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Freedom of religion and the prophetic role of the church

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the prophetic role of the church in the South African society where the right to freedom of religion is entrenched. It firstly warns that the risk is real that the prophetic voice of the church can become silent and that the church can be co-opted by the agenda of the state that grants this right to religious freedom. Secondly it argues that the prophetic voice of the churches can become silent, because churches are not equipped to fulfil their prophetic calling in a way which is appropriate to the demands of a democratic society where the freedom of the plurality of religious and nonreligious world views are constitutionally recognised. By drawing insights from James Gustafson's distinction between four modes of moral discourse, namely prophetic, narrative, ethical/technical and policy, it is argued that churches can fulfil their prophetic task in our democratic culture where the right to religious freedom exists, in a credible way if they participate in the ethical/technical discourse. It is suggested that churches view the decision to participate in this discourse, that is the option for moral deliberation, not as optional but as a moral choice, that these moral positions are made as far as possible cognitively accessible to non-Christians, that churches strive to reach moral consensus with other role players without becoming unfaithful to their convictions, that churches table their religious convictions in the moral debate in a way that is, as far as possible, accessible to non-Christians, and that churches ensure that people with low or no schooling and who are in various ways marginalised, are included in this moral deliberation.

INTRODUCTION

This article intends to make three points. Firstly it argues that the entrenchment of the right to freedom of religion in the Bill of Rights of the South African Constitution does not mean that the prophetic voice of the church should become silent. Secondly it suggests appropriate ways for speaking prophetically in a democratic society where the right to freedom of religion exists. Lastly this article pleads for and strives to identify a unique Christian prophetic role in a pluralistic society.

1. FREEDOM OF RELIGION – A TEMPTATION TO BECOME SILENT

The South African missiologist Gerrie Lubbe reckons that the description of religious freedom in the 1992 Declaration on religious rights and responsibilities of the South African branch of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP-SA) can be summarised in the following three principles. Firstly the recognition of the reality of religious diversity in South Africa, secondly the separation between religion and state, and thirdly equal opportunities for all religions in societal life (*A Christian perspective on religious freedom in the South African context* 1993:146). These

three principles are also embedded in Article 15 on freedom of religion, belief and opinion of the Bill of Rights of the South African Constitution 1996.

Albie Sachs's view on a secular state is also important for the argument of this paper. Sachs views the relation between the state and religion in a context of religious freedom as follows. He rejects the idea of a theocracy that implies that religious laws determine the civil laws of society. He opts for a secular state. The type of secular state that he envisages does not imply that religion is oppressed by the state. Neither does it imply that religion is being sidelined to the private spheres of life. It rather implies that an autonomous space is reserved for religion within society, but that the state and religion cooperate with regard to issues of mutual concern. A secular state according to this definition, therefore, does not only recognise and cooperate with so-called secular or nonreligious traditions, but also with religious traditions (*To believe or not to believe* 1991:39). Sach's view of a secular state is currently unfolding to a high degree in South Africa. As examples we can cite the continuing state subsidising of the diaconal services of churches, theological training programmes, chaplainry services in state institutions, room for religious education and practices in public schools, access of religious groups to the public media and the declaring of religious days as public holidays.¹ At this point it is appropriate to mention the continual appeal of the state to religious bodies to help building the moral fibre of society and to help addressing immense challenges like poverty and AIDS. The room for religious bodies to influence the lawmaking process by means of proposals to the portfolio committees of parliament also proves this point. One can conclude that the official church and state relationship which exists in South Africa opens the door for churches to engaged prophetically and critically with the governing authorities.

The above-mentioned declaration of the WCRP-SA makes room for the prophetic voice of religion in a context of religious freedom. In Article 3 of the declaration it calls on religious communities to educate their members in spiritual and moral values and to promote these values in society. It should strive to eliminate discrimination based on gender, race, language or social status in their own structures and among their members. Religious bodies are also called upon to critically evaluate all social, economic and political structures and their activities (*Declaration on Religious Rights and Responsibilities* 1992:161).

