

## **“FOR THE TYRANT SHALL BE NO MORE”**

### **Reflections on and Lessons from “The Arab Spring” in North Africa, the Middle East and the Civil Rights and Anti-Apartheid Struggles<sup>1</sup>**

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#### **Singing songs of freedom**

As I, like millions others I suppose, sat glued to the television over the past months watching events unfold in North Africa and the Middle East, my thoughts constantly returned to two biblical texts, one from the prophet Isaiah and the other from the Gospel of Luke. Isaiah prophesies, “[In a very little while...] the meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord... for the tyrant shall be no more” (Is. 29:20), and Jesus says, “I have seen Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (Lk. 10:18)

I have preached from these texts during our own liberation struggle in the most difficult of times, while oppression and violence were our daily bread, while our people were bleeding and dying in the streets, while our country was becoming less and less our mother and more and more our grave. Then I started thinking about the similarities and differences with our struggles: the dawn of the knowledge that the time has come; the rise of dignity that could no longer be denied. I saw the ancient, grim resolve of Pharaohs of all times not to let the people go; the unstoppable determination of a people to be free. I saw the millions from Tunisia to Egypt to Syria and Yemen, from Jordan to Bahrain and Libya, wave after wave of human hunger and thirst after justice and righteousness, with every step and every day carving renewed hope out of utter despair. I saw strength emerging from a well that yesterday and the day before was dry and unyielding: “We had given up on ourselves”, said a young man from Tripoli on television, “until last week”. I saw the determined, yet fragile, militant, non-violent resistance despite unremitting pressure and almost unbearable provocation, and the contagiousness of courage. I saw the faces of the women, men and young people standing up for freedom and justice; and I saw the children on the shoulders of their parents, the wondrous hope of a nation displayed in gap-tooth smiles and waving little hands.

More and more I understood the connections: Ghandi in South Africa and India and the non-violent resistance movement of the 1940s; Albert Luthuli and the Defiance Campaign in South Africa in the 1950s and Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights struggle in the United States

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during that same period.

Jesus of Nazareth and Mohandas Ghandi inspire Albert Luthuli and Martin Luther King; they in turn inspire a whole generation of freedom fighters in South Africa and the US and the course of history is fundamentally and irrevocably changed.

But it goes further. When the Russian tanks rolled over the Polish border and entered the city of Prague in 1968 with orders to stop the surge towards change in Poland, they were met by jubilant young people handing out flowers and singing "We shall overcome". Instead of talking of the expected massacre, we would now speak of the "The Prague Spring". When the Berlin Wall fell at last in 1989, we saw crowds with tears streaming down their cheeks, and they were singing "We shall overcome". When the students in Tiannenmen Square faced the soldiers and the guns and a fearful Chinese government, they were singing "We shall overcome". Right through the struggle in South Africa we were held aloft and carried by freedom songs. At our rallies and marches, prayers services and funerals we sang "Senzenina", which means, "What have we done?" And we sang "Tuma mina, tuma mina, tuma mina, Nkosi Yam", which means "Send me, Lord". Even if I am afraid, send me Lord. Even if I have to go to prison and face torture, send me Lord. Even if I have to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, send me Lord. Send *me*, Lord. And we sang, "Ukanamandla, uSatani!": "it is broken, it is broken, the power of Satan is broken, hallelujah!" The students sang it as they faced police and dogs and tear gas and guns; as they were detained, taken to prisons to stay for God knows how long, not knowing whether they will ever come out alive. But it was certain, *ukanamandla uSatani!* – it is broken, that power. And we also sang, "We shall overcome".

Let me pause here to ask a question: have you ever thought, have you ever realised what a gift you have been to us, and yes, to the world?

I know that such a statement is most paradoxical, for many even impossible. I am not ignorant of history and I am not insensitive to the experiences of our peoples. The America we in the developing world have come to know is the America of the dreaded empire, the America that made all the wrong choices the consequences of which we had to bear in order to realise the dream of American imperialism.<sup>3</sup> This America had taken sides with the worst dictators from South and Central America to Asia and Africa and the Middle East. You have overthrown our rightfully elected governments and trodden with scorn on the will of our peoples. You have trained the security forces of your dictator puppets in the dark

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<sup>3</sup> David Griffin rehearses the "story of American imperialism" that is "neither accidental nor benign" – a story that begins with the extermination of the Native Americans through the "theft of what is now the American South West from Mexico" to American imperial acts throughout recent history until today. "It is a very long story", cf. David Ray Griffin, John B Cobb Jr., Richard A Falk and Catherine Keller, 2006: *The American Empire and the Commonwealth of God – A political, economic religious statement*, Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox Press.

arts of torture and supplied their armies and police with money and weapons. You have robbed us of our choices and your guns and tanks, your fighter jets, cluster bombs and drones have killed our children and our dreams. You have sacrificed our hopes on the altar of greed and rapaciousness and you have spat upon our aspirations and our ideals. And we could not understand how you could sing "America, the Beautiful".

But I have come to know the other America: the America of the slave revolts and the abolition movement and the civil rights struggle. The America of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman; the America of WEB DuBois and Frederick Douglas and Fannie Lou Hamer; of Rosa Parks, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.

