

**African Independent Churches and the  
Challenge to the State: South Africa's First  
Democratic Decade**

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## Declaration

I hereby certify that this thesis is entirely my own work, except where stated otherwise, and that it has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Barbara Bompani

October 2006



## Abstract

Since the end of apartheid in South Africa, African independent churches [AICs] have grown rapidly. In the past, work on AICs in South Africa has been mainly anthropological or theological. My doctoral thesis, *African Independent Churches and Challenges to the State: South Africa's First Democratic Decade*, uniquely places socio-political and economic factors at the core of the analysis of this phenomenon. AICs represent a high percentage of South Africa's Black population, most of whom are very poor. In my work I embed narratives of religious life in township AICs within the broader dynamics of political transition in the post-apartheid era, and in the subsequent reshaping of civil society and its relationship to the state. This approach is crucial in defining the particular—and original—angle I take in this thesis. My thesis describes five AICs in Soweto, and places them within the broader contexts and concerns of politics, economic realities, the search for new identities in post-apartheid South Africa, and above all the need for tangible socio-economic development.

The classical view of the growth and popularity of AICs has been to focus on their role in granting people protection and fortification against the powers of evil. My research also shows how AICs are involved in important economic activities such as voluntary mutual benefit societies, savings clubs, lending societies, *stokvels* (informal savings funds) and burial societies that control millions of South African Rand. My thesis highlights how these societies play a strong and supportive role among blacks in a deprived economic situation and that this role is stronger than in other churches. These mutual aid societies have both socio-economic and socio-religious functions. In a period of socio-political transformation in South Africa, AICs were able to answer the needs of the people and their hunger to rebuild an identity. My major critique of classical research on AICs has been its inability to address 'social change' in a theoretically adequate way, as something more than just descriptions of 'traditional' social structures.

By investigating and developing a theoretical framework pertinent to the emergence of AICs in South Africa I have been able to demonstrate the significance of different

understandings of 'modernity' and how AICs develop and articulate their own techniques of modernisation. AICs have usually been evaluated in terms of their relationship with the past and with tradition, as black churches linked to African traditional rituals and aloof from Western ideas of development and modernity. However, my research elaborates a possible avenue of escape from the modernity-tradition dilemma by understanding that the churches, by continually negotiating a path between modernity and tradition, are creating their own way to reach the modern in the post-colonial context by seeking answers to issues of poverty, democracy, instability and inclusion. The major theoretical claim of my thesis, then, is in acknowledging the processes of construction and deconstruction of both 'modern' and 'tradition' that the churches undertake. Rather than simply relics of the past, they are shaping the future. I argue that when religious belief motivates people to action, its relation to politics becomes most evident. Most of the people I interviewed defined their religious community as a network of solidarity to fight for their proper social rights, such as education, health, knowledge on HIV, economic support and housing. Ultimately, AICs exist within the politics of modernity as well as the faith of tradition.

## Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the contribution and support of so many people. First of all my two supervisors, Dr Jack Thompson and Dr Sara Rich Dorman, who never made me lack constant support and intellectual challenge. I would like to thank Jack in particular for his sporting metaphors - one should always remember to fight for one's argument like a professional boxer and should lead the reader through one's work like a slalom skier. I would like to thank Sara Dorman for her pastoral care, and her encouragement to engage with the academic community. I would also like to thank my previous supervisor, Professor Anna Maria Gentili from Bologna University, who initiated me in the study of this wonderful continent and through her example encouraged me to become a researcher.

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At the centre of this research there is the life of people that will always have my gratitude for their hospitality and warm welcome in Soweto. There are too many people to list individually to thank from the five churches in Jabulani who let me spend so much time in their community and showed their interest in my research, with the expressed desire of 'telling the truth' on independent churches. In particular I should mention Bishop Ntongana and Mama Ntongana, who carefully introduced me to other people in Jabulani and they were always ready to help me with my requests. Thanks for your caring presence and for your trust.

Nana and her family for letting me stay in their house and always taking care of me around Soweto. Archbishop Ngada for the long interview in his church's farm. Ines

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People in Italy played a role, especially my mother and my sister who never approved of my love for travelling but that are starting to accept it is not going to stop. My friends in Parma and in Bologna, in particular Jacopo and Rossana, because even faraway their friendship is something solid and unique. Finally, Mirka and Luciano who really believed in this research and pushed me hard to arrive to an end.

In the last years people in Scotland played an important role. The Centre of African Studies provided a supportive environment for the hard work of writing up. Barbecues and social events and of course intellectual contribution all played a part. In particular I would like to thank the head of the Centre, Professor Paul Nugent, and Professor Andrew Walls for his knowledgeable ideas and his kindness. A special acknowledgment should be made to Dr Francesca Locatelli and her coffee and chats on work and life. I would like to thank the support of Anne Smith who made me feel welcome in moving to Scotland, especially at the beginning.

And last but not least my beloved partner, whom this research led to us meeting in South Africa. It is hard to find the right words to say thanks to James for his support,

for his constant presence and patience in following these years of work. After myself, he is the person who has had to read and digest this thesis the most and nonetheless he is still with me! Without his love and help this work literally would not have been possible, but without this research probably we would have never met. This research is a sort of metaphor of our life together. Not always easy, hard work but incredibly satisfying and exciting! May this life bring us a lot of new research projects and happy events in Africa.

## Preface

I began to study the relationship between religion and politics in South Africa in 1999 for a previous dissertation<sup>1</sup> in African Studies at Bologna University. Following that I collaborated with colleagues from the same University in different projects on this topic and began to focus in particular in the post-apartheid period. Between September 2001 and September 2002 I was placed in Johannesburg at the University of the Witwatersrand as a visiting research fellow to start my doctoral studies funded by Bologna University. During this period I developed more and more clearly the idea that the real phenomenon that should be analysed within the study of Christianity and its public role was the growth of African independent churches. Their public voice and their grass roots involvement was something so different from the past and so powerful that I decided to orientate my research in this direction. It was a fruitful intuition that allowed me to collect a vast range of material and to develop an interpretative answer to their development in the nation building process. In 2003 I changed my University and I moved to Edinburgh University, to the Centre of African Studies. Edinburgh has been an appropriate place to undertake this work given the large number of academics working on related issues in the Schools of Social and Political Studies and Divinity. This environment assisted me in focusing and strengthening my work.

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<sup>1</sup> Bompani B., *Movimenti Cattolici in Opposizione all'Apartheid: Sudafrica 1984-1994*, unpublished thesis, Bologna University, 2000.

Part of my research and my interpretation were already published in some articles<sup>2</sup> and presented at conferences.<sup>3</sup> These works represent milestones in the germination of my ideas that I hope are encapsulated within this thesis.

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<sup>2</sup> Bompani, B. (2006) 'Mandela Mania: Mainline Christianity in Post-Apartheid South Africa' in *Third World Quarterly*, 27 (6), 2006 [this article is inserted in the thesis as appendix 2; permission to add it to the thesis was granted by the publisher, electronic source: <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals>]; Bompani B., 'Percorso Bibliografico. La Cristianità in Sudafrica', in *Afriche e Orienti. Rivista ai confini tra Africa Mediterraneo e Medio Oriente*, 4, 2000; Bompani B. 'AIDS in Africa: il ruolo delle chiese nella lotta al virus' in *Afriche e Orienti. Rivista ai confini tra Africa Mediterraneo e Medio Oriente*, 1, 2001; Bompani B., 'Pluralismo religioso in Sudafrica: I diversi volti della minoranza musulmana in epoca post-coloniale' in *Afriche e Orienti. Rivista ai confini tra Africa Mediterraneo e Medio Oriente*, 1, 2002; Bompani, B. and Smith, J. 'Biotechnology and the Bible: Development, Religion and Modernity in Kenya', submitted to *Development and Change*, forthcoming.

<sup>3</sup> 'Commissioning the Truth: the Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa', invited seminar given at Centro di Studi Religiosi, Milano, February 2004; '10 years of democracy in South Africa', invited paper given at Centre for Political Analysis, Parma, December 2004. Conferences: 'Mandela Mania: Mainline Churches in the Post-Apartheid', paper given at the Africa-Europe Group for Interdisciplinary Studies (AEGIS) conference, London, June 2005; 'Biotechnology and the Bible: Development, Religion and Modernity in Kenya', paper given at the African Studies Association (ASA) Conference, Washington, D.C., November 2005; 'African Independent Churches in Post-Apartheid South Africa: New Political Interpretations' paper given at the workshop 'New Research on Religion and Politics in Africa' organised by the Centre of African Studies and Department of Politics, the University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, 19<sup>th</sup> July, 2006.

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# Chapter 1

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## **An Introduction: Non-Western Christianity on the Threshold of the Third Millennium**

### **The Rise of Christianity in Africa**

Religion can be a potent agent able to mobilise people and synergies in a profound way, and this is evidenced by the enormous growth of so-called *Non-Western Christianity* in Africa as in Latin America and in Asia. African Christianity in the post-colonial era was able to convert itself alongside and within African historical cultures. This 'inculturation' became the dominant paradigm of African Christianity. African theologians have rethought the relationship between Christianity and African society for a considerable time. In the past Western *milieux* generally refused to introduce ancestral values of African culture into faith, inside their institutions and within their normative framework. This diffusion of the faith did not easily accept non-Western Christian symbolism, the conversion of Africans to Christianity, consequently, was never complete and definitive.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear that scholars have much to learn from the debate about the relation between Christianity and political power in the old colonised order. African consciousness was too resilient, too immediately engaged with the possibilities of

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Corten A., Marshall-Fratani R. (ed), *Between Babel and Pentecost: Transnational Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2001, especially pp.10-15.

a new religion, to be crushed or colonised by a colonial-missionary hegemony. Again and again we see processes of localisation, seizure and manipulation at work, whether it be with sacred objects, liturgies, the translation of the bible<sup>2</sup> or the wealth of ideas about evil, healing, authority and identity contained within it. To borrow Lonsdale's phrase 'the long international conversation' between missionaries and Africans was often on 'equal terms'.<sup>3</sup> Christianity, partially established before formal empire, rooted itself, spread and flourished across much of sub-Saharan Africa in the colonial era.<sup>4</sup> It escaped missionary hands within a generation or two (sometimes even longer), and by the turn of the twenty-first century it had become the cornerstone of African culture and society.<sup>5</sup>

Religion and politics have been intimately linked throughout two different processes. One is African history, beginning with missions and the often-ambivalent role played by Churches during the colonial period, through the liberation struggle and towards independence. The second is the holistic African approach to religion that fuses together cultural, religious and socio-political elements.<sup>6</sup> In African cultures a continuum exists between visible and invisible worlds<sup>7</sup> and religion reaches all sectors of the public life. Generally, Western analysts and disciplines struggle in considering how religious ideologies come to have a bearing on the way political power is actually perceived and exercised.<sup>8</sup> Steven Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar<sup>9</sup> rightly affirm that the Francophone School of political science led by Jean-Francois Bayart, strongly influenced by wider

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<sup>2</sup> Though almost always this process involved local linguists, translation of religious material remained strongly under the control of missionaries.

<sup>3</sup> Lonsdale J., 'Kikuyu Christianities' in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 29 (2), 1999, p. 218.

<sup>4</sup> And in some areas there was never a Western imported faith, like in Egypt and Ethiopia. See Sundkler B., Steed C., *A History of the Church in Africa*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 124-150.

<sup>5</sup> Maxwell D., 'Introduction' in Maxwell D. (ed), *Christianity and the African Imagination. Essays in Honour of Adrian Hastings*, Brill, Leiden, 2002, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Bediako K., 'Africa and Christianity on the threshold of the third Millennium: the religious dimension' in *African Affairs*, 99 (2) 2000, pp. 303-323.

<sup>7</sup> Appiah, K.A., *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, New York, 1992, p.58.

<sup>8</sup> See Haynes J., *Religion in Third World Politics*, Open University Press, Buckingham, 1994, p.172.

<sup>9</sup> Ellis S., ter Haar G., 'Religion and politics in sub-Saharan Africa' in *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 36, 2, 1998, pp. 175-201.

literature of philosophy, history and anthropology, has succeeded rather better than the Anglophone tradition of political science in incorporating religion in its frame of analysis.<sup>10</sup>

In the new orders of the post colony and of pluralistic societies, where one possible answer does not exist, the rise of the new religiosity and the *reassemlage* of ancestral voices gave answers to the needs of a new order among the numerous possibilities in the current situation.<sup>11</sup> These values, as part of a process of identity re-construction, are particularly important in Africa because they challenge the state in the utilisation of 'resources of extraversion', quoting Jean-Francois Bayart,<sup>12</sup> and because they elaborate an alternative vision of modernity and future.<sup>13</sup> The research of identity is, in a certain way, the focal point of the post-colonial reinterpretation. Religious and cultural phenomena are not free from changes embedded inside this process of reinterpretation, as they are historical constructions of it. Democracy had different meanings for different actors inside society. This is, in a broad sense, the interpretative line followed by this thesis. This work aims to analyse the changes inside religious institutions as social actors within the broader transformations of nation building and their interactions with other social agents. The ability of new forms of Christianity to deal with the challenges of the post-colonial period could be one of the sociological explanations of the rise of Christianity in Africa in the last few decades.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Bayart J.F., *The State in Africa: the Politics of the Belly*, Paris 1989; Mbembe A., Toulabor C., *Religion et Transition Democratique en Afrique*, Paris, 1997; Mbembe A., *Afriques Indociles. Chistianisme. Pouvoir et Etat en Société Postcoloniale*, Karthala, Paris, 1985; Mbembe A., *On the Postcolony*, California University Press, Berkley, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> See Mbembe A., *Afriques Indociles*, 1985, p. 78.

<sup>12</sup> Bayart J.F., *The State in Africa*, 1989, p.103.

<sup>13</sup> See for example Corten A., Marshall-Fratani R. (ed), *Between Babel and Pentecost*, 2001, p.15.

<sup>14</sup> Fyfe C., Walls A. (ed), *Christianity in Africa in the 1990s*, Edinburgh Centre of African Studies, 1996, p. 54; Isichei E., *A History of Christianity in Africa. From Antiquity to the Present*, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London, 1995, p.205.

The new expectations of 'popular pity'<sup>15</sup> supply to the believers the conceptual tools and practices necessary to assist them in negotiating post-colonial uncertainty. In the last four decades, independent churches, as part of civil society, have played a political role in East Africa and West Africa.<sup>16</sup> The Kimbanguist Church in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) emerged in the post-colonial period as a 'honoured community in the land, with an administration that showed that in a society falling to pieces here was a body prepared, in a crisis, to take over leadership and with new ecumenical contacts on an international scale'.<sup>17</sup> In West Africa, for example, once controversial and marginalised, the Aladura churches became of central importance in society, 'a force to reckon within'.<sup>18</sup> It is important to investigate if post-colonial South Africa will follow this trend and what this could mean for the relationship between church and society, given South Africa's position as arguably Africa's newest post-colonial state. Africa in the last thirty/forty years has produced new religious identities as new socio-political spheres. For this reason the aim of this work is to analyse the changes inside religion itself and its interactions with other social actors as a component with the forces, structures and rationales of the new political dispensation.

## **African Christianity and the Global**

In the post-colonial era Christianity was asked to convert itself alongside and within African historical cultures. Achille Mbembe asserts that in Africa a religious identity does not exist anymore, but there exist religious agents who investigate the questions posed by society and who are able to use the most

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<sup>15</sup> In Mbembe A., *Afriques Indociles*, 1985. According to Mbembe 'The new expectations of the "popular pity" supply to the believers the cognition and practice required to help them to control the post-colonial uncertainty', *Afriques Indociles*, p.35. The translation from French is mine.

<sup>16</sup> AICs experienced an extraordinary explosion in West Africa and East Africa in the post-colonial period. Now Pentecostalism seems more active than the independent churches. In South Africa AICs are still the strongest actors of expansion. It will be interesting to analyse this proportion in the future. These ideas are the abstract of an interview with professor Andrew Walls, Edinburgh January, 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in Sundkler B., Steed C., *A History of the Church*, 2000, p.1033.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

practical and immediate answers that they receive.<sup>19</sup> The African Christian elaboration of the post-colonial era was able to generate new forms of religiosity and to attract millions of believers. During the decolonisation process it was commonly thought that Christianity would disappear because of its perceived collusion with the colonial power and for the 'natural' process of modernisation, already experienced by Western countries that led to the weakening of Christianity in the public sphere.<sup>20</sup> Kevin Ward argues that at some point in the twenty-first century African Christians will become more numerous than Christians in any other continent of the world and fundamental in articulating a global Christian identity in the world.<sup>21</sup> Even if African Christians are becoming more and more important in shaping a global Christian identity, it is still early to understand the importance and the effects of this change. Kwame Bediako suggests that the Western academic world is moving slowly in this direction and is beginning to recognise the non-marginalisation of the continent from the global perspective.<sup>22</sup>

African Christianity needs to be understood in the context of two phenomena: the loss of Western Christian faith and the holistic character of African Christian life that fuses together religious, cultural and socio-political aspects. To understand the global evolution of Christianity we have to consider these aspects of African religiosity because due to its increasing number of members and relations with the global community through African Diasporas and new African missions in Europe and in North America, these aspects are going to affect the new global Christian community. The precise nature of the relationship between religion and politics<sup>23</sup> needs to be reconsidered in the light of current developments.

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<sup>19</sup> Mbembe A., *Africques Indociles*, 1985, p.34.

<sup>20</sup> See for example, Hervier-Léger D., *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 125.

<sup>21</sup> Ward K., 'Africa' in Hastings (ed), *A World History of Christianity*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1999, pp. 192-233.

<sup>22</sup> Bediako K., *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1995, especially pp. 68-75.

<sup>23</sup> Especially in non-Western countries. In Western countries the separation of church and state has been gained after a long process and long battles.



What has happened in Africa in the last two or three decades calls into question assumptions that have been made about the role of Africa in the world system. Issues like migration, instability, and terrorism are of concern not only to African governments but also to the international community. As Christopher Clapham pointed out international politics are increasingly concerned not with sovereignty, but with issues that 'cut across, and subvert, the boundaries of states and the role of governments. Such issues though currently dominated by terrorism, also include international migration, global diseases, the protection of the environment'.<sup>24</sup> International politics is also increasingly concerned with religious movements and ideologies able to cross international boundaries. Religion is encapsulated within a globalising process that is not purely a homogenising force, but is combined with myriad creations of local difference. Ruth Marshall-Fratani and Didier Péclard alert us to the danger of considering religion primarily as a symbolic expression of destabilising forces such as globalisation or hegemonic powers in post-colonial societies. This limits religion to a passive role as a 'function of signification'.<sup>25</sup> Religion constitutes a field of action that believers occupy and control. More than a reflection of external forces, religious action is a form of self-fashioning. Religious performances reconstitute people as moral and social agents, using techniques that have historical resonance. This leads to the assumption that people's beliefs can thus develop an understanding and acknowledgement of how they respond to their socio-political contexts. And this seems to be the case for the research's case study in South Africa.

### **Research Aims: Independent Churches in a South African Township**

Precisely because Africa is so tightly bound into global religious networks, the study of the relationship between religious thought and political practice in Africa

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<sup>24</sup> Clapham C., 'Afrique dans le relations internationales: quelle évolutions depuis la guerre froide?' in Ellis S., Ter Haar G., *Worlds of Power*, 2003, p.178.

<sup>25</sup> Marshall-Fratani R., Péclard D., 'La religion du subject en Afrique' in *Politique Africaine*, 87, 2002, p.8. This article critiques especially the recent anthropological studies of religion and globalisation.



provides a window on an aspect of world affairs that deserves a new understanding in socio-political analyses. In this sense this thesis has been written with the intent of contributing to the understanding of the relation between religion and politics in South Africa. This thesis will focus on the analysis of a sample of African independent churches (AICs) in the country, in particular in the urban context of Soweto Township, near Johannesburg.<sup>26</sup> The idea of investigating this case study derived from the desire to better understand the developments of African independent churches and their relation with the changing socio-political setting. Following these considerations there is a need to place the South Africa situation in a broader context, and to track its links with recent events in the continent. Although defined as a 'unique' case study, or as an 'exceptional' country with an 'exceptional' history and trajectory of development, this research will place South Africa inside the dynamics of the entire continent. For this reason I believe that the insights presented in this thesis are relevant to other parts of Africa and of the world. Rather than struggling to catch up with other continents, Africa may be in the vanguard when it comes to understanding the close relationship between religion and politics. This analysis can be useful to define similarities and differences with the rest of the continent. South Africa can be considered as one of the last countries to experience the end of colonisation. For this reason it is relevant to try to understand if this country is following the same trends of the other post-colonial African countries inside the relationship between religious actors and political transformation. A rapid comparison gives us the possibility to immediately highlight the distinction between the Pentecostal Churches' massive expansion in the rest of the continent and the strong mass appeal that AICs still have in South Africa and trying to offer some conceptual explanations for that. For example, in a post-colonial perspective AICs seem to be able to offer strong answers to the need

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<sup>26</sup> Following the discussion in StatsSA (2003) it is important to acknowledge the fluidity and blurring of divisions between 'urban' and 'rural' in the South African context. For the purposes of this study urban is taken to mean households whose primary dwelling is either formal or informal accommodation in the Township, and whose primary income streams are off-farm (primarily formal or informal employment or reliance on remittances). StatsSA, Investigations into appropriate definitions for urban and rural areas in South Africa, Statistics SA, Pretoria, 2003; electronic resource: <http://www.statssa.gov.za>

of reconstructing a new identity, and that was true in all the countries in the post-colonial situation, while much current research shows that Pentecostal churches' upsurge is related to the crisis of the post-colonial nation-state, transnationalism and diasporic culture; all elements that South Africa is currently experiencing at a different level.

Since the end of apartheid in South Africa, African independent churches have grown rapidly. AICs represent a high percentage of South Africa's Black population,<sup>27</sup> most of whom are very poor. In my work I embed narratives of religious life in township AICs within the broader dynamics of political transition in the post-apartheid era, and in the subsequent reshaping of civil society and its relationship to the state. This approach is crucial in defining the particular angle I take in this thesis. Although anthropological and theological approaches are not uncommon in the analysis of AICs, sociological and political investigations remain quite unusual. My thesis describes five AICs in Soweto, and places them within the broader contexts and concerns of politics, economic realities, the search for new identities and above all the need for tangible socio-economic development in post-apartheid South Africa.

The classical view of the growth and popularity of AICs has been to focus on their role in granting people protection and fortification against the powers of evil. This research also shows how AICs are involved in important economic activities such as voluntary mutual benefit societies, savings clubs, lending societies, *stokvels* (informal savings funds) and burial societies that control millions of South African Rand. The thesis highlights how these societies play a strong and supportive role among blacks in a deprived economic situation and that this role is stronger than in other churches. These mutual aid societies have both socio-economic and socio-religious functions. In a period of socio-political transformation in South Africa,

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<sup>27</sup> In 2001 they represent around the 32% of the entire South African population (in terms of black population the percentage would be higher) according to StatsSA, Census by province, gender, religion recode (derived) and population group, Statistic SA, 2004, Pretoria; electronic resource: <http://www.statssa.gov.za/census01/Census/>

AICs were able to answer the needs of the people and their hunger to rebuild an identity. My major critique of classical research on AICs has been of the failures of the literature to address 'social change' in a theoretically adequate way, as something more than just descriptions of 'traditional' social structures.

## **Thesis Summary and Structure**

This thesis examines the actions, interactions, perceptions and techniques of resistance of the everyday life of church members in the poor urban context of Soweto Township. Anyone with a careful eye on the religious situation of the country can not help but observe the extraordinary impact and reach of these churches. The main idea behind this work was that in identifying the reasons why people feel attracted to these kinds of churches, especially in this particular historical moment, it would be possible to elaborate a theoretical explanation of the role of these actors in a particular period of dramatic social and political change, tracing a link between the end of the apartheid period and their growth, given that the lack of theoretical interpretations of independent churches was an important issue lamented by different authors.<sup>28</sup> This analysis uses methods of investigation from the social sciences and does not make any theological claims. For this reason although spiritual reasons are acknowledged as important, this research gives space especially to social and political aspects in its explanations. If new religious movements are rarely considered inside socio-political analyses in Africa (and in other continents), it is certain that independent churches in South Africa were neglected from political considerations from old and recent literature. This thesis tries to re-elaborate definitions and interpretations of the political discourse in the post-apartheid period in South Africa giving voice to church members' perceptions. Reformulating the idea of what can be considered political in non-Western contexts, the intent here is to demonstrate that independent churches could be poised at the centre of a political analysis and they can act as valuable social (and perhaps political) actors. Focusing on three particular aspects

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<sup>28</sup> See chapter 4, 'Historiography and AICs in South Africa'.

of their contribution to the nation-building process from the perspective of a township (chapter five and chapter six), their developmental attitude, their injections of self-esteem and empowerment, and their contribution in the understanding of political changes and acquisition of rights, these churches seem to deserve a new theoretical interpretation inside the new political dispensation. Previously considered as actors more linked to tradition and to the past, now independent churches appear to act as vehicles of modern interpretations and, as such, they are an integral part of the future of South Africa (chapter seven). Mainline Christianity in the country seems to follow different paths due to its past relations with previous political actors (the ANC or the NP) and therefore a chapter (chapter two) is dedicated to an overview of the 'other side' of Christianity in South Africa to compare and better understand the role of AICs in the post-apartheid period. The genesis of this thesis emerged from a simple consideration. The reading of the existing literature on the topic (chapter four) sharply contrasted with the findings of this research. The ethnographic work was, with its long presence in the field, particularly adaptable and useful for the understanding and de-codifying of local meanings and symbols in this context (chapter three).

Chapter two starts with a quotation from an interview with the General Secretary of the Southern African Council of Churches (SACC), Dr Molefe Tsele. In this interview Dr Tsele defined the nation-building period in South Africa as 'an obsession of alignment with Mandela and his establishment's position',<sup>29</sup> an obsession that conditioned all the following actions and politics of the churches (especially mainline churches) as part of that society. In fact, the response of the historical churches (the five mainline churches in the country) during this period is very weak and the work of the SACC very limited if compared to the past. South African Mainline Christianity after 1994 had to pay a high price in terms of independence from political transformation. The *raison d'être* of this chapter derives from the fact that a deep understanding of the role played by mainline churches after 1994 is useful in understanding the shift from historical

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<sup>29</sup> My interview with Dr Molefe Tsele, SACC, March 2002, Johannesburg.

denominations to independent denominations. Transition in South Africa has meant many different things for various religious communities. If this thesis will focus on the study of AICs in the post-apartheid era, it is relevant for a complete understanding of the Christian scenario to analyse and evaluate the changes that the new political situation brought inside the other counter part, Mainline Christianity. It is important for this work to present the public role of Christianity from a broader perspective, showing that past relations with the political establishment conditioned actions and techniques in the public sphere in the present. The post-apartheid situation is not a disconnected moment from the past of the country, and the relations developed under apartheid determined and affected the present. In this sense the lack of political affiliation (at least from an institutional point of view) of Independent Christianity in the past, creates new social and political spaces in the present. The post-apartheid period is a moment of redefinition of identity and while mainline churches seem to struggle to rebuild an independent public voice from the political institutionalised one, independent churches seem, once again, offering a unique answer to the current socio-political change (as discussed in chapter six).

Chapter three will describe my approach to the research in a global way, implying a complete and exhaustive knowledge of my entire work process. This chapter will describe the different sources (oral and written) that I have used for the thesis, the rationale behind their choice, their interaction and their utility in elaborating the thesis's body. Since I have chosen an ethnographic approach, my research methods will follow techniques and dynamics familiar to anthropological studies. But this thesis also adopts a multidisciplinary approach and uses techniques of socio-political and historical analysis. Methodological implications and problems faced studying and working on secondary sources have been investigated. An interesting aspect that this thesis will take into great consideration is the terminological problem that emerged in working on religious beliefs and vague boundaries between colonial and post-colonial terminology. The implicit claim of Independent Christianity is the right to reinvent and redefine roles and systems 'independently'

from any kind of authority (religious and secular). In such an openness of opportunity the adoption of a proper terminology has been a challenge to this thesis.

Starting from the first pivotal work of Bengt Sundkler on the AICs in South Africa,<sup>30</sup> chapter four will try to trace the way AICs were analysed and perceived in an historical perspective and how the way of analysing and perceiving this religious movement changed through the decades. Sundkler's book in 1948 asserted that AICs were bridges that led back to tradition. This original claim, even if in part retracted in the second edition in 1961, continued to reverberate among those who research AICs. On the contrary this thesis, in particular in chapter seven, *Modernity and Tradition: Need for Reinterpretation*, will assert that AICs are bridges that allow modernity to be represented in older cultural forms, a strategy for contrasting a legitimising tradition that combines older and newer elements, the study of the past literature will appear extremely relevant in understanding the shift and the distance of this analysis from the first one. To better understand this religious phenomenon and its connections with secular power, it is necessary to trace its historical origin and development and to analyse it systematically in relation to concrete secular conditions. This will be useful to explain Independent Christianity's dynamics in different conditions. It is just twelve years since these churches began experiencing a post-colonial situation. Although the thesis will focus on the post-colonial period, chapter four will help the reader to understand the key historical elements that conditioned the formation and investigations of these churches in South Africa. To write this chapter I have used secondary resources collected in South Africa and I have conducted further research in UK archives and libraries. The next two chapters (chapter five and chapter six) form the main empirical body of the thesis.

Chapter five aims to analyse the forces that bring people to these churches and that place them in the forefront of the spectacular growth of Independent Christianity

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<sup>30</sup> Sundkler B., *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1948 and 1961 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition).



in post-apartheid South Africa. My research data highlight the fact that the attraction of the AICs lies in their life-enhancing activities. AICs have emerged as communities where people can share in a totality of relationships that enable them to participate in the fullness of being. That the AICs are considered to be experts in granting people protection and fortification against the powers of evil, accounted to a high degree for their popularity and growth. This chapter demonstrates how AICs are also involved in the important economic activities of voluntary mutual benefit societies such as savings clubs, lending societies, *stokvels* (informal savings funds) and burial societies. One of the points that I aim to demonstrate in my thesis is how these societies play a strong and supportive role among blacks in a deprived economic situation and this role appears stronger than in the other churches. These mutual aid societies have a socio-economic and socio-religious function. In the light of firsthand empirical research, this chapter will try to better understand these kinds of activities, and understand how the AICs work. In this period of transition and crisis the independent churches were able to answer the needs of the people and their hunger to rebuild an identity. This chapter raises specific challenges to existing data and theories. For example my work carried out in 2001, 2002, 2004 and 2005, rethinks the relations of AICs to modernity and it places socio-political and economic factors at the centre of the analysis.

The focus of chapter six is a socio-political analysis of AICs after 1994. This approach is quite important in defining the particular angle of this thesis and in some way to justify its originality. In fact if anthropological and theological approaches are quite frequent in the analysis of African independent churches, socio-political investigations seem still quite unusual in South Africa.<sup>31</sup> Maybe this is conditioned by the fact that AICs' relationship to politics has always been problematic. Their sometimes open collaboration with the apartheid state has caused sections of the public to regard them as aloof from critical and subversive politics. The rationale behind this chapter is the idea that the end of apartheid and

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<sup>31</sup> This point will be better explained in chapter 4, especially in the section 'AICs in South Africa: Delineations of Acquiescence and Activism'.

the end of the struggle against it opened different perspectives to define political action. If in the past that was defined by supporting the old regime or being against it, the post-apartheid situation brought a less simplified categorisation of political action. There is another kind of political action that is emerging in the South African context and this is politics, to use Jean-François Bayart's formula, formulated from below. This is the chapter that gave a genesis to the thesis' title: in the long term, the rehabilitation of AICs inside the political sphere could bring new challenges to the South African State. The aim of this chapter is to track these challenges. This chapter will benefit from some of the literature produced on religion and social change in Latin America, where studies on politics and religious movements are more advanced.

African independent churches have not only formed fascinating research topics but also have been major sites for more general investigations in many directions. Classical works published in the 1960s and in the 1970s showed how AICs instigated the development of alternatives to the then still dominant structural-functional paradigm, which failed to address 'social change' in a theoretically adequate way.<sup>32</sup> In the light of a rise of Independent Christianity in post-apartheid South Africa, the necessity of investigating and providing a theoretical framework to the emergence of AICs in the country becomes more and more evident. As we will see in chapter seven, this theoretical explanation could be found in the analysis of the significance of modernity and its interpretation inside AICs. If AICs keep being evaluated as links to the past, how can we explain their growth in the modern? This chapter, engaging previous researchers and further developing their ideas, will try to elaborate a possible avenue of escape from the modernity-tradition dilemma. The analysis of my data and the elaboration of my material should demonstrate that instead of being a *bridge* back to tradition (taking Sundkler's early

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<sup>32</sup> See for example Fabian J., *Jamaa: a Religious Movement in Katanga*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1971; and Sundkler B., *Bantu Prophets*, 1961.



image), AICs provide a way of linking backward and forwards at the same time.<sup>33</sup> The interpretation of modernity that emerges provides a way of linking backward and forwards at the same time represents a strategy constructing and legitimising tradition that combines older and newer elements.

Finally, Chapter eight provides a conclusive interpretation of the thesis as a whole in attempting to draw together the central themes explored in the research.

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<sup>33</sup> For the original use of this image, see Thompson J., 'Sogni e visioni come mezzi di rivelazione nelle chiese africane indipendenti' in Introvigne M. (ed), *Nuove Rivelazioni nel contesto culturale dell'Africa e dell'Asia*, Centro Studi sulle Nuove Religioni, Editrice Elle Dici, Torino, 1991, p. 61.

## Chapter 2

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### **A Different Path: a General Overview of Mainline Churches in Post-Apartheid South Africa<sup>1</sup>**

*It is like to say you are good if you embrace Mandela[']s] position.  
The Mandela Mania became a very challenging theological  
factor for the churches. Churches have to say where do they stand  
when the magic of Mandela has gone.*

Dr Molefe Tsele, General Secretariat of the Southern Africa Council of Churches (SACC)<sup>2</sup>

#### **Introducing Mainline Churches in Post-Apartheid South Africa**

This chapter investigates the public role of mainline churches in post-apartheid South Africa and their interaction with prevailing political discourses. While this thesis focuses on the study of AICs in the post-apartheid period, it is relevant for a fuller understanding of the Christian context to analyse and evaluate the ways the new political situation shaped Mainline Christianity. The rationale behind the choice of investigating mainline churches in a thesis dedicated to the analysis of African independent churches lies on a different set of justifications. Firstly, this research supports the idea that religious actors should be placed at the centre of

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<sup>1</sup> Part of the work of this chapter has been recently published. Bompani B., 'Mandela Mania: Mainline Churches in Post-Apartheid South Africa' in *Third World Quarterly*, 27 (6), 2006, pp. 1137-1149. See Appendix 2.

<sup>2</sup> My interview with Dr Molefe Tsele (SACC), Johannesburg, 30 May 2002.

socio-political analyses and that their specific contributions inside what is broadly defined as civil society should be recognised. Secondly, a deep understanding of the role played by mainline churches after 1994 is important to understand how different relations with the political establishment in the past could determine and affect action and interactions of religious subjects in the post-apartheid period. It is possible to characterise a certain number of contrapositions between these two forms of Christianity: the national character of mainline churches versus the local nuance of African independent churches, a history of Mainline Churches' political involvement in the liberation struggle as opposed to little or no involvement of AICs, the post-apartheid government's cooptation of mainline churches and 'independence' for the AICs,<sup>3</sup> and institutionally well-organised organisations versus poor and ephemeral realities. These are all aspects that deserve to be investigated to better understand how Christianity, in its different forms, develops in the post-apartheid period.

This chapter will offer an analysis of institutional channels like Southern African Council of Churches (SACC) and Southern Africa Catholic Bishop Conference (SACBC) press releases, press statements of consortia between religious organisations, civic organisations, and different Christian denominations, ANC reports, religious leaders' discourses, parliamentary speeches, presidential speeches and interviews with religious leaders and religious activists. In so doing, this investigation will attempt to understand how religion affects politics and how the political discourse might change religious action in society. In a certain sense this approach takes an alternative perspective from the traditional Weberian analysis of religion that investigates religion in the univocal way of how it affects political (and economic) discourse. Through the analysis of political discourse and its expression of power and definition of subjectivities, this chapter will focus on the two-way process: how religion can affect politics, but also how politics affects religious

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<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to see how this aspect could be perceived as a problem by the ruling party: 'Contacts with AICs are with the people not with institutions. AICs are independent from everything. It is a real problem to reach them'. My interview with Rev Cedric Mayson, ANC, Religious Affairs Bureau, Johannesburg, 30 October 2001.

discourse.<sup>4</sup> The analysis presented here will focus on this interaction in light of the changed political scenario of democracy.

This analysis did, however, raises a methodological problem that I have tried to address. If the object of my analysis is mainly institutional Christianity through the voice of the leadership and of the main institutions like SACC and SACBC, is that enough to guarantee a deep understanding of the broad reality that includes also local organisations and the periphery dynamics? Is it really possible to define changes inside religious action in society if the object under analysis does not represent the spectrum of Mainline Christianity? The answer is yes if we consider two possible interpretations, one theoretical and one historical. There is a consistent literature that evolves from Antonio Gramsci to Robert Darton<sup>5</sup> on the role of leadership and institutional channels in the production and origin of social change. It is possible to identify a shift in religious action in society and a different attitude toward the political establishment, that it is possible is thanks to the theoretical interpretation of the fact that any kind of social change derives from an initial intellectual, institutional (and Marxist analysts would say bourgeois) action. The changes inside religious action in public life are still at a primordial level. For this reason it is possible to seek recourse in this theoretical interpretation. Similarly from an historical point of view, it is necessary to remember that also the shift within the liberation struggle by the churches has been driven by a limited, institutionalised, highly intellectual channel: prophetic Christianity.<sup>6</sup>

The action of churches in the public sphere in the 1990s has been commonly defined as one of 'critical solidarity' and their voice was of support and alignment with the position of the African National Congress (ANC) in the process of nation

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<sup>4</sup> Process followed by Max Weber in Weber M., *The Sociology of Religion*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1964. But also in Weber M., *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), Allen & Unwin, London, 1976.

<sup>5</sup> For example in Gramsci A., *Selections from Political Writings [of] Antonio Gramsci 1910-1920; with additional texts by Bordiga and Tasca*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1977; Darton R., *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*, W. W. Norton, New York 1995.

<sup>6</sup> It is a South African definition of the active part of Christianity involved in the liberation struggle.

building, abandoning the critical voice of the liberation struggle. Through an analysis of political and religious discourses this chapter aims to demonstrate that it is possible to identify a shift in the position of the churches<sup>7</sup> in the last five or six years, passing from a position of alignment and non-confrontation with the government, to a situation of disengagement and (initial) critical opposition. This new attitude reoriented the relationship between the ruling party and churches as civil society actors. Although unity became the main eschatology of the post-apartheid South African government, the end of the authoritarian regime of apartheid brought to light a plurality of differentiated voices with their own goals, strategies and interests. In an interview the General Secretary of the SACC Dr. Molefe Tsele explained the position of the churches after 1994 in this way:

1994 meant for the churches realignment to policy. The role of the SACC and its identity changed enormously and drastically. The churches were not able to relate to the new reality. The change is connected to the theology of power of the persons who now are in charge in Parliament, colleagues and friends. They asked us not speaking about history; we have to speak about reconciliation just in terms of the future. Speaking about the past means to be against reconciliation. The public opinion embraced just the *Mandela mania*. The reconciliation of Mandela and of the TRC was popular with perpetrators and became an attraction for media.<sup>8</sup>

The end of apartheid defined the end of mainline churches' engagement in the political arena if not as actors supportive of the ANC project of nation building. This chapter aims to demonstrate that there has been a change in church action in public life in the last five or six years, from the dominant position of alignment and cooptation towards a more independent and critical voice that created a distance between churches and the government position. This period is marked by an evident change inside the churches, especially in the voice of the South African Council of

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<sup>7</sup> For the purpose of this chapter I will use the term 'churches' to refer to mainline churches and not independent churches.

<sup>8</sup> My interview with Dr Molefe Tsele (SACC), Johannesburg, 30 May 2002.

Churches (SACC) and its current leadership, and is characterised by a new wave of criticism of government policy. In the 2001 national conference of the SACC<sup>9</sup> the council decided to adopt an 'attitude of critical engagement in its dealings with the state and other organs of civil society'.<sup>10</sup> These different attitudes are the result of the religious leadership's search for a place in contemporary South Africa and a new engagement with the national political arena. If the South African state after decolonisation has found that the assimilation and the appropriation of Christian values and terminology<sup>11</sup> spurred the integration of various forms of militancy and division, South African Mainline Christianity after 1994 had to pay a high price in terms of independence from political transformation.<sup>12</sup>

### **A History of Liberation: The Role of Churches in the Struggle Against Apartheid**

Although in African culture a continuum exists between visible and invisible worlds<sup>13</sup> and religion reaches all sectors of public life, Western analysts and disciplines generally struggle in considering how religious ideas come to have a bearing on the way political power is actually perceived and exercised.<sup>14</sup> The wide spread of religious trends, common to other continents such as Latin America,<sup>15</sup> is characterised in Africa by the increasing role of religious actors in politics.<sup>16</sup> From

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<sup>9</sup> SACC National Conference, Durban, October 2001.

<sup>10</sup> 'Unholy battle between ANC and churches' in *Mail and Guardian*, 02 November 2001.

<sup>11</sup> It interesting for this aspect to analyse the president's speeches and the adoption of religious rhetoric. For example Yehosua Gitay, 'Religious rhetoric: a prolegomenon when, who, and where?' and Wayne C. Booth, 'Can rhetoric yield a truce between science and religion?' both in *Journal for the Study of Religion*, vol. 14, 1, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> For the centrality of cultural issues, as the religious ones, to the study of conflict and violence, I make reference to Warren B. (ed), *The Violence Within: Cultural and Political Opposition in a Divided Nation*, Westview Press, 1993, p. 77 and p. 89.

<sup>13</sup> Appiah, K.A., *Father's House*, 1992.

<sup>14</sup> See Haynes J., *Third World Politics*, 1994, p.103.

<sup>15</sup> See for example for Latin America: Corten A., Marshall-Fratani R. (ed), *Between Babel and Pentecost*, 2001, p.15.

<sup>16</sup> This thesis is supported by Gifford P. (ed), *The Christian Churches*, 1995; Gifford P., *Public Role*, 1998; Chidester D., *Religions of South Africa*, 1992; Chidester D., *A Global History*, 2001; Maxwell D., *Christians and Chiefs*, 1999; Mbembe A., *Afrique Indociles*. 1985; Bayart J.F., Mbembe A. Toulabor C., *Le politique par le bas*, 1992; Corten A., Marshall-Frantani R., *Between Babel and Pentecost*, 2001; Helgesson A., *Church, State*, 1994; Haynes J., *Religion and Politics*, 1996; Haynes



the end of the 1980s, with the collapse of the one party system, a trend seemed to emerge characterised by an erosion of legitimacy in African nation-states. In this period Churches played a remarkable role in preventing political *impasse*, in criticising threats to the democratisation process, and in promoting democratic values whilst acting inside civil society.<sup>17</sup> From the Ivory Coast to Kenya (considering examples of stability in the past), from Zambia to Zimbabwe and the Democratic Republic of Congo, the rewriting of national laws has brought conflicts to light and highlighted the importance of the state. In this particular time of crisis we can see the emergence of the churches' voice.

Religion and politics have been intimately linked throughout African history,<sup>18</sup> but in South Africa two main periods are usually identified with respect to churches as actors of socio-political change in social context: the process of colonisation, in which they acted as a vehicle of 'modernisation' and westernisation of the indigenous population, and the liberation struggle that brought apartheid to an end. When we talk of Christianity in South Africa we have to consider two different theological traditions: Afrikaner Calvinism and the more liberal theology of the English-speaking churches. The first related to politics and apartheid through the idea that it is possible to achieve national salvation through the doctrine of separate spheres;<sup>19</sup> for the second, reconciliation of the divided spheres of the country was an ideal goal but difficult to realise. 'For both, the Christian doctrine of reconciliation was inextricably bound up with social reality and thereby politicised, whether through its denial in support of apartheid, or the painfully slow recognition that racial segregation and Christianity were incompatible'.<sup>20</sup> Only in 1968

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J., *Developing World*, 2002 (especially chapter 5); de Gruchy J.W., *Christianity and Democracy*, 1995; de Gruchy J.W., *Restoring Justice*, 2002.

<sup>17</sup> I adopt this category following Gifford P., *Public Role*, 1998, p.20; even if I think that the author failed to highlight the differences between the level of action and organisation of civil society in the different African countries, making appear it as a uniform and strong vehicle in all the countries.

<sup>18</sup> See for example Bediako K., 'Africa and Christianity on the threshold of the third Millennium: the religious dimension' in *African Affairs*, 99 (2), 2000, pp. 303-323.

<sup>19</sup> See for example Bompani B., unpublished thesis, 2000.

<sup>20</sup> de Gruchy J.W., 'Reconciliation' in Ford D.F., Quash B., Soskice J.M., *Fields of Faith. Theology and Religious Studies for the Twenty-first Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, p.154.

churches, English-speaking churches recognised with no ambiguity the incompatibility between apartheid and the Christian message with the publication of *The Message to the People of South Africa*.<sup>21</sup> But finally it is only in the eighties, in concomitance with the escalation of violence in the country, that the ecumenical religious movement started to organise its synergies and being an active part of the liberation struggle.

Transition to democracy in South Africa has meant many things for various religious communities. While the independent movement has experienced a constant level of growth in membership since the end of the eighties, mainline churches are going through the opposite process.<sup>22</sup> The ecumenical movement, whose identity was closely knit to the anti-apartheid era, has emerged considerably weaker. This has happened in part because senior leadership was lost to new institutions of State or other secular organisations including business, in part because the shift from the register of resistance to the key of cooperation with government has proven very difficult, and in part because the identity of these organisations (once the apartheid regime had been defeated) could no longer be the same and their reason of existence was no longer obvious.<sup>23</sup> The ecumenical character of the churches' struggle against apartheid is contrasted by the weak collaboration among churches in the post-apartheid period. It seems that a process of closure has replaced openness and collaboration among churches and religious organisations of the liberation movement.<sup>24</sup> Following the interpretation of conceptual history, the post-apartheid is the variable that determined a change from flux to closure in the everyday religious institutions' action in social life. Mainline churches grew constantly in the first half of the twentieth century and they were dominant in the Christian landscape. They kept growing in the 1960s and in the

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<sup>21</sup> *The Message to the People of South Africa*, SACC, 1968.

<sup>22</sup> Walshe P., 'South Africa: prophetic Christianity and the liberation movement' in *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 29 (1), 1991, pp. 27-60 and Googhew D., 'Growth and decline in South Africa's Churches, 1960-1991' in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 30 (3), Leiden, 2000, pp. 344-369.

<sup>23</sup> My interview with Professor James Cochrane, Department of Religious Studies, University of Cape Town, 15 April 2001.

<sup>24</sup> An aspect many times lamented by people interviewed inside mainline churches.



1970s at a lower rate and with differences between ethnic groups, but in the 1990s mainline Christianity started to suffer a considerable decline.<sup>25</sup> In parallel we can observe the rapid growth of independent Christianity and, to a lesser extent, of Pentecostal/Charismatic churches.<sup>26</sup>

In South Africa the churches' voice was particularly powerful in the struggle against apartheid and it was embodied by the so-called prophetic Christianity. Based on respect of African values and on a commitment to analyse society and to challenge the state,<sup>27</sup> prophetic Christianity represented an obstacle for the dominant racist party and for mainline theology that always refused to confront the state. But this movement was never cohesive and churches had to deal with the problem of unity inside the single denominations and the less progressive side of Christianity. While prophetic Christianity opposition appeared strong in the struggle against apartheid in the 1980s, divisions occurred within Christian institutions between conservative and progressive factions.<sup>28</sup> The *Kairos Document* is the highest expression of confrontation between the apartheid state and progressive Christianity.<sup>29</sup> Prophetic Christianity in the struggle received 95 percent of its funding from overseas.<sup>30</sup> This money was used by an extensive network for helping with the psychological, legal and material support of detainees

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<sup>25</sup> The Catholic Church is the historical denomination that lost the least number of members after the end of apartheid.

<sup>26</sup> Data from the South African State in Googhew D., 'Growth and Decline in South Africa's Churches, 1960-1991' in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 30, 2000, pp. 344-369.

<sup>27</sup> My interview with Archbishop Denis Hurley and my interview with Paddy Kearney, Diakonia organisation, both on the 12 of August 2000, Durban.

<sup>28</sup> Walshe P., 'Prophetic Christianity', 1991, pp. 27-60.

<sup>29</sup> Even if we can critically point out that this document has been elaborated in an already advanced stage of the struggle, in 1985. *The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church. A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa*, Institute for a Contextual Theology, Johannesburg, 1985.

<sup>30</sup> A rare case in history in which money to support a liberation struggle was routed through international religious channels. For example the Kagiso Trust, established in 1985 to channel funds from the European Community's (EC) to support victims of apartheid, represents the unique case in which the EC has chosen to allocate funding through religious institutions. Highly contested by part of the Church and by the South African government that tried to stop this partnership. See for example Tingle R., *Revolution or Reconciliation? Struggle in the Church in South Africa*, Christian Studies Centre, London, 1992. Money was also channelled by the World Council of Churches through the Programme to Combat Racism, which supported the non-violent aspect of the ANC struggle, such as education and public relations.

and their families in the townships. Hundreds of clergy and Christian activists were detained, many were tortured, some deported.<sup>31</sup> The SACC building, Khotso House, as well as the Catholic Bishops' Conference Building, Khanya House, were targeted by bombs in 1988. It is possible to trace pragmatic reasons behind the choice of using churches to channel money. While political organisations were banned and political leaders exiled or imprisoned, religious organisations were able to preserve a certain level of autonomy and they were never completely repressed by the apparatus of the apartheid state. A certain level of associational life has always been tolerated by the apartheid regime,<sup>32</sup> especially in the case of religious organisations that were well connected to the international community. In the post-apartheid era, prophetic Christianity assisted in the withdrawal of religious institutions and leaders from the political arena, due in part to the movement of leadership and trained people into bureaucratic or political institutions, to the lack of money from abroad, to the decline of membership inside mainline churches and due to internal problems of redefinition of identity in the democratic context.<sup>33</sup>

To understand the decline of prophetic Christianity in the post-apartheid period it is important to understand an important aspect that defined prophetic Christianity before the end of the regime. In the apartheid era prophetic Christianity has never formulated alternative and independent solutions to the liberation struggle and never heralded a Christian third way to heal South African society. Christian efforts were more orientated into the broader liberation movement. It is not possible to talk of a Christian struggle but rather of Christian leaders and activists as part of the liberation movement. Prophetic Christianity in South Africa has never been synonymous with a strong and monolithic Church. On the contrary we are talking of ecumenical institutions (like Diakonia and the Institute for Contextual Theology)

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<sup>31</sup> Bompani B., unpublished thesis, 2000.

<sup>32</sup> See for example Mayekiso M., *Township Politics. Civic Struggle for a New South Africa*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1996; Lodge T., *Politics in South Africa*, 2003.

<sup>33</sup> For more detailed explanations of these points see Walsh P., 'Prophetic Christianity', 1991, p. 51 and Bompani B., unpublished thesis, 2000.

and organisations (like the Young Christian Students) inside the different Christian denominations, or Christian political leaders and activists that entered independently in the movement without the support of the parish. And more importantly, the majority of members of prophetic Christianity were black Christians who were already active in the political struggle. This characteristic is important in understanding the complexity of Christian actors (and action) in the liberation struggle, although narratives of the struggle tend to present the movement as a homogenous (ANC dominated) reality. The relation between prophetic Christianity and the liberation movement in the apartheid era determined the relations between churches and the political establishment in the post-apartheid era and contributed to its support of the government's politics in the initial moment of national reconstruction.

### **Pluralism in Civil Society: The Anti-apartheid Struggle and the Democratic Context**

As previous literature has richly demonstrated, churches in South Africa were broadly recognised as a fundamental part of civil society.<sup>34</sup> However, these studies have tended to lack detailed analyses of the role of churches' actions and identities inside the broader sweep of civil society in the country. The particular stress of this chapter (and of this thesis in general) lies on the study of churches and not on other actors of civil society because my intention is, through churches, to give fuller recognition to diversity, plural identities and plurality of aims and endeavours within the broad sweep of civil society, a complexity and plurality that has often been denied (or not properly recognised) by the history of liberation.<sup>35</sup> If it was difficult to dissociate and disaggregate religious action in the liberation movement, the post-apartheid period, with its focus on pluralism, should allow for a full

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<sup>34</sup> For Villa-Vicencio their involvement has never been strong enough: 'I think they (churches) were not involved enough in the anti-apartheid struggle and they are not involved enough now as they should be'. My interview with Charles Villa-Vicencio, 02 August 2002, Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, Cape Town.

<sup>35</sup> See for example Seekings J., *The UDF: A History of the United Democratic Front in South Africa 1983-1991*, David Philip, 2000, p. 134.

recognition of the singularities and diversities of individual actors in the socio-political spectrum. This is one of the advantages of the study of the post-apartheid. As Terence Ranger pointed out,<sup>36</sup> South Africa has been the world regime most concerned with identity. The past apartheid policies, with the imposition of strongly defined identities (White, Coloured, Black, Indian but also Zulu, Venda etc.), had denied the space for flexibility and pluralism. Ranger defined the obsessive identity articulation of the apartheid regime as the production of 'frozen' identities. It is interesting in this respect trying to individuate how the post-apartheid apparatus acted and dealt with the 'de-frosting' of these identities.

As we saw above, Prophetic Christianity had never formulated alternative and independent solutions to the struggle and never heralded a Christian 'third way' to heal South African society.<sup>37</sup> Christian opposition, as other different fragments of the struggle, had lost their singular identities within the United Democratic Front (UDF) structure in the name of the liberation struggle. The notion of "the people" was seen in the 1980s as a unified whole, which did not allow for much internal differentiation and diversity, while in reality this mass (liberation movement) was composed of disparate segments.<sup>38</sup>

In the 1990s the ANC had to bring together in a single organisation different realities: leaders in prison, exiled people, the militant wing of *Umkhonto se Sizwe*, and an active internal mass movement (UDF), not formally part of the ANC.<sup>39</sup> That the people are composed of different groups, with sometimes overlapping and sometimes contradictory interests, which cannot always be collapsed into a larger

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<sup>36</sup> Ranger T., 'Concluding Summary: Religion, Development and Identity' in Petersen K. H. (ed), *Religion, Development and African Identity*, Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Uppsala, 1987, p. 156.

<sup>37</sup> Walshe P., 'Prophetic Christianity', 1991, p. 38.

<sup>38</sup> See for example Southall R. (ed), *Opposition and Democracy in South Africa*, Frank Cass Publishers, London, 2001.

<sup>39</sup> See Ottaway M., 'Liberation movements and transition to democracy: the case of the ANC' in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 29 (1), 1991, pp. 61-82.

unity, is a notion that is relatively new to South Africa'.<sup>40</sup> On the conceptualisation of 'post' lays the broad understanding of how past and present relations are constructed and preserved. Post-colonial, post-apartheid and post-liberation are all terms that define an historical period in contraposition to the previous one.<sup>41</sup> There is no fluid passage from one to the other. Belonging to a political site in the struggle for liberation created dynamics and expectations in the post-apartheid period.

To certain extents the idea of unity appears as a *trait d'union* between the liberation struggle and the post-liberation period. If in the past all the energies were orientated in the struggle against the common enemy, in the current situation the ANC is calling for unity across all the different segments in the name of a perpetuating struggle that coincides with the process of democratisation. But pluralism, in the democratic context, led to a new conceptualisation and exercise of power: the rigid binary of the anti-apartheid struggle (against apartheid/supporting apartheid) have been replaced by independent heterogeneous sites that deal individually with centres of power. Unity was a sacred principle of the past struggle and it seems to remain the symbol of the post-apartheid era. The central power in the new political dispensation, in the voice of the ANC, advocates for itself the right to define political discourse. Drawing perspective from other countries in the post-colonial period it is possible to identify the idea that the maintenance of unity was more important than democracy in the African conditions of the 1960s and this was accepted within the decolonisation period.<sup>42</sup> There is an historical tradition on the continent that identifies civil society action in contraposition to the government primarily involved in a struggle against the aggression and disrespect of civic and human rights. In this sense African civil

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<sup>40</sup> Greenstein R., State, civil society and the reconfiguration of power in post-apartheid South Africa, paper presented at Wiser Seminar, Wits University, Johannesburg, 2003.

<sup>41</sup> See for example Young R.J.C., *Postcolonialism*, 2001, p.240.

<sup>42</sup> Ottaway M., *Liberation Movements*, 1991. See also Zolberg A.R., *Escape from Violence: Conflict and the Refugee Crisis in the Developing World*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989; Zolberg A.R., *Creating Political Order: the Party-states of West Africa*, Rand McNally, Chicago, 1966. And Ake C., *Democracy and Development in Africa*, Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C, 1996; Ake C., *The Feasibility of Democracy in Africa*, Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, African Books Collective (distributor), Oxford, 2000.



society has frequently been portrayed as 'anti-state'.<sup>43</sup> There is a constant stress of a need of unity in ANC statements, in parliamentary discourses and individual MPs speeches:

It is at this stage of our transition that we should strive for the greatest unity of purpose across the nation manifested in partnerships between the state and civil society with the minimum disruption to the delivery of goods and services to the mass of the people.<sup>44</sup>

Those most supportive of the independence of civil society expressed concern that the relationship between civil society and the ANC would not be characterised by a constructive dialectic but by the subordination of all the organisations to the party.<sup>45</sup> The ANC's intention was not for the maintenance of the UDF as an organisation, but to absorb some of its cadres into its own structures. The debate on the role of civil society in the transition has shown the difficulties of maintaining the autonomy of civil society from an overarching party. Civic movements played an important role in the struggles for democratisation but it was difficult to sustain themselves once the institutions of representative democracy had been put in place. The movements were affected in two ways: many civic leaders saw the achievement of a democratic political system as the conclusion of civics' primary function. Secondly, popular grievances could now be raised through channels that were not available in the 1980s such as the ANC or other parties, MPs, members of the provincial legislatures or local councillors).<sup>46</sup> The general relationship of civil society and the government has been well expressed by Kotze:

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<sup>43</sup> See for example Makumbe J., 'Is there a civil society in Africa?' in *International Affairs*, 74 (2), 1998, pp. 305-317.

<sup>44</sup> Turok B. (ANC MP, National Assembly), 'What role for civil society organisations (CSO's) in transformation?' in Department of Political Education and Training, *Umrabulo*, n.7, 1999, electronic resource: at <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/pubs/umrabulo/umrabulo5.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Mayekiso M., *Township Politics*, 1996, p. 110.

<sup>46</sup> Seekings J., 'Civic organisations in the "New" South Africa' in Adler G., Steinberg J., *From Comrades to Citizens. The South African Civics Movement and The Transition to Democracy*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, pp. 205-224.

a classic swing of the political pendulum had thus taken place and, for quite some time, there would be little meeting ground between government and civil society. The expectation of a perfect match and 'comradely' co-operation between government and civil society proved naïve and unrealistic. In reality, this relationship is infinitely more complex and assumes different shapes in different times.<sup>47</sup>

The general strategy of the movement of South African religious groups from state resistance during the liberation struggle to 'critical support' of the new post-apartheid state can be explained in part through other movements' pathways to democracy but in part through unique internal reasons: religious institutions and leaders withdrew from the political arena, return to a denominational character (abandoning of the ecumenical alliance), flight of leadership and trained people into bureaucratic or political institutions, weak financial support from abroad,<sup>48</sup> decreasing number of believers,<sup>49</sup> and internal problems of redefinition of identity. Paddy Kearney from Diakonia pointed out that 'churches adoption of critical solidarity was more similar to a form of cooperation with the power than with the poor. Churches were scared of criticising the government'.<sup>50</sup>

### **Christianity and Opposition: ANC as Ruling Party or Post-liberation Movement?**

State and religious movements and churches are considered by this research as sites in which identities, goals, techniques of action and conceptualisations of beliefs are

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<sup>47</sup> Kotze H., 'Swimming in the wild sea: The new challenges facing civil society' in Marharaj G. (ed), *Between Unity and Diversity. Essays on Nation-Building in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, IDASA, David Philip Publishers, 1999, p.175.

<sup>48</sup> See for example Tingle R., *Revolution or Reconciliation*, 1992. The interruption, or conspicuous reduction, of financial support from overseas after the end of apartheid is an important element in understanding the weakness of the ecumenical movement in the democratic context.

<sup>49</sup> The problem with the membership that mainline churches have to face does not coincide with the lack of religiosity of the secularised western countries but with a shift of members from historical churches into Pentecostal, Charismatic and Independent Churches.

<sup>50</sup> My interview with Paddy Kearney, Diakonia, Durban, 12 August 2000.



shaped through the interaction of institutions and individuals. The nature of these interactions changes in different historical moments, as it is possible to see in the comparison between the apartheid and post-apartheid periods. This analysis benefits from Foucault's<sup>51</sup> idea that state and society are spaces of power that continuously produce and shape rather than merely reflect consolidated social identities and interests.

