

3rd UniSA Nelson Mandela Lecture and Adelaide Festival Centre's OzAsia Festival Keynote Address

Introductions:

Mr Hieu Van Le

Good evening and welcome to the OzAsia Festival Keynote Address, a joint function between the Hawke Centre at the University of South Australia and the Adelaide Festival Centre. My name is Hieu Van Le, I'm the patron of the OzAsia Festival and it is great honour for me to welcome you all here this evening, what promises to be a wonderfully and thought-provokingly lecture.

Can I first of all acknowledge the Chancellor of the Uni SA, Dr Ian Gould, the Vice Chancellor and President of Uni SA, Professor Peter Høj, Mr Douglas Gautier, CEO Adelaide Festival Centre, the hats and representatives of State, our department, government departments, Head of School and Dean of Universities in South Australia, my predecessor, Dr Basil Hetzel, AC, former Lieutenant Governor of South Australia and also Patron of the Hawke Centre. Mr Elliott Johnston, Patron of the Reconciliation SA. Members of the Adelaide City Council, all the distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

I would also like to acknowledge that we meet on the traditional lands of the Kurna people and we respect their spiritual relationship with the country.

As a Patron of OzAsia Festival it is a great pleasure to welcome you to this event. When I arrived here in this country 33 years ago, as one of many thousand Vietnamese boat people, I held certain perception about what Australia was like. I thought that Australia was overwhelmingly Anglo Celtic and European society, and as a refugee who tried to rebuild my life in a new land and a top priority at that time was to get settled, work very hard and gradually realise my dreams for a brighter future. I thought along the way I might have to give up all of my cultural heritage and assimilate into the society. It soon become apparent to me, however, that my new home was much much more culturally diverse than I had imagined. I was and still am amazed how culturally rich the Australian society is. I realise that this country has been settled by merits of migrants and refugees from all corners of the world, for all of its history, and I realise that the cultural influence of these waves of migrants and refugees on Australia was tangible and growing and that the influx of the Vietnamese added just another dimension to this culturally diverse society.

As the 1970s gave way to the 80's, and the 80's to the 90's, our country became more closely engaged with Asia in an economic and political sense. All this of course has been accompanied by a great blooming in the cultural relationship as well, a trend that has brought us outstanding events at the OzAsia Festival. The festival is getting better every year I believe, and its scope is becoming broader and deeper as it becomes widely known and triggers significant interests, not only in South Australia and Australia but also in Asia as well. We are being spoiled with a terrific range of artistic performances from across Australia and Asia, and we are welcoming to Adelaide many highly respected and original thinkers, such as the man, the main speaker who we'll be hearing tonight.

For their overall influence and leadership on OzAsia Festival I want to thank Dr Gautier, the CEO and Artistic Director of Adelaide Festival Centre and Jacinta Thompson, the Director of the OzAsia Festival. I would like also to acknowledge the partners who have worked together to present this lecture, Vice Chancellor Professor Peter Høj, Professor Paul Fairall and Ms Elizabeth Ho representing the Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre.

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Ladies and gentlemen it's been an honour to welcome you to this evening address, I thank you for your attendance and I hope to see you at other OzAsia Festival events in the coming weeks, including tomorrow night, a moon lantern festival down at the Elder Park.

To formally introduce this evening's distinguished speaker, I would like now to welcome to the lectern, someone whose upbringing and professional career reflects merit of cultural heritage. Born in Kenya, he studied and worked in many countries including Canada, USA, England and Australia. His main interests includes African studies, social and cultural theory, post-colonial theory, processive diaspora, exalt and migration. In 2008 he was appointed the UNESCO Chair in Transnational Diaspora and Reconciliation Studies. Currently, he is the Pro Vice Chancellor and Vice President of the Division of Education, Arts and Social Science at the Uni SA. Ladies and gentlemen please welcome Professor Pal Ahluwalia, thank you.

Professor Pal Ahluwalia

Thank you Hieu. Let me begin also by extending my welcome to everybody on behalf of the University of South Australia and in particular the Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre and our Law School, which have been instrumental in putting this program together.

