Public Faith and the Politics of Faith: A Review Essay

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A symposium entitled *In the Presence of Faith: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on Southern African Studies of Religion* was held in Johannesburg from 24 to 26 February 2010.[1] This review essay outlines our rationale for the symposium, highlights its most pressing debates, and introduces the papers included in this special edition of the *Journal for the Study of Religion*, an edition entitled *Public Faith and the Politics of Faith*.

The Symposium

There were a number of reasons to call together a symposium of this nature. As organisers and in our own work we have been struck by the very limited extent of inter-disciplinary reading, discussion or collaboration about religion. Our first wish was to create a place where scholars from different disciplines who have an interest in religion could converse together and be exposed to a diversity of questions, methods and literatures. In doing this, we hoped to open a debate about how religion has been studied in Southern Africa, what is missing and where the field should be moving. Drawing on the experience of Wiser's 2007 *Reasons of Faith* event, the organisers made efforts to invite the participation of historians, sociologists and anthropologists as well as those working from religious studies departments.

Our second wish was to invite and stimulate more empirical attention to religion, particularly by social science and humanities scholars. We also hoped to raise a discussion on topics not normally encountered under the purview of religion in the social sciences. We were interested in the relationship between religion and the state, both in how religious communities attempt to influence the state, but also how the state structures its relationship with religious communities. The relationship of African nationalism to religion, both Christianity (independent and mainstream) as well as traditional, was also something we felt would lead to productive discussion. We were also interested in topics we felt had been neglected in the regional scholarship, such as personal conceptions and appreciations of faith; the public role of Christians who attend mainstream churches in Southern Africa; and the need to engage between traditional, independent and mainstream forms of religion in our theory and research. And we sought to pay attention to some of the growing religious phenomena of the last two decades, not least of which is the increasing Pentecostal involvement in public life. There is a great deal of work yet to be done on this.

As part of our planning we carefully weighed up the use of our words. In choosing our symposium title, we opted for the more polysemic word "faith," instead of the more normative "religion." The former, we felt, offered a point of ingress into the symposium of a wider set of views on spiritual practice; it also offered a way to move beyond more dogmatic understandings of religion. "Faith" also seemed to offer a way for comparative discussions between some of the major world religions practised in the region, allowing for a symposium in which scholars of Islam, Judaism, African spirituality and Christianity could speak alongside one another.

A third rationale for the symposium lay in the great need for scholars working in South Africa and other Southern African countries to engage in dialogue on religion. One reason is that there is an increasingly dense network of religious and labour migration across our respective borders. A regional perspective on such migration and the study of transnational religious communities is increasingly imperative.

The call for papers elicited an enthusiastic response. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the majority of abstracts were theological in orientation. The planning group decided to exclude them. Many reflected a narrow focus on Biblical scholarship, or were poorly-researched from a social scientific perspective. As such, they did not meet the requirements of our call for papers. The high volume of scholarly theological and Biblical publishing in South Africa does not evidence much attention to most of the issues referred to above. Because of the broad nature of the call for papers and its openness to a variety of approaches and disciplines, the symposium nonetheless saw a wonderful diversity of presentations, some of which is evident in this special edition.

Three major themes emerged from the papers and deliberations. The first concerns what we are calling here *The Politics of Faith*. Much of the discussion at the symposium revolved around the presence of religion in the public and political life of South Africa, and the changing nature of church-state relations and relations between the ANC and religious leaders of a variety of faiths. This emphasis was the first clue that, although the symposium had been billed as covering Southern Africa, its major focus lay with South Africa itself. This theme raised many normative questions for both religious groups and for public policy.

The second theme was that of *Public Faiths*. Here the question of publicness itself came into focus. In this theme, the symposium was greatly assisted by an opening presentation by Abdulkadar Tayob which introduced the idea of religious heterotopias, which we have found to be a helpful framing device. We will return to the issue of heterotopias.

