

# The Violence of Monotheism

Janet Trisk

## ABSTRACT

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Drawing on the insights of Regina Schwartz and Laurel Schneider, both of whom contend that monotheism gives rise to violence, this article seeks to relate their understandings to the contextual theologies of liberation in South Africa, and whether such theologies might be said to have opened the possibility for violence. Concluding that this indeed may be the case some theological alternatives are suggested.

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... last year a property at his (Zim Ngqawana's) farm ... was broken into. Electrical cables were ripped out of sockets; toiletware was dug out and, more horribly, the legs of two of the institute's grand pianos were sawn off... "The souls of the people have been vandalized. What kind of criminal doesn't know the value of a piano?" he asked.<sup>1</sup>

This particular act of violence is only remarkable for the unusual identity of the victims – two pianos. It is almost trite to observe that we live daily with violence: murder, rape, racism, homophobic attacks, and destruction of property. What is perhaps less obvious or accepted is that religion lends its support to violence or at least provides conditions favourable for it. The haunting possibility that theology may in some way contribute to the vandalization of souls is the question I set out to consider here. What theological interpretations may we make of the violence in post-apartheid South Africa? In a country where the monotheistic religions play a significant part in most people's lives I wish to consider whether, as Regina Schwartz, Laurel Schneider and Grace Jantzen suggest, there might be a link between monotheism and violence. I shall also reflect on whether there might be an even more specific link between some forms of theologies of liberation and the violence of post-apartheid South Africa. I shall initially describe the thesis of Schwartz and Schneider that there is a connection between monotheism and violence. Next I shall consider whether and to what extent some contextual theologies, as they have been developed in Southern Africa, fall prey to the contagion of such violence. Finally, drawing on Schneider's "logic of multiplicity" I shall attempt to offer some theological alternatives; a way of thinking theologically that is not violent. The alternative includes a

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1 Percy Zvomuya, "Jazz mystic's quest for self cut short." in *Mail & Guardian* May 13 to 19 (2011) 9.

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call to foreground and celebrate art, beauty and creativity – in the words of Zim Ngqawana, to know the value of a piano.

### “What about the Canaanites”

Regina Schwartz, in the preface to *The Curse of Cain*<sup>2</sup> tells a story of how her book came to be written. Teaching a class on Exodus, she was extolling the inspiring nature of the Exodus narrative because it is a celebration of liberation, when she was interrupted by a student who asked “What about the Canaanites?”

<sup>3</sup> This question led her to consider the connections between collective identity, violence, covenant and land in the Hebrew Bible. She theorises that the Hebrew scriptures (she does not work with the New Testament) primarily tell stories of how Israel constructed its collective identity. This identity was forged against a background of “a cosmic shortage of prosperity.”<sup>4</sup> Everything is scarce – land, power, resources, and even the benevolence of God. The scarcity of resources leads to a violent struggle for these resources. These themes of scarcity and struggle are revealed for example in the myth of Cain and Abel where the scarce resource is God’s blessing. Similarly, in the story of Jacob and Esau the struggle is over the unique paternal blessing which can only fall on one son. Schwartz whimsically asks what would have happened if God had accepted both offerings and promoted co-operation rather than violent competition between Cain and Abel?<sup>5</sup> But scarcity and competition are the essence of the story and their story has become ours: “We are descendants of Cain because we too live in a world where some are cast out, a world in which whatever law of scarcity made that ancient story describe only one sacrifice as acceptable...still prevails to dictate the terms of a ferocious and fatal competition. Some lose.”<sup>6</sup> She notes that even today most of our ethical systems are based on this notion of scarcity: “The law assumes that we cannot have what we want, and so we will covet, steal, or even kill our neighbour to get it.”<sup>7</sup>

In a climate of scarcity, identity is formed by “an act of distinguishing and separating from others, of boundary making and... is the most frequent and fundamental act of violence we commit.”<sup>8</sup> We are us because we are not them. The first act in defining identity is against the other, those who are not us.

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2 Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*. (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press. 1997)

3 Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, ix.

4 Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, xi.

5 Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, 3.

6 Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, 3,4.

7 Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, 3,4.

8 Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, 5.

Thereafter, Israel is constantly enjoined to separate itself from the other nations, not to worship the gods of others, not to marry people from other tribes. Schwartz recognizes that Israel is not peculiar in this respect; nor does the Bible contain only this narrative. However, this dominant narrative has come to have enormous significance in western Christendom.<sup>9</sup> So for example the divine injunction to separate and observe difference is carried over into modern secular understandings of nationalism and the nation state. “We are ‘us’ because we are not ‘them.’”<sup>10</sup> I shall later suggest that this mentality also plays itself out in smaller groupings too and in the context of contextual theologies.

