IDEOLOGY OF 'NEIGHBOUR': A THEOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATION FROM A THEOLOGICAL-ETHICAL INTERPRETATION OF LEVITICUS 19

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Abstract

In May 2008, South Africa experienced horrific xenophobic attacks on internationals, the likes of which have not been seen since the fall of the *apartheid* regime. Leviticus 19 will be viewed ideologically as a search for an appropriate way of relating to others, especially those who are deemed as different. Mary Douglas' ring composition will be the ideological methodology that will be utilized to propose a theology of transformation from an exegesis of the Hebrew text of Leviticus 19. The proposed theology of transformation will accentuate the interrelationship between spiritual and social transformation. The intended outcome of this research is simple: When will the church (universal) begin to reflect on issues preemptively instead of having to address injustices after the fact?

Key words: Neighbour, theology of transformation, social justice, evangelical, ring composition

1. Introduction

The influx of migrants to the shores of South Africa and America is leaving politicians of these countries scrambling in an attempt to process and incorporate these individuals into mainstream society. Both countries are essentially lands of immigrants and cultural 'melting pots.' America

has become known as the 'salad bowl' or 'mosaic' due to the waves of immigrants that are now transforming American society into a truly multicultural mosaic. South Africa is experiencing a similar transformation due to thousand of Congolese, Angolans, Somalis and the infiltration of untold thousands of Zimbabweans fleeing the political crisis in their own country.

The question that remains unanswered is: Are these immigrants 'neighbours' and if so how is society in general and the Church in specific to deal with these people? In this article a theological-ethical interpretation of Leviticus 19 will be utilized to formulate a theology of transformation. Four areas will be highlighted: an ethos of equality and dignity, a pedagogical ethos, an ethos of unity amid diversity, and the creation of islands of hope. These are put forth as guidelines for individuals or churches around which to organize social justice endeavours.

An ideological critical methodology that appeared in 1948 (Van Otterlo), again in 1969 (Muilenburg)[1] and then in 2007 (Douglas) is ring composition. This rhetorical device will be

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[1]Muilenburg (1969:9) mentions ring composition as a type of form criticism: "A second clue for determining the scope of a pericope is to discern the relation of beginning and end, where the opening words are repeated or paraphrased at the close, what is known as ring composition, or employ the term already used,…the *inclusion*."

used to reinterpret Leviticus 19. A traditional interpretation of this text has been a focus on holiness: "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God am holy" (19:2b). Wenham (1979:18) dubbed this as the motto of Leviticus. But with the application of ring composition the focus shifts to: "but you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (19:18b) and "you shall love the alien as yourself" (19:34b). Milgrom (2000:1656) states:

> "This injunction, (v. 18b.), falls in the middle of chap. 19, containing thirty-seven verses. It is 'the culminating point' of H as well as the apex of Leviticus...Within its own periscope (vv. 11-17) it serves as the climax in the series of ethical sins: deceit in business (vv. 11-12), oppression of the weak (vv. 13-14), evil judgment, and hatred leading to planning and executing revenge. The remedy: *doing good* (love). The result: a giant step toward achieving holiness."

The argument that follows will be divided into three sections. The reluctance Evangelicals have had in engaging social justice issues will comprise the first section. The second section will be a brief interpretation of Leviticus 19 utilizing ring composition as presented by Mary Douglas. The final section will outline a theology of transformation as gleaned from Leviticus 19. This section will also highlight some of the causes of the May 2008 xenophobic outbreaks and a discussion of the concepts of a proposed theology of transformation.

2. Reluctant Evangelical involvement in social justice

During the 18th and 19th centuries evangelicals were committed to both social action and evangelism (Stott 1998:6). However, the dawn of the 20th century brought about a change that saw the eradication of social action and a focus on strict evangelism (Bowers and August 2005:26). Two movements that arose at approximately the same time – the Social Gospel movement and Fundamentalism – ushered in what Stott (1998:6) deems 'The Great Reversal.' Bowers and August (2005:25) state: "The Enlightenment also (in part as a reaction to the shift towards the evangelistic mandate) gave rise to the Social Gospel movement. This stressed the need (in light of the humanism and rationalism of the Age of Reason) for institutional change as the key thrust of the gospel." The Social Gospel movement stressed salvation through social institutions, while Fundamentalism emphasized that the salvation of the individual would lead to social transformation. The Social Gospel movement's establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth through community improvements in education, health care and urban sanitation would convert a host of people to the kingdom of God as the government and societal institutions instructed society in brotherly love (Bebbington (2004:2-3).

