

## THE BIBLE AND ETHOS IN A NEW SOUTH AFRICA

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### Abstract

*In an attempt to understand the questions implicit in the topic Smit discusses three methodological questions and a moral one. Firstly, he deals with the distinction between ethics and ethos and shows that ethos is the more comprehensive and socially influential factor. Secondly, he considers the question as to how the Bible influences the ethos or moral world of a particular society like 'a new South Africa' and argues that it affects the public moral language and imagination. Thirdly, he asks what is meant by 'the Bible' and argues that different communities of interpretation construct different Bibles and that the influence of 'the Bible' on public moral language and imagination is therefore also determined by the power struggles between these groups and by their respective roles within a particular society. He concludes with the moral question why and for whom this is an important question at this point in time.*

### 1. This is the topic. What is the question?

I was invited to speak on the topic 'The Bible and ethics in a new South Africa.' Unfortunately, I was not told what to say. In my attempts to reflect on the question or questions implicit in the topic the task became increasingly difficult. Finally I decided simply to share this undertaking with you, i e to let you share in my attempts to understand the nature of the problem(s) at stake. In the process, I shall make three methodological observations and one moral one.

#### 1.1 The obvious questions

The obvious questions possibly implied in the topic could be 'What role will the Bible play in ethics in a new South Africa?' or 'What role should the Bible play in the processes of ethical decision-making in a new South Africa?'

In order to answer such questions one must - in traditional/ Biblical imagery - attempt to be either a prophet or a lawgiver. For several reasons I am not able to do that.

Instead, one can follow the more modest approach and simply attempt to analyze, to observe and to describe, i e to take the implicit question to be 'What role could the Bible play in ethics in a new South Africa?'

## 1.2 This brings one to a first difficulty

This brings one to a first difficulty, because of the important distinction between ethics and ethos. In a technical sense 'ethics' is a scientific discipline, the 'science of morals,' the discipline dealing with processes of human decision-making on moral issues. 'Ethos,' however, is 'the habitual character and disposition of a group.' The difference between the two is extremely important.

For three reasons I decided to change the topic to 'The Bible and ethos in a new South Africa.'

### 1.2.1 A first reason

In popular usage the distinction is often not made. This leads to confusion and to a widespread and serious overestimation of the public importance of 'ethics,' the scientific reflection on moral conduct.

When one therefore asks: 'What role could the Bible play in ethics in a new South Africa?' the underlying question, given this confusion, may be: 'What role could the Bible play in scholarly reflection on ethical decision-making in a new South Africa?'

This is, however, not a very important issue, because scholarly reflection on ethical decision-making is not that important. It seldom makes any difference to the way people live and act. The factors influencing public life, how people behave themselves, what they think and believe, like and dislike, what they hope and fear, what they regard as shameful or as praiseworthy, what they will do and what they will not do, which actions they commend and which they despise, whom they vote for and with whom they disagree, in short, the factors influencing the 'moral world' of people, their ethos, are quite different.

In an ironic way, this is seldom better illustrated than in the arguments of the 'professional ethicists' themselves. Precisely the people arguing in public, on television and in the media, for 'biblical principles' and 'biblical norms' to be applied in processes of socio-political decision-making demonstrate and have demonstrated in recent years that their own 'ethics' only reflects and rationalizes the changes in ethos of the groups to which they belong. In short: ethics seldom determines ethos. Ethos more often determines ethics.

What is of greater importance and interest, therefore, is the question: 'What role could the Bible play in the ethos, in the "moral world" (Meeks 1987), in the public morality, of a new South Africa?'

### 1.2.2 A second reason

The distinction between ethics and ethos often has something to do with the difference between (moral) decisions and acts and (moral) human beings, between acts and agents.

The authoritative ethicist Hauerwas is well-known for his arguments that the emphasis ought to be on the latter instead of on the former (1974; 1981; 1983). The

formation of the character, the ethos, the moral identity of a group and of the people within the group has much more effect than the scholarly argument with regard to particular ethical decisions or actions.

