



Safundi

The Journal of South African and American Studies

ISSN: 1753-3171 (Print) 1543-1304 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rsaf20>

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To cite this article: Tal Zalmanovich (2019) “What is needed is an ecumenical act of solidarity:” the World Council of Churches, the 1969 Notting Hill Consultation on Racism, and the anti-apartheid struggle, *Safundi*, 20:2, 174-192, DOI: [10.1080/17533171.2019.1558622](https://doi.org/10.1080/17533171.2019.1558622)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17533171.2019.1558622>



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Published online: 08 May 2019.



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“What is needed is an ecumenical act of solidarity:” the World Council of Churches, the 1969 Notting Hill Consultation on Racism, and the anti-apartheid struggle

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the Notting Hill Consultation on Racism organized by the World Council of Churches (WCC), held in London in May 1969. The meeting framed racism as an urgent global problem. Its innovative “Program to Combat Racism” (PCR) acknowledged the historical complicity and benefit of the Church with imperial conquest. The Program’s special fund for liberation movements signaled a shift from verbal protest against apartheid to actions such as disinvestment in South Africa and material support for resistance movements. I use a rich archive of WCC reports, correspondence, speeches, and press coverage to offer the first major examination of the Notting Hill Consultation and its influence on the wider historical development of anti-apartheid protest. I demonstrate how a host of challenges from black power activists in Britain and the USA, nonwhite WCC delegates, and from British white supremacists made during the week-long consultation, shaped the WCC’s methods of protest and its PCR.

KEYWORDS

Solidarity; religion; anti-apartheid; World Council of Churches; racism

On a Thursday in late May 1969, British newspaper readers found reports of two dramatic events in the daily press. The London *Times* reported a heated exchange between the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Michael Ramsey and one of the leaders of the British Black Power movement, Roy Sawh.¹ The confrontation occurred in an unexpected setting – the international meeting of the World Council of Churches (WCC) during its Notting Hill Consultation on Racism in London. Both men had been invited to the week-long conference that was convened to tackle the problem of racism: the Archbishop as a delegate and Sawh as a “consultant.” Sawh’s intervention arose in response to a speech about race relations in Britain given by Labour Minister with special responsibility for race relations, Mr. Merlyn Rees. Sawh stated that “without a voice from the black people it would be possible to leave the conference having heard Mr Rees and to believe that things were being done to solve the problem” of race relations.² Sawh protested that he had not been able to question the Minister because the latter had left the venue before the Archbishop had permitted him to speak. The altercation ended with Sawh storming out of the meeting hall;

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¹“Dr Ramsey in Black Power Clash,” *The Times*, May 22, 1969.

²Ibid.

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delegates directing a spate of criticism at the Archbishop; and the latter apologizing for “mishandling of a little episode.”³

The second event occurred later the same day at Church House, Westminster during a public event that accompanied the WCC meeting. Two speakers were on the bill, Trevor Huddleston, the Bishop of Stepney, and Oliver Tambo of the African National Congress (ANC).⁴ The disturbance began when Huddleston claimed that the issue of race relations could not be treated as an isolated problem as if it were an incurable disease.⁵ When he pointed to the Conservative MP and most outspoken opponent of immigration in Britain, Enoch Powell, as a culprit, supporters from the far-right group, the National Front began chanting “Enoch! Enoch!”⁶ The chanting went on for 15 min until the police cleared the hecklers from the balcony of Church House.⁷ The *Guardian* reported on “[s]houts of ‘integration leads to miscegenation’ and ‘the Church is a Communist front. You are the apostates.’”⁸ Other reports added that the demonstrators also called out slogans in support of apartheid and of Ian Smith the Prime Minister of Rhodesia.⁹ The protestors were finally taken out the hall singing, of all songs, the unofficial anthem of the Civil Rights Movement, “We will overcome some day.”¹⁰

These two events highlight the challenges to race relations in Britain both from black Britons and white supremacists. They reveal the furious debate over Commonwealth migration that dominated contemporary politics. In public discourse, in part because of the rhetoric of Enoch Powell, colonial immigrants were routinely linked to poverty, disease, and social disorder to be solved by limiting immigration.¹¹ Powell’s emotive language in a speech from April 1968, gave voice to a growing minority anxious over nonwhite immigration and rekindled the public debate about immigration.¹² The Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1968 announced measures that further increased the controls introduced already by the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act. Significantly, the 1968 Act included the legal concept of partiality and allocated or withheld citizenship on racial grounds. The Act demonstrated a seldom-admitted support for racial purity in Britain that also manifested in the government’s support for minority rule in South Africa and Rhodesia.¹³ As things stood, the consultation opened on a tense note when news from Rhodesia poured in that its Prime Minister had just announced his new constitution and the subjugation of the country’s black population to white minority rule.¹⁴

³“Protesters Disrupt Church Talks on Race,” *The Guardian*, May 22, 1969.

⁴“A Public Meeting: Racism as a Major Obstacle to World Community,” May 21, 1969, Mss. Huddleston, Box 407.

⁵Dr. Cecil Northcott, “Black Power Leader Quits Race Talks,” *Daily Telegraph*, May 22, 1969.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷See note 3 above.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹J. Robert Nelson, “London Conference Equals Consultation plus Confrontation,” *Presbyterian Life*, July 1, 1969.

¹⁰“Bishop Howled Down.” The South African exile and communist activist H.A. Naidoo described an eerily identical moment that occurred in 1959 when Bishop Reeves of Johannesburg addressed a meeting at Central Hall, Westminster. The Bishop had just begun his speech when Naidoo noticed across the balcony, “a large white banner with the heavy sign in black: ‘KEEP BRITAIN WHITE.’” Although the banner hangers were led out from the hall and the banner was removed, Naidoo confessed that “a white flash with the inscription ‘KEEP BRITAIN WHITE’ remained as an image in my mind in the same way that the slogan ‘FOR EUROPEANS ONLY’ has stuck since my childhood in South Africa.” H.A. Naidoo, “Keep Britain White,” *Africa South*, January 1959, 65.

