

# Resurgent Fundamentalism, Politics, and the Anti-Liberal Agenda: Challenges for South Africa's Constitutional Democracy

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## Abstract

Against the background of changes in the religion-state relationship in South Africa since 2009, this essay provides the foundational history of a resurgent fundamentalist Christian alliance that seeks to exert influence in politics, state institutions, and civil society. The discussion includes the growth of fundamentalist groups in the United States that established the religious right as a political force on which the alliance's stringent anti-liberal agenda and strategies are modelled. In conclusion, the unlimited right to religious freedom is questioned in the context of guarantees of protection from discrimination in a constitutional democracy.

**Keywords:** Fundamentalism, anti-liberal, Kingdom Nation, New Apostolic Reformation (NAR), religion and state, constitutional democracy

## Introduction

Christian fundamentalism has a presence in South African history from the pre-transition era to the present. The resurgence of the fundamentalism discussed in this essay can be viewed in three ways. In the narrowest sense, it refers to a specific fundamentalist Christian initiative called the Kingdom Nation (KN) that made its public emergence in South Africa in 2018. It also refers to a broader affiliation of churches, supporting a common goal to transform South Africa into a 'Kingdom Nation' under God's law. In the broadest sense, the term 'KN' in this essay includes the global 'Kingdom Now' movements originating in the United States (US) that are united

towards achieving the same ends and on which the local expression is modelled. While Kingdom Now theology emerged within the Charismatic sector of Protestant Christianity, there is no easy categorization of the terms ‘charismatic’, ‘evangelical’, and ‘Pentecostal’, as it all brings varying degrees of influence to Kingdom Now movements, despite the degrees of divergence in its independent identities. What unites these terms, however, is that all three share, on a continuum, an emphasis on the Holy Spirit, a belief in spiritual gifts and miracles, and an affirmation of the Pentecostal experience. Adding complexity is the fact that followers within the three traditions fall across the conservative to liberal spectrum on various issues and, unlike the KN movements, cannot be blanketly categorized as fundamentalist.

Christian fundamentalism has undergone many changes since its emergence in the late 1800s as a reaction to the theological accommodation of developments in the biological and natural sciences, and to Darwin’s theory of evolution in particular. Reasserting the inerrancy of the Bible and creationism, fundamentalism was a reaction to both theological modernism and social liberalism, and advanced social change as a means of building the Kingdom of God on earth. It is worth noting that the Fundamentalism Project conducted by American scholars, Martin Marty and Scott Appleby from 1987 to 1995, viewed fundamentalism primarily as the militant rejection of secular modernity. Like its global fundamentalist counterparts, the KN adopts a strong anti-liberal agenda and, in rejecting passive and private Christianity, works to influence national politics and policy to achieve its goals. David Chidester (2008:364) proposes a concern about fundamentalism ‘because the term configures a crisis that is local, resonating within our national and intimate politics’. What he correctly infers, is that fundamentalism is a problematic phenomenon that necessitates attention, not least for the breadth of its intrusion into the political realm and into the politics that govern the private lives of citizens. The KN, as with each expression of Christian fundamentalism, arose in response to specific sets of historical, social, and political circumstances. Looking at the media and academic interest in fundamentalism, Chidester finds it ‘appearing during the 1970s as contrary to the apartheid state, during the 1980s as legitimating the apartheid state, and during the 1990s as resisting the new democratic dispensation’ (Chidester 2008:350).

Although there are complex intersections between the current wave of fundamentalism and the aforementioned, it is a resistance to aspects of the

new democratic dispensation that marks the KN's program of action to undo what it deems to be unbiblical changes in legislation and in society. This is clearly evident in a comment made by Errol Naidoo, the founder of the Family Policy Institute (FPI) who, at the ultra-conservative World Congress of Families summit in Hungary, 2017, was quoted saying that after the end of the apartheid regime, 'the doors were thrown open and an ultra-liberal constitution was imposed on us...and all kinds of wickedness came into South Africa including pornography' (Mugo 2018).

The marked difference from prior expressions of fundamentalism is that the KN initiative has developed a meticulous strategy to overturn what it deems the 'liberal agenda', not only in legislation but also in state institutions and all sectors of society. A further difference from its predecessors is that the KN argues in public statements that it speaks as the voice of the Christian majority in the country. Their arguments and strategies are modelled on specific fundamentalist schools of thought arising in the US from the 1970s, and their timing is grounded in Kingdom theology that teaches the urgency of manifesting heaven on earth in the present as an essential antecedent to the return of Jesus. Fundamentalism is not a term with which members of the KN alliance publicly identify, but it is used here as a broader description of an alliance that conforms to Gerald West's assessment of right-wing fundamentalism as 'rooted in anti-scientific, anti-intellectual, and Pentecostal tendencies' (West 2010b:105).