I think it's fitting that the lecture is called the Nelson Mandela Lecture given the speaker tonight is a person who I have great pleasure and honour in introducing. Ashis Nandy, who fundamentally believes in the values and embodies the spirit of what Mandela has sought to do. One of the pleasures of having Ashis here has been talking about him meeting Mandela a few years ago and how inspiring that was for him personally. But I want to be very brief to say that we're in for a real treat tonight.

I have heard Ashis Nandy speak many times now in the last few weeks and it's not surprising that he's been labelled as India's most arresting thinker. In India he will be considered a national treasure and of course, if you were watching the screen earlier he is listed as one of the top 100 public intellectuals in the world today. I'm sure you've read a lot about him in the publicity but I could just add a couple of things – one, Ashis's work is absolutely path breaking and for people in cultural and political and post-colonial theory particularly, it's absolutely mandatory reading. He has forged such a path for those of us who grapple with the post-colonial condition, but it's also the everyday which is so important to his work, and the idea that it's not just theorising at one level, but it's really capturing the essence of the everyday and the way in which people work through that problematic. So without further ado, I introduce Professor Ashis Nandy, our speaker for the Nelson Mandela Lecture tonight.

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Is it Necessary to Love Your Neighbours? Living with Radical Diversities and the Right to be Oneself

Dr Ashis Nandy, Fellow, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, India
Prominent International Sociologist and Political Scientist

Tuesday 21 September 2010
Her Majesty's Theatre, 58 Grote Street, Adelaide

Final Draft: 6 Nov 2010

Ashis Nandy

I begin with some snippets from a large study we did on the genocide that attended the birth of India and Pakistan sixty years ago. But first, a glimpse of Urvashi Butalia's moving account of Bir Bahadur Singh's visit to his ancestral village in Pakistan fifty years after Partition.¹

Bir Bahadur, as a child, had witnessed a number of women in his family, including his sister, killed by his father, a leader of the Sikh community at the foothills of the Himalayas in what is now Pakistan. The Sikhs, hopelessly outnumbered, feared an attack by the Muslims and the Sikh women and few elderly men feared dishonour. Bir Bahadur, now around 80, had survived the trauma and made peace with his memories by recasting them in the form of a heroic saga that he recites at community gatherings at a Sikh temple. Assumption of that heroic posture has also made him fiercely anti-Muslim. He is an office-bearer of the Bharatiya Janata Party and subscribes to its version of Hindu nationalism. During the demolition of the Babri mosque, he led a squad that participated in the demolition of the mosque.

However, Bir Bahadur also believed that the Hindu and Sikh commensal taboos that forbade them to eat with the Muslims—and to consider food or water even touched by a Muslim to be polluted—humiliating to the Muslims. He considered these taboos a positive evil. Though a victim of Partition, he nurtured a deep sense of guilt about the social customs centring on impurity and untouchability and Butalia describes in evocative detail Bir Bahadur's meeting with his former neighbours and how he fulfilled his lifelong wish to drink water from his village well and share a meal with his childhood friends and neighbours.

Bir Bahadur's beliefs are shared by a number of witnesses, most of them from refugees from East Pakistan, and scholars who have in recent times turned to studies of Partition and the social implosion and violence it caused with a vengeance. Thus, social anthropologist Satish Saberwal has argued that the Hindu caste system was ultimately responsible for Partition itself.² May be it was, but that is not what the testimonies of those who directly experienced the Partition violence always say. As a modern Hindu, Saberwal is embarrassed by the caste system and, now that there is a clear consensus on its evils in modern

¹ Urvashi Butalia, 'Community, State and Gender: On Women's Agency During Partition', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 24 April 1993, pp. WS-12-22; and 'Persistence of Memory', *Civil Lines* 5, 2001, pp. 169-98.

² Satish Saberwal, *Spirals of Contention: Why India Was Partitioned in 1947* (New Delhi: Routledge, Delhi, 2008).

