WHICH STORY DO WE FOLLOW?
'CULTURE WARS' AND THE ISSUE OF PUBLIC MORALITY ON CANAAN'S SIDE OF THE JORDAN

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Abstract

In apartheid South Africa the issues of morality were quite clear and specific. In spite of the various attempts at justification or obfuscation it was clear that apartheid was wrong and the struggle for democracy was right. Other issues that might have come to the fore in a normal society were eclipsed by the apartheid story. In post-Apartheid, liberated, South Africa, the issues are not so clear. A multiplicity of stories from various segments of the society compete for the moral high ground. This has produced what JD Hunter called "culture wars" (1991) – that is, different groups expressing different sets of values that find their legitimating moral base in different meta-narratives. While Hunter describes only two for the American situation at least seven are discernible in contemporary South Africa. From myths that support the free market to those that sidestep the AIDS pandemic to those surrounding burgeoning witchcraft practices, the moral terrain is being contested by various groupings in the new society. What are the indications of the presence of these myths in the society? How are they being used to construct moral understandings of the society? Which worldviews are they assuming? What sorts of values are emanating from them? What impact are they having on our society?

South Africa, almost overnight, has become a liberal society. "*Izangoma* open conferences for intellectuals, praise singers enter parliament, whites go to soccer matches, blacks to rugby matches, gays parade in the streets, and born again Christians publicly protest at all this licentiousness" (Balcomb 1995:18). In the light of its history this is indeed an extraordinary phenomenon, and unique in Africa. So what has happened that we have become so brazenly eclectic with our customs and morals? Apartheid used to divide us, but is there anything that now unites us, or does our very pluralism signify more sinister divisions and centrifugal tendencies that will yet tear us apart?

In his book *Culture Wars – the Struggle to Define America, making sense of the battles over the family, art, education, law and politics*, James Davison Hunter (1991) attempts to demonstrate two profoundly different and opposing sets of moral understandings that define American culture. One he describes as the impulse of orthodoxy and the other as the impulse of progressivism. The values that each espouse are quite different to the other. The orthodox define morality as adherence to the moral law, the progressives as commitment to social justice; the orthodox are pro-family, pro-market and pro-life; the progressives are pro-society, pro-equity, and pro-choice; and so on. The principles and ideals that mark these competing systems each have a sense of ultimacy about them. They create worldviews, define values, transcend religious barriers and constitute political identities. According to Hunter these systems are at war with each other in the sense that they are each struggling to control the American soul.

In this paper I would like very briefly to attempt a similar analysis of post-apartheid South African society. I would like to ask questions such as: What are the different understandings of morality amongst the various groupings in South Africa? How should they be characterized? What are the narratives, myths, and traditions, in which they are embedded? In what ways do they influence public behaviour? Where do they encounter each other? How are they to be understood theologically and in terms of moral theory?

Let me begin my analysis by referring to several stories that have appeared in the media recently:

1. A group of several hundred people gather for an open air meeting expressing solidarity with Israel in the present conflict in the Middle East. It appears to consist only of Christians and Jews and is overwhelmingly white. There is a small group of blacks (probably countable on two hands) present and the main speakers are a leading (progressive) Jewish rabbi and the leader of the African Christian Democratic Party, who is also a leader of a charismatic church. They are both at pains to point out that "Not all blacks are pro-Palestine".

2. Two die-hard free marketeers appear on the television show "The Big Question" where the question under discussion is "Are the rich obliged to share their money with the poor?" They argue that it is immoral to expect the rich to share with the poor because this would impinge on their freedom to choose whether to do so or not. In other words their freedom of choice was a sacrosanct right that transcended all obligations. Two others attempt to rebut this argument by appealing to an ethic of sharing or "ubuntu". When a vote was taken amongst the studio and viewer audiences the overwhelming majority voted in favour of the free marketeers.

3. Another TV programme organized and run by HIV-positive people and designed to support and advise HIV-positive people on issues of lifestyle rejects the A and B sections of the government's "ABC" campaign (that is abstention, be faithful, use a condom) as being "unrealistic".

4. A group of students go on the rampage, destroying millions of rands worth of property because they were only given R300 000 for their freshers' party. At exactly the same time several hundred students stage a march through central Johannesburg, also in which property was ransacked, protesting lockout practices at their schools

5. A university department in the process of transformation experiences profound tension amongst its staff around the issues of the affirmative action policy, with divisions occurring mainly along racial lines.

