

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND INTIMIDATION IN A SECULAR STATE THE NAMIBIA EXPERIENCE

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INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be a secular state in a country where the majority of the people claim to be Christian? Shortly before the UN supervised independence elections in Namibia the press published a decision of the Politburo of the major liberation movement, Swapo of Namibia, making it clear that a Swapo government will not honour Christian public holidays in an independent Namibia if it comes to power.¹

This radical Swapo statement was consistent with several pro-socialist statements that the movement made while in exile.

Swapo won the elections comfortably, although it did not get the expected 2/3 majority. The Constitution was drafted in a short time. It includes an article declaring Namibia a secular state. The Constitution was accepted unopposed by 71 of the 72 members of the Constituent Assembly. Only Mr. Kosie Pretorius, representing Aksie Christen Nasionaal, an alliance between the old National Party and the Deutsche Aktion, abstained. Mr. Pretorius later claimed that he abstained because, among other issues, he is against the idea of a secular state in a country where the majority of the citizens are Christians.²

This article looks at the effect of declaring Namibia a secular state on the freedom and liberty of the churches after independence.

Composition of the Church

The London Missionary Society established the first foreign mission in Blydeverwacht in the south of Namibia in 1805.³ They were followed by the Weslean Missionary Society in 1820. From 1840 the Rhenish Mission took over the work of the London Missionary Society. The Rhenish missionaries were soon followed by Finnish Lutheran missionaries in the north.

¹ The document was distributed before the United Nations supervised elections in 1989 in the form of a leaflet by someone opposing SWAPO, claiming to be a copy of an official SWAPO document. The leaflet was later published by several newspapers. SWAPO never denied that the document originated from them. Copy in possession of author.

² Discussion with Pretorius, Jan. 2005.

³ Dierks, K. 200 Namibian Library of Dr. Klaus Dierks,
<http://www.klausdierks.com/FrontpageMain.html>, accessed on 10 April 2008 at 23h33.

The Catholic and Anglican Churches also started their missions amongst the Oshwambo people in the second half of the 19th century. Klaus' description of the early Namibian history is a story of the settlement of Nama tribes in the south, and the movement of the Ovahereros in central Namibia and their relationships with the Rhenish missionaries.

The three Afrikaans Reformed Churches played an important role in pre-independent Namibia. The adherents of the Reformed Church (Gereformeerde Kerk) were the first organised white group from South Africa who settled in Namibia for a while on their way to Angola. The Dorslandtrekkers were conservative Calvinists who left the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek in the 1870's in search of a new frontier when they became disillusioned with the liberal excommunicated reformed minister-turned-president and his secularisation programmes. They initially requested the later war president Paul Kruger to lead them, but he declined and opted for ZAR politics in an attempt to make the Boer republic a Christian state. The Dorslandtrekkers stayed for a while in Rietfontein in the north of Namibia before settling in Angola.⁴

Although small in number, the Reformed churches became very influential after the occupation of South Africa during World War I and the eventual period of South African rule.

In the 1990's Namibia was the African country with the highest percentage of Christians. More than 90% of the population identified themselves as Christians.⁵ Namibia is the only African country with a Lutheran majority.⁶ At the time of independence only 2,5% of the population were Pentecostal and 8,9% evangelical.⁷ At independence the position did not change dramatically in the last fifteen years, and although there are no official figures available, it is possible that the church grew since independence. Many missionaries arrived in Namibia after independence, especially Pentecostals and charismatics, but not exclusively. Unlike the first wave of missionaries, the group of the late 1990's and early 21st century, are predominantly

⁴ See Giliomee, H 2003: *The Afrikaners. Biography of a People*, Cape Town, Tafelberg. p.188.

