



From Mandela to Ramaphosa: Theology of Dialogue Cruising on a Bumpy Road

Dr Kelebogile Thomas Resane

Research Fellow

Department of Historical & Constructive Theology

Faculty of Theology & Religion

University of the Free State, Bloemfontein

South Africa

Email: resanekt@ufs.ac.za

Abstract

The article argues the importance of theological voice in political spheres. It shows how theology of dialogue has played some roles during the presidencies of Mandela, Mbeki, Motlanthe, Zuma, and Ramaphosa in a South African context. It discusses the ways in which theology of dialogue has been applied, marginalised or even ignored during the five presidencies of the democratic South Africa. Each president's religious background is highlighted, and how during their tenures each developed and applied on the practical level, the dialogue with religious communities and persons in different cultural contexts. The discussion demonstrates how theology was articulated during these presidencies. There is an importance given to intense debate within and among religious leaders and the government. Theology of dialogue is thus presented as a reflection on inter-relationships of different religious traditions, and how it further engages other spheres of society such as politics, economics, civil affairs, sciences etc. Dialogue is called upon to see politics and theology as partners in the building of a peaceful society, even when there are disturbing episodes by fanatical groups located in both institutions. Theo-political dialogue should be an ongoing deliberation. It is able to bring politicians and theologians together for better understanding of societal concerns; and devise some strategies to address these concerns.

Keywords: Theology, Dialogue, Politics, Church, Religious, President.

Introduction

This article hopefully contributes to the debate about the place of church-state relations in democratic South Africa by developing a theology of dialogue. It proposes a theology rooted in the themes of welcome, listening and hospitality. It argues the importance of theological voice in the political spheres by showing how from President Rolihlahla Nelson Mandela to the current President Matamela Cyril Ramaphosa, theology has been employed to give some ethical input in political governance. The article proposes an alternative vision of how Christian theology is to be articulated through dialogue with political authorities. It addresses a subject of intensive debate within and among religious leaders and the government. Theology of dialogue is interactive, since human persons do not only live in private space, but also in natural and moral space (Gregersen cited in Gregersen, Dries & Gorman, 2000:7).

Socio-political and theological reflection question each other through dialogue, and once synergized, they become mutually of enriching for the benefit of society. The two must enter a dialogue necessitated by the religious pluralism due to some complexities of some social realities. Theology of dialogue is a reflection on inter-relationships of different religious traditions, but goes further to engage other spheres of society such as politics, economics, civil affairs, sciences etc. For indeed, theology undertakes the attempt to interpret all the very different aspects of the world, the whole world (Gregersen in Gregersen & Van Huyssteen, 1998:185). Dialogue in this context raises fundamental questions for citizens and all matters



affecting them in a pluralist, post-modern world. Dialogue is not a magic formula, though theology is certainly helped in its renewal when it opens channels of dialogue. Church and politicians' dialogue contribute enormously towards the building of a society that values diversity and fosters respect, brotherhood and peaceful coexistence.

The current era is that of decadent scholasticism where theology is trapped and chained inside the textbooks and manuals, including journal papers out of individual scholars, colloquiums, and institutions of learning. Research findings are archived and left bare collecting dust with no valuable contribution towards communities. Dialogue especially between theologians and politicians should facilitate some means of rediscovering these findings and expose them to the public domain. To gain peaceful and dialogical coexistence, theology is to build the future of societies and nations, rather than occupy the judgement seat. Dialogue is called upon to see politics and theology as partners in the building of a peaceful coexistence, even when there are disturbing episodes by fanatical groups located in both institutions (Mosala, 1984).

Dialogue's purpose is to convince extremists that life is to be enjoyed by all citizens of the state. This is an attitude of closeness and dialogue. Right-wing politics and extremist Christians pose a serious danger to peaceful coexistence, as they normally exclude dialogical possibilities. Politicians dialogue with churches means educating each other to understand the culture, the way of thinking (ideology), in order to better understand and live in cordial relationship on the social level. The theological faculties and seminaries should include public theology, comparative theology, theology of dialogue, liberation theologies etc in order to enhance mutual knowledge between church and government. There are two ways dialogue can be made a cross-curricular subject in theological studies.

First of all, *dialogue can be a method of study, as well as of teaching*. When we read a text, we dialogue with it and with the "world" of which it is an expression; and this also applies to sacred texts, such as the Bible. Often, we interpret a particular text in dialogue with others from the same period or from different eras, in agreement with Gregersen (1998:188-190), the texts of the great monotheistic traditions are in some cases the result of a dialogue. There are cases of texts that are written to offer answers to some of life's deeper questions posed by texts that preceded them. This is also a form of dialogue.

The second example is that *dialogue can be lived as a theological hermeneutic in a specific time and place*. For Christianity, the Mediterranean at the beginning of the third millennium serves as a context of study, historically and culturally. This is where history, anthropology, archaeology etc. play an important role towards the study of theology as an interdisciplinary subject. It is not possible to realistically read this space except in dialogue and as a historical and geographical bridge between Europe, Africa and Asia. This is a place where the absence of peace has led to multiple regional and global imbalances, and whose pacification, through the practice of dialogue, could instead greatly contribute to initiating processes of reconciliation and peace (Gregersen, 1998:11).

