

# CHALLENGES TO CHRISTIAN ETHICS IN THE PRESENT SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIETY

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## Abstract

*Political, economic and social factors can significantly influence Christian Ethics. This is nowhere more clearly illustrated than in the case of South Africa. In the article the influence apartheid and the resistance against apartheid had on Christian Ethics in South Africa is illustrated. The significance of the comprehensive transformation of the South African society since 1994 for Christian Ethics is also analysed. An attempt is made to define some of the challenges to Christian Ethics that the transformation poses.*

## 1. Introduction

The significant influence of political, economic and social factors on Christian Ethics is, perhaps, nowhere more clearly illustrated than in the case of South Africa. For more than four decades since 1948 the South African society was drastically restructured on the basis of the apartheid policy. Since the advent of the nineties a drastic transformation of the South African society into a democratic and non-racial society has been taking place. Both these processes did not leave the study of Christian Ethics in South Africa untouched.

It is the purpose of this article to illustrate the influence of apartheid, as well as the present transformation of the South African society on Christian Ethics in this society. The challenges that the present South African society poses to Christian Ethics are also defined.

## 2. Characteristics of Christian Ethics in the apartheid era

### 2.1 Relevant features of the South African society in the apartheid era

Perhaps the most outstanding feature of the apartheid policy was that it strived by statutory means to bring about maximum separation between the people of South Africa on racial grounds (viz Groenewald 1986:18; Wiechers 1986:10). Apartheid did not introduce laws based on race to the South African society. The policy of racial segregation had been part and parcel of the South African society long before the implementation of the apartheid policy. The so-called 'Native Land Acts' of 1913 and 1936 that restricted the right of black people to land ownership to less than 14% of the South African territory are but two examples of such racially based laws in the pre-apartheid era (Groenewald 1986:20). The policy of apartheid, however, strived to attain a degree of racial separation in the South African society that was far more drastic and comprehensive. Laws were introduced that classified all South Africans according to race and enforced racial separation in the social, political and economic spheres of life.

The primary aim with the implementation of apartheid was to maintain and enhance the political and economic domination of the White minority in South Africa. As a result most of the apartheid laws were highly discriminatory against Black, Coloured and Asian people. Apartheid increased the already marked inequality in political and economic power between the White and other populations in South Africa. It also strengthened the dominance of the Western culture and world view and contributed to the marginalisation of other cultures and world views.

The resistance that apartheid elicited was met by increasingly repressive measures. To

counter the security measures of the Nationalist government the liberation movements since the sixties resorted to violent resistance. The violent resistance initially did not have a significant impact on the lives of ordinary South Africans. As the liberation movements gained support in and outside South Africa, however, the lives of ordinary South Africans were increasingly disrupted by a struggle that was fought on many fronts, including the economic front, and in which both non-violent and violent methods were used. An essential part of this low-keyed civil war was the ideological strategies that were employed by both sides to win the hearts and minds of the people of South Africa (De Villiers 1989:259; Nürnberger 1988:167-183).

## 2.2 The effect on Christian Ethics

### ● *The predominance of the 'prophetic' and 'narrative' modes of moral discourse*

The American ethicist James M Gustafson has made a distinction between four varieties or modes of moral discourse which is very relevant in describing Christian Ethics in the South African situation (Gustafson 1988a; Gustafson 1988b). The first, the 'prophetic' mode, has two main features. It takes, on the one hand, the form of moral or religious accusations. A particular root cause of the evil in society is usually identified and strongly condemned in emotive language. On the other hand, a utopian vision of the ideal society is given and people are encouraged to contribute to the realisation of this ideal. The second, the 'narrative' mode, refers to the use of narratives to shape the religious and moral identity of a community, or to fulfil a prophetic or educational function. The third, the 'ethical' mode, compounds the use of philosophical modi of argumentation and analysis. It is typified by 'more precise use of concepts..., more careful distinctions between concepts and between the classes of moral issues addressed; and stronger logical arguments in support of moral prescriptions or moral condemnations' (Gustafson 1988b:33). The fourth, the 'policy' mode, is used by people in positions of power who have to take policy decisions and are accountable for these decisions in particular historical circumstances.

To restrict a discussion of Christian Ethics in the apartheid era to the contribution of those who made use of Gustafson's 'ethical' mode, would present a distorted picture. In fact, the bulk of contributions made in the field of Christian Ethics from 1948 to 1990 were of a 'prophetic' or 'narrative' nature. There were of course publications that can be classified as 'ethical' in the more scientific sense of the word. They were, however, relatively few. The reason for the predominance of the 'prophetic' and 'narrative' modes of moral discourse is that theologians and church leaders were from the beginning drawn into the fierce debate on the apartheid policy. They had to take a stand: initially on the theological and moral legitimacy of the apartheid policy, eventually also on the theological and moral legitimacy of the armed struggle of the liberation movements against the Nationalist government. As the struggle intensified, the confrontational and emotional nature of the Christian ethical debate on apartheid and the armed struggle also increased.

The majority of contributions in the 'prophetic' mode in the apartheid era were made by opponents of apartheid and proponents of the struggle against apartheid. The most typical and also most well-known example is undoubtedly the *Kairos Document* (1985). This document exhibits all the typical features of the 'prophecy' mode: a sense of urgency (the *kairos* has arrived!); an accusatory style (church theology and state theology should be condemned, because they are both unfaithful to the gospel); the root of sin is found in the repressive system and not in particular factors; the explicit demonising of the enemy; emotional, even dramatic language.

