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**PARABLES,
POLITICS,
AND
PROPHETIC
FAITH**

Hope and Perseverance
in Times of Peril

© 2023

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For Dirkie Smit

With admiration and deep gratitude for the brilliant work he has done and the example he has set,

And to the memory of Vuyani Vellem

With praise and thanksgiving to God for his life, our friendship, and the enduring legacy he left behind.

For Iva E. Carruthers, Angela Y. Davis, Emilie M. Townes,

and to the memory of James H. Cone

Whose faithful disciplined critique of empire, imperialist religion, and white supremacist nationalism and patriarchy inspire, challenge, and encourage prophetic denunciation of religious conformity to and complicity with oppression, and revolutionary effort to unmask its disguises, condemn it, and combat it.

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Foreword

Dr. Jeremiah A Wright Jr.



In the opening chapters of his historic book, *The Destruction of Black Civilization: Great Issues of a Race from 4500 B.C. to 2000 A.D.*, Dr. Chancellor Williams records the conversation between a traveler in West Africa and one of the region's famed griots.

The traveler asked, "Whatever became of the people of Sumer? Legend has it that they were Black!"

The griot thought for a moment then said, "Ah! They forgot their story and so they died!"

African pedagogy demonstrates just how important storytelling is in preserving the culture, the history, and the legacy of a people. Africans used and still use storytelling to make a point, to teach a lesson, or to demonstrate a truth. Jesus was cut from the same cultural cloth as all other Africans. He knew the stories of Moses, Joshua, Deborah, Anna, Miriam, Samuel and the judges, David and the kings. He knew the stories of his people.

The same is true all over Africa. In South Africa alone, Afrikaans, English, Pedi, Sotho, Ndebele, Swazi, Tsonga, and Tswana are the official languages (in addition to English) of the people. In each of those languages, children are taught the stories of their people. They are passed on from generation to generation. They do not forget their stories!

I included English and Afrikaans because they are listed as two of the "official" languages of the country. The stories they represent as colonizers, however, point to one of the problems with which South African theologians wrestle today. Including stories in Afrikaans as the true stories of a people (such as the *Voortrekkers*) is problematic because colonizers do not tell the truth about any of the indigenous African people. More drastically, moreover, almost no South African knows the story of the Khoi and San people. "They forgot their story and so they died!"

In a private conversation with Dr. Allan Boesak, one of the authors of this fascinating book, I asked him if he knew of anyone in his family who could speak Khoi or San. I asked because I was taught in elementary school that to learn a foreign language, one had to think in that language.

To think in a foreign language means to embrace not only the phonics, the semantics, the grammar, the pragmatics, the syntax, and the other elements of

the linguistics concerning that particular language; it also means thinking in that language. One had to think like a Khoi. One had to think like a San. One had to embrace the culture of the people whose language he or she was trying to master. To learn their language is to learn an entire history of a people.

Dr. Boesak told me that his brother could still speak Khoi and some words of San, but he could not speak them fluently because he had no one with whom he could converse in those languages. “They forgot their story and so they died!”

The matter of decolonizing becoming more complex in this area of language and linguistics has been illustrated by two different authors, Cornel West and Jerome Ross. Mitri Raheb should also be added to the list of scholars who “muddy these waters.”

Cornel West argues that no matter how steeped in the culture of African peoples African Americans may become when trying to decolonize the racist thought, racist teachings, and racist understandings of the world we inherited, African Americans can learn Ibo, Yoruba, Xhosa, Zulu, Fon, Ashanti, Ga, or whatever, but they will still “dream in the English language!” The fact of being born in a particular settler colonial project and learning the language of the colonizer in infancy will make the problem or task of decolonizing that individual’s thinking (and beliefs) even more difficult.

I reference Cornel West and Jerome Ross. I would be remiss, however, if I did not mention at least one or two of my sisters in the theological education community, Madipoane Masenya’s work in the Old Testament wisdom literature, African biblical hermeneutics, and Hebrew Bible is one such sister. Dr. Masenya’s insights did not come alive for me because of my association with her at the University of South Africa. They came alive and heightened or underscored the whole issue of decolonizing the thought patterns of South Africans (and African Americans) as she relayed her story about riding on a bus to go facilitate a women’s retreat with females of the First Congregational Church of Groutville. She was on the bus carrying the women and seated next to a colleague of hers who also taught at the University of South Africa. Seated behind them on the bus were two women who were church leaders of the First Congregational Church, and they were talking to each other in Zulu.

During a lull in Dr. Masenya and her colleague’s conversation, she overheard one of the women say to the other, “I sure hope these professors lead their workshops in Zulu so we can understand what it is they are saying.”

That one sentence caught Dr. Masenya off guard and caught me off guard. The assumption in South Africa is that the “official language” of English is taught in the school system. The underlying assumption there, however, is that all citizens of South Africa go to elementary school and secondary school.

The assumption never takes into account the vast—overwhelmingly vast!—number of South African citizens who are not privileged to have any kind of education given their rural living conditions.

Dr. Musa Dube-Shomanah of Botswana put an exclamation point behind this issue when she pointed out to me that the Bible when translated into English, Spanish, or Portuguese is not the same as the word of God in their (Botswanan) native language (Tswana). For members of the church in her context, hearing the Bible in Tswana in many instances is diametrically opposed to what the European translations are saying. The word “demon,” for instance, means “ancestor” in her native language. It has no negative connotations or denotations.