¹¹Waters, “Dark Strangers,” 218.

¹²Burkett, *Constructing Post-Imperial Britain*, 5.

¹³McNeil, “Rivers of Zimbabwe,” 732.

¹⁴J. Robert Nelson. “If It’s Any Comfort - We Are Not Alone,” *The Episcopalian*, August 1969.

The “revelation” that England too had a race problem became one in a series of four “shocks” that upset the WCC consultation and impacted its results. The renowned American Methodist, theologian and academic J Robert Nelson, reported this in *Presbyterian Life*. He wrote that the events came “as shocking news to some that England... is herself embroiled in a white/black conflict of major proportions.”¹⁵ The three other shock waves he described were all related to the theme of the consultation. The first was the testimonials of American clergymen that “the churches are hopelessly racist in America.”¹⁶ The second was a forceful complaint against “Christian missions-plus-colonialism” raised by “black and brown members” who “broke their restraint and spoke bluntly.”¹⁷ Lastly, on the Friday evening before adjournment, the third shock wave broke when a delegation of five black activists “calmly walked to the head table and lifted the microphone from the hand of Miss Jean Fairfax of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] Legal Defense Fund.” The group leader read a “Declaration of Revolution,” that specified demands for 60 million pounds sterling from the WCC for the support of liberation movements, the legal defense of arrested black Panthers, and the funding of an international publishing house.¹⁸ To delegates, these events clarified the need to act decisively and rapidly against racism.

The host of protests on display during the consultation points to the entanglement of local histories and contexts in the activities, aspirations, and imaginations of organizations with a global reach such as the WCC.¹⁹ The events demonstrate that local responses from below are a crucial component of any analysis of an international organization such as the WCC. It is the embedment of the local in the global that this article seeks to highlight through a focus on the WCC’s Program to Combat Racism (PCR) and its emphasis on anti-apartheid protest. To do so, I offer the first major examination of the influence of the Notting Hill Consultation on the wider historical development of global anti-apartheid protest. Recently, Louise Bethlehem has argued that “apartheid moves things.”²⁰ Bethlehem and others in her research group have demonstrated how the lens of anti-apartheid activism and the cultural production that grows around it and in response to exile and displacement enforced by the South African regime, reveal local conflicts and tensions.²¹

Building on this paradigm, I will explore the encounter of two transnational movements – the ecumenical movement and the anti-apartheid movement (AAM) – at the apex of the turbulent 1960s. This research asks how these two movements imagined the establishment of communities of solidarity through a joint campaign against racism. It will refer to the consultation and the PCR that came out of it as acts of solidarity as they are defined by David Featherstone. Featherstone explains solidarity as a relation forged through political struggle, which “seeks to challenge forms of oppression.”²² He cogently argues that solidarity is dynamic, inventive and unfinished. The WCC Notting Hill meeting positioned racism as its main theme and framed it as an urgent

¹⁵See note 9 above.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Dubow, “Closing Remarks,” 329.

²⁰Bethlehem, “Restless Itineraries,” 50.

²¹Hashachar, “Guinea Unbound”; Levi, “Zaire ’74”; and Zalmanovich, “Screening Solidarity.”

²²Featherstone, *Solidarity*, 5.

global problem that called for international collaboration. Moreover, the organizing committee had intended the consultation to be a community-building event – delegates originated from every continent; the chairman of the meeting was American democratic senator, George McGovern; and Oliver Tambo was one of its two keynote speakers. Equally important was the result of the consultation, which was the creation of the PCR that ran for 25 years. The PCR had a lasting impact on the networks of advocacy in the anti-apartheid struggle and on their methods of protest.²³ Thus, I argue, the WCC meeting can be seen as a creative act of solidarity that produced new communities and new politics.²⁴

The meeting was also a dramatic moment in the transformative process that the WCC had embarked on from 1966, and that resulted in a demographic change in the make-up of the organization, and in its methods of resistance to white racism. From 1969, through its PCR, the WCC pioneered international campaigns of disinvestment in South Africa and committed to financially supporting and empowering liberation movements in Africa.²⁵ It played a significant role in what Håkan Thörn has termed the increased “globalization of politics” after the Second World War.²⁶ The WCC encapsulates the postwar development of “Christian human rights” as Samuel Moyn termed it.²⁷ Moyn traces the rise of the postwar discourse of human rights to a Christian affirmation of the centrality of the concept of the dignity of man and the set of rights that grew out of it to Pope Pius XII’s 1942 Christmas address. This formulation of rights was seen by Catholics and ecumenical formations of transatlantic elites as “the key to future world order.”²⁸ The WCC 1969 meeting thus captures a moment of transition from international movements and organizations that called for the self-determination of people manifested in decolonization to the politics of human rights. The shift that began in the 1940s, intensified so that “over the course of the 1970s the moral world of Westerners shifted.”²⁹ As the PCR that the WCC created demonstrates, the transition included a move, “from the politics of the state to the morality of the globe.”³⁰

Consequently, this study will demonstrate that attempts to halt racism were not the sole preserve of secular progressive groups. Sources from the rich archive of the WCC, ranging from reports, correspondences, addresses from the Notting Hill meeting and press coverage will show the importance of expanding the analysis of the global civil society to religious organizations.³¹ The analysis of the WCC meeting and its resulting emphasis on South Africa will add to the limited body of historical scholarship about religion and the religious experience in the struggle.³² It will reveal the little-

²³World Council of Churches, Central Committee, “Plan for an Ecumenical PCR.” (International Consultation on Racism, Notting Hill, London, May 19–24, 1969).

²⁴Featherstone, *Solidarity*, 7.

²⁵Welch, “Mobilizing Morality,” 866.

²⁶Thörn, *Anti-Apartheid and Global Civil Society*, 4.

²⁷Moyn, *Christian Human Rights*.

²⁸Moyn, “Christian Human Rights: An Introduction,” 2

²⁹Moyn, *Last Utopia*, 1.

