

THE ZION CHRISTIAN CHURCH AND THE APARTHEID REGIME

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"If the ANC leadership wants to win mass support it may be better advised to work on the Zion Christian Church hierarchy than to dismiss this enormous group as a relic of political underdevelopment."¹

Introduction

On Easter Sunday, April 7, 1985, State President P.W. Botha addressed a crowd of over two million black South Africans at the headquarters of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), which was then celebrating its 75th anniversary.² The festivities took place at Zion City, Moria, about forty-eight kilometres from Pietersburg in the Northern Transvaal. The presidential couple arrived by helicopter and the head of the church, the Right Reverend Bishop Barnabas Lekganyane, went to the landing pad in an extra-long American limousine to greet his visitors. The President was given an opportunity to address the congregation, and Bishop Lekganyane presented him with a scroll conferring on him the first-ever honorary citizenship of Moria, "in appreciation of his efforts to spread peace and love, and to prove the high esteem in which he is held". The President returned the compliment by giving the bishop a leather-bound Afrikaans Bible.

In his speech, which was frequently interrupted by applause, Botha warned his audience against "the powers of darkness and the messengers of evil", terms which were interpreted by sections of the press as referring to the African National Congress and its supposed communist supporters (*The Times*, April 8, 1985). Citing St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, he declared,

every man is subject to civil authorities. There is no authority except that which is willed by God. Good behaviour is not afraid of magistrates; only wrongdoers have anything to fear. If man lives honestly, authority will approve of him.

The state is there to serve God for your own benefit.

Coming in the wake of the Uitenhage shooting and countrywide civil unrest, with the attendant international outrage, the chance to be seen addressing such a massive gathering of Africans provided Botha a heaven-sent opportunity to recoup some lost political ground and to ensure the neutrality of ZCC members in defiant townships. The latter point was alluded to by Bishop Lekganyane, who preaching after I Corinthians 13, said that love and not violence was the key to the solution of all problems: "We have love and this has enabled our church to take the word of God to so many people".³

The event was widely covered by the mass media, both nationally and internationally. Reports of the event impressed even the *New York Times* (April 8, 1985), which gave it front-page coverage. Most expressed surprise at the warm reception which Botha received at Moria, but there was cynical comment as well. Thus *Sowetan* (April 12, 1985) noted that, while the South African government was in the habit of accusing church leaders such as Tutu and Boesak of meddling in politics, the man at its helm was apparently free to address a church gathering on a political subject. The paper further noted that Botha's "political pilgrimage" to Moria City had caused considerable anger among organisations such as the United Democratic Front (UDF), Azania's People's Organisation (AZAPO), Azanian Students' Movement (AZASM), the African National Congress (ANC), and the South African Council of Churches (SACC). The UDF's publicity secretary, Patrick Lekota, observed that President Botha's visit was calculated to undercut the growing resistance to apartheid, and AZAPO's Imram Moosa spoke of a "gigantic fraud".

Dr Beyers Naudé, general secretary of the SACC, for his part reminded the public that this was not an isolated case, but that the government had been trying to build up good relationships

with the ZCC over a number of years.⁴ Although Botha was the highest ranking, he was not the first government official to pay a visit to the ZCC's Easter celebration. Daan de Wet Nel, minister of Bantu Administration and Development, had preceded him in 1960, and in 1980, on the occasion of its seventieth anniversary, the church's leadership had invited such political figures as "Mayor" David Thebehali, chairman of the Soweto Community Council, Cedric Phatudi, Chief Minister of Lebowa, and Piet Koornhof, minister of co-operation and development. Bishop Lekganyane had on that occasion called on his followers to support the government's homeland policy and to abide by the laws of the country. That speech too had been sharply criticised by African churchmen and political leaders, but the ZCC leadership apparently had felt confident enough to ignore such criticism.

