

SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES  
*ON*  
NOTIONS  
AND FORMS OF  
ECUMENICITY

Editor

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*South African Perspectives on Notions and Forms of Ecumenicity*

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# EFS A

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The EFS A Institute, founded in 1990, is an independent ecumenical institute that functions as a division of the non-profitable “Cape Development and Dialogue Centre Trust” (CDDC). Trustees include Dr Welile Mazamisa, Archbishop Dr Thabo Makgoba, Dr André van Niekerk, Prof. Russel Botman and Dr Renier Koegelenberg. It consists of a unique network of participating institutions: representatives of the Faculties of Theology and the Departments of Religious Studies of the Universities in the Western Cape are represented on the Board and Executive of the EFS A Institute.

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Currently, the focus is on the following priorities.

Firstly, the *development role of the church* and other religious communities: the eradication of poverty in South Africa; the role of religious networks in community development, in social and welfare services; and the development of community and youth leadership.

Secondly, the *healing and reconciliatory role of the church* and other religious communities: this includes a project on the role of women in the healing of our violent society; the mobilisation of the church and religious communities against crime and violence; and the breaking down of stereotypes (racism) in our society.

Thirdly, the *formation of values in the strengthening of a moral society by the church* and other religious communities: the promotion of moral values such as honesty; support for the weak; respect for life and human rights.

Fourthly, the *development of youth and community leadership*: special courses for the development of leadership skills among our youth have been developed and are presented to support the building of a new society.

It is also significant that the EFS A Institute acts as Secretariat to the National Religious Association for Social Development (NRASD), which is a Principal Recipient of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria in South Africa. It is also a partner of Johns Hopkins Health and Education in South Africa (JHHESA – a USAID funded programme). It currently serves as the national secretariat of the religious sector – for the South African National Aids Council (SANAC).

These priorities cannot be separated from one another, since many of the complex social issues are interrelated.

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## FOREWORD

The publication of *Notions and Forms of Ecumenicity* coincides with the emergence of several challenges and changes in the broader ecumenical landscape of South Africa. In his overview of several new ecumenical or interfaith umbrella networks the editor therefore highlights that “it is evident from these rather confusing developments that the relationship between church, party, government and state calls for constant clarification. Many churches that supported the liberation movement in South Africa nowadays recognise the need to maintain their autonomy from any political structure and refuse to be regarded as the religious wing of any party or faction.”

He also notes that there is “a tension between grassroots ecumenical fellowship and appropriate ecumenical structures at a national level. As indicated above, ecumenism is alive and well in local communities throughout South Africa ... By contrast, larger ecumenical structures are, to put it simply, ‘under review’ ... the lack of representative structures has left a political void. To set up such ecumenical structures merely for the sake of political expediency would not be advised without an appropriate ecumenical vision”.

This publication is contribution to the debate on what ecumenicity means in our current South African context.

*Renier Koegelenberg*  
SERIES EDITOR

## INTRODUCTION

The Department of Religion and Theology at the University of the Western Cape is hosting a series of think tanks and public conferences on the interface between ecumenical theology and social ethics in the (South) African context. It has identified a number of critically important themes where some degree of clarity may aid further ecumenical discourse. These think tanks will be hosted over a three-year period from October 2012 to June 2015. Reflections emerging from these think tanks will be published in cooperation with the EFSA Institute in a series of booklets – where appropriate. The themes that are envisaged include the following:

- ♦ Guiding visions for the transition to a post-apartheid society (held November 2012);
- ♦ A critical assessment of “reconciliation” as one of the guiding visions during and beyond the transition period (held October 2012);
- ♦ Notions and forms of “ecumenicity” in (South) Africa (held February 2013);
- ♦ The quest for denominational identity within mainline churches;
- ♦ Ecumenical engagement in the form of NGOs and FBOs as dynamos for social transformation in the Western Cape;
- ♦ Religion and moral formation towards responsible citizenship;
- ♦ Recognising current ecclesial reform/deform movements in South Africa;
- ♦ African Pentecostal expressions of ecumenicity in (South) Africa;
- ♦ African notions of leadership;
- ♦ Ecclesiology and ethics in the (South) African context: How are ecumenical studies related to social ethics?

