



The absurdity of reconciliation. What we (should) learn from Rustenburg and the implications for South Africa

Demaine Solomons
University of the Western Cape
Cape Town, South Africa
dsolomons@uwc.ac.za

Abstract

The quest for reconciliation in South Africa is an exercise in the absurd. To say it is an exercise for the absurd might also have some merit. Like Sisyphus, the figure in Greek mythology, those engaged in the quest for reconciliation are condemned to repeat forever the same, in some cases, meaningless task of pushing a boulder up a mountain only to see it roll down again. This is amid the human propensity to forever search for meaning irrespective of the incongruity of the ideal and the absurdity that defines our existence. The illogicality of apartheid and the subsequent pain and alienation continues to be a defining feature of a country trying to come to terms not what it ought to be, but what it is – chaotic, irrational and sometimes meaningless. In this context, Rustenburg is a symbol of the audacity to dream of something beyond the absurd. Moreover, invoking a theology of reconciliation to achieve something extraordinary amid an uncertain future.

Keywords

South Africa; absurd; reconciliation; apartheid; Rustenburg

Introduction

As a philosophical premise, determinism leads one to believe that every event, including human cognition and behaviour, is causally determined by previously existing causes or an unbroken chain of events. In colloquial terms, this is what we refer when we say the “one thing leading to the next.” Consequently, if we take the time to string it all together, many of

our challenges, as well as successes, can be traced to a source, a genesis of sorts, from which a trajectory is set in motion. Yet, whether they are old or new, such trajectories are not fixed. It is in a state of flux, constantly gravitating towards an ideal; in a search for meaning in a world riddled with contradictions and obscurities. This is what the French existentialist philosopher Albert Camus grapples with when he writes about the “absurd” in his famous essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942).¹ For Camus, the “absurd” centres on the notion that life is inherently devoid of meaning, hence, the reference to the absurdity of our existence. This goes against those tendencies seeking inherent value and meaning in the context of a meaningless or chaotic, irrational world. Camus compares the absurdity of life with the situation of Sisyphus, a figure of Greek mythology who is condemned to repeat forever the same meaningless task of pushing a boulder up a mountain, only to see it roll back down again – a metaphorical loop that continues indefinitely into the realms of eternity. Moreover, at its core, the Sisyphus analogy speaks to our propensity to forever search for meaning irrespective of the incongruity of the ideal and the absurdity that defines our existence. The illogicality of apartheid in South Africa is nothing short of apt in this regard. As a counterbalance to such illogicality, religious leaders at the now-famous Rustenburg Conference embarked on a journey to shift the trajectory of their country. This was a romantic pursuit – a search for a new way of being in the aftermath of the absurdity of apartheid. The Rustenburg Conference is, as it were, the audacity to dream of a society that does not exist; what is more, harnessing a theology of reconciliation (a mystery) to fulfil that dream, not as an end in itself, but as a means to build a just social order.² It was bold and set in motion a chain of events that culminated in what became the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a process for better or worse, etched the dream of reconciliation in hearts and minds of South Africans.

1 A. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O’Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2000).

2 For a detailed discussion on a theology of reconciliation in South Africa see, J.W. de Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring justice* (London: SCM Press, 2002).

Setting the scene

Thirty years ago, the former president of South Africa, F.W. de Klerk made his famous speech signalling the unbanning of the liberation movements, the easing of repulsive race laws, and the freeing of political prisoners – the crossing of the Rubicon as it was referred to in political phraseology.³ Reflecting on this period, Robert Price argues that a precondition for the collapse of legislative apartheid, leading to fundamental change, is due to an extended period of economic decline as well as the political unrest of the 1980s.⁴ Furthermore, in geopolitical terms, the post-Cold War environment left the apartheid regime exposed. The anti-communist narrative, a staple of apartheid upkeep, no longer garnered the support of its Western allies after the collapse of Soviet Communism. Essentially, there was no need for a Western proxy (in the apartheid regime) to “safeguard” the region from the communist threat. Geopolitically the world had moved on. Domestically things were also unravelling. The Mass Democratic Movement with its expansive network of community-based activists left an indelible mark. This grabbed the attention of the international community and the efforts to rid the world of apartheid intensified. In the context increasing protests and un-governability at a local level, Western States responded through the intensification of economic sanctions (including disinvestment) having a crippling effect on the economy. The apartheid regime was struggling. Not only was it running out of friends but also out of options. The debt service crisis brought about by a stagnant, at best, sluggish economy was one of the many signs that something had to give. Effectively this made it more difficult for the regime to continue with its resource-intensive campaign to defend the system. Notwithstanding the difficulties faced, even the most ardent adversary of apartheid would have to concede that the regime if it willed, could have grind it out some more. One should not forget that South Africa possessed one of the most advanced (well-organised) military forces in the world and this gave apartheid loyalists reason to be bullish. In this regard, suggestions that the anti-apartheid armed struggle posed an

