



## **By another's death? A theological exploration of the rhetoric of reconciliation**

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### **Abstract**

In South Africa, the rhetoric of reconciliation is complex and contested. Indeed, reconciliation itself is viewed as “a controversial symbol”. In part, this may have to do with the different ways in which theological and social, political understandings drive the conceptualisation of reconciliation in South Africa. Within the theological tradition, salvation has long been portrayed by way of the metaphor of reconciliation, and many theologians have engaged the fruitful but potentially confusing difference in assumptions regarding what reconciliation is and requires of us. For a thicker, more robust theological concept of reconciliation, it may be important to consider what the intended use is of this complex notion when employed as a soteriological concept. This article explores David Kelsey’s portrayal of reconciliation by another’s death with some suggestions for contours of a soteriological grammar of reconciliation that could shape more lifegiving ways of speaking about reconciliation in South Africa today.

### **Keywords**

*Reconciliation; rhetoric; salvation; David Kelsey; Kudzunai Chiurai*

## **Introduction**

In his single-channel film *Moyo* (2013), Zimbabwean artist Kudzunai Chiurai portrays the moment of death, “when the air or spirit leaves the

body”.<sup>1</sup> It forms part of a larger collection of films – the first being Iyeza (2012, (a reinterpretation of Leonardo da Vinci’s The Last Supper), and the second entitled Creation, of which very little information is available. As the last of three films, Moyo offers a reinterpretation of Michelangelo’s Pieta, where Jesus’ dead body is cradled by his mother Mary after the crucifixion. Mary sings an isiXhosa song of mourning – and old Methodist song sung at funerals – while she gently wipes the blood off of her child’s body. The words of the dirge are “wakrazulwa ngenxa yam”, which could be translated as “you were ripped and torn for my sake”.

What Kudzunai Chiurai’s *Moyo* offers is a masterful and deeply sensitive portrayal of public imaginings of reconciliation in South(ern) Africa. There are rich themes to be explored here – with its portrayal of the heaviness of blood, of public violence, public mourning for loss of life, and the weight of death – often carried by mothers, and often carried by mothers alone (as is the case in *Moyo*). Commentators point out the resonances between this film and South African tragedies such as the Marikana massacre (2012) and the Soweto Uprising (1976). It is, however, worth noting that Chiurai made two versions of this film, with the portrayal of Jesus as a black man being the first version, entitled *Moyo I*. The second version, entitled *Moyo II*, portrays Jesus as a black woman. Here Chiurai explicitly confronts his audience with what South African president Cyril Ramaphosa has called a pandemic of gender-based violence in this country: the image of a woman’s bleeding body.

When we consider how we might speak about reconciliation in South Africa today, and which images we invoke with our words, Kudzunai Chiurai’s Jesus confronts us with a stark portrayal of reconciliation by another’s death. With this image in mind, a number of important questions about our languages of reconciliation may require some deeper and more careful theological reflection. For instance, what do we mean when we speak of reconciliation? What is our intent in speaking about reconciliation? How does our rhetoric of reconciliation look – and feel?

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1 See the description of this film, which is on display by the Goodman Gallery, here: <https://www.artbasel.com/catalog/artwork/46807/Kudzanai-Chiurai-Moyo>. See also the wonderful Mail & Guardian article on these films, available: <https://mg.co.za/article/2013-06-14-kudzanai-chiurai-considers-the-nature-of-violence/>. Accessed 17 January 2023.

## Speaking of reconciliation

In South Africa, the rhetoric of reconciliation is complex and contested. Indeed, reconciliation itself is viewed as “a controversial symbol”, as South African theologian Demaine Solomons would describe it in his doctoral work (cf. Solomons 2017). On the one hand, reconciliation is “one of the guiding concepts in South Africa”, argues Solomons (2017:5). On the other hand, there is a “lack of conceptual clarity” and various “layers of meaning” – including political and theological layers of meaning – that co-shape public imaginings (cf. Van der Borgh 2015) of what reconciliation is and what reconciliation means (Solomons, 2017:5–7; Solomons, 2020a:198). One may wonder, with John de Gruchy, whether this word could still be of any use, as a concept that has become “so overloaded with ambiguity in some contexts and so emptied of significant meaning in others” (2002:25).

