



Be not  
overcome  
by evil

**The response of  
the South African Council of Churches  
to the Eloff Commission.**



## The response of the SACC to the Eloff Commission

**W**e, representing the member churches of the South African Council of Churches, believe the Government's primary motive in establishing the Eloff Commission was to discredit the Council of Churches and bring it into line with the policies of the Government.

We feel that all South African Christians should be informed about the way in which the State has tried to use the Eloff Commission to manipulate the Council, and the extent to which it is interfering in religion and theology for its own purposes.

### Financial control

We cannot dispute that at the time of the Commission's founding the reporting on the Council's finances was inadequate.

This was the opening the Government needed and the Eloff Commission was brought into being to examine irregularities in the Council's finances. Now they had a rationale. The stage had been set but the Commission had not been in existence for long when the original limitations were far exceeded.

Eventually the members of the Commission examined the Council's position on matters as diverse as propaganda, trade unions, disinvestment and state security. Even the Council's theology was brought into question by this secular body.

It is in the one area in which the Commission was instructed to function that its findings are of most interest. At the end of an investigation, that left little if anything to chance, the Commission could not avoid finding that the present executive had not been involved in any sort of embezzlement or theft and that the Council is not controlled or in any way manipulated by its overseas donors. It is also interesting to note that this conclusion was drawn by the Commission despite a police report in which overseas manipulation was alleged.

In dealing with the Council's finances, there is a point on which the Commission is uncharacteristically reticent. No mention is made of their own auditor's report that the inadequate financial con-

trol to which the Council was once victim is now something of the past. It needs to be borne in mind that, if anyone was defrauded, it was the Council, not the Government.

The facts surrounding the formation of the Eloff Commission and the manner in which it conducted its duties fuel the suspicion that it was nothing more than a political manoeuvre, part of a strategy to discredit the Council, to cast doubt upon the validity of its theology, to isolate some of its office bearers, casting them in the roles of the real culprits, and to justify its plans to silence the prophetic voices in the Church. The Council does not dispute the State's right to have its own political interests or its right to investigate financial irregularities, even in a Church body, but here we are dealing with an attempt to exploit the situation for political gain, regardless of whether its actions are in conflict with the justice demanded by God. It is not the Council that possesses an illicit interest in politics, but the State that is interfering in the work of a religious body for its own political purposes.

### Theology

In its report the Commission seems to have assumed the policy that it was not competent to pass judgement on theological matters. On page 145 the report says: "No state can take it upon itself to decide what the theology of the Church should be and the question if ever it is to be settled, is to be

resolved by theologians, not by a government, and not by this commission." Fourteen pages later, on page 159, the Commission repeats the sentiment: "The Commission repeats that it is not for it to judge of these (theological) matters."

Having recognised its incompetence in this area, the Commission nevertheless repeatedly pronounces judgement upon the Council's theological position. At first it approaches this area "with diffidence" because of "differing theological perspectives," page 152, but by the end of the report this early reluctance is forgotten. Eventually, on page 443, it recommends that the Government control the

Council's funds in order to ensure that they are used for "only truly spiritual purposes."

The Commission developed a narrow theology of its own, one in which spiritual matters are seen as a purely private transaction between God and the individual.

**After being in existence for over two years, hearing evidence that filled eighty-two volumes and deliberating for five months, the Eloff Commission of Inquiry into the South African Council of Churches published its report in February 1984. The report itself ran to four hundred and fifty pages and is the cause of considerable comment both in South Africa and overseas.**

**In all of this debate the voice that most needs to be heard is that of the Council itself. This document is the response of the Executive Committee of the SACC to the Eloff Commission's report.**



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In its view it is the Government that must decide how far the work of the Holy Spirit may be allowed to extend. If a spiritual relationship spills over into the odd private act of charity, it can be presumed that this will be acceptable to the Commission. Public acts of charity that might affect the status quo are seen as not being "in the national interest".

