

## CHAPTER 7

# To legitimate Power or to be a prophetic Voice – a Choice for Churches

*By Birger Løvlie*

*There is a time for everything –  
a time to be quiet and a time to speak up.*

*Eccl 3, 1: 7*

This chapter compares the roles of different churches in the development of democracy in Malawi and Norway. We will look at the two nations with their histories with differences and similarities. A special attention will be given to churches with differences in understanding, not primarily of doctrine and message, but of their relationship to state and secular authorities. A church will carry out one part of her mission by being silent or by speaking up – in support or in critique of the national authorities. So it is also with the churches of Malawi and Norway. We will look into their history to see if they have been silent when they ought to speak, or have spoken in favour of the authorities when they should have condemned their policies.

How a church relates to her surroundings is determined by many factors and tradition is most important. Tradition makes a church quite predictable and this implies that we rather seldom think that the church can change. This is especially true for a church and a nation with a long tradition and therefore it is interesting to compare Malawi and Norway. The latter has a relatively long church history of about 1000 years while the former has a shorter one of about 150 years.

Since our tradition is normally not questioned, it is fair to think that there are parts of it that are not well known. After all, who

*The main  
question: to  
speak or to be  
silent*

*Tradition is  
important*

knows that nine paragraphs in the Constitution of Norway are more or less connected to ‘the official religion of the state?’<sup>14</sup> This chapter will show how the state church reacted to the development towards a modern democracy in Norway. It will also show in the case of Malawi how the younger churches relate to a young nation. It is meant to be a supplement to the other chapters about the history of democracy. But first, some words about how and why churches understand themselves differently.

## **Church and state**

Churches can be different in many ways as a result of different histories and cultures. State churches have been linked to the monarch as the head of both church and state, while other churches have tried to limit the power of the rulers to earthly matters. A people may be under the influence of one or many churches with quite different links to a particular society and state. There can be a state church or a free church. A free church can be either national, regional or more universal in her approach. Let us have a look at the state church first. For historical reasons a church may understand herself as a national church and accept the monarch as the supreme head. The Church of Norway has developed a double structure. One is based on the Constitution of Norway, making the king the head of the church. He has the authority to appoint the bishops, deans and priests/pastors and to sanction new liturgies and hymnals. The other structure was formed little by little in the second part of the 1800s as a voluntary one, by lay people who were not comfortable having the king as the supreme bishop. They stayed formally in the state church, but they formed independent organizations and built prayer houses where they had their own services, led by lay people. Today, lay people are also involved in the formal structure of the state church. Each congregation elects members to a district synod and the members of all district synods are members of a national synod. The king has delegated most of his authority to these synods, except the appointment of bishops and deans, because that would have been violating the constitution. Since this chapter is connected to the 1800s, the word ‘church’ will mostly

*The Church of Norway has a two sided structure: an official and a voluntary*

*In the 1800s the official church was more or less the clergy*

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<sup>14</sup> This is the expression you will find in the constitution. The writers did not use the word church.

refer to 'the official religion', i.e. the clergy.

A church of this kind will be understood as an important element in the identity of the people. Some famous words from the 1500s 'high church' theologian Richard Hooker explain the vision: "There is not any man a member of the Commonwealth which is not of the Church of England." This is the church of the establishment, a state church, built on the theory that the king, or state, has a divine right to exercise power in the church.<sup>15</sup> How much the Church of England, from now on called the Anglican Church, was linked to the Crown, can be seen from the beginning of her mission work in Malawi. The initiative came from English universities, where a 'Mission to Central Africa' was formed and the committee wanted the work to be led by a bishop. But at that time, the land around Lake Nyasa was not under British rule and therefore it was impossible to get sanction from the Crown to ordain him. The problem was handed over to the Anglican bishops in South Africa, who agreed to ordain him. This is a parallel to the problems that the first Norwegian missionary to Africa, H.P. Schreuder, created when he wanted to be ordained by the Church of Norway as bishop for the church in Zululand. Finally the king gave his permission with one reservation: Schreuder would have no Episcopal authority within the borders of Norway.

