

The Christian Discourse and Culture of Reconciliation in contemporary South Africa

Robert Griffiths

► **To cite this version:**

Robert Griffiths. The Christian Discourse and Culture of Reconciliation in contemporary South Africa. Alizés: Revue angliciste de La Réunion, Faculté des Lettres et Sciences humaines (Université de La Réunion), 2004, Founding Myths of the New South Africa / Les mythes fondateurs de la nouvelle Afrique du Sud, pp.199-218. hal-02344097

HAL Id: hal-02344097

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02344097>

Submitted on 3 Nov 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

The Christian Discourse and Culture of Reconciliation in contemporary South Africa

*Robert GRIFFITHS
Université de Savoie*

On the 23rd of April 1998 the South African Parliament passed an unopposed Motion noting with great sadness the death three days before of someone who “during the worst chapter of South African history... had the strength, courage and the conviction to stand up against the apartheid oppressor and to mobilise the world to help end the suffering of the people of South Africa.” Three months later, in July 1998, after a memorial service in Westminster Abbey, his ashes were carried back to his “real home” in South Africa by Alfred Nzo, South Africa’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, there to be received at Johannesburg airport with a red-carpet welcome by Thabo Mbeki and a military guard of honour and to be taken by motorcade with police motorcycle escort to Sophiatown’s Christ the King church for a memorial service and for internment of his ashes.

Who was this revered figure? It is probable that not every contemporary commentator of South African politics today will immediately recognise the reference—or not find rather surprising the Parliament’s eulogy that here had been “one of the greatest champions of freedom and equality the world has ever seen, an internationalist who helped to deepen the relationship of friendship and solidarity between our country and the peoples of the world.”

It was Trevor Huddleston, an English monk (in an Anglican Benedictine order, the Community of the Resurrection, based in Mirfield, West Yorkshire) who had spent 12 years in Johannesburg's slums—from 1944 to 1956, and who wrote one very angry and eloquent book of protest against the South-African government's sudden clearance of those inner-city shanty-towns (*bidonvilles*) and the enforced relocation of its inhabitants into crude townships further away from the city. The book, *Naught for your Comfort*, became an international bestseller and introduced the present writer, as well as countless thousands of others, to the shock of what we called at the time "the colour bar." It was written at a time when the rules of apartheid were tightening and turning what had always been a very racist society into an ideologically absolutist state based on principles of "rational" racial segregation. For my present purposes, I wish to stress that the book is an overtly religious text (with a strongly anti-apartheid political message) recounting the day-to-day activities and the curiously Catholic practices of a high anglican parish priest, for whom "social work" was inseparable from religious work and practice. Trevor Huddleston's reactions against the apartheid government were always rooted in the underlying theological (and simple) conviction that any poor black person was born in the image of God and thus as inherently worthy of dignified treatment as any so-called white person.¹

¹ Trevor Huddleston, *Naught for Your Comfort* (London: Collins, 1956; Fontana paperback edition, 1957). The Christian theological underpinning—and the anglo-catholic cultural outlook and tonality of expression—are pervasive throughout. If there is a more specifically political underpinning, it is anti-Statist, with comparisons of South African government action (with particular condemnation of the Bantu Education Act) with Adolph Hitler's government. The religious and the political are usually linked. For example in chapter one: "I believe that, because God became Man, therefore human nature in itself has a dignity and a value which is infinite. I believe that this conception necessarily carries with it the idea that the State exists for the individual, not the individual for the State" (p. 16). The final chapter reiterates the message: "I KNOW the solution... It lies in the simple recognition that ALL men are made in "the image and likeness of God": that in consequence each PERSON is of infinite and eternal value: that the State exists to protect the person, but is in itself always of inferior value to the person" (p. 186).

Fifty years later, and roughly ten years after the “liberation” of South Africa from the apartheid régime, it has become normal to think that the world has moved on from the embarrassingly archaic religious conception and cultural outlook of “Father” Huddleston, as everybody called him.² South Africa has passed quickly (even abruptly) to a democratic constitution, and as part of that process has undergone the experience of a much publicised “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” which was intended as a means of facilitating the transition, an experience which stands comparison with many other experiments in political transition (particularly in South America and Eastern Europe). Many of these exercises in reconciliation are essentially jurisprudential in nature, often international (or supranational) in make-up, and align themselves with the demand for justice which, as the influential American philosopher John Rawls has been a pioneer in showing, are at the basis of a conception of the modern state and of a new international order, based on respect for the fundamental “droits de l’homme,” or human rights. Since the proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (if not, at least for the French, since that tumultuous month of August 1789), “rights” have gradually become the dominant language of the public good around the globe and this “rights revolution” has recently been

