

CHANGING THE WORLD: FAITHFUL DISCIPLESHIP AND RESPONSIBLE CITIZENSHIP

In 2012 I was in Perth, Western Australia on tenure as a Visiting Theologian at the Murdoch University School of Theology. During the visit Australia hosted the Summit of the Commonwealth Heads of State and Government in Perth. The Saturday was billed as the great day of the outdoors, and a massive braai was to be held at the public park in the centre of Perth, and the Queen was to do a walk-about. Public transport was provided free of charge from every part of Australia and Western Australia. The place was indeed choc-a-bloc. The 'Occupy Wall Street' Group was holding a demonstration right at the Centre of Perth, not very far from the venue of CHOGM. They had placards, and they sat down at the centre of the square, and evidently they came from across the world. The demonstration was noisy, and the banners screamed aloud. Many innocent bystanders and passers-by like my wife and I who had not been anticipating this were quite irritated by this inconvenience, cars were honking their horns, and the police just could not handle the meleé.

Somewhere in the midst of this protesting crowd, stood a young man holding his banner. It had the words: "SORRY FOR THE INCONVENIENCE: We are Changing the World." I thought that was cool. I became attracted to this young man in particular, and I wondered about his passion and commitment for a just world. I also knew that he was a sensitive person, aware of the inconvenience that his/their occupation of a public space was causing to so many innocent people, who had come to catch a glimpse of the Queen, and now they were confronted by a demonstration they had little interest in. What attracted me, I think was that, he acknowledged the inconvenience caused, and sought to bring the passersby to his cause.

I tell that story because indeed changing the world is an inconvenience. It turns our world upside down. It changes our usual routine and blocks our tried and tested ways of life. It challenges us to look beyond the present and live today as if we are already experiencing the possibility of a future we can imagine. Finally, it is unapologetic about the course of action undertaken.

It is perhaps a curious fact that many South Africans perhaps pay scant attention to, that three of the top public personalities in South Africa belong to and are pastors/preachers of the conservative, Christian fundamentalist churches. President Jacob Zuma, Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng, and now Leader of the Opposition, Mr Mmusi Maimane.

Mr Jacob Zuma was made an honorary pastor by some independent charismatic churches in Ntuzuma, KwaZulu Natal in May 2007. At the time he was Deputy President of the ANC campaigning to be elected President of the party. This group claimed to be honouring Zuma as a show of support in the midst of his troubles, both in his personal life and in his

political life. He had been charged with Rape and acquitted, and in 2005 President Thabo Mbeki dismissed him from his position as Deputy President in the wake of the remarks by Judge Squires in convicting Mr Schabir Shaik of corruption. He went on, of course, to become the President of the ANC in 2007, and in 2009 President of the Republic and Head of State. In ordaining him, one of the pastors said, "We want a leader who sees poverty and lives among poverty-stricken people in Nkandla." He was pictured at the occasion dressed in a clerical collar. It is fair to point out that the Full Gospel Church of God distanced itself from this act by pastors who claimed to be part of that denomination.

Mr Jacob Zuma has, of course, since been known to make some controversial statements about the church and about the Bible, perhaps the most famous of which are both that the ANC will rule until Jesus comes, and that any business that wished for success was advised to support the ANC. More recently he has become famous for his performance in Parliament and his exclamation "Thixo wase George Goch!" Of special interest is his belief that government must be assisted to espouse Christian beliefs so that the poor can receive compassion and charity. He continues to profess his Christian beliefs. Pastor Ray McCauley of the Rhema Bible Church, and others of similar persuasions, have drawn closer to Mr Jacob Zuma since he became President. Mr McCauley has since emerged as the Chairperson of the National Interfaith Council of South Africa. This has become Mr Zuma's support base within the religious community seen as Zuma's way of undercutting the SACC.

Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng is an ordained pastor of the Winners Chapel, a charismatic evangelical church. Mr Mogoeng famously declared that he had been anointed by God to become Chief Justice after prayer, and that prophecies by "men of God" from Nigeria, Washington, Ghana, London foretold what was to become of him in that regard long before he was actually approached for the position.. For him it was a prophecy of God that he became Chief Justice. The Chief Justice told a Christian TV network that "notwithstanding the intensity of the opposition... the prophecy of God, who never lies, prevailed." His church is one of the prosperity cults founded by a Nigerian pastor David O Oyedepo, whose personal wealth is said to be worth \$150m, making him the richest pastor in Nigeria.

Last year the Chief Justice delivered an address at this university entitled, "Law and Religion in Africa: The Quest for the Common Good in Pluralistic Societies" which some of his detractors understood to be a veiled assault on the Constitution and a purveyor of his narrow conservative Christian dogma. Richard Pollak, more seriously, sees parallels between what the Chief justice preaches and what Jacob Zuma believes about God and the Constitution. He suggests that the fears of many, especially women's rights and gay rights activists, were more than justified by the statements made by the Chief Justice in the lecture. In a carefully considered rebuttal of the Chief Justice's views on religion and morality as the basis of our constitutional arrangements, Pierre de Vos in his blog "Constitutionally Speaking", notes that the Chief Justice's views seek to associate South Africa's legal system with those of his peculiar strand of Pentecostal Christianity "that

focuses on sex as the root of all evil in the world.” The Chief Justice’s views, then, in de Vos’ judgment are “socially and politically reactionary and hence in direct opposition to my (meaning deVos) own value system and the norms embedded in the Constitution.”

Mr Mmusi Maimane is the Leader of the official opposition in parliament. He was elected recently in May. Mr Maimane is also elder and Pastor of the Liberty Church in Randburg where he goes by the name Pastor Aloysias. The theology of the church is decidedly conservative, focused on a view of morality that is controlling and judgmental. It also makes claims about God and divine activity and mandate for human actions, as in prophecy. In a recent sermon made much of lately by the ANC, and by his detractors in the DA, especially with regard to Mr Maimane’s views about homosexuality, and his apparent minimalist views on the Constitution, Maimane confessed that he wanted Christians to be in charge of the nation – a view that very much echoes Jacob Zuma’s call for the dominance of the ANC in the political affairs of the nation. When he says that, logically, he means that his own brand of Christianity should dominate national affairs. He, too, was led to politics by a vision.

On September 12 2014, a guesthouse in Lagos belonging to the Synagogue Church of All Nations collapsed. Many people then lodging in the Guest House died, 85 was the number of South Africans known to have died there, or while many others were injured, some very seriously. The pilgrims from all over the world to attend founder prophet TB Joshua’s healing services. It was estimated that well over 100 South Africans were at the church at this time on a pilgrimage. I was curious to know what it was that drove such a large contingent of South Africans to travel to Nigeria; and what was it about Pastor Joshua that had such a pull on the faithful in South Africa as to travel that distance to hear him preach? I was told that Joshua was a popular prophet and pastor in South Africa with churches in various parts of the country. Some famous South Africans are also adherents to his brand of church. It is a prosperity cult that believes in prayers for healing and miracles as well as prayers for deliverance and material blessings from God. If planeloads of South Africans can travel that far then it must be that South Africans are captivated by his preaching and they have faith in his miracles. Since the tragedy, as well through the struggle to repatriate the remains of those who had perished in the disaster Joshua’s reputation appears to remain untainted even though he took no responsibility for the tragedy. TB Joshua Ministries has been presented as offering support to the widows and orphans, even to the point of inviting some of them to spend Christmas with him in Nigeria.

In this study on religious consciousness and the prevalence of right-wing, conservative charismatic and Pentecostal religion in South Africa, and the social problems that have been identified as a result, it interests me that there are no studies in sociology of religion on this phenomenon. I am interested in determining how this blend of religion and wealth and privilege affects the consciousness of South Africans towards their social and political environment, and to what extent religion plays a role in the dominance of right-wing conservative ideas, especially in the political statements of President Jacob Zuma.

Underlying that it seems to me to be of interest that we understand the kind of Christianity South Africans embrace and how that relates to the political and social conditions in society. Faith practices have the capability to shape a people's perception of reality and human life and inform their contribution, or none, to the good society and to human flourishing.