⁵ Johnstone, P. (1993) *Operation World*, Carlisle, UK, OM Publishing. pp. 42,5% of the population 01 – 403.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., p. 401. I use the word evangelical in the North American sense to refer to the so-called born again movement (Christian who believe that a conversion experience is essential for becoming a believer).

from Africa, and most of them are black! They come from Nigeria, Ghana,⁸ Zimbabwe, Zambia,⁹ and South Africa.¹⁰ The Universal Church of the Kingdom started a mega church in the heart of Windhoek.¹¹

The north also sent their missionaries (or church planters as they are now called) to Namibia. Several United States based Pentecostal/charismatic denominations started churches, including the Potter's House, a radical conservative movement,¹² and the Church of God in Christ, one of the oldest and biggest African American Pentecostal Churches in the United States. Bishop Wahl Abrahams¹³ worked for a period under the leadership of an African American group, the Full Gospel Church, not to be confused with the South African Full Gospel Church.

After independence the Namibian census forms no longer include sections on church affiliation. Consequently, many observers concentrate on the mainline churches and small, yet well-sourced new missionary groups. The growth in the Pentecostal/charismatic movement is often ignored.

A case in point is the US State report on religious freedom. They do not even mention the Pentecostals as a significant group, while giving special attention to the much smaller Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).¹⁴

Most of the non-Christian religions only organised after independence when adherents of the faith moved to Windhoek for diplomatic and business reasons. The exception being the Jewish community, who settled in the country at beginning of the 19th century. Although their numbers declined after World War II, the synagogue is still in weekly use and the community is served by a lay leader.

The Muslims represent less than 1% of the population.¹⁵ With foreign assistance they were able to build two mosks in the capital. The majority of the adherents are foreign

⁸ Missionaries from West Africa include, the Gorro family and Dr. Elizabeth Arowalo with her Christ Love Ministries. The controversial healing evangelist, Prophet Josua, has a big following in Namibia, especially amongst white Pentecostals and charismatics, but he does not have a church in Namibia.

⁹ Former deputy president of Zambia, Neves Mumba, has planted a Victory Ministries in Namibia under the leadership of Denzel Shipaza.

¹⁰ South African black church planters include Bishop Wahl Abrahams of the New Covenant Church and Pastor M Shapley, a former ANC cadre in the Eastern Cape.

¹¹ The Universal Church is a Brazilian Pentecostal Church. They are led by Brazilian bishops and do not fellowship with other Pentecostals.

¹² The church broke away from the mainline Pentecostal Church, Foursquare Gospel Church in the 1970's because they did not agree with the growing emphasis on theological education.

¹³ See footnote 8.

¹⁴ US Department of State, (2007). *International Religious Freedom Report (2007)*, <<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2007/90112.htm>>, accessed on 2 April 2008 at 18h12.

¹⁵ Ibid.

diplomatic staff, but there are also nationals who converted to Islam in exile and Cape Malayan Muslims settled in Namibia from the Cape as teachers and public servants. The Baha'i Faith came to Namibia as an evangelistic endeavour. They are small in numbers, but represent affluent and influential members of the business and academic communities. Many of them came from Iran and use their influence to campaign on behalf of persecuted Baha'is in Iran.

THE CHURCHES IN PRE-INDEPENDENT NAMIBIA

The pre-independent Namibian churches can roughly be divided in four groups:

- The members of the Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN), who supported the struggle for liberation. The Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Evangelical Reformed Church in Africa (EGKA), sister churches of the white Dutch Reformed Church (NGK), were both members of the CCN. Fred Joseph and his Khomasdal congregation of the Apostolic Faith Mission actively supported the mission of the CCN, but was never a member, possibly because the denominational structure of the AFM still gave the white leadership some power over the black churches.¹⁶
- The so-called multi-racial evangelical and Pentecostal/charismatic churches, and the mainline English-speaking churches, who opposed what was known as petty apartheid, and specifically the idea of separate places of worship for different ethnic groups. However, despite their multi-racial approach, they were nevertheless conservative and many of them opposed the liberation struggle vigorously. Many of the multi-racial Pentecostal churches actively supported the transitional government of national unity, instituted by South Africa in an attempt to create an international acceptable settlement in Namibia without involving the liberation movements, Swapo and the South West Africa National Union (Swanu).¹⁷
- The black evangelical and Pentecostal churches who believe in the spiritual mission of the church. For them a political agenda for the church is unthinkable. The non-political church in apartheid Namibia was clearly a pipe dream.¹⁸ This, however does not mean that these churches were active supporters of apartheid. Mulondo has pointed out that many of the strong black-led Pentecostal churches in Namibia (Ebenaeser, Morewaak, etc.) left

¹⁶ The so-called coloured, Indian and black sections of the AFM operated reasonably independent in the colonial period, but it had only one legal personality.

