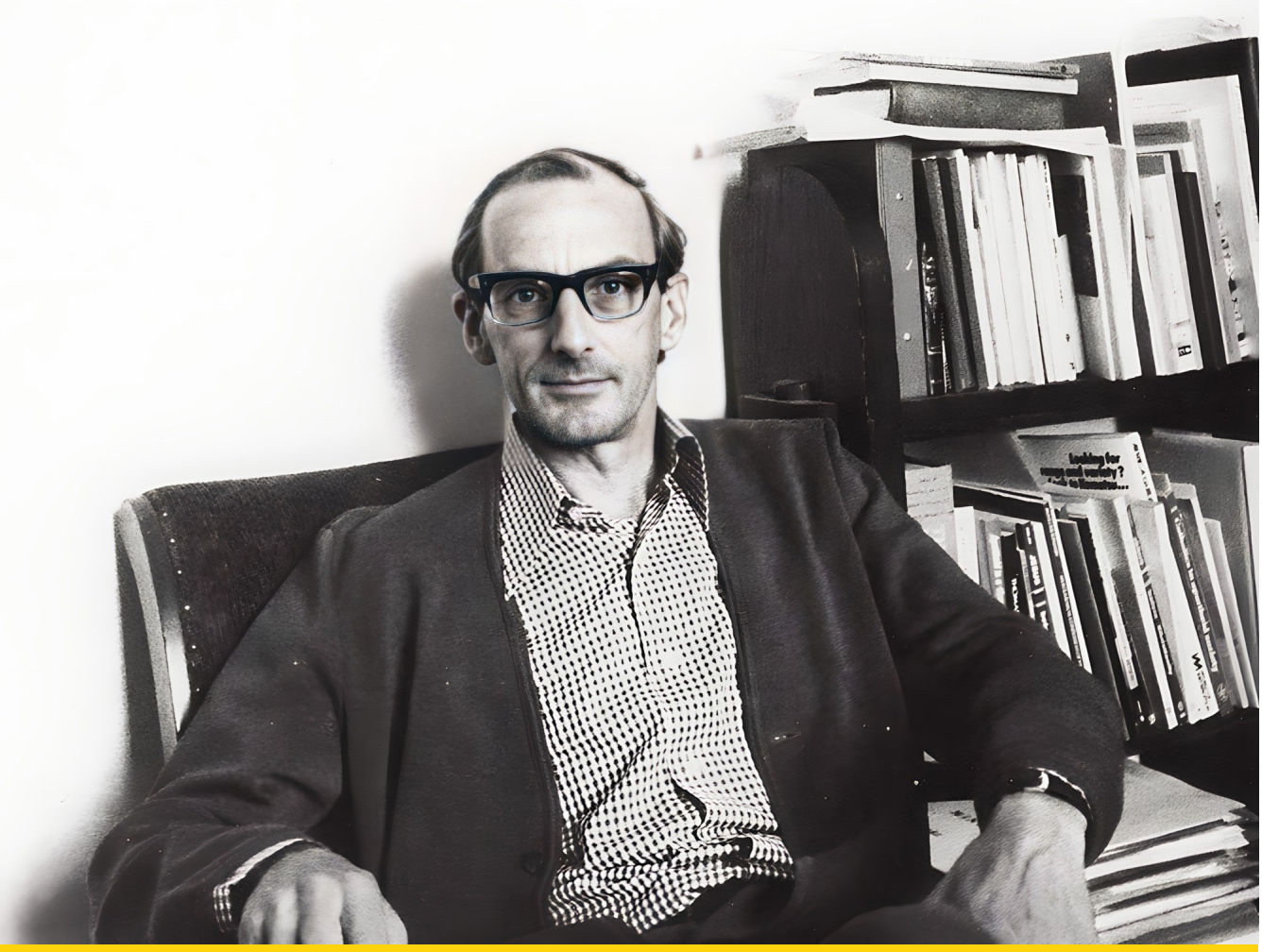
Put Right Something That's Wrong



Albert Nolan OP

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The Call to Action, Education, Justice, *Kairos*, and Leadership

Albert Nolan OP

ATF PRESS
Adelaide
2023

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Photo on front cover is of Albert Nolan and was taken around 1983 in South Africa. Copyright Vice-Province of Southern Africa. Used with permission.

Cover Design: Myf Cadwallader

Cardijn Studies: On the Church in the World of Today
Volume 4, Number 2, 2023

The *Cardijn Studies* journal is a refereed journal which aims to document the history of the Jocist, Cardijn inspired, lay movements both historically and in the present day as well as the examining the rich tradition of Catholic Social teaching on the Church in the world of today. Articles cover a range of areas: the spirituality, methodology and the history of these traditions and movements in the Church and in society.

