The Relevance of the Gospel in Post-Apartheid South Africa: A Dialogue with Albert Nolan

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Abstract

Albert Nolan's book, *God in South Africa: The Challenge of the Gospel* (first published in 1988), provides insights for both academic and general reading, making it an interesting book to read. Almost three decades have lapsed since the book was first published. Numerous Bible reading establishments (including theological institutions, seminaries and Bible colleges) have emerged, and new theological approaches to expounding biblical themes are coming to the fore. Post-apartheid South Africa has undergone various transformative phases, which the book did not address. A democratic dispensation was obtained in 1994, with Nelson Mandela becoming the first president to be elected by the majority of South African citizens. Post-apartheid South African societies have had high expectations at the dawn of this new dispensation. These expectations emerged from two fronts: (1) The praxis of justice and delivery of services by the ruling party and (2) the role of the Church and the function of the Gospel in developing and transforming societies. This study aimed to elucidate Albert Nolan's book in detail and blend its contents with the lived realities obtained in the new dispensation in South Africa. The focus of the investigation was to set an agenda for the Church and the teaching of the Gospel to realign towards addressing socioeconomic particularities affecting the majority of South Africans daily. The study utilised Secondary Data Analysis (SDA) as a methodological approach.

Keywords: Albert Nolan; the Church; the Gospel; post-apartheid; poverty; South Africa

UNISA university of south africa PRESS
Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae
#16075 | 17 pages

https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/16075
ISSN 2412-4265 (Online), ISSN 1017-0499 (Print)

Introduction

Albert Nolan's book sets the tone for the function and applicability of the Gospel to South African society during apartheid. The majority of South Africans experienced various forms of oppression during the apartheid era. When South Africa obtained democratic rule in 1994, local communities had anticipated an economic turnaround among the Black people. However, poverty, influenced by a lack of access to income-earning, productive activities, and essential social services (Kankwanda 2002, 3), continues to haunt them. The function of the Gospel towards poverty reduction cannot be over-emphasised when communities continue to lack basic survival needs (Scheffler 2011, 193). South Africans yearn for basic human needs such as nutritious food, clothing, housing, clean water, and health services (Addae-Korankye 2014, 147). There is no better time for the liberating message of the Gospel to the oppressed citizenry than when basic needs promised during the struggle for democratic rule are not being fulfilled. It is well-documented and acknowledged widely that most South African citizens are impoverished (e.g., Battersby and Watson 2019; Kanu 2019; Stats South Africa 2014; Wax 2013). In the aforementioned context, the present study sought to examine the validity of the claim that the Gospel epitomises the soul of Christianity. For Albert Nolan, the term "Gospel" echoes the idea of the "good news." The term "gospel" is derived from the Greek verb *evangelizo* (meaning "to announce" or "to bring good news"), which provides the noun form *evangelion* (meaning "a proclamation"). Horbury (2005, 12) assumed that the term developed from the Old Testament (OT) concept of a "messenger" or "one that is sent to tell the good news" (see also Diehl 2011, 173). Thus, the Gospel or "Good News" recaptures the values of birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus, "humanity is reconciled to God through physical actions of Jesus—his death and resurrection" (Diehl 2011, 195; see Col. 1.15–23). In other words, individuals who "preach" the Gospel do so through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that God provides. Therefore, reference to the Gospel refers to the "Word of God" (John. 1:1). It can further be envisaged that the categorisation of the New Testament (NT) books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John locates them as the "Gospels." The Gospel commences with God's love for sinful humanity. In the Gospel of John (3:16), the love of God to the lost world through Jesus Christ is apparent (see Morrison 2010, 3). Biblical authors have used the phrase "salvation history" (e.g., Bergsma 2015; Keener 2009) to refer to Jesus becoming a ransom for the sinful world. The notion of salvation history is dominant in the Gospels. Admittedly, this is the line of thought that Nolan's book attempts to take. Also, the appropriation of the Gospel to South Africa today cannot be disregarded. The current South African experience that the book's earlier version attempted to address but was overtaken by time deserves our attention. The Gospels show that the character of God is depicted in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. It can further be problematised that the Gospels teach that the Holy Spirit, which Jesus left for His followers, constitutes the authority given to the Church. As noted elsewhere, the parables and miracles of Jesus Christ demonstrated God's compassion and works of charity towards those in need. The Church regards the death of Jesus on the cross as a sacrifice which individual believers should guard jealously and with empathic