3 J. Jansen, *Knowledge in the Blood: Confronting Race and the Apartheid Past* (California: Stanford University Press, 2009), 25.

4 R.M. Price, *The Apartheid State in Crisis: Political Transformation in South Africa, 1975–1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 12.

immediate threat must be viewed with the suspicion it deserves. Up until that point, the state was relatively successful in keeping the liberation forces at bay. What is more, there were certainly enough apartheid hardliners ready to defend their privileged position. Nevertheless, on the part of the regime, there were lingering doubts, too many questions, a sense that the situation was unsustainable. This was made all the more dramatic with the forced resignation of the then-president P.W. Botha in the final months of 1989 who was then replaced by F.W. De Klerk.

In the meantime, secret talks were getting underway to consider a peaceful transition through a negotiated settlement. The Groote Schuur talks in May 1990 marked the beginning of the official negotiation process between the National Party led by De Klerk and the African Nationalist movement led by Nelson Mandela. This was followed by the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) at the end of 1991. At this moment, it was quite clear that neither side could achieve a decisive victory. Working towards a negotiated settlement appeared to be the most sensible thing given the circumstances. However, the initial euphoria associated with the start of the negotiations was followed by a general sense of disillusionment, as the talks seemed to drag on inconclusively. This happened amid rising black-on-black violence in townships across the country.⁵ The situation in East Rand (near Johannesburg) together with what was happening in the Natal Province was particularly gruesome. Here, clashes between supporters of the African National Congress (ANC) and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) often resulted in the gruesome killing of political opponents. Likewise, according to Saul Dubow, the assassination of Chris Hani, a popular leader of the resistance movement by white right-wing extremists raised political tensions to dangerous levels amidst the fear of black retaliation. Realising the urgency of the situation, negotiators on both sides of the political spectrum were now even more determined to resolve this crisis.⁶

Today, the questions concerning the causes of the violence at the time remain a mystery. Still, this has not kept scholars from speculating what reasons were behind such incidents. However, there others like

5 For a detailed analysis of the violence at the time see D. Chidester, *Shots in the streets: Violence and Religion in South Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1992).

6 S. Dubow, *Apartheid: 1948–1994* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 271.

Erik Doxtader, who contends that the evidence presented at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) provides considerable evidence that a “third force” with links to the regime was directly involved in the incitement of township violence, thus leading to the brutal skirmishes at the time.⁷ We also see a similar version of events in the work of scholars who are leaders in their fields.⁸ Not surprisingly, those in power, including the then-president continue to deny any involvement in the incitement of violence at the time.

The churches and the changing socio-political landscape

Once at the forefront of the resistance against apartheid, the role of the churches changed considerably with the unbanning of the liberation movements. This meant that the churches could no longer assume the role of “official” opposition as it did in the past. An even bigger concern was that the unbanning of the liberation movements and the easing of repulsive race laws caught the churches by surprise. Not only were they found wanting strategically but a clearly defined theological agenda was also lacking, with some suggesting that at this moment South African theology, and South African ecumenism, in particular, was in some kind of recess, if not a kind of disarray.⁹ On the other hand, some church leaders used the opportunity to return to what they dubbed “getting back to normality.” For them, this meant scaling down of political activities. Apparently, social justice issues had a fair run, giving good reason to shift attention to other areas of interest. In this context, the 1990s were being thought of as the decade of evangelisation or getting back to the basics of “being church,” whatever this may have meant. Cautioning against this, John de Gruchy writes that while such an attitude may have been understandable given the

7 E. Doxtader, *With Faith in the Works of Words: The Beginnings of Reconciliation in South Africa, 1985–1995* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2009), 173.