¹⁷ Several Pentecostal pastors actively participated in transitional politics. A case in point is Gospel Outreach/Gospel Mission pastor, Harry Booysen, who was a minister in the transitional government.

¹⁸ The Kairos Document points to the fact that this non-participatory model is just concealed support for the status quo.

the traditional white bodies such as the Apostolic Faith Mission and the Latter Rain Movement because of the apartheid structures of the church.¹⁹

- The Afrikaans-speaking churches, specifically the three reformed churches, the NGK, the Hervormde Kerk and the Gereformeerde Kerk and the prominent Pentecostal denominations, the AFM the Full Gospel Church of God and the Pentecostal Protestant Church, who all supported the apartheid policies of the South African administration and the principle of separate ethnic churches.

The churches supported the status quo on many levels. At the beginning of the final negotiations for a peaceful settlement in Namibia, the white AFM District Council passed a resolution and wrote a letter to the Administrator-General stating that all the sections of the AFM opposed independence for Namibia.²⁰ The resolution was, however, only the position of the white section, since the other two sections never discussed the issue. The coloured section under the leadership of Pastor Fred Joseph actively supported the independence process.²¹

The NGK was, among other things, deeply involved in the founding of a theological institution, Windhoek Theological Seminary, to counter the progressive pro-independence department of religious studies at the Windhoek Academy.²²

All these churches maintained a whites-only membership. The Hervormde Kerk's Constitution declared itself as a church for white Afrikaners, while the AFM Constitution referred to *white members* and *black, coloured and Indian adherents*. (emphasis NH).²³

Observers expected the new government to be anti-religion, faithful to its Marxist past. However, the fall of communism shortly before independence, the realities in the country (the vast majority of Namibians seeing themselves as Christians) and the support that Swapo received from the CCN during the struggle, gave Swapo second thoughts.

¹⁹ Mulondo, A. (2000). *A History of the Namibian Black Pentecostal Churches*, Unpublished BA dissertation, Vision International University, Ramona, California.

²⁰ Minute Book of the AFM South West Africa, minutes of the District Council meeting.

²¹ Personal interview with Pastor Joseph, Windhoek, 14 February 2008.

²² Rumors of government and SA Defense Force funds going to WTS were widespread after independence.

²³ Art 4 of the Private Act No of 1961.

The radical decision of Swapo in exile to abolish religious holidays came to naught. All the religious holidays were maintained. Even when South Africa later abolished Ascension Day as a public holiday, it was maintained in Namibia.

Dr. Zephania Kameeta, theologian, pastor and poet, became the Deputy Speaker of the first National Assembly and the sessions of Parliament were frequently opened with prayer.

THE SURVIVAL OF THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH AND THE RISE OF THE PENTECOSTALS

If the people expected a sudden change in the corridors of the new transformed Namibian Broadcasting Corporation, they were in for a surprise. In the religious department of the NBC, all the staff members of the old Southwest Africa Broadcasting Corporation were retained and nothing significantly changed. A Dutch Reformed (DRC) dominee, Rev. Kobus Venter, remained the head of religious broadcasting, with a full time religious broadcaster for television, and at least ten religious radio broadcasters, including some DRC dominees. With the assistance of Pastor Fred Joseph, who was appointed by government to serve on the first NBC board Rev. Venter created an advisory body for religious broadcasting at the NBC.