³⁰Ibid., 43.

³¹Mufamadi demonstrates this well in a recent PhD thesis dedicated to the WCC and its PCR. Mufamadi, “The WCC and Its PCR,” 4.

³²Bonner, “Life after Thirty’ Colloquium,” 26. Although historians have begun to examine the role of the WCC in the anti-apartheid movement, the role of religion, and in particular that of the ecumenical movement, is still under-researched. Macqueen, “Ecumenism and Global Anti-Apartheid Struggle,” 88.

acknowledged role of the WWC in the global AAM, in particular during high apartheid, a period that until recently was considered an era of stifled anti-apartheid activity both in Southern Africa and abroad.³³

“Ours is a task of exorcism”³⁴

The WCC is an umbrella association of Anglican, Protestant and Orthodox churches and the largest representative of the ecumenical movement in the world.³⁵ It has 349 member churches in more than 140 countries, on all six continents and represents over 572 million Christians.³⁶ The roots of the movement go back to the English and American revivalist movements of the mid-nineteenth century, when young Christian men worked to convert individuals through missionary work, especially in the inner cities.³⁷ The World Missionary conference held in Edinburgh in 1910 was the starting point for the modern ecumenical movement and the institutionalized cooperation between Protestant mission councils.³⁸ The title of the conference alludes to organization’s ties to the missionary movement going back 150 years. The movement drew on a shared evangelical inheritance and on student and youth work.³⁹ From the early teens voices from the non-Catholic Christian world had been calling for the creation of a “fellowship of churches” similar to the model of the 1920 League of Nations. In various meetings in the 1920s and 1930s, it was decided to create a movement that would work toward the unity of the churches and would give more recognition to the younger churches outside Europe and North America.⁴⁰ Unlike the League of Nations, the churches in the USA were involved in the initiative from its inception. In 1938, a draft constitution for the WCC was prepared and accepted by many churches.⁴¹ The war interrupted these processes, however, so that the first assembly of the WCC met in Amsterdam in 1948. Since then, its administrative center has been located in Geneva.⁴² Many of those involved in the founding of the WCC in 1948, were also involved in the immediate postwar years with the Commission of Churches on International Affairs that participated in the drafting stages of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.⁴³

The WCC’s mission in the immediate postwar years reflected the current mood in Europe, when new possibilities for international cooperation were pursued by the Allied forces. This was a moment of reconstruction and a belief in the possibility of remaking the world order. Although this period is frequently thought of as the beginning of the secularization of the continent, policymakers in Europe and the USA turned to religion “for answers for a way forward to a brighter future for all.”⁴⁴ As Moyn shows, Christian

³³Dubow, “Closing Remarks,” 305. This view has also been contested by Helgesson, Bethlehem, and Han, “Cultural Solidarities,” 262.

³⁴WCC, “Plan for an Ecumenical PCR,” 7.

³⁵Kunter, “Global Reach”.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Kunter, “Global Reach,” 152.

³⁸Thompson, “Ecumenism,” 50.

³⁹Ibid., 51.

⁴⁰Ibid., 52–4.

⁴¹Ibid., 58.

⁴²WCC, “History — WCC.” (accessed December 4, 2017).

⁴³Kunter, “Global Reach”.

⁴⁴McVety, “Fear, Want, and Cold War,” 17.

elites were instrumental to the development of human rights in the 1940s.⁴⁵ Despite the decline in religious belief at the time, historian Daniel Loss argues that, “the historic churches of Europe continued to enjoy a privileged position in public life.”⁴⁶ As the WCC’s actions reveal, churches pursued opportunities to weigh in on the controversial topics of the day, such as racism and apartheid. Perhaps as a reaction to the horrors of the war, political protest over contested issues and a willingness to intervene in the politics of other nations, were regarded by many clergymen “almost as an ecclesiastical obligation.”⁴⁷ Consequently, international groups such as the British AAM or the *Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament* (CND) which was the main avenue for alternative politics in Britain in the late 1950s and early 1960s, explicitly and regularly appealed to organized religious groups and many of their members came from within the church.⁴⁸

The speeches of both secular and religious policymakers during this period were rooted in a language that promoted shared responsibility for fellow human beings and a demand “to relieve suffering and fight injustice.”⁴⁹ This language was shaped both by a focus on the value of each individual and the responsibility of believers to “relieve the sufferings of those in need,” and by the secular discourse of an “international community” linked “by a common humanity.”⁵⁰ These two strands of thought informed a postwar vision of a globalized civil society. Thörn ties this change to the expansion of new media, the facility of travel, including that prompted by decolonization and postcolonial migration, and “the rise and consolidation of new ‘global’ organizations and institutions” such as the WCC.⁵¹ In the late 1960s, however, the WCC began moving away from campaigns that focused on individual rights to organizing collective action against racism and the empowerment of liberation movements through direct financial support.⁵² The definition of human rights the WCC would advocate from the 1970s onwards, was expanded to second and third generation human rights.⁵³

The question of racism was pushed to the top of the WCC’s agenda during its conference on Church and Society in Geneva in July 1966. The meeting set the agenda for theological debates and social action for its churches for years to come.⁵⁴ The appointment of Eugene Carson Blake as general secretary of the WCC in December that year, lent further impetus to the demand for social action. Blake was an American Presbyterian minister and a leading protagonist in the American Civil Rights movement, who was imprisoned in 1963 for leading an anti-segregation march. His appointment reflected the *Zeitgeist* but also contributed to the radicalization of the WCC that

⁴⁵See note 27 above.

⁴⁶Loss, “Institutional Life of Christian England,” 283.

⁴⁷Thompson, “Ecumenism,” 69.

⁴⁸Burkett, *Constructing Post-Imperial Britain*, 101–2. Reverend John Collins, Reverend Michael Scott and Methodist minister and socialist Donald Soper were all leading figures in both CND and AAM. In his comprehensive book about humanitarianism, Barnett acknowledges the centrality of religion. Moreover, he concludes that, “humanitarianism is a matter of faith.” Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, 18.

