

**The ANC's deployment of religion in nation building:
from Thabo Mbeki, to "The RDP of the Soul", to Jacob Zuma**

Gerald West

Ujamaa Centre, School of Religion and Theology,
University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

Introduction

"You will see, Jacob Zuma knows the Bible much better than Thabo Mbeki". This was said to me as I sat and waited for my car in a car-wash in central Pietermaritzburg several months before the Polekwanne 52nd National Conference of the African National Congress in December 2007. The person who spoke to me, who was also waiting for his car, had noticed me working on a paper while I waited. Making conversation with me, he asked whether I was preparing for a speech. No, I said, I was actually correcting a paper I had written. I introduced myself, explaining that I lectured in Biblical Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. He introduced himself as someone who also had an interest in theological issues, regularly writing booklets for his church, even though his tertiary training was in history and his work was in the department of education of the provincial government. When he asked me what my paper was about I said that I was writing a paper on Thabo Mbeki's use of the Bible in the public realm. I explained that as a biblical scholar I had been intrigued to note that Thabo Mbeki had begun to use the Bible more and more in his public speeches, culminating in his speech at the 4th Annual Nelson Mandela Lecture in July 2006. My conversation partner became even more animated at this, stating that Mbeki was not really interested in the Bible, and besides, "You will see, Jacob Zuma knows the Bible much better than Thabo Mbeki." Before I could pursue this comment, his car was completed and we separated. But his comment has led me to this essay.

The essay begins with an analysis of Thabo Mbeki's appropriation of the Bible in some of his major speeches, arguing that during his period as deputy president and president of South Africa Mbeki shifts his attitude to the Bible, culminating in his substantive use of the Bible as a resource to direct the nation to the need for an "RDP of the soul". The second section of the essay shows how Mbeki's call for an RDP of the soul is taken up by the African National Congress in its Policy Discussion Document, "The RDP of the Soul", and goes on to analyse how this document envisages the role of religion in the public realm in South Africa after its 52nd National Conference in late 2007. Following the dramatic shift in power that took place at this National Conference

in Polekwane, when Thabo Mbeki sought a third term as ANC president but was roundly rejected in favour of Jacob Zuma, the third and final section of the essay examines to what extent “The RDP of the Soul” Policy Discussion Document has been taken up, concluding that a quite different form of religion has made its way into South Africa’s public life.

Mbeki’s deployment of religion

Having observed the gradual withdrawal of Christianity and religion in general from the public realm after 1994, and Nelson Mandela’s careful refusal to use religion in the public domain and his even more careful refusal to refer to a specific religious tradition, I was surprised and intrigued by an extract of an article by president Thabo Mbeki which was published in the *Mail & Guardian* in June 2003, in which Mbeki referred directly to the Bible. The extract was taken from the May 30 edition of *ANC Today* (Mbeki 2003). Mbeki begins his online letter by referring to the Bible: “In the Biblical Gospel according to St Matthew, it is said that Jesus Christ saw Simon Peter and his brother Andrew fishing in the Sea of Galilee. And he said to them: ‘Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men’ [Matthew 4:19].” In the next line he goes on to interpret this biblical passage:

Perhaps taking a cue from this, some in our country have appointed themselves as ‘fishers of corrupt men’. Our governance system is the sea in which they have chosen to exercise their craft. From everything they say, it is clear that they know it as a matter of fact that they are bound to return from their fishing expeditions with huge catches of corrupt men (and women) (Mbeki 2003:1).

The rest of his letter develops this theme, sustaining the ‘fishing’ metaphor throughout. The thrust of Mbeki’s letter is clear. He is deeply distressed by those in our country who assume the government is corrupt simply because it is a predominantly (black) African government. He rejects their “highly offensive and deeply entrenched stereotype of Africans” as they seek “to portray Africans as a people that are corrupt, given to telling lies, prone to theft and self-enrichment by immoral means, a people that are otherwise contemptible in the eyes of the ‘civilized’” (Mbeki 2003:4). The self-appointed task of these detractors, Mbeki seems to be saying, is to fish for corruption when there is none (or very little). However, while Mbeki’s basic argument is clear, his use of Matthew 4:19 is somewhat obscure. He may be using the Matthew text to set up a contrast between the legitimate appoint-

ment by Jesus of disciples who will go out and do good to men and women – Mbeki is carefully inclusive in his language – and the illegitimate self-appointing of those who “have appointed themselves” to the task of rooting out imagined corruption. Both sets of people are on a mission, Mbeki may be saying, one legitimate and one not. Or, as has been suggested to me by a colleague, Tinyiko Maluleke, Mbeki may be using the Matthew text more negatively, inferring by his use of this passage that just as religious people are easily taken in by religious propaganda, so too there are those South Africans who are easily taken in by anti-African stereotypes. Or, finally Mbeki may simply be using an image from the Bible that has become separated from and independent of its textual context, in which case there may be little or no connection between Mbeki’s use of the image and Matthew’s.

I was now hooked! What was our missionary schooled, but somewhat secular and urbane president doing quoting from and engaging with the Bible? What I discovered as I worked through Mbeki’s public speeches was a religious shift (West 2009b, forthcoming). In his earlier public speeches, whether as deputy president or in the early years of his presidency, Mbeki was either instrumentalist or tentative in his appropriation of the Bible. However, 2006 brought about a substantial shift. In his “State of the Nation Address” in February 2006 Mbeki uses a quotation from the biblical book of Isaiah to frame his address. He quotes the biblical text in English, using the New King James Version (his favoured translation), and then follows immediately by quoting the text again, this time from the isiXhosa translation of the Bible. The focus of this speech is his reflection on the state of the nation within the “historic challenge” set before the nation by Nelson Mandela at “the very first Annual Regular Opening of our Democratic Parliament, on 24 May 1994”. The words of Mandela’s challenge, quoted by Mbeki, form a regular refrain throughout the speech; but so do the words of Isaiah 55:12-13.

Mbeki’s speech at the 4th Annual Nelson Mandela Lecture a few months later, in July 2006, went even further. In this case there is sustained engagement with the Bible. So much so that he felt the need to point out in the oral presentation of the lecture (though it is not included in the published version) that his extensive reference to the Bible did not mean that he was “about to become a priest” (to which this audience responded with laughter) (Mbeki 2006a, 2006b). Remarkably, given the Africanist Mbeki is, in this speech he grants the Bible precedence over the African notion of ‘ubuntu’, using the book of Proverbs to interpret it (Mbeki 2006a:1-2):

The Book of Proverbs in the Holy Bible contains some injunctions that capture a number of elements of what I believe constitute important features of the Spirit of Ubuntu, which we should strive to implant in the very bosom of the new South Africa that is being born, the food of the soul that would inspire all our people to say that they are proud to be South African!

The Proverbs say [Proverbs 3:27-31]: Withhold not good from them to whom it is due, when it is in the power of thine hand to do it. (28) Say not unto thy neighbour, Go, and come again, and tomorrow I will give; when thou hast it by thee. (29) Devise not evil against thy neighbour, seeing he dwelleth securely by thee. (30) Strive not with a man without cause, if he have done thee no harm. (31) Envy thou not the oppressor, and choose none of his ways (Mbeki 2006a:1-2).¹

Having quoted the text, he then goes on to appropriate it, making the point that “[t]he Book of Proverbs assumes that as human beings, we have the human capacity to do as it says, not to withhold the good from them to whom it is due, when it is in the power of our hand to do it” (Mbeki 2006a:2). Adopting an African-American type preaching cadence, Mbeki elaborates on what Proverbs might be understood to assume of us in our current context: “It assumes we can be encouraged not to devise evil against our neighbours ...”, “It assumes that ... we should not declare war against anybody without cause ...”, and “It urges that in our actions, we should not seek to emulate the demeanour of our oppressors, nor adopt their evil practices” (Mbeki 2006a:2).

