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*“The common humanity we share”
– earlier visions of equality and solidarity as
seen through Christian missionary work in
South Africa*

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Introduction

“The common humanity we share” is a phrase in a statement issued recently by the South African Council of Churches (SACC)—of which the United Congregational Church of South Africa is a member—concerning NEPAD, or the New Partnership for Africa’s Development. The statement is intended to justify the assessment of NEPAD by the SACC on the principle of “Solidarity—that gives social and material expression to the common humanity we share in a communion held by our faith in a common Source.” But much earlier already, in 1978, speaking about Dr W.E.B. Dubois, the chairman of a special meeting of the United Nations Special Committee Against Apartheid said that “the vision of Dr Dubois is a vision of a world based on a common humanity.”¹

¹ Statement by Ambassador Leslie O. Harriman (Nigeria), chairman, at a special meeting of the United Nations Special Committee Against Apartheid on the 110th anniversary of the birth of Dr. W.E.B. Dubois, February 23, 1978.

In the Preamble of the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, it is stated that the very first aims of that Constitution are

- **to heal the divisions** of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights
- to build a **united** and democratic South Africa able to take its rightful place as a sovereign State in **the family of nations**.

Clearly, divisions within South African society and isolation from the rest of the world are considered evil diseases that should be healed, remedied; and unity should be built to replace them, not only among South African citizens, but among humankind. The vision is of nations forming a single family, of which the members owe solidarity to one another, regardless of the differences in their races, political systems, etc. The purpose of this paper is to show that the view of division as evil, the vision of mankind recovering its original unity and the duty of solidarity between people(s), were already at the heart of the motives of Christian missions throughout the 19th century. I have chosen to take as an example the London Missionary Society (LMS) which was created at the end of the 18th century by leaders among the Independent Churches, who joined forces with Anglican and Presbyterian clergy and laymen to form a Missionary Society whose object was “to spread the knowledge of Christ among heathen and other unenlightened nations.”

Much of the reference I will be using was extracted from the *Proceedings of the Founders' Week Convention*, which was held on the occasion of the centenary of the London Missionary Society at City Temple, in London, on 21-27 September 1895. I found the book, which can be considered a sum of LMS ideology, as its missionaries gathered from every part of the world to share their experience, at the FJKM library in Antananarivo, Madagascar.²

² The Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar (FJKM) is one of the heirs of the London Missionary Society, like the United Congregational Church of South Africa. The two churches then have common archives, the bulk of which is currently stored at the Council of World Mission and the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London. And at different periods of history, LMS missionaries who had to flee Madagascar went to South Africa,

The churches have played a crucial role in the modern history of South Africa. Significantly, in the 1919 Constitution of the South African Native National Congress, the "ancestor" of the ANC, it was stated that one of the objects of the Association was "to encourage and promote union of Churches free from all sectarian and denominational anomalies." And though no such specific reference to the churches is made in subsequent formal documents, whether of the ANC or of the government, still churches and churchmen played an important role in the struggle against the apartheid regime. For example, an interdenominational conference of African churchmen was held at Bloemfontein in October 1956 to consider the NP government's Tomlinson Commission proposals on the Bantustans.

The clergy's opposition to these proposals, and their decision to call for a "multi-racial conference" of "national leaders" was, it was claimed, an "important step" in the "broadening" of the "anti-Nationalist front".³

1. The biblical myth of Jesus rebuking the wind: a central spring of the London Missionary Society's work

When the disciples of the Lord entered into a ship and there arose a great tempest in the sea, for fear of perishing they woke the Lord. He rebuked the winds and the sea, so that there was a great calm. Yet those with the other ships which suffered at the same time of the tempest, without having the Master on board, enjoyed the same calm made at His command. It is that calm of life which is brought to the heathen world by the missionary work.⁴

The story of Jesus rebuking the wind was mentioned in one of the many speeches made at the LMS Centenary Convention in

whereas others, a century later, who had to leave South Africa, went to work in Madagascar.

³ Richard Monroe, *Lessons from the 1950s*, chapter 4, The role of the Communist Party in the ANC, first published in *Inqaba Ya Basebenzi*, no. 13, March-May 1984.

⁴ Rev. Dr. Van Nes, in *Proceedings of the Founders' Week Convention*, London, 1895, p. 115.