⁴⁹See note 44 above.

⁵⁰Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, 102–3 as quoted in McVety, 21.

⁵¹Thörn, *Anti-Apartheid and Global Civil Society*, 4–5.

⁵²Welch, “Mobilizing Morality,” 865, 878.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 908. Second generation human rights focus on equality of conditions and treatment. For example, rights to food, housing and health care. Third generation rights go beyond the civil and social and are at times defined as environmental. They include, for example, the right to development, right to natural resources and right to satisfactory environment.

⁵⁴de Gruchy and de Gruchy, *Church Struggle in South Africa*, 114.

occurred in the upcoming years.⁵⁵ In addition, the development in the USA of Black Theology as a critique of ethical failings of the white racist church, as well as anti-Vietnam, labor, and student protests, all set a militant tone for the WCC fourth Assembly in Uppsala, Sweden in July 1968.

The social ferment in 1968, the year that was declared by UNESCO as International Human Rights Year but is remembered as a year of global revolutions, increased delegates' fears of a deterioration in race relations and an increase in state-sanctioned racial violence. In particular, in South Africa, the apartheid state's crackdown on resistance in the years following the Sharpeville massacre of March 1960; and in America, the murder of Martin Luther King Jr only months before he was to address the Uppsala meeting, added a sense of urgency.⁵⁶ Some of the delegates were energized by the development of Black Theology and the establishment of the National Conference of Black Churchmen in the USA and its affirmation of black Power as a tool with which "to engage the leaders of America, white churchmen, Negro citizens and the mass media."⁵⁷

In response to delegates' demands, it was decided that Churches needed to embark on a "vigorous" campaign against racism. The General Committee of the Assembly authorized its members to put forward a program of this kind.⁵⁸ The first step was to call an international consultation that would advise on a program of education and action. Although racism was not a new issue for the WCC, "today it arises with a new and terrifying urgency."⁵⁹ The mandate of the consultation was to explore the "nature, causes and consequences of racism in light of contemporary conflict situations, the means employed to combat it, and the new possibilities of new Christian witness in this area."⁶⁰ The organizers wished to renew and emphasize a commitment to "offer a convincing moral lead in the face of this great and growing crisis."⁶¹ They argued that, "[w]hat is needed is an ecumenical act of solidarity which would help to stem the deterioration in race relations."⁶²

The discussion of the PCR took center stage at the Notting Hill Consultation in 1969. The location of the meeting was itself a symbolic reminder of the dangers of racial tensions,⁶³ as well as of the powerful black response that they evoked.⁶⁴ Forty Christian leaders, both lay and clergy, involved in and concerned with the issues of race conflict,

⁵⁵Walsh, "The Religious Ferment of the Sixties," 314.

⁵⁶Mufamadi, "The WCC and Its PCR," 21. Similarly, the assassination of Eduardo Mondlane from Mozambique in February 1969, months before he was scheduled to address the Notting Hill Consultation, strengthened participants' resolve to intensify their protest of racism.

⁵⁷de Gruchy, "Religion and Racism," 391.

⁵⁸WCC, "Plan for an Ecumenical PCR," 1.

⁵⁹Ibid. The Former General Secretary of the WCC, Dr. W.A. Visser 't Hooft, argued in his address that it has been on the agenda of the ecumenical movement from 1925. Visser 't Hooft, "Reflections on WCC."

⁶⁰See note 58 above.

⁶¹Ibid., 2.

⁶²Ibid., 3.

⁶³In late August-early September 1958, a series of conflicts erupted in Notting Hill, London and in Nottingham. White Britons attacked West Indian immigrants. The events were framed by the media and politicians as evidence of Britain's "race problem." The proposed solution was to be immigration control. Bleich, *Race Politics in Britain and France*, 44.

⁶⁴Notting Hill now represents not only racial strife but also black activism. This spirit was embodied in the Notting Hill Carnival initiated by the Trinidadian writer and activist Claudia Jones in 1959 in response to the Notting Hill disturbances, and the murder of an Antiguan immigrant by white Britons that year. Tompsett, "London Is the Place for Me," 46.

attended the meeting. Twenty-five additional consultants were invited to participate in the proceedings. In addition to WCC members, participants came from diverse backgrounds: they were social scientists, trade unionists, black power or student activists, South African exiles, and Roman Catholic observers.⁶⁵ The delegates expressed their awareness of the “sense of impotence” felt by churches that wished to act against racism.⁶⁶ They feared that this sense of despair would discourage others from acting against racism. Some were frustrated that “Christians often engage in irrelevant and timid efforts to improve race relations – too little and too late.”⁶⁷ South Africa was the main focus of the consultation – both as an example of the failure of the reformist approach and as the locus for future intervention.

State and church in South Africa, 1940–1969

The South African case presented a challenge for the WCC. State and church in South Africa were not and never had been separated. Moreover, the church was not a unified entity. In 1652, Dutch settlers established the Dutch Reform Church (DRC) of Calvinist origins in the Cape colony. From the nineteenth century, a host of missions descended on South Africa. The theologian Steve De Gruchy argues that this set of circumstances “has rooted the tension of mission church/settler church, black church/white church, and therefore issues of racism, into the very meaning of what it means to be church in South Africa.”⁶⁸ As early as 1857, a synod resolution allowed the racial segregation of congregations. This soon became official policy and the church was divided into four racially defined denominations (white, “coloured,” black and Indian),⁶⁹ a division carried over into the post-1948 apartheid state. After 1948, the DRC became so central to upholding apartheid that it was dubbed the “National Party in Prayer.”⁷⁰

The English-speaking churches were also complicit in the beginnings of apartheid. Up to 1960 they were hesitant to engage in outright critique of the regime. Early critics such as Geoffrey Clayton, the Anglican Bishop of Johannesburg (and between 1948 and 1957 Archbishop of Cape Town), called on the church in 1940 to rethink the “shape of race relations” in a postwar society.⁷¹ Although Clayton criticized racial segregation and called for social and political change, he was cautious and did not abandon the ideal of trusteeship or challenge the South African regime directly.⁷² This approach was generally sustained throughout the decade and carried on to the 1950s, save for the voices of a number of radical Anglicans such as Michael Scott, Canon John Collins and Trevor Huddleston. These clergymen were anxious that a failure of the church to address the concerns of African nationalists would “fatally undermine” Christianity within Africa.⁷³ The solidification of apartheid and its system of racial segregation in the 1950s, however, forced the church and mission establishment to consider possible

⁶⁵Mufamadi, “The WCC and Its PCR,” 80.

