



## **Theology of dialogue in peace negotiations and settlement: A South African case**

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### **Abstract**

The early nineties ushered in the dawn of democracy; and attempts towards negotiations and settlement for peaceful elections were due to theological dialogues that seem to have been obscured later. This article explores the meaning, method, and implementation of theology of dialogue in peace negotiations and settlements. The role of five dialogues is explored as cases for South Africa during that time. Reference is made to the impact dialogical theology made upon the socio-political landscape during the negotiations that led to some peaceful elections that opened the door for the new democracy in South Africa. Theology of dialogue is proposed as a powerful approach to peace making and settlement in any socio-religious or socio-political tensions and impasses.

### **Keywords**

*Theology; dialogue; church; Apartheid; peace*

## **1. Introduction**

Theology of dialogue can be traced from the twentieth century and is observable in the Vatican II Council documents. Theology has always been in dialogue with itself e.g. Catholics and Anglicans, Catholics and the Reformed traditions, Catholics and Pentecostals, Catholics and the Disciples of Christ etc.

Ever since the end of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), the RCC has used these dialogues as the preferred method of its ecumenical relations with and rapprochement to other Christian Churches. At one time, it was involved in no less than fourteen

conversations with various groups. As a result, it has given an unexpected boost to the confessional dialogues (Tesfai 1996:15).

Mainly these dialogues seem almost to reinforce confessional self-awareness (Tesfai 1996:73). The latter half of the twentieth century saw the emergence of necessity of interreligious dialogues that later became known particularly in South Africa as interfaith dialogues.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the ecumenical movements especially the World Council of Churches started to aggressively address the issue of dialogue. Theologians such as Kärkkäinen (2003) highlighted that religions that used to be distant, almost exotic, and were regarded as vague and mentioned in passing, “have come much closer to us whether we live in the West or elsewhere” (2003:17–18). This article aims to point out that the theology of dialogue contributed immensely towards the current democratic dispensation in South Africa, so will limit itself to dialogues that played a role in the process.

## **2. As a matter of definition**

Theology of dialogue or dialogical theology is introspective reflections where self-examination is deliberated to assess standing relationships with another view that may differ from one’s own standpoint. Kasper (2004:35) speaks of dialogical philosophy that ends monological thinking, and contributes immensely in understanding this dialogical philosophy as:

I don’t be without thou; we don’t exist for ourselves; We exist with and for each other; We do not only have encounter, we are encounter, we are dialogue.

The same notion is explained by Resane (2018:4) that:

Dialogues often take the form of theological consultations, which highlight differences and seek ways of coming closer together through new understandings, reinterpretation or correction of misunderstandings, and healing of divisions. The process of discussion itself brings people closer together and helps to break down barriers in social spaces, necessitating the need for social scientists’ interventions

Dialogical tasks are carried out transparently regardless of dialogical partners' differences regarding their personalities, convictions, and/or predispositions. Johnson (2018:4) is correct in this regard:

Theologically seen, the conduct of mutually respectful dialogue is a concrete way to affirm and honour the image of God even in persons and groups with whom we vehemently disagree.

The participants carry different personalities and dialoguing with them may bear some dissenting ideas. It is true that:

Dialogue makes participants more sympathetic to one another, even when they disagree, and assists enormously in preparing the ground for negotiation or decision-making on emotion-laden issues (Resane 2017a:204).

Consensus and mutual understanding are the goals of dialogue. The dissenting parties around the table synergize towards a unified action in order to address the situation; or clarify any misunderstanding. In theological dialogue, fragmentations, misunderstandings, and misinformation are all addressed because:

Dialogue is a special kind of discourse that enables people with different perspectives and worldviews to work together to dispel mistrust and create a climate of good faith (Resane 2016:62).

Dialogue minimizes prejudice, stereotypes, bigotries and inhibitions. Theology has and is always at the centre of dialogical tasks to bring harmony, peace, synergy, and stability during the civil restlessness. This is done both internally (ecclesiastically) and externally with other churches and communities, with other religions, and also with modern culture, arts and science, politics and media (Kasper 2004:176). It is a sensible endeavour to dialogue with those holding different worldviews and perspectives. "A dialogue makes sense simply because we have different experiences and concerns" (Holter in de Wit & West 2009:77).