*Church of England: from a national church to a worldwide communion*

On the other hand a church can have a theology for separation between church and state, like the so-called "Two Kingdom Theory."<sup>16</sup> In principle there is only one authority in the church and that is the word of God. The power of the king, which is also from God, should be limited to the earthly realm. The Church of Scotland is a good example. In the last part of the 1800s this church was strongly influenced by a way of thinking that was expressed in the slogan 'a free church in a free state.' This principle is not a hindrance for a church to influence a people to the degree that the church may be an integral part of the identity of the people. This church has no bishops at all. The cornerstone of its constitution is the local 'Kirk', where the members elect elders, or presbyters, who lead and represent the congregation in the synod.

*The Two Kingdom Theory*

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<sup>15</sup> The Church of England is one of the reformation churches, founded as the pope refused to cancel the marriage between King Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon. The king answered by enacting a number of bills (1532-1534) that established a national church with the king as the supreme head. Later, this church was established in most of the colonies and all these churches are a part of the Anglican communion, see Tengatenga 2006: 36-49.

<sup>16</sup> Although this theory is explained here by an example from a Calvinistic church, this theory found its first expression in the (Lutheran) Augsburg Confession, article XXVIII.

*Aristocratic thinking: Church and society as a pyramid*

There are some important differences coming out of these basic theories. An understanding of the king as the head of the church leads to an understanding of society in aristocratic terms. In more modern words, society is understood as a pyramid. At the top you find the king and the bishops, in dependency of each other for legitimacy. As king James said: 'No bishops, no king.' Though it is an oversimplification we may say that this goes for all Episcopal churches. However, when a theory of a Christian king is combined with episcopalism, the result has often been a church with a clergy closely linked to aristocracy. European history shows us pyramidal societies with the king at the top and the bishops are officials of the crown directly beneath him. At the bottom you find the people who are supposed to be obedient subjects. In this connection it should be noted that an Episcopal church does not need to be a state church. The Roman Catholic Church is Episcopal, but not national at all. The universality of this church is expressed through the bishops under the Holy See.

*The churches have had to accept more egalitarian and more pluralistic societies*

Both a state church and a free church can adapt to democracy. The state churches of Europe have had to walk the long road from aristocratic thinking towards the democratic idea that all are born equal, although that has been fundamental in their theology all the time. Churches with a self-governing structure are mostly younger. Many of them are results of great revivals at a time when equality of man became basic to those who fought against poverty and injustice. They motivated their members to struggle for a more egalitarian society and they did so within the framework of a Christian nation. Today both state churches and free churches have to accept liberal political ideas and find their places in pluralistic societies. That means a kind of society where churches are without legal privileges, but at the same time there is a room of freedom for independent organizations that are not controlled or suppressed by political authorities. In the future, the contribution of Christian churches to a democratic state must include acceptance and even defence of such a pluralistic state.<sup>17</sup>

### **Democratic development and the church in Norway**

The constitution of Norway of 1814 gave little or no room for religious freedom. Most of the clergy in the second part of the 1800s

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<sup>17</sup> That this should be the Christian strategy has been convincingly expressed by the former Finance Minister of Germany, Hans Apel (2007) in his book *Europa ohne Seele* (Europe without a soul).

did not accept democratic ideas at all, because they did not manage to combine it with Lutheran theology. Their idea of a Christian nation was little by little conquered in the secularization process that produced the liberal democracy.

The two nations have one thing in common in their histories, namely a period as colonies. For Norway, the colonial period ended early, compared to Malawi.<sup>18</sup> The people of Norway could celebrate 150 years of freedom from Denmark the same year as Malawi became independent from England. As part of the celebration, the principle of religious freedom was written into the Norwegian constitution.

The lengths of our histories as free nations are different. Norway got her own constitution in 1814 at the end of the Napoleonic wars and under the influence of liberal ideas from the French Revolution in 1789 and the American Constitution of 1787. The result was a relatively liberal constitution for that time. Here three exceptions could be mentioned. One concerns religions. Jews and monastic orders were excluded from the country and the state church was protected from criticism by a limitation of the freedom of expression. This intolerance was a remnant of the royal autocracy<sup>19</sup> and reflects the theocratic understanding that the king should make his subjects obedient to the Ten Commandments. The second was the right to vote, which was not a personal right, but a privilege given to men with property and a certain social position. The third was in the area of distribution of power. The king had the right to appoint the government without consulting the national assembly, Stortinget, and to appoint persons to civil and military positions as well as to offices in the church.