As was the experience in much of post-colonial Africa, demands of unity may then be used by elites to counter the more militant and self-interested demands of various constituencies, including those of trade unions and movements such as churches.<sup>52</sup> In South Africa the comparatively high degree of organisation achieved by such groups during the long struggle against minority rule represented a potential conflict between these groups and the ruling party's élites. The call for unity in the name of the past anti-apartheid struggle impelled the different voices of civil society to abandon criticism and differences in the name of nation building.<sup>53</sup> The dialectic relationship between State and organisations involved in the struggle had lost its own *raison d'être* in the moment in which the political arena became populated by the same agents of the grassroots movements. The new eschatology in the current scenario is unity itself. It is illuminating to consider a similar situation in a different country.<sup>54</sup> Tracy Kuperus described Zimbabwean state-civil society relations after independence as 'co-opted and consensus driven'.<sup>55</sup> The main target of national unity and strengthening development coincided with the request from the government of the total support of civil society organisations in order to reach a full level of credibility and legitimacy in the nation-building process. If some of these organisations followed the politics of

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<sup>51</sup> Foucault M., *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, Harvester, London, 1980.

<sup>52</sup> Thesis supported by Warren K. B., 'The violence within', 1993. See also Sylvester C., 'Unities and Disunities in Zimbabwe's 1990 elections' in *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 28 (3), 1990, pp. 375-400.

<sup>53</sup> See for example Lodge T., *South Africa Politics*, 1999.

<sup>54</sup> Different level of cooptation of civil society in South Africa and Zimbabwe as Kuperus explains.

<sup>55</sup> Kuperus T., 'Building democracy: an examination of religious associations in South Africa and Zimbabwe' in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 37, (4), 1999, p. 648.

alignment because of perceived benefits, many more did it because 'the new government's policies embraced the norms of equality and justice promoted by the liberation struggle'.<sup>56</sup> According to Kuperus this solidarity with the government lasted ten years before the civic organisations started to regret their 'passive acceptance'. In terms of a chronological comparison, the same amount of time that passed since the end of apartheid.<sup>57</sup>

This phenomenon is connected to the nature of the ruling party: did the ANC abandon the character of the struggle movement in the democratic context or does it still adopt symbols, techniques, mythology and rhetorical language linked to the struggle? Should in the name of the past struggle the different agents of the society deny their own originality? This problem is not new in the post-colonial situation of African countries.

A core belief within the ANC remains that the organisation is not only a political party but remains a liberation movement.<sup>58</sup> The terminology is not merely used to keep its social appeal (the end of apartheid through the ANC leadership) but to highlight its current role of liberator of 'Africans, in particular black people in general from political and economic bondages'.<sup>59</sup> This liberation of the Africans depends on economic and institutional changes brought on by the government. One of its goals is to remove resistance and to extend its control 'to all levels of power'.<sup>60</sup> In the ANC journal, *Umrabulo*, Gugile Nwinkinti, stated that 'as a political party, the ANC allows for criticism. But its leadership tends to be defensive when responding to criticism; even what appears to be fair criticism. That is why people

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<sup>56</sup> Kuperus T., *Building Democracy*, 1999, p.648.

<sup>57</sup> According to Sara Rich Dorman this interpretation is basically correct although Kuperus overestimates the extent to which this shift was common to most churches, CSOs and NGOs. It was an attitude that emerged in a few 'activist' NGOs in the early 1990s, but many other NGOs carried on regardless. See Dorman Rich S., *Inclusion and Exclusion: NGOs and Politics in Zimbabwe*, The University of Oxford, 2001, unpublished thesis, chapter 3.

<sup>58</sup> For example, Southall R (ed), *Opposition and Democracy*, 2001, p. 103.

<sup>59</sup> Department of Political Education and Training, *Umrabulo*, 5, 1998, electronic resource: <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/pubs/umrabulo/umrabulo5.html>.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

find it easy to criticise the organisation informally, or move into sister organizations to criticise it'. And again: 'One is afraid to criticise for fear of being labelled as belonging to this or the other group, probably bent on destroying a leader or the organisation itself'.<sup>61</sup>

The reaction of ANC to criticism could be analysed from two perspectives: inside the party and outside the party. Richard Calland, co-author of *Democracy Index*,<sup>62</sup> in the latest IDASA report on Democracy in South Africa, stated that if generally there is freedom of speech there is also a price to pay for making opposition to the ruling African National Congress.<sup>63</sup> 'There is full freedom of speech but it comes with a price. What this means is that arguing with the ANC has its own price both within the ruling party and outside'.<sup>64</sup> If for the political parties freedom of expression is affected by strong party discipline and control, that means that generally politicians are reluctant to engage individually with the media and with the public,<sup>65</sup> on the other level criticism from outside the party is inevitably accused of being anti-patriotism and of being against the national interest. As Tom Lodge highlighted in the ANC 'briefing document' circulated after the National Executive session in September 2001, President Mbeki complained about COSATU's collaboration with international left-wing forces and he accused his ally of 'counter-revolutionary' plans to launch an independent political party.<sup>66</sup> Similarly it is possible to analyse the critical ANC reaction to the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) different position on the recent parliamentary election in Zimbabwe.<sup>67</sup> And again Mamphela Ramphele criticised what she defined the 'significant silences', or the reluctance of intellectuals who identified with the

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<sup>61</sup> Nkwinti G, Department of Political Education and Training, *Umrabulo* 13, 2001, electronic resource: [www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/pubs/umrabulo/umrabulo13s.html](http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/pubs/umrabulo/umrabulo13s.html).

<sup>62</sup> Calland R., Graham P. (ed), *IDASA's Democracy Index: Democracy in the Time of Mbeki*, Cape Town: IDASA, 2005.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Calland R., Graham P., (ed), *Democracy Index*, 2005, p. 12.

<sup>65</sup> See Christina Murray 'Are civil and political rights for all guaranteed?' in Calland R., Graham P., *Democracy Index*, 2005, pp. 78-95.

<sup>66</sup> Lodge T, 'The ANC and the development of party politics in modern South Africa' in *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 42 (2), 2004, p.200.

<sup>67</sup> 'Making them blush', *Mail & Guardian*, 03 February 2005.

liberation struggle to openly criticise what it appears to be mistaken or abused by the ANC unless they construed as being 'anti-liberation'.<sup>68</sup> The ANC maintains tight control over its MPs through a highly controlled parliamentary caucus and limits to the MPs to question ministerial work (e.g. Bantu Holomisa,<sup>69</sup> Patrick Lekota).<sup>70</sup>

Opposition by religious organisations or religious leaders to government policy is not an exception. For example Cedric Mayson<sup>71</sup> said in the *Mail & Guardian*: 'For the past two years some religious leaders and NGOs seem to have used the HIV/AIDS epidemic to make personal political attacks on the president of South Africa'.<sup>72</sup> One month later president Mbeki stated: 'Religious faiths had some difficulty in determining what their role would be in the aftermath of the common victory over the apartheid regime. They have abandoned the common struggle against the legacy of apartheid'.<sup>73</sup> This renegotiation of the Churches' critical position with regard to the state should form an important strand for future analysis. Offering an alternative to the ruling party political discourse assumes the meaning of 'abandoning the struggle' and creates strong cleavages between the ANC discourse and the religious one:

One would have imagined that there would have been more harmony and support between government and religious movements and civil society in general, given the fact that so many politicians and government officers come from civil society organisations and they studied and grew up in religious organisations.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Mamphela Ramphele, 'When Good People are Silent' in *Mail & Guardian*, 10-16 December 1999.

<sup>69</sup> In 'The Rise and Fall of Bantu Holomisa', *New Nation*, 21 February 1997 and ANC website: [www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/misc/holomisa.html](http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/misc/holomisa.html).

<sup>70</sup> ANC, Department for Information and Publicity, September 1998.

<sup>71</sup> Head of the ANC's Commission for Religious Affairs.

<sup>72</sup> Cited in 'Mayson castigates church leaders' disgusting ploy' in *Mail & Guardian*, 19 October 2001.

<sup>73</sup> 'Unholy battle between ANC and churches', *Mail and Guardian*, 2 November 2001.

<sup>74</sup> Ines Ceruti, Grail (Catholic Organisation), my interview, Johannesburg, 18 July 2002.

## The Language of Politics and Power

Language develops and frames the relation between political and religious discourse. Analysis of political language turns around Foucault's idea of discourse, and in this case we are making reference to political discourse, is always a discourse of power because it carries a message of truth.<sup>75</sup> The generation of discourses and ideas is not a passive process: the relation between the central power and the other ramifications of power is active and productive. It is from the interaction between the central political discourse and other discourses that new identities and interests are generated and shaped. For these reasons it seems relevant to investigate the manifestation of power through dialogues of the South African state: government speeches and reports through which the voice of the ANC is incarnated and the reaction, interaction and formulation of new identities and ideas from the religious counterpart.

The language of ANC leaders is profoundly formal, reflecting intellectual conventions that have evolved over a long history as a revolutionary movement.<sup>76</sup> An interaction between Archbishop Desmond Tutu, after his lecture at the Nelson Mandela Foundation, and president Thabo Mbeki illustrates this point.<sup>77</sup> After a long report on what was achieved by the South African State after 1994, the Archbishop lingered on the current problems of the South African situation. After identifying HIV/AIDS as the 'most serious', Archbishop Tutu passes to another order of problems that we can characterise as a call for a 'better society':

We want our society to be characterised by vigorous debate and dissent where to disagree is part and parcel of a vibrant community, that we should play the ball not the person and not think that those who disagree, who express dissent, are ipso facto disloyal or unpatriotic. An unthinking, uncritical, kowtowing

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<sup>75</sup> Kelly M. (ed), *Critique and Power Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, MIT Press, London, 1994; Foucault M., *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, Penguin, 1979,

<sup>76</sup> Lodge T., *Development of Party*, 2004.

<sup>77</sup> Tutu D., Nelson Mandela Foundation Lecture, 23<sup>rd</sup> of November 2004, electronic resource: [www.safm.co.za/webfeatures/featureList.jsp?featureID=12](http://www.safm.co.za/webfeatures/featureList.jsp?featureID=12)

party line-toeing is fatal to a vibrant democracy. I am concerned to see how many have so easily been seemingly cowed and apparently intimidated to comply. I am sure that proportional representation has been a very good thing but it should have been linked to constituency representation'. And again 'Truth cannot suffer from being challenged and examined. There surely can't have been unanimity from the outset. I did not agree with the President (previous reference on the Presidential stance on HIV/AIDS) but that did not make me his enemy. He knows that I hold him in high regard but none of us is infallible and that is why we are a democracy and not a dictatorship'

He wishes there would be more openness and space for debate and he added:

'We should not too quickly want to pull rank and to demand an uncritical, sycophantic, obsequious conformity.'<sup>78</sup>

In the African National Congress' online publication, *ANC Today*, president Mbeki replied:

One of the fundamental requirements for rational discussion suggested by the archbishop is familiarity with the facts relevant to any matter under discussion, as well as respect for the truth [...] the Archbishop has never been a member of the ANC and would have very little knowledge of what happens in an ANC branch.'<sup>79</sup>

He continued by calling Tutu

[A] liar with scant regard for the truth, and a charlatan posing with his concern for the poor, the hungry, the oppressed and the voiceless.'<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> T Mbeki, 'The cloud with the silver lining', *ANC Today*, 5 (2), 2005, electronic resource: <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/anctoday/2005/at02.htm>.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*



The ANC took a more conciliatory approach in the words of its spokesperson Smuts Ngoyama but it is interesting to see how he addressed the COSATU leader, Zvenlinziwa Vavi, who supported Tutu's attack on the 'culture of sycophancy in the ANC':

As the ANC we take serious exception to that kind of statement and we regard it as a statement that is coming from a leader that is highly reckless, highly impetuous, and Vavi has demonstrated over and over again that he is reckless.<sup>81</sup>

In January 2003 the ANC national spokesperson Smuts Ngonyama publicly accused Bobby Godsell, the AngloGold CEO, of being 'surprising' and 'unwise' for working as a 'facilitator' at a top-secret meeting of Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and Democratic Alliance (DA) on 9 and 10 December 2002.<sup>82</sup> It is interesting to note that Smuts Ngonyama unfavourably compares Godsell's actions with another leader, Archbishop Desmond Tutu. This time the ANC spokesperson said that 'the country needed leaders who stood above party politics, like Desmond Tutu, who could act as trouble-shooters'. And he adds 'By taking this route, Godsell appears to have disqualified himself from this category'.<sup>83</sup> Once again it is the voice of the ruling party that defines the boundaries of political action for other agents in society. Being outside these boundaries means not being part of the nation-building process: 'Lively religion is not a watch-dog barking round the boundary fences, but a full participant on the factory floor of building a new nation.'<sup>84</sup> If a debate on the risk of co-optation by the government emerged about civil society in general, a similar reflection focused just on

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<sup>81</sup> SAPA, 'ANC extends olive branch to Tutu', Dispatch Online, 30 November 2004, electronic resource: <http://www.dispatch.co.za/2004/11/30/SouthAfrica/aalead.html>.

<sup>82</sup> SAPA, 'Godsell takes flak', South African Press Association, 10 January 2003, electronic resource: <http://www.sapa.org.za/secure/login.cfm?CFID>

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> ANC, *The ANC and Religion*, published pamphlet, 2001.



churches did not occur. The churches debate was concentrated on the issues of morality, values, reconciliation and human rights.<sup>85</sup>

The focus of the churches on reconciliation, morality and rights happened for a complex set of internal and external reasons. South African churches had been encouraged to be an active part of the nation-building process but in a form that was circumscribed by the political leadership. Churches after 1994 were encouraged to engage in a battle for a 'moral' transformation of South African society finding a communal alliance between religious values and the political values of reconstruction. Moral transformation, human rights and reconciliation became the terrain of action over which the churches were addressed by the political establishment. In an ANC pamphlet published by the ANC Commission for Religious Affairs the role of religion is highlighted as important for the 'transition from an immoral society to a just society with basic moral values'. Religious values should not be restricted to religious institutions but they should be part of the entire process of national reconstruction in post-apartheid South Africa. 'Some religious people are deeply committed to the new community, and they are trying to overcome the resistance of those who still limit their faith to personal morality, and those who relish their role as critics but not co-workers in nation-building'.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> See for example Villa-Vicencio C., Doxtader E. (ed), *Through Fire With Water: the Roots of Division and the Potential for Reconciliation in Africa*, Africa World Press, 2003; Villa-Vicencio C., *Theology of reconstruction: nation-building and human rights*, Cambridge University Press, 1992; de Gruchy J.W., *Christianity and Democracy*, 1995; de Gruchy J.W., *Restoring Justice*, 2002; Cochrane J., 'Polity, probity and piety: religion in the making of public policy' in Tayob A. & Weisse W. (ed), *Religion and Politics in South Africa: from Apartheid to Democracy*, Waxmann Munster, New York, 1999.

<sup>86</sup> ANC, 'Ethical Transformation. ANC Statement on the Moral Renewal of the Nation', ANC Commission for Religious Affairs, Marshalltown-Johannesburg, 1998, p.12.

## Church/State Dialectics in the 1990s

If we regard the post-colonial condition<sup>87</sup> as the epistemological framework for this analysis, then it must be argued that in South Africa religion and its concern for human values and virtues enjoys an important place on the public post-apartheid agenda. The new political dispensation of the nineties did not mean the decline of religion, or the removal of religion from the public sphere. But what has happened in the transitional period and after 1994 is that the public space of churches is driven more by the State than by the religious communities of South Africa. It is the State, especially in the person of the president,<sup>88</sup> which has repeatedly pushed for a stronger response from religious communities to the challenges of transformation. And it is still the State that orientates churches direction, defining the space where churches can express their public voice. Churches were invited to collaborate with the government in the reconstruction process but only in terms of agents of moral regeneration. In 1997 president Mandela addressed the churches in Soweto in this way:

We need religious institutions to continue to be the conscience of society, a moral custodian and a fearless champion of the interests of the weak and down-trodden. We need religious organisations to be part of a civil society mobilised to campaign for justice and the protection of basic human rights.<sup>89</sup>

In light of a political analysis it is possible to reinterpret Nelson Mandela's speech to religious leaders in June 1997. If the religious community welcomed and applauded this speech for the recognition of Christian efforts in the nation-building process, a second level of analysis could unmask a certain ANC orientation.

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<sup>87</sup> See for example Mamdani M., *Citizen and Subject*, 1996.

<sup>88</sup> In the form of personal presidential (both president N. Mandela and president T. Mbeki) appeal to churches like in Cape Town in 1997 and numerous parliamentary speeches directed to the religious community.

<sup>89</sup> Mandela N., 'On the Occasion of Regina Mundi Day', (Regina Mundi, the largest Catholic church in Soweto), 30 November 1997, Soweto, electronic resource: [www.info.gov.za/speeches/1997/1202regina97.htm](http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/1997/1202regina97.htm)

The transformation of our country requires the greatest possible cooperation between religions and political parties, critically and wisely serving our people together. Neither political nor religious objectives can be achieved in isolation. We are partners in the building of our society.<sup>90</sup>

This relation is univocal: churches are encouraged to claim a place in the process of reconstruction while concurrently having to support the ANC's engagement in the democratisation process. The position allocated by the government to religious institutions raises a series of questions on the role of churches as part of civil society and their cooptation inside the government's orientation. Churches' response to president Mandela's invitation to cooperate was positive and led to the creation of the National Religious Leaders Forum (NRLF), a permanent organ of discussion between religion and political groups. In October 1999, after discussion between religious communities and political parties, the NRLF convened a Moral Summit:

Religious and political leaders across the board attended the event. They agreed to find the cause of our moral problems and to seek the answer together. Co-operation to build a successful nation would come first. South Africa is the first country in the world in which all religious and political groups have come together to seek transformation.<sup>91</sup>

In 1999 the climax of solidarity with the government was still alive as illustrated by the Multi-Event publication entitled *Religion in Public Life*,<sup>92</sup> the result of a seven day meeting that gathered religious organisations, religious leaders, politicians, ecumenical organisations and community based organisations (CBOs) in Cape Town. The main issue debated on this occasion was the role of religion in public life. The complete title was *Transforming Public Life in the New Millennium:*

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<sup>90</sup> Mayson C., *Faith and Politics in Society*, ANC, Commission for Religious Affairs, Marshalltown-Johannesburg, 1997, p.14.

<sup>91</sup> *The ANC and Religion*, ANC, electronic source:  
[www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/misc/anc\\_and\\_religion.html](http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/misc/anc_and_religion.html)

<sup>92</sup> Multi Event 1999, Cape Town 14-20 February.

*Religion in the Making of Cultural Values and Public Policy*. Once again emphasis was placed on the contribution of cultural values drawn from religion in the socio-political arena. The primary goal was to help religion find its role in public life 'which would contribute positively to both the making of cultural values and the formulation and implementation of public policy'.<sup>93</sup> The main idea that emerged is that religion should contribute to the production of ideas and values for the regeneration of the country. However, a real change in the shift between churches and the state appeared to emerge in the last five or six years, concurrently with the new SACC leadership. In the 2001 national conference of the SACC<sup>94</sup> the council decided to adopt an 'attitude of critical engagement in its dealings with the state and other organs of civil society'.<sup>95</sup>

### **Shifts in Action: Formulating Hypotheses**

In the last few years, the study of religious organisations in public life has become increasingly important within the discipline of African political science. Churches have played a significant role in the political sphere and more and more literature has started to consider and analyse this phenomenon.<sup>96</sup> Scholars in the field of religion and politics<sup>97</sup> are concerned with the changing relationships between religious organisations and society as a whole. Church leaders constantly make choices in assessing the proper relationship between religion and politics.<sup>98</sup> This is

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<sup>93</sup> *Religion in Public Life. Multi-Event 1999. Conference Proceedings*, Salty Print, Cape Town, 1999 and *Constructing a Language of Religion in Public Life. Multi-Event 1999*, RICSA, Academic Workshop, Cape Town, 30 September/2 October 1998. Many thanks for this material to Prof. James Cochrane, UCT, Cape Town.

<sup>94</sup> SACC National Conference, Durban, October 2001.

<sup>95</sup> SACC National Conference, Durban, October 2001, cited in the *Mail and Guardian*, 02 November 2002.

<sup>96</sup> Gifford P. (ed), *Democratisation of Africa*; Gifford P., *Public Role*, 1998; Chidester D., *Religions of South Africa*, 1992; Chidester D., *A Global History*, 2001; Maxwell D. (ed), *African Imagination*, 2002; Mbembe A., *Afrique Indociles*, 1985; Bayart J.F., Mbembe A. Toulabor C., *Le politique par le bas*, 1992; Corten A., Marshall-Frantani R., *Between Babel and Pentecost*, 2001; Helgesson A., *Church*, 1994; Haynes J., *Religion and Politics*, 1996; Haynes J., *Developing World*, 2002 (especially chapter 5); de Gruchy J.W., *Christianity and Democracy*, 1995; de Gruchy J.W., *Restoring Justice*, 2002.

<sup>97</sup> Ellis S., Ter Haar G., *Religion and Politics*, 1998; Ellis S., Ter Haar G., *Worlds of Power*, 2004.

<sup>98</sup> Borer T.A., *Challenging the State*, 1998, p. 98.



especially true when some segments of the population call upon the churches to act as forces for social change, as was the case with Latin American churches with their Liberation Theology in the face of military dictatorships or Prophetic Christianity under apartheid.<sup>99</sup>

In South Africa churches appear to be reorganising their action in public life around the problem of civic rights (like health, education, employment, housing) expressed in the Constitution but not delivered by the government.<sup>100</sup> The ANC's role of liberator from the past political authoritarian regime remains a dogma in the democratic context, what comes under criticism is its ability to liberate citizens from economic bondages and inequality. In this context, of weak and incomplete delivery, the ANC's call for unity seems to be losing its appeal and this is an important factor for understanding the de-alignment of segments of civil society. Literature produced on religion and social change in Latin America, where studies on religion and politics are more advanced than in Africa,<sup>101</sup> underlines the fact that democratisation requires not just the creation and consolidation of institutions and procedures but also a 'culture of citizenship'<sup>102</sup> and churches act as fundamental agents in this process. Tom Lodge noted that South Africa's lively associational life may engender a struggle for a 'more sustainable citizenship'<sup>103</sup> especially when the 'the moral aura surrounding 'charismatic authority'<sup>104</sup> derived from the struggle will stop compensating for the weakness of trust between citizens.

The element that this analysis adopts to define the end of 'critical solidarity' is the revival of churches' political participation and action as agents of mobilisation. Dr

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<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> See for example, Terreblanche S., *A History of Inequality*, 2002.

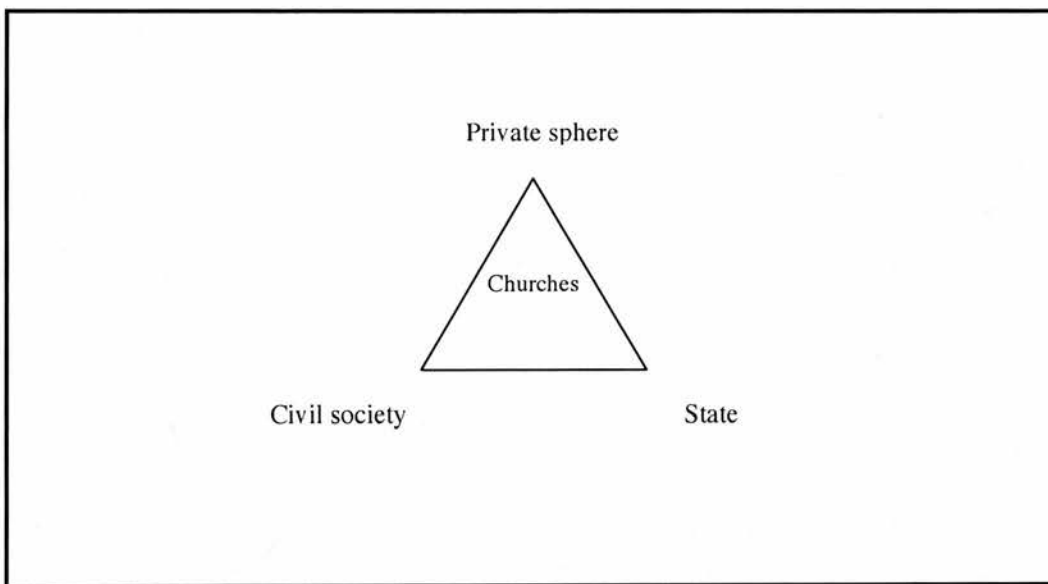
<sup>101</sup> Corten A., Marshall-Fratani R., *Between Babel and Pentecost*, 2001 and Peterson A., Vásquez M.A., Williams P. (ed), *Christianity/Social Change*, 2001.

<sup>102</sup> Peterson A., Vásquez M.A., Williams P. (ed), *Christianity/Social Change*, 2001, p. 15.

<sup>103</sup> Lodge T., *Politics in South Africa*, 2003, p.226. The figures from the Democracy and Social Capital Survey in Lodge's book show how in South Africa the highest number of civic movements and associations belong to the category 'Cultural/Religious', p.223. These are important data to be considered inside the political analysis.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

Tsele in 1997 (at that time director of ESSET and member of the Commission for Religious Affairs) used the image of triangle to describe the position of churches in post-apartheid South Africa (**figure 1**). The triangle was formed by state, civil society and the private sphere (in the sense of family or personal beliefs, not the private sector). According to Dr Tsele in 1997 churches were still deciding where to locate themselves.<sup>105</sup> If in 1997 churches' position was not in contraposition to the state, in 2002 is possible to highlight a different tone and terminology in the public voice of mainline Christianity that positions them faraway from the side of the state.



**Figure 1** Mainline churches in post-apartheid South African society

In August 2002 at the conclusion of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) religious movements participated, within an umbrella of organisations and social movements that came under the name of the United Social

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<sup>105</sup> ANC, *Faith and Politics in Society*, ANC Commission for Religious Affairs, Marshalltown, 1997, pp.42-43.

Movement,<sup>106</sup> in a march in Alexandra township. The ANC organised an alternative march the same day at the same place. If the genesis of these two events is the same, a symbolical march to give voice to developing countries at an international summit like the WSSD, the fragmentation of the march brought to light a different intent. The United Social Movement underlined the use of state power and its politics for debate, in the attempt to re-define the work of civil society outside of the sphere of state control.<sup>107</sup>

Churches started to question the government in different directions. During the SACC conference in Sandton in July 2004<sup>108</sup> SACC president Russel Botman and the general secretariat Molefe Tsele clearly criticised the government position on the Zimbabwe crisis:

The SACC notes the ineffectiveness of outside intervention and the desire and efforts of many Zimbabweans to solve their problems themselves. The quiet diplomacy clearly failed. It had not produced results and was unlikely to.<sup>109</sup>

Again the SACC (in alliance with the SACBC, SANGOCO<sup>110</sup>, IDASA,<sup>111</sup> and the Centre for Policy Studies and the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation) spoke of the failure of the South African Observer Missions in addressing 'the critical issues affecting free and fair elections standards' that compromised their role 'as honest and non-partisan observers'.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Notes from my work as observer of South African NGOs Coalition (SANGOCO), SACC and Justice and Peace Commission preparation work to the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, August 2002

<sup>107</sup> 'A new movement is being built that for the first time since 1994, poses the potential of a serious challenge to the South African government amongst its historic core constituency - the broad working class', Social Movement Indaba, press statement, 1st September 2002.

<sup>108</sup> SACC Annual Conference, 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> July 2004.

<sup>109</sup> *The Star*, Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> July 2004.

<sup>110</sup> South African NGOs Coalition.

<sup>111</sup> Institute for Democracy in South Africa, independent public interest organisation.

<sup>112</sup> SACC, *Statement of the Zimbabwe Observer Consortium*, 7 April 2005, electronic resource: <http://www.sacc.org.za/news05>



Through the churches' tenacious defence of the Treatment Action Campaign's (TAC) lobbying for the state provision of treatment for people living with HIV/AIDS the idea that the dominant political discourse has to be challenged for the defence of human and socio-economic rights has further crystallised. Citizens' rights with regards to HIV/AIDS are addressed at local, national and international levels with legal and political strategies. The image of President Thabo Mbeki has become deeply associated with dissident movements who deny links between AIDS and the HIV virus. The TAC campaign was supported by churches that, according to TAC activist Siphon Mthati,<sup>113</sup> are indispensable partners on the double level of the challenge and lobby to the state and on the more concrete level of health care projects in the territory. In a meeting on September 17, 2001, representatives of the Anglican Church, the Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference, COSATU and the Treatment Action Campaign stipulated a common commitment to 'life and dignity, to join forces against the AIDS epidemic. The document states that:

It can no longer be denied that AIDS is by far the leading cause of death for adult South Africans, especially those between 20 and 50. The report by the Medical Research Council (MRC) says that, unless we can ensure that all HIV-positive people get treatment, between four and seven million South Africans will die over the coming decade.<sup>114</sup>

And it refers to the government in this way:

We have agreed: To set up a working group that will develop shared campaigns to overcome the denial syndrome that has emerged in some official and unofficial circles; and to work with representatives of civil society in the South African National AIDS Council (SANAC) to guide and challenge our national leaders to take more positive action on AIDS, to replace the cycle of controversy and denial with co-operation, common purpose and courage in the national interest. Government must ensure that its policies face up to the

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<sup>113</sup> My interview with Siphon Mthati, TAC, Cape Town, 29 July 2004.

<sup>114</sup> Press Release, Pretoria, 21 September 2001.

national emergency caused by AIDS, or it will fail our people in both human and economic terms.<sup>115</sup>

The Churches' criticism of the government on its politics and policies on HIV/AIDS proceeds on two levels: in collaboration with other organisations and independently as a purely church-led protest. The South African Catholic Church is the largest provider of home based care and palliative care for people living with HIV/AIDS, in addition it is a significant provider of anti-retroviral treatments. Sister Alison Munro, co-ordinating secretary AIDS office for the SACBC pointed out that 'church projects are struggling financially while the government is inefficient and a huge amount of public funding remains unspent'.<sup>116</sup> A press statement of the Catholic Bishops reiterates this: 'The Catholic Church calls on the South African Government to step up its response to AIDS in the country by delivering on its proposed anti-retroviral roll out, and overcome all bureaucratic hurdles which are hindering the realisation of initiatives promoted by civil society in the health sector'.<sup>117</sup>

Also in terms of 'reconciliation' mainline churches recently seem to reconsider their position of total support to the government's reconciliatory paradigm represented by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Mainline churches supported the TRC in the nation-building process. The SACC strongly embraced and promoted the idea that the nation could be healed through truth, reconciliation, confession and restitution.<sup>118</sup> Clearly reconciliation was perceived to be part of the process of nation-reconstruction; equally clearly it was regarded as contingent upon the perpetrators of oppression and the victims, in the double formula of telling the truth about crimes and receiving reparative justice. Thus reconciliation became the key word in speaking about how to deal with the past and defining the future of the

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<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> My interview with Sr Alison Munro, SACBC, Pretoria, 04 August 2004.

<sup>117</sup> SACBC Press Statement, Pretoria, 4 February 2004, electronic resource: [www.sacbc.org.za/2004](http://www.sacbc.org.za/2004).

<sup>118</sup> See Pityana B., Villa-Vicencio C., *Being in the Church in South Africa Today*, SACC, Johannesburg 1995, p.77.

nation. But the way reconciliation was presented did not leave space to reflect further on the ways other political forms and outcomes in the post-apartheid context.<sup>119</sup> Yet, as the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission soon discovered as it set about its task in 1996, reconciliation carries a far more complex meaning in contexts such as South Africa where it has become a highly contested term in public life, and where its achievement remains elusive.<sup>120</sup> However, as de Gruchy pointed out, 'the rhetoric of reconciliation in contemporary South Africa reflects the divisions and conflicts within public life.'<sup>121</sup>

'The Truth Commission was part of a general and long-term orientation within state institutions which asserted the state's ability to rein in and control the informal adjudicative and policing structures in civil society'.<sup>122</sup> Thus, interestingly, a few years ago the South African Council of Churches' secretariat offered a critical re-evaluation of the reconciliatory approach followed by the government:

The reconciliation process was hijacked by the TRC and by the political parties. It was grossly secularised or hijacked by the liberal tradition of the churches. It became something that those people seen connected without any cost, any pay. Our debate as churches was not so much about reconciliation but about a correct reconciliation. It had avoided intentionally the problem of the victims and of the repayment. People from the government said to us that it was right during apartheid to be involved in the struggle but that now the churches have not to get involve.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> In the previous chapter we have seen the way independent churches (or at least some representatives of them) had dealt with the concept of reconciliation. It seems important here to briefly present the meaning of this process for mainline churches.

<sup>120</sup> de Gruchy J.W., 'Reconciliation' in Ford D., Quash B., Soskice J.M., *Fields of Faith*, 2005, p.153.

<sup>121</sup> de Gruchy J.W., 'Reconciliation' in Ford D., Quash B., Soskice J.M., 2005, *Fields of Faith*, p.154.

<sup>122</sup> Wilson R.A., *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa. Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p.21.

<sup>123</sup> Quote from my interview to Dr. Tsele, 3 June 2002, Johannesburg.

But while monopoly over the post-apartheid discourse can be tolerated in the nation building process, could it still be accepted in a consolidated democracy with a healthy civil society? New trends inside civil society and church orientation seem to offer a negative answer to this question. What starts to be discussed by the SACC leadership, and in other interviews,<sup>124</sup> is the heavy price that Christian churches had to pay in terms of sacrifice for the nation-building paradigm defined by the government.

In this respect is important to understand to what degree the reconciliation discourse advances the cause of the nation-building process and unity and diminish the need for plural histories and independence. In some way the answer lies in Wilson's words: 'Human rights bodies such as the TRC are part of an extension of those boundaries of the justiciable to incorporate, and expunge, that which stands in the way of a state strategy of centralization, unification and standardisation'.<sup>125</sup> And according to Dr Tsele this was true for the South African government and the way it advocated for itself the right to univocally reconstruct history:

We [churches] were caught up in a very uncomfortable narration of history. We did not know how to deal with history. We felt like obstructionist or reactionary if we wanted to talk of the people who tried to kill us, who bombed our headquarters. It was better not to talk of history because your interpretation of history could portray you as anti-change, as anti-Mandela.<sup>126</sup>

## Conclusion

Michel Foucault was alert to the depth and meaning of transformation and change: 'If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position

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<sup>124</sup> For example my interviews with sister Ines Ceruti, the Grail, Johannesburg (plural interviews) and Dr Wolfam Kistner, Johannesburg, 14 July 2002.

<sup>125</sup> Wilson R.A., *The Politics of Truth*, 2001, p.21.

<sup>126</sup> My interview, Dr Molefe Tsele, Johannesburg, 30 May 2002.

leads not to apathy but to hyper-and pessimistic activism.'<sup>127</sup> Political and social transformations, and the dynamics that drive them deserve our fullest attention. Political transformation often involves ruptures, ruptures between the colonial and the post-colonial, between state and society, and as this chapter illustrates, between church and the state. This chapter has documented the transformation of the relationship between state and civil society in South Africa, and by focusing on churches as a particular important component of this shifting relationship underlines the importance of acknowledging and analysing the pluralities of civil society; of a civil society comprised of multiple actors, ideologies, ideas and trajectories of change.

For the ANC and its alliance partners the state is conceptualised as a guiding force of social, economic and even moral change. As we saw in the case of Mainline Christian churches, the government often invoked the collaboration of different forces in the reconstruction and nation-building process. This participation is however perceived as a tool for strengthening the control and power of the state under the ANC and not as a challenging, independent force in opposition. The dominant idea of the democratic process produced by the ANC discourse was that the end of apartheid coincided with the end of political mobilisation. If churches keep emerging as independent actors in the political arena and as instruments of mobilisation, this new trend will constitute a challenge to the ANC discourse. This chapter has shown how the ruling party interacts with and reacts to this initial attitude of disengagement. The tone of the political discourse is much more similar to the rigid response of a liberation party than to a democratic party. Alternatives to the central discourse are not admitted and a continuous call to unity is perpetrated. These are the real challenges to the process of democratisation in a continent where the liberation movements themselves have failed to negotiate their own transition into a complete democracy.

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<sup>127</sup> Foucault M., *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth. The Essential Works, 1954-1984*, vol.1, The New Press 1997, p.256.

The history and relations between the liberation movement first, and the ANC in the democratic context after, are very different in the case of mainline churches. In a certain sense the idea of independence from the liberation struggle in the apartheid era<sup>128</sup> created the space for independent churches to enjoy greater independence from government-led politics in the post-apartheid era. It is important to distinguish in this regard the local character of the political action of independent churches, a character that contrasts with the national character of the well organised and publicly recognised mainline churches. Religious leaders' public voice from mainline Christianity, like Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane are well known in the country, much more than the less published and unknown political activities of leaders and members of independent churches, as we will see in the next chapters. What mainline and independent Christianity have in common is the lack of socio and political analysis that consider them as separate and distinctive actors inside the broader definition of civil society. There are specific and unique contributions that religious organisations can bring to the development of the country and these contributions deserve recognition and separate analyses.

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<sup>128</sup> Independence due to the fact that AICs did not recognise that political system of the time, as this research tried to explain and not due to an intrinsic apolitical character of these churches.



## Chapter 3

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### AICs in Soweto: Method, Ethnography and Reflection

*The purpose of all science is to coordinate our  
experiences into a logical framework*

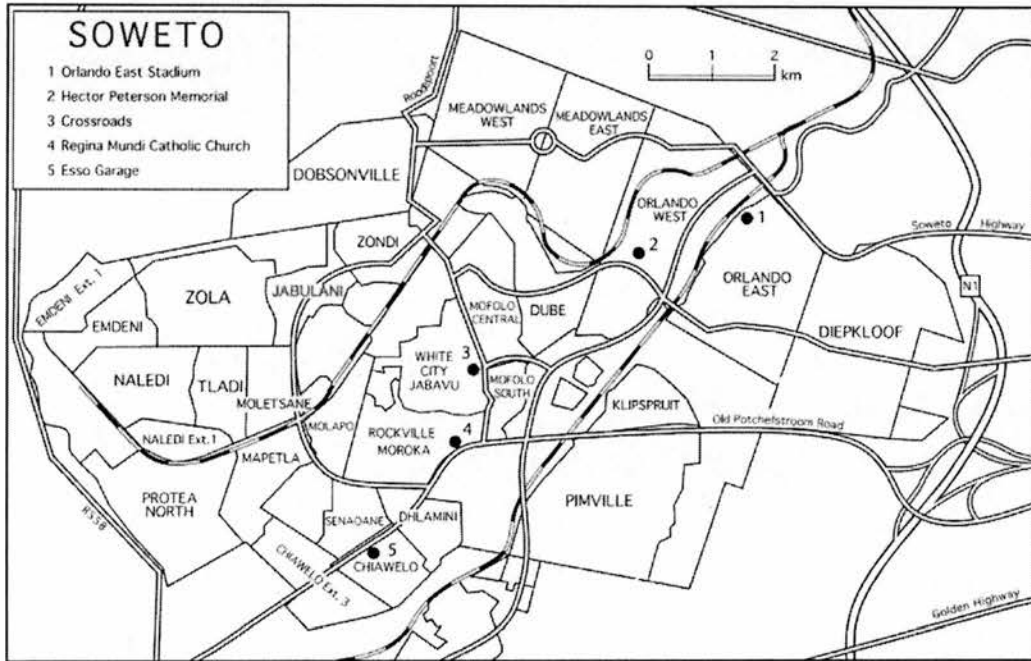
Einstein A., *The Meaning of Relativity* [1922], Chapman and Hall, London, 1978, p.1

#### Introduction to the Research

My experience with the African independent churches movement started in 2001 when I was introduced to some of them by Bishop Ntongana. I met Bishop Ntongana and his family for the first time at the end of September 2001 in his office, a small building made of raw concrete blocks behind his house in Jabulani, in the northwest part of Soweto (**figure 2**). Bishop Ntongana is the founder of his church, the Methodist Church of South Africa, which originated from a separatist movement from the Methodist Church. The bishop is also the president of the Council of African Initiated Churches (CAIC), instituted in 1995, an umbrella of independent churches that are also members of the South African Council of Churches (SACC). I met him for an interview and I stayed for four hours, talking of the history, present and future of independent Christianity in South Africa. I was introduced to his extended family, that included numerous grandchildren and I was brought around the area to meet people and to see the place where his church community lived. It was a Saturday morning and the area was crowded. I was



invited to go back to the Sunday service to ‘better understand the life of the church’s members’.<sup>1</sup> I did and since then I have attended numerous Sunday liturgies, bible readings and meetings in the Pace Elementary School between September 2001 and September 2002.



**Figure 2** Map of Soweto<sup>2</sup>

At the beginning I attended just Bishop Ntongana’s church service, in one of the rooms in the elementary school that on Sunday was used by several different independent churches, too poor to buy their own building. The beginning was not the easiest thing. I arrived every Sunday morning before eleven to spend a few minutes talking to people before the service, but what happened for almost five weeks was that people did not feel comfortable to attend the service because of my

<sup>1</sup> My interview with Bishop Ntongana, Jabulani, September 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Special thanks for this map to Mrs Wendy Job, based at the Geography Department of the Witwatersrand University, Johannesburg, who has kindly drawn it for this thesis.

presence and the service turned out to consist of just myself and Bishop Ntongana and Mama Ntongana's oldest grandchildren.<sup>3</sup> This situation made me feel uncomfortable with the idea that instead of observing the life of the church, I was in fact affecting and conditioning the regularity of the community's life. Bishop Ntongana explained to me that people said that they did not feel comfortable because they did not know me and because they were 'not used to having whites in the church'.<sup>4</sup> At different times I questioned the idea of going back but I was always encouraged by Mama and Bishop Ntongana to persist, because 'it was important for my research but especially for the members of the church that academics would talk about them'.<sup>5</sup> After a few weeks things began to change and people started to attend regularly again and began to stay longer after the liturgy spending time in long conversation. The number of members who regularly attended this service varied between 20 and 25. Also the members of the other churches who gathered on Sunday in the school for the service started to recognise me and to invite me to their services. I was advised by Bishop Ntongana to introduce myself to the other bishops and their churches and to present my work and my intentions. One Sunday instead of attending Bishop Ntongana's service, I went to the other four services where they gave me space, before or after the liturgy, to talk and to introduce myself. People were extremely welcoming and from that point they started to invite me into their houses, to their meetings and religious happenings. In that moment I felt that my field research had really begun and I started to investigate all these churches that gathered in the same place. The sample of my research consisted of five churches, two Apostolic churches (the Methodist Church of South Africa, and the Native Church of South Africa), two Zionist churches (the South African Christian Church in Zion, and the Zion Congregation Church) and an Ethiopian church (the Ethiopian Church of South Africa).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> 'Mama' is a term used to express respect to an adult African woman. Mama Ntongana rarely used her first name.

<sup>4</sup> Personal conversation with Bishop Ntongana, fieldwork notes, Jabulani, October 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Personal conversation with Bishop and Mama Ntongana, fieldwork notes, Jabulani, October 2001.

<sup>6</sup> In this thesis I accept and maintain the definition that Bishops and churches' members gave me of their church and I do not try to discuss the differences between Zionist, Apostolic and Ethiopian churches. The Methodist Church of South Africa and the Native Church of South Africa have been

It is clear that the main rationale behind the choice of my sample churches in the urban environment of a township derived firstly from reasons of practicality and accessibility. I was introduced to Bishop Ntongana and his church by the South African Council of Churches. Through this church, following a snowballing process, I was introduced to other churches that gather on Sunday mornings in the same primary school as the Methodist Church of South Africa. Secondly when I started to plan this research I intentionally looked for an urban environment because the choice of an urban setting fit better within my theoretical framework. The urban environment is more exposed to rapid social change, and this is a relevant aspect of an analysis that aims to investigate the dynamics and evolutionary movements that exist within the nation-building process as elaborated by independent churches. In direct contrast to theories that consider secularisation as directly proportional to the level of urbanisation, it has been demonstrated that in urban South Africa the growth of Independent Christianity is related to the level of urbanisation.<sup>7</sup> All these are fundamental considerations for my final theoretical interpretation.<sup>8</sup>

This chapter will discuss the methodology used in this work and some of the issues that emerged during the research in the field. A multidisciplinary approach, that draws on the traditions of ethnographic practice and socio-political analysis appeared to be relevant to the aim of this thesis. This chapter will show how and why interviews, focus groups and extensive use of participant observation were undertaken. An interesting methodological issue that this thesis engaged with is the terminological problem that emerged in working on religious beliefs and vague borders between colonial and post-colonial terminology. Inside the implicit message of the AICs there is the right to reinvent and redefine roles and systems 'independently' from any kind of authority (religious and secular). In such an

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defined as Apostolic by their leaders and they recognise themselves as different from the other two categories, although the word 'apostolic' does not appear in their church's name. For the historical origins of these churches in the country, see chapter 4.

<sup>7</sup> See Venter D., 'Concepts and theory in the study of African Independent Churches' in Venter D. (ed), *Engaging Modernity. Methods and Cases for Studying African Independent Churches in South Africa*, Praeger, London, 2004, pp. 13-44.

<sup>8</sup> See chapter seven, 'Modernity and Tradition: A Reinterpretation in the Context of Religion'.

openness of opportunity the adoption of a proper terminology has been a fascinating challenge. The chapter is divided into two parts. The first one will present in more concrete ways issues and problems that emerged and how the research tried to address them; the second part will offer a more theoretical interpretation of this methodology. The attention now turns to the way the methodology of this thesis was constructed.

### **Constructing a Methodology**

This research uses a combination of oral and archival sources. It is multi-disciplinary in nature, drawing on elements of history, religious studies and political science because the study of religion itself is invariably a multi-disciplinary undertaking. By combining a wide range of sources from across an array of disciplines it is possible to draw out tension and difference, and agreement and accord within the church, between churches and between church and society. This research therefore draws on broad postcolonial theoretical material.<sup>9</sup> This kind of approach has benefited greatly in recent years through the use of multi-disciplinary sources. As Robert Young argues, post-colonial theory produces a curiously fragmented and hybrid language that mirrors and repeats the changing forms of a central object of its analytic experience:

The kind of theories from which postcolonial cultural critique has developed are thus derived from earlier founding moments of anti-colonial thought, which was itself a hybrid construction. The term has emerged to describe a set of critical concepts, and oppositional political identities and objectives, that have been developed out of the continuing reverberations of the political and cultural history of the struggle against colonialism and imperialism.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This research will consider South Africa as a state in a post-colonial situation following different academics like Achille Mbembe and Mahmood Mamdani.

<sup>10</sup> Young Robert J.C., *Postcolonialism. A Historical Introduction*, Blackwell Publishers, Massachusetts 2001, p. 69.

Deconstructing the history of the post-colony allows recognition of the different actors that actively participated in the reshaping process of the South African society. Ron Greenstein suggests that research must continue to strive for 'detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural within which it operates *at the present time*'.<sup>11</sup>

An analysis of the public role of the independent churches involves examining a disparate range of materials. The recovery of the sources for this research started with fieldwork in the Johannesburg area during the academic year September 2001-September 2002, when I was based as a research fellow at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg supported by a Bologna University fellowship. During this time and the several months spent in the region as undergraduate between 1999 and 2000, I had built up a considerable range of contacts within religious movements and civil society more generally. The research was focused in particular on sharing the experiences of five independent church communities in the suburb of Jabulani in Soweto, assuming the methodological approach of cultural and sociological anthropology. As Bernardo Bernardi stated: 'Differently from history that takes its knowledge from archival sources, social and cultural anthropology goes into the real life of every country's people, to grasp live ideologies, myths and rituals of social organisations of the communitarian order'.<sup>12</sup> My research benefits from data collected during the period of participatory observation and the data collected during my follow-up trips in July 2004 and again July 2005.

The archival sources that I have investigated are: the Historical Papers Archive at the University of Witwatersrand,<sup>13</sup> the Institute for a Contextual Theology (ICT),<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Greenstein R., *The study of South African Society: Towards a new agenda for comparative historical inquiry*, in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 20 (4), 1994, p. 643.

<sup>12</sup> In Bernardi B., *Nel Nome d'Africa*, Franco Angeli Editori, Milano 2001, p. 212. My translation from Italian to English.

<sup>13</sup> Historical Papers, Witwatersrand University, Johannesburg. In this archive is catalogued a broad collection of material from Justice and Peace Commission, SACC, Diakonia Council of Churches,



the South African Catholic Bishops Conference (SACBC) Documentation and Archive Resource Centre,<sup>15</sup> the National South African Archive (NASA) in Pretoria, Harold W. Turner's Collection on New Religious Movements, University of Birmingham, available in micro-fiches at the Centre for the Study of Christianity in Non-Western World (CSCNWW), the University of Edinburgh.<sup>16</sup> Particularly useful for the study of the African independent churches in South Africa was the material of the Research Unit for New Religious Movements and Indigenous Churches (NERMIC), Zululand University.<sup>17</sup> Contacts were made with the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR)<sup>18</sup> and with the Institute for Comparative Religion in South Africa (ICRSA).<sup>19</sup> This research also benefited from interlibrary loans from other Universities in the United Kingdom, especially from the University of Cambridge and the University of Birmingham. This research, through its nature embedded in the contemporary, benefited from all these sources.

During my stay in South Africa I have interviewed a certain number of religious leaders, political leaders and members of Christian institutions. I found that these oral resources were extremely profitable to delineate the current situation of Christianity in the country and its interactions with other social actors.

I conducted 17 semi-structured interviews with religious leaders of mainline and independent churches<sup>20</sup> and approximately 40 unstructured interviews with

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World Conference on Religion and Peace, and a part of the Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) documents.

<sup>14</sup> ICT, 150 Carolina Street Brixton, Johannesburg at the time. Now in Braamfontein, Johannesburg.

<sup>15</sup> SACBC Documentation and Archive Resource Centre, 140 Visagie Street, Pretoria. Contacts with the Documentation Officer Mr Johnson Mkahabela.

<sup>16</sup> From now this collection will be referenced as Harold Turner's Collection.

<sup>17</sup> NERMIC, Department of Religious Studies, University of Zululand, Dlangenzwa, Natal

<sup>18</sup> IJR, Rouwkoop Road, Rodensbosch 7701, Cape Town

<sup>19</sup> ICRSA, Robert Leslie Social Science Building, University of Cape Town.

<sup>20</sup> Mainline churches in South Africa were my previous field of interest (see for example Bompani B., *Movimenti Cattolici in Opposizione all'Apartheid: South Africa 1984-1994*, unpublished thesis, Bologna University, 2000). Interviews and meetings with members of these churches helped me in three different directions: firstly to explore their interpretation of the growth of independent Christianity in the last decades. Secondly to investigate the situation their churches were



members of the five independent churches in Jabulani area, Soweto (see Appendix 1). These interviews were conducted on the occasion of religious events or at church members' private houses in Jabulani. Some were also conducted in small groups during a bible-reading event, a prayer, or a workshop and these events proved particularly useful not just for asking questions but especially to observe the interaction among participants. All the people interviewed were asked if their intervention could appear in this work and their name expressly referenced, or if they preferred to treat their interviews confidentially. Just two respondents requested to remain anonymous and their opinions do not appear in direct quotations in this thesis. I either interviewed in English or relied on translators. While the majority of the informants were quite fluent in English, worshipping, meetings and bible reading were in Zulu or Sotho. On these occasions an interpreter assisted me.<sup>21</sup>

The rationale behind my choice of interviewees is twofold and is best conceptualised as composed of horizontal and vertical components. By horizontal I mean I interviewed people from across a range of different churches, and by vertical I mean I interviewed people from a range of different positions and perspectives within particular African independent churches. There are two key reasons for this methodological geometry. Firstly, it is important to unstitch the differences between the various churches in order to build up a more complete understanding of religious organisations and how they interact with each other and their relation with the broader political scenario, within the nation-building process.<sup>22</sup> Secondly, it is important to understand the internal dynamics of the actors within the same church. To only interview leaders or well connected

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experimenting in the post-apartheid context and their relation with the political scenario. All this material will be used in chapter six, 'Mandela Mania': Mainline Churches in Post-Apartheid South Africa. And finally the knowledge and links of these religious leaders helped me to start this research and to find members and leaders of independent churches in Johannesburg and Soweto.

<sup>21</sup> The fact of relying on a translator in some occasions raised some methodological problems that will be addressed later on in the chapter.

<sup>22</sup> Anderson A., *Zion and Pentecost. The Spirituality and Experience of Pentecostal and Zionist/Apostolic Churches in South Africa*, University of South Africa Press, Pretoria, 2000, p. 44; Maluleke, T. S., 'Theological interest in AICs and other grass-root communities in SA. A review of methodologies', *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa*, 10 (1), 1996a, pp.18-48.

members would portray a particular set of biases. Attention in this work was paid to include different parts and perspectives (not just leaders, but also and especially ordinary church members, male and female, old and young).<sup>23</sup> My sample of people interviewed and observed lamented on some occasions the fact that frequently just the opinion of leaders was presented.<sup>24</sup> My methodological approach is more similar to that of Allan Anderson, who in his different works in Soshanguve township near Pretoria, focused on both the leaders and the ordinary Church members.<sup>25</sup> . This is a different approach from the seminal work of Martin West, in Soweto, who focused exclusively on interviewing Church leaders.<sup>26</sup>

I have chosen to rely on unstructured interview techniques to investigate ordinary Church members fundamentally because the delicacy of the topic; it was quite hard to investigate religious and political convictions and involvement. Following Anderson, who in discussing the importance of an inclusive methodology, stated: 'We wanted people to talk about their churches and their convictions rather than answer a stereotypical questionnaire',<sup>27</sup> my focus is on collecting the essence of peoples' feelings for the Church, and their convictions regarding the role of the Church within society. Moreover, it is important to deconstruct these multiple perspectives in light of the forces of attraction the Church asserts on the one hand, and the political contexts of the individuals and the Church itself on the other. Another reason for conducting unstructured interviews is that the great majority of ordinary members are poorly educated. Unstructured interviews allowed me to attempt to overcome these communication difficulties by giving me the opportunity to repeat questions, explain and expand upon questions and ask further questions in order to make sure the interviewee understand what I was asking of him or her. The use of fieldwork notes was relevant to this research for its predisposition to grasp

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<sup>23</sup> Shaw R., 'Agency, meaning and structure in African religion' in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 28 (3), 1988, p.256.

<sup>24</sup> Similar criticism for example has been expressed by Kiernan versus Martin West; see in the next chapter, chapter 3.

<sup>25</sup> Anderson A., *Zion and Pentecost*, 2000, especially in the Introduction, pp. 1-19.

<sup>26</sup> West M., *Bishops and Prophets in a Black City*, David Philip, Cape Town, 1975a.

<sup>27</sup> Anderson A., *Bazalwane. African Pentecostals in South Africa*, UNISA, Pretoria, 1992, p.9.

meanings, de-codify symbols and to better understand interviews and to extend my understanding of the resonance religious concepts have in the everyday life. Data collected from structured, unstructured interviews, life histories and conversations have been integrated with other data, like data related to churches' worshipping, like sermons, prayers, songs and rituals,<sup>28</sup> acknowledging them and their value without trying to offer theological explanations. This remains an analysis placed in the field of social science: these meanings are explored in ways that acknowledge the phenomenological reality of their religious experience.

In this research I made use of focus groups on two occasions. Focus groups provide a helpful tool to investigate dynamic and fluid issues such as self- and group identity transformation because they rely on a less rigid topic guide. In fact focus group (small in nature, around six people for each group) allowed me to understand the formation of the group's internal dynamics and choice of the most relevant themes of discussion from the participants. The researcher becomes a less obtrusive presence (acting as facilitator more than interviewer) and the atmosphere less formal, particularly important when sensitive topics like beliefs are discussed.

This research, moreover, had availed itself of textbooks,<sup>29</sup> journals,<sup>30</sup> newspaper<sup>31</sup> articles and electronic sources that contribute to formulate broader macro-interpretations of African independent churches. Textbooks for example were relevant to the understanding of the literature produced on the topic and the way AICs perceptions changed along time; journals, being the main way of academic dissemination, have been important to acknowledge the past and current debates on independent churches; newspapers and electronic sources were particularly

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<sup>28</sup> Always trying to trace their social-political value more than their theological ones due to the purposes of this thesis and the researcher's background.

<sup>29</sup> See bibliography below.

<sup>30</sup> Especially *African Affairs*, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, *Journal for the Study of Religion*, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, all available at the Libraries of the Witwatersrand University of Johannesburg and the University of Edinburgh Library.

<sup>31</sup> A South African collection of newspapers of the period analysed is available in the Library of the University Witwatersrand and University of Cape Town. Some of them are available on Internet.

relevant for the analysis of contemporary perspective not yet filtered into journals and books.

### **The language Issue**

Participant observation, with a full immersion in a social reality, allows an understanding and conceptualisation of a language in its context. 'Knowing the language is an important guarantee of integrity of fieldwork'<sup>32</sup> and it is important to grasp all the concepts deconstructed. Unfortunately frequently the problem of the lack of extensive language skills remains insoluble and the researcher has to rely on collaboration.<sup>33</sup> Two ethical questions emerge: how can the researcher try to be a non-intrusive presence in the context under analysis, how can he/she resolve the epistemological problem of minimising his/her presence during an interview or a meeting if there is the presence of a third person, the interpreter? And is it really possible to talk of independent judgments if an interpreter filters the translation? These are challenges presented by my research.

For example during a CAIC meeting in Soweto in October 2001 the president of the organisation that organised the event, Bishop Ntongana, asked a lady of his congregation to be my interpreter.<sup>34</sup> The lady spoke poor English and she was quite shy in expressing and translating parts of the speeches of the convenors. I had the feeling that parts of them were totally omitted. The speaker's tone and emphasis served to underline that her translation was losing the potency of the speaker's images and convictions. In the second half of the meeting I asked a colleague who drove me to Soweto to sit close to me and to translate. He was South African, spoke fluent SeSotho and Zulu, the two South African languages of

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<sup>32</sup> MacGaffey J., Bazenguissa-Ganga, R., *Congo-Paris. Transnational Traders on the Margins of the Law*, James Currey, Oxford, 2000, p.21.

<sup>33</sup> I attended a one year Zulu course at the University of Witwatersrand. This allowed me to develop a basic knowledge of the language sufficient to introduce myself and to grasp parts of a conversation but not to discuss or interview my respondent.

<sup>34</sup> Confederation of African Instituted Churches (CAIC) an umbrella that gathers numerous African Independent/Indigenous Churches. Soweto, 13 October 2001.



the meeting, and English, but he did not belong to the religious community. His knowledge of my work and his belonging to the academic world made it possible to create a strong empathy between my translator and me. Through his translation I could understand what the lady did not feel comfortable to convey to me. These were the political attacks against 'white' people and their political and cultural control in African societies, fundamental philosophical apparatuses of the AICs. Losing these parts of the speeches could mean losing a relevant aspect of the political and sociological interpretations of these religious organisations. It is not difficult to understand the position of the lady who found it difficult to translate to the only white person in the audience a crude attack against white people. However, I did not accept the alternative idea of the religious leader asking people to adopt English during the event. One of the principles of the AICs is the redefinition of African identity in the Christian arena with the adoption of African languages during worship. Regardless, requiring the adoption of English to people who do not have good English could mean a further distortion of their interpretation of reality. In this case the problem of language was surmounted by finding (with some difficulties) a trusted translator able to understand my aim and my academic background. We respected our ethical duty to look for accuracy, which means to review the notes and the transcripts of interviews, discussing the implication of what we had been told and checking our interpretation.

There is an explicit protest in the independent churches' ethos against the role of language in 'causing colonised people to absorb and accept the norms of the colonisers'.<sup>35</sup> Language is not value-free but politically manipulated and orientated. Language is an expression of identity. The epistemological assumption of the AICs is that language is a national heritage, often unevaluated and sadly marginalised by the dominant regimes. This is an idea that belongs to the post-colonial discourse in general. In the era of independence, when the Organisation of African Unity was founded (1963), a stipulation in its charter was that the official use of foreign colonial languages would be only temporally accepted. Linguistic

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<sup>35</sup> Phillipson, R., *Linguistic Imperialism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992, p.36.

imperialism and dominance were recognised and highlighted. However, in contemporary Africa it remains the case that very few national languages<sup>36</sup> are official languages.

What AICs seem to refuse is the idea that foreign languages should become a vehicle of Westernisation. Independent churches try to offer an alternative to Western modernity and an answer to the dynamics of the global era. At the root of this assumption is the idea that Western modernity attempted to destroy religion through the secularisation process, while African society cannot be separated from a religious ethos. The adoption of an African language is functional to this cultural (and political) aspiration. Ethnographers must engage with these ontological linguistic assumptions in investigating the AICs in Africa.

When non-Western philosophers, like Frantz Fanon, called for indigenous intellectuals and artists to create a new literature and to work to construct a national culture after liberation, it was not an invitation to exclude Western academic, but to fill the vacuum left by colonisation. In the same way a contraposition between Insider and Outsider has no reason of being. These limits could be overcome following Merton's approach, which sees the relation outsider/insider not as a contraposition or a dichotomy, but as an interaction in the production of knowledge.<sup>37</sup> The foreign researcher is able to probe for the deep understanding of explanations that the Insider takes for granted. Polanyi stated:

People who have learned to respect the truth will feel entitled to uphold the truth against the very society which has taught them to respect it. They will indeed demand respect for themselves on the grounds of their own respect for the truth, and this will be accepted, even against their own inclinations, by those who share these basic convictions.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> In the meaning of African languages talked by the majority of the nation.

<sup>37</sup> Merton R.K., 'Insiders and outsiders: A chapter in the sociology of knowledge', *The American Journal of Sociology*, 78 (1), 1972, pp. 9-47.

