

Truth and Reconciliation

TRANSCRIPT

Broadcast Date: March 22, 2007

KRISTA TIPPETT, HOST: I'm Krista Tippett. South Africa's process of truth and reconciliation brought a new model of political healing into the world, a model that other nations are now seeking to replicate. Today we'll explore the moral and religious implications of truth and reconciliation. I'll speak with two individuals—a theologian and a psychologist, a white man, and a black woman—who took part in the work of South Africa's commission.

DR. CHARLES VILLA-VICENCIO: Those perpetrators—and I've met some bad ones, of all kinds of political persuasions—when you sit down and you talk, they are human beings. There's introspection. There's a desire to move on. There's a quest to regain humanity.

MS. TIPPETT: This is *Speaking of Faith*. Stay with us for a look inside "Truth and Reconciliation."

[Announcements]

Program:

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett. As South Africa experienced political transformation in the 1990s, it created a new model of grappling with the history of extreme division and violence. I'll speak with two individuals this hour—black and white, a theologian, and a psychologist—who took part in the work of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. We'll explore the ongoing moral and religious lessons of that experience.

From American Public Media, this is *Speaking of Faith*, public radio's conversation about belief, meaning, ethics, and ideas. Today, "Truth and Reconciliation."

First, some history. Apartheid was a system of government in South Africa that officially sanctioned state-sponsored terror against non-whites. It was enforced by the dominant, white Afrikaner National Party for over 50 years. Mass human displacement, murder, and torture accompanied a systematic denial of civil rights. In that culture of hatred, opponents of apartheid—most prominently the African National Congress, or ANC—also adopted methods of violence. As apartheid unraveled in the early 1990s, the ANC and other liberation movements proposed a Nuremberg-type process of public criminal trial and punishment of members of the past regime. The outgoing National Party and its allies hoped for a general amnesty that might have the effect of simply leaving the past behind. The possibility of blood revenge and renewed civil war was real. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, or TRC, emerged as a compromise in negotiations that led to South Africa's first free election in 1994. In a stunning moment, black ANC leader Nelson Mandela, who had spent 27 years in prison, became his country's president.

PRESIDENT NELSON MANDELA: I, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, do hereby swear to be faithful to the Republic of South Africa, and do solemnly and sincerely promise at all times to promote that which will advance and to oppose all that may harm the republic, so help me God.

MS. TIPPETT: : The basic premise of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was this: Any individual, whatever he or she had done, was eligible for amnesty if they would fully disclose and confess their crimes. Victims were invited to tell their stories and witness confessions. Through the TRC, many families finally came to know when and how their loved ones were killed. The commission investigated human rights violations by the architects of apartheid, as well as those who fought to destroy it. By the end, the commission took statements from more than 20,000 victims of apartheid and received applications for amnesty from 7100 perpetrators. For decades apartheid in South Africa justified itself with Christian theology, and a religious leader, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, led the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to redress apartheid's wrongs.

ARCHBISHOP DESMOND TUTU: We had this remarkable process of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. When people who had suffered grievously, whom you could have said had a divine right to being angry and filled with a lust for revenge, came and told their stories, and so frequently you wanted to take off your shoes because you said, "I'm standing on holy ground."

MS. TIPPETT: I wondered how some of the people who designed and led the TRC now evaluate what they learned of religious and moral ideals like truth-telling, reconciliation and justice, and how they evaluate that aspect of their work today. What role can these ideals play in the rebuilding of a nation? And what are the limits of such a process?

MS. TIPPETT: My first guest, Charles Villa-Vicencio, a white South African, was a theologian who directed research for the 17-member commission. Now he directs the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation in Cape Town, which is attempting to use lessons of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa, as well as other countries. He began by reminding me of the atmosphere in his country, including the religious atmosphere, as the commission first began its work.