8 See for example, S. Ellis, “The historical significance of South Africa’s Third Force.” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24, no.2 (1998): 261-299; G. Kynoch, *Township Violence and the End of Apartheid: War on the Reef* (New York: Boydell & Brewer, 2018); J.W. de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 216.

9 T.S. Maluleke, “The rediscovery of the agency of Africans: An emerging paradigm of post-Cold War and post-apartheid black and African theology,” *Journal of Theology of Southern Africa* 108, (2000), 20.

many years of struggle against apartheid, this period also reflects a failure on the part of church leadership to respond to the changes sweeping the country. In his view, the task of “being the church” now needed to include working towards reconciliation and working towards the establishment of a just social order.¹⁰ Sadly, it was obvious that many church leaders were not up to the task.

Frank Chikane, the General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches (SACC), had similar concerns. In an address entitled, “The church’s role during a period of transition,” organised by Diakonia, an ecumenical Durban based organisation, Chikane laid out that the gospel demanded an even greater emphasis on justice now that state-sponsored apartheid had ended. Further underscoring the necessity for churches to act as mediators between conflicting parties. That would include working towards reconciliation, but always with the demands for justice in mind, herewith, highlighting that restitution would have to be an integral part of the reconciliation process.¹¹ With that in mind, the SACC attempted to chart a dual ministry: intervention and mediation in the short term, followed by reconstruction as a longer-term initiative. Unfortunately, this was not spelt out in any detail. Nevertheless, what it did do is allude to the need for a revised contextual theology given the new set of circumstances. This included the immediate crisis of political transition, as well as the monitoring of township violence through accurate exposé and mediation. As well as work towards greater parity as far as land redistribution, the restructuring of economic institutions and the reordering of economic priorities to meet the basic needs of citizens are concerned.¹² With this understanding, the SACC, under the Chikane’s leadership, went on to play a crucial role in organising the now-famous Rustenburg Conference called the National Conference of Church Leaders in November 1990.¹³

10 De Gruchy, *The church struggle*, 219

11 P. Walshe, “Christianity and democratisation in South Africa: The prophetic voice within phlegmatic churches,” in P. Gifford (ed.), *The Christian Churches and the Democratisation of Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 77–78.

12 Walshe, “Christianity and democratisation,” 76.

13 L. Alberts and F. Chikane (eds.), *The Road to Rustenburg: The Church looking forward to a new South Africa* (Cape Town: Struik Christian Books, 1991).

Rustenburg: Towards a redefinition of “being church”

Rustenburg brought together church leaders from a variety of denominations. Both supporters and opponents of apartheid were represented. Other than the SACC affiliated denominations, the meeting included churches that had not been in contact with each other for decades.¹⁴ Their main task, as it were, was to redefine what it meant to be the “church” in light of new developments as well as advancing a program for reconciliation. This turned out to be quite challenging since delegates had very different ideas on how to advance such an agenda. Some were deeply moved by what was described as the sinful state of division in the country, thereby, calling for reconciliation with God and neighbours. Conversely, some invoked the Christian faith as a means to liberating political action, arguing that the situation was characterised by totalitarian oppression, which was idolatrous, and completely under the judgement of God. For them, the quest for reconciliation (in a narrow sense) was inadequate since those in power could easily manipulate the message for narrow political gains.¹⁵

Besides the official declaration, the meeting is also known for the spirit of confession, something that became a characteristic feature of the gathering. The best-known example came from respected Dutch Reformed theologian, Willie Jonker. As one of the main speakers, Jonker expressed deep regret that his church, the Dutch Reformed Church, and the Afrikaner people defended apartheid. For this reason, he could do little more than acknowledge guilt and ask for forgiveness. Deviating from his originally prepared text on the day, Jonker confessed, saying,

I confess before you and before the Lord, not only my own sin and guilt, and my personal responsibility for the political, social, economic and structural wrongs that have been done to many of you, and the result of which you and our whole country are still

14 E. van der Borgh, “Religions and Reconciliation of Conflicting Sociocultural Identities.” *Acta Theologica* 38, no.1 (2018), 165.