These think tanks and public conferences proceed on two legs, namely ecumenical theology and social ethics, shifting the weight from one leg to the other each semester. The first think tank that addressed ecumenical theology raised the very basic issue of “Notions and forms of ecumenicity” from within the South African

context. This think tank was held on 22 February 2013 at the University of the Western Cape. The following persons participated in the event: Edwin Arrison; Ian Booth; Ernst Conradie; Geoff Davies; Ben du Toit; Hans Engdahl; William J Everett; Renier Koegelenberg; Christo Lombard; Tinyiko Maluleke; Moss Nthla; John Oliver; Mautji Pataki; Elizabeth Petersen; Teddy Sakupapa; Peter Storey; and Keith Vermeulen.

The think tank was a quite remarkable occasion given the current ecumenical situation in South Africa – as sketched in the position paper on “Notions and forms of ecumenicity: Some South African perspectives”, which was discussed at the start of the think tank. The paper elicited lively discussion since several of the persons who played a leading role in presenting the document entitled “The church speaks ... for such a time as this” were present at the think tank.

It became evident that ecumenism is alive and well and flourishing at a local level in South Africa – as is clearly evident at funerals, support groups, prayer groups and so forth. By stark contrast, the South African Council of Churches is “under review” – as indicated by Rev. Mautji Pataki, the current General-Secretary. At the same time the unresolved tensions between mainline churches, on the one hand, and Pentecostal and independent churches, on the other hand, allow for a vacuum in terms of leadership and representivity that is being exploited in the current political climate.

During the discussion the fault-lines and underlying tensions in the ecumenical movement were explored at some length, with specific reference to the tension between Ecclesiology and Ethics. The observation was made that local churches in South Africa are often predominantly interested in issues of Faith and Order, while ecumenical gatherings at a regional, national and continental level are predominantly focused on issues of Church and Society. Whether this is appropriate either way is open to further deliberation.

Those who attended the think tank and indeed all the other invited participants were subsequently invited to submit responses to the theme of “Notions and forms of ecumenicity”. The idea was not so much to respond to the position paper, but to the issues and tensions underlying the ecumenical movement, with specific reference to the current South African context. Of course, not all the invited participants could attend the think tank and not all of them were eventually in a position to submit a response. Alas, given this *modus operandi*, a certain lack of demographic and especially gendered representivity could not be avoided in the end. There was no lack of denominational diversity though, albeit that the very



word “ecumenism” often inhibits participation from Pentecostal churches and AICs. This will be explored in more detail at a similar think tank envisaged for 2014.

It should be noted that this skewed pattern of diversity was not reflected in the original list of participants, except for the obvious but not exclusive bias towards participants from the Western Cape region because of financial considerations. The Department of Religion and Theology (UWC) discussed this and eventually agreed to continue with the publication of the outcomes, given the quality of the work that was done and the significance of the theme.

*Ernst M. Conradie*  
EDITOR

## NOTIONS AND FORMS OF ECUMENICITY

### Some South African perspectives

*Ernst M. Conradie*

#### **The underlying question in the current South African context**

What does the word “ecumenical” refer to? At one level this is a highly abstract question. At another this question has an immediate and very concrete socio-political relevance in the current South African context. This may be illustrated with reference to the significant statement issued by church leaders in the week before the national conference of the African National Congress (ANC) in Mangaung, December 2012.

