

Laying Claim to the South African Miracle: The Place of Religion amongst Competing Theories of Change

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The transition to democracy came as a surprise to most people. A body of popular and scholarly literature soon emerged to explain what had happened. Groups and even individuals claimed, sometimes with breathtaking reinventions of the past, to have been the key players. The nineties was a time of repositioning and entering new forms of political life. Scholarly debates about concepts such as "civil society" became a forum for expressing an opinion on the nature of the change that had taken place. The essay traces the discussion about the ways in which religious metaphors such as "liberation", "reconciliation" or "ubuntu" shaped the political imagination. The concern is thus not just with the phenomenon of religion in the public sphere but with the emergence, in the midst of a changing landscape, of theory which seeks not only to explain but to influence.

Over the past decade a considerable body of literature has emerged to explain change in South Africa. Much of this work is the product of an academic "transnational civil society",¹ made up mainly of South Africans, some living abroad, and a spread of international scholars from Europe, the United States, Canada and Australia. Characteristic of this group is the degree of passion evident in their interpretations. Just as the international struggle against apartheid was built on an idealised vision, so the kind of society that emerged after its collapse is often described in veiled categories of disappointment and hope.

Because theorising about change is itself an exercise of the political imagination, explanation easily becomes a space for contestation. This essay accepts the assumption that those doing the theorising about change are themselves actors, and that the relationship between theory and context is therefore worth

exploring. While "religion" is sometimes not mentioned at all in the literature, at other times it can surface in a variety of surprising ways. One of its more noticeable forms is religious metaphor in biographical narratives of the past: the theorising of the ordinary person.

Religion and Memory

While professional theoreticians may disguise their personal opinions, the influence of the interpretative horizon is more easily seen in lay analyses of change. The autobiography of former State President F. W. De Klerk opens with the drama of succession (De Klerk 1998). The inauguration of President Nelson Mandela in 1994 is described in poignant detail. He recalls glancing over the familiar sandstone parliament buildings to the shuttered room where he had once had his office. In one of several contrasting images he describes how apartheid legislation had not only been ratified in that place but how he and his predecessor had systematically dismantled it, act by act. With pride he remembers his insistence on taking the oath as Deputy President in the name of the Triune God.

In the next chapter, as the narrative moves back to his early childhood and socialisation in the Afrikaner community, the importance of religion is an ever-present theme. The origins of the decision to abandon apartheid came from a recognition that apartheid was contrary to the principles of social justice. His own role as National Party Cabinet Minister sees him always acting according to the highest moral principles. Any participation in or even knowledge of undercover human rights violations during this period is strongly denied. The narrative ends with an appeal for understanding and support by laying claim to a familiar metaphor: "We have completed a great spiritual trek" (1998: 391).² Sceptics and opponents are allocated roles in the heroic narrative: "As with the first Great Trek, there were those who chose to stay behind, there were stragglers and there were arguments about which direction we should take and the haste with which we should make it" (1998: 390-391).

De Klerk's autobiography well illustrates an "imaginative rationality" which enables people to deal with change and ambiguity (Johnson 1993: 32-77). Narrative gives clarity and coherence to the past, while at the same time offering an account that will be morally acceptable in a particular social and cultural setting. Appropriate details are selected, others forgotten, and occasionally an appeal is made to the audience for understanding and perhaps forgiveness as actions are justified in this freshly created moral world. Cognitive Semantics reminds the social researcher that informants have been profoundly influenced by the events they describe. Descriptions of the events of the eighties will therefore inevitably reveal something of the narrator's self-understanding in the nineties and beyond. The meanings of concepts and the status of theories of change are thus influ-

enced by the politics of memory.

Concepts of "Change"

During the eighties the concept *change* was widely used in a positive sense to describe moves away from apartheid (cf. Van Vuuren, Wiehahn, Lombaard & Rhodie 1983; Berger & Godsell 1988). Even though it could have incrementalist overtones and was sometimes appropriated in the Government's reform rhetoric, the concept continued to be generally used. In its broadest sense "change" has been applied to the events surrounding the unbanning of all opposition political parties in January 1990 and the elections of April 1994. It has remained relatively imprecise in the literature and is usually supplanted by other categories, most notably "transition" and "transformation".

Transition is the most widely used concept in more recent scholarly discussions on South Africa and describes the replacement of an authoritarian political system by a democratic one (cf. Howarth & Norval 1998: 1-12; Guelke 1999: 1-22).³ In much of the literature on South Africa, "democratic transition" and "democratisation" are virtually synonymous (Howarth 1998: 198). In line with the international discussion these political scientists describe "transition" as a broad structure divided into historical phases of "liberalization", "democratisation" and "consolidation".

