


Christian activism and the fallists: What about reconciliation?



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This article aims to understand what role Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement, and the Soweto Uprising, played in Christian activism between the early 1970s and late 1980s. The question is: did the Black Consciousness Movement and the Soweto Uprising influence Christian activists to engage differently with notions such as reconciliation during the struggle against apartheid? The article revisits the actions and thinking of Christian activists before 1994 to understand some of their views on reconciliation, but most importantly, to understand their interactions, engagement with the Black Consciousness Movement and the Soweto Uprising. The article focuses on some of the church leaders and liberation theologians who were inspired and encouraged by Black Consciousness movements, including Allan Boesak and Desmond Tutu. To revisit their thinking and actions, in the heart of the struggle against apartheid, may help us understand current struggles on reconciliation, particularly in connection with the new generation of activists known as the Fallists. We may discover that the new generation is opening 'old or new' debates around reconciliation in South Africa.

Introduction and background

This article will focus on the new generation of activists that came to be known as the 'fallists'. Lwandile Fikeni (2016:3), a contemporary writer, describes the heart of 'fallism' as 'an insistence on moving beyond the boundaries of "civil" discourse towards attacking the symbols of white supremacy through disruptive acts of rage'. The seemingly abrupt appearance of student movements on university campus emerged out of a context marked by socio-economic injustices, racism, systematic inequalities in post-apartheid South Africa. Along with collective action, the fallists opened a fresh critique of the ideals of the rainbow nation, Ubuntu, reconciliation and forgiveness on which the democratic South Africa was founded. Even the views of struggle leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu regarding reconciliation and justice have been subject to cross-examination, criticism and at times outright rejection from student activists. The article involves a brief analysis on how the post-1994 narrative of reconciliation has come under fire by a new generation of activists. The article concentrates on the student-led fallist discourse, particularly, as it emerged from 'Rhodes Must Fall' protest led by Chumani Maxwele. The article will reflect on Chumani Maxwele's act of throwing faeces at Cecil Rhodes statue as a possible sign of hope, but also a sign of activism in our time.

The aim of the article is to sketch in broad parameters the term 'reconciliation' in pre- and post-1994 South Africa in relation to Christian activism. The article begins with a brief discussion of the current socio-economic situation in the country which provides background on the rise of student-led fallism discourse. The article reflects on Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement, and the Soweto Uprising, to understand the role Steve Biko and Black Consciousness Movement, and the Soweto Uprising, play in influencing Christian activism between the early 1970s and late 1980s. Revisiting Christian activism in the heart of the struggle against apartheid may help us understand current struggles regarding reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa. The question is: did the Black Consciousness Movement and the Soweto Uprising, influence Christian activists, to engage differently with notions such as reconciliation during the struggle against apartheid? We may discover that the new generation is opening 'old/new' debates around reconciliation in South Africa. The article will include a brief outline on how reconciliation in South Africa before 1994 was understood, along with a brief consideration of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa (TRC). Finally, the article presents intersections between the old and new generation of activists, with a focus on Chumani Maxwele's act of hurling faeces at Cecil Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town in 2015. To conclude, the

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article will seek to give remarks on the implication of the fallist discourse in the context of Christian activism today.

Context and relevance

Current challenges around social cohesion amidst harsh inequalities in South Africa are shaped by the legacy of imperialism, colonialism and apartheid. This is a history characterised by land conquest, the quest for cheap labour, political oppression, white supremacy, discrimination and domination which were often legitimised in the name of Christianity. The South African story is one that includes a pervasive spiral of structural violence (in terms of the political dispensation and apartheid legislation), revolutionary resistance (including the armed struggle against apartheid) and repressive violence (epitomised by the state security system, police brutality and torture). The gross human rights violations committed by the state enforced retaliation, disproportionate retribution, resentment and revenge (Boesak 2014:1065).

In the first two decades of the democratic dispensation, the South African government has been confronted with the continued social and economic exclusion of millions of South Africans. Many South Africans live in informal settlements and remained dependent on social grants. This marginalisation from the formal economy is reflected in high levels of poverty, unemployment and inequality (see World Bank 2014). The government stated that it is aware of these immense challenges and it aimed to accelerate progress and build a more inclusive society. Its vision and priorities to address them are outlined in the 2030 National Development Plan (NDP), namely, to double the GDP by 2030, eliminate poverty and reduce inequality, as measured by the income Gini coefficient, from 0.70 to 0.60.

The lofty plans outlined in the NDP seem like a pipe dream when considering the political and social landscape of the country today. According to many South African observers the country has entered into a period of social and political instability. One may argue that the social and economic exclusion of many millions of South Africans is unsustainable and is South Africa's biggest challenge today. In the Diagnostic Overview released by the National Planning Commission (NPC) in 2011, it was reported that South Africa remains a deeply 'divided society' (NPC 2012a:26), more recently confirmed by the *South African Reconciliation Barometer 2015: Briefing Paper 2* (Hofmeyr and Govender 2016:1). Such divisions were ascribed to economic underperformance and deeply entrenched patterns of historic privilege and deprivation (NPC 2012b:412), and were related to high unemployment, low quality of education for black people, inadequate infrastructure, significant spatial development challenges, a resource-intensive and unsustainable growth path, an ailing public health system unable to cope with the national disease burden, uneven public-sector performance and corruption.

