

Abstract

This paper, derived from the post-apartheid experience in South Africa, distinguishes between a plurality of religions in any given country and state policies of religious pluralism. It proposes a framework for multi-religious interactions in post-conflict societies, based on pluralism, tolerance and secularism in public life.

Introduction

South Africans have experienced a negative understanding of religious pluralism under apartheid, as well as a unique history of inter-religious solidarity in the struggle against apartheid. In recognition of this latter reality, the democratically elected ANC Government led by President Nelson Mandela committed itself to pursuing a public policy of genuine religious pluralism. In contradistinction to the apartheid regime's policy of separate development based on the homogenization of cultures and religions, and the privileging of Calvinistic Christianity, the new government adopted a policy of non-alignment to any religious tradition or denomination, but nevertheless welcomed active and constructive interaction with all religious traditions and institutions. As a democratic institution, the government acknowledged the critical role that religion had to play in society, and is prepared to listen to its prophetic voice.

How has this overtly religio-pluralistic state policy influenced and affected the quality of religious co-existence in post-apartheid South Africa? But more importantly, for the purposes of this paper, how has this historical context informed and influenced my own self-understanding, theological reflections and religious praxis?

Religious plurality in South Africa

It might be useful to begin by presenting a brief statistical overview of the religious scene in South Africa. The figures we shall be introducing are derived from the first democratically supervised population census which was conducted in 1996.

Adherents of the different religions in South Africa:

Christians	66.40%
Hindus	1.74%
Muslims	1.10%
Jews	0.41%
Buddhists	0.01%
Confucians	0.02%
Other beliefs	0.13%
No religion	31.00%

From the above statistics it is clear that Christians are in an overwhelming majority. However, as many analysts have reminded us, there was no category for African Traditional Religionists in the census, and it is highly probable that many Africans who indicated they were Christians might well have chosen to identify themselves with African Religion if such a category existed (Mndende 1998:115). A complementary point is the fact that 34% of those that indicated they were Christians belonged to one or other of the over 4000 African Independent Churches (AICs). Protestant Churches accounted for 41% of Christians and Catholics 11.4% (Kritzinger 1998:4).

There are three critical points in relation to the question of religious pluralism that emerge from the above. Firstly, statistics were used in apartheid South Africa as an instrument of Christian hegemony and thus the denial of the existence of indigenous African belief systems. Secondly, from a cursory glance at the census figures, religious diversity - or plurality of religion - is an inescapable reality in South Africa. This however does not automatically imply religious pluralism. Facts and figures about different religions in a country refers to religious plurality, and should not be confused with the concept of religious pluralism, which relates to the quality of religious co-existence between the diverse

religions within a specific context. In other words, religious plurality informs us about cold statistics and religious demography, while religious pluralism presents us with a story of human interactions. It is this story which concerns us in this paper. Shockley (1988:140) succinctly captures the nuance between these two concepts in the following quote:

“Religious pluralism must be distinguished from religious diversity, the reality and presence of a variety of types and forms of religious expressions. This is minimal religious pluralism. The essence of religious pluralism is not regalia but relationships. What is the relation of the content of the various faiths in a community? What is their common history, if any? What are their status and power relations? How do they relate to each other? What are some common humanity efforts that can be planned and worked on jointly?”

Thirdly, in order to deal with diversity within a particular religion, it may be useful to nuance our concept of religious pluralism. There is a need for us to acknowledge not only the plurality of religious traditions that pervade our landscapes (what we may call extrinsic pluralism), but even more importantly, we need to incorporate pluralism into our very notion of a religious tradition (intrinsic pluralism).

The challenge of intrinsic pluralism

No religious tradition likes to acknowledge diversity within its own ranks, more especially if it has to take place in the context of inter-religious dialogue. Applying this to the Islamic context, we need to understand that there is no (one) monolithic Islam in South

Africa, or for that matter elsewhere in the world but a number of diverse articulations or understandings of Islam, frequently locked in fierce rivalry in their claims to be the privileged, orthodox and authentic voice of Islam in South Africa.