appreciation. It is believed that Jesus, as a sacrifice, fulfilled the sacrificial system of the OT as an atonement for a sinful world. Jesus' resurrection is personified as an all-conquering activity not only over sin but also over death. The extent to which death was "conquered" remains a bone of contention, particularly among critical scholars, arguing that humans are still battling with transience in which death is always winning. The primacy that punctuates the Gospel message is the romanticism of sin, which Jesus' death and his resurrection overcame. Thus, both evil (sin) and death, which characterise Satan (the devil), were asphyxiated by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The above concept comprises the context of apostle Paul's questions: "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" (1 Cori. 15:55). The Church believes that the Gospel presents Jesus Christ as one who became sinful in the place of sinful humans (an atonement; see Isa. 53:5–8; 2 Cori. 5:21; 1 Pet. 2:24). God gave and lost His own son to draw and reconcile the sinful world to Himself. Therefore, the Gospel's message is apparent: The Church as an institution is depicted as a selfless entity that brings people together from diverse and geopolitical spaces but is united by the atonement that Jesus offered. Another concept that deserves our attention, which the book also touches on, is the illuminating and transformative power of the Gospel. Thus, apostle Paul affirmed this belief when he wrote: "For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake" (1 Thess. 1:5). According to the message of the Gospel, there is a regeneration which is futuristic. The regeneration occurs in humans, who, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, were able to expedite love, mercy, and justice toward others. What is also known of the Gospel is its power to heal and restore broken hearts. The Gospel also influences cultures and transforms diverse ethnic groups. When Nolan's book discusses the Gospel as elucidating the concepts of hope and salvation, especially for the South African readership, a reflection of liberation from apartheid comes to the fore. In that sense, the emancipatory character of the Gospel will only be acknowledged when post-apartheid South African communities begin to experience a dispensation of euphoria. Until that happens, the message of the Gospel cannot be deemed relevant for the majority of South Africans. In order to achieve the aforementioned objectives, this study explored the following themes as expressed in Albert Nolan's book: Sin in the Bible; Crucified People; Unmasking the System; Sin and Guilt in South Africa; Salvation in the Bible and the Good News of Salvation; The Signs of Hope; The Struggle; The Role of the Church; and The Challenge. Secondary Data Analysis (SDA) was employed as a method.

Secondary Data Analysis

In Secondary Data Analysis (SDA), existing data is used in research, which the present study adopted as a methodological approach. The same impetus motivated Melissa P. Johnston to write: "Practicality of utilising existing data in research is becoming more prevalent" (2014:619). According to Johnston (2014:619), "secondary data analysis is an analysis of data collected by someone else for another primary purpose." This study employed SDA to analyse Albert Nolan's book, *God in South Africa: The Challenge of*

the Gospel (1988). To date (December 2023), 35 years have elapsed since the book was published. The analysis is neither a critique nor a review of Nolan's contribution. The purpose of the analysis is to launch a basis for an argument against the limitation of the book, given new socioeconomic and geopolitical developments that emerged in post-apartheid South Africa when the country attained democratic rule in 1994. In addition to Nolan's book, the biblical text will also be analysed as a resource in view of SDA. Analysis of the biblical text is an attempt to locate the claim of the ancient text in the context of modern South African societies and their lived realities and everyday experiences.