I am talking about the America who rose above and against slavery and lynching and Jim Crow; the America who defeated fear, turned humiliation into dignity, stood up and marched for justice and freedom. I am speaking of the America who taught us to rise above our fears, to believe in freedom and to sing, "And before I'll be a slave I'll be buried in my grave", and "Steal Away to Jesus", and "He has promised never, no, never, never to leave me alone", and "We shall overcome".

That is the America which saw the world not through the eyes of the powerful and privileged, not through the eyes of the empire, but through the eyes of the victims of empire, of those who suffer and bleed; the despised, the dispossessed and the vanquished. The America who looked at the world not from lofty thrones within gilded and guarded palaces, nor through the cross hairs of an insatiable imperialism, but from the boughs of the lynching tree and from the bottom of the well. And because they looked through *those* eyes, they saw what God saw, and because they saw what God saw, they could stand where God stands and is always to be found: on the side of the poor and the destitute and the wronged, the vulnerable and the excluded and the wounded. Because they saw with those eyes, they could walk not by sight but by faith. This is the America of the right choices, who made common cause with the wretched of the earth.

Do you understand the gift?

And this is the America that needs to find itself again.

### **The unexpected ways of God**

I was looking at the unfolding events in the Middle East and North Africa and I could not help but think how wonderfully unexpected the ways of God are. First of all, here was Gandhi, sowing the seeds in India, a tree grows in South Africa and the United States, and in the Middle East and North Africa they are today harvesting the fruits. There is, I believe, an unbreakable connection between what happened in India, South Africa and the United States, Prague, Berlin, Tiannenmen Square and the Middle

East and North Africa today. History is not just a trash bag full of random coincidences. It is a process of interdependent human life and experiences in which we learn from one another – our mistakes, our bewilderments as well as our inspirations. I have no doubt that the people in Tahrir Square, in Yemen and on the streets of Libya have learned from history made by the courageous masses in Delhi, India, in Soweto and Cape Town, and in Selma, Alabama and Memphis, Tennessee.

Second, experts keep on telling us how totally unexpected the events in the Middle East and North Africa are, and perhaps in a sense they are right, seen from one point of view. After all, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak was in power for thirty years; Yemen's Ali Abdullah Saleh for over thirty years as well; Muammar Gaddafi has ruled Libya for forty-one years and in Syria the "emergency laws" which guarantee total dictatorship and total control of the population by a minority have been in place since 1963. But they are only "totally unexpected" to those who think that tyranny can last forever, that guns and fear can forever hold a people captive, that human aspirations crumble to dust and dreams of freedom wither and die as bodies are buried. But the oppressed have always known that tyranny is not to be borne without protest and resistance. We have also always known that it is not the will of God for the people of God's heart. "Tyranny", the reformer John Calvin writes, "is a violation of human dignity...tyrants are hated by the whole world [for it is a] perversion of order; its overthrow can thus be called a *restitutio*, (restitution). God himself cannot endure tyrants and God listens in empathy to the secret groans of those who live under them".<sup>4</sup>

Why would it be "totally unexpected" for people who had suffered under oppression for centuries, to decide that enough is enough? That the time for freedom had come, and that they, like others, were entitled, as children of God, to dignity and worthiness and peace? Only those who were living lives of privileged contentment, protected by violence and systemic injustice, lulled to sleep by a false sense of security and the arrogance of power, would deem the uprisings "unexpected". They did not expect the oppressed to understand the nature of their oppression, even less the ability of the oppressed to challenge and resist that oppression. They underestimated the power of hope and the longing for freedom.

No, the events we are witnessing are not unexpected. In India the British thought they had it all under control – the Raj was safe, compliant and profitable. In the United States the Ku Klux Klan never thought that fear could be challenged and overcome; in South Africa the apartheid regime was convinced that their claim on God's approval guaranteed their right to rule.

But Isaiah says that it is only short while, "and the tyrant shall be no more"; and Jesus has seen Satan fall "like lightning from heaven".

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<sup>4</sup> Commentary on Matthew 2:9

Endlessly we have been told that Islam is a religion hopelessly mired in "pre-modernity", in a culture incapable of responding to a new age, inherently alien to freedom and genuine democracy so that the tensions between the West and the Arab world is in fact a "clash of civilizations",<sup>5</sup> where the West, (a geographical direction and location), and Islam, (a religion) are being metaphorised as homogenous cultural units. As Charles Amjad-Ali correctly pointed out,

"A geographical designation and a religion are thus made to serve similar purposes are drawn against each other. Thus the West is deprived of all its religious elements and is viewed exclusively in cultural terms, and the Islamic world is reduced to an all-encompassing, all-consuming, exclusively religious culture."<sup>6</sup>

That religion, Islam, is portrayed as violent, intolerant and backward. All Muslims through vilification and demonization, become fundamentalists and terrorists, while the west is defined as synonymous with goodness who are engaged in the democratization of these "barbarians". It is a battle between "globalists", those who understand the workings of the modern world, and "tribalists", those who defend isolationist, xenophobic fundamentalism.<sup>7</sup>

