

The Church of Norway and the Struggle against Apartheid

by
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Time does not allow me more than a few glimpses into the long and fascinating story on the Church of Norway's involvement in the struggle against Apartheid. The Church of Norway is constitutionally a "State Church". It embraces 85% of the population and may be regarded as a "Non-Governmental Organisation" paid for by the Government, self-contradictory though this may sound.

I have chosen to limit my speech to the role of the Church of Norway - bearing in mind that it was only one part of a broad anti-apartheid movement. However, the Church was the main Norwegian financial contributor to South African NGOs during the apartheid years. Or may be better to say that the church was the most important *channel* for Norwegian government funds to opposition groups within South Africa. More of this later; first, let us ask:

When, why and how The Church of Norway got involved in South Africa?

There is a long history about The Norwegian Missionary Society which started its work in 1844 in the Zulu kingdom, and was active in South Africa to 1997. Norwegian missionaries were active in establishing ELCSA in 1975. The Lutheran churches' attitudes towards apartheid are tangled and difficult. Traditionally, Lutherans have been reluctant in involving the Church in politics, holding this should be left in the hands of the secular authorities. In Natal ELCSA had in addition big problems because many church members belonged to Inkatha, and the church was dragged into the violent conflict between Inkatha and ANC. There is no time to tell this long story today - even though it would be interesting as we are in Durban where there was a 'Norwegian' white Lutheran Church (The St. Olav Church - 1880) which caused us a lot of trouble in the 1970s and -80s .

More important for the theme for this Conference is the short history which begins in 1960. The Sharpeville massacre, The Cottesloe conference, and the award of the 1960 Nobel Peace Prize to Chief Albert Luthuli and the subsequent visit by the ANC president to Norway in 1961, all attracted attention from the international church community, including Norwegian bishops and churchmen. From 1960 on, the Church of Norway took a lively interest in developments in South Africa.

Why care about South Africa?

The Church of Norway did not involve itself as much in liberation struggles elsewhere. Why did apartheid in South Africa cause this strong commitment, not only from the Norwegian churches, but first and foremost from the churches in South Africa and from the international church family? One obvious answer was of course the terrible oppression in South Africa and Namibia. The policy of the Nationalist party deprived all non-whites of fundamental human rights. This led to unanimous condemnation from the international community. However, you could find equally poor and oppressed people in other parts of the world, who did not get the same attention from the Nordic churches. Could it be that Western opinion cared more where whites were involved in conflicts than where civil wars were going on between different African ethnic groups? Or is there another explanation?

The answer is simple: Right from the start, the National Party declared Apartheid to be based on the Bible. God created people of different races, it was asserted, and intended them to develop along their own lines and not mix with each other. Theologians from the Dutch Reformed Churches were among the main architects of the apartheid ideology. This Biblical justification of racism turned it into a theological issue, which the church could not leave to the

politicians. Therefore the English-speaking churches watched the policy of the new government carefully. Steps which were regarded as contrary to the Gospel were condemned by most of the churches, not only in South Africa but also by the international church community. This made South Africa a very special case. Almost all of the official statements on apartheid-related issues from the Church of Norway during the years 1963-1994 state that the policy of apartheid is a caricature of the Gospel.

The involvement of the International Ecumenical organisations LWF and the WCC in Southern African affairs in the 1960s, was to be of decisive importance for the Church of Norway. In 1968 the WCC presented the idea of a new Study Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) at the General Assembly in Uppsala. It was also proposed that the WCC provide economic support for the liberation struggle. LWF and WCC encouraged their member churches to work with human rights.

In the early 1970s there was therefore a strong wish among Norwegian church leaders to show in practise that the statements of principle were real commitments. But what kind of action could be taken? The Church of Norway knew of the Christian Institute founded by Beyers Naude. Could this be a worthy cause for the Church of Norway to support? It was. In 1973 the Christian Institute became Church of Norway's first partner in South-Africa, only two year before the Institute was declared an affected organisation by the South African Government, and no longer allowed to receive financial support from abroad. However, our relationship with the Institute did not end, and Beyers Naude became one of Church of Norway's most trusted adviser in South Africa for more than 30 years. He was deeply loved and a highly respected man in our Church

Another important partner was The South African Council of Churches, which got financial support from Church of Norway from 1978, the same year Desmond Tutu took over as secretary-general. After the Soweto uprising and the murder of Steve Biko, the Church of Norway also started to support the Black Consciousness Movement, and the Black Parents Associations in Soweto, led by Manas Buthelezi. In 1983 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Oslo granted a large sum to help establish the Ecumenical Centre in Durban. This centre housed several organizations, among others Diakonia and Legal Resources Centre which were to become close partners to our Church. In 1985 we in close co-operation with the Norwegian consulate in Cape Town, set up the Social Change Assistance Trust which distributed money to a large number of grassroots organisations in the Cape Town area. In the 1980s up to 1994 Church of Norway expanded the financial support to a large number of NGOs in South-Africa, the main partners were SACC, Diakonia and SCAT.