DR. CHARLES VILLA-VICENCIO: In those days, there was huge anger. Huge anger. There was no sense of movement on the side of the apartheid government or regime. There was no inkling of repentance or a willingness to talk or a willingness to say, "Well, let's sit down and reason together." That was just not there. There was intransigence, which, of course, in turn provoked huge anger and, if you like, intransigence on the side of liberation.

At the time, South Africa was, of course, an intensely religious country in the sense that most secular organizations, political parties, etc., had either been banned or restricted. And so the milieu through which resistance was coming was through faith communities. And so you had this combination of religion and context and resistance and anger that was giving expression to the voice of the people.

MS. TIPPETT: And which I think empowered people like you, also, to speak theologically to the present. Is that right?

DR. VILLA-VICENCIO: Oh, yes, we could speak theologically. Theological debates broke out in parliament. One could write a fairly heavy theological piece and get it published in the Cape Times. Theology was there. We've moved on since then, let me say. South Africa's a far more secular culture today.

MS. TIPPETT: Well, I wonder if I could throw at you some theological words and concepts and ask you specifically how your contextual theology, how your understanding of these concepts has changed. And I'd like to begin with the word *truth*.

DR. VILLA-VICENCIO: Look, I think the notion of truth has always been a contested concept. For me, theologically speaking, truth is something that one aspires after. It's something that you reach towards. And I think religion generally, and Christian theology in particular, is at its all-time low and most oppressive when it has a decisive interpretation of truth, in the sense of a dogma, and says, "This is the truth." And to the extent that you deviate from this, you know, you're not a Christian, you're a heretic or something like that. And pastorally speaking, if you like, what the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has done is that it's opened a space within which people—we like to use the word, don't we, ordinary people, rank-and-file people—have an opportunity to speak their truth. Subjective truth may not always stand up to the cross-examination of a court of law. It may not be the forensic truth. But if that is that person's experience of what happened, we, as Christians, above all, need to listen.

MS. TIPPETT: And I think those words *truth and reconciliation*, that that phrase—I don't know—can seem pat in the face of the complexity of how powerful the truth is and how many different responses it can cause.

DR. VILLA-VICENCIO: I think it is, you know. Some people, especially in the early days of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, somehow thought that what was being suggested is that if we all told the truth, we will all be reconciled. You know, simple as that. You do A, you'll have B, which is absolute nonsense. Let me put it to you this way, if I may, that if we want to talk about justice or we want to talk about truth outside of the desire to be reconciled, outside of the desire to build a relationship, outside of the desire to

move on, if it's outside of that, then truth and justice can be a very destructive and a very vindictive thing. I think one of the fundamental philosophical roots of the Truth and Reconciliation is an African notion of ubuntu. *Ubuntu* loosely translated means "humanity." It means to live together. It is a concept that says, "I am through you and you are through me." It's only as we engage in truthful dialogue and in a quest for building a relationship that we can grow as individual people. So to the extent of I am estranged from you, I am less than human. It's a relationship that is required.

MS. TIPPETT: Former director of research for the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission Charles Villa-Vicencio. I asked him what effect the truth, in all its aspects, as he heard it in years of proceedings, had on him.

DR. VILLA-VICENCIO: Whoa! Let me preface that by saying that I think anger, I think hatred, I think a desire for revenge is a most understandable human emotion and response. I can fully understand it. I think at a communal, at a political, at a nation-building level, it is a very dangerous thing. And so you ask what impact did it have upon me. You know, I sat and listened to hearings and some of the most horrendous stories told by victims and, goodness knows, told by perpetrators, you know, and I'd find myself sitting there and saying, "My goodness," you know, "Where do we go from here? What do we do with this person?" And I think I come away from the commission perhaps learning two things, and that is, one, that human beings in certain circumstances are capable of the most outrageously treacherous deeds. And I would like to emphasize that we're talking about human beings. We're not talking about Nazis in the Second World War. We're not talking about white Afrikaners in South Africa. We're talking about human beings. Every human being—American, South African, Christian, Muslim, Jew—we have within us the capacity to commit some dreadful deeds. We have a little perpetrator within each one of us. And placed in the right context, that little perpetrator becomes an outrageously powerful perpetrator.