Rev. Venter (no relation to Mr. Piet Venter, the last director-general of the SWABC), was a staunch evangelical and broadcasted sermons of controversial Pentecostal televangelist Jimmy Swaggart on national television to the dismay of his reformed colleagues. The vast majority of its members were representatives of evangelical and Pentecostal/charismatic churches. The African Independent Churches, the Zionists and the Oruuanu Church²⁴ were not invited.²⁵

By the time Kobus Venter left the NBC to become the pastor of the DRC in Okahandja, the influence and power of the DRC were firmly established. Granted, the basis for the power was no longer the government or some unwritten official ideology. But the precedents were created: the face of Afrikaans religious broadcasting was to be Dutch Reformed. Venter was succeeded by Nathan Kapofi, a Lutheran pastor, but several white DRC dominees remained prominent over the ethers of the Afrikaans service of national radio.²⁶

²⁴ The Oruuanu Church, also known as the Protestant Unity Church, It broke away from the Lutheran Church after a dispute over the place of African customs in the church.

²⁵ Copies of minutes of the Religious Advisory Board of the NBC between 1990 and 1995 in the possession of the author, who was a member of the committee until 1995.

²⁶ Some of the prominent dominees on radio were more of the traditional Reformed school rather than the evangelical type Kobus Venter preferred. After Venter left the NBC, he joined forces with Media for Christ, an evangelical organization specializing in Christian media productions. Venter

Venter was less successful in bringing evangelicals and Pentecostals to prominent positions in radio broadcasting. But his successor at the religious section of the influential religious television, John van Heerden, was a Pentecostal. While the Pentecostals and evangelicals were less prominent on the Afrikaans religious programmes, they were well represented on the other language stations and on the NBC Religious Advisory Board.

The first five years of independence was a time of euphorie. National reconciliation was the buzz word. The government was not going to intervene in the internal affairs of the national broadcaster, especially not in a subject as sensitive as religion.

But there were also signs that government is not too comfortable with the strong DRC/evangelical power base at the NBC. In the early 1990's the Ministry of Broadcasting and Information gave directives to the religious department of the NBC to include other religions, including Islam, in their broadcasts. The issue was discussed by the advisory board. They came up with a broadcasting policy that excluded most new movements such as the Church of the Latter Day Saints (Mormons), who came into Namibia in big numbers after independence, the Worldwide Church of God and Islam by playing the numbers card. Only movements with more than 500 members would be allowed to broadcast.²⁷ The policy guidelines were accepted by the NBC Board. The idea of incorporating other religions died a natural death after that.

Rev. Joseph was not re-appointed on the NBC Board after serving one term, possibly because government wanted change in the religious department.

The new team at the NBC did not change much in terms of religious broadcasting. All the religious programmes remained on radio, including broadcasts of services from local churches and a long three hour television broadcast on Sunday mornings.

CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

The old church schools, mainly Anglican, Catholic and African Methodist Episcopal Churches, received subsidies from government after independence. Government

became the chairperson of the board and played a prominent role in setting up a Christian radio station, Channel 7. Since 1993 Channel 7 was seen by many evangelical Christians as the flagship of evangelical broadcasting in Namibia. The more reformed dominees seized the moment and filled the gap at the NBC.

²⁷ The numbers game could have been detrimental for many of the members of the Board. In the 1990's. There were several evangelical and Pentecostal Churches with less than 500 members. And to speak of a Pentecostal or evangelical movement was presumptuous since there was no structure organizing or co-coordinating the churches. The Namibia Evangelical Fellowship was a fellowship of people rather than churches without official church membership.

made it clear, however, that they will not subsidise new private church schools. Their problem was not so much church control, but rather a fear that the old segregated white churches were using the Christian (or Reformed) tag to keep black children out of the school. The suspicion was not without foundation. Shortly before independence several white churches convinced the South African Administrator-General to privatise some of the prestigious white schools and hand them over to a consortium of churches before the administration of education was handed over to the elected government. The plan failed when it was leaked to the press before the Administrator-General could privatise it.

The majority of the private Christian schools that came into being after independence came from the Reformed and Pentecostal ranks. The crisis in Namibian education (more than 40 % of the grade ten students failed in 2008) helps to keep private schools in business. And the numbers are growing. Despite allegations that Christian schools are elitist or vestiges of the old unequal apartheid education, the schools will grow if segments of the population are not happy with government schools.