To say, then, that Jesus went about casting demons out of poor people is to say that their ancestors were evil! Language is all important. Language as a part of culture must be taken into consideration and deep study when talking about decolonization of theology, theological education, and the everyday language of the people in whose culture one works. Dr. Musa Dube’s book, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretations of the Bible*, offers another female voice that enters the conversation concerning decolonization and language.

Jerome Ross, Professor of Hebrew Bible at the Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology at Virginia Union University, makes the matter even more complicated in his essay, “The Cultural Affinity Between the Ancient Yahwists and the African-Americans: A Hermeneutic for Homiletics.” (That article can be found in Samuel Roberts’s book, *Born to Preach*, a festschrift in honor of the ministry of Drs. Henry and Ella Mitchell.) Among the many fascinating things that Dr. Ross points out in showing the cultural similarities between the writers of scripture whom we know as the Yahwists and the African Americans, Dr. Ross says every word in the sacred text that we honor as the Holy Scriptures was written during six different kinds of oppression and consequently six different periods of oppression: Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman. The entire New Testament was written under Roman oppression!

Those six different kinds of oppression produced six different cultural realities. Being enslaved in the first chronological period of oppression is quite different from being under oppression in diaspora (starting with the Babylonian diaspora up through the Greco-Roman diaspora). A cursory reading of Acts 2 gives the reader a glimpse of just how many languages the diasporic Jewish community claimed as “home” and their “native languages.” Decolonization becomes almost an insurmountable task when it comes to those different cultures, those different ways of thinking, those different ways of our differing belief systems and of knowing.

Both Boesak and Griffen introduce the reader to the problems involved at this level of decolonizing the thought patterns and belief systems of the African American community, the Euro-American community, the South African community—both Black and white—and the white supremacists’ construct of beliefs and belief systems.

As I read this text, I thought about a text written by Samuel, the last of the judges in the Hebrew faith, and Solomon, the king described as the greatest of thinkers in the Hebrew Bible and indeed in sacred history. Samuel was a judge, and Wendell Griffen is a judge. Samuel also was called by God to perform the offices of priest and pastor. Wendell Griffen is a pastor of a church in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Samuel performed his ministry while under the oppression of the Assyrians. Solomon was the king of Israel during the reign of the Persians and the Greeks. The biblical judge and the biblical pastor lived and ministered under oppression. The twenty-first-century judge Wendell Griffen and the South African politician and pastor Allan Boesak are both contemporary prophets who carry out their ministries under harsh oppression. Griffen performs his ministry under the umbrella of 400 years of white supremacy, white racism, and American “exceptionalism.” Allan Boesak performs his ministry under white oppression—the ideology and practice of apartheid and the harsh heel of a revolution gone bad. I speak of the “new pharaoh” who looks like us—the African National Congress that made errors when they signed the “negotiated settlement” to set Mandela free and attempted futilely to make membership in the ANC contingent upon the color of one’s skin.

To the reader of this very important volume, that last sentence may come as a surprise to you. Yet it is true, sadly enough. The ANC, after freedom came to Black Africans, wanted to make membership in the ANC all Black. That insane position would cause Allan Boesak to be sent to prison on trumped-up charges! Boesak wanted the United Democratic Front (UDF) to be the incarnation of the freedom charter, a multiracial, multicultural, interfaith body of persons who wanted freedom, justice, peace, and what was best for all South Africans, no matter their color or creed. The UDF was gaining so much popularity that the leading members of the ANC saw it as a threat to their power, so they created false charges against Boesak and sent him to prison.

Not only was the ANC not pleased with Boesak’s position on race and his popularity among the masses; they were also not happy concerning his challenge to their position on violence. None less than Madiba himself posited that there comes a point in time when nonviolence does not work and threw his support behind the MK (uMkhonto we Sizwe). But one of Boesak’s mentors, Albert

Luthuli, had a strong stance against violence. Along with that, Boesak's desire for the UDF not only to be nonracial but also to be nonviolent was disturbing to the ANC.

Albert Luthuli was a deacon at the Congregational Church of Groutville and also chief of the ANC and the first South African to win a Nobel Peace Prize. During his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize, he wore his traditional ANC chieftain's kufi. (The day of his acceptance speech also marked the first property bombing that the MK carried out in its attempt to hasten the end of apartheid.) Many commentators reflect on the seeming disparity while reporting that the bombing took place during Chief Luthuli's acceptance speech.

Boesak carries Dr. Martin Luther King and Archbishop Tutu's position on violence begetting only violence a step further:

The greatest myth about violence is not that it is controllable, but that it is redemptive. The most visceral reality of violence is not that it begets violence [*pace* Dr. King!], but that it is idolatrous. The most tragic thing about violence is not that it is toxic, but that it is intoxicating. The most devastating truth about violence is not its horrors, but its delusions.

Those complicated issues that are illustrated in the following pages and Judge Griffen's insistence that the enemies against whom we fight are not "monsters" demonstrate how these two twenty-first-century prophetic pastors are in lockstep with each other theologically and sociologically. They are literally birds (the doves of peace) of a feather!

Judge Griffen believes that the teachings of Jesus outweigh the teachings of the "state," and he acted out that belief in front of the courthouse in Little Rock, Arkansas, one Good Friday. He had the audacity to lie in state on the sidewalk in front of the Arkansas Governor's Mansion for ninety minutes on Good Friday (April 15, 2017) to demonstrate the insanity, the inhumanity, and the brutal practice of the death penalty. The "gatekeepers" had apoplexy when this Black judge dared to challenge the hallowed belief of killing being the perfect display of punishment, a bedrock on which this racist country is built.

