

RELIGION &
RECONCILIATION
IN SOUTH AFRICA

RELIGION &
RECONCILIATION
IN SOUTH AFRICA

Voices of Religious Leaders

Audrey R. Chapman and
Bernard Spong, editors

Templeton Foundation Press
Philadelphia and London
www.templetonpress.org

Templeton Foundation Press
Five Radnor Corporate Center, Suite 120
100 Matsonford Road
Radnor, Pennsylvania 19087
www.templetonpress.org

© 2003 by Audrey R. Chapman and Bernard Spong

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without
the written permission of Templeton Foundation Press.

Designed and Typeset by Kachergis Book Design

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Religion and reconciliation in South Africa : voices of religious
leaders / Audrey R. Chapman and Bernard Spong, eds.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-932031-52-9

1. Reconciliation—Religious aspects.
2. Religious leaders—South Africa—Interviews.
3. South Africa. Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I. Chapman, Audrey R. II. Spong, Bernard.

BL2470.S6 R45 2003

200'.968'09049—dc21

2002153740

Printed in The United States

03 04 05 06 07 08 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This report is a product of the American Association for the
Advancement of Science (AAAS) Science and Human Rights Program.
The interpretations and conclusions are those of the authors and do
not purport to represent the views of the AAAS Board, the AAAS
Council, the Committee on Scientific Freedom Responsibility, or
the members of the Association.

CONTENTS

Preface, *Audrey R. Chapman and Bernard Spong* vii

Introduction: Religion and Reconciliation
in South Africa, *Audrey R. Chapman* 1

INTERVIEWS, *Conducted and edited by Bernard Spong*

Protestants 19

Roman Catholics 175

African Indigenous Churches 210

Orthodox 215

Jewish 222

Muslim 238

Other Religious Traditions 252

ESSAYS AND PERSPECTIVES

The Role of the Church in Promoting Reconciliation in
Post-TRC South Africa, *Hugo van der Merwe* 269

Perspectives on Reconciliation Within the Religious Community,
Audrey R. Chapman 282

APPENDIX

The Challenge of Reconciliation 305

Religion Census 1996 311

An Open Letter to Pastors of All Churches in South Africa 312

Index 315

PREFACE

THIS VOLUME HAD ITS ORIGINS in a project designed to understand better the interrelationships between truth-finding and reconciliation in South Africa. The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) began a multidisciplinary study with several South African collaborators shortly after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) submitted its final report to the Mandela administration in October 1998. Both the AAAS Science and Human Rights Program and its major collaborator, the Johannesburg-based Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, had been involved with the TRC.

It is important for any study of the process of and prospects for reconciliation in South Africa to take the role of the religious communities into account. One important source is the personal perspectives of religious leaders. The AAAS therefore decided to undertake a series of in-depth interviews with a cross section of key persons in various religious communities. The objective was to elicit their views about the TRC and the prospects for reconciliation, and to find out more about the status of relevant church-sponsored programs. Audrey Chapman, the project director, asked Bernard Spong, the former Director of Communications of the South African Council of Churches and a former colleague, to conduct the interviews, and he agreed to do so.

To begin the process, we decided on a series of open-ended questions that could serve as the basis for a conversation with a range of religious leaders. We then drew up a list of potential candidates. The letter to all who were invited to participate in this project stated that the purpose was “to share the thoughts that arise and, hopefully, be a useful input into the ongoing task of reconciliation in South Africa.”

Bernard Spong conducted the interviews in this volume over a period of twelve months beginning in August 1999. The same instrument was provided to each person so there is an obvious pattern throughout, but the conversations—a more appropriate characterization for the meetings than a formal interview—allowed room for the priorities of each person to receive attention. This flexibility has given an added richness to the overall content. There were times when the particular status, situation, or past experience of a person drew further direct questions, again adding another layer of viewpoints to a number of the exchanges. In reading the interviews that follow it is important to keep in mind that they are conversations and not essays, and need to be understood as such.

Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that the conversations did not take place in a vacuum. They were held within the context of an emerging democracy and against the background of a world where issues and priorities changed. The issue of blanket amnesty for apartheid perpetrators was very much in the forefront when the questions were determined. It quickly changed to the priority of reparation and compensation for victims. Farm invasions in Zimbabwe, amnesty applications by well-known figures, and a general election all took place during the course of the interviews and made their mark on these meetings as much as on any other conversations in South Africa during those times.

