

# JOURNAL

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2023 Special Issue:

The Contested Legacy  
of the *Kairos Document*



# Introduction

Anthony Balcomb and Philippe Denis

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1990 when former president FW De Klerk announced that the ANC would be unbanned, that Nelson Mandela would be released, and that negotiations would take place in order to inaugurate a constitutional democracy, the academic staff of the then School of Theology, University of Natal, were on a retreat in the Natal Midlands planning the academic programme for the coming year. A stunned silence descended on our small group, broken by a question one of us asked that was to prove one of the most significant we had ever asked ourselves: ‘What do we do now?’ This simple question would sum up the crisis that contextual theology was about to face. The School of Theology had been fashioning itself as *the* centre for contextual theology in the country; and the context was about to drastically change. If the truth be told, we were not expecting the white regime to fall so quickly, so completely, and so radically. Not that it had experienced some kind of Damascus Road experience of repentance. On the contrary, the widespread uprising among the masses in the townships, the resistance campaign that followed the formation of a broad alliance of forces known as the Mass Democratic Movement in 1988 which called for non-cooperation with the apartheid state and which had followed the appearance of the *Kairos Document* in 1985, along with pressure from the global community, had brought it, kicking and screaming, to the negotiating table.

But change it did. White minority rule was flushed down the plughole of history, there were free and fair elections four years later, a democratically elected government came into power, and through a process of remarkable consultation that included the widest possible spectrum of interest groups we created one of the most enlightened constitutions in the world. With one of the most iconic leaders of the century leading us, we were being celebrated as the greatest success story of the post-colonial era.

Yet, in spite of having everything going for us in 1994, by the end of the Zuma regime in 2017 and even more since then, we realised that things had gone horribly wrong. At the time of writing, we continue to be the most unequal society in the world. Racial divides are as entrenched as ever despite the absence of apartheid laws. We have a government known more for its corruption and inability to rule than for the emancipatory ideals that characterized its early struggle against injustice. We have the looming possibility of a failed state. A Commission of Enquiry into State Capture was instituted and a remarkable report, commonly known as the Zondo Report, was released but neither the government nor the

# The *Kairos Document* and its Implications for Liberation in South Africa\*

Bonganjalo Goba

## Introduction

The *Kairos Document* presents a theological response to the deepening political crisis in South Africa which has far-reaching consequences for the Christian community in South Africa. The *Document* is unique because prior to June 1985 the churches tended to reflect a typical, liberal response to the ongoing political crisis. Previous resolutions of the major denominations clearly evidence this viewpoint. The only exceptions to this pattern were the Christian Institute, the University Christian Movement and the Black Theology Movement in South Africa in the early seventies. When we met as a small group of Christians to respond to the deepening political crisis in South Africa, we were very much aware of the serious confusion within the Christian community. Moreover, we knew that the prevailing theologies of our churches exhibited inadequacies and limitations for helping the Christian community to engage in the struggle for liberation.

It became clear to us at the initial meeting of the *Kairos* theologians that any response to the deepening political crisis in South Africa would require a fresh understanding of the nature of the root problem of our society. In other words, we needed a critical social analysis, one very much conversant, on the one hand, with the perceptions and aspirations of the masses and, on the other hand, with the political agenda of the white regime in terms of a deep understanding of its total strategy. We explored these concerns in analytical terms as well as in terms of an appropriate theological response to the situation.

Thus, the *Kairos Document* differed considerably from other church-related pronouncements on the South African situation. The *Document* began with a critical analysis of the role of the Church and also sought to come to terms with the political realities of South African society. Further, it explored alternatives in terms of possible action by the South African churches.

It is also important to note at the beginning of this exploration that the theologians meeting in June 1985 (just before the declaration of the state of

\* Source: *Journal of Law and Religion*, 1987, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1987), pp. 313-325 Published by: Cambridge University Press. Republished with permission of the publishers.

# The Cosmopolitan Christ: A Contemporary Agenda?

James R. Cochrane

## ABSTRACT

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Reflecting on Albert Nolan's book, *Jesus Before Christianity*, I ask what image of *Christ* fits the testimony of Albert's life and suggest: "the cosmopolitan Christ." To explain, I consider three signs of the times: aggressive new ethnonationalisms, the normalization of new kleptocracies that 'capture the state', and the failure to properly anticipate climate change, a poisoned planet, and species extinction. This leads to a reflection on the nature of freedom as a mark of what it means to be human, upon which I ground 'the cosmopolitan Christ' as a counter to the harmful exclusions evidenced in these contemporary developments.

