

**Detention without trial:  
the experience of the Reverend Douglas Thompson  
in the South African state of emergency, 1960**

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*Abstract*

This article is a Lyotardian “little narrative” of the experience of Methodist minister Douglas Thompson’s period in detention during the 1960 state of emergency in South Africa. It highlights the way in which Thompson boosted the morale of fellow detainees through his conduct of religious services – acts which reflect Scott’s “arts of resistance” of the powerless. It presents a picture of the white left/liberal opposition during this period and illustrates the importance of the churches to act decisively against the apartheid state during the period.

**Introduction**

South African biography and autobiography has recently become the focus of academic attention among numerous scholars, particularly those who see it as giving a voice to those who historically have little or no voice (Radithalo, 2003; Rassool, 2004). In his classic 1979 text *The postmodern condition* (English translation 1984), Jean-Francois Lyotard puts forward a spirited plea for what he calls the “little narrative”, stories tactically put together by small groups with particular objectives. While not offering any “answer” to great social questions, they present counter-hegemonic accounts of events and in doing so resist our temptation to construct totalitarian “grand narrative” epistemologies. Following Stuart Sim’s (2005:262) observation that “[o]ne might regard the individual as the ultimate little narrative seeking to resist the power of authoritarian grand narratives”, this article is an attempt to retrieve from obscurity an incident in the life of a largely forgotten Christian activist in the struggle against apartheid, Methodist minister Douglas Chadwick Thompson. The focus of this article is on Thompson’s detention without trial, largely in Pretoria, during the 1960 state of emergency, an event precipitated by the 21 March 1960 massacre at Sharpeville, but with its roots in the decade of resistance of the 1950s.

The decade saw the shift from a general policy of requests, pleas and petitions by the African National Congress (ANC) and its allies to the South African government – all ignored – to militant nonviolent protest actions, the construction of what was effectively an alternative non-racial constitution (the Freedom Charter) and a growing realisation that more militant political actions might be inevitable.<sup>1</sup> The last gasp (for decades) of mass protest action culminated in the events of March 1960, when the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) – hastily followed by the ANC – initiated pass law protests. The protests were ruthlessly crushed at Sharpeville on 21 March (cf. Frankel, 2001; Reeves, 1960) and later in Langa in Cape Town. A peasant revolt in the Transkei (1959-60) was also crushed (Mbeki, 1964).

Douglas Thompson was among over 1800 men and women detained in the March 1960 state of emergency. Though he was not a high-profile political activist by any means, he had since his return from theological studies in England in the 1930s espoused a Christian Socialist position that had become increasingly sympathetic to Marxism, indeed to the Soviet Union. From early work with trade unions in Johannesburg in the mid-1930s, Thompson had combined his pastoral ministry with political activism. During the Second World War he was a prominent figure in the Medical Aid to Russia movement, which in 1946 became the South African Friends of the Soviet Union (SAFSU). SAFSU after World War II was largely composed of communists; Thompson, though never a Party member, was its chairperson. He later joined (and for a while chaired) the South African Peace Council (SAPC), journeying as an SAPC delegate to Budapest and Moscow. In 1953 he spoke at a secular memorial service for Stalin at the Soviet Consulate in Johannesburg – his co-speakers were the Soviet consul general and South African communist Michael Harmel. He also was a staunch member of the South

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African Congress of Democrats, an earnest supporter of the Freedom Charter and would have presented a talk on the second day of the Congress of the People in Kliptown on 26 June 1955 had the meeting not been disrupted and stopped by the security police. For his activities he was one of the 156 charged with treason in 1956. Because he was not a high-profile figure, and possibly because he was not asked to testify to his overtly pro-Marxist understanding of the Christian faith, he was among the first group of Trialists released (Egan, 2000).

Like the Treason Trial from which he had only recently emerged, it had quite a devastating effect on him and his family. Just as he was settling into “normal” life and trying to find a congregation to which he could minister again full-time, he found himself behind bars.

### **Thompson in detention**

On the eve of the shootings at Sharpeville, Thompson was busy with correspondence. He had written to two contributors to his Treason Trial fund – one an English labourer, the other a correspondent from Pietermaritzburg – commenting that the trial of the 30 accused had reached a stage where the defendants could at last present their defence.<sup>ii</sup> Within a few days he would once again be in jail.

His son Geoffrey was in London at the time of his detention, where – rather unusually given his more conservative political views – he was assisting Canon John Collins’ Defence and Aid Fund. Writing to his parents on 30 March 1960, he reported that Christian Aid would soon be sending his father some financial assistance. Ironically, he added that he “was relieved to see that you [his father] were not one of [those arrested]”.<sup>iii</sup> By the time his letter reached South Africa, his father was in detention.

Thompson was awakened at 2.20am on March 30, 1960, by four policemen. His study was searched and he was taken to the Springs Police Station at 3.20am. He immediately demanded to call his lawyer which was denied him in terms of the state of emergency. In response he declared that he intended a three-day hunger strike in protest.<sup>iv</sup>

The next morning Station Commander Muller gave him a copy of the *Rand Daily Mail* that announced the “state of emergency”, and was given a chair for his cell. On the third day of his fast he repeated his protest to the police over detention without access to a lawyer, adding his concern about police treatment of “Africans and Non-Europeans”. He complained about the drain in his cell and requested disinfectant so that he could clean it. He was being deliberately difficult. For the rest of the day he spent a period in meditation and, bored, contemplated a moth that fluttered about his cell.

Muller returned the next day, evidently concerned about Thompson’s fast, saying that the three-day fast had been noted and registered, and begged him to eat the fish and chips that Gwen, his daughter, had sent him. He then asked to speak to the African prisoners. Muller refused, explaining that it was contrary to state of emergency regulations. Sunday April 3, 1960, was gloomy (“dark skies, rain, then sun”) according to Thompson’s diary. Perhaps to communicate with other prisoners, if possible, Thompson had been teaching himself Morse code. He noted with evident pleasure “Mastered the Morse Code”.

Monday was another “chilly” day. Thompson was bored, felt ill and paced around his cell. The next day, at 10am, Muller arrived to tell him that he was being transferred. At midday on 5 April, he was placed in a cell at the Fort Prison in Johannesburg with two other white detainees, Vic Goldberg (from the Congress of Democrats (COD)) and Vincent Swart, a sometime lecturer in English at the University of the Witwatersrand, who was politically close to the Liberal Party.<sup>v</sup> Later Thompson was moved on 8 April to Cell 39 with Louis Baker (also, like Thompson and Goldberg, of COD) and Swart.