² On Huddleston, see Robin Denniston, *Trevor Huddleston: A Life* (London: Macmillan, 1999). For the above quotations concerning his final reception in South Africa, see the second paperback edition (London: Pan, 2000), p. xiii and p. xx. Trevor Huddleston was recalled to England by his monastic order in 1956 (no doubt because of his politically controversial rôle). He went on to be the Anglican bishop of the newly independent Tanzania, then bishop of Stepney in the east end of London and finally bishop of Mauritius and archbishop of the Indian Ocean. From 1981 he was president of the Anti-Apartheid movement and addressed the United Nations General Assembly in 1982 speaking in favour of the introduction of sanctions against South Africa. My purpose in highlighting Huddleston’s rôle is not to stress any particular prominence compared with other freedom-fighters (with many of whom Huddleston worked closely) but to suggest the specifically Christian input in the struggle for human rights.

well described as “a fundamental change that has come over us in our lifetime.”³

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission is not totally unrelated to this “rights revolution” along with the many other judicial and juridical experiments undertaken in an unstable world which has seen the collapse of established oppressive régimes occurring in the space of a mere ten or fifteen years. The Commission, set up by the South-African State under its new transitional constitution, was indeed a judicial body: the seventeen commissioners could subpoena witnesses, had powers of search and seizure of evidence, and, above all (through one of its three committees and the only one made up exclusively of professional judges and lawyers) it could grant individual amnesty for serious “violations of human rights” as well as award financial compensation (which has turned out to be very limited). But it is the purpose of this present paper to demonstrate that the importance and the very distinctiveness of this South African Commission is not to be viewed in terms of a “rights revolution” or even in terms of its effectiveness in promoting justice—so much as constituting an attempt to achieve (some would say to conjure up)—in primarily spiritual and ethical terms—the “reconciliation” of the old and the new élites into a “new” régime whose “raison d’être” is not founded on racial segregation but on an ethos of racial harmony and equality. The promotion of such an ethos in the public sphere was instinctively seen, or felt, by the élites who worked on composing the new constitutional settlement, to be a necessary first step in implementing the extraordinarily reconciliatory vision of Nelson Mandela and the projection of this new mentality was an indispensable concomitant, or even a necessary precursor, of effective change on the political or economic front. In undertaking such a task, the constant points of reference (in French, the “référénts”) were not legalistic or

³ Michael Ignatieff, *The Rights Revolution* (Toronto: the CBC Massey Lectures, 2000), p. 1. See also Michael Ignatieff, *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry* (New Jersey: Princeton U.P., 2001). Blandine Kriegel sees Rawl’s *Theory of Justice* as “l’un des résumés possibles de la pensée de la fin du XX^e siècle” (*Réflexions sur la Justice*, Paris: Plon, 2001, p. 9).

political, but moralistic and religious; they were not primarily referring to the forensic truth of juridical process and political right, but to the “revealing” and “healing” processes which took on an openly spiritual and often Christian form. To assert otherwise would be to misconceive the true nature of the Commission, *as it was, or as it happened*. It was in fact a “happening”—intended as a national catharsis or a deliberately provoked *crise de conscience*. Once it was over (and it lasted two and a half years), there was to be no further indulgence or special pleading; there was simply the practical and daunting task of undertaking the entire reconstruction of South Africa.⁴

The religious complexion of the work of the Commission is discussed in this paper as a form of discourse,⁵ as a form of culture,⁶ and thirdly as a justificatory philosophy,⁷ and it is our contention that all three (in intertwining ways and varying degrees) pervade and illuminate the Commission’s work and conclusions. Of course it is logical and understandable to reject all of these as

⁴ This explains, at least in part, why the TRC has had a bad press in South Africa and has almost entirely faded from view; nobody wishes to persist in reliving or reviving traumatism, even though the recognition of the “truth” of the past (which inevitably was revealed in only very partial and incomplete form) is intended to make the present more bearable. The final report of the Commission was presented to the South African President in March 2003 and attracted much less media attention than did the main report in 1998.

⁵ “Discourse analysis” aims to formulate meaning entirely in terms of words used. A major work remains to be undertaken on the whole text (and audiovisual recordings, films, etc.) of the Commission’s work (and particularly the official seven published volumes). Analysis of words (in sung and chanted form as well as the varying registers of their spoken form) needs to be supplemented by analysis of gestures, of body movements, of dancing, of dress and other accoutrements and the general use of space. In the brief space of this article, I limit my few comments to different connotations of words in English and in French, placing the words in the specific context of not only Christianity but of Anglicanism.

⁶ Many meanings of “culture” are apposite here, but particularly the image, the perception or the comprehension of a world which is specific to a particular *milieu*. See Michel de Certeau, *La Culture au pluriel* (Paris: Seuil, 1980).