The dialogue between theologians and politicians has become very important in the contemporary South Africa. This dialogue presupposes as its ultimate aim mutual understanding of full trust between proliferated politics. This aim however is not something that could be easily and quickly achieved, hence requires a lot of work for its realization. However, even first steps in this direction show that church-politics dialogue bears a lot of good fruits for those who are engaged in it. Communication between representatives of both sides leads to a better understanding of each other and to mutual enrichment. Furthermore, awareness of the *other* brings about a change of one's own mind. This leads dialogue partners from the dialogue for understanding to the dialogue for change. An important part of this kind of dialogue is reassessment of the current socio-political space, especially of the events that cause disagreements and divisions between politicians and churches, which are often accompanied by condemnations and anathemas. The sound and biblical way is that of genuine and authentic love towards one another. It is love that lies at the very heart of any



true dialogue, which therefore can properly be called the dialogue of love. 'He who does not love does not know God; for God is love' (1John 4:8). It is with this point that any theological reflection on the dialogue should begin before it turns to the discussion of different aspects and levels of dialogue, both theoretical and practical. The concept of dialogue, due to the works of 20th century thinkers such as Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, Mikhail Bakhtin etc., has taken an important place in the contemporary philosophical and theological discourse. It seems however that this often remains at the level of scholarly talks about 'dialogue in general', full of fascinating and exciting ideas but without any significant realization in terms of praxis. In this sense, any theology of dialogue should be ultimately orientated towards concrete work in the field of socio-political and inter-religious relations. The aim of this article is to discuss the ways in which theology of dialogue has been applied, marginalised or even ignored during the five presidencies democratic South Africa. It highlights each president's religious background, and how during their tenures developed and applied on the practical level, the dialogue with religious communities and persons in different cultural contexts.

Rolihlahla Nelson Mandela (1994-1999): Theology of Dialogue Moving into the Wilderness.

Mandela was baptized in the Methodist Church and received elementary education at Methodist school in the Eastern Cape village of Qunu. As he grew up, it became uncertain as to the exact denomination he affiliated to, and in fact how his commitment to God was like (Sampson 1999:15-20). In a letter from the prison he wrote to his sister, he mentioned: "I was, of course, baptized in the Wesleyan Church and went to its missionary schools" (Meer, 1988:297). Michael Trimmer in an article for *Christian Today* (2013) says much of Mandela's family – his first wife, his sister and other close relatives were Jehovah's Witnesses. The bottom line is Nelson Mandela attended Methodist missionary schools during his formative years. His understanding of Christian values was reflected in his passion for social justice.

In his autobiography, *The Long Walk to Freedom*, he talked of his early experiences with Christianity, praising its engagements with the society around him: "The Church was as concerned with this world as the next: I saw that virtually all of the achievements of Africans seemed to have come about through the missionary work of the Church" (1997:22). While attending the University of Fort Hare, an elite black university in Alice, Eastern Cape, Mandela became a member of the Students Christian Association and taught Bible classes on Sundays in nearby villages (1997:55).

Among other factors, it was Mandela's Christianity that steered him away from Communism and the class struggle that was spreading into South Africa in the 1940s. Despite befriending Gaur Radebe and Nat Bregman, prominent Xhosa and Jewish South African communists, he could not reconcile communism's atheistic attitudes with his Christian faith. Also, he felt that the idea of class struggle was misleading, and that South Africa's problems were primarily racial in origin. Although he was impressed that the local communist party saw Europeans, Africans, Indians, and those of mixed heritage all mixing equally, he clearly believed there was another way to go (1997:85-86).

As he was immersed into Methodism in Healdtown, he hated missionary imperialistic ideals, but embraced the puritanical atmosphere especially the strict discipline and mental training. His autobiographer, Sampson (1999:19) mentions that this atmosphere impressed on Mandela to avoid frills and distractions, disapprove heavy drinking or swearing. Mandela was a strict disciplinarian, and very particular when coming to ascetic way of life.

Denominations aside, Mandela believed that Christianity was responsible for many achievements and advances in Africa. He recognised the power of all religions to influence people to do good and worked tirelessly to create a South Africa where all people were equal despite differences in race or religion. He was quoted by *The Huffington Post* that:



Religion is one of the most important forces in the world. Whether you are a Christian, a Muslim, a Buddhist, a Jew, or a Hindu, religion is a great force, and it can help one have command of one's own morality, one's own behaviour, and one's own attitude.¹

According to Sampson (1999:314-315), Mandela's presidency ascended corridors of power after a long-noted struggle of the church in South Africa. Through church organs such as South African Council of Churches (SACC) and Southern African Catholics Bishop's Conference (SACBC), The Evangelical Alliance of South Africa (TEASA) and other formations, the church for decades was painfully trying to dialogue with the erstwhile apartheid regime. Attempts by the church to dialogue most of the time resulted into some futility. Mandela acknowledged the role of theologians during the struggle and embarked on bringing theologians closer to his throne. "Mandela could find more encouragement elsewhere, particularly from the Churches, which had been so cautious in opposing apartheid at the time when he had gone to jail" (Sampson, 1999:314).

