

## Mainline Protestantism in South Africa – and modernity? Tentative reflections for discussion<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

*In many ways the South African society has come under the impact of western-type modernisation over the last decade, with the breakdown of the apartheid society and the accompanying acceleration of western-style development. A crucial question concerning religion is accordingly what role religion played and still plays in these processes, and vice versa whether and how religion has been affected and perhaps transformed by them. In the essay some of the obvious effects of this “collapse into modernity” (Beck) on mainline Protestant and especially Reformed churches are considered. For heuristic purposes, three social forms of the church are distinguished and treated separately, namely worship and congregational life, denominations and the ecumenical church, and individual believers*

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally written on request, for an International and Interdisciplinary Meeting called “Religion and Development: Crisis or New Opportunities?,” held at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, Netherlands, on 14-15 June 2007. The conference was jointly organised by the Faculty of Theology, the Blaise Pascal Institute and the Centre for International Cooperation of the Free University of Amsterdam in cooperation with the Society for International Development (Netherlands Chapter) in order to discuss three main issues: What assumptions and general observations form appropriate points of departure for describing and evaluating the role of religion in actual processes of development? What roles do actual religious practices, spiritualities, beliefs and ideas play in processes of development? What attitudes do the discourses and practices of international development cooperation take towards religion in ‘developing regions’ and is it possible to establish a connection between such discourses and notions of efficiency and effectiveness in development practice? It was a closed meeting of experts involved in development work, from development agencies, governments and civil society. Several international figures were invited to address key themes, including Ronald Inglehart from the World Values Survey (with books like *Modernization, cultural change and democracy*, 2005; and *Sacred and secular: Reexamining the secularization thesis*, 2004), Thorleif Pettersson from Sweden and the European Values Survey (with many publications on globalization and religious developments), Scott M. Thomas from England (well-known for *The global resurgence of religion and the transformation of international relations*, 2005), and to focus on specific regions of the world, including Paul Freston and Juan Sepulveda (both Latin America), Anata Kumar Giri (India), Kirsteen Kim (Korea), Oscar Salemink (Vietnam) and Philip Quarles van Ufford (Indonesia), Mansoor Moaddel (Iraq), and Frans Wijzen (East Africa) and Dirkie Smit (South Africa). The overall question was “whether it may be true that the so-called resurgence in religion may be interpreted as a form of critique on western-type modernization, and also as a form of critique on development processes.” A much longer version of this essay was presented during the Meeting and is available on the internet at [http://www.bezinningscentrum.nl/Religion\\_Development/smit.pdf](http://www.bezinningscentrum.nl/Religion_Development/smit.pdf). Afterwards, there was another invitation to present this shortened version of the paper for plenary discussion during the meeting of the Southern African Think Tank on Missional Theology and Praxis in partnership with the Allelon International Mission to Western Culture-Project, held at the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, 12 -13 November 2007. The paper is here offered in the shortened version, as a discussion document, without footnotes and a full bibliography, but it originated as part of an intensive research stay at the Centre for Advanced Studies in Berlin (the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin), working on “Religious Transformation Processes in the Present,” together with Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, Mohammed Sani Omar, and several other scholars from a diversity of disciplines, and the extensive body of material studied and discussed there during weekly sessions.

*and their participation in public life. In conclusion, the question is raised whether and how actual church practices help or hinder so-called development goals, in these churches.*

So, what is the actual response of Protestant denominations and ecumenical bodies regarding processes of modernisation and development? This question leads to interesting observations, this time however more concrete and empirical than in the case of worship and spirituality. Here, the dramatic effects of the radical social transformation processes are already most clearly to be seen. Modernisation has fundamentally altered the self-understanding, the identity and the role of denominations and ecumenical bodies in South Africa.

There is no longer an apartheid church or a form of state church, and this indeed represents a major change. There is no longer “a” church that claim to speak to government on behalf of anyone and there is no longer “a” church for the government to consult, should it feel such need. The new democratic Constitution changed South Africa into a secular and pluralist society. The Constitution ensures religious freedom and prevents any position of privilege. The common spirit in society therefore seems to be one of multi-religious tolerance and respect. Government and its official structures seem committed to treat all religions fairly and equally, irrespective of the number of the adherents. In practice, this often means that small religious groups seem overly represented in some bodies and structures. Most Christian churches seem to accept this new status, probably silently acknowledging the problematic nature of the role of some churches in the apartheid era. Most churches definitely support the new Constitution and its values enthusiastically.

