

A critical black analysis of the church's role in the post-apartheid struggle for socio-economic justice

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Abstract

This article reflects on the role of the church in the economic justice discourse post 1994 within the context of a dominant calculative rationality. It is firstly argued that language becomes distorted as a functionary of the dominant market fundamentalism in this context. Furthermore, the saturation of pragmatist politics, equally a sign of the crippling effects of this rationality, impedes democratic impulses as it eclipses theoretical and intellectual discourse. The article demonstrates that the passages from GEAR to NGP do not portray a significant radical change in economic policy. On the contrary, 'faith' has become central in an ambiguous economic imaginary. Ecclesiastical discourse, particularly its lapse into "church theology" mode, delinks social justice from reconciliation. Against an elusive interlocutor in this context, black theology of liberation must be authentic to the plight of the scum of the earth to achieve the goals of social justice in history.

Introduction

This article originated as a public lecture that was presented at the University of KwaZulu-Natal at the Ujamaa Centre. The lecture was delivered in honour of Mzwandile Nunes whom I had known from a distance – a struggle activist and academic at the UKZN University who played a significant role in critical theological thought in the 1980s. I still remember that I obtained a copy of the work by Sampie Terreblache, *A history of inequality in South Africa 1652-2002* at the Ujamaa Centre which was not readily available in a number of institutions and libraries in South Africa.

This article comprises four main sections. I set the tone for my arguments within the context of calculative rationality and move to a brief analysis of the passages of economic policy in South Africa from GEAR to the NGP. The article then reflects on the role of the church in economic justice and looks at the question of faith in relation to interlocution and concludes by arguing that economic injustice requires interlocution in the disembowelling experience of economic injustice among the miserable.

The distortion of calculative rationality and economics

Umsebenzi, an isiZulu or isiNguni word for work is not conceivable among black Africans without the components of land, faith, God, the fireplace, the living-departed, and people to say the least.

The dislocation of the concept, *umsebenzi*, from the fireplace – its disentanglement from *isibaya*,¹ the "shrine" of an African home – is a festering narrative of the corrosive discourses of modernity and the Enlightenment, including the calculative rationality that has dominated our economic imaginary which underlie the cheap labour extracted from blacks in South Africa. I have observed, not without being astounded, the distortion of these concepts in Durban's Casino named Isibaya. Right at the centre of Isibaya – imagine the centre of the kraal (*ubuhlanti*) – are machines, robots, gadgets, and people, young and old, as if at prayer in honour of the gods of gambling.

Isibaya among Africans assumes a similar place as the "temple" in the psyche and religious world of the Jews, or the church among Christians – imagine gambling machines and gadgets in the centre of a temple or a church. The dominion of market fundamentalism – the central place that has been given to neoliberal economics post 1994, which continues to disembowel the poorest of the poor, is a form of religion we can only welcome by betraying the gospel of Jesus Christ. The hegemony of pragmatic politics which has resulted in a skewed logic of justice does not only render our reconciliation discourse post 1994 "heretical", but also dislodges our theology from its foundational interlocutor, while market fundamentalism attains a pseudo-religious status. Cornel West says:

¹ *Isibaya* is the kraal. In isiXhosa it is called *ubuhlanti* and in Sesotho it is called *lesaka* or *kgoro*

Democracy matters are frightening in our time precisely because the three dominant dogmas of free market fundamentalism, aggressive militarism, and escalating authoritarianism are snuffing out the democratic impulses that are so vital for deepening and spreading democracy in the world.²

Indeed, snuffing out democratic impulses that are vital to deepen democracy is symbolised in our case by the manner in which concepts such as *umsebenzi*, *ubuhlanti*, the church or the temple are emptied of their value in the name of economic progress and imagination that have become dominant in South Africa since the demise of apartheid. It is troublesome to observe that the change in the content and meaning of these symbolic concepts as a result of the subjugation of everything to calculative rationality is infectious to language itself, a point that Ulrich Duchrow and Franz Hinkelammert poignantly make:

Our relationship to language has indeed changed, particularly since the end of the nineteenth century, when the whole view of the world was already trivialised because of the subjugation of everything to the vantage point of functional mechanism and to the efficiency and utility calculation. This way of viewing the world also infected language. Language has metamorphosed into a secondary functional mechanism, just like the market and the state.³

The change of language, the distortion arising from the dominant dogmas of market fundamentalism, militarism and authoritarianism set the context for my reflection on the themes that follow in this article.