In the remainder of his speech Mbeki will return to Proverbs 3; he will also engage with Proverbs 6:6-11, as well as Genesis 3:19, John 1:1, and Matthew 4:4/Luke 4:4. Indeed, so prolific has been his use of the Bible that he feels the need to explain to his audience why he has been so persistent and insistent “on the Christian Holy Scriptures” (Mbeki 2006a:12). “Let me explain,” says Mbeki (2006a:12).² The crux of his explanation is that, in the context of our country’s daily economic deliberations, the debate itself “must tell us that human life is about more than the economy and therefore material considerations”. This is important, Mbeki continues, because

¹ I have inserted verse numbers for ease of reference; Mbeki quotes from the King James Version (which clearly appeals to his ‘classical’ ear), but does not include the chapter and verse references.

² As indicated above, it is at this point that Mbeki makes an aside, saying, “Do not worry, I am not about to become a priest” (Mbeki 2006b).

I believe that as a nation we must make a special effort to understand and act on this because of what I have said already, that personal pursuit of material gain, as the beginning and end of life's purpose, is already beginning to corrode our social and national cohesion (Mbeki 2006a:12).

What this means, Mbeki goes on to argue, is "that when we talk of a better life for all, within the context of a shared sense of national unity and national reconciliation, we must look beyond the undoubtedly correct economic objectives our nation has set itself" (Mbeki 2006a:12). What our country needs, therefore, says Mbeki, is what Nelson Mandela called an 'RDP of the soul' (Mbeki 2006a:3). And, Mbeki implies, it is the Bible which provides the necessary spiritual trajectory for an RDP of the soul.

Mbeki admits that the RDP "was eminently about changing the material conditions of the lives of our people" and that "it made no reference to matters of the soul, except indirectly" (Mbeki 2006a:3). He then assures his audience, quoting extracts from the original Reconstruction and Development Programme document, that its concerns "were and remain critically important and eminently correct objectives that we must continue to pursue" (Mbeki 2006a:3). However, he goes on deftly to argue that the RDP's intention to improve the human condition implies a spiritual dimension. Human fulfilment, he says, consists of more than the access to "modern and effective services" promised by the RDP. "As distinct from other species of the animal world, human beings also have spiritual needs"; thus, he continues, "all of us and not merely the religious leaders speak of the intangible element that is immanent in all human beings – the soul!" What is more, he adds, "all human societies also have a soul!" (Mbeki 2006a:4).

As he develops his argument for an RDP of the soul, Mbeki returns again to Proverbs, this time to Proverbs 6:6. The literary context in which he quotes the latter is worth indicating at some length:

With some trepidation, advisedly assuming that there is the allotted proportion of hardened cynics present here this evening, I will nevertheless make bold to quote an ancient text which reads, in Old English:

[Proverbs 6:6-11] Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise: (7) Which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, (8) Provideth her meat

in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest. (9) How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? When wilt thou arise out of thy sleep? (10) Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep: (11) So shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man.

I know that, given the level of education of our audience this evening, the overwhelming majority among us will know that I have extracted the passages I have quoted from the Book of Proverbs contained in the St James's edition of the Holy Bible.

It may be that the scepticism of our age has dulled our collective and individual sensitivity to the messages of this Book of Faith and all the messages that it seeks to convey to us.

In this regard, I know that I have not served the purposes of this Book well, by exploiting the possibility it provides to say to you and everybody else who might be listening, "Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways and be wise" (Mbeki 2006a:10).

This is a truly remarkable shift from Mbeki's earlier back-handed appropriations of the Bible. He not only engages with the text in detail, he distances himself from the educated, elitist, liberal, and sceptical attitudes that may dismiss his references to the Bible. He even deprecates his own grasp of the text. Though there is some coyness, embarrassment and humour here, as is evident in the oral presentation, Mbeki is also deeply serious.

He realises that citing "from the Book of Proverbs will, at best, evoke literary interest and at worst a minor theological controversy", but his "own view is that the Proverbs raise important issues that bear on what our nation is trying to do to define the soul of the new South Africa" (Mbeki 2006a:10).

I believe they communicate a challenging message about how we should respond to the situation immanent in our society concerning the adulation of personal wealth and the attendant tendency to pay little practical regard to what each one of us might do to assist our neighbour to achieve the goal of a better life (Mbeki 2006a:10).

Mbeki invokes the hardworking, communal ant of Proverbs in order to argue that the nation “must develop the wisdom that will ensure the survival and cohesion of human society” (Mbeki 2006a:10).

He realises that “many among us might very well think” that he is indulging in wishful thinking in “trying to wish away the waves of self-aggrandisement that might be characteristic of global human society” (Mbeki 2006a:10), so he strengthens his argument -- by quoting another biblical text. The text he chooses is from the book of Genesis, and again he states explicitly that he is quoting from “the Holy Bible”. The Genesis text he quotes is 3:19, and on this occasion the reference is given:

In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return (Genesis 3:19) (Mbeki 2006a:10).

“This biblical text suggests,” argues Mbeki, “that of critical importance to every South African is consideration of the material conditions of life and therefore the attendant pursuit of personal wealth” (Mbeki 2006a:11). The point he seems to be making here, though again the logic is not that clear, is that immediate material means are important, perhaps even foundational. He supports this biblical claim by a fairly extensive appropriation of the materialist philosophy of Friederich Engels, Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin, citing from their work.³ However, he then immediately juxtaposes ‘materialism’ with ‘idealism’ in order to make the related point that materialist concerns cannot be allowed to be our only concerns. “In the context of our own challenges, this ‘idealism’ must serve to focus our attention on issues other than the tasks of the production and distribution of material wealth” (Mbeki 2006a:11).

What Mbeki does through this intertextual exchange is to inaugurate a discussion of the relationship between materialism and idealism. This discussion is not that easy to follow, but he seems to be saying that though Marx and the Genesis text are legitimately concerned about material considerations, we must not abandon aspects of idealism, which, as we might now suspect, he also finds in the Bible, this time citing John’s gospel: “[John 1:1] In the beginning was the Word” (Mbeki 2006a:12). Our preoccupation, Mbeki seems to

³ In his speeches Mbeki regularly appropriates Marxist rhetoric. In his more recent appropriations, including this instance, the appropriation is ambivalent. Rhetorically he shows he knows his Marx, but he also indicates that ideologically he is not fully persuaded.

be arguing, has been with Marx's "Man must eat before he can think!", whereas we should also be considering Rene Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" (Mbeki 2006a:11). The Bible is useful in exploring this tension because it acknowledges the need for both bread and soul, body and mind/Word.

As Mbeki draws his speech to a close he returns to his critique of capitalism, saying "that for us to ensure that things do not fall apart,⁴ we must in the first instance, never allow that the market should be the principal determinant of the nature of our society" (Mbeki 2006a:14). "Instead," continues Mbeki, "we must place at the centre of our daily activities the pursuit of the goals of social cohesion and human solidarity. We must, therefore, strive to integrate into the national consciousness the value system contained in the world outlook described as Ubuntu" (Mbeki 2006a:14). Which brings Mbeki back to the Bible, once again using the Bible to explicate ubuntu:

We must therefore say that the Biblical injunction is surely correct, that "Man cannot live by bread alone" [Matthew 4:4/Luke 4:4] and therefore that the mere pursuit of individual wealth can never satisfy the need immanent in all human beings to lead lives of happiness (Mbeki 2006a:14).

This is Mbeki's final reference to the Bible. He shifts his attention in the last few minutes of his speech to emphasising our need for a "cohesive human society" (Mbeki 2006a:15), praising our nation's gains and pointing out the dangers that persist from our past. But we are fortunate, he concludes, because "we had a Nelson Mandela who made bold to give us the task to attend to the 'RDP of the soul'" (Mbeki 2006a:16).