The Church of Norway never gave any financial support directly to the liberation movements themselves. This was left to other organisations in Norway. However, Norwegian church representatives frequently met with representatives from ANC visiting Norway. The Church had an advantage (over other Norwegian organizations) because their relations to LWF and WCC brought the church leaders in contact with the liberation movements, and the Church helped the liberation movements reach Norwegian authorities. In 1988 ANC opened an office in Oslo which handled much of the contact with the church and. Frequent contact helped the church to understand ANC's views on political developments during the negotiation process. Close church relations with the Ministry for Foreign Affairs helped ANC to get access to high-ranking politicians in Norway.

'The Norwegian (Nordic) model':

A special relationship between the State and NGOs

To many foreigners the close and trusting relationship between the church and government in Norway is striking. Examples of disagreement are exceptions rather than the

rule. South African guests were often astonished to learn that church people in Norway could easily phone or meet with the parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee or the highest officials in the Ministry to discuss matters of common interest. It was a new experience to accompany their Norwegian hosts to Parliament and Government offices and meet friendly politicians. It also surprised them that the church, along with other NGOs, could receive millions of NOK from the Government for their anti-apartheid work, seemingly without any problems. The Norwegian government gave money to the Church and NGOs even when these strongly opposed government policy. From 1973 onward all the funds transferred by the Church of Norway to organisations in South Africa were granted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The intimate relationship between the church, NGOs and the Norwegian authorities may be seen as one of numerous examples of the so-called Nordic Model of government. A precondition for the close co-operation was of course a common political understanding on the apartheid issue. Even though government power shifted between the Labour party and conservative ministries between 1948 and 1994, nearly all parties largely agreed on Norway's policy toward the Southern African countries. The broad consensus was made easier by the fact that Norway did not have any colonial background in the region and very few economic interests there. The only matters of some importance were the import of manganese from South Africa and the transport of oil on Norwegian ships.

In other Western countries the churches often had a more contentious relationship with their governments. Great Britain, Germany and Portugal were of course directly involved in the independence wars going on in their colonies. Strong ties, political, economic and emotional, had been forged during the colonial period. This made the question of apartheid and especially the issue of economic sanctions much more complex than in the Nordic countries. Some Western churches had shares in companies that invested in South Africa or funds in banks that gave loans to the apartheid regime. This caused intense debates in these churches. For the Church of Norway such questions did not arise.

From 1974 to 1995 approximately US\$ 40 million were granted by the Foreign Ministry to Church of Norway's partners inside South Africa and Namibia. This was possible because of trust, reliable church contacts within South Africa and Namibia and personal relations between a few committed persons in the Church and the Ministry. And of course, the mutual understanding between the church and the Norwegian government of the importance of assisting the internal opposition. The government could not itself give financial support to political opposition within another country. But by co-operating with the church (and other Norwegian organisations) this could be done. All the money CEIR transferred from 1973 on came from the Ministry. In the mid 1980 a very special relationship was built between the secretary-general of the Church of Norway Council on International Relations, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Oslo and the Norwegian Consul General in Cape Town. It did not become publicly known until after the change of government in South Africa, when Trond Bakkevig, former secretary-general in Church of Norway's foreign office, revealed some of the details in a book.

Partners in Norway

The struggle against apartheid also created new alliances in Norway, not least between the church and the political Left. This happened both at the national level and, not least, in local communities. The church's strong commitment on the apartheid issue clearly strengthened its credibility among political radicals. In this sense the church's work against racism in South Africa became a part of its preaching of the Gospel. When the anti-apartheid work outside the ecumenical movement was established in Norway in the early 1960s, church people played an active role. Many of those who were most active in Church of Norway's anti-apartheid work had been involved in the Norwegian Council on Southern Africa (the

'Norwegian anti-apartheid movement - broad umbrella organisation). The World campaign against military collaboration with South Africa was led by Abdul Minty who was a close friend of CEIR. The information, which this organisation provided for CEIR, was highly appreciated. CEIR's project work in South Africa and Namibia led to close co-operation with the two other main "channels" for governmental funds, the Norwegian Federation of Trade Unions and the International Relief Fund of Students and Academics.

