

*This edition of Focus is dedicated to exploring some of the relationships between religious belief and society. In a modern and supposedly secular age, religious belief and practice have a curious and intriguing persistence – the assumption being that religion has no real place in a modern or modernising world: when it occurs, it is, no doubt, a legacy of some sort of archaic sensibility.*



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There are problems with this view, which can easily be caricatured as a species of (western) triumphalist secularism. The secular sensibility can no doubt persuade and convince us that the logic of modernity leaves no place for these archaic sensibilities. That may be so. But in killing off God, modernity may very well have forgotten about the Devil – evil not being a category readily accessible to sociologists!

How then do we understand secularism and, in a secular polity, how do we accommodate varieties of the religious experience?

Some of these dilemmas are neatly captured by the eminent historian, Michael Burleigh<sup>1</sup>, who poses two questions: “Can a society survive that is not the object of commitments to its core values or a focus for the fundamental identities of all its members?” and “Can a nation state survive that is only a legal and political shell, or a ‘market state’ for discrete ethnic or religious communities that share little by way of common values other than use of the same currency?” Burleigh is here, of course, concerned with the issues of identity in a highly secularised Europe. But these questions do have relevance for us in secular South Africa where religious belief persists, notwithstanding the forces of modernity, materialism and secularism.

All our contributors wrestle with the problem of belief in a secular age.

Anthony Egan, somewhat provocatively, begins by posing the question, “Does God have a vote?” He sketches out the broad themes of the secular imagination and gives a brief outline of the historical hostility of organised Christianity to democracy, but also of the (Catholic) Church’s sometimes very fumbling attempts to come to terms with modernity.

David Bilchitz’s article explores the tension between religious belief and equality in the liberal constitutional setting in contemporary South Africa. What underpins Bilchitz’s argument is the importance – he in fact regards it as an *imperative* – that all religious associations need to embody an ethos that respects the equal dignity of all individuals.

This theme is taken up by Abdulkader Tayob in his article on *Islam and Democracy* in South Africa. For Tayob, Foucault’s concepts of utopian

and heterotopic spaces capture the complexity of the dilemmas which confront all believers in their relations with a secular liberal constitutional order.

Iraj Abedian pursues a similar line of argument when he considers the relationship between religion and social progress. His concern is the distorting impact which ‘materialistic’ secularism has had on social, political and economic human activity.

Sibusiso Masondo extends our discussion when he considers the relationship between African Traditional Religions and secularism. Here, we face a long history of marginalisation and discrimination by missionaries, and colonial and apartheid governments. Paradoxically – from the secular perspective – the post-1994 dispensation opened up a space for African Traditional Religions, as Masondo suggests, “to have a public voice and profile”.

Ivor Chipkin and Annie Leatt pursue a parallel line of enquiry in their discussion on *Religion and Revival* in post-apartheid South Africa. They suggest that an important paradigm shift has taken place which is best encapsulated by the phrase *the return of religion*. Of particular interest are their discussions about Pentecostalism and of post-apartheid Afrikaners.

Maria Frahm-Arp further explores Pentecostalism and wonderfully illustrates its ongoing appeal in her discussion on the *Making of Female Managers*.

Francis Davis brings our discussion on religion and society to a close by offering a perspective from the UK. For Davis, religious belief is an important contributor, even if indirectly, to the formation of social capital. How then do policy makers mobilise this social capital?

This edition includes a review article by Claudia Braude of Hugh Lewin’s recently published *Stones Against the Mirror*. Braude explores, with great sensitivity, the issues of responsibility, activism and justice. Reviews by Lewis Mash of Gillian Godsell’s *Helen Suzman*, and by William Gumede on du Toit and Kotze’s *Liberal Democracy and Peace in South Africa*, are also included. We end with Richard Steyn’s tribute to the late Patrick Laurence, a long-serving editor of *Focus*.

#### NOTES

1 Burleigh, M. *Earthly Powers*, United Kingdom: Harper Collins, 2005