Managing Cultural Diversity in a Democratic South Africa: Is there a Surplus Value to the National Project?

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Historians are to nationalism what poppy-growers in Pakistan are to heroin-addicts: we supply the essential raw material for the market.[1]

A recent book on the hopes and aspirations of South Africans illus-trates the South African dream on a trampoline (Lascaris and Hunt:1998). Now it goes up and now it drops to the lowest of the low, as the nation roller coasters on the most recent sports victory, defeat, a marriage made in heaven, a legal hurdle and alas, also an urban bomb. A South African dream, if such can be envisaged, is closely related to the question of national identity. We can only dream a dream if we have some semblance of a consciousness, or at least a set of symbols that binds the people of South Africa together. National identity as a unifying concept or symbol seems to elude South Africa as it tries to reconstruct and reshape the society from the ashes of the old. I would like to approach this important ques-tion from the perspective of the history of religions in this country. By history of religions I do not only mean the discipline which concerns itself with the human history of religion from primitive or primal religions to monotheism to science. Rather, I mean thereby the complex history of each religious tradition and community

through the torturous history of our country. We know full well that, like national identities, religions make demands on identity and commitment through their unique worldviews, and ethical and moral conceptions. It is important, therefore, to ask how the national question in South Africa accommodates the presence of religions. I hope to explore this question by first taking a brief look at the place of religion and culture during apartheid. This will then be followed by an examination of the major symbols of national unity to have inspired our attention since the first elections.

The politics of culture and religion

Cultural diversity in South Africa was a justification for exploitation and repression, name-calling and vilification, and sheer bigotry. From 1948 to 1994, particularly, the abuse of South Africa's cultural diversity took on grotesque proportions. Under apartheid ideology, racial division and discrimination became a finely tuned, ruthless system of repression. What is often overlooked is to what extent this form of minority rule and racism was informed by a particular vision of cultural diversity. In terms of this ideology, cultures were destined to remain watertight islands, constantly in need of protection against contamination and mutual enrichment. Racial groups were identified as distinct and unique cultural groups which had to maintain their cultural purity and essential uniqueness (Hammond-Tooke 1997:4; West 1979:2). Supported by a peculiar discipline of anthropology, cultural groups were mapped and grouped in their blissful uniqueness. Of course, the white volk stood at the pinnacle of this pyramid, and ensured this peculiar cultural pluralism by force and persuasion. This last point clearly makes a mockery of cultural pluralism, and unmasks the anti-pluralism that lay at the heart of the system.[2]

Bearing the brunt of this cultural policy, the peoples of South Africa accepted neither the concepts nor the classification. Among the many responses, two may be discernable in cultural perspective.

2   From the time of Dutch company rule until the final apartheid constitution of 1983, the South African state has not really been promoting pluralism. In the seventeenth century, the Dutch company government recognized the Dutch reformed church as the only recognized religion, particularly outlawing the public practice of other religions. Such draconian measures were gradually modified, but as late as 1983, the state had still a long way to go. The Constitution of the same still declared South Africa a Christian country (Chidester 1992:149).

3   Dexter in this volume.

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