The South African Experience

Why has transition in South Africa from apartheid to democracy been relatively peaceful? Albert Nolan OP describes the breaking down of barriers but there is still a long way to go to aschieve real equality

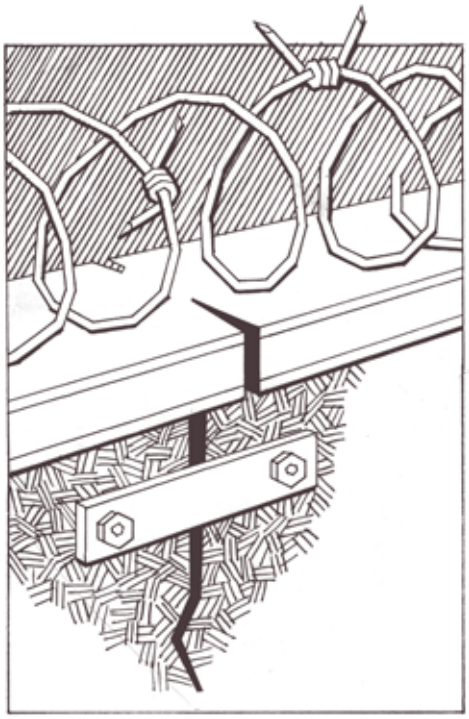
This year South Africa celebrates ten years of freedom. Readers will remember South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994. The peacefulness of the transition and the spirit of reconciliation that has reigned in South Africa since then have been hailed as a miracle and a sign of hope. Miracle or not, the South African experience with all its limitations is surely one of the signs of our times.

The South African experience speaks to us of the possibility of peace and reconciliation in situations that appear to be irredeemably conflictual. None of us thought that democracy and peace would come as quickly and effectively as they did in South Africa. There are still problems – serious problems. Much depends on whether you see the incomplete reconciliation as a glass that is half full or half empty. The miracle is that there is any reconciliation at all.

The role of leadership

Around the world people have come to believe that the South African miracle was the work, almost exclusively, of Nelson Mandela. Most impressive was, and still is, his personal freedom. He speaks his mind and does whatever he believes to be right no matter what anyone in the world may think or say – including his own strongest supporters.

But Mandela was not alone as a great leader. Walter Sisulu, who died last year, was our extraordinarily humble, saintly and inspiring father figure. They were together in prison on Robben Island. Behind the two of them was Chief Albert Luthuli, the first South African to win the Nobel Peace Prize. And Oliver Tambo was the gentle but indefatigable



leader of the ANC in exile during the dark days when others like Mandela and Sisulu were in prison. He did not live to see the first democratic elections. Nor did Steve Biko, tortured and killed by the apartheid police in 1979.

Then there were the great church leaders of the time who contributed significantly to South Africa's peace and reconciliation: the well-known Anglican Archbishop, Desmond Tutu, the Afrikaans director of the Christian Institute, Dr Beyers Naude, and the Catholic Archbishop of Durban, Denis Hurley. And many others, men and women: thousands of unsung heroes who were imprisoned, tortured and killed so that the rest of us might one day enjoy freedom.

What the South African experience seems to be saying to us here is that justice, peace and reconciliation can be achieved only through good leadership: leadership that is humble, honest, fearless and unselfish, based upon a deep personal freedom.

The policy of non-racialism

The ANC or African National Congress advocated a policy of non-racialism. The enemy was not white people or the Nationalist Party or the apartheid president, P.W. Botha. It was the unjust system of apartheid that had to be destroyed, not people.

Unlike so many other conflicts in the world then or now, the South African conflict was not tribal or ethnic or religious. In fact, the white regime, by excluding all people of colour irrespective of their culture, religion or ethnic origins, even the people who were racially mixed, effectively united all tribes, religious faiths and shades of colour against them.

There can be no doubt that the policy of treating the system of apartheid itself as the enemy contributed substantially to the peacefulness of the transition and to the subsequent reconciliation – limited as it is. It also made it possible for Christians and people of other faiths to support the struggle with a theology of justice and peace. It became possible to hate the sin of racism without hating the sinner.

The role of civil society

Another element was the development of a strong civil society. Change was not just the work of politicians. Because only the mildest of opposition political parties were allowed to operate, the real opponents of apartheid, black and white, worked in and through the organs

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of civil society. They worked in trade unions, youth movements, women's movements, student movements as well as volunteer organisations or NGOs working for the poor, uneducated, illiterate, disabled and so forth. Churches and religious communities, especially movements working for justice and peace, were also seen as part of civil society. In 1983 almost all these organisations and movements came together to form the extremely powerful United Democratic Front (UDF).

