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Faith and Secularism

An African Perspective

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African Modernity

Sub-Saharan Africa presents itself as one form of modernity with its unique characteristics among many world modernities. Modern societies are marked by functional differentiation, that is, sub-systems are separated into compartments such as the state, the economy, law, medicine, technology, education, religion, the arts, etc. Africa inherited this functional differentiation from Colonial rule. The structures remained the same when the colonies metamorphosed into democratic states. African modern societies were thus secular and laicised from the very beginning. Religion did not play a dominant role over secular institutions. As a matter of fact, religion was itself a sub-system. Some African leaders insisted that politics knows no religion (Chande in Levtzion and Pouwels, 360). They were sensitive to the divisive nature of religion and ensured that it be kept at bay. Some of the institutions that were run by the churches have been taken over by the governments. Only a few private institutions such as schools, tertiary institutions and hospitals still remain in the custody of the churches. Public institutions are seen as the primary responsibility of the State. In some cases, the State even subsidises some of the private institutions run by the churches.

African modernity has on the whole not been opposed to religion. Perhaps two forms of opposition are worth noting. Radical anti-colonialists were historically deeply suspicious of missionaries whom they considered to be the religious arm of the colonialists.

Christianity and its civilising mission was seen as part and parcel of the advance of western imperialism. Socialist governments in Somalia, Angola and Mozambique were hostile to religion. But these negative attitudes have mellowed over the years as it became clear that Christianity is not a threat to political authority. Discussions on secularisation have tended to highlight the opposition, even hostility between religion and European modernity. This is understandable when the long history of reform in Europe is taken into consideration. The French revolutions mounted virulent de-Christianisation campaigns. The reform movements sought to disentangle the State from the hierarchical order which apparently enjoyed divine endorsement and to close the gap between the hierarchy and laity (Taylor, 2007, 424, 446).

Reference to God in Constitutions

There was no such similar opposition between the Church and State in Africa. This however does not mean that at present there are no tensions. In the North African States including Somalia and Sudan, Islam is the religion of the State. Some of the Constitutions refer to “Allah, the Compassionate and Merciful”. The Coptic, the Orthodox and other Christian churches maintain that the Muslim States pay lip service to freedom of religion in spite of the constitutional guarantees. Van der Vyver quotes An-Náim who says “that there are Islamic cultural impediments to the full and effective safeguards of the rights of religious minorities” (Van der Vyver, 1999, 112). Other non-Muslim countries also refer to God in their constitutions. Van der Vyver further points out that the trend now is to move away “from religiously based constitutional testimonies” (Van der Vyver, 116). He goes on to draw attention to the Constitution of Mozambique that guarantees the freedom of all citizens “to practice or *not to practice* a religion” (article 78.1). This constitution points to the acceptance of pluralism of outlooks. Religion is now a choice among many spiritual options including rejection of religious belief. This theoretical position does not necessarily point to the decline of religious belief and practice. It does, however, underline a new emerging

consciousness in Africa, that the goal of order and the promotion of the common good can be “a matter purely of human flourishing” and not as a response to some divine injunction (Taylor, 2007, 84,437).

Secularisation, a Definition

Bryan Wilson defines secularisation as “the process by which religious thinking practices and institutions lose their *significance* for the operation of the social system” (Wilson, 1998, 49). He further points out that this does not mean that religion ceases to exist. Wilson quotes Karel Dobbelaere’s definition of secularisation: it refers to “the shrinking relevance of the *values* institutionalised in church religion for the *integration* and *legitimation* of every life in modern society” (Wilson, 1998, 49).

Institutions of society are governed by their own rational principles and policies. African States are governed by democratic processes, difficulties of fairness at the polls notwithstanding. Today it would be unthinkable that anyone would expect such secular processes to be religiously endorsed or legitimated by religious authorities. These processes function independently of any religious interference. Dobbelaere’s observation that in modern society religiously endorsed moral values ostensibly play a lesser role equally applies to African societies. But then this is a contested terrain.

Now Bryan Wilson makes a song and dance about the changing nature of human knowing, about scientists’ “dependence on *ethically-neutral* investigation into the most intimate areas of human experience and relationship, of birth control, of *in vitro* fertilization, of generic engineering”. He also asserts that *rational* behaviour is required of all those who play a role in these matters. But what is considered *rational* might not necessarily be *morally* acceptable from a religious Christian viewpoint. Issues such as birth control and genetic engineering are not considered by all to be ethically-neutral. From a Christian viewpoint the sacredness of human life from its

beginning to its end, rests “on the inviolable dignity of the human person (John Paul II, Gospel of Life, 1995, no.20).

During and after colonial rule, religion in Sub-Saharan Africa did not play a legitimizing role for the State. The various societal institutions functioned independently of religion. Differentiation was, and is, the norm. Those who write about the secularisation thesis and the diminishing role of religion in public affairs are preoccupied with the history of events in Europe and America and not necessarily other parts of the world.

This specific historical background has heavily conditioned the way they assess the role of religion. Some secularists are driven by the desire “to reduce or eliminate religious agencies, beliefs and practices” even though they grudgingly admit that a *requiem* for religion is not yet about to be sung. The secularisation process in Sub-Saharan Africa is best described under the Eisenstadt’s concept of *multiple modernities* which share common traits. These traits assume different forms in different situations and are “continuous or congruent with the traditional historical civilisations” (Casanova, 2008, 106).

Religion is one of those traits that assumes a different form in the African context. It is admittedly a choice among many but cannot be reduced to “the personal, familiar, and private sphere” or relegated to the realm of private predilections” as Bryan Wilson would rather have it (Wilson, 2008, 62). Christianity and traditional, indigenous religion have always emphasised the *communitarian* character of belief. *Gaudium et Spes* highlighted the bond between the Incarnate Word and human solidarity. “God did not create man for life in isolation, but for the formation of social unity” (*Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II, no.32). The document states further that “the promotion of unity belongs to the innermost nature of the church, since she is by her relationship with Christ, both a sacramental sign and an instrument of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind” (ibid, no.24).

The social significance of religion manifests itself in both the individual and collective contribution toward the common good. Religion is intended to cultivate in men and women moral and social virtues for the betterment of the conditions of human life. Many religious organisations work hand in hand with secular organisations that share similar goals around issues of justice, poverty elimination, corruption, human trafficking, environmental challenges, care for the sick and the dying etc.

Transcendence

Any discussion on secularism in Sub-Saharan Africa will be shaped and influenced to a certain degree by secularism in Europe. The roots of secularism in Europe run deep and are complex. They stretch back to the age of Enlightenment. One of the key elements in the European version of secularism is the denial of transcendence i.e. “denying that human life finds any point beyond itself” (Taylor in Beiner and Norman, 2001, 386). In other words, human life derives ultimate meaning within itself and not from some supernatural entity or being. This position runs contrary to the beliefs firmly held by African indigenous religion, by African Christians and Muslims. African indigenous religion embraces the belief in the existence of a panoply of spirits. These spirits intervene in the lives of the living. They are propitiated through sacrifices for a variety of reasons, for good health, and for the general well-being of people. Spirit possession as a metaphor of illness continues to be a common phenomenon. Some African Christians and Muslims continue to cling to some of the traditional beliefs about spirits in spite of their faith in God and in Allah. For most African believers, there is life beyond death. Communication by means of ritual with the living-dead, attests to this persistent belief. These rituals are performed by Christians outside the church. There is undoubtedly an uneasiness and even tension between traditional belief and Christian belief. But as far as many are concerned, their attitude is summed up in the words of the Gospel: “let them both grow till the harvest” (Mt.13.30). From an African perspective, human flourishing, the overcoming of evil and suffering

and the promotion of the commonwealth are inextricably linked to the disposition of the ancestral spirits. For African Christians, saints are considered to play a pivotal, intermediary role.

This is also the case among some Muslims. But the role of spirits in human affairs in addition to God, have not been totally banished at all. They are part of an overall belief system with different emphasis according to circumstances and traditions.

Secularism in Europe

In Western secularism the denial of the transcendent and the affirmation of the self-sufficiency of human beings go hand in glove. A clear distinction evolved between the immanent and the transcendent. This distinction did not take place overnight. It matured over centuries as C. Taylor has been at pains to argue. “This very clear-cut distinction is itself the product of the development of Latin Christendom” (Taylor, 2010, 305). Firstly, there was the distinction between secular, profane or ordinary time, and the sacred, or higher time. Then, after the Reformation functions and institutions were removed from clerical authorities and transferred to lay people. Still, during the eighteenth century, God was generally understood to be the “designer” of Creation. After the French Revolution, the self-sufficiency of the *laïcité* was given prominence and religion was virtually set aside. Against this background, the secular came to refer to what Taylor calls the *immanent sphere*, the “this-worldly” concerns namely health, well-being, prosperity, security etc. The secular came to mean “this worldly affairs”, and the transcendent was considered a “human invention” forged in the imaginative minds of the clergy. Taylor asserts that people of the West have come to understand their “lives as taking place within a self-sufficient immanent order,” that this understanding of our predicament has as background, a sense of our history: we have advanced to this grasp of our predicament through earlier more primitive stages of society and self-understanding. In this process, we have come of age”. (Taylor, 2007, A Secular Age, 543).

Seen through the prism of the history of (Western) Christendom, the word “secular” is a dense expression that encapsulates several layers of meanings that have accrued during different epochs stretching at least over three centuries. Against this background, one can only surmise that Africa is only partially secularised and that the long march of secularisation still lies ahead. José Casanova rightly points out that secularisation should not be viewed “as a general universal process of human and social development” (Casanova, 2008, 102). For example, Africa still believes in the porousness of human beings, that “all thought, feeling and purpose” are not exclusively lodged in human minds only, that the spirit world is an African reality (perceived or real), that the transcendent and the immanent interlock. Africa is currently experiencing an explosion of a variety of Christian beliefs alongside the expansion of Islam. Africa thus presents itself as a different form of modernity.

The Rise of Individualism

Central to the discussion on secularism is the theme of disenchantment. The disenchanted modern world holds forth that “the only minds in the cosmos are humans”. In the enchanted world, the pre-modern world, on the other hand, meanings reside or can reside in extra humans or in things. C. Taylor then goes on to point out that the line between moral, personal agency and impersonal forces is all but “fuzzy”. In fact, there are no boundaries. “Charged objects” such as magical potions or relics can affect a cure or death. Taylor says this happened in Europe 500 years ago. But Africa is still in the relentless grip of such beliefs. It is not uncommon to find professors, doctors, nurses, priests and nuns who practise as “sangoma’s” or traditional healers – on the side, thus blurring the boundaries between modernity and traditionalism. In the enchanted world, persons are perceived as porous. Demons and ancestral spirits can possess people.

Taylor describes this as mental illness, as psychotic behaviour. (2007, *A Secular Age*, 35). In the disenchanted modern world, the self is

“bounded”, “buffered”. “As a bounded self I can see the boundary as a buffer, such that the things beyond don’t need to get to me” (2007, 36)

Now Taylor points out that the buffered, bounded self has historically been accompanied by the distinction between mind and world, between the inner and the outer self. Besides, a plethora of epistemological theories have equally accompanied the rise of the buffered subject. A rich vocabulary and language have developed in exploring “the inner realm of thought and feeling: (idem.539). Spiritual disciplines of self-examination have flourished; modern novels have engaged the theme of the subject, Romanticism decried the division within us, extolled beauty as “the fullness of unity” and protested “the tyranny of reason over feeling” (313-315). These have evolved to a point where people in the modern world see themselves as individuals. Such individuals are said to be people of breeding and education, who cherish privacy and intimacy. This entire process gives rise to individualism underpinned by virtues of discipline and responsibility. (idem.539-542).

There is a link between the emphasis on individualism and the goals of the evangelical movements in Europe which had an impact on the population. Taylor asserts that these movements contributed towards “enabling certain populations to become capable of functioning as productive, ordered agents in a new non-traditional environment”. (ibid.452). The stress was on “conversion as a personal act, undertaken for oneself, rather than as a disposition inherent in the group. The Evangelical culture promoted virtues of temperance, industriousness, discipline and ordered life. Work was seen as a divine calling. Men were expected to be educated and to be good providers. Such virtues endowed persons with the dignity of free, self-governing agents and made them responsible citizens. Max Weber describes the Protestant career as cumulative and long range, unmitigated by atonement and absolution; it centred on the individual as a self-determining agent of planned activity and moral accounting” (J. Comaroff. *Body of Power Spirit of Resistance*, 131). These virtues represented the core teaching of the Protestant ethic as embraced by

Wesley, Methodists and the Evangelicals. These popular movements were decidedly anti-hierarchical and worked towards a democratic order.

African Response

The break from the African, enchanted world is painfully slow. But so too is the loosening of the grip of the community, the family, the clan on the individual African person. Many Africans are simply proud to be identified with their clans. Literacy, schooling and university training are yet to bring about profound societal changes. The culture of education has not yet taken root to a point where society and every person sense the obligation and need for learning, training and self-construction.

African churches, Christian or Indigenous, have not embraced the theology and practice of the evangelical movements that promoted the virtues of sobriety, hard work, discipline and ordered life. Work is not seen as a divine calling. The emphasis still falls on *deliverance* and *healing*. Families do not necessarily expect their children to obtain higher education. Africa can learn a lot from the virtues of the Protestant Ethic that contributed significantly towards a secular culture. Admittedly African modernity moves at its own “speed”, at its own unique pace. Even though African modernity is functionally differentiated, it still harbours at its core the enchanted world of extra-terrestrial spirits. The upshot of this state of affairs is the tragic crippling of the human capacity to break loose from the inertia of culture and tradition. Hence the slow pace of African modernity.

Increase in Belief and Practice

One of the salient markers of European secularisation is *decline in belief and practice*. Both Dobbelaere and Wilson argue that numbers only tell a “fraction of the story” and “should not be used as indicators of laicization” (Wilson, 2008 p56-57). But statistics do speak to the visibility, meaning, value and significance of religion and can

therefore not be entirely ignored. A drastic drop in church attendance over time, across Europe, has been singled out as evidence of the irrelevance of religion in people's lives. For instance, only 10% of the population in the United Kingdom reportedly attend church. Sub-Saharan Africa presents a completely different picture. The reasons for the explosion of the African version of Christianity are linked to the root-causes of the founding of the indigenous churches. Circumstances that gave rise to these churches have not changed much in the last hundred years. It was the love-hate relationship mainly between the imperial Protestant missionaries and indigenous people that spawned a series of breakaway churches and churches that were independently founded by charismatic indigenous religious leaders. Jean Comaroff quoting A. Vilakazi says the African religious pioneers sought to wrestle the Christian "message from the messenger". (Comaroff, 1985, 196). She continues to say that "the battle was over the control of master symbols" namely baptism and communion. These key sacred signs were then naturalised as "the captured bearers of alien power". (ibid.197).

Daneel lists a whole host of other causes gleaned from other authors. In South Africa, independent churches arose as a result of social injustice due to the policy of social segregation. In the Congo the rise of the Messianic movements came about in response to a need for political expression. In West Africa, indigenous churches were a creative response in that they provided security, fellowship and spiritual guidance. Indigenous churches have flourished in tribes that practise polygamy and uphold the tradition of ancestor veneration. Some of the churches were founded as soon as the Scriptures were available in local languages. Missionaries were accused of insensitivity, of failing in love and of paternalism. Some churches were formed as a result of family or kin conflict. (Daneel, 1974,1-24). Rasmussen, quoting Welbourn, points out that these churches are mostly small, intimate groups, whose members are able to experience a true fellowship with each other. They are "a place (in which) to feel at home". It is said that they "do not regard Jesus Christ as a central figure in their faith". They emphasise the Holy Spirit presumably because of the prominent role of ancestral spirits in their worldview.

Their concern is deliverance from malign spirits rather than fasting, renunciation and absolution. (Rasmussen, 1996, xxix).

Oosthuizen points out that converts in the indigenous churches have not received a thorough catechetical instruction. These churches emphasise healing. Through the key metaphor of healing, says Comaroff, these churches highlight “the reintegration of matter and spirit, the practical agency of divine force, and the social relocation of the displaced”. (Comaroff, 1988, 176). Oosthuizen argues that “the old constitute a real, dynamic metaphysical world for them, a world in which age-old adverse forces continue to play the negative role of making people weak and ill, and of destroying life”.

“The evil spirits and demons are still real for many”. (1992 ,xxi). He further describes baptism as an act that could be understood as exorcism, healing and receiving spiritual power. These churches are also considered as anti-sorcery cults. Superstition and witchcraft run so deep among the Africans, writes Molema, that “even those who pretend to enlightenment and Christianity do not cast a shadow of doubt on the reality of witchcraft” (quoted in Comaroff, 1985,144). It is also generally accepted that the Eucharist is understood in magical rather than in symbolic terms (Comaroff, 144). The African indigenous churches are effectively *healing* churches. Africans live in a “cure seeking world” to borrow the words of MacMullen (1997, 56). People are mainly attracted to these churches because of mental, spiritual and physical healing rather than for the “atonement of sin and forgiveness of guilt” (Anderson, 1993, 137) (Draper in Berger, 2009, 271).

This discussion brings us back to C. Taylor’s discussion on the great disembedding. According to the early religion, the social group was the primary agency. The ritual is efficacious because of the collective action of the group. The self is embedded in the group. There is, in other words, “no salvation outside the group”. Now in a sense, members of the indigenous churches described above, are unable to imagine themselves outside the community. Secondly, embeddedness also implies a belief in the active role of spirits and forces as is the

case in the African churches. Thirdly, prayers and rituals concentrate on healing, prosperity, fertility and long life. What people pray for represents some kind of human good; a search for human flourishing. This triple embeddedness, according to Taylor, is characteristic of pre-modern religion. The primacy of the collective, of the social group or community in the African culture as in ritual performances, is in stark contrast with the primacy of the individual in Western modernity. The buffered identity comes along with its emphasis on personal devotion and discipline and pushes for “the distance, the dis-identification, even the hostility to other forms of collective ritual and belonging”. (Taylor, 2007, 156).

Africans on the other hand tend to see themselves as embedded in a family, clan, tribe or an institution. It is primarily one’s membership to a group and not one’s personal worth or achievement that accords a person his or her status within the group. Referring to the traditional Japanese society, Fukuyama says that an individual who seeks to assert his personal dignity and rights against the group, is subject to a social ostracism and loss of status that can be as devastating as the overt tyranny of traditional despotism”. (Fukuyama, 1992, 238). Patriarchal institutions, kingship networks, and the moral bonds of a traditional society bring security and well-being to their members. But this comes at a price. Individual freedom and aspirations are curtailed. And yet, the promotion of work, education, and economic advancement that come along with secularism – will lead to the breakdown of traditional communities. Traditional communities will break up because individuals or groups of individuals no longer share a common meaning, common understanding and aspirations as members of their community (Lonergan 1982, 79). Individuals will strive to become equal. They will naturally respond to what Fukuyama calls *thymos*, “that part of a human being that deliberately seeks out struggle and sacrifice, that tries to prove that the self is something better and higher than a fearful, needy instinctual, physically determined animal” (Fukuyama *ibid.*304). Currently, the major challenge on the African continent, is to find a healthy balance between the principles of Western rationalism and the aspirations of individuals on the one hand and the demands of community on the

other. This tension is characteristic of transitional societies. The individual, the buffered, bounded identity of the self in Western secularism goes against the description of Africans by J. Mbiti's phrase, cast in a Cartesian formula: "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (1969, 108). This tallies with the Sotho/Zulu conventional wisdom: "Motho ke motho ka batho", umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu", literally translated: a person is a person through others. Taylor has traced the history of the rich theme of the subject and the rise of individualism in the West. But in talking about the challenge to understanding the mystery of incarnation, he points out that we could not possibly do it alone, but "together we can live it more fully than any one of us could alone" (2007, 754). The emphasis is back on the value of community, of togetherness.

