

Can History Bring Reconciliation in Divided Christian Communities?

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Abstract

As Elazar Barkan, the founding president of the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation, pointed out, the recounting of history has been exploited to provoke conflict, incite war, and inflame genocides. Can it also be drawn upon to facilitate reconciliation? Indeed, many conflicts have an ideological component which is based on contested views of history. This applies to the Christian churches, starting with the Reformation. Using four case studies, the article argues that “good” history, based on reliable archival and oral evidence, can lay the foundation for a more serene view of the past and lead to reconciliation. It is essential to consider all points of view. The historian must navigate between diverse opinions and emotions, deepening the analysis when there are conflicts of interpretation. The article examines four recent memory debates in the Christian churches: the painful closure of the Federal Theological Seminary in 1993; the silence of the Rwandan churches during the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda in 1994; the brutal transfer of a group of black sisters from Newcastle to Montebello in 1939; and race relations and the search for unity in the history of the Lutheran churches of Southern Africa.

Keywords: apartheid; conflict; genocide; history; memory; reconciliation



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Introduction

History for war or history for peace? This question was raised during a workshop organised by the newly established Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) in Jinja, Uganda, in July 2004. The participants tried to understand the roots of the conflict between northern and southern Uganda. They examined the legacy of colonialism in relation to pre-colonial history in an attempt to unravel the sources of the conflict. “The accounting of history had been exploited to provoke conflict, incite war, inflame genocides,” wrote Elazar Barkan, the co-founder of the project, now professor of international and public affairs at Columbia University. “Can it also be drawn upon to facilitate reconciliation?”¹

While historical memory of mass violence and war crimes plays a central role in a nation’s or an ethnic group’s cultural identity, Barkan argues, it can also contribute to reconciliation between groups and nations. Historians should not remain in the ivory tower of the academic world. They can play a role by putting their professional expertise at the service of conflict resolution. For this, a forum needs to be established where representatives of the opposed parties exchange views about the past and narrow down their differences. Age-old prejudices based on distorted views of historical situations are critically analysed on the basis of archival evidence provided by historians. The protagonists learn to distance themselves from the historical narratives that fuel conflicts and once common ground has been found, they recognise their own responsibility for certain aspects of the conflict. A more nuanced historical narrative, which integrates the point of view of the opposing groups, emerges from the discussion.

Based in Salzburg at its inception in 2004, the IHJR is now located in The Hague under the chairmanship of Timothy Ryback, a co-founder of the movement. It has run projects in Uganda, Israel and Palestine, Ireland, the Balkans, and other war-torn areas. One of its latest publications is a collection of essays entitled *Contested Histories in Public Spaces. Principles, Processes, Best Practices*, which includes a chapter of the Rhodes Must Fall Movement in 2015.²

Occasionally, the IHJR alludes to the role of religion in conflict and conflict resolution. Reference was made, for example, to the Polish Catholic Church’s reluctance to admit the involvement of church members in the massacre of 1600 Jews in Jedwabne in July 1941 at a time when the president of the country, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, publicly asked for forgiveness.³ In 2015, Elazar Barkan and Karen Barkey published, under the title *Choreographies of Shared Sacred Sites: Religion, Politics, and Conflict Resolution*,

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- 1 Elazar Barkan, “History on the Line. Engaging History: Managing Conflict and Reconciliation,” *History Workshop Journal*, 59 (2005), 229.
 - 2 International Bar Association, Case Study III: Why Rhodes Fell’, *Contested Histories in Public Spaces. Principles, Processes, Best Practices*, An International Bar Association Task Force Report (Salzburg Global Seminar and IHJR, 2021), 7196.
 - 3 Elazar Barkan, “AHR Forum: Truth and Reconciliation in History. Introduction: Historians and Historical Reconciliation,” *American Historical Review*, 114–4 (2009), 899–900.

an edited book describing contestations for the use of sacred spaces in Algeria, Cyprus, Bosnia, Israel, and Palestine.⁴

In this article, I aim to show that historical research conducted in a spirit of dialogue can also assist Christian communities in dealing with contested memories. History writing may help them to reconsider past contentious issues, revisit the historical narratives that entrenched divisions, and find a path to reconciliation. I shall draw from my experience as an academic, a community activist, and a church member in my own right. Based on that experience, I shall suggest guidelines on using history as a tool for reconciliation in the Christian churches. Past conflicts created lasting divisions among churches and within the churches themselves. Mending those divisions has been the task of the ecumenical movement since its foundation. Four case studies will illustrate attempts to develop a narrative that helps the protagonists of past conflicts to reconsider their troubled history in a more consensual manner: the closure of the Federal Theological Seminary, the silence of the Rwandan churches during the genocide against the Tutsi, racial segregation in the Dominican congregations of sisters in the interwar period, and race relations in the history of the Lutheran churches of South Africa.