The World Bank echoed extreme concerns about South Africa's inequality, arguing that the inequality in South Africa had become a corrosive reality and without social grants 40% of the population would experience a decline in

income (see World Bank report 2014). South Africa is rated by the World Bank as one of the most unequal countries in the world, with the top 10% of the population accounting for 58% of the income and the bottom half less than 8.0% (World Bank 2014:3). The World Bank's South African Economic Update suggests that 70.0% of the poorest 20.0% of South Africans were jobless in 2008. The growth forecast for South Africa has gone down to 2.5% from the 3.1% estimated in November 2011. South Africa's economy would have had to grow by more than 3.5% in order to address the 2014 unemployment rate of 25.5% (World Bank 2014:3).

Against this background, the young democratic South Africa has faced a host of social and economic challenges which contributed to the rise of youth activism. Social conditions in South Africa have remained unfavourable for historically disadvantaged groups since the advent of colonialism and apartheid. The legalised denigration of the black population under apartheid created a legacy of unemployment, inequality and poverty which had continued to plague society in spite of hopeful aspirations. The African National Congress (ANC)-led government has been weighed down by allegations of mismanagement, self-enrichment and incompetence failing to meet the country's most pressing challenges. These are of some of the social, political and economic conditions which have caused a new generation to feel economically excluded and socially marginalised, helping shed light on why the ideas of reconciliation, rainbow nation Ubuntu, and forgiveness are being called into question by the fallists generation.

A reflection on Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement, and the Soweto Uprising

This article suggests that influenced by Steve Biko and the emergence of Black Consciousness, and the revolution of the children, church leaders and theologians began to take a more radical stance of resistance than the mainstream view of most Christian churches during the struggle against apartheid. Allan Boesak in his article, 'A hope unprepared to accept things as they are': Engaging John de Gruchy's challenges for 'Theology at the edge', published in 2014, documents the role that was played by youth at the time of the struggle against apartheid, namely, Steve Biko and the arrival of Black Consciousness along with and the courageous acts of Soweto children. The following sections delve into Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement, and the Soweto children, investigating the role played by the Soweto Uprising and Black Consciousness in the church struggle against apartheid.

Black Consciousness and the Soweto Uprising: Stimulating Christian activism

Stephen Bantu Biko, regarded as the 'father' of the Black Consciousness Movement, directly challenged church leaders to engage in the struggle for liberation (1978:2). In his salient conference paper, 'The Church as Seen by a Young Layman', Steve Biko characterises Christianity as an

instrument of colonialism and subjugation for the black population. He stated:

Christianity in its *introduction* was corrupted by the inclusion of aspects which made it the ideal religion for the *colonisation* of people, nowadays in its *interpretation* it is the ideal religion for the maintenance of the *subjugation* of the same people. (Biko 1978:57)¹

Allan Boesak highlights the significance of Biko's indictment of the church, arguing that he was in the first instance, 'criticising the white missionaries and the white church for their use of faith and the Scriptures to justify oppression' (2014:1064). Boesak (2014) writes that in the second instance, Biko challenged the black church:

We were the ones whose interpretation of the Bible became what he called a 'poisoned well' from which our people were forced to drink. There was, he seemed to say, nothing redemptive, liberating or hopeful we had to say to the people of South Africa at the time of the struggle against apartheid. (p. 1064)

Boesak (2014) goes further, and argues that unlike Steve Biko, the children of Soweto, did not so much critique both the white church and the black church with their words but instead:

with their courage, their sacrifices, and their blood. They showed us not only the emptiness of our words, but called for the end of those – to be replaced by deeds of courage and commitment. (p. 1063)

He asserts that it was in the context of the revolution of the children and Biko that the church was moved to action. Boesak argues that it was Biko and the Soweto Uprising that called the Christian church to action, and to realise that there was no neutral line in the struggle against apartheid. Boesak (2014) writes:

It was then that we were able to move from a theology of acquiescence to a theology of refusal, from a theology of resignation to a theology of hope, from a theology of protest to a theology of resistance. Then we began to ask the fundamental questions about power and powerlessness. We understood that the issue was not simply one of equality in society but really the question: what kind of equality in what kind of society? We then began to inquire not just about justice and injustice, but also about the nature of structural, systemic injustice. We talked not just about poverty. We began to debate the socio-historical processes of generational wealth and generational impoverishment. (p. 1064)

It can be argued that it was in the context of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness, and the Soweto Uprising, that the church realised that there was the 'struggle' which begged active participation. It was perhaps in wrestling with Steve Biko and the Soweto children that the church began to understand the struggle better and on different terms.

1. Biko (1978:58–59) further criticised the apartheid-inspired church structure which reinforced white superiority and black servitude: 'Equally we should agree that through living in a privileged society, and through being socialised in a corrupt system, our white Christian counterparts though brothers in Christ have not proved themselves brothers in South Africa. We must agree that they tacitly or overtly, deliberately or unawares, white Christians within the Churches are preventing the Church from assuming its natural character in the South African context, and therefore preventing it from being relevant to the black man's situation' (pp. 58–59).