A strongly worded document entitled “The church speaks ... for such a time as this”, together with a covering letter signed by Archbishop Thabo Makgoba on behalf of the National Church Leaders’ Consultation, Bishop Joe Seoka of the SA Council of Churches, Rev. Moss Ntla of The Evangelical Alliance of SA (TEASA), and Rev. Edwin Arrison of Kairos Southern Africa, was sent to President Jacob Zuma with copies to Helen Zille as the leader of the opposition. In this correspondence the church leaders warned that the country was sliding into a state of “moral decay” and observed that South Africans are yearning for leadership to restore hope amid growing unhappiness about a generation of leaders who seem to have largely lost their “moral compass”. They plead for a new way of engaging in politics and emphasise that they are not interested in a superficial change of one self-serving political leader for another, or one political party for another. They recognise the role of churches amongst other civil society movements to mobilise people to bring about a more healthy democracy that is accountable to the citizens of the country. The responses from ANC representatives suggested that this was a “mischievous” attempt by church leaders to manipulate events at Mangaung.

In order to illustrate the significance of this event for reflection on the term “ecumenical”, a few observations may be appropriate.

Firstly, the document continues with a long history of ecclesial comment on political developments that the Kairos Document (1985/1986) had termed “prophetic theology”. The statement by church leaders clearly focused on the social agenda of the church in terms of its long-standing commitment to a “Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society” (Nairobi, 1975). This raises the question of what distinct role churches can play in society (that cannot be fulfilled by other organisations). Can this be captured in terms of words such as “moral compass” or the dream for a just, non-racial and prospering democracy?

Secondly, the four signatories do not represent any one ecumenical organisation. The South African Council of Churches, with 26 mainline churches as its members, represents only a minority of Christians in South Africa. The real forum for a gathering of church leaders now seems to be the National Church Leaders’ Consultation, a meeting of church leaders hosted by the Ecumenical Foundation of Southern Africa (EFSA) to discuss common concerns. The presence of TEASA, the absence of any representative from the AICs and the role of a para-church organisation such as Kairos Southern Africa are all highly significant. These consultations are very influential, even if not widely publicised, but focus of course only on the directives of senior church leaders.

Thirdly, in the dismissive responses from Gwede Mantashe and Mathole Motshekga (as reported in the media) it was suggested that these concerns should be best expressed at the National Interfaith Council of South Africa (NICSA), an organisation allegedly initiated by President Jacob Zuma that includes representation from some mainstream, charismatic and African indigenous churches and other religious groups. The question as to which organisation best represents the voice of religious leaders has become highly politicised in terms of their alignment with various factions within the ANC.

Several such forums have been established since 1994. The National Religious Leaders Forum (NRLF) and the National Religious Association for Social Development (NRASD), associated with each other on the basis of a memorandum of understanding, was established in 1997. When President Jacob Zuma took office in 2009, Pastor Ray McCauley of Rhema Bible Church formed a new interfaith organisation called the National Interfaith Leadership Council (NILC). Attempts to bridge the tension between religious leaders who still recognised the (now dormant) NRLF and NILC were not successful, so that the matter remains

politicised in terms of their respective alignments with factions within the ANC and with other political parties.<sup>1</sup>

In attempts to find a new more inclusive structure NILC was subsequently to be replaced in 2011 by an amalgamated body, namely the National Interfaith Council of South Africa (NICSA). However, a statement released by the Presidency on 28 November 2012 reported that President Zuma had met with the National Religious Leaders Council (NRLC), led by Pastor Ray McCauley. The primary aim of the meeting was to introduce the new organisation to the president following a name change when NICSA was supposed to be officially launched. The meeting discussed the calling of a national summit to discuss ways of working together towards a “unity of purpose in dealing with the socio-economic challenges facing the country”.

At a National Church Leaders’ Consultation on 17 January 2013 it was alleged that such new interfaith structures were not established by religious leaders but by a government commission and that such a structure would not be recognised as representative by the church leaders present. A subsequent letter to Pastor McCauley and other representatives of NRLC, signed on 21 January by Archbishop Buti Thlagale, who was the interim co-chair of NRLC(!), requested them to put on hold their plans for a plenary meeting to launch any new Interfaith Council of South Africa. This letter conveys a request for a meeting of the National Church Leaders’ Consultation with the leadership of the NRLC.

