

The empire – in the context of South Africa

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Abstract

My premise is that apartheid created the “empire” system in South Africa, with its resulting consumerist culture; the western/European style of living and presentation has become the norm for a majority of South Africans. What part did Christianity play in this? The Bible has been used to justify so many injustices, especially slavery. Post-apartheid, is South Africa still under the empire system – a social and economic dominance of a few over the masses? Using articles as well as personal observation, I will try to show that in post-apartheid South Africa the empire system still exists.

Introduction

There is always a moral and ethical call to fight injustice, whether it is inflicted by race, colour, economics or class. Empire is the political subject that effectively regulates these global exchanges, the sovereign power that governs the world (Hardt & Negri 2001). There is also the historical fact that empires do fall as the Roman and British empires fell. The subject matter of this article is “empire” and its concepts, with special reference to the nation of South Africa.

History dictates that we humans learn from our mistakes; however, all the historical empires had their beginnings, their progress and their fall. These empires seem to make the same mistakes over and over again, with a few having the economic and social dominance over the rest of the population. The decline of the empire seems to start when the masses refuse to accept their situation. Have we as Africans learnt anything from historical events pertaining to empire? Does this political system of empire exist in South Africa today?

The definition of empire suitable for the discussion as it pertains to South Africa is: when the economic power of a nation is vested in the hands of a few, the meaning of empire shifts, thus becoming an economic and social issue (Neufeldt & Guralnik 1988).

Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae, December 2011, 37 – Supplement, 195-204

In a speech in November 2004 made to a group of mothers concerned about the future of their children, Hilfiker discussed the issues of American empire: he started off with a prophetic statement made by Walter Brueggemann several years ago, which is as follows:

In a time of scarce resources:

Something happens to a society when its wealth is reckoned in commodities, and it is stashed away for some to have and some not to have. Some can pay and some can't.

Something happens to a society when its 'know how' becomes sophisticated and mystifying and technical, and it is possessed by some and not possessed by others. Some know and some don't.

Something happens to a society when a sense of solidarity among persons yields to a kind of individuality, when a sense of belonging with each other is diminished and a sense of being apart from each other takes its place. Some belong and some don't.

Whatever it is that happens is happening to us. And there is the new, powerful emergence of those who can pay and those who know and those who belong. Very often the paying ones and the knowing ones and the belonging ones are the same ones — or at least they talk only with one another and trust one another. They are content to be left to their own resources, which are ample. And so the others — the ones who can't pay and don't know and don't belong — are left to their own resourcelessness (November 2004, p1)

It seems that the discourses of the empire have not changed when we read the above quotation from Walter Brueggemann about the empire.

When one reads about the history of empires, one comes away with this pattern: empires rise to power, and they fall. This rise to power is always good for a small number of people who are wealthy. This group, who may be considered the "upper class", continues to have influence and makes sure they stay in power. They maintain an economic stranglehold on the poor. In the empire, there is the political subject that effectively regulates the global exchanges, the sovereign power that governs the world. Empire not only manages a territory and a population but also creates the very world it inhabits. It not only regulates human interactions but also seeks directly to rule over human nature. The passage to empire and its process of globalisation offer new possibilities to the forces of liberation (Hardt & Negri 2001).

There seems to be the sentiment that Christianity has taken away the fibre of African society. I observed at the Apartheid Museum that there was a picture of an African man lying on a bench with an open Bible covering his face. The caption on this picture read:

Piet falls asleep with the Bible on his face.
Africans say when the Europeans came, they had the Bible and we had the land. Now we have the Bible and they have the land.

That is what the Bible has done not only to South Africa, but all of Africa. As FW de Klerk stated in October 1990: “The ‘New South Africa’ would recognise the reality of the need for people and communities to remain themselves and be able to preserve the values that are precious to them so that the Zulus, the Xhosas, the Sothos and the whites can feel secure in their distinctiveness” (Sparks 1994:128). To De Klerk, this meant that rather than apartheid fading away gradually, apartheid racial categories were to be secured through state sanction.

According to Desai and Vahed (2010), the preamble to the post-apartheid constitution of 1996 bequeathed the country “to all who live in it”, while recognising the multicultural/racial/ethnic nature of the society. Whereas apartheid exploited diversity to separate and dominate, the new ANC government provided space for South Africans to recreate themselves within particular cultural, racial and ethnic milieus, and to be brought together as equals in celebration of unity through diversity in a non-racial state. While not bound by any precise definition, non-racialism was inscribed as a founding value in the constitution (Eastern Mosaic 2010:1-2).