<sup>38</sup> Polanyi cited in Merton R.K., 1972, p.44



'One of the things ethnographers should deal with is *culture shock*'.<sup>39</sup> *Culture shock* could be a dangerous limit to the researchers from a Western *milieu* with pre-established beliefs and pre-defined *forma mentis*. Every single researcher has to find personal answers to the challenges of participant-observation. According to Lévi-Strauss this is possible adopting 'precision', a 'sympathetic approach' and 'objectivity', and deriving benefit from his/her skills acquired during the academic trial. I personally found that time spent in the area and the patient introduction to the people of the community carried on by the local leaders helped me not to be seen as an intrusive presence. That meant that my research started after almost two months of preparation. Time is really a challenging element inside the research design of an ethnographic work.<sup>40</sup>

### *Semantic Problems*

Steven Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar lament the fact that usually analysis of contemporary African issues has been dominated by political and economic idioms typical of the Western discourse while 'there is reason to believe [...] Africans, in pondering questions regarding the vagaries of power, phrase the question and its response in a religious idiom in preference to, or in addition to, the idiom of conventional Western discourse'.<sup>41</sup> I think this point that Ellis and ter Haar expressed raises a common interpretative issue that brings to question the 'authenticity' of what is really African and if the language to describe 'African' situations should not be more liberated from Western idioms and dominion. For reasons of clarification I would like immediately to address this issue that was directly posed by Gerrie ter Haar to my work in a recent workshop in Edinburgh. As James Ferguson noticed in his last book, African aspirations to development, life improvement and 'modernity' have always been shadowed by questions

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<sup>39</sup> Agar M.H., *The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography*, Academic Press, Orlando, 1986, p.50.

<sup>40</sup> Agar, *The Professional Stranger*, 1986, p.26.

<sup>41</sup> Ellis S., ter Haar G., *Religion and Politics*, 1998, p. 198. Gerrie ter Haar addressed me with a similar question regarding this research during the workshop: 'New Research on Religion and Politics in Africa', the University of Edinburgh, 19<sup>th</sup> July 2006.

surrounding the authenticity of the copy and of the originality.<sup>42</sup> African political expressions are often questioned as facsimiles from Western systems and demands like ‘are African elections real elections?’ ‘Are words like good governance, empowerment, full citizenship, rights only western terms?’ ‘Are African political institutions real institutions?’ ‘Is African political language a real political language or is just a copy of the Western one?’ are frequent. In questioning that, the question that consequently emerges is ‘Do languages and institutions then retain some “authentic” African features?’<sup>43</sup> My analysis on the cultural aspects incorporated inside the socio-political analysis will try to demonstrate the impossibility of splitting the Western imaginary from the African one, as this question would require. And it would become almost impossible for a researcher to succeed in the task of tracing and identifying a pure pre-Western language. The new political dispensation and imaginary is not a copy *per se*, a negative space. On the contrary the political discourse in South Africa expresses a connection, proximity and an identity with Western interpretation. It is not for a separation of meanings that we have to look for, but for the understanding of the different symbols and actors involved, without denying one or the other. The churches under my analysis used a language in a contemporary ‘Western’ style that revealed an almost perfect dominion of the political contemporary lexicon and this will be the kind of language I will re-offer and use in this thesis. Looking for a different language to express different values would misrepresent the context I found. The real problem that this research wants to highlight is the necessity to reinterpret and understand meanings traditionally excluded from the analysis. But this does not mean that these meanings cannot be or were not expressed in a ‘modern’ contemporary language; that is the language of a ‘modern’ contemporary urban setting. It is not that the language is different, but the modalities adopted to challenge socio-political issues that are different, as the incorporation of religious aspects inside socio-political analysis. As the end of thesis will state, it is not the

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<sup>42</sup> Ferguson J., *Global Shadows. Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*, Duke University Press, Durham, London, 2006, p.16.

<sup>43</sup> See Mbembe A., ‘African modes of self-writing’ in *Public Culture*, 14 (1), 2002, pp. 239-273.

notion of modernity and the modernisation process that change meaning in the township, but the ideas and techniques to reach and implement it that seem more articulated and complex than the usual western analysis on democratisation and nation-building processes. This is what South Africa at the threshold of the twenty-first century is and what the democratisation process brought with its massive use of mass media communication.

### **Classifying Indigenous Expressions: Need for Definition**

A challenging aspect that this thesis took in great consideration is the terminological problem that emerged in working on religious beliefs and vague borders between colonial and post-colonial terminology. Inside the implicit message of the AICs there is the right to reinvent and redefine roles and systems 'independently' from any kind of authority (religious and secular). In such an openness of opportunity the adoption of a proper terminology has been a fascinating challenge to this thesis. As we have seen above, one of the first responsibilities of a researcher in a foreign country is the adoption of a proper lexicon in describing the phenomena analysed. The study of African religions in the era of independence offers a good example for understanding this process.

Decolonising methodologies means also to learn how to classify indigenous expressions. As James Cox points out,<sup>44</sup> it is artificial to try to unify factors within these factors under a variety of names. For Emil Durkheim<sup>45</sup> classifications are social conventions and all societies possess developed systems of classification as a part of their inherited culture: 'Moreover, different societies sustain different systems, and classification for an individual in a given society is largely a matter of terms being drawn from the given inherited repertoire of that society, and put to

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<sup>44</sup> Cox J., *Rites of Passage in Contemporary Africa*, Cardiff Academic Press, Cardiff, 1998, p.213.

<sup>45</sup> See for example Jones R.A., *Emile Durkheim: An Introduction to Four Major Works*, Beverly Hills, Sage Publications, 1986.

use'.<sup>46</sup> The recognition and understanding of these different systems of classification are a real challenge for the external observer. In the 1960s there was a sharp increase in the study of religion giving a positive image of African religions, but again this positive image was forged using Judeo-Christian norms. Turner and Taylor<sup>47</sup> started to adopt the term *primal* religions instead of *primitive*. Professor Walls defended the adoption of this definition because it was able to avoid the derogatory meaning underlying the word *primitive* and because it highlights a 'historical anteriority'.<sup>48</sup> This terminology still appeared incomplete and was accused of being associated with the idea of local and ethnic, making religions unable to respond to the forces of historical changes 'demanded by the modern world'.<sup>49</sup> Western and non-Western academics criticised also the adoption of the terms *traditional*, because it implies a stagnant and static state, and *tribal* because it conveys a certain patronising attitude. The need for an appropriate descriptive terminology brought to the adoption of the more articulated word *indigenous*, still debated inside the academic world. Rosalind Shaw<sup>50</sup> aims to reach the real focus of this debate; what should be criticised is not just the concept of 'primal religion', 'traditional' or 'tribal', but the widespread acceptance by Western scholars that the religions of indigenous people can be treated as a unity, following their own methodology of knowledge's classification. She argues that Northern academics 'have expressed a bias toward religions with written scriptures, organised structures, and identifiable doctrines'.<sup>51</sup> She notes that this bias has provoked problems for classifying religions, which are primarily oral without central organisations and little articulated beliefs. These structural

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<sup>46</sup> Barnes B., *Scientific Knowledge: A Sociological Analysis*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 48.

<sup>47</sup> Turner H.W., *Living Tribal Religions*, Ward Lock Educational, London, 1971 and Taylor J.B., *Primal Worldviews: Christian Presence amid African Religion*, SCM Press, London, 1963.

<sup>48</sup> Walls A. F., 'Primal religions in today's world' in Whaling F. (ed), *Religion in Today's World*, Edinburgh, Centre for African Studies, 1987, pp. 117-142.

<sup>49</sup> Shaw R., 'The invention of African Traditional Religion' in *Religion*, 20, 1990, pp. 339-353; Cox J., 1998.

<sup>50</sup> Shaw R., *African Traditional Religion*, 1990, p. 340.

<sup>51</sup> Shaw R., *African Traditional Religion*, 1990, p. 342

differences should be recognised by Western scholars and shape their approach to the studies of indigenous religions.

Independent churches have articulated a popular translation of Christianity 'from below' interpreting Western Christianity through the lens of African religions and tradition.<sup>52</sup> If Africa enjoyed a flowering of AICs in the post-colonial era of the sixties, South Africa is experiencing this phenomenon after the end of apartheid, in the relatively short period of the last ten years. The adoption of an appropriate terminology is crucial within the current academic debate in the country and it is inserted into the wider debate on the reconstruction of black identity in the post-apartheid era. From some fragments of the interviews that I conducted in the months between September 2001 and September 2002 and in July 2004 and July 2005 it is possible to reconstruct the terminological complexity of the debate enounced above. For example during a Sunday service in the Methodist Church of South Africa, the sermon was dedicated to the history of independent churches. The Bishop on that occasion declared:

We are not independent churches, independent from what? Jesus Christ was born in Egypt, where he and his family created the first Christian unit, the first church. Then Christianity was born in Egypt, in Africa. Our form of Christianity is the original one. Western [mainline] churches are the real independent, we are the original expression of Christianity.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> '[...] but in the meantime black Christians had begun to read the Bible for themselves. What they discovered was something very different from what they had been taught to believe. There was nothing in the Bible about Western respectability and customs. Jesus in the Bible did not wear a white mask! Gradually some black Christians began to realise not only that it was possible to be a Christian without the white mask, but that in order to be a true Biblical Christian a person would have to reject the prejudices and hypocrisies of white Christianity. Western traditions had invalidated the message of the Bible itself, just as the traditions to the scribes and Pharisees had annulled the word of god in Jesus time'. In Ngada N.H., Mofokeng K.E., *African Christian Witness. African Indigenous Churches*, Cluster Publications, Pietermaritzburg, 2001, p.3.

<sup>53</sup> Sermon by Bishop Ntongana, Methodist Church of South Africa, Jabulani, Sunday 16 December 2001, fieldwork notes.

And again for example when I asked two religious leaders how they would prefer to call their church, the first leader replied as follows:

We are not independent. If we say independent we keep thinking that we are generated from the mainline churches. You can say that we, as black people, are independent from the political system of the white minority regime. But you cannot say that churches are independent. These are African churches with a proper origin. We do not want to be connected to the mainline churches. These are churches instituted independently. For this reason we like to be called African Initiated Churches.<sup>54</sup>

The second leader:

Well the African Indigenous Churches were well named by other people. We were classified as *African independent*, but independent from what? We are not instituted, instituted by whom? We are a church. There were people with all the academic knowledge. Well, those people who are well vested in English language, can make past tense and talk well, they would make us not better at all. So we want to identify ourselves in the indigenous language, indigenous land, indigenous people, indigenous everything. We don't come from anywhere else than this country and you grew up in this country, we were born where our forefathers were born. So even our faith is indigenous, that's why we prefer to be called indigenous.<sup>55</sup>

As Rosalind Shaw argued, perhaps Western scholars can just accept the assumption that indigenous people and indigenous religions cannot be treated as a unified entity and respect the complexity of a differently structured system of knowledge. Personally I found it fruitful to ask every single Church leader for a

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<sup>54</sup> My interview with bishop Ntongana, Methodist Apostolic Church of South Africa, Jabulani, 05 October 2001.

<sup>55</sup> My interview with Archbishop Ngada, African Spiritual Churches Association, Walkerville, March 2002.



personal definition and description of his/her own institution. All the answers were perfectly acceptable and none seemed more appropriate than the other.<sup>56</sup>

### *Why Independent? Justifying the Terminology*

Studies on AICs in South Africa generally agree on the date the movement started (1884) and how to classify them into different types, Ethiopian, Zionist and Apostolic, although this differentiation is becoming less clear. Some authors, for example Allan Anderson, start to see a minimal border between Ethiopian and Zionist churches; some other scholars, for example David Chidester, recognise another type, the messianic or prophetic. On the contrary literature has not reached an agreement on the adoption of the terminology and, scholars are still divided on the adoption of the word indigenous, independent, instituted or initiated. The difference consists in the importance that has been given to a particular aspect of these churches, like their link to tradition makes understandable the adoption of the term 'indigenous'; the fact that they were started by Africans and not external forces makes understand the adoption of the name 'initiated' and 'instituted'; and the act of separating from existing churches makes understandable the definition of 'independency' (**table 1**). All these terms are acceptable and they are not exclusive or in contradiction with each other. But some problems keep persisting in defining the better term of definition. For example not all the churches are generated by separation like the 'independent' term would suggest. Nonetheless it would be interesting to investigate and understand how really important are the ancestral cults to keep talking of African inputs and ethos referring to the term 'indigenous'. In this thesis I propose to use the 'oldest' term used to define these churches, that although not adopted by the majority of my interviewees, it appears to be the least

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<sup>56</sup> For a broader debate on terminology see the work Harold Turner and Rosalind Hackett; for example Turner H.W., *Modern African Religious Movements: An Introduction for the Christian Churches*, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 1965; Turner H.W., *A Further Dimension for Missions: New Religious Movements in the Primal Societies*, available at CSCNWW, the University of Edinburgh, 1973; Turner H.W., 'Problems in the study of African Independent Churches' in *Numen*, 1, 1966, pp. 30-49, (available at CSCNWW ). Hackett R.I.J., *Prophetism and Healing as Complementary Functions of a West African Independent Church*, West African Association of Theological Institutions, Ibadan, 1977; Hackett R.I.J., *New Religious Movements in Nigeria*, Mellen, Lewiston, 1987.

problematic term. This research acknowledges the fact that few leaders or members of the churches under analysis used the term 'independent'. The main criticism of this term comes from the idea that the word 'independent' was imposed by Western academics<sup>57</sup> to identify everything that was not the mainstream church, everything that was 'outside'. But while there was confusion or disagreement on the adoption of the other terms (Indigenous, Initiated and Instituted) 'independent' remained the most understandable for everyone. Exactly for the reason that this movement is not a monolithic and unified entity, but the result of a number of variegated churches, I believe that it is not possible to easily reach a common and unified agreement on the right terminology. I offer nonetheless to adopt the term 'independent' for the fact that this term has been used for the longest time and it seems useful to adopt a sort of neutral, overarching definition that overcomes all the different polemics around the right and wrong adoption of terms to define these churches. Although the term is far from being perfect, no other term has taken its place, neither in the academic world, nor among independent churches. Time in my perspective brings a sort of neutrality and acceptance to the term 'independent' that even in the version used to broadly define the type of Christianity, Independent Christianity, is largely accepted.

In addition, I maintain the definition of AICs and Pentecostalism in Africa as separate entities even if they are fused together by some scholars.<sup>58</sup> These two movements could be unified from a theological perspective and their origins,<sup>59</sup> but not from a socio-political point of view and from their historical trajectory and developments, as we will see in the next chapter. Despite their initial link with American missionaries, AICs re-invented themselves as African churches. These are usually small churches with a membership that varies from 12 members to few hundreds (excluding the big ZCC and the Ibandla lamaNazaretha); they are poor

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<sup>57</sup> Sundkler B., *Bantu Prophets*, 1961 and Turner H.W., *Religious Innovation in Africa*, G.K. Hall, Boston, 1979.

<sup>58</sup> For a better comprehension of the debate, see chapter 5, 'The growth and dynamism of African Independent Churches in Post-Apartheid South Africa'.

<sup>59</sup> Anderson A., *Zion and Pentecost*, 2000; Anderson A., 'Challenges and Prospects for Research into AICs in Southern Africa' in *Missionalia*, 23 (3), 1995, pp. 283-294.

black churches with a different approach, with respect to the so-called New Pentecostal churches, to the international community and to the use of mass media.

**Table 1** Major terms used to define AICs in South Africa

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>African Independent Churches</b></p>	<p>Indicates a separation from another church. Not dependent on any other church or religious organisation.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>African Initiated Churches</b></p>	<p>Indicates that these churches were initiated by Africans and not by Europeans. Started as a result of African initiatives.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>African Instituted Churches</b></p>	<p>Indicates that these churches were initiated by Africans and not by Europeans. Establishment and growth in African contexts.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>African Indigenous Churches</b></p>	<p>Generated by African people with African inputs and ethos in theology and organisation.</p>

**Problematizing Methods, Modernity and Ethnography**

Undertaking research in another society means to investigate knowledge at different levels, the deeply stratified level of the new society and the level of your own cultural world. This world of codes and structures cannot be taken for granted by the researcher and not investigated. Foucault, for example, suggests that this world, or ‘archive’, of knowledge reveals ‘rules of practice’ which the West itself cannot necessarily describe because it operates within a set of rules and circumscriptions, which are taken for granted. Meeting another culture does not just imply the discovery of new cultural structures but also the opportunity to deconstruct and understand one’s own system of knowledge and rules. In some ways, Western research is more than just research located in a positivist tradition,

it is a 'research which brings to bear, on any study of indigenous peoples, a cultural orientation, a set of values, a different conceptualisation of such things as time, space and subjectivity, different and competing theories of knowledge, highly specialised forms of language, and structures of power'.<sup>60</sup> Northern researchers can deconstruct (or if we want, decolonise) knowledge undergoing the process of a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values that inform research practices. Research is never value-free or neutral. What research can do, and ethically should do, is to aim at a negotiated objectivity.

My research is rooted in the theoretical production of the three great sociological thinkers, Marx, Weber (especially for the study of sociology of religion), and Durkheim. Each sought to remove the disconnects between the experience, the living, of social phenomena and the structures and processes that underpinned those phenomena. They sought to remove the filter of 'appearance' in order to discern the 'truth' and this highlighted the sociological imagination inherent in their impulse to understand social action, not only what humans *choose* to do, but what they *can* do given the strictures and structures that determine the world of possibility. This reminds me that as a social scientist my duty is to understand the processes through which realities are created, objects signified, and culture codified. The proper methodology to investigate this process appears to be the ethnographical strategy, in particular the technique and rationale of participatory action. And this returns my attention to a key question regarding ethnography: what methodological operations are needed to practice ethnography? As Marx, Weber and Durkheim understood the historical dialectic between theory and practice, so we must understand the contemporary relationships between the provenance of theory and practice and context of method.

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<sup>60</sup>Tuhiwai Smith L., *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People*, London, Zed Books, 1999, p.42

In a general sense I viewed my presence in the field as an ethnographer, observing the life of the churches' members, within the complex life of the township setting in the post-apartheid era, keeping in mind three questions. The first one was 'how do members of these churches construct their daily life?' And the second one 'what kind of interpretation of the socio-political events are offered by the churches?' And thirdly, 'why are these churches able to attract believers in this precise historical moment?'

Ethnographers aim to construct a theory by establishing relationships among a series of events and by engaging with informants, to use Agar's image.<sup>61</sup> Participatory approaches to field research revolve around a critique of traditional, positivist, and structuralist concepts of what knowledge and society is - and ought to be - with an increasing acknowledgment of the legitimacy of local indigenous knowledge. To uncover the cultural gap between a Western cultural *milieu* and samples of, and for, analysis in an African country, I found ethnographic enquiry the best method to see things from the perspective of the participants. In order to most fully comprehend and analyse concepts of modernity from a 'local' perspective, as this thesis aims, it is necessary to engage ethnographically, considering that only from the inside is it possible to understand local perceptions in relation to the 'modern' socio-political changes of the country.<sup>62</sup> Ethnographic studies in the context of the developing world, particularly in relation to studies of development policy and practice, have been a key propellant of critiques of notions of modernity in contemporary times.<sup>63</sup> I have used a participatory approach as an attempt to avoid a rigid agenda, and gain information from inaccessible, voiceless communities. In this case, it made sense to me to carry out *unstructured interviews* and to use a *non-directive* form of questioning within them.<sup>64</sup> The main ethos of

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<sup>61</sup> Agar M., *The Professional Stranger*, 1980, p.115.

<sup>62</sup> For this point see chapter 7, also perceived as theoretical interpretation of this research.

<sup>63</sup> See for example Mosse D., *Cultivating Development. An Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice*, Pluto Press, London, 2005; especially 'Introduction: the ethnography of policy and practice', pp.1-20.

<sup>64</sup> Crotty M., *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process*, London, Sage Publications, 1998, pp. 91-92.



participatory approaches is to get the best quality data possible from the widest variety of people with the minimum amount of disruption. This technique arises from a number of problems, like language, translation and the justification of my presence and my acceptance from the community under observation.

Allan Anderson alerts researchers who are starting to investigate new religious movements to adopt a 'humble' and 'honest' attitude in relation to the topic and being willing to spend a long period of time with the movement before starting to formulate conclusions: 'When conclusions are eventually made, they will at best be tentative, they should avoid reflecting an observer's cultural or ecclesiastical biases, and should as much as possible be subjected to the scrutiny of those being observed'.<sup>65</sup> Approaching the study of independent churches immediately brings the researcher to confront his/her Western identity with a diverse one. And with much honesty, it is not an easy path trying to understand where subjectivity leaves space for objectivity. This research experience, and previous ones, led me to believe that subjectivity cannot be eliminated but can be corrected. The cultural background of the researcher cannot be eliminated or forgotten, but it can be used to open new trajectories. Through ethnography and participant observation in the long term the researcher has time to understand and face his/her interpretative mistakes and leave time and space to bring the findings under the scrutiny of the observed. In a certain sense, the analysis of these churches, especially the political analysis to which this research is dedicated, is the result of a precondition: I was expressly asked by members and leaders of independent churches to 'say the truth about AICs'. 'When you go back say what we really are', 'when you go back say that this is real Christianity', 'when you go back say that we did and we are still doing a lot politically for this country' such requests have created a sense of ethnographic responsibility and that affected the way conclusions were elaborated. I was frequently told that independent churches have been for a long time misled or not understood by academics and historical churches and that new research that poses

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<sup>65</sup> Anderson A., *Challenges and Prospects for Research*, 1995, p. 285.



their voice and scrutiny at the centre of analysis is welcome and necessary.<sup>66</sup> Participants were treated, as Rosalind Shaw would say, as 'active agents rather than functionalist puppets'.<sup>67</sup> After spending one year in the field, I decided to go back for five weeks in July 2004 to refresh my data and to discuss my findings (after letting them gestate for almost two years) with the members of the churches. In July 2005, in the process of starting to write the thesis, I felt the need to go back to Soweto for the same reason. Of course the limited amount of time I had during these second trips did not allow me to spend enough time with every informant. But this research is planned as the beginning and not the end of a project. This reflects the attempt of trying not to be the singular voice and perspective in my findings. I usually went back to the informant (when possible), asking if my interpretation of his/her words was acceptable and if it could be written in my thesis; and this resulted in a valid corrective method that gives a major role to the informants. People who let me generously enter into their lives deserved to be presented with much care and honesty, trying to avoid to be misled by cultural and personal biases when possible.

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<sup>66</sup> This request will become evident in the course of the thesis, especially in chapter 2, 5 and 6.

<sup>67</sup> Shaw R., 'Agency, meaning and structure', 1988, p. 255.

## An External Observer in Soweto

In Soweto I was an external member of the community that I was observing. As an external observer I had to rely on informants who helped directly and guaranteed my access into inaccessible social structures<sup>68</sup> and I sometimes had to rely on translators. The participant-observer is an Outsider, adopting the structural conception of Insiders and Outsiders, the 'insiders are the members of specified groups and collectivity or occupants of specified social statuses', and the 'outsiders are the non members'.<sup>69</sup> Experiencing walking in the streets of Soweto as one of the 'rare white persons', attending conferences of African independent churches where numerous speeches were articulated against Whites, are all feelings that determine and fortify ones identity as an Outsider. This identity cannot be denied. My intention is not to question if this identity is a threat to the validity of the ethnographic work or to the importance of the participant-observation but just to identify it as an element that could influence my own research. During an interview in Johannesburg in 2002, the president of the African Spiritual Churches Association, began his speech in this way:

A lot has been written in South Africa and elsewhere about the African indigenous churches. Numerous academics have received their degrees by writing theses about these churches. As outsiders they often did not really understand what they were writing about. Sometimes they were prejudiced and sometimes they even distorted the facts. There are very few publications written by African Christians about their own beliefs and practices. African Christians to write for themselves.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> See for example Kaufmann J., 'The Informant as resolute overseer' in *History in Africa*, 29, 2002, pp. 231-255.

<sup>69</sup> Merton R.K., *Insider and Outsider*, 1972, p.21. In this regard Gustav Visser's article could be of interest. Visser, G., 'In other worlds: on the politics of research in a transforming South Africa' in *Area* 32(2), 2000, pp. 231-236. This article talks of the positionality of the researcher in an alien context and how he relates to the research subjects.

<sup>70</sup> My interview with Archbishop Ngada, Walkerville, Johannesburg, March 2002.

It is evident that this observation was slightly hostile. Underlying the Insider/Outsider dichotomy, Archbishop Ngada created a polarisation that radically defined our identities (he, member of the religious community/myself, a foreign academic 'who receives degrees by writing theses about these churches') with intellectual and ideological claims. Similarly to what Linda Tuhiwai Smith describes in *Decolonising Methodologies*,<sup>71</sup> the Outsider appears, through the indigenous words, as structurally incapable of comprehending alien groups, statuses, culture and knowledge. This cynicism was overcome during the interview and explained by Archbishop Ngada as an attempt to investigate my intents, to see if I was interested in imposing my system of knowledge or if I was trying to respectfully approach his. Apparently in the past he experienced an invasive approach from other researchers. The importance of ethnographic consistency emerges from this case and it appears once again a solution that the researcher risks to be considered in the field as an intrusive presence. Archbishop Ngada was not a member of the churches I was studying and did not live in the area where I usually stayed. The long stay in Jabulani and the participant approach made me feel accepted and perceived of less and less as an outsider.

Borrowing the terminology from 'linguistic' analysis it is possible to talk of 'emic' terms, that means the point of view of the internals (in this case members of the church community) and 'etic' the external point of view that in more rationalised terms that correspond more closely to a Western way of seeking for objective truth. Emic correspond to an approach that allowed the researcher to analyse the believers in the way they would like to be investigated, trying (when it is possible) to suspend predefined judgments. An 'emic' approach should take into consideration the holistic interpretation to life offered by independent churches. In this context religion is not a sphere separated from the political, social and economic environment. Political and economic issues fully enter into the religious

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<sup>71</sup> 'It told us things already known, suggested things that would not work, and made careers for people who already had jobs. 'We are the most researched people in the world' is a comment I have heard frequently from several different indigenous communities' cited in Tuhiwai Smith L., *Decolonising Methodologies*, 1999, p.5.

discourse and the religious rituals. This raises the important problem for an external Western researcher: how it is possible to express this cosmological unity when it does not belong *in primis* to the cultural background of the researcher? The first challenge is not to subordinate these meanings to 'Western' rationalism. The second challenge for an outsider is to turn a new system of beliefs, rituals, actions and worshipping into a globally understandable text. For example how can you render the value of silence during a ritual? How to insert the value of songs, prayers and rituals into the political analysis? Could a text-only-document fairly represent what I have heard, seen, experimented? It is a matter of trying to understand, articulate and reformulate the meanings of these events and to make the experiences of the members of the churches in Jabulani understandable to those who are external to their socio-cultural context. In this sense I perceive the work of an ethnographer as a passage from 'etic' (an external) to 'emic' (attempt to look and participate as an internal) and from there again to 'etic' but with the knowledge gained in the process. In this case it is useful to reverberate the value of direct observation and participation. Time in the field was a precious ally to decode symbols and to verify through feedback if the interpretation was right. As Ruth Stone said 'often music, dance and speech are so intimately bound together that is hard to separate them. Religious aspects are fundamental to the very being of many musical acts and cannot be stripped from the performance'.<sup>72</sup>

Powerful dilemmas can emerge in undertaking participant-observation research.<sup>73</sup> What am I going to bring to this community? Am I creating expectations? Who authorises me to undertake research and be part of this community for some months? What social effects can it have? When you spend a long period with people on the edge of extreme poverty the question that frequently emerges is: can I contribute to better their life in an economic way instead of engaging in purely academic participation? These questions were always in my mind during my

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<sup>72</sup> Stone R., 'Bringing the extraordinary into the ordinary: music performance among the Kpalle of Liberia' in Blakely T., van Beek W. (ed), *Religion in Africa*, James Currey, London, 1994, p.394.

<sup>73</sup> See Homan R., *The Ethics of the Social Researcher*, Longman, London, 1991; Cook B., Kothari U., *Participation. The New Tyranny*, Zed Books, London, 2001.

research in the field. I tried to tackle these problems sometimes following my conscience and sometimes my academic background. For this reason a robust methodological background to undertaking research helped me to remember the rationale of my research and my *raison d'être* in the field.

The mere act of conceptualising and analysing the questions I have listed above is a value-laden act. In many ways neutrality is allied with indifference, and when the research subjects are, to paraphrase David Harvey, 'manifesting their emotions, mediated by powerful and conflicting processes of social reproduction',<sup>74</sup> and the researcher spends many months building up close and complex relationships that are also a form of social reproduction indifference does not exist. In other words, 'research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise'.<sup>75</sup> All one can do is understand that perhaps neutrality is an unachievable goal when one adopts a deeply ethnographic approach. That acknowledgement is perhaps mitigation in itself. I believe (as do many others) that discourses and ideas have very important and real social consequences. The ontological duty of a researcher is not to research a truth, or following Foucault<sup>76</sup>, to speak only of a 'conceptual apparatus', in order to suggest that what we are concerned with is not an abstract set of philosophical or scientific propositions, but an elaborate contraption that does something. Vivisecting a social reality does not mean to critique or refute this apparatus. Performing such an operation neither correction nor judgment is called for. One can aim only to be, in Nietzsche's terms, 'a good physiologist'.<sup>77</sup> My work gains strength from the assumption that my research is the beginning of an inquiry, not the end.

## Conclusion

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<sup>74</sup> Cited in Harvey D. *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, Blackwell, Cambridge, 1996, p.86 and again: 'There is an increasing realisation that the world cannot be seen and analysed as we would like it to be, but rather it must be analysed as it really is: the material manifestation of human emotions, mediated by powerful and conflicting processes of social reproduction'.

<sup>75</sup> Thuhiwai Smith L., *Decolonising Methodology*, 1999, p.5.

<sup>76</sup> Foucault M., *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Harper and Row, New York, 1971. Foucault M., *The Order of Things*, Vintage, New York, 1973.

<sup>77</sup> Ferguson J., *The Anti-Politics Machine. 'Development', Depoliticisation and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1990, Preface, p. xvi.

As Einstein's quotation at the beginning of the chapter attests, this thesis was perceived as an attempt to dispose into a logical framework the findings of a piece of research in a South African township at the beginning of the twenty-first century, during the historical moment of the democratisation process. Independent Christianity is a dynamic, constantly changing phenomenon and not a monolithic reality. It would be impossible to cover all the peculiarities and complexity of this religious movement. This research tries to offer instead an interpretation of a group of independent churches in the urban environment of a specific township, using socio-political methods of analysis, acknowledging the fact that still much analysis on the topic should be done.

This chapter has tried to demonstrate the importance of approaching this topic from an internal perspective. Following Western interpretations that separate religion from politics it would have not been possible to understand the socio-political value of these churches in the national-building process. This thesis recognises the importance of a holistic view to study independent churches and it is something that emerged as this research was going on.

To explore classical literature on African independent churches<sup>78</sup> is simultaneously to re-evaluate a set of long-established concepts and ideas that do not reflect the reality I found in the field, and to begin the effort of identifying and re-constructing my own intellectual tradition and my tools of interpretation. This research is perceived in this sense as an attempt to cover some interpretational gaps in the literature.<sup>79</sup> For this reason the attention now turns to the next chapter that offers a critical analysis of the literature on independent churches in South Africa.

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<sup>78</sup> See the next chapter, chapter 4, 'Historiography and AICs in South Africa'.

<sup>79</sup> Similar point in Anderson A., *Challenges and Prospects for Research*, 1995.



## Chapter 4

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### Historiography and AICs in South Africa

[...] and finally there is the handicap of historical conflicts between the so-called traditional Churches and ourselves. Because most of our members are converts from these churches and because sometimes whole congregations have come over to our churches, we are labelled 'sects' or 'cults' and described as 'separatist', 'nativistic' or 'syncretistic'. There is still some tension between ourselves and the churches from which our members came because these churches obviously do not like to lose their members to us. And this tension leads to misunderstandings and distortions. Why should we be regarded as mere sects while they [mainline churches] can be called churches? Why should we be regarded as separatists while they too broke away from other churches when they were founded years ago in Europe [...] And finally why should our Bishops, priests and ministers not be recognised just as they are?

ICT, *Speaking for Ourselves*, 1985, p. 60

#### Introducing Historiography

Starting from the first pivotal work of Bengt Sundkler on AICs in South Africa,<sup>1</sup> this chapter traces the way AICs were analysed and perceived from a historical perspective and how ways of analysing and perceiving this religious movement

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<sup>1</sup> Sundkler B., *Bantu Prophets*, 1948 and 1961 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition).

changed through the decades.<sup>2</sup> Sundkler's book in 1948 asserted that AICs were bridges that led back to tradition. This original claim, even if in part retreated from in the second edition in 1961, continued to reverberate amongst those who research AICs. On the contrary this thesis, in particular in chapter seven (*Modernity and Tradition: a Reinterpretation in the Context of Tradition*), will assert that AICs are bridges that allow modernity to be represented in older cultural forms, a strategy for contrasting a legitimising tradition that combines older and newer elements. The study of the past literature is relevant in understanding the shift and the distance of this analysis from the older analyses which Sundkler's work epitomises. In addition, to better understand this religious phenomenon and its connections with secular power, it is necessary to trace its historical origin and development and to analyse it systematically in relation to concrete secular conditions. This is useful in explaining Independent Christianity's dynamics in different conditions, such as within the post-apartheid era. It is just twelve years since these Churches began experiencing, and experimenting within, a post-colonial situation; if the thesis will focus on the post-apartheid period, this chapter will give the reader the opportunity to understand key historical elements that conditioned both the formation of and investigations of these churches in South Africa, in particular considering the 'importance of treating the writing of histories as a generic mode of making both the past and the present'.<sup>3</sup>

Two important limitations in the study of literature on independent churches emerged. Although this is not a work of accusation against previous authors that focused their analysis on this topic, it is nonetheless undeniable that literature, especially the older material, reflects prejudices and misleading interpretations of a movement that for the greater part of the twentieth century has been interpreted in a derogatory way. It is possible to argue that missionaries, as well as scholars, historically acted and interpreted the independent churches movement in the way

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<sup>2</sup> This chapter benefits from the use of secondary written sources collected in different libraries in the UK (Edinburgh, Leeds, Birmingham, Cambridge) and in South Africa (Johannesburg, Pretoria) and several archives. For archival sources, see pp. 21 -22.

<sup>3</sup> Comaroff J., Comaroff J., *Of Revelation and of Revolution. Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*, vol. 1, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1991, p. 17

they did because they were, as much as their study, a 'product' of their time and their context. This is more or less Oosthuizen's position. Oosthuizen acknowledged in 1997 the limitations of his previous book, *Post-Christianity*,<sup>4</sup> but he highlights the importance of his attempt to look for the reasons behind their growth and that from the first page to the last page they are described as not politically insensible. He said the book's title should have been *Post-Western Christianity in Africa*. He apologised for certain terminology (like the definition of 'sects'<sup>5</sup>) but specified that this terminology was largely used at that time, and posed the problem of if an author can escape from his/her era's interpretations and definitions. Another example that can be used to understand how language changes according to a specific historical context, is the article of the German scholar and missionary H.J. Becken published in 1980. In this article on the history of African independent churches in South Africa, Becken wrote that 'among their numerous bishops and prophets there are some striking characters who make you forget that their skins are black'.<sup>6</sup> And immediately after he specified:

That does not by any means involve the judgement that they are also better than the missionary churches or the churches in Europe. The church members in Africa are neither angels nor perfect saints. They are flagrant sinners, and can make more public confessions of their adulteries and robberies in front of the assembled church than I have ever heard in any church in the West.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Oosthuizen G.C., *Post-Christianity in Africa - A theological and Anthropological Study*, Hurst, London, 1968, p. 17. Material collected in NERMIC, Zululand University, June 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Oosthuizen G.C., 'My pilgrimage through the AIC crucible – a dynamic post-Western Christianity' in du Toit C.W., Ngada N.G., *Hearing the AIC-Voice*, Research Institute for Theology and Religion, UNISA, Pretoria, 1998, p. 61.

<sup>6</sup> Becken H.J., 'Where the faith is still young. The origin and history of the African Independent Churches' in *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft*, 36 (1), 1980, p. 2. English version in Turner's archive, MF 401, the University of Edinburgh.

<sup>7</sup> Becken H.J., *Faith still Young*, 1980, p.3.

Becken's terminology appeared very different to numerous other works and this example perhaps should make us reflect on the context of the time and the kind of audience this piece of work was addressed to.<sup>8</sup>

It is possible to identify a different register of interpretation and analysis between the earlier scholars of African independent churches and more recent ones. The previous derogatory approach of analysis, that reflects cultural and linguistic expression of a specific time, made me return to the words of Bishop Masuku from the Native Church of South Africa in Jabulani, who on a Sunday afternoon after the service discussed the importance of re-writing the history of AICs from the perspective of the independent churches themselves, and told me: 'if you want to learn something about us, do not read anything that was written by whites; and if you already have done that, make the effort to forget it!'<sup>9</sup> Although this is apparently an impossible challenge given the bulk of literature and research produced by non-African scholars and missionaries, this chapter, and this research in general, will take into account the feeling that emerged during field research that African independent churches were not understood or even acknowledged by white researchers<sup>10</sup> in the past (an important challenge then for any author, including myself)<sup>11</sup> and the powerful critique of the earlier literature that emerged in the middle of the eighties through the texts of black scholars and leaders of the African independent churches themselves.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Becken H.J., 'Sounds of the double-headed drums' in *Mission Studies*, 12 (2), 1995; Becken H.J., 'African Independent Churches' in Müller K. (et al.) (ed), *Dictionary of Mission*, Orbis, New York, 1998, pp. 148-162.

<sup>9</sup> Conversation with Bishop Masuku, Native Church of South Africa, Jabulani, Sunday 14 July 2002, fieldwork notes. See also the introduction of *Speaking for Ourselves*,

<sup>10</sup> Although in an earlier period, on the other hand, black writers who were not members of independent churches, were not any more accurate.

<sup>11</sup> Different interviews and notes from the field raised the issue of 'telling the truth about African independent churches' and not just wrong interpretations from outsiders. This critique was especially moved to the traditional literature's interpretation that defines independent churches as apolitical during the Apartheid era. An issue that will be addressed bellowed and in chapter 5.

<sup>12</sup> See for example Maluleke T.S., *Theological Interest in AICs* 1996a, pp. 15-29; Maluleke, T.S., 'Black and African theologies in the New World Order: A time to drink from our own wells', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 96, 1996b, pp.3-18.

A second important limitation of working on the history of AICs exists in the disadvantage of a lack of written sources in comparison with mainline churches.<sup>13</sup> I well remember my early research in South Africa working on the history of mainline churches.<sup>14</sup> The comparison between the material on mainline churches and on African independent churches was striking; every time some rare document on AICs appeared in the archive, I thought that I was lucky to not be dealing with a topic so scant in written sources. I did not know at the time that independent churches would have become my main terrain of investigation a few years later. There are few sources written by members of independent churches, although there are some exceptions like the collection of written sources by Shembe in the Nazaretha Church and the written history of the Methodist Church in Africa by LWM Xozwa.<sup>15</sup> For being such an important phenomenon, as Pretorius lamented, there is a paucity of AICs historical publications:<sup>16</sup> firstly there is a scant number of historical publications devoted purely to AICs, secondly there is no single comprehensive church history book on independent churches in South Africa, and thirdly, there is little bibliographic information on specific churches, and it is unusual to find biographies of leaders or of common people who belong to these churches. Pretorius identifies three main reasons for the slowness of Africans in writing their own history and this research recognises the possibility that these conditions could change in post-apartheid conditions. Firstly, Pretorius identifies the relatively low level of education among independent churches' members. Secondly, a general shortage of facilities and opportunities exist for the writing of history. This is reflected in the relative lack of knowledge of the historical origins and development of the movement and its relationship to mainline churches. This point is confirmed in the words of Archbishop Ngada, president of the African

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<sup>13</sup> An interesting possibility would be investigating the court processes documents of African investigated for crime under the effects of witchcraft or spiritual possession. Some of this material is available in the major South African archives.

<sup>14</sup> Bompani B, *Catholic Church Opposing Apartheid: South Africa 1984-1994*, unpublished thesis (in Italian), the University of Bologna.

<sup>15</sup> Xozwa L. W. M., *Methodist Church in Africa: History of the Church*, Cory Library for Historical Research, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, 1989.

<sup>16</sup> Pretorius H.L., *Historiography and Historical Sources Regarding African Indigenous Churches in South Africa: Writing Indigenous Church History*, E. Mellen Press, Lewiston, New York, 1995, p.86.



Spiritual Churches Association (ASCA), a broad umbrella of African independent churches, and one of the main authors of the book *Speaking for Ourselves*, the first reflection on writing history on independent churches, written by members of AICs:

The great eye-opener to us was the discovery that so many books had been written about us and so much study had been done on our history and origins. Most of us do not read books but those who had been able to read these books, especially Bishop Ngada and Reverend Chikane, told us what had been written about us. We objected very strongly to some of the things that were said about us but the books also raised many questions that we found it difficult to answer. We realised how little we knew about ourselves, about our own theology, about the differences among our Churches and especially about our history [...] We found the history in the books very interesting and we learnt a lot but we also felt that there were gaps in this written history. Things that we felt if would be important to know about were left out or glossed over'.<sup>17</sup>

The third point highlighted by Pretorius was the shortage of trained historians and theologians in the ranks of these churches. Pretorius also pointed out three other rather less convincing obstacles such as a general deficient sense of historical consciousness within the African worldview; a lack of sense of modern histories and historical reflection; and particularly arguable, a different time concept than that of Western scholarship.<sup>18</sup> This last point is particularly problematic and runs contrary to critiques of the literature written by African/black scholars and it opens up a set of questions.<sup>19</sup> Can we really talk of the exclusion of Africans from the Western interpretation of time? Even in a contemporary urban context? Does that mean then that African scholarship is excluded from other Western interpretations? Should we then always use a 'traditional' African concept of time when we talk of

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<sup>17</sup> ICT, *Speaking for Ourselves*, 1985, p.15. Similar claims in Vilakazi A., *Shembe: the Revitalization of African Society*, Skotaville, Johannesburg, 1986; from an earlier period Ntubane L., *Ibali lobomi nomsebenzi womfi umfundisi Pambani Jeremiah Mzimba: Livingstone Ntubane Mzimba*, Lovedale Institution Press, Lovedale, 1923; although not South African see also Pobee J.S., Ositelu G. II, *African Initiatives in Christianity*, WCC Publications, Geneva, 1998.

<sup>18</sup> Pretorius H., *Historiography and Historical Sources*, 1995, p. 96

<sup>19</sup> See for example Maluleke T.S., *Black and African Theologies*, 1996b.



independent churches? These assumptions clash with the theoretical interpretation of modernity that will be offered in the final chapter of this thesis and are in my opinion very problematic.

## **A Brief Historical Introduction to Independent Christianity in South Africa<sup>20</sup>**

The origin of the independent movement goes back at least to the 1880s when a number of black African churches separated from the white missionary churches and their control. These churches tended to maintain the same rituals and praxis of the missionary churches while they created different structures and organisations. This initial separatist act gave origin to the name of the movement, an 'independent' movement, a name rich in symbolic value that expressed the intentional refusal of the white political dominion over African life. The periphrasis 'independent churches' was elaborated during the first general inter-Church Missionary Conference in Johannesburg in 1904.<sup>21</sup> This definition has come to be applied to a wide range of churches ranging in size from small single-congregation churches to the enormous Zion Christian Church (ZCC), nowadays 'the largest church in South Africa'. These churches vary widely in theology and ritual, but share certain striking characteristics. According to Oosthuizen 'they assert vigorously their independence from the missionary churches, and they are always suspicious to moves towards ecumenism; in many instances, they combine unmistakably Christian traditions and beliefs with traditional African rituals and beliefs; the majority of their parishioners are blacks'.<sup>22</sup> In 1884, Nehemiah Tile, Methodist minister in the Eastern Cape, formed an independent church among the

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<sup>20</sup> This section is a brief and not exhaustive historical introduction to independent churches in South Africa. For a complete introduction to AIC history, see for example Elphick R., Davenport R. (ed), *Christianity in South Africa: a Political, Social and Cultural History*, David Philip, Cape Town, 1998.

<sup>21</sup> Unknown author, 1905 in Oosthuizen G.C., *African Independent Churches and Small Business: Spiritual Support for Secular Empowerment*, Human Science Research Council, Pretoria, 1997, p.16.

<sup>22</sup> Oosthuizen G.C., *Independent Churches and Small Business*, 1997, p.17.

Tembu, a royal clan of Xhosa-speaking people.<sup>23</sup> Tile encouraged non-payment of hut taxes and he organised opposition against the pass laws and against the colonial rules in Thembuland. In 1885 Tile was arrested for his political involvement. Although Tile died in 1890 the Cape colonial government continued to see his church as a threat. Government officials saw Tile's church as a potential encouragement to the black educated elite to start a mass movement of rebellion against colonial rule. The word Ethiopia comes from the biblical psalm in Ps 68.31: 'Ethiopia shall soon stretch her hands out of God' and in Acts 8.27 talking of the Ethiopian Eunuch, and it refers in general to the Church in Africa.<sup>24</sup> Symbolically Ethiopia became important as the country that opposed colonialism and remained independent. This aspect became even more central after the defeat of the Italian army at Adowa in 1896. The symbolic value of Ethiopia at the time was shared by afro-American movements (such as the UNIA of Marcus Garvey) as well as by African countries, and it assumed a pan-African and inter-Atlantic role in the symbolic interpretation of emancipation and liberation from white dominion.<sup>25</sup> 'Ethiopian' symbolism became relevant to South Africa thanks to Moses Mokone, who in 1893 founded the Ethiopian Church of South Africa (which was characterised by independence from white control, its apocalyptic character and links with similar American black churches). As Chidester pointed out, the growth of the Ethiopian movement can be associated with the changing urban environment of Pretoria and Johannesburg during the expansion of the gold mining industry after 1890.<sup>26</sup> Tile inspired other black religious leaders to become independent, like for example Mangena M. Mokone. Mokone was appointed as Methodist minister in Pretoria in 1882 where he remained until when he founded his own church, the

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<sup>23</sup> For the Tembu Church see for example electronic resource:

[http://gospelcom.net/dacb/stories/southafrica/tile\\_nehemiah.html](http://gospelcom.net/dacb/stories/southafrica/tile_nehemiah.html); Nelson Mandela comes from this Clan.

<sup>24</sup> See for example Chidester D., *Religions of South Africa*, Routledge, London, 1992; Kiernan J.P., 'Old Wine in New Wineskins' in *African Studies*, 33(2) 1975, pp. 193-201.

<sup>25</sup> For South African and Afro-American (the black *abelungu*) connections, see for example Johnson W.R., 'The AME Church and Ethiopianism in South Africa' in *Journal of Southern African Affairs*, 3 (2), April 1978, pp. 211-224.

<sup>26</sup> Chidester D., *Religion of South Africa*, 1992, p. 82.

Ethiopian Church, when a white young minister was promoted ahead of him.<sup>27</sup> Mokone declared that he wanted to practice the Christian faith independently from any white interference but, nevertheless, he decided to cooperate with the political authority in Transvaal, from whom he received recognition in 1893 from Paul Kruger's government. Under his leadership, and subsequently with Kanyane and Samuel J. Brander, the Ethiopian Church grew and became a distinctive church in the country.<sup>28</sup> Another important leader of the Ethiopian church was James Mata Dwane who also left the Methodist church as a protest of the way he was excluded from the administration of the funds he raised for the Methodist church during his visit to Scotland.<sup>29</sup> Many reasons have been put forward for the rise of the independent churches. It is impossible to give an account of the historical and other factors that facilitated the founding of independent churches, but it is possible to acknowledge that the founding of the Thembu Church by Nehemiah Tile and the Ethiopian Church by Moses Mokone (both originally Methodist) started what later became a large church movement, that eventually spread throughout the country.

Religious independence was scarcely accepted by the white government and the movement was perceived as a threat not just at a religious level but also at the political level. The Cape Colony government called for an official inquiry and between 1903 and 1905 the South African Native Commission gathered a broad range of material on Ethiopian churches. The collection of this material showed that these churches were perceived in different ways at the beginning of the twentieth century and that some religious ministers and some government administrators saw them as a threat while others as just organisations moved by the desire for more independence over religious ecclesiastical issues.<sup>30</sup> At the end of the enquiry the South African Native Affairs Commission opted for not banning the Ethiopian churches. A year after, in 1906, the Bambatha rebellion raised fresh doubts regarding the political nature of independent churches. The imposition of a poll tax

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<sup>27</sup> Sundkler B., *Bantu Prophets*, 1961, p.39

<sup>28</sup> Chidester D., *Religion of South Africa*, 1992, p.117.

<sup>29</sup> Sundkler B., *Bantu Prophets*, 1961, p. 42.

<sup>30</sup> See for example Chidester D., *Religion of South Africa*, 1992.

in January 1906 imposed by the British authority to push blacks to move into the agricultural and mining industries, provoked an insurrection in several different places in Natal. Bambatha, head of the Zondi clan, played a dominant part in the rebellion against taxation. Bambatha was captured and beheaded. In 1910 the government of the newly formed Union of South Africa started to view the independent churches with more suspicion. The Native Affairs Commission instituted in 1918 reported that these churches were 'a source of embarrassment to the Administration' and 'a serious hindrance to the spread of true religion among the natives'.<sup>31</sup> This report of the Native Affairs Commission affected the recognition and approval of the government, that recognised just a few of the oldest Ethiopian churches awarding them the permission of building sites for church buildings and schools, while others, the majority, did not get permission and recognition by the authorities. A survey on race relations in South Africa in 1958 showed that in that year there were only 78 recognised independent churches, while a further 1,286 applications were on the Native Affairs Department's waiting list. The Commission on Native Affairs suggested then that no further separatist<sup>32</sup> churches should be recognised for the time being.<sup>33</sup>

'Most of the studies of the AIC movement have treated AICs as a reaction to the unfolding history of South Africa, attempting to provide a conservative and traditionalist bulwark against the inexorable pressures of modernisation. Yet the AICs have shaped South African society as much as they have been shaped by it'.<sup>34</sup> As many scholars agree, the origins of the independent movement lay in the desire for independence from both ecclesiastical and political colonialism. The earliest 'separatist' church represented one of the most important and powerful expression of black self-expression and Black Nationalism. Nehemiah Tile in fact established

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Sundkler B., *Bantu Prophets*, 1961, p.71.

<sup>32</sup> Separatist churches are churches that broke away from existing religious structures (that is the case, for example of the Ethiopian Church).

<sup>33</sup> In Horrel M., *A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa*, South African Institute of Race Relations, Johannesburg, year 1958-1959-1960; available in Turner's Collection, CSCNWW, the University of Edinburgh, Microfiche 421.

<sup>34</sup> Oosthuizen G.C., *Independent Churches and Small Business*, 1997, p.17.

his church in 1884 to object to the criticism from his previous missionary (Methodist) church that accused him of being too involved in politics, according to Saunders.<sup>35</sup> Tile attacked the white dominion and the imposition of their rules over the Thembu Chieftdom. Tile distanced himself from white control in the church without refusing Christianity; on the contrary Christianity had become an expression of black liberation achievable through Black Nationalism. The image of Ethiopia, as one of the few countries in Africa not subjugated by European colonialism, assumed a symbolic value and became a sort of black icon.

Another link with America was the formation of the Zionist churches, named after the Christian Catholic Church in Zion of John Alexander Dowie, founded near Chicago, Illinois at Zion City in 1896.<sup>36</sup> Zionist interest in South Africa started with the visit to Zion City by Reverend J.U. Buchler, a South African congregationalist who started to collaborate with Dowie. The first work in South Africa conducted on behalf of Dowie in South Africa occurred in 1902 in the Orange Free State and in 1904 in Johannesburg. The Zion Christian Church (ZCC), located in the North of Transvaal, became the largest Zionist church in South Africa. The Church was founded in 1924-5 by Eugenias Lekganyane, and it expanded dramatically under the leadership of his son Edward Lekganyane.<sup>37</sup> From less than a thousand followers in 1925 the ZCC grew to nearly 30,000 members by the early 1940s. Nowadays the ZCC is considered to be the biggest Christian church in South Africa.<sup>38</sup> According to Chidester the reason why this church was able to keep such an extensive membership turns on the fact that, thanks to its hierarchical and centralised organisation, it was able to avoid schisms and divisions.<sup>39</sup> Unlike most of the other churches that grew in the 1940s, particularly in urban contexts, the ZCC preserved its original attachment to the sacred land typical of the churches at the beginning of

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<sup>35</sup> Saunders C., 'Tile and the Thembu Church: politics and independency on the Cape Eastern Frontier in the Late Nineteen Century' in *Journal of African History*, 11, 1970, pp. 553-570.

<sup>36</sup> Chidester D., *Religion of South Africa*, 1992, Oosthuizen G.C., *Independent Churches and Small Business*, 1997.

<sup>37</sup> Anderson A., *Zion and Pentecost*, 2000, p.69.

<sup>38</sup> Oosthuizen G.C., *Independent Churches and Small Business*, 1997, 97.

<sup>39</sup> Chidester D., *Religions of South Africa*, 1992.



the century.<sup>40</sup> The sacred site for the Zion Christian Church is Mount Zion in Moria (an old biblical name for Jerusalem), 25 miles from Pietersburg in Limpopo Province. In contrast with the general level of poverty of the church's congregations, Moria is a relatively wealthy centre with expansive farmlands and business enterprises and is an important centre for pilgrimage, especially at Easter when thousands of ZCC members take to the road to the annual Easter festival. In South Africa the number of Zionist churches expanded between 1917 and 1927 and initially they were localised in the northern provinces.<sup>41</sup> According to Daneel the real growth of Zionists in Southern Africa started from 1920.<sup>42</sup> The number of AICs literally doubled by the middle of the twentieth century and they became a powerful reality in KwaZulu-Natal and then in the Transvaal,<sup>43</sup> and while this growth according to Daneel started to slow down in Zimbabwe between 1960 and 1970, in South Africa after the 60s accelerated.<sup>44</sup> Following Oosthuizen's data the word 'Zion' today appears in eighty per cent of AIC names.<sup>45</sup>

The third major kind of independent church, the Apostolic church, also pays some debts to an American contribution. The first Apostolic church, the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) was established in South Africa in 1908 in Johannesburg by John G. Lake and Thomas Hezmalhalch from the Apostolic Faith that was at the time a leading player in the growth of Pentecostalism in some independent churches. Zionist and Apostolic churches flourished by concentrating on spiritual healing to recover a human identity in the midst of difficult economic, social and political environment. The Pentecostal movement, that initially had a multi-racial

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<sup>40</sup> Sacred land is also important in the Shembe Church, the 'Mountain of Jerusalem'.

<sup>41</sup> De Wett J., 'Social change, resistance and world view of a community in the Transkei' in Oosthuizen G.C., Kitshoff M.C., Dube S.W.D. (ed), *Afro-Christianity at the Grassroots: its Dynamics and Strategies*, Brill, Leiden, 1994, pp. 137-164.

<sup>42</sup> Daneel M.L., *Quest for Belonging: Introduction to a Study of African Independent Churches*, Mambo Press, Gweru 1987.

<sup>43</sup> De Wett J., 'Social change', 1994, p.153

<sup>44</sup> Daneel M.L., *Quest for Belonging*, 1987, p.38 and p.45.

<sup>45</sup> This is to express their link to the sacred land. Oosthuizen G.C., *Indigenous Christianity and the Future of the Church in South Africa*, unpublished paper, NERMIC, Zululand University.



character,<sup>46</sup> appealed to Africans and Afrikaners who suffered the social hardship that accompanied the country's mining industry and the rapid industrialisation process. The movement emerged in the final stages of the 1906-1908 depression, after the Boer War.<sup>47</sup> Thousands of churches<sup>48</sup> emerged with a similar 'Zionist' or 'Apostolic' commitment to healing and spirituality, and the AIC movement started to flourish especially after 1910.<sup>49</sup> In the 1930s a new generation of missionaries started to put a great emphasis on theological training, and as Martin West asserted, a stronger theological attention is one of the main (and actually) few differences between the Zion type and the Apostolic type of church.<sup>50</sup> The imposition of white missionaries of the notion of orthodoxy and the abandoning of traditional rituals, led to a wave of schisms in the 1940s and in the 1950s which created a number of similar churches retaining the label 'Apostolic'.<sup>51</sup> By the 1960s one in every five black South Africans was a member of some independent church. By the 1990s this had nearly doubled and this process is still increasing.<sup>52</sup> These churches are usually congregations no larger than twenty or thirty people.

Other types of independent churches have purely South African origins, like for example the Nazarite Baptist Church (often called the Shembe church), founded by the prophet Isaiah Shembe. By the time of Shembe's death in 1935, the church of the Nazarites had a following of nearly 30,000 members, almost all Zulu-speaking converts. Scholars have linked the popularity of this movement with the effects of colonialism, the Union of South Africa, the end of Zulu autonomy after the Bambatha rebellion and the rise of Afrikaner nationalism, in particular after the

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<sup>46</sup> Although the early practice of multi-racial worship rapidly changed to one of segregation and the black AFM evolved separately from the white church. In 1909 was established that the baptise of blacks, whites and coloured would have been separated. Sundkler B., *Zulu Zion and Some Swazi Zionists*, Oxford University Press, London, 1976, p.54.

<sup>47</sup> See Maxwell D., 'Historicizing Christian Independency: the South African Pentecostal Movement c.1908-1960' in *The Journal of African History*, 40 (2), 1999, pp. 243-264.

<sup>48</sup> Oosthuizen estimated at least 6,000 at the end of the nineties. Oosthuizen, *Independent Churches and Small Business*, 1997.

<sup>49</sup> Sundkler B., *Bishops and Prophets*, 1961, p.48.

<sup>50</sup> See West M., *Black City*, 1975a, p.18.

<sup>51</sup> See Maxwell D., 'Historicizing Christian Independency', 1999, p. 252.

<sup>52</sup> Oosthuizen C.G., *Independent Churches and Small Business*, 1997, p. 20.

Land Act in 1913 that began to force mass migration to urban areas and the disintegration of the rural economy.<sup>53</sup>

### **Historiography of African Independent Churches in South Africa: From the Pivotal Work of Bengt Sundkler to the Eighties**

It is not possible to draw up a systemic historiography of AICs since the beginning of their existence, but it is possible - and appropriate - to give an account of some of the main issues involved, emerging themes and relevant contributions to the ongoing debate of non-Western Christianity history. This analysis will be more or less chronological, dealing with the historiography of independent churches in South Africa. From the existing literature it is possible to discern little consensus on the causes of or reasons why African independent churches found fertile soil in South Africa. This chapter does not deal with the large body of literature which is the work of missionaries and theologians who tried to understand these movements in order to contain and challenge the separatist process. Their explanation is usually to see this movement as a syncretic phenomenon, a fusion between the old and the new (some material of this nature is available in Turner's archive, in microfiches at Edinburgh University). Missionaries were threatened by the phenomenon of secessionism and separatism. Government attention focused especially on the Ethiopian movement and the risk of political involvement. When the South African government instituted a South African Native Affairs Commission in 1903-1905 it created also a special commission for the study of this phenomenon; this exercise was repeated in 1925 after the Bulhoek massacre of the Israelites in 1921.<sup>54</sup> The results of the Native Church Commission instituted in 1925 reported that the reasons for the establishment of 'Bantu Separatist churches' were:

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<sup>53</sup> Sundkler B., *Bantu Prophets*, 1961, p.133. Sundkler made the point that when apartheid was institutionalised, actually the independent movement was already well instituted and through a growing process.

<sup>54</sup> Massacre of Israelites refers to 1921 when South African police heavily armed massacred nearly 200 members of an Ethiopian church in the eastern Cape. Church members, inspired by their leader, refused to pay taxes to the government who intimated them to leave their sacred land. The church was known as the Israelites. Enoch Mgijima was the leader and prophet that founded this church.

- The desire of independence in church matters. The Commission report states: 'in every direction Bantu activity was restricted by the rules and regulations made by white men'.
- The colour bar among European missionaries who were not sufficiently sympathetic towards blacks aspirations and had become infected with the 'colour bar' prejudice
- The secession of members due to the Africans incapacity to respect discipline. It has been written that 'in many cases reported where there had been moral laxity on the part of a Bantu minister and the mother church sought to subject him to discipline he seceded and formed a church on his own'.
- The example of separatism and division of European churches, especially inside protestant churches. It is reported that a white minister said: 'the example they are following is what they saw when the first white missionaries came with their separate denominations'.
- Personal ambition and an easy way of earning a living. 'new sects started by Bantu who wished to acquire the status of ministers, even if self-appointed, in order to enjoy the emoluments and privileges of the office because in most Bantu churches the minister is supported by subscriptions from members'.
- The importance of 'tribal' divisions. 'The Church formed by Tile [Tembu Catholic Church] became the National Church of the Tembus. When Uzimba seceded from the Free Church of Scotland, he took with him the men and women of his own tribe'.
- The desire of a church in conformity with traditional 'Bantu' customs. 'A result of reaction against the policy of the European missionaries in suppressing many of the Bantu costumes'.
- The interest to control properties and funds. The Commission found that it was difficult for most 'Bantu' to understand that property may be held in trust for a body spread over a large part of the country and could not be

placed entirely at the disposal of the local section of the body. 'This fact, as well as many others, induced certain Bantu to believe that money which had been subscribed by or for Bantu, was used for the benefit of Europeans'.<sup>55</sup>

The final view of the Native Churches' Commission instituted in 1925 was that with all its shortcomings and faults, which were both many and consistent, the 'separatist' [quote marks mine] movement was an inevitable step in the 'social evolution of the Bantu people' and that 'it would be as foolish as it could be impossible to attempt to suppress it by any repressive legislation'. The Commission held that as soon as the movement would become political 'tending to subversion' of public order, it would be 'the duty of the government to suppress it, but as long as the movement is not mischievous it should be tolerated'. In cases where the churches were driven by worthy motives and were working in harmony with the government, then the movement should be encouraged. The 1925 Commission considered the recommendations of the earlier South African Native Affairs Commission instituted in 1903-1905 as still wise and sound: 'to secure such wise control and guidance of the movement that the potentialities may be exerted for good and not for evil'.<sup>56</sup>

Initially the dominant interpretation of the reasons that led to the evolution of the independent movement was syncretism, an interpretation that considers the independent movement as a synthesis between African tradition and Christianity (interpreted as a merely Western production). The most influential voice on syncretism (with negative implications) has been Sundkler who asserted that 'the syncretic sect becomes the bridge over which Africans are brought back to heathenism' and he continued saying that there is a logical link between Ethiopianism, Zionism and primitive animism.<sup>57</sup> It was Sundkler's pioneering work

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<sup>55</sup> 'Government recognition of Bantu Churches and allocation sites in Bantu areas and Bantu urban township' in *Bantoe/Bantu* (English version), Pretoria, 9 September 1959, pp. 101-108. In Harold Turner's Collection, Microfiche 397, CSCNWW, The University of Edinburgh.

