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Writing the Kingdom of God in South Africa

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Abstract

John de Gruchy's *The Church Struggle in South Africa* was a bold attempt to write the story of the kingdom of God in his native land. While it stood toward the beginning of his written work, the themes laid down in it have followed De Gruchy's writings up to the present. They have also sketched the story of South Africa from the climax of the struggle to end Apartheid to the present travails to realize its promise. This article takes up the final chapter in that work, comparing it to another great theological attempt to write the kingdom of God: H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Kingdom of God in America*. It follows that chapter through its disappearance in the third edition of *The Church Struggle*, to its re-emergence in *The End is Not Yet*. The article is especially interested in De Gruchy's eschatological retrieval of Bonhoeffer's tension between the ultimate and the penultimate, and in the question of God's trinitarian reality shaping the world – and us as community of anticipation.

Keywords

Kingdom of God; church struggle; justice; ultimate and penultimate

It was Alasdair MacIntyre who said, "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" (MacIntyre 1984:216) A theological version of this question reads: "What is God doing?" Thus, is the Christian story is told in terms of the divine act and our lived response to it. In *kairos* moments it provokes a further question: "what must we do to be saved?"

H. Richard Niebuhr asked both questions, rendering the church as a community of confession: of its utter dependence upon the gracious, sovereign God and of its utter complicity in exchanging that dependence for cultural power. Such confession forms the backdrop of his 1937 classic, *The Kingdom of God in America*, which told the story of American

Christianity as response – at times faithful, at times unfaithful – to the sovereign God. Forty years later, a young South African theologian gave the title "The Kingdom of God in South Africa" to the final chapter of his own confessional work, *The Church Struggle in South Africa* (De Gruchy, 1979). While written decades (and worlds) apart, the two authors invite comparison. Thus, the purpose of this article. It also tracks the fate of "The Kingdom of God in South Africa." It was supplemented in the second edition of *The Church Struggle* (De Gruchy 1986) but disappeared in the third (De Gruchy and De Gruchy 2005). Its themes emerged fresh in De Gruchy's latest (as of this writing) work, *The End is Not Yet* (De Gruchy 2017), along with a closer resonance to Niebuhr's questions "in apocalyptic times."

1. The Kingdom of God in America

The Kingdom of God in America was written as the world tottered on the edge of catastrophe. The forces of race and class, of nationalist ideology and economic self-interest, were amassing everywhere. America was poised between protectionism and global crisis, and the church in America was "on the retreat." Its enemies pointed to the role of Christianity

> in fostering the sense of national destiny, in giving religious sanction to the imperialist programs of kings and democracies, in justifying nationalist wars and in blessing armies bound on conquest … The critics have reminded the church of its part in the development of that economic system which, whatever its virtues, has revealed its vices so clearly to our times that none can take pride in having assisted it to success … Convicted by its conscience more than by its foes, it joins the penitents at its own altars, asking, "What must we do to be saved?" (Niebuhr 1935b).

This entanglement of church and culture had already been taken up in H. Richard Niebuhr's first book, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. It chronicled how the multitude of denominations reflected sectional, racial, and economic divisions in America. Where is the church which "has transcended the divisions of the world and has adjusted itself, not to the local interests of classes or races or nations but to the common interests of mankind and to the constitution of the unrealized Kingdom of God?" (Niebuhr 1987:280).

With *The Kingdom of God in America*, Niebuhr took a fresh approach to the problem, an approach enabled by a change in his own orientation from liberal idealism to theological realism.[1] God now stood over against human aspiration, a view he would later call "radical monotheism". "The One beyond the many in whom the many are one" (Niebuhr 1960:16) corresponded to radical faith which relativized the many to the One. In this view, "God is pure act," (Niebuhr 1996:ix) and human action is response to "what is going on" (Niebuhr 1963:63). The kingdom of God is the way that act confronts humans in the midst of their lives, "the act of God in the present moment." (Johnson 1996:xv) This theological shift brought in its wake a methodological transformation from sociological determinants – "the social forces" as primary shapers of American Christianity – to the kingdom of God as "a radical revolution at the centre of life" (Niebuhr 1937:192), "the apocalypse of the divine sovereignty" (Niebuhr, 1937:138). The kingdom was not "a goal toward which men were traveling but the end which was hastening toward them" (Niebuhr 1937:137. It was an historical and cultural-formative force in itself, provoking "an immediate and urgent awareness of the real" (Niebuhr 1937:186). *The Kingdom of God in America* thus re-presented American history as response to the act of God.

The kingdom of God in America manifested itself in three dynamic forms. The first was the sovereignty of God, "the living reality of God's present rule … in the world of nature and human history" (Niebuhr 1937:51). The sense of the utter sovereignty of God produced Christian constitutionalism in antebellum America, a covenanted relationship bounded by the characteristically American suspicion of making the state or the church into an idol, and the separation and limitation of powers. (Niebuhr 1937:64) The church was that people called out of the clashing pluralisms and contested goods of this world and called to "loyalty to the supreme reality and the only good" (Niebuhr 1937:67). When the kingdom as divine sovereignty threatened to become institutionalized in an eternal law, a new awareness of the kingdom arose, less the sovereign rule of God in nature and history and more as the presence of God in the heart of the believer: "The Kingdom of Christ." This manifestation began with the renovation and transformation of interior life, but enabled the apprehension of the true transcendent, the

1 See Fowler, 1973; Keiser, 1996.

true Beauty which drew hearts together in an invisible bond, a national self-consciousness looking for visible realization in "one nation under God" (Niebuhr 1937:126). It was no accident that the birth of the nation happened between Great Awakenings. Such evangelical zeal could not rest in other-worldliness but moved out again to transform empirical reality. Thus, the third form: social reform, the coming kingdom, dominated the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Niebuhr 1987:161).