Moreover, reconciliation in South Africa, has been due in no small measure to the faith communities. By supporting the struggle against apartheid and by rejecting the ideology behind it as 'heretical', the South African faith communities helped to dismantle apartheid and bring the politicians and revolutionaries to the negotiating table.

The path of negotiations

The National Party government had been struggling for years to contain the revolution. The ANC was engaged in urban guerrilla warfare, known as the armed struggle; the people, especially through the UDF, were making the country ungovernable; the churches were delegitimising the policy of apartheid and international sanctions were crippling the economy. The apartheid government tried every possible form of repression to maintain the status quo; but in the end they had to face the fact that either we had some kind of negotiated settlement or we would just destroy one another and the whole country in a bloodbath too horrible to contemplate.

The ANC, on the other hand, had always wanted a negotiated settlement. They knew perfectly well that a military victory or a coup d'état was impossible. A negotiated settlement offered the possibility of a 'win-win' solution. What the National Party and its allies had to learn was that there could be no reconciliation without *justice*. What the ANC and its allies had to learn was that there would be no peace without *compromise*.

Peace without justice

Over the years most whites had been pleading for peace and reconciliation, but they had not been willing to sacrifice their privileges and allow equal rights for the black majority in one undivided nation. They wanted peace without justice. On the other hand the black oppressed majority were very suspicious of any compromise that would leave them disadvantaged, or discriminated against, in one way or another. And yet, white fears had to be addressed.

An interim constitution allowed for a fully democratic election and, after that, the writing of a final constitution in which everyone would have a say. Today, we have one of the most progressive constitutions in the world as well as a very effective constitutional court. The result has been a growing human rights culture and a society based upon the rule of law.

Reconciliation in South Africa is based squarely upon a common belief in the value of negotiations. Negotiations were never brokered or facilitated or mediated by anyone from outside – even when the negotiations threatened to break down and once or twice did break down. The negotiators themselves were able to pick up the pieces again and again and get the process back on track.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)

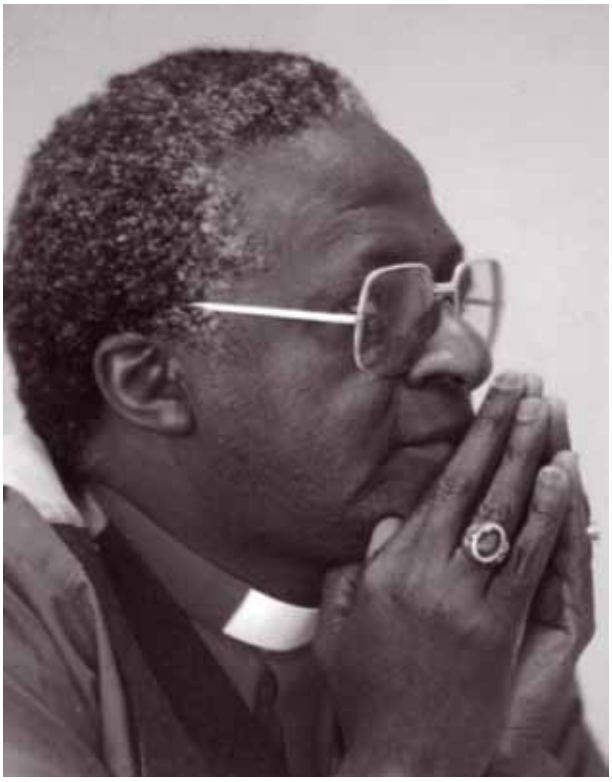
The negotiated settlement included an amnesty for the tens of thousands of people guilty of human rights violations. The last clause of the interim constitution obliged the newly elected government to set up mechanisms to deal with amnesty.

The principal mechanism was the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. It had 17 members with the highly respected Archbishop Desmond Tutu in the chair. Its mandate was to investigate gross violations of human rights, to facilitate the granting of amnesty to those who made full disclosure of what they had done and who could prove that their motives were political. In addition, the Commission was to recommend ways in which the victims' dignity could be restored and reparations be made to them.

In the years that followed, 20,000 statements were received from victims, 2,000 of them were made in public hearings broadcast in full on the radio with highlights on television, and 8,000 applications for amnesty were heard, many of them also at public hearings. For more than two years South Africans were exposed almost daily to revelations about their traumatic past. It was an extremely emotional experience as perpetrators and victims faced one another. Some repentant, some not. Some willing to forgive, others not.

