



## **When tomorrow is yesterday: Black Theology, Black Consciousness, and our incomplete revolution**

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### **Abstract**

In an early 1977 interview, Steve Biko offered not only insights into the events of June 16 the year before, but also a prophetic analysis of a post-apartheid situation if black people's political liberation did not include economic liberation as an essential and indispensable reality. Taking those insights as point of departure, and engaging the intellectual work of Kwame Nkrumah, this article argues that Biko's words were not only prophetic and correct, but absolutely relevant for South Africa's neo-colonial situation today. Embracing the thinking of Iranian social scientist Hamid Dabashi, I further contend that the events on June 16, 1976 were the start of a revolution, in the sense of "delayed defiance," still ongoing and manifesting itself in different forms in South Africa today. An analysis of our present South African context, especially as regards the plight of the poor, women, the LGBTQI community, and the still-contested state of our reconciliation process as illustrated by the controversies stirred by former president De Klerk's denialism regarding apartheid, leads me to conclude that this revolution is "incomplete."

### **Keywords**

*Black consciousness; Black Liberation Theology; revolution; neo-colonialism; empire; gender justice; gender-based violence; LGBTQI community; reconciliation*

### **“Yesterday is a foreign country”**

Way back in 1998, when then-Deputy President Thabo Mbeki announced his grand vision for the “African Renaissance,” he harked back to words from a group of young Afrikaners he had been in discussion with. He found

those words inspiring. “Yesterday is a foreign country,” they told him. “Tomorrow belongs to us!”<sup>1</sup> Many of us joined the Deputy President in his enthusiasm. After all, it was promising: young Afrikaners wanting to make the apartheid past “foreign”, claiming a morrow of non-racial democracy, justice and equality for all South Africans. In those early, euphoric days, most of us wanted desperately for the country to succeed, and it sounded if at last there was a generation of young Afrikaners who wanted it too. It sounded like a kind of “all- hands-on-deck” call that gave us hope.

It is more than ironic though, seeing how that young generation, now a powerful and privileged older generation twenty-five years later, have remained in the seats of economic power, to see how much that “tomorrow” really does belong to them.<sup>2</sup> In the light of the continued economic disempowerment and impoverishment of the vast majority of South Africa’s people, those words now sound more like an exclusivist war cry or a confident neo-colonialist claim than inspirational support for genuine transformation. Apart from the small black elite, thanks to the secret

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- 1 In his opening address to the African Renaissance Conference, Mbeki spoke in tones of high optimism of the sentiments expressed: “They spoke of how our country’s transition to democracy had brought them their own freedom; of how their acceptance of themselves as equal citizens with their black compatriots defined apartheid South Africa and its legacy as foreign to themselves, of how South Africa, reborn, constitutes their own heritage.” See “Statement by Deputy President Mbeki at the African Renaissance Conference, Johannesburg, September 28, 1998, [dirco.gov.za/docs/speeches/1998/mbeki0928.htm](http://dirco.gov.za/docs/speeches/1998/mbeki0928.htm). See Allan Boesak, *The Tenderness of Conscience, African Renaissance and the Spirituality of Politics* (Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 2005), 1-2. Journalist Alistair Sparks’ *Tomorrow is Another Country* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), is a word play on this phrase. A passionate white liberal defence of the elite pact between the ANC and the white ruling classes, it is an excellent example of the dominant narrative about the heroism and political wisdom of F.W. De Klerk and the “chemistry” between De Klerk and Nelson Mandela, and the triumphs of the secret talks between 1985 and 1989. For a concise overview of the relationship between Thabo Mbeki and the Afrikaners as reflected in the development of the secret talks and after, see J. P. Brits, “Mbeki and the Afrikaners.” *Historia* 53, no. 2 (November 2008): 33-69.
  - 2 In 2017, by far the largest portion of wealth in the country and among the top 10% was still in the hands of whites. See Mohammad Amir Anwar, “White people in South Africa still hold the lion’s share of all forms of capital.” *The Conversation* (April 24, 2017); accessed from <https://theconversation.com/white-people-in-south-africa-still-hold-the-lions-share-of-all-forms-of-capital-75510>. And so it would remain. In 2020, among the 6 richest billionaires in the country only one – Patrice Motsepe – is black, see Quinton Bronkhorst, “These are the 6 richest people in South Africa.” *BusinessTech* (27 February 2020); accessed from <https://businesstech.co.za/news/wealth/377703/these-are-the-6-richest-people-in-south-africa/>.

deals and the elite pacts made with the African National Congress exile leadership – with Thabo Mbeki strongly taking the lead – for those masses that “tomorrow” has remained painfully and devastatingly elusive.<sup>3</sup> It seems hindsight can be a painful reminder of a lack of insight. Our present contexts in South Africa prompt a re-reading of those words, which we will endeavour with the help of Steve Biko.

In an all-important interview in early 1977, as far as could be determined, mere months before his final detention and murder, Steve Biko, with clear prophetic insight, said this:

I think there is no running away from the fact that now in South Africa there is such an ill distribution of wealth that any form of political freedom which does not touch on the proper distribution of wealth, will be meaningless. The whites have locked up within a small minority the greater proportion of the country's wealth. If we have a mere change of face of those in governing positions, what is likely to happen is that black people will continue to be poor, and you will see a few blacks filtering through into the so-called bourgeoisie. *Our society will be run almost as of yesterday.* So, for meaningful change to appear there should be an attempt at reorganizing the whole economic pattern and economic policies.<sup>4</sup>

Note that Biko's critique here is of South Africa's economic policies and what he calls “the *whole economic pattern*”. That critique was not just of what some today call “predatory capitalism”. It is much more, I think, if only a fleeting reference in this interview, of the very nature of neoliberal capitalism, no more brutally exposed in these times than by the coronavirus. It is Naomi Klein's exposé of “disaster capitalism” multiplied one hundred-

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3 See for extensive treatment of these issues e.g. Sampie Terreblanche, *Lost in Transformation: South Africa's Search for a New Future Since 1986* (Johannesburg: KMM Publishers, 2012); Patrick Bond, *Elite Transition: From Apartheid to Neoliberalism* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2002).

4 Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like* (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2017), 169. In the interview, Biko advocates for a social democratic system, a “judicious blending of private enterprise ... and state participation in industry ... And to the question, Do you mean a socialist system?” Biko responds, “Yes” (170).

fold.<sup>5</sup> And what is being exposed is not its “weaknesses” but the absolute inevitabilities of its workings and its innate, idolatrous anti-humanness.

Nothing less than genuine revolutionary change was necessary. Of course, Biko knew that the essence of such a revolution was not only gaining power in order to affect the social and economic transformation the country so badly needed. He knew it was about much more. Hence his insistent reach for something greater, and deeper, and in a sense infinitely more essential.