Unfortunately, that was the time when theology, carried by the broad church generally, embarked on the way into dry wilderness. Resane (2016:4) asserts that:

It is clear that Mandela gave Churches the pavilion of honour in transforming South Africa. The response of the church was unfortunately slumping into false utopia of Solomon's time when everyone "lived in safety, each man under his own vine and fig tree" (1 Kings 4:25).

Nelson Mandela summed up his understanding of the role of the church in relation to contributing to national development when he addressed the Methodist Conference in 1998:

Religious communities have a vital role to play in this regard [nation building]. Just as you took leading roles in the struggle against apartheid, so too you should be at the forefront of helping to deliver a better life to all our people. Amongst other things you are well placed to assist in building capacity within communities for effective delivery of a better life.²

He believed that the church has an important role to play in South Africa. His question was always: "What should the relationship be between the church and the state?" In all references Mandela made about the church shows that for him the church was precisely engaged in the work of ministry and mission. In this sense the church was deeply political and a significant force for moral and spiritual formation that contributed towards the transition from apartheid to participative democracy in South Africa (Forster, 2014). In line with his ideology of inclusive democracy, he once wrote from the prison:

I'm strongly in favour of a move towards the merger of all S.A churches, so long as the doctrine of the new church is progressive and moves away from the rigid and backward dogmas of olden time (Meer, 1988:297)

The spirit of inclusivity was intertwined with his ability to reach across the divisions of language, race, religion, politics and culture towards a Rainbow Nation. So, he was an ecumenical first citizen (Leon, 2014:127). Theology of dialogue took a subtle dormancy

¹ Sam Clemence, Nelson Mandela's Faith Made Him a Worldwide Leader of Peace.

<https://www.deseret.com/2013/12/7/20531001/nelson-mandela-s-faith-made-him-a-worldwide-leader-of-peace> (Accessed 20 April 2020).

² Mandela, "Address by President Nelson Mandela at the First Triennial Conference of the Methodist Church of South Africa." Unpublished notes.



regardless of Mandela's attempts to conscientize the church of her role in shaping the new South Africa. During his tenure, he spoke at many church events and his message was always that the church should become the vehicle of reconciliation. The leader of one of the opposition parties then Tony Leon, mentions that Mandela was "inspired by the single vision of creating a people-centred society" (2014:72). "Nelson Mandela represented the Christian virtues of love instead of hate, reconciliation instead of enmity, and forgiveness instead of bitterness," says George O. Wood, Assemblies of God General Superintendent.³ Mandela pleaded with the Dutch Reformed Church to actively participate in reconciliation initiatives and the alleviation of poverty from the poor. When the Dutch Reformed Church (NGK) newspaper, *Die Kerkbode* interviewed him in October 2002, he told them:

The NG Kerk has a unique reconciliatory role to play in South Africa. Your history, where your church members wanted to throw off the British yoke, enables you to understand how our people had felt. You, who had broken bridges by means of apartheid, can now help to build new bridges of reconciliation. In these matters one can never underestimate the individual's role in leadership. When individuals become convinced of a cause, they can make a big difference. Also, with reconciliation.

For Mandela, dialogue was the best weapon to bring understanding between the people sitting on the opposite sides of the pole. Theology disappointed his presidency by retreating into the dark corner. Dialogue between theologians and politicians should never be static or reach some cul-de-sac, or a plateau. It should be an ongoing endeavour.

Thabo Mbeki (1999-2008): Theology of Dialogue in a Cocoon

Thabo Mbeki's religious views are very vague or unknown. From his autobiography, *Dream Deferred*, a reader gleans that Mbeki is the product of both his parents' communism and his grandparents' Christianity (2007:41). In reference to his parents and grandparents, productivity was their religion. For them productivity was a form of redemption captured through independence and self-reliance (2007:57). Christianity was intertwined with their communistic ideology. Mbeki's mother, Epainette (nee Moerane) took her children to church every Sunday morning, "not for any religious reasons, but for the cultural ones." She never saw any contradiction between her Christian upbringing and her communism (2007:61). This is the upbringing that has engrossed young Thabo into humanism and secularistic view of life. Thabo's attitude towards religion might have been shaped, apart from his upbringing, by his expulsion from the missionary school, Lovedale College, which interrupted his matric year and his involvement in Students Christian Organisation (West, 2016:463).

Ironically, Mbeki's presidency under our liberation-movement-led democratic government, which includes large number of theologians who drafted or supported our current constitution, exerts considerable pressure on the religious sector to stay within the confines of Church-type theology, that was condemned by *Kairos Document* by theologians in 1985. This theology perpetrated by the apartheid state promoted the religion that is narrowly defined to deploy dealings with matters of morality, with no prophetic engagement in socio-political matters. "It empowers those in power to continue their evil systems such as corruption, without any fear of being a prophetic voice calling to the contrary" (Resane in Venter, 2016:57). Misnomers are accepted as normal. "So, crime, corruption, and condoms are its terrain, not macro-economic policy."⁴

³ George Wood, Nelson Mandela Represented Christian Virtues. <https://www.charismanews.com/us/42017-george-o-wood-nelson-mandela-represented-christian-virtues> (Accessed 20 April 2020).

