

Religion, Violence,
Conflict Transformation
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| Faculty of Theology
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The Coloured War

Unresolved and Unacknowledged: the Deteriorating Aftermath of Apartheid in South Africa

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When we think of a ‘wall of separation’ we think of Jefferson’s famous expression¹ alluding to the segregation of church and state. In the context of this essay however, it refers to the socio-ethnic fault line² perpetuating South Africa’s³ struggle with its painful history of racial division. Unlike Jefferson’s politically desirable wall of separation however, this particular ‘wall’ is of course one lamentably signifying the most undesirable blowback of the even less desirable system of racial segregation that was in place under the infamous apartheid regime. 1995 Rugby World Cup’s only coloured ‘Springbok’ player Chester Williams, during an interview with ESPN’s Tom Hamilton⁴, lucidly recalled how he was the only one to have to change clothes on the bus as ‘the changing rooms were only for white players.’ And despite the fact that the nineties are generally considered to be the decade that ushered in the end of South

¹ Thomas Jefferson, “Jefferson’s Letter to the Danbury Baptists. The Final Letter, as Sent,” *The Library of Congress* 57, no. 6 (June 1998), <https://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9806/danpre.html>.

² Sociological terminology, see: Marc Hooghe and Luc Huysse, “From Armed Peace to Permanent Crisis: Cracks in the Belgian Consultative Model,” *De Lage Landen* 17th annu. ed., 2009. Trans. Lindsay Edwards, 227-228.

³ From hereon also referred to as ‘SA’.

⁴ Tom Hamilton, “Chester Williams on his ‘almost impossible dream’ to become a Springbok,” *ESPN*, September 25, 2015, https://www.espn.com/rugby/story/_/id/13622995/chester-williams-almost-impossible-dream-become-springbok-apartheid-south-africa.

Africa's system of racial segregation, anyone who visits the country today has trouble not to notice that skin tone is still⁵ the thing by which South Africa seems most divided.

As past and recent developments regarding this observation are becoming ever more relevant⁶ to both public and academic discourse on socio-ethnic schisms, this essay will attempt to inspect and discuss what 'efforts' have been made to recover from the apartheid regime, to explore the *status quaestionis* of peacebuilding and conflict transformation theories that have been formulated and consulted to advance and assess these efforts and to consider the reasons for the impact—or lack thereof—that these efforts have had on SA's recovery from apartheid era policies and transgressions. The central question towards which these points of focus are directed, is: are South Africa's various recovery and reconciliation initiatives to be considered more of a success than a failure or vice versa? An answer to this question will be approached by considering a set of sub-questions that I'll address as I go along, these being: 'What efforts were made to transition South Africa to a post-apartheid, 'healed' and just democracy?' as well as 'How do these efforts measure up to theories of conflict transformation and peacebuilding?' and 'What were the intended effects of these efforts versus which effect did they end up having?' The *issue* this essay focuses on, as alluded to by its subtitle, is South Africa's *status quo*—and the answer(s) to the central question, with which I will conclude this essay, will hopefully contribute to our understanding of *how* we arrived there.

The end of the apartheid era—which is where our trail of inquiry departs—is, most notably, marked by a change of president, Mandela's release from prison and the negotiations leading to the assembly of what is known as *South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (TRC). The TRC was a first and most ambitious step⁷ towards recovery from apartheid, engaging in therapy on a national scale, gradually battling the societal damage incurred. However, in it doing so by means of using 'elements of Christianity' to administer this therapy, this first crack at initiating a conflict resolution process was also in immediate violation of the principles of

⁵ Russel Pollitt, S.J., "Racism remains a common scourge in South Africa and the United States," *America: The Jesuit Review*, August 29, 2017, <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2017/08/29/racism-remains-common-scourge-south-africa-and-united-states>.

⁶ See for example Gerhard Schutte, *Sage Series on Race and Ethnic Relations, Vol. 8. What Racists Believe: Race Relations in South Africa and the United States* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995).

⁷ Elizabeth Stanley, "Evaluating the Truth and Reconciliation Commission," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 39, no. 3 (Cambridge University Press, September, 2001): 525, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3557322>.