You know what else I learned is that even those perpetrators—and I've met some bad ones, of all kinds of political persuasions—when you sit down and you talk, they are human beings. There's introspection. There's a desire to move on. There's a quest to regain humanity and to take one's place with responsibility in society. Let me use this as an illustration. In our office in Cape Town, we had Brian Mitchell, who was the commander of a military unit that went into Trust Feed's community in KwaZulu-Natal and mowed down a whole group of innocent people—men, women and children. In that same office at the same time, in dialogue with him, was Letlapa Mphahlele, who was the head of APLA, one of the guerilla groups that ordered the massacre in St. James' Church and in the Heidelberg pub.

These are two people on different sides, both guilty of the most horrendous and unqualified, unacceptable deeds, engaging and talking. That is the beginning, the beginning, not there, the beginning of the journey towards reconciliation. And these people who are honestly, if you like, truthfully disclosing their past, acknowledging who they were. And you know what? Talking about their vulnerability. I heard Mphahlele say to Brian, "My God, where do we go now?" That was the most hopeful question I heard in that conversation.

MS. TIPPETT: And I'm assuming that it needed all these years for that conversation, that encounter to take place.

DR. VILLA-VICENCIO: Yes. You know, we often say, "My God, the years that we wasted. Why didn't we talk 30 years ago? Think of the bloodshed we would have saved." But, yes, I suppose us frail human beings, us strong-headed human beings, need time to learn to speak. And we were so desperate that we realized that if we did not speak, there would be nothing left to speak about. At the same time, I suppose if you or I were to have gone into a community in Germany at the end of the Second World War and asked Jewish people to forgive, to be reconciled with their Nazi persecutions, those responsible for their persecution, it would have been obscene for us to do that. It does take time to heal.

MS. TIPPETT: South African theologian Charles Villa-Vicencio.

I'm Krista Tippett, and this is *Speaking of Faith* from American Public Media. Today we're exploring the religious lessons of South Africa's process of truth and reconciliation.

MS. PUMLA GOBODO-MADIKIZELA: There was always this need to suspend my own emotions about this, because these are my stories. There were stories, collectively, of black people who had suffered in apartheid. They were my stories.

MS. TIPPETT: Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela is a psychologist who also served on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. She's published a book about her encounters with the former head of apartheid's covert operations, Eugene de Kock. He was a notorious state killer and torturer. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela grew up in a black township created as a labor pool for white businesses. She told me stories by way of reflecting on what she learned about the relationship between truth and reconciliation.

MS. GOBODO-MADIKIZELA: And what was really healing about it for me was to witness these encounters of victims between perpetrators. And I'm going to—there are many that I could talk about, but I really want to talk about the one that I refer to in my book, which are the encounters between Eugene de Kock and widows of some of his victims. Now, he was responsible for training death squads and assassination squads who committed many, many murders during the time of apartheid. And de Kock was then arrested. He was one of the very, very few—in fact, he probably was the one—of the most powerful perpetrators under apartheid who was arrested. And then he was sentenced to 212 years imprisonment and two life sentences.

Now, many of those other crimes he has been granted amnesty for. But what remains are the life sentences for which he was not granted amnesty. Now, de Kock, at one of the hearings, he asked if he could speak privately with widows of some of his victims. And the first thing that surprised me about that in that encounter is that the widows agreed to meet with him. You know, we have always talked about the spirit of reconciliation within the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, that the understanding was, this is not about retribution, but it is about reconciliation. The spirit was always there, but we never actually imagined concrete examples of forgiveness actually happening. And this was one of the first ones that happened on the Truth Commission. And then they forgave him. They gave him the forgiveness that he asked for. And in that, when they uttered the word of forgiveness, one of the women said to me, "I really, absolutely forgive de Kock unconditionally." And then I asked her, "What do you mean?" You know, "What motivated you to forgive him so unconditionally?" And she said, "I could see that he meant his apology. And more importantly, de Kock really told us the truth about our husbands. We felt the truth."

