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Old and New Alliances: Christian churches and the African National Congress in South Africa.

1. Introduction

At the conference organised by the Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) of the World Council of Churches in Lusaka in May 1987 (4-8 May), the then president in exile of the African National Congress (ANC), Oliver Tambo, acknowledged the long history of partnership between churches and the ANC, at that time a liberation movement and not yet a political party, and called religious actors in the country to play an even more active role in the final stages of the joint struggle against Apartheid:

The African National Congress has a long history of association with the Church. Our founders were churchmen and women. Throughout our 75 years [from 1912 to 1987] that link has never been broken. As we enter the final stages of our struggle, we believe that you, too, have a responsibility to contribute to the maximum to remove a regime which offends the very principles on which the Church itself was founded (Oliver Tambo, 1987, Lusaka in *SAHO online A*).

While at its inception the ANC was, as Stephen Ellis put it, ‘a rather genteel organisation’ composed of middle class black South African mostly educated in religious schools or religious leaders themselves (Ellis, 1991: 439); the relationship between religion and the ANC was almost completely forgotten or strategically swept away by the dominant public media coverage at the time of the 1987 WCC conference in Lusaka. Indeed, those were the years in which armed opposition and violent strategies intensified in South Africa and in which the Cold War was used to frame politics and public action. Therefore, the South African Church (with the exception of the Dutch Reformed Church that maintained its support to the regime of Pretoria), which had had publicly supported the liberation struggle led by the ANC and the civil society umbrella of the United Democratic Front (UDF) since the 1970s, was accused by various voices - the Apartheid regime *in primis* - of collaborating with a liberation movement that was allied to the Communist Party (SACP) and colluded with the Soviet Union which persecuted churches and encouraged others to do so in neighbouring African countries (see for example in independent Angola and Mozambique from 1975. Helgesson 1994; Blanes & Paxe, 2015; Morier-Genoud 1996). In the polarized climate of the time, the African National Congress was, nationally and internationally,¹

depicted as a secular anti-religious organisation that aimed to eradicate any form of religious presence if successful in its political struggle against the National Party (NP) regime. The fact that the ANC consistently pledged allegiance to the founding principles of the Freedom Charter (the precursor of the current democratic Constitution) that stated that the struggle aimed to build a ‘democratic state, based on the will of all the people, can secure to all their birthright, without distinction of colour, race, sex or belief’ counted for little (Freedom Charter, 1955: 1). Churches were publicly requested to take a clear separational stance from the ANC and the Communist Party, for example as the then president of South Africa P.W. Botha conveyed in a public letter to Archbishop Tutu on the 16th of March 1988: ‘You are no doubt aware that the expressed intention of the planned revolution by the ANC/SACP alliance is to ultimately transform South Africa into an atheistic Marxist state, where freedom of faith and worship will surely be among the first casualties’ (*Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, June 1988:72).² If the media controlled by the NP managed to forge the opinion, at home and abroad, that the relationship between religion and the ANC was of a dangerous nature, academic literature has not been successful in uncovering the relevance and specificities of this collaboration.

The study of public Christianity in Africa went through considerable changes with the end of colonialism. In most of the African continent, the 60s ushered in the idea that it was time to reinterpret much of the history, including the historical role played by religion in politics. The Department of World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches (WCC) meeting in 1962 was fundamental in sparking a new re-interpretative process putting a great concern on the idea of ‘building of bridges of mutual understanding and reconciliation’ (Pretorius, 1995:185). In 1965 an international congress of African historians held in Dar el 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 and the uncovered work played by religion. At the centre of the debate there was the need to understand the workings of the African Church and its interaction with society and politics (Ranger, 1968). While this new attitude was pervading a large part of the continent, it is possible to identify problems and limitations in the South African academic production. As Lonsdale pointed out South African historiography remained outside the mainstream: ‘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' (Lonsdale, 1983:70). Without its own end of colonisation, South Africa did not reinvent its way of writing history, including religious history, as was happening elsewhere on the continent. Until the 80s the study of religion in the country was mainly dominated by functionalist approaches that privileged typologies and classification of religious phenomena more than the analysis of their action and impact on society and politics. The functionalist paradigm persisted until the 80s (Kruss, 1985) when Marxist thinkers started to dominate with the insistence that explanations should be founded in social and economic circumstances, to the exclusion of culture and religion (Marks & Atmore, 1980). Focussing attention on class analysis and political economy, though, the dominant South African academic production largely excluded analyses of the public role that religion played in Apartheid and post-Apartheid South Africa. Uniquely to the country, this intellectual dominant approach persisted until the end of the 20th century, opening spaces for debates and investigations on the public role of religion only in very recent times.