Liberal and democratic winds blew over Norway in the second part of the 1800s, reaching a climax with the adoption of the parliamentary system in 1884. New victories were won as the right to vote was extended to all adult men in 1898 and to women in 1913. How did the church react to these radical changes? In order to answer and to explain, it should be made clear that all the anti liberal paragraphs of the constitution mentioned above had a connection to how the church understood a nation. According to the church a nation was an order of creation, made by a divine act,

*A liberal constitution with some exceptions*

*More political freedom and a theology against democracy*

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<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, Norway was a colony for about 400 years, while Malawi had 73 years of colonial rule.

<sup>19</sup> The king had absolute power in Denmark and Norway from 1660 till 1814.

where the inhabitants should remain in the position where God had placed them. Liberal ideas were looked upon as a result of growing atheism, a sign of rebellion against God, and therefore something that worked against the great project of that period: to build 'a nation under God.' From this point of departure, professors of theology, bishops and priests took a stance against a democratic development, mainly expressed in an open letter to the people under the title: *To the Friends of Christianity in Our Country* in January 1883, shortly after a general election was won by the liberal party. The message of the letter, a compendium of aristocratic theology and ideology, was very simple: If Norway was to remain a Christian nation, Christians had to fight against political radicalism.

*A gap  
between  
clergy and  
lay people*

The effect of this act of panic was an almost permanent gap between the clergy and the lay people of Norway, especially in the Western part of the country. The clergy had no theology that could support a democratic development and the lay people answered by limiting the realm of theology. They more or less rejected the idea of a Christian nation and proclaimed that the Christian faith primarily should have its impact on the personal level. Their understanding of a Christian people was that it should not be built on political power, but on believers who by their witness fulfil the parable of the leaven (Math 13: 33)<sup>20</sup>. The clergy was caught in a theology that gave no other option than to think of society as composed of classes. In that system it became a sign of ungodly pride to try to advance from one class to another. After all, St. Paul had written: 'Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called' (1 Cor 7: 20). Founded on a conviction which was a mixture of Christian faith and political liberalism, common people fought for the right to vote, for their children's right to get an education, for better health care, for fair wages and so on. It goes almost without saying that this struggle also included the right to leave the church without losing common civil rights. This fight included a demand for changes in the constitution.

*Christian lay  
people and a  
few pastors  
fought for  
democracy*

With the conservative clergy in mind, we should notice that there were many exceptions. The first social democrat in Stortinget was a pastor, Alfred Eriksen, and many other pastors joined the struggle for democracy led by the Liberal Party (Venstre). The most famous example is Lars Oftedal, clergyman, newspaper editor and

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<sup>20</sup> Leaven was used in baking and had the same effect as yeast in the dough, see Gal 5: 9.

social worker in Stavanger. Bernt Støylen, a bishop from Sunnmøre, could also be mentioned. He was untiring in his political liberalism. One hundred years ago he signed, together with some laymen, a petition to Stortinget for a new constitution with freedom of religion and without an official religion. They were not heard. There is one important thing to be remembered from this history. The Christian contribution to the development of democracy did not come from the church as an institution, but mainly from lay people who fought for democratic rights as a consequence of their faith.

When we look at the second part of the 1900s, there is one crucial question in many political debates in the history of Norway: What should the church do when a reform can be seen both as a democratic progress and as a loss of her influence? This question points to the effect of modernization. Norway had in practice become a secular country and the church seemed to lose her hegemony in one area after another. This process reached a climax as Stortinget passed a liberal law on abortion in 1978, a reform that could be seen as a decisive victory for the women's liberation movement. The church protested vehemently, pointing at §2 in the constitution, where it is written that the Evangelical Lutheran religion is the official religion of the state. The protests were more or less silenced as the Supreme Court decided in 1983 that this paragraph does not set barriers for Stortinget or government (with one exception: the state cannot rule the church contrary to the official religion).