The Painful Closure of the Federal Theological Seminary of Southern Africa

The Federal Theological Seminary of Southern Africa (Fedsem), a joint seminary for Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregationalist candidates for the ministry, inaugurated in 1963 in Alice in the Eastern Cape, expropriated by the apartheid government and relocated to Umtata in the Transkei in 1975, then to Edendale near Pietermaritzburg in 1976, and finally to nearby Imbali in 1980, closed its doors in controversial circumstances in 1993. It was a unique experience both from an ecumenical point of view, with four churches agreeing to jointly train their students, and from a political point of view, by being racially desegregated in a segregated South Africa. Students and staff from different racial groups defiantly cohabited in the same space, under the watchful eye of the apartheid regime's security apparatus for which Fedsem was a thorn in the flesh.⁵ As Professor Tinyiko Maluleke, who studied at Fedsem between 1984 and 1988, put it, "purposefully constructed as an independent, alternative and counterhegemonic, educational model, in a country where Blacks were deliberately fed an especially inferior diet of education called 'Bantu Education' and where Blacks had little access to institutions of higher learning, Fedsem was a total experience."⁶

In 2003, Graham Duncan, a Presbyterian minister who had spent several years in Fedsem in the 1980s as a lecturer, and myself, a member of the Catholic Church who

4 Elazar Barkan and Karen Barkey (eds.), *Choreographies of Shared Sacred Sites: Religion, Politics, and Conflict Resolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

5 Philippe Denis and Graham Duncan, *The Native School that Caused All the Trouble. A History of the Federal Theological Seminary of Southern Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2008).

6 Tinyiko Maluleke, "Theology in My Life," *Reformed World*, 56/3 (September 2006), 302.

had had dealings with Fedsem in the early 1990s in my capacity as the coordinator of the Pietermaritzburg Cluster of Theological Institutions, decided to write a book on the history of Fedsem, Duncan concentrating on the early years of the seminary and I on the period from 1980 to 1993. It was a sad history. The number of students had dwindled, the deficit had deepened and many disgruntled staff members had left. Subsequent to the decision made by the participating churches in late 1993 to close the seminary, the plan to sell the building—erected with funds from international donor agencies in the late 1970s—to a local educational institution did not materialise and vandals dismantled it brick by brick until nothing was left.

Until 1990, Fedsem was a federal institution, with four, then three residential colleges, St Peter's College (Anglican), John Wesley College (Methodist), and Albert Luthuli (Presbyterian and Congregationalist), a central office and joint classes. The decision to unite the colleges, implemented under the leadership of Joe Wing, a former general secretary of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA) and by then full-time president of the seminary, ended up contributing to the demise of Fedsem. The participating churches were not ready to jointly run the seminary. The Anglican Church, deeply attached to its Anglo-Catholic liturgical tradition and ecclesiological principles, found it difficult to lose St Peter's College. They gradually ceased to send students, while remaining influential. By the early 1990s, only a handful of Anglican students and two Anglican lecturers were still in the seminary. The Methodist Church maintained a strong presence, both in terms of student numbers and financial support. The other two churches continued to support Fedsem but were dwarfed compared to the Methodist Church.⁷

As long as he was the head of the seminary, Joe Wing managed to maintain the unity of the institution. His replacement by Khoza Mgojo, a senior Methodist minister who had been a lecturer at Fedsem for a number of years, in early 1991, the appointment of Sol Jacob, another Methodist, as registrar, and of Colin Wollacott, also a Methodist, as president of the Finance Committee, created the perception that the Methodist Church was dominating the seminary. The afflux of refugees resulting from the civil war in the region and a student strike exacerbated the crisis. In an attempt to improve the financial situation of the seminary, Heather Garner, an Anglican lecturer, raised a considerable amount of funds for a practical theology placement project and a theological education programme for women but the plan fell through because of a conflict on who would manage the funds. Disagreement also arose about a proposed joint BTh programme with the University of Natal under the auspices of the recently established Pietermaritzburg Cluster of Theological Institutions. The staff was disheartened. In 1992, Mgojo, Garner, and many others left. A last-ditch attempt was made in 1993 to revive the seminary but funds were lacking and the seminary had to close.

