

# Agapé: The Cape Office of the Christian Institute

James R. Cochrane

Director of Research Institute on Christianity in South Africa  
University of Cape Town

**A micro-study of a vital centre in the history of Christian struggle against apartheid, this essay—part homage—identifies some key characteristics of those who influenced and trained people as they confronted the state and racism in South African society, especially those who operated out of a deep religious conviction. The history of the Cape Office of the Christian Institute, its complex interactions with an enormous variety of people from all walks of society, national and international, and the particular charisma of its director, Theo Kotze, form the substance of the essay. It is history, but it is also an attempt to point to and recover, for the future, the kind of leadership and commitment that this institution produced in large measure, to unpack on a small, local scale, exemplary historical dynamics that were present in South African society that still have a bearing for us.**

On Good Friday in 1968, on this day of the Passion, in the designated “white” sea-side suburb of Sea Point, Cape Town, comfortably nestled below Signal Hill, the Reverend Theo Kotze preached a sermon to his Methodist congregation describing racism as contrary to the will of God, the necessary consequence being that Christians are called to oppose apartheid.<sup>1</sup> The sermon was extensively reported in the secular news; it was attacked in the Dutch Reformed Church’s official national publication, *Kerkbode*; and it stirred the Security Police to take an interest in this man and his activities that reached a climax when he was banned in 1977.<sup>2</sup>

The sermon also enlivened the interest of Ds Beyers Naudé, the moving force and prime founder, in 1963, of the Christian Institute of Southern Africa (CI). The CI was established after Naudé and other senior members of the Dutch Reformed Church had unsuccessfully challenged their own denomination on its theology and political position about race.<sup>3</sup> Kotze, since then, had on several occasions invited Naudé to the Sea Point congregation, and had helped organize other platforms for him.<sup>4</sup>

Kotze had been one of those who had joined the CI soon after its inception, taking his own significant steps along the route that Naudé and others had traveled. On this journey, he had perhaps been influenced most notably by a year he spent as chaplain to Robben Island, where he had become acquainted with Nelson Mandela and befriended fellow Methodist, Robert Sobukwe.<sup>5</sup> Kotze’s time as chaplain (1966) was curtailed by the prison authorities when they began to realize that he was taking advantage of the restrictive conditions placed upon him—by using

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<sup>1</sup> His interpretation moved along lines parallel to the famous “theology of the cross” and “theology of hope” of Jürgen Moltmann, whom Kotze was later to befriend. At this point I should note that many comments and judgements in what follows reflect my, the author’s, own personal involvement with Kotze and the Cape Office, having grown up in his congregation and been drawn into his work at the CI from the outset. The later link with Moltmann came as a result of a my marriage to a former student of Moltmann’s, a marriage conducted by him and Kotze (soon after his exile).

<sup>2</sup> [Doc #1] Cf. Charles Villa-Vicencio, “Theo Kotze,” *South African Outlook*, November 1977, 173.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Peter Walshe, *Church Versus State in South Africa: The Case of the Christian Institute*, London: C. Hurst & Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983. “Ds,” in Ds Beyers Naudé, is the standard short form for “dominee,” Afrikaans for “Pastor” or “Reverend.”

<sup>4</sup> [Doc #2] Cape Western Regional Committee of the CI, Cape Peninsula Itinerary, 22<sup>nd</sup> September to 28<sup>th</sup> September, 1967.

<sup>5</sup> Walshe, *Church Versus State*, 74.

prayer, hymns, private sermons, and confessional acts to pass on messages about family, people and events to the prisoners. In fact, Kotze was nevertheless able to continue to pastor Sobukwe until his death from lung cancer, often visiting him in Kimberley where, after an early release from Robben Island, Sobukwe had been placed under house arrest by a unique Act of Parliament (the so-called “Sobukwe Clause”).

Naudé now approached Kotze to become Cape Regional Director of the CI and to set up a Cape Town office to partner the main office in Johannesburg. As Peter Walshe puts it, he “had chosen a large-hearted colleague who was to play a major role in the Institute’s future. A free spirit, an innovative, humorous and at times pugnacious character who was passionately committed to ecumenical cooperation ....”<sup>6</sup>

Released by his church initially for three years, with financial backing from the Board of Overseas Ministries of the Methodist Church of the U.S.A.,<sup>7</sup> Kotze brought together the small group of CI members in Cape Town (twenty by early 1968, according to a type-written provisional listing)<sup>8</sup> to launch, jointly with the Cape Peninsula Christian Council,<sup>9</sup> the first regional CI Office in the Wellington Fruitgrowers building in January, 1969.<sup>10</sup> While many prominent people and gifted members provided the vital basis of all the Cape Office later did, it was Kotze’s charismatic substance and presence that held it all together.

The times were propitious: repressive laws were being put into place at an alarming rate, the infamous Terrorism Act among them; anti-apartheid movements had been forced underground or into exile and had not yet gained great strength; the first currents of the Black Consciousness Movement were flowing; and South Africa’s isolation from the rest of the world was well under way. The State itself had by now put in place numerous bureaucracies and agencies, including the Bureau of State Security (BOSS) and the Security Branch of the police services, to control those who sought actively to resist their authority or undermine their legitimacy.