The selection of interviewees is wide, although no attempt was made to mathematically calculate the exact numeric representation required to cover the South African religious population as per the latest census. We tried to include activists and theorists, leaders and local representatives. Many were invited to take part; some agreed, some declined, some could never quite find time, and others made numerous promises that never materialized. We regret that this means some of the voices we would like to have heard are not included in this volume. On the other hand, we are delighted at the number of people who gave generously of their time and reflections.

We particularly regret that we missed the voice of more representatives of indigenous African churches and faith groups. The issue of reconciliation is obviously not a priority for them. We are reminded that, despite much pressure, the leader of the Zionist Christian Church remained silent when he attended the religious community hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Perhaps there is a need to listen to that silence!

The vast majority of the interviews conducted are people from Gauteng

Province.¹ This is a change to the original plan that had greater geographic coverage. The practical difficulty of getting people in a particular area to be available within a reasonable period of time was enormous. This is not, however, the reason for the shift. Two other things happened. One was that some of the leaders who were approached asked us to be in contact with Gauteng surrogates to be interviewed on their behalf. Second, it became obvious after a short time that the geographic placement of a person was not the important issue within the conversations, and the views within a short distance of Bernard Spong's home were varied enough to cover a wide spectrum of national viewpoints.

There is a predominance of Christian participation. This is not only a matter of relative numbers. It became obvious during the conversations that the issue of reconciliation in South Africa is a matter that the Christian churches especially have to face. It is the churches that hold within them those who supported and sustained the apartheid regime. It is the churches that hold those who spoke out against, and in some cases fought hard against, that same regime.

This is not to deny the role that people of all faiths have to play in the creation of a non-racial, non-discriminatory society. It is to emphasize the baggage that the Christian church carries from its past and needs to face in its own internal struggle for reconciliation.

The interviews, which were taped, were then transcribed, slightly edited, and given to the interviewees for any changes or revisions felt necessary. The result is a wide collection of views with two commonalities: they are all from a religious perspective and all around the theme of reconciliation.

The interviews were originally intended to be a resource for the larger study of the nature and dynamics of reconciliation. But as we read them over, it became clear that they deserved to be shared with a wider audience. Once we decided to publish an edited volume based on the interviews, we prepared the introduction and commissioned several commentaries. As in the case of the interviews, only some of the commentaries materialized in time to be included in this volume.

We would like to thank all of the religious leaders who agreed to be interviewed and worked with us to edit the transcripts of their interviews. We realize that they all are busy people with many demands on their time.

We would also like to acknowledge the generous support of the John Templeton Foundation. A grant from the Templeton Foundation to the

AAAS has served as the major source of support for the research project and enabled us to prepare this volume.

Audrey R. Chapman

Bernard Spong

March 2002

N O T E

1. Gauteng Province is the region that includes Johannesburg and Pretoria and therefore has the central offices for many religious communities.

RELIGION &
RECONCILIATION
IN SOUTH AFRICA

INTRODUCTION

RELIGION AND RECONCILIATION

IN SOUTH AFRICA

AUDREY R. CHAPMAN

LIKE MANY OTHER COUNTRIES emerging from periods of repression and conflict, South Africa confronts a legacy of deep social, economic, and political divisions, which in the case of South Africa also have a significant racial overlay. Unlike most contemporary transitional societies, the institutionalized racism, injustice, and violence at the heart of the apartheid regime made South Africa an international pariah. The international anti-apartheid movement, led by nongovernmental and religious organizations, and its successful efforts to impose economic sanctions reinforced the domestic opposition forces within South Africa and helped bring about a transition to majority rule. So too, post-apartheid South Africa's efforts to come to terms with its past, particularly its Truth and Reconciliation Commission's emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation, have inspired many in the world community.

