

The Lenten Pastoral Letter: a first public declaration of the hidden transcript

Hilary B. P. Mijoga

Introduction

It is no longer a secret that the one-party rule of the Malawi Congress was dictatorial.¹ 'Public discourse was shaped by party propaganda and the mark of political correctness was unquestioning personal loyalty to the Life President.'² In this setting, 'no alternative view was tolerated in public or even in private.'³ Even the churches were not immune from the state's control. 'The churches, while free of state control over internal matters, were required to give the regime their stamp of legitimacy and to restrict their witness to personal spirituality and morality.'⁴ This implies that 'the totalitarian character of the Government made it difficult or practically impossible for the church to enter into any meaningful dialogue on issues affecting social services and the abuse of human rights.'⁵ The government did not only make it difficult or impossible to talk about social issues in the country, but the 'Church leaders also had to reckon with a political climate in which dissent was likely to attract swift retribution.'⁶

It is in this political climate that in 1992 the Catholic bishops in Malawi issued their Lenten Pastoral Letter.⁷ The Letter begins by quoting Pope Paul VI: 'the church is certainly not willing to restrict her action only to the religious field and dissociate herself from man's temporal problems.'⁸ On the basis of this mandate, the Catholic bishops forced into the open issues which had not been publicly discussed in the past. The Letter begins with a social critique, i.e., it tackles issues such as wage structure, education and health services, human rights and democratic accountability of government.

The Letter's function and importance can be seen in the various descriptions it has been given and the roles it is supposed to have played in Malawian history, e.g., it

is called 'an intervention';⁹ an 'epoch-making Lenten Pastoral Letter';¹⁰ and 'simply the Word of God which has liberated the people'.¹¹ It introduced 'accountability to Malawian public life i.e. it made the regime accountable to *reality*.'¹² Such was its effect that 'modern Malawian history is divided into "before the Pastoral Letter" and "after the Pastoral Letter".'¹³

As has already been alluded to above, the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) government had established a culture of deceit and the first to break this culture were the Catholic bishops. Their 'statement was the first public criticism of the MCP regime to be issued in the country since independence in 1964 and called for far-reaching social and political reform.'¹⁴ The bishops' bold stand in the reform movement exposed them to danger since any opposition to the government was put down ruthlessly and violently. Within a few days, the Letter was banned and branded seditious. The bishops were criticised and insulted. There were even fears for the lives of the bishops as it is reported that at a specially convened meeting, certain members of the MCP threatened to have them killed.

A number of reasons can be suggested as to why the bishops issued the Lenten Pastoral Letter. For example, it is argued that 'in the absence of opposition groups which have either been banned or exiled, people look up to the churches to speak out on their behalf.'¹⁵ This is because people realise that 'the church is called to solidarity with the poor, the dispossessed, the exploited, the marginalized.'¹⁶ This solidarity with the poor and oppressed and marginalised 'commits the church to seeking the political empowerment of the masses of ordinary people who tend to be excluded and exploited.'¹⁷ In short then, this Letter was written with the plight of the poor and marginalised in mind. In this case, the church saw itself as an effective agent of social liberation. The emphasis on the poor and oppressed and marginalised is interesting here, for this is what contextual Bible study is all about. According to Gerald O. West, contextual Bible study is 'a form of Bible reading that begins with an emancipatory interest that is grounded in the real conditions of poor and marginalized local communities.'¹⁸ West claims that this form of Bible study is liberating for it provides processes, critical resources and a safe social site in which the unarticulated (and primarily religious) responses to domination of individuals are given expression in language, symbol, and ritual. So, one would argue that the bishops adopted biblical hermeneutics of liberation in their approach to the biblical texts referred to in their Letter.¹⁹

One could also suggest that the Letter was issued perhaps because the church realised that 'society can be strong only when it enjoys the active support of all its members.'²⁰ In the case of the MCP government, it did not enjoy the active support of most of the citizens of the country. So the Letter may be looked at as a reminder to this effect, but also as a way of addressing the imbalance. When Pope John Paul II visited Malawi in 1989, he addressed the bishops privately on the observance of human rights in this country. So Chakanza argues that 'it was in these circumstances that the Bishops issued their Lenten Pastoral Letter.'²¹

It has been observed that the Catholic Church world-wide has demonstrated an increased appreciation that the gospel demands solidarity with the poor and disadvantaged. This appreciation, it is claimed, cultivated a readiness to speak out against exploitation and oppression and promoted 'a growing awareness amongst the Christian community in Malawi that human rights are part of the Gospel.'²² Hence, in this context the Lenten Pastoral Letter might have been issued.