One cannot, however help to be sceptical about the real motives behind Christian education in Namibia. In an investigation at Swakopmund Primary School, a former German speaking government school,²⁸ and the Christian Academy, a fundamentalist Christian school using the controversial American Accelerated Christian Education curriculum, it was found that a student in the former pays N\$1 800,00 per year²⁹ and a student at the latter N\$ 1000,00 per month.³⁰ At the new Windhoek Gymnasium a parent of a primary school student pays N\$18 000 per year. Under the heading Values of the School, its website stated that *(t)he school is consecrated to Jesus Christ and based on Biblical values.*³¹ The private church schools are only accessible the higher middle class and they make no attempt to take quality education to a broader section of Namibian students, or to assist the 10 000 grade 10 failures to get a place where they can repeat.

Government was never comfortable with Christian schools. Since the Constitution guarantees the right to found Christian schools, there is not much that the State can do to undermine them, except to deny them a subsidy.

²⁸ Since English is the language of instruction in all Namibian schools from grade 1, one can no longer theoretically speak of German or Afrikaans schools. In practice, however, the schools maintain a strong German-speaking character.

²⁹ Although the Constitution guarantees free primary education, the Ministry sidestepped the provision by making contribution to the development fund compulsory.

³⁰ Investigation done by author.

³¹ Windhoek Gymnasium Private School, <http://www.windhoekgymnasium.com/general.htm>, accessed on 14 February 2008, at 18h40.

President Nujoma and other cabinet ministers have criticised the predominantly white Christians schools on several occasions, calling them racist. The attack was never on Christian schools per se and Pres. Nujoma has always made it clear that he has respect for the contribution of the Lutheran, Anglican and Catholic schools. A case in point is a speech by the president on 23 June 2000. In the speech President Nujoma made a clear distinction between the Anglican and Lutheran schools in the North, which he claimed are real Christian schools, and white private schools, which he said were racist and not Christian.³²

Yet the church school have never clashed with government and at no stage did government attempt to close them, mainly because the Constitution explicitly allows the right of every person to establish and maintain private schools.³³

THE ABORTION ISSUE

When Namibia became independent, the South African Abortion and Sterilization Act (1975) dealt with legal issues of abortion. The basic rule amounted to the illegality of abortion, allowing specified exceptions. Exceptions were strictly monitored and limited to the following circumstances:

- (i) When a pregnancy endangers a mother's life or constitutes a permanent threat to her physical health;
- (ii) When the continued pregnancy constitutes a serious threat to the mother's mental health;

³² Namibian, 3 July 2000, <http://www.namibian.com.na/Netstories/2000/June/News/008C4BA3E8.html>, accessed on 12 February 2008 at 17h46

³³ The full text of Art. 20 (4) reads:

(4) All persons shall have the right, at their own expense, to establish and to maintain private schools, or colleges or other institutions of tertiary education: provided that:

- (a) such schools, colleges or institutions of tertiary education are registered with a Government department in accordance with any law authorising and regulating such registration;
- (b) the standards maintained by such schools, colleges or institutions of tertiary education are not inferior to the standards maintained in comparable schools, colleges or institutions of tertiary education funded by the State;
- (c) no restrictions of whatever nature are imposed with respect to the admission of pupils based on race, colour or creed;
- (d) no restrictions of whatever nature are imposed with respect to the recruitment of staff based on race or colour.

- (iii) When there exists a serious risk that the child will be born with a irreparably seriously handicapped (physical or mental);
- (iv) When the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest);
- (v) When the mother suffers from a permanent mental handicap that makes her unable to comprehend the implications of the pregnancy or bear the parental responsibility.

In 1996 government released a draft Abortion and Sterilisation Bill for discussion. The Minister of Health and Social Services, Dr. Libertine Amathila, and the Permanent secretary of the Ministry, Dr. Kalumbi Shangula, campaigned for three years to convince the Namibian people that the Bill – following a strong liberal, pro-choice approach – was the way forward for Namibia.³⁴

The churches reacted immediately. The opposition to the Bill was overwhelming across denominational and confessional lines. In the North the respected pro-Swapo Bishop Kleopas Dumeni of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia supported the opposition, as did Former Secretary General for the Council of Churches of Namibia and respected Lutheran pastor, Dr. Ngeno Nakamhela.³⁵