As an evangelical, I am pierced to the core by the declaration of Le Bruyns (2006:344), "evangelicals are typically portrayed as socially irrelevant and superficial, politically narrow and embarrassing, and theologically intolerant and other-worldly." The evangelical mind needs to refocus to complement the message of the gospel with social reform[2]. Haney (1998:20) adds the priority of evangelicals "was individual salvation and waiting for Christ to return to establish justice and peace. That priority has changed dramatically, however. As white Evangelical members have become more affluent, they have also shifted from a concern with the next world to a passionate concern about this one."

3. Introduction to Mary Douglas' ring composition

An alternative way in which the Biblical interpreter can engage the text is through ring composition. The goal of the exegesis and the use of ring composition will aid in a possible alternative emphasis of Leviticus 19. The use of

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[2]Ed Stetzer (2009), known as the best missional thinker in North America, was asked in an interview about striking a balance between social justice and 'living out' the gospel in which he responded: "Now from my perspective I might think they are equally important, but we have to remember this: When you speak of justice, people will praise you, but when you speak of Jesus, they'll condemn you. But we can't speak of Jesus without speaking of justice and we can't biblically speak of justice without understanding Jesus, so ultimately we have to overcompensate in the area of evangelism because that's where there is resistance."

this rhetorical device serves as a breath of fresh air to help give meaning and interpretation of ancient text. It becomes more plausible when the Biblical interpreter realizes that Leviticus 19:18b is referred to four times in the synoptic gospels (Matt. 5:43-48; 19:16-22; 22:34-40; Lk. 10:25-29) and twice in Paul's letters (Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:13-15). Lipson (2007:92) states: "Conversely, Plaut quotes a Hasidic source observing that of the three times the Torah asks us to love, two are in Leviticus (19:18, 34) and concern loving human beings. Only one, in Deuteronomy (6:5), concerns loving God. This, he says, indicates that loving people comes first. Only after we have learned to love people can we hope to achieve love of God."

Muilenburg (1969) mentioned ring composition as a type of form criticism. He also elaborates on the many components of ring composition without specifically delineating them as Mary Douglas would 38 years later (Muilenberg 1969:4, 5, 7, 9,11 and 17). Douglas (2007:1) suggests: "A ring is a framing device. The linking up of the starting point and end creates an envelope that contains everything between the opening phrases and the conclusion." According to Van Otterlo (1948:6) this literary style "is bound downwards by a time limit (approximately the middle of the fifth century BC)." Every composition utilizing this technique has the distinct signature of a specific writer or poet instead of a

guild of poets or a conglomeration of scribes (Van Otterlo 1948:6). This indicates a distinct ideology or rhetoric of a definite author, scribe or redactor.

One may wonder why the ancient writers utilized a rhetorical device such as ring composition. Since many ancient cultures were oral societies, the writers needed some device (mnemonic) that would spur the memories of the audience to be able to remember what had been said. Douglas (2007:12) suggests "that something in the brain preserves" this grammatical device…"It is also possible that reciting or writing in parallels may be good for memorizing." The modern reader and Biblical interpreter may gloss over this reality as implications for the 21st century are drawn from the text.

In addressing this idea of parallelisms' function to aid understanding, Douglas (2007:14) states they "are endless; as a pattern of analogies a ring composition constrains the multiple meanings of words. It does so by giving each stanza or sections its parallel pair; the members of a pair are placed on opposite sides of the ring so that each faces the other; each indicates its pair by verbal correspondences." As a text is outlined in this manner, the reader or interpreter is enabled to see the parallels that are being placed opposite each other. Needless to say, it does take practice to recognize this

feature within a text[3]. The reader will find that many times the English translation of a text does not easily indicate the parallelisms that are to be found in the Hebrew text.