Yet, despite the numerous commentaries that appeared in the press after the 1985 Easter celebration, few gave a satisfactory explanation of this unusual event. According to *Sowetan* the applause so generously given Botha could only be explained, if it was remembered that the majority of the ZCC adherents were either "semi-literate or illiterate". Desmond Tutu, Nobel Peace Prize winner and Anglican bishop of Johannesburg, expressing his shock at the applause of the ZCC members after almost every sentence of Mr Botha's speech, could only say that it looked "as if someone was directing them" and "as if they were programmed" (*Sowetan*, April 12, 1985; *Sunday Tribune*, April 14, 1985). *The Times* (April 9, 1985) seemed more to the point when it suggested that the popularity of the ZCC and the massively attended 1985 Easter celebration should be viewed as an answer to the violent anti-government demonstrations in the black townships. The *Christian Science Monitor* (April 12, 1985) concurred by pointing out that the ZCC's support for the government was of obvious relevance to the crisis facing Botha as the black rebellion in the townships continued to simmer. At the very least, ZCC support for the government guaranteed the neutrality of its numerous followers in the black townships, where the young and

unemployed had become increasingly defiant of authority. David Breier, political correspondent of the *Sunday Tribune*, added a further dimension by emphasising that the attitude of Bishop Lekganyane and his church was diametrically opposed to that of such "turbulent priests" as Boesak and Tutu (*Sunday Tribune*, April 14, 1985). Where the latter in the eyes of the government directly or indirectly seemed to provide religious legitimisation for the use of violence, the ZCC challenged such legitimisation in no uncertain terms. This was not a novel viewpoint for, when Bishop Lekganyane visited Soweto in 1981 at the invitation of "Mayor" Tebehali, the latter said at a rally that the bishop was the only person who could save the township from hatred, killings and gossip.

Speaking out against violence can be done without giving one's blessing to the apartheid system, which is what the bishop's words and deeds at the 1985 Easter celebration amounted to in the eyes of many. Why did the ZCC go that far? None of the commentators answered that question. Yet, the answer had been suggested almost forty years earlier in the *Sunday Tribune* (18 December 1949). In an article entitled "Zulu Zionist Danger in Union" and published under a nom de plume, the author made the crucial observation that "African Zionism" was an African apartheid system, and the rapid growth of that movement should be a matter of concern for all those who looked to interracial co-operation as the ultimate solution for race relations within South Africa. It is this interpretation that we want to pursue in the next section.

Origin and growth of the South African Zion movement

The ZCC forms part of a religious movement, which originated around the turn of the century out of an American revivalist body known as the Christian Catholic Apostolic Church in Zion.⁵ Members of this church brought their strong pentecostal message out to South Africa, where Zulu converts subsequently formed

their own churches. Since then, they have increased to the extent that their number is now estimated at around 3.500 in the Republic alone, with an overall membership of some six million, or thirty percent of the African population.⁶

Most of these churches are rather small, counting from a few hundred to a few thousand members. This is mainly due to their organisational structure, which offers little defence against schismatic movements occurring with a certain regularity. There are a few exceptions, though, including the ZCC and the intensely nationalistic Nazareth Baptist Church, described by one of its members as the "Zulu High Church."⁷

Although it is not possible to obtain precise membership figures, there need be no doubt that the ZCC is by far the largest Zion church in the whole of southern Africa. According to the population census of 1980 the ZCC had then a membership of 769.000, amounting to 4,5% of the black population.⁸ Bishop Lekganyane himself estimated in 1985 that the church counted around 4,5 million members spread over South Africa, Zimbabwe, Swaziland and Malawi.⁹

The ZCC differs from most other Zionist churches in that it is "pan-ethnic" in the sense that it recruits across cultural and linguistic boundaries, although more or less exclusively among Africans. There are a dozen or so ZCC followers of European and Asian descent, but the character of the ZCC is and has always been emphatically African.