There is also no longer a struggle church. The ecumenical movement, very strong during the apartheid years when many churches were committed to their common struggle against apartheid, has lost most of its appeal and influence. There is no longer a common enemy, and most churches have withdrawn into their own spheres of denominational (if not congregational) activities. Attempts to recover the prophetic ecumenical spirit and to engage churches in a common struggle against for example HIV/Aids or the disastrous effects of the global economy have mostly proven to be without visible success. In general, the official churches show a spirit of cooperation towards the present government rather than one of prophetic distance on any issue.

Does this mean that no one now speaks publicly on behalf of religion or even the churches? Is there for example no longer any public voice of the churches to support state policies regarding development? Seeing this need, the government itself initiated several processes of consultation with religious leaders in order to develop “a Reconstruction and Development Program for the soul of the nation,” as former President Nelson Mandela formulated the challenge. These include a National Religious Leaders’ Forum, who regularly meets with the President and other government officials. It also includes a so-called Moral Regeneration Movement, focusing on moral issues, like corruption and moral formation. These meetings are in principle not different from many other consultations and talks by government, and they have not as yet produced any meaningful results.

Are the churches satisfied with this seeming lack of a public voice? From the side of the South African Council of Churches, a Parliamentary Office has been founded “to monitor the proceedings in Parliament and the Constitutional Assembly and to convey to the relevant

Portfolio Committees, Ministries and Theme Committees the concerns and opinions of the Churches." When it was started in 1996 the expressed intention was to serve as witness, "strengthening the voices of the poor and marginalised groups in the public policy process." The original decision was therefore informed by "the ethical concerns of the Churches" and by the principle of "critical solidarity." This meant, said the SACC at the time, that they "would support government in the work of reconciliation, nation building, and reconstruction and development, but reserved the right to criticise government if it violated principles of justice and democracy or if it contravened the bill of rights." In 2001 this principle was amended to one of "critical engagement." The amendment from "solidarity" to "engagement" is clearly intended to create some distance. This SACC Office monitors the development of legislation and policy, engages in advocacy issues, informs churches of current policy debates, conducts advocacy-training workshops and offers pastoral support to parliamentarians. The advocacy work is focused on four themes, namely building democratic institutions, securing justice for the poor, protecting children and nurturing families, and strengthening peace and security – obviously a development agenda. What has been the impact of this initiative? This is hard to guess. Those involved in these activities witness to the fact that their voices are heard in every respect and are taken seriously by the lawmakers. Whether the process also has much of a reverse impact back on life in the churches themselves is even more difficult to determine.

Does this represent the total picture? The answer is no, since looking at the largest mainline denominations in the country, one finds a truly impressive list of programs, projects, services, activities and engagements with the major social problems and human needs. There can be no doubt that the official churches are major role players in society in these fields and are having a vast impact on the concrete lives of many people, even if these activities are not always that well-known and publicly acknowledged. One only has to visit the websites of these churches to come under the impression of the scope and size of these almost routine activities. Such programs and projects typically include development and welfare work, justice and peace work, HIV/Aids activities, dealing with gender issues, addressing human rights violations, ecological initiatives, dealing with racism, taking care of the poor, sick, elderly, homeless, refugees, caring for children and contributing to education, and many others. Most of the churches have communication offices distributing information, discussion documents, position papers, and more. Perhaps it is fair to conclude that these churches make a major contribution to development by affecting the lives of many in society through their regular activities.

Perhaps a few concrete cases can illustrate the case. The (white) Dutch Reformed Church could present a first remarkable example. A turning tide in this Church is clearly discernible and in many ways truly notable. Late in 2002 the General Synod of the DRC publicly committed itself to serve the country with its entire people and the continent with its complex challenges. Since then, a whole range of initiatives demonstrated the seriousness of this commitment – all of them directly related to what could be called a development agenda, concentrating on poverty and structural and systemic responses to its causes. The Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa offers a similar example, although less remarkable, since it has been consistently dedicated to a similar agenda. Already in 1982 The Dutch Reformed Mission Church drafted the Confession of Belhar, officially adopted in 1986, committing itself to compassionate justice. It was through re-unification of the black Reformed Churches on the basis of this Confession that the URCSA was formed, with a Church Order very clearly written as an attempt to embody this kind of vision in the structure and activities of the church. This is a clear example where the conviction and spirituality, the liturgy and teaching, the beliefs