The way in which analytical concepts see their claims to neutrality being removed in their local reception is well illustrated here. Consider for example, Patrick Bond's *Elite Transition: From Apartheid to Neoliberalism in South Africa* (Bond 2000). "Transition" in this setting now has connotations of a sleight of hand which saw the continuance of social and economic disparity in spite of the advent of democracy (cf. Marais 2000)!⁴

Another term was therefore necessary to describe what still needs to happen. Elsewhere *transformation* had been used of, for example, the fundamental socio-economic and cultural changes that have taken place in Eastern Europe (cf. Märklender 2000: 5). Since the mid-nineties, "transformation" has become a rallying call for dissatisfaction with the quality of the "New South Africa". It is argued that the structures of apartheid survive in every sector of society. For the political Left, "transformation" means something along the lines of a social and economic revolution (Marais 2000; Bond 2000). In the public discussion, however, 'transformation' has for many become synonymous with "Black Economic Empowerment", "Affirmative Action" and "African Renaissance". In the title of a collection of essays by black writers calling for greater transformation, *African Renaissance: The New Struggle*, the metaphor of struggle is revived (Makgoba 1999). Given the outspoken commitment to free-market principles by several of its essayists, this time around "the struggle" is less about class or gender than it is about race. The perceived ironies of the "New South Africa" are well captured

by the play on contrasts in the titles of publications. Consider for example, *The Negotiated Revolution* (Adam 1993) or *Comrades in Business* (Adam, Slabbert & Moodley 1997). Concepts of change in the South African discussion are rarely free from partisanship and ideological struggle. As we have seen, both "transition" and "transformation" receive new connotations in the local debate. The scholarly discussion about models of change, which both preceded and accompanied political change, continues to be very much a part of this debate.

Myths and Models of Transition

During the nineties South Africa was seen to be part of a wave of democratic experimentation in Africa (Bratton & van de Walle 1997: 120-122). Local studies of South Africa's transition to democracy however were inclined to pay little attention to these external trends (Guelke 1999). A considerable literature emerged seeking to explain why the Nationalist Party embarked on the route which led to their eventual removal from power (Etherington 1992; Giliomee 1992; Adam 1993; Seegers 1996; Giliomee 1997). Economic explanations usually include pressures on economic stability resulting from a declining gold price, the impact of international sanctions and the cost of maintaining parallel services in the homelands. Political explanations include the inability of the Security Services to contain the revolution in the townships and the changing international political landscape brought about by the demise of international communism. It is argued that the way in which the ruling political party interpreted these events resulted in their decision to enter the negotiation process. Furthermore, it is argued that the De Klerk government miscalculated when it thought that it could share power and exercise control over an ANC now weakened without its major international ideological and financial backer (Giliomee 1997).

The failure of these explanations to satisfy everyone is evident in the plethora of more popular accounts.⁵ In his speeches and publications describing the transition Archbishop Desmond Tutu sees the hand of God in the birth of the rainbow nation (cf. Tutu 1995: 3-12). In the past, South Africans had been blinded by racial prejudice, but the scales had fallen from their eyes making reconciliation possible. Another supporter of the divine providence theory was Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi. In the tense months leading up to the election there were fears that the continued withdrawal of Inkhatha would result in anarchy rather than democracy. A Kenyan mediator was only able to meet Buthelezi because his plane had been forced to turn back because of engine trouble. This meeting was crucial in enabling Inkhatha to participate in the elections. Afterwards Buthelezi suggested that this was "not a coincidence" (cf. Guelke 1999: 181). As we saw earlier F.W. De Klerk himself saw the events in which he had a role as a "great spiritual trek".

In his victory speech at the Carlton Hotel on 2 May 1994, Nelson Mandela referred to the birth of democracy in South Africa as "a small miracle". Miracle, birth and rebirth as ways of describing the transition became common not simply in popular piety and journalistic commentary but in academic analysis, as well. Examples are Patti Waldmeier's *Anatomy of a Miracle: The End of Apartheid and the Birth of the New South Africa* (Waldmeier 1997) and Heather Deegan's *South Africa Reborn: Building a New Democracy* (Deegan 1999). In these works the term "miracle" conveys simply "an outcome that is both highly benign and contrary to expectations" (Guelke 1999: 181). Common to both the religious and secular understandings of miracle is an assumption that South Africa is somehow different, an exception to the social-scientific norm. While external commentators concentrate on the apparent ease of the transition to democracy, internal commentary gives the term "miracle" a narrower application, concentrating on the resolution of a series of crises threatening the election: the participation of Inkhatha, the small revolutions in the former homelands of Ciskei and Bophuthatswana, and the elections themselves (Guelke 1999: 181).

