

SACLA II – Pretoria – 7 to 11 July, 2003

Tuesday, 8 July, 2003

WHERE HAS THE CHURCH FAILED IN THE REALM OF EDUCATION?

By Prof BRIAN O'CONNELL

Thank you for inviting me to speak at this important assembly. I believe we are indeed at the crossroads in our country's journey, and this meeting is timely. Its deliberations, its decisions and its messages will no doubt greatly influence the path we choose.

We are gathered together in this forum to reflect on Christianity and Education, with the focus today on Repentance – the act of accepting responsibility for one actions and the sins embedded in them and seeking forgiveness both from those against whom one had sinned and from our God.

Some regard "The Tempest" as Shakespeare greatest work, and Miranda's reference to "a brave new world", as one of the most poignant and ironic in literature.

It is a great work, a story of betrayal and hurt and repentance and forgiveness, reconciliation and hope, and the resolve to make good. It is a tale about all those things that are the best and the worst in us. "The Tempest" is certainly the work of a mature craftsman and a gentle soul, presenting us with the full spectrum of our foolishness while also saying that we are also something else, courageous and kind and capable of the most extraordinary acts of generosity. Perhaps, it seems to suggest, we can, in fact, construct a brave new world.

"The Tempest" is then, essentially, about repentance and reconciliation, about calculated evil done and about the largeness of the human spirit, about the triumph of the spirit of mercy and forgiveness over the instincts of revenge and retribution. We know from our own experiences, big and small, just how difficult this is. We know that all around the world there are people who cannot and will not repent and those who cannot and will not forgive, people who cannot and will not be reconciled and who cannot and will not make reparation, and who are being destroyed by this, just as surely as they are destroying those around them.

The Jesus story told by the evangelists and developed by Paul and the Church fathers after him, is the story of healing the breach between God and humankind, and being welcomed back into God's house renewed.

I am a Christian and a Catholic, and my church's sacrament of repentance is the sacrament of reconciliation: I have erred. I am weak. I am sorry. Help me to help myself. Where I have hurt others, help me to heal the wounds. I resolve not to be parted from you and my brothers and sisters again. Even as a young altar boy, reciting my responses in Latin, I felt the weight and the majesty of that cry of sorrow and repentance and reconciliation: *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*. We are led to make this cry with humility and confidence by our belief in the mercy of our God, who will embrace us and be reconciled with us, if we seek to recognise our sins and seek forgiveness.

Repent and be reconciled, forgive and be reconciled.

Throughout history, there are those who acted in this spirit, those who would choose the harder path: "Blessed are the peacemakers," and we remember them with wonder, for we know that their way is perhaps contrary to our nature, it is perhaps counter-intuitive – Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mandela, Tutu. What else ties the first three together is that they all died violent deaths at the hands of those who would not be reconciled. It stands to the credit of South Africa, that the last two have been granted the space to lead a nation to reconciliation.

But given our chosen path of reconciliation what remains to be said about repentance and education? Is there still some unfinished business here? Have we not exorcised all the demons through the Truth and reconciliation Commission (TRC) and should we not simply proceed to contribute to the creation of a new order on the basis on our constitutional framework? We are constantly reminded of, or chastised about, the fact that we are nine years into the new republic, that apartheid is dead and we should bury it.

I am sure that it is the resolve of most South Africans not to memorialise the past, and to remain fixated there, but we ignore at our peril the proposition that history is the process of continuity and change, that the challenge is to understand the sins committed, to understand their legacy, to understand our weaknesses as a species and to be alerted to the need for vigilance as we attempt to shape our future. We must do this because, as Shakespeare so presciently warns us: "The evil that men do lives after them..." not just in reputation, but in consequence.

So, what are our "educational" sins; what is the evil that men did that lives with us still and that requires us to engage with it purposely so as to heal the festering sores? To answer that I ask first what education must do for a nation, and what in our past and present gets in the way.

Brian Simon argues that the "purpose of schooling is the induction of pupils into knowledge and the development of their skills and abilities that derive from the objectives of an all round ...education appropriate to the time".