Sin in the Bible

The doctrine and the universality of sin are prominent in the entire narrative of the biblical text. In his book *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle* (1997), Henri Blocher discusses and critiques in detail the phenomenon of original sin as depicted in the biblical text. The Bible depicts that the perpetuity of sin was the reason for the death and resurrection of Jesus. For the apostle Paul to state, "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cori. 5:21), reinforces sin as the dominant theme in the Bible. The sin narrative in the Bible commences with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. According to Genesis 2:8, the Garden of Eden was planted by God, which perhaps motivated the prophet Ezekiel to describe it as the "Garden of God" (Ezek. 28:13). The Hebrew meaning of the term "Eden" is "luxury" and "delight" (see Parry 1994, 133). Despite the Garden of Eden being a place of luxury and delight, the "sanctuary" was infiltrated by the power of the devil, causing the first people to sin. The Bible reveals that waywardness by Adam and Eve subsequently precipitated a separation between humans and God because sin had corrupted the relationship between humans and God. The prophet Isaiah had since noted, "But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you so that He will not hear" (Isa. 59:1–2). In his writings, the apostle Paul echoes the OT's position on sin. For example, in Romans 3:23, we read, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." The first epistle of John also explains the sinfulness of humans and that "…if we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar, and his word has no place in our lives" (1 John. 1:8–10). What the readership is getting is that sin has shattered human society. For Almond (1999) to state that "what sin had shattered, science could in large part repair" (p. 36) contradicts the Christian teaching that Jesus atoned human sin through his death and his resurrection. Scholars have devised what they described as "sins of commission and omission" (see, for example, Feldman, Kutscher and Yay 2020, 1–15; Spranca, Minsk and Baron 1991, 76–105). The term "sins" in the phrase "sins of commission and omission" might be deceiving to imply only a deliberate violation of God's commands. Thus, Schmid (2008, 254) writes, "Sins of commission are positive acts, by which the negative precepts of God are violated." Supporting Schmid, Jeffrey Siker (2019) maintained that "anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin" (2019, 151; see also James 4:17). However, sins of omission can generally involve failing to do what is

right. The universality of sin is apparent in the Bible. For example, James 4:17 reads: "Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin." Other examples include Acts 17:30, Galatians 6:7–9, 1 John 3:4, 1 John 5:17 and numerous others. In the Bible, there are people whom the sins of commission and omission could not hold back. For example, David admitted that "…I have sinned against the LORD…" (2 Sam. 12:13) when he killed Uriah and took Uriah's wife, Bathsheba. In Psalm 51:2–3, David says: "Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me." Commenting on the term "cleanse" used in Psalm 51:2, Ross (1985, 852) explained that "the verb 'cleanse' comes from the ceremonial law and speaks of purification for temple participation." In other words, David's sin would hold him back from participating in the temple. David realised that confessing his sin provided access to the sanctuary. Perhaps it was a similar context that the Psalter scribed of David: "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer" (Psa. 32:3–4). Following Ross' assertion, pilgrimage and participation in the temple were important for David to engage and interact with both Yahweh and other congregants. In other words, isolation from society was a kind of condemnation to death. King Saul also acknowledged his sinfulness before the Lord when he said to Samuel: "I have sinned: For I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD and thy words because I feared the people, and obeyed their voice" (1 Sam. 15:24). Earlier on in the discourse, Paul's writings which explored the concept of sin was mentioned. In one of his writings, Paul says: "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory God" (Rom. 3:23). According to Paul, sin prohibits individuals from accessing God's redemption and salvation. From time to time, the biblical text presents Jesus' death and resurrection as how redemption and salvation can prevail. Jesus Christ is presented as the atonement for sin.

Crucified People

It is not only Albert Nolan who wrote on the theme of "Crucified People." The list includes Sobrino (1982/87), Tesfai (1994), Song (1996), Brondos (2007), Crowley (2008), McDonald (2010) and Tombs (2023), and numerous others. What is common among writers is that the concept of "crucified people" undergirds the Christian teaching and that Christians should identify themselves with Jesus Christ, who is the centre of Christianity. Furthermore, the identification is premised on the belief that Jesus was sacrificed for sinful humanity and that His blood "cleansed" them of their sins. The "cleansing" provided a way to reconcile humans to God. This teaching punctuates both the Gospel message and modern homiletics. The concept is commensurate with Jesus' teaching on servanthood. When apostle Paul, who is purported to be the author of the biblical book of Galatians, wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me…" (Gal. 2:20), he implied to have shared Jesus' own life which was modelled on humility and selflessness. Believers are called to take up their cross – a symbol of suffering and sacrifice – and follow in His footsteps. Perhaps it was the same perspective that the idea that to be crucified people means embracing suffering

for the sake of righteousness and love. Christianity teaches that because Christ endured the cross for the atonement of human sin, its adherents are expected to follow the example set by their master. Whether church members and Bible believers are following Jesus' teaching is debatable.