7 Denis and Duncan, *The Native School that Caused all the Trouble*, 231–266. See also Philippe Denis, “Unfinished Business. The Painful Closure of the Federal Theological Seminary of Southern Africa,” *Missionalia* 37-1 (April 2009), 5–19.

To write that history, I relied, among others, on archives put at my disposal by the Methodist Connexional Office in Durban and on oral history interviews with the different role players. I was confronted with opposing versions of the same events, with some blaming the duo Mgojo-Jacob for the demise of the seminary, others putting the blame on the Anglican Church which had withdrawn its support in the late 1990s. Elements of context had to be taken into account such as the changing theological education scene which put Fedsem in competition with formerly white faculties of theology in state universities that were now admitting black students.

The challenge was to write that history without exacerbating the conflict of memory. I had to collect enough data to reconstruct the sequence of events year by year, month by month, as factually as possible. The interviews were loaded with sadness and anger. I had to listen without taking sides. I tried not to fall into the trap of a blame game.

One interviewee who helped me in this respect was Stanley Mogoba, a Methodist bishop involved in the affairs of Fedsem at the time, whom I interviewed at his home in the Limpopo province in October 2007. For me, it was a breakthrough. He explained that beyond the issues of personality and character which muddled the water, the important thing was that in the early 1990s, the Methodist Church was determined to train its students in an ecumenical institution and was prepared therefore to invest in the seminary. This account put the conflict between members of the Methodist Church and the Anglican Church in a different perspective.

This interview allowed me to complete writing the chapter on the demise of Fedsem. We had hoped that the publication of the book would be the occasion of a healing of memories workshop of sorts with the various protagonists in the story. This has not happened. The book, meanwhile, has been well received. Nobody has discussed the findings. Slowly some peace was found regarding the contested history of Fedsem's closure.

The Churches' Silence during the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda

Even if the conflict which resulted in the genocide against the Tutsi had nothing to do with religion, it had a religious dimension. Believers killed other believers. Worse, they killed them, in large numbers, in places of worship, thus committing sacrilege. They killed priests and pastors they knew, claiming, without any proof, that they were "accomplices" of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). The killers instrumentalised religious symbols, with God, Christ, and the Virgin Mary being mobilised in the service of the extremist Hutu cause.

Believers indeed saved lives. Some died because they refused to obey the killers' orders. Without these mostly anonymous opponents, the number of victims, already enormous, would have been even higher. On the other hand, a certain number of priests and pastors who had absorbed the Hutu extremist propaganda actively participated in the killings. Some of them were condemned for genocide in international and Rwandan courts.

Catholic and Protestant church leaders at national and local levels indirectly played a role in the genocide by failing to use the moral authority they enjoyed in Rwanda to stop massacres which they saw clearly targeted non-combatants, or by uncritically reproducing elements of the discourse that legitimised the genocide against the Tutsi. If they had spoken clearly about the openly discriminatory nature of the conflict, it is likely that the civilian authorities, many of whom recognised themselves as Christian, would have hesitated to target the Tutsi, and the calls for murder launched by Hutu extremists would have found less traction. Instead, the church leaders merely called for a ceasefire as if the massacres of Tutsi that were happening before their eyes merely resulted from a war and not a genocide.

Differences of attitude persisted in the churches as in many institutions after the genocide, some fully recognising the reality of the genocide of the Tutsi, others balancing them with the crimes, attested or not, of which the RPF was allegedly guilty and therefore minimising the gravity. When the genocide ended, some of the Catholic and Protestant leaders and faithful took refuge in Tanzania, Zaire, and Kenya, where they formed parallel churches, close to the authorities of the former regime in exile. Many denied the existence of a genocide or trivialised it by speaking of a double genocide. They adopted an attitude of systematic opposition to the new government, accused of serious violations of human rights. Many priests suspected of having actively participated in the genocide were given pastoral responsibilities in European dioceses with no questions being asked.⁸

Most of the Christians who remained in Rwanda made an honest assessment of the situation, calling for a resumption of evangelisation on new bases. There is a contrast between the Presbyterian Church in Rwanda which released a confession of guilt during a general synod in December 1996 and the Catholic Church whose leaders initially refused to name the genocide and waited until 2000 to acknowledge, in cautious terms, the involvement of some of their own in the genocide. Relations between church and state, tense at first, gradually improved in the country.

As I explained in an article published in the British journal *Oral History* in 2019,⁹ the interviews threw light on how the interviewees reflected upon and referred to their experience of the genocide period. I became privy to genocide survivors' poignant life stories and the questions these stories raised about the churches' lack of response or wrong response to the genocide at the time. But I also heard the stories of people who minimised and even denied the reality of the genocide against the Tutsi, insisting instead on the RPF's responsibility and on problems of governance in post-genocide Rwanda.

