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## *The Contemporary Theological Project*

# The Option for the Poor in South Africa<sup>1</sup>

Albert Nolan

‘This phrase [the option for the poor] burst upon the ecclesiastical scene only a few years ago. Since then, it has become the most controversial religious term since the Reformers’ cry, “salvation by faith alone”.’

These are the opening words of Donal Dorr’s recent book on the option for the poor and Vatican social teaching.<sup>2</sup> He is not exaggerating. I should say that the challenge to the church, to almost all our churches, represented by this term “option for the poor” goes far beyond anything envisaged by the Reformers. It challenges both Catholic and Protestant, and it challenges us in a very fundamental way.

Here, I should like to do little more than open up the debate about the option for the poor in South Africa. The question has been raised here and there in a variety of forms, mostly without the term “option for the poor”; but in South Africa there has been no systematic Christian practice based upon it and not much research and reflection around this controversial phrase. My intention, then, is to open up the specific approach implied in this new theological term for further research, reflection, debate and practice.

There is a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding about the meaning of the phrase itself, and even a measure of deliberate distortion of its meaning. Hence, in the first place, it will be necessary to state quite clearly what we are talking about and even more importantly what we are not talking about. Then we shall have to give some account of how this new theological theme is grounded in the Bible. And finally, we must venture some suggestions about what it may mean in the struggle for liberation in South Africa today.

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1 This article is reprinted, with permission, from *CrossCurrents*, Spring 1986, Vol. 36, No. 1, pp. 17-27. Albert Nolan, O.P., author of *Jesus before Christianity* (Orbis), was in 1983 elected Master General of the Dominican Order, but declined the post so that he could continue his work in South Africa. The present article appeared first in *Resistance and Hope*, published by David Philip (Pty) Ltd., Werdmuller Centre, Claremont 7700, South Africa, and was reprinted in the British Dominican monthly, *New Blackfriars*.

2 D. Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching* (Maryknoll, NY, 1983).

## *The Contemporary Theological Project*

# Work, The Bible, Workers, and Theologians: Elements of a Workers' Theology<sup>1</sup>

Albert Nolan

### ABSTRACT

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What does it mean to construct a genuine theology of work? This essay discusses the elements involved in developing a theology of work that is the product of workers themselves. The usual role of the professional theologian as the expert who uses the insights of others is analyzed and critiqued. A rather different role for the theologian emerges within a process in which the experience, faith, biblical interpretations, and interests of workers are fundamental.

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### Introduction

It seems to me that many people concerned with a theology of work have been moving gradually towards at least one very important conclusion. The conclusion is this: a genuine theology of work will have to be a worker's theology, that is to say, a theology constructed by workers and for workers – a theological reflection of workers upon their experience of work and their experience of struggle. This does not mean that the professional theologian, biblical scholar, or pastor will have no role to play in the construction of a theology of work but that they will have a subordinate role to play. To say that a genuine theology of work must be constructed by Christian workers and not expert theologians raises a host of

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<sup>1</sup> This article is reprinted, with permission, from James R. Cochrane and Gerald O. West, *The Threefold Cord: Theology, Work and Labour* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 1991). See also ICT Church and Labour Research Group. 1991. "Workers, the Church and the Alienation of Religious Life." In *The Threefold Cord: Theology, Work and Labour*. Ed. James R. Cochrane and Gerald O. West. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.

# Corruption as the *Kairos* of Democracy:<sup>1</sup> A Historico-Theological Reflection on Political Corruption<sup>2</sup> in a Democratic South Africa

McGlory Speckman

## ABSTRACT

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This article argues that rampant corruption which has culminated in the Judicial Commission on Allegations of State Capture, and its subsequent four-part report in South Africa, is the *kairos* of the democratic South Africa. Precedents of what may be interpreted as *kairoi* in the Bible and in contemporary history, suggest that a *kairos* is neither a scheduled nor seasonal event but occurs as a divine visitation in a distress situation, a response to which determines what happens thereafter. Hence the need for precision in responding to the rumblings around it. Following a tracing of biblical and historical precedents and a discussion of the contemporary South African situation of corruption, the article confirms the *kairos* hypothesis, then calls on South Africa to return to the original shared vision of the common good in a democratic country while taking advantage of the opportunity.