and the practices of the denomination seem to embody a vision of human development. That such an observation should not be generalised too easily is also obvious. There will be many congregations in the URCSA where these convictions and this spirituality are not as actively present and there may even be many believers that do not themselves share these beliefs and practices. Doctoral research conducted in several rural congregations of the URCSA in the Eastern Cape region has in fact demonstrated this fact (by Pieter van Niekerk 1997, the same researcher who earlier conducted a national survey on poverty in the then Dutch Reformed Church in Africa together together with the well-known statistician and social scientist Mark Orkin, former head of Statistics SA and then appointed President of the Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa). Many members of these congregations are so completely caught in the power of poverty that they have no vision of ever escaping this life, for them or their children, and they seem completely unaware of the faith convictions of the church expressed in Belhar, in fact, they do not expect any compassion and help in their plight from either the church or from God. They simply accept their realities passively, without any hope.

It is perhaps instructive to point to the way in which the Confession of Belhar informed the so-called Kitwe Declaration by the Southern African Alliance of Reformed Christians on worldwide economic injustice and ecological destruction. This Declaration in turn together with other voices inspired the so-called Debrecen decision of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to call a *processus confessionis*, a process of confession during which all members churches were called upon to consider whether their faith is not being challenged by the realities of injustices and the state of the ecology. Finally, this process led to a strong commitment by the World Alliance in Accra, Ghana, to witness and action regarding these urgent crises in our global world today.

The DRC and the URCSA have already combined many of their diaconal activities, both on national and regional levels, in deliberate attempts to be more effective in serving their increasingly common agenda. In the Western and Eastern Cape this joint project is for example called Badisa, but this is just one example amongst many new initiatives to be more effective in serving people in need through networking, co-operation and full integration of services. There can be no doubt regarding the enormous extent of this work of these (and many other) mainline churches, the reach of their activities, the amazing amounts of money invested in their work, the sustainability over many years, the importance and reliance of the institutional structures that have been established, and the professional nature of the work. Studying their annual reports makes for impressive reading. In terms of some development debates the nature of these activities probably ranges from immediate and short-term relief work and charity to more long-term developmental work focusing on structural causes and seeking solutions through networking. It is also fair to say that these services of the churches are continuously focusing on new challenges, for example on the new faces of poverty shown as result of recent social and political developments.

It remains a question, however, also for these churches themselves, how close the ties are between these activities on the one hand and the local congregations and members on the other hand. Many people seem to be worried that the services become so professional, institutional and structural that they are increasingly alienated from any awareness and feeling of involvement on the level of ordinary congregations and members. In recent years, the URCSA and the DRC have together been involved in many discussions on these questions, considering whether it is necessary and whether it would be effective to attempt to bring these development activities closer to congregations and to the lives and spiritual practices of believers.

On a much larger scale, the different religious communities through the National Religious Leaders' Forum (NRLF) have become involved in a joint national project to co-ordinate their social services and are in fact approaching the national government with concrete proposals how the churches could better be of service to the whole of South Africa. Their joint body known as the South African National Religious Association for Social Development (NRASD) has been active for several years now – and serves as a clear illustration of recent initiatives to strengthen what could be called a national development agenda. This body in fact makes very strong claims form the crucial role of religious communities in South Africa, regarding development and “the building of a caring, democratic and equitable society through partnerships”. They argue that the government alone is not able to eradicate poverty and underdevelopment. Civil society, the private sector and faith based organisations have an important role in extending the reach of government programmes, together addressing the five key areas jointly identified by government and the religious sector, namely home and community based care, social capital and social cohesion, early childhood development, social housing, including emergency and transitional shelter, and skills training and access to information. In general, the strategy strives to foster sustainable community development, including the fostering of social cohesion and the creating of a caring society, especially integrating the marginalised into communities.

It would accordingly probably be accurate to say that the religious communities on a national level are committed to these kinds of development ideas, that the mainline Protestant churches on national and regional levels also share these same ideals. It is probably even fair to speculate that many if not most congregations are on their own local scale also active in projects that fall within this overall vision. It is further quite probable that most church members of local congregations today – whether as a result of the social transformation processes and new public discourses, or not – also share these commitments. The critical question would be whether these members and even these local congregations are aware of or in any way integrated into these broader national initiatives, or whether the national networks do not follow policies, strategies and practices of their own, without necessarily involving people on grass-root level, or depending on their convictions, spiritualities and practices.