The North American theologian Stanley Hauerwas outlines the temptation of religious freedom to churches in various publications. In an article titled "The Politics of Freedom. Why Freedom of Religion is a Subtle Temptation", in his book *After Christendom?* (cf his article "The Kingship of Christ: Why Freedom of 'Believe' Is Not Enough" for similar thoughts.) Hauerwas gives reasons why churches are happy with this right: Churches are tempted to think that the protection of the right to religious freedom might give them space to control, if not dominate the public ethos (1991:70). He cites Richard Neuhaus and Robert Bellah as proponent of this ideal of sustaining the public ethos and of serving as critical agents within society (1991:86-88). Hauerwas, however, reckons that the empirical position in the USA indicates that this ideal has not materialised (1991:87-88). On the contrary, he is convinced that the notion of freedom of religion has led to various negative consequences for churches in the USA. Churches feel that they are supposed to form the moral underpinnings of American culture where the century-long Protestant

1 This situation highly resembles the church and state relationships in Germany in terms of Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights that protects the right to religious freedom as an individual right and also as a corporate right. As corporate right it ensures autonomy for religious institutions with regard to their distinctive roles (cf *The Relationship of Church and State – A Perspective on the European Union*).

religious establishment has ended and has not been replaced by any other religion or even by secular humanism (1991:73-74). Hauerwas is, however, of the opinion that “in the process it remains unclear how the church becomes anything more than a court religion held captive to the interests of a nation-state” (1991:74). Churches, according to Hauerwas, are so keen to support the social and legal institutions that sustain freedom of religion that they run the risk of giving in to the temptation of the state to compromise their loyalty to God (1991:70-71).

... in such a context, believer and nonbeliever alike soon begin to think what matters is not whether our convictions are true, but whether they are functional. We thus fail to remember that the question is not whether the church has the freedom to preach the gospel in America, but rather whether the church in America preaches the gospel as truth. The question is not whether we have freedom of religion and a corresponding limited state in America, but whether we have a church that has a people capable of saying no to the state. No state, particularly the democratic state, is kept limited by constitutions, but rather states are limited by a people with the imagination and courage to challenge the inveterate temptation of the state to ask us to compromise our loyalty to God (1991:71).

If churches give in to this temptation the truth we proclaim is no longer the truth of God’s redemption through Jesus of Nazareth, but the “truth” of the state that power and violence finally determine the cause to which we should be loyal (1991:90). Hauerwas reckons that this response of especially Protestant churches in the USA has led to a situation where their members no longer accept their authority. “... freedom of religion has resulted in the corruption of Christians who now believe they have the right religiously ‘to make up their own minds’” (1991:88).

Churches in South Africa, where freedom of religion is also entrenched in the Bill of Rights, should take heed of this warning of Stanley Hauerwas. This warning does not only apply to churches who supported the former liberation movements whose members are now in government, but also to those churches who supported the apartheid regimes and who would like to restore their credibility in the South African society. The first group of churches run the risk of showing uncritical loyalty to the state. The second group should strive to resist the temptation of political correctness and a consequent uncritical stance towards the government in order to regain public credibility.

2. PROPHETIC SPEAKING IN A PLURALISTIC CONTEXT

In the previous section I concurred with the plea of WCRP-SA that religions and, in the case of Hauerwas, churches resist the temptation to abandon their prophetic task in a context where the right to freedom of religion is entrenched. At this point it might be helpful to table my understanding of the concept “prophetic” in this paper. I adhere to the use of this concept in the *Kairos Document* that was written in 1985 by theologians of various confessional backgrounds. This document distinguishes between state theology, church theology and prophetic theology. State theology is a theology that legitimised apartheid. Church theology opposed apartheid but was not capable of engaging in the resistance against apartheid and in transforming society. Prophetic theology is a theology that is capable of discernment, of reading the signs of the times, of determining what the priorities for the life and witness of the church should be. Consequently to be prophetic is to be able to engage critically with society and the state and to participate constructively in transformative praxis. The ecumenical theologian Geoffrey Wainwright also describes the prophetic role of the church in a helpful way. According to him it is the task of the church to show the world where her future really lies. In a world where there, on the one hand, exists an abundance of information and knowledge, and on the other hand a lack of wisdom and

discernment, the church should call people to God's wonderful light (*For Our Salvation* 1995:121-135). The prophetic role of the church, therefore, seems to entail: discerning priorities for the agendas of church and society, portraying the vision of a morally good society, engaging critically and constructively with society and the state, participating in transformative praxis. This understanding of prophetic speaking applies to churches in post-apartheid South Africa as well.