The African indigenous churches by and large continue then to live in an enchanted world. This is where the majority of African Christians are to be found. Some Christians in the mainline churches are equally embedded in the enchanted world, that is, in the world of spirits and forces. They also simultaneously dwell in the Christian world of the Trinity, angels, demons and saints. The traditional world of enchantment thrives alongside the evolving African modernity. Functional differentiation does not necessarily cancel out stubborn traditional, religious beliefs. A hundred years of Christianity on the African soil has not yet been able to purge traditional religious beliefs. There is mutual accommodation between secularity and the world of spirits and moral forces, between secularity and religious belief and practice.

Philip Jenkins in explaining the phenomenal increase of Christians in Africa says that the independent churches are "critical in demonstrating the real spiritual hunger that Christianity encountered and sought to fill". Secondly, Africa has a fast growing young population. The "prosperity churches" have become a big draw card. People believe that sin and spiritual impurity bring about illness, poverty and business failure. He presents figures from the Centre for the Study of Global Christianity. According to this study, Africa has 389 million Christians, Latin America 511 million, Europe 531

million, Asia 344 million. He extrapolates these figures to 2025 when Africa will have 595 million Christians. (Jenkins, 2007, 2). There is no reason to believe that the numbers of practising Christians will come down any time soon. In spite of the forces of globalisation, indigenous religious institutions and cultures appear to determine their own pace of change. Christianity in Africa is a mere hundred or a hundred and fifty years old compared to Europe of two thousand years of Christianity. The unique history of Latin Christendom and of Europe in general, has given birth to the unique form of European secularism. Consequently the word secularism could never be universally applicable to diverse historical situations outside Europe.

In establishing new indigenous churches and in breaking away from the mission churches the dignity of people was restored. But losses were also incurred. Missionary churches and societies aimed at inward conversion and the conversion of others. But they also had a strong civilizing and educational mission. They aimed at producing modern, civil, disciplined and hard-working individuals. Regrettably they came across people for whom work and self-construction “had not yet become equitable with absolute currencies as money and spirited capital”. (Comaroff, 1988, 134). After a hundred years, one could easily argue that that situation has not changed radically.

Perhaps a word on Pentecostalism is in order. It is said to be “the most rapidly expanding religious movement in the world”. It represents a quarter of the world’s Christian population. It comprises two-thirds of all Protestants. (Anderson, 2010, 2). Anderson claims that there is a correspondence between the growth of African Pentecostal churches and the decline in membership among the older churches. Figures are not provided (1993, 136). Pentecostals use mega-churches, large auditoriums or unused cinemas. They are very visible. On their own they are a statement against the decline of church attendance.

African Islam

Like African Christianity, African Islam is also a religion of Africa. Both Islam and Christianity are transnational religions. They are open to strong influences, trends and changes that take place within each specific global religion. African Islam has been openly influenced by Islamic affairs in the Middle East. Arab countries established financial institutions in various African countries. Many African Muslim students studied in the Middle East. African Islam is therefore not immune from the events, the thinking and the secularising tendencies taking place elsewhere in the Islamic world.

Historically and traditionally Islam has always held fast to the idea that “there is no distinction between the religious sphere (*al Din*) and things which concern the socio-political organisation of the state (*al-Dawla*) (Pace in Laermans, 1998, 166). In other words, the religious and the political are inextricably intertwined. This is true of the North African states, including Somalia, Northern Sudan and the Comoros. In the Sub-Saharan countries where Muslims have a significant presence or even a majority, the situation is different. For example, there was a joint opposition to colonialism in West Africa. But after independence the new African elite established a secular order. Some Muslim fundamentalists called for an involvement in politics “as a means to establish a Muslim-centred government” (Kaba in Levtzion and Pouwels, 2000, 191), (Chande in Levtzion and Pouwels, 2000, 375). There was a general resistance to pan-Islamism and pan-Arabism on the part of the political rulers who saw these developments as a threat to their power base. The emergence of Pan-Islamism coincided with the growing awareness and radicalism of Islam across the world.

The advance of Islamic radicalism in some African countries is attributed to the vision of the universal *ummah*, the common-wealth of all Muslim believers. This vision took root in the Islamic world. It motivated Muslims to embrace reform and to bring about changes in the Muslim faith and religious practices in accordance with the Quran and the Sunna. The newly trained scholars advocated a return to a

stricter practice of Islam, a return to the faith of the *salati*, the ancestors. Chande points out that for example, in Kenya the reform crusade opposed local practices such as costly mourning rites and saint veneration (Chande, 2000,350). Diagne observes that Sufism, (the mystical aspect of Islam) “sought to penetrate the legal aspect of devotion to the *Shoykh*, the marabout (guide, master) and obedience to his commands” (Diagne, 2004, 380). Historically, Sufism is the form of Fraternities, Orders or Brotherhoods. These fraternities elevated the Charismatic saints. Clan ancestors were seen as comparable with Muslim saints. The modern Islamic reformers promoted a “disenchanted” worldview where the belief in ancestors and the veneration of Muslim saints is seriously challenged.

Muslim holy men symbolised a certain mixing or symbiosis of Islam and African traditional belief. Ordinary people consulted the holy men for appropriate amulets and prayer. Soares points out that, for example, in Mali that has between 70%-90% Muslims in a population of 9 million, there are spirit societies. Both Christian and Muslim Malians are involved in spirit possession and mediumship for purposes of “good health, prosperity, or simply to make sense of the world” (Soares, 1999, 231).

It is interesting to observe that there were and there still are some who believe that Islam continues to spread in Africa because of “the connection assumed to exist between creed and colour.” Kaba writes that “ethnicity and “Muslim-ness” have been so closely identified and have interacted so thoroughly that they have become inseparable components in many communities” (Kaba, 2000, 197). This of course, goes against the grain if the catholicity of the vision of the *ummah* is taken into consideration.

Islam in Africa has been further strengthened by the fact that many countries are members of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC). Local Muslim organisations also benefit from foreign Islamic organisations and foreign Islamic governments. These helped to finance universities, mosques, schools, clinics, scholarships, publications, etc. In different countries, Muslim communities have a

public voice through Judicial Councils, Cultural Associations and Welfare Societies. Some of these associations are transnational.

In West Africa, Islam has experienced a strong resurgence and vitality. In East African countries, whilst it has a strong presence, there has been on-going dissatisfaction with the apparent discrimination against Muslims in favour of certain dominant ethnic groups and Christianity. Muslims were excluded from senior government positions in some cases. Another case of prejudice in Kenya showed itself when Muslim girls were barred from school for wearing the *hijab* (headscarf) (Chande, 2000, 351). This was an attempt to enforce the African version of the French *laïcité* (secularism) which sparked a furore in France when similar incidents were considered to challenge the very secular constitutional principles of the French Republic. (Scott, 2007, 21-40), (Taylor, 2010, 314).

Prejudice notwithstanding, Muslims made significant inroads into the business sector, in trade and transport industries, real-estate and in the informal economic sector. These business initiatives enhanced the social status of the Muslims and made Islam an attractive religion among the local people. Inspired by their religion and indeed by secular interests, many Muslim women are involved in works of charity, in the formal economy and in professional careers. This has enhanced the status of women. Many are reported to go on the *umra* pilgrimage to Mecca (Kaba, 2000, 190-197). Professional women are a challenge to the patriarchal Muslim society. The lack of access to education has been a long-standing grievance among Muslims in various countries.

But this situation has changed significantly. Muslims agitated for parity between Christians and Muslims. Many young Muslims received scholarships to study in the Gulf region. Education and significant business involvement facilitated the participation of African Muslims in modern life. This also contributed in no small measure to the vigorous growth of Islam. Kaba concludes that “such fervour has shattered the commonly held assumption that religion

would decline under the pressure of modernisation and secularism” (Kaba, 2000, 204).

Religious diversity in Africa like elsewhere, poses a stern challenge to interreligious dialogue and mutual acceptance or tolerance. Dialogue on religious differences is conditional by power relations. Saba Mahmood suggests that it is incumbent on the religious group with a majority of followers to start with “an internal accounting of how this historical privilege structures the possibility of communication across difference (Mahmood, in Warner, 2010, p298).

African Modernity and its Challenges

Sub-Saharan Africa by virtue of embracing secularism has proven to have made a remarkable break with its past. And yet, it continues to be steeped in traditional beliefs which hold it back. Stubborn cultural impediments obstruct progress. Even where enlightenment appears to have gained some victory, the traditional mind set is still evident. The values, virtues and blessings of secularism have been hesitatingly adopted. Africa has not moved with full speed to work relentlessly for peace, prosperity, growth, equality, participation and political stability. “These-worldly” goals are also fully embraced by religious believers. The face of Africa continues to be scarred by conflicts, wars, severe poverty, corruption, disease, unemployment, economic instability and lack of self-sufficiency. There is above all a debilitating lack of political will on the part of African leadership.

Secularism is a condition in which religious transformation has taken place. Taylor argues that religion can strengthen the social order by “inculcating the right principles” and “by generating the right moral motivation” (Taylor, 2010, 307). Now in the West, “the training in a disciplined, sober, industrious life” became second nature for vast numbers of ordinary citizens and helped “to shape both the instrumental character of modern secular society and its productivity” (Warner et al. 2010, 16).

In Africa, this radical transformation is partially obstructed by the ideas of the traditional belief system which also have insinuated themselves into African Christianity. Belief in ancestral spirits, in spirit-possession and performances of blood-sacrifices, still abound. These religious ideas have been woven into the daily lives of people. Almost a contradiction in terms, in Africa, the scientific and the technological are found side by side with the magical and the superstitious. Fifty years of widespread education has not yet broken the back of traditional beliefs. The understanding of the self as “porous” is still rampant. The understanding of the self as “bounded, buffered, disciplined and responsible” is still seriously compromised. The selves are conceived as embedded in their social matrix. Operating outside the collective is still not yet part of ordinary African living. Western Christianity has travelled a long way to reach a point where “inwardness” and not merely external rituals, become a feature in the spirituality of the individual person. This position is reinforced by secularity which upholds the values of personal commitment and responsibility. Africa’s emphasis on the collective or community needs to be based on a transformed conception of the self and not exclusively on the “natural” or presumed membership of the group. Modern institutions demand personal commitment and loyalty in order to create common identities (Taylor, 2010, 316). African states need strong common identities which transcend family, or tribal identities. Such a demand leads to a transformation of some traditional form of self-conception.

Taylor dissipates the belief or idea that secularism and religion are in opposition to each other. This is not necessarily the case. Secularity for Taylor “is a matter of the whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search takes place” (2007, 3). It is thus within the context of secularity that many forms of religiosity have emerged and flourished in Africa, easily dwarfing the mainline churches. The choice of religious belonging is still by large bound to confessional societies or institutions rather than to the newer forms of spiritual life, religious and non-religious. It has been pointed out that secularity has changed religion “from a set of rites, rituals and liturgies to a set of beliefs in a set of propositions”

(Mahmood, 2010, 283). This is certainly not the case in the majority of the African Independent churches. This is an area that is sorely in need of research. For example, in Pentecostalism, experience and practice is “more important than dogmatic formulations”. There are also questions whether African Independent churches are part of the global Pentecostal movement (Anderson et.al.2010, 24, 4). A second example is from the African Independent church known as the Shembe church, (the Nazarite), in South Africa. Vilakazi quotes a verse in Sundkler’s translations:

“I believe in the Father
And in the Holy Spirit
And in the communion of the Nazarites.”

According to Vilakazi, the Son (Jesus Christ) is not mentioned because according to Zulu ideas, if the Son were mentioned, this would “bring about a diminution in the importance of the Father” (Vilakazi et al 1986, 74-75).

Lastly, *In Dilemmas and Connections*, Taylor makes a novel leap on the discussion on secularism. He has shifted his focus from an understanding of secularism as “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged to one in which it is understood to be one option among others” (2007,3). Now he says the model in use is wrong. Secularism has to do not with the relation of the state and religion, but rather with the (correct) response of the democratic state to diversity” (2010,310). He presents a three-principle model of secularism. The goals sought by secularism are: (1) *Religious liberty* including the freedom not to believe. (2) *Equality* between people of different faiths. (3) *Fraternity*. This he interprets as the obligation to give a hearing to all spiritual families. The State is expected to be neutral in order to be even-handed to all. This is a novel way of presenting the challenges of secularism. It has certainly removed religion from the centre stage of the discourse. It relocates the discussion on the duties of the state and its responsibility towards the rights of citizens both believers and non-believers alike. This is a formidable challenge in Africa where political parties seek to woo

ethnic or religious groups for their vote. Part of the challenge is that ethnic, tribal, cultural and religious divisions run deep. And yet modern democratic states demand an identity that transcends these traditional divisions.

Secularism, Christianity, Islam and other religions came to Africa bearing many gifts. Secularism, among its many gifts, offers a new and fresh context of understanding why some choose to believe and others choose not to believe.

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“Faith in the Face of Secularism”

**The Resilience of a Besieged Spirituality:
African Religion in an Age of Secularisation**

LAURENTI MAGESA¹

Introduction

There was a time, approximately fifty years ago, when a leading scholar of African Religion² could introduce his book on the subject with the bold assertion: “Africans are notoriously religious.” He noted in explanation that “each [African] people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices.” As he put it, “Religion permeates into all the departments of [African] life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it.” Consequently, he argued that in Africa, knowledge of a given people’s “religious systems” amounts to knowledge of the people in question.³ Presumably, for this savant, the reverse would also hold true, at least to some extent: namely, that knowledge of a given people is in general inseparable from knowledge of their religion. In other words, he sees social data about a community as indivisible from that of its religious system. According to him, the two are a composite reality. Practically no student of African Religion worth the name is unfamiliar with this assertion, regardless of one’s position on the issue in the intervening years. The Reverend John S. Mbiti, its initial articulator in the now classic book *African Religions and Philosophy*, remains a universally respected authority on the subject.

Not everyone, of course, agrees entirely with Mbiti’s audacious claim concerning the notoriety of African peoples in religious matters, the

assumption that they are “inherently” religious.⁴ Nevertheless for most of his disciples over the decades, and also for many of his academic colleagues in the study of African Religion,⁵ the strength of this contention has varied little. In most African scholarship, for instance, the description of the essential characteristics of African Religion and spirituality have remained fundamentally constant, basically that African culture or civilisation and African Religion are all but identical: the culture is the religion and the religion is the culture. The indispensable elements espoused by both consist in the belief that the Divine Existence and that Its claims on humanity are indisputable. These divine claims, according to African spirituality, are deemed to be self-evident among all human beings. The only difference from one people to another, as African spirituality sees it, relates only to the details, that is to say, to the precise nature of the divine intervention in the world: what concrete demands does the divine place on humanity and the universe, on the one hand, and, on the other, how do different human communities appropriate and respond to them through particular codes of behaviour and rituals. In brief, it is accepted that religious traditions are different and that this difference is legitimate.

The general social-spiritual-religious environment among most Africans is, consequently, that religious belief underlies their life and activity. The most ridiculous thing for anyone in his or her right mind to do among most Africans would be to deny the existence of that pervasive and pervading Power that is believed to sustain the universe and, indeed, to make all existence possible. Obviously, this Power is referred to by different names to denote different functions or forms of power in the universe – *Muumba* - moulder (Swahili), *Imana* - organizer (Rwanda-Burundi), *Unkulunkulu* - most powerful/greatest (Zulu), *Udumakade* - ancient/of days and days (Zulu), *Uzivelele* – self-existent (Zulu), *Jok* - spirit of the universe (Luo), *Endandala* - the unknown (Kongo), and so on. But all of these designations and more indicate that, in a word, which Ogbu U. Kalu, for example, identifies as the spiritual Principle that renders the universe “alive,” that makes possible and necessary “the continuity of life and human relationship

beyond death,” and enables “the unbroken bond of obligations and the seamless web of community.”⁶

Scholars of African Religion have spent much study time since Mbiti’s contention variously elaborating on the codes of behaviour and rituals that distinguish different African communities.⁷ Depending on the orientation of the particular scholar, some in their scholarship have emphasised the differences in African spiritualities, seeing in them a categorically pluralistic and unbridgeable character. Others, without at all denying the divergences, have nevertheless seen a basic homogeneity in these religious behaviours and rituals, thus justifying the conception of a unified African spirituality and religion. The debate on this issue continues, though the weight of the evidence today leans toward the latter opinion. There is increasing recognition that there exists an internal structure in the spirituality of different African peoples south of the Sahara – pastoralists, agriculturalists, and the majority of city dwellers, especially the lower classes – that makes it also a single unified reality. I should mention right away that the perspective of those postmodernist scholars who deny the existence of distinctive cultures, spiritualities or religions in the world (which they refer to as meta-narratives or grand stories) is accepted by some, but it does not concern us here.⁸ In view of the brief review just presented concerning the nature of African spirituality and civilisation, I accept as my starting point the anthropological, philosophical and empirical fact of African culture and religion.⁹

Notwithstanding this, questions must be and are asked today about the claims and assertions about the nature of the religiosity and spirituality of African peoples. The intention or goal is not necessarily to reject them out of hand; rather, it is to attempt to understand them deeper. In how far, if at all, do they still hold true in the contemporary African social and religious scene, or, if not, why and in what way has the situation changed? The premise of enquiry that we follow here is that it is not possible to appreciate adequately any human reality, least of all the religious beliefs and practices of a people at any given time, without taking as fully as possible into account the physical and social environment in which these realities are expressed, particularly if

there have been significant shifts in society. We need to investigate whether and in what way such mental and socio-cultural shifts have affected assumed forms of belief so as to appreciate correctly current forms of religious expression.