8 Philippe Denis, "Contested Memories and Competing Narratives of the Past in Post-genocide Rwanda," in Tharcisse Gatwa and Philippe Denis (eds.), *Memory Work in Rwanda. Churches and Civil-society Organisations 25 Years after the Genocide against the Tutsi* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2020), 21–32.

9 Philippe Denis, "Difficult Navigation. Dealing with Divided Memories in Post-genocide Rwanda," *Oral History*, 49–1 (2021), 104–114.

I struggled to reconcile, not only in my mind but in my heart, these contradictory messages. After each interview, I had to revisit my interpretation of the genocide.

Reflecting on this process, I realised that, in the end, this confusion constituted an opportunity for knowledge production. It created in me what Dominick LaCapra has termed “empathic unsettlement.” By this, he means “a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognising the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place.”¹⁰ Along the same lines, South African oral historian Sean Field pointed out that empathy should not be confused with sympathy and compassion. Oral history requires critical empathy, a distance enabling the oral history practitioner to see the other as other.¹¹

By unsettling me, my interlocutors helped me to develop critical empathy. They showed me that there is not only one view of the Rwandan past. As I gained confidence, I started to share with some research participants the views of informants with whom they disagreed. More than once, this created a fruitful engagement. The complexity that emerged from these exchanges did not dispense me from forming an opinion, at least provisionally, on what happened during the genocide against the Tutsi and on the various memory strategies adopted by the Rwandan churches afterwards. I did not allow myself to develop a form of sceptical relativism.

My research led to the publication of a book entitled *The Genocide against the Tutsi and the Rwandan Churches* in March 2022.¹² A French translation was published in April 2024. I am not naïve enough to think that a research project can resolve at one stroke the conflict surrounding the Christian churches’ response to the genocide, but it can contribute to levelling the ground. Having presented the book to a variety of audiences, including a Catholic cultural centre in Kigali, a Catholic seminary in Kabgayi, and a Protestant university in Huye (formerly Butare), I can say that my project is appreciated. So far none of the findings has been disputed.

The reception during the official book launch, held in Kigali in May 2022 under auspices of the Ugandan co-publisher Fountain Publisher ended up, however, being a bit difficult. A number of government officials were present, including a cabinet minister I knew from the time he was the director of an archive centre. They expected an unreserved criticism of the Catholic Church’s attitude during the genocide. I responded that a historian is not a judge and that my role was to put on the table the elements of the problem in all their complexity. This being said, I had demonstrated that, in the words of the German philosopher Karl Jaspers, the churches had a moral responsibility in the genocide. The cabinet minister privately said to the Ugandan

10 Dominick LaCapra, “Trauma, Absence, Loss,” *Critical Inquiry*, 25–4 (1999), 699.

11 Sean Field, “Critical Empathy through Oral Histories after Apartheid,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 31–5 (2017), 660–70.

12 Philippe Denis, *The Genocide against the Tutsi and the Rwandan Churches. Between Grief and Denial* (Melton: Woodbridge: James Currey, 2022), 343 pp.

publisher that he requested a new edition, in other words, the original edition had to be censored. I then engaged with him. He rapidly withdrew his request and we agreed to insert in the Ugandan edition an addendum clarifying the contested question of the number of genocide victims and stating unambiguously the fallacy of the so-called double genocide theory, according to which an equal number of Hutu and Tutsi allegedly fell victims to mass violence in 1994 and after. It was just a question of spelling out my position because, in some parts of the book, I had distanced myself from the double genocide theory anyway.

As proof that the topic remains contentious, one of the peer-reviewers of a journal article I recently submitted to a Belgian journal blamed me for the opposite, for not criticising the RPF enough for its alleged crimes and bad governance. My interaction with a wide array of genocide scholars at a conference co-organised in September 2022 by Vincent Duclert, the author of a widely commented report on France's responsibility in the genocide against the Tutsi, in Huye, and at a subsequent conference in September 2023 in Paris confirmed, however, my impression that my book is well accepted in Rwanda not only in the churches but in the academic community. It fulfils the role I had assigned to it, which is to create a space for a more serene discussion of the subject.