1895. But the emphasis here is not so much on Jesus' power in itself as on the result—all those who were on the sea at the time were saved from shipwreck in the tempest. The idea is that Christianity is universal, that its message of salvation affects not only the people(s) who received it first, not only those who happened to be nearest Jesus in time and in space, but the whole of humanity, who are embarked on the same sea, if not on the same boat.

Other speeches made during the LMS Centenary Convention reflect the ideological implications of the myth of Jesus rebuking the wind, for the benefit not only of his disciples, but of all other humans on other boats.

2. Ideological implications of the myth

2.1. *All humans are equal before God*

In a statement he made before the assembly of the LMS Founders' Week Convention in 1895, chief Khama, then ruler of the Bamangwato tribe in Bechwanaland, is reported as saying: "Jesus, our Saviour, is a judge of black and white."⁵

A minister from the Moravian Missionary Society, a "sister" society of the LMS, is quoted as saying in a speech before a white audience: "What strange people these Moravians are. They actually believe that the soul of a poor black Negro is quite as precious in the eyes of God as either yours or mine." And the person who reported this in 1895 commented: "You may imagine, dear friends, what an effect that had. The thought first came upon the people of the value of a black Negro's soul."⁶

Equality between the races is thus asserted, quite a challenge at the end of the 19th century, particularly among the white settlers scattered all over the British Empire. The assertion is rooted in the belief that "He hath made of one blood all nations to dwell on the face of the earth."⁷

⁵ *Proceedings of the Founders' Week Convention*, London, 21-27 Sept. 1895, p. 30.

⁶ Rev. Otto Padel, *id.*, p. 31.

⁷ Rev. Dr. Lindsay, *id.*, p. 107.

2.2. *There are no boundaries to the kingdom of God*

Closely linked to the belief that all humans are equal before God is the idea that there are no boundaries to His kingdom. As one speaker put it: "The brotherhood to which Christ calls us is a worldwide brotherhood. Christianity knows nothing of political boundaries, it is larger than patriotism, it takes no note of difference of climate, or difference of colour. As our friend Khama reminded us the other day, Christ Jesus is the same to a black man as to a white, and therefore the whole world is the field on which we must go forth as sowers of the Word. The field is not England, it is not the British Empire; the field is the world, and no man has a right to draw its limits more narrowly." Limitations, narrowness, are thus considered as sinful. The true Christian is aware of belonging to the brotherhood of men, or to put it in more modern words, is a citizen of the world. And the speaker rounded up his point with this striking phrase: "Foreign missionary work is just home missionary work on foreign soil."⁸

This view is grounded on the belief that "Jesus was not simply the son of David, but he was the Son of Man; he was not simply the Messiah who had come to redeem the Jews, He was the Saviour of the world."⁹

Another expression of that concept of the boundlessness of the kingdom of God was what we would call nowadays integration, which a speaker at the convention described in these words:

Judged by our literature and art, and by our political and social movements, we of the nineteenth century are the children of the Revolution. That great moral and political cataclysm, in its ideal, was an endeavour to break down the barriers of caste and privilege which encircled the common people and kept them out of the full inheritance of their manhood. But we Christians of this nineteenth century claim to be the children of another revolution, and a greater, which was distinguished from the first named in the features of its origin. It was not announced to the world with any great noise. This revolution has for its object to break down the barriers of race prejudice, of bigotry,

⁸ Rev. E.P. Rice, *id.*, p. 199.

⁹ Rev. A. Rowland, *id.*, p. 6.

and of rancorous superstition, and to let all the races of mankind into the full inheritance of the redeemed children of God.¹⁰

The Christian revolution, a soft one, is deemed greater than the previous one in that, though both had the same object of breaking barriers down, of fighting exclusion, the latter is supra-national, whereas the former had only a national scope. The process of integration, of letting “all the races of mankind into the full inheritance of the redeemed children of God,” of throwing the doors wide open for every human to be admitted into the house of God, is a recurrent theme of LMS statements of mission. Once the integration completed, all humans would be re-united, the original unity would be restored as “the everlasting fruits of missions are gathered around the Throne of God and the Lamb.”¹¹