The third theme is more diverse, and will be called here *Spaces and Imaginaries of Faith*. This descriptor refers to a wide range of phenomena that are themselves sometimes examples of religious heterotopias. This review essay will take up these three themes, referring to papers included in this volume as well as to some that are as yet unpublished.

Of the symposium speakers, a significant number were practising or ordained religionists. This made for discussion which largely–and to our mind, interestingly–subverted some of the private/public distinctions which usually govern academics lives. Many of the speakers told of how their own personal faith affected the subject positions they were taking in a way that is not often encountered in sociological academic gatherings.

The Politics of Faith

One of the most interesting aspects of the symposium was the persistence of a sometimes heated debate about the normative basis for religious participation in politics, society and public life. The debate was kicked off by Canadian lawyer Iain Benson's provocative paper, included in this special edition under the title "Taking Pluralism and Liberalism Seriously: The Need to Re-understand 'Faith' 'Beliefs', 'Religion' and 'Diversity' in the Public Sphere."

Benson has been an active participant in the development of a South African interfaith religious leaders' Charter of Religious Rights and Freedoms. To give some sense of how this initiative regards religion, the draft of this charter, presented by Benson, includes the following in its preface, "Whereas religious belief may deepen our understanding of justice, love, compassion, culture, democracy, human dignity, equality, freedom, rights and obligations, as well as our understanding of the importance of community and relationship in our

lives and in society and may therefore be beneficial for the common good, and Africa . . . ."

Benson's position is based on the assertion that a secular public is anti-religious. This assertion is largely derived from his work in North America; the same does not necessarily hold true for Southern Africa. However, for him, religion is a strong public good. Benson views secularism as an approach that discounts the validity and beneficial effect of religion in the public sphere and, as such, requires reform in order to open the gates for religious participation. He proposes a reduction of the state's intervention in the social life of its citizens. Government intervention, according to him, promotes an agnostic dominance of the public sphere, and thus goes against the grain of the South African Constitution. Following on from this, he argues that the demands of sexual or gender equality ought not to be held against religious groups. These are quite contentious claims, both for the writers of this essay, as well as for many of the symposium participants. While Benson feels that religion is excluded from the public sphere, religion's entanglement with apartheid history, for example, as well as an emerging alliance between the ANC and socially conservative churches, points to a more nuanced situation. Such a situation was outlined by Gerald West.

West presented a paper which is included here under the title "Jesus, Jacob and the New Jerusalem: Religion in the 'Public Realm', between Polokwane and the Presidency." While there can be no doubt that the South African Constitution is secular, West's paper attends to the many ways in which religion is invoked at the very heart of African National Congress (ANC) rhetoric and political mobilisation. Drawing mainly on speeches and policy documents by Presidents Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma, West points to the enduring use of the Bible in political and nationalist rhetoric. In this the ANC is developing partnerships with, as West calls it, Evangelical-Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity; a form that Paul Gifford contends has allied with other African political elites (Gifford 2004). West concludes that while there have been differences between the forms and registers of Christianity deployed by ANC leadership, Mbeki and Zuma have been consistent in their invocation of "Church theology." This form of Christianity holds that the church's public remit lies in promoting morality, particularly its sexual and familial personal registers. This goes against a more progressive and contextual theology, including liberation theology.

A more explosive articulation of this debate about the political place of religion took place on the second evening of the symposium, one that was open to the public. The panel was made up of Farid Esack, Steven Friedman and Nomboniso Gasa. Esack is currently head of Islamic Studies at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), and was previously a Gender Commissioner and founder of the progressive Call of Islam. Friedman is currently director of the Centre for the

