

RECONCILIATION AND STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

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WHEN SOUTH AFRICA WON THE FINAL MATCH of the 1995 Rugby World Cup, many commentators were as thrilled by the symbolic significance of the emergence of a new South Africa as they were about the emergence of a new rugby world champion side. As a prisoner on Robben Island, Nelson Mandela used to rejoice when the Springboks lost; as President, he phoned the team every day in the week preceding the match. A Springbok side playing for a black president spoke volumes about the process of reconciliation which is going on in the new South Africa. And, on the Saturday that South Africa beat the All Blacks, President Mandela wore a Springbok rugby jersey.

The ANC and the armed struggle

When the African National Congress moved to armed struggle in the wake of the massacre of sixty-nine peaceful demonstrators at Sharpeville and the subsequent banning of the ANC, it was a decision taken in recognition that fifty years of delegation, negotiation and peaceful protest had proved useless against an implacable system that had proved impervious to every peaceful appeal. It was not a decision to *introduce* violence into the struggle against apartheid, but the only appropriate *response* to a violent state system which was determined to tolerate no protest at all. Blacks were to be excluded from any forms of political process which might transform the South African political economy, so that the only alternative was a revolutionary strategy which would do away with apartheid. It was at this point that the ANC, banned and forced underground, was transformed from an organ of black protest and resistance into a liberation movement.¹

The armed struggle was to play an additional vital role. Concerted state repression meant that mass action disappeared from the political landscape during the period between Sharpeville and the Soweto uprising of 1976, and suffered fragmentation in the latter's immediate aftermath. The armed struggle provided visible reassurance that the struggle was continuing during these times. It retained a focus for black political activity and was a key element in keeping a co-ordinated mass

movement alive. As a direct result the ANC emerged in 1976 with renewed popularity and credibility among the township blacks. Its broad support base contributed vitally to its claim among the international community to constitute a credible 'government-in-waiting'.

The campaign of sabotage was launched on 16 December 1961 and intended as 'a forceful invitation to change directed towards the South African government'.² This was not an abandonment of peaceful means. Armed struggle was, from the first, a central plank in a raft of measures designed to bring about not the violent overthrow of the government but a crisis sufficient to lead to negotiations for a non-racial, democratic South Africa. The duration and course of the struggle – the totality of the means by which the ANC would exert pressure for negotiated change – was to be determined by the government's willingness to negotiate. The sabotage campaign would initiate, if necessary, a period of ongoing armed struggle in which guerrilla warfare would be the next stage. Political realism suggested that the reality would prove to be an extended struggle which would intensify in response to continued government intransigence.

It was to prove so. The co-ordinating of mass political action under the banner of the Mass Democratic Movement (an alliance of political, economic and religious groups) in the 1980s brought huge pressure to bear internally. Additionally, the growing militarization of South African society in response to the armed struggle yielded dividends in terms of economic, psychological, social and political pressure for change from within the white community. Economic and political pressure was brought to bear on South Africa by the international community. Crisis point was reached during 1985–1989 with South Africa's townships under military occupation, tens of thousands of people – including children – detained without trial and the country under a continuous State of Emergency which was renewed four times. The cost of maintaining apartheid was too high. Afrikaner hegemony – political and religious – fragmented. The *verligte* ('enlightened') Afrikaners, who now dominated, were prepared to think the previously unthinkable. The securocrat P. W. Botha was succeeded as President by the pragmatist F. W. De Klerk. On 2 February 1990, the black organizations – including the ANC and the South African Communist Party – were unbanned, Nelson Mandela was freed and the tortuous process of dismantling apartheid began.

The emergence of a prophetic theology

South Africa is certainly unusual in the degree to which Christianity has played a consciously formative role in South African political life.

The churches have played vital roles both in the imposition and maintenance of apartheid and in the struggle for liberation. Just as those Afrikaners who were responsible for devising and implementing apartheid saw it as the authentic expression of God's will for South Africa, others saw its opposition as defining what Christian faith meant in that country. Under the successive States of Emergency in the mid-1980s, the churches remained the only significant forum of resistance left operating legally within the country. It was this period which saw the emergence of a thoroughgoing prophetic theology in the form of the *Kairos Document*³ and the body of theological reflection and church action to which it gave rise.