⁷ In the given context, “philosophy” can be replaced by “theology.” The best survey of the theological groundwork in this area is John W. de Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (London: SCM Press, 2002).

bogus, even fatuous, if one wishes to reject religion as merely a legitimising and subliminal strategy for social and political domination or merely the instrumentalisation of other human or societal forces.⁸ But such a rejection, while plausible on *a priori* philosophical grounds, does not take us far in understanding (if only as “cultural history”⁹) all the evidence of the omnipresence of religion in South Africa. Seen from the perspective of a Western European country that prides itself on its “laïcité” and which assumes (rightly or wrongly) that religion is an entirely private matter, it is startling to note the religious affiliations of the large majority of those who fought in the last fifty years for evolutionary or revolutionary change in South Africa—and this has to be set side by side with the centrality of the Christian religion for the white supremacist oppressors—a very uncomfortable mirror image. This predominance of religious affiliation cannot be demonstrated or exemplified here in detail, but we should note that nearly all the leaders in the black community (or the exiled or imprisoned ANC leaders) had been educated in Church mission schools and (what is more surprising by European standards) remained close to their religious mentors in later years (if they did not become religious leaders themselves). They operated in a sociological and cultural context where it was not so much a question of “*church and state*” going together (the South African State had become a Republic in 1961, at least in part in order to abolish church schools since they were seen as incompatible with apartheid) so much as a question of “*church and society*,” with religious practice permeating society at all levels and in a multitude of forms. In the 1991 South African census, more than seventy percent of those who responded indicated an affiliation

⁸ The question of the instrumentalisation of religion in the TRC’s work is well discussed in Dominique Darbon, “La TRC: Le Miracle sud-africain en question,” *Revue française de Science politique*, vol. 48, no.6 (Dec. 1998), p. 707-724. For a general discussion, see Daniel Dubuisson, *La religion et l’occident* (Paris: Editions Complexe, 1998).

⁹ The treatment of methodism in the industrial revolution by E.P. Thompson springs to mind (with its particular emphasis on the singing of hymns—see below!). See *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Allen Lane, 1963), chapter 11, “The transforming power of the cross.”

with one or other of the major denominations of the Christian church, and there was no “European-style” general split between the “laïc” and the religious in intellectual life, at least before the 1990s.¹⁰

The membership of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission is in itself very revealing. The Chairman was the anglican Archbishop of Capetown, Desmond Tutu, a man whose name and reputation throughout the world stood second only to Nelson Mandela. He dominated the proceedings of the Commission and set the tone, by his use of the media and by his “presence” as a sort of Moses leading his flock. The title of his book describing the work of the TRC is sufficient indication of his interpretation of the Commission’s work: *No Future Without Forgiveness*.¹¹ The deputy Chairperson of the Commission—like Tutu appointed directly by Nelson Mandela—was Alex Boraine who had previously been President of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (followed by a career in opposition politics and NGO international pressure-group work). Whilst there is some evidence that he was occasionally embarrassed by the overly-Christian tone of the Commission, he expresses few misgivings about its essentially religious nature, seeing this as a reflection of

¹⁰ Intellectuals may well of course see the recent emergence of such a split as a sign of the “maturing” of South African modern civilisation. In demographic terms, given the exponential growth of newer and less institutionalised forms of pentacostalist “born-again” religious practice, it is doubtful whether the perceptible decline in traditional denominational religion reflects a general decline in religious practice. See David Maxwell, “African Gifts of the Spirit: Fundamentalism and the Rise of the Born-Again Movement in Africa” in M. Percy & I. Jones (eds.), *Fundamentalism, Church and Society* (London: SPCK, 2002), p. 160-182.

¹¹ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, London: Random House, 1999. This book is demonstrably more religious in its language and cultural references than *Naught for your comfort*. The crucial 1994 election is described as “a veritable spiritual experience, a mountain-top experience. The black person entered the booth one person and emerged on the other side a new, transfigured one” (p. 5) etc. The tone throughout is inspirational. Even the celebrated “rainbow people of God” was not first intended by Tutu as a felicitous *trouvaille* concerning multi-coloured South Africa but was a biblical reference to the rainbow which signalled the end of Noah’s flood.