Linked to the idea of separation from the other are the twin narratives of being chosen (which in the Biblical stories, is demonstrated by the cutting of covenants) and the asserted right to land. The covenant, initiated by God, demonstrates God’s choosing of a particular group. The covenant is constitutive of the group. We are the chosen. The covenant also requires absolute allegiance to God, rejection of other gods, often including destruction of their holy places and in return, the chosen people are given the promised land (no matter that it was already occupied by others). Schwartz notes that the covenant is embedded in violence. Firstly, even the term contains violence – *karat berit* – literally “cutting a covenant”. But its mark is also violent. Schwartz points out that the Abrahamic covenant involves the cutting in half of the animals<sup>11</sup> and the Mosaic covenant involves not only the cutting of stone but also the sacrifice of bullocks.<sup>12</sup> The covenant also involves violent cutting in the flesh of males who are to be circumcised.<sup>13</sup> The people of the covenant are not only enjoined to violence towards “the other” but the covenant carries violent threats to the covenanted people too, if they fail to keep its terms. So for example, on Moses’ instructions 3000 people are killed because of their failure to keep the commandments of Yahweh.<sup>14</sup> The unfaithful are cut off, literally, from the life of the chosen people.

The covenant stories also do violence to women as they ratify masculinist patriarchy as Grace Jantzen points out.<sup>15</sup> The covenant with Abraham is signed in the circumcision of males. There is no way of signaling the women of the covenant people. In the covenant at Sinai, Moses instructs “the people” to prepare for the covenant ceremony by keeping away from women.<sup>16</sup> Clearly this is an instruction

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9 Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, 5,6.

10 Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, x.

11 Genesis 15.

12 Exodus 24.

13 Grace Jantzen, *Violence to Eternity* (eds. Jeremy Carrette and Morny Joy) (London & New York: Routledge, 2009), 73.

14 Exodus 32:26-28.

15 Jantzen *Violence to Eternity* 89, 92.

16 Exodus 19:15.

to men. They alone, are significant in making the covenant with Yahweh.

The making and enforcement of the covenant is entwined in violence. However, "Monotheism does not simply define a people as a covenanted community... It is in delineating a people another way, as those who belong to a land, that monotheism has left its deepest, most lasting, and undoubtedly its most troubling political legacy."<sup>17</sup> The chosen, the covenant people are blessed with the promise of land. This again leads to violence. In fact violence is sometimes commanded by God when "the others" are to be displaced and often killed. As she goes on to note, there are dozens of examples of peoples of different identities who lay claim to the same land, often believing that their claim is endorsed by God.<sup>18</sup> Israel/ Palestine and South Africa are just two examples and of course the links between Israel's chosenness and the chosenness of the Afrikaner people was explicitly made.

The desire to possess land results in turn in two possible narratives (and sometimes both) – those of exile or conquest.<sup>19</sup> It is because Israel was in exile that Yahweh hears their cry and brings them to the land which they have to wrest from 'the others'. Their falling away from the covenant in turn leads to their exile in Babylon. The God who gave also takes away.<sup>20</sup> But even in Babylon the promise is that the righteous remnant, the chosen of the chosen, will return to be even greater, a light to the nations.

The struggle over scarce resources, the blessing of being chosen and the gift of land also leads to a particular understanding of God - "The God who excludes some and prefers others, who casts some out, is a monotheistic God – monotheistic not only because he demands allegiance to himself alone but because he confers his favour on one alone"<sup>21</sup> Herein lies the crux of violence: "The Other against whom Israel's identity is forged is abhorred, abject, impure, and in the 'Old Testament' vast numbers of them are obliterated, while in the 'New Testament' vast numbers are colonized..."<sup>22</sup> Schwartz reminds her readers that the narrative she outlines is not the only narrative, and it is in other narratives that other possibilities, less violent and more inclusive, can be found. However, it is the dominant narrative and the one which has most strongly influenced the parts of the world which have come under the sway of the Judeo-Christian tradition.<sup>23</sup> More importantly for our purposes in considering South African contextual theologies, this narrative has been fundamental to both apartheid theology and some of the theologies of liberation.

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17 Schwartz *Curse of Cain*, 39.

18 Schwartz *Curse of Cain*, 40.

19 Schwartz *Curse of Cain*, 55.

20 Job 1:21.

21 Schwartz *Curse of Cain*, 3.

22 Schwartz *Curse of Cain*, 19.

23 Schwartz *Curse of Cain*, 33.

## The Logic of the One

Developing Schwartz's analysis of the Hebrew Scriptures, Laurel Schneider traces a similar logic through Christendom and into modern scientific reasoning. In her book *Beyond Monotheism* Schneider notes the surprisingly late appearance of the word "monotheism" in 1680. The term monotheism was coined by Henry More as a polemical tool against Unitarianism and its conflating of the world and God.<sup>24</sup> However, she notes that the concept of one God who ought to be worshipped is very old – about 3500 years old. More correctly, one should speak of monolatry – worship of one God. But this is a rarely used term. Because of these linguistic complications she prefers the term "the logic of the One" which both describes monotheism but also expressly takes into account its implications, namely "a story of totality, of a closed system, of a One."<sup>25</sup>

Schneider relates a vivid story, a memory which comes to act for her as a "snapshot" of the logic of the One. Visiting relatives in a small West German town in the 1980's she was taken on a walking tour. In the square in front of the cemetery stood a tall black obelisk inscribed with the words "Ein Volk – Ein Reich – Ein Gott' One people, one nation, one God."<sup>26</sup> This one people, one nation, she suggests, is the theological and philosophical heir to the chosen Israel. As Israel viewed itself chosen by God, so many Christians identified themselves as the new Israel, the new chosen people. (For example Paul argues in Romans 2:28-29 that the true Jew is one who is Jewish inwardly and that circumcision is matter of the heart). The consolidation of being chosen and political and ecclesial power came about with Constantine's Edict. The Constantinian affirmation of Christianity is a moment of locking "the single ruling deity" of Christianity in with "an absolute and solitary ruler over an empire that was symbolically envisioned as universal."<sup>27</sup> As Moltmann observes "The monotheistic God is Lord of the world"<sup>28</sup> and legitimates political and clerical monarchical power. "The notion of a divine monarchy in heaven and on earth ... generally provides the justification for earthly domination – religious, moral, patriarchal or political..."<sup>29</sup>

The Scholastic joining of the "One ruling patriarchal deity in heaven with an idea of eschatological unity for creation"<sup>30</sup> is the next step in the process of

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24 Laurel C. Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity*. (London & New York: Routledge, 2008)19.