Popular enthusiasm

In the 1960s and 1970s the apartheid issue attracted the interest of a few "specially interested people", mostly working with international organisations or radicals who took a special interest in liberation movements. In Norway this changed tremendously in the mid-1980s. Visitors from South Africa were surprised to learn that taxi drivers asked about ANC, and that schoolchildren were familiar with Steve Biko and Nelson Mandela. There were two main reasons for this change of attitude; the question of economic sanctions became a hot political issue and the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Desmond Tutu and SACC.

The Nobel Peace Prize ceremony itself was memorable for more than one reason. It was interrupted by a bomb threat. After a while the police reported that no bomb had been found, and everyone could go back inside the University Aula. In the meantime the orchestra had disappeared. What happened next will not be forgotten in a hurry: all the South Africans present, led by Tutu himself, went up to the podium to sing *Nkosi Sikelele Afrika* with raised fists. The audience, among them King Olav V of Norway, all rose in respect for this national anthem. The South Africans were deeply moved to hear that the song was well known to many in the audience. Tutu had brought with him both family members and colleagues in SACC. At gatherings both in Oslo and in other parts of the country their joyful singing and joking combined with testimonies about the terrifying situation in their home country made an enormous impression both on ordinary churchgoers and on those who normally kept their distance to the church.

Welcome to Norway, Mr. Mandela!

From the day Nelson Mandela walked out of prison as a free man, the Norwegians started waiting for him to come to Norway. He attended the 'Conference on Hatred' in September 1990, but it was not until 1992 he appeared in public. On 17 May that year, Norway's Constitution Day, he was welcomed at Oslo Airport by a choir singing freedom songs from South Africa. Church representatives were members of the reception committee co-ordinated by the ANC office in Oslo. Mandela took part in the celebration of 17 May, and watched the parade of tens of thousands of children singing and waving their flags to greet the royal family on the palace balcony. Later the same day Mandela was present at the service in Oslo Cathedral. His sermon was his first official appearance in Norway. The congregation was deeply moved by his words, and the police had problems escorting him out of the church due to the large crowd outside waiting to catch a glimpse of a great freedom fighter.

Mandela was back in Oslo in December 1993. This time he came together with de Klerk to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. This was the third time the prize was awarded to South Africans. And like the two first times, the church played a central role in organising the festivities in Oslo. CEIR hosted an informal reception at the residence of the bishop of Oslo. Mandela and his companions met with prominent church leaders. 'For practical reasons' de Klerk was not invited.

Theology from the South

The commitment of the international ecumenical movement inspired the Church of Norway. Experiences drawn from the partnership with African churches in their turn enriched the liturgy and the Norwegian church's understanding of the Gospel. Documents like *The*

Kairos Document, *The Road to Damascus*, *The Evangelical Witness* and *The Rustenburg Declaration* were translated into Norwegian and widely studied. The poems of Zephania Kameta from Namibia were also translated, together with sermons by Desmond Tutu, Allan Boesak, Frank Chikane and others. Music, liturgies and hymns from Southern Africa became well known to many Norwegian church members. Prominent Southern African church leaders were invited to summer camps and national events like the 'Norwegian Church Days'. The Norwegian Ecumenical Council for Southern Africa (NEKSA) has most of the credit for bringing African theology to the Norwegian churches. Several church and Youth choirs learned to sing African liberation songs, and these songs are perhaps what most ordinary Christians in Norway noticed.

The theological institutions in Norway have also been involved with Southern African theology. Exchange programmes and study tours have been of great importance in establishing personal relations between Christians in Norway and Southern Africa. When major crises occurred in South Africa, for instance the massacres in Sharpeville in 1960 and in Soweto in 1976, the banning of organisations in 1977 and 1988 and the bombing of the Khotso House, Norwegian church leaders asked Christians to pray for the people of South Africa. These calls came originally from churches within South Africa or from LWF and WCC. Local congregations arranged special solidarity services. Christians in South Africa reported back that this kind of support meant very much to them, and encouraged them to continue with the struggle. Calls for prayers were also made in connection with the elections both in Namibia and in South Africa.

