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Religion and Revival in post-apartheid South Africa

Until the 1960s, social scientists were convinced that the future of religion was bleak. They argued that as the world became increasingly industrialised and urban, and as modes of social life became more bureaucratised and individualistic, religion would fade from view. They thought that fewer people would find religion a meaningful part of their lives, and religion would have no place in public and political life.

This view of religion has informed the majority of international and South African sociological scholarship until recently. Working with this assumption, scholars have often dismissed the religion they encountered as some kind of archaic remnant. This perspective has changed in the last decade.

In this article we will briefly address the many empirical and theoretical critiques of this earlier secularising view of religion. To do this, we look at what has come to be known as the “return of religion” – the new ways in which religion is both important to individuals and communities, and also the return of religion in the analysis of society, politics, and subjectivity. The major part of the article will then develop this in relation to South Africa. We argue that, throughout processes of modernisation, South Africa has remained a deeply religious place. In addition, both apartheid and religious anti-apartheid activists determined an important place for religion, and particularly Christianity, in public and political life.

What then is the current status of religion in South Africa? As we will show in this article, South Africa now has a secular constitutional dispensation and religion is no longer as distinctive a feature of South African national public life as it was before 1994. But religion has continued to be just as important to the majority of South Africans in the last two decades. We provide a brief overview of religious adherence. And new forms of religiosity are becoming increasingly prominent. Pentecostal Christianity is one such form, and this article speaks to its presence and effects in local communities.

The return of religion

Secularisation was mainly theorised in the Europe of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. There, levels of individual religiosity have been declining for many decades. European scholars clearly thought this pattern would and ought to be emulated in the rest of the world.

As it turns out, Europe is the exception rather than the rule. The first evidence for this came from the USA where scholars demonstrated that high levels of

urbanisation, commerce, and modernity can coexist with high levels of individual religiosity as well as a significant public presence of religion, including in political rhetoric and nationalism.

It has become increasingly apparent that the rest of the world is much more like the USA than Europe in this respect, and theories of secularisation cannot take the particular history, politics and experience of religion in Europe as a model for all human society. Most sociologists of religion have abandoned the secularisation thesis. Jose Cassanova has called this a Khunian paradigm revolution; “it is not reality itself which has changed, as much as our perception of it... .”¹

This paradigm shift has come to be known as ‘the return of religion’. This has two meanings. First, religion has returned to our analytical categories and is once again a legitimate subject for research in the social sciences. Secondly, religion has returned to prominence in areas in which it was once considered marginal.

Aside from these overtly political contestations, social movements across the world have also challenged areas of private and family law in the name of religion; around termination of pregnancy for example, and equal rights for same sex couples

None of the major world religions has experienced a decline since the Second World War. And from the 1960s onwards, new forms of religion have been developed. These include significant transformations of older religious traditions – the increasing prominence of Pentecostalism in Christianity and pietism movements in Islam. In addition, new religious forms have emerged, New Age, the spread of Asian religions across the world, astrology, and various ‘spiritual’ traditions.

Aside from these religious movements and the more or less stable demographics of personal faith, religion has once again come to be an important presence in public and political life. As Cassanova² notes, the late 1970s and 1980s witnessed a remarkable return. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was its first announcement. It was followed by the rise of Catholic Solidarity in Poland, new roles for Catholicism in the Sandinista revolution, the emergence of the religious right and Protestant Fundamentalism as a political force in the USA, and the presence of religious elements to a number of conflicts in the Middle East, Northern Ireland, Yugoslavia and India. Along with this came the development of liberation theologies, including in South Africa. Aside from these overtly political contestations, social movements across the world have also challenged areas of private and family law in the name of religion; around termination of pregnancy for example, and equal rights for same sex couples³.

Religion in South Africa

It is clear that in South Africa, like in the many places in which modernity was introduced through colonialism and missions, modernisation was not accompanied by an increasing level of atheism. Quite the contrary; Christianity is a significant part of both our colonial and apartheid histories.

It is clear that in terms of the fates of personal faith, South Africa has been a deeply religious country – religious in African customary terms, in Christianity, and a significant minority of other religious traditions – particularly Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism.