25 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, ix.

26 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 185.

27 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 75/6.

28 Jurgen Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*. (trans. Margaret Kohl) (London: SCM, 1981)198.

29 Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 191/2.

30 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 76.

the logic of the One. The purpose or end of all creation is unification in oneness with God. The one God has one purpose for creation – what Schneider terms a “monocosmos”.<sup>31</sup> Aquinas’ contribution was to relate this “solitary divine reality”<sup>32</sup> with the dogmatic teaching of the church. There is only one truth and the church has it. To disagree is heresy.

Ironically, not even the Reformation put an end to this logic of the One. The Reformers of course critiqued the teachings of the church and instead emphasized the truth as revealed in the scriptures. But there was no doubt about the singularity of truth. It was just that it was to be found primarily in the scriptures rather than in the church’s teaching. “This meant that the splintering of the churches only reinforced the oneness of the truth because it essentially lay outside of the all-too-human church... Modern science was born in the minds of priests and theological scholars...” who could go to the Bible for the truth about everything.<sup>33</sup> So even with the Age of Reason, there was a search for one truth and from Bacon to Descartes and Galileo and Newton “no other alternative to a monocosmic idea was seriously considered.”<sup>34</sup>

In addition to the consequences already identified by Schwartz and set out above, I shall note just three further consequences of the logic of the One.

The logic of the One, firstly, admits to only one truth which inevitably leads to violence. Douglas John Hall believes that “A religious community that believes itself to be in possession of ‘The Truth’ is a community equipped with the most lethal weapon of any warfare: the sense of its own superiority and mandate to mastery.”<sup>35</sup>

Jantzen, citing Edward Farley, notes the connection between monotheism and anti-aesthetic tendencies.<sup>36</sup> The nature religions which recognized and celebrated the immanence of God in the natural world were replaced by a “rejection of all identification of divinity with the world of the things of nature.”<sup>37</sup> Even though the Bible emphasizes the identity of God as creator, “in the theology of Christendom, these organic metaphors are replaced with metaphors of the covenant and courtroom... a model ... which has little space for the celebration of beauty.”<sup>38</sup> Christian associations of the body, or material beings, with sin and

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31 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 75.

32 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 76.

33 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 77.

34 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 78.

35 Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans & New York: Friendship Press. 1986) 5.

36 Grace Jantzen, (eds. Jeremy Carrette and Morny Joy) *A Place of Springs*. (London & New York: Routledge, 2010) 38.

37 Jantzen, *A Place of Springs*, 39.

38 Jantzen, *A Place of Springs*, 39.

dangerous pleasure has also led to an attitude that despises beauty and instead views it as a snare.<sup>39</sup>

Thirdly, Jantzen, along with many other women theologians, notes the connections between Biblical monotheism and violence towards women. God of the Bible is presented only in male metaphors – King, Lord, Father and so on.<sup>40</sup> This is the God in whose image humanity is made. It is the woman who is said to lead humanity into temptation, who becomes responsible for human sin and who is associated with the body whilst the man is associated with the “higher” faculty of reason.

The challenge that faces theology is to transgress the logic of the One and to imagine and point out other possibilities, suggests Schneider. We shall return to this challenge in the final section.

### **Contextual Theology: An Incitement to Violence?**

In the light of what Schwartz calls “the violent legacy of monotheism”<sup>41</sup> I turn now to consider the implication of violence in the contextual theologies of Southern Africa. Recognising of course that all theology is contextual, I am using the term in its slightly narrower sense, as that family of ways of doing theology that take their inspiration from Liberation theology of Latin America which includes Black, African, Feminist, Womanist, and Dalit theologies. Some characteristics common to this family of theologies include:

1. the identification of and response to a particular situation of injustice, where injustice is usually understood as a lack of access to resources – social, political, economic or ecclesial.
2. a commitment to commencing theologising from the perspective of the “poor” (those with less access to power whether social, economic, political or ecclesial) whose experience shapes the questions for theology.
3. an attempt not only to reflect on the situation but to become involved in transformation, in other words, action and reflection, that is praxis.
4. a strong reliance on the Exodus narrative (namely that God hears the cry of the poor and responds by bringing the oppressed into freedom) as a model for God’s preferential dealing with the poor and as a story of eschatological hope.
5. God’s promise of the transformation of the present order and blessings for those who are now poor and oppressed.<sup>42</sup>

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39 Jantzen, *A Place of Springs*, 42.

40 Jantzen, *A Place of Springs*, 40.

41 Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*.