South Africa's 1993 Interim Constitution recognized the importance of reconciliation to South Africa's future. The post-amble to that document stated that "the pursuit of national unity, the well-being of all South African citizens and peace require reconciliation between the people of South Africa and the reconstruction of society." It went on to note: "There is a need for

understanding but not vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for *ubuntu* but not victimization.”¹

Taking up this theme, South Africa’s widely heralded Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a Nobel peace prize winner and South Africa’s most senior Anglican cleric, sought to balance truth-finding with reconciliation. Truth commissions are temporary bodies mandated by governments or international agencies to investigate and make findings about acts and patterns of violence and gross human rights violations that took place during a specified period of time.² Their role typically is documenting and acknowledging a legacy of conflict and vicious crimes as a step toward healing wounds and shaping a shared future.³ In contrast with most of the major truth commissions that preceded it, the TRC was mandated to go beyond truth-finding and “to promote national unity and reconciliation in a spirit of understanding which transcends the conflict and divisions of the past.”⁴

This volume is intended as a contribution toward understanding the implications of the South African experience to promote forgiveness and reconciliation among former adversaries. Despite its critical importance to a wide range of countries, the process through which parties in a divided society can achieve reconciliation is relatively unexplored. Almost all of the research on forgiveness and reconciliation to date has focused on interpersonal or small group relationships, and the relevance of these findings to wider societal processes is unclear.⁵ The introduction to a recent publication, for example, comments that “no comprehensive research has been conducted on the dynamics of interaction between justice, reconciliation, and the pursuit of peaceful coexistence among parties”⁶

South Africa offers an unusual opportunity to explore the interaction between justice, forgiveness, reconciliation, and reconciliation on a national, social, and political landscape and to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of utilizing a truth commission body for promoting societal reconciliation. In addition, this volume has the additional benefit of being part of a broader multidisciplinary study of the TRC.

The volume focuses on the relationship between religion and reconciliation and does so particularly by providing the perspectives of leaders of a wide range of faith communities.⁷ During 1999 and 2000 the Rev. Bernard Spong, the former communications director of the South African Council of Churches, conducted a series of in-depth interviews of thirty-three key religious figures as one component of a more comprehensive assessment of

the TRC conducted by the Science and Human Rights Program of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, with the collaboration of the Johannesburg-based Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation. The interviews sought the views of these actors on a series of topics with as little intervention or direction as possible.

While the relevance of the South African experience to understanding reconciliation is clear, the focus selected here needs further explanation. During much of South Africa's history, religious communities, particularly many of the Christian churches, have had significant public roles. Some of the earliest colonizers were missionaries, and the Christian faith was sometimes used as a rationale to defend colonial rule. During the apartheid period, churches and religious bodies served as both a major source of support and opposition to apartheid regimes. Many politicians on both sides of the apartheid divide, particularly members of the Afrikaner-dominated National Party, had some religious training. Some were ordained as ministers, and religious doctrines were offered as rationale to bolster and critique apartheid policies. After the democratic transition, religious leaders continued to play important roles. In contrast with other truth commissions, the TRC was led by clerics rather than lawyers and judges. And the TRC's approach to reconciliation was shaped by and imbued with religious content. Thus the role and influence of religion in South African society are central to efforts to assess the problems of and prospects for reconciliation in that nation.

The Apartheid Legacy

The apartheid system of compulsory racial separation enabled a white minority amounting to some thirteen percent of the population to monopolize economic and political power and relegate the black majority to a subordinated and politically powerless status. Apartheid ("apartness" in Afrikaans) supported white supremacy through an elaborate set of laws that reserved eighty-seven percent of the land and virtually all natural resources to the white population and skewed access to good quality education, decent medical care, and well-paying jobs to the white minority. An official population registration apparatus provided a documentary basis for birth-to-death racial classification and discrimination against the African, Asian, and mixed race population. The Group Areas Act of 1950 and its various amendments defined separate areas that legally could be owned and occu-

ped by various racial groups. To enforce the Group Areas Act, the government forcibly relocated people, primarily Africans, by deporting them to “homelands” or native reserves and instituted a vicious system of pass laws to control the movement of the black population. The Reservation of Separate Amenities Act mandated the reservation of separate (and significantly unequal) services, buildings, and conveniences for each racial group. Other laws sought to entrench white political power by stripping many black South Africans of their citizenship and relegating them to membership in unviable homelands.

