

ETHICS IN CONVERSATION

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KLC CELEBRATES BLACK HISTORY MONTH:

A Conversation with Tshilidzi and Fritz van der Lecq

INTERVIEW BY CRAIG BARTHOLOMEW

From the Director

October is Black History Month in the UK. The issue of race moved front and centre after the brutal murder of George Floyd, and as Black Lives Matter protests spread all over the place. Having grown up in apartheid South Africa, I have long felt that the South African story has much to teach us in this area. Thus we are delighted to publish an interview with Tshilidzi and Fritz van der Lecq from Cape Town related to these issues. They are married and have a lovely daughter, Orinea; Tshili works in health care as a specialist and Fritz works in university ministry.

- Craig G. Bartholomew.

CB: Tshili and Fritz, thank you so much for doing this interview for us. Can I begin by asking you to introduce yourselves, please.

Tshilidzi: My name is Tshilidzi (a Venda name which means “grace”). I’m a 38-year-old black South African woman. Although I was born in SA, I spent some of my early childhood years in the US and have lived in several places here in South Africa. I am also a wife and mother to an energetic 2-year-old. Career-wise, I am an ophthalmologist with a passion for teaching, research, and collaboration. Lastly, I am a Christian. I mention my faith last just to highlight that it is the basis upon which I am able to fulfill and find joy in all of the above callings.

Fritz: I was born in Johannesburg just over a decade before Tshilidzi but have lived in Cape Town for all but two months of my life. My family is Afrikaans and, growing up in apartheid South Africa in the ‘70s and ‘80s, I really wanted for nothing. Needless to say, my interracial marriage to Tshilidzi – a precious gift from God – was inconceivable growing up, with our families of origin existing on opposite sides of the racial fault line that ran through the very fabric of our society. After a brief jaunt in commerce, I found my home in theology, and in missiology more specifically. I was ordained in the early 2000s but, instead of ministry in the local church, I have spent most of my ministry career grappling with in-context contextualization of the gospel at



Anthony Vasquez: *A Deep Beautiful Storm Carries Hope*

the University of Cape Town (UCT), where I am the director of the Student YMCA Christian Study Centre.



Fritz, Tshilidzi and Orinea

CB: As you know the horrific death of George Floyd sparked Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations across the globe, including in South Africa. With its history of pervasive and institutional racism it seems to me that South Africa is uniquely situated to help us understand and confront racism. Some people object to the very expression “BLM.” Can you tell us your thoughts on this?

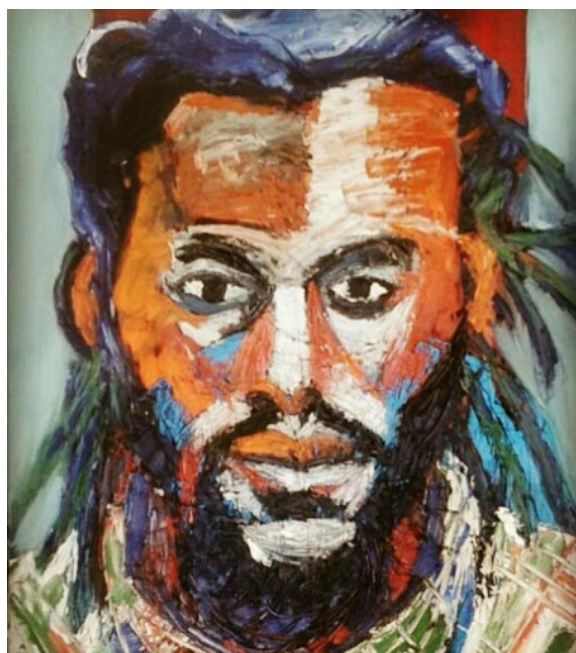
Tshilidzi: One of the things that struck me when I returned to SA as a 13-year-old, was just how obvious the racial divide was. Although my first conscious experiences of racism were in the USA, I was struck by how freely individuals spoke about race and racial differences in South Africa. George Floyd’s public death was shocking and frightening. As the BLM movement grew, I felt its arrival in SA as a very welcome wave. I experienced it as affirming and validating of the regular visible and invisible racial barriers and challenges that black people are faced with in general. Truth be told, I found it difficult to relate to those who objected to the expression BLM. I was also saddened by the fact that many of my non-black acquaintances were unable to appreciate the broader significance of the movement.