Thompson found a whole group of white detainees in the Fort. They included COD activists – many of them Communists – and members of the Liberal Party, who had also been “hit” by the emergency detentions. One Liberal, Advocate Ernest (Ernie) Wentzel, later analysed the group of “white male detainees” in the following terms:<sup>vi</sup>

Firstly, there was the liberal group, which consisted on Wentzel, [John] Lang, [Jock] Isaacowitz, Colin Lang, John Brink, Father [Mark] Nye. Then there was the Communist Party group as such ...

Of the some 35 detainees, about 18 to 20 were communists.

The third group in detention were a group of ex-Communists, who didn’t appear to be subject to the discipline of the Communists. I would class Monty Berman, Hymie Basner, Michael Miller, Archie Levitan.<sup>vii</sup>

Wentzel does not mention where he placed Thompson, who had been close to a number of Liberal Party people and in fact had tried to bring Liberals and COD together shortly after his part of the Treason Trial had ended.<sup>viii</sup> Politically, Wentzel would probably have seen Thompson as some exotic kind of Communist; certainly fellow-detainee Joe Slovo (1995:125) saw him as solidly within COD.

Thompson's detention devastated his wife, May Thompson, and the family. In a letter to him, she commented with an evidently strained sense of humour, "We haven't recovered from the shock of your walking out on us!" It was an additionally difficult time for her because her mother was ill and the already precarious domestic financial situation had worsened. She tried to reassure him by pointing out that her kindergarten – opened to bring in some money when he was on trial – had opened, with a new pupil, and that she'd managed to get some cheques sent to him altered to her name.<sup>ix</sup> In a subsequent letter she tried to cheer him up by telling him of the congregation's Easter play and the good wishes that some members of the congregation sent him.<sup>x</sup>

Palm Sunday was "chilly", with no apparent opportunity available for Christian clergy like Thompson and Mark Nye to observe the beginning of Holy Week. Early morning breakfast was followed by a walk in the yard. As on most days, 10.15am till 2pm was a period of confinement to the cells. In the afternoon, Thompson and his cellmates were joined by Ernie Wentzel for a chat and game of cards. After a short period out in the yard again, he returned to his cell at 3pm "for an early night". A boring routine set in.

The mood and atmosphere of the prison changed in the days that followed. After the period of tedium, a mood of creativity and dialogue emerged. It seems to have coincided with the arrival of Cecil Williams – a former teacher turned actor-director, veteran of the Springbok Legion, COD and an underground Communist. He soon became the unofficial leader of the detainees. Williams managed – despite growing tensions between the rival factions – to encourage the detainees to keep each other sane by presenting talks of general interest. These talks ranged from current events through philosophical or political debates to issues of literature. Among the first of these was John Lang and Ernie Wentzel's briefing of the group on the Sharpeville Massacre. Both had been involved in the collection of affidavits, often in the face of police obstruction.<sup>xi</sup> Thompson was moved by this. Williams also started casting and rehearsing a detainees special production of Shakespeare's *A midsummer night's dream*.

However, it would be a mistake to see their detention as a kind of enforced holiday camp. The Fort was far from pleasant.<sup>xii</sup> The political detainees were housed in a double-storey block of cells that led on to a hall, which doubled as a dining room. Leading off from this room was a concrete exercise yard with high walls. The prisoners' cells were on the second floor, 10' by 9' in dimension with a door and peephole. Each had a high, barred window that looked onto the exercise yard, but too high to give any view, not that there were any trees or grass in sight. The cells were, according to Wentzel, "indescribably dirty" on their arrival, containing a straw mattress or coir mat, a few blankets and a sanitary bucket. The prison contained cold showers and basins.

Each day at 7am the cells were unlocked and the prisoners went to empty their buckets into an open drain a short distance from the breakfast hall, filled their buckets with disinfectant, returned to shower and clean their cells before going to breakfast – "mealie-meal porridge with a tiny blob of jam and fat. Quite the best meal of the day. There was also black coffee dosed ... [allegedly] with copper sulphate to restrain [prisoners'] libido";<sup>xiii</sup> Lunch, at 11.30am, was soup with "katkop", a heavy, doughy bread – "rather delicious and filling" but with a tendency "to produce loose bowels". At 3.30pm was dinner: beef or pork cubes with a vegetable. Generally "[f]ood at the Fort was tasteless, inadequate in quantity and sometimes vermin-infested. There was no fresh food at all while we were there".<sup>xiv</sup> After supper, the detainees were locked into their cells, with a junior warder in the corridor outside the cells.

Initially conditions improved somewhat (or at least the detainees stopped noticing) as the weeks passed. Cordial relations developed with the warders, for whom the detainees were an enigma: clean and tidy men, well-educated and utterly unlike the awaiting-trial prisoners who were their usual charges.

As the detainees settled into their routine the ban on letter-writing relaxed. By this time Thompson had received two letters from May. Writing to his family on the eve of Good Friday, a long fortnight after his arrest, he commented:

... tomorrow we commemorate Good Friday when the Great Drama of the Cross was enacted for the first time, and which has been repeated many times since in the long and tortuous history of mankind.<sup>xv</sup>

Was this Thompson's way of expressing detention? His diary suggests boredom rather than great suffering – though prison life was boring, punctuated only by activities he described at the end of his letter (exercise, playing chess, acting), conditions were far less appalling than those of black detainees. Given his concern for black detainees – particularly those he'd merely heard at Springs – it would appear that the implied message was one that linked the original Good Friday with the "Good Friday" experience of South Africa under the state of emergency.

His letter was matter-of-fact, almost cheerful. He expressed his love for and confidence in his family and suggested to May what bills needed prioritisation in his absence (telephone, electricity, water, Geoff's insurance, Geoff's car instalments, home instalments) and which he would settle himself on his release.

On Easter Sunday, 17 April 1960, Thompson was due to lead services at Methodist congregations in Brixton (11am) and Parktown North (7.30pm).<sup>xvi</sup> Instead, his Sunday service was held in the yard of the Fort. Of his "congregation", he was the only Methodist. Apart from Mark Nye, only a handful of those attending were practising Christians. The rest were humanists, Communists or Marxists of different persuasions, professing varying degrees of atheism or agnosticism.