Finally, it has been recorded that when asked about the origins of the Pastoral Letter, one of the bishops replied, 'I did not write the Letter; it was written a long time ago on the hearts of our people.'²³ This response would suggest that the Letter was simply an echo of what Malawian Catholics were telling their priests over the years. In this case, one could claim that the church was in touch with the people and was therefore able to be the voice of the poor. This state of affairs would explain why many Malawians supported the sentiments of the Letter and the church after it had been read.

First public declaration of the hidden transcript

While the above are all possible reasons for the writing and reading of the Letter, it is also an example of a first public declaration of a hidden transcript. Here, I am indebted to Scott for the terminology and illustration of this position. Scott discusses the terms 'public' and 'hidden' in the context of power relations and discourse. He claims that 'every subordinate group creates, out of its own ordeal, a "hidden transcript" that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant.'²⁵ According to him, the term 'hidden transcript' characterises the discourse that takes place 'offstage', i.e. beyond direct observation by those holding power. This consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices

that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears on stage. While this hidden transcript is revealed in the comparative safety of friendship, it is occasionally openly declared in the face of power.²⁶

What creates the hidden transcript is domination.²⁷ For the hidden transcript to exist, there must be a public. This is because 'none of the practices and discourses of resistance can exist without tacit or acknowledged co-ordination and communication within the subordinate group.'²⁸ In addition to requiring a public, the hidden transcript finds fertile ground when at least two conditions are met: 'first, when it is voiced in a sequestered social site where the control, surveillance, and repression of the dominant are least able to reach, and second, this sequestered social milieu is composed entirely of close confidants who share similar experiences of domination.'²⁹

According to Scott 'the notion of hidden transcript helps us understand those rare moments of political electricity when, often for the first time in memory, the hidden transcript is spoken directly and publicly in the teeth of power.' If we compare this with the Pastoral Letter, we see, as we have already noted, that the Letter was the first public criticism of MCP rule. The statement contained what people said offstage (hidden transcript) and now that offstage discourse was brought to the open, i.e., it was directly and publicly presented in the face of power.

To illustrate how the hidden transcript 'storms' the stage, Scott cites one of the speeches of a character in George Eliot's *Adam Bede*. The character at issue is Mrs Poyser. Scott observes that 'when, suddenly, subservience evaporates and is replaced by open defiance we encounter one of those rare and dangerous moments in power relations.'³¹ In the case of the Pastoral Letter, these rare and dangerous moments are when the letter was banned and declared seditious and when the bishops were threatened with death.

Scott claims that although Mrs Poyser and her husband resented Squire Donnithorne, their landlord, for putting some new, onerous obligation on them and treating them with disdain, Mrs Poyser always said, 'your servant, sir' and was polite to him. In a similar way in Malawi, many people resented the MCP government, but yet they were loyal to the government for fear of their lives.

Tired of being ignored by the squires, one day Mrs Poyser explodes, for Scott records that she 'burst in with desperate determination to have her say out this once,

though it were to rain notices to quit...'³² In Malawi, people were tired of being exploited and oppressed. So the bishops' burst in determined to have their say. We have already noted, however, that the bishops 'exploded' being fully aware of the consequences of their outburst.