<sup>56</sup> SANAC, 1905, vol. 1, p.64 in Harold Turner's archive, CSCNWW, the University of Edinburgh.

<sup>57</sup> Sundkler B., *Bantu Prophets*, 1961, p. 397.

on independent churches among the Zulu that laid the foundation and provided guiding principles for many subsequent studies, both by missionaries and social scientists. Syncretism thus became the most accepted traditional explanation for the growth of AICs in South Africa. For Sundkler AICs were primarily a reaction to white rule. The core of Sundkler's explanation may be summed up thus: 'in a segregated and chlorocratic society as South Africa, the separatist church becomes an outlet for the pent-up frustrations of the dominated group and tends to develop into a means of reaction to conquest'.<sup>58</sup> In a certain way all the literature after 1948 recognises that the main explanation for the development of these churches is a reaction to white domination. The need to explain the reasons that led to secession (at the time a diffused phenomenon) was much stronger than any desire to explain the meaning for the existence of these churches. While acknowledging the failure of mission churches in many respects, nevertheless the concern in Sundkler's first analysis was that pagan worship and heathen thought patterns of the African became a dominant part of the church and perverted true Christianity. This negative attitude prevailed in the early period of study, as is evident in Oosthuizen's claim that many separatist churches are nativistic movements, and thus post-Christian.<sup>59</sup> Sundkler interpreted the 1913 Land Act and Protestant denominationalism as responsible for secession, especially in the case of Ethiopian churches. Another explanatory concept is the competition for leadership. Thus a major thematic concern is analysing leadership patterns, and succession. Sundkler isolated a chief type leader found in Ethiopian churches, and a prophet type in Zionist churches.<sup>60</sup> But this typology was debated and not always accepted by other authors. Both West<sup>61</sup> and Kiernan<sup>62</sup> claimed on the basis of their own research, that both types of leader are found within the same church and even the same person. Thus, leadership is explained in terms of how it functions in attracting and maintaining members to the church; and also how the competition for leadership often leads to secession.

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<sup>58</sup> Sundkler B., *Bantu Prophets*, 1948, p.179.

<sup>59</sup> Oosthuizen G.C., *Post-Christianity in Africa*, 1968.

<sup>60</sup> Sundkler B., *Bantu Prophets*, 1948 and 1961.

<sup>61</sup> West M., *Black City*, 1975a.

<sup>62</sup> Kiernan J.P., 'Old Wine', 1975.



Sundkler strongly believed in this point and claimed particularly that aspiration to leadership in some Zionist churches is 'the deepest cause of the emergence of independent churches...a nativistic-syncretistic interpretation of the Christian religion'.<sup>63</sup> This point is in part criticised by Chidester who showed that for a long time black Christians in the mission churches showed little interest in becoming ordained ministers or assistants for the fundamental reason that their salary was extremely low. The mission churches kept black religious leaders' salaries much lower than the income they could get from farming, business or skilled trade. It is only after the 1890s that government introduced heavy taxation, land reservations and restrictive conditions in efforts to stem African agriculture which may have increased the interest in church leadership.<sup>64</sup> One of the major concerns was to explain the proliferation of separatist churches. Many studies tried to focus on attempts at co-operation between independent churches and reasons for the success or failure of such attempts.<sup>65</sup>

More recently Luke Pato suggests that the syncretic explanation does not provide an adequate understanding of independent churches for different reasons.<sup>66</sup> Firstly this kind of explanation does not consider socio-cultural and religious conflict and thus the desire of independence from missionaries and white dominion that was the original motive of their emergence. Secondly, it does not explain why AICs kept existing and growing rapidly even after the initial moment of 'fusion' between the two different worlds, the 'modern' and the 'traditional' one.<sup>67</sup> A critical view of syncretism assumes that Christianity is a unified phenomenon and that there is just one interpretation and one (Western) origin. Syncretism builds in certain ways on the ethnocentric idea that the European forms of Christianity are the authentic ones.

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<sup>63</sup> Sundkler B., *Bantu Prophets*, 1948, p.297.

<sup>64</sup> Chidester D., *Religions of South Africa*, 1992, pp. 111-112.

<sup>65</sup> See for example Sundkler B., *Bantu Prophets*, 1948, pp.169-179; West M., 'Independence and unity' in *African Studies* 33 (2), 1974, pp. 267-290.

<sup>66</sup> Pato L., 'The African Independent Churches: a socio cultural approach' in *Journal of Theology for South Africa*, 72, 1990, pp. 24-35.

<sup>67</sup> This research will try to address this point in chapter 7, 'Modernity and Tradition: Need for Reinterpretation', considering modernity and its interpretation as the theoretical framework to explain their growth in the contemporary context.



I personally experienced accusations from AIC leaders against this assumption. One of the sermons held during the Sunday liturgy focused on a refusal of the western centricity of Christianity. The exact words I heard during the sermon were: 'Christ was an African, not a European. He was raised in Egypt, why then should he be considered a European?'<sup>68</sup> The Westernisation of Christianity has an implicit negative meaning of distorting Christian interpretation offering a sort of what Luke Pato defines as 'deviation'. It also seems to be an unconscious process that occurred without a clear statement from these churches. The syncretic interpretation in a way dismantles and denies African symbols, absorbing them in the mainstream of the religion of the dominants. It does not take into consideration the social and historical context in which Christian faith is accepted and spread and it relies on the assumption that Christianity should remain an external factor with external interpretations. In synthesis syncretism does not offer an explanation to understanding the nature of these churches, it just offers a classificatory explanation.<sup>69</sup>

In a second classification of analysis the independent movement has been classified as a moment of formation identified as a 'reaction to conquest', as opposition to and refusal of domination. Exponents of this stream include Kamphausen. Kamphausen argues that the classical study on 'Bantu' prophetism by Sundkler lacks methodological consistency. He stated that 'by combining a historical review of the origins of the "Ethiopian" movement with a detailed empirical analysis of present day Zulu "Zionism", Sundkler develops a typology which has rather limited relevance for his historical research'.<sup>70</sup> Another approach that Kamphausen refutes is the socio-anthropological method of interpreting African Independent movements

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<sup>68</sup> Bishop Ntongana's Sermon at Sunday Service at the Methodist Church of South Africa, Jabulani, fieldwork notes, Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> July 2002.

<sup>69</sup> Although historically it is possible to argue that the desire to retain aspects of African culture within African Christianity was one of the causes of the development of AICs. The problem, again, was the definition of syncretism was used in a negative way, as something deviated from the mainstream. For a more positive interpretation of the use of syncretism by early missionaries, see Thompson J., *Christianity in Northern Malawi: Donald Frasers Missionary Methods and Ngoni Culture*, Brill, Leiden, 1995, pp. 251-252.

<sup>70</sup> Kamphausen E., 'Current research projects. studies on the early history of AICs movement in South Africa' in *African Marbugensia*, 4 (1), 1971, pp. 28-30.

in terms of the culture-contact situation and the problem of acculturation, a method that explains AICs' emergence as a manifestation of a culture clash between different ethical and religious value systems.<sup>71</sup> According to Kamphausen this method eliminates the very roots of African claims that express themselves in the independent movement. Ethiopianism has to be understood with reference to the historical conditions in which it originated and developed.<sup>72</sup> According to Glenda Kruss the theme of reaction to conquest has been used primarily to explain the rise of Ethiopian churches, and focused largely on rural areas but it was not as strongly adopted in the later interpretation of urban Zionism.<sup>73</sup> Studies, especially on Zionist churches, sought to connect the idea of the development of the independent movement with the emerging theme of 'urbanisation'. Independent churches were then seen as an adaptation to different urban conditions. The theme highlighted by Sundkler and Mills, of a move towards accommodation or adaptation, has become the dominant explanatory motif of Zionist churches. This shift can be logically explained following the historical development of both independent churches and South African industrialisation and urbanisation. As we have seen, Oosthuizen in his initial work considered the AICs as 'post-Christian' and 'nativistic' churches.<sup>74</sup> Oosthuizen has argued that the proliferation of separatist churches may be explained partly by the race issue and the failure of the church, but most importantly is the reaction of indigenous cultures in the face of the onslaught of Western civilization, technology and industrialisation.<sup>75</sup> Independent churches, for Oosthuizen, played an important role in the acculturation process by recovering old securities in the face of the destruction of traditional-society. Thus, Zionist churches become psychological safety centres in the urbanisation process. The adaptation

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<sup>71</sup> He especially makes reference to Kellermann A.G., *Prophetism in South Africa in Acculturation Perspective: A study of the Impact of Christianity and Western Culture on the Bantu as Manifested in Prophetic Movements*, Voorburg, Zanon, 1964.

<sup>72</sup> Kamphausen E., *Beginning of the Independent Churches Movement in South Africa. History and Theology of the Ethiopian Movement 1872-1912*, translated in English by Dr Worrall in 1990, in Turner's Collection, Microfiche 423, CSCNWW, the University of Edinburgh.

<sup>73</sup> Kruss G., A Critical Review of the Study of Independent Churches in South Africa, paper presented at the Zululand Symposium, 1985 available in Turner's Collection, Microfiche 426, CSCNWW, the University of Edinburgh.

<sup>74</sup> Oosthuizen G.C., *Post-Christianity*, 1968, p.17.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

theme has been most thoroughly formulated by West in his study of some of the approximately 900 Zionist churches in Soweto at that time (1970). His major explanatory hypothesis is that Zionist churches 'play an important adaptive role in the process of urbanisation'.<sup>76</sup> They are explained as voluntary associations which fulfil the role previously played by kinship groups in rural areas, by providing personal networks and so security and identity in the alien urban environment, 'a place where to feel at home'.<sup>77</sup> According to Martin West 'one of the strengths of the Zionist movement has been in fact its ability to adapt and synthesise, and thus appeal to people in both urban and rural areas'. He did not recognise their political value but their social potential in protecting the life of their members. He wrote that 'the Ethiopian-type churches in Soweto today [in the 70s] do not appear to be as overtly political, if only because the political organisations to which they were once attached are now illegal. With political avenues largely closed to them, these churches now concentrate more on religious matters and the welfare of the church members'.<sup>78</sup> Extending beyond the urbanisation process to the poverty and difficulties of urban living, West argued that Zionist churches are engaged in improving the uncomfortable conditions of the urban setting. Zionism is claimed to have created a 'blend of old and new', a new religious organisation of African orientation, which in providing a more satisfactory quality of life, is more relevant to many than the Christianity of the mission churches.<sup>79</sup> Missionary writers in general always seem very keen on documenting rituals and worship services, giving particular space to the healing process. The emphasis again has been on demonstrating how (and how much) traditional African religious elements have been incorporated into aspects of Zionist worship.<sup>80</sup>

Similarly to West, Kiernan praises the importance of Sundkler's work that 'quite correctly characterised Zionists by their proclivity to withdraw from the mainstream

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<sup>76</sup> West M., *Black City*, 1975a, 201.

<sup>77</sup> West M., *Black City*, 1975a, p. 202.

<sup>78</sup> West M., 'African churches in Soweto' in Kileff C., Pendleton C. (ed), *Urban Man in Southern Africa*, Mambo Press, Givelo, 1975b, p. 22.

<sup>79</sup> West M., *African Churches*, 1975b, p. 199.

<sup>80</sup> For example see Becken H.J., 'Faith still Young', 1980.

of society [...]'.<sup>81</sup> Kiernan clearly argued that Zionism was a 'response' to urban poverty'.<sup>82</sup> Kiernan in his 'small-scale' studies of Zionist bands in Kwa Mashu<sup>83</sup> argued that the Zionist band is concerned with defining boundaries against the evils of township life, and to protect itself from the rest of the African population, illustrating this with studies of their leadership patterns, communion and healing services. Zionist bands are thus the voluntary associations of the 'poorer than poor', dominated by puritan ethic and aimed at transcending the adverse conditions of urban living.<sup>84</sup> Kiernan says of Sundkler that at the end of his 'remarkable survey' (mainly of Zulu independent churches) he reached the conclusion that the 'separatist church' is, on the part of the African, his logical reply to the Whites' policy of segregation and separation and he strongly hinted that both Ethiopians and Zionists were nationalistic in outlook.<sup>85</sup> One of the foremost concerns of a Zionist band in Kwa Mashu is to 'protect themselves against the township as an African community by drawing and maintaining boundaries setting off their membership from the rest of the population'.<sup>86</sup> Kiernan, quoting the work of the anthropologist Mary Douglas, has drawn attention to the association between social boundaries and physical boundaries that find formal expression on ritual occasions.<sup>87</sup> According to Kiernan, AICs 'emerged out of the confrontation between whites and blacks, whether this is seen as merely a culture clash, or as involving conflict or social, economic and political interests'.<sup>88</sup> Similarly for Pretorius the 'synthesis of old and new' in Zionist churches facilitates adaptation to urban living, both in terms of facilitating the approach for Africans coming from a traditional religious rural

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<sup>81</sup> Kiernan J.P., 'When Zionists draw the line: a study of religious exclusiveness in an African Township' in *African Studies*, 33 (2), 1974, p. 82

<sup>82</sup> Kiernan J.P., 'Poor and Puritan: an attempt to view Zionism as a collective response to urban poverty' in *African Studies*, 36 (1), 1977, pp. 31-41.

<sup>83</sup> Kiernan J.P., 'Draw the line', 1974, p. 75.

<sup>84</sup> Kiernan J.P., 'Old wine', 1975, pp. 193-201.

<sup>85</sup> Kiernan J.P., 'Draw the line', 1974.

<sup>86</sup> Kiernan J.P., 'Old wine', 1975, p. 82.

<sup>87</sup> Douglas M., *Purity and Danger*, Penguin, London, 1970, p.137. We will go back to the idea of social and physical boundaries in the next chapter, chapter 4. As we will see in chapter 5 and 7, this research will offer a slightly different interpretation of independent churches. More than creating boundaries and closures, these churches seem to let the external coming inside the church to be healed and treated, in a process of flux and not of closure as Kiernan describe.

<sup>88</sup> Kiernan J.P., 'Draw the line', 1974, p. 79



environment to alien values and in terms of the adverse conditions of poverty and social deprivation.<sup>89</sup> Pretorius claimed that in Transkei around 1880, when political and military resistance was declining, resistance moved into other channels such as independent churches, taking the form of Ethiopianism.<sup>90</sup> Mills, by contrast, has claimed that religious separatism, especially Zionism, is pre-millenarian, being a pietistic retreat in the face of the decline of the African's economic conditions and living standards by the period 1890-1910.<sup>91</sup>

Despite the variety of anthropological, historical and/or theological approaches, and whether independent churches are criticised or interpreted as legitimate, it appears that scholars to date are in basic disagreement in offering a justification of their proliferation. Fundamentally the reasons offered to explain why independent churches proliferated on the scale they have, differ according to the orientation of the investigator. Missionary and theological writers are concerned to determine the particular pattern and worship able to attract black South Africans. The political establishment is interested in evaluating the danger that these organisations pose to the existing order. Social scientists generally are concerned with explaining the social and cultural functions of independent churches that attract black people in South Africa. This problematic is so widely accepted, that it often remains implicit. Indeed, the complete lack of explicit theorisation in studies of independent churches in South Africa is striking. The only accepted theoretical interpretation is that Africans, coming from a traditional society, with its particular set of cultural values and meanings, have to adapt culturally to a large-scale modern, industrial society with its Western and Christian values and meanings. In short, independent churches are a reaction, or adaptation, to conquest, or cultural contact. This theoretical interpretation, resulted from a functionalist framework, remained dominant until the eighties. Scholars, according to Glenda Kruss, have used methods such as participant observation, interviews and surveys questionnaires, but they have tended

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<sup>89</sup> Pretorius H., 'Historical trends in Transkeian Zionism' in *Missionalia*, 11(3), 1983.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> Mills W.G., 'The Fork in the Road' in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 9 (3), 1978, pp. 189-192.

to focus on a limited range of issues and aspects of independent churches. If a different problematic and theoretical orientation were assumed, then studies would focus on a different set of issues. This leads to a reappraisal of the identification of a more appropriate framework for the study of AICs in South Africa. In this thesis I posit that theoretical interpretations of modernity may provide such an analytical framework.

The main critique that can be brought against the functionalist approach is the convincing analysis of Glenda Kruss based on a broad range of literature.<sup>92</sup> Kruss defines the functionalist approach as ahistorical: cultural and social events are analysed as static, as never changing in time. In response a Marxist historical approach is suggested as an alternative (e.g. as followed by Kruss and Mosala). Glenda Kruss categorises Sundkler, Barret, Oosthuizen (at least his first production), West and Daneel (and his work on Shona churches) as functionalists. They emphasised cultural aspects (beliefs, values, perceptions) without inserting them into a broader historical and material context. Their analysis perceived social change as a reaction to external forces within existing structures and as a clash between different cultures or identities. Kruss contests the way African culture and Western culture appear to be static and as two different closed systems. Glenda Kruss and David Chidester in the eighties criticised the dominant classificatory approach to retreat of theorisation and historical contextualisation.<sup>93</sup> Also, Luke Pato<sup>94</sup> has stated that literature in general recognises the limits of writing history on AICs as usually descriptive and focused on classification more than theorisation.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> This thesis did not use Glenda Kruss' dissertation (Kruss G., *Indigenous churches in South Africa, with special reference to Zionist-Apostolics*. MA thesis, University of Cape Town, 1985) in which she surveyed a large volume of literature on AICs, but a shorter version of her dissertation available in microfiche in Turner's archive: Kruss G., 'A Critical Review of the Study of Independent Churches in South Africa', paper presented at the Zululand Symposium, 1985 available in Turner's Collection, Microfiche 426, CSCNWW, the University of Edinburgh.

<sup>93</sup> Kruss G., 'A Critical Review', 1985; Chidester D., 'Religion alive/studies unborn?' in *Journal for the Study of Religion*, (1) 2, 1988, p. 83-93.

<sup>94</sup> Pato L., 'Socio-Cultural Approach', 1990, p.28.

<sup>95</sup> See for example Chidester D., 'Religion alive', 1988, p. 87.



## **A Significant Change in AIC Historiography in South Africa: a Late Re-interpretative Approach**

The independent churches movement continued to grow and to attract greater numbers of believers forcing missionaries, theologians and social scientists to formulate a more positive approach to the explanation of AICs' growth. Internationally literature on Christianity in Africa went through a process of 'decolonisation' earlier than this shift in thinking occurred in South Africa. The end of colonialism ushered in the idea that it was time to reinterpret much of the history of the continent, including the history of religious movements. The Department of World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches (WCC) meeting in 1962 was fundamental in the beginning of the new re-interpretative process putting a great concern on the idea of 'building of bridges of mutual understanding and reconciliation'.<sup>96</sup> In 1965 an international congress of African historians held in Dar es Salam marked a watershed in African historiography in general and it affected the writing of Church history in Africa. One of the main themes identified was that of resistance and rebellion against colonial rule. Following this theme a resolution was adopted: 'an African philosophy of history which could serve as liberation from the colonial experience must be a vital concern of all historians studying in Africa'.<sup>97</sup> A multidisciplinary approach to the analysis of new religious movements was applied by Lanternari who highlighted the relevance of historical phases and contexts of religious movements in general, but perfectly applicable to the South African case study:

Speaking generally, I believe that no absolute and simplistic theory concerning the historical and socio-cultural role of religion can be considered acceptable within a critical and dialectical perspective. Neither the Marxist, dogmatically negative interpretation of religion as 'the opiate of the people', nor the vague and optimistic view of religion as 'the supreme way of redemption' and a

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<sup>96</sup> Pretorius H., *Historiography and Historical Sources*, 1995, p.185.

<sup>97</sup> Ranger T., *Emerging Themes of African History*, East African Publishing House, Nairobi, 1968, p.218

totally autonomous human experience, as phenomenologists of religion regularly assume, seems to me capable of offering satisfactory and well-balanced ground for the evaluation of religious manifestations in specific societies, since a satisfactory evaluation must recognize the close connection of religion to all other social factors as well as the historical dynamics of the culture and religion in question.<sup>98</sup>

At the centre of the debate there was the need to understand the workings of the African church and its interaction with society. It is in this context that the desire to look for a socio-historical approach of the study of Christianity in Africa emerged. While this new attitude was pervading a large part of the continent, it is possible to identify problems and limits in the South African situation as Lonsdale pointed out South African historiography remained outside the mainstream changes of the 60s:

The situation is changing rapidly at the present [in the 80s], but South African historiography had what was virtually a lost generation in the 1960s, the 'Africanist' or nationalist historians who elsewhere began to rewrite the history of independent tropical Africa.<sup>99</sup>

Without the end of colonisation, South Africa did not reinvent its way of writing history as the rest of continent did. Until the transition to the post-apartheid academics in general maintained the tendency, identified by Kruss, to simply identify and analyse one church trying to define typologies. One of the first to talk of the necessity of moving social science studies beyond the functionalist approach was Shula Marks who expressly called for a 'revolution in the historiography in South Africa' with the insistence that explanations should be founded in social and

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<sup>98</sup> Lanternari V., 'Revolution and/or Integration in African Socio-religious Movements' in Lincoln (ed), *Religion, Rebellion, Revolution*, MacMillan, London, 1985, p. 130. See also Lanternari V., *The Religions of the Oppressed. A Study of Modern Messianic Cults*, MacGibbon and Kee, London, 1963.

<sup>99</sup> Lonsdale J., 'From colony to industrial state: South African Historiography as seen from England' in *Social Dynamics*, 9(1), 1983, p.70, cited in Pretorius H., *Historiography and Historical Sources*, 1995, p.19

economic circumstances.<sup>100</sup> Focussing attention on class analysis and political economy are two trends that contrast with the manner in which AICs had been studied in the previous forty years, since Sundkler's first work. As mentioned earlier, the major problem highlighted by the new historiography has been the fact that previously AICs have been studied within a framework that is inherently ahistorical. This trend changed in the 1980s when historical materialism started to be applied to the study of the sociology of religion (cf. Shula Marks, Kruss and Mosala). With the new approach historical social concepts are introduced to explain the social formation of South Africa. For example Mosala brought attention to the fact that '[u]ntil now [1980s], all the "recognised" literature on these churches has reflected ruling class interests and models of explanation'.<sup>101</sup> Mosala uses a historical-materialist approach within the perspective of black theology teaching. The Zion-Apostolic AICs emerged in his analysis not only as 'authentically black' and 'authentically African', but as 'authentically working class'.<sup>102</sup> He highlights the limitations of a Western liberal interpretation:

African to the extent that they are historically rooted in African pre-capitalist social formations, and are forced by their position of alienation within contemporary capitalist social relations to draw in the struggle for survival from the cultural resources provided by that historical past.<sup>103</sup>

Under the new interpretative dispensation of the eighties the definition of culture emerged as perceived in a dualistic way. There was a dominant assumption that there were two opposite cultures, a traditional African culture and a Western

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<sup>100</sup> Marks S., Atmore A., *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa*, Longman, 1980, London, p.1.

<sup>101</sup> Mosala I., 'African Independent Churches: a study in socio-theological protest' in Villa-Vicencio C, de Gruchy JW (ed) *Resistance and Hope: South African essays in honour of Bayers Naude*, Eerdmans, Cape Town, 1985, p. 110. See also Mosala I., *Race, Class and Gender as Hermeneutical Factors in the African Independent Churches' Appropriation of the Bible: A final Report to the Human Sciences Research Council*, Human Research Council, Pretoria, 1989.

<sup>102</sup> For an analysis of the limits of Mosala's work, see Petersen R.M., 'The AICs and the TRC: Resistance Redefined' in Cochrane J. (et al.) (ed), *Facing the Truth. South African Faith Communities and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, David Philip, Cape Town, 1999, p.116.

<sup>103</sup> Mosala I. in Villa-Vicencio C., de Gruchy J.W., *Resistance and Hope*, 1985, p. 110.

Christian culture as separate, and the first one helped Africans to satisfy their needs in an adverse world. Culture in this way was perceived as a static set of values that did not change under different circumstances and different historical processes. This interpretation assumes that African tradition did not change over the decades and Africans still feel the same need and links moving from the rural context into the urban one. Mosala made the point that no culture is timeless and static, as we can see in the work of Chabal and in Comaroff and Comaroff<sup>105</sup>. Thus 'African' culture no longer exists in the form and with the same features it had in earlier historical epochs. An innate 'Africaness' is assumed to exist in every black person in South Africa (and in Africa). If we take for example the Church Commission instituted in 1925, we can see that no distinction is made talking of religious leaders through time and space, and that all of them without distinction just seek to gain power and economic status through secession and creation of their own churches.

The critiques of the eighties supplemented the debate by discussing the previous literature's excessive stress on cultural answers while material needs are totally ignored. Considering the historical conditions under which most blacks lived, poverty and material needs should, indeed must, be considered. In Sundkler's presentation of Zulu society for example, missions and racial discrimination remain defined as 'religious and social background of the Zulus'<sup>106</sup> while the study merely focuses on the classification of the Zionists' life and on their beliefs. As Kruss alerts us, the concern with syncretism in belief and worship can easily become a mystification which diverts attention from the material conditions under which people are living, both are important to a holistic understanding.<sup>107</sup> At the same time it is possible to criticise the historical materialist considerations of the eighties that did not give enough space to cultural interpretations (and religion) while culture is simply presented as determined by material conditions. The concept of

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<sup>105</sup> Comaroff J, Comaroff J, *Of Revelation and of Revolution*, 1991; Chabal P., Deloz J.P., *Culture Troubles. Politics and the Interpretation of Meanings*, Hurst & Company, London, 2006.

<sup>106</sup> Sundkler B., *Bantu Prophets*, 1961, p. 19

<sup>107</sup> Kruss G., A Critical Review, 1985.



culture (not considered in a dualistic way) remains important for certain anthropological analysis in the middle of the eighties and it is possible to identify a shift in the study of AICs by social anthropologists, who have concentrated largely on Zionist type churches in urban areas, like for example, Jean and John Comaroff.<sup>108</sup> Jean and John Comaroff talking in defence of historical anthropology invite us to consider 'post-modernist' critique, especially the 'admonition to regard culture not as an overdetermining closed system of signs but as a set of polyvalent practices, text and images that may, at any time, be contested'.<sup>109</sup> Later on Oosthuizen says that 'the emphasis should always be on the indigenisation of a church within the context of the culture in which it exists and operates. It is true that it should be Christ-centred, but it is important that it should be stimulated by this centredness within the culture in which it operates. The indigenisation of the church is the task of the people who operate in the specific culture, as the church was never meant to be a kind of sanctified pot-plant that descended from heaven' and again after referring to the negative interpretation of Sundkler's bridge back to the original traditional religion: 'the negative attitude towards some of the movements has not impaired their growth – on the contrary – and one is delighted today that their spiritual power sustained them and they are now the future of the church in South Africa'.<sup>110</sup>

To understand the importance of cultural interpretation we can follow the example of the Tembu Church of Nehemiah Tile, considered the pioneer of independent churches in South Africa. Pato uses this as explicative example of the importance of cultural aspects in the adoption of Christianity among Xhosa speaking people. The beginning of the mass conversion among Xhosa can be dated to around 1860, when a Xhosa Christian missionary, Tiyo Soga, came back from Scotland.<sup>111</sup> The end of Xhosa independence in those days gave space to the creation of different forms of

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<sup>108</sup> Comaroff J., *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: the Culture and History of a South African People*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1985.

<sup>109</sup> Comaroff J., Comaroff J., *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 1991, p.17.

<sup>110</sup> Oosthuizen G.C., 'My Pilgrimage' in du Toit C.W., Ngada N.H. (ed), *Hearing the AIC-voice*, 1998 p. 65.

<sup>111</sup> Pato L., 'Socio-Cultural Approach', 1990, p.27.

organisations, in society as in the church. The dramatic changes that Xhosa subjugation brought with it and the resulting new social structures were the fundamental aspects that determine the subversion of their entire old life. In this new situation they could neither relate to their past or nor to their previous environment. Some forms of resistance remained and in the church resistance took the form of 'forms of organisations'.<sup>112</sup> Returning to Nehemiah Tile, he broke away from the Methodist church for political and cultural positions and he founded the Tembu Church among the Xhosa. The insistence of Tile in demanding space for cultural Xhosa issues, like circumcision, inside Christian rituals led to objections amongst white authority, a breakaway from the European socio-cultural dominant system that did not appear essentially Christian. 'The breakdown of Xhosa independence and society, however, precipitated the need for them to take control of the shaping of their lives and this resulted in the emergence of the AIC movement'.<sup>113</sup> Missionary records have well documented this discontent among the Xhosa people between 1836 and 1857 (the famous Cattle Killing) and they lamented the incapacity to fully convert them according to their aspirations.<sup>114</sup> In counterpoint there had been little attempt from the missionaries to understand the Xhosa social system (such as the role of authority and chieftaincy) and cultural ideas as anything other than being pagan and morally reprehensible. Missionaries' attacks were not only on traditional religion but also on institutions and authority, which in this context are indivisible from religion.<sup>115</sup> Thus Pato interpreted the beginning of the independent movement as a protest against all the 'forms of European domination' although 'their strategy can remain politically questionable'.<sup>116</sup> Is culture seen as an end or a means AICs can use: 'liberating

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<sup>112</sup> Pato L., 'Socio-Cultural Approach', 1990, p.27. Most of these were not actually AICs but organisations within missions. Nevertheless they were organisations of resistance. See for example Thompson J., *Touching the Heart: Xhosa Missionaries to Malawi, 1876-1888*, University of South Africa Press, Pretoria, 2000, p.6.

<sup>113</sup> Pato L., 'Socio-Cultural Approach', 1990, p.27.

<sup>114</sup> See Bundy C., *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, David Philip, Cape Town, 1988.

<sup>115</sup> Independent movements, especially in the case of the Xhosa people, was one of the several strategies of resistance and not the only one.

<sup>116</sup> Pato L., 'Socio-Cultural Approach', 1990, p.29.



cultural symbols as political tools towards total liberation of people'? Pato's interpretation is not convincing in terms of the political analysis of independent churches. He asserts: 'the question that remains, therefore is: how could these cultural dimensions in fact be used as political tools rather than as ends in themselves?'<sup>117</sup> Pato does not recognise the political value of the independent movement during apartheid while this research will provide different interpretative evaluations.

To conclude, AICs have been explained in terms of normative idealised types, and they have been studied in isolation from the South African social formations in which they arose and exist and therefore are lacking a sense of historical reflection. Many observers of AICs welcomed the long awaited efforts of the leaders of independent churches to re-write and reflect on their own histories, like 'Speaking for Ourselves' in 1985, promoted by the Institute for Contextual Theology. In this work members and leaders of AICs expressed the need of not only being presented and studied by outsiders, but of bringing to the fore their views (or partial view considering the variegated spectrum of diversities inside these churches) and their knowledge on their own formation and history. In that context they clearly acknowledge gaps in AICs' written history that need to be fulfilled:

[...]there is one enormous omission through the whole history that has been written by outsiders. The work of the Holy Spirit throughout our history has simply been left out. The events of our history have been recorded as if everything could be accounted for simply by sociology and anthropology [...] We would like to write our own history from the point of view of the Holy Spirit.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Pato L., 'Socio-Cultural Approach', 1990, p. 35.

<sup>118</sup> ICT, *Speaking for Ourselves*, 1985, p.16. This research interpret AICs' desire to be investigated from the point of view of the Holy Spirit as the request to be considered in a holistic way in which the *pneuma* fuses with every aspect of the everyday life.

Makhubu forwarded a similar critique to previous history on independent churches in his book *Who are the independent churches?*<sup>119</sup> expressing the need for a more contextualised and holistic (not just cultural) interpretation. And it is exactly within that trajectory that this research hopes to offer a contextualised interpretation of independent churches in their historical (post-apartheid), geographical (township) and socio-economic (restraint and poverty) environment. In the nineties this call for a different interpretation found some takers, like Luke Pato who clearly researched independent churches with interdisciplinary methods: '[t]he emergence of AICs represents the growth a new self-awareness which is the result of a lengthy socio-cultural and political onslaught on the Africans [...] The notion of "independence" in respect of AIC movement is in a sense a reincarnation in ecclesiastical terms of what had been lost in political and cultural terms'.<sup>120</sup> This analysis of the literature on AICs highlights in particular an important gap: the lack of a political analysis applied to the study of independent churches. That is a gap this thesis seeks to address.

### **AICs in South Africa: Delineations of Acquiescence and Activism**

African independent churches' relationship to politics has always been problematic and a perennial topic of interest for academics. The numerically enormous Zion Christian Church (ZCC) is usually taken as an example of explicit collaboration with the apartheid regime. The episode that is frequently quoted to support this explicit accusation of collaboration with the past regime is the visit of Prime Minister Botha in 1985 to the ZCC headquarters in Moria for the Easter celebrations.<sup>121</sup> Another less well-known episode goes back to the sixties when the minister for Bantu Administration and Development, De Wet Nel and his wife were invited in 1965 to attend the Easter celebration in Moria. The leader of the church, Bishop Edward Lekganyane on that occasion greeted the audience saying:

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<sup>119</sup> Makhubu P., *Who Are the Independent Churches?*, Skotaville Publishers, Johannesburg, 1988.

<sup>120</sup> Pato L., 'Socio-Cultural Approach,' 1990, p.30.

<sup>121</sup> Analysis of this episode in Bompani B., unpublished thesis, University of Bologna, 2000.

'I thank the Whites for leading us out of the darkness'. After some gifts were offered to the minister and his wife, Bishop Lekganyane addressed the minister saying:

Moses led the Israelites to freedom with a sceptre in his hands. We present this sceptre [of rooibos wood, one of the presents for the minister] to you for you and your government to lead the Bantu to orderly freedom. Our church has no room for people who subvert the security of the State and break the laws of the land. Besides the punishment for breaches of the law imposed on such like by the courts, our church also takes appropriate action.<sup>122</sup>

On occasion this perception of collaboration has led Zionists to be molested, as recounted in Rian Malan's autobiographical work, *My Traitor's Heart*, where a Zionist was forced to eat the iron star badge that he was wearing as symbol of his church.<sup>123</sup> Indeed, Black theologians have periodically chastised AICs for their lack of overt political activity.<sup>124</sup> But as Maluleke pointed out, if Black Theology, and by implication Black Consciousness, criticised AICs, it was in the context of its critique of the spiritual and socio-political state of Black people in general.<sup>125</sup>

Matthew Schoffeleers noted that, in contrast to contemporary analyses, a few decades ago it would have sounded surprising to define the healing churches as politically acquiescent<sup>126</sup> in view of the fact that until the late sixties it was customary in the social sciences to consider AICs primarily as instruments of people's resistance against colonialism. Some authors distinguished between Ethiopianism and Zionism, characterising the Zion Churches as anti-revolutionary

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<sup>122</sup> 'Bantu multitude thanks minister De Wet Nel' in *Bantu* (English version), 12 (6), Pretoria, June 1965, p. 240 in Harold Turner Collection, CSCNWW, MF 397, The University of Edinburgh.

<sup>123</sup> Malan R., *My Traitor's Heart*, Vintage, London, 1991, p.201.

<sup>124</sup> Maluleke T. S., *Theological Interest in AICs*, 1996a.

<sup>125</sup> See Maluleke T.S., *Theological Interest in AICs*, 1996a.

<sup>126</sup> Schoffeleers M. 'Healing and political acquiescence in African Independent Churches' in Hallencreutz C.F., Palmberg M. (ed), *Religion and Politics in Southern Africa*, The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Uppsala, 1991, pp. 89-108.

countercultures.<sup>127</sup> The political protest of the 'Ethiopian' churches in South Africa can best be followed in the case of Mokone's organisation, the Ethiopian Church of South Africa. Having separated from the Wesleyan Methodists in 1893 where he had been one of the most prominent preachers and head of the Kilnerton Institution, Mokone took another determinant step: he turned to the President of the Republic, Paul Kruger, asking for recognition by government, which was subsequently granted. In 1925 a government commission recommended certain conditions on which a church could be officially 'recognised'. During the 40 years after 1925, only eleven churches, including Mokone's Church, were accepted.

But also in regard to the political roles of the Ethiopian church movement, it is possible to discern a scale of different attitudes from open political protest to various degrees of pragmatic adaptation. It was necessary for the Churches to proceed carefully. If they went too far, the controlling machinery of the government was there to check their attempts. This was brought home to Mokone's church in 1953 in connection with a popular strike against the use of government buses on the Rand. The Ethiopian church raised its protest and the result followed immediately; the church's prestigious and valuable 'recognition', enjoyed for over fifty years, was withdrawn. Government recognition had become an instrument of political control. As mentioned earlier, Muriel Horrel, in her *A Survey on Race Relations in South Africa* recounted that in 1958 there were 78 recognised independent churches, while a further 1,286 applications were on the Native Affairs Department's waiting list.<sup>128</sup> The Commission on 'Bantu' Separatist Churches instituted in those years, suggested that no further separatist church should be recognized. In Kamphausen's work the author asserts that the Ethiopian movement came to an end as a political force in 1912, the year of the formation of the ANC.<sup>129</sup> This is startling when one thinks of the impressive new

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<sup>127</sup> For example Robert Buitenhuijs quoted by Schoffeleers M. in Hallencreutz C.F., Palmberg M. (ed), *Religion and Politics*, 1991.

<sup>128</sup> Horrel M., *A Survey of Race Relations*, 1958.

<sup>129</sup> In Sundkler B., 'The politics of African Independent Churches', in Hallencreutz C.F., Palmberg M. (ed), *Religion and Politics*, 1991, pp. 86-87. Kamphausen's work on Ethiopian Churches until

Ethiopian churches formed after this date, such as the African Congregational Church in 1917 and the Bantu Methodist Church in 1932 and a great number of others, together with the flourishing of the Ethiopian-Abyssinian churches in the mid 30s, as a protest against the Italian invasion. According to Sundkler, Kamphausen could have been influenced by an influential theory that sees the political *raison d'être* of the Ethiopian church fulfilled and absorbed in the political party, the ANC, at the early stage of its formation. A similar interpretation would deny the peculiarities of Ethiopian churches until the present time not just from a political perspective but from any kind of theological and sociological analysis. An interesting interpretation is given by Chirenje<sup>130</sup> who recognised links to politics inside the Ethiopian spiritual movement while tracing links to African-American figures. In his study South Africa appears as an exporter as well as an importer of political Ethiopianism. Richard Newman in *Black Power and Black Religion: Essays and Reviews* similarly asserts this.<sup>131</sup>

Not all the scholars recognised this schism between Ethiopianist and Zionist movements. This is well documented by Anderson<sup>132</sup> who asserts that Ethiopian independent churches appear to be declining, except where they have transformed themselves to become, in effect, Zionist Churches. Also Martin West demonstrated in Soweto that the dividing line between 'Ethiopian-type' and 'Zion-type' indigenous churches is not as clear as it used to be.<sup>133</sup> Studies of the Zionist Shembe church affirm that there was a subtle political protest with the turn to traditional society and its chiefs. The main proponents of this theory were Balandier and Bohannan who argued that these churches served as a kind of cover-up for political resistance in situations where colonised people had little or no possibility of founding regular political parties. The evidence used was that a

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1912, is published in German. Part of this work translated in English is available at the Harold Turner Collection, CSCNWW, the University of Edinburgh, microfiche n. 422 and n. 423.

<sup>130</sup> Chirenje J.M., *Ethiopianism and Afro-Americans in Southern Africa, 1883-1916*, Baton Rouge, 1987.

<sup>131</sup> Newman R., *Black Power and Black Religion: Essays and Reviews*, West Cornwall, Cape Town, 1987.

<sup>132</sup> Anderson A., *Zion and Pentecost*, 2000, p. 203.

<sup>133</sup> West M., *Black City*, 1975a, p. 47.



number of independent churches have been active as anti-colonial resistance movements. John Chilembwe's church in 1915 in the former Nyasaland being a particularly well-documented example.<sup>134</sup> But Chilembwe was somewhat of an exception, and it would be difficult to maintain that the majority or even a significant section of the Independent Churches was actively engaged in resistance against colonial governments. There is also evidence that in the early days the level of political involvement was higher than in more recent times and that the AICs progressively moved away from direct political involvement in the Apartheid setting.<sup>135</sup> It is possible to highlight a different register on the evaluation of the political action among AICs taking two pieces of literature from different historical moments as example. If we compare Hoekendijk's work written in the sixties with Hope and Young's work written in the eighties, we can find a striking divergence. Hoekendijk wrote:

More important [after the organised nationalist movement of sabotage active since 1946] however, than all those movements of resistance, which are really universal, is that that of the "Independent Bantu Churches", in the past usually referred as the Ethiopian movement. Here we find not only the oldest but probably also the most important expression of organized resistance against the caste [Apartheid] system. It originates there, where the most vulnerable spot in the whole system is to be found: the church [...] they all want to be "church" because this is the only independent structure which is still permitted.<sup>136</sup>

In contrast, Hope and Young in the eighties offer a questionable interpretation of the causes that kept independent churches apart from politics:

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<sup>134</sup> Shepperson G., Price T., *Independent African: John Chilembwe and the Origins, Setting and Significance of the Nyasaland Native Rising of 1915*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1958, p. 125.

<sup>135</sup> For example see Sundkler B., *Bantu Prophets*, 1961, pp. 306-307.

<sup>136</sup> Hoekendijk J., *The Church Inside Out*, Student Christian Movement, London, 1967, p.133 in Harold Turner Collection, MF 420, the University of Edinburgh.

Until recently, leaders and members of the independent churches have shown little interest in political change. One reason is that the great majority are illiterate or had little informal formal education. Another reason is poverty; these people rise early for miserable jobs and return home late at night. Politicization is a process that is more likely to occur only when people have free time to think. Finally, the women members – who form the majority – fear involvement in politics.<sup>137</sup>

However there is a school of thought that emphasises that the protest character of the Zionist Churches is implicit and symbolised rather than explicit. Jean Comaroff is one of the main representatives of this school. Comaroff demonstrated that the Tshidi Zionism developed as a form of consciousness that encompassed colonial political economy and culture.<sup>138</sup> From another perspective Liz Gunner analysed the oral tradition inside the Shembe's Nazareth Baptist Church, identifying the Church's position in the face of external state power and its political apparatus.<sup>139</sup> Another interpretation of the political activity in these churches is given by Matthew Schoffeleers<sup>140</sup> where he reviews conflicting interpretations of Zionist Churches in Southern Africa and offers the explanation that their emphasis on healing individuals runs counter to collective political action. Whether right or wrong, Schoffeleers performs a service by calling attention to the reasons why Africans join independent churches: that in turn raises the vexed question of how religious expressions change, and how religious convictions respond to the political situation.

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<sup>137</sup> Hope M., Young J., *The South African Churches in a Revolutionary Situation*, Orbis Book, New York-Mary Knoll, 1981, p. 191.

<sup>138</sup> Comaroff J., *Body of Power*, 1985, p. 49.

<sup>139</sup> See for example, Gunner E., 'Power House, Prison House-An Oral Genre and its Use in Isaiiah Shembe's Nazareth Baptist Church' in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 14, n.2, 1988.

<sup>140</sup> Schoffeleers M., 'Ritual healing and political acquiescence: The case of the Zionist Churches in Southern Africa', *Africa*, 60, 1991, pp. 1-25.

Archbishop Ngada<sup>141</sup> explained his position in *Speaking for Ourselves*<sup>142</sup> and more recently in an interview. In 2002, when we met at the headquarters of his church, in answering the question ‘can African Independent Churches be defined as apolitical’ he stated:

It is still very difficult to cut the line between politics and religion, even today. I don’t understand how people can separate politics from religion. Even the mere existence of the mainline churches was political. They had a political agenda from abroad. We fought against their agenda and their politics. Again those people who said the African indigenous churches were apolitical, they were not undertaking a political analysis. Those people are real hypocrites because even before 1912, before the African National Congress was founded, was formulated the African independent churches (people and leaders) were fighting against the oppressing role that was killing Africans. And later traditional leaders, kings, and chiefs were fought side by side the African National Congress.<sup>143</sup>

Archbishop Ngada expanded upon his view of ‘what politics is’ locating his analysis within contexts of poverty and history:

The majority of people who belong to AICs are poor. They had no skills, education, but it was them that organised demonstrations in the factories, in the sugar field in the whole country. How can you say those people are apolitical? I think to be political, to some people, is to put on a tie around the collar, seating in an office and bringing all the media around. We are the voice of the voiceless, we are political minded but we haven’t a political organisation. The people who were involved in the riots are the people who live in the townships, in the squatter camps. Leaders of African Indigenous Churches live with the people and they try to alleviate their everyday life.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Archbishop Ngada is president of the African Spiritual Churches Association (ASCA), an umbrella of Zionist, Ethiopian and Apostolic Churches that claims to reach six million believers in South Africa. I personally did not find data to confirm this assertion.

<sup>142</sup> ICT, *Speaking for Ourselves*, 1985.

<sup>143</sup> My interview with Archbishop Ngada, Walkerville, 08 March 2002.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.* Similar opinions are expressed by Archbishop Ntongana, President of the Conference of African Initiated Churches (CAIC), my interviews, Soweto 2001/2002.

This position was reaffirmed in Rustenberg II, the National South African Religious Meeting to face the past responsibilities of apartheid and to elaborate a common strategy during the transitional period.<sup>145</sup> The Rustenburg Conference, held in November 1990, gave the churches the opportunity to acknowledge and distance from the past the ambiguous position of Christianity in the apartheid era. For de Gruchy 'Rustenburg provided [...] evidence of the AIC's becoming a part of a united Christian witness in the country. The presence of the AICs was also a reminder that there is another history of the church struggle in South Africa than that perceived by white eyes'.<sup>146</sup> It is interesting to witness the behaviour of two of the oldest and largest AICs, the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) and the Shembe Church (Ibandla lamaNazaretha) during the TRC faith community hearings.<sup>147</sup> Both took the view that they had nothing to apologise for, and both rejected the longstanding view that they had been apolitical or apathetic. The ZCC's stance is that silence under particular conditions is a rite of resistance in itself. Of particular interest for this research project is that in the post-apartheid era the ZCC argues that, far from being isolated from the public sphere as struggle analysts had supposed, it considers itself to have held on to, and now be in a position to offer, precisely that moral and cultural foundation which others now so desperately seek. At the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's hearing on the role of the churches, the ZCC's spokesperson Rev. Emmanuel Motola asserted that the Zion Church led its people into a mode of resistance against apartheid. 'But as a church the ZCC taught its people to love themselves more than ever, to stand upright and face the future, to defy the laws of apartheid. And that all these teaching are not known in the press, in the general public at large can hardly be the problem of the Zion

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<sup>145</sup> The result and the outputs from this conference are controversially criticised by different authors, for example T.S. Maluleke (personal communication) Edinburgh, May 2006. Archbishop Ngada spoke in this occasion as representative of the AICs.

<sup>146</sup> de Gruchy J.W., 'From Cottesloe to Rustenburg and beyond' in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 74, 1991, p.30.

<sup>147</sup> For that see Peterson R.M., 'AICs and TRC' in Cochrane J. (et al.) (ed), *Facing the Truth*, 1999, pp. 81-103. There are also testimonies from other smaller groupings of AICs that are part of the South African Council of Churches, including the Council of African Instituted Churches (CAIC).

Christian Churches'.<sup>148</sup> Mr Mpanza, spokesperson of the amaNazaretha argued that Shembe taught his people to respect the authorities but this respect can be elaborated and interpreted as a form of resistance and it can bring to a 'mystical destabilisation of power' through prayer:

Isaiah Shembe also taught that the Nazarite must lead a simple life and that every year they must walk on foot to Mt Nhlankakazi, to worship God and report all their suffering. So, for amaNazaretha, whenever they were confronted by the government, or other missionary churches, all they had to do was to ask the congregation to kneel down and have *Isiguqa*, that is a special prayer to God.<sup>149</sup>

This research does not aim to solve the old dichotomy between acquiescence and political activism of African independent churches in the past, although it acknowledges that a holistic interpretation of African Christianity should lead to the understanding that politics, as any other component of the socio-reality of the religious community, should have been an integral part of the religious discourse even in relation to the apartheid period. This thesis, instead, focusing on the end of apartheid, aims to understand that if under different socio-political conditions a nuanced analysis of political action is possible. What this research on the post apartheid politics of the sample of churches in Jabulani highlighted is that politics cannot be divorced from the religious sphere in the everyday life of church members. Perhaps this should open more spaces for further reflections and investigation on why and how these churches were considered to have split this dimension in the past following the rigid (Western) political interpretation that see political activism just related to the binary level of opposing or struggling against apartheid.

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<sup>148</sup> Zion Christian Church, Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Human Rights Committee, 1999. Electronic resource: <http://www.web.uct.ac.za/depts/ricsa/commiss/trc/zcctest.htm>.

<sup>149</sup> Petersen R.M., 'AICs and the TRC', in Cochrane (*et al.*) (ed), *Facing the Truth*, 1999, pp. 120-121.



## Conclusion

Any discourse outside the rigidly defined modernisation discourse has been perceived in a derogatory way and it has been treated as such by the literature. Independent churches, as we have seen, were categorised and interpreted as links to tradition and not as an innovative religious and social expressions with positive implications. In this context there was no need for a theoretical interpretation but just classificatory explanations aimed at understanding the schismatic process from mainline churches. Independent churches have been excluded from the main discourse. In a certain sense syncretism, with its negative interpretation of African culture and African political formations, represents the socio-cultural conflict that has been part of the struggle between Church and society in Africa. This point of view interprets Christianity as extrapolated from history, a static formation applicable in its original (Western) form to any kind of society at any time. Syncretic interpretations perorated the dichotomy between African culture and Western culture, where Christianity belonged to the second, without finding space for new religious interpretations. 'Why could we not maintain our African customs and be perfectly good Christians at the same time?',<sup>150</sup>

Some anthropological analysis and especially the Marxist analysis that emerged in the eighties represents an attempt to redefine the interpretative approach followed by previous research on independent churches. Nevertheless this research recognised that the end of apartheid, that coincides with the end of its cultural implications of dominion, criteria of inclusion and exclusion, appropriation of a dominant 'white' historical language and systems of interpretation, opens the possibility to include the analysis of independent churches inside the 'positive' socio-religious interpretation of society and to include them into the dominant socio (and political) discourse. It is just from the nineties that independent churches start to be perceived as agents of development,<sup>151</sup> as original centres for healing and

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<sup>150</sup> ICT, 'Speaking for Ourselves, 1985, p.23.

<sup>151</sup> Oosthuizen C.G., *Independent Churches and Small Business*, 1997, p. 37.

social support in the fight against HIV/AIDS,<sup>152</sup> as part of a global discourse,<sup>153</sup> as a religious vanguard able to interpret better than anything else African spirituality and to conjugate spiritual and material needs.<sup>154</sup> As this research will try to demonstrate, they are also able to be an integral and important part of the political discourse of the nation-building process. All these new analytical approaches do not firmly fit into the theoretical framework of functional or historical materialistic analyses, but benefit from interdisciplinary and more flexible frameworks. This research acknowledges as one of the considerable limits of the functionalist approach the fact that factors that determine cultural, political, economic changes are always considered in a restricted geographical context, like for example a province in South Africa (Zulu people in Kwa-Zulu Natal), a country (South Africa), or at most a region (Southern Africa) while there is no space for broader theoretical and interpretative explanations. As we will see in chapter 4, this research tries to bring socio-cultural explanations of the growth of AICs into the broader process of the post-colony (or post-apartheid) leaving space for comparison with the broader process of decolonisation that crossed the continent in the fifties and sixties. Perhaps it is possible to trace similarities with the growth of independent churches in West and East Africa during the end of colonialism and the growth of AICs in South Africa along the dismantling of the apartheid regime. Importantly, this research does recognise this historical context as an important element in understanding the growth of this movement, but not the only one.<sup>155</sup> Also Hennie Pretorius and Luke Pato invite us to look for broader comparisons with similar movements across the continent and to not circumscribe.<sup>156</sup> On the other side, materialist considerations do not give enough space to cultural interpretations and

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<sup>152</sup> Garner R., 'Safe sects? dynamics religion and AIDS in South Africa' in *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 38 (1) 2000, pp. 41-69.

<sup>153</sup> Venter D., 'Globalisation, world system and African Independent Churches in Transkei' in Venter D (ed), *Engaging Modernity*, 2004, pp. 171-192.

<sup>154</sup> Anderson A., *Zion and Pentecost*, 2000 and Oosthuizen, G.C. (et al.) (ed), *Afro-Christianity at the Grassroots: Its Dynamics and Strategies*, EJ Brill, Leiden/NY/Koln, 1994; Oosthuizen, G.C., *My pilgrimage* in du Toit C.W., Ngada N.H. (ed), *AIC Voice*, 1998.

<sup>155</sup> For example in other African countries after the end of colonisation their existence and their growth did not drastically diminish in the years after.

<sup>156</sup> Pato L., 'Socio-Cultural Approach', 1990, Pretorius H., *Historiography and Historical Sources*, 1995.

culture (and religion) is merely presented as determined by material conditions while this analysis tries to follow a different interpretative approach taking into consideration cultural and spiritual factors in the analysis of this movement.

As Kitshoff, in his analysis of the secession of Nehemiah Tile from the Methodist Church in 1882, asserted, the independent churches that emerged in the nineteenth century cannot be understood outside the ideological and spiritual context of their emergence, a peculiar context different from any other, similarly I would like to acknowledge the impossibility to understand the growth of African independent churches in the last decades in South Africa without considering the implications of the new democratic context.<sup>157</sup> Taking seriously the assumption (Kruss) that independent churches should be studied in their contemporary context looking at their history, taking account of cultural (culture is not static) and environmental changes (being in a township in the post-apartheid has a different meaning than living in a township in the eighties as in the fifties during different challenge and political developments) and socio-economic factors. In synthesis, giving a holistic interpretation of a movement with a global religious approach to life.

The new democratic context of the post-apartheid era opens new challenges and different sets of investigation. The new context offers the end of segregation and exploitation, economic opportunities (black empowerment and black middle class as a growing reality), black political leadership, democracy, nation-building process, new social challenges like HIV/AIDS, uncontrolled criminality (end of politically controlled violence in the township), and reconciliation with white South Africans (an interesting aspect to analyse) are all factors to be considered by the analysis of AICs since 1994. The analysis of the way independent churches in Soweto address these challenges, will be the focus of analysis in the next two chapters. The more detailed ethnographic material necessary to support and develop the argument will be introduced in chapters 5 and 6.

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<sup>157</sup> Kitshoff M.C., 'Between Mainism and Independentism: a case study of an early secession' in *Afro-Christianity*, 1994, pp. 3-16.

## Chapter 5

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### **The Growth and Dynamism of African Independent Churches in Post-Apartheid South Africa**

It is time to recognise the impossibility - in any terms that are not unduly vague - of any general theory of new movements. Certainly we should not aim, as sociologists have sometimes been wont to do, at a theory that seeks to be outside time and space, even though we wish our concepts to apply outside and beyond the confines of any one culture or historical epoch. If sociology is not to abandon the real world for purely theoretical artefacts, then we are always likely to be in some degree captive to the empirical circumstances of given cultures, of geography and of history.

Wilson B., 'The new religions. Some preliminary considerations' in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 1979, 6 (1-2), pp. 193-216.

#### **Introduction to a South African Reality**

The following chapter attempts to offer an explanation for the growth of Independent Christianity in South Africa in the last decades. The chapter will examine drivers of this growth at both the macro and the micro levels.<sup>1</sup> The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that Independent Christianity expanded in South Africa thanks to its ability to interpret and address the challenges of the post-

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<sup>1</sup> At the micro level the analysis focuses on the five small African independent churches in Jabulani, Soweto. The macro level analysis uses materials such as the South African Census (1996 and 2001) and secondary sources from the archive of the Research Unit for New Religious Movements and Indigenous Churches (NERMIC), Zululand University in KwaZulu-Natal, and the Human Science Research Council

apartheid period on both a theoretical and a practical level, through stressing the re-elaboration of African identities and through the application of a developmental approach in the face of conditions of deprivation and poverty in a changing social and political context. If we consider apartheid as a form of colonialism,<sup>2</sup> and its end as the beginning of the very latest post-colonial process, we can interpret the growth of AICs in South Africa in the 1990s as analogous to the growth of Independent Christianity in the immediate post-colonial periods that occurred throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The post-colonial seems to provide the conditions in which Independent Christianity, with its ability to deal with moments of dramatic change in providing spiritual, cultural and material answers, could ferment.<sup>3</sup> Although social science has paid scant attention to African independent churches in South Africa, this chapter will argue that African Christianity in the post-apartheid period,<sup>4</sup> in part due to its incredible growth started in the 80s and in part due to its increasingly powerful voice as a civil society movement, deserves an interpretative analysis within the post-apartheid nation-building process of the last 15 years.

Within the Christian arena in South Africa the most astonishing recent event has been the growth of the African independent churches. Census figures show that AICs constitute approximately one third of the total population of South Africa (**table 2**). Statistics (from both 1996 and 2001)<sup>5</sup> show that over 30 per cent of the

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<sup>2</sup> During the apartheid period, an internal form of colonialism racialised class divisions. Mamdani (1996) proposes that the apartheid state continued the quintessential form of state established in the late colonial period. Just like indirect rule, apartheid created racialised urban citizens, with tribalised rural subjects under a Native Authority, 'supervised by white officials'. Cited in Mamdani M., *Citizen and Subject. Decentralised Despotism and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996, p. 287.

<sup>3</sup> Conversation with Professor Andrew Walls, The University of Edinburgh, January 2003.

<sup>4</sup> For post-apartheid period this thesis considers the period starting in the second half of the eighties, when the struggle against apartheid intensified and the regime started to be dismantled.

<sup>5</sup> See Anderson A., 'Dangerous Memories for South African Pentecostals' in Anderson A., Hollengweger W.J. (ed), *Pentecostals after a Century: Global Perspectives on a Movement on Transition*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 1999, pp. 190-228 and StatsSA (2004), *Census 2001 by province, gender, religion recode (derived) and population group*, Statistics SA; electronic resource: [www.statssa.gov.za](http://www.statssa.gov.za)



total South African population claims some form of link with Independent Christianity.

**Table 2** South African Religious Affiliation 2001 (Stats SA, 2004)<sup>6</sup>

<b>Religious Affiliation 2001</b>	<b>Number of members</b>	<b>% of the Population</b>
Zion Christian churches*	4,971,931	11.09
Ethiopian Type churches*	1,150,102	2.57
Other Apostolic churches*	5,627,320	12.56
Other Zionist churches*	1,887,147	4.21
Other AICs *	656,644	1.47
Bandla Lama Nazaretha*	248,825	0.56
<b>AIC subtotal</b>	<b>14,541,231</b>	<b>32.46%</b>
Mainline churches	16,997,516	37.93
Pentecostal/Charismatic	3,695,211	8.24
Apostolic Faith Mission	249,193	0.55
Other Reformed churches	226,499	0.51
No religion	6,767,165	15.10
Islam	654,064	1.46
Hinduism	551,668	1.23
African Traditional Beliefs	125,898	0.28
Orthodox Church	42,253	0.09
Other Beliefs	283,815	0.63
<b>Total</b>	<b>44,819,774</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

\* Total number of AIC members: 32.46% of the total population of South Africa in 2001. Affiliation data includes infants, who were assigned to their mother's belief

Emerging shortly before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and for a while threatening white security and raising fears, AICs have since the late 1920s either been virtually ignored by the rest of the Christian community, or regarded as apolitical

<sup>6</sup> See electronic resource: [www.statssa.gov.za](http://www.statssa.gov.za)

and socially impotent, if not reactionary.<sup>7</sup> One of the most eminent scholars of independent churches in South Africa, Professor G.C. Oosthuizen,<sup>8</sup> stated: ‘The negative attitude (from the Mainline churches) towards some of the Independent Movements has not impaired their growth – on the contrary – and one is delighted today that their spiritual power sustained them and they are now the future of the Church in South Africa.’<sup>9</sup> The idea that the future belongs to the independent churches recurs frequently in the more recent literature.<sup>10</sup> But what are the forces that bring people to these churches and that places them in the forefront of the spectacular growth of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa? A review of the literature and material from my fieldwork provides some answers.