A police state was in the making. White South Africans who toed the line were presented with a range of justifications for this change in the nature of the state, chief among them the threat of communism and the danger of “terrorist” attacks on the places and spaces that protected their privileged interests. The fears thus generated fed effectively, too, on a generalized white fear of “the black masses,” an underlying racism that became harder and harder to root out as the cultural, geographical and political divisions along racial lines that Apartheid represented were entrenched. The fear of change, of the loss of possessions, privileges and power, on the back of which despotism thrived, had been supplemented by the fear of the state as it threatened and acted against those who sought to challenge its policies and practices.

Kotze saw this latter fear as a kind of social conditioning, noting at a protest meeting how, when his large, formidable dog had annoyed him and he had bent as if to pick up a stick, she cringed and turned tail. “My goodness,” he thought, “I’ve indoctrinated my dog. ... The gesture was enough.”<sup>11</sup> Transposed into the key of an authoritarian police state and a highly controlled population,<sup>12</sup> this was a fear which Kotze himself described as one which “stifles con-

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<sup>6</sup> Walshe, *Church Versus State*, 73.

<sup>7</sup> [Doc #3] Director’s Report July 1968 to June 1969, CI, Johannesburg, 8/8/69. The Board is now known as the “Board for Global Ministries.”

<sup>8</sup> [Doc #4] The document is dated 18-2-1968, and includes two names in Kotze’s handwriting.

<sup>9</sup> The Christian Council was soon to become the Western Province Council of Churches, in line with the national body that had just been reconstituted as the South African Council of Churches.

<sup>10</sup> [Doc #5] Announced in the CI Newsletter, No. 5, Oct-Dec. 1968.

<sup>11</sup> [Doc #6] “Kotze Says S. Africans are Afraid of Change,” *Cape Argus*, 17<sup>th</sup> October, 1973.

<sup>12</sup> One of the chief instruments of such control was the Bantu Administration department, an extensive state bureaucracy that managed the infamous “Pass Laws” that required all Africans to carry identity documents declaring their status and rights to be in

science and destroys integrity.”<sup>13</sup> Precisely these virtues of conscience and integrity were for Kotze the necessary expression of the Christian gospel he himself so fervently believed in, and it is these virtues that he, and his spouse Helen, sought to bring into the work of the regional CI and to inculcate in others around them. What this meant in practice is our focus here, for it is both an important historical exemplar of a particular kind of contribution to the anti-apartheid struggle made by many people of faith, and a story of a journey that opened up pathways into the future whose pertinence has not diminished.

For a Methodist pastor like Theo Kotze, serving at the time in the comfortable white suburb of Sea Point, to lead the regional CI represented both a considerable challenge and a risk. This was a time when black people were still routinely expected to cross or move into the street when a white approached along a pavement, and any social interaction between white and “non-white” people was frowned upon if not legally constrained. Sea Point itself had during the 1960s lost its “coloured” population under the removals authorized by the Group Areas Act, and the only black people to be found in the suburb were those working for whites. Its famous beachfront was also segregated in the process.

For the vast majority of whites, the only meaningful exchange with black South Africans was in the context of a master-servant or boss-labourer relationship. In the Western Cape, overlaying this dynamic was the further one of an apartheid policy declaring the region to be a “Coloured Preferential Area,” on the basis of a large “coloured” population, many of whom saw their future to be with whites—“trying for white,” it was said—rather than with their “darker” forbears. In short, multiple layers of identity permeated persons, families and communities in ways that more often than not produced disharmony, fragmentation, splintering, disintegration, and a complex field of prejudice and bigotry that has not yet unraveled. Kotze, in his local ministry in Sea Point, had already begun to question the kind of society that was being produced by white domination and racism, thereby gaining some prominence in Cape Town dailies and generating ferment (most of it positive) in his congregation. The decision to accept Naudé’s request to direct a Cape office of the CI was therefore a natural extension of his ministry.

For someone with Kotze’s background, another layer of meanings inevitably pervaded his choice to take up Naudé’s offer. Like Naudé, he came from established Afrikaner stock, a leading judge being among the well-known figures in his extended family. He too would be seen by many as a traitor to the “Volk,” to the contract that Afrikaners had made with God to prosper and rule in this, “their” country. He too would enact this betrayal on the very grounds upon which its justification lay—an evangelical Christian theology that took its role in the world seriously. He too challenged his own Afrikaner roots, as in a detailed public repudiation in the *Cape Times* of the newly appointed moderator of the Dutch Reformed Church, Dr J. D. Vorster, brother of the Prime Minister of the country, who sought overt biblical justification for apartheid from which, he said, “The DRC would not budge one inch ....”<sup>14</sup>

Kotze’s decision to accept the role of directing a Cape office of the CI was made in the full recognition of these dynamics and of the potential costs they bore; costs inflicted by whites generally, by Afrikaners in particular, by the state, and by the security establishment set up to protect precisely that which the CI confronted. And, indeed, in due course state action and threats

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a particular area. Statistically, by the estimate of an agency that monitored the application of these laws, during their application the entire African population of South Africa had been arrested under one or another of the controlling provisions.