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- 1 This article is dedicated to the memory of Fr Albert Nolan (R.I.P. 17:10:2022), an optimist and theologian who was sincerely committed to God and his country. He had a unique approach to life. For example, if he were to be confronted with a choice between asking: “what is wrong with our country?” and “why do things seem to be falling apart?” he would choose neither, preferring to pursue the question: “what has become different from when we first inaugurated our democracy?” I hope that this article does in some ways emulate that approach.
- 2 We distinguish between political corruption which has wide social ramifications and private acts of corruption. Both are important; Speckman “Destroying the City, Burning the fields: Towards a New Testament Concept and Definition of Corruption. *Pharos Theological Journal*, 103 no. 2 (2022b). Open Access. <https://www.pharosjot.com> (Forthcoming, November 2022) but our focus in this article is on the former. Acts of corruption which affect what elsewhere (ditto) I refer to as the “common good” constitute political corruption and they invariably appear to result in *kairoi*; See De Gruchy, JW, “*Kairos* Moments and Prophetic Witness: Towards a prophetic Ecclesiology”, *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, 72 no. 4(2016). <https://doi.org/10.401021/hts.v72i4.344> (Accessed on 12/08/2022). In an earlier essay, I define corruption as “abuse of officially managed state resources for personal gain where state resources refer to assets that are owned by everyone belonging to a state”; Speckman, M, “Killing the *Mgodoyi* Syndrome: An African Reading of the Ananias and Sapphira episode in Acts 5:1-11” (2022a), forthcoming in *Festschrift for JA Draper*.

# Planting Seeds During a Time of Death – an Ecofeminist-inspired Contextual Bible Study on 1 Corinthians 15:37-44

Annalet van Schalkwyk

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## ABSTRACT

This article was written as the research outcome of a Contextual Bible Study (CBS) on 1 Corinthians 15:37-44 with a group of homeless women and men in Tshwane (Pretoria, South Africa) in the aftermath of xenophobic violence and gender-based violence during July to August 2019. The researcher asked herself, ‘Could a Bible Study help the homeless community make sense of these events in any way?’ Her memories of her friend Edward Diba’s garden, and the exchange of seeds among women from southern African countries inspired her to choose the text. The enquiry ‘Show me how resurrection works’ and the seed theme was central to the current research. The CBS took place in a democratic forum; the participants formed with the researcher. Their insights and experiences were trusted to be central to the deliberations of the CBS. The participants recalled their childhood experiences of food gardening and the feelings of joy and achievement it brought. They could relate these to the possibility that planting seeds in rich soil and the sprouting of seedlings might bring about the regeneration of life. These reflections were discussed within the framework of resurrection in 1 Cor 15, leading to reflections on the hope of resurrection in life and after death for themselves as human beings. In the next phase the participants planted heritage beans, thereby reflecting experientially on the possibility of resurrection and regeneration in ecology. In sum, this approach demonstrates the possibility of a regenerative approach to agroecology as one solution to the crises of our times. In this manner the researcher applied an ecofeminist approach to the reading of 1 Cor 15:37-44 as an underlying research methodology.

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## Dedication to Edward Diba

This article is dedicated to my friend Edward Diba who died under suspicious circumstances on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2019. Early in the morning of that fateful day, Edward got a lift from Pretoria to Beitbridge, the border between South Africa and Zimbabwe. We suspect that Edward was drugged by the people who gave him the lift and left him next to the N1 just south of Bela-Bela. Late that afternoon, he

# Wangari Maathai Responds to *Laudato Si'*: An Ecofeminist Dialogue with Pope Francis

Susan Rakoczy

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## ABSTRACT

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This article places Wangari Maathai of Kenya who founded the Green Belt Movement and received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, in dialogue with Pope Francis, author of *Laudato Si'*, his encyclical on ecology. It situates her ecological work within the broader framework of ecofeminism, especially that of African ecofeminism. While there is much in *Laudato Si'* that Maathai would applaud and support, I argue that she would be very disappointed that women are (with two exceptions) absent from *Laudato Si'* which ignores the contributions of ecofeminism.

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Wangari Maathai (1940-2011), the Kenyan founder of the Green Belt Movement and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, died four years before Pope Francis issued his encyclical *Laudato Si'*: “On Care for Our Common Home” in 2015. This article will first discuss Maathai’s life and commitment to ecological justice through the Green Belt Movement which she founded. Maathai’s pioneering ecological work is a congenial companion to ecofeminist insights, especially those of African women. Her ecological perspectives and spirituality will be placed in dialogue with several key themes of *Laudato Si'*. These are the descriptions of the ecological damage which our planet is experiencing, the four core values of the Green Belt Movement which resonate with the Pope’s analysis of “ecological integrity”, and the need for change which *Laudato Si'* names as ecological conversion. How might this African woman, who was a Catholic, have responded to the Pope’s understanding of ecology? How does the thinking of these two persons converge and how does it diverge? The article will then critique the lack of gender analysis and ecofeminist thinking in the document. Maathai died in 2011, two years before Pope Francis became pope. They never met but, if they had, we can imagine they would have had a fascinating conversation on ecological matters, and Maathai would have explained to Pope Francis why the omissions in *Laudato Si'* are so disappointing and so significant.