Joe Slovo had put him up to it.<sup>xvii</sup> Noting that other prisoners at the Fort had access to Sunday services, Slovo and the others decided that this was unfair and needed rectifying. Since the prison authorities would not provide them with chaplains, the detainees should – and could – produce a chaplain from within their own ranks. For Slovo and the other COD activists, Thompson was the ideal person, a COD member, a trusted comrade, and almost a Party member.

Slovo proposed it to Thompson, who heartily – and with a certain amount of amusement, no doubt – agreed and set about the necessary preparations for the service. These Sunday services, alternating Thompson and Nye as presiders, would become a feature of life in detention. Both clerics were remembered – Nye as rather pious, Thompson as thoroughly down to earth, political and non-dogmatic (Slovo, 1995:125; Bernstein, 1999:206-7).<sup>xviii</sup>

Such an event as a church service, so normal in the world "outside", can be seen as an opportunity for subtle resistance. In his important text *Domination and the arts of resistance* (1990), James Scott points out how in the confrontation between the powerful and powerless the powerless can and often do transform the ordinary into expressions of resistance. Beneath the surface of apparent conformism lurk "hidden transcripts" that resist the status quo. One can see this in the nature of the talks that Cecil Williams organised. Significantly, too, Scott illustrates how slave worship took on two forms: that which served the interests of the masters and "offstage Christianity" that "stressed the themes of deliverance and redemption, Moses and the Promised Land, the Egyptian captivity, and emancipation" (Scott, 1990:116). Such themes, too, are central to the discourses of Christian socialism (in which Thompson was steeped) and liberation theology. The appeal of such an approach would have been obvious to the imprisoned activists, even before Scott coined the term, and explains why Thompson's services were so popular among a group of mainly atheists and agnostics.

For his text that Easter Sunday, Thompson chose *1 Corinthians 13*, the famous Pauline discourse on love. Aware that most of his "flock" were agnostics, he produced a powerful sermon on three Greek New Testament notions of love – the love of God, the love of another person, and the love of community, with its emphasis on sharing.<sup>xix</sup> His homiletic intention was clear: the detainees should stick together, support each other in their time of crisis. Though the source of this exhortation to solidarity lay squarely in the Gospel tradition, its content dovetailed neatly with Liberal values of generosity of spirit and Marxist notions of solidarity. Years later, former detainees would remind him of that sermon and in an interview in 1982 Thompson recalled it with delight.<sup>xx</sup>

The days after Easter were routine. The informal talks continued, co-ordinated by Cecil Williams. Issy Heymann spoke on "The Israeli State"; Vincent Swart discoursed (from memory) on Gerard Manley Hopkins' poetry. The regular cell-cleaning was developed into an informal group operating a rota, which was dubbed "The Third Royal Albanian Fusiliers", whose "hybrid name told [its] hybrid political ancestry [sic]".<sup>xxi</sup> Thompson took his turn with the others; Ike Horvitch recalled how he would polish the floor, standing on a cloth and doing a kind of "dance" as he cleaned.<sup>xxii</sup>

On Thursday 20 April 1960, May and Gwen were finally allowed to visit him.<sup>xxiii</sup> They were his first visitors since his detention. In a letter to them three days later he brought them further good news:

We have been officially informed that we may receive two letters a week and send out two letters as well as receiving two visitors twice a week on Wednesdays and Fridays respectively.<sup>xxiv</sup>

He expressed pleasure at seeing them, but asked them not to send him clothes or books unless requested – too many things would clutter up his cell. On conditions in prison, aware that his letter would be censored, he remarked:

The spirit of the fellows is good, and our organisation of play, plays, discussions, talks and arguments, has been stimulating, entertaining and creative.

Meanwhile, we all long to know what is happening in the great world outside ...,<sup>xxv</sup>

recommending to them the text *Malachi 2:10*, since it exhorted them to keep faith with each other.

Between Easter Sunday and May 6, when the detainees were moved to Pretoria Central, Thompson conducted two further services. The first, on April 24, had as theme “Jesus, the Master of Repartee”, a theme he’d used on a number of occasions. The image of Jesus as someone who could think on his feet, outwitting his opponents and challenging the powerful, was one that resonated with the detainees.

The last Sunday service at the Fort was on May 1. Pencilled into his diary is “International Day”. His sermon was on “Justice and Righteousness”, the text being Matthew 25:31-46, the account of the Last Judgment. With its suggestion that the righteous – those who are “saved” in Christian terms – are not necessarily believers, but those who live lives of charity and generosity to fellow humanity, it is a key text for any liberation theologian or Christian Socialist, who would argue that for it to be truly effective charity or love, the righteous person must go beyond mere charity and work to establish a more just, egalitarian society. Thompson, steeped in the Christian Socialist tradition, would certainly have expounded eloquently on this.

However, he shortened the service substantially so that a fellow-detainee could address the assembly on “The Significance of May Day”. No record can be found of the talk, but it almost certainly followed the traditional line that the day had started as a commemoration of the deaths of striking workers in Chicago in 1895 and had become the great holiday of the working-class, a working class struggling for liberation from capitalism’s fetters, a working class whose ideological home was the socialist bloc and the Soviet Union, the great workers’ state. All this would have appealed to Thompson the Soviet enthusiast. It did not appeal to the Liberals. Ernie Wentzel recalled: “My stupid intervention was to sing a rather rude parody of the *Red Flag* which goes: The Working Class can kiss my arse, I’ve got the foreman’s job at last! The Communists took this very bitterly indeed.”<sup>xxvi</sup> Rather than unite the detainees, the service divided them.

Following the May Day celebrations, Cecil Williams produced a play-reading (called “Shakespeare in the Yard”) and trade unionists Willy Kalk and Ronnie Press spoke on the history of trade unionism. On May 4, Thompson presented a talk on “Christianity and the Social Order”.<sup>xxvii</sup> The title suggests both the source – Anglican Archbishop William Temple’s book of the same name (Temple, 1942) – and the talk’s direction. In this book, Temple, a Christian Socialist and supporter of the British Labour Party, had argued that Christianity was a materialist religion concerned about this-worldly justice, a justice represented in the bread and wine of the Eucharist,<sup>xxviii</sup> and in the examples of Jesus and the Early Church’s common ownership of goods. Thompson’s talk, he noted in his diary, was well received.

