

**Revival of a kairos consciousness:
Prolegomena to a research focus on religious and
social change in post-apartheid South Africa¹**

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Abstract

My point of departure in this article is a new interest in the socio-religious reality of a reviving kairos theological tradition – or kairos consciousness – in post-apartheid South Africa, but indissolubly related to this is also an interest in the question of the potential and actual role of the country's historic mainline churches as reviving change agents. This leads me to present, firstly, an exploratory perspective on the discourse and appeals of two ecclesial letters in particular through which the leadership of a broad ecumenical representation from South Africa's mainline churches have sought in recent times to critically engage with the country's ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC). On the basis of this exploration and my claim that I regard these two letters as the boldest manifestation to date of the socio-religious reality of a reviving kairos consciousness in post-apartheid South Africa, I conclude the article by, secondly, also looking forward to an envisaged longer-term research focus that would be steered by the research question about the prospects of a reviving kairos consciousness actually becoming a meaningful catalyst of positive social change in post-apartheid South African society. More specifically, in this consideration of an envisaged longer-term research focus I identify four topical concerns that need to be taken into consideration and researched in relation to a concern with the post-apartheid kairos theme.

Introduction

In post-apartheid South Africa new theological claims are being made about an apparent “rebirth” of the kairos theological tradition – or “kairos consciousness” – which had rendered decisive theological and political direction to the movement of ecumenical mainline churches in the country in their opposition to apartheid and the apartheid state (Le Bruyns 2012; see also Boesak 2011). In the first instance, these can be considered as claims that may be directly related to the launch in early 2011 of Kairos Southern Africa, an organisational initiative that resulted from a noticeably deepening concern amongst ecumenical leaders and theologians from mainline descent about the theological and church sector's lack of contribution to the public good in post-apartheid South Africa (Le Bruyns 2012:4-6; Nthla & Arrison 2011). Accordingly, Kairos Southern Africa eventually came into being as a direct result of this concern to serve as an ecumenical association and network of Christian individuals and groups, explicitly aiming to newly “carry forward the legacy of Kairos theology in Southern Africa” and “to be in solidarity with others throughout the world” (Kairos Southern Africa n.d.:1; cf. Le Bruyns 2012:6; Nthla & Arrison 2011) by finding its direct orientation in *The Kairos Document* from the late apartheid years. In an elaboration of this organisational aim worth quoting, Kairos Southern Africa further states in the latest draft of its constitution:

Kairos Southern Africa recognises the interrelatedness and interdependence of the struggle of peoples of Southern Africa, and the role that faith played and continues to play in the humanisation or dehumanisation process in our different countries and regions. The South African Kairos document of 1985 recognises that Church and State Theologies, while often dominant, need the corrective of Prophetic Theology in order for faith to be credible. The Zimbabwe Kairos document of 1988 builds upon this prophetic tradition. This organisation and network is now conceived and established to reconnect and nurture the prophetic voice that recognises God's face in the face of the poor and most marginalised people in Southern Africa (Kairos Southern Africa n.d.:1).

¹ This article was initially delivered by the author as his inaugural lecture at the University of South Africa on 19 November 2013. The article also builds on ideas that the author first developed in a paper presented at the conference on “The Impact of Religion: Challenges for Society, Law and Democracy” held from 20-22 May 2013 in Uppsala, Sweden.

In the second instance, it can be considered as appropriate to also relate the claims of a reviving kairos consciousness in post-apartheid South Africa to a broader movement of ecclesial organisations. According to this identification, glimpses of such a consciousness could firstly – and even prior to the establishment of Kairos Southern Africa – be recognised in a gradual new critical positioning of particular ecclesial institutions vis-à-vis the post-apartheid South African state. This new critical stance has conspicuously involved the strategic decision by the South African Council of Churches (SACC) in the early 2000s to shift from a position of “critical solidarity” with the state to one of “critical engagement” (Bompani 2006:1146; see Kuperus 2011:289-295), which has since led to increasing instances of friction and tension between the SACC and the country’s ruling party (see De Waal 2012; O’Grady 2011). At the same time, the new critical reorientation has also involved other prominent denominations from mainline descent such as the Catholic Church and Anglican Church following suit and criticising the government and the country’s political leadership at times for the nature of its particular involvement in addressing the HIV/Aids pandemic, the bad moral behaviour of political leaders (not least as reflected in the behaviour of Jacob Zuma, the country’s current president), the degree to which efforts have been made to fight poverty and corruption and address inequality, and the ANC’s inability to address failures in the education and health systems (see Bompani 2006:1145-1147; Faul 2011; *News24* 2010).

In the third and final instance, it could well be postulated that the claims of a reviving kairos consciousness are today most boldly manifested by the way in which the leadership of a broad ecumenical representation from South Africa’s mainline churches has in recent times sought to critically engage with the African National Congress (ANC). More specifically, this identification of a critical engagement refers, firstly, to an initiative by Kairos Southern Africa, which led to an ecclesial letter that was presented to the ANC as theological and ethical reflections a few months before its centenary celebrations in April 2012 (Kairos Southern Africa 2011). Secondly, however, it also refers to another ecclesial letter that was issued almost exactly one year later under the title “The church speaks ... for such a time as this ...” (hereafter referred to as “The church speaks”). In comparison to the first letter – also known as “Kairos 2012” – this second letter could be distinguished by its even stronger kairos-like tone, through which it sought to address not only the ANC prior to its National Conference in Mangaung in December 2012 but importantly, also the economic leadership as well as the most poor and oppressed citizens of the country. Importantly, however, this second letter would not only be issued in the name of Kairos Southern Africa; it also carried with it the support and formal endorsement of the leadership of the SACC, the Church Leaders Consultation and The Evangelical Alliance of South Africa (TEASA).²