South African society in general.¹² Other prominent members of the Commission were: Bongani Finca, a Presbyterian minister, (who was asked to take the special church service before the Commission's first hearings)¹³ Khozo Mgojo, a Methodist minister (nominated directly by Mandela) who was a former president of the Methodist Church and also president of the South African Council of Churches which played such a large role in the anti-apartheid movement. Another member was Ms Yasmin Sooka who was the South African leader of the multi-faith World Conference on Religion and Peace. She was a Hindu and Boraine tellingly lets slip that she had misgivings about the "strong religious and largely Christian emphasis in the Commission."¹⁴ Other members of the Commission—lawyers and doctors for the most part—had clear links with the Church. Moreover, the Commission's Director of Research, Dr Charles Villa-Vicencio, was a well-known Professor of Religion, who had attacked apartheid as an "all-pervading heresy."¹⁵ But it is difficult to discern a pro-religious bias—choosing the religiously-oriented for membership and rejecting those of more secular persuasion. Some of Nelson Mandela's personal nominations (not on the list presented to him) were

¹² Boraine did not like Tutu wearing his purple episcopal cassock at the Commission's hearings (a sort of "pulling rank"?) and he thought that Tutu often acted "as a pastor rather than as a secular commissioner" (Alex Boraine, *A Country Unmasked*, Oxford University Press, Capetown, 2000, p. 101 and p. 252). Nonetheless he often enjoyed and took full part in the symbolic rituals. After one of the Commission's religious services at the beginning of their work, he comments: "For me the saving grace was the singing, the dancing, and the traditional enactment of purification; of repentance, of sorrow, of commitment" (p. 101). He makes the very important point that the prayers and the hymns often came spontaneously from those who were attending and he concludes: "... even though there is certainly room for criticism, I think the religious nature of the wider South African community helped the Commission in its work" (p. 268).

¹³ "It was supposed to have been an inter-faith service but it soon became apparent that it was almost entirely a Christian service and very largely Protestant" (Boraine, p. 101).

¹⁴ Boraine, p. 79.

¹⁵ See John De Gruchy & Charles Villa-Vicencio, *Apartheid is a Heresy* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1983).

religious, but so were his vetos. There had been an outcry, for example, about the fact that Stanley Mogoba had been omitted from the final list: he was the presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa and later president of the Pan African Congress.¹⁶

But this listing of Christian affiliations tells us less about the religious tone of the Commission than do the ceremonies surrounding its inauguration and the rituals of its daily routine. It began with a spiritual “retreat” at the Anglican Centre at Faure in the Western Cape, led by Father Francis Cull, a small, 81-year old white-haired priest. Alex Boraine gives us the cultural milieu and the “atmosphere”:

It brought back memories for me of my days in the methodist Church. There was a sense of déjà vue (*sic*); nothing had really changed, certainly not the religious in-jokes!... [Father Cull] was a lovely man, deeply spiritual... What I liked particularly about him was his sensitivity to members of the Commission who represented different faiths and those who were agnostic... Some of his notes were helpful and constantly emphasised the need for roots, for introspection, for self-love and affirmation, for humility and fidelity. He referred to an old rabbi who is reported to have said, “An angel walks before every human being saying “make way, make way for the image of God.” For me this summed up the goal of the Commission.¹⁷

The last sentence of this quotation might raise eyebrows, but it does reveal much, not only about the preparation of the Commissioners for their rôle (a rôle of understanding rather than of judging), but also about the way in which the Commission’s work was subsequently undertaken. The Commission’s hearings involved the construction of a theatrical space, a sanctified forum, where all the actors (including the Commissioners themselves) were participants in a special kind of *sharing* experience, where narratives of suffering, either inflicted or endured, however strong or harrowing in detail, could be recounted in powerfully charged language—words that are made active and effective by being

¹⁶ Boraine, p. 74.

¹⁷ Boraine, p. 82.

spoken out from the inside of the person into the hushed assembly (and, through the television cameras, to the outer world of the “nation”) and where the shock, or the anger and the disgust, and any other emotions, however intense and private, were sublimated or purified (“cleansed” is the religious word) in a shared spiritual consciousness. The religious connotations of all this were not hidden at all (and I leave aside entirely the psychological interpretations which are hardly hidden deeply): the Commission’s hearings usually began with prayers, candles were frequently lit and hymns were sung; witnesses were hugged, tears were openly shed, as souls were beared.¹⁸

This all seems very far removed from the juridical concern for trying crimes or the political concern for settling conflict. The Commission could not in fact avoid hard politics. Yet even some of the Commission’s tensest moments involving heated confrontation of strong political enemies could be overlaid with religious symbolism or angst. For example, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, the notorious leader of the Inkatha Freedom Party and by the 1990s the deadly enemy of the ANC, was subpoenaed to appear before the Commission to explain—and it was hoped to confess to—well-known atrocities that had been committed in Kwa-Zulu Natal. Buthelezi was an Anglican, like Tutu, the man facing him in the well-attended Commission hearing. He began his short speech (before submitting a long written report) by saying that during his quiet time that morning he had come across a hymn that he wanted to share with the members of the Commission. It was a well-known anglican hymn and he not only shared it but sang it!