Passage from the Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) to the New Growth Path Framework (NGP)

My intention is to demonstrate the continuum of neoliberal economics and the response of the “left” to neoliberalism in my reflection of the passage from GEAR to NGP. I am not amazed to see the rising of an “e-tolling Jesus”⁴ in this passage – a type of Jesus who lords himself in the economic sanctuary that dismembers the poor being obeyed even by the ‘left’ in South Africa. Neoliberalism is a powerfully driven ideology in our times. The GEAR got stuck, Rogate Mshana⁵ once said, so we had to move on with *The New Growth Path*? The current economic vision in South Africa presupposes a shift from what was initially called GEAR, a macroeconomic policy that has been discounted, rightly so, as a neoliberal and anti-democratic project. It is now widely known that getting into GEAR, “The irony was that in order to stave off the power of international finance, the ANC committed itself to policies approved by the same financiers.”⁶ Avoiding the power of these institutions is one reason. There are many other reasons that have been provided in support of the move to GEAR, indeed most of them fraught with ironies.

That the ANC “volunteered willingly for the kind of policies that are usually imposed on unwilling governments”⁷ continues to be one of the striking ironies to this day in my view. Sampie Terreblanche states that, “the trend towards modernization and ‘capitalist enclave’ that started in the 1970s was strongly stimulated by the government’s policy of neoliberalism, market fundamentalism and globalization”.⁸ He goes on to say that this trend, at least, brought about six million black people into the middle class even though it deepened the gap between the poor and the rich. Furthermore, this “capitalist enclave”, he argues, “also strengthened the pro-rich and pro-global orientation of the modern sector of the economy”.⁹ These contradictions have continued until the adoption of the new policy framework, *The New Growth Path*, after the Polokwane Moment¹⁰ in South Africa. Yes, a number of black people have moved into the middle class, but the chasm between the poor and the rich has widened so much, making South Africa to be one of the most unequal societies in the world.

² Cornel West, *Democracy matters: winning the fight against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), p.12.

³ Ulrich Duchrow and Franz Hinkelammert, *Interreligious solidarity for just relations: transcending greedy money* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), p.113.

⁴ See Vuyani Vellel, “Celebrating May Day in the Midst of an “e-tolling Jesus” Ecumenical Reflections,” South African Council of Churches, <http://www.sacc.org.za/pages/ecumenical.html>, 2012.

⁵ Rogate Mshana, “A People-centred economy: Alternative to Capitalist economy” (paper presented at the World Allicane of Reformed Churches, Africa Region, Johannesburg, October 3-4, 2007). He made this metaphorical remark to imply that the policy could not deliver for the poor.

⁶ Alan Hirsch, *Season of hope: economic reform under Mandela and Mbeki* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005), p.69.

⁷ Michael MacDonald, *Why race matters in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2006), p. 143.

⁸ Sampie Terreblanche, “The Developmental State in South Africa: The Difficult Road Ahead” in *State of the Nation*, eds. Peter Kagwanja & Kwandwe Kondlo (Pretoria: HSRC Press, 2009), p.108.

⁹ Sampie Terreblache, “The Developmental State,” p.108.

¹⁰ The ANC’s Conference that was held in the city called Polokwane brought the end to the era of Thabo Mbeki’s presidency and was in many respects epochal. For this reason, it has come to be dubbed as Polokwane or the Polokwane Moment in writings and reflections in South Africa.

This must be worrisome though, if Terreblache's point is not evaded, namely that this trend of "capitalist enclave" should be traced to the 1970s. A number of theses had been postulated though by the time of this shift to the NGP. One of them, as MacDonald argues, is that "South Africa's inequalities were made intentionally and systematically as the *raison d'être* of white supremacy."¹¹ If this thesis is correct, the economic question of South Africa post 1994 as Hirsch puts it was:

How would the new South Africa balance the tasks of setting the economy on a path of economic growth, to lay the basis for prosperity and, simultaneously, redistribute income, wealth and other resources such as human capital to meet the objectives of social justice and long term sustainability?¹²

If the racial supremacy of the white race was intentionally and systematically made to create inequalities, how would social justice and economic sustainability be achieved in post 1994 South Africa? It is indeed this economic question that has been debated for some years now. It seems that economic growth has become important if not too central to the questions of redistribution and social justice if one takes the view expressed by MacDonald above into consideration. How could the African National Congress (ANC) simply accept to be a party that agreed to a capitalist democracy by giving up the dreams of socialism?¹³ This question must continue to be posed because it is the crux of the history of economic exclusion and injustice in South Africa. Of course there are many answers to this. Some, like Allan Hirsch seem to provide an "apologia" for the ANC, while others like John Saul and Michael MacDonald are a bit polemical and critical in their views.