In his comprehensive analysis of the literature on South Africa's transition, Adrian Guelke (1999: 197) argues that their underlying assumptions of exceptionalism stem from a selection of the wrong comparative models. He points out that a number of South African political scientists were at the time influenced by the writings of Arend Lijphart who believed that the following conditions were favourable for the establishment of power-sharing in cleaved and multi-ethnic societies (Lijphart 1982: 183):

1. A multiple balance of groups
2. No majority groups
3. Groups of roughly equal size
4. A relatively small population
5. External threats perceived as a common danger by the different groups
6. The presence of some society-wide loyalties
7. The absence of extreme socio-economic inequalities
8. The relative isolation of the segments from each other
9. Prior traditions of political accommodation

Because most of these conditions were not present in the case of South Africa, the transition does then appear to be a dramatic exception. For Guelke this realization has given rise to two myths: the myth of non-racialism and the myth of the South African model. Instead of comparing South Africa with Switzerland or Belgium, Guelke proposes that the transition can best be understood if Kenya, Zimbabwe or Namibia are understood as precedents. This "last colony" model facilitates explanation for some of the puzzling aspects of the transition. Although the African National Congress was in a comparatively weak position at the outset of the negotiation period, by the end it emerged as the dominant player (cf. Giliomee 1997). This, argues Guelke, may be explained by the mo-

mentum of decolonization, a process which sees the initial power-sharing concessions of a ruling minority rapidly being overtaken by the logic of majority rule (1999: 196). The results of the 1992 Referendum in which 69 percent of the whites supported continuing the negotiations is another puzzle Guelke sets out to explain with this model. Opinion polls at the time showed significant polarization on racial lines and a continuance of racial identities constructed under apartheid (1999: 186). How does one then explain the Referendum result? Guelke dismisses the notion that whites had been influenced by the ideals of non-racism or that South Africans had rapidly created a new national identity. Instead, he maintains that whites, fearing increased violence and a return to political isolation, saw no other alternative.

To defend his rather cynical analysis, Guelke points out that the rhetoric of racial reconciliation was also a feature of several other transitions from colonialism. For example, immediately after the announcement of the internationally supervised general election in February 1980, Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe introduced his new policy of reconciliation on national television: "We will ensure that there is a place for everyone in this country. We want to ensure a sense of security for both winners and losers Let us forgive and forget. Let us join hands in a new amity" (Guelke 1999: 190).

While dismissive of claims that the ideal of non-racism was the explanation for the successful transition, Guelke does recognise that some explanation should be sought for why South Africa did not experience the traumatic sort of transition that other settler colonies such as Algeria, Mozambique or Angola experienced (1999: 195). On this he is, however, tantalizingly brief and does little more than raise the question.

The exceptionalism which has characterised much of the theoretical discussion of South Africa's transition is sometimes described as a "boerewors line" being drawn at the Limpopo river (Etherington 1992: 103). Africa is rarely used as a source of comparison or explanation. At the time when books could still be entitled *A Future South Africa* (Berger & Godsell 1988: 267-298), an essay by Peter Berger and Bobby Godsell appeared which suggested the Meiji Restoration in Japan as *the* useful analogy.⁶ The end of Shogun hegemony was achieved at a time when the influence of the regime had been severely undermined by economic change. Political change was initiated from *within* this ruling elite and was implemented in such a way that they continued to have a stake in the new order. Aristocratic privilege was thus exchanged for entrepreneurial opportunity. Berger and Godsell considered the "last colony" model, only to reject it on the grounds that the size of South Africa's minorities, their long ancestry in the country and their economic power made comparison with other African states of limited value (1988: 267-275).⁷

What is noteworthy in these explanatory models, particularly those from the eighties, is that they not only set out to predict but also to express a preference.

Berger and Godsell, for example, do little to hide their commitment to a process of transition which would not damage the human or economic fabric of the society (1988: 1) and their preference for market capitalism (1988: 296-298). As far as the predictive power of their scenario planning is concerned, a "pacted transition" is remarkably close to what the disillusioned Left believe happened eventually between the white government, the ANC, and business (Bond 2000, Marais 2000).

Great Individuals or Great Institutions

The Great Man theory of history dominated much of the earlier discussion about the political transition, both popular and scholarly. F.W. De Klerk supporters enthusiastically observed the "boerwors line" in finding comparisons with a Mikhail Gorbachev or a Charles De Gaulle, but not with any African politician (Etherington 1992: 103-105). Nelson Mandela is obviously accorded a place of prominence in most accounts of the transition (Berger 1997: 606).

There is no way in which an historical account could avoid the role of key individuals in the transition, even though this goes against the grain of the "the people as liberators" ideal (Etherington 1992: 109-111). Equally inadequate are agency-based accounts which neglect the role of social structures in creating decision-making terrain. "It is only within this strongly constrained set of possibilities that most of the agency-centred existing accounts of democratization in South Africa become relevant" (Howarth 1998: 202).⁸

There is certainly no shortage of institutional candidates seeking recognition for their role in the peaceful transition to democracy. Undisputed for their role in mobilizing resistance and promoting democracy are the NGOs which played an active political role during the eighties and the United Democratic Front, an umbrella organisation for a variety of NGOs, sports clubs and cultural organisations (Seekings 2000). Other institutions however find themselves jostling with each other for their place in the reconstructed narrative.