2.3. I am my black brother’s keeper: the duty of solidarity among humans

Another recurrent theme of LMS debates is the myth of Cain, which according to one participant at the LMS Centenary Convention, was often raised among the colonists and traders of South Africa in these terms: “Am I my black brother’s keeper?” According to that LMS document, there is no hierarchy among the human races. The only advantage of Britons—and then not all Britons, but excluding godless traders and settlers in the colonies—is that they have received the Good News before other nations. Uplifting those who do not know the Gospel is not “the burden of the white man,” as other ideologies put it, but the duty of all those who were lucky enough to receive it before the others. Thus it is honestly acknowledged that most of the work is really carried out by the native converts in every place where missions are going on. And an illustration of the fact that there is no question of the superiority of one race over another is this statement by a speaker at the convention:

¹⁰ Rev. W. Pierce, *id.*, p. 205.

¹¹ Rev. Dr. Van Nes, *id.*, p. 114.

As Emile de Laveleye has shown, the Reformation is a source of moral and political developments and of social wealth. Was not Ireland until the sixteenth century much more civilized than barbaric Scotland? "And now the relation is entirely overturned between the ultramontane and the reformed country," to quote Macaulay.¹²

This view, in which the Protestant faith is considered more progressive, and hence socially more profitable than Catholicism, by establishing comparisons not between races, but between religions, takes the paternalistic ring out of the question of Cain, as adjusted to African contexts: "Am I my black brother's keeper?"

To the LMS, the answer to the question is "Yes" on two different levels. The speaker who raised the question mentioned one instance: "A trader made a poor Kaffir put down his name on blank pieces of paper, and these he filled up with IOU's, one for £80 and the other for about £1,000. He had been suffering from the Kaffir war, and he thought he would raise some money in this way." And he added: "Now, I want you in this meeting to write some IOU's for these poor Negroes. I want you to write: "IOU, my black brother, my love for Christ's sake; IOU a willing heart; IOU my prayers. IOU every help and assistance I can give you to lead you, my black brother, to Christ"."¹³ But the Christians' duty to their black brothers is not only spiritual: it is also of a worldly kind; it is their duty to protect their black brothers from exploitation by other white men, who are not considered by LMS missionaries as their brothers. As another participant declared: "Our faith is more to us even than our country, and our Saviour more to us than our Queen,"¹⁴ let alone than some fellow white men or even some fellow-countrymen. The sense of fellowship is established along lines that definitely transcend colour or even nationality.

Another aspect of that solidarity between humans is medical missions. According to different speakers at the LMS Centenary Convention, Christ himself set the example by demonstrating that Christianity is concerned not only with the spiritual welfare of humans, but also with their material and physical well-being:

¹² *Idem*, p. 115.

¹³ *Id.*, p. 32.

¹⁴ Rev. A. Rowland, *id.*, p. 8.

The Gospel promotes also external welfare, being a message of cleanliness, order, and simplicity; it does not suffer any irregularity or rudeness. History has taught us that the more deeply the Gospel penetrates the life of a nation, the greater are the external and material blessings which are enjoyed. The first medical mission was started 1,865 years ago, when our Lord and Master first commenced His ministry. This was the first example that was set in the founding of medical missions. He combined the healing art with ministration to the soul's great needs.¹⁵

Another speaker put it in these words: "Wherever He went He sought to bestow a more abundant life, physical as well as spiritual. Christ's instructions to His followers were very simple ones: "Preach the Gospel, heal the sick"."¹⁶

3. Challenges to be met while implementing the egalitarian ideology

One of the main objections to missionary work, according to one speaker at the LMS Centenary Convention, was formulated by critics in these words: "Why don't you leave these poor heathen alone?"

3.1. An old name for globalization – the intrusion of Western civilization

To those who blame Christian missions for not leaving "the poor heathen alone," the speaker replies:

Our critics forget that we have not left them alone, and cannot leave them alone. We are touching them now at all points. Indirectly and unwittingly we are shaking the nations to their very foundations. Our Western civilization has utterly overthrown many existing institutions in heathen lands, and has left the ancestral faith of multitudes of people in absolute ruin. We have no right to leave it in ruin... We go to Africa, and soon discover that the words spoken again and again by Capt. Hore are perfectly true: "The farther you go from the coast, the nobler you find the people to be"... Therefore I say the salvation of the world, aye, our own salvation is to be found not in our

¹⁵ Dr Habershon, M.D., *id.*, p. 272.

