

Research summary PNR42+

Swiss Churches, Apartheid & South Africa: The case of the Swiss Mission in South Africa

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Apartheid posed profound challenges to conceptions of humanity and development that came to dominate the world stage after the 1939-45 war. This report analyses the manner in which religious organisations dealt with the formulation and implementation of apartheid in South Africa during the second half of the twentieth century. It studies this question through an examination of the Swiss Mission in South Africa (SMSA), an institution which had a presence in South Africa, Switzerland and on the international ecumenical scene. In South Africa, the SMSA conducted evangelical, medical and educational work in the northern regions of the country from the late nineteenth century onwards. It gradually built up an indigenous church which became independent in 1962 as the Tsonga Presbyterian Church (TPC). In Switzerland, the SMSA emerged as an autonomous religious society from the pietistic awakening movement of western Switzerland in the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1963, it became part of a new, wider missionary association formed by the French-speaking Protestant churches, the Département Missionnaire des Églises de la Suisse Romande (DM). Through the DM and the activities of some of its member churches, the SMSA/TPC was present and active within Swiss and international ecumenical circles.

The debate on Swiss-South African relations after World War II (as developed in Swiss public forums, the political arena, the media as well as within academia) has been dominated by economic and financial issues. Similarly, most of the NRP 42+ research projects focus on the Swiss state and on Swiss private companies or banks. The present report attempts to expand this view of the relationship between the two countries by enlarging the scope of actors and ties considered. The project studies an organisation of faith, a sphere hardly considered until now in the context of Swiss-South Africa relations. In addition, it examines a religious institution which was present in different settings, namely in South Africa, in Switzerland and within the international religious scene. The analysis of the SMSA thus allows a multifaceted examination of the involvement of a Swiss institution in apartheid South Africa. It permits an in-depth analysis of how the involvement of the SMSA in South Africa impacted on the churches in Switzerland and, vice versa, how Swiss and international dynamics impacted on Swiss missionary efforts in South Africa. These insights into additional actors and links allow a deeper and more complex understanding of how Switzerland at large responded to apartheid.

Swiss missionaries were among the first Swiss to go to South Africa in the nineteenth century and settle there for long periods of time. The SMSA as an institution provided the first regular

channel of information on South Africa for a wider Swiss public. Letters and reports sent by missionaries “from the field” were published in widely distributed journals and newspapers, and missionary discourse on “pagan Africa” informed religious education provided by Sunday schools throughout Switzerland. From the mid-twentieth century, the sources of information on South Africa became more diversified and the Mission became just one avenue of information amongst others. Still, throughout the apartheid period, churches and other religious organisations in Switzerland remained one of the most important loci of, and actors in, the debate on apartheid. This was a result of the wide involvement of Swiss religious circles in mission work in South Africa (including various Catholic congregations), as well as of the participation of many religious and lay people in Swiss anti-apartheid, developmentalist, egalitarian and human rights movements from the 1960s onwards.

The report analyses in particular the religious and cultural ties which organisations and individuals of faith established between the two countries. These ties did not, however, exclude economic or political aspects. In fact, in some cases, religious and ethical considerations came to be overlain and dominated by economic and political-strategic ones. Still, in the situation of apartheid, questions of ideology and culture played a particularly important role as the racist apartheid ideology challenged the fundamental assumptions with which religious and lay international bodies increasingly identified themselves after World War II, in particular the universality of human rights and the equality of all races. Indeed, the genocidal application of racial difference in the Third Reich, and the nationalist struggles for independence in Africa and Asia in the 1940s and 1950s, had led to a complete rethinking of conceptualisations of social change and difference, and the location of the Other within them. In terms of religious organisations and institutions, this process led to a rethinking of the relationships between religious bodies in sending countries and the newly created churches in the mission fields, as well as to the creation of world-wide ecumenical bodies such as the World Council of Churches (WCC). Apartheid impacted right at this point. It received much ideological support from the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), the main Afrikaner Protestant Church, and racial segregation and discrimination were justified by Christian discourse and ideas spread by the DRC. Thus, apartheid challenged the new ways in which cross-cultural Christian relationships had begun to be imagined.