The most important contention, from a theological perspective, is that capitalism itself must be viewed as religion; a point I have already suggested in my introduction. Capitalism's very logic is questionable, and the distortions arising from its calculative rationality and the subjugation of symbolic concepts such as language and the state, becoming rendered functionaries of the same logic and rationality, cannot be accepted in my theological views. The NGP is presented as a shift from GEAR, but many of the questions that arose in the context of GEAR still have to be answered. Let me briefly state what these questions are before we proceed with our conversation. GEAR itself was a shift from the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) and one of the reasons for this shift was that the RDP was going to endanger economic growth.

In this sense, redistribution would be hampered. The lopsidedness of the GEAR strategy for years has stemmed from the moral dilemma about the rich and the poor, mainly the huge price at which economic stability was sought at the expense of the poor among other reasons. Some of these reasons include the myth we must debunk about the notion of economic growth and its attendant rationality as I have already indicated above. Now, one of the central elements of this new economic path is decent work in response to the core challenge of mass joblessness, poverty and inequality.¹⁴ The policy offers government a leading role and states that a "strong government"¹⁵ is needed to tackle the challenge of unemployment. It presents a powerful analysis of the context and lists serious challenges such as the unemployment rate of the youth; the inequitable share of the national income; the global shifts in economics; job shedding; and many other important challenges most of which must be familiar to South Africans. I must state that I generally agree with the analysis that is offered by the NGP. What I think is problematic are some of the solutions that are proposed in the *framework*. I will only focus on one broad question in relation to the *New Growth Path*, with those questions that have been posed against GEAR already in mind.

The question is whether the *New Growth Path* represents anything new. It seems to me that there is no fundamental departure from the neoliberal assumptions that were a major point of contention about GEAR in my reading of this policy framework. To support my view, I take my cue from the promises that the current leadership of the African National Congress (ANC) made after the Polokwane Conference. Somadoda Fikeni in his analysis of the Polokwane Conference of the ANC says, "There was no fundamental departure from the ANC's policies, and emphasis was placed on more effective implementation of existing policies and better delivery mechanisms."¹⁶

We can all remember that President Jacob Zuma even visited the United States of America and attended a host of meetings with businesspeople, giving them all the assurance they needed to hear that there would be no changes in economic policy after the Polokwane Conference. The document (NDP) itself makes this point:

¹¹ Michael MacDonald, *Why race*, p.125.

¹² Alan Hirsch, *Season of hope: economic reform under Mandela and Mbeki* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005), p.257.

¹³ There are many scholars who have said this, Sampie Terreblanche, Michael MacDonald, cited above, but the other one is John Saul, *The next liberation struggle: capitalism, socialism, and democracy in Southern Africa* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005).

¹⁴ Cf. *The new growth path: the framework*, Accessed May 11, 2012.

¹⁵ *The new growth path*,

¹⁶ Somadoda Fikeni, "The Polokwane Moment and South Africa's Democracy at the Crossroads" in *State of the Nation*, eds. Peter Kagwanja & Kwandiwe Kondlo (Pretoria: HSRC Press, 2009), 20.

The New Growth Path responds to emerging opportunities and risks while building on policies advanced since the achievement of democracy 16 years ago. The Reconstruction and Development Programme advocated a greater equity basis for long term development and growth. In the mid-'00s, AsgiSA renewed government's commitment to addressing joblessness and poverty and identified infrastructure needs, skills shortages and unnecessary regulatory burdens as core constraints on growth. In addition, in the face of the global crisis in 2008/9, government, organised business labour and community groups forged a response to minimise the impact on the economy and on working people. That constructive and collaborative approach to meeting the challenges facing South Africa informs our strategies going forward.¹⁷

I read this policy framework not as a departure from GEAR, even though it is only the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (AsgiSA) that is mentioned in the quotation above. The point is that evidently, after the Polokwane Moment, it is not a radical change in policy we must have expected including economic policy. This should be one of the points we recognise in some of these shifts that have been clamoured in public life. From this point one could begin by saying the pseudo-religious pedestal of neoliberal principles vividly remains.