As biblical literalists, KN believers are uncompromising in their view that society has moved away from God, who has provided them with the mandate for its transformation prior to the return of Jesus. The application of biblical law in a radically diverse and plural nation that has constitutionally moved away from the privileging of any single religion, warrants concern, particularly in light of the influence that the KN has exerted in politics and in challenging legislation promulgated to represent and protect the rights of all citizens in a constitutional democracy. This essay is intended as a foundational document, providing as much detail as possible on the individuals and organizations involved in the current resurgence of fundamentalism and on their local and global political and religious influences. Within the wide scope of the essay, I acknowledge the numerous issues and connections raised that warrant extended academic attention.

## **Evangelicalism, Politics, and the State – Post-2009**

Changes in the relationship between religion, politics, and the state followed Jacob Zuma's appointment as president of South Africa in 2009. This laid the groundwork for a resurgent fundamentalism with unprecedented social and political influence. In his detailed essay on the deployment of religion by the African National Congress (ANC) after their succession to power in 1994, West notes Thabo Mbeki's shift away from Nelson Mandela's 'careful refusal to use religion in the public domain' (West 2010b:90). At the 4<sup>th</sup> Nelson Mandela Memorial Lecture in 2006 (Nelson Mandela Foundation 2006), Mbeki introduced a religio-spiritual imperative as integral to social transformation in saying that the country needs 'what Nelson Mandela called an "RDP of the soul"' (West 2010b:93). This was adopted by the ANC, which, at their 52<sup>nd</sup> National Conference held in December 2007 in Polokwane, developed the 'RDP of the soul' Policy Discussion Document through their Commission on Religious Affairs (ANC 2007). Under the title 'The role of religion', this document includes a sub-section headed 'Right wing Fundamentalism' in which it notes that '[t]he fastest growing religion in the world including Africa today is right wing fundamentalism' (West 2010b:105), which has, alongside agnosticism, filled a vacuum created by the failure of the sectarian and institutional sectors to liberate religion from its colonial past (West 2010b:105). Acknowledging the potential for extremism in fundamentalism, the section concluded that 'fundamentalism is a major problem preventing transformation' (West 2010b:105).

When Zuma became president in May 2009, the ANC's assessment of fundamentalism underwent rapid changes, as he was 'robustly Christian in his religious discourse [and seen as] favouring the Evangelical-Pentecostal-Charismatic forms of Christianity' (West 2010a:51). West adds that this position falls 'within the broad band of Church Theology, an evangelical form of theology in which the primary terrain of religion is personal morality' (West 2010a:64). Zuma's presidency marked increased dialogue between the ANC and the churches, as he publicly dismantled the boundaries between politics and religion in political campaigns and public appearances. In 2009, Zuma visited the Charismatic-Evangelical-Pentecostal Rhema Bible Church of Pastor Ray McCauley, which takes what West describes as a 'politically conservative and theologically "fundamentalist" stance' (West 2010a:54). In what was judged as a controversial speech, Zuma openly declared to conger-

gants that ‘government should open its doors to enable interaction with faith-based organisations on policy and implementation’ (West 2010a:53). A conservative moral agenda is the province of fundamentalist Christian churches such as Rhema, and what is of interest is Zuma’s almost prophetic allusion to potential religion-state conflicts, ‘especially concerning some laws seen to be progressive such as the “termination of pregnancy legislation” or “legislation for civil unions of people for the same sex”’ (West 2010a:53-54). The rising prominence of a politicized evangelicalism laid the ground for the resurgence of a fundamentalism that, as in the KN initiative, would politically and socially target these pieces of legislation as necessitating repeal on account of their being against the will of God.

In September 2011, Zuma appointed Mogoeng Mogoeng as the new chief justice. Objections to Mogoeng’s appointment were widespread<sup>1</sup> and centered largely on constitutional concerns considering his prior morally conservative judgments. On his blog *Constitutionally Speaking*, Pierre De Vos (2011), a constitutional law scholar, questioned the potential ‘consequences for the implementation of the transformative vision embodied in the South African Constitution’, while realistically noting that the appointment would be welcomed by many conservatives ‘who are uncomfortable with the progressive, pro-poor and pro-diversity trajectory of the Constitutional Court’. In response to the breadth of objections, Mogoeng (2011) issued a public statement in which he reiterated his conviction that God had willed his appointment, and affirmed the primacy of God over government institutions in saying, ‘Everyone must submit himself [sic.] to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established’.