Development of Secularisation/Secularism

The concept(s) in context

Several levels of the meaning of the concept of Secularisation have been identified, for instance by C.J. Sommerville.¹⁰ Although distinct, they are not completely separate from one another. The level that concerns us most, however, has to do with religion in relation to comparatively large populations, where “Secularisation refers to broad patterns of societal decline in levels of religiosity.”¹¹ In this sense, “Secularisation is the transformation of a society from close identification with religious values and institutions toward non-religious (or "irreligious") values and secular institutions.” This is based on the theory that “as societies ‘progress’, particularly through modernisation and rationalisation, religion loses its authority in all aspects of social life and governance.”¹² In this sense, Secularisation has traditionally geographically been associated with the industrialised regions of Europe and America where there is greater reliance on the empirical sciences, and human reason rather than religious belief as foundations of cultural life. Moreover, cultural emphasis is more on individual that communal identity and *proximate* rather than *ultimate* concerns.¹³

The present rationalistic and individualistic perspective of Euro-American cultural ethos finds its immediate origin in the ideas of the Enlightenment of the 18th century, itself a social extension of the resurgence of learning in language, literature, philosophy and the arts in Europe between the 14th and early 17th centuries, for which reason it came to be called the Renaissance.¹⁴ Arising from the intellectual and social achievements of the Renaissance, what underpinned the Enlightenment period was essentially a reaction against the mindless and abusive domination of faith and religion over the people by a

corrupt, decadent and immoral clergy and other secular aristocracy that was at its peak, but had dominated European life since the Middle Ages. The Enlightenment was thus a search for complete rationality, accordingly called the Age of Reason. The movement turned the tables upside down to make reason and pragmatism, not God, faith or religion, the exclusive touchstones of mature humanity. Faith and religion came to be viewed no longer as elements of human fulfillment but of alienation of the human person from him or herself. Secularisation from this perspective meant the assertion of the autonomy of the human person (the rational individual) and society (the rational human community) from dependence on any supernatural being, God or gods. “Humanity has come of age” was the mantra of this intellectual and social movement. Humanity could handle the universe without reference to God, it claimed. The decline of religious in preference to non-religious outlook on life was under way.

The Enlightenment inspired radical, practical changes in society too, especially in economic and political organisation. In economics there is no doubt that it motivated the Industrial Revolution which began in the mid-18th century, in 1733 in England with the invention of the cotton mill. In politics, the success of Enlightenment was subsequently epitomised by the American Declaration of Independence (July 4, 1776) the United States Bill of Rights (December 15, 1791), the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789/1793), and the Polish-Lithuanian Constitution (May 3, 1791). Among other things, all of these documents legally removed the direct influence of religion from civil affairs. This is usually referred to as the separation of church and state. It constitutes a concrete symbol of Secularisation as “*differentiation*: a process in which the various aspects of society, economic, political, legal, and moral, become increasingly specialised and distinct from one another.”¹⁵

Although often used interchangeably, there is a subtle but important distinction between “Secularisation” and “secularism.” In the sense above, Secularisation may be a positive development for both church

and society. Carried to the extreme, however, Secularisation becomes secularism, and implies the desire and attempt to remove faith and religion altogether from individual consciousness as well as from the public square. The perfect expression of extreme secularism in this sense was embodied in the ideology of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia (1917) which created the now defunct USSR (the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) of Russia and Eastern Europe. Here, as well as in Maoist China later, religion was by law proscribed. It was granted no role at all in society, even on a personal level. Here faith was perceived to represent an irrational, superstitious idea, a form of slavery to be legally uprooted. In a foundational statement for secularism worldwide, Karl Marx had in 1843 expressed his disdain of faith and religion as follows:

Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again. But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man – state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual point d'honneur, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realisation of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion. Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. *Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is,*

*therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.*¹⁶

Phenomenology of globalisation

It seems clear that secularisation/secularism is a phenomenon that is facing religious belief worldwide. In one way or another, it touches all organised religion, including Christianity and Islam. It also encounters different reactions and responses from each religion, or even from different strata within the same religious systems. Faced with the phenomenon, some people have adopted one or the other of two extremes: either they have totally embraced secularism, thus completely rejecting all claims of religious belief, or they have withdrawn without question inwards into the bosom of the claims which their religious beliefs espouse, which tend to exclude or subordinate secular reality, thus taking on the character of what we would refer to today as fundamentalism. Most people, however, remain somewhere in between the spectrum of the two extremes. Our purpose here is first of all to try to understand how the phenomenon of secularisation or secularism relates to African religious belief or, in more precise terms, African spirituality.

One of the biggest influences – some, indeed, describe it as a challenge – to African Religion or spirituality as Mbiti portrayed it is said to consist in the rapid spread of Secularisation and secularism in the form of globalisation. The century in which we are living is unique in many ways. More than at any other time in human history, there are now practically no barriers against political, economic and socio-cultural movements and interactions among peoples and nations across the globe. Thanks mainly to mass human contact made possible by transportation and information technology, the saying that no one, no nation, or no people is a self-contained island¹⁷ is now something that is not only figuratively true but factual and experiential. Whatever nuances are used to describe “globalisation,” this is the core meaning of the phenomenon. It implies the rapid, uninhibited, and often nebulous relocation of people and ideas from

one place and society to another. On the microcosmic level, the same thing happens at an even faster pace within societies and communities. Regardless of whether it takes place on the global or local levels, however, globalisation impacts every area of human life – be it political, economic, social, or religious.

Obviously, globalisation affects different people and locations indifferently but, fundamentally, its dynamics in every case ultimately involve power relations. Take the economic aspect of life as one illustration. For the industrialised countries of the North Atlantic region of the world, globalisation usually involves locating sites in the Southern hemisphere from where to extract raw materials for their factories. Industrial mass production, however, implies mass consumption and then mass production. The contemporary global economy can be sustained only by this vicious circle. Concomitant to this, globalisation implies the necessity for the industrialised regions of tracing global consumers, especially from the huge populations of the southern non-industrialised hemisphere, to guzzle their manufactured goods. Almost a century and a half ago now, in the 1880s, the colonial entrepreneur Cecil Rhodes articulated this philosophy very bluntly but accurately as follows: “We must find new land from which we can easily obtain raw materials,” he counseled his English compatriots, “and at the same time exploit the cheap slave labour that is available from the natives of the colonies. The colonies [will] also provide a dumping ground for the surplus goods produced in our factories.”¹⁸

Unlike a century ago when actual human physical movement was required to achieve this, it is now easily done by simply using the airwaves to advertise through the electronic or the print media. For this purpose, it is in the interests of the factories and industries that as many people as possible in the South own radio and television sets or possess a smattering of reading skills. After consumerist appetites for manufactured goods have been whetted by advertising in this way, the only physical movement that is required is the movement of the goods themselves. Again unlike in previous ages, this is now easily

accomplished by air transportation to any part of the world within a very short time.

For the economic South, on the other hand, globalisation may mean just the opposite experience, generally the absence of any alternatives but to give up its raw material resources and to consume, usually at a very high cost to itself, what it does not produce. Though often imprecise and difficult to quantify, the cost in question is nevertheless real and cuts across all levels of human existence. This includes the psychological level, in terms of the self-identity and self-worth of the peoples of the southern regions of the world. It is important to note that contemporary consumer culture in the South is never psychologically neutral; it is edged on by various kinds of external crude or benign political, military or economic pressure. This results not only in political subservience and economic dependence of the South to the North. It also engenders in the peoples of the South a palpable sense of self-doubt and denial, or in other words, a cultural inferiority complex.

Although expressed in more sophisticated ways today, typically with undertones of philanthropic benevolence, Cecil Rhodes' logic above still dominates the economic, political and social dynamics of the contemporary world. Globalisation must be perceived and understood essentially as a serious struggle of power relations in political-economic and socio-cultural terms. The concern of this paper is mainly with the latter. Framed in a few words, the question is this: under the umbrella of globalisation, how do social, cultural and religious developments from Europe and America (the powerful North) impinge upon the religious worldview indigenous to Africa (part of the powerless South). What has been the response so far? I will consider specifically the influence of the Secularisation movement and the ideology of secularism on the spirituality of contemporary sub-Saharan African peoples.

Secularisation/Secularism in Sub-Saharan Africa

The reality of globalisation in sub-Saharan Africa is accompanied by the Secularisation movement and ideology of secularism strongly influenced by Euro-American history. Economically and socially, globalisation is fuelled by the ideology of “development” as conceived there. Development is understood to mean, almost exclusively, upward economic and social mobility, confirmed by material acquisitions, made possible by technological advancements in mass production. From a religious faith perspective,

The modern idea of development has [paradoxically] a genealogy in Western Christianity and can be seen as the secular translation of a millenarian belief whereby the kingdom of God is no longer projected in heaven but can be created on earth. Inherent in this thinking is the aspiration to eliminate evil in all its forms from the earth and the belief that human beings will eventually achieve this goal.¹⁹

As ter Haar notes, “This ideology stands in rather sharp contrast to the religious worldview that recognizes human imperfection and generally accepts that life will never be perfect.”²⁰ It is an idea of development that the Church now sees as reductionist, clearly at odds with the Catholic Church’s social teaching in its contemporary expression. Recalling the sentiment of Pope Paul VI, who, in 1967 published a landmark letter on the authentic meaning of development from the vantage point of Christian faith,²¹ Pope Benedict XVI, in a recent letter, affirms the perspective of this letter as valid for all times: development, Pope Benedict reiterates, “if it does not involve the whole man and every man ... is not true development.”²² True development, according to the Church’s vision, must incorporate, beyond the economic, also the social, political and spiritual aspects of every person and all persons. The Pope emphasises that

progress of a merely economic and technological kind is insufficient. Development needs above all to be true and integral. The mere fact of emerging from economic

backwardness, though positive in itself, does not resolve the complex issues of human advancement, neither for the countries that are spearheading such progress, nor for those that are already economically developed, nor even for those that are still poor, which can suffer not just through old forms of exploitation, but also from the negative consequences of a growth that is marked by irregularities and imbalances.²³

A most serious form of irregularity and imbalance in the technological view and practice of development, according to Pope Benedict, is the exclusion of faith from economic and political “reason.” Human reason, in whatever field of endeavour, “*always stands in need of being purified by faith.*”²⁴ As Pope Benedict puts it, “Denying the right to profess one’s religion in public and the right to bring the truth of faith to bear upon public life,” for instance, “has negative consequences for true development” because it robs development of its “transcendent foundation.”²⁵ Science and faith must work together if the welfare of the person and the human community, as also that of the universe, is to be advanced in a way that is balanced. Without the equilibrium between science and faith, there is a real danger of tyranny of one over the other. Religious despotism is just as alienating and as destructive of the humanity of the person as total unbelief: the one denies the divine character of reason in a person, the other tries to eliminate the equally divine gift of self-transcendence in him or her. Science on its own runs the risk of disregarding the autonomous identity of the universe while religious fundamentalism can stifle human creativity, dialogue, and cooperation.

Unfortunately, however, the perception of development in Africa, championed in many ways by globalisation and secularisation, is often one of cultural replacement of the African religious worldview by Western purely technological approaches. This endeavour is not new; it was there since colonial times. At the height of the imperial colonial era at the end of the nineteenth until the end of the first half of the twentieth century, it was contained in the colonialists’ basic

assumption that through the transplantation of European “civilisation” into Africa, the people of the continent would change radically to reflect Europe’s image. This was the “white man’s burden,” as much as possible to eliminate black person’s self-perception and assimilate it into the white, western world. Thus the “evolues” (in the French colonies) or “assimilados” (in the Portuguese), meaning those African’s who, in the eyes of the colonial masters succeeded to some degree to achieve this, were considered “more human” on the scale than the rest. Perhaps unwittingly, early Christian evangelisation in Africa complemented the imperial effort with its conviction that Western Christianity as the religion of civilisation should supplant indigenous African spirituality, one, according to them, blighted by darkness and doom. From the point of view of missionary evangelisation, divine self-revelation was, non-existent in Africa. This view violated Christianity’s own acknowledged principle of God’s primary self-communication through creation.

The collaboration between imperial colonialism and missionary Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa was unfortunate for both Christianity and the African peoples. First, some Africans came to view the Christian religion as an extension of imperial Europe – a perception which, for various reasons, still lingers on in the minds of some. Secondly, by the time of the missionary movement in the nineteenth century, Christianity had been deeply affected by the philosophical and cultural ideas born of the Renaissance, Enlightenment and rationalism, the basis, as we have seen, of practical Secularisation and ideological secularism in Europe. While Christianity as an expression of religious belief would, obviously, ultimately be unable to reconcile itself to these ideas involving the exclusion of faith in human life, they nevertheless inevitably rubbed off on it. As it was introduced into Africa, to take a concrete example, Christianity was ambivalent about the perception of a thoroughly sacral character of the world and of all existence as assumed by African Religion and spirituality. Ironically, like the rationalism it objected to, it tried to put a wedge between the “sacred” and the “secular” in the African spiritual approach to reality. Thus it condemned what it disparagingly called “animism,” the African

conviction of the existence of a spiritual force throughout all existence, one that is dynamic, communal, vitalistic and unitive. In its approach to African Religion, Western Christianity still today holds strongly to this view, and tends to interpret its mission of evangelisation largely in terms of removing or overriding the African perceptions of the deep sacredness of all nature.

If we try to find the source of this attitude in the history of Catholic Christianity in modern times, we will find it partly in the legacy of the two Church councils that took place immediately before the missionary era in Africa, namely, the Council of Trent (1545-63) and the First Vatican Council (1869-70). Vatican I conceived and described the Church as “Holy,” “Catholic,” “Apostolic;” and “Roman,” and ascribed to the Pope the “full and supreme power of jurisdiction over the whole Church.”²⁶ Structurally, this view of the Church and the Pope mandated a practical uniformity of government and models of belief in a descending manner from a central authority – Rome. It is this kind of monolithic thinking that was “planted” in Africa by the missionary movement. The African Church was compelled to imbibe philosophies and cultural expressions of a Christianity which were foreign (and often incomprehensible) to African converts. Conversion, for the missionaries in Africa then, implied an individualistic approach to the divine and a complete break with African identity, with scant consideration to African cultural values. Urged on by contemporary social Darwinist theories concerning the evolution of the human race, according to which the black person was at the bottom rung of the evolutionary ladder, this view became pervasive in Catholic catechetical and pastoral activity. African forms of spirituality, its creeds, codes of behaviour and rituals were neither perceived as holy ground nor signs of divine presence, before entering which missionaries should have taken off their shoes.

The training of African clergy through the seminaries instituted by the Council of Trent was especially instrumental in the alienating process of Africans from their own culture.²⁷ With the rare exception of very few farsighted individuals – but even these were mostly ambivalent in many aspects – missionary evangelisation followed the pattern of

eradication of African spiritual memory, which it considered completely opposed to the Christian faith, and replacing it with western cultural-spiritual experience. For Christianity in Africa, the fundamental expectation was that African spirituality and religion would gradually decline, die and disappear. Although one can understand the grounds for this kind of attitude at the time of early evangelisation, it is difficult to see why, almost two centuries later, the Church in Africa is still conditioned by the same basic trend of thought and pastoral action which emphasises the intellectual-rational aspect of the person over the affective, and accentuates in its teaching the “despiritualisation” of reality. Why has this conviction outlasted the classical missionary period in Africa and continues today in the methods of theology, catechetics, and pastoral practice? Yet – and this is the point – despite every effort to eradicate them, African spirituality and religion persist, even though often in various mutations, as is normal for any living organism.

Persistence of African Spirituality

An anecdote tells of a zealous reporter, who, eager to sell his paper, wrote that the American author and humorist Mark Twain was dead. Twain, still very much alive, is said to have retorted, “The rumours of my death have been greatly exaggerated.” Similarly, those who report on the death of African Religion or spirituality may be overzealous. Even after almost two hundred years of trying to destroy it, rumours of the death of African Religion must be seen, on evidence, to be greatly exaggerated. Changes brought about in African spirituality by missionary evangelisation and modern education notwithstanding, what the Africanist scholar Evan M. Zuesse characterizes as the “deep structure” of Africa’s pervading worldview, its “profound spiritual assumptions about the nature of reality”²⁸ remains fundamentally intact. In Black Africa, Zuesse affirms, the “poise,” the “stance towards life,” the decisive “way of looking at things”²⁹ is still indigenous. We are here referring to the normally subliminal criterion upon which fundamental human decisions are based. As illustrations of this claim Zuesse writes:

In market places in Nigeria handbooks to the Book of Psalms circulate, instructing the reader on which verses to read to cure boils and which verse to chant to destroy a rival trader. Rituals to assuage ancestors are enacted in the mining towns of Zaire [now Democratic Republic of Congo] and amid drilling rigs in South Africa. The former “Emperor Bokassa” of the Central African Empire ... is brought to court for conforming all-too-well to the stereotype “bad sacral king” of African mythology and cult, even to the practice of cannibalism. The recourse to Islam and Christianity can be added to this brief catalogue of traditionalist paradoxes, for it can be persuasively argued that the modern African interest in direct worship of God is a traditional African response to catastrophic change.³⁰

In their study, *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa*, a comprehensive survey on the intersection between religious belief and governance in Africa, the researchers Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar support this view. They reveal many of the basically African beliefs and practices of African leaders and intellectuals, some of whom publicly disavow these beliefs in favour of classical Western Christian dogma that excludes them in theory.³¹ Ellis and ter Haar cite to this end very concrete evidence. They discuss some aspects of behaviour in the lives of such varied personalities as presidents Felix Houphouet-Boigny of Cote d’Ivoire, builder of the St. Peter’s-like basilica at his home village of Yamoussoukro, Sekou Toure of Guinea, Samuel Doe of Liberia, the aforementioned Jean-Bedel Bokassa of Central African Republic, as well as Idi Amin Dada of Uganda, among numerous others.³² According to Ellis and ter Haar: “The late President Felix Houphouet-Boigny,” as an example, “... widely considered one of the most successful and enlightened African heads of state and known as a staunch Catholic, was nevertheless privately devoted to secretive traditional religious practices throughout his career.” Many will not believe the information, disclosed by close observers of his life, as Ellis and ter Haar report, “that he [Houphouet-Boigny] may have

carried out ritual killings, and that his death in 1993 was followed by mortuary slayings designed to send servants with him to the next world.”³³

Further, Ellis and ter Haar report that according to the memoir of one of his ministers, a reliable associate, President Sekou Toure once had seventy people murdered in one night to cast a spell on his arch-enemy, President Houphouet-Boigny. Sekou Toure’s soothsayers “had convinced ... [him] that by sacrificing as many party and state functionaries as [Houphouet-Boigny’s] years of age, on his birthday, it would bring about his inevitable downfall.”³⁴ Confronted with such (not completely unfounded) claims concerning these African elite, it would be unwise to dismiss African spirituality as dead or dying. Among the common folk, similar behaviour inspired by African spirituality does not often reach such bizarre proportions, but it is definitely much more widespread. African belief in the spiritual power of witches to cause harm from a distance, basically a religious idea, is something that has been scoffed at by Christianity and western-trained African intellectuals for generations. Some civil administrations in Africa have even tried to legislate it away. Still, no one would deny that it is perhaps the most entrenched of beliefs in the populations of the sub-Saharan region. Hidden in the apparent ridicule by the schooled and elite, there often lurks in their consciousness nervousness and fear of the phenomenon, testifying to their deep belief in its reality and effects.