Jefferson's aforementioned separation of church and state—leading already to some controversy, as Shore illustrates⁸:

Domestically, many South Africans were unsure of the Commission's institutional affiliations and loyalties. For example Cosmas Desmond, a former Catholic priest and Christian Institute employee, wondered at the outset of the Commission about the overtly religious and Christian nature of the TRC. He remarked, 'the question arises as to whether the TRC is an arm of the state or the church. Most church leaders, including Archbishop Tutu, chairperson of the TRC, agreed that the new South Africa would be a secular state' (Meiring 2000, p.125).

These 'elements' translated to the TRC employing or delegating some of its tasks to 'support' offering church groups or organisations committed to 'train' Christian actors to take statements, accompany witnesses of human rights violations at and to hearings and, indeed, offer both witnesses and victims of apartheid era transgressions trauma counselling if needed.⁹ However laudible these efforts are judged¹⁰ to be, it is not hard to understand why both domestic and foreign politicians dedicated to secularization would be concerned¹¹ when the TRC's efforts to therapize the South African people is partly conducted by people wearing holy orders. Now, regardless of there having been Christian actors holding sway over the TRC's proceedings or not, the cardinal objective for which the TRC was commissioned was to write up a historical account of SA's apartheid era racial injustices, so that the country would always have access to documentation reminding it of the human rights abuses perpetrated—hoping to grow towards a future conscious of past pains (and break the long-standing doctrine of denial when it comes to human rights violations).¹²

⁸ Megan K. Shore, "Christianity and South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission," *Ashgate Research Companion on Religion and Conflict Resolution*, ed. L. Marsden (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012): 279.

⁹ Shore, "Christianity and South Africa," 285.

¹⁰ Daniel Philpott, "Religion, Reconciliation, and Transitional Justice: The State of the Field," *Social Science Research Council (SSRC)* (2007): 8, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1417034>.

¹¹ R. Appleby Scott, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*, Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 3.

¹² Priscilla B. Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Transitional Justice and the Challenge of Truth Commissions* (London: Routledge, 2002), 20-21.

To hopefully one day be able to discharge itself from this momentous enterprise, the TRC divided its resolution, reconciliation and justice-restoring efforts over three sub-committees: the Human Rights Violations Committee (HRVC), tasked with collecting evidence of such violations; the Amnesty Committee (AC), charged with processing and deciding upon amnesty applications and third; the Reparations and Rehabilitation Committee (RRC), of which the purpose was to explore the possibilities of and advise on providing victims of apartheid era human rights violations with some form of reparations. Desmond Tutu, human rights activist and then-Archbishop of Capetown was elected chairman of the TRC. What makes the Tutu-headed ‘Truth and Reconciliation Commission’ stand out is that unlike the modus operandi of similar truth commissions elsewhere, the TRC does *not* solely treat the apartheid era regime as a monolithic-culprit, but rather imposes blame and or grants amnesty on an individualized level.¹³ Not only that, under the Mandela administration South Africa passed the *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act*, providing the TRC with ‘extensive investigatory reach’.¹⁴ This made it the prerogative of the TRC to act like an almost FBI-like body. With the aim to get the full truth out about apartheid era wrongdoings, the truth commission was allowed to search people’s properties, seize evidence, subpoena witnesses and even set up witness-protection programs. And though these useful tools had all been put at the TRC’s disposal, it elected to be rather conservative in actually using them.¹⁵ Considering the commission’s efforts were to transition South Africa to a post-apartheid, healed and just democracy, one would think it would grab onto its given privileges with both hands. But rather, Tutu strived to steer people and politics towards a sentiment of reconciliation and forgiveness (also coined ‘restorative justice’) over healing and moral justice.¹⁶ It’s only because this type of prioritization did *not* resonate with late 20th century and recent German politics (as demonstrated by the attitude of uncompromising condemnation of Nazi war criminals), that a strong sense of unity could be achieved for the German people—and that WWII victims could find peace and solace in knowing the German people were on *their side*, championing conscientiousness, acknowledgement, understanding and, indeed, a sense of

¹³ Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths*, 13.

¹⁴ Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths*, 27.

¹⁵ Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths*, 28.