There have been widespread reports, for example, of the power and hold that pastors appear to have on congregations to the extent of submission to dubious, dangerous, unlawful, and at times, immoral practices like stripping naked, drinking petrol, or eating grass. There are also complaints about how poor people are taxed out of their meager resources by cults that promise them heaven and riches. Concerns have been raised that so many of the churches are fronts for criminal conduct as in drugs and prostitution. On another front, the control of or nefarious influence on the thinking in government by the likes of Rhema Bible Church, and the ones that Mr Maimane's refers to, may well lead to an erosion of the constitutional values, or point to support for dubious, criminal and corrupt practices by politicians and other public officials, and may well erode the moral fibre of society¹.

Let it be borne in mind though that we do well to heed the warning expressed in the Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of the Church of England, *Who is My Neighbour?* In the run-up to the recent General Elections (May 2015). The Letter states that we should neither hold politicians to a higher set of moral standards that we practice ourselves, and yet nor let them off the hook by treating political life as if it was outside the demands of morality. I add a further caution. It is that citizens are entitled to expect more from their leaders and politicians than they as ordinary citizens are capable of, otherwise we shall be in danger of reducing public life to the lowest common denominator. This is a very early attempt at understanding the religious consciousness of this country and how that may affect the fibre of society in public life.

It is a common sight in South Africa nowadays that on any high street, especially in the CBD, there will be a variety of churches that occupy premises originally built as shops or commercial premises; or places of worship set up in tents on any open space in street

¹ There is a fascinating study on fundamentalist American protestant religion in www.salon.com, and in www.religiondispatches.org "Christian fundamentalism is a capitalist construct: The secret history of American religion", by Daniel Silliman, accessed 5 June 2015. In this essay I have avoided using the word, "fundamentalism" because it has connotations of a much narrower depiction of the religious tendencies I am interested in. Besides, there are ways of referring to the fundamentals of the Christian faith that are not in themselves objectionable. My objection, though, remains that some conservative groups seem to have appropriated to themselves the authority to define or limit the fundamentals of essentials of the Christian faith to the exclusion of all others, and that they somehow believe that public life and politics must be beholden to their particular view of the world.

corners, or homes that have been converted into church buildings. Many of the churches are led by pastors, many of them from Brazil, or from West Africa, and almost all of them are charismatic evangelical or in some instances linguistic, cultural associations for the people who worship there, generally migrants. On the other hand, in many suburban areas one also notices that a large number of wealthy extensive plants for charismatic, evangelical and apostolic churches are also evident. For the purpose of this paper, I do not deal with established churches ranging from Full Gospel, Pentecostal, as well as traditional mainline churches, and African-initiated or indigenous churches or even, non-Christian religions. In the end, from mere observation one is bound to say that South Africa is a Christian country. I am interested in the interface between religion and public life especially in the face of enormous deprivation, crime and an increasingly authoritarian and conservative government².

II

The question then has to be asked what does religion, and more specifically Christianity, actually mean to the people of South Africa? It is fair to say that the obvious trend is a move away from the historic missionary churches towards the growing Christian sects characterized by independence (meaning, not under any of the historic or missionary denominational structures as universal or global). They are rather localized ecclesial formations, may even be loosely-formed, under a founding and charismatic leader, who virtually “owns” the church, rather like a business or property, which he then franchises it out to followers or elders to replicate the church elsewhere. It is not unusual that there are serial schisms from the original founder. What then follows is that the “church” becomes a “family affair” and not unusually, the wife and children also becoming partners and ‘shareholders’ in the enterprise, and with it a dynasty takes shape.