I, therefore, submit that faith in its crudest sense in neoliberal economics must be repudiated.¹⁸ There are many similarities between GEAR and the NGP such as tight fiscal measures and indeed, its 'eschatological' promise for the poor and jobless. What I suggest we examine a bit is the fact that the South African Communist Party, as they have said it clearly, have accepted the NGP despite its rootage in the neoliberal foundations and ideals. In addition, we must remember that Minister Patel, a former unionist, is one of the drivers of this new policy framework. When the two important leaders support what others see as a vision steeped in neoliberal capitalism, surely there is some reckoning that requires to be made. Shawn Hattingh might sound cynical when he says:

The flawed logic of the SACP, however, is merely a representative of a general trend amongst many within the left. There is often a mistaken assumption that neo-liberalism equates to a reduction in the power of the state, and that under neo-liberalism the state withdraws from the economy.¹⁹

In other words, caution against a logic that simply emphasises the protection of the state against neoliberal elements may not be adequate as the state itself is not immune against metamorphosing into a functionary of neoliberal antics. For example, while the NGP is poised to fight unemployment and inequality, it still "views export oriented economy, increased competitiveness, foreign direct investment, increased productivity, wage restraints, cutting of costs for business and economic growth as being central to supposedly creating jobs",²⁰ Hattingh argues. In short, and I seem to agree with Hattingh – the SACP does not repudiate neoliberalism in the NGP and appeals rather to the South African public to support this new policy framework. It is as if they were saying "because we are now in power, the problems of neoliberalism are resolved".

Still, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu),²¹ which rejects the neoliberal assumptions of the NGP, apparently welcomes the intervention of the state as a solution, hence, the talk about a developmental state without necessarily engaging the notion of a developmental state with capitalism. Cosatu, Hattingh argues, "does not call for a complete break with capitalism".²² It is difficult to discount some of these claims. Ferial Haffajee argues that the support base of Cosatu's anti-toll march recently revealed that Cosatu is now equally a middle class organisation. She says, "As we all threw a toll tantrum in March, there were gasps of amazement that Cosatu had managed to get the middle class to march."²³ She points out that since 2008, Cosatu grew in its public sector, and avers, "Cosatu has created a middle class where one did not exist in 18 years of democracy."²⁴ Granted, these are contentious issues, but if the SACP honestly *believes* that the shift from GEAR to the NGP is

¹⁷ *The new growth path*, p 6.

¹⁸ I am not alone in this view. Before the Mangaung Conference of the ANC that subsequently re-elected Jacob Zuma for the second term, there was talk of nationalization of the mines associated mainly with Julius Malema, the then ANC Youth League President. After the Conference, the ANC explicitly rejected nationalization. Furthermore, it is worth noting that some unions in the Tripartite Alliance have expressed sharp skepticism against the promises of this new path.

¹⁹ Shawn Hattingh, "South Africa's 'New growth path,'" *Amandla*, May 11, 2012, accessed May 11 2012, <http://www.amandlapublishers.co.za/new-growth-path/619-south-africas-new-growth>.

²⁰ Shawn Hattingh, "New growth path," 2.

²¹ See "New growth path framework: one step forward, two steps backward," accessed May 22 2013, www.coastu.org.za/show.php?ID=4459.

²² Shawn Hattingh, 5.

²³ Ferial Haffajee, "A middle class act," *City Press*, May 13, 2012, 27.

²⁴ Ferial Haffajee, "A middle class act," 27.

a paradigm shift from neoliberalism, we must be perplexed. For me it is crudely a matter of *faith*, this is what they believe, and want us to believe.

In the same manner, Cosatu repudiates the NGP, but simply has *faith* in the state, indeed a developmental state. We must remember that this organisation also played a significant role against what the SACP called “the ‘presidentialising’²⁵ of the ANC” during the Polokwane Moment. To collapse the entire public life into the whims of the state, a capitalist state can only be driven by those who want us to believe that capitalism might be our saviour. I must however be careful here lest my point is misunderstood. Cosatu does reject the neoliberal view that limits the role of the state and clearly castigates the use of the state as a vehicle of wealth accumulation and calls for a developmental state as I have already indicated. Admittedly, the points I have made about the SACP and Cosatu are complex and nuanced and thus require a cautious critique arising mostly from the contradictions these members of the Tripartite Alliance have hitherto shown in the period under review.

