

**THE CLOWN BEFORE THE POWERS.
A SOUTH AFRICAN RESPONSE TO CHARLES CAMPBELL'S COMIC
VISION ON PREACHING¹**

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ABSTRACT

In this paper Charles Campbell's vision on the foolishness of preaching is brought into dialogue with the South African context with its history of apartheid and its struggles with issues such as poverty, HIV and AIDS, crime and most recently, xenophobia. The contribution of Campbell is discussed in terms of its significance for breaking the syndrome of silence, the revalidation of the image of the preacher as jester or clown, the role of the biblical texts as counter-testimonies to the status quo, and the rediscovery of the image of a vulnerable God.

1. THE DONKEY ON THE CROSS

Charles Campbell's vision on the foolishness of preaching³ sets three images flashing before my mind's eye. The first one is actually quite old. Etched against a wall of what once was Caesar's majestic palace in Rome, a provocative picture, probably drawn by a child thousands of years ago, can still be seen today. The picture is of a donkey crucified on a cross like a human being. Someone – an unknown Christian – stands and worships this donkey in front of the cross. Across the picture is written in broad, childlike strokes: *Alexamenos worships his God.*⁴

God, a donkey? On a cross? How could one worship such a God? Let alone preach about Him? Even Paul knew that this strange Gospel, in which the Cross is central, would always be absurd and ludicrous to some, and a stumbling block and irritation to others (cf. 1 Cor 1:18-31).⁵

Foolishness. Complete and utter nonsense. *Holy* nonsense, for sure, but still nonsense – to many. That is preaching. And that is what Charles Campbell's homiletic vision is all about. Let us picture, with him, the following in our mind's eye: a man or woman stands before a group of people with different backgrounds, needs, personalities and expectations, and opens his/her mouth on the assumption, or at least the hope, that his/her words will, in some way, be transformed into words that are supposed to heal and comfort, and somehow spell out the most profound meaning of our existence. Imagine this God, who orchestrates the pulsating powers of the universe beyond the farthest galaxy, who is the foundation and centre, the beginning and the end of creation and time, who is the living energy in the smallest blade of grass and the mysterious adhesive of the most minuscule concentration of atoms somewhere in a grain of dust – but at the same

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³ For instance in his book *The Word before the Powers. An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 116-119.

⁴ Cf. www.biblepicturegallery.com alexamenos

⁵ cf. also J. H. Cilliers, *The Living voice of the Gospel. Revisiting the basic principles of preaching* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2004), 3-4.

time a donkey on a cross - imagine that this God chooses to speak his mind via the medium of a human word, via a stammering, stuttering vocal chord....

But that's not all. Imagine that this God, who chooses, within the coordinates of time and space, to reveal himself through human words, uses these humans and these words to confront and expose, and ultimately transform every power, principality, system and structure that dominates and destroys his creation and his creatures. Imagine that the strange collection of facts and events that we call the *Gospel*, that is *good news*, comes through the funnel of the preacher's mouth in such a way that, somehow, it makes sense and mediates meaning - in a world filled with senseless violence and meaningless suffering

Yes, just imagine that – if you can.

2. LOOKING THROUGH SOUTH AFRICAN LENSES

I tried to do just that in the light of the South African context. Is it not quite absurd to think that the act of preaching can make a (meaningful) difference in a country plagued by crime, poverty and xenophobia? A second picture popped up in my head as I reflected on Campbell's thoughts concerning the foolishness of preaching, a picture that might have been disturbing to some, but nonetheless was on the front page of newspapers during the recent spate of xenophobic attacks that swept across our country. It depicted the horror of a man engulfed in flames after being set alight by a mob on the rampage.

The police are seen in the picture, desperately trying to extinguish the human inferno by throwing a blanket and some sand on him. He survives the ordeal, but is badly scarred, obviously for life.

This and similar pictures⁶ graphically illustrated the fact that the powers about which Campbell is speaking are not illusions or harmless word-play, especially not in the South African context. They are frightfully real. The question that burned into my being was: how can preaching make a difference against powers and systems that result in unspeakable events like these?

Obviously, I cannot respond to what Campbell has written other than through South African lenses. As a matter of fact, much of what he advocates resonates strongly with any preacher who has ever tried to preach in South Africa. During the apartheid years we had our share of experiences of powers that institutionalized, propagated and theologically legitimized dehumanizing and inherently violent structures. Many of us grew up with sermons that perpetuated and preserved this status quo. During those times, our country was burning.