⁶⁶WCC, “Plan for an Ecumenical PCR,” 3.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸de Gruchy, “Religion and Racism,” 393.

⁶⁹Ibid., 395.

⁷⁰Kuperus, “Political Role and Democratic Contribution of Churches,” 285.

⁷¹Skinner, “Christian Reconstruction, Secular Politics,” 247.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Skinner, “Moral Foundations,” 407.

contradictions between apartheid and the Christian gospel. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 proved a particular bone of contestation.⁷⁴ The archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey Fisher, declared in an address to the Convocation of Canterbury in London that the South African government was pursuing a policy toward its black population “which was regarded by almost all Christian opinion outside the DRC as unchristian in principle and bound.”⁷⁵ And yet, despite these explicit words and though the Bantu Education Act threatened the autonomy of the church in South Africa, most Anglican churches did little more than protest. A notable exception was Bishop Ambrose Reeves of Johannesburg, who closed all Anglican schools in his diocese in defiance.⁷⁶ Reeves was deported from South Africa in September 1960 after his public account and condemnation of the Sharpeville massacre.

During the 1950s, Christian activists had in effect despaired of the church and turned to secular politics to promote their agenda. Rob Skinner has shown that they opted for a position of solidarity with African political movements that “presupposed identification with African claims to citizenship rights.”⁷⁷ This position signaled the rejection of the ideal of trusteeship and lent moral legitimacy to anti-apartheid campaigns.⁷⁸ Through their vocal and public critique of the church, individuals such as Huddleston, who famously accused the church of “sleeping on” and tolerating racism in the church and in the apartheid regime,⁷⁹ ultimately popularized and legitimized the idea of a non-racial democracy in South Africa.⁸⁰

Although the WCC condemned apartheid from 1948, the Sharpeville massacre in March 1960 demanded more than proclamations. In mid-December 1960, the WCC organized a consultation in Cottesloe, Johannesburg.⁸¹ Representatives of all South African churches, including the DRC, gathered to discuss apartheid and agreed on a joint concluding statement. The Cottesloe statement rejected unjust discrimination and passed several resolutions on issues such as freedom of religion, migrant work, due process, and the extension of suffrage and political representation to blacks.⁸² The Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd realized that the statement was a denial of the theological basis for the National Party’s policy of apartheid and increased his pressure on the Afrikaans Dutch Reformed Church (DCR) and its leaders to repudiate the agreement.⁸³ Although the Cape Town and Transvaal synods of the DRC were founding members of the WCC in Amsterdam in 1948, the DRC backed away from the Cottesloe statement. Afrikaner newspapers condemned the WCC and accused it of having communist influences, links to the Roman Catholic Church, and humanist and liberal tendencies.⁸⁴ The DRC withdrew from the WCC, although it maintained informal ties with the organization till 1969.⁸⁵ Cottesloe exposed the rift between Afrikaans

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵“Totalitarian Charge,” *The Living Church*, November 7, 1954.

⁷⁶Skinner, “Moral Foundations,” 408.

⁷⁷Skinner, “Facing the Challenge of ‘Young Africa,’” 70.

⁷⁸Ibid., 69.

⁷⁹Huddleston, “The Church Sleeps On,” *Observer*, October 10, 1954.

⁸⁰Skinner, “Moral Foundations,” 416.

⁸¹Visser ‘t Hooft, “Reflections on WCC.”

⁸²WCC, “Action Concerning Interracial Relations,” 3.

⁸³See note 81 above.

⁸⁴Walshe, “Church versus State in South Africa,” 23.

⁸⁵de Gruchy, and de Gruchy, *Church Struggle in South Africa*, 124.

and English-speaking churches.⁸⁶ It also created a splinter within the DRC. Beyers Naudé, a high-profile DRC minister and one of the Cottesloe delegates, refused to recant. He later resigned from the church and went on to establish the Christian Institute (CI) in August 1963. The CI became an important vehicle of protest until its activities were restricted and Naudé himself was banned in 1977.⁸⁷

Following the 1966 WCC meeting in Geneva, the newly established South African Council of Churches (SACC) and the Christian Institute created a theological commission to examine the position of the church in relation to apartheid. This resulted in the publication of the *Message to the People of South Africa* in 1968.⁸⁸ The document was sent to all clergy in South Africa in August that year and was made public in a news conference. It declared that apartheid was a “false gospel” and was signed by 600 ministers.⁸⁹ In the following months, the Christian Institute also came into contact with leaders and students of the Black Consciousness movement in search of a Christian alternative to apartheid. The Black Theology for South Africa grew out of these discussions and emphasized the humanity and dignity of black South Africans and called for solidarity in the struggle against racism.⁹⁰ This work inspired the discussions at the Notting Hill meeting and, argues de Gruchy, “contributed to debates about racism, power and revolutionary violence.”⁹¹

The local in the global: the case of South Africa

The case of South Africa brought into focus the dangers of institutional racism in a national setting. But the WCC wished to contextualize this local case within a global framework. This notion was put forth to Oliver Tambo in the letter of invitation to address the WCC Consultation. Tambo was asked to “speak to the global aspect of racial unrest, as this is evident in the conditions in Southern Africa where racial conflict is an urgent and increasingly explosive reality.”⁹² Following the Bandung Conference in 1956 and the diplomatic efforts that ensued, South Africa was to be presented as one (albeit pressing) of many examples of the dangers of institutional racism.⁹³ In the opening sentences of his address, “Racism a Lighted Power-Keg of Violence in Southern Africa,” Tambo located apartheid on a continuum with Nazism. He maintained, that Hitler’s racism had plunged the world into a global war and that “[t]oday, Hitler’s disciples in South Africa are recklessly fanning the flames of war in Southern Africa and Africa.”⁹⁴ The devastating results of the Second World War, maintained Tambo, should have been “the last that the world ever heard of racialism and fascism.”⁹⁵ However, although Nazi Germany was crushed, “racialism still exists in the world today particularly in Southern Africa where it has adopted a virulent form comparable to Nazism.”⁹⁶

⁸⁶Lalloo, “Church and State in Apartheid South Africa,” 44.