John Nixon says that "the deeper significance of learning lies through its forming of our powers and capacities in our unfolding agency". (Nixon 1996:49)

Manuel Castells, in his brilliant analysis of development in this digital age, takes up this theme of constant change and great technological leaps, and argues that no individual or nation is now capable of dealing with the multitude of natural and social challenges in isolation. The answer lies in education and the development of supportive networks, in knowledge and collaboration, in informed partnerships.

All three suggest that we acquire knowledge so that we can interact with our world in all its complexity, and change it. They suggest that we are not victims of structure and while structure has a significant role they are not a determinant influence. We can, we must, proceed as confident agents impacting on both our natural and social worlds, and create the enabling environments that facilitate our growth and well-being.

All three share the view that education is indispensable for development, because knowledge to inform individual, and collaborative choices and action in response to the challenges of change, lie at the heart of a people's life-chances.

If we agree, at least with this view of the role of education, then we can proceed to assess the sins, the evil that lives on. We could start this quest in pre-colonial times, or follow Van Riebeeck and the Dutch East India Company (DEIC) and the British when they held sway, but I wish to fast forward to 1948, to when a foundation document that was to have devastating consequences for education and development in South Africa, issued in the name of Christianity, was published.

The document was written by an Afrikaner cultural organisation, the FAK, and it argued for a policy of Christian National Education for South Africa. The document argued for:

1. A country of separate nations;
2. The propagation, protestation and development of the culture of the separate nations on Christian and National Principles;
3. A conception of nationalism based on the preservation of the language, culture, history of the Afrikaner people;
4. Afrikaner education based on this principle of nationalism and on life and world view of parents, based on the Bible as expressed in the creeds of the three Afrikaans churches.

There is a sense in which these arguments are perfectly reasonable, and that it would be the right of any nation to decide on the principles that guide that nation's vision and endeavours. The devastating legacy of the framework proposed is contained in articles 14 and 15 of the document which contextualises these principles and the arguments based on them.

In Article 14, entitled Coloured Teaching and Education, the relationship between the Afrikaner and the coloured community is established. "We believe that coloured teaching must be seen as a subordinate part of the vocation and task of the Afrikaner. We accept the principle of trusteeship of the Afrikaner over the non-white".

Here a hierarchical relationship between the benevolent Afrikaner trustee, and the child-like coloured

people is proposed, with the trustees having “the sacred obligation to see to it that the coloured man is educated according to the Christian and national principles”, as “only when the coloured man has been Christianised can he and will he be truly happy and ... secure against his own heathen and all kinds of foreign ideologies”. It argues further that the national principle as applied to the coloured man required that the coloured man must be made race-conscious, and that his salvation lay in his “grasping that he is a separate race group, that he should be proud of”. It followed then that education would seek to create this proud, separate, subordinate coloured nation. This, too, might be argued away, using the notion of a developing people’s right to secure their self-determination with the aid of a benevolent, developed friend.

The last sentence of article 14 provides another, more calculating perspective: “The financing of coloured education must be placed on such a basis that it does not occur at the cost of white education.” Clearly neither equity nor equality was envisaged.

Article 15, which deals with African (Bantu) Teaching and Education, follows broadly the same argument, with a few interesting twists. Instead of the Afrikaner now claiming stewardship for “native” education and development, this now becomes the task of “white SA”, with the Afrikaner as senior trustee. The call is still to Christianisation, and the task must be based on the principles of “trusteeship, no equality and segregation”. Education must then seek to secure for the “native” this unequal, inferior status.

Article 15 ends by stating that separate nationalism remained a priority, but Afrikaans and English would have a special status. The state, in collaboration with the Christian Protestant churches, should give and control native education, but that this should be transferred to the natives themselves over time, but still under state control. Again, the proviso, that all of this must not occur “to the cost of white education”, is stated.