The development in the school system in the period from 1936 till 1969 is another example of the same dilemma. Church leaders looked upon the school as a Christian school, ruled by the church and with a main objective to teach the Lutheran doctrines to all baptized children. The reforms were heavily influenced by the ideology of the social democrats: in order to get a more democratic and tolerant school system, the hegemony of the church needed to be diminished. At the end of the reform process both educational and democratic gains were obvious. On the other hand it is easy to see the losses of the church. Stortinget decided that every qualified person could be a headmaster or teach Christianity in school, a discipline that was given an ever smaller space in the curriculum. In the years after more reforms came. The laws that criminalized homosexuality and the practice of living together without legal marriage were abolished and when the first law about pre-schools

*The Supreme Court: political decisions cannot be limited by an official religion*

*The ties between school and church loosened*

was introduced in 1975, it had no formal Christian basis. In all these reforms, the social democratic device: religion is a private matter, had its way. From a constitutional point of view this is totally wrong: Norway is a state with an official religion. At the same time it is evident from the perspective of a liberal democracy that a secular state has a very limited competence in religious matters and cannot give privileges to one religion without violating its basic liberal ideology.

*The welfare state needs the churches to support society with basic values*

The history of Norway after World War II is the history of a welfare state, pluralistic with regard to religion and ideology, but centered around equality, education for all and social security as a moral contract. Obviously, it is difficult to maintain a common moral obligation based on pluralism. Therefore a state like the Norwegian has an ongoing debate about how power and politics can be legitimated. A church commission concluded in 1973 that the function of wrongly legitimating power is a constant danger for a state church in a modern society. The church needs a free position to speak up against the abuse of power. We may still remember how angry Prime Minister Kaare Willoch was when the bishop of Oslo, Andreas Aarflot, tried to change our policy towards the apartheid regime in South Africa. The political authorities are not concerned about the freedom of the state church in Norway. The church is thought to supply the public sphere with welfare of 'non-material character' within the framework of a democratic state. The church is used by the state as an answer to the need of basic values for a pluralistic society. The church is there to legitimate a pluralism that is a part of democracy. This represents a formidable problem for an institution that is committed to what is regarded an absolute truth.

*UN: compulsory religious instruction has to be pluralistic*

To what extent the church has accepted or adopted this role, can be discussed. The most recent example is the introduction of compulsory religious instruction in school in 1997. It was a reform that violated individual rights, but it was useful for a state with a policy of integration or assimilation of immigrants. The church played an active part in the work with the plans for this instruction, which from the beginning was meant to have a qualitative and quantitative centre of gravity in Christianity. Some minorities protested in vain, but when they appealed to The United Nations commission of Human Rights, the conclusion was that the plans had to be changed. A compulsory instruction in religion has to be neutral and pluralistic. Nobody can be forced to participate in something that can be regarded as religious activities.

## **The first period of independence in Malawi – ambivalence between church and state**

Malawi started her history as independent nation in 1964 with Dr Banda as the first president. In this period the churches were mostly silent about his abuse of power. This was not only a time for building a nation it was also a time for the churches of Malawi to find their own way, independent of European mother churches.

Arab slave traders brought Islam with them to Malawi in the 1840s. The Yao tribe, also involved in slave trade, began to adopt the Islamic practices. Christianity came a little later, with Scottish missionaries like David Livingstone (1813-1873). He is regarded as the most influential person in the history of modern Malawi. Christian missionaries brought with them many changes: The abolition of slave trade,<sup>21</sup> improvement of agriculture and modern education. The church was also successful in bringing tribal wars to an end. Today 75-80% of the inhabitants are Christians while 10-15% are Muslims. They seem to live side by side without serious conflicts. When Dr Banda was removed from his office as president of Malawi in 1994, the people elected a Muslim, Dr Muluzi, as the new president. The fall of Dr Banda came after pressure from the Catholic Church with the support of other churches. This shows that Christian religion, the driving force behind the abolition of slavery and tribal conflicts, played an important role also in the development of the democratic republic of Malawi.

In 1891 the area that we know as Malawi was declared to be a British protectorate, called Nyasaland. The colonial government came to Nyasaland upon an invitation by the church for the church's protection. At that time British policy seemed to be in favour of giving most of the land over to Portugal, as a part of Mozambique, but the Scottish Presbyterian mission protested and thus there was laid a basis for a movement that eventually led to the forming of the nation. A long struggle ended in 1963/1964 with Malawi as an independent country. Dr Banda, who was an ordained elder of the Presbyterian Church, became the first president. He led the country in an autocratic style and turned the country into a

*European missionaries important in Malawian history*

*Dr Banda was replaced by a Muslim as president*

*Dr Banda was an ordained church elder*

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<sup>21</sup> Slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1833, but the Arab slave trade from East Africa to Turkey, Persia and French and Portuguese colonies continued on a large scale. Livingstone made the termination of slave trade 'the first great step to any mission'. He appealed to the Parliament and the sultan of Zanzibar was forced to close the slave market in 1873, one month after the death of Livingstone.

police state. According to his view, political opponents were to be meat for the crocodiles.