In my critique of these movements, I am alert to the dangers of anti-state fetishisms. While there might be something deeper than one can make for the SACP to support the NGP in its analysis and for Cosatu to have a middle class membership, while critiquing the NGP framework for its neoliberal affinities, that Cosatu in particular proposes a different form of state is not unimportant albeit fraught with contradiction. Political theorists such as Ernesto Laclau²⁶ welcome this blurring of political lines or ideological divisions shown in the contradictions I have pointed out which tend to bring together diverse and often contradictory positions into one camp. In other words, the uncertainty and diffuse collaborations must be welcomed as there is a convergence on some shared antagonism to power and authority. Perhaps this is what the SACP and Cosatu might want to argue. I am extremely cautious against this line of argument as in the tradition of Black Theology of liberation there remains clarity about who the interlocutor of the liberation struggle is even when there is an inclusion of different groupings converging on who the enemy might be.

The Racial Strand in Black Theology of liberation is a good example. For this reason, the convergence of disparate and grieving groupings on shared antagonisms does not have to be welcomed at the expense of the interlocutor that defines the comprehensive struggle for liberation – the poor. My point is that whether one believes in the paradigm shift that the SACP believes the NGP has taken, or other believes in the powerful and monstrous state albeit different a model as Cosatu does, it is certainly difficult for me to avoid the role that faith has now come to play in the Left. Cosatu argues that this policy framework is not in line with the historical positions of the ANC in economic policy, yet it seems to believe that the same ANC could form an alternative model of state. It is not the incorrectness of the arguments advanced by Cosatu that poses a problem for me, but faith in the current ANC led government.

If there is no alternative to the ANC at the moment, the question for me is how does the prodigal ANC get transformed and capacitated to become a functionary of the dreams of our liberation? Is there faith without reason? Without reason, what is faith? Do we simply have to believe in capitalism and neoliberal economics because our own struggle icons say we should? Do we simply have to believe that the ANC can transform the state simply because our leaders say so? I am not responding to these questions in this article, but am inclined to make one point: response to ambiguity or ambivalence requires faith – it is a matter of faith. To simply avoid repudiating neoliberal capitalism and believe that there is a paradigm shift where it might not exist and to simply repudiate neoliberalism by evoking “faith” in the state perhaps point to a deeper challenge of the sterility of the left. I have argued that the structural shifts that have taken place in the world since 1989 have contributed to the political discourse that has become too pragmatic with, among others, the sovereignty of the state equally diminishing while the sovereignty of money is rising.²⁷

Because of the saturation of pragmatic discourse of politics, theoretical and intellectual discourses are eclipsed if not muzzled. Zwelinzima Vavi has eloquently put the matter this way, “An empty stomach does not have an ideology” addressing his constituency after one of the unprecedented marches the country has ever seen post 1994.²⁸ There is no uncertainty about who the hungry are in South Africa. There is no lack of clarity about who are on the peripheries of the city in *mekhukhu* (squatter camps) in South Africa. The rhetoric of liberation is becoming more and more sterile though as there is no distinction between a capitalist and a communist, a beneficiary of colonialism and apartheid against its victim, the dreams of the poor and the rich in a country of grotesque inequalities on the globe. On this note let us turn to the church.

²⁵ Somadoda Fikeni, 44.

²⁶ See Ernesto Laclau, *On populist reason* (London: Verso, 2005).

²⁷ Vuyani Vellem, “Black theology of liberation and radical democracy: a dialogue” upcoming, (unpublished paper presented in a Conference on Brazil-South Africa cooperation, Pretoria, March 23, 2012c).

²⁸ On Radio SAfm, May 16, 2012. Vavi alluded to the unceasing delivery strikes and the political significance of the march by the Democratic Alliance on the 15th March 2012. The DA’s march was a demonstration against the position held by Cosatu with regard to the policy of subsidies for wages.

The role of the church in economic justice

A lot of good work has been done in this regard, in particular the paper that was presented by Clint Le Bruyns in 2010 at this very Lecture.²⁹ “No solidarity without sadness”,³⁰ he charges, as too much of the rhetoric of the progressive church in South Africa leans towards “State Theology”. Le Bruyns applies the Kairos tradition(s) to illuminate the paralysis of the church’s solidarity in the economic sphere. Indeed, some have shown their faith in the state as we have already demonstrated above, like Cosatu, while others simply believe that economics is better left to economists. Apart from the very small role that the South African Council of Churches played in the economic discourse, I regard the “People’s Budget Campaign” as one of the main projects that the ecumenical church has hitherto paid attention to.