But it must also be said that we were graced with *preachers on the margins*, as Campbell calls them, who lived by the ethic of risk rather than control, and who became rhetorically powerful in their preaching against these powers and indeed played an important role in subverting this status quo. One need only think of preachers such as Desmond Tutu, Beyers Naude and Allan Boesak, whose sermons have been well documented for generations to come.⁷

⁶ Cf. www.home.arcor.de xenophobia

⁷ Cf. H. J. C. Pieterse (ed.) *Desmond Tutu's Message. A Qualitative Analysis* (Kampen: Kok; Weinheim: Deutscher Studien Verlag, 1995); A. Boesak, *Die Vinger van God. Preke oor geloof en die politiek*, (Johannesburg: Ravan Press Ltd., 2005); L. Hansen (ed.) *The Legacy of Beyers Naude* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2005), to name but a few sources.

It is quite clear, however, that our society is still being threatened by dehumanizing and inherently violent and powerful systems, by forces that incinerate our humanity - even after fourteen years of democracy. The dream of a *unified, reconciled and just* South Africa, as articulated in the Belhar Confession⁸, seems to be shattered and indeed turning into a nightmare. Violent crime, HIV and AIDS, fraud and perpetual poverty are but some of the “giants”⁹ we are battling against. Perhaps the recent spate of xenophobic¹⁰ attacks could be interpreted as an *extreme expression of systemic anger* against situations that leave a majority of South Africans powerless and indeed hopeless, struggling to make sense of their circumstances, and to find some meaning in life.

It is exactly at this junction in our history that we need to rediscover the power of foolish preaching, in the sense that Campbell is proposing it. We need to expose the myth of redemptive violence, which Campbell also addresses in his homiletic vision via the writings of Walter Wink. Wink, of course, is no newcomer to the South African scene: he visited our country in 1986 through an invitation from the SA Council of Churches, and in workshops held with a cross-section of churches he introduced ideas that were then considered by many in power, and especially the Dutch Reformed Church (which was often described as the National party at prayer), as dangerous and indeed subversive. He spoke about Jesus’ Third Way,¹¹ a way between violence, on the one hand, and fatalistic submission to authorities and powers (erroneously called “pacifism”), on the other. Wink concluded:

“Instead of the two options engrained in us by millions of years of unreflective, brute response to biological threats from environment: flight or fight, Jesus offers a third way. This new way marks a historic mutation in human development: the revolt against the principle of natural selection.”¹²

This “third way” could be described in exactly the terms Campbell uses. The powers are to be resisted, but not violently. Rather ethically, aesthetically, comically. We should play the fool, and so frustrate the powers. We should juxtapose, and so jolt the systems. We

⁸ D. Smit. “Wat beteken status confessionis?” ‘n Oomblik van waarheid. Opstelle rondom die NG Sendingkerk se afkondiging van ‘n status confessionis en die opstel van ‘n konsepbelydenis. (red.) Cloete D en Smit D. (Kapaastad: Tafelberg Uitgewers, 1984), 16.

⁹ At a meeting of South African Christian Leaders (Sacla) held in Pretoria on 17-20 July 2003, the gravest factors eroding South African culture(s), and indeed the greatest challenges facing the church, were depicted as seven Giants – alluding to the biblical narrative of David facing Goliath. The aim of this assembly, organized by the SA Council of Churches (SACC), African Enterprise (AE), and the Evangelical Association of South Africa (TEASA), was to discern and act together on what it meant according to the scriptures to be church in South Africa, facing seven of the great giants threatening society, namely: HIV/Aids, Crime and Corruption, Violence, Poverty and Unemployment, Sexism, Racism, and the Crisis in the South African Family

¹⁰ More than 50 people were murdered, 25,000 people (some with refugee status, many illegal aliens, but also legal immigrants, and even people with South African citizenship) were forced to flee their homes and livelihoods, and 47,000 people decided to return to their home countries. Many reasons for this extreme form of social ostracism have been offered: that it is a so-called “third force” at work, perhaps inspired by right-wing ideology; or Inkatha (predominantly Zulu political party); lack of an adequate immigration policy and effective border control; criminal elements in society; perhaps the beginnings of ethnic cleansing; massive demonic possession; and most probably underdevelopment and unemployment, resulting in a harsh struggle for economic survival.

¹¹ Walter Wink, *Jesus’ Third Way. The relevance of nonviolence in South Africa today* (Lansdowne: Citadel Press, 1987).

¹² *Ibid.*, 22-23.

should subvert, and so shatter the status quo. *The clown must take a stand before the powers.*

I do not know exactly how we should do this. I do, however, believe that Charles Campbell helps us in this risky endeavour in at least four ways.