The history of how religion shaped politics during and after the Apartheid era, and *vice versa* how politics shaped religion itself, still need to be written in full alongside a history of how politics and party dynamics in the post-Apartheid era affecting the way religion manifests in the public. As this relationship changed and transformed across decades and through different political settlements, from Apartheid to the democratic transition to contemporary post-Apartheid, this chapter will explore the dynamic relationship between different Christian churches and the African National Congress across time. In doing so the chapter will highlight the importance of understanding the interconnective and evolving relations between religion and party politics in a country in which religion plays a major role in shaping society and visions for the future, and where the ruling party, at certain times, had tried to co-opt and develop preferential relationships with certain religious groups at the expense of others.

2. From Apartheid to Democracy

South Africa encompasses Christian denominations from across the spectrum (Elphick & Davenport, 1997), and while mainline churches – the so-called churches with European missionary origins – have been publicly dominant and more populous until the end of the 20th century, in the past decades evangelical churches, especially African Independent Churches (AICs) and Pentecostal-charismatics have grown rapidly, a trend that reflects their dynamic ascent across the rest of the continent. Christianity, as the main religion in the country (79.8%

according to the 2001 national census, last census that included religious affiliation in the questionnaire, *StatsSA online*), has always had a privileged relationship with political parties. "We recognise that while there is extensive religious diversity, the majority of South Africans are Christians" shouted Jacob Zuma from the altar of a Pentecostal-charismatic church just a few days before the presidential elections in 2009 that followed the general elections on April 22 (Rhema Church Prayer Service, 30 April 2009 cited in West 2010:52).

This connection between Christianity and politics was particularly clear, for example, during the Apartheid era with the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC)³ and the National Party (for an analysis of the Dutch Reformed Church and the National Party during the Apartheid era, see for example Kuperus, 1999). Indeed, the National Party, continuously in government between 1948 and May 1994,⁴ found justification in Christian political theology through specific readings of Calvinist thought and through the unquestioning support of the DRC. The loss of the special connection with the ruling party and the crumbling of Apartheid, left this Church silent in the public arena in the 90s, only beginning to reshape its public voice around issues of social justice in the middle of the following decade, when it also joined other ecumenical bodies, as for example the SACC in 2002 (Kuperus, 2011).

The ANC, when it was a liberation movement, ran a Department of Religious Affairs in order to deal with religious organisations and leaders (African National Congress Records: 1970-1991.B2.5a Department of Religious Affairs, Historical Papers research archive, the University of the Witwatersrand). In 1995, a year after the first democratic elections that swept the ANC to power with majority support (62.7% of the total votes), the office was formalised with the establishment of 'The ANC Commission for Religious Affairs' that remains based in Luthuli House, the ANC national headquarters in Johannesburg. While the ANC founders were influenced by evangelical thinking and the speeches of the first ANC president, Rev. John Dube, 'read as charismatic sermons' (Balcomb, 2004:6), during the Apartheid era the ANC had a preferential relationship with mainline churches, especially through the umbrella of the South African Council of Churches, an interdenominational forum that unites thirty-six member churches and other Christian organisations across the country. This did not preclude the collaboration with individuals or leaders belonging to other religions, for example, records can be found of the meeting between ANC leaders in exile and the interfaith delegation composed of Christian, Muslims and Hindu participants in Lusaka in 1987 (*SAHO online* B). Nonetheless, it was with the SACC and the churches and