More recently, Solomons has approached reconciliation as an “absurdity” (cf. Solomons, 2020b) and “a wicked problem” (cf. Solomons, 2020a), by which he means “something that is either too difficult or nearly impossible to resolve” (2020a:198).<sup>2</sup> Conceptual clarity in theologies of reconciliation are notoriously difficult to achieve, since it means not only working with one concept – namely, reconciliation – but instead with a set of interrelated concepts. As such, making sense of reconciliation takes place on a conceptual spectrum, argues Solomons (2013:100), on which four key ideas – justice, truth, forgiveness, and repentance – shape how we speak about reconciliation. In particular, there are two poles (liberation and reconciliation) or two groups of concepts (justice-truth and forgiveness-repentance) that are in constant flux in attempts to define reconciliation, observes Solomons (2013:100). What is clear, however, is “that most theologians would insist that all four elements must be present for reconciliation to occur” (Solomons 2013:100).

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2 One of the key characteristics of a wicked problem is that it “lacks conceptual clarity” (Solomons 2020a:199). This is particularly true of how the concept of reconciliation is defined in South Africa, according to Demaine Solomons since there is a clear tension between political approaches and theological approaches to defining reconciliation (2020a:200). This tension, coupled with the reality that this concept “has lost its premier status as a guiding vision for social transformation in South Africa” (Solomons 2020a:200), ask that we (re)consider what we mean when we speak of reconciliation.

There are of course also dangers present in speaking about reconciliation, as John de Gruchy has pointed out (2002:17), since our speaking – not only what we say, but how we say it – may make for despair, or hope; for violence, or care; for exclusion, or embrace (cf. Volf, 2019). As such, any attempt to clarify the concept of reconciliation in South Africa is inadequate if it does not take seriously the category of experience, warns South African theologian Vuyani Vellem (2013:103), seeing as reconciliation is deeply embedded in our “shared stories” (cf. Mouton & Smit 2008). It is therefore important that we also consider how we speak of reconciliation, argues De Gruchy (2002:17), since

[s]peaking assumes a particular form of discourse, a language, a style of rhetoric. What language should we employ? What is the appropriate way for those of us who are citizens and Christians, as well as the heirs of colonial privilege, to speak about reconciliation?

How we speak about reconciliation in South Africa today is, of course, deeply shaped by how the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1995 – 1998) have been received. There is a growing skepticism and disappointment – if not an outright hostility – about the rhetoric of reconciliation, especially among younger generations of South Africans (Vellem 2018:12). Theologians like the late Vuyani Vellem would point out that reconciliation is highly contested and contradictory, since the TRC is viewed by some as “foolish, a mimicry of justice... fraught with veils of secrecy” (2018:7). It is therefore by no means a given that reconciliation should necessarily shape civil, social, and political relationships in South Africa.

Moreover, any talk of reconsidering reconciliation or reclaiming reconciliation as a governing symbol in post-1994 South Africa must reckon with a deficit<sup>3</sup> (2013:103), since reconciliation “trickles up” from the maimed bodies of the poor, argues Vellem (2018:17; cf. also 2018:13). Speaking of reconciliation cannot simply erase this deficit, for “the tragic

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3 The concept of a deficit is especially important in theological reflection on reparation. Deficit is “a discrepancy that arises from an act of wrongdoing” and is, moreover, long-lasting: “a deficit that can never be undone” (Vellem 2013:104). As Ernst Conradie observes, this is a deeply complex notion shaped by “[t]he economic, social and educational impact of centuries of imperialism, slavery, colonialism and apartheid in South Africa” (Conradie, 2014:45).

losses emanating from the dismembered body of a black African at the encounter with a white, racist and masochistic domination cannot and will never be repaid” (2013:103). Reparation, and not reconciliation alone, is increasingly being called for.<sup>4</sup> As Ernst Conradie notes (2013:45), “[t]wo decades after the transition to a democratic dispensation this deficit is undoubtedly still felt by many “previously disadvantaged” citizens, often with considerable resentment and anger.”

It should therefore come as no surprise that a growing disappointment with and critique of the champions of reconciliation – such as former president Nelson Mandela<sup>5</sup> and archbishop Desmond Tutu<sup>6</sup> – is palpable, especially since the 2016 #feesmustfall protests on South African university campuses.