Religion has also been very significant to public and political life. The apartheid

regime politicised Christianity in a number of ways; through the National Party's close association with the Dutch Reformed Church, through apartheid's political theology of race, and through Christian national education. Opposition to apartheid also drew heavily on Christianity. The development of liberation theology in the 1970s gave a platform to the prominence of Church and Muslim leaders in the 1980s when they became politically active as the state cracked down on the leadership of civic and political organisations.

The negotiations that framed South Africa's new democracy also paid attention to the place religion does and ought to take in the country. The negotiators acknowledged the importance of religion to the majority of South Africans and the variety of religious traditions in the country. The 1996 Constitution includes a strong right to freedom of religion, and the possibility of the presence of religion in state institutions under conditions of fairness and neutrality.

A variety of forms of customary religious marriage are also provided for. The drafters of the constitution were also very clear to exclude reference to Christianity in the preamble, and made a point of the importance of state neutrality towards various religions in law. During important state events, religious leaders of a variety of traditions play a role. At the same time, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and political rhetoric often draws on the legacy of liberation theology.

According to the Census data we have, Christianity, in all its forms, is by far the largest religion in the country. It could claim the adherence of around 74 percent of the country's inhabitants in 2001.

Religion in South Africa today

The Census provides the most thorough and reliable data on religious affiliation in South Africa. Unfortunately these data are somewhat out of date now. There was a complete census in 1996 and 2001, and it is possible to look at religious affiliation in these two surveys. The next census is only due in 2011. It will be interesting to see how much affiliation may have changed in the last important decade.

According to the Census data we have, Christianity, in all its forms, is by far the largest religion in the country. It could claim the adherence of around 74 percent of the country's inhabitants in 2001. Mainline churches, otherwise known as English speaking churches, are Protestant denominations. They include Methodists (6.7 percent of the population), Anglicans (3.8%), Lutherans (2.5%) and Presbyterians (1.9%). Reformed church membership declined from 1996 to 2001. The Dutch Reformed Church, for example, had approximately 3 million adherents in 2001, half a million less than 5 years previously. It is likely that more have since left the church. The number of black reformed church members almost halved over the same period. The Roman Catholic Church had around 3.5 million members in 2001.

The other main Christian denominations are the African Independent Churches (AIC). From the census data it appears that membership of these churches decreased from about 34 percent in 1996 to just under 20 percent in 2001. This is a massive drop in numbers, and it will be necessary to wait for the next census to confirm the scale of this change. If the census data are to be believed, the AIC aggregation masks the fact that the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) grew its membership by around one million (to nearly 5 million) over the five year period, consolidating its dominance amongst AICs.

The other significant change to Christian demographics has been the rapid rise of Pentecostal Charismatic Christianity. In 1996 the census category Pentecostal-Charismatic churches made up 5.4 percent of the population with 2.2 million adherents. This is probably already significantly higher than it would have been five years previously. By 2001 they had grown by 1.5 million adherents to make up 8.2 percent of the population. This growth does not adequately capture the increasing Pentecostalisation of Christianity in South Africa. The census figures reveal a fragmentation of Christian denominations as people moved away from big established churches into smaller apostolic and charismatic groups. If the census is accurate, the Apostolic Faith Mission Church, for example, which had a membership of 2.2 million in 1996 declined over these five years to just 250,000. A catch-all category of 'other Apostolic' on the other hand grew from 3.5 million in 1996 to 5.6 million in 2001. And the even less definite 'other Christian churches' category more than doubled from 1.3 million to nearly 3 million. Most of these smaller 'other' churches are likely to be Pentecostal. This probably points to a net increase of around 4 million Pentecostals in just five years.

According to the 2001 census, Muslims made up just less than 1.5 percent of South Africans; about 650,000 people. There were 550,000 Hindus. There were a little more than 75,000 Jews, about 0.2 percent of the population. A catch-all category of "other faiths" which include "Buddhists, Taoists, Confucians, New Age, Jehova's Witness and Baha'i" grew from nearly 200,000 in 1996 to nearly 300,000 by 2001.

