

HUMAN DIGNITY AND MORAL RENEWAL¹

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Abstract

The pathway adopted by South Africa to give serious attention to the challenge of moral transformation as a public responsibility that is affirming of life is explored in this article. In the first place, the historical journey on this moral road since its initiative by Nelson Mandela in the late nineties is summarised. In the second place, the resourcefulness of the churches and other faith communities for their moral import is probed. In the third place, attention to the possibility of an ethic of human solidarity for renewing the moral fibre of the nation, with special reference to insights from Karl Barth, is discussed. In the fourth and fifth places, the notion of transcendence as a potential cornerstone for affirming life and seeking moral renewal, drawing on insights from Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr, is proposed.

Key words: K Barth, Human dignity, R Niebuhr, Public morality, Transcendence, P Tillich

Moral Talk in South Africa – a Road less Travelled?

In the 1990s during his term of office as president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela inaugurated a process of moral renewal for the nation. It began as he gathered together various religious leaders in June 1997 to talk about the role of religion in nation-building and social transformation. This collaborative mode was in itself significant in reflecting a shift in how religious groupings could contribute to life together in society, from “watchdog” to “partner”. In this consultation Mandela bemoaned the moral condition of the nation as “a spiritual malaise” from which emerged “problems of greed and cruelty, of laziness and egotism, of personal and family failure” that helped fuel in turn “the problems of crime and corruption and hinders our efforts to deal with them” (Mandela 1997:9). Given his emphasis on the need for cooperation in order to transform the spiritual life of the country, he enquired: “Specifically, can we devise a way for the leadership of all religions to come together to analyse the cause of this spiritual malaise, and to find a way of tackling it? And can this be done as a matter of urgency?” (1997:9) Several months later, in February 1998, Mandela instituted “a campaign of moral regeneration” as “a call to all South Africans to firm up the moral fibre of our nation,” which was followed up by workshops and consultations with a range of prominent political and religious leaders (Mandela 1998a).

In October 1998 a Moral Summit was staged during which Mandela highlighted the kinds of problems demanding engagement through the moral regeneration campaign. These included “the extent of corruption both in public and private sector, where office and positions of responsibility are treated as opportunities for self-enrichment; the corruption that occurs within our justice system; violence in interpersonal relations and families, in particular the shameful record of abuse of women and children; and the extent of tax evasion and refusal to pay for services used” (Mandela 1998b). Then in February 1999, Mandela gave

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premier importance to the moral regeneration objective as he set it before the people of South Africa in his opening parliamentary address:

South African society needs to infuse itself with a measure of discipline, a work ethic and responsibility for the actions we undertake. ... related to this is the reconstruction of the soul of the nation, the 'RDP of the Soul': By this we mean first and foremost respect for life; pride and self-respect as South Africans ... It means asserting our collective and individual identity as Africans, committed to the rebirth of the continent; being respectful of other citizens and honouring women and children of our country who are exposed to all kinds of domestic violence and abuse. It means mobilising one another, and not merely waiting for government to clean our streets, or for funding allocations to plant trees and tend schoolyards. These are the things we need to embrace as a nation that is nurturing its New Patriotism. They constitute an important environment for bringing up future generations (Mandela 1999).

The call for a "RDP of the Soul" paved the way for the establishment of the Moral Regeneration Movement (see Rauch 2005:15ff). Firstly, a host of consultations and workshops were held from 2000 with the Department of Education, the South African Broadcasting Commission, the Presidency, and Faith-Based Organisations. The aim of these consultations was to work towards the establishment of proactive measures to ensure that the nation did not degenerate into a moral slum. The need for thorough contextual and ethical analysis was underlined by the participants who argued that unless there is sufficient clarity on the nature and extent of the nation's moral situation, their attempted responses would be futile. Secondly, broader consultations from 2001 led to the set-up of a working committee whose responsibilities included various practical tasks of setting up national priorities, devising a national framework for moral regeneration, and establishing a steering committee to implement the process. Finally, in 2002 the MRM was officially launched at the Waterkloof Airforce Base in Pretoria.

The MRM launch received much attention and prominence. It brought together roughly one thousand attendants, which included national, political as well as other high-profile leaders, and was supported by a generous budget of three million rand. Speakers emphasised the Movement as one that required ownership by the people, and discussions centred on what was being done, what should be done, and what could be done to bring about a moral regeneration of society. At the birth of the MRM, it received a mandate that comprised a vision of a caring society, the promotion of the values of the constitution (of which human dignity is a key component), and national cohesion; and a mission of facilitating and coordinating initiatives and mainstreaming moral regeneration. The Movement would go on to focus on the following issues as part of this mandate: Building the family; developing moral leadership; combating crime and corruption; inculcating values in education; religion; riches and poverty; positive images in the media; and focusing on the youth.