As the political and armed struggle intensified theologians and clerics who supported the

Nationalist government also increasingly made use of the 'prophetic' mode of moral discourse. Reflecting the 'total onslaught' rhetoric of the government chaplains of the defence force and religious organisations such as the 'Gospel Defence League' and 'Frontline Fellowship' branded Communism in their publications as Satan's accomplice and maintained that this was the major cause of unrest in South Africa (viz De Villiers and Smit 1994:232).

The 'narrative' mode of moral discourse played an important role especially in anti-apartheid circles. Personal stories of suffering, biographical and autobiographical stories of people that could serve as role models in the struggle, and detailed journalistic descriptions of significant events in church life or in society abounded in publications.

A dramatic example in this regard is the internationally known document *The road to Damascus* (1989). The first paragraph that deals with 'The root of our conflict' starts with these words: 'As Christians, we look at our situation with eyes that have read the Bible stories. According to the Bible...' Then the history of the Bible and the history of the church is briefly told. It is clear that the prevalent situation is read through the glasses of Biblical and church history. By careful use of language this history is narratively reconstructed to evoke strong associations with the public debate in South Africa. Almost every word is calculated to move the reader to recognise him- or herself in Biblical and church history. In this way religious legitimacy is given to the liberation struggle.

- *The narrow scope of ethical issues discussed*

The Christian Ethical agenda in the apartheid era reflected the dominance of issues regarding apartheid and the struggle against apartheid in public debate. Initially the most debated issue was: 'Can the policy of apartheid be Biblically or theologically justified?' Since the end of the forties Afrikaans churches published a series of reports in which they tried to prove that the policy of apartheid or separate development (as they preferred to call the policy) could be Biblically or theologically justified. These attempts were criticised by some theologians within the Afrikaans churches (for example professors Ben Marais and Ben Keet in the Dutch Reformed Church), and most of the so-called English churches in South Africa (viz De Villiers 1984:57-58). Later the attention shifted to the moral evaluation of the effects of apartheid measures on Black, Coloured and Indian people. At the end of the sixties the issue of the 'inherent or fundamental wrongness' of apartheid was introduced in the Christian Ethical debate.

Since the liberation movement resorted to violent methods of resistance at the beginning of the sixties new moral issues were added to the Christian Ethical agenda. Christian Ethical debate increasingly focussed on issues relating to the moral justification of the various methods of resistance that were implemented against the Nationalist government: the encouragement of disinvestment and economic sanctions, consumer boycotts, politically motivated strikes, rolling mass action, the indiscriminate killing of civilians by bombs planted in public places, the targeted killing of police and the 'necklacing' of supposed traitors or police informers. The moral justification of methods implemented by the security forces to suppress the resistance of the liberation movements were also fiercely debated: detention without trial, the torturing and killing of detainees, hit squad activities against activists, the alleged involvement in 'third force' activities, cross border raids against members of liberation organisations and the destabilisation of neighbouring countries that supported the liberation struggle.

One would expect exponents of the 'prophetic' and 'narrative' modes of moral discourse

among South African Christians to concentrate on moral issues relating to apartheid and the struggle against apartheid. It is, however, revealing that even exponents of the more scientific 'ethical' mode of moral discourse, especially theologians teaching at university faculties and seminaries, could not escape this pre-occupation with apartheid issues. Even when they ventured beyond the discussion of apartheid issues they tended to restrict themselves to very specific moral issues in the fields of sexual, medical, political and economic ethics, which can be categorised as 'special ethics'. The reason is that they felt themselves compelled to contribute to the solution of the urgent and concrete moral problems of the South African society. It is only in very rare instances that publications dealt with more fundamental and universal ethical issues in the fields of 'normative ethics' and 'meta-ethics'<sup>1</sup>.

- *The tendency to ideologise in ethical debate*

In an article discussing the question 'How does the church address the structured-related convictions of its members?' Klaus Nürnberger defines ideology as a combination of facts and clever arguments by which we convince ourselves and others that the promotion of our own interests is fully legitimate and in the interest of everyone involved (Nürnberger 1986:28). If one takes this definition of ideology as point of departure one would be obliged to classify a large portion, if not most, of the contributions to the Christian Ethical debate in the apartheid era as ideology. Clearly not only the exponents, but also the victims of apartheid made use of arguments that presented the promotion of their own interests as theologically and morally legitimate and in the interest of the South African society as a whole.

We are faced with this dilemma: On the one hand one would not want to classify all attempts by victims of apartheid to justify the promotion of their own interests by theological and moral arguments as ideological and - by implication - illegitimate. Seen from the perspective of Christian Ethics victims of severe oppression have the right to resistance and the right to gain support for their liberation struggle by making use of theological and ethical arguments. On the other hand, one would not want to exempt in advance all such attempts by victims from being designated as ideology. We have to take into account that victims of oppression in a particular society are, in most cases, not represented by one liberation organisation only. These liberation organisations vie for the support, not only from the victims within society, but also from overseas governments and organisations. They, of course, have the right to use valid arguments to gain this support. I would, however, suggest that the thin borderline between the legitimate and ideological justification of the promotion of own interests is crossed when a particular liberation organisation makes use of theological and ethical arguments to single itself out as the only legitimate representative of the victims and to present the promotion of its interests as the promotion of the common interest.