His interest is therefore in the formation of 'communities of character' and in the role the Bible can play in this. He challenges the popular inclination to link ethics with 'difficult decisions' and argues instead for the importance of creating contexts more conducive to deciding one way or another. Contexts like these are found in communities, like the church: social institutions seeking to embody a specific configuration of virtues in its members. These virtues are formed by the language, the 'grammar,' the collective stories or narratives of the group. In this 'roundabout yet organic way' the ethos of people is shaped and ultimately also their particular decisions and acts. Much more important, according to Hauerwas, than looking at the role of the Bible in particular difficult decisions and acts, is therefore to look at the role of the Bible within the social institutions where the people's ethos is being formed.

### 1.2.3 A third reason

Even if one is interested in 'ethics' in the technical and more traditional sense of 'a scientific analysis of the processes of moral decision-making,' in difficult (moral) acts more than in (moral) agents, it is still remarkable to see what role the ethos of people plays within such a process.

Put differently: the ethos of a group determines how its members live and act almost unconsciously, unreflectively, in their every-day actions and decisions. What happens, however, when they are faced with 'difficult' so-called 'ethical' decisions forcing them to deliberate, to think and choose consciously and reflectively what to do?

Gustafson (1984), another authoritative North American ethicist, has made a famous analysis of this kind, precisely in order to ascertain the role which the Bible plays in 'ethics,' in decision-making.

Reminding ourselves of his analysis, we may keep our own contemporary 'moral issues,' dealing with the transformation from '*apartheid*-South Africa' to a 'new South Africa,' in mind.

As example he uses 'a complex event' which has excited 'the moral passions of the American people, namely, the invasion of Cambodia by American troops from South Vietnam in the last days of April 1970. Many articulate Christians have judged this to be morally wrong and have participated in various forms of action to express their indignation about it. Our major and long-range question is: Why do Christians judge this to be morally wrong? How does scripture enter into their judgment?'

He starts by commenting that not all who believed the invasion to be a mistake necessarily judged it to be wrong for 'Christian ethical' reasons. Different adjectives that were used to qualify the 'wrong' demonstrate this and show the various frameworks of interpretation that could be used in evaluating this (and any other)

action. He reiterates four: It could be legally wrong (a violation of the delicate fabric of international law), militarily wrong (judged on previous military experience and factual grounds to be a mistake), politically wrong (not achieving the desired political ends and/or not taking other political consequences fully into account) and economically wrong (e.g. in terms of long-term economic policy). Gustafson shows how all four types of argument can, in fact, also include moral assessments, e.g. about justice and legality, military action, political goals and economic priorities - which only makes the respective arguments more complex.

In addition to all of these evaluations, already implying intricate moral arguments, it is also possible that people could make more straightforward moral judgments concerning the event, in this case the invasion, and even appeal to Scripture for their positions. How does such an argument work?

Gustafson distinguishes three ways in which moral evaluations can apply to any historical event.

A first possibility is that a moral interpretation is made of the structure and meaning of the historical process or wider context in which particular events take place. Various views of history will, for example, make a fundamental difference in the way believers evaluate a particular event or socio-political trend:

A progressive view of history, such as was in vogue sixty years ago in many circles, might interpret the events in Southeast Asia as part of the ongoing evolution of the human race, painfully breaking the shackles of the past, but confidently moving toward a more nearly perfect future state of affairs.

An alternative to this would be a Marxist view, adopted also by important Christians, that this struggle is part of a historical process of conflict between those who seek to retain their powers and exercise them in the repression of the weak and those who seek release from the bondage of oppression in their efforts to liberate themselves from colonial or other dominating powers.

A third might be more radically eschatological; the future is drawing the present and the past toward itself in such a way that wars of the sort being fought are really revolutions of hope that a new day for mankind is dawning.

In contrast to these three would be a view that sees the events as part of the ongoing struggle between the forces of disruption and disorder that also threatens the delicate fabric which restrains chaos and the forces that preserve the modicum of order that makes existence possible among men.

(Gustafson 1984:157)

So: people's perspective on the more comprehensive meaning of historical events affects their evaluation of particular historical events. The same events are charged with different meanings from different perspectives. As a result of people's 'view of history' certain features of events appear more salient and morally significant than others. The point is that biblical themes are used in order to form and legitimate these different views of history, when held by Christians.