Though it is clear that the church does have a prophetic task and that it should resist forsaking this task in a context of religious freedom, it is not that clear how churches should go about fulfilling their prophetic task in a society where a plurality of religious and nonreligious traditions co-exist and enjoy, and rightly so, constitutional protection. In fact, I think it is exactly this lack of knowledge on how to fulfil our prophetic task in a pluralistic context that causes churches to neglect, unintentionally, their prophetic calling.

I reckon that a distinction used by James Gustafson (*An Analysis of Church and Society Social Ethical Writings* 1988a; *Varieties of moral discourse: prophetic, narrative, ethical and policy* 1988b; *Moral Discourse About Medicine: A Variety of Forms* 1990) might be helpful to South African churches in their quest to fulfil their prophetic calling. In a survey of documents on social ethics of the Church and Society division of the World Council of Churches Gustafson identifies four varieties of moral discourse, that is ways of speaking about morality. He reckons that these ecumenical writings can be divided into the prophetic, narrative, ethical/technical and policy moral discourses.

The prophetic moral discourse takes two distinguishable forms, namely that of indictment and a more utopian form. Indictment points to the roots of moral or social problems. By using vivid language and symbols and by evoking a sense of crisis or urgency, indictment shows how far human society has fallen from what it ought to be. On the other hand utopian discourse, which is similarly vivid, evokes a hopeful vision. It proclaims an ideal state of affairs in the future and allures and motivates people towards its realisation (1989:269). The prophetic discourse, as already suggested in the reference to the *Kairos Document* above, was prominent in the years of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. Apartheid was rejected in strong, dramatic and almost sloganlike language. In the same vein the vision of the post-apartheid society was portrayed in dramatic, alluring and almost sloganlike fashion.

The second discourse that Gustafson identifies, is the narrative discourse (1988a:269). Stories and parables are told of significant events and of moral heroes in the community and tradition. These stories sustain common memory in a community. They shape the consciences, moral identities and characters of members of the community. More than a rigorous casuistic argument stories provide illumination and help in the process of moral decision-making. This discourse is not strange to various African contexts with our strong oral traditions.

Gustafson's third discourse is called the ethical or technical discourse (1988a:269). This discourse uses philosophical and rigorous modes of moral argumentation. Logic, precise distinctions, precision in use of concepts like justice and rights and the identification of the rational grounds of autonomous ethics, which might be backed by Christian convictions that can be shared with non-believers, are typical features of this discourse. The South African ethicist Etienne de Villiers indicates how Christians from both the churches who originally supported apartheid and those who opposed apartheid, did not attend sufficiently to the ethical discourse. The white Dutch Reformed Church that was closely connected to the government enjoyed the power that the so-called state churches previously had enjoyed in Europe. Within this so-called Christendom paradigm the Dutch Reformed Church could to a high degree ensure that their moral positions become law in South Africa (*Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk en die nuwe situasie in die samelewing* 1995:559-560). It is clear that this influencing of public policy could take place without intense attention to the ethical discourse as portrayed above. Attention by government was

given to only one religion, specifically one Christian denomination and religious arguments, which were not necessarily accessible to non-Christians, were offered for moral positions. De Villiers also refers to the liberation theologians that mainly used the prophetic and narrative discourses during the apartheid years and even now in their quest for economic justice in post-apartheid South Africa (*Challenges to Christian ethics in the present South African society* 1999:82). The South African theologian Dirkie Smit also views it as an important challenge to South African churches to fulfil their prophetic-critical calling within the framework of scientific reflection, discussion and dialogue within a specific Christian denomination and also between various Christian denominations. According to Smit prophetic speaking that does not take this route is no longer credible and impressive (*Oor die unieke openbare rol van die kerk* 1996b:199-200). Together with Etienne de Villiers he suggests that the moral positions of Christians be rationally accessible also to non-Christians (*“Met watter gesag sê U hierdie dinge?” Opmerkings oor kerklike dokumente oor die openbare lewe* 1995:54). Smit and De Villiers suggest that engaging in ethical discourse involves speaking together, entering in dialogue. It seems that the practice of Christian ethics within the framework of the ethical discourse is a prominent challenge for the broad spectrum of Christian churches.

