“We Pray for the Death of ‘God’”: 
Southern African Women in Prayer

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Introduction

In South Africa foreigners (North Africans) are being ambushed, burnt, or beaten to death in xenophobic attacks that have been sporadic but widespread. The media carry gruesome stories of displaced women and children who originally come from war-torn regions of Africa or economically unstable countries in Africa north of the Republic of South Africa. Having come to South Africa seeking a different life, their husbands and fathers are killed, and they are displaced again. The reasons given by South African mobs have ranged from “the foreigners are taking ‘their women’” (notice the objectification of South African women) to “foreigners take jobs that rightfully belong to South Africans.” Activists and government officials both inside and outside South Africa are working to effect change so that women and children’s lives are not at stake. Rape statistics are high in South Africa with a woman being raped every two minutes. Police statistics reveal that twenty-seven cases of rape are reported per day in the province of the Western Cape alone. Statistical more women than men are unemployed in South Africa.

With this context in mind, I will consider the prayers of women in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa (ACSA). I realize that the task of describing women’s prayer in ACSA is not only difficult but in fact impossible to do in an article of this length, for ours is a “rich church” with multiple languages, multiple ways and forms of expressing diverse spiritualities, all of which form the totality of ACSA in

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2 See the Statistics South Africa website at www.statssa.gov.za/.
prayer. Women pray in song and dance, words and deeds, with traditional African drums and Western guitars, in deep silence and tears, in meditation and wonder, in bright colors and candlelight, around adorned altars and under trees in rural places where there are not any church buildings—yet they are all in prayer. I will focus on the concerns of women’s prayers in ACSA. Women in ACSA pray away rape and pray away xenophobia in South Africa brought about by the violence of those who believe this land belongs exclusively to them. Women also pray away deeply gendered poverty affecting mostly women and children, and pray away violence against women.

Many Christians have believed that violence and poverty are ordained by God. So women in essence pray for the death of this “God” who ordains this violence and pray to a God who wills peace and the affirmation of the humanity of women and the weak of our communities. Women pray to a life-giving God for all humanity. Women pray to a God who will answer their prayers and not oppose everything that women experience and believe to be divine and life-giving.

Contrasting Images of God

Neither the progressive South African constitution nor the ideals of Ubuntu have modified the impact of the male image of God. Despite the equality affirmed in the constitution, African culture and religion continue to influence the daily experience of black women. Although many argue that Ubuntu makes up the fabric of African society, and that violence against women and xenophobia are against the spirit of Ubuntu, it is clear from the statistics offered in the introduction that Ubuntu has not been effective for women’s freedom and equality. Ubuntu itself is based on patriarchy and male-dominated cultures in Southern Africa, therefore Ubuntu can never liberate women from male domination. Mercy Oduyoye correctly argues that “in Africa as elsewhere a literal reading of the creation narratives has stifled the theological content and buried the chance for real

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3 According to Ubuntu, older male relatives take an honored part in family decision-making. Aunts are important keepers of family custom, take part in the transition of young girls to womanhood, preparation for marriage, and so on. The problem is that the aunts help in keeping customs that no women has ever had a say in whether or not they are life-giving to women, because the power of decision-making rests on male relatives. Thus Ubuntu even at the family level perpetrates male domination and socializes women to perpetrate male domination among themselves.
reflection.”4 The literal reading of Genesis has also given to South Africa a “God” who is only like those and for those who were the first Africans to interpret the Bible—men. Indeed this “God”—who in the Anglican Prayer Book of the ACSA is “male” (“Father,” “Almighty,” “Lord”)—has given human men an undue status, where they see themselves as more like God than women are. Women, therefore, should be submissive to men. This “God” is a “God” in agreement with what Ubuntu has socialized women to be: obedient even in the face of abuse and death. Oduyoye argues further that “women’s experience of being persons primarily in relation to others—as mother or as wife—predominates in Africa. A woman’s social status depends on these relationships and not on any qualities or achievements of her own.”5 And this is Ubuntu.

Since men see themselves as more like “God” than women are, and even more problematically, they see “God” as more like them than like women, violence has been directed toward women and those who on the hierarchy are perceived to be below the South African woman—the foreigner, the gay, and the differently-abled. The xenophobic attacks that have plagued South Africa continue because the “other” is truly other, “not like us and therefore not like ‘God’.” Or more problematically, “Our ‘God’ is like us and therefore not like the ‘other.’” This “God” has been ruthless to women, has subordinated them to men and ordained all violence necessary to keep them subdued. The image of “God” has been presented to women as male, and not just any male, but a violent male who conquers women and encourages the conquering of women. This image of God has undoubtedly led to gendered poverty, higher rates of unemployment among women than among men, and gender-based violence toward women.