Another very interesting ecumenical initiative is the work of the Economic Justice Network of the Fellowship of Christian Councils in Southern Africa (EJN of FOCCISA). It is an ecumenical body, calling itself the implementing agency of the Fellowship of Christian Councils in Southern Africa. With eleven national Christian Councils affiliated to them, they claim to “represent the interests of 133 million people on the poorest continent.” Over several years they have been active in national and international, even global ecumenical endeavors for economic justice, for example through developing advocacy strategies and interventions on a number of selected priority issues, undertaking research on issues of particular concern that could be useful in the advocacy activities of the national councils or their partner organisations, facilitating information gathering, dissemination and exchange on areas like debt, trade and food security, encouraging economic literacy programmes by churches at all levels, and liaising on behalf of these councils with similar networks in Southern Africa, on the continent and internationally. Although they work internationally, their present director (Malcolm Damon) works from Cape Town and is a minister of the URCSA.

What about the leadership of churches? The leaders of several major denominations have taken several initiatives to play increasingly active roles. It even seems already as if the public media, at least the newspapers, are taking these church leaders again more seriously and are paying more attention to the activities and positions of churches. It is especially

remarkable that this group of increasingly prominent church leaders also involves many from Evangelical and Pentecostal circles. There is little doubt that these church leaders have a public profile of being concerned about public issues, including poverty, HIV/AIDS and violent crime.

What about ordinary members of these churches? Again, many ordinary members of churches from all traditions and backgrounds in South Africa today increasingly seem to share this commitment. During July 2003 many Christian groups together organised SACLA II in Pretoria, the second South African Christian Leadership Assembly, to identify the so-called “giants” that South Africa is facing, the major public challenges, and to commit themselves to struggle against these giants. They identified HIV and Aids, violence, racism, poverty and unemployment, sexism, and family life in crisis. Well-known public figures, also from politics and business, were in attendance and gave plenary papers, and groups were set up to continue the work after the meeting. Although exceptionally large, SACLA II was just another of many recent initiatives demonstrating that South African Christians are seeking to make a difference.

What about theology, theological studies and theological training? Again, there have been remarkable developments over the last years. Perhaps the Faculty of Theology of Stellenbosch University could serve as just one illustration of what probably applies in many other places as well. There is the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology, that is involved in a wide range of projects (including issues like arms trade, social justice, reconciliation, race and gender questions, and human dignity); there is the Unit for Religion and Development Research involved in a range of activities, from community projects (craft training for unemployed mothers; developing entrepreneurial skills; exposure to local tourism activities) to extensive research and publication; there is the Network for African Congregational Theology, empowering many congregations in Sub-Saharan Africa to deal with the challenges of amongst others the HIV/Aids pandemic; there is the Center for Bible Interpretation and Translation in Africa, training indigenous translators from many African countries involved in publicly distributing the Bible and its message; there is the Bureau for Continuous Theological Education and Research empowering ministers and members from a wide variety of congregations for their service and ministries, including whether consciously the work with the poor and with congregations of the poor; there is the Ecumenical Foundation of Southern Africa, serving the public role of the ecumenical church through its various activities, networks and programs, including conferences (on development; on social capital), public lectures, publications, facilitating dialogue, co-operation and networking (with local and national government on social security; with local and international business on HIV/Aids), actively contributing to public policy, supporting culture and the arts, and encouraging research; there are people deeply engaged in community interaction, for example working in local congregations and communities creating “islands of hope”; there are biblical scholars involved in research projects on reading the Bible by ordinary people and in local communities; there are those giving basic theological training to the membership and leadership of African Indigenous Churches in the Cape Town area, empowering them for their roles of leadership in the community; there are others involved in inter-disciplinary research on church-state relations, on freedom of religion under the Constitution and on concretely implementing social and economic justice according to the Constitution; there are people involved in ecumenical initiatives regarding globalisation, economic injustice and ecological destruction; almost all staff members are active in two joint research projects dealing respectively with combating

poverty and respecting human dignity; there are some who play leading roles in regional and national government initiatives to regenerate public morality and to strengthen responsible leadership; there are those who participate actively in public debates on themes like race, gender and diversity, homosexuality, or language politics and policies in tertiary education – many of these activities clearly have to do with a development agenda, broadly understood.