Boesak (2014:1064) argues that they understood that 'it was not just about the prophetic voice of the church but also about the prophetic participation of the church in the resistance to evil' (2014:1064). Through Steve Biko's (2014) critique of the church and the Soweto Uprising, it became clear that:

the church was fundamentally divided: there was the church that benefited from our oppression and therefore acquiesced in it, and there was the church that suffered under the oppression and felt called to rise up in resistance to it. (p. 1064).

According to Boesak (2014:1064), 'Both could not be the church of Jesus Christ'. Boesak claims that such understanding became fundamental in the theological discourse and call to repentance, conversion, commitment, and action on the Kairos Document 1985 (2014:1064–1065).

West (2010) writes, it was at this time, of the Biko and Soweto Uprising that:

the call and task of the Christian was to "read the signs of the times," discerning where God was already at work bringing life in the midst of death, and then to become co-workers with God. (p. 1)

In addition, in the framework of liberation theologies, it was clear that theology was to be done in the context of the struggle for life amid death. Liberation theologies in South Africa were to take seriously the message of the God of the poor (liberation theologies in South Africa includes contextual theology, African women's theology, and black theology). In the following section, black liberation theology will be reviewed in relation to contextual theology, African women's theology and black theology.

Black Consciousness and liberation theologies

After Steve Biko's critique of the church as mentioned above, and the Soweto Uprising, in the 1970s, a new theology was to confront the church communities in South Africa. A new theology which challenged what was termed as 'white theology', was a theology of the oppressed. It was aligned with the black experience of oppression in South Africa, and therefore intentionally political and liberative in orientation (see Hopkins 1989:2; Kritzinger 1988:2). Steve Biko (1978:54–60), provided the philosophical analysis of oppression arguing that Christianity cannot remain abstract and removed from the people's environmental problems in publicising his criticism, Biko introduced the philosophy of Black Consciousness into the black churches in South Africa.

In the context of black liberation theology, it was clear that reconciliation in South Africa would never be possible without justice. Because of the historical narrative of colonialism and apartheid, black liberation theologians argued that it was precisely through engaging with societal problems such as social and economic inequality and the need for restitution that the significance of the Christian message of reconciliation in Christ is rediscovered. The broken relationships between individuals and groups derived from a skewed social life provided the vocabulary to

engage in a theological conceptualisation of reconciliation. This then meant that there could not be reconciliation without black South Africans being reconciled with their livelihood, their land and cattle (see Boesak 1976; Mofokeng 1988; Mosola 1986; Tutu 1983). Allan Boesak, in his book, entitled *Farewell to Innocence: A socio-ethical study on black theology and black power*, (1976), indicated that since the theology of liberation in South Africa emerged from the context of oppression, it required theologians to conceptualise a theology of reconciliation that takes seriously the lived experiences of black people under colonialism, and apartheid.

As a result, Boesak's theology of reconciliation remained the same over time. Before and after 1994, his concept of reconciliation is based on the God of the Bible who takes sides with the oppressed and the poor. He argued that this God calls all humanity to participate in the struggle for liberation and justice in the world from the perspective of a black liberation theologian, in his book *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation, and the Calvinist Tradition* (1984). He challenged the church to preach the gospel in relation to black experience under the apartheid system. Thus, Boesak's notions of reconciliation were similar to those of Biko (1978) and Cone (1969) who had become catalysts of change in the black church at that time. Boesak argued that reconciliation has to start within the black community that had experienced oppression under the apartheid government. In the 1980s, he called for liberation as a pre-condition of reconciliation because God's salvation is intended for the poor and helpless, and it is identical with their liberation from oppression.

Influenced also by the Black Consciousness Movement and the Soweto Uprising, Archbishop Desmond Tutu became famous for his many sermons and speeches in the 1970s and the 1980s. At the funeral of Steve Biko, Archbishop Tutu called for justice as a precondition for reconciliation. He preached a moving sermon that illustrated the suffering of black South Africans under the apartheid system (Tutu 1983:12–16). In his sermons, he suggested that because of the suffering experienced by black people under the apartheid system, the black community cried out to God, saying to the Lord '*Unzima lomthwalo ufuna amadoda*' [which illustrates the intense suffering carried within black bodies] (Tutu 1983:70). Desmond Tutu argued that God cannot be neutral, God takes sides with the slaves and the oppressed.

Following Steve Biko's funeral, Tutu wrote an article on 'The Role of the Church in South Africa: A Black Theology Perspective', (1983), and an article entitled 'Crying in the Wilderness' (1983). He wrote sermons and preached about justice and the humanisation of black people. Desmond Tutu argued that justice was the only way to reconciliation at that time.

Christian discourse on reconciliation before 1994

The term 'reconciliation' has been regarded as one of the guiding concepts in Christian discourses in South Africa at

least since the publication of the *Cottesloe Declaration* (1960), and the famous *Message to the People of South Africa* (1968) that declared apartheid to be a false gospel. In the 1980s when the oppression of apartheid was at its peak, reconciliation was emphasised but now with conflicting connotations. This was expressed specifically in three documents, namely the *Belhar Confession* (1982[1986]), the *National Initiative for Reconciliation* (launched in 1985) and the *Kairos Document* (1985).

The *Belhar Confession* (1982[1986]) suggested that Christians cannot accept a social system that assumed that human beings are irreconcilable because of God's work of reconciliation in Jesus Christ. In addition, the confession suggested that reconciliation with God in Jesus Christ calls the church to embody reconciliation and to take up the ministry of reconciliation into a divided social context.