organisations it represented, including the Southern African Catholic Bishop Conference (SACBC), that the liberation movement developed a programmatic strategy of collaboration and seeking public and financial support. Founded in 1968, the SACC became a platform for anti-Apartheid activities in the country and internationally through church networks and ecumenical organisations, financially and spiritually they supported victims of the regime in the country and in exile, they collaborated with the international Anti-Apartheid Movement and the boycotts against the Pretoria regime, they led the formulation of the Kairos Document (Goba, 1987), the very first theological denunciation of the Apartheid regime as an evil force to vanquish, they urged churches in South Africa to distance themselves from the NP and the government. Several members of the SACC were, or became later in the post-Apartheid context, members of the ANC – for example an ex SACC general, Frank Chikane (1987-1994), served as Director General (1999-2009) in the office of president Thabo Mbeki. So closely was the SACC associated with the ANC that it was often raided by government security forces, members of the organisation were often persecuted and detained without trial and in September 1988 the headquarters in Johannesburg, Khotso House,⁵ were destroyed by a bombing that was personally ordered by the then South African president P.W. Botha because it was considered ‘a secret meeting place for members of the ANC, then a banned organisation’ (TRC final report, volume 5, 1998: 225-6 in *SAHO online C*).

The SACC’s strong connections with the African National Congress during the Apartheid era determined its relationship with the ANC-led post-Apartheid government and left the Council and other ecumenical organisations largely weaker and in search of a separate identity after the first democratic elections in 1994. Indeed, with the ‘historical friends’ taking power, ‘the role of SACC and its identity changed enormously and drastically. Churches were not able to relate to the new reality. The change is connected to the theology of power of persons who were now in charge in Parliament, colleagues and friends’ (author’s interview, Dr Molefe Tsele, SACC General Secretary, 30 May 2002). The problem of a close identity with power and other factors (such as the reduction in international financial support after the end of Apartheid, the growth of evangelical churches and also a considerable movement of well-educated religious people into well remunerated jobs in politics and business) determined what was defined as a period of ‘critical solidarity’ (Bompani, 2006) towards the government’s work, that indeed corresponded to a period of relative silence on the part of the SACC during the Mandela’s presidency (1994-1999) and the early Mbeki presidency. This was also in line with the invitation from Mandela himself to churches to retreat from the

public sphere, returning to their denominational space and supporting the nation-building process by focusing on the moral reconstruction of the country. In short, an invitation to leave politics well alone was expressed in several speeches and through the institution of the National Religious Leaders Forum (NRLF), a permanent platform where churches were consulted and invited to co-operate with the government and act as moral agents for the new democratic dispensation (Bompani, 2006). Given the nature of contemporary South African party politics, where the head of the largest party is generally elected President of the country, the President of the country also shapes the direction of the ruling party and its interaction with governmental and non-governmental bodies. In this line, with Mandela we can observe a honeymoon period of ‘critical solidarity’ in which churches retreated from the political sphere. Under Thabo Mbeki churches started to adopt a slightly more critical tone and to reform around ecumenical organisations in relation to issues of service delivery, xenophobia, the neighbouring Zimbabwe crisis and most of all the Anti-Retroviral Campaign (ARC) and Mbeki’s peculiar policies towards HIV/AIDS in the country (author’s interview with Rev. Eddy Makue, SACC General Secretary, 8 June 2010. For more information, for example, see Bompani, 2012). This re-entrance into politics was not comparable, though, to the anti-government effort during the anti-apartheid struggle, but can be interpreted as a ‘critical engagement’ and collaboration with other civil society organisations in publicly questioning the ANC’s impact and the President’s work. This second phase in the post-Apartheid era corresponded with the ANC’s attempt to recompose the ranks and old alliance with the SACC while regularly reminding them, through the voice of President Mbeki, that criticizing the operate of the ANC, was like abandoning ‘the common struggle against the legacy of apartheid.’ (*Mail and Guardian*, 2 November 2001 cited in Bompani, 2006: 1142). As with Mandela, Mbeki expected that the ANC’s old allies would remain supportive of the government’s mandate, distance themselves from politics and focus on issues of morality and spirituality. It is only with the Zuma Presidency that this expectation of a neat separation between the moral and the political sphere from churches fully crumbled and religious voices, mainline churches but also evangelicals, found a new strong political public voice in the post-Apartheid era and that the SACC reinvented its prophetic mission⁶, as the next section will illustrate.