In the mid 1980s, mass black protest against oppression and refusal to co-operate with the authorities was met by massive militarization of the townships and ruthless repression. It was in these circumstances that a group of theologians met in the townships in June 1985 to hammer out a theological response to the crisis which would give Christians a way of acting appropriately. The result was the *Kairos Document*, a theological reflection on the political crisis and a challenge to the churches.

The crisis was a *kairos* – a moment of truth – because there could no longer be any misunderstanding about the nature of South African society and the present conflict. South Africa was being riven by a conflict between the oppressors and the oppressed. It was a conflict in which neutrality was impossible. The Church had therefore to take the side of the oppressed. What followed was a call for the Church to participate in the struggle and to do so by aligning itself unambiguously with the oppressed people in their struggle for liberation.

Christians, if they are not doing so already, must quite simply participate in the struggle for liberation and for a just society. The campaigns of the people, from consumer boycotts to stayaways, need to be supported and encouraged by the Church . . . In other words the present crisis challenges the whole Church to move beyond a mere 'ambulance ministry' to a ministry of involvement and participation.⁴

Participation in the people's struggle would transform the Church and its activities.

The Church should challenge, inspire and motivate people. It has a message of the cross that inspires us to make sacrifices for justice and liberation. It has a message of hope that challenges us to wake up and to act with hope and confidence. The Church must preach this message

not only in words and sermons and statements but also through its actions, programmes, campaigns and divine services.⁵

What was revolutionary about the prescription offered by the Kairos theologians was the identification of the Church's struggle with the liberation struggle (that is, 'The Struggle' in its broadest sense). For years, the progressive churches' own role in the struggle for a new South Africa had been to try and persuade the Afrikaner nationalists of the sinfulness of apartheid and the need for repentance, reconciliation and reform. Waged primarily at the level of dogmatic theology, it had proceeded alongside and in tandem with the broader political struggle. Occasionally, it found itself in ambiguous relationship to that struggle, if not in outright opposition to aspects of it.

It had been assumed that the churches were peculiarly equipped for a ministry of reconciliation. This was presumed to be the distinctively Christian contribution that they could make towards resolving the conflict in society. Crucially, reconciliation was seen as an alternative to violence, so that, in a conflict played out in the political and military arena through strikes, boycotts, protests and armed struggle on the one side, and oppressive legislation, repression, bannings, arrests, torture and military mobilization on the other, the Church could act as a neutral 'honest broker' in reconciling the warring factions. Reconciliation rendered conflict unnecessary and was thus the key to a peaceful transformation of society. On this model, reconciliation cast the churches in the role of providing a 'third way' on the assumption that they could be neutral in the present conflict.

Now, however, the Church was faced with the new challenge of *how* to be the Church in a violent system which was fundamentally and irredeemably opposed to the gospel. The new situation was the fruit of a new way of doing theology, one which allowed the material conditions of the oppressed people to bear theological weight. It was the use of social analysis as a theological tool which clarified for the Kairos theologians the nature of the conflict in South Africa and the necessity for the Church's participation on the side of the oppressed.

Social analysis exposed the *ideological smokescreens erected to obscure the real nature of apartheid*. The fundamental conflict in South Africa was, in their analysis, about the distribution of political, social and economic power. Despite a series of transformations in the political, racial and theological rhetoric during the years of Afrikaner Nationalist rule and despite a series of apparent changes to the South African political landscape, apartheid had always been and remained the means by which social, political and economic power was concentrated in white hands.

Social analysis also exposed the *structural violence of apartheid* which ensured that blacks were either co-operative or quiescent and which contained and repressed revolt. Apartheid did not depend on the racial attitudes of individual South Africans, nor indeed, on those of groups. Rather, it was a system which was structured in such a way as to oppress black people regardless of the racial dispositions of white South Africans. The structural violence of apartheid lay hidden from many well-meaning whites who resented deeply charges of being racist. At the heart of the Black Consciousness Movement of the 1970s was the recognition that black humanity was so destroyed by apartheid that blacks contributed to their own oppression. Blacks were internalizing white images of them as inferior and sub-human. Steve Biko's cry, 'Black man, you are on your own!' was a call for blacks to rediscover and reclaim their lost humanity and become architects of their own histories.