3.1. Ring composition of Leviticus 19

The composition of Leviticus 19 does not fall into a neat chiastic format. Verses 31 and 32 have to be rearranged (as shown in the six unit divisions of the chapter listed below.) But it does form two rings that utilize parallelisms. For the sake of comparison, the text will be divided into six units. Each unit will encompass the long form of the *inclusio* ('I am YHWH your God") or short form ('I am YHWH'). The six units are: 1) vv. 2-10; 2) vv. 11-18; 3) vv. 19-25, 31; 4) vv. 26-30, 32; 5) vv. 33-34; 6) vv. 35-37.
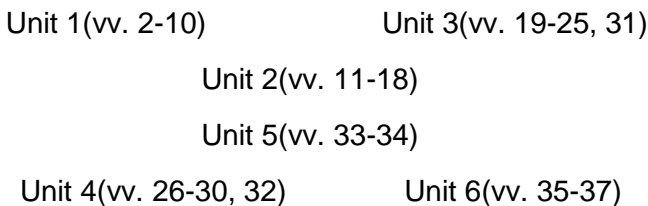

Unit 1(vv. 2-10)   Unit 3(vv. 19-25, 31)

Unit 2(vv. 11-18)

Unit 5(vv. 33-34)

Unit 4(vv. 26-30, 32)   Unit 6(vv. 35-37)

Figure 1 *Ring composition of Leviticus 19*

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[3]Douglas has a fine example of a ring composition taken from Genesis 22:1-18 – the story of Abraham and Isaac. The reader would do well to visit this example of a well-constructed ring composition as an example of form and format (Douglas 2007:20, fig. 4).

An analysis of Figure 1 presents the reader with a double ring (chiastic) composition. The first ring, consisting of Units 1-3, begins and ends with the giving of offerings, with the apex of the ring being the command 'you have love for your companion'. The second ring begins with the command 'you will keep' and ends with 'and you will keep'. The apex of the ring contains the command 'you have love for him' – referring to the emigrant.

Figure 1 substantiates the chiastic ordering and parallelism of this section of chapter 19. Douglas (2007:31) states: "A major ring is a triumph of chiastic ordering." The use of the same terms on both sides of the parallelism restricts the meaning of these terms, which many times can be interpreted in a host of ways depending on context. Both the centre and beginning are full of meaning, as the congregation will be blessed ('produce of the land will increase' and 'you will not incur sin') if they obey the instructions of the LORD.

3.2. Leviticus 19 at a glance

As stated above, this chapter is composed of two styles of *inclusios* involving statements about YHWH. The short form ('I am YHWH') signals that the reader is instructed in ethical considerations. The long form ('I am YHWH your God') indicates that religious or theological obligations for the community of Israel have been proposed. The chapter

itself is divided into two units with eight sections. Four sections (vv. 2-10; 19-25; 31; 33-34) contain the longer formula, while four sections (vv. 11-18; 26-30; 32; 35-37) use the short formula.

Leviticus 19 opens with YHWH instructing Moses to speak to the 'assembly of the sons[4] of Israel.' Hartley (1992:303) comments: "This is the only place that, *edah* the official assembly of Israel, occurs in a commission-to-speak formula in Leviticus." It seems that this designation for the people of Israel is being utilized in a form for covenant renewal, which is one possible setting for this passage (Hartley 1992:312). The purpose of this text is to outline specific ways the people of Israel could become effective transformers of their society. Milgrom (2000:1603) sees the utilization of *'edah* ('assembly') as significant due to the fact that the legislations that follow are the means by which the nation can become holy. Joosten (1996:39) suggests: "We will not be far wrong, therefore, if we ascribe to the *'edah* a social, even a political function. As a result, we

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[4] Joosten (1996:31) states: "Although women are made subject to the law, it is the men that are made responsible for their observance of the laws. The intention behind the use of the phrase עֲדָה בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל ('assembly of the sons of Israel') is not, therefore, to exclude women – as if they should not hear or keep the laws – but rather to subsume them under the person of the man in whose household they live." Or it is simply a collective noun used generically.

may say without exaggeration that Lev. 19:2 lays down the blueprint for a nation."