¹⁸ In terms of religious *practice*, this is much closer to modern evangelicalism than to Father Huddleston’s anglo-catholicism of the 1950s, in which he as a priest (Christ’s special representative) administered the sacraments from the altar and heard confessions (constantly!) in private. Modern evangelical practice (not confined to any one wing of the traditional denominational spectrum) is much more congregationally based, involving the sharing of spiritual feelings (often with the holding of hands), the narration of experiences (and conversions) and the *frissons* (the “feel-good” sentiments) of strong emotional sharing. Emphasis is placed on “community” (the “community of the faithful” or “faith communities” which denominations now tend to be called).

Just as I am, without one plea
But that Thy Blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bidd'st me come to Thee,
O LAMB OF GOD, I come.

Just as I am, though toss'd about
With many a conflict, many a doubt,
Fightings and fears within, without,
O LAMB OF GOD, I come.¹⁹

Boraine comments: "I think Desmond Tutu was the only one who joined in, somewhat belatedly, in the singing of those two verses."²⁰ How should such a strange piece of theatre be interpreted? Clearly here, religion is a cultural referent, an "interface," a *terrain d'entente*, to let all those present know that Buthelezi did not consider himself as an "outsider," acting in deference to Tutu's moral superior status and that Buthelezi was prepared to challenge the archbishop "on his own ground." The greater the crimes (or the "sins"), the greater the need to take, or at least to share, the high moral ground.

But all this outward cultural religiosity, so jarring when extracted in this way from its overall context, was consistent with, and merely reflective of, an inner purpose which suffused much of the Commission's exhaustive and exhausting hearings. The whole purpose of the Commission, as expressed in the very title of the

¹⁹ This 19th century hymn (N^o 71 in *The Mirfield Mission Hymn Book*, compiled by the Community of the Resurrection and widely used fifty years ago in South Africa) was usually sung at the solemn point in the Anglican mass where the congregation came forward to the altar rail to receive the eucharist. A full study of the hymns sung at the Commission's hearings would be very revealing: Christ's sacrificial sufferings (and especially the shedding of blood), the wounded body, leading to triumph *through* as well as *over* adversity; all can be taken as metaphors for South Africa.

²⁰ Boraine, p. 149. A similar use of Christian references—about whether Christ had answered questions before Herod or Pontius Pilate—provided the nearest thing to a degree of civility between Tutu and the former Prime Minister Peter Botha, who came very close to being gaoled for refusing to attend the TRC. (He escaped gaoled on a technicality). See Piet Meiring, *Chronicle of the Truth Commission*, p. 337-8, quoted Boraine, p. 206-7.

Act of parliament which set it up,²¹ was the promotion of “national unity” and “reconciliation.” The rhetoric used in the Act has a remarkably balanced, measured (and even anglican²²) ring: “There is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for ubuntu, but not for victimisation.” Leaving aside the much-commented-on meaning of *ubuntu* (which certainly has the merit of bringing any imported political, legal or theological notions into contact with an indigenous African notion), one must express a certain reservation about a resultant “nominalisation” process in which words or phrases take on righteous meanings, which foreclose any open discussion of their real meaning. The word “reconciliation” is one such word, which the present Archbishop of Canterbury warns against, as “a seductively comfortable word, fatally close to ‘consensus’.”²³

The words “reconciliation” and “national unity” have indeed to be interpreted in the practical political context of South Africa in the early 1990s, and particularly in the light of Nelson Mandela’s oft-stated desire (and that of the majority of others in his entourage) to work for an inclusive South Africa, one in which the new democratic culture would not lead to a total displacement of one existing exclusive ruling élite and its replacement by

²¹ The “Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act,” 28th June 1995. The passage quoted also appears in the epilogue of the 1993 interim Constitution.

²² See below, note 28.

²³ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, p. 266, quoted in de Gruchy, *Reconciliation.*, p. 25. De Gruchy himself stresses that reconciliation is “an action, praxis and movement before it becomes a theory or dogma, something celebrated before it is explained” (p. 21). Nominalisation is the representation of a process as a noun; for an application of this to Blairism, see Norman Fairclough, *New Labour, New Language?* (London: Routledge, 2000) Blairite discourse is very similar in many respects to the South African reconciliation discourse, including the common use of words such as “empowerment” and the “third way,” (see below). Concerning the word “reconciliation,” linguistic coherence reaches its limits in the United States Congress’s enactment of legislation (to bring to an end the welfare state?) entitled the “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act” (U.S. Congress, 22 August 2001)!

another. The words “reconciliation” and “national unity” imply unavoidably the recognition of *the acceptance of differences* which go beyond the establishment of a common system of justice according to “laws,” criteria and standards of human rights (with as a consequence a system of punishment or sanctions when these laws or standards are infringed). “Rights” imply an absolute, definable (and hence legal) standard, even if a practical application of these standards falls short of the absolute. Reconciliation implies the merging or at least the bringing together of opposites, for the sake of an attainable harmony (meaning national unity), hopefully leading to (in French) a *compromis* (desirable) rather than a *compromission* (undesirable).