We have set out on a quest for true humanity, and somewhere on the distant horizon we can see the glittering prize. Let us march forth with courage and determination, drawing from our common plight ... and our brotherhood. [*sic*]. *In time we shall be in a position to bestow upon South Africa the greatest gift possible – a more human face.*<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, Black Consciousness also understood that a revolution is not simply for oneself. The interconnectedness of the world, the global nature of the war against the poor, the internationalised reality of capitalist

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5 See Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine, The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Henry Holt, 2007). Among the now already countless examples of profiteering from the crisis, putting essential workers’ lives at risk by not providing adequate protection, and shameless price gouging of essential goods, is one of the most hideous: the Hitleresque suggestion by Texas Lt Governor Dan Patrick that older Americans should disregard the virus, their safety and desire for life and risk their lives for the sake of the American economy. “Let’s get back to work. Let’s go back to living. Don’t sacrifice the country. Don’t do that,” he said on television, a call that has now been taken up by numerous American political figures and corporate representatives. In cruel irony, Patrick invites them to “go back to living” while he knows he is inviting them to their possible death. It is, fundamentally, a call for older Americans to offer themselves as sacrifice on the altar of “the Market” because their lives, like the lives of the poor and vulnerable everywhere, are expendable, useful only if they can serve “the Market.” The cruelty is all the more shameless since a rich, privileged, powerful person like the Lt Governor knows he can avail himself of the medical care that is routinely excluding the poor. See David Sherfinsky, “Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick suggests he’d risk dying to help save U.S. economy.” *The Washington Times*, (March 24, 2020); accessed from <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/mar/24/dan-patrick-texas-lt-gov-suggests-hed-risk-dying-h/>. No wonder South African theologian Ernst Conradie argues that the “market-based consumerism may well amount to idolatry”; see his “To Cover the Many Sins of Galamsey Mining,” *Missionalia* 46, no. 1 (2018):109-130. The quote is on 122, but see especially the section headed “Mine, Mine, Mine, Jesus is Mine! Ideology, Idolatry, and Heresy.”

6 Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like*, 108. There is much more to be said about this insightful phrase and I will return to it elsewhere.

corporatist power, the very nature of empire and its military omnipresence, the global spread of what I call the “politics of vulgarity,” make a self-centred revolution a futile one. All this speaks to the reality and necessity of the connectivity of global nature of struggles for justice, freedom and dignity, and all of these underscores what Martin Luther King Jr. called our “inescapable network of mutuality”, our “single garment of destiny.”<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, speaking of the role and contribution of Africa to what I have elsewhere called the “ubuntufication of the world,” Biko writes, expanding his lens from South Africa to the whole world, as is right and proper:

We believe that in the long run the special contribution to the world by Africa will be in this field of human relationships. The great powers of the world may have done wonders in giving the world an industrial and military look, but the great gift still has to come from Africa – giving the world a more human face.<sup>8</sup>

For those of us who were part of the Black Consciousness Movement, it is strangely satisfying, but simultaneously strangely disturbing, and for some of us truly heart breaking, to see how right Biko was, how prophetic his wisdom, how relevant his insights are for South Africa today.

But even as we heard him, we knew he was right. Our generation had heard and understood Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah well, who taught us that political freedom without economic freedom, by which he meant control over our social and economic resources and the decisions about them for the good of the people, is no more than neo-colonialism. Nkrumah was as consummate a politician as he was a wise mentor, a truly organic leader with a formidable intellect who set his knowledge to work for the sake of the people of Africa. “The essence of neo-colonialism,” he taught us,

is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent, and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality,

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7 In his last Sunday sermon before his death mere days later in the Episcopal National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., March 31, 1968, “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution”; see James M. Washington, (ed.), *A Testimony of Hope – The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 269.

8 *I Write What I Like*, 51. Emphasis added.

its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside.<sup>9</sup>

However, Nkrumah also saw very early that the neo-colonialist grip on Africa was broad and comprehensive, as we are increasingly discovering today. Their methods, he warned, are “subtle and varied.” “They operate not only in the economic field, but also in the political, religious, ideological, and cultural spheres.”<sup>10</sup> The political manoeuvrings of the rich North should therefore be understood in a wider context, he knew, and dissected through the lens of the Global South in order to truly understand the impact of these actions on Africa and other countries of the Global South. He understood what U.S. President Eisenhower was talking about when, in his famous last address to the American people, he warned America against the danger of “the Military-Industrial Complex”. Nkrumah looked with Global South eyes. Lurking behind all this, Nkrumah saw,

are the extended tentacles of the Wall Street octopus. And its suction cups and muscular strength are provided by a phenomenon dubbed “The Invisible Government” arising from Wall Street’s connections with the Pentagon and various intelligence services.<sup>11</sup>

Looking at, and understanding the devastating history of U.S. interventions, coup d’états, and regime-change wars across the Global South – from the assassination of democratically elected leaders who refused to do the bidding of the U.S., to the endless wars for endless profits we are witnesses of today, killing Global South citizens by the millions – one would be utterly foolish, blind, or wilful not to see the truth of this statement.

Furthermore, considering the truly astounding role U.S. media have been playing, in what Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, in their masterful and still unsurpassed treatise on the real workings of the modern mainstream media as “defender of the dominant classes,” called

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9 See among his other works Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1965); accessed from <https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/nkrumah/neo-colonialism/conclusion.htm>.

10 *Neo-Colonialism*, “The mechanisms of neo-colonialism,” 1.

11 “The mechanisms of neo-colonialism,” 1.

“manufacturing consent.”<sup>12</sup> Before, but especially after 9/11, it is perhaps more appropriate to speak of the Military-Industrial-Financial-Media-Intelligence Complex. None of it happened without a carefully calculated and coordinated plan executed by the powerful network of organisations, agencies, and institutions Nkrumah pointed us to, and which make the American Empire commit such deadly crimes against humanity, (not to mention its war crimes) on such a regular basis. That this behaviour caused dangerous “blowback” for the U.S. as Chalmers Johnson rightly saw,<sup>13</sup> is doubtless true. But, as the endless wars of terror on terror make clear, “blowback” did not stop the U.S. hunger for global power and the lust for the spread of white, monopolist, acquisitive neo-liberal capitalism, with the threat of military devastation at its core.<sup>14</sup>

But perhaps that implacable, early twentieth-century American hero of truth-speaking, the late Major General Smedley Darling Butler of the U.S. Marines, one of the exceedingly few military officers to speak out so courageously about the real motivations behind war, today more shamelessly paraded than ever before, said it best. “War is a racket,” he wrote. “It has always been. It is possibly the oldest, easily the most profitable, surely the most vicious. It is the only one in which the profits are reckoned in dollars and the losses in lives.” Smedley Butler makes it plain, proving Nkrumah’s point at every turn:

I spent 33 years and four months in active military service and during that period, I spent most of my time as a high-class muscle man for Big Business, for Wall Street and the bankers. In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism. I helped make Mexico and especially Tampico safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys

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12 See Edward S Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

13 See Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback, The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2000).