Rumours of supernatural invulnerability of anyone seen to have extraordinary powers are usually started and spread by, and at the level of, the common folk themselves. At given occasions of significance, for instance, it is the general population that initiates and continues to fan the fires of these beliefs. If an election is won or lost, it is, to many people, because of “medicine”; if a leader constantly carries around with him a fly whisk, a stick, a club, a handkerchief, or whatever object, the rumours that make the rounds over a broad spectrum of the population are to the effect that the power of the leaders in question resides respectively in these objects. Consequently, if any of these artifacts is lost, it is believed that the

owner would face serious trouble; his leadership power and authority would “waste away.” This is to say nothing of the traditional religious beliefs that natural disasters such as death by lightning or drowning, or the occurrence of droughts, floods or earthquakes as acts of malevolent forces. Diseases and illnesses such as HIV/AIDS, are perceived as “mysterious,” and are equally interpreted in terms of the spiritual causality of malevolent supra-human beings manipulated by human agency.³⁵

Gerrie ter Haar discusses at some length how neurobiology is trying to understand the nature of “spiritual or mystical experiences” which are part and parcel of various religious beliefs around the world. But

Whether or not scientific research makes progress in this direction, the fact is that Africans, like people in other societies with long religious traditions, have established techniques and standard means of communication with an invisible world. The latter is usually represented as a world of spirits that is a source of power. Therefore ... spiritual experiences [of the kind just mentioned] ... are considered by many Africans to be direct infusions of power. Spiritual power becomes *real* power for those who believe in it, having an effect on individuals and communities.³⁶

It is not too difficult to observe among the general African Catholic faithful to what intentions and purposes articles such as rosaries, medals, holy water, and crucifixes are put on a daily basis. Moreover, in the deep structure of African thought, how is the Bible understood, in terms of the spiritual “power” it is supposed to have? Is it for many African Catholics just a sacred book or does not its sacral character, drawn from God, the omnipotent Spirit, confer upon it special mystical powers into which the believer can tap to his or her own tangible advantage? And then, what are the popular attitudes towards the Eucharist? What deep structure of the African religious psyche do these perceptions and attitudes respond to? Is it not quite often either intensification of health or other physical and spiritual goods or protection against malevolent realities in existence? In the popular

African mind, is Jesus understood as only the theoretical “Saviour” of Christian dogma, the “second Person of the Trinity,” or, is he, for any number of African Christians, rather the spiritual/divine equivalent of the powerful “medicine man” to whom to have recourse in times of illness, suffering and pain on account of his power to heal? Why is it that Christian healing ministry in Pentecostal churches and Catholic charismatic movements, where Jesus is made to play this role in a very tangible way is very popular, while the remote, academic Jesus of dogma attracts only muted enthusiasm among Africans? These are issues that touch directly the persistence of African Religion naturally transmuted as Christianity. It is, indeed, an authentic form of African Christianity. Official Western Christianity may refer to it as “superstition,” without, however, delineate the contour of this term, especially where its own religious practices are concerned.

There is a very fine line between official Christian teaching and popular African beliefs on many other issues. Only sincere self-introspection will yield for the Church authentic understanding of them in the African Christians’ mind. For, despite appearances to the contrary, which appearances, for very good reasons, the African Christians is desperate to maintain, the Christianity of official dogma is in general not exactly the same as that of the African faith-practitioner on the ground. This can be inferred from examples already adduced – in the population irrespective of educational standards, social standing, class belonging, or public function in the Church or society. For most African Christians, including civic and Church leaders, it is rather the spiritual, power-related understanding that consciously or subconsciously dominates the interpretation and use of many Christian symbols. Sacraments are understood in terms of medicinal “power” that brings wholeness to the body and soul, either psychically from afar or proximately by physical contact with the articles used in their celebration. On evidence, it is impossible to agree with those who claim that this is a minority phenomenon among African Catholics, or that it is an inconsequential denigration of the faith by African Christians. On the contrary, it is a sign of transformation through mutual interaction of cultures, and, without

any doubt, a positive indication of the resilience the foundational spiritual values of Black Africa.

It is astonishing that while the *subliminal criteria* of interpreting reality are expected to change drastically, or even die out, among African Christians, the same is not anticipated, at least not to the same degree, for many other cultural groupings. For instance, the cultural identity of the Japanese and Korean Christians remains, and is acknowledged in Christian pastoral approaches there. There is a Japanese or Korean Christian “ethic” that is different from that of Western Christianity, though not essentially in the sense of exterior behaviour patterns. Exteriorly, some Japanese or Korean Christians’ world outlook and behaviour patterns may resemble their Western European or American Christian counterparts. But the mode of looking at and interpreting reality, the deep structure of thought, is different, because it is spiritually fundamentally Japanese and Korean, with unmistakable emphasis on ancestral cult. This is what the Italian Jesuit missionaries Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) and Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656) had tried to do in China and southern India respectively. The effort of both was frustrated by a rigid, though culturally unrealistic, adherence to Western spiritual patterns, dictated by some of their colleagues and the Roman authorities.

To further illustrate this point, let us cite the case of some Westerners in Africa. There are many missionaries from Europe and America who have lived in Africa perhaps longer than they have lived anywhere in the West but whose worldview remains essentially “European.” Their early socialization does not make them easily amenable to change of mentality. This is perfectly understandable. What is objectionable, however, is that the opposite is generally expected of Black Africans, that in the name of faith in Jesus Christ, they should reject their cultural identities and deep modes of thought and feeling. What does this say about perceptions of African culture? Is it not an explicit denial of its merit on the one hand, and the validity of building gospel values upon its foundations on the other? Numerous words in favour of taking African spirituality positively and seriously in the effort to understand and live out the gospel of

Christ (inculturation or enculturation) in Africa at any significant level have, as everyone knows, rarely been translated into action.

This is why it is useful to revisit the biblical images of salt, light and yeast to appreciate their implications in the context of our discussion. In the gospel versions according to Matthew (13:33) and Luke (13:20-21), Jesus compares the transformative work of God to a small amount of yeast mixed with a large amount of wheat flour. Though proportionately insignificant, the yeast leavens the whole batch of dough. Similarly, it does not need a big measure of salt to give flavour to a large quantity of food. Culture is the dough and the food which the Christian faith as yeast or salt should work to transform. But to be effective, the faith must first insert itself thoroughly into the culture as yeast in the dough or salt in the food. Faith cannot transform people effectively outside, above, or in spite of their culture. The faith, necessarily expressed as culture must encounter the host culture in a conversation or dialogue between their foundational rituals and myths (the primary language of faith) as well as that of their codes of behaviour and teaching (the second-level, intellectual language of faith). It must be kept in mind, in the words of Pope John Paul II, that “The synthesis between culture and faith is not only a demand of culture but also of faith, because a faith that does not become culture is not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived.”³⁷

Interculturation and inculturation

In any lasting meeting of peoples and cultures anywhere in the world, relationships are always formed that are extremely intricate in nature. Interculturation, as this process of cultural encounter is called in contemporary social science studies, involves practically every aspect of human existence: their intellectual, psychological, emotional and spiritual selves, their political, economic and social realities, and their geographical and climactic surroundings. Indeed, it embraces the entirety of their lived experiences as human communities. Since at its deepest level the interculturation process is mostly unreflective and spontaneous, rarely do people have the inclination, find the time or, in

fact, even see the need to try to consciously unravel these intricacies. So, oftentimes we live by accepted conventions which may or may not accurately reflect the inner changes that might be taking place in us as a result of interculturalisation. This is especially the case when faiths and religions are the issue.

The experience of the Christian evangelisation throughout history can be explained culturally in terms of a psycho-social and intellectual dialectic between *what is* and *what ought to be*. This is a process of instinctual, emotional, and cognitive struggle between the existential and normative positions, or the real and the ideal. Does the existential reality conform to the intended supposition in the Christian message's encounter with culture? Thus the goal of religious proselytism, at least on the cultural level, is generally twofold. On the one hand, it is conformist: proselytizers desire to make converts adhere to the creeds, the codes of behaviour and the rites that they espouse as the ideal. In a situation where power relations are at issue, this is a relatively easy program to put into effect by those with the upper hand in the process and its degree of success can be observed and gauged. But the actual, inner achievement of the ideal is another matter. The hope and goal that the appropriation of the faith will have exactly the same interpretation and meaning in both camps is a much more difficult, if not, indeed, impossible result to achieve fully.

A statement appears in a small book by Edmund Leach that spells out well the problem of interculturalisation: "In the case of ordinary language or ordinary musical performance," Leach writes, "any particular 'utterance' has originated in a human mind and the central puzzle is to determine how far the 'meaning' which is conveyed to the listener is the same as that which was intended by the originator."³⁸ The puzzle applies also in the case of intercultural encounters, as we now are aware through the work of biblical hermeneutics. In this context, the way out of the dilemma is simply to acknowledge that there often cannot be strict identity between cultural meanings, but only analogy, semblance or correspondence with different degrees of approximation. Thus, as C.K. Anyanwu warns, to suppose that the "identity of words" between Christian and African approaches to

reality “imply an identity of meaning” is a mistake if used as a criterion of evaluating the *content* of belief among the people of the continent.³⁹ It is a worse error to impose Western Christian meanings artificially onto African realities, the foundations of both of which are culturally conceived differently. This is particularly so when these realities are of a spiritual nature. Impositions of this kind seldom bring about transformation at any significant spiritual depth, for they often involve serious misrepresentations of people’s mindset, which is the sum-total of the basic “assumptions, theories, concepts, and world view in terms of which ... people justify their expressions, institutions, and behaviour.”⁴⁰ These are the “factors,” according to Anyanwu, that “form what may be called the value system of a people. In fact, the understanding of the mindset of a people leads to the understanding of their behaviour. We see how people behave in their daily lives, but we do not empirically see their mental world, which justifies their behaviour. But that mental world, the world of beliefs and ideas, exists.”⁴¹

In Africa, religion does not represent a philosophy of life that searches for ultimate meaning ... Rather, it represents a view of life that acknowledges the existence of an invisible world, believed to be inhabited by spiritual forces that are deemed to have effective powers over one’s life. The spirit world is considered to be distinct but not separate from the visible world of human beings. One implication of such a worldview is that the invisible world is an extension of the visible one, and people’s social relations extend into it. Therefore it is important for human beings to maintain a good relationship with this spirit world.⁴²

Anyanwu insists correctly that to understand this inner, mental or “spiritual” world is to truly appreciate the foundations of the beliefs the African people, their behaviour, and the real meaning of this behaviour. When surface expressions in a civilisation change, however drastically, they may give the impression that the deep core of that civilisation has changed as well. But this is not always the case because the surface level of a culture involves mainly what Zuesse

characterizes as “folk practices,” “actual names and symbolisms,” and “intellectual rationalisations.”⁴³ Despite appearances of change of this kind, the cultural structures and mindset of the people in question may only be minimally affected, or, worse, may be torturously confused, often called the phenomenon of “double religious consciousness.” This is not uncommon among many African Christians.

Yet, it is still often the case among Christian evangelizers to imagine that the intention to bring about inner transformation or “conversion” among African people overrides this fact. Christian evangelists, both foreign and domestic, persuade themselves that the conversion they intend happens exactly at the level they envision it, that is, their own which they have achieved through a very long process of a well-calculated educational programme. In the process, it becomes all too easy to ignore, or even suppress, clear evidence to the contrary. Instead of observing what is actually happening in the encounter, evangelists may (and often do) continue to promote religious beliefs in their previous cultural forms, and even legislate in their favour, oblivious to changed contexts. The main reason for this intellectual myopia lies in the driving emotional need to justify the missionary effort for conformity. In other words, “orthodoxy” is the issue; unfortunately, however, it is orthodoxy understood as total accord in perception and expression between or among different worldviews and cultures. This is a practical impossibility, and the insistence upon it has always been at the root of religious fundamentalism and intolerance.

Thus, a most serious collective misconception that has endured for a surprisingly long time in African Christianity pertains to the view in the mainline churches that to be “Christian” equals to adopt Western Christian forms of thought and behaviour of the kind we have grown to be accustomed to. It has become customary to think and argue that Western forms of Christianity are not only normative universally, but that they are thoroughly replacing African indigenous ways of spiritual intuition and, in spite of contrary evidence, Christian churches continue to believe that African indigenous spirituality is disappearing (or will eventually do so – “it is just a matter of time.”)

Any small external sign in this direction is, therefore, to them evidence of the “success” of their evangelisation effort.

For the last century and a half of Christian presence in Africa, however, the effort has hardly succeeded, simply because it does not even form part of the logic of Christian expansion, which has always been “translatability” – the readiness of the Christian faith to be interpreted through various cultures and symbols. The appropriate metaphor here might perhaps be that of “mating”: Christianity makes sense and is able to effect transformation only if it is willing to have “carnal knowledge,” as it were, of the welcoming culture. Only through this activity of intercourse would a “child” be born, new and unique, that is, a new cultural reality. But mating requires actual physical proximity and a measure of mutual attraction and intimacy. If we are to stretch the metaphor a little further, the absence of cultural contact is the sexual equivalent of impotence or frigidity, whereas cultural imposition of values over the other is the equivalent of rape, an oppressive aberration of sexual activity. Refusal to realize and acknowledge this truth just keeps us in denial of the existing spiritual reality of the vast majority of African Christians. It weakens the effort at genuine inculturation of the gospel as proposed by current Catholic thought since the mid-1960s with the Second Vatican Council. Moreover, it renders the true perception of the state of the faith, and therefore pastoral guidance of the faithful, extremely difficult.

African Religion and the “Remaking” of Christianity

Throughout the history of Christianity, the meeting of meanings between a particular cultural expression of the Christian faith and a different culture has meant the necessity of the process of “remaking” or “reconstructing” Christianity, a process that started from the very beginning of the Christian Movement (although, of course, without the name of “inculturation”). The whole of the New Testament and the post-Apostolic conspicuously illustrate this process and struggle in terms of thought-forms, symbols, and language. There is no need to expand too much on this, but it is important to note that the

expression of faith in Christ was gradually adapted from being exclusively Jewish to Greco-Roman as the Apostle Paul brought non-Jewish converts to belief in Christ and as other Christian evangelizers moved into other parts of the Roman Empire where Hellenistic culture predominated, including North Africa, Egypt and Ethiopia. The Christian experience throughout the subsequent centuries was not different. As soon as Europeanized Christianity encountered the peoples and cultures of Africa during the latter two waves of evangelisation there,⁴⁴ the challenge, though often resisted, continues to be evident.⁴⁵

As a process, inculturation is an exercise in intercultural encounter that belongs somewhere in between two extremes: the attitude that absolutely excludes different other expressions of the faith on the one hand, to that which completely subsumes them on the other as the process of translation and appropriation of Christian dogma, behaviour, and rites takes place. The two extremes are obviously not conducive to authentic inculturation, since, in the first case, genuine encounter between Christianity and culture is avoided, elevating a form of Christianity as “pure truth,” uncontaminated by culture. But this is a false claim. The essentials of Christianity, just like those of any other religion, must be expressed and lived in cultural terms. The influence of Jewish, Greek, Roman and European cultures on Christianity is historically beyond question. Complete subjugation of the other, however, is equally undesirable, since it would mean that all the essentials of Christianity are swallowed up by the new culture, robbing Christianity of its specificity, uniqueness, and so ability to inspire. In this case, there can be no mutual exchange at all between the two, but just mutual hostility at best. Both realities remain virtually unchanged, something that is undesirable in any process of genuine interculturalization.

The necessary dynamics of inculturation as a process of mutual transformation is to be found somewhere between the two poles. Towards the left of the continuum, for example, Christian elements may predominate, whereas, towards the right, elements of the host [African] culture may prevail. Somewhere along these two poles

Christianity and the new cultural reality must encounter each other and the level of inculturation is determined by the outcome of the meeting: how much have the two realities have shared with each other? Inculturation, therefore, involves a meeting of the meanings from both protagonists on a given question in the spirit of candor, mutual agreement, correction, or tolerance. As inculturation attempts approach the inclusive pole, the results may be seen as unacceptable to official Christianity and consequently may be disapproved of or condemned as syncretism. Yet, often they represent the resilient force of the host culture which would be remaking or reshaping Christianity. The beliefs and practices among Afro-Brazilians, called Candomble, easily come to mind as a good example of one type of outcome of this encounter.⁴⁶ It may not be the most desirable, but it is given to show how the process happens.

In Candomble, certain Catholic saints and angels are identified with specific African gods or goddesses, and worshipped as such. Statues of Catholic saints, including crucifixes, are placed in homes and temples for the purpose. Candomble adherents may attend Mass on a particular saint's feast day, as fixed in the Catholic Church's hagiographical calendar, but the people's celebration will be for a Yoruba, Ewe, Fon, Igbo or Bantu deity. The Church has for centuries inveighed against this form of "syncretism" but has had very little to show for the effort by way of suppressing or eliminating these beliefs and practices. Similar instances of culture remaking Christianity can be observed in various empirical expressions of the faith in other parts of the world,

In Africa, the phenomenon is perhaps most visible in the African Initiated Churches (AICs).⁴⁷ Among them in East Africa is the Legio Maria of African Church Mission (or Legio Maria) among the Luo ethnic group living in both south western Kenya and northwestern Tanzania. The Legio Maria Church is thoroughly Roman Catholic in external appearance, complete with the ever-present symbol of the cross, the rosary, images of Jesus Christ, Mary, and numerous saints. Just like Roman Catholicism, the Legio Maria has a hierarchical structure with popes, priests, nuns and prophets, in similar garbs to

boot. It celebrates similar rituals of baptism, the Eucharist and benedictions. It also boasts of Old and New Testament figures such as Abraham, Moses, Melchizedek, the Apostles, and so on. All of these, however, are perceived, interpreted and understood in a thoroughly African (Luo) light, so that these symbols, rituals, and figures, far from being exclusively biblical or non-African, are contemporary and thoroughly “Africanized,” their biblical-like functions in the church and society today.

From such transmutations of Christianity as has happened in Brazil and is continually happening in different parts of sub-Saharan Africa, we can restate the central point of this reflection. “Besides surviving in its own right,” to use the words of a pioneering Africanist Noel Q. King, African Religion “*will survive in many other ways, but especially through the Christianity and Islam it has shaped.*” In fact, according to King, Christianity and Islam “*have and will become vehicles for African traditional thought and practice.*”⁴⁸ In a dramatic reversal of expectations and roles, instead of some African beliefs customs becoming the seed for the Christian gospel, it seems that, in Africa, Christianity is becoming a vehicle for the perpetuation of African beliefs and practices. As P.M. Steyne argues, the “vener” of Christian (or, for that matter, Islamic) orthodoxy may “overlay” or “hide” Africans religious convictions; however, a search into the “orthodox” beliefs and practices of Christianity (and Islam) in Africa will usually find just under the skin there the subtle but pervasive African spiritual presence.⁴⁹

African Theology

One of the most important offshoots of the encounter between Christianity and African culture in recent times has been the academic articulation of African belief systems and spirituality in dialogue with Christianity in the form of African Theology. Sooner or later in the Christian encounter with African culture, the question was bound to arise: In which ways did the values espoused by Christianity differ from those of African Religion such as to render the latter inferior or

condemnable in comparison? Was the difference really one of essential religious values or merely of perceptions, expressions, and approaches? This triggered the need for a closer intellectual analysis of the African worldview in relation to the missionary presentation of the Christian faith.