Against this backdrop then, our presentation here should not be construed as the Islamic viewpoint on the complex topic of religious pluralism, but rather one particular perspective deriving its inspiration from the Islamic ethos. There may be many alternative Muslim viewpoints on the topic. All of this polyphony of voices need to be heard, if we are indeed serious about religious pluralism. At this juncture it may be expedient to explicate my own theological appreciation of the concept of religious pluralism, which I have already alluded to, has been profoundly influenced by the South African context.

Theological foundations for religious pluralism

The foundations out of which an Islamic perspective on any topic should arise is nothing less than the authentic sources of Islam, the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Both the Qur'an and the Hadith embrace and affirm *ikhtilaf*, i.e. differences in belief, perspectives and viewpoints, as being natural and an essential part of the human condition. A denial of the right of others to hold beliefs and views which are different and incompatible to one's own is tantamount to a denial of Allah himself. In Surah Yunus (10), verse: 99, Allah, the Sublime, declares:

"If your Lord had so desired, all the people on the earth would surely have come to believe, all of them; do you then think, that you could compel people to believe?"

And again in Surah Hud (11), verse: 118, Allah, the Sublime, declares:

"And had your Lord so willed, He could surely have made all human beings into one single community: but (He willed it otherwise, and so) they continue to hold divergent views."

Both of these verses establish the principle of freedom of belief and thought in Islam. At the conclusion of the first verse, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is himself reproved for transgressing this principle by being over-enthusiastic in convincing others with regard to the truth of Islam. Thus the Qur'an stresses that the differences in beliefs, views and ideas of humankind is not incidental and negative but represents an Allah-willed, basic factor of human existence.

The challenge which the principle of freedom of belief and thought in Islam holds for us is to develop clear ethics and find mechanisms to manage and deal with the differences of beliefs and theologies that exist. This is the challenge that religious pluralism holds for us. Let us briefly examine how this challenge has been met in post-apartheid South Africa.

Religious pluralism and the post-apartheid democratic South African state

In the transition period leading up to the 1994 democratic elections religious leaders and organizations were engaged in a number of interfaith consultations and conferences aimed at defining a progressive relationship between organized religion and a democratic state. A number of probing questions occupied their minds. How should religion relate to public policy in a modern secularized society? Should they have no significant relationship at all and religion be privatized? Or is religion

so important that it should dominate public policy? Which of the competing religious discourses should be privileged by public policy formulators? And what are the political implications of such religious privileging? In the ensuing discussions the following typology of constitutional models were considered as possible options.

- 1) Theocracy, that is, a state wherein public policy is completely determined by one particular religious denomination.
- 2) A partly religious, partly secular state, with power sharing between it and a particular religious denomination, but public policy is dominated by the religious interpretations and moral standpoints of one particular religious denomination.
- 3) A secular state with interaction between the state and religious organizations, and religion is encouraged to play an important role in influencing public policy.
- 4) A secular state in which religious organizations have a tolerated, private sphere of action, but there is no overlapping or joint activity with the state, and little or no consideration given to religious standpoints in the formulation of public policy.
- 5) A secular, atheistic state in which religion is suppressed. (Albie Sachs 1991:39)

The third option, namely that of a secular democratic South African state, with active interaction between the state and all religious organizations, which not only have a constitutionally recognized sphere of autonomy, but collaborate with the state in tasks of mutual concern, was considered the most appropriate given South Africa's religious demography, and more importantly the strong influence of religion on the anti-

apartheid culture. The embracing of the third option was not done without an acute awareness of the polychrome perils it could and has to bring in its wake.

Undoubtedly the most crucial peril arising out of the third option for organized religion was that of religious co-optation or legitimization. We had in front of us the tragic example of the apartheid state's co-optation of the Dutch Reformed Church: such that the Nationalist Party was said to be the Dutch Reformed Church at prayer. The inter-religious movement needed to be careful of not falling into the same trap and becoming the African National Congress at prayer. Progressive religious organizations were under no illusions that there would be violations of human rights in a new South Africa and religious leaders would be obliged to maintain their historic role of being the moral conscience of our society, and raise their voices of protests against such violations of human dignity. This could however only effectively be achieved if religious organizations maintained their moral and spiritual integrity by not succumbing to the pressures and expediences of one or other political party, but maintained a position of positive neutrality vis-à-vis all political parties of the democratic South Africa.