But the operation of the kingdom could be arrested. It could become rigid and unyielding, degenerating into "the rule of an absentee monarch;" or "a familiar and unreal crisis." It could lose its theological basis altogether and become simply progress writ large (Niebuhr 1937:135). The church could become "the executive arm of God's moral government" rather than the cusp of God's movement (Niebuhr 1937:51). Indeed, in Niebuhr's time, Christianity had degenerated into "culture Protestantism," a liberal Christianity from which the radical otherness of God had been expunged. In the most famous and damning phrase of the book: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross" (Niebuhr 1937:193). Thus "the ultimate permanent revolution" (Niebuhr, 1937, 124) had been thoroughly institutionalized and secularized, "the strain toward the coming kingdom into moral sanction or belief in progress" (Niebuhr 1937:182).

"The Sovereignty of God," "The Kingdom of Christ," and "The Coming Kingdom" represent for Niebuhr a "trialectic" of the overwhelming reality of God in history and nature, in the individual and in society. Analogous to that discerned by the Old Testament prophets for Israel, this pattern made America. Thus [protestant] Christianity at its core "must be understood as a movement rather than as an institution or series of institutions." Thus "institutionalized Christianity … is only a halting place between Christian movements. Since its goal is the infinite and eternal God, only movement or life directed toward the ever transcendent can express its meaning" (Niebuhr 1937:xiv). How ironic, then, that with this legacy American Christianity had become a reduced to showing how religion can help society enshrine its values. It had lost its faith in the sovereign God. "What must I do to be saved?" was thus an appropriate question for the church. But Niebuhr also discerned a growing "spiritual unrest" within the "institutionalization and secularization" of the kingdom of God. New

movements were manifesting "increasing interest in the great doctrines and traditions of the Christian past," not simply as heritage, but because "there was no way toward the coming kingdom save the way taken by a sovereign God through the reign of Jesus Christ." Could this become "the seed bed of new life?" (Niebuhr 1937:198).

The Kingdom of God in America was thus motivated less by a concern for an "accurate" chronicle of history and more to address the question of the theological meaning and existential message of the history for Niebuhr's own day. His writing of the kingdom of God in America rendered it as a series of *kairos* moments removed from the material crises faced especially by those on the underside of the story. Indeed, the underside seemed to exist only as an occasion for the social gospel to promote "the coming kingdom."[2] Further, opposing the "permanent revolution" of the kingdom to institutions made the constructive side of Christian activity seem like a turning away from the kingdom, as refusing its judgment. America as "experiment in constructive Protestantism" was by definition doomed to fail. Finally, even though "the kingdom of Christ" located divine activity in the depths of human subjectivity, the overwhelming view of God as absolute otherness confronting "man the sinner" (Niebuhr, 1935a) lacked a properly theological point of contact with the world.

2. The Kingdom of God in South Africa

Just over forty years after the publication of *The Kingdom of God in America*, John de Gruchy chronicled the story of Christianity in South Africa. *The Church Struggle in South Africa* similarly was a work of a theologian "seeking to reflect on the social history of the church in South Africa" (De Gruchy 1986:240). What emerged from this reflection was a threefold pattern very much like that which Niebuhr suggested for the kingdom of God in America. That pattern also seemed to have reached a crossroads in which the church was confronted by cultural affiliations that arrested the dynamic of the kingdom and constrained its mission. As it turned out, the year 1976 and the Soweto uprising would mark the beginning of the final

2 However, Richard R. Niebuhr speaks of his father's increasing awareness of "the 'class crucifixion' (not [in H. Richard's words] 'a class struggle as Marx believed … but a class crucifixion as Christ demonstrated') then taking place" (Niebuhr 1996:viii).

phase of the struggle against Apartheid. It would also mark the beginning of a new phase in the church struggle. Of course, this is hindsight. But writing only two years after Soweto De Gruchy nevertheless identified "the question of the church" – or perhaps, the question that the church had become. And he would dramatically change his answer to the question in the years immediately following. Is the church "a third way" in relation to withdrawal from the struggle on the one hand and casting its lot with the resistance movement on the other? (see Balcomb 1993) Having come close to losing its identity in the South African conflict, how does the church find it again?

America and South Africa shared histories of Christianity borne on the wings of missionary activity, but also settler identities. Both were overwhelmingly Protestant, though the Protestantism that Niebuhr claimed had shaped America was different from the multiple Protestantisms De Gruchy described among Dutch and British settlers and European (and American) missionaries in South Africa. One of the most significant developments in the story De Gruchy narrates is the emergence of Black theology alongside the growing Africanization of church leadership. While the black church in America during the 1930s played an important role supporting African American identity (see Niebuhr 1932:252f.), it was not [yet] as politically mobilized as the black church in South Africa during the 1970s. Christianity in 1937 America was still predominantly white, theologically and racially. But the liberalism that tempered the extremes of both societies was rooted in the mainline church nevertheless.