Of special interest and worth separate mentioning is the fact that new modules on church and development and theology and development have been introduced in recent years as central to the basic theological training of ministers. In Stellenbosch the responsible person was Kalie August, who wrote his own doctoral dissertation on the history of the Moravian Church in South Africa as a history of public church in the service of development (2005). At other universities in South Africa similar and very popular courses on development were introduced, for example in Natal by Steve de Gruchy.

Again, of particular importance is also the extensive research of the Unit for Religion and Development Research, especially the theoretical work by Ignatius Swart on development debates in the ecumenical movement, on people-centered development and on so-called fourth generation development (2006). He speaks and publishes widely on these theoretical discourses, adding a dimension to the church's theological reflection that is most certainly innovative and of crucial importance.

Finally, of special interest too is the extensive research and publication projects on ecological themes by Ernst Conradie, a colleague at the near-by University of the Western Cape. His work is widely read and used, not only in scholarly circles, but also in the popular market. He most certainly contributes to a change of consciousness regarding ecological justice and care and therefore issues of sustainable development. His work on the ecology (2006) has for example very recently been awarded the Andrew Murray prize for popular theological literature for 2007 – showing its popular impact. Several churches, including the URCSA, has made use of his knowledge to develop liturgical material and to organise special worship services on specific Sundays in the year dedicated to meditation on creation. So, what does this picture, regarding denominations and the ecumenical church, say about modernisation and development?

Finally, there is the social form of the church as individual Christian believers, as salt of the earth and light of the world, each involved in their own daily ways of following Jesus Christ and confessing the faith through their lives and actions. This is certainly the direction in which many people will think when they hear the question concerning the influence of the church in society and the impact of modernisation on the church. What are the attitudes of Christian people regarding modernisation and development? How do Christians resist or support these processes? How do they experience processes of modernisation and how do they respond to these processes in contemporary South Africa?

How do they for example contribute to public opinion in this regard? In the two spheres of public life critical for the formation of public opinion, namely the public media – including public broadcasting, television, publishing houses and newspapers – as well as education – including public schools and the tertiary education system – there has been a remarkable silence on the part of the churches in recent years. This is obviously a gross generalisation, but the impression is overwhelming that the church has either retreated or been shifted to the margins. The voice of the church is seldom heard, public declarations on the part of the church are no longer made, church activities are no longer regarded as

interesting news.

What happened, then, to the voice of believers – so clearly heard during the apartheid era as the voice of the voiceless? Still generalising, a few comments may perhaps be fair. Firstly, many Christians probably feel that the voiceless are no longer voiceless and no longer need spokespeople. An advocacy stance, earlier often called contextual and even prophetic, has been replaced by one of gratitude and loyalty, sometimes even uncritical loyalty. For completely understandable reasons many of the former Black and prophetic theologians now serve in Parliament or in very influential positions in government, business, public life and tertiary education. One could interpret this trend positively, arguing that this is precisely the presence of the church in the harsh realities of policy-making, money-making and governance that is urgently needed to contribute to development, but many would of course disagree, missing the element of critique and resistance.

Secondly, some of the Christians who had been involved in defending and practising apartheid clearly lost their nerve and now strive not to make the same mistake twice. Many of them argue that faith and politics do not and should not mix. Many have clearly lost all interest in public issues, in social responsibility, in political involvement and in a calling in everyday life. They have become apathetic and uninvolved. This is clearly an effect of the internalisation of assumptions supposed to belong to modernisation.

Thirdly, in the earliest years of the transformation, the church as church did not visibly, fully and enthusiastically participate in the reconstruction of the new society. In many ways and for many reasons it was not expected of them, and they were not invited. Church leaders did not play active roles in the initial negotiations, they were not there discussing the new Constitution, and they did not participate in the crucial debates on television and in the newspapers about the future of the country. They were onlookers, rather than participants. Even when the church was present, for example in the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, it was an ambiguous presence. While Archbishop Desmond Tutu as chairperson clearly played an incredibly influential and widely respected role as a spiritual person and leader, the official churches did not escape the process without many hesitations, questions and ambiguities.

