

The Silence of Lukewarm Churches in South Africa Today: A Theo-ethical Analysis of the Implications of the Zondo Commission for the Church

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Abstract

This article attempts to engage theologically with the implications of the findings of the State Capture Commission (commonly known as the Zondo Commission) for the church in South Africa today. The article is the product of a presentation by the author at the contact session of the Northern Theological Seminary (NTS) of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa. Initially, the author was in a conundrum because, legally, the church as an institution was not involved in so-called “state capture.” However, after careful consideration, it became clear that the church in South Africa had failed in its task as “the maker of conscience” (Batten 1902) or moral compass. Hence, this article is guided by the notion of “lukewarm” that is found in the Bible to refer to the conduct of the church in relation to so-called state capture in South Africa. The article explores the history of state capture and the politics thereof, as well as the role of the church in relation to state capture.

Keywords: Zondo Commission; state capture; church in South Africa; lukewarmness

Introduction

This article attempts to examine theologically the notion of “state capture” as popularised in South Africa by the State Capture Commission, commonly known as the Zondo Commission. This article acknowledges that the work of the Zondo Commission was largely dealing with legalities, and not so much with ethical behaviour. The article is the product of a presentation by the author to theological students of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). The author was asked to share ideas regarding the implications of the revelations, recommendations, and findings of the Zondo Commission for the church in South Africa. It must be stated outright that, legally, the church is not implicated in so-called state capture. However, it will be

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argued in this article that the church, as a moral compass and maker of moral conscience (Batten 1902) in South Africa, is indirectly involved in so-called state capture. This is because the church in South Africa has a history of taking a stand, or in the language of the Belhar Confession, has a history of “Standing Where God Stands”—that is, against any situation that challenges the heart of the gospel, like the so-called state capture. Hence, people on social media and other platforms asked the following questions: “Where is the church?” or “Why is the church silent?” or “Why is the SACC suddenly mum?” or “Has the church towed a party line?” It is for this reason that this article invokes the notion of “lukewarm” to refer to the church in South Africa today, especially in relation to so-called state capture. This notion of “lukewarm” was used in the Book of Revelation when Jesus referred to the church of Laodicea: “So because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth” (Rev 3:16). This article will argue that the conduct of the church in South Africa warrants it to be likened to the church in Laodicea. The church in Laodicea, given the make-up and influence of its aristocratic members who were owners of industries (or, in today’s language, “captains of industries”) decided on what it saw, what it heard, who it listened to, and who it ignored.

In dealing with the notion of state capture, this article will first set the scene of socioeconomic discontent in South Africa. We then look at the genesis, history and politics of state capture and explore the role of the church in South Africa as a moral compass of society before concluding the article.

Socioeconomic Setting: Discontent in South Africa

This article is written at the time when South Africa is going through what could be termed a “perfect storm” (Burg et al. 2013), which is a violent storm arising from a combination of adverse factors. This is because the country has experienced a rise in crime, especially violent crimes, unemployment and, of course, feelings of discontent with the “system.” These feelings of discontent have pushed many South Africans to narrowly point to foreigners as being the source of their discontent. Zulu points out that “it must be acknowledged that anger at what seems like the ever-increasing presence of immigrants is dangerous but understandable” (Zulu 2020). Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that post-apartheid feels like a grand disappointment for many South Africans (Zulu 2020). It must also be acknowledged that signs of our societal decline and decay are visible for everyone to see, and these signs produce a mixture of feelings, as Zulu argues, “fear for the future, frustration with an unbearable present and cynicism that drains people of energy, causing some to detach from caring about the state of the nation” (Zulu 2020). Amid all this, many South Africans, especially those disappointed by the system, see “outsiders” (foreigners) as a threat. Outsiders (foreigners) are seen as taking jobs that should be reserved for South Africans, and they are also regarded as human traffickers, killers and agents with the sole purpose of destroying “our” beautiful, safe and prosperous country (Zulu 2020). It is argued that “trauma allows for the embrace of the irrational.”

This discontent forces the people to adopt simple measures as “a new recipe” under the banner of *PutSouthAfricaFirst*. Under this new solution, the people are pushed to advocate for tougher border control and narrow nationalist ideals. These narrow nationalist ideals tend to offer an encompassing narrative, an identity that blurs the lines of social classes and hides social fractures. Furthermore, these narrow nationalist ideals foster the idea that problems within society are usually two-fold, namely external and migrants. These two-fold problems are related. It is always argued that there are external forces with capitalist interests and the intention of destroying “our” country, and of course, migrants or foreigners are foot soldiers of the system controlled by external forces. These foot soldiers are hard at work in destroying or harming the country and making it unsafe. These narrow nationalist ideals tend to be characterised by the following:

- 1) Narrow nationalist ideals usually push patriotic mottoes, songs and any idea to promote the notion of advocating for “our nation,” “our people,” “our jobs,” “our communities” and “our safety.”
- 2) Narrow nationalists usually argue against some points of human rights because of their fear of enemies, migrants and the need for security. Narrow nationalists persuade “the people” that certain human rights can be ignored in certain cases because of “need,” for example, to protect the country against “agents.” “The people” tend to look the other way or even approve of violent attacks against so-called “agents.”
- 3) The people tend to be rallied into a patriotic frenzy over the need to eliminate a perceived threat, for example, “foreigners.”
- 4) Fear is usually used as a motivational tool to control “the people.”
- 5) Intellectuals and journalists tend to be a target. It is usually argued that they are unpatriotic, and they are sometimes called “agents” and, in the context of South Africa, “clever Blacks.”
- 6) It is usually argued that the police should use force and be given limitless power to enforce certain laws. The people tend to overlook police brutality in the name of patriotism.
- 7) It is usually argued that the army should be called in domestically to deal with “enemies” and protect the country.
- 8) There is always an obsession with national security, crime and punishment, and fostering a sense of the nation under attack.

What is seen on the ground is a result of the failure of the political elite to use the system to change the lives of “the people” for the better. Moreover, 1994 (the miracle year) did not produce the kind of society many South Africans were looking forward to. Dealing with such “naivety” should, however, not be allowed to manipulate our psyche.

The political elites who took office in 1994 and in the years that followed have failed to transform South Africa socially, politically and economically by including the majority of South Africans (who happen to be poor and Black). Now, these political entities find

themselves in a political conundrum because the neo-liberal transition, which was cemented with the ushering in of the government of “the people” in 1994, has created a political elite that did not control the economy, as stated by Terreblanche in his remarkable work titled *A History of Inequality in South Africa: 1652–2002*.

Terreblanche argues that the previous political elite was created during colonial-apartheid (Lephakga 2015) and cemented when the Nationalist Government took over control of both the state and the economy (Terreblanche 2002). During the transition (in 1994), they lost political power but retained economic power (Lephakga 2015; Terreblanche 2002). This meant that the earlier political elite who retained economic power, would continue to live in opulence but live in fear that their assets would be seized (Lephakga 2015; Terreblanche 2002). This also meant that the “new” political elite that was created in 1994 took political power without economic power. This political power would be controlled through the courts.

During the transition, there was also a move from parliamentary democracy to constitutional democracy (Lephakga 2015; Terreblanche 2002). The political elite created in 1994 now had access to government revenue, which they distributed amongst themselves through salaries and corruption (Terreblanche 2002). Failure of the new political elite is plunging our country into chaos and turning our communities into centres of narrow nationalist ideals with an anti-foreigner agenda. It is possible that the current political elite might even have to jump onto the bandwagon of these narrow nationalist ideals to stay in power. Nevertheless, crime must still be dealt with by those tasked with fighting crime. The damage seen in society, ranging from a crumbling education system, compromised security, mismanagement of the economy, non-service delivery and actualising the basic human rights (as envisioned in the Constitution) can be traced directly to the failures of the political elite (Zulu 2020). Government institutions tasked with actualising the notion of a “better life for all” are headed by political leaders (elites), and they have made incompetent, irresponsible and destructive choices (Roberts 2007; Zulu 2020).

The Genesis of the State Capture Inquiry: History and Politics

The notion of “state capture” became prominent in the public space (popularised through media outlets) in South Africa following the remedial action taken by the then Public Protector, Madonsela, in her *State of Capture* report in October 2016.¹ Following the popularisation of this notion, the then President, Mr J. G. Zuma, said state capture was just a “politically decorated expression.”² Mr Zuma noted that the state comprised of the executive, parliament, and the judiciary and, as such, he asked: “Is the executive

1 judicial-commission-inquiry-state-capture-reportpart-1.pdf (www.gov.za)

2 <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2018-09-12-there-is-no-state-that-was-captured-zuma/>

captured? Is parliament captured? Is the judiciary captured?”³ For him, the thinking was that the executive was made up of ministers appointed by the president, and an argument could be made that they were afraid of speaking up because they were appointed by the president.

But what about parliament? Parliament is made up of two houses, namely the National Assembly and the National Council of Provinces, and these houses comprise elected members from different political parties. How is it possible that all these members allowed themselves to be captured? The argument could be made that the majority of members in both houses were from the African National Congress (ANC), Zuma’s organisation. Moreover, what about the judiciary? Could it be captured? If yes, then why did the courts (especially the Apex Court) make adverse rulings against him?⁴

It must, however, be noted that this notion of “state capture” has been around for some time. It was popularised by institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Hellman et al. 2000; Hellman and Kaufman 2000; Mbaku 2018). State capture refers to “a form of grand corruption” (Hellman et al. 2000; Hellman and Kaufman 2000; Mbaku 2018). This grand corruption usually happens when state organs and governance structures are captured, that is, taken control of (Hellman et al. 2000; Hellman and Kaufman 2000; Mbaku 2018). According to these institutions, corruption has taken on a new image, namely that of so-called oligarchs (Greek “rule by few”) manipulating policy formation and even shaping the emerging rules of the game for their own very substantial advantage.