It was these evident parallelisms that led De Gruchy to formulate the question of the church in South Africa in terms of "the kingdom of God in South Africa," the last chapter of the book. In De Gruchy's case, however, there is a critical edge to the categorizations. Reflecting the idea of national purpose, the Dutch iteration of settler Christianity understood the kingdom as divine Providence that brought the settlers to the Cape in the seventeenth century. While theocracy might not be the best characterization, the establishment of a Christian society at the southern tip of Africa was certainly (and in 1979 continued to be) an important goal. While the British theologized nationalism differently, their settlers saw themselves as part of a Christian empire. Mission Christianity's focus on Christ crucified and the redemption of the individual in South Africa

paralleled strongly the Christianity of the American Great Awakening and its emphasis on personal transformation. It was in this strand that African Christianity began. Finally, the social Christianity of the ecumenical and Roman Catholic churches in South Africa shared important parallels to the American social gospel, which sought a society in anticipation of and conformity to the coming kingdom (De Gruchy 1979:199).

Thus, the story of the kingdom of God in South Africa "resembles in an almost uncanny way the story of the Kingdom of God in America" (De Gruchy 1979:199). The parallels cross the divides within South Africa. For instance, both Afrikaner and black theology believe in "the hand of providence," though they differ on the primary agents of divine purpose (De Gruchy 1979:200). The missionary movement in South Africa and the social gospel in America both stemmed from the evangelical experience of a renewal of the heart are at the roots of Christian social conscience. The idea that such renewal should extend to the renovation of social structures is shared by neo-Calvinists and social activists in South Africa. But this comparison also opens space for theological critique of the different ways the kingdom of God has been understood within South Africa. Afrikaner nationalism gave Afrikaner history a special role in bearing the kingdom of God in South Africa. It separated the order of creation, where each nation was assigned a place by providence, from the order of redemption, which mandated all nations to be taken up into one community in Jesus Christ (De Gruchy 1979:202). At the same time this loosened the tension between present system and future transformation, identifying the coming kingdom too closely with the present interests of Afrikaners. Piety in mission Christianity has been individualized to the point of making the Kingdom "purely transcendental," (De Gruchy 1979:203) purely future, with no significance given to present struggle. Secular progressivism amongst liberal and Marxist Christians has led to activism to bring the coming kingdom without the need for inner renewal. Indeed, the latter can become a reduction of the Kingdom to human works so that no doctrine of providence is needed as foundation (De Gruchy 1979:204–205). Thus, holding any one Kingdom motif to the exclusion or reduction of the others results in a distortion of the others.

The kingdom, providential, personal, and presently transformative, is "the criterion by which we must evaluate what is happening in history, and the

focus for the life and mission of the church" (De Gruchy 1979:198). But in contrast to the position of Niebuhr, the kingdom of God, whether in America or South Africa, must be discerned "from below," through the eyes of the poor (De Gruchy 1979:206). Indeed, "a theology of history is meaningless unless it responds to the cry for liberation and grapples with the theme of the kingdom" (De Gruchy, 1979:206). The kingdom of God can function as ideology to keep people in bondage, as a strategy to maintain an unjust system. Indeed, Marxism in the present context might even be an instrument of the kingdom of God in South Africa to awaken the church at this very point (De Gruchy 1979:215). But to adopt Marxism uncritically is dangerous for the identity of the church as transcending particular interests. Just as a church bearing the ideology of Afrikaner nationalism, so the church bearing the ideology of Marxism could not be the church bearing faithful witness to the kingdom of God in South Africa. Moreover, the utopian end must match the means to achieve that end, and so the advocacy of violent means to bring about "God's *shalom*, God's gift of a renewed creation and fulfilled humanity," must be ruled out (De Gruchy 1979:213). Marxism seeks to accomplish what only God can.

The question of the kingdom of God in South Africa is thus posed amidst debates about the "when" of its coming (the question of present or future), the "where" of its coming (the question of a privileged people, class, or institution), and the "how" of its coming (the question of ideology and, as we shall see, violence). De Gruchy addresses these by introducing a new set of categories: the penultimate and the ultimate.[3] The penultimate is activated by the experience of the poor that all is not right. It disposes the church to the posture of engaging in struggle. The ultimate is the kingdom God brings. It disposes the church to the posture of receiving a gift. While the activity of the church in the penultimate context cannot bring the ultimate kingdom of God, it activates hope in that ultimate kingdom. Such active hope defines the church over against all other secular ideologies, but also enables participating in the struggle by identifying these ideologies as belonging to the penultimate. Marxism is "a valid protest, but it is not the answer" (De Gruchy 1979:216). It does not grasp the true nature of

3 The terms are derived from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, where they were used to speak of the doctrine of justification by faith (Bonhoeffer, 2005:146–170).

the problem, nor does it recognize that its "solutions" will exacerbate rather than resolve the problem. The action of the church for penultimate justice, what Moltmann calls "messianic activity," realizes what has been made possible "through the inbreaking of messianic time" (quoted in De Gruchy 1979:229). While it does not bring in the kingdom, the action of the church "prepares the way for the coming of the King … The church acts in anticipation; it anticipates through action" (De Gruchy:1979:230).

