

CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY IN DIALOGUE WITH SECULAR AND AFRICAN SPIRITUALITIES WITH REFERENCE TO MORAL FORMATION AND AGENCY

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Abstract

This article notes the need for personal and communal moral renewal in South Africa and asks what contribution Secular, African and Christian spiritualities can make in this regard. A dialogue with Secular and African Spirituality from the perspective of Christian Spirituality is embarked upon with reference to spiritual and moral paradigms, personal moral character and moral agency within communities. I seek to evaluate both the strengths and weaknesses of these three spiritualities and to identify what they can learn from one another in the task of effecting moral renewal in South Africa.

1. INTRODUCTION

Driving on South African roads has become rather challenging in recent years. The problem is not simply that the number of cars and potholes have been increasing, or that a good many of one's fellow drivers do not appear to have attained a valid driver's licence. It goes deeper than that. Many of us have been side-swiped by overloaded taxis or literally pushed off the road by the speeding cavalcades of self-important politicians. When driving in the fast lane on the highway, what appears to be a barely adequate following distance ahead of one is quickly filled by a Mercedes, two taxis and an Uno! If that is not enough, one is simultaneously passed on the left by a BMW whilst a large 4x4 seems to be hell-bent on driving up your exhaust pipe. These common scenarios draw attention, in a graphic but humorous manner, to the spirit of aggression, selfishness, foolishness, and lack of common courtesy in our country

today. This deeper reality impels us to ask, "Who are we and what type of society are we creating?"

This article recognises that South Africans are experiencing a moral crisis and asks what possible solutions three commonly used approaches, namely Christian, Secular, and African spirituality can offer.¹ Clearly, given the growing interest in spirituality and the myriad approaches to spirituality within contemporary pluralistic society, both locally and internationally, some space will need to be given to definitions of these spiritualities. However, as this debate has for long been pursued by other writers, I propose to rather focus on the contribution of these spiritualities to the urgent matter of moral formation and agency, with reference to both personal character and communal social renewal. While still drawing on the insights of 'overseas' writers in the area of spirituality and ethics, I have chosen to focus on aspects of the South African debate, because of the importance of our context and because I think that South African theologians do not sufficiently engage with each other's writings.

By the term 'dialogue' I mean rigorous, but not arrogant, engagement. I engage in this dialogue from the position of Christian ethics and spirituality, but am deeply aware of both strengths and weaknesses within my own tradition. In my view, any contribution from a Christian perspective must include the confession that, by failing to live in accordance with its own biblical precepts and the best examples of its tradition, the church has lost credibility. It, too, is on a journey and needs to invite and attract rather than hinder those who, equally, are in search of love, cosmic meaning, belonging, beauty, truth, deliverance from evil, and integrity in life.

¹ Within Africa, the other main approach is that of Islam, sadly the limitations of space do not allow a discussion of Islamic spirituality and morality here. See the entire April 2006 issue of *Missionalia* for a comprehensive discussion of the Christian-Muslim encounter in Africa.

This article discusses the relationship between spirituality, morality and society, and notes that a deepened spirituality results in the formation of moral character, agency and community which, in turn, often give rise to prophetic witness. Conversely, engagement in society, which involves confrontation with evil, suffering and death, often nurtures a deepened spirituality. In what follows, I briefly note the need for the renewal of personal and social morality in South Africa. Thereafter I explain the inter-relationship between spirituality, morality and society. In the major part of the paper I engage in a dialogue with some Secular and African spiritualities from the perspective of Christian spirituality. I identify what can be regarded as their relative strengths and weaknesses and conclude by distilling what these three spiritualities can learn from one another in the task of effecting moral renewal in South Africa.

2. THE INTER-RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPIRITUALITY, MORALITY AND SOCIETY

Despite our numerous recent successes as a country, several threats and challenges remain, strangely both exacerbated and muted in the enthusiasm for the projected hosting of the 2010 Soccer World Cup. Issues pertinent to South Africa - and also the rest of our continent and the globe - include gross inequalities, starvation and poverty (Speckman 2001; August & Bowers 2005), corruption in high places, wars, and economic globalisation (Cochrane 2004). Violence against women and children (Kayonga 1999; Nasimiyu-Waskie 1999) and the proliferation of HIV infected and affected persons (Snyman 2005) are vitally important topics.² The importance of environmental issues (Olivier 2005; Anderson 2007) are discussed against the backdrop of how to deal with the threat

² Regarding HIV/AIDS see the entire July 2006 issue of the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*.

of the extinction of life as we know it.³ Global warming, floods and droughts in different parts of the world and the extinction of thousands of species all threaten life on earth.

What contribution can spirituality make to the moral crisis exhibited in contexts such as these? Can the moral formation of its citizens and leaders, and the moral transformation of its structures, customs and institutions, alleviate the frustration and suffering of Africa's inhabitants? Even more fundamentally, how do these three spiritualities respond to the evil, suffering and death that stalk our continent? For many, the need for morality is obvious, though the type of morality may be disputed. Less clear, for some, is the role of spirituality. Like the moral debate, the debate about what spirituality is, or ought to be, is a vigorous one.

Broadly speaking, spirituality can be defined as an awareness of and a desire for alignment with, ultimate reality - a consciousness that there is more to life than physical reality, and that the physical universe is interpenetrated by a spiritual Reality. Spirituality is often a search for wholeness, belonging, meaning and purpose. According to Prozesky (2006:132-133), "Spirituality is that dimension of our existence which enables us to experience ourselves as part of a greater totality ... a higher kind of reality that enfolds us, where we can feel most truly at home."

