CHAPTER 10

III

RELIGION AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN SOUTH AFRICA

INTRODUCTION

The need for shared values

It must be obvious to us all that if there is to be hope and stability in South Africa, a common set of values will have to be widely accepted. It is not so obvious where these shared values are to come from. Apartheid has left us with sectional group loyalties, rather than a conscious loyalty encompassing the whole national community. Sectional loyalties have collapsed even further into selfish individualism.

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RELIGION AND RECONSTRUCTION

it is clear that the still-to-be-negotiated constitution and the laws passed by a new government will not command the loyalty of all. It seems likely that respect for law, for property, and for humans is has been so destroyed in South Africa (and, doubtless, political expectations will be disappointed) that considerable numbers of individuals will continue to disregard any laws.

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CHAPTER 10

Rorty, rights and religion: The contribution of South African religions to a shared value system

Ronald Nicolson

INTRODUCTION

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The new constitution will include a Bill of Rights protecting individuals and minorities from the arbitrary and unfair whim of the majority. But Charles Villa-Vicencio reminds us, quoting Milner Ball, that a written constitution does not per
se give authority to the values enshrined in that constitution. The authority of any constitution or Bill of Rights is ultimately vested ‘... in a people who at a certain time in history commit themselves to a process of living together according to a given set of values’ (Villa Vicencio 1991).

The purpose of this paper

Where is this set of values to come from? Does such a shared value system include agreement on basic human rights? Are there such things as self-evident rights to guide our social relationships? Since the discourse about rights raises a number of cross-cultural problems, we shall broaden the discussion to see whether, where rights are regarded as problematic, other values exist which may fulfil the same purpose.

The first part of the discussion will note how the writers of the American constitution believed that philosophy could provide a more universal foundation for values and rights than sectarian religion. We shall see that modern American philosophers no longer think this is true. We shall then ask where, in South Africa, we can find a common core of values. Since much human rights thinking in South Africa is also drawn from the Christian West, we shall look mainly at Islam, Hinduism, and African traditional religion.

NORTH AMERICA

Self-evident rights

The American Declaration of Independence includes these famous words:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

The signatories to the Declaration believed they could base the values governing their new state on what everyone agreed was obviously true, rather than the dictates of a church. Nevertheless, they saw these rights as existing because God had granted them. The words of the Declaration are largely those of Thomas Jefferson. Under the influence of Samuel Adams and Benjamin Franklin, Jefferson’s original wording, that these rights were ‘sacred and undeniable’, was changed to ‘self-evident’. In what way these rights are self-evident, and by what authority they are undeniable, is not specified.
I suspect most of us continue to think of human rights as ‘self-evident’ to all except the wilfully perverse. We believe in an essential human dignity which applies across race and gender - it is on this basis that we can criticise the inequities of apartheid and welcome a new dispensation. We expect that our religion (if we hold one) will harmonise with, and bolster belief in, these rights; but we do not expect that fellow citizens of another (or of no) religion will disagree about these rights.

Religion and human rights

Religion has not always been enthusiastic about human rights. But David Hollenbach points out that the Roman Catholic Church, while suspicious of doctrines of human rights in the mid nineteenth century, now demonstrates a growing consensus that human rights should be ‘... a prime focus of its ethical teaching and pastoral strategy’ (Hollenbach 1982:9). This does not mean insisting on a new Catholic hegemony imposing Christian moral values on to the world. World society is a mixture of different cultures and religions, and it is precisely this plurality which makes recognition of universal human rights so important. In a global, transnational, transcultural society, human rights become necessary - not in order to impose one view on everyone else, but to protect individuals and cultures from being dominated by others.

Human rights are needed to keep a proper balance between individualism and interdependence. Hollenbach suggests that the reason human rights have become so central to the Catholic church is because the Church has itself become a global and transcultural institution. In this situation, we need to accept basic human rights which people can appeal to prior to their acknowledgment in a particular society and independently of specific cultures and ideologies (Hollenbach 1982:14).

Hollenbach concedes that human rights theorists are divided between those who stress political, individual, and civil rights, and others who stress economic and social rights. While specific human rights are still under discussion, and will not lead to any simple economic or political blueprints, all these different kinds of rights (to which we might add third generation and environmental rights) depend on something we a priori agree on - human dignity (Hollenbach 1982:17).

We know that South Africa, like the Catholic Church, is a microcosm of the world, seeking to contain in itself people from many cultures, languages, and religions. Like the Catholic Church, it needs a core set of values by which all decent people agree to live. But South Africans are not all Catholic, nor Christian, nor intellectual descendants of the American Founding Fathers.
Rorty and the denial of 'a common core'

The contemporary American philosopher Richard Rorty strongly denies that there is any core concept of human rights or human dignity to which we can all appeal independently of religious or cultural basis. This is part and parcel of his denial that philosophy can lead to any universal truths based purely on reason. Just as there is no universally true religion to which all may appeal, so we have no access to universal truth of any kind. There is no meta-truth, no core of meaning, accessible to all through the power of reason:

There is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves, no criteria that we have not created ... no standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no rigorous argument that is not obedience to our own convictions (Rorty 1982:xiii).

Rorty is not alone in his rejection of meta-truth; obviously deconstructionism takes a similar line. While in continuity with philosophers such as Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus, Rorty takes his logic further, applying it to private and public morality:

There is no epistemological difference between truth about what ought to be and truth about what is, nor any metaphysical difference between facts and values (Rorty 1982:163).

The dictates of my personal conscience do not spring from reason, but from historical conditioning. Further, reason cannot provide any dictates to my personal conscience.

If this is true, then the idea that universal human rights (or public morals) can be established through reason - and those who reject these rationally demonstrable virtues are prejudiced, blind or evil - cannot be sustained (Rorty 1990:280). Reason and acculturation are inextricably mixed. While this opposes the idea of any inherent system of justice in the world, Rorty claims legal philosopher John Rawls for his side. For him:

Philosophy as the search for truth about an independent metaphysical and moral order cannot provide a workable and shared basis for a political conception of justice in a democratic society (Rawls, quoted Malachowski 1990:5). No general moral conception can provide the basis for a public conception of justice in a modern democratic society (Rawls, quoted Rorty 1990:283).
Thinkers of the Enlightenment, including the framers of the American Declaration of Independence, were anxious to throw off the tyranny of emperors and kings supported by church authorities. Rejecting religion as the basis of a common society, they sought to build society on the basis of cool reason. Rorty is suggesting that reason cannot perform that function. There are no such things as self-evident, inalienable human rights about which we can all agree. There is nothing about humanness that, of itself, confers rights. There is no such thing as a core human nature at all:

The result is to erase the picture of the self common to Greek metaphysics, Christian theology and Enlightenment rationalism; the picture of an ahistorical nature centre, the locus of human dignity, surrounded by an adventitious and inessential periphery (Rorty 1990:280).

Rorty denies that this means he is in favour of arbitrary decisionism. While there is nothing essential about the self or society at all, Rorty agrees that there is still a private and a public morality. Coherent and powerful private and public moralities still exist. My private morality, while entirely of my own choice, is not arbitrary. Since I live in a web of relationships with other people, both past and present, my actions and attitudes will have a certain coherence about them. However, there are no absolute ‘oughts’ to limit my choices. Public morality is merely the collective set of attitudes held by those amongst whom I live, those of my own culture and history. Since we share much common experience, and since we influence one another, it is likely that a group sharing culture and history will share values too. But there is nothing absolute, binding, or universal about these values. Neither religion nor philosophy can provide moral certainty nor can they legitimate political decisions (Rorty 1990:286).

Rorty is aware that his views lay him open to charges of relativism and of destroying the moral basis of society. He denies the charge of relativism; we will still hold our private views strongly and defend them ‘unflinchingly’ (Guignon and Hiley in Malachowski 1990:343). And with regard to public, shared morality, he affirms that North America has a rich public culture of shared moral and democratic values. He does not think that the moral fabric of American life is about to collapse, and he willingly accepts the legacy of Judeo-Christian morality for himself. There is, therefore, no need to worry that there is no deep philosophical basis for these views; they exist, they are happily accepted, and they work. Why ask for more?

As long as we recognise that these values are not given in terms of a universal essence, but are self-chosen largely for historical reasons, we shall defend
democracy from tyranny. We lay the foundations for a culture of tolerance and creativity: where ‘a hundred flowers may bloom’ - some as creative, new forms of intellectual life (Guignon and Hiley 1990:343). For all its risks, Rorty believes that his morally open universe is far preferable to one which seeks, falsely, to base its values on an authoritative philosophy of universal currency.

SOUTH AFRICA

Ethnocentricty and solidarity

But Rorty lives in North America, where democracy is indeed well established, and where, despite its pluralism, the community of academics, philosophers, and lawmakers is far more homogeneous than in South Africa. Rorty may be overestimating the degree of moral consensus in North America, but the consensus here is far less. We cannot assume a legacy of Enlightenment-flavoured Christianity. There is a wide spectrum of different cultures, ideologies and religions.