The Theology that emerges, such as it is, is an amalgam of biblical fundamentalism, social and ethical teaching that is socially conservative, focusing on gender relations and sexual practices and habits, male dominated, patriarchal, with family mores that are strictly conservative and are at variance with modern developments, with an emphasis on sexual relations as determinative of a life lived without sin, an aversion to homosexuality and a diversified appreciation of sexuality as a creation by God; worship that is wordy and bare, interspersed with preaching and song, and prayer, spontaneity and, in charismatic churches, a practical and material and visible manifestation of the Spirit, hands lifted in prayer and praise, and oftentimes, adherents being wont to “fall” and to be “possessed”, and preaching that is a succession and listing of scriptural verses, with occasional commentary, and application that is literalist with simplistic interpretation of the texts, subjective and judgmental. I grant that this may sound like putting up a “straw man”, a

² As a matter of comparative interest, vide Eric C Miller’s review of the book by Jonathan J Edwards: *The Rhetoric and Politics of American Fundamentalism*, in *Religion Dispatches*, 1 June 2015.

caricature, you might say, but I hope that this description is not very far from reality. But there is more. In some of these churches devotion also requires that the laying on of hands, healing and rewards follow those who believe. The responsibility of the believer then becomes that of an evangelist and prophet sometimes understood as one who recruits others to the church, who has superior power, a diviner even, one who is chosen above all others.

This then brings me to the critical point of exploring what precisely does it mean to be a Christian. Definitely it is not just about belonging to and attending church regularly, nor is it just about reading the bible, or praying faithfully. It is about all these things and more. The Bishops' Pastoral letter (2015) simply states it that life as a Christian is to be grounded in – it is grounded in practices of prayer and service, through which people learn to reflect on the deep nature of themselves, others and the world at large, under God, and work together for greater human flourishing. But there is yet a higher level of commitment to being a Christian. It is that to be a Christian is an acknowledgement of God as “presence” in your life and in the world. It is a life of confession of Christ in word and deed to be the Saviour of the world, *salvator mundi*. It is, if one likes, to be in a relationship of discipleship to Christ (Matthew 28:19).

I believe that former Pope Benedict XVI puts it very well when he said that, “Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.” Rowan Williams restates this same idea recalling an aphorism by Wittgenstein who said that believing in Christ was “the result of your own biography, and so you must ‘make a quite different place in your life for it’” (2012; 319). Religion becomes a factor in one’s life when it touches one’s heart and soul. It is not so much what one does to appease God, but that one acknowledges what God has already done in and through His Son Jesus Christ. It is also not so much about what we receive as a benefit of our believing and good deeds so much as that our lives become a reflection or mirror of the love of God at work in and through us. It is rather a compelling reflection and outworking of a life in the midst of a messy world. It makes God “visible” to the inhabited world (*oikoumene*) and evangelism becomes an offer and an invitation to share in the life of Christ.

Many believers actually know this. They know that in real life they pray ceaselessly without any tangible “result”. They know that in real life many faithful are treated unjustly; that suffering is the fate of all humankind, and that disease and struggle are part of what makes human-beings human. Faithful people also know that there are many people in the world who are poor not because they are evil, or sinful, or contact disease and suffer misfortune not because God has turned his back on them. These things happen, and no amount of prayer will necessarily fix them. Of course, we also know or we should that part of addressing the human condition is to address the sources of suffering: an unjust world and its systems and structures, engage in

struggles for justice, and putting together available resources to build a better world. Changing the world and unjust structures is as much a calling through prayer as it is to pray and sit and wait. At the same time fatalism is not an adequate response to human suffering. We should be looking differently at how divine activity is at work in the world.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, now Bishop Rowan, Lord Williams, Master of Magdeline College, Cambridge states this succinctly in one of his last books published while he was Archbishop of Canterbury³. This how he puts it: “belief itself is not a possession, something acquired by the ego that will henceforth satisfy the ego’s needs for security and control. *To believe in God is to be a ‘trustee’ of God’s truth*” (2012; 303)⁴. The point being made here is telling. Contrary to what prosperity cults would have us believe, believing is not a commodity to be traded for benefit or investment, or profit. It is not what we parade as virtue above all else. It is a responsibility, a burden often at a cost rather than at a profit. Williams goes on to say that believing does not give us any superiority over others but is an invitation to others to share that which we have already received. Yes, this attitude of mind calls for Christian humility and grace because, says the Bishops’ Pastoral letter, “none of us has a ‘God’s eye view’. It behoves all people... to think it possible that you may be mistaken...”