It is worth noting that this question had always been implicit with various degrees of emphasis among all categories of Africans, both those who accepted and those who resisted conversion to Christianity.⁵⁰ In the case of the converts, it is, once again, arguable to what extent they either wanted or succeeded in abandoning completely their African traditional religious worldviews. They may have been taken away from African Religion, to paraphrase a saying, but it is by no means certain how much African Religion may have been taken out of them.⁵¹ Those who have resisted conversion, on the other hand, seem to object to the exclusivist claims of Christianity about the knowledge and understanding of God. “Presumably, they ... reasoned and concluded that their own religious universe makes as much sense ... as that advanced by the new teaching.”⁵² Bold voices about this unease in the relationship between the two faiths began to be heard from priests, ministers and other trained African personnel of the Christian since the second half of the 1950s, making the birth and development of African Christian theology possible.

However, in the course of its half-century or so of existence, some aspects of the methodology of African Theology, when brought under scrutiny, have been shown to fail to show respect to African culture or spirituality. Roman Catholic inculturation theology, in some of its early forms, exhibits this tendency. What at first sight appeared as a genuine effort to preserve authentic African religious values, as Douglas E. Thomas points out, was in fact “a search for whatever is of Euro-Roman Catholic value in African culture that can be used by the church.”⁵³ The problem with this methodology is now clear: it does not only degrade African spirituality by making its values essentially subordinate to another, so-called “Christian” expression, it is also redundant: If there are certain impeccable values in European Christianity, what useful purpose does it serve to try to find

equivalents for them in African Religion? Would it not be logical just to impose them on the latter? The reverse should also be the case. This kind of inculturation methodology is justly condemned as “an attack against black culture,” no matter what language it is couched in.⁵⁴ The truth is that even perfect values must be expressed in imperfect human language. That’s where mutual transformation through dialogue is necessary.

Conclusion

It was Franz Fanon who remarked that “If we want to turn Africa into a new Europe, then let us leave the destiny of our countries to Europeans. They will know how to do it better than the most gifted of us ...”⁵⁵ This is no less true for Christianity in Africa: If we want to turn African Christians into carbon copies of Western European Christians, let us leave the task to Western missionaries. They will know how to do it better than the best of us. But this is certainly not what we want or need. It is not what the Church wants or needs, her constant and official forms of retrogression into a universalizing theology notwithstanding. The Christian faith is an incredibly translatable one; it is capable of being at home in any culture. What the church needs is for African Christians to be at the same time truly Africans and Christians.

It should be clear what this process demands. It requires that the Christian faith in Africa be built on the African people’s experience of the divine, of God’s self-revelation in African people’s culture, in their spirituality. Apart from this, we are building the church on sand, not quite a wise move, even by biblical standards (see Mt. 7:26). Douglas E. Thomas, among others, argues that we might thereby be inflicting on people a much worse damage by introducing mental “chaos” in them, for “The adoption of ideas that are antithetical to one’s primal cultural thought patterns may create mental chaos.” This can be tragic. “The human mind can function under severe pressure, but chaos causes it to shut down. The acceptance of one’s self, which is ingrained within culture, may eliminate cultural chaos and serve to

create a healthy sense of identity.”⁵⁶ One of the major tasks of African Theology today is thus to cultivate the African Christian’s self-acceptance before God.

Notes

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² For reasons well known now and which I do not intend to repeat here, I have, contrary to old scholarship, chosen to use the singular for this African reality and to capitalize it as “African Religion” instead of African *traditional* religions. For an extended explanation see Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 14-28.

³ See John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 1.

⁴ See Aylward Shorter, “Secularism in Africa: Introducing the Problem” in *African Christian Studies* 13:1 (March 1997).

⁵ Publications on the study of African Religion, both general and ethnographic, since 1969 when Mbiti’s *African Religions and Philosophy* was first published are numerous. I wish here to list just three very recent anthologies: Thomas D. Blakely, et al., eds. *Religion in Africa: Experience & Expression* (London: James Currey, 1994), Jacob K. Olupona, ed. *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1991), and Jacob K. Olupona, ed. *African Spirituality: Forms, Meanings and Expressions* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000).

⁶ Ogbu U. Kalu, “Ancestral Spirituality and Society in Africa” in Olupona, *African Spirituality*, p.55.

⁷ As only one example, see Evan M. Zuesse, *Ritual Cosmos: The Sanctification of Life in African Religions* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1986).

⁸ The concept is called “cultural creolization” and was introduced into anthropological scholarship by Ulf Hannerz. See his *Cultural Complexity* (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1992). In the specific context of Africa, see Frans Wijsen and Ralph Tanner, “*I am Just a Sukuma*”: *Globalization and Identity Construction in Northwest Tanzania* (Amsterdam – New York: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2002).

⁹ See Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997), Michael C. Kirwen, ed. *African Cultural Domains: Life Cycle of an Individual* (Nairobi: MIAS Books, 2008), and Michael C. Kirwen, ed. *African Cultural Domains – Book 2: Cycle of Family & Interpersonal Relationships* (Nairobi: MIAS Books, 2010).

¹⁰ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secularization> Accessed on 07/02/2011.

¹¹ This is distinct from (a) the “individual-level secularization” where the process of the decline in religious belief is personal, and (b) from the differentiation (now accepted in all democratic civil administrations around the world) between religious belief and the

economic, political, legal and moral functioning of society. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secularization> Accessed on 07/02/2011.

¹² See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secularization> Accessed on 07/02/2011.

¹³ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secularization> Accessed on 08/02/2011.

¹⁴ The Renaissance movement was characterised by two motives: (a) at the political level, to be free from papal authority, especially in the Germanic empire, and (b) at the religious level, to bring about reform in the Church, which culminated in the Protestant Reformation of Martin Luther and other reformers.

¹⁵ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secularization> Accessed on 07/02/2011.

¹⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opium_of_the_people. Emphasis added. Accessed on 07/02/2011.

¹⁷ Titled “Devotions upon Emergent Occasions,” the exact quote from John Donne reads: “No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as any manner of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” See <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/no-man-is-an-island/> Accessed on December 7, 2010.

¹⁸ Quoted in Wayne Ellwood, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Globalization* (Oxford: Verso, 2001), 13.

¹⁹ Gerrie ter Haar, *How God Became African: African Spirituality and Western Secular Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 76-77.

²⁰ Ter Haar, *How God*, p. 77.

²¹ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 1967.

²² Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 2009, no. 18.

²³ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 23. Italics in original.

²⁴ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 56. Italics in original.

²⁵ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 56.

²⁶ *Pastor Aeternus*, chapter 3, #9.

²⁷ It can be argued that the institution of the seminaries was misused in Africa to eradicate African culture. Its main goal by the Council of Trent was positive: to train the clergy who were until then mostly uneducated but only inducted into the clerical order by apprenticeship. An example of where seminaries succeeded well was in the Archdiocese of Milan where the renowned Charles Borromeo was Archbishop.

²⁸ Evan M. Zuesse, “Perseverance and Transmutation in African Traditional Religions” in Jacob K. Olupona, ed. *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1991), 172.

²⁹ Zuesse, “Perseverance,” 173.

³⁰ Zuesse, “perseverance,” 167.

³¹ See Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar, *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³² See Ellis and Ter Haar, *Worlds*, especially chapters 4 and 5, pp. 70-113. See also Bill Berkeley, *The Graves Are Not Yet Full: Race, Tribe and Power in the Heart of Africa* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

³³ Ellis and ter Haar, *Worlds*, 80.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 80.

³⁵ Among the Luo people of East Africa, this is referred to in the vernacular as *chira*, a curse, notwithstanding the fact that the sexual means through which the virus that causes AIDS is transmitted is now universally well known.

- ³⁶ Ter Haar, *How God*, p. 11.
- ³⁷ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* (1995), no. 78.
- ³⁸ Edmund Leach, *Culture and Communication: The Logic by Which Symbols are Connected* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 6.
- ³⁹ See K.C. Anyanwu, *The African Experience in the American Marketplace* (Smithtown, New York: Exposition Press, 1983), 4.
- ⁴⁰ Anyanwu, *The African Experience*, 2.
- ⁴¹ Ibid. 2. Also Aquiline Tarimo, *Applied Ethics and Africa's Social Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2005), 13-14.
- ⁴² Ter Haar, *How God*, p. 28.
- ⁴³ Evan M. Zuesse, "Perseverance," 170.
- ⁴⁴ The phases of Christian presence in the continent of Africa are historically dated as the 1st-5th, 14th-16th and 19th century to the present respectively.
- ⁴⁵ See Dermot Lane, *Faith and Culture: The Challenge of Inculturation* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1993), 11.
- ⁴⁶ Variations of Candomble, found in the Latin American sub-continent, the West Indies, Africa and the rest of the world include Vodun (also known as Vodoun, Voodoo, Voodoo, Vudu, or Sevi Lwa), Lucumi, Macumba, Umbanda, Quimbanda and Santeria. It is estimated that together they boast of more than 60 million members worldwide. The scary descriptions of these religious practices as cannibalistic and so on are often the imagination of prejudiced film makers.
- ⁴⁷ They were formerly generally referred to as African Independent Churches, a designation which emphasized their character as break away communities from the mainline Christian establishments, which some of them were. For a great many others, however, this designation is inaccurate because they have arisen as fresh initiatives by African charismatic leaders themselves.
- ⁴⁸ Noel Q. King, *African Cosmos: An Introduction to Religion in Africa* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1986), 113. Emphasis added.
- ⁴⁹ In Yusufu Turaki, *Foundations of African Traditional Religion and Worldview* (Nairobi: WorldAlive Publishers, 2006), 20.
- ⁵⁰ See Michael C. Kirwen, *The Missionary and the Diviner: Contending Theologies of Christian and African Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987).
- ⁵¹ The tongue-in-cheek saying goes: "You can take the African out of the bush, but you cannot take the bush out of the African."
- ⁵² Laurenti Magesa, "Foreword" in Kirwen, *The Missionary*, viii.
- ⁵³ Douglas E. Thomas, *African Traditional Religion in the Modern World* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc., Publishers, 2005), 60.
- ⁵⁴ Thomas, p. 62.
- ⁵⁵ Quoted by Anyanwu, *The African Experience*, 61.
- ⁵⁶ Thomas, *African Traditional Religion*, 8.

Moral Theological Approaches to Religious Engagement with the Public Square in the Light of Secularisation

ANTHONY EGAN

Defining Secularisation

Charles Taylor¹ sees the retreat of religion from the public space, which he often calls secularity, in three stages. First, the religious worldview withdraws from the public sphere. This for Taylor is not simply caused by the rise of the scientific worldview – which had little impact initially on most people – but is part of a deeper disenchantment of reality.² Where once “[h]uman agents are embedded in society, society in the cosmos, and the cosmos incorporates the divine”³, the embedding “sacred canopy” (to use Peter Berger’s evocative term)⁴ has disappeared. The world is now human-centred and run according to a range of rational human principles based on reason. This happened, suggests Taylor, initially with an elite during the Reformation who by promoting the idea of unmediated individual access to God unintentionally led to a new mentality: “from a hierarchical order of personalised links to an impersonal egalitarian one, from a vertical world of mediated access to horizontal, direct-access societies.”⁵

The second stage of this saw the decline of individual religious involvement. As people started “using Reason and Science, instead of Religion and Superstition”⁶ to interpret a reality where God was no longer integrally part of the worldview, the ‘designer’ God of reformed Christianity that replaced the enchanted God of a previous

epoch started to fade away. Of course, with this growing sense of a scientific worldview the integrated ‘enchanted cosmos’ started to fade, and with it the power of organised religion over the lives of first elites and later, perhaps as late as the 19th Century, the masses. This alienation of the European masses from the Church was initially linked to church leaders’ hostility to democratic movements, only later to ‘crisis of faith’. It was also, as Taylor points out, based on a growing unease with the notion of ‘providential deism’: if science, not direct divine action, explains how things happen, God becomes increasingly transcendent, far away from the swirl of daily life, originator of everything but not really involved, in short a kind of absentee landlord. The result is what Taylor calls the ‘anthropocentric shift’⁷: the world is now no longer God’s but human-centered.

The third stage, in effect the third type of secularism Taylor identifies, entails the recent shift in many parts of the world away from the assumption that religious belief is the norm. This form began in the 18th Century. Taylor argues:

The multiple critiques levelled at orthodox religion, Deism, and the new humanism, and their cross-polemics, end up generating a number of new positions, including modes of unbelief which have broken out of the humanism of freedom and mutual benefit (e.g. Nietzsche and his followers) – and lots else besides. So that our present predicament offers a gamut of possible positions which extend way beyond the options available in the late eighteenth century.⁸

This opening up of multiple possible approaches to making meaning, thirdly, spread beyond elites to the masses. The result is that no single meaningful discourse is acting as a means to keep moral/spiritual coherence. A non-religious, humanist, morally polyvalent approach has become the default position for society. The growth of a global system and the interaction of Western society with multiple non-European religious and cultural systems has intensified this and, I would argue, made this polyvalence both inevitable and necessary for congenial coexistence.

This has not meant the suppression of religion as such. Indeed today there has been a revival of religious belief and practice in many places, but no single religion holds sway.⁹ Religions exist plurally among a range of other social discourses. Except in places where movements spearheaded by hard-line religions (fundamentalism) have seized control the resurgence of religion has not overtly led to religious states.

The problem we face is that secularisation and secularity is often confused with overt hostility to religion and a radical commitment to excise religion from the public life.¹⁰ How might this be overcome?

Reacting to Secularisation Politically

There are two politically extreme moves in reaction to secularisation. One model – the theocratic turn – is an attempt by religious leaders to reassert their role in the face of encroaching secularity. When such leaders are in a subordinate position their strategy is to assert dogmatic authority over adherents and adapt a sectarian outlook against the world. Historically we see this employed by a religious organisation most dramatically in the 1870 Declaration of Papal Infallibility of the Catholic Church's First Vatican Council. We might call this an internal theocracy expressed against secular democracy.

Where the religious movement enjoys political power as well, we see the emergence of theocratic states. The classic case study here is the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran after the 1979 fall of the Shah. Although the idea of 'rule by cleric' is alien to Islam, the new state combined democracy with a Supreme Council of clerics under Ayatollah Khomeini. A similar establishment occurred in Afghanistan under the Taliban, making it clear that both Sunni and Shia forms of Islam were open to what might be called a theocratic state.

A final example of theocracy is the Vatican State, established by the 1929 Concordat of the Catholic Church with the Italian state. Whereas

in Iran and Afghanistan one has a kind of democracy overseen by religion, in the Vatican City one has in effect a religious monarchy where the pope is both absolute head of state and head of a worldwide church.

At the other extreme of the picture we have seen the emergence of atheist states, most notably Albania and North Korea, but including most of the former Eastern bloc. In the former states religion was effectively outlawed, its adherents persecuted. In places like China religion is directly administered by the state as a department of government, under the rule of (presumably) atheist administrators. If religion has a voice in these places it is one of endorsing the social order.

Modern democracies tend to be secular too. Few countries nowadays (except for Britain, Italy and some Latin American countries) have an established church and where it exists religious ‘minorities’ are tolerated (admittedly to varying degrees) and are allowed to express their views in a culture of toleration and free speech – even if these views are not always, or often, taken too seriously. Religious views are part of the ‘free market’ of opinion – and views that are explicitly religious-based are treated as ‘sectarian’ and ‘suspect’.

Redefining religion’s role in secular democracy

How then does religion fit into democracy today? Philosopher Robert Audi ¹¹ proposes that in a secular liberal democracy we need to adhere to three guiding principles for church-state relations:

1. The *Libertarian Principle*. The state must permit any religion to function, within the limits of civil and criminal law¹² (*tolerance*). While the state does not necessarily approve of a religion it recognises its right to exist.
2. The *Equalitarian Principle*. The state gives no preference to one religion over another (*impartiality*). In short there is no established church.

3. The *Neutrality Principle*. The state should neither favour nor disfavour religion as such (*no favouritism*).¹³

Such principles should apply in both directions, he suggests, state to church and church to state. Audi does not naively presume that there is a disconnection between the political and the moral. What he resists is a particular morality imposed on everyone, particularly where one is rooted in a theological set of presuppositions which may disadvantage the exercise of the two foundational ideas of liberal democracy, personal liberty and basic political equality.

Audi does not rule out religious arguments in a secular society but merely insists that they should not be the foundations for a church's political engagement since they do not necessarily hold the same value for believers as for unbelievers (or indeed, one might add, be shared by believers within a particular church or religious tradition). A religious argument advanced in a democracy has to be conscious of the degree to which its content is founded on a particular religious belief, the way it uses empirical and other evidence to justify itself, its motivation, and the historical pedigree of its argument.¹⁴ Its argument should not simply be based on some 'conversation-stopper' rooted in unverifiable 'divine revelation' claims based on scriptures or doctrines not everyone shares or on claims to the authority of religious leaders. Audi is deeply concerned about many of the phenomena and ways in which religions conduct themselves in trying to pursue their religio-political agenda, including features that often prefigure institutional intolerance.¹⁵

To those who object that secular reasoning as pursued in democracy is fallible because it is human, Audi responds that religious reasoning is equally fallible.¹⁶ Given that one cannot prove that such reasoning, whether from scripture or authority, is truly divine (unless one accepts it as such) religious reasoning as such cannot legitimately be privileged, let alone when religious reasoning is contradictory between and within religions. There is also the danger within religious reasoning that it bases its secular reasoning on unverifiable religious presuppositions – here one thinks of certain forms of natural law and

notions of personhood that are at bottom religious though couched in secular language. At best this may simply be naivety on the part of religious activists who cannot see that what they're saying is fundamentally based on faith, not scientific evidence; at worst it may be intellectual dishonesty and manipulation.

Should religions say anything, then? Audi thinks they should. "Reason without intuition," he argues, "is at best too formal to guide everyday life" but "faith requires reason to interpret its objects and human life in general; and the traditions most worthy of our attention surely reflect reason in major ways or at least depend on it for their interpretation."¹⁷ Religious intuitions, although not based on cold empirical facts, may offer insights that need to be addressed, may open areas of debate that may be overlooked. But, Audi insists, when dealing with questions of policy religions should advance arguments that are basically rational and secular in content and form.

But how might these religious responses be framed?

Christian strategies for engaging ethically with the secular age

In the rest of this paper I shall look at a selection of ways in which Christian scholars have tried to engage in the secular public square. While my sympathies, let me say at once, are with Reinhold Niebuhr and John Courtney Murray, I hope to be fair to my other subjects – who are in various ways important contributors to the ongoing debate over religion in public life.

The 'Sectarian' temptation: Stanley Hauerwas and a community-based Christian ethic

Let me start by saying that, contrary to the claims of many, the great US Methodist moral theologian Stanley Hauerwas is by no means a sectarian thinker in the narrowest – dare I say it, sectarian – sense. What is true is that Hauerwas is a strong defender of an ethic that is decidedly and unapologetically Christian in tone and content, and

rooted in the Church as community. It is from this strong vantage point, Hauerwas would argue, that Christians must engage with the secular state. Not only is this the Christian's duty to do so, this is also the best way Christians can make a positive contribution to the state. And they do this best by presenting the Christian stance in its fullness, without compromise and in its own terms. Indeed he insists that it is

...the Christian duty to use power to secure the forms of justice possible in our social and political system. To do anything less is to be unfaithful to the Christian's understanding of history and our involvement in it.