The contents of Leviticus 19 can be arranged under three major headings: sacrificial giving (vv. 5-10), personal relationships (vv. 3, 11-18, 19-25, 29, 32, 33-34, 35-36) and spiritual relationships (vv. 4, 26-28, 30, 31, 37). Each piece of legislation either ushers in commands for the assembly of Israel to follow or warnings against certain ethical, spiritual or social behaviours which are to be avoided. In essence, the author of this body of material was imagining a society that would be ordered or structured in a particular way. The author also prescribed specific ways in which the Israelites were to interact with one other. If these prescriptions were to be followed, the nation would be a fully functioning society based on godliness and justice. History informs us that this never occurred on a large scale. As the nation became more prosperous, the poor, the orphan, the widow and the sojourner were often overlooked and neglected (DeVries 1997:227; Bright 1981:243-244; De Vaux 1973:73). In other words, a theology of transformation was never fully integrated into the fabric of the nation, as can be seen by the prophetic condemnations levelled against both Israel and Judah.

4. A Theology of transformation: Towards a moral compass of societal ethos

The motivation for a theology of transformation stems from the May 2008 xenophobic violence that swept over the nation of South Africa. The two weeks of violence that ensued reminded some of the brutality experienced toward the end of the struggle against the *apartheid* regime. Many potential causes for the violence were provided by journalists, political figures, academics and religious leaders. Even so, the suddenness and viciousness of the violence indicates that the source could not be narrowed down to one specific cause. It is apparent that the cause of this outbreak of violence was a combination of varied societal factors.

4.1. Causes of the xenophobic outbreaks

Mayor Zille and others reported that mobs sang popular political freedom songs as they perpetrated violence. Zille (De Lange & Mkhwanaze 2008:4) exclaims: "We cannot hide from the fact that many of those carrying out the attacks in Gauteng are Zulu speakers allegedly singing his (Jacob Zuma's) signature anthem, *umshini wami.*" This song has been linked by the Mayor to those who are looking for any excuse to dispense their anger and discontent toward the more vulnerable in society.

A more sinister and disturbing trigger for the violence was suggested by Mozambican, Solomon Chibebe (Gordin 2008:2) as 'ethnic cleansing, South African-style': "The people here are jealous of us, and people and newspapers are always saying that 'foreigners did this, foreigners did that, foreigners are the criminals, and foreigners rape women.' So they attacked us." Katola (1998:144) echoes this sentiment by suggesting the 'tribal' factor is at the heart of the current refugee crisis. Boyd (2005:56) admonishes: "So long as people are willing to advance their self-interest by force, and so long as their sense of identity, worth, and security is rooted in their national, ethnic, religious, or political distinctives (their 'tribal identity') – there will be violence and injustice."

Crush suggests that South Africans have nurtured xenophobic tendencies while at the same time applauded their constitution which respects the rights of all living within the borders of South Africa and their leadership in African affairs. He (2008:7) adds: "In other words, as the 2006 Survey confirmed, xenophobia and hostility to (particularly) other Africans is not the preserve of a lunatic fringe but represents the convictions of the majority of citizens."

Society needs to reconsider the way in which foreigners are being referred to in the media and the public square.

Makhanya (2008:27) states the community was shouting: "Asiwafuni amakwerekwere lapha, buyelani emakini lapho nivela khona!" This means: "We do not want you foreigners here, you (all) return to the place over there from where you came!" Makwerekwere[5] originally meant someone who looked like a local but could not be understood by the local population. Commey (2008:13) defines *amakwerekwere* as 'scavengers.' It has now been transformed into a derogatory term that is on par with K****r. Adesanmi (2008:15) writes that black South Africans have a convenient explanation for the complex problems facing society: "Ah, the *makwerekwere*! These Nigerians are all criminals! When they are not busy trafficking drugs, they are taking over our jobs, our houses and, worse, our women. All foreigners must leave this country!" The use of this term needs to be subjected to critical debate. It would be a significant show of solidarity if Parliament would legislate against the use of this term and issue appropriate punishment for noncompliance.