14 For one of the most comprehensive and exhaustive analyses of this see Stephen Kinzer, *Overthrow: America’s Century of Regime Change from Hawai’i to Iraq* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006). See also the excellent work by Max Blumenthal, *The Management of Savagery: How America’s Security State Fuelled the Rise of Al Qaeda, ISIS, and Donald Trump* (New York: Verso, 2019).

to collect revenues. I helped in the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefit of Wall Street. I helped purify Nicaragua for the International Banking House of Brown Brothers in 1902–1912. I brought light to the Dominican Republic for the American sugar interests in 1916. I helped make Honduras right for the American fruit companies in 1903. In China in 1927, I helped see to it that Standard Oil went on its way unmolested. Looking back on it, I might have given Al Capone a few hints. The best he could do was to operate his racket in three districts. I operated on three continents.<sup>15</sup>

The deliberate, yet chillingly casual<sup>16</sup> turning of targeted sanctions, boycotts and divestment from an instrument of nonviolent pressure on an oppressive, racist government committing a crime against humanity, (apartheid South Africa), into a weapon of mass destruction (Iraq, under Bill Clinton; Iran and Russia under Obama; Iran, North Korea and Venezuela under Donald Trump) is only the open face of this terrifying phenomenon. The economic warfare against the poor, so essential to the neo-colonialist project and the survival of empire, goes on at much more subtle levels as Kwame Nkrumah prophetically understood, even though this particular phenomenon emerged after his time, as the neo-colonialist project waxed in lethal sophistication. Self-confessed “economic hitman” John Perkins explains:

Economic hit men (EHMs) are highly paid professionals who cheat countries around the globe out of trillions of dollars. They funnel money from the World Bank, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and other foreign “aid” organizations into the coffers of huge corporations and the pockets of a few wealthy

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15 See Smedley D. Butler, *War is a Racket* ([radical.org/ratville/CAH/warisaracket.html#1](http://radical.org/ratville/CAH/warisaracket.html#1)). The citation can be found at [goodreads.com/author/quotes/115545.Smedley\\_D\\_Butler](http://goodreads.com/author/quotes/115545.Smedley_D_Butler)

16 One calls to mind the way Clinton’s Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright pooh-poohed the question on national television whether the 500,000 deaths in Iraq, the majority of them children, as a result of U.S. sanctions, and more than the number of children killed in the bombing of Hiroshima, were “worth it.” “Oh, it’s worth it,” she responded so coolly that that remark now characterises Ms Albright in the mind of millions across the globe, as she herself characterises the essence of American Empire. See [youtube.com/watch?v=bntsfAXMEE](http://youtube.com/watch?v=bntsfAXMEE)



families who control the planet's natural resources. Their tools include fraudulent financial reports, rigged elections, payoffs, extortion, sex, and murder. They play a game as old as empire, but one that has taken on new and terrifying dimensions during this time of globalization. I should know; I was an EHM.<sup>17</sup>

These are all witnesses to the truth so boldly spoken by this African prophet. And for the new generation, grappling with the all-important matters of Africanness, Africanity, neo-colonialism, re-colonisation, de-colonisation, and empire, the call to listen and learn from him could not be more urgent.

It is now clear that Kwame Nkrumah spoke too soon of “the last stages of imperialism.” The 3 year-long globalisation research project of the Evangelisch Reformierte Kirche in Germany and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, of which I was privileged to be a part, has offered a helpful definition of empire, since then widely accepted in ecumenical discourse on these matters:

We speak of *empire*, because we discern a coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power in our world today, that constitutes a reality and a spirit of lordless domination, created by human kind yet enslaving simultaneously; an all-encompassing global reality serving, protecting and defending the interests of powerful corporations, nations, elites and privileged people, while imperiously excluding, even sacrificing humanity and exploiting creation; a pervasive spirit of destructive self-interest, even greed-the worship of money, goods and possessions; the gospel of consumerism, proclaimed through powerful propaganda and religiously justified, believed and followed; the colonization of consciousness, values and notions of human life by the imperial logic; a spirit lacking compassionate justice and showing

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17 See John Perkins, *Confessions of an Economic Hitman* (San Francisco: Brett-Koehler, 2004), “Introduction.” See also his “Introduction,” in Steven Hiatt, (ed.), *A Game as Old as Empire, The Secret World of Economic Hitmen and the Web of Global Corruption* (San Francisco: Brett-Koehler, 2007).

contemptuous disregard for the gifts of creation and the household of life.<sup>18</sup>

With what we now know of the workings of the American Empire, its relentless economic, political and military grip on the throats of the most vulnerable in the world, Kwame Nkrumah's characterization was apt: at the heart of the empire is not a fire-spewing dragon, though that image is also frighteningly, and despairingly, fitting. Its real heart is an octopus with its tentacles and suction cups and brute strength. If ever there was a "tomorrow" for Global South citizens, it is not yet.

### **Almost as of yesterday**

I should perhaps pause here to make clear that I do not mean an "incomplete revolution" to be the opposite of a "perfect" revolution. One does not have to agree with orthodox neo-Calvinism's idea of "total depravity," to acknowledge humankind's terrifying propensity towards sinfulness, that deliberate turning away from God as we turn our backs on our neighbour. Human beings' tendencies towards selfishness, self-centeredness, and self-delusion, the blindness that cannot see the self-destruction in how the elevation of self-interest endangers the common good, our common life together and our own humanity. Black theology fully understands the Apostle Paul's desperate cry as he reflects on "the sin that dwells within me," that drives him to ignore the "good I want to do" and rather drives him to do the evil he does not want to do. "Oh, wretched man that I am! Who shall rescue me from this body of death?" (Rom 7:19, 20, 24) That reality makes the "perfect revolution" as impossible as the "perfect world." However, Christians who consider themselves followers of Jesus of Nazareth, and empowered by God's Holy Spirit, shall not stop striving and working towards that world of love, justice, equality and peace; that

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18 See Allan Aubrey Boesak, Johan Weusmann, and Charles Amjad Ali, (eds.) *Dreaming a Different World, Globalisation and Justice for Humanity and the Earth – The Challenge of the Accra Confession for the Churches* (Stellenbosch: The Globalisation Project, 2010), 2. For further, detailed discussion of this definition of empire see Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Dare We Speak of Hope? Searching for a Language of Life in Faith and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), ch. 5.

world, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, where “justice and peace shall embrace”(Is 11:6–8). German theologian Jürgen Moltmann saw it well:

As a social concept, equality means justice. As a humanitarian concept, equality means solidarity. As a Christian concept, equality means love. Either we shall create a world of social justice, human solidarity and Christian love, or this world will perish through the oppression of people by people, through a-social egotism, and through the destruction of the future in the interest of short-term, present-day profits.<sup>19</sup>

Brazilian liberation theologian Rubem Alves is correct when he states, “What drives us is not the belief in the possibility of a perfect society, but rather the belief in the non-necessity of this imperfect order.”<sup>20</sup> It is the absolute dissatisfaction with our situation perpetually being “almost as of yesterday.” It is a dissatisfaction fuelled by righteous anger because we know that it is the incompleteness in which the powerful and privileged prosper, but the poor and the oppressed, the defenceless and the vulnerable, the weak and the powerless are cast aside and left behind. It is the continual striving toward wholeness, the openness to learning and unlearning, towards a more whole becoming, perhaps what Biko meant when he talked about our striving towards our “envisioned self.”<sup>21</sup>

As we have known for some years now, South Africa is now the country with the deepest social and economic inequality on earth. The rich/poor gap is now wider than in the days of apartheid. That means the future of our country, all our people, especially our youth, is captured by yesterday. For them there might be no tomorrow at all. That is an incomplete revolution.

