



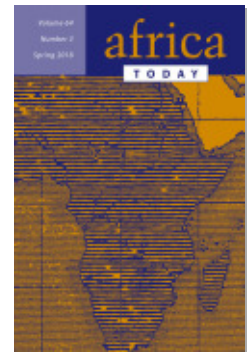
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Democratization, Religious Actors, and Political Influence:
A Comparison of Christian Councils in Ghana and South Africa

Tracy Kuperus

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Ghana and South Africa offer compelling contrasts regarding the sociopolitical influence of religion. In both countries, the number of religious adherents is high, religious experiences are varied, and public spaces filled by religious organizations are innumerable. This article focuses on the role that two prominent ecumenical councils play in ongoing efforts of democratic consolidation in Ghana and South Africa. Relying on data from interviews, newspaper analysis, and primary and secondary sources, it argues that the Christian Council of Ghana and the South African Council of Churches play prophetic roles, steering their countries toward the consolidation of democracy; however, the former is a far more influential political actor than the latter.

Introduction

Ghana and South Africa offer compelling contrasts regarding the sociopolitical influence of religion. In both countries, the number of religious adherents is high, religious experiences are varied, and public spaces filled by religious organizations are innumerable. Religious organizations in both countries comment on public policy often, and they have contributed, positively and negatively, to the process of nation-building and democratization (Gifford 1998:57–111; Kuperus 2011). This article analyzes the political role and influence of two Christian ecumenical councils in ongoing efforts of democratic consolidation in Ghana and South Africa.¹

Ghana and South Africa are among the continent's model constitutional democracies. They contain two of the continent's most prominent Christian councils, the Christian Council of Ghana (CCG) and the South African Council of Churches (SACC). But what role do these councils

play in the democratization of Ghana and South Africa, particularly in an environment constrained by the fragility of democracy? Beyond their political role, what is their political influence? And finally, if one of them is more politically influential than the other, what factors might explain the outcome?

The answers to these questions lead to the following research finding: both the CCG and the SACC embrace a prophetic role, steering their countries toward the consolidation of democracy²; however, the CCG, having visionary programming and framing during the democratic transition and maintaining a stance of political neutrality, is by far the more influential political actor.

This result is surprising because the literature suggests that ecumenical councils with stronger international support and organizational capacity historically—in this situation, the SACC—would capitalize on these resources to maintain their political influence. The SACC, despite its obvious advantages as a religious civil-society actor, has been unable to do this in South Africa.

This article is organized as follows. After a brief description of key debates regarding religion and politics in Africa, it provides an overview of the country studies and its own methodology. After comparing the CCG's and SACC's political roles and assessing their political influence, it concludes by commenting on the significance of its findings to the literature on religion and politics.

Religion and Politics in Africa

In the early 1990s, many countries in sub-Saharan Africa embraced democratic transitions in which authoritarian regimes gave way to multi-party rule. Liberal democracy deepened. African governments, for the first time, consistently experienced regularly scheduled, competitive elections, accepted constitutional norms, and encouraged a free press and an active civil society (Cheeseman 2015). This third wave of democracy, however, peaked around 2006, with “no net expansion in the number of electoral democracies” (Diamond 2015:142). Hybrid regimes are the norm on the continent today (Moller and Skaaning 2013), and many African regimes struggle with weak rule of law, economic deprivation, and elite entitlement to state resources, all of which make the consolidation of democracy a significant challenge.

Democratic trends on the continent have coexisted with the spread of Christianity. In 1900, roughly 8.7 million Africans were Christians, but by 2010 that number was 517 million, constituting 57 percent of sub-Saharan Africans (Pew Research Center 2010). The growth in Christianity, reflecting demographic change and coexisting well with Africa's high level of spirituality, has led many to wonder what role Christianity might play in consolidating African democracy.

The literature on religion and politics portrays the ambiguity and diversity of religious organizations in African politics (Patterson and Kuperus 2016:321). Research has examined church engagement in national politics (Gifford 1998; Kuperus 2011), the ways that church leaders become embedded in neopatrimonial governance (McCauley 2012), the Pentecostal emphasis on individualism and Catholic and mainline Protestant political themes of social justice (McClendon and Riedl 2015; Ranger 2008), and the effects of church–state relations on socioeconomic development (Longman 2009; Patterson 2011). A consistent finding of this research is that religious organizations are one of the most trusted civil-society actors in Africa (Uzodike and Whetho 2008). They contribute to democratic consolidation when they foster civility, hold government accountable, provide an empowered space for marginalized groups, and promote the welfare of people at large.³ Environment matters, too. Religious organizations and communities are likelier to support liberal democracy in religiously diverse settings, as opposed to religiously segregated settings (Dowd 2015). But what about the role that mainline Christian organizations play in democratic consolidation? Four factors may explain it.

The first factor is public theology. The public theology of mainline Christian organizations may contribute positively to democratic consolidation. Mainline organizations, whether Catholic or Protestant, spurred on by prophetic theological traditions, are more cognizant of structural injustices in Africa than their Pentecostal or Charismatic counterparts, which focus on personal and public integrity (McClendon and Riedl 2015). Mainline churches espouse a liberating political theology, in which Christ's "sufferings demand, in response, the pursuit of justice for His suffering brothers and sisters" (Lonsdale 2009:64). Such churches and their religious networks support engagement in politics, but this engagement does not demand blind obedience to the state. If the state does not allow its citizens to flourish, even undermining their dignity and abusing their rights, these religious organizations will advocate on their behalf. In short, a prophetic or liberating public theology aids mainline Christian organizations in their efforts at consolidating democracy by providing a biblical framework to hold governments accountable to the norms of justice and transparency (Gifford 2015).