In April 1999 the Minister set out on a country wide tour to address public meetings on the Bill. She only visited Otjiwarongo. The opposition was so strong that she cancelled her tour and declared that the Bill has been dropped because 99% of the population was against it.³⁶ Women groups objected to the tabulation of 99%, which was possibly an overestimation of the numbers of the pro-life group. The opposition to the Bill was nevertheless overwhelming. In an editorial the Namibian admitted that the vast majority of the population opposed the Bill, but blamed middle-aged male church leaders for the populist campaign against the legislation. The newspaper suggested that the abortion issue can be compared with the South

³⁴ Namibian, 20 April 1999, published on the website Euthanasia.com, Namibia Drops Move to Legalise Abortion, <http://www.euthanasia.com/nambia.html> accessed on 10 February 2008 at 16h27.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

African Constitutional Court case of State versus Makwanyane³⁷, where the Court abolished the death penalty despite strong public support for it.³⁸

In November 2002 the Minister stated again that abortion will not be legalised in Namibia for at least the next ten years, because of the strong opposition against it.³⁹

The abortion issue was the first serious clash between government and the churches. In this instance the churches that supported the struggle and those who opposed it, stood together. If the leaders of the black Lutheran churches and the Anglican Church, took a strong supportive stand, the government would in all possibility have pushed the legislation through.

THE ONGOING CONFLICT: NUJOMA AND THE “OTHER” CHURCHES

The churches who did not contribute to the struggle (which in Pres. Nujoma’s mind include all churches except the Anglican, Lutheran, Catholic and the AME Church), were, like the church schools, a bone of contention for the founding president.

During a meeting with farmers in northern Namibia in 2001, the President said while the Constitution recognises freedom of religion, he does not have to embrace Christianity since it is *artificial* and a *foreign philosophy*. Pres. Nujoma then encouraged them to dump Christianity and worship the ancestral cattle God, *Kalunga ya Nangombe*.⁴⁰

This was one of the few instances where Nujoma attacked Christianity without excluding the mainline denominations that supported the struggle. In this instance

³⁷ *S v Makwanyane and Another*, 1994 (3) SA 868 (A).

³⁸ *Choice is the Better Option*, Editorial, Namibian 23 April 1999, <http://www.namibian.com.na/Netstories/Cols4-99/edit230499.html>, accessed on 10 February 2008, at 22h12.

³⁹ Maletsky, C. *Abortion Ruled Out*, Namibian, 28 November 2002. <http://www.namibian.com.na/2002/November/national/029C6A15DC.html>, accessed on 10 February 2008 at 16h59.

⁴⁰ Maletsky, C. 2004. *Nujoma should be clear on 'misleading churches*, Namibian, Thursday, June 17, 2004 - Web posted at 9:16:06 GMT. <http://www.unipeak.com/gethtml.php?url=aHR0cDovL3d3dy5uYW1pYmlhbi5jb20ubmEvMjAwNC9kdW5lL25hdGlvbmFsLzAONEi5MzZGRtIuaHRtbA>, accessed on 9 March 2008 at 22h17.

he addressed communal farmers in the heartland of the Lutheran Church. Yet, the President was only expressing a personal view. And he made sure everyone understood it as such when he also stated that the Constitution guarantees freedom of religion.

In June 2004 President Nujoma attacked the 'non-traditional churches' in Tsumeb, stating that they try to mislead their followers. The President stated that the government only recognises the Catholic, Anglican and Lutheran churches.⁴¹

It is not clear what the President meant when he stated that only certain churches were recognised. One thing is sure: It cannot mean that these 'recognised' churches are state churches or enjoy any official status denied to other denominations. The Namibian Constitution not only guarantees freedom of religion, it also declares the Republic a secular state.

It is possible that the President referred to some executive decision that the government will only invite pastors from the 'recognised' churches to officiate at government functions such as the opening of Parliament state funerals, etc.