For over two thousand years Christians have lived with the balance of what is promised and the reality of its lack of realization in their own lives. Christians have seen generations remain unrequited even though they lived faithful lives. Christians have lived with the evidence of evil in triumph over truth and justice, at least for a time; and many have experienced a very deep sense of the absence of God. The early church from Luke-Acts, the Pauline writings, Peter, John and James and all the way to the Book of Revelation have had to grapple with the fact of the human condition with unfulfilled promises. The early church did not make empty promises, and did not take ownership of the promises Christ made in the gospels. What it did was to acknowledge that they lived in “in-between” times. All that it did was to be pastorally and spiritually conscious and affirming without simplifying the complex, to live with the uncertainty and to focus in the penultimate with a life lived to the full, and in promoting goodness and truth at all times, and to seek the common good.

The Letter of Peter says it for me. The emphasis is that living a full life is to live not for oneself but “for the will of God” (1Peter 4:2). Peter, like other writers, affirms the central belief of the church, the certainty of the Second Coming, the uncertainty of a future clouded in the mists of time bounded by faith, and the realization that there is a life that must be lived in this present in faithfulness to the unknown:

³ Faith in the Public Square, 2012: London, Bloomsbury.

⁴ My emphasis.

The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear-minded and self-controlled so that you can pray. Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be glory and power for ever and ever. Amen (1Peter 4: 7-11).

That means recognizing and living with the messiness of the world that is imperfect and that is in the making, or in formation.

What I am reading from this is that believing is not just a transactional relationship, of barter and tender, of returns and rewards. It is rather a faithful self-giving and a living representation of God to the world in the act of being human. To revert back to Williams, he recalls words from the Diary of Etty Hillesum, a Dutch Jew who perished in the Holocaust. She concludes with what Williams believes is the essence of Christian affirmation:

To see what matters is not that you are – in any easy sense – safe in the hands of God, but that God is safe in your hands is to turn upside down any consolatory version of faith, to take yourself indeed on an 'eternal covenant' (2012; 325).

In a very real sense then one must take oneself out of the equation, not least because it is never one's responsibility to double guess God, but to be faithful regardless.

III

The great danger in today's world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades. This is a very real danger for believers too. Many fall prey to it, and end up resentful, angry and listless. That is no way to live a dignified and fulfilled life; it is not God's will for us, nor is it the life in the Spirit which has its source in the heart of the risen Christ (Pope Francis SJ: *Evangeliium Gaudium*).

In October 2012, Archbishop Rowan Williams addressed the Holy Synod of Bishops at The Vatican in Rome on "The New Evangelism for the Transmission of the Christian Faith". He mentioned that the essence of the Christian and Catholic faith was to attest to a 'true humanism' and, he went on, "to proclaim the Gospel is to proclaim that it is at last possible to be properly human." The point here is that a truly faithful life is

itself a recognition of the joys and gifts of our humanity, and that such was given by God. To be human is to be derived from God, and “in our image, in our likeness” (Genesis 1:26) and therefore to be of God for a divine purpose. Therefore

To be fully human is to be recreated in the image of Christ’s humanity; and that humanity is the perfect human ‘translation’ of the relationship of the eternal Son to the eternal Father, a relationship of loving and adoring self-giving, a pouring out of life towards the Other (2012; para 5).

This, of course, is the tenet of the Church’s belief in the Incarnation.

I do not believe that this affirmation means that we are abstracted, as human beings from the course of nature or of the divine will. We are neither separate from nor abstracted from the wholeness of nature, or of the divine will. It means only that human life is itself given for the extension and expression of the divine purpose. That purpose cannot be manipulated to serve human needs, however laudable. This humanity, though, is one that is shaped by that relationship of the eternal covenant with God that seeks and responds to the love of God, confident in the knowledge and, with humility, that God is glorified in the being of our humanness.