Unmasking the System

The phrase "unmasking the system" may not be clear initially. However, as one reads further, Nolan's position becomes apparent. First, "unmasking the system" tends to criticise the colonial system and its perverse tenets, which continue to emerge in various ways in post-apartheid South Africa. Twenty-nine years have lapsed since South Africa obtained the perceived Black majority rule. However, the prevailing situation among societies suggests that most South African citizens are groaning and languishing in poverty and unemployment precipitated by bad governance, greed, and corruption. The beneficiaries of the so-called democratic rule are those aligned with the ruling party (ANC) and individuals occupying higher echelons of leadership both in the public and private sectors. Also included in the category of beneficiaries are individuals still enjoying the privileges of a special class inherited from the apartheid policy. The only difference that manifests itself between apartheid and the post-1994 rule is that today, people are allowed to exercise their institutional rights through voting. Also, Black people no longer carry a pass and can stay wherever they choose if they have the capacity. However, exclusivity persists as a serious challenge in South Africa because the majority of our population is poor and incapacitated. They continue to live from hand to mouth, and their shelters are typically tin houses (shacks) in squatter camps dotted all over the country and in surrounding major cities. Second, the phrase "unmasking the system" is a critical dialogue on societal structures and establishments which influence injustice and vengeance. This naturally speaks to both the political hegemony and naïve religious practices that "refuse" to embrace transformation. Again, as alluded to previously in this conversation, the concept is anchored on the teachings of Jesus and the disciples after Jesus ascended. As noted through some examples, Jesus' teachings challenged religious hypocrisy and societal injustice. Of course, there is something in us as humans that loves control and power. Genesis 3 shows that humans enjoyed being in charge from time immemorial (and in ancient Israel). According to Matthew 20:25, Gentile rulers liked control and power, in which the majority of the poor were oppressed. Furthermore, Jesus instructed his disciples, "Not so with you…" (Matt. 20:26). It is, therefore, not in the best interest of the scared institution for one to manipulate the system to reach the top. Nevertheless, extreme love of excessive control results in oppressing those at the lower ranks of society, including the poor. At the beginning of Matthew 20:20–28, a "mother of Zebedee's sons" (v. 20) who was familiar with the system among Gentile rulers in which a request could be made with the governing authority for one's children to be given high office jobs, went to Jesus and asked for a favour saying: "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom" (Matt. 20:21). In the modern day, such a practice would be described as "favouritism" or "corruption". Jesus' response to the

"mother", "You do not know what you are saying," though harsh, showed the gravity of corrupt practices that had infiltrated every sphere of life among Gentile communities. Jesus' response in Matthew 20:23 is also exhilarating when he said: "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father". In light of the above response, Jesus exonerated Himself from the function that does not belong to Him. In the last part of verse 23, Jesus cautions: "These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father". In other words, by using the verb "prepared," Jesus metaphorically drew closer to the verb "qualify", which is preferred in our contemporary world. Verses 27–28 are equally interesting: Jesus says He came to serve and not to be served. Here, Jesus addresses the question of servant leadership, which is a challenge for many leaders in South Africa. In terms of pastoral calling, one becomes "a servant of the Gospel" because the "focus and end of authentic Christian leadership is not determined by the self-interest of the leader but by the self-giving nature of leadership characterised by humility and obedience" (Naidoo 2012, 6). Nell's (2014, 16) analysis affirms that "…a spirituality of servant leadership relates to pedagogies of transformation and performance, and responds to the problem or challenge of power and authority in academy, church and society…" Therefore, unmasking the system requires an overhauling of the entire system that promotes and sustains injustice from the top cascading down to the lowest level of leadership. Unmasking the system also consists of recognising challenges that require immediate attention. The biblical call to implement and exercise justice is intertwined with the invitation to stewardship. The OT prophets embraced this concept and chose to fall out of favour with the leadership of the time as they focused on geopolitical and socioeconomic crises and the lack of social injustice affecting members of society at large. Today, the Church in South Africa needs to respond to this prophetic calling not only by ministering to congregants about eternity but also on the day-to-day particularities that affect most of our people, including the negative impact of injustice and inequality.