To be sure, right through these momentous events there have been any number of clerics in Arab countries who have been repeating the mantra, pleading for the meek acceptance and submissiveness that until now have guaranteed despotic rule. But that freedom and democracy are exactly what the people in one country after another are demanding – and that in the name of Islam. Unforgettable is the voice a young man in Yemen, responding to the call of some clergy to leave the streets, return to their homes and submit once again to authority of the president, the "father of the nation": "I am a Muslim. I submit to Allah alone". They, like my friend and Islamic theologian Farid Esack, have found in the Qur'an what we Christians have found in the Bible: a message of hope and liberation and of power.<sup>8</sup>

And it was an impressive sight indeed: all those hundreds and thousands of people, in and despite the presence of the soldiers in their tanks and with their guns, falling to their knees at the appointed prayer time, witnessing that when they fall before Allah they do not have to bow down to any human person, no matter how powerful they deem themselves to

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Samuel P Huntington, 1996, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Simon and Schuster.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Amjad-Ali, 2006, *Islamophobia or Restorative Justice, Tearing the Veils of Ignorance*, Johannesburg: Ditshwanelo CAR'AS, 3, 4

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Thomas Friedman, 2000, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization*, New York: Anchor Books; see also Benjamin Barber, 1996, *Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism are Reshaping the World*, New York: Ballantine Books.

<sup>8</sup> See Farid Esack, *Our'an, Liberation and Pluralism, An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity Against Oppression*, Oxford: Oneworld Publishers, 2000.

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### **Libya and the agony of difficult decisions**

There are things that we, from our own struggles, immediately recognise.

The determination to be free;

The sense of burning urgency, for a time table set by themselves, not by the powers that be or the outside world which has refused to hear their cries for so long. This is a time table they are following resolutely at their own, sometimes bafflingly rapid pace – the outside world has to play catch-up;

The understanding that this is a struggle and the willingness to make the sacrifices called for;

The understanding of the necessity of global realities and hence of international solidarity and intervention, but on their terms;

The way in which the struggle breaks down barriers. Islam is, in many if those countries a very traditional religion, embedded in a very traditional and conservative culture. Yet we see men and women, young and old, rich and poor together raising their voices for the same demands for fundamental change. Remarkable, as well as encouraging also it is to see how often women emerge as leaders, as spokespersons of the struggle. This has to have consequences for the way in which society is ordered after the revolution, if the women remain vigilant; for in these matters there are no guarantees that these gains will be built upon, as we have repeatedly experienced;

The persistence of disciplined non-violence despite the severest provocation, at least until Libya, but amazingly still held onto in places like Syria;

The humbling and deeply moving display of courage in the face of ruthless suppression and wanton violence, and the remarkable cohesion despite the lack of visible, identifiable leadership, displaying not only the truth that courage is contagious, but also what Steve Biko called “the righteousness of our strength”.<sup>9</sup>

The role of a politically and socially conscious militant youth, determined to throw off the shackles of the past, determined not to be mollified by deceitful promises and meaningless tinkering with systems of oppression, determined on meaningful change, while using means they know best, (in this instance the power of social media and networking for example) thereby shifting the terrain of struggle and changing the rules of

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<sup>9</sup> Steve Biko, (1978) 1996, *I Write What I Like, A selection of his writings*, Johannesburg: Raven Press, 134.

engagement with the oppressor.<sup>10</sup>

I do not know what lies ahead for the peoples of the Middle East and North Africa, but I do know that every dictator is quacking in their boots right now. But we also know that once a people are determined to get their freedom that urge will prove unstoppable. But we also know, from experience, the dangers, temptations and pitfalls of revolutionary struggle, and the human frailties that make us vulnerable.

So we need to talk about the elephant in the room. What about Libya?

From where I was watching in South Africa, we knew that Libya would see tragedy. Knowing Colonel Ghaddafi, we did not expect him to respond reasonably. We know from experience that power is never surrendered voluntarily. From the playing-for-time tricks to the false promises and the meaningless reforms being offered in an attempt to appease the international community and deceive or co-opt some of the people, we have seen it all before. Nothing was new. Not new as well, although fearsome, was the inevitable wave of violence meant to break the back of the resistance, reviving old fears and reminding the people of what those in power are capable of. Muammar Gaddhaffi was going to fall back on the most effective strategy he knows, namely violent suppression of the revolt in hopes of violent retaliation. The only question was how the people would respond; whether the discipline of the first weeks would last; whether there were enough spiritual resources to make them believe that the gentle power of having right on their side are enough to resist, withstand, endure and overcome. We now have an answer to that question.

We also knew that these situations are all uniquely complex, with dynamics uniquely their own, arising from contexts not always comparable with our own historical situations, or even with the contemporary situations elsewhere in the Arab world. There is no such thing as one size fits all, and as much as we support them, Amilcar Cabral of Guinea was right: the rice has to be cooked in one's own pot. Final decisions would have to be made by the Libyan people themselves, and being human, they will make mistakes, such as the one I believe they made when they decided to respond violently to the violence of Gaddhaffi.