The debate on economic sanctions

The first signs of a church debate in Norway on trade with the apartheid regime appeared in the 1970s, but it was not until the early 1980s the question of economic sanctions was on the political agenda in Norway. The import of South Africa goods, especially manganese, which was crucial for the large Norwegian production of aluminium, and the transport of oil on Norwegian ships were both difficult since they affected Norwegian companies and a considerable number of jobs both in Norway and on Norwegian ships. In 1979/80 approximately 18% of all oil to South Africa was transported on Norwegian tankers.

CEIR supported the efforts of the Norwegian Council for Southern Africa to make Parliament outlaw all trade between Norway and the racist regime. CEIR forwarded calls for sanctions from the churches in the region and from the international ecumenical community. However, it was not the Church but the Norwegian Council for Southern Africa who was the major pressure group for economic sanctions in Norway in the political debate in the 1980s. In March 1987 the Parliament at last agreed on a law on economic sanctions. It outlawed all economic co-operation between Norwegian companies and South Africa, and all transport of oil to South Africa on Norwegian ships. The law had, however, some significant loopholes. In 1988 Norwegian Council for Southern Africa launches a campaign against Shell, which the Church supported only half-heartedly. The reason was that the Church wanted to speak on sanctions in principle, and did not wish to target a specific oil-company.

There were other tensions between the Church and the popular 'solidarity movement'. In 1988 Norway and South Africa had agreed that the Norwegian General Consulate in Cape Town should be allowed to continue if South Africa were allowed to establish an office in Oslo. The Church agreed to this because Consul Bjarne Lindstrøm in Cape Town played a key role in organising CEIR's financial support to South African opposition groups. Because of this breach in the diplomatic isolation of the apartheid regime, the church was heavily criticized by members of the Norwegian Council for Southern Africa. Some also expressed dislike of the close connection between the Church and the Norwegian government. But after

1994, when the cooperation between the Church and the Consulate in Cape Town became publicly known, it was easier to understand why the Church had accepted the South African Office in Oslo.

What happened after 1994? Norwegian Church Aid

1994 has been followed by a decade in which South African issues have been toned down. The reason for this was partly that the financial support the Church got from The Foreign Ministry for South African NGOs ended with apartheid. Some of the projects were transferred to Norwegian Church Aid, who works on long term development and democracy building. Even though civil society organisations are well established in South Africa, we are told that they need international solidarity and funding to be able to continue its work.

Norwegian Church Aid's overall development goals are to support and strengthen civil society organisations, church related and secular, to be credible and relevant actors in the South African society that through advocacy, service delivery and capacity building address issues of community empowerment, good governance, reconciliation and HIV/AIDS. Norwegian Church Aid works through partners and aims at strengthening their capacity and enhancing their competence to be able to implement projects and programmes that focus on marginalized, primarily rural populations whose basic needs and human rights are not met. Special consideration is given to the situation of women and children and indigenous peoples. Emphasis is given to organisations that link their experiences on the ground with advocacy and lobbying on various levels and that do this in alliances with other organisations.

Some closing remarks: Challenges for the future

Church leaders from Norway took part in the recent funeral of Beyers Naude, and this moving event was a strong reminder of the very special relationship we have developed over a long time between churches in Norway and our brothers and sisters in South Africa. We are hoping - and also planning - to revitalize our relationship with the South African Churches. These days, for instance, work is going on to strengthen the cooperation between The Lutheran Church of South Africa and the Church of Norway. We have a 150-year long history of cooperation - and the time has not come to end it, on the contrary we are committed to develop it further.

The Conference is also valuable in helping us to reflect on the role we played during the struggle against Apartheid. We need to remember and record our own history. You South Africans taught us what it meant to be a true witness of Christ in a time of oppression and suffering. You showed us a Church serving the oppressed and bringing hope and reconciliation. We - representing the rich minority in our divided world - need to be constantly reminded and also challenged as to which side we are on in the ongoing global struggle for justice and peace.

Litterature:

Trond Bakkevig: *The Church of Norway and the Struggle against Apartheid*, Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations, 1996

Berit Hagen Agøy: *The Freedom Struggle in Southern Africa - the role of the Norwegian Churches 1948 - 1994*, in Tore Linne Eriksen (ed.) *Norway and the National Liberation in Southern Africa*, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2000

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