

# Reflection on Otto Sera Mbangula: Does the Truth Matter?

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## Abstract

This article presents a reflection on the contribution that the Reverend Otto Sera Mbangula made to the Black Methodist Consultation, a formation within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. The particular question that is explored is: Does the truth matter? Importantly, the reflection on the ministry of the Rev. Mbangula is presented against the background of Marxist ideology with a view to highlighting the ideals that Mbangula held.

**Keywords:** Black Methodist Consultation; Mbangula; truth

## Introduction

This article serves to recall the tenacity that characterised the Reverend Otto Sera Mbangula's entire professional career, which covered a number of decades, and his dedication to the project of the Black Methodist Consultation (BMC) as well as the Jesus Project. I believe one can summarise his ministry in this way: a commitment to the Jesus Project and the Jesus Programme. Of course, I take all the responsibility for characterising his career in this way. I doubt that there would be disagreement with my interpretation; nevertheless the description cannot be ascribed to him.

In this article I attempt to review the dynamics and contradictions of the Jesus Project and Programme. I choose deliberately to speak of the Jesus Project and Programme because other modes of appropriating the actions and sayings of Jesus seem to me to be idolatry. The traditional spiritualisation of Jesus, for example, is simply idolatrous. The only way to correctly understand the biblical Jesus is from a social and political perspective. If we call that faith, then it is political and social faith. For me, the only way the Bible can be made to be of value and relevance to believers is to interpret it in accordance with social and political Christology. Political Christology is true to the empirical facts of the Bible. The notion of the Jesus Project and the Jesus Programme, for me, therefore, approximates the



Jesus Way. So, to understand what the Rev. Mbangula was trying to do with his life as a minister of religion, one needs to capture the essence of what I call the Jesus Project and Programme.

My own call to the ministry is based on the notion of the Jesus Way. I can only explain my claim to have received a call to serve as a minister of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) by saying that I was captured by the words of Jesus in the Book of John where He proclaims: “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father unless they come through Me.”<sup>1</sup> The result is that I have been tortured throughout my own journey and career by the question: “Does the truth matter?”

## **Does the Truth Matter?—The Leadership of Otto Mbangula**

At a critical and decisive moment before His death by crucifixion, Jesus problematised the outcome of His final trial in terms of the question of the truth. The conversation between Him and Pilate, the governor in charge, goes like this:

Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. I was born and came into the world for this one purpose, to speak about the truth. Whoever belongs to the truth listens to me.”<sup>2</sup> “And what is the truth?”, Pilate asked.<sup>3</sup>

Let us briefly look at the Book of Jeremiah. The reason for this is that the issues it raises also haunt me perennially, and that their connection between me and the reality they point to have not been resolved. This essay is a moderate attempt to reflect on the leadership of the Rev. Mbangula in and through the BMC. In doing so, it seeks to establish the implications for the MCSA and South African societies of that leadership in terms of the issues raised in Jeremiah 12:1–4, and the way these implications unfolded. The text of Jeremiah 12:1–2 reads as follows:

Lord, if I argued my case with you, you would prove to be right. Yet I must question you about matters of justice. Why are wicked men so prosperous? Why do dishonest men succeed? You plant them and they take root; they grow and bear fruit. They always speak well of you, yet they do not really care about you.

To this text, the Setswana Methodist hymn, which is sung every Sunday in African worship services throughout South Africa, replies with the refrain:

*Fa re re ga re na boleo, rea itsietsa, mme boammaruri go bo yo mo go rona! Mme fa re ipolela dibe/ditlolo tsa rona, o boikanyo le tshiamo go re le balela dibe tsa rona, le go re itshekisa mo tshiamololong yotlhe.*<sup>4</sup> (If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves

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1 John 14:6.

2 John 18:37b.

3 John 18:38.

4 Methodist Church of Southern Africa. 1953. *Setswana Methodist Hymnal*, 10. Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House.

and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.) (author's translation)

There are other ways of wrestling with the contradictions of the truth. Karl Marx speaks directly to the non-straightforwardness of the truth when he locates it within a historical and sociological context. He writes:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. (Marx and Engels 1965, 64)

In relation to social and anthropological pain, some would say that it is a spiritual pain, as verbalised by Marx (1957, 38):

Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people.