15 This was, similar to concerns raised years earlier by the *Kairos Document* (1985). See, Kairos Theologians, “The Kairos Document, Challenge to the Church: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa,” (Revised Second Edition), In: G. S. D. Leonard (ed.), *The Moment of Truth: The Kairos Documents* (Pietermaritzburg: Ujamaa Centre for Biblical and Theological Community Development and Research, University of Kwazulu Natal, 2010).

suffering from, but vicariously I also dare to do that in the name of the Dutch Reformed Church of which I am a member, and for the Afrikaner people as a whole. I have the liberty to do just that, because the Dutch Reformed Church at its last synod had declared apartheid a sin and confessed its own guilt of negligence in not warning against it and distancing itself from it long ago.¹⁶

One should note that this was not the first time that Jonker expressed reservations about apartheid. Helené van Tonder reminds us that in 1962 after the establishment of a General Synod that brought together the independent regional Dutch Reformed Churches of the Cape, the Free State, Natal, Transvaal and South-West Africa, he argued that the unification based on a common church order and confession should also include the so-called Coloured, Black and Indian churches – an expression of the visible unity of the church. On this occasion, his opponents indicated that such a move would result in non-whites being included in all other sectors of society – including education, economy, and social life, among other things.¹⁷ Rustenburg, thus, comes on the back of almost thirty years of reflection. At this point, Jonker may have realised (at best, here, one can only speculate) that as a leader of his church he had not been vocal or forceful enough in working towards the visible unity of the church and society. Nevertheless, Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who as a sign of accepting the apology responded with a warm embrace. In a vivid recollection of events, Allan Boesak, observing the gravity of the moment states that when Tutu strolled to the podium that day, speaking into stunned silence, “We forgive you,” an unforgettable, historic moment was made.¹⁸ Frits Gaum, one of the senior Dutch Reformed figures remembers the deafening applause that followed; tears of gratitude and forgiveness were

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- 16 F. Gaum, “From Church and Society (1986) to Rustenburg (1990), Developments within the Dutch Reformed Church,” in M.A. Plaatjies-Van Huffel & R. Vosloo (eds), *Reformed Churches in South Africa and the Struggle for Justice: Remembering 1960–1990* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2013), 72.
- 17 H. van Tonder, *Recollection and confession: The Heidelberg Catechism as a site of memory in the Dutch Reformed Church, 1862–1963* (Unpublished PhD Dissertation: Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2017), 240–246.
- 18 A.A. Boesak and C.P. DeYoung, *Radical Reconciliation, Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 133.

flowing. From his perspective, it truly was a special moment.¹⁹ Still, once the dust had settled over Rustenburg, it became clear that not everybody approved of the confession and the subsequent act of forgiveness. Some believed Jonker had no right to confess on their behalf, while others felt Tutu had no authority to accept an apology for anyone other than himself.

As a gathering, Rustenburg had very clear intentions. Van der Borghst remarks that reconciliation took centre stage. Furthermore, in addition to confessing sins and offering forgiveness, church leaders and theologians offered ideas on how churches could contribute towards the reconciliation ideal. Some understood the call in terms of unity among churches whereas others suggested the role of facilitator in the ongoing political negotiations. Finally, some believed the future of South Africa should be grounded in a new mission enterprise, to change the hearts and minds of the people. In this context, the Rustenburg Declaration started with a common confession of guilt, but more than half of the statement contained suggestions for a reconciled and new South Africa. Although the churches expressed failure, the underlying thrust was still one of confidence in their knowledge of how reconciliation works. In this way, the churches presented themselves again in the public square as agents of reconciliation.²⁰