<sup>13</sup> [Doc #7] Address by the Rev. Theo Kotze, Regional Director of the CI, Lunch Time Forum of the Progressive Party, 2<sup>nd</sup> October, 1973.

<sup>14</sup> [Doc #8] Rev. Theo Kotze, “Dr J. D. Vorster challenged: All S.A. Churches Guilty of Racism,” *The Cape Times*, 20<sup>th</sup> November, 1970.

from other quarters were to be part and parcel of daily existence for Kotze and his colleagues and co-workers.

The repressive acts of the state against the CI that included a national commission of enquiry into its activity in 1973/4 and culminated in its banning in 1977 were some time in coming. They were augmented by attacks of various kinds from right-wing operatives such as the secretive “Scorpio,” a clandestine group that included members of the security apparatus. The Cape Office was a particular target of attack of Scorpio’s, with several attempts at arson (one successful, the burning of the St Thomas’s Anglican Church Hall in Rondebosch, where the CI had held a meeting the evening before),<sup>15</sup> spray-painting, smear letters, harassing phone calls, death threats, and other miscellaneous acts, including shots fired into the Kotze home on one occasion, which fortunately hit no-one.<sup>16</sup>

Not surprisingly, legal and illegal attacks on the CI affected the way its members understood themselves and their work. Already in 1973, while in Europe, and referring to the pending Schibusch Commission set up to investigate the CI and three other organizations,<sup>17</sup> Kotze had commented that “anyone who is committed to change in South Africa must expect Government action to be taken against him,” and from a Christian point of view, “that becomes a privilege.”<sup>18</sup>

Like many others in the CI in Cape Town and elsewhere, Kotze’s experiences had gradually radicalised him, with clear political consequences. Yet what set apart the work of the Cape Office of the CI, in large part because of Theo and Helen Kotze and others inspired by them, was not its political activism—there were after all many other active people and organizations working out of a variety of convictions and commitments—but the human encounters that they mediated, the personal quality of all that was done.

As Kotze pointed out, the origins of the CI generally could be traced back to a variety of causes, including the Sharpeville massacre, the Cottesloe Consultation of Churches, the disillusionment following the rejection by the two leading Afrikaner churches of its findings, a growing concern generally among church leaders about deteriorating race relations, and a new sense of urgency about the witness of the Christian gospel in South Africa.<sup>19</sup> But his own motivations were deeply connected to his personal faith, and embodied by himself, in his own words, in the conviction that “the commandment ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ was seriously meant, and meant to be taken seriously ....”<sup>20</sup> His vision of the Cape Office of the CI was intrinsically shaped by this conviction.

Hence, soon after launching the CI in the city centre, Kotze rapidly moved to find another, more suitable location in Mowbray, then a working class suburb along the main commuter railway line. Its station served as a key terminal for black workers pouring into the city and various suburbs of Cape Town. It was also a key bus terminus for the Cape Flats townships. Kotze believed that the CI needed to be at such a crossroads if it was to draw upon, and reach into, the lives of black people in the greater Cape Town area.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. “Sequel to Christian Institute Meeting? Church Hall Blaze: Arson Feared,” *The Cape Times*, September 11, 1972.

<sup>16</sup> *The Cape Times* (September 11, 1972) published a listing of some events of this kind, pointedly noting after each item that there had been “No arrests.” Members of the CI, with the help of a *Cape Times* reporter, investigated the group, producing a substantial dossier of photographs, documents and other items which detailed its membership, its printing press, its links to the police and its activities, all of which was presented by Kotze to the Chief Commissioner of Police, to no avail. Kotze reports that the Chief Commissioner simply said, “My hands are tied.”

<sup>17</sup> [Doc #9] A depiction of what transpired in this investigation is contained in “Summary of Actions Taken Against the Christian Institute and SPRO-CAS Between August 1973 and January 1974,” Issued by the Programme for Social Change and published as a folio document by Ravan Press, January 1974.

<sup>18</sup> [Doc #10] “Kotze on Inquiry—‘A Privilege’,” *The Argus*, 27<sup>th</sup> April, 1973.

<sup>19</sup> [Doc #11] Rev. Theo Kotze, “The Christian Institute—What it is and what it does,” *The Cape Times*, 7<sup>th</sup> April, 1971.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

It was a strategic decision, certainly, but it was also one deeply imbued with a conviction that the work of the CI should and must be that of engagement with ordinary people in the actual contexts in which their pain and anger could be felt, their energy and gifts be tapped. Precisely this view on the nature of the task before him, of the human, personal dimensions in the political drama which was playing itself out locally and nationally, points to the distinguishing mark of the CI Cape Office. The character of its work and the nature of its impact can only be understood in this light, and it is in this direction that we must go in order to unpack and lay out the history of the office.