To put it in more general terms: one may speak of ideology whenever theological or ethical arguments are used to blur the distinction between the narrow interests of a particular group or organisation and the interests of a broader group or society as a whole, in order to secure a privileged position for that particular group or organisation.

If this definition of ideology is taken as point of departure it is clear that a series of

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1. Examples are the published doctoral dissertation of DE de Villiers, *Die eiesoortigheid van die Christelike moraal*, and JA Heyns', *Die nuwe mens onderweg: Oor die Tien Gebooie and Teologiese etiek*, Vol 1,2/1 and 2/2.

official reports on race relations adopted by the Afrikaans churches since 1948 can be described as 'ideological'. In these reports the policy of apartheid or separate development - a policy that consolidated the privileged position of white people in South Africa - is presented as in agreement with the moral will of God and - by implication - in the best interest of all the people in South Africa. The common denominator of all these reports is that it is God's will that the diversity of peoples and races should be maintained. In the earliest reports the link to the policy of apartheid is laid rather directly. In a 1948 report on the 'Scriptural basis of the policy of race apartheid and trusteeship', tabled at the Transvaal synod of the Dutch Reformed Church, for example, it is alleged that the Bible teaches a national, social and religious apartheid. In the report 'Race, people and nation and the relation between peoples in the light of Scripture', adopted at the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in 1974, the link is more vague. It is only alleged that 'a policy of separate development' is not contrary to Biblical teaching. At that stage, however, there was no need anymore for a strong and direct theological legitimation of the policy of apartheid, because it was already entrenched in the South African society and supported by a great majority of White voters. A vague and indirect theological legitimation sufficed.

During the eighties Willem Nicol rightly warned against the development of an ideological 'state theology' in the Afrikaans churches (Nicol 1988). There was the tendency to emphasise the God given right of the government to maintain law and order in society and the obligation of Christians to obey the laws of the government to such an extent that almost no allowance was made for any legitimate resistance against unjust laws or an unjust government. The first version of the report 'Church and society', tabled at the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in 1986, for example, rejected the use of any violent methods of resistance. It admitted that non-violent resistance and civil disobedience could, in theory at least, be seen as morally acceptable as a last resort. In practice, however, even the apparent non-violent methods of resistance - according to the report - often lead to violence and misuse and should therefore not be supported. That leaves only the method of reform - propagated by the Nationalist government at that time - as the morally acceptable way to change unjust laws (par. 334-339).

A clear example of ideological justification of the liberation struggle specifically of ANC and ANC affiliated organisations is found in Albert Nolan's book *God in South Africa: The challenge of the gospel*, published in 1988. The context within which God, according to Nolan, was doing his work of redemption in South Africa was the liberation struggle against the evil of apartheid, more specifically the liberation struggle of those who refused to accept any compromise with this system. These people could know that the power that was revealed in the liberation struggle was the power of God and was therefore invincible. They could know that they were indeed busy building the Kingdom of God. Nolan even went so far as to allege: 'the practice of the struggle is the practice of faith even when it is not accompanied by an explicit profession of faith in God or in Jesus Christ' (Nolan 1988:178).

It is conspicuous that, according to Nolan, God's power of liberation in South Africa was not active in all organisations that claimed to strive towards black liberation. Only organisations that advocated a non-racial democracy, that were anti-capitalistic and socialist in orientation and refused to operate within the framework of the apartheid system, qualified; organisations such as the ANC, the UDF and COSATU. Organisations associated with the PAC, or organisations such as Inkatha and the Coloured Labour Party apparently did not qualify as channels for God's power of liberation (viz De Villiers 1989:262-265).

- *The predominance of a conservative public morality*

In contrast to most Western societies a conservative public morality predominated in the South African society in the decades following 1948. It led to the introduction of strict legislation regulating public morality. Gambling and abortion (with a few exceptions) were, *inter alia*, legally prohibited and strict censorship regulations were promulgated with regard to publications and films. These strict laws in turn strengthened the hold of the conservative public morality on society.

Two factors that contributed to the predominance of a conservative public morality were the geographical and political isolation of the South African society and the strong public influence of the Afrikaans churches. As a result of the isolation, the processes of modernisation and secularisation that strongly influenced Western societies and led to the liberalisation of many laws regulating public morality in those societies especially in the second half of this century, could not exert the same influence in South Africa. The influence of these processes was held back even more by the public influence of the Afrikaans churches. As a result of their close links with the Nationalist government they had access to the mass media, schools and government departments and had ample opportunity to spread their message of a conservative Reformed morality. The introduction of strict legislation regulating public morality was, to a large extent, due to pleas by the Afrikaans churches to a sympathetic government.

As a result of the predominance of a conservative public morality there was very little debate in church circles on moral issues regarding abortion, homosexuality, pre-marital sex, gambling and censorship. The strict censorship legislation was criticised by theologians and church leaders mostly from English churches, however, more in reaction to the banning of political publications critical of the government than in reaction to the banning of publications and films which contained material of an explicitly sexual nature.