Meanwhile, the *National Initiative for Reconciliation (NIR)* that had been launched at a meeting organised by African Enterprise in 1985, various churches, theologians and ministers, endorsed a programme of action that called for the necessary steps to be taken towards the elimination of all forms of legislated discrimination in South Africa. These ministers and theologians issued a statement that included a call to the apartheid government to release all detainees and political prisoners, secondly, to withdraw charges against those who were charged with treason by the state, thirdly, to allow those who were in exile to return home, and finally, to allow a space for negotiations and reconciliation between leaders of various populations. Negotiations and reconciliation were to be conducted with a view that could lead towards equitable power sharing between political organisations in South Africa at that time (see NIR 1985).

The term 'reconciliation' elicited much controversy because of the *Kairos Document* released in 1985. The emphasis on reconciliation was severely criticised as a form of 'church theology'. The *Kairos Document* suggested that there were two irreconcilable causes or interests in South Africa at that time, the one just and the other unjust. The document highlighted the primary conflict in South Africa at that time between the oppressor and the oppressed, a conflict that was characterised by economic injustices, poverty, racism and power.

The *Kairos Document* attempted to provide a balanced and a sharp criticism of what it regarded as a message of 'cheap reconciliation' from the church at that time. It asserted that any plea from the church for peace and reconciliation before removing present injustices would be a plea that played into the hands of the oppressors. Such an attempt would place those who were oppressed to accept their oppression and be reconciled to the biased crimes committed by the apartheid government, subsequently asking those who are oppressed to become accomplices in their own oppression. For the drafters of the Kairos document, talk of reconciliation and peace before removing the injustices was to commit sin (asking those who are oppressed to become 'servants of the devil') and therefore, not Christian reconciliation. It pointed

out that there was supposed to be repentance, and a clear commitment to fundamental non-racial change that was meant to precede negotiation and reconciliation.

The *Kairos Document* is said to have given legitimacy to 'the use of violence if it became necessary' in the struggle for liberation. For some, it was a document necessary for liberation and reconciliation to take place in South Africa. Unlike the NIR document, racial reconciliation for the Kairos theologians was only possible if, and when justice for the oppressed had taken place. The Kairos theologians and church leaders criticised and contested any notions of negotiations, not to mention reconciliation (and forgiveness) in the context of the armed struggle as cheap reconciliation. In 1989, the national government appealed to Christian churches to formulate a strategy that would be conducive for negotiation, reconciliation and change in South Africa. In response to this, the churches in South Africa called all Christian church leaders to a conference in Rustenburg in 1990. The most notable statement of the conference was that the church leaders condemned the policies of apartheid as a sin. Secondly, they agreed that injustices were perpetrated by the apartheid government and as such, they saw the need for its complete abolishment. Moreover, they agreed that injustices perpetuated by the apartheid system in terms of land dispossession and racial-discrimination, required restitution. Finally, the conference called for negotiations that were to ensure all South Africans a peaceful transition from apartheid to a new Democratic South Africa (see the Rustenburg Declaration of 1990).

What can we learn from previous generations of Christian activism publicised through these various declarations? The church took time to reflect and act in another time considering how to engage with the oppressive system of apartheid and the resulting structural injustices for the majority of the population. In light of such strong declarations in the past, what can the Church gain from understanding and engaging with the current milieu of expressions and activism taking place today among young people known as the fallists? Looking at the church today in South Africa is there embodiment of reconciliation between races and economic classes? The questions about reconciliation advanced at the times of the drafting of the *Kairos Document* (1985) are similar to those which have emerged from the fallists discourses.

National reconciliation and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa

The notion of (national) reconciliation as an appropriate guiding vision for South Africa is typically discussed with reference to the TRC of South Africa. During the transition period towards a democratic dispensation, the need for national reconciliation was widely recognised as necessary for social cohesion (typically referred to as 'nation building'). Consequently, the aims of the TRC included the promotion of national reconciliation which was then described in the

constitution of the TRC in terms of the *Promotion of Unity and Reconciliation Act*, No.34 of 1995.

Without doubt, the TRC of South Africa unearthed horrific truths about apartheid and opened the space for national reconciliation (see Gobodo-Madikizela 2008; Krog 2009), however, on the stated primary aim namely, national reconciliation it is questionable if the objective was met. The TRC is often criticised in its work and mandate, especially in terms of its promotion of national reconciliation (see Boesak and Curtis DeYoung 2012; Maluleke 1999; 2001; Vellem 2015).

Mamdani (1996:183) for example, observes that the focus of the proceedings of the TRC prioritised the perpetrators and victims of gross human rights violations. Mamdani outlined several far-reaching implications for national reconciliation:

- It reduced the injustices of the past to the relationship between the state and certain individuals, whereas national reconciliation would need to involve entire communities traumatised by apartheid.
- The commission defined gross violations of human rights as including the killings, abductions, torture or severe treatment of any person in the period from 21 March 1960 to 10 May 1994. Consequently, the TRC left out minor human rights violations such as detention without trial, the jailing of people for pass law offences and the many forms of racism that characterised ordinary life in South Africa. The commission was eager to create a picture that made the story of apartheid (a crime against human beings) a lesson of reconciliation than to actually address the violation of human rights. Human rights were denied through oppressive practices, while the exercise of civil rights was limited as a result of prevailing inequalities. These ways in which the potential of life was diminished were not addressed through the TRC processes.
- Instead of addressing structural violence, the TRC mostly focused on repressive violence. The structural violence committed by the state, for example, the forced removal of three and a half million people to create racially segregated residential areas, was not addressed through the TRC.
- Between 1960 and 1994, 25 000 people died as a result of political, racially motivated violence, but many millions more were condemned to live in anguish and poverty. The TRC thus limited the definition of harm.
- The respective roles of beneficiaries, bystanders or collaborators regarding the social injustices and systematic inequalities of apartheid were not recognised.