On the basis of this threefold observation up to this point, my point of departure in this article is one that duly wants to acknowledge what appear to be visible signs of a reviving kairos consciousness in the present-day post-apartheid socio-religious landscape. At the same time, however, this acknowledgement also leads me to go one step further by observing how this new development appeals strongly to my own interest in researching the nexus between religious change and social change in post-apartheid South African society. This research focus is as much concerned with how religion and religious traditions manifest themselves as dynamic, changing phenomena over time as with how religion and religious traditions also hold the potential to act as catalysts of social change (both negatively and positively) in broader society. Consequently, I will devote the rest of this article to a discussion that can at the most be regarded as a prolegomena to this research focus.

Given the limited space at my disposal to present this article, I will set out to outline two tasks as an introduction to what I foresee from a sociologically oriented point of view as a longer-term research focus of considerable complexity. My point of departure is a new interest in the socio-religious reality of a reviving kairos consciousness in present-day post-apartheid South Africa but indissolubly related to this is also an interest in the question of the potential and actual role of the country’s historic mainline churches as reviving change agents. Firstly, I will present an exploratory perspective on the discourse and appeals encountered in the aforementioned two ecclesial letters, which could be regarded as the boldest manifestation to date of the socio-religious reality of a reviving kairos consciousness. Secondly, I want to look forward to an envisaged longer-term research focus that would be steered by the research question about the prospects of a reviving kairos consciousness actually becoming a meaningful catalyst of positive social change that would affect both the quality of South Africa’s democracy and the socio-economic prospects of the masses of poor and excluded citizens in such an anticipated context. In other words, in this outline of the broad contours of such a research undertaking, I will attempt to identify other topical concerns that need to be taken into consideration and researched in relation to a concern with the post-apartheid kairos theme. This is necessary, more specifically, since these topical concerns pertain significantly to other pertinent realities that in their own right not only influence and shape a more complex contemporary post-apartheid socio-religious landscape, but also influence and challenge the contribution that the reviving kairos consciousness could make to social change.

² The leaders who signed the covering letter that accompanied the actual letter were Reverend Edwin Arrison, General Secretary of Kairos Southern Africa; Bishop Joe Seoka, President of the SACC; Anglican Archbishop Thabo Makgoba of the Church Leaders Consultation; and Reverend Moss Nthla of TEASA (see Makgoba, Seoka, Nthla & Arrison 2012).

Probing deeper into the reviving kairos consciousness: the case of the first ecclesial letter

In continuing a discussion of the two ecclesial letters, particularly as their contents reflect the most expressive indication to date of a reviving kairos consciousness in post-apartheid South Africa, I find it helpful to quote from a recent reflection by well-known Reformed liberation theologian, Allan Boesak, on what he considered to be the essential meaning of such a revitalised kairos consciousness. Boesak formulated his reflection in response to a request by Kairos Southern Africa and commented:

A Kairos consciousness is a critical consciousness. It discerns and critiques the situation in which we live. It understands that it is a situation of life and death. There is a conflict – between rich and poor, oppressor and oppressed, powerful and powerless, beneficiaries and victims, those who are included and those who are excluded. In that critique there is no room for sentiment and romanticism – people’s lives are at stake. The crisis we are facing is not just economic, social and political, it is a moral crisis (Boesak 2011:2).

Indeed, if taken as our hermeneutical lens, Boesak’s description may well lead one to suggest that, as a public statement, the initial expression of a reviving kairos consciousness through the first of the two letters – “Kairos 2012” – did not quite meet the critical standards that are required by such a consciousness. Thus, if viewed through the lens of Boesak’s description, a closer look into the contents of this first letter of 17 pages may well lead one to discover a text that appears too benign in the way in which it approached the ANC and that, as such, had given way to the kind of sentimentalism and romanticism that Boesak refers to: firstly, by beginning with a word of congratulations to the ANC on its achievements in the struggle against colonialism and apartheid and, secondly, by going to great lengths to appreciate the shared legacy of the ANC and the churches in the struggle for liberation during different periods of South Africa’s history (see Kairos Southern Africa 2011:1-10).

I want at this point to draw attention to the way in which some in the Kairos Southern Africa network have found it necessary to criticise the “Kairos 2012” letter (see Cormick 2012a; 2012b; Khumalo 2012a; Mbanjwa 2012) for falling short of the critical inclinations that characterised and defined the two kairos documents of the apartheid era: “Challenge to the Church” and “The Road to Damascus”. According to this critique, whereas these two documents “were hard-hitting pulpit-bashing denunciations of the evils of the day” (Cormick 2012a:1; 2012b), “Kairos 2012” did not reflect the same boldness of character. In contrast, it did not denounce the crimes and injustices of the post-apartheid state – corruption, greed, theft and tender fraud, lack of accountability, lack of transparency, lack of services to the poor, and classism – in the same measure. Instead, as a public statement it could be seen as treading “softly around the ANC, gently offering a few ‘words’” and lacking a “loud prophetic voice speaking the truth and demanding conversion”. In effect, this letter could be criticised for its fear of the state’s authority, for not daring to speak out sufficiently against the erstwhile “liberator’s corruption” (Cormick 2012a:1; 2012b).