Another factor contributing to mainline organizational support for democracy is extensive international linkages and strong organizational capacity. The international, resource-rich, and centralized nature of mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic churches, many have argued, helped them fill the political vacuum of the 1980s and challenge authoritarianism in the early 1990s throughout Africa (Gifford 1995). These linkages continue to contribute positively to democracy-supporting efforts today. For example, the Catholic-based Justice and Peace networks existing throughout Africa provide resources and ideas that shape the actions of the Roman Catholic Church regarding "human rights education, education for democracy, election monitoring, and grassroots empowerment" (Gifford 1998:311). In contrast to mainline Protestant Christianity and Roman

Catholicism, Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity is more localized and decentralized, leading to what many have argued are more fragmented political initiatives (Freston 2001).

These binary analyses of mainline Christianity's contributions to democratic consolidation have been countered by studies highlighting the hegemonic elitism of mainline organizations, the third factor in question. Mainline Christianity's historical roots in the European missionary experience, combined with its continuous access to power, leads Protestant and Roman Catholic churches in Africa to support the corrupt government of the day because of "shared class concerns" (Haynes 1996). Simply put, both political and religious elites protect their socioeconomic interests. Far too often, mainline religious elites forward political stability over and against the needs of the masses. Examples where mainline Christian organizations have supported narrow identity-driven interests, thus hurting the cause of democracy, include the Dutch Reformed Church's support for apartheid in South Africa and the role of the church with regard to the Rwandan genocide (Kuperus 1999; Longman 2009).

The final factor explaining mainline organizational democratic initiatives is church–state interactions, expressed as autonomy or cooptation, which can be measured by the positioning on policy issues or the official (and unofficial) interaction between civil-society leaders. Being freer from state control gives a religious actor a greater chance of holding a government accountable and promoting democratization (Kuperus 1999; Philpott 2007). The actions of mainline Protestant and Catholic organizations in Zambia in resisting the late President Frederick Chiluba's attempts at running for a third term are connected to an autonomous relationship with the state (Freston 2001:154–64). An example of a coopted church–state relationship would be the actions of the Roman Catholic Church during Zimbabwe's constitutional crisis in the early to mid-2000s (Tarusarira 2016).

A detailed study of Christian councils in Ghana and South Africa allows us to examine how these factors shape their political roles. All these factors are present in varying degrees in both cases, though it is the prophetic political theology of the CCG and the SACC that primarily explains their past and present engagement with politics and their support for democracy.

Scholarly attention to the factors explaining the political influence of religious actors is more disparate. All the factors listed above, particularly organizational capacity and state–civil society relations, explain the political influence of religious actors, but others can be added, including visionary leadership, religious demographics, sociopolitical context (including the opportunity structure of civil society), historical activism, and moral authority. Indeed, this article enlarges the discussion of religious organizations as political actors by exploring the issue of political influence in an in-depth, comparative context.

Research on religion and politics in Africa suggests that the SACC would be a more influential political actor than the CCG in the contemporary political environment. The SACC not only retained its commitment

to a prophetic political theology, one that encouraged active engagement in South African politics, but also entered a political environment where the ruling party embraced its commitment to social justice, opening doors for engagement (not cooptation) in terms of building strong political institutions. Additionally, the SACC could capitalize on the strong international support and organizational capacity present during the late apartheid years to maintain its political influence in South Africa's new democratic dispensation.

Method and Comparison of Countries

Fieldwork pertaining to this research occurred from February through mid-August 2016. Data were collected from primary and secondary document analysis, newspaper searches, and one-on-one interviews with sixteen current or former staff members of the CCG and the SACC and a few independent observers, staff members of organizations that work with the councils. A repetitive case study design was used, in which the same questions were asked for each individual.

The CCG and the SACC operate in similar sociopolitical contexts. Both Ghana and South Africa are highly religious, majority Christian countries. In Ghana, according to the 2010 census, 94 percent of Ghanaians are religious, with 71.2 percent claiming to be Christians (Ghana World Factbook 2017). The Christian landscape is diverse, with Pentecostals or Charismatics dominating but coexisting with large numbers of mainline Protestants and Catholics. Muslims constitute about 18 percent of the population. In South Africa, according to the 2001 census, "some 85 percent of South Africans are religious. . . . The vast majority (nearly 80 percent) report being Christians" (Piper 2009:66). The Christian landscape in South Africa is diverse, with no single denomination predominating. Mainline Protestant, Catholic, Pentecostal denominations, and African-initiated churches all have nontrivial numbers of adherents. South Africa contains a low number of Muslims—about 1.5 percent of the population.

Ghana and South Africa share a similar political landscape. Both countries serve as models of democracy in Africa because they emerged out of authoritarian rule (in the early 1990s) and embarked on a democratic transition that has led to a politically stable, multiparty constitutional democracy (Cheeseman, Lynch, and Willis 2017; Gyimah-Boadi 2009; Lodge 2002; Sisk 1995). Both countries are effectively governed: they rank among the top ten countries on the continent, Ghana being in seventh place and South Africa in sixth (Jarosz 2016). Finally, both countries have developed strong political institutions, whether that be electoral commissions, parliamentary oversight bodies, or the judiciary (Roux 2016; Stepenhurst and Pelizzo 2012).