Where Boesak was sent to prison in his context, Griffen came under attack in his context. Griffen's enemies tried to strip him of his judicial status and even tried to disbar him as a lawyer in the State of Arkansas and in the United States of America.

If you can imagine a book being co-authored by Solomon and Samuel, then you get a glimpse of what a book co-authored by Boesak and Griffen is like. Most intriguing to me about this important work, however, is not their shared

prophetic vision from different contexts that speaks to the *zeitgeist* of the twenty-first century. Nor is it their dogged determination to preach hope amid hopeless situations—Griffen in the wake of the Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Elaine, Arkansas, massacres and Boesak in the wake of the Sharpeville massacre (under the old pharaoh) and the Marikana massacre (under the new pharaoh who looks just like us).

Most intriguing to me is the prophetic boldness with which both of these men of God address the illegal state of Israel/Zionism and its vicious, inhumane treatment of the Palestinians from the Nakba in 1948 to Gaza in 2023. These two Christian pastors write parables of hope that parallel the writings of Jewish thinkers like Marc Ellis in *Judaism Does Not Equal Israel* and Ilan Pappé in *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*. Boesak and Griffen's prophetic vision on this matter and every justice matter they address gives me a glimpse of the global dimension that justice ministry has taken and continues to take.

This powerful volume flies in the face of Audre Lorde's maxim that says you cannot destroy the master's house using the master's tools. Griffen and Boesak are both trained jurists and theologians. Their formal training, however, was at the master's hands. They take those tools and masterfully (pardon the pun) proceed to destroy the master's house in this volume that they have co-authored.

What Audre Lorde did not take into account in her maxim, however, was the "extra-judicial" (pardon the pun again) training that both Griffen and Boesak received at the hands of their people—not at the hands of the master, not at the master's institutions of higher learning, and not inside the walls of the racist institutions of settler colonialism. What Griffen got at the kitchen table of the Griffen household and what Boesak got flowing in the waves of the Camissa River that runs down from Table Mount underneath the city of Cape Town are not the master's tools. They are the combined wisdom of enslaved Africans who fought for their own freedom and the Khoi San who never bought into the lies of the white invaders of their sacred grounds.

That fascinating combination helped produce the volume you hold in your hands. It is our prayer that the parables told by Jesus and the parables that these two men of faith have woven together will bless your lives and cause you to answer their question addressed to us in the Epilogue in the affirmative.

Parables were the primary pedagogy of the African and African American way of teaching important lessons. Just like the spirituals created by the enslaved Africans in the United States, parables function on many different levels. Parables are like onions. The more you peel away layer after layer, the stronger the smell of the onion becomes and the more powerful its ability to change the taste of the

food in which it is used as seasoning. So it was with the parables of Jesus, and so it is with the parables told by Boesak and Griffen.

Since we are talking about the “taste,” let me close with a parable of my own. Dr. Charles H. Long, the preeminent African American professor of the History of Religions, shared this parable with his students at the University of Chicago Divinity School.

Suppose you are to bake a cake and you mix up all of the ingredients perfectly: flour, milk, butter, baking powder, vanilla extract, cinnamon, and nutmeg. Then, you preheat the oven to the desired temperature while you mix the ingredients in a mixing bowl.

Next, you pour the ingredients from the bowl into a baking pan, put that pan in the oven, and let it bake for the accurate amount of time. Then, you pull the cake out of the oven, place it on a wooden baking board, and prepare to add icing when you suddenly realize you have forgotten to put the sugar in with the initial ingredients.

There is no way you can pour sugar on the top of the concoction you just pulled out of the oven and make it a cake. It can never be a cake. The constituting elements determine that it is something less than a cake!

It can be what Black Virginians will recognize as hot water cornbread, but it can't be a cake! Why? Because you forgot one of the constituting elements—sugar.

You cannot pour sugar on the top of that concoction and call it “cake.” All you have to do is scrape the sugar off the top, and you will have what you had at the beginning of this concoction, which is missing the most important ingredient for it to be a cake. You cannot put icing on the mess you have made and call it cake. You are missing one of the constituting elements.

It is the same with the Constitution of the United States of America. The constituting elements of this document determined that Africans were never full citizens of the United States. You cannot put sugar on top of that mess. The Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments are sugar on the top of an imperfectly constituted mess. All you have to do is scrape those amendments off, scrape the sugar off, and the resulting mess will be as it was in 1787. It remains a mess. With *Roe v. Wade* having been removed, scraped off, can the Nineteenth Amendment be far behind? Can the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments be far behind the Nineteenth Amendment?

The answer is an unequivocal no! The framers of the Constitution—the new framers—have to do what they did in South Africa. The South Africans had to build on the Freedom Charter. They had to construct a whole new constitution, this time including the sugar that was omitted in the first concoction.

The new constitution needed in the United States must include the “brown sugar” of Africans as citizens, LGBTQ people as citizens, the right of a woman to choose what happens to her own body—all of this must be part of the sugar that was omitted in the first 1787 concoction. Otherwise, we will end up with the same old mess, rearranging the furniture on the *Titanic*.