⁴ Thabo Mbeki's Bible: The Role of the Religion in the South African Public Realm after Liberation. <https://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?ArticleId=770>. (Accessed 20 April 2020).



Gerald West in *The Society of Biblical Literature* informs that Thabo Mbeki, the South African President, has come to recognize that the Bible remains a significant text in the South African context and has chosen, therefore, to harness its resources, attempting both to co-opt this silo of the masses and increasingly to deploy it in addressing the moral fibre of South African public life. He has increasingly cited the Bible, recognizing perhaps that the masses are more likely to connect with the Bible than almost any other literature and that he must therefore contend for its meaning, appropriating its purported (Church Theology) moral aura.

During his second term, Mbeki seemed to deploy the Bible more substantially and less problematically. In his "State of the Nation Address" in February 2006, Mbeki used a quotation from the biblical book of Isaiah to frame the address.⁵ He quoted the biblical text in English, using the New King James Version (his favoured translation), followed immediately with a quote of the text again, this time from the Xhosa translation of the Bible. The focus of this speech is his reflection on the state of the nation within the "historic challenge" set before the nation by Nelson Mandela at "the very first Annual Regular Opening of our Democratic Parliament, on 24 May 1994." Mandela posed the challenge then in the following words, quoted by Mbeki: "We must, constrained by and yet regardless of the accumulated effect of our historical burdens, seize the time to define for ourselves what we want to make of our shared destiny" (West, 2008). Mbeki uses these words of Mandela as a regular refrain throughout the speech; and he does similarly with the Isaiah text.

Theology of Dialogue went deeper into wilderness, despite Mbeki's various engagements with religious leaders. The once outspoken SACC, SACBC, TEASA withdrew into the cocoon. This sentiment is not uncommon, as the ecumenical voice has disappeared. The South African leader who is respected worldwide realises that the churches had become silent (Resane, 2016:5). In response, the Mbeki era embarked on the enhancement of the Inter-Faith Movement leaders. By 2001, Mbeki and the Churches were walking far apart from each other. The gap between the church and the state was felt when corruption escalated in the deafening silence of churches. The prophetic voice was not heard in the corridors of political power centres (Resane, 2016:5). Attempts to close a rift between politics and the church from the presidency were undertaken. For instance:

- On 7 April 2001, the President convened a meeting with church leaders. "The president decided to get the relationship between the government and the country's religious leaders back on track – and met 34 clerics of all faiths at the Union Buildings last week."⁶
- The other attempt by Mbeki administration was on 30 April 2003, when the meeting was held with 33 religious leaders. "The two delegations reached a broad understanding on the need for the involvement of religious leaders in issues such as nation-building, reconciliation, poverty eradication, social and moral delivery and better communication with the rest of the country"⁷
- On the 20 November 2006, Mbeki met with Religious Leaders, again trying to invite the church to actively participate in the moral reconstruction of the South African society.⁸
- On the 19 July 2007, he initiated a meeting with Religious Leaders Working Group to discuss progress on the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding

⁵ Thabo Mbeki, "State of the Nation Address 2006," n.p. [cited 2 June 2007]. Online: <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mbeki/2006/tm0203.html>. (Accessed 20 April 2020).

⁶ Caroline Hooper-Box and Jeremy Gordin. <http://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/mbeki-holds-straight-talks-with-church-heads-1.63807#.VkJyQV8aKpo> (Accessed 17 April 2020).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ <https://www.gov.za/t-mbeki-meet-religious-leaders-20-nov> (23) (Accessed 23 April 2020)



between Government and National Religious Forum, moral regeneration, social cohesion and crime.⁹

- Mbeki continued to highlight the role of the church even after his tenure as President of the Republic. Peter Kenny of Ecumenical News 6 Oct 2013 reports that Mbeki has criticized the country's churches for not playing a greater role since the end of apartheid and has hit out at churches all round Africa for not speaking louder on issues facing the continent. He criticized South African churches for "demobilizing" after the end of apartheid and called on them to become more active in responding to the challenges faced by society.¹⁰
- On 13 July 2013, Mbeki gave an address in honour of Rev Z.R Mahabane (Black Methodist Consultation) and said:

This is particularly painful given the outstanding role the SACC played to help bring about our liberation and the vital role it must play as we attend to the imperative successfully to achieve the reconstruction and development of our country, consistent with the objectives to which our nation agreed, as expressed in our Constitution.

I do sincerely hope that our Churches will do everything possible to rebuild the SACC. Perhaps the Black Methodist Consultation can take this as one of its urgent responsibilities.¹¹

Mbeki has been described as an able, intellectually strong politician, who understands the politics of power and compromise (Boesak, 2005:39). He weaved this intellect into dialogical tenacity with theologians, hence his presidency is noted for the legacy of theology of dialogue. Regardless of his humanistic atheistic ideology, he acknowledged the importance of dialogue with theologians. Many deliberations were mostly his initiatives. While theology was cocooning itself, Mbeki cracked the whip, and this can be seen by his cry for rebuilding of SACC. The road of dialogue was bumpy but promising (Resane, 2016:5).