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South Asia, it is a safe villain to identify. Saberwal, like most other well-educated South Asians, seems gloriously oblivious of the many communities in the region, taking advantage of the caste system, have survived for centuries as what social anthropologist Imtiaz Ahmed calls 'bridge' communities between Hindus and Muslims and have also sometimes pursued vocations that their formal religious affiliation should force them to reject. The Langas and the Manganiyas of Rajasthan, who are communities of musicians, and some communities of Patuas in West Bengal, who are traditionally painters of Hindu gods and goddesses, are good examples of such communities among Indian Muslims. They also often have their shared myths and theological justifications for what they do. Similar communities are found Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan among Hindus and Buddhists, too. Caste divides but it can also sometimes be divided to protect a community's lifestyle, livelihood and its connections with one or more larger religious traditions.

Ian Talbot's comparatively less one-dimensional approach, too, while admitting that pre-Partition Hindu-Muslim relations in Punjab were less conflicted than it was to later become, has to quickly add that he does not share the 'romanticized' idea of pre-Partition Hindu-Muslim relations in the testimonies of the victims of Partition. He tries to skim history from memories of witnesses the way Saberwal seeks to find 'truth' from history.³

However, we have also run into witnesses with 'politically incorrect' responses to such issues. Two examples follow. Saba Khatak, a well known Pakistani scholar, was interviewing an elderly woman who had lost some relatives in the violence. Khatak asked her if the Hindu caste system, with its ornate ideas of purity and pollution did not distance the South Asian Muslims from the Hindus. The woman said 'no' and went on with her narrative. Khatak wanted to be doubly sure and, after a while, asked her the same question again. This time she said more firmly, 'Why should the caste rules on purity and pollution offend us? A Hindu does not even eat with most other Hindus.'

Historian Anindita Mukhopadhyay tells the story of a refugee, S.K. Talukdar, who went to the village home of his friend Sirajuddin Ahmed, a Muslim, before fleeing to India from East Pakistan. The friendship crossed generations; Talukdar's father, who was by then dead, also knew Sirajuddin's father, personally knowing the context, personally welcomed Talukdar to his vast village home. Knowing Hindu customs, he offered to get the services of a Hindu cook for Talukdar or, alternatively, supply Talukdar rice, pulses and fish so that he could cook himself. Talukdar chose the second option. However, he never had to cook, for in the meanwhile the two friends had convinced Sirajuddin's mother to cook for them.

One day Sirajuddin's father stumbled upon them while they were eating together. He was furious with the two friends and was about to beat them up. After a while, tired of scolding them, he broke into tears and said to his son, 'What have you done? You have ruined the caste, *jat*, of your friend! How shall I tell his father, when he asks me about his son, that I have taken away his son's caste?' Later, still deeply perturbed, he went to a local *pir*, a Muslim divine, to pray for his unintended transgression and make an offering.

³ Ian Talbot, Pakistan and Sikh Nationalism: State Policy and Private Perceptions, *Sikh Formations*, 6(1), pp. 63-76.

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Please note that both respondents were educated. The first one came from an urban, middle class family that had travelled around and Sirajuddin's father, too, was not only enjoyed an economic status higher than his Hindu friend's family, but was also educated and stayed in a metropolis. The behaviour of neither could be attributed to lack of education or urban exposure.

Also note that in the first case the attitude is casual, in the second a matter of serious ethical commitment. The former may not be as irrelevant as it at first sight seems; religion had not yet probably become a matter of tense negotiation and self-affirmation. Psychologist Chavi Bhargava speaks of Shakuntala Devi, a refugee devastated by the turn of events in 1947 and bitter about it. But Shakuntala also begged her son-law, a pilot in the Indian Air Force, during an India-Pakistan war, not to Bomb Lahore, because it was her natal place. She also openly said that she still missed the presence of Muslims in her Jaipur neighbourhood; she was accustomed to them. Eating with Muslims was a problem for her, too, in her childhood; her mother would beat her if she ate at the home of her Muslim friends. Unfortunately, she liked their food more than what she ate at her own home. One day she posed this her problem to a friend's mother, who solved it immediately. She asked Shakuntala if she knew any Hindu prayer or mantra; she did. Her friend's mother then taught Shakuntala a *kalma*, so that when she went to her friend she could recite it on the way and become a Muslim. On the way back, she could recite the Hindu prayer she knew to become Hindu again. That worked.