Boesak and Griffen have laid out the ingredients for a new cake—this time with the sugar included as one of the constituting elements. The new meal has been prepared. “Oh taste and see that the Lord is good. Blessed is the one who trusts in God!”

Enjoy the meal. The table is set.

Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr.
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Preface

Dr. Teresa Smallwood



Some kairos moments come when exigencies present conditions so dire that God must lift holy actors to usher in crucial correctives, change, or direction to bring alignment between God and God’s people. Such a prophetic mandate is evident in this manuscript. It is a venerable response to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s pronouncement of “the fierce urgency of now” because it relates to the triple evils that Dr. King wrote about in his final manuscript *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* This volume provides a roadmap to reparations, biblical exigency, cultural competency, and political expediency.

The authors evaluate the failures of world systems as well as purported faith-based initiatives in specific regions related to racism, poverty, and militarism. Racism and its cousin xenophobia continue to shroud humanity with the death clothes of incarceration, economic insufficiency, cultural exploitation, old and new Jim Crow. Racist governance is so palpable that truth appears to have been overcome by lies—the very manifestation of evil operating as an “angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14, NRSV). Poverty continues to ravage people all over the world. Efforts to deal with hunger and homelessness are meager and ineffective. Militarism continues in the interstices of Myanmar, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Russia, North America (particularly in the streets of the USA through the “blood-letting” of police brutality), South America, Asia, and Africa. Reminiscent of the holy anger of *David Walker’s Appeal*, the political resolve of the Black Manifesto, the sobering reasoning of the Belhar Confession, and the spiritual prowess of the ancestors, this book comes at a time when the world needs credible, godly witnesses, witnesses who commune with God, who speak for God as true prophets sent by God.

One born and raised in South Africa and the other born and raised in North America—brothers, nonetheless, in Spirit, discernment, integrity, and prophetic power—Allan Boesak and Wendell Griffen bring cosmic, holy insight for the scriptural exegete and the Bible aficionado as well as the skeptic. Leaving no stones unturned, the authors confront the issues of the present world, and while “standing in awe of the mystery, [they] embrace the prophetic.” This volume is replete with example upon example of where we went wrong in the last fifty-five years since the death of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The prophetic has been used to describe those who speak and act as representatives of God. That general definition, however, has been coopted by those who present themselves as sheep but are literally wolves in sheep's clothing. This point is treated in the following pages with an ardent and precise analysis that will enlighten the most erudite scholarly minds. This book aims to fill the void in the intellectual as well as the spiritual study of biblical exegesis by separating the "marrow from the bone" in critical, cultural interpretation from stories about Moses and the burning bush to stories about the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. This volume explicates the wise counsel of God in strategically employing women in the work of God's kin(g)dom. No other volume confronts false prophets the way this work does by identifying the insidious shackles placed upon the church through slavish mentalities sold out to "imperialism, racism, capitalism, authoritarianism, sexism, militarism, technocentrism, religious nationalism, and xenophobia."

This manuscript will ably support students of theology as it examines a plethora of political events through the insightful use of scripture. It will enhance scholarly research with its in-depth and keen reflection on key sociopolitical events germane to the rise of nationalism, populism, greed, and avarice around the world. It is an invaluable resource for the clerical body, especially those who are pastoring, because it will serve as a standard bearer to awaken those who have been lulled to sleep by the opiate of prosperity. It is also a consummate checkpoint for those in elected positions who have adopted the meaning of "under God" with the solipsistic notion of a self-absorbed nimbus. This is a manuscript to equip God's people for *prophetic activism*.

Rev. Dr. Teresa Smallwood

James Franklin Kelly and Hope Eyster Kelly Associate Professor of Public
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United Lutheran Seminary

Introduction

“Utter Chaos Under the Heavens”



As 2022 was limping towards its end, Irish Minister of Foreign Affairs Simon Coveney, at the end of Ireland’s stint on the UN Security Council and looking back at that year, observed, “The world is a crazy and tragic place.”¹ Those words caught all sorts of headlines because they struck a chord with people all over the world. Just more than half a century ago, amid the turbulent sixties, Mao Tse Tung, the father of the Chinese Revolution, saw it and said it better. Mao observed the situation in China, appraised the historic moment, and reportedly said this: “Under the heavens, everything is utter chaos.” Then he added, “The situation is excellent.”²

This is a book about parables for our times. We work with selected passages of Scripture, reading and interpreting them as parables as we attempt to understand and discern the signs of our times that we may now, perhaps too benignly, describe as times of great upheaval and confusion. The climate crisis alone, with floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, heat waves, and cold spells that broke every previous record, not to speak of the life-threatening situations in certain parts of our planet, has removed any doubt about how serious that crisis really is. The rising tides of panic on many Pacific islands, for instance, do not even begin to match the ferocity of the rising tides of the ocean that will now certainly, sooner rather than later, swallow them up and wipe them out.

However, it is the apparent combination of inability, shortsightedness, incomprehensible incompetence, and stubborn lack of political will, again on display at the most recent climate conference in Cairo, *even now*, that really reveals the depths of the crisis. The stunningly reckless abandon with which the still unseemly powerful, neo-liberal capitalist forces are wreaking havoc on what is left of the global economy and on the lives of the world’s most vulnerable humans is another. COVID-19, with the appearance of new variants just as we thought we might be getting out of the woods, remains a stubborn, death-dealing menace. But we begin with the observations of two political leaders as each were pondering their own times. Might it be that the words of these two world leaders, uttered at such different times, are in themselves a parable for our times?