In his keynote paper at the 2014 Law and Religion in Africa Conference held at Stellenbosch University, Mogoeng (2014:4) shared his personal belief that ‘[w]e can only become a better people if religion could be allowed to influence the laws that govern our daily lives starting with the Constitution of any country’. This controversial statement alarmed many in the audience, as did his argument that crime, corruption, and moral degeneration in society ‘would in my view be effectively turned-around significantly, if religion were to be factored into the law-making process’ (Mogoeng 2014:5). Mogoeng’s statements must be contextualized within his

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<sup>1</sup> One of the more noteworthy parliamentary objections to President Zuma was risen by DA leader, Helen Zille on September 5, 2011 (Zille 2011).

religious capacity as an ordained pastor in the Winners Chapel Church, a branch of the global megachurch Living Faith Church Worldwide, founded in 1981 by Nigerian bishop, David Oyedepo. Winners Chapel is ubiquitously identified as an Evangelical-Charismatic Christian denomination that, according to Tim Cocks (2014), ‘preaches the “prosperity gospel” that faith in Jesus Christ lifts people out of poverty’. Mogoeng has become an exemplary model of what the KN refers to as ‘righteous government’ that they argue is prerequisite to the transformation of the South African society. In the elevated interplay between churches, politics, and the state, many state officials became less reticent in publicly voicing their religious convictions, while fundamentalism made a transition from being identified as a threat to transformation to, in some quarters, being heralded as a potential key to its achievement.

## **The New Apostolic Reformation**

A discussion of the South African KN initiative and the larger Kingdom Now movements in Africa and abroad must be preceded by an overview of the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) and its scale of influence on the motivation and strategies of both these movements. The NAR is a term associated with both the Pentecostal revival of the early 1900s and with a resurgence of Charismatic Christian movements in the 1960s and 1970s. This movement is not an organization with a single spokesperson and while its central tenets are easily identifiable, it is not a common term of self-identity for its millions of adherents, who are more likely to identify as members of their specific churches or organizations.

The theoretical model that can best be applied to a sociological understanding of the NAR and the local KN is the still valuable 1968 SPIN theory<sup>2</sup> introduced by Luther Gerlach and Virginia Hine as a model for movements that are segmented, polycentric, integrated networks (Gerlach & Hine 1968). It is segmented in being composed of many diverse churches and organizations that might, or might not, be constant to the movement into the future; it is polycentric in the autonomous leadership of each segment and with different leaders applying their unique skills to various internal projects; and it conforms to integrated networks in the sense of having multiple

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<sup>2</sup> A synopsis of this theory can be found in Gerlach (2001).

linkages that share a loose collective identity, identify common opponents, and unite in certain strategies and activities towards achieving a common goal.

The joint commitment of these autonomous groups is enhanced through a series of collective actions and strengthened through the interaction and mobilization on digital and social media platforms where their common sense of purpose is ratified. A common feature that unites the autonomous parts of the NAR is the primacy given to direct, embodied, often ecstatic religious experiences and to the validation of the power of earthly apostles and prophets to interpret not only God's word but also the signs and wonders that indicate God's intervention in an immoral world that necessitate their individual and collective response. Their aim of building a Kingdom of God on earth is therefore contingent on the cultural and political transformation of society and the uprooting of any agendas deemed to contradict biblical values.

The NAR was first identified by C. Peter Wagner, who was an apostle, theologian, and missionary. He developed a theology of spiritual warfare as the means for social transformation. A critic of this theology, Churchwatcher, provided a synopsis of Wagner's 2010 publication, *Wrestling with alligators, prophets and theologians: Lessons from a lifetime in the church* (Wagner 2010) in which Wagner contextualizes the radical transformation of society in terms of the Dominion Mandate, the 7 Mountains Mandate (7MM), and the Great End-Time Wealth Transfer. Here the Dominion Mandate is described as 'seeing the Kingdom of God actually being manifested here on earth as it is in heaven' (Churchwatcher 2017:261), central to which is the breaking of the cycles of poverty and moral decay through spiritual warfare. Wagner and other NAR apostles taught that God has revealed the 7MM as a strategy for bringing Godly change to a nation by reaching its seven spheres/mountains and thus securing dominion over the earthly kingdom. Interpretations of this revelation are that there are seven mountains of societal influence that must be penetrated and transformed for this to be achieved. According to the mandate, the seven mountains are education, religion, family, business, government/military, arts/entertainment, and the media (Churchwatcher 2017:262-263). It is within this framework that autonomous groups and individuals are urged to bring their unique skills and influence to the transformation of one or more of these domains.