¹⁶ Philpott, “Religion, Reconciliation, and Transitional,” 9, 20.

moral justice.¹⁷ At any rate, we've got a decent picture of what SA's Truth and Reconciliation Commission was supposed to do, able to do and, in the end, actually ended up doing. In retrospect, countless scholars have looked at the truth commission's efforts to deal with past grievances, resolve conflict and promote the nation's recovery, and judged the commission's course of action according to various theories of conflict transformation and peacebuilding.

And this is where the importance of terminology comes in, because how can we assess the TRC's efforts if definitions of 'peace', 'violence' or 'conflict' vary? Galtung¹⁸ for example, states that a 'violence' is present when the impediment of 'progress'—in the broadest sense of the word—in any one scenario, is avoidable. So: are South Africans still suffering from violence directly inflicted by the apartheid regime? No. But are certain South Africans today, despite the TRC's efforts, still at an avoidable social disadvantage due to the impact the system of apartheid has had on the way South African society is structured? Yes. According to Galtung, *both* examples are occurrences of 'violence', which leads him to make a further distinction, that between *physical* and *psychological* violence. Interesting to note is that the TRC was born of the former to combat the latter. And now that we've established that a post-apartheid South African society may not exactly be considered violence-free, where does that leave the country in terms of being at 'peace'? To this respect, Galtung adds the distinction between *structural* and *personal* violence.¹⁹ In the case of South Africa, structural violence would of course refer to the apartheid era's state-sponsored and -sanctioned racial segregation and discrimination, whereas personal violence would refer to 'local', 'occasional' and heterogeneous cases of racism—that we know permeate South African society to this day. According to this distinction, post-apartheid's *absence* of structural violence implies a peace that Galtung calls *negative*—a state 'merely' indicating the absence of conflict or war. 'Negative', because after all the very *need* for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission indicates the presence of personal violence; and *only* once that's absent—meaning the absence of *injustice*—we may speak of *positive* peace—otherwise known as *social justice*.²⁰

¹⁷ The Germans even coined a specific word for the struggle to achieve this: *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, meaning 'working through the past' or, in the context of South Africa's efforts for reconciliation, 'national self-therapization'.

¹⁸ Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 169, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/422690>.

¹⁹ Galtung, "Violence, Peace," 171.

²⁰ Galtung, "Violence, Peace," 183.

To add to the complexity, there's a superlative of positive peace that ought to be mentioned, this being the theory of *Just Peace*.²¹ Imagine a South Africa enjoying a complete absence of personal violence or, in other words, (racial) injustices, and thus approximating a positive peace. Such a state of peace could still be one in which apartheid era perpetrators of human rights violations would be granted amnesty by the TRC. It's easy to see how some would object to that, 'positive peace' or not. A Just Peace in this case, would be a peace not only—or necessarily—enjoying the absence of injustices in the present, but also a quenching of the thirst for past evils getting their due. One may wonder how to decide what's more important, or if it's even possible to achieve both: working towards a positive peace while also providing a *just* way of getting there. We know that 'truth and reconciliation' for the Germans now²² means to bring all Nazis to justice and grant them not an ounce of leniency—something they've only 'recently' pledged to do, as earlier now-contentious post-war policies actually prioritized positive peace over a just one, as demonstrated by the early amnesty laws that would even pardon some of the worst of Nuremberg defendants.²³

To understand how the peacebuilding efforts of the TRC fit into this, I return specifically to the "truth" and "reconciliation" in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Truth purportedly alludes to some type of confronting and processing pain and owning up to reality, but how is reconciliation to be approached? According to Brounéus, reconciliation is defined²⁴ as a 'societal process that involves mutual acknowledgement of past suffering and the changing of destructive attitudes and behaviour into constructive relationships toward sustainable peace'. Murphy²⁵ defines reconciliation more succinctly, as the processes cultivating 'recognition of and respect for agency, in particular toward those to whom such respect was previously not

²¹ Mona Fixdal, "Some Theoretical Considerations," in *Just Peace: How Wars Should End* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 23.