Rustenburg was meant to mark a new beginning in the life and ministry of the churches. However, this was in sharp contrast to reality. For some, it marks a decline of the churches in the political life of the country. In this context, Rustenburg did very little to help facilitate the process of reconstruction. Some describe Rustenburg with a sense of disillusionment, labelling the declaration a disappointment, with the prophetic demands called for subdued by the burden of consensus.²¹ So, while the SACC and its affiliates did much to invigorate initiatives within the churches, denominational responses were largely disappointing. At that moment, it was clear that the vibrant, populist responses generated in the 1980s had passed. According to Walshe, all too often appeals from church leaders were met by timid local clergy and uninterested parishes.²²

19 L. Gaum and F. Gaum, *Praat verby grense* (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2010), 82–83.

20 Van der Borghst, “Religions and Reconciliation,” 165–166.

21 De Gruchy, *The Church Struggle*, 214.

22 Walshe, “Christianity and democratisation,” 81–82.

Reconciliation as a national initiative

South Africa's transition also marks the beginning when the quest for reconciliation shifted from an almost exclusively theological endeavour to something that now formed part of the national consciousness. It gained further traction when key political figures started using it in their general plans for national reconstruction. Notwithstanding its deep theological roots, it now became an issue observed through the lens of public morality. Among other things, the concept was now incorporated into various spheres, including the vocabulary of psychology, sociology, philosophy, and political science.²³ In very broad terms, this contributed to the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, set up in terms of the *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act* of 1995.

From the onset, it was quite evident that the TRC (and its framing of reconciliation) placed much emphasis on the acknowledgement of history as a means of establishing a shared truth. However, Audrey Chapman observes,

What seems appropriate in theory may not be feasible in practice or may be at least very problematic to achieve. Truth commissions, including the TRC, typically function in situations where the legacy of conflict has resulted in deep social divisions and sharply conflicting and contested versions of the past. In such situations, it is difficult for any single body to succeed establishing a widely accepted version of the truth of historical events and the chain of responsibility for them or promoting reconciliation among antagonists or contending groups, let alone both. Moreover, the immediate requirements of these two goals may be in conflict. While truth finding and the formulation of a shared history are prerequisites for long-term nation building, the process may not be conducive for promoting reconciliation, at least in the short term.²⁴

23 E. van der Borgh, "Reconciliation in the public domain: The South African case," *International Journal of Public Theology* 9, no.4, (2015), 413.

24 A.R. Chapman, "The TRC's approach to promoting reconciliation in the human rights violations hearings," in A. R. Chapman and H. van der Merwe (eds.), *Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa. Did the TRC deliver?* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 45.

Further complicating the work of the commission is the tension that exists between the different (often-contesting) notions of what reconciliation actually means. Megan Shore calls this one of the biggest challenges as far as the work of the TRC is concerned.²⁵ Furthermore, during the actual functioning of the process, there was no attempt to provide a commission-recognised definition of the term. This is also the case in the *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act*. There it states that the overall objective of the commission is to promote national unity and reconciliation, but it fails to define what reconciliation entails. Whatever the merits of such concerns, it was through the charismatic leadership of Desmond Tutu and other church leaders and theologians (such as Alex Boraine, Charles Villa-Vicencio and Piet Meiring) that a predominantly religious understanding of the term was pursued. An awareness of these different interpretations was already observed as early as 1994. At the conference entitled, ‘The South African Conference on Truth and Reconciliation,’ organised by Alex Boraine. Richard Goldstone in his address to the conference noted that:

... on the one hand, there is the vital legal underpinning of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission without which such a commission could not succeed and would not exist. On the other hand, there are philosophical, religious and moral aspects without which the commission would be an empty legal vessel, which would do a great deal of harm and achieve nothing.²⁶

For Goldstone, both “streams” were crucial for the successful running of the commission. He was optimistic that the mandate of the commission (as far as reconciliation was concerned) would become clearer as things progressed and that they would merge in the end. Yet, it would be a stretch to say it did. Instead, the lack of conceptual clarity meant that the commissioners were left to provide a particular (mostly religious) interpretation of reconciliation. This does not mean “non-religious” especially legal scholars, were opposed to the idea. Like Goldstone, Dullah Omar, a lawyer and Minister of Justice at the time, also supported the idea

25 M. Shore, *Religion and Conflict Resolution: Christianity and South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 108.