Among the outcomes Mbeki accomplishes in this speech are a severing of the RDP from the economic domain and its re-attachment to the spiritual domain. It is not GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution), the Mbeki-driven (Gumede 2007; SACP 2006:22), neo-liberal, capitalist, macro-economic policy that has constructed a system which celebrates material gain. The problem is the person not the system. An RDP of the economy has been replaced by an RDP of the soul (West 2009a, forthcoming). A related outcome, and the focus of this essay, is the return of religion to the public realm, but narrowly construed as religion centred on the soul. The tone is erudite, but the substance is a form of evangelical Christianity, what the Kairos Docu-

⁴ Mbeki is probably alluding here to the novel by Chinua Achebe (1958).

ment referred to as “Church Theology” (Theologians 1986), in which the focus of religion is the realm of morality, narrowly defined.⁵

The ANC’s deployment of religion

I turn now from Mbeki’s deployment of the Bible in the service of an RDP of the soul to the ANC’s Polekwane Policy Discussion Document, “The RDP of the Soul”. While Mbeki’s Nelson Mandela Lecture prepared the ground rhetorically for a shift from an RDP of the economy to an RDP of the soul, the ANC policy document, “The RDP of the Soul” (ANC 2007b), turns rhetoric into policy. In discerning the distinctive features of this document’s understanding of the role of religion in the public sphere, I will continue to use economic issues as a litmus test on the kind of ‘theological’ trajectory envisaged. Mbeki allocates economic issues to the realm of state and moral issues to the realm of religion. But what of “The RDP of the Soul” Policy Discussion Document?

“The RDP of the Soul” Policy Discussion Document was produced by the ANC Commission on Religious Affairs.⁶ Driven by the need to move our society beyond forms of religious apartheid in which religion and politics were separated and in which South Africa’s different religions remained separate, “The RDP of the Soul” set out to provide an alternative vision for the role of religion in South Africa’s public realm.⁷ However, given that “Church Theology” was the dominant trajectory within the ANC itself, among both ‘lay’ and ‘ordained’ officials, this Policy Discussion Document received little attention. It remains, nonetheless, an official document within the ANC and deserves careful analysis.

This document’s take on religion is in some respects quite different from Mbeki’s, though there is some significant overlap, not least in the forced removal of ‘RDP’ from the economy to the soul. The preamble to the policy document “The RDP of the Soul” makes the link with Mbeki’s Nelson Mandela lecture clear, following the document’s statement of intent with a quotation from the lecture:

⁵ This is a form of theology that is more concerned with legitimating, sustaining, and consolidating the structures that constitute the status quo of church and state than with the challenges, questions and critiques posed by the pain these structures perpetrate and perpetuate.

⁶ All the information included on the production of this document and its reception and discussion within the ANC is based on interviews and correspondence with Cedric Mayson, the coordinator of the ANC Commission on Religious Affairs at the time.

⁷ Much of the analysis and many of the arguments found in this document were presented for discussion by the ANC Commission for Religious Affairs in the November 2006 edition of *Umrabulo*, a journal of the African National Congress (ANC 2006).

This document reviews the problems we found in Liberation, analyses them, and sets out the way of Transformation through the reconstruction and development of the nation's spirit. For it is the spirit of South Africans that drives our political, economic and social processes.

"The question must therefore arise – for those of us who believe that we represent the good – what must we do to succeed in our purposes? ... We must strive to understand the social conditions that would help to determine whether we succeed or fail. What I have said relates directly to what needs to be done to achieve the objective that Nelson Mandela set the nation, to accomplish the RDP of the Soul". Thabo Mbeki (ANC 2007b:1).

Liberation brought us a packet of problems

The first part of the policy document, headed "Liberation brought us a packet of problems", analyses the "packet of problems" liberation brought the ANC, under the following subheadings: "The RDP", "Lack of experience", "The population explosion", "The dictatorship of capital", "The Western imperialist empire", "Corruption", "Crime" and "The media" (ANC 2007b:1-3).⁸ While there is no explicit or implied reference to religion in the analysis under the first three subheadings, there is under the remaining subheadings. Under the subheading, "The dictatorship of capital", the document states that "[a]n economic system which allows dictators to administer capital without responsibility to anyone is wrong in principle for those who believe in the spirit of democracy" (ANC 2007b:1). This general ethical statement is then followed by a more religion-specific statement: "To maintain that it is a legitimate human right to accumulate wealth through a system condemning the majority of our citizens to poverty is totally illegitimate. It is condemned by religious prophets, humanists and economists alike" (ANC 2007b:1-2). Already we can discern the shape of this policy document's take on religion. First, though the document takes Mbeki's moral perspective as its starting point, there is definite recognition of the systemic nature of wealth accumulation. Here morality is about more than individual responsibility; it is also about systems, especially economic systems. However, as we will see later on in its

⁸ The use of upper and lower case in subheadings is not consistent. I have reproduced the usage in the document.

argument, the document refuses to take sides on economic systems, imagining that the kind of religion envisaged will take South Africans beyond both capitalism and socialism. In this respect the argument of the document sounds similar to the “Church Theology” argument (Theologians 1986:28).

As a second distinctive feature, the document is careful to refrain from privileging any one religious tradition. An inclusive and broad understanding of ‘religion’ is deployed here, including even “the spirit of democracy” and “humanists” in its range. The systemic dimensions of morality are developed more fully further on under this subheading, with the policy document declaring that “[t]he economic problem of the poor is the spiritual problem of the rich. To move from the greed of the rich to the need of the poor we must change the system. We need a new spirit – an RDP of the soul” (ANC 2007b:2).

Under the subheading, “The Western imperialist empire”, another, third, feature of this document’s take on religion becomes apparent. Arguing that the “dictatorship of capital is an integral part of the centuries old western imperialist Empire which is dominated today by the United States of America”, the document goes on to say that “US efforts to indoctrinate Africa with fears of Islamic terrorism, to establish a US Military mission in every African country, to control our media, our financiers, our religions and our politicians ... inhibits our transformation” (ANC 2007b:2). Again we see an inclusive conception of religion, with specific reference to Islam and rejection of US definitions and portrayals of this religious tradition.⁹ But the document goes further, introducing this third thread in its understanding of religion. Though not explicit yet, the reference to US attempts to control “our religions” includes not only their characterisation of Islam, but also the influence of US forms of fundamentalist Christianity on South African Christianity.

There is no specific reference to religion under the subheading, “Corruption”, but there is extensive use of ‘morality’ language. The subsection begins by acknowledging that South Africa has “inherited a culture of corruption” established by colonialism and that corruption continues to be a concern, even within the ANC. “Many in society,” the section goes on to argue, “openly and avowedly promote self-centred,

⁹ The only other mention of religion in any of the other twelve Polekwane policy documents is found in the Policy Discussion Document on “International relations” and, here too, Islam receives specific mention along similar lines: “The world is becoming divided on the basis of religion and we see forms of discrimination occurring in the name of fighting terrorism. While terrorism is the new threat to peace and stability and has to be defeated, including its fundamental causes, we need to take extra care that we do not antagonise people on the basis of religious intolerance and discrimination” (ANC 2007a:4).

political and economic policies which worship anti-human greed, promote their own profit, and sideline the needs of the poor and the survival of humanity” (ANC 2007b:2). At this point the document again invokes Mbeki’s Nelson Mandela lecture where Mbeki argues that “[t]he capitalist class, to whom everything has a cash value, has never considered moral incentives as very dependable” and that this class has entrenched in our society as a whole, “including among the oppressed, the deep-seated understanding that personal wealth constituted the only true measure of individual and social success”. Indeed, the document continues, quoting Mbeki, even “the new order, born of 1994, inherited a well-entrenched value system that places individual acquisition of wealth at the very centre of the value system of our society as a whole” (ANC 2007b:2). This subsection concludes with a succinct statement: “The root of the problem is the corruption of thought and motive. If the primary objective of life is to get rich, the means are secondary” (ANC 2007b:2). Again we see some recognition of the systemic nature of corruption as well as the impact of empire, but the focus is firmly on the individual and the individual’s values, thoughts, and motives.