6. A high profile member of the ANC who also happens to have been a vociferous member of the AIDS dissident group dies of what is obviously an AIDS related disease. A newspaper runs a story on him indicating various skeletons in the cupboard and is immediately scolded and threatened.

7. Detectives from Scotland Yard come to South Africa to follow up their investigations of the first *muthi* murder that has taken place in England.

Through these stories I will attempt to identify how it is that the people concerned are constructing their moral understandings of society, what myths or worldviews they are drawing on to do this, what sorts of values seem to accompany these myths, and what impact they may be having on society as a whole.

The first story indicates the abiding presence of the myth of Israel as the chosen people of God, believed in by millions of Christians and Jews throughout the world. To mess with the Jewish people is to mess with God. To question their actions is to be anti-Semitic. The

significance of the myth is not so much in the fact that it provides ideological justification for gross violation of human rights in Palestine but that it is usually accompanied by a basket of conservative values and beliefs. And despite the pro-Palestinian stance of the government it is apparent that there are many in South African society who adhere to this different set of values. With the adoption of the new constitution and the progressive liberalization of South African society, these more conservative values have newfound significance in contemporary South Africa. They are pro-life, pro-capital punishment, pro-censureship and anti-gay. And they have a rapidly expanding political party that promises to promote their values in Parliament. The extent to which these values are gaining ground can be seen in the clear shift to the right made by government concerning moral values. Unwilling to be seen as soft on crime, immorality, and family values the ruling party has very recently mooted the possibility of closing nightclubs after 02:00 "so that fathers can get back to their families" and has publicly come out in support of the conservative Christian organization "Focus on the Family".

The second story highlights the profound belief by many in our society in the myth of the autonomy of the individual and freedom of choice. One of the essential pillars of the European Enlightenment, this myth has become the central motif in Western value setting. The extent to which it has displaced completely different understandings of personhood in Africa is debatable. However one cannot doubt that it constitutes the basis of our notion of human rights in post-apartheid South Africa. That it can be used in this way – that is to valorize choice in such a way that it precedes any other responsibility – is an interesting development. The expectation directed toward those who have to share with those who do not have becomes immoral because it transgresses the holy law of freedom of choice. What this says about the virtue of charity would make an interesting debate. What it potentially says about the moral state of the average free marketeer is serious.

The third and fourth stories about rejection of sexual restraint and destruction of property indicate the myth of entitlement. The myth probably finds its origins in a (mis)interpretation of the culture of human rights. It is sad, of course, that the lofty ideals enshrined in such documents as the Freedom Charter and the South African Constitution can be translated into demands of free sex and free booze. How widespread these sentiments are, and the extent to which they have displaced the virtue of discipline that used to characterize the struggle for justice amongst the youth, is difficult to say. But what appears to most of us as a fairly incomprehensible kind of death wish surely does not appear to them that way. On closer inspection, in fact, one might find that the only difference between the self-interest of the gentlemen in the previous story, that is the free marketeers, and that of the students in this story is the means available to indulge those interests. There is arguably little moral difference between believing that it is your absolute right to have sex and to party whenever you like without restraint and believing it is your absolute right to choose not to give away your money. The difference lies more in the ability or otherwise to consummate that desire. In such circumstances it is the people without power that have to resort to violence, not the people with power.

The fifth story is the story of the dilemma that faces the entire commercial and educational sectors of our society. It is the story of how to transform without destroying. The difference between the set of values held by emerging young black scholars who are in the minority in institutions of higher learning and their white counterparts who dominate these institutions is bound to be significant. The dynamics of transformation for the latter will be expressed in values such as competency, continuity, and stability, and for the former in terms of equity, power and uniformity. The potential for each side simply to be pronouncing to one another their understanding of the issues and not engaging in meaningful

dialogue is great indeed. In Mannheim's terms the myths of one are the myths of utopia and the myths of the other are the myths of ideology. In his seminal *Ideology and Utopia* Mannheim (1936:36) argues "… that ruling groups can in their thinking become so intensely interest-bound to a situation that they are simply no longer able to see certain facts which would undermine their sense of domination." This kind of thinking he calls ideological. Conversely "... *utopian* thinking reflects the opposite discovery of the political struggle, namely that certain oppressed groups are intellectually so strongly interested in the destruction or transformation of a given condition of society that they unwittingly see only those elements in the situation that tend to negate it" (1936:36).