- *Little recognition of moral diversity*

Both the predominance of apartheid issues and the predominance of a conservative public morality contributed to the fact that there was very little recognition among Christian ethicists of the moral diversity in the South African society as a whole and the Christian community in particular. Moral issues regarding apartheid had such absolute priority that even Christian ethicists that were sensitive to the moral diversity and were proponents of a more tolerant and accommodating attitude towards non-Christian religious groups or alternative Christian groups, neglected the issue of moral diversity. The conservative Reformed morality, taught by the Afrikaans churches, was so predominant and the public intolerance toward divergent moral views so strong, that Christian proponents of divergent moral views or of a more accommodating attitude toward such views, preferred to keep a low profile.

Perhaps the most important reason for the neglect of the issue of moral diversity in South Africa is the fact that the Afrikaans churches fell prey, at least to some extent, to what G C de Kruiff calls the 'theocracy temptation' (De Kruiff 1994:10-12). By this he means the ever present, but not always overt temptation, especially in Reformed circles, to take for granted that theocracy is, after all, the best, if not the only acceptable form of government. The implication is that Christians have the obligation to strive toward the implementation of as many elements of theocracy as possible in their own societies. The reasoning behind the theocratic temptation is usually the following: 'The Triune God is the only True and Almighty God. All worldly authorities are subordinated to Him. They should see to it that

the laws of their societies are in accordance to the Law of God. They need not and should not make legal allowance for the customs and morals of groups that does not worship the true God.'

The influence of the theocratic temptation was one of the factors that contributed to the predominantly negative view that Afrikaans churches had of human rights, long after most overseas and South African churches adopted a more positive view. It is difficult, if not impossible, to accept the right of an individual to profess belief in a different God openly, or to openly express divergent moral views, if you believe that it is the task of the government to forbid anything that contravene the will of the Triune God. It was only in 1986, with the acceptance of the report on 'Church and Society' that the Dutch Reformed Church for the first time took an unambiguous positive stance toward human rights (par. 182-199). With the acceptance of the right to religious freedom and the right to freedom of expression by the biggest Afrikaans church, a more open Christian Ethical discussion on moral diversity and the right attitude over against groups and individuals with divergent moral views have become possible.

### **3. Challenges for Christian Ethics in the era of transformation**

#### **3.1 Relevant features of the South African society in the era of transformation**

The election of 27 April 1994 introduced a new political dispensation in South Africa. The election led to the transfer of political power from the Nationalist government that represented only a minority of the population to an ANC controlled government that represented the majority of the population. As a result of a past dominated by colonialism and apartheid it was inevitable that the transfer of political power would also introduce a comprehensive transformation that would involve all spheres of society: the economy, education, welfare services, health services, the security forces, sport and organised religion. In the 'White paper on reconstruction and development' of September 1994 the new government formulated its vision of a fundamental transformation of the South African society. The goal of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), as a policy framework for integrated and coherent socio-economic progress, was to mobilise all the people and resources of the country toward the final eradication of the results of apartheid and the building of a democratic, non-racist and non-sexist future (par 1.1.1).

During the past five years certain mechanisms were employed by the new government to deal with injustices of the past. These mechanisms dominated the news headlines and determined the mood in the society to a large extent. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was instigated to deal with gross human rights violations of the past and promote reconciliation in society. Land reform legislation was adopted and procedures set in place to rectify the illegitimate alienation of the land of Black people by previous governments. An affirmative action programme was launched in the public service to eradicate imbalances in the composition of the personnel. Labour legislation was introduced that compels private enterprises to have workforces that are more representative of the total population and vigorously protects the rights of workers. In education a comprehensive process of transformation has been set in place to eradicate the discrimination against Black students.

On the basis of an interim constitution that was negotiated at Kempton Park, a new constitution for South Africa was developed and eventually adopted by parliament in 1996. The new constitution replaces the race based, three chamber system of the previous political dispensation by a full-fledged, non-racial, liberal democracy. It bestows civil rights on all

adult inhabitants of South Africa and makes provision for majority government. At the same time the rights of individuals and religious and cultural groups are protected by a bill of rights.

A consequence of the introduction of a liberal democracy and the adoption of a liberal constitution is that political liberalism has become the dominant political ideology in South Africa. This means, amongst others, that there is greater sensitivity than before for the rights of individuals and for the need to separate the spheres of influence of church and state in the present South African society. The political liberalism that finds expression in the constitution is, however, a moderate one, because the rights of the individual and the rights of cultural and religious groups are kept in balance and religious institutions are allowed to operate in state institutions.

### 3.2 Challenges to Christian Ethics

- *To pay more attention to the 'ethical' and 'policy' modes of moral discourse*

It is conspicuous that both the ANC and the PAC still refer to themselves as 'liberation movements'. The reason is that there are influential fractions in both these organisations who believe that the task of liberating the South African society is unfinished. Although they agree that the political liberation of South Africa has, to a large extent, been accomplished, they are of the opinion that especially the economic liberation of our society still has to be achieved. To achieve the economic liberation a further struggle is needed that would be not be fought by military means, but would be just as fierce as the political one.