42 See for example Gustavo Gutierrez. *A Theology of Liberation*. (London: SCM, 1974); and Charles

From this list we might already discern hints of issues raised by Schwartz – scarcity or lack of access to resources, a chosen group, reliance on the memory of Exodus, the promise of future blessings. I shall return to these shortly. Before doing so, however, I would first like to consider whether contextual theologies themselves expressly sanction the use of violence. Louise Kretzschmar helpfully considered this question when she investigated whether a commitment to transformation and revolutionary change sought by Liberation theology necessarily involves the use of violence. She concludes that there are at least three positions that may be identified, namely those who explicitly condemn the use of violence as being antithetical to the way of Jesus, those who accept the use of violence as being a means to an end and finally those who neither commend nor condemn violence.<sup>43</sup> She is, however, of the opinion that South African liberation theologians Desmond Tutu, Allan Boesak, Simon Maimela and Bonganjalo Goba “are closer to those Latin American Liberation Theologians who do not promote violence as a valid means of achieving any desired end.”<sup>44</sup> The question then arises as to whether, whilst either expressly eschewing violence or at least neither commending nor condemning it, the South African contextual theologies in fact contain within them the seeds of violence? To this question I now turn.

I want to make it explicit that I do not set out here to deny the validity or necessity of the theologies of liberation such as Kairos or Black theology in South Africa. The magnitude of the violence of apartheid should never be underestimated. What I am concerned to explore however is whether, and to what extent, in the very theologies formulated to respond to apartheid, lie some of the seeds of the violence we experience today. I am also not suggesting that, even if such seeds be found, these theologies should shoulder all the blame for contemporary violence. Of course apartheid (and its theological justification) bears by far the largest responsibility for the current state of affairs.

### *The “right” theology*

The very fact that there are multiple contextual theologies provides a basis for the critique of “the logic of the One”. As Maimela notes: “no theology is a universal language, but rather theologies are particular and culturally conditioned modes

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Villa Vicencio, “Liberation Theology.” in John De Gruchy & C. Villa Vicencio (eds.) *Doing Theology in Context: South African Perspectives*. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis & Cape Town: David Philip, 1994). 184-196.

43 Louise K Kretzschmar, “War, Peace and Revolution in Liberation Theology” in E.K Mosothane, L.L. Pato and L. Kretzschmar (eds.) *Religion, War and Peace*. (Mthatha: University of Transkei, 1984), 90-112:97.

44 Kretzschmar “War, Peace and Revolution”, 107.



of speaking about God.”<sup>45</sup> However, Maimela goes on to critique Black theology for failing to recognise this very issue:

...black theologians appear unwilling to accept the full consequences of modern historical consciousness by claiming for it a privileged position on the grounds that the black theological reading of the Bible is *the* correct one.<sup>46</sup>

In other words, there is a drive towards the logic of the One, even whilst contextual theologies recognise various theological positions. The *Kairos Document* similarly identifies three theologies – state, church and prophetic – but it is made clear that only one of the three is valid, labelling state theology as idolatrous<sup>47</sup> and church theology as unbiblical.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, the Kairos theologians do expressly recognise that the document and its theological conclusions are open-ended and not final.<sup>49</sup>

### *Exodus as the theological narrative*

The enormous importance of the Exodus story for Liberation theologies is perhaps best illustrated by a Liberation theologian who wishes to escape this very story. Mitri Raheb, as a Palestinian Liberation theologian, is faced with the problems of the chosenness of Israel and Israel’s claim to land:

The Bible I had heretofore considered to be ‘for us’ had suddenly become ‘against us’... The issue was my land, which God had promised to Israel and in which I no longer had a right to live unless it was as a ‘stranger’. The God I had known since my childhood as love had suddenly become a God who confiscated land, waged ‘holy wars’, and destroyed whole peoples.<sup>50</sup>

Other theologians of liberation, not faced directly with the injustices of Palestine, much more readily identify with the Hebrew people of Exodus. The Kairos theologians, for example, locate prophetic theology in the story of Exodus. “Throughout the Bible God appears as liberator of the oppressed.”<sup>51</sup> Maimela asserts that Black theologians draw “their inspiration from a theological vision in

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45 Simon S. Maimela, 1993. “Black Theology and the Quest for a God of Liberation.” in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* Vol. 82 (1993) 54-66: 56.

46 Maimela, “Black Theology” 62.

47 Kairos Theologians. 1985. *Challenge to the Church: The Kairos Document: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa*. 13.

48 *Kairos Document*, 21.

49 *Kairos Document*, 5.

50 Mitri Raheb, *I am a Palestinian Christian*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 56. It is not being suggested that this is the only way of reading the exodus narrative; see for example Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.E.* (London: SCM, 1980).

51 *Kairos Document*, 25.

which God is portrayed as the liberator of slaves from the Egyptian captivity...<sup>52</sup> and de Gruchy notes that: "Like other liberation theologians, the exponents of black theology regard the exodus as the paradigmatic event in God's dealings with the world."<sup>53</sup> Expressly linking the Exodus narrative and monotheism, the Hammanskraal Resolution of 1974 acknowledged "the one and only God 'who mightily delivered the people of Israel from their bondage in Egypt and who in Jesus Christ still proclaims that He will set at liberty those who are oppressed."<sup>54</sup> In other words, most theologies of liberation, including those of South Africa, are firmly rooted in the very narrative Schwartz has identified as constitutive of "the curse of Cain" and this heavy reliance placed on the Exodus narrative opens the contextual theologies of South Africa to the possibilities of fostering violence.