No one wanted military intervention from outside and in this we followed the lead of the Libyan people. Hence I believe that UN Security Council resolution 1973 was absolutely the right stance to take. As it is, this resolution was only possible after changing the rules of the UN on intervention so jealously guarded by the great powers who insisted on absolute sovereignty within their own territory, including the right to kill

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<sup>10</sup> While during the ant-apartheid struggle it was relatively easy for the apartheid regime to clamp down on information by placing a blanket ban on the media and by simply detaining journalists, the onset of social media and the efficacies of their use have introduced entirely different realities and possibilities which were used to the full by the technically-adept youth of the Middle East.

whoever opposed their rule. The genocide in Rwanda and the realisation of the disastrous role played by the UN in those events as well as massacres in other places also brought a sense of urgency as well as realism to the UN. Now, armed with the possibility to intervene in order to execute its "responsibility to protect" vulnerable people from mass killing by their own government, the "sovereignty" principle so badly abused by myriad dictators over the years, could be overcome. In 2005 the African Union included the concept in its founding charter and enabled the reluctance of the great powers in the UN over this matter to be broken.<sup>11</sup>

It was always going to be problematic once that resolution was going to be implemented, and in such fluid situations there were always going to be unforeseen and unwanted consequences and uncertainties. Yet the first and fundamental rule here is always to try to listen closely to the voice of the people themselves and try to respond to what they thought was necessary. In this regard we need to make what I consider to be an important point. Before the Libyan people became the violent revolutionaries they are now, they had been, for over forty years, the victims of the Ghaddafi regime, and before that of a regime that was as oppressive as any they had ever known. While Ghaddafi claims to be the voice of Libya – a voice that, for the most shameful of reasons, has found sympathetic ears in the West and in Africa for more than forty years – the real voice of Libya is the voice of the victims. And it is in that voice that the voice of God, calling us to the undoing of injustice and the bringing of justice, is to be heard: *vox victimarum, vox Dei*. The voice of the victims is the voice of God. It is a voice that reminds the world of its complicity and of its obligations toward compassionate justice, and of the right of Libya's people to be free.

Our own experiences in South Africa have taught us to carefully analyse every situation in which we found ourselves, to understand historical developments as well as human frailties and the dynamics of power. So even though I would always plead and work for non-violent solutions to problems, I thought I should try to understand the causes of the violence at last chosen by the liberation movements in my country, and I could see with my own eyes the deliberate provocations a violent, illegitimate regime bent on self-preservation could present, and then to address those causes in order to make alternatives to violence possible and viable.

I too would have chosen for peaceful ways to solve the situation in Libya: diplomatic means, non-violent means of pressure such as the targeted sanctions that are possible today which we, in our struggle did not know of. And it is deeply regretful that those possibilities were not timeously explored in Libya. But by the time the international community woke up to the reality of Libya, it was much too late, and as always, the West's own, and indeed Africa's complicity in the oppression of the people of Libya in their support for, and cooperation with Ghaddafi, has made them fatally slow to react with speed and integrity.

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<sup>11</sup> See Gwynne Dyer, "Today Libya, Tomorrow Syria?", *The Free State Times*, March 25-31, 2011.

We must take serious note of the objections that have since arisen against the military intervention of the Western and Arab allies in Libya, in fulfilment of Resolution 1973. As I understand it, there are at least seven such objections.

1. People are afraid of a repetition of the catastrophic events in Iraq and Afghanistan.
2. The motives of the United States and its allies may not be as pure as they are pretending.
3. The interests of the big oil conglomerates and other corporations may outweigh the interests of the people of Libya.
4. We may, more deliberately than many might realise, be heading for a situation of regime change with the aim of the West gaining economic control over Libya's oil riches rather than the lofty goal of supporting the Libyan people in their struggle for freedom, including the freedom to make their own choices and evolve their own form of democracy.
5. The plan the allies have concocted is too vague and open: what is to happen after the disappearance of Gadhaffi which is, perhaps the wished-for outcome despite the denials?
6. There are simply too many unforeseen consequences, such as for instance civilian deaths, and there are no guarantees that this will not become a long, drawn-out war.
7. There is too much hypocrisy and double standards for this to end well. What about Syria? Why does the West respond one way to Libya and completely differently to Jordan, Bahrain and most of all Saudi Arabia?

For the people of the United States there are of course other reasons as well, and they are indeed deeply worrying. This we must respect. The US is already mired in global warfare, from Iraq to Afghanistan to Pakistan. Already these wars, in the face of a growing budget deficit, a widening chasm between rich and poor and already indefensible military expenditure in the face of the economic situation and screaming needs at home, are not justifiable. Another war in Libya, however well-intended, cannot be welcome. Besides, it must be of deep concern that some of those who were the most enthusiastic supporters of the deeply immoral invasion of Iraq in 2003, now, on ostensibly moral grounds, are calling for action against Ghaddaffi. The spectre of oil and profits might once again be looming large here.

Again, we must not ignore any of this or the frustratingly complex nature of the situation in taking all these issues into account.