⁸⁷Müller, “Evangelical Nationalism in Apartheid South Africa,” 115–7.

⁸⁸de Gruchy and de Gruchy, *Church Struggle in South Africa*, 115.

⁸⁹de Gruchy, “Religion and Racism,” 397.

⁹⁰Ibid., 398.

⁹¹Ibid.

⁹²Rena to Tambo, March 24, 1969.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴Tambo, “Racism a Lighted Power-Keg.”

⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶Ibid.

Tambo used the analogy to Nazism to frame the need to intervene in South Africa. This analogy had been common practice in anti-apartheid and communist circles since the early 1940s.⁹⁷ Activists speaking to audiences within and outside South Africa regularly referred to the Afrikaner support for Germany during the war and reminded listeners of the *Ossewabrandwag*, an anti-British and pro-German organization, which had opposed South African participation in the war. The Union of South Africa did join the war in September 1939, but this required the deposing of the Prime Minister J.B.M. Hertzog in favor of Jan Smuts.⁹⁸ The analogy between Nazism and apartheid was invoked regularly in the postwar era in the international diplomatic effort to end apartheid.⁹⁹ As historian Shirli Gilbert demonstrates, numerous media outlets in the country and abroad branded the anti-apartheid struggle as “the most important moral battle in the world since the defeat of Nazism.”¹⁰⁰ This framing obscured the anti-Semitic component of the Nazi project, and was in keeping with the Soviet narrative of The Great Patriotic War as a general struggle against fascism.¹⁰¹ In addition to grounding anti-racist activity in anti-fascist resistance, Tambo also called on the support of anti-colonial networks of resistance. This too was common for anti-apartheid activists who turned to African nations for support and solidarity.¹⁰²

In this speech, however, Tambo asked his listeners to commit to solidarity that went beyond verbal protest. He called on “British workers, intellectuals, priests, writers, and scientists and soldiers to paralyze any effort by the ruling group to involve them on the side of the racialists.”¹⁰³ Tambo aspired to solidarity forged by support of an armed struggle carried out by the victims of racism all over the world. He cautioned that, “[t]he struggle is going to be bitter, long and costly.”¹⁰⁴ He called on his audience to “close ranks and unite in this battle, all irrespective of color, race and creed and make sure that we bury racialism forever.”¹⁰⁵ In his address, Tambo rallied his listeners to take up solidarity as an act of creation: the unification of the ranks, despite distances and differences to form a new public defined by its commitment to end racism and the perpetuation of exploitive regimes.

Tambo’s emphasis on an international armed struggle was a response to contemporary politics. As Irwin demonstrates, over the course of the 1960s, the USA and Britain had moved from a critique of the apartheid state to supporting the legitimacy of its rule.¹⁰⁶ As to African states, during the early and mid-1960s, the ANC was isolated by African nationalists. And although anti-apartheid sentiment was spreading in the West, trade relations with the West and South Africa’s development projects in East and West Africa, ultimately strengthened the National Party.¹⁰⁷ The ANC therefore needed to expand its network of allies and to reframe the issue of apartheid in a way

⁹⁷Gilbert, “Jews and the Racial State,” 33.

⁹⁸Todman, *Britain’s War*, 229.

⁹⁹Brian Bunting’s 1964 book, *The Rise of South African Reich* made the connection most explicitly and memorably.

¹⁰⁰Mark Gevisser as quoted in Gilbert, “Jews and the Racial State,” 34.

¹⁰¹Fox, “The Holocaust under Communism,” 421.

¹⁰²Irwin, *Gordian Knot*, 4–5.

¹⁰³See note 94 above.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶Irwin, *Gordian Knot*, 8.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.* For a short summary of British and American trade relations with South Africa, see Dubow, “Closing Remarks,” 314.

that appealed “to an emerging community of stateless activists in the global north and south.”¹⁰⁸

The ecumenical nature of the meeting enabled Tambo to bring his agenda to an international organization with widespread influence. Tambo’s rhetoric also demonstrated the second characteristic of contemporary politics: the abandoning of the postwar essentialist language of humanism as the basis for equality. Tambo’s emphasis on a transition from words to action was also in keeping with the direction in which the WCC as an organization had been evolving. The militant word “combat” in the title for the organization’s plan against racism suggested a new commitment to act rather than to pontificate. Although some of the members of the WCC were still struggling with how to react to the inherent violence of racism, many called for an active response to the suffering endured by those living in racial domination.¹⁰⁹ As we shall see, this shift in WCC politics accrued a lot of criticism in South Africa even within dissident circles.