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[5] Masenya (2005:743 n. 4) defines *amakwerekwere*: "The demeaning appellation stems from the 'inability' of African persons from other African countries on the continent to express themselves perfectly in the accent of the indigenous peoples of South Africa. This 'imprecision' is very natural in that if African-South Africans were to settle permanently in one of the African countries and venture to speak in the local indigenous languages, the same 'imprecision' would be heard from them!"

4.3. *Imitatio dei/imago dei* – Ethos of equality/diginity

In Leviticus 19, the concept of *imitatio dei*, is expressed through the idea of 'being holy as YHWH is holy.' Milgrom (2000:1604) comments: "Thus the *imitatio dei* implied by this verse (2) is that just as God differs from human beings, so Israel should differ from the nations." This difference would be expressed through their moral conduct as a theocracy under the headship of YHWH and realized through their observance of God's commands. Milgrom (2000:1604) states: "Thus holiness implies not only separation from but separation to." For Israel to practice *imitatio dei* they must not be removed from the surrounding people but must be a positive influence through their life choices.

4.4. Pedagogical ethos as the portal for social transformation

Addressing concerns and challenges of theological education in South Africa Slater (2006:4) writes: "Theological education, a pedagogy that is to be engaged with all social issues, particularly in a country like South Africa, cannot remain an intellectual abstraction. The specific methods to realize the practical emphasis in ministry and theological education are praxis-oriented." This is the heart of a theology of transformation. This type of 'hands-on' theological education can be the impetus to

usher in an ethos change by getting future ministers out into the 'highways and byways' with ordinary people.

Having experienced taking seminary students to various locations around Cape Town and hosting mission teams from America and Europe, I am amazed when I hear national students and foreign visitors comment that they did not realize that people lived in such horrid conditions. Is it actually possible that someone who has spent their entire life in one place cannot be aware of how the majority of South Africans (or Americans) live? Claiborne (2006:113, 114) exclaims: "I had come to see that the great tragedy in the church is not that rich Christians do not care about the poor but that rich Christians do not know the poor...I truly believe that when the poor meet the rich, riches will have no meaning. And when the rich meet the poor, we will see poverty come to an end." This is a major reason why a praxis-oriented theological education is of the utmost importance. If those who will be leading congregations do not understand the current social crises how will they be able to direct their congregants in any type of meaningful involvement?

4.5. Solidarity: Ethos of unity amid diversity

Towards the quest for social transformation that is grounded in justice, alliances must be forged between individuals that form a cross-section of society. Haney

(1998:11) stresses this by stating: "Working in alliances is similar to what liberation theologians call 'standing in solidarity.'" These alliances will forge individuals into a fortified unit striving for the same goals in the interest of those of the marginalized. Farisani (2003:29) comments: "Moreover, a theology of reconstruction involves the task of breaking-down prejudices of race, class and sexism, and also the task of creating an all-inclusive, non-racial and democratic society, built on the values denied the majority of people under apartheid." To be effective, these alliances cannot be based on a once-off involvement. They will have to embody prolonged and sustained pro-active commitment if diverse communities truly desire radical social transformation.

I often suspect the reason(s) that more affluent communities are hesitant to become involved in social transformation is based on the belief that the community to be assisted will misunderstand or have unrealistic expectations not espoused by the helping community. Haney (1998:12) continues: "Entering into an alliance or helping to create one is making a covenant promise with oneself and others – to risk misunderstanding and being misunderstood, to stay with the others in the relationship, and to be open to challenge and transformation." The key to sustained social involvement will depend on the

deliberation and eventual construction of a 'covenant promise.' Involvement with communities different from ours will present its unique set of challenges – misunderstandings and unrealized expectations. This should be the motivation that beckons seemingly dissimilar communities to excel in transformation.