Mr. Simon Coveney was speaking at the United Nations—to the whole world, in other words—and for him, the “craziness” and “tragedy” of this world

mostly meant the war in Ukraine, invaded by Russia, and the consequences for all of Europe. He also spoke about the ongoing crisis in Syria and the failure of the Security Council to secure peace, allowing the never-ending influx of refugees into European countries. A solution there was possible, he says, “but it’s all up to Russia,” whose veto on the Security Council blocks every possible exit from this treadmill of horrors.

Mr. Coveney is correct about the stranglehold the right to veto any Security Council resolution by the five major powers—the US, Russia, the UK, China, and France—has over the efficacy of such resolutions. He is also right that Russia has stepped in repeatedly to protect Syria. Mr. Coveney knows, too, that at this moment a significant portion of North Eastern Syria, with its rich oil reserves, is being militarily occupied by the United States, while the US is literally stealing Syria’s oil for itself—an average of 66,000 barrels per day, according to sources—which is a war crime. Russia does protect Syria and its present leadership. But selective forgetfulness does not make the world a less crazy place. In fact, it adds to the tragedy of world politics at the moment.

Simon Coveney did not mention Yemen, and he did not admonish the United States for its role in that genocidal war driven by Saudi Arabia, who was not mentioned either. Not a word about the forty years of failure of the Security Council on Israel, the Nakba, the occupation, and the question of justice and freedom for Palestinians, worse in 2022 than ever before. He did not mention “Israeli apartheid” and the tragedies it is causing the Palestinian people, while Europe, washing its hands like Pontius Pilate, looks on, supports it, and profits from it, while the US blocks every effort at the UN to hold Israel to account.

The Irish Minister of Foreign Affairs spoke much about the war in Ukraine, and that war, as every war, is a tragedy, no question. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is a contravention of international law. But it is even more tragic if we hear not a word about the craziness that got that war started. US military experts like Scott Ritter, who also served as UN inspector on the Iraq weapons of mass destruction investigation, and retired Colonel Douglass McGregor, to mention only two, along with respected academics such as Noam Chomsky, John Mearsheimer, and Jeffrey Sachs have all exhaustively explained the reasons for what has become the NATO/US/war against Russia in Ukraine.³ They explained the foolish determination of NATO expansion toward the borders of Russia, totally ignoring the legitimate security concerns of Russia, or the rush toward war, eschewing every path to diplomatic solutions. The point they unflinchingly make is that this is a war that could have been prevented. It was truly bewildering to see Boris Johnson, then Prime Minister of the UK, rush to Kyiv, not once but at least twice, to stop Volodymyr Zelensky from even thinking about any peace talks with Russia, who

seemed to be ready for it. And as this is being written, Johnson, now an ordinary UK Member of Parliament, is in Ukraine again, and nobody knows why. If one has to go on his record, though, it can only be to make sure that peace talks are ruled out, and the war is prolonged. And what to say of Democratic Congressman Adam Schiff's now infamous words from December 20, 2022, "We'll fight them [the Russians] until the last Ukrainian"? On which Senator Lindsey Graham doubled down on a recent visit to Ukraine: "Russians are dying and it's the best money we've ever spent."⁴ The despicable absurdity of such intentions may have escaped the senator's war-mongering mind, but it certainly will not have escaped the mind of the mothers and families of those soldiers in Ukraine. In perfect accord with US Congress spending patterns and allocations, year after year, the most money is in any case always spent on war and death—never on health care, education, infrastructure or student debt relief. But to boast, in the company of the Ukrainian leadership, that these amounts are actually the "best" money ever spent because it kills Russians, even if Ukrainian soldiers die in vastly disproportionate numbers in this war gone so horribly wrong for Ukraine—is that not unspeakably "tragic" and "crazy"? That Senator Graham's remark passed without much public comment, let alone public indignation, is perhaps in itself a parable for our times.

Meanwhile, we have learned about the even more foolish and dangerous goal of "regime change" in Russia that slipped out of President Biden's mouth in his infamous speech in Poland.⁵ Not a word about the craziness of European governments plunging headlong into US-driven sanctions of Russia that turned out to be devastating to those same European countries as one sanctions package after another proved an utter failure and in fact backfired on Europe. Or what we know now: that the West used the Minsk Agreements, which were meant to prevent the war in the first place, as mere "delaying tactics" according to former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, at last coming clean in her now famous interview in *Der Spiegel*. And before the week was over, this was confirmed by former French president Francois Hollande.⁶ All of which leads us to yet another, perhaps even more disturbing question. Does this mean that what has become known as "the collective West" not only shuns diplomacy as it almost instinctively leans towards war but is also now incapable of diplomacy—that it has, in its captivity to its military-industrial complexes and imperialistic, ideological blindness, lost completely the art of diplomacy? That would be tragic indeed.