In an essay describing the role of business in the early nineties, Anne Bernstein, former Director of the Urban Foundation, argues that business was *the* key intermediary institution in the transition (Bernstein 1997, Bernstein, Berger & Godsell 1998: 1-34). She, for example, draws attention to the provision of funds for peace monitoring in the lead-up to the historic election in April 1994. Furthermore, business facilitated meetings between opponents and provided money at key points during the election itself. Big business in South Africa had long understood itself as upholding a liberal tradition. Their claim to be opponents of apartheid is however sharply contested by the political Left which maintains that capitalism was a direct beneficiary of the system of apartheid (Asmal, Asmal & Roberts 1997: 153-57). Organised Labour, for its part, argues that it played a crucial role in the transition. In articles written by intellectuals long-associated

with the unions, it is argued that mass action in resisting apartheid, as well as a preparedness to enter into a pact with government, were crucial in securing a peaceful transition (Adler, Maller & Webster 1992). The media also claims a crucial role for itself in promoting liberalisation and in fostering democratic consolidation (cf. Märlander 2000).

For religion it is the Christian Church that is the most prolific in describing its unique role in contributing to the transition. It is argued that "prophetic Christianity" was vital in undermining the theological legitimacy of the State, promoting the liberation struggle, and laying the foundation for democracy (Walshe 1995; De Gruchy 1995).⁹ Particularly in the early nineties, this privileging of Christianity in relation to other faiths went further in that it limited itself to certain kinds of Christianity. Thus, Charles Villa-Vicencio could describe the role of the Dutch Reformed Church in these terms: "There was no significant commitment to anything the government had not already initiated" (Villa-Vicencio 1995: 83). In many of these insider accounts, the concept of "civil society" is used in explaining roles, both past and present, and in convincing audiences of the vitality of their particular contribution.

The Civil Society Debate

"Civil society" has since the late eighties come into vogue as a means of understanding the democratic wave of that decade (Huntington 1991), and the concept is widely used by political scientists as a means of understanding democratic transition in Africa (cf. Bratton & van de Walle 1997: 147-149, 253-255). It is generally noted that the contribution of the institutions of civil society are vital to democratization and that such institutions are in limited supply on the continent. "Civil society" then becomes the missing key for understanding and addressing Africa's current crises (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000: 2). The Comaroffs maintain that Third World experts have thereby rediscovered "a language in which to talk about the utopian ideals of democracy and moral community" (2000: viii). The parallel with the civilising mission of nineteenth century imperialism is then no longer far-fetched in a model which portrays Africa in deficit terms (2000: 16).

In South Africa the debate about civil society emerged in the early nineties. Even prior to the General Election of 1994, a number of conferences sponsored by donor agencies addressed this theme. Papers delivered found their way into a range of publications, generally expressing considerable support for the necessity of a vibrant, critical and independent civil society in South Africa in order to safeguard and consolidate democracy (for example, Micou & Lindsnaes 1993). Not all parties were, however, enchanted by what was perceived at the time as white nervousness at the prospect of a government for the first time elected by a majority.¹⁰ For Blade Nzimande and Mpume Sikhosana excessive emphasis on

civil society diminishes the state's role in consolidating democracy. "Liberals" are seen to ignore inequalities and mistrust between organisations in their assumption that all collective actors enjoy similar opportunities to influence decision-making processes, and the failure to take class into account results in a term that is vague and misleading (Nzimande & Sikhosana 1992). Hein Marais (2000:199) therefore proposes as an alternative, "popular movement" which includes grass-roots organisations, civics, youth groups, and so on. The institutions of capitalism are by this definition excluded.

Within the local intellectual debate, "civil society" sometimes became a vehicle for criticising the governing party for centralising power and marginalising the poor (cf. Marais 2000; 199-240, Neocosmos 1999). It is argued that, whereas in the eighties civil society was politicised from below, in the nineties it became the object of a form of state politics or statism and an adjunct of the state itself. The past is reflected upon with nostalgia. The vibrant civic movement of women's groups, trade unions, church societies and sports clubs was built on a culture of "people's power". Democracy meant collective leadership, mandates, accountability, reporting, criticism and self-criticism (Neocosmos 1999: 17). The African National Congress, it is argued, turned these grassroots structures into branches of a national body (1999: 12). Popular political energy was redirected in the national interest and they became "development organs".¹¹ The state was not innocent in this loss of power, argues Neocosmos (1999: 14).

Civil society is an important analytical category in Herman Giliomee, James Myburgh and Lawrence Schlemmer's critique of political trends of the nineties (Giliomee, Myburgh & Schlemmer 2000). They argue that "the real watershed for South Africa's democracy was the ANC's 50th National Conference in Mafikeng, December 1997" (2000: 11). "At Mafikeng Mandela delivered an address written by, and delivered on behalf of, the new party leadership. In the speech he lambasted white opposition and civil society and warned that the "process of fundamental social transformation had only just begun" (2000: 12). Mandela's strong criticism of certain "mainly white" institutions is interpreted as an attack on "civil society" and his use of "transformation" as meaning affirmative action to further black empowerment and Africanisation. Whether Mandela wrote the speech or not, he certainly does return to the theme at the National Civil Society Conference held in April 2001.¹² While seeing the great importance of the "transformational energies" of civil society in promoting the welfare of all, he returns to his earlier critique, albeit in considerably more measured tone (Mandela 2001: 3):

What I do wish to say is that we cannot approach the subject of civil society from the point of view that government represents an inherent negative force in society; and that civil society is needed to curb government. Such an approach runs the risk of projecting civil society as an adjunct

to the organized political opposition.