It is at least evident from these rather confusing developments that the relationship between church, party, government and state calls for constant clarification. Many churches that supported the liberation movement in South Africa nowadays recognise the need to maintain their autonomy from any political structure and refuse to be regarded as the religious wing of any party or faction. By contrast, political leaders typically seek support from religious groups and look for religious legitimisation of their policies and practices. Some politicians even take on religious roles and make religious pronouncements. The difficulty is that Christian leaders have always been deeply involved in South African politics (whether in the former National Party or the ANC) so that a switch in roles from church leader to politician calls for some finesse. Moreover, with the clear majority that the ANC

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1 In an as yet unpublished paper delivered at the Joint Conference of academic societies in the fields of religion and theology in June 2012 Simanga Kumalo traced the rapid shifts in forums to represent the voice of religious groups during the terms of office of presidents Mandela, Mbeki, Motlante and Zuma.

has commanded in elections since 1994 the distinction between party, government and state often tends to become muddled.

Fourthly, the political marginalisation of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) deserves special mention. The ANC has traditionally drawn on the mainline churches represented by the SACC for guidance and support. However, the SACC entered into a phase of “critical solidarity” with the government after the transition to democracy and then into a phase of “critical engagement” through the establishment of the SACC’s Parliamentary Liaison Office in 1996. Given that Frank Chikane was the Secretary General in the office of President Mbeki as well as a former General Secretary of the SACC, the document “The church speaks ... for such a time as this” is indicative of the tension between the SACC and the government of President Zuma.

There has clearly been a shift in ANC allegiances to seek religious support and solidarity with the state from a more conservative alliance of Evangelical, neo-Pentecostal, charismatic and African Initiated Churches. One may add that these new forms of Christianity, evident in inner city “store-front churches” often imported from elsewhere in Africa, offer religious support for upwardly socially mobile (lower-)middle classes in urban areas, often through preaching some form of a prosperity gospel. The message is one of health, wealth and deliverance: by sowing seed money given to God (and the church!) and by having faith that this investment will yield a rich reward, one will prosper. The more one gives (even if this has to be borrowed with interest), the more one will reap in the end (see Amanze 2008:161-162). The alignment of religious salvation with the quest for self-enrichment for which government officials are so often criticised in the media should be obvious but is rarely noticed. What is new is that such forms of Christianity seem to have established a political profile in South Africa that is supportive of decision-making that advances the process of neoliberal globalisation.

Fifthly, the political need to identify umbrella organisations to somehow represent Christianity in South Africa is striking. The incident reveals deep tensions in this regard, especially since mainline churches together constitute a clearly decreasing proportion of Christians in South Africa, even if the confused denominational categories of the 2001 census are employed.<sup>2</sup> In a simplified form one may capture the history of Christianity in Southern Africa in terms

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2 For some recent statistics, see the addendum derived from the South African Audience Research Foundation. The statistics may be reliable, but the categories employed remain confused and are distorted by the very large proportion of those classified under “other faiths”. One obvious difficulty is how to classify various Pentecostal and independent churches that resist such classification.

of a number of movements. The establishment of various mainline churches in colonial times prompted questions of ecclesial identity since these churches, with their distinct theologies, liturgies and forms of governance, were largely “imported” from elsewhere. The ecumenical movement in South Africa may be understood as a response to this quest for identity amongst mainline churches in order to address any exclusivist claims to represent Christianity. However, perhaps precisely because of this quest for identity, two breakaway movements were evident by the time that the Union of South Africa was established in 1910, namely the emergence of African “independent” churches (one may say over issues of leadership and cultural identity), and the emergence of Pentecostal Churches (one may say as a form of resistance against attempts to “quench” the Spirit” in mainline churches). These two movements were historically related in terms of the “Zionist” type of AICs. By the time of the transition to a democratic dispensation in 1994 these two breakaway movements had tended to merge with each other in urban areas through the emergence of African forms of neo-Pentecostalism.