The move to 1, Long Street in Mowbray, directly opposite both the railway station and the bus terminals, a move financed by a “Space to Keep Pace” campaign that reflected the growing work of the Cape Office, was governed by the ethos of personal contact: “We want to have a centre where all people can feel at home . . .,” wrote Kotze, a house that “will become a real centre of vibrant ecumenical life.”<sup>21</sup> The ecclesiological conception that lay behind this was captured in a report Kotze wrote after a trip to the U.K., to which he referred CI members while the CI was still located in the city centre, titled “A Church without walls”<sup>22</sup>—a church open to all, freely welcoming, without constraints of ideology, dogma or even belief as a condition of that welcome.

From this centre, Kotze and his colleagues, staff and CI members, moved to interact with people all over the Cape, and in Namibia (then under South African rule as “South West Africa”). Within the first year contact had already been established with groups as far flung as Bellville, Paarl, Stellenbosch, Port Elizabeth, Addo, Grahamstown and Kimberley.<sup>23</sup> Personal communication was put at a premium, and Kotze and company invested large amounts of energy and money into ensuring that it happened.<sup>24</sup> This in itself bound people to the Cape Office deeply, and strengthened their sense that they belonged to a group that would sustain them in an environment where sustenance and support was crucial, especially if, in the words of the editor of the *Cape Times*, Anthony Heard, whom Kotze had won as a personal friend, working with the CI meant “swimming against the tide with a vengeance.”<sup>25</sup>

That the Cape Office in fact became what Kotze had envisioned is made clear in several ways. Interviews with some of its key members of that time reflect this in their enduring memories of the significance of the Office. Florrie de Villiers, cook, caterer, cleaner and general assistant, believes that “the CI made people say to themselves, ‘I am a human being as human as everybody else.’ It was a different atmosphere from what other people were experiencing.”<sup>26</sup> Theo Kotze’s personal secretary emphasized the “joyful” character of its atmosphere, and the absence of animosity.<sup>27</sup> Crucial to this environment was Kotze’s willingness actively to promote positive and productive relationships through retreats and workshops aimed at developing a strong sense of community. As Erica Murray, whose educational work was based at the CI, puts it, “there was a philosophy that if you are not a community, you cannot embrace others.”<sup>28</sup> This was no closed community, however: “When there was trouble,” notes Margaret Nash, “people came to the CI.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> [Doc #12] Cf. The Cape Newsletter of the CI, September 1969.

<sup>22</sup> [Doc #13] Theo Kotze, undated circular, but certainly from January 1969 (he wishes members “a very happy new year”).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> In this, Kotze followed a pattern already established by the National Director, Ds Beyers Naudé.

<sup>25</sup> Editorial, “Light and Hope,” *The Cape Times*, 22<sup>nd</sup> August, 1969.

<sup>26</sup> [Doc #14] Personal interview, Florrie de Villiers, Kuils River, 19<sup>th</sup> December, 2000.

<sup>27</sup> [Doc #15] Personal interview, Gwen van Wyk, Mowbray, 28 November, 2000.

<sup>28</sup> [Doc #16] Personal interview, Erica Murray, Lansdowne, 12<sup>th</sup> December, 2000.

<sup>29</sup> [Doc #17] Personal interview, Margaret Nash, Claremont, 21<sup>st</sup> November, 2000.

A great many people did, either because they were in trouble or needed help with trouble, names that have become well-known in many circles of South African life: Peter Jones, Faried Esack, Njongonkulu Ndungane, Geoff Budlender, Vivienne West, David Russell, Francis Wilson, Grace Qunta, Margaret Nash, Bishop Colin Winter, Archbishop Selby Taylor, Fathers Robert Mercer and Bernard Chamberlain, Wesley Mabuza, James Matthews, Margaret Malherbe, James Polley, Erica Murray, Abel Hendricks, Mervyn Kemp, Mongesi Guma, Patrick Matolengwe, Chris Wessels, John Ulster, Ann Brown, Margie and Steve Carolus, Moira Henderson, Dean Ted King, Allan Boesak, and a host of similar people from an astonishing range of organizations and sectors of South African society. More than once, the CI building itself became a refuge for those who needed safety and a place to stay, as over Christmas, 1975, when dozens of people who had been displaced by state authorities, who had bulldozed their tin shacks at Modderdam, found temporary accommodation.

The Cape Office was in fact a focal point for a hive of activity, some of which had preceded its formation, some of which emerged later, but all of which drew strength and solidarity from the open, caring, nurturing, supportive manner of the work of the staff of the CI.

Those who formed part of this powerful circle of humanity in action, and benefited from the interaction included the South African Council for Higher Education, the Black Sash, the Institute of Race Relations, the Churches Urban Planning Commission, the Christian Education Leadership Trust, Dependants Conference, South African Outlook, and the Christian Fellowship Trust.

In equal measure with its stabilizing role in the struggle against apartheid, the Cape Office was clearly also a destabilizing force from the point of view of “the system,” the state authorities and their agents. This, and the capacity of Kotze to draw a variety of people into the work of the CI in a way that called forth integrity, courage and solidarity, may be well illustrated by one of the Office’s most provocative and prophetic actions. This was the production of the extensive document on *Torture in South Africa*.