Since in moral (and hence religious) terms, a “violation of human rights” means the committing of a “wrong” (interpreted as a “sin” in religious terms applying to the volition of the person committing the act), Christianity as a theological system has one particular way of moving away from the irreconcilable clash of wrongs; and the key to this reconciling of the irreconcilable is the continual distinction made between the “sin” and the “sinner.” All human beings (since Adam and Eve) are born into sin, by their very humanity; but the *full* recognition of the committing of sin (and the awareness of its consequences) can have a redemptive effect, releasing the individual from the wretched state of simply needing punishment and revealing in the human being the divine potential of goodness (or Godness). Such a state of grace can only come about when the individual has fully realised his or her commission of wrong, has fully acknowledged it (through confession, remorse and repentance) and (what is more important for the process of national reconciliation) is prepared to recognise (through the application of the simple principle of loving your neighbour as yourself) the potential for others to be forgiven, as he or she is forgiven. This was the “forgiveness” which Desmond Tutu frequently referred to as a process of “healing wounds” (of the individual, but by extension, of the nation).

The most startling example of this approach of “hating the sin but loving the sinner” occurred when the President of the Commission had to confront Winnie Madikizela-Mandela who

was widely suspected of perpetrating terrible crimes, including murder, or incitement to murder, children. This case, like many others, described in detail the utter deprivation of humanity in inflicting extreme torture leading to death—and these descriptions were uttered in the presence of the relatives of the victims with the suspected perpetrators also present—the difference this time being that the chief suspect (not quite the “accused”) was a leading and charismatic figure, and this meant that the heart-rending expressions of emotions led to the highest audience rating being recorded by the ever-present media of all the Commission’s hearings. What followed when Desmond Tutu pressed Winnie to confess became however a form of pioneering “reality TV show” that shocks (or morbidly attracts) by its excessive candour, by its seeming mixing of genres, by the frisson of the (hardly concealed) sexual overtones in close juxtaposition to horror and cruelty:

I don’t know that we will ever know all the details of what it is that went wrong. Many, many love you. Many, many say you should have been where you ought to be, the first lady of this country... I speak to you as someone who loves you very deeply. Who loves your family very deeply... There are people out there who want to embrace you. I still embrace you because I love you and I love you very deeply... I beg you, I beg you, I beg you please. You are a great person and you don’t know how your greatness would be enhanced if you were to say sorry, things went wrong, forgive me, I beg you.²⁴

However implausible we might think it—that Mrs Mandikizela Mandela’s “greatness” would be enhanced by a full confession (and she did, after all, say sorry, albeit in a rather mealy-mouthed sort of way)—it should be noted that this “loving of the sinner” approach, while specifically Christian, has never been the Church’s traditional philosophy concerning the treatment of crime or of “sin.” Better known by far has been the Church’s traditional approach to retributive justice—a good part of which is held in common with the “new” concerns of the international “rights” revolution. But religious condemnations and calls for retribution could in the past go much deeper. In theological terms,

²⁴ Boraine, p. 251-2.

“punishment” was meted out, not only for civil reasons (to do with the supremacy of an order of law), but also to appease a wrathful God (or the gods)—often through *persecution* or even *sacrifice*, as the necessary means of “propitiation” or “expiation” for sins (the same words in French²⁵), as in the case of the “witches of Salem,” or, for that matter, the prevalent persecution of witches in South African traditional society. The new Christian conception (of restorative justice) is far removed from these traditional conceptions, and does not require rendering “satisfaction” to God.²⁶

The new Christian discourse can however be very deceptive. In spite of Tutu’s pleas and declarations of love, Winnie Mandikizela did not receive an amnesty from the Commission, for she did not apply for one. There is in fact considerable semantic confusion caused by the word “forgiveness” particularly when we remove ourself from the cultural South African context. In French the word is translated by the word *pardon* which, in modern French,—so more clearly than in the still heavy morally-laden “forgiveness” of the English language—carries as its main meaning the basic juridical meaning of “release from punishment for an offence” (as in the English, “royal pardon,” etc.).²⁷

²⁵ There is a word in French which defines this more sombre process: “satisfaire à Dieu,” defined in the new *Grand Robert*, 2001, in the theological sense, as “Donner (à Dieu) la réparation de l’offense que constitue le péché.” There is another theological word—“atonement”—which is English in origin (14th century “at one-ment”) which stresses the harmony reached with God in the process of propitiation. It was a favourite with Desmond Tutu: perhaps the “at-one-ment” can apply to South African reconciliation. (It is untranslatable into French).

²⁶ John de Gruchy (*Reconciliation*, p. 65-76) stresses the theological contributions of Albrecht Ritschl, P.T. Forsyth and Karl Barth in moving to this new conception of reconciliation.