Christians believe that they see and interpret history 'through the glasses of the Bible' (Calvin) and these very basic convictions, part and parcel of their world-view, their social construction of reality, their ethos, fundamentally determine their particular ethical judgments and decisions when faced with particular historical events and issues.

A second possibility. In evaluating the morality of a particular historical event or movement people can judge the 'motives and intentions' of those who are in power and who seem to be able to determine the course of events more than other people can. Gustafson uses the common philosophical distinction between motives as 'backward-looking reasons for action' and intentions as 'forward-looking reasons' for action and shows how moral evaluations enter into the assessment of each.

Again, motives and intentions, the 'reasons why people do things' and why people in power follow certain directions have everything to do with their ethos, their - often unreflected - values, visions, virtues, ideals and goals. And again, Scripture can be used in a variety of ways to defend and criticize both motives and intentions.

In addition, evaluating motives and intentions gives rise to two further difficult questions, namely whether the professed reasons are also the real reasons, i.e. the question of the moral integrity of the people involved, and the question whether or not the actual situation warrants the actions based on the given reasons, motives and intentions, i.e. the question of analyzing the situation.

A third possibility. In order to evaluate the morality of a historical event or movement, the consequences must also be subject to moral evaluation. This is however not easy to do in an incontrovertible way, since it again involves a complex argument, with many unconscious assumptions, based on the general convictions of the people making the judgment, their worldview, their priorities, their convictions, in short, their ethos.

It goes without saying that the Bible can again be used in a variety of ways to legitimate judgments of this nature.

For the purposes of our discussion it is not necessary to go into the detail of Gustafson's analysis of the role Scripture plays in the different stages of such an ethical argument. The value of this example is that it shows that ethical decision-making, even so-called scientific moral argument, is never 'pure,' but ethos-laden, deeply influenced by the moral visions, the virtues, the values, the priorities, in short, taking for granted moral assumptions of the group to which the ethicists belong, however 'professional' they may be.

Therefore, in the light of these remarks, I changed the topic to 'The Bible and ethos in a new South Africa.'

## **2. The Bible and public ethos**

This brings us immediately to a second methodological difficulty, implicit in the topic. How does the Bible influence the ethos, the moral world, of people, of

communities? And how does one describe that role? Let us consider three aspects of this difficulty.

## 2.1 A first observation

One is obviously dealing here with the role of the Bible in a particular 'social construction of reality' - to use the phrase popularized by Peter Berger. What role can the Bible play in the social construction of reality of a particular society like a new South Africa, specifically with regard to the moral, the ethical, aspects of such a construction?

In his authoritative work on the interpretation of culture, religion and ethos, Geertz (1975) makes the very helpful suggestion that culture, of which ethos, world view and religious symbols are all parts, is an elaborate set of signs, a system of communication, and that understanding culture is like learning a language.

Many anthropologists, philosophers and ethicists have used a similar approach in order to understand the way a particular ethos is constituted, transmitted, appropriated and transformed. Gustafson (1970:83-95) argues that the history of the early Christian movement can be written as the development of 'communities of discourse.' Meeks (1987) uses Geertz's suggestion in describing the 'grammar of early Christian morals,' dealing with the different 'moral languages' of the early Christian communities, reflected in their documents and looking at the social factors that played a role in the shaping and changing of these 'grammars.' Hauerwas (1981; 1983; Hauerwas & Jones 1989) uses this approach in analyzing the 'story' and the 'language' of the Christian church, the community of vision and character, in which the moral world of Christians is constituted and transmitted, and contrasting that with the 'stories' and 'languages' of other communities with their own forms of ethos. Stout (1989) in his recent award-winning major study, *Ethics after Babel. The languages of morals and their discontents*, takes the same cue.

One extremely influential contribution of this nature, is the work of Lindbeck. In the widely-read *The nature of doctrine* (1984) he developed a cultural-linguistic approach to religion and theology, drawing on Berger and Geertz. During an important symposium on the implications of his views for the task of the Christian church in a postmodern and pluralist world, he has recently further developed this approach, making use of the idea of 'biblical literacy' (Burnham 1989: 37-55).