Cedric Mayson, one of the key role-players in the MRM's establishment, later remarked on the distinctive South African path taken: "Nowhere else in the world today will you find a conference coming together from every sector in society committed to solve its moral challenges together" (see Richardson 2003:4). Moreover, "[i]t is one of the few countries that openly admits it has problems, and the only one in which government and all sectors of civil society have embarked on a specific movement of Moral Regeneration" (2003:4).

The path taken by South Africa as a young democracy is telling for several reasons. In the first place, it draws attention to the public and national commitment of South Africa to morality as a fundamental dimension of its life together, and on which its democracy either stands or falls. John de Gruchy claimed that "[d]emocratic transformation can only be achieved in a society committed to the development of a moral culture, a society striving to

uphold moral values and constantly seeking to achieve, elusive as it is, an ever broadening moral consensus” (in James & van der Vijver 2000:167). In the same vein, Barney Pityana asserts that “an abiding and sustainable moral renewal” lies at the heart of social renewal, the building of a new society, and the achievement of an African renaissance (in Makgoba 1999:148).

In the second place, this path of moral regeneration underlines the weight attributed in the new South Africa to building and sustaining strong partnerships between government and civil society. The post-apartheid situation attests to a new working relationship with various stakeholders, institutions and role-players in society. The estranged and isolated modes of engagement of the past will not do in the new situation of moral challenges, but rather demands a close collaborative manner of being and acting to effect transformation. Mainstreaming moral regeneration implies, therefore, an ownership of the moral mandate across all sectors of public and private life. The problem as well as the promise of moral renewal concerns the realms of culture, gender, family, community, organisation, world of work, economy, religion, sport, politics, media, and so on.

In the third place, it reflects a critically important understanding of how morality is being interpreted in South Africa. Our understanding of morality, as Nico Koopman conveys in various dialogues, is not to be associated with the problematic tendencies of reductionism (i.e. reducing it to such issues as sexual promiscuity, substance abuse, pornography), moralism (i.e. emphasising less important issues at the expense of more important matters), absolutism (i.e. parading a singular view as if it was the only and correct interpretation on a particular problem), fundamentalism (i.e. defending a particular subjective interpretation at all costs, even if it requires violence), relativism (i.e. reflecting an “anything-goes” mentality), simplicism (i.e. not taking cognisance of the complexities inherent in moral problems), or judgementalism (i.e. brandishing labels, showing condescension to others who hold different views, and ill-treating them accordingly) (see Koopman 2004, 2005, 2007a, 2007b).

On the contrary, I would argue, public moral discourse in South Africa is devoted to the question of human dignity, the question of being human, of the integrity of our humanity. It is, therefore, concerned with the needs and challenges that seek to threaten or compromise the “integrity of life” principle (see Schweiker 2004:passim). It has to do with the core values of “human dignity, equality and freedom” as reflected in our Constitution (1996:§7.1). It is directed at enhancing the common good and striving for justice. It embodies a consciousness of human solidarity, “of being in the world for one another and because of and through others” (Mandela 2004:2). It encourages the development of character that contributes to the realisation of these values and ideals. It is committed to the “return of splendour” in the world (see Gestrich 1997:passim).

The Churches and Morality – Stumbling Blocks or Stepping Stones?

To what extent, if any, are the churches (and indeed other faith communities) resourceful role-players in the search for human dignity and moral renewal in society? I need to qualify this question on at least two counts. Firstly, we need to understand the faith communities as one among many different communities that contribute to public morality and human dignity. I appreciate Paul Tillich’s preference for talking about the “Spiritual Community” and for reflecting a certain duality (not the old Protestant distinction between the visible and invisible Church) in his understanding of the churches: He distinguishes between the “latent” and “manifest” church “in order to take into account the Christian humanism which exists outside the churches” (1966:66-67). Recalling his religious socialism involvement with other groups of noble standing, he remarks:

In living among these groups ... I learned how much of the latent Church there is within them. I encountered the experience of the finite character of human existence, the quest for the eternal and unconditioned, an absolute devotion to justice and love, a hope that lies beyond any Utopia, an appreciation of Christian values and a very sensitive recognition of the ideological misuse of Christianity in the interpenetration of Church and State. It has often seemed to me that the "latent Church" ... was a truer church than the organised denominations, if only because its members did not presume to possess the truth (1966:67).