As Helen Kotze recalls this moment, “we were a community against the enemy.”<sup>30</sup> Theo Kotze, David Russell and above all Dot Cleminshaw were the prime authors of the document, drawn from court records and authenticated news reports. It was produced secretly in Athlone, a nearby “coloured” suburb, and printed by a Muslim printing house, later to be petrol-bombed by state agents. Sixteen staff worked on it in the process, quickly, and without divulging what they were doing to anyone else. The final report was assembled and parcelled in the Salt River Methodist Church, where Theo Kotze had been part time pastor, after which different people transported it to a widely spread range of post offices for mailing. It had been planned for the Easter week, both for symbolic and for strategic reasons—the Post Office would be expecting lots of mail at that time going to many parts of the world. Though it was immediately banned once the security police cottoned on to it, it had already reached newspapers, key national and international church leaders, embassies, and other CI contacts; and every member of the South African Parliament received a copy.

The document itself was typical of the growing interest the CI had in uncovering what was happening within the country, and even though it depended entirely on records that were, in one way or another, publicly available to anyone, the mere fact that it had been compiled into a single, extended dossier of the practice, experience, and extent of torture in South Africa had a profound impact.

Another, enduring sign of the character of the Cape Office lay in Kotze’s decision to use

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<sup>30</sup> [Doc #18] Personal interview, Helen and Theo Kotze, Rosebank, 21<sup>st</sup> November, 2000.

the large, central room of the Long Street offices as a non-racial eating and meeting place between people of all kinds, local and international, for which there was no equivalent anywhere in Cape Town. Domestic servants and foreign diplomats were as likely to meet each other there as were clergy and laypeople from a wide range of denominations. People of faiths other than Christianity also found a home here, in a remarkable testimony to the kind of ecumenism that Kotze promulgated in his notion of the “church without walls.”

The wide-open ecumenism practiced by Kotze at the CI in Cape Town played an important role in bringing the most unlikely people together, often leading to enduring friendships. Perhaps the most direct example of this lay in the group of people he employed to run the local “White Conscientisation Programme” of SPRO-CAS II, which was sponsored and housed in the Cape Office.<sup>31</sup>

The leader of the Programme was Neville Curtis, recent past president of the National Union of South African Students and a declared atheist, whose sister, Jeanette, was later to die with her daughter after receiving and opening a parcel bomb in Botswana sent by security police operatives. The senior researcher was Dot Cleminshaw, well-known human rights activist and agnostic. A third staff member was Ivor Shapiro, a gifted writer and then still Jewish.<sup>32</sup> The other two members of the team were Christians.<sup>33</sup>

That this mix of people was possible despite the clear and overt commitment of Kotze and the CI to a Christian position and theological judgements, lay above all in their equally clear and deep passion for justice and concern for individual persons. In short, this was an ecumenism based on the unity of praxis, out of which the faith of the faithful was strengthened and the credibility of the gospel defended, precisely through a fully inclusive compassion and sense of human dignity that was willing to acknowledge the convictions and gifts of others. This illuminates Peter Walshe’s comment on the White Conscientization Programmes nationally, that they “had few successes, unless one associates the robust political activism of the Christian Institute’s Cape Town staff with the new cast of mind of SPRO-CAS II.”<sup>34</sup> Yet it was not simply in SPRO-CAS that this characteristic was prevalent. From the outset, Kotze and his colleagues had not only welcomed interaction with people of other faith and none in the tasks they had set themselves, but actively drew them in—Muslim youth leadership, prominent Jewish citizens,<sup>35</sup> senior leaders of a variety of religious denominations, philosophical atheists and pragmatic agnostics, even security police if they wanted!<sup>36</sup>

Its religious and theological character, the core of what held the CI together, is best captured in the unique fellowship meal Theo Kotze established on a weekly basis. The “CI *Agapé*” provided enormous spiritual sustenance to those who came, a forum for discussion, a source of breaking information, and a means of coordinating action.<sup>37</sup> It has been used in many other parts of the world since and, within the CI, it was the catalyst for much, indeed the origin at least one

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<sup>31</sup> For an extended discussion of SPRO-CAS I (Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society) and SPRO-CAS II (Special Programme for Christian Action in Society)—note the differing meanings of, and intentions behind the acronym—see Walshe, *Church Versus State*, Part III, 87-171.

<sup>32</sup> Shapiro was later to convert to Christianity and become an Anglican priest.

<sup>33</sup> They were June Pym and myself, both out of Kotze’s Sea Point Methodist Church youth group.

<sup>34</sup> Walshe, *Church Versus State*, 143.

<sup>35</sup> The accountant for the CI, for example, was Mike Sher.

<sup>36</sup> On many occasions, as one would expect, security police and other state operatives appeared at meetings or in the offices of the CI, not infrequently in some other guise. They were often quite easy to spot, however, and Kotze made it a habit to invite them in, to ask them to share in the *Agapé*, or just to sit and talk and explain what it was that offended or frightened them about the CI. Most declined the invitation, naturally.