Mrs Poyser's statement to Squire Donnithorne was as follows:

You have run away from my words, sir, and you may go spinning underhand ways o' doing us a mischief, for you've got old Harry to your friend, though nobody else is, but I tell you for once as we're not dumb creatures to be abused and made money on by them as ha' got the lash i' their hands, for not o' knowing how t' undo the tackle. An if I'm th' only one as speaks my mind, there's plenty o' the same way o' thinking i' this parish and the next to 't, for your name's no better than a brimstone match in everybody's nose.³³

There are key issues of domination and resistance in this speech, e.g., the Poyser and others will not be treated as animals despite Donnithorne's power over them; the declaration that he has no friends and is hated by the whole parish. Although the confrontation originates from exploitation of an onerous tenancy, "the discourse is one of dignity and reputation".³⁴ The Pastoral Letter also talks about the same thing, e.g., 'the dignity and unity of humankind' and 'the aspiration to greater equality and unity'.³⁵

In Mrs Poyser's speech, we note that Mrs Poyser presumes to speak not for herself, but for the whole parish. Scott states that:

She represents what she says as the first public declaration of what everyone has been saying behind the squire's back. Judging from how rapidly the story travelled and unalloyed joy with which it was received and retold, the rest of the community also felt Mrs. Poyser had spoken for them as well... The vicarious pleasure of the neighbors had nothing to do with the actual sentiments expressed by Mrs. Poyser — hadn't everyone been saying the same thing about the squire among themselves for years? The content, though Mrs. Poyser may have put it with considerable folk elegance, was stale; it was saying it openly (with witnesses) to the squire's face that was remarkable and that made Mrs. Poyser into something of a local hero. The first open statement of a hidden transcript, a declaration that breaches an apparently calm surface of silence and consent, carries the force of a symbolic declaration of war. Mrs. Poyser had spoken (a social) truth to power.³⁶

A number of issues pertinent to the Pastoral Letter can be noted from this extended quotation, e.g., the speech being the first public declaration of what everyone has been saying behind the squire's back; Mrs Poyser had spoken for all the tenants; saying it openly to the squire's face; speaking a social truth to power. All what is said here is true of the Pastoral Letter. We have already noted that the Pastoral Letter was the first statement to openly criticise the MCP regime; the letter expressed what people were saying behind the government; the letter spoke the social truth to power.^{37,38}

Scott states that Mrs Poyser's speech was spontaneous. This 'spontaneity lay in the timing and vehemence of the delivery, not in the content. The content, had, in fact, been rehearsed again and again.'³⁹ As for the Pastoral Letter, its delivery was timed to coincide with Lent. To the Catholics, the Lent is one of the most important seasons in their calendar: observation of this season is mandatory. The reading of the Letter was timed to coincide with Lent because many Malawian Catholics would be attending mass. It is also recorded that on the day the letter was to be read, each bishop was to be in his cathedral. From experience, whenever the bishop is present and says mass, many people gather there. As for the content of the letter, there was nothing unusual because, as noted earlier, one of the bishops said the letter was written a long time ago on the hearts of the people. The Letter itself said, 'people will not be scandalized to hear these things; they know them. They will only be grateful that their true needs are recognized and that efforts are made to answer them.'⁴⁰ In short then, the spontaneity of the letter did not depend on its content, but in the timing and vehemence of the delivery, as was the case with Mrs Poyser's speech.

In her speech, one of the issues at stake is the shared situation of subordination. Scott explains that:

The tenants of Squire Donnithorne and, in fact, much of the nongentry in two parishes had ample personal reasons to take pleasure in his being publicly humbled and to share vicariously in Mrs. Poyser's courage. Their common class position and their social links thus provided a powerful resolving lens bringing their collective hidden transcripts into focus. One might say, without much exaggeration, that they had together, in the course of their social interchange, written Mrs. Poyser's speech for her. Not word for word, of course, but in the sense that Mrs. Poyser's 'say' would be her own reworking of the stories, the ridicule, and the complaints that those beneath the Squire all shared... Her speech was her personal rendition of the hidden transcript of a subordinate group.⁴¹

Ross observes that 'much of the power of the Pastoral Letter lay in the fact that it simply voiced what everyone knew but no one dared to say.'⁴² Hence, much of the Letter must be read as an echo of what Malawian Catholics have been saying to their priests over the years. For this reason, we can say that the Malawian Catholics had together, in the course of their social interchange, written the Pastoral Letter for the bishops. However, the final form of the letter was the bishops' own rendition of the hidden transcript of a subordinate group (the ordinary citizens).