He understood that while they did not belong to a church, they were nevertheless not excluded from the Spiritual Community, where positive moral capital was to be found (Tillich 1963:153). He viewed those in latency as teleologically related to the Spiritual Community, thus calling for Christian ministry "to consider pagans, humanists, and Jews as members of the latent Spiritual Community and not as complete strangers who are invited into the Spiritual Community from outside" (1963:154-155). In other words, the presence of moral capital and the potential of moral influence is not confined to the Christian community, but is readily discernible in communities from other spheres of life – cultural, family, workplace, organisational, and so on. Among the advantages the manifest church assumed, however, were the religious and organisational weapons necessary for the struggles in society (Tillich 1966:67), as well as "the principle of resistance in itself" (Tillich 1963:154) to hold itself accountable against potential profanisation and demonisation and for "the ultimate criterion of both faith and love" (1963: 153; cf. Tillich 1954:passim). At the same time, the churches were not necessarily excluded from "instances of profanisation and demonisation of the Spiritual Presence" (Tillich 1963:153).

Secondly, we need to concede that faith communities (and indeed other communities) do not necessarily fulfill constructive roles in moral renewal in all cases. Reinhold Niebuhr points this out in his discussion of the Christian witness in the social and national arenas, in which moral renewal and human dignity are understood to be included. He mentions at least four "social sins of the Church" (Niebuhr 1953:109-110) in this regard, which draw attention to some of the ways in which the faith communities obstruct rather than support the moral discourse. First, he contends: "There is no social evil, no form of injustice ... which has not been sanctified in some way or other by religious sentiment and thereby rendered more impervious to change" (1953:109). Second, there are some who, "fearing involvement in the ambiguities of politics, [have] declared the problems of politics to be irrelevant to the Christian life" (1953:109). As such they have abandoned the modern community and pretended to be neutral but, as Niebuhr rightly notes, this neutrality has usually "not even been honestly neutral" since "The neutral Church is usually an ally of the established social forces" (1953:109). Third, there are others who react to these complexities "with an insufferable sentimentality" by asserting: "These problems would not arise ... if only men would love one another" (1953:109). And fourth, others "conscious of these perplexities, [have] been ready to elaborate detailed schemes of justice and of law for the regulation of the political and social life of mankind, below the level of love and of grace. But it has involved itself in a graceless and inflexible legalism" that "may hinder rather than help the achievement of true justice" (1953:110).

Human Dignity and Moral Renewal – Renewing Human Solidarity

As communities among other communities in society, and as fallible communities that do not always contribute positively to human dignity and moral renewal in public life, how then could we talk about the potential resourcefulness of the churches and other faith communities? Bearing in mind Tillich's correlative principle which maintains that the questions

implied in human existence are answered through the symbols of Christian beliefs and practices, I will assume that we can agree that the symbols of our faith in the form of doctrines, values and practices do indeed affirm the worth and esteem of humanity. Given that one could contend that the moral challenges in South African society are bound up with a compromised human solidarity – that “of being in the world for one another and because of and through others” (Mandela 2004:2) – the theological capital within our faith tradition requires some exploration for its public morality import. To the extent that the churches and faith communities demonstrate a capacity for nurturing an ethic of human solidarity in broader society, its resourcefulness will increasingly find favour beyond its religious sphere and be gratefully received as a public gift.

A most potent analogy of such an ethic is found in Karl Barth’s doctrine of reconciliation. Employing the metaphorical logic of the Lukan parable of the father and the younger son (Luke 15) to explain and illuminate the history of reconciliation in Jesus Christ, Barth talks about three necessary, inseparable and simultaneous dimensions of Christ’s profound work. First, is the dimension of the Son who leaves home to venture into the faraway country; second, is the dimension of the Son who leaves the faraway country to return home; and third, is the dimension of the Son as witness to his journey away from and back home (cf. Barth 1956; 1958; 1961).

In the first dimension of reconciliation, Barth focuses on the obedience in humility of Christ as Son of God in venturing into the faraway country. It is “that condescension in which God interests Himself in man in Jesus Christ” in a most gracious manner (1956:158). God’s grace in Christ “comes to man as the (sinful) creature of God freely, without any merit or deserving, and therefore from outside, from above” (1956:158). This is to say, Barth explains, “from God’s standpoint, the aspect of His grace in which He does something unnecessary and extravagant, binding and limiting and compromising and offering Himself in relation to man by having dealings with him and making Himself his God” (1956:158). All the limitations, all the weaknesses, all the perversities – these all become God’s. By so doing, “God acknowledges man; He accepts responsibility for his being and nature” (1956:158) as “the Judge being judged” in their place (1956:211ff).