Both Sabarwal and Talbot would have gained much if they had taken their witnesses, untutored in contemporary social sciences and history, more seriously. Memories have no obligation to follow the rules of history. Memory work, if I may call it so, is a technology of the self, which is designed to grapple with life, not theoretical concerns of the academe. The job of utopia, even when you project it into the past and not the future, is not to supply a guidebook the way linear programming in economics does, but to critically evaluate the present, so as to open up the future. In the study we did of the Partition violence, we found our most of our witnesses, even when bent by life, humble and unexposed to our intellectual universe, not merely socially sensitive but also ethical and life-affirming. Let me tease out a few possible implications of the snippets I have supplied.

My first proposition is that, even if we reject Bir Bahadur's politics or the killings in his family, we *are* more comfortable with his understanding of social hierarchy because we feel we have the politically correct categories for it and we have a grip on her narrative. Our cognitive frame is populated by concepts such as feudalism, honour killing, primordial prejudices and stereotypes, and gender inequalities inherent in traditional social orders. We are likely to dismiss the significance of the first two stories where inequalities do not look like inequalities to the protagonists, but as asymmetries arising out of peculiarities of community practices and cultural belief systems. As if these peculiarities were parts of the landscape and there was a tacit expectation that the peculiarities of one's own community will be treated similarly by other communities.

What to Bir Bahadur, a modestly educated son of a village shopkeeper and moneylender, were already looking like humiliating inequities and obscene discrimination was for them normal, intuitive, unself-conscious tolerance of the perplexing oddities of communities. It is unself-conscious because, if forced to be self-conscious, they will be torn within and try to find out if the oddities they notice were

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motivated by any desire to humiliate or assert dominance. It will then be a different kind of game. You cannot breathe normally once you try to count your breath.

Please note that I am not passing any judgement on the ethics of commensal taboos. This does not mean that I have no position on them. I am talking here of the capacity to live with asymmetrical relations between communities. Thus, in India about four-fifth of the population is Hindu and a large majority of them consider the cow sacred. It is not surprising that cow slaughter is banned in a number of Indian states. What is surprising that in a number of states cow slaughter is *not* banned and there is no demand for it either. More important, in these matters there is no demand for reciprocity. You do not tolerate something *in exchange of* similar tolerance shown. The resigned tolerance I am talking about transcends law. A few years ago, long after Islamic fundamentalism had become a major force in Pakistan, in a Hindu-majority village in Pakistan—a few of them are still there in the country—a Muslim inhabitant did something perfectly legal in Pakistan. He slaughtered a cow for a festive occasion. The man was badly beaten up and thrown out of the village. No one made any fuss about it, not even the press. And no fundamentalist group, to the best of my knowledge, picked up the cause. The news was covered in a local daily in a small box as a curiosity. That is how Pakistani journalist came to know of it and used in a letter to the editor of an Indian newspaper.

My second proposition is that the relaxed, non-ideological tolerance—the tolerance that does not call itself tolerance and comes from the rhythm of everyday life—can be seen as part of an odd, tacit, unheroic cosmopolitanism in many societies. Our dominant cosmopolitanism—with its ideas of mainstream, national integration and multiculturalism does not recognise its strange cousin and would like to legislate it out of existence. But that also is not easy. For it is all around us in different guises in different communities.

Years ago, historian Dipesh Chakrabarti noticed the consistent invocation, by many uprooted by the Partition, of the memories of an idyllic village where nature's bounty matched social and interreligious harmony.⁴ In our study of Partition violence, too, these happy memories are a running theme most of the interviews. Chakrabarti's analysis covers the memories of some sophisticated intellectuals of the left, ever eager to talk of class relations and socioeconomic discrimination that characterised Pre-Partition South Asian society. Is it only nostalgia and the romanticization of the pre-Partition days? Or is it a semi-articulate critique of post-Partition Hindu-Muslim relations?

A vital part of the subjectivities that shape such invocation of the past is the tacit, ill-defined struggle to be oneself and that includes the right to disapprove and dislike not only individuals and groups but also cultures and cultural practices, though not the right to hate or nurture fantasies of annihilation or extermination. (However, at some moments, atypically, these fantasies might take an epidemic form and get an opportunity to come into play. In Sri Lanka, Val Daniel's work suggests, these fantasies are now no longer rare. In Gujarat, in India, in the pogrom of 2002 against the Muslims such fantasies were fairly routine in the urban, middle class Hindus and, a recent documentary film on the riots suggests, such

⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarti, 'Remembered Villages: Representation of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of the Partition', *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 10, 1996, pp. 2143-51.