It is obvious by now that the letter had a dramatic effect on the people. Shortly after the letter was read, students marched and workers went on strikes, acts which were unheard of in Malawi. These actions demonstrated popular support for the bishops' initiative. Ross observes that:

It was with tears that many people read the photocopies of the Pastoral Letter which spread through the country like wildfire. Practically overnight the mode of discourse being used in everyday conversation was changed. People discussed that, as promised in the Pastoral Letter, 'the truth will set you free'.⁴³

So the ordinary citizens 'had ample reasons to take pleasure in the government's being publicly humbled and to share vicariously in the bishops' courage.'

Scott also observes that 'Mrs. Poyser's explosion was potentially very costly, and it was her daring — some would have said foolhardiness — that won her much notoriety.'⁴⁴ In a footnote, Scott says, 'for readers unfamiliar with *Adam Bede* who would like to know how things turned out, the squire died providentially some months later, lifting the threat.'⁴⁵ In the case of the Pastoral Letter, one could also say that the bishops' move was also potentially very costly. We have already noted that the bishops were threatened with death by the MCP. Ross states that 'only intense diplomatic and ecclesiastical pressure prevented this threat being carried out.'⁴⁶ Due to this pressure also, the government was forced to concede that a national referendum should be held on the question of whether to retain the one-party system or to adopt a multi-party system of government. People voted for a multi-party democracy. This led to the general elections in which the ruling party lost. The success of the general elections meant, to put it crudely, that the one-party government providentially died some months after the Letter was read and ensured the lifting the threat over bishops.

Scott records that the effect generated by Mrs Poyser's speech did not come about because Mrs Poyser was a forceful woman or because she enjoyed any particularly exalted status among cottagers and tenants before her outburst. It is also not because of the speech's words and sentiments. Obviously, all these things were said behind the back of the squire throughout the parish. The issue is Mrs Poyser's courage in having spoken those words in the face of power. If Mrs Poyser became a charismatic heroine to the parish, it is because she was the first person to publicly confront power with the hidden transcript. This transcript was to a large extent scripted in advance for her by all members of her subordinate group. The shock waves the speech created were dependent, to a great extent, on how successfully the speech expressed the hidden transcript that all shared.

Those who then sang Mrs Poyser's praises are far from being the simple objects of manipulation. They quite genuinely recognize themselves in her speech; she quite genuinely speaks for them... The powerful emotional valence of the charismatic speech or act for subordinate groups—their sense of elation, joy, release depends... on it finding this resonance within the hidden transcript.⁴⁷

The above is applicable to the Catholic bishops and the reading of the Pastoral Letter. The momentum generated by the letter was not due to the fact that the Catholic Church was forceful or that it enjoyed exalted status in the country before the letter was issued. In fact, it has been pointed out that

The contribution of the Catholic Church in Malawi to the process of democratization from 1960 to 1992 (before the issue of the Pastoral Letter) is generally regarded by many observers as not only negligible but insignificant as well. The popular view is that the Catholic Church broke its long silence and started making a significant contribution when the Catholic Bishops issued their epoch-making Lenten Pastoral Letter, *Living Our Faith* on 8th March 1992.⁴⁸

We have already noted that what the Pastoral Letter contained was an echo of what Malawians were saying behind the back of the regime. The Letter's importance lies in the fact that the bishops were the first to publicly confront power with that hidden transcript. Because the Letter expressed successfully the hidden transcript that all shared, it generated shock waves across the country. Scott points out that:

The highly charged atmosphere created by the open declaration of the hidden transcript may produce social effects that bear the marks of collective madness. If the first act of defiance succeeds and is spontaneously imitated by large numbers of

others, an observer might well conclude that a herd of cattle with no individual will or values had been stampeded inadvertently or by design. The same pattern of action can, however, be produced when a subordinate group learns from a breakthrough event that they may now, more safely, venture open defiance. Nearly any member of the subordinate group could substitute for Mrs Poyser.⁴⁹