Generally the attraction of the AICs lies in their life-enhancing activities. Independent churches are communities where people can share in a totality of relationships that enable them to participate in the fullness of being. A further attraction is that these churches take the negative forces within African cosmology<sup>11</sup> seriously by responding to real problems as perceived by Africans, namely witchcraft, sorcery and evil spirits, seeing that it is quite natural to interpret socio-economic hardships and deprivation in contemporary society within the context of adverse cosmic forces. That AICs are considered to be experts in granting people protection and fortification against the powers of evil, accounts to a large degree for their popularity and growth. This chapter, while acknowledging the importance of these cosmological elements, will stress the importance of social dynamics and political contexts.<sup>12</sup> In the township, as in elsewhere in South

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<sup>7</sup> For a different consideration on the protest character of the South African independent churches see Comaroff J., *Body of Power*, 1985.

<sup>8</sup> Professor G.C. Oosthuizen worked at the University of Zululand, and previously at the University of Durban-Westville, where he was head of the Research Unit for New Religious Movements and Indigenous Churches (NERMIC).

<sup>9</sup> Oosthuizen G.C., ‘My Pilgrimage’ in du Toit C.W., Ngada N.H. (ed), *Hearing the AIC*, 1998, p.65.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* See also Oosthuizen, G.C. (et al.) (ed), *Afro-Christianity*, 1994.

<sup>11</sup> I make reference for this point to Kitshoff M.C., *African Independent Churches, a Mighty Movement in a Changing South Africa*, Faculty of Theology, University of Zululand, unpublished paper, professor Oosthuizen’s archive, NERMIC.

<sup>12</sup> For example in the recent publication of Hennie Pretorius, Pretorius H., *Drumbeats. Sounds of Zion in the Cape Flat*, University of South Africa Press, Pretoria, 2004.

Africa, there are not only invincible forces like witchcraft, as Adam Ashforth highlights in his recent book, but also concrete, identifiable forces that create a dimension of insecurity.<sup>13</sup> Ashforth talks of spiritual insecurity, my analysis focuses on the 'palpable', 'tangible' insecurity of the everyday life. AICs offer, especially in the post-apartheid context, concrete resources (alongside their Christianity) able to attract new believers. AICs are also involved in important economic activities of voluntary mutual benefit societies such as savings clubs, lending societies, *stokvels* (informal savings funds)<sup>14</sup> and burial societies that encompass millions of Rand. These societies play a strong and supportive role among black Africans in a deprived economic situation and this role appears more important in AICs than in other churches. This is one of the key points that this chapter aims to demonstrate. Within this framework the aim of the research is to better understand these kinds of activities, and understand how the AICs work. In this period of transition and crisis independent churches were, and are, able to answer the needs of the people and their hunger to rebuild an identity. In contrast, western mainstream churches appear to struggle to redefine their public role after the end of apartheid, as will be explained in chapter 6.

### **African Independent Churches in an Urban Environment**

Jabulani, a Zulu word meaning 'Rejoice' or 'Celebrate', is a highly populated area in northwest Soweto. The unemployment rate in this part of Soweto hovers around

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<sup>13</sup> Ashforth A., *Witchcraft, Violence and Democracy in South Africa*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> The origin of the word 'stokvel' is uncertain, though in the Eastern Cape, the word is commonly accepted as having being derived from 'stock fair'. 'Stock fairs' in the Eastern Cape were monthly stock sales of cattle and sheep. The definition not only implies merely business expectations, but also a 'pleasant, relaxed atmosphere with refreshments served and plenty to talk about' cited in Oosthuizen C.G., *African Independent Churches and Stokvel: Entrepreneurship Activities with a Religious Dimension*, unpublished report, NERMIC, Zululand University, p.19. For others the word 'stokvel' implies a group of people who gather to buy a goat, a sheep or a cow at an auction and then share the meat among themselves. Stokvels, as other self-helped societies, are not just related to independent churches. They go back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and they belong to African tradition (see Thompson T.J., *Touching the Heart*, 2000, p. 168).

60 per cent and it is double the commonly-quoted national average.<sup>15</sup> Soweto (South-west township) is an acronym for the well-known clustered South African township areas located approximately 15 kilometres southwest of Johannesburg. Jabulani was famous in the past for its massive migrant hostels that often acted as a battlefield between African National Congress (ANC) and Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) supporters during the transition from apartheid to democracy.<sup>16</sup> More recently Jabulani appeared in the local press for being the area selected for the construction of the second shopping mall in Soweto after Protea Gardens in Dobsonville, another suburb in the township. There is little else to attract the attention of a visitor in the area besides the lack of infrastructure, a general sensation of poverty, concrete 'matchbox' houses, the schools built with red bricks, the *shebeens* (local pubs created inside shacks or private houses), the spaza shops (thousands of small informal stalls in the street) and the overcrowded streets. In short, Jabulani is typical of the more deprived suburbs of Soweto.

Generally literature on the representation of the everyday life in Soweto, as in other townships in South Africa, is limited. Most of the literature<sup>17</sup> on Soweto deals especially with the role of the township during the liberation struggle, with scant attention to the distinctive forms of urban life present in the township in the post-apartheid situation. Although the genesis of this thesis does not lie in the analysis of Soweto, but on African independent churches in an urban context, Soweto assumes an important symbolic role in this research. There is a strong sense of identity when the township is mentioned by its dwellers. As Ashforth in his recent book asserted, to understand the significance of insecurity 'for the development of

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<sup>15</sup> Statistics SA Datasets (2001) webpage; electronic resource: [www.statssa.gov.za](http://www.statssa.gov.za). This research acknowledges the limitations of national statistics and its use, but it takes in account the impressive percentage of unemployment giving a quick and broad overview in comparison with the national level.

<sup>16</sup> Bishop Mbongani: 'in our churches most of the fears, tensions and insecurities of the time were overcome, as prejudices and ethnic divisions. In our church there were Zulus and Sothos while ethnic conflicts were normality around the country', my interview with bishop Mbongani, Jabulani, November 2001.

<sup>17</sup> I refer to academic literature, while drama, music and television writings abundantly focus on the representation of Soweto.

South African democracy, therefore, it is necessary to focus primarily upon urban experiences. There is no better place than Soweto'.<sup>18</sup>

This research focuses its attention on a sample of five small Independent Churches in Jabulani, two Apostolic churches (Methodist Church of South Africa, and the Native Church of South Africa), two Zionist churches (South African Christian Church in Zion, and the Zion Congregation Church) and an Ethiopian church (the Ethiopian Church of South Africa).<sup>23</sup> In this thesis I will maintain the traditional division of the three categories that compose the broader definition of independent churches. As we have already seen in chapter 3, not all the scholars recognise the division between Ethiopianism and Zionism movements. This is well documented by Anderson<sup>24</sup> who asserts that Ethiopian independent churches appear to be declining, except where they have transformed themselves to become, in effect, Zionist Churches. Daneel argues that the Ethiopian AICs were strongest between 1890 and 1920, and started declining from the 1930s.<sup>25</sup> Martin West<sup>26</sup> demonstrated in Soweto that the dividing line between 'Ethiopian-type' and 'Zion-type' indigenous churches is not as clear as it used to be. This is confirmed by the most recent research of Anderson in Soshanguve, Pretoria, where many former 'Ethiopian' churches adopted Zionist characteristics. The reason for this transformation appears to be a terrain of investigation for theologians rather than for social scientists. My research acknowledges the tenuous separation between the two types of churches and it will analyse them as distinctive types inside the broader category of African Independent Churches.

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<sup>18</sup> Ashforth A., *Witchcraft, Violence, Democracy*, 2005, p. 20. Walter Sisulu powerfully said 'the history of Soweto is the history of South Africa' cited in Bonner P., Segal L., (ed), *Soweto: A History*, Maskew Miller Longman, 1998, p.7. Soweto is also home of tens of thousands of traditional healers and Christian faith-healing prophets, see Ashforth A., *Witchcraft, Violence, Democracy*, 2005, p.44.

<sup>23</sup> This last church actually was less open and did not always allow me to participate in their activity.

<sup>24</sup> Anderson A., *Zion and Pentecost*, 2000, p.144.

<sup>25</sup> Daneel M., *Quest for Belonging*, 1987, pp. 45-53.

<sup>26</sup> West M., *Black City*, 1975, p. 48.



It is commonly recognised that these are poor churches. Most ministers are not paid and there are no finances for the general running of the church. This is one of the main problems raised by the church leaders I interviewed. In July 2005, in an interview, Archbishop Ntongana highlighted the fact that in the last years (referring to last time we met in September 2002) the economic situation of his church and his bible group was getting worse. He also claimed deteriorating levels of support from other institutions like the South African Council of Churches that in the recent past had supported his pastoral activity.<sup>27</sup> The restricted church income is used largely to assist needy church members and little remains for church activities. Mr Radebe, a member of the Apostolic Church of South Africa, stated that 'what we receive comes from God, for this reason we have to use carefully this money for the well-being of our families and community'.<sup>28</sup> This sense of community sharing where AICs members engage in mutual support, reducing the need for outside assistance, is well expressed by the informal saving institutions that I will present later in the analysis. A HSRC survey (1996) reports, through the analysis of data collected from a sample of 1845 adult respondent at a national level, that there is a relation between church affiliation and personal income (**table 3**).

The survey at a national level shows the relation between the monthly national income and church affiliation. Members of Zionist, Apostolic and Ethiopian churches appear to earn much less compared to mainline churches. This survey supports the idea of what in the field was frequently stated by AIC members: 'We are the poor of the poor' which was a recurrent definition among respondents.<sup>29</sup> Only about five percent of the AICs are housed in Church buildings,<sup>30</sup> sometimes

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<sup>27</sup> Phone interview with Archbishop Ntongana, Johannesburg, 12 July 2005.

<sup>28</sup> My interview with Mr Radebe, member of the Apostolic Church of South Africa, Jabulani, 16 March 2002.

<sup>29</sup> Several respondents, fieldwork notes, Soweto, September 2001/September 2002. I wonder if more analysis has been conducted on broader churches like the ZCC with millions of members and a more differentiated membership, not all identifiable as poor. But for sure, although the trend could change and already started, in general in South Africa the majority of AICs are still small and poor churches. Perhaps a different approach should be used with the ZCC and the Shembe Church.

<sup>30</sup> G.C. Oosthuizen, Private Archive at NERMIC, Zululand University, June 2002

school classrooms and homes are the localities for joint worship (this explains the large number of house congregations which act as fully recognised denominations). Even the large ZCC (Zion Christian Church), that claims a membership of three million members, can accommodate only a portion of its members in church buildings. As Archbishop Ntongana of the Methodist Church of South Africa states: ‘We are poor churches. The poor of the poor. Clergymen cannot just lead the religious community but they also need to do another job. We are humble. Church money is not our money. It is the money of the community’. In the townships the AICs are a house-centred movement with no buildings, while on Sunday afternoon they worship and gather in open spaces, under trees in parks or in rented schools rooms. For example on Saturday morning the Zionist Congregation of taxi drivers in Melville, Johannesburg, organises short functions in the parking space of a supermarket. Images of people wearing AICs uniforms became a distinctive sign of weekends in urban and peri-urban Johannesburg. The most characteristic uniforms are the clothes of Zion church members and the female Apostolic churches members, wearing colourful hats, mainly blue, green and white to symbolise the colours of the *veld*, of the sky and water, and of purity and trust respectively.

**Table 3** Church affiliation and personal income

<b>Church Affiliation</b>	<b>Income up to 830 rand a month</b>	<b>Income more than 2,500 rand a month</b>
Mainline Churches	38	60
Pentecostal	10	12
AICs (Zionist/Apostolic)	27	8
AICs non Zionist*	10	2
No Church	7	3
Other	8	15

\*HSRC survey, as the National Census, maintain the categories AICs Zionist (that includes Zionist and Apostolic churches), and non Zionist (Ethiopian churches) separated.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Data from HSRC, ‘Omnibus Survey’, Pretoria, 1996. Available at History Workshop, the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

## Explanations for the Emergence of AICs in South Africa

In this section I will present a set of explanations, offered by other authors, for the growth of Independent Christianity in South Africa. It is through the analysis of these previous analytical interpretations that it will be possible to highlight some limitations of these analyses and to position the different approach of this work. The emergence of AICs has been justified through cultural, political (in the early stage), and economic explanations linked to the impact of a capitalist economy, the political structure of apartheid, the religious system of traditional African societies, a desire for community in a traditional way in response to the disruptive effects of urbanisation, disappointment with mainline Christianity and a desire for physical healing associated with a better understanding of traditional African cosmology. Kiernan<sup>32</sup> argues that Zionism is not a response to racial segregation as Sundkler<sup>33</sup> asserted but a form of life-control in 'deprivation'. If Kiernan's assertion is true it would be interesting to investigate if the 'end' of deprivation through economic and social progress has limited the appeal of Zionism.

The emergence of AICs within Africa as a whole can be periodised in terms of three peaks: the 1880s, 1914-1925, and 1930 to the present.<sup>34</sup> In South Africa Zionist churches emerged between 1911-1927, and were at first flourishing in the northern provinces.<sup>35</sup> From the 1930s onwards, AICs became the fastest growing religious sector. Southern Xhosa-speaking regions (Ciskei and Transkei) proved more resistant - although 'a few Zionist churches [...] occurred in the Transkei from about the 1930s'.<sup>36</sup> During the period from 1960 to 1980 AICs gained more followers in the southern areas, such that 2-5 per cent of the Ciskei and 10-15 per cent of the population of the Transkei had become members, of whom 71 per cent were

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<sup>32</sup> For example in Kiernan J.P., *How Zionists See Themselves. In The Production and Management of Therapeutic Power in Zionist Churches within a Zulu City*, Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, 1990.

<sup>33</sup> Sundkler B. *Bantu Prophets*, 1948, Sundkler B. *Bantu Prophets*, 1961.

<sup>34</sup> See Jules-Rosette B., 'The sacred in African new religions' in Beckford J.A., Luckmann T. (ed), *The Changing Face of Religion*, Sage, London, 1989, pp.147-148.

<sup>35</sup> De Wet J., 'Social change/resistance' in Oosthuizen G.C., (ed), *Afro-Christianity*, 1994, p.152

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

Zionist-Apostolic.<sup>37</sup> Between 1939 and 1955 the number of AICs doubled (from 600 to 1286 respectively).<sup>38</sup> By the 1950s Zionist and Ethiopian AICs 'were powerful forces' in Natal and Transvaal.<sup>39</sup> Their growth accelerated after 1955, doubling in five years to 2 200 in 1960, and slowing down between 1960 and 1970 increasing to 'only' 3000 in 1970.<sup>40</sup> Among the better known arguments for why AICs emerged are those of Bengt Sundkler (1961) and David Barrett (1968).<sup>41</sup> The reasons vary from individual motivations to institutional innovation, and tend to focus on intra and inter-societal factors. Another effect on cultural identity was to erode it through acculturation, in which some aspects of African identities were retained and others altered. This is the case with Zionists, as shown by Kiernan's work.<sup>42</sup> Through the passage from rural areas to urban contexts, Africans construct new religious identities that combine aspects of traditional belief systems and rural ethnic identities with Christianity.

These are all factors that to varying degrees led to the emergence of AICs and that to some extent are still present in the life of these churches but, as Daneel pointed out,<sup>43</sup> although these elements were relevant for the churches' genesis, at a later stage of AICs' history these factors might have become less important. For example the political stance that in the 1930s determined the emergence of Ethiopian churches as actors of protest against white domination and expressed a message of liberation and pan-Africanist solidarity slowly disappeared and are now absent in the Ethiopian churches. To construct a theory on the growth and development of AICs it is necessary to understand them in relation to historical changes. The evolution of AICs is context-bound. Among the more typical arguments for the emergence and growth in the number of AICs are the following:

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<sup>37</sup> De Wet J., 'Social Change/Resistance' in Oosthuizen G.C., (ed), *Afro-Christianity*, 1994, p.153.

<sup>38</sup> Anderson A., *Bazalwane*, 1992, p.58.

<sup>39</sup> De Wet J., 'Social Change/Resistance', 1994, p.152.

<sup>40</sup> Anderson A., *Bazalwane*, 1992, p.58.

<sup>41</sup> Sunkler B., *Bantu Prophets*, 1961; Barrett D., *Schism and Renewal in Africa: An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements*, Oxford University Press, Nairobi, 1968.

<sup>42</sup> For example see Kiernan J.P., *How Zionists See Themselves*, 1990, p. 91.

<sup>43</sup> Daneel M., *Quest for Belonging*, 1987, p.68

1. AICs flourished because of a prolonged contact between non-indigenous and African belief systems (embedded in Western cultural systems). The growth of AICs fit the function of religion as a form of cultural defence, which arises in a context in which ethnic identity is perceived as under threat.<sup>44</sup> So even the present non-racial ideology of the African National Congress (ANC) may contribute to the growth of AICs for Zulus - a hypothesis which awaits empirical confirmation by a longitudinal breakdown of AIC growth according to ethnic grouping. AICs accept and promote certain traditional beliefs and ways of life, which contrast with the dismissive attitudes towards these matters within the mainline churches.<sup>45</sup> But yet contact and social change by themselves cannot be the only major causal factors.

2. AICs emerged as cultural responses to secularisation. Jules-Rosette argues that the multiplication of new African religious movements (of which AICs are one form) are cultural responses to secularisation, which take one of four forms: neo-traditionalism,<sup>46</sup> in which references to an idealised past are used to re-establish an authoritative tradition (such as African Traditional Religion); revitalisation, in which new religious concepts are used to renew older traditional ones (AICs, fitting ancestors into new cosmology alongside God), this represents a cultural attempt to re-sacralise 'dominant traditional symbols' through preserving 'customary notions of community and conventional expressive symbols'; syncretism, in which old and new concepts are combined;<sup>47</sup> and, millenarianism, in which an ideal future is posited, with new definitions of the sacred and a new social order. Millenarianism represents a cultural attempt to redefine social and political values.

Because African New Religious Movements (NRMs) involve the adjustment of Western religious systems, or the addition of new doctrinal systems to the Western ones, they represent Africanised forms of religious identity - not Westernised forms

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<sup>44</sup> Wallis R., Bruce S., 'Secularisation: the orthodox model' in Bruce, S (ed) *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1992.

<sup>45</sup> West M., *Black City* 1975a, p. 78.

<sup>46</sup> Jules-Rosette B., *The Sacred*, 1989, pp.156-7

<sup>47</sup> See for example Sundkler B., *Bantu Prophets*, 1948 and 1961.



of African religions. Discussions of AICs tend to view the alteration of African values and forms of social organisation in terms of change towards Western forms. Instead, Jules-Rosette argues that AICs represent the adaptation of Western forms to the African context. The ultimate outcome envisaged here is that new forms of identities are emerging, which combine African and Western elements. They contribute towards 'new forms of cultural expression, such as discourse and dress'.<sup>48</sup> Jules-Rosette argues that where AICs engage in fundamentalist Scriptural interpretations, this 'serves to develop a new fabric of ideas through which individuals attempt to create alternative types of social relationships'.<sup>49</sup> Christianity - through translation of the Scripture into indigenous languages - opened up new possibilities for Africans to define themselves. An African content is given to doctrine and leadership structures.<sup>50</sup> African religious identities in West Africa have been changed in different ways through contact with Islam and Christianity. According to Jules-Rosette developments in African religions in fact affirm African robustness in resisting, creating, and adapting to changing environments. From this perspective AICs represent the emergence of a new African identity, which spans traditional and modern cultural practices. The innovation of AICs lies in 'unique forms of social and political organisation' and in the development of their own doctrines.<sup>51</sup>

3. David Barrett, after a wide-ranging systematic study of 336 'tribal' units, suggested a general theory based on the conclusion that the primary cause of AIC growth was as a reaction to missionary activities. His thesis is that 'independency is a societal reaction to mission arising out of a tribal zeitgeist or climate of opinion in which Christian missions were believed to be illegitimately mounting an attack

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<sup>48</sup> Jules-Rosette B., *The Sacred*, 1989, p.159

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> See for example in Nigeria in the Native Baptist Church movement from 1888 onwards, and in the Aladura revival in Yorubaland between 1928-1930. Turner H.W., *Religious Innovation in Africa: Collected Essays on New Religious Movements*, G.K. Hall, Boston, 1979; Peel J.D.Y, *Aladura: a religious movement among the Yoruba*, International African Institute by the Oxford University Press, London, 1968.

<sup>51</sup> Jules-Rosette B., *The Sacred*, 1989, p.149.

against African traditional society and in particular its basic unit, the family'.<sup>52</sup> According to Barrett national, 'tribal', and mission factors all play a role. National factors that produced AICs growth occurred in societies that had a large number of Protestant missionaries, a relatively high ratio of whites to blacks, higher standards of living for whites than blacks, and a high percentage of literates. 'Tribal' factors included polygamous tribes with ancestor worship. The individual religious motivations of those who start or join AICs should not be neglected.

4. Passive resistance to white political domination and cultural control of colonial church structures. In South Africa the resistance of Africans to the colonial economies and belief systems were highly successful until the destruction of their political systems through warfare.<sup>53</sup> The breakaway from white dominated mainline denominations around the turn of this century indicate a mixed source of rejection of racism and assertion of African identity.

5. The growth of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) is related to the continuing urbanisation of rural South Africans. Zionist churches form important bridges in the rural-urban and the Western-African continuums. The link that exists between urbanisation and increasing ZCC affiliation directly contrasts with the commonly accepted notion that urbanisation contributes to secularisation.<sup>54</sup> The growing numbers within the AICs confirm that a linkage exists between religious vitality and urbanisation that has not yet levelled off. More Indigenous churches emerged in the urban areas of the Reef 'than in any other urban area in the whole of Africa'.<sup>55</sup>

6. To conclude Kiernan and Oosthuizen offered another interpretation, that sees in the level of intimacy, care and financial support offered by small Zionist churches

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<sup>52</sup> Barrett D., *Schism and Renewal*, 1968, p.74.

<sup>53</sup> Kiernan J.P., 'African Independent Churches' in Prozesky M., De Gruchy J. (ed), *Living Faiths in South Africa*, David Philip, Cape Town, 1995, pp. 116-128, Chidester D., *Religions of South Africa*, Routledge, London, 1992

<sup>54</sup> Brown C.G., 'A revisionist approach to religious change' in Bruce S. (ed), *Religion and Modernization*, 1992, p.47.

<sup>55</sup> Daneel M., *Quest for Belonging*, 1987, pp.102-103.

the reason for its growth; elements that cannot be matched by larger mainline congregations.<sup>56</sup>

Two comments need to be made concerning the inherent limitations of these reasons, and their possible contribution to the process of nation-building. First, for the most part the causative factors outlined above restrict the focus to economic and political change at the societal level, whether in South Africa or Africa at large. Although global trends (capitalism, colonialism) are touched upon, they are not used to delineate a strong macro-analysis. Second, some concepts could usefully fit in with a general understanding of the post-colonial nation-building process. These include acculturative factors and rapid socio-political changes.

### ***Phaphamani phaphamani, Nina maAfrika.*<sup>57</sup> Identifying Problems in Post-Apartheid South Africa**

This section will try to identify through the empirical material collected specific problems that seem to be emerging (or increasing) since the end of apartheid in the urban context of a township. At the moment studies on AICs in townships after the end of apartheid are limited, the only studies of note being Allan Anderson in Pretoria and Robert Garner in Durban.<sup>58</sup> At a national level the research will benefit from the use of nationwide surveys.

Through the analysis of the respondents' answers it is immediately possible to define a set of problems in the township and identify the techniques of resistance that independent churches offer to them. It appears evident that, as Venter stated, independent churches act more as a social movement than 'organised

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<sup>56</sup> Kiernan J.P., *How Zionists See Themselves*, 1990, Oosthuizen G.C. in different publications.

<sup>57</sup> 'Wake up, Wake up, You Africans', English translation from Zulu.

<sup>58</sup> Anderson A., *Challenges and Prospects for Research*, 1995, pp. 283-294 and Anderson A., 2000; Garner R. 'African Independent Churches and Economic Development in Edendale' in Venter D. (ed), *Engaging Modernity*, 2004, pp. 81-104.

denominations'.<sup>59</sup> To the question 'what are the problems that you feel the New South African State does not address?' And 'how does your church address these problems?' the respondents offered similar answers that could be grouped in these categories: one, poverty with stress on unemployment; two, crime and lack of security (sometimes highlighting a lack of trust of institutions like police); three, a lack of education (perceived as a limit to self-development); four, access to poor health systems (with particular attention to the lack of assistance in facing the HIV/AIDS pandemic).

Focus group one on 13 October 2001,<sup>60</sup> focused primarily on health problems. Sister Monica said: 'We have to learn as African people, we cannot always say 'yes' ignoring facts. It is important to acknowledge. It is like learning a new language. We need that somebody explains us how things work'.<sup>61</sup> Everybody's concern focused on a lack of education. Bishop Ntongana: 'Poverty arrived to Africa when white men arrived. We are poor and we cannot sort out these problems, but we can learn what to ask to our authorities'. And again: 'why are we so poor in Africa? For a lack of education. We need education to understand God. It is our right to be educated and to have a better life'.<sup>62</sup> This point emerged from different respondents, for example Archbishop Ngada said:

ASCA started self-help projects to face the problems we have. The priority in ASCA has given to theological problem because we are a church, but the establishment of our church was something different. We take care of all the problems of our people. We were established under the offices of the Holy Spirit. Most people didn't go to school, they had no education of whatsoever. Because of that we found that really something must be done. So we started a

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<sup>59</sup> Venter D. (ed), *Engaging Modernity*, 2004, p. 13.

<sup>60</sup> Jabulani, Focus Group 1, after CAIC meeting, Jabulani 13 October 2001.

<sup>61</sup> Sister Monica, member of the Zion Christian Congregation, Focus Group 1, Jabulani, 13 October 2001.

<sup>62</sup> Bishop Ntongana, focus group 1, Jabulani, 13 October 2001.

theological class in our garages because we don't have buildings and we started to discuss what to do for people's problems.<sup>63</sup>

'We need to pray God for education. You are African, you were born in Africa. I would like to discover my Africaness through the Bible. I want to understand myself through the Bible and through religion'.<sup>64</sup> Mr Elias Kubeka: 'The situation is getting worse and worse because unemployed people are more and more'.<sup>65</sup> Bishop Mabanga spoke of the facts that money is not used for building houses by politicians but for personal interests, 'Why is there not attention for poor peoples' needs? Community houses are so tiny that people cannot live there. They are built with no fundamentals'.<sup>66</sup> Bishop Masuku raised the problem of crime and the problem of corruption: 'crime will never be defeated because rich people can afford to protect themselves and they leave poor alone to struggle with criminality. We cannot win this struggle if there is not a massive intervention from the state. But the state is corrupted, the system is corrupted and we do not even feel protected by our own institutions. We need to shake politicians. They have to start to take care of the problems of the people. We are paying such a high price for their life standard'.<sup>67</sup> During the same CAIC Conference a prophetess gave a lesson on breast cancer (prevention, test and where to go for consultation) followed by a discussion on breast-feeding children. She asserted that the traditional way of breastfeeding should not be replaced by the artificial way; feeding artificially will affect also the behaviour of the child. 'We want to raise children in the African way, we want children that behave in a traditional way. Artificial food changes the way children nowadays behave'.<sup>68</sup> Other topics were touched in the meeting like approaches to sexual behaviour, monogamy, and respect for the partner. Mr Chilame said: 'Going with other women is like poisoning your wife's milk for your children'.<sup>69</sup> Talk also

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<sup>63</sup> My interview with Archbishop Ngada, 8 March 2002, Walkerville, Johannesburg.

<sup>64</sup> Sister Stella Mthembo, CAIC Conference, Jabulani, 13 October 2001.

<sup>65</sup> Mr Elias Kubeka, CAIC Conference, Jabulani, 13 October 2001.

<sup>66</sup> Bishop Mabanga, CAIC Conference, Jabulani, 13 October 2001.

<sup>67</sup> Bishop Masuku, CAIC Conference, Jabulani, 13 October 2001.

<sup>68</sup> Prophetess Elizabeth Lamola, CAIC Conference, Jabulani, 13 October 2001.

<sup>69</sup> Mr Chilame, CAIC Conference, Jabulani, 13 October 2001.



focused on child abuse caused by ignorance and inhuman environments that determine this unacceptable behaviour. 'If men do not respect their own life, they won't respect others'.<sup>70</sup> 'The only solution is to talk to people in power, to ask them to address these problems, to ask them to create new jobs and to give people dignity'.<sup>71</sup> All this points to and provokes a pressing need for AICs to undertake a real political engagement (next chapter will better address this relation between AICs and politics). What emerged from this analysis is a constant contraposition between AIC members social status (poverty) and the lack of intervention from political institutions. It appeared unacceptable that in the new South Africa, where institutions are mainly controlled by (black) Africans, the political establishment is not taking care of its 'own' African people, this was perceived as understandable in the past during the white regime. Respondents said that they try to address these problems in their religious community but that they feel that the State should take its responsibility and be present in the lives of the poor. In the majority of discussions it emerges that independent churches are able to elaborate techniques of resistance and responses to the everyday environment that respect African tradition and African identities This point can be illustrated in **figure 3** (p. 144).

This is an important issue that frequently recurred in interviews and in the two focus groups. Archbishop Ntongana at the regional CAIC Conference stated 'some people are starting to realize that our home is not the mainline church, our home is through the African indigenous church'.<sup>72</sup> And Mr Themba on another occasion said: 'Most white priests look down on our traditional ways of worshipping through our ancestors, yet expect us to listen to their stories about the Jewish ancestors'.<sup>73</sup> And again Mr Ncube: 'We need to realise that we have been singing other peoples' songs for years with foreign languages and with foreign images'.<sup>74</sup> The need to

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<sup>70</sup> Sister Monica, CAIC Conference, Jabulani, 13 October 2001.

<sup>71</sup> Bishop Ntongana, CAIC Conference, Jabulani, 13 October 2001.

<sup>72</sup> Bishop Ngada, CAIC Conference, October 2001, Jabulani.

<sup>73</sup> Personal conversation after liturgy with Mr Themba, member of the South African Christian Church in Zion, Jabulani, 16 December 2001.

<sup>74</sup> Personal conversation after liturgy with Mr Ncube, member of the Native Church of South Africa, Jabulani 16 December 2001.

elaborate a distinctive African Christian message is still posed as a necessity to address racism and attitudes of rejection from other – mainly white-dominated denominations. This approach is still strong in the post-apartheid period and it deserves to be analysed. Through media articles it is possible to investigate ethnic problems and division in other Christian denominations. In October 2001 an article in the *Sunday Times* portrayed ethnic fractures inside the large Pentecostal Rhema Church.<sup>75</sup> The article investigated members' attendance to the weekly Sunday service in Johannesburg and highlighted the fact that in general white members attend the early function (at eight in the morning) while the black community the second function later in the morning. In independent churches, where the membership is one hundred percent black, these issues are not present. More recently still the *Sunday Times* asked the South African Council of Churches to publish the results of an investigation conducted in 2004 in the aftermath of several racist episodes in the Catholic Church in South Africa.<sup>76</sup> The report, entitled 'Racism and the Catholic Church',<sup>77</sup> showed that there was an unequal distribution of resources between black and white church communities. It alleges that there were financial discrepancies between white and black Catholic schools and that black priests were not trusted enough to manage funds. Some black priests alleged that they were perceived as thieves by white parishioners. Church officials and members said they became suspicious of each other. Self-esteem of those discriminated against has been eroded and the church remains deeply divided along racial lines. The report reveals different standards of living for white and black priests. Many white Catholics abandoned their parishes and schools when the number of black parishioners increased. The investigation acknowledged that a general 'belief of Western superiority' emerged to a detriment of African culture that is considered inferior.<sup>78</sup>

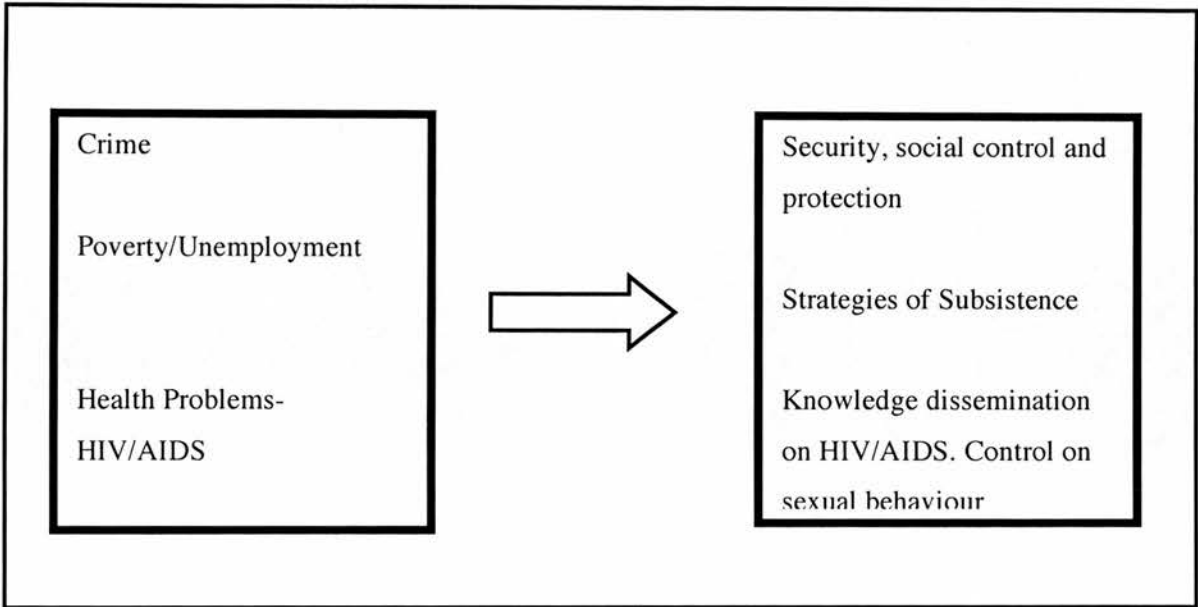
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<sup>75</sup> 'Fracture in the rapture at giant fast-food church', *Sunday Times*, 21 October 2001.

<sup>76</sup> 'South Africa's racial divide yawns widest on Sundays', *Sunday Times* on line, 20 March 2005, electronic resource: <http://www.sundaytimes.co.za>

<sup>77</sup> The investigation was conducted by the Catholic Church itself, Justice and Peace Commission, and it lasted two years.

<sup>78</sup> 'Racism shock in Catholic Church', *Sunday Times* on line, 13 March 2005.



**Figure 3** Problems and Solutions to the township’s challenges

The persistence of levels of racial division and discrimination are important factors in the analysis and evaluation of the growth of African Christianity in the post-apartheid period. These elements are usually considered dominant in the analysis of the growth of independent churches in the colonial period, thus underestimating the importance of race in the post-colony. Black Theology’s urging of African Christians to address the problems and divisions within the Christian community in the church in an African way are still present and powerful.<sup>79</sup> Archbishop Ngada stated:<sup>80</sup>

The growth of the churches [AICs] comes after a political situation. It was the consequence of a devastation of the culture of the people, and the church derived from the Africaness of the African people. Africans did not feel part of other denominations so we began a different kind of church. When we started we knew nothing about a church, our forefathers knew nothing about churches [...] you were asked to deny yourself. They took away our identity,

<sup>79</sup> ICT, *Speaking for Ourselves*, 1985.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Archbishop Ngada, Walkerville, 8 March 2002.

you had to give away your soul to be called a Christian the first African indigenous churches were established by people who were converted to be part of foreign churches. In these foreign churches they had to act like being in a foreign land and use foreign languages, use foreign social style. And then we said no, we don't fit. You had to live with a mask, we cannot be ourself. We have been brought up in a hypocritical way. They did not consider that we were human beings who loved God. They have taken for granted that Africa was the dark-continent, people were barbarous with no GOD, no feelings. They took our beliefs. So we, African indigenous churches, refused to be made puppets and we kept refusing until these days.

Some Sunday liturgies that I attended in Jabulani,<sup>81</sup> were almost all constructed as an attack on Western Christianity and invariably stressed the need of taking care of African people in an African way. Numerous respondents expressed the idea that the AICs were the 'custodians' of African cultural identity and the churches of black people. Assimilation was also an implicit element in the English and Afrikaans-speaking churches where scant attention was paid to cultural diversity. This is in part due to the colonial equation of Westernisation with civilisation, and the expectation that Africans who converted should reject African traditional religious practices - particularly those associated with ancestor cults.<sup>82</sup>

### **Elaborating Techniques of Resistance: AIC Responses to the Social Environment**

AICs have not been well served either by South African or international social scientists or by scholars of religion. For this reason multiple aspects of their interventions in public life have been missed or misinterpreted. The post-apartheid era can be perceived as an era that places an emphasis on socio-economic development. In post-apartheid South Africa it is possible to identify a

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<sup>81</sup> For example on Sunday 28 October 2001 at the Methodist Church of South Africa. From my research in the field notebook, September 2001-September 2002.

<sup>82</sup> Assimilation alienated black elites from the political struggles of the 1960s townships, brought about class division within black communities, and caused role confusion in relation to peers.

'developmental' ethos in these movements that promote communities to initiate and sustain their own improvement. My research identified several elements of developmental thinking: poverty and unemployment (crime), education (self-development), health (HIV/AIDS). The strategies of AICs do not elaborate a revolutionary message; nor do they create an alternative system. These churches adopt processes of flow and closures as a reaction to socio-economic deprivations.<sup>83</sup> Urban AICs are part of a well-defined socio-political community that create expectations. Their developmental ethos is always presented as a necessity rather than as having been moved by the desire of creating an alternative society. To be very clear, this movement is not the proletariat of a Marxist analysis.

Most of the people I interviewed inside African independent churches in 2001-2002, and again in July 2004 and July 2005, defined the religious community as a network of solidarity to fight for their proper social rights, like education, health, knowledge on HIV, economic support and housing.<sup>84</sup> To the question 'how would you improve your standard of living?' respondents followed a common line: through religious beliefs and prayers, through the community/church support and through a better communication with political power.<sup>85</sup> Members of independent churches meet regularly during the week for Bible studies, choir practices, singing festivals and in *Ibandla* (local meetings). Generally these meetings are separated by gender and driven by a hierarchical principle: senior churchmen lead the activities and senior women are married to the senior men. This portfolio of daily activities creates a safe social context, like the 'Women only meetings' during the week. There are also regional meetings once or twice a year. The meetings and activities organised by Apostolic churches give more of a sense of order than the Zion churches where drums and dancing are generously adopted. Churches and congregations are small spaces, which are easy to control. This aspect can be

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<sup>83</sup> See Geschiere, P., Meyer, B., 'Globalisation and identity: dialectics of flow and closure' in *Development and Change*, 29 (4), 1998, pp. 601-616.

<sup>84</sup> O'Donnell calls it 'low intensity citizenship'. O'Donnell G., 'On the state, democratisation and some conceptual problems: a Latin American view with glances at some post-communist countries' in *World Development*, 21 (8), 1993, pp. 1355-1369.

<sup>85</sup> Fieldwork notes, Jabulani, 2001-2002, 2004 and 2005.



considered an advantage in the township where bigger organisations become easy targets for criminal attacks or the centre of attention for local gangs. For example the area surrounding the enormous Catholic Church Regina Mundi in Soweto is becoming a terrain for local gang battles. Small African Independent churches, or better the religious community, functions as a social institution that constantly controls its space and its boundaries. Churches become an opportunity to construct social relations. Against the danger of the street in the township, great attention is paid to controlling children through special strategies (womens' houses become temporary nurseries in the afternoon, a car becomes the school bus to collect congregation's children at school). Mrs Mafa said: 'We need to control our children. Now nobody speaks to children. People are always busy doing something else. Children need discipline and who teaches them if not the parents? We cannot complain if they grow up as bad Christians and bad people if we do not discipline them'.<sup>86</sup> Home and church are linked in the respondents' interpretation. Especially in womens' responses the religious community becomes the place that support home and the family against the negative aspects of the external environment. Mrs Radebe told me:

If you read the Bible, you keep troubles away. You should look for people who belong to your church if you feel to speak a bit. They will understand you and you will understand them. We share our troubles and our needs. We learn how to sort them out in our church. We learn everything from our church. We learn how to live a better life. If you want to live your life without fearing God it is your choice. But I think we need to serve God all the time.<sup>87</sup>

It is interesting that a sort of social construction emerges from the parallel between religious community and political community. According to the respondents' assertions, a good Christian should inevitably be also a good citizen. Mrs Radebe again: 'The church should give the strength to avoid bad influences'.<sup>88</sup> The

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<sup>86</sup> Mrs Mafa, member of the Methodist Church of South Africa, Jabulani, 17 February 2002.

<sup>87</sup> Mrs Radebe, member of the Native Church of South Africa, Jabulani 14 April 2002.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

religious community plays a fundamental role defining social networks and the way to engage with surrounding reality. Church members are able to forget their identity in the church space. Nana, a secondary school teacher, said:

There are a lot of women here in my congregation who go through difficult times. Some have to support the family by themselves. Some have husband that spend all the day in the *shebeen* and when they go home they do not talk, they just beat their wives. Their life is miserable but when they are in the church they can forget all these troubles and becoming just a member of the house of Lord. Here their work is important and well respected. It is really like living a second and better life here.

To address sexually transmitted diseases and uncontrolled pregnancy churches function as place of social control. One young girl lamented excessive control over her life by her mother and other women of the congregation. She was expected to stay at home after her school and she could never leave the house without a family member. She was allowed to go by herself only to church meetings. Her mother said it was the only way to protect her from bad influences and the risk of pregnancy.<sup>89</sup> If socially men are encouraged to be sexually active, with multiple partners, unfaithful women are considered disgraceful. 'If a man has more than one woman concurrently, he is considered a playboy, a hero. But if a woman has got more than one sexual partner is consider an *isifebe* (prostitute)'.<sup>90</sup> Mama Ntongana: 'Everybody knows that men are not faithful to their wife. Women are generally resigned to that. But we teach to our sisters that it should not be like that. Men should respect God's will. God created family and men should respect their wives and their families. If we do not go against God's rules, we do not have problems like AIDS'.<sup>91</sup> Garner, in his study on a Kwazulu township argues that there is no evidence that church membership affect sexual habits significantly, if not in the

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<sup>89</sup> Personal conversation with Lulu Luthuli, Jabulani, fieldwork notes, March 2002.

<sup>90</sup> Ms Regina Motole, member of the Zion Congregation Church, 9 June 2002.

<sup>91</sup> Mama Ntongana, personal conversation, 'only women meeting', Jabulani, 14 July 2002, fieldwork notes.

case of Pentecostal churches.<sup>92</sup> A powerful way to prevent HIV/AIDS is through knowledge dissemination. Regular workshops on the topic for example were organised by the Federal Council of African Indigenous Churches in Walkerville, an agricultural area 10 km from Johannesburg. These workshops was part of series of weekly workshops open to women who belonged to the Council's churches. A senior nurse who belonged to the congregation led the workshop. When I attended the workshop 18 women were present. The main topic was the sexual transmission of HIV/AIDS. The nurse distributed posters and pamphlets in Zulu among the attendants. Great emphasis was placed on careful sexual behaviour and monogamous relations. The languages adopted in the workshop were Zulu and Sotho.

### **Development Attitudes: Saving Clubs**

Saving clubs were another important social entity I encountered in AICs in Jabulani. Some types have been clearly illustrated by church members, others, must be elaborated through an analysis of the literature (in this case use of NERMIC material, Zululand University). The independent movement in South Africa has been frequently defined by literature as an agglomerate of small churches and institutions, divided by continuous secession and with limited or absent cooperation between them.<sup>93</sup> Normally attention is paid to their divisive character and not to their interaction and cooperation. As is the case for the vast majority of black South Africans, households in Jabulani have incomes below the poverty line. For example **table 4** shows that at a national level the official unemployment rate among black African people is higher than Indians/Asians, and coloured people by a large margin. For example, in March 2005, the official unemployment rate among black Africans was 31.6 per cent as opposed to 19.8 per cent amongst coloured people, 18.0 per cent amongst Indians/Asians and 5.1 per cent amongst white people.

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<sup>92</sup> Garner R.C., *Safe sects?*, 2000, pp. 41-69.

<sup>93</sup> See Martin West in his analysis of AICs in Soweto in the Seventies, West M., *Black City*, 1975a and Sundkler B., *Bantu Prophets*, 1961.

**Table 4** Official unemployment rate by population group, March 2004 to March 2005<sup>94</sup>

<b>Unemployment rate</b>	<b>March 2004</b> %	<b>September 2004</b> %	<b>March 2005</b> %
Black African	34.2	31.3	31.6
Coloured	18.0	21.8	19.8
Indian/Asian	16.5	13.4	18.0
White	4.9	5.4	5.1
<b>Average</b>	<b>27.9</b>	<b>26.2</b>	<b>26.5</b>

Almost 36 per cent of the total national income is earned in Gauteng. It is the country's wealthiest province and the local per capita income is 30 per cent higher than in the Western Cape, which is the next wealthiest province. Despite this, Gauteng's poverty gap, the money needed to alleviate poverty from all poor households to a minimum living level, is the fourth largest of the nine provinces, as a Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) report states.<sup>95</sup> The incorporation of Soweto into Johannesburg gives this district the highest poverty gap, accounting for almost a quarter of the provincial total. Pretoria, Vanderbijlpark and Alberton have the next highest poverty gaps.

Consequently households, involved in a daily struggle, construct subsistence livelihoods from a vast range of strategies and activities. Among the most important of these are communal support networks and various community-based structures which allow households to work together communally to contribute to their livelihood needs at a household level. Communal support networks consist of networks of family and friends who can offer food or money to struggling households, or can supplement a household's income through offering opportunities

<sup>94</sup> Data from *Labour Force Survey 2005*, Statistical Release P0210 available on line. Electronic resource: [www.statssa.gov.za](http://www.statssa.gov.za)

<sup>95</sup> *Poverty Gap in Gauteng Fourth Largest in SA*, HSRC report, 14 June 1998.

for causal labour. Research has however shown that these networks are tenuous and may even be eroding in urban and peri-urban areas.<sup>96</sup> Community-based structures on the other hand appear to be important instruments in facilitating sufficient household income levels. *Stokvels* and burial societies – the two types of organisation under analysis in this section – are good examples of this process. In both cases they allow households to draw upon a quantity of money contributed by the members of community based organisations (CBOs) in order to afford certain necessities. There are different kinds of *stokvel*, depending on the purpose for which money is raised, the differing conditions of investment and payout and the different forms of organisation. Broadly speaking, however, two types can be distinguished: those organisations which allow for the collection of money into a pool out of which members can draw at times of need; and those which collect a pool of money which is allocated to each member in turn. *Stokvels* may also be formed to buy food in bulk, or to provide resources for festive occasions. Where *stokvels* are associated with AICs, these social activities are also accompanied by religious activities.

Mrs Ntongana's 'women only meeting'<sup>97</sup> was financially supported by a different saving scheme, an *umholiswano*, a small club paying a regular amount into a container (in this case they used a biscuit box) that goes to each member in turn. Members of the *umholiswano* are the six members of the sewing club. In this six-person small organisation the payment per week is 20 Rand. Each member, in rotation, would receive a payout of 100 Rand every six weeks. They only discuss money when no outsider is present, and the money goes directly to the person whose turn it is. I could not attend one of these 'business meetings' because I was not an active member of the club, while I could attend all the other sections of the 'women only meeting'. In the *umholiswano*, two members are delegated to take the payout to the house of the member whose turn it is to receive the amount. They carefully avoid going as a group for fear of being followed by criminal elements.

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<sup>96</sup>Cross C., Luckin L., Mzimela T., Clark C., 'On the edge: poverty, livelihoods and natural resources in KwaZulu Natal' in *Land, Labour and Livelihoods in Rural South Africa*, vol 2, 1996.

<sup>97</sup> Called 'No more hunger', I actually do not remember the exact translation in Zulu.



My interviewees told me that usually the member who gets the money will invest a part of the share in buying material to sew with the other women in the club. They will sell these clothes and they will use the money to support their family. It emerged that the *umholiswano* provides a strong financial base. It enables the members to achieve objectives which were otherwise out of reach. It is relevant also to highlight the existence of food *stokvels*. There are two main types of food *stokvel*: one saves money to buy food in bulk at the end of the year, the other sells food for profit. In Jabulani I was only able to attend the first type of *stokvel*. The second form was not practised by the five church members under analysis.<sup>98</sup> The aim of bulk buying associations is not to save money, but rather to build up capital to buy a reasonable amount of groceries for use over the festive season. An example is provided by the Women Chorus Club of the Native Mission Church. An important rule is that no member can draw from the 'investment' until the end of the year. The Chorus Club chooses two women to open their saving account at the beginning of the year. Usually these two members cover other important roles in the club. Thereafter, money collected by the representatives will be deposited into the bank during the second week of the month and the payment will be recorded in the club book. The aim of this type of *stokvel* is not just to collect money and investments, but also to develop members' skills. Seminars are organised to teach members how to budget for example. In Mama Ntongana's saving association these workshops were organised four times a year. At a certain time towards the end of the year, club members decide what to buy with the amount each will receive. When the list is completed with separate orders, members can pay wholesale prices because they buy the same items and amounts: 'It is important not to feel poor and having good and sufficient food in Christmas time. We, Christians, have so many reasons to celebrate our Lord for Christmas time!'<sup>99</sup> Many *stokvels* are started by people who work together. Outsiders may join but they have to be recommended by a member of the saving group. For example regular worship services are held by a

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<sup>98</sup> Introduced to this type of *stokvel* by literature, especially Oosthuizen C.G., NERMIC, unpublished report.

<sup>99</sup> Mama Ntongana, personal conversation, Jabulani, 4 August 2002, fieldwork notes.

group of Zionist taxi drivers on Saturday morning in Melville, Johannesburg. Their venue is the parking space of a supermarket. These services, started for those who could not attend church services on the weekend due to their job, also provide financial support for the members. There are Bible readings, preaching, as well as the singing of hymns. At the end of each service, members collect money to assist those who are in need for paying funerals. And what really grasps the attention of an external observer is the quantity of funerals that a family has to organise, or attend, in the townships in a year. Crime, HIV/AIDS and other untreated illnesses, are the major causes of death. They explained to me that this mutual aid club started initially as an *umhliswano*, but it was transformed into a *stokvel* to generate profit. Money is regularly deposited into a bank account and the *stokvel* affairs are briefly discussed on Saturday morning. Eligibility for a *stokvel* membership is determined by the person publicly recognised as reliable by other members. Acquaintances, relatives or friends who already belong to the organisation recruit most new members of the *stokvel*. Personal ties, rather than income levels, are the greatest influence on membership. Where members of *stokvel* are also members of AICs, or where AICs are actively involved in the establishment of *stokvel*, it is inevitable that AICs membership become a major determinant for trust creation. This is well-expressed by Siphso Gwanya: 'a member of our church would prefer to die than not to do his duty in front of other church members and in front of God. You can be sure that if a new member belongs to your church he will always pay his share'.<sup>100</sup> Ms Thando, a member of the same church, added: 'we spend so much time together and we know so much about each other that there is a familiar atmosphere that helps our business. I would not trust anybody else as I trust these people'.<sup>101</sup> The religious aspect of many *stokvels* is clearly established by the fact that many societies start their activities with prayers and religious songs. This helps to focus the attention of *stokvel* members upon the fact that they are engaged not merely in activities relating to personal financial gain but also to a wider context of empowerment of poor and disadvantaged people in the community. In many cases

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<sup>100</sup> Siphso Gwanya, elder member of the Native Church of South Africa, Jabulani 24 March 2002.

<sup>101</sup> Ms Thando, member of the Native Church of South Africa, Jabulani, 24 March 2002.

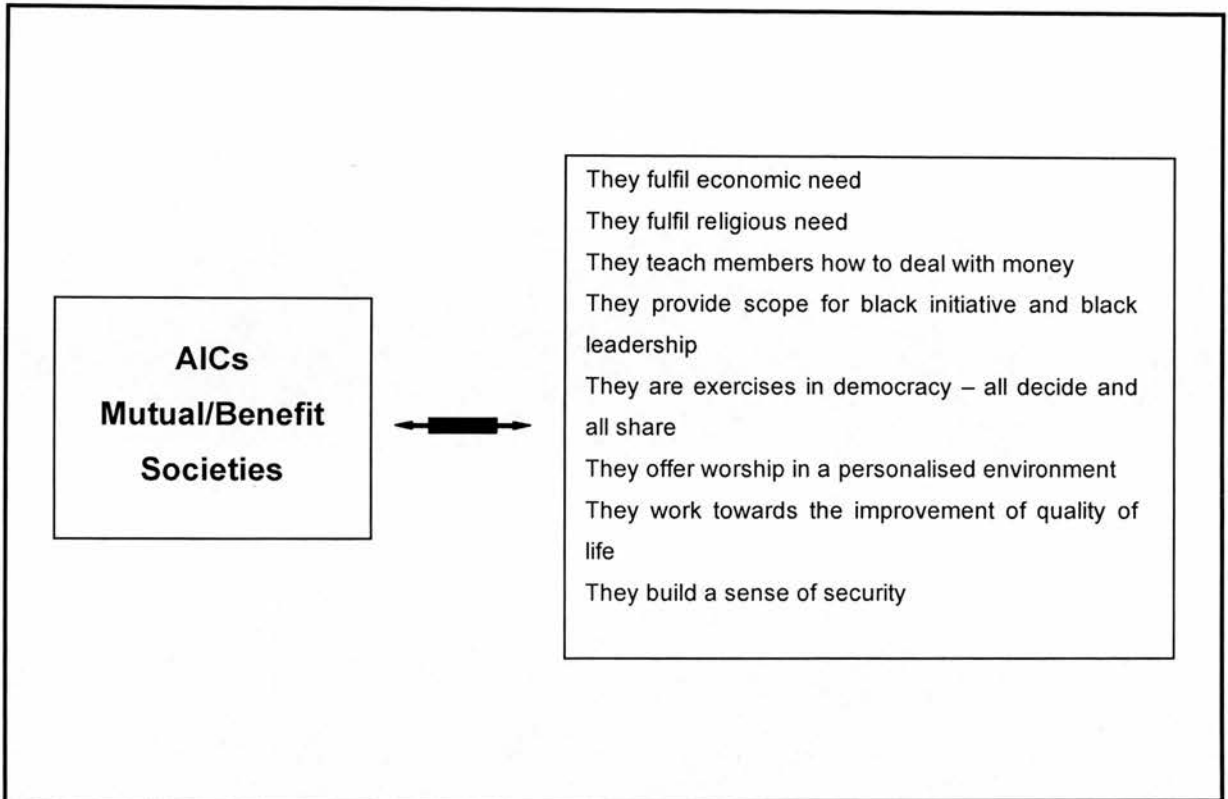
churches and church associations (like CAIC, for example) are directly involved in *stokvels*, so as to ensure that the social upliftment target of the activity is always under supervision. Frequently *stokvels* are held in church buildings (or Bishop's offices) and this helps members to create a strong sense of community. *Stokvels* are not associated with a specific church but they can be formed by members of different churches or different denominations. The perception is that *stokvels* are forms of empowerment not just of individuals but also for collective identities, and that the mutual support which *stokvel* members give to each other is thus consistent with the religious message of mutual support.

There are many other aspects of *stokvel* activity that suggest a holistic approach which is lacking in formal lending institutions: for example, sick members of *stokvels* are visited by their colleagues. Mrs Nana said that 'If one of our sisters is badly sick we organise ourselves to go to visit her and being sure that her family is doing well. It is important to let her know that she will always have our support. We share our money as we share our life'.<sup>102</sup> Research into skills training for community development has indicated that many *stokvels* and other grassroots civil society formations are now able to provide skills training and other tangible benefits to their members with minimal outside assistance.<sup>103</sup> Although some members view their *stokvel* as purely an instrument for financial gain, *stokvels* provide a service in assisting individuals and households to save and budget. The general perception that emerged from my observation is that *stokvels* are important organisations that improve the community and individuals. Mutual aid and other societies have a socio-economic and socio-religious function. The value and significance of the mutual benefit societies that are reinforced by AICs can be summarised by **figure 4**.

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<sup>102</sup> Mrs Nana Myeza, member of the Native Church of South Africa, Jabulani, 22 February 2002.

<sup>103</sup> Cross C., Luckin L., Mzimela T., Clark C., *On the Edge*, 1996, p. 124.



**Figure 4** Values and significance of mutual benefit societies for members of AICs

### **Independent Churches in a Parallel Perspective**

David Venter asserted in his recent publication, *Engaging Modernity*, that ‘macro-structural explanations are usually neglected in accounts of the rise of African Independent Churches’,<sup>104</sup> due to a set of assumptions that pushed specialists to privilege micro-variables.<sup>105</sup> This research recognises that it is important to consider how these micro-variables (like unemployment, education, etc) relate and how they serve to legitimate national and structural changes, like the nation building process in a democratic context. It becomes more and more evident that the difficulties that AIC members experience and address in the township are

<sup>104</sup> Venter D. (ed), *Engaging Modernity*, 2004, p. 170.

<sup>105</sup> For example Barrett D., *Schism and Renewal*, 1968 and Daneel M., *Quest for Belonging*, 1987.

perceived as due to structural problems and a lack of macro-intervention from the state mainly through the lack of a systematic project of reform. Democracy brought implicit expectations of the new political establishment and there is a claim for full recognition of full rights for citizens (this aspect will be analysed in the next chapter). In general there is trust that 'the people we vote for' will try to tackle citizens' problems. This sense of trust still follows the sense of positive expectations of the nation-building process in the post-colonial period. Future analysis will be able to observe what happens when (or if) this sense of trust will vanish. In different parts of the continent (especially in West Africa) the lack of trust in public institutions due to the failure of post-colonial States witnessed the rise of new Pentecostal Charismatic Christianity. In West Africa some independent churches (like Aladura Church) are evolving into a more Pentecostal orientated organisation.<sup>106</sup> Could it be a natural evolution? An adaptation to change during the post-colonial period? It is not the intention of this research to investigate this relation but future research should be addressed in this way. In this direction Garner<sup>107</sup> offered a parallel between the social power of Pentecostalism in a South African township and the social power that Methodism and Protestantism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century constituted for the creation and strengthening of the market economy in England and America. AICs in South Africa do not offer this ethos and they do not produce an alternative to existing societal or socio-economic models. Rather they elaborate techniques of resistance to the rapid socio-political changes<sup>108</sup> of the post-colonial period. According to Jules-Rosette, rapid social change and cultural contacts are inevitable results of decolonisation in the undeveloped world.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> See for example Adogame A., 'African Christian Communities in Diaspora' in Kalu O., *African Christianity. An African History*, Perspectives on Christianity Series, 5 (3), University of Pretoria, Pretoria, 2005, pp. 494-514; Adogame A., 'Engaging the rhetoric of spiritual warfare: the public face of Aladura in Diaspora' in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 34 (4), 2002, pp. 493-522.

<sup>107</sup> Garner R.C., 'Religion as a source of social change in the new South Africa' in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 30 (3), 2000, pp. 310-343.

<sup>108</sup> Comaroff J., Comaroff J., *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 1991; Jules-Rosette B., *The Sacred*, 1989.

<sup>109</sup> Jules-Rosette B., *The Sacred*, 1989, p. 98.



African independent churches (AICs) continued to flourish in the post-colonial period in Africa, and in particular Pentecostalism has risen in the last two decades, because they were able to give answers to the questions posed by 'modernisation' (working on the two concepts of 'identity' and 'modernity'); they are not phenomena isolated from and external to modern events. If Pentecostalism and African independent churches in Africa are equally distributed between rural and urban centres, the old dichotomy between rural/traditional and urban/modern does not seem appropriate. Besides Pentecostalism in Africa seems very successful among relatively educated and wealthy people,<sup>110</sup> and both these forms of spirituality are successful in attracting huge proportions of youth. This form of attraction would not be possible if antithetic with the idea of modernity. The state of modernity (and its relations between past and present) should be redefined in different terms within the old sociological definition of individualism and secularisation. If scholars such as Andrew Walls, Adrian Hastings and Kwame Bediako<sup>111</sup> are correct in suggesting that there has been a Christian shift of gravity from the north to the south, then African independent churches, as an African phenomenon, provide us with one of the most potent ways of grasping this reality. I maintain the definition of AICs and Pentecostalism in Africa as separate entities even if they are fused together by some scholars. These two spiritual bodies could be unified from a theological perspective<sup>112</sup> but not from the perspective of socio-political analysis and from their different development. AICs in South Africa are still an African phenomenon where the role of African identity is constantly debated. Birgit Meyer presented this point in a recent publication.<sup>113</sup> It is necessary to maintain (or to construct) a clear typological distinction between AICs and Pentecostal Charismatic Churches (PCC) especially after the massive expansion of

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<sup>110</sup> Corten A., Marshall-Frantani R. (ed), *Between Babel and Pentecost*, 2001. Independent churches still remain fundamentally 'poor' churches in South Africa, Introduction, pp. 1-15.

<sup>111</sup> Kwame B., *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, Maryknoll: Orbis/Edinburgh University Press, 1995; Hastings (ed), *A World of History Christianity*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1999; Fyfe C., Walls A. (ed), *Christianity in Africa*; Isichei E., *A History of Christianity*, 1995.

<sup>112</sup> Anderson A., *Zion and Pentecost*, 2000, p. 231.

<sup>113</sup> Meyer B., 'Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches' in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 33, 2004, pp. 447-474.