¹⁶ Dr. A. Fells, *id.*, p. 279.

withdrawing our influence from foreign lands, but in Christianising it.¹⁷

The idea is that Western civilization, as brought by traders, had already touched, if not penetrated, most parts of the world, and that there was no stopping it from spreading everywhere. And that type of civilization, because it is based on profit, on the pursuit of material interest, has a basically corrupting and destructive effect. The Christian missions' duty is then to heal the injuries done to other cultures by the intrusion of Western civilization, to counter-balance the evil influence of Western traders by giving a different version of the West—not its commercial, but its moral aspect.

This mission of the Church is echoed, over a century later, in this analysis the South African Council of Churches issued earlier this year on NEPAD:

The church must continue to raise collective public awareness of the ways in which current global financial, trade, and political systems hurt the poor throughout the world, just as Jesus "upset the tables of the money changers and the seats of the dove sellers" in the temple. The Earth is the household of God, and humanity is God's temple today. The global human community is therefore called to live together in dignity and solidarity.

The same document continues: "The church must also continue to raise the collective public conscience about the ethical choices that lie at the heart of the current global financial, trade, and political systems in which NEPAD proposes Africa should participate more actively." Here is raised the same question as was posed more than a hundred years ago by the LMS: "Did those Hindus who first received the attentions of the East India Company—those princes and states that were first deceived and then plundered—want our civilization?" "We have a mandate from civilization, and that justifies intrusion," is the reply. What shall we say? That we, too, have a mandate to go in the name of Christian civilisation with the religion of the love of God and the brotherhood of man.¹⁸ What was reproached with Western civilization, at

¹⁷ Rev. A. Rowland, in *Proceedings...*, p. 6.

¹⁸ Rev. W. Pierce, *id.*, p. 207.

least in the shape it took of “imperialism as the ultimate phase of capitalism,” to quote Lenin, is that it destroyed the original brotherhood of man, to establish power relations in its place. A century later, with the West imposing de facto its own economic and political systems in the rest of the world today, the mission of the Church remains the same—to defend the poor from exploitation by the powerful and the rich. The only difference is that, whereas in the 19th century the LMS and other Christian missions conducted their work quite apart from the activities undertaken by other British institutions, in which they took no interest, the SACC in the new South Africa, having actively participated in the struggle against apartheid, now is “engaged in assisting the reconstruction of the nation and the development of South Africa’s fragile new democracy.” Its mission, according to its mission statement, is to “work for moral reconstruction in South Africa, focussing on issues of justice, reconciliation, integrity of creation and the eradication of poverty and contributing towards the empowerment of all who are spiritually, socially and economically marginalised.” Today as a century ago, the sense of solidarity applies not to the members of any particular race, but to the whole of humanity, and particularly to the poor, the disadvantaged, the exploited part of it.

3.2. The necessity of networking and contracting alliances

The London Missionary Society, as previously mentioned, was an association of various Independent Churches as well as the Anglican and the Presbyterian Church. It was considered vital, for the sake of efficiency, to establish alliances, partnership with various institutions.

The following analogy was established by a speaker at the LMS Centenary Convention to demonstrate the use of networking:

Our Christian missionaries have been storing the heathen world with Gospel forces, and we are reminded when we think of this of the blowing-up of those great jagged submarine rocks at the entrance of New York harbour, which had rendered the entrance of ships so difficult. It was proposed in Congress that those rocks should be

blown away, and engineers began to bore from north to south and from east to west, and nobody saw them doing anything. Congress was approached a second time and a third time for more and more money. But at last it was said that all was ready. They had bored chambers through and through those rocks, had stored them with dynamite, had connected chamber with chamber by means of copper wires, and had linked those wires to one copper thread and brought it ashore. There was a table placed there, and the wire came under the table to a button; and a little girl of eleven, the daughter of Governor Newton, of New York, was to press this button. Presently the little girl pressed the button, a great dome of water rose from the harbour, a huge wave washed it ashore, and Hell Gate was blown up. So the missionaries have been digging chambers in the heathen world, storing them with Gospel force, and in God’s good time the dynamis—it is the very Scriptural word—will do its work.¹⁹

Connections, linkages, are key words if final victory is to be achieved. Networking and alliances between Christian missions were particularly vital in South Africa.