A study of the history of South African Education and Governance will detect clear evidence of the power of this Christian National Education document in shaping the thoughts and policies of the apartheid government. The Bantu Education Act of 1953, the pass laws of that decade, the slew of apartheid legislation in the 60s, including the Group Areas Act, the Native Advisory Council Act, the Coloured and Indian Education Acts, and Act 39 of 1967 on National Education Policy, which states explicitly that education must have both a Christian and a national character, the creation of the homelands and the further alienation of South Africans from one another through ethnic division, the development of separate ethnic higher education institutions, and the funding of education in the ratio 5:3:1 for the categories white, coloured and black, all bear the stamp of the FAK policy. This document is clarion proof of the truth of the caveat that leaders must take great care of what they say and do. Their acts and utterances have consequences.

But where in all of this is the sin, the need for repentance, what evil that lives after? We repent because the policy of separation of the people of South Africa on race and ethnic lines severely impeded the development and growth of a South African identity. The entire apartheid apparatus and all of its agents diverted the energy and the resources away from nation building towards the development and maintenance of separate identities, inhabiting separate spaces, a policy without any hope of being sustained. And so it proved.

We repent because South Africans were prevented from developing a deep respect for diversity in unity and we delayed the process of nation building by more than 50 years. And we repent because, to quote Shakespeare: “All the interim was like a miasmal mist and a hideous dream.”

We repent because as a nation we are now engaged in a desperate struggle for survival. We must now, when faced with incredible internal, continental and global changes, first try to construct a unity of vision, a unity of purpose. We must first attempt to break down thoughts and habits developed over so protracted a period, long a time, in order to fashion our new democracy. The task is proving to be daunting indeed.

We repent because the apartheid years scarred us deeply and the process of healing is proving to be far more complex than we had imagined. The abundance of raw material, which was our people’s treasure, was mined and exported in an unbeneficiated state, because to have developed the internal capacity to work the raw material would have necessitated the opening up of the economy and the education and training of black South Africans to the highest levels. The dangers of a literate, highly skilled and well paid black population to white minority rule were evident, and the policy chosen was the deliberate under-development of our economy and our people.

We repent because we are now called upon to transform ourselves and a nation on a multitude of levels simultaneously; create a new democracy, a new economy, a new national identity; reconstruct our devastated social institutions; deal with the multitude of ills that are the legacy of apartheid, all at the same time as the global context is undergoing radical change, while at the same time confronting the challenge of a water starved region with grim prospects for the future, and the challenges of affordable energy, while at the same time HIV/Aids threatens to overwhelm us. Let us pause for a moment on the matter of HIV/Aids, and reflect on our folly. HIV/Aids bids fair to accomplish what apartheid could not, to bring our country to its knees.

Charles Simkins, a respected South African social analyst, in his challenging essay entitled: "The Jagged Tear", tells us of a pattern of declining birth rates in South Africa which by the year 2000 had declined to 1,46%. While this was happening, South Africa's large investment in education over many years had increased the human capital in the country, measured in completed school years, from 48 million to 230 million. South Africa was following the path of all developed economies, and while the quality of that education, in general terms, was questionable, we were on a good path. Our golden age was at hand.

But then came HIV/Aids. Simkins projects that Aids will cause a drop in population growth and that the total South African population will decline in real terms from 2007. But there is a difference in this decline. This decline, has the potential to reverse the positive human capital developments of the last 40 years. It will be a decline caused by accelerating deaths and not be reduced births.

He argues that there will be a peak of deaths within the next five to 10 years, and those dying will be people older than 20 and younger than 40, the group in which we will invested so much through child-rearing, schooling and higher education. These investments will be lost before we can obtain real benefit.

What follows, if this prediction is true, is a nightmare of illness and death and despair and social pathology and poverty and the possible collapse of the social system as our tax base is eroded. This horror is almost certain to be visited on our country and it could have been avoided – it may still be!

Ignorance, rumour, refusal to heed warnings, refusal to accept the scientific evidence, resulted in our very, very late response to HIV/Aids. I read the most heartbreaking of books just a few month ago. It was on HIV/Aids and written by Graham Jefferies, a South African, and published in South Africa in 1988. He argued for either a miracle cure or an intensive programme of education in South Africa as the only way to protect our nation. In the appendix, he gave the number of confirmed cases in South Africa as 157. Today we speak of at least 4,5 million!