²² Atika Shubert and Nadine Schmidt, "Most Nazis escaped justice. Now Germany is racing to convict those who got away," *CNN*, December 15, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/12/14/europe/germany-nazi-war-trials-grm-intl/index.html>.

²³ Belinda Cooper, "Truth and Reconciliation," *The New York Times*, February 9, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/09/books/truth-and-reconciliation.html>.

²⁴ Karen Brounéus, "Reconciliation and Development," in *Building a Future on Peace and Justice*, ed. Ambos K., Large J. and Wierda M. (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 2009), 205.

²⁵ Colleen Murphy, "Truth Commissions," in *A Moral Theory of Political Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 146.

shown'. Both definitions are consistent with the objectives²⁶ of the TRC, insofar that they strive towards 'national unity' and a 'spirit of understanding that transcends the conflict and divisions of the past'. It clearly aims for bringing about a positive peace, but at the cost of a just one, hoping its efforts will rid South Africa of personal violence as it did with the apartheid regime's structural violence, but only hand in hand with Tutu's occasionally criticized²⁷ *ubuntu* doctrine of forgiveness, facilitating the 'silence and subsequent denial of responsibility taken by state actors,' potentially impacting 'future societal stability and transformation.'²⁸ But what, really, was the impact of the TRC's efforts to transition South Africa into a healed, just and peaceful secular democracy? Now that we have some idea of the theoretical framework encompassing conflict transformation and peacebuilding and how it advises on the objectives and course of action taken by the TRC, we might approximate some sort of verdict on the long-term effects the Commission's efforts ended up having, as well as explore how these effects are received.

A first contradiction of the TRC's efforts is that of—perhaps unintentional—exclusivity in its 'Christian' approach of victims of apartheid era human rights violations²⁹:

Christians (...) seemed to gain strength and healing from the Christian atmosphere. (...) [But] critics charge that there was no room for other conceptions of forgiveness or reconciliation. And there was no room for any other type of Christianity than that of Tutu. Moreover, any inclusion of other faiths was an afterthought.

The other elephant in the room is of course that of whether 'faith' should be included in the process of peacebuilding and reconciliation at all. One must remember that though it was the TRC's *aim*, a positive peace is by no means a goal the TRC may consider achieved. And if South Africa is no country 'at' positive peace, than is it perhaps in some sense still at 'war'? When one of the objectives is national unity, it is unfortunate to notice how the perception of the TRC's peacebuilding efforts wasn't shared by all, as those very efforts didn't engage with everyone.

²⁶ Shore, "Christianity and South Africa," 281.

²⁷ Marwan Darweish, *Peacebuilding and Reconciliation: Contemporary Themes and Challenges*, ed. Carol Rank (London: Pluto Press, 2012), 5-6, ProQuest Ebook Central.

²⁸ Stanley, "Evaluating the Truth," 532.

²⁹ Shore, "Christianity and South Africa," 290-291.

The state-sponsored Dutch Reformed Church promoted racial division and a theology of white supremacy, indoctrinating the white masses for generations, incubating everyone from politicians to children with the belief that they too had ‘God on their side’ in *their* efforts to ‘reconcile’ the ‘uncultured’ African country with God by ‘governing and spreading white civilization.’³⁰ The establishment of the TRC couldn’t just wash *this expression* of Christianity away by forcing everyone onto *another*. In fact, it is not hard to grasp how some white communities, as they do to this day, feel ‘threatened’ by Tutu’s Christianity and the societal change it represents. Apartheid created a socio-ethnic schism perpetuating a confrontational atmosphere susceptible to ‘personal’ and ‘psychological’ violence, which in this context, Juergensmeyer would call a *cosmic war*³¹—one that is waged in a ‘cold’ manner: *informal, subtle* and *subdermal*, standing in between the TRC and the reconciliation it so hoped to bring about. Would that explain the audience of a rugby match being predominantly white?³² Or why in a place like Soweto ‘white’ and ‘black’ only ever positively engage with one another in the shade of a tourbus?³³ Or indeed why only recently Julius Malema, head of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party, submitted a motion³⁴ to the South African parliament seeking to change the constitution so that white farmers could be legally dispossessed of their land without compensation, much like the reverse during the apartheid era—an unfortunate sentiment of *retribution* rather than reconciliation. Stanley affirms that looking at the effects the efforts of the TRC have had—or rather, *didn’t* have—on South African society, the ‘Commission has struggled to fulfil its objectives’ to say the least.³⁵

³⁰ Francis Adu-Febiri, “The State, Racism and Domination in Contemporary Capitalist Societies,” *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 38 (Regents of the University of California, 1993-1994): 200, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41035471>.