The Controversial Decision to Send the Black Sisters from the Newcastle Dominican Congregation to Montebello

The first black Catholic priest in South Africa, Edward Mnganga, was ordained in 1899. As pointed out by George Mukuka, Mnganga and his first companions all suffered racial discrimination at the hands of their white colleagues in the first half of the 20th century.¹³ Until recently, the story of the first black Catholic sisters in South Africa had attracted little academic attention. Yet it is equally controversial. A first group of black women was received in the Catholic diocese of Mariannhill in 1921, a second group in Oakford near Durban in 1922 and a third group in Umsinsini on the Natal South Coast in 1927. Stories of racial discrimination in the last two of these communities are transmitted by word of mouth from generation to generation in the communities of black sisters.

It was against this background that, in March 2018, the general chapter of the Dominican sisters of Newcastle, the British-based congregation which had welcomed a group of black candidates in 1927, decided to revisit this painful part of their history. A few months later, following the instructions of the Chapter, the general prioress of the congregation, Sr Felicity Cunningham, asked me to investigate the circumstances of the precipitated transfer of a group of black sisters from their house of Newcastle to the newly-established black congregation of Montebello in January 1939.

13 George Mukuka, *The Other Side of the Story: The Silent Experience of the Black Clergy in the Catholic Church in South Africa (1898–1976)* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2008).

The Newcastle sisters gave me a free hand in this research. They granted me unhindered access to their archives in their motherhouse in Bushey Heath, north of London and in Boksburg near Johannesburg. I also consulted the archives of the Oakford Dominican sisters, of the Montebello Dominican sisters, of the Catholic Archdiocese of Durban and of the Roman congregation De Propaganda Fide in Rome. This led to the publication of a book entitled *The First Black Dominican Sisters in Natal (1922–1939). At the Crossroad of Race and Gender*¹⁴ in October 2023.

The candidates from Unsinsini and a few others who had joined the Dominican sisters in the meantime first went to Lennoxton near Newcastle in 1932 where a novitiate house had been opened for their training. Some of them became qualified teachers and nurses. They felt relatively well treated by the white sisters but wondered why they had to wear a different habit —grey instead of white—and why they had to eat, sleep, and pray separately from the other sisters. Even some white sisters as well as the local priest interrogated this practice. The black sisters from Lennoxton were conscious of being discriminated against and suffered from it.

Then, suddenly, in January 1939, the black sisters were told by the vicar apostolic of Durban, Henri Delalle, that they would be transferred to Montebello, 250 kilometres south of Newcastle, where another group of black Dominican sisters, previously members of the Dominican congregation of Oakford, had been recently awarded the status of a diocesan congregation, under the jurisdiction of Bishop Delalle. Unlike the black sisters from Newcastle, those from Oakford did not want to mix with the white sisters, whom they felt had discriminated against them. Hence the decision to establish a congregation of black sisters only, under the leadership of Mother Euphemia Ruf, the former novice mistress, and two other German sisters, in 1939.¹⁵ For the black sisters from Lennoxton, who were attached to the congregation of Newcastle, the decision to leave Lennoxton came as a shock. Thirteen gave their consent under duress and were sent to Montebello at a very short notice. Three chose to leave the congregation.

The question which haunted the black sisters from Lennoxton is why they had to leave Newcastle. They were never briefed properly. This question still haunts other sisters from Newcastle and Montebello today, as I discovered when I interviewed sisters who had interacted with the group of Lennoxton when they were young. The research shows that the initiative came from Bishop Delalle who did not want two groups of black sisters in his vicariate and felt that the black sisters from Lennoxton, more educated than those from Montebello, could be usefully employed as teachers in the Montebello school. The government of the Union of South Africa at the time was beginning to implement policies which anticipated apartheid: black children were supposed to be taught by black teachers. Mother Rose Niland, the foundress and prioress general of the

14 Philippe Denis, *The First Black Dominican Sisters in Natal (1922–1939). At the Crossroad of Race and Gender* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2023).

15 “White and Black Women under the Same Roof. The Early History of Montebello’s Black Sisterhood, 1922–1939,” *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, 34–1 (2021), 127–141.

Newcastle congregation, and her Council were given the option by Rome to integrate the black sisters into the white congregation or to let them go. They opted for the latter. The responsibility for the brutal transfer of the black sisters from Lennoxton to Montebello in January 1939 was therefore shared.

At the launch of the book in Durban North on 13 January 2024 and in a similar event a week later in Boksburg, Sr Ann Cunningham, the current prioress general of the Newcastle Dominican sisters, publicly declared that her congregation repented for the harm done to the black sisters of Lennoxton about a century ago and she asked for forgiveness. Many sisters from the Newcastle congregation, others from the Oakford and Montebello congregations, and various church members attended these events. The book will hopefully open a space where memories of racial segregation and discrimination will find expression and be processed in a spirit of dialogue. The initiative of the Newcastle Dominican sisters to investigate this painful page of their history is not unprecedented¹⁶ but is not common either. Allowing an independent historian to look at controversial aspects of their history required honesty and courage. This could be a model for other church groups confronted with a history of racial discrimination.