Furthermore, these institutions define state capture as the efforts of corporate firms and private individuals to shape the laws, policies and regulations of the state to their own advantage by providing illicit private gains to public officials or politicians (Hellman et al. 2000; Hellman and Kaufman 2000; Mbaku 2018). From this, we can deduce the following; that, for corruption to occur, there should be a *corruptor* (usually powerful) and the *corruptee* (usually a politician in this context). The corruptor usually promises the corruptee bribes and any form of incentive with the aim of manipulating policies and rules for their own advantage (Hellman et al. 2000; Hellman and Kaufman 2000; Mbaku 2018). The corruptee is usually legislatively empowered to protect, defend, and implement policies and rules, but due to bribes and promises of gains, they neglect that and allow the corruptor to run amok and take charge of institutions of governance (or the state in this regard) (Hellman et al. 2000; Hellman and Kaufman 2000; Mbaku 2018).

There is an argument that the “state” (Aristotle 1962; Kakuthas 2014; Lephakga 2015; Lenin 1917) is inherently captured (Lenin 1917). Those who adhere to this argument put forward the point that the state was created by the bourgeoisie (the controlling

3 <https://www.news24.com/citypress/news/zuma-there-is-no-state-that-is-captured-20180912>

4 <https://www.news24.com/citypress/news/zuma-there-is-no-state-that-is-captured-20180912>

middle class) to create a pseudo-unity with the proletariats (working class or controlled class) (Adler 2019; Dyer 1972; Lenin 1917). According to this argument, the state was a way out for the bourgeoisie, as there is an inherent class antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (Adler 2019; Dyer 1972; Lenin 1917). The struggle between these classes is that the bourgeoisie, that is, those who control the means of production (and not necessarily the “rich”), are conscious of the fact that they have to make the most of their profit by forcing the working class to sell their labour in exchange of wages, and they exert control over and will do everything in their power to maintain this control (Adler 2019; Dyer 1972; Lenin 1917). On the other hand, the proletariat, those who labour to produce goods, are forced to sell their labour for wages and, of course, this class is also conscious of their condition, which will force them to rebel (Adler 2019; Dyer 1972; Lenin 1917). As such, the bourgeoisie, in an attempt to maintain their control over the proletariat, has created the state (Adler 2019; Dyer 1972; Lenin 1917).

The state was then regulated, and these regulations were used to tame and quell the rebellion against the bourgeoisie (Adler 2019; Dyer 1972; Lenin 1917). The argument advanced is that the state is inherently captured, and in South Africa, the state has always been captured. This capturing has been systematised and regulated by certain private institutions, individuals and businesses (Terreblanche 2002). This argument should not be advanced to defend “grand corruption” (Hellman et al. 2000; Hellman and Kaufman 2000; Mbaku 2018), but the notion of “state capture” should be read within history and context. Terreblanche, in his remarkable work titled *A History of Inequality in South Africa: 1652–2002*, makes the argument that the political elite who came into office in 1994, inherited a corrupt system (Terreblanche 2002). For Terreblanche, the African National Congress (ANC) not only inherited a corrupt system, but was also duped into adopting economic policies that are not only detrimental to the poor but also make corruption easy (Terreblanche 2002). Terreblanche also argues that the economic system and policies (RDP, GEAR, ASGISSA and NDP) adopted by the ANC have enforced elitism amongst the few ruling Blacks and encouraged “self-enrichment” (Terreblanche 2002).

Furthermore, Terreblanche points out that the rapid development of the Black elite testifies to its successful co-option by the corporate sector (Terreblanche 2002). For Terreblanche, the corporate sector (in its quest to institutionalise a neo-liberal and globally oriented economic approach in the “new South Africa”) was not only prepared to condone the lucrative remuneration of the Black politicians and bureaucrats, but also to offer the emerging Black elite even more lucrative deals in the private sector (Terreblanche 2002). While this was happening, the majority of South Africans, especially the Black majority, were left behind (Terreblanche 2002). Furthermore, Terreblanche points out that this idea of “self-enrichment” came because of the Black elite modelling their extravagance and arrogance on White elitism (Terreblanche 2002).

The argument here is not to defend “grand corruption” but to point out that the notion of “Nine Wasted Years”⁵ should not lead many to be a-historical.

The notion of “state capture” was popularised by media houses in South Africa following an investigation by the then public protector on the then President, Mr J. G. Zuma. The public protector titled her report *State of Capture*, but the media outlets decided to run with “state capture.” The then public protector opted for this title for obvious reasons, which include the fact that only the proposed Commission of Inquiry could determine whether there were any merits to the allegations of state capture.