This focus is sustained in the next subsection dealing with crime, though the starting point is profoundly systemic. Crime is situated, at least initially, in an unjust and unconstitutional economic structure, for “[i]n hard fact the economic structure of South Africa condemns half our population to very limited life” (ANC 2007b:2). And while “[t]his economic system does not justify those who steal to live”, it does recognise that “many turn to crime from need” (ANC 2007b:2). The document then turns to “crimes of greed” and the value system that undergirds it. Such a system, which is “directly related to the worship of money and possessions”, is “denounced by all religions and ethicists” (ANC 2007b:2). Again we find many of the features of this document’s analysis of religion and the public sphere: recognition of a systemic root to crime, a broadened meaning of religion, and a focus on personal morality. This subsection concludes by emphasising the last of these. All crimes, whether of need, greed, or violence, “are produced by the deliberate promotion of a community without moral integrity” (ANC 2007b:3). It is here, the document argues, that the religious sector must accept substantial responsibility for the “promotion of false inhuman values”. “Because the main focus of much religion has moved to financial support for institutions, and individualistic concern for the afterlife, many have excluded themselves from its theological, ethical and social emphasis, with a consequent collapse of value systems”. In sum, the section concludes, “Crime is the result of spiritual failure” (ANC 2007b:3). A fourth distinctive feature in the document’s analysis of religion emerges here, namely, the damage

done by institutionalised religion in failing to hold together the individual and the social. Ironically, there is a tendency to precisely the same dislocation both in “The RDP of the Soul” policy document and in Mbeki’s Nelson Mandela lecture.

The final subsection, “The media”, is brief, but the argument is clear. The media are often irresponsible in handling their freedom, “portraying Western oppressive values, instead of the liberating values of ubuntu thinking” (ANC 2007b:3). A fifth distinctive feature of the document’s analysis is readily apparent here, though it is implicit in most of the document. The fifth feature is “Western oppressive values”, with an emphasis on the first word in the phrase. The logic of the argument throughout is that, lying behind and beneath the need for an RDP of the soul, is the damage inflicted historically, institutionally, and psychologically by Western forms of knowledge and practice. This becomes even clearer in the next section of the document. So though the document adopts Mbeki’s moral trajectory, it broadens that trajectory substantially, recognising and analysing the systemic dimensions of ‘the moral’.

The role of religion

The second major section of the document is headed “The role of religion”, and is prefaced with another quotation from Mbeki’s Nelson Mandela lecture, the section in which Mbeki argues that not only do all human beings have a soul but “all human societies also have a soul” (ANC 2007b:3). This quotation is followed by an analysis of the colonial misuse of religion and the emergence of liberating forms of religion in South Africa, the postliberation relapse into institutional ‘religious apartheid’ which refuses to collaborate across different faith traditions for transformation, the malaise in traditional institutional religion and the rise of agnosticism and fundamentalism, and the prophetic signs of a cross-sectoral commitment to progressive transformation of society (ANC 2007b:3-5).

The preamble to this section of the document is a set of quotations from Mbeki’s Nelson Mandela lecture. It is worth quoting, because it sets the scene for much of the rest of the argument of “The RDP of the Soul” Policy Discussion Document.

Human fulfilment consists of more than access to modern and effective services like electricity, water, telecommunications, transport, health, education and training for our people...

As distinct from other species of the animal world, human beings also have spiritual needs. Thus all of us,

and not merely the religious leaders, speak of the intangible element that is immanent in all human beings – the soul!

Acceptance of this proposition as a fact must necessarily mean that we have to accept the related assertion that consequently, all human societies also have a soul. Thabo Mbeki (ANC 2007b:3)

The argument in this set of quotations, which are true to Mbeki's more extended argument, is that the focus of the RDP, which committed the ANC government to "modern and effective services" for all our people should not be our primary focus; there is a more urgent concern, namely the moral failure infecting our nation and so, while the government gets on with sorting out the economy, we the people must get on with repairing our individual and corporate soul. As early as 1995, while Mbeki was deputy president, he said that the liberation government's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) had "established a unique national consensus on the need for prosperity, democracy, human development and the removal of poverty". "However," he goes on, "despite its almost biblical character, the RDP Base Document did not provide us with all the answers." This is because, he continues, "[w]e have always known that its many, many priorities and programmes need to be distilled into a series of realistic steps, guided by a long-term vision and our resource constraints" (Mbeki 1995:1). The vision of prophetic religion, Mbeki seems to argue, is unrealistic, particularly in economic terms. However, the vision of moral religion, "Church Theology", is adequate for our nation's needs. Again, this section of the "The RDP of the Soul" Policy Discussion Document seems to accept Mbeki's trajectory as its starting point, though it does go on to broaden it.

The first subheading in this section, "The colonial misuse of religion", focuses on the damage done by the imposition of colonial institutional religion on Africa and Africans. The colonial and missionary enterprise "coopted" us "into western civilisation and a corrupted version of the Gospel", undermining "the essentials of spiritual humanity proclaimed by the great spiritual leaders of the past", none of whom "were products of western civilisation", "not Hindus, Confucius, Isaiah, Amos, the Buddha, Jesus, or Mohammed" (ANC 2007b:3). The anti-Western argument is clear here, and so is a sixth distinctive feature. According to this analysis religion is in and of itself not bad for us. There is an uncorrupted version of "the Gospel", with a capital 'G', there are "essentials of spiritual humanity", and there are "great spiritual leaders of the past".

The next subsection, "Liberating religion", draws attention to more recent examples of life-giving religion from our own recent past. Among these are the ecumenical and inter-faith movements of the liberation struggle, liberation theology, and various declarations (like the 1991 inter-faith Declaration of Religious Rights and Responsibilities) and institutional formations (like the National Religious Leaders Forum). But, the subsection concludes, little came of this legacy (ANC 2007b:3).

The reasons for the failure to liberate religion are discussed in the next subsection under the heading "Relapse". The continued colonial practice of 'religious apartheid', with a refusal, largely on the part of the dominant Christian majority, to embrace ecumenical and inter-faith collaboration is the first reason (ANC 2007b:3). A second reason for the failure to liberate religion is that "although religious institutions are aware of agreement on the principles of spiritual values and integrity for the whole human community, many are too busy running their inherited separate activities to work out united strategies of transformation" (ANC 2007b:3). A third reason is the rampant prevalence of what the Kairos Document referred to as "Church Theology", in which "Many religious communities recuse themselves from involvement in the programmes of national, provincial or local government 'because you cannot mix religion and politics' (a totally un-godly anti-human colonial doctrine)" (ANC 2007b:3). Along with some of the other distinctive features we have already identified in the document's analysis of religion in the public realm there are signs here of a seventh (closely related to the sixth). Leaning on the contribution of the Kairos Document, this subsection, and the previous one on "Liberating religion", recognise the reality of contending trajectories within a religious tradition. This is clearly articulated in the final analysis in this subsection, when the document argues that there is "a clear contrast between religious leaders (at all levels) who wish to present a united front for the better progress of humanity, and those who see no further than keeping their local religions going" (ANC 2007b:3-4). The document elaborates further and, in so doing, adds an eighth distinctive feature: "Many pulpits refuse to explore the spiritual unity in religious diversity which is written into our Constitution" (ANC 2007b:4). This eighth element is the implicit claim, which will be made more explicitly later in the document, that the constitution (and government) should on occasion dictate to religion what directions it should take.

The final reason, perhaps (because the logic of the argument is incomplete here), why liberating religion has had little impact on our new democracy is that, because of sectarian and institutional forms of religion, millions of people "have left religion" (ANC 2007b:4). The

argument is developed more fully in the next subsection, "The gap". The crux of the argument here is that sectarian and institutional forms of religion have failed many, so that "[a] gap has been formed between a world needing a new spirit of transformation and the failure of religions to provide it" (ANC 2007b:4). Two other forms of 'spirituality' (though the document does not designate them as such) "have rushed in to take the gap", namely agnosticism and right-wing fundamentalism (ANC 2007b:4).