26 R. Goldstone, “To Remember and Acknowledge: The Way Ahead,” in A. Boraine and J. Levy, *The Healing of a Nation?* (Cape Town: Justice in Transition, 1995), 120.

of bringing a religious understanding of reconciliation into the fray. On the contrary, the Director-General of the Presidency, Jakes Gerwel warned not to misrepresent the TRC as a search for the holy grail of spiritual reconciliation, but instead to appreciate it first (and foremost) as a secular pact, a political agreement, that confirmed the latent national unity that has been present since the Union of South Africa in 1910.²⁷

At the time though, systematic reflection on the theological, moral, and religious questions concerning the TRC was lacking. On this matter, Maluleke's warns that the TRC presented an opportunity to assess what exactly is meant when concepts such as "reconciliation," "truth" and "forgiveness" are invoked. This did not happen. Instead, South Africans were urged to support the TRC process in various ways. However, some theologians, he suggests, went "overboard" in singing the praises of both the TRC and government. In his words, "It is one thing to acknowledge the need for national healing – even reconciliation or national unity – but not to probe whether the processes, strategies, discourses, gesticulations, and pseudo-theologies [reconstruction] currently in circulation [were] conducive to genuine national healing and genuine reconciliation is another."²⁸ Accordingly, if national healing, unity, and reconciliation are indeed crucial for the people of South Africa, then sharp, thorough, deep and honest theological reflection was needed. For some, as the TRC process unfolded it became clear that the victims of apartheid were once again disadvantaged. In most cases they were encouraged to embrace reconstruction and transformation, not knowing that these processes were not necessarily in the best interest of those most in need.

27 J. Gerwel, "National reconciliation: Holy Grail or Secular Pact?" in C. Villa-Vicencio and W. Verwoerd (eds.), *Looking back, reaching forward: Reflections on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa* (Cape Town: Cape Town University Press, 2000), 277–286.

28 T.S. Maluleke, "Dealing lightly with the wounds of my people: The TRC process in theological perspective." *Missionalia* 25, no.3 (1997), 341–342.

Reconciliation: A prized idea or cheap deception?

Fanie du Toit and Erik Doxtader underscore the persistent nature of reconciliation as a shared dispute and the challenges it brings. In their words:

There is a good chance that reconciliation was a necessary condition for the negotiated revolution that ended apartheid *and*, that at the same time, it directed us away from, if not distracted us from, some of South Africa's most pressing problems. It is possible that the TRC taught us a great deal about reconciliation's value *and*, at the same time, did not teach us a great deal about how to carry on the process ourselves. Today we have likely grown tired listening to the debates over reconciliation's promise *and yet*, at the same time, we still hear the commission's profound claim that reconciliation is fundamental for the development of a just society. These ambiguities make it difficult to agree on what reconciliation means, how it works and why it is important. Sometimes we think of it as our most prized idea, the next moment as cheap deception.²⁹

Today it would be fair to say that the quest for reconciliation still forms part of the public discourse in South Africa, albeit in a way (more) hidden from public attention. Evidently, it has lost its status as a guiding vision for social transformation in South Africa. Along with this, the legacies of people like Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela are being scrutinised more than ever before. In some cases, they are even referred to as "sell-outs." These sentiments are triggered by the notion that under their leadership the (over) emphasis on reconciliation and forgiveness did very little to disrupt the socio-economic vestiges of apartheid. Here forgiveness and reconciliation, without addressing the root causes of injustice are often cited as a concern.