These political successes mask serious challenges for democratization. Indeed, cautionary assessments of democratic consolidation are linked to the fragility of democracy in both countries. Ghana is struggling with

an under-resourced judiciary, a disproportionately powerful executive, an inefficient bureaucracy, and socioeconomic inequality (Osei-Assibey 2014). South Africa grapples with gatekeeper politics—a unique patronage arrangement, which accentuates the role of crony capitalism and bitter factional struggles within the African National Congress (ANC) (Beresford 2015). Besides the undermining of democratic political institutions that occurs in South Africa related to an overpowering executive branch and a domineering party, South Africa exhibits high levels of violent crime, poor social-service delivery, and gross socioeconomic inequality (Habib 2013).

The comparisons between Ghana and South Africa along religious and political lines suggest a solid basis for a most similar research design, but these countries differ in important ways. A smaller proportion of Ghanaians engage in politics beyond the formal realm, compared to South Africans; Ghana's GDP per capita is much lower than South Africa's; and Ghana emerged from military rule into democracy in a top-down democratic transition, while South Africa emerged from apartheid via a more inclusive, gradual democratic transition. These differences could affect the political influence of the Christian councils in Ghana and South Africa, but one political difference in particular stands out: Ghana is a multiparty democracy with a highly competitive two-party system, which has experienced three peaceful transfers of power since 1992; South Africa, in contrast, is a multiparty democracy with a dominant party system. The ANC has garnered 60 percent or more of the vote in every national election since 1994. Why is this significant? It could be that Ghana's electoral system has greatly contributed to the CCG's position of political neutrality over and against the SACC. Perhaps the CCG's political influence has less to do with visionary leadership and more to do with political structure.

In the end, the political and religious differences described above lead one to a cautionary embrace of the broader conclusions of the findings of this article. Comparisons with other countries that have Christian councils operating in dominant-party or more competitive party systems would be beneficial. Ghana and South Africa are not crucial cases, indefinitely proving or disproving a theory (Kopecky 2011), but they do offer enough similarities that the findings related to the political role and influence of Christian councils could refine the explanatory factors in the religion and politics literature pertaining to Christianity in Africa.

The Political Role and Influence of the Christian Council of Ghana

The CCG, founded in 1929, is one of the oldest Christian councils in the world and one of the largest in Africa.⁴ It has a long and distinguished record of political involvement, one that has fostered democratization. Some of these highlights, before Ghana's return to constitutional democracy in the early 1990s, include the CCG's call in 1949 for the Gold Coast's natural right

to self-determination, the CCG's plea in 1960 to Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah to stop detaining citizens without trial, and the CCG's bold challenges to military rule in the 1970s and 1980s, calling out human-rights abuses and rejecting arbitrary trials (Anquandah 2009).

After Ghana's transition to democratic rule in the early 1990s, the CCG has continued to support democracy's consolidation and advocate for the improved welfare of Ghanaian citizens. During national elections, its public role looms large. It encourages Ghanaians to vote, educates them regarding their rights, and urges peaceful participation in the electoral process (Van Gyampo and Asare 2017). Since the early 1990s, it has played a major role in refugee and public health matters, working with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in refugee resettlement and urging Ghanaians during the West African Ebola outbreak in 2014 to heed medical admonitions, rather than attributing the outbreak to God's punishment of Africans for their sins (CCG 2014). Finally, it is regarded as an independent voice among civil-society actors, consistently urging the government toward just and fair public policy, ranging from calls for electoral commission reform to campaigns against small-scale, illegal gold mining (Patterson 2018).

The CCG's public theology and autonomous church-state relations explain its steadfast support for democracy. Its public theology has been consistently liberationist. The Rev. Robert Aboagye-Mensah, General Secretary of the CCG from 1999 to 2003, confirmed this reality:

One of the things I'm most proud of is that as an institution we took a firm decision that as believers in Christ, we have a social responsibility. It was not seen as an added sort of responsibility. We believe in the Kingdom of God. . . . Being inspired by the kingdom, you get involved in social issues because you see the church as a body for the transformation of society. So we are agents of transformation. (Interview, Accra, Ghana, May 2, 2016)

The CCG's liberationist public theology is connected with a strong commitment to political neutrality (Anquandah 2009:7). Its nonpartisan stance has garnered widespread credibility and respect among Ghanaians, who feel that it speaks on their behalf, rather than that of the government. In the words of the Rev. Kwabena Opuni-Frimpong, General Secretary of the CCG from 2013 to 2018:

The council has maintained its neutrality in that we don't work for any political party. We are here for the common good of Ghanaians. We are a pro-poor institution. We are on the side of the disadvantaged in society, and we are not here to do [for] a particular government or particular political party what they would want us to do. (Interview, Osu, Ghana, April 28, 2016)

The political role that the CCG has played in fostering democracy in Ghana is undisputed, but what about its political influence? If political influence is measured by media attention, the government's pursuit of religious actors as a relevant public player, and the religious actor's contribution to public policy debates and strengthening political institutions, the CCG can be regarded as an influential political actor.