After 25 years of democracy, South Africans now know for certain that a black face in office, as Biko has foreseen, does not guarantee justice and rights for our people. Our experience now teaches us that a black face in office does not guarantee economic opportunity, economic security, and

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19 See Jürgen Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 130-131.

20 Cited in Jose Miguez Bonino, *Towards a Christian Political Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 90.

21 *I Write What I Like*, 53, 74, 101.

economic dignity for our youth. After 25 years, we know that what we have is not the democracy we thought we were fighting for, but in fact the fruits of what University of KwaZulu Natal economist Patrick Bond called an “elite transition from apartheid to neo-liberalism.”<sup>22</sup> It is what the late, greatly lamented Sampie Terreblanche of Stellenbosch University bluntly called “the elite conspiracy” between the African National Congress and the white political and economic establishment.<sup>23</sup> In painful lesson after painful lesson, we have learnt that a democratic society is not necessarily a liberated one. So indeed, we have today what Biko referred to as “the few blacks filtering through into the so-called bourgeoisie” while the vast majority of our people remained mired in the misery of continuing impoverishment.

South Africa’s new, small black aristocracy, who have made such disastrous, if immensely profitable, common cause with the old white capitalist class, have done so even though they knew that the heart of that system is endless greed, endless exploitation, endless carelessness, endless compassionlessness without which neo-liberal capitalism cannot survive. Hence, we should not be at all surprised at what we see today: the bottomless corruption, the shameless cronyism, nepotism and cadre-favouritism, all sustained by a deliberate disdain for the poor and the vulnerable.

At this point the tomorrow that millions have struggled, sacrificed and died for, is hardly different from the yesterday we rose up against. And it is for all these reasons that we speak of an incomplete revolution.

Speaking the words in our first quotation from Biko in 1977, just months after Soweto’s children began to change history, Biko knew that something extraordinary had started. That generation soon realised that to call what was happening in Soweto a “protest” was inadequate. We began to understand that there are times when, in the words of Black poet and philosopher Adam Small, protest can be “a form of begging.” We stopped calling it a “rebellion,” or even an “uprising” as some did. We called it a revolution,<sup>24</sup> because we understood that what began in Soweto and would

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22 See Patrick Bond, *Elite Transition*.

23 See Sampie Terreblanche, *Lost in Transformation*.

24 Steve Biko’s intimate friend, spiritual guide and struggle comrade Fr. Aeldred Stubbs had it right when he tells of his return from England to Soweto, and his presence in

morph into the United Democratic Front was a revolution of the people, but uniquely led by the youth. We understood that Soweto was not so much a *place but a condition; a condition of oppression, exploitation, and marginalization, a condition of outrage, anger and despair; and that it was our duty to turn that into a condition of consciousness, of decision, and of resistance.*

*But we understood our revolution in two ways. First, in the sense of recognizing what Iranian scholar Hamid Dabashi years later would give words to when he discusses the Arab Spring.*<sup>25</sup> “What we are witnessing is a revolution against domestic tyranny and globalized disempowerment alike, now jointly challenged beyond the entrapment of postcolonial ideologies.” It is no longer to be understood in the Marxian sense, as a single cataclysmic event.<sup>26</sup> These revolutions, including the revolution that ended formal and legal apartheid in South Africa have not yet run their course. What we are witnessing in the Arab and Muslim world, in Palestine and South Africa is “the unfolding of an open-ended revolt, the conjugation of a new revolutionary language and practice, predicated on a reading of reality that is an *opera aperta* – an ‘open work’ ... a self-propelling hermeneutics that mobilizes a constellation of suggestions yet to be fully assayed.”<sup>27</sup> It is something new, still unfolding and open to the future. Habashi calls that “delayed defiance.”

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Soweto on June 16, “when the killings of students ... marked yet another irreversible step on the road to freedom. Returning to Johannesburg on July 1 one could only find words in W. B. Yeats to describe the revolution in the atmosphere: ‘All, all is utterly changed ... /A terrible beauty is born ...’” See his “Martyr of Hope: A Personal Memoir,” in *I Write What I Like*, 175–244. The quote is on 219.

- 25 See Hamid Dabashi, *Arab Spring, The End of Postcolonialism* (London: Zed, 2012), 2-3.
- 26 See *Arab Spring*, 5, 6: “Revolution in the sense of a radical and sudden shift of political power with an accompanying social and economic restructuring of society – one defiant class violently and conclusively overcoming another – is not what we are witnessing here, or not quite yet. There is a deep-rooted economic and social malaise in all these societies ... No single angle of vision – economic, social, political, or cultural – would reveal the totality (and yet inconclusive disposition) of these massive social uprisings. Instead of denying these insurgencies the term ‘revolution’, we are now forced to reconsider the concept and understand it anew... The longer these revolutions take to unfold, the more enduring, grassroots-based, and definitive will be their emotive, symbolic, and institutional consequences.”
- 27 See Dabashi, *Arab Spring*, 230. See also Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Kairos, Crisis, and Global Apartheid: The Challenge to Prophetic Resistance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 19–20.

It is not delayed in the sense of “postponement,” I think, but rather in the sense of alert political judgement and strategic engagement. It is a kind of revolutionary vigilance. It will unfold in phases, always cognizant of the endless abilities of existing power structures and systems to adapt and mutate, to adopt new strategies, to offer meaningless reforms as response to pressure, to co-opt and bribe, to neutralize and eliminate. “Significant in the new revolutions,” Habashi writes, “is the acute awareness that this is resistance against imperial power and might in all their global manifestations.” One might consider it, Dabashi says, “a Palestinian intifada going global.”<sup>28</sup>

That is exactly what we have seen since Soweto and the United Democratic Front, and now in the “delayed defiance” of countries such as Sudan, Algeria, Chile, Tunisia, and Haiti. We will see it again in Hong Kong, and it is always present in Palestine. Our revolution is such a delayed defiance, taking new shape in the new post-1994 situation.<sup>29</sup>

That is why in the Black Consciousness movement, we did not merely speak of our ideal of a “non-racial, non-sexist, open democracy” as the slogan went. Our ideal was an open, non-racial, non-sexist, responsible, responsive, *and egalitarian* democracy.<sup>30</sup> The omission of that crucial word (“egalitarian”) in the current slogan and understanding of what is called our “National Democratic Revolution” is not accidental.

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28 *Arab Spring*, 6

29 “Since South Africa’s advent to democracy in 1994, public protest, either service delivery protest, [or] protest against undemocratic laws of land distribution, has become an integral part of the society ... The second decade of democracy has been characterised by escalation of popular protests; increased militancy reminiscent of the anti-apartheid struggle days.” See “Public Protest in Democratic South Africa”, [Online], available: sahistory.org.za/article/public-protest-democratic-south-africa. Sociologist Peter Alexander speaks of “the rebellion of the poor.” See “Rebellion of the poor: South Africa’s service delivery protests – a preliminary analysis.” *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 37, No. 123 (March 2010): 25–40. Taken together with the #RhodesMustFall student protests, these are all manifestations of an ongoing revolution in search of that egalitarian society Black Consciousness set as an ideal. One would have to wonder what would happen if, and when, the relatively privileged students on university campuses and the much less privileged, unemployed youth in the townships discover that the causes of their dissatisfaction are basically the same, rooted in the same economic system of inequality and indifference, and join forces.