Sin and Guilt in South Africa

It has been noted that the history of apartheid in South Africa is a painful history. Admittedly, the history of apartheid raises critical questions about sin, guilt, and reconciliation. When Nico Vorster wrote his *Land Dispossession as "Original Sin"* (2020), I thought it was a response to Katharina von Kellenbach's *The Mark of Cain* (2013) because guilt and reconciliation characterise the history of South Africa from apartheid to the post-1994 era. While Von Kellenbach (2013) wrote about "forgetting, erasing, and burying the guilt of the past" (p. 8), Vorster's (2020) argument on "land dispossession as an original sin" tends to legitimise the debate on land expropriation currently prioritised as the topical issue in post-apartheid South Africa. The scenario resembles the virtual enmity between a hyena and a lion, both predators. While the lion depends heavily on its size and stamina, the hyenas depend primarily on numbers, which can potentially dispose the lion of its prey. Regarding the Holocaust, repeated reflection

on the apartheid era "makes memory unbearable for both survivors and perpetrators as well as their families" (von Kellenbach 2013, 206; see also Snyman 2014, 1037).

On the one hand, a sense of guilt is created against the perpetrators, while on the other hand, insistence on guilt for perpetrating apartheid potentially tends to brew vengeance on the part of the victims. In my view, when the commission of sin is acknowledged, a common ground is then created on a peaceful settlement between conflicting parties, the perpetrators (apartheid beneficiaries) and the victims (the majority indigenous people of South Africa). Also, in some instances, racial and oppressive practices are experienced. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa (also in other places, for example, Sierra Leone and Peru, see DeMinck 2007, 1–36) provided a dialogue for both victims and perpetrators. The TRC focused on alleviating the burden of guilt to promote healing. The Church played a key role in solving questions of guilt and reconciliation. TRC was comprised of many Christian leaders in South Africa and was chaired by Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Though not at the level expected, the current atmosphere of tolerance in South Africa can be attributed to the Church's involvement in the TRC. Truth commissions, in which the Church was involved, were also established in other parts of the world, such as Sierra Leone and Peru (see DeMinck 2007, 1–36). However, the narrative of sin and guilt in South Africa is a good example that the Church and its Gospel can proffer profound healing among groups experiencing hostilities or disagreements.

Salvation in the Bible and the Good News of Salvation

The biblical text is replete with narratives and concepts on salvation. Some representative examples are discussed herein. Psalm 79:9 reads: "Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name; deliver us, and atone for our sins, for your name's sake!" The prophet of doom, Jeremiah, also mourns: "Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved, for you are my praise" (Jer. 17:14). In Ezekiel 34:11–16, God promises to seek out and save those who are lost, and to bind up the injured. In the Bible, the word "salvation" tends to share the same meaning as "atonement"/ "righteousness"/ "liberation" (see Oliver 2018; Igba and Stoker 2018). The prophet Isaiah already foresaw Yahweh giving His son Jesus as an atonement for our sin (Isa. 53:5). The Lord is depicted as both the Judge, the King, and the Saviour (Isa.33:22). The Psalter exalts the Lord as the redeemer who does not condemn those who come to Him (Psa. 34:22; see also John 3:16–17). The redeeming activity of the Lord is also manifested in Isaiah 44:22. In the New Testament (NT), the saving activity of Christ is conveyed in many places (see Luke 19:10; John 10:9–10). In Acts 16:30, the condition for accessing God's salvation is belief "in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." According to apostle Paul, sinful humans were saved by the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus and have become the righteousness of God (Rom. 5:10; 2 Cori. 5:21; Hebrews 5:9; 7:25; 2 Tim. 3:15ff).

One's admittance of guilt and confession with one's mouth that Jesus is Lord will yield into salvation (Rom. 10:9–10). However, endurance is also a concept intertwined with salvation because one who endures to the end will be saved (Matt. 24:13). Here, the "end" is not time-specific; it means a period taken in endurance. For example, one who endures oppression will someday attain liberation, and a known sinner will be forgiven. In light of the biblical text, salvation covers concepts such as redemption, reconciliation, and restoration. The book of Ephesians (e.g., 1:13) illuminates these aspects, emphasising salvation as a gift from God received through faith. Redemption, a central theme, refers to liberation from sin's power. However, this "liberation" also means freedom from poverty. Individually, salvation offers the assurance of eternal life and a transformed existence. Thus, salvation speaks to God's plan to reconcile all humans to Himself through Christ. The Gospel, often referred to as the "good news of salvation," encapsulates the heart of Christianity. At its core, the Gospel proclaims the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, offering hope, forgiveness, and eternal life to all who believe. This message of salvation addresses the deep longing within humanity for meaning, purpose, and reconciliation with God. The Gospel begins with the recognition of humanity's fallen state due to sin. It highlights the separation between God and humans and the need for a Saviour. Through Christ's sacrificial death on the cross, the Gospel reveals God's profound love and willingness to bridge the gap. Salvation is a gift – not earned through human merit but received through faith. This foundational truth contrasts with many other religious systems that emphasise human effort.