When we examine the ways in which other countries acted when they received this HIV/Aids warning, and how they, with success, organised their defences, we must conclude that despite our huge, if deeply hurt, resource of social organisations like the Church, our schools and our higher education system and other social organisations failed us and have left us vulnerable to a pandemic that may destroy us. This was despite our being the best-resourced education and health systems as a percentage of GDP in all of Africa – and perhaps even in all of the developing world. What apartheid education had done was to prevent the development of a learning nation with shared values, and a citizenry with a strong scientific sense, ready to engage with the world in terms of traditions and faith, but always subjecting this engagement to intellectual scrutiny. We did not – perhaps we could not – keep science in the frame.

Without a trusted government before 1994, without a vibrant system of social institutions, without an educated citizenry, the consequence of apartheid education, policy and practice, South Africa was denied the tools with which to receive the messages of this pernicious virus, and respond to it appropriately. A total of 159 cases, the scientists told us in 1988; a vaccine or education the only ways to deal with it successfully, the scientists told us. We ignored science and 4,5 to 5 million cases is the tally today.

Jerome Bruner speaks of cultures as knowledge amplification systems. His argument is that the more closed a culture, and the more inward-looking it is, the more it will restrict the search for truth and the more it will prevent its people from having access to that truth. There are cultures today still, where knowledge is kept from certain categories of people – like women or the poor or the disabled or those outside the dominant party or those of certain religions or those outside the guild – and there are cultures where certain matters are placed outside the realm of intellectual scrutiny.

Bruner's conception of cultures has special significance for the education system and its higher education institutions, because it follows that where they exist in a culture, they form the culture's premier knowledge

production organs. It follows that if there is indeed a link between knowledge and the hopes of a culture, its social institutions, including its schools and higher education institutions, can be thought of as the lifeblood of a people, consistently carrying fresh thoughts and facts into the culture for its use. In this respect, these social institutions, including the schools and the higher education institutions, are the duty-bearers. They owe the culture the knowledge it needs on which to base its choices. This is a weighty responsibility indeed.

Have our people the right to ask its leaders, in education and the Church and particularly its HE institutions, where their voices were from 1988 to 1994, during the years that the apartheid government failed to heed the warnings, failed to create the knowledge on which this country could have made sound choices and so perhaps have avoided the nightmare that now looms? Do these social institutions, including our education system not stand accused for our silence from 1994 until fairly recently? Is there not a case for repentance here?

But can we deal with this dereliction simply by seeking the sin in the apartheid system, in the evils in pre-1994 Pretoria and all its minions who embraced its pernicious policies, or in the lack of understanding and urgency until fairly recently, even if some say there is still not enough? In my inaugural speech at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), I took a view on this. Allow me to repeat that argument.

In 1976, the children of Soweto rose up in revolt against apartheid education, and what followed is unprecedented in modern human history. For almost 30 years after that, schools were used as sites of political struggle and in the process we destroyed authority relations in families and schools as comprehensively as the apartheid state had done. The apartheid state impelled by evil and cunning; we impelled by passion, arrogance and ignorance. The revolt that followed, led largely by the youth, was iconoclastic in nature, it was essentially directed at breaking down and not building. Learners rejected the authority of the teacher and the order of the school, and a new, different relationship between learner and the potential site of learning was created. The rules were the rules of power and were disconnected from the learning project, the knowledge acquisition project, from the project of developing a scientific sense. In this space all relations were conceived of as power relations, and teachers, principles, the education departments and the family and the community lost their hold. The all-round education appropriate to the late 20th century, and that which was required to develop our power and capacity in our unfolding agency, and that which was needed to create informed collaborations with which to engage in this digital age, lost its hold. "Mischief thou art afoot. Go where thou wilt," said Mark Antony.

And so the oppressed embarked on a very dangerous journey, a journey characterised by a deep belief in the necessity and sufficiency of structural change; by anti-intellectualism and magical notions of how knowledge is acquired without sustained and committed effort; by triumphalism and voluntarism and the belief that our future will be secured simply because we are special or that we wish it; by a rejection of authority and order, except perhaps in the political sphere; by the rejection of accountability and the measurement of good stewardship; by the celebration of mediocrity and the advancement of the mediocre. Perhaps the greatest casualties in all of this were education and the family in community. These were assailed by apartheid laws and practices and all but destroyed by our response.