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fantasies are now nurtured by many young Muslim children, in reaction to their experiences of loss and humiliation).

It is my suspicion that the spread of Enlightenment values is making it increasingly obligatory to disown all hostility towards or even dislike of any artefact, tradition or practice that is culturally marked—from cuisine to sports, from marriage rituals to religious rites, and from dress to ideas of personal hygiene. Exceptions are made only in case of the rich and the powerful. You can fulminate against Cola drinks but not convey your dislike for Thai or Sri Lankan food, which routinely brings steam out of your ears. It is still possible to make wry comments on English food in polite society, particularly if you are English, but it is increasingly becoming difficult to say anything negative about Bombay films if you are not an Indian. Yet, there are many more Indians who passionately dislike Bombay films as there are English who disparage English food. That is the price of multiculturalism.

I believe that it is possible to live with diversities without such a tough, sanitised version of cross-cultural tolerance and many societies that are communities-based have done so. A good marriage can be defined by how few quarrels the couple has. But it can also be measured how many quarrels the marriage can take.

Diversity in some cultures means not merely the tolerance of difference but the tolerance of the inability or refusal to bend one's deeper beliefs to accommodate a facile, skin-deep tolerance. I am trying here to identify this alternative cosmopolitanism.

In Cochin, a three-thousand-year-old city in the South-West coast of India, there are two Jewish communities, both facing extinction. Both have a fantastic record in that they have any hostility from the other communities in Cochin or for that matter India. But they have faced hostility from each other. Migration to Israel has taken its toll over the last six decades. But when I did my fieldwork there in the mid-1990s, though gradually diminishing in size, they were still vibrant, proud communities. Both were convinced that not only were they superior to other communities in Cochin, the various Hindu and Muslim castes and sects, but they were superior to each other. One claimed that they had come to Cochin after the fall of the second temple and felt that they protected an older heritage of the Jews of the city, the other felt that they had a better access to Jewish ritual tradition because they had come to Cochin only after the fall of Moorish Spain via the Ottoman Empire. Both discouraged intermarriage between the two Jewish communities, even though the population in one had fallen below sixty in one and thirty-five in the other.⁵

⁵ The growing demand that you must be perfectly impartial in matters of culture is a relatively modern development. So is the belief that cultural dislike and ethnic stereotyping must sometime or other lead to violence. This is not what experience tells us. For instance, '... the founder of Zegota, the one organization in Poland and in Europe as a whole that had as its sole purpose the saving of Jewish lives, was herself a zealous anti-Semite. She reportedly expressed her wish that the Jews she was protecting would disappear from Poland after the war.' István Deák, 'Heroes and Victims', 'The Politics of Retribution', *New York Review of Books*, 31 May 2001, pp. 52-6; p. 55. See also Ashis Nandy, 'Time Travel to a Possible Self: Searching for the Alternative Cosmopolitanism of Cochin', in *Time Wars: The Insistent Politics of Silent and Evasive Pasts* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002), pp. 157-209.

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This story is not the story of Cochin but of a possible alternative cosmopolitanism, a cosmopolitanism that does not, alas, conform to our idea of multiculturalism but must not have at one time looked strange or esoteric. Given the limitations of time, I can only briefly touch upon one or two aspects of it.

One example could be a somewhat dismissive attitude towards history that allows us to see history not as the authoritative discipline it has become after the Enlightenment. History in this other cosmopolitanism is the domain of multiple, intersecting epics that double as so many morality tales. Shamelessly using the legends, myths, shared memories transmitted over generations, grand parents' tales, and limited-edition, quasi-mythic 'histories' of communities and even shamanic visions, it tells the stories of oppression, exploitation and man-made suffering that have fallen through the interstices of mainstream history trying to avoid human subjectivities. If it is history, it is history told in an ahistorical mode; it is history that tries to be its own other and be unabashedly anti-historical.