Study of Democracy at UJ, and a progressive Jew known for his outspoken criticism of Zionism. Gasa is a gender activist, also a previous Gender Commissioner, a sangoma and an Anglican. Their inputs were all made informally. In this panel, the relations between political power, religious leadership, and gender were at issue in very practical ways. The three speakers, all of whom were part of the prophetic politics of religion in the 1980s, are extremely suspicious of the role that many conservative religious leaders are playing in South Africa at present. They all take issue with recent ANC behaviour in relation to religious communities. They also criticised those religious leaders who have entered into political relations with the ANC without, in their view, being adequately critical of the failings of the current government. At the heart of this debate was the question of what is at stake in the move from a prophetic to a socially conservative face of religion in the political public. The recent formation of the National Interfaith Leadership Council is an example. The organisation, formed in South Africa in 2009, styles itself as an engine for moral upliftment in conjunction with the state. In a statement issued by the ANC, the party views this new religious council as "well-placed to be the key driver for social education and moral regeneration for sustainable development" (Motshekga 2009). This organ appears to have become the state's religious interlocutor of choice, replacing the National Religious Leaders Forum set up by Nelson Mandela, which was comprised mainly of progressive religionists.

Taking the analysis somewhat further, it is possibile to see that Friedman, Esack and Gasa were referring to a referential (in both senses of the word) circularity which characterises the relationship between certain religious leaders and the ANC. A failure to critique the ANC rests upon those very conditions–a shared and narrow understanding of morality which make certain religious leaders favourable to the ANC, and which makes current ANC-driven policy favourable to these bodies. Discussing a recent call by the President of South Africa for a "Moral State of the Nation Address," the panellists pointed out that the ANC's turn to a language of morality comes at a time of a deep crisis within the ANC, tied up with concerns about the illegal and unethical awarding of tenders, the way in which ANC members have used their positions to amass personal wealth, as well as corruption within and the effectiveness of government.

What is the issue with the nature of these ANC-sanctioned moral interlocutors and their moral positions? In the case of Judaism, Freidman held that Warren Goldstein, the Chief Rabbi for South Africa's orthodox communities, is not an appropriate moral interlocutor. Friedman bases his comments on Goldstein's Zionist politics. Gasa, in a critique of the notion of Traditional African Religion, took task with essentialising notions of African identity and the call for Traditional Leaders and the Shembe church, for example, to be moral compasses. For these presenters, religious institutions are always inherently corruptible and tend

towards being repressive, authoritarian and patriarchal, excluding marginalised voices both outside and within religious communities. All three of these speakers seek to reinvigorate the prophetic tradition within religious groups, and in so doing, they also caution against the development of public policy that idealises religion or assumes it to be a privileged source of morality.

At the same time as espousing a prophetic tradition, the position articulated within this debate was consistent with a continued support for a secular public. A similar position was taken later in the symposium by Anthony Egan of the Jesuit Institute who made a theological case for secular reason. He suggested that a common secular language for political and social issues blocks creeping theocracy, keeps spaces open for the non-religious, and also allows for critical voices within religious traditions. Such a position allows for internal religious pluralism in religious bodies and spaces, while contextual (or critical) theologies and the defence of reason act as a check on systems of power in church and state.

It is clear that the changing relationships between religious groups and the ANC government in South Africa is something that will require more attention in the coming years, both in empirical and normative terms. In retrospect, it was surprising to us that we had not received more submissions in this vein, given the continued and reflexive discussion of the issue which continued throughout the symposium.

Public Faiths

One of the challenges for understanding religion in contemporary Southern Africa is to articulate the relations between the social spaces of religious practice and the rhetoric and policy of the national public.

A key theoretical intervention in this regard was made by Abdulkadar Tayob from the University of Cape Town's Department of Religious Studies on the opening evening of the symposium. Drawing on the 1967 lecture by Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," Tayob developed the concept of *heterotopias* to assist in understanding and framing religious pluralism in contemporary South Africa. Religious institutions and bodies participate in a politics of civil society, representing themselves as interest groups in relation to the government, parliamentary debates and legislative formation. Religious groups, in this sense, can participate in the utopian project of South African constitutionalism, where the fulfilment of all constitutional principles would imply the realisation of a perfect society. But, Tayob suggested, the constitutional utopia is itself ambiguous and contradictory. As he put it "The utopia of the new nation holds within itself contradictory desires. The desire to redress would lead to a full expression of cultural diversity, while the desire to rectify represents a modernist project to critique and contain that cultural diversity."