On Friday May 6, 1960, all white detainees at the Fort were moved to Pretoria Local Prison. Rather incongruously a tank was brought into the Fort’s grounds. Army and Security Branch, many of them carrying submachine guns, watched them as they packed and moved to the closed truck that would take them to Pretoria.<sup>xxix</sup> On arrival later that afternoon, they were booked into much cleaner cells. They had beds with sheets. Even the food, they discovered, was more palatable. They were also allowed to order food from the prison officers’ canteen. Detainees could deposit money into an “account” (which Ernie Wentzel ran) from which they could buy food from the mess. More space was available for talks, debates and the prison pageants and theatrical productions of the seemingly ubiquitous Cecil Williams.

A new development for Thompson lay in the area of Sunday services. At the Fort he had led them all. At Pretoria it was finally agreed that he and Mark Nye would alternate public services. In addition, early each Sunday morning, the practising Christians among the detainees – Thompson, Nye, Wentzel, John and Colin Lang – held a short ecumenical Holy Communion service. In addition, the prisoners received visits from a number of chaplains – Protestant and Catholic – some of whom Thompson knew. A Rabbi also visited the Jewish detainees. Writing to his family, Thompson observed:

Our removal to Pretoria has meant much more pleasant conditions in which we are detained. The authorities have done and are doing all that they can to aid us in every way in the context of our detention.”<sup>xxx</sup>

If his comments sounded altogether too jolly, it was perhaps because in this letter he was unable or unwilling to tell them the main news: a hunger strike, that was to be deeply divisive, was about to start the next day.

Divisions lurked beneath the surface between the three “factions” detained together. Ernie Wentzel spoke for many Liberal detainees when he recalled that it was very hard to form a “united front” with the Communists. They were, he suggested, “markedly romantic ... not attracted by materialism but by a hope and belief in the future of mankind”.<sup>xxxi</sup> He saw them as a brotherhood, rigidly keeping group discipline on political matters, presenting a common front in relation to other detainees – yet always ready to argue and dispute with each other.

The roots of the hunger strike lay in an attempt to concretely protest against the state of emergency. The left-wing prisoners decided that they would not eat until they were released and the state of emergency was lifted. A sign perhaps of their romanticism and bravado was talk of a fast to the death. Within five days it was agreed by the prisoners that to avoid serious long-term health risks they would take one spoonful of sugar a day and drink large amounts of water (Press, n.d.).

From cryptic notes in his diary numbering the days, it is clear that Thompson participated in the hunger strike. Not so Mark Nye and most of the Liberals. On May 12, Nye spoke out against the idea of fasting. He argued that “what he had done for the struggle was God’s work. If however he was to be imprisoned then that too was God’s will and he would not oppose it by joining a hunger strike”.<sup>xxxii</sup> The Liberals followed Nye’s line, much to Joe Slovo’s disgust (1995:126). Political temperatures rose sharply.

The strike lasted, according to Thompson’s diary, from 14 to 23 May 1960.<sup>xxxiii</sup> During that time life continued as normally as possible: daily exercise, reading, choir practice, games of Scrabble or chess with fellow prisoners and the usual public events, including a quiz show and play readings.

The day before the hunger strike ended, all the detainees were summoned to the prison yard, where the chief warden told them to end the fast as the women detainees had already done so. Eli Weinberg retorted sharply that they did not believe him. Evidently desperate, the chief warden allowed the detainees to consult with the women – a message could be sent to and from the women’s section. The next day his claim was confirmed and the male detainees broke their fast with helpings of a cake made for Leon Levy’s birthday (Press, n.d.).

Writing to his family on the eve of the strike’s end, Thompson recounted nothing of the week’s controversy. Rather he told them that they had been visited by Progressive Party parliamentarian Helen Suzman and was busy working his way through the philosopher Baruch Spinoza and quoted Albert Einstein’s insight that developments in knowledge and technological progress had neither particularly warded off despondency or isolation, nor ennobled human action.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Coming in the wake of his account of better prison conditions and the Suzman visit, it is possible that Thompson was trying to subtly let his family know that he’d left much unsaid.

The spirits of the prisoners were certainly not raised by the appearance of a Security Branch colonel with a letter (dated May 17) notifying them that their detention under Emergency regulations was valid until 28 March 1961, unless the State deemed it fit to release them earlier.<sup>xxxv</sup> Probably not unconnectedly, the Security Branch started interrogating a number of the detainees.

Amidst this rising tension Cecil Williams and Monty Berman tried to raise spirits with a play reading of Jerome Lawrence and Robert E Lee’s *Inherit the wind*, a powerful courtroom drama based on the 1925 Tennessee “Scopes Monkey Trial”, where a school teacher was put on trial for teaching evolution. Thompson, who believed in evolution, clearly enjoyed the play: at the back of his 1960 diary there are short, enthusiastic notes about it, and in a letter home he recommended the play to his family, recalling how well he remembered the controversy.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

### **An unusual letter**

Shortly after the incident of the Security Branch colonel, Thompson drafted a letter – so far we know, never sent – appealing for the release of all the detainees.<sup>xxxvii</sup> To whom he planned to send it is also uncertain – the Prime Minister, perhaps the Minister of Justice.

He starts by stating clearly, “I am writing on my own behalf first and then on behalf of the Detainees held in [sic] the present Emergency regulations in the Union of South Africa,”<sup>xxxviii</sup> to put on record that he was acting in his personal capacity and not as spokesperson of any group of detainees so

that the State could not use the letter to make political capital through it, and further divide the detainees.

He pointed out that he was appealing as a Christian to a Government that claimed to be Christian. Thompson summed himself up as a Christian humanist committed to “Peace and the conditions that secure Peace” in both domestic and international relations. By these words, he implicitly defended the political choices he’d made, choices which had landed him in detention.