Liberation theologians, sympathetic to the cause of economic liberation, would probably argue that the 'prophetic' and 'narrative' modes of moral discourse should have priority in Christian Ethics also in the present situation. As a result of the fact that the transformation of the South African society into a more just society is still underway and can only be achieved if the resistance of economically privileged people is overcome, one has to agree that the 'prophetic' and 'narrative' modes of moral discourse would be needed. It is, however, doubtful whether they should still have priority in Christian Ethical debate. The transformation of the South African society into an economically just society does not only entail the destruction of the unjust economic structures of the past, but consists, above all, in the construction of new economic structures that would benefit all the people of South Africa. Christian Ethics would only be able to contribute to this reconstruction of our society if the prophetic condemnation of the unjust economic structures of the apartheid past and the relating of narratives about the suffering of people as a result of these structures are supplemented by detailed analysis of the particular circumstances in South Africa and the implications of the Christian gospel for a just economic system in South Africa.<sup>2</sup> In the present situation much more emphasis should, in other words, be laid on the 'ethical' mode of moral discourse.

Not only the 'ethical' mode, however, needs to be stressed. We are presently experiencing a moral crisis in our society which manifests itself particularly in the

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2. What JM Gustafson writes about the need for ethical discourse in general is definitely applicable to Christian Ethics in the present South African society: 'A prophet can utter, 'The distribution of health care ... is unjust' The narrator can tell stories to the effects of such injustice on deprived persons in our society. But to determine what a more just distribution would be requires sophisticated and rigorous use of the concept of distributive justice. Ethical discourse provides the concepts, the modes of appropriate argumentation, and important distinctions which lead to greater precision and stronger backing for what Christians and other religious communities think is the right thing to do, the good thing to do' (Gustafson 1988b:42).



workplace. Reports on large scale corruption and fraud in both the public and private sectors have made the headlines on a regular basis during the last few years. If Christian Ethics wants to help to alleviate the moral crisis in the workplace it will have to equip Christians to deal effectively with the temptations and moral dilemmas they have to face in their occupations. It will have to assist managers in the public service and in private enterprises to make morally acceptable management decisions and to inspire their employees to set a high moral standard in doing their job. It means that the 'policy' mode of moral discourse will also have to get more attention in Christian Ethics than has been the case up to now.

- *To broaden the scope of moral issues discussed*

In his book *A theology of reconstruction* Charles Villa-Vicencio writes about the challenge that the church in South Africa faces in the new South Africa : 'The challenge now facing the church is different. The complex options for a new South Africa require more than resistance. The church is obliged to begin the difficult task of saying 'Yes' to the unfolding process of what could culminate in a democratic, just and kinder social order' (Villa-Vicencio 1992:7). This is also true of the challenge that Christian Ethics faces in the present South Africa. Christian Ethics has to be transformed from an ethics of resistance that deals with the moral issues concerning apartheid and the resistance against apartheid to an ethics of reconstruction that deals with the moral issues involved in building a new just and democratic society. This inevitably involves a broadening of the scope of moral issues that should be discussed.

Many of the moral issues that need urgent attention in the new South Africa are not altogether new. Moral issues relating to poverty, economic inequality, racism, racial conflict and sexism were, to some extent, also discussed by Christian ethicists in the previous political dispensation. The attention was, however, often restricted to the analysis and evaluation of the apartheid structures that contributed to these problems. In the new situation Christian Ethics will also have to pay attention to constructive ways in which the negative legacy of the past can be overcome. This should not be done in an isolated and abstract way. The efforts of other role players in the reconstruction of the society, especially of the government, should thoroughly be taken account of. In fact, a substantial part of the time and effort of Christian ethicists should be spent on the analysis and evaluation of relevant programmes and policies of the government such as the Redistribution and Development Programme (RDP) and the land reform and affirmative action policies. In particular, attention should be given to morally acceptable ways in which individual Christians and church denominations can contribute to the reconstruction efforts of other role players. The problems with regard to reconstruction that we are facing in South Africa are so overwhelming that a concerted and coordinated effort of all the role players would be needed to solve them.

One of the mechanisms that has been set in place to deal specifically with gross human right violations of the past, is the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC). The proceedings of the TRC over the past few years have illustrated the difficulty of the moral problems we are faced with in the reconstruction phase. No consensus has been reached on questions such as: 'Should only the perpetrators of gross human rights violations be kept responsible, or also their senior officers and the politicians?'; 'Is it morally right that perpetrators who received amnesty may not be sued for damages by victims or the family of victims?'; 'Can the modest financial reparation the TRC grants to victims and their families

be morally justified?'; 'Can reconciliation in society be achieved without justice being served?'. Although one of the aims of the TRC is to contribute to reconciliation in South Africa, it has not been perceived by some groups and institutions as a mechanism that served that purpose. They have perceived the TRC as a partisan institution, used by the ANC dominated government to discredit political parties such as the National Party and Inkatha Freedom Party, and the security forces of the previous government. It is conspicuous that even some churches, especially the Afrikaans Churches, could not fully cooperate with the TRC as a result of the negative attitude of their members towards the TRC. The occurrence of these difficulties is an indication that comprehensive reconciliation has not been achieved by the TRC, but is still a goal that lies ahead of us

Apart from the challenge to deal with moral issues related to development and reconciliation, Christian Ethics is confronted with the challenge to contribute to the alleviation of the deep-seated moral crisis in our society. Another set of new moral issues - at least in the South African context - is related to the introduction of a liberal constitution<sup>3</sup>. More will be said about some of these issues in a following paragraph.