30 See *I Write What I Like*, 170

Back in 1998, when we already knew about the corruption that dogged the arms deal scandal, the moral, political, and socio-economic consequences of which are haunting us today still, Thabo Mbeki raised a profoundly moral issue for us, perhaps today more so than then. He spoke a truth that was perhaps more prophetic than he knew, more brutally honest than he had meant to, leaving the ANC, and all the rest of us, no avenue of blame or escape:

The thieves and their accomplices, the givers of the bribes and the recipients are as African as you and I. We are the corrupter and the harlot who act together to demean our Continent and ourselves.<sup>31</sup>

So, what South Africa is going through at the moment is beyond disheartening, though not surprising. The Zondo Commission is not only lifting the veil on the kind of corruption the depths of which we could not begin to imagine, it is also ripping into our soul in ways we were never prepared for. As a company, Bosasa may have changed its name,<sup>32</sup> but the very word has now indelibly and unforgettably entered the lexicon of global scandals. Bosasa is the symbol of what happens when an organization forgets that nobility may be inherited, but trustworthiness has to be earned, and sacrifice has to be respected. That arrogance and hubris are never good substitutes for the integrity, decency and honesty that calls forth the love of the people. Bosasa is the weeds that grow on the grave of the nobility of our struggle.

## **The Jerusalem of Jesus' Day**

What is being revealed through the work of various commissions of inquiry into the rampant corruption in our country seems to be the real “state of the nation.” These are the consequences of untrammelled greed and deep-seated corruption at every level of government and in the private sphere; the abysmal mismanagement of precious state resources, to say nothing of the waste of even more precious human resources. The callousness of

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31 See Thabo Mbeki, “The African Renaissance Statement of Deputy President Thabo Mbeki”, Gallagher Estate, *SABC*, 13 August 1998, [dirco.gov.za/docs/speeches/1998/mbeki0813.htm](http://dirco.gov.za/docs/speeches/1998/mbeki0813.htm).

32 It is now called African Global Operations.

officials whom we had elected and in whom we had invested our power to govern, the disdain with which our democratic dreams and ideals have been treated is matched only by the disdain with which the hopes of the poor, the aspirations of our children and the sacrifices of our people have been treated by those in power. The very word “Bosasa” is now more than just the symbol of the myriad ways in which we have lost our direction.

But even more than that: what we have witnessed during the month of September 2019 has powerfully focused our minds on the tragic truth that if we even believe in Ubuntu we are a people seriously in need of Ubuntu. The waves of xenophobic violence and criminal vigilantism exposed not just the inadequacies of our intelligence and police services. It also exposed the dysfunctionality of our politics and the inefficaciousness of our politicians. As a caller on an afternoon radio programme put it, it shows how impossible we have made it for ourselves. For how can we garner proper intelligence about lurking dangers such as these when all our intelligence energy is spent on spying on each other, of watching factions, of plotting against each other, of covering up our own misdeeds while plotting to expose those of the enemy within, abandoning the interests of the nation for the self-destructive self-interests of factionalism?

So in one, single week we were reminded how close we always are to the horrific temptations of 2008: our people necklacing our brothers and sisters from other countries, as they did in Katlehong to 35 year-old Isaac Sithole.<sup>33</sup> His murderers leaving his burnt-out body in the street for his widow to weep over while leaving us wondering how we could ever have had the nerve to defend necklacing as an instrument of liberation, how we could have ever made peace with violence as a method of political blackmail, as we did in the early 1990s. Can we ever close that door, now that we have once opened it? These questions, not ever properly confronted or honestly grappled with, will remain a festering wound in South Africa’s national soul.

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33 See Sheree Bega, “Zimbabwean woman recounts how husband was beaten, burnt to death in Katlehong”. *Saturday Star* (7 September 2019); accessed from <https://www.iol.co.za/saturday-star/news/zimbabwean-woman-recounts-how-husband-was-beaten-burnt-to-death-in-katlehong-32498218>.



Since 1994, we have rubbed our Ubuntu-ness in Africa's face. We have preened and basked in the admiration of the world because we were the ones who knew what "reconciliation" meant. We deemed ourselves fit to teach other nations from Rwanda to Ireland to Serbia how it worked and how they should follow our example. We have so much to learn still, and the first seems to be a lesson in humility. The second is to learn to embrace the painful healing of honest self-critical reflection as necessary for our growth toward what Biko called our "envisioned self," for our ability to give South Africa and the world a human face.

But even more: the spate of unspeakable violence unleashed upon young girls and women has stunned the country, shaken our complacency, drowned us in shame. Just after August, it almost looks as if there are men who want to show their anger that we should even dare to have such a thing as Women's Month, calling attention to gender injustices, gender inequality, and gender-based violence, while calling into question the kind of manhood they seem murderously bent on preserving. It is as if they are determined to spit in the face of women, daring them to fight back. But in spitting in the face of women, they are spitting in the face of the country and all our people. They are spitting in the face of God. So besides all else, it has huge moral dimensions.

Politically too, that September's gender-based violence has brought us to yet another point of decision. What kind of people are we? After all, gender-based violence has been a daily occurrence in our communities for ages. And it was, and still is, aided and abetted by too many churches and their ideologized theologies of baptised bigotry, sacralised patriarchy, and sanctified homophobia. It is also aided and abetted by our complacency, our silence, and our infinite ability to fail the very basics of our own constitutional righteousness.

This is a moment we, the people of South Africa, cannot walk away from. Our righteous outrage must outdo, outdistance, and outrun the toxic, destructive anger of those men. At the very least, we must not only come to understand the fear of women; we must come to match the anger of women. As men, we must also understand that that fear is for us, that that anger is directed toward us. It is not the women who must prove themselves not fearful or innocent; it is men who must prove themselves not dangerous,

not predatory, not guilty. If we cannot do this, as a people we will have forfeited the right to claim to be a people striving toward reconciled community; as a nation we will have forfeited the right to raise our voice or cast our vote in international forums on human rights. As a country we would rightly be branded not a “rainbow place of hope,” but a vacuous space for meaningless sloganeering, mindless pietistic prattle, and mind-boggling hypocrisy.

Inasmuch as we have failed to make South Africa a safe place for girl children and women, we have failed to make South Africa a safe place for democracy, for integrity, dignity, and decency. Those are the signs of an incomplete revolution.

In our country gender-based violence is a pandemic. In 2013 when news of the horrific rapes in India spread shock, nausea and anger across the world, in the same time span South African women had been brutalized by men in the same horrific crime: *9,000 rapes in seven weeks*, including the torture and horrifying rape *with a steel pipe*, and murder of 17 year-old Anene Booysen. South African men rape 75-year old grandmothers as well as 3-year old children. September has seen the killing that has caused the Uyinene hashtag to go viral and sweep the nation. And that is right. But that young UCT student was not the only one to suffer violence in that same week. The boxing champion Leighandre Jegels was disappeared and killed, and so were at least five other young girls, one only 12 years old. In that same week a man in Athlone, just around the corner from where I live, raped a 1-year old baby. In our schools our daughters are subjected to sexual violence on a scale that is shocking. As a country we should ponder and respond to the question put by a secular newspaper in Cape Town in 2013: “If we [men] are not shamed into action by that statistic, what on earth will it take?”