An example best illustrates the CCG's media presence. In January 2016, the Ghanaian government accepted the transfer of two Yemeni ex-detainees from the US military prison in Guantanamo Bay. A popular outcry ensued, with some groups, including the CCG, arguing that the deal was secretive and unconstitutional; the CCG added that the deal put the security of Ghanaians at risk (Opuni-Frimpong 2016; Syme 2016). The council's statements on the issue made headline news in print, online, and on radio and television—a standard response, in fact, to the CCG's pronouncements on public issues. The Rev. Kwabena Opuni-Frimpong confirmed its media presence:

Just last week, the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC) was launching their 2016 election public campaign, and then the GBC board chair wrote to me and said they would want the general secretary of the Christian Council to come and be there at the launch, and what you say becomes headline news! If you review our newspapers, a whole month cannot pass in Ghana without "the Christian Council this, the Christian Council that." (Interview, Osu, Ghana, April 28, 2016)

Joyce Steiner, Director of Programmes and Advocacy at the CCG, likewise addressed this reality:

Just a few days back, a minister in the Volta region said something that was very tribalistic and negative, and the leader of the National Peace Council had spoken and condemned it. But you could imagine the number of calls that we had! Everybody was asking, "What is the Christian Council saying?" But the CCG was not saying anything because the chairman of the National Peace Council had said something, and he was partly representing the views of the CCG, but the media would rather want the general secretary or the chairman of the CCG to speak because they represent, what they call it, the "voice of God": that is what they say. (Interview, Osu, Ghana, April 28, 2016)

In addition to strong media presence, the CCG, as the quotes above demonstrate, is a sought-after actor on political issues, as it has been since early in Ghana's transition to democracy. In 1988, the CCG replaced petitions and memos to government officials as its core political tactic

with political education programs, which informed Ghanaians about the Christian call to political involvement (Gifford 1998:71). Given the CCG's extraordinary commitment to "socializing Ghanaians into the democratization process, the CCG was also invited to serve on the constituent assembly that was established by the PNDC regime and tasked to draft Ghana's 1992 constitution" (Van Gyampo and Asare 2017:13). It was not the only religious actor present at the Constituent Assembly, but its invitation to contribute to the making of the constitution indicates it was viewed as a key player regarding the shape of Ghana's political future.

Since the early 1990s, the CCG's most prominent role politically has been its engagement during national elections as one of the leading organizations that train election observers and monitor elections (Anquandah 2009; Deegbe interview 2016). But perhaps the best example of its access to political players is its involvement in mediating tense election outcomes. Ghana's 2008 and 2012 presidential elections led to contested outcomes, for different reasons (van Gyampo and Asare 2017; Whitfield 2009). Many feared that the animosity between supporters of the two major political parties could spill over into widespread violence. In both instances, the CCG played a key role in brokering peace between the contesting stakeholders, along with other civil-society actors like the Institute of Economic Affairs and the Center for Democratic Development (Gyimah-Boadi 2009). The CCG chaired meetings with key leaders from both political parties, and it called for calm among Ghanaians via a variety of media outlets. Interviews with CCG staff members, former or current, confirmed these realities. Joyce Steiner said the following about the 2012 election:

During the last election, there was so much tension, so we had this group we called the Eminent Persons Group, that met with all the political parties and got them to sign a commitment to peace, and we got the two major parties to also sign that they would accept the results, and I think that helped. Before the NPP decided to go to the court in 2012 to contest the results, they came here to inform the CCG and fellow heads of churches that they think that something is wrong, so they wanted to use the courts, and since it is everybody's democratic right, we didn't stop them, because it's constitutional... But the main point being that they came in front of the council before this decision was made to the public! (Interview, Osu, Ghana, April 28, 2016)

In addition to gaining considerable attention from the media and the political establishment, the CCG has contributed regularly to conversations that have influenced public policy and participated in organizations that strengthen Ghana's political institutions. Examples include resistance to the Religious Bodies Registration Law of 1989 (requiring individual congregations to register with the government), which was declared

unconstitutional in 1992 on the grounds that it violated religious freedom (Dovlo 2005); resistance by the CCG and other civil-society organizations to the government's attempts at water privatization in 2001, as a result of which the government abandoned the effort (Public Citizen n.d.); and more recently, advocacy by the CCG and other civil-society actors of passage of the Petroleum Revenue Management Act and the creation of a watchdog group, the Public Interest and Accountability Committee, both of which demand transparency and citizen oversight related to "the government's stewardship of petroleum funds and compliance with the law" (Gyimah-Boadi and Premphah 2012:99; see also Antwi 2010).

In sum, the CCG has played a key role supporting democracy in Ghana. It gains considerable political influence from media attention, political access to key decision-makers, and contribution to public policy debates. Turning to the SACC, we encounter a different outcome. The SACC, like the CCG, has played a key role in supporting South Africa's democracy; as a religious actor in the public domain, however, it has lost its political influence.

The Political Role and Influence of the SACC

The SACC, representing more than half of all Christians in South Africa through its thirty-six member churches and organizations, is an ecumenical organization "committed to expressing ... the united witness of the church in South Africa, especially in matters of national debate and order" (SACC 2017).⁵

The SACC, like the CCG, has a long and distinguished record of political involvement in South Africa in support of democratization. Its commitment to a contextual prophetic theology shaped its antiapartheid involvement in the 1980s (Goba 1988; Walshe 1995). It often directed its actions toward transforming unjust power structures and mobilizing the resources of the oppressed, mainly black, communities. As one of the few unbanned liberation-oriented institutions in the country, it provided support for conscientious objectors, commended international economic sanctions, and resolved that churches should withdraw from cooperation with the state in all areas where the law of the state contradicted what it interpreted to be the law of God's justice (Borer 1998; Walshe 1995). It was one of the most visible aboveground civil-society actors sustaining the liberation struggle in the 1980s.