### 3. The method of dialogues

Dialogues can be bilateral or multilateral. When something is *bilateral* it has two sides, or it affects both sides of something. Discussions between two parties are called *bilateral* because both sides get to share their views

in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. The goal is to understand each other and come to conclusion that favours both parties. In bilateral discussions, there is no win-lose expectation, but win-win outcome. Dialogue is a platform for change. It is a unique opportunity to bring together a varied range of stakeholders in civil society. The diverse perspectives undoubtedly fuel important debates about socio-political or religious issues. On the other hand, multilateral dialogue is when three or more stakeholders agree to participate in dialogue for mutual benefit. So, theology of dialogue is when theologians dialogue with each other for a better understanding of each other's standpoint. But also, for cooperation and partnership in addressing menaces in a society. These dialogues may either take the forms of conversations or argumentations. Conversations encompass sharing the joys and sorrows of life, or even to discern what an authentic way of living implies. On the other hand, argumentation is a relatively more peaceful way of resolving conflicts (Conradie 2005:105).

Smit (2015:157) proposes that theological discourse in the public arena should ascertain the participants of inclusiveness, interactive, participatory, hermeneutical competence, and anonymity so that threats and bridging of confidence is not at risk. This is what Ratzinger (1987:36–38) calls the “we” structure of the faith where isolation is not an option, as God himself is a “we” – the unity in the trinitarian relation of I-you-we.

In the recent past, it has been observed that these dialogues do not immerse themselves in doctrinal issues, but on ecumenical cooperation and partnership in promoting social justice. The doctrinal issues are divisive, but partnership or comradeship during the civil or national crises offer better solutions (Tesfai 1996:54–58). Dialogues is when ecclesial life becomes diaconal and missional (Yong 2014:324). Dialogue opens the first door towards mutual understanding and synergy. Dialogues are normally necessitated by crises or conflict. “A dialogue is interesting and useful only when there is something to dialogue about” (Kärkkäinen 2015:466). A stage and conditions must be set for free dialogue with no inhibitions or patriarchy. Anum (in de Wit & West 2009:144) points out that “biblical scholars in Africa need to provide conditions under which a dialogue can genuinely take place.” Indeed, there is a need for *callida junctura* – a skilful connection. The five cases stated in this article show that it was out of socio-political crises that these dialogues had to take place.

#### 4. South African theological dialogue journey

It is easy to go deeper and further into the history of resistance to socio-political injustices in South Africa from the seventeenth century. I am not willing to go as far as that. I focus on the eighties and the early nineties when the democratic dispensation's first rays of dawn appeared. The eighties were a difficult era in South Africa. The state brutality was intensified through detentions without trials. The government of P.W. Botha used repetitive declarations of state of emergencies. This action turned South Africa into a police state where brutality against the so-called opponents of the state suffered banishment, house arrests, detentions without trials, etc. People, including some church leaders were charged under the Terrorism Act, mass human massacres by state forces, and many young educated elite took cover into exile. It was out of this crisis that the South African church as a witness of unity in diversity deemed it appropriate to

readily take concrete steps to address the inhumane situations that generate division and violence in the society so that justice, peace, and unity will prevail (Mendy 2013:266).

Theological voices were vocal and bold. Ecclesiastical deliberations convened to dialogue on how to address the situations. The church's voice is expected to be *à haute voix* (loud voice), never to be restricted within *à huis clos* (with closed doors). It is normal for the existential dimensions of dialogue as an encounter not only of ideas, but of persons (Flanagan in Thiessen 2009:149). Differences of who should participate or stakeholders stalled some progress. For some theologians, dialoguing with the repressive government was *anathema*, while others held the view that government should be party to dialogues for peaceful settlements. The Christian community descended into proliferation of ideologies and meanings of peace. To some degrees, dialogical tasks were compromised. The fact remains that:

Disagreements in open dialogues are inevitable, but the mutual understanding of the differing opinion or ideology calms down the potential of conflicts and mistrust. (Resane 2018:4).