Against this background, this study shows that, from the 1970s onwards, the DM developed a singular position in relation to apartheid in Switzerland, a position that differed from that taken by other churches and religious institutions, notably the Swiss Federation of Protestant Churches. On the other hand, the DM was in line with the anti-apartheid positions of other missionary organisations and of the World Council of Churches, although its stance was possibly more discrete. In South Africa in contrast, the position of the SMSA/TPC was more complicated and nuanced. While there was a period, between 1980 and 1986, when the church leadership was dominated by radical anti-apartheid elements, the Church founded by the Swiss Mission was politically reformist or mute the rest of the time. In consequence, while there was a good and constructive relationship between DM and the church in South Africa up to the mid-1980s, tensions arose between Lausanne and Johannesburg after 1986, reflected by tensions within the church in South Africa itself.

From the beginning of its work in the Transvaal, the SMSA found itself in an ambiguous position. During the pre-apartheid period (until 1948), it integrated itself into South African colonial society, notably via the purchase of large farms, between 2'000 to 4'000 hectares each, on which it established its mission stations. On the other hand, it was critical of certain aspects of the colonial society, and its project was to protect Africans against the dangers of the latter. Critically, however, the Swiss Mission shared some of the fundamental ideological conceptions upon which apartheid was later to be developed. In the eyes of the Swiss missionaries, the adoption of Chris-

tianity by black Africans could only be realised if they were given the opportunity to develop on their own, in the context of their own culture – or rather a fusion of this culture with Christian norms. With the coming of apartheid, this ideology of what is often called ‘protective segregation’ was challenged because apartheid pushed the logic of segregation to such political and social extremes that it went against Christian ideas of equality between human beings, a position that was unacceptable to most missionaries. However, when the South African government, under Prime Minister Verwoerd, created so-called homelands or bantustans for the different ethnic groups living in South Africa, the SMSA welcomed this move. Swiss missionaries were very much in favour of the creation of Gazankulu, the homeland for the Tsongas, which they saw as an important symbolic and material recognition of the “nation” they had striven to “protect”. This was partly due to the fact that the Mission had come to identify its work with the Tsonga ethnic group. The Gazankulu homeland was also supported by most of the Tsonga elites, and in particular by those with close contact with the Mission. Besides, the Mission saw the initial policies implemented by the apartheid government as potentially beneficial to the Tsonga-speaking population as apartheid seemed to initiate new levels of government support for mission-run schools and clinics.

By the late 1950s and 60s, the situation began to change, however. First, the Mission was challenged by a loss of control over its schools, and, later, its hospitals. Its farms came under the threat of expropriation, and the people living on them with removal, when the South African state attempted to implement its homeland policy. At the same time, divisions in the structure of the TPC started to appear, especially between its rural and urban congregations and between generations which (had) experienced apartheid in different ways. These differences grew particularly when a radicalised youth brought home the experiences and expectations born of the Soweto uprising. By the 1980s the Church, renamed the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in South Africa (EPCSA), had grown into an institution with a dual identity. On the one hand, a radical, or prophetic, wing began to appear under the leadership of the then moderator of the Church. It called for a more active role in the fight against apartheid. On the other hand, large sectors of the EPCSA maintained close ties to the Gazankulu homeland and remained, like many other churches throughout the country, rather passive in the confrontation with apartheid. If the radical faction took power and implemented its views between 1980 and 1986, the reformist and/or conservative majority ran the Church the rest of the time. While before 1980 this created relatively few problems, the radicalisation of the anti-apartheid struggle in the late 1980s led to severe divisions and, by the end of the decade, the institutionalisation of divisions and factions within the Church.

In Switzerland, apartheid came to occupy a prominent role in debates within church circles in the 1970s. The Swiss anti-apartheid movement, created a decade earlier, owed much to progressive elements within the church, especially in Geneva. More generally, the World Council of Churches (WCC), based in Geneva, had a considerable influence on the way churches in Switzerland and throughout the world considered their role in the fight against apartheid. In 1968, it launched its Programme to Combat Racism (PCR), a project aimed at fighting racism and racial discrimination world-wide, with a strong emphasis on Southern Africa. The PCR created much debate and controversy, in particular because it offered financial support to liberation movements (albeit on condition that they used that money for social and humanitarian purposes only) and because it advocated, during the second phase of its development, an end to investments in South Africa as a way to force Pretoria to put an end to apartheid. Swiss churches were very divided on the issue, some cantonal churches supporting the PCR while others opposed it. The Swiss Federation of Protestant Churches (FEPS), on its side, was very slow to take an official stance on the PCR. When it eventually did, it did not stand for or against the Programme, but it

set up an alternative plan. Drawn first as a wide-ranging human rights programme, this alternative eventually took the form of a so-called “mission of good offices” whose main aim was to obtain from the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) a commitment to change its policy of open or tacit support for apartheid. Launched in 1978, the mission of good offices came under severe criticism from some Swiss church circles as well as from the majority of its black South African partner churches. It was eventually terminated in 1981 without having achieved any tangible results other than drawing Swiss people and faith institutions away from WCC’s stand.