Borouchowitz asked a pertinent question when the report *State of Capture* was challenged in court: “Are these [allegations] enough to justify an inquiry?”⁶ The *State of Capture* report came about from an investigation conducted by the public protector concerning certain complaints received around allegations of improper conduct on the part of the then President of the Republic of South Africa, Mr J. G. Zuma, and on the part of certain members of the Gupta family.⁷ One of the remedial actions proposed by the report included that the then president should appoint a judicial commission of inquiry to be chaired by a judge selected solely by the Chief Justice.⁸ This report, particularly the remedial action, amounted to the stripping of constitutional powers of the president under the words: “No one can be a judge in their own court,”⁹ which was challenged unsuccessfully by the then president.¹⁰ The public protector identified at least the following issues that warranted the establishment of a Commission of Inquiry on whether President Zuma improperly violated the Executive Ethics Code:

- 1) Allowed members of the Gupta family and his son to be involved in the process of removal and appointment of the Minister of Finance in December 2015.
- 2) Allowed members of the Gupta family and this son to engage or be involved in the process of removal and appointing of various members of the cabinet.
- 3) Allowed members of the Gupta family and his son to be involved in the process of appointing members of boards of directors of SOEs
- 4) Whether President Zuma has enabled or turned a blind eye, in violation of the Executive Ethics Code, to alleged corrupt practices by the Gupta family and his son in relation to allegedly linking appointments to quid pro quo conditions
- 5) Whether President Zuma and other cabinet members improperly interfered in the relationship between banks and Gupta-owned companies, thus giving preferential

5 <https://businesstech.co.za/news/government/298278/what-south-africa-lost-in-the-9-wasted-years-under-zuma>

6 Zuma can’t appoint a judge in own case, court hears | George Herald

7 judicial-commission-inquiry-state-capture-reportpart-1.pdf (www.gov.za)

8 judicial-commission-inquiry-state-capture-reportpart-1.pdf (www.gov.za)

9 Zuma can’t appoint a judge in own case, court hears | George Herald

10 judicial-commission-inquiry-state-capture-reportpart-1.pdf (www.gov.za)

treatment to such companies on a matter that should have been handled by independent regulatory bodies

- 6) Whether President Zuma improperly and in violation of the Executive Ethics Code exposed himself to any situation involving the risk of conflict between his official duties and his private interest or used his position or information entrusted to him to enrich himself and or enabled businesses owned by the Gupta family and his son to be given preferential treatment in the award of state contracts, business financing and trading licenses.
- 7) Whether anyone was prejudiced by the conduct of President Zuma.¹¹ Furthermore, the then public protector requested that the envisioned Commission of Inquiry should investigate the issue of contracts in relation to the Guptas on whether any state functionary in any organ of state or other person acted unlawfully or corruptly in connection with:
 - i. The appointment or removal of ministers and boards of directors of SOEs.
 - ii. The award of state contracts or tenders to Gupta-linked companies or persons.
 - iii. The extension of state-provided business facilities to Gupta-linked companies or persons.
 - iv. Exchange of gifts in relation to Gupta-linked companies or persons.
 - v. Whether any person or entity was prejudiced due to the conduct of the said state functionary or organ of state.¹²

The narrative of “state capture” in South Africa was also popularised following the “Gupta Gate”¹³ incident, that is, an incident where members of the Gupta family, together with their guests attending a wedding, landed their private jet at Waterkloof Air Force Base in 2013.¹⁴ This incident had social media buzzing because it was unheard of for a private family or anyone to land a private jet at the Air Force base, since the base was supposed to be a national key point.¹⁵ Reports that came out following this landing indicated that the landing embarrassed the country¹⁶ and exposed weakness in the management of the base.¹⁷

In the same year that “Gupta Gate” took place, an Austrian student pilot conducting a night training exercise was lost when he ventured into military airspace and landed at Waterkloof Airforce Base.¹⁸ The difference here was that the said aircraft (private jet registered at Grand Central Airport) was impounded, and the private pilot and occupants

11 judicial-commission-inquiry-state-capture-reportpart-1.pdf (www.gov.za)

12 judicial-commission-inquiry-state-capture-reportpart-1.pdf (www.gov.za)