The South African experience highlights a number of human and Christian values:

- the value of dialogue and negotiation in place of violent conflict,
- the value of striving for a more just society rather than the victory of one group over another,
- the value of making carefully defined concessions or compromises,
- the value of a willingness to forgive or at least to grant amnesty when necessary,
- the value of dealing with the past rather than burying it,
- the value of avoiding complacency and apathy in the face of overwhelming problems,
- the value of a strong civil society including trade unions and religious communities; and, last but not least...
- the indispensable value of good leadership and personal freedom.



Bishop Desmond Tutu, one of the architects of modern South Africa. Photograph taken about the time when he received the Nobel Peace Prize, in 1984

The TRC was an extraordinarily important instrument for bringing about reconciliation in South Africa. It could not demand repentance from the perpetrators nor forgiveness from the victims – much less prove either of these. That kind of reconciliation belongs in the arena of religion (the sacrament of confession, for example) or the sphere of personal relations. It did happen, though. There have been some dramatic displays of remorse and powerful acts of forgiveness, both during the TRC hearings and since then.

On the other hand, watching the worst perpetrators of crimes against humanity 'get away with it' was not easy. It was, unfortunately, the price that had to be paid for peace. Perhaps more could have been done, though, for the victims. But there can be no doubt that without the TRC there would have been practically no reconciliation to speak of.

An ongoing challenge

South Africa's reconciliation remains incomplete in some very serious ways.

Racism is still rife. As an attitude of mind it did not, and cannot, disappear overnight. Some say that it has simply been swept under the carpet. One of the greatest of insults in South Africa now is to call someone a racist. And yet, how often one hears that give-away disclaimer: 'I don't want to be racist, but …'

Misunderstandings between black and white abound. Some are cultural, others arise from a lack of appreciation of how much black people actually suffered under apartheid. Whites on the whole are singularly lacking in gratitude for the miracle of reconciliation in South Africa.

On the other hand, as a nation we are learning to live together. The present leadership goes out of its way to celebrate reconciliation and to promote it. December 16, once a holiday celebrating a military victory, is now our *Day of Reconciliation*. The struggle for reconciliation continues because, as President Thabo Mbeki never ceases to remind us, we are still fundamentally a divided nation.

Another great evil that remains is ***poverty***. Much has been done. Millions of houses have been built, the supply of electricity and water has been widely extended, roads and schools have been improved, the economy is booming and yet large numbers of people are still jobless and destitute. Economic justice will be the great challenge of the future.

A social problem that seems to have increased substantially since the end of apartheid is ***crime***. It is not easy to say why. There are no doubt numerous factors that come together to account for the increase in muggings, burglaries, car hijackings, heists, bank robberies, drug-dealing, fraud, corruption, rape and child abuse. But we are not the kind of country that will allow such things to go unnoticed and unchanged.

Towering above all our other problems, though, is the ***HIV/AIDS pandemic.*** By far the majority of infected people in the world today live and die in the southern countries of Africa. South Africa has been particularly hard hit. Our democracy, our economy and our reconciliation will be seriously challenged by the deaths of millions of relatively young people, many of them economically active and well educated, and by the many millions who will be orphaned and by a struggling population that will be further traumatised by this new tragedy.

On the other hand, we are a dynamic country, full of energy and activism. We argue, debate, accuse and blame one another, but when we are faced with problems like racism, poverty, crime, corruption, rape, child abuse, and HIV/AIDS, we protest, organise, mobilise, demonstrate and run campaigns. In the political language of South Africa, we 'toyi-toyi'.

This is a sign of hope for the future, among other things because such forms of protest generally bring together people of different races, creeds and cultures. Examples of this would be the *Treatment Action Campaign* which campaigned successfully against the government's policy on AIDS, and the Basic Income Grant Campaign which is proposing a particular way of helping the poor.

From the point of view of Christian hope we still have much further to go. We can see how the Spirit of God has been working in our midst, but we can also see that our peace and reconciliation are limited, because as individuals most of us are not at peace with ourselves, not yet at peace with the earth and not at peace with God. Without a great degree of inner peace, human beings, in South Africa or elsewhere, will always find it difficult to live in peace and harmony with one another. ■

Albert Nolan, South African author and Dominican Vicar General, was recently awarded the Order of Luthuli in Silver for his lifelong dedication to the struggle for justice in his country.