Kgalema Petrus Motlanthe (2008-2009): Theology of Dialogue Coming to Senses

Kgalema Petrus Motlanthe was the transitional president from Mbeki to Zuma (2008-2009). He grew up in Anglican faith of his parents who were very committed Christians. He served as an altar boy and at one point intended to enter the Anglican priesthood. This influenced his outlook of life. This is confirmed by his auto biographer, Ibrahim Harvey:

The values of Christianity broadly and the teachings of the Anglican Church particularly had a very big influence on my outlook on life when I was still young (Harvey, 2012:14).

He began schooling at Anglican Missionary School (Pholosho Primary School) in Alexander Township, Johannesburg. This school was eventually closed when it refused to implement Bantu Education. His biographer notes that the Anglican school "had a huge formative influence on him, shaping his values and outlook at a still tender age" (2012:9). Even at the zenith of his political career, it could still be affirmed that "From his youth in the Anglican Church, dedication and discipline have come easily to him" (2012:73). In the midst of harsh and reckless politicking, "His approach demonstrated the bidding values he had learnt from

⁹ <https://www.gov.za/t-mbeki-meeting-religious-leaders-0> (Accessed 23 April 2020)

¹⁰ John Battersby. <http://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/mbeki-church-leaders-discuss-nation-building-1.105516#.VKH2zV8aKpo> (Accessed 10 April 2020).

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/38131714712/posts/address-by-thabo-mbeki-in-honour-of-rev-zr-mahabane-black-methodist-consultation/10151594872329713/> (Accessed 22 April 2020)



youth in his family home and the Anglican Church..." (2012:81). The Church and what it stood for made sense to Motlanthe in the political and social context of apartheid, especially when he and his family grew closer to the church leaders at St. Peter's in Johannesburg. That is why, unlike other Marxists, he is especially careful not to disparage any religions (2012:18).

In 1964, the Anglican Church awarded him a bursary to attend St Christopher's in Swaziland to complete his secondary schooling and then enter the priesthood. His application for travel documents to the Bantu Affairs Department was turned down, and he was informed that he had to study in South Africa. His political interest was aroused after reading a book by Anglican priest Trevor Huddleston, *Naught for Your Comfort*. Family and friends described him as a gentle and kind person (Harvey, 2012:19).

He credits notwithstanding the harshness of the prison in Robben Island to his Anglican upbringing.

Among other factors the inner strength he derived from many years in the Anglican Church gave him a sturdy basis for meeting the often-brutal conditions on the Island (2012:34).

His presidency was short, but as a Deputy President (2008-2009), he engaged some dialogues with church leaders. As per press releases below, he presided over the nation that was hungry and lacking theological and prophetic essence. For instance,

- On the 14th July 2012, he led the Inter-Ministerial Committee (IMC) to meet representatives of the National Interfaith Council of SA (NICSA) and National Religious Association for Social Development (NRSDA). The objective of the dialogue was to deepen consultation process on the Gauteng Freeway Improvement Project (GFIP). The religious delegation was led by Rev. Ray McCauley and Rev. Desmond Lambrechts, representing NICSA and the NRSDA respectively.¹²
- On 3 October 2012, the Inter-Ministerial Committee of the Gauteng Freeway Improvement Project (GFIP), led by Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe, met religious leaders under the banners of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) and the National Interfaith Council of SA and the National Religious Association for Social Development. Government and the religious leaders have committed themselves to communicate more frequently and to share information on matters that concern the public, including government's budgeting processes. Deputy President Motlanthe has expressed confidence that a solution like the one reached with the leadership of the religious community will be reached with other concerned stakeholders.¹³
- On 16 December 2013, religious groups have put differences aside to unite for Reconciliation Day. Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe joined representatives from various faiths to pray for those who lost their lives in the fight for freedom, and they also celebrated the life of Nelson Mandela.¹⁴
- On the 9 April 2014, the Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe led a government delegation in a meeting with leaders and representatives of the religious sector. The meeting, held at the Sefako Makgatho Presidential Guesthouse in Pretoria, provided a platform for the religious community and government to jointly reflect on the past 20 years of democracy and exchange views on how to move South Africa forward. The

¹² <https://infrastructurenews.co.za/2012/07/14/govt-meets-religious-leaders-over-gfip/> (Accessed 17 April 2020)

¹³ <https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/govt-religious-leaders-agree-user-pay-principal> (Accessed 17 April 2020).

¹⁴ <https://www.enca.com/south-africa/religious-leaders-pray-reconciliation> (Accessed 17 April 2020).



religious leaders expressed their commitment to establish a working partnership with government to confront current challenges and build a better South Africa.¹⁵

The list is bit longer. Motlanthe's presidency was the commencement of theology of dialogue starting to kick itself out of the dust of slumbering. Politics of factionalism, careerism, and patronage were gaining ground at the time. Civil service was a brewery for corruption at its core. The national religious conscience was dampened and at its lowest ebb. Theo-political dialogue was demobilized and paralyzed regardless of the presidential efforts to awaken the national conscience.