The last discourse that Gustafson refers to is the policy discourse (1988a:270). This is the discourse of the policy and decision-makers in society. They are people in positions of authority and responsibility. They deal with questions like: What is desirable within the constraints of what is possible?; Do we have power to affect change?; What are the time frame for the achievement of ends?; Do we have all the necessary information and knowledge? According to Gustafson (1988a:277-278) work in the policy discourse entails that we have to distinguish between matters of ethical principle and the inferences we draw for policy. We can be more certain about the first than the second. De Villiers is of opinion that this discourse needs to get more attention in South African churches. He refers, for instance, to the high levels of corruption in the workplace and is of opinion that churches that engage in the ethical and policy discourses can assist managers to make morally good management decisions and inspire their employees to set a high moral standard in doing their job (1999:83-84).

The four discourses of Gustafson suggest that prophetic speaking in a pluralistic context is crucial, but that it requires engagement in the ethical and policy discourses as well in order to be credible and effective. Gustafson reckons that the moral responsibility of churches is not fulfilled after they have only spoken in the prophetic or narrative mode. “The prophetic discourse in the WCC literature has an important, legitimate, but limited function. It evokes a sense of urgency, and provides images of hope. It appeals not simply to the rational faculties of the readers, but also to their senses of injustice, moral indignation and moral aspiration. Prophetic discourse motivates action, but is not sufficient to direct it. One cannot move from prophecy to policy without the mediation of more specifically stated ethical principles and human values” (1988a:272).² Credible prophetic speaking is not possible if the route suggested by Gustafson is not taken.

In the last section of this article we investigate ways in which the ethical discourse can help churches to fulfil their prophetic calling credibly in a context of religious freedom.

2 According to Gustafson the following theories can be helpful in the technical discourse which guides the way from prophecy to policy, and that, in the language of this paper, eventually assure credible and convincing prophetic speaking. Gustafson cites the theory of middle axioms that was introduced by the ecumenical theologian J Oldham and developed by John Bennett, Karl Barth’s concession to practical casuistry, Reinhold Niebuhr’s dialectic between love and justice, the revisions of the natural law tradition developed by Roman Catholics and K E Kirk (1988a:277).

3. PROPHETIC SPEAKING IN THE ETHICAL MODE

I would henceforth like to make some suggestions on the way in which churches can engage in the ethical discourse. This will enable them to raise their prophetic voice in a credible way. I suggest that churches view dialogue as a moral obligation, that they strive to offer arguments for their moral positions which are accessible to non-Christians and that they seek consensus within a context where a plurality of moral positions exist. As far as the role of religious and philosophical views is concerned, there are mainly two positions. There are those who believe that these views should not play a significant role in moral deliberation. On the other hand, there are those who reckon that these convictions are crucial elements of the moral debate. This last-mentioned debate will also be entertained in this section of the paper.

I believe we can learn a lot from the Dutch ethicist Harry Kuitert who invested much of his theological labour in addressing the question on the place and contribution of the Christian faith and morality in a pluralistic context. Kuitert views the choice for moral deliberation and the quest for moral consensus as a moral obligation. He describes the option for discourse, debate, dialogue, argumentation and moral deliberation as a moral choice. Hereby unfair law enforcement, unjust exercise of power and even violence and bloodshed can be avoided (*Pluraliteit van moraal in de christelijke gemeente* 1981:30-31). Elsewhere Kuitert phrases this conviction as follows:

Zolang we aan ethiek-beoefening doe, wordt er (nog) gepraat in plaas van geschoten. Strikt genomen is de bereidheid om aan ethiek (lees: moreel beraad) te doen, zelf een morele stap (*Morele consensus: mogelijkheden en grenzen* 1988:31).