3. THE CLOWN BEFORE THE POWERS

3.1 Breaking the syndromes of denial and silence

Firstly, he reminds us that we cannot, and indeed dare not, remain silent in the face of the reality and brutality of the powers that dominate and enslave us. *Jesus came preaching*, Campbell reminds us; He refused to remain silent in the face of the powers of domination, destruction and death. He opened his mouth and spoke out. This is of paramount importance for a country, and sadly also church, that so often buy into the *syndromes of denial and silence*.¹³ These syndromes are typical of the conventional functioning of public life. In most public spheres we are required to adopt the language of equilibrium; the raw edges of suffering and chaos must be suppressed or denied in order to ensure “safety and security.” This is particularly true in the political sphere, where denial seems to be an integral part of political strategy. Consequently, our speech corresponds with the “normalities” of a self-deceptive culture in which everything must be seen to be functional, and which may never depict frailty and brokenness. Language that upholds this culture of denial becomes mundane and unimaginative: it dare not criticize the raw reality of the status quo, dare not be revolutionary and dangerous.¹⁴ More often than not we also preach in such a manner that we in fact stabilize the status quo – which is about as bad as denying that there are systems and powers in place that enslave us.

This language of denial or stabilization needs to be disrupted by the gospel’s rhetoric of vulnerable madness, by stuttering the “unspeakable meaning” of the vulnerable Word in the holy, nonsensical endeavour of preaching that is in search of meaning.

3.2 Clowning for change

Secondly, Campbell reclaims the picture of the preacher as clown. This image is, of course, not new – people like Kierkegaard, Heinrich Böll, Dostoyevsky¹⁵ and others have used it in connection with the church and the life of faith. Campbell’s reference to the preacher as jester particularly resonates with my own understanding of preaching. I was reminded of Kolakowski’s classic description:

The philosophy of the jester is a philosophy which in every epoch denounces as doubtful what appears as unshakable; it points out the contradictions in what seems evident and incontestable; it ridicules common

¹³ This *culture of denial* has been illustrated by telling incidents on governmental level in the recent past. President Thabo Mbeki’s expressed disbelief in the exclusive link between HIV and AIDS is well known. So also his persistent conviction that Zimbabwe “faces no crises”, and most recently, his hesitancy in speaking out about the xenophobic attacks in South Africa.

¹⁴ J. H. Cilliers, “Preaching as language of hope in a context of HIV and AIDS,” *Preaching as a Language of Hope. Studia Homiletica 6*, Ed. Cas Vos, Lucy L Hogan and Johan H Cilliers (Pretoria: Protea Book House, 2007), 158.

¹⁵ For a summary of their ideas, cf. H. Faber, *De pastor in het moderne zieken huis*. (Assen: Van Gorcum en Comp, 1971), 97 f.

sense into the absurd – in other words, it undertakes the daily toil of the jester’s profession along with the inevitable risk of appearing ludicrous.¹⁶

The court jester, playing before the King, implicitly proclaimed a message, extended an invitation: that the King should become more of a jester; that he should relativize himself; that he should not take his own power so seriously that it becomes an eternal state of affairs, or worse, a tool to be misused. *The image of the jester suggests reciprocal transference: the King relinquishes his power to the jester, and the jester his (foolish) wisdom to the King.*

I believe that this reciprocal transference attains an acute meaning in our present South African context. We know what it means to *grieve for change* – to borrow the title from Arbuckle’s well-known book.¹⁷ As a matter of fact, the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) could also be described as inter alia an institutional and therapeutic space in which national mourning could take place. Our theology does understand at least something of lament.¹⁸

But we need also to embrace a theology of laughter. As a matter of fact, *what we need is not only grieving for change, but also clowning for change.* Grieving and clowning are closer to one another than one tends to think; they are two sides of the same coin. Like laughter and tears they complement one another. *Perhaps one could venture to say that meaning is found exactly in the interaction between grieving and clowning.* Death is swallowed up in the comical cry: “Where is your victory? Where is your sting?” (cf. 1 Cor. 15:55). Meaning (life triumphing over death) is born out of an empty tomb. It is a laughing matter. In Eugene O’Neill’s play, *Lazarus Laughs*, Lazarus emerges from the tomb with a bellow of laughter.¹⁹ Meaninglessness is overcome by mirth.