3. The Zuma era and the search for new allies

Under the Zuma presidency between May 2009 and his resignation in February 2018, it is possible to observe a shift in the way the ANC engaged with religion in the public sphere. Throughout his presidency, and before then during the run-up to becoming the head of his party in 2007, Zuma made several appearances in selected evangelical churches (Ward, 2010), and encouraged the public support of religious leaders in relation to his court cases (for his ongoing sixteen charges of corruption, fraud and racketeering in total, *SABC News*, 4 June 2018). He also famously made statements such as for example ‘When you vote for the ANC, you are also choosing to go to heaven’ (*Mail&Guardian* online, 7 February 2011) or ‘the ANC will rule until Jesus comes’ (*Mail&Guardian* online, 5 July 2016). This generated much public debate on the unprecedented lack of neutrality and secularity demonstrated by an elected head of state in the democratic dispensation. This shift towards religion not only altered political dynamics in the South African post-Apartheid context, but also reshaped long-standing alliances with religious actors. Indeed, if the ANC’s historical allies since the struggle against Apartheid have been mainline churches, with Zuma we can observe a clear alignment with Pentecostal-charismatic churches and African Independent Churches (AICs); religious groups that, for different reasons, until recently have remained quite distant from party politics.

The now vibrant evangelical charismatic movement, previously political aloof, has started to emerge as a political force and to define its position within the South African political establishment (Kuperus, 2011:284). Although, as Anthony Balcomb (2004) demonstrated, the evangelical charismatic movement is complex and encompasses different political positions; amongst this umbrella several Pentecostal-charismatic churches clearly emerged as ANC supporters under the Zuma leadership. No longer a minority in the country and with the urge to influence political leaders (Frahm-Arp, 2015 uses the term charismatic ‘chaplains’ in relation to those ones in the highest offices of government) in order to promote their values, some of which are opposition to some of the liberal and progressive South African Constitution, Pentecostal-charismatics found a way to express their voice during the Zuma presidency through the newly formed inter-faith structures and the nascent alliance with the president:

Our church has taken the view that leadership is required among politicians and business people, to provide a moral and spiritual, or prophetic voice, that calls for integrity, justice, fairness and accountability. We see this was a calling we have as a

Church to engage the leaders of our society. It is for this reason that we have participated in ecumenical and inter-Church forums and structures (author's interview with Marius Oosthuizen, Rhema Bible Church, 25 September 2018).

AICs, although evangelical in their theology, constitute a separate reality from Pentecostal-charismatic churches in the country but they equally found a way to push through into the public scene. In the post-Apartheid period between, or at least from 1994 until the Mbeki era, there have been a few attempts from the government to involve AICs in the 'moral reconstruction' of the country, to echo the call started by president Mandela towards South African religious groups but only answered by a few individual AICs leaders (author's interview with Archbishop Ngada, African Spiritual Churches Association, 08 March 2002).

Although some cooperative links were created with individual AICs, the general sense from the within these religious communities was that there were still fractures in need of healing between AICs and the ANC given that the ANC did not understand or recognise their work during the liberation struggle (Bompani, 2010). AICs have not acted politically in South Africa as they have elsewhere in the continent. For example, AICs in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Kimbanguism) and in the Ivory Coast (Harrist Church) have supported political movements; while in South Africa AICs tend to stay away from national public discussions and debates. Reverend Cedric Mayson in 2001, then Head of the ANC Commission for Religious Affairs, pointed out that in the post-apartheid there have been various attempts by the ANC to collaborate with AICs, adding that in the case of independent churches traditionally their contacts were with people and not with institutions:

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 (author's interview with Rev. Cedric Mayson, ANC Religious Commission Affairs, 30 October 2001).