MS. TIPPETT: A bout what happened to them.

MS. GOBODO-MADIKIZELA: About what happened to them.

MS. TIPPETT: A bout how they died and...

MS. GOBODO-MADIKIZELA: How they died, how he planned it. And she said, "I want you to tell me,"—she was asking me to tell de Kock that they meant the forgiveness that they gave him. She said, "And I know that de Kock might not have understood that we meant the forgiveness that we gave him. I'd like you to tell him that we meant the forg..." because they were crying. They met de Kock for the first time on a face-to-face basis, and when he was speaking, they were crying. They were, you know, sobbing. And I wondered, you know, what was that sobbing about? And then she says to me, "He must know. I want him to know that, although we were crying, our tears were not only tears for our husbands, but they were tears for him as well. I want to hold him by the hand and to show him that it is possible to change."

MS. TIPPETT: Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela is a South African psychologist and the author of *A Human Being Died That Night: A South African Story of Forgiveness*.

This is *Speaking of Faith*. After a short break, more of Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela's stories and more from theologian Charles Villa-Vicencio on living with truth and reconciliation in South Africa today.

At speakingoffaith.org, you'll find an annotated guide to today's program. There's a [particulars](#) section that provides images, details, and a list of the music you've just heard. You can also listen to and read historic speeches by South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu and former President Nelson Mandela. In the archives section, you can listen to this program again and to our past programs for no charge, or learn how to purchase downloadable copies. Also, sign up for our free e-mail newsletter, which includes previews and my

journal on each interview as well as a transcript of last week's program. That's speakingoffaith.org. I'm Krista Tippett. Stay with us. *Speaking of Faith* comes to you from American Public Media.

[Announcements]

MS. TIPPETT: Welcome back to *Speaking of Faith*, public radio's conversation about belief, meaning, ethics and ideas. I'm Krista Tippett.

Today we're examining the moral and religious meaning of the truth and reconciliation process in South Africa. My guest, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, is a psychologist who served on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. She's written a book about her personal encounters with the former head of covert operations for the apartheid government, a man named Eugene de Kock. He earned the nickname "Prime Evil" for the scale of atrocities he committed. He's now serving two life sentences for crimes for which he did not receive amnesty.

Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela describes her own surprising discovery that she could feel compassion for this man who had symbolized the violent face of her country's past. This happened when she met him alone after witnessing a dramatic moment at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission proceedings in the mid-1990s. There de Kock described how he tortured and murdered several men. And their widows, who were present and listening, publicly forgave him.

MS. GOBODO-MADIKIZELA: This was our first meeting with de Kock, and I was going to ask him about his level of apology. I mean, I just wanted to understand what he meant by his apology. And secretly I really wanted to know if he was worthy of the forgiveness that the widows had given him. And so I asked him to tell me about his meeting with the widows.

And sitting right there across from him, I could see the discomfort just from being asked the question, "What was it like? Tell me about that moment when you looked the widows of the men you killed so brutally in the eye." And immediately he just started to shake. I could see the shaking. And he took off his glasses and put them on the table. And I could see some tears in his eyes. And he started to speak. He said, "I wish I could bring their husbands back. I wish I could say"—and he was holding his hands up like this, you know, holding as if he's holding a child. And he said, "I wish I could say, 'Here are your husbands.'" And his voice was—he had tears in his voice. It was cracking and really a voice that was broken. Broken is the right word to describe that moment with de Kock. It was brokenness. And he says, "I wish I could bring them back. I wish I could say, 'Here are your husbands.' But unfortunately I cannot do that."