It must be clear that in the Libyan situation international solidarity and intervention are of the greatest necessity. We from South Africa

have understood early on that if it were not for international solidarity, apartheid would not have been overcome as soon as we have seen. It is for this reason that in 1962 Albert Luthuli made common cause with Martin Luther King Jr. to call upon the international community to join together in widespread action to isolate the apartheid regime in their *Appeal for Action against Apartheid*.<sup>12</sup>

If it were at all still possible to intervene with peaceful means, it would have been vastly preferable. It is of course easy to judge the people of Libya: why did they not maintain the non-violence stance as it happened in Egypt, for example? But then, Egypt is not Libya and Ghaddafi is a tyrant of a different hue. There was no one in Libya who could, or had the time to train people in non-violent resistance as was possible in the United States for example. Ghaddafi pushed his people much sooner into violent confrontations and once the first counter-violent responses came, it would prove to be all the justification he needed to massacre his own people. If the West had been more sensitive to situations of injustice and oppression much earlier, if it had not been so seduced by greed, Ghaddafi would not have been so secure. As it is, Africa is not blameless either. As late as December 2010 South Africa had been selling weapons to Muammar Ghaddafi, those same weapons he was now turning on his own people. And the African Union, permeated as it is by the questionable political ethics and human rights records of more than a few dictators of long standing amongst its own ranks, was rendered paralysed in the face of these latest atrocities. But the African Union had been just as helpless in the face of the holocaust in Rwanda, the increasingly oppressive situation in Zimbabwe, civil war in Uganda, the Gambia and Liberia, and in the Ivory Coast.

Perhaps the parable of the Good Samaritan might be useful here. (Lk. 10:25-37) We are used to reading the story taking valuable lessons from the example of the Samaritan finding the wounded and broken body on the Jericho road and tending to him. We almost always fail to ask the question J. Cardonel forced us to ask years ago: what would have happened, what *should* have happened if the Samaritan had come upon the scene whilst the robbers were attacking their victim? To problematise the issue even more, Cardonel raises the question of the meaning of neighbourly love in this context. What here is the true act of love for the neighbour? Should he have waited until they were done in order for him to perform his deed of love? Or would the deed of love have been to intervene and stop the robbers from causing harm to their victim?<sup>13</sup> Cardonel argues that true love of neighbour is not just a healing love, but a combatant love, which needs to be transformed into an inventive, prophetic, pioneering, creative love. In other words, a love not afraid to engage the situation as one finds it, a love that seeks to understand

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Scott Couper, 2010, *Albert Luthuli, Bound by Faith*, Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 172-173.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. JGB Jansen, 1974, *De Barmhartige Samaritaan in Rovershande*, Apeldoorn: Semper Agendo, 223-224.

the causes of suffering and seeks to engage those causes, not just their consequences.

These are the deeply troubling issues Dietrich Bonhoeffer struggled while grappling with the responsibility of the church regarding “the Jewish Question”, and which later became crucial in his painful decision to participate in the conspiracy against Hitler: do we wait to help the victims who have come under the wheels, or do we grab the steering wheel and wrest it from the hands of the wrongdoer?

There are thus three possibilities for action the church can take vis-à-vis the state: *first*, (as we have said), questioning the state as to the legitimate state character of its actions, that is, making the state responsible for what it does. *Second* is service to the victims of the state’s actions. The church has an unconditional obligation towards the victims of any societal order, even if they do not belong to the Christian community. ‘Let us work for the good of all’....The church may under no circumstances neglect either of these duties. The *third* possibility is not just to bind up the wounds of the victims beneath the wheel, but to seize the wheel itself. <sup>14</sup> (Original emphasis)

These are precisely the difficult issues Christians should take seriously when considering these matters. And it is always good to remember that Bonhoeffer was brought to this action because the world had miserably failed those who called for peaceful intervention long before Hitler made war “the only option left”. But that call for peaceful intervention in the beginning was not to stop war; it was to prevent war. If the world had shown moral outrage at the earliest Nazi actions towards the Jews, if the mere raising of “the Jewish question” had been enough, war would not have been necessary.

The argument that the West is not to be trusted is a shared sentiment across the world. Experience has taught us painful lessons. It is also true that for the West war is an immensely profitable thing – the disasters that “disaster capitalism” profits from are not always caused by nature; they are designed.<sup>15</sup> But I must say this: Americans must learn to hold their own government accountable. If you don’t, there is something deeply wrong with your democracy and something deeply wrong with you. The hopes and lives of the people in Libya cannot be sacrificed on the altar of Americans’ unwillingness to embrace their democratic responsibilities, distrust of their government in international affairs or to American moral indignation at their own government’s lack of transparency or moral responsibility; or, for that matter, their government’s persistent imperial

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<sup>14</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Geffry B Kelley (ed.) 1996- Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 12, II/13. See for an excellent contextual discussion, Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, 2010, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945, Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance*, London: T&T Clarke International, 126; 313.

<sup>15</sup> See Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*; Noam Chomsky, 1999, *The New Military Humanism, Lessons from Kosovo*, London: Pluto Press.

designs upon the rest of the world. It may be too late for the people of Libya, but certainly not for the people of Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Arab world where people are crying out for freedom and justice.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Germany, like Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela in South Africa, faced the kind of situation that the people of Libya are facing now. It is unquestionably hard and fraught with ambiguity. Bonhoeffer came to the conclusion that he had no other option but to join the conspiracy against Hitler. But he entered it, much as I discovered Oliver Tambo did, not with triumphalist self-justification, but with trepidation and deep awareness of the fact that by doing this he took upon himself responsibility as well as guilt.<sup>16</sup> But in all honesty, in that situation, he had no choices left. Personally I take the stand of Albert Luthuli who himself could not concede to violence, mourned the decision, but understood and agonised with the inevitability of it caused by the intransigence of the apartheid regime and hence called Mandela and the others "brave and just men"<sup>17</sup>, but as a result of that decided to determinedly seek a different way should the opportunity arise.