### *Formation of identity against "the other"*

As we noted above, Schwartz suggests that the act of separating and distinguishing between 'us' and 'them' is the most "frequent and fundamental act of violence we commit."<sup>55</sup> Jantzen, in an attempt to provide a more nuanced definition, suggests that violence enters, not when we distinguish, but when the other is perceived as dangerous.<sup>56</sup> This distinction, understandably, is very much a feature of theologies of liberation. As Nolan notes: "Kairos theology, like all other theologies of liberation, has no difficulty with this analysis of society into oppressor and oppressed because it is exactly the same analysis we find throughout the Bible."<sup>57</sup> So the *Kairos Document* notes that "God sides with the oppressed."<sup>58</sup> It describes the apartheid regime as "the enemy of the people" and "the enemy of God."<sup>59</sup> In other words, it explicitly sets up an us/them dualism, views the other as dangerous (the oppressor) and claims God's choice for the oppressed. I am not here criticising the moral correctness of these claims. Nor am I criticising the analysis of the Kairos theologians. What I am suggesting is that this way of constructing a theological position has inherent in it the seeds of violence. Once a group has set up distinctions between us and them, it becomes permissible to treat "them" as

52 Maimela, "Black Theology" 61.

53 John De Gruchy *The Church Struggle in South Africa*. (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, London: Collins and Cape Town: David Philip, 1986) 163.

54 Cited in Peter Walshe, *Church Versus State in South Africa: The Case of the Christian Institute*. (London: C. Hurst and Co. and Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1983) 120.

55 Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, 5.

56 Jantzen, *Violence to Eternity*, 19.

57 Albert Nolan, "Kairos Theology". In John de Gruchy and C. Villa Vicencio (eds.) *Doing Theology in Context: South African Perspectives*. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis & Cape Town: David Philip, 1998), 212-218: 215.

58 *Kairos Document*, 31.

59 *Kairos Document*, 27.

sub-human – as apartheid amply demonstrated. As Schneider observes, the logic of the One “forces the issues of allegiance and identity into dualistic gambits of ‘with us’ or ‘against us’.”<sup>60</sup>

*Identity as God’s chosen people and the promises which follow*

A number of South African Black theologians seem to be very cautious in claiming any kind of chosenness. Boesak for example, specifically criticises Cene on this point: “We submit that to make black as such the symbol of oppression and liberation in the world is to absolutize one’s own situation.”<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Manas Buthelezi “demanded...black Christians... work for the conversion and liberation of whites”<sup>62</sup> rather than claiming any particular election by God. Nevertheless the very foundation of liberation theologies is the understanding that God takes a preferential option for the poor. So for example Maimela states that “God is the God who takes the side of the oppressed and the defenceless”<sup>63</sup> and he quotes Desmond Tutu “God...is no neutral God, but a thoroughly biased God...the God who always takes sides.”<sup>64</sup>

On the other hand, Buti Thlagale notes that even if “the Afrikaner did not claim to be a specially chosen people, such a viewpoint appears to contradict the practice of the Afrikaner religion.”<sup>65</sup> So too, de Gruchy observes the irony of the similarity of claims made by both Dutch Reformed Calvinism and Black theology to a particular group being chosen by God, just as was Israel.<sup>66</sup>

In both cases, as in ancient Palestine, the idea of being preferred or chosen is frequently linked to a struggle over land. For example Sebibi notes that “(T)he history of the black struggle in South Africa has been long and checkered (*sic*). It is a 333 year struggle for land.”<sup>67</sup> And Allan Boesak proclaims: “doesn’t he

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60 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 191.

61 Allan Boesak, “An Ethic of Liberation for South Africa.” In John Parratt (ed.) *A Reader in African Christian Theology* (Revised edition) (London: SPCK, 1997) 120-128: 121.

62 Walshe, *Church Versus State*, 159.

63 Maimela, “Black Theology,” 58/9.

64 Simon S. Maimela, “Archbishop Desmond Tutu: A Revolutionary Political Priest or Man of Peace.” in Buti Thlagale & Itumeleng Mosala (eds.) *Hammering Swords into Ploughshares: Essays in Honour of Archbishop Mpilo Desmond Tutu*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1986) 41-60: 46.

65 Buti Thlagale, “Nazism, Stalinist Russia and Apartheid – A Comparison.” in Buti Thlagale & Itumeleng Mosala (eds.) *Hammering Swords into Ploughshares: Essays in Honour of Archbishop Mpilo Desmond Tutu*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 265-278:269.