He also stated that transformation in South Africa coincides with the proliferation of a new spirituality that needed to be recognised and taken into account by the political establishment: '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' (author's interview with Rev. Cedric Mayson, ANC Commission Affairs for Religious Affairs, 30 October 2001). It consistently emerged from several interviews with government

bodies and ecumenical organisations (author's fieldwork between 1999 and 2018) that AICs have always been considered as diverse, fragmented and 'uneasy' actors, difficult to involve in public debates and action for social transformation. In contrast, the political strategy of Zuma, with a mix of 'rational populism' and pragmatism (Marais, 2010), invoking 'Africaness' and national identity, provided a new public platform for those churches that similarly pose importance to tradition and African culture (Bompani, 2008).

Zuma's attitude and search for new alliances marked a change not only in terms of the kinds of religious actors that occupy the public sphere but also in the way the ruling party actively shaped and initiated the creation of new religious bodies in seeking religious and moral support for its mandate. Indeed, Zuma's ascent to power had withstood a long succession of ethical and legal issues, from the rape trial in 2005 to the corruption case around the South African Arms Deal in 1999 (Gumede, 2008), which motivated the newly elected president to look for a way of demonstrating his own and his party's moral. Similarly to other African contexts (for example in Uganda, Bompani 2018; in Kenya, Deacon 2015; and in Nigeria, Obadare, 2018) but also to the U.S. (Gorski, 2019), Zuma turned to the growing variegated group of Pentecostal-charismatic churches in the country to find moral and spiritual support. As a polygamist involved in multiple charges of corruption coupled with their history of collaboration with the Mandela and Mbeki factions of the ANC (Pillay, 2017), Zuma could not find public support from the mainline churches united as they were under the umbrella of the SACC and of the SACBC. Zuma's rise to power determined a shift from the placid public role of those bodies. From the period of 'critical solidarity' and 'critical engagement' discussed above, they shifted to becoming active critical voices of the government once again, this time a government ran by their historical allies. From press statements, to campaigns and public protests, to sermons and news interviews against corruption and the malfunctioning of the state in delivering services, Zuma in some ways managed to reignite the political nature of those bodies. In 2012 the SACC held a conference to redefine and renew its mission as a critical public voice in South Africa where the fight against corruption and poor state performance were articulated as priorities (author's interview with Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana, SACC General Secretary, 31 August 2018, Johannesburg). 'We have come to recognise that South Africa may just be a few inches from the throes of a mafia state from which there may be no return, a recipe for a failed state' said the SACC General Secretary Bishop Mpumlwana in a press release in May 2017 while talking of the cases of corruption related to Zuma and the Gupta family (*Reuters* online, 23 May 2017).

When president Zuma felt that the ANC were losing support from mainline churches, and their ecumenical bodies, he turned to other denominations for public support. It is in light of this shift that the institution of the National Interfaith Leadership Council (NILC) can be explained. In 2009 Pastor Ray McCauley of Rhema Bible Church and Dr Mathole Motshekga, head of ANC Religious Affairs Commission and ANC chief whip at the time, formed a new interfaith organization called the National Interfaith Leadership Council (NILC). This network was defined as ‘a mass-based interreligious group intended to partner with the government in terms of improving service delivery regarding the provision of basic services like water, electricity and housing’ (Kuperus, 2011:291) and saluted by Zuma as ‘The holy revolution of the people of God against corruption, moral degeneration and the invisibility and marginalisation of previously disadvantaged people and communities’ (ref. More orientated towards AICs and Pentecostal-charismatic groups, the NILC has been perceived as a substitute for the (more critical) South African Council of Churches. This was confirmed by the fact that SACC was not invited to the launch of the new organisation in August 2009 (author’s interview with Rev. Eddy Makue, SACC General Secretary, 8 June 2010). Although they never publicly identified themselves as having a preferential link to the ANC, many NILC members were ANC MPs, no member was associated with other political parties and the organisation relied on the ANC parliamentary caucus’s communication facilities for their external communication and most of all they displayed an extremely strong support to Zuma (*Mail&Guardian* online, 11 September 2009).

