

No Man's Land: A Possible Frontier for Healing Encounters

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Abstract

“No Man’s Land” in South Africa offers a possible venue for the continuing pursuit of healing. Land is not simply a place for living but is a space where identities and memories are forged. It shapes our social and even spiritual self. Being the locus of human experiences, land therefore is a reservoir of memories and narratives of people. In the context of South Africa’s history where painful narratives and memories of its experience of apartheid and colonial past continue to haunt its people, there is a need to explore the significance of land in achieving peace. By reflecting on the functions of No Man’s land, this paper proposes a novel path for healing and reconciliation.

Introduction

One of the things I have noticed in South Africa is the existence of abandoned pieces of land situated in-between communities. I discovered that these lands are called ‘No Man’s Land’¹. During the apartheid, they served as boundaries separating racial groups. It was a crime to cross these boundaries. At present, most of these lands remain uninhabited and unutilized. There are some places, however, where people have built infrastructures or have converted these lands into public spaces such as playgrounds, parks and sports’ clubs.

South Africa has been into a process of transition: from the wounds of its colonial and racial past towards its vision of a healed and reconciled society. When the apartheid ended with the country’s first democratic election in the spring of April 1994, a new hope seemed to have dawned on South Africans that enabled them to dream of a new society. Captured in the expression *Rainbow Nation*, they envisioned a country united regardless of color, political

¹ ‘No Man’s Land’ is not exclusive to South Africa. In fact, there are variety of usage connected to this concept. First, it is a term used to describe a piece of land that served to separate one state from another. It designates a land that is not owned by any state. Secondly, this term refers to disputed lands. Thirdly, The International Encyclopedia of the World War I would tell us that the term “‘No Man’s Land’ has been used ‘since the medieval era to denote disputed territory. During the First World War it was re-coined to describe the terrain between opposing forces, particularly where fronts were static, gaining common currency from late 1914. The term remains current, and is used more broadly to indicate areas of ambiguity and lack of ownership as well as military situations.” (Emmanuelle Cronier, sec. ed., “No Man’s Land,” *International Encyclopedia of the First World War* (August 20, 2015),https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/No_Mans_Land[accessed July 5, 2017].) In South Africa, the term is used in the same manner to describe areas of boundaries that were coined during apartheid. It refers to pieces of land used to separate racial groups in South Africa.

affiliation, culture, religion, gender and economic status creating, as it were, different strands of colors as in a rainbow. In the past 27 years, there have been successes in realizing this vision. Yet with the issues of poverty, corruption and economic instability, along with the persistent concerns on racial discrimination, political exclusion and the rising xenophobic tendencies among some of its people, is South Africa starting to fall back from its vision of a society free from division?

The existence of these “No Man’s Land” symbolize the wounded past of South Africa. They reflect the difficulties that South Africans face today. With this context in mind, this paper would like to ponder the function and significance of these lands in relation to South African society. Moreover, it explores the implications of such spaces in the Christian faith-life and missionary practice.