The Great Wealth Transfer is effortlessly included in this prosperity gospel and speaks to the transfer of wealth to churches, apostles, and prophets through tithing and appeals for donations, justified as enabling them to work effectively on Kingdom goals. Further inspiration for the goals, language, and strategies of the NAR is provided by the history of The Great Awakenings, which dates to a sequence of evangelical revivals from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century (cf. History.com Editors 2019). In 2000, Robert Fogel, an economist and Nobel laureate, diagrammed The Phases of the Four Great Awakenings to underscore the role of evangelicalism in the abolition of slavery and the unique role of evangelical awakenings in defeating moral crises. In describing the rising political effect of the Fourth Awakening, Fogel (2000) includes the ‘rise of pro-life, pro-family, and media reform movements’ that provide a template for action across the rising local and global KN movements. This activism has in turn driven an unprecedented escalation in discriminatory legal and social initiatives based on a fundamentalist interpretation of biblical morality.

Whether or not Wagner (2011) was correct in asserting that ‘[t]he roots of the NAR go back to the beginning of the African Independent Church Movement in 1900’, its influence became increasingly visible in apostle- and prophet-led evangelical churches across sub-Saharan Africa. A comparative analysis of the intersections in NAR influence in these churches and the KN initiative is beyond the scope of this essay, although the elevated religious, social, and political powers and influences wielded by earthly apostles and prophets are significant. For the KN and all Kingdom Now initiatives, the Dominion Mandate provided a clarity of purpose and urgency, while the 7MM gave a cohesive structure to strategies for social transformation.

## **The Kingdom Nation**

No religious movement starts in a vacuum, and to grow sufficiently in strength and numbers to be of influence in society requires a high degree of receptivity to religious rhetoric entering the public domain. Religio-political changes from 2009 and the proliferation of churches grounded in NAR teachings, provided a fertile field in which several fundamentalist Christian organizations, churches, and advocacy groups could join forces in pursuance

of a meticulously detailed program to fulfil the Dominion Mandate. The most prominent faces of the local KN are local Bible teacher and business consultant, Arthur Frost, who actively works on implementing Kingdom principles in the marketplace; Pearl Kupe, a Zimbabwean-born apostle, lawyer, and activist, who oversees the running of the Kingdom Mandate Assembly and who has a powerful media presence; and Arno van Niekerk, a senior lecturer in economics at the University of the Free State, who can be credited for the systematic development and implementation of 7MM strategies towards transformation. He has been a speaker at the Mighty Men Conferences held by evangelist Angus Buchan since 2004 and is the organizer of its offshoot, Mighty Families. On the website promoting Van Niekerk's book, *Enough!: What is the plan?*, it describes his 'unique understanding of how to advance the Kingdom [and that the book was written] as a wake-up call and prophetic announcement to South Africa' (Van Niekerk n.d.). Integral steps taken by Van Niekerk to activate this prophecy can be found in a triangle of initiatives that are underpinned by an anti-liberal political and social agenda. Van Niekerk is recognized as a prophetic voice and his prophecy that God has revealed his will and plan for transformation in South Africa has been supported by other prophetic voices within the KN and in the wider evangelical sector.

Common to NAR thought is consensus that obeisance is to God's laws and that government should follow the lead of the churches. This conviction informed the attention that the KN gave to the national elections, held on May 8, 2019. Fully integrated with the pre-planned 2019 agenda of the KN and yet prior to its official launch, the first public initiative was the laying of foundations for the New Nation Movement (NNM). Clearly stating its location within the 7MM, the NNM was 'founded in April 2017 by Christian South Africans from a variety of backgrounds that want to implement transformation in South Africa – in each sector of society, including the government' (Joy! News 2020).