In some respects, the SACC's political role in South Africa today does not differ much from what it was during the apartheid years. Its positions on many public-policy issues indicate the survival of its critical, prophetic voice and its promotion of democracy. This is seen most strikingly in its advocacy of issues involving economic justice; for example, it provided important leadership in the People's Budget Campaign in the 1990s, an effort that presented a people-centered, redistributive economic vision, compared with South Africa's fiscally conservative, elitist-driven economic

framework (Tilton 2002).⁶ It has consistently called out government abuses and corruption, whether they be lucrative arms deals or issues related to so-called state capture.

Many deeply appreciated the SACC within the broader liberation struggle during the apartheid years, but its influence as a religious actor in the new South Africa is much diminished, even marginalized. One marker of this reduction in political influence is scant media attention. Mogomotsi Diutwileng, a staff member with the SACC in the early 2000s, described this lack of media attention:

The SACC is not influential. If we had influence and power, the government would consult with us before it takes certain decisions. . . . The government doesn't take the church seriously. They just continue doing what they want. Even when the church stands on a public platform to issue a statement, if we are lucky, a spokesperson of the ANC replies to the statement—that is, if we are really lucky. But generally, they will just ignore the statement. . . . Even the media in South Africa—print and electronic—doesn't take the statements from the SACC very seriously. (Interview, Katlehong, South Africa, July 26, 2016)

These remarks suggest a link between the SACC's lack of media presence and its position as a diminished sociopolitical actor. Evidence of officials ignoring the SACC can be seen in the government's resistance to many of the positions the SACC has staked out, whether it was urging the South African government to hold Mugabe accountable to Zimbabwean citizens in the 2000s or its continued defense of good governance in the face of the ANC's commitment to state capture. The government has sometimes sidelined the SACC. In 2009, it created the National Interfaith Leaders Council, an interreligious group intended to work with the government to improve the delivery of basic services like water, electricity, and housing (Kuperus 2011), but it did not invite the SACC to the formation of this council—a remarkable development, considering the SACC's historic commitment to eradicating poverty and empowering the marginalized.⁷ Another example of the SACC being sidelined by political actors was an event in 2012 involving the ANC centenary celebrations. A former SACC general secretary, Mautjie Pataki (2011–14), at a seminar on church and state relations in South Africa in the context of the centenary celebration, wondered “why the SACC was not invited, considering the role the church played in the formation of the ANC and the struggle against apartheid” (Kumalo 2014b:628; see also Kumalo 2014a).

Political influence can be measured by an organization's contribution to conversations that influence public policy or its participation in organizations that strengthen political institutions. Already in Cape Town by 1998, it had set up a parliamentary liaison office that was staffed by individuals who

monitored parliamentary legislation “to participate in public policy debates and processes” that forwarded socioeconomic justice and democratization (Vermeulen and Lovaas 2006:27; see also Egan 2008:462–5). Its parliamentary office worked in tandem with its Catholic counterpart (larger in staff and resources) to support bills dealing with employment equity, land reform, basic income grants, civil unions, and other issues; however, the lack of financial support has led to the recent closure of the SACC parliamentary office (Arrison interview 2016)—another indication of waning influence.

Additionally, despite the SACC’s commitment to public-policy engagement during the postapartheid era, receiving scant media attention and being sidelined as an actor in the public sphere have meant that its contributions to public debates are often folded into the pronouncements of more influential actors. An example of this occurred in April 2016, when SACC President Zipho Siwa and other religious leaders called for President Zuma’s resignation after the Constitutional Court had upheld the public protector’s Nkandla ruling (Naki 2017). The call for Zuma to resign made headline news; however, the SACC did not provide the leadership in this event, and it was one of many organizations calling for Zuma’s resignation. The SACC’s protests against corruption and bad leadership in South Africa today often mix with the efforts of other organizations, like the Save South Africa campaign, that more readily capture public imagination.⁸

Explanation and Significance of These Findings

Both the CCG and the SACC embrace a political role that tries to steer their countries toward consolidating democracy; however, the CCG is a far more influential political actor. This result is surprising because the literature suggests that ecumenical councils with stronger international support and organizational capacity historically—in this situation, the SACC—would be able to capitalize on these resources, as well as draw from its contextual public theology, to influence contemporary politics.

In the early 1990s, the SACC had more advantages than the CCG. It was operating in a political environment where the ruling party, the ANC, was embracing its commitment to social justice, thus, opening doors for engagement—not necessarily cooptation—to build strong, democratic political institutions (Storey 2012). The SACC’s prophetic theology, merged with the ANC’s commitment to democratic socialism, explains, in part, the SACC’s strong support for the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in the 1990s (Kuperus 2011). Both church and state could support endeavors that promoted justice and reconciliation to aid South Africa’s democracy—a potentially new norm for church–state relations in South Africa.