Race Relations and the Search for Unity in the Lutheran Churches of South Africa

The legacy of colonialism and apartheid continues to affect all South African institutions, including the Christian churches. Unlike the Anglican, Catholic and Methodist churches, which always formed one body, and the Congregational and Presbyterian churches, which ceased to be divided along racial lines in 1967 and 1999 respectively, the Lutheran churches, heirs of German, Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish, and American mission societies, are divided up to this day into formerly white and formerly black churches with different constitutions, membership sizes, socio-economic profiles, and means of income.

All efforts made so far to create a united Lutheran church in South Africa have remained unsuccessful so far. Since 2022, the leadership of the Evangelical Church of Southern Africa (ELCSA), which comprises seven formerly black dioceses, has expressed the desire to resume the search for unity. This implies a re-examination of the history of the Lutheran churches of Southern Africa,¹⁷ a task initiated by several Lutheran historians, including Georg Scriba and now entrusted to the KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council, an ecumenical agency based in Pietermaritzburg.

16 See for example Dee Shannon Williams, *Subversive Habits: Black Catholic Nuns in the Long American Freedom Struggle* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022).

17 There is no comprehensive history of the Lutheran churches in Southern Africa. For an overview see Georg Scriba with Gunnar Lislerud, "Lutheran Missions and Churches in South Africa," in Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport, *Christianity in Southern Africa. A Political, Social and Cultural History* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1997) 173–194.

The division between black and white churches goes back to the first years of the Lutheran presence in South Africa. Initially compelled to worship in Dutch Reformed churches, the German settlers, who constituted a significant part of the white population of the Cape in the 17th and 18th centuries, were allowed to form properly constituted Lutheran congregations in the late 18th century. With the arrival of more German settlers, the number of German Lutheran congregations increased throughout what was to become South Africa in the 19th and 20th centuries. They formed an integral part of colonial society which not only accepted but actively promoted racial segregation. The white congregations often welcomed the families of missionaries working in mission stations or the missionaries themselves after their retirement. To justify a strict separation between black and white Lutheran congregations, the church leaders invoked the need to develop self-sufficient, autonomous African churches.

The first Lutheran mission to indigenous people was founded by Georg Schmidt, a Moravian missionary, in Genadendal in the Cape in 1737. Missionary societies were established in 1824 and in the following years in Germany (Berlin Missionary Society, Rhenish Missionary Society, Hermannsburg Mission Society) and Scandinavia (Norwegian Mission Society, Church of Sweden Mission, Finnish Missionary Society) began to send missionaries to various parts of South Africa, Namibia, and Botswana. At first, the white congregations and the black missions functioned on a congregational model with little communication among each other. This was due, for a part, to differences in social background and theological culture.

Another factor of divisions was the notion, in the Berlin and Hermannsburg societies particularly, that mission work should be done on an ethnic basis. Called “people’s theology” (*Volkstheologie*) or “people’s evangelisation” (*Volkschristianisierung*), this doctrine was popularised by German theologians such as Gustav Warneck and Bruno Gutmann in the late 19th and early 20th century. According to it, the Gospel must be preached to national or tribal communities as such, whether German or Zulu, Tswana or Pedi.¹⁸ In effect, this “people’s theology” prepared the ground for an uncritical acceptance of the separate development ideology promoted by the National Party and the Dutch Reformed churches. Ideologically and socio-economically, the German settlers and the members of the Dutch Reformed churches, all with a small proportion of farmers, had a lot in common.

Soon, however, the mission societies felt the need to cooperate and, one after the other, established “mission-affiliated synods” which remained under the authority of the mission societies in Europe or the United States while retaining a certain degree of autonomy. Between 1959 and 1964, the synods morphed into regional churches, initially based on an ethnic basis in line with the apartheid ideology. One should note

18 Gunther Packendorf, “For There is No Power but of God.” The Berlin Mission and the Challenges of Colonial South Africa,” *Missionalia*, 253 (1997), 262–264.

that the Lutheran missionaries were among the last ones in South Africa to create churches independent from the mission societies abroad.

This movement of unification culminated with the constitution of two common structures: the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (UELCSA) for the German churches in 1964 and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) for the black churches in 1975. The creation of ELCSA constituted, in a conscious way, a form of resistance to apartheid.