*For a long  
time the  
churches gave  
him their  
support*

The Presbyterian Church was from the beginning linked closely to the nationalist movement. On the one hand we see that the modern state could not have been brought into being without the presence of Christian missions. On the other hand, churches were in danger of losing credibility because of their support of the dictator. There are ample indications that the joint message from the Catholic and Presbyterian churches on the 10th Anniversary of Independence was written more in fear than in truth as it read: 'What has been achieved during this period in all fields is so unbelievable that it confounds even the most optimistic expectations of most of us and there is no doubt that all of this achievement is due to the untiring efforts, dedicated, selfless and responsible leadership of His Excellency, the Life President Ngwasi Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda...' (Ross 1998: 131). Thus, most people did not think of the church as an agent for political change. But the reform process in the 1990s cannot be properly understood without looking at the role of the churches. It started with the Pastoral Letter of the Catholic bishops in March 1992 and the next step was the forming of a Public Affairs Committee (PAC) the same year, with representatives from different churches. PAC became involved in a very effective way as steps were taken towards a multiparty system. At the same time the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) issued a declaration admitting with regret that the church had been too closely linked to the ruling political party, often to the point of performing ceremonies around various government functions. Looking back, most churches admit that they legitimated the Banda regime by their practice, as well as by their silence. Contrary to the expectations of the masses, the church leaders 'danced to the tune of the government' This is not to say that they did nothing, but that the churches focused on important civil society issues like health and education.

*Churches'  
influence in  
society*

To understand this, we have to recognize some of the differences between Malawian and Norwegian societies. Norwegians are accustomed to systems of social and political security and a more or less defined role of the churches as a sector within the civil society. That limits the role of the church towards the state. European churches would be more than happy to increase their influence in areas like education and health, but that would be asking for the moon. Most people in Europe seem to think that the church is there for the ceremonies they need. In Malawi the involvement of

churches in education and health has been an important part of the process of building an independent nation. The churches and the state seem to have relied on each other in a common task and the churches have been granted more influence in public life than would be possible in Norway today. The churches should not be criticized for that, but it is important to see and understand that churches in different nations will have different ways to act as a church of Christ in relation to the state.

One example can be enlightening if we use it as an exercise. In 1998 the CCAP synod of Livingstonia wrote to president Muluzi, a Muslim, a letter that opened with these words:

‘His Excellency the State President  
Dr. Bakili Muluzi

Church Concerns on Socio-Economic and Political Situation in Malawi.

Your Excellency Sir,  
We greet you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and congratulate you for the first four trying years in a Multi-Party State.’

For Norwegians it may be recommended an exercise where they exchange the names Bakili Muluzi and Malawi for Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland and Norway and try to find church leaders who could have written the letter!

### **The church as a prophetic voice as dictatorship is fought out**

The churches played an important role as the dictator of Malawi was removed. The churches acted according to a theology that made them responsible for the welfare of the people. It started with a pastoral letter from the Catholic bishops and gained support from other churches, both in Malawi and abroad.

The Pastoral Letter of the Catholic bishops of March 1992, *Living our Faith*, had an explosive effect on the nation. The ruling party, Malawi Congress Party (MCP), which was gathered for an emergency session, condemned the act of the bishops. All efforts to stop the effect of the letter were in vain: ‘It was like the moment in the fairy tale when the little boy pointed out that the Emperor had no clothes’ (Ross 1998: 95). Modern Malawian history is divided between before and after the Pastoral Letter.

