

# John de Gruchy's Understanding of the Kingdom of God as Articulated in "The Church Struggle in South Africa"

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## Abstract

In 2019, John W. de Gruchy turns 80 and it will be 40 years after his influential *The Church Struggle in South Africa* was published. This contribution reflects on the last chapter of De Gruchy's book, titled *The Kingdom of God in South Africa*. In this chapter, De Gruchy engages with well-known theologians such as Niebuhr, Bonino, Barth, Bonhoeffer, Pannenberg and Moltmann. He enters into conversation with liberation theologians from South America and Africa. His interpretation of the kingdom of God within the context of South Africa, with all its socio-political challenges, became a seminal text in the theological critique of apartheid. De Gruchy concludes with a "theology of hope" with reference to Bonhoeffer's letters from prison in which he reflects on Christian hope.

**Keywords:** John de Gruchy; public theology; kingdom of God; apartheid; justice

## Introduction

I started my theological studies at the University of Pretoria in 1977.<sup>1</sup> Our curriculum was filled with Greek, Hebrew, Latin, philosophy and the full encyclopaedia of theological subjects. Theological education consisted of six years' extensive reading of

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1 This research is part of the project, "Justice and Human Dignity. A Reformed perspective" directed by Wim A. Dreyer, Department of Church History and Church Polity, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria.



German, Dutch, English and Afrikaans texts. By the time I finished my BA in 1979 and BD in 1982, neither John W. de Gruchy nor his influential *The Church Struggle in South Africa* had been mentioned once. Afrikaans and English theologians in South Africa were still worlds apart, divided along ideological, cultural and political lines.

De Gruchy articulated something of this tension in an interview he had with Philippe Denis of UKZN (17 January 2013)<sup>2</sup>: “When I became a member of the society [referring to the *Dogmatologiese Werkgemeenskap*, which later became the *Theological Society of South Africa*] I felt uncomfortable generally, but I decided to stick to it. Eventually, the society attracted more English speakers. I was eventually elected president of the society—in the 1980s—it became more English speaking. Many DRC theologians withdrew their membership. A new generation came with people like Dirkie Smit.”<sup>3</sup>

When the Church History Society of Southern Africa (CHSSA) annual conference took place in August 2018 at UKZN under the theme “Church and Empire,” participants were invited to revisit John W. de Gruchy’s book *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, which he had completed 40 years ago. I bought the book some years ago in a second-hand bookshop and had read passages from it. Announcing De Gruchy’s book as a sub-theme of the annual conference provided the opportunity to reflect more intentionally on De Gruchy’s theology and the role he played (as theologian) in the socio-political transformation of South Africa.

*The Church Struggle in South Africa* was written towards the end of the 1970s, when apartheid legislation was rigorously enforced in South Africa. The first edition appeared in 1979, just three years after the Soweto Uprising (16 June 1976). A second edition was published in 1986. The second edition does not differ in the main text from the first (see De Gruchy 1986, xiv). However, it was improved with an extended bibliography, index and notes at the end. In 2004, a revised and expanded 25th-anniversary edition (De Gruchy and De Gruchy 2004) was published. The 2004 edition placed the religious struggle against apartheid into a larger global setting.<sup>4</sup>

*The Church Struggle in South Africa* became an important text during the last phase of apartheid and to many a seminal theological critique of apartheid. This contribution reflects on the last chapter only, where De Gruchy presents us with his interpretation of

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2 I am grateful to Prof. Denis, who made a transcription of this interview available to me. Denis also refers to this interview in an article in *JTSA* (see Denis 2013, 6–22).

3 Paper delivered at the 2018 Church History Society of Southern Africa (CHSSA) conference on “Church and Empire” at UKZN (Pietermaritzburg).