In the case of the aftermath of the Pastoral Letter, it was within weeks that strikes were organised by students and workers; a prominent trade unionist announced publicly his commitment to campaign for democracy and human rights in Malawi; other churches made statements in support of the bishops; a powerful engine for reform emerged (Public Affairs Committee — PAC); organised opposition now emerged in the form of 'pressure groups' campaigning for multi-party democracy. Scott's description of what happens after an open declaration of a hidden transcript is also true of what happened in Malawi when the Pastoral Letter was read out around the country.

Conclusion

My position in this paper has been that the Pastoral Letter by the Catholic bishops in Malawi in 1992 was the first public declaration of the hidden transcript. To demonstrate this position, I have used Scott's presentation and analysis of Mrs Poyser's speech, which, according to him, is an example of the first public declaration of the hidden transcript. Scott's presentation matches perfectly well the picture that emerged from the issuance of the Pastoral Letter in Malawi in 1992. In short then, in the language of Scott:

When the first declaration of the hidden transcript succeeds, its mobilizing capacity as a symbolic act is potentially awesome. At the level of tactics and strategy, it is a powerful straw in the wind. It portends a possible turning of the tables. Key symbolic acts are, as one sociologist puts it, 'tests of whether or not the whole system of mutual fear will hold.' At the level of political beliefs, anger, and dreams it is a social explosion. That first declaration speaks for countless others, it shouts what has historically had to be whispered, controlled, choked back, stifled, and suppressed. If the results seem like tumultuous, frenetic, delirious, and occasionally violent, that is perhaps because the powerless are so rarely on the public stage and have so much to say and do when they finally arrive.⁵³

Notes

1. Cf. Kenneth R. Ross, 'The Transformation of power in Malawi 1992-94; the role of the christian churches' in Kenneth R. Ross (ed.), *God, People and Power in Malawi: Democratization in Theological Perspective* (Kachere Monograph No. 3; Blantyre: CLAIM, 1996), pp. 15-40, especially pp. 17-19.
2. Kenneth R. Ross, 'The truth shall set you free: Christian Social Witness in Malawi' in Kenneth R. Ross, *Gospel Ferment in Malawi: Theological Essays* (Kachere Books No. 2; Gweru: Mambo Press in association with the University of Malawi, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, 1995), pp. 9-29, especially p. 10.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Joseph C. Chakanza, 'The pro-democracy movement in Malawi: the Catholic church's contribution, 1960-1992' in Matembo S. Nzunda and Kenneth R. Ross (eds.), *Church, Law and Political Transition in Malawi 1992-94* (Kachere Books No. 1; Gweru: Mambo Press in association with the University of Malawi, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, 1995), pp. 59-74, especially p. 70.
6. Ross, 'The truth shall set you free' in Ross, *Gospel Ferment in Malawi*, p. 13.
7. For the original form of the letter, see 'Living our faith: pastoral letter from the Catholic bishops 1992' in Kenneth R. Ross (ed.), *Christianity in Malawi : A Source Book* (Kachere Books No. 3; Gweru: Mambo Press in association with Kachere Series, 1996), pp. 203-15. See also 'The truth will set you free' in *Church in the World*, No. 28 (London: The Catholic Institute of International Relations, September 1992). For comments on the letter, cf. Joseph C. Chakanza's article cited in footnote 5 and Kenneth R. Ross' article cited in footnote 1 and in 'Not catalyst But ferment: the distinctive contribution of the churches to political reform in Malawi 1992-93' in Nzunda and Ross (eds.), *Church, Law and Political Transition in Malawi 1992-94*, pp. 31-42.