Dialogue is theology in action. Theology is not supposed to be the obscured voice, but a vociferous echo in the dark. Differences in dogma, creed, confession, and polity were set aside, though these differences were to

be acknowledged and respected in order to give others a chance to offer intelligible arguments (Kusmierz 2016:277).

During those difficult and turbulent times, regardless of dissensions and differences of opinions, dialogues took a centre stage, though under some strenuous situations of state of emergency. This happened even when the apartheid regime was assertive in its cruelty against humanity.

#### 4.1 Kairos Document

One of the echoing voices of dialogues in the eighties was a *Kairos* meeting which produced the famous *Kairos Document* in 1985. This is a Christian, biblical and theological narrative on the political crisis South Africa faced in the eighties. Concerned Christians attempted to reflect on the socio-political massacres of the time. It was an attempt to develop, out of this perplexing situation, an alternative biblical and theological model that will in turn lead to forms of activity that will make a real difference to the future of South Africa. It was out of this rule by the gun that a number of theologians who were concerned about the situation expressed the need to reflect on the situation to determine what response by the Church and Christians in South Africa would be most appropriate. Theologians saw the need to dialogue and proposed some amicable resolutions for the oppressive and repressive situation, where human dignity was marred by violence.

In its last chapter, the *Kairos Document* proposed actions to be taken as a way of implementing the outcomes. First is that God sides with the poor, where it is mentioned that:

there is only one way forward to Church unity and that is for those Christians who find themselves on the side of the oppressor or sitting on the fence, to cross over to the other side to be united in faith and action with those who are oppressed (*Kairos Document* 1985:17).

Secondly, Christians are to engage in the struggle for liberation and for a just society (1985:18). Theologians should be on the cutting edge where God is i.e. on the side of the poor. Thirdly, transforming church activities – activities must be re-shaped to be more fully consistent with a prophetic faith related to the *kairos* that God is offering us today (1985:18). Fourthly,

the church should organise special campaigns, programmes, and projects and because of the special needs of the struggle for liberation in South Africa today. But there is a very important caution here. The church must avoid becoming a “Third Force”, a force between the oppressor and the oppressed (1985:18). The fifth proposal is civil disobedience. Once it is established that the present regime has no moral legitimacy and is in fact a tyrannical regime, certain things follow for the church and its activities.

In the first place the church cannot collaborate with tyranny. It cannot or should not do anything that appears to give legitimacy to a morally illegitimate regime. Secondly, that church should not only pray for a change of government, it should also mobilize its members in every parish to begin to think and work and plan for a change of government in South Africa. Sixthly and finally, the church is encouraged to provide moral guidance. The people look to the church, especially in our present crisis, for moral guidance. In order to provide this the church must first make its stand absolutely clear and never tire of explaining and dialoguing about it. It must then help people to understand their rights and their duties (1985:19).

#### **4.2 Evangelical witness in South Africa (EWISA)**

In September 1985, a group of Concerned Evangelicals met in Orlando, Soweto, to dialogue about the crisis in South Africa. They saw themselves as responding to the crisis in the country posed by the State of Emergency. In the light of the engendered conflict, they sought to review their own mission and ministry. Out of this dialogue emerged a document known as Evangelical Witness in South Africa (EWISA). Its purpose was to express evangelicals’ frustration with their own ecclesiastical formations and organisations, and their failure to respond in a prophetic way to the crisis in the country. There was no known public voice in the situations of escalating violence caused by structural imbalances in society (Smit & Hansen 2015:72)

The dialogical partners undertook to critique their own theology and praxis in order to turn their faith into a more effective evangelical witness in the politically troubled South Africa. This dialogical critique developed over nine months from September 1985 to June 1986. It involved a series of seminars, workshops and discussion groups. It started in Soweto, and then in the broader Pretoria-Witwatersrand area. Discussions were robust

and various individuals were asked to summarise these outcomes. These topics became the titles for the document's seven chapters. In April 1986, a draft of the document was sent to various evangelicals around the country. The final form was then discussed in June 1986 and made available for publication. The document had 132 signatories, mainly African and Coloured evangelical ministers and laypeople from number of churches.