Even though the Ecumenical Service for Socio-economic Transformation (Esset) is playing a vital role in issues related to theology and economic justice, their focus has hitherto been on informal traders. Their magazine, *Daily Bread*, does provide powerful insights, but they too are moving deeply into theology and economic justice if their intention is anything to follow.³¹ I want to presume that the *The Kairos Southern Africa*³² which scantily makes references to matters of economic justice could be the latest of our theological commentary today. Directing its word to the ANC reference is made to “the economic disparities” that “are stuck with us.”³³

Alluding to the 1913 Land Act, *The Kairos Southern Africa* employs an extremely significant phrase, “350 years of imperialism, colonialism and apartheid”.³⁴ While not necessarily new, this phrase affirms the context in which the roots of Prophetic Theology are in South Africa, the moment in which the truth of the gospel was crushed, “a prophetic rupture which streamed into the development of a Black Theology of liberation ...”³⁵ and other forms of contextual theology in South Africa.

What I have found amazing is the fact that these sentiments are expressed in the section that deals with “a word of appreciation” in this document. Let us not lose the point that I am making here. The phrase: “350 years of imperialism, colonialism and apartheid” is a quintessential affirmation of the flawed, discrepant relationship of theology and economics and, thus, the starting point from where we trace all the flaws of Western Christianity in South Africa. We shall return to this point, for now let us move on with the references to the *Kairos Southern Africa* makes which have economic implications.

The document also refers to “disparities between black and whites within churches”.³⁶ Let us hear some of these mouth-watering lines of the *Kairos Southern Africa*:

Unfortunately many Christians interpreted this call as a call to only become involved in the anti-apartheid cause, and when this cause came to an end, the involvement of many Christians in reversing social and economic injustice in South Africa, also came to an end.³⁷

These sentiments above speak to the journey of the church in the 1980s. It explains the lapse of Christianity in South Africa into church theology after the demise of apartheid. It explains why the participation of the church in the reversal of social and economic justices has hitherto been lukewarm. *The Kairos Southern Africa*, within the tradition of the Kairos Document, explicitly calls on the church to challenge “the entitlement of the rich, the powerful and those who serve their interests” and aptly declares that “this is the dominant narrative in South Africa at the moment”.³⁸ The punch line of the *Kairos Southern Africa* comes out clearly when the authors express their “word of caution and concern”:

Our second concerns (sic) is that we need to find the best possible route, maintaining our unity despite our diversity, towards economic justice and together closing the gap between the richest and the poorest in South Africa. We recognise the temptation of some to hold onto their economic privilege, and ask that a national dialogue about this matter be held as soon as possible. We have started some initiatives in this regard, where we will urge those who have “said sorry”, and who

²⁹ Clint Le Bruyns, “Religion and the economy in the public realm: from the RDP of the economy to the RDP of the soul?” (Paper presented at the Mzwandile Roddy Nunes Memorial Lecture, Pietermaritzburg, 2010).

³⁰ Clint Le Bruyns, “Religion and the economy”, 9.

³¹ See their Strategic Document 2012.

³² *Kairos Southern Africa: theological and ethical reflections on the 2012 Centenary Celebrations of the African National Congress*, 28 December 2011.

³³ *Kairos Southern Africa*, 2.

³⁴ *Kairos*, 2.

³⁵ Cf. Vuyani Vellem, *Prophetic “Prophetic theology with special reference to the Kairos Document” in Prophetic witness: an appropriate contemporary mode of public discourse?*, eds. Heinrich Bedford-Strohm & Etienne de Villiers (Berlin:Lit,2011), 83.

³⁶ *Kairos*, 4.

³⁷ *Kairos*, 9.

³⁸ *Kairos*, 11.

have begun to implement some initiatives to give effect to this, to also begin to “do sorry”, but to do so as a national project together with all South Africans who have much more than they need. The aim of this will be to contribute more significantly to closing the gap between the rich and the poor in South Africa, and to do so not merely as individuals, but together.