The Christian Institute in the 1960s and the Institute for Contextual Theology in the 1980s developed programmes to bridge the divide between mainline churches and such independent churches, and managed to foster some mutual respect if not reciprocal relationships. Admittedly, any attempt to extend the ecumenical movement to include these breakaway movements would be in danger of underestimating the original impetus of resistance against the domination of mainline churches. While different umbrella organisations to represent Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches have emerged (TEASA but also others), such attempts have not come to fruition amongst AICs, probably because of the differences in size, different orientations and the underlying urge to maintain ecclesial autonomy. As a result, it is easy for political leaders to claim that new structures such as NILC, NICSA or NRLC represent the majority of Christians in South Africa.

Finally, the attempt to find umbrella terms to include religious affiliations other than Christianity is also striking. The concern here is not only with particular religions (or forms of secularism) and their contested relationship with Christianity. The more abstract question has to do with the categories that are employed in this regard. Such categories are never innocent and invite theological reflection that is highly contested amongst Christians. Is Christianity one form of “religion”? Does God then have many names? Is Jesus Christ the only Way to salvation? Is it perhaps better to speak of “other living faiths”? What about “dead faiths” and how should dangerous forms of religion such as fundamentalism but also the

scandalous propagation of consumerist prosperity in the name of religion be resisted? What, then, are the limits to religious tolerance? How should the “gospel” of appreciating diversity be preached in national education? Can one speak of “faith-based organisations” (FBOs) alongside non-government organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs)? Can all of these be encapsulated under the rubric of “civil society”? Or can they be safely placed alongside issues of culture and language to describe various quests for identity? Can these be included under the rubric of “one nation, many cultures” represented by some or other government department?

On the basis of these observations I now return to the more abstract question, namely how the adjective “ecumenical” may be understood. What notions and forms of ecumenicity may be identified? There may be no single authoritative definition, but one may identify a range of specific connotations attached to the term “ecumenical”. Here I will have to fly a bit higher in order to gain an “overview” that is wider than South Africa. I will offer some South African perspectives where appropriate.<sup>3</sup> In what follows below I will identify and briefly describe some 23 distinct ways<sup>4</sup> in which the term “ecumenicity” can and has been understood in different historical epochs and contexts.<sup>5</sup>

## What does the word “ecumenical” refer to? A list of 23 agendas

### 1. The whole inhabited world (*oikoumene*)

The term *oikoumene* was originally used in the Greco-Roman world to refer to the inhabited world (or at least the known part of it). It is derived from the verb

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- 3 The most comprehensive discussion of ecumenism in South Africa remains the volume of essays edited by Lombaard (1999). It is helpful in providing information on a range of facets of the modern ecumenical movement. This focus of this contribution is on the underlying tensions within the ecumenical movement and the ways in which this becomes manifest in the South African context.
  - 4 See also the essay by Ninan Koshy and Julio de Santa Ana (2006). They identify eight dimensions of the adjective “ecumenical”, namely the unity of the church, the renewal of human community, the unity of humankind, unity in the struggle for justice, liberation for all, a dialogue of cultures, an ecumenical social ethics and a wider ecumenism.
  - 5 Given the immense quantity of literature available on all these views on ecumenicity I have opted, quite gratefully, to make use of various entries in the second edition of the *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* edited by Nicholas Lossky and others (Geneva: WCC, 2002). The references to publications in 2002 in the text below are, unless otherwise indicated, to various entries in this volume. For the latter half of the discussion I also made use of the various essays in a volume entitled *A history of the Ecumenical movement Volume 3 1968-2000* (2004). The references to these essays are included in the bibliography.