Because of the limited space that this article allows me, I want to confine myself here to briefly acknowledging and appreciating this critique of “Kairos 2012” for (a) introducing a very necessary debate about the mode of a revitalised kairos discourse in a post-apartheid, democratic South African dispensation; and (b) substantiating an argument about the limitations of the “Kairos 2012” letter specifically in the light of Alan Boesak’s recent reflection. At the same time, however, it seems to me quite unfair to conclude a discussion of this letter by not at least expressing some appreciation for the way in which it made a founding contribution to a reviving kairos consciousness in post-apartheid South Africa. I want to make two points in this regard.

Firstly, as a letter addressed to the ruling party of the day, “Kairos 2012” does grow in critical kairos-like tone and intention as the discussion progresses, both in its words of self-criticism and critical judgement (cf. Boesak 2011:2-3). In self-critical fashion the letter ultimately not only raises concerns about recurring tendencies of “state” and “church theologies” in post-apartheid South Africa, which it sees as being manifested respectively in the way in which church leaders are (again) “at the ‘service of the party’ in a “party political sense” and in the way in which South African Christians are (again) adopting a “neutral” stand on the social realities in the country (Kairos Southern Africa 2011:10-11, 15). In a further word of “caution and concern” it also proceeds by presenting its own analyses of the current South African situation to the ANC as one of deep concern about the country, its people and its future. Accordingly, it warns that “things can go terribly wrong if not addressed properly and as a matter of urgency” (Kairos Southern Africa 2011:12), after which it proceeds to elaborate on nine concerns in particular that it sees as manifestations of the current undesirable situation.³

³ The concerns listed and elaborated on are: 1. Factionalism within the ANC; 2. The need for economic justice and closing the gap between rich and poor; 3. Maintenance of a proper order and structure within the security and intelligence forces and the link between this (or the lack of this) and the increase of criminality. 4. Corruption (including in party political activities); 5. Maintaining a real social cohesion in the country; 6. The unsustainability of an opulent “America dream” lifestyle; 7. The poor standards of education for the vast majority of the poor in the country; 8. Making solidarity with the oppressed across the world a key to South Africa’s international relations; and 9. Respecting the constitution of the country (Kairos Southern Africa 2011:13-14).

Yet “Kairos 2012” also deserves some appreciation for the way in which it closes with a new-found affirmation of how those within the Kairos Southern Africa network will continue to re-orientate their theology and action within a prophetic mode. To this extent, one could well observe how the letter shows some resemblance with the way in which *The Kairos Document* from the late apartheid years closed its own address (see *The Kairos Document* 1988:37-40) by likewise making a statement about a new-found commitment to action according to which the Kairos Southern Africa network would over the next ten years be focused on “closing the gap between the richest and the poorest in South Africa, by attempting to empower both” (Kairos Southern Africa 2011:16). Not least, however, it is in the light of this commitment to action that one can appreciate the way in which the letter also deems it necessary to further strengthen the impact of its message by concluding with “a prophetic word to the ANC”; more specifically, it urges the ANC to begin to focus more proactively on the challenges of the current period as it foresees that “[a] time will come when the history of the struggle against colonialism and apartheid will become dim” and young people especially “will look forward rather than backward” (Kairos Southern Africa 2011:16).

Secondly, I also find good grounds for further appreciation in Kairos Southern Africa’s own explanation of why it wrote the “Kairos 2012” letter to the ANC. Thus, even if it may be regarded as a text moderate in its kairos inclination, “Kairos 2012” could in the light of Kairos Southern Africa’s explanation be appreciated for its contribution as an ongoing “confidence-building exercise” assisting the South African Christian community towards regaining “its confidence after almost 20 years of almost complete silence and ineffective witness in the new democracy” (Kairos Southern Africa 2012a). Accordingly, even if more could be expected in terms of a critical voice and engagement, it could be argued that “Kairos 2012” has contributed at least in some moderate but not insignificant way to a reviving public voice and mobilisation of the Christian community and its churches in present-day post-apartheid South Africa. This, one could argue, has manifested itself and continues to manifest itself in especially four ways: first, the way in which the printed and electronic media have given greater exposure than before to the Christian community and its churches by communicating the concerns expressed in the letter to the South African public; second, the way in which the ANC has itself found it necessary to meet and engage in discussion with a delegation of Kairos Southern Africa about the contents of the letter on more than one occasion; third, the way in which the letter has become a catalyst for discussion and dialogue in the electronic and social media and at public meetings; and fourth, the way in which the letter today forms the basis of a one million signature campaign showing the support of Christian individuals, groups and churches but also of members from the South African public at large (see Arrison 2012; *City Press* 2012a; 2012b; Kairos Southern Africa 2011:18-32; 2012a; 2012b; 2012c; 2012d; Khumalo 2012a; 2012b; 2012c; Khumalo-Seegelken 2012; Le Bruyns 2012:7-8; Marthiomombergblog n.d.; Mbanjwa 2012; WordPress.com n.d.).

Enhancing the critical tone: the case of the second ecclesial letter

If it is possible to criticise the “Kairos 2012” letter for being too moderate in tone and even for succumbing to the temptation of being sentimental and romantic, the same critique could certainly not be delivered against the second of the two ecclesial letters under discussion: “The church speaks ... for such a time as this”. In comparison to the first letter, this second letter not only appeared more strongly positioned from the outset because of its broader support base, as already mentioned, but this broader support base clearly also gave its authors the confidence to present a 10-page public statement with a conspicuously enhanced critical tone.