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*Houtōs gar ēgapēsen ho Theos ton kosmon ....*

"For God so loved the world (cosmos) ...." [John 3:16]

## Introduction

Albert Nolan, before passing, asked that not he, but rather the work he believed in, be the centre of attention. Prompted by his *Jesus Before Christianity* I thus ask: *what image of Christ* might fit his life? The cosmopolitan Christ, I imagine. Herman Waetjen's interpretation of John 3:16<sup>1</sup> provides a clue: it evokes an immanent eschatology – the actualization of the possibility of world transformation.<sup>2</sup>

Why, however, do I turn to the idea of cosmopolitanism (being a "citizen of the world")? The concept is not stable, acquiring many meanings over time, some

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1 Herman C. Waetjen, *The Gospel of the Beloved Disciple* (New York; London: T & T Clark, 2005), 141-58. The popular phrasing of John 3:16 used above should, strictly, be "For in this way God loved the world ...." (Waetjen, *Gospel of the Beloved Disciple*, 156). I take love to be inclusive and comprehensive ('cosmic'), justice as love writ large.

2 The assertion of immanence may well lead to a claim by the believer or believing community to have a divine imprimatur for their actions; this is false, effectively usurping God, and is not what Waetjen means.

# A Time (for Women) to Speak: A Feminist Theological Critique of the *Kairos Document*

Janet Trisk

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## ABSTRACT

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The *Kairos Document* explicitly claims to follow the liberation theological method of critique, retrieval and reconstruction in a named context. It also, in the process of drafting and revision, is the work of the community of trained and untrained theologians reflecting on their experiences in a moment of crisis. In both these respects the *Kairos Document* accords with principles of feminist theologies. Nevertheless, the *Kairos Document* in some respects fails to match up to important principles of feminist theologies, such as a Biblical hermeneutic of suspicion, interrogation of understandings of God and exposing the consequences of certain traditional theological concepts such as sin as disobedience. This article identifies these shortcomings, offers some reflections on the consequences and briefly suggests how these shortcomings might have been addressed.

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Despite being a regular church attender, I heard nothing of the *Kairos Document* for the first five years of its life. That probably says something about where I went to church in those days. I was not politically unaware, but when the Kairos theologians – that ecumenical group of trained and untrained Christian theologians – met in Soweto in July 1985 to reflect theologically on the deepening crisis facing the Church in South Africa, I was much more concerned to engage the political crisis through the practice of law. My not yet 30-year old self imagined I could be useful acting for teenagers who had been arrested and detained under the State of Emergency legislation. Now, nearly 40 years later, I rather doubt my youthful optimism. Certainly, the *Kairos Document* still stands as a point of reference and a challenge to the Church. It has inspired a number of other Kairos documents around the world. On the other hand, I doubt if any one of those dozens of teenagers I used to visit in Krugersdorp prison can even remember my visits to them, let alone recall my attempts at legal assistance.

I tell this story by way of appreciation for what the Kairos theologians achieved in the crucible of those torrid days. They worked rapidly, with a wide-spread group of people from a range of Christian denominations and theologies, before

# ‘God is not Christian, God is not White, God is not a Man’: Three Provocations for Reading Albert Nolan’s ‘God in South Africa’<sup>1</sup>

Sarojini Nadar\*

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## ABSTRACT

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Framed within three provocations, this essay asks new questions about Albert Nolan’s book ‘God in South Africa.’ While acknowledging the deeply significant role that the book played in the anti-Apartheid struggle (as part of the *kairos* era), the essay argues that the book didn’t go far enough. For while Nolan’s book in that *kairos* moment spoke a particular truth about the situation of “the people” as a crucified people, it left the crucified God largely intact as a white, male and Christian God. Using a Black feminist methodology, and the heuristic devices of suspicion, subjectivity and story, I contend that in this particular moment in history, and in line with the Kairos legacy, we need, more than ever, to boldly assert that God is not a Christian, God is not white, and God is not a man.

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## Approaching God-Talk

On 3 June 2023, I had the pleasure of giving the keynote lecture at an international ‘Asian Theologians Conference’, in England, in a city called Leicester which is popularly known to house the largest Hindu population outside of India. Two things stand out for me about the invitation to speak. First, when I received the invitation, my immediate response was, “but I am not Asian!” Notwithstanding that I am of Indian descent, our Apartheid racialised history, as well as my ancestral history of slavery, euphemistically called indentured labour,<sup>2</sup> elicits a gut-reaction against

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1 The title of this essay was inspired by two books: Desmond Tutu, *God is not a Christian: And other provocations* (Harper Collins, 2011) and Chine McDonald, *God is not a white man: And other revelations* (Hachette UK, 2021).