By morality I mean not only an ethical reflection on life, but the pursuit of goodness and integrity in personal life and both justice and love in social life. Below I discuss spiritual-moral paradigms, personal moral agency and the development of moral communities. The creation of personal moral character is part of an "inner" journey of healing, integrity and moral courage. The moral agency of such persons, within moral communities, involves the increased ability to

³ See also the Network of Earthkeeping Christian Communities in South

engage constructively with society, to actively promote what is good and expose what is evil in our societies and world. Part of being human is to be able to decide, live and act - also in moral terms. When people are marginalised, coerced and frightened, they are dehumanised and their human agency is limited or destroyed. In contrast, the development of moral agency focuses on the formation of moral convictions, identity, courage and actions as a necessary foundation for prophetic witness and engagement in society (Kretzschmar 2007). In short, how do we become the type of persons and communities that can engage in both prophetic witness and practical reconstruction?

3. THE TRANSFORMATION OF PERSONS AND THE MORAL RENEWAL OF SOCIETY: THE CONTRIBUTION OF CHRISTIAN, SECULAR AND AFRICAN SPIRITUALITIES

Below I discuss the contributions of these three spiritualities to two areas: *spiritual and moral paradigms*, and *personal moral character and moral agency within moral communities* against the backdrop of the challenges of social and global existence already mentioned.

3.1. Spiritual and Moral Paradigms

How can Christian, Secular and African spiritualities be defined and what are the world-views or paradigms on which the moral views propagated (and practised) by these spiritualities are founded?

3.1.1. Christian Spirituality: Spiritual and Moral Paradigms

Christians construct (and, because of changing intellectual and social challenges, continually re-construct) their spiritual and moral paradigm on the basis of the Bible, the Christian

tradition, reason, culture, the work of the Holy Spirit, and experience - both religious experience and experience of the world. This rigorous intellectual process is both widened and critiqued on the basis of the church's rich, innovative tradition of liturgy, music, art, prayer, and worship. A Christian spiritual and moral framework of meaning is further centred on a mystical relationship with a moral God who created the physical universe - which is also a spiritual and moral universe. Spirituality and morality, then, are rooted in a God-shaped universe. To use metaphor: we are "pilgrims on a journey with God, not flotsam in a flood".⁴ Human experiences of intimacy with God, in both ministry and silence, and the interplay of relationships in Christian communities, further deepen the understanding and emotions of believers. Other experiences, for example, of joy, the beauty and the groaning of creation, human suffering and compassionate service also form part of the rich tapestry of Christian spirituality (Tastard 1989, Rakoczy 2006).

Although it is true that moral life without religion is possible, within a Christian perspective it is important to ask what a spiritual journey can add to a moral life and, conversely, how a moral life can inform one's spirituality. Spirituality provides morality with a sense of the sacredness of life, and indicates a willingness to move beyond human self-fulfilment to self-transcendence. Christian spirituality lends to morality an awareness of God in mystical contemplation, and a consequent change in self and other awareness; contemplation becomes a prolegomena for personal conversion and social action. In turn, ethics helps spirituality to be more outward looking and active in the world. The spiritual content and resources for the moral life include the following biblical themes: creation; God's love and justice (e.g. Exodus and the prophets); Mary's magnificat (Lk 1:46-

⁴ Adapted from the introduction in Jeeves 2006.

56); Jesus' incarnation, life, preaching, death and resurrection; the double (or triple) commandment (Mk 12:28-34); the hope and task of salvation; and the eschatological triumph of the good (Cook 1983:50-58).

Christian spirituality involves a mystical encounter with God which is ongoing. Human beings are invited into God's presence, indeed, into union with God through contemplation.⁵ Mysticism has, over the centuries, taken many forms, and is itself a deep and complex mystery, which includes both the *via negativa* and the *via positiva* (Kourie 2005, Col 1:9-14, 24-29). It brings human beings into the deep heart of God, awakens our sense of transcendence, and evokes adoration and worship. This mystical journey is not intended for a small elite, but all are invited to participate. In this journey prayer is an essential means of entering God's presence. It is also, according to Lanzetta (2005:110), "the surest method by which the soul moves from oppression and fragmentation to freedom and wholeness". Furthermore, Hughes (2003:24) states: "Our ability to laugh, especially the ability to laugh at ourselves, is another sign of the transcendent within... Intense seriousness and lack of humour is a danger sign in any religiously inclined person. In the Roman Catholic Church, a spirit of joy and merriment has been one of the special marks of those who are to be declared saints." Hence mysticism is neither self absorbed nor escapist, as King (1998:20) points out: "For the Christian, the love of God is expressed through the love of Christ, who united human beings to him, and through him to one another."

Hebblethwaite (1997:197) advises us to avoid mysticism without love (which becomes self-centred) as well as pure activism without worship (which becomes ideology). Hughes

⁵ Traditionally, meditation is mental reflection on God and God's will for us, whereas contemplation goes beyond thought and is an activity of the heart and soul; a resting in God's loving and sublime presence.

(1996:13) makes a similar point by stating that without God's transcendence Christianity becomes divisive and partisan, without God's immanence, the church acquiesces to repressive regimes. By way of contrast, "a genuine spirituality will be one which helps us deepen our awareness of the suffering of the world around us, and empowers us to do something about it" (Tastard 1989:5). This does not mean that the Christian gospel is solely concerned with social action, as pointed out by Underhill (in Mursell 2001:328):

A shallow religiousness, the tendency to be content with a bright, ethical piety wrongly called practical Christianity, a nice brightly varnished this-worldly faith, seems to me to be one of the ruling defects of institutional religion at the present time. We are drifting towards a religion which consciously or unconsciously keeps its eye on humanity rather than on Deity, which lays all the stress on service, and hardly any stress on awe and this is the type of religion, which in practice does not wear well.