In the weeks following the meeting, an appointed committee drew up a five year “PCR” which was presented that August at a meeting in Canterbury, England. The organization allocated three staff members to execute the program and called for the establishment of an International Advisory Committee of 20 specialists.¹¹⁰ It pledged the allocation of 150,000 dollars over five years for running the program. The first item of the PCR called to create “teams of inquiry” that would focus on select areas around the world to examine them and formulate guidelines “for ecumenical understanding and action.”¹¹¹ The educational component of the plan included a commitment to collect and circulate the best analyses of racism. Second, the committee suggested that the WCC would facilitate more “opportunity for confrontation between those holding different positions on the meaning of racial justice and those advocating different methods for attaining it.”¹¹² The idea was that confrontation was essential for reconciliation. And indeed, over the decades, the organization headquarters in Geneva were used to bring together multiracial groups of South Africans holding diverse and divergent political beliefs.¹¹³

Third, the committee called for the WCC and its member churches to acknowledge the role of the Church in enabling and benefitting from racism. In the meeting a year earlier in Uppsala, the American black intellectual and writer, James Baldwin, had accused the Church of betraying black people and holding on to its position of privilege.¹¹⁴ During his 1969 address, Oliver Tambo had also argued that the Church participated in conquest crusades in which, “[t]he people of Africa, Asia, North and South America were robbed of their land, the right to rule themselves; their cultural development was stifled and choked and their labor ruthlessly exploited.”¹¹⁵ As aforementioned, this charge was voiced by members of the WCC during the Notting Hill meeting.¹¹⁶ The WCC took these allegations on board and its self-examination included

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

¹⁰⁹Mufamadi, “WCC and Its PCR,” 67.

¹¹⁰WCC, “Plan for an Ecumenical PCR,” 5.

¹¹¹Ibid.

¹¹²Ibid.

¹¹³Mufamadi, “WCC and Its PCR,” 257.

¹¹⁴Ibid. 70.

¹¹⁵See note 94 above.

¹¹⁶See note 14 above.

adopting measures “to correct the current racial and cultural imbalance in the structures, staff and decision making bodies of the WCC.”¹¹⁷ In the following decades, the make-up of the WCC changed to reflect this commitment. In 1948, nearly two thirds of its member churches came from Europe and North America. By 2000, the ratio had shifted and only a third of the member churches were from the West.¹¹⁸

The fourth component was a request for redistribution of resources. The demand for reparation was put forth by some delegates at the Notting Hill consultation and was dramatized by the capture of the meeting by black activists who commanded reparations in return for the commencement of the talks. The demand was rejected as “inadequate” because “it seeks simply to apportion guilt for the past and highlights a method of action which leaves out of account the need for acts of compassion, brotherhood and community which go beyond any financial payment.”¹¹⁹ The committee did state, however, that a successful program had to contain action that “must cost something and must be affirmative, visible and capable [of] emulation.”¹²⁰ The plan was to render charity and grants obsolete as “agents for the radical reconstruction of society.”¹²¹ This would include “a transfer of economic resources to undergird the redistribution of political power and to make cultural self-determination meaningful.”¹²² Churches were asked to acknowledge their share in the perpetuation of racism and to examine to what degree “their financial practices, domestic and international, contribute to the support of racially oppressive governments, discriminatory industries and inhuman working conditions.”¹²³ They asked member churches which had benefitted from racist economic systems to “immediately allocate a significant portion of their total resources, without employing paternalistic mechanisms of control, to organizations of the racially oppressed or organizations supporting victims of racial injustice.”¹²⁴ The PCR advocated economic sanctions, both on behalf of the member churches and of governments.¹²⁵ From the early 1970s, for example, the WCC was at the vanguard of international bodies using financial withdrawal from institutions that lent money to the apartheid government. In the 1980s, the WCC had sold its holdings in banks that provided loans to the South African regime.¹²⁶

The fifth, and most controversial economic component of this Plan, however, was the creation of a special fund to support liberation movements such as the ANC (South Africa), FRELIMO (Mozambique), and PAIGC (Guinea-Bissau). The special fund would distribute \$500,000 (\$200,000 from the WCC and \$300,000 that it asked its members to collect) to organizations of oppressed racial groups or those supporting them.¹²⁷ This was a watershed moment for the WCC. Although it had announced that the money would be channeled to humanitarian projects, it was understood by some of the WCC members, by some clergymen (both white and black) in South Africa, and by

¹¹⁷See note 110 above.

¹¹⁸Welch, “Mobilizing Morality,” 869.

¹¹⁹See note 6 above.

¹²⁰*Ibid.*

¹²¹*Ibid.*

¹²²*Ibid.*, 3–4.

¹²³*Ibid.*, 4.

¹²⁴*Ibid.*

¹²⁵*Ibid.*, 4–5.

¹²⁶Mufamadi, “WCC and Its PCR,” 256.

¹²⁷See note 34 above.

the apartheid regime as support for the armed struggle.¹²⁸ This line of action facilitated the South African regime's capacity to limit the activity of the WCC in the country, accusing it of supporting violence.¹²⁹ But it also forced the South African churches to clarify their positions and to commit to their stand against apartheid. This reckoning led to support of a non-violent campaign to end compulsory conscription in 1974 that preceded the *End Conscription Campaign* of the 1980s.¹³⁰ Thus, argues historian Ian Macqueen, even if the amount of money in the fund was limited, the WCC managed to use the special grants as a "symbolic act of solidarity with the oppressed majority."¹³¹

New solidarities?

The emergence of the United Nations as a legitimate tool of politics expedited processes of decolonization and African nationalism around the globe. It also expanded the parameters of the debate of apartheid. As Ryan Irwin has argued, white racism was defined as the central concern of the times back in 1956 at the Bandung Conference. Participating nations shared a "moral commitment to refocus the attention of the world on the true banes of human civilization – colonial rule and white racism."¹³² Delegates to Bandung invoked apartheid throughout their speeches as a concrete example of these evils.¹³³ The adoption of this proposition as the basis of the activity of the WCC over a decade later, testifies to the success of "Bandung diplomacy" in promoting this view on an international platform and its transformative effect on world politics. It is significant that a religious, ecumenical organization picked up the gauntlet of Bandung and centered its efforts to eradicate racism on the apartheid state.