He argued:

In wishing to apply the Christian principles of life as I have found them to be to the complex situation of South Africa I see the one solution and necessary adjustment of our policies to be that of Paul meeting a similar situation of his day where he found that in Christ ‘there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor freeman, neither male nor female, but all are one in Christ Jesus’... and that when the same principle is applied to the context of the South African scene [sic]. I declare and have declared that ‘In Christ there is neither Afrikaner nor African, neither Coloured nor Asian, neither Black nor White nor Coloured, but all are one in Christ Jesus’. In other words I have both proclaimed and practised this faith and know that it works, not only in my own inner life and practise but in all my relationships with my fellow men and women of whatever class, creed, colour or sex.

And further, none can dispute the correctness of this position, neither by reference to the original standards of teaching as contained in the Scriptures, nor in the practice which is the practical proof in action of the Christian believer.

He then challenged his reader to examine what he’d said in the previous twenty years “in the light of these eternal principles”. He indicated that he was prepared to defend himself “in any Council, conference or Synod of the Church and in any Court in the World”. In the light of these principles, he requested the release

of my fellow-detainees and myself, believing that the only hope for the South Africa that is to be, is that found in the practice of those principles which are in Christ.

so that he and his colleagues might be able to continue to work towards that goal.

What was Thompson really trying to do with this letter? That it was a plea for his own release seems highly unlikely: the letter speaks on a number of occasions of himself *and* the other detainees. He was not seeking his freedom at the cost of his friends.

Despite the flamboyance of its tone, its element of self-justification, even self-publicity, culminating in a mock-Shakespearean rhetorical flourish

if this be untrue and upon me proved as untrue, no man ever professed his Christian conviction more firmly, and no man ever loved his fellow-beings more sincerely ...

he expressed the same ideas of equality, equality under God, an equality which made him a socialist. His letter links his convictions to those of his fellow detainees, whom he sees as doing God’s work, but did he really think the apartheid state, replete with its own religious ideological state apparatus (the Dutch Reformed Churches) would see truth in what he said? However strongly Thompson believed in the ultimate goodness and reasonability of humanity, he could not have seriously entertained the hope – in the light of his experience of the state – that his words could make a difference. He was idealistic, even naive in some matters, but no fool.

Another possibility arises. On another occasion – when on trial for treason – Thompson wrote a similar *apologia* for his commitment to Christian humanism (or “dialectical realism” as he’d called it then). Given the strain of detention, the conflict among the detainees, the possibility of Security Branch interrogations and long-term detention, combined with the inability of Thompson to communicate any of this overtly to his family, perhaps this letter was a self-defence mechanism – where reason overrode fear and stress.

This hypothesis helps explain a number of issues. It does not suggest that Thompson was simply trying to save himself at his comrades’ expense. Nor does it deny the personal truth of the convictions that he expressed in the letter. That he was acting under stress also explains the letter’s linguistic hyperbole and somewhat conceited tone. It should be noted that the document during the Treason Trial was essentially a prepared statement in anticipation of taking the witness stand. As a clergyman,

Thompson had been trained to speak with notes. Perhaps more than a simple defence mechanism, this letter was drafted in anticipation of interrogation, a means of clarifying for himself what he was to say to the Security Branch: much about himself, nothing to incriminate his comrades.

### **Letting off steam: limericks and sermons**

In the light of all the pressures, it was inevitable that the detainees needed to “let off steam”. Their Saturday 28 May evening gathering took a frivolous turn, becoming an occasion to compose limericks about each other. Each man was assigned another and had to compose a limerick that somehow said something about the subject, his personality or something that had happened in detention.

Not all the limericks are extant. There is, for example, no limerick about Thompson, but Thompson’s limerick about Louis Joffe runs:

A veteran comrade named Joffe,  
Whose thesis is Marx and Nut Toffee,  
Expressed his dialectic,  
In a stronger synthetic –  
Vegetables, egg and people’s coffee.<sup>xxxix</sup>

which is a gentle dig at Joffe’s Marxism, sweet tooth and the food in prison. The extent to which this eased ideological tensions between the “blocs” is open to question. An examination of the extant limericks shows that the Communists and independent Marxists largely wrote across their divide, while the Liberals wrote about each other. Perhaps what this exercise showed was that all the detainees were able to laugh at themselves.

On May 29, the first Sunday after Ascension Thursday Thompson once again led the service, using as his text *Luke 4:18-19*.<sup>xl</sup> Another classic text for Christian socialists, the passage contains explicit reference to “liberty to captives” and “the Lord’s year of favour” (i.e. the Jewish tradition of jubilee) and can be widely interpreted as indicating divine support for liberty – from oppression as much as from prison. The text could have been written for Thompson and the detainees. Combined with their context – “prisoners” in a land about to celebrate a jubilee, many of them socialists seeking a fairer redistribution of wealth and power (a jubilee in the sense of the Old Testament) – it was a text in which believers and atheists alike could find hope.

The days that followed were relatively quiet. The most dramatic was Union Day – 31 May 1960 – on which police arrived to search all the detainee’s cells. On the same day to everyone’s surprise and delight two of their number – Ronnie Fleet and Mark Nye – were released. A few days earlier they had been told that they were facing up to a year’s detention. Was this a sign that they would all shortly be released?

That evening, the detainees produced a “radio play” titled – appropriately – “50 Years of Union”. Given its producers and cast, it is unlikely that it reflected the official view of South Africa’s recent history. Thompson enthused about it in his diary, noting “Excellent. Most significant celebration held in the Union of South Africa.”<sup>xli</sup>

Thompson had a new visitor on June 2. Winsome Munro was a Methodist deaconness and COD member who made a point of visiting not only Thompson but also “some other Detainees and their families”. He remarked of her: “[S]he is a fine type and sees through all the humbug and sham religion.”<sup>xlii</sup> She was one of the few Methodists to visit Thompson during his detention, though the chairman of the Methodist Conference, Lesley Hewson, had tried to secure the release of Thompson and other Methodist detainees.

### **A wedding anniversary**

On 10 June, Thompson celebrated his 27th wedding anniversary. Scones were specially baked for morning tea and in the evening “a grand special augmented supper with a birthday cake [sic], the top of the box inscribed with signatures of the fellows” was presented. Speeches of congratulation were made. In addition, letters of congratulation were read and handed to him, which included best wishes to May. Extant letters of congratulations include one from Cecil Williams, who commented

And what I have seen of Mrs Thompson through the mesh of this cage suggests that – in a far more difficult situation than we detainees are in – she has been very brave and never lost her pride in her “difficult” husband.<sup>xliii</sup>

He was perceptive indeed.