<sup>37</sup> [Doc #19] *Agapé*, issued by the CI, Cape Town. Besides Kotze, the central drafter of the *Agapé* liturgy was Dr Margaret Nash, a South African theologian who had grown up in the ecumenical movement internationally.

influential member believes, of the “fluidity” that marked the work of the CI—its ability to draw together people with differing levels of engagement and conviction without requiring them to prove their activist credentials.<sup>38</sup> In this sense, it was a place of nurture.

The meal began with a liturgical circle, and was self-consciously described in the liturgy as “a family meal” of a family whose commitment “should point us beyond ourselves.” The liturgical text profoundly expressed both a critical and a self-critical appreciation of the context, the tasks before the CI, and the sources of hope and promise, and included intercessions for “the sick, the sorrowful, the distressed and the lonely,” “the Church,” “the unity of the Church,” and “the Government of our country.” One clear indicator of the threat felt by those who stood with and behind the CI lay in an intriguing and pointed rewrite of the line in the Lord’s Prayer usually translated as “lead us not into temptation”: in the CI *Agapé*, it becomes “and do not bring us to the breaking point.”

This reformulation of the prayer in fact had its origin in another context of crisis and threat—the *Cotton Patch* version of scripture originating in the Koinonia experiment headed by Clarence Jordan in Americus, Georgia, USA, where Christians attempted to live out, in community, a non-racial, anti-violence commitment at a time when the post-war Civil Rights Movement was just birthing. Jordan, a Greek scholar, had rewritten the gospels in colloquial Southern idiom, and Kotze had met him and was to become a good friend. That Jordan’s translation had found its way into the CI *Agapé* points to another aspect of the Cape Office: an extended community, which the *Agapé* symbolized theologically par excellence, that went far beyond the shores of South Africa. Kotze, like Naudé, regularly received a host of international visitors, from the high to the low. These visitors frequently became friends, to play a major role in making space for the CI internationally, and in getting the information and perspectives it was able to disseminate to a very wide international audience.

For the CI staff in particular, that threat took the form of regular and continuing harassment from security police and their agents. As Florrie de Villiers recalls, “We were dealing with people who would not spare us. But I was not afraid. They used to phone regularly at night. My in-laws reminded me of the danger.” The meaning of the *Agapé* was embodied in those who attended, and in the actions they took, ‘Aunt Florrie’ being a good example.

After being encouraged and supported to do some training courses (a feature of the Cape Office’s attitude to its staff and members too), she worked later as a field officer in shack settlement areas, and recalls an occasion when she saw an emaciated old man trying to prepare a meal using a dry jaw bone of an animal: “Next day was *Agapé*. I put the bone on the table. I was too upset to let *Agapé* continue. I told them the story of the man.”<sup>39</sup> The result was an immediate search for money, a vehicle, and groceries that Florrie then took to the man. Later she was to become a founding member and President of the South African Domestic Worker’s Union, a major initiative in a context where black women in particular were subjugated to what some have since called a “triple-oppression”—poor, black and a woman—and where migratory labour legislation and related labour laws marginalized women above all, geographically, economically and legally.

A major aspect of the Cape Office of the CI, then, was the willingness of its staff, and often its members, to go out of their way to help others, to act on their convictions in ways that communicated their care to others, to bind their commitment to justice with a compassion for persons. Kotze personified what he expected from others in this respect. As Villa-Vicencio has

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<sup>38</sup> Personal interview, Margaret Nash, Claremont, 21<sup>st</sup> November, 2000.

<sup>39</sup> Personal interview, Florrie de Villiers, Kuils River, 19<sup>th</sup> December, 2000.

put it, "... his ceaseless pastoral ministry took him to the homes of many banned persons and the families of detainees [and] few have appeared in a court-room in or around Cape Town on a political charge who did not see Theo there, simply understanding and caring."<sup>40</sup>

The final element that characterized the Cape Office of the CI, again given flesh in the person of Theo Kotze, was humour. Not at all a trivial virtue, the capacity to laugh deeply in the face of threat and unjust punitive action may be understood as a vital resource in giving to any struggle or situation of suffering that humanity which humanizes others, even those that threaten and punish one. Repeatedly in interviews with staff and key CI members of the time, the presence of humour is recalled as being important. People think of Kotze as "fun," and he himself loved two posters that hung in the Cape Office. Both reflected an awareness of state surveillance and threat against the CI, while accepting it simply as an inevitable outcome under the conditions of Apartheid of one's convictions and founding tradition. One, depicting a branch with green leaves, had it that "Where there is a branch, there is growth; where there is a Special Branch [the official designation of the widely feared Security Police], there is a special growth." The other simply declared that "Just because you're Paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you!" Black humour they were, but that was precisely what was required; it helped lift the spirits, strengthened, almost in the tradition of Hasidic Judaism, one's sense of being part of God's joke on those who would thwart justice.