PCCs in the last twenty years.<sup>114</sup> If this distinction is blurred from a theological point of view, clear demarcations can be traced along their socio-historical interpretation. According to Meyer, but perhaps subject to critique, Pentecostal churches seem to build their appeal on a 'complete break from the past'.<sup>115</sup> Meyer also highlights that PCCs in West Africa define themselves in contraposition to AICs. PCCs growth depends on factors such as the crisis of the post-colonial state,<sup>116</sup> transnationalism and expanding diasporic cultures,<sup>117</sup> the growth of mass-media and technology,<sup>118</sup> and neo-liberal capitalism.<sup>119</sup> Most African independent churches (at least in South Africa) are small fragmented entities with little or no coordination among them, a lack of money and exhibiting a strong local character with no or scant connections with the supranational context. Rather than being inside the global process, these churches elaborate techniques of resistance to the rapid changes brought by globalisation. Ms Lulu Mwanza said: 'we are poor people who utilise our own resources'.<sup>120</sup> All the leaders interviewed lamented scarce support from other South African religious organisations or Christian

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<sup>114</sup> It is possible to classify Pentecostalism into three types: (1) Classical Pentecostals; (2) the Charismatic renewal movement; and (3) 'Neo-Pentecostal churches', referring to those churches and movements which have their origins in the Charismatic Movement which began in 1960, including the so-called 'non-denominational' and 'new' churches. Some of these churches have departed quite significantly in many respects from the 'classical' position and some are also referred to as 'Third Wave' churches and they are particularly spread in developing countries (such as the Vineyard Association founded by John Wimber). The so-called 'classical' Classical Pentecostalism (First Wave) began early in the twentieth century in the United States and it thought of itself as a revival (or renewal) of the first-century manifestations (gifts) of the Holy Spirit in Christian communities. The 'Second Wave' is the 'charismatic renewal movement' or charismatics. In the 1950s and 1960s, some people in mainline denominations started experiencing the supernatural gifts of the Spirit in their midst. See for example, Corten A., Marshall-Frantani R. (ed), *Between Babel and Pentecost*, 2001.

<sup>115</sup> Gechiere P., Meyer B., *Globalisation and Identity*, 1998 and Meyer B., *From African Independent*, 2004.

<sup>116</sup> See Bayart J.F., *The State in Africa*, 1993.

<sup>117</sup> See Martin D., 'Charismatic Christianity is the portable identity of people in diaspora' in Martin D., *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 2003, p. 145.

<sup>118</sup> Hackett R.I.J., 'Charismatic/Pentecostal appropriation of media technologies in Nigeria and Ghana' in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 28 (3), 1998, pp. 141-146; Gifford P., *African Christianity and its Public Role*, Hurst and Company, London, 1998, Gifford P., *Ghana New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalising African Economy*, Hurst and Company, London, 2004.

<sup>119</sup> Comaroff J., Comaroff J. (ed), *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2001.

<sup>120</sup> Ms Lulu Mwanza, member of the South African Christian Church in Zion, Jabulani, 16 December 2001.

denominations.<sup>121</sup> The respondents interviewed in African independent churches have a different perception and they highlighted differences between Pentecostal and independent churches in the township. Mr Themba:

My church is not a 'church-basket' (basket used to collect money during functions), one of these 'tent-church' (refereeing to new Pentecostal churches in Soweto usually hosted in big tents) were they keep asking for all your money, and they even check into your pocket. In my church you are free to give according to your possibilities and you will get back according to your needs. In these churches they keep asking for money to be listened by God.<sup>122</sup>

To understand the different levels of diffusion between Pentecostal Charismatic Churches and African independent churches in South Africa it is useful to compare some data from the last two national censuses. **Table 5** indicates membership of the main religious groupings by population group among those living in Gauteng between the 1996 and 2001 censuses. In 1996, approximately 5.2 million people were classified as belonging to a Christian religious group of one kind or another compared to 6.7 million in 2001. Approximately 897 000 persons reported having no religious affiliation in 1996, compared to 1.6 million at the time of Census 2001. **Table 6** shows broadly defined religious affiliations at a national level in 1996 and 2001. In 1996, 36.5 per cent of the population indicated that they belonged to conventional or mainline Christian churches; this percentage had dropped to 31.4 per cent by 2001. The mainline churches, in Census 1996/2001, include reformed churches, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches and the United Congregational Church of South Africa. In 2001, the population who indicated that they belonged to one of the independent churches had increased from 21.4 per cent to 28.7 per cent. This group includes Zionist

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<sup>121</sup> This trend partially changed since 2001 when archbishop Ntongana still maintained good relations (and a partial economic support) with the South African Council of Churches. In July 2005 archbishop Ntongana could not find financial support for his bible courses.

<sup>122</sup> Mr Themba, member of the South African Christian Church in Zion, Jabulani, 16 December 2001.

churches, iBandla lamaNazaretha and Ethiopian-type churches. It is not clear how the Apostolic type is identified. They could have been included in ‘other Christians’ or they could have been included inside the Zion type. Once again classification inside AICs appears to be problematic and there is a lack of homogeneity in their definition. Amongst those for whom the question was answered, 12.5 per cent stated that they did not belong to any religious grouping at the time of Census 1996, compared to 18.4 per cent at the time of Census 2001. Although it is not clear how the survey was constructed and where they allocated Apostolic churches, the data gives a general indication of the growth rate of Pentecostalism and Independent Christianity in South Africa.

**Table 5** Distribution of the population by religious affiliation in Gauteng<sup>123</sup>

<b>Religious Affiliation</b>	<b>Percentage Census 1996</b>	<b>Percentage Census 2001</b>
Mainline Christian	36.5	31.4
African Independent Churches*	24.1	28.7
Pentecostal/Charismatic churches	6.6	6.4
Other Christian	5.3	9.5
No Religion	12.5	18.4
Refused to answer/ Other Unspecified	11.5	1.6

In 1996, approximately 30.0 million people were classified as belonging to a Christian religious group of one kind or another, compared to 35.8 million in 2001.

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<sup>123</sup> Comparative analysis of Gauteng Census 1996 and Census 2001. Electronic resource: <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/statsdownload.asp?PPN=Report-03-02-07&SCH=3584>

Approximately 4.6 million persons reported having no religious affiliation in 1996, compared to 6.8 million at the time of Census 2001. In both censuses, approximately one-third of the population indicated that they belonged to conventional or mainline Christian churches. In 2001, a further third of the population indicated that they belonged to one of the independent churches. Amongst those for whom the question was answered, 11.7 per cent stated that they did not belong to any religious group at the time of Census 1996, compared to 15.1 per cent at the time of Census 2001.

**Table 6** Distribution of the population by religious affiliation at a national level South Africa Census 1996/2001<sup>124</sup>

<b>Religious Affiliation</b>	<b>Percentage Census 1996</b>	<b>Percentage Census 2001</b>
Mainline Christian	36.5	32.6
African Independent Churches*	26.8	31.8
Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches	6.7	5.9
Other Christian	5.4	9.5
No Religion	11.7	15.1
Refused to answer/ Unspecified	9.4	1.4

According to the 2001 edition of the World Christian Encyclopaedia,<sup>125</sup> in 2000 there were 83 million African Independents and 126 million Pentecostal-

<sup>124</sup> Comparative analysis Census 1996 and Census 2001 at a national level. Electronic resource: <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/statsdownload.asp?PPN=Report-03-02-04&SCH=3590>



charismatics in Africa. As was stated previously some of these categories partially overlap and they follow different interpretations of analysis. Although it is possible to define a general clear trend in the continent that differs from South Africa's trends. While Pentecostalism thrives around Africa, especially in West Africa, in South Africa Zionist-Apostolic churches still have a strong mass appeal. This difference between the African trend and the national/South African growth level raises once again doubts on the adoption of globalisation as a macro-theory in understanding the AICs' growth in the last period. South African trends, even if constricted to small changes, do not reflect the broader international trends and new explanations should be found.

## Conclusion

Religious and cultural phenomena are not free from macro-changes and from history because to certain extents they are a construction of it.<sup>126</sup> We cannot move from the analysis of African independent churches without reflecting on the incidence of the mutated historical situation. Venter is right in asserting that 'local responses to pressures from a global identity can take many forms, and Africans can be both Western and African, both Christian and traditional'.<sup>127</sup> But in the light of the analysis above we cannot adopt globalisation as the macro-analysis to interpret the growth of African Independent Christianity in South Africa (as Venter suggests). For example in the case of small independent churches there are very few links with the broader globalised community. There are few links between small independent churches and other churches out of the country, and when churches are invited to participate to international events, only leaders (and then very few of

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<sup>125</sup> Barrett D.B. (ed), *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Study of Churches and Religions in the Modern World*, vol. 2, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001.

<sup>126</sup> Bayart J.F., Mbembe A., Toulabor C.M., *La Politique par le bas. Contributions a' une Problematique de la Démocratie*, Karthala, Paris, 1992; Mbembe A., *On the Post-colony*, University of California Press, Berkley, 2001.

<sup>127</sup> Venter D., 'Globalization and the cultural effects of the world-economy in a semiperiphery: The emergence of African Indigenous Churches in South Africa' in *Journal of World-Systems Research* 5, 1999. Electronic resource: <http://jwsr.ucr.edu/>

them) can afford to go.<sup>128</sup> All the churches under my analysis lamented the lack of technological tools (fax, internet, tape recorders) that would give them access to broader horizons.<sup>129</sup>

Rather than globalisation, this research supports the idea that macro-explanations for the rise of Independent Christianity in South Africa should be sought in the modernisation theory offered by the new political dispensation.<sup>130</sup> Following Durkheim's approach, independent churches could be interpreted as the social spaces (within the religious scenario) that better adapt to and better address the rapid political and social changes of the post-apartheid situation. According to Wallis's model, religion, for the new religious movements, is a 'reflection of prevailing social structure and a source of solidarity and collective identity. As the social structure changed, so too, therefore would the dominant form of religious expression'.<sup>131</sup> In this way is possible to link the growth of Independent Christianity in the last 15 or 20 years and the profound shifts in political situation. As Said stated colonialism was not just a matter of militarisation and coercion but also the creation of a powerful discourse of dominion.<sup>132</sup> The main message of Independent Christianity lies precisely within the idea of independence/separation from the dominant colonial discourse and on the subsequent formulation of a separate identity. That this message has been transmuted into the post-colonial (post-apartheid) moment with its own sets of social and economic realities and demands for new cultural and social appropriations highlights the context and time-bound meanings of identity and independence. The term 'Independent', and its underlying meanings, should be reconsidered with much attention.

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<sup>128</sup> This point emerged in several interviews, Soweto, September 2001-September 2002.

<sup>129</sup> I found a total different scenario in the New Pentecostal-charismatic church of Pastor Eddy Edwards (leader of the African Christian Forum), the Jesus Celebration Centre. My interview with Pastor Eddy Edwards, Industria, 15 May 2002.

<sup>130</sup> This point will be better explained in chapter 7, 'Modernity and Tradition: a Reinterpretation in the Context of Religion'.

<sup>131</sup> I am grateful to Dr T. J. Thompson for suggesting me this reading. Wallis R., *The Elementary Forms of the New Religious Life*, Routledge & Kegan, London, 1984, p. 49.

<sup>132</sup> Said E.W., *Orientalism*, Penguin, London, 1995, p. 110.

The post-apartheid can be considered as an era that puts great emphasis on socio-economic development<sup>133</sup> and AICs appear to offer important answers that ought to be considered within broader socio-economic analyses. If this chapter focussed on AICs developmental ethos (both in terms of economic development and personal empowerment), in the next chapter attention will turn to the political action and potentiality of AICs. Although AICs were previously neglected from political analyses, this thesis will try to demonstrate AICs' contribution to the nation-building process also from a political perspective.

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<sup>133</sup> This is due to the relation between the ANC government and the liberation struggle. Liberation was not just perceived as political liberation but also as liberation from poverty and improvement of life. See next chapter (chapter 6), 'African Independent Churches in Post-Apartheid South Africa: New Political Interpretations'.

## Chapter 6

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### **African Independent Churches in Post-Apartheid South Africa: New Political Interpretations**

*There is an alternative sphere of real politics, quite separate from the formal operation of government and represented political parties, which will be ignored at its peril.*

Calland R., 'What future for South African Politics?' in *The Mail & Guardian* online,  
12 September 2006

#### **Introduction: New Political Interpretations**

In the last few years, study of religious organisations in public life has become increasingly important within the discipline of African political science. Churches have played a significant role in the political sphere and more and more literature has started to consider and analyse this phenomena. A body of literature<sup>1</sup> broadly known as 'Religion and Politics' in which religious ideas and institutions are the primary units of analysis has developed in recent years. My South African case study sits squarely within this rubric. Scholars in the field of religion and politics

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<sup>1</sup> Gifford P. (ed), *The Christian Churches and the Democratisation of Africa*, Brill Press, Leiden, 1995; Gifford P., *Public Role*, 1998; Chidester D., *Religions of South Africa*, 1992; Chidester D., *Christianity: a Global History*, Penguin, London, 2001; Maxwell D., *Christians and Chiefs in Zimbabwe*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1999; Mbembe A., *Afrique Indociles*, 1985; Bayart J.F., Mbembe A. Toulabor C., *Le politique par le bas*, 1992; Corten A., Marshall-Frantani R., *Between Babel and Pentecost*, 2001; Helgesson A., *Church, State and People in Mozambique*, International Tryck AB, Uppsala, 1994; Haynes J., *Religion and Politics*, 1996; Haynes J., *Politics in the Developing World. A Concise Introduction*, Blackwell Publishing, 2002 (especially chapter 5); de Gruchy J.W., *Christianity and Democracy: a Theology for a Just World Order*, D. Philip, Cape Town, 1995; de Gruchy J.W., *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice*, SCM Press, London, 2002.

are concerned with the changing relationships between religious organisations and society as a whole.<sup>2</sup> Church leaders constantly make choices in assessing the proper relationship between religion and politics.<sup>3</sup> This literature poses concrete questions about exactly how these religious organisations contribute to political changes, how can we define them as social actors and how these organisations are themselves changed in the process, and finally what are the consequences of this interaction. This is especially true when some segments of the population call upon the churches to act as forces for social change, as was the case with Latin American churches with their liberation theology in the face of military dictatorships or the contextual theology and the Kairos document of South African churches under apartheid.<sup>4</sup> Previous studies that explicitly examine the relation between religion and politics in Africa have tended to focus on religious institutions rather than religious ideas.<sup>5</sup> My aim, rather, is to show how religious communities, and not just the institutional channels, are essential parts of politics in South Africa, and perhaps in the continent as a whole.

The idea of analysing AICs in South Africa from this analytical point of view derives from my personal and direct observation of the growth of these organisations in the 1990s and my attempt to forge an understanding of that process of growth. The relative numerical strength of these groupings raises the question of the impact of their scale and the influence it allows them to assert with respect to the church and nation as a whole. AICs appear to contribute at different levels to the nation-building process and this needs to be considered also. From October 2001 until August 2002 I attended weekend liturgies almost every weekend and religious events in the Pace primary school in Jabulani, where my sample of five AICs gather. Sermons at the liturgies and speeches at church meetings appear to be

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<sup>2</sup> Ellis S., ter Haar G., *Religion and Politics*, 1998, pp. 175-201; Ellis S., ter Haar G., *The Worlds of Power*, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Borer T.A., *Challenging the State. Churches as Political Actors in South Africa, 1980-1994*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> See for example Haynes J., *Religion and Politics*, 1996, and Borer T.A., *Challenging the State*, 1998 for the role of churches in the democratisation process in South Africa.



directly engaged with political debate surrounding the democratisation process and with the evolution of new politics. The idea that these organisations, in opposition to previous academic approaches, could be investigated through a political perspective began to crystallise. AIC leaders are constantly searching for ways to care for and represent their communities, and that inevitably means engaging with political issues and through political channels. There is a strict link between the idea of representation and politics. African people in power after 1994 opened the possibility of a new interpretation of politics as not a faraway and distant discourse, but as a practice of engagement both intellectual and concrete. Representation is the interpretative key to understand the different dynamics and attitude of the churches I have analysed. At the main core of AICs political interpretations of the post-apartheid era, there is the idea that for the first time the government should represent and defend the interests of churches' members, and bringing answers to the challenges posed by the everyday reality. This implicitly raises the issue of responsibilities and socio-political activism. 'It is our government, no government of whites now. We have to be active and responsible, then'.<sup>6</sup> Another important interpretation is the idea that the promises of equality and life-improvement listed in the Constitution, and promoted by the struggle against apartheid, should be maintained.

These are the reasons why the focus of this chapter is a socio-political analysis of AICs after the end of apartheid. This approach is fundamental in defining the conceptual slant of my research and is further an important component in a justification of its originality. In fact socio-political investigations in this direction are still quite rare.<sup>7</sup> Maybe this is conditioned by the fact that AICs' relationship to politics has always been problematic and unclear. Their sometimes open collaboration with the apartheid state has caused sections of the public to regard

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Ms Lindigwe Mokoena, member of the Zion Congregation Church, Jabulani, 17 February 2002.

<sup>7</sup> For example many important scholars who have worked on African independent churches were ministers of a Church or attached to a theology department. See Sundkler B., Anderson A., Daneel M.L. and Oosthuizen G.C.

them as distant from critical and subversive politics. The rationale behind this presentation is the idea that the end of apartheid and the end of the struggle against it, opened different perspectives in defining political action and more importantly different opportunities at engaging with the political dimension. Spaces opened up for the shaping of new political formations.

If in the past all politics in South Africa was defined through the binary of supporting or resisting the apartheid regime, the post-apartheid situation brought new complexities regarding to how political action ought to be categorised. In the longer term, the rehabilitation of AICs inside the political sphere could lead to a new interpretative analysis of political discourses in South Africa. Then it is time to track these changes in defining politics and political actors in the shifting context of the democratic dispensation. As Glenda Kruss suggested, independent churches in Southern Africa have been frequently analysed from an a-historical perspective.<sup>8</sup> This investigation tries to give relevance to the interpretation of the nation-building process from the perspective of independent churches and their members. This analysis is situated in the post-apartheid period and the political discourse investigated refers expressly to that. Historically rooted these organisations shape new interpretations and new techniques of resistance to deal with current socio-political realities, and this is the direction that this analysis will follow.<sup>9</sup>

### **On Being 'Apolitical': A View From Inside**

If following Anderson in that undertaking research among AICs should mean to 'avoid reflecting an observer's cultural or ecclesiastical biases' and 'being subjected to the scrutiny of those being observed',<sup>10</sup> this research should acknowledge that the majority of the respondents interviewed, with more or less

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<sup>8</sup> Kruss G., 'A critical review', 1985.

<sup>9</sup> Few analyses until recently have been shaped around this theoretical interpretation. Robert Garner did that about economic issues and the struggle against HIV/AIDs in the townships (case study in Durban). Garner R.C., *Safe sects?*, pp. 41-69, 2000, Garner R.C., 'Economic development in Endendale' in Venter D. (ed), *Engaging Modernity*, 2004, pp. 81-104.

<sup>10</sup> Anderson A., 'Challenges and prospects', 1995, p. 285.

emphasis, criticised the usual interpretation of being considered apolitical during the apartheid era and they complained that the anti-apartheid struggle has been perceived in a very rigid way and from a very peculiar perspective, that of the strong involvement with the 'organised' liberation struggle (thus, the ANC). Church members who contributed to this analysis declared that AICs have not been understood and their contribution to the liberation and emancipation of the country has not been recognised.<sup>11</sup>

Following this line Bishop Masuku of the Native Church in South Africa in Jabulani tried to explain the difficulties of understanding the involvement of independent churches in politics during the transition to democracy:

People seem to forget that the struggle in this country was not such a unified struggle. I was living in KwaZulu-Natal and being part of the IFP or an ANC supporter made a big difference. Especially at the end of the 80s. The church did not want the same kind of division inside. People could not come and say you should support this party or that one. You can do it privately, but that is you, not the church. The church tried to bring unity and not division in these days. The church and the bible reminded us that we were brothers and sisters, all African fighting and suffering together. That was what we needed in such chaos.<sup>12</sup>

Some respondents said that the rules of their churches did not allow a member to be part of a political organisation, some other replied that the majority of the people they knew in the church were also part of some political organisation.<sup>13</sup> Once again independent churches followed different procedures and praxis. Ms Nana Myeza explained her idea of AIC political involvement: 'We were political, all of us were involved in some way in politics. It was impossible not to be involved in politics in those times, because everything was political and our

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<sup>11</sup> Interviews and fieldwork notes, 2001-2002, July 2004, July 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Conversation with Bishop Masuku, Jabulani, 11<sup>th</sup> November 2001, fieldwork notes.

<sup>13</sup> Field work notes and interviews, Jabulani, October 2001/September 2002.

suffering was provoked by political choices. But the churches tried not to come out politically'.<sup>14</sup>

This statement is in line with what emerged from the sermon on Sunday 17th February at the Methodist Church of South Africa. Bishop Ntongana focussed his preaching on what AICs can offer to the community and how they can teach the message of unity. The sermon presented the township people as more and more divided and only interested in protecting their individual interests. 'If people would work together to raise the voice of the oppressed in the township, the voice would be stronger against criminality and they would not live in terror'.<sup>15</sup> The Bishop said that division has always been a danger for African people. Even at the beginning the nineties when the political struggle brought division among blacks, independent churches, according to Bishop Ntongana, preached unity. The Bishop went on telling the story of when he and his congregation took a mini-bus to go to a two day function in Alexandra township, in northeast of Johannesburg, and they were stopped by six men brandishing guns. They were asked to identify themselves. The Bishop said that they were not trying to rob them because they did not ask for their money. They were asking their political affiliation. It could have been fatal to reply IFP or ANC. But they were wearing church uniforms and he, in his role as the elder, replied that they were there in peace and that they just wanted to go to the church, that they were not concerned with political fights. The men let them go, said the bishop, because they understood and recognise their peaceful message. 'We did not want any kind of division and we did not recognise ourselves in that division. At that time the country was so divided and only institutions like the independent churches could unite South Africa. That is the reason why they let us go'.<sup>16</sup> After the sermon followed a prayer for unity and for a radical change inside the community to work together and strengthen each

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<sup>14</sup> Ms Nana Myeza at Nana's house, Soweto, December 2001, fieldwork notes.

<sup>15</sup> Bishop Ntongana's sermon, Methodist Church of South Africa, Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> February 2002, fieldwork notes.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

member in the fight against crime in the township. That Sunday the prayer was longer than usual and the involvement of the assembly extremely powerful.

This work supports the idea that in post-apartheid conditions, where political analysis is not fundamentally concentrated on the contraposition liberation-struggle/white-regime-preservation, there are more possibilities of interpretation to define what is political and what is not. In this terrain AICs seem to find space for political activity of many hues and thus warrant a political analysis. De Gruchy points out that after February 1992 'there was a need to redefine the role of the churches'<sup>17</sup> in South Africa. Gerald West concluded that 'a crucial part of the South African crisis is an interpretative crisis' and again 'a crisis of interpretation within any context eventually becomes a demand to interpret the very process of interpretation'.<sup>18</sup> African independent churches in the post-apartheid period, because of their incredible growth, for their voice as civil society actors and for their contribution to the democratisation process, deserve an interpretative analysis inside the political discourse of the post-apartheid era.

### **Politics and New Interpretations: African Independent Churches in a Democratic Context**

This analysis aims to reinforce the idea that political practice is concerned not only with formal activities of elected representatives or government servants, but also with 'informal' activities and less analysed organisations. It frequently emerged from different informants that in the pluralism brought by democracy there are several interpretations of politics, and 'politics is not just being political in public'.<sup>19</sup> Something that constantly emerged was the idea that politics was not just public political discourse, but also a daily constant of work not publicly recognised.

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<sup>17</sup> de Gruchy J.W., *Christianity and Democracy*, 1995, p. 211.

<sup>18</sup> West G., *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation. Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context*. Maryknoll, Orbis, Pietermaritzburg, 1991, p.48.

<sup>19</sup> Quotation from my interview with Archbishop Ngada, Walkerwille, 08 March 2002. Similar interpretations were offered by several informants.



As de Gruchy pointed out in addition to the 'need to redefine the role of churches' in post-apartheid pluralism,<sup>20</sup> there is also a need to redefine the same interpretation of politics and to understand the different ways in which the political discourse is elaborated. Following Bayart,<sup>21</sup> it is possible to say that politics is also made *par le bas*, from below, by ordinary people. In African modern pluralistic societies,<sup>22</sup> as in South Africa, religion legitimised new aspirations, new forms of organisation, new relations and a new social order.<sup>23</sup> All these are issues for political analysis. It is when religious belief motivates people to action that its relation to politics becomes most evident.<sup>24</sup> Most of the church members I interviewed in Soweto<sup>25</sup> defined the religious community as a network of solidarity to fight for their proper social rights, like education, health, knowledge on HIV, economic support and housing.<sup>26</sup> From my observations and collection of material it is becoming more and more evident that those politics formulated 'from below' in the current democratic scenario, are the product of a struggle for reaching a *status* of full citizenship. And, as this chapter will try to demonstrate, it is not possible to separate religion from politics in the context of independent churches, then the struggle for full citizenship is a political struggle as much as religious.

From the analysis of the literature produced on religion and social change in Latin America, where studies on Religion and Politics are more developed than in Africa, it is possible to draw out some dynamics.<sup>27</sup> Experiences in Latin America underline the fact that democratisation requires not just the creation and consolidation of

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<sup>20</sup> de Gruchy G.W., *Christianity and Democracy*, 1995, p. 211.

<sup>21</sup> Bayart, J.F., 'La politique par le bas en Afrique Noire: Questions de Méthode' in *Politique Africaine*, 1, 1981, pp. 53-82.

<sup>22</sup> In Walls A., Fyfe C. (ed), *Christianity in Africa*, 1986; and Bediako K., *Africa and Christianity* 2000.

<sup>23</sup> See Gifford P., *African Christianity*, 1998.

<sup>24</sup> Ellis S., ter Haar G., *The Worlds of Power*, 2004, p. 98.

<sup>25</sup> Mainly between September 2001 and September 2002, in July 2004 and July 2005.

<sup>26</sup> O'Donnell calls it 'low intensity citizenship'. O'Donnell G., 'On the State', 1993, p. 172.

<sup>27</sup> Corten A., Marshall-Fratani R., *Between Babel and Pentecost*, 2001 and Peterson A., Vásquez M.A., Williams P. (ed), *Christianity, Social Change, and Globalisation in the Americas*, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey and London, 2001.

institutions and procedures but also a 'culture of citizenship'.<sup>28</sup> Religion plays a crucial role in this process of constructing moral, civil agents and strengthening bonds of solidarity. Following the Latin American approach African religious movements may qualify as 'new social movements', which contest and redraw 'the parameters of democracy and the very boundaries of what is properly defined as the political arena'<sup>29</sup> Tom Lodge noted that South Africa's lively associational life may engender a struggle for a 'more sustainable citizenship'<sup>30</sup> especially when the 'the moral aura surrounding 'charismatic authority'<sup>31</sup> derived from the struggle will stop compensating for the weakness of trust between citizens. The figures from Lodge's book show how in South Africa the highest number of civic movements and associations belong to the category 'Cultural/Religious' and considering the high number of AIC members inside this category, these are important data to be considered within any political analysis.<sup>32</sup>

Should we come to accept the interpretation that AICs were reluctant and aloof from politics under the apartheid regime, we cannot forget that nonetheless church members at that time were part of an extremely politicised environment and that it was impossible to escape from politics in the township. The feeling that emerged from spending time with AIC members in Soweto is that for most of the people, as a result of spending a long part of their lives involved in the 'struggle' or anyway in an environment that was a theatre of struggle,<sup>33</sup> politics was, and is, a fundamental part of social interaction and social discourse. Political discourse is a pervasive part of everyday life in Soweto, in the church as in every other context.

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<sup>28</sup> Peterson A., Vásquez M.A., Williams P. (ed), 'Social Change', 2001, p. 15.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Lodge T., *Politics in South Africa, From Mandela to Mbeki*, David Phillip, Cape Town, 2003, p.226.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> According to Tom Lodge individual townships contain an impressive range of different kind of associations. In Moroka (Soweto) for example cultural/religious associational groups (48% of the population) represent the second highest group in the township after the sport associational groups (58% of the population). See 'Democracy and Social Capital Survey' in Lodge T., 2003, p.223.

<sup>33</sup> Using Belinda Bozzoli's definition and interpretation of the township as a no-static stage of social changes during the struggle against apartheid. Bozzoli B., *Theatres of the Struggle and the End of Apartheid*, Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2004.

There is a strong link between the idea of being part of a painful process of liberation from apartheid and the full recognition of an active involvement, as several people articulated to me. Tsepo Motola, elder of the Native Mission Church, said:

Everything to me is politics, because I suffered. I have been brought up in suffering. My parents suffered. I also suffered and my children are suffering. All of them are not working. Some of our children are drug addicted, I don't know'.<sup>34</sup>

And again Bishop Ntongana's wife explained the political value of actions that were not considered inside the political analysis, like funerals, but that were symbolically important:

We are all liberated now in South Africa. We [members of AICs] are the people who suffered for that liberation. Liberation was meant for all the people in South Africa. They told us we were not political and we did not participated in the struggle, but how many funerals of political leaders we celebrated? And those were political funerals.<sup>35</sup>

The legitimisation of their involvement in political action during the apartheid regime seems to find justification in the idea of suffering in a moral way. In the post-apartheid context there is a new way of perceiving involvement in politics. Political actors and political leaders have been elected and they are really representative of the people, in this case of the churches' members. The main contra-distinguishing elements that link the 'people' to the leadership are their ethnic belonging [black leaders] and their common suffering as victims of the past regime:

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<sup>34</sup> Conversation with Mr Tsepo Motola, after liturgy, Jabulani, 10 February 2002, fieldwork notes.

<sup>35</sup> Bishop Ntongana's wife, personal conversation, Jabulani, 20 June 2002, fieldwork notes.

When they say that we were apolitical they do not understand that we were far from politics because we suffered too much. But now, we have to think in a different way. Forget to say: the government will do it for us. White people think in this way. Who is the government? We made this government and we have to ask them to work for us. We voted them and now we have the right to ask.<sup>36</sup>

There is an emerging connection between voting, representation and the idea of active political action. If the past apartheid government was not representative of the membership of AICs, there was no necessity or interest to communicate and interact with it. In the new political dispensation of the post-apartheid era a different attitude from authorities is expected. The government, because is a 'black' government, is the government that 'can listen to black people'.<sup>37</sup> 'Although we are still struggling, the main difference after 1994 is that the government now can listen to us or they can help, whatever they can'.<sup>38</sup>

But what kind of political action are we talking about? If in the sixties Bengt Sundkler defined the AICs' attitude as insufficient to be considered political,<sup>39</sup> more contemporary interpretations are little more generous. For example Adam Ashforth in 2005 blamed independent churches for remaining quiet in the face of political issues like HIV/AIDS:

In the post-apartheid era, although the vast majority of AICs members actively supported the liberation struggle and the ANC, the churches have remained quiet. While church leaders [from mainline churches] like the Anglican archbishop Njongokulu Ndungane have been outspoken on a range of political issues, most notably AIDS, the AIC churches have not spoken out.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Archbishop Ntongana, CAIC meeting, Jabulani, 13 October 2001, fieldwork notes. Similar points were made by several people.

<sup>37</sup> Liturgy Sermon, Methodist Church of South Africa, Jabulani, 20 February 2002, fieldwork notes.

<sup>38</sup> Focus group 1, church members, Pace elementary school, October 2001, fieldwork notes.

<sup>39</sup> Sundkler B., *Bantu Prophets*, 1961, p. 295: 'Claims that "political reasons" are behind the Separatist Church movement miss the mark. The few instances of certain Ethiopian or Zionist groups do not offer a sufficient proof of any political trend'.

<sup>40</sup> Ashforth A., *Witchcraft, Violence, Democracy*, 2005, p.192.

Nevertheless the absence of publicity and public recognition is not a sufficient element of evaluation in the new political context, where pluralism inside the voices of civil society should find recognition even when it does not find strong public spaces to be declared. There is no proof of a strong political position of AIC leaders at a national level, but there is evidence at the local level. The lack of homogeneity and unity at a national level reflects the nature of Independent Christianity in South Africa.<sup>41</sup> AICs are a heterogeneous reality and a fragmented community not unified under a strong leadership and they do not act, at least at the moment, as a compact movement. They do not arrive to delineate a political common stance or directly support or endorse a political party as an organisation:<sup>42</sup>

In our church we know that our members are politically active. That's a good thing because it means that our members are good citizens who know what is happening in this country. We do not talk of ANC or IFP, DA, and all this stuff. You can do it privately. But if we talk of the government, it is clear that we are talking of the ANC. When you talk of politics you do not just talk of parties but of unemployment, houses, health and our rights to electricity and water at a decent price. And so, yes, in our churches we talk of politics without directly talking of parties.<sup>43</sup>

AICs in South Africa act more as a social movement than a structured organisation.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> It would be interesting to analyse this aspect in countries where the character of fragmentation is less strong.

<sup>42</sup> Like in the case of the big Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in Brazil (but spread in other continents); see for example Corten A., Marshall-Frantani R., *Between Babel and Pentecost*, 2001, p. 158.

<sup>43</sup> My interview with Mr Xolela Modise, elder member of the Native Church of South Africa in Jabulani, Soweto, December 2001.

<sup>44</sup> I think that this is understandable. Taking seriously the idea of independence and non-desire of institutionalisation of these organisations due to several factors, theological, role of leadership, economic for example.



It is possible to recognise forms of political activism and a public role at a local level. For example the problem of approaching local authorities and of establishing relations to help and support church's members emerged in the regional meeting of the Council of African Instituted Churches (CAIC).<sup>45</sup> CAIC had been instituted in 1995 as an umbrella of independent churches affiliated to the SACC. When I attended the CAIC two-days meeting in October 2001, the specific agenda for the day was: poverty, HIV/AIDS, corruption/crime, education, lack of houses, unemployment, wealth distribution among white and blacks in South Africa, youth, funding (from other organisations and from CAIC associated churches). At the meeting there were 46 members from different independent churches affiliated to the organisation. The meeting lasted two days, nights included. At the focus group, that I organised with some members of the Council of African Instituted Churches before the meeting, Mr Chilame said 'The only solution is to talk to people in power, to ask them to address these problems, to ask them to create new jobs and to give people dignity'.<sup>46</sup> Bishop Kubeka reported his frustration in his attempts to meet with local authorities in Cape Town while he was representing his community. 'They always said to look for somebody else. Nobody was responsible and [they] told me to seek for somebody else'.<sup>47</sup> During the same meeting the president of the CAIC, Bishop Ntongana, mentioned another case. As a result of a previous CAIC meeting it was agreed the president would write a report. The intention of this report was to bring to the attention of local authorities [perhaps in Soweto, no other details] the living conditions of members of the churches, asking for change and intervention. The main points of the document presented the unacceptable level of poverty of the communities, tracing social injustice and inequitable wealth distribution (frequently presented as 'racial' problems, still a strong characteristic of AIC political debate) as the major causes of the problem. The document was submitted to local authorities. Another example of AICs public action in Soweto is the march against crime, organised by local independent churches, where churches'

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<sup>45</sup> CAIC regional meeting, Jabulani, 13/14 October 2001.

<sup>46</sup> Mr Chilame, Focus Group 1, Jabulani, October 2001, fieldwork notes.

<sup>47</sup> Bishop Kubeka, CAIC regional meeting, Jabulani, 13/14 October 2001, fieldwork notes.

leaders and churches' members demanded for a stronger action by the local authorities against crime.<sup>48</sup>

To a certain extent the lack of unification and institutionalisation compared to mainline/missionary churches could be perceived as a positive element in a broader analysis of political interpretation. As we have seen in chapter two,<sup>49</sup> the lack of organisation and the consequent impossibility of giving any kind of solid institutional support to a specific party or to the government, as in the case of mainline churches, left more freedom to criticise institutionalised political action (although more at a local level than at a national one). If in the post-apartheid scenario mainline churches present isolated and limited independent voices critical of the government such as Archbishop Ndungane or Archbishop Desmond Tutu in Cape Town, in the context of AICs there are more voices and more lines of criticism although not at a national (and more public) level.

We, as African indigenous churches, as I said to you, we have no way of separating the church lifestyle from the political life. We are not interested in organising ourselves into political parties, but we are, as we have for so many years, organizing ourselves as Africans. Perhaps our organisation does not meet the standard that was set by the academicians of this world, that of saying we are an organization if we are against this and that and that [...] if we do this and we do that.<sup>50</sup>

At the centre of the political discourse in Jabulani's churches is the idea of social injustice. This is associated with the lack of 'service delivery', which means the complex of civic rights mandated by the Constitution but not yet delivered by the government. As Adam Ashforth wrote in his recent book 'in Soweto '[there is a] pervasive sense of social injustice that is difficult to express in the ordinary terms of

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<sup>48</sup> Dobsonville, August 2001 (I have seen the poster of the march, but I did not find any other material about that).

<sup>49</sup> Chapter 2, 'A Different Path: a General Introduction to Mainline Churches in Post-Apartheid South Africa'.

<sup>50</sup> My interview with Archbishop Ngada, Walkerville, 08 March 2002.

conventional political discourse but that nonetheless has real political effects'.<sup>51</sup> The issue of 'service delivery' during my stay between 2001 and 2002 was emerging in the township as a theme of everyday political analysis. It was not difficult to hear phrases like this one: 'if we do not get what they promised us, what we fought for, we will go to fight again' or 'Who is the government? They should think that we are stupid because we pay [for the nation-building process] but we do not get anything back'.<sup>52</sup> There is a constant contraposition between AIC members' social status (poverty) and the lack of intervention from political institutions. It appeared unacceptable that in the new South Africa, where institutions are mainly controlled by (black) Africans, the political establishment is not taking care of its 'own' African people:

We cannot win this struggle [crime] if there is not a massive intervention from the State. But the state is corrupted, the system is corrupted and we do not even feel protected by our own institutions. We need to shake politicians. They have to start to take care of the problems of the people. We are paying such a high price for their life standard.<sup>53</sup>

As a remedy to this sense of dissatisfaction caused by the inability of the government to address needs, the churches offered spaces within which to talk about and to learn how to address authorities to ask for action:

Since 1994 we have democracy, and that brought big changes to our country. But I am still learning what democracy is and what should bring to my life and to the life of my community. I am grateful to my church and to my bishop that give us the possibility to talk of our rights as citizens. Some people in power behave as our only right is going to vote during the elections and after that they forget that we exist. They forget to come to the poor areas and they forget the poor people. But voting is not our only right. We have the right to ask for what

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<sup>51</sup> Ashforth A., *Witchcraft, Violence, Democracy*, 2005, p.17.

<sup>52</sup> Mr Themba and Mr Joel, conversation after liturgy, Pace elementary school, Jabulani, October 2001, fieldwork notes.

<sup>53</sup> Bishop Masuku, focus group 1, Jabulani, October 2001, fieldwork notes.

we fought for, that means better conditions for everyone, not just for the leadership.<sup>54</sup>

In contrast with the current situation of poverty and economic constraint there is still a strong belief in a positive improvement of socio-economic conditions of the country, and several interviewees highlighted the reality that these kind of changes required patience. The number of respondents who concluded their narratives of the socio-political reality of the country on an optimistic note for the future is the great majority (and this coincides with the results of the HSRC national survey, 1999).<sup>55</sup> Although trust in the democratisation process and in the institutions did not decrease, the sense of distance from the political leadership is consistent:

Leaders of African indigenous churches live with the people and they try to alleviate their everyday life. Those ones who academics call “political leaders” they don’t even stay with the people during the struggle [...] Even today, they don’t stay with the people, they don’t know what is happening. To them after 1994 everything is fine; they don’t care about what people go through. They have never starved even from the very beginning of the struggle. Do you know where they were? Abroad, studying for their doctorates, through, riding on the back of the African indigenous church.<sup>56</sup>

This attitude does not generate a passive behaviour in the religious communities but it stimulates a debate on the need for possible change and techniques of action.

In the past we did not have any right to vote. There is not worse thing that ignorance. I want to know my rights as citizen and I want these rights being respected. No matter what party is ruling us, we can always vote for another party if our rights as citizens are not respected.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> My interview with Ms Nana Myeza, member of the Native Church of South Africa in Jabulani, June 2002.

<sup>55</sup> Fieldwork material, Jabulani, October 2001/August 2002.

<sup>56</sup> My interview with Archbishop Ngada, Walkerville, 08 March 2002.

<sup>57</sup> My interview with Ms Stella Hadebe, member of the Apostolic Church of South Africa, Jabulani, November 2001.

The idea of political liberation seems to clearly fit into the idea of liberation from poverty:

Until when the majority of the poor of this country will be black, there won't be justice and we will have to struggle. Liberation has never meant just political liberation, but also liberation from poverty. That is clear for everyone and this is what we discussed in this place since when we were very young. Can you believe that it was sufficient for some black leader to make some money to forget that? Eish ... liberation is for everyone! I just pray God to keep me alive until I will see a real change in this country.<sup>58</sup>

Church members and leaders dedicate a good part of their time in their religious communities to debate and improve knowledge on social rights. The theme of the constitution and of 'service delivery' emerged in several discussions:

In the church we talk of these rights, of our duties to build a New South Africa. We do not talk of political parties, no, this would create tension among members. But at least we learn how to complain, how to protect ourselves and we learn how to recognise how politicians can lie to us. Thanks to the bishop's intervention a friend of mine could sort out her mother's pension. The government initially said she was not qualified. If you do not know how things work, they can rip you off.<sup>59</sup>

It is possible to delineate a new idea of struggle in the post-apartheid context at a grass-root level. In the everyday life of these communities there is the perception of struggling for civic rights. Civic or social rights are the elements that determine the fulfilment of the sense of full citizenship. Despite the transition to democracy with the elections in 1994, the political system has not succeeded in equalising peoples' access to rights. Nevertheless, with the implementation of neo-liberal economic

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<sup>58</sup> My interview with Mr Mbuli, member of the Ethiopian church in Jabulani, February 2002.

<sup>59</sup> My interview with Ms Nana Myeza, member of the Native Church of South Africa and teacher at the secondary school in White Houses (Soweto).



reforms in the second half of the 1990s, the State's social function has been modified in order to increase efficiency instead of equality.<sup>60</sup> Social rights, like employment, education, houses, public health, were diminished contrary to the liberation struggles' expectations.<sup>61</sup> The political system has not been successful in assuring full citizenship in the meaning of guaranteeing equal access to resources and equal access to fundamental rights, such as education, health, security and employment.<sup>62</sup> This is central to interpreting the dialectic tension between AICs, as a part of civil society, and the political leadership. The demand for full citizenship and respect of social rights is the real challenge that these religious communities are taking up with the political establishment. As Mama Ntongana said 'All the citizens are the same and they should enjoy the same rights'.<sup>63</sup>

Implicit in the idea of the struggle against apartheid was the principle of equality,<sup>64</sup> and the 1996 Constitution strongly restated this principle. But the principle of equality won't be reached while there remains such a wide economic gap within the population, especially to the detriment of the black community (once again the 'ethnic element' is strongly part of AICs political debate). As we saw in the previous chapter, poverty is identified as the main consequence of social injustice. Poverty is perceived as a macro/structural problem that churches try to address to support their members, but that only the government can radically sort out with specific policies. 'Government does not care of poor. That is the reason why churches have to take care of these who are in need. But it is a problem that just the government can sort out'.<sup>65</sup> Bishop Ntongana stated: 'Poverty is the biggest problem of this country. It came to this country with the white man. Talking about

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<sup>60</sup> See, for example, Terreblanche S., *A History of Inequality in South Africa, 1652 – 2002*, University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 2002.

<sup>61</sup> Natrass N., Seekings J., 'Democracy and distribution in highly unequal economies: the case of South Africa' in *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 39, 3, 2001, pp. 471-498.

<sup>62</sup> Mamdani M., *Citizen and Subject*, 1996, p. 45.

<sup>63</sup> Conversation with Mama Ntongana, Jabulani, Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> November 2001, fieldwork notes.

<sup>64</sup> See 'The Freedom Charter (1955)' in Asmal K., Chidester D. Lubisi C. (ed), *Legacy of Freedom. The ANC's Human Rights Tradition*, Jonathan Ball Publishers, Johannesburg, 2005, pp. 87-99.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Ms Thando Letsolao, member of the South African Christian Church in Zion, Jabulani, 18 November 2001.

that does not sort out the problem, but it is important to talk about it to understand what we can ask to authorities to do'.<sup>66</sup> And again Bishop Elias Kubeka at a CAIC meeting said:

The situation in the country is getting worse thanks to the higher level of unemployment. Politicians and authorities, even bishops [from mainline churches] keep all the money for themselves, instead of helping people. We cannot sort out the problem of unemployment, just politicians can and we have to talk to them to force them to do something for unemployment [...] Being poor is not just your problem. If you starve to death because you do not have food in your house, it is their [authorities] problem too.<sup>67</sup>

Poverty is also a limit for the development and subsistence of the church and the attempt to raise money from other religious organisations seems fruitless. For example the president of CAIC, Bishop Ntongana, attended a conference in 2001 organised by the SACC and took that occasion to ask for 'money' to 're-educate' his people, stating that it was the duty of any Christian organisation to help poor churches to emerge from 'ignorance that is one of the main consequences of poverty'.<sup>68</sup> The request for funding to support his church members to look for a remedy for their poor level of education did not receive a positive response from mainline churches, which are always presented as rich churches in contraposition to poor independent churches:

Churches [mainline churches] in this country are able to help people [AICs], but they do not do it. They have prejudices in front of AICs. Representatives of CAIC could join the World Churches Conference [WCC] in Harare in 1998 just thanks to the support of the Muslim community (300 Rand for the

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<sup>66</sup> My interview with Bishop Ntongana, Jabulani, 05 October 2001.

<sup>67</sup> CAIC regional meeting, Jabulani, 13 October 2001, fieldwork notes.

<sup>68</sup> Bishop Ntongana, CAIC regional meeting, Jabulani, 13 October 2001, fieldwork notes.

registration and trip from Johannesburg). Christian churches [mainline churches] in this country do not help us.<sup>69</sup>

The lack of resources within AICs to support their clergy economically appears to be another limit to church life. 'In these churches [AICs] money does not belong to the bishop. It is the money of the people [...] there is the problem of clergy that in AICs cannot work full time, they need to find money in another way'.<sup>70</sup> According to the message that emerges from my material, poverty fits within a political interpretation that follows ethnic lines. For example Mr Modise said: 'Do you know why black people are kept poor in this country? That is because a black man should work for all his life for a white man'<sup>71</sup> and again Reverend Jacobs stated:

There is a huge problem in this country and we have to address it [politician do not put in their agenda] but it is a problem. We have to do it: there are rich people in this country who are not blacks; of course they are white people. They employ five black workers to do the job of ten people. They force five people to work as dogs.<sup>72</sup>

And once again the main political discourse links poverty to the main idea of the liberation struggle and to the promise of equality. Being poor means to be dependent and easily controlled. In these churches there is space for the elaboration of a new idea of struggling for a 'new' idea of independence and justice. 'Until when we will be poor we won't be independent. There will be always someone who will take care of us'.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Bishop Ntongana, CAIC regional meeting, Jabulani, 13 October 2001, fieldwork notes. This argument appears to be stronger in July 2004 and in July 2005 when during my visit to Jabulani bishop Ntongana reasserted it with reinvigorated bitterness, perhaps due to the deterioration of relations with the SACC.

<sup>70</sup> Conversation with Mr Joel Mbuli, Jabulani, 10 February 2002, fieldwork notes.

<sup>71</sup> Mr Modise, CAIC regional meeting, 13 October 2001.

<sup>72</sup> Reverend Jacobs, CAIC regional meeting, 13 October 2001.

<sup>73</sup> Mr Joel, conversation after liturgy, Pace elementary school, Jabulani, Sunday 28 October 2001, fieldwork notes.

## **Religion and Politics: A Non-Western Interpretation**

This study does not intend to cover all the complex reality of African independent churches in South Africa. It would be impossible to do that considering the fragmented and articulated composition of these churches, with different origins, structures, size, rituals and organisation and theological interpretation. Instead this study tries to offer an interpretation of the role of a sample of AICs in Soweto in a given and precise historical moment placing them, quite differently from the usual literature on independent churches, at the centre of a political analysis. And this analysis can result useful in understanding a non-Western approach to politics. Through participatory approaches it was possible to identify a trend in the religious life of these communities. Religion is never separate from other aspects of the everyday life and these aspects, like politics, economics and culture are perfectly embedded in the religious/spiritual events. It becomes then impossible to shift their religious role from the political one, as any other social aspect. Politics in this way fits inside the religious life of the community and it becomes part of religious events. Going to a mass, to a prayer meeting, to rituals and commemorations meant also being part of a community where politics is talked about and taught.

This research was not originally conceived of and constructed around the idea of a political analysis but it simply started from the analysis of the incredible growth of independent churches since the end of apartheid. The idea that AICs deserve a political interpretation emerged during my attendance at religious events while I was already in the field and as the striking discontinuity between my finding and the literature (and assumptions) on the topic became evident. My interviews originally were not constructed around political issues. Politics always emerged by itself from places and discourses inside the church and the religious community. Politics was entirely part of the religious life. Attending the liturgy on Sunday at Jabulani meant also going through the debate on the nation building process, discussion on corruption, on unemployment, on the government. The Sunday service was held in

the morning in the small redbrick classrooms at the Pace primary school in Jabulani. The time of the other services usually overlapped and it was possible to distinguish the Zionist congregations from the Apostolic ones from the loud sound of their drums. Sometimes there were special meetings or all-night prayers going on from the night before. The room was kept simple; the only decoration was the white cloth on the main desk that for the occasion became the altar or the pulpit (*ipalpiti*, in Zulu). The audience sit on the chairs in the centre of the room, while the preacher, generally the bishop or the archbishop, sits watching the congregation with the elder members of the church behind, or beside him. Sometimes the bishop's wife or the prophetess sits close to the preacher. In the two Apostolic churches under my observation there was a chorus organised by young and old women. Liturgy was vividly experienced by the audience. The singing played an important part in the ceremony and it started always after three defined moments, the reading, the sermon and the prayers. But the singing was also sometimes started spontaneously by the audience, usually started by senior women or by the bishop's wife. Often hymns were texts of the bible. Instruments were not used except for drums in the two Zionist churches. Singing was accompanied by clapping and dance, quite contained in the two Apostolic churches, while more intense in the Zionist churches where people were under a sort of possession by the rhythm.

On Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> December the reading inspired the bishop to talk of social justice and he urged the audience to fight for their rights. Bishop Ntongana referring to the stagnant conditions of poverty in the township that he specified were the consequence of the past white regime, addressed the audience in this way: 'Fight for your rights, fight for justice, because there cannot be peace without justice and no reconciliation without peace. How can we forgive for the past if we keep suffering now? Things have to change'.<sup>74</sup> Attendants agreed nodding and shouting 'Alleluia'.

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<sup>74</sup> Bishop Ntongana's sermon, Methodist Church of South Africa, Pace primary school, Jabulani, Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> December 2001. Fieldwork notes.



On Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> November 2001 the sermon was more on international issues like Israel and 9/11. I was involved and asked by the bishop to better explain the political situation and the complicated history of Israel.<sup>75</sup> Also the audience started to ask questions and they felt very close to Palestinians for their experienced sense of segregation, land exploitation and Mama Ntongana made a comparison between the Gaza Strip and the situation of the homelands during the apartheid era. It followed a long prayer and a song that I heard for the first time, dedicated to God's justice on earth.<sup>76</sup> A visitor such as myself was expected to take active part in the speaking or at least to say some words. That happened the first times I attended the services. After a few months I was consider an integral part of the congregation and I was rarely invited to speak since then.

I was invited to the Bible reading group on Saturday 13 April at Mama Ntongana's house in Jabulani in the afternoon. I was expecting a pure discussion on religious matters but after the reading of two pieces of the scriptures, one from the new testament and one from the old one, the discussion became totally concentrated on the events of the Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> of April 2002 when eighty-seven people were arrested at a protest outside the house of Johannesburg's mayor, Amos Masondo. The protest had been organised by the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee to protest against the practices of the South African electricity company Eskom, which had been disconnecting users who cannot pay their bills from the electricity grid in Soweto. The arrests took place after one of mayor Masondo's security guards fired at the crowd with live ammunition, injuring two of the protestors, a youth from Thembalihle and a pensioner from Tshiawelo. Then the crowd responded by throwing stones and smashing Masondo's water meter. To my question 'why did the debate focus on political events and not purely on theological interpretations of the reading' a member of the group, Mr Masoto, explained: 'Bible reading teaches us

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<sup>75</sup> Harold Turner urges religious studies students to be prepared to participate more fully inside the independent churches' community life. 'One must be willing, if called upon, to engage in preaching or the conduct of some part of the service ...' cited in Turner H.W., *Problems in the Study*, 1966, p.34.

<sup>76</sup> Religious song in Zulu, dedicated to Justice, *Ukulunga* (literally 'to do justice'), on Earth. I was just able to reconstruct part of the song thanks to the work of my interpreter.

about rights and equity and justice. Nobody more than us takes seriously these teachings, believe me. If the bible says something we try to interpret our times through that. And this is our reality in the township'.<sup>77</sup> Mr Anthony Rhadebe from the Methodist Church of South Africa knew one of the people involved in the protest at the mayor's house and told me:

You know, I have always been angry with the old [apartheid] government and I did not want to be involved with them, not even listen to them or reading on the newspaper about what these whites were doing. It was too painful. But I have never, never thought that I could arrive to be angry with a government of blacks. They should know what we are going through.<sup>78</sup>

After the discussion, followed a spontaneous prayer for people arrested and for the politicians, wishing them to find the right way to deal with the township problems. The prayer said: 'Give the light to the people we elected. We will never give up looking for justice as the bible teaches us'. After that the audience followed Mama Ntongana singing the hymn: 'Never give up', a long hymn in Zulu with an English refrain, also popular on the Sunday liturgy in the two Apostolic-type churches. Another popular song in every congregation was the national anthem, *Nkosi, sikelel'iAfrika*.

Another episode helps us better understand Mr Masoto's point. On a Wednesday evening I was invited to a Women's prayer group. The women's group was held at Ms Regina Motole's house. At the meeting there were eight women, six from one congregation and two from another congregation, but as friends of the hostess who joined the meeting 'for the nice atmosphere and for learning and praying with Ms Motole'.<sup>79</sup> We were all sitting on chairs and on the sofa. In the middle there was a book of prayers handwritten by Ms Motole. Before starting the prayer Ms Motole

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<sup>77</sup> Mr Masoto, Bible reading group at Mama Ntongana's house, Jabulani, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2002.

<sup>78</sup> Mr Rhadebe, Bible reading group at Mama's Ntongana's house, Jabulani, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2002.

<sup>79</sup> Ms Stella and Ms Lindiwe at the women's prayer group at Ms Regina Motole's house, Jabulani, Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> March, 2002.

collected three Rands from each member. The money would be used to buy tea and biscuits for the next meeting. In that occasion it was decided to donate half of the money to a blind person of the congregation to improve the quality of his food. After the prayer they explained to me the value that this meeting had to them:

It is hard for whites to understand that when you pray you are opening your heart to everything. Praying means talking of children, how to raise them, how to feed them, how to find the money for their uniforms and their education. Our religious beliefs are our guide and everything we do comes from the bible teaching, but of course, we do not read the bible as the whites taught us. There is an African way of reading the bible and we learnt in the independent churches to do that. In this way the bible give us the right answers to be good Christians and good citizens here in this country. You have to learn who you are, to respect yourself and to look for the answers you need. I still believe that whites were not so good in reading the bible. Why they did cause so much pain then?<sup>80</sup>

During the apartheid period, Kiernan,<sup>81</sup> and Chidester<sup>82</sup> more recently, talked of social and spiritual separation of Zionist churches from the township using as a metaphor the image of the doorkeeper that controls and closes the door of the church in the Sunday service. My experience revealed another attitude in front of the township and its reality. The township, with its set of problems and challenges, was an integral part of the Sunday rituals and services. The service was not a passage of closure but of fluid continuity between the religious community and the environment surrounding it. The new political dispensation, that scarcely delivers the expected promises of equality, dignity and social improvement as well as any other issues related to the religious community, found an important space at the centre of the service where they were put through a healing process. Politics finds a physical space at the centre of the room, from the pulpit, where the leader through

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<sup>80</sup> Ms Regina Motole, at the women's pray group at Ms Regina Motole's house, Jabulani, Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> March 2002.

<sup>81</sup> Kiernan J.P., *Draw the Line*, 1974, p. 82; Kiernan J.P., *Poor and Puritan*, 1977, pp. 31-41.

<sup>82</sup> Chidester D., *Religion of South Africa*, 1992.

the sermon and church's members through the prayer, address political issues and they mystically invoke for a change.

This chapter tried to offer a different reading and interpretation of what normally is considered to be political. AICs' testimony gave the material to reformulate the idea of the meaning of struggle during the apartheid (although briefly presented here) and the idea of political involvement in the post-apartheid context. This approach implied a break with the traditional (Western) way of considering political action as a well-organised and public intervention, ignoring the value and the political nature of actions, rituals and symbol of resistance in the everyday life of these religious communities.

Robin Petersen in his analysis of AICs' intervention during the public hearings of the TRC, makes the point that the entire idea of resistance to apartheid should be re-evaluated on the light of AICs' reading and interpretation of this concept, that does not seem to coincide with the usual one offered by literature. As some religious leaders of independent churches said during the TRC hearings, there is not need for AICs to apologise for lack of political involvement during the apartheid era. AICs resistance and struggle simply were not understood although they strongly contributed to the emancipation and liberation of the majority of the population from the subjugation of the past regime. Mr Mpanza of the amaNazaretha clearly expressed his idea of resistance:

When the missionaries came from overseas, trying to change and trying to force the people to abandon their culture and tradition, ... we resisted. Instead we continued to worship God using our own culture and tradition.<sup>83</sup>

This seems an important point that similarly emerges in the post-apartheid period. The feeling that emerged from the study of the sample of churches under my

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<sup>83</sup> Cited in Petersen R.M. 'AICs and the TRC' in Cochrane J., de Gruchy J., Martin S. (ed.), *Facing the Truth*, 1999, p.123.

observation is that they were not understood in the past as well as in the present. AICs, in this sense, are challenging the idea of liberation and struggle in the past as well as the main idea of political action in the present. The struggle, was said to me in a choral way, it was not just the struggle linked to the ANC or the United Democratic Front (UDF), but there was a struggle that is not commonly recognised, that is the struggle that tried to 'give hope to a demoralised nation, to give dignity to people who were taught to be racially inferior, to give unity to a country that was divided'.<sup>84</sup> In the same way, political action in the present days does not just correspond to organised parties or publicly recognised fragments of civil society, like Trade Unions or NGOs. There are synergies and meanings, rituals and actions with a political potential that need to be better understood and considered by the literature.<sup>85</sup>

### **'Independent from Everything': Defying Relations with Political Institutions**

If in the previous section we gave space to the way AICs in Jabulani perceive and interpret politics and political institutions, in this section the analysis will give space to the other side of the spectrum, to the way political institutions look at AICs in the new democratic dispensation. If Christian values and symbols have always been part of the political arena in South Africa,<sup>86</sup> in the post-apartheid period Christianity is as pervasive as ever. David Chidester in his work on Christianity in South Africa pointed out that all the political parties, including the ANC<sup>87</sup> made some claims to the Christian message in the 1994 election campaign.<sup>88</sup> The fact that political

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<sup>84</sup> My interview with Reverend Jacob, after CAIC meeting, Jabulani, 13 October 2001.

<sup>85</sup> As we will have seen in chapter 2, the idea of a monolithic and unified presentation of the liberation struggle and as well as of the current situation that tends to present all the elements of civil society well aligned and supportive of the government action, is starting to be also criticised by mainline churches.

<sup>86</sup> This point was clearly expressed by James Cochrane in an interview at the department of religious studies in Cape Town. My interview with professor James Cochrane, UCT, 15 April 2001.

<sup>87</sup> For this point see especially chapter 2 on Mainline Christianity, 'A Different Path: a General Overview on Mainline Churches in Post-Apartheid South Africa'

<sup>88</sup> Chidester D., *Christianity in South Africa: An Annotated Bibliography*, Greenwood Press, London, 1997.



parties in post-apartheid South Africa make an effort to appeal to Christian voters in order to win elections is indicative of the persistent importance of religious life in contemporary South African society. To understand the size of this phenomenon, as a direct result of the pure proportional electoral system, it is sufficient to observe the massive mushrooming of Christian parties that more or less directly join Christian values to the political agenda. These include: the Afrikanerbond Party,<sup>89</sup> the Christian Democratic Party,<sup>90</sup> the African Christian Democratic Party,<sup>91</sup> the Nasionale Aksie (National Action),<sup>92</sup> and the United Christian Democratic Party.<sup>93</sup> The most recent example of this attempt to catch votes by appealing to Christian values is offered by the recently constituted Christian Party called the Azanian Salvation Party (ASP) that entered into the local electoral competition in March 2006. The ASP hails from GaRankuwa in the North West Province and its leader, Johannes Tebogo Molapo,<sup>94</sup> comes from the African Apostolic Church. The party's principles derive from Christian fundamentalism and during the campaign Pastor Molapo tried to consolidate an alliance with other Christian parties.<sup>95</sup> This party received few votes in the municipal election in the North West Province<sup>96</sup> and

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<sup>89</sup> 'Its mission, founded on Biblical principles is to serve and to contribute towards the development of the Afrikaans community to the level of excellence in all spheres of life and thus also serving the interest of all South Africans'. Electronic resource; <http://www.afrikanerbond.org.za/>

<sup>90</sup> 'The CDP offers itself to the electorate as an alternative government, or alternatively as a responsible opposition party. We commit ourselves to ordering civil government according to Christian/Biblical principles'. Electronic resource: <http://www.christiandemocraticparty.org.za>

<sup>91</sup> 'The ACDP stands for: Christian principles, freedom of religion, an open market economy, family values, community empowerment and human rights in a federal system'. Electronic resource: <http://www.acdp.org.za/>

<sup>92</sup> 'The NA will fight for cultural and language rights of each group in South Africa and in particular, for the rights of Afrikaans and the Afrikaner'. 'The NA subjects itself to the supreme authority of God, acknowledges the Bible as norm and will guide its actions as such. The NA is committed to freedom of religion'. The party derives from a split from the Afrikaner Eenheidsbeweging. Electronic resource: <http://www.naweb.org.za/> See also: <http://groups.msn.com/nasaksie>

<sup>93</sup> Political party headed by Kgosi Lucas Manyane Mangope. Aims to be 'the leading party in uniting all South Africans, Christians and non-Christians alike, in a truly democratic, non-racial and non-sexist partnership[...]' Electronic resource: <http://www.ucdp.org.za/>

<sup>94</sup> Molapo was a former Azanian People's Organization (APO) member. He initially wanted to register his party as the Christian Party but the Independent Electoral Commission declined saying that there were already too many Christian parties.