Most commentators agree that one of the main reasons why the Zion churches exercise such a great attraction is that they put great emphasis on ritual healing or prayer healing. It is probably true and no exaggeration to say that most people join these churches in the course of seeking a cure for some ailment or other. Zionist healing differs from that of the traditional *ngaka* (medicine person) in that it relies less on magic substances and is therefore thought to be less tainted by witchcraft. It differs from modern medicine in that it attributes the occurrence of disease (and other forms of human misfortune) to the activities of witches or spirits, and to the neglect of certain taboos by the patient or someone near to him or her.¹⁰

Unlike medical practitioners in the western tradition, healing prophets in Zion churches take such beliefs seriously. They are thus able to free patients of some of their fears and by so doing contribute to the healing process. An important element in that process is the feeling on the part of the patient that he or she now belongs to a community. As Adam and Moodley put it, these "rituals of healing place the needy in a circle of touching, caring fellows and make up for the lack of costly western medicine".¹¹

The fact that Zion churches are much more numerous in South Africa than in other subsaharan countries suggests furthermore that they function as instruments of protest or resistance against white domination, and that this is to be regarded as another reason for their popularity. Indeed this has been the dominant view in the social sciences after World War II, when these and other "prophetic movements" became a popular subject of investigation. However, that view was challenged in later years, when most African countries became politically independent. The expectation had been that under an African government these churches would lose some of their appeal, but the opposite seems to have taken place, for, if anything, their following kept growing. Moreover, it became clear also that Zion churches were, politically speaking, very much on the conservative side. Their leaders might occasionally preach against injustices perpetrated by the colonial or post-colonial state, but they seldom engaged in political activism. In the words of James Kiernan, one of the experts on South African Zion churches,

these gentle, peace-loving people are not engaged in a crusade of social reform. They are not intent on moving the earth by social upheaval. Nor are they the least interested in bringing about political change. At one time the Ethiopian churches (i.e. western-type African churches; M.S.) aligned themselves with the aims of African nationalism but Zionists have never espoused any political cause.¹²

This political conservatism the Zion churches have in common with healing movements everywhere, which seem so preoccupied with the micro-world of the suffering individual that they tend

to lose sight of the macro-structures which cause those sufferings.¹³ On the other hand, the Zion churches can be justifiably described as a protest movement. Only, the type of protest which they represent is cultural rather than political. Robert Buijtenhuys, an expert on movements of political protest in Africa, describes them essentially as counter-cultures, which provide their followers "a place to feel at home".¹⁴ In the words of Sundkler, a pioneer in the field of African Independent churches, the Zion churches represent a *tertium genus*, an entirely new form of religious culture, different both from the white churches and African ancestral religion.¹⁵ This cultural protest is directed not only against the real or supposed evil influences of white culture, but also against the dangers thought to be inherent in the ancestral African culture. As far as white culture is concerned it is particularly sexual promiscuity, drugs and criminality that are condemned, and with regard to African traditional culture, their main concern is with witchcraft and evil spirits. As they see it, the answer to all these problems is the creation of a new social and cultural environment in which a person can lead a life of purity.

Two other factors, which are often mentioned as having contributed to the ZCC's attraction, are its pan-ethnic character to which we have already made reference, and what is referred to as its "particularly successful combination of Christianity and traditional culture".¹⁶ The latter reason does not seem particularly illuminating, for which criteria does one use to describe the type of religious syncretism developed within the ZCC as "particularly successful"? It would seem that we are on somewhat safer ground, when we consider the ZCC's reputation in the labour market. Shop owners and factory managers prefer to employ ZCC members, because they are known as hard-working and honest, obedient, teetotallers, non-smokers, and above all people who come to their work on time and never go on strike. This work-ethic is kept alive by a tight social control, made possible by the fact that the ZCC followers in the various quarters of the black townships form a close-knit community. The principal emblem of that community is the small silver star

worn against a black cloth backdrop, which every member wears on his lapel. That star is a precious possession, because it makes him recognisable as a church member not only when applying for a job but also when looking for something to eat or a place to sleep. This is one of the chief reasons why the ZCC is so popular in urban areas and why it has almost as many men as women members, in contrast to other Zion churches where men usually form a distinct minority.