A closer look into the contents of the letter evinces an ecclesial text that, unlike “Kairos 2012”, clearly finds little scope for celebrating the historical path to liberation in South Africa. Instead, in a mould that very much resembles *The Kairos Document* from the late apartheid years, a similar claim is made right at the start of the letter that the current South African situation indeed has the qualities of a new “kairos moment”, “a special moment” when God is speaking to South Africans “in particularly urgent tones” (SACC *et al.* 2012:1; cf. Boesak 2011:1, 3; *The Kairos Document* 1988:7-8). Accordingly, as far as the letter is concerned, this ought to be regarded as “a moment that requires transformational leadership and action” (SACC *et al.* 2012:1). In its references to the biblical texts of Amos 5:13 and Psalm 37:7, it further suggests that these may even be considered as “evil times”, which require the South African Christian community to break its own silence and speak out (SACC *et al.* 2012:2).

At this point I want to suggest that the second of our two letters under discussion here, “The church speaks”, could well be appreciated and interpreted precisely as an ecclesial text that wants to achieve this purpose: to break the silence of the South African Christian community on alarming social developments in the post-apartheid dispensation, but to do so with a reinvigorated kairos-like voice more urgently and critically than in “Kairos 2012”, the first of our two letters. From this perspective, I want to highlight several defining elements of this second letter.

- For “The church speaks”, breaking the silence and speaking out in a reinvigorated kairos-like voice entails first and foremost (not unlike “Kairos 2012”) that the South African Christian community and its churches need to look inward and confess their “own complicity” and “relative prophetic silence” on detrimental developments in contemporary South African society. This indeed becomes a noticeable feature close to the beginning of the letter, where confessional statements are made about various issues, not the least about the Christian community’s failure in the post-apartheid era to stand united against the problem of poverty, fulfil its role in helping to strengthen civil society, and cooperate with political and economic leaders to ensure abundant life for everyone in the country (SACC *et al.* 2012:2).
- For “The church speaks”, breaking the silence and speaking out in a reinvigorated kairos-like voice secondly means that the South African Christian community and its churches had to proclaim anew a message of hope in the faithfulness of God as the underlying and ultimate beacon. This theme of hope surfaces clearly in the section that directly follows the various confessional statements and that has as its subheading the question whether there is hope for South Africa’s democracy. Like *The Kairos Document* of old, the letter clearly wants to proclaim the message that there is hope for the country (see *The Kairos Document* 1988:35), exactly because of the knowledge that God is faithful and the historical experience of how God made it possible to defeat colonialism and apartheid (SACC *et al.* 2012:3-4). At the same, however, it is exactly because of such sustained hope that the letter finds it necessary to direct itself most pointedly to the reigning powers of political and economic leadership in the country. For the letter, this has become necessary because South Africa has become a place where “the dream of a just, non-racial and prospering democracy is temporarily in eclipse”, precisely because of a generation of leaders who are promoting “an increasingly corrupt political, business and societal culture”, who “have largely lost their moral compass”, and who are today contributing “to more and more racial alienation and growing cynicism” among the country’s people (SACC *et al.* 2012:3).
- For “The church speaks”, breaking the silence and speaking out in a reinvigorated kairos-like voice therefore implies, thirdly, that the South African Christian community and its churches were compelled to address themselves as a matter of great urgency first to the political leaders and the government of the day. In the section that follows, with the subheading “We speak to you, political leaders”, one accordingly encounters a text of great intensity and frankness in which the theme of hope is significantly reintroduced to challenge the political leaders and government of the day to recognise how their words and actions are in actual fact “leading many South Africans towards cynicism and away from hope” (SACC *et al.* 2012:4). Yet from this point on the letter pursues its interrogation of the current leadership by also posing the question to them whether they could understand how, as a most specific derailment of a spirit of hope in South African society, their waste of public resources has led to “a culture of impunity and immunity” that has once again made the poorest sections of the population “the main victims of bad governance” (SACC *et al.* 2012:4). Consequently, for the letter this interrogation in turn provides the sufficient grounds to finally make an extensive, seven-fold plea to the current political leadership to become newly awakened to current adverse developments and re-orientate their actions towards constructively addressing particular critical issues.⁴
- For “The church speaks”, breaking the silence and speaking out in a reinvigorated kairos-like voice, fourthly, necessitated that the South African Christian community and its churches also had to broaden their address to include the economic leadership of the country. In what could be regarded as a significant broadening of scope in comparison to “Kairos 2012” (which still sought to address the country’s political leadership exclusively), the letter acknowledges as a limitation on the part of the churches that they have not addressed the economic leadership of the country before (SACC *et al.* 2012:6). Consequently, a significant defining element of the letter becomes the way in which it, in a subsequent section under the subheading “We now speak to you, economic leaders, trade unions, etc.”, seeks to remove this blind spot. Whilst this is done by also expressing appreciation of the economic players in South African society who have been acting with integrity and have been taking risks to grow the economy, a critical stance similar to that taken against the political leaders is ultimately adopted. Through a form of interrogation that comprises ten sets of critical questions, the main thrust of this ques-

⁴ The critical issues listed and elaborated on are:

- The loss of hope and growth of cynicism and anger, with specific reference to the events in the towns of Marikana and De Doorns in 2012;
- The abuse of power as well as the corruption and self-serving among politicians;
- The prevalence of “sickening double-talk” whereby politicians speak out against corruption, but at the same time participate in various forms of corruption or turn a blind eye to it;
- The prevailing mediocrity in political leadership and the accompanying tendency to put the interests of the party above those of society;
- The voice and needs of the young people in the country;
- The need to stop the decay of the education system;
- The need to implement the National Development Plan (SACC *et al.* 2012:4-5).

tioning of the economic leaders is to indicate that they have made little contribution towards achieving a fairer, more equal and inclusive economic order in post-apartheid South Africa. Instead, as evident from one of the sets of questions, they are reproached for being more concerned about maximising the short- and medium-term profits of their companies through mechanisation, specialisation and optimisation than about the long-term future of the country through job creation, education of the youth and applying sustainable business practices (SACC *et al.* 2012:6-7).