To maintain their control, the Afrikaner-dominated government used instruments of state power, including violence and gross human rights abuses, to repress legitimate demands for greater equity, freedom, and democracy. As resistance grew, laws became more draconian and successor National Party regimes increasingly resorted to violence, house arrest, imprisonment, torture, and assassination to keep apartheid in place. Non-governmental human rights organizations estimate that as many as two hundred thousand South Africans were arrested between 1960 and 1992, the majority of whom were tortured while in detention. Moreover, in most cases whole families and sometimes entire communities were affected, as well as individuals. State violence during apartheid permeated every aspect of non-white South Africans’ lives, from the direct brutality of illegal detention and torture to the daily injustices of separate facilities, pass laws, and segregated residential areas.

Unequal access to education, health, and economic opportunities left the overwhelming majority of blacks in grinding poverty with few prospects to better their situation. Apartheid policies segregated students from elementary school on up, allocated resources unequally among various racial groups, and offered better quality education to the white minority. State expenditure for white children in 1985 was estimated to be seven times higher per child than the expenditure for Indian, mixed race, and African children.⁸ Even after universities began to lower the color bar, the number of black students who were academically qualified (not to mention financially able) to pursue higher education was limited by the earlier lack of a fair educational infrastructure, a factor still true now in the post-apartheid era.

Moreover, apartheid policies continue to be reflected in continuing economic divisions. A household survey conducted by the Community Agency for Social Enquiry (CASE) in 1994, the year of the democratic transition, of a nationally representative sample of four thousand households in

South Africa found that close to two-thirds of all African households (more than three-quarters in rural areas) had monthly incomes below the minimum living level (then R900) and nearly one-fourth monthly incomes of only R300. In contrast, two-thirds of white households reported incomes of more than R2000.⁹ Approximately two-thirds of the African population lived in overcrowded housing without electricity, clean water, or sanitation. Only twenty percent of African households reported having a water tap inside the home compared with nearly one hundred percent of whites.¹⁰ As more recent figures from the 1996 census indicate, a slow rate of economic growth has made it difficult for the Mandela and Mbeki governments to overcome these economic divisions. In 1996, forty-eight percent of employed African women earned R500 or less per month, whereas sixty-five percent of white men earned more than R3000.¹¹

Moreover, the implications of apartheid spread well beyond inequalities in access to resources and political power to exacting a psychological toll. Claims of white superiority and black inferiority, which undergirded the system, have left a legacy of deep social divisions, psychological scars, and distrust between groups. As Bernard Spong observes,

If people do not meet one another as equal human beings in all areas of life they do not know or understand one another. This simple implication of apartheid meant that there were two nations within one. Black and White lived apart from one another except in the workplace where White was legislated to be in the superior commanding position. Apartheid laws supported a societal mentality of “us and them.” Inferior resources lead not only to poor living conditions and a lack of prospects for improvement but also to a mental state of superiority and inferiority. White training and education was toward an automatic understanding of oneself as a cut above the rest of society. Arrogance creeps into such sensibility very quickly. On the other hand, inferior status in the social order leads, especially with constant conditioning, to an acceptance of oneself as less than fully human.¹²

Although the divides between perpetrators and victims and between the beneficiaries and the exploited of the apartheid system were the major fault lines, they were by no means the only social and political divisions bequeathed by apartheid. The apartheid policy of divide and rule set supporters of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), a Zulu-based political party, against those who identified with the African National Congress (ANC), which had a multiracial and multiethnic base. From the mid-1980s many black townships and the KwaZulu-Natal region erupted in black-on-black violence fostered by the apartheid administration and a mysterious so-called “Third

Force” that apparently had Inkatha connections. These conflicts continue to simmer in some areas.

There are also other continuing political divisions. Differences in political strategy during apartheid created friction between the ANC and more radical black political movements. The Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and the Azanian Peoples Organization (AZAPO) disagreed with the ANC over the appropriate racial basis for an anti-apartheid coalition, whether to seek a multiracial or exclusively black African membership. Then after Nelson Mandela’s release from his long imprisonment neither the PAC nor AZAPO supported the ANC’s policy to negotiate the dismantling of the apartheid system with the ruling National Party government.

Historically a small minority of the white community, primarily drawn from the English-speaking population, opposed the apartheid system and supported the goals of the ANC. Currently the white community is divided between those supporting democratization and others unable or unwilling to adjust to the new society.