Some of the detail of these changes can be mapped using the *South African Christian Handbook* published for the years 1986/7, 1996/7 and 1999/2000. In 1986/7 the editor notes a move towards charismatic churches "which are growing at a rate of a new church every 2.1 days."⁴ Ten years later she reports that the Baptist Union, for example, has "planted no less than 110 churches in the past five years."⁵ She notes a major shift from large denominations to "small, mainly charismatic churches, many of which are autonomous..." This was accompanied by a rise in the number of international missions to South Africa, particularly from the USA, and an explosion of South African missions to other African countries.

The remaining South Africans are varied in their religious affiliation. Each of the other religions is relatively small. According to the 2001 census, Muslims made up just less than 1.5 percent of South Africans; about 650,000 people. There were 550,000 Hindus. There were a little more than 75,000 Jews, about 0.2 percent of the population. A catch-all category of "other faiths" which include "Buddhists, Taoists, Confucians, New Age, Jehova's Witness and Baha'i" grew from nearly 200,000 in 1996 to nearly 300,000 by 2001. The 1996 census for the first time included "African Traditional Belief" as an option in the survey sheet. That year just 17,097 people identified with this category. In 2001 however, the number had increased to nearly 126,000. All the figures for the "minority religious" listed above should be treated with caution since sampling errors are likely to be greatest where the population proportion is so low.

What about atheists? In 1996, nearly 11.5 percent of the population – 4.6 million people – said that they had "no religion". Another 9 percent or 3.75 million refused to answer the religion question. By 2001, far fewer people refused, and the number of people who reported that they had no religion increased to 6.7 million or 15 percent of the population. It is possible that people are now more open about their non-religiosity than before. While it is true that South Africa is a religious country, it is also true that a significant proportion of people don't claim affiliation to a religious tradition.

There have been a few other surveys which add to that picture. The most recent HSRC social attitudes survey reports that 80 percent of South Africans identify themselves as Christian.⁶ Aside from identification, it is clear that the intensity of religious practice is high amongst participants. A little over half the population attends religious services at least once a week, and another twenty five percent at least once a month. Even given the likelihood that this is over-reported, these are very strong indicators of religious attachment. According to the HSRC “three-quarters of the adult population express a resolute faith in the existence of God and claim that ‘Jesus is the solution to all the world’s problems.’” Nine out of ten said that they believed in “the power of prayer,” and three quarters reported that they pray at least once a day. And “[w]hile trust in many public institutions began to wane in 2005 ...there remained an overwhelming and steadfast confidence in churches and religious organisations.”⁷

Pentecostalism and the State in Africa

Does the apparent growth of Pentecostal churches in South Africa say anything more than the attractiveness of their liturgy and mode of prayer for people that are already Christians? In other words, is Pentecostalism a strictly Christian affair? There have been two major social developments on the African continent during the 1980’s and 1990’s which may be suggestive for South Africa.

What is more, many of the NGO’s operating in the development field are subsidiaries of church organisations. We might say that the church has taken-over from the state the role of linking individuals and communities to wider networks and associations.

The first was the “phenomenal growth” of Christian Churches⁸ This growth has been associated with the “precipitous decline” of African economies and marginalisation of African states. As the state in Africa either withdrew or was unable to provide education, health and other services, so this role has increasingly been assumed by church movements. What is more, many of the NGO’s operating in the development field are subsidiaries of church organisations. We might say that the church has taken-over from the state the role of linking individuals and communities to wider networks and associations. “In any major African city,” writes Gillford, “from Harare to Freetown, from Nairobi to Kinshasa, these new churches were to be found every Sunday in schoolrooms, cinemas, theatres, halls and hotel conference rooms. Some of them in the space of a few years have become mega-churches with a very high profile”⁹. We might name a few of these: Idahosa’s Church of God Mission International in Nigeria, Otabil’s International Central Gospel Church in Accra, Wutawanashe’s Family of God in Zimbabwe, Leslie’s Abundant Life in Kampala, Gitonga’s Redeemed Gospel Church in Kenya. Twenty years ago, none of them existed¹⁰.