I do not understand why the authors of the *Kairos Southern Africa* decided to express the sentiments above merely as a word of caution and concern. I do, however, find comfort in the explicit section that directs a prophetic word to the ANC which declares that “The worship of Mammon (money) is one of the key signs of our times, for all people everywhere on this planet.”³⁹ I cannot proceed without making a brief qualification about my position with regard to the prophetic word that must be directed to the ANC. My view of prophetic theology is not a narrow, polemical stance as some might be tempted to think that way.

My view is broader and goes along with Nico Koopman’s⁴⁰ attempt to expand the contours of prophetic discourse. He says, “Five complementary and supplementary ways in which churches can fulfil their prophetic calling can be identified, namely prophesy as *envisioning*, prophecy as *criticising*, prophecy as *storytelling*, prophecy as *technical* (philosophical, social, political, economic, cultural etc.) analysis, and lastly prophecy as *policy making*.⁴¹ One can, therefore, argue that *The Kairos Southern Africa* calls on the church to envision, criticise, tell the stories, analyse and participate in policy making. Without much ado, like the picture that I have painted about the left in South Africa, the church has as the *The Kairos Southern Africa* also suggests, lapsed into ‘church theology’ leading to a decline in progressive Christian theology in South Africa. The church simply left economics to economists making us believe in their choices without reason too. It is the critical church I have in mind here and I am going to offer one worrying reason for this state of affairs.

Faith in the disembowelling economic and political heresies

“Our greatest error” Allan Boesak suggests,

... is not that we have made reconciliation an arbitrary instrument of negotiation, as we did, nor a calculated tool for political accommodation serving and elite pact, which we also did. Our greatest error is that we, after delinking reconciliation and social justice, have carefully, in our official national narrative and in the narrative of our private lives, created images of absolute good and absolute evil, of demons and angels to which we cling, and behind which we hide our culpability and our responsibility. If moral justification of apartheid was apartheid’s heresy, this abuse of our reconciliation is our political heresy.⁴²

At core, what Boesak rightfully describes as a political heresy, arises from the distortions the negotiated settlement has done on the concepts of interlocution. I argue a bit extensively elsewhere⁴³ that the post-1994 political settlement has created an elusive interlocutor and perhaps succeeded to outmanoeuvre progressive theological thought since the demise of apartheid. Mamdani’s seminal ideas found in his book, *Citizen and subject* might help us at this stage. The core of his thesis is that colonial power was a bifurcated state. It was a form of a combination of indirect and direct rule which divided the colonial territory between civil power and ethnic power. While civil power was *racialised*, customary power in the rural spaces was *ethnicised*. His prognosis, which is familiar to a number of theologians in South Africa, is that South African democracy requires both the de-racialisation of civil power and detribalisation of customary power for a durable reconciliation to be attained.

The political compromise resulting from the negotiated settlement has impinged on important symbols such as justice, which also remain important for the durability of our polity and a reconciled society. Mamdani castigates firstly, what he perceives to be an undue equation of revenge with justice, in other words, the propensity to collapse justice as a form of revenge in Kadar Asmal’s thinking and more importantly, in the reasons that are offered to justify the choice made against the route of the Nuremberg trial becoming a paradigm of justice in South Africa. In other words, when justice is viewed as revenge, it becomes logical for it to be abandoned when reconciliation is identified as a goal. Surely, following on Mamdani’s case of Rwanda, justice without reconciliation becomes extremely dangerous and South Africa sought to maintain the tension between justice and reconciliation.

³⁹ *Kairos*, 17.

⁴⁰ Nico Koopman, “Modes of prophecy in a democracy” in *Prophetic witness: an appropriate contemporary mode of public discourse?*, eds. Heinrich Bedford-Strohm & Etienne de Villiers (Berlin:Lit,2011),181-192.

⁴¹ Nico Koopman, “Modes of Democracy”, 183.

⁴² Allan Boesak, “Demons, angels and the search for reconciliation” (lecture presented at Monash University, Johannesburg, May 7, 2012.

⁴³ Vuyani Velle, “Interlocution and Black Theology of Liberation in the 21st Century: a reflection” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* XXXVIII, Supplement, August 2012: 345-360.

Equating revenge to justice, Mamdani argues, is an error we should however not commit if it has not committed already been committed. The political compromise in South Africa contributed to what Mamdani refers to as justice based on “pragmatic political concession”.⁴⁴ Justice based on pragmatic political concession renders the South African state heteronymous – too saturated with pragmatism, thus eclipsing intellectual reflection and theory while self-interest is occupying centre stage. While political justice must not be rejected, as Mamdani also cautions, what cannot be overlooked is the capacity of political justice to either enhance, or impede social justice. To take Mamdani’s point further, justice in the pragmatic political concession – the heteronymous state – is justice without theory and intellectual reflection shaped only by pragmatic considerations.