In response to these concerns, government's National Development Plan (NDP) for 2030 recognises the need to prioritise reconciliation, social cohesion and nation-building to strengthen the social fabric of the

29 F. du Toit and E. Doxtader (eds.), *In the Balance: South Africans Debate Reconciliation* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2010), ix.

country.³⁰ In the meantime, the lack of expectation and cynicism often turns to anger and violence. The continuing spate of student and public service protests are good examples. These protests often accompany views expressing disenchantment with democracy in the country. Many understand democracy primarily in instrumental terms, as a political form through which inequality is to be curtailed and essential services, such as housing, water and food, are provided. This understanding of democracy, together with the disparity between what many believe, is, and what ought to be, leaves our young democracy vulnerable should socio-economic inequalities continue. In this sense, it is not surprising that reconciliation gets less attention with some even questioning whether under current circumstances it should be prioritised at all. Here, one would have to (re) consider, as Dirkie Smit did in the 1980s, whether reconciliation (as a symbol) has the potential to transform society.³¹ Since it is a notion that needs constant clarification, it often loses its power as a symbol. By definition, a symbol is the exact opposite: it is self-evident; needs no explanation; and grips the imagination. It is for this reason that some often find it necessary to talk about “true,” “genuine” or authentic reconciliation, thereby implying that they reject a notion of reconciliation considered “cheap” or “inauthentic.” If anything, the question of whether reconciliation has a role to play in addressing some of the most difficult challenges facing us at present would have to be addressed.

Jonker as a disruptive force

So, what does one learn from South Africa’s transitional period one may ask? As mentioned, every event, including human cognition and behaviour is causally determined by an unbroken chain of events. A point of origin from which a trajectory is determined (or set in motion). In this context, Piet Naudé, one of Jonker’s (former) students, may very well be correct when referring to the now-famous confession as an important precursor

30 The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, Barometer. [Online]. Available: <http://www.ijr.org.za/home/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/800108-IJR-Barometer-Report-2019-final-web.pdf> [Accessed: 28 April 2020].

31 D. J Smit, “The symbol of reconciliation and ideological conflict,” In: Willem Vorster (ed.), *Reconciliation and Construction* (Pretoria: Unisa, 1986), 88.

to what became the public discourse on reconciliation. This includes the conceptualisation of the TRC in South Africa.³² This account gives weight to Jonker's lifework as situated in the context of the church's struggle against apartheid as well as the need for post-apartheid reconstruction. Nevertheless, Naudé reminds us that Jonker himself never depicted his theology as "public theology." Rather, a theology contributes to the reframing of current debates about the public nature of theology. Here his Reformed theology, drawing on John Calvin and Karl Barth, is an important variable in framing all reality under the rule of God. In this sense, there is no denying the ecclesiological focus of his theology. From this vantage point, Jonker believed, "that the road to other publics in society leads via the public of the church," Naudé writes. This is best expressed through preaching, confessing and the public witness of the church. In doing so, Jonker made an important contribution within the Dutch Reformed Church and the wider ecumenical church in the dismantling the theological support for the apartheid system.³³

One cannot help but appreciate the thoroughness of Naudé's work on Jonker. At the same time, it appears that something quite glaring may be amiss in this analysis. Beyond interpreting Jonker's (public) theology in ecclesiological terms and his confession as a symbol of Christian piety (or benevolence), in essence, is this all Jonker has to offer? Surely, more is at stake, especially when reflecting on the trans-personal potential of Jonker's theology. Simply put, how did Jonker confront the "self" in relation to the situation of racial alienation in South Africa? Not in broad ecclesiological or societal terms, but on a more personal level. In fairness to Naudé, Jonker himself, in his "gentle promptings for justice" to use the phrase coined by Christo Lombard, is also not very clear on the matter.³⁴ This is particularly so when delving a bit deeper into Jonker's social ethics. In this context, Lombard, also a (former) student of Jonker, suggests that theoretically and methodologically a clue may very well be found in Jonker's response to

32 P. Naudé, "Public theology' from within the church? A reflection on aspects of the theology of W.D. Jonker (1929–2006)." *Verbum et Ecclesia* 35, no.1. (2014), 5.