The second striking phenomenon is the form that this growth has taken. It has been led by Pentecostal churches, often supported by American evangelicals. What has driven this development has been the “explosion” of North American missionary activities¹¹. The Florida-based Campus Crusade for Christ, for example, has a staff of over 40 000 people situated in more than 150 countries. What this means is that the theology, and sometimes even the politics, of these new churches is strongly influenced by US-based churches. What is noteworthy, in particular, is how these churches preach a gospel of ‘wealth and health’: the idea that Divine providence is evidenced by material riches. They also tend to be organised around powerful charismatic figures. It is not difficult to see the consequences for such a gospel on practices of conspicuous consumption.

More importantly, Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar suggest that these new religious movements do not simply fill the vacuum left by the decline of the formal apparatuses of the State. They have become a major political factor in their own rights. According to Ellis and ter Haar, “The religious revival in Africa can be said to reflect a concern with poor governance, expressed in a different idiom, inasmuch as new religious movements are often centrally concerned with the problem of evil in society and are looking for alternative sources of power”¹². In effect, they continue, many of these churches challenge the very bases of legitimacy of states which operate through institutions and norms of governance premised on secular and administrative/bureaucratic principles¹³.

Why has Pentecostalism proved especially popular amongst some Christians rather than others? Why, in particular, have these churches grown amongst Afrikaans-speakers and amongst the ‘Black Middle Class’? These developments suggest the growth of Pentecostal churches is embedded in broader social and political processes.

There may be something of this dynamic in South Africa as people try to come to terms with the unpredictability of South African social life: as a citizen (or customer) engaging with the public service, the existential uncertainty generated by crime, or by sickness, for young people who are unlikely to find a job in the formal economy and for those who are unemployed. Yet as much as it has become routine to describe government and its associated institutions and apparatuses in cataclysmic terms – “failed state” – the remit of the State is wider today than it was during the Apartheid period. It is more uniform

than the dozens of fragmented and parallel administrations that made up the Tricameral system and the Bantustans, even while the performance of state bodies is highly uneven, ranging from relatively effective to dysfunctional. We do not know whether patterns of religiosity in South Africa coincide with any of these variables. Moreover, it is not clear why, even if there is a deep sense of malaise in South Africa, especially with regard to the State, it should manifest religiously and take the form specifically of a Pentecostal reaction. Why has Pentecostalism proved especially popular amongst some Christians rather than others? Why, in particular, have these churches grown amongst Afrikaans-speakers and amongst the ‘Black Middle Class’? These developments suggest the growth of Pentecostal churches is embedded in broader social and political processes.

Afrikaners post-Apartheid

In *Fruit of a Poisoned Tree*, Anthony Altbeker provides a fascinating account of the trial of Fred van der Vyver and of the circumstances surrounding the murder of Inge Lotz. Fred, the former boyfriend of the beautiful Stellenbosch student was ultimately acquitted for killing her. Both he and she belonged to wealthy and respected members of the Afrikaans community in Stellenbosch. Altbeker makes a compelling case that despite the lack of evidence against him, Fred attracted suspicion, in part because of his religious practices. He had left the NG Church and had become an active member of the Stellenbosch chapter of His People church – an American based protestant church that preached a gospel of personal salvation. Altbeker writes: “Fred’s membership of His People Church was interpreted as evidence of some imbalance in his personality”¹⁴.

Yet Fred’s new religious inclination was neither isolated, nor idiosyncratic. It was part of a general movement of young, Stellenbosch students away from the Dutch Reformed Church.

What Altbeker noticed as a trend in Stellenbosch is the norm in the new Roodepoort developments. Altbeker's findings, that is, resonate very strongly with the conclusions of a Public Affairs Research Institute (PARI) study on the Western edges of Johannesburg, that young Afrikaners are abandoning the Dutch Reformed Church in favour of Pentecostal churches, often preaching a gospel of prosperity. Over the last 10 years, hundreds of thousands of mostly young men and women have crossed over the Witwatersrand to settle in the tens of thousands of townhouses that have been built during this short period. A substantial portion of this population consists of young Afrikaners leaving the West Rand towns of Krugersdorp, Westonaria, Randfontein. They have been joined by equal numbers of young Black men and women, crossing the historical boundaries of the Apartheid City from Soweto and townships further afield, like Tsakane, Vosloorus. For our purposes it is not the unprecedented racial, cultural, linguistic and even diversity of national origins that is striking about the new society emerging in Roodepoort. The growth of this new society has happened together with the growth of Pentecostal churches. To the extent that residents are practicing Christians, they are members of, or they attend, Pentecostal churches and/or services. In the case of young Afrikaans-speakers, these patterns of worship represent an abandonment of Dutch Reformed Church congregations and a repudiation of its theology.