²⁷ A recent major French study by Sandrine Lefranc, *Politiques du pardon* (Paris: PUF, 2002), documents very clearly the extraordinary difficulty of bridging the private moral and religious world and the public legal world in terms of any “law of forgiveness.” In spite of Hannah Arendt’s striking admission of the Christian origins of what she considered a morally necessary—at least partial—political pardon, moral philosophers in general lay stress on the incompatibility of the juridico-political order and the religious.

Archbishop Tutu was on almost all occasions talking a language of individual morality and of Christian attitudes, when he talked of forgiveness. This has been, I contend, the source of much general confusion concerning the overall rôle of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in which a general impression has been given that the “Christian” leaders were “soft” on the perpetrators of the horrific crimes committed by the State’s agents in the years of apartheid. It should be noted that the moralising “Christian” leaders of the Commission which we have mentioned so far *had nothing whatsoever to do* with the granting of amnesty to the relatively small proportion (eleven percent) of those who applied for it. The amnesties were decided by a special Amnesty Committee (of which the chairperson was not even a member of the Commission!) made up entirely of qualified lawyers and judges (some of whom had been members of the judiciary which had overwhelmingly functioned as a pillar of the apartheid edifice, lending it legality and thus becoming accessories to crimes against humanity!). Their decisions concerning amnesty were certainly controversial, but cannot be said to have been based on Christian moral principles, since “remorse” (or “contrition” or “repentance”) was *not* a condition for the granting of amnesty (only the “full disclosure” of related facts, together with the judgement that the “human rights violation” had been undertaken with a political objective, not through personal volition).²⁸

Finally, we can ask the question, why (apart from this much disputed jurisprudential rôle played by the separate Amnesty Committee) did the overall Christian approach to a Truth and Reconciliation Commission prove to be more palatable and practicable in South Africa (whatever subsequent misgivings there might have been) compared with other commissions, notably in South America? We have already noted the extraordinary inter-connexions of church and society in South Africa. Perhaps a further part of the answer lies in the fact that the Catholic Church

²⁸ Only 650 candidates were amnestied, out of the 6000 applicants, giving a percentage of only 11%. Half of those applying were already serving prison sentences for the crimes committed (Lefranc, *Politiques du pardon*, p. 71).

had not played the dominant role in the multi-faceted religious history of South Africa, in the way that it had played such a role (and disgracefully so, from a political and moral point of view) in South America. There is moreover a hegemonic aspect of Catholicism and an insistence on the over-riding collective “auctoritas” of the Church, which would prevent the confession or the forgiveness being a therapeutic individual experience in the way that the South African example called for. Perhaps (and I put this forward tentatively), there was a particular applicability of Anglicanism to this example of “mediation” in South Africa. Its record on human rights in terms of ethnic matters for almost two hundred years had hardly been much to be proud of (Trevor Huddleston and a handful of others notwithstanding) but at least it had been the main enemy (for political rather than theological reasons) of the Dutch Reformed Church which had supported the moral horror of apartheid, and anglicanism could therefore be easily seen as an alternative ready-made “élite.” Desmond Tutu was brought up on the famous 1662 Preface to the Book of Common Prayer which made the “via media” an article of central faith (however unfulfilled its real pretensions were) and “mediation” etymologically implies a “via media.”²⁹ Desmond Tutu saw the Commission as a “Third Way” between Nuremburg and National Amnesia³⁰ and Alex Boraine wrote of “redressing imbalances” in overcoming racism, rather than the triumph of “right” over “wrong.”³¹ This is the essence of the spirit of

²⁹ “It hath been the wisdom of the Church of England, ever since the first compiling of her Publick Liturgy, to keep the mean between the two extremes, of too much stiffness in refusing, and of too much easiness in admitting any variation from it...” For a commentary on the mediatory aspects of the Church of England, see my article, “Neither right nor left, but middle wicket: Some reflections on the middle position in the topography of British political perceptions,” *Idéologies dans le monde anglo-saxon*, n° 11, Grenoble, 1999, p. 79-97.

³⁰ Tutu, p. 10-36.

³¹ Speaking as an opposition member of parliament in 1977 about the problem of white power, he asserted: “the thesis is White power, the antithesis is Black power, and what we have to struggle together for in this country is a synthesis which will resolve the basic conflict between White and Black power.”

reconciliation and mediation, rather than the triumph of an absolute order of human rights justice.