Clearly this is a theology that is useful to the Commission and to its mentors in the Government. Its only discernible flaw is that no scriptural grounds are advanced in its support. It relies entirely upon a secularly perceived and parochially motivated view of the national interest. It is not in the national interest to allow the Holy Spirit to have an influence on public affairs or to allow the churches to apply the word of God to Government policies. Black theology is condemned simply because it has the potential of disturbing the political status quo. It is not the Word of God but the will of the Government that is of supreme importance here.

### Politics

The Commission has chosen to see signs in the evidence that the Council has specific political objectives, mounts political campaigns, plans strategies of resistance and undertakes secret operations. In a South African context these are serious allegations. One of the accusations is that the Council orchestrates a campaign of "massive psychological warfare" against South Africa. The evidence for this astonishing allegation is drawn from a single letter, written not by a member of the Council, but to the Council from an outsider in Germany.

We repeat what the Council has said before. The SACC has no political policy, no political ideology, no political blueprint for the future and it does not mount any official political campaigns, nor does it undertake political games with the government or engage in political manoeuvres. All the statements and actions of the Council and its member churches that touch upon politics are motivated by the Word of God. Criticism of injustice in public affairs has always been part of the prophetic role of the Church. Prophecy is not politics. Prophecy does not have a political objective. The aim and objective of prophecy is that the people may turn back from their sinful ways and that the nation may experience something of God's justice and peace.

That all prophetic statements and actions are misconstrued as being political strategies is not surprising when we realize that the Commission itself has judged everything from the point of view of the Government's political interests.

If concern for the disadvantaged is politics then

the Council pleads guilty. If caring for the poor and downtrodden is not in the national interest, then the Council has no defence. If the law of the Government is above the commandment of God, only then is the Eloff Commission exonerated without question.

### The so-called National Interest

Every aspect of SACC activities have been judged according to only one criterion. This is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ but the *national interest* as perceived by the Government. That the Commission's view of what constitutes the national interest will be a limited and biased one can be seen from its very composition. In passing judgement on an organisation, the membership of which is largely black, it included no black member in its ranks. As the RAND DAILY MAIL pointed out in its edition of February the 18th "The Commission saw things through white eyes." Mr Dave Dalling, the Member of Parliament for Sandton, enlarged this perception. "The entire report is couched in the language and ideology of the National Party," he said. And in case the reader of the report is not sure of what Nationalist ideology consists, one of the commissioners, Prof. P. Oosthuizen, has inserted a long account of government policy. He explains that only the present government can act in the national interest because any alternative government would dominate and have sectional interests. A government elected by all the people to govern in the interests of all the people is regarded as impossible (page 431-5).

Here is the ultimate fallacy to be found in the Commission's report. It is not the true national interest that is being safeguarded. It is rather the sectional interest of a privileged minority, in the defence of which the Commission is acting. It is not the SACC that is acting in defiance of the national interest, but the Government itself.

On many occasions in the past the Council has called on the Government to initiate true consultation between the representatives of the many interest groups in the country. This is the path to establishing the true national interest. "Peace, peace, they say, when in fact there is no peace" (Jeremiah 6:14, 8:11).

The Council is not trying to disturb peace. It is trying to call the governing section of the population out of its illusion of peace. Only in this way will a true peace be possible, one based upon justice for all of our citizens.

### The Council and its member churches

The State wishes to silence the prophetic voice of the Churches. The Council's alleged financial problems of the past have given the State its opportunity for investigating and discrediting this prophetic voice. Not satisfied with this, the State has made use of the age-old political tool of 'divide and rule'. In its





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report the Commission declares that a few agitators are manipulating the Council. It then appeals to member churches to exercise control over the Council in order to end this situation. This is an interesting position, especially when one compares it to the Commission's own argument advanced against declaring the Council an affected organisation. In this regard it finds that "member churches pursue substantially the same sort of objectives as those endorsed by the SACC." It even foresees that the member churches would regard such a declaration "as an unwarranted action by the State against the Church and as a restraint on religious freedom. How well this manipulation of logic would have resisted the scrutiny of a court is a matter on which the commissioners would possibly rather not have speculated.