The Public Role of South Africa’s Religious Communities

During the apartheid era, religious bodies played significant roles both as supporters and opponents of the apartheid system. The *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report* identifies religious communities and leaders, particularly Christian churches, as falling into three categories: some were supporters of the apartheid system, others were opponents, and a third group were victims of oppression.¹³ The actual relationships were, however, more complicated than this triune classification. Members did not necessarily support the official policies of their denominations. Thus some denominations contained both supporters and opponents of apartheid. Moreover, many religious bodies were ostensibly apolitical, taking no official position on apartheid initiatives, but by so doing in reality supporting the status quo.

The Dutch Reformed churches, particularly the largest of them, the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Klerk (NGK), served as pillars of apartheid, actively promoting and supporting the apartheid system. These churches were infused with a conservative theology that preached it was contrary to the laws of God for whites and blacks to be put on equal footing or even to have close social relationships. The belief that people of different races should be

kept apart motivated the NGK to establish separate churches for its converts and eventually to advocate for the political process of separate development. Like the apartheid society, the structure of the NGK was officially segregated. It set up parallel religious structures for whites, blacks, coloureds (persons of mixed racial backgrounds), and Indians. After 1948, when the Afrikaner-dominated National Party came to power, the NGK urged the government to implement the policy of apartheid and actively supported the adoption of many of the laws that were central to the system.¹⁴ During the half century of apartheid rule, the NGK conferred its blessings on the system, offering biblical sanction and theological justification for the practice of racial separation. Until 1986, when the NGK Synod began to distance itself from an active defense of apartheid, the church functioned *de facto*, if not *de jure*, as an official state church, with considerable benefits accruing from this role.

Other religious communities also gave the apartheid state tacit support through such means as propagating theologies that neutralized dissent and/or promoting obedience to the existing political leaders. The Apostolic Faith Mission and other conservative and pentecostal denominations constitute examples. Various right-wing Christian groups like the Christian League of Southern Africa, the Catholic Defense League, and the Anglican Reform League also played important supportive roles.

In contrast, some religious communities and ecumenical bodies opposed apartheid's principles and policies, most notably the South African Council of Churches (SACC). Under apartheid the suppression of opposition political parties and the incarceration of major black politicians left a void that the SACC and some church-related voluntary organizations tried to fill. Many of the progressive denominations approved official statements and resolutions critical of apartheid. Others sent petitions and letters to the government on a range of issues, and some sought to intervene behind closed doors. Some faith communities, undertook marches and acts of civil disobedience to express opposition to specific apartheid policies and requirements. For example, local congregations deliberately flouted laws by establishing multiracial congregations. And a few appealed to international partners to press for economic sanctions and disinvestment from South Africa.¹⁵ Despite the violence of the apartheid regime, the anti-apartheid movement was remarkably nonviolent, partially as a result of the influence of the religious community. In addition, the SACC served as a liaison to

agencies in the international religious community involved in the anti-apartheid movement.

The SACC and the more progressive Christian churches suffered for their activism. Their activities were disrupted, their leaders persecuted, and in a few cases, their land and assets seized by the apartheid regime.¹⁶ Not infrequently, the government and its allies tried to discredit them with propaganda. A bomb was planted in the SACC's headquarters, and the Southern Africa Catholic Bishops' Conference was set alight.

Nevertheless, religious opposition to apartheid, much of it emanating from the SACC and a few multiracial denominations of British origins (Congregational, Methodist, Anglican, and Presbyterian) tended to be expressed more through the drafting of official statements and the courageous leadership of a few individuals than through the sustained commitment and mobilization of members. Indeed, the 1986 *Kairos Document*¹⁷ drafted by a group of progressive black theologians criticized these churches for issuing condemnatory statements without undertaking effective action. Although the most severe criticism in that document was directed at the Dutch Reformed churches for their "state theology" that officially supported apartheid, the *Kairos Document* also characterized the group of denominations that had prided themselves on their progressive stance as guilty of adhering to a "church theology" based on "cheap" reconciliation. It argued that authentic reconciliation could only follow white repentance and a clear commitment to fundamental change. According to its drafters, "No reconciliation is possible in South Africa without justice."¹⁸ The pejorative "church theology" designation sought to challenge these denominations to a more activist stance, referred to in the document as a "prophetic theology," characterized by solidarity with the victims of apartheid and partnership with their struggle for a just, democratic society. Nevertheless, only one denomination, the Congregational Church of Southern Africa, endorsed the document in its entirety. While the *Kairos Document* may be considered unduly harsh in its critique of mainline churches, the religious leaders of several of these denominations have subsequently been self-critical about their records under apartheid.¹⁹