The Consultation in London represents an attempt to imagine a new world order that would not be based on colonial rule and white racism. The conference was an invitation to millions of church members to participate in a creative act of solidarity and community building. This exercise constituted a transformative moment both for the WCC as an organization and for the struggle against apartheid. A sociologist from the Netherlands, Dr. Baldwin Sjollema, was appointed the first director of the PCR. Sjollema recalled in an interview immediately after the event that, "this was an unusual consultation, it was a happening and it left nobody unaffected."¹³⁴ Unlike most ecumenical reports, Sjollema admitted that the PCR was "a crude and rough report which will not make everybody happy."¹³⁵ This, he argued, was due to its subject: "Racism goes very deep under the skin of those who are existentially involved."¹³⁶

The drama was heightened, according to Sjollema, because the agenda for the meeting could not be completed due to the interruption by black power activists.¹³⁷

¹²⁸For a discussion of the brouhaha around the special fund, see Welch, "Mobilizing Morality," 882–90.

¹²⁹Macqueen, "Ecumenism and the Global Anti-Apartheid Struggle," 95–9.

¹³⁰The WCC did not inform the SACC and CI about the grants. When the PCR was published, the South African government demanded that they withdraw their membership from the WCC because of this clause. They refused, but distanced themselves from the decision. Lalloo, "Church and State in Apartheid South Africa," 46–7.

¹³¹Macqueen, "Ecumenism and the Global Anti-Apartheid Struggle," 108.

¹³²Irwin, *Gordian Knot*, 4.

¹³³*Ibid.*, 5.

¹³⁴Baldwin Sjollema interviewed by Michael de Vries from the WCC Communication Department, May 1969.

¹³⁵*Ibid.*

¹³⁶*Ibid.*

¹³⁷*Ibid.*

Consequently, reports were sent to the WCC staff in a rougher form than expected and elicited a spate of furious responses. As Sjollema had anticipated, the conference and the consequent plan opened a heated public debate that was reported on by Christian and national newspapers in the USA, in the UK, in Europe, Africa, and not least, South Africa.¹³⁸ Sjollema's remarks demonstrate the excitement about the organization's new thinking about racism. But his comment about the interruption by black power activists, points to the WCC's surprise at the depth of racial strife in countries such as the USA or Britain. Thus for example, the German theologian K.M. Beckman who prepared a report about racism in Britain for the Notting Hill meeting, concluded that racial discrimination against nonwhites in Britain had been repudiated, and that increased contact between whites and nonwhites would ease existing tensions.¹³⁹ Moreover, Beckman maintained that there was no "acute racial problem on a major world-political scale" in Europe.¹⁴⁰

The lessened focus on Europe resulted also from the transformations that the WCC underwent during the period in question. Its power center shifted from Europe to Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Solidarity and funding were extended from Europeans to activists beyond Europe.¹⁴¹ Black and Asian activists fighting to achieve equality in European countries such as Britain strengthened their bonds with other minority groups in the country or found inspiration and support across the Atlantic. The quadruple protest directed at the delegates of the conference: from American black power activists, from British black power representatives, from nonwhite WCC delegates, and from white supremacists, reinforced the premise of the meeting that race was central to contemporary global politics. The raw emotions on display in each of these axes testify to the limitations of a transnational campaign of solidarity. It illuminates the necessity to acknowledge the embeddedness of local histories and national contexts even in movements that aspire to transnational reach and a transracial make-up.

David Featherstone reminds us that political struggle can yield unexpected results. The Notting Hill consultation found that attempts to create a "global community" around the commitment to eradicate racism, exposed it to accusations about the role of the church in disseminating and benefiting from racism, and about the spread of racism within its own churches. The provision for a special fund for liberation struggles in its PCR was a means to meet pressures from within and without the organization to address racism in a meaningful way. Moreover, the WCC as an organization adopted two far-reaching conclusions that dictated its future actions on racism in general, and apartheid in South Africa in particular. Those were a recognition that "[T]he urgency [*sic*] of overcoming all forms and institutions of racism requires revolutionary action, not gradual reform."¹⁴² It was also accepted that, [V]iolent action should be used only as a last effort in a condition of tyranny; but Christian faith does not forbid this."¹⁴³

¹³⁸Over 70 journalists confirmed their attendance at the Notting Hill Consultation. Around half represented Christian publications and the rest were representatives of the secular press. Sjollema, "Press Reaction to Notting Hill and Canterbury," 1969.

¹³⁹Beckman, "European Thinking on Race," 5.

¹⁴⁰WCC, "Racism (Focus on White Racism) Unofficial Background Paper," (report presented to the WCC meeting in Notting Hill May 19–24, 1969), 6.

¹⁴¹Welch writes that more than 80 percent of the WCC's support comes from Europe and around 15 percent from North America. See note 118 above.

¹⁴²See note 14 above.

¹⁴³*Ibid.*

These radical conclusions turned the PCR into a document that was circulated and debated in many forums, and its impact on protest politics attests to the community that it generated. As Claude Welch demonstrates, the success of the PCR can be measured by the network of advocacy focused on equality that converged around it.¹⁴⁴ In its “ecumenical act of solidarity” the WCC created a new community committed to combatting racism and, moreover, centered on South Africa. The PCR became an axis around which ranks of activists from around the globe could connect, even if they were located in different geographical sites or belonged to diverse ethnic and social classes. Oliver Tambo summed up this sentiment in a note to the Liberian-born Reverend Dr. Burgess Carr from the WCC after the Consultation. Tambo thanked Carr for the, “edifying experience” of the Consultation which “left me with a fresh sense of being part of a vast, if varied, army of seekers after truth and Defenders of right and justice.”¹⁴⁵ On 16 June 2004, in recognition of these efforts, South African president Thabo Mbeki presented Sjollema with the Order of the Companions of O.R. Tambo in Pretoria.¹⁴⁶

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Louise Bethlehem, Jonathan Hyslop, the anonymous reviewers, Noa Erez and the WCC archives.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

The research leading to these results was funded by the European Research Council under the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme (FP/2007-2013)/ERC Grant Agreement no. 615564.

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¹⁴⁴Welch, “Mobilizing Morality,” 865.

¹⁴⁵Tambo to Carr, September 4, 1969.

¹⁴⁶“Geneva Ceremony to Celebrate WCC Programme to Combat Racism and Honour Baldwin Sjollema — World Council of Churches.” (accessed January 31, 2018).

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