In relation to South Africa, "the [ultimate] hope of the kingdom and the [penultimate] hope of South Africa are related in the promise [future: ultimate] and desire [present: penultimate] for peace" (De Gruchy 1979:230–231). One of the most important debates of De Gruchy's time for the church was around the question of violence as a means to bring the penultimate struggle to ultimate resolution. De Gruchy draws specifically at this point on the work of John Howard Yoder. Violence, for Yoder, is anything, whether personal, systemic, or structural, that violates "the dignity of a person in his or her psychosomatic wholeness" (De Gruchy 1979:231). Such violation is to be condemned whether perpetrated by the oppressor for the sake of maintaining injustice, or by the oppressed, for the sake of destroying it (De Gruchy 1979:232). Clearly, apartheid is the very definition of violence, with its assault on human dignity and policing of human movement: all to the benefit of the white minority. Just as the churches who protested apartheid without confronting their own implication in its policies, so the "cheap pacifism" of whites against black resistance was legitimately criticized by blacks such as Desmond Tutu, even though he himself is an advocate of non-violence. The difference is whether "non-violence" is a means of engagement or simply "a way of escape from the struggle for justice and human rights" (De Gruchy 1979:234.)

It is significant that Yoder grounds the problem of violence in something deeper than simply acceptable (or unacceptable) means to bring about certain goals. In *The Politics of Jesus*, Yoder links pacifism with the renunciation of the claim to control history, to have the power to decide its outcome. "Christ renounced the claim to govern history. The universal testimony of scripture is that Christians are those who follow Christ at just this point" (Yoder 1972:241). On the other hand, the common characteristic of contemporary social ethics is the opposite: "a deep desire to make things move in the right direction" (Yoder 1972:233). Outside of

a non-violence grounded in Jesus' renunciation, each contending view of ethics proposes a "handle" with which to grasp and thus seize control of history: empowering the proletariat through education, liberating the individual will, and adopting an agenda of black economic empowerment are examples he gives. This strategy pulls out "one thread of meaning and causality" with the conviction that pulling this one thread is necessary "to save the whole fabric" (Yoder 1972:234). The irony is that the whole fabric unravels as a result. While they are worlds apart in other ways, Yoder cites Reinhold Niebuhr's dictum that "that when men try to manage history, it almost always turns out to have taken another direction than that in which they thought they were guiding it" (Yoder 1972:235).

This contest over the ultimate control of history, which turns out to be a contest over the penultimate, is at the core of the cycle of violence. The systemic violence of apartheid incites revolutionary violence, which in turn brings further repression. The "vicious circle" must be broken. But it cannot be broken by mere good intentions. The breaking of this cycle observes De Gruchy, "is not possible without justice" (De Gruchy 1979:234), and justice cannot happen without the advocacy of the church. For in this lies the identity of the church. The church has for too long advocated only for sectional interests which has tied it to *other* identities: "the problems and aspirations of Afrikaners or English-speaking people, of whites *or blacks*" (emphasis added De Gruchy 1979:229). Basic to the penultimate witness of the church in South Africa to the ultimate kingdom of God is that it "become the church *for* all, especially for those who suffer" (emphasis added De Gruchy 1979:232). In H. Richard Niebuhr's terms, the church needs to rediscover a "radical faith," a loyalty to something genuinely transcendent. But unlike Niebuhr's, *this* radical faith is not premised on an existential encounter with "the one beyond the many," but that identifies it with the dispossessed – not because the dispossessed are morally superior to the elites, but because that is where God is to be found in these penultimate times. Clearly one important difference between De Gruchy and Niebuhr then is around their doctrine of God, and to that we must return.

The distinction between the ultimate and the penultimate allows De Gruchy to be more positive than Niebuhr when it comes to Christians involved in reconstruction. For the latter, the kingdom of God was a *kairos* continually confronting human aspirations, even aspirations for justice.

Any achievement or satisfaction was a turning away from that *kairos*, and any secular aspiration was a marker of compromise. While the De Gruchy of the first edition of *The Church Struggle* still treated secularity with suspicion (associating it with "the world" in need of transformation by the gospel), there is at least a recognition that the secular as engaged in the penultimate struggle could be a partner for the church, provided the church maintains its identity vis-a-vis the kingdom.

In the final pages of "The Kingdom of God in South Africa," De Gruchy returns one last time to *The Kingdom of God in America*. The fullness of the Christian understanding of the kingdom must be brought to bear on the context for the sake of the God who alone is worthy of worship. It calls the church to renounce any interests not governed by and/or responding to the sovereignty of God ("the piety of transcendence"), the kingdom of Christ ("the piety of solidarity"), and the coming kingdom in the Spirit's call to justice in its action (De Gruchy 1979:237).[4] In so bearing witness, "the church reaches beyond itself to the [ultimate] future, a future which is God's gift of shalom. Thus, it keeps hope alive and, in so doing, counters the powers of this [penultimate] "passing age" and worships God alone (De Gruchy 1979:237). This conclusion would have received a hearty "amen" from H. Richard Niebuhr.