As I write this, the coronavirus (COVID-19) is raging across the earth, threatening the total structure of the global capitalist systems, exposing the incompetence of governments who constantly brag how “great” they are, taking human lives by the hundreds. The virus has brought forth calls for human solidarity, for consideration of others, for forging bonds of togetherness even though “social distancing” is now part of the modes of survival.

Once again however, it emerges that the feelings of shared vulnerability do not include women. University of San Francisco scholar Rebecca Gordon's question had become a reality even before it was asked. Writing on the coronavirus and its impact on especially women, she asks, "Are you safer outside risking coronavirus, or inside with a bored, angry male partner?"<sup>34</sup> Not long after the outbreak became public, we heard from China, the country where the virus first took hold, that gender-based violence has risen alarmingly, that the lockdown of neighbourhoods and sometimes whole cities has made women and children much easier targets of male violence. An anti-domestic violence organisation reports that gender-based violence cases are three times higher than for the same month in 2019. "According to our statistics, 90% of the (recent) causes of violence are related to the COVID-19 epidemic."<sup>35</sup> Even in a crisis of these proportions, the women and the children must pay twice the price; bear a double burden, laid upon them not by God or circumstances, but by men.

I discuss the question of South Africa and our LGBTQI community elsewhere,<sup>36</sup> but here it is appropriate to comment on the contradictions that strain South African society. The Constitution guarantees equal rights and equal protection under the law for LGBTQI persons, but it seems that as a society we are drifting farther and farther away from the ethos of Ubuntu our Constitution aspires to and South Africans almost routinely claim as essential to our world view and way of life.<sup>37</sup>

"Our voting majority is homophobic," laments Siya Kumalo, and it is exacerbated by an African religious and political leadership who have allowed themselves to be bamboozled and bribed by the American Christian Right who bring with them

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34 Rebecca Gordon, "The Future May Be Feminine, But the Pandemic is Patriarchal." *TomDispatch*, (31 March 2020); accessed from [readersupportednews.org/opinion2/277-75/62150-focus-the-future-may-be-feminine-but-the-pademic-is-patriarchal](https://readersupportednews.org/opinion2/277-75/62150-focus-the-future-may-be-feminine-but-the-pademic-is-patriarchal).

35 See Zhang Wanqing, "Domestic Violence Cases Surge During COVID-19 Epidemic". [Online]. Available: <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1005253/domestic-violence-cases-surge-during-covid-19-epidemic> [2 March 2020]. On Saturday March 3, SABC evening news reported the same rise in domestic violence for South Africa.

36 See Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Kairos, Crisis and Global Apartheid*, ch. 4.

37 See the discussion in Allan Boesak, *Prophetic Critique on Empire: Resistance, Justice, and the Power of the Hopeful Sizwe - A Transatlantic Conversation* (Eugene; Cascade Books, 2017), ch. 4.

An anti-gay craze that subverts democracy by centering accountability around anti-gay, anti-feminist principles that prop up patriarchal leaders who otherwise don't have a political leg to stand on.<sup>38</sup>

As a result, this young, gay, Christian activist has no confidence in politicians who “expediently vacillate on gay rights depending on the political climate.” It is a vacillation that “counterfeits the balancing act needed by events outside people’s bedrooms like economic upheavals, evolving treaties and climate change.” They are all fundamentally untrustworthy, because

like typical politicians, they’ll all shift toward acceptance at the first sign that homophobia is costing them votes because politics is easy and gay lives are more dispensable than the paper their apology statements will be printed on.<sup>39</sup>

Meanwhile, the assaults on LGBTQI persons continue to rise. Kumalo argues, and who can really gainsay him,

When ‘othering’ and discrimination are normal, dictators rise on the back of scapegoating. It’s how Hitler did it ... When they surrender scapegoats on the altar of ... homophobia they open the collective up for violation ... We are ‘state captured’ by actual enemies, becoming the Jerusalem of Jesus’ day. We open our coffers and hand over our own for crucifixion until there is practically no one left for foreign empires to decimate.<sup>40</sup>

Hence, what follows should come as no surprise. In 2011, since the murder and alleged gang rape of a lesbian activist, Noxolo Nogwaza, in Kwa Thema, Erkuhuleni, human rights activists have warned of an “epidemic” of brutal homophobic attacks in South Africa. Noxolo was a victim of a seemingly particularly South African hate crime called “corrective rape.” It is an increasingly common crime, through which gangs of young men, often Christians, rape lesbians in order to “turn” them straight, or to “cure” them of their “deviant” sexual orientation. Noxolo’s head was disfigured through

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38 See Siya Khumalo, *You Have to be Gay to Know God* (Cape Town: Kwela, 2018), 263-264

39 Khumalo, *You Have to Be Gay*, 264.

40 Kumalo, *You Have to Be Gay*, 261-262.

stoning, indeed suggesting a religious motivation (and justification), and she was stabbed several times with glass from broken beer bottles.<sup>41</sup> This is sheer savagery. But here is the true vulgarity of this situation: four years later, in 2015, her killers are still free. By 2015, at least eighteen LGBTQI persons (as far as we know) have since been murdered. Homophobia and transphobia remain so prevalent throughout South African society, writes human rights activist Tracy Doig, that LGBTQI people “don’t even recognize taunts and insults as a form of violence against them.”<sup>42</sup>

Unless LGBTQI persons find complete, equal, and unconditional acceptance, unless women and children experience our country, its public spaces, private spaces and places of worship as places of safety; and as long as our police services and court system act as if the lives of LGBTQI persons do not matter and their persecution and deaths do not diminish us as a people; and as long as we make “othering” our instinctive body armour, we will have an incomplete revolution. African National Congress politicians speak proudly of our “National Democratic Revolution”. But what kind of revolution is it that reminds LGBTQI persons, women, and the poor of “Jerusalem in Jesus’ day”?