Theology and theological reflection begins with the human, rather than with God. God may well be the subject, but theology is a human activity - curious, inquisitive, probing, questioning, enquiring, discovering. It is an ongoing quest of faith seeking understanding in the words of St Anselm of Canterbury. To the extent that humanity is by its nature broken and incomplete, which explains why becoming human is a constant state of being and becoming. In the process, at least, it is in that search for perfection and holiness that the essence of being human is to be found because God has created us to be holy and perfect like he is. Human consciousness is never about egoism but about otherness. It is the otherness that recognizes the source of one’s being that we are never created in splendid isolation but in community and that we are never our own creators, but God’s. Rather echoing sentiments later expressed by Pope Francis above, Rowan Williams goes on, in his Vatican Address, to frame his thoughts on the joy of contemplative life for a Christian because

it is the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics, the key to the essence of a renewed humanity that is capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom – freedom from self-oriented, acquisitive habits and the distorted understanding that comes from them. To put it boldly, contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit. To learn contemplative practice is to learn what we need so as to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly. It is a deeply revolutionary matter (2012; para 8).

The point is made also about the fact that to be human is also to be truly free. Freedom is the essence of being human. It means that the human being at her/his best has the freedom to make truly free choices and take responsibility for them, can seek human wellbeing and the capacity to be so human as to be loving and generous, kind and

caring, intelligent and vested with the imagination and value and to appreciate the abstract like aesthetics. My summary of the ethic of human freedom is

- Freedom to think independently;
- To speak truthfully;
- To act with integrity; and
- In pursuit of moral goals.

To be human is hardly ever to be just about the hard character but also the softer side of being human. To be human is to be a part of the whole and never the whole itself. It is not individualism. Drawing from Mahatma Gandhi one must also suggest that human freedom is incompatible with one's being imprisoned by an iron cage of attachment to things, material things, ostentatious living and selfish pursuits. It means that one does not get subjected to the slavery of debt or consumerism. Mahatma Gandhi says that his study of the Hindu scriptures the *Gita*, he learnt that "teaching of non-possession to mean that those who act like the trustee, who, though having control over great possessions, regard(s) not an iota of them as his own" (Williams; 2012; 303). Hoppers and Richards, in their study *Re-Thinking Thinking: Modernity's Other and the Transformation of the University*, take this trusteeship principle further to mean that it is a call on everybody "to practice self-restraint and to work for the good of the whole, regarding whatever property or talent she or he might possess as a trust to be devoted to the service of others." This is done so that there can be enough for all to share equitably and to discourage acquisitive behavior. The intention is to communicate what is good for the common good and for human flourishing.

To Williams (2012; 305), though, the imperative that follows the knowledge that one contemplates the kingdom of God as that condition of human relationships "where the purpose of God is determinative... and so becomes visible in our history. That community steeped in the culture of waiting, and celebration and desiring to see the face of God in Jesus Christ is the church. The church then acts as a sign and sacrament of the Christ who is alive in the midst of the faithful and the unfaithful just as much. It is a sign that points away from itself to Christ Risen and Ascended, but is assuring of grace and salvation by its presence that fills the vacuum with hope. Once again then this is an enormous responsibility that is bestowed upon the church, hence the admonition that "we have this treasure in earthen vessels" (2 Cor 4: 7) brittle, precarious, liable to breakage never to be recovered again. In other words it is instructive to recognize that the faith we have both somehow depends on our loving care, but also that it is not protected from the inevitable consequences of our reckless actions. There is this sense of vulnerability, of a faith lived without assurance.

The church gathers together in prayer and praise and in contemplation in the knowledge that it envisions the kingdom of God on earth and points towards the heaven where Christ dwells. The church therefore offers society a presence that is firmly rooted in Christ and that serves as the sign of the Living Lord in the midst of the human condition. It is a sign of hope. To summarise, Williams again, he reminds us that what the church offers the world is keeping alive "a concern both to honour

and to justify the absolute and non-negotiable character of human vision of responsibility and justice that is at work in all human association for the common good” (2012: 307). For that the integrity and credibility of the church arises in the minds of society, including the faithful, not so much to the extent to which it exercises authority and restraint over human will, but to the extent that in its life, witness and proclamation it can embody the deepest human instincts, but also that the church can be trusted to seek the vision of God in truth, with humility and allowing that from time to time it gets it wrong too.