But taking all of the aforesaid into account, for me one truth still remains. I have what I believe to be a deep commitment to non-violence. I have tried to make it my philosophy of life for as long as I can remember. I am, in thinking of my Reformational roots in this regard, more a child of Erasmus of Rotterdam than of Martin Luther and John Calvin. I am spiritual child, more of Mohandas Gandhi, Albert Luthuli and Martin Luther King than of Franz Fanon and Che Guevara. I am much more uplifted by the song of Hannah (2 Sam. 1) than by the song of Deborah (Judges 5); much less attracted by the war-like militancy of King David and infinitely more by the revolutionary non-conformism of Jesus of Nazareth; much less drawn to the throne-and-altar religiosity of Western Christendom and much more to the non-violent resistance of the early Christian church.

I have learnt from Jesus, Gandhi, King and Luthuli; I have seen too much horror caused by violence and counter-violence in South Africa during our own struggle, and since then in Europe, Africa and Asia. I do not believe that violence in the long run can offer any lasting solutions. Violence destroys the chances for peace and reconciliation in the final destruction of the other. It casts the other in the mould of an unchangeable, incontrovertible enemy. It systematises as well as personalises enmity. After the violent blow is struck there are no more options left and the last word is already drowned in blood. Violence takes on a life of its own, feeds on ancient, base human emotions far stronger than we seem to realise, releases a relentless, deadly dynamic we are

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Christine Schliesser, 2006, *Everyone Who Acts Responsibly Becomes Guilty, The Concept of Accepting Guilt in Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reconstruction and Critical Assessment*, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner Verlag. See also Allan Boesak, 2009, *Running with Horses, Reflections of an Accidental Politician*, Cape Town: JoHo! Publications, 89-92.

<sup>17</sup> Couper, *Albert Luthuli*, 174-179.

not able, or prone to stop. It sweeps reason and better judgement aside as in almost ritualistic helplessness not acknowledgeable to ourselves as well as to others, but too often deny: that in our creaturely, relational existence as well as in our common humanity we are not meant to be reduced to mere instruments of destruction; that we are created to affirm, choose and celebrate life rather than death. Non-violence affirms the humble acknowledgement of the possibility that we might be wrong, that the other is not just pure evil. It opens the way for the choosing of another path, to the unbentification of the other, because it longs for the affirmation of humanity in the humanity of the other. Violence, in its irreversibility, is a reach too far for mere mortals such as we are. Non-violence acknowledges the existence of holy ground, such as the taking of the life of another. We dare not tread upon that ground. Non-violence is quite simply the way of Jesus Christ.<sup>18</sup>

History does not only teach us the human proclivity towards war and violence, it also teaches us the utter futility of it all. Whichever way we look at it, the consequences of war always outweigh whatever reasons there might have been to start it. The wars the United States have mired itself in the Middle East can only be described as utterly disastrous, the consequences, economically and morally, will always be devastating, and increasingly more so for the people of the United States than for those they are making their victims.<sup>19</sup> Even now it is clear that whatever difficulties they may be facing, the people of Egypt have a more secure future than the people of Libya whose chose violent response to Gaddhaffi's violent oppression. Despite the conventional wisdom, the non-violent revolution offers a sounder foundation for the future and for a reconciled community. The people of the Middle East and North Africa would do well to take to heart the age-old wisdom of Erasmus of Rotterdam that it is always better to seek a glory not steeped in blood or linked with the misfortune of another, nor brings us a victor "who weeps over a victory bought too dearly".<sup>20</sup>

## **The dangers that lie ahead**

We must, however, raise one more question: are there dangers ahead, and what might those be? Of course there are, and I can discern at least the following:

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<sup>18</sup> See Allan Boesak, 2010, "The Glory Which Is Not Steeped In Blood", *Globalisation II: Global Crisis, Global Challenge, Global Faith, An ongoing response to the Accra Confession*, Allan Boesak and Len Hansen (Eds.), Beyers Naudè Centre Series on Public Theology, Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 133-147.

<sup>19</sup> See for example, Chalmers Johnson, 2000, *Blowback: The Costs and consequences of American Empire*, London: Little, Brown and Company; T Walter Herbert, 2009, *faith-Based War, From 9/11 to Catastrophic Success in Iraq*, London, Oakvile: Equinox Publishing.

<sup>20</sup> See Allan Boesak, "The Glory Which is not Steeped in Blood", *Global Crisis, Global Challenge, Global Faith*, 13-147.