But is South Africa facing a new kind of stranglehold from the democratically-voted ANC party? Have the white ruling class of the apartheid system given way to a black ruling class of the post-apartheid era, thus still keeping the system of “empire” (economic enrichment) in the hands of the few in place?

During apartheid, in the health field, the African population supposedly grew and their life expectancy which used to be only 38 years in 1948 grew to be 64 years – on a par with Europe and better than the other African countries. South African blacks felt they were better than Africans in the other African countries (Tshabalala 2001). Post-apartheid, it seems that several health issues are reaching a crisis situation. Some, like the journalist Vusile Tshabalala, attribute the decline in health to the fact that during the apartheid regime, the African population grew and health care was good because South Africans had the benefit of the boers’ medical knowledge and their excellent agricultural skills. During apartheid, the SANTA executives were seen to be extremely frugal with government

funding; many thousands of patients were cured annually and many doctors and nurses volunteered their services free of charge. Now, however, South African hospitals are becoming places for dying instead of healing because public funds are being looted by the ANC hierarchy and the police seem helpless to stop it (August 2001).

In an article about post-apartheid fiction by Rachel Donadio, she tells a story about South Africa after apartheid and makes the statement that racism still exists in South Africa, although now it is no longer institutionalised or overt like before. Today, the country is contending with the complications of freedom. A racial divide once enforced by law has become an economic divide that falls along racial lines. Everyone is profoundly uncertain of his place. Four out of five South Africans are black, one in four is unemployed and at least one in nine HIV positive. Violent crime is rampant, with rape rates among the highest on the globe. South Africa today is a grand experiment in multicultural democracy where leadership is black, money largely white and the line between empowerment and exploitation ever shifting (December 2006).

What is to happen when farmers who are given lands cannot farm because they have not been given the equipment to farm the land? They have lost rights to the land of their forefathers to people who now believe they also own the land.

Before investigating the constitution of empire in juridical terms, we must analyse in some detail the constitutional processes that come to define the central juridical categories, and in particular give careful attention to the long process of transition from the sovereign rights of nation-states to the first postmodern global figures of imperial rights. It is widely recognised that the notion of international order that European modernity continually proposes and re-proposes, at least since the peace of Westphalia, is now in crisis. It has in fact always been in crisis and this crisis has been one of the mottos that have continuously pushed toward empire (Hardt & Negri 2001:4).

In any case, there can be no doubt that, by the time of the First World War and the birth of the League of Nations, a notion of international order along with its crisis has been definitively established. The birth of the United Nations after the Second World War merely re-initiated, consolidated and expanded this developing international juridical order that was first European but progressively became completely global. The United Nations in effect can be regarded as the culmination of this entire constitutive process, a culmination that both reveals the limitations of the notion of international order and points beyond it towards a new notion of global order (Hardt & Negri 2001:4). The birth of the United Nations was intended, not to assist the duntrodden, but to ensure that the power that had been gained would remain in the hands of the same group who took

that power – controlling power. Modernity is not a phenomenon of Europe as an independent system but of Europe as a centre (Hardt & Negri 2001:4).

There is a lot of work to be done, and it has to start with society and with each other. There is the need to understand and accept that society has to chart its own course, but how can society do it when “they have the Bible and the foreigners have the land”? Society needs to embark on an extensive re-evaluation of the current structure and to revive the culture which their ancestors established for the community. By accepting the missionaries’ interpretation of the Bible, the society has abandoned its means of economic survival to Europeans, and the Europeans – having seen the wealth of that country – refuse to leave it until all its resources are depleted. The belief that God will provide welcomes the other whose concern is the wealth of the society.

According to Professor Kofi Asare Opoku, this praxis of self-hatred is part of a larger problem that faces people who have experienced oppression and who tend to internalise their subjugation and believe the preconceptions and stereotypes held about them by those who oppress them. People who were convinced that they were in possession of the only truth, utterly confident that they were on a divinely-appointed mission, and armed to the hilt with deep and profound ignorance, erroneous conceit and thundering contempt, set out to blow out the African lantern by converting people, without knowing what they were converting them from (Opoku 1978:2).

Africa was, in the words of HM Stanley, “a place governed by insensible fetish” and the predominant expectation was that this crass and abominable fetishism, utterly devoid of any divine self-disclosure, was destined to become extinct and that the only possible option for Africans, if they were to become religious, was to choose between Christianity and Islam. Edwin Smith put it this way: “African paganism is doomed to decay and extinction. If they are to remain religious the only possible alternative open to the Africans is to choose between Islam and Christianity, both of which offer them some knowledge of God.” Knowledge of God was thus assumed to be exclusive to the two religions, and was deemed to be lamentably absent from the African heritage (Opoku 1978:2).