Apartheid suffered from a lack of humour.²⁰ As a matter of fact, all oppressive systems and ideologies do, as they are characterized by pretentiousness, arrogance, fanaticism, intolerance and repression. Grieving changed the gravity and humourlessness of apartheid, and by the grace of God we also had a few people with a liberating laugh such as Desmond Tutu, but I believe we need that now more than ever. Humour not for the sake of being funny – realities such as poverty and xenophobia are no laughing matter – but in the sense that Campbell writes about it. We need preachers who subvert the status quo, that rock the systemic boat, that rattle the cages in which we have become so comfortable. We need preachers who point towards, and embody, the biblical alternative, that is: who understand something of the subversive character of biblical texts.

3.3 Preaching biblical texts as counter-testimonies

And this is, *thirdly*, where Campbell also helps us. He leads us back to exactly this: the biblical accounts of God’s alternatives, within the *cul de sac* of the impossible, because he believes that the ironical twists that shift our minds; the juxtapositions that

¹⁶ L. Kolakowski, “The Priest and the Jester,” *Dissent* 9/3 (Summer): 1962.

¹⁷ G. A. Arbuckle, *Grieving for change. A spirituality for refounding communities* (Strand, London: Cassell Publishers Limited, 1991).

¹⁸ Cf. D. Ackermann, *Tamar’s cry: re-reading an ancient text in the midst of an HIV/AIDS pandemic.* (Johannesburg: EFSA, 2001), 15.

¹⁹ as quoted in S. E. Wirt, “The Heresy of the Serious,” *Christianity Today* 35 (1991): 44.

²⁰ Theron, P.F. “Liberating humour. Calvinism and the comic vision,” In *Studies in Reformed Theology Volume 1*, (1996): 216.

invite us to reconsider; the strange counter-testimonies that have an iconoclastic and anti-ideological function lie in the texts.²¹

Texts often serve as counter-testimonies or cross-examinations of our core beliefs. They more than often reveal sides or images of God that hardly fit in with conventional theological and sermonic language. They speak of the *hiddenness, ambiguity and negativity of God*. Often we choose not to preach on this, because we do not understand that we need these images of God, held in tension with others, if we are to make sense of reality with all its experiences of disorientation, chaos and death.

Campbell argues that “preaching represents an ethical decision to rely on the Word, rather than on the stone or the gun or the bomb.” In relying on the Word, one somehow steps back, allowing the Word to create its own space, within which God “can make a difference”. In this powerlessness of the preacher lies the power of the Word of God, and the God of the Word. The strange, subversive text reshapes and reframes our God images.

3.4 Embodying God in a wheelchair

This brings us, *fourthly*, to another contribution that Campbell makes. He opens up vistas of a theology that take the *vulnerability and weakness of God* seriously. Behind the image of the preacher as jester lurks the image of Christ as jester, or clown – as Campbell also explicitly points out. Already in 1969 Harvey Cox thought that we need exactly this image of Christ and therefore also of preachers in a world surrounded and overwhelmed by powers of domination and violence and death. He asks a question, and then answers it:

But why a clown Christ in a century of tension and terror? The clown represents different things to different people. For some he is the handy butt of our own fears and insecurities. We can jeer at his clumsy failures because they did not happen to us. For some he shows what an absurd clod man really is, and he allows us on occasion to admit it. For others he reveals to us our stubborn human unwillingness to be engaged forever within the boundaries of physical laws and social proprieties. The clown is constantly defeated, tricked, humiliated, and tromped upon. He is infinitely vulnerable, but never finally defeated.²²

In this last phrase lies a striking God image: infinitely vulnerable, but never finally defeated. If I had to opt for a God image that needs to be portrayed in South African preaching at this point in time in our history, it would be exactly this one. Campbell refers to the Word that is “vulnerable and fragile”, that “relies on flawed speech”, and is open to misuse “in violent ways to abuse and manipulate and exclude.” Behind this vulnerable Word stands a vulnerable God. He does not side with the powerful and mighty, but rather is “*in a world full of injustice and enmity ... in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged*” (Belhar Confession, article 4).

²¹ Cf. also Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament. Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 317-403.

²² Harvey Cox, *The Feast of Fools. A Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy* (London: Harper Colophon Books, 1969), 141.

Apartheid ideology operated with the certainty, the *securocracy*, of a God that was omnipotent and strong, and that acted according to the basic beliefs of the ideology.²³ In a sense, we had control over this God; we had a “handle on the cross.”²⁴ We were unashamedly selective in our God images.