A similar point is made by Habgood (1983:99-100) who argues that even though Christian faith and morality cannot be separated, and Christians (and churches) need to exercise a moral function in society, "Christianity is not just about values. Nor is its primary purpose to secure social stability, though this may in practice emerge as one of its useful function. A faith reduced to this role, however, would have become as secularised as the society in which it is set."

Christian spirituality, thus, is the paradigm within which Christian morality is located; our human experience of God's love and forgiveness impels us to be moral in heart and life.

3.1.2. Secular Spirituality: Spiritual and Moral Paradigms

Some clarity regarding the term "secular" is important. According to Prozesky (2006:135, 136), "The secular is a concern for involvement with this present age and this present world" whereas secularism "is the belief that this pre-

sent existence of ours is all there is and that it is entirely physical in nature. As such it is incompatible with a belief in a supernatural reality of any kind...”

But what, then, is a secular spirituality? Quoting Van Ness, Botha (2006:100) points out that it is an attempt to “locate optimal human experience within a nonreligious context of existential and cosmic meaning”.⁶ This search for spirituality, Kourie (2006:77) notes, is a reaction to contemporary Western society’s experience of a “lost dimension of depth” or a “lobotomy of the soul”. Secular spirituality, however, is reluctant to speak of God, less so of an intimate relationship with God. Rather, it seeks to be open to existential and cosmic meaning, and to “life-enhancing philosophies”, based on “optimal human experience” and “the intrinsic value of the human person” (Kourie 2006:87-89).

This recognition that the secularist assumptions of much of Western society have led to a dead end is, to my mind, a welcome one. By denuding human existence of the spiritual and transcendent, the paradigm of a God-shaped universe was abandoned, the human spirit quenched and the glory and wonder of the whole cosmos reduced to a sterile materialism and rationalism.⁷ Even though I recognise that secular spirituality is filling the vacuum resulting from the frustration of many people with organised religion and deeply appreciate secular spirituality’s search for meaning within a spiritual universe, I now wish to turn to some of its weaknesses.

To begin with, whilst affirming some “spiritual” or “supernatural reality”, both Mason and Prozesky launch an attack on religion. They argue that a secular spirituality must replace outdated, formal religion. Prozesky (2006:129-130) mentions: “Religion as we usually encounter it cannot provide a shared

⁶ See Introduction, in Van Ness, PH (ed) 1996.

⁷ Brilliantly portrayed, for example, in Charles Dickens’s novel, *Hard Times*. Penguin Classics, 1969.

basis for the transforming, enriching and sustainable ethical praxis in the world, and probably never will. Furthermore, I am increasingly persuaded that religion as we know it can no longer even provide a home for spirituality".⁸ Whilst I readily agree that religion can and has been misused and distorted, such an approach does not solve the problem because its analysis is too shallow. Both Mason (2006:1, 2-3) and Prozesky (2006:130-131) present us with a caricatures of religion, describing it as a single entity, based on "unchallengeable fixed doctrines", "medieval and Victorian notions of God", and "institutionalised belief-systems". Prozesky (2006:131) furthermore argues: "Nor can anybody who has experienced religion from within be unaware that its priorities are not concern for the greatest well-being of this wounded world of ours. Its gaze is fixed on heaven, not on earth." Whilst examples of the abuse of any religion, including Christianity, can be found, equally examples that disprove this monolithic, simplistic analysis can also be found. These include the witness of well-known figures such as St Francis of Assisi, Dom Helder Camara, Mother Teresa, and Desmond Tutu as well as the lives of countless ordinary believers who have, through the centuries prayed, fed the poor, read their bibles, worshipped together, visited the sick, nurtured children, founded hospitals and universities, and challenged unjust governments (Kretzschmar 2004, Rakoczy 2006).

Secondly, within the bible itself the distinction between genuine and false religion is repeatedly made (e.g. Deut 5 and 30; Is 55-59, and Mtt 5-7, 23, 25).⁹ The problem with religion, and in this case Christianity, is not that it is outdated, but that it has departed from its own roots. For instance, a Christian faith that is cold, callous and has no commitment to social justice, is not authentically Christian.

⁸ He further argues that religions, which have reached their "sell-by date", must now be replaced with spirituality (2006:132).

⁹ Discussed in Botha 2006:95-126.

Thus to abandon religion and to embrace spirituality, is to miss the point (Thomas 2000:267-282). To embrace any spirituality without due discernment is no final solution since spirituality, like religion, the law, business and politics are all open to abuse and distortion. The essential task then is to discern between what is true and false religion, or true and false spirituality - a much more important, though difficult, task. Finally, as Kourie (2006:88) points out, the very "dogmatism and authoritarian structures" that cause people to depart from institutionalised religion may re-emerge within these new spiritual movements.

Another question which needs to be asked is whether secular spirituality can so easily throw off its secularist assumptions? Is a secular spirituality which is centred on nature, humanity and social needs, not a new, partly disguised form of secularism, despite its claims to being a spirituality? Clearly, secular spirituality seeks to embrace a spiritual understanding of the world, but upon what is this based? Mason (2006:13) seeks to replace God and all religious traditions with *la force vital*. This vital force, he states, is to be found in the human community and experience, and it unites humanity. What must be done, he avers, is for people to "appreciate the Vital Force lying within their own humanity" or rediscover "the deep reality of their own humanness" (Mason 2006:14, 21).