13 GuptaGate, the scandal that keeps on giving (dailymaverick.co.za)

14 GuptaGate, the scandal that keeps on giving (dailymaverick.co.za)

15 What’s the point of National Key Points? (dailymaverick.co.za)

16 Government rattled by Waterkloof landing but learnt nothing - former justice DG | News24

17 Waterkloof landing: Pilot was lost (ewn.co.za)

18 Waterkloof landing: Pilot was lost (ewn.co.za)

were detained for questioning before being released.¹⁹ Following this landing of a private light civilian aircraft, the SANDF's Pikkie Greef indicated that there was weakness in the management of the base and that "the suspects' only sin was they were not friends with the president."²⁰ Of course, "Gupta Gate" was the big issue, as the jet that landed at the base was carrying the "friends" of the president or "friends of the friends" of the president.²¹ Following "Gupta Gate," media reports worsened matters by claiming that the landing happened after a go-ahead given by the then President, Mr J. G. Zuma.²² Media houses provoked the public with this narrative. Social media was buzzing with a lot of people calling for the "head" of the then-president. The name of the then chief of state protocol, Mr Bruce Koloane, was used to push the narrative that the then head of state put him under pressure to facilitate the landing.²³ This narrative was rebutted when Mr Koloane appeared at the State Capture Inquiry.²⁴ According to this narrative, it is claimed that Mr Koloane told those close to the then minister of defence that he was under pressure from the head of state to secure clearance for the landing. During his appearance, Mr Koloane denied that former President Zuma asked him to facilitate the controversial 2013 Gupta wedding landing.²⁵ However, the chair of the Commission, Acting Chief Justice Raymond Zondo, found it improbable that Mr Koloane had acted without instruction from the former statesman.²⁶ The chair of the Commission indicated that the evidence presented by Mr Koloane was incoherent and sometimes contradictory, but the evidence at the disposal of the Commission did not justify a finding that he had acted because of the "capture" of any officer or institution of the state.²⁷

The notion of "state capture" was further escalated when a narrative was presented that the "The New Age" (TNA), the "Gupta paper," was a propaganda machine,²⁸ and it was argued that TNA was "used to fleece the state."²⁹ TNA was a daily newspaper owned and operated by TNA Media (Pty) Ltd, established in 2010.³⁰ TNA presented itself as

19 Waterkloof landing: Pilot was lost (ewn.co.za)

20 Waterkloof landing: Pilot was lost (ewn.co.za)

21 Guptas: We were friends with Zuma before he was president | News24

22 Improbable 'fall guy' for Gupta wedding landing acted without instruction from Jacob Zuma: Zondo (timeslive.co.za)

23 Improbable 'fall guy' for Gupta wedding landing acted without instruction from Jacob Zuma: Zondo (timeslive.co.za)

24 Improbable 'fall guy' for Gupta wedding landing acted without instruction from Jacob Zuma: Zondo (timeslive.co.za)

25 Improbable 'fall guy' for Gupta wedding landing acted without instruction from Jacob Zuma: Zondo (timeslive.co.za)

26 Improbable 'fall guy' for Gupta wedding landing acted without instruction from Jacob Zuma: Zondo (timeslive.co.za)

27 Improbable 'fall guy' for Gupta wedding landing acted without instruction from Jacob Zuma: Zondo (timeslive.co.za)

28 The Guptas, Bell Pottinger and the fake news propaganda machine (timeslive.co.za)

29 How the Guptas used the New Age to fleece the state - TechCentral

30 The Guptas, Bell Pottinger and the fake news propaganda machine (timeslive.co.za)

the alternative to the “White media”³¹ (narrative) and, of course, presented the positive things the government of the ANC (under President Zuma) was doing. The notion of “White media” refers not only to the ownership of media houses but to the choice of reporting (that which is being reported), why that is being reported, and how it is reported, as well as the freedom of journalists to deal with “facts.”

This forces one to zoom into the ownership pattern of media houses in South Africa.³² This definition by the author is influenced by the idea that the media has “power” or, as Malcolm X put it: “The media’s [sic] is the most powerful entity on earth” (Petropoulos 2010). Given the history of South Africa, it must be mentioned that the untrusty relationship many South Africans have with the media is that, in the past, the media was used to push a particular narrative. The media has the power to influence minds, ideas, behaviours, and attitudes, and can influence others to hold certain views without evidence. Malcolm X further says: “They [media] have the power to make the innocent look guilty and to make the guilty innocent, and that’s power [and this is] Because they control the minds of the masses” (Petropoulos 2010). Following this narrative (that was pushed by TNA of “White media”), many media houses did research that narrowly focused on ownership. Most of the research found that the ownership of media houses was still in the hands of White males.³³

Within TNA issues, there was the role of Bell Pottinger, a British multinational public relations, reputation management and marketing company that was apparently hired by the Guptas to peddle so-called “fake news” (Lephakga 2022) in South Africa (Wocke, Mthombeni, and Cuervo-Caxurro 2020). This PR firm (Bell Pottinger) appears to have taken advantage of the fact that South Africa had remained at least two “South Africas” (Gevisser 2007), one for the rich, who were mainly White, and the other for the poor, who were mainly Black.

With this in mind, the narrative of “White monopoly capital” was peddled in order (as alleged) for the Guptas to run amok. This notion of “White monopoly capital,” which had its roots in racial capitalism (Terreblanche 1994; 2002) had become “an excuse for corruption.”³⁴ TNA, in their agenda to present the positives that the government did (as led by President Zuma) became the mouthpiece of the ruling elite.³⁵ Media houses in South Africa historically tend to become mouthpieces of institutions, individuals and the governments they favour. This has been confirmed by the apology offered by Naspers on their role during apartheid.³⁶ TNA was accused that it was used by the

31 Who runs SA’s media is a black-and-white issue - The Mail & Guardian (mg.co.za)

32 Who runs SA’s media is a black-and-white issue - The Mail & Guardian (mg.co.za)

33 Who runs SA’s media is a black-and-white issue - The Mail & Guardian (mg.co.za)

34 <https://www.news24.com/Fin24/white-monopoly-capital-an-excuse-to-avoid-sas-real-problems-20170328>