Louis Joffe wrote directly to May Thompson:

This is to convey heartiest congratulations to you and the children on the 27th anniversary of your marriage. We were all glad to celebrate it here ... as a significant day for him, supported by his family. For we are conscious of the fact that he has played a noble role in his profession as minister of the Church to carry his and your principles in practice for the cause of peace and a better life for all mankind.<sup>xliv</sup>

Joffe, speaking personally and for the other detainees, expressed pride at being Thompson's friend.

### **Deepening divisions ... and the long wait for release**

After Mark Nye's release, Thompson was again the only minister to his fellow detainees. He acted with skill and sensitivity to the needs of his highly unusual congregation, drawing on memory for some of his services, as well as a growing number of books he'd received from family or friends.

However, Sunday June 26, 1960, was to deepen ideological divisions. In Congress Alliance circles it was Freedom Day and the fifth anniversary of the adoption of the Freedom Charter. Though most of the white detainees were Charterists – in Wentzel's typology the Communists and many of the independent Marxists – the Liberals were not. The Liberal Party had generally boycotted the Charter campaign because they had seen COD as a Communist front organisation. Among the detainees John Lang and Ernie Wentzel were vocal in their denunciation of the Charter and its nationalisation clause, arguing that popular ownership of land and mines was simply a ploy to advance the SACP's agenda. Joe Slovo and the Charterists vigorously defended their position.<sup>xlv</sup> Thompson was a committed Charterist; the intervention drafted by himself and other members of the Friends of the Soviet Union/South African Peace Council may well have been the basis for the clause "There shall be peace and friendship". In Pretoria Local, he cheerfully prepared to celebrate Freedom Day.

In a later letter to his family, surprisingly uncensored, he recounted:

The Church Service cum Freedom Day Remembrance was held and was a group effort and many participated in the announcing of hymns, reading of lessons; short address, and prayer by myself. It was a most impressive act of worship and dedication.<sup>xlvi</sup>

It is unclear whether the Liberals, who were now in a section of the prison away from the "Communists", even bothered to attend the service.

The following week, a number of detainees were released. On June 29, Mike Muller and John Lang were released. The next day Lewis Baker was released. On July 1, a dozen detainees – including Cecil Williams, Issy Heymann, Vincent Swart, Harold Wolpe, Raymond Thoms and Ernie Wentzel – followed them. The following day John Brink and Willy Kalk were released

leaving Twelve, Ronnie [Press], Vic Goldberg, Percy Cohen, Mannie Brown, Eli Weinberg, Vic Syoret, Leon Levy, Joe Slovo, Archie Levitan, Rusty Bernstein, Monty Berman and self.<sup>xlvii</sup>

These releases were greeted with delight – and mounting expectations – on the part of those left behind. When would they follow?

Writing to his family, Thompson commented:

To be or not to be - that is the question! There is much sober expectancy, but on the matter of releases I have no doubt and must presume that people outside know a great deal more of what is happening than I do. For the rest I can only hope that saner councils [sic] will prevail and that we shall not be unnecessarily detained beyond what is considered a minimum period.<sup>xlviii</sup>

Following what had become custom for him, he told his family of the sermon he'd conducted that day. Unusually, he dealt with the subject at length:

The subject I chose was "Christ the Constructive Revolutionary – Christ the Crust Breaker". From the New Testament and the Gospels we see how Jesus broke through the crust of man's complacency, broke through Racialism and exclusiveness, and died to make all men free, setting in process a Gospel of liberation which frees the lives of

people individually, nationally and internationally. It is a subject which I shall develop when I see you, but these are the main few points:

1. Jesus called for universal brotherhood and meant it. His Gospel converts (?) us to this.
2. Jesus placed his faith in the common people, and he was rejected by the rich and upper classes!
3. Jesus said the Kingdom was like seed, with steady growth followed in the fullness of time by violent upheaval (See Matthew 13 ||be of mustard seed, etc. + Luke 21, etc.)
4. Jesus utterly rejected racial barriers (See Luke 4:25, 26 – and its sequel).
5. Jesus challenged class as class (see Matthew 23 etc.).
6. It was Jesus who coupled belief with action. The Unity of theory and practice was integral to the understanding of Christ and his teaching. The Sermon on the Mount and the Life of Christ are inseparable.

Jesus knew the peril to himself as a Crustbreaker, and if Christians are not able or are afraid to break through the crust (the many crusts!) we betray him. And indeed what Christianity fails to do, nationalism and communism will do – if we do not, by God’s grace do now.<sup>xlix</sup>

This letter confirms that his period in detention did not break Thompson’s commitment to radical social change in South Africa. If anything, its programmatic, point-form approach suggests a deepening clarification of his theological thinking on justice. It is interesting too that he uses a phrase like “gospel of liberation”, a phrase that was to gain prominence in Latin America among liberation theologians, and was to be imported to South Africa from the late 1960s onwards by, among others, the Christian Institute.

What is also striking is Thompson’s sense of expectancy – despite his counsel of patience to his family at the beginning of his letter, he was expecting to be released soon and was looking forward to getting back to his political and theological work. Ironically, it would be another 19 days and almost as many years before his return to active ministry.

Days dragged on. On July 6, Vic Syoret was released; the next day, five more – Archie Levitan, Eli Weinberg, Vic Goldberg, Mannie Brown and Percy Cohen. Writing to his wife, Thompson drew an analogy with a famous Agatha Christie murder mystery, “It seems to be a question of ... and now we are six!”; his mocking humour hardly covered his impatience.

Though now small in number, the group quietly did their best to resist prison authorities where they could. One means – in a situation where access to newspapers was still restricted – was to listen to news on a small radio smuggled into the prison by their lawyer, Bram Fischer.<sup>li</sup> Unfortunately, their resistance ended when a warder accidentally walked in on them one day.

One of the remaining detainees, Ronnie Press, carved a walking stick out of a prison broomstick with a small penknife smuggled in by Bram. An ornate piece of work given the circumstances, its design included “two linked snakes, Apartheid and Capitalism; [t]he prison gates, keys, an assegai, a knobkierrie [sic] and two prison bars”. The knob was made from one of the wooden feet of a prison bed. It bore five signatures, those of the last remaining white detainees in Pretoria: his own, Rusty Bernstein, Joe Slovo, Leon Levy and Thompson (Press, n.d.).