While I believe it is important to affirm the value and dignity of our human capacity, several criticisms of Mason's view come to mind. For example, in seeking to describe *la force vital* and to explain the content of his prophetic vision, he draws on a range of ideas from African religion, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam, including figures such as Isaiah, Jesus and the Buddha (Mason 2006: 7, 8, 9, 11 and 14) . Whilst abandoning religion on the one hand, he draws support for his secular spirituality from those very despised religions on the other, thereby reinforcing my argument above that one

needs to discern what the authentic elements of religion are, rather than simply discarding religion. It appears that secular spirituality seeks to add spirituality to a secular understanding of reality, instead of allowing a God-centred spirituality to critique both secularism and religion.

A final critique is that secular spirituality is often vague, dislocated from historical context, and separated from a specific paradigm of meaning. Hence it can easily become subject to any ideology or powerful leader. If it is true, as noted above by Hebblethwaite, that religion without mysticism becomes ideology, this eclectic spirituality is even more vulnerable to any and every passing fad. As it has little content, it has no internal critique; there being no God to send a Nathan to critique King David or a Jeremiah to challenge the false priests. Kourie (2006:88) also notes other weaknesses of secular spiritualities, namely, they are uprooted from "established wisdom traditions", they lack "community support", and they have no adequate "matrices for spiritual development". Thus, despite its sense of longing for the spiritual, secular spirituality lacks a full consciousness of the transcendent dimension of spirituality; it does not journey deep enough.

3.1.3. African Spirituality: Spiritual and Moral Paradigms

African spirituality is rooted in its conception of a Supreme Being called, for example, Qamata or Thixo (isiXhosa), Modimo (Sesotho), Mvelingqangi or Nkulukulu (isiZulu), and Nwali (Tshivenda) by different South Africans (Mdende 2006:165). Despite regional nuances, Kudadjie (1996:67) proclaims, throughout the continent, God is seen a "Great Spirit, Self-existent Creator and Ruler, the Eternal and Merciful One, the Just One, the One who knows everything, is everywhere and can do whatever he pleases. He is the Ancient One who lives in the sky, and the One who helps the helpless". There is a strong awareness not only of God, but also of other spiritual beings, including evil spirits.

African spirituality is also vibrant and holistic (Pato 2000:93-94). No particular day is regarded as a "Sabbath", instead frequent festivals and rituals celebrate rites of passage such as birth, initiation into adulthood, betrothal, marriage, and death. Hence the sacred and secular become intertwined. An African world view is one which recognises an essential unity of life: the natural world, people, animals and supernatural realities are all interrelated.

The ancestors, or the living dead, are regarded as being the mediators between God and humanity. Not all persons who are deceased are automatically regarded as ancestors, but especially those who have made a meaningful contribution to others. For traditional believers the bond between the living and the 'living dead' is a close one. The ancestors, as the protectors of African life and tradition, are also the guardians of morality: "It needs to be stressed that traditionally African people have held a strong belief that spiritual powers are deeply concerned about the moral conduct of individuals and communities alike. Furthermore, Africans have in the past believed that these powers do not hesitate to sanction morality" (Kinoti 1999:79).

However, traditional African spirituality, though still part of the consciousness of the majority of Africans, is also both incorporated into and challenged by Islam, Christianity and secularism. Even though there are many millions of traditional religious adherents and a vibrant African Christian Theology, Africa is increasingly secular, as seen in a lessening of religious adherence and increased secularisation in public life. Devotion to African traditional religion, especially among the youth, has diminished. Nürnberger (2007:206) notes: "Ancestor veneration is losing its credibility and effectiveness under such [changing social] circumstances. Where there is no communal structure left, as in child headed households, it may lose its significance altogether". This makes it increas-

ingly difficult for African religion to continue to have a powerful influence on the moral formation of Africans, particularly as it is inextricably linked to the coherence of its community structures. I return to this point below.

3.2. Personal Moral Formation and Agency within Moral Communities

3.2.1. Christian Spirituality: Personal Moral Formation and Agency within Moral Communities

Personal moral formation is located between the extremes of indoctrination and norm-less permissiveness. It aims at the inner formation of moral conscience and character and the outer exercise of moral agency. Christian spirituality encompasses an extensive intellectual and practical tradition of moral philosophy, virtue ethics, holiness, formation, and discipleship. Moral formation, in the Christian tradition, is not a matter of pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps, the believer is guided and empowered by her/his intimacy with God. According to Kourie (1996:5), mysticism, leads to the transformation of consciousness, or deep inner change “which in turn effects social transformation”. Field (1973:111), quoting Manson, writes: “The living Christ still has two hands, one to point the way, and the other held out to help us along”. From a Christian perspective, moral formation is an aspect of spiritual formation aimed at believers becoming “Christ-followers”, namely people who are growing in love for God, neighbour and creation.

One crucial element of moral formation is the formation of conscience. This formation of conscience is not a matter of legalistically imposing rules. Gula (2004:52) speaks of the three dimensions of conscience as “capacity, process and judgment”. He (2004:55-56) furthermore explains: “The proper formation of conscience uses [the] sources of moral wisdom not only to answer the practical moral question,

'What ought I to do?' but also the prior moral question 'What sort of person ought I to become?'" According to Foster (1998:173), it is necessary to root out what is wrong within one's own life: "we repudiate and crucify the self-sins within: self-promotion, self-pity, self-sufficiency, self-righteousness, self-worship. We attack the inner citadels of arrogance and independence". A narcissistic, self-engrossed life is contrary to Christian spirituality, because it has no love for God or neighbour (Mtt 22:34-40). "This is why traditional Catholic morality describes vices like sloth, avarice, envy, lust, wrath, gluttony and pride as *deadly* sins, because habits like these slowly eat away our character and turn us away from God and others" (Connors & McCormick 1998:217). What is needed, then, is both a knowledge of what is good and the will and ability to do what is good (Col 3:5-10). In short, because a genuine mystical journey results in the growth of personal consciousness, believers can enter into a process of self transcendence and increased purity of heart and life.