According to Kuitert the purpose of moral deliberation is to make a moral decision for which reasons can be offered that are accessible to Christians and non-Christians. Moral deliberation should also ensure that consensus is reached on a moral position.³ Kuitert gives a pragmatist and theological rationale why morality is rationally accessible and why the potential for the success of moral deliberation is high. He argues that moral directives were formulated by human beings of all religious and philosophical backgrounds to ensure that the competition for commodities, which are indispensable to sustain life in a so-called pre-moral situation, would not lead to conflict and bloodshed. Moral principles like respect for life, the truth and the property of others (including their bodies) are universally accepted and serve the purpose of the harmonious co-existence of human beings (1981:33-34). The North American ethicist Wayne Boulton also emphasises the rational character of the moral debate. Besides the Bible and the documents of the long Church history he spells out that other disciplines like psychology, sociology, anthropology, medical science are sources for Christian moral decision-making (*From Christ to the World* 1994:6-11)

The theological rationale for Kuitert's option for moral deliberation is well formulated in a book entitled *Alles is politiek maar politiek is niet alles*. In this book he distinguishes between the so-called eternal redemption ("ewige heil") en creation redemption ("skeppingsheil"). The first type of salvation refers to the salvation in Jesus Christ. It has to do with our eternal destiny,

3 The type of consensus that Kuitert refers to has to do with consensus about the so-called social morality or minimum morality, narrow morality. This morality, to which Kuitert refers in various works, entails those moral guidelines without which a society cannot function in harmony. It does not include the so-called morality of the good life, the broader morality that also refers to the religious and philosophical understanding that we do have about life, human beings, society, etc. The narrow morality, therefore, does not include the meaning-giving framework of our moral position.

forgiveness and with the ultimate meaning of life. Only those who believe in Jesus Christ receive this redemption (1985:144-145). The creation redemption refers to our well-being in this world. It has to do with things like parenthood, happiness and prosperity. All human beings share in this redemption as creatures of God (1985:145). Because all human beings receive the creation redemption they are capable of accessing moral knowledge (1985:148). This distinction of Kuitert resembles the traditional Christian convictions that moral knowledge can be acquired by all human beings in terms of the natural law and the common grace of God.

After investigating Kuitert's pragmatic and theological rationale for the moral deliberation of people of various religious and philosophical convictions it might also be helpful to investigate the concrete suggestions he makes for making a moral decision and for reaching moral consensus. He identifies four conditions for fruitful moral deliberation (1988:38-39). Firstly participants must view the option for dialogue as a moral choice per se. Secondly they must be honest and motivated to convince others of their position, but also open for correction. Thirdly arguments in favour of a moral position must be cognitively accessible to all people, no matter what their religious or philosophical background is. Fourthly participants must be willing to give what the deliberation asks for, namely time, energy and patience.

He suggests the following steps for moral consensus (1988:37-40). Firstly moral positions should be tabled without mentioning the reasons for it. Secondly arguments in favour of the moral position should be forwarded. Thirdly thorough attention is being paid to the positions and motivation of participants. Fourthly it is being determined where the differences really lie. Do participants, for instance, differ on the description of the problem or do they differ on the validity of a moral rule? Lastly the various elements of every moral position is analysed, namely the appropriate information, the tradition of the specific participant, the intuition of the participant (intuition referred to his or her position before the reflective phase), the motivation of the participant, the purpose (*telos*) of the decision, the appropriate interests, the experiences of the participant and lastly, and only if it is really acquired, the religious or philosophical position of the participant.

Kuitert's suggestion involves that religious arguments not be tabled. He reckons that it will hamper the possibility of consensus. Moreover, it is his conviction that the religious positions of people will become clear without having to explicitly table it. It should only be tabled if consensus is not reached after the above-mentioned steps. The North American theologians Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen, who also plead for the rational legitimation and the intellectual accessibility of our moral decisions, call this stage the level of ultimacy where people's ultimate loyalties, interests, commitments and beliefs, or what Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, according to them, calls people's "can't helps", are tabled. They refer to Aiken who calls this phase the post-ethical phase (*Bible and ethics in the Christian life* 1989:112). To reach consensus, we should, according to Kuitert, take the route of rational moral deliberation.