Rorty's concept of public morality is unashamedly ethnocentric. There is no basis for democratic or humane values outside the fact that they are shared by the group with which we identify (Guignon and Hiley 1990:341). There are no neutral criteria by which we may judge political programmes. Rorty's views on the position of modern liberals might be summarised thus:

As clear ethnocentrist we can - and indeed must - congratulate ourselves on our current moral practices and tell ourselves stories about how we are better people than the slave owners of the past or the fascists of the future. But it would be self-deception to think that we do so on the basis of access to truth about human dignity or the moral law they lack (Guignon and Hiley 1990:355).

It happily just so happens, says Rorty, that the liberal community agrees on the virtues of personal liberty and opposition to slavery. There is nothing inherently better about one state of affairs than the other - but since we [in America] all agree on it anyway, we need not bother finding a philosophical or metaphysical justification for our common commitment to what we call justice.

This may or may not be sufficient for Americans. It is far from sufficient in countries lacking shared commitment to these (or any other) values. Kai Nielsen, in his critique of Rorty, points to the specific implications of Rorty's views for South Africa: each ethnic group has its own set of values growing out of its history and self-identity.
Following Rorty, 'if one is an Afrikaner, then one should stick to that solidarity; if one is a Zulu one should stick to that solidarity' (Nielsen 1991:155). This scenario offers no prospect or hope of building a common nation:

The Afrikaner, the Zulu or the North American liberal can only just pit their solidarities against each other and, should anyone prevail over the other, power and a willingness to stick it out will be the relevant deciding factors, if Rorty's account is right (Nielsen 1991:155).

While agreeing that our values are historically rooted, Nielsen points to the example of Beyers Naude, who began in solidarity with his own white Afrikaans group, but, while never cutting himself off from that community, sought to widen his solidarity to include other groups (Nielsen 1991:153).

If Rorty's views are followed through, there is no moral high ground for those who claim that fairness and justice, respect for individuals and groups, should be the basis on which our new nation is built. A person is just as entitled, and perhaps more likely, to choose a set of values which privilege him or her above others. If true, this has serious implications for South Africa. There will be no reasons, other than purely pragmatic ones, for a Bill of Rights. Inalienable human rights only exist if those who make the rules want them to.

Kai Nielsen's WRE as alternative?

Why spend so much time discussing Rorty if his views are so unhelpful for South Africans wishing to build a common society? Rorty is important because, as Nielsen admits, he may be right - although in that case Nielsen believes that it would be more honest and direct simply to agree with Michel Foucault, 'that for “modern thought no morality is possible” than to accept Rorty’s cheery, “liberal” tribalism' (Nielsen 1991:157).

For all his opposition to Rorty, Nielsen concedes that philosophy has yet to provide a satisfactory basis for universal social values. He hopes that, eventually, the critical theory of people like Habermas may provide this basis. Nielsen advocates what he calls a ‘wide reflective equilibrium’ (WRE). Any attempt to provide a philosophical basis for public morality will begin with the moral convictions that we all share regardless of our ideology, such as ‘torture of children is wrong’. We then seek to match these specific convictions with more general moral principles. These are, in turn, matched with our best knowledge of the world. Through critical theory, we select, adapt, and winnow our principles.
accordingly. Finally, we ask ourselves whether this process provides us with any helpful guidance about principles we may apply in new situations.

Nielsen's concedes that WRE 'is a very chancy claim, for such an ambitious, holistic research programme may well come to nought' (Nielsen 1991:157). Rorty's powerful critique may yet succeed. The prospect for any underpinning of moral theory may be bleak. But Nielson is hopeful.

I am only able to offer a tentative critique of Nielsen's alternative to Rorty. Nielsen provides us with a useful model for how to proceed in South Africa with our diverse ideologies and religions. But there are still problems. Our 'best knowledge of the world' is still ideologically slanted; there is no pure or neutral knowledge, particularly as far as the social sciences are concerned - which is where critical theory would be most important. How will we know whether the moral principles give us 'helpful guidance' unless we already know where we want to get to? Nielsen wishes to avoid philosophical foundationalism ('Nothing in WRE is basic or foundational' [Nielsen 1991:234]), but then we do not have any basis for our critique or judgment of what is helpful.

We thus still have no rational basis for rejecting crude majoritarianism in South Africa. We may still be able to make a convincing case that care for weak minorities or oppressed individuals is in the pragmatic best interests of everyone, and that enlightened self-interest should mean that we grant certain universal rights. But that is far less than we might have hoped. There is still no moral high ground for one position rather than another.

**Back to religion**

Max Stackhouse notes that it has become common to attribute human rights concerns in the modern world to post-religious philosophy or the pragmatic necessities of power politics (Stackhouse 1984:6). In South Africa, however, it seems that the battle for human rights has been fought by lawyers, politicians, and a few outspoken church leaders; while millions of religious people seem unconcerned and significant church groups opposed the whole concept as Communist-inspired. But Stackhouse goes on to say that the efforts of politicians and lawyers to get human rights built effectively into law only work when a human rights ethos already exists because of a religious tradition. Religious people may not all be human rights activists (to put it mildly), but their traditions may be the only basis on which human rights have any authority.
Even the modern tendency to say that human rights depend neither on religion nor philosophy but on the pragmatic biophysical need to survive assumes that there is value in surviving (Stackhouse 1984:8):

Each view of human rights entails an ultimate metaphysical moral vision about what is meaningful ... and about what social ethic should be followed in order to prevent chaos, social alienation and tyranny from destroying essential humanity (Stackhouse 1984:6, my emphasis).

The italicised words are those which Rorty would say have no philosophical basis. Stackhouse agrees that they have no basis - except in a religious context.

All natural law theories rest on a faith assumption [that there is a normative moral order in the universe]. Where this faith assumption is not maintained, natural law theory fades and reason does not lead us to universal moral principles such as those taken up by human rights concerns (Stackhouse 1984:8).

Perhaps, then, it is to religion that South Africans will have to turn as a basis for an authoritative, shared value system. But enormous problems immediately loom, not least around its affinity to Durkheim's theory of religion. Society, said Durkheim, needs a set of values to provide a shared loyalty across class and other divisions. Religion provides a way of celebrating and institutionalising that loyalty. Individuals would not make the necessary sacrifices to the common good without a religious motivation. Religion provides a basis for the necessary collective consciousness without which society would sink into anomie (Durkheim 1976).

Durkheim did not think that religion preceded society and gave birth to a social order. On the contrary, he believed that society developed a collective consciousness for itself, and religion was then created by society in order to lift this consciousness into the realm of the sacred, the universal, and the unchangeable.

Have we moved beyond Rorty? Durkheim would have agreed with Rorty that the norms which religion provides have no ultimate validity in themselves, but are thrown up by the circumstances of a particular society. 'Religion is the product of social causes' (Durkheim 1976:424). In addition, Durkheim's views of the role of religion in society were based on the homogenous, fairly simple religious context of aboriginal Australia. Only by implication are they applied to Western society (or to his own France - which, in any case, has a homogenous religious background).
South Africa is not a religiously homogenous society. Although nearly seventy percent of its citizens claimed to be Christian in the last census, the forms of Christianity are very diverse. Conservative Protestants, even if we include the whole DRC family, constitute only about twenty-five percent of Christians. Thirty-three percent are members of African Independent Churches, which may not even be regarded as Christian by conservatives (South African Statistics 1992:1.18).

Christianity in South Africa has a mixed human rights record. Those who have pressed hardest for a human rights culture - Catholics and main-line English-speaking protestants - only comprise about twenty-five percent of Christians (South African Statistics 1992:1.18). There have been close historical links between the Dutch Reformed Churches and apartheid. While some other churches have protested against apartheid, there have been well-founded criticisms that these churches have also been servants of the dominant ruling class (Cochrane 1987; Kairos Document 1986). Some Conservative Protestants claim that humans only have rights insofar as they are in a saved relationship with God. Montgomery says:

The Bible contains no irrefutable evidence of the idea that man, by the mere fact of his existence, is entitled to make a number of fundamental demands or claims on other members of society (quoted Traer 1991:50).

African Independent Churches are often held to be quite indifferent to socio-political issues and to be uninterested in the question of human rights. Kiernan goes as far as saying that they are '... not in the least interested in bringing about social change' (quoted in Schoffeleers 1991:94).

This does not necessarily mean that Christianity will not be able to provide an ethos for a human rights culture in South Africa. Even if Christians have not always been conscious of it, there can be no doubt that there is much in the Christian tradition which is supportive of human rights. Montgomery himself asserts that, although the Bible does not support the idea of inalienable human rights, the teachings of Jesus Christ which reveal God's will do establish a foundation for human rights - not inalienable but conferred by God's grace (Traer 1991:53). Events since the Rustenburg Conference (1990) show how quickly churches which had been opposed to a liberal political view can find a basis for democratic values within their tradition. The African Independent Churches, while avoiding involvement in political protest, do provide an effective foundation for recognising the importance of the poor and marginalised.
Thus:

Liberal Protestants fundamentally agree with Roman Catholics and evangelical Protestants about human rights despite quite different theologies and approaches (Traer 1991:10).