Because Africans gave their lands freely to the missionaries/guests to their land to help them, the missionaries in turn acquired these lands and enslaved the inhabitants – the Africans. A well-known theologian, Dr Mercy Oduyoye, stated this problem in her speech at the Unisa conference (October, 2011): are Africans following Jesus’ words of loving our neighbours as ourselves or are Africans loving their neighbours better or more than they love themselves? Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesars; and unto God the things that are God’s – Matthew 22:21. Have we taken Jesus’

word too literally? And in rendering to Caesar things that belong to Caesar and to God things that are God's, have we ended up compromising our cultural integrity? There is a growing sense that the course of empire is shifting toward the Asian and more specifically, the Chinese – “the other”.

In conclusion, it seems that the system of empire still exists in South Africa today. The ruling class or upper class may have changed hands somewhat, because there still remains the empire system where, as Brueggemann stated, “Whatever it is that happens is happening to us. And there is the new, powerful emergence of those who can pay and those who know and those who belong. Very often the paying ones and the knowing ones and the belonging ones are the same ones—or at least they talk only with one another and trust one another. They are content to be left to their own resources, which are ample. And so the others – the ones who can't pay and don't know and don't belong – are left to their own resourcelessness.”

In one article, it claims that post-apartheid South Africa shows a blossoming black middle class filling the boardrooms and back offices of a diverse economy that is the engine and envy of the African continent; yet there is a deep malaise, a creeping fear that the next decade and a half will not be as good as the first was. In low-income black townships, residents complain that while the leaders of the liberation struggle are getting rich, running the new South Africa, they are still spinning their wheels in the old one – a place of deprivation where electricity, clean water, affordable homes and decent schools remain out of reach (Bengali April 2009:1)

Among the still-prosperous white minority, worries about crime and corruption are driving many young educated people overseas, leaving the country short of doctors, engineers and other skilled professionals. “People thought this was not Africa”, said Simanga Khumalo, a professor of religion who grew up in the black township of Soweto in the 1970s when it was a cauldron of anti-apartheid resistance. “People looked at our economy and businesses and we look like an advanced society. But this is Africa. We are no different. Our leaders also love power” (Bengali April 2009:1).

It seems that in many ways class barriers have replaced the old racial divisions. Despite robust economic growth under Mbeki, unemployment has risen to 38 percent from 32 percent in 1994. The black diamonds – the fast growing middle class – comprises 6 percent of the country but more than a quarter of its buying power. Grants and government loans have helped many to launch new businesses, while affirmative action has dramatically diversified once lily-white corporate ranks. However, some South African blacks state with Joyce Mlambo: “Initially I was really happy, we were all happy but nothing is happening here and I feel betrayed. For someone at the bottom of the ladder ... things haven't changed much from the apartheid years” (Bengali April 2009:1).

What were the conditions of blacks during the apartheid era? What has happened since the post-apartheid period? In 1990, 42 percent of the population lived in poverty. In 1991, South Africa had a Gini co-efficient, which measures the extent of income inequality, of 0.68: the highest in a group of 36 developing countries. That same year the poorest 40 percent of households earned 4 percent of national income, while the richest 10 percent received more than half. In 1995, unemployment among Africans was calculated to be 37 percent – almost certainly an underestimate (Weekly Mail & Guardian March 1994:1).

The appalling economic plight of the black majority was summed up recently by the Socialist Workers Organization of South Africa:

- Only one out of five African households has running water BUT every white household has running water.
- One quarter of all African households get less than R300 a month. Two thirds get less than the breadline – R900 a month. BUT two thirds of white households get more than R2000 a month.
- Two thirds of African children and half of coloured children live in overcrowded houses BUT only 1 out of 100 white children live in overcrowded conditions.
- Less than half of African kids live in a proper brick house. The rest live in shacks or huts BUT most white children live in a brick house (Socialist Worker, October 1995:1).

Leaving in place such poverty and inequality would help to perpetuate the desperation and misery that have produced levels of violence, both political and criminal, that make South Africa one of the most dangerous societies in the world. It would also, over time, undermine the political achievements of the ANC-led mass movement. To see whether such a grim outcome is inevitable we need, in the first instance, to consider the process that brought about the triumph of April 1994 in the first place (Socialist Worker 1995:1).