For centuries, he argues, the Bible has been culturally preeminent, since it shaped 'the language and imagination of whole societies.'

Until recently, most people in traditionally Christian countries lived in the linguistic and imaginative world of the Bible. It was not the only world in which they dwelt ... Yet the text above all texts was the Bible. Its stories, images, conceptual patterns, and turns of phrase permeated the culture from top to bottom. This was true even for illiterates and those who did not go to church, for knowledge of the Bible was transmitted not only directly by its reading, hearing, and ritual enactment, but also indirectly by an interwoven net of intellectual, literary, artistic, folkloric, and proverbial traditions.

(Burnham 1989:38)

The remarkable feature is certainly the way in which the Bible influenced non-Christian language and imagination, and therefore culture and ethos, as well:

There was a time when every educated person, no matter how professedly unbelieving or secular, knew the actual text from Genesis to Revelation with a thoroughness which would put contemporary ministers and even theologians to shame. Even the deists and the atheists of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, who for the first time made the high culture of the West avowedly non-Christian, were linguistically and imaginatively saturated with scripture.

This did not cease to be the case in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Those who tried, like Nietzsche, to repudiate not only biblical beliefs, but the linguistic and imaginative universe of the Bible, nevertheless knew it well. Few escaped its influence. Marxism is not simply a secularized or this-worldly version of biblical eschatology, but that is part of its appeal; and, as recent studies indicate, the deep structures of Freud's thought were largely formed in interaction with his Jewish heritage, and John Dewey's, with his Protestant one.

(Burnham 1989:38-39)

Lindbeck's conclusion is noteworthy:

A familiar text can remain imaginatively and conceptually powerful long after its claims to truth are denied ... Thus, in a scripturally literate culture, even the antiscriptural is biblically troped and colored. Christians need not be entirely unhappy with the misuse of their book.

(Burnham 1989:39)

How does this influence work, how do 'texts influence human hearts and minds even when they are not believed?' Lindbeck answers:

Once they penetrate deeply into the psyche, especially the collective psyche, they cease to be primarily objects of study and rather come to supply the conceptual and imaginative vocabularies, as well as the grammar and syntax, with which we construe and construct reality. Thus, texts ... can become, as Calvin said of the Bible, the spectacles through which we see ...

(T)he Bible has in this respect been preeminent in traditionally Christian lands. Its lenses have functioned as the most powerful, penetrating, and comprehensive ones.

(Burnham 1989:39-40)

The most remarkable aspect of his analysis is perhaps the appreciation with which he regards such a 'cultural Christianity' and such a free, almost 'midrashic' way of reading and using the Bible:

So pervasive is this scriptural idiom that much of western literature consists of subtexts of the biblical text ... This telling of the stories which exhibit biblical meanings is a way of explicating or commenting on the Bible itself: it is what the Jewish rabbis call midrash. There is a sense in which most of western

literature is midrashic commentary ... (T)he basic sub-structure of the literary imagination of the West is biblical ...

Through most of Christian history, the Bible has been construed as a typologically unified narrative centered on Jesus Christ, in which all parts from Genesis to Revelation interact with all other parts. This interaction allows free play to imaginative intertextual and intratextual interpretations which are often not dissimilar to those of contemporary deconstructionists. Figuration and allegory are important, as well as midrash. Ordinary folk as well as preachers and theologians have engaged in the often game like activity of commenting on the biblical text by using it. In certain kinds of interpretation ... the populace has taken the leading role. Thus all of experience ... was absorbed into the scriptural framework.

(Burnham 1989:40-41)

He condenses this in the short formula that 'Christendom dwelt imaginatively in the biblical world' and comments:

(I)t is worth recalling that this cultural Christianity, this linguistic and imaginative influence of the Bible, is not religiously unimportant. It has often been a condition for the communal shaping of convictions and conduct.

(Burnham 1989:42)

In fact, the kind of (post-modern) reading and appropriating of the Bible for which he pleads, is exactly such a free and imaginative procedure, in distinction from the rational search for the 'meaning' of Scripture, so basic to Biblical scholarship of the last century. He finds 'the most impressive recent instance of combined imaginative and behavioural use of Scripture' in the traditions of black preaching, seeing the Bible as 'an inexhaustible source of good preaching material,' providing 'the basis for unlimited creativity in the telling of rich and interesting stories.' To him that 'sounds very much like a description of what the rabbis did, of early patristic exegesis, of how Luther spoke and wrote, and of much Puritan preaching.'

