

Religion and Politics in South Africa

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The role of religion in politics is a topic that has gained enormous significance in light of the events of 11 September 2001. It has left almost everyone thinking that religion in politics is probably negative, harmful, and something to be avoided, especially if what happened in New York and Washington exemplifies the role of religion operating in the political sphere. I say this without presuming any particular upswing by the dominant discourse. I fear that the discourse that we are engaged in currently has the potential to create an atmosphere in which religion is simply disqualified from any role in politics.

This is very difficult for people of my generation i.e., the generation of activists who found a comfortable intersection between religion and politics. Therefore, I want to focus on my experiences of religion and politics in South Africa not as a representative of a political party, but as a co-religionist. It is very difficult to accept that religion should be disqualified from any political role, currently or even potentially. It is very clear that the role of religion in politics up to 1994 was fairly undisputed. On the one hand, one finds the NG Kerk, theologically justifying Apartheid, helping to present the Apartheid State as Christian, but creating no distinction between what it saw as Christian values and the need for the Apartheid State to be the abode of these particular values. This was the major form of discourse on religion and politics.

Against this, across racial, religious and denominational lines, there were three broad responses to the Apartheid State. What I call the accommodationist response, consisted largely of traditional orthodox and conservative elements, not very active in opposing Apartheid but simply carrying on with life. The second response was represented by those that adopted religious discourse to challenge Apartheid, reaching a high point with the development of a liberation theology and where religious figures became active partners in the struggle, making contributions that often ranged from simple prayer right up to martyrdom. The third response to the Apartheid State in the pre-1994 period was far more fundamentalist. It was a hybrid fundamentalism rather, sometimes operating in the realm of traditional orthodoxy and at other times reflecting aggressive evangelism and an aggressive

relationship with God as the antidote to evil that goes on in society. This strand – within the challenging discourse – argued that what we are busy with is not the formation of a democratic South Africa, but an Islamic or theocratic state. They thus put the margins a little bit further than what the broad mass of people in South Africa were busy with.

The liberation theology discourse was in a sense, hegemonic. It had powerful charismatic advocates, a coaching theology and popular appeal, but its projection was often disproportionate to its actual size. In the Muslim community the few acted as a fig-leave for the many. A similar situation was often projected in Christian theology as well, as if all Christians were active in the anti-apartheid struggle. The truth, I think, is that those who were opponents of Apartheid hid their marginal status because of the need to create the illusion of a mass popular theological uprising against Apartheid. This is the first instance where forgiveness should be asked for in advance.

The post-apartheid, post-1994 construction of a democratic state effectively displaced the focused role of religion in politics so prevalent in the Apartheid era at the intellectual, theological, and philosophical level. It was replaced by ambiguity, confusion and demobilisation of religious forces and of the religious discourse in politics. The key-debates that emerged at the time centred on the new role of the church or of religion in post-apartheid South Africa. Some church leaders felt that now that the real political leaders were free, the priests should return to the parish. The church should now get on with the business of religion and politicians should take on the business of politics. I don't believe that this was a step forward. I believe that the model-building that we did up to 1994 eroded in that moment of ambiguity, confusion and demobilisation. The impact of this ambiguity has resulted in the return of the dichotomy between religion and politics. Church activists were recalled to the parish, resulting in an abdication by intellectuals from the project to transform South Africa.

This abdication was a product of the discourse at the time of 1994, which I believe prevails up to today. This discourse centred on the question of the essential nature of the democratic state in the post-1994 period. The answer to that question, which is now the dominant and hegemonic position, is that the essence of democracy is opposition; if you don't have an opposition, you don't have a democracy. The alternative to the same question, which is far less than hegemonic, is that the essence of democracy in a post-apartheid, post-polarised, unequal, damaged society, has to be transformation. I am not saying, that we should create

walls between the two options, that you either choose transformation or opposition as the essence. What I am saying, is that the consequence of the idea of opposition as the central thesis of democracy has resulted in the pronouncement that the church has only one role politically, and that is to be the watchdogs of society.

One can understand the dominant discourse, where it comes from, because it speaks to the sentiments of a group who have enjoyed all the power and privilege up to 1994, and who are now set up as the opposition. They therefore see opposition as the essence of democracy. It speaks to the discourse of a group who understood that quick transformation was to be the essence of a democratic project to which they had to contribute, and therefore, it was not comfortable to say that the essence of democracy is transformation. It was far better to say that the essence of democracy is opposition, with all its racial assumptions, and that a Black government should not be trusted.