66 De Gruchy *The Church Struggle*, 166.

67 J. Lebamang Sebibi, “Towards an Understanding of the Current Unrest in South Africa.” in Buti Thlagale & Itumeleng Mosala (eds.) *Hammering Swords into Ploughshares: Essays in Honour of Archbishop Mpilo Desmond Tutu*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 253-263:261.

know that this land is not his to give to us, that this land is ours and will one day belong to us.”<sup>68</sup> Boesak takes the matter even further. He claims: “I think the story is meant to tell us that oppressors shall have no place on God’s earth. Oppressors have no home. Oppressors do not belong to, are not at home in God’s objectives for this world.”<sup>69</sup> Kritzinger summarises Black theology’s understanding of land issues as a “theology of disinheritance”<sup>70</sup> and that “Black Theology calls on black people to affirm their right of ownership to the land and to commit themselves to the struggle for regaining it”<sup>71</sup>

### *The violent legacy of monotheism*

Of necessity, this analysis cannot afford a comprehensive reading of all the theologians of liberation in South Africa. However, even in this small selection, I suggest that there are more than enough clues for us to link these contextual theologies to what Schwartz calls “the violent legacy of monotheism.” There is however, an issue that Schwartz does not discuss at all, which I believe to have enormous significance in the “vandalization of the soul”. It was Franz Fanon who noted the internalisation by oppressed people of the image given them by the oppressor.<sup>72</sup> Desmond Tutu agrees:

The worst crime that can be laid at the door of the white man... is not our economic, social and political exploitation, however reprehensible that may be; no, it is that his policy succeeded in filling most of us with a self-disgust and self hatred. This has been the most violent form of colonialism...<sup>73</sup>

Fifteen years later and just before the first democratic elections in South Africa, Barney Pityana wrote:

Besides the inner wounds, our society is broken. ... There is crisis in schools and hospitals. Unemployment is endemic. There are conflicts in housing.... Crime has escalated to such an extent that South Africans live in fear even in their own homes. Poverty has multiplied. Violence in home and family, sexual abuse of children and violence against women point to a society ill at ease with itself.<sup>74</sup>

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68 Allan Boesak, ‘If This is Treason, Then I am Guilty.’ in Buti Thlagale & Itumeleng Mosala (eds.) *Hammering Swords into Ploughshares: Essays in Honour of Archbishop Mpilo Desmond Tutu* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 279-288:282.

69 Allan Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition*. (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1984), 151.

70 J.N.J. Kritzinger, *Black Theology: Challenge to Mission*. (Unpublished D.Th thesis, 1988), 127.

71 Kritzinger, *Black Theology*, 129.

72 Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. (London: McGibbon and Kee, 1965).

73 Desmond Tutu, “Black Theology/ African Theology – Soul Mates or Antagonists?” in G.S. Wilmore and J. Cone (eds.) *Black Theology: A Documentary History 1966-1979*. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1979), 483-491: 484.

74 N. Barney Pityana, ‘The Evolution of Democracy in Africa: Agenda for the Churches.’ in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*. No.86 (1994), 4-13:12.

How hauntingly contemporary those words sound. Whilst it would be entirely unjustified to make a one to one correlation between internalized oppression and monarchical monotheism, I want to suggest that there are some connections. For example in the logic of the One, only one truth is possible. So even while some theologians such as Tutu and the Kairos theologians identify the linked problems of state theology and internalized oppression, the “truth” of the oppressor became the “Truth” for most people. As Moltmann points out, when the universe is seen to have a monarchical structure, then the state has legitimacy.<sup>75</sup> It is not too great a leap from this idea of one “Truth” to the belief that one is “in exile”, alienated from one’s land, and dignity, because God has willed it thus, as some kind of punishment or test.

But the revenge of this internalized oppression is also violent. Schwartz warns: “Conquering the Canaanites was a fantasy of an exiled people; it could only carry force when it was adopted by groups who held the reins of power in Christendom.”<sup>76</sup> When the oppressor is conquered violence does not end, but is simply re-directed.

Furthermore in our consumer driven market, a person’s worth is judged on the basis of material possessions and a consumptive life-style, so that those who do not have these things discover themselves to be “worthless”. Self-hatred now is rooted not only in race, but in economic deprivation. The mentality of scarcity persists and so there is still “not enough” for everyone. On the other hand I want to suggest that the “value of a piano” (metaphorically speaking) offers both an alternative to violence and a way of relating without rivalry. I turn now to explore this suggestion.

## **Beyond the Logic of the One: Theological Alternatives for Human Flourishing**

If, as I am arguing, the theologies of liberation were formulated in a “logic of the One” theological framework, the question now is: can we develop a theology that has as its concern human flourishing (including the flourishing of “the Canaanites”) that is not monotheistic, that goes beyond the logic of the One? Can we develop a theology which is founded in abundance rather than scarcity? Can we articulate a theology that rather than lending support to violence, disrupts it? This is not a plea for some romantic or utopian vision which avoids suffering and pretends that oppression is not very real, but an earnest quest for a theology that both challenges that suffering but also does not fall prey to “the curse of Cain”; that takes seriously the risk of fostering violence. The development of such a theological framework

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<sup>75</sup> Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 191-197.

<sup>76</sup> Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, x.

is an enormous enterprise and so all I offer here are some markers on the way, ideas for further exploration and development.

As I embark on the exploration of alternatives, it is important to re-state Schwartz's position that violence is not the only possible outcome of monotheism; nor is it the only narrative of the Bible. Indeed the cost of monotheism is made apparent as the numbers of those killed and the separation of Israel from other people are recorded.<sup>77</sup> Against the flow of insistence on monotheism, there are also expressions of tolerance, for example in Micah: "For all the peoples walk, each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God forever and ever"<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, covenanting is not always steeped in violence and bloodshed. Schwartz draws attention to the evocative words of Exodus 34:11 "They (the elders of Israel) beheld God, and they ate and drank". Here is a covenant sealed with the sharing of food. Nevertheless the dominant story is one of scarcity, exclusion and violence and the search for other narratives requires what Schwartz terms "a genuine rewriting of traditions."<sup>79</sup> However the dominant story and its consequence has been that of monotheism and violence.