However, women know another image of the God of Jesus. African women’s “bonding with Jesus is that of persons who, while marginalized by society, continue to call attention to the periphery and to act as if that were the center.”6 Indeed the God women pray to is one who is at the periphery with them and who takes seriously this periphery as central in God’s own relation to humanity. Women thus

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5 Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing*, 122.
do not worship or pray to the “God” who ordains violence. Rather, in their praying away violence, they are also praying this “God” away. “African women demonstrate an affinity with Jesus as a person who is sensitive to the misery and oppression of the weak and seeks their empowerment for liberation.”7 The “God” who ordains violence can never be the God of Jesus, because the God women see in Jesus is one who is sensitive to women’s misery and oppression. Women pray away the violent “God” and pray for the coming of the God of Jesus Christ. With their own experience of God who dwells in the periphery with them, African women of different races and tribes have gathered in different prayer forums to pray against violence. Prayer against violence and marginalization of women in society is in essence prayer against the “God” who ordains such violence. So women pray away the “God” who ordains this violence and pray for the emergence of a God who wills peace and the affirmation of the humanity of women and the weak of our communities. Women in ACSA pray to and for a life-giving God for all humanity. So women pray away the “God” of violence, and they pray this devilish “God” back to hell! Women pray for the death of “God.”

Public Prayer and Activism

The death of one image of “God” and the birth of another in the prayer of women in Southern Africa is exemplified in their history. This spirit is embodied in the 1956 Women’s March. Southern African women of all races and all creeds came together on August 9, 1956 to protest against the apartheid regime. The march on the Union Building happened in a time in South Africa that was defined by the violence of apartheid and the death of many black people at the hands of an oppressive regime. Women of every race—white, black, Indian, colored—came together to protest. They decided to march on the Union Building in Pretoria “to hand over a petition to J. G. Strijdom, South Africa’s prime minister, over the introduction of the new pass laws and the Group Areas Act No 41 of 1950. This act enforced different residential areas for different races and led to forced removals of people living in ‘wrong’ areas.”8 These women came together under the slogan Wathinta abafazi, wathinta imbokodo—“You strike

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7 Fabella and Oduyoye, *With Passion and Compassion*, xiii.
8 Alistair Boddy-Evans, “Women’s Anti-Pass Law Campaigns in South Africa: What Happened When the SA Government Tried to Force Women to Carry
a woman, you strike a rock.” They sang “Wathint’ abafazi, wathint’ imbokodo, uza kufa” (“When you strike a woman, you strike a rock, you will be crushed, you will die”). This proverb provides the summary term: the spirit of imbodoko. The petition that they handed over included these words:

We are women from every part of South Africa. We are women of every race, we come from the cities and the towns, from the reserves and the villages. We come as women united in our purpose to save the African women from the degradation of passes. . . . In the name of women of South Africa, we say to you, each one of us, African, European, Indian, Coloured, that we are opposed to the pass system. We voters and voteless, call upon your Government not to issue passes to African women. We shall not rest until ALL pass laws and all forms of permits restricting our freedom have been abolished. We shall not rest until we have won for our children their fundamental rights of freedom, justice, and security.9

Women in this march were led by women of different races—Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Rahima Moosa, Sophia Williams-de Bruyn, Motlalepula Chabaku, Bertha Gxowa, and Albertina Sisulu—and indeed the participants in this march were also South African women of all races. About twenty thousand women joined the march on the Union Building in Pretoria. White women allowed black women to carry their babies on their backs as they marched to stop the police from shooting at these women, lest they kill a white baby. So both black and white women risked their physical security by putting their bodies and their children at stake to protect each other from the violence of apartheid. They did this not only for themselves, but for the good of this country and its entire people, as their petition says—for the “rights of freedom, justice, and security.”

In this march South African women understood and expressed their experiences in terms of interconnectedness and relatedness among women, extending to the peoples of South Africa. In that event, mutuality and solidarity that transcended race, creed, and class operated among women. This action is what Carter Heyward identifies

as “power in relation,” making God present in the world. Heyward argues that where there is no relation there is no God.\(^\text{10}\) It could be argued here that where relations are based on hierarchy and violence, there is no God. From the South African perspective, where women’s relationships are not sufficiently explored and taken seriously, the true God is not present. Rather, what we undoubtedly have is the violent “God” who ordains the oppression of women. This is the “God” whom women are praying away. In this march, women exhibited a different way of being and a different understanding of God as connectedness and relatedness.