It reflects, says Lindbeck, 'the natural use of scripture when Christians have not been spoiled by misconceived theology or science.' Since the Reformation and especially during modernity 'the Bible became more and more exclusively an object of study with fixed and univocal meanings. It was no longer a language with many senses, a dwelling place of the imagination.' Pietists, legalists, social activists, rationalistic orthodox, fundamentalists and biblical critics all played their part so that the Bible was no longer used 'in endlessly varying ways to interpret the worlds in which the readers lived.'

Modernity has been deeply prejudiced against treating a classic as a language or lens with many meanings or uses with which to construe reality and view the world. Instead ... modernity viewed texts primarily as objects of study ... possessed of a univocal meaning, a single meaning ascertainable only by specialists, by historical critics for example.

(Burnham 1989:50)



As a result the historic cultural role of the Bible, argues Lindbeck, has weakened dramatically inside and outside the churches (in Western and especially North American society) in recent years. Biblical literacy and biblical imagination, which are not identical, since 'intimate knowledge of the text as object can be dissociated from its use as a language with whom to construe the universe,' have both been lost.

Language, culture, and imagination have ... been debiblicized at a remarkable rate.

(Burnham 1989:44)

This 'amnesia' has multiple consequences, *inter alia* that public discourse has been impoverished and that 'a single tongue, a common language ... in which to discuss the commonweal' is needed. 'Society as a whole, and to a large extent the church also, has become a communicative basket case. Genuine argument is impossible, and neither agreements nor disagreements can be probed at any depth. Manipulation of public opinion with the threat of coercion from the right and of repressive toleration from the left becomes stronger and stronger, and the still small voice of reasoned argument ... now has no common language in which to express itself.'

The rest of his discussion then deals with the church's present 'cultural mission' in the West, which he sees as relearning and speaking the biblical language. The intellectual climate is changing. Modernity is being replaced by post-modernity. The textualization of reality is accepted by more and more people, from diverse spheres. The new climate is 'congenial to the close reading of texts in order to see what the world looks like in and through them' (Burnham 1989:51).

Whether the churches are capable of seizing the opportunity is another question, says Lindbeck.

Relearning the language of scripture is difficult, and at present there are no signs that the churches can do it. Forgetting rather than relearning is still the major trend. Yet if the direction were reversed, the cultural consequences might be considerable.

(Burnham 1989:52)

In short, then, biblical literacy - in Lindbeck's terms - means that the Bible influences the imagination and the language of society, the way people see, their vision, their grasp of reality, of history, of totality, and the way people talk, their language, 'the house in which they learn to live.' It reminds one strongly of Calvin's use of the Bible as the glasses, the spectacles, through which believers learn to see, grasp and understand, as well as Barth's reference to the language of Zion or the language of Canaan which believers ought to learn in order to get into the 'biblical world.'

One can therefore popularize these views and say that the Bible will influence the ethos, the moral world, of a society to the extent that it teaches people to see and it teaches them to speak.

So, to rephrase the question in terms of this approach: How can the Bible influence the grammar, the language, the story, the culture, of a new South Africa? How can

the Bible influence people in a new South Africa in the ways they see and the ways they speak?

## 2.2 This calls for a second observation

Perhaps it may be instructive to reverse the question for a moment by asking how the Bible has helped people to see and to speak in past - and present South Africa.

When one does that several issues immediately become clear. Perhaps the most important fact is that there is not merely one moral world, one ethos, in South Africa. There has never been and there will not be. The imaginations and the languages of different groups of people in South Africa have been influenced by the Bible in diverse ways, and often with conflicting results. In a new South Africa it will be the same. There will be many groups, churches, denominations, movements, in which the Bible will play different roles in shaping their identities, their discourses, their visions, values and virtues.