This analysis leads into the penultimate subsection of "The role of religion", headed "Right wing fundamentalism". Here the third distinctive feature of the document's analysis of religion in the public realm is extensively examined. "The fastest growing religion in the world including Africa today," the document argues, "is right wing fundamentalism" (ANC 2007b:4). Right-wing fundamentalism is characterised as rooted in anti-scientific, anti-intellectual, and Pentecostal tendencies. In terms of content it is characterised by superstition instead of faith, the narrowing of theology to proof texts, the salvation of the individual, the pursuit of health and wealth, a focus on life after death, and the desire for a sectarian end to the world (ANC 2007b:4). The document makes it clear that fundamentalism is found in all religions and that it breeds extremists in all religions (ANC 2007b:4). The document devotes considerable space to this topic, concluding that "[f]undamentalism is a major problem preventing transformation" (ANC 2007b:4).

The final subsection of section 2 on "The role of religion" turns from right-wing fundamentalism to the other end of the religious continuum, namely "Progressive prophets". This subsection is worth quoting in its entirety, for it reiterates many of the features of religion already discussed and introduces a ninth distinctive feature, namely the significant commonalities that characterise prophetic religion across various religious traditions (including secular humanism):

And throughout our society there are progressive people already enacting transformation. They are in all sectors, young and old, women and men, spiritual and secular, poor and rich, working as individuals or in institutions, seeking the transformation of society, citizens of the age whose dawn cannot be held back, promoting progressive movements in religion and politics, economics and academia, schools and colleges, unions and businesses, medicine and the media. Behind all the criticisms and tensions, across the board, people and communities are engaged in clear constructive commitment to human rights and social cohesion, to community renewal and

spiritual adulthood from their living rooms and local communities to national and international bodies. In many places in the world, especially in the West, the issue of transforming humanity is not even on the agenda. In Africa, you can smell it coming like the rain after drought, or the warmth of the sun after winter.

“Somewhere ahead there beckons a civilisation which will take its place in God’s history with other great human syntheses: Chinese, Egyptian, Jewish, European. It will not necessarily be all black; but it will be African.” Chief Albert Luthuli (ANC 2007b:4-5).

Central to this analysis, and affirmed by the quotation from Albert Luthuli, is the notion of an emergent form of progressive religion arising from the soil of African ubuntu but encompassing the best of each and every religious and secular-ethical tradition. This is perhaps a tenth distinctive feature in the analysis of religion in this document, the flip side of the argument about a damaging Western legacy. If Western imperialism is part of our problem, then the recognition and recovery of African conceptual resources is part of our transformation. This becomes even clearer in the third section of “The RDP of the Soul”.

Analysing the answers

The third section of the “The RDP of the Soul” Policy Discussion Document returns to the problems that “inhibit the progress from Liberation to Transformation”, and is headed “Analysing the answers”. The preamble to this section notes that, to the list of problems discussed under section one, section two has added another, namely “conservative religion” (ANC 2007b:5). But the focus of the third section is on the positive factors which are a resource for transformation, the problems notwithstanding. The first positive factor is that oppressive empires eventually collapse, and that there are already signs that “the oppressive violence”, the politics of control, “the lust for wealth and power”, and “the grim grip of right wing fundamentalist heresy” of the US empire are collapsing (ANC 2007b:5).

The second factor is “a new economic system”, where the document finally lays an RDP of the economy to rest, without explicitly mentioning it. The “recovery of soul in the secular world moves us onward,” the document argues somewhat obscurely, from thinking of economics “in terms of a conflict between earlier capitalist and socialist systems” (ANC 2007b:5). The “ongoing evolution of human society” and the “political wisdom which led us to liberation without

ongoing violence, is directing our economic wisdom to discover a new role for capital in a new concept of socialism” (ANC 2007b:5). Socialism has not been abandoned, it would seem, but reconceptualised. The new economic relationship between

the national democratic state and private capital is one of unity and struggle. On the one hand, the democratic state has to create an environment conducive for private investments from which investors can make reasonable returns, and through which employment and technological progress can be derived. On the other hand, through effective regulation, taxation and other means, the state seeks to ensure redistribution of income, to direct investments into areas which help national development, and broadly to ensure social responsibility (ANC 2007b:5).

The argument here seems to be that “the recovery of soul” – an RDP of the soul – enables us to transcend not only the boundaries of different religious traditions but also the boundaries of different economic traditions. The work begun by Mbeki in legitimating the ANC government’s ideological shift to GEAR by invoking religion is now completed in this Policy Discussion Document. The lurking eleventh distinctive feature in this document’s analysis of religion in the public realm is evident here; religion should enable us to move beyond economic contestation. Just when one imagines that the document will break with Mbeki’s rather narrow moral trajectory, it balks at the economic dimension, refusing to be prophetic.

The third factor in “Analysing the answers” is “a new African identity”, centred on Africa as the cradle of humankind. Having sent out humanity millennia ago “into innumerable racial, national, religious and economic groups”, Africa now summons humanity “to come together again”, rediscovering its common core (ANC 2007b:5). This macro recall of humanity to its common core has been mirrored, so the document seems to argue, in the ANC’s vision of South Africa’s diversity being held together “within the overall sense of being African” (ANC 2007b:6). Religion too has played its role here, working with politics, education, sport and entertainment, to recognise a “new Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) ... which is not western ... but African” (ANC 2007b:6).

The fourth factor which enhances the capacity for transformation is “a secular spiritual understanding”. The second distinctive feature of this document’s analysis of public religion now becomes the focus. Not only is the document careful not to privilege any one reli-

gious tradition; it goes further in advocating the sixth distinctive feature, namely a common substratum underlying all forms of progressive spirituality, here called secular spirituality. This form of spirituality “extends spiritual understanding from the religious world to the whole secular creation” (ANC 2007b:6). “Humanity,” the document argues, “is reaching for a new reality”, rooted in “the deep primal human concept of *ubuntu*”, and “given a thousand different words in a thousand different languages” (ANC 2007b:6). Secular spirituality explicitly “rejects the individualistic priorities of western civilisation as anti-human”, embracing instead – and here the document quotes Mbeki again – “values and norms that have ... resided amongst our people and which have held together our communities from ancient times up to the present. These values [are] contained in the world view known as *ubuntu*” (ANC 2007b:6). “This is the spiritual truth of all humanity,” the argument of the document concludes. “It is a basic understanding to be taken into all progressive religious, political, and economic institutions. *Ubuntu* rules” (ANC 2007b:6).

The final factor in this third section has to do with “Unity of the spirit is the RDP of the soul”, which continues the argument of the previous subsection, arguing that “[a]ll religions agree on the great spiritual truths which drive humanity, and we need to accept this agreement as the launch pad for new development”. Moreover, these great truths and values “arise from *ubuntu*” and are put “into secular expression by ordinary people in the daily life of home, work and play” (ANC 2007b:6). The RDP of the soul, in sum, the document argues, is characterised by compassion, cooperation, and commitment; they are “the fruit of secular spirituality, the heartbeat of *ubuntu* ... the essence of the RDP of the Soul” (ANC 2007b:6). In case the more traditionally religious might balk at the notion of spirituality, the document concludes this third section by stating that “[n]one of this denies the positive role that religion can play: the value of sacraments, the message of theology, the empowering experience of communities of faith, the role of history, the proclamation of the prophets, the lives of the saints: all feed the spirituality of the human world, the secular reality in which the soul of humanity has its being” (ANC 2007b:6-7).