In the last few weeks of his detention, Thompson’s diary records the anguished phrase “How long?” Writing to his family, thanking them for their regular and continuing visits, he remarked on July 17:

Please do not build up any false hopes about my release – but try and take a sane view so that you spare yourselves unnecessary unhappy reactions. We all want our release, and that it will not be long delayed. You on your side and we on ours look forward to the day of happy reunion. Work therefore to obtain our release.<sup>lii</sup>

He continued by telling them how quiet it was, how they missed “the noise, hurly-burly life of the bigger group”.

What Thompson could not tell them was that on the 17th he’d managed to play a brief game of chess with David Pratt, the farmer who had attempted to assassinate Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd at the opening of the Rand Easter Show that year.<sup>liii</sup> Pratt was in Pretoria Local pending psychiatric evaluation; kept apart from most prisoners and officially – like the other prisoners – not supposed to

have dealings with the detainees, Pratt had on a number of occasions tried to smuggle messages to them. Some of these, secreted in the toilet block, had reached them. In some he tried to associate himself politically with the detainees. Wentzel had thought him deranged, but the prisoners had on one occasion sung a hymn for Pratt.<sup>iv</sup>

Thompson finally managed to meet Pratt, on the pretext of playing a game of chess. He too found him emotionally disturbed. For his concern, he was called in by the prison authorities to give an account of himself. A few days later – March 21 in fact – he was summoned again, this time to see two police majors<sup>lv</sup> regarding the incident.

The next day, as he was getting into the routine of his walk in the yard, coffee and conversation with his remaining companions, at 12.40 Warden Louw arrived. He took Thompson aside and told him that he was being released that afternoon. Thompson returned to his cell, told his comrades and packed. Excited farewells were exchanged as he “signed off” the prison register. May, Gwen and Geoffrey were there to receive him. In his diary were two words: “Wonderful Release”.

### **Thompson’s impact – sermons and resistance**

One of the key features of Thompson’s detention was his contribution to the building of prisoner morale – though not uncontroversially as this narrative has described – through his presiding at Sunday services. Crucial to these services were his sermons, unabashedly “liberationist” and subtly defiant in tone. Space prevents a closer rhetorical and theological analysis of the sermons in particular but they seem to have had quite an impact on those who listened. While some of the Liberal Party detainees clearly disliked them, feeling they were too overtly Marxist in their sympathies, those on the Left (Communist, Trotskyists and ex-Communists) certainly welcomed the spirit in which they were presented and the space they gave for an expression of defiance to the state that had detained them.

The important point to note is that Thompson freely selected texts that he believed met the needs of his fellow detainees and tailored his discourse to suit their context. He was clearly aware that his comrades were for the most part not religious people, perhaps (among the most diehard Communists in particular) anti-religious in their sentiments. Without any understanding of philosophical and anthropological theory (e.g. Scott, 1990) he intuited that the space he had to preach in prison was a space that he could use, through “political disguise” (cf. Scott, 1990:136-182) to give voice to his comrades’ deepest political and moral feelings. By speaking theologically he was also able to speak politically. To speak of love as solidarity (his first sermon) he was not only expressing a gospel theme, but also one that those in the Left would have clearly understood in Marxist terms as “struggle solidarity”, with deep resonances in the classic socialist songs of the labour movement and Communist parties, songs that had long been part of common parlance in South Africa. Drawing upon the Jubilee traditions and on Jesus’ proclamation of liberty to captives was not only an expression of the detainees’ longing for freedom but also an affirmation – that no matter the religious differences between believers and nonbelievers, nor indeed the lackadaisical practices of the churches in South Africa at that time, the ties that bound Christians and socialists together went deeper than matters of belief and church practice. So, too, in his reading of Jesus as a “constructive revolutionary”, he was affirming the intimate ties between political liberation and the founder of Christianity, implying perhaps, as Nolan would suggest decades later (1988:176-7), that some theoretical atheists could be closer in practice to the practice of Jesus.

How did this affect his fellow detainees? Apart from the ideological differences that emerged as a result of some of his sermons with the Liberals, there is no evidence that any of the Marxist detainees were “converted” in any clearly religious sense. They appreciated Thompson primarily as a comrade and human being, and saw his sermons as a particularly innovative way of expressing resistance while passing the time. A few may have shifted their perception of religion slightly. In a letter to the author, Ronnie Press commented that until he’d met Thompson, he’d thought that religion and revolution were incompatible, but that he’d come to see that “Thompson was right” (personal communication), even if not necessarily becoming a believer. Significantly, some South African Communists subsequently developed a greater affinity for religion, even without subscribing to any religious beliefs. Joe Slovo, who had first suggested that Thompson preach in prison, later commented that an origin of Communism could be found in the New Testament, that faith in God was not irreconcilable with Marxism. Indeed Slovo ended his comments with an observation: “... if I eventually find a paradise in heaven, I will regard it as a bonus” (Slovo 1994:50).

### **Conclusion**

Thompson's experience – his “little narrative” – as a detainee was nothing unique. His was a shared experience of the thousands who were detained in 1960. If anything, and particularly in comparison to the often harrowing experiences of later detainees, it was relatively untraumatic. Unlike, to name some among thousands, fellow clergyman Frank Chikane (1990) and Simon Farisani (1988) twenty-odd years later, he was not tortured. Perhaps the only unusual aspect of it was that he became a kind of “locked-in” prison chaplain and that he was put up to it by a Jewish friend who was an “atheistic Communist”. For the most part, Thompson and his comrades engaged in a politics of survival, keeping sane and counting days. The busy schedule set up and directed by Cecil Williams was – like the services Thompson conducted – largely aimed at relieving boredom. Ideological tensions arose despite attempts to keep up a “united front” because, perhaps inevitably, their activities frequently took on a tone of subtle resistance, revealed in the “hidden transcripts” (Scott, 1990) of religious services, discussions and even “fun” events that the prisoners undertook to keep themselves sane.