Not a word about the tragedy of the war because the West is pouring billions of dollars into the most corrupt country in Europe, shunning every attempt to demand accountability for all those weapons and money. Not a word either about one of the most disturbing facts of all: that the proudly liberal, democratic

Western nations are backing a dictator in Ukraine who in turn is backed by Nazis who revere the infamous Stefan Bandera as a national icon; backing a government who is banning opposition news channels, throwing opposition leaders in prison, supporting the publication of a “kill list” on the internet of those who dissent, and suppressing people’s language and cultural rights in the Donbass, Donetsk, and Luhansk. President Zelensky is persecuting a Christian church in the Ukraine, locking up its priests, and confiscating its properties. It is tragic that while everybody else, certainly in the Global South, knows all this, the Western media barely ever mention it, suppress the truth about it even as they discover that truth, and denounce those who do raise these issues as “Putin puppets.” That epithet alone has the power to shut off all rational discussion, it seems. And because the all-powerful Western media do not mention it, it does not exist. Making mature, informed debate on issues of such global importance impossible while so much is at stake—is that not “crazy” and “tragic”?

Are Russia’s troops committing war crimes in Ukraine? Are Ukrainian troops committing war crimes in the Donbass? No war is without crimes, and every war is a crime. So Mr. Putin may very well be a war criminal. But so is every Western leader who has ever backed the United States in its illegal, never-ending wars in the Third World, and who has not had the courage to engage in a single meaningful act against Israel’s occupation and the war crimes it is committing on a daily basis. Instead, they parade Mr. Zelensky from world stage to world stage, pronouncing him “the closest thing to Churchill we have ever seen.” And again, from a Third World point of view, they may not be entirely wrong. The denunciation of Russia sounds utterly hollow if it comes from the mouth of someone like Ms. Victoria Nuland, US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, an open, warmongering neo-conservative and a key architect of the 2014 Maidan coup in Ukraine. So, as one weeps for the tragedy befalling the suffering people of Ukraine, one should rise up in outrage at the hypocrisy, egotism, and greed that make it possible and acceptable in the eyes of far too many in the Western world, for they believe their leaders in this war, like Mao in the Cultural Revolution, have some “higher” goal in mind.

Perhaps the craziness and tragedy is not that Mr. Coveney is right about our world but that he is deliberately only halfway right, and he knows it. It is crazy to bemoan the tragedies of a proxy war that could have been prevented were it not for imperialist greed, egotism, and political foolishness on a scale unheard of in modern history. The tragedy is not only that Third World people are suffering unimaginable consequences from a war they did not start, have nothing to do with, and have no interest to maintain. It is also that the Third World in the Rich North, the poor, powerless, and unprivileged, the people of colour, the have-nots

and the never-will-haves, have no say in any of this. Despite living in proudly proclaimed “democracies,” they have no way to influence the debates, no power to stop the carnage done to others in their name, no choice but to swallow the lies told in their name, no say in this bleak future being created for their children in their name.

Except if they flood the streets in their thousands, disrupt the workings of their captured democracies so that genuine democracy may stand a chance; except if, through their righteous anger, they dismantle the death-dealing systems that rule over them so that they may save their lives. The tragedy is that almost nowhere in the world do we see signs of the wisdom of that great African American scholar/intellectual/activist, W. E. B. Du Bois, as he searched for what he called the politics of decency, honesty, integrity, courage, and virtue, the immortal wisdom of which we will return to again and again in the chapters that follow. Meanwhile, the real, and only, winners in the war in Ukraine, or Yemen, or Mali, or the Congo, are the arms manufacturing companies in the US who, restless and dissatisfied after the end of the war in Afghanistan, are now once again posting record profits. And of course the politicians who line up to do their bidding.

To say that Mao Tse-tung saw it better is not at all to say that the Chinese Cultural Revolution was “better,” less bloody, less tragic, or that the situation in 1960s China was less chaotic than our global situation right now. Far from it. The deaths of 500,000 to one million Chinese citizens in the brutal purges just about everywhere in society, with students taking the lead in a zeal whose lethality still stuns the mind, can never be justified. That, on top of the millions who perished through bad policy decisions, famine, and bloodshed, not even counting the ruination of the lives of millions more during the preceding “Great Leap Forward” of the late 1950s, is beyond tragic. Mao is not wiser because of his belief that “power comes out of the barrel of a gun,” even though those same Western leaders who despise him so much have clung ferociously to that belief for as long as anyone can remember.⁷

But sometimes human beings, even in their utter sinfulness, as though they cannot help it, have insights of wisdom that can influence others, with the advantage of hindsight, to gain a deeper understanding of our own situations. Such wisdom from Mao lies in the four words he adds to his observation: “The situation is excellent.” For Mao, it might have meant that chaos, in and of itself, is “excellent,” and that what he wanted to achieve is more easily achieved by the chaos his cultural revolution had created. In light of the historical evidence, that might be partly true. However, what we in our own times may learn from what Mao said is that when the chaos in any situation is too obvious to ignore, too devastating to be disowned, or downplayed, and when the tragedies piling up because of misuse

and greed and abuse of power can no longer be trivialized, people have no choice but to open their eyes and see the truth of it all. Denial of that truth is no longer possible, and people realize not only that too much is at stake but also that they are the ones to do something about it. That is why the situation is “excellent.” It is not the chaos by itself that is excellent. It is the realization of the *causes* of that chaos—that it is not divinely appointed or ordained and that human beings have it in their power to change the situation in which they find themselves. That is the situation that is excellent. So Mao, as I read him, is teaching us that in utter, undeniable chaos, humankind may find their most hopeful potential.