4 For the purpose of this contribution I used the second edition which was published in 1986. It will be referenced as “De Gruchy 1986.” The first and second editions are identical in terms of the relevant chapter.

the kingdom of God and the implications it has for a just society in South Africa (De Gruchy 1986, 195–237). Three further preliminary remarks must be made:

1. This contribution's "commemorative" nature implies that the material presented is limited to the chapter as it appeared 40 years ago. Since then De Gruchy's theology has developed and changed as he addressed a changing South African context. It is not possible to delineate the later development<sup>5</sup> of De Gruchy's theology. It is, in essence, a hermeneutical exercise, interpreting one chapter of a specific book within a specific historical context.
2. *The Church Struggle in South Africa* should be read against the backdrop of De Gruchy's passion for an indigenous and contextual South African theology. De Gruchy was acutely aware that theology should be relevant; that it should speak to the problems and challenges facing South African society.<sup>6</sup> From early on he was involved in the Christian Institute (with Beyers Naude and Albert Geysers) and the South African Council of Churches. The political situation in South Africa, as well as his extensive knowledge of the theologies of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, directed De Gruchy in the development of a South African contextual theology (Denis 2013, 7). De Gruchy's extensive use and reference to European and American theologians do not detract from his contextual South African approach to theology.
3. This contribution is limited to the last chapter on the kingdom of God, because I believe it laid the theological foundation for the *Kairos Document* and to some extent also the *Belhar Confession*, a triad of struggle documents.

In the following paragraphs, De Gruchy's understanding of the kingdom of God and its relevance within the South African context, as articulated in the last chapter of the 1979 and 1986 editions of *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, will be discussed.

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5 De Beer (1997) distinguishes three phases in De Gruchy's development: 1) As director of communications of the South African Council of Churches he placed much emphasis on ecclesiology, defining the church in dialogue with Barth, Bonhoeffer, Hoekendijk, Moltmann and Metz. Theology can only be relevant if it relates to the contemporary socio-political situation. The German Confessing Church's opposition to Hitler provided De Gruchy with an orientation point. 2) As the anti-apartheid movement became more articulate during the 1970s, De Gruchy moved into a new theological phase. During this era, his writing was marked by a criticism of Afrikaner Calvinism and Christian Nationalism as well as a focus on a South African Biblical theology. 3) During 1986, a year after the *Kairos-document* was published, De Gruchy's theology shifted towards liberation theology. This meant a reinterpretation of reformed theology from the perspective of the poor and oppressed.

6 See Denis (2013, 6–22) for an extensive discussion how De Gruchy contributed to the establishment of contextual theology in South Africa, *inter alia* by launching the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* (JTSA) in December 1972 while he was still working for the South African Council of Churches.

## The Kingdom of God in South Africa

De Gruchy (1986, 195) takes as his cue for the heading of the chapter on the kingdom of God, the work of Richard Niebuhr<sup>7</sup> who published *The Kingdom of God in America* 40 years earlier (Niebuhr 1988[1937]). Niebuhr writes in his preface that “the idea of the kingdom of God had indeed been the dominant idea in American Christianity” (Niebuhr 1988[1937], xxii). Niebuhr interprets the kingdom of God as the sovereignty of God and the reign of Christ over all spheres of human existence. With the emergence of social gospel, it also came to mean God’s kingdom on earth. Theologians and preachers in various contexts expressed a conviction that beneath and beyond the flux of history the sovereign presence and purpose of God is to be found. The kingdom of God became a powerful matrix to interpret American history. This theocratic understanding of American society is to be found among the Puritans as well as the evangelicals of the Great Awakening of the 18th century. The focus was, however, on the individual. The kingdom of God had to be internalised before it could be socialised (De Gruchy 1986, 196).

The kingdom of God is one of the dominant theological concepts of the 20th century (see Ridderbos 1950, 5–6). Since Albert Schweitzer (1875–1957) pioneered research on the kingdom of God and eschatology, it was regarded as fundamental to the understanding of the New Testament message and of utmost relevance to the church of the 20th century (De Gruchy 1986, 197). De Gruchy (1986, 197) comes to the conclusion that “there is a remarkable agreement on what the kingdom means in Scripture, and considerable consensus on what it implies for today.” He agrees with Ladd’s definition that “the kingdom is the reign of God, not merely in the human heart but dynamically active in the person of Jesus and in human history.” Furthermore, it is “both present and future, inward and outward, spiritual and apocalyptic” (De Gruchy 1986, 198). In short, the kingdom of God is centred upon Christ, and relates to our personal and social existence in the present as well as future history.