But there are also other images of God in the Bible, unsettling counter-testimonies that we need to listen to. We need to learn that our theology is an (open, surprising, shocking, disturbing, comforting) *event*, not a stable, eternal *structure*. We need to be “wounded by theology, unhinged and uprooted by the blow it has delivered to my heart.”²⁵

In a moving account the theologian Nancy Eiesland, herself being a disabled person, speaks of her epiphany in regard to the image of God, as follows:

I had waited for a mighty revelation of God. But my epiphany bore little resemblance to the God I was expecting or the God of my dreams. I saw God in a sip-puff wheelchair, that is, the chair used mostly by quadriplegics enabling them to manoeuvre by blowing and sucking on a strawlike device. Not an omnipotent, self-sufficient God, but neither a pitiable, suffering servant. In this moment, I beheld God as a survivor, unpitying and forthright.²⁶

We need to understand anew in South Africa that God sides with the broken and downtrodden, the poor, the suffering, and those being displaced by xenophobia. *Preachers who take clowning for change seriously, who act as court jesters before the King (those in power), should not only subvert the King to become like the jester, but to become like the God lurking behind the jester, the God that is found in the vicinity of the marginalized. It is preaching that proclaims, and embodies, God's solidarity with broken humanity.*

Because that is who, and how, God is. Nowhere in the Bible is God portrayed as a king only dealing with an issue at some distance. He does not even send a subordinate to cope with the problem, and he does not issue an edict designed to alleviate the suffering. God does not view suffering from the outside, as through a window. He sees it from the inside, relates to it internally, enters into it fully and makes it his own. In this way He overcomes it.²⁷

As I mentioned in the beginning, three images flashed before my mind's eye while reflecting on Charles Campbell's provocative exposition on the madness of preaching. I saw the foolish image of a crucified donkey. I saw the image of a human being engulfed in flames of xenophobic frenzy. But there was a third image that haunted me throughout, an image of the vulnerable God, siding in solidarity with suffering

²³ Cf. Johan H. Cilliers, *God for us? An analysis and evaluation of Dutch Reformed preaching during the Apartheid years* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2006), 77f.

²⁴ Cf. D. Bosch, *A Spirituality of the Road* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1979), 32.

²⁵ John. D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God. A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 1.

²⁶ Nancy. L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God. Towards a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 89.

²⁷ T.E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 128.

humanity. Campbell's conviction that the world should not be shaped "by domination and violence, but by a God of self-giving solidarity and love" echoed through my thoughts and I was reminded of the pencil drawing by the Chechen artist and author Oskar Kokoschka (1886 – 1980), entitled *Christ in Solidarity*.²⁸

At first glance it looks like a classic rendition of the crucifixion. But on closer scrutiny several layers of meaning are revealed, all connected to the notion of solidarity, and therefore sacrifice.²⁹

This sketch dates back to Kokoschka's so-called London period and was created some time between 1945 and 1946, in other words during, or just after, the Second World War. His intention was to put up 5000 posters in all the public spaces in London during the Christmas season of 1945, and the original version (it went through different stages of development) carried the inscription: "*In memory of the children of Europe who have to die of cold and hunger this Xmas.*" It articulated Kokoschka's protest against the inhumane events of that time, in the form of a prophetic cry against hunger, cold and the atrocities of war.

The sketch seems simple, even drawn too hastily. On the one hand, one recognizes the classic components of crucifixion imagery, with the words INRI above the Crucified's head, the crown of thorns and the nails through the palm of the hand. The people gathering around the cross are reminiscent of the crowd on Golgotha. But a closer look yields other perspectives: the Crucified is only hanging by one hand; with the other He is moving away from the cross, in a type of prolepsis of resurrection dynamics. He is crucified, disabled, weakened and dying. He is, again in the words of Cox, infinitely vulnerable, but never finally defeated. He lives, and reaches out to the crowd in solidarity.

But an even deeper look reveals that the crowd is not made up of Mother Mary and John or some of the other apostles or the soldiers and the Sanhedrin, but the hungry children of Europe. More than that – the gathered, emaciated children seem to be eating the outstretched hand of Christ. One of the figures already has his hand in his mouth. Christ has become their sustenance, their living bread.

To preach is to stand aside so that Christ can stretch out his hand. Sometimes we may even use words to try and express this mystery. We preachers, together with all of the church, have been entrusted with words that the world needs and, consciously or subconsciously, yearns for. Sometimes people may laugh at us, ridicule us, reject us, but we have received words that make all the difference in our search for meaning. Without the donkey on the cross, the hungry children and the burning refugees are lost.

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²⁸ Cf. www.kunsthalle-jesuitenkirche.de kokoschka Christus

²⁹ P. Post, "De Solidaire Christus van Oskar Kokoschka," in M. Barnard, P. Post (eds.) *Ritueel bestek. Antropologische kernwoorden van de liturgie* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2001), 223f.

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