It must not be thought that personal moral formation occurs in isolation. Gula points out that the root meaning of the word conscience is "knowing together with" (Gula 2004:55), thus indicating the importance of the role of the community in moral formation. In Christian spirituality, there is a dual emphasis on the community and the God inspired prophetic voice, the latter becoming essential when communities, driven by ignorance, disobedience and self or group interest, depart from God's will. Even though the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are replete with examples of the importance of the prophets and the community in the deepening of the spiritual and moral life, after the Enlightenment Western theology and especially Western philosophy became more individualistic. Within the Catholic Church, this individualism was somewhat tempered by its structural unity, the religious Orders and local church life. In the Protestant tradition, the interdenominational missionary movement and the many small

groups formed at local, regional and national church levels kept the communal aspect of church life alive. Hudson (2005:99) cites a Methodist example:

Wesleyan spirituality is a spirituality that affirms the corporate nature of Christian faith and life ... Within these [societies, bands and classes] contexts of relationship, belonging and community, Methodists found themselves nourished and sustained in their discipleship. Any form of solitary or private religion was anathema to Wesley who knew that to be a Christian is to be part of a new community. Wesley knew that when we open our lives to the living presence of Christ he always brings his human family with him. Gospel life is always a life together.

Also important in counteracting individualism was the ecumenical movement which was significant, for example, in the formation of Bonhoeffer and in the moral struggle against Apartheid.

In South Africa, many churches have hugely benefited from the influence of African culture and theology which emphasise the importance of community in the life of the church. As a member of a township church, I have personally experienced the warmth, acceptance and belonging that are so important in giving believers the insight and courage to embark deeper into intimacy with God and engage in honest self-reflection.

The explosion of interest in spiritual direction and Benedictine and Ignatian spirituality, for instance, in some South African churches in recent years and the renewed stress on cell or other similar groups within churches, have been signs that some Christians are seeking to counteract the postmodern loss of community. A book written by two American Catholics, Russell Connors and Patrick McCormick, entitled, *Character, choices and community* is an example of a greater interest in the role of the Christian community in the development of personal virtue and the

struggle for social justice.¹⁰ Similarly, Gill (1991:23) notes that Christian values are intimately related to Christian communities and that the latter are rooted in worship, not simply private but also joint, public worship.

Two South African theologians, Neville Richardson (1996, 2003) and Dirkie Smit (1997) have also stressed the importance of moral character, communities and worship. Moral conscience is shaped and moral obligations are formed within those communities to which we owe allegiance. Character is formed when persons emulate the virtues valued in communities and imitate the behaviour of revered leaders. In my view, however, much more needs to be done in seminaries and local churches in the area of moral formation by lecturers, pastors and spiritual directors. Neither a *laissez faire* approach nor narrow fundamentalism will form spiritual and moral identity and, without formation, how will the active engagement and prophetic witness our continent urgently requires emerge?

3.2.2 *Secular Spirituality: Personal Moral Formation and Agency within Moral Communities*

In the articles discussed in this paper, secular spirituality concentrates on an engagement with social, economic, political, and environmental reality. Given the social and environmental crises facing our world, this is a vitally important focus. However, as it is human beings who are engaged in forming the policies and structures that govern our world, it is my view that it is equally important to focus on the transformation of human motivation, character and agency.

When writers in the field of secular spirituality do turn their attention to the interior life, it is focussed on the vital self of the person. Thus, Kourie (2006:87-88) notes that these spirituali-

¹⁰ Also see Gutteriez 1984:128-135.

ties reveal “a deep-seated desire by twenty-first century women and men for meaning and for life-enhancing philosophies that will speak to the everyday concerns that face humanity... based upon the intrinsic value of the human person”. In my view, a limitation within secular spirituality is that in its focus on humanity, its stress is on the positive elements; personal and systemic evil receive insufficient attention. Du Toit (2006:64) does mention “the human attributes of self-indulgence, indolence, lust for power, vanity and ostentation”, but he does not embark on an analysis of their causes or possible amelioration.

When Mason (2006:18) asks why this new spiritual enlightenment “does not happen”, his answer is that “we are hooked into institutions which are designed to keep humanity as it is. Political, economic, and religious bodies look backwards they are dominated by people committed to their traditions, their status and their pensions”. But this statement raises two questions, namely, what or who will give human beings the courage to give up their stultifying traditions, status and financial security and what solution can secular spirituality present in the face the evil and death which stalk our world? In my view, *la force vital* is too amorphous to contain moral content, let alone provide moral obligation. Secular spirituality, despite its claims to *la force vital* does not move much beyond secular humanism¹¹ because it remains centred, as shown in the previous section, on nature and the human spirit itself. As it struggles to move from self-fulfilment to self-transcendence, and from selfishness to love, it is even more prey than Christian spirituality to the narcissism of our age.