To this capacity to laugh in the face of threat was added a good dose of daily fun, and more importantly, a generosity of spirit and home-place second to none, both at the CI Office and in the Kotze residence itself. Both places were remarkably open to all at the oddest times, and both were dependent as much on Helen Kotze and her fortitude and charity (often much needed!) as it was on Theo Kotze and his warmth and natural inclination to commune with others. But it was contagious, as many people still testify. It spread to and through others. It summarizes best the human character of the indelible piece of history that the Cape Office became.

The Cape Office of the CI did much more than can be captured here, including fundraising for all sorts of activities and groups it wished to support, and disseminating a huge amount of information and commentary at a time when reliable insights and perspectives were hard to come by inside South Africa. One of the best publications of the Cape Office, which saw several issues appear before it was finally banned outright, was *Bandwagon*, a half-size occasional journal that provided its readers with a wealth of information on detentions, bannings, disappearances, court appearances and the like which was not easily found elsewhere.<sup>41</sup> Many workshops, educational events, seminars, public meetings, services, vigils and group meetings packed the life of the Office staff and supporters.

To an extraordinary extent, commentators, journalists, analysts, policy-makers and other publicly influential people from outside South Africa saw the CI as the one deeply reliable, up to date source of information and insight. This was a role made easier by its religious (as opposed to specifically political) foundations and links, both because this meant many local people went, often first, to the CI for help or to pass on critical information about what was going on "on the ground," because it was not easy for a professedly "Christian" state to be seen to attacking other Christians, because the information could be trusted to be less agenda-ridden than other possible sources, and because the network of trusted personal links across the global *ecumené* themselves often had significant resources for disseminating what was provided, including direct channels to governments and other international agencies.

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<sup>40</sup> Charles Villa-Vicencio, "Theo Kotze," *South African Outlook*, November 1977, 173.

<sup>41</sup> James Polley, Des Adendorff, Dot Cleminshaw, Ivor Shapiro and, for a while, myself, were involved in this production.

In this respect, the small size—in membership and supporters—of the CI, in Cape Town as elsewhere, was completely disproportionate to its influence. It was a generative matrix for two generations of committed actors against apartheid.

Above all, however, what marked the Cape Office of the CI as special, as having a particular contribution of enormous value to make, was its focus on persons, their fears and needs, their dignity and pain, their guilt and complicity, in ways that were humanizing, that engendered a greater sense of what it means to be human. This was a major reason for the trust that the CI and its staff engendered in people who otherwise trusted little. This was why it could function, as it did over and over again, as a crisis coordination centre in dealing with the pain caused by apartheid and its overseers and in offering comfort, support and strength to mobilize. This is why it could do all of this, on the basis of an overt and deeply practised Christian conviction and theology, in truly ecumenical style—operating virtually as a forum and launching pad for inter-religious engagement with people of other faith, in the search for common responses and solutions to a context of violence and oppression.

It is important, in the context of this essay, to note that this contribution was not coincidentally drawn from the deepest roots of the Christian tradition, and that what one sees in significant individuals such as the Kotze's represent not simply the gifts of one individual, but the flowering of a transcendent sense of justice as bound up with love, both embodied in relation to others in the world. The character and significance of this small body of people at the Cape Office of the CI evokes a certain judgement about what, or who, makes history.

Grand scale events, powerful institutions, and heroic individuals often frame the way we trace the patterns of our history, or mark off points in time and locations in space by which to measure our own lives. Thus we might justifiably claim that, if the 1960 Sharpeville massacre was the signature tune of the sixties, then the seismic student rebellions of 1976 provided the crescendo. Similarly, we may describe the open resistance and the deepening patterns of revolt of the 1980s as a series of fugues—themes repeated by successive voices and developed in counterpoint with one another. Chief protagonists here included the United Democratic Front, the African National Congress, the militarised South African state, and the Inkatha movement. This tumultuous decade closed, for many unexpectedly, with the end of the apartheid system in sight. This is the stuff of history books everywhere.

Less visible, but crucial to this broader history, are the small-scale activities of a myriad tiny organizations that provided the fertile ground for resistance to the apartheid state. It was in these organizations that people knew each other as persons, as those with whom they shared the work and tasks to be done, and often much more—aspects of social life, intimate interactions, times of personal stress and strain.

Here it was, one might say, that “people were grown.” Here it was that the struggle against apartheid was “peopled” through those small-scale groups and organizations that provided the crucial arenas where persons of skill, commitment, courage, or conviction could find the space and the support to begin their journey of resistance, where they could pursue the process of trying to envisage and build an alternative to that which they knew and detested. Here it is that the roots lie of what subsequently become grand events and institutions.