Behind FEPS’ response to the PCR was a belief in the virtues of dialogue, as well as a fear of confrontation and pressures. First, contrary to the WCC, to the anti-apartheid movement and to the DM, who thought a direct opposition to the Pretoria regime and its supporters would help end apartheid, FEPS believed in dialogue. This was a theological stand (theology of reconciliation as opposed to the prophetic theology which stands with the oppressed) and a cultural stand (typically Swiss?) according to which confrontation would crystallise divisions further and add fuel to the fire in contrast to negotiation, reconciliation and consensus building. Second, FEPS’ stand had to do with the nature of the institution. As a federal body representing some 26 cantonal churches, with little executive power, all the decisions it took were the expression of a compromise, acceptable to all, something which made it difficult to adopt any radical gestures and moves (whether in favour or against apartheid). Thirdly, FEPS’ position on the apartheid question mirrored an opinion quite widely spread in Switzerland at the time, according to which the apartheid regime, especially under P.W. Botha’s government, was able and willing to reform, and that support to the South African economy was the key to encouraging and sustaining a reform process that would lead to a bloodless dismantling of apartheid. Finally, churches and religious individuals came under pressure, if not plain blackmail, from various economic actors who stated openly that they would sanction them if they took too radical and active a stand on the question of apartheid.

During the 1980s, the debates on apartheid and South Africa were dominated by economic questions. In Switzerland, one of the main issues at stake was the attitude of the three main banks singled out in 1981 by the UN special committee on South Africa as Pretoria’s main sources of financial support. Again, WCC and the anti-apartheid movement opted for a strategy of direct confrontation, the former putting an end in 1981 to its relationships with banks investing in South Africa in a much publicised move, while the latter launched in the same year a “Campaign against banking relationships with South Africa”. Churches were as divided on this issue as they had been on that of the PCR. The Département Missionnaire stood on the side of the WCC and the UN, along with most Swiss missionary organisations. In contrast, FEPS, in collaboration this time with the Swiss Bishops’ Conference (CES), again chose to elaborate a non-confrontational policy and it set up an alternative to the WCC and the UN options. This second alternative took the form of dialogue between an ecumenical church delegation and a delegation from the main Swiss banks. The church delegation was hoping to convince the banks that they should put an end to investment in South Africa or at least use their financial power to obtain some reforms in South Africa. Yet, just like the ‘mission of good office’, these Bankengespräche did not yield many tangible results. This was in large part because FEPS and the CES refused to allow the church delegation to resort to public actions against the banks if the talks were unfruitful, and because banks refused to engage with the churches’ proposals. Yet, if FEPS and CES did not gain much, the banks obtained precious time and they used the Bankengespräche to polish their public image.

In sum, what we have seen is that, in Switzerland, the Département Missionnaire was from 1973, and especially after the events of Soweto, actively working against apartheid. It collaborated with the WCC and the anti-apartheid movement to combat racism in South Africa. Such a stance con-

trusted with many cantonal churches' and even more with FEPS' stance. The latter was silent for long and from the late 1970s it tried to find a reformist policy which avoided confrontation with apartheid and Swiss economic milieu, yet expressed criticisms of apartheid. In South Africa, the Swiss Mission was ambivalent in relation to apartheid for many years. With the coming to power in the Church of a new generation of radical pastors in 1980, the institution became actively involved in the anti-apartheid struggle. But, in 1986, the president of the Church was arrested by the apartheid state and a more conservative leadership came to power. The consequence was that the Church turned politically silent while the now marginalised radical faction organised itself as a confessing movement. The division and position of the EPCSA in South Africa was in line with most South African religious institutions – divided and officially silent. On the other hand, it contrasted markedly from that held by its Swiss partner institution, the Département Missionnaire. This was something that led to a great deal of tensions between the two institutions. The differences between the Swiss and South African branch of the Mission can be explained in good part by the difference of context, that is the differences between an institution engaged on the ground for more than a century and an institution outside of the country. The missionary nature of the Swiss Mission in South Africa also explains much of the latter's singular position in relation to other faith institutions in Switzerland. On the other hand, the SMSA and the Swiss churches' divisions may be contrasted with the united position adopted by Switzerland's economic networks. A study of religious institutions highlights this state of affair as well as the fact that Swiss economic interests tried to prevent churches from combating apartheid.

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