In the Son of God’s identification and solidarity with humanity, God does not cease to be who God is, for this is precisely who God is as the Son “goes into the far country, into the evil society of this being which is not God and against God”, yet does not repudiate those who have wronged God (1956:158). By being neighbour to them, God does not forfeit anything, but instead “shows Himself to be the great and true God in the fact that He can and will let his grace bear this cost, that He is capable and willing and ready for this condescension, this act of extravagance, this far journey” (1956:159). This is what sets God apart from all false gods, for whom unbending human pride reigns (1956:159). Rather, “It is this high humility that He speaks and acts as the God who reconciles the world to Himself” (1956:159) since “for God it is just as natural to be lowly as it is to be high, to be near as it is to be far, to be little as it is to be great, to be abroad as to be at home” (1956:192). The lordship of Christ becomes increasingly evident through the servanthood of Christ (cf. 1956:159ff).

Could Barth’s narrative provide concrete correspondence with real-life scenarios in and beyond South Africa in our search for a renewed moral fibre that affirms human dignity? Like the Son who, as God, condescended, left his home of the high moral ground and took the initiative in favour of those who had wronged him, of those who had broken the covenant, might this represent a movement that should be initiated by those who have been wronged in society towards those who have wronged them? Just as God took the initiative,

a strange act, because God could not expect anything better from “the other side”, might this represent a movement that could potentially contribute to freeing the flow around stuckness in the moral crises? Just as God graciously and extravagantly – even strangely – forgave (justified) those who wronged God, is this what is prospectively paradigmatic for moral transformation today?

In the second dimension of reconciliation, Barth focuses on the exaltation of Christ as Son of Man in returning home. Not “ceasing to be man, but assumed and accepted in his creatureliness and corruption by the Son of God”, he “returned home to where He belonged” (1958:20). This was “to His place as true man, to fellowship with God, to relationship with His fellows, to the ordering of His inward and outward existence, to the fullness of His time for which He was made, to the presence and enjoyment of the salvation for which He was destined” (1958:20-21). This “exaltation” involves “the movement of man from below to above, from the earth which is his own sphere, created good by God and darkened by himself, to heaven which is the most proper sphere of God, from man in his creaturely and fleshly essence, and therefore his being in opposition, to peace with God His Creator, Judge and Lord” (1958:29). It is an “exaltation of our essence with all its possibilities and limits into the completely different sphere of that totality, freedom, correspondence and service” (1958:30).

Barth presents Jesus as “the man who (like us in His creatureliness and fleshliness, at all points our Brother) does not break but keeps the covenant of God with His people in the action of His life” (1958:30). For “He is the man who is faithful both to God and therefore also to Himself, the man who is reconciled with God, the true man, and in relation to all the rest the new man ... the man who is well-pleasing to God” (1958:30). In the Son of Man’s “upward-directed” life, God’s identity as one of radical and total mercy is prevalent to account for “the depth to which He willed to descend from His throne, and the height to which He willed to exalt the creature man to the right hand of His throne” (1958:43). Barth points out that “because His free mercy wills that He should, He can break through the bounds of the divine being and descend into the depths, into the far country, the world, and there become and be a completely different being – man” (1958:44). And, moreover, “as man He can open the frontier, not to make man a second God, but as man, by Himself becoming and being man, to set him within this frontier, to bring him to His own home” (1958:44). This homecoming of the Son of Man signals the basis of the reconciliation of the world with God.

Like the Son who returned home from the faraway country as he lifted up humanity in the midst of being in the strange land, might this represent a movement that could be initiated and sustained by those who have wronged “the others”, as they learn together with all people that “coming home” to where one really belongs is possible. Should moral renewal not similarly be understood as demanding not only forgiveness but also confession, not only acceptance but also transformation?

In the third dimension of reconciliation, Barth focuses on the revelation and actualisation of reconciliation in and through the directional ministry of Christ. As Barth means it, reconciliation “is the history in which God concludes and confirms His covenant with man, maintaining and carrying it to its goal in spite of every threat. It is the history in which God in His own person and act takes to Himself His disobedient creature accursed in its disobedience, His unfaithful covenant-partner lost in his unfaithfulness” (1961a:3). For “He does this as He both abases and sets Himself at the side of man, yet also exalts man and sets him at His own side; as He both vindicates Himself in face of man and man in face of Himself” (1961a:3-4).