Various critical questions can be posed to this rational approach to moral decision-making. The first set of questions can be formulated as follows. Is it possible to separate moral arguments from religious positions? In the same vein, is it possible to separate my identity that is formed by my religious or philosophical position in this neat way from my moral position? Is it possible to speak of rationality in a religion-independent way? The Dutch ethicist Gerrit Manenschijn agrees that the moral debate should be informed by technical expertise, but he disagrees with the role that Kuitert gives to religion in the moral discourse. He is of the opinion that it is not possible to come to a moral decision without visions of the good life. It is not possible to reach a responsible moral decision in the field of medical ethics, for instance, without addressing religious and philosophical questions about that which makes life good for healthy people and for sick people (*Consensus en dissensus in de ethiek* 1994:138). The North American ethicist Lisa Cahill is also of opinion that

it is impossible to enter the public moral discourse from a tradition-independent position: “No politician, philosopher, or ‘humanist’ marches into the contest armed only with the sharp sword of reason, stripped naked of the costume of any moral culture – however invisible he or she might wish that clothing to be” (*Can Theology have a role in “Public” Bioethical discourse?* 1994:376). Manenschijn even argues that religious or philosophical arguments be tabled in the moral deliberation, from the start, because it will inform and enhance the debate. Manenschijn describes himself as a pluralist, because he makes room for religious and philosophical views in the moral debate. He views Kuitert as a liberalist thinker since he does not view religious and philosophical views as essential for the debate. Kuitert only views the rationalistic presumptions of the liberal philosophies as essential for moral deliberation (1994:138).⁴

One is in agreement with Manenschijn on the role of religious and philosophical traditions – not only due to fundamental theological reasons,⁵ but also due to practical considerations. With the last remark I refer to the high percentage of South Africans whose moral positions are informed by their religious convictions. If we, however, do table our religious positions from the start of the debate, it is important that we use language that is accessible to non-Christians. In this regard Cahill suggests that we use moral quandaries, moral sensibilities, moral images and moral vocabulary shared among other religions and moral traditions. She is of opinion that Jeffrey Stout’s notion of a “creole” language that begins as a simplified “bridge dialect” to enable communication among unconnected communities, but that eventually gets rich enough to be used as a language of moral reflection, can be helpful in this regard (1994:376). This creole language develops, according to Stout, as the result of the “bricolage” among dialogue partners who speak beyond, but always out of, their own traditions. Bricolage refers to the borrowing among partners of what is handy, appropriate and communicative in jostling, negotiating and persuading towards a common moral sense (Cahill 1994:373). The public moral debate in South Africa has already led to broad consensus amongst various religious and nonreligious traditions on the general moral principles embedded in the Bill of Rights. The notion of a bricolage and the eventual development of a creole language can perhaps help South African churches in their quest for consensus with regard to the application of these general principles to concrete moral situations.

Motivation for this quest is strengthened if we consider the unique contribution that the Christian religion, for instance, can make towards the moral debate. In his doctoral dissertation Etienne de Villiers described the unique contents of Christian morality: Although Saint Paul borrows from the morality of the Stoa, that part of their moral contents which he omits is significant, for example polygamy, paid marriages and glorification of the fatherland. Although the

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- 4 Kuitert’s position does not imply an absolute independence from religion. His theory of the creation redemption opens the door for Christians to acknowledge that the moral insights of people of other faith convictions might be informed by the triune God whom Christians worship and therefore deserves attention. One might even say that Kuitert also does not suggest that our rationality is independent of our religious tradition. In fact, he states that our religious convictions will become evident as the discussion unfolds. However, he asks that we, as far as possible, do not explicitly table our religious convictions as arguments in favour of our moral position. There is only room for this explicit articulation of our religious conviction if we do not reach consensus. Still this space that Kuitert grants to religion is not sufficient. The question remains whether it is possible to distance yourself, even if it is just for the initial phases of the moral conversation, from your religious or philosophical convictions.
- 5 It is especially the so-called post-liberal theologians of the Yale school in the USA, amongst others, who argue strongly in favour of the close relation between religious and moral views, and also for the fact that rationality is not tradition free as liberal thinkers suggest (cf Koopman, N, *Dade of deugde? Implikasies vir Suid-Afrikaanse kerke van ’n modern-postmoderne debat oor die moraliteit* 2000:144-145).