3.3. Turbulences that affected “the calm of life” in the South African situation

That somewhat idyllic “calm of life” to be enjoyed by all those who were on the sea after Jesus had rebuked the winds was seriously disturbed throughout the 20th century in South Africa.

At the end of the 19th century a threat was hanging over South Africa, which was described by the LMS Foreign Secretary in these words:

The chiefs are at present under the Imperial Protectorate, under which they and their people enjoy their own land and their own native government, and carry out their own laws in regard to drink; and the Protectorate protects them to certainly a very large extent from the importation of drink amongst them by white men. Now, the Queen’s Government has seen fit to promise, without consulting their protected people, that the jurisdiction of this great territory shall be handed over to a great chartered company who have dual interests. They are legislators, but they are also members of a great commercial corporation; and it is not surprising, I think, that the native tribes should feel that they would much rather be under the Government of the Queen, which

¹⁹ *Id.*, p. 113.

is purely a Government and an Imperial Government, than that they should be handed over to the government of a company, however strong, however good it may be, which has its own pockets to consider in all its dealings with them, and its dividends and the value of shares, as well as the administrative and judicial side of its charter.²⁰

White men who import drink into Africa, and more generally tradesmen and trade companies, are the enemies of the LMS as well as of the chiefs, whose claim, according to the speaker, “appeals to the British people.” Already at the end of the 19th century, the LMS was thus trying to mobilise the common people in Britain in support of South African traditional chiefs, so that “a body of public opinion may be raised up, strong and united, irrespective of political party,”²¹ against the rule of a trade company, that as experience had shown, was likely to bring corruption, destruction, and exploitation.

And then there was of course the issue of racism, which culminated in 1948 with the National Party electing a whites-only Parliament.

Given such peculiar circumstances, the Churches, while continuing with their work of propagating the Gospel to make all peoples have their share of the “calm of life,” had to give more emphasis to the active solidarity part of their message, or in other words, to get increasingly involved in political action.

3.4. Broadening the front: increased involvement of Christian missions in political action

The notion of solidarity in moral terms, takes the name of unity of action at a political level. I have chosen two organisations among those with which the Churches have established collaboration in the 20th century—the ANC, and its earlier version, the South African Native National Congress, and the South African Communist Party.

Unity, cooperation, organisation, were the first steps in meeting the challenge of defending the interests of the people who

²⁰ *Id.*, p. 186.

²¹ *Id.*, p. 187.

were referred to in the first decades of the 20th century as "the Bantu people." Quite significantly, the South African Native National Congress, as appears in its 1919 Constitution, denounced the fact that "there existed in the Provinces of the Union of South Africa several small and independent Associations, Organisations or Vigilant Committees each one established for the purpose of advancing, observing and considering interests within its own tribal or local limits"; ... and that "the good work of the aforementioned bodies was being rendered futile by the apparent indifference, ignorance and want of cooperation between one another." One of the main objects of the South African Native National Congress (which named itself an "Association") was then "to unite, absorb, consolidate and preserve under its aegis existing political and educational Associations, Vigilance Committees and other public and private bodies whose aims are the promotion and safeguarding of the interests of the aboriginal races."

The South African Native National Congress, in its 1919 Constitution, was critical not only of the fragmentation of the people along geographical and tribal lines, but also of the Churches' action along denominational lines. One of its aims was thus: "To encourage and promote union of Churches free from all sectarian and denominational anomalies; To establish or to assist the establishment of National Colleges or Public Institutions free from denominationalism or State control."

Though one of its primary aims was "to promote mutual help, feeling of fellowship and a spirit of brotherhood" among "the Bantu people," this is limited, if compared with the planetary view of mankind as one defended by the LMS. Still, the effort of bringing "together into common action as one political people all tribes and clans of various tribes or races" was a meaningful step forward in the context of the time, and the breaking down of limits and barriers long advocated by the LMS was at the heart of the process.

