

Prologue

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The meaning and place of religion in personal and public life differ from one region to another in the world. In Western Europe, the march of secularisation is thought to have liberated society and relegated religion as an antiquated and backward form of life. If religion and politics are mentioned in the same breath, they evoke notions of destruction and isolation. Examples abound, but the following connotes a common repugnance or mistrust of religion: the attempt of the National Socialists in Germany to use religion for spreading and promoting fascism; the segregation in Northern Ireland and in former Yugoslavia along confessional borders; and the radical claims of religious fundamentalist groups. Religion is perceived in Western Europe as an historic relict—a stronghold for reaction—which has been forced out of the public sphere. If anything at all, religion belonged to the private and individual spheres, and was irrelevant for the organisation of public and political spheres of life. It may be only relevant in the life of mostly elderly people. Wilson put this place of religion in perspective when he said “religion remains an alternative culture, observed as unthreatening to the modern social system, in much the same way that entertainment is seen as unthreatening. It offers another world to explore as an escape from the rigors of technological order and the ennui that is the incidental by-product of an increasingly programmed world” (Wilson 1985:20).

This model was perceived as a trend that the rest of the world would and ought to follow, sooner rather than latter. A superficial understanding of the Third World seemed to justify this perception.

The close connection of religion and politics was regarded as a primitive form of social organisation; at best a necessity to create a source of comfort for the miserable living conditions in these countries. This commonplace assumption acted as a blinker to what was happening elsewhere in the world, and more recently in Europe as well. Until the late-1970s, most sociological theories tended to ignore countries that did not match this presumption. For example in the USA, which functions often as the trend-setter for Europe, religion was well represented in the private and to a great extent in the public sphere. The rise of religion in other parts of the world is even more significant, and dramatic.

The experience of South Africa in regard to the place and relevance of religion in the public sphere is instructive. The secularisation thesis obscured much that was taking place there. From the mid-1970s on and especially in the 1980's, the awareness of injustice and apartheid in South Africa increased in the media and in scholarship. From the assumption of the secular perspective, it was no surprise to find a Christian denomination directly involved in the formulation of the apartheid-doctrine. However, it was far more surprising to find opposition leaders, even many members of the African National Congress, referring in their struggle to religious doctrines, mostly Christian ones. South Africa imposed a challenge to all the voices that claimed that the process of democratisation was only possible through secularisation.

Since then, a fundamental change, tinged with some irony, has occurred in South Africa. A democratic government in 1994 replaced the political system of apartheid. The close connection between Christian churches and the government has been abolished and a complete separation of religion and state has been introduced in the new constitution. To this extent, this seems to follow the process of secularisation expected in the dominant model. In Western Europe, however, the role of religion in public life has increased. We find this debate in the installation of common Christian sym-

bols in public buildings and the introduction of general religious symbols in public institutions. In Germany, for example, this debate emerged around the question of displaying crucifixes in public schools. Also, the wearing of the headscarf by Muslim women in public schools has raised questions of religious freedom, national identity and public symbols. The question of an adequate Religious Education in public schools is becoming the focus of public interest—should Religious Education be separated along the different confessional or religious lines, or be developed for all students, irrespective of their different religious and cultural backgrounds? In Germany and elsewhere, these questions have become relevant in the public debate due to a strong decrease in Christian church membership and the increase of non-Christian groups due to migration. But religion does not only come with foreigners. Preliminary empirical studies show that teenagers are very sceptical towards the established churches, but increasingly interested in religious questions and topics (Sandt 1996). On this level, therefore, it seems that religion is gaining more prominence in Europe, whilst it is downgraded in South Africa—the former from a lower, the latter from a very high level. Certainly, this conclusion sounds unorthodox and unthinkable, and merits greater reflection. Some aspects of this new phenomenon are broached in this collection of essays.