At its best then the church is a transitional community of the faithful that lives not for itself and its own good but for others. Such a community properly conceived, in the words of the Pastoral Letter, becomes a society where one learns about goodness and virtue and where Christ-like relationships are forged. Pope Francis’ recent Apostolic Exhortation makes the startling claim that the church he hoped for was not just an institution of genteel society concerned only about its self-preservation, but one that is messy because it is at the heart of the struggles of God’s people taking risks and sharing in the suffering of Christ. That strikes me as a far cry from the prosperity cult-like church, or from the church of the respectable society, but one that stands like that young man, the inconvenient truths that change the world.

IV

If the imagination is to be stirred, if the intellect is to work, if mental life is not to sink to a low ebb, and the pursuit of truth (or justice, or self-fulfillment) is not to cease, assumptions must be questioned, presuppositions must be challenged sufficiently, at any rate, to keep society moving.

- Sir Isaiah Berlin (Oxford, 1979).

My sense is that if society is pervaded by ‘bad religion’ that simply seeks to contract out human freedom, that is domineering and oppressive of human initiative, creativity and ingenuity, that is exploitative or that enhances a value system as if it is God-designed, then no wonder we have political leaders who embrace such religion. That is the religion of the dictatorship. True religion must make dictators uncomfortable and uneasy. Because power corrupts it is a dangerous thing to wed or embed religion to political institutions or to the power elite. In that sense religion indeed truly becomes in Karl Marx’s famous dictum, ‘the opium of the people’. In the section of his Essay on Religion, Karl Marx says, more fully, as follows:

Religious misery is in one mouth the expression of real misery, and in another is a protestation against real misery. Religion is the moan of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions....

The point taken in this paper, though, is that what Marx refers to, even then, was not religion, but a pseudo-religion. It is (was) not religion based on the expression of human fulfillment. It is the religion informed as it was during Karl Marx’s Prussian

Christianity against which Martin Luther rebelled, what we later called ‘State religion’ in the Kairos Document. It is bad religion. I am afraid that in such a case religion becomes the handmaid of oppressive and authoritarian government and church.

Pope Francis is referring to the situation in our country where poverty and misery for large numbers of our people continue to increase, while the political elite and the bosses in mining and industry can never have enough to acquire and to possess more and more, at the expense of the poor and working people.. The Head of State and Government of our country clearly do not deserve what they earn if under their watch unemployment and poverty levels have risen to such unprecedented levels. Stats SA reported the latest Household Labour Survey for Q1 in 2015, for example, that the economy continues to shed jobs standing at 28,6% in the narrow band, the real figure possibly standing at almost 40%, it is generally surmised. Hardship due to the deteriorating economic outlook is dire, but one would not think so if one observes the government’s management of the fiscus, e.g. Nkandla, Eskom, hiring and firing of executives in state enterprises and state agencies with the resultant shedding of taxpayer’s money, or the wasteful expenditure of the President in multiple jets hired to ferry him to Russia and back. Evidence abounds of a careless, spendthrift government of “spend, spend, and spend...” as long as it is public funds! It is fair to say that we have been witnessing a mismanagement of the economy at a grand scale.

What is most astonishing is the evidence of what Pope Francis calls, “the blunted conscience” in the cynical disregard of any sense of value or ethics or conscience in the manner in which the business of government is undertaken. It is not simply the blatant corruption we are daily being entertained to, or the mocking cynicism towards parliament and our constitutional institutions of accountability, but the unconscionable disregard for and display of incompetence, of crass materialism in the midst of abject poverty, of unearned and undeserved wealth, of the expenditure of public resources, the manipulation of public institutions, all while paying lip service to the tenets of the Constitution..