3. After the Kingdom of God in South Africa

Within a short period of time of the publication of *The Church Struggle in South Africa* the trends De Gruchy anticipated came to fruition. The leadership of the ecumenical churches became more representative of their black membership and more visible in resistance. As protests gained energy, especially around the Tricameral elections of 1983, the government, at least in public, laid down the gauntlet: negotiations were off the table. P.W. Botha's proclamation of a state of emergency triggered the publication of *The Kairos Document* (1985), a document that announced the time for third way theologies that sought to steer between radical alternatives was over. A moment (*kairos*) of truth had arrived.[5] While its signatories (which included

4 Quoting Moltmann and Meeks, 1978:47.

5 For the Kairos theologians, a moment of truth was discerned sociologically, in the midst of the penultimate (to use de Gruchy's term). Niebuhr would have seen the *kairos*

De Gruchy) ranged across the racial spectrum, *The Kairos Document* "was largely the work of black theologians" (De Gruchy 1986:242–243).

A new chapter in the story had begun, and De Gruchy's narrative needed updating.[6] Most significantly, in the first edition of *The Church Struggle* it is notable that the church was a church *for* … now it must be a church *with* those struggling for justice. The church could no longer afford to stand apart from the contestants in the struggle while working for justice. Justice demanded that the church declare itself in solidarity with the liberation movements.

While he had already begun to reformulate the narrative of *The Church Struggle in South Africa* (De Gruchy, 1986, xii), owing to the restrictions of time, De Gruchy chose to leave the original text in place and add a new introduction and postscript. "The Kingdom of God in South Africa" continued to serve as the final chapter, though its dismissal of Marxism (De Gruchy 1986:239–240) and refusal of violence as part of the penultimate struggle was blunted, if not completely renounced, in the postscript (De Gruchy 1986:243). The assumption in the first edition that race was the primary social determinant was taken back, though race and class were each understood as "fundamental and interrelated" (De Gruchy 1986:240). Additionally, the growing involvement of black Christians in the liberation movements meant that the church was also present there. Within two years of the second edition's publication (and less than ten years from that of the first) pastors, priests, and bishops would lead marches involving the United Democratic Front and other anti-apartheid organizations.

During South Africa's transition in the early 1990s, the position of the church became different – and more complex. With the elections of 27 April 1994, the liberation movements were now the government. Was "the kingdom of God" finally *now* "in South Africa?" Clearly, the penultimate

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in the continual decentering and displacing kingdom of God. In other words, it was the kingdom rushing towards people – a kingdom that reminded them of their radical finitude on the one hand and God's otherness on the other – that provoked the *kairos*.

6 The retelling would take place in and through the Social History project, led by de Gruchy (de Gruchy, 2009) and Charles Villa-Vicencio (Villa-Vicencio and Grassow 2009). This project took much more seriously the socioeconomic factors shaping the church. The third edition of *The Church Struggle* stayed closer to the original with an expanded final two chapters that brought the story up to 2004 (see below).

was still the theological context even though the socio-political context was now characterized by "transformation." Thus, De Gruchy spoke of the church in "critical solidarity" with the [new] government. The "solidarity" part expressed the optimistic note that a "just social order" was on the horizon and that initiatives leading to it were to be supported. The "critical" part recognized that "liberation movements that come to power are not exempt from the temptation to resort to authoritarian rule" (De Gruchy 1995:222). South Africa was still in the penultimate struggle for a just society, but the kingdom of God was not far off. What did this mean theologically?

Christianity and Democracy was an attempt to answer this question, and not simply with reference to South Africa.[7] A global wave of democratization had swept through the world in the late 1980s and early 1990s in which arguably the transformation of South Africa was both agent and outcome. But the moral and theological basis of this wave was not well articulated. The underlying conviction of *Christianity and Democracy* was the dictum of Reinhold Niebuhr: "Democracy has a more compelling justification and requires a more realistic vindication than is given it by the liberal culture with which it has been associated in modern history" (De Gruchy 1995:11).[8] What was that "compelling justification" and "more realistic vindication" in this time? The question was not dissimilar from that addressed in "The Kingdom of God in South Africa." Indeed, the idea of the kingdom (or "reign") of God announced by the prophets, embodied in Jesus of Nazareth, and proclaimed by the church was the first key to the theological vindication of democracy. But what was the relationship between the kingdom of which Jesus spoke and democracy?

As in *The Church Struggle*, the kingdom (or reign) of God was grounded in the preaching of Jesus of Nazareth, which carried forward a prophetic trajectory from the Hebrew scriptures. This deepened the idea that the God revealed in the Bible was a God "with a particular predilection for the poor, the oppressed, and for other victims of society" (De Gruchy 1995:11). The

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7 My interest here is not a full treatment of *Christianity and Democracy* but rather the teasing out of themes reflecting "The Kingdom of God in South Africa." For another angle on this important work, see the contribution of James Tengatenga to this volume.