Two years later only, the Communist Party of South Africa, in its Manifesto adopted at the inaugural conference of the Party in Cape Town in 1921, made an "appeal to all South African workers, organised and unorganised, white and black, to join in... the establishment of a Commonwealth of Workers throughout the

World.” This appeal appears to be a further step down the road of re-creating the original unity of mankind shattered by the apartheid system, as it is directed both at white and black workers, but also has a worldwide commonwealth as its ultimate aim. However, the scope of the South African Communist Party’s action was necessarily limited, due mainly to the peculiarity of the situation in South Africa. The SACP had emerged in 1921 from revolutionary socialists active among white workers only; and the Rand Revolt, in 1922, in which white workers went on strike, was both anti-boss and anti-black workers. Just as the South African Native National Congress had to deal first with the marginalisation of the majority native people of South Africa, so the South African Communist Party had to address first the question of white workers being class-conscious, but also race-conscious. So as early as 1929, the Communist Party had to change its strategy, deeming that “the most direct line of advance to socialism runs through the mass struggle for majority rule,” which meant that it had to give up some of its rigid Marxist principles and take up the line of the ANC, though the latter’s leaders were often termed “middle-class” by CP members.

One of the aims of the South African Native National Congress was “to propagate the gospel of the dignity of labour” among the Bantu people; that of the South African Communist Party was “to propagate the Communist gospel” among “workers of all ranks and races.”²² Taking up the Christian missions’ terminology was probably a sign of such organisations placing themselves in competition with the Churches, but it also meant that that terminology was popular among the common people. While the former’s objective is not in contradiction with Christian ideology, the latter’s certainly is, in that the Communist Party advocated “working class hegemony over society,” in which “working class interests will be dominant.”²³ Hegemony and domination of whatever class or category of humans are not part of

²² Manifesto of the Communist Party of South Africa (Adopted at the inaugural conference of the Party, Cape Town, 30 July, 1921).

²³ Constitution of the South African Communist Party, adopted at the 8th SACP Congress, amended at the 9th and 10th SACP Congress. Publication date January 1999.

the Christian vision, in which Christ made the gift of "the calm of life" to all indiscriminately.

Yet, it was such a variety of organisations with their different aims that finally united in the ANC, which in its own words "has come to be recognised as the central organiser and inspirer of a vast popular upsurge against apartheid, involving a great array of social, cultural, religious, trade union, professional and political organisations."²⁴ It took that much to defeat the apartheid regime, which carefully hid its racism beneath layers of pseudo-democratic declarations. The 1983 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, for instance, declares:

We are convinced of the necessity... to uphold Christian values and civilized norms; ... to uphold the equality of all under the law; to further the contentment and the spiritual and material welfare of all; to respect and to protect the human dignity, life, liberty and property of all in our midst.

This looks like the Constitution of any democratic nation, until comes up with a sentence like: "We are convinced of the necessity to respect, to further and to protect the self-determination of population groups and peoples." It is this kind of division that LMS ideology had reprovved from its creation, as it meant, to take up the biblical myth again, that the people on the other boats had no right to "the great calm." It was a way of rejecting the universal scope of Christ's action, particularly when that Constitution defines franchise in these rather antinomic terms as reserved to "every White person, Coloured person and Indian." With the abolition of any limitation by colour or race, the transitional Constitution of 1993 was to reestablish the universal equality between all members of humankind by guaranteeing a long, almost exhaustive list of rights to "every person" without any qualification.

The biblical myth of Jesus rebuking the winds and all the boats on the same sea enjoying the same great calm was put to severe tests where the work of Christian missions and churches in South Africa was concerned. In fact, they had to experiment all kinds of partnership, including with the Communist Party, adjus-

²⁴ As adopted at the ANC National Conference, June 1991.

ting to the circumstances, but always keeping in mind the “solidarity—that gives social and material expression to the common humanity we share in a communion held by our faith in a common Source.”²⁵ When the racist 1983 Constitution was replaced with the transitional Constitution in 1993, that historic victory of the South African people was also a victory of the churches who for two centuries had been fighting for all humans sailing on the same sea to share a sense of solidarity, if not to enjoy the same great calm yet.

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²⁵ The South African Council of Churches, *Un-blurring the vision, An Assessment of the New Partnership for Africa’s Development by South African Churches*, 2003.