De Gruchy (1986, 198) is of the opinion that the kingdom of God and the rediscovery of Biblical eschatology provide the criteria by which we should evaluate what is happening in history. He also agrees with Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928–2014) that the kingdom of God should be the “central concern of the Church, if the Church is to remain faithful to the message of Jesus Christ” (De Gruchy 1986, 198; Pannenberg 1969, 73; see also Pannenberg 1998). To Pannenberg’s understanding, the kingdom of God and the church are interrelated. The church is the anticipation of the kingdom (Kärkkäinen 2002, 117). Pannenberg places both church and society under the kingdom of God. In dialogue with Karl Barth, he agrees that the kingdom points towards the future of a

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7 Helmut Richard Niebuhr (1894–1962) is considered one of the important ethicists in 20th century America, best known for his 1951 book *Christ and Culture*. Niebuhr taught at the Yale Divinity School. His theology (together with that of his colleague Hans Wilhelm Frei) has been one of the main sources of post-liberal theology, sometimes called the “Yale School.”

united humanity under one God. If the church is a sign of this future, the unity of the church is of utmost importance (see Kärkkäinen 2002, 118). It also has far-reaching implications for our understanding of justice and the role of the church in promoting justice in this world.

De Gruchy finds similarities between the struggle of Christianity in South Africa and the USA to articulate in a satisfactory manner the nature of the kingdom of God and how it impacts on the church's role in society (De Gruchy 1986, 199). This is especially evident in the way some Afrikaner theologians and churches interpreted the kingdom of God.<sup>8</sup> De Gruchy has three objections to the way in which the kingdom of God had been distorted, not only in South Africa but also in America and other countries:

1. The doctrine of providence had been distorted by nationalism and imperialism. This is done by giving national history a “quasi-sacred” character (De Gruchy 1986, 201). Linked to this is the understanding of a people (like the Afrikaners, or the English, or the Americans) to have a divine calling to “save” the other. This is done from a position of power. In that sense, to be opposed to this line of thinking is to be “unchristian.” The creation of various nations and ethnic groups is regarded as the part of God's providence. Keeping ethnic groups separate is obedience to Gods providence. De Gruchy, following Berkouwer, calls it “a piously disguised form of self-justification” (1986, 202). He also follows Karl Barth (1886–1968) who reminded us that the separation of providence from Christology always leads to a false belief in our own history, so that even Hitler could claim the patronage of the Almighty. In the same publication, which De Gruchy does not mention, Barth gives another perspective on the kingdom of God: “*Wo Kirche ist, da hat sie ein Ziel: das Reich Gottes*” (Barth 1947, 173–174). To be church, is to have purpose: The purpose is the kingdom of God. To be church without the vision, the hope and imperative of the kingdom of God is to be like a bird in a cage with no freedom. If the church is focused on the kingdom of God, we would not be ashamed to call ourselves “church.”
2. The doctrine of redemption had been distorted by turning redemption into an “individualised pseudo-pietism” (De Gruchy 1986, 202–203). The kingdom could not be understood in a Platonic way, a dualism between the individual's redemption and pious life which has little to do with this world. The kingdom of God has implications for both individual faith and responsible engagement with creation and society. It is a severe reduction of the gospel when it is all about the individual's soul going to heaven. Such an approach reduces the kingdom of God to something transcendental and spiritual, while Jesus

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8 The similarities between American and Afrikaner political concepts must be worked out fully in a next contribution. One remark is enough to illustrate: Some American and Afrikaner theologians found in the kingdom of God and theocracy enough reason to follow the path of racial segregation.

proclaimed the kingdom of God in terms of the real-life situation of the people (see also Ridderbos 1950, 167–173 for a discussion of the kingdom of God in relation to the poor). In South Africa, this understanding of the kingdom of God led to a situation where good Christian folk could turn their back on the socio-political predicament of fellow Christians, with the excuse that any engagement in socio-political issues constitutes “social gospel” and “horizontalism,” which distracts from our real purpose—finding our way to heaven.