But here is the rub. Mao knew, as our modern politicians know, that people always crave hope. The more desperate the situation, the more desperate we are for hope. With death and destruction all around, hope is a force that gives us life. Politicians have always relentlessly exploited that deeply implanted, inescapable human desire. What Mao did with that inextinguishable hope as potential for change that would save China and serve humankind is the tragedy of his times. Perhaps one reason for China’s spectacular success today is that they have learned from their mistakes. Perhaps the mistakes of Mao are also read as a parable for the China we encounter today, a global power to be reckoned with. What our modern politicians are doing with the still living hope of the masses is the tragedy we are facing right now, and it is exactly what comes under critique in this book. That is why the words of these two leaders are a parable for our times.

But even half-right, Mr. Coveney is not completely wrong, as a cursory glance at our global situation will verify. Gender-based violence, in its never-ending and ever-growing horrors, was a pandemic long before COVID-19. Apart from the ongoing devastation of the COVID pandemic, two scientists have now warned, in an article published by Al Jazeera, that the new pandemic is hunger.⁸ Oxfam continues to point out that global socioeconomic, gender, and racial inequalities, as well as inequality that exists between countries, “are tearing our world apart.”⁹ This, Oxfam goes on to say, is not by chance or accident but by choice: “economic violence is perpetrated when structural policy choices are made for the benefit of the richest and most powerful people.” Another Oxfam report from 2022 makes the point precisely and graphically: socioeconomic inequalities all by themselves—not pandemics or natural disasters or war—are costing the lives of 21,000 people globally every day. That is one person dying every four seconds.

In Afghanistan, one year after the US lost the war there and left, the US is continuing the war through other means—almost, one is compelled to conclude, out of sheer spite, belligerence, and wounded pride. The US has placed punishing sanctions on the country, including on medicines and medical aid, and has frozen the country’s assets, crippling the economy. Six million Afghans are now at risk of

famine. Groups even more extreme than the Taliban continue the terrors perpetrated on the people for so many decades now, and the most recent bombing of a school as we write this left dozens dead. Most were girls.¹⁰

In Yemen, on top of the war, the naval blockade, the internal strife, and deadly political uncertainties, the people have to cope with yet another kind of disaster. Because of the sanctions, medicines are very hard to come by. Smuggled-in, contaminated medicines have just killed at least ten children.¹¹ The Horn of Africa is facing yet another famine, Libya's slave markets are still thriving, and Sudan, Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea Bissau, and Guinea have all suffered military coup d'états in the last year or two.¹²

In South Africa, the hopes and dreams of the people who have struggled so hard for so long have been betrayed in indescribable ways. We are a people severely diminished by politics without principles, leadership without vision, policies without commitment, and hence by failure after failure. We are drowning in corruption and lies and cover-ups. We are plagued by deceit and confounded by subterfuge. Our disastrous choices in economic policies have deepened the generational impoverishment of our people while creating new millionaires every second week, it seems, making us the most unequal society in the world today. Just how far have we sunk when the president hides millions of dollars in his mattress while the colonialist, white-controlled media tell us to look the other way; the Reserve Bank, the South African Revenue Service, and the National Prosecuting Authority seem to have lost their collective tongue; and those in parliament who demand accountability are ignored, outvoted, shouted down, and suspended? South Africa is one of the most tragic examples of how a noble struggle for freedom can lose its way.

In the United States, the signs of fascism masquerading in the words and symbols of religious nationalism and white supremacist nativism continue to grow. White people who call themselves evangelical Christians began moving towards authoritarianism in opposition to the New Deal social safety net policies of the Franklin D. Roosevelt presidency and the action by Roosevelt's successor, Harry S. Truman, to desegregate the US military in 1948. Billy Graham and other white religious leaders rejected appeals by Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders to join calls for an end to Jim Crow segregation. In 1948, Southern politicians led by South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond broke from the Democratic Party to form a splinter group known as the Dixiecrats. Although their efforts to defeat Truman in 1948 failed, Thurmond's Dixiecrats grew numerically and in political strength after the 1954 US Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* declared racial segregation in public education unconstitutional.

Southern white Democratic politicians opposed public school desegregation, voting rights, equal rights for women, collective bargaining efforts by workers, anti-poverty initiatives proposed during the Lyndon Johnson presidency, and Medicare. Their stance was almost never challenged by white Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish clergy of any faith, a fact made clear by Martin Luther King Jr.'s now famous "Letter from Birmingham City Jail." Religious nationalism was not obvious, however. Rather, white religious leaders led by Billy Graham became cheerleaders for US military adventures in Southeast Asia, South America, and the Caribbean. They cheered pro-Zionist policies in Palestine and supported the white apartheid regime in South Africa.

White religious tolerance for authoritarianism rose to new levels when Ronald Reagan ran for the US presidency in 1980 against then President Jimmy Carter. Carter's reelection bid ended in defeat because white voters and their religious leaders embraced Reagan's pro-capitalist Cold War nationalism and militarism; his opposition to racial justice, voting rights, and equal rights for women; his support for Israeli expansion in Palestine; and his support (with British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher) of the white apartheid regime in South Africa. The so-called "war on drugs" begun during the presidency of Richard Nixon continued during the Reagan presidency but took on new meaning as news unfolded that the Reagan Administration used Central American drug-smuggling operations to finance illegal arms deals in what became known as the Iran-Contra Scandal.

As cocaine smuggled into the US during and after the Reagan presidency made its way to urban streets, Reagan and US presidents after him increased militarization of local law enforcement agencies. The result of that militarization was that the "war on drugs" became a frontal attack on civil liberties, especially in indigenous, Black, and Latinx communities. Thanks to those efforts, the increased voting strength of Black persons in the US brought about by the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was undercut. Mass incarceration in the US, the nation whose national anthem boasts of being the "land of the free," is now higher than anywhere else in the world.