Further, apartheid was imposed on the black community through the ruthless deployment of the police, the army and the judiciary. Those opposing apartheid were subject to arbitrary arrest, detention and torture. Government access to emergency powers meant that what few legal rights blacks enjoyed could be circumvented.

Social analysis also enabled a *theological assessment of the state and Church*. The structural features of apartheid led the Kairos theologians to conclude that the state was tyrannical, totalitarian and a reign of terror. It was an enemy of the people and irreformable. In making itself an enemy of the people, it had made itself an enemy of God and must be removed.⁶ The Church – in order to be the Church and not something masquerading as the Church – therefore had to take the people's side against the state.

It is important to stress both what the Kairos theologians are and are not saying at this point. The call to take the people's side is not a blanket endorsement of the means by which the struggle was being waged. In particular, it is expressly neither a call to armed uprising nor to participation in acts of violence such as the brutal 'necklacing' of suspected informers which was a hallmark of ANC punishment killings in the townships and which elicited widespread repugnance. Taking the people's side calls for *critical engagement in the struggle*. It is as the Church takes its place alongside and with the people that it is able to 'curb excesses and to appeal to the consciences of those who act thoughtlessly and wildly'.⁷ It does so, though, as comrade rather than as critic.

At stake is the significance of structural violence for the identity both of the Church and the state. The call to take the people's side was

issued not on the basis of the moral worth of the oppressed people but on the justice of their cause in a structural conflict. What made the issue of taking sides a *kairos* was the fact that the Church was already divided between the oppressors and the oppressed precisely because it was made up of people on both sides of the conflict. The crisis for the Church was thus acute:

Both oppressor and oppressed claim loyalty to the same Church. They are both baptised in the same baptism and participate together in the breaking of the same bread, the same body and blood of Christ. There we sit in the same Church while outside Christian policemen and soldiers are beating up and killing Christian children or torturing Christian prisoners to death while yet other Christians stand by and weakly plead for peace. The Church is divided and its day of judgment has come.⁸

The Church would be judged on whether or not it discerned the 'signs of the times' – that is, where God was to be located within the conflict.⁹ Taking sides with the oppressed was the means whereby the Church could locate itself with God rather than against God.

Prophetic theology and the armed struggle

One result of the intense theological reflection which followed the publication of the *Kairos Document* was a theological assessment of the ANC's armed struggle. Published as *Theology and violence: the South African debate*,¹⁰ the study examined the contextual situation in the light of the classical traditions of the Church on violence in the quest for a responsible Christianity in a violent society. Prudence in the light of the legal possibilities of the time prevents any of the authors overtly endorsing the armed struggle. Their conclusions are abundantly clear, however: in a situation which involves Christians inescapably in violence, both the contextual circumstances and the weight of the traditions represented by the mainstream South African churches support the notion of a just revolution. The armed struggle can clearly be viewed in this light and should, therefore, not be viewed as Christianly irresponsible simply by virtue of being a deliberate engagement in violence. On the contrary, it may arguably be affirmed as a thoughtful, ethical and necessary response to the structural violence of apartheid.

The only possible point of serious critique of a deliberately violent strategy to combat apartheid could come, say the writers, from a position of radical pacifism, but that is not a tradition found among South African churches. One might disagree with the strategy of armed

struggle (as indeed many within the Kairos movement did); one cannot dispute the inescapability of violent conflict.

The fact that church leaders were only now espousing and endorsing an analysis of the South African conflict that had been reached by the ANC political analysts twenty-five years previously was all the more ironic because it was precisely the inevitability of taking sides in a conflict that they had resisted for so long as unchristian.

Pragmatically, we might ask whether the life of apartheid and the suffering of the people might not have been significantly shortened, had the Church been prepared to advocate the measures put forward in the *Kairos Document* (and subsequently) twenty-five years earlier. Pastorally, it is worth noting that it was only in 1988 that some of the churches actively explored establishing chaplains to the liberation movements. Choices made responsibly by young blacks to join these movements had apparently put them beyond the pale and left them without pastoral support, while the same churches had previously seen little difficulty in allowing its young men to become military chaplains to the South African Defence Force.