Since 1994 there have been wider debates on the legacy of the TRC, particularly on the stated aim of national reconciliation. Some scholars have criticised Mamdani's analysis of the TRC by arguing that instead of blaming the TRC for continued social inequality and racial polarisation, his criticism should be directed at the democratically elected South African government's inability to ensure delivery on its promises to create a more just and equal society (see Ellis 2000:70).

Reconciliation as social cohesion in the aftermath of the TRC invited further discussions of how the TRC failed to address the social and economic legacy which has continued the racial divisions of the apartheid state. The divisions that are still visible in South Africa today have invited further discussions and reflections and clarification on what reconciliation should entail. Some have questioned whether national reconciliation is feasible. Is the bar set too high? People have attached rather different connotations to the term 'national reconciliation' (see Gerwel 2000; Villa-Vicencio 2002).

In the current South African context, the youth are faced with abject poverty, persistent unemployment, economic exclusion from educational institutions and systemic inequalities. This situation feeds simmering social tensions in terms of race, class and citizenship having erupted through various forms of violent conflict in every region of the country. The need for social cohesion is widely recognised but reconciliation seems to be elusive to say the least. In the following section, the article will delve deeper into the responses of a generation that has given rise to the term fallism.

The fallist generation

Primarily, there is no clear description of what is fallism and there is no clear-cut definition of what constitutes as fallism. Instead, various people and groups attach fallism to different actions and events that have come to occupy the South African narrative since 2012.

There are those who describe fallism as emerging in the context of service delivery protests and trade unions negotiations for a living and decent wage for mineworkers and a watershed moment in South Africa's democratic history. The workers, in corporation with the trade unions – such as the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) – took a stand that led to several violent clashes, including the notorious Marikana massacre in August 2012. The struggles of mine-workers are said to be characterised by squalid living conditions and lack of access to basic social services – single sex hostels or shacks, unsanitary toilets, untarred roads, shortages of water and lack of access to legal electricity in the new South Africa.

In addition, there are those who describe fallism as the rise of Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) under the leadership of Julius Malema, the expelled ANC Youth League leader. Julius Malema became some sort of inspiration to young people by naming corruption in the ANC government countless times, calling for restitution, appealing for the return of land to its rightful owners and economic justice. Malema, and the EFF, openly supported every student protests whether against tuition fees hikes or outsourcing.

Nevertheless, fallism is most commonly ascribed to the sudden appearance of student protests in 2015 on several South African university campuses. Public gatherings of

students calling for the removal of Cecil Rhodes statue, the halting of tuition increases and the end to the outsourcing of jobs on campus were popularised on social media with '#MustFall' attached to each controversial issue being opposed. The fallist generation has primarily been associated with the uprising of students in universities against lack of access to tertiary education and financial exclusion from higher education institutions in South Africa. It is believed that this student-led movement, known as fallism, has raised divisive and radical question around the socio-economic political dispensation that was negotiated in 1994 between big business, the ruling elite, and the liberation movements. Student-led fallism is said to be linked with national and international youth struggles of the recent past, and is informed by Black Consciousness politics and social movements of the international left (see Booysen 2016).

In the book, *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa*, edited by Susan Booysen, it is suggested that student-led fallism:

challenges the hierarchical, top-down leadership system of university managements and their double speak of professing to act in workers, and students interests while being captive of old styles of governing. (2016:outside back cover)

Student fallist discourse is said to have gone beyond the university campuses and confronted the government on its higher education governance and various policy duplicities. The student led fallist discourse expresses the students' anger and frustrations with the prevailing social order in South Africa (see Booysen 2016). This article, focuses on this student led fallist discourse, as it emerged in the context of Rhodes Must Fall.

The emergence of the student-led fallists movement

The tapestry of continual social-economic challenges strained the transformation agenda in post-apartheid South Africa. In the context of South African universities, it is argued that the emergence of #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall and the inevitable call for decolonisation of the university is a result of many discussions and events that challenged the transformation discourse on campus over the two decades of democratic dispensation. Chigumadzi (2015: n) writes that at Witwatersrand (Wits) outsourcing has been opposed since 2000. While in universities such as Fort Hare University, University of the Western Cape for some time students had been raising concerns regarding the high number of students forced to drop out because of unaffordable tuition fees. In fact, the so called 'Bush universities' (designation for the tertiary institutions historically disadvantaged under apartheid) have been raising concerns about the unaffordability of university fees for decades.²

It was in 2011 when University of Cape Town (UCT) students' council began to host series of discussions to ask, 'To whom

².During apartheid, 'Bush universities' were designated to accommodate Indians, coloured, and black African students; this included the University of Fort Hare, the University of the Western Cape and others.

does UCT belong?’ (see Godsell & Chikane 2016:57). The aim of the gathering was meant ‘to question and examine the institutional culture of the university, particularly the belief that UCT, as an institution, was inherently anti-black’ (see Godsell & Chikane 2016:57). In 2012, another seminar was hosted to ask the question, ‘is UCT racist?’ During this seminar, Godsell and Chikane (2016:57) argue that a student asked, ‘If UCT is not racist, why is Cecil John Rhodes’s statue still there?’