Until the private sector, by which I also mean the tertiary education sector, is transformed it is likely that these differences will continue and Mannheim's analysis will remain pertinent.

The sixth story is about the capacity for denial that exists in some of our leading public figures. Denial is a common and well-documented condition that obtains in various circumstances that may or may not indicate psychological pathology. However in the case of the support given to the AIDS dissidents by our President and other leading figures there is clearly another force at work. The controversial *Castro Hlongwane* document gives us the clearest indication yet as to the source of this denial. This document is subtitled *HIV/AIDS and the Struggle for the Humanisation of the African* and begins with a reference to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the book that symbolizes for many Africans the repugnance that Europeans have had for them ever since their first encounter. The following quotation is especially revealing:

(This document) accepts that the HIV/AIDS thesis as it has affected and affects Africans and black people in general, is … informed by deeply entrenched and centuries-old white racist beliefs and concepts about Africans and black people. At the same time as this thesis is based on these racist beliefs and concepts, it makes a powerful contribution to the further entrenchment and popularization of racism. It further recognizes the reality that, driven by fear of their destruction as a people because of an allegedly unstoppable plague, Africans and black people themselves have been persuaded to join and support a campaign whose result is further to entrench their dehumanization (www.mg.co.za.mokabadoc p. 5).

This entire document is written in terms of an almost apocalyptic struggle against those with a "vested interest in the perpetuation and entrenchment of the currently dominant HIV/AIDS propositions" and thus to destroy the African people.

So in which myth does the public denial of AIDS reside? Clearly in the myth of the eternal struggle against racism which, in turn, is embedded in the Western constructed myth of the African savage. This has not been helped by the so-called shame culture that characterizes Africa. Public denial of *hamartia* happens to be more common in cultures that tend to sacralize the public sphere than in cultures that have thoroughly desacralized the public sphere. Very few societies in Africa have desacralized their cultures to the extent that the secular West has gone. In this regard South Africa has probably gone the furthest.

The last story indicates the presence of a worldview in South Africa that has withstood the advances of modernity, continues to influence the lives of millions of people and which we ignore at our peril. Primal understandings of reality in which people live in a vulnerable and interconnected relationship with all other beings in the universe through vital participation, was a universal phenomenon before modernity. While it has been destroyed in other parts of the world, in Africa it has not only survived but continues to flourish. This was discovered by Adam Ashforth, an anthropologist, who lived for some years in Soweto before and after April 1994. He documented his experience in a book entitled *Madumo – a*

man bewitched (2000) in which he moots the idea that there is more "witchcraft" activity after the demise of apartheid than there was before, arguing that the myth that apartheid was the cause of every evil in the lives of black South Africans has had, with its demise, to be replaced by more traditional myths of the presence of evil spirits. The ancestors have been re-summoned, as it were, to give new explanations of the situation. Ashforth's attempts to understand and identify with his friend Madumo's interpretation of what is happening to him ends in frustration and he describes the difference between his and Madumo's understanding of reality as "radically and irreducibly different"(2000:245). Ashforth, a Canadian citizen, clearly went a lot further than most white South Africans in trying to understand the worldview of many of their black compatriots. But the divide remains and takes the notion of "culture wars" way beyond anything possible in the West.

How are we to account for the presence of such a diversity of stories, variety of worldviews, and plurality of moral systems in post apartheid South Africa? Is there a danger of this variety of moralities undermining the social contract of the new South Africa? Is there room for consensus, or possibility for commensurability?

In his book *After Virtue* McIntyre (1985) bewails the demise of virtue in modern society and offers his explanation and remedy. His thesis is simple. Firstly all virtues have their origins in ancient narratives and traditions; secondly modernity has destroyed these narratives; thirdly what we are left with are mere "simulacra" or remnants of virtues that have lost their significance because of the destruction of the narratives in which they were embedded. The loss of these traditions results in the mere assertion of moral judgments without meaning – a condition that he calls "emotivism". Fourthly, new traditions, new stories, with clear beginnings and clear endings have to be constructed to reconstruct new notions of good.