Militarization of law enforcement, voter suppression, and intimidation against the people whose ancestors were enslaved were joined by repression against recognition of the rights of women and girls to exercise autonomy over their reproductive choices. Those oppressive efforts combined with bigotry and discrimination against gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer persons. The generation of white religious people who were in grade school during the civil rights gains of the 1960s did not become more affirming, welcoming, or accepting of human diversity, pluralism, and autonomy. Instead, neo-fundamentalist, white supremacist, patriarchal, and militarist religious authoritarianism was

preached from white evangelical pulpits and broadcast over “Christian” radio and television channels. According to that worldview, expressions of human diversity, reproductive choice autonomy, demands that racial and other social inequities be recognized and remedied, and efforts to address corporate greed were more than issues to be pondered. They were threats to “the way things used to be.”

Strangely, white people in the United States who professed to follow Jesus came to view immigrants as threats rather than people to be welcomed. Those who claimed to be followers of the Palestinian Jew whose entire life was lived under Roman occupiers and whose death sentence was ordered and carried out by Roman occupiers came to champion Israeli occupation of Palestinian land. Somehow, people who professed to follow the itinerant rabbi named Jesus who rebelled against sacralized greed and disregard for the vulnerable came to champion greed and vilify vulnerable persons. Somehow, people associated with the religion of Jesus brokered so many deals with free-market capitalists, white supremacists, misogynists, and bigots that Christianity can no longer hide its complicity in imperialism, colonialism, oppressive capitalism, white supremacy, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, militarism, environmental destruction, xenophobia, and global apartheid. In the minds of many people of colour, women and girls, people whose sexuality is expressed outside a heterosexual binary, people who are impoverished, indigenous people, and people who seek asylum and refuge from oppressive regimes in the world, Christianity is not a moral and ethical critique about oppressive power.

Instead, it has become such a dominant belief system for sacralizing oppressive power and providing religious cover for so much injustice that even Jesus would be mistreated, misrepresented, and murdered by it. The experiences of George Floyd, Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, Palestinians, immigrants, women, girls, victims from Pulse nightclub in Orlando, drone victims in Iraq and Afghanistan, people in Haiti, and survivors of domestic terror attacks where reproductive services were provided to women and girls before the US Supreme Court overturned the 1973 decision in *Roe v. Wade* by its 2022 decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* demonstrate this point. The litany of terrors, with no end in sight at this point, do not merely fatigue the mind. They terrify the soul.

In this book, we read selected scriptural passages as parables for these situations and our times, just as the observations of Chairman Mao and Foreign Minister Coveney are in themselves a parable. This is how politicians read the signs of the times. The challenge this book attempts to confront is how Christians, standing in the tradition of the biblical prophets and of Jesus of Nazareth, and the prophets of today read and discern the signs of our own times. How do we interpret the situations contemporary politics is creating for especially the poor and

oppressed, the vulnerable and excluded children of God? How do we reclaim not only our prophetic imagination but also the boldness and courage to enact it in the dismantling of what is wrong, unjust, and inhuman, as Walter Brueggemann has long since urged us to do?¹³

We talk of parables not as stories about tragedies or chaos in the observations of politicians whose politics is so flawed that their perceived wisdom drowns in the tragedies their own politics created and keeps creating. We speak of parables as Jesus told them, as subversive of the politics of these men and women of power and subversive of their ultimate intentions that in both cases, then and now, were and are so contrary to the politics of Jesus. And to be clear, for us, Jesus is not just a social but also a political revolutionary as Black liberation theologian Obery Hendricks describes him:

To say that Jesus was a political revolutionary is to say that the message he proclaimed not only called for change in individual hearts but also demanded sweeping and comprehensive change in political, social, and economic structures in his setting in life: colonized Israel. It means that if Jesus had his way, the Roman Empire and the ruling elites among his own people either would no longer have held their positions of power, or if they did, would have had to conduct themselves very, very differently. It means that his ministry was to radically change the distribution of authority, power, goods and resources, so all people—particularly the little people, or “the least of these,” as Jesus called them—might have lives free of political oppression, enforced hunger and poverty, and undue insecurity.¹⁴

In what follows, we take the lead of New Testament scholar William R. Herzog II, who sees the parables of Jesus as “subversive speech” coming from the mouth of Jesus as “pedagogue of the oppressed.”¹⁵ In telling these parables in the language of resistance, Jesus was subverting and undermining the narratives disseminated and enforced by the elites and the dominant classes, correcting and upending the assumptions that in turn upheld the unjust status quo. Jesus’ parables questioned the situations created by the powerful, which they expected the people to accept as evidential truth. Jesus was telling these parables to the poor, oppressed, colonized, and occupied people of Galilee, teaching them how to really understand the situations they found themselves in, hence the subtitle of Herzog’s brilliant study: “Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed.” Jesus was not just telling stories. He was decolonizing the people’s minds, revolutionizing them. This is exactly what we have in mind when we ponder these selected portions of scripture as parables for

our time. We read them as parables that teach us about our politics and the death-dealing calamities it creates, in contrast to the politics of God and the life-giving possibilities it creates, and that call us to prophetic faith and hope to persevere in these times of great peril.

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