The Methodist Church was far from militant in mobilising support for Thompson's release. Leslie Hewson tried hard to charm Thompson out of detention. Winsome Munro visited him in Pretoria. A number of clergy and laity supported his family morally and at times financially. But as an institution – like many of its counterparts at that time – it avoided taking a very strong line, choosing rather to prepare a rather general, at times abstract, critique of apartheid for the emergency meeting of South African churches and members of the World Council of Churches held at Cottesloe, Johannesburg, in December 1960 (Hewson, 1960). Unsurprisingly, the white minister most qualified to make a practical intervention at the consultation – particularly on matters regarding state harassment, detentions and repression – was not invited to attend.

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### *Archival*

Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand

1. A1906 Douglas Thompson Papers  
AiA2: Letters  
Ai15: Manuscript of Limericks  
Da2: Diaries of D C Thompson
2. A1931: Ernest Wentzel Papers  
A6: Unpublished Memoirs
3. A1985: Interview with Douglas Thompson

### *Interviews (conducted by author)*

Luli Callinicos, Johannesburg, 24 September 1997.

Ike Horvitch, London, 13 November 1997.

### *Online*

Ron Press, "To Change the World! Is Reason Enough?" Available at: <http://anc.org.za>.

### **Endnotes**

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- 1 By the end of the 1950s the ANC were already considering how to operate underground, viz. the development of the M-Plan for underground organisation by Nelson Mandela and others. Among the Left within the alliance, and their liberal critics, armed resistance was also being examined as a possibility (Harmel, 1958; Lewin, 1958; Roux, 1958; Simons 1958; see also, Bundy, 1988:1-2).
  - 2 A1906.AiA2: DCT to John S D Miles, 20/3/60; DCT to E W Sykes, 20/3/60.
  - 3 A1906.AiA2: Geoffrey Thompson to 'Mum and Dad', 30/3/60.
  - 4 A1906.Da2: Diary 1960. Remarkably, Thompson was able to keep a diary of his detention.
  - 5 A1906.Da2: Diary 1960.
  - 6 A1931: Ab: Part of a MS.
  - 7 Ibid. Wentzel, following common Liberal Party parlance of the times, regarded most if not all COD members as Communists. He certainly did not know whether they were underground SACP members. Ironically, quite a few – including key figures Cecil Williams and Joe Slovo – were SACP. Some of his third group were also in COD or related organisations. Others were ex-COD, or Trotskyites.
  - 8 Luli Callinicos, interviewed Johannesburg, 24/9/97.
  - 9 A1906.AiA2: May Thompson to DCT, 5/4/60.
  - 10 A1906.AiA2: May Thompson to DCT, 10/4/60.
  - 11 Ibid, p 20.
  - 12 The description of the Fort and the routine is based largely on Wentzel's eyewitness testimony: A1931.Aa: Memoirs (MS), pp 32-36. Also: Rusty Bernstein (1999:199-216).
  - 13 Ibid, pp 34-35.
  - 14 Ibid, p 35.
  - 15 A1906.AiA2: DCT to his family, 14/4/60.
  - 16 A1906.Da2: Diary 1960 (crossed out details).
  - 17 A1985.F9: Interview with Thompson, 20/8/82. Bernstein (1999) thinks Thompson volunteered his services.
  - 18 Slovo (1995:125); Bernstein (1999:206-207).
  - 19 This would seem to echo the thinking of a famous Lutheran theologian, Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros: a study of the Christian idea of love* (London: SPCK, 1953). A classic work of 20<sup>th</sup> century theology, Thompson would almost certainly have read it. His use of this fairly conservative work here is creative, to say the least!
  - 20 A1985.F9: Thompson interview.
  - 21 A1931.Aa: Memoirs, p 35.

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- 22 Ike Horvitch, interviewed London, 13/11/97; cf the sketch in the MuseumAfrica 'Treason Trial' Exhibition, Johannesburg.
- 23 A1906.Da2: Diary 1960.
- 24 A1906.AiA2: DCT to family 23/4/60.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 A1931.Ab: MS, p 6.
- 27 A1906.Da2: Diary 1960.
- 28 Temple was a progressive Anglo-Catholic, though not to the degree of a Conrad Noel.
- 29 A1931.Aa: Memoirs MS, p 47.
- 30 A1906.AiA2: DCT to his family, 13/5/60.
- 31 A1931.Aa: Memoirs, p 38.
- 32 Press comments: "I tried to follow his reasoning but I am afraid that almost half way through I lost the thread." Many political theologians and activist clergy would concur with Press.
- 33 A1906.Da2: Diary 1960.
- 34 A1906.AiA2: DCT to family, 22/5/60.
- 35 A1906.Da2: Diary 1960 (May 21).
- 36 A1906.AiA2: DCT to family 22/5/60.
- 37 A1906.Ai6: DCT to "Dear ...", 25/5/60.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 A1906.Ai15: MS "Detainees Limericks. Saturday 28/5/60 @ 8pm"
- 40 A1906.Da2: Diary 1960. In fact it was the nearest Sunday to the anniversary of the founding of the Union.
- 41 A1906.Da2: Diary 1960.
- 42 A1906. AiA2: DCT to family, 5/6/60. Winsome Munro went into exile in the early 1960s, returning only after the ANC was unbanned. In the interim she became a Methodist minister and New Testament scholar, cf.: Johan Engelbrecht (1996).
- 43 A1906.AiA2: Cecil Williams to Douglas & Mrs Thompson, 9/6/60.
- 44 A1906.AiA2: Louis Joffe to Mrs May Thompson, 17/6/60.
- 45 A1931: Ab: MS, pp 4-5; also Aa Memoirs, p 51.
- 46 A1906.AiA2: DCT to family, 26/6/60; A1906.Da2: Diary 1960.
- 47 A1906.Da2: Diary 1960.
- 48 A1906.AiA2: DCT to family, 3/7/60.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 A1906.AiA2: DCT to May, 10/7/60. Thompson was referring here to the unfortunately titled novel and play *Ten little Niggers* (subsequently re-titled *Ten little Indians* and later to *And then there were none*).
- 51 Bram Fischer was himself a key figure in the Congress Alliance as well as South Africa's top advocate. For a moving and detailed account of his life, see: Clingman (1998)
- 52 A1906.AiA2: DCT to family, 17/7/60.
- 53 A1906.Da2: Diary 1960.
- 54 A1931.Aa: Memoirs, p 52.
- 55 A1906.Da2: Diary 1960. Names according to Thompson's spelling.