35 Is The New Age’s coverage really pro-ANC? (dailymaverick.co.za)

36 Naspers apologises for its role in apartheid | News24

Guptas to “fleece the state.”³⁷ During the state capture inquiry, witnesses presented that TNA and the New Age Business Briefings were used to loot Eskom, Transnet, and the South African Airways.³⁸ All these acts (few), as revealed in the Commission of Inquiry, point to the fact that the state *was allowed* to be vulnerable and for private institutions and individuals to do as they please with the “public purse” (Vos 2020). During the Commission of Inquiry, it was revealed that, for so-called state capture to happen, there were many role players who could be categorised as follows:

- 1) The “facilitators”; those who enforced the demands of the corruptors.
- 2) The “enablers or followers”; those who compromised themselves, covered up or legitimised the process of state capture.
- 3) The “resisters”; those who did not accede to the demands of the corruptors and were removed politically.³⁹

The Church in South Africa and State Capture: Lukewarm or Voiceless?

In this article, the church in South Africa is likened to the “lukewarmness” of the church in Laodicea in the Book of Revelation. This is because the church in South Africa has wittingly or unwittingly decided to be “silent” on matters that threaten the heart of the gospel-like in matters involving state capture. This silence is *loud* and strange because historically, the church in South Africa has always been loud on matters that threaten the heart of the gospel-like “colonial apartheid” (De Gruchy and Villa-Vicencio 1983). It is imperative to state outright that the church as an institution was not legally involved in state capture. However, through the “silence” of the church, the argument is that the church is indirectly complicit. The church in South Africa, given its rich history, has failed in its calling of not only praying for the state, but holding the state accountable. Thus, the “silence” of the church in South Africa will be analysed through the “lukewarmness” of the church in Laodicea in the Book of Revelation.

The church in Laodicea was pompous, apathetic, and, more importantly, it had forgotten its prophetic role. The church in Laodicea was situated in the city of Laodicea, which was about 45 miles (70 km) southeast of Philadelphia (Adeyemo 2006; Laymon 1971). Laodicea, unlike Philadelphia (which was poor), was rich. This city was proud of its power and prosperity and had a famous school of medicine (Adeyemo 2006; Laymon 1971). This city was so proud of its wealth that, in cAD60, when it was destroyed by an earthquake and the then Roman Empire offered them aid, they refused this aid or any help from anyone outside their city, and instead opted to rebuild it with their own resources. Their prosperity came from many sources, but two to note (that are important

37 How the Guptas used the New Age to fleece the state - TechCentral

38 How the Guptas used the New Age to fleece the state - TechCentral

39 How the Guptas used the New Age to fleece the state - TechCentral

for the purpose of the letter that Jesus instructed John to write on the Island of Patmos) are:

- 1) One was the beautiful bluish-black wool, which contrasts with the white clothes of sanctification (Rev 3:18) (Adeyemo 2006; Laymon 1971). This bluish-black wool was worn and prized by the wealthy all over. This wool was in demand, and quality-wise, it was the best. With this wool, they cornered the market and produced tremendous wealth (Fairchild 2017).
- 2) The second one was the world-famous eye ointment. John refers to this ointment when he counsels the church to buy from Christ “salve to put on your eyes so that you can see” (Rev 3:18) (Adeyemo 2006; Laymon 1971). This eye ointment was used by the medical school in Laodicea to treat eye problems with a special eye salve called Phrygian ointment.

This city of Laodicea was also famous for its banking sector. It became a centre of currency exchange and money lending. This city had a monopoly in the textile, medical, and banking industries (Fairchild 2017). However, this city had a weakness, and that was the water supply. Water had to be piped into the city of Laodicea from cities like Colossae. This water had to travel through a pipe from cold streams, but when it arrived in Laodicea, it was lukewarm (Fairchild 2017).

The church in Laodicea was made up of wealthy aristocrats because of the prosperity of the city. This church housed members who were “workers,” that is, those who were not in the aristocratic class. The aristocrats supported the church financially. They bankrolled all the projects of the church. They specifically funded the mission projects. They looked after the leadership of the church. Usually, under these conditions, the church often ignores the plight of those abused by those who give. They usually see only what they are being asked to see by those who give. They usually hear only what those who give say they must hear. They usually take a neutral position and thus take the side of powerful abusers. More importantly, Adeyemo indicates that what made Jesus to be disgusted, besides their arrogance, was that the church in Laodicea was apathetic. They lacked motivation to act based on their calling as Christians (followers of Jesus Christ), but they also lacked interest in what was going on around them (Adeyemo 2006). Adeyemo indicates that “the apathy of this church disgusts the Lord” (Adeyemo 2006, 1554). For Jesus, this church was spiritually poor. In this Letter to the Church in Laodicea, Jesus likens them to their weakness, that is, the “lukewarmness” of their water. For Jesus, their “lukewarmness,” just as their water situation, was good for nothing. Lukewarm water makes one vomit and is useless. For Jesus, the church in Laodicea was comfortable, smug and, of course, lukewarm (Rev 3:16) (Adeyemo 2006; Laymon 1971). Hence, Jesus said to them: “You say, I am rich, I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing. But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked” (Rev 3:17). “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot ... I will spit you out.” It is safe to infer that Jesus addresses the notion of “neutrality,” that is,

not taking sides in situations where those who call themselves followers of “Christ” are expected to act.