I agree with Mary Grey’s critique of the idea of relatedness and interconnectedness, where she asserts that this concept cannot be spoken of without paying attention to key difficulties. Among the difficulties that Grey posits is that “black women find it almost impossible to dialogue with white women because of the history of white women’s collusion in their oppression. This collusion has history and has modern expressions.” Another difficulty Grey cites is that “poor women are separated from middle- and upper-class women by structures of poverty and class.”\(^\text{11}\) However, at this march women of all races, ages, creeds, and classes came together and challenged not only apartheid as a system of oppression, but also the constructs in which women are socialized to see and understand themselves. They challenged the very foundations of violence, the constructs that we so often take as given: race, class, age, and creed. They challenged the hierarchies that divide society, the violence of patriarchy, and the “God” who ordains all these ills. These women asserted that not only are we all in a process of becoming, but God is also becoming with us in a mutual relationship between God and humanity.

Lest I fall into the trap of romanticizing black women’s struggle against racism, classism, and oppression in South Africa, I should mention that I am aware of—and the women who took part in that march in 1956 were aware of—the role that white women played in our oppression as black women. However, the fundamental imbokodo spirit of the march suggests that our awareness of the different roles white women played and continue to play in black women’s oppression do


not in any way stop us as women from uniting and seeing the truth
that we were socialized in different circumstances—whites to hate
blacks and blacks to be subordinate to whites. We can and should
stand together in challenging such socialization and in one voice say:
“This violence must stop. We want nothing to do with it and the ‘God’
who ordains this. We pray for the death of ‘God.’ ‘God,’ you strike a
woman, you strike a rock, you shall die!!”

Indeed from the march we see how the *imbokodo* spirit of African
women has enabled women to transcend these constructs and unite
against violence. They create an environment in which women can
work against these societal constructs of race and classism. Such mu-
tual relatedness and connectedness speaks of the presence of the God
to whom African women pray. Whether or not they are in the same
parish, using the same form of prayer and supplication, or speaking in
the same language, women’s groups throughout ACSA pray away vio-

ence. Some pray in word, some in deeds: donating clothes and food
and visiting and sharing fellowship with those affected by violence.
Such prayer continues to bring women together. Although they may
not express it this way themselves, I interpret the women of ACSA in
prayer, praying for the death of “God.”

The *imbokodo* spirit is not unique to Southern Africa, but it is
exhibited by women in Liberia as well. In Liberia women also came
together, from every creed and tribe to protest against the violent re-
gime of then President Charles Taylor. Women of Liberia said, “The
bullet doesn’t know whether you are Christian or Muslim, it kills us
all,” and they staged a protest in an African Union meeting, laying
down on the cold floor, thus putting their bodies at risk and refusing
to let those in the meeting leave unless a nonviolent resolution was
reached.\(^\text{12}\)

The spirit of African women, the *imbokodo* spirit, cuts across
race, tribes, and creeds and unites people in one aim: justice and life
for all people. This spirit stands opposed and in contradiction to the
violent “God” who ordains the death of those who are different and
the violation and dehumanization of women and children. In exhib-
ting this African women’s spirit, women do not only stand opposed
to violence, but also stand opposed to whoever ordains violence.
Hence, we may envision that African women in their prayers, praying

\(^\text{12}\) See the documentary film *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, directed by Gini Reticker
and produced by Abigail Disney (Passion River Films, 2009).
together against violence, are participating in a protest march today as they have been in the past, when violence seemed to overwhelm this part of the world. They are protesting against the violent “God.” In the presence of the violent male “God,” women in ACSA continue to put their bodies and security at risk, yet they engage in what should be understood as a spiritual protest march in prayer against violence and against the “God” who ordains it. Women pray away the “God” who ordains injustice and pray for the emergence of the true God who is love and who is the source of life in all its fullness, the God of Jesus Christ. Women pray to the God of Jesus Christ and pray the devilish violent “God” back to hell! We pray for the death of “God.”

*Let Us Pray with African Women*

We pray for a society made whole with men and women as partners and where children are not lesser beings but fully human and entitled to all human rights. We pray that the human community might be liberated from hierarchies and dichotomies of gender and race. We pray for liberation from the wildly romanticized notion of *Ubuntu*. We pray for openness and creativity to be visible within the church as well, for the church to repent and accept the re-emerging God, the God of Jesus Christ. We pray to the true God, the God of Jesus Christ, for the death of “God”! Amen.