Underpinned by the tenets of the NAR, this project addressed what were considered to be systemic failures in governance and the proclivity to corruption, facilitated by the lack of accountability that parliamentarians have to their constituencies through the current electoral system. Section 19:3(b) of the Bill of Rights, which grants the constitutional right of any individual 'to stand for public office and, if elected, to hold office' (South Africa 1996)

was, however, not legislated into the Electoral Act 73 of 1998<sup>3</sup>. The KN goal was to achieve this correction prior to May 8 in order to facilitate the election of independent candidates to national and provincial government, where they would serve as ‘righteous leaders’ in a transformed nation. On its website (New Nation 2020), the NNM interestingly does not present itself as a religious or political organization, while its inclusive invitation for support raised later concerns in the KN community. In response, Van Niekerk consistently gave assurances on social media that the NNM would never compromise biblical principles<sup>4</sup>. The NNM and allied applicants appeared in the Western Cape High Court in March 2019 and drew support from the 2018 judgment on political funding by Chief Justice Mogoeng in which he had affirmed the individual rights in Section 19:3(b) of the Constitution (Herman 2018). In April the case was dismissed by Judge Desai but, bypassing an appeal to the High Court, the NNM application was given a hearing at the Constitutional Court on May 2, 2019. Despite the dismissal of the case on urgency, the ConCourt decided that the matter warranted a full hearing, which took place on August 15, 2019. On June 11, 2020, the ConCourt found in favor of the NNM and allied applicants.

The second initiative was Van Niekerk’s launch of the Christian Consensus, drafted on the basis of responses he had received from 200 Christian leaders on their ‘10 principles/focus points that would be their highest priority if a Christian government took office’ (Gateway News 2019a). Each of the points presents a biblically based vision for a society, with point nine including the aim to ‘uproot the liberal agenda’ (Gateway News 2019a). The Consensus was followed by the Kingdom Nation Declaration (Buchan 2019) and both applied to a campaign to attract support from politicians and leaders in religion, business, and civil society.

According to Naidoo (2019), the Consensus was sent to all political parties and party leaders with its goal being ‘to inform and educate political

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<sup>3</sup> There are two precedents in support of this argument. The first is the Report of the Electoral Task Team (2003), also known as the Slabbert Report, while the second is the Motlanthe Report of 2017 (Motlanthe 2017).

<sup>4</sup> To reinforce these assurances, Van Niekerk uploaded a video on Facebook: Kingdom Nation, titled ‘Message 17 April 2019’, stating the uncompromising position of his initiatives and explaining how all three work in unison (Van Niekerk 2019e).

parties in Parliament about the values and principles that are shared by the vast majority of citizens in South Africa'. Arguing that this majority is in 'support [of] traditional family values' (Naidoo 2019), the fact that the ruling ANC and the Democratic Alliance (DA) as official opposition both 'promote a liberal secular humanist ideology' (Naidoo 2019) was deemed inexplicable. Arguing that liberal ideology is a minority position, Naidoo's conclusion was that '[c]onsequently, liberal secular humanism is magnified and grossly over-represented in the South African government while the conservative values of the majority of citizens are marginalised' (Naidoo 2019).

Extending alliances across all political parties was a critical factor in exerting a broader influence in the upcoming elections and, on Human Rights Day, March 21, 2019, all political leaders were invited to Gallagher Estate for a Christian Consensus meeting, hash tagged as #ElectionsDivineIntervention. Van Niekerk then posted an invitation<sup>5</sup> to a National Intervention meeting on April 6 at the Doxa Deo Church in Pretoria, where the KN initiative was publicly launched with over 400 church, political, business, community, and traditional leaders in attendance, and the Kingdom Declaration was signed. Drawing directly on historical evangelical revivals/awakenings, Van Niekerk was quoted as saying, 'By signing this declaration, the great awakening of the Church has now officially begun' (Becker 2019). How far the commitment to this signing was taken by political leaders was never fully disclosed, but the degree of receptivity to invitations underscores the degree to which politicians and political parties are attentive to the powers of the churches in influencing electoral outcomes and the personal religiosity of numerous key figures.

On April 20, 2019, Van Niekerk's Christian Consensus and the inclusive Kingdom Nation held a prayer meeting at Victory Sandton Church, Johannesburg, at which Kupe gave an opening speech on God's mandate for transformation<sup>6</sup>. Coverage of this event in online media was framed in the language of the NAR and structured around the goals of Dominionism and the 7MM. Gateway News (2019b) cited Janet-Brann Hollis, prophetess and founder of SA Back to God, testifying to 'the anointing of politicians' and, according to Kupe, '[a] shift truly took place in our midst' (Gateway News

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<sup>5</sup> This invitation lists the alliance partners, the key leaders invited, and the purpose of the gathering (Van Niekerk 2019f).