In a nutshell, the document highlighted the problems of theological application in evangelicalism. This specifically referred to withdrawal from world realities, arrogant pietism, and worldview of dualism. The second critique was on theology of the *status quo* which uses Romans 13 to justify obedience to even unjust civil authority. Structural conformity was the third area of concerns by which African evangelicals are paternalistically controlled by the Western philosophies of colonisation, apartheid, and supremacist ideals; whereby Whites structure these churches according to the separate development of the government policies. The fourth area of concern was the separatist attitudes of evangelicals from ecumenical cooperation, due to emphasis on soul conversions above social justice. The fifth area of concern was that of evangelistic groups and mission theology practised by many evangelical groups in South Africa. These are supported and funded by Whites who are concerned to win souls against communism. The sixth critique was based on radicalism and evangelicalism. Attempts were made to integrate a radical political stance with evangelical theology. The document rejects the dualism of separating “spiritual” and “social” realities as unscriptural, appealing to its tradition to formulate its own political and theological position. Finally, the document highlights a major concern regarding the right-wing Christian groups in South Africa that in some subliminal way are supportive of the repressive and oppressive regime.

The importance of EWISA towards the new democratic dispensation is that, regardless of criticism labelled against it, it is a dialogue that shook evangelicals out of slumber, and *conscientized* them that the country was on fire, therefore needed some evangelical response.

#### 4.3 National Initiative for Reconciliation (NIR)

This dialogue did not receive much scrutiny, critique or evaluation like other dialogues. So, literature on it is very scanty and limited. In a nutshell,



it was a group representing the majority of the almost 400 Christian leaders and 47 denominations from across South Africa. It was composed of a group of Christian leaders from different races, churches, academia and political persuasions around their common Christian commitment. They met on the 10–12 September 1985. Theirs was not just the statement or some resolutions that always led into further divisions, but a commitment to action. This commitment was summarised as:

1. To seek every opportunity, corporately, congregationally and individually to proclaim and witness to the good news of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, persuading all that in Him alone is to be found forgiveness and that newness of life that is eternal.
2. To continue in prayer and fasting for renewal in the Holy Spirit and reawakening of the Church of Jesus Christ and for peace and justice in our land.
3. To create concrete opportunities for meaningful worship, fellowship and discussion with people of differing social and cultural groups.
4. To help remove ignorance of events in South Africa and prepare people for living in a changed and totally non-racial land.
5. To share the South African reality of suffering by extending and accepting invitations to experience the life of fellow Christians in the townships.
6. To plan and mount regional gatherings of Christian leadership to continue this process of reconciliation and to initiate concrete changes in South African society (Cassidy 1986:3).

As a corporate body, the dialogue felt compelled as witnesses of Jesus Christ to share with the nation the hope experienced together. For those who suffer under the pain and despair of the South African reality, these leaders felt bound by God to visible and obedient actions of hope. While not every participant in the conference could agree on the details of these actions, the clear majority of the Christian leaders gathered there in such remarkable denominational diversity declared Wednesday October 9<sup>th</sup>, 1985 for Christians, rather than attending the places of their usual employment (except so far as essential services are concerned), should be the day to repentance, mourning and prayer for those sinful aspects of the

national life which have led to the present crisis. Congregational leadership was charged to further enable this process by bringing greater awareness to members regarding those aspects of the national life. Moreover, Christian employers were asked to encourage their employees to observe such a day and observe it themselves by suspending their normal commercial and professional activities.

This dialogue was focused on evangelism and racial reconciliation. They called for spirit of compassion and forgiveness. They sent some delegation to the State President to appeal for removal of South African Defence Force from the townships, repeal the State of Emergency, and to dismantle some Apartheid structures that undermined human dignity.