And instinctively, really instinctively, I just reached out and touched his hand. And that moment of touching his hands, just looking back, was a very interesting one for many reasons. I mean, interesting's not the right word, but it was very complex. In fact, by the end of that interview, I started to feel, "Oh my goodness, how can I do that? These are the hands that killed my own people. How can I reach out with compassion to touch them?" And over the weeks and months that I was going back and forth with my sense of empathy for de Kock, I began to question my own sense of empathy. "Is this right?" At the same time, it's not as if I willed my empathy. I mean, it's something that really happened in that truly humane moment. You reach out to another person in pain. And then it came back again when I couldn't lift my hand the following morning.

I couldn't lift my hand, you know? I just could not raise my right hand...

MS. TIPPETT: The hand that had touched him.

MS. GOBODO-MADIKIZELA: ...that had touched de Kock. And I knew immediately because I'd had nightmares that night. And two weeks later de Kock came to the offices of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and

he asked to see me, and I went up to where the perpetrators were. And I walked into this room full of perpetrators where they have their tea and their break. And de Kock is quite tall. And so he's standing in front of an um, and he greets me, says hello, I extend my hand. And he rushes over the greeting, you know. And I could see that he wants to say something. And then he says, "Pumla, thank you for the other day," by which he meant my reaching out to him and kind of comforting him. And then he looks at me and says, "Pumla, do you know that that was my trigger hand you touched?" Just those words.

MS. TIPPETT: His trigger hand.

MS. GOBODO-MADIKIZELA: Just, yes.

MS. TIPPETT: Well, you speculate in a chapter about why he did that. Did you ever come out knowing?

MS. GOBODO-MADIKIZELA: I had to go back to that moment. I speculated. I go back and forth, what did he mean?

MS. TIPPETT: Did he do it to be sadistic, or...

MS. GOBODO-MADIKIZELA: Yeah right,—or did he do it—both to be sadistic and to be thankful and to be questioning? So all of those things. And I don't think there's any right answer to that. But I had to think back to that moment, what was the impact of that statement as I looked into his eyes? And I realized that de Kock was really crying out. He was crying out. He was saying, "Yes, this is my trigger hand, but thank you. You came in and entered into my world to understand me."

MS. TIPPETT: Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela's book is *A Human Being Died That Night: A South African Story of Forgiveness*. I'm Krista Tippett and this is *Speaking of Faith* from American Public Media. We're talking about the moral and religious lessons and implications of South Africa's process of truth and reconciliation.

Now back to my earlier conversation with Charles Villa-Vicencio, a theologian and the former director of research for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that South Africa chose as its method to rebuild after a violent past. In the mid-1980s, well before the fall of apartheid could have been predicted, Charles Villa-Vicencio helped draft a seminal religious statement together with other white and non-white South African Christian leaders. The document pointed to the Church's complicity in the injustices of apartheid, and it called on every individual person of faith in that country to work to bring about a new form of justice. This was called the Kairos Document. *Kairos* is a word for time in New Testament Greek, but it does not imply chronological time so much as a moment of truth. And Villa-Vicencio says that invoking a religious sense of time was useful for expressing the urgency he and others had begun to feel.

DR. VILLA-VICENCIO: The Kairos, in a sense, it's a moment in time. It's an opportunity. But that opportunity is, in a sense, there beyond that moment. God's grace is always there to be responded to. But when that opportunity comes, one needs to grasp it. If there was a Kairos in 1985 that said, "The time's come, this is it," you know, "We prepare to die for what we believe. We cannot deviate. We cannot even talk about forgiveness if there's no movement on the other side," there is a sense in which there is a new Kairos in South Africa today, even a more difficult Kairos. And that Kairos is an opportunity for us to learn to live together. And if we get this right, then the South African transition would have succeeded. If we fail to get it right, it will be a case, I fear, of the revolution delayed because those things that brought us to the brink of collapse in 1985 will be revisited upon us. So we've got an opportunity, an opportunity, time and space within which to rebuild a relationship and find our humanity. And that, I think, is what reconciliation is all about. I think it's what the gospel's all about. I think it's what this wandering preacher 2000 years ago called Jesus of Nazareth was talking about.