The consequences of this are manifest everywhere: the weakness of social institutions in our communities, including the family and the church, and the absence of role models who understand the challenges of the time and who can capture the imagination of our youth and win them for a life of informed commitment to the South African cause. It is manifest in the absence of a strong sense of community, particularly with respect to a shared vision for the future and an understanding of what it takes to create that future. It is revealed in an absence of a strong sense of agency, deep commitment to be players in making and remaking our lives, not victims dependent on some external agency for our welfare. It is manifest in difficulty with accepting responsibility, evaluation, judgement and accountability on the individual level, even among our teachers whose task it is to lead learners to understand responsibility, standards, the need for judgement and accountability. It shows itself in a lack of industry and productivity, particularly by learners, many of them in schools being taught by teachers whose entire experience has been in schools as sites of political struggle, whose experience traps them in a closed space. It comes in an anti-intellectualism that led to the rejection of the science of HIV/Aids and the magic of a new curriculum constructed initially without reference to content, and which has now placed this country in deep peril. We see it in the authority voids left everywhere and into which the gangs with their drugs and their intimidation and their destruction of hope have come rushing in.

Is there not a case for repentance here? *Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.* This brave,

large-hearted country deserves to succeed. It has all the potential necessary for success, but it is deeply, deeply challenged. In institutionalising apartheid, the regime and all those who supported it and all those who were silent, stabbed it in the heart. In opposition to apartheid, a route was chosen that assailed authority in all its forms, including the authority of knowledge, and which twisted the knife; a route that all but destroyed the very social structure, the family, the club, the church, the school, through which we now so desperately need to reconstruct and develop our nation. There is an argument for repentance here.

Albert Nolan, the Catholic theologian, has argued that a life in God is a life lived in the present and for the present within the spirit of God. I believe him to be saying that the recognition of God in a life lies in the way that that life contributes to the well-being of others, in the recognition of the love and the compassion that characterises that life. I understand him to say that there is no path to God except through service to others in the spirit of love.

Our most direct repentance and reconciliation project, the TRC, establishes a special place in history for this country. Wherever conflicts occur in future, the participants during and after will have to reckon with the TRC. It was an incredible, perhaps unparalleled, expression of wisdom and generosity on the part of the oppressed in South Africa. If for nothing else, we deserve to succeed in our quest for development. I think that we could have done much more with the TRC at the level of community, and the school system missed a great opportunity to initiate a hope, agency and knowledge discourse around this incredible process. We should have broadened the scope beyond the political, to include acts of omission as well as commission, to get our country talking about its future and the ways to secure it. It is still not too late.

We can – we must – rally our people to a life of faith, hope and charity, a life of service. Is this possible or are behaviourists correct when they argue that self-interest, self-preservation and self-propagation in competition with others is the natural law that drives all species, that we participate to the extent that we gain some material advantage from the engagement, and that, like Pavlov's dogs, we operate only in terms of incentives and disincentives; that it is only through punishment or reward that we can be motivated to take on the task of building our nation?

I cannot accept this impoverished view of human nature. Our species, created in God's image, must be much grander than that. We are not simply in the business of buying and selling ourselves. Giving the lie to this are the Mother Teresas of this world, who live to serve; the Nelson Mandelas, whose response to the brutish behaviour of the ignorant and the cruel is to extend the hand of reconciliation and forgiveness; the principals and teachers, who in the most challenging of environments create spaces of gentleness and excellence; the ministers of the faith who administer to their flock and who preach the word of God and the example of Christ; and the millions of ordinary people who give up everything, often life itself to fly to the assistance of others.

In this time of dramatic and persistent change, when even the concept of sin appears to have been psychologised and abandoned; in this time where truth and principles and values have been rejected in favour of extreme forms of relativism; in this time of rampant materialism and instant gratification, we require leaders who can help us to restore our humanity, our love for God and our love for our neighbour. We need modern-day prophets, who, like the prophets of the Bible, could read the times and were able to see the disastrous consequences for Israel of their sinful activity, and to point to them the road to be taken.