Of course, the term 'a new South Africa' may imply that we are especially interested in society at large, in public life itself, in the socio-political and economic sphere, in the public ethos or moral world, in the moral vision and the moral grammar of the powerful people and groups in a new South Africa, in the role of the Bible in the rhetoric shaping politics and economy, the rhetoric forming and transforming South Africa itself, the role of the Bible in the corridors of power, determining the South African culture and ethos at large.

## 2.3 A third aspect

A third important aspect of this question then comes to the fore. How is the influence of the Bible on the way 'the public' see and talk established? Which factors determine the public role and influence of the Bible? Several remarks can be made.

Firstly, it is not so obvious to all people, including all Christians, that the Bible should indeed play a direct role in shaping public imagination and language. In fact, according to many Christian believers and theologians there are serious difficulties attached to such an assumption.

According to many believers the Bible is the book of the Christian church, the stories of the Bible are the stories of the Christian church and tradition; the community shaped by the narrative, by the message, of the Bible can only be the Christian community, the church. The character and identity of people formed by the Bible can only be the character and identity of followers of Jesus Christ. The vision, the values and the virtues formed by the Bible can only be shared by people committed to its message.

According to them, the influence of the Bible in the shaping of the public ethos can therefore only be indirect, through the participation of Christians, people themselves shaped by the biblical imagination and language, in public life and in socio-political, economic and cultural affairs.

Secondly, the public influence of the Bible in any society is obviously determined by a variety of factors, including the nature and influence of the church or churches, the function of religion and specifically the Christian religion in society, especially in

schools, but also in the academy, the nature of the political system, the dominant world view, the way the public media treat the Bible, and many others.

Thirdly, since all these factors are variables that can differ from one society to another, it speaks for itself that the role and importance of the Bible will also change with changing socio-historical circumstances. In Berger's terminology, the influence of any cultural factor, including the Bible, will vary in accordance with the 'plausibility structures' that are operative in the particular society at the specific point in time.

Taken together, these remarks pinpoint the question somewhat further. In order to reflect on the possible influence of the Bible on the ethos of a particular society, like a new South Africa, one will have to consider the plausibility structures operative in the particular society, the powerful institutions, the factors really determining the public language and imagination, in order to see whether the Bible will actually play a role within those institutions and structures.

In other words: What could be the role of the Bible in influencing the important players and institutions, determining the public imagination and language of a new South Africa?

### **3. What is the 'Bible'?**

This leads us to a third methodological difficulty, namely the question: What do we mean by 'the Bible'?

#### **3.1 A look at past and present S A**

Again, a close look at past and present South Africa will demonstrate the problem. Has 'the Bible' played a formative role in shaping the grammar, the language, of the public ethos in *apartheid*-South Africa, or not?

Some would say: Yes; and others would say: No, not at all. Some would say: Yes, and it led to oppression and injustice, since the Bible was used to legitimate racism and exploitation. Others would say: No, that only demonstrates that the Bible as God's Word of hope, justice, liberation and peace played no formative role at all, except in the struggle against the oppressive and racist public ethos.

The difference of opinion is caused by our different ways of seeing 'the Bible.' Recently, many systematic theologians and ethicists have showed that communities and traditions of interpretation construe unity within the diversity of the Bible and call their construct 'the Bible.' When people therefore say 'the Bible says this' or 'the biblical message is' or 'Scripture teaches' or this or that is 'against Scripture' they are all referring to the way their own tradition and community constructs Scripture, organizes it into a message, into a unity, a *Gestalt* (Smit 1991).

#### **3.2 'A site for struggle'**

It is for this reason that the Bible has become 'a site of struggle' in South Africa. In reality, the struggle is fought over the power, the authority, to be able to determine

the contents and the message of 'the Bible.' The struggle has more to do with the question to whom the power and authority belongs to construct the biblical message than with the message itself.

In this sense the struggle is not a new one either. In fact, this same struggle has continued through the history of the Christian church from the days of the Early Church, albeit in many different forms and configurations.

The struggle over the Bible is therefore an ideological struggle. In its classical definition, ideology means that 'ideas are used as weapons in a social struggle.' In recent years the insight has grown that ideas do not exist by themselves, but that they live in language. Some of the influential interpreters of ideologies have therefore started to concentrate on 'the ideological use of language,' i.e. the use of language as a weapon in a social struggle.

