

# **Church-State-Relations as an Ecumenical Issue**

## **A contribution from Africa**

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### **Africa's "state" (our present context as Church in Africa)**

The state of Africa and the states in Africa are often equated with the daunting challenges of extreme poverty, a devastating HIV and AIDS epidemic, cruel and dehumanising dictatorship and failing leadership, ravaging civil wars, uncontrolled corruption and unrestrained economic exploitation, resulting in an ever worsening situation. And arguably so, this is one of the realities of today's African states and they have names like Darfur, Zimbabwe, Charles Taylor and many more. The explanations given for Africa's state range from reasons inflicted from the outside like imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism (in the form of so-called trade liberalisation) to inherent reasons of cultural or as some still argue 'genetic' origin (the latter being a modern form of perpetuated racism). The wounds of Africa are made up by a conglomeration of causes, effects, impacts and actions, which has led to and perpetuates them. The solutions are likewise complicated and complex. However, adding insult to injury, solutions often seem affordable, simple and within easy reach, like the provision of mosquito nets to combat malaria-related-deaths, immunisation, ARVs, or food security to name just a few.

This legacy is somewhat contrasted by the prominent biblical witnesses of Africa: Jacob and his family, economic refugees, who out of hunger sought and were freely granted refuge in Egypt, Africa (Gen 42-47). Or the holy family, Maria and Joseph with our Lord Jesus, in fear of persecution fled to security in Africa (Mt 2:13-23). An introduction to the state(s) of Africa would be incomplete and misleading without its ancient and ongoing history, from our Hebrew Bible up until today, with the enormous blessings of and hope in Africa: Its wealth in terms of people and resources, in terms of history and present developments – after all, mod-

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ern science unequivocally identifies Africa as the cradle of humankind. Africa has brought up heroes and heroines in the fight against injustice and oppression, she has produced world-class politicians, theologians, intellectuals, artists, musicians, and athletes influencing and shaping the rest of the world. Africa has some of the youngest democracies and also some of the most vigilant and creative debates are going on throughout this continent. Some African states are regarded to have the best and most progressive gender-sensitive constitutions in the world. Africa is a place of wide cultural diversity and yet for many it constitutes a symbol of the living idea of “ubuntu”, where a person only becomes a person through the community with others. Africa is a continent of enormous strength, potential and hope.

Where and what is the role of the church on this continent of extremes and especially vis-à-vis the states that are supposed to bring about development and well-being for their citizens? (Barmen thesis 5; cf. 1 Pet 2,17)

In the following the church-state relationship will be looked at in two categories:

1. An oppressive, dictatorial state, which will be referred to as an illegitimate state: Human rights of the first generation (civil and political rights) are violated.
2. A legitimate, democratic state. The socio-economic human rights (second generation rights) are the main societal challenge.

In the Namibian experience, the transition from one to the other is closer and more evident in terms of recent history than for most people in Europe. But also recent European history (e.g. Yugoslavia) has painfully shown that a reversal from a peaceful to an abusive situation in fact is a realistic threat.

## **Biblical and theological considerations on the church-state relationship**

The relationship and the place of the church vis-à-vis the state has to be based on the biblical foundation of the church in society. Ultimately, our state (with Phil 3:20) is in heaven: “*But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ*”. So our civil states, up until the second coming of Christ, are penultimate entities (Bonhoeffer). Ultimately, we through Christ Jesus look forward to being part of the pilgrimage of all nations to mount Zion. (Is 2:3b-4a): “*The law will go out from Zion, the word of the*

*LORD from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples.”*

## **The approach of the Church towards a dictatorial state**

The ultimate reality of the Kingdom of God has direct implications for the Churches' role towards the state, today in our penultimate unredeemed existence. As we are awaiting the New Jerusalem, the „polis“ of God to come on earth (Rev 21), Christians can never be indifferent as against our current states (cf. Barth, *Rechtfertigung und Recht*, 22ff). *“Weil Jesus Christus gekommen ist und wieder kommt, darum muß ihm überall in der Welt der Weg bereitet werden, darum allein also hat es die Kirche auch mit den weltlichen Ordnungen zu tun.”*<sup>2</sup> (Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 1992:362) In faith we are called into the discipleship of Jesus Christ (analogia fidei). Therefore Barth says: *“Nun gibt es zwar keine Idee, kein System, kein Programm, wohl aber eine unter allen Umständen zu erkennende und innezuhaltende Richtung und Linie der im politischen Raum zu vollziehenden christlichen Entscheidungen.”* (Barth, *Christengemeinde und Bürgergemeinde*, 60) Barth and Bonhoeffer rightly point out that living in the discipleship of Jesus Christ can never mean being indifferent to one's political environment, but fundamentally means to get involved and to concretely take sides: What God fights against, we have to fight against as well.

In this regard, however, Barth warns against the *impertinent equation* (“unverschämte Identifikation”) (Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, 2.nd Ed.) of our humanly acts with God's acts. He points to the danger that thereby we would confuse our own acting with building up God's Kingdom.