South Africa's constitutional utopia is of full equality in a liberal democracy. Its heterotopias on the other hand are those spaces, religious and secular, where other values and formations frame experience. South Africa might be better understood as including series of overlapping and often non-consensual heterotopias, zones of distortion and division of the Constitution. For Tayob, it is therefore necessary to go beyond an analysis of the religious content of religious right claims under the Constitution. We also need to examine the other values and social processes that frame experience. To this end, he drew on a series of authors who have written about religious phenomena that construe a different kind of politics outside of the formal structures and concepts contained within our understanding of civil society and political liberalism. Where Foucault used the concept of heterotopias to write about ships, stadia and brothels, Tayob draws on it to explore aspects of various religious publics. Amongst these he counts Bompani's analysis of African Independent Churches, and Garner and Czeglédy on Evangelical churches. From his own work, Tayob referred to some Muslim claims to the autonomy of Islam and Muslims with respect to marriage, even if that results in inequalities in marriages. These, he suggest, point to ambivalent groups with ambiguous roles in the public sphere, even as they are almost entirely absent from political discourse.

Spaces and Imaginaries of Religion

The idea of religious publics and attention to public faiths continued in various registers across the three days of the symposium. Elizabeth Gunner, for example, presented a paper exploring performance and fluidity within the Ibandla lamaNazaretha African Independent Church founded by Isaiah Shembe in 1910. She examined the relationship between the Shembe church and the national public domain through an examination of two burials, of Shembe himself in 1935 and of the slain Reggae star Lucky Dube in 2007. In both cases, these funerals created a public space and a framework for public mourning. Particularly with the case of Dube's funeral, it created a ritual to deal with the mourning of a national figure cut down by crime. Gunner provided an extremely good example of a religious public that functions in heterotopic ways in relation to the state, an example of what she called "a bleeding between the bodies of the secular and the religious."

Interlocking and intersecting notions of space were present in three papers considering the phenomenon of Pentecostalism in Southern Africa. Unfortunately, although the symposium included some very perceptive papers on the phenomenon, including attention to the notion of spaces of religious practice, none of the authors were able to submit for publication in this special edition. Ilana van Wyk, for instance, presented on the extreme levels of mistrust

amongst members of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG), which she calls "a church of strangers." Since the UCKG's arrival in South Africa from Brazil, it has rapidly become one of the largest of the store-front churches working in South Africa. In his paper, Baroto Ntakobajira examined youth in a Pentecostal congregation in Pretoria, seeking to understand their notions of civil place and political process. The third was by Peter Kankonde who, against the background of xenophobic violence in 2008, examined South African membership of Hillbrow churches run by African pastors from the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Nigeria.

What these papers on Pentecostal churches have in common was that they reveal how these churches read the social and the everyday as a site and space of crisis. Here, everyday life is populated by demons, an elusive purity, and a state of spiritual as well as social danger. Van Wyk's work on the UCKG reflects on the social imaginary against intimacy and trust in the church, and its teachings that empathy is an instrument of Satan. For van Wyk, the congregation seeks, through various contracts with God, to avoid the state of being unblessed. If you are unblessed, she suggests, other people are dangerous: including family and intimates. Rather than the church being a site for the creation and maintenance of social capital, an argument advanced in many studies of new Pentecostalism, Van Wyk's UCKG research site represents the harnessing of technology against solidarity and community. Individuals communicate, not within and through an imaginary community, but directly with their God. Her paper also drew attention to the role of technology in the practice of faith. The discussion after Ntakobajira's presentation revolved around the political epistemology of youth congregations whose African members share with South African congregants an interpretation of African political life as filled with demons and the spirit of evil. This interpretation, he suggests, works against the likelihood of future professionals in these congregation taking up politics in its liberal or civil society modality. Demonology produces a charismatic political subject that cannot, in Ntakobajira's view, effectively engage in rational public political discourse. We can consider the religious publics constituted in these Pentecostal churches to be heterotopic in relation to South African constitutionalism.