The Gospel's emphasis on grace transforms the way believers perceive their relationship with God – it is not based on performance but on God's unmerited favour. Furthermore, the Gospel brings transformation. It renews minds, hearts, and lifestyles. As believers grasp the depth of God's love and forgiveness, they are empowered to love and forgive others. This transformation extends beyond personal realms, inspiring believers to engage in acts of social justice, mercy, and compassion. The Church's role is to proclaim and live out the good news of salvation. This includes sharing the message of Christ's redemptive work and embodying its principles in daily life. The Church becomes a living testimony to the transformative power of the Gospel, showcasing a community characterised by love, unity, and service.

The Signs of Hope

There are various references to hope in Scripture, and the Bible is replete with stories that exemplify signs of hope, reminding us that even in the darkest moments, God is at work. Examples include the following: Job 5:16: "So the poor hath hope, and iniquity stoppeth"; Job 14:7: "For there is the hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that the tender branch thereof will not cease"; Psalms 16:9: "Therefore, my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth: my flesh also shall rest in hope". According to Paul, Bible believers (Christians) have hope while Gentiles have none (Eph. 2:12; 1 Thess. 4:13). This hope is not known to Stoics (1 Thess. 1:3; Rom. 5:3–5). In numerous cases, hope is not a stand-alone concept; it is expressed in combination with faith and

love (see 1 Thess. 3:5; Gal. 5;5–6; 1 Cori. 13:13; Heb. 6:10–12; 1 Pet. 1:21–22). In 2 Corinthians 9:10, apostle Paul says, "…the ploughman should plough in hope, and the thresher thresh in hope of a share in the crop." Unfortunately, commoners in South Africa are ploughing and threshing without a share; the farmer (the corporate world/the capitalist) takes away almost everything, leaving the labourer to pick up the crumbs.

In times of despair, the Church in South Africa is called upon to continue providing signs of hope through teaching and preaching. Christian songs have also been helpful in steering hope to people whose livelihoods were disseminated by various macroeconomic difficulties. Our world, South Africa included, is seriously marked by despair and turmoil. In such a situation, signs of hope will not only anchor people toward a better future but will also provide renewed mechanisms toward transformation. As affirmed by Purity Malinga, there is a need to persistently "encourage faith and hope in God who is ever present with the world and suffers with it" (2021, 4). Suppose hope is anything that influences humans to see signs of a better future beyond the now positively. In that case, South Africa cannot afford to neglect it. The signs of hope surpass the suffering and impoverishment that are loud and clear among our communities. Signs of hope should be accompanied by our endurance and resilience as we anticipate the best of South Africa unfolding slowly but surely. One would concur with Nobesuthu Tom, who wrote, "While the length of the period one has to wait for such peace is uncertain, the hope that the peace will come is ever-present" (2021, 31). According to Tom (2021, 31), this hope "is largely possible through the rituals and customs of mourning, each important in its own way, as a step in the journey of grieving." Although Tom was referring to the devastation caused by COVID-19, her proposition on signs of hope in South African geopolitical and socioeconomic landscapes is applicable in this discussion.

One would also see glimpses of God's redemptive work amid challenges. Perhaps Clyde J. Steckel's observation may need a reflection from a South African perspective for penning that "standing behind and within all these mediations is the God who invites people to participate in the divine ministry of reconciliation and hope" (1981, 380). The sacred institution in South Africa may need to work towards a new dispensation which looks at life holistically. Steckel (1981, 381) called this new dispensation a "new age" that recognises and appreciates the quality of life. Steckel (1981, 381) added: "Quality of that new age, providing hope and confidence in the ultimate triumph of goodness, and calling for active participation in the struggles to achieve the justice and love which Christ gives and promises in that new age." Signs of hope can be observed in personal transformation. Individuals battling with addiction, broken relationships, sickness (e.g., cancer), or disability (e.g., visual impairment) will need to live with the reality of their condition in the hope that they will experience healing from which they will testify to the power of God's grace. Thus, hope, in this case, becomes an antidote not for ameliorating but for coping with an unfriendly condition. However, South Africa may need to resist when a call for hope emerges from beneficiaries of either the apartheid system or an extension of it. This argument is raised in view of the historical fact that it

is the apartheid system that dismembered Black South Africans "from their land, from labour, from power, and from memory, which destroyed the base from which people launched themselves into the world" (wa Thiong'o 2009, 28).