However, the southern African experience with the oppressive, dictatorial state created a situation, which particularly pointed to another insight, namely the presence of the Holy Spirit, the location of God in our daily lives. As people who have been living under apartheid, we as church could only compare our sufferings to the suffering of Jesus at the cross. The Kairos document of 1985 was a direct expression of this. A moment of truth had come for the churches to condemn the theology of the state and the English liberal theology. The equation of the people's suffering with God's suffering, the experience that God is with His people, right here at that moment, and condemns the apartheid state as illegitimate and evil, was an experience, which has shaped African liberation theology. It has formed the basis of the

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<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhöffer, *Ethik*, ed. v. Ilse Tödt, 1992

church's relationship to the state<sup>3</sup>. For me the church always has to live and be aware of this ambiguity: We need to say "Save me, Lord!" Only the Lord, who is ready to pull us out of the high waves or our self-centredness and self-deification, can save us. Only he can save us from drowning into ourselves. To be aware of this, in faith, at all times, is to take the focus off ourselves and "*keep our eyes on Jesus, the Originator and Perfector of our faith*" (Hebrews 12:2). This is no contradiction to trusting in God's intervention and presence in our lives. And therefore it needs a Church that will always endeavour to listen, to understand and be in solidarity with the weak, so as to read the signs of times correctly. Only then can we be a church towards the state, which can tell those in political or business power, in praise or admonition, without apologising to anybody: So says the Lord ...! The messenger of such message, the Church of Jesus Christ, does not ask for permission to say so, nor does it speak up to impress or to be praised; neither does she inquire whether the message will make powerful people happy or enrage them. She proclaims her message without fear or favour, with the one divine purpose: to save and to give life that will never die, even in the face of death, as ensured for us by the resurrected and victorious Son of God, Jesus Christ.

### **The approach of the Church towards a legitimate state**

The main mandate and obligation of the church is for the poor and marginalised in society and against or for the state as Jesus taught us: "*I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me*" (Mt. 25:45). In short and precise words, justice and dignity for the poor remains the yardstick for any system, and the Church has to act according to God's will and Jesus' example in how to bring about justice and dignity for God's creation and within human society. Dignity and justice are all-embracing and inclusive concepts covering the fullness and completeness of life, hope and compassion, sharing of resources, mutual support, respect, equality and protection of human freedoms. On this basis, the church cannot allow herself to be limited by the dominant forces of the world, but is obliged to stand in for what is needed and biblically imperative, and not for what seems possible in a worldly way.

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<sup>3</sup> Note, there were also South African theologians, who were supportive of the cause, but were afraid that theologically, this clear identification of the divine intervention in our lives could be misused towards a fundamentalism Barth warned against.

## **Our Namibian experience**

The church was vocal in very difficult times often taking the place of the political liberation movement within the country of oppression. The church could often speak up where the liberation movement was silenced. This was done on the basis that the apartheid regime was evil and against the biblical foundation that all people are equally created in the image of God. A state that denies this right to its citizens and instead tramples on people has no authority.

However, this sister- and brotherhood with the liberation movements has created a legacy for today's role of the church vis-à-vis the state. Being part and parcel of the liberation struggle also meant that if one followed the ideas of and praised the actions of the movement, one became a beloved comrade. However, if one criticised or questioned the movement, one became a traitor, with often deadly consequences. This modus operandi is still visible and unfortunately often practiced by the liberation movements, which by now are the parties in power in many liberated African states. It practically also determines the relationship and actions of many churches in Africa vis-à-vis their respective states.

My personal career probably stands for many individual histories of churchmen and -women in Africa and illustrates part of the problem of the churches' relationship towards a liberated state. Having been a minister and executive staff of my church in Namibia under the apartheid rule and involved in the struggle against the regime, I had to take a decision between staying in the church or taking up a political appointment when independence was achieved. In fact my own Bishop at the time encouraged me to take up the political position saying: 'This is what we have fought for all these years.' There are many more cases like mine, especially in Southern Africa, that people who came from the church and fought in the struggle on the side of the church later joined government after liberation. This 'migration of prophets' as it is called - is as such not a bad thing and has evidently increased the influence of the church and of biblical values on the political level. The constitutions of Namibia and South Africa are witness to that. However, on another level, the struggle-relationship between the church and the liberation movement and the incorporation of many church leaders into government had and still have detrimental effects on the churches' vis-à-vis the state. Although the churches have a history of resistance and critical analysis, they do not speak out because our comrades are in power now. Churches in Africa are in general not critical towards their governments and this is mostly due to the history that one is still marked as a traitor if one speaks up. This is a very painful experience.

After liberation and independence, the churches have locked themselves up and people have been too scared to stand up. But after all, the disciples went out of their room after the Holy Spirit had come to them on Pentecost and started to preach and practice their faith. However, the churches in Africa seem to have a difficult road ahead to redefine their role in the political sphere and decide on appropriate action. It is telling that in recent African theological literature, statements or action plans of churches, the relationship with the respective state is not discussed and the state as a role-player is hardly mentioned. It seems what is still lacking is a process of churches in Africa defining their role after liberation. Such a process has not happened and it is urgently needed.