MS. TIPPETT: You know, you mention that some people criticize the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, or that whole idea, for being too Christian. But I'm curious about how you felt about imposing political structure and political imperatives on these theological values.

DR. VILLA-VICENCIO: This was always a tension. It was always there. How does one link—let's not even say Christian or theological concept, let's say moral aspirations. How does one operationalize these? And certainly I'd always try to say in those days, and I think most of my colleagues were saying that we as a government commission—and that in the end was who we were. The archbishop was our chair, but he happened to be paid by the taxpayers. He was in government, he was a civil servant, as we used to try and remind him. As a government commission, we could not reconcile the nation. We couldn't offer forgiveness. We couldn't provide God's grace. All we could do was to try and create a space within which people listened to one another, damn it, listen to one another. I think that was our theme. "Are you hearing what your enemy is saying?" And to the extent that a greater depth of understanding, of being aware of what caused people to do things—their motives, their aspirations, what drove people to do these dreadful things—as that understanding began to emerge, so the morality began to flow in. If you like, the theology was revisited and people began to realize that amidst this political structure, there was a need to deal with deep, deep, human, theological, spiritual, ethical issues.

MS. TIPPETT: So here we're talking about large theological values like forgiveness and reconciliation happening communally. And it seems to me that they're so difficult on the individual level, it's hard for me to imagine how much more complex it is communally. But have you seen this be possible?

DR. VILLA-VICENCIO: You know, you're a theologian. And I cut my theological teeth about a hundred years ago on [Reinhold Niebuhr](#), who wrote a wonderful book called *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, that it's easier to be a moral individual than a moral community. All sorts of forces are built into those communities which make it very, very difficult to persuade communities. You know, I think one of the most amazing things that is happening in South Africa—and a very, very, very controversial thing, let me tell you, is that the African National Congress, the premier liberation movement of the past, Mr. Mandela's party, the president of whom today is President Mbeki, the ruling African National Congress in political alliance with the old National Party, who now call themselves the New National Party, by the way. But you find the oppressors of the past and the liberationists of the past sitting down and working together. Do you know what? They don't love one another. They don't even fully trust one another. But they are saying, "If we're going to get ourselves out of this mess, we've got to learn to cooperate."

KwaZulu-Natal, another example, were often referred to as the killing fields of South Africa. KwaZulu-Natal was pointed to as the place where, quote, "black on black violence" was happening, wars between the Inkatha Freedom Party, essentially a zealous Zulu movement, and the African National Congress. Those people are jointly governing. There is a government of national unity today. Hey, I squirm sometimes about some of the moral issues involved, but they brought peace to that area. People are not being killed in KwaZulu-Natal. They are learning to live together and, through a compromised process, to try and construct a better future. So, for me, reconciliation is not the consequence. Reconciliation is the beginning of a journey, a cautious journey, a journey filled with all kinds of potholes and minefields. But as we journey on, we trust one another more. And in the end, we may even learn to love one another, but we're not there yet.

MS. TIPPETT: Theologian Charles Villa-Vicencio.

I'm Krista Tippett, and this is Speaking of Faith from American Public Media. Today, "Truth and Reconciliation." My guest, Charles Villa-Vicencio, was director of research for South Africa's historic Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which met from 1996 to 1998.

Charles Villa-Vicencio has advised Sierra Leone, Ghana and Peru as they have worked to form Truth and Reconciliation Commissions of their own. He's also spoken with groups in this country who are building models of what is called restorative justice into the American criminal justice system. As Villa-Vicencio works with others, he's candid about the difficulties as well as the successes of his experience of a national process of truth and reconciliation. He also says that these experiences have changed his personal understanding of fundamental religious ideas.