And even for conservative Protestants:

These Biblically supported human rights provide as much protection for men and women as the rights elaborated through the actions of the United Nations (Traer 1991:54).

We could, therefore, make quite a strong claim that Christianity can provide the foundation for a human rights culture in South Africa. Even if rights are not self-evident or absolute, as Rorty argues, this foundation is adequate since Christians, despite their differences, turn out to share the same values in the end.

But there is another problem. Thirty-two percent of South Africans did not claim in the census to be Christians at all. About twenty-eight percent chose not to define their religion. Some of that number are, what we might call, 'post-Christians'; persons who no longer personally profess Christianity but whose culture and values, like Rorty's, are shaped by that background. Post-Christians are likely to have no difficulty sharing basic values with Christians. But some 1.3 percent of South Africans are Hindu, 1.2 percent Muslim, and an unknown number are followers of African traditional religion (which the census form does not seem to recognize as a legitimate religion). The proportions of these religions may seem small, but are much larger in regions like Natal or the Western Cape. It is also likely that members of the African Independent Churches, and very likely black members of main-line churches, are still influenced by their own neglected traditions. The people of these religions have been oppressed and their religions marginalized. A human rights culture based purely on Christianity would continue to exclude them from the national community.

Yet Stackhouse suggests that human rights are derived essentially from Christianity (Stackhouse 1984:278). Hinduism, with its caste system, is not able to provide a foundation for human rights. The values enshrined in human rights come, in his view, from a belief in the covenant which God has made with humans (Stackhouse 1982:147).

Where do we go from here? Rorty alleges, and many agree with him, that Philosophy cannot provide a grounding for common values and human rights. Stackhouse alleges, and many agree with him, that we must turn back to religion.
to find this grounding. However, this grounding is derived from the revelation of a covenant with God which only Jews and Christians believe in.

How can this help us in South Africa? The final section of this paper will look at how Christians and post-Christians may find a shared basis for values with Muslims, Hindus, and African traditional religion. Judaism and Buddhism will not be considered, since their numbers are very small in South Africa and their values are not likely to be very different from Christians or Hindus respectively.

TOWARD SHARED VALUES IN SOUTH AFRICAN RELIGIONS

Islam

Many Muslims believe that the human rights culture is imposed on them by a Christian West dominated by the United States. In 1948, Saudi Arabia led a number of Muslim states in opposition to some aspects of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, particularly those relating to freedom of religion (Little et al 1988:5). Some Muslim states also reject the rights of women being imposed on them.

Muslims believe that Allah requires all people to be Muslim, and all societies to be built on lines revealed in the Qur’an and the hadith. To privilege secularly based human rights over Allah’s revealed will is blasphemy. Freedom of individual choice is seen as typically Western, relativist, and godless. In Muslim eyes, human beings have no inalienable rights, only duties and privileges ordained by God.

It seems, therefore, that Muslims are no different from conservative protestant Christians:

The Qur’an vigorously denounces those who renounce Islam .... Secession from Islam is ... an offence against God and against the state: it is both apostasy and treason. Far from having the right to become a non-Muslim; the Muslim faces the death penalty as a sanction for such a change (James P Pescatori, quoted Little et al 1988:6).

This does not seem to provide a promising basis for building a common society with South African Muslims.
Islam is not, however, as monolithic in its opposition to secular humanist values as may seem. Just as Christianity embraces a number of different perspectives in its tradition, so not all Muslims agree that human rights are a product of Christianity or the secular West. In 1948, as is well known, Muhammad Zafrulla Khan argued on behalf of Pakistan that Muslims should accept the Universal Declaration (Traer 1991:9), and claimed that Islam provides a foundation for a society which valued individual freedom (Little et al 1988:45). Amir Ali argued that Islam lifts the religious and moral consciousness of humanity to new and more liberal heights:

Islam was the first to recognize basic human rights and about 14 centuries ago it set up guarantees and safeguards that have only recently been incorporated in universal declarations of human rights (Amir Ali, quoted Traer 1991:112).

Perhaps, therefore, Muslims in South Africa may find common ground with Christians and humanists - despite different traditions. Ebrahim Moosa (1991) expresses South African Muslim suspicions about Western human rights assumptions. Although Islam in South Africa has always rejected racism, and has from the beginning had heroes of resistance to apartheid, it has not always felt comfortable working alongside other liberation movements, fearing that their own struggle, undertaken in obedience to God’s revealed will, might be contaminated by those whose motives may be different.

Although cultures such as Islam may not feel comfortable with the idea of rights, they may have something else which performs the same function of safeguarding human dignity (Moosa 1991). For example, the notion of *taqwa* (‘... an existence of heightened awareness of self, society and divinity’) requires that an individual should respect others, because this is the will of God.

Abdulkader Tayob has suggested that the ideas of *jihad* and *zikat* also provide a basis for recognising human dignity. *Jihad* is best understood not as a defensive war against outsiders, but as a struggle within, against selfishness, on the part of individuals or groups:

The greater *jihad* is the jihad that is directed at self; its purification from greed and self-centredness .... *Jihad as an institution in Islam can enrich and extend reconstruction in South Africa* (Tayob 1991).

*Zakat*, the obligatory charity that those with resources must provide for the disadvantaged, also promotes an awareness of the importance and the dignity of
each person no matter what their status. The poor person has a right to expect help from the rich. ‘The portion of wealth that constitutes zakat belongs in principle to the disadvantaged’ (Tayob 1991). The Qur’an speaks of this portion as being the ‘right’ of the poor (Qur’an 70:24-25). Clearly, therefore, in Islam there are human rights which are decreed by God, which the wealthy ignore at the peril of God’s anger. Thus:

The Ulama regarded human rights as an integral part of faith. A man cannot be considered religious in the true sense of the word if he does not grant the rights of his fellow men (Rashid Ahmad Jullindhri, quoted Tracer 1991:114).

Of course, these rights, for Muslims, only exist insofar as God has conferred them; humans have no rights in themselves. This serves to underline Stackhouse’s point that the concept of human rights depends ultimately on a theological anthropology. But there is, clearly, a common basis among Christians and Muslims for forming community values.

Hinduism

Stackhouse concedes that Hinduism promotes ‘a kind of tolerance not fully present in Western or Marxist societies’. (Stackhouse 1984:213) Hinduism might, therefore, seem more open to the individual freedom and relativism which is so marked an emphasis in Western society than Islam or conservative Christianity. But this freedom is limited by the idea of dharma, particularly in the rules surrounding caste. Brahmins, ksatriyas and sudras do not have equal rights or equal access to resources. Indian society has tolerated great social inequities, and its relativism has led to indifference to human rights:

There is relatively little inclination to forsake the basic social philosophy of Hinduism with its family-caste, solidarity-group grounding (Stackhouse 1984;228).

While this is undeniably true, it is dubious whether ideas of caste still apply in South Africa to any meaningful degree. Also, modern Hinduism has provided important figures who have made major contributions in creating a human rights ethos throughout the world. Gandhi is only one in a long line of thinkers, such as Raja Rammohan Roy, Vivekenanda, and Tagore. Moreover, modern Hinduism has provided a new kind of religious basis for human rights for many Westerners who no longer identify with the claims of Judeo-Christianity - that God made covenants with Noah, or Abraham, or Moses, or with the claims of
exclusive revelation of God in Jesus - but who still sense the presence of transcendence in the world. Hinduism provide a belief in the presence of God in every human being.

Anil Sooklal has suggested that the strong Hindu belief in the divinity, the brahman, abiding in all things and in all people, is a very powerful foundation for a society in which not only the dignity but the sacredness of all people is recognised. Sooklal suggest that this was the basis for Gandhi embracing the outcastes as God's harijans (Sooklal 1991). Rabindrath Tagore shows how the Hindu belief in the unity of atman and brahman has socio-political implications:

Open thy eyes and see thy God is not before thee. He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the pathmaker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun and shower and his garment is covered in dust. Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil (Tagore, quoted Wilfred 1992:7).

Sooklal concedes that, like the Christian churches, Hindu religious institutions in South Africa have sometimes been non-committal about social reform, concentrating on piety rather than politics. But this is not because Hinduism lacks a basis for political action. Hindus sometimes fail to recognise the implications of their own beliefs. ‘The great national sin is the neglect of the masses and this is some of the causes of our downfall’ (Vivekenanda, quoted Sooklal 1991).