Another question that could be raised with respect to secular spirituality relates to the loss of meaning engendered by secular and post modern thinking itself. Because of this loss

¹¹ Which is very different to Christian humanism - see de Gruchy 2006.

of ultimate meaning, of a clear vision of the purpose of life, the self can neither be transcended nor a basis for morality be posited. This loss of meaning has had a devastating effect on those societies where it has been widely embraced. Because a moral framework of meaning is essential in the construction of ethical world views and competence, such a loss of meaning leads to demotivation. People who feel an essential unrootedness and uncertainty about their world view find it difficult to create meaning, let alone moral meaning. This leads to the moral relativism and cynicism so prevalent in the 21st century. In his book, *After Virtue*, MacIntyre (1981:6-12, 23-35) argues that rational debates do not result in commonly agreed upon solutions to ethical conundrums. Consequently, people resort to emotivism; exercising personal preferences in the absence of commonly accepted moral norms. According to Childs (1995:32), loss of meaning and emotivism further lead to cynicism in the lives of individuals, families and society; thereby further weakening commitment to personal integrity, community and service.

Thus, in the teaching of courses such as Business Ethics within a multi-disciplinary context, secular thinking can provide no basis as to why values such as justice should be adhered to in a socially dysfunctional context where self interest can be advanced without any negative legal consequences. How can secular spirituality answer the questions "Why should I be good?" or "Why should I care about others?" when asked by persons or groups centred only on short-term gain, and who recognise no accountability to a moral system or community? Furthermore, values such as justice, if unattached to the norms that frame a particular system of meaning, and unattached to moral communities, can provide little or no moral motivation and authority.

In the place of religion, Mason (2006:11) emphasises the community: "Community is the arbiter of morality and spiri-

tuality, and the measure of what is right and good, not personal entitlement to my own ambitions." It is true that as human creatures, we need the nurture, support and sustenance of community life, and it is also true that blatant individualism creates lonely, driven, and selfish persons. But will adherence to community solve humanity's problems? To begin with, which community is being spoken of here? Can secular spirituality form a new community of persons vitalised by a common vision and is this common vision strong enough to survive the challenge of conflicting group loyalties? Especially, as noted above, when the loss of transcendent moral meaning and commitment to community weaken the capacity of secular spirituality to develop a framework of moral meaning and to motivate moral behaviour.

3.2.3 African Spirituality: Personal Moral Formation and Agency within Moral Communities

The point originally made by Mbiti (1969:108-109) "I am because we are..." has often been repeated. In African thought personhood develops through relationships with others and a sense of belonging to a community. In discussing this view of personhood, Shutte (1994:30) quotes Senghor's argument that traditional African society was "based on both the community and the person and in which, because it was founded on dialogue and reciprocity, the group had priority over the individual without crushing him, but allowing him to blossom as a person".¹² Because African spirituality is communal in nature, from birth a person is part of the life of the family, clan and larger community. Hence traditionally, family and community public opinion had a strong mentoring and restraining moral function. As noted earlier, the ancestors traditionally played a particularly important moral function in this regard (Opong

¹² Original reference from Senghor, L 1996. *Negritude*, *Optima* 16:5.

2005:93-96). The moral virtues often stressed, says Mwikamba (1999:84), included "charity, honesty, hospitality, generosity, loyalty, truthfulness, solidarity, respect for elders, respect for nature and respect for God". These, he sadly comments, "are fading away".

This unity of spirituality and morality was important in the social cohesion and stability of traditional African society. It provided moral vision, norms and obligations. Taboos or prohibitions against actions such as incest, murder, adultery, and eating certain foods, were enforced and positive communal relations nurtured both in daily life and in the regular practice of many customs and rituals. Obviously, this does not mean that such societies were without crime, violence, inequalities, conflict or hatred. But it does mean that moral socialisation was a consequence of the stress on communal well being. Thus, adhering to family customs, performing kinship duties, practising hospitality, and adhering to the prescriptions of the ancestors were emphasised. Failure to do so could result in a range of misfortunes such as crop failures, sickness and death. Fear of alienating the ancestors or bringing disaster on the community were central moral motivations.

The foregoing paragraphs have noted the way in which morality was traditionally understood and practised within the life of the community. But it is necessary to go on to ask "to what extent can African religion still perform these moral functions within contemporary African society, whether practised by traditional adherents, or within the consciousness of Africans of another faith or no religious faith"? Several reasons can be adduced to suggest that the traditional world view and approaches are not adequate for this task.

The first is the fact is that we no longer live in a traditional African context. The development of moral virtues in individuals and the moral restraint of the community are de-

pendent on the proper functioning of family, clan and other community networks. To the extent that these have been eroded by forces such as urbanisation, poverty, political change, and materialism, these community mechanisms are no longer operational, and the moral force of the community is weak or, even, absent. This may partly explain why incest, traditionally a taboo, is now common in our society in the form of child sexual abuse by family members.

Secondly, to stress the positive elements of traditional morality is to provide only part of the picture. Negative elements of traditional morality, for example, the low status and oppression of women, are being challenged. African women theologians and church leaders (e.g. Shishaya 2002:231, 242; Kapuma 2002:348-369; Rakoczy 2004:19-23, 36-38, 117-123) have been far more critical of aspects of African culture than their male counterparts, who benefit from patriarchy.¹³ Inspired by Christ, African women challenge oppressive cultural assumptions that have turned women into "beasts of burden"; they challenge the immoral aspects of their religio-cultural heritage. Their insights and courage ought to inspire others to move beyond description and an automatic defence of African culture *in toto* to a nuanced discussion of how both practitioners of African religion and African Christians can contribute to resolving the moral ills detrimentally affecting our nation and continent.