The gap represents a signal failure to deal with the question of violence and we must ask why the churches failed so. It was the failure to understand the conflict as a result of the structural violence of apartheid that blunted the most effective Christian response to the situation for so long.

The white churches and the violence of apartheid

Christian ethical reflection on violence in South Africa operated under the constraints of experience and tradition. Both of these were shaped in turn by the place occupied within the system of apartheid. Unsurprisingly, there were sharp differences between black and white Christians.

Violence was a novelty, an intrusion into white life. The rigid separation of the races meant that violence as an everyday occurrence was confined to the hermetically sealed universes of the townships. It was easy to believe that the reports of unrest, of beatings, of political faction-fighting and violent crime bore no necessary relationship to the system of apartheid but were, in the terms of state propaganda, the result of both 'communist agitators' seeking to overthrow a legitimately elected, Christian government, and a peculiarly black propensity for crime and violence which derived (perhaps) from differences in levels of civilization and which was certainly reflected in black political practice. The violence of the townships did not have 'surprise

value' for whites such as to occasion a reassessment of what was happening in society.

The armed struggle was experienced through conscription and the world of international relations where world disapproval was manifested through economic, sporting, academic and cultural boycotts. World opinion was held to be fatally flawed on three significant counts: it failed to recognize that the South African conflict was part of the struggle against international communism; it failed to recognize the extent to which violence was generated from within the black political communities and, lastly, it failed to recognize both what benefits apartheid had brought to blacks and how white domination was preferable, for all concerned, to any alternative.

The result was a general perception in the white community that violence was an added, external, complicating factor to the whole question of apartheid, rather than something inherent to the system. It fitted neatly into an ethical system which on the personal level eschewed violence, and on the structural level maintained the right of a state to defend itself and to call upon its citizens to be legitimate instruments of force in so doing. This meant that the ANC should be regarded as a terrorist organization and that any moves made by a lawful government to counter revolution were justified.

The black experience was (almost literally) a world apart. The violence in their streets was simply the more naked face of a system which was determined to deny blacks a just and meaningful share in society while retaining them as a vast pool of migrant labour. The violence of police beatings, army shootings, detention and torture was indistinguishable from every other aspect of 'the system' (as blacks called apartheid) against which they were struggling, personally and collectively. Apartheid in its totality was experienced as an attack on black people by a regime which had no mandate from the majority of the population, and township life was seen as a continuous, low-grade civil war which erupted periodically into greater intensity.

The presence of violence occasioned genuine mutual agony, arising in no small part from the total inability of each group to find common ground for a meeting of hearts and minds. The sharp divisions over the nature and place of violence were reflected in the churches and nowhere more clearly than in the question of the nature and place of reconciliation.

Reconciliation and neutrality. The key question to be asked about any proposed reconciliation is what exactly is being reconciled. The conflict which arose from the structural violence of apartheid was not a

conflict based on misunderstandings in which the parties were mutually to blame. It was a struggle between the protagonists of an oppressive system in which one side was right and the other wrong. In such cases, a policy of seeking consensus and refusing to take sides is neither possible nor morally defensible. Reconciliation is a similarly inappropriate Christian response which springs from a lack of real love and compassion for those who are suffering. The Kairos theologians put it thus:

There are conflicts where one side is a fully armed and violent oppressor while the other side is defenceless and oppressed. There are conflicts which can only be described as the struggle between justice and injustice, good and evil, God and the devil. To speak of reconciling these two is not only a mistaken application of the Christian idea of reconciliation, it is a total betrayal of all that Christian faith has ever meant. Nowhere in Christian tradition has it ever been suggested that we ought to try to reconcile good and evil, God and the devil. We are supposed to do away with evil, injustice, oppression and sin – not come to terms with it. We are supposed to oppose, confront and reject the devil and not try to sup with the devil.¹¹

Reconciliation and justice. For many sincere Christians – particularly within the white community – this sounded like the demonization of one's opponents. Not having a grasp of the workings of 'the system', they mistook the structural for the interpersonal. While both groups talked of the indissoluble link between justice and reconciliation, each gave justice a different content in line with its differing place in the power structure. For whites, it was the justice of reform, to be achieved through negotiation with the Government and gradual incorporation into the political process. For blacks, such reform simply meant making oppression more comfortable. Unless justice meant the complete abolition of apartheid, reconciliation meant reconciling blacks to their chains. Justice had to be defined 'from below', by apartheid's victims.