Many South African Hindus follow the way of bhakti, of popular devotion rather than high Vedantic philosophy. This ‘little way’ can also be of importance in creating a human rights ethos. Its favourite texts are the Bhagavad Gita and the Puranas. Walter Fernandes in Wilfred (1992) traces the way that these scriptures have been interpreted in different ways, in different historical contexts, bolstering the authority of different ruling classes. Although kings, priests, and foreign invaders used these texts to bolster their positions, the themes of equality and dignity for all continued to persist, representing the continual subversion of ruling class ideology by the ordinary people:

The thought of equality became the basis of the people’s ideology and eventually turned into the bhakti movement which challenged the caste system itself .... Social change requires a religious basis. The history of the bhakti movement shows how religion is capable of providing such a basis (Fernandes in Wilfred 1992:50, 60).
The bhakti idea of the self finding its meaning in union with the Deity who loves each individual already affirms the dignity of the poor people embracing bhakti. The idea has been extended and reinterpreted to recognise the Deity in others too. Devotionalism becomes a spirit of reverence for fellow humans (Wilfred 1992:3). Therefore in Hinduism, like Christianity and Islam, there are powerful themes which can provide a basis for community values.

African traditional religion

Since Christianity has made such advances in Southern Africa, one might question the extent to which African traditional religion is still a significant factor in creating a South African national consciousness. But people do not entirely leave their culture behind when they embrace another religion. African traditional religion is still a major formative factor in many of the independent African churches. It continues to exert an influence within later traditions - much as popular primal Hinduism continued to exert an influence in Vedic and Upanishadic Hinduism.

South Africa has tried for so long to exist in independent pockets where the ills of one group have no effect on the other. A major contribution that African traditional religion can make is its insistence that the individual depends for existence on the community, and that the health and well-being of the individual depend on the health and well-being of the whole community. In African traditional religion ‘Individuals are cherished. But they find their significance only in a particular pattern of social behaviour’ (Setiloane 1976:33). Setiloane continues:

A ‘good’ man is the one who promotes the well being of his own society: and in mophato [initiation] all have to learn not only the joys of fellowship under hardship, but that of responsibility to others without which community is impossible .... A man or woman has to learn that freedom is impossible without the close necessity of the group (Setiloane 1976:33,37).

There are powerful currents in African traditional religion which can contribute to building a society where individuals are committed to the common good. Here is a corrective to the emphasis on the importance and freedom of the individual so predominant in Western human rights theories. The Western emphasis is often on the duty of the individual to succeed, and on the duty of society to support the individual. When the individual fails, falls ill, or becomes deviant, Western healing models continue to see this as an individual problem which society has a duty to address. In African traditional religion, it is the duty of the
individual to support the community. Failure to properly respect ancestors or elders, or antisocial behaviour, affects the well being of the whole community. But disharmony or disruption in the community will, in turn, cause individuals to fall ill or to fail. Unless tensions are dealt with, and means of reconciliation found, uncontrolled anger will spill over and lead to spiritual disruption and witchcraft. African traditional religion provides community rituals for the expression, externalisation, and healing of the disruption.

CONCLUSION

Surprisingly, we find ourselves back with Rorty. Rorty claimed that there is no philosophical basis for societal values. But, since we find ourselves with a useful set of values anyway, it doesn’t really matter. Neither, we have discovered, is there a universal theological basis for societal values. Christians do not agree on such a basis, though some think that the covenantal relationship between God and humans in Christ provides the only true basis. Islam, Hinduism, and African traditional religion do not share the belief in a covenant, nor do they have the same theological anthropology as Christians. What could be further apart than the theological anthropology of a Calvinist and a vedantic belief in *tat tuam asi*? But, from different starting points, they do end up placing their emphasis on values which, if not identical, are at least compatible and complementary. Thus, with Rorty, we can say that the lack of absolute philosophical or theological justification for human rights does not matter.

Yet the strength of a religious basis for values, rather than Rorty’s ‘cheerful “liberal” tribalism’, is that, for religious people, those values are certainly worth ‘standing for unflinchingly’. Our religious traditions are likely to provide the emotional strength of will (which Rorty cannot) in order to work and struggle to see their values triumph.
It is important to note that Thomas Jefferson’s world was still a Christian one, and clearly his seemingly self-evident values were inherited from that religious background. Jefferson himself had no perception that human rights extended beyond adult male whites. Although uncomfortable with slavery, he kept, bought and sold slaves until his death. He had a slave concubine by whom he had children (Johnson 1991:316). Clearly the rights to Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness, so self-evidently granted to white males, did not extend in Jefferson’s mind to all human beings.

Even in the Catholic church, Hennelly points out, many Latin American theologians are suspicious of the concept of human rights, believing that the concept:

... serves as an ideological mask to conceal the massive suffering on the socio-economic level that envelopes great masses of human beings in the Southern continent (Hennelly 1982:26).

Non-Westerners often resent what they see as the imposition on them of Western, especially American values. Hollenbach concedes that the core concept of human dignity gains warranty primarily from the religious belief that people are created by God, redeemed by God and called by God to a destiny beyond this world (Hollenbach 1982:20). This is hardly a basis for universally shared values.

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CHAPTER 11

The role of religion in promoting democratic values in a post apartheid era

Bonganjalo Goba

Christians have used beliefs about God and the world to undergird attitudes and actions with highly problematic import.

(Tanner 1992:1)

INTRODUCTION

This statement by Kathryn Tanner highlights the fundamental problem of determining the role of religion in politics, as well as in general. This is not an issue that can be easily resolved by ignoring the ambivalent and sometimes contradictory role religion has played in society. This is particularly true in the South African context. Those of us who have been part of the struggles to promote justice and democracy know how religion was used for many years both to give legitimacy to the policy of Apartheid and to promote the struggle for liberation. There is nothing new about this, for religion always responds or adapts to the political dynamics of a particular society. However, what is rather problematic is to pretend that religion is neutral or transcends problems associated with the human conflicts. The critical question for us as we move to a new political dispensation is to revisit the question of how can, or how should, religion make a significant contribution to the promotion of democratic values. In order to respond to this challenge, I want to assess what role religion can play in the
process of transition, and to project ways in which this can be reconceptualised from a socio-ethical perspective.

RELIGION, LEGITIMATION AND TRANSFORMATION

One of the most disturbing features of the expression or orientation of religion - especially Christianity - in South Africa is that has been, to use Charles Villa-Vicencio's (1988) expression, 'trapped in Apartheid'. This entrapment has made Christianity very controversial in South African history. I need not belabour this point, for it has been well documented by many scholars. The issue has also been long debated by sociologists of religion. Some have adopted an interactionist perspective - particularly influenced by Max Weber - stressing a mutual interaction between religious ideas and social behaviour. Others have adopted a conflict perspective - particularly influenced by Karl Marx - that behaviour plays a key role in shaping ideas and that the critical issue is related to those who control the means of production. Still others take the perspective of Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, which stresses that ideas are products of a particular social context. I mention these perspectives here to indicate that, when addressing this issue, we have critical choices to make from a sociological point of view (see Gill 1987).

As an attempt to understand how Christianity has played a role in various struggles of legitimation and transformation, I find myself attracted to a conflict perspective, closer to that of Randall Collins (1975:56-67) than Karl Marx. What I find interesting in this perspective is the emphasis on conflict and power. These two concepts play an important role in understanding conflict - especially over the issues of stratification and organisation. Collins' approach has eight relevant aspects. The first is that human relations are explainable in terms of individual or collective self interests. Second, the interests of individuals and groups are always in conflict. Third, individuals and groups are inclined to use violence or threats to achieve their interests. Fourth, property, used as power or control of material instruments, can also be used in class conflicts. Fifth, for individuals to co-operate they develop shared beliefs or values which, sixth, are created or promoted in order to exercise power. Seventh, dominant groups in a conflict situation tend to impose their beliefs and values on others. Finally, self interest is not just based on material values and power alone, but also confers to a group a special status. The thrust of Collins approach is that individuals and groups co-operate as a means to engage in conflict. In this perspective, structures and economic resources are used to consolidate power relations which are at the centre of any conflict situation.
Whilst this perspective of conflict does not deal specifically with religious ideas or values, it does provide insights as to how Christianity has been used by various groups to consolidate their power positions or to inspire forms of resistance against oppressive structures. To approach the impact, or rather the influence, of Christianity from this angle will enable us to appreciate the serious contradictions of religion in the South African context.

Christianity has had a variety of expressions and different kinds of political orientations. I want to mention, in passing, two of these expressions as reflected in their respective theological discourse; that is, Afrikaner theology and Black theology. I want to begin this overview with what I prefer to call ‘Apartheid theology’, or what Dr J A Loubser (1987) calls ‘racial theology’. This theology has its roots, according to Loubser, in the theory of Ham which is based on a peculiarly strange exegesis of Genesis 9:18-27. Although this theory, which sought to provide legitimacy for white supremacy, was later rejected by various synods of the DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH, it must be viewed as a foundational theological presupposition which has promoted the view that black people in general are innately inferior. This theology of Apartheid played a very critical role, not just in promoting a new sense of identity, but as the motivating force for Afrikaner nationalism. As many writers have observed, this theology of racism, or Apartheid, played an important role in providing legitimacy to the political self interest of the Afrikaner (see Moodie 1975 and Ngcokovane 1989). In other words, this theology of Apartheid not only claimed certain biblical motifs for the destiny of the Afrikaner, but also became the driving force in consolidating their ethnic exclusiveness. I want to suggest, without rehearsing the whole history of Afrikaner theological discourse within the Dutch Reformed Churches, that this type of Christianity accentuated conflict in the South African context, creating divisions that are hard to heal even to the present day. I do not intend to open old wounds, but those of us who are part of the Reformed community know how this expression of Christianity has left scars which are still painfully visible in the body of Christ (Oosthuizen 1985).