Christian ethicists are, however, not only challenged to deal with moral issues that are in one way or another, related to the reconstruction of the South African society. They now have the opportunity to link up with international debates in Christian Ethics that are taking place presently, for example debates on moral issues relating to cloning and the use of information technology. They are challenged especially to take part in international discussions on fundamental issues in Christian Ethics. It is heartening that a few Christian ethicists in South Africa have taken the opportunity over the past decade to become acquainted with the international discussion on 'virtue ethics' and have begun to make significant contributions to the discussion<sup>4</sup>. One would like to see more South Africans taking part in international discussions on a broader spectrum of moral issues of a meta-ethical, normative ethical and special ethical nature.

- *To deal in a non-partisan way with moral issues in the present South African society*

It would be naive to expect that the deep-seated racial and ideological divisions of the apartheid era would vanish within a short span of time in the new South Africa. There was a short period after the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as new president in May 1994 during which it seemed to be the case indeed. The feelings of elation about the peaceful manner in which the transfer of political power took place and of benevolence toward all fellow South Africans were so strong that it seemed as if the racial and ideological divisions of the past did not play a role anymore. It did not, however, take long for these divisions to reappear and to threaten the process of reconciliation and nation building.

Ironically the TRC played an important role in the uncovering of persisting racial and ideological divisions. Representatives of liberation movements like the ANC and the PAC and of the previous government and security forces felt obliged to reaffirm ideological approaches of the past. When they appeared before the TRC, the ANC and PAC asserted that they have a moral advantage over the previous government because they had resisted the oppressive apartheid system that was branded a crime against humanity by the United Nations. They alleged that their liberation struggle had a just cause and should therefore be

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3. In his book *Christianity and democracy* John de Gruchy pays attention to some of the challenges liberal democracy poses to the church.

4. Especially the following three South African theologians have made valuable contributions: TN Richardson, DJ Smit and RR Vosloo. See the bibliography for some of their publications.

seen as a just war. Representatives of the previous government and security forces asserted that they also fought a just war against Communist imperialism. They only turned to unconventional methods of warfare when the liberation movements started to make use of guerilla methods of resistance and left them no other choice. As already mentioned many Whites perceive the TRC as an ideological instrument of the present government to discredit the previous government. Many Blacks have been infuriated by the disclosure of the brutal manner in which members of the previous security forces treated members of the liberation movements. The negative way in which many Whites reacted to the TRC also contributed to the hardening of the attitudes of some Black people towards White people.

Other factors also contributed to the maintenance of racial and ideological divisions. As White people started to feel the brunt of mechanisms put into place by the government to rectify the effects of discriminatory measures of the past, the negative attitude of many of them towards the government and the new political dispensation was strengthened. As it became clear that the government would not be able to fulfil the high expectations of many poor Blacks of a better standard of living, the government was accused of being soft on Whites and not taking drastic enough measures to redistribute wealth in South Africa.

As a result of the fact that racial and ideological divisions, to some extent, still remain in society, the temptation to Christian ethicists to reflect the ideological preferences of their own racial, ethnic or political group also remain a real one. One way of avoiding ideological one-sidedness is of course to expose oneself to the views and also to the criticism of Christian ethicists that belong to other church denominations, other racial and ethnic groups and other political parties. Another way, which I would strongly recommend in the South African context, is to direct specifically the that one would wish to express primarily against the morally unacceptable views and attitudes of the groups that one belongs to. It is difficult in a divided country such as South Africa to avoid biased criticism of the views and attitudes of people from other groups with whom you have no regular personal contact and of whose background you do not have firsthand knowledge. The chances are so much better that criticism of your own religious, political, ethnic or racial group would be appropriate. Added to that is the advantage that racial and ideological divisions will be softened if the stereotype that one's own group is always praiseworthy and the opponents' group always blameworthy, is actively broken down.

To be more specific: White Christian ethicists from the Afrikaans churches and the mainline English churches should in the first instance direct their ethical criticism against the negative and often selfish attitudes and views of fellow White members of their own churches. The belief of many White church members that we are inevitably heading for a catastrophe in South Africa, for example, should be criticised, because it reflects an unsubstantiated deterministic view of history and a lack of trust in the providence of the God they believe in. Black Christian ethicists should primarily criticise the morally unacceptable views and attitudes of fellow Black Christians. Although most Black people have until now displayed a remarkable willingness to forgive, Black Christian ethicists will have to guard against any exploitation of the natural desire for retaliation amongst Black people.

Christian ethicists should, however, not only direct their ethical criticism against their own group. They should also positively lay the emphasis on *the responsibilities of their own group and the rights of other groups*. People usually tend to do just the opposite: to emphasise the rights of their own group and the responsibilities of other groups. They are quick to protest when they feel that their own rights are infringed upon and also quick to

assert that opponents are neglecting their responsibilities. This type of reaction is especially prevalent in racially and ideologically divided countries such as South Africa and contributes to the maintenance of such divisions. By emphasising the responsibilities of their own group and the rights of other groups Christian ethicists would not only be true to the gospel of Jesus Christ, but would also help to break down racial and ideological barriers in South Africa.