This strange logic is again in evidence when the Commission tries to show that the Council does not enjoy the support of its member churches. Its only evidence to support this contention is the fact that ninety seven percent of the Council's funding comes from overseas. Yet the National Party Sunday newspaper "Rapport" itself said in an editorial "It is unbelievable naivety and counter productive propaganda to deduce that the SACC has virtually no domestic support because ninety seven percent of its funds come from overseas."

The truth of the matter is that the majority of the Christians who belong to our churches are black and that their economic circumstances make it very difficult for them to support their own churches, let alone the Council. That the majority of the Council's money comes from overseas proves only the poverty suffered by most of our people.

That some kind of political plot has been devised by one or two staff members is ridiculous. The Council has an elaborate system of accountability and cannot be manipulated by one official, nor will it allow itself to be manipulated by the State.

The tension between the SACC and the State is not based upon the activities of a few agitators, but upon the very serious grievances of many millions of Black South Africans.

### Is the Church above the law?

Despite its interesting use of logic, its contradictions, misrepresentations and sectional attitudes the Commission is still a wonder of restraint and objectivity when compared to the Minister of Law and Order. "No church is above the law," he said in the Parliamentary debate on the Eloff Report. It is not unreasonable to ask which law he is referring to. The unjust laws of apartheid or just laws that are made in the interest of all the people? In accordance

with Romans 13:1-7 the churches will give full respect and obedience to all laws that are just and fair. But in accordance with Romans 12:1 the Church will not adapt itself to any unjust laws, nor will it alter one jot or tittle of the Word of God in order to suit the pattern of this present world.

His words leave every Christian before a choice. Here the Council's decision is clear. We must heed the admonition found in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter five verse twenty nine, and obey God rather than man. In replying to the Minister's warning the churches cannot avoid exercising their own duty to warn the Minister and his supporters that they will have to account for every action, not to the Council, nor any church, but to God Himself!

### Conclusion

The Eloff Commission ~~tries~~ to prove that the SACC destabilises and undermines the South African state, but the Christian faith places the Council under an obligation to resist evil and oppression by evildoers who legislate a system of injustice. For such a state this resistance is dangerous. The Gospel is always subversive of injustice and evil. Opposition to such evil and oppression is part of the church's vocation from God for the healing of human relationships in state and society. In doing this ~~the~~ Council and its member bodies are concerned not only for the victims of oppression, but also for the liberation of the oppressors from the fear by which they are obsessed. In rendering this service to the South African state and society the SACC and its member churches seek to promote peace in South Africa along the guidelines which St. Paul gives in the twelfth chapter of his letter to the Romans.

Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good. Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love, in honour preferring one another, not slothful in business, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord, rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing instant in prayer, distributing to the necessity of saints, given to hospitality. Bless them which persecute you; bless and curse not. Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep. Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits. Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink; for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:9-21)

1. I believe that this was a worthwhile and effective exercise. The delegation reached a most influential group of people in each country and the measure of the seriousness with which it was treated is to be found in the time given by people like the U.N. Secretary General, Black Ambassadors at the U.N., Dr. Chester Crocker, British F.O. officials and the Swedish Foreign Minister.

In the U.S. particularly the nature of our contacts was heavily biased towards political rather than religious leaders and while they were very worthwhile, this was a real weakness. In Europe this imbalance was rectified.

2. The main purpose: ie Publicising the "Churches Report on Forced Removals" was kept at the centre of every encounter. While most of those who were met were familiar with "Apartheid", they were clearly shocked at the inhumanity, scope, and above all, the irreversible nature of forced removals and the need to focus international pressure on this aspect.

A secondary effect of the visit was that of updating committed persons with recent developments in Southern Africa, and placing events like the Nkomati Accord in perspective.