The Struggle

There is a saying that struggle should be an integral part of the human experience and of Christian theology. When Dube and Molise (2018, 161) wrote: "The struggle for freedom was fought from the platform of tradition, as well as from within religion itself…", the above saying occupies an affirmative position. Black South Africans were liberated from apartheid in 1994. However, the economic privileges still remain in the hands of the beneficiaries of the previous colonial system, which unceremoniously established itself in an unholy partnership with the African National Congress (ANC). This argument is made in light of the majority of Black South Africans, who are still languishing in extreme poverty. Dube and Molise (2018, 171) contended that "the struggle of the Church to eradicate poverty is important because the apartheid system transferred government to Black people, without handing over the economy, which is essential for total emancipation and a better life." While the apostle Paul tries to elucidate the tension between the desires of the flesh and the desires of the Spirit (Eph. 2:3), the pragmatic character of the struggle we continue to encounter in our modern-day South Africa persistently reminds us of our colonial past. Our narrative might have changed, but our struggle has not. While those at the echelons of the leadership of the Church have everything to celebrate about life, the majority of the congregation continues to pray that their God may remember them, too. Politically, South Africa is punctuated by individuals who make much noise because they have lots of wealth protection. However, the impoverished majority, which naturally is persuaded to protect the properties of the capitalist society, is bound by legal statutes which remind them to wait for another five years to exercise their constitutional right by electing a new leader who tends to forget them immediately after ascending the position of power. The fate of the poor is *aluta continua* (the struggle continues!). The struggle of the majority of South Africans is from two fronts: within (internal) and without (external). While the preaching about democracy is a mere rhetoric aimed at democratising the *de facto* personalised democracy exerted by the new face of the same regime and by revived entrants into the South African political space, the emergence of various forms of injustice among South African societies suggests that the apartheid system has just changed hands because it is still thriving in which "Black people are oppressing other Blacks" (Dube and Molise 2018, 170). It is indeed a struggle. It is a discord which cannot be transformed into a sweet melody too soon. It encompasses the internal battle against sin – those moments when our desires conflict with God's standards. This internal strife reflects the fallen nature of humanity and underscores the need for salvation and sanctification. Externally, the struggle extends to the pursuit of justice and righteousness in a broken world. The apostle Peter (1 Pet. 2:19–20) speaks of enduring trials for the sake of righteousness, emphasising that believers are called to navigate challenges with faith and resilience. However, the struggle in South Africa is not

without hope. The Gospel offers the promise of victory over sin and death. Jesus' own life demonstrates that suffering is not in vain but can lead to ultimate triumph. The Holy Spirit's presence empowers believers to overcome the desires of the flesh and live in alignment with God's will.

The Role of the Church

The role of the Church in South Africa in the struggle is critical. As a community of believers, the Church embodies the values, teachings, and mission of Jesus Christ. The role of the Church is multifaceted, encompassing worship, discipleship, fellowship, and societal engagement. The Church's role is informed by the biblical teachings and is inspired by the life of Jesus. However, some scholars, for example, Dube and Molise (2018, 160), argued that "the role of the Church in the liberation of South Africa in total, but especially at the provincial level, and in the Free State in particular, has not received its fair share of attention". This may need the attention of the readership. According to Dube and Molise, there is a deliberate neglect on the part of both liberation narratives and academic discourses to acknowledge the role of the sacred institution in the liberation of South Africa. Dube and Molise's (2018, 160) study revealed that scholars such as Bailie (2009, 105), Campbell (2004, 85), Dlamini (1988, 44), Molobi (2014, 196), Rasool (2000, 3), Saunders (2009, 25) and Storey (2012, 1), among others, have exalted the contributions of politicians in the liberation of South Africa in which the contributions of civic and religious groups are not mentioned.