Recognizing their responsibility as custodians of moral values, religious organizations had a duty to exhort and challenge the government whenever they perceived them to be failing in their political mandate. They also had a political right and obligation to censure and criticize them. At the same time they also had a responsibility to support and collaborate with the government in areas of mutual concern and benefit. On the other hand, they needed to resist temptations of merely being apologists for the political authorities, of simply getting co-opted by the government

onto any seemingly good cause. Genuine support and critical distance did not need to be opposed positions in the relationship between religion and the state. Such a position was complex and demanding but it is free of the expediencies and political opportunism of opposition political parties. But exactly how well has the inter-religious movement been able to play this prophetic role as the moral conscience and custodians of post-apartheid South Africa?

The progressive inter-religious movement in post-apartheid South Africa

Since the first non-racial democratic elections in April of 1994, the progressive inter-religious movement has been somewhat in disarray. It was struggling, along with the rest of the anti-apartheid movement, to make the transition from a 'theology of resistance' to that of a 'theology of reconstruction'. In the five years since, the inter-religious movement lost a lot of its earlier vibrancy and support-base, and was kept and held together by a small band of committed activists, meandering along an undefined agenda. As a direct consequence of the leadership vacuum left by the progressive inter-religious movement, sections of our conservative religious leadership have filled them. These conservative religious leaders are more exclusivist in their religious outlooks and view religious pluralism with great suspicion. In some instances it is regarded as syncretism and a devious attempt to create a single universal religion. These religious leaders urge their followers to resist religious pluralism. The danger then is the formation of religious ghettos, which resembles so much of the discredited apartheid philosophy of separateness.

It was against this backdrop that President Mandela intervened and introduced the idea

of a morals summit to address the declining moral fibre of South African society. A National Inter-religious Leaders Forum was established to drive this process. The first morals summit was convened late last year and a follow up summit is planned for mid 1999.

Challenges facing religious pluralism in post-apartheid South Africa

Religious pluralism has no doubt been one of the major beneficiaries of the post-apartheid dispensation. The democratic South African state has established the necessary conditions for the emergence of a culture and ethos of inter-religious tolerance and co-operation. The irony however is, that while in the past this religious pluralism was being driven by civil society from the ground, it is now being driven from the top, by religious individuals who are too close to the government. This is an anomaly which inter-religious activists are aware of and attempting to correct. The challenge for inter-religious activists continues to be how to bring other members of the clergy and more importantly the rank and file along in this new found culture and ethos. There is a real risk that the wonderful benefits which procure from religious pluralism may not filter down to the rank and file.

Yet another challenge confronting the inter-religious movement continues to be its lack of ability to transcend the extrinsic motivations on which interfaith solidarity is sought. It appears always to be external factors, for example, the need to fight crime or lead the moral reconstruction programme of our country or do damage control after provocative attacks on members of another faith community by one or other radical factions, which provide the impetus for interfaith co-operation. In order for the inter-

religious movement to become self-propelling and mature, we need to find intrinsic reasons from within our own faith commitments for promoting good relations with people of other religions. Intrinsic motivations continue to be the most elusive goal for the South African inter-religious movement.

It is true to say that the inter-religious movement led by World Conference on Religion and Peace, South Africa, grew in response to the need to fight a common enemy, apartheid. There are numerous other examples the world over of inter-religious co-operation developing in response to situations of conflict. But it is our considered view that intrinsic reasons need to precede external reasons for authentic religious pluralism to be procured. Why do we always need to wait for conflict and violence to overwhelm us before we feel the need to develop healthy inter-religious and cross-cultural relationships? If intrinsic reasons were to precede external ones, we would not only be contributing to the resolution of existing conflict situations, but be going a long way towards preventing them occurring in the first place. In fact, a far more genuine and permanent religio-pluralistic culture and ethos could emerge. This we believe to be the major challenge of the inter-religious movement in the democratic South Africa. Now that apartheid has been dismantled, we need more than ever before to find intrinsic motivations, and for the religio-pluralistic ethos to transform itself into a culture with a long-term relevance to our new nation.

Conclusion

Religious pluralism in post-apartheid South Africa has and continues to make a difference to relations within the broader society. It has contributed to the difficult reconciliation process, the sensitive transformation phase

and above all nation-building.

Acknowledgements

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