It is especially difficult for White people in the present South Africa to play a constructive role in society. They feel that they are made the scapegoat for everything that goes wrong in the country and feel threatened by the mechanisms that the government introduce to rectify the apartheid legacy of discrimination against Black people. They are generally more concerned about the violation of their rights in the present society than with the responsibility they have to contribute to a prosperous and just South Africa. White Christian ethicists have a special responsibility to help White Christians to acknowledge their responsibilities in the present society and to fulfil them with enthusiasm. White people would, however, only be able to do it if they are willing to at least admit to themselves and to others that they have profited from a system that for many decades discriminated against Black people and therefore have a responsibility to contribute to the prosperity of all the people of South Africa, and especially to alleviate the need of those who suffered most. Willingness to take responsibility for the present and the future is definitely linked to the willingness to face one's personal responsibility and the collective responsibility of one's group for the past. Part of the challenge Christian ethicists have in this regard is therefore to help White Christians to face up to their personal and collective responsibility for the past.

The challenge Christian ethicists in this regard have in relation to Black Christians is a different one. Black Christians often also find it difficult to take up their responsibilities in the present South Africa. One reason is that they often have no previous experience or training in the fulfilment of these responsibilities. Another reason is that they sometimes tend to blame their inability to fulfil their responsibilities on apartheid and White racism, and are unwilling to admit their own lack of effort and commitment. Black Christian ethicists will have to help Black Christians not to use apartheid as an excuse for their own lack of responsibility.

- *To help Christians to deal responsibly with the effects of modernisation and the liberalisation of legislation governing public morality*

Modernisation can be defined as the social development marked by the desire to solve problems solely by means of the human reason (Van der Ven 1993:18). It has led in the Western world to an increasing distance between the church and other spheres of life like the economy and politics. These spheres of life withdrew themselves increasingly from the authority and control (including moral control) of the church and became secularised. The limitation of the influence of the church on other spheres of life went hand in hand with the increasing and reversed influence of developments related to modernisation in these spheres on the church and its members. Especially the free market economy with its emphasis on competition, consumption and the accumulation of material possessions, led church members to take over values that are hardly compatible with traditional Christian values.

One of the results of the advent of the new political dispensation has been that the influence of the processes of modernisation and secularisation in the South African society can be felt more strongly now than in the previous political dispensation. As a result of the breakdown of political and economic isolation, the reduction of the public

influence of the Afrikaans churches and the introduction of a liberal constitution, there is apparently very little that can now hold back the influence of these processes in the South African society.

The role that the introduction of a liberal constitution plays in enhancing modernisation should be highlighted. As a result of the fact that the new constitution protects the right of an individual to his or her own faith, conviction and opinion, it has become impossible to maintain the laws that prescribed a conservative public morality. Many of these laws have already been liberalised. Gambling is not prohibited anymore, abortion, even abortion on request, is allowed and pornographic material, except those portraying bestiality, sado-masochism and sexual acts with children, can be bought in South Africa. The end result is that the conservative moral convictions of probably the majority of Christians, if not the majority of religious people, in South Africa are not recognised in the public sphere anymore. In this respect the secularisation of public life in South Africa has advanced rather drastically over the past five years.

The confusing influence that the drastic liberalisation of laws regulating public morality has on ordinary Christians should not be underestimated. Many of them have not, until now, been able to adequately defend their rejection of gambling, pornography, abortion, drug abuse, etc. Their moral stance was based, to a large extent, on the legal prohibition of these practices and the fact that the church rejected them. In a new situation in which they are confronted with practices that were prohibited previously, as well as with all sorts of arguments in favour of these practices, church members who have not learnt to defend their own views, inevitably experience greater moral uncertainty.

Like their fellow Christians in Europe and the United States Christians in South Africa are more and more experiencing tension between the lifestyle and values taught in the church and the lifestyle and values prevalent in the other spheres of life they are involved in, like business and politics. The result is not only an experience of inner fragmentation, but also the experience that the traditional Christian lifestyle and values are seemingly not relevant to a large portion of their lives.

Christian Ethics is faced with the challenge to help Christians to deal responsibly with the effects of modernisation and the liberalisation of laws regulating public morality. This means, first of all, to help them to overcome, as far as possible, the tension they experience between a Christian lifestyle and values on the one hand and a modern, secular lifestyle, on the other hand. They should be helped to develop an integrated, contemporary Christian lifestyle that enables them to live authentic Christian lives in all the spheres of life they are involved in. Two ingredients of such a Christian lifestyle seem to be of special importance. Christians would only be able to live authentic Christian lives in the different spheres of life if they have the skills to make their own moral decisions on the moral problems that they face in these spheres of life. Christian Ethics can help to equip Christians with these moral decision making skills by, amongst others, providing guidelines on the steps that should be followed in moral decision making and the correct use of the Bible in making such decisions and by introducing and discussing the typical moral problems that they face in the different spheres of life. Probably even more important is the possession of strongly imbedded moral virtues. The value of such moral virtues in guiding Christians in times of moral uncertainty in all the spheres of life is appreciated by Christian ethicists from all confessions today. Although the formation of Christian moral virtues is primarily the task of the family, the church and the school, Christian Ethics can indirectly contribute to it by advising parents, pastors and teachers on the most effective ways of instilling such virtues, and by holding up the example of virtuous people in the history of the church.