These student gatherings signalled a shift in the conversation highlighting unequal race relations, employing more direct challenges to the university administration from the students. The conversation changed as the validity of black students’ sense of being marginalised within the academic environment became a focal point. Godsell and Chikane (2016:57) indicate that the ‘imbalance – caused primarily by the role that “whiteness” has played in tempering the discussions-has placed a lid on volatile conversation, which seemingly is only for a few’. Thus, the university unrest in 2015 ‘can be traced to the continued use of tempered discussion as proxy conversation for transformation. These conversations maintained the status quo’ (see Godsell & Chikane 2016:57). However, it was only after Chumani Maxwele’s protest at the Cecil Rhodes site that the whole country came to know about the unsatisfactory nature of the ‘transformation’ conversations from the vantage point of the students.

Chumani Maxwele throws faeces at the statue of Cecil Rhodes

One can argue that when Chumani Maxwele threw faeces at Cecil Rhodes statue, the South African media characterised this act as irrational, inappropriate and even immoral, while the supporters counted the act as symbolic as this site of colonial glorification was a permanent assault on the senses of many black students. The students, staff and workers who were, in fact, part of the protests supported and defended Chumani Maxwele and took the protest on Twitter as #RhodesMustFall (see Mpofo-Walsh 2016:74). Trying to describe the meaning of the act of throwing faeces at Rhodes statue, Mpofo-Walsh (2016:76) identifies at least five implications of Chumani Maxwele’s act:

- The statue itself became a totem of the persistence of white supremacy and black exclusion at UCT.
- The faeces became symbolic of black pain, revulsion and disgust.
- The statue also became a token for failures of the higher education system to dismantle the remnants of apartheid and colonialism.
- It represented Cape Town’s own inequality: a way of bringing struggles happening at the periphery of the city into the centre.
- UCT became a symbol of South African society, where black was forced to assimilate to succeed.

In short, the act in itself, of throwing faeces at Rhodes statue stirred up a ‘social hornet’s nest’ propelling the whole country to open conversations on race relations, colonialism

and reconciliation, questioning concepts such as reconciliation on which the new South Africa was founded.

Tinyiko Maluleke (2016) echoes the current questioning of the democratic South Africa and alludes that the younger generation of activist are asking valid questions regarding concepts such as the rainbow nation, Ubuntu, forgiveness and reconciliation which have been promoted since the start of the democratic South African venture. The question is how can we think of these founding concepts including reconciliation differently if we are to take seriously the implications of this act of defiance?

Reflections on the fallist discourse and church activism

It is said that theologians and church leaders in the transformation discourse post-apartheid in South Africa have been lacking involvement with the struggles of the people. For the most part, in the past and present, theologians and church leaders have failed to engage positively with liberation theology, and thereby the poor have been lost as interlocutors in the discourse of doing theology within the university and the church (see Vellem 2015).

The focus of this article is to better understand the fallist discourse bearing in mind the perspective of an older generation who lived under the struggle against apartheid. There is a sense that through the fallist actions and discourse that some within the older generation may struggle to see the legitimacy and validity of their cause. This article assumes that by revisiting the interaction of the church during the liberation struggle, insights may emerge for our times. Revisiting old notions of reconciliation, which were questioned in the past by Church leaders based on structural injustices, might help us better understanding the fallist discourse – particularly their rejection of reconciliation with what they perceive as empty words. In reviewing the way liberation theologians engaged with the Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement, and the coming of the revolution the children Uprising it can be argued there is a better way of understanding the current youth that have come to question the new South Africa.

In fact, as mentioned above, Boesak argues that ‘it was in the wrestling with Steve Biko and the Soweto children that the church began to understand the struggle better and in different terms’ (see the above discussion). This understanding formed a major part on how they did theology. Boesak argues that their interaction, and coming to understand the ‘struggle’ as it emerged from the Black Consciousness Movement, and the Soweto Uprising formed a fundamental role in shaping theological discourses, which then led to the *Kairos Document* of 1985.

Influenced by Black Consciousness and the Soweto Uprising, the liberation theologians realised that in order to be able to conceptualise the idea of reconciliation they had to take

seriously the lived experiences of black people under colonialism, and apartheid, which upheld white supremacy and black exclusion. This meant reconciliation has to start within the black community which had experienced oppression under the apartheid government where back pain and voice were dismissed. It was necessary to begin with the black community because of the historical narrative of colonialism and apartheid which insisted on inequality and assimilation for success. It was believed that through engaging with social problems such structural injustices, and the related socio-economic issues, inequalities and racism, which manifest in different ways today, might be addressed. It is here where the significance of the Christian message of reconciliation in Christ and the need for restitution could be rediscovered in South Africa.