Thirty years ago, Jurgen Moltmann warned of the dangers of monotheism put in service of political and clerical powers.<sup>80</sup> Whilst liberation theologians have drawn extensively from his ideas, for the most part, they have ignored his plea for a deeply Trinitarian understanding of God as a corrective to monarchical monotheism. I want to re-iterate his plea for a communal metaphor for God, but, with the help of Schneider, take his case further.

Schneider begins to open up other possibilities with what she terms "a logic of multiplicity." The use of the definite and indefinite articles is deliberate. *The* logic of the One permits of only one, "a totality... a closed system... it cannot abide ambiguities."<sup>81</sup> A logic of multiplicity always countenances other possibilities. Negatively stated, a logic of multiplicity is not the opposite of the logic of the One, nor is it the same as many – a "pile of many separable units, many ones."<sup>82</sup> Multiplicity "results when things – ones – so constitute each other that they come to exist ... because of one another. Essential separation becomes incoherence."<sup>83</sup> In African terms, this is what we may recognize as *ubuntu* – I am because we are. The distinction between the logic of the One and a logic of multiplicity is this: The logic of the One "hides the drive to totalization whereas a logic of multiplicity always seeks to expose it."<sup>84</sup>

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77 Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, 31.

78 Micah 4:5.

79 Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, 175.

80 Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*.

81 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, ix.

82 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 142.

83 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 142.

84 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 138.

For Christians who proclaim the incarnation multiplicity rather than monotheism is inescapable. As Schneider expresses it “the dream of the One”<sup>85</sup> is a theological error because the incarnation affirms the particularity of multiple bodies. She regrets however, that although the doctrine of the incarnation is central to all Christian theology, and is Christian theology’s most distinctive contribution, the gap between “doctrinal claims of incarnation and actual bodies in the world remains wide.”<sup>86</sup>

In conclusion therefore I wish to outline four gestures towards a way of responding to the violence of monotheism and which may offer possibilities for the recovery of “soul” from its vandalization. I do so cognisant of Schneider’s warning that it is difficult to imagine a logic of multiplicity, so accustomed are we to the logic of the One, and even when we do, we too easily fall back into the habit of making this logic of multiplicity a totalizing concept.<sup>87</sup> In denoting some markers of a theology of flourishing and non-violence I am also mindful of Schneider’s critique that “Christian systematic theology is so deeply wedded to abstractions as ultimate ends (to purity of thought and devotion)”<sup>88</sup> that we need to be wary of creating just such another system of thought. These gestures therefore are just that – motions, descriptive of possibilities rather than dogmatic prescriptions. I shall seek to offer disruptive possibilities to monotheism, fixed identity as “the chosen”, the narrative of scarcity and the claim to “Truth”.

### *Divine multiplicity*

Schneider insists that multiplicity, rather than monotheism, is a preferable way of speaking about God. She argues for a logic of theological multiplicity on two quite simple grounds. Firstly, because we must speak metaphorically and there is never only one metaphor for God, we must admit plurality.<sup>89</sup> Secondly, our experience of God is never singular. Every experience is particular and embodied.<sup>90</sup> God occurs, comes to us, in ever new ways, she suggests, and therefore disrupts “ideologies of ... stasis”.<sup>91</sup> She, like Moltmann insists that for Christians, theology begins in flesh, in the body of Jesus. Without the bodily, fleshly reality of Jesus there is no God for Christians. Divine multiplicity flows from this.<sup>92</sup>

Against the first commandment to adhere to monotheism, she suggests that

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85 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 200.

86 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 141.

87 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 138.

88 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 151

89 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 153.

90 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 154.

91 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 1.

92 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 163.

the commandment (which is framed in the logic of the One) is not from God but rather from our own jealous “dysfunctional corporate anxiety... that cannot abide a God who loves indiscriminately.”<sup>93</sup> The command to monotheism is a totalitarian response of fear, whilst God, on the other hand, seems to enjoin hospitality and generosity, for example in the commandments to care for the stranger, widow and orphan. “What leaks out ... is a divine love for the world... Monotheism fails... because it cannot overcome the heartbeat of generosity that will not be stilled.”<sup>94</sup> “(L)ove is what divinity is because love cannot be One.”<sup>95</sup>

### *Identity as fluid and multiple*

If we speak of divine multiplicity, then we have also to be open to a logic of multiplicity when considering human identity. Just as the “God Who Does Not Change”<sup>96</sup> is a fantasy, so too is the idea that our identity as individuals or groups, is fixed and bounded. In his fascinating book on nationalism, Michael Ignatieff observes that the construction of national identity relies on compartmentalization which never entirely works. National identity is not fixed depending, for example, on whether it is constructed along ethnic, political (civic), cultural or religious lines.