In fact, religion is not disappearing in South Africa, much as it has been disestablished from its privileged statutory position. Religious discourse and presence has become more pronounced and more complex. Several religions other than Christianity play an important role in South Africa's public life. Christian dominance, which was enforced through the previous constitution, has been replaced with the realisation of religious pluralism. South Africa had always been a religiously plural country, but most acted as if it was not so. The issue was intensely debated during the period of negotiation, when Motala prophetically warned that "the way one approaches the notion that South Africa is a plural society will significantly affect the strategy one adopts in regard to what are the appropriate

institutions for a post-apartheid South Africa" (Motala 1991:273). Whilst South Africa is a secular democracy, it has entered into a more complex relationship with religion, culture, and values.

What relevance cultural pluralism will have for the South African society and what role religions will play in it are not clear yet. International research has shown that the influence of religion should not be underestimated in the political and public sphere. This is especially relevant for the role of culture and religion in conflict situations (Huntington 1996), as for the importance of religions for dialogue, coherence and community spirit in a society (Berger 1997). We focus our interest on South Africa in this volume, and suggest that the collection of essays provide us with some key indicators for similar situations and problems elsewhere. We focus more on the dialogue possibilities than on the "battle" between different cultures and religions, but keep the recent and continuing destructive potential of religions in mind.

The contributions to this book originate mainly from two symposia held in 1997 at the Universities of Cape Town and Hamburg. These contributions represent a spectrum of religious and political perspectives in South Africa in their social context. The collection of papers was first published in 1999 by Waxman as *Religion and Politics in South Africa: From Apartheid to Democracy*. With its kind permission, the JSR is making the essays accessible to its subscribers and the broader South African public. We do not claim to have covered all the areas in this complex theme, but believe that these contributions are an indication of the complexity, fascination and importance of "Religion and Politics in South Africa". Our definition of religion is not limited to a monolithic understanding of a religious institution but considers the different forms of social and religious ideologies within the religions as well. The term religion takes into consideration the construction of worldviews, cultures, and the promotion of values. The term "politics" refers mainly to the meso- and micro-level of society in South Africa and only secondarily on the macro-level of governmental politics. This defini-

tion of “Religion and Politics” will not make our research easier, but in respect of the different social levels more concrete and differentiated.

This collection of papers and essays covers some key areas in the field. Firstly, it tackles the important question of transformation within religions. Since the period of transition and democracy, the country is witness to a re-ordering and re-classification of values and priorities within society and religious traditions themselves. In this regard, Kinghorn takes another look at the Afrikaners in the period of transition, while Mndende focuses on the rise of African Traditional Religions in the public sphere. In one of his essays, Tayob focuses on the internal debates raging in the Muslim community, while Reisenberger articulates the turbulence in Jewish women’s voices. But religion is not only concerned about the boundaries of confessional groups. Cochrane, Dexter and the second contribution of Tayob focus on the possible role of religions in fashioning values and identities on a broad national scale. Mitchell revisits the question of moral development and social change in schools, focusing on multicultural understanding and development. The role of religion in the sublimation of the human voice is the subject of Tisani’s essay, while Roux focuses on preparing teachers to cope with a multicultural and pluralistic country. Adam analyses controversially the impact and political development of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, an important part of the country’s future. So, both within confessional communities as well as on the broader, public, level, the new democratic society is intensely engaged with religion, culture and values. A secular constitution does not automatically switch off the religious sensibilities of a people, it only transforms them.

The tradition-specific and overall religion/cultural fields of this collection are not mutually exclusive, so we have organised the collection of essays around a time-framework. We begin with those papers that focus on the period of transition, and then follow with reflections on the post-apartheid democratic period. In a special

appendix, we have also included some essays and addresses by South African and German officialdom, to indicate what both University and government officials are thinking on this important topic.

While South African authors mainly wrote these contributions, we have enjoyed healthy co-operation on this topic between South African and German researchers for several years now. The contribution of Weisse et al. refers to this co-operation and indicates its future direction. This publication is a first visible evidence of this co-operation, which we hope will clarify the questions and topics, and raise interest for further co-operation and understanding on this vital issue.

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