Fourthly, new forms of Christian spirituality are growing popular who support and undergird new forms of apathy regarding South African realities and public life. Berger and Huntington (2002) demonstrated what others have also already argued, namely that evangelical Protestantism, especially in its Pentecostal version, is one of the major carriers of contemporary cultural globalisation. They document how American-style Pentecostal Protestantism impact on many regions, societies and continents, leading to individuation and an increasing disregard for tradition and collectivity. According to them, this should be understood as “the perduring challenge of modernisation, albeit in an intensified and accelerated form.” This powerful process produces new kinds of Christian people and new kinds of churches, often mega-churches, large congregations and networks, with new spiritual visions, agendas and commitments – which not always call for traditional forms of public service and responsibility, but often rather for privatistic and individualistic, sometimes even self-serving, -rewarding and -enriching forms of life and engagement. The collapse into modernity in its present form of American cultural and economic hegemony also impacts on South Africa. One only has to observe the role of paid television channels, televangelism and American religious broadcasting, many of them proclaiming a success-, prosperity- and wealth-gospel.

The recent survey by The Pew Forum on Religion and the Public Life called “Spirit and power. A 10-country survey of Pentecostals” (October 2006) also included South Africa. It is however not possible to gain any direct information concerning the attitude of South African Pentecostals concerning development issues. When asked about moral and social issues, the emphasis is very much on sexuality, alcoholism, gender issues and abortion. When asked about social and economic issues, the interest is primarily in trust of other people and of institutions and on being careful when dealing with others, on their own financial situation and economic prospects, on views of God as a key determinant of economic success, and on the importance of education. When asked about perceptions of political problems, only three are mentioned in the report, namely corruption among political leaders, moral decline and conflict among religious groups. It would however be unreliable to draw any conclusions based on the absence of development themes, since the questions may not have included such issues. Once again, what does this picture, regarding ordinary believers and their attitudes and convictions say about modernisation and development?

#### CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: CHURCH PRACTICES AND DEVELOPMENT?

In short, what collapsed in South Africa at the beginning of the 90's was much more than just the apartheid regime. What has happened in South African society over the last decade or more was much more dramatic and radical than just the change of government or the transformation of the political sphere. The whole fabric of society itself has been radically transformed and the process is still continuing. It is indeed possible to argue that South Africa collapsed into modernity itself, almost overnight. Social, economic, cultural, legal, educational, legal, intellectual, and indeed political transformations that took centuries to develop in some other countries, particularly in the West, have been happening here within just more than a decade.

Of course, the apartheid regime did collapse and the political transformations took the central stage. The miracle of the rainbow-nation was in the first place and certainly in the first phase a political miracle. During this initial phase the church was certainly involved in a variety of ways and forms. The collapse of the apartheid regime and the miraculous political transformation, however, only paved the way for the real, radical and lasting changes, affecting every fiber of society. The government's own overview of the first decade of democracy covers a full range of social, economic, legal, security, cultural, health, educational, human development, nation-building and other achievements and challenges – and hidden behind these enthusiastic descriptions, ideals and commitments, the face of accelerated and intensified modernity is obvious for anyone to discern.

In sum then, what has been happening with mainline Protestantism in South Africa during these processes of modernisation? How do they respond, and what specifically are their attitudes regarding any development agenda? These questions deserve careful and complex responses. In many ways the impact *on* the church was much stronger than the impact *of* the church on society – the impact of the rapid and radical processes of transformation into a democratic, pluralist modern society, deeply affected by the present worldwide collapse into cultural, economic and political globalisation.

Still, the church in South African society remains a very important presence with a major impact on the lives of many and on the very nature of everyday life, cultural, moral, social, economic, and political. Faith convictions, religious practices, personal spirituality and piety, beliefs and attitudes of religious people most certainly play a major role in the social fabric of

society – yet is it possible to describe this presence more closely, even to ask specifically about the importance of all of this for the development policies and activities of the government and of development agencies? One could only attempt to answer by way of informed observation and generalisations, in the absence of properly researched and documented information.