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- 4 Demaine Solomons writes (2020a:210) that “if reconciliation is to be taken seriously by blacks the need for a “reparations” paradigm will have to be addressed. Given the actual situation in which blacks find themselves, with their history of inequality, unaddressed violence, oppression, and subjugation for which whites who have benefitted have yet to apologize, never mind make meaningful repair – to presume, on this basis, that interracial relationships are even desirable for blacks is highly problematic.” Indeed, “why would whites even assume reconciliation to be desirable or beneficial to blacks? In my estimation, blacks have more pressing concerns than merely focusing on their proximity to whites” (2020a:210).
  - 5 As Demaine Solomons observes, it has become “commonplace for black youth to talk about Nelson Mandela as the one who ‘sold out’” (2020a:201). Nelson Mandela is – for many South Africans – not the hero that he was long believed to be, particularly during the first years after apartheid and especially during his term as president of the South Africa (1994–1999). Especially among the so-called “born frees” – those South Africans born after the transition to democracy in 1994, and who were in other words babies and toddlers while the Truth and Reconciliation Commission met in the very years that Nelson Mandela was president – there is often little sentiment attached to the years marked by the TRC proceedings, the influence of Archbishop Tutu, or the legacy of President Mandela.
  - 6 Given the leading role that a theologian and church leader – namely, archbishop Desmond Tutu – played as chairperson of the TRC, it is perhaps no wonder that theological expressions of reconciliation played such an important public role in shaping South African views of reconciliation. As John de Gruchy notes (2002:41), “[t]he debate about reconciliation within the TRC and the wider South African public would undoubtedly have been different if the Commission had been chaired by a judge rather than an archbishop, by a politician rather than a pastor and father confessor.” Many, especially younger South Africans view the language of reconciliation as the product of political compromise; a strategic language of settlement that is neither visionary nor particularly inspiring or inviting. It is worth nothing that archbishop Desmond Tutu was evidently aware of this critique. He writes that “[a] Christian understanding of reconciliation... [is] often dismissed as romantic obscurantism, political naiveté, and hopelessly out of touch with the socio-economic realities that govern our world” (2012:vii). Indeed, “[n]one of us get to see ourselves quite as others do, and I would be peeved that I might have seemed other than radical at any period in my life. I do not

At the heart of this growing disillusionment, is the critique – voiced by Jakes Gerwel and others – that the TRC has “spiritualized” reconciliation (Solomons 2020a:202). Gerwel regarded this as dangerous because he could foresee it posing “the risk of “pathologizing” a nation in relatively good health by insisting on the perpetual quest for the holy grail of reconciliation” (Solomons, 2020a:203).<sup>7</sup>

Yet it is not only in recent years, decades after the TRC proceedings took place, that critique and suspicion of the rhetoric of reconciliation would first be voiced. Already during the proceedings of the TRC itself, as John de Gruchy points out, “the rhetoric of reconciliation had become highly politicized” (2002:42). Indeed, the very rhetoric itself became – for some – not a means of recognizing one another as fellow human beings and South Africans, but a way out of taking responsibility for what happened during apartheid and for skirting the demands of justice, in that (2002:42)

[it] became possible to determine a person’s political commitments by examining the way in which he or she used the term. Those who wanted to forget the past spoke of the need for reconciliation as though it was coterminous with moral amnesia, a particular failure of the apartheid ruling class ... Right-wing conservatives spoke of reconciliation as an impossible dream and clung to their apartheid ideals. On the other wide of the spectrum, some victims or their families were totally opposed to the granting of amnesty to the perpetrators and challenged this in the courts.

Critique of the rhetoric of reconciliation is neither new nor unexpected; for as De Gruchy notes (2002:42), “South Africans are well aware that whatever the TRC has done to promote national reconciliation, it could not and did not fulfil the hopes of all those who long for justice and peace in South Africa.” There are, in other words, also limitations to our speaking of reconciliation. There is a point where the language of reconciliation

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think the gospel allows us that luxury. I would be guilty of crying peace, peace, where there is no peace, trying to heal ever so superficially” (2012:ix).

7 Allan Boesak and Curtiss DeYoung do not agree with Jakes Gerwel’s warning that Christian reconciliation could potentially be “pathologizing” and would respond in the following way (2012:153): “If it [the demand for radical Christian reconciliation] is “pathologizing,” it is because it makes us “maladjusted” to injustice, as Martin Luther King noted.”

disappoints, and perhaps even unravels. Not all kinds of speaking about reconciliation is lifegiving, and worse still: we know that there is the terrible possibility of speaking about reconciliation in ways that can be violent, and death-dealing, or coldly detached and apathetic – without care or love or grace.

Speaking of reconciliation can represent attempts to “trade justice for peace” (cf. Guðmarsdóttir et al, 2021). Allan Boesak and Curtiss DeYoung also warn that the rhetoric of reconciliation can be caught up in the power dynamics of political accommodation, and that Christians should be wary of how reconciliation is leveraged exactly insofar as it becomes a way to provide “security only to those who are privileged” (Solomons, 2020a:204). However, they also argue that (speaking of) reconciliation can and should be radical: deeply shaped by justice, equity, and the concern for the human dignity of “the vulnerable and the powerless, the neglected, and the excluded” (Solomons 2020a:203; Boesak & DeYoung 2012:154–155).