Thirdly, there has been a decline of adherents of African religion which, as noted above, reduces its moral impact. Mdende (2006:156-157) argues that it is increasingly marginalised and misunderstood, pointing out that African traditional religion or African religion was not even included as a category in the 1999 census. As noted earlier, following the acceptance of either Christianity or Islam by millions of Africans, African re-

¹³ Some, like Kasenene (1994:143), have critiqued both paternalism and sexism.

ligion largely survives in the consciousness and behaviour of adherents of these faiths. Thus African theologians like Kinoti (1999:81) have argued that churches now often exercise this moral function, they are the "kinship" system of today. When one thinks of the millions of African members of Christian churches, including the membership of African Initiated Churches, such as the large Zion Christian Church, one can recognise the validity of Kinoti's argument. This, however, does not mean that deeper questions do not need to be asked concerning whether African Christian Spirituality has gone far enough along the path of nurturing personal moral formation and agency and enabling Christian communities to act as agents of moral renewal.

Even though the positive elements of the stress on community in African religion have already been readily admitted, its weaknesses ought to receive more attention. I turn now to a consideration of the weaknesses of communalism.

The first weakness is when community life degenerates into communalism or "collectivism". Despite Senghor's claim, quoted earlier, that the community allows the individual to "blossom", this is not always the case. When "dialogue and reciprocity" disappear, the strength and value of community life is distorted into communalism, which undermines, even destroys, hope and the freedom to choose and act morally.

An example of this distortion of communal life, as witnessed in Rwanda and Kenya, is that of tribalism or ethnic identity. Waruta (1991:128) has discussed this as a moral problem in contemporary Africa where "Tribalism, corruption, graft and incompetence have naturally accompanied each other". He continues (1991:128):

This awareness that corruption and graft, while denounced during the day and practised in the evening, have become a way of life demoralizes the citizenry and

creates a feeling of disenchantment with public institutions which may ultimately lead to an explosive situation.

This “demoralisation” has a negative effect on persons, reducing their moral agency and weakening the moral resolve of communities, often leading to apathy. Furthermore, citizens become “disenchanted” with public institutions, such as local government, health, education and the police services; and their frustration may erupt into violent protests.

To what extent are ethnic differences a South African problem? Prior to 1994, black South Africans largely resisted the attempts of the Nationalist government to “divide and rule” them. Since then ethnic differences have been muted by the size and apparent unity of the African National Congress. But who will deny that, in addition to competing political and economic ideologies, there is an ethnic element to the current debate about who will be the next South African President?

A second weakness of communalism is that its emphasis on the harmony of the group logically means that the individual’s insights, needs and autonomy are of lesser importance; they are subsumed to the needs of the collective:

Although African societies respect individuals and members are free to act and think independently, as long as their actions do not harm others or restrict their rights, this autonomy is often disregarded. The good of the group is much more important than personal autonomy. This militates against freedom of choice, which is important and must be respected if a person is to be responsible for his or her actions (Kasenene 1994:143).

This means that African morality is weak in the areas of the development of individual conscience and personal moral agency. How, then, will individuals be empowered to act when the community becomes immoral? Children and young adults are socialised to respect elders and to per-

petuate the customs and traditions of the group, hence there is little stress on freedom and responsibility:

Life in the traditionalist community is based on authority and submission. Members of the traditionalist hierarchy do not ever come of age; everybody is subject to superiors; individuals are allocated status and roles according to their gender, age and seniority, which they may not transgress (Nürnberg 2007:155).

This approach, remarks Nürnberg (2007:155), is very different to that of the Christian Church. In Christ, one is given freedom that requires one to act responsibly. Believers become co-workers with God in creation and are encouraged to become self-reflective, mature adults who are able to serve God freely and effectively. Personal moral maturity cannot develop unless individuals have a sense of personal guilt, personal responsibility and moral identity. Communal moral responsibility cannot develop unless there is transparency and accountability. In Christian spirituality, persons and groups are responsible to God, and to each other, and in that order.

A third flaw of communalism is its lack of internal critique; its prophetic voice and its ability to “speak truth to power”. Because African culture is primarily a “shame” rather than a “guilt” culture, that is, the moral stress is placed on a violation of social values, on fear of failure to meet the expectations of the group and fear of being ostracised from the group. In communitarian cultures, such as Japanese and African cultures, right and wrong are associated with “disgrace or loss of face before the group” and the important thing is to “maintain the relationship as part of the group” (Schubert 2007:13). Related to this is the emphasis placed on the necessity to preserve harmonious relations within the group. Hence disagreement, “breaking ranks” and the confrontation, especially of seniors and elders, are discouraged and extremely

rare. This need to maintain relationships within the group means that critique of one's superiors is actively discouraged:

It is particularly hazardous to communicate with one's superiors. Here one's whole attitude must be one of awe and respect. At higher levels of authority, one cannot address a superior directly: one has to go through an intermediary, sometimes a whole chain of intermediaries... One is not supposed to contradict a superior or express one's own opinion unless required to do so (Nürnberg 2007:38).

This is evidenced in the workplace, for example, where employees will privately express disagreement, even serious disapproval of their leaders, but in a public meeting they will remain silent. Where individuals do "stick their necks out" they suffer marginalisation and ostracisation from the group. This, in a culture where one's identity is based on belonging, is often perceived as a fate worse than death. Thus, the development of the conscience, prudence, moral character, independent moral decision-making, moral courage and what one might call a "prophetic voice or witness" within the group is not encouraged.