Later in 2004 the President aimed a second blow at the non-mainline churches. Some churches, he stated, spread HIV/AIDS by operating throughout the night. The target was the Pentecostal churches and their well-known night tarry meetings.⁴²

In January 2005, shortly before President Nujoma stepped down, the NBC Director General. Gerry Munyama, suspended all religious programmes on National radio and television. Initially he stated that he was *concerned about the way some devotions are conducted* and wanted to *revisit its guidelines to that effect*. He also said that it was his own decision and not influenced by any politician.⁴³

In an edition of Signpost, an opinion magazine, several articles appeared on the Pentecostal/charismatic movement. The magazine evaluated the movement to answer one question: Is it a positive religious movement or is it money-driven?

The debate about the Pentecostals and charismatics was sparked by the decision of the NBC to stop all religious broadcasts, and the earlier statement of the President

⁴¹ Craig, A (2005), *NBC bans religious devotions - claims a need to 're-visit guidelines'* - Web posted Friday, January 7, 2005 at 7:28:49 GMT, http://www.unipeak.com/gethtml.php?_u_r_l_=_aHR0cDovL3d3dy5uYW1pYmlhbi5jb20ubmEvMjAwNS9KYW51YXJ5L25hdGlvbmFsLzA1OEFERkFFMzQuaHRtbA, accessed on 20 March 2008, at 19h07.

⁴² The so-called tarry meetings is an old Pentecostal practice, especially in black churches. The congregation come together on a week night and pray throughout the night, most of the time for a *new baptism of the Spirit*.

⁴³ Press release by the Director-General, January, 2005.

that the government only recognises three Pentecostal churches. After discussions with the CCN, the NBC resumed religious broadcasts.

The mainline churches were quick to agree that some control was necessary. From their response it seems as if the Pentecostals and charismatics are the Jonas that caused the storm. In the process the movement has become free game and every church leader was ready to fire. Even some traditional Pentecostals have joined the mudslinging, claiming that they are okay, but the rest of the group really smells.

The Pentecostals and charismatics, so we hear, were against the struggle and are now only on the scene to make money. They do not belong to the Council of Churches of Namibia – only two big ones do (is this necessary bad or an indication of heresy?), most of the leaders are foreigners and they exploit the people.

The old tar brush of *they did not support the struggle* is the worst of all the arguments. Let us first look at the Pentecostal/charismatic scene before independence. There were a few big white Pentecostal churches, the AFM, Full Gospel, the Latter Rain and the Pentecostal Protestant Church. But the total white membership of these churches was less than 1 000.

They opposed independence and supported the apartheid regime. But what is exceptional about that? The three reformed churches were much more vocal in their support of apartheid. And some of them are now members of the CCN – the shibboleth of respectability. Why tag the Pentecostals and charismatics? Or did we forget that the apartheid system was actually born as a result of the reformed Kuyperian theology of the Dutch Reformed Church? And who are the Pentecostals who have joined the CCN after independence? The two big white-dominated denominations!

The black Pentecostals like Filadelfia and Eben-Ezer left the white mother churches in protest against apartheid, as Albert Mulondo has clearly pointed out in his BA dissertation. They were part of the oppressed people and even if they were not political activists or very vocal, their existence alone was an act of protest against apartheid. Were they against the struggle? I have not seen one piece of evidence to convince me of that. On the contrary, many of the black pastors had children in exile. In South Africa Joseph Kgobo, a former MK cadre and father of children who were either in MK or studied abroad, became a leader in the Back to God Group – a movement prominent in pre-independent Namibia.

And in Khomasdal the AFM under the leadership of Fred Joseph was vocal supporters of the struggle and fiercely against apartheid. Several young black and

brown learned about God's preferential choice for the poor and about the sinfulness of apartheid at the feet of the Khomasdal leadership.

The South African Pentecostal leader Frank Chikane was so deeply involved in the struggle for independence that the Transitional Government refused him entrance into Namibia. And the young people of the Pentecostal churches in the north went into exile like all other young people at the time. I know of at least two sons of AFM pastors who became Plan fighters.

And the charismatics? Well, before independence they were far and few. Gospel Outreach had a multi-cultural church in the old AFM building and All Nations had a multi-cultural church in Suiderhof – a clear indication that they did not fit into the apartheid-style *whites only* denominations. They were not political activists, but they were doing more than most mainline churches to normalise the church and society. In the transition to independence they did not invite conservative preachers to preach against “terrorists”. No, they invited former Zimbabwean freedom fighter-turned preacher Stephen Lungu to help their churches to make the necessary switch to a new dispensation. Protagonists of apartheid?