As we look at this particular expression of Christianity, we observe that, more than simply giving rise to a most unjust and oppressive political system, religion was used to provide ideological legitimacy to the political interests of one group. Christianity became a driving force in promoting conflict between various communities in South Africa. In forging their own political destiny, the Afrikaners adopted the kind of religious symbolism that sought to consolidate both their economic and political power. However, it is also important to mention that, within the DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH, there were voices that were extremely critical of this theology (see de Gruchy and Villa-Vicencio 1983). Today, the major theological shifts that we see within the DUTCH
REFORMED CHURCH are really the result of the efforts of those few individuals who have rejected this ideological manipulation and distortion of the Christian faith. We also have to acknowledge the positive role of certain Afrikaner politicians for promoting the change of heart within their community by committing themselves to process of reform, thus creating a crisis of conscience within the DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH community.

The other expression of Christianity that I want to mention is the emergence of Black theology in the South African context. Black theology became an expression of resistance, especially toward the system of oppression. It was a theology whose basis was to restore the dignity of the black person, and to authenticate the cultural and religious experience of black people which was distorted and manipulated by the policy of Apartheid (see Mosala and Thagale 1986). Inspired by the philosophy of Black consciousness, this theology sought to challenge members of the black Christian community to resist racial oppression by embracing the basic tenets of the black nationalist struggle (see Gerhart 1978). One of those tenets was to instill a sense of black pride, affirming the God given rights of black people. From its inception, this theology was confrontational; it sought to accentuate the conflict between black and white Christians by insisting that the God of the Bible was on the side of the black masses. Whilst stressing the positive aspects of blackness, it welcomed polarisation, because this would provide a political space for both blacks and whites to address the contradictions of their respective political situations.

Black theology, as a form of theological discourse, not only promoted conflict because of its use of certain exclusive categories, such as blackness, but also because it sought to develop a new sense of identity which was critical of what white existence represented. So, at the opposite end of Apartheid theological discourse granting legitimacy to white supremacy, black theological discourse emerged to provide legitimacy to positive black identity. It is very difficult for me to give a neutral and objectively critical assessment of black theology, because my entire theological formation has been rooted in this movement (see Goba 1988). But what is clear is that black theology, as a response to oppressive aspects of white Christian theology, exposed the enormous contradictions of the praxis of Christianity in the South African context. Whilst Apartheid theology promoted the process of dehumanisation, black theology sought to promote humanisation by insisting on the just cause of the oppressed black majority.

One of the unique aspects of this movement was its development of a hermeneutics of suspicion - something which continues to prevail because of the deep mistrust, produced by a long historical struggle between two opposing forms of Nationalist ideology, enshrined in both theologies. Both are rooted in particular
struggles reflecting different values and power relations. Together, they demonstrate conclusively that religion is not neutral, but becomes embroiled in various human struggles for legitimation or transformation. But also, these expressions of Christianity reflect the deep ideological cleavages that have for a long time shaped our political life in South Africa. In both cases, Christianity has played a key role in generating conflict, serving the collective interests of each group. Afrikaner and Black theologies, therefore, pose a challenge in exploring new ways in which religion can promote democratic values in the emerging South African context.

TRANSCENDING IDEOLOGICAL CONFLICT

In our attempt to unravel the kind of theological discourse represented especially by Apartheid and black theologies, we discern a lack of commitment on the part of each to promote inclusive democratic values. What emerges is a commitment to promote their own political self interests. However, one notices a special shift in *The Kairos Document*, one which provides the kind of social analysis which goes beyond both Apartheid theology and black theology. What is important about *The Kairos Document* is that it depicts the conflicts within the life of the church. As the document (1986:1) puts it:

> What the present crisis shows up although many of us have known it all along, is that the church is divided. More and more people are saying that there are in fact two churches in South Africa - a white church and the black church. Even within the same denomination there are in fact two churches. In the life and death conflict between different social forces that has come to a head in South Africa today, there are Christians (or at least people who profess to be Christians) on both sides of the conflict and some who are trying to sit on the fence.

I do not have any particular problems with the critique of state theology in *The Kairos Document*. My real problem is with the section on church theology. At no point does this section include in its analysis certain expressions of black theology. As I reflect now on some of the early leading exponents of black theology the same critique could have been levelled at them (see Mosala 1988). One of the serious weaknesses of early expressions of black theology was a lack of critical social analysis. The major shortcoming in *The Kairos Document* was its failure to develop a self-critical appraisal of the theologies emerging from the community of the oppressed, failing to expose inadequacies in their alternative, inclusive vision for our society.
Some argue that *Kairos*’ critique was indirect because of the kind of social analysis used in its section on prophetic theology. Its analysis adopted the variable of class rather than race, distinguishing oppressor and oppressed. *Kairos* opposed those who benefitted from the system to those who were its victims. Hence, the fundamental problem in the South African conflict situation was defined, not in terms of Apartheid, but in terms of tyranny and oppression. I believe it was for this reason that a number of leading black theologians did not give their enthusiastic support to the *Kairos* movement - a tension that still remains.

*The Kairos Document* represents an important phase in our struggle, one which attempted to adopt a so-called ‘progressive’ theological stance geared at uniting certain key elements in our conflict situation. Whether this strategy succeeded in promoting a new, democratic vision is problematic. In the current situation, it has promoted, on the one hand, a tacit and unconditional support of the current process of political transition while, on the other hand, it has promoted a total rejection of the process because of its serious contradictions. The significance of *The Kairos Document*, however, is that it provided moral support to the struggle for justice waged by the oppressed majority in their efforts to dismantle the system of Apartheid.

A recent statement that attempts to forge a new kind of theological consensus, is the Rustenburg Declaration of 1990 (‘Rustenburg Declaration’ 1993). The statement highlights what is calls ‘a period of gestation with the hope of a democratic peaceful and just dispensation emerging for our nation’, and points to the ‘threshold of new things’ and ‘promise of reconciliation between South Africans’. The statement (1993:256) then makes the following commitment:

> We therefore commit ourselves to the struggle for a just, democratic, non-racial and non-sexist South Africa so that our witness may carry greater credibility. When we address church-state relations in the new dispensation.

The statement does not say how is this to be achieved in terms of Christian praxis but stipulates principles that must be reflected in the new constitution under Section 4.2.4.1 to 4.2.4.8. Whilst the statement raises a number of important themes, it does not provide a new vision of how Christianity can promote democratic values for the post Apartheid era. Instead, the statement is preoccupied with resolving certain basic problems, such as violence.

While many of the problems mentioned in the Rustenburg Declaration remain unresolved because of the complexity of the issues, they are also unresolved
because the need to redefine the role of Christianity remains. To put it differently: there is a need for different forms of theological discourse to address our complex and challenging new context. Since the publication of the Rustenburg Declaration, there has been no serious attempt on the part of the churches to deal with its implications. For example, the statement made a clear commitment to work in a number of areas, including addressing the questions of land and education, the preparation of study material to guide churches in understanding their mission in a new South Africa, a commitment of church resources to the work of reconstruction and renewal of South African society, the provision of assistance to exiles and working for a new economic order. These are all important issues relating to the task of promoting democratic values. But the real task in responding to this challenge is to explore new forms of theological discourse - which are neither trapped by the legacy of Apartheid nor serve the political interests of the emerging political elites - committed to the quest for democratic justice.

THEOLOGY AND THE QUEST FOR DEMOCRATIC VALUES: THE HUMAN RIGHTS AGENDA

Klaus Nürnberger (1991) makes an important statement:

Democracy presupposes a communal spirit. The formative values behind the democratic system are equal dignity, freedom and responsibility. The goal is to create the space for the life potential of every person and every group to unfold freely. Freedom means self-determination. There is no freedom without a minimum of power. But for a society to be free power must be distributed justly. Just distribution means in principle that each person or group receives the measure of freedom and power which is compatible with an equal measure of freedom and power of all others. This means that equal opportunity and equal access to the resources necessary for the unfolding of life must be granted to every person or group in need of such opportunities and resources.

This statement captures the essence of what democracy should be - especially in our new political context. The challenge is to capture what Nürnberger calls a 'new communal spirit'; one which transcends nationalist ideologies tending to create conflicting political interests. In the past, as I have explained earlier, our theologies were embroiled in major ideological struggles and as a result, created more divisions within the church. As we move away from the terrible legacy of
Apartheid, we need to rediscover fresh perspectives on what a Christian ethos can be in our society, especially in promoting democracy.

Nürnberger's article, suggests a deeper understanding of democracy, characterised by the values of freedom, the right of self determination, and equality of dignity, as well as the honouring of legitimate interests, and responsibilities.