NILC had that special relation with the ANC and we do not want to have any kind of similar relation with political organisations. We want to protect jealously our autonomy and independence; we believe that it is the president prerogative to establish agencies that he respects; but we are worried that if every president has to choose the religious leaders that he wants, it will further weaken religious communities in South Africa (author’s interview with Rev. Eddy Makue, SACC General Secretary, 8 June 2010).

The NRLF subsequently merged with the existing National Religious Leaders Forum (NRLF) instituted by Mandela to form the National Interfaith Council of South Africa (NICSA) in 2011. This did not happen without contestation from many non-aligned religious leaders that felt that the original broad umbrella became co-opted by the government and was excluding religious voices that were not in line with the president.

In February 2016 we arranged a meeting with ANC representatives to discuss corruption and other urgent matters for the country. The meeting took place at Oliver Tambo airport. There was a delegation of five bishops, including the SACBC General Secretary and myself from Justice and Peace. When we arrived, we were surprised to

find out that instead of ANC delegates, we were welcomed by members of NICSA. Their agenda was to persuade the SACBC to join the platform (author's interview with Father Stan Muyebe, Justice and Peace, Southern African Catholic Bishop Conference, 30 August 2018).

NICSA maintained clear support to Zuma throughout his presidency and beyond, battling against other critical political and religious voices. Criticising the National Persecuting Authority, Bishop Bheki Ngcobo from NICSA, for example, publicly said: 'Some like the South African Council of Churches have found Zuma guilty before he appeared in court. We cannot tolerate being ruled by the SACC. They are nothing to us indigenous churches here in South Africa. We are not looking for anything from them. They can go to hell' (*IOLNews online*, 15 April 2018).

Although there have been several public attempts, initiated both by the Presidential Office and by religious leaders, to reconcile churches and interfaith bodies (interviews with representatives of the SACC and SACBC, 2010-2018), and there has been a constant reclamation of political independence by those bodies, churches' deployment in support or against Zuma opened up a new form of divisiveness within public Christianity in South Africa and determined the emergence of new political strategies and alignments across churches. This fragmentation also reflects divisions within the same ruling party that struggles to grapple with fringes still supportive of Zuma's populist style and critical of the so-called neoliberal, moderate style of other ANC leaders. When President Ramaphosa took power in February 2018, he was saluted by many as a politician respectful of the separation between religion and politics. 'President Ramaphosa is a participative leader who has a history of consultation with multiple stakeholders, across the social and political sphere. As such, we expect the president will want to work with the Churches, while respecting their autonomy (author's interview with Marius Oosthuizen, Rhema Bible Church, 25 September 2018). *De facto*, in marked contrast to his predecessor, Ramaphosa remained silent on religious matters and did not consult publicly with churches during his initial mandate (author's interview with Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana, SACC General Secretary, 31 August 2018). Although it is quite early days to provide a serious analysis of the relationship between the ANC and religion under Ramaphosa's leadership, it appears that one of the major challenges posed to him in the upcoming national elections in June 2019 is the issue of fragmentation within the party and across their religious and secular allies. His quiet strategy and cautious approach towards old and new religious allies may be dictated by the need to heal and mend divisions created by Zuma and to gain the broadest support across the

electoral spectrum. After all, political leaders cannot ignore the power of the reservoir of the religious electorate in South Africa.

5. Conclusion

From this analysis of the shifting relationships between the ANC and public Christianity across several decades it is possible to draw at least three distinct conclusions. Firstly, religion in South Africa has been and continues to be relevant in the public realm, but its interaction with politics is dynamic, changes and evolves. Similarly, the religious subjects that become more politically active and visible alternate along the construction of new alliances to the detriment of older ones. Evangelical Christianity, in the case of South Africa especially in the form of Pentecostal-charismatic churches and African Independent churches, remained distant from politics and public engagement with political parties and political movements during Apartheid and in the first democratic era. However, in the past decade it is possible to observe from these churches the building up of a political theology and practical involvement in the running of the State (for an analysis of the motivations beyond this political ascent, see for example Burchardt, 2017). While across the evangelical spectrum churches differ quite considerably in terms of organisation, priorities and theology, they all appear to emerge as political actors in ways that are new and different from the past. This is in sharp contrast with earlier analyses of African Pentecostalism as distant from democratic contributions and as apolitical in nature (from example, see Corten & Marshall-Fratani, 2001 and Gifford, 1998). As per other African contexts, South African political leaders found in these denominations alternative allies from mainline churches.