1. The danger that the West might indeed have hidden agendas, as it did with the invasion of Iraq, cannot be underestimated.<sup>21</sup>
2. Conservative or extremist Islamist groups with a distorted understanding and interpretation of the Qur'an might exploit a fluid and uncertain situation. The Muslim Brotherhood, the only organised opposition in Egypt, has disavowed violence and deliberately underplayed its role in countries like Egypt and Yemen. But they are not the only entities out there with agendas not always in accordance with the hopes and dreams of the revolutionary generation we now see on the streets. Unless credible, cohesive progressive forces arise to replace the present tyrannies and conservative regimes in these countries the people may find themselves without real viable alternatives. To replace the tyrannies with repressive religious rule would not become this revolution. Experience teaches us that there is a vast difference between promises made by liberation movements before elections and what becomes actual policy once these movements claim political power even after democratic elections. It is absolutely vital that a credible, viable political power arises, with an alternative vision, appeal and the ability to deliver lest extremists of all sorts, or power elites that merely wish to continue the captivity to the West under another guise, step up to fill the void.
3. There is the great danger of an incomplete revolution. I would suggest three concerns here:
  - a. Perhaps we should make the point that although the resistance that has developed so rapidly in North Africa and the Middle East is popularly called revolutions, a term we also used in this piece, we need to be reminded that a revolution is a total reversal of power relations and economic and societal structures. In every case so far, with Libya the great exception, the military has, at one stage or another, decided to "take the side of the revolution", and has in fact taken over power for an indefinite period. We have not seen that total reversal of power and even though the neutral stance the military has taken in the midst of the confrontation with security forces in Egypt for example has

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<sup>21</sup> Secret memoranda obtained through the Freedom of Information Act in Britain, show secret meetings between ministers in the Blair Cabinet and senior oil executives discussing how British oil companies could benefit from the invasion of Iraq. These are "are at odds with the public denials of self-interest from oil companies and Western governments at the time". Paul Bignell, "Secret memos expose link between oil firms and invasion of Iraq", *The Independent*, 19 April, 2011. See also especially Naomi Klein's careful and devastating analysis of the US invasion of Iraq, its ideological and economic motivations and their effects: Naomi Klein, 2007, *The Shock Doctrine, The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, New York: Metropolitan Books, Part VI, "Iraq, Full Circle Overshock", 325-382.

been decisive for the continuation of pressure on Hosni Mubarak, it is not at all clear what this development might mean. It is certain that the military cannot guarantee democracy, and in Egypt, the arrest and conviction by military tribunal of Mikal Nabil, the blogger who criticised the military and continues to call for a genuine, participatory democracy in Egypt, is not a good sign.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See *San Francisco Chronicle*, 17 April 2011.

- b. All these dictatorships survived because of at least two factors: one is the support of the military in their own countries, with again Libya being the exception where Colonel Gadhaffi concentrated much more on the building up and loyalty of his private militia than on the army. The second factor is that the dictatorships were deeply in cahoots with the West – its governments and military-industrial complexes and its transnational corporations upon which they depended strongly for their survival. Unless that situation is fundamentally changed the sustainability of democratic initiatives in these countries remains uncertain. These relationships with transnational corporations and Western governments meant the inexorable militarization of these societies with the concomitant distorted understanding of “security” and a disproportionate dependence on the armed forces. It also meant the eager and uncritical embrace of neo-liberal capitalism. With that came political and social injustices, systemic economic exploitation, endemic corruption and deeply disturbing social and economic inequalities.
- c. Despite the growing and encouraging role of women in these resistance movements, there should be firm resolve to translate this into permanent change regarding the role and status of women in these societies, guaranteed and protected by the Constitution. Without these guarantees all the gains made for women may well be forgotten, ignored or eroded by “greater” needs for a society emerging from social and political turmoil. But this is what we mean: If the rights and dignity of women are forgotten or deferred, if political change is not followed by social and economic change, if the present social and economic injustices are not overturned by the bringing of justice for the poor masses and the institutionalised effort toward the eradication of inequalities, one would be justified to speak of an incomplete revolution. In the long run, that would be more harmful to these societies than one might be inclined to think.

### **Where God is at work**

In 1961, that remarkable and influential lay theologian from India, M.M. Thomas created an intense ecumenical debate with his assertion that the hand of God should be seen in the revolutions and upheavals in Asia and

Africa at that time.<sup>23</sup> Taking the Lordship of Christ as central to Christian understanding, Thomas argued that Christ, as Lord of history, is at work in all nations of the world in spite of, and indeed through the ambiguous political, economic and social actions in any given country. These upheavals, insofar as they represent the search for what he called “the new humanity”, for freedom and a new dimension of humane life, fulfil the promises of Christ and must be seen as commensurate with the work of God in Christ.

This does not mean that these revolutions determine the work of God, but that God is in control of the revolutions of history; not that the divine power is subordinate to the revolutionary purposes of human beings, but that the “pressures of God are at work in them”. In other words, wherever where human beings rise above themselves, find the courage to work for genuine justice and humanity, God is at work, for that is the will of God for humanity. Then “the meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord”, says Isaiah, “and the neediest people shall exalt in the Holy One of Israel, for the tyrant shall be no more...”