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ISBN	978-1-923006-08-9	soft
	978-1-923006-09-6	hard
	978-1-923006-10-2	epub
	978-1-923006-11-9	pdf

SCAN ME

Published and edited by

ATF PRESS

Making a lasting impact

An imprint of the ATF Press Publishing Group
owned by ATF (Australia) Ltd.
PO Box 234
Brompton, SA 5007
Australia
ABN 90 116 359 963
www.atfpress.com
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Editorial

The photo on the front cover of this volume is of Albert Nolan OP and comes from around 1983 shortly after he served as National Chaplain in South Africa for the National Catholic Federation of Students (NCFS), a tertiary based student member movement of the International Movement of Catholic Students (IMCS). He was National Chaplain from 1973–1980. From 1977–1984, Nolan served as National Chaplain of the South African YCS (a member movement of the International YCS), which affiliated itself to the United Democratic Front (UDF) in South Africa.[1] The colours of the cover are those that were used by UDF, black, red and yellow.

The title of this volume, *Putting Right What Is Wrong*, comes from Nolan himself when he talks of the 'actions' of the YCS and of biblical justice in a 1980s interview, which is published in this collection.

Albert Nolan OP (1934–2022), a South African Dominican, joined the Order in the 1950s and was, in the 1970s and early 1980s, involved with various Cardijn inspired lay movements in South Africa, particularly student and post-graduate student movements in that country. He was a chaplain to various Catholic student bodies

1. 'The UDF was a South African popular front that existed from 1983 to 1991. The UDF comprised more than 400 public organizations including trade unions, students' unions, women's and parachurch organizations. The UDF's goal was to establish a "non-racial, united South Africa in which segregation is abolished and in which society is freed from institutional and systematic racism". Its slogan was "UDF Unites, Apartheid Divides". The Front was established in 1983 to oppose the introduction of the Tricameral Parliament by the white-dominated National Party government, and dissolved in 1991 during the early stages of the transition to democracy.' Taken from Wikipedia. Last accessed on 15 April 2023.

and a writer. He is best known for his *Jesus before Christianity*[2] book which was first published in English in 1976 (was translated into over a dozen other languages) and is still in print. He was involved in the writing of the 1985 *Kairos Document*[3] and worked with the Institute of Contextual Theology (ICT) in South Africa.

In the mid 1970s he went to Latin America for an international student conference and met Gustavo Gutiérrez (who later also became a Dominican), who was also involved with international student movements in the Catholic Church at that time.[4] The trip, and the writings of liberation theology he encountered around that time, were both an important influence as he explains in the 1985 interview with the South African Historical Archives (SAHA), which is published in this volume: 'A very important thing too, was a Theology of Liberation in Latin America. But even that, I started reading that gradually and then spent six weeks in Latin America in 1975 and that was very important to me.'

A number of other Dominicans in South Africa were also involved in the Jocist movements of formation as were Dominicans in France like Chenu, Congar and others in the twentieth century as well as other countries over the years. Thus Nolan was not alone in South Africa, nor internationally within the Dominicans, to be involved in lay movements of formation.

The link between Nolan's work and writings with the Jocist, Cardijn inspired, action based movements of formation, has not often been written up, alluded to, explained or detailed to any great extent in academic journals or publications, nor referred to by many theologians when examining contemporary theological trends. In the same way, the links between Gustavo Gutierrez's theology, and his involvement with the student movements, has seldomly been detailed or written about by those who have studied his work or liberation theology.

2. Jesus *before Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976).
3. *Kairos Document* (Braamfontein: Skotaville, 1986).
4. The latest entry of the life and work of Gustavo Gutiérrez in Wikipedia makes the connection with the lay movements: 'He studied medicine and literature at the National University of San Marcos, where he also became involved with Catholic Action, which greatly influenced his theological arguments.' Last accessed on 10 March 2023

In this volume Nolan speaks in two interviews from the 1980s (one with fellow Dominican Mark James OP and another which is was recorded by Julie Frederikse and is in the files of the South African Historical Association) about his time with the student movements in South Africa, his theological development because of his involvement with the student movements, his visit to Latin America in the 1970s, the connections between liberation theology in Latin America and theology in South Africa in the Apartheid regime and of contextual theology. 'We talk about an option for the poor,[5] which might describe what I'm trying to do and describe what Latin American theologians and others are trying to do.' While noting differences between theologies of liberation in South Africa and Latin America, Nolan also links the work of the student movements, movements for justice in Latin America and South Africa and social analysis: 'But a social analysis of the structure of our society reveals a power relationship of oppressor and oppressed just as it does in Latin America, and many other countries.'

In the two interviews he speaks of leadership which developed based on 'action', often small actions in the student movements, where students take action to change and 'put right that which is wrong'.[6] There is the link between those small actions and actions at a larger scale in a time of 'struggle' against repression, oppression and witnessing suffering, poverty and inequality.

There are also two articles on the *Kairos Document* and *Kairos* theology. While not mentioning the links with 'action' based movements, in these articles Nolan refers to movements of change which are theologically grounded in responding to the 'signs of the times' and change in a society where one 'puts right something that is wrong'.

Finally, there are two pieces from 2003, some of his most recent pieces of writing and significant pieces as these were presentations that he gave to members of the student movements. In 2003, Nolan participated in an international meeting of IMCS, at a joint training session with the International YCS which was held in Barcelona,

5. The 'option for the poor', was a term used by the YCS and other international student movements beginning from the late 1970s and 1980s coming first from Latin America and then from various international meetings.
6. 'All the actions of YCS and CAM etc are always actions to try and put right something that's wrong.'