The way of transformation

The fourth and final section of “The RDP of the Soul” Policy Discussion Document charts “The way of transformation”. Returning to the economic RDP for the last time, the document draws on the centrality of the “concept of struggle” in the original RDP Base Document. Though “The RDP of Soul” does not acknowledge that the core of the struggle discussed in the RDP document is the economy (Terre-

blanche 2002:108; Seekings & Nattrass 2006:347; Saul 2005:206-207; Legassik 2007:456-457), it takes up the language of 'the struggle' to urge all South Africans to join the struggle, which in this case "demands a struggle to evolve a new society through compassion, cooperation and commitment, which includes an economy designed for people not for profit, and the release of spiritual values into secular life" (ANC 2007b:7). Again, the basic trajectory set by Mbeki is maintained but broadened. The opportunity to take up a prophetic political-economic trajectory is declined.

In the first subsection of this final section, "A site of struggle", the document returns to the seventh distinctive feature with respect to the analysis of religion in the public realm, namely that religion is itself "a site of struggle". This was the case in the struggle against apartheid and it continues to be the case in the struggle for a new society (ANC 2007b:7). The incipient eighth distinctive feature mentioned briefly above now takes shape in the concluding part of this subsection:

The ANC is not a religious organisation; it fully supports the Constitutional policy of freedom of religion; it has no policy of interference with those whose religious policies are not its own. But the ANC has a major responsibility to spell out the dangers when people promote organisations which are opposed to the spiritual or material development of our people, whatever religious credentials they may claim. ... The ANC is deeply involved in South Africa's struggle to renew and develop her soul" (ANC 2007b:7).

In this document the ANC reserves the right to talk back to religion. But does it accept the right of progressive prophetic religion to talk back to the ANC and the state it governs on issues other than the moral, no matter how broadly defined? In other words, adopting the phrasing of this document, may and should the "prophetic prophets", particularly those promoting progressive economic policy, spell out the dangers to the ANC government when they promote economic policies which are opposed to the spiritual or material development of our people, whatever economic credentials they may claim? This is the crucial question from the perspective of a prophetic religion trajectory.

"The RDP of the Soul" Document concludes this section with some discussion of ANC programmes, arguing that, in working for "South Africa's struggle to renew and develop her soul", the ANC is required "to devise policies and set out comprehensive programmes for secular transformation by spiritual values, through public education

and commitment in the branches, the religious bodies, the media, in branches of government, in the structures of the ANC, and wherever people are learning to transform human community together” (ANC 2007b:7).¹⁰

To what extent “The RDP of the Soul” Policy Discussion Document has been taken up through ANC programmes is not clear, though discussions with Cedric Mayson, the past coordinator of the ANC Commission for Religious Affairs, indicate that not much has been done about this document. One imagines that much of what happened at Polekwane and in its aftermath, including the recall of president Thabo Mbeki and the ongoing legal struggles of the new ANC president, Jacob Zuma, has overshadowed not only the Policy Discussion Document but all the others as well. But whatever the formal status of this document after Polekwane, there has been a marked shift in religion in the public realm since Polekwane. And this brings me to the third and final part of my essay.

¹⁰ Three other areas are discussed in this fourth and final section, including the issue of religious “Public holidays”, “The open vote”, and the formation of a “CRA [Commission for Religious Affairs] Pastoral Committee” (ANC 2007b:7). There are also a number of “Questions for discussion” (ANC 2007b:8).

Jacob Zuma's deployment of religion

Both the erudite and somewhat bookish religion of Thabo Mbeki and the ecumenical secular spirituality of "The RDP of the Soul" have been relegated to the backseat since Polekwane. Popular religion is now firmly in the front seat. Though it is too early to tell the precise shape of post-Polekwane religion in the public realm, there are already clear markers.

There is no evidence yet that my car-wash companion was right about Jacob Zuma knowing the Bible better than Mbeki, unless he was using the phrase "knows his Bible" to mean that Zuma is a more overtly religious person than Mbeki, in which case he is probably right. Zuma appears more comfortable and fluent in deploying religion in the public realm. He clearly presents himself as a religious man, but in ways which differ from his predecessor and the religious policy document of his party. Zuma is in many ways quite different from Mbeki, the classically literate humanist with a feel for the language of the King James Version and a preference for the Bible's wisdom tradition, and his spirituality is also quite different from the ecumenical and secular spirituality advocated by the ANC's "The RDP of the Soul" Policy Discussion Document. Zuma is robustly Christian in his religious discourse, favouring the more Pentecostal and 'fundamentalist' (in terms of the "The RDP of the Soul" Policy Discussion Document) forms of Christianity, not the highly textual form of Mbeki or the avant-garde secular spirituality form of "The RDP of the Soul". But there are also areas of overlap with each of these in Zuma's deployment of religion.

Before I analyse Zuma's more considered statements and arguments about religion, I briefly reflect on the media feeding frenzy that has erupted around Zuma's more off-the-cuff remarks. Though it is difficult to discern Zuma's precise claims about his likeness to Jesus amid the media reports such claims have generated, there is sufficient evidence to indicate that Zuma has appropriated aspects of a likeness to Jesus. Some of it has been playful, as when he said in June 2003, having visited the Jordan river in Palestine, "where Jesus was baptised", that he "was around there ... So, if I look at anyone, he or she will be blessed" (DA 2008). Others have been more serious, as when in an interview with the *Sowetan* on 24 March 2006 he said that he is "like Christ", that the media and his detractors wanted to nail him to the cross like Jesus, and that certain newspapers had sought to "crucify him" (DA 2008). Most recently he implicitly associated himself with Jesus when he claimed that the ANC breakaway political party Cope (Congress of the People) is like Jesus' donkey. Referring explicitly to the biblical story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a

donkey, Zuma went on to say, "The people were waiting for the Son of Man [Zuma/ANC] who was on the donkey [Cope]. The donkey did not understand it, and thought the songs of praise were for him" (Du Plessis 2008).

Such remarks, however seriously intended, have led to a chorus of claims from supporters that Zuma is in various ways 'like Jesus' (Tromp & Nqiyaza 2008). Opposition parties (DA 2008; IOL 2008a), cartoonists (Zapiro 2008), churches (IOL 2008b), and ordinary South Africans of different persuasions have lent their voices to the apparent messianic pretensions of Jacob Zuma as well. So in this case Zuma and the media have succeeded admirably in returning religion to the public realm, albeit in a more popular form than the initiatives by Mbeki and the "The RDP of the Soul" Policy Discussion Document.

Zuma's comments about Jesus or God blessing those who vote for the ANC (Reporter 2006), about the ANC ruling until Jesus comes back (Reporter 2004), about the ANC being the only organisation which was blessed by pastors and heaven when it was formed (Reporter 2008), and about Jesus supporting and/or being a member of the ANC (Mbanjwa 2009) have generated similar responses and effects. So have Zuma's ordination as an honorary pastor by an independent charismatic church (Sapa 2007) and his recent visit to the Rhema Bible Church (Sapa 2009a).

The latter event is particularly significant, because a careful reading of what Zuma said indicates that he is more nuanced about religion than the media acknowledge. Though not his dominant mode of discoursing about religion, it is in his more nuanced moments that Zuma overlaps Mbeki and the ANC's "The RDP of the Soul" Policy Discussion Document. Though visiting a church which the "The RDP of the Soul" Policy Discussion Document would consider 'fundamentalist', Zuma begins his speech on 15 March 2009 by reminding the congregation that our constitution "enshrines the freedom of religion, belief and opinion. It allows religious diversity in our multicultural society" (Zuma 2009a:1). Though Zuma's focus in this speech is, understandably on the Christian faith, and though he does continue by saying that the ANC has its roots in the Christian faith, he immediately adds that the ANC "celebrates and supports all beliefs in its broad membership and support base". He justifies his Christian emphasis by saying that "[w]e recognise that while there is extensive religious diversity, the majority of South Africans are Christians" (Zuma 2009a:1).