Because of the scourge of Apartheid, these ideas sound as though they are new. Yet they must be reflected in any relevant theology that seeks to promote democratic values. The credibility of Christianity in this country will only be restored when we reclaim these values in creating a new community and a new social order. One of the theologians who has made a strong case for this is Professor Charles Villa-Vicencio (1992). For him (1992:128), this kind of theological discourse must recapture the human rights agenda:

The task of theology is to help locate the human rights struggle at the centre of the debate on what it means to be human and therefore also at the centre of social and political pursuit.

Whilst I share Professor Villa-Vicencio's concern that the human rights agenda is critical in fostering democratic values, my main problem is: how do we go about this in a context of serious and destructive conflicts? How do we promote human rights in a context of political conflict and the escalation of violence? For the conflict is generated by different social values, as well opposing ideological perspectives.

For me, the process of promoting democratic values has to be understood within the context of conflict mediation, especially in our present political context. For the legacy of Apartheid is not going to disappear just because we are moving to a new political dispensation. South Africans as a whole have been socialised in a context of intense political conflict producing abnormal levels of intolerance. How do we speak about democratic values of equal dignity when we are confronted by horrendous forms of human carnage? How do we rediscover the African concept 'ubuntu botho'? It is in this context that a theology seeking to promote peacemaking and the radical alteration of broken human relationships is vital. The challenge is to develop an approach to conflict mediation and such a perspective is reflected in Hizkias Assefa's (1993:6) definition:

Conflict resolution and therefore peacemaking involves a restructuring of relationships, a transition from an order based on coercion to one based on voluntarism from a relationship
characterized by hierarchy to one marked by equality, participation, respect, mutual enrichment and growth.

This restructuring of human relationships is the process of reconciliation - one that is not superficial but seeks to create a new community, a new social order. This recreation of the social order is based on those democratic values of equal dignity, love, mutual respect, freedom, and a radical sense of tolerance.

One of the goals of conflict mediation is to promote collective problem solving - especially in strife torn communities. But from a theological perspective, this process of conflict mediation attempts to provide a new vision of life, as well as of society. In other words, it promotes a new understanding of humanity, a new theological anthropology. The central theological affirmation is that, as human beings, we are all equal and unique before God. Apart from this, it affirms our unique relationship with God and with one another. So the process of mediation is to restore relationships at both levels. It is a process of recreating community. From a theological perspective, the creation of a new social order (democratic order) entails the restoration of broken relationships inspired by the power of the Holy Spirit. The restoration of broken relationships is incomplete, however, if it does not affirm the human rights agenda. Reconciliation is critical for our nation - especially if we are to rediscover once more the meaning of a lasting and true democratic order.

This is the challenge confronting Christianity in the new political situation - a challenge which must be faced contextually by dealing with all the issues that threaten the process of democratisation, such as violence and intolerance. Christianity can make a significant contribution in this regard. What we need, as we move into this new situation, is to encourage various Christian communities to embark on programmes of dialogue to confront those issues that have created conflict. Such dialogue should enable these communities to refocus on alternative theological visions. In other words, churches must embark on a re-educational process designed to revisit certain basic tenets of the Christian faith - especially as they address the exploitation, racism, ethnic chauvinism, and sexism that form the legacy of Apartheid.

Our theological dialogue must explore all interfaces of conflict behaviour, those cultural, sexual, political, and economic aspects which continue to be steeped in the legacy of Apartheid. It is here that religious and theological studies - especially as represented in the South African Academy of Religion - can be in facilitating such a process. All religious groups could be invited to participate in the creation of just democratic order through the organisation of workshops on education for democracy and conflict mediation at local levels. Any such pro-
gramme must seek to empower communities to determine the content and the goal for promoting a lasting democratic order.

At the centre of all our religions is an affirmation of the sacredness of human life - a pre-requisite for establishing a democratic order and, thus, a key contribution religious people must actively make in the New South Africa.
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CHAPTER 12

Religion and cultural identity:
A perspective gleaned from the Abrahamic Faiths

Pieter J J S Els

INTRODUCTION

Identity answers the basic questions of orientation and direction, such as ‘who am I?’ ‘Where do I belong?’ ‘Where did I come from?’ ‘What is my task in the world?’ ‘Where am I going?’ Identity is a factor which all of us have experienced as operating very forcefully even decisively, either consciously or unconsciously in our minds and conduct as individuals and groups. It also to a large extent determines a person’s attitudes, belief-systems, conduct and decisions.

Identity is of course a phenomenon which is composed of various constituents and determining factors: ethnic, cultural, religious, social, economic and geographical. Of these the strongest and most determinative in terms of inter-human relations are probably the ethnic, religious and cultural factors. The others, namely the social, economic and geographical dimensions, obviously play a modifying role in the way in which other persons perceive one’s identity and the implications thereof. It is so unfortunate, even tragic, that in countries like South Africa, where strong group identities and racist ideas and attitudes have existed, very often without a word having been said, one’s mere identity as perceived may evoke an attitude of scepticism or prejudiced feelings of mistrust and rejection. This very predicament can and should be converted into a drama-
tic and effective opportunity to show disarming love to people of other identity
groups whom we are so apt to stereotype. In this way one can be a liberated
instrument in the service of God to bring about reconciliation between
prejudiced-enslaved captives of an unloving laager mentality. This can only be
done if one has a correct divinely-guided (i.e. a religiously determined conscious)
sense of what identity and its function in society should be all about. In order to
achieve this it is vital that one should study and understand the relationship(s)
between culture and religion.

This article deals with religious and cultural identities, their mutual interaction
and the manner in which people’s reactions (in terms of individual and group
contexts) are consciously or sub-consciously influenced by them. My proposed
thesis is that in the historical-theological narratives which deal with the life and
teachings of the ‘spiritual ancestor’ of the so-called ‘Abrahamic religions’ (i.e.
Judaism, Christianity and Islam) we find a paradigm for relating religious faith
and ethnic-cultural identities. This paradigm can be of great value for reconci­
lia tion and sound interpersonal relations between adherents of these particular
faiths. As a scholar who is interested both in the Hebrew Bible and inter-faith
studies, I offer this as a contribution to meaningful inter-faith dialogue. Standing
within the Abrahamic tradition, I assume that the Holy Scriptures of the Abra­
hamic faiths are not merely of historical, but also of normative significance.

TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF CULTURE AND RELIGION

It is of course not so easy to define culture. Adrio König points out that close
to three hundred definitions of culture had already been formulated by the
middle of this century. These formulations can be divided into six categories:
descriptive, historical, normative, psychological, structural and genetic defi­
nitions. One of the main points of discussion has been the relationship between
thought (i.e. idea) and behaviour (i.e. code) in the definition of culture. König
presents a few brief formulations of what culture could be. According to the
Encyclopaedia of Anthropology, culture is the patterned behaviour learnt by each
individual from birth. Kussing states, that culture is the system of knowledge
more or less shared by society. Kottak also argues that culture is the beliefs and
behaviour acquired by people who wish to conform as members of a society.
Olivier on the other hand, defines culture as the design for living, characteristic
of any human society, whereas, Luzbetak perceives culture as a map or
blueprint for living.

König also attempts a definition which encapsulates the course and scope of
culture. He takes great pains in contrasting humans and animals. He argues that,
while animals merely live in nature, human beings objectify nature, relating themselves to it and forming culture in the process. Accordingly, humankind also develops certain patterns and structures in terms of which they live, while animals simply repeat their life, day by day, without any planning. We may call culture the 'human structure' added to nature, a thought-structure in terms of which we live. Culture is our 'artificial, secondary environment' which we add to our primary environment.\(^7\)

Several attempts to identify different levels of culture are identified by König. Zuern distinguishes three such levels in culture: (1) A centre of intangibles which lies at culture's heart, representing basic beliefs and ideals, its philosophy of life, and its answers to the fundamental questions of life. Around this centre of intangibles are: (2) structures, including all the structures that underlie the social institutions within society. The structures rise from intangible values, but are also influenced by external circumstances. All that people have to know in order to act properly within the traditions of their culture, are found in these structures. They are the unwritten patterns and directions underlying interpersonal activities. These structures tend to become traditional and are defended not by reason but by appeal to tradition. Finally, around the circle of structures is a circle of tangibles, the visible elements of a culture: its behaviour patterns, customs, social habits, fashions, rituals, etc. There is a natural tendency to compare cultures on the basis of these tangible, visible elements, but the deep roots of every culture are in the centre of intangibles.

Change within specific cultures is also widely discussed by scholars in various academic disciplines, particularly anthropology, sociology and theology. Many reasons or causative factors may be adduced for such changes. Acculturation - involving contact between two or more cultures - is one of the major modern causes of change. This occurs in many Third World countries and is beginning to constitute a key dynamic within the West as more people of Asian and African origin emigrate there. In some cases, ethnic groups are in the process of being welded together into a modern nation-state, often producing a new common culture. People's social, cultural and religious identities, as well as their perceptions of such identities, also change as part of the wider process of political and social changes.