*The bishops spoke with great courage*

*A political shock*

*The main message: a quest for equality and justice*

*The bishops claimed authority from the New Testament*

Much of the content of the letter can be read as not provocative. It starts with a short statement about the dignity and unity of mankind, with emphasis on 'equality and the same basic rights for all'<sup>22</sup>. Next paragraph is about the obligation for the church to express her concern for these rights in the society. The third paragraph points out the need to work for greater equality and unity, while the Malawian society shows a growing gap between the rich and the poor, between people struggling for survival and a minority who 'can afford to live in luxury'. The letter speaks about the right of a decent and just salary and against bribery and nepotism. It spells out a concern about poverty, health and illiteracy. It speaks about the need for a close cooperation between church and state in order to give people equal access to education. In these matters the bishops just wrote what everyone knew but nobody dared to say. But the letter also, by focusing on basic elements in democracy, exposed the problems in political life of Malawi, especially in a section called 'The Participation of all in public life', where the bishops write about the New Testament teaching about the gifts of the Spirit, concluding that no individual can claim to have a monopoly of truth and wisdom. In the following paragraph the highlight is on the freedom of expression: 'Nobody should ever have to suffer reprisals for honestly expressing and living up to their convictions: intellectual, religious or political. We can only regret that this is not always the case in our country...' The bishops also proposed some steps towards a restoration of trust: an independent press, places for open discussions, freedom for associations for political purposes and impartial courts of justice. The crown argument is taken from John 8:32: 'The truth will set you free.' The bishops ended their letter by quoting Luke 4, 18-19: 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, for he has anointed me to bring the good news to the afflicted. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free...'

These are words from the first public speech of Jesus, a speech with a programmatic character. He announced the Kingdom of God that he brought with him. By quoting this passage, the bishops claimed to be commissioned to continue the work of Jesus, the head of the church. To place oneself in a messianic role may be perceived as taking too big shoes on, but what the bishops tried to

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<sup>22</sup> This and following quotations are from *Living our Faith*, 1992.

make clear was that they addressed the state on behalf of the church of Christ.

Shortly after The Pastoral letter, a group of church leaders sent an open letter to president Banda, supporting the critique that came from the Roman Catholic Church. They asked for a commission that should propose a new and democratic system in the country. At the same time, in May 1992, the Western donor community decided to stop all aid to Malawi until there was evidence of greater respect for human rights in the government. In August the same year the Christian Council, consisting of the different protestant churches, along with the Roman Catholic Church, the Muslim Community and the Malawi Law Society wrote a letter to the government about the need for a referendum. The referendum should decide if Malawi should reintroduce a multiparty democratic system or not. Thus the Public Affairs Committee (PAC) was established as a representative organ, being able to sit down with the Presidential Committee on Dialogue, which they did for the first time on October 19. The day before they met, the president announced that the government's plan was to hold the referendum that the churches had asked for. The MCP continued to use violence against people who fronted the campaign. Clergymen were detained for preaching a political message, which indeed they did because they worked for a participatory democracy. Both the chairman and the secretary of PAC were exposed to several attempts of assassination. But people were willing to suffer for their convictions.

Church of Scotland (CofS) played an important role in the colonial history of Malawi. Already before the time of national independence, CofS had given the local leadership full responsibility and that implied that the local church should decide how the church should act on political issues. It was no longer a relation between a mother church and a mission field (or between patron and client), but between sister churches. During the long Banda period it seems as if CofS advised the Malawian Presbyterians to keep silent and the Malawians did so, maybe as a sign of subordination to the mother church. There were, of course, exceptions. Many Scottish missionaries had supported the opposition to Banda and at least in one case, the CofS more or less forced Banda to change a death sentence to imprisonment for life. But such cases could not hide the feeling of Malawian people that CofS supported the dictator.

*Support from other churches as well as Muslim leaders*

*The silence of CofS was by many taken to be support for Dr Banda*

*Eventually,  
the CofS  
also acted*

As the international climate changed rapidly around 1990, the end of the cold war encouraged churches to speak out more loudly about human rights in different parts of the world. This change of popular thought influenced of course also CofS and when president Banda made it a part of his rhetoric that he was an ordained elder of CofS, the time had come for this church to choose: whether to support the Banda regime by silence or to speak for the people of Malawi. Seven days after the Pastoral Letter of the Catholic bishops, the World Mission General Secretary, Chris Wigglesworth, announced in an interview with the BBC that Banda could not be regarded as an elder of CofS. This was confirmed at the General Assembly of CofS the same year and the immediate response from the opposition in Malawi was: 'The Moral authority of the KIRK will emancipate us for the second time' (Ross 1998: 122).