8 Citing Niebuhr, 1944:xii.

corollary of "the kingdom of God" is "the sovereignty of God," and this represents the second key to the theological vindication of democracy. The sovereignty of God relativizes the claims of national, popular, and ecclesial sovereignties. But this is neither an abstract "one beyond the many" nor a hegemonic power-over. The God whose kingdom the church proclaims is the triune God whose power is most profoundly disclosed in suffering, particularly in the suffering Jesus. Thus, the norm for popular and national sovereignty concerns the enabling of the freedom and community modelled in the divine trinity (De Gruchy 1995:258). The centrality of the doctrine of the trinity to "a theology for a just world order" represents an important development. As a model for human community it provides "the insights necessary to overcome the way in which democracy has become a casualty of the contradictions of modernity, and therefore lost its spiritual foundations" (De Gruchy 1995:11–12). These contradictions include the pitting of the rights-bearing individual against the common good. The doctrine of the trinity also links to African humanism, especially the idea of *ubuntu* (De Gruchy 1995:240). Just as the members of the trinity cannot "be" apart from each other, what it means to be a person is impossible apart from other persons. But the "community" of the trinity does not equate to collectivism, as the particularity of each person is maintained. Thus, "individualism and collectivism are both Christian heresies… which represent destructive half-truths about humanity" (De Gruchy 1995:241).

And yet the tone of *Christianity and Democracy* remains cautious on the question: "what is [this] God *doing*?" Is it possible to give an account of divine action in history – not simply what Christians *thought* was divine action, but something more *actual*. To invoke Niebuhr: how is the whole story of Christianity and democracy taken up into this triune God's singular "pure act?" Can we go beyond helpful "ways of thinking" about God to which the aspirations of democracy seem analogous? De Gruchy remains at the level of models *of* God and models *for* sociality that mediate liberal and social democracy and individual and collective rights.[9]

Further, while the doctrine of the trinity is an important (even though unfinished) development in *Christianity and Democracy*, it is curious that

9 Sometimes termed "social trinitarianism," this idea of trinity as model for society is associated with John Zizioulas (1985) and was a popular idea during the 1990s.

the eschatological tension of ultimate and penultimate of "The Kingdom of God in South Africa" is muted.[10] While the latter was concerned for the distinctive identity of the church vis-à-vis the world as it engaged in struggle, *Christianity and Democracy* is more concerned that the church model more consistently a just and participatory society. This was already evident in the transformation of the church in South Africa over the past decade, as we saw with the period immediately following the publication of the first edition of *The Church Struggle*. With the prospect of "a new world order" on the horizon, the context is different. At the same time, the idea of the "secular" (and a "secular state") is treated more positively in *Christianity and Democracy*. Indeed, because the secular is an idea with theological foundations,[11] the establishment of a secular state is a goal Christians can laud, provided the freedom of religion to participate therein is guaranteed. But the convergence "between the democratic system and its vision, and the ecumenical koinonia, its holistic missionary paradigm, and its vision of shalom … is not yet the kingdom of God." A "creative and constructive tension expressing the dialectic between Christian faith and culture, between the reign of the triune God and the sovereignty of the people" must be maintained (De Gruchy 1995:276).

To mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of *The Church Struggle in South Africa* and the tenth anniversary of the first democratic elections in South Africa, a third edition of *The Church Struggle* was published in 2004. Unlike the second, the third edition updated the text and language. But the most significant change was the removal of "The Kingdom of God in South Africa" as final chapter. In its place were two new chapters, the first an extension of the narrative to 1994, the second a survey of the challenges

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10 In *Christianity and Democracy*, de Gruchy identifies "kairotic moments of God's grace," as times "the interconnectedness of the penultimate and ultimate" are revealed. They show human history as "located between… God's inauguration of a just new world order in Jesus Christ and its fulfillment." (de Gruchy, 1995, 233) It is worth noting that while the tension between ultimate and penultimate is muted in *Christianity and Democracy*, the term "utopia" does appear at several points in association with the "prophetic" vision (e.g. de Gruchy, 1995:236–7), but with a new tension between "abstract" and "concrete" utopia. (de Gruchy, 1995:230ff). I acknowledge an anonymous referee of this article for pointing this out.

11 The development of the secular is related to the two cities of Augustine (de Gruchy 1995:62), the two kingdoms of Luther (de Gruchy 1995:248), and the separation of church and state of the radical reformers (de Gruchy 1995:75).

facing the church in the new dispensation.[12] With the title "From Church Struggle to Church Struggles," the implication was that the original idea of representing the history of Christianity in South Africa as singular struggle was now diffused into particular questions of poverty, sexuality and gender justice, pluralism, and globalization. The tension between ultimate ("the kingdom of God") and penultimate ("in South Africa") was now refocused.

The move "from church struggle to church struggles" represented both gain and loss. The gain was in the more precise articulation of the challenges facing the church in South Africa. Indeed, these challenges did not appear out of nowhere, and could be seen as extensions of the original struggle. The question of gender was always present though rarely discussed during the struggle, and certainly is a perennial question in the church. The impact that labour migrancy and group areas had on the family during the apartheid years was profound. The question of poverty, subordinated for the most part to race in the first edition, was always entangled with race, as indicated in the postscript to the second. This was in keeping with De Gruchy's own nuancing in the postscript to the second edition of the social challenge beyond race to include the economic realities of poor South Africans, his naming of what Niebuhr would have called "the social forces" shaping South African Christianity. And as the church confronted these challenges, there were important lessons to be drawn from the struggle against Apartheid.