Rather oddly he then states that one of his "favourite books in the Bible is the Book of Exodus in the Old Testament". This abrupt shift to the Bible, conjuring up the words of my car-wash companion,

becomes clear when Zuma, rather boldly in this conservative right wing church context, quotes from Exodus 3:

(7) The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. (8) So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey" [New International Version].¹¹

Zuma follows this quotation by following the narrative in Exodus chapter 5 where Moses and Aaron confront Pharaoh, saying in verse 1, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the desert'" (Zuma 2009a:1).

With many members of the thoroughly "Church Theology" Rhema Bible Church probably squirming in their plush seats Zuma continues: "The Exodus from Egypt has always symbolised the liberatory character of the church." Zuma elaborates on this line of argument, saying that the story of "Moses and his mission as a man of God inspired many an oppressed people and made them realise that indeed God is on the side of the poor and oppressed" (Zuma 2009a:1). Making his audience even more uncomfortable is Zuma's next move, in which he associates the ANC with Moses and his mission.

The call "Let My People Go" is not far removed from our organisation's vision. It is not surprising that the phrase is the title of a biography of our illustrious ANC former President, Inkosi Albert Luthuli. When our leaders in the ANC and the Church said to successive apartheid regimes: "Let My People Go", we knew that God would be on our side until our freedom was attained. Since its formation in 1912 the African National Congress understood this liberation mission of the Church and the word of God, and aligned itself with it (Zuma 2009a:1).

Oblivious of the theological history (in the prosperity theology of the United States of America) and orientation of his audience, it would

¹¹ Once again I have inserted the verse numbers for each reference. It is interesting to note that Zuma have used the New International Version, a more modern translation than the version preferred by Mbeki. The New International Version is an overtly Evangelical translation, but whether this is a factor in Zuma's choice is difficult to determine without more examples.

seem, Zuma goes on to instruct them about the ANC's historical relationship with the church, citing Nelson Mandela who "traces the relationship between the ANC and the church to the 1870s when the Ethiopian Church Movement was formed as a response to the rapid land dispossession from the 1800s" (Zuma 2009a:1). The purpose of this theological history lesson becomes clear after Zuma has mentioned a number of examples "which illustrate that the historical association of the ANC and the Church cannot be doubted", when he states, "The ANC practically derived its moral vision from the Church amongst other sources" (Zuma 2009a:1).

The "moral vision" of the church, which according to Zuma's historical analysis includes a profoundly political dimension, not only explains the mission of the ANC but "also explains the key role played by the religious sector in the struggle for freedom in our country" (Zuma 2009a:1-2). And it is because of this relationship between the ANC and the church that "the post-2009 election administration", continues Zuma, "will work for a continued partnership with the faith-based sector to give practical meaning to the ANC's moral vision, based on our country's Constitution". In sum, argues Zuma, "Our moral vision embodies the values of a just and caring society" (Zuma 2009a:2). In the remainder of his speech Zuma elaborates on ways in which the ANC needs "the support of the Church and all faith-based organisations, so that together we can release our people from the slavery of poverty and its manifestations" (Zuma 2009a:2).

In general, Zuma says, government "should open its doors to enable interaction with faith-based organisations on policy and implementation". Specifically, there are "many programmes that require collaboration with faith-based organisations" (Zuma 2009a:2). These include health, education, rural development, the fight against crime, and the creation of "decent jobs". The first two, Zuma argues, are domains in which the church has a long history, and he commends Rhema Ministries for their support programmes for orphans and children living in the streets. The third, rural development, is important because churches "are the only institutions that are found in every corner of the country, even remote rural areas" and are therefore key partners in the ANC's proposed rural development initiative. The fourth programme, the fight against crime, is "everybody's business" (Zuma 2009a:2). Significantly, Zuma says nothing more about the fifth programme, the creation of "decent jobs".

The phrase, 'decent work', derives from the International Labour Organisation and is embedded in a careful socio-economic analysis (ILO 1999). Zuma invokes this phrase, but avoids its socio-economic implications by refusing to pursue it. Instead, he continues his speech by calling for "a more active role of the Church in strengthening and

deepening democracy”, including popularising the constitution and bill of rights (Zuma 2009a:2). Zuma is aware that this kind of call will cause some discomfort among his audience, for he goes on immediately to recognise that there will probably be “occasional friction between Church and State”, especially concerning “[s]ome laws considered to be progressive and necessary by politicians and administrators”, including “the termination of pregnancy legislation” or “legislation for civil unions by people of the same sex”. The solution to such conflict, he continues, is to have open dialogue and discussion (Zuma 2009a:2). Zuma correctly recognises that such ‘moral’ matters will be of particular concern to this congregation. But he refuses to concede too much to this kind of Christianity, accepting that “[w]here no common ground is found, we will be able to disagree without being disagreeable” (Zuma 2009a:2).

He concludes his speech by affirming that “[w]e believe in the power of prayer” and then urging “the church to pray for peaceful, free and fair elections and a smooth transition to the new administration after April 22”, as well as for nation building, working together with the ANC and government “to make all South Africans feel at home in their country, regardless of colour, language, gender or creed” (Zuma 2009a:2). “Working together,” he says, returning to where he began with an allusion to the Exodus biblical text, “we can definitely do more to make South Africa a land of milk and honey” (Zuma 2009a:3).

Like Mbeki, Zuma privileges the Christian faith, drawing on the Bible but, as with the “The RDP of the Soul” Policy Discussion Document, he acknowledges the role of a plurality of religions in South Africa’s public realm. Rather surprisingly, given the politically conservative, historically right wing ‘fundamentalist’ stance of the Rhema Bible Church, Zuma is overt about the prophetic liberation tradition in which the ANC stands. Unfortunately, however, he does not follow through on this trajectory, choosing to downplay the national priority for decent work and focusing instead on narrower moral dilemmas such as abortion and same-sex marriage. Such is the dominance of the moral religion trajectory in our country since liberation (West 2008) that Zuma, like Mbeki and “The RDP of the Soul” Policy Discussion Document, cannot even imagine the religious sector talking back to the ANC or government about economic matters!

And though a few days later Zuma would again return to his more casual and robust religious discourse, when he claimed at a meeting with religious and traditional leaders in Mafikeng that the church’s support for the ANC was an “unequivocal biblical declaration that if God is for us who can be against us” (Sapa 2009b), there have been a number of occasions when Zuma has demonstrated this more nuanced approach to religion in the public realm, including when he

addressed both the International Pentecost Church (Zuma 2009b)¹² and the Muslim Sultan Bahu Fete (Zuma 2009c)¹³ on 12 April 2009, and the Indian Christian community in Phoenix on 14 April 2009 (Zuma 2009d).¹⁴

Jacob Zuma has clearly brought religion back into the public realm. And while his casual comments indicate a rather rough use of religion, his recent speeches as president of the ANC demonstrate a more nuanced understanding of the role of religion in the public realm. Positioning the ANC more clearly within the prophetic liberation religious tradition than either Thabo Mbeki or “The RDP of the Soul” Policy Discussion Document did, he nevertheless, like them, ends up envisaging a quite narrow role for religion in the public sphere of South African society.

Conclusion: post-Polekwane religion and the New Jerusalem

My car-wash companion has proven to be an astute analyst; we are indeed entering a period after Polekwane when religion will be more evident in the public realm. Quite how religion will be deployed within the ANC and quite how the religious sector will be dealt with now that they have secured the 2009 elections, remains to be seen.

The 52nd National Conference of the African National Congress in December 2007 in Polekwane has ushered in more than a renewal of the alliance between the African National Congress, the South African Communist Party, and the Congress of South African Trade Unions. Just as the visit of ANC president Josiah Tshangana Gumedede to the Soviet Union in 1927 prompted both a vision for a united front of African nationalists, communists, and workers in South Africa, so too it prompted him to use religious imagery to imagine this alliance: “I have seen the world to come, where it has already begun. I have been to the new Jerusalem” (ANC 1982).¹⁵ Polekwane has ushered in a new era, it would seem, in the ANC’s deployment of religion in the public realm, and though the general trajectory is clear, the breadth of the trajectory appears to have widened, providing space for prophetic

¹² On this occasion he quoted a number of texts from the Bible.