<sup>95</sup> Its leader tried to form an alliance with the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) but it failed to organize a meeting with its leader, Reverend Kenneth Meshoe. Charles Phahlala, *Daily News*, 26 February 2006.

<sup>96</sup> North West Province, municipal election, 4 March 2006.

along with another 84 small parties was able to secure just 1.3% of the total votes cast in the province.<sup>97</sup>

Considering the growing number of AIC members it is easy to understand the increasing attention shown by political parties to this potential cadre of voters. For example in April 2004 before the national elections the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) invited representatives of the major parties to attend the traditional Easter Rally in Moria, east of Polokwane, Limpopo.<sup>98</sup> This invitation did not include the possibility that political parties could use this platform to address the four million strong Zionist worshippers. In fact the political leaders, invited to the church headquarters, were not allowed to do political speeches. There were nine political parties represented: ACDP, ANC, AZAPO, DA, Freedom Front Plus (FF+), IFP, PAC, NNP and UDM. The last time politicians were invited to Moria was in 1994, when the leader Bishop Barnabas Lekganyane believed they could, in the violent pre-electoral climate, use the opportunity to engage with their members. At this meeting the leader of the African Christian Democratic Party, Kenneth Meshoe, expressed the desire for his party to strengthen ties with the Zionist community:

We would like it, if they give parties an opportunity to speak. If they do, the ACDP's message will be well received by church members [...] while other parties support abortion, pornography and special rights for homosexuals, the ACDP is against all these things, and I am sure [ZCC] church members are with us on this one.<sup>99</sup>

In February 2006, during the electoral campaign for local elections, the MEC for Public Works, ANC MP, Howard Yawa met the Church of Christ's Assemblies in Ledig, in Rustenburg (North West Province). Mr Yawa's speech highlighted the role played by AICs in promoting 'religious philosophy' that was based on 'sound African systems'. He added that 'many leaders of AICs have assumed leadership

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<sup>97</sup> For electoral results see electronic resource: <http://www.elections.org.za>

<sup>98</sup> Moshoeshoe Monare, 'No touting for votes at Moria, ZCC rules' in *The Sunday Independent*, 11 April 2004.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

positions in society over the years'<sup>100</sup> and that churches (including independent churches) have played an important role to 'regenerate' society in association with the Moral Regeneration Movement promoted by the government:

As government, we understand the often neglected and marginalised history of the AICs and understand the role that they continue to play today as churches with a mission to heal, hence many AICs are known as healing churches.

And again:

The AICs in particular provide massive constituency, through which we can all work together in building our nation, whether one belongs to the Church of Christ's Assemblies, the Zion Christian Church, or the Nazareth Baptist Church, we all belong to one country and have the same national interest.<sup>101</sup>

It is the case MEC Howard Yawa made an explicit invitation to the churches to support the ANC at the local election, inviting the churches members to join a march organised by the local government:

We therefore call on the church to mobilise its constituency to assume its rightful role in strengthening our democratic system of governance by participating in the March 1<sup>st</sup> Local Government Elections [...] We all have a civic duty, to sustain local democracy by electing leaders of our own choice. When we said in the Freedom Charter, "The people shall govern", we meant that the People will and must continue to be the guarantors of our freedom and democratic governance. Your vote in the forthcoming elections is the mandate we need to give new content to our Age of Hope. Your vote is the mandate that we [as ANC] need to implement our plan to strengthen local government [...] we trust we will continue working together to make further advances in the second decade of our democracy to build a better life for all in our

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<sup>100</sup> From the North West Provincial Government Website: MEC Howard Yawa, MPL, at the Annual Thanks Giving Festive of the Church of Christ's Assemblies, Ledig, 12 February 2006. Electronic resource: [www.nwpg.gov.za/PublicWorks/Documents/Speeches/Speech](http://www.nwpg.gov.za/PublicWorks/Documents/Speeches/Speech)

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

country.<sup>102</sup>

There were not clear demands for support at the meeting between Mangosuthu Buthelezi, president of the IFP, and the Zion Christian churches during the national election campaign in 1999.<sup>103</sup> Although he did not make any direct invitation to the church's members to vote IFP, his speech emphasised shared interests and values.<sup>104</sup> Mr Buthelezi focused on the image of the good political leader as a leader who follows Christian values. He highlighted the historical links between the Zulu royal family and the Zion church: 'This church has its roots deep in the ground of our land, our ancient traditions and the idiom and the language, but also by our sacred traditions which we have received from our ancestors since time immemorial'. He invited religious leaders to work with political leaders for a moral and economic rebirth of the country:

This understanding compels me to urge all religious leaders and political leaders to join their efforts and contributions to make our country succeed and bring about its rebirth. We stand in a position of leadership, not merely as social leaders in our communities, but as leaders in morality, integrity and hope. As such, we are ambassadors for truth and it remains up to us to carry the banner of righteousness into the communities of South Africa.<sup>105</sup>

The IFP and ANC's acknowledgement of the potential political support of AICs is understandable in the light of the findings of a national survey of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) that revealed a link between religious affiliation and the typical supporter of the ANC and IFP. The survey investigated a sample of 2 200 adult South Africans throughout the country in March 1999, just before the national elections. According to the survey, the typical supporter of the ANC is black and speaks one of the five most common African languages in the

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<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> In Mandleni/Matleng, Ulundi, 24 April 1999.

<sup>104</sup> Similar kind of relationship between the IFP and amaNazaretha. Personal conversation with Dr Jack Thompson, 05 May 2006, Edinburgh.

<sup>105</sup> From Inkatha Freedom Party webpage: Conference of Ikhaya Lama-Zion, 24 April 1999. Electronic resource: [www.ifp.org.za/Archive/Speeches/240499bsp.htm](http://www.ifp.org.za/Archive/Speeches/240499bsp.htm)

country (isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sepedi, Sesotho or Setswana). He/She is likely to have an educational qualification of less than Grade 10 and in two cases out of five has some form of employment. Although the average ANC supporter is not satisfied with the financial situation in his/her household or with the general economic situation in South Africa, he/she expects that things will improve during the next twelve months. Most ANC supporters live in Gauteng, in the Eastern Cape or the Northern Province. And interesting for this analysis is the fact that the three church groupings mostly represented among ANC supporters, are Zionist Christians,<sup>106</sup> then the Roman Catholic and immediately after the Methodist.

The typical IFP supporter speaks isiZulu and lives in KwaZulu-Natal. Half of them have an education level of below Grade 10 and two in every five are employed. Similarly to the previous case, although the IFP supporters are not positive about the national economy or their personal financial circumstances, the majority of them believe that the situation can improve during the next year. Church groups to which IFP supporters mostly belong are the Zionist or the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>107</sup> With such a clear correspondence between party support and religious affiliation, it is not surprising to see an increasing political interest in independent churches.

At this stage the churches I analysed did not regard political party interests as invasive or too insistent. Bishop Ntongana and Reverend Jacobs told me that it would be impossible for the government or for any party to reach the myriad of African Independent Churches in the country and they will always feel free from any kind of political interference.<sup>108</sup> When asked if independent churches perceive these invitations from the political establishment as invasive, Bishop Ntongana answered:

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<sup>106</sup> It is not clear if inside the definition of Zionism the survey includes also Ethiopian churches and Apostolic ones; but it is nonetheless indicative of a link between Independent Christianity and party affiliation. This connection can find confirmation in a class analysis of South African AICs membership.

<sup>107</sup> HSRC, *Democracy South Africa Party supporter Profile*, Media Releases, May 1999, electronic resource: [www.hsrc.ac.za/religion-partyaffiliation.html](http://www.hsrc.ac.za/religion-partyaffiliation.html)

<sup>108</sup> Reverend Jacob and bishop Ntongana, personal conversation, Jabulani, 20 February 2002, fieldwork notes.



Not at all, not at all because it is normal to invite all the important parties to churches big events. Of course the ANC will trouble many people, and will come with many officials. It is something that no other political organisation would be able to do, anybody except the ANC. But we do not feel threatened at all by the ANC and I don't think they are also threatened by us.<sup>109</sup>

Independence from political institutions, as 'from anything else'<sup>110</sup> is an important character of the socio-political interpretation of AICs in the country. Hope and Young elaborated an interesting definition of independency specifically, in their case, applied to the apartheid era but to some extent still applicable to the current socio-political situation:

Beyond this, AICs have established a 'structure' that would be almost unthinkable in the West. It is a religious institution virtually without formal buildings, stock holdings, estates, rectories, or even full-time salaries for its clergy. A church without money. A church so poor that it lies outside the capitalist system, and so decentralised that, although each congregation is organised, there is no umbrella bureaucratic power structure. Yet these possible weaknesses become its strengths. How can a government threaten thousands of half-visible, money-less, self-sufficient groups of Christians?<sup>111</sup>

In an interview Reverend Cedric Mayson pointed out that there is a tradition of collaboration between the ANC and religious institutions in South Africa and AICs are part of this traditional collaboration (but only in the post-apartheid period).<sup>112</sup> Though in the case of independent churches traditionally their contacts are with people and not with institutions:

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<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> See below interview with Rev. Cedric Mayson head of the ANC Religious Bureau Affairs.

<sup>111</sup> Hope M., Young J., *Revolutionary Situation*, p. 196.

<sup>112</sup> My interview with Reverend Cedric Mayson, head of the Religious Bureau Office, ANC Headquarters, Johannesburg, 30 October 2001.

These are fragmented churches. It is difficult to reach them also because they are in rural areas or in deprived urban areas, like informal settlements. The main problem when you talk of accessibility to AICs, is that these organisation are literally independent from everything, not just from Mainline Churches, but even from the government and political organisations.

He also stated that transformation in South Africa coincides with the proliferation of a new spirituality. 'We are aware of that and we, as the ruling party chosen by the majority of the population, have to consider this renovated need for religion and religious values, mainly Christian'.<sup>113</sup> Following this attitude, the Religious Bureau of the ANC try to meet main representatives of Christianity and Christian Organisation to create links and a debate on the nation building process. One of these cases, for example, was the ANC meeting on 'ethical transformation' in 1998 where representatives of African Independent Churches were invited.<sup>114</sup> The invitation to be part of the ANC established Religious Leaders Forum<sup>115</sup> was extended to some AIC representatives. Archbishop Ngada explained his decision to be part of the forum in this way:

The Commission for Religious Affairs of the ANC invited us, our organisation, to be part of that commission for purpose of bringing into the ANC a religious department, because most members of the ANC belong to our organisation [...]

If you are leading people you have to listen to the voice of the people. When the ANC made that call to re-build the country, it made the invitation to religious people too. I was invited by the ANC [ANC religious leaders forum] to discuss the future of the country. I discussed with my community if it was the case to go

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<sup>113</sup> My interview with Reverend Cedric Mayson, ANC Religious Bureau Affairs, Johannesburg, 30 October 2001.

<sup>114</sup> The contributions to that meeting were published. *Ethical Transformation. ANC Statement on the Moral Renewal of the Nation*, ANC Commission for Religious Affairs, Marshalltown-Johannesburg, 1998.

<sup>115</sup> Form more information on the Religious Leaders Forum see chapter 2, 'A different Path: A General Overview on Mainline Churches in Post-Apartheid South Africa'.

to a conference organised by the ANC. Everybody said it was ok and when I came back we talked of the conference's outcomes.<sup>116</sup>

The desire for independence, 'independence from everything' affected also, in the past as in the present, the possibility to create an umbrella, an organisation of independent churches representative of the country. Nevertheless, there have been attempts to create these forms of organisations. The first attempt was in the sixties by Beyers Naude<sup>117</sup> while CAIC represents a more recent attempt. It was created in 1995 but is undergoing a divisional process. For example Archbishop Ngada explained his decision to leave CAIC:

My association came together with other associations and we formed CAIC. Yes, as you would understand in any structure there are problems. Then there were some problems that make some associations to dissociate themselves from CAIC. If you see now CAIC is becoming a puppet of the South African Council of Churches. Now we have decided to gather those associations which decided to break away from CAIC.<sup>118</sup>

The above examples demonstrated that although impossible to include a myriad of small organisations inside broad political agendas, political institutions appear to desire to reach at least the biggest independent churches or to involve some of their leaders inside political discourse. The appeal of the inclusion of Christian values inside the political agenda is another element of attraction deserving of a deeper analysis. Clearly AICs do not act in South Africa as in some other parts of the continent. For example AICs in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Kimbanguism) and in the Ivory Coast (Harrist Church) have supported political movements.<sup>119</sup> It is the contention of this research that the analysis of AICs in South Africa should not

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<sup>116</sup> My interview with Archbishop Ngada, Walkerville, 08 March 2002.

<sup>117</sup> West M., *Black City*, 1975a; West M., *Independence*, 1974.

<sup>118</sup> And from there creating the African Spiritual Churches Association, ASCA. My interview with Archbishop Ngada, Walkerville, 08 March 2002.

<sup>119</sup> In both cases these are large, dominant independent churches. See for example Venter D. (ed), *Engaging Modernity*, 2004.

focus on the relation between institutionalised politics and churches at a national level. Political discourse is part of the religious community life at a local level, and it is a discourse that does not deal with the institutionalised component of politics, such as political parties, but rather engages with the promotion of democratic values, like citizenship, social justice, social/civic rights.

## **Conclusion**

Following AIC political interpretations in Jabulani, it is possible to affirm that if the past struggle against apartheid corresponded to a quest for democracy, then there is a consistent linking of the struggle of the past to the idea of 'fighting' in the present. There is a question connected to the main idea of the struggle: does the government/liberation party movement deliver the promises of the struggle easily identifiable through the Freedom Charter? Does it deliver the civic rights incorporated in the Constitution? Does the government meet demands for physical security and economic wellbeing? Through the last two chapters, and through an economic analysis of the government's performance in the last twelve years, the answer appears to be 'no'. Nonetheless the practice of democratic governance in this part of the continent, although very recent, does not represent an alien imposition with little connection to the grassroots. But, as this chapter brought up, church members perceive the democratic practice as incomplete when they consider their own needs, particularly their desire for security and social justice. The idea that political authorities should be devoted to advancing the security and welfare of citizens is taken for granted in consolidated democracies, forgetting that the democratic revolutions went through difficult processes throughout history.

In this chapter I have sought to show how the African independent churches' role in post-apartheid South Africa can be understood in the context of the main shifts of the South African democratisation process. Anthony Balcomb offered a similar analysis of evangelical churches in South Africa and he showed how many

evangelicals actively oppose some features of the present liberal-democratic Constitution.<sup>120</sup> This analysis attempted to address the cultural aspects of democracy. Democracy, or better the democratisation process, is not just a matter of affecting appropriate institutional change. These changes are more complex and interwoven, involving different layers and different interpretations. Democratisation is not just a political system but also a system of ideas, it is a cultural phenomenon that is developed and promoted by different centres. As this analysis hoped to reveal, AICs in South Africa act as religious organisations deeply rooted inside their social environment and they are able to promote a democratic culture and democratic values, representative of the new socio-political dispensation. This is an important element in support of the idea that AICs, in the new democratic context, should be re-incorporated in political analysis.

African independent churches do not just produce spiritual answers but also different centres of interpretation of forces that shape church members' lives. These forces are also political. The spiritual side of these churches is not taken under analysis in this work although it acknowledges the important role covered by praying and healing activities to change the economic/political course. This work just acknowledges it but it is more interested in socio-political aspects than spiritual ones (for that see Adam Ashforth's book). Healers offer protection in Soweto. And if as Adam Ashforth wrote 'security in all its senses is a primary concern of everyone in places like Soweto'<sup>121</sup> healing and spirituality are not the only foundation of social power of these churches.

There are some conclusions that we can make concerning to AICs' contribution to

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<sup>120</sup> 'With regard to the new constitution, I have argued that it is precisely its liberalism that has stirred many evangelicals to participate in the new democracy. Some evangelicals have entered the debates on the liberalism of the constitution because they saw an opportunity to engage in an important debate concerning the nature, extent, and appropriateness of individual rights and civil liberties, while others have done so with a view to resisting what they consider the moral degeneration of society. While resisting the cultural values of liberalism it seems fairly apparent that most of them, nevertheless, support the values of liberal capitalism'. Balcomb A., 'From Apartheid to the New Dispensation: Evangelicals and the Democratisation of South Africa' in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol. 34 (1-2), 2004, p.33.

<sup>121</sup> Ashforth A., *Witchcraft, Violence, Democracy*, 2005, p.16.



the democratic transformation of South African society. Their ability to effect change in accordance with their beliefs, attitudes and actions, depends mainly on two factors. Firstly they are strategically placed within society and, as Cedric Mayson says, they can reach parts of society that are inaccessible to other organisations. Secondly their membership is growing.<sup>122</sup> This element seems to attract the political establishment. African independent churches in Jabulani acted as centres for a political interpretation for the mutation of political discourse and most importantly contributed to the promotion of democratic values, like citizenship, social justice and civic rights. Although this is not a work of pure political theory it may contribute in a minimal part to rethinking some of the assumptions regarding the concept of democratisation within politics. Rather, I hope this analysis has showed how organisations usually not considered by political analysis, could constitute part of the core of political discourse in the new South African context. And unless we consider and attempt to understand these alternative centres of political discourse and political activity, it will be rather more difficult to understand the politics of the country.

Previous chapters of this thesis focused on literature reviews and empirical case studies. Attention now shifts to offering a theoretical interpretation of this work. Independent churches (but the same could be done for mainline churches as we have seen in chapter two) are an active part of the 'modern' democratisation process of the post-apartheid era, then they should be considered as vehicle of development and modernisation inside the new political dispensation. Modernity and modernisation theories seem to be the natural analytical investigation to apply to this work.

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<sup>122</sup> See StatsSA (2004), *Census 2001 by province, gender, religion recode (derived) and population group*, Statistics SA electronic resource: [www.statssa.gov.za](http://www.statssa.gov.za)

## Chapter 7

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### **Modernity and Tradition: a Reinterpretation in the Context of Religion**

More important, while the missionaries may have had an aversion to the vices of metropolitan culture, they needed the trappings of Western technology to impress their potential converts. As much as they desired to heal the sick, they were fully aware of the momentous implications of their modern technology. They knew that they, as Westerners, possessed scientific knowledge that set them apart from the 'natives' [...] Moreover, the missionaries inextricably linked their 'errand of mercy' to the relentless course of nineteenth century Western expansion. God, in their eyes, had put the Great Powers of the world at the service of Christ and those who served him. From their own Puritan heritage, they knew that the 'invasion within' of the Indian communities of America would have been impossible without the support and power of European military might and technology.

Makdisi U., 'Reclaiming the Land of the Bible: Missionaries, Secularism, and Evangelical Modernity' in *American Historical Review*, 102 (3), 1997, p.695

#### **Introducing New Conceptions of Modernity**

Since African independent churches became an important topic of investigation, they also have become major sites for more general theoretical reflection and innovation. Classic works published in the 1960s and in the 1970s showed how

AICs instigated the development of alternatives to the then still dominant structural-functional paradigm, which failed to address 'social change' in a theoretically adequate way.<sup>1</sup> In the light of the rise of Independent Christianity in post-apartheid South Africa, the necessity of investigating and providing a theoretical framework to the emergence of AICs in the country and to their ability (as we saw in previous chapters) to act as social agents becomes more and more evident. I believe that this theoretical explanation can be found in the analysis of the significance of modernity and its interpretation within AICs. By investigating and developing a theoretical framework pertinent to the emergence of AICs in South Africa I hope to be able to demonstrate the significance of different understandings of 'modernity' and how AICs develop and articulate their own visions of what is modern. AICs have usually been evaluated in terms of their relationship with the past and with tradition, as black churches linked to African traditional rituals and aloof from Western ideas of development and modernity.<sup>2</sup> The major theoretical claim of my thesis, then, is in acknowledging the processes of construction and deconstruction of both 'modernity' and 'tradition' that the churches themselves undertake. Rather than simply being relics of the past, they are shaping the future.

As I have argued in previous chapters some scholars evaluated AICs as 'links to the past', this fails to fully explain the churches' continuing relevance and growth in the modern. This chapter, drawing together literature and arguments and empirical material from earlier chapters, will try to elaborate a possible avenue of escape from the modernity-tradition dilemma. The need to find an answer to this dilemma comes from the simple observation of the emergence and massive growth of AICs in South Africa in the last twenty years,<sup>3</sup> in stark contrast to predictions of their extinction

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Fabian J., *Jamaa: a Religious Movement*, 1971 and Fabian J., 'Six thesis regarding the anthropology of African religious movements' in *Religion*, 11, 1981, pp. 109–26; Jules-Rosette B., *African Apostles: Ritual and Conversion in the Church of John Maranke*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1975.

<sup>2</sup> See for example some early missionary work in Harold Turner Collection, CSCNWW, the University of Edinburgh.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Barrett D. (ed), *Encyclopaedia*, 2001.

due to their ‘incapacity’ to link with the ‘modern’.<sup>4</sup> Therefore the modernity-tradition debate can be evaluated against the contributions that AICs have made and are making to the nation-building process. The thesis demonstrates that instead of being a *bridge* back to tradition (evoking Sundkler’s early image), AICs provide a way of linking backwards and forwards at the same time.<sup>5</sup> The interpretation of modernity that emerges is of a *telos* representing a strategy constructing and legitimising tradition that combines older and newer elements, and local and global meanings in an epoch of reconstruction, much like the post-apartheid period itself. Churches, by continually negotiating a path between modernity and tradition, are creating their own vision of what is modern in the post-colonial context by seeking answers to issues of poverty, democracy, instability and exclusion. I argue that when religious belief motivates people to action, its relation to politics, and political changes, becomes most evident. Ultimately, therefore, AICs exist within two spheres: the politics of modernity as well as the faith of tradition. Luke Pato<sup>6</sup> underlined the fact that the study of independent churches remains focussed on descriptive analysis and Venter highlighted the fact that only micro analyses are elaborated in the study of these movements.<sup>7</sup> Macro analyses are conspicuous by their absence within the literature. This concluding chapter tries to offer an interpretation and a theorisation of AICs in the urban context of post-colonial South Africa. The chapter proceeds with a theoretical definition of modernity, offering a presentation of its relation to religion, and religion and development. In the second part of the chapter this theoretical analysis will be applied to the empirical material of this research.

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<sup>4</sup> See for example some early missionary’s work in Harold Turner Collection, CSCNWW, the University of Edinburgh.

<sup>5</sup> This thesis acknowledges the fact that Sundkler’s position changed in part in the second edition of *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* in 1961, and further more in *Zulu Zion and Some Swazi Zionists*, Oxford University Press, London, 1976. Although this image of AICs as a bridge linked to the past was in part retreated in 1961 and then completely changed, this powerful early image affected great part of the literature of the time and in the following decades.

<sup>6</sup> Pato L., *Socio-Cultural Approach*, 1990, p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> Venter D. (ed), *Engaging Modernity*, 2004, pp. 171-192.

## Defining Modernity

A critical approach to modernity is necessary for the understanding of 'who we are in the present' to recall Foucault's statement.<sup>8</sup> It is difficult to define modernity as a concept, especially in the singular because modernity is an increasingly recurrent and confused term of reference. Simply, for the purposes of this chapter, modernity will be considered as the images and institutions associated with Western-style progress and development in the contemporary world.<sup>9</sup> Modernity was originally thought to be a teleological process, a movement toward a known end point that would be nothing less than a Western-style industrialised modernity. These images and institutions do not need to be Western, but they remain at a certain level associated with Western social, economic and material development, in whatever way these are locally or nationally defined. Modernity in the contemporary developing world continues to be defined in association/comparison with the desire to improve social life by subordinating what is locally defined as backward and underdeveloped.<sup>10</sup>

This research does not follow post-modern interpretations. A prefix like 'post' implicates *per se* a concept of periodisation, proceeding through ruptures or transformations, and so on, which modernity itself invented and delineated. The idea that the present is a point of transition or an element of a teleological transformation, at the edge of the new, located in relation to the historicity of events, and thus circumscribed by defined limits, belonging to a narrative of history (linear, progressive) that modernity itself inaugurated. From the 1960s post-structuralism has targeted the discourses that have authorised modernity as a project, interrogating the foundational concepts and narratives that underwrote it,

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<sup>8</sup> Foucault M., *The Foucault Reader*, Paul Rabinow, New York, 1984.

<sup>9</sup> See for example Knauff B.M. (ed), *Critically Modern. Alternatives, Alterities, Anthropologies*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2004, p.18. Modernity in this chapter won't be approach from a philosophical point of view. It is not the aim of this chapter to present and investigate AICs' 'vision of the world', their refusal or acceptance of certain aspects of Western modernity.

<sup>10</sup> See Berman A., *Preface to Modernism*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1994, p.3.



like those of history as the linear and progressive unfolding of a *telos*.<sup>11</sup> My remarks are also meant to highlight the relation of critique to the work of memory, for the danger today lies in forgetting that modernity was a Western 'invention'. There is an anthropological meaning of modernity as myth, 'which focuses on the story's social function: a myth in this sense is not just a mistaken account but a cosmological blueprint that lays down fundamental categories and meanings for the organisation and interpretation of experience'.<sup>12</sup> A myth provides an understanding of the world, providing a set of premises that continue to shape people's experiences of their life. Modernity, much like one of the historical events closely associated with it, the French Revolution, is a myth of contemporary Europe, 'a character of a social order rather than an aid to its understanding'.<sup>13</sup> The myth of modernity has been characterised by the institution of a radically new form of sociality and subjectivity.<sup>14</sup> Modernity invented itself as a heroic subject, ranged against the difficulties it confronted through narratives of universal and subjective emancipation. If we think of the idea of modernity as a myth, then we have to agree with Latour that 'we have never been modern', in the sense that the project has never been totally realised.<sup>15</sup> Modernity was a myth formulated in a particular (Western) context in a specific historical moment. To understand the meaning of modernity in contemporary contexts (in our case to understand the changes brought by the democratisation process in South Africa) it seems necessary to follow other paths.

Arjun Appadurai, for example, has suggested that it was necessary to rethink our understanding of modernity to take account of the many different sorts of *modern* cultural trajectories that researchers were documenting in different parts of the

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<sup>11</sup> See Foucault M., *Reader*, 1984.

<sup>12</sup> Ferguson J., *Expectations of Modernity. Myths and Meaning of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999, p.14.

<sup>13</sup> Friedman J., 'Modernity and Other Traditions' in Knauff B.M. (ed), 2002, p.287.

<sup>14</sup> For similar interpretations, see for example Venn C., *Occidentalism. Modernity and Subjectivity*, Sage Publications, London, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Latour B., *We Have Never Been Modern*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993, p.13.

world.<sup>16</sup> If non-Western cultures were not necessarily non-modern ones, then it would be necessary to develop a more pluralised understanding of modernity: not modernity in the singular but modernities in the plural, a variety of different ways of being modern.<sup>17</sup> Would it be better to singularise or use the multiple form of modernity? This is undoubtedly a very appealing idea, but it immediately raises a number of problems. One problem is the meaning of the term 'modernity'. Once we give up the criterion of a singular modernity, then what does the term mean, analytically?<sup>18</sup> I would rather suggest it is not the meaning of modernity that has changed but the different actors and the ways in which they operate to reach their 'project of modernity' in different geographical and historical contexts. I would then use the word 'modernity' in the plural, maintaining the central meaning of the term,<sup>19</sup> but rather considering local specificities, exploring different local contributions to this idea. It is not the meaning of modernity that changes but the way modernity is pursued according to local interpretations. Thus there could be for example a South African modernity because there are South African actors pursuing modernity with local techniques, but the meaning of modernity in this context remains unaltered, and it still coincides with images and institutions associated with Western-style progress.<sup>20</sup> Contextualising local specificities means to understand how to arrive at the *telos* with local resources, local interpretations and local realities. Modernity has previously failed to deliver on this and other promises; it is unable to reconcile the diversity of cultures. Societies and cultures cannot be understood as located along a continuum between 'premodern' tradition, on the one hand, and a Euro-centrally conceived modernity on the other.

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<sup>16</sup> For alternative modernities see Appadurai A., *Modernity at Large, Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996. Appadurai uses the example of India.

<sup>17</sup> Perception that generally modernity corresponds just to singular project is testified by the fact that my computer does not recognise the word modernity in its plural form.

<sup>18</sup> For support for this idea of modernity at the singular, see for example Ferguson J., *Global Shadows*, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Modernity as the images and institutions associated with Western-style progress and development in the contemporary world.

<sup>20</sup> An attempt to reconcile traditional local worldviews with external technologies and institutions.

It is necessary to consider modernity from a historical perspective to understand critically the meaning of being or becoming modern. As part of this history, we have to consider how modernity has emerged as a problem in Western settings and how it connects socio-cultural transformation and orientations. These dynamics are mediated by cultural history and by the economic and political realities of what it means locally to be developed or experience (or desire) progress. Considering these trajectories and their relationship is crucial for an engaged and contemporary analysis. As this research has shown, AICs were not perceived to be included inside the project of modernity during the colonial era. It seems that different interpretations of the democratisation process are possible. It is with the end of apartheid, with the end of a rigid dominant discourse and a rigid definition of modernity, that it is possible to open spaces for the inclusion of new actors inside the 'modernisation' project. In this sense the end of apartheid could be interpreted as the end of a process of inclusion and exclusion from the 'modernity' project. I will be concerned throughout this chapter with the question of if independent churches could be analytically considered new actors (with new techniques) to be included inside the new project of modernity in the contemporary South African political dispensation. AICs' history of exclusion from and (perhaps) re-inclusion inside a project of modernisation, I argue, allows us to see the modernist meta-narrative of post-apartheid South Africa in a rather different theoretical and political light. The post-colonial period is the critical space that is itself modified in the course of the kind of critique that I am proposing. Does the post-apartheid era offer a new mythology of modernisation? It designates the future of what comes after the end of apartheid and therefore what comes after the idea of modernity that the apartheid regime offered, as an ongoing reinterpretation of the future.

The idea of modernity offers in this way a mode of conceptualising, narrating and experiencing rapid socio-political changes in the post-apartheid period, bringing together evidence of the complexities and the ways that such process have been understood by churches members and researchers too. Dipesh Chakrabarty, questioning the value of the term 'modernity', notes that 'the word is already

around us, and it may be too late to legislate its uses'.<sup>21</sup> That does not mean we ought to hide from the terminology, rather we should analyse it and treat it with the fullest concern. It is clear that the notion of 'modernity' is not going to disappear any time soon. The desire to become modern is clearly not only and simply an intellectual academic speculation but it is something tangible in the context of the township, and perhaps also more widely in other areas of South Africa. The modernisation myth has never been simply an academic invention. Nobody can deny that, although problematic, modernity has had a major impact on contemporary systems of knowledge.

My argument is to consider modernity as a cultural space, a *locus* of social experience following a more recent literature (especially from an anthropological perspective) that claims that any theoretical interpretation of modernity cannot be separated from culture. Seeing modernity as a cultural project allows us to understand the ways local interpretations are used to render familiar the 'unfamiliar' paths to realise the modernity project.

Since modernity has not led to the wholesale convergence of societies and cultures, it is plain that there is nothing particularly 'natural' or inevitable about it. Modernity is not simply the logical outcome of an inevitable unfolding of structures and ideas. Rather, modernity turns out to have been cultural all along.<sup>22</sup>

Past interpretative models<sup>23</sup> that did not consider local culture and its importance failed to recognise the importance of cultural influence on change. The adoption of these models creates a strong and rigid divide between western and non-Western

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<sup>21</sup> Chakrabarty D., *Habitants of Modernity. Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*. University of Chicago Press, 2002.

<sup>22</sup> Moore H.L., Sanders T., 'Introduction' in Sanders T. (ed), *Magical Interpretations, Material Realities. Modernity, Witchcraft and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, Routledge, London, 2001, p.13.

<sup>23</sup> See for example chapter 4, 'Historiography and AICs in South Africa'.

cultures and histories.<sup>24</sup> In this way development theory, as part of the modernisation project, constructs categories of persons and recognises greater capacity to certain categories and not to others on the basis of presumed effects that they already had in other parts of the world.<sup>25</sup>

## **Modernity and Religion: General Premises**

At the end of colonialism the prevailing thought was that Christianity would become ever less significant in part because it was so closely associated with colonial power but also because it was predicted that Africa would succumb to, or strive towards, a Western and secularised idea of modernisation. This prediction never became a reality and it appears that that particular historical moment represented 'not the end but the metamorphosis of religion'.<sup>26</sup> As Ward has pointed out 'at some point in the 21st century, Christians in Africa will become more numerous than Christians in any other single continent'.<sup>27</sup> This expansion of religious trends, common to other developing regions such as Latin America,<sup>28</sup> is characterised in Africa by the increasing role of religious actors in politics.<sup>29</sup> From the end of the 1980s, with the collapse of the one party system, a trend seemed to emerge characterised by an erosion of legitimacy in African nation-states. In this period Churches played a remarkable role in preventing political *impasse*, in

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<sup>24</sup> That is the case followed for example by Anthony Giddens in Giddens A., *Consequences of Modernity*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1990.

<sup>25</sup> See Knauff B.M. (ed), *Critically Modern*, 2002.

<sup>26</sup> Hervieu-Léger D., *Religion as a Chain*, 2000, p.25. This chapter supports the idea that modernity is a way of understanding modern developments, and not that modernity is a mechanism for appropriating and benefiting from the technologies and institutions of the modern world.

<sup>27</sup> Ward K. 'Africa' in Hastings A., *A World History*, 1999, p.123.

<sup>28</sup> See for example for Latin America: Corten A., Marshall-Fratani R. (ed), *Between Babel and Pentecost*, 2001.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* In Latin America churches are able to mobilise huge masses, like the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in Brazil, and they organise themselves in classic forms of political participation, like political parties. This kind of organisation is not present in Africa where it is still the State that controls the discourse on development and resources.



criticising threats to the democratisation process, and in promoting democratic values whilst acting inside civil society.<sup>30</sup>

Social science theory in general, believing that modern life was fundamentally antipathetic to religion, simply failed to notice the continuing importance of religion and the manner of its insertion into changing contexts. Modernity, following the tenets of the European Enlightenment, was the rule of institutions that demarcated the boundaries between the unreasonable and irrational on the one hand and the idea of progress and promise of development on the other.<sup>31</sup> But in retrospect, many scholars have demonstrated how modernisation and development theories largely failed to produce the type of Africa that developmental theorists had predicted.<sup>32</sup>

In the wake of a new school of thinkers on development in Africa, we can observe a new school of political scientists<sup>33</sup> that are involved in a process of re-evaluation of the meaning of religious and so-called *pre* or *non* modern values inside the socio-political institutions of the continent. Achille Mbembe, for example, accused political science and development economics of having undermined 'the very possibility of understanding African economic and political facts'.<sup>34</sup> Ignoring religion as a matter of obvious political and even economic importance is similarly dangerous to the credibility of academic investigation. John Lonsdale in his work on the *Kikuyu* political system showed that even so-called stateless societies had

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<sup>30</sup> I adopt this category following Gifford P., *Public Role*, 1998, p.20; even if I think that the author doesn't highlight the differences between the level of action and organisation of civil society in the different African countries, making appear it as a uniform and strong vehicle in all the countries.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Chakrabarty D., *Habitants of Modernity*, 2002, especially Introduction; Chakrabarty D., *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press, 2000.

<sup>32</sup> Ferguson, J., *The Anti-Politics Machine*, 1991; Crush, J., *Power of Development*, Routledge, London, 1995; Sachs, W., *Planet Dialectics: Explorations in Environment and Development*, Zed Books, London, 1999.

<sup>33</sup> For example Bayart J.F., *The State in Africa*, 1989 and Chabal P., Daloz JP, *Africa Works. Disorder as Political Instrument*. James Currey, Oxford, 1999. As Ellis and Ter Haar noticed, should be recognised that French political literature in this sense, appears to be more advanced than the English-speaking one; in Ellis S., Ter Haar G., *Worlds of Power*, 2004.

<sup>34</sup> Mbembe A., *Postcolony*, 2001, p. 7.

their own forms of political thought that provide elements for forging new discourses on power in the face of modern changes. He affirms that in order to solve Africa's political crisis 'an effective political language' is necessary and that 'it can be produced in only one way, by historical process. Historical awareness is the only force of self-knowledge'.<sup>35</sup>

In the concluding chapter of Anthony Giddens' book, *The Consequences of Modernity*<sup>36</sup>, modernity is defined as a distinctively Western projection in terms of the ways of life fostered by the 'great transformative agencies' of capitalism and nation-state, but not peculiarly Western from the stand-point of its globalising tendencies. There are emergent forms of interdependence and 'planetary consciousness'<sup>37</sup> and the way these issues are approached and coped with, inevitably involve conceptions and strategies derived from non-Western settings. It seems that many kinds of cultural response are possible, given global cultural diversity as a whole.

The theoretical assumption of this thesis is encapsulated by the idea that modernity should not have some ideal typical form when removed from the Western context, even if it was exported as a Western production. This is evident in the analysis of Non-Western Christianity. Christianity arrived in other continents as a Western production but local people were able to re-interpret it in a local way. But when they moved beyond the dominating power structures of mission-controlled Christianity, missionaries regarded these ideas as unacceptable. Missionaries and theologians initially judged this process as a deviation from orthodox Christianity or as a form of syncretism.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, Africans who fully embraced Western Christianity accused these forms of religiosity of staying 'outside' modernity and

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<sup>35</sup> Lonsdale J., 'African Past in Africa's Future' in Lonsdale J., Berman B., *The Unhappy Valley, Conflict in Kenya and Africa*, Currey, London, 1991, p. 205.

<sup>36</sup> Giddens A., *Consequences*, 1990, pp. 174-175.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Sundkler B., *Bantu Prophets*, 1948 and literature at the beginning of the 20th century. From Sundkler's second edition (1961), and from Oosthuizen, Daneel and Anderson studies, AICs were evaluated positively and called 'churches'.

linking to tradition. This argument enabled an understanding of the specificity of the relationship between modernity and religion and it follows the approach of considering (local) tradition as an opposite of or antithetic to modernity.<sup>39</sup> According to Horton<sup>40</sup> mainline Christianity was itself the expander of macroscopic horizons, in contrast to traditional religions, which could not see beyond their 'local shrines'. Terence Ranger, through his case study of Zimbabwe, mounted a powerful assault on this proposition to show how missionaries strove to narrow the universe of their converts to the microcosm of the station, while traditional religions spread networks of interaction and spiritual efficacy over vast distances.<sup>41</sup> But we could even add a third position that recognises that local people (and we are talking of members of independent churches but this assumption could be applied to broader notions of 'people', Christian or not) developed religious strategies for coming to terms with the modern, that coincided with the wider world introduced by missionaries.<sup>42</sup>

If within Christian tradition lies the codes of meaning that establish and express social continuity, as Danièle Hervieu-Léger<sup>43</sup> in her seminal work demonstrated, both the concepts of tradition and modernity should be redefined inside the *corpus* of social science. African Independent Churches grew in the post-colonial period in Africa, and in particular Pentecostalism<sup>44</sup> expanded in the last two decades, because they were able to give answers to the questions posed by 'modernisation'; they are not phenomena isolated and external to modern events. If Pentecostalism and African independent churches are equally distributed between rural and urban

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<sup>39</sup> This is particularly true in countries in which AICs were numerous, like in South Africa.

<sup>40</sup> Horton R., 'African Conversion' in *Africa*, 41 (2) 1971, pp. 85-108.

<sup>41</sup> Ranger T., 'The Local and the Global in Southern African Religious History' in Hefner R.W. (ed), *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation*, Berkley, 1993. For flow and closure processes inside religion see Geschiere P., Meyer B., *Globalisation and Identity*, 1998.

<sup>42</sup> Abstract from a personal conversation with Dr T. Jack Thompson, CSCNWW, the University of Edinburgh, January 2006.

<sup>43</sup> Hervieu-Léger D., *Chain of Memory*, 2000, especially chapter 5.

<sup>44</sup> As I have previously stated, I maintain the definition of AICs and Pentecostalism in Africa separated even if they are fused together by some scholars. I personally think that these two spiritual bodies could be unified from a theological perspective (as Anderson A., *Zion and Pentecost.*, 2000) but not from a socio-political analysis perspective.

centres in Africa, the old dichotomy between rural/traditional and urban/modern does not seem appropriate. Besides Pentecostalism in Africa seems very successful among relatively educated and wealthy people,<sup>45</sup> and both these forms of spirituality are successful in attracting large youth memberships. This form of attraction would not be possible if it were antithetic with the idea of modernity. The state of modernity (and its relations between past and present) should be redefined in different terms inside the old sociological definition of individualism and secularisation. If scholars such as Andrew Walls, Adrian Hastings and Kwame Bediako<sup>46</sup> are correct in suggesting that there has been a Christian shift of gravity from the North to the South, then African independent churches provide us with one of the most potent ways of grappling with this reality.

### *Religion and Secularism*

Far from disappearing as theories of the processes of modernity predicted, religion has acquired renewed life in the contemporary era, with the expansion of Islam and the so-called 'third force' Christianity:<sup>47</sup> a new wave of Christianity based on the 'Gifts of the Spirit'. In the past the growth of religion on such a scale would have been regarded as thoroughly implausible in the most influential sociological circles. Peter Berger insists, far from being a model of the future, Western Europe with its idea of secularisation looks ever more the exception so far as religion goes.<sup>48</sup> Western European countries have to deal and engage with a global system in which religious identity is shaping local and global realities.<sup>49</sup>

Predicting the disappearance of religion from public life is contentious in part because it has important social implications but also because secularisation is a

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<sup>45</sup> Corten A., Marshall-Frantani R., *Between Babel and Pentecost*, 2001. The Independent Churches still remain fundamentally 'poor' churches and, especially in South Africa, attended by not well-educated people.

<sup>46</sup> Bediako K., *Christianity in Africa*, 1995; Hastings A. (ed), *World of History*, 1999; Fyfe C., Walls A. (ed), *Christianity in Africa*, 1986; Isichei E., *A History of Christianity in Africa*, 1995.

<sup>47</sup> See Martin B. 'From pre-to postmodernity in Latin America; the case of Pentecostalism' in Heelas P. (ed), *Religion, Modernity and Post-Modernity*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1998, pp. 106-107.

<sup>48</sup> Berger P.L., *A far glory*, Doubleday, New York, 1992.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

multi-faceted notion that does not lend itself readily to definitive quantitative testing.<sup>50</sup> The secularisation thesis has a core explanatory (ideal -typical) model. This model asserts that the social significance of religion diminishes in response to the operation of three important features of the modernisation (another ideal-typical model) process; these are a) social differentiation, b) socialisation and c) rationalisation. The social significance of religion is clearly a multidimensional notion. It is possible here to make a reference to Max Weber's ideas regarding modernity and religion that assert that modernisation brings in its wake (and may itself be accelerated by) 'the diminution of the social significance of religion'.<sup>51</sup> These ideas illuminate the reflections of Wilson in relation to religion in public life:

When outside the confines of the relatively small circles of those who have involved themselves with it, one raises this subject with historians, sociologists, economists, or psychologists, one sees how readily those engaged with other aspects of the social system and its culture take secularisation for granted. Their overwhelming tendency, as I have observed it, is to regard religion as a peripheral phenomenon in contemporary social organisation, and one which, in their studies of the broad contours of social change, productivity, economic growth, or human psychology, they rarely find need to consider. Not infrequently they express some amusement that religion should be given the serious attention which I and others in the sociology of religion devote to it. Of course, these various and numerous social scientists could be overlooking a social force of paramount importance in the operation of those facets of the social system in which they are expert, but I doubt it.<sup>52</sup>

Modernity is the first historical period to be legitimised on the basis of narratives that are secular in their foundation. The epochality of modernity in the West is specified by the unique conjuncture characterised by the co-emergence of 'rational'

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<sup>50</sup> Bruce S. (ed), *Religion and Modernization*, 1992.

<sup>51</sup> Berger P.L., *Facing Up Modernity*, Harmondsworth, 1979, p.101 and see also Giddens A., *Consequences*, 1990; Weber M., *The Sociology*, 1964.

<sup>52</sup> Wilson B.R. in Bruce S. (ed), *Religion and Modernisation*, 1992, p.210



capitalism, European colonialism and technological innovation. There was a precise need in the seventeenth century to reinvent the function and role of spirituality:

The all-powerful Gods could descend into men's hearts without intervening in any way in their external affairs. A wholly individual and wholly spiritual religion made it possible to criticize both the ascendancy of science and that of society, without needing to bring God into either. The modern could now be both secular and pious at the same time'.<sup>53</sup>

In some way this project was successful in the Western context at different levels and in different ways. But was the rationalisation process of religion<sup>54</sup> applicable in non-Western contexts? The expansion of Christianity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in Africa and in Latin America testified to the limitations of these predictions. Modernity in developing countries clearly appears more of an 'incomplete project' than a successful myth.<sup>55</sup>

Values and norms have been colonised by standards of (Western) rationalisation. The increasingly global implantation of modernisation has grown into a self-motivated, autonomous process, which did not consider cultural interpretations of modernity. It is striking in this sense to see how the project of modernity tried to construct a univocal example, globally applicable without accounting for local cultures and local interpretations. The failure of predictions of secularisation in African contexts appears to be an important element in tracing interpretative blanks in the understanding of modernity in non-Western environments. Another failure is represented by the past interpretative incapacity to recognise religion as a vehicle of development.

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<sup>53</sup> Latour B., *Never Been Modern*, 1993, p. 33. Strong reference to Weber M., *The Sociology*, 1964.

<sup>54</sup> See Weber M., *The Sociology*, 1964.

<sup>55</sup> Paraphrasing Habermas J., 'Modernity, an incomplete project' in Foster H.E. (ed), *The Anti-Aesthetic: essays on post-modern culture*, Bay Press, Seattle, 1983.

## Religion and Development in Africa

In Africa it is often difficult to untangle the Church from the agency of development. The evangelical development agency World Vision had an effective aid budget of \$1.25 billion in 2002.<sup>56</sup> The World Bank notes that in Benin the Church represents “the most prominent and effective protection network”.<sup>57</sup> In southern Africa the Church is equally prominent, in Malawi in the 1970s it was claimed that the annual budget of the *Christian Service Committee of the Churches of Malawi*, a key ecumenical organisation, was 1.5 times the size of the state’s entire development budget.<sup>58</sup> Even in South Africa the Catholic Church provides more anti-retroviral treatment for people infected with HIV than the state.<sup>59</sup> It is widely acknowledged that religious groups provide by far the majority of home-based health care in Africa.<sup>60</sup> In agriculture, too, the church plays an important role not only in terms of agricultural extension but also in terms of influencing policy. The South African Catholic Bishops’ Conference has on several occasions discussed and released policy papers and statements on the positives and negatives of biotechnology in alleviating hunger and poverty in Africa.<sup>61</sup> Religion, rather than declining as had been predicted with the advent of secular development,<sup>62</sup> is taking an increasingly central and vibrant role in African political and developmental life.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> World Vision International, *Annual Report*, 2003.

<sup>57</sup> Kliksberg B., ‘Facing the inequalities of development: some lessons from Judaism and Christianity’, *Development*, 46(4), 2003, p. 58.

<sup>58</sup> World Faiths Development Dialogue, ‘The provision of services for poor people: a contribution to WDR 2004’, 2003, *mimeo*, electronic resource: [www.wfdd.org.uk](http://www.wfdd.org.uk)

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Sister Alison, South African Catholic Bishops Conference, 04 August 2004. The specific reasons behind the Church’s action are easily understandable in relation to the State lack of intervention in challenging the virus in the country.

<sup>60</sup> Myers B. L., *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, Orbis/World Development, 1999.

<sup>61</sup> For example, in 2000 the South African Bishops Conference published its own perspectives on GM food. In 2002/03 they produced a series of documents discussing GM food aid in southern Africa. And on other occasions (2003, 2004) they have called for a moratorium on agricultural biotechnology.

<sup>62</sup> Berger P. L., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Eerdmans, 1999.

<sup>63</sup> Ward K., ‘Africa’ in Hastings A. (ed), *World History*, 1999. Clapham, C., *Afrique dans le relations internationales*, 2004.

Development and modernity are intimately related to one another. Contemporary critiques of development theory assert that 'development' poses solutions to development problems in a peculiarly apolitical, antiseptic, neutral way.<sup>64</sup> The idea of religion, of placing 'unreasonable faith' above 'enlightened rationality', does not fit comfortably within development narratives that revolve around 'linear progressions and optimistic teleologies'.<sup>65</sup> If, as Pieterse states, development involves 'telling other people what to do in the name of modernisation, nation-building, progress... poverty alleviation and even empowerment and participation'<sup>66</sup> we can be fairly confident that at least a healthy portion of development is primarily concerned with telling other people what they ought to be thinking. We can equally confidently assume that this preferred thinking is not likely to identify religious thought as a priority.<sup>67</sup> A large body of literature suggests that development has not marched Africa towards a state of 'modernity'<sup>68</sup> in quite the way it was anticipated, promised or hoped for,<sup>69</sup> indeed Ferguson in his study of the decline of the Zambian Copperbelt creates an image of Zambians watching development recede back over the horizon.<sup>70</sup>

Churches have often picked up the slack precipitated by failures of the state and shortcomings in development. This research reading of this situation suggests that the western notion of modernity as applied in African development has failed on two counts. Firstly, as prevailing post-development received wisdom suggests the

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<sup>64</sup> As Escobar would do. See for example Escobar A., *Encountering Development*, 1995.

<sup>65</sup> Ferguson, J., *Expectations of Modernity*, 1999, p. 13.

<sup>66</sup> Pieterse, J. N., 'After post-development', *Third World Quarterly*, 21(2), 2000, p. 182.

<sup>67</sup> This has certainly be the case historically although now the World Bank for example are beginning to identify churches as an important development tool, if not as important belief systems. See for example Pallas C., 'Canterbury to Cameroon: A New Partnership Between Faiths and the World Bank' in *Development in Practice*, 15 (5), 2005, pp. 677-684.

Belshaw, D., Calderisi, R., Sugden, C., *Faith in Development: Partnerships Between the World Bank and the Churches of Africa*, World Bank, 2001.

<sup>68</sup> I use here Knaupt's useful definition: 'Modernity can be defined as the images and institutions associated with Western-style progress and development in a contemporary world'. Knaupt B.M. (ed), *Critically Modern*, 2000, p.18.

<sup>69</sup> Ferguson J., *Expectations of Modernity*, 1999. Escobar A., *Encountering Development*, 1995. Crush, J., *Power of Development*, 1996. Power, M., *Rethinking Development Geographies*, Routledge, London, 2003. There are literally hundreds of other applicable references of course.

<sup>70</sup> Ferguson J., *Expectations of Modernity*, 1999.

types of development posited by notions of the modern have not been successful. Secondly, modernisation assumed that the non-secular would gradually recede from public life when in reality the non-secular is pervading the spaces that the secular has singularly failed to fill.

### **AICs and Discourses of Modernity**

It is not my purpose to explain in detail the broad definitions of modernity, which many better-qualified scholars have already set out to do, but rather to trace some of its effects on people's modes of conduct and ways of understanding their lives. This section aims to explore in a more modest way the dynamics that were used historically to include and exclude African independent churches from the discourse of modernity and how these forces have changed with the advent of the post-apartheid era. Recently a book that investigates the relation between AICs in South Africa and modernity has been published with the title *Engaging Modernity: Methods and Cases for Studying African Independent Churches in South Africa*.<sup>71</sup> This edited book presents the contributions of different authors and offers a set of useful information on methodologies and theories. Nonetheless this book does not offer an overarching and unified consensus<sup>72</sup> on the modernity/tradition debate and most of all it does not demonstrate the variety of ways that AICs engage with modernity and it does not list the challenges that this current historical situation poses to Independent Christianity. Alternatively, this chapter, and more generally this thesis, tries to offer an evaluation of the different ways in which AICs engage with modernity in the current context of the post-apartheid scenario.

Modernity is intimately related to the local understanding of what it means to be either 'traditional' or 'progressive'. Colonial forces ideologically used the force of modernity to project 'everything else' as backward and underdeveloped. This projection of the 'others' is at the basis of the modern and generated awareness of

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<sup>71</sup> Venter D., *Engaging Modernity*, 2004.

<sup>72</sup> See for example the different conclusions to the modernity debate from Robert Garner and Lwarence Kwark.

modernity. Modernity existed as a contraposition to the other. The notion of the modern creates the space in which ideas of tradition are constructed and reconstructed. There are two spin offs from this. Firstly, tradition can be delineated as the discursive space outside of modernity. Secondly, the concept of tradition exists only in relation to the concept of modernity. As Foucault clearly expressed, modernity is 'often characterised in terms of consciousness of the discontinuity of time: a break with tradition'.<sup>73</sup> All the definitions of modernity stress the passage of time. The adjective 'modern' designates a new regime, an acceleration, a rupture, 'a revolution in time' 'when the words "modern", "modernisation" or "modernity" appear, we are defining by contrast, an archaic, unchanging and stable past. Furthermore, 'the word is always being thrown into the middle of a fight, in a quarrel where there are winners and losers, ancient and moderns'.<sup>74</sup> Modernity remains at the centre of a powerful 'discourse of identity' that defined the borders of inclusion and exclusion from a social order. The Western stress on progress was reinforced by the comparison with the past and 'history' and tradition provided an index of underdevelopment to be compared with the progress of the present. Comaroff and Comaroff noted that (intentionally or not) the missionaries provided the basic sites for local perceptions of modernity, from medicine, to education, from clothes to architecture.<sup>75</sup> In this way institutionalised Christianity was included inside the colonial project of modernity and offered the 'Western' idea of progress, without leaving space to local interpretations.

As we saw in chapter two, Sundkler (until the 1960s) and the early literature on AICs did not consider independent churches as proper churches but sects, syncretic movements, or 'bridges back to tradition'. Independent churches were kept outside the dominant discourse of modernity. Academics and non-academics had for a long time misunderstood Africa's differences from the West as anachronistic relics, as a

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<sup>73</sup> Foucault M., *The Reader*, 1984, p.39.

<sup>74</sup> Latour B., *Never Been Modern*, 1993, p. 24.

<sup>75</sup> Comaroff J., Comaroff J., *Of Revelation*, 1991.



symptom of backwardness and incomplete development.<sup>76</sup> Indigenous religion should not be understood just as a relic of the past but can become a set of practices that can regulate and deal with contemporary economic and social challenges in a modern context. The need to re-evaluate independent churches as part of a modern discourse is understandable in the face of decades of scholarship that insisted on portraying African societies as in some sense located in the 'primitive' or 'traditional' past.<sup>77</sup> As Peter Geschiere<sup>78</sup> suggested, considering witchcraft as part of a modern discourse, contemporary Africanists are understandably drawn to a way of thinking that insists on contemporising African societies alongside ideas from the West and understanding African ways of life not as 'a-historical' tradition, but as part and parcel of the modern world.<sup>79</sup>

The relation between modernity and African spirituality was an argument of study and perennial interest, as literature on the topic testified. For example a 1977 study sponsored by the South African Council for Social and Industrial Research (SACSIR) tried to analyse the role of indigenous belief in facilitating or hindering the modernisation process. This study by JC Thompson developed the prerequisites necessary for development to take place.<sup>80</sup> The final report of this study expressed the prevailing thought of the time; that people cannot develop politically if other forms of 'development', including 'development of faith' and belief, do not receive attention. Underdeveloped black Africans were not thought to have the ability to deal with contemporary political issues due to their personal/cultural/religious and economic underdevelopment. In order to move towards more modern types of economic existence it was thought that people had to leave behind their old mythologies and systems of beliefs which 'held them back' from political and

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<sup>76</sup> As tradition, see Fabian J., *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Objects*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1983.

<sup>77</sup> See chapter 4, 'Historiography and AICs in South Africa'.

<sup>78</sup> Geschiere P., *The modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1997.

<sup>79</sup> See for example Fabian J., *Time and the Other*, 1983.

<sup>80</sup> Study by Thompson J.C. See Thompson J.C., *The Measurement of Modernisation among South African Blacks: a Pilot Study*, National Institute for Personnel Research, Council for Social and Industrial Research, Johannesburg, December 1977 (material from NERMIC, Zululand University).

economic advancement. According to the study people rooted in traditional societies had to move away from the forces that kept them isolated within traditional societies. While clearly highly ideological, this and other similar interpretations gave significant emphasis to certain beliefs and focused on the link between tradition and independent churches without paying attention (or refusing to see) the other side of the coin, their relationship with modernity and the role they could play within the 'modernisation' process. The contribution to 'modernity' of these religious organisations was not recognised or considered.

My research inferred something quite different. AIC members demonstrated an ability to act as agents of modernity, especially along three particular types of contributions: personal emancipation; developmental inputs; and political strength in the advancement and promotion of democratic values. In the field there was a clear perception that modernity was something desirable and not just an academic projection. Modernity coincides with the Western idea of development and with an idea of future and improvement. It was obvious to people living in Soweto that their lives were lacking in aspects of the modern promises of development, security and social-economic empowerment (and this was not perceived as an external and foreign reality). For this reason in Soweto the question of modernity is widely perceived in relation to the concept of development and the issue of economic standards of living was clearly expressed by Mrs Motambo: 'Modernisation as an improvement of life or what?'<sup>81</sup> Moving a few kilometres from Jabulani to Braamfontein in Johannesburg or even to the richest areas in Soweto (like Orlando) starkly highlighted that promises of modernity were realised at different levels. The new South Africa brought and built up a promise of modernity that should have reached the totality of the population and not just a privileged few. This sense of developmental disappointment and inequity emerged strongly from my interviews.<sup>82</sup> In a certain way AICs became victims of an interpretative error. As

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<sup>81</sup> My interview with Mr Motambo, elder of the Native Church of South Africa, Jabulani, Sunday 24 February 2002.

<sup>82</sup> 'Some people in power behave as our only right is going to vote during the elections and after that they forget that we exist. They forget to come to the poor areas and they forget the poor people. But

outlined earlier, Western secularism was already sceptical of considering religion – at least religion lived in the ‘public space’ as AICs do – as part of a future image of society.<sup>83</sup> The AIC relation with tradition and their way of offering local interpretations of Christianity and religion in public life, were considered as antithetic to the process of modernisation. Africans who did not renounce and distance themselves from their tradition, refusing to embrace a narrow and pre-conscripted interpretation and vision of the future, were rigidly cut off from the dominant discourse. As we saw in chapter two, literature pre-1990 represented AICs as external to the dominant discourse, which defined who or what was entitled to gain access to the process of being or becoming modern. As this thesis has argued, real pluralism has only been possible with the end of apartheid, which coincides with the end of a rigidly defined project of modernity. The apartheid-era model of modernity created a neat contraposition between future and past, modernity and tradition but also between right and wrong, fuelling the feeling among AICs that they had been positioned on the ‘wrong side’:

We have got our way of living Christianity. Whites defined what was right and what was wrong, even the way of talking of God, was defined by whites. We were on the wrong side for so many years. Slowly people, at least African people, not so sure about whites and mainline churches, started to understand that it was not a matter of being right or wrong, that one way of living religion and following God was the correct way, and everything else was a mistake. It was a matter of being different, of following God in different ways. We, as African black churches are able to give answers to Africans, to understand each other, even using our own languages and traditions. We are able to praise God in a way that Africans feel real. But in the past this way of living Christianity was considered wrong.<sup>84</sup>

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voting is not our only right. We have the right to ask for what we fought for, that means better conditions for everyone, not just for the leadership’. My interview with Ms Zukisa Mafika, member of the Native Church of South Africa in Jabulani, June 2002.

<sup>83</sup> See secularisation and the rationalisation process at page 217.

<sup>84</sup> Mr Radebe, member of the Methodist Church of South Africa, personal conversation after liturgy, fieldwork notes, Jabulani, 16 December 2001.