33 Naudé, "Public theology," 5.

34 See C. Lombard's, "Willie Jonker's Gentle Promptings towards Justice," in M.A. Plaattjes-Van Huffel & R. Vosloo (eds), *Reformed Churches in South Africa and the Struggle for Justice: Remembering 1960–1990* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2013), 280–292.

a narrow focus on *praxis pietatis*, which is dubbed insufficient to deliver a Christian ethic on a trans-personal level. Instead, what was needed is a theology (or social ethic) for defined relationships of life with others in a pluralistic society. Here the problem of the undefined “neighbour” whatever that may have meant to closed (or separated) communities requires attention. From this vantage point, personal piety finds a home in an ethic rooted in the many defined relationships of our life with the “other,” a deeply personal affair. The idea of separateness, therefore, is judged inadequate because within it lurks the dangers of a racist ideology.³⁵

Reflecting on Jonker’s legacy it is quite easy to get lost in romantic notions of what transpired at Rustenburg. Unfortunately, in the creation of such narratives, we often lose essential elements that underpin the protagonist’s actions in the first place. Nevertheless, one is left satisfied that Jonker, unlike many of his time, understood that it would take more than mere gestures of goodwill to address the seriousness of the situation. The folly of “cheap” reconciliation, therefore, appeared to be lost on him. At the very least, his actions indicate an appreciation, that, without acknowledging guilt and asking for forgiveness mutual trust could not be restored and authentic reconciliation not be realised. His actions speak to the proclamation of God’s general and abiding demands for justice, fairness and the protection of the vulnerable. Calling the Christian community to be radical disciples of Christ whilst knowing that the collapse of apartheid alone is insufficient to liberate us from inner bondage. At the same time, one cannot help but think that scholars who have worked on Jonker’s theology are somehow missing a key ingredient preventing them from further unlocking its potential. For the most part, their accounts are deeply personal. Jonker obviously had a significant influence on them. However, for some reason, not once do they give proper recognition to the existential reality of Jonker’s whiteness – his grappling with the self in the context of a white racist society. Is it maybe because of the general difficulties associated with confronting whiteness? At best, here one can only speculate. Nevertheless, beyond what is already known about his theology there is no denying his challenge, that for the liberation of white people to occur, white consciousness would have to be dealt with. Herewith a better understanding of whiteness and its associated

35 C. Lombard, “Willie Jonker’s Gentle Promptings,” 284–285.

privilege in a society set up to benefit white people at the direct expense of black people is an important starting point. Thus, if Jonker's contribution at Rustenburg were to mean anything, this realisation instead of defending the status quo would open the door for more meaningful conversations to unfold – a necessary step for the re-humanisation of both black and white South Africans. With our memories of Jonker slowly fading, it is becoming more apparent that such conversations are yet to happen, at the very least, there still is a very long way to go.

The absurdity of reconciliation

The quest for reconciliation in South Africa has become an exercise in the absurd. To say it is an exercise for the absurd might also have some merit. In the deepest sense, reconciliation is best conceived as an elusive mystery, a dream that cannot be fathomed or achieved. And like Sisyphus the figure in Greek mythology, those in the quest for reconciliation are condemned to repeat forever the same, in some cases, meaningless task of pushing a boulder up the mountain only to see it roll down again. This is amid our inherent propensity to forever search for meaning irrespective of the incongruity of the ideal of a reconciled society and absurdity that defines our existence. The illogicality of apartheid and the subsequent pain and alienation continues to be a defining feature of a country trying to come to terms not what it ought to be, but what it is – chaotic, irrational and sometimes meaningless. In this context, Rustenburg as flawed as it might be is the audacity to dream of something beyond the absurd. Moreover, invoking a theology of reconciliation to achieve something extraordinary amid such absurdity and in the process resisting the temptation of utter hopelessness.

Camus unlike many existentialists provides a glimmer of hope. Reminding us that our efforts may very well be futile but that we should endure, nevertheless. In this sense, we are like Sisyphus charged to roll a boulder up a mountain, only to see it roll down again. Ultimately, we should cope as best we can with whatever challenges and through it all acknowledge the absurd background to our existence. In Camus words, “one must imagine

Sisyphus happy.”³⁶ If anything, this is a constant reminder why some problems, at least, are worth enduring. The absurdity of reconciliation is our reality, but love saves us from it. Maybe this is the one thing we (should) learn from Rustenburg.

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36 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 107–111.

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