The impact of apartheid on the religious community is important to note. The Dutch Reformed and conservative denominations were not the only ones with racially segregated structures. The Baptist churches were racially divided as well. Despite their official opposition to the principle of racial segregation, many Protestant congregations were racially homoge-

neous. Sunday was and continues to be the most racially divided day as people tend to remain in their various racial and ethnic areas for church. Even when denominations were officially multiracial, white congregations and clergy usually benefited from having far more resources at their disposal. Moreover, many of the religious bodies, particularly local congregations, were internally divided into supporters and opponents of the apartheid regime. Frequently, proposed initiatives to express opposition to apartheid policies generated controversy. As the Truth and Reconciliation report notes, “Different interests, perspectives and world views were represented—often within the same faith tradition. Likewise local churches and similar communities contained victims, beneficiaries and perpetrators of apartheid.”²⁰

As the political transition became more likely, some religious actors sought to prepare for and encourage a democratic future. The National Peace Accord was launched in September 1991, with the active involvement of the SACC, to help promote an ethos conducive to a democratic transition. When political compromise seemed elusive, members of the religious community helped to bring politicians back to the negotiating table. When the TRC was established, the religious community also sought to be supportive. The SACC characterized the TRC as “an extraordinary act of generosity by a people who insist only that the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth be told.” It anticipated that through the TRC “the space is thereby created where the deeper process of forgiveness, confession, repentance, reparation, and reconciliation can take place.”²¹

Consistent with the public and political role of the religious community, religious thinkers and clergy held key positions in the TRC: Chairman, Deputy Chairman, four other Commissioners, and the Director of Research. And given the charismatic presence of Archbishop Desmond Tutu as the Chair, theological formulations and religious liturgy were interwoven into the TRC process, particularly its public hearings. The Christian atmosphere and discourse of the TRC, and particularly Archbishop Tutu’s frequent framing of issues in terms of repentance and forgiveness, was applauded by some South Africans, for whom Christian ideals had served as an ethical critique of apartheid, but it was distasteful to many others. This latter category included some of the Commissioners and staff of the TRC as well as some academics, victims, and victim advocates. These multiple voices are reflected in the TRC report.

Recognizing the public role of religion in South African society, the

TRC held a special hearing on the role of faith communities during apartheid. One of several such sectoral hearings, the faith communities hearing took place in East London in November 1997. The TRC received more than sixty submissions from a wide range of religious communities. Some thirty groups testified during the three days of hearings, as well as individual staff and leaders. The submissions and testimonies at the hearings formed the basis of a chapter in the fourth volume of the TRC report.

The TRC's Efforts to Promote Reconciliation

Given South Africa's history and the events leading up to the establishment of the TRC, the mandate assigned to the TRC to balance truth-finding with promoting reconciliation made a great deal of sense. A wide variety of religious and secular thinkers emphasize that forgiveness and reconciliation require coming to terms with the past, not attempting to forget or repress it. Establishing a shared truth that documents the causes, nature, and extent of severe and gross human rights abuses and/or collective violence under antecedent regimes is a prerequisite for achieving accountability, meaningful reconciliation, and a foundation for a common future. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu stated in the foreword to the Commission's five-volume report, "Reconciliation is not about being cosy; it is not about pretending that things were other than they were. Reconciliation based on falsehood, on not facing up to reality, is not true reconciliation and will not last."²²

But what seems appropriate in theory may not be feasible in practice. Truth commissions, including the TRC, function in situations where the legacy of conflict has resulted in deep social divisions and sharply conflicting and contested versions of the past. In such situations, it is difficult for any single body to succeed in establishing a shared truth or promoting reconciliation, let alone both. Moreover, the requirements of these two goals may be in conflict. While truth-finding and the formulation of a shared history likely are prerequisites for long-term nation-building, the process may not be conducive for promoting forgiveness and reconciliation, at least in the short term. At the least, the examination of gross human rights violations risks reopening deep wounds and thereby exacerbating societal divisions. Moreover, as the TRC experience showed, both the process of truth-finding and the conclusions drawn can be contentious and leave actors holding a wide range of perspectives deeply dissatisfied and thus potentially more divided. Conversely, the desire not to harm prospects for national rec-

conciliation may influence the manner in which a truth commission accumulates evidence and shapes its findings.