Thomas makes two further points. First, we must not make the mistake of limiting the work of God’s Holy Spirit to the church. The church and the world both centre around Christ and history is not easily divided into “salvation history” and “secular history”. Christians can see, through faith, that the promises of Christ are fulfilled in revolutionary action. “Under the creative providence of God the revolutionary ferment in Africa and Asia has within it the promise of Christ for a fuller and richer life for Man (*sic*) and society” These promises include the new discovery of selfhood, freedom, dignity, new forms of society and the search for the meaning of life. Second, it is our faith in Christ, not in human endeavour that makes us discern the work of Christ in contemporary history.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes the same point but from a different perspective, namely that of suffering.<sup>24</sup> Discipleship, Bonhoeffer argues, is to “stand with God in the hour of God’s grieving – that is “to be caught up in the way of Christ”. It is not our religion that makes us believers and followers of Christ. Rather it is participation in the sufferings of God. We are called to share the suffering of God at the hands of a hostile world. That, Bonhoeffer maintains, is what distinguishes us, not from people of other faiths, but from pagans.

We are disciples of Christ when we stand by God in the hour of God’s grieving. The grieving of God, I argue in another context,<sup>25</sup> is not in the

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<sup>23</sup> M.M.Thomas, 1969, “Issues Concerning the Life and Work of the Church in a Revolutionary World”, in A.H. van den Heuvel (ed.), *Unity of Mankind*, Geneva: W.C.C., 89-98. For discussion of the controversy see also Allan Aubrey Boesak, (1977) 1984, *Farewell to Innocence, A Socio-Ethical Study of Black Theology and Black Power*, New York: Orbis Books, 81ff.

<sup>24</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, 8, 515-516.

<sup>25</sup> See Allan Boesak, “To Stand Where God Stands: Reflections on the Confession of Belhar after 25 Years”, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiae*, July, 2008, Vol. XXXIV, Nr. 1, 161.

pain of God for God, but in the pain of God in the suffering of humanity. That pain inflicted by people on people is inflicted upon God. When Bonhoeffer speaks of the pain of God, he does not look toward heaven, or even to the Cross, but around him, at the pain of people created in God's image. When we fail to stand with them in their suffering, we fail to stand with God. We do not ask whether that pain is the pain of Christian believers. *That* is the pagan in us who asks. We stand by them because their pain is the pain of the suffering and grieving God. That is discipleship, being "caught up in the way of Christ".

I believe Thomas and Bonhoeffer are right. The incredible human drama that is unfolding before our eyes is the work of God toward freedom and justice, dignity and meaningful life and the search for a new humanity, but also the suffering of the people under tyranny and in their struggle to free themselves from tyranny. Why should we see this in Martin Luther King but not in Malcolm X, in South Africa but not in North Africa, in the masses following Gandhi but not in the masses of the Arab lands? I am not asking that Christians first baptise those actions, Christianising them into acceptability as it were. I am arguing, like Bonhoeffer and Thomas that our faith in the Lordship of Christ allows us, no, *compels* us to recognise where God is at work in our history. But it also allows us to see where God stands, namely with the poor and oppressed, the destitute and the wronged, with those deprived of justice and dignity, who are now in the name of God are rising up to claim that God-given dignity; and hence to stand where God stands, alongside those who suffer for righteousness sake, see through their eyes and hope with their hearts. Our loyalty to Christ and our acknowledgement of the Lordship of Christ do not distance us from our brothers and sisters in North Africa and the Middle East. To the contrary, we recognise in their struggle for freedom and justice, in their courage and commitment, in their willingness to sacrifice even their very lives for what is right and just, the call of discipleship, and we support them in obedience to Christ.

Infected by their courage, we must this time make the right choices. We must trust the people to work out their destiny according to the promises of God. We must, in these ongoing struggles, choose for the good and gentle powers so that the powers of evil and injustice might be overcome.

Is this situation not fraught with danger? Will we not make mistakes in the decisions we have to make? When we were fighting apartheid and asked the ecumenical movement to take a strong stand against apartheid and the churches who provided that system with moral, biblical and theological justification, we called upon Bonhoeffer's plea to the ecumenical movement in 1933, at a time when there was much prevarication in the church on the question of Nazi Germany's racism and its challenge to the church in Germany and the world.<sup>26</sup> But we, like the ecumenical church then, have to make up our mind and are subject to error, like everything

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Allan Boesak, 1984, *Black and Reformed, Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition*, New York: Orbis Books, 110.

human, Bonhoeffer argued. "But to put off acting and taking a position simply because you are afraid of erring, while others," (in Bonhoeffer's case the Christians in Germany, and today our brothers and sisters in the Arab world) "have to reach infinitely difficult decisions daily, seems to me to almost go against love. To delay or fail to make decisions may be more sinful than to make wrong decisions out of faith and love... and in this case it is really now or never. 'Too late' means 'never'... Let us shake off our fear of this world – the cause of Christ is at stake; are we to be found sleeping?"<sup>27</sup>

So let us take courage and stand up for justice by standing with those who are fighting for justice in the Middle East and North Africa today, so that all of God's children, in America and South Africa, in Egypt and Yemen, in Syria and Saudi Arabia, in Bahrain and Jordan, in Lebanon, Palestine and Libya will be able to sing with us and proclaim as we proclaimed, "My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!"

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<sup>27</sup> Bonhoeffer in his letter to Henriod, Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 159.