The late Professor Russel Botman, former rector and vice-chancellor of Stellenbosch University, would also write extensively about the complexities of reconciliation in South Africa – before, during, and after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – and would argue that “[i]ssues of reconciliation, apology and forgiveness ... require the vigilance of a snake (a hermeneutic of suspicion) and the openness of a dove (a hermeneutic of love as an openness to an alternative future)” (1999:338).<sup>8</sup> He alerts us to the importance of developing a lifegiving hermeneutic for speaking about reconciliation: a hermeneutic that is neither naïve nor cynical.

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8 There are, of course, also many dangers to how we today speak – or don’t speak – about reconciliation. It is the very same Russel Botman who tells the story, in various publications, of a class discussion in 1978 at the University of the Western Cape, wherein the systematic theologian Jaap Durand would ask the class what the theological problem with apartheid was. The class concluded that apartheid theology is both a sin and a heresy because it “departs from the irreconcilability of people” (Botman 1996:40). The argument that apartheid assumes of irreconcilability of diverse people would consequently be adopted at the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in 1978, and eventually lead to the proclamation of a *status confessionis* in apartheid South Africa and the birth of the Belhar Confession. Resisting apartheid theology was born from a deep commitment to reconciliation. Any assumption – or, worse even, a return to the argument – that we are irreconcilable would not only be short-sighted, but also dangerous. Perhaps this is one of the most important reasons why we need to continue speaking (also theologically) about what reconciliation in South Africa means.

Yet what would such speaking and such seeking require? What kind of a hermeneutic could shape such a language? Perhaps here we might return to the memory of Kudzunai Chiurai's Jesus. How do we frame the relationship between justice and reconciliation in front of the bleeding body of Jesus in Moyo? How do we face the lamenting mother of Jesus, and hold the memory of the injustice and violence perpetrated against her child, holy?

## Holding the memory holy

In his book *Reconciliation* (2002), John de Gruchy makes a helpful distinction – borrowed from Dietrich Ritschl – between primary expressions of reconciliation (reconciliation as a theological concept) and secondary expressions of reconciliation (reconciliation as a social, political concept) (2002:18 – 19). Yet for him the legitimacy of speaking about reconciliation lies in how it is expressed in its secondary forms: “[t]he challenge in speaking about reconciliation from a Christian perspective is... engaging public life in ways that make God's gift of reconciliation and Christian hope a reality through secondary expressions” (2002:19). John de Gruchy would describe the relationship between justice and reconciliation by way of “covenanting” (2002:213): “[c]ovenanting to restore justice, covenanting together as a people reconciled to God and one another.”

Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf observes that for many theologians – including Karl Barth, in his account of salvation as reconciliation – reconciliation with God and reconciliation with fellow human beings are inextricably intertwined (2000:161n12).<sup>9</sup> Justice and reconciliation are intrinsically related: whereas reconciliation provides the larger impetus and rationale for justice work, justice in turn is the litmus test for a socially responsible and credible account of reconciliation. The logic of a theology of reconciliation is shaped by the death of Christ, argues Volf, but it is also exactly this logic of reconciliation that “stands in contrast

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9 He writes (2000:161n12) that “[t]he larger issue that lies behind my concern is the belief that reconciliation is not a unidirectional act but a process that involves all mutually estranged parties (though it does not necessarily involve them in the same way!). Reconciliation with God cannot take place, so to speak, above human beings; it is a way of bringing human beings into communion with God and one another. Hence Paul both makes a claim (“God ... reconciled us to himself through Christ”) and issues a call (“be reconciled to God”) in 2 Corinthians 5:18, 20.”



to most contemporary notions of reconciliation between God and human beings” (2000:164). As such, Volf foresees a variety of possible distortions in the relationship between justice and reconciliation, however, that need to be avoided in any Christian account of reconciliation.

Firstly, reconciliation without justice – where reconciliation has no social implications or scope, insofar as the doctrine of reconciliation is reduced to “the reconciliation of the individual with God” (Volf 2000:162) – represents “an inadequate understanding of reconciliation” because such a “retreat from social responsibility” fails to “take seriously the traditions of Jesus and the prophets” (Volf 2000:162). This means that not cheap and private reconciliation – “which averts its eyes from injustice” – but costly and public reconciliation – which “names the injustice” and “resists the behaviour” – is in view here (2000:166). Grace itself requires that justice be sought out and affirmed, not for its own sake but as an expression and outflow of the undeserved grace offered by God (2000:166). As Volf points out, “[g]race is unthinkable without justice” (2000:165). Such grace, when confronted with evil, does not shy away from “evil being named as evil” (2000:167).