#### **4.4 South African Conference of Evangelical Leaders (SACEL)**

This was sponsored by the Evangelical Fellowship of South Africa on the 28 October – 2 November 1985. The robust dialogue on socio-political issues affecting the evangelical witness in South Africa unfortunately led to some split that left evangelicals in three main streams: the right-wingers (United Christian Action) who supported the government's attempts to end apartheid, Concerned Evangelicals (mostly Blacks) who felt the government's brutality is too much to be condoned, and moderate and multiracial Evangelical Fellowship of South Africa. As an active participant, and an eyewitness to this sad secession, I wrote somewhere regarding the direction of United Christian Action (UCA):

From that day on, there was a “maragana teng a bana ba mpa” (war of the siblings). UCA went into an aggressive arsenal against other evangelicals and mainstream Christianity. Their press releases and pamphlets were unpalatable attacks on the church in South Africa for not praying or supporting the government's efforts of ending apartheid. Many evangelical groupings and the likes of Archbishop Desmond Tutu were negatively painted by this group (Resane 2017:157).

On the other hand, the Concerned Evangelicals (CE) re-asserted themselves and became vigorous in their evangelical witness. Their efforts culminated into EWISA and for the first time, the black evangelical voice started to echo in the corridors of the regime and political landscape at large. The

Evangelical Fellowship of South Africa (EFSa) enhanced their stance and entered dialogues with some dissenting voices such as the right-wing leader, Eugene Terreblanche.

The conference produced a charter for mobilising evangelical unity. The charter noted the failure of evangelicals to speak out against oppression and work for justice in South Africa.

It resolved “through proclamation and legitimate channels to resist moral evils” in society and called for integration in churches and concern and prayer relating to “specific situations of need and for dismantling discriminatory legislation” (Walker 1988:9).

The historical and noteworthy contribution is that the dialogue enhanced the evangelical voice. Despite the splits that resulted out of it, evangelicalism in South Africa made an indelible mark during the critical era of state brutality. The conference also sent a delegation to the State President to discuss these resolutions.

#### 4.5 Rustenburg Conference

President F.W. de Klerk proposed a National Conference of Church Leaders. There were mixed feelings regarding accepting and participating in the conference. Different formations took different standpoints, but at the end, the conference became a dialogue that contributed towards transformation of South African society. The co-chairs of the conference were the late Dr Louw Alberts (renowned metallurgist and physicist, committed NGK Christian and the President of Youth for Christ S.A. for 33 years), and Rev Frank Chikane of Apostolic Faith Mission (By then a General Secretary of SACC). The 230 delegates came from 97 denominations, 40 church associations and ecumenical agencies.

All the delegates at Rustenburg, though differing on some issues, agreed on “the unequivocal rejection of apartheid as a sin.” The final declaration advised that “repentance and practical restitution” were necessary for God’s forgiveness and for justice as a step toward reconciliation. Apartheid was condemned “in its intention” – a point with which the NGK had special difficulty – in its implementation, and in “its consequences as an evil policy” (Walshe in Elphick & Davenport 1997:397).

The conference was not just a rhetoric dialogue but was also emotionally encumbered. Confessions, sorrows, regrets, and repentance dominated the conference. Both the perpetrators and the victims acknowledged their roles in the perpetuation and justification of the unjust system. Forgiveness was sought, and humbleness embraced. The apex of dialogical deliberations was the call for constituent assembly to determine the new constitution that would enshrine the value of human life created in the image of God, with a bill of rights subject to the judiciary alone, a common voter roll, and a multiparty democracy within a unitary state (Walshe in Elphick & Davenport 1997:397). Despite some rejections of these resolutions, the Rustenburg Declaration sensitised F.W. de Klerk's government to the heartbeat of the nation, especially the Christian community.