He continues:

Moreover, from this perspective attempts by Christians to avoid political involvement because of the 'dirty' nature of politics is rightly condemned as irresponsible, if not unfaithful. Rather it is the task of Christians to be politically involved exactly because we recognise that our politics inherently involves compromise and accommodation. To withdraw from the political in order to remain pure is an irresponsible act of despair. Even more, such withdrawal is self-deceptive as it creates the condition by which the political realm may claim unwarranted significance.¹⁸

The Church's role he sees as the challenge to present an explicitly Christian critique of liberal democratic society. If the Church does not do this it fails in its evangelical task – and may also end up acting and sounding like the society in which it lives.

He finds the latter deeply unsettling because of what he sees as liberalism's assumptions: "A people do not need a shared history; all they need is a system of rules that will constitute procedures for resolving disputes as they pursue their various interests".¹⁹ Such a system cannot in and of itself create virtuous people, people of character, but only individuals with competing desires. The Church, however, is (or should be) a 'school for virtue' among people who are

already all liberals [if not even libertarians perhaps? I would add], rooted in a story – the Christian story. It is in living out this story that the Church becomes truly herself and in offering this story as a challenge that exposes the story of the world that the Church best serves the common good.

He adds, however, that

..we must admit the Church has not been a society of trust and virtue. At most, people identify the church as a place where the young learn ‘morals’, but the ‘morals’ often prove to be little more than conventional pieties coupled with a few unintelligible ‘don’ts’. Therefore any radical critique of our secular polity requires an equally radical critique of the Church.²⁰

The ‘Godless’ delusion: Don Cupitt and Richard Holloway

If Hauerwas and his disciples would have us present a strong Christian witness to the state (almost with a ‘to hell with Audi’s propositions’ attitude), scholars like Don Cupitt (retired Anglican priest and Cambridge philosopher of religion) and Richard Holloway (former bishop of Edinburgh and Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church) seem to go in the opposite direction: a de-Christianised ethics.

Don Cupitt: From Ethics on the Sea of Faith to Solar Ethics

In a long, prolific and controversial career Don Cupitt’s thinking has spanned Christian orthodoxy, anti-realism, non-realism and what he has called the ‘religion of being’. He has engaged with – some would say superficially and eclectically – Wittgensteinian language games, Derrida, Foucault, Heidegger, Hegel and the more obscure areas of literary theory. For Cupitt the reality of God as being is at stake: God has since the 1980s been a construction of human language and a projection (à la Feuerbach) of the human longing and imagination.²¹ The attempt to create a ‘real’ God by the Church is as much a desire

for social control over people as it is a forlorn longing²². Christian ethics of a real God is thus in part at least the Church seeking control over members and the retention of its power lost over the centuries since the Middle Ages.

Cupitt's understanding of ethics has permeated much of his thought but found their clearest exposition in two works: *The New Christian Ethics* (1988) and *Solar Ethics* (1995). In his earlier text Cupitt explicitly rejects any notion of Christian teleology or Eschaton:

...there will be no final success. No End of all things, no communist society, no New Jerusalem, no Sabbath Rest of the Saints, no final victory. Rather, we'll just soldier on indefinitely.²³

With this as his proposition he argues that “a modern Christian ethic can only be had if we utterly forget pre-Enlightenment Christianity. *Our* ethics will be an ethics of the flesh, an ethics of human feeling, an ethics of libido and of being true to the life-energy in us.”²⁴ In short, it will

- Say yes to life now, not to an afterlife
- Commit to a fulfilled human life now
- Reject a supernaturalist vision
- And celebrate creative, expressive, value-valorising human action.²⁵

In his later reflections²⁶, Cupitt extends this thoroughly non-religious view of ethics to the notion of living under the Eye of God – his way of expressing the imperative to develop a sense of self-detachment so as to see oneself and one's actions from the perspective of a ‘greater whole’ that helps us see our actions in terms of environmental and social context. This is for him “almost the last useful idea or function that religion can take from the idea of God”, as Greenfield notes.²⁷ Through a ‘blissful void’ we let go of our self and passions and learn what he calls Solar Living, joyfully casting ourselves into the flow of living. This does not, Cupitt argues, lead to narcissism or despair but

to a deep concern for others and the planet and a commitment to human wellbeing, without the narrow demand of adherence to religious orthodoxy in public life.

Richard Holloway: from See of Edinburgh to Godless Morality

Unlike with Cupitt, with Richard Holloway you still get the sense that behind his turn to secular ethics there remains a compassionate pastor trying to support an increasingly diffused flock. Holloway wants the Church to say something in the world, despite its real or perceived corruption, faults and outdated theology. It is the latter that most concerns him. Too much of the Church's theology is rooted in outdated science – Aristotelian biology, for example – and models of government rooted in anachronistic medieval models of government. He is also all too aware of an aggressive, arrogant side to religion that has helped alienate many from the Church.

Holloway sums up his project in the following statement:

...if we hold that there is a reality to which one word 'God' refers, which is more than the sum of our aspirations and longings, we are not thereby freed from the need to make choices in the kind of world we live in. Whatever choices we make, even choices that claim to be prompted by God, we should remain inescapably fixed on the human side of the dilemmas. We can only know the divine mystery and the life it commands from within our own human experiences, because no other experience is available to us.²⁸

He differs from Cupitt in that he does not see God as a purely linguistic creation, though here as elsewhere in his work he acknowledges (refreshingly for a bishop!) that proof of divine existence is by no means easy. What he stresses is the need for personal responsibility in ethics – we must make moral choices, not give up our faculties to God or God's presumed representatives. As a theologian he is also aware that much of what we call theology or divine revelation is a *human* exercise rooted in our experience too. Ethics must therefore be rooted in reflective human experience,

informed no doubt by scripture and tradition (themselves products of human experience of the divine), and rooted ultimately in moral reasoning. Such an approach acknowledges the need to be aware of complexity “due to the sweep of our vision” and that “we are often confronted with opposing goods [rather] than with simple choices between good and evil”²⁹. He admits too that the age of ‘command systems’ political and religious has passed away. What we need now is an ethics rooted in a ‘principle of consent’:

Just as obedience to the commands of authority, whether God, state or any other centre of power, was the dominant characteristic of ancient traditions, so, today, is the consent of our reason and emotion. Today, we expect to be persuaded by coherent argument and the consequential results of particular policies.³⁰

Public engagement must therefore take this form and must be rooted in reason and experience. This is done without adherence to commandist religious ideas.

The Dialectical Engagement: Reinhold Niebuhr and John Courtney Murray

Reinhold Niebuhr: Methodological Pessimism serving Christian hope³¹

Niebuhr’s Christian Realism (hereafter CR) might be seen as “a methodological pessimism in the service of Christian hope.”³² It is “a combination of different ‘realisms’ – political, moral, and theological. The distinctive insights come as these perspectives are drawn into a relationship in which no one of these conclusions is definitive, but from which, likewise, none can be omitted. The moral truths that Christian Realism claims depend on an attentiveness to all the forces at work in a situation, *and* on the limits imposed by human nature, *and* on the possibilities opened by love.”³³

Niebuhr's aphorisms like "Man's [sic] capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary"³⁴ are densely packed expressions of the impossibility of any kind of simplistic following of the Christian Gospel. For Niebuhr, Jesus' ethics do not deal with immediate moral problems of everyday life whether personal, political or economic, all of which are to do with establishing balances of power ("the problem of arranging some kind of armistice between various contending factions and forces"³⁵), but constitutes an absolute, ultimately impossible ethic rooted in the love command that "sets aside the objective circumstances, the limits on material resources that constrains love for others."³⁶ We are told *what* to do, not *how* to do it. Whenever religion concerns itself with society it risks giving birth to a kind of millennialism. Courage is needed for such a vision of a just, egalitarian society because it "seems always to be a hopeless one when only present realities and immediate possibilities are envisaged", a secularized version "of the classical religious dream."³⁷ Millennial dreams are ultimately unattainable. The most effective change agents for at least the Niebuhr of the early 1930s were those "who have substituted some new illusions" for the illusion "that the collective life of mankind can achieve perfect justice".³⁸ Yet even here Niebuhr warns of fanaticism and chaos unless it is brought under the control of "reason", but "One can only hope that reason will not destroy it before its work is done."³⁹

The problem for Niebuhr is that fallen, sinful humanity is subject to what he calls 'collective egotism', the social dimension of pride. "Man," he argues, "is insecure ...he seeks to overcome his insecurity by a will-to-power". This tries to usurp the place of God. It is also unjust: the ego "subordinates other life to its will and thus does injustice to other life".⁴⁰ Collective egotism creates the temptation to idolatrous "reverence for majesty"⁴¹ of the state or the group, undermining reverence due to God. True justice, Divine justice, is not possible because of sin, refuting any secular or Christian form of utopianism: "[T]he fulfillment of the law of love is no simple possibility. Love is the law of freedom; but man is not completely

free; and such freedom as he has is corrupted by sin. All historic schemes and structures of justice must take the contingencies of nature and history and the fact of our sin into consideration.”⁴²

Drawing on his notion of a dialectic between ‘original righteousness’ (a mythical sense of Edenic wholeness) and ‘original sin’ (the sense of perfection’s absence)⁴³, Niebuhr calls politicians to seek a balance between love and justice, a balance which stresses a certain relativity of one’s position and righteousness because of one’s sinfulness. Yet Niebuhr recognises the limitations to this position: although we may be forced to critically re-examine our position constantly, it is no recipe for peace between peoples.

Niebuhr’s solution involves two strategies, two middle axioms⁴⁴, the ‘test of tolerance’ and ‘the balance of power’, two categories that “comprise the cultural and the socio-moral problems of history”⁴⁵. The ‘test of tolerance’ is more than maintaining a tolerant attitude to viewpoints contrary to our own; the test itself involves “the ability to hold vital convictions which lead to action ...[and] the capacity to preserve the spirit of forgiveness towards those who offend us by holding convictions which seem untrue to us.”⁴⁶ The problem is that we may not have the moral truth, at least not in its fullness. We must be loyal to such truth, i.e. confident in the possibility of its attainment; yet toleration of others “requires broken confidence in the finality of our own truth.”⁴⁷ There must be social organisation – government – to keep society going, a balancing act between authority and power of the community over all members, the principles of order and justice against anarchy, while all the time remaining deeply conscious that “government is also morally ambiguous...[vulnerable to] the sin of idolatry and pretension”⁴⁸. The need is thus a balance that avoids the extremes, “the twin perils of tyranny and anarchy”⁴⁹.

John Courtney Murray: The Con-spiration of Natural Law and Democracy

By the 1950s, democracy was endorsed by the Catholic Church as a kind of ‘lesser evil’ than various forms of totalitarianism – and

religious freedom. For Jesuit John Courtney Murray, his agenda was (1) to show that democracy was compatible with Catholic doctrine, (2) to convince Catholics that religious freedom was compatible with Christianity, and (3) to show (American) democrats that one could be both a good Catholic and a good citizen.

In his book *We Hold These Truths* (1960)⁵⁰, Murray did in effect a theological exegesis of the Preamble to the US Constitution to assess what he called the ‘American proposition’ of pluralistic, liberal democracy. He came up with four basic points:

1. A nation under God.
2. The Principle of Consent of the Governed.
3. A Virtuous People.
4. With Human and Historical Rights.

Under God

While the French Revolution had proclaimed human autonomy and was agnostic regarding God, the US affirmed “the sovereignty of God over society as well as over individual[s]”⁵¹. Democratic government did not automatically rule out religious belief, but was an act of self-limitation by the state, further expressed politically in separation of powers – including church and state – and within the limits of the law.

Consent of the Governed

The sense of justice, he suggested, was thus inherent in the people, mirroring the Thomist medieval principle that “there is a sense of justice inherent in the people, in virtue of which they are empowered, as the medieval phrase had it, to ‘judge, direct, and correct’ the process of government.”⁵² This not only challenged tyranny, but also stressed that “the state is distinct from society and limited in its offices towards society”.⁵³

Virtue

“Part of the inner architecture of the American ideal of freedom,” he argued, “has been the profound conviction that only a virtuous people can be free”, freedom not understood in libertinism but in a freedom

to seek the good.⁵⁴ This was a profoundly Thomistic idea, hardly incompatible with Catholic Christian values.

Human Rights

Finally the sense of inherent and inalienable human rights followed closely in line with Thomas and Catholicism, rooted in natural law with its “ultimate source...in God, the Creator of nature and the Master of history. The power of this doctrine” Murray argued, “...lay in the fact that it drew an effective line of demarcation around the exercise of political or social authority. When government ventures over this line, it collides with the duty and right of resistance. Its authority becomes arbitrary and therefore nil; its acts incur the ultimate anathema, ‘unconstitutional’.”⁵⁵

From this, Murray concluded that “[t]he American Bill of Rights is not a piece of eighteenth century rationalist theory... Behind it one can see, not the philosophy of the Enlightenment but the older philosophy that has been the matrix of the common law” rooted in the Christian faith.⁵⁶ This matrix is natural law, long accepted by the Catholic Church as morally binding, while not claimed as such as uniquely Catholic or even uniquely Christian:

...that man [sic] is intelligent; that reality is intelligible; and that reality, as grasped by intelligence, imposes on the will the obligation that it be obeyed in its demands for action or abstention.⁵⁷

While Murray does not claim that natural law prescribes any particular rights or laws, what it does is create a common foundation for moral reasoning that might formulate positive laws and social systems.

Reason does not create its own laws, any more than man [sic] creates himself. Man has the laws of his nature given to him, as nature itself is given. By nature he is the image of God, eternal Reason; and so his reason reflects a higher reason; therein consists its rightness and its power to oblige.

Above the natural law immanent in man stands the eternal law immanent in God transcendent; and the two laws are in intimate correspondence, as the image is to the exemplar. The eternal law is the Uncreated Reason of God; it appoints an order of nature – an order of beings, each of which carries in its very nature also its end and purposes; and it commands that this order of nature be preserved by the steady pursuit of their ends on the part of all the natures within the order.⁵⁸

It is possible therefore to have a common language to explore moral problems, to ‘con-spire’ in the sense to ‘breathe together’ even when people may have different religious symbols.⁵⁹

Drawing on Aquinas notion that humans participate in the eternal law, through participation in the natural law, Murray emphasizes that human beings are created to be free, free to seek the good and as beings participating in God’s life and law, must be accorded rights. This is classic Catholic moral theology of freedom and leads one to conclude that conscience – one’s deepest sense of moral self that is most intimately connected to God – must be respected. The implication for politics is clear: societies must defend freedom of conscience and promote human freedom and participation.

Towards a kind of Assessment

I have not hidden where I stand, but it behoves me to try to give a fair summation of why I take the stand I do.

Much as I admire the work of Stanley Hauerwas, agreeing with ethicists like Biggar, Woodhead and others that he has much of importance to say⁶⁰, I find him problematic for the purpose of making a Christian contribution to the secular public debate. There is undoubtedly an important contribution that Christian ‘communities of character’, indeed communities of resistance and solidarity, can make in society. Their existence, way of life and language contribute enormously to witnessing to alternate values to materialism,

individualism and selfishness – and at times to militant jingoistic adventurism – but by their very strengths (prophetic Christian critique) they become marginal in the secular age. By failing to express themselves at the same time in the language of secular public discourse they seem to lose their ‘edge’. There is an added, internal dimension – not everyone within a religion shares in the beliefs in the same way. There is a certain elite presupposition of consensus about beliefs – that Catholics believe X, that Muslims believe Y, particularly in the moral area (which includes but is not exhausted by the political) – that is simply not there. In a confessional state, whose confession should we consider normative for policy and law? In a multi-confessional state which ‘official line’ should we embrace as law? If we embrace the dominant (i.e. religiously dominant) view, how can we be sure that it reflects truly the beliefs of the majority of a particular religion? And, in any case, what space do we provide for dissenters (whether within or outside the dominant religion)? If, indeed, the religious foundations of the dominant view is empirically tenuous (e.g. the personhood of a fertilised ovum, or a seven day creation myth), should a religious truth claim not held by everyone trump the evidence and become normative?

With regard to our non-realist reverends, I find myself more in sympathy with Holloway than with Cupitt. Many years ago I commented on the inadequacy of Cupitt’s thought for political theology. In the context of liberation theology I argued that

some – possibly most – political theologians would disagree vehemently with Cupitt. Some would argue that God actively supports the struggle for justice, that the many political and social failures and setbacks – which I think Cupitt would see as life’s absurdity – merely remind the activist that the kingdom of God/Utopia will not come about by the Pelagian trap of human action alone. Such theologians would argue that the struggle for justice is both approved of by God and can be fulfilled in totality by God alone.⁶¹

Just how one does this in a pluralist democracy is the question. My sense is that while expressly religious formulations of social criticism may be helpful they do not escape the tendency towards ‘creeping theocracy’. However Cupitt’s solar ethics, where faith no longer informs the discourse, is unhelpful. Religion says nothing to the public square. Holloway’s more complex approach – where religious faith forms the bottom stratum of discourse but is then challenged to move beyond formulations that may not be adequate in their reflection of modern reality, and is then reformulated informed by Christian values into a secular language – is more useful.

One certainly sees realism in liberation theology and the Radical Orthodox movement led by John Milbank and others. If anything some of the latter seem closer to the position of Hauerwas than non-realism, despite close and fruitful dialogue with post-Marxist atheists like Slavoj Žižek.

My deepest problem with Cupitt is that one is left ultimately with a feeling of ‘So what?’ So what if we develop a free floating ethics, made up as we go along? – After all, we can do this (indeed should do this) within a Christian ethic of conscience properly understood. Or indeed by the moves made by Murray and Niebuhr.

With Holloway at least one gets the sense that his turn to secular reasoning has a kind of purpose – defending the Christian faith (however thinly and agonistically believed) from the scandal of Christian fundamentalist silliness that by its very claims alienate secular thinkers from the very idea of Christianity itself. In this he at least fulfils Audi’s call for a Christian voice to be reasoned and reasonable and not based on pure religious assertions.

Finally, and not without problems, let me turn to Niebuhr and Murray. Niebuhr’s weakness – which Hauerwas famously, perhaps unfairly, called “functional atheism” – is the way in which his *Christian Realism* (rooted in Augustine) so quickly seems to fade into the background, becoming merely a voice within the secular discourse of realism. Where he succeeds, I think, is in his ability to show how

Christian language can be used to understand realpolitik on its own terms. Whether this gives the discourse a distinctively Christian dimension is open to debate.

My problem with Murray lies more in his appropriation of history – as an apologetic to Catholicism – than in his use of Catholic natural law theory. Much as I respect and welcome his exegesis of the US Constitution, I think he overemphasizes its Christian roots too much. (Indeed this has been a strategy of the US Christian Right in recent years, who have produced bizarre interpretations rooted in the deluded idea that the Founding Fathers were in fact bible-believing Christians like themselves, which is historically nonsense). Murray is strongest in his use and application of natural law reason as a ‘secular’ basis for a Christian contribution to the public discourse. In this he admirably demonstrates how Audi’s injunctions to religious organisations to use accessible secular language rooted in one’s faith tradition can be applied in practice.