The struggle over 'the Bible' is an ideological struggle in this sense: groups of people want to use 'the Bible,' i.e. their Bible, as a weapon in a social struggle, in order to empower their own ethos publicly, to undergird their public language and imagination with divine authority. In the process 'the Bible' thus constructed serves purposes of legitimation (i.e. using the people's own ultimate values to promote one's own interests as legitimate), of dissimulation (i.e. using expressions that cover up what is actually happening) and of reification (i.e. using symbols to clothe actions or structures with transcendent or divine sanction and authority, or simply pretending that they cannot be changed) (Thompson 1984:132).

This means that our question is again modified: 'Which roles could be played by whose Bibles in shaping the public moral world, in influencing the socially powerful people and institutions in a new South Africa?'

Or, phrased differently, to emphasize the all-important role of the communities appropriating the Bible in diverse ways, and therefore the 'material base of the reading process': 'Will there be communities, institutions, establishments, reading and using the Bible to inform their own ethos, that will be powerful enough to influence the public ethos in a new South Africa?'

### 3.3 A formative role

The Bible could only play a formative role in the moral world of a new South Africa if the answer to this question is affirmative. And if the answer is affirmative, the next questions are obvious: which institutions are these, what do their respective 'Bibles' say, and how influential will they really be in the shaping of the grammar of the South African ethos?

Theoretically, one can conceive of a variety of possible institutions that could play such a role: biblical scholarship in the academy; biblical and religious education in the schools; Christian families; the Christian church or churches; Christian political parties; religious discourse in the public media, newspapers, broadcasting; religious publishing and literature; public groups or movements using biblical rhetoric, imagery, symbols, values.

It is impossible to speculate on the role of these institutions in a new South Africa. As far as biblical scholarship is concerned, it may be a sobering thought to remember that it has not been very influential in the ethos of past and present South Africa either. In fact, at least as far as South African New Testament scholarship is concerned, one may generalize and say that its own dominant ethos has been, for many years, the scientific ethos of detached inquiry, and that it has deliberately stayed clear from the corridors of power in both church and society, thereby influencing ecclesial and public ethos only in the negative way that it did not really contribute much (Smit 1990a and 1990b).

To summarise: Considering three methodological difficulties implicit in the topic has helped us to formulate the issues at stake more precisely. For the Bible to play a formative role in the public moral world of a new South Africa some of the socially powerful institutions will have to read and appropriate the Bible, their Bibles, in such a way that it influences their own ethos, language and imagination.

#### **4. A moral perspective**

Let us conclude by adding a moral question. Why is this topic important? For whom is it important? What are the reasons for our interest in this theme?

It is obvious that we suspect that the role and the importance of the Bible will also change with the changing socio-historical circumstances on the way to a new South Africa. The plausibility structures within the public discourse of a new South Africa will be different. There will be new authoritative people, new symbols, new values and visions, new collective life-stories and myths, in short, the moral world will have a new logic and a new grammar. Realizing that, people want to know what the role and influence of the Bible will be in this transformed ethos. But why?

Several possibilities exist.

##### **4.1**

It may simply be that people involved in teaching Biblical Studies are interested in the question because their own careers, their own personal futures, are closely tied up with the Bible and its public importance. The question then almost becomes: Will the Bible (and therefore us) still have a public role to play in a new South Africa?

It is difficult to speculate on this, but in Namibia, which is in many ways similar to South Africa in this regard, the Draft Proposal of SWAPO on Education Reform and Renewal ('The National Integrated Education System for Emergent Namibia') makes interesting reading. In the broad outline for the content of future education, for example, Religious and Moral Education is included as a subject from pre-school level (as 'Social Skills,' namely 'Living Together'), through pre-grade to grade VI and again from grade VII to grade VIII. Religious and Moral Education, within such a framework, obviously has to serve the function of helping to form a public ethos and it is to be expected that the Bible will occupy an important role in Religious and Moral Education in a society constituted like Namibia.