Secondly, justice before or instead of reconciliation – where reconciliation “can commence only after liberation is accomplished” and “peace will be established only after justice is done” (Volf 2000:162) – separates justice from “the very center of the Christian faith”, which is “the narrative of the cross of Christ which reveals the character of the triune God” (Volf 2000:163). Reconciliation thereby becomes an afterthought, something optional to be attempted (or not) after liberation.<sup>10</sup> Reconciliation has both a vertical and a horizontal dimension: it involves not only turning away from “enmity with God” but also “a turning away from enmity toward people” without which “a movement toward a human community” would

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10 It is, however, “unclear why reconciliation should be attempted after victory” – argues Volf (2000:163) – if “liberation has [not] been integrated into the larger agenda of reconciliation.” Indeed, “Christians find it difficult to help foster reconciliation, even to resist being pulled into the vortex of conflict ... they are often no more than eager combatants with the destruction of their enemies as their only consideration” (Volf 2000:163).

become impossible (2000:166).<sup>11</sup> Here there is a palpable tension between reconciliation and justice, for restoring communion with evildoers is not determined by “justice done”, argues Volf (2000:167). Instead, reconciliation is rooted in “God reaching out in grace to the perpetrators” (2000:167).

This does not mean that there is any option for Christians to abandon justice in favour of reconciliation, for to view reconciliation as an alternative – or even a competing good – to the struggle for justice, is to misunderstand not only reconciliation and justice, but to betray the very gospel itself. Reconciliation itself demands justice – “out of its own inner logic” (Volf, 2000:168). As such, for Volf, the “grace [that] has priority over justice” is a grace “that does not negate justice but that affirms justice in the act of transcending it” (2000:169).

Volf concludes that justice is subordinate to reconciliation (2000:165), whereby he means that the struggle for justice is part of a larger story about salvation – human beings’ reconciliation to God and one another. Grace is per definition undeserved, within the Christian gospel: God “make[s] friends out of enemies and continues to do so despite their persisting sin and enmity” (2000:167). Justice, in other words, stands in service of a larger, longer purpose: namely, the pursuit and establishment of “a community of love” (2000:163). Justice is indispensable in seeking out the full flourishing of all, and reconciliation orients us toward the bigger commitment of human flourishing. How we make sense of the relationship between reconciliation and justice is therefore important for our speaking in a credible and lifegiving manner about reconciliation.

Yet reconciliation also means not forgetting injustices and violations perpetrated. It means “holding the memory as holy before God, so that the victim is honoured, and the atrocity is never repeated again” (Boesak & DeYoung 2012:153). If theological conceptualisations of reconciliation

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11 In this account, Volf appeals to the story of Paul and in particular Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus (cf. 2000:164 – 168). He writes that “[j]ust as [Paul] the persecutor was received by Christ, so the persecutor was received by the community he had persecuted ... [moreover,] he became a builder of the very community that he had sought to destroy” (2000:166). All of this would be impossible without God’s generous love and offering of reconciliation to Paul, “the enemy”, notes Volf – for in the pursuit of “strict justice” “Paul never would have become the apostle of the very church he had been persecuting” (2000:166).

is to respond adequately to the growing frustration, disillusionment, and cynicism with the rhetoric of reconciliation in South Africa – born of the lack of “addressing the root causes of injustice” and economic inequality, argues Solomons (2020a:201), which in turn often erupts in “violent protest action” – good and just and respectful remembering, or “holding the memory holy”, may be crucial. Indeed, this “holding the memory holy before God” becomes “a means of responding to God’s demands for justice for the vulnerable and the powerless, the neglected, and the excluded” (Boesak & DeYoung 2012:153).

How might what we need from the concept of reconciliation, as “holding the memory holy”, be shaped by the classic soteriological discourse that portrays salvation as reconciliation? Might we “hold the memory holy” while also “holding the holy memory” of our reconciliation by another’s death? How could the good news that we flourish by Christ’s death shape our soteriological grammars of reconciliation?

## Holding the holy memory

Salvation has long been described by way of the metaphor of reconciliation (cf. Saarinen, 2022).<sup>12</sup> More recently, theologians like the American Reformed theologian David Kelsey – influenced by the German theologian Karl Barth, for whom “the work of reconciliation is the centre of the Christian message” (Saarinen 2022:18) – have again engaged the discourse on salvation as reconciliation. In the third part of his tripartite theological anthropology, entitled *Eccentric Existence* (2009), Kelsey argues that the ultimate context of God relating to reconcile all that is not God to God – which includes human beings, but is not limited to human beings – is that we live by another’s death. The trinitarian logic or taxis that governs this overcoming of estrangement is our reconciliation in “[t]he Son sent by the Father in the power of the Spirit” (Kelsey 2009:618), and it is this logic

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12 Demaine Solomons points toward the importance of (the choice for) soteriological metaphors as “an important element in the interpretation of Christ’s atoning work” (2020a:205). Indeed, “at the heart of the matter ... [lies] the search for appropriate theological models and root metaphors within the framework of Christian soteriology” (2020a:205). These metaphors hold tremendous power insofar as these “often relate to specific predicaments in which humans longed for salvation or comprehensive well-being” (2020a:205).

that provides “the distinctive pattern in which the three-person God perichoretically reconciles estranged humankind in particular” (2009:618).