Reconciliation and violence. A call for reconciliation as an alternative to engaging in a violent conflict is to misunderstand the nature of structural violence. It is to suggest the possibility of an alternative, peaceful 'space' when that possibility does not in fact exist. Structural violence means that violence is not an optional response to a system: it is an omnipresent feature of that system which necessarily involves all constituent groups. It creates a 'spiral of violence' in which the structural violence attracts the violence of resistance or revolt, which in

turn incurs repressive violence. In this case, the perception that there is an escape from the violence of the situation is ultimately an illusion. There is, in a radical pacifist option, the possibility of refusing to be an *agent* of violence, but not of avoiding participation in a violent conflict. The call for reconciliation without doing away with the primary cause of all violence – the system – is to justify a form of escapism from the realities of injustice and conflict.

Reconciliation and ideology. Reconciliation without doing away with apartheid was a way of siding with the oppressor, albeit unintentionally. Unless the causes of injustice are removed, 'bringing the two sides together' is extremely beneficial to those who have an interest in maintaining a system of privilege. It enables the *status quo* to be maintained by obscuring the true nature of the conflict and keeping the victims quiet and passive.¹² Unsurprisingly, the main calls for reconciliation came from the white community. They were born out of fear of black anger, and were an (often subconscious) attempt to defuse that anger. Furthermore, they were born out of a fear of the consequences of a radical justice which would see a fundamental redistribution of power. White liberals were genuinely unable to perceive the extent to which their stress on the Christian imperative for reconciliation was motivated less by a grasp of the gospel than by the paralysis that resulted from their vested interests within an exploitative system.

As the struggle intensified during the late 1980s, reconciliation became a key area of debate, focusing, as it did, the question of which competing analysis of South African society, the struggle and the gospel was right. The liberation theologians who saw the significance of structural violence clearly found that the onus of articulating a true understanding of reconciliation in the face of its ideological distortions was firmly on them.

Structural violence and true reconciliation

The grounds for reconciliation must be defined by the victims of the system. True reconciliation can only begin with a confession of the reality and extent of the divisions which penetrate to the heart of society and the Church. In the case of South Africa, it involved an acknowledgement of the fact that apartheid divided power in society along racial lines so that whites were, by virtue of their colour, oppressors of black people in a system enforced and maintained by violence. The Church was not exempt from those divisions or insulated from the conflict; rather, as Tutu put it, 'The anguish in the black community is because we are oppressed, not by pagans, but by fellow

Christians who read the same Bible and who say they worship the same God'.¹³

Reconciliation requires that the causes of conflict are confronted and removed. While people are structurally on different sides of a conflict between oppressors and the oppressed, reconciliation is impossible. In cases of structural violence, the key to reconciliation thus lies in taking sides.

Taking the side of the oppressed is a *means of repentance* on the part of the oppressors which is the precondition for reconciliation. Reconciliation is the fruit of repentance and forgiveness; of a turning away from the sin which is at the root of the conflict. Where that root is structural violence, true repentance requires a change of place within the system and embracing the cause and interests of the victims. It is to put myself (as an oppressor) on the same side as those from whom I seek forgiveness and reconciliation.

Taking sides is the *means of loving one's neighbour*. In the case of structural violence, sharing in the struggle for liberation is a commitment to doing all in my power to ensure that my neighbour is not treated as less of a human being than I am. And, where I am unable to do anything else, it is a commitment to share in my neighbour's suffering instead of being part of its cause.

Taking sides is the *means of loving one's enemies*. It is first of all an acknowledgement that those who cause my neighbour's suffering are genuinely enemies. This is to acknowledge the reality of the conflict, and not to trivialize the profound suffering of others. It is to acknowledge the need for reconciliation and thereby to create its genuine possibility. To love my enemies rather than to hate them is to be committed to their welfare and their best interests.