The 2015 World Happiness Report 2015 places South Africa 113rd among the nations of the world. The measure of Human happiness is a guide to public policy. Human Happiness is not simply a measure of hedonistic pursuit. It determines those matters that render society’s wellness. It measures a society’s ethical disposition, life expectancy, whether when times are hard, will there be someone one can rely on, whether one has freedom to make life choices, freedom from corruption and the prevalence of generosity and a caring society. Happiness results in a peaceful and well-adjusted society. Mind you, happiness is not affected by employment rates, although the caring society would have such policies as to ensure that decent livelihoods are maintained; not just that the poor receive grants and social security, or even free housing, because often that does not render one to be in charge of one’s life and life’s chances. Professor Jeffrey Sachs tells us in the 2015 Report that societies with a high level of social capital – meaning generalized trust, good governance, and mutual support, are conducive to pro-social behaviour. Those that do not tend to be governed by generalized distrust, pervasive corruption and lawless behavior.

It matters that most of the people, especially the poor, cannot be guaranteed medical care and support when they are ill, or that they can expect an early death due to violence or lack of decent hospital care, or if they will be robbed of their hard earned cash. Where life is so precarious people live in misery. They are not free. Happiness, therefore, says the Report “is the aspiration of every human being, and can be a measure of social progress.” Where the economy is structured so as to entrench inequality and exclusion, observes, Pope Francis, “it breeds violence.” The daily protest marches, the anger and the violence that have become so much a texture of the fabric of our society, is not anything that we should disregard. It is a measure of the ill health of our society. It is not, as the government would have us believe, the negative success of government policies. What it does signify is that there is a gap between what the Constitution promises and what citizens actually experience daily. It is also a mark of the deterioration of the trust relationship between those who govern and those who are governed. “Without the values of moral conscience”, writes American evangelical writer and activist, Jim Wallis, “our political life quickly degenerates into public corruption, cultural confusion and social injustice.”

The irony of all this is that we are a democratic and constitutional state. We are proud that the Constitutional Court continues to uphold constitutional values of “human dignity, the achievement of equality and the advancement of human rights and freedoms...” The reality is that we, the citizens, have never voted for Mr Jacob Zuma or any of the members of Parliament or those who run our country at national and provincial levels. What we did, under our electoral system, we voted for a political party. The political party is faceless and uneven, at the best of times. It is merely represented by its public representatives. We can only put the party to account once every five years. But what we do have is a faith community or communities who live daily in the midst of the struggles and aspirations of the people. It is those same communities who vote governments into power. It cannot be that we are not responsible for the government and the leaders we have elected.

V

To conclude, if South Africa then is such a religious society what does the church represent to the people? My fear is that above all, even with the prevalence of popular religiosity of the kind that I have highlighted, South Africa is deteriorating into becoming a selfish, uncaring, angry, violent society – in other words, exhibiting all the symptoms of a psychotic condition. It just does not help when we have brands of Christianity that simply point them to some messianic figures, whose wealth they can only envy and whose lifestyle is a betrayal of everything they purport to preach. It just does not help if churches preach wealth and consumerism and a hedonistic lifestyle that flies in the face of those who are poor.

I believe that the churches should be organizing the poor to demand a better life and to uphold the Constitution and not to cast aspersions on what the Constitution

promises our otherwise secular society. Otherwise my conclusion is that the church becomes part of the problem when church leaders ‘honour’ politicians by a blatant abuse of the holy mysteries like ordination to ply for favours both political and economic, or abuse prayer and the Bible to buy favours. When self-proclaimed church leaders in their various colourful and ill-fitting robes dare to protest against the Public Protector in defence of a corrupt Head of State, then the finger of God is pointing at us all with unerring accuracy. In my view the circumstances of our time places such churches under judgment.

N Barney Pitso Ratliff GCOB

Visiting Honorary Professor
Allan Gray Centre for Leadership Ethics,
Department of Philosophy
Rhodes University

Fellow of Stellenbosch University Centre for Advanced Studies (STIAS)

Emeritus Professor of Law
University of South Africa.

Stellenbosch Winter School
Faculty of Theology: Stellenbosch University

2 June 2015.