Fritz: As is the case everywhere, the spectrum of opinions and levels of (dis)agreement regarding BLM – the expression itself, the movement, and the organization – is

broad and complex. I’ve come to see that our responses to something like BLM in large part have to do with the vantage point from which we tell the story of our beloved, but highly racialized, country. How else do I account for the white community’s passive indifference to this kind of event? How do I account for the fact that the lived experience of millions of ordinary South Africans is that their lives do not seem to matter in the ordinary encounters and experiences of everyday life? I believe we need time grappling with these foundational questions. And for this we have to position ourselves as *listeners* who listen to each other across our divides – to listen and to welcome the “stranger,” for that is what many fellow South Africans are to each other.

CB: As we know from the history of South Africa, racism can be deeply personal and institutional. Do you think critical race theory can help us identify the institutional aspects? Do you see any dangers with it?

Fritz: There is no doubt that critical race theory has proven to be a helpful tool for numerous evangelical leaders in my context in their struggle to carry their piety through to its social (structural and systemic) consequences. It has given them the words to start articulating the world from the perspective of those denied human rights or economic access or racial justice. It also offers a lens for understanding the role of institutions (like universities and schools in SA) in perpetuating race, class, and gender interests. And, yet, I’ve seen the real limitations of critical race theory in making sense of conflict situations and,



Ntobeko Mjijwa, *Portrait*

importantly, for transforming those on both sides of a divided community. For one, it constructs the world in terms of polarities, while we know the moral world is a lot more complex than critical race theory suggests. I’ve also found it quite unproductive in the sense that it seldom fosters constructive and compassionate engagement with “the other side,” but instead tends to create rival groups where the Other is constructed as an enemy and not as a *human* Other that has to be engaged, confronted and changed.

Tshilidzi: I have often reflected on my experiences of racism personally and in institutions in SA. Although I live in an African country, I am still often the only person of colour in many of the

spaces I occupy. Even as a Christian and in Christian circles, I have had to learn to adapt quickly in social situations. To live a life of joy, purpose, and connection I have had to learn to read people and situations and respond accordingly. Although this “skill” enabled me to excel in many areas, I have since realized that it has come at the cost of exploring who God has authentically called me to be. As an older, wiser believer, I am less willing to compromise myself in order to fit in. The main challenge that I am faced with is how I will teach my daughter to live a full authentic life as a believer and a person of colour, not just in SA, but wherever in the world she finds herself.

CB: What resources would you leverage in the Bible and theology to combat racism?

Tshilidzi: As an academic I value gaining knowledge from books and articles. However, I really believe that the best way to combat racism is to build relationships with people of colour. We all have prejudices which can only properly surface and be acknowledged when we are in proximity to those they affect. I realize it’s not easy but building authentic relationships where there can be candid open discussions about beliefs, doubts, fears, and stereotypes really is the way to bring about change.

Fritz: An excellent starting point (if we’re not accustomed to it) would be to read (and live into) our Bibles as the “immense, sprawling, capacious metanarrative” that it is, to use Eugene Peterson’s words. As we do so, in community, the contours of a Christian moral vision will start emerging, centered on the theme of God’s reign. It envisages a “new heavens and new earth” (Isa. 65:17) and it is a vision of justice that includes the command to execute justice in the structures of society. I also take inspiration from Paul’s words 2 Corinthians 5: “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself ... and he has entrusted us with the message of reconciliation.” ... “When anyone is united to Christ ... the old [order] has gone, and a new [order] has already begun” (2 Cor. 5:17). As I understand it, that “new order” or reconciliation is not shapeless, and certainly isn’t irrelevant to the matter of racism.

CB: Why is it that so many – especially white – South African evangelicals failed to address racism during apartheid, and even today?

Fritz: A key reason would be that much of South African evangelicalism stands in a dualist tradition – both doctrinally and existentially – that tends to narrow the comprehensive gospel of the kingdom and consign to it a private place within the dominant cultural worldview. This leads to the kind of cultural captivity of the Church that we saw during apartheid – a deeply religious Afrikaner society, totally captured by an idolatrous nationalism, with deadly consequences. Another widespread and ingrained



Fritz and Tshili with their parents on their wedding day

characteristic of South African evangelicalism is a grievous reduction of the Christian mission resulting in ignorance of and negligible impact on the pressing societal issues of the day. Add to this the activist and pragmatic nature of the evangelical ethos and you’ll find that South African evangelicals are probably as corruptible as ever, either withdrawing from public life or disinterested in it.

CB: As a so-called “mixed-race” couple with your lovely daughter, are there things that you have learnt from each other and each other’s families that have helped you to come to grips with racism?