The SACC in the 1980s had considerable strengths in international support and organizational capacity, which many hoped would provide a foundation for its continued political influence in the new South Africa. Indeed, for many South Africans, it was then the alternative

government. Impressive leaders, like Desmond Tutu, Frank Chikane, and Alan Boesak, garnered worldwide support. Substantial funding came from the World Council of Churches and European governments including Germany, Norway, Netherlands, Sweden, and Denmark. In the late 1980s, international donors contributed to a budget of R23 million and a staff of six hundred (Borer 1998:162; Simpson 2015:262). These staff numbers allowed the organization to house other parts of the liberation movement, both channeling funds and giving office space to groups like the United Democratic Front and the National Union of Mineworkers. It supplied legal and material aid for thousands of detainees, launched a variety of social services, and set up crisis centers during states of emergency (Walshe 1995). Many staff members associated with it knew that monetary support would decrease in a new South Africa, but its impressive leaders and professional, well-organized structure led it to envision a future in which it could give effective support and criticism in the political and economic restructuring of the country.

The SACC today is a diminished organization, in terms not just of its political engagement, but its organizational capacity. Its national staff of twenty-four in 2000 (Simpson 2015:262), already a considerable drop from six hundred, has declined merely to one, with approximately twelve to twenty regional staff members.⁹ In 2012, the *Mail and Guardian* reported that it might “close its doors” for dwindling funds and a crisis of authority (Sosibo 2012).¹⁰

What factors might explain the CCG’s continued political influence in the public sphere, relative to the SACC’s diminished political voice? Socio-political factors are part of the explanation. Ghana is a multiparty democracy with a highly competitive two-party system. Class ties indicate an affinity between the CCG and the NPP, but the CCG is incentivized to maintain its autonomy from *both* major political parties, as alternations between them often occur. Conversely, the political parties in Ghana place fewer constraints on religious institutions, as they must seek the support of every citizen in close, highly contested elections. South Africa, in contrast, has a dominant party system. The ANC wins 60 percent or more of the vote in national elections. The SACC and ANC’s symbiotic relationship before 1994 did not bode well for autonomous church–state relations after 1994, but the more ominous reality is the ANC’s insistence that civil-society actors play supportive but not watchdog roles in the public sphere, thereby selecting church actors that do its bidding and ignoring those with more independent voices (Kumalo 2014b).

Party structure alone does not determine the nature of church–state relations. In Kenya, the political influence of the National Council of Churches is much diminished today, yet it operates in a competitive, albeit flawed, two-party system (Knighton 2009). Conversely, the political influence of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches has veered between influential and diminished, both before and after the achievement of national independence, as Zimbabwe has a dominant party system (Dorman 2002). More research on the nature of church–state relations and the influence of

ecumenical councils across the continent is needed to determine how party structure factors into such relationships.

The more robust explanation for the CCG's prominent political influence relative to the SACC's rests in visionary leadership. In essence, the CCG successfully repositioned itself as a religious actor in the early 1990s with creative programming and theological framing during and after Ghana's democratic transition, and it has maintained its position of moral authority within Ghanaian society via an autonomous relationship with the state. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, it devoted considerable leadership to civic education programs regarding the upcoming democratic elections and thoughtful political education programs designed to teach Ghanaians what political activity should look like in a democracy (Anquandah 2009). Through its local councils, it organized a series of workshops and seminars designed to prepare mainline Christians for political involvement in a democracy. Short monographs with titles like "The Nation, the Church, and Democracy" (1992), "Ecumenism and Democratic Culture in Ghana" (1993), and "Human Rights and a Democratic Culture" (1995) were used to structure these workshops.¹¹

The CCG's efforts at articulating a thoughtful political engagement strategy did not begin and end with mainline Christians. The CCG, already in the 1990s, was on the forefront of creating cooperative partnerships with different religious groups regarding meaningful political engagement. It consistently worked with Muslims and Christians from other faith traditions—for example, traditional religions, Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, and Charismatic—on interfaith conflict resolution, interethnic and chieftancy disputes, socioeconomic policymaking, and democratic governance (Anquandah 2009). An example of the last includes its initiation, in 1996, of the Forum of Religious Bodies, comprising twenty-five civil-society organizations rooted in every faith tradition within Ghana, for "the purpose of developing a programme for voter education and for close monitoring of elections in order to . . . promote democratic governance" (Anquandah 2009:78). CCG leaders recognized early on that cooperation among diverse religious actors was a pragmatic strategy in a variegated religious environment, and they believed that more could be accomplished working in interfaith partnerships (Aboagye-Mensah Interview 2016).

The SACC's efforts during the democratic transition, in contrast, involved civic education regarding the electoral process and mediation efforts between the political parties (Simpson 2015). Discussions about Christian responsibilities regarding active engagement in politics were muted in lieu of commitments to reconciliation and healing during a critical time of transition (Kumalo and Dziva 2008). Ironically, former SACC leaders, like Desmond Tutu and Manas Buthelezi, announced in the early 1990s that church involvement in South Africa could shift from politics to ecclesial matters. Desmond Tutu famously said, "Now I am going back to the church to do the real business of the church and leave politics to those well qualified to do it" (Kumalo and Dziva 2008:175). Father Michael Lapsley, a

South African Anglican priest who recently served as deputy president of the SACC, poignantly commented on why the SACC retreated from activist politics in the early years of South Africa's democracy: "I think in some ways we are all a bit naive. I think we thought that come 1994, give us four or five years, and the kingdom of God will be here. And I think twenty years later we have sobered up" (interview, Cape Town, South Africa, June 29, 2016).¹²

The CCG's efforts in political education during the democratic transition were more intentional than the SACC's, and they were grounded in a theological framework accepted by everyone connected with the organization. The CCG successfully reoriented its role as a nondenominational ecumenical Christian movement regarding societal engagement. In 1991, like the SACC in 2012, it was facing insolvency. Some called for it to be shut down. It decided to regroup. After numerous consultations with outsiders and staff members, it outlined a fourfold role in Ghanaian society: prophetic, advocacy, educational, and transformational roles (Anquandah 2009). Research-based advocacy in a democratic environment has been its driving agenda since the early 2000s. The Rev. Kwabena Opuni-Frimpong added depth to this role with *Christian Ministry of Advocacy* (2015), a publication including a call for faith-based citizen mobilization around public policy.