As mentioned above, a group of church leaders followed up with strong support of the Pastoral letter and with a request to the protestant churches to take their prophetic role seriously. This letter went on to ask for a broadly based Commission with a mandate that revealed the specific wishes of the church leaders for a democratic state. The Commission should 'make specific proposals for structural reform towards a political system with sufficient checks and balances on the use of power and guarantees of accountability at all levels of government: to review the judicial system in line with the rule of law, to look into the distribution of income and wealth required by the demands of social justice' (ibid : 98).

*Churches  
were engaged  
in the work  
for reforms*

This letter was signed not only by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, but also by representatives for Presbyterian (CofS) synods within Malawi. The immediate result was the Public Affairs Committee, the main instrument in the struggle for a peaceful political change, a purple revolution. After the initiative from the Catholic bishops, the reformed churches seem to have taken a responsibility for the construction of a modern democracy. Distribution of power and wealth, accountability and justice were some of the claims. The PAC started to work on a programme for democratization supported by CofS and the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland. The first major aim was the National referendum on 14th of June 1993. The result was a majority of 63 % in favour of a multiparty system. The next task was the campaign before the General Election on 17th of May 1994. At both elections the CofS was responsible for an ecumenical group of observers.

## **Biblical inspiration in fight for democracy**

Recent history shows that relevant theology can be an important force in the development of democracy. The most striking aspect of the action of the churches of Malawi is their willingness to let the Bible speak for peace, justice and freedom.

So far we have seen that churches with a different approach to political authorities played a role in the democratic development in Malawi. And it is clear that it was the Catholic bishops who really saw the *kairos*<sup>23</sup> of the Malawian nation and had the courage to be the prophetic voice, while the Presbyterian Church can be blamed for silence. Different traditions do not seem to be decisive for whether a church speaks or keeps silent towards the political establishment. We have to look for a better explanation than just aristocratic traditions. In the following are some other elements.

It happened in the aftermaths of the second Vatican Council (1963-65). Pope John XXIII initiated biblical studies of the nature and commission of the church, focusing on the church as the body of Christ (Eph 4), sent to the world with the gospel and to practise his divine love to all people, especially those who are suffering. His successor, Paul VI, followed up by an encyclical called *The Evangelization of Peoples*. The Pastoral Letter quotes Paul VI, saying that the church cannot disassociate her self from man's temporal needs because that is to deny both creation and the purpose of the church. An awareness of the universality of both mankind and church, combined with a biblical understanding of the church as Christ in the world, made the bishops compelled to speak – with one voice. The visit of John Paul II in 1989 may have encouraged the bishops, but it is also obvious that this awareness was woken up by studies of the Bible. It is a radical use of the Bible we meet in this letter. It starts with a passage from Mark 1: 15: 'Repent and believe the Gospel', a passage that explains both why the bishops had to speak publicly and that those who exercise power are accountable to God. Further, the bishops argue directly from the creation story in Genesis chapter 1 and 2 to conclusions about the dignity and unity of mankind and from St. Paul's teaching of the body of Christ to a statement of participation of all in public life. Both in the beginning and in the end of the letter other passages are quoted to support the

*Why were the Catholic bishops the first to protest?*

*Inspiration from the universal church*

*Courage to let the Bible speak the truth*

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<sup>23</sup> Kairos is a word from the Greek New testament and is often used in literature of recent history of Malawi. It literally means 'time', but has become a word for a decisive moment, or a 'moment of truth'.

reasons for the Church to speak. Finally the bishops have a word about how to build a climate for trust: the truth will set you free (John 8: 32).

*Close ties  
may prevent  
a church  
from  
speaking up,  
but also  
inspire to be  
an advisor*

The other two influential church bodies, the Anglican and the Presbyterian, were different in many ways, but they had one thing in common: They were closely linked to the project of building a nation. That may have contributed to their silence during the Banda period. On the other hand we can observe that the Church of Central Africa Presbyterians little by little became very specific in advises to the new regime. In an open letter of August 1998 this church wrote in length about what politics would be best for the people of Malawi. The advices were given according to the church's concept of a democracy and aiming at the realization of a vision for the nation. Democracy is defined as '... a system of Government of the people, by the people and for the people. It is a Government where members of Parliament listen to the views of ordinary people, the electorates, and present them to Parliament...People demand that elected leaders be responsible, hardworking, accountable and transparent, and can vote out of office anybody who does not satisfy their needs. People are free to speak out and express their opinion, free to criticize the Government...People are free to join any association of their choice...True multiparty Democracy is sustained when there is a strong opposition...' (Church Concerns 1998: 6). The vision is 'By the year 2020, Malawi as a God-fearing nation will be secure, ecologically balanced, democratically mature, environmentally sustainable, self-reliant with equal opportunities for and active participation by all, having social services, vibrant cultural and religious values and being a technologically driven middle-income country' (ibid: 8).