Since the eighties, academics have started to challenge the assumption of the dualistic premises of old and new, of two socially and culturally pure categories, as implausible.<sup>85</sup> Of course we should keep in mind that the process of colonisation has made it impossible to return to a pure uncontaminated space of authentic experience or thought from which the West can be expunged. For example Terence Ranger has stated that the idea of so-called traditional cultural forms are in some way in 'contradiction' with modern western societies 'belongs to a universe of inevitable transitions from one clear-cut type of society to another, a model which seemed convincing for a relatively brief moment of European industrialisation but which now seems more and more exception rather than the rule'.<sup>86</sup> In fact the model of society offered by my sample of investigation revealed that the two categories of old and new are not rigidly conceptualised and that this form of dualism does not belong to the cosmology of independent churches: 'There is no need to choose between tradition and God. Salvation does not mean that you have to leave your culture'.<sup>87</sup>

Cultural aspects and notions of tradition evolve and change. And we should always critically consider what kind of tradition we are talking about and when (and where) tradition was shaped. Links with the land and the village of people living in Soweto since the fifties are different from people living in villages in Limpopo Province thirty years ago. As Brandon Shank stated 'of all the "misnomers" in the "traditional African religion" "traditional" is perhaps the most misleading. It implies a set of beliefs that have not and will not change through time'.<sup>88</sup> This is certainly not the case. Beyond the rigidity of the old/new dichotomy, the value and meaning of certain rituals and beliefs have been marked by radical change through time and space. For example if we consider the relation between traditional African

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<sup>85</sup> See for example Ferguson J., *Expectations of Modernity*, 1999.

<sup>86</sup> Ranger T., 'Rural class struggle and popular ideology in the Transkei', *Southern African Review of Books*, 1987, p.13.

<sup>87</sup> Ms Brigitte Monyae, member of the Zion Congregation Church, interview after bible reading group, Jabulani, 6 April 2002.

<sup>88</sup> Shank B., *The Power of Neutrality, The Price of Politics: The African Independent Churches and Political Involvement*, Independent Study Project, 13 May 1996, p.10, unpublished paper, Professor Oosthuizen's personal archive, NERMIC, University of Zululand.

and Western medicine we can understand how in the past the complex and multifunctional relationship between Western medicine and traditional healing was misled. For example great emphasis was placed on the importance attributed to traditional medicine in independent churches, neglecting the recognition they attributed to Western medicine. According to many authors 'traditional' remedies were basic constituents of the majority of indigenous churches, and *sangomas* were consulted for 'problems ranging from aching feet to problems with the Holy Spirit'.<sup>89</sup> A survey conducted in the Durban metropolitan area in 1985 revealed instead that AICs' members had more faith in doctors and hospitals than their counterparts in the Mainline Churches.<sup>90</sup>

I would suggest then that the way to get beyond the limitations of linear and teleological descriptions is to give full importance to the recognition of coexisting variation at any given moment within the historical process. There is a complex range of local elaborations to realise the project of modernity, actual strategies followed by churches members that have not been considered by literature. This research recognises the need to see beyond classic interpretations of modernity and recognise the microscopic and macroscopic contradictions that manifest local productions of modernity. This also calls for a re-evaluation of AICs as agents of modernity and points the analysis in exciting new directions.

### **Agents of Modernity in Three 'Modern' Ways**

The five independent churches in Jabulani became an especially productive site for rethinking socio-political (and economic) ideas about history and modernity. This 'ethnographic testimony' forms the empirical core of my research and analysis.<sup>91</sup> For a certain (long) period academic interpretations saw independent church members (in the rural as in the urban context) as living in a backward past. Along

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<sup>89</sup> West M., *Black City*, 1975, p. 178.

<sup>90</sup> Oosthuizen G.C. (ed), *Religion Alive: Studies in New Movements and Indigenous Churches in Southern Africa*, Hodder and Stoughton, Johannesburg, 1986.

<sup>91</sup> Expression from Ferguson J, *Expectations of Modernity*, 1999, p.21.



the line of an imaginary historical succession AICs were positioned closer to superstition than to Christianity, to the past more than to the future. But the empirical material leads me to dispute the conventional wisdom that portrayed AICs as relics incapable of addressing contemporary challenges like personal, political and economic development.

Thinking of the relation between modernity and independent churches, some ideas germinated for a long time, while others developed rapidly. Inside the context of the South African democratisation process, churches perhaps are not the place to look for protection in isolation; it seemed to me that the religious space of independent churches does not construct walls to protect its members in isolation from external forces. AICs do not just provide a mere defence from the political situation as David Chidester suggested.<sup>92</sup> External forces instead enter into the religious space and there they are challenged. Protection in the face of these forces comes through a healing process, an articulated process that does not consist merely of spiritual answers. Economic, political, social and all other discourses are infused in religious life and it is within the religious community by adopting a religious (African) way that it is possible to face these challenges. There is no separation between a sermon in the liturgy and a political attack on the disappointments of the current government, there is no distinction between an overnight vigil and collecting money for victims of HIV/AIDS and their families.

Several vignettes and interviews led me to reflect on the different interpretative tools I was using to analyse certain events. There is a need for a Western researcher to abandon the cultural interpretation of separate spheres between religious discourses and secular/social discourses derived ultimately from the Enlightenment. As this research documented, this dichotomy loses sense in the context of independent churches. If we take for example the episode of the collection of money for a blind person recounted in chapter six, where women gathered for

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<sup>92</sup> And I would suggest that this interpretation would be also applicable to the apartheid era (time in which Chidester wrote his article). Chidester D., *Religion Alive*, 1988.

prayer finished by collecting money for a blind member of the church, or the bible reading group that turned out to be a discussion on political events and became a moment for prayer for political activists in prison, it is possible to highlight a different system of values designed for these contexts.<sup>93</sup> On both occasions I asked the participants to explain why they were dedicating time to what I considered a different outcome from the original intent of the meeting, the prayer in the first case and the bible reading in the second. On both occasions (and these are just two examples, there are many others) the participants were surprised by my question and they explained to me that there was no difference or contradiction between praying and collecting money for the poor, or reading the bible and praying for justice and political rights.<sup>94</sup> These delineations of values were designed for other contexts, but there were no such delineations in the context of AICs. Time and space were experienced differently in the religious communities. It is sufficient to think about the long liturgies, all night services, symbolic meanings of time; the fact that there was no institutional physical church, that the church's services were held in classrooms and prayers in open-fields or in supermarket car-parks, were not important.

It was a matter of *locus*: there was no separation between places for rituals and worshipping and places for public and political debate according to my 'Western' and 'secular' perception of space. These spaces do not just overlap but they fuse together to create one entity, difficult to define if not in the way that was repeatedly recounted to me: 'this is the African way'. Praying in the 'African way', reading the bible in the 'African way', looking for politician solutions in the 'African way', taking care of crime in the 'African way', dealing with HIV/AIDS in the 'African way'. It is challenging to describe and think about this 'African way' for a non-African. Understanding the meaning of religion in this context means losing the conceptual burdens of division or spheres. The religious community was the

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<sup>93</sup> Chapter 6, 'African Independent Churches in Post-Apartheid South Africa: New Political Interpretations'.

<sup>94</sup> This point, in some way, is the result of a conversation with Professor Andrew Walls, Edinburgh, July 2006.

physical place where political discourse emerged, where the techniques of resistance to the township's challenges were elaborated, where religion blurred with all else, as the analysis offered in chapter five highlighted.<sup>95</sup> AICs were not 'bridges to the past' according to my respondents and interviewees. Indeed they were not bridges to anything or anywhere as political, social and religious spheres did not and had never existed within the churches. There was nothing to connect; everything was already connected. When I asked church members 'what it meant to be modern?' I was rebuked: 'Does it mean that just people with a collar, with an expensive car and a bank job can be modern? Because I live in a township I am not modern?'<sup>96</sup> Like the churches themselves, modernity is everywhere.

### **African Independent Churches and Development**

Gerardus Oosthuizen lamented that AICs, although highly relevant to the modernisation process (in terms of mediating the meaning of change), are usually considered to be irrelevant or reactionary obstacles to real development as if they are nearer to the 'primal community with its isolationist disposition' without acknowledging any change.<sup>97</sup> 'Explanations that the black man has not grown out of this primitive "communality", that he looks for no other solution than a magic-religious one'.<sup>98</sup> Oosthuizen recognised the capacity of Nehemia Tile, who established the first independent church in 1884 and was a precursor of 'black consciousness', and he identified his work as a facilitator of the modernisation process. And fundamentally an important characteristic of independent Christianity was not recognised, which is the idea that 'human dignity' has always been central in the AICs message.<sup>99</sup> Kamphausen said that Kiernan was right to define the independent movement as an attempt to modernise (and he adds to emancipate,

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<sup>95</sup> Chapter 5, 'The Growth and Dynamism of African Independent Churches in Post-Apartheid South Africa'.

<sup>96</sup> Sister Monica Monyae, Jabulani, Focus Group 1, after CAIC meeting, 13 October 2001.

<sup>97</sup> Oosthuizen G.C., *The AIC and the Modernisations Process*, working paper, p.9, NERMIC, Zululand University (article published with the same title in *Africana Marburgensia*, 20 (1), 1997, pp. 59-81)

<sup>98</sup> Oosthuizen G.C., *The AIC and the Modernisations Process*, working paper, p.10.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

referring to Ethiopianism as an agent of black identity's emancipation) the Africans through education.<sup>100</sup> Education (as emancipation) was a recurrent theme and claim in the churches I studied. This point emerged from different respondents, for example Archbishop Ngada said: 'Most people didn't go to school, they had no education whatsoever. Because of that we found that really something must be done. So we started a theological class in our garages because we don't have buildings and we started to discuss what to do for people's problems'.<sup>101</sup> And again 'Why are we poor in Africa? For lack of education. We need education to understand God. It is our right to be educated and to have a better life'.<sup>102</sup>

Crucially, I have argued that independent churches in Jabulani acted as groups that focus on the reformation of the individual and family life, and are political in the way they concern themselves pragmatically with local community issues like housing, unemployment, health care, education and so on.<sup>103</sup> Like the early Methodist campaign against 'vices', they try to strengthen and stabilise the family and the community. These issues are at the centre of sermons and teaching in the churches. In this way they directly address the social and the moral ills around them, with the primary purpose to heal and to improve the life and soul of their members. The religious community functions as a social institution that constantly controls its space and its boundaries. Churches become an opportunity to construct social relations. For example, against the danger of the street in the township, great attention is paid to controlling children through special strategies. Home and church are linked in the respondents' interpretation. Especially in the responses of women, the religious community becomes the place that supports home and the family against the negative aspects of the external environment and where values of respect and dignity were maintained. This point was well expressed in Kiernan's

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<sup>100</sup> Kamphausen E., 'Beginning of the Independent' in Harold Turner's archive, Edinburgh University, MF 423.

<sup>101</sup> Archbishop Ngada, 8 March 2002, Walkerville, Johannesburg; see chapter 3.

<sup>102</sup> Bishop Ntongana, Jabulani, Focus Group 1, after CAIC meeting, 13 October 2001, see chapter 3.

<sup>103</sup> Martin B. 'From pre to postmodernity' in Heelas P. (*et al.*) (ed), *Religion/Modernity*, 1998, pp. 106-137.

study on the role of culture in Zulu Zionism in the KwaZulu-Natal mines. Zulu Zionism, Kiernan argued, transformed the use of money to serve their own needs and to assist in the creation and maintenance of a boundary between themselves and non-Zionist: 'what might otherwise make inroads into their organisational integrity is purposively subverted to be used in building and preserving the distinctive Zionist order'.<sup>104</sup>

Chucchiari's study on Pentecostalism in Sicily and its function as a transformative agent, could be emblematic in explaining how certain religious expressions could function as transformative agents in particular historical periods. In a certain sense the Cucchiari's model of Pentecostalism could be applied to independent churches in post-apartheid South Africa.<sup>105</sup> If we consider the traumatic nature of the transformative nation-building moment, we can affirm that African independent churches are acting as a transformative system with regards to the surrounding panoply of rapid changes (social, political, economic and construction of identity). In the contemporary moment of nation building, AICs demonstrated themselves to be actors that consolidate this process (although in the past they were not included inside political interpretations and analyses). AICs develop the potentiality of self-development, freedom and self-empowerment, as well as techniques of economic resistance and development,<sup>106</sup> and political participation and awareness in a sacred space in religious terms. AICs appear to be formidably predisposed to deal with the tensions of the transitional period of the country also at a political level by giving space to education on political and civic rights, making people conscious of changes, mediating the political language (see graphic below). For this reason it is important to recognise the value of AICs as vehicles of development and if

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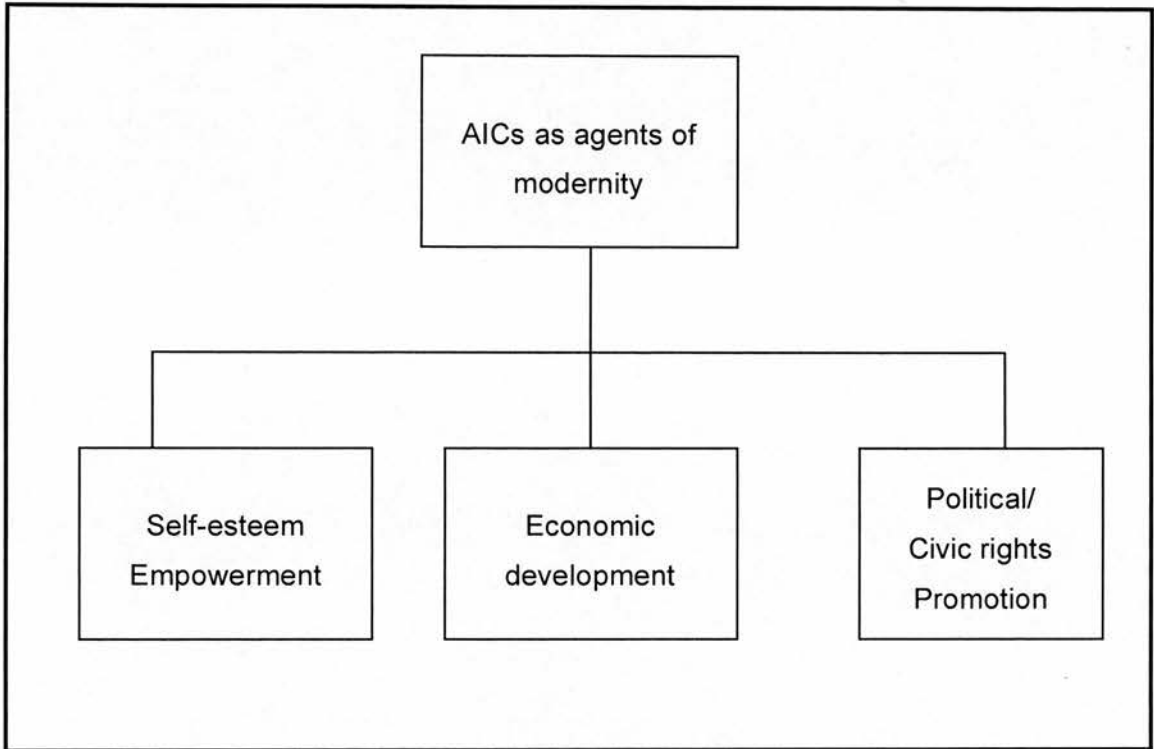
<sup>104</sup> Kiernan J.P., 'The other side of the coin: conversion of money to religious purposes in Zulu Zionist churches' in *Man* (N.S.), 23 (3), 1988, p.456.

<sup>105</sup> Chucchiari S., 'Between shame and sanctification: Patriarchy and its transformation in Sicilian Pentecostalism' in *American Ethnologist*, 17 (4), 1990, pp. 687-707.

<sup>106</sup> This encouragement to micro-entrepreneurship is typical of the informal economy.



development is part of the modernisation process, then we have to understand AICs as vehicles of modernity (figure 5).<sup>107</sup>



**Figure 5** AICs: three ways of acting as agents of modernity

For these active inputs, I see the religious community as a site that has shaped the idea of modernity as much as it has been shaped and affected by it; a place that reinterprets the modern discourse (still as an incomplete project) in its own local and particular way. Western secular intellectuals, who tend to regard political protest as the only proper, rational or secular response to dramatic social change, ‘have simply failed to recognise the religious movements of the poor as genuine

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<sup>107</sup> For the great majority of the church members under my analysis, development coincide with the idea of a ‘better living’ and ‘liberation from poverty’ implicit in the project of reconstruction of the nation-building process. Several informants, fieldwork notes, September 2001- September 2002.

mass movements'.<sup>108</sup> And we can further ask if research on mass movements in Africa has given enough recognition to religious movements.<sup>109</sup> For this reason this work supports the idea that AICs have to be contextualised within a socio-political analysis to be able to understand all the aspects of their everyday life, even though political analysis was traditionally not applied to these churches. If literature from the 80s in South Africa<sup>110</sup> started to investigate what religion is and what it represents from an African perspective, then perhaps there is still a need to investigate what modernity is from a non-Western perspective. Modernity in Africa, this work would suggest, has to be investigated from a regional and local perspective to discover specificity and local relations within the Eurocentric idea of modernity.

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<sup>108</sup> Martin B. 'From pre to postmodernity' in Heelas P. (*et al.*) (ed), *Religion/Modernity*, 1998, p. 110.

<sup>109</sup> For a brief analysis of the religious contribution inside the UDF see chapter 5, 'Mandela Mania: Mainline Christianity in Post-Apartheid South Africa'.

<sup>110</sup> Different in other countries, see chapter two, 'Historiography and AICs in South Africa'.

## Chapter 8

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### Conclusion

If we think in narrow teleological terms of progress, development and modernisation, then religion should have disappeared. But independent churches 'far from being irrational forms of beliefs, are a form of historical consciousness, a sort of social diagnostics. In this sense, they strongly resemble other forms of social, economic and political diagnostics, originating in the academy and without, that try to explain why the world is the way it is'.<sup>1</sup> This analysis acknowledges that no feeling has been perceived within independent churches themselves that the term modernity has to be exclusively associated with Western culture; instead it has been associated with Western development and Western wealth, health and welfare. The link remains at an economic and organisational level. A proud sense of African culture as part of an African modern discourse emerged again and again from the research.

Following the weaknesses in the literature on independent churches and the findings of my research, I have tried to position this religious movement at the centre of a socio-political analysis that has been used to reinterpret the relation between independent churches and modernity, with its associated implications of progress, development and future, in the particular situation of post-apartheid South Africa. The main focus of this research was to observe and document how beliefs operate in an everyday context where religious interpretations are an integral part of socio-political realities; how Independent Christianity meets the basic needs of the poor and vulnerable when the state is unable or unwilling to do so; and how traditional

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<sup>1</sup> Moore H.L., Sanders T., 'Introduction' in Sanders T. (ed), *Magical Interpretations*, 1999, p.20.

religious ideas underpin developmental decision-making in the state and 'formalised' religious organisations. I would argue, moreover, that is 'only by descending to the quotidian and the empirical that one can observe the ways in which such movements operate to empower individuals in new ways and open up to them freedoms'.<sup>2</sup> This is not an isolated phenomenon in history and similarities could be traced with other Christian movements in the past, like the role of Methodism among working class people in the early phase of industrialisation in England.

Faiths and faith-based organisations pose a serious challenge both to conventional development theories that assume that personal faith is something for the private sphere, and to current development practice (largely premised on measurable goals of efficiency or equity) that presume that development is not well served when matters of personal faith affect the recruitment of staff, the selection of tasks, the choice of beneficiaries or clientele and the management of projects. If we consider the political transition to post-apartheid in South Africa, we have to take into account the fact that AICs have an acknowledged capacity to generate 'social capital' and thus to mobilise their adherents, sometimes in different ways from other forms of social mobilisation.<sup>3</sup> On their own or in partnership, AICs are often similar to other collective actors, but possibly adding value, for example through leadership perceived as clean and committed; through local roots and sources of accountability; through a commitment to values compatible with democratisation, good governance, environmental and other forms of sustainability, as well as participation.

To conclude, this research allows us to interrogate what the concept of modernity means in contemporary South Africa. Michael Watts, amongst many others, points to a totalising twinned dependency where the modern (and developed) cannot exist

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<sup>2</sup> Martin B. 'From Pre to Postmodernity' in Heelas P. (*et al.*) (ed), *Religion/Modernity*, 1998, p.113.

<sup>3</sup> See for example chapter 5, in particular the section 'Elaborating Techniques of Resistance: AIC Responses to the Social Environment'

without the non-modern (and undeveloped).<sup>4</sup> For David Harvey these ‘oppositions that contain the other’,<sup>5</sup> are the clashing of two great meta-narratives. We know that they clash, but what does that mean? And what cultural formations are produced? Following Knauff<sup>6</sup> it is possible to conclude that by delving into the real, the spaces in which the modern and non-modern are contested, where we argue alternative modernities are generated, we can produce insights into what modernity might be and what that might mean. The experience of the five African Independent Churches in Jabulani point to four key issues that speak to different elements of a modern-local dialectic.

Firstly, in given contexts even religious institutions,<sup>7</sup> in contraposition to secularising theories, can be agent of modernity. AIC developmental techniques, rooted into African tradition (e.g. *stokvels*), are used in the township to promote ‘modern’ development. This stretching from the non-modern to the modern and back again resonates with James Ferguson’s fractured modernist vision of the twisting of linear trajectories of change and unproblematic teleologies in Zambia.<sup>8</sup> Appropriation and requisition can blur the boundaries of the modern and non-modern quite as efficiently as globalisation is supposed to be able to do. Latour’s ‘mythical frontier’ of modernisation can readily be crossed, and for us this crossing does not represent transcending a modern/non-modern binary but rather the production of something new and something localised.<sup>9</sup>

Secondly, the Soweto experience points to independent churches as something more complex and dynamic than merely repositories of tradition and belief. AICs are actively engaged in creating spaces to interpret the political situation and its rapid

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<sup>4</sup> Watts, M., ‘The crisis of development’, in Crush J. (ed), *Power*, 1995.

<sup>5</sup> Harvey, D., ‘From place to space and back again’ in Bird R.J. (et al.) (ed), *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, Routledge, London, 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Knauff B.M., *Critically Modern*, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> And this does not only refer to independent churches but to any form of Christian denomination or other religion. See for example the role of the Catholic Church in the struggle against HIV/AIDS in South Africa (see chapter 7 and chapter 6).

<sup>8</sup> Ferguson J., *Expectations of Modernity*, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Latour, B., *Never Been Modern*, 1993.



and traumatic changes in society. Independent churches are engaged as development agents disseminating techniques of personal and economic development to challenge the harshness of the township. These churches are generating a series of heterodoxies regarding the political situation (especially at a local level), drawing attention to definitions of what political participation and political activism might mean. Whether that be in terms of contesting the operate of political leaders or teaching to fight and protest for civic rights, AICs are adept at spreading local networks of interaction and communication and in doing so are folding the modern into the local.

Thirdly, the case study underscores the complexity of the politics and practice of the nation-building process in South Africa with all its sets of expectations of progress. At this present time, the political change in the country represents neither a shiny modernist utopia, nor a post-modern dystopia where there is no space for progress and improvement. The case study instead illustrates how the desire to become modern is clearly not only and simply an intellectual academic speculation but that it is something tangible in the township (and I assume in a more general African) context. The modernisation myth has never been merely an academic invention. AICs have been shown to act as agents of modernity, especially along three particular relevant kinds of contributions: personal emancipation, developmental inputs and political strength in the advancement and promotion of democratic values. These activities are fundamentally embedded in church members' realities, whether they be the need to achieve food security, concerns over issues of safety and security in the township, or the local capacity to develop particular techniques of saving and money accumulation. As described above, the impulse to create discourses and debate and undertake activities and action is contested, shaped and wrought in the local context.

Fourthly and finally, notions of modernity, and of what is modern and what is not, should be subject to more critical and more place-based study.<sup>10</sup> The Jabulani experience points to the need to understand the local, social, cultural, economic contexts in which knowledge and practice are generated. Churches' negotiation with what is modern demonstrates elements of assimilation, appropriation and absorption refracted through the prism of the local. The context shapes the way in which notions of modernity are absorbed and indeed shape the very notion of modernity itself. In an effort to distance debates from the meta-narratives of 'modern' and 'modernity at large' scholars have talked about 'plural modernities'. The meaning of modernity *per se* does not change. Modernity in this case study still coincides with the Western idea of development and with an idea of future and improvement. But in this context of analysis different actors have been considered as generating space for the different ways they operate within the project of modernity. I would then use the word modernities in the plural but rather without changing the main meaning of the term, instead considering the local specificities, presenting different local contributions to this idea. It is not the meaning of modernity that changes but the way modernity is pursued according to local interpretations.

I hope that this research has contributed to the debate on independent churches in at least two specific ways: offering an alternative to interpretations of modernity and to reconsider the meaning of political action and political involvement in a non-Western context. These interpretations sought to consider AICs as social and political actors that actively participate and contribute in a 'modern' way to the nation-building process. In this way AICs in the post-apartheid era represent both a challenge and a contributor to the new South African state.

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<sup>10</sup> Knauff B.M., *Critically Modern*, 2002.

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## Appendix 1 - Interviews

### Semi-structured interviews

Archbishop Denis Hurley (OMI), Catholic Dioceses, Durban, 20 August 2001

Mr Pedy Kearny, head of Diakonia Council of Churches, Durban, 20 August 2001

Sister Shelag Mary, Justice and Peace Commission, Johannesburg, 18 September 2001

Rev Wesley Mabuza, Institute for a Contextual Theology, Johannesburg, 20 September 2001

Sister Ellen Ellison, SACBC, Pretoria, 04 August 2005

Sister Ines Ceruti, GRAIL, Johannesburg, several interviews

Prof James Cochrane, Department of Religious Studies, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 15 April 2001

Dr Beyers Naude, Dutch Reformed Church and Christian Institute, Johannesburg, 16 July 2002.

Dr Wolfram Kistner, Lutheran theologian, Johannesburg, 14 July 2002.

Rev Cedric Mayson, Religious Bureau of the African National Congress, ANC headquarter, Johannesburg, 30 October 2001.

Dr Molefe Tsele, general secretary of the South African Council of Churches, Johannesburg, 30 May 2002

Bishop Ntongana, Methodist Church of South Africa and director of Centre of African Instituted Churches (CAIC), Jabulani, 22 September 2001.

Archbishop Ndumiso Ngada, Zion Christian Church and director of the Association Spiritual Churches Association (ASCA) and commissioner of the ANC's Commission for Religious Leaders Forum, Walkerville, 08 March 2002.

Pastor Eddy Edwards (leader of the African Christian Forum), the Jesus Celebration Centre, Industria, 15 May 2002.

Charles Villa-Vicencio, Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, Cape Town, July 02 August 2002.

### **Unstructured interviews**

Bishop Masuku, Native Church of South Africa, Jabulani, 14 July 2002.

Mr Radebe, member of the Apostolic Church of South Africa, Jabulani, 16 March 2002.

Mr Themba, member of the South African Christian Church in Zion, Jabulani, 16 December 2001.

Sister Monica Monyae, member of the Zion Christian Congregation, Jabulani, 13 October 2001.

Mr Ncube, member of the Native Church of South Africa, Jabulani 16 December 2001.

Mrs Mafa, member of the Methodist Church of South Africa, Jabulani, 17 February 2002.

Mrs Radebe, member of the Native Church of South Africa, Jabulani 14 April 2002.

Mrs Lulu Luthuli, Jabulani, member of the Zion Congregation Church, Jabulani, 10 March 2002.

Ms Regina Motole, member of the Zion Congregation Church, 9 June 2002.

Mama Ntongana, bishop's wife, member of the Methodist Church of South Africa, Jabulani, several interviews.

Sipho Gwanya, elder member of the Native Church of South Africa, Jabulani 24 March 2002.

Ms Thando, member of the Native Church of South Africa, Jabulani, 24 March 2002.

Mrs Nana Myeza, member of the Native Church of South Africa, Jabulani, 22 February 2002.

Ms Lindigwe Mokoena, member of the Zion Congregation Church, Jabulani, 17 February 2002.

Mr Xolela Modise, elder member of the Native Church of South Africa in Jabulani, Soweto, December 2001.

Ms Stella Hadebe, member of the Apostolic Church of South Africa, Jabulani, 10 November 2001.

Mr Mbuli, member of the Ethiopian Church in Jabulani, 17 February 2002.

Ms Thando Letsolao, member of the South African Christian Church in Zion, Jabulani, 18 November 2001.

Mr Motambo, elder of the Native Church of South Africa, Jabulani, 24 February 2002.

Mr Joel Mbuli, member of the Methodist Church of South Africa, Jabulani, 28 October 2001.

Mr Masoto, member of the Methodist Church of South Africa, Jabulani, 13 April 2002.

Mr John Rhadebe, member of the Zion Congregation Church, Jabulani, 13 April 2002.

Mrs Khumalo, member of the Zion Congregation Church, Jabulani, 13 March 2002.

Reverend Jacob, member of the Zion Congregation Church, Jabulani, 20 February 2002.

Ms Zukiswa Mafika, member of the Native Church of South Africa, Jabulani, 12 June 2002.

Mr Radebe, member of the Methodist Church of South Africa, personal conversation after liturgy, fieldwork notes, Jabulani, Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> December 2001.

Ms Brigitte Monyae, member of the Zion Congregation Church, Jabulani, 6 April 2002.

Mr Simon Modise, member of the South African Christian Church in Zion, Jabulani, 10 March 2002.

Mrs Elizabeth Nngonyama, elder of the South African Christian Church in Zion, Jabulani, 24 March 2002.

Mrs Matshiqi, member of the Ethiopian Church, Jabulani, 17 February 2002.

Mama Modise, member of the South African Christian Church in Zion, Jabulani, 10 March 2002.

Mrs Regina Mangena, member of the Zion Congregation Church, Jabulani, 14 July 2002.

Mrs Thembi Zikala, member of the Native Church of South Africa, Jabulani, 28 October 2001.

Mr Isaac Tshiqi, member of Ethiopian Church, Jabulani, 18 November 2001.

Mr Chilame, member of the Native Church of South Africa, Jabulani, 26 May 2002.

Sister Stella Mthembo, affiliated to CAIC, Jabulani, 13 October 2001.

Mr Elias Kubeka, affiliated to CAIC, Jabulani, 13 October 2001.

Bishop Mabanga, affiliated to CAIC, Jabulani, 13 October 2001.

Prophetess Elizabeth Lamola, affiliated to CAIC, Jabulani, 13 October 2001.

## Appendix 2 – Published Article

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### ‘Mandela Mania’: mainline churches in post-apartheid South Africa

BARBARA BOMPANI

**ABSTRACT** *This paper investigates the public role of mainline churches in post-apartheid South Africa and their interaction with the political discourse. The action of churches in the public sphere in the 1990s has been commonly defined as ‘critical solidarity’ and their voice was of support and alignment with the African National Congress (ANC) position in the process of nation building. Through an analysis of political and religious discourse this paper aims to demonstrate that it is possible to identify a shift in the churches’ action in the past five years, passing from a position of alignment and non-confrontation with the government to a situation of disengagement and critical opposition. This reshaped relationship highlights the internal and external difficulties of the ANC in shifting from liberation to democracy. This is underscored by the generation of rhetoric and myth that preclude critical spaces, asserting the inalienable right of the ANC to produce all political discourses.*

It is like to say you are good if you embrace Mandela’s position. The Mandela Mania became a very challenging theological factor for the Churches. Churches have to say where do they stand when the magic of Mandela has gone. (Dr Molefe Tsele, General Secretariat of the Southern Africa Council of Churches (SACC))<sup>1</sup>

This article investigates the role of the mainstream churches as political actors in post-apartheid South Africa.<sup>2</sup> Two main periods are usually identified with respect to churches as sociopolitical actors in South Africa: the process of colonisation, in which they acted as a vehicle of modernisation and westernisation of the indigenous population, and the liberation struggle that brought apartheid to an end. South Africa’s democratic transition has meant many things for various religious communities. The ecumenical movement, whose identity was closely knit to the anti-apartheid era, has emerged considerably weaker. This happened in part because senior leadership was lost to new institutions of state or other secular organisations

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and business, in part because the shift from the key of resistance to that of co-operation with government proved very difficult, and in part because its reason for existence and identity was no longer obvious.<sup>3</sup> In an interview the General Secretary of the Southern African Council of Churches (SACC), Dr Molefe Tsele explained the position of the churches after 1994 in this way:

1994 meant for the churches realignment to policy. The role of the SACC and its identity changed enormously and drastically. The churches were not able to relate to the new reality. The change is connected to the theology of power of the persons who now are in charge in Parliament, colleagues and friends. They asked us not speaking about history; we have to speak about reconciliation just in terms of future. Speaking about the past means to be against reconciliation. The public opinion embraced just the *Mandela mania*. The reconciliation of Mandela and of the TRC was popular with perpetrators and became a very great attraction for media.<sup>4</sup>

The end of apartheid defined the end of churches' engagement in the political arena, although not as actors supportive of the ANC project of nation building. This paper demonstrates that there has been a change in churches' action in public life in the past five years, from the dominant position of alignment and co-optation towards a more independent and critical voice that has created a distance between churches and the government position. This period is marked by a change inside the churches, especially in the voice of the SACC and its current leadership, and is characterised by a new wave of criticism of government policy. At the 2001 national conference of the SACC the council adopted an 'attitude of critical engagement in its dealings with the state and other organs of civil society'.<sup>5</sup> These different attitudes are the result of a new interaction between the religious leadership and political life, as it searches for a place in contemporary South Africa. If the South African state after decolonisation has found that the assimilation and appropriation of Christian values and terminology has spurred the integration of various forms of militancy and division, on the other hand South African mainstream Christianity after 1994 has had to pay a high price in terms of independence from political transformation.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Pluralism in civil society: the anti-apartheid struggle and the democratic context**

Churches in South Africa have been broadly recognised as a fundamental part of civil society. However, studies of them have tended to lack detailed analysis of the role of churches' actions and identities within the broader sweep of civil society. It is important to study churches within civil society so as to give fuller recognition to diversity, plural identities and plurality of aims and endeavours within civil society broadly writ, a complexity and plurality that has often been denied (or not properly recognised) by the history of liberation.<sup>7</sup> If it was difficult to disaggregate religious action in the liberation movement, it will be possible in the post-apartheid period, with its fuller



recognition of pluralities, to better understand the singularities and diversities of individual actors in the sociopolitical spectrum. South Africa has been the world regime most concerned with identity. Apartheid policies, with the imposition of strongly defined racial and ethnic identities, had denied the space for flexibility and pluralism. Terence Ranger defined the obsessive identity articulation of the apartheid regime as the production of 'frozen' identities.<sup>8</sup> It is important to understand how the post-apartheid apparatus has acted and dealt with the 'defrosting' of these identities.

Prophetic Christianity did not formulate alternative and independent solutions to the struggle and never heralded a Christian 'third way' to heal South African society. Christian efforts were orientated as part of the broader liberation movement. It is not possible to talk of a Christian struggle but rather of Christian leaders and activists as part of the liberation movement. Prophetic Christianity in South Africa has also never been synonymous with a strong and monolithic Church. On the contrary, it was often from ecumenical institutions such as Diakonia and the Institute for Contextual Theology, and from organisations such as the Young Christian Students within the different Christian denominations that people entered the movement; Christian political leaders and activists often entered the movement without the support of their parishes.<sup>9</sup> Christian opposition, like other social movements, lost its singular identity under the United Democratic Front (UDF) structure in the name of the liberation struggle. The notion of 'the people' was seen as a unified whole in the 1980s, which did not allow for much internal differentiation and diversity, although in reality this movement was composed of disparate segments.

In the 1990s the ANC had to bring together in a single organisation different realities: leaders in prison, exiled people, the militant wing of *Umkhonto se Sizwe*, and an active internal mass movement not formally part of the ANC.<sup>10</sup> The idea of considering the people not as a monolithic unit but as composed of different fragments with different interests and history, is quite recent to South Africa.<sup>11</sup> The broad understanding of how past and present relations are constructed and preserved is reflected in the conception and usage of the term 'post'. Postcolonial, post-apartheid and post-liberation are all terms that define an historical period in contraposition to the previous one.<sup>12</sup> There is no fluid passage from one to the other. Belonging to a political site in the struggle for liberation created dynamics and expectations in the post-apartheid period.

To a certain extent the idea of unity appears as a *trait d'union* between the liberation struggle and the post-liberation period. If in the past all the energies were directed towards the struggle against the common enemy, in the current situation the ANC is calling for unity across all the different segments in the name of a perpetuating struggle that coincides with the process of democratisation. But pluralism brought a new conceptualisation and exercise of power: the rigid binary of the anti-apartheid struggle has been replaced by independent heterogeneous sites that deal individually with centres of power. Drawing perspectives from other countries in the postcolonial period it is possible to identify the idea that the maintenance of unity was more important than democracy in the African conditions of the 1960s.<sup>13</sup> There is an historical tradition that identifies civil society action in contraposition to

the government, primarily involved in a struggle against the aggression and disrespect of civic and human rights. In this sense African civil society has frequently been portrayed as 'anti-state'.<sup>14</sup> There is a constant emphasis on the need for unity in ANC statements, in parliamentary discourses and individual MCs speeches:

It is at this stage of our transition that we should strive for the greatest unity of purpose across the nation manifested in partnerships between the state and civil society with the minimum disruption to the delivery of goods and services to the mass of the people.<sup>15</sup>

Those most supportive of the independence of civil society have expressed concern that the relationship between civil society and the ANC would not be characterised by a constructive dialectic but by the subordination of all the organisations to the party.<sup>16</sup> The ANC's intention was not for the maintenance of the United Democratic Movement (UDM) as an organisation, but to absorb some of its cadres into its own structures. The debate on the role of civil society in the transition has shown the difficulties of maintaining the autonomy of civil society from an overarching party. Civic movements played an important role in the struggles for democratisation but this was difficult to sustain once the institutions of representative democracy had been put in place. The movements were affected in two ways: many civic leaders saw the achievement of a democratic political system as the conclusion of civics' primary function. Popular grievances could now be raised through channels that were not available in the 1980s, such as the ANC or other parties, MPs, members of the provincial legislatures or local councillors.<sup>17</sup> The general relationship of civil society and the government has been well expressed by Kotze:

[A] classic swing of the political pendulum had thus take place and, for quite some time, there would be little meeting ground between government and civil society. The expectation of a perfect match and 'comradely' co-operation between government and civil society proved naïve and unrealistic. In reality, this relationship is infinitely more complex and assumes different shapes in different times.<sup>18</sup>

The general strategy of South African religious groups' move from state resistance during the liberation struggle into 'critical support' of the new post-apartheid state can be explained in part through other movements' pathways to democracy but in part for unique internal reasons. These include the fact that religious institutions and leaders withdrew from the political arena, and there was a return to a denominational character (abandoning the ecumenical alliance), flight of leadership and trained people into bureaucratic or political institutions, weak financial support from abroad, problems with membership and internal problems of redefinition of identity. Paddy Kearney has pointed out that 'churches' adoption of critical solidarity was more similar to a form of cooperation with the power than with the poor. Churches were scared of criticising the government.<sup>19</sup>

**Christianity and opposition: ANC as ruling party or post-liberation movement?**

State and religious movements or churches are considered in this paper as sites in which identities, goals, techniques of action and conceptualisations of beliefs are shaped through the interaction of institutions and individuals. The nature of these interactions changes in different historical moments, as it is possible to see in the comparison between the apartheid and post-apartheid periods. As was the experience in much of postcolonial Africa, demands for unity may be used by elites to counter the more militant and self-interested demands of various constituencies, including those of trade unions and movements such as churches. In South Africa the comparatively high degree of organisation achieved by such groups during the long struggle against minority rule represented a potential conflict between these groups and the ruling party's elites. The call for unity in the name of the past anti-apartheid struggle impelled the different voices of civil society to abandon criticism and differences in the name of nation building.<sup>20</sup> The dialectic relationship between state and organisations involved in the struggle had lost its own *raison d'être* at the moment when the political arena became populated by the same agents of the grassroots movements. The new eschatology in the current scenario becomes unity itself.

This phenomenon is connected to the nature of the ruling party: did the ANC abandon the character of the struggle movement in the democratic context or does it still adopt symbols, techniques, mythology and rhetorical language linked to the struggle? Should actors deny their own originality in the name of the past? This problem is not new in the postcolonial situation of African countries. A core belief within the ANC remains that the organisation is not only a political party but is still a liberation movement.<sup>21</sup> The terminology is not merely used to keep its social appeal (the end of apartheid through the ANC leadership) but to highlight its current role of liberator of 'Africans, in particular black people in general from political and economic bondages'.<sup>22</sup> This liberation of the African depends on economic and institutional changes brought on by the government. One of its goals is to oppose resistance and to extend its control 'to all levels of power'.<sup>23</sup> In the ANC journal, *Umrabulo*, Gugile Nwinti, stated that 'as a political party, the ANC allows for criticism. But its leadership tends to be defensive when responding to criticism; even what appears to be fair criticism. That is why people find it easy to criticise the organisation informally, or move into sister organisations to criticise it'. And again: 'One is afraid to criticise for fear of being labelled as belonging to this or the other group, probably bent on destroying a leader or the organisation itself'.<sup>24</sup>

The reaction of the ANC to criticism can be analysed from two perspectives: internally and externally. The 2005 Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA) report on democracy in the country stated that, if generally there is freedom of speech, there is also a price to pay for making opposition to

the ruling African National Congress: 'There is full freedom of speech but it comes with a price. What this means is that arguing with the ANC has its own price both within the ruling party and outside.'<sup>25</sup> While freedom of expression within political parties is affected by strong party discipline and control, and politicians are reluctant to engage individually with the media and with the public, at another level criticism from outside the party is inevitably accused of being anti-patriotic and against the national interest.<sup>26</sup> Opposition by religious organisations or religious leaders to government policy is not an exception. For example, Cedric Mayson said in the *Mail and Guardian*: 'For the past two years some religious leaders and NGOs seem to have used the HIV/AIDS epidemic to make personal political attacks on the president of South Africa'.<sup>27</sup> One month later President Mbeki stated: 'Religious faiths had some difficulty in determining what their role would be in the aftermath of the common victory over the apartheid regime. They have abandoned the common struggle against the legacy of apartheid.'<sup>28</sup> This renegotiation of the churches' critical position with regard to the state should form an important strand for future analysis. Offering an alternative to the ruling party's political discourse assumes the meaning of 'abandoning the struggle' and creates strong cleavages between the ANC discourse and the religious one.

#### **The language of politics and power**

An analysis of the ANC leaders' language reveals its deeply formal character, which has evolved over a long history as a revolutionary movement.<sup>29</sup> An interaction between Archbishop Desmond Tutu, after his lecture at the Nelson Mandela Foundation, and President Thabo Mbeki illustrates this point. After a long report on what had been achieved by the South African state after 1994, the Archbishop lingered on the current problems of the South African situation. After identifying HIV/AIDS as the 'most serious', Tutu passed to another order of problems that we can characterise as a call for a 'better society':

We want our society to be characterised by vigorous debate and dissent where to disagree is part and parcel of a vibrant community, that we should play the ball not the person and not think that those who disagree, who express dissent, are ipso facto disloyal or unpatriotic. An unthinking, uncritical, kowtowing party line-toeing is fatal to a vibrant democracy. I am concerned to see how many have so easily been seemingly cowed and apparently intimidated to comply. I am sure that proportional representation has been a very good thing but it should have been linked to constituency representation... Truth cannot suffer from being challenged and examined. There surely can't have been unanimity from the outset. I did not agree with the President [on HIV/AIDS] but that did not make me his enemy. He knows that I hold him in high regard but none of us is infallible and that is why we are a democracy and not a dictatorship... We should not too quickly want to pull rank and to demand an uncritical, sycophantic, obsequious conformity.<sup>30</sup>

In the African National Congress's online publication, *ANC Today*, President Mbeki replied:

One of the fundamental requirements for rational discussion suggested by the archbishop is familiarity with the facts relevant to any matter under discussion, as well as respect for the truth... The Archbishop has never been a member of the ANC and would have very little knowledge of what happens in an ANC branch.<sup>31</sup>

He continued by calling Tutu 'a liar with scant regard for the truth, and a charlatan posing with his concern for the poor, the hungry, the oppressed and the voiceless'.<sup>32</sup>

The ANC took a more conciliatory approach in the words of its spokesperson Smuts Ngoyama but it is interesting to see how he addressed the Congress of South African Trades Unions (COSATU) leader, Zwelinzima Vavi, who supported Tutu's attack on the 'culture of sycophancy in the ANC'.

As the ANC we take serious exception to that kind of statement and we regard it as a statement that is coming from a leader that is highly reckless, highly impetuous, and Vavi has demonstrated over and over again that he is reckless.<sup>33</sup>

In January 2003 the ANC national spokesperson Smuts Ngonyama publicly accused Bobby Godsell, the AngloGold CEO, of being 'surprising' and 'unwise' for working as a 'facilitator' at a top-secret meeting of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and Democratic Alliance (DA) on 9 and 10 December 2002.<sup>34</sup> Note that Smuts Ngonyama unfavourably compares Godsell's actions with those of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. This time the ANC spokesperson said that 'the country needed leaders who stood above party politics, like Desmond Tutu, who could act as trouble-shooters'. And he added, 'by taking this route, Godsell appears to have disqualified himself from this category'.<sup>35</sup> Once again it is the voice of the ruling party that defines the boundaries of political action for other agents in society. Being outside these boundaries means not being part of the nation-building process: 'Lively religion is not a watch-dog barking round the boundary fences, but a full participant on the factory floor of building a new nation'.<sup>36</sup> If a debate on the risk of co-optation by the government had emerged about civil society in general, a similar reflection focused within churches did not occur. The churches' debate was concentrated on the issues of morality, values, reconciliation and human rights.<sup>37</sup>

The focus of the churches on reconciliation, morality and rights happened for a complex set of internal and external reasons. South African churches had been encouraged to be an active part of the nation-building process but in a form that was circumscribed by the political leadership. Churches after 1994 were encouraged to engage in a battle for a 'moral' transformation of South African society, finding an alliance between religious values and the political values of reconstruction. Moral transformation, human rights and reconciliation became the terrain of action over which the churches were addressed by the political establishment. In an ANC pamphlet published by

the ANC Commission for Religious Affairs the role of religion is highlighted as important for the 'transition from an immoral society to a just society with basic moral values'.<sup>38</sup> Religious values should not be restricted to religious institutions but they should be part of the entire process of national reconstruction in post-apartheid South Africa. 'Some religious people are deeply committed to the new community, and they are trying to overcome the resistance of those who still limit their faith to personal morality, and those who relish their role as critics but not co-workers in nation-building'.<sup>39</sup>

*Church–state dialectics in the 1990s*

If we regard the postcolonial condition as the epistemological framework of this analysis, then it must be argued that in South Africa religion and its concern for human values and virtues enjoys an important place on the public post-apartheid agenda. The new political dispensation of the 1990s did not mean the decline of religion, nor the removal of religion from the public sphere. But what has happened in the transitional period and after 1994 is that the public space of churches has been driven more by the state than by the religious communities of South Africa. It is the state, especially in the person of the president, which has repeatedly pushed for a stronger response from religious communities to the challenges of transformation. And it is still the state that orientates churches direction, defining the space where churches can express their public voice. Churches were invited to collaborate with the government in the reconstruction process but only in terms of being agents of moral regeneration.<sup>40</sup> In 1997 President Mandela addressed the churches in Soweto in this way:

We need religious institutions to continue to be the conscience of society, a moral custodian and a fearless champion of the interests of the weak and down-trodden. We need religious organisations to be part of a civil society mobilised to campaign for justice and the protection of basic human rights.<sup>41</sup>

In the light of a political analysis it is possible to reinterpret Nelson Mandela's speech to religious leaders in June 1997. Although the religious community welcomed and applauded this speech for the recognition of Christian efforts in the nation-building process, a second level of analysis could unmask a certain ANC orientation.

The transformation of our country requires the greatest possible cooperation between religions and political parties, critically and wisely serving our people together. Neither political nor religious objectives can be achieved in isolation. We are partners in the building of our society.<sup>42</sup>

Churches are encouraged to claim a place in the process of reconstruction, while they have to support the ANC's engagement in the democratisation process. The position allocated by the government to religious institutions raises a series of questions on the role of churches as part of civil society and on their co-optation within the government. Churches' response to President



Mandela's invitation to co-operate was positive and led to the creation of the National Religious Leaders Forum (NRLF), a permanent organ of discussion between religion and politics. In October 1999, after discussion between religious communities and political parties, the NRLF convened a Moral Summit:

Religious and political leaders across the board attended the event. They agreed to find the cause of our moral problems and to seek the answer together. Co-operation to build a successful nation would come first. South Africa is the first country in the world in which all religious and political groups have come together to seek transformation.<sup>43</sup>

In 1999 the climax of solidarity with the government was still alive, as illustrated by the multi-event publication entitled *Religion in Public Life*,<sup>44</sup> the result of a seven-day meeting that gathered religious leaders, politicians and ecumenical, religious and community-based organisations in Cape Town. The main issue debated on this occasion was the role of religion in public life. The primary goal was to help religion find its role in public life 'which would contribute positively to both the making of cultural values and the formulation and implementation of public policy'.<sup>45</sup> The main idea that emerged was that religion should contribute to the production of ideas and values for the regeneration of the country. However, a real change in the alliance between churches and the state appeared to emerge over the past five years, concurrently with the election of a new SACC leadership. At the 2001 national conference of the SACC the council decided to adopt an 'attitude of critical engagement in its dealings with the state and other organs of civil society'.<sup>46</sup>

#### Shifts in action: formulating hypotheses

In South Africa churches appear to be reorganising their action in public life around the problem of civic rights (like health, education, employment, housing) expressed in the constitution but not delivered by the government.<sup>47</sup> The ANC's role of liberator from the past political authoritarian regime remains a dogma in the democratic context; what is criticised is its (in)ability to liberate citizens from economic bondage and inequality. In this context of weak and incomplete delivery the ANC's call for unity seems to be losing its appeal and this is an important factor for understanding the de-alignment of segments of civil society. Literature produced on religion and social change in Latin America, where studies on religion and politics are more developed than in Africa, underlines the fact that democratisation requires not just the creation and consolidation of institutions and procedures but also a 'culture of citizenship'; churches act as fundamental agents in this process.<sup>48</sup> Tom Lodge noted that South Africa's lively associational life may engender a struggle for a 'more sustainable citizenship', especially when 'the moral aura surrounding "charismatic authority" derived from the struggle will stop compensating for the weakness of trust between citizens'.<sup>49</sup>

This analysis defines the revival of churches' political participation and action as agents of mobilisation as the end of 'critical solidarity'. In August 2002, at the conclusion of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), religious movements participated, within an umbrella of organisations and social movements under the name of the United Social Movement, in a march in Alexandra township.<sup>50</sup> The ANC organised an alternative march on the same day in the same place. If the rationale for these two events was the same—a symbolic march to give voice to developing countries at an international summit like the WSSD—the fragmentation of the march brought to light a different intent. The main intent of the United Social Movement was to demarcate a clear line between civil society's action and the sphere of state control.

Churches started to question the government in different directions. During the SACC conference in Sandton on 12–14 July 2004 SACC President, Russel Botman, and the General Secretary, Molefe Tsele, clearly criticised the government's position on the Zimbabwe crisis:

The SACC notes the ineffectiveness of outside intervention and the desire and efforts of many Zimbabweans to solve their problems themselves. The quiet diplomacy clearly failed. It had not produced results and was unlikely to.<sup>51</sup>

Again the SACC, in alliance with the South African Catholic Bishops Conference (SACBC), the South African Non-governmental Organisations Coalition (SANGOCO), IDASA and the Centre for Policy Studies and the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, spoke of the failure of the South African Observer Missions to address 'the critical issues affecting free and fair elections standards' that compromised their role 'as honest and non-partisan observers'.<sup>52</sup>

Through the churches' tenacious defence of the Treatment Action Campaign's (TAC) lobbying for state provision of treatment for people living with HIV/AIDS the idea that the dominant political discourse has to be challenged for the defence of human and socioeconomic rights has further crystallised. Citizens' rights with regards to HIV/AIDS are addressed at local, national and international levels with legal and political strategies. The image of President Thabo Mbeki has become deeply associated with dissident movements who deny links between AIDS and the HIV virus. The TAC campaign was supported by churches that, according to TAC activist Sipho Mthati, are indispensable partners in challenging and lobbying the state and in supporting health care projects.<sup>53</sup>

The churches' criticism of the government over its politics and policies on HIV/AIDS proceeds on two levels: in collaboration with other organisations and independently as a purely church-led protest. The South African Catholic Church is the largest provider of home-based and palliative care for people living with HIV/AIDS; in addition it is a significant provider of anti-retroviral treatments. Sister Alison Munro, co-ordinating secretary, AIDS office for the SACBC, has pointed out that 'church projects are struggling financially while the government is inefficient and a huge amount of public

funding remains unspent'.<sup>54</sup> A press statement of the Catholic bishops reiterates this: 'The Catholic Church calls on the South African Government to step up its response to AIDS in the country by delivering on its proposed anti-retroviral roll out, and [by] overcom[ing] all bureaucratic hurdles which are hindering the realisation of initiatives promoted by civil society in the health sector'.<sup>55</sup>

### Conclusion

Political and social transformations, and the dynamics that drive them deserve our fullest attention. Political transformation often involves ruptures, ruptures between the colonial and the postcolonial, between state and society and, as this paper illustrates, between church and state. This article has documented a transformation of the relationship between state and civil society in South Africa. Focusing on churches as a particularly important component of this shifting relationship underlines the importance of acknowledging and analysing the pluralities of civil society, of a civil society comprised of multiple actors, ideologies, ideas and trajectories of change.

For the ANC and its alliance partners the state is conceptualised as a guiding force of social, economical and even moral change. As we saw in the case of Christian churches, the government has often invoked the collaboration of different forces in the reconstruction and nation-building process. This participation is, however, perceived as a tool for strengthening the control and power of the state under the ANC and not as a means of creating a challenging, independent force in opposition. The dominant idea of the democratic process produced by the ANC discourse was that the end of apartheid coincided with the end of political mobilisation. If churches keep emerging as independent actors in the political arena and as instruments of mobilisation, this new trend will constitute a challenge to the ANC discourse. The article has shown how the ruling party interacts with and reacts to this initial attitude of disengagement. The tone of the political discourse is much more similar to the rigid response of a liberation party than to that of a democratic party. Alternatives to the central discourse are not admitted and a continuous call to unity is perpetrated. These are the real challenges to the process of democratisation in a continent where the liberation movements themselves have failed to negotiate their own transition to a complete democracy.

### Notes

- 1 Dr Molefe Tsele, SACC, author interview, Johannesburg, 30 May 2002.
- 2 I will use the terms mainstream churches and historical churches as interchangeable. These are the churches instituted in South Africa in the first period of colonisation (for this reason 'historical') by European missionaries.
- 3 Professor James Cochrane, Department of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town, author interview, 10 August 2000.
- 4 Dr Molefe Tsele, SACC, author interview, Johannesburg, 30 May 2002.
- 5 'Unholy battle between ANC and churches', *Mail and Guardian*, 2 November 2001.
- 6 For the centrality of cultural issues, as religious ones, to the study of conflict and violence, I make reference to B Warren (ed), *The Violence within: Cultural and Political Opposition in a Divided Nation*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993.

- 7 See, for example, J Seekings, *The UDF: A History of the United Democratic Front in South Africa 1983–1991*, Cape Town: David Philip, 2000.
- 8 T Ranger, 'Concluding summary: religion, development and identity', in KH Petersen (ed), *Religion, Development and African Identity*, Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1987.
- 9 P Walshe, 'South Africa: prophetic Christianity and the liberation movement', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 29 (1), 1991, pp 27–60.
- 10 See M Ottaway, 'Liberation movements and transition to democracy: the case of the ANC', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 29 (1), 1991, pp 61–82.
- 11 R Greenstein, 'State, civil society and the reconfiguration of power in post-apartheid South Africa', paper presented at Wiser Seminar, Wits University, Johannesburg, 2003, pp 1–57.
- 12 See, for example, RJC Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2001.
- 13 Ottaway, 'Liberation movements and transition to democracy'.
- 14 See, for example, J Makumbe, 'Is there a civil society in Africa?', *International Affairs*, 74 (2), 1998, pp 305–317.
- 15 B Turok (ANC MP, National Assembly), 'What role for civil society organisations (CSOs) in transformation?', *Umrabulo*, 7, 1999, at <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/pubs/umrabulo/umrabulo7.html>.
- 16 M Mayekiso, *Township Politics: Civic Struggle for a New South Africa*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1996.
- 17 J Seekings, 'Civic organisations in the "new" South Africa', in G Adler & J Steinberg, *From Comrades to Citizens: The South African Civics Movement and the Transition to Democracy*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000.
- 18 H Kotze, 'Swimming in the wild sea: the new challenges facing civil society', in G Maharaj (ed), *Between Unity and Diversity: Essays on Nation-Building in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, Cape Town: David Philip, 1999, p 175.
- 19 Paddy Kearney, Diakonia, author interview, Durban, 12 August 2000.
- 20 See, for example, T Lodge, *South African Politics since 1994*, Cape Town: David Philip, 2003.
- 21 R Southall (ed), *Opposition and Democracy in South Africa*, London: Frank Cass, 2001.
- 22 Department of Political Education and Training, *Umrabulo*, 5, 1998, at <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/pubs/umrabulo/umrabulo5.html>.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 G Nkwinti, 'A brief commentary on "Through the eye of the needle"', *Umrabulo*, 13, 2001, at <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/pubs/umrabulo/umrabulo3.html>.
- 25 R Calland & P Graham (eds), *IDASA's Democracy Index: Democracy in the Time of Mbeki*, Cape Town: IDASA, 2005.
- 26 C Murray & A Pillay, 'Are civil rights for all guaranteed?', in Calland & Graham, *IDASA's Democracy Index*.
- 27 C Mayson, Head of the ANC's Commission for Religious Affairs, quoted in 'Mayson castigates church leaders' disgusting ploy', *Mail and Guardian*, 19 October 2001.
- 28 T Mbeki, quoted in the *Mail and Guardian*, 2 November 2001.
- 29 T Lodge, 'The ANC and the development of party politics in modern South Africa', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 42 (2), 2004, pp 189–219.
- 30 D Tutu, 'Nelson Mandela Foundation lecture', 23 November 2004, available at [www.safm.co.za/webfeatures/featureList.jsp?featureID=12](http://www.safm.co.za/webfeatures/featureList.jsp?featureID=12).
- 31 T Mbeki, 'The cloud with the silver lining', *ANC Today*, 5 (2), 2005, at <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/anctoday/2005/at02.htm>.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 'ANC extends olive branch to Tutu', *Dispatch Online*, 30 November 2004, at <http://www.dispatch.co.za/2004/11/30/SouthAfrica/aalead.html>.
- 34 'Godsell takes flak', South African Press Association, 10 January 2003, at <http://www.sapa.org.za/secure/login.cfm?CFID=1082479&CFTOKEN=27960>.
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 ANC, *The ANC and Religion*, published pamphlet, Marshalltown-Johannesburg, 2001.
- 37 See, for example, C Villa-Vicencio & E Duxtader (eds), *Through Fire with Water: The Roots of Division and the Potential for Reconciliation in Africa*, Cape Town: David Philip, 2003; C Villa-Vicencio, *Theology of Reconstruction: Nation-building and Human Rights*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992; JW de Gruchy, *Christianity and Democracy: A Theology for a Just World Order*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995; and de Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice*, London: SCM Press, 2002.
- 38 ANC, *Ethical Transformation: ANC Statement on the Moral Renewal of the Nation*, Marshalltown-Johannesburg: ANC Commission for Religious Affairs, 1998, p 12.
- 39 *Ibid.*

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- 40 In the form of a personal presidential appeal to churches (both President N Mandela and President T Mbeki), for example, in Cape Town in 1997, and in numerous parliamentary speeches.
- 41 Regina Mundi is the largest Catholic church in Soweto. N Mandela, 'On the occasion of Regina Mundi Day', 30 November 1997, Soweto, available at [www.info.gov.za/speeches/1997/1202regina97.htm](http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/1997/1202regina97.htm).
- 42 C Mayson, *Faith and Politics in Society*, Marshalltown-Johannesburg: ANC, Commission for Religious Affairs, 1997, p 14.
- 43 *The ANC and Religion*, ANC website: [www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/misc/anc\\_and\\_religion.html](http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/misc/anc_and_religion.html).
- 44 Multi-Event 1999, Cape Town 14–20 February.
- 45 *Religion in Public Life: Multi-Event 1999. Conference Proceedings*, Cape Town: Salty Print, 1999; and *Constructing a Language of Religion in Public Life. Multi-Event 1999*, RICSAs, Cape Town: Academic Workshop, 30 September–2 October 1998. Many thanks for this material to Prof James Cochrane, University of Cape Town.
- 46 SACC National Conference, Durban, October 2001, cited in the *Mail and Guardian*, 2 November 2002.
- 47 See, for example, S Terreblanche, *A History of Inequality in South Africa, 1652–2002*, Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2002.
- 48 A Corten & R Marshall-Fratani (eds), *Between Babel and Pentecost: Transnational Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001; and A Peterson, MA Vásquez & P Williams (eds), *Christianity, Social Change, and Globalisation in the Americas*, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001.
- 49 T Lodge, *South African Politics since 1994*, p 226. The figures from the Democracy and Social Capital Survey in Lodge's book show how in South Africa the highest number of civic movements and associations belong to the category 'Cultural/Religious' (p 223). These are important data to be considered inside the political analysis.
- 50 Notes from my work as observer of the South African NGOs Coalition (SANGOCO), SACC and Justice and Peace Commission preparatory work for the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, August 2002.
- 51 *The Star*, 15 July 2004.
- 52 SACC, *Statement of the Zimbabwe Observer Consortium*, 7 April 2005, at <http://www.sacc.org.za/news05>.
- 53 Siphon Mthati, TAC, author interview, Cape Town, 29 July 2004.
- 54 Sr Alison Munro, SACBC, author interview, Pretoria, 4 August 2004.
- 55 SACBC Press Statement, Pretoria, 4 February 2004, at [www.sacbc.org.za/2004](http://www.sacbc.org.za/2004).