Civil society features prominently in the literature of political change published in the nineties, and is often located in critiques of the new government. At the same time as these debates were being conducted, theologians had begun to appropriate civil society to describe a new role for their institutions, but without much reflection on the contours of the wider political debate.¹³ Both Christian (Cochrane 1999) and Muslim (Tayob 1995) theologians sought by means of this concept to position their constituencies in relation to the new South Africa. The concept's positive reception in these circles is probably in part shaped by the influence of Jürgen Habermas' theory of civil society.¹⁴ As with other organisations, the early nineties was a time for "a redefining of roles" by religious bodies (De Gruchy 1995: 211-215).¹⁵ Civil society with its positive connotations of promoting democracy presented a useful option. In January 1994 the founding congress of the South African Academy of Religion met under the title, *Religion and the Reconstruction of Civil Society* (De Gruchy & Martin 1995). Construction metaphors abound and "civil society" is something to be "built" (De Gruchy 1995: 163). It is also something with boundaries. Being inside or outside of civil society is a new way of speaking of social justice and human rights.

The use of civil society purely as a neutral tool of political analysis is relatively rare. Tracy Kuperus in a study of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) makes an important departure from the norm (Kuperus 1999a).¹⁶ Although categorized as an "institution of civil society" the DRC according to her did not contribute to democratisation, and in fact hindered the process of political liberalisation. She argues that the term is most useful when freed from some of its positive and its negative connotations. In a further study (Kuperus 1999b), *Building Democracy: An Examination of Religious Associations in South Africa and Zimbabwe*, Kuperus unintentionally illustrates another limitation in the civil society discourse. The only examples of religious institutions cited by her are the Christian churches and associations! This observation holds good for other writers using the concept to describe the role of religious institutions in society. While civil society is often used in describing the democratising role of mainline Christian churches and sometimes also of Islamic associations,¹⁷ other religious forms and institutions are not included. African Religion and traditional associational life are seldom mentioned at all in the civil society discourse. Is this because these make no significant contribution to public life and democracy, or is it because of conceptual tools which from the outset limit the scope of scholarly investigation?

Studies of civil society normally begin with definitions and then provide lists of examples, usually trade unions, business associations, NGOs and Church associations.¹⁸ When the Comaroffs trace the origins of the concept of civil society in nineteenth century Europe they are not simply embarking on cheap

criticism of a concept (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000). They are critiquing as Eurocentric a "tendency to limit civil society to a narrowly defined institutional arena" (2000: 22). They continue: "Few have considered the sorts of public sphere presumed by specifically African relations of production and exchange, codes of conduct, or styles of social intercourse; by African markets, credit associations, informal economies, collective ritual, modes of aesthetic expression, discourses of magic and reason..." (2000: 23).

In their discussion of political institutions in Africa Bratton and van de Walle (1997: 274) insist on a broad definition of "institution": "But just because politics is not bureaucratized in Africa does not mean that it is not institutionalised." Institutions are identified by recurrent patterns of behaviour "to which all political participants are attuned and which impart structure to political life" (1997: 274). Social scientists working in Africa need to develop skills in identifying the distinctly *African* forms of associational life (1997: 38).

At one point the Comaroffs argue that the polyvalence and incoherence of "civil society" may "leave its status as an analytic term fatally compromised" (2000: 8) but nevertheless propose its retention as a "placeholder, a transitional term at a moment of paradigmatic revolution in which the social sciences seek to bring an unruly world to conceptual order" (2000: 33). The need to broaden the understanding of "institution" into a conceptual tool appropriate to African societies is clearly a necessity.

If one examines the self-understandings of religious institutions it also becomes clear that they see themselves as doing more than promoting democracy. Whereas "civil society" normally appears in tandem with "democratic transition", religious institutions often understand themselves to be engaged in "transformation" as well.

We take the example of the South African Council of Churches (and in doing so illustrate how voices from bureaucratic forms of institution receive more recognition from researchers simply because they are more easily accessible). During the eighties they saw themselves as supporting the liberation struggle and in the end contributing to the downfall of the apartheid regime. They clearly understood churches, in the words of prominent Liberation Theologian John de Gruchy, as "midwives of democracy" (De Gruchy 1995: 193-94; cf. Walshe 1995: 114-115). However, in the writings of their leading theologians in the nineties, it is clear that they see themselves as doing much more than assisting in transition. The role of the Church is now to co-operate in "nation-building", as well as "reconstruction" and "development". By then the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) was becoming *the* way to create a genuinely new South Africa.¹⁹ Theologian Charles Villa-Vicencio called for a "Theology of Reconstruction" as well as of "Development" which sees a close co-operation with the democratic state on questions such as socio-economic justice, gender justice and national reconciliation (Villa-Vicencio 1993).²⁰ Transformation is

definitely closer to what they see themselves doing.²¹ This marks an expansion beyond a civil society discourse linked primarily to the question of democratisation. Indeed, in general, religious institutions see themselves as doing more than contributing to wider society. Questions of values and meaning remain essential to their self-understanding.