As James Scott has pointed out, without the myriad “arts of resistance” to domination that one finds in the interstices of society, in the small corners, the hidden places and the coded transcripts, most of it fleshed out without public fanfare, the great changes and rebellions that produce more just societies would have no foundation from which to draw, no sources of human

agency.<sup>42</sup>

What the Cape Office of the CI did under the leadership of Theo Kotze was to allow important sources of human agency to emerge, with the support they required to grow and develop. It is evidence of a more general contribution of many Christian (and other religious) groups in the struggle against apartheid: an emphasis on political struggle and economic justice that refused to demote, indeed insisted upon promoting, that which came to be known and appreciated among many activists of all kinds as “the human factor.” This was a term used by other political activists to describe the particular character of several faith-based groups whom they admired for what they often felt to be missing in their own struggle organizations—the kind of personal attention, care, nurturing and relational commitments that often get lost in the intensity of political struggles, where goal-oriented and strategic behaviour take precedence over the dynamics and effects of intersubjective human interaction.

Thus, if Peter Walshe in his history of the CI nationally describes it as “an example of the historical phenomenon of recurring hope,”<sup>43</sup> then one may say of the Cape Office that its enduring character was one of love, provided one recognizes in that term the three elements of the “Great Commandment” referred to by Kotze as his normative foundation: self-regard, justice towards the other, and a commitment to transcendent possibility in the midst of the actualities of the world.

The actualities of the struggle against apartheid were real enough, as Kotze and the CI were to find. On the 19<sup>th</sup> October, 1977, not long after the killing of Steve Biko in detention (himself a major influence on the CI, as was the Black Consciousness Movement generally),<sup>44</sup> the CI was banned along with all defined Black Consciousness organizations and a couple of newspapers. The senior staff of the CI, Kotze included, were also served with personal banning orders, severely restricting their movement and preventing them from continuing their work in any form or guise.<sup>45</sup>

When Kotze left the Long Street offices on that morning with security police and state agents swarming over the building, to return home and begin his confinement under banning orders, a chapter in the history of religious engagement in public life in Cape Town came to an end. It was not the end of the CI, however, as it had already set up an office in Holland in anticipation of such an even, with the crucial backing of all those international friends it had made in Europe and elsewhere among people concerned about South Africa in particular, or racism and domination in general.

In due course, therefore, the “inner circle” of the national CI, with the strong backing of key international friends and support groups, asked Kotze to leave the country and take over the Dutch office. He himself felt that he was not “called” to that particular ministry, and struggled deeply with the request, but in the end acceded to the wishes of his colleagues.<sup>46</sup>

Though his most profound instincts and convictions were against the move, on the 14<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1991.

<sup>43</sup> Walshe, *Church Versus State*, xiv.

<sup>44</sup> Walshe, *Church Versus State*, xii. The increasingly deep impact of the Black Consciousness Movement on the CI produced what Walshe calls “a new historical context. In short, the Institute was faced with the need for a new praxis.”

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *The Cape Times*, October 20, 1977. Fr David Russell, also working out of the CI Cape Office, was another banned on that day, along with Beyers Naudé and others nationally. Security Police detained many others, from a wide range of organizations and places.

<sup>46</sup> It is widely held, by ex-CI members and friends among others, that Theo Kotze left the country in large part because he was unable to cope with the strains of banning. This is far from the whole truth, and the account offered here is far closer. It is based on the intimate involvement of the author with the plans to have Kotze leave the country, and almost daily discussions with him while these plans were being debated.

July, 1978, he departed on a secretive, and somewhat hair-raising trip out of the country, smuggled in the trunk of an ambassadorial vehicle across the border into Botswana, where he was to receive United Nations papers before departing for Europe.<sup>47</sup> There he found the CI office in disarray, with its existing staff at loggerheads, and it was not long before a decision was made by all concerned to close it.<sup>48</sup> Theo Kotze had chosen, as others before and since in many parts of the world, to “leave the country and involve himself in the struggle for peaceful change from outside and accept the consequences of alienation and separation.”<sup>49</sup> A painful period of exile began.

“The decision by Theo Kotze to leave South Africa and to walk the painful path of exile is a dreadful indictment of the government of this country,” wrote Francis Wilson, editor of *South African Outlook*, adding further that, nevertheless, “There is also cause to rejoice for all Theo’s good works which can never be destroyed.”<sup>50</sup> The humanity of Helen and Theo Kotze and the impact of the work that they had carried out and sustained at the Cape Office of the CI, much of which remains to be recorded, endured in multiple ways and in many people, an embodiment of a Christian understanding of justice bound up with love as *agapé*.

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. *The Cape Times*, Editorial, July 19, 1978.

<sup>48</sup> Walshe, *Church Versus State*, 226, fn 59. Walshe notes that Kotze “tried to heal the rift and bring the situation under control.” Other factors also played a role, however, notably the sudden and unexpected arrival in Europe of Walter Felgate who interfered with and counter-acted Kotze’s authority, claiming to act on behalf of Beyers Naudé. Felgate had been an advisor to Naudé before, with a well-demonstrated maverick streak; hence, before Kotze left for Europe, it was specifically agreed that Felgate would no longer have any role in the CI. This too is a story that remains to be told.

<sup>49</sup> Quote from “My Father Theo Kotze,” by Derek Kotze, his eldest son, in *The Nation*, August 1978.

<sup>50</sup> *South African Outlook*, July 1978.