DR. VILLA-VICENCIO: I've given up trying to talk about God a long time ago. I, at the same time, continue to struggle to identify the presence of the divine, moments in life which, given my theological and my cultural

background, I perceive as the presence of God. And miraculously, that presence of God happens, I think, where relations begin to be restored, where a Mphahlele and a Brian Mitchell—talking about them a few moments ago—sit down and look one another in the eye. I said to them, "Maybe you were both terrorists." They laughed. They said, "We're both human beings. We're trying to encounter one another." Or I change that. I talk about my colleague, Nyameka Goniwe, whose husband was Matthew Goniwe, one of the Cradock 5 who—one of the Cradock 4, excuse me, who was killed by the security police. We created a situation where she sat down with one of the security police who gave the order for her husband to be killed. And she said to him, "You know, Colonel, there's absolutely nothing you can give me. I don't want your money. You can't give me my husband back. All I'm looking for is a signal of your humanity. And if I see that through acknowledgment, through humility, then I, as a vulnerable human being, am required to explore the possibility of being reconciled to you." In that moment, given my background, I witnessed the presence of God.

MS. TIPPETT: You know, speaking as someone who's been outside your country, looking in, now what we see, what we read in the news is about this terrible violence in your country. And I'd like to ask you, as a theologian, again, and as someone who's lived through this and been part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where does that fit into your theology and to these ideals that you held in 1985 and since?

DR. VILLA-VICENCIO: I think it's been a—it is, it is, present tense—it is a rude awakening for all of us. We were all understandably very optimistic in 1990 and 1994, the first general elections. You know, it was almost a sense that the kingdom of God is about to dawn. Well, we've since discovered that there's a lot more work to do. The huge expectations of 1994 were not fulfilled, and so we're experiencing a level of violence in South Africa which none of us ever anticipated, a level of crime, as are all other countries in transition, as we have recently witnessed the tragic events in Russia, the Balkan states.

All of these transitional countries are struggling with tremendous levels of crime and violence. Why? I think we're back to the basic concepts of theology, aren't we? That people in these situations continue to struggle with an internal tension. On one level a desire to acquire, to possess. On another level I think we're dealing with a fundamental human aspiration to say, "We've heard of this thing called liberation, we've heard of political freedom. We've got that. We now want to translate that political freedom into economic rights, into moral rights, into cultural rights." The gospel calls us to be more than we are at any point in time. And that is what we struggle for in transitional societies in South Africa, and I hope it's what you struggle for in the United States of America.

MS. TIPPETT: I'd like to quote you, back to yourself. You wrote once that all theologies are prefaced by a set of questions. And you wrote this, years ago, that liberation or contextual theology in South Africa is also formed by a set of questions. I wonder what your questions are now, at this moment in time, how your questions have evolved.

DR. VILLA-VICENCIO: Well, that's maybe why one should never write. I think my questions are: Are we, as a people, are South Africans going to have enough patience to wait so that these fundamental problems that still have the capacity to destroy all that we have, to be realized? Do we have enough time to deal with those fundamental problems? I think that's a question. I think another very serious question is how are we going to deal with this huge gap between the rich and the poor, a gap that has been created by 300 years of colonialism and 50 years of apartheid? And so I think those are the issues that face theology today. How do we learn to live together? And what do we do about poverty that has the capacity to destroy all that we have gained since 1994?

MS. TIPPETT: I know there are other attempts at truth and reconciliation activities in some other countries. We're wondering if you are sharing your experiences with other places, and if you see that something new is in the world in these years along those lines.

DR. VILLA-VICENCIO: Look, I think, as you know, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission was not the first truth and reconciliation commission. I think it was number 19 or 17 or something. I can't remember my mathematics anymore.

MS. TIPPETT: But it was really qualitatively different, wasn't it?

DR. VILLA-VICENCIO: But—that's what I was going to say. It caught the public imagination. It was a transparent, public event. And that's what made it different. I think it was also because it happened in South Africa where, in the late '80s, we were all expecting Armageddon. We were expecting the worst kind of slaughter. But it did capture the imagination. And since then a number of other truth and reconciliation commissions have emerged. There is one in Ghana, there is one in Sierra Leone, there is one in Peru, and there is one in East Timor. There are also expectations that there will be truth and reconciliation commissions in other situations, Sri Lanka, etc. South Africans are sharing in a number of those events, just sharing our experience and hoping that some lessons can be learned from our failures, that certainly I'm personally involved in Sierra Leone, in Ghana and in Peru. So yes, we're involved in these processes, and we observe with interest that maybe this is another way beyond Nuremberg-type trials and beyond ongoing war, another way to deal with the past, a relatively peaceful way. No built-in guarantees, but another opportunity to make peace.