The nationalist vision of an ethnically pure state, for example has the task of convincing ordinary people to disregard stubbornly adverse sociological realities, like the fact that most societies are not and have never been ethnically pure.<sup>97</sup>

Deliberate acts of violence against groups considered to be threateningly “other” are very much part of our contemporary world, as they were part of the biblical world. From the “Islamophobia” of the post 9-11 world to the civil wars of Serbia, Bosnia and Croatia or Rwanda or Northern Ireland, to the hostility directed against those perceived to be “*amakwerekwere*” or “corrective rape” in South Africa, we may discern the perceptions of the threatening other. But, as Schwartz observes, “when identity is mobile and multiple, the other is difficult to name – and to hurt.”<sup>98</sup> If we were to recognise that collective identity is a fiction and that there is no simple categorising of women, or black people, or colonised people or any other group, then it becomes more difficult to distinguish the other. Violence against the other is less likely because the boundaries of identity are always being transgressed. Much as our sense of justice rebels against this,

93 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 203.

94 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 204.

95 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 205.

96 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 157.

97 Michael Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism*. (London: Vintage, 1994), 186.

98 Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, 20.



might we recognise the theological basis for this blurring by a God who blurs our identities by causing it to rain on the righteous and unrighteous alike (Matt 5:45)?

*Incarnational ethics: "Abundance is a communal act"<sup>99</sup>*

Earlier I noted Schwartz' observation that most Judeo Christian ethics is premised on scarcity.<sup>100</sup> The question is framed: how ought I to behave when I cannot have what I want? More terrifyingly, she suggests that "Scarcity, the assumption that one can only prosper when someone else does not, proliferates murderous brothers, murderous peoples."<sup>101</sup> But the narrative of scarcity and restriction is not the only (Biblical) narrative. The first commandment given to people in Genesis is to be fruitful and multiply. The prophets use the image of people and the land flourishing.<sup>102</sup> Grace Jantzen has written persuasively in favour of a theology of flourishing.<sup>103</sup> This metaphor suggests a mutual commitment and responsibility to one another's well-being rather than an ethics which sets up rules to limit the "proliferation (of) murderous peoples." Jantzen is not naive in pretending that there is always enough for everybody. She asks that we always question ourselves: At whose expense do I flourish?<sup>104</sup> However, drawing on Levinas, Jantzen develops an "ethics of natality".<sup>105</sup> Though she critiques his masculinist approach, she calls for "justice in the face of the natals".<sup>106</sup> Rather than being an ethical system which seeks to police the incipient violence of competition for scarce resources, instead it is an ethics in which the divine is called forth: "God can only be defined through human relations."<sup>107</sup> The "other" is not to be ruled, saved, or categorised in any way, but always to be responded to with sympathy and love, allowing her to make fresh and unexpected new beginnings in relationship. Natality is thus a constant coming into being of beings in relationship.

Although there is not space to explore this here, an ethic of abundance and flourishing has implications for consumerism and capitalism. Flourishing and abundance does not mean an abundance of things.

In her discussion of ethics, Schneider suggests that transformation of violence and despair occurs only through the embodied physical presence of those who care

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99 Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2000), 108.

100 Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, 34.

101 Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, 83.

102 Isaiah 32:15; Hosea 14:3-7

103 Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998) and Jantzen, *A Place of Springs*.

104 Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 165.

105 Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 231-248.

106 Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 227.

107 Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 250.

with those who suffer hunger, violence, despair and disregard.<sup>108</sup> She reminds us, in other words, that ethics is not an abstract system of thought, but an incarnational way of living.

### *A spirituality of beauty*

Jantzen's last major project, cut short by her death, was an exploration of the ways that violence and death, rather than beauty and flourishing, have dominated the western imagination for at least the last 2500 years. Troubled by this violence, she set out to describe a philosophy of religion that affirmed the beauty, love and wonder that she herself experienced. As part of this exploration, she regrets the preponderance of attention given by theologians to notions of truth and the scant notice paid to beauty and asks, rhetorically, whether "truth claims can actually enable us to understand the divine nature in a way that beauty cannot."<sup>109</sup> This is not just an academic question. As we have already noted, claims to "Truth" in the name of the monotheistic God lay the foundations for violence against those with whom we disagree. She seeks also to show "how the attraction of beauty can inspire resistance and creative response, and can draw forward desire that is premised not upon lack or death but upon potential for new beginning."<sup>110</sup> Her thesis is that paying attention to beauty and creativity bring newness and life which disrupts violence.

The displacement of beauty is intertwined with the distortion of attitudes to the body, desire, sexuality and violence. Reclaiming beauty and its significance enables fresh approaches to the divine in the world and in one another, that of God in everyone, and shows how it can be cherished.<sup>111</sup>

### **Restoration of "Soul"**

The four gestures I have made – divine multiplicity, fluid identity, an ethics of abundance and a spirituality of beauty – do not constitute a meta-theory, a recipe for the end to violence. That would be a preposterous claim. There is no doubt however, that we are seeking theological responses to the life-threatening post-apartheid issues we face – poverty, HIV and AIDS, sexism and homophobia, xenophobia and violence. What I am suggesting are some considerations to be upheld as we seek to develop a new contextual response and at the same time avoid the vandalization of the soul, remembering the value of a piano.

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108 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 206.

109 Jantzen, *A Place of Springs*, 151.

110 Grace Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence* (New York & London: Routledge, 2004) viii.

111 Jantzen, *A Place of Springs*, 153.