It seems apparent that another hesitation experienced by those contemplating social engagement is misplaced stereotypes. The essence of this problem is helping communities to get to know others who come from different locations than their own. Hooper-Box (2005:4) reported: "More than a third of South African city dwellers rarely or never have any cross-racial contact during an average day…In Cape Town, a third of white respondents claimed they never or rarely socialized with residents from other communities…Seventy-eight percent of black Africans and 55% of Coloureds in Cape Town did not socialize with other races." This report indicates that a majority of Capetonians have little or no contact with other ethnic groups. This makes it virtually impossible to break down walls of prejudice or stereotypes. In our current societal make-up we will have to make a concerted effort to get to know people from the different communities in our cities.

It will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to present a God who is interested in justice if his representatives on this planet are aloof to the needs of the marginalized. This means that the Church must become pro-active within her communities. It has often been presumed that the majority of the Church's resources should be consumed by the need to keep the church members, as well as the church facilities, satisfied and functional. For the kingdom of God to have credibility, the Church will have to invest not only their time but resources to advance the cause of social transformation.

4.6. Islands of hope: Christian counter-cultural ethos

How does the evangelical community approach social transformation from a Christian counter-cultural emphasis? The approach has to be based on something other than soothing our guilty consciences. It must be established upon something that is life changing, yet revolutionary for all parties involved.   As evangelicals, we must first love those who may at first seem unlovable. This will involve the creation of an alternative ethos within current society. This ethos must be founded upon love expressed through actions (1 John 4:7-21). Haney (1998:116) admonishes: "Christian love takes its shape from Jesus' proclamation of the coming realm, the new creation, the new society; it broadens our understanding of our neighbour." Love is not

necessarily a feeling, but rather an expression of compassion exhibited through benevolent or sincere actions on behalf of others in need. Approaching others that are deemed as 'cursed' by society may enable the greater community to accept these individuals and society may realize, through random acts of kindness, that God desires to bless them and make them whole.

This *agape* ethos will be the foundation for a new kind of society. Haney (1998:26) elaborates: "He [Jesus] held out a vision of a new society. He proclaimed and taught a pattern of relationships – he called it the kingdom of God – that embraced spiritual, personal, interpersonal, and social dimensions of our lives." Societal transformation did not occur due to the upheaval of society, but through his creating an alternative way of relating to those who had been relegated to the fringes of society by the societal 'labels' heaped upon them by the powers-that-be. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17[6]: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation (*ktisis*)". This passage parallels Ephesians 2:15: "…so that he might create (*ktise*) in himself one new humanity in place of the two".

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[6] The Scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and are used by permission.

Commenting on the interpretation of 'new creation' and 'new humanity', Yoder (1999:222) states that these do not refer to a "renewed individual but a new social reality, marked by the overcoming of the Jew/Greek barrier." These passages (2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:15) are stating in a concrete fashion what Jesus and Paul demonstrated through their lives – the institution of a new social order or as Hauerwas and Willimon (1991:12) noted "a colony, an island of one culture in the middle of another."

5. Conclusion

For at least a century evangelicals have been reluctant in pursuing consistent, sustained social transformation. Their focus has been on defending the 'pure' gospel as they see it. This emphasis has led them to veer from their socially balanced conviction to take up 'arms' against modernistic tendencies that they viewed as a threat to their sacred belief system. This detour has of late begun to turn back to a more balanced approach to evangelism and socio-political involvement. This movement will be a breath of fresh air if it can gain momento in a racially and politically charged 21st century America.

Professor Tinyiko Maluleke presented the annual Desmond Tutu lecture which was delivered at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa on 26 August 2008. In this

lecture, Maluleke addressed the problems and promises facing the postcolonial South African Church. His thesis was based on the proposition that the prophetic voice of the Church has been diminished by the fact that priests, theologians and church people had 'jumped ship' and become engulfed in politics. According to Maluleke (2008:2), "the SACC leadership appointment in particular and church leadership appointments in general, have now become a training group for future civil and governmental appoints. This creates the worrying spectre of church leaders spending their time waiting for that call; not the call from heaven, but the call from the Union Buildings or Luthuli House." In other words, some of the prophetic voices are now in bed with the government. The political involvement of former religious leaders has lead to the Church being "often silent when it should be speaking; often absent where it should be present; mostly inaudible where it should be heard loud and clear; tongue-tied when the nation is hungry for its word" (Maluleke 2008:3).

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