Jacob Zuma (2009-2018): Nine Wasted Years in Theological Utopia.

The media had dubbed Zuma, the chief architect of grand corruption, a stuttering economy and a failing civil service clattered with patronage – the legacy that he will go down the history with as the president who put South Africa up for sale. Even after nine years in office, Zuma is the only President who had not yet written his memoirs. There is Jeremy Gordin's *Zuma's Biography* (2008), but it is sketchy, as this was before he took a revolving desk chair in Union Building. Very little is written about his birth and growing biography. One thing known of him is that he never received formal education, he served a sentence in Robben Island, was in exile in Swaziland, Mozambique and Zambia and "likes women a great deal and he likes making babies; he is the proverbial family man. He is also an unabashed polygamist" (Gordin 2008:27).

His presidency was attained during the critical moment of factionalism in the ruling party, African National Congress (ANC), civil service immersed in corruption, organs of state such as National Prosecuting Authority (NPA), and South African Revenue Services (SARS) faltering, and State Owned Entities (SOE) such as South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), South African Airways (SAA) and Eskom (electricity supplier) and many others were walking on some thin ice. These events are well captured by Basson and Du Toit's book, *Enemy of the People* (2017). Zuma called upon the religious leaders to participate in the social cohesion and poverty eradication initiatives. Regarding theology of dialogue, this presidency will be remembered for the promotion, elevation, and commendation of the president and some of his cabinet ministers by the leaders of African Initiated Churches, especially those of charismatic inclinations (Resane, 2016:6). Politicians under Zuma regime became regular guests to some charismatic cultic centers where they would be prayed for and affirmed in public. One hardly hears from these ecclesiastical formations, any prophetic voice rebuking the wayward conduct of politicians or religious leaders. South African Christian communities that are theologically sound, were taken aback when in 2007, the Full Gospel Church ordained Zuma as the honorary pastor.¹⁶

The African Initiated Churches had always suffered political abuse in the hands of African politicians. Their indifference regarding political ramifications is exploited for political gains. President Zuma himself regularly visits these ecclesiastical formations where he always receives a hero's welcome. He sees mainline Christianity as too much interfering. He took a swipe at religious leaders on the 4 December 2016, telling them not to get involved in politics. Addressing the Twelve Apostles' Church in Christ thanksgiving event at the Moses Mabhida Stadium in Durban, Zuma said:

It doesn't sit well with us when we see church leaders involving themselves in politics and creating problems, instead of bringing

¹⁵ <https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/govt-meets-religious-leaders> (Accessed 17 April 2020).

¹⁶ <https://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/pastor-zuma-raises-eyebrows-351761> (Accessed 25 April 2020)



people together. What we're really asking from church leaders is that they pray for us".¹⁷

He is the president surrounded and followed by criminal charges involving rape, and largely corruption. He has always been defiant and often boasted of God's divine support whenever trapped in some scandalous titbits. Mainline Christianity (encased within SACC, SACBC etc.) was always restless with his religious insinuations, while Neo-Pentecostal leaders embraced him. He increasingly eschewed the critical religious communities of more mainline churches in favour of Neo-Pentecostal Churches (Van Wyk, 2015: 136–7). This became particularly pronounced after the Nkandla scandal provoked angry reactions and public protests from some ANC supporters, the SACC, the NRLC and, uncharacteristically, from the ZCC (Moloto, 2014).

The Neo-Pentecostal church leaders rally around Zuma whenever he faces political scrutiny for his scandals. They would offer their pulpits as political platform to air his innocent sacrificial slaughterings. They mobilize protest demonstrations and marches to express their solidarity. Even post his presidency, court cases are going on, and on the steps of courts, his supporters liken him to Jesus, decrying his crucifixion and convening special prayer vigils for him.¹⁸

Zuma's public life has much in common with flamboyant political leaders and former leaders on the continent who have publicly declared their membership, leadership or support of Neo-Pentecostal churches. His religious utterances are mere political populism. Resane (2016) complains that these utterances disturb theological logic as his life, character, and actions are not in synchrony with the same utterances he makes.

Whatever religious statement the president utters, becomes a national debate championed by churches. The rationale behind this is that the President's ethical norms are in collision and not consonant with religious didactic (Resane, 2016:5).

Theology of Dialogue suffered sectarian leniency during Zuma's presidency. The legitimate theological voice was replaced with some questionable church voice. The issue here is not the legitimacy of the voice of the African Independent Churches' voice or Neo-Pentecostal Churches voices, but the manipulation of the political voice within the discourse. This is summarized by Van Wyk (2019:118):

Jacob Zuma is well versed in the prosperity gospel. Apart from his longstanding membership of various NPCs, Zuma was ordained as an honorary pastor in the Full Gospel Church in 2007 (Munusamy 2013). In the run-up to the April 2009 general elections, Zuma visited a number of NPCs and preached an NPC message in the Rhema Bible Church (*Mail & Guardian* 2009; West nd: 10). Taking the archetypal liberation theology text of the Israeli exodus from Egypt (West nd: 11), Zuma turned it into a prosperity gospel message by emphasising Moses' inspired leadership and its resultant prosperous consequences for those he led (Zuma 2009: 1–3). He encouraged his listeners to use 'the power of prayer' (and socio-economic development ventures) to 'make South Africa a land of milk and honey' (Zuma 2009: 3). At Easter, Zuma further raised eyebrows when he eschewed the traditional head of state's visit to the country's largest church, the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), in order to attend a service at the

¹⁷ <https://www.enca.com/south-africa/zuma-tells-religious-leaders-to-back-out-of-politics> (Accessed 23 April 2020).