Sociologists Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus made a valuable contribution when including in their definition of civil society's "mediating structures" an account of those value-generating and value-maintaining agencies in society where individuals discover answers to the question, "who am I?" and are supported in living out the answer (Berger & Neuhaus 1996).²² This is a development of Durkheim's "intermediary institutions" which stand between the individual and the mega-structures of society. Examples of such institutions are the family, the neighbourhood, the voluntary association, the church. In his later work on the question of processes of change and conflict resolution in pluralistic societies, Berger sees the need to pay greater attention to the relationship *between* the institutions (Berger 1995; Berger 1997: 581-614). He therefore further distinguishes between polarising and mediating functions of such institutions. The task of social science then becomes one of investigating both the values by which people live and the relationship of these to vested interests (1997: 596).²³

The question of the relationship between values, individuals, institutions and political processes is a complex one. A study of the engagement with these questions in the emerging field of Religious Studies will provide a useful detour on the road of theoretical clarification.

Religious Metaphor and the Political Imagination

In order to illustrate some of the theoretical debates which have influenced this field we shall concentrate on the way in which the discipline of Religious Studies in South Africa has developed over the past two decades. The Department of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town has been influential in the development of conceptual tools for the study of religion. Proud of their location in a Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, they have sought to pursue the study of religion within this intellectual framework. The emphasis on Liberation Theology made social sciences theory, particularly Marxist analysis, an essential tool and perspective during the eighties (cf. Petersen 1994). Central was the exploration of the relation between values and questions of political legitimisation of the *status quo* and of liberation. Religious symbols could then be classified either as oppressive or liberatory (Villa-Vicencio 1988).

A few years after his arrival in Cape Town, Californian David Chidester wrote his essay "Religious Studies as Political Practice" (Chidester 1987) in which he provided an intriguing example of "committed scholarship". The lines of his training in the phenomenological approach to Religious Studies remain

intact, but he now seeks to demonstrate how such an approach increases the recognition of plural religious identities. In this and in subsequent publications, inner diversity and hybrid identities on the edges of religious institutions are notable features. The political context gave this work its distinctive shape. Serious attention to the question of group identities was inevitable if one considers the relationship between religious communities such as Hindu, Muslim and African Religious, and the ethnic identities of apartheid's Indians, Coloureds and Africans.²⁴ The task of undermining the scholarly foundations of apartheid policy was to be taken up with enthusiasm.

The quest for methods appropriate for the study of African Religion meant that myth, ritual and space became the dominant categories, not only for the study of African Religion but for religions in general (Chidester 1992; Tayob 1999). The constantly shifting overlap between African Religion and African Christianity further reinforced the understanding of religious identities as fluid and multiple.

The question over the portability and adaptation of sacred symbols became an important way of studying religion's place in society. Concepts of "stealing the sacred symbols" (Chidester 1987: 15; cf. Chidester 1988)²⁵ and the politically charged concept of "co-opting the struggles of the poor" (Mosala 1989), during the eighties became ways of understanding the role of religious metaphor in society at the same time as critiquing various forms of civil religion. Itumeleng Mosala, Black Theologian and at the time President of the Black Consciousness AZAPO (Azanian People's Organisation), traced the co-option by a literate ruling class of the oral traditions of peasant struggle in ancient Israel. This analysis was then used to critique the way in which the values and symbols of poor black South Africans were used to legitimize the ANC and UDF liberation movements. A similar kind of argument is found more recently in the work Tinyiko Maluleke, Professor of Black Theology at the University of South Africa. He is highly critical of the way in which religious metaphors of reconciliation and forgiveness have been co-opted and, to his mind, misused in the national Truth and Reconciliation ritual. At the same time he challenges the associated set of Rainbow Nation metaphors in spite of the "fashionableness of race-blind discourses in the 'New South Africa'" (1998a: 37). He argues that the "reconciliation debate largely excludes the Blacks, the poor and the marginalised – especially black women" (1998a: 41).

The adaptation of religious symbols and rituals for political ends is often described as *civil religion*.²⁶ Within South Africa it has often been used in a perjorative sense of Afrikaner Civil Religion (Dunbar-Moodie 1975; Bosch 1984). Given this history, the call upon religious communities a decade later to accept their role in a pluralistic situation and to make their contribution to the shaping of civil religion illustrates how a concept can receive an entirely new set of connotations (Tayob 1995).²⁷ German scholar Helga Dickow applies the term as a neutral tool of analysis in an extensive study of civil religion in South Africa

(Dickow 1996). She argues that during the time of apartheid there were two civil religions in one state: apartheid civil religion and the civil religion of the liberation movement. In the new South Africa these have been superseded by the civil religion of the Rainbow Nation (cf. Mitchell 2001).