- For “The church speaks”, breaking the silence and speaking out in a reinvigorated kairos-like voice, fifthly, necessitated that the South African Christian community and its churches also had to speak to the most poor and oppressed in the country, in addition to the political and economic leaders. Accordingly, in the section that follows the address to the economic leaders, the letter distinguishes itself significantly from both *The Kairos Document* and “Kairos 2012” by now not only speaking on behalf of or for the poor and oppressed, but directly to them (see SACC *et al.* 2012:7-9). More significantly still, in doing this the letter in effect recognises the agency role of the poor and oppressed in the current context. In what could be regarded as being effectively an allusion to the letter’s earlier reference to the events in the towns of Marikana and De Doorns during the second half of 2012,⁵ this recognition is conveyed more specifically by expressing a word of gratitude for “the strong messages from the poorest on the mines and the farms”, who through their protest actions have brought South Africans to the realisation that the country is, in kairos-like terms, in fact facing “a crisis moment” (SACC *et al.* 2012:7; cf. Swart 2013a; *The Kairos Document* 1988:7). For the letter, furthermore, this reality of the protest actions of the poor could be compared to the image of a cracking “house” (SACC *et al.* 2012:7-8), which urgently calls for the institution of “a new social compact” (SACC *et al.* 2012:9) that should be put to the test by way of eight pertinent questions that the poor should put to government, business and society at large (SACC *et al.* 2012:8-9). However, if the answers to these questions turn out to be negative, the letter concludes, the workers and youths of the country will “have no choice but to break down the foundations so that something completely new can emerge” (SACC *et al.* 2012:9).
- For “The church speaks”, breaking the silence and speaking out in a reinvigorated kairos-like voice, sixthly and finally, required that the South African Christian community and its churches had to reclaim their commitments to action in the current context in authentic kairos-like terms (SACC *et al.* 2012:9-10; cf. Kairos Southern Africa 2011:16; *The Kairos Document* 1988:37-40). This is expressed in a list of seven commitments on their part, which mention such critical issues as corruption, education, employment, the ecology, and revitalising the voice of the church and the rest of civil society (SACC *et al.* 2012:10). Not least, one may infer how this commitment takes on even more political overtones in the covering letter that accompanied the actual letter. Directed directly to President Jacob Zuma, it states:

[I]f political leaders do not take seriously what we are saying we will continue to strengthen and support the Church’s role within the civil society movements, especially those working amongst the poorest of our people to bring about a more healthy democracy. At this moment we believe that our democracy can be significantly improved (Makgoba, Seoka, Nthla & Arrison 2012:2).

It is hardly surprising, then, given its enhanced critical tone, that “The church speaks” would attract even more attention from the printed and electronic media than was the case with “Kairos 2012” (see *Cape Argus* 2012; *City Press* 2012c; Copley 2012; Devenish 2012; Ghosh 2012; Jones 2012; *Mail & Guardian* 2012; Mkokeli 2012; Rossouw 2012; The Presidency 2012; *Times Live* 2012). In contrast to “Kairos 2012”, this second letter would not similarly become connected to a public signature campaign, and neither did it lead (for obvious reasons, one might say) to any meeting between the leadership that endorsed the letter and the ANC. At the same time, however, based on an exploration of the articles and reports that emanated from the media at the time when “The church speaks” was released, it could be claimed that the message sent out to the South African public suggested that a decisive turn in the relationship between the country’s ecumenical movement of mainline churches and the post-apartheid state may have taken place as result of the letter; that is, a turn that is not only reflected by the message of these churches in the letter, but certainly also by how the ANC responded to this message (see *Cape Argus* 2012; *City Press* 2012c; Copley 2012; Ghosh 2012; Jones 2012; *Mail & Guardian* 2012; Mkokeli 2012; Rossouw 2012; *Times Live* 2012). In the words of one of the media reports that followed its release, through this letter public concern at the state of the nation was expressed that could be regarded as “almost unprecedented in South Africa’s recent history”. The report continued by comparing the letter to the way that the churches last came out as strongly “in the 1980s when late apartheid repression was at its worst and the Kairos Document movement started” (*City Press* 2012c).

⁵ See footnote 4.

Prospects of a reviving kairos consciousness? Towards researching a more complex post-apartheid socio-religious landscape

This seems to be the right moment to more explicitly acknowledge the recent contribution of the South African public theologian Clint le Bruyns to my topic. In a paper delivered a few months after the release of the first of the two letters (“Kairos 2012”) at a consultation of Brazilian and South African theologians at the University of South Africa,⁶ Le Bruyns significantly raised the question of whether it was in fact possible to speak of “the rebirth of kairos theology” at this point in South Africa’s post-apartheid history (see Le Bruyns 2012:4-8). He responded positively to this question, based on his conviction that the establishment of Kairos Southern Africa and the release of the “Kairos 2012” letter in particular could be taken as signs not so much of the rebirth of a kairos theology, “but of a kairos theological tradition with its kairos consciousness marked by contextuality, criticality and change” (Le Bruyns 2012:6, 7-8). For Le Bruyns, this development therefore demanded from all those who are active role-players and thought leaders within various theological paradigms in present-day post-apartheid South Africa – such as black theology, liberation theology, womanist theology, feminist theology, confessing theology, African theology and public theology – to once again take cognisance of the apparent “rebirth” of a kairos consciousness in the post-apartheid socio-religious landscape. Moreover, it required that they “seriously consider” the implications and responsibilities of this development for public theologians in present-day South Africa, in one way or another (Le Bruyns 2012:6).