Is the picture that I have painted of South African reminiscent of such an analysis? In other words: is our society a hotchpotch of competing value systems derived from fragments of stories that have become disembedded from their histories and robbed of all meaning? And, as a result, are we indulging in emotivism – asserting what we deem to be moral without being able to explain why? Ten years ago none of the stories told above, save perhaps for the last one, could have been told. Ten years ago the state was overwhelmingly pro-Israel and it was inconceivable that there would be a reactionist meeting of a small white pro-Israel group of Christians under a black majority government that was pro-Palestine. Ten years ago the free marketeers were the liberals in the DP who wanted the demise of apartheid but were scared to death of the ANC. Now they are right wing members of the DA. Ten years ago students were rioting for reasons somewhat different to the demands for free sex and free booze. They were involved in the revolutionary struggle against apartheid and were getting sjambokked, or, if they weren't so lucky, were being put in jail and tortured. Ten years ago the universities were black or white and debates around affirmative action and transformation were inconceivable. Ten years ago AIDS was a disease contracted by gays in San Francisco, not by heterosexual Members of Parliament. Ten years ago the ANC was a revolutionary movement talking about a socialist state when they took over, not a ruling party needing to conform to the demands of the global market.

So what has changed that the telling of the above stories has become possible? What has happened is that in the last ten years as a nation we have begun to fulfil what we had begun to construct for ourselves decades ago – a new myth, a new meta-narrative, that is all-embracing and that has a promise of both a beginning and an end – the myth of democracy. The story of South African democracy began with the very earliest struggles against

oppression. It has its history, its highlights, and its hero's. Apartheid was not the only manifestation of this oppression. The struggle of the Xhosa, Zulu, and Boer against the British were also part of the story. But with the final removal of apartheid and the establishment of a new constitution there was inaugurated an era of freedom unprecedented in South Africa's history. And under the canopy of this freedom the atmosphere of tolerance has allowed all the other stories that have become part of our history to be told.

Accompanying these stories, I have attempted to argue, is a variety of ways in which the protagonists understand morality. These understandings have been shaped by the histories peculiar to each one. Faced now with such a pluralism, the topic of theology and public morality may be problematized by asking the questions "Whose theology? Which morality?" This raises the question of whether there should be limits to pluralism and if so what justifications can be given to impose such limits. The question that Hunter asks of American society must be asked of our own, namely "Can a liberal democracy not just remain superficially functional but healthy and robust without an elementary and somewhat universal agreement in the public realm about the criteria distinguishing the socially good from the socially destructive or about the rules of reason for making equitable public policy?" (1991:314). The answer is obviously "No". But universal agreement should not imply universal criteria. In a society such as South Africa's which, in spite of the changes that were brought about since April 1994, continues to be made up of people living in different worlds, it is impossible to apply the same criteria to everyone because the exigentcies of each world differ. Simplistically put there are at least four different kinds of people in post-apartheid society. There are those whose world has changed quickly, those whose world is changing slowly, those whose world has hardly changed at all by virtue of the fact that their privileged position has more or less remained intact and those whose world has hardly changed at all by virtue of the fact that their underprivileged situation has hardly changed at all. The person who has just come out of a revolutionary struggle into a position of power and affluence surely has a different set of problems and temptations than the person who has just been given a whole new set of opportunities that he or she can make use of but who cannot expect to benefit from in the short term. Similarly this person has a different set of problems and temptations to the person who sees others benefiting from the new democracy but who sees no way out of his or her situation of poverty except through illicit means. And the circumstances of all three of the above differ, in turn, from the person who has not known anything but privilege and opportunity. Stepping straight into the shoes of the erstwhile rulers of the promised land is one thing, getting the opportunity to start in it from scratch is another. Helplessly watching people have a good time in the promised land while you are still in the wilderness is yet another. And having occupied Canaan for several hundred years making space for new arrivals coming in from the wilderness is yet another.