¹³ On this occasion he quoted from the Holy Qur’an.

¹⁴ On this occasion he referred extensively to Gandhi.

¹⁵ My invocation of Gumedede is not idiosyncratic for, in a Discussion Document of the African National Congress National General Council in 2005 on the ANC’s experience of unity and diversity, Gumedede is explicitly mentioned (ANC 2005:3-4), as he is in the post-Polekwane period in an article by the ANC’s chief whip, Nathi Mthethwa, when Gumedede is again cited as an example of an ANC leader who promoted “the revolutionary alliance in South Africa” (Mthethwa 2008:5-6).

elements to surface and perhaps even change the direction of the trajectory itself.

In his Nelson Mandela lecture Thabo Mbeki also alluded to the New Jerusalem, drawing on William Butler Yeats's poem "The second coming". Mbeki appeals to his audience not to allow a "monstrous beast" to be born from South Africa's New Jerusalem (Mbeki 2006a:13). For our country not to "fall apart", he argues, "we must in the first instance, never allow that the market should be the principal determinant of the nature of our society" (Mbeki 2006a:14). Mbeki is right about the market, but he is wrong when he goes on to argue that it is the "Church Theology" trajectory in the Bible that is sufficient to direct the path of our nation. While it is true "that the Biblical injunction is surely correct, that 'Man cannot live by bread alone' [Matthew 4:4/Luke 4:4] and therefore that the mere pursuit of individual wealth can never satisfy the need immanent in all human beings to lead lives of happiness" (Mbeki 2006a:14), it is also true that Jesus imagined a society in which all individual citizens would have their daily bread and would be free from unjust economic systems (Matthew 6:11). An RDP of the soul without an RDP of the economy is nothing more than "Church Theology" at its worst.

Works consulted

- Achebe, C 1958. *Things fall apart*. London: Heinemann.
- ANC 1982. J.T. Gumede.
http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/people/gumede_jt.html.
- ANC 2005. African National Congress National General Council 2005: Discussion Document: Unity and diversity in the ANC overview of the ANC's experience. ANC 2005 [cited 10 February 2009; available from
http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/ngcouncils/2005/unity_diversity.html].
- ANC 2006. From liberation to transformation: spiritual revolution in secular society. *Umrabulo* 27:23-29.
- ANC 2007a. International relations: a just world and a better Africa is a possibility.
- ANC (African National Congress) 2007b. Section 7: RDP of the Soul: Umrabulo.
- DA (Democratic Alliance) 2008. Jacob Zuma, Jesus, and Robert Mugabe. *Politicsweb*, 30 June 2008.
- Du Plessis, C 2008. Cope like Jesus's donkey – Zuma. *News 24*, 19 November 2008.
- Gumede, W M 2007. *Thabo Mbeki and the battle for the soul of the ANC*. Cape Town: Zebra.
- ILO (International Labour Organization), Director General 1999. Decent work. Geneva: International Labour Organization.
- IOL (Independent online) 2008a. Blasphemous to compare Zuma with Jesus.
http://www.iol.co.za/general/news/newsprint.php?art_id=nw20081201174257902C720160&sf=.
- IOL (Independent online) 2008b. Church slams Zuma remark.
http://www.iol.co.za/general/news/newsprint.php?art_id=nw20080506191857460C197862&sf=.
- Legassik, M 2007. *Towards socialist democracy*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Mbanjwa, X 2009. Pop star Zuma does it again. *The Pretoria News*, 17 January 2009, 2.
- Mbeki, T *A national strategic vision for South Africa: address by Deputy President TM Mbeki, at the Development Planning Summit, hosted by the Intergovernmental Forum* 1995 [cited 06/12/2006; available at
<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mbeki/1995/sp951127.html>].

- Mbeki, T 2003. Our country needs facts, not groundless allegations. *ANC today: online voice of the African National Congress*, 30 May – 5 June, 1-4.
- Mbeki, T 2006a. 4th Annual Nelson Mandela Lecture by president Thabo Mbeki: University of Witwatersrand, 29 July 2006 [cited 06/12/2006; available at <http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2006/06073111151005.htm>].
- Mbeki, T 2006b. The Nelson Mandela annual lecture: transcript of president Thabo Mbeki's lecture, 29 July 2006: Nelson Mandela Foundation (DVD).
- Mthethwa, N ANC 2008. *The revolutionary alliance in South Africa: ANC, SACP and COSATU: historical reflections and contemporary tasks of the African National Congress* [cited 10/02/2009; available at <http://anc.org.za/caucus/docs/notes/2008/nt0515.html>].
- Reporter, 2004. ANC will rule SA until Jesus comes back, says Zuma. *Business Day*, 15 March 2004.
- Reporter. 2006. ANC voters will be blessed – Zuma. *Sowetan*, 5 March 2006.
- Reporter. 2008. ANC to rule until Jesus comes back. *Cape Times*, 5 May 2008.
- SACP (South African Communist Party) 2006. Special edition. *Bua Komanisi! Information Bulletin of the Central Committee of the South African Communist Party*:31.
- Sapa (South African Press Association) 2007. Zuma's no pastor of ours, says church. *Mail & Guardian*, <http://www.mg.co.za/article/2007-05-08-zumas-no-pastor-of-ours-says-church>.
- Sapa (South African Press Association) 2009a. Rhema defends Zuma visit. *Mail & Guardian Online* (25 March 2009), <http://mg.co.za/article/2009-03-16-rhema-defends-zuma-visit>.
- Sapa (South African Press Association) 2009b. Zuma: If God is for us, who can be against us? *Mail & Guardian Online*, <http://www.mg.co.za/article/2009-03-18-zuma-if-god-is-for-us-who-can-be-against>.
- Saul, J S 2005. *The next liberation struggle: capitalism, socialism and democracy in Southern Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Seekings, J & Nattrass, N 2006. *Class, race, and inequality in South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Terreblanche, S 2002. *A history of inequality in South Africa, 1652-2002*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.
- Theologians, Kairos 1986. *The Kairos document: challenge to the church*. Revised 2nd edition. Braamfontein: Skotaville.

- Tromp, B & Nqiyaza, B 2008. Crowd raises Zuma to status of a deity. *The Star*, 3 November 2008, 3.
- West, G O 2008. Contending with the Bible: biblical interpretation as a site of struggle in South Africa, in Kittredge, CB, Aitken, EB & Draper, JA (eds), *The Bible into the public square: reading the signs of the times*, 101-115. Philadelphia: Fortress.
- West, G O 2009a. (forthcoming). From a Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) of the economy to an RDP of the Soul: public realm biblical appropriation in postcolonial South Africa, in Coomber, MJM (ed.), *The Bible and justice*. London: Equinox.
- West, G O 2009b (forthcoming). Thabo Mbeki's Bible: the role of religion in the South African public realm after liberation, in Brown, D (ed.), *Religion and spirituality in postcolonial South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Zapiro 2008. Hark the herald angels cringe. *Sunday Times*, 21 December 2008.
- Zuma, J 2009. Address by ANC president Jacob Zuma at the Rhema Church prayer service. ANC 2009a [cited 30 April 2009; available from <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/zuma/2009/jz0315.html>].
- Zuma, J 2009. Address by ANC president Jacob Zuma to the Easter Sunday service of the International Pentecost Church. ANC 2009b [cited 30 April 2009; available from <http://anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/zuma/2009/jz0412.html>].
- Zuma, J 2009. Speech by ANC president Jacob Zuma at the Muslim Sultan Bahu Fete. ANC 2009c [cited 30 April 2009; available from <http://anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/zuma/2009/jz0412a.html>].
- Zuma, J 2009. Speech by ANC president Jacob Zuma to the Indian Christian community. ANC 2009d [cited 30 April 2009; available from <http://anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/zuma/2009/jz0414.html>].