This can be extended to “turning a blind eye” in situations that threaten the very foundation of being a follower of Christ. However, it must be mentioned that Jesus says there is still hope for Laodicea, for He (Christ) is standing at the door and knocking (Rev 3:20–21) (Adeyemo 2006; Laymon 1971). Given the “hope” that is still there for Laodicea, if only they allow Jesus Christ in and do away with their pompous attitude that comes as a result of their wealth and pride, they must also do away with their apathetic attitude. They must be motivated as followers of Christ to act as per their calling, but more so, they must also be aware of the situation around them, and they must remember their prophetic calling, that is, to stand where the head of the church stands. The message to the church in Laodicea can be sent to the church in South Africa: “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot ... I will spit you out.” Like with the church in Laodicea, there is still “hope” for the church in South Africa. The church in South Africa must return to its former self “prophetic” wise. The church in South Africa used to stand “side-by-side” with liberation movements during the fight against apartheid.

The sudden silence of the church in South Africa is very strange, given that the church stood “side-by-side” with liberation movements. This is because the relationship between the church and the liberation movements, like the African National Congress (ANC) (governing party), dates back to the formation of liberation movements and struggle days. Liberation movements like the ANC were formed and launched in churches (Mdhlela 2022; Nthali 2019). Hence, one of the leaders of the ANC, O.R. Tambo, once observed that the “African National Congress has a long history of association with the church. Our founders were churchmen and women. Throughout our years, that link has never been broken” (Nthali 2019, 1). It must also be mentioned that this link Tambo talks about can be with liberation movements having religious desks. Faith-based organisations and ecumenical movements during the struggle against “colonial apartheid” (Lephakga 2015), such as the South African Council of Churches (SACC), South African Catholic Bishops Conference (SACBC), and many others, provided spiritual support, guidance and pastoral work in support for those in exile and for the emancipation (liberation) of the people of South Africa (Nthali 2019; Womack and Pillay 2019; Zondi 1996).

This link between liberation movements and the church (through faith-based organisations) continued until the unbanning of liberation movements. After the unbanning of liberation movements, the country was preparing itself for democratic elections, and the church (through faith-based organisations) was asked to participate in peace structures. These peace structures were established to create conducive conditions for free and fair elections (Nthali 2019; Womack and Pillay 2019) and different churches (now separate from faith-based organisations) took the role of running the religious desks of different political parties. For instance, Nthali notes that in the 1990s,

the *de facto* leader of the ANC, Mr N. Mandela, instructed the then secretary general of the ANC, Mr C Ramaphosa, to explore possibilities of re-establishing the religious desk at Shell House, ANC Head Quarters (Nthali 2019, 2).

Prior to 1994, the church (through faith-based organisations) (Womack and Pillay 2019) was a major role player both globally and within South Africa. The church (through these faith-based organisations) played the major role of uniting denominations and Christians to stand against the injustices of apartheid (Lephakga 2015; Womack and Pillay 2019). The church, through organisations like the SACC, took a resistance stance alongside the liberation movements. The approach of fighting and standing “side-by-side” against “colonial apartheid” changed for both the church and liberation movements following the Sharpeville shooting. Hence, Pheko (2012) said: “Sharpeville closed the old chapter.” For instance, the SACC, following the Sharpeville shooting in 1960, appointed a commission “to consider what obedience to God requires of the church in her witness to her unity in Christ in South Africa” (Villa-Vicencio 1986, 200). The outcome of this commission was the “Message to the People of South Africa,” published in 1968, which rejected apartheid as a “pseudo-gospel” and called Christians to obey God rather than man (Villa-Vicencio 1986, 200). This stance came at a price for church leaders who endorsed this position.

Following the 1976 Soweto uprising, the church saw changes in its leadership, especially in mainline churches. This saw many faith-based organisations electing prominent Black ministers into leadership positions (Villa-Vicencio 1986; Womack and Pillay 2019). The SACC elected Desmond Tutu to the position of general secretary in 1978, and in 1982, Allan Boesak was elected the president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) (Villa-Vicencio 1986). This led the state to be on the defensive when these leaders took a clear, direct stance against the state. Tutu wrote a scalding letter to the prime minister, and this was seen by the prime minister as an attack, especially since a Black minister was offering his counsel to him (Villa-Vicencio 1986). This led to the prime minister warning Tutu, whereafter Boesak felt obliged to respond to the so-called “warning” of the prime minister to Desmond Tutu. Matters deteriorated after the decision of the WARC (as led by Allan Boesak in 1982) to declare “apartheid to be a heresy” (De Gruchy and Villa-Vicencio 1983; Villa-Vicencio 1986).