I want to argue that our constitution was precisely crafted in a way to facilitate the ongoing contribution of religion to and in politics. When the constitution was conceived and when it came to discussion on the relationship between state and religion, there were four options. There was the option that we should craft an atheistic state, hostile to religion, a state that had nothing to do with religion or did not encourage it. This option would have been betrayal because the very nature of South African society is fundamentally religious. It would also betray the entire role that religion played in bringing us to freedom. Therefore, this option never really became an issue of discussion in our work towards our new constitution. Then there were obviously those who thought that maybe this is the moment to craft a theocratic state. South Africa has its own problems in terms of its diversity and I don't think that this was the kind of discourse that we needed to get into because it simply involved too many complications. The third option was to construct a secular state where religion operated in the private sphere, where individuals believe what they choose, as long as there is tolerance of the religious sentiments of our people. The option that we eventually adopted and that's placed in the constitution is one of the secular state, but with an active role for religion, that guarantees freedom and even guarantees access to resources in order to make sure that religions are equitably represented. For example, town planning should make sure that religious sites are made available equitably, the airwaves and television time have to be proportionally allocated, etc. Briefly, the constitution guarantees equality of status for all religions, but

proportion of facility, i.e., you don't have Muslims and Christians sharing equal time on radio since their demands are different.

What is disappointing is that the broader religious community did not take up this discourse and therefore the fourth position was not debated. Important questions concerning challenges and responsibilities were not raised. What we had was religion claiming its rights. The question to be asked is whether the religious establishment fulfilled its responsibility, because the constitution did not simply guarantee religious freedom, it also offered an opportunity for religious activism. But what are the responsibilities other than being the watchdogs of society?

One bemoans the absence of a theology of transformation in society today. We find religious organisations and institutions fighting battles on various issues, but with no coherent sense. No one seems to be crafting a theology of transformation to guide us and bring us together, as was the case with the theology of liberation in the Apartheid years.

A theology of transformation, for example, should be able to help influence and guide the debate on whether South Africa is indeed a country of two nations, one, rich and White and one, poor and Black. In this way, it isn't a matter of simple political discourse about what exists or not, or whether Thabo Mbeki right or wrong. There must be some objective value that we are guided by in our Scriptures, so that we speak with conscience and not simply with the pragmatism of the moment. We thus begin to spell out the complementary roles of politics and religion, without holding that religious activists should be politicians, or that politicians should be religious activists, or that they all have the same role.

Politicians in our context often operate on a pragmatic basis in which tasks are mediated with the idea and the identification of one country and two nations. Religion asserts values; it asks questions of right and wrong, of practical implementation, of fulfilling God's command. Religion, for example, consults Scripture on our role in persuading those who have, to share and those who have not, to be patient until the sharing starts taking effect. It is the absence of a theology of transformation that, in my view, creates an intellectual gap in our society. We have to be self-critical as people who are activists in religion as well, because all of the discourses that play out at the macro-level in society in South Africa are also a challenge to religion.

The question is, can religion rise above its own constraints in order to help guide society? Religion is trapped in racial inequality as well. White churches have certain assets, while the Black churches have very few assets. And once they unite, will they share their assets? Is the Coloured priest getting a salary equal to the White priest, since they belong to the same church? We are inhibited from giving guidance to society because we are unable to confront the demons in our own institutions. A second question worth considering is whether religion is capable of freeing itself from a 'welfarist' paradigm of life? Can it go beyond welfare in order to embrace the full impact of transformation? You don't simply ameliorate in a society that was racially divided and fundamentally unequal. We need to go beyond simply making better through welfare and become activists for equity. These are some of the challenges that we need to confront in order to guide society as a whole in transformation.

Religion has to confront its own ideological debates and try to fashion a broad consensus and coherence that is once again hegemonic. Not all religious people were against apartheid, but those who were managed to occupy a position of hegemony in the 1993/1994 period. Therefore, it stands to reason that not all religious institutions will embrace transformation, but those that do, must become hegemonic. To achieve this we must overcome ideological divides and confront those within the broader religious community because the dominant discourse is still the traditional conservative orthodox one. Raymond Williams is correct in saying that orthodoxy cannot push back boundaries it merely confirms. We need to go beyond practicing a discourse that emerges in vicious form from time to time. Fundamentalist discourse avoids the real challenges of society by operating at the soft underbelly of an emerging democracy, taking on issues such as abortion, homosexuality, prostitution, crime, etc. Antonio Gramsci explains that transitions are the most painful and dangerous periods in the life of a nation because the old is not yet dead and the new has not yet been born. When you have the old and the new co-existing so uncomfortably in society, you always have a powder-keg.

The discourse in religion that only seeks to ignite that powder-keg does not confront the need to be the best undertakers of the worst of the old, and the midwives for the best of the new. We need to bring about a discourse that hopefully starts to position religion as the undertaker of the worst and the midwife of the best. We may not be able to convert everyone to this discourse, which some call post-modernist, others progressive etc. The point is that we have

to make the new discourse hegemonic. We may not have everybody believing, but we have to speak with a clarity and force that is compelling. I believe that this is the only discourse that can slot into the space that our constitution opens up. The prevalent discourses, in my opinion, are constrained by their own ideological inability to understand what is happening in our society.