3. A grave weakness was the rushed nature of preparations. The group met in total for the first time in New York, just a day before the first engagements at the U.N. It was only then that I was asked to be the spokesman for the group and was launched into three or four major addresses the next day (see paragraph 8). Nevertheless there was a remarkable unanimity in respect of the approach I took and as the journey developed, the gifts amongst us were all fully utilised.
4. The size of the group (and therefore its cost) could have been an embarrassment but was in fact the opposite. The fact that it was so fully ecumenical (especially the R.C./Protestant link) the balance between leaders and pastors actually working in resettlement areas, were most valuable. The most common remark was that this was the Churches speaking and not just one person whose views could be dismissed as "personal".
5. I wish to pay tribute to the role played by the Rev. Jimmy Palos, whose grasp of the intricacies of legislation in every sphere of South African life was quite invaluable. He was a credit to our Church. Also, the contribution by Frs. Germond and Mothe was one of deep personal testimony and had a strong impact on persons familiar with statistics but needing to experience the personal pain of resettlements.
6. The seminars were particularly valuable, consisting of: opening address by Peter Storey, legal and economic implications by Jimmy Palos, slide-tape presentation on Itamekeng (removal of a small village in Natal), testimonies from Germond and Mothe, panel questions and answers.
7. Statements made by Peter Storey have drawn comment (and attack) here in South Africa. I have examined most of the Press cuttings and find them reasonably accurate but unfair in what they left out. I see that "Tantalus" in the Sunday Express attacked me as "fatuous" for saying the Nkomati Accord was "meaningless" and "Hogarth" in the Sunday Times has accused me of "bearing false witness" for saying that the South African system was "wholly comparable with Nazi Germany".
  - a) The following is a verbatim of my oft-repeated answer to Nkomati questions:
 

"Last year the Church Leaders called on all parties in conflict in S.A. to lay down their arms, and therefore the first thing we must do is to welcome anything that stops people shooting each other and starts them talking to each other. Insofar as the Accord does this, the Churches, who are committed to non violent change, welcome it.

But we must say with all the power at our command, that unless the policy of forced removals is stopped and unless South Africa's internal policies are changed

such agreements will in the end be meaningless. In the long run (and that is the only run that matters) the fundamental issue is not South Africa's relation with neighbouring states, but the South African Government's relations with its own people, particularly the Black population."

- b) In respect of comparisons with Nazi Germany; I used an address first delivered here in Johannesburg at the Black Sash Week on Forced Removals .  
"A people, systematically stripped of all their rights, including citizenship itself, and then, having been made aliens and non-people in the land of their birth, shipped off into a limbo of designated places where their continued existence is totally ordered by the whim of their rulers - in the case of the Jews, to be finally disposed of by Genocide.

Now let me ask: if Hitler and Himmler had stopped short of the gas ovens, if those six million had been simply left to make their own way in those places, what then would have been the difference?

Now let us ask: What of the scale of Hitler's crime? Surely that unbelievable figure of 6 millions is what distinguishes it? But South Africa is more than half way there: 3½ million already disposed of by resettlement and another possible 2 million to go - ½ million short of Hitler's total.

Now let us ask: What of the motive? Surely that is different? Is it? For Hitler the deciding factor was race. So is ours. For Hitler the motive was to be rid of unwanted people. So is ours. To "purify the nation" or to ensure a white South Africa - what is the difference?

Now let us ask: What of the result? With Hitler it was the destruction of one people and the dehumanisation of another. In South Africa people are not killed, and there are those who say "while there is life, there's hope". I wonder! Death takes different forms and the fact is that it is only where there is HOPE that there is life. Real life, as distinct from meaningless existence is inextricably bound to the reality of Hope - to be able to see visions and dream dreams. Take that away and life is reduced to mere existing.

There is no escaping the comparison.

The Nkomati statement was made many times in response to questions. The other was made at two seminars as part of an opening address.

Perhaps these full quotes of what I said will set the record straight. I have written to both the Sunday Express and Sunday Times but do not expect any redress there.



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