8. 'Living our faith' in Ross, *Christianity in Malawi*, p. 205 (cf. *Evangelization of Peoples*, No. 34).
9. Chakanza, 'The pro-democracy movement in Malawi' in Nzunda and Ross (eds.), *Church, Law and Political Transition in Malawi 1992-94*, p. 39.
10. 'Choosing our future: pastoral letter from the Catholic bishops 1993' in Ross (ed.), *Christianity in Malawi*, pp. 223-35, especially p. 223.
11. Ross, 'The truth shall set you free' in Ross, *Gospel Ferment in Malawi*, p. 16.
12. Ibid. p. 24. Emphasis his.
13. Ross, 'The transformation of power in Malawi 1992-94' in Ross (ed.), *God, People and Power in Malawi*, p. 23.
14. Ross, 'Not catalyst but ferment' in Nzunda and Ross (eds.), *Church, Law and Political Transition in Malawi 1992-94*, p. 31.
15. Chakanza, 'The pro-democracy movement in Malawi' in Nzunda and Ross (eds.), *Church, Law and Political Transition in Malawi 1992-94*, p. 70.
16. Ross, 'Not catalyst but ferment' in Nzunda and Ross (eds.), *Church, Law and Political Transition in Malawi 1992-94*, p. 33.
17. Ibid. p. 32.
18. Gerald O. West, *Reading the Bible on the Boundaries: The Difference it Makes* (Semeia, forthcoming in 1997), p. 22.
19. Cf Gerald O. West, *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in South Africa Context*, 2nd edn (Pietermaritzburg and Maryknoll, New York: Cluster Publications and Orbis Books, 1995).
20. Ross, 'The truth shall set you free' in Ross, *Gospel Ferment in Malawi*, p. 15.

21. Chakanza, 'The pro-democracy movement in Malawi' in Nzunda and Ross (eds.), *Church, Law and Political Transition in Malawi 1992-94*, p. 71.
22. Ross, 'The truth shall set you free' in Ross, *Gospel Ferment in Malawi*, p. 17.
23. Ross, 'Not catalyst but ferment' in Nzunda and Ross (eds.), *Church, Law and Political Transition in Malawi 1992-94*, p. 34.
24. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990).
25. Ibid. p. xii.
26. Ibid. p. 6.
27. Ibid. p. 27.
28. Ibid. p. 118.
29. Ibid. p. 120.
30. Ibid. p. xiii.
31. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, p. 6.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid. pp. 6-7.
34. Ibid. p. 7.
35. Cf. 'Living our faith', Ross (ed.), *Christianity in Malawi*, pp. 204-6.
36. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, pp. 8-9.
37. Cf. the response of one of the bishops as to who wrote the letter, see note 23.
38. Cf the slogan 'The truth will set you free' from the Pastoral Letter.

39. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, p. 8.
40. 'Living our faith', in Ross (ed.), *Christianity in Malawi*, p. 213.
41. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, p.8.
42. Ross, 'The truth shall set you free' in Ross, *Gospel Ferment in Malawi*, p. 16.
43. Ibid.
44. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, p. 9.
45. Ibid.
46. 'Living our faith' in Ross (ed.), *Christianity in Malawi*, p. 203.
47. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, p. 222.
48. Chakanza, 'The pro-democracy movement in Malawi' in Nzunda and Ross (eds.), *Church, Law and Political Transition in Malawi 1992-94*, p. 59. Emphasis his. Chakanza, however, does not fully subscribe to this popular view. He states, 'in my opinion, to concentrate only on the Pastoral Letter as if it were a bombshell that sent the country rocking, is to undermine the Catholic action and thinking which has gradually led to the issuing of the Pastoral Letter.' (ibid.)
49. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, p. 222.
50. Ross, 'The transformation of power in Malawi 1992-94' in Ross (ed.), *God, People and Power in Malawi*, pp. 26-40.
51. Ibid. pp. 26-34.
52. Cf. The introduction to Nzunda and Ross (eds.) *Church, Law and Political Transition in Malawi 1992-94*, pp. 7-14.
53. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, p. 227.

DEPARTMENT OF THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES
CHANCELLOR COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF MALAWI
P. O. Box 280
ZOMBA
MALAWI