Apart from this, the Church is also a prosperous enterprise in itself. It owns a large fleet of buses, which run on most of the routes in the African areas of the northern Transvaal. It also owns a shopping complex, a large saw-mill and vast tracts of land in the vicinity of Moria. On top of this the ZCC headquarters receives many donations from its members. On feast days large oil barrels are placed in front of the cathedral, where worshippers jostle to deposit their gifts. On the occasion of the Easter celebration of 1985 it was even said that the church received several million rand worth of donations from the faithful. A large portion of the money thus obtained is devoted to the church's welfare services aimed at assisting church members experiencing employment, financial or health problems (*Sunday Times*, April 14, 1985).

The leaders of the church especially radiate great economic success. The founder, Engenas Lekganyane, used to make recruiting tours in a Rolls Royce. Edward, his son and successor, is said to have had forty-five cars, among which Cadillacs, Daimlers, a Buick, a Lincoln Continental and a big Mercedes Benz. The present bishop is somewhat less extravagant, but even he surrounds himself with symbols of opulence. Whatever outsiders may think of such luxuries, they are viewed by the faithful not only as symbols of the bishop's success but also of that of the church to which they belong.

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Zionist prophet prays for a patient during a healing rite in a river near Soweto (photo by Martin West).

The organisational structure of the ZCC

While the reputation of the ZCC in the labour market and its own financial success have contributed considerably to its rapid growth, this does not tell us why the ZCC has remained virtually free of schisms. The church was founded by the present bishop's grandfather, Bishop Engenas Lekganyane, in 1910 (although there is uncertainty about that date). After his death in 1948 his two sons, Edward and Joseph, contested each other for the leadership. The conflict led to a split - Joseph renaming his faction St. Engenas ZCC, and Edward taking the bulk of his father's flock. As far as is known this has been the only occasion a split did occur.

The principal reason for this relative absence of schisms seems to lie in the unique organisational structure of the ZCC, which is characterised by a stable balance between the autonomy of the local congregation and the centripetal attraction of the sacred centre, Moria. It is this which is considered the particular genius of the ZCC.¹⁷ The church operates very much like a franchise system under which the proprietor of a large business chain allows an investor to operate an outlet for its products or services by using its chain name and management know-how. Generally speaking, the success of a franchise system depends on the demand for, and the quality of its product, and the stability of its governing board to keep that demand going by means of intensive advertising and by disenfranchising those who fail to observe the chain's rules.

Applied to the ZCC, we may say that the proprietor is the bishop and his council, the headquarters is Zion City Moria, the investors are the local congregations, and the products and services delivered by the headquarters are blessed articles, -the right to wear the ZCC name and paraphernalia and the right to call on the church in time of need. Under the ZCC franchise system, much depends on the fame of the sacred centre, Moria, which has been aptly described as "a graphic icon of the appropriation of the material and spiritual cargo of the

neocolonial system".¹⁸ Moria is the place where the bishop resides, where the vast cathedral stands, and the place to which three times every year pilgrims travel in their thousands. The bishop possesses the authority of a traditional chief, but he also fulfils functions reminiscent of the traditional diviner and healer. Much like these traditional functionaries acted as the link between the community and the supernatural world, so the ZCC leader is the mediator between God and the members of the church. He communicates divine power and healing to his followers.¹⁹ The veneration the ZCC members have for their bishop is virtually unbounded. He is the sacred symbol on which all the expectations of the ZCC followers converge.

The bishop is assisted by a general council, which nowadays consists of twelve members. According to some commentators, among whom Arlene Getz of the *Sunday Tribune* (April 14, 1985), the present bishop is essentially a figure-head, the "real work" being controlled by Emmanuel Matolla, the leader of the church's head-committee. It is true, Bishop Barnabas is not the flamboyant figure that his father was, but the qualification "figure-head" seems a misrepresentation not only of his person but also of his role. It would be more helpful to think of the bishop and the church's head committee in terms of a division of power. The bishop holds supreme spiritual power. The council on the other hand may be seen as holding legislative and managerial power. These two types of power are interdependent. The council derives its power from the fact that it assists a person who is considered by millions as God's representative on earth. It is to their advantage that the bishop's reputation as a great charismatic leader is maintained and constantly re-affirmed. On the other hand, it is in the interest of the bishop and the Lekganyane dynasty as a whole to have a council which remains loyal under all circumstances. Briefly, the council would have no power without the bishop, and the bishop would not be what he is now without the protection and advice from the council. One has the impression that nowadays it is the council which decides which of the sons is to be the present bishop's successor, and

that there is no repetition of a schism in the top of the organisation - as happened in 1947.