3. De Gruchy (1986, 204–205) makes a third observation, i.e. the distortion of the kingdom of God by secularisation, especially within the English-speaking churches and community. Secular liberalism, which influenced the greater part of English society both in Great Britain and South Africa, “errs in believing that the kingdom of God will come through education and social programmes” (De Gruchy 1986, 205). De Gruchy articulates the same criticism in terms of Liberation Theology, which believes the kingdom will come through revolutionary actions and social change. Following Torrance (who is a major interpreter of Karl Barth, hence the typical Barthian formulation), De Gruchy is of the opinion that “justification by faith alone creates the ethical disturbance that turns the world upside down” (1986, 205). The kingdom of God is not the product of human actions or programmes; however, the kingdom of God is profoundly important in shaping human actions and programmes. Despite this, De Gruchy agrees with José Miguez Bonino (1924–2012) that the kingdom of God could not be identified with socio-political action, but there exists a real and positive connection between the kingdom of God and socio-political action in specific historical situations.

With this theological introduction, the scene is set for De Gruchy’s criticism of ideology and the role it plays in the church.

## **The Kingdom, Ideology and the Church**

De Gruchy (1986, 209) starts out the next section with the statement that “Christianity never exists in some pristine, unhistorical form.” Religion is always imbedded in culture—without culture, it will be impossible to communicate the gospel; too much culture and it is no longer Christianity. In South American liberation theology, the alignment of traditional churches with right-wing regimes and neo-colonial economic structures was severely criticised, not so much about the influence of culture and ideology per se, but because the churches made the wrong choice. According to Bonino, they should rather have aligned themselves with Marxist ideology, because it has similar penultimate goals than the kingdom of God (Bonino quoted in De Gruchy 1986, 210). Bonino criticised Moltmann whom he regarded as a captive of liberal ideology. De Gruchy (1986, 211, 214) disagrees with Bonino in terms of a “strategic alliance with Marxism” and points out that the question of ideology and the kingdom of God is not so easily resolved by choosing whatever ideology (according to our own personal view) has some resemblance to the kingdom of God. Travelling down this road creates a real

danger that any political agenda could be “Christianised” and presented as the kingdom of God.

It is for this reason that ideologies like Communism, Marxism, Fascism, Nazism, Capitalism and all other -isms had been regarded as idolatry or paganism. When ideology becomes a totalitarian set of ideas used to justify social structures, the kingdom of God moves to the background. The norms and values prevalent in a society no longer reflect the values of the kingdom of God, but rather the values of the most dominant ideology.

This brings De Gruchy (1986, 212) to the heart of the problem facing the church in South Africa (in context of the 1970s). He formulates it as follows: “In order for the Afrikaner to break free from the bondage of British imperialism, Afrikanerdom developed a cultural system adequate to the task ... but gradually this system took on an ideological character and apartheid was born.” The legitimate aspirations of a people to free themselves from imperial domination were given religious justification and became a destructive ideology. A similar process (according to De Gruchy) threatens black nationalism to become just another ideology which threatens our common humanity (De Gruchy 1986, 213).

De Gruchy (1986, 213) is of the opinion that the golden thread which could assist churches in South Africa to find a way forward, is to maintain the biblical proclamation of the kingdom of God, as revealed in Jesus Christ, as the basis for the evaluation and critique of all ideologies. De Gruchy is aware that this might seem simplistic, but the kingdom of God promises a new earth where justice and righteousness will flourish. That is the hope the kingdom of God brings. In this regard, De Gruchy (1986, 214) quotes Andre Biéler, who made a case that both Calvin and Barth espoused a universal humanism, which in itself could “save us from destruction.”

The church needs to repent from its slavery to ideology. Renewal (*ecclesia semper reformanda*) requires more than just a confession of guilt. It needs the church to witness to the kingdom of God in word and deed.