*The debate  
on churches'  
role in  
democracy  
must go on*

Statements like these are first and foremost witnesses of churches that are willing to take up an obligation for the future of a nation and its people. On the other hand they raise a lot of questions that can only be answered in the future. The future will show whether the churches are able to contribute to democracy that takes traditions and culture of Malawi into consideration and not mostly copy ideas and practices from Europe and USA. It is important that there is an ongoing discussion on this and related questions. From this the churches of Malawi may get some advices in the task of finding their public identity, their role in a democratic society and how to communicate Christian and ethical conviction in their political and

civil context. Such advice might be useful for the churches in Norway too. One of these related questions, perhaps the most important one, concerns the practice of the churches: How can a church communicate a commitment to democracy in teaching and practice? The problem is outlined here and is treated as an ethical and didactical question in chapter 14 'Building Democracy by teaching Religion and Ethics.'

Clearly, there are many factors of history, culture and doctrine that may have some influence on how a church understands her role in a society. These factors may be more or less important, but they seem to be secondary in the sense that in the Malawi case they were not strong enough to make the church speak against the abuse of power. It is obvious that the action of the churches to a larger extent was based on Bible studies. The Bible gave the bishops an analytic tool and a language that enabled them to address poverty and injustice as a violation of the will of God as well as a clear understanding of the church's obligation to speak out, calling the rulers of this world to take their responsibility towards God's will seriously. This way the Bible became a basis for *acting as a church of Christ* in a way that was understood by people and politicians alike.

*The Bible  
gives the  
church  
courage and  
tools*

This happened in the early 1990s. At the kairos of the Malawian nation, churches spoke with a prophetic voice against oppression and injustice. Today, in a society where democratic ideals are more or less institutionalized, the roles of the churches are likely to be different. Malawi may have entered 'a post prophetic era' (Ott 2000: 13). Bible studies do not give churches all competence needed in the building of a nation. To build up a welfare state that can be measured to sound democratic standards takes all political skills that are available. The job will have to be done through political institutions and the churches should refrain from becoming too detailed technically and judicially involved in that process. The churches will still play a role, because it is vital for a democracy to have people committed to Christian values at all levels of political institutions. The most important job for the churches will be formation of lay people with an ethical commitment that prepare them to act consistently as Christians in politics.

## Questions

1. Describe some similarities and differences between The Anglican Church, The Church of Scotland and The Church of Norway.
2. What was meant by ‘a Christian nation’ in the history of Norway? Why could this ideal be used against a democratic society?
3. What did Christian lay people want to gain, fighting for democracy?
4. To what extent should churches accept a secular state?
5. What made the Malawian churches prepared for a fight for democracy?
6. How can the parable of the leaven, or the yeast in the dough, be applied to understand the role of a church in society today?
7. In the minds of western readers, for example from the perspective of a modern and liberal state, religion has become a private matter. From that perspective one may think that the churches of Malawi have become too closely involved in politics. It may be an eye opening exercise to try to answer some historical questions (Looking for answers to these questions might lead to an expanded understanding of the role of a church in building and nourishing a young as well as an old democracy):
  - a. What would have been the result if the Norwegian clergy had written about democracy in 1883 like the Catholic bishops did in 1992 and Church of Central Africa Presbyterian did in 1998?
  - b. What would have happened if people had not fought for this idea of democracy *as a part of their Christian conviction*?

### *Compare and contrast Malawi and Norway*

After having read two or all of chapters 5, 6 and 7 in this book, discuss the following questions.

1. Make a list of similarities and differences between Malawi and Norway in the development of democratic government.

2. What similarities and differences can you draw from Norway's union with Denmark and Sweden and how does this compare with Malawi's experience as a British protectorate?

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# PART 4

## Perspectives of special Interest