In post-apartheid South Africa today, the economic, social and political situation does not seem to be much better than it was before. According to an article in *The Economist* written by RW Johnson, a South Africa-born former adherent of the radical left who taught politics at Oxford for some 20 years before returning to his country to head a liberal think-tank, the Helen Suzman Foundation, “this has merely enabled an ANC-connected elite to enrich itself fabulously in the name of affirmative action officially meant to tip more of the economy into black hands”. He lists in remorseless detail a web of ties between ANC leaders and their families and the new rich and powerful. In Mr Johnson’s eyes, the ANC's crude efforts to replace

whites with its black supporters across the board has harmed the health service, served to “debase the entire educational system” and generally helped the black masses not a whit (Johnson 2009:1).

It was an improbable sight even 10 years ago in [South Africa](#): white people in shacks – poor, desperate and surviving on handouts. But with the fall of apartheid and the transformation of the job market in favour of the majority black population, increasing numbers of white people are without work and living below the poverty line. Recent statistics from the [Bureau for Market Research](#) show that there are 650 000 whites aged 16 or over without work, with estimates saying that this total is growing by 15 percent a year. Trade unionist [Dirk Hermann](#) says the increase in white poverty is due to the changing economic landscape, the collapse of government support structures once offered to whites, and the transfer of public jobs to blacks under positive discrimination. Under apartheid many low-skilled and blue-collar jobs were reserved for whites (Evans 2010:1).

The significance of this point is that the paradigm shift of many whites joining the ranks of the black poor proves that the establishment of empire is mainly about economic dominance. The maintenance of power is more about economic power than racial discrimination.

In post-apartheid South Africa, the economy, including 87 percent of the productive farmland, continues to be in the hands of whites. The recent brutal murder of the Afrikaner Resistance Movement (AWB) creator Eugene Terreblanche might be the spark that lights the fuse, but the powder keg representing the unmet needs of black South Africans has been simmering for some time. Then there is the land question, and all of the ink being abused in order to discuss white fears of a black takeover of the economy. This question prompted then President Mandela to say in 1997 that:

Their task is to spread messages about an impending economic collapse, escalating corruption in the public service, rampant and uncontrollable crime, a massive loss of skills through white emigration and mass demoralisation among the people ... because they are white and therefore threatened by the ANC and its policies which favour black people (Davey 2010:1).

The irony is that the tides seem to have turned even though the economic power still rests with the whites; more whites are beginning to know what it feels like to be discriminated against and it is not a good feeling because there is a certain amount of helplessness that comes with that social position that does not sit well.

Post-apartheid South Africa is pregnant with the anticipation of an eruption of some kind. As in a classic state of the empire, there is a clear distinction of the haves and the have-nots. The masses do not seem to be

happy about their situation, and historically this has led to some kind of agitation. This is what we have to be careful about: post-apartheid South Africa is a volcano ready to erupt. Is there anything that can be done to stop this? It will take some time for the blacks to shake off the remnants of apartheid and the now-poor whites to get used to their poverty – will the two ever see eye to eye? I believe when and if they do, there will be a social eruption that will topple those with economic power – that is the way of the decline of the empire that is embodied in South Africa.

Cry, the beloved country, by Kevin Bloom, discusses the alarming murder rate, the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots, the rampant corruption and the belief in high places that the rule of law can be applied selectively, all of which make South Africa a place of extremes. At the same time, there is a vibrant cultural life, a strong business sector, good infrastructure, a wealth of natural resources and a thriving tourist industry. But the most worrying issue for whites is whether they can find a way of accommodating themselves in the new South Africa.

What have the people of South Africa been exposed to? Where does the church come in? We have to remember what Piet said on the walls of the Apartheid Museum – there is a lack of trust in the church. Archbishop Desmond Tutu was an ardent critic of apartheid but most black South Africans did not see what he did beyond being outspoken. How has the church stepped out to assist with the poor and the marginalised, the people at the lowest rungs of the ladder, to let them know that, as Jesus said, the church is always open and available to assist this class of people in society?

On a visit to South Africa in October, it was easy to look around in Pretoria to see blacks and whites mingling in restaurants and shopping malls; however, it was plain to see that the western/European style of living and presentation has become the norm. Lost are the indigenous way of life, gone is the pride their ancestors instilled in them. Empire still exists. In going to restaurants, you find that these establishments are owned by whites but the workers are black. I was hard pressed to see any South African blacks in African clothes. Most of the women I saw either had weaves in their hair or were wearing wigs. The society it seems has totally incorporated the Western style.

They seem to be dealing with imposed political systems that is not their own, and dealing with bureaucracies and hierarchical systems that their society does not understand. These dominant systems do not help the community but rather enslave them. When will the society come to the realisation that without economic freedom, all other freedoms are an illusion? Empire still exists but the ruling forces look strangely familiar. More work is needed to educate the masses to gain the understanding or appreciation that you cannot fly on borrowed wings.

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