Our churches are also too often stuck 'up there' somewhere to be relevant in a church-state relationship. We think in hierarchies and in positions - we only talk to the Bishops, far too seldom to the cleaners. We are concerned what to get out of it, but we neglect the calling of the church to serve. We are not addressing the real problems on the ground, but are busy supporting the status quo which in most cases perpetuates poverty. Without taking ownership we too often say, we are dependent on our outside funders, who determine what we are doing. Likewise, we refer the responsibility for transformation and upliftment of our people to the government, too quickly. If things then go wrong, we do not speak up, but out of the fear to take clear positions, we are trying to stay "neutral!" But such an attitude is not neutral and it clearly does not improve the situation, it cements the status quo. Even worse, we limit ourselves in what we are doing and working for, and we are also limiting the hopes and expectations of the poor towards a better life and the achievement of social justice. According to Luke 4, 18 and 19, Jesus has come to fulfil the scripture: *"to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoner and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."*

### **From welfare to prophetic examples**

If the church is called to preach the good news to the poor and to be an advocate of those who are otherwise not heard, then we have to seriously redefine our role in society and towards the state. We cannot preach the good news from the pulpit, while not being connected, attached and most importantly touched by the every day life and suffering of the people living in poverty. Without this we do not allow the Holy Spirit to touch us and we are not true to our calling. As the Jewish philosopher Abraham J. Heschel rightly said: "Philosophy, to be relevant, must offer us a wisdom to live by – relevant not only in the isolation of our study rooms but

also in moments of facing staggering cruelty and the threat of disaster.” (Cf. Heschel, Who is Man)

### ***Listening to the voices, who are otherwise not heard***

The basis for us in Namibia is to find out with and from our people through participatory research how they experience their living conditions and to find out what they themselves see as solutions to the problems. The church has the advantage of having a structure, which is close to the people. We need to use it and listen!

In Namibia we are trying to put this approach into practice. We are training people to do research in the fast growing informal settlements of our towns and even villages. This research aims to find out more about the living conditions there. Findings so far are very shocking as it becomes apparent that our people do not have access to clean water and that they often go hungry to bed. Children’s basic needs not even in terms of food are met and many women are forced to prostitute themselves to put some bread on the table. This research should enable us as a Church to propose an adequate response to this situation and to strategically lobby for a change.

The Church has to tackle poverty head-on, not by being neutral, but by being in critical solidarity with our governments. The church has to speak up in the public domain by critically looking at the development of our nations. The Church has to develop concrete proposals how to improve the situation. It does not help to only criticise the strategies of others, but we have to offer solutions which have the potential to effectively address mass poverty in the face of national and international mass accumulation of wealth. We ourselves have to critically examine our business as usual. We need to be bold enough to be ready to be judged by our fruits (Mt 7,16: *You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?*) and to be honest what we are able to accomplish. Maybe our role is not so much in doing projects or, as it nowadays, in becoming just another „service provider“ for the state. Rather we need to learn again to be a ‘player’ in society as a whole. Our Church in Namibia has spearheaded the process of advocating a guaranteed basic income for all citizens which we believe would go a long way to alleviate poverty, reduce inequality, foster economic development, and restore some social justice. By now, we have formed a ‘Basic Income Grant’ (BIG) Coalition that includes all role-players in civil society: the NGOs, the Aids organisations, the unions and the Namibian churches. This Coalition is in critical dialogue with our

government to find ways to implement this noble idea. And while we face resistance and even intimidation, we believe that this is the task of the church: to stand in and advocate solutions to the pressing issues and to inspire people to support this task.

### ***Acting prophetically***

The problem lies in the fact that the churches themselves have become part of the system, which now needs to be radically transformed. The current structures, and not people's behaviour, lock people in the vicious cycle of poverty. While we had hoped that by coming to power, also the economy would change, we have to realize that the structure is such that it reinforces inequality and mass structural poverty. Therefore it will also not be enough to criticise the current system and state, but we need to actively develop new visions and concrete plans and policies - or rather "prophetic examples" - that can challenge the situation from a structural point of view.

There is a saying that the ultimate test of the pudding lies in its taste. We need to move from an ambulance approach, which manifests the current structure towards real prophetic examples. We as Lutherans believe that in the Holy Communion in the bread and wine, God is present, we actually taste him on our lips, in our mouth and feel his spirit. It is this taste of the communion, the real presence of the Lord, the reality of the Holy Spirit in our daily lives that we need to build on, reckon with and share with the people in communion. Thereby we will be true to our calling.

### **An ecumenical issue**

Last but not least, this is and has to be an ecumenical issue. How would you want to nationalize and limit the pilgrimage to the mount Zion? The structures, which enforce poverty and suffering today are stronger than our nation states, which are just a part of the whole picture. But we hope and trust in the liberating power of the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.