Secessions at the lower levels of the ZCC are well-nigh impossible because the one who secedes loses the considerable material and immaterial advantages that he derives from the church. Of course, that would be the case also, if he seceded from a church other than the ZCC. The difference, however, is that the ZCC is the first in terms of wealth, power and prestige, and that virtually all of that wealth, power and prestige is concentrated at headquarters. Few people would be willing to trade the glory of Moria and the prestige they get from the silver star for membership in a small, little-known church.

The ZCC and the use of violence

The journalist Allister Sparks, who visited the headquarters of the ZCC around Easter 1982 and who was received by some of the church's leading personalities, writes that on the walls of the room in which he was received were the portraits of South Africa's white political leaders and of the old Afrikaner heroes. On the table there was a replica of the Voortrekker Monument, which to black radicals is perhaps the most hated symbol of white domination (*NRC/Handelsblad*, May 24, 1982, translated from *Natal Witness*). The same source mentions that in 1965, when the minister of Bantu government paid a visit to the church, the famous "Bishop Eddie", father of the present bishop, thanked the minister for having led the black man to "orderly freedom", adding that "In our church there is no room for those who undermine national security and who trespass against the law". Sparks interprets this as testifying to "an enormous ambiguity", since in his view the Zion Churches on the one hand represent the resistance against the white domination in the churches - and in that sense constitute a massive independence movement - while on the other hand, they collaborate with the white state. Although Sparks' surprise is understandable, it only

shows that he is not aware of the difference between political and cultural protest. The Zion churches have no need to militate against apartheid. On the contrary, one has to see that they try to organise their own apartheid system under their own leaders, and that white apartheid is in a sense their natural ally. The ZCC went further in its collaboration with the white government because it was prodded to do so, its voice being more important than that of all the other independent churches combined. The church was rewarded for its devotion by being one of the first black churches to receive official recognition by the state.

Forty years ago, the first Afrikaner government could not make much use of the Zion churches, had it wanted to. They were simply too fragmented. Till about 1960 even the ZCC counted no more than 80.000 members. Its major expansion occurred only after 1960, in other words after Sharpeville. It was then that the ANC gave up its policy of non-violence, and the black townships became the foci of continuous unrest. In 1967, overall membership in the ZCC stood already at 200.000 at the most conservative estimate, and by now it stands at several million. There can be little doubt therefore that the explosive growth of the ZCC has been partly due to a desire on the part of a large section of South Africa's urban blacks to stem the tide of violence. Bishop Lekganyane said as much in his Easter address, when he mentioned that the remarkable expansion of his church was due to its message of non-violence. Although there is no reason to doubt the bishop's sincerity when proclaiming his faith in non-violence, it was a tragic error to invite Botha, thereby making himself and his church suspect in the eyes of the entire world. In August of the same year, the bishop still saw fit to argue that sanctions against South Africa were harmful only to the African population, and that those being in favour of them knew nothing about the South African situation. According to the bishop, there was much more goodwill between blacks and whites than was commonly thought, as shown by the grandiose welcome given to the state president on the occasion of the Easter celebration.²⁰

It was not before Easter 1986 that things began to change. According to a news item in *The Citizen* (April 1, 1986) the bishop had denied that the minister of external affairs, Roelof ("Pik") Botha had been invited to that year's Easter celebration, or that the event of the year before was meant to provide support for the state president. The bishop's statement was made after the Easter weekend of 1986, when the homes of some ZCC members who were attending the gathering at Moria had been burned down. The incident took place in the township of GaRankuwa, where a youth organisation had demanded that ZCC members stay home this Easter (*Sunday Times*, March 30, 1986). At almost the same time, sixteen people were killed and scores injured, when a passenger train carrying ZCC worshippers to Pietersburg was derailed in what was probably sabotage. At Alexandra, ZCC members, returning from Moria were attacked. Earlier that week, there had been newspaper reports about threats of violence from political activists, who accused church members of not being "committed to the struggle for liberation in South Africa" (*Star*, March 29, 1986). It seemed as if the good old days were over.