¹⁸ <http://www.702.co.za/articles/298331/kzn-religious-leaders-to-embark-on-prayers-for-jacob-zuma> (Accessed 25 April 2020)



International Pentecost Church. From its pulpit, Zuma used biblical verses to make veiled swipes at his ‘plotting’ enemies (Zuma 2009b).

The question remains as to reality of Zuma’s association with these Christian formations. Is he a genuine member by affiliation, subscription, association, coercion, or conviction? Or like some African politicians, is he associated just *go ya go ikopela dithapelo?* (Visiting just for prayer requests?). Has he ever entered a robust dialogue with these leaders in order to identify and ratify the socio-political issues? I do not recall any Memorandum of Understanding or Statement Release resultant as Zuma- Neo-Pentecostal Church leaders, while from other church formations there are such kind of statements.

Matamela Cyril Ramaphosa (2018 – present): Theology of Dialogue Towards the Future

Cyril Ramaphosa was born in Soweto, Johannesburg on the 17 November 1952. Both his parents are of Venda tribe descents. Whenever or wherever you read of Ramaphosa’ s religion, one sees nothing much except his active involvement with Student Christian Movement (SCM). This was both at Mphaphuli High School in Sibasa, Venda, where he matriculated, and at University of the North (Turfloop) where he studied law. It was through SCM that hundreds of students during the repressive regime, organized themselves to do evangelism and good works. That is what made SCM an incubator of leaders in all spheres of life in the current South Africa.¹⁹

Those close to Ramaphosa will tell you that in his early days as a student, he was hard-working, someone who was very much shaped by his early years by his Christianity. As a high school and a university student, he embraced liberation theology, which was largely and ideologically intertwined with black consciousness at that time, especially black theology.²⁰ This theology asserted that for the biblical God to be appropriated, there should be a dialectical interplay between the historical experience of the oppressed classes in the Bible and the historical experience of the black working class and peasants in South Africa (Mosala, 1984, Hopkins, 2005:131). This is not surprising as he encountered another active Christian liberationist through SCM at Turfloop i.e. Frank Chikane. He was then deemed as more religious than political, though for him politics and religion were inextricably related.

The current presidency of Ramaphosa is faced with two challenges. When he came into power after unceremonious departure of Zuma, Ramaphosa was confronted with the epidemic of listeriosis, which was contained within few months.²¹ At the moment there is pandemic of Coronavirus known as COVID-19 which is holding the world at the ransom. Many countries, including South Africa are locked down, and population kept staying behind doors. As the pandemic was looming, Ramaphosa as a noted skilful negotiator, set dialogue on course with all community formations, spectacularly with church leaders. The meeting with religious leaders on the 19 March 2020 was aimed to reinforce the national response to Coronavirus outbreak. The outcome of the dialogue is that various leaders have taken the decision to cancel mass gatherings and also cancel normal weekly services. They've asked their congregants to take heed to a call by the president to not have gatherings of more than 100 people and practise social distancing. Cooperation was taken further when subsequently churches across the country indicated they would suspend Easter Weekend services.²² As

¹⁹ <https://www.biznews.com/thought-leaders/2017/12/07/ramaphosa-unofficial-biographer-anthony-butler> (Accessed 11 May 2020).

²⁰ <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/frank-chikane> (Accessed 11 May 2020).

²¹ <https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/2-000-jobs-lost-in-listeriosis-outbreak-mps-told-15745138> (Accessed 11 May 2020).

²² <https://www.gov.za/speeches/president-meet-religious-leaders-virus-outbreak-19-mar-2020-0000> (Accessed 26 April 2020)



dialogue continued, President Cyril Ramaphosa called for a National Day of Prayer on the eve of the 21-day national lockdown which was set to begin at midnight on Thursday 23 March 2020. He invited South Africans to observe two minutes of prayer, reflection or silent meditation that Thursday between 18:00 and 18:30. He quipped:

These are challenging times. We are traversing a path we have never travelled before. There are many among us who are fearful, uncertain and vulnerable. I call on our people to offer a prayer and a thought for the protection and healing of our land and its people from this disease,²³

Religious leaders have on number of occasions expressed support for President Ramaphosa's championing social compacts in which various sectors of society and government work together to develop solutions to national challenges. This is influenced by Ramaphosa's liberationist ideals that truth (context of the oppressed masses), "not ideology, takes constructive incarnation in progressive practice and socio-economic justice" (Berghoef & DeKoster, 1984:128). Cyril Ramaphosa represents a kind of 'cooperative democracy', that tries to bring about a somewhat unifying perspective within the dynamics of cultural diversity - a plea for attitudinal change in order to provide a moral basis for the re-establishment of a democratic dispensation (Louw, 2020:2-3).