During these formative years, education was a central component of the Lutheran churches' search for unity. In 1912, the Berlin, Norwegian, and Swedish missionary societies, later followed by a few others, established a joint structure called Cooperating Lutheran Missions (CLM) which established, among others, a combined teachers' training college in Umphumulo, a mission station of the Norwegian Missionary Society, and a common seminary for the training pastors in Oskarsberg (Rorke's Drift), a mission station of the Swedish Church Mission in Natal.¹⁹

Under the impulse of the Lutheran World Federation,²⁰ the vision of a united Lutheran Church of South Africa encompassing all churches and mission societies began to take shape in 1966 with the establishment of a loose federal structure called the Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in Southern Africa (FELCSA) in 1966. The idea of merging black and white churches was in the air, but, for lack of support in the German churches, it failed to materialise. When ELCSA was constituted in 1975, UELCSA declined the offer to join the new body. Apartheid was still strong not only on the ground but in the minds.

A year later, the Soweto Uprising erupted and South Africa became increasingly polarised. The newly-created ELCSA joined the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), the South African Council of Churches (SACC) and the All Africa Council of Churches (AACC), all of which took positions against apartheid. Black pastors such as Manas Buthelezi (later to become bishop of the ECLSA Central Diocese), Simon Maimela, and other Lutherans became proponents of Black Theology. The detention, torture, and in some cases, assassination of prominent Lutheran pastors and laypeople in Namibia and in the so-called homeland of Venda, two areas with a strong Lutheran population, increased the tension. Unable or unwilling to unambiguously condemn apartheid, the German churches remained behind. In 1984, the LWF suspended the membership of the German churches of Namibia and the Cape on account of their inability to unite with the black churches and their insufficiently clear condemnation of apartheid. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of South Africa—Natal Transvaal (ELCSA-NT), a church

19 Herman Schlyter, *The History of the Cooperating Lutheran Missions in Natal, 1919–1951* (Durban: Lutheran Publishing Houses, 1953).

20 Carl Hellberg, *A Voice of the Voiceless. The Involvement of the Lutheran World Federation in Southern Africa, 1947/1977* (Lund: Verbum, 1979).

resulting from the merger in 1981 from the Natal and Transvaal German churches (Berlin and Hermannsburg), withdrew its application for LWF membership.

Already before the LWF Assembly in Budapest, however, a Unity Committee consisting of ELCSA, ELCSA-NT, and ELCSA Cape Church had been established under the auspices of FELCSA with the intention of bringing about structural unity within the Lutheran Church of South Africa. The process occurred in war-torn Namibia. The Unity Committee resumed its work in 1985 despite ELCSA's withdrawal from FELCSA. Its main task was to merge the three constitutions—that of ELCSA more episcopal in structure and that of the two white churches more congregational in their practice. To that end, four subcommittees were instituted: on constitutional matters, on legal matters (e.g. relations with overseas churches), on finances and on living in unity. The new constitution was never ratified by the church courts. The Unity Committee last met in 1995. With the advent of democracy in South Africa, there was no longer political pressure to work on the unity question. The new dispensation meant that the churches had to find afresh their identity, on the issues of homosexuality and the termination of pregnancy for example.

In the late 1990s, however, the bishops of ELCSA, ELCSA-NT, and ELCSA (Cape Church) started, at regular intervals, to see how best to cooperate at the local and regional levels. The idea of a Joint Council of Lutheran Churches was mooted, and a constitution drafted, but the project was never brought to completion. The bishops of the last three churches last met in 2008.

In 2000, the establishment of a Lutheran Centre in Bonaero Park near Kempton Park and, in 2003, the creation of the Lutheran Theological Institute (LTI) in Pietermaritzburg, a joint project of the black and white churches, signalled a renewed desire for unity in the Lutheran churches of South Africa. LTI was closely associated with the University of Natal, where two Lutheran theologians, Günther Wittenberg and Wolfram Kistner had come to teach in the 1970s and where a Lutheran House of Studies (Luthos) had been established, in defiance of the apartheid laws, in the mid-1980s. LTI received funding from the LWF and successfully negotiated—at least for an initial period—a remission of fees scheme for Lutheran university students. This meant, however, the closure of Umphumulo Theological Seminary, a decision that a certain number of black lecturers and students found difficult to accept.