Tshilidzi: The biggest lesson I have had in our relationship is a realization of the power of racial stereotypes. In many ways I am more “white” than Fritz and in many ways he is more “black” than me. We decided in the early stages of our relationship not to feel obliged to offer explanations to others about this seemingly “mismatched” union. To be honest, most days I do not relate to Fritz as a white man, I relate to him as my husband. As we celebrate our upcoming anniversary, I thank God that he allowed us to find each other especially in a country where 36 years ago it was illegal to do so. Our families get along very well. My parents-in-law have really been my biggest highlight. They have challenged so many negative stereotypes that I didn’t even realize I had towards white South Africans of their generation. Their grace, love, understanding, generosity, and kindness continue to humble me to this day.

Fritz: Since my early days as a Christian, I've understood that cultural diversity is part of God's vision for the church as one body of Christ. And yet, my marriage to Tshilidzi – and the coming together of our families – has given me deeper insight into God's wisdom in bringing different cultural entities together in the body of Christ: in the words of Andrew Walls, "they belong together as one of them is incomplete without the other. Only 'together,' not on our own, can we reach Christ's full stature." (Walls 2002: 77) Apartheid ("apartness" in the Afrikaans language) – and, by extension, racism – is not only antithetical to God's redemptive purposes in the world, but it stunts our maturation as individuals and communities. It's nothing short of a tragedy. And, thus, I am profoundly grateful to God for Tshilidzi and her gracious family who have helped to confirm that we belong together, not apart.

CB: Are there particular thinkers or books that you would recommend in this regard?

Fritz: Yes, of course.

Some of the best theological critiques of apartheid and racism will be found in the writings of the following South African Theologians:

- Allan Boesak**, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation, and the Calvinist Tradition*;
Why are they Weeping? South Africans under Apartheid;
Pharaohs on Both Sides of the Blood Red Waters;
- David Bosch**, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*;
Believing in the Future: Towards a Missiology of Western Culture;
Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective;
- John de Gruchy**, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice*;
Liberating Reformed Theology: A South African Contribution to an Ecumenical Debate;
In Word and Deed: Toward a Practical Theology for Social Transformation.

The works of the following South African Church Leaders are worth reading:

- Frank Chikane**, *No Life of My Own; The Churches and the South African Crisis*;
Breaking a Rainbow, Building a Nation;
- Desmond Tutu**, *No Future Without Forgiveness*;
- Caesar Molebatsi**, *A Flame for Justice*;
- Albert Nolan**, *God in South Africa – The Challenge of the Gospel*.

A critique of South African Evangelicalism in the mid-1980s worth reading is a statement by a group of black evangelicals called the **Concerned Evangelicals**: *Evangelical Witness in South Africa: A Critique of Evangelical Theology and Practice by South African Evangelicals* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1986).

Other South African Authors that I have found meaningful are:

- Steve Biko**, *I Write What I Like*;
- Jonathan Jansen**, *Knowledge in the Blood – Confronting Race and the Apartheid Past*;
- Njabulo Ndebele**, *Fine Lines from the Box – Further Thoughts About Our Country*;
- Wandile Ngcaweni**, *We are No Longer at Ease*;
- Nigel Penn**, *The Forgotten Frontier: Colonist and Khoisan on the Cape's Northern Frontier in the 18th Century*;
- Zakes Mda**, *Ways of Dying*;
- Nigel Worden**, *The Making of Modern South Africa: Conquest, Apartheid, Democracy*;
- Clifton Crais**, *Poverty, War, and Violence in South Africa*;
- Albert Luthuli**, *Let My People Go*.

International Biblical Scholars and Theologians that have helped me tremendously to build a missional moral framework for pursuing the justice of the Kingdom, include:

- Craig Bartholomew**, *Where Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today*;
 - Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen**, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*;
Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview;
 - Michael Goheen**, *A Light to the Nations; Introducing Christian Mission Today*;
 - Richard Bauckham**, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World*;
Jesus: A Very Short Introduction;
 - Daniel Maguire**, *The Moral Core of Judaism and Christianity – Reclaiming the Revolution*;
 - Stephen Mott**, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change*;
 - David Zac Niringiye**, *The Church – God's Pilgrim People*;
 - Oliver O'Donovan**, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*;
 - Miroslav Volf**, *Exclusion and Embrace – A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation*;
 - Nicholas Wolterstorff**, *Until Justice & Peace Embrace*;
 - Christopher Wright**, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*;
The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative;
 - Orlando Costas**, *Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom*;
- and, last but not least,
- Emmanuel Katongole**, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa*;
Mirror to the Church;
 - Bob Goudzwaard, Mark Vander Vennen and David Van Heemst**, *Hope in Troubled Times*;
 - René Padilla**, *The Local Church, Agent of Transformation*.