It is the task of the leader to help every individual member of the group to work out what they hope for in life, and then to help them to live inside that hope – not as a spectator or victim awaiting the cataclysmic act from outside that will bring about transformation (what I call the Cinderella syndrome), but as an confident agent acting on their own lives and in the life of their community.

Mine is not an argument for a Church that can be dismissed as the opiate of the people with a pious focus on the life after death and an abandoning of the earthly struggle for justice and peace. It is exactly the opposite, it is a call for deep involvement in the matters of our day, in the lived existence of people, for leadership in agency, in engagement with the world in order to change it; it is a call to improve the quality of life on earth through acts of caring and love and collaboration as the path to eternal life. It is a call to love God and love your neighbour.

Let me return to the issue of HIV/Aids, but this time to speak about living with it. We have lost the battle to prevent infection, now let us try to win the war against losing those infected. We know how to do this: a healthy body in a joyful mind is able to combat this virus for a long, long time. Anti-retrovirals will help

when the body is threatened and a long life can be secured. A malnourished, unloved person, will succumb rapidly. This is what our President meant with his claim that we must keep poverty in the frame when discussing this pandemic. If we keep our people well and happy we need not experience the coming anarchy and we can continue of our strong developmental path.

But we cannot do this because we do not know who they are. They will not be tested and if they are they will not reveal their status because they fear the response of the community. They fear rejection, and banishment, they fear being outcasts, they fear us, their families and there communities.

Our good future lies in keeping them alive, so our good future lies in their being tested, their revealing their status if positive and our embracing them and loving them and keeping them healthy and keeping their spirits buoyant. This will require a social transformation of the highest order, where communities change their response to those infected to one of love and respect and caring. Can we accomplish this? Who will take the lead?

There was a time, not too long ago, when I concluded that perhaps the school was the only social structure that could undertake this task with any hope of success. I had reluctantly concluded that our churches were too fragmented, divided and unco-ordinated, too insular and inward looking, too isolated from the real lives of people to give credible leadership with respect to this great task. But a number of recent experiences have given me reason to pause.

We must extend the repertoire of knowledge and understanding necessary for the kind of life on earth that is connected to life with God. We must interpret Scripture for our times and confront our demons here on earth, and we must wage war against the powers of darkness that would take our souls.

The collapse of the social fabric, including our social institutions, presents us with a challenge second to none. The crude marxist belief that structures determined human history, led to an assault on those structures deemed to be part of the ideological apparatus of the oppressor, like the family and the school and the church.

Althusser spoke of the family and the school and the church as ideological state apparatuses, social organisations that enchained us and manipulated us and reproduced us ready for acquiescent delivery into capitalist bondage. As true disciples, we suspended our intellectual inquiry, and driven by a not unusual need in history to transform our society and create a brave new world, we rejected Marc Bloch's perspective that history was a process of continuity and change, and we sought only the change and assailed the very structures that held the promise of our transformation. In a fit of iconoclastic zeal, we all but destroyed our reconstruction infrastructure. We destroyed authority relations in families and schools as comprehensively as the apartheid state had done.

We now see clearly the havoc that such misguided arrogance has wrought. We must reconstruct our social system and the Church must once again take its place in the life of the community with vigour. We must again capture the minds and the hearts of our youth and win them for virtuous action.

That is the task that you have chosen, the burden that is now laid on you. Should you fail, should the school's fail and should our families fail, then we will indeed experience life on earth as a miasmal mist and a hideous dream. But we will not fail. We will interpret the word of Christ anew for this time, and, like the prophets of old, bring knowledge and understanding, and move our people to loving hopeful action in pursuit of God's Kingdom on earth.

But first we must understand what we have done or not done, what evil is abroad and how it came to be. First we must be humble and accept our share of the burden; we must repent. Then, in a spirit of reconciliation and informed collaboration, we must enter the fray and create a brave world of love and caring. History will speak of our success or failure. Please God it will be the former.