Nevertheless, the sacred institution in South Africa offers both spiritual and moral support to the communities, reminding them that they are not alone when they face life challenges. Through prayer, Scripture reading, praise and worship, the Church equips congregants to endure the struggle, hoping they will be victorious through faith. It involves honouring God, expressing gratitude, and seeking spiritual connection. Worship is not limited to Sunday services; it encompasses all aspects of life, reflecting an attitude of reverence and devotion. Discipleship is another vital aspect. The Church is tasked with teaching and nurturing believers, helping them grow in their faith and understanding of God's Word. This includes equipping believers to navigate challenges, make ethical decisions, and live out their faith in the world. Fellowship within the Church fosters a sense of community and support. Believers are called to encourage, uplift, and care for one another. The Church serves as a place where individuals can find belonging, build meaningful relationships, and receive practical help. Societal engagement is an extension of the Church's role. Just as Jesus challenged the norms of His time, the Church is called to address societal issues, advocate for justice, and care for the marginalised. This role is not limited to charity work but involves challenging unjust systems and promoting positive change.

In conclusion, the Church's role is multi-dimensional, encompassing spiritual growth, community, and societal transformation. It reflects Jesus' teachings and exemplifies His love in action. The Church becomes a powerful force for positive change and a beacon

of hope in a broken world by embracing this role. While politics tends to juxtapose force with manipulation, the sacred institution encourages pacifism and tolerance. Regrettably, the latter position has received little attention.

The Challenge

The challenges facing societies and sacred institutions in South Africa are numerous, though surmountable. The challenges are intrinsic to the human experience, and the Christian journey is not exempted from them. Challenges can take various forms: personal, societal, moral, and spiritual. These challenges test faith, character, and resilience, prompting believers to reflect on their convictions and values. Dube and Molise (2018, 162) maintained that "the Church should challenge colonial systems that have remained in place long after apartheid…" (see also Muchie and Gumede 2017, 177; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013, 13). The challenge of living out one's faith authentically is a common theme. In a world that often contradicts Christian values, believers face the tension between cultural norms and biblical principles. This challenge invites believers to examine their priorities and make intentional choices that align with their faith.

Moreover, challenges can serve as opportunities for growth. The apostle James writes about considering trials as opportunities for joy, as they produce endurance and maturity. Challenges cultivate patience, perseverance, and empathy, moulding believers into stronger and more compassionate individuals. The Church's role is to provide a supportive community during challenging times. Fellowship, prayer, and encouragement from fellow believers help individuals navigate difficulties with a sense of unity and solidarity. The Church also equips believers with spiritual resources, enabling them to face challenges with faith and hope. While they can be daunting, the challenges also offer opportunities for personal growth, deeper faith, and the chance to contribute positively to the world—the challenges believers face become opportunities to demonstrate the transformative power of the Gospel. However, the main challenge facing the Church in South Africa is that politicians do not take the sacred institution and its clerics seriously. Politicians are still viewing the Church as a vehicle for the imposition of neo-colonial intimations. The abolition of the biblical traditions in South African schools suggests that our society has outlawed Christian teachings (Dube and Molise 2018, 170).

Conclusion

The present study has explored the conversations that Albert Nolan's book espoused. The conversation is neither a critique nor a review of Nolan's contribution; it is rather an appraisal of (and a dialogue with) the author's discussion on the relevance of the Gospel message during apartheid in South Africa. The present discourse comprehends some adjustments and additional observations regarding the current situation in post-apartheid South Africa. The present investigation tackled critical issues which Nolan's

book did not address back then. What largely emerged from the book entitled *God in South Africa: The Challenge of the Gospel* is the function of the Gospel towards poverty reduction as well as the promotion of collective and individual actualisation among South African communities. The investigation was premised on the contention that the Gospel message should be applicable and relevant in every spectrum of South Africa's socioeconomic sphere. It was argued that both the political leadership and the Church should deal decisively with matters of crime and sinfulness, which tend to be by-products of poverty and lack of survival strategies among local communities. The sacred institution and believers were challenged to re-examine their priorities and make intentional choices that align their faith with praxis given the socioeconomic and geopolitical particularities devastating the majority of South Africans.

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