Dialogue builds Socio-Political Harmony

When members of society don't dialogue, they will never understand or know each other. They build prejudices, bigotries, and inhibitions about each other. This leads to mistrust, and once this has scaffolded higher, cooperation becomes impossible or difficult. Theology, as a prophetic ministry, is political, but not partisan. Theology is sensitive to injustices and the violation of human rights and dignity, such as oppression of the poor, racism, hatred towards other humans or creation at large, and economic mismanagement. It has an ethical task, which is concerned about liberation, humanization, and reconciliation (Roberts, 1987:18). Politics should be open towards scrutiny. It must be transparent and be willing to walk in the light with theology. Politics and theology dialogue in order to build a culture which is a social construct that provides people with a worldview by which they are guided and identified. The objectives of theo-political dialogue are undoubtedly the shaping of human world, provision of values, norms and a philosophy in life (Gwamna, 2014:4). Theology through dialogue is committed to enrichment of life that points to primal meaning and formation of community and of persons (Spezio in Lovin & Mauldin 2017:25). Walking and fighting injustices together is ideal *modus operandi*. The church and the state were never intended to be enemies or contestants. Ratzinger (1987:145) correctly points out that:

Although the Christians were being persecuted, they did not have a negative view of the state in principle, but rather they still recognized in it the state qua state and did what was in their power to build it up as a state; they did not try to destroy it.

Socio-political dialogues happen because the church's role is to participate in the work of liberation and to live in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed (Veeneman, 2018:122). This means the success, or the failure of the government revolves around the church's intervention both prophetically and/or incarnationally. When theology and politics do not dialogue and propose some proactive and *interventionary* measures, humanity will fall into frailty and disarray, consequently missing the experience of the *abundant life* that Jesus promised to his followers (John 10:10). Passiveness and social distancing of the church during crises is the

²³ <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/ramaphosa-calls-for-national-day-of-prayer-ahead-of-lockdown-20200325>. (Accessed 24 April 2020)



same as allying itself with the dominant forces that create oppressive activities. Theology as a retrieval project should do well in order to change the world, the present and the future. "Retrieval does not equate with agreement but at the very least connotes dialogue" (Anizor, 2018:95). It should be the integral livelihood of Christianity to engage the world in order to understand and seek synergy towards creation of harmony in God's grand plan of the universe where unity in diversity coexist without any friction. Pietersen (2015:96) highlights one of indicators in Calvin's reformist approach that he engaged in extensive correspondence with political and religious leaders throughout Protestant Europe.

Conclusion

The church and the state vis-a-vis theology and politics are two powerful forces which to a large extent shape the cultural norms of society. Theo-political dialogue on social issues is not an option, but mandatory. Theology of dialogue is a mark of church and secular history through the ages. In South Africa, it was a theology of dialogue that intervened during a very depressive era when the state hurled atrocities on humanity, especially during the four decades prior to democratic South Africa. Life was not easy as human rights and dignity were trampled on by the iron feet of state and church theology that interpreted biblical texts from a prejudicial perspective of favoring one group of the population over another.

Mandela's presidency (1994-1999) embraced and promoted theology of dialogue, attempting to revive the moral regeneration of the country lapsing into indifference and entering theological wilderness of prophetic passiveness if not silence. Mbeki's presidency (1999-2008) entered the foray while theology was cushioning itself inside a cocoon, opening doors for outrageous invasion of corruption into socio-political structures. With his humanist leniency, the president turned towards the Bible and vigorously cracked a whip over theology to wake up from its slumber in order to alleviate poverty, and moral decadency in society. The interim presidency of Motlanthe (2008-2009) presided over the nation that was hungry and lacking theological and prophetic essence. It was the era when church leadership was starting to kick itself out of cocoon. Zuma's presidency (2009-2018) sidelined the authentic theological voice; and instead vied for Neo-Pentecostal and generally African Independent Churches that knighted him the Messiah. Political corruption gained the fastest momentum and was covered with spiritual innuendos that are not consonant with theological authenticity. Ramaphosa's presidency (2018-present) is staying on course, trying its best to engage theology of dialogue in every main decision to steer the nation. Current pressures especially the listeriosis epidemic of 2018 and Coronavirus (COVID -19) pandemic are challenging his theological and spiritual outlook of life.

History is witness that when theology and politics dialogue, tensions are minimized. For instance, it took former President F.W. de Klerk some courage to summon theologians to dialogue in Rustenburg (1990) in order to gain perspective of the future for South Africa (De Gruchy in Elphick & Davenport, 1997:171). Self-understanding improves, culture is enhanced, and humanity is reformed. Dialogue must continue. It is always on a bumpy road, but theology of dialogue must 'cruise and slide through'. The church should continue to 'surf on God's mission wave and cruise on God's ethical highway'. Politics should continue to engage in order to involve. Theo-political dialogue brings enemies together and finally builds synergy towards human normality where peace and stability reigns supreme. Societal harmony and self-understanding become enhanced.

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