## **Seduced by rainbow-nationalism**

As I write, the country is fairly, and understandably, convulsing with anger at former president F.W. De Klerk who, in an interview with the South African Broadcasting Corporation, made the statement that apartheid may well have been wrong, but it was not, as people claimed, a “crime against humanity.” Mr. De Klerk, somewhat stunned by the angry backlash, ultimately succumbed to the pressure and issued a patently non-

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41 See [theguardian.com/world/2011/may/03/south-africa-homophobic-attacks](http://theguardian.com/world/2011/may/03/south-africa-homophobic-attacks)

42 See Tracy Doig, “Four years later, Noxolo Nogwaza’s killers are still free.” *Thought Leader: Mail & Guardian* (24 April 2015); accessed from <https://thoughtleader.co.za/amnestyinternational/2015/04/24/four-years-later-noxolo-nogwazas-killers-are-still-free/>. In Cape Town, the case of the killers of a young lesbian woman, Zoliswa Nkonyane from Khayelitha township, took six years to bring convictions, after the case had been postponed 40 times.

heartfelt apology, “an attempt,” reported the BBC, “to calm a fortnight of increasingly furious debate.” A full two weeks later.<sup>43</sup>

“At first,” reports the BBC, “South Africa seemed to shrug.” Until the opening of Parliament and the EFF’s Julius Malema’s outburst on the floor. To the surprise of some, I shared Mr. De Klerk’s surprise at the angry reaction of so many, overwhelmingly black South Africans. Here is my reasoning. Right from the start, right after he received the Nobel Peace Prize along with Mr Nelson Mandela, Mr. De Klerk had refused to offer more than a qualified apology for apartheid. I am not even mentioning asking forgiveness from South Africa’s oppressed people for the crime against humanity whites had perpetrated against the indigenous peoples of this land for over 350 years. So, this latest episode should have come as no surprise. In part, this is pure, plain and simple white arrogance; in part, it is denial; in part, it is that incessant need to take on the cloak of victimhood because it is the surest form of self-defence, and the best bulwark against genuine change and transformation.

But it is also we, the oppressed people of South Africa that had told ourselves that true reconciliation is too costly, too high a bar to set. In consequence, we offered white South Africans a cheap reconciliation: one without contrition, without remorse, without repentance, without justice, without restoration. We accepted the colonialist view of the land question and hid those ugly realities within the most prized outcome of the negotiated settlement: the Constitution. Then we sacralised the Constitution by embedding it in the language of reconciliation, Ubuntu and human rights, thereby making the issue of stolen land and the restoration of that land an almost untouchable matter.<sup>44</sup> If it were not for the insistence of a new

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43 See [bbc.com/news/world-africa-51532829](http://bbc.com/news/world-africa-51532829), “F.W. De Klerk and the South African row over apartheid and crimes against humanity” (18 February 2020).

44 So, again not surprisingly, we let it slide when in 2017, (on Sikita Makwetla’s SABC radio afternoon show 21 December 2017), Mr. Omri van Zyl, CEO of Agri South Africa, argued that land restitution is “not a moral issue. It is an economic issue, because a farm is an economic unit.” In doing so, van Zyl introduces a false juxtaposition – “land” and “farm”. He neatly separates “the land” from agribusiness, as well as the colonial-era theft of land from historical reality, the deliberate legitimising of it through successive acts of a fraudulent parliament built on racialist exclusion, disempowerment, and silencing. So now, seen only as a “farm”, an economic enterprise and nothing more, “the land” about which whites have always waxed so lyrically as being part of their “Boer” identity, becomes nothing more than “a farm” as economic entity, detached from any

revolutionary generation we would not now have those crucial debates about the land, our historic dispossession, and our right to reclaim it. So why are we surprised at F. W. De Klerk? De Klerk is the one who should be surprised at our reaction to his latest – and only his latest - outrage since he has been saying this for a long time. We gave him permission by offering a reconciliation that was far more sensitive to the desires of white South Africans, and to the agreements reached in those pre-negotiation secret talks than to the historical, spiritual, economic, and political claims of Black oppressed people.

From a Black liberation theology point of view, I have raised these issues several times. So let me summarize my argument.<sup>45</sup> Taking my queue from the story of Zacchaeus in the gospel of Luke, I believe that unless reconciliation is radical, real, and revolutionary, it is not true reconciliation. As I understand biblical reconciliation, it is not possible without:

- Acknowledging the alienation, and the reasons for it that now calls for reconciliation;

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notions of belonging and emotional rootedness. He also separates it from any moral responsibility, including the responsibility for restitution. That means that Blacks have no claim on the land historically, in the sense of identity, or rootedness, or belonging. Downgraded to mere romanticism, these are no longer valid notions of human existence so central to African life. This is as clearly an apartheid, “for blacks only” argument as one can get. It is an act of complete and total alienation and renewed dispossession, which, if allowed to stand, offers no recourse or recompense, except a helpless kind of remembering in the African mind, which is nothing but spiritual and political surrender. For whites, it is the opposite. For them, all those strong emotional bonds still hold, serving a decidedly political agenda and finding refuge in the Constitution. See the strong romantic, ethno-patriotic, militant lyrics of Anton Myburgh’s song, well-loved among Afrikaans speaking whites, “Die Boer en Sy Roer” (The Farmer and His Gun”); accessed from [musixmatch.com/lyrics/Anton-Myburgh/Boer-En-Sy-Roer](https://musixmatch.com/lyrics/Anton-Myburgh/Boer-En-Sy-Roer).

45 See Boesak, *Tenderness of Conscience*, ch. 4, and for the argument responding to Mr. De Klerk’s insistent call for a truth and reconciliation commission rather than just a truth commission which the ANC originally wanted, see especially pp 181-183, and 188. See also Allan Boesak, *Running with Horses, Reflections of an Accidental Politician*. (Cape Town: Joho!, 2009); Boesak, “And Zacchaeus Remained in the Tree: Reconciliation and Justice and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.” *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 29(3) DOI:10.4102/ve.v29i3.40, (2008) 636-654; Allan Boesak with Curtiss Paul DeYoung, *Radical Reconciliation, Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism* (New York: Orbis Books, 2012); *Pharaohs on Both Sides of the Blood-red Waters*, especially chs. 4, 5, 6.

- Confronting the evil of the past and present, including the evil within ourselves that refuses to acknowledge the evil of the past and present because it benefits us;
- Remorse and repentance;
- Forgiveness being asked for given;
- Justice
- Finally, reconciliation is possible only among equals.

I argued then that the main problem with South Africa's reconciliation process is that we have left Zacchaeus "sitting in the tree." In other words, we have learnt nothing from him. We have shunned this biblical model of radical reconciliation as "excessive spiritualisation," setting the bar too high, to run toward a cheap, shallow reconciliation, for fear of "pathologizing the nation" with unrealistic demands.<sup>46</sup> In 2012, after his infamous interview with CNN's Christiane Amanpour, journalist Elna Boesak wrote an article responding to Mr De Klerk's refusal to acknowledge the criminal nature of apartheid. There are things, she told De Klerk, that might be forgivable, but they are never excusable.<sup>47</sup> In other words, ask for forgiveness, but do not try to offer excuses for apartheid.

If Mr De Klerk took reconciliation seriously, he would have worked assiduously to make sure all these things were in place and he would have given leadership to whites to do the same. But he did not then, and he does not now. He refuses to acknowledge that apartheid was an unbelievably cruel, oppressive, and exploitative system and a crime against humanity. He refuses to repent, to show any kind of remorse. He is not interested in dismantling the systems of power and privilege he helped to maintain and benefited from. Therefore, he cannot bring himself, even now, to help South Africa build new structures of justice that would give dignity to our people and redress the wrongs of the past. Perhaps, keeping the lessons

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46 See my engagement with Jakes Gerwel who raises the issue of "pathologizing the nation" as he argues against what he calls reconciliation as the search for "the Holy Grail" in *Tenderness*, ch. 4, especially 181–194

47 See Elna Boesak, "Time for apartheid's truth to be spoken", *Sunday Independent* (21 May 2012), [iol.co.za/sundayindependent/time-for-apartheids-truth-to-be-spoken-1301002](http://iol.co.za/sundayindependent/time-for-apartheids-truth-to-be-spoken-1301002). Boesak sounds a warning more valid today than ever: "A nation lost in the storm raging in the wilderness between alienation and reconciliation, will not survive."



from the Zacchaeus story in mind, the deepest truth – and I cannot stress that enough – is that Mr. De Klerk refuses genuine reconciliation because he cannot bring himself to see black people as his equal. But again, we have known this for a long time now.