In the first place, the obvious importance of congregational life and the regular, loyal and often enthusiastic attendance of worship surely indicate that the liturgy and spirituality of the Christian tradition is important for many, and in measurable ways even increasing in importance. At the same time, the story is very complex and can only properly be told with many twists and turns. There are different forms of worship, different forms of spirituality, different reasons why they grow in popularity and influence – and obviously widely diverse forms of impact that they have on society. In Paul Gifford's words, South African society is also inhabited like Africa in general by "different Christianities" at one and the same time (2001). Some forms – propagating individual success, personal happiness, and own achievement – obviously work against agendas of care and people-centered development. Some forms – propagating human dignity and rights, social and economic justice, and eradication of poverty – obviously serve and justify agendas of care and people-centered development. Ironically, all these "different Christianities" may result from processes of modernisation.

Secondly, what is the actual contribution of official denominations and the ecumenical bodies on development? Again, careful distinctions are called for. The impact of modernisation on these churches has been strong – to the point where it seriously challenged their self-understanding and even led to forms of what has been called self-secularisation. Although by far the majority of South Africans are confessing Christians, there is on the surface not much Christian discourse, rhetoric, values and ideals to be discerned in political life. The churches seem to feel that they have to be silent in public. The new sacred canopy rather seems to be provided by modernisation itself, by liberal democracy, strongly individualistic human rights and the highly regarded Constitution.

In this regard, the widely respected South African missiologist and public figure J.J.F. (Jaap) Durand recently published a very insightful analysis of this process (*Ontluisterde wêreld. Die Afrikaner en sy kerk in 'n veranderende Suid-Afrika*, 2002). He refers to forces, other than the political, that have been „unleashed“ during the last decades. These forces „can be rubricated under the headings of secularism and pluralism.“ They have taken on such proportions that the leadership in these Churches „is left baffled, uncertain how to cope with these forces and, paradoxically, with the new forms of spirituality these forces engender.“ This bewilderment paralyzes them, „rendering them incapable of dealing with“ issues of transformation, he argues. His description of the nature of the present transformations is helpful. Modernity, and specifically the forces of secularism and pluralism, has been unleashed in South Africa. The title *Ontluisterde wêreld* alludes to Weber's notion of disenchantment, to describe the quality of life under conditions of modernisation.

One specific effect of this form of modernisation is of course the intellectual challenges it presents to more traditional faith convictions. Also in this respect, the powers of modernisation have certainly been unleashed in many South African churches. It is almost as if many of the developments within critical scholarship during the 19<sup>th</sup> century have only reached ordinary members of these churches since the end of apartheid. Both scholarly theological and more popular books dealing with these questions have overnight been published in numbers. It is still too soon to interpret and evaluate the importance of these developments for the mainline churches in South Africa. It may indeed still turn out to be an important phase of secularisation and self-secularisation, also with implications for their public role and their

commitment to social agendas, but it is not yet possible to know.

Thirdly, in the economic sphere one must already acknowledge the absence of Christian language and commitment in the real corridors of power – although that was also the case during the time of apartheid and the struggle, when all attention was only focused on the state and political power. The free market in the form of global capitalism seems to be the reigning idol, proclaimed and celebrated through popular culture and eagerly worshiped by many, even in many churches. This does not however imply that the church is completely silent. Some Churches, including the Ecumenical Movement in the form of the SACC, the Roman Catholic Church, and many member Churches of the WARC indeed play strong advocacy roles. They even attempt to be prophetic voices in the economic sphere, in the way they did in the political sphere during apartheid. Internally, much is done by way of study, analysis, discussing possibilities, education and distributing information. All of this, however, still seems to have little impact, if any, on the realities of the global economy. Perhaps this is precisely the point, namely that the impersonal, faceless nature of the global economy leads to marginalisation and exclusion, especially of Africa. Even governments lose their power, if not their will, to intervene meaningfully. If the economy is the real battlefield, determining the quality of life of most people in society, then the conclusion should probably be that the church does not yet have much of an impact.

Economic development has of course been at the heart of the transformation in South Africa, and even more so during the presidency of Thabo Mbeki. One government initiative after the other has been framed in terms of development – the original Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the Growth, Employment and Redistribution plan (GEAR), as well as more recent initiatives. South Africa was of course also deeply involved with others in formulating visions for the development of Africa, including the African Renaissance, the present New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the United Nations Millennium Goals (to eradicate poverty and hunger; to achieve universal primary education; to promote gender equality and empower women; to reduce child mortality; to improve maternal health; to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; to ensure environmental sustainability; and to develop a global partnership for development). Although these are national and even international programs and global and comprehensive ideals, it is probably fair to say that South African believers have been and still are supportive of most of these visions and goals. The enthusiasm for some was definitely higher – the RDP and the African Renaissance for example were strongly supported by churches and people as visions to which they were deeply committed. GEAR was more controversial and NEPAD is probably further away from everyday reality and practices.