The rainbow however remains elusive and race continues to feature prominently in political and religious debate. Maluleke (1998a: 37) speaks of "the silence and absence of Black thinking (and thinkers) from the discourses that are shaping and assigning meaning to the 'New South Africa' project". At the same time whites express a similar sense of alienation from the national project. Ari Sitas (1998: 40) in his history of ideas in South Africa of the nineties writes:

Invariably the new status scripts and mobilisation of social sentiment has "racialised" all debate, dialogue and exchange. The goal of non-racialism and democracy has been subsumed under racial empowerments and dis-empowerments and by implication, any argument about non-racialism and democracy has been marginalised as the monologue of a white liberal or left constituency.

As early as 1994 scholars were predicting the demise of the ideal of "non-racism". Shula Marks in a lecture delivered in the weeks before the elections pointed out that the tradition of non-racism in the African National Congress was very much an "invented tradition" and that it was unlikely to survive intact (Marks 1994). Earlier that year John Comaroff had traced the rise of what he called "heteronationalism" in which the understanding of culture had already shifted significantly in an essentialist direction (Comaroff 1995). By the end of the decade almost all the political analysts were maintaining that race had completely overshadowed issues of gender and class in the public discourse (Bond 2000; Marais 2000; Lodge 1999). The Rainbow Nation imagery is said to have been replaced by the African Renaissance of the Mbeki presidency. A "neo-traditional Africanism" has increasingly received the official stamp of approval (Sitas 1998: 42).

What the foregoing discussion illustrates is the contested and fluid nature of political as well as religious metaphor. The discourse on civil religion is one in which competing logics of civic, ethnic and religious identity jostle for position, inventing and reinventing themselves in the effort to imagine community (cf. Anderson 1991). We are still faced with the challenge of tracing the relationship between religion, whether considered institutionally or as particular sets of metaphors, and this ever-changing political imagination.

Religious and Political Imagination in a Changing World

The theoretical discussion about religion and change in South Africa has to a certain extent been shaped by the events themselves. The internal multiplicity and fluidity of religion certainly presents a challenge to the researcher. When religious groupings are understood as institutions of civil society it becomes easier to examine their role, given the implied anticipated connection between civil society and democratisation processes. However, when one looks at those religious institutions which are presented as examples, it soon becomes clear that the method itself privileges certain forms of religious life. Even if one tries to expand the "institution" to include all forms of patterned social and religious existence, a point is reached where the term is no longer comprehensible in its usual sense. Other theorists therefore prefer concepts of symbol or myth in tracing the relationship between religion and the political imagination. Do religious metaphors need a particular capacity in order to promote social cohesion or to shape the political imagination?

Theories weighted in favour of economic or political explanations generally take little account of the potential of religion to influence change or to enable people to deal with changes affecting them. All theorising about the place of religion in changing societies must account for people living in a multiplicity of worlds: subjects criss-crossed by racial, generational, gendered, class-related, ethnic and religious forms of identification. Identities can be multiple and fragmented. Only an analysis which captures such complexity is in the end convincing.

Notes

- ¹ Further on the concept of "international civil society", see Haynes 2001.
- ² With its associations of an exodus to the promised land, the Trek metaphor has long occupied pride of place in Afrikaner Civil Religion (Dickow 1996: 126).
- ³ The work of Huntington 1991, amongst others, has provided the terminology for the South Africa debate. For a survey of the international discussion, cf. Merkel 1999, esp. pp. 69-76.
- ⁴ The title of Marais 2000 is something of a mystery. While the outsider cover has, *South Africa. Limits to Change. The Political Economy of Transformation*, the final subtitle on the inside cover is *The Political Economy of Transition*. Whatever the explanation might be, the author clearly uses 'transition' in the body of the book to express the undesirable alternative to thorough social change.
- ⁵ Guelke 1999: 181-199 offers a comprehensive survey of both the popular theorizing of miracle as well as its influence on the scholarly discussion of South African "exceptionalism".
- ⁶ The publication emerged out of research project co-ordinated by Peter Berger and Bobby Godsell entitled, "South Africa Beyond Apartheid". Berger was Professor of Sociology at Boston University and Godsell Industrial Relations for Anglo-Ameri-

can Corporation, later to become its chairman.

7 There is something to be said for several of the models which have been proposed. Bratton and van de Walle in their sweeping survey of the period 1990 - 1994 in Africa in search of regime transition theory maintain that South Africa is both an example of "transitions from a settler oligarchy" (1997: 81, 178) and of "pacted transition" (1997: 178). In the latter sense South Africa constituted an exception to the neopatrimonial African norm (1997: 257).

8 The relationship between structure and agency is explored in a systematic analysis of the theories of transition by David Howarth (1998: 197-206); Cf. also Bratton & van de Walle 1997: 20-27.