Secondly, mainline churches after the huge effort of participating into the democratisation process of several African countries in the 90s (Gifford, 1995) and challenged by the growth of evangelical Christianity have struggled to redefine a clear political theology of action in more recent times. An honourable exception being the extremely active Catholic Church in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) during the building-up and running of the national elections in December 2019. However, this may be determined by the fact that the DRC Catholic Church still represents almost half of the population (Pew Forum, 2016), is without a real challenge to its membership posed by the rise of evangelical Christianity, and that its networks and organisational apparatus is unique in the vast and badly connected country. The South African case, through the South African Council of Churches, also demonstrates how

alliances shaped in pre-democratic contexts through liberation movements may affect the way in which religious subjects feel constrained to challenge old allies in the new democratic dispensation. For the SACC, it took more than two decades to begin to reformulate a critical active voice apart from the government.

Thirdly, this chapter highlights new distinct forms of contrast and division in political theologies and in the everyday between mainline churches oriented more towards progressive, liberal stances of social justice and equality and charismatic churches exhibiting more traditional and conservative values and objectives such as for example the fight against ‘amoral’ modern world that disrupts old and ‘ethical’ ideas of family and gender divisions in South Africa (Burchardt, 2018). Even if constitutionally South Africa is a secular country, Christians remain an important political reservoir and leaders try to tap into them. The pragmatic and strategic intervention of Zuma in his search of new religious allies, ratcheted up this religious division that is now visible and ritualised in public action and public statements. This demonstrates how politics and political leaders can be effective in shaping religious public action and in privileging certain religious subjects over others in order to gain public support. This emerging clash between different denominations is quite new in South Africa where interfaith and multi-denominational fora have traditionally been dominant and faith-interaction has been quite fluid. It will be interesting to observe in future years whether this division was merely the product of Zuma’s strategic intervention, or if deeper unreconcilable theological stances and political interpretations will forge ever broader separations between those two religious blocks.

If we engage with recent literature on the public role of Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa, we can observe many similarities between South Africa and other African countries. Tracing these parallels can be used, alongside other academic work, to vanquish the ‘exceptionalism’ that is often reserved for academic analyses of the South African context.

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¹ For example, preoccupations that a South Africa governed by the ANC could transform into an atheist state where religion was persecuted have been expressed by the then Pope John Paul II to the South African Archbishop Denis Hurley, president of the SACBC between 1981 and 1987 (author's interview with Denis Hurley, Durban, 20 August 2001).

² The full public correspondence between Desmond Tutu and P.W. Botha is published in that volume.

³ Under the umbrella of the Dutch Reformed Church, the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk (NHK), there are three main Afrikaner Reformed denominations, that during the Apartheid regime were divided along ethnic lines.

⁴ The National Party was in government from 1924 but then it became an opposition party during World War II.

⁵ In the previous year, 1987, Khanya House, the headquarters of the Southern African Catholic Bishop Conference in Pretoria was also bombed in the night by the government secret police.

⁶ In 2012 the SACC called a conference to renew its public mission in the country and to elaborate new strategies, both political and financial. Six past general secretaries, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, Reverend Frank Chikane, Dr Brigalia Bam, Ambassador Dr Molefe Tsele, Rev Eddie Makue and Rev Mautjie Pataki initiated this process. In order to overcome the financial impasse that conditioned part of the weak activities in the new political dispensation after the reduced flow of funding from international churches with the end of Apartheid and the diminishing of membership in mainline churches, the SACC re-modernise the building, Khotso House, in inner city Johannesburg and entrepreneurially rented offices to external companies and privates. They also tried to revitalise forms of financial support and donations from grassroot South African church members (author's interview, Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana, SACC General Secretary, 31 August 2018).