It has to be noted that these assertions by Marx come from his writings on religion. Understandably, they are reflections of his struggles with the truth. For a while he avoids confronting the philosophical and spiritual character of the truth but he finally comes round to confessing the nature of his struggles, our struggles, humanity's struggles. He continues:

Criticism has plucked the imaginary flower from the chain not so that man will wear the chain without any fantasy or consolation but so that he will shake off the chain and cull the living flower. (Marx 1957, 38)

And then Marx says:

The task of history, therefore, once the world beyond the truth has disappeared, is to establish the truth of this world. The immediate task of philosophy, which is at the service of history, once the saintly form of human self-alienation has been unmasked, is to unmask self-alienation in its unholy forms. Thus the criticism of heaven turns in the criticism of the earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of politics. (Marx 1957, 38)

The thoughts of Marx then wander, and, almost narcissistically self-engaged, he reflects on the hypocrisy of German history, politics, religion, economics and philosophy before he concludes rather cruelly and caustically by saying:

Led by our shepherds, we never found ourselves in the company of freedom except once – on the day of its burial. (Marx 1957, 39)

History is thorough and goes through many phases when carrying an old form to the grave. The last phase of world-historical form is its comedy. The gods of Greece, already tragically

wounded in Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, had to re-die a comic death in Lucien's Dialogues. Why this course of history? So that humanity should part with its past cheerfully. (Marx 1957, 41)

Marx was relentless in searching for the truth in history. He despised the philosophical approach because up to then philosophers had only interpreted the world whereas the point was to change it. He continually found fault with his nation and his people. He bemoaned the contradictions of truth—theoretically and practically—in the history of the German nation and people. He recognised their amazing achievements but struggled with exactly what the meaning of the truth was (historically and theoretically) to the German people and in respect of German history, even spirituality:

Even historically, theoretical emancipation has specific practical significance for Germany. For Germany's revolutionary past is theoretical, it is the Reformation. As the revolution then began in the brain of the monk, so now it begins in the brain of the philosopher ... Luther, we grant, overcame bondage out of devotion by replacing it by bondage out of conviction. He shattered faith in authority because he restored authority of faith. He turned priests into laymen because he turned laymen into priests. He freed man from outer religiosity because he made religiosity the inner man. He freed the body from chains because he enchained the heart. (Marx 1957, 46)

He continued:

In Germany, where practical life is as spiritless as spiritual life is unpractical, no class in civil society has any need or capacity for general emancipation until it is forced by its immediate condition, by material necessity, by its very chains. Where, then, is the positive possibility of a German emancipation? Answer: In the formation of a class with radical chains, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates. (Marx 1957, 50)

It is my conviction that the successes and limitations of the Rev. Mbangula's professional and ministerial career can be explained in terms of similar contradictions. The search for the truth is an unenviable pilgrimage. Mbangula's struggles with his church and his decision to co-found the BMC was a laudable attempt to remain tied to the Jesus Project and Programme while dealing with the antagonistic forces that sought to redefine the truth of the Jesus Project and Programme.

The MCSA failed Mbangula in much the same way that it failed a significant number of other black ministers. The BMC became a home for him where the ravages of racism were mitigated and the betrayals by colleagues could be placed in context. The truth was a problem in the MCSA and it was painfully experienced as a problem in the BMC also. Little wonder that Pilate asked what the truth was when he observed how Jesus was treated by his own people.

Marx's answer to the question of the truth was the need "for the formation of a class with radical chains, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates" (Marx 1957, 50). In exploring the meaning of the truth, we can move away from the nineteenth-century circumstances of Marx to a more modern period, to our time, Mbangula's time, the BMC's time. There is no better example to look at than the experience of the African-American community and especially professionals in a country that regards itself as the leader of democracy in the world. The truth is a strange stranger especially where the contradictions of race relations are dominant. Souljah, an African-American scholar and revolutionary and a producer of incredible scholarship, brings home the truth of black experience in a remarkable way:

I have a mother who taught me the difference between everything cheap and high quality. I had three sisters, all dimes living swolled in a beautiful Long Island palace. The last thing my poppa promised me was a pony so I could trot around our property. It's the police who are the criminals, kidnapers, and thieves. The authorities know the deal, they all in it together. That's why I jammed the sharpened number two pencil in my caseworker's neck as she was driving me in her state-owned vehicle. She tried to say something slick about my family, Winter in particular. I don't play that shit. "Family sticks together" ... My caseworker is paralysed now. So she got a lot of time to sit still and think about all the lies she been telling little kids, about taking them to live in a better place, in better circumstances. She knew what the fuck was up. She'd say and do anything, no matter how evil it was as long as they paid her to do it. She'd drop me off anywhere, including hell, and leave me with anyone including the motherfucking devil, even if she knew for sure I was in serious danger. As long as that was the address printed on her per, she'd leave me without looking back. So they got me locked up in juvy. It's better than playing house. Everything is clear in here, the way I prefer things to be. No one is pretending to love me, or the rest of us. We damn sure ain't pretending to love them or each other either. In here, there's only friends and enemies, no in-between. (Souljah 2012, 7)

The contradictions of the truth plague all areas of life and all disciplines that pursue knowledge. Clearly, the truth is in trouble everywhere. The student uprisings in America in the 1970s were captured in an incredible study by Gitlin (1980) that revolves around the issue of leadership that gives rise to key questions about the truth. In a chapter titled "Certifying Leaders" he writes as follows:

The movement elevated many leaders; the media selected for celebrity those among them who most closely matched prefabricated images of what an opposition leader should look and sound like: articulate, theatrical, bombastic, and knowing and inventive in the ways of packaging messages for their mediability. ... whether extravagant or moderate, movement leaders could get certified as celebrity-leaders although they were not accountable to a movement base. They floated in a kind of artificial space, surrounded by haloes of processed personality; the media became their constituency. ... The first step in this power syndrome is to become a "personality." You begin to monopolize contacts and contracts. You begin making \$1000 per speech. With few real friends and no real organization, you become dependent on the mass media and travel in orbit with similar "stars." (Gitlin 1980, 154)

The contradiction of the truth in terms of its relationship to the media is remarkably well captured by Gitlin, whose description would elicit the traditional protestations by the media. It is axiomatic that truth is not the first principle of operation for media practitioners and theorists.

Matters concerning the truth have worsened in the age of globalisation. Hertz (2002, 14), a British economist from Cambridge University, in her powerful book provides a flavour of the sacrifice of truth in the age of globalisation:

My decision to write *The Silent Takeover* was not a disinterested one. I needed to make sense of my own growing discontent, my own feeling that things were going awry. ... How was it that I, daughter of a woman who devoted much of her life to putting women into politics, now saw politics as a co-opted, increasingly meaningless arena – a sideshow whose best act was the farce of the last US presidential elections? How could it be that ten years after landing in Leningrad to set up Russia's first stock exchange – a travelling saleswoman with capitalism in my briefcase – I now felt a burning need to question its very tenets? Why was it that at Cambridge University's business school, where I teach, when I made it clear that I was willing to supervise on the issues that this book examines, I was deluged with so many requests from students that I couldn't possibly satisfy them all?

The attack on the truth can probably be traced back further than Jesus's time, and the conspiracy against it is universal. Still, in economics, Napoleoni (2008, 4) brings the issues closer to home in an enlightening manner:

The low-fat promotion is more often than not a pure lie perpetrated by food corporations, retailers, and even government agencies. It is also a multibillion-dollar business. Almost every product we consume has a hidden, dark history, from slave labor to piracy, from fakes to fraud, from theft to money laundering. The most dangerous breeding ground for rogue economics is the global market. Rogue products penetrate and corrupt traditional economies. When we buy a wedding ring produced with gold mined by Congolese children working for ruthless warlords, smuggled to Uganda, and sold with forged documents of origin by crooked trading companies, we establish a commercial link with the sinister underworld of Africa's illegal and criminal economy.

Conspiracy against the truth is a multibillion-dollar business. The truth is on sale everywhere. Jeremiah's complaint against God echoes through the centuries: "Lord, why do the wicked prosper?"

The situation is worse in the fields of economics and finance. Most ordinary people believe what the so-called financial and economic experts say and teach about our economies. In South Africa we have been inundated with the self-righteousness of the economic rating agency. Unfortunately, distorters of the truth have risen to prominence in South Africa at a time when the national deviation from the truth is at its worst. Global economic fraud has been on the ascendency with great speed and agility since the global economic collapse of

2007. Shutt (2010, 38), a British economist and a life-time activist against global economic fraud, has the following to say:

One element of officially sponsored fraud aimed at ensuring market stability is the orchestrated manipulation of financial markets. It is self-evident that such manipulation must be overt, bearing in mind that investors and the public at large must not be encouraged to suspect that markets are rigged, particularly given that:

- the high rewards of so many financiers are typically justified on the basis of the high risks that they run rather than trading on the basis of privileged “insider” information;
- the public might be less willing to invest their savings in securities whose price they perceived to be determined by covert illicit manipulation rather than by the functioning of “efficient markets” based on free and fair competition.

## Conclusion

Based on the above reflections, some questions arise: Does it matter that everything is a lie? Does it matter that everything is a fake? Also, one may say: food is fake; money is fake; cars are fake; the economy is a fake; democracy is a fake; education is a fake; religion and the church are fakes; politics and politicians are fakes; love is a fake. What about the BMC? It was founded to defend the legacy of the faith of our mothers and fathers, but what is its view of the truth? How long will the jury be out on the truth? Those who accepted the mantle of leadership in the BMC needed to understand how to carry an uncomfortable cross related to the truth that was betrayed. Reverberating down through the ages are the words of another biblical voice: “To those who have, more shall be added; To those who do not have, even the little that they have will be taken away from them” (Matthew 25:29). The Rev. Mbangula lived, served and led like one who was permanently tortured by the uncomfortable knowledge that the jury was still out on the truth. Unfortunately it is also true for us that the jury is still out on the truth.

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