Another site of heterotopia, also central to the social imaginaries of religious publics, is the experience of women within religious traditions. This is not to suggest, in any essentialist manner, that women in religion naturally constitute heterotopic spaces, but that social conventions, in what are often morally-conservative spaces, tend to assign women eccentric roles. The religious space currently claimed by the ANC for instance, as discussed earlier, is for a return to family values and in opposition to the equality clauses of the Constitution. These are spaces that seek to re-esentialise women. A range of papers on the last morning of the symposium revolved around this theme. This session was

in answer to issues raised in the public debate about the heterogeneity of experience within religious communities, about the plurality of religion, and the importance of non-orthodoxy. Not only did they address hitherto neglected women's experiences, they also included a very wide range of registers—personal reflections, life histories, and research on grassroots theologies.

In an excellent presentation, Sa'diyya Shaikh reported on the results of empirical work with women in working-class Muslim communities in Cape Town. She challenged dominant Western thinking about the relationship between Islam and feminism. It is often assumed that religious, social and sexual repression are closely tied. Her research addressed women's experience of their gender and sexuality in relation to popular and localised interpretations of Qur'anic texts. She was able to show that women were often able to engage in their own Qur'anic interpretation in defence of their sexual pleasure and position in marriages. Rabbi Azila Reisenberger spoke of her own path to religious authority within a progressive Jewish Synagogue. Her account of her journey into faith highlighted some of the constraints placed upon female religiosity in Orthodox Judaism. Speaking in a very different manner from Steven Friedman in the public debate, she nevertheless highlighted the conservative nature of a normative religious tradition, as well as the counter-hegemonic spaces that can exist within them. Her account of her spirituality was a very poignant exemplar of the kind of heterotopic space to which Tayob referred. Her paper was also a very good instance of the degree to which practising believers integrate faith into their academic work. Radikopo Ntsimane presented on the ritualisation of gender relations in the Ibandla lamaNazaretha. He paid particular attention to the policing of virginity and monogamy by church elders, and the ways in which women's uniforms mark them as resistant to defilement, and identify their sexual status. Only those who marry as virgins can wear the shawl, for example, and on their wedding days can carry a spear.

All three papers, in their different ways, raised questions about the relationship of faith to public and private spaces and institutions. Ntismane's paper, for instance, demonstrated how matters discursively situated as private, such as sexuality, are registered and marked in social and public spaces and sanctified by religious authority. In the discussion which followed, a number of speakers from the floor highlighted the need for further discussion of the co-mingling of religion and gender. In a way, the symposium itself bears out this observation, given that few of the more political papers saw gender as a public issue.

Overview of Papers in the Special Issue

The papers by Iain Benson and Gerald West have already been referred to in some length. Five other papers are included in this edition, two of which address

questions of history. The first of these takes stock of the state of studies of religion in South and Southern Africa in the post-apartheid period. Deborah Gaitskell, who is the preeminent historian of women and Christianity in South Africa, was asked to reflect upon changes she has observed over the years as a scholar of gender and religion. Her paper covers developments in the study of Christianity, including mission and world Christianity, and gender. It is included in this volume with the title *Feminising Faith: A Reflection on Personal and Academic Journeys*. Many of her reflections pay attention to the material and institutional conditions for the production of knowledge about women and African Christianity, and point to the increasing attention to women's experiences of Christianity, particularly in UK, American and European institutions. In addition to her characterisation of developments, her paper provides an invaluable resource in its bibliography of mostly historical studies in this area.