However, Boesak noted that the failure of the church post-apartheid was to remember some of the discussions they had during the struggle regarding reconciliation. Notably they had forgotten that reconciliation was not cheap, but reconciliation was costly. Boesak (2014:1065–1070) laments the fact that the church did not express publicly the high cost of reconciliation. He argues that in the new South Africa:

- We never publicly, consistently and prophetically proclaimed reconciliation as not a handy tool for, and relatively harmless result of, politically negotiated settlements, but as a radical biblical demand even though we were aware of how reconciliation as a recognisably Christian concept became the hallmark of South Africa's reconciliation process.
- We did not remind the nation that if reconciliation is to be real, durable and sustainable, it has to be radical and revolutionary, and that reconciliation, in order to be real, has to be effectively and attentively translated into political and socioeconomic reality with the restoration of justice at the heart of it.
- We did not insist, publicly, prophetically and consistently, what we have known from the beginning and actually preached during the struggle, that reconciliation is not possible without confrontation of evil – both the evil from the past, the evil of on-going injustice and the evil of acquiescing to that injustice because it is to our benefit.
- That reconciliation is not possible without equality, which means profound and fundamental shifts in power relations. Neither is reconciliation possible without the restoration of justice, human dignity and hope.
- We forgot to remind the nation that reconciliation is not possible without restitution.
- We forgot to preach as loudly as we could that reconciliation is costly, that it is never cheap and that a 'miracle such as we claim our transition to be becomes valueless if it is divorced from the costliness of remorse, repentance, restitution, and the restoration of justice, and the consequences of these for politics.

While perhaps the church might have been silent, about what reconciliation should entail in the new South Africa. The article seeks to, propose that the struggles of a new generation

play a major role in reminding liberation theologians where the struggle lies. A new generation of activist may also be prompting the church leaders that:

the call and task of the Christian is to 'read the signs of the times,' discerning where God was already at work bringing life in the midst of death, and then to become co-workers with God. (West 2010:3)

De Gruchy and De Gruchy (2005:152) writes that Steve Biko was disillusioned by the church struggle against apartheid. Perhaps, also with the new generation, there is some disillusionment about what the church had come to represent in the new South Africa. Reflecting on what was behind the symbolic act of Chumani Maxwele throwing faeces at Rhodes may provoke some important questions for Christian activists. How do we receive this act as Christians, church leaders and theologians? What do we make of the throwing of faeces at Cecil Rhodes statue 23 years after the democratic dispensation? Is there a willingness to consider the relevance of the implications behind the act as identified by the students through what has been voiced during their prolonged protest actions? What are the implications for Christian activism?

Is it possible that the hurling of faeces was an act that shocked people yet it was an action exposing the demeaning sanitation situation of the township, bringing dehumanising conditions in direct contact with the wealth and power of the university dominated by a colonial framework? This action brought to light the current marginalisation of black people which could be seen as an open door to facilitate old and new questions about reconciliation. Formerly disadvantaged students who attend university were considered an elite group who were meant to be the bridge to racial reconciliation, yet their sense of alienation as a result of systemic exclusion and economic pressure has formed the basis for their activism. This protest action served to mobilise students into strong resistance against the status quo while causing South Africans to self-reflect on the founding notion of one people reconciled under the rainbow nation.

Learning from past Christian activism

Today's student activists provide an important reminder that taking action against structural injustice can be disruptive and costly. Revisiting some of the words and actions of church leaders and theologians before the democratic transition could inform Christian activism today.

In the past, liberation theologians such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu not only advocated for strident resistance in the struggle against Apartheid but also amplified the radical voice of young activists within church structures. Pilusa (2015:125–126) recalls how Archbishop Desmond Tutu aided the cause of youth activists for the Anglican Student Federation (ASF), helping them to promote their call for churches prioritise the oppressed and marginalised along with God and to make churches the centres of struggle in the 1990s. He granted the youth leaders access to vet their

ideas with him and subsequently contended for their concerns in decision-making gatherings of the Anglican Church (Pilusa 2015:126). Desmond Tutu was at times a portent for the church and Christians in the nation of South Africa. It is significant to think of the challenges that provoked him to articulate what was happening and even boldly suggest actions that the church should take in light of the signs of the times.

In recounting the contested witness of church activism in South Africa, Alan Boesak documents the persistent historic witness of a segment of the church during apartheid (Boesak 2015:13-29). Although much of the church seemed to side with the legislative domination of white people through passivity, unwittingly aligning themselves with 'a theology of conquest, appropriation and justification', there remained a small group who participated in prophetic engagement, recognising the essential role of Christians to resist systemic injustice and oppression (Boesak 2015:14). Boesak highlights the role of the remnant within the South African church that was 'driven by a radical gospel of justice, hope and liberation' (Boesak 2015:13). Prophetic engagement requires actions of resistance which counteract dysfunction in society.

According to Boesak (2015:15), this church on the margins of the institutionalised church employed various means of resistance in the face of constant opposition (Boesak 2015:15). They rejected the western missionaries' interpretations by exploring and embracing a gospel rooted in the context, including 'an interpretation of the gospel applicable to the world of political, economic, and human subjugation and alienation in which they had to live'; members of the church were willing to join the mainstream struggle campaigns of defiance (Boesak 2015:16-17). We see in the Christian activism Boesak speaks of a willingness to engage with the concrete realities of oppressed people, much like Biko encouraged people to do through the Black Consciousness Movement. Could Christians once again become active, engaging with the ongoing socio-economic exclusions to which the fallists are drawing attention to?