In that CNN interview I referred to above, May 2012, Mr. De Klerk once again publicly defended apartheid, the Bantustans, the apartheid legal system and the apartheid courts which found Mandela guilty of treason.<sup>48</sup>

On Amanpour’s insistent questioning, De Klerk refused to acknowledge that apartheid was morally wrong and that he has anything to apologize for. Recalling what he did present as an apology, De Klerk went on to say, “What I haven’t apologised for is the original concept of seeking to bring justice to all South Africans through the concept of nation states.” This, he admits, “failed.” He advances three reasons:

1. Because whites wanted to keep too much land for themselves;
2. Because whites and blacks became economically integrated;
3. And because the majority of blacks said that “this is not how we want our rights.”

Asked twice whether he thought apartheid was morally repugnant, De Klerk responded, “I can only say in a qualified way. Inasmuch as it trampled human rights it was, and remains, morally reprehensible.” But originally, in its pure form, De Klerk insists, apartheid was not wrong; it was simply “seeking to bring justice to all South Africans.” Note that “qualified” and the “inasmuch as.” In reality, as Mr. De Klerk is proving once again, “inasmuch” was not very much at all, certainly not if he regards apartheid as excusable. In 2012, there was no outrage, no waves of national indignation, no sense of wounded expectations.

In the CNN interview, Mr. De Klerk speaks as if the problem was “white people wanting too much land,” not at all giving a thought to what was the heart of colonialism and apartheid: dispossession, land theft, disenfranchisement, brutal oppression and genocide. In De Klerk’s view, the fact that apartheid was well-meant but did not “work” make its failure

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48 [Online]. Available: [www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/africa/120511/fw-deklerk-cnn-interview-amanpour-video](http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/africa/120511/fw-deklerk-cnn-interview-amanpour-video) [Accessed: 14 May 2012].

a matter of mere practicalities, at most perhaps a political miscalculation; not because it was morally repugnant, socially perverted and politically unsustainable, let alone sinful and evil. Once having set such a bad example for whites in South Africa, holding up apartheid as morally acceptable, but practically hampered, it became his mantra: “Apartheid would have worked, if ...” The implication is clear: “If you only left us alone, we would have been able to show its success ...” Within the context of 2012, perhaps worse? “If you had left us alone, the country would not have had a Zuma ...” This is one reason why so many have lost hope in our reconciliation process.

In the SABC interview in February, Mr. De Klerk simply reiterates what he has stated as his firm beliefs since 1994. So, the question is pertinent: why the outrage? Mr. De Klerk has been saying this, encouraging white South Africans to feel this way, for as long as we can remember. But seduced by our ideology of rainbow-nationism, we allowed him to. We gave him permission to think that way and say these things. We offered white people forgiveness that they saw no need or reason to ask for. So, it’s not just white arrogance and unrepented racism that are to blame. We must take responsibility for the De Klerk’s of this world. We invited him to parliament. We gave him honour and respect, even when we already heard him say these things. We know better. We cannot plead innocence.

Over forty years ago I made the point that in these matters it is the innocence which constitutes the crime.<sup>49</sup> So the ultimate question becomes: which crime weighs more? The crime of denying the crime, or the crime of enabling, protecting, and elevating the criminal? The truth South Africa has tried to run away from for twenty-five years, is this: unless we do speak truth to ourselves on this matter, we are not the rainbow nation we imagine ourselves to be, but rather the nation “lost in the raging storms in the wilderness between alienation and reconciliation.” Unless we embrace this truth, our outrage and protests will be no more than another form of begging.

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49 See Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence: A Socio-ethical Study of Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976), “Introduction.”

## Tomorrow's children

Christians in the struggle see social justice as the “essential truth of the struggle.” They find themselves “in the grip of this truth and cannot but witness to it” wrote India’s M.M. Thomas.<sup>50</sup> This is the heart of it: Christians choose to join the struggle because they join God in God’s struggle for justice and dignity, for the humanization of the world. Being in the grip of that essential truth, as we learned from M.M. Thomas, is embracing the restlessness that longs for a different world, a new humanity, a recreated tomorrow.

It is Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s stubborn, provocative, defiant hope as he speaks from the prison that he would not leave alive:

There are people who regard it as frivolous, and some who think it impious for anyone to hope and prepare for a better future. They think that the meaning of present events is chaos, disorder, and catastrophe; and in resignation or pious escapism they surrender all responsibility for reconstruction and for future generations. It may be that the day of judgment will dawn tomorrow; in that case, we shall gladly stop working for a better future. But not before.<sup>51</sup>

It means, paraphrasing Brazilian liberation theologian Rubem Alves, having the imagination and creativity to work for the rebirth of the future, a rebirth of the dreams, ideals and hopes others have abandoned or sold out, but too many had believed in, fought for, sacrificed for, given their lives for. It means stubbornly clinging to the possibility of making that hopeful, just, and peaceable tomorrow a reality. That, Alves says, frees us from the shackles and enslavements of yesterday and makes each one of us, as the hopeful title of his book proclaims, “tomorrow’s child.”

Despite the pain of disappointments, disillusionments, bewilderments and betrayals, the revolution of values retains its grip. So, Alves writes:

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50 See M.M. Thomas and J.D. McCaughey, *The Christian in the World Struggle*. A Grey Book of the World Student Christian Federation (Geneva: WSCF, no date), 39-40.

51 See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 15

If ours is not the harvest season, it may well be a time for sowing ... In spite of – and because – our tall trees have been cut down, our air polluted with fear, and our soil turned into a heap of refuse, a new seed must be planted: the seed of our highest hope.<sup>52</sup>

As I finish this, it is April 4, 2020, fifty-two years since Martin Luther King Jr.'s murder. So perhaps it is fitting that we end with words from a man whose eyes have seen the coming of the glory of the Lord. A man who, whether marching in the streets, speaking inspiration and courage to his people or prophesying truth to the powers of this world; whether walking through the valley of death or standing on his mountaintop, truly was “tomorrow’s child.” The night before his death, in his last address to the striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee and their crowd of supporters, calling on the people not to get distracted, to keep those minds set on freedom focused on what mattered:

Let’s keep the issues where they are. The issue is justice ... There are thirteen hundred of God’s children here suffering, sometimes going hungry, going through dark and dreary nights wondering how this thing is going to come out. That’s the issue ... For when people get caught up with that which is right and they are willing to sacrifice for it, there is no stopping point short of victory.<sup>53</sup>

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52 Rubem Alves, *Tomorrow’s Child, Imagination, Creativity, and the Rebirth of Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 197

53 See Martin Luther King Jr., “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” *The Radical King*, 265-276

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