2 Cf. Richard B Allen, “Reconceptualizing the ‘new system of slavery’.” *Man in India* 92, no. 2 (2012): 225-245. Despite Allen’s call for reconceptualizing and nuancing indenture beyond the “new system

\* This essay is based on research supported by the National Research Foundation of South Africa (Grant number: 118854). The author acknowledges that opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed are those of the author alone, and the NRF accepts no liability whatsoever in this regard.

# The Character and Potential Pitfalls of Prophetic Theology:

## An Appreciatively Critical Look at Fr Albert Nolan

Andrew G. Suderman

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### ABSTRACT

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One cannot overstate Fr Albert Nolan's contribution to South Africa's emancipatory quest nor his own personal prophetic witness in the pursuit of justice and liberation in and for South Africa. He was a shining witness of what it meant to be prophetic. And his role in editing and writing *The Kairos Document* demonstrates this.

Nolan's work, theology, and witness provide much from which we can – indeed must – learn. Because of his intentionality in being near and with black South Africans and those who the apartheid regime oppressed and dehumanized, Nolan witnessed and also experienced, because he was a close ally to Black South Africans, the injustice of the apartheid system and the violence of its racially constructed social engineering project. This experience nourished his ongoing involvement in the struggle against apartheid, fed his desire to be in solidarity with those who suffered under its regime, and caused him to re-evaluate his own theological training, theology, and theological approach. This was an important lesson for Nolan as he realized that to confront the political expression of apartheid he (and those struggling against apartheid) would also need to provide an alternative theological imagination than that which undergirded apartheid. This alternative theological imagination Nolan described as a Prophetic Theology. "Prophetic Theology" was prophetic not just because of what it proclaimed or challenged but also because of the way it was developed and embodied. It was prophetic because it arose through communal reflection and discernment "from below;" it was a people's theology that wrestled with their particular context and questions.

In this paper, I offer an overview of Nolan's formulation of "Prophetic Theology", especially as depicted in his *God in South Africa*. I then offer a critical – yet appreciative – analysis of Nolan's articulation of "Prophetic Theology," highlighting the strengths as well as some of its potential weaknesses that may have caused such a theology to dissipate after 1994. My hope is that, in better understanding the potential pitfalls we may once again embody a more prophetic theology today.

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I cried upon learning of Fr Albert Nolan's passing in October of 2022. Fr Nolan's theology, work, and witness has been a significant influence in my own work, research, and thinking. In 2015, I had the privilege of sitting down with Fr Nolan as part of my doctoral research into the *Kairos Document* and South African

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# On Being a Prophetic Church at *This Kairos Moment*: In Celebration of Albert Nolan: Prophet, Disciple, and Mystic

John W. de Gruchy

## ABSTRACT

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This essay celebrates the legacy of Albert Nolan who read the “signs of the times” and faithfully spoke truth to power. As an author of the *Kairos Document*, Nolan challenged the church in South Africa to join in solidarity with the oppressed in their struggle for justice. The essay considers possible reasons why Archbishop Desmond Tutu did not sign the KD, especially his unwillingness to uncritically support the liberation movement. Tutu’s fears were later justified when the ecumenical church failed to speak truth to the ANC when it achieved power. While that prophetic voice is being recovered, Tutu’s reluctance is a reminder that prophetic witness requires an understanding of kairos moments in a way that remains faithful to the gospel. This is likened to Bonhoeffer’s rejection of kairos theology in Nazi Germany and the rejection of apartheid theology as a heresy in South Africa. So, the question must now be put: what would Nolan, Tutu, and Bonhoeffer say today at this kairos moment? How should the church respond, for example, to the war in the Ukraine or in Palestine, or to the unfolding drama in South African politics? This essay proposes that while prophetic witness requires a genuine knowledge of concrete reality, it is the gospel that should determine our response, and that requires a spirituality of prophetic discernment. That is why Nolan’s legacy remains critical for the ecumenical church today.

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*True prophets stand up and speak out about the practices of their own people and their own leaders – while others remain silent.* Albert Nolan<sup>1</sup>

*The time will come when prophets in the mould of Jeremiah will speak the Word of God in such a way that the world is changed and renewed.* Dietrich Bonhoeffer<sup>2</sup>

*If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.* Jesus of Nazareth<sup>3</sup>

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1 Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom*, (Cape Town: Double Storey, 2006), 63.

2 “Thoughts on the Day of Baptism of Dietrich Bethge,” May 1944. Bonhoeffer. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. 437, slightly amended.