Contrast these efforts with those of the SACC. Many have noted that mainline Christianity and the SACC in particular have not developed a post-apartheid "theology of transformation to guide us and bring us together, as was the case with the theology of liberation in the Apartheid years" (Piper 2009:73). The SACC's theological framework for political engagement has been described as critical solidarity (Kuperus 2011). This position, however, has not been accepted widely by the stakeholders of the organization. Some theologians, including Tinyiko Maluleke and Vuyani Vellum, argue that critical solidarity—a theology of reconstruction—distances itself unnecessarily from liberation theology: it is too Western in origin and politically conciliatory (De Villiers 2011). Vena Mqondisi, director of the Western Cape Province of Churches, thus addresses this critique:

We seem to have lost the prophetic voice.... The Council of Churches started talking about being in critical solidarity with the government, but if we are going to be in critical solidarity with the government, where do we draw the line? And I think to a certain extent ... we have been a very complacent and also a compromising organization.... For me, I think we should do away with critical solidarity with the government. I think our solidarity should be with the poor and marginalized. (Interview, Cape Town, South Africa, July 7, 2016)

Visionary leadership expresses itself in relevant programming and theological framing, but the CCG has also continuously maintained its position of moral authority as a religious actor via an autonomous relationship with the state. Anna Grzymala-Busse defines moral authority as something that

“relies on the perception that churches are faithful representatives and loyal defenders of society as a whole—of the ‘nation’—rather than of narrower regional, partisan, or sectarian interests” (2016:13). Moral authority goes beyond pietistic actions, such as presiding over a public funeral, and offering spiritual guidance: rather, the public views a church actor as forwarding the common good instead of partisan ends.

The CCG has maintained its moral authority by successfully walking the fine line of nonpartisan political engagement. This is how the Rev. Robert Aboagye-Mensah, former General Secretary of the CCG (1999–2003), describes this effort on the CCG’s behalf.

For us to remain neutral and to be able to speak out on issues as we felt led to do, we decided not to take any financial support from any of the political parties, the leading parties or those in opposition; but for most of our engagements, we made sure that they [appropriate government actors and political parties] were all invited to be part of the discussion—that they were fully represented—because we felt that we needed to take that neutral sort of position. (Interview, Accra, Ghana, May 2, 2016)

The SACC, in contrast, has had a more difficult time presenting itself as an impartial, nonpartisan civil-society actor. First, quite a few prominent leaders, including Frank Chikane, Brigalia Bam, and Desmond Tutu, left the SACC for government or public sector posts after 1994 (Kumalo and Dziva 2008). As a result, a considerable overlap existed between the SACC and the government in terms of positions on policy issues, particularly in the first fifteen years of South Africa’s democracy. This reality, combined with the SACC’s position of critical solidarity, cemented the perspective in many people’s minds that the SACC had been coopted by the government.

This was confirmed when the SACC became embedded with the ANC faction led by Thabo Mbeki when he was South Africa’s president—evidenced by the SACC’s failure to criticize Mbeki’s position on HIV and AIDS and the ANC’s movement toward democratic centralism. Close alignment with the Mbeki faction of the ANC continued even after Mbeki was replaced by Zuma. High-profile leaders who had been associated with the SACC, notably Mvume Dandala, the former presiding bishop of the Methodist Church and president of the SACC from 1998 to 2001, and ecumenical leader Alan Boesak, ran for office under the banner of the Congress of the People, an opposition party formed by Mbeki allies in 2008 (Kuperus 2011).

Partisan alignment with an ANC faction continues to be a challenge for the SACC. The organization’s restructuring in 2012–15 led to the reentry of the old guard into leadership positions, including Frank Chikane, former SACC general secretary (1987–1994) and director general of the presidency of South Africa under Thabo Mbeki (1999–2009). Some perceive the SACC’s

political pronouncements about state capture and corruption to be more about opposition to the ANC faction that pledges loyalty to Zuma than support for South Africa's democratic consolidation. Tinyiko Maluleke, the SACC's president from 2007 to 2010, spoke thus to this reality:

I think part of the problem is that link with government. And so when, for example, Chikane criticizes government today, people wonder whether it is because it is someone other than Mbeki who is in leadership of the government, and so that diminishes the voice of the churches tremendously. (Interview, Johannesburg, South Africa, July 24, 2016)

In short, the SACC has lost its influence as a political actor because of leaders who have ineffectively addressed political programming and theological framing. They were too easily coopted by a particular ANC faction. Changes that would help the SACC retrieve its moral authority include being willing to criticize government officials who have ties to the SACC when their actions contradict the common good, practicing participatory democracy within its own structures, and formulating an interfaith theology of transformation that facilitates partnerships with multireligious organizations (Kumalo and Dziva 2008, Storey 2012; West 2009).

Conclusion

Both the CCG and the SACC embrace a political role that steers their countries toward consolidating democracy; however, the CCG, as a result of visionary programming and framing during the democratic transition and maintaining a stance of political neutrality, is by far the more influential political actor.