For Kelsey, the triune God is the agent of reconciliation and reconciliation is the remedying of estrangement, which he defines as “bondage to a demonic dynamic, a self-contradictory self-destructiveness” (Kelsey, 2009:618). Estrangement – a term Kelsey uses to describe multiple estrangements, instead of a singular, simple expression of “our self-destructive self-estrangement from God” (2009:623) – is marked by repetition, persistence, deep ambiguity, and an unrelenting resistance to God. Moreover, these multiple estrangements infuse every kind of relationship between human beings, and not only the relationship between us and God (Marais 2011:179). This deeply human condition of estrangement is therefore inescapable, and neither the best of our intentions nor our every good work can ultimately disentangle us from the violent and violating conditions that we are caught up in.

At the heart of the good news of the gospel lies the recognition that we need help “from the outside” – eccentric help, help that comes from outside of the centres of our existence – so to speak, if we are to have any hope of remedying our deep entanglements in “living death”.<sup>13</sup> It is, ultimately, a crisis of a death-dealing relationality: as relational beings, our relationality makes it impossible for us to disentangle ourselves from one another, for better or for worse. We need no less than a lifegiving, radical, structural intervention from the outside in and amidst the web of our relationships – including our relationship with God – if what has become toxic and violent is to be recalibrated into that which is loving, caring, and grace-like.

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13 Here it is important to understand that Kelsey views human beings as deeply relational created beings: those not only related to by God (in creation, eschatological consummation, and reconciliation) and other living beings, but also as those whose lives are constituted by the endless creaturely cycle of nurturing, giving, and receiving (Marais 2011:178). These creaturely cycles are, however, prone to corruption and can become “distorted into vicious cycles of violence, violation, exploitation, exclusion and oppression” (Marais 2011:178) – especially where we live in denial of our vulnerable dependence on and sheer openness to the nurturing, giving, and receiving of other created beings and God, as though we were our “own ground of reality and worth rather than living in appropriate response to God relating” (Kelsey 2009:645). In short, this is what Kelsey describes as “living death”.

Herein the incarnation of Jesus Christ plays a key role, argues Kelsey, for “only as one among us can he be the locus of God’s relating to us to reconcile us to God” (2009:627). The doctrine of the two natures of Christ is important here.<sup>14</sup> The confession that Jesus is fully human and fully divine is at once an affirmation of eccentricity – of that which comes from the outside in and is therefore wholly different to our expected human web of relations – and at the same time a recognition of sameness: he is human, he is one of us. He is not so different that he cannot come home in and to our living death.

It is this dynamic of eccentricity and sameness that makes what Kelsey calls “exchange” possible: reconciliation to God and one another happens by “exchange”, since it is as “one of us” and “one among us” that Jesus stands as “one in solidarity with us” (Marais 2011:176). This means that Jesus, “who in being with us is for us” (Kelsey 2009:642), respects fellow human beings as equals and acts toward the well-being of others (Marais 2011:178). Eccentricity and sameness are both necessary for Kelsey’s portrayal of the soteriological dynamic of exchange. For Kelsey, there is no reconciliation by another’s death without this lifegiving exchange.

If reconciliation hinges on exchange, this also means that Jesus is incarnated – as God-become-human – within the vicious and distorted cycles of “living death” in order that he might take upon himself the full scope and consequences of human beings’ estrangement from God and fellow living beings. The exchange Kelsey has in mind is not simply that of death for life, but of “living death” for “dying life”: a lifegiving exchange that enables human beings to “live truly by another’s dying life” (Kelsey 2009:646). As such, God in Jesus “structurally” reconciles us to God and one another “by breaking into the vicious cycles of violence, extinction and disintegration” and thereby “taking the deadly and destructive consequences of these cycles upon Godself” (Marais 2011:179). Human beings are, in exchange, drawn “into God’s own, triune, giving and receiving life of reconciliation” (Marais, 2011:179).

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14 In particular, for Kelsey, this means recognising that Jesus “shares in the full range of biochemical psychological, cognitive, social, political, economic, and cultural energy systems that characterize all living human bodies” (2009:627). Reconciliation is only possible because Jesus is (also) fully human.