If anything I hope that this paper has shown that the role of religious ethics in the public square is deeply problematic, even given Audi’s schema for religious involvement. My selection of Christian thinkers highlights the tension. Yet faced with theocratic or rigidly atheist alternatives we are faced with the ongoing, perhaps never-ending, challenge of trying to find a voice for Christian ethics in a secular environment.

Notes

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

² Intriguingly this was, as sociologist Rodney Stark convincingly argues, largely done *within* the framework of Christendom. Personal spats between prelates and astronomers aside, Stark debunks the claim that the Church opposed science, arguing convincingly that the rise of science in medieval Europe was the result of theological curiosity about the nature of God’s creation. See: Rodney Stark *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 121-199.

³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 152.

⁴ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a sociological theory of religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

- ⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 209.
- ⁶ Taylor, *ibid*, 270.
- ⁷ Taylor, *Ibid*, 221-269, 290-292.
- ⁸ Taylor, *Ibid*, 299.
- ⁹ Note here Berger's revision of the 'sacred canopy' theory. Cf. Peter Berger, *The Desecularization of the World* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000).
- ¹⁰ Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 93.
- ¹¹ Robert Audi, *Religious Commitment and Secular Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
- ¹² How the state may limit religious freedom where it violates civil-criminal law is suggested by: Graeme MacLean, "Freedom of Religion and State Neutrality: A Philosophical Problem", *South African Law Journal* 174, 1997.
- ¹³ Audi, *Religious Commitment*, pp. 32-33.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*, pp.69-75.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*. pp. 100-103.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*. p.138.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*. p.215.
- ¹⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 73.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*. p.78.
- ²⁰ *Ibid*. 86.
- ²¹ See, inter alia: Don Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith* (London: SCM, 2003) (1984),
- ²² Don Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church* (London: SCM, 1989);
- ²³ Don Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics* (London: SCM, 1988), p. 25.
- ²⁴ *Ibid*. p. 41.
- ²⁵ *Ibid*. pp. 56-58.
- ²⁶ Most explicitly in: Don Cupitt, *Solar Ethics* (London: SCM, 1995).
- ²⁷ Trevor Greenfield, *An Introduction to Radical Theology: The Death and Resurrection of God* (Winchester: O Books, 2006), p. 155.
- ²⁸ Richard Holloway, *Godless Morality: Keeping Religion out of Ethics* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1999), p.75.
- ²⁹ *Ibid*. 130.
- ³⁰ *Ibid*. pp.156-7.
- ³¹ In the Niebuhr section I summarise and partly paraphrase parts of a chapter in my recent book, *The Church and War in the 21st Century* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 212), 77-82.
- ³² Robin Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p 46
- ³³ *Ibid*, pp 28-29.
- ³⁴ *Ibid*, p 29; originally cited in Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defense* With New 1960 Foreword (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), p xiii.
- ³⁵ Quoted in Lovin, p 6.
- ³⁶ Lovin, p 204.
- ³⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), p 61.
- ³⁸ *Ibid*, p 277.
- ³⁹ *Ibid*.

⁴⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* Volume I (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), pp 178-179.

⁴¹ Ibid, p 209.

⁴² Ibid, p 296.

⁴³ For detailed outline, see Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man* I, pp 288-295.

⁴⁴ These are attempts to define the directions in which, in a particular situation, Christian faith must express itself: the connection between general statements of the eternal demands of the Gospel and the decisions that must be made in concrete situations.

⁴⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* Volume II (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), p 213.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p 219.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p 241.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p 267.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p 284.

⁵⁰ John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1960). [Hereafter WHTT]

⁵¹ WHTT, p.30.

⁵² Ibid, p.34.

⁵³ Ibid, p.35.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p.36.

⁵⁵ Ibid. pp.37-38.

⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 39.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p.109.

⁵⁸ Ibid. p.330.

⁵⁹ John Courtney Murray, "America's Four Conspiracies", quoted in: Mary Eastham, "The Church and the Public Forum: John Courtney Murray's Method" *Australian E-Journal of Theology* Pentecost 2006.

(http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt_7/Eastham.htm) (accessed: 2008/11/4).

⁶⁰ See, for example, the important collection of essays: Mark Thiessen Nation & Samuel Wells (eds.), *Faithfulness and Fortitude: In Conversation with the Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000).

⁶¹ Anthony Egan, "Does a Real Albert Nolan Need Don Cupitt? A Response to Ronald Nicolson", *Heythrop Journal* XXXVIII, 1997, 186

Patience and its implications for ethical leadership in organisations

MARILISE SMURTHWAITE

This paper argues that while our globalised world shows little evidence of or inclination towards patience, we should reconsider this so-called unpopular and seemingly neglected virtue and what its practice might mean for ethical leadership in business organisations. The paper therefore examines not only the meanings and associations of patience, but also seeks to develop a richer and more nuanced understanding of the term within a virtue ethics framework. It is such an understanding that illustrates both the importance and the applicability of *patience* in ethical leadership within organisations.

Patience and its implications for ethical leadership in organisations

Our economically globalised world shows little evidence of or inclination towards *patience*. It is a world characterised by speed and immediacy, a world where technology bridges boundaries of distance and time and allows us constant and immediate access to vast amounts of information on a plethora of subject matters. It is a world of change and flux and economic crisis, a world which demands action, efficiency, and often, in the economic and political sectors, evidence of immediate benefits. We no longer wish to wait for change or profits or delivery or service.

In such a context, business leaders have, at times, ignored the long-term view and shunned ethical practice in favour of short term gains. In our times, the latter have frequently been ill-gotten, leading to the

demise of and collapse of many corporations and banking institutions thought to be “too big to fail”. Society’s trust in business has been systematically undermined since the late 1990s. Citizens have now become *impatient* with both economic and political actors. This is evidenced in business, particularly in respect of the banking sector, and with such macro-economic organisations as the G20. One has only to look at the civil unrest sparked by anger at the current financial crisis and its implications for citizens, to understand that citizens have lost *patience* with and faith in their leaders. So, for example, October 2011 saw protests in Germany and London against “the world’s financial system and economic injustice” (<http://www.euronews.net/2011/10/16/protest-camps-set-up-in-frankfurt-and-london> accessed 3 November 2011); and against “banks and corporate greed” (<http://www.euronews.net/2011/10/22/second-weekend-of-occupy-protests-in-germany/> accessed 3 November 2011). As one source commented:

Angry about what they say are the injustices of the financial system, they marched through the capital from Alexanderplatz square to the Brandenburg Gate.

In the country’s financial capital Frankfurt, about 2,500 people took to the streets – many outside the headquarters of the European Central Bank.

(<http://www.euronews.net/2011/10/22/second-weekend-of-occupy-protests-in-germany/> accessed 3 November 2011)

Likewise, there were protests in Italy, Greece and Spain and, in New York and other American cities there were protests against “corporate greed and cutbacks”

(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/financialcrisis/8829838/Occupy-Wall-Street-protests-stepped-up-around-the-world.html> accessed 3 November 2011).

It seems difficult, therefore, to even consider *patience* in such a context. Yet the wisdom of the ages suggests that *patience*, while difficult, is both necessary and beneficial for human society. Or, as

Wadell (2008:151) suggests, “*Patience* may not be a popular virtue, and it certainly is not one easily acquired, but there is no way that human beings can live together in peace without becoming skilled in *patience*”. Perhaps then, in our fraught world, we should reconsider this so-called unpopular and seemingly neglected virtue and what its practice might mean for ethical leadership in business organisations.

Encouragement for a virtue ethics approach in business is given by Solomon (1993:191) who reminds us that in his view “...properly understood, ethics does not and should not consist of a set of prohibitive principles or rules...” He notes that the ethics of virtue is integral to living a good and flourishing life and is not motivated by or dependent on “elaborate soul-searching and deliberation but on the easy flow of interpersonal relationships in a company that respects and honours the virtues and condemns...vice” (:191). Virtues are not about complicated analysis and thought, but are integral to a person’s character, they are context bound and “determined by ...particular roles and circumstances” (:197). Solomon shows how new practices may herald new virtues and how some virtues will be very important in one context but not in another. So our task here becomes one of discovering if and what relevance *patience* has for today’s business leaders.

How then are we to understand this so-called “virtue” in our context and specifically for purposes of leadership in organisations? Regrettably, we are not helped much in our task by a web search on *patience and leadership* or by the Leadership literature itself. A web search on *patience and leadership* yields little substantial content amidst a plethora of such titles as “*Patience is a leadership virtue*”, (<http://www.krconsulting.com/patience-is-a-leadership-virtue/> accessed 3 November 2011) or “Leading with *patience*: the will to wait while you lead” (<http://ifyouwilllead.net/2010/02/02/leading-with-patience-%E2%80%93-the-will-to-wait/> accessed 3 November 2011); or “The tougher side of leadership: *patience* with people”

(<http://www.brandonacox.com/leadership/the-tougher-side-of-leadership-patience-with-people/> accessed 3 November 2011) or “Is *patience* a leadership competency?”

(<http://leadertalk.mountainstate.edu/2009/07/is-patience-a-leadership-competency.html>). The web also reveals literary studies courses on *patience literature* such as that at the Wilfred Laurier University which runs a course in *Medieval Literature (9English 643)*. The latter aims to understand this particular genre. Follow the notion of *patience in literature* and you will find over 30 million web results. However, this is unhelpful for our particular quest.

Turn to the leadership literature and we find it makes rare mention of *patience*. In my paper, entitled *Anger and its implications for ethical leadership in organisations*, presented at the Virtual Conference on Moral Leadership in 2010, I observed that

...very little is ever said about anger and leadership..... In fact, the leadership literature excels in directing our attention to the ‘ideals’ for leadership, whether these be in terms of character or conduct. There are many lists of those virtues and qualities required for the ethical leader, such as respect, courage, justice, honesty, temperance, self-control, perseverance, humility, truthfulness and many others. (Smurthwaite 2010:3 conference paper)

Unfortunately, it seems most of those “lists of virtues and qualities required by the ethical leader” make no mention of *patience*. If we do a quick survey of some well-known leadership theories and checklists of the characteristics of leaders (Boyett and Boyett 1998:5-9), we find a great silence in respect of *patience*. Warren Bennis does not mention it in his “Basic ingredients of leadership” (:3), nor do Burt Nanus, (“Seven Megaskills of Leadership” :4), O’Toole (“Characteristics of Value-based Leaders” :4), or Covey (“Seven Habits of Highly Successful People” :5). We do, however, find that In Covey’s “Eight Discernible Characteristics of Principle-centred Leaders”, *patience* is *implied* as an attribute necessary for one of the eight characteristics (:6), and a similar instance is found in Max

Dupree's "Attributes of Leadership" (:7). Gardner's "Attributes of Leadership" (:8) mentions '*resolution*' and '*steadiness*' but not *patience*, while Boyett and Boyett (:9) suggest '*patience*' is a *quality* needed for having leadership *potential*. If we look at the leader-follower relationship which Boyett and Boyett claim will help us better understand leadership, we find no mention of *patience* in the distinctions drawn between managers and leaders (:16), and none in Blank's "Nine Natural Laws of Leadership" (:13). Only in reference to servant leadership do we learn that the leader should be *patient*, but also firm, so as to empower his followers. In addition, *patience* does not mean accepting efforts which are not good enough. This brief survey shows the paucity of references to *patience* and we may well ask what this silence means?

One way of answering this question is to turn firstly to a consideration of what I call "the anatomy" of *patience* and reflect on the meaning of this quality and the associations it has generated over time. To do this, we will consider definitions, and synonyms for *patience*, as well as the views of philosophers, writers/poets and others. Although we call *patience* a virtue in popular discourse, for reasons which will become evident, I hesitate to call *patience* a "virtue" at this stage.

The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations (1972) refers to a number of literary mentions of *patience* which suggest to us some of its connotations over the centuries. In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, *patience* is equated with love, but also with melancholy as in "and with a green and yellow melancholy/she sat like *patience* on a monument smiling at grief" (*Twelfth Night* II.iv (111)). In the well-known sonnet by Milton (1608-1674), *On His Blindness*, *patience* is personified, cautioning the blind poet to "serve" by waiting and bearing the "mild yoke" that God has imposed. John Dryden's (1631-1700) satiric poem *Absalom and Achitophel* (line 1005) warns us to "beware the fury of a patient man", while Robert Bridges (1844-1930) exhorts "O soul be patient..." (*Dejection* line 18). Mathew Arnold (1822-1888), in *Scholar Gypsy*, refers to *patience* as "close-lipp'd", "sad" and even as a close "neighbor" to "despair"(line.194). Thus the literary connotations seem evocative of sadness, waiting, bearing

suffering without complaint and even of despair. Not an attractive proposition for our contemporary world with its emphasis on immediacy, continual novelty and instant satisfaction and an even less attractive proposition for business leaders seeking to solve problems, make decisions and take action with similar immediacy. Let us turn therefore to semantics and see if this proves more helpful.

Definitions of *patience* and synonyms are numerous. Merriam-Webster suggests the word was first used in the 13th century and rather unhelpfully defines it, not as a virtue, but as “the capacity, habit, or fact of being patient” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/patience> accessed 2011/10/07), giving such synonyms as *forbearance*, *long-suffering*, *sufferance* and *tolerance* and noting *impatience* as the sole antonym. *Roget's Thesaurus* (1971) does not even list *patience* as a separate entry but includes it as a synonym for *perseverance* (1971:208: 604a). Other synonyms for *perseverance* include *constancy*, *steadiness*, *tenacity of purpose*, *persistence*, *plodding*, *indefatigability*, *grit* and *stamina*. Some of these we would associate with *patience* as well. *Patience* is also mentioned at the entry for *endurance* (307:826) under “*inexcitability*” alongside such words as *even temper*, *tranquil mind*, *tolerance*, *passiveness*, *coolness*, *imperturbability*, *composure*, *tranquility*, *serenity*, *quiet peace of mind* and *mental calmness*. It is also associated with *equanimity*, *stoicism*, *command of temper*, *self-possession*, *self-control/self-restraint/self-command*, *fortitude*, *long-suffering*, *the patience of Job*, *moderation*, *repression*, and *taking all things as they come, and being steady, enduring and level-headed*. *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed. 2003:827) defines *patience* as the “*capacity to tolerate delay, trouble, or suffering without becoming angry or upset*”. As a final example, the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Little, Fowler, and Coulson: 1970:1447) refers to *patience* as “*the practice, or quality of being patient, suffering/enduring of pain, trouble/evil with calmness and composure, forbearance under provocation of any kind esp. bearing with others, their faults, limitations etc*”. Other synonyms given for *patience* are *forbearing*, *unwearied in the face of difficulties*, and *less flatteringly, “passive”*.

Thus *patience* is a quality, habit or capacity associated not only with a tranquil and calm disposition, but also with endurance and tolerance of challenges, hardship, and suffering. There is also the notion of self-control and steadiness. Yet despite this noble profile, *patience* is not a ‘popular’ ‘virtue’ and, in fact, does not even qualify to be called a virtue in some traditions. Let us turn now to a consideration of the notion of virtue and to the understanding of *patience* we can glean from philosophers and religious traditions.

According to Alasdair MacIntyre (1981, 1985) there is a considerable range and diversity of treatments of the virtues and we will find different lists of virtues in Homer, Sophocles, Aristotle, the New Testament, medieval thinkers, eastern and western traditions and so on (: 180). While we do not, in this paper, have the liberty to trace MacIntyre’s argument in his chapter on “The Nature of the Virtues”, it is helpful to note what he calls his “tentative definition” (:191)

A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods (:191)
(italics in original)

Stan van Hooft (2006:1) tells us that *virtue* is a word deriving from

the Latin *virtus* meaning “excellence”, “capacity” or “ability”. In this sense, to have virtue is to have power or ability to achieve something. More commonly in modern English the word has come to refer to a disposition or a pattern in someone’s character or personality that leads them to act morally. It refers to traits of character that we find admirable. Examples of virtue include generosity, honesty, courage, *patience*, good humour and friendliness.

Now this notion of virtues being “admirable” could be part of the reason why *patience* is so little lauded in contemporary society: we do

not really value or admire those who are *patient*, often interpreting *patience* as a sign of docility, malleability and a willingness to “put up with” all manner of exploitation and unsatisfactory conditions and circumstances without protest. However, this is not the only way of viewing this quality and we need a more nuanced understanding of *patience* if we are to find any relevance and application of this for contemporary leaders. Certain philosophers may perhaps assist us to understand *patience* in this more nuanced way.

Although there seems to be some debate as to whether Aristotle actually included *patience* as one of his virtues, van Hooft (2006: 129) claims that in Aristotle’s scheme of the virtues, *patience* is the mean between the excess of *irascibility* (which derives from the passion *anger*), and the deficiency, called “*lack of spirit*”. Alasdair MacIntyre (1981, 1985), the well-known contemporary philosopher, disagrees and notes that “...*patience* is not mentioned at all by Aristotle” (:177). Solomon (1993:200), a business ethicist, concurs with MacIntyre but points out that Aristotle’s classic list of virtues includes “*good temper*”.

If one turns to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (Dover thrift editions 1998:69), one will find that the term *meekness* is used to indicate the mean between “*over-aptness*” and “*anger*”. Now *meekness*, in Aristotle’s view, is to be praised and a *meek* person would mean being “imperturbable and not being led away by passion, but being angry in that manner, and at those things, and for the length of time which reason may direct” (Bk IV; p.69). I would venture to suggest that *meekness* does not seem to have the same connotations for Aristotle as for us in contemporary life. In our society, a *meek* person would be one who is probably never angry, biddable, non-assertive and mild. But Aristotle disapproves of just this type of person, notably those who exhibit ‘*angerlessness*’ and show no anger at things which they should be angry with. Such persons are ‘foolish’. Also foolish are those who do not show anger appropriately (both in time and in manner) with the person they ought to be angry with. Those who show this “defect”, lack perception and are not inclined to take revenge as they feel no anger. For Aristotle, such persons are like

slaves because they tolerate “scurrility” towards self and others. This would seem an important insight for contemporary leaders: if we assume *meekness* could be a synonym for *patience*, this understanding of *patience* does not mean tolerance of injustice and lack of action when one has the power to change things so that people might live better lives in more just conditions. Thus, Aristotle notes that despite the difficulties of discerning how to show appropriate anger, if by *meek* we mean showing no feelings, such *meekness* is not really praiseworthy. For *meekness* to be a virtue we need to show appropriate anger where necessary, timeously and in the correct way. This observation allows us to dispose of the notion that *patience* (meekness) is not an appropriate quality or ‘virtue’ for leadership because it suggests passivity, malleability and tolerance of anything and anyone no matter how unjust.

