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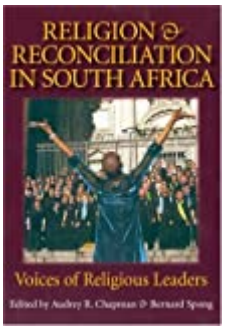

Audrey R. Chapman, Bernard Spong, eds. *Religion and Reconciliation in South Africa: Voices of Religious Leaders.* Philadelphia and London: Templeton Foundation Press, 2003. x + 321 pp. $22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-932031-28-7.

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Reconciliation, Religion, and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Beginning in August 1999, Bernard Spong, former communications director with the South African Council of Churches, interviewed thirty-three leaders from the various faith communities in South Africa to assess the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The views of religious leaders were sought as a component of a comprehensive evaluation of the TRC conducted by the Science and Human Rights Program of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, which was led by Audrey Chapman, in collaboration with the Johannesburg-based Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation on Johannesburg.

At the time of the interviews, the TRC had concluded its victim witness hearings, had handed over its five-volume report to the government, and was still hearing amnesty cases. The subjects were asked their understanding of reconciliation and its relationship to forgiveness; the differences between religious and secular approaches to reconciliation; the contribution of the TRC to reconciliation and the value of its work to survivors; and the role of religious communities in furthering the goals of the TRC. Leaders in the Protestant, Catholic, African Indigenous, and Orthodox churches were interviewed. Also included were interviews of Jewish, Muslim, Baha'i, and Hindu spokespersons.

One weakness of the book is that the majority of interviews were conducted in the Gauteng region. The editors explain, "the geographic placement of a person was not the important issue within the conversations, and the views within a short distance of Bishop Spong's home were varied enough to cover a wide spectrum of national viewpoints" (p. ix). Still, one wonders whether regional differences would have surfaced from a more geographically diverse sample. A lesser criticism is the inclusion of the Baha'i Faith; its numbers are so small in South Africa as to diminish any real influence it might have.

Another obvious weakness–one which the editors themselves concede–is the underrepresentation of voices from the African Indigenous Churches. Archbishop T. W. Ntongane of the Apostolic Methodist Church is the single spokesman from these churches although over seven million South Africans are members of the AICs. In explaining the paucity of voices from the AICs, the editors assert, "the issue of reconciliation is obviously

not a priority for them" (p. viii). Perhaps this misreads the AICs. The AICs were misunderstood during the apartheid era, accused by the mainline churches of being indifferent to the struggle. But it became obvious during the TRC's religious sector hearings, when Immanuel Lothola testified on behalf of the four-million-strong Zion Christian Church, that the ZCC interpreted resistance and struggle differently, in a non-political way. He explained, "As a church, the Zion Christian Church did not lead people into a mode of resistance against apartheid. But as a church the ZCC taught its people to love themselves more than ever, to stand upright and face the future.... We thought genuinely we needed to teach our people to be able to stand upright and not to hurt others, but to refuse to be hurt by others."[1] Their refusal to see themselves as victims, refusing to be hurt and to hate, has no doubt left a legacy of goodwill toward the former rulers and may make this group of Christians, who live out the command "to love your neighbor as yourself," an example of reconciliation for other population groups to emulate.

Most of the interviewees agree that reconciliation was central to the work of the TRC, and that the churches are uniquely qualified to offer their insights about the process. Lutheran theologian William Kistner, for instance, believes that the strength of the TRC was putting on the public agenda issues like guilt, forgiveness, repentance, and restitution–"issues which we preach about in Church" (p. 67). Most respondents welcome the large number of religious leaders chosen as commissioners, and they especially praise the role of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, chairman of the TRC, and his decidedly Christian view of reconciliation. In fact, one interviewee does not believe a secular form of reconciliation is even possible. (One respondent, however, does worry that reconciliation has been conflated with forgiveness, and wonders if South Africa's approach would work in non-Christian societies.) Hugo van der Merwe, in an essay following the interviews, worries that the distinction those interviewed drew between secular and religious perspectives on reconciliation (with the latter viewed as superior) "would reduce their ability to learn from other civil society initiatives to build reconciliation" (p. 270).

On the question of forgiveness and reconciliation, most respondents are uneasy with the unreciprocated form of forgiveness the TRC often promoted. Some note, for instance, that victims were urged more often to forgive than perpetrators were encouraged to apologize. How sincere were the apologies that were forthcoming? A common view is that true reconciliation requires more than a mere verbal acknowledgment of wrongdoing. Bishop Patrick Matalengoe, a bishop of the Church of the Province of South Africa, believes that apology must be coupled with some kind of reparation: "National reconciliation needs another step in which the perpetrators engage themselves in reparations. And the perpetrators include all who readily accepted the franchise" (p. 113). For Muslim leader Farid Esack, redistribution of the "ill-gotten gains of the social and economic system that underpinned apartheid is a precondition for reconciliation" (p. 241). Dutch Reformed Church minister Piet Meiring agrees that restitution is absolutely essential, especially since the amnesty provision is viewed as taking away justice for victims, but fears that "it does not look as if that is going to happen." (In 2003, the government authorized modest reparations to identified victims, far below what the TRC had recommended.)

Respondents universally agree that the post-TRC church is not living up to its calling to bring about reconciliation. Dr. Brigalia Bam, former general secretary of the South African Council of Churches, laments that there are not identifiable programs on reconciliation in the churches, and that the churches themselves are internally fractured and unreconciled. She confesses, "For me as a church person, I am overwhelmed by a sense of failure" (p. 31). Many respondents note that Sunday worship hour is the most segregated hour in South Africa, and that local church membership is still mainly along racial lines. One black respondent who attended a multiracial church complains that there is an "us" and "them" mentality. She says, "We have been singing their songs but they will not sing ours. They make no effort" (p. 56). For the Reverend James Ruys, Moderator of the Uniting Reformed Church, the church had been a major actor before 1994, but with democratic elections has been "dis-armed by having a democratic government" (p. 45). And Afrikaner Piet Meiring worries that the "Afrikaans churches suffered from an identity crisis. They have withdrawn themselves" (p. 127). Many respondents call on the churches to conduct their own internal TRCs to deal with their own problems of exclusion and to create bonds between people. Some of the strategies churches could engage in are identified: reconciliation sermons; symbolic events; counseling; storytelling; cross-racial dialogue and community building; advocacy on behalf of victims; victim-perpetrator mediation; and social justice and poverty alleviation. But most respondents seem overwhelmed with the enormity of the task and question their church's commitment to continuing the reconciliatory work of the TRC.

Spong and Chapman have provided a series of fascinating interviews of South African religious leaders at a time when the TRC was close to finishing its work. Unlike many of the recent publications on the TRC, this volume highlights one sector–the churches and church leaders' critique of the TRC. It would serve as a useful text in many courses–including those in Peace Studies, African Religions, and South African Politics, among others–and would be especially valuable when read alongside *Facing the Truth: South African Faith Communities and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission* and the chapter on "Institutional Hearing: The Faith Community" in the TRC's final report.[2]

Notes

[1]. Faith Community Hearings, November 17-19, 1997, www.doj.gov.za/trc.

[2]. James Cochrane, John de Gruchy, and Stephen Martin, eds, *Facing the Truth: South African Faith Communities and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 1999); and "Institutional Hearing: The Faith Community," *Truth and Reconciliation of South Africa Report*, 4 (Cape Town: Juta & Co., 1998), pp. 59-92.

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