## **Political Consequences of the Kingdom of God**

De Gruchy (1986, 217–221) says: “The story of the church in South Africa demonstrates that religion is directly and intimately related to the socio-political history of the country ... In South Africa, politics and the church have been, and remain, bound together in one historical drama, one persistent struggle.” He distinguishes between three models of how the relation between Christians (church) and government (state) functions:

1. The Constantinian model for centuries had been the dominant model. The *corpus christianum* (body of Christ) was not limited to church being the body

of Christ, but rather government, church and people were together the *corpus christianum*. In this model the church is required and called to uphold the authority of government and support state structures; in return, the state protects the church and even supports the church in the training of clergy, mission and land. In this model, the “kingdom of God” is protected and promoted and the current political order is legitimised. Through history, this relationship has resulted in the church supporting unjust political systems.

2. Diametrically opposed to this is a revolutionary model, where the church enters the political arena and fights for change—even in a violent manner. One of the religious movements during the 16th century was the Anabaptists, who radically and violently opposed secular and ecclesial authorities. During the 20th century, many Christians and clergies became involved with the violent overthrow of repressive regimes, justifying the use of violence with a specific understanding of the kingdom of God.
3. A third model is one of no involvement in politics, with a strong individualistic and spiritualistic understanding of the kingdom of God. Religion is a private matter and should not be drawn into the political arena.

In the Gospel of John (18:36) Jesus says that His kingdom is not of this world, because if it were His followers would fight to save Him from the authorities. These words were often interpreted as an indication that Christianity should not get involved in political matters. De Gruchy (1986, 221) interprets the passage as meaning that the kingdom’s authority is not derived from any worldly power, but from God himself. He concludes: “Jesus’ reign is no less political than the other option we have mentioned, but it is a new and distinct type of politics, the politics of the cross—politics in the service of human redemption and reconciliation.” It reminds me of Van Niftrik’s words, when he said there is a vast difference between the gospel and politics; at the same time, the gospel is of vast importance to politics (Van Niftrik 1950, 20–25).

After discussing the views of Yoder and Moltmann on the relation between politics and the kingdom of God, the “politics of the cross,” De Gruchy (1986, 223) concludes: “But just as the church is not called to rule the world, neither is the church called to redeem the world. The church is not the kingdom, nor is it the Christ; its responsibility is to bear witness to, not to replace them.” With this formulation, De Gruchy follows the formulation of Bonhoeffer (and Barth) who both were of the opinion that the church should be very much aware of its limitations to fulfil its task and calling in a proper manner. De Gruchy (1986, 224) states: “In serving the interests of the kingdom through a ministry of suffering love, the church is called to identify with the powerless.”

De Gruchy (1986, 225–227) defines the prophetic witness of the church in a very practical way, pointing out the following:

1. The church must support the state in maintaining law and order, but in a qualified manner. Law and order should be applied equitably to *all* people under

its authority. The only basis for law and order is justice. That means that the only people who should fear the power of the state are criminals, not those who seek to support the poor and marginalised.

2. The church must remind the state of its boundaries. The greatest service the church can render is to prevent the state and ideology to become a quasi-religion.
3. The church must not expect too much from the state. The church should not be politically naïve. Governments, politicians and the state are part of a fallen and sinful world. This remark of De Gruchy would imply that the church should expect that corruption and oppression will be part of politics.
4. The church should not expect too little of the state. The church should not pretend to have a blueprint for society, but it does have a vested interest in a just society. Justice, peace and human dignity are central to Christian faith. As such the church should expect from government to rule with justice and to the good of all, and continually witness to that end.
5. The church should set an example in life and behaviour. If the church compromises the message of love and reconciliation through its words and deeds, it cannot witness in an authentic manner to any worldly authority.
6. Even if the church rejects certain policies or comes into confrontation with the state, the state should never become the enemy. Following Bonhoeffer, De Gruchy (1986, 227) concludes that the enemy of the church is evil, not people.

## **A Theology of Hope**

From early on, De Gruchy's theology was greatly influenced by the German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. His books on Bonhoeffer's theology (De Gruchy 1984; De Gruchy 1991, first published in 1988 by Collins in the series *The Making of Modern Theology*) are still regarded as some of the best ever written on Bonhoeffer's life and theology. De Gruchy (1991, 1) regarded Bonhoeffer as a "paradigmatic martyr-theologian for the twentieth century." Bonhoeffer, as is well-known, was executed by Hitler in 1945 for his resistance to the Nazi regime.