Inculturation is a Christian missiological concept concerning the way the Gospel enters a non-Christian culture.\(^8\) Such a culture can resist the influence of the foreign religion (Christianity) in many ways.

The influence of faith on culture, and of culture on faith, has important implications for the inculturation process. The relationship between the two can be
intimate, as when the religion has so thoroughly imbued and shaped the culture with its belief-system, norms and customs. In this case culture and religion can hardly be distinguished from each other and a change of religion is often seen as an illicit betrayal or renunciation of one’s culture, ethnicity, and social group, as well as a threat to one’s psychological stability and the well-being of the group. Yet if a religion wants to present itself as a meaningful answer to the needs of humanity at large - of peoples outside one’s own ethnic group or culture - this vital distinction between religion and culture has to be made, as we will subsequently point out in the following discussion.

IDENTITY IN INTER-HUMAN RELATIONS

As soon as the question of transcending particularities such as culture and ethnicity is raised, the question of normativity - and therefore of truth - arises. Our postmodern age proclaims that truth is relative and that only what makes for an individual’s or a group’s psychological and emotional well-being is normative for them. Here cultural identity may function as the primary norm which determines choice, association/adherence and faith-commitment.

One the other hand, many people today claim no particular allegiance to any particular faith or cultural identity. Such people are not ‘tribalist’ in the sense that justice is only justice for ‘one’s own people’, but hunger for a genuine ethic which promotes human flourishing in the world. Perhaps they subscribe to a vague and undefined notion of a supreme being, yet this doesn’t enter into their reflections since it is deemed ‘irrelevant’. Having rejected the incommensurable truths asserted by various religions, these people term themselves ‘world citizens’ and occupy a standpoint that may be described as ‘humanistic’. And yet the archemedian point by which they stand beyond particularities of culture and ethnicity is not well defined. In other words, the basis for asserting transcendent norms of truth and justice is lacking. It is to this group especially that the assertion of transcendent truth within a religious perspective may be especially relevant.

An alternative to both these viewpoints states that religious truth and beliefs (of which rituals and customs are ultimately merely symbolic expressions) are only meaningful if they are absolute in their veracity and eternal existence. No personal satisfaction or psychological stability is possible without an inner certainty about the so-called ‘objective veracity’ and continuous existence of that which one holds to be ultimately true. This ‘something’ provides more than mere existential satisfaction.
This alternative position sees faith based on objective (and subjectively verifiable) facts. Believing that the Holy Scriptures, for instance, constitute revealed truth about God, humanity, human history, the world and its destiny provides such a basis for ascertaining fundamental truth. In terms of this, humanity can experience the security of a sure and logical faith which is not reducible to one particularity.10

THE ABRAHATIC ARCHETYPE

The Abrahamic (Ibrâhim) narratives as recorded in the Hebrew, Christian and Muslim scriptures provide an illuminating, and indeed paradigmatic, example of how faith can permit people to move beyond confinement in one’s cultural, ethnic or other particularities.

There are a number of basic theological truths present in the so-called Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), which, when traced back to the history of their common spiritual father Abraham (Ibrâhim), are vital for the positive functioning of personal and group identity.

The sources for our discussion of the history and religion of Abraham (called the millat Ibrâhim in the Qur’an) is found in the Hebrew Bible (Genesis 12-25 and Isaiah 51) the New Testament (particularly Romans 4; Galatians 3 and 4; James 2) and in the Qur’an (Suras 2 and 3; 6:75-79; 19:51-50; 21:51-71; 26:70-82; 37; 40:4-6; 51:34-37). These passages demonstrate that the message and theology embedded in this archetype of the true and faithful believer are exemplary, liberating and conclusive in terms of identity, salvation and service. While rooted in an ancient near eastern context, for millions of his spiritual descendants his significance transcends his own time and location to embrace all ages and places.

The fundamental theological paradigm which seems to dominate and govern the rest of the Abrahamic history in the Bible and, to a lesser extent the Qur’an, appear right at the beginning of his story. Gen. 12:1-4 reads as follows:

Now the Lord (Yahweh) said to Abram, ‘Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father’s house to the land which I will show you, And I will make you a great nation. And I will bless those who bless you and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’ So Abram went forth as the Lord had spoken to him.

In similar vein, according to various passages in the Qur’an, Ibrâhim was divinely guided to the true knowledge of the one and only monotheistic God, Allah. In
light of this he boldly and courageously set himself against the idol-worship of his family and kinsfolk - even to the point of being willing to separate himself from them (Sura 19:41-43, 46-50).

There are a number of other passages contained in the Abrahamic paradigm in Sura 19:

Abraham he was a man of truth, a prophet (41).

Behold he said to his father: ‘O my father, why worship that which heareth not, and seeth not and can profit thee nothing?’ (42)

O my father! to me hath come knowledge which hath not reached thee: So follow me: I will guide thee to a way that is even and straight (43)

O my father! serve not Satan: for Satan is a rebel against (God) most gracious. (44)

(The father) replied: ‘Dost thou hate my gods. O Abraham? I thou forbear not, I will indeed stone thee: Now get away from me, for a good while!’ (46)

Ibrahim said: ‘Peace be on thee: I will pray to my Lord for thy forgiveness: For he is to me most gracious.’ (47)

And I will turn away from you (all) and from those whom ye invoke besides God: I will call on my Lord: Perhaps by my prayer to my Lord, I shall be not unblest. (48)

The essential and determinative pointers in this passage include the viewpoint that there is religious truth which is the product of divine revelation - i.e., knowledge which is in some way communicated to humankind and which should be distinguished from false (wrong) concepts. Such divinely revealed religious truth is so important that even family ties and cultural identity should be sacrificed (or transformed) for the sake of loyalty to the revealing God. Falsehood is associated with the great opponent or enemy (Satan) of the one true God. This is an instance where a clash is portrayed between true religion based on divinely-given knowledge and inherited culture which is (wrongly) maintained in contradistinction to new, revealed truths. Such an stance appeals
to God for merciful forgiveness. Religion may meaningfully influence and enrich culture provided that it is the determining instead of the (culturally) determined factor.

Culture is, however, a dangerous stumbling block in the quest for liberating religious truth. Here was a pre-figurement of another Hijrat many centuries later - the flight of the prophet Muhammad to Medina in 622 AD. In both cases the prayer was abundantly fulfilled. Three aspects are abundantly clear in this passage, as in the Abrahamic story as told in the Hebrew Bible: firstly, Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his social identity; secondly, that in severing his family ties for the sake of his primary faith-identity he saw the quest for religious truth as the costly ‘pearl of great value’ (cf Matthew 13:44) for which one had to sacrifice everything; thirdly, that abundant blessings flowed to and through him as a result of his faith in the one God.

Thus Abraham’s physical and spiritual descendants benefitted from his willingness to take the risk, humanly speaking, of putting his faith-identity first and let it dictate his social and cultural identities. And so we read in verses Sura 19:49-50: ‘When he had turned away from them (i.e his family and social group), and from those whom they worshipped besides God, Allah bestowed on him Isaac and Jacob, and each one of them we made a prophet. And we bestowed mercy on them, lofty honour on the tongue of truth.’

The Abrahamic narratives also point to the absolute sovereignty and omnipotence of the one (unique, monotheistic) God, Yahweh (in the Qur’an known as Allah). This is encapsulated in the formulae ‘there is no other god but Allah’ and ‘Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one God.’ This God is able to transform the single individual, Abraham into a great and numerous nation; to bless (empower) him and many nations through him. This means God will make him very famous and influential among humankind. The essential theological principle to take note of here is that a child of Abraham and a believer in the God of Abraham is expected by the Almighty to spread the blessing of the Abrahamic faith to all the nations and all of humankind.

There is also the universal significance of Abraham in terms of blessing (barakat) or curse (pala’) upon the nations, according to people’s attitude to Abraham and his religion, (cf millat’ Ibrâhim in the Qur’an and Gen 12:3):

> And I (God) will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you, I will curse, and in you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.
But the pre-requisite for the successful execution of this process of blessing is the right choice in terms of determining identity. God wants to take Abraham and his believing descendants on this universal journey of blessing and wholeness, but he demands at the outset a certain choice of priorities concerning identity (Genesis 12:1). We have seen how he had radically to place his faith-identity as determining priority in his life and that he had to be willing even to sacrifice his familial and cultural links. In other words, Ibrahim was willing to risk total estrangement and excommunication from his family and social group for the sake of his newly found faith. His faith-identity overruled his social identity.

Again there is a similarity between Abraham’s faith and the prophet Muhammad’s constant struggle against idol worship. The prophet starts his public career with this faith struggle, coming up against the accepted idol-worship practices of the day. At this stage he risks his life for the quest of truth. His clansmen try to kill him but he manages to escape. (In the Hebrew Bible a similar account is found in the story of Gideon. See Judges 6). The Talmud also contains a tradition of Abraham destroying the idols of his kinsman and having to face their displeasure.