One specific economic issue with which many mainline churches have been involved is the proposals for a Basic Income Grant (BIG) for all South Africans. The idea is that such a grant would be affordable since it would fact be funded by the more privileged citizens, but that it could make a very meaningful contributions in the lives of really poor people and households, in spite of the fact that the amounts involved are very small. The whole process provides an instructive case study of how mainline Protestant churches can become conscious of and even supportive of a very specific economic project that could perhaps eventually contribute to concrete development actions. Even if this would not be accepted and implemented by government, the initiative most certainly focused the attention and discourses of many in the church on the immediate plight of the poor and on practical but systemic steps to do

something.

Regarding the economy, one more perspective involving another economist with support in the churches may perhaps also be instructive. Sampie Terreblanche published a widely read and influential, albeit controversial, study called *A history of inequality in South Africa 1652-2002* (2002). It offers a detailed historical reconstruction of the developments in the country from systemic exploitation to systemic exclusion. He analyses the complex relationships between power, land and labour through six successive periods of history – from slavery and colonialism to a final phase that he calls “a new accumulation strategy: increased globalisation and privatisation.” He pleads for nothing less than “a new power shift,” although he seems skeptical of the necessary political will to achieve this, today. He is not the only one who suggests that radical socio-economic transformation is needed in South African society, but the fact that he is well-known and respected in the churches and that he is often invited to speak to ministers, theologians and church-people, has the result that these radical proposals are being discussed in church circles. It is obvious that he calls for much more than any normal development agenda to face the real structural challenges of South African economic realities.

Finally, are believers contributing development discourses in the sphere of the public media and the formation of public opinion? The answer is again ambiguous, but probably no. Perhaps understandably, Christians and churches are not seen to be part of the mainstream of voices forming and informing public opinion in South Africa today. In a way this is remarkable, since by far the majority of citizens are confessing Christians and probably deeply religious, but then again there are good reasons explaining this trend, including the privatised role of religion in typically modernised, secular societies.

Again this is important, at least if the development theories also represented by Ignatius Swart (2006) are correct. According to him (following David Korten’s theories of third generation and especially fourth generation development approaches) the most powerful contribution that churches could make to development follows from the fact that churches (at their best) can represent “a politics of ideas,” the fact that they can contribute as “value institutions” in the “unlimited space of social life,” where they impact through “the power of their ideas, their values, their transformed relationships and their communication.” What churches can do best, according to this approach, is “to appeal to and change the attitudes and consciousness of people across boundaries and cultures.” Churches can become “a significant if not indispensable actor in promoting but also resisting the implementation of particular values viewed as the precondition and foundation for meaningful development.” If, therefore, churches, even in the form of individual believers, are not seen as active role players in the formation of public opinion – most probably as a result of the impact of processes of modernity and self-secularisation – then it is obvious that they will also be unable to fulfill this crucial role in fourth generation development.

So, what about civil society? There can be little doubt that the church is very active and crucially important as actor in civil society. What is true of so many other societies in the African continent also applies here, as many recent studies have shown. The activities, funding, involvement, social care and welfare, poverty relief, health services, educational contributions, justice and peace work, and much more in many ways all together form the heart of the functioning of everyday life in South African society. Many local congregations, many denominations and many initiatives of groups of dedicated and caring people do this in collaboration with all kinds of NGO’s and international development agencies, churches, or partner congregations. The number of these activities is hard to imagine. They seem to

exist everywhere. This is of course a major presence, recently leading the state and the private sector to seek for more forms of serious partnership and cooperation, since they realise only too well that without this involvement of the church important parts of life in South Africa would simply be impossible and non-existent.

Recent examples – including speeches by President Mbeki (2002; 2006) and publications by church leader Allan Boesak (2005) – demonstrate that some of the most influential thinkers in the country, both from the side of politics as well as from the side of the churches are convinced that firstly, in spite of and perhaps even as a result of dramatic processes of modernisation, economic and social development in South Africa is not being achieved in the way South Africans would wish, and that secondly, there are resources available in the form of faith and spirituality that could indeed contribute towards more people-centred development.

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