Despite the introduction of an access programme, however, many black Lutheran students struggled to adjust to the academic environment of the university. The discontinuation of the remission of fees scheme in 2009 further complicated the situation. A major financial crisis within ELCSA, caused by the controversial reinvestment of 40 million rands belonging to the church into an elusive fund on the grounds that it would generate income for a development project in Pretoria, resulted in the closure of LTI, an institution, already in crisis, that until then had been jointly run by the formerly black and white churches, in 2015. The 40 million issue, as it was called,

caused dissent not only within ELCSA but between ELCSA and the formerly white churches.

Rev. Nkosinathi Myaka, who was elected bishop of the ELCSA South-Eastern diocese in August 2000 and presiding bishop of ELCSA in April 2022, and his colleagues saw as a key priority for the church to resume unity talks with NELCSA (formerly ELCSA-NT) and ELCSA (Cape Church), the reinforcement of cooperation between the churches and the search for a mutually acceptable form of institutional unity. Part of this vision was to involve in the unity process the other Lutheran churches, including the Moravian Church, the Free Lutheran Synod in South Africa (FELSISA), the Bapedi Lutheran Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Botswana (ELCB) and the Liberating Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Africa (LELCSA).

Given the long history of failed attempts to reach unity, history has a major role to play in this endeavour, both to avoid the mistakes of the past and to build on what had been successfully carried out. Myaka, who happens also to be the chairperson of the KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council, asked this ecumenical agency to facilitate, at least in their initial phase, the unity talks, and to carry out research on race relations and the search for unity in the history of the Lutheran churches of South Africa. Five joint bishops' meetings have taken place by the time of writing. At each of them, documentation was provided to the participants on the history of the church and a discussion took place, cautiously at first, on the issues dividing the churches. Similar meetings are planned for pastors, men, women, and youth of the formerly black and white churches. The legacy of colonialism and apartheid in the church, the white churches' unreadiness to join ELCSA in 1975, the suspension of two white churches in Budapest in 1984 and ELCSA's subsequent withdrawal from FELSISA, the decision to close the Lutheran Theological College in Umphumulo in 2003, the closure of LTI and the loss of 40 million in 2015 are among the issues that could be on the agenda of a Lutheran unity forum.

Conclusion

The four case studies presented here show that a better knowledge of the history of divided communities can contribute to healing and reconciliation, as suggested by Elazar Barkan and his colleagues of the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation. This applies to the Christian churches. The closure of Fedsem, the silence of the churches during the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, the brutal transfer of the black sisters from Lennoxton to Montebello and the failure of the black and white Lutheran churches to find common ground, elicited feelings of disappointment, sadness and, in some cases, anger. What can a historian do to help the protagonists move forward, revisit their contested past, and invent a new future?

For this to happen, several conditions need to be met. The first is to get the facts right. Misunderstandings, global judgments, stereotypes, oversimplifications, half-truths, or

even lies poison the atmosphere in a conflict situation. The historical method, which entails deliberate recourse to archival and oral evidence, duly verified and corroborated whenever possible, helps to dismiss false or incomplete accounts of the past and put the events or opinions in dispute in perspective. Historians never find “the truth” about the past because the truth is always constructed, but the accounts they produce should be as close as possible to the historical reality they purport to describe.²¹ Disagreements on what has happened and why it happened are inevitable but a solid, critical, comprehensive account of the past narrows down the gaps of perceptions and contributes to reconciliation.

The second advice would to define the scope of the research as widely as possible. The researcher must constantly look for new documents which will bring new light on the story. When there is a conflict, it is essential to interview people on both sides and, if possible, people who were not involved in the conflict. Likewise, a wide variety of archives must be consulted. This will give credibility to the research and increase the chances of developing a narrative of the past that is accepted by all parties. Widening the scope of the research means delving more deeply into the complexity of the contested events of the past, their motivation, and their outcome. Research which is based on one category of sources and which reflects one side of the spectrum of opinions will entrench the conflict rather than resolve it.

My third recommendation is that historians should make every effort to put their findings at the disposal of the people struggling with painful or contested memories in a clear and user-friendly way. History should not remain in the ivory tower of the academy. There are various ways of doing so: by exchange of emails, by face-to-face meetings, by workshops with an external facilitator, by academic conferences, to name a few. A dialogue must be established between the researchers and the protagonists of the conflict. Yet, this must be done with caution. It takes time before a wounded person is ready to revisit a painful memory. An atmosphere of trust must be created first. Processing together painful or contested memories is a difficult exercise but, when it is done wisely and professionally, it brings considerable results. The experience gained in the course of these four projects suggests that it is worth trying.

21 Philippe Denis, “On Teaching History of Christianity in the Postmodern World,” *HTS. Theological Studies*, 75–1 (2019), a5210.

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