MS. TIPPETT: You know, when you spoke with me earlier about how, when the Kairos Document was drafted in 1985, you could have had no inkling of the way the world would change. And we saw that kind of revolutionary change also in Europe in those same years. Unimaginable change.

DR. VILLA-VICENCIO: Something did happen, didn't it? I think it bears witness to the resilience of the human spirit, a resilience that is there within the hearts or the souls, or wherever these things are harbored, of perpetrators and dictators as well as those struggling and fighting for liberation, that there are moments where people actually sit down. I think one of the miraculous things in South Africa is that Mr. Mandela, who showed remarkable, unbelievable statesmanship, but F.W. de Klerk who said, "Well, OK, let's sit down and let's negotiate a different kind of future." My boss, the archbishop, said it's a miracle. I used to say to him, "Well, excuse me, Father, it's a miracle, but my task is to deconstruct your miracle." What is it? What is it? What is it? What are the ingredients? What's the recipe that helps this to happen? And I'm still working on that one.

MS. TIPPETT: Charles Villa-Vicencio is executive director of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation in Cape Town.

Earlier in this hour you heard psychologist and author Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela. The most striking thing about meeting these two colleagues, a black and a white South African, is the delight they take in each other's presence and accomplishments. Their friendship is a testament to the history they made together. However imperfect South Africa's process of truth and reconciliation, it does represent a new model of rebuilding a nation politically and morally after a history of violence. As in many conflicts in our world today, violence in South Africa had religious underpinnings on every side. One of the great achievements of the truth and reconciliation process was the way it transmuted religious impulses to address and move beyond the crimes committed. And so it seems only fitting to give the last word of this program to the commission's leader, the man Charles Villa-Vicencio calls his former boss, retired Archbishop Desmond Tutu, speaking here before an American audience in 1999.

ARCHBISHOP DESMOND TUTU: There are those who said, "Oh, well, just wait. Once a black-led government is in place, as sure as anything, what will you see? An orgy of retribution and vengeance when these black people are going to take it out on all of these whites who, for so long, enjoyed some of the most incredible privileges at their expense." Ha! Hah! That didn't happen either. For, instead of this, the world again was amazed. The transition has been wonderfully smooth. The greatest achievement has been the remarkable stability of South Africa. You have to say, "What happened there?"

MS. TIPPETT: We'd love to hear your thoughts on this program. Contact us through our Web site at speakingoffaith.org. There you'll find an annotated guide to today's program. There's a [particulars](#) section that presents images and details about all the history, readings and music you've just heard. This week you can listen to and read historic speeches by South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu and former President Nelson Mandela. speakingoffaith.org contains an [archive](#) of all of our past programs. You can listen online at no charge and learn how to purchase downloadable copies. Also, sign up for our free e-mail newsletter,

which includes my journal on each interview, as well as previews and exclusive extras. That's speakingoffaith.org.

This program was produced by Kate Moos, Mitch Hanley, Brian Newhouse, Colleen Scheck, and Jody Abramson. Our Web producer is Trent Gilliss. Special thanks for this program go to Mieke Holkeboer and John Carlson. The executive producer of *Speaking of Faith* is Bill Buzenberg, and I'm Krista Tippett. Please join us again next week.

Visit speakingoffaith.org

For more information on this topic, or to sign up for a weekly e-mail newsletter or free weekly podcasts, visit speakingoffaith.org.

Speaking of Faith® is public radio's conversation about religion, meaning, ethics, and ideas. It is produced and distributed by American Public Media.