What do the findings of this article signify regarding our understanding of religious actors and the political process? Based on the evidence provided here, our understanding of what makes civil-society actors robust still stands: religious organizations contribute to the consolidation of democracy when they maintain an autonomous relationship with the state and foster civility, hold governments accountable, and promote the welfare of the populace at large.

Second, an examination of ecumenical Christian councils in South Africa and Ghana offers nuance to the religion and politics literature by delving into matters of religious organizations and political influence. We know that in the cases of the SACC and the CCG, the CCG's visionary leadership and its ability to walk a fine line between a prophetic voice and nonpartisan positioning is valuable, but what other factors shape the political influence of religious actors? This research indicates that such factors help explain the dynamics of church-state relations, including historical relations between church actors and the state and political party structure. Transcending

the contextual particularities of this study would involve comparative analysis of other case studies to look at these factors and others, including constitutional establishment clauses and regime type (such as hybrid regime and fragile democracy) that influence church–state relations in the context of democratization.

Finally, recent trends in the religion and politics literature seem to suggest the death knell of ecumenical organizations. Pentecostal and charismatic churches and their religious expressions are receiving renewed interest and appreciation; however, ecumenical councils can still take advantage of stable structures, high intellectual resources, and rich ecclesial traditions to strengthen democracy in the right circumstances. In the words of Rev. Emmanuel Asante, Chairman of Ghana’s National Peace Council,

By pure numbers, the Pentecostals and the charismatics are growing, but we [mainline Christianity and the CCG] still have the clout. It is just recently that the Pentecostals have become interested in social issues ... and again it has to do with their theology, “this world is not our home.” And the Christian Council of Ghana has already been there for a long time, and therefore if they, the Pentecostals, are now getting involved politically, they will need the cooperation of the Christian Council, and their leadership to be able to make their contribution to the public. (Interview, East Legon, Ghana, May 3, 2016)

Time will tell if ecumenical organizations and Pentecostal churches, as well as other faith traditions, will work together in ways that promote citizenship and good governance in places like Ghana and South Africa. Whatever happens, religious civil-society actors are prominent in many parts of Africa, and the potential of ecumenical Christian organizations to make unique contributions to the political process deserves continued investigation.

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1. This paper focuses on formal, mainline Christian councils. It cannot be, nor does it attempt to be, an exhaustive study of formal Christian organizations as they relate to democratization efforts. Moreover, the political role, both informal and formal, of indigenous, revivalist, and/or Islamic religious networks should also be explored for additional comparative insight.
2. Democratic consolidation is a process that involves the maintenance of democratic electoral arrangements and democratic procedures over time without reversal. There are different ways to measure democratic consolidation, ranging from a two-election test to the grounding of a civic culture.
3. Civil society is a contested concept within the democratization literature. It can contribute to authoritarianism and an elite's hegemonic hold on power as well. For a brief overview of the debates concerning civil society, see Cheeseman (2015:68–70).
4. The CCG represents thirty-one members, a mix of mainline Protestant and evangelical denominations, and its staff size is roughly thirty individuals. Although the CCG (and the SACC) will be portrayed in this paper as an organization that acts monolithically, further research can extract the ethnic, political, and theological divides that definitely exist within it (and the SACC).
5. The SACC's membership is similar to the CCG's, comprised of mainline Protestant and evangelical churches. The only substantive differences concerning membership involve the SACC's membership with two Catholic organizations and countless Reformed churches.
6. Numerous articles in *Challenge* from 2000 to 2007 illustrate the SACC's consistent efforts at promoting economic justice, from those on the People's Budget to those supporting a Basic Income Grant to calling for a variable rate VAT. The SACC's Public Liaison, Doug Tilton, and the Ecumenical Service for Socio-Economic Transformation (ESSET) were instrumental in these campaigns.
7. NILC's creation overlapped with the mission and purpose of the National Religious Leader's Forum (NRLF), an interfaith forum started in 1997 during Mandela's leadership of South Africa. The two organizations merged in 2013 to form the National Interfaith Council of South Africa (NICSA). For more information on these developments, see Kumalo (2014a).
8. An exception to this pattern may be the SACC's release of The Unburdening Panel report in April/May 2017. See Stone (2017).
9. Staff numbers fluctuate due to uncertainty connected with the SACC's 2012–15 restructuring efforts that are continuing to be phased in.
10. Indeed, financial ineptitude explains the SACC's diminished profile as well. All those interviewed named loss of international funding as the reason behind the SACC's marginalized status, thus indicating the absence of long-term financial sustainability plans in the 1990s and 2000s on the part of the SACC.
11. These monographs were provided to the author after an interview with Rev. Robert Aboagye-Mensah on May 2, 2016. All the monographs were edited by David Dartey, Robert Aboagye Mensah, and B. D. Amoa, published by the Christian Council of Ghana, and printed by Pentecost Press based in Accra, Ghana.
12. Interviews with SACC staff members (past or present) admitted that the SACC, in part, lost its legitimacy because the SACC had a hard time, in Vena Mqondisi's words, criticizing, "our brothers and sisters who were in the trenches with us" (Interview 2016).

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TRACY KUPERUS is a professor of political science and international development at Calvin College, in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She received her PhD from the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. Her research interests include religion and politics, democratization, and citizen mobilization. She has published articles in numerous African studies journals.