Indeed, all triumphalism would be inappropriate as a conclusion. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission solved nothing and was never intended to “achieve” reconciliation but merely to promote it. The Commission spokesmen in presenting the final reports (in 1998 and in 2003) were the first to point out the emptiness of any discourse of reconciliation and indeed the futility of the whole exercise if politicians do not succeed in bringing about the indispensable “economic justice.” It is true that many (especially professional lawyers) feel that the Commission was “hi-jacked” by religious interests, but, as we have seen, the general national healing mission was ordained in a moralistic tone by the Act setting up the Commission.³² In this paper I have suggested that a knowledge of the specifically Christian cultural background is helpful and indeed indispensable in analysing and understanding the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In undertaking this task, I run the risk of inferring that there is an exclusively religious meaning to the Commission’s work or that the religious element can be “extracted” from a more general meaning. This is not my intention. There is no clear-cut dichotomy separating the ethical from the legal work accomplished

(Boraine, p. 23). He also talked about appealing to those in the middle: “South Africans desperately need to create a common memory that can be acknowledged by those who created and implemented the apartheid system, by those who fought against it and by the many more who were in the middle and claimed not to know what was happening in their own country.” (Alex Boraine and Janet Levy (eds), *The Healing of a Nation*, Cape Town, 1994, p. xvi-xvii).

³² The most persuasive and researched criticism of the beatitudinal tone of the Commission is Richard A. Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001). The final sentence: “Turning human rights talk into a moral-theological treatise which extols forgiveness and reconciliation in an effort to forge a new moral vision of the nation in the end destroys the most important promise of human rights: that is, its possible contribution to a thoroughgoing transformation of an authoritarian criminal justice system and the construction of real and lasting democratic legitimacy.” (p. 230) See my comment above in the text, for the reasons why the Commission was set up. It was never intended primarily as an organ for the promotion of human rights.

by the Commission and it would be a strong falsification to extract any “other-worldly” meaning. It was not only practicing Christians who could demonstrate a strong sense of forgiveness, nor was it only Christians who could develop ideas of “restorative justice” rather than retribution.³³ But this is merely the corollary of claiming that the diverse religious interests in South Africa form an integral part of general South African society at all levels, and do not stand apart from it.

Robert GRIFFITHS
Université de Savoie



BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Boraine, A., *A Country Unmasked*, Cape Town: O.U.P., 2000.
Certeau, M., de, *La Culture au pluriel*, Paris: Seuil, 1980.
Darbon, D., “La TRC: le Miracle sud-africain en question,” *Revue française de Science politique*, vol. 48, n°6, Décembre 1998, p.707-727.
Denniston, R., *Trevor Huddleston: A Life*, London: Macmillan, 1999.
Fairclough, N., *New Labour, New Language?* London: Routledge, 2000.

³³ Joe Slovo, humanist and communist, commented when minister of housing in 1994: “I would like to know who killed my wife [assassinated by a government police agents in 1982]. Not to see to it that he was hanged but just to achieve inner peace. I’ve always thought that this is the best revenge I can take for the murder of my wife—to make these people live in a free society” cited in Gillian Slovo, *Every Secret Thing: My Family, My Country* (London: Little, Brown, 1997), p. 253. As for restorative justice, a recent French book comments the profound mutation in penal policy stemming from full consideration given to the sufferings of victims and the perpetrator’s recognition of this, A. Garapon, F. Gros & T. Pech, *Et ce sera justice: Punir en démocratie* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2001).

- Garapon A., Gros F. & Pech T, *Et ce sera justice: Punir en démocratie*. Paris: Odile Jacob, 2001.
- Graybill, L., *Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Miracle or Model?* Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2002.
- Griffiths, R., "Neither right nor left, but middle wicket: Some reflections on the middle position in the topography of British political perceptions," in *Idéologies dans le monde anglo-saxon*, n°11, Grenoble, 1999, p. 79-98.
- Gruchy, J. de, & Villa-Vicencio, C. (eds.), *Apartheid is a Heresy*, Cape Town: D. Philip, 1983.
- Gruchy, J.W. de, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice*, London: SCM Press, 2002.
- Huddleston, T., *Naught for your comfort*, London: Collins, 1956.
- Ignatieff, M., *The Rights Revolution*, Toronto: Anansi, 2000.
- Ignatieff, M., *Human Rights as politics and idolatry*, Princeton: Princeton U.P., 2001.
- Kriegel, B., *Réflexions sur la justice et sur la loi*, Paris: Plon, 2001.
- Lefranc, S., *Politiques du pardon*, Paris: PUF, 2002.
- Maxwell, D., "African Gifts of the Spirit: Fundamentalism and the Rise of the Born-Again Movement in Africa," in Percy, M & Jones, I. *Fundamentalism: Church and Society*, London, SPCK, 2002, p. 160-182.
- Thompson, E.P., *The making of the English working class*, Oxford: OUP, 1963.
- Tutu, D., *No future without forgiveness*, London: Rider, 1999.
- Williams, R., *On Christian Theology*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.
- Wilson, R.A., *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State*, Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2001.