In offering this article as nothing more than a prolegomena to an anticipated larger and more complex research focus on religious and social change in present-day post-apartheid South Africa, I find important support in Le Bruyns’s injunction that we need to place the thesis of a reviving kairos consciousness at the centre of such a research focus. From the point of view of my own interest in researching religion’s potential and actual contribution to critical, positive social change, I want to go along with Le Bruyns by identifying the recent visible manifestations of a reviving kairos consciousness (with both letters being a visible manifestation of this) as undoubtedly the most serious sign to date in the post-apartheid dispensation of a new publicly expressed critical awakening within the religious sector about socio-political and socio-economic developments in South African society.

At the same time, however, it is at this point of identification with Le Bruyns that I want to steer my own research focus in a more cautious, sociologically inclined direction, guided by the question about the prospects of a reviving kairos consciousness to actually become a meaningful catalyst of social change in the present-day South African context. In what can be understood as an attempt to situate my own research over against a mere construction of theological ideas on the reality of an apparently reviving kairos consciousness, an all-important point of departure will be the hypothesis that the prospects of a reviving kairos consciousness actually contributing to meaningful, far-reaching social change in present-day post-apartheid South African society can by no means be taken as a foregone conclusion at this point in time. More specifically still, as the basis of this hypothesis, my own ongoing attempts at sense-making are taken into account, according to which I have identified at least four pertinent topical concerns that need to be taken into account and investigated in a research project focused on religious and social change specifically concerned with the prospects of a reviving kairos consciousness to contribute towards meaningful, far-reaching social change.⁷ I now conclude this article with a brief exposition of these concerns.

First amongst my list of topical concerns, on the basis of a wider exploration of the scholarly literature on religion and society in post-apartheid South Africa I am indeed struck by the extent to which the claims of a reviving kairos consciousness – with which I have associated myself in this article – are in fact not shared by the majority of contributions to this corpus of literature. These contributions present an almost complete antithesis to the claims of a reviving kairos consciousness, claiming instead that as a collective South Africa’s mainline churches and their leadership in particular have become trapped in the post-apartheid post-colonial condition, relegated by the post-apartheid state but also by civil society and their own theological orientation to the margins of public discourse and engagement.⁸

This apparent divergence clearly calls for a first layer of supplementary research questions to be explored in relation to the main question of a reviving kairos consciousness. The important first question that arises from this engagement with the aforementioned corpus of critical literature is whether these recent expressions of a reviving kairos consciousness – in the form of the establishment of Kairos Southern Africa and the dynamics around the two ecclesial letters that followed – do not at least call for some kind of corrective to the outright

⁶ Le Bruyns more precisely presented this paper at the Brazil-South Africa Consultation on citizenship and interculturality held at the University of South Africa on 23 March 2012.

⁷ I first identified these thematic or topical concerns in the paper presented at the conference in Uppsala mentioned in footnote 1 of this article. I repeated the same insights in a public lecture presented after the conference at the Uppsala Centre for the Study of Religion and Society at Uppsala University. See Swart 2013b.

⁸ I have identified the following contributions that reflect this claim in one way or another: Cochrane 2009; Kumalo & Dziva 2008; Maluleke 2010; Mkhatswa 2007; Rule & Mncwango 2010; Storey 2012; West 2009.

critical perspectives from this corpus of literature. Since the proponents of those critical perspectives have not taken account of these most recent developments in their own reflections, are they not challenged to at least start rethinking their own position, in so far as these developments may point to a prevailing ability in South African mainline Christianity to transform at least sections within its ranks into new “project identities”⁹ that exert themselves in the cause of positive transformation? As such, are we not here in fact witnessing the beginnings of a meaningful transformation in the identity politics of a particular religious representation in post-apartheid South African society that will continue to escalate in terms of its impact both on its own constituency and on the wider society? Or will ongoing research over time rather show the opposite: that the initiatives to revive a kairos consciousness was from the start the undertaking of a few concerned leaders and individuals; that it ultimately by and large remained pitched at the leadership level, not even meeting the target of its one million signature campaign; that on an even more profound level it did not succeed in influencing and transforming the popular consciousness and theological orientation of a substantial section of post-apartheid mainline Christianity, so much so that this religious representation has remained statically stuck in its dominant post-apartheid identities of legitimisation¹⁰ (of the reigning powers of political, economic and social hegemony)¹¹ and resistance¹² (characterised by withdrawal to the private sphere and denominationalism);¹³ and lastly, that it did not deliver or was not able to deliver on its promises and commitments towards mobilisation, empowerment, social change and creation of socio-economic opportunities to which I referred in my discussion of the two ecclesial letters earlier in this article?

I take as the clue to the second of my topical concerns the way in which the country’s ruling party, the ANC, has responded to the message of those actors at the centre of the new kairos awakening. The media reports that followed the release of the second letter well support the thesis that the country’s ruling party has done nothing through its response to contradict the existing social theory that “the postcolonial state does not tolerate the development of religion as a critical voice” (Tayob 2004:21; cf. Bompani 2006:1144-1145; Kumalo 2013:9-10). This is captured by the rather fretful statements from the ruling party that the bishops should “back off”, that their outcry was seen as a “mischievous warning ... directed to the ANC”, that the letter formed part of a broader sectoral effort to “manipulate” the outcome of the ANC’s Mangaung conference of December 2012, that “the bishops needed to engage the ANC, showing respect, instead of engaging in mudslinging”, and that it was a matter of principle that “the ruling party would not allow any sector to write the ANC’s policy” (see *Mail & Guardian* 2012; Mkokeli 2012; Rossouw 2012). It is in these statements that I find the necessary grounds to start formulating a second layer of supplementary research questions to be explored in relation to the main question of a reviving kairos consciousness.