commandment to love your neighbour is not unique to Christianity, the fact that Jesus Christ universalised it to include all human beings and radicalised it to include even the so-called enemy is unique. This commandment helps Christians in determining their moral priorities. Two other moral notions, according to De Villiers, that Christianity can offer to the public moral discourse, are that of sacrifice and humility (*Die Eiesoortigheid van die Christelike moraal* 1978:185-212). Christians are in agreement, for instance, that social justice is not possible without the willingness to sacrifice. I think that the public moral debate in South Africa will be poorer if these contents are omitted from it.

We should also take heed to respect the views of other religious and nonreligious traditions and, while we stay true to our own religious convictions, resist debating in an imperialistic mode.

The second set of questions deals with the exclusive nature of moral deliberation. In a country like South Africa where the level of illiteracy is high, this approach that assumes technical expertise might exclude millions of people from the conversation. The South African theologian Jim Cochrane pleads strongly that creative ways be searched for to ensure the participation of these people in the moral debate (*Theological reflection on public policy* 1997:1-15). He views it as the task of the church to protect, in the words of Habermas whom he refers to, the life worlds (i.e. the life views and actions which provide coherence and direction to life) from the system (i.e. the objective economic and political structures of power which serve as the steering mechanisms of modern societies), especially where the system threatens the human dignity and quality of life of the citizens of a society (1997:11). He argues that it is the task of the church, as the one sector of civil society that reaches into virtually every historically disempowered community in South Africa, no matter how small (1997:4, 12), to help equipping local communities with the skills, capacities and resources that will allow them to participate effectively in the public discourse (1997:4, 11). The Dutch scholar Gerben Heitink also supports this education role of the church. He pleads that the congregation be a community of teaching and learning where people are not only inspired for their public responsibilities, but where they are, with the help of, amongst others, people from various appropriate professions, also equipped with technical skills for this task (*Het publieke karakter van de kerk* 2000:272).

Cochrane stresses the importance of the participation of the powerless and marginalised because, unlike the powerful and privileged, they are aware of the negative effects of decisions and they thereby provide us with a broader and deeper knowledge of the nature of society (1997:8). Cochrane also reckons that the public moral debate can be enriched by subjugated knowledges, that is the “enormous wells of meaning and cultural and religious resources for life to be tapped” from the memory of struggle against oppression and marginalisation. For Christians this recovery of subjugated knowledges is not only a human, social and ethical task, but also a theological one, since the memory of suffering and the celebration of victory over the forces of death is the central eucharistic symbol of the Christian faith (1997:12).

He strengthens his plea for the participation of powerless people in the moral discourse by drawing insights from the feminist theory on the geographical modalities of space and place in the construction of the self and the other. Space is a fabric of continually shifting sites and boundaries. He refers to the abortion issue and states that this debate should take all the boundaries, which distinguish some people from others in relation to their access to power, into account. In the abortion debate there is not only one boundary, namely the body of either the mother or the foetus. There are also economic, social, race and gender boundaries that are important to the debate. These boundaries are affirmed by statistics that indicate that it is the poorest, usually black, often unemployed woman who most often seeks back street abortions. These boundaries (poor, black, unemployed, woman) should be taken into account in the moral debate about abortion (1997:12-14).

CONCLUSION

A last concluding remark would suffice. The central argument of this article that we should engage in the ethical discourse in order to fulfil our prophetic calling should not inhibit the more vocal speaking and the visible presence of the church in society. The plea of this article does not call on churches to neglect the functions of indictment and envisioning of the prophetic discourse. On the contrary, this discourse helps us to make sure that the vital questions in society are addressed. Our prophetic task, however, cannot stop at this level. To be credible, accountable and convincing it should explore and exhaust the possibilities offered by the ethical discourse.

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