A fourth weakness of communalism is that it is ineffective in dealing with the abuse of power. Not only are ordinary people reluctant to critique poor leadership, other leaders also often fail to do so. The result is that leaders accused, or even proven, to be corrupt, incompetent, dictatorial, and brutal all too often remain in power. In this regard the citizens of our continent can cite a plethora of examples! At the recent Southern African Development Community meeting (21 August 2007), despite pronouncements about good governance and NEPAD's African Peer Review mechanisms, the Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe "received the loudest applause at the summit, [and] came under no scrutiny by fellow SADC leaders, delegates said".¹⁴ If the maintenance

¹⁴ NEPAD is the New Economic Partnership for African Development.

of relationships and the avoidance of shaming a person are the overriding concerns, the essential moral link between action and consequence is lost. If there are no consequences for immoral actions, the rule of law begins to collapse and is replaced with personal preference and patronage. In short, moral responsibility or accountability are neither admitted nor enforced. Consequently, persons who are found to have defrauded a government department, for example, are often moved to another section rather than dismissed. Even within the African church, with some notable exceptions, the prophetic voice in post independent African countries is muted, especially given the huge numbers of members and leaders in these churches.¹⁵

A fifth weakness is a tendency to 'centrist' styles of leadership and an unwillingness to brook criticism. Unconditional loyalty and obedience are valued above integrity, competent service, rigorous dialogue, and moral courage. Clarity regarding moral norms and correct procedures disappears and is replaced by confusion and uncertainty. Transparency is replaced by manipulation and obfuscation. At the time of writing, President Thabo Mbeki is being heavily criticised for his dismissal of the Deputy Health Minister Nonzizwe Madlala-Routledge interestingly citing, amongst other things, her "inability to work as part of a collective..." and his continual support for the much criticised Health Minister Manto Tsabalala-Msimang.¹⁶

http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set_id=1&click_id=84&art_id=nw20070821110440398C530601 [Accessed 23 August 07].

¹⁵ Church leaders such as Desmond Tutu (South Africa), David Gitari (Kenya) and Pius Ncube (Zimbabwe) being notable exceptions. The South African Council of Churches has continued to criticise "repression" and "human rights violations" and to "call for the immediate action to halt the persecution of Zimbabweans at home and abroad", <http://www.sacc.org.za/news07/actinzim.html> [Accessed 24 August 2007].

¹⁶ (e.g. *Sunday Times* 12 August 2007, 1, 4, 5 & 19 August 2007, 1; *Pretoria News*, 24 August, 2007, 1 and the hard hitting Zaprio cartoons published in the Mail and Guardian, www.mg.co.za/zaprio [Accessed 24 August 2007].

What must become central to African spirituality, then, is not simply the **theory** of *ubuntu*, but the **ethics** of *ubuntu*. Thus, African Christianity needs to not only stress the many positive elements of its African heritage, but also recognise and resist its weaknesses.

4. CONCLUSION

I have argued in this paper that, if Christian spirituality goes beyond lip-service, it can do better than secular and traditional African spirituality in terms of the moral formation of persons and communities. But it needs to be itself renewed and to learn from other spiritualities.

What can a renewed Christian spirituality learn from secular spirituality? It can learn to resist a narrow pietism and further apply its energies to the social and environmental challenges facing our globe. It also needs to openly admit its failures and confess that many have been driven away from the Gospel by the failure of Christians to live according to their own precepts.

Based on the arguments provided above, it can also be asked whether those who promote a secular spirituality have given sufficient attention to discerning the features of both false religion and spirituality. Furthermore, to what extent has secular spirituality moved away from the secularist paradigm that has led to the loss of meaning, emotivism and moral cynicism of many contemporary societies? In short, has it travelled far enough in its search for meaning and the transcendent?

Christian spirituality has already learnt a great deal from the holism of African spirituality, although certain churches could further imbibe the warmth and celebration of life that is inherent in African spirituality. Contrary to the individualism of both modernism and post modernism, Christians need to learn more about the necessity of moral account-

ability to the community and that moral formation takes place in communities. The vibrancy, sense of belonging, moral socialisation, and community stability of traditional African spirituality and morality need to be valued. But, African religion must also take cognisance of the problems that have resulted because moral taboos and obligations are no longer sufficiently recognised or enforced, given social change and a lack of adherence to a traditional moral paradigm, including conformity to the wishes of the ancestors or the community.

Further, African Christian spirituality must beware when communal life degenerates into communalism or collectivism. Where dialogue and reciprocity disappear along with a focus on primary allegiance to God, the formation of personal moral identity and moral accountability, the future of a genuine African Christian spirituality is threatened. Alarm bells need to ring when personal moral choice and responsibility are stultified by fear and submission to a collective, thereby weakening the moral agency of individuals and the moral resolve of communities. Apathy or anger result when either an ethnic group or person receives unwarranted, privileged treatment, hence the importance of nurturing a Christian prophetic voice. Otherwise, the unwillingness of persons, and especially leaders, to confront evil or to "speak truth to power", will mean that evil will flourish, leading to the suffering of people and creation. Where privilege replaces moral principle, and protection replaces accountability, the moral foundations of our society shake.

Both Western and African societies are immersed in a moral crisis. Moral indifference or cynicism, murder, poverty, sexual abuse, greed, disease, and oppression are daily experiences. In contexts such as these guilt needs to be confessed by individuals and personal responsibility for the state of their lives and the world admitted. Equally,

communities need to confess that their fear, sloth, selfishness, avoidance, and violence are root causes of the moral crisis we face. The role of the churches in this regard is to encourage and facilitate a deeper spiritual life and the moral formation of individuals and communities.

If, by God's grace and our obedience, the moral accountability of individuals and groups, character, conscience, courage and agency and prophetic witness are increasing, our world can be transformed. A renewed Christian spirituality can result in a deepened mystical experience, personal moral growth and agency, and the development of moral communities that can also better engage with social and global concerns. We may even learn to drive better!

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