If it could be said that the above-mentioned first layer of questions more specifically pertains to an exploration of the actual ability of a reviving kairos consciousness to contribute over time to meaningful, far-reaching social change in South African society, it could also be said that the second layer of questions would more pertinently deal with the power of the post-apartheid state, as a most important force of the post-apartheid post-colonial condition, to impede on such ability over time. Accordingly, some of the important questions that come to mind here are: How will the post-apartheid state react in the longer term to a reviving kairos movement that may prove itself over time to grow in popular appeal, intensity, criticality and ability to deliver on its promises of mobilisation? Whilst the actors of a reviving consciousness may at present still be allowed to publicly speak out as critically as they wish, in terms of the rules of post-apartheid South Africa’s formal democracy, will this still be allowed by the state in a potential context of growing criticality and mobilisation? Given the immense powers at its disposal, what will the longer-term impact be of the state’s already evident actions to marginalise actors from the reviving kairos ranks – most noticeably amongst them to date the South African Council of Churches (see De Waal 2012; Kuperus 2011:289-295; *IOL News* 2009a; 2009b; Makoni 2009; Mataboge 2009; Sosibo 2012a) – in terms of public representation, dialogue and access to resources? How will a reviving kairos movement overcome this marginalisation and what measures and avenues will be necessary to empower and promote itself independently from the state? Not least, how will this movement relate

⁹ In seeking meaningful sociological categories to theorise about agency and the possibility of social change in present-day South African society, I am drawing on the three typologies of identity formation identified and conceptualised by eminent sociologist Manuel Castells in his recent work on the “Network Society” (cf. also a similar reliance on Castells’s work from a South African perspective in Tayob 2004). Briefly, the first of the typologies, namely “project identities”, indicates those social actors of contemporary civil society who are able to “build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by so doing, seek the transformation of overall social structure” (Castells 2004:8, 10). In contrast, the second identity type, namely “legitimising identities”, refers to those actors or institutions of civil society that are instrumental in upholding and reinforcing the dominant institutions of society to extend and rationalise their structural domination *vis-à-vis* other social actors (Castells 2004:8, 9); the third, “resistance identities”, refers in turn to those social actors who, as a result of the devaluation and stigmatisation that they experience because of society’s dominant institutions and ideologies, build defensive identities whereby they reverse the value judgement forced on them and at the same time reinforce boundaries of separation (Castells 2004:8, 9; see also Castells 2004:419-428).

¹⁰ See footnote 9.

¹¹ This, noticeably, is a line of critique that surfaces strongly in the literature referred to in footnote 8 above.

¹² See footnote 9.

¹³ These elements are likewise highlighted in the critical discussions of the authors referred to in footnote 8.

to those more benign formations from the present-day post-apartheid religious sector – of which the recently established National Interfaith Council of South Africa (NICSA) serves as a particularly good case in point – that are today favoured by the state in consultations and partnership discussions?¹⁴ And, in a situation in which the mantra of religion-state partnership can and will no longer represent the magic bullet (cf. Swart 2010:19) for what clearly remains an ambition also for the reviving kairos actors – to on the basis of the commitment they have made in the second of their ecclesial letters contribute towards meaningful economic development in the form of employment creation for all people in the country – what will the development paradigm be but also the resource base on which they will rely to meet that ambition?¹⁵

I find it necessary to deal, as the third of my topical concerns, even more pointedly with the issue of the increasingly marginal position of the South African Council of Churches (SACC), hinted at in the second layer of questions above. However, here I should mention immediately that I have more in mind than merely a concern with the post-apartheid state's deliberate attempts to side-line this ecclesial formation. Of even greater concern is the fact that, whilst the SACC and its leadership may at present still enjoy a prominent place in the ranks of the reviving kairos movement, recent media reports and observations in the scholarly literature reflect a pessimistic picture of an organisation that has not only lost its former appeal and influence, but also one that faces potential closure because of a lack of financial and institutional support (see Cochrane 2004:229; 2009:100-102; De Waal 2012; *IOL News* 2009a; 2009b; Khumalo-Seegelken n.d.; Kuperus 2011:289-295; Maluleke 2010:154; Makoni 2009; Mataboge 2009; Sosibo 2012a; 2012b).