It is the life and death of this Jesus through which human beings are on the one hand reconciled to God and on the other hand shown for what they really are: namely, profoundly distorted and estranged from God. Herein any talk of reconciliation is itself deeply caught up in the power dynamics of “saving” language: “Jesus is one who, in his powerlessness to save himself, saves others” (Marais 2011:177). Human beings are those saved through reconciliation. Reconciliation is not an optional extra, that we could opt in and out of, but rather the means by which we live fully and truly human lives. In this account we are wholly unable to reconcile ourselves to God or to one another. The recognition that it is (only) the gift of Jesus’ death that makes reconciliation possible not only rescripts the power dynamics in reconciliation talk, but also reframes reconciliation as good news: we are those who flourish by another’s death.

David Kelsey is, however, not naïve about the possibilities of a final and complete disentanglement from estrangement. For him, structural reconciliation does not necessarily replace structural estrangement (Marais 2011:179). Rather, he foresees the relationship between structural reconciliation and structural estrangement as one of “containment”: estrangement is contained within the “structure of relations among Jesus, Father and Spirit into which they have been set” (Kelsey 2009:647). At the same, however, the structure of reconciliation is deeply necessary as “the condition of the possibility of humankind overcoming estrangement” (Kelsey 2009:648). This possibility is embodied through “acknowledgement of [our] own participation in these vicious cycles” – and in particular through the practices of “[g]iving and receiving forgiveness, repenting and confessing” (Marais, 2011:179).

Yet as Demaine Solomons rightly observes, reconciliation cannot *only* be eccentric – “something that happens to us from the outside” – but also needs to be participatory, in that it calls for appropriate response (2020a:207). Indeed, “reconciliation with God no longer comes to us solely from the outside but we ourselves become participants in our own liberation” (2020a:207). Ultimately, such difficult and rich theological engagement with reconciliation is unavoidable because any talk of reconciliation

confronts us with the question: who are we?<sup>15</sup> For Kelsey, we are “those who are ‘in Christ’” and, as such, “we have our identities in Christ’s identity” (2009:695). The appropriate response to this recognition – namely that who we are, are those reconciled by another’s death, in Christ – is (eccentric) love (Marais 2011:182). We flourish by another’s death, as reconcilees, when we respond in love to God and one another.

The love that reconciliation demands of us is, however, shaped by a number of contours: (1) eccentric love is deeply perichoretic, meaning that it is rooted “in the triune God’s own self-relating in love, a communion of mutual and reciprocal self-giving and receiving that constitutes the triune God’s own life” (Kelsey 2009:704); (2) eccentric love desires communion, amidst and in spite of estranging responses: “faithless, hopeless and loveless responses to God’s relating” (Kelsey 2009:706), (3) eccentric love is humble, in that it acknowledges the “condition shared with fellow human ... bodies” (Kelsey 2009:712), (4) eccentric love is gift-like, insofar as it is wholly undeserved and freely given by the triune God (Marais 2011:186), and (5) eccentric love is liberating, in that it frees human beings from life-denying entanglements and estrangements and for reconciliation (Marais 2011:186 – 187).

The emphasis on appropriate response to reconciliation does not, however, mean that the source or energy of our will to reconcile – or will to embrace<sup>16</sup>

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15 For Kelsey, Christology is deeply existential, since it seeks to make assertions not only about who Jesus and who God is, but also about who we are (Marais 2011:181). What we think and have to say about the triune God relating to reconcile human beings to God and to fellow living beings is therefore not merely interesting, but intended to be deeply personal, practical, and public. Such faith claims are truth claims, and therefore thoroughly political. As Allan Boesak and Curtiss DeYoung observe (2012:153): something is lost in translation when reconciliation is either de-spiritualized or depoliticized. Indeed, “[w]hile in South Africa reconciliation has been de-spiritualized into political pietism by many, in the United States reconciliation has been de-politicized into Christian pietism” (2012:153). An alternative to either de-spiritualisation or depoliticisation is radical reconciliation – which means that “Christians are called as agents of reconciliation, that that reconciliation is radical, and that the demands of that radical reconciliation should be made applicable to the political, social, and political realities within which they live and work” (Boesak & DeYoung 2012:156).