# Soteriology as Pre-condition for Bonhoeffer's Ethical Thought

Michael Phiri

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## ABSTRACT

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The article proposes soteriology as the pre-condition for Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ethical thought. Particular analyses are given of Bonhoeffer's 1929 lecture *Basic questions of a Christian ethic* and the 1932 seminar *Is there a Christian ethic?* It uses excerpts from student notes from the early period and two *Ethics* manuscripts from the late period of his theological work. The analyses are made bearing in mind the political, economic and theological context in which Bonhoeffer's ethical thoughts emerged.

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## Introduction

The article first examines the gist of *Basic questions of a Christian ethic* and *Is there a Christian ethic?* suggesting the manner in which soteriology informs Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ethic. The two documents were written in 1929 and 1932, respectively. The period was characterised by political uncertainties and economic challenges. The Weimar Republic was drifting towards its collapse. Questions abounded in Germany as regards the role of Christianity in the Great War and post-war national rebuilding. Bonhoeffer set out to examine the ethic that undergirded Christianity's stance in the war and post-war periods. In his explanation, the prevailing philosophical ethic and Christian ethic were inadequate to address the political and economic challenges of the time because those ethics tended to move from humanity to God. Bonhoeffer proffered a typically Christian ethic that accepted God's movement towards the sinful and unholy humanity. In the early period, soteriology foregrounds Bonhoeffer's ethical thought.

We proceed to consider *Ethics* which was written later, between 1940 and 1943, during the Second World War. Two manuscripts, "Christ, Reality and Good: Christ, Church and World" and "Heritage and decay", are selected. The examination of the manuscripts reveals the doctrine of salvation as the base of Bonhoeffer's ethical reflections. Bonhoeffer's earlier ethical thoughts, such as the will of God critique of the *Volk* ideology and exploring the essence of a Christian ethic, appear in these *Ethics* manuscripts.

## Book Reviews

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Tim Hartman. *Kwame Bediako: African Theology for a World Christianity*.

Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2022. ISBN 978-5064-8045-9. Softback. Includes Table of Contents and Index. 209pp.

Hartman presents Kwame Bediako's theological thought, characterized as authentically African and uniquely Christian, in an accessible manner for audiences both familiar and unfamiliar with Bediako and with African theological discourse.

He briefly narrates Bediako's personal religious background, drawing on Bediako's autobiographical record and supplemented by material from Gillian Bediako, Bediako's marriage and ministry partner. Bediako's personal story and struggles are part of Bediako's theological method (24; 135), providing the context that motivates Bediako's quest to articulate a theology of African Christian identity that is different from Western Christian formulations. Bediako describes Western Christianity as operating under the assumptions of Christendom, as Christianity wedded itself to political power. Evangelism in Europe was accomplished through conquest leading to a theology of conquering (166). Under Christendom, Christianity is inherited as part of an ethnic and cultural identity (63).

By contrast, Bediako builds his Christian thought upon two Christian sources: early church theologians prior to Constantine, and African Christian theologians writing towards end of African political colonization (4; 62). Using these two Christian sources Bediako engages in theological and cultural acts of *sankofa*, an Akan concept of moving forward by retrieval (65; 164). He integrates African life experience and his study of the *négritude* movement with the gospel of Jesus Christ as initially apprehended by Africans through the translation of the Bible into African languages.

Hartman argues that Bediako understands the Bible "more like a record of the gospel" (84). For Bediako there is no pure gospel disconnected from human culture and language (29; 52), and yet he understands the gospel to be universal (133). The translation of the Bible is part of Africa's historical experience that is inherited from missionary Christianity. While Bediako is critical of Western Christianity, he accepts missionary translation. The translatability of the Christian gospel is key for Bediako's 'post-missionary' theological project. Bible translation forces an initial dialogue between the gospel of Jesus Christ and culture through African languages. Bediako extends the theological dialogue initiated by translation by exegeting 'mother tongue Scriptures' using a hermeneutic of continuity between

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