Ahistoricity nowadays arouses much discomfort and anxiety in the Southern world. It is a stigma since the colonial times and the former colonies of Europe in Asia and Africa have been trying hard to remove the stigma during the last 150 years. The well-educated, Afro-Asian intelligentsia have been trying to turn historical with vengeance and there have been clenched-teeth efforts to spot historical and proto-historical works in Asian and African past. At the same time, tolerance of ahistoricity or its celebration has begun to look like a betrayal of reason and collaboration with obscurantism.

Strangely, there have also been sustained, parallel efforts since the mid-nineteenth century to decode the language of myths and legends to bring them within historical space. All such efforts have claimed that they have discovered the key to the 'real', 'objective', social realities, motives and historical compulsions driving the mythic discourse. From Marxism to psychoanalysis to structuralism—a whole range of theories have ended up claiming that they have demystified myths and bared the 'hard' realities beneath them—the 'truths' of political economy, class relations, psychosexuality, binary oppositions of human reasoning and traces of historical experiences.

Yet, these have not led to self-confidence. If you have cracked the mystery of myths and established them as another form of language transparent to those who have learnt the technology of interpretation, you do not have to harangue others speaking the language of myths for being stubbornly irrational, superstitious and retrogressive. If you claim you can read myths, you should be able to accept the mythic or the legendary as another language in which some obstinate people choose to speak.

I suspect that many who claim to have read myths live with the fear that myths may never be fully transparent to them and those who live in the mythic world will always remain partly a mystery. Such opacity arouses anxieties and sometimes fear. Many also probably dislike the language of myths because they do not want to hear the voice of those who speak it; they have acquired the habit of speaking on their behalf. Michel Foucault once reportedly said that there was nothing more obscene than speaking on behalf of someone else. But in a world increasingly dominated by professionals and experts, we prefer to behave as if the living human beings telling the story of their suffering through myths and legends, like the way novelists do, have forfeited their right to be our next-door neighbours and deserve to be exported to

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history. We should meet them only in textbooks or museums. Elsewhere I have called this the new slave trade of our times.

Our pathways to the future, Bruno Latour believes, wind their ways through the past. Breaking the shackles of history, thus, is not merely introducing new disjunctions in the contemporary consciousness but a means of opening up the past outside the suzerainty of history. It also means shedding the load of the past and freeing the future in societies where the future has been either stolen or hijacked.

This other cosmopolitanism, pushed to the margins in recent centuries, does not share the popular belief in an irreversible, linear, diachronic movement from the pastoral or the rural to the civic or the urbane. Nor does it presume that this movement has to enshrine the ideas of evolution and progress. Indeed, it reaffirms the belief that cities in dialogue and communion with villages represent a healthier and more creative way of life. It is a reaction to the displacement and uprooting that today constitutes the underside of the grand projects of our times.

A second instance can be the refusal of the other language of cosmopolitanism to respect the boundaries between the secular and the this-worldly, on the one hand, and the transcendent and the other-worldly, on the other. As in the epics, gods and demons, animals and spirits, the dead and the immortal enter and exit human life with effortless ease and are in constant communion with human beings. No one is terribly surprised when the humans encounter the nonhuman inhabitants of the cosmos or when the latter begin to speak human languages. I am not talking of a magical world peopled by the fantastic but of an everyday world that is open-ended by virtue of being open to the mysterious and the unpredictable.

Categories of tolerance come to ordinary citizens less frequently from constitutional guarantees and ideals of citizenship; they come from personal faiths, ethical commitments and shared traditions of tolerance in a culture.

The person in whose name this lecture series has been named was associated with an exceedingly imaginative, ambitious project on reconciliation about which most of you have heard. That initiative, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, was based on the presumption that testimony is more important than the forensics of culpability. A testimony opens up the future by establishing a dialogue between the oppressor and the oppressed within a single ethical frame that recognises the humanity of both. A trial, even when necessary, can only establish guilt and while bringing in the oppressed within a frame that recognises their humanity, pushes the oppressor out of it. It absolutizes the differences between the two. I am aware of the many criticisms of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but I do believe that it challenged our clear-cut divisions between victims and perpetrators, the killers and the killed, and between what Dostoevsky called the anthropologists and their subjects. I consider that the major challenge of our times.

I thank you for your patience. Speaking can never be as important as listening.

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