Insofar as all these groupings are concerned, moral expectations should be congruent with situational exigencies. Our expectations of the first category, that is those who have just stepped into power, must surely be those of anybody in power – that is of clean, competent, and responsible government. The exigencies of the new government's situation are to do with the fact that they are considered by a large section of the population still to be a revolutionary movement who should be delivering on their promises of the good life. The chances, I venture to submit, of their original constituency interpreting these virtues differently to the rest of us are surely substantial. In this case "the rest of us" are probably the "haves" from whom the government needs to take things so that "they" – the "have nots" can have the good life as well.

Our expectations of the second category, that is, those who have been given equal opportunity for advancement, but only since the demise of apartheid, may be the same as

those expected of anyone else in society – that is honesty, patience, and hard work. The exigencies of their new situation is that they have to compete with those of us who have had these opportunities for several hundred years and continue to occupy all the key positions in society. Under such circumstances "delayed gratification", a condition, which, according to Max Weber, was essential to the success of the European capitalist project, is a tall order. Remember, the Protestant work ethic took generations to bed down into the psyche of European capitalism. Democratic capitalism has been going in South Africa for about eight years.

And what of our expectations of the third category, that is the indigent poor. What virtues can we expect indeed from someone who has no money, is unemployed, and feels trapped in an endless cycle of poverty? Is it patience? Hope? Fortitude? Longsuffering? Perhaps, as our newest hero wizkid Mark lets-go-for-a-$20million-jol-in-space Shuttle-worth would have us believe, they can even dream dreams? Despite the obvious sarcasm, the extraordinary thing is that the poor are probably capable of all of these virtues. But I suggest that the immorality would lie with us if our expectations are that they should have them.

Which brings us to our expectations of the fourth group – those who have had for gene-rations all the things that everyone else now wants. I have not said "taken by conquest" the things that everyone else now wants, though history points in this direction. There have been those indeed who have deemed it immoral simply to be in such a situation and have left for home shores, even though "home shores" means those places their ancestors left several generations ago. Most, of course, leave for more selfish reasons altogether. The problem with such a course of action is that one takes with one the spoils of one's occu-pation – whether they be skills or goods. In spite of this, it is my conviction that it is still best for those who are unable to live comfortably (and by that I think I mean "able to make space for newcomers") with the new dispensation that they should indeed leave. For those who do stay what virtues can we expect? Perhaps at the bottom end of scale we could expect good will – that is a desire to "make it work". At the top end of the scale, assuming that the Joe Slovo's and Beyers Naude's of this world are actually off the scale, we can expect a measure of recognition of one's privilege, dare we say of one's own culpability, and to take the next step of doing something about this. I understand all of the above as ha-ving something to do with the Christian gospel – that is repentance, forgiveness, salvation, and so on and so forth.

I have in these reflections attempted to problematize the issue of public morality. What I have not done is deal with the issue of theology. Suffice it to pose three questions and make one recommendation. The questions are: To what extent has liberation theology, by which I include black and feminist theology, succeeded or failed in its task of being relevant to the poor and oppressed in South Africa? To what extent has there been a theological shift over the past ten years from the impulse of progressivism to the impulse of orthodoxy? To what extent are we dealing, in our departments and schools of theology, with the issues sur-rounding plurality in a post-apartheid society? The recommendation is that the most appropriate theological method to use in such a post-apartheid pluralist society, as I have argued elsewhere (Balcomb 1998), would be found in the narrative school.

I wish to close with a description of an incident that I witnessed recently. An incident that for me has become something of a moral vision. Just down the road from the Pieter-aritzburg campus of the University of Natal, there used to be a well-known middle aged white male tramp begging outside a shopping centre. He was obviously an alcoholic and his condition used to vary with his level of intake, but on the whole he was the picture of the

down and out. Besides the odd Christian praying for him he was largely ignored by passing pedestrians. One day I saw a black woman, younger than he and obviously working class poor, in the crouched position of respect, trying to get lower than he was slouching on the pavement, giving him some money, with the traditional two-handed mode of giving to someone of higher status than oneself. What value system, one must ask, was informing that woman, that she makes such a gesture that contradicts the entire value system of a Western consumerist society. Here is a black working class female, probably at the bottom of the social hierarchy, giving respectfully to a white male, symbol of her oppressor, in an attitude of profound and undeserved respect? The question must be asked: "Why did she do this?" Perhaps if we can answer this question we would be approaching an ethic that would be informing the kind of public morality that is needed in our society.

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