The only other predecessor truth commission with the twin objectives of establishing truth and working toward reconciliation was the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation. The Chilean Commission framed its task as “a truth for reconciliation.”²³ While its focus was on investigating and determining the truth, it understood that this truth had a clear and specific purpose: “to work toward the reconciliation of all Chileans.” To that end, the Commission sought the advice of a broad range of groups of victims’ relatives, human rights agencies, professional associations, and political parties regarding how the Commission could best reach the truth and thereby aid national reconciliation.²⁴

In contrast, the TRC Commissioners understood their mandate as pursuing both truth and reconciliation. To do so successfully at the least would have required a clear conception of each task and a sense of how they interrelate. However, the TRC did not have consensus on either the nature of the reconciliation it was mandated to pursue or the relationship between truth-finding and reconciliation.²⁵ As the TRC report notes, “The overarching task assigned to the Commission by Parliament was the promotion of national unity and reconciliation. Debates within and outside the Commission demonstrated that the interpretation of this concept was highly contested.”²⁶ Complicating the task of the TRC, reconciliation was not well defined in the National Unity and Reconciliation Act of July 1995, which established the body, and thus it was not clear what the mandate entailed. Understandably, the TRC’s leadership, both Commissioners and senior staff, had problems deciding how to proceed with this obligation. Moreover, the TRC was inclined to focus on other things, particularly its public hearings and amnesty process. It was not until much later in the TRC’s life that the Commissioners turned their attention to the subject of reconciliation.

Piet Meiring, who served as a member of the Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee of the TRC, indicates in his interview in this volume that about halfway through the life of the TRC “a long, drawn out argument” developed among the Commissioners over the nature of reconciliation, its needs, and what the TRC should do. He alludes to the many debates among them and to their failure to resolve the very significant discrepancies in their perspectives. These ranged from the politico-judicial or legal minimalist position of the lawyers and politicians that equated reconciliation with the end of overt conflict to those of Archbishop Tutu and some of the other clergy

and committed Christians in prominent positions who insisted on a religious approach to reconciliation.

The TRC never resolved differences in viewpoints on reconciliation. As a result, Commissioners and staff often pursued very different approaches to reconciliation. Depending on who was taking the initiative, the public interface and sections of the final report of the Commission sometimes conveyed religious perspectives and linked reconciliation with interpersonal forgiveness. At other times the TRC reflected a more political and judicial concept of reconciliation. The dominant role of Archbishop Tutu meant, though, that the religious understanding of reconciliation often trumped other views.

The TRC also had a “particular difficulty of understanding the meaning of unity and reconciliation at a national level.”²⁷ During its life, the TRC slid between a variety of approaches, variously prioritizing reconciliation between political parties (the African National Congress vis-à-vis the National Party), reconciliation between races (blacks and whites), and reconciliation between victims as a group and the structures of the state.²⁸ Much of the time, though, the TRC individualized issues of reconciliation, just as it individualized its interpretation of responsibility for violence and abuses, and thus neglected the national and community dimensions. Both the TRC process and the final report focused on reconciliation between victims and perpetrators, interpreting it as little more than forgiveness, rather than the more complex and ultimately significant topic of national or political reconciliation. The section on reconciliation in volume five of the TRC report devotes most of its space to anecdotes recounting specific instances of reconciliation between victims/survivors and perpetrators.

Quite ironically, in view of the religious imagery and public witness of the Commission, the final volume of the TRC report alludes to the “potentially dangerous confusion between a religious, indeed Christian understanding of reconciliation, more typically applied to interpersonal relationships, and the more limited notions of reconciliation applicable to a democratic society.”²⁹ It then goes on to observe that the model of confession, repentance, and forgiveness is central to religion but raises questions about its applicability and relevance to South Africa’s situation.³⁰