## **5. The relevance of dialogue in the current South Africa**

Given the level of public acrimony, escalating service delivery protests, abuse of women and children, and diversified social ills, it is clear that the wellbeing of our nation is at the high risk and needs the Creator's intervention that may come through community dialogue. The Church needs to take initiatives of dialoguing with persons and groups into transformational relational encounters and working collaboratively in the public square on endeavours of reconciliation and social justice (Johnson 2018:3). Sands (2018:2) proposes the application of Cardinal Cardijn's method of "a movement from engagement and solidarity, then to reflection and understanding, and finally to cooperative involvement and action." Keeping the distance leads to sin of omission. The church's docility in times of crises is obnoxious. The church needs to come closer and participate in a dialogue for peaceful settlements in national disputes such as land redistribution, minimum wages, etc.

we could not understand others unless we participate in their own world. We have no right to impose our categories of understanding on them. We need collaborative fieldworks, connections, and participatory observations (Selçuk 2018:6).

The pastoral role of the church should enter the conflicting spaces of national crises. Ratzinger (1965:25) correctly warns that "a fruitful pastoral

theology of the future will have to overcome the sterile side by side system of mere theories and pragmatic recipes.”

South Africa is able to move forward corporately if the church can initiate dialogues with the civil, religious, and corporate communities. Church dialogue is relational, other-directed, open and transparent. It is the dialogue which is not isolated, but both horizontal and vertical as a connect base with God and other human beings. The church in South Africa is called upon to engage in public issues with various stakeholders in public sphere.

This does not mean losing a Christian identity or distinctiveness, but rather, while keeping them, actively searching for a shared solution so that theological insights will not be excluded in public conversation (Kim 2017:12).

## 6. Conclusion

The initiators of these five dialogues understood the importance of dialoguing with all stakeholders. In this case the Christian community and the government. For some, the government was the enemy of the people, therefore not illegible to participate in the dialogue, while for some, the enemy had to be invited to the table to participate in the dialogue. In reality, theology is confessional by nature, on all sides (Kärkkäinen 2014:364). Dialogue must shape the environment; hence, some dialogues pressed the nerve of the government. Some dialogues sent the delegations to the head of the government to articulate the truth. The deliberations were ethical, grounded in communicative rationality and the reason of anamnesis in remembrance of the reality of the innocent victim and mass suffering (Chung 2017:158). The participants in these dialogues embraced the Christian theology which according to Verhoef (2017:3)

is reinterpreted in practical terms to criticise ‘sinful’ socioeconomic structures that cause social inequities, but also to actively participate in changing those structures.

Theology that spoke in the past is still speaking in the present. The current egregious social menaces are still subject to theological scrutiny and prophetic denouncement. Theology in dialogue is capable of enacting

transformational determinants that can birth the society coxswained by both natural and social justice.

With the new dispensation of democracy, dialogue should still be the door to open opportunities for South Africans to live with each other in peace, understanding each other's worldview and respecting the space in which we all occupy. The South African church is obligated to initiate dialogues, because she is *chiesa libera in libero stato* – a free church in a free state. De Gruchy (1984:85–86) says 'it means to exist for each other, for the victims of society, for future generations, and for the community of faith.' South Africans need to dialogue more with each other. The apartheid walls are still visible, tangible, and felt. Racism is ideological and subliminal at the same time. We don't know each other:

South Africans in general do not know one another deeply; they lack true understanding of those who are different in language, culture and history; they do not communicate honestly and clearly with one another; they do not listen deeply to one another (Burton in Conradie 2013:86–87).

The voice of the church had retreated into obscurity. The prophet and the king are dining around the same table – just as it was during the apartheid when the church (Dutch Reformed Church) and the republic were bedfellows. There is a need for dialogue towards the liberation of the church. This agrees with West (1991:76) that

When the prophetic voice of the church is strangely silent, dialogue among those who share a commitment to the struggle for liberation and life in South Africa is vital.

The church in South Africa is in a unique position to engage dialogically for social justice, human dignity, and freedom of expression. Vorster (2018:2) is correct that "The uniqueness of the church determines the role of the church. The unique character of the church as a pilgrim in a hostile world should never be compromised by politics or ideologies." Theologians dialogued during the zenith of apartheid, and as a result, transition from apartheid to democracy took shape in still surprising way. Now is the time for going back to the drawing board: Dialogue! Retreat in order to advance. It is the way forward – *vestigia nulla retrorsum* (no going back!).

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