Faced with this reality, it therefore seems inevitable that a third layer of questions will also take more pertinent account of the implications of the SACC's institutional decline not only for mainline ecumenism in post-apartheid South Africa in general but also for the prospects of a reviving kairos consciousness to actually contribute to meaningful, far-reaching social change in the longer term. From a point of departure that would juxtapose the historical strength of the SACC as critical centre of mainline ecumenical solidarity in South Africa with its current position of ongoing decline (cf. Khumalo-Seegelken n.d.; Kuperus 2011:289-296), leading the way towards a deeper exploration should certainly be the question of the extent to which post-apartheid mainline ecumenism has been weakened by this decline. In the current context in which South Africa's mainline churches have by all accounts lost the critical central point of focus that the SACC provided and in the process have also shown their reluctance to sustain and reinvigorate this centre, does this in fact signal the overall decline of mainline ecumenism in South African society that will not easily be reversed? Do we in fact encounter here, as some scholars suggest, the reality of structures that have become obsolete not only in the South African context but indeed also globally?¹⁶ Does this signal the historical end of a particular ecclesial dynamics in South Africa and elsewhere? Or will a new dynamics emerge from the current ecumenical crisis, characterised by the ability of particular established mainline traditions to reposition themselves as critical actors independently from, but also through the formation of, new creative and appropriate ecumenical formations? As such, whilst it at present still draws on the support of the SACC and its leadership, will the emerging critical ecumenism revolving around the reviving kairos consciousness set out in this article not reflect such possibility of repositioning and reinvigoration? Does the way in which a formation such as Kairos Southern Africa utilises the technology of the information age – most notably the Internet (cf. Castells 2000; 2004; Swart 2006:175-188, 215-222) – to function as an organisation and network, communicate its message, establish connections and dialogue, and meet its aims of mobilisation, not indicate the way forward for cost-effective ecumenical reinvigoration? And will it not be through the support rendered by prevailing strong structures such as the Anglican Church of Southern Africa and The Evangelical Alliance of South Africa – which others such as the Catholic Church may eventually join¹⁷ – that one will see the reviving kairos consciousness grow in momentum and impact? Or will research ultimately show that South African mainline Christianity permanently lost the critical centre that the SACC once provided and, accordingly, that the endeavours to revive a kairos consciousness remained the concern of a critical few?

Fourth and last on my list of topical concerns, I regard it as inevitable that a deeper exploration of my research focus will in the last resort take into consideration the factor of post-apartheid South Africa's ever-changing religious demography. My interest in this regard lies more specifically with what a growing body of supporting literature suggests is the ever-diminishing position of mainline Christianity and its churches in the

¹⁴ The way in which this umbrella body and its predecessor, the National Interfaith Leadership Council (NILC) replaced the National Religious Leaders Forum (NRLF) in a series of events since 2009 as official forum through which a partnership relationship between the country's religious sector and the state would be promoted has been covered quite extensively in the electronic media. See *inter alia* African National Congress Parliamentary Caucus 2010; Free Society Institute 2009; Howden 2010; Makoni 2009; Peyper 2010; Rhema Ministries n.d.; Rossouw 2009; South African Government Information 2009; Suderman 2011.

¹⁵ See the discussion in the last bullet point of the previous section of this article.

¹⁶ Tinyiko Maluleke equates the decline of the SACC with that of the World Council of Churches after the Cold War (Maluleke 2010:153-154). See also Cochrane 2009:100-102; Khumalo-Seegelken n.d.:3.

¹⁷ Cf. in this regard James Cochrane's comparison between the SACC and the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference (SACBC) in which he portrays a picture of the SACBC as far more dynamic and able than the SACC in the post-apartheid dispensation (Cochrane 2009:100-102).

South African socio-religious landscape to the benefit of especially the charismatic and Pentecostal Christian faith traditions (see Anderson 2005; *City Press* 2012d; Cochrane 2009; Comaroff & Comaroff 2004; Czeglédý 2008; Erasmus 2012; Hendriks & Erasmus 2001; 2005; Howden 2010; Pew Forum 2006:89-90). This process has led to a substantial diversification of the post-apartheid socio-religious landscape in which mainline Christianity and its churches no longer hold the centre but rather take their place amongst what one scholar of religion refers to as the proliferation of other phenomena that “shape the nature and character of Christianity in the post-apartheid era” (Cochrane 2009:103-104). This implies that a fourth layer of questions should necessarily be concerned with the implications of these demographic developments for a reviving kairos consciousness contributing to social change in the longer term.

As a modest attempt to develop better insight into phenomena as complex and vast as the charismatic and Pentecostal faith traditions from a South African perspective, I find it best to focus my exploration here on the question of what scope the charismatic and Pentecostal faith traditions in contemporary South African society may also offer after all in support of a kairos theological orientation. In other words, instead of merely opting for a negative outlook in which the related factors of mainline decline and charismatic and Pentecostal growth are seen as detrimental to the prospects of a reviving kairos consciousness, my emphasis will fall on exploring what I would like to refer to as the question of the “exception” regarding the case of the charismatic and Pentecostal phenomena in present-day post-apartheid South Africa. Accordingly, whilst there may be much substance in a thesis that a particular dominant spiritual, theological and ecclesial orientation much different from the kairos theological orientation may be found in South African charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity,¹⁸ the question that could be asked is whether this presents us with the complete picture? In particular, what might new comparative case study work reveal about the actual perceptions and attitudes of ordinary believers and their leadership towards the new kairos texts, that is, both in mainline as well as charismatic and Pentecostal settings? Based on such a comparative exploration, what differences but also similarities might emerge from these settings? Will it in fact be a case of mainline perceptions and attitudes proving to be more positive and receptive, or will a more blurred, mixed and complex picture in fact emerge in which the opposite also holds true between the different settings? In addition, what picture will emerge from those mainline settings that have themselves been markedly influenced by the charismatic and Pentecostal traditions? And how would this differ in those African indigenous (AIC) settings where the charismatic and Pentecostal traditions have likewise left their mark? In all, what picture of post-apartheid popular religiosity will emerge from such comparative case study work as a whole? Will it strengthen perceptions of a most important counterforce characterised by its aloofness, if not opposition, to the ideas of a reviving kairos consciousness, or will it offer surprisingly different results?

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¹⁸ This different orientation is captured in some of the literature made reference to in the previous paragraph.

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