Altbeker implies that in Stellenbosch the growth of churches like His People amongst university students represents a challenge to the Dutch Reformed Church as volkskerk, that is, as the spiritual embodiment of Afrikaners as a nation. On these terms the embrace of Pentecostalism represents a repudiation of Afrikaner nationalism.

The PARI work supports these conclusions, though it nuances them as well. It is likely that amongst Afrikaans-speaking university students at the former intellectual bastion of Afrikaner nationalism, Stellenbosch University, the embrace of Pentecostalism is as much a spiritual act as a political one. In the Roodepoort area, however, the Dutch Reformed Church is regarded as 'old fashioned'. In other words, the disavowal of the historical role of the Dutch Reformed Church as the 'nation's church' is expressed not so much politically as aesthetically. This is why the move away from the Dutch Reformed Church is accompanied by the physical movement away from the 'old fashioned' suburbs of their birth to the 'modern' townhouses over the ridge in Roodepoort. Yet the effect is the same as in Stellenbosch – to differentiate the (political and cultural) 'tastes' of this generation of young Afrikaners from those of their parents and their grandparents. But that is not all.

The embrace of Pentecostalism also allows young Afrikaners, like middle class Black South Africans, to retain basically conservative social attitudes, regarding the role of men and women in particular, without the association of Apartheid.

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Pentecostalism in South Africa, especially as it was organised through churches like Rhema, very early on disavowed Apartheid as a system of racial segregation and discrimination. Even before the Anglican and Catholic churches in South Africa – traditionally more political in their opposition to Apartheid – desegregated their congregations, Rhema was convening racially mixed services. Pentecostal theology,

therefore, was hardly deemed complicit in Apartheid, neither politically nor even socially. This is more than what could be said about the traditional churches in South Africa. Yet apart from their 'liberalism' on questions of race, the Pentecostal churches tend to preach a gospel that valorises patriarchal gender relations, especially in the home, and is hostile to homosexuality. PARI research shows that whereas during the Apartheid period conservatism constituted a chain of equivalence linking racism with homophobia with patriarchy with class exploitation, Pentecostals today have reinvented social conservatism as a legitimate *post-Apartheid* faith. This goes a long way to explain the growing attractiveness of these churches in South Africa today.

Conclusion:

To the extent that the end of Apartheid was supposed to herald a more secular age in South Africa, the persistence of religious practices is, perhaps, surprising. Alternatively, religious observance might be construed as an expression of the deep social malaise with the post-Apartheid condition. The problem with both takes is that they assume that a) secularism is the norm and b) they do not acknowledge social meanings of religious practice. Yet it is precisely these social meanings that help explain the growth and vitality of religious practices today, especially the growth of the Pentecostal churches. In the case of Afrikaners, for example, Pentecostal practices allow many people to distance themselves from Apartheid and the institutions associated with it, without forsaking their attachment to speaking Afrikaans and identifying as Afrikaners. It is important that we pay more nuanced attention to the social meanings of religious observance.

NOTES

- 1 Casanova, Jose. 1994. *Public Religions in the Modern World*, p. 11. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Froise, Marjorie, ed. 1986. *South African Christian Handbook 1986/87*, p. vii. Florida: World Vision of Southern Africa.
- 5 Froise, Marjorie, ed. 1996. *South African Christian Handbook 1996/7*. Welkom: Christian Info
- 6 Roberts, B., Kivulu, M. wa & Davids, Y.D. (eds). 2010. *South African Social Attitudes: 2nd report: reflections on the age of hope*. (South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS)). Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 11
- 8 Gifford, p. 515
- 9 Gifford, pp. 515-516
- 10 Gifford, p. 516
- 11 Gifford, p.516
- 12 Ellis and ter Haar, p. 194
- 13 Ellis and ter Haar, p. 194
- 14 Attbeker, p. 197

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