³¹ Mark Juergensmeyer, “Cosmic War,” in *Terror in the Mind of God, Fourth Edition: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), 160-161, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctv1xxtbk.12>.

³² Francois Cleophas, “The Rugby World Cup is reminding South Africans that sport, like society, is still divided,” *Quartz Africa*, October 2019, <https://qz.com/africa/1731639/rugby-world-cup-reminds-south-africa-its-still-divided-on-race/>.

³³ Jennifer Briedenhann and Pranill Ramchander, “Township Tourism – Blessing or Blight? The Case of Soweto in South Africa,” in *Cultural Tourism in a Changing World: Politics, Participation and (Re)presentation*, ed. Melanie Kay Smith and Prof. Mike Robinson (Channel View Publications, 2006), 96, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/rug/detail.action?docID=274485>.

³⁴ Wendell Roelf, “Vote in South Africa’s parliament moves land reform closer,” *Reuters Africa*, February 27, 2018, <https://af.reuters.com/article/africaTech/idAFKCN1GB23N-OZATP>.

³⁵ Stanley, “Evaluating the Truth,” 526.

It is as Hayner points out: ‘The impact of the TRC on reconciliation and race relations has been the subject of debate’³⁶, and it is naive to think it would in a mere couple of years resolve the aftermath of decades of apartheid abuses. The TRC’s final report, which was due to be published in 1998, *both* the ANC and the last apartheid regime’s president F.W. de Klerk ironically attempted to block. The former because it was unhappy with the portrayal of its activities and the latter because he didn’t want to be named in the report. Once published, reception of the report on the TRC’s efforts was twofold: first Deputy President Thabo Mbeki issued a response, saying that ‘the net effect of [the commission’s] findings is to delegitimize or criminalize a significant part of the struggle of our people for liberation’.³⁷ As for the South African people, a survey was conducted interviewing the supposed beneficiaries of the TRC’s efforts, showing that overall, the reconciliatory impact of the TRC was in various instances considered to be more *ineffective* than *effective*, as for example ‘most participants felt that the TRC process had not overcome the divisions that were created by the past conflict at the community level.’³⁸

So has South Africa ‘successfully’ transitioned to a *post-apartheid, healed* and *just* democracy? One that implies the implementation of a positive peace and a people reconciled with the past the way the Germans are? Looking at South Africa’s unimproving status quo in light of the literature on the TRC’s efforts, and having ‘applied’ some of the theories of conflict transformation and peacebuilding, one would unfortunately be inclined to play it safe and—without unfairly neglecting the fact that the TRC strictly speaking *did*³⁹ achieve its ‘objectives’ as well as the instances wherein the TRC *did* succeed in overcoming old and recrudescing grievances—say ‘no, it hasn’t’. And so, with bated breath, we await the obsolescence of the words in South Africa’s 1993 Interim Constitution that describe the hope for ‘the people of South Africa to transcend the divisions and strife of the past’.⁴⁰

³⁶ Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths*, 31-32.

³⁷ Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths*, 31.

³⁸ Brandon Hamber, Traggy Maepa, Tlhoki Mofokeng and Hugo van der Merwe, “Survivors’ Perceptions of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Suggestions for the Final Report,” *The Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation* (1997-1998), <https://web.archive.org/web/20060925181412/http://www.csvr.org.za/papers/papkhul.htm>.

³⁹ Omogolo Taunyane, “TRC 20th anniversary: Archbishop Tutu reflects on the successes and shortfalls,” *CapeTalk*, June 1, 2016, <http://www.capetalk.co.za/articles/13970/trc-20th-anniversary-archbishop-tutu-reflects-on-the-successes-and-shortfalls>.

⁴⁰ Shore, “Christianity and South Africa,” 281.

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