Conclusion

In this article we have tried to interpret the remarkable role played by the Zion Christian Church in South African politics. More particularly we have tried to make sense of the church's grandiose Easter celebration of 1985 to which it invited P.W. Botha, and which caused a great deal of surprise and anger inside and outside the Republic of South Africa.

We have argued that part of the explanation is to be found in the fact that the ZCC puts so much emphasis on ritual healing. Churches engaging in that kind of activity are usually conservative, as testified to by the entire group of Zion churches in the country. Another suggestion has been that the Zion churches represent a version of Black Apartheid, whose origin

and development has to a considerable extent been stimulated by the system of White Apartheid.

The ZCC was an interesting partner for the South African government, because of its large membership, and because it drew its members from all over the country. We have argued that this large membership was due, inter alia, to its pan-ethnic character, its position on the labour market and its freedom from secessions. The latter characteristic has been attributed to its franchise-like organisation. Finally, the explosive expansion of the ZCC in the past quarter of a century has also been attributed to the mounting spiral of violence in the black townships, the ZCC recruiting from among that section of the public which wanted to stem the tide of violence.

Notes

1. Heribert Adam and Kogila Moodley, *South Africa without Apartheid. Dismantling Racial Domination* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/ London 1986) 202.
2. I am indebted to ms I. Vegter for passing on to me a full set of newspaper reports on the ZCC and for allowing me to make use of her unpublished M.A. thesis written for the Department of Antropology at the Free University, Amsterdam (Vegter, 1988). The interpretation of the ZCC's career as described in this paper is my own.
3. *Inligtings-Nuusbrief, Bijvoegsel tot SA-OORSIG* (Pretoria, Departement van Buitenlandse Sake, 1985), May 24.
4. I. Vegter, *Waar olifanten vechten, groeit het gras niet; apartheid en de Zion Christian Church* (unpubl. M.A. thesis; Amsterdam 1988) 11.
5. For an account of the movement's beginnings see B.M.G. Sundkler, *Zulu, Zion and Some Swazi Zionists* (London 1976) chapter 1. In Southern Africa "Zion" is a popular name for African Independent Churches. I prefer to refer to them as Zion Churches rather than Zionist Churches.

6. O. Erasmus, *Onafhanklike Swartkerke in Suid-Afrika* (Pretoria 1985) 12; Adam and Moodley, *South Africa without Apartheid*, 200.
7. Absalom Vilakazi et al., *Shembe. The Revitalization of African Society* (Braamfontein 1986) 156.
8. J.A. Loader, "Church, Theology and Change in South Africa" in: Van Vuuren et al. ed., *South Africa: a Plural Society in Transition* (Durban 1985) 274.
9. B.E. Lekganyane, *Representations* (Zion city Moria 1985) August 28.
10. W.D. Hammond-Tooke, "The Aetiology of Spirit in Southern Africa", *African Studies* 45, 2 (1986) 157-170.
11. Adam and Moodley, *South Africa without Apartheid*, 201.
12. J.P. Kiernan, "The New Zion", *Leadership* 4, 3 (1985) 90-98.
13. Kaja Finkler, "The Social Consequence of Wellness: a View of Healing Outcomes from Micro and Macro Perspectives", *International Journal of Health Services* 16, 4 (1986) 627-642.
14. R. Buijtenhuijs, "Messianisme et nationalisme en Afrique noire: une remise en question", *African Perspectives. Special Issue on Religious Innovation in Modern African Society* (1976) no. 2, 25-44.
15. B.M.G. Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (2nd edition; London 1961) 95.
16. Vegter, *Waar olifanten vechten*, 53.
17. J. Comaroff, *Body of Power. Spirit of Resistance* (Chicago 1985) 24.
18. Ibidem, 239.
19. Vegter, *Waar olifanten vechten*, 53.
20. Lekganyane, *Representations*.