And so the witness of the Son comes into view. As Son of God and Son of Man, Jesus Christ reveals or witnesses to reconciliation, to this journey of transformation and healing, to this movement between home and the faraway country. The witness of the Son pervades as a summons to conscious, intelligent, living, grateful, willing and active participation in its occurrence (cf. 1961a:368ff; 1961b:554ff). The self-declaration character of reconciliation establishes knowledge and evokes confession, irrespective of the extent of its reception. Barth advances that in Christ “the Light of Life”, the fullness of this revelation of true reconciliation dwells as a model and an imperative.

Renewing Human Solidarity – on Self-transcendence

Tillich defines the moral imperative as “the command to become what one potentially is, a *person* within a community of persons” (1963:19). We constantly encounter the world, our environment, and within these interactions find ourselves confronted by disintegrating forces that conflict with our centredness and seek to destroy the balance between our individualisation and participation. But “[t]he moral imperative is the demand to become actually what one is essentially, and therefore potentially” (1963:20). It is “to become a person” (1963:20), where one’s true being is actualised in time and space. This imperative “is not an act in obedience to an external law, human or divine [cf. heteronomy]. It is the inner law of our true being, of our essential or created nature, which demands that we actualise what follows from it” (1963:20). So, “an antimoral act is not the transgression of one or several precisely circumscribed commands, but an act that contradicts the self-realisation of the person as a person and drives toward disintegration” (1963:20). “It disrupts the centredness of the person by giving predominance to partial trends, passions, desires, fears, and anxieties” (1963:20). The moral act, therefore, “is always a victory over disintegrating forces” with its aim being “the actualisation of man as a centred and therefore free person” (1963:21).

Tillich describes the religious dimension of the moral imperative as “unconditional” (1963:22). Faced with several acts that may or may not conform to the moral imperative, consciousness of the unconditional imperative concerns “its ultimate seriousness” as an expression of the “Will of God” (1963:23). This Will “is precisely our essential being with all its potentialities, our created nature declared as ‘very good’ by God” (1963:24). While we are free to choose to waste our potentialities, “[t]he moral imperative is unconditional only if I choose to affirm my own essential nature” (1963:24). It is “the silent voice of our own being which denies us the right to self-destruction. It is the awareness of our belonging to a dimension that transcends our own finite freedom and our ability to affirm or to negate ourselves” (1963:25). To transcend our finitude thus involves contesting forces within a hierarchy of values (1963:25): “If the aim implies something above finitude and transitoriness, the fulfillment of this aim is infinitely significant, or unconditional in its seriousness” (1963:28). Tillich explains: “Happiness or blessedness as the emotional awareness of fulfillment is not in conflict with the unconditional, and therefore religious, character of the moral imperative. A conflict exists only when the function of self-transcendence in man’s spirit is denied, and man is seen as totally imprisoned in his finitude” (1963:30).

The self-transcendence discussed by Tillich is a critical calling towards a renewed moral culture in South Africa. Denying our need for self-transcendence keeps us imprisoned in our finitude. We fail to transcend our past historical baggage, our hatred of other races, our resentment of other classes, our apathy towards “the other”, our untapped potential. We become not only complacent with our limitations, we also seek to justify our unrealised being, which unfortunately serves as a basis for many in society who strike out in

rage and despondency, justifying their damaging actions to some extent (cf. Peters 1994:34ff). The movement of the Son from the faraway country to his home where he rightly and essentially belongs, is a model of the question of self-transcendence that demands critical attention by the churches, who themselves possess various theological and organisational tools for nurturing an ethic of self-transcendence for moral renewal (e.g. justice, conversion, hope).

Renewing Human Solidarity – on Community-transcendence

Niebuhr, while affirming the social substance in human nature, notes: “While man may be universal as free spirit, he is always parochial and tribal in the achievement of organised community” (1965:83). It is precisely this sense of tribalism that limits our sense of obligation to others and may even serve as the chief source of our inhumanity (1965:84). He elaborates: “Any distinguishing mark between the ‘we group’, in which mutual responsibilities are acknowledged, and a ‘they group’, who are outside the pale of humanity, may serve the tribal character of human nature. The distinguishing marks of tribalism may consist of common racial origins, or language, or religion and culture, or class” (1965:85). Tribalism usually takes on one of two forms: “Brutal warfare” and “cruelties of oppression” (1965:86), the latter being “more wounding to human self-esteem than any other conflict” (1965:87).