The historian Leslie Hadfield has contributed a finely researched article to this edition. It deals with the material relations between the Black Consciousness Community Programmes and the Study Project on Christianity in an Apartheid Society (Spro-cas), established as a research project under the aegis of the South African Council of Churches and the Christian Institute in 1969. Her paper, *Christian Action and Black Consciousness Community Programmes in South Africa*, provides an important supplement to the body of research on the theological links between black consciousness and black and liberation theology. Hadfield points to the very material inputs by some progressive Christians in partnership with this radical social and political movement before the major mobilisation of mainline churches in the 1980s.

Two of the articles in this edition look at performance, although in very different registers. Nehemia Chivandikwa's essay, *Dialectics and Dynamics of Religion in Theatre: Reflections on Gender and Sexuality in Selected Zimbabwean Theatrical Performances*, attends to the ways in which theatre provides a space for reflection on the engagement of religious tropes from Christianity and African traditional life with contemporary social relations, particularly gendered ones. Working with plays by Innocent Dube and Daniel Maphosa, Chivandikwa argues that theatre offers us "reservoirs of religious epistemologies, practices and sensibilities." The second performance piece was contributed by Colin Skelton who, like Chivandikwa, is a theatre director, performance practitioner and researcher. Skelton takes these interests to the Sunday services of The New Gospel Church of Zion in Africa, held on the Melville Koppies, a series of rocky outcrops established as part of a public park, in Johannesburg. In this article, *Performing the Holy Spirit: Ritualised Manifestations of Faith in an African Independent Church*, Skelton analyses the actions of the service-goers as enacting their belief, particularly in the Holy Spirit, which leads them through spirit possession, full and drunk with power, to be able to heal.

The last article included in this volume is by Annamarie Paulin-Campbell, an educational psychologist and spiritual director at the Jesuit institute. Her essay, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius and Shifts in Images of God and Self: The Experience of Two South African Women*, shifts the focus from the socio-political aspects of religion that occupied much of the symposium to the intrapersonal experience of faith and its effects on personal development. Paulin-Campbell introduces and theorises techniques of imaginal and dialogical exercises and evaluates their impact on the personal development of two women.

Notes Towards the Future

The symposium aimed to bring together people who have been working on religion across disciplines and across Southern Africa. In this aim, the symposium was reasonably successful, with substantial representation from the disciplines of history, religious studies, anthropology, literary and theatre studies, and psychology. While many leading scholars from religious studies attended the event, there is still room for the participation of a wider range of people, both academic faculty and postgraduate students, from sociology, political studies and anthropology. Its third aim of bringing people together from across Southern Africa was less successful. While there was some representation from Southern African scholars working in Zimbabwe and Swaziland, South Africa dominated the discussion and participation.

In the course of the papers and discussions, many more questions were asked than answered. But we were pleased with the empirical work that was presented on religion, and the scope this offers for the future. We hope that the symposium contributed towards the understanding of the consequentiality of religion in the present. And we hope that these debates will invigorate research and help frame or reframe research questions and support new networks of collegiality. We certainly hope that it will be possible to host a similar symposium in the future, one with increased international participation, including across Southern Africa.

Notes

[1] The Centre for Culture and Languages in Africa (CCLA) at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER) at the University of the Witwatersrand, and UJ's newly formed Department of Religion Studies hosted the event together. Support from the symposium came from an NRF Rated Researchers' Incentive Grant, the Faculty of Humanities and the Department of Religion at the University of Johannesburg. Natasha Erlank and Annie Leatt would like to give special thanks to Caroline Jeannerat who bore the vast burden of the administration of the symposium and the special edition with such skill and grace. This review essay is dedicated to the memory and legacy of Steve de Gruchy. Until his recent tragic death, he was the head of Department at the School of Religion and Theology at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal.

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