9 De Gruchy (1995: 169) cites with approval from an *Ecclesiastical History of Uganda* which insists that in much of sub-Saharan Africa "the principles of unity, democracy and self-government were developed in the church long before they were even dreamed of in the state".

10 For an overview of the debate at the time, cf. Singh 1993.

11 Diminishing public influence in the aftermath of regime transition is by no means unique to South Africa (cf. Bratton & van de Walle 1997: 255). A number of qualified people take up positions in the new government, and new opportunities for influence are eagerly followed by NGOs.

12 Its ability to attract political controversy was again evident in the events surrounding a conference on Civil Society held in Cape Town in April 2001. In spite of the presence of Nelson Mandela and Bill Clinton it was boycotted by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the NGO Coalition. Their stated reason was suspicion about its hidden political agenda. These fears were possibly increased by the fact that the main organiser was Roelf Meyer, former National Party Cabinet Minister.

13 Cochrane 2000: 28-39 offers one of the first critical analyses of political interests influencing the way in which "civil society" is used.

14 Publications by Habermas appear in their bibliographies, for example Cochrane 1999: 65-67. On the influence of Habermas on Liberation Theologians in South Africa, cf. Petersen 1994: 106-108.

15 Hein Marais describes it as a period of identity crises (200: 209).

16 Tracy Kuperus is Professor of Political Studies at Gordon College, Massachusetts. Her outsider status perhaps helps to explain the degree of critical detachment in her analysis.

17 For example, Paul Gifford's study *African Christianity. Its Public Role* (Gifford 1998) and Tayob's *Civil Religion for South African Muslims* (Tayob 1995).

18 The restricted use of NGO (Non Government Organisation) is also noteworthy. Comprehensive studies of the political significance of NGOs as institutions of civil society in South Africa draw examples exclusively from organisations that could be considered bureaucratized (Heinrich 2001, Beck & Demmler 2000). See particularly the table of institutions analysed in Beck & Demmler 2000: 146-48, 181-82. Those with religious links are the Catholic Development Services, Sisters of Mary, Stigmatine Welfare Association, Young Mens' Christian Association, and the African Co-operative Action Trust, founded by a group of Christians.

- ¹⁹ Marais ironically remarks that by 1994 RDP had achieved a "sacrosanct status" (2000: 183). For the political left the RDP discourse was itself to become a "terrain of struggle" in that the rhetoric disguised the failure to institute serious change (2000: 183-195, cf. Sitas 1998: 40).
- ²⁰ The theology draws on the Biblical metaphor of the rebuilding of Jerusalem after the return from Babylonian exile. Although the customary label in Biblical Studies for this period is "Restoration", in the interests of relevance, it now becomes "Reconstruction".
- ²¹ For example the journal *Scriptura*, a journal for Bible, Religion and Theology in South Africa, based at the University of Stellenbosch, published a set of articles under the theme: "Social Transformation and Biblical Interpretation" (*Scriptura* 2000, Vol.1).
- ²² First published in 1975, the study had a significant influence in the United States with regard both to Development Policy and to the domestic debate about limiting the state's role in social welfare.
- ²³ During 1985 - 1988 "South Africa Beyond Apartheid" (Berger & Godsell 1988), Club of Rome project during 1995 - 1997 (Berger 1997), and since the beginning of the nineties, *Business and Democracy* (Bernstein, Berger & Godsell 1998). It is therefore surprising that apart from the above-mentioned publications these categories have not played any significant role in the internal South African debate.
- ²⁴ Colleagues in other social sciences had devoted considerable energy in countering the logic of ethnic identity (West 1988). Arch opponent was the *Volkekunde* of the Afrikaans speaking universities, whose essentialist understanding of cultural groups was seen to be integral to apartheid thinking. Neo-marxist and Postmodernist theory was used to reach the conclusion that ethnicities were invented by colonial and apartheid regimes (Mouton & Muller 1995: 173-190).
- ²⁵ Chidester adapted Kenneth Burke's description of the literary scholar as someone engaged in the cultural process of "stealing back and forth of symbols" (Burke 1961: 328). The inclusion of "sacred" made it a useful conceptual tool for Religious Studies and beyond. In 1994 President Mandela shocked his own constituency by donning a Springbok Rugby jersey at the World Cup Rugby final in Johannesburg. In defending what seemed an open identification with a symbol of white exclusivism, Dullah Omar, the newly appointed Minister of Justice, argued at a press conference that this was legitimate in that it was a matter of "stealing the sacred symbols". In describing how symbols could be appropriated he was drawing on terminology gained from association with the Religious Studies discussion.
- ²⁶ It was the seminal work of Robert Bellah (Bellah 1967) that introduced this concept into recent discussion. For a detailed survey of its usage, cf. Dickow 1996: 19-31.
- ²⁷ It is perhaps not insignificant that this call is made by a leading Muslim intellectual who sees the risk of a minority isolating itself.

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