*oikein* (to inhabit) and is thus related to the words *oikia* (house or dwelling) and *oikos* (household). Over time the word came to mean the civilised world and to be synonymous with the Roman Empire. To add the adjective “whole” may therefore function in either an imperialist or in anti-imperialist, critical way to refer to whole known world outside the sphere of influence of the empire.

The term raises further geological and even cosmological questions about what was known of the earth and its continents at that time. Eratosthenes of Cyrene (276–196 BCE) had already deduced the circumference of the earth with remarkable accuracy. Claudius Ptolemy (83–161 CE) provided a description of the known lands and calculated the remainder of the Earth’s surface in his *Geographia*. Although his *oikoumene* covered 180 degrees of longitude, he was well aware that he knew about only a quarter of the earth’s surface. This still leaves the crucial question open, namely what was the shape of the earth. Clarity in this regard emerged only on the basis of Galileo’s empirical investigations. One may argue that before the Spanish voyages of exploration and exploitation there were two inhabited worlds, the one including Europe, Asia and Africa, and the other the so-called Americas. It was the Spanish Conquistadores that fused this second *oikoumene* with the first to create an integrated inhabited world – dominated in succession by the Spanish, Dutch, French, British and American empires.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Ecumenicity and catholicity

Since its inception early Christianity spread from Jerusalem in all directions and quite soon covered the whole inhabited world, also extending beyond the borders of the Roman Empire of that time. In the New Testament the term *oikoumene* was integrally linked with mission. The good news of the reign of God will be preached through “all the world” (Matt 24:14). The seed of the gospel found some fertile soil in very different cultural and geographic contexts. Why this is the case relates to the deeper mystery of the Christian faith. I would guess that one reason had to do with its simplicity compared to the pantheons of divine beings in other traditions. Another reason may be that it was attractive to those who were marginalised wherever empires exercised power and authority. Compared to other religions, where adherents seek power to influence events that fall beyond one’s locus of control, Christianity embodied a deeply counter-intuitive message of a God who is concerned about the weak. Alas, Christianity itself did not always take its own

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<sup>6</sup> I am making use here of the quite helpful information in the entry on *oikoumene* in <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecumene>, retrieved on 13 January 2013.



message seriously, so the “whole inhabited world” later became synonymous with the “Christian empire”.

The inner secret of such inhabitation in different contexts may be captured with the term “catholicity” (from *katha holon* – in general, on the whole). The etymological link between ecumenicity and catholicity is the concern for “the whole”. The catholicity of the church points to the “essential relatedness of churches and Christian communities locally, nationally, regionally and globally” (see WCC 1997:12).

The catechetical lecture of Cyril of Jerusalem in 350 noted that “The church is called catholic because it is spread throughout the world, from end to end of the earth ...” (Staples 2002:152). Admittedly, this term is open to very different interpretations, including connotations such as wholeness, inclusiveness, comprehensiveness and universality. It could refer to the fullness of the canonical witnesses to Jesus Christ, to the universality of Christian doctrine (“what has been believed everywhere, always and by all”, as Vincent of Lerins suggested), of the presence of bishops (the whole church was present if the bishops of Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople and Rome were present), of the church and of Christianity.

On this basis I prefer a qualitative definition relating catholicity to the astonishing power of the seed of the gospel to take root in such different contexts. If so, it may function as a critique of attempts to claim Christianity for one empire, nation, culture, language or denomination. Alternatively, one may argue that it is not the seed of gospel that becomes planted in different soils. God as Creator enables a wide variety of seeds to flourish in different geographic and cultural contexts. The gospel is more like a shovel or pruning scissors that can liberate such plants from weeds and parasites that are encumbering the growth of the plant. The gospel does not add a different seed that is then supposed to become indigenous in another habitat. In the same way that sin has no ontological status, the gospel of salvation does not add to God’s work of creation but allows it to flourish. The gospel does not replace but transforms culture. The gospel is there for the sake of culture. If this is the case, the whole world can be inhabited only by offering a home for all people (ecumenicity) through the transforming power of the gospel that seems to work everywhere.

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