De Gruchy (1986, 227) points out that it is easy to lose hope, especially in South Africa with socio-political turmoil and violence. Hope is at a premium—at the same time, it is fundamental to the message of the kingdom of God (De Gruchy 1986, 228). The promise of the kingdom is God's *shalom*, in which His justice and peace will reign supreme. Quoting the Dutch missiologist Johannes Verkuyl, De Gruchy (1986, 228) writes: "The gospel contains much more than the promise of earthly *shalom*. The message of the Kingdom is concerned with the victory over demons, with eternal life, with a new world." The messianic community must live with the knowledge that the kingdom had already come, preaching the message of deliverance to the poor, sick and marginalised. Jesus offered a foretaste of the future. The joy and healing of the kingdom can be experienced now, on a personal as well as a social level.

In a letter to Miguez Bonino, Moltmann speaks of Barth and Bonhoeffer who constantly reminded us of an “intensification of historical hopes through the eschatological hope” (Moltmann 1976; De Gruchy 1986, 229). This does not mean that the struggle for justice “causes” the kingdom of God to come; rather, the kingdom of God has a causal character in the experience of liberation through the in-breaking of the messianic time. The initiative remains with God.

De Gruchy (1986, 230) follows Bonhoeffer when he distinguishes between the “penultimate” and the “ultimate.” The penultimate is important for the sake of the ultimate. It is important that the church and the witness of the church reflect something of justice and peace in expectation of the ultimate coming of the kingdom of God. Through the Spirit, the church bears witness to kingdom which is present in history, through the coming of Christ. “The church acts in anticipation; it anticipates through action” (De Gruchy 1986, 230).

This leads De Gruchy to the logical conclusion by questioning the use of violence in the struggle against apartheid. If action is required, what type of action? To his view (De Gruchy 1986, 234) the black protest against cheap pacifism is totally justified. Following the analysis of Yoder as well as Desmond Tutu, De Gruchy concludes that violence is much more complex than armed resistance which leads to loss of life. Systemic violence—which denies people basic human rights, a living wage, equal opportunities, safety and justice—is the root of violence. Therefore the right to resist cannot be denied.

However, the circle of violence very easily spirals out of control, and it must be stopped. De Gruchy concludes that the ability to break through the circle of violence is to be found in the biblical concepts of *shalom*, justice, the kingdom of God and unity in Christ (De Gruchy 1986, 234–235). The church needs to witness through word and deed of God’s *shalom*. The church should preach faith, act in love and insist on hoping against all hope. This is the church’s calling (De Gruchy 1986, 237). It is clear that De Gruchy is not a liberation theologian as many others, but has developed a distinct approach and voice.

## **Concluding Remarks**

De Gruchy’s major contribution was (and is) his ability to reflect theologically (and thus prophetically) on the role of the church and theology within the South African context. His astute analysis of church history, tension-filled race relations, apartheid and the search for a just society 40 years ago is still remarkable and relevant in the current South African context. It still holds indispensable lessons for all concerned about justice and reconciliation.

It is also remarkable how easily De Gruchy enters into discussion with major theologians from different traditions—Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed,

Evangelical, Liberation and Black Theology. The reader becomes captivated listening to the conversation unfolding on the pages; listening to the voices of those for whom the kingdom of God is of utmost importance.

However, 25 years after political freedom was attained (1994–2019), the question still remains: How just is the South African society? During the last 25 years, the gap between rich and poor in South Africa has become much wider, with a new black elite (the so-called “black diamonds”) stepping into the shoes of the white elite, amassing billions in private wealth. It does not take much to realise that South Africa is on the brink of a new revolution, driven through economic factors. A change in government brought political freedom, but continued economic deprivation for millions of South Africans, mainly by corruption on a massive scale. Taxpayers’ money, which should have benefited the poor, flowed in streams to individuals and companies in their unbridled quest for private wealth.

The church is still called to speak out on inequality and injustice. The question is whether the church and theologians are able (like De Gruchy) to make a relevant and significant contribution to the discourse on South Africa’s future, without falling into the trap of cheap rhetoric and ideological bias.

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