The way that Muhammad was able to unite the various Arab tribes by pointing to a transcendent loyalty. Also the Galatians passage in the New Testament notes a transcendent loyalty ‘in Christ’ (Galatians 3:26-27) which overcomes cultural and ethnic divisions and interpersonal strife. It is interesting to note that this New Testament passage is also framed by the story of Abraham: ‘If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise’ (vs 29).

Those who claim Abraham as spiritual ancestor cannot be confined to any one geographical or historical people. In this they are only following his example is refusing to allow any specific location to be an end in itself. The link between (the promised) land (Genesis 17:7ff), numerous descendants and blessing for the nations is based on a covenant - hence an Abrahamic perspective views land as a means of blessing toward all people. Thus, in the further theological development of the Abrahamic theme in the New Testament, the inheritance of Abraham and his followers becomes the whole earth. There is within this paradigm a universalistic extension of blessing toward all peoples and places. This point is especially relevant today where people - even some Christians, Muslims and Jews - tie their identity to a specific geographical location. (See Akenson 1992).

A final theme in the Abrahamic story is that of the promised son as heir. In ancient time, one’s future was wrapped up (and assured) in one’s physical
descendants. The Abrahamic paradigm sees true and enduring identity in faith and persistent trust in the one God who keeps his covenant with his faithful rather than in human efforts (see Genesis 15:2-6, 16; 17:15-21).

THE ROLE OF FAITH AND CULTURE IN THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY

In the light of all these theological perspectives which the history of Ibrāhīm (Abraham) presents to us, we return to the relation between culture and faith (religion) and its impact on the way a person experiences his or her identity. It is a truism that a dynamic religion (or faith) can have a formative impact on the culture(s) in which it operates - as in the case of Islamic, Jewish and so-called Christian Western cultures. Outside these traditions we may point to Hindu-Indian societies as also exemplifying this. Many people, especially in societies where the psychological-emotional experience of group identity is very strong, experience their cultural and/or societal links as being so dominant and intertwined with their inherited religion that a change in religion seems unthinkable. Such people are never really in a position to objectively evaluate the truth-content of their religion. That which purports to be of absolute and eternal significance, becomes undermined by particularistic group interests. Of course many, if not most, people prefer the psychological and social security of belonging to a (relative) cultural group, and do not have such a passionate desire for fundamental certainty about religious (absolute) truth. (This does of course exclude minor variations and diversities in perspectives). People are in general not willing to sacrifice group-acceptance and be prepared to be ostracised for the sake of truth. Only a deep thirst for reconciliation with God can overcome the fear of rejection by people with whom one has shared past affinities.

We in South Africa have experienced people being primarily tied to cultural-ethnic and nationalistic identities and their ideals. We have seen the abuse of religion to sanction narrow and often misguided self- and group-interests. It is only when such people come to an understanding that God demands a primary faith-identity to govern and determine secondary and tertiary cultural and societal identities that they will be brought into the wider movement of universal, Abrahamic blessing.

The Hebrew Bible presents this movement in an eschatological way. In Isaiah 51:1-2 the addressees are designated as those who want to do what is right and enquire concerning the will of Yahweh. They are exhorted to contemplate their origin, Abraham, as the rock out of which they are hewed (verse 2):
Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, and who seek the Lord. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who gave birth to you in pain. When he was one I called him, then I blessed him and multiplied him.

The message of Isaiah 51 is that a sense of geographical and cultural identity does not stand in the way of universal service towards one's fellows in the broadest sense. Precisely and only when one's ethnic, cultural and inherited religious identity is transcended and expanded in a commitment to the salvation and blessing of humankind as a whole is God's purpose achieved. The restoration of Zion is not an end in itself, but a means towards a much larger end or purpose, namely divine salvation and blessing reaching all nations. Hence, a particular cultural identity is subsumed under a wider, universal identity of the people of God.

Isaiah contrasts the barrenness of Abraham and Sarah, their incapacity to bring forth children and hence to create a future for themselves, with the numerous lineage of descendants which God brought about. This serves as an analogy to the salvation and blessing which Yahweh God will bring about. This will reach all the nations and will turn the ruins of Jerusalem into the pristine beauty of Eden.

A second main theme of Isaiah 51 in connection with the history and religion of Ibrahim is that Yahweh alone brings about salvation; human beings cannot bring it about (cf. also the exodus tradition reflected in verse 10 as well as the creation tradition in verse 9). Participation in the divine salvation through faith in this God brings about a victory over fear for people. Isaiah 51:7-8 testifies:

Listen to Me, you who know righteousness. A people in whose heart is my law. Do not fear the reproach of man, neither be dismayed at their reviling. For the moth will eat them like a garment, and the grub will eat them like wool. But My righteousness shall be forever and my salvation to all generations.

Here we have a prerequisite for a person to rise above any fear of persecution by people in response to the stand he or she takes on the basis of divine truth. What should be clear is that they have personally experienced God's salvation, His divine actions and norms (i.e., His righteousness (sedeq) and his Torah (law and instruction). The heartfelt faith of such a person is that the ultimate and eternal triumph of God's salvific deeds over the temporary though awful deeds

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of some people towards others will bring comfort and peace of mind. This is beautifully illustrated here:

I, even I, am he who comforts you. Who are you that you are afraid of man who dies, and of the son of man who is made like grass? (51:12).

Hence a faith-identity can be maintained over against any other social identity which opposes it as well as, against the oppression of persecutors (Isa 51:13).

The creator God gathers a new, a universal people of Zion (cf Isa 19; 51:16) - Yahweh’s teaching will universally reach the nations, and His divine instruction will be the norm for them:

Pay attention to me, O my people; and give ear to me, O my nation. For a law will go forth from me, and I will set my justice for a light of the peoples (verse 4).

Zion now expands in significance and becomes the symbolic centre of all those who believe in the God of Zion (cf Isaiah 2:1-5; 19:23-25; 51:7):

In the last days, the mountain of the house of the Lord, will be established as the chief of the mountains. And will be raised above the hills; and all the nations will stream to it. And many peoples will come and say, Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord. To the house of the God of Jacob; that He may walk in His paths. For the law will go forth from Zion, And the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And He will judge between the nations, and will render decisions for many peoples. And they will hammer their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, And never again will they learn war (Isaiah 2:1-4).

CONCLUSION

The vision of salvation and reconciliation inspired by belief in the God of Abraham has at least three characteristics commending it as a paradigm for transcending those boundaries within which humans confine themselves. First, it is a vision of reconciliation and co-operation, even between nations with deep hostilities. (cf Isaiah 19:18-22, 23-25) and the God of Zion uniting all believers into being one people of God. Isaiah 19 verses 24-25:
In that day there will be the third party with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed. Saying: ‘Blessed is Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance’ (Isaiah 19:24-25. See also 19:18-23).

Second, it is a vision of joy and deep gladness:

So the ransomed of the Lord will return, and come with joyful shouting to Zion, and everlasting joy will be on their heads, They will obtain gladness and joy, And sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Finally, it is a vision of universal scope. This God is not only the Redeemer and liberator of the Jewish exiles but of all people in situations of oppression who put their faith and trust in Him. Precisely the fact is that (the message of) Isaiah 51 starts off with a perspective on Abraham (Ibrāhim) as universal spiritual father, and specifically because God addresses his people (in verse 4 and 5) and directs their attention to the fact that His teaching, His torāh and the knowledge of his divine will shall be a light (= guidance) for all the nations:

My righteousness is near, My salvation has gone forth, and My arms will judge the people, The coast land will wait for Me, and for My arm they will wait expectantly (Isaiah 51:5).

All this implies that the spiritual descendants of Abraham must base their religious faith on and anchor their personal identity in the centuries long revelatory history of Abraham as spiritual father and of his unique spiritual Descendant, the Messiah (‘al-masiach) who was willing to diminish his heavenly social identity to the point of taking up the identity of a slave, of the suffering Ebed Yahweh, for our sakes, so that we could be given the glorious identity of becoming children of Abraham, but also royal sons and daughters of the Eternal King and God of Ibrāhim.
NOTES

1 In this regard see especially the work of H Richard Niebuhr (1951).
2 In this regard, König 1989, 7-18.
3 Lett 1987, 55.
4 König 1989, 1f.
5 Cited in Lett 1987, 57.
6 Luzbetak 1988, 157f.
8 König 1989, 12ff.
9 See especially the work of Fowler (1982); and the article by Ronald Nicolson, ‘Rorty, rights and religion’ in this volume.
10 See ‘Divino afflante Spiritu’ and ‘Dei Verbum’ in Abbot 1966.
11 Yusaf bin Ali 1957, 77 (note 2500) comments on these verses as follows: ‘Abraham left his father and the home of his fathers (Ur of Chaldees) and never returned. He left because he was turned out, and because it was not possible for him to make any compromise with what was false in religion. In return for abuse, he spoke gentle words, and expressed his fervent hope that at least he Abrahim would have God’s blessing in reply to his prayers.’
12 Cf Els 1968 for a more detailed discussion in this regard.

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