But there were losses as well.[13] The church of the third edition remained a church in solidarity with the former liberation movements, which had now become the government.[14] The eschatological tension created by the [pen]ultimate nature of the kingdom of God was considerably lessened. The imaginative and paradoxical tone of "The Kingdom of God in South Africa" is exchanged for a more pragmatic – "what shall we do to realize the democratic vision" (which is the legacy of the church struggle). The

12 The latter was written by Steve de Gruchy, though presumably the decision to cut "The Kingdom of God in South Africa" to make room for it was John de Gruchy's.

13 In engaging the final chapter of the third edition I realize I am also in dialogue with Steve as much as John de Gruchy. As I write I feel even more the loss of Steve as a theological dialogue partner.

14 The era of "critical solidarity" was coming to an end, and within three years would be replaced by "critical engagement." On the transition, see (Maluleke 2008).

democratic vision was realized in a system of "one [hu]man, one vote." And for that, the church was all in. This gave it a close identification with the world, though there were occasional warnings that even a democratic system, such as regular elections open to all citizens, and a democratic constitution, possibly the most progressive in the world of the time, did not ensure shalom. At the same time, it had been easier to talk about the church's integrity to avoid ideological captivity during the struggle.

De Gruchy's own rationale for removing "The Kingdom of God in South Africa" was that "unlike the other four chapters it was not so much historical narrative as it was theological reflection and commentary" (De Gruchy and De Gruchy 2005:xiii). Indeed. But it was "theological reflection and commentary" necessary to differentiate the thrust of the book from a mere chronicle of the past. This is why the fact that the account of "the church struggle in South Africa" ended with "the kingdom of God in South Africa" was so profound. And the fact that the latter ended with "hope against hope" was not simply a note to be sounded in the dark days of apartheid but also one needed as a reminder during reconstruction. Finally, the phrase "en route to the coming of God's kingdom" (De Gruchy and De Gruchy 2005:xiv) is ambiguous: the kingdom of God is "coming" (which captures the sense of the ultimate that is gift not achievement); but each "achievement of justice, no matter how small" marks a route to that kingdom. Does the penultimate have its *telos* in the ultimate? Or is that *telos* found in reminding each "achievement of justice" that they do not equate to the ultimate? Is this why outside of a single instance in the Preface the penultimate is not mentioned anywhere else in the book?

4. The Kingdom of God in apocalyptic times

The optimism reflected in *Christianity and Democracy* in the mid-nineties in South Africa and elsewhere has long subsided. Many of the democracies that were hailed as signs of a new world order have stalled or reverted. By the second decade of the twenty-first century, the world had plunged again into uncertainty. Even South Africa, hailed as a model of democratic transition, had been mired for nearly a decade in corruption. The 2008 election of Barack Obama as the first African American president of the United States which promised a new politics of inclusivity almost immediately

degenerated into "meet the new boss, same as the old boss" cynicism (Keller 2010). But the election of Donald Trump in 2016 changed cynicism into apocalyptic despair on the part of progressives, and immanent apocalyptic fulfilment for Trump supporters.

With all this in the air De Gruchy was invited to contribute to a series of small books that drew "upon the legacy of early twentieth century theological responses to the crises of the two world wars" (De Gruchy 2017:v) The result was *The End is Not Yet: Standing Firm in Apocalyptic Times*. The book revisited a number of motifs in *The Church Struggle* nearly forty years earlier and represented a return of Bonhoeffer's distinction between the ultimate and the penultimate which was central to "The Kingdom of God in South Africa." It recapitulated the story of *Christianity and Democracy* and picked up the question of God from there, this time offering a more mature account of divine action in the context of a world suffering at the limit, facing the end. Its underlying question brings us back to where we started: what is God doing?

"Apocalyptic," De Gruchy begins, is not a fringe aspect of Christian thought. It is central to Jesus' own teaching about the kingdom of God. Speaking of "the end" is coincident with Jesus' return to establish "God's reign of justice and peace on earth" (De Gruchy 2017:5). The time of his coming is "soon" (Rev 22:20). The kingdom of God, in other words, is *inherently* apocalyptic – though its character is hopeful rather than reactionary, constructive rather than destructive. The hope "that all shall be well" (De Gruchy 2017:6) has sustained believers throughout history, and especially in times of uncertainty. It remains part of the Christian imagination during the Eucharist, which is celebrated in churches "until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26). When the church forgets that this world is not the world as God intended it, the church gets into trouble. In such cases, apocalyptic hope is taken up by marginal groups challenging the status quo (De Gruchy 2017:7), speaking to the church even from outside the church. As he had stated in "The Kingdom of God in South Africa" even secular movements can speak prophetically to the church. Against the idea of a static social order guaranteed by God and mediated by the church, the immanent and immediate sense of the kingdom rushing towards us breaks open the formulations of Christendom, as Niebuhr showed in *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937:20).