In general, human beings struggle largely with life together in community. Having made “little progress in solving the problem of their aggregate existence”, humanity confronts inevitable moral and relational complexities over time (Niebuhr 1960:1). Peace and justice are difficult to maintain in their common life (1960:3). Manifesting itself within these moral dynamics, are “limitations of the human mind and imagination, the inability of human beings to transcend their own interests sufficiently to envisage the interests of their fellow-men as clearly as they do their own” (1960:6).

Niebuhr argues that “consistent self-seeking is bound to be self-defeating; on the other hand, self-giving is bound to contribute ultimately to self-realisation” (1965:106-107). Our preoccupation with the self at the expense of our social substance will be self-defeating (1965:108). At the same time, “self-giving is impossible to the self without resources furnished by the community” (1965:109). In the first instance, says Niebuhr, it is the family as the first community providing the necessary resources for relating to others and with it the possibility of self-fulfillment (1965:107-109). The family as well as other communities become critically significant components within one’s history and development, and ultimately contribute to a meaningful or destructive pool of resources for relating to others in society (1965:108). They may facilitate or impede self-transcendence.

In this regard, Niebuhr highlights the role of the faith community in helping persons in both self- and community-transcendence: “The community of faith or the religious tradition is able to supply an additional resource for freeing the self from idolatrous forms of communal loyalties” (1965:110). He talks about the reality of “saving grace” as being “induced by a religious experience in which the conscience of the individual self transfers devotion from a contingent community, such as family, race or nation, to an ultimate loyalty to God, the fountainhead of the whole realm of value” (1965:110). For this reason, Niebuhr underlines “the redemptive value of dissident individuals, the prophet, the critic, even the rebel, in a free community” (1965:112). These and others assist us through the “pull of responsibility” that takes the self beyond itself and beyond its immediate community (1965:117). This is “the primacy of grace in saving the self from undue and destructive self-regard”

(1965:118) with “the pull of the exercise of creative capacities or of responsibilities and loyalties to a cause greater than the self” (1965:119).

A selfish preoccupation of the self with itself, or with a confined community, lacks a community transcendence that reflects a commitment to an ethic of human solidarity. Disregard for others poses moral challenges, just as much as disregard for broader communities, whereby “[t]he social life of man can obviously be both the source of common grace and of demonic evil” (1965:123). Niebuhr recognises “the law of love is indeed the basis of all moral life” and “that it can not be obeyed by a simple act of the will because the power of self-concern is too great” but “that the forces which draw the self from its undue self-concern are usually forces of ‘common grace’ in the sense that they represent all forms of social security or responsibility or pressure which prompt the self to bethink itself of its social essence and to realise itself by not trying too desperately for self-realisation” (1965:125). The movement of the Son to the faraway country in solidarity and identification with those who stand in opposition to him, is a model of the question of community-transcendence that demands critical attention by the churches, who themselves possess various theological and organisational mechanisms for facilitating such a radical love of an *agape* quality that affirms the dignity of the other and seeks their salvation, even at great personal cost (cf. *grace, sacrifice, eros, koinonia*).

Conclusion

The moral “road less travelled” in the South African story is of profound importance for the future of human dignity for all people, especially those at the very edges of life. As we are daily bombarded with news reports and images attesting to our moral failure as a society where realities such as gangsterism, poverty, violence, murder, fraud, abuse, racism, corruption, robbery, drug trafficking, rape, and greed prevail, we all find ourselves at the edge. To be at the edge is to be in the midst of the action, of ambiguity, of marginalisation, of threatened exclusion and elimination, of disconnectedness, of danger and risk – but it is also to be on the boundary line of promise and hope. For, according to Tillich, on the boundary we stand between alternative possibilities of existence, in a position that is most fruitful for new thought, and in a difficult and dangerous setting that again and again demands decisions and the exclusion of certain alternatives (1966:13).

Churches and faith communities do not bear the mandate of moral values and conduct that affirm human dignity alone, for it belongs to all. At the same time, there is a definite resourcefulness within the religious traditions that might meaningfully contribute to moral renewal in society at large. An important starting point rests with the renewal of human solidarity as an ethic to be sought and lived out and experienced in the manifold spheres of society. But, revisiting the value of transcendence for the self and for the community is one step in the right direction. Unless we renew the ethic of human solidarity, the moral fibre of our society will never change and human dignity will remain a beautiful albeit abstract notion in a most intriguing public discourse.

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