Clem Marais of the Dutch Reformed Church is quoted in the Signpost article saying that the independent churches are preaching prosperity. (The article is so badly researched it is possible he was misquoted). This is a big generalisation to begin with. Even the photo of Bishop Wahl Abrahams' church helps to create the idea that all independent charismatics are prosperity-orientated, even if the New Covenant Celebration Centre is a balanced Pentecostal/charismatic church in the mould of the African-American churches, involved in social actions and in no way a faith church (the collective name for churches that preach prosperity).

Many independent churches come from the so-called restoration branch, which are not faith churches either. The apostolic leaders Alan Scotland and the late Bryn Jones of the UK had a huge impact on this line of thinking in the 1990's in Namibia. Jones was busy with a Ph D on the USA foreign policy in Namibia when he passed away. Several prominent non-denominational leaders like John Hess, Michael Witbeen and Albert Mulondo to mention a few, can in no stretch of the imagination be called proponents of prosperity.

And then the prosperity message did not prove to be that harmful either. Somewhat ridiculous and surely unbiblical, but not harmful to the poor. No one still preaches the silly idea that all Christians should be rich. Many former faith teachers are now older and wiser. An evangelist like Pieter Barry even teaches God's preferential option for the poor! Others like Neville Davids has written several academic papers

during his post-graduate studies, pointing out that while the name-it-claim-it-obtain-it aspect of the prosperity teaching is obviously wrong, it had another dimension: it taught young oppressed black Pentecostals to believe in themselves.

The youngest empirical research on the prosperity gospel has shown that it is not as dangerous as Dominee Marais alleges. On the contrary, research in Latin America has shown that members of faith churches are more prosperous, more successful and more productive than members of mainline churches. Even Witwatersrand University academic Lawrence Schlemmer, who wrote his sociological criticism of the faith movement, *Faith for the Fearful*, in the 1980's, has changed his mind. Which does not mean that prosperity as such is a Biblical principle. But Neville Davids has a point that the faith movement has another dimension.

The proof of the pudding is after all in the eating. The Kuyperian Reformed theology is supposedly a strong Biblical theological system. But it gave us apartheid. The faith movement gave us a flawed theology and lifted the poor.

In a country where we sing the African anthem at official occasions and where the President is the patron of Pacon, how can we have problems with Nigerian and Zimbabwean pastors, especially since almost all white churches call their pastors from either South Africa or Germany? And if our Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, why are the denominations and the NBC so concerned about the "gospel truth"? After all, do the accepted denominations agree on everything? And were they not all guilty of heresy that led to human rights abuses at one time or another in history?

I do not think that a concern for the well-being of the members of independent charismatic churches are really the issue at stake. The faceless Insight journalist reveals his/her hand when he/she asks Bishop Abrahams if charismatics will become a political force opposing Swapo.

The independent charismatics are exactly what their opponents call them: **independent**. And they are springing up everywhere: in houses in suburban Windhoek, in informal corrugated iron buildings in Greenwell Matongo, but also in big churches all over the city. But rest assured: they are religiously and politically as diverse as their names and as independent as their tag. Even the apostles, prophets and bishops have limited authority. Forget about an apostolic council or a new denomination for all of them. Not even the denominations speak on behalf of all their churches.

In a secular state that guarantees freedom of religion, the pureness of doctrine can never be a criterion for including or excluding churches for any official purposes. Our history has proved that good theology, even if it is substantiated by theologians trained under great academicians in Europe, can never be a guarantee for correct actions.

And while churches have the right and obligation to criticize poor theology, it is never possible for the national broadcaster in a secular state to bar churches from the air because *the situation was getting out of hand and that religion is getting out of the traditional way we know it*, as NBC Director General Gerry Munyama is reported to have said.

The theology is sometimes horrible and some practices and some teachings may indeed be unhealthy. But in the new independent Namibia they all have a place in the desert sun.