- *To deal responsibly with the moral diversity in our society*

In his *Theological Ethics*, vol. 2/2, the late Prof. Johan Heyns wrote the following: 'When the state acknowledges the existence of God, sees itself as an instrument of God and acts accordingly, submits itself to the authority of Scripture, follows the basic prescripts of Scripture, formulates its laws in accordance with the Christian notion of justice and in general does not act contrary to what Christianity teaches and does not allow Christianity to be restricted, one can say that such a state is a Christian state' (Heyns 1989:136, translated from Afrikaans). This Christian state Prof. Heyns referred to is the type of state that the majority of Christians in South Africa would probably prefer. With the introduction of a liberal constitution which constitutes a secular state in South Africa the realisation of such a Christian state has, however, become a remote possibility more than ever.

Is the introduction of a secular state in South Africa something that Christians should deplore and continue to agitate against? In my opinion one of the challenges that Christian Ethics faces in the present South Africa is to convince Christians that the moderate separation of state and religion laid down by the constitution is morally acceptable. Another challenge is to inspire them to take advantage of the opportunities granted to them by the new constitution to exert a positive moral influence in South Africa.

Christians should, in my opinion, accept that in a religiously and culturally plural society such as South Africa the introduction of a Christian state would not only be highly improbable, but also morally undesirable. Adherents of other religions would always experience the fact that they have to pledge loyalty to a state which is run according to the principles of one particular religion, as extremely unfair. They would not, for example, accept as fair that they could face prosecution if they act according to their own moral convictions, but in contravention of laws regulating public morality according to Christian morality.

The morally undesirable consequences of too close a relationship between the state and a particular religion necessitates - in my opinion - the separation of state and religion to a certain extent. The constitution of any religiously plural state should not include articles which reflect the views of only one particular religion. No particular religion or religious denomination should be granted privileges by the state which are not granted to other religions or religious denominations. It is therefore morally commendable that the right to freedom of religion, conviction and opinion, as well as the right to freedom of expression and the right to freedom of association, are entrenched in the South African constitution.

This does not, however, imply that Christian Ethics have to accept a complete separation of religion and state in South Africa. Separation of religion and the state should not mean that the state denies religions in their institutionalised form any role in the public sector, and allow them only to play a restricted role in the private sector. An over-emphasis on the separation of religion and state would not reflect the fact that the vast majority of people in South Africa are active members of one or other religious denomination. It would also fail to appreciate the important and positive role that religions play, not only in the private lives of citizens, but also in building and preserving the moral fibre of the South African society.

Fortunately the new constitution does not ban all influence of religious institutions from public life. Religious institutions are explicitly allowed to exert restricted influence in the public sphere. They have, for example, the right to conduct religious observances at state or state-aided institutions on a fair and voluntary basis (Section 15[2]). They also have the right to establish religiously based schools at their own cost as long as no racial discrimination is at stake (Section 29[3]).

The challenge Christian Ethics is faced with in this regard is to point out how the constitutional room that is given to churches, Christian organisations and individuals to influence public life could be made use of in a responsible and balanced way. On the one hand it would not only have to point out that it has become virtually impossible in South Africa to promulgate laws that prescribe a conservative public morality, based on the morality of only a segment of the population, but also that it would be morally irresponsible to agitate for the reintroduction of such laws in a religiously and culturally plural society such as ours. The reintroduction would mean that it would, in some instances, be illegal for people with more liberal views to act according to their own conscience. One has to agree with Wolfgang Huber that part of being morally responsible in a religiously and culturally plural society is to take into account the probable impact that methods used to promote one's moral views would have on people with different religious and moral beliefs (Huber 1990:151). If it is probable that the methods one is considering would restrict people to act according to their own conscience, one would have to reconsider them.

On the other hand the opportunity to influence public life should not be neglected by Christians. The moral quality of public life depends, amongst others, on the extent with which religions succeed in instilling the moral values they proclaim in the public sphere. They have little chance to succeed in this regard if they fiercely compete with each other for influence in the public sphere. Their chances for success would be far better in a religiously plural society such as ours if they could reach moral consensus on the most important public moral issues. The influence they have on public opinion would be far greater if they could speak unanimously on these moral issues. As a result of the fact that legislation on public morality depends, to a large extent, on the moral consensus in society, religions would then be able to influence such legislation without imposing their particular views on others.

The challenge to Christian Ethics is to show the way in which moral consensus can be reached, not only among Christians from different confessions, but also among adherents of different religions. This means, amongst others, that they will have to motivate churches and individual Christians to seek this broader moral consensus actively and to implement moral arguments that can be accepted by non-Christians.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The drastic transformation of the South African society since the advent of a new political dispensation in 1994 has also brought about a drastic change in the challenges that Christian Ethics faces in South Africa. Some of these new challenges have been discussed in this article. Christian ethicists would only deal efficiently with these challenges if they are willing to make the necessary adaptations, e.g. shed outmoded ways of thinking, step out of the restricted range of moral issues and thereby broaden their scope of ethical thinking. That is the most important and also most fundamental challenge that they face in the new South Africa.

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