Once again, the actions of young activists are calling on the Christian church for a new spirit to arise, so the church again may be relevant in the new struggle for justice in post-apartheid South Africa. Like the Black Consciousness Movement which inspired people like Allan Boesak and Desmond Tutu in the 1970s, the new generation of activists should inspire us for a better tomorrow, to dream again of a just and equal society.

What can we learn from previous generations of Christian activism? Perhaps, tracking the traces of the movement of the Spirit upon the church to act in another time could echo into the current milieu of expressions and activism taking place today among young people known as the fallist. Is it time to question the notions of reconciliation we have been holding onto, asking ourselves what we have been thinking, teaching and assuming. Looking at the church today in South Africa there is much work to be done to embody reconciliation

between races and economic classes. The questions about reconciliation advanced at the times of the drafting of *the Kairos document* (1985) must be opened up again in the light of the fallist discourse.

Implications for action

Reflecting on youth activism from an earlier generation and responses from church leaders in the past, where are the signs of hope to stimulate our attention and engagement? If the church, even if only a remnant, responded to the activism of Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement alongside the Soweto children of 1976, could the church be mobilised to freshly engage in with the messages of a new generation of youth activists? A concrete act symbolising the encounter of degrading sanitation conditions clashing with an image of economic and racial domination could serve as a wake-up call for a church that has been quiet post-1994. Can an act that helped South Africans reflect on the legacy of racial divisions and exclusion amidst unfulfilled promises of the rainbow nation assist the church to admit the task of reconciliation is far from over?

What if the Spirit is calling the Church to engagement alongside of the youth who are prepared to participate in costly acts of resistance to challenge what has become the status quo of unjust systems? When Chumani Maxwele threw faeces at Cecil Rhodes statue, he was not asking for yet another round of conferences, workshops, or grandstanding about black pain and black suffering. Instead, it was a call to action for a new generation. He was advocating for justice for the majority of black people who live with deplorable sanitation and inhumane living conditions within the townships of Cape Town and throughout the country. He was not asking for yet another policy, for South Africans have tolerated 23 years of policy-making and promises of transformation.

Where is the church with resistance, energy and imagination to overturn tables of injustice which have captivated state institutions meant to uplift those who have been subjugated by systemic discrimination? Walter Brueggemann (2001) proposes dual areas of focus for the church to stimulate communities towards authentic witness:

The task of prophetic ministry is to hold together criticism and energizing, for I should urge that either by itself is not faithful to our best tradition. Our faith tradition understands that it is precisely the dialectic of criticizing and energizing that can let us be seriously faithful to God. (p. 4)

In the course of roughly 2 years, a fragmented rabble of students managed to not only get the long-standing statue of Cecil Rhodes removed from UCT campus but also to halt excessive tuition fee increases which the government was determined to impose. They also raised the call for free decolonised education and several other large-scale concerns. The student protests helped resurfaced the exploitative labour practices of outsourcing of campus workers, causing university administrations to shift entrenched labour practices. The mobilisation of students at university campuses around the country sufficiently impacted both university

administration and political decision-makers to repeal fees increases breaking from the status quo. If the leaderless fragmented fallist movement could initiate such social and economic reversals, what could the church do if members were mobilised to take up the call to deal with the systemic and structural issues plaguing South African society today?

The call from today's fallists presents the church with several opportunities of active engagement. Like the youth of today the words of Steve Biko (1978) continue to invite the church to embody reconciliation with justice:

Christianity can never hope to remain abstract and removed from the people's environmental problems. In order to be applicable to people, it must have meaning for them in their given situation. If they are oppressed people, it must have something to say about their oppression. (p. 59)

Boesak speaks of how the church on the margins of the institutionalised church employed various means of resistance in the face of constant opposition (Boesak 2015:15). He recalls:

There was the church that lived in the center, benefitting from conquest and enslavement, and there was the church on the margins, seeking to resist both the enslavement of people and the appropriation of the gospel for that enslavement. (p. 13)

For today's fallists, the enduring circumstances of injustice are simply too much to bear. What conditions will it take for the Church to be mobilised to engage in prophetic resistance to contend for the kind of reconciliation which will make South Africa liveable for all. The time is right for solidarity with the suffering and excluded moving the church to embody prophetic action and imagination listening to a new generation of youth.

In conclusion, this article highlights the ways in which Black Consciousness and the Soweto children provoked church leaders to fresh engagement and participation towards the struggle for liberation in South Africa. The student-led fallism echoes this provocation towards Black Consciousness that could energise the church in South Africa towards prophetic action in South Africa's contemporary struggles. The activism of the fallist forces us into moments where we can engage one another on what reconciliation could and should look like in democratic South Africa and could stimulate new thoughts and actions by the church to participate in the transformation of society. We can view fallism as a movement that allows us to consider the kind of activism that will bring about an equitable society in the face of great socio-economic challenges. Instead of rejecting the seemingly radical displays of fallism, we can consider how to bring the fresh challenges being spotlighted into our churches.

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Authors' contributions

S.H. and S.L.K. equally contributed to the research and writing of this article.

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