16 For Miroslav Volf, there are four important claims related to the will to embrace, especially toward clarifying the relationship between reconciliation and justice in his thinking (2000:171): (1) “the will to embrace is unconditional and indiscriminate” (but here he makes the important distinction between the will to embrace and the embrace itself: “only the will to embrace is unconditional and indiscriminate, not the embrace itself”), (2) “truth and justice are preconditions of the actual embrace”, (3) “the will to

(cf. Volf 2000:171) – lie within ourselves, in our own capacities and powers to disentangle ourselves from the condition of “living death”. Rather, reconciliation is possible “by another’s death”: it is initiated from outside of ourselves, by God’s reconciling work that frames, inspires, and relativises our efforts at reconciliation. When faced with Kudzunai Chiurai’s Jesus, ripped and torn for our sakes, we are not only confronted with the responsibility to hold the memory holy, but also the invitation to hold the holy memory – not letting go, not wanting to forget, but remembering rightly that we are those who are reconciled by another’s death.

## Conclusion

In his overview of the emergence and development of the concept of reconciliation, Finnish theologian Risto Saarinen reminds us that it is the 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel who would first endeavour “to take the concept of reconciliation out of its Christian religious context, ascribing to it a fundamental role in the emergence of modern social and political community” (Saarinen 2022:13). Reconciliation – as a political, philosophical concept – therein became instrumental to fostering (national) unity and an important “tool of nation building” (Saarinen 2022:23). Indeed, “Hegel’s philosophy of reconciliation contributes significantly to the emergence of national identities and the production of the modern nation-state in the nineteenth century”, writes Saarinen (2022:13).

Herein – in stretching the concept of reconciliation to meet every kind of social and political challenge to nation building and national unity – we may need to reckon with the very real “threat of its becoming thin – or even empty”, warns Saarinen (2022:25). The expectation that reconciliation should function as “a generic meta-concept of all conflict resolution” – which seems to be typical of “the current political concept of reconciliation” – is perhaps overly ambitious, in view of the deep “ambivalence” of reconciliation as a political concept, argues Saarinen (2022:26). Risto Saarinen nevertheless views the recent debates about

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embrace is the framework for the search for justice”, and (4) “embrace is the goal of the struggle for justice.”



reconciliation – including in South Africa – as an opportunity to re-engage theologically with this concept (2022:26). Clearly, a non-theological, only political concept of reconciliation is also no solution in our efforts to imbue the concept with legitimacy, credibility, and integrity.

It would be a strange leap in logic to assume that theological re-engagement with the concept of reconciliation must necessarily be naïve, superficial, or unnecessary. Clearly, theological discourses on reconciliation do not shy away from the reality of brokenness and estrangement. As South African theologian Nico Vorster points out (2018:2), “reconciliation is all about the renewal of all broken relationships.” As such, the theological language of reconciliation can never become a sterile, neatly packaged, clearly defined grammar, because it is a language that knows death – it knows the ripping and the tearing, of bodies and of futures and of families and of children. It is a language that knows betrayal, even betrayal onto death, for it is the language of Judas’ kiss; and yet, it is also a language that knows love, for it is the language of Jesus calling Judas friend. It is the language of Jesus dying for his friends – including his friend Judas, the betrayer. Evidently, reconciliation is a language of languages.

But perhaps, most of all, it is an infuriatingly hopeful language. For what if reconciliation could be an expression, not only of a society characterised by justice and peace, but of human flourishing – and the conditions that make living a life of dignity, a humane life, possible? What is reconciliation for, after all, if not for living in more just, more humane societies that could make for well-being and – dare I say – happiness?

Perhaps we should not overlook the fact that artists like Kudzunai Chiurai opt, in works like *Moyo I* and *Moyo II* that carry clear political overtones, for deeply theological portrayals of reconciliation. This choice appears to be deliberate, as evidenced by the larger collection of films in which *Moyo* is embedded. It is not possible to look Chiurai’s Mary in the eye and remain untouched and uninvolved in her lament and the tragedy of the dead Christ in her lap. The haunting moment of care between a lamenting mother and her dead child cannot met with anything less than “soul”: those deeper, thicker theological notions of reconciliation that is able to speak the language of death, betrayal, love, and hope. Politically strategic approaches to reconciliation alone does not have enough soul for holding

the memory holy and holding the holy memory in the face of Kudzunai Chiurai's Mary.

Perhaps what we encounter in Moyo is nothing less than the warning to not only count our words, but to also weigh them; to carefully consider the impact they have, the bodies they touch, and how this touch looks. And perhaps in Moyo we may also encounter the reminder that we are reconciled by another's death, and that at the heart of reconciliation has always lain the memory of Christ's death. Perhaps we may yet need theological expressions of reconciliation in order to seek out lifegiving and humanising ways of living into the gift of being reconciled by God. Perhaps Moyo reminds us not to forego "soul" in our clever and strategic grammars of reconciliation, for reconciliation without soul is no reconciliation at all.

After all, this work is all about heart and soul: it is the very meaning of the word "moyo".

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