But apocalyptic is also dangerous when severed from biblical hope. It can degenerate "into cultural neurosis that accompanies mass disappointment when optimistic dreams about the future fail to materialize" (De Gruchy 2017:13). It can take secularized forms, such as the political messianism in the wake of Trump (De Gruchy 2017:14) (or the populism of Zuma-era South Africa).[15] But it is the Euro-American axis that is the concern of De Gruchy here, and especially America's "*kairos* moment" (De Gruchy 2017:xxvii). For "when peoples and nations look into the abyss not quite knowing what to do next, they generally elect strong, illiberal leaders, of allow them to grasp power" (De Gruchy 2017:18). Scapegoating identifies an enemy or enemies responsible for the failures of utopian dreams, the removal of which will Make America Great Again. This political messianism can invoke "the almighty" (as did Hitler), but it is really the nation that is "the object of trust and loyalty" (De Gruchy 2017:22, quoting Niebuhr 1960:22). This is not the patriotism which allows the love of country as a legitimate but lesser good; it is nationalism making "absolute, ontological, or God-given claims" (De Gruchy 2017:23).[16] This kind of nationalism has a long history in Europe. It was transplanted around the world through colonialism but thought dead by the early 1990s (De Gruchy 2017:32). It represents a serious and severe possibility for America. But this is *not* the end of the story. America might yet come to trust in the God revealed in Jesus Christ (De Gruchy 2017:41), as Niebuhr also hoped in *The Kingdom of God in America*. Reasserting the question of God in a context of destroyed idols might bring newness "of faith, of humanity, of a rebirth of soul" (De Gruchy 2017:42).

This brings De Gruchy to the question of God. "What is God doing?" is articulated as "where on earth is God?" (De Gruchy 2017:43) This is a question of theodicy, not in the abstract sense discussed in philosophies of religion, but in the concrete situation of failed dreams. Invoking God without qualification may fool some people, especially those who forget Karl Barth's warning against depictions of God as "the Almighty" favoured by Hitler to empower defeated Germany after the devastation of World

15 De Gruchy does not mention this, though it seems an obvious parallel.

16 Citing Hobsbawm, 1990:169.

War I. This God – which had affinities with the God of apartheid[17] – was a monster, an idol. "The 'Almighty' means chaos, evil, the devil" (De Gruchy 2017:65).[18] By contrast, Christian theology unites

> … within God the free creative power that brings the world into being and sustains it in being [with] the suffering love of God which is God's power operative in redemptive solidarity with the world (De Gruchy 2017:68).

De Gruchy invokes the doctrine of the trinity, as he did in *Christianity and Democracy*, that God

> is not a monad [but] a community of distinct "persons" (not individuals) inseparable from each other, a communion that draws us humans into a relationship in which we do not lose our identity but discover who we are in relationship. *This is what it means to "live, move, and have our being" in God*. It is precisely what it means to "love God and our neighbour as ourselves", for that is the nature of God (De Gruchy 2017:69).

But here De Gruchy is no longer speaking of analogous models, but of the very nature of reality. Apocalyptic times have given birth to a renewed theological realism. The "dynamic and creative Presence that draws us into a relationship of trust and love in company with others" names "what is going on" and "what God is doing" more clearly than in *Christianity and Democracy*. But it does so in a way discerned *from below*, from engagement with and within rather than a position above struggle. Clarifying who this God is does not solve the problem of the problem of evil, or of failed dreams. It is part of the character of the penultimate, and living in penultimate times means indwelling such disappointment, whether it be the loss of a loved one – something De Gruchy knew far more profoundly at this stage of his life than before (De Gruchy 2017:73) – or the failure of political programs.

At this point the distinction between the ultimate and the penultimate is freshly deployed. To say "we live in apocalyptic times" is to say we live

17 See Kairos Theologians, 1985:23.

18 Citing Barth, 1949:48.

in penultimate times where the alternatives are particularly evident. But these alternatives are neither the radicalism "that sees only the ultimate" and "therefore disregards the penultimate" nor the way of compromise that fails "to act responsibly here and now with 'the end' in sight" (De Gruchy 2017:xxxi, 77). That end is not utopia. It is the quest "to make this world a more just and peaceful habitat for all humanity" (De Gruchy 2017:78). This is "engaging reality" by "'striv[ing] first for the kingdom of God as his righteousness' … within the given realities of contemporary politics" (De Gruchy 2017:79) Admittedly there is an implicit nod to Reinhold Niebuhr in the assumption that the "givens" are socio-politically mapped ("contemporary politics") rather than theologically reimagined. But even though the "participation" is articulated more along the lines of participation in contemporary public life than participating in God, or "what God is doing," *The End is Not Yet* representing the culmination of De Gruchy's wrestling with the questions we have put.

The End is Not Yet is "The Kingdom of God in South Africa" for the twenty-first century. It is also an appropriate final chapter for *The Kingdom of God in America*. Apocalyptic times return us to America's crossroads, to the question, "what must we do to be saved?" (Niebuhr 1935b). But the question is shifted in the second section of *The End is Not Yet* to "The People We Need to Become." That is, the question now is one of virtues. We have been here before: "The Kingdom of God in South Africa" echoed the threefold scheme of *The Kingdom of God in America* in the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. The people we need to become are a people characterized in their being and acting by these very virtues which, after all, characterize the coming of grace. Perhaps this is why the final pages of *The End is Not Yet* also echoing the words of that more famous Niebuhr,

> Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore, we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness (Niebuhr 2008:63).

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