Although we noted that *self-control* could be a synonym for *patience*, for Aristotle this is not the case. *Self-control* is, for Aristotle, a “state” and while it is similar to a virtue it is not actually a virtue (Dover thrift editions 1998:115 Bk IV). Aristotle links *self-control* to *endurance*: these two “states” are good and praiseworthy in those who stick to their resolutions, and thus, knowing their ‘lusts’ are wrong, do not indulge them (:116 BkVI). According to Aristotle, if someone has ‘perfected’ both ‘*self-control*’ and ‘*endurance*’ he (sic) is a person of ‘Perfect self-mastery’. However, in his view, *self-control* is of greater significance than *endurance*, given that the latter means “*continued resistance*” while the former consists of “*actual mastery*” (:127). This nuanced distinction between the virtue of *meekness* and the states of *self-control* and *endurance*, adds more depth to our understanding of what we call *patience*, revealing a richness which has diverse implications for leadership. Leaders need to know their “lusts are wrong” and not indulge them. We have seen examples of the opposite in contemporary society: greed, sexual promiscuity, and corruption in some contemporary leaders. *Self-mastery*, which includes both the state of *self-control* and *endurance*, would be critical in many leadership contexts while *meekness*, if it were passivity and a failure to be appropriately angry where necessary (e.g. at injustice), would be a fault. In a leader, such a fault would be greater than in the non-

leader, because the leader has power and this means power to change things, power to make things more just, which the non-leader lacks.

Another insight into *patience* is provided by considering the Christian tradition, most particularly the work of Thomas Aquinas. According to Gratsch (1985, 2004:143), Aquinas claimed that all virtues can be reduced to the three theological virtues (faith, hope and charity) and four cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance). *Patience* is seen as one of the four ‘quasi-integral parts’ of *fortitude* necessary if a person is actually going to be able to act with *courage* (the others being *magnanimity*, *magnificence* and *perseverance*). Thus *patience* and *perseverance* might be necessary where “a courageous person is called upon to endure bodily torment and death, as in the case of a martyr...” (:193).

MacIntyre (1981, 1985:177) believes Aquinas’ treatment of the virtues to be in accord with the usual scheme of his (Aquinas) time i.e. as Gratsch has observed, distinguishing between the cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, temperance, courage) and the three theological virtues (faith, hope and charity). However, MacIntyre has questions about this and asks:

But what then of, for example, *patience*? Aquinas quotes the epistle of St James “*Patience* has its perfect work’ (S.Th.qu.LXI, art.3) and considers whether *patience* should not therefore be listed as a principle virtue. (:177).

It seems from MacIntyre’s account that Aquinas thought *patience* could be *part* of one of the cardinal virtues, contained in it but not an independent principle virtue in itself. In medieval times, MacIntyre notes that the rank ordering of virtues would vary in practice depending on what circumstance one was trying to apply the virtues to. This provides an important insight for us: *patience* is more important in certain circumstances than in others and some circumstances might call for one aspect or nuanced version of *patience* while others call for another. MacIntyre argues that in medieval life *patience* could become a very important virtue “because

it is the virtue of endurance in the face of evil” (:177). He believes that to have a more complete idea of specific virtues requires us to have an idea “...of the *telos* of a whole human life, conceived as a unity...” (:202).

To illustrate what he means here, he uses *justice* and *patience* to explain. In the case of *patience*, he contends it is the “virtue of waiting attentively without complaint, but not of waiting for anything at all. To treat *patience* as a virtue presupposes some adequate answer to the question: waiting for what?” (:202). He argues that while there are many situations we can envisage as requiring *patience*, which supply a reasonable answer to this ‘for what’ question (e.g. being patient with a slow learner), the question remains as to whether in some situations we need to ‘give up’ or whether, like the “medieval exponents of the virtue of *patience*” there are situations “in which the virtue of *patience* requires that I do not ever give up on some person or task, situations in which, as they would have put it, I am required to embody in my attitude to that person or task something of the patient attitude of God towards his creation” (:202). MacIntyre observes that this type of *patience* would be called for if it “served some overriding good, some *telos* which warranted putting other goods in a subordinate place” (:202). This is both an important and relevant observation for contemporary leadership because it points to the need for discernment in respect of the kind and nature of *patience* required in particular circumstances, its purpose and the priority to be given it in these circumstances.

Another useful insight provided by Gratsch (1985, 2004:195), is that Aquinas believed the ‘moral virtue’ of *patience* protects our “good reason” from “the impulse of the passions”, something leaders might wish to consider in negotiations and decision making, as well as in personal behaviour. In addition, *patience* also enables a person to bear sorrows and evil without giving way to these or being overwhelmed by them. *Patience* enables us to endure evil so it “might not be done” and is a virtue which “comes from charity, which loves God above all things and is prepared to do anything to preserve this love” (:195).

Perseverance, often seen as a synonym for *patience* is, for Aquinas, the virtue which persistently does good over a long period until the good is attained. Like fortitude, "...it "stands firm in the face of difficulty" (Gratsch 1985, 2004:195). For the leader, working for the common good and persevering despite the effort and hard work this requires, would require *patience* in the guise of *perseverance* as understood here. On the other hand Aquinas distinguishes between *perseverance* and another synonym for *patience*, namely *constancy*. The former "makes a person persist in doing good" where the act of doing so is difficult, while *constancy* means a person keeps trying despite external obstacles. Both *perseverance* and *constancy* might be necessary for leaders particularly in our business environment where too many leaders have not persisted in doing good and have done just the opposite. Obstacles and difficulties are inevitable when working for the common good: persevering despite the obstacles requires *patience* in the form of *constancy*. MacIntyre (cited in Moore 2008: 488) reminds us that both *integrity* and *constancy* are necessary virtues to counter the moral stress experienced by managers as a result of character fragmentation and the erosion of the true self. This comes about in the contemporary context as a result of managers being required to don different selves and assume varying moral perspectives depending on the 'stage' and 'audience' they are playing to. Moore (2008: 88), basing his argument on MacIntyre (1999:317-318) puts it as follows: "To avoid this potential for what we might call moral stress, the virtues of integrity and constancy are required. Integrity requires us to be the same person in each and every context, while constancy requires us to "pursue the same goods through extended periods of time"".

While MacIntyre is helpful in adding to our understanding of *patience*, it is interesting to note, that Aquinas' categorization of virtues means that at least in the Catholic Tradition despite being much extolled and admired in the lives of the saints and being seen as a quality to be cultivated, *patience* is not actually classified as a virtue at all. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, (http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c1a7.htm accessed 7/10/2011) *patience* is not one of either the theological

virtues (faith, hope and charity) or of the cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance). Neither is it one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit (wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord). Rather it is seen as one of the Fruits of the Holy Spirit (i.e. “perfections that the Holy Spirit forms in us as the first fruits of eternal glory” of which there are twelve (charity, joy, peace, *patience*, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, chastity). This suggests that *patience* is something which develops over time while practicing other virtues such as justice and fortitude and is part of our becoming truly who we were meant to become. Interestingly, in some other religious traditions we also find that *patience* is not always seen as a “virtue”: Hinduism, Daoism and Confucianism seem not to view it as a virtue, Islam does, while Theravada Buddhism sees it as one of the “ten Perfections” and Mahayana Buddhism gives Six Perfections of which *patience* is one (<http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Virtue> accessed 7 October 2011).

So where does this brief consideration of “the anatomy” of *patience* lead us with respect to its relevance and application in ethical organisational and business leadership? As Ciulla (1998:3) noted, “We live in a world where leaders are often morally disappointing”, a world which led Solomon to observe that he had “... become convinced that morally sensitive leaders are the essential feature of any good organisation.” (in Ciulla 1998: 87). It seems to me that *patience* might be a significant quality or virtue that reflects such “moral sensitivity” and perhaps helps to stem the tide of moral disappointment. For

A leader is not a sole voyager, but a key figure whose actions or inactions can determine others’ well-being and the broader good. It is not too much to say that communal social health, as well as achieving a desired destination, are largely influenced by a leader’s decisions and the information and values upon which they are based.

The leadership process is therefore especially fraught with ethical challenges (Hollander in Ciulla 1998:49).

If we agree with Northouse (2001:250), that we could consider respect; service; justice; honesty; and community as the principles of ethical leadership or if we agree with Larry Spears (1998:5-8), who advocates Greenleaf's Servant Leadership, that the ten characteristics of the Servant Leader are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualisation, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and the building of community, we will immediately understand the relevance of *patience* in a positive and nuanced sense.

Patience is relevant for building relationships and community both within and outside the organisation, is needed for self-reflection and for discernment in decision making and lies at the root of taking a long-term rather than a short-term perspective on building a profitable and sustainable business. Thus such a leader would be required to exercise *patience* in the sense of *constancy* and of *perseverance* in his/her relationship with others. This means a respect for the dignity of others, taking the time needed for listening empathetically, guiding and facilitating the growth of others, healing wounds where necessary, and persuading to action rather than coercing. To build community requires *patience* in the sense of *perseverance*, *fortitude*, and *constancy* and may even require *meekness* in Aristotle's sense where anger at injustice may be called for. Business today is called on to contribute to the common good and to be sustainable and this requires moral discernment and a willingness to venture beyond the confines of short-term profit-making and a merely "instrumental approach" to social responsibility (see Garriga and Melé 2008). But perhaps most of all, leaders need to demonstrate and value *patience*, to counter the prevailing demand for short-term or immediate results which has so often resulted in unethical behavior. *Patience* is a much needed virtue in our current world: our economic crisis demonstrates no possibility of vanishing in the wake of "instant remedies". We have tried these and they did not work: now, our leaders need to demonstrate and exemplify the *self-control*, *endurance* and *self-*

mastery advocated by Aristotle, the *fortitude*, *perseverance* and *constancy* advocated by Aquinas and MacIntyre and the discernment required to assess what we are waiting for in the context of the common good. Leaders must therefore ask themselves what kind of *patience* is required in our current global context, and discern the purpose and priority of *patience* in its many guises in terms of this context and the common good of all.

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“Is this seat taken? Conversations at the Bar, the Bench and the Academy about the South African Constitution”

by S Woolman and D Bilchitz (eds), Pretoria: Pretoria University Press. 2012., 446pp, ISBN 978-1-920538-07-1 (R190 p/bk).

Book Review

In recent years comparative legal scholarship has highlighted the importance of debating fundamental constitutional values that underpin democracy, continuously asking tough but vital questions regarding constitutional matters, whether reviewing mundane or contemporary topics. Recent events, such as the Marikana tragedy or attacks on the freedom of expression, serve as reminders of the importance of arguing basic questions of law and human rights in the South African constitution, despite the fact that this constitution is arguably the most progressive of its kind. This book aims to aggressively “push the boundaries of legal thought”¹ not merely by introducing challenging issues, but by placing different authors in conversation with each other, thus providing critical debates, useful in legal and civilian circles, about a selection of core constitutional problems facing South Africa. The book consists of a collection of essays from public lectures, seminars and other publications for the South African Institute for Advanced Constitutional, Public, Human Rights and International Law (SAIFAC), which address ten diverse topics. For each topic the initial essay introduces the commentator’s view, followed by a reply from a different author. The panel of contributors comprises a number of distinguished academics, including Stu Woolman, David Bilchitz and Jonathan Klaaren,

international scholar Frank Michelman and former South African Constitutional Court justice, Yvonne Mokgoro. A comprehensive index of contributors is not found in the book.

The first topic is the constitutional doctrine of ‘rationality review’ and ways in which the doctrine may be developed. In another pair of articles the authors ask what the paramount justification for a democratic constitutional order is, and the implications that the possible justifications have on discrimination, specifically work-related discrimination, within religious associations. The following topic investigates the traditional concept of democratic ‘citizenship’ linked to a specific territorial republic and envisages changes to that of an empire, transnationalism, post-nationalism and cosmopolitanism in addition to addressing the question of whether these changes are desirable.

The next avant-garde topic of the book is whether equality demands that the Bill of Rights be interpreted to extend its protection to non-human animals in seeking to realise an ethos of non-arbitrariness. The value of Ubuntu in relation to dignity and other constitutional rights makes for an interesting constitutional jurisprudence debate which demonstrates the way in which “a dominant norm in Western ethical discourse can itself be illuminated” when compared to a “central feature of African thought”.

In the next chapters the authors discuss questions of the principle of proportionality in the balancing approach to the limitations of rights and its effect on the very meaning of what it is to have a right in the South African Constitution. In order to facilitate further understanding of the familiar construct ‘constitutional deference’ in the adjudication of social economic rights, questions regarding what social entitlements one can ultimately expect are discussed. A further essay challenges preconceived ideas about the relationship between legal theory and legal practice across forms of life, and whether law is different from norm-driven social practices such as golf or religion. The answering essay argues that law is an autonomous domain. In another conversation, two authors consider the appropriate amount of

clarity needed, through coherent judgements and clear precedents set by the Constitutional Court, in a democracy based on the rule of law. Acknowledging transparency as essential for an effective democratic process, in the final essay three interlocutors address the groundbreaking notion of judicious transparency and the potential role of the judiciary in maintaining it.

While this book will be an indispensable addition to a constitutional lawyer's library, the conversational format makes it worth reading for anyone who has an interest in constitutional matters.

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¹ Woolman and Bilchitz *Is This Seat Taken? Conversations at the Bar, the Bench and the Academy about the South African Constitution* (2012) v

Tradition fixed and mobile: Essays in honour of Rev Prof Rodney Moss

by Mothoagae ID & Prior AL 2013. Pretoria, Research Institute for Theology and Religion, UNISA. xxv + 250 pages. ISBN 978-1-86888-727-9.

Book Review

This book is a fitting tribute to Rev Prof Rodney Moss's life as priest and esteemed academic as well as his passionate interest in the critical appropriation of Tradition as both 'fixed and mobile'. The book begins with an introductory essay on his life and work. Thereafter the rest of the book is divided into three parts, each reflecting a different perspective on Tradition namely: theological (Part 1); women (Part 2) and contextual (Part 3). Moss begins the theological part with a thorough overview of Tradition that sets the context for the rest of the book. Citing the radical shifts brought by Vatican II he argues for constancy and fluidity as the hallmark of Tradition found in the works of theologians throughout history such as Irenaeus, Newman, Tilley, Congar and Thiel. The fluidity of Tradition allows it to enter into critical dialogue with each context so that it can be relevant and transformative. Continuing with this theme the other three articles in this section present contemporary challenges to Tradition and propose creative responses. A 'theology of secularity' proposed by Anselm Prior seeks to address the inequality between clergy and laity as inconsistent with equality of the baptized espoused in Vatican II and the reduction of the mission of the laity to ecclesiastical affairs instead of outreach to the world. Similarly Celia Kourie presents mysticism as a response to the alienation many feel towards Tradition and also as having a space in the multiplicity of meaning postulated by postmodernism. Laurent Magesa's argues for a prophetic response to

the political, social and economic problems in Africa in discontinuity with early missionary appropriation of the Tradition that failed to address African realities.

Part 2 of the book represents the voices of women in dialogue with Tradition and Vatican II. Judith Coyle brings together the two interpretations of Vatican II as 'event' and 'pastoral' and integrates these within a Trinitarian theological framework that allows for unity and discontinuity with tradition. Sue Rackozy delves deeper into the role of women during the council and their contribution. Using a feminist paradigm she argues that the ordination of women presents a challenge to the radical claims of change by Vatican II. Francisca Chimhanda contextualises the challenge of the exclusion of women by proposing an appropriation of Shona beliefs on the earth as mother in a theology of land that embraces communal ontology and values of personhood, togetherness, friendship and hospitality which can be brought into critical dialogue with the Tradition.

Part 3 of the book brings together a range of topics, each seeking to interrogate aspects of Tradition in response to contemporary issues. The range and diversity of the remaining five articles attests to the relevance of this theme to the global church: Paul Decock on the challenge of the apocalypse's theocentric notion of reconciliation in relation to contemporary understandings; Anthony Egan's biography of the ministerial formation of the socialist Methodist minister Douglas Thompson in South Africa as a challenge to seminary formation of priests; Ithumeleng Mothogae on the structured marginalisation of black Theology in the post-Apartheid era; Jakub Urbaniak on the different ways of understanding suffering from a Christian perspective where suffering is understood as a mystery and Buddhist perspective where it is perceived as a problem; and Michael van Heerden on pragmatism and the epistemic virtues leading to incompleteness and humility.

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About St Augustine College of South Africa

The idea of founding a Catholic university in South Africa was first mooted in 1993 by a group of academics, clergy and business people. It culminated in the establishment of St Augustine College of South Africa in July 1999, when it was registered by the Minister of Education as a private higher education institution and started teaching students registered for the degree of Master of Philosophy and Doctor of Philosophy.

It is situated in Victory Park, Johannesburg and operates as a university offering values-based education to students of any faith or denomination, to develop leaders in Africa for Africa.

The name 'St Augustine' was chosen in order to indicate the African identity of the College since St Augustine of Hippo (354-430 A.D.) was one of the first great Christian scholars of Africa.

As a Catholic educational institution, St Augustine College is committed to making moral values the foundation and inspiration for all its teaching and research. In this way it offers a new and unique contribution to education, much needed in our South African society.

It aims to be a community that studies and teaches disciplines that are necessary for the true human development and flourishing of individuals and society in South Africa. The College's engagement with questions of values is in no sense sectarian or dogmatic but is both critical and creative. It will explore the African contribution to Christian thought and vice versa. Ethical values will underpin all its educational programmes in order to produce leaders who remain sensitive to current moral issues.

The college is committed to academic freedom, to uncompromisingly high standards and to ensuring that its graduates are recognised and valued anywhere in the world. Through the international network of Catholic universities and the rich tradition of Catholic tertiary education, St Augustine College has access to a wide pool of eminent academics, both locally and abroad, and wishes to share these riches for the common good of South Africa.

Instructions to Contributors

EDITORIAL POLICY

St Augustine Papers is the journal of St Augustine College of South Africa and is published twice annually. It publishes scholarly, refereed articles and book reviews in all the fields in which academic programmes are offered at the College. Interdisciplinary articles are especially welcome. Publishing decisions are made by the Editorial Committee.

PRESENTATION OF MANUSCRIPTS

Articles may be around 6 000 – 12 000 words in length and should be an original contribution. Articles may be e-mailed using software that is compatible with MS Word. The first page of the manuscript should carry the proposed title and author's name with highest degree. Under the name should appear an identification line, giving title and position held, the institution and its location. Personal details and a short biography (10-15 lines) should also be submitted. A brief abstract (no more than 150 words) should follow the author identification data.

REFERENCES

The Harvard method should be used. All references should be specified in parentheses in the text (and in the text of notes) by surname(s) of the author(s), the year of the publication and page number(s), for example (Dworkin 1986:45-52). The complete citation should appear at the end of the manuscript (after the notes, if any) under the caption 'References'. Such citations should be listed alphabetically by surname of author; for authors cited more than once, by year of publication, with the most recent references first. Please note the use of capital letters, punctuation marks and italics in the following examples:

- Bean, P. and Melville, J. 1989. *Lost Children of the Empire*. London: Unwin Hyman.
Black, M. 1979. *More About Metaphor*. In Ortony, A. (ed.) 1979: 19-43
Hrushovski, B. 1984. Poetic metaphor and Frames of Reference. *Poetics Today* 5 (1):5-43
Ortony, A. (ed.). 1979. *Metaphor and Thought*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

NOTES

Notes should be numbered serially throughout the text by superscript numbers (without parentheses) to the right of any punctuation marks. The notes themselves should appear at the end of the manuscript but before the references, under the caption 'Notes'.