## 4.2

It may also be that some people hope that the Bible will play an important role in the ethos of a new South Africa because they accept that it will be 'their' Bible and that its influence will guarantee them influence and power as well. It has been a strong tendency in the history of the Christian church to strive for social power and the ability to influence the public ethos and culture. Instead of accepting 'a naked public square' they often long to transform and influence culture, the public square, e.g. 'until justice and peace embrace' (Neuhaus 1984; Wolterstorff 1983).

Such a longing is typical of many Christians traditions and communities - in the sense of Richard Niebuhr's well-known fifth type of 'Christ and culture' (Smit 1990c) - but it is not without its difficulties and ambiguities.

It may, in fact, simply cover a selfish longing for social power and be a strategy in an ideological struggle. The fact that the people involved in attempts like these often do not realize their own selfish and ideological purposes and are unconscious of the fact that they are not really fighting for the Bible but for themselves and their own interests simply makes it more ideological in the classical sense of a false class consciousness. Hidden interests and not the proclaimed good intentions have only too often been the driving force behind the attempts of believing communities to influence public ethos in history.

Given the history of past and present South Africa it is not surprising that the people who used the Bible so blatantly to legitimate the *apartheid*-ethos for some time claim that they now want nothing to do with the Bible influencing socio-political affairs, since the Bible can only change 'attitudes.' What is surprising is their recent remarkable turnabout to attempt anew to prescribe 'Christian principles' for a constitution for a new South Africa and their claim that, should other Christian churches not join them, they will (again) 'go it alone.' Underlying such claims are not merely remarkable assumptions concerning the Bible and public ethos but also concerning their own credibility and legitimacy.

It may, however, also be that people sincerely hope that the Bible will play an important role in forming the ethos of a new South Africa, not out of own interest, but because they truly consider the message of the Bible as they have come to appropriate it in their own tradition and community of interpretation as good, as wholesome, as liberating, as humanizing, as good news, for society.

Of course, they may still differ as to what this good news is. Some may believe that the Bible can provide a 'common language' for a new South African society (Jüngel 1988), common symbols (Berger 1988), common values (Lategan et al 1987), a common myth or a common story (see Adonis & Smit 1989; Smit 1989) thus facilitating a process of nation-building; some may believe that the Bible will defend human rights, dignity and worth; some may believe that the Bible will lead to order and stability; some may believe that the Bible will help people to seek justice and true peace. However they conceive the biblical message, they somehow believe that its vision, its values, its virtues, its imagination, its dream, its language will be beneficial to a new South Africa.

### 4.3

It may, of course, also be that some people are asking the question out of fear that the Bible will indeed be influential in a new South Africa in the light of the oppressive and violent history of its usage, in the history of Christianity but also in South Africa itself.

It is not necessary to document this ambiguous and often terrifying history here. 'Truth and its victims' is the title of a recent edition of *Concilium* retelling the stories of some of these dark episodes in the history of Christianity.

It goes without saying that in the history of Christianity the short episode of *apartheid* and the theology that legitimated it will also be remembered as one of these dark, tragic moments.

For many South Africans who suffered and still suffer and will suffer for years to come from the effects of *apartheid* it may not be easy to forget the role which 'the Bible' was made to play in the formation, legitimation, entrenchment and application of the *apartheid*-ethos.

In the Belhar Confession the Dutch Reformed Mission Church confesses:

We believe ... that the credibility of (the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ) is seriously affected and its beneficial work obstructed when it is proclaimed in a land which professes to be Christian, but in which the enforced separation of people on a racial basis promotes and perpetuates alienation, hatred, and enmity;

that any teaching which attempts to legitimate such forced separation by appeal to the gospel and is not prepared to venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation, but rather, out of prejudice, fear, selfishness, and unbelief, denies in advance the reconciling power of the gospel, must be considered ideology and false doctrine.

Precisely since so many people have suffered on account of these appeals to the Gospel, the message itself has lost its credibility in the eyes of many, and in a new South Africa, this will obviously play an important role in the formation of new South Africa and its ethos, an ethos which will be 'new' exactly because it will be free from the - biblically legitimated - *apartheid*-ethos.

For anyone interested to serve the role of the Bible in the ethos of a new South Africa there will be no easy way escaping this issue.

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