3 Luke 16:31.

# Liberation, Reconciliation or Transformation? Revisiting the *Kairos Document* and the Belhar Confession

Ernst M. Conradie

## ABSTRACT

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This contribution offers a comparison of the soteriological logic embedded in the *Kairos Document* (1986) and the Belhar Confession (also 1986). Some surface-level similarities and differences are described, in order to then offer an analysis and comparison of the soteriological logic of each of the two documents. Employing the typology proposed by Gustaf Aulén, it is shown how the emphasis on liberation in the *Kairos Document* is aligned with a Christus Victor view of atonement. By contrast the emphasis on reconciliation in the Belhar Confession is aligned with the so-called “Latin” type of atonement. However, both documents also employ so-called “modern” terminology with reference to God being on the side of the oppressed in their struggle for liberation (*Kairos*) and “following Christ” (Belhar). Such soteriological terminology, here captured under the rubrics of liberation, reconciliation and transformation, continues to shape contrasting theological approaches in South Africa but also debates in the public sphere. The legitimacy of all three of these forms of soteriology is defended but this is partially dependent on reading the signs of the time and the counter-movements of the Spirit.

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## Introduction

Alongside the “Message to the People of South Africa” (1968) and perhaps the “Rustenburg Declaration” (1990), the *Kairos Document* (1985, 1986) and the Belhar Confession (1982, 1986) are probably the two most significant Christian statements to be released in the history of South Africa (officially since 1910). Both documents were finalised in 1986 at the height of the church struggle against apartheid. As a theological student at that time both these documents shaped my theological development in a decisive way. In this contribution I will offer a comparison of these two texts by seeking to compare and contrast the soteriological logic that form the backbone of these two documents. Other points of comparison, for example on its methodology, Christology, ecclesiology, issues

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# “It’s Our Time to Eat” – Prophetic Theology and the Culture of Entitlement

Tony Balcomb

Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil, who turn darkness to light and light to darkness. (Is 5.20)

The goal to be attained is that of being a free and conscientious being, in a progressive liberation from a thousand servitudes, in order that our basic freedom may grow: in order that we may be free to the point of being able to deliver ourselves from ourselves and be able to give ourselves to others.<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

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At the heart of the political and economic crises that face the country is a moral crisis and at the heart of the moral crisis is the so-called “culture of entitlement”. What is this and what is an appropriate theological response to it? The rationale behind it is the historical exclusion of the black majority through institutionalized racism which has disadvantaged them to such an extent that many feel the need to take into their own hands the “pay-back” that is due them. The justifiable resentment that many feel has generated a distorted ethic that they use to condone the exploitation of the system for their own personal gain and enrichment. The problem lies with the original wounding caused by the dehumanization that racism has inflicted. The wounding and its cure can only be fully understood and articulated by the victims themselves. A prophetic theology for this moment will come out of the realization that liberation is an unfinished project and will pick up where the *Kairos Document* left off, drawing on the insights of thinkers such as Biko, Fanon, and others, who have been the victims of racism.

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## The Moral Crisis in South Africa

Of all the crises facing South Africa perhaps the most worrying, at least for people of faith, is the moral crisis. If morality is to do with knowing the difference between right and wrong then at best there are huge differences between our understandings of what these differences are in contemporary South Africa and at worst we have lost this understanding altogether. There are numerous signs of this. When the government has to appoint an Integrity Commission to help it

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<sup>1</sup> Camara D. in Boff L. 1985. *Salvation and Liberation*, 19.

## Book Reviews

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Marthie Momberg, *21 Voices from Israel and South Africa*.  
De Kelders: Naledi, 2023. ISBN 978-1-92893-079-4. Softback. Table of Contents and Index Included. 507pp.

John W. de Gruchy  
*University of Cape Town, South Africa*

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David Tombs, *The Crucifixion of Jesus: Torture, Sexual Abuse, and the Scandal of the Cross*.  
London: Routledge, 2023. ISBN 978-0-367-25765-1. Hardback and Open Access. Includes Table of Contents. 102pp.

Sathianathan Clarke  
*United Theological College, Sydney, Australia*

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Kenneth N. Ngwa, *Let My People Live: An Africana Reading of Exodus*.  
Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2022. ISBN: 978-0-664-2625-94. Softback. Table of Contents Included. 320 pp.

Aliou C. Niang  
*Union Theological Seminary, New York, USA*

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Joerg Rieger, *Theology in the Capitalocene: Ecology, Identity, Class, and Solidarity*.  
Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2022.  
Print ISBN: 978-1-5064-3158-1. eBook ISBN: 978-1-5064-8715-1.  
Softback. Table of Contents and Index Included. 257 pp.

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