Our narrow and political reconciliation is thus a heresy to revert to Boesak’s sentiments. For our case today, we should understand clearly what pragmatic political concession does to an important tool in our theology: interlocution.

In the politics of saturated pragmatism the actual conversant – the interlocutor – an important tenet to identify the type of theology one is doing, continues to be a casualty with far reaching implications for the impeccable verbalisation of the gospel in economics and democratic South Africa. The critics of the notion of “critical solidarity” express concern about the possible danger of convergence between powerful spheres of the institutional – the Constantinian model of the church and the state forming solidarities against the powerless. *Kairos Southern Africa* alludes to the ‘theology of reconstruction’⁴⁵ and later repudiates “critical solidarity” by declaring that “we have now come to realize that our key solidarity has to be with the poorest of the poor and the marginalized in society”.⁴⁶

The politics of saturated pragmatism eludes and makes us believe that the politicians are powerful while, according to Moeletsi Mbeki, they are simply consumers of an economy that was encircled for a few for centuries and now includes a few black elite while millions continue to be excluded. According to Moeletsi Mbeki,⁴⁷ apartheid was an “enclave economy”. One version of this elusion occurs when the critics of blackness often, very much disguised anyway, see a convergence between the middle class blacks with the poor blacks: “The poor blacks must now be careful because blacks are in power, the view suggests.” Indeed, the politics of saturated pragmatism also creates dangerous fundamentalisms such as the essentialist discourse on blackness and its elusive forms of entitlement. The adoption of the apartheid nomenclature to designate our diverse population, for pragmatic reasons, has yielded to an interpretation of concepts such as “African” in exclusive terms and “blackness” in essentialist terms. What all this demonstrates among others, is that justice without theory and intellectual reflection has become a dominant paradigm.

The *Hara-kiri* of the miserable

Where do we go from here? Where do we go from the economic discourse that is saturated with pragmatism and “a Left immunized against any hope of renewal and neutralized, practically and theoretically, with respect to any subversive struggle”?⁴⁸

Terry Eagleton,⁴⁹ argues that the scum of the earth constituted the primary locus of the gospel of Jesus. Albie Sachs, envisioned democracy and religion in the following manner:

It will seek to ensure that in terms of language, symbols and personality it has a character that roots in Africa. The fact that religion plays a big role in South African life will find appropriate acknowledgement in the constitution, without creating a state religion or giving any religion preference over others.⁵⁰

Perhaps one aspect has been seriously undermined in our theoretical and intellectual work: the terms of language, symbols, and personality with a character that is rooted in Africa.

I began with the concept of *umsebenzi*, and I would like to submit that work without God will always be work with other gods. This African notion of work was deliberately articulated in line with the vision articulated by Sachs above – that our democracy should take the African symbols and integrate them in our democratisation processes. This, of course, must not be a sterile exercise. As the church, our task is to unveil God in the *hara-kiri* of the miserable, lest we betray the gospel of Jesus. Let us throw our lot in radical democracy, deepening liberal

⁴⁴ Mahmood Mamdani, 1998, p.11.

⁴⁵ *Kairos*, 10.

⁴⁶ *Kairos*, 11.

⁴⁷ Moeletsi Mbeki 2011, *Advocates for change*.

⁴⁸ Antonio Negri, *Goodbye Mr. Socialism* (New York, Toronto, London, Melbourne: Seven Stories Press,2006), Preface.

⁴⁹ Terry Eagleton, [*Reason, faith, and revolution : reflections on the God debate*](#) (New Haven, Conn. : Yale University Press, 2010)

⁵⁰ Albie Sachs, *Human rights in Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press,1992),192.

politics and social democracy theoretically and intellectually rather than turning our positions into a faith devoid of reason that dismembers the poor.

Conclusion

The passages and shifts from one designation to the other in the economic policy framework of our land post 1994 remain entangled in a calculative rationality of neoliberal economics and thus continue to undermine the challenge South Africa faces, namely, to reverse the intentional and systematic logic of racial supremacy and economic exclusion. With a church that seems to have lapsed into a mode of state theology in South Africa, faith with a clear interlocutor might help the course of justice. Without this, the miserable continue to be disembowelled.

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