Taking sides is the *means of becoming the Church*. The divisions of race, class, wealth, values and vested interests are more than problems of good church order. In a conflict between those who are oppressed in society and those who are oppressing them, God is not neutral and the social location of the Church is thus a crucial one. The question of whose vested interests the Church embraces – whose side the Church is on – is a question that penetrates to the roots of who God is, what the gospel means and what it meant to be the Church. The side occupied by the Church in a structural conflict becomes a means of distinguishing between true and false understandings of the gospel, true and false manifestations of the Church and whether or not a church finds itself struggling with God or against God. Taking the side of the oppressed and becoming reconciled with the marginalized is to become the

Church of the poor. This is to recall the Church to its place alongside God in history after centuries of collaboration with and collusion in oppression. It is to re-evangelize the Church.

Taking sides is a *means of understanding the true Christ*. Jesus looks very different to people who are poor and oppressed from the way he appears to those who are the beneficiaries of the system. To the poor, Jesus is supremely the one who sides with the marginalized of his day, who proclaims their acceptability to God simply because they are marginalized. The Jesus who is murdered by the political and religious powers of his day dies with all who are murdered by the violence of evil systems. His resurrection is the guarantee of liberation from all forms of sin – not just from personal sin, but from sins committed against them by others. The Holy Spirit is God's presence with them in their struggle for liberation and the guarantee of their ultimate vindication. Taking sides is to see Jesus through this lens and to rediscover the Christ of the Gospels.

Taking sides is a *means of evangelization*. It is to proclaim the meaning of the gospel in a society divided by violent conflict. It is to proclaim signs of hope, love and resurrection where there is only the despair which oppression produces. The new society which is the goal of the struggle is a sign of the kingdom. And, as oppressors are reconciled with their former victims, it is to bear witness to the reality of the power of love by which Christ reconciles us to God.

Postscript: the new South Africa and the challenge of reconciliation

Apartheid has left its legacy. The 'new South Africa' celebrated its World Cup victory against a dramatically changed political landscape but against the backdrop of hugely escalating violent crime, economic slump, black deprivation, high levels of inflation, massive unemployment, disillusionment, political infighting and unresolved tensions which threaten the fragility of the present political consensus. Profound questions of how to deal with the events of the past are even now still only in the process of coming to light. There is a legacy of hatred and suffering which threatens at every turn. South Africans sowed the wind during the apartheid era and they are reaping the whirlwind.

It is important that these problems are acknowledged as a legacy of the past. The imbalances created by apartheid are not automatically resolved by destroying the system. Granting the poorest sections of the black populace the vote and removing discriminatory legislation is hugely significant but it does not of itself liberate them from deprivation and disadvantage. In this sense, South Africa is still wrestling with

an apartheid society and the search for genuine reconciliation remains urgent. The gap between expectations and the reality of immediate post-apartheid South Africa has generated its own additional problems of disillusionment, bitterness and alienation.

The success of the continuing struggle for reconciliation will be determined both by the vigour with which people are prepared to take their part and by the extraordinary capacity for forgiveness among black people which can only be the working of the grace of God.

NOTES

¹ Cf the words of Nelson Mandela in 1962: 'They [the white government] set the scene for violence by relying exclusively on violence to meet our people and their demands . . . We have warned repeatedly that the government, by resorting continuously to violence, will breed, in this country, counter-violence amongst the people, till ultimately, the dispute between the government and my people will finish up being settled in violence and by force.' And in 1964: 'The time comes in the life of any nation when there remain only two choices – submit or fight. That time has now come to South Africa. We shall not submit and we have no choice but to hit back by all means in our power in defence of our people, our future and our freedom.' See T. Karis and G. Carter (eds), *From protest to challenge* vol 3 (Stanford: Hoover Institution Publications, 1977), pp 740 and 777.

² A. Boesak and A. Brews, 'The black struggle for liberation: a reluctant road to revolution' in C. Villa-Vicencio (ed), *Theology and violence: the South African debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p 59.

³ The Kairos Theologians, *The Kairos Document: a theological comment on the political crisis in South Africa* (London: CIIR, 1986).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 25.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 27.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 20–23.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p 27.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p 5.

⁹ Cf A. Nolan OP, *God in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).

¹⁰ See note 2 above.

¹¹ *Kairos Document*, p 12.

¹² Cf A. Nolan OP, *Taking sides* (London: CIIR, 1984).

¹³ D. Tutu, 'The processes of reconciliation and the demand of obedience' in *Transformations* vol 3, no 2 (April/June 1986), p 6.