This move by the WARC gave the churches opposed to the government a new sense of initiative (Villa-Vicencio 1986, 203). This resolution was also adopted by most of the SACC member churches in South Africa in response to the WARC resolution. For instance, the NG Sendingkerk (NG Mission Church) declared apartheid to constitute a *status confessionis*, a condition in which the very truth of the gospel is at stake, and adopted a Confession of Faith (which came to be known as the Belhar Confession) that has been referred to local congregations as a basis for Christian living (Boesak 2008; Villa-Vicencio 1986). The Catholic Church, in particular, addressed itself to the need for reconciliation within its own ranks through an important Declaration of Commitment in 1977, which identified the forms of racism, paternalism, and

exploitation within its own ranks in a frank and revealing manner (Abraham 1984; Law 1991; Villa-Vicencio 1986, 203). Womack and Pillay point out that the church and the SACC, in particular, were active prior to 1994, but since 1994, it has disappeared from both the global as well as the South African ecumenical scene (Womack and Pillay 2019).

For the purpose of this article, it is imperative to consider the following in response to the question: “Why is the church silent?”

- 1) The church, especially mainline churches, allowed their voice to be heard in their commitment to ecumenism in public space via faith-based organisations such as the SACC. Prominent church leaders of different mainline churches took leading roles in the SACC and, as such, they spoke through the SACC. Historically, the SACC enjoyed influence in the public space, and now, as Kuperus (2011) points out, in a religiously pluralist and democratic state, the SACC has had to share the public space with Pentecostal, charismatic, and evangelical churches that are often technologically savvy, connected with the grassroots, and increasingly willing to engage the government on political issues; which is newsworthy in a democratic South Africa (Kuperus 2011, 292).
- 2) The church, via the SACC, has lost financial influence and, as such, lost public influence. The SACC was historically known to have supported community-based programmes and liberation movements. However, since 1994, the donations coming through to the SACC have dropped drastically. Kuperus points out that ecumenically-oriented churches outside of South Africa and a variety of other philanthropic agencies provided major support (financial and otherwise) to the SACC during the apartheid years, but since the birth of democracy in South Africa, interest has dropped considerably (Kuperus 2011, 292).
- 3) The church, via the SACC, has been sidelined. The SACC, as an ecumenical body and voice, fought “side-by-side” with liberation movements like the ANC. The SACC supported the goals of the liberation struggle, and its “liberation-oriented” Christian vision was also embraced by many leaders of the ANC (Kuperus 2011, 291). The SACC even influenced many of their member churches to allow the use of church buildings and congregation within the prophetic Christian tradition to advance the cause of liberation (Kuperus 2011, 290–291). This relationship between the church (via SACC) and liberation movements like the ANC was maintained until the political elite took control of the country. For instance, Kuperus notes that it became visibly clear that the SACC had lost influence on the ruling party when the government sidelined the SACC during the formation of the National Interfaith Leaders Council (NILC), a mass-based interreligious group intended to partner with the government in terms of improving service delivery regarding the provision of basic services like water, electricity, and housing (Kuperus 2011, 291).
- 4) The church leaders who led the SACC co-opted, since many prominent leaders of the SACC left the SACC for academic and governmental positions after 1994. This created an impression that those leaders still represented the standpoint of the

SACC. Maluleke perfectly explains this when he says: “We lost our credibility when some of the SACC folks or mainline church thinkers ended up working for the government (e.g., Frank Chikane, Molefe Tsele) and then we were too polite to criticise their errors ... in some ways, we look like we’re in bed with the government” (Maluleke, in Kuperus 2011, 294).

- 5) The church, via the SACC, was asked to “be the church again” (Kuperus 2011). Those who pushed this argument maintained that the SACC faced a liberated and democratic South Africa, with politicians in office who embraced the same cause as the SACC (Kuperus 2011). This meant that the SACC no longer needed to confront the government; instead, it could embrace a supportive political role (Kuperus 2011).
- 6) The church, via the SACC, was asked to take up the role of being “watchdogs.” The ANC-led government has made it perfectly clear over the years that it prefers South African churches to adopt a supportive partnership role with the government in nation-building efforts in lieu of a watchdog role (Boesak 2008; Kuperus 2011).

Conclusion

It is argued in this article that the church in South Africa, through its sudden “silence” on matters that threaten the heart of the gospel, like the so-called “state capture,” might not be legally guilty of allowing state capture to take place, but it is definitely complicit. This is because the church in South Africa has always stood where God stood, that is, against anything that threatens the heart of the gospel, like apartheid, state capture and, of course, other things that dehumanise those created in the image of God. Apartheid, state capture and all other things that the political elite is accused of doing, are affecting people physically, emotionally, spiritually and psychologically, and this, in turn, causes those affected to question their “being” in relation to God. This article has also shown how the church, through faith-based organisations, was silenced or set up for failure.

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