<sup>6</sup> Kupe's video invites everybody to join the Kingdom Nation (Kupe 2019).

2019b). To this, anti-NAR Christian blogger, Rick Becker cynically responded that ‘I would agree that a “shift took place” at this event. A shift away from scripture and into the false teachings of the NAR such as Dominionism and Word of Faith heresy. This event led by Dr Arno Van Niekerk was unashamedly promoting NAR teachings’ (Becker 2019).

Online responses to these politicized events reflected a widespread rejection of supporting any leader considered ‘righteous’, if their party endorsed a liberal agenda and/or failed to denounce the Choice of Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1996 and the Civil Union Act (17) of 2006 under which same-sex couples can be legally married. A specific example was made of the DA, which supports these rights, notwithstanding that its then leader, Mmusi Maimane, a pastor and elder of the evangelical Liberty Church, has supported the Declaration and has given an impassioned address at the Victory Sandton Church gathering<sup>7</sup>. Again tasked to respond to KN voter concerns over the prospects of voting for any party that supports ‘liberal’ legislation, Van Niekerk (2019a) uploaded a video on Facebook in which he stressed that the Christian Consensus is uncompromising and ‘will never support any liberal policies by liberal parties’. The results of the national election failed to reflect any impact of a fundamentalist Christian vote, but the disappointment throughout the KN initiative was assuaged by Mogoeng who, in the mindset and language of the NAR, offered his opinion that

[w]e must stop trying to answer our own prayer...once God has released a prophetic word, our responsibility is to hold onto it and pray it into manifestation relentlessly...Christians must key into the revival that has permeated South Africa and Africa and never give up, no matter the opposition, no matter the attacks (Viljoen 2019).

On May 22, 2019, newly appointed members of Parliament were sworn into office by Mogoeng, who took the unprecedented step of kneeling in a three-minute prayer at the commencement. This was praised on all fundamentalist Christian media platforms and simultaneously attracted pockets of criticism

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Maimane’s speech calling for repentance at Victory Church Sandton (Maimane 2019). In this speech, he reiterates the KN message that God has prophesied South Africa’s readiness for a harvest.

from other quarters. In Christian online media, Mogoeng is quoted re-raising the now global trope of Christian persecution by saying, ‘There’s a barrage of attacks against Christians when they seek to exercise their right to live out their faith’ (Viljoen 2019). In response to what he called ‘a trend to try and intimidate Christians out of Christianity’ (Viljoen 2019), he is quoted calling for Christians to ‘feel absolutely free to initiate prayer at their workplace or wherever they were’ (Viljoen 2019). This assertion from so high an office underscores another dominant KN narrative, namely the call for freedom to express religious beliefs and practices in all private and public spaces. Any restriction on these freedoms conflicts with the 7MM, where every sphere of society is targeted for transformation, and whether or not all followers are informed of its history is inconsequential to the fact that dominion over these spheres/mountains is reinforced in all KN messaging. Fully consistent with Dominion theology, the KN and other NAR apostles advocate that the cornerstone to success in complete transformation is made possible only when Christians respond to God’s call to undertake a spiritual war against the dangers of humanism and secular liberalism, regarded as ‘rampant in society.

The multidirectional plan of the KN towards mobilizing its many component parts to exert their influence, was made evident at a one-day conference held on April 5, 2019 at Nelson’s Wine Estate, Paarl<sup>8</sup>. The event, called Leaders and Influencers<sup>9</sup> Conference, was hosted by Total Change Forum, Transformation SA, an active participant within the KN initiative. The purpose was to share critical information on the challenges confronted by each group in the network, with each other, and with informed church and business leaders. The event, at which I was in attendance, provided no public record of the program, which outlined a methodical campaign of influence in all spheres of society and ratified a call to greater activism. The presentations clearly indicated the grounding in NAR thought and the 7MM, as leaders covered their current and future objectives in exerting influence in education,

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<sup>8</sup> The owner of this estate is Adv Alan Nelson, who is an alliance partner of the KN and who represented the NNM in their application to the High Court.

<sup>9</sup> The term ‘Influencers’ is important in Dominionist circles, where it refers to the recruitment of leaders to act as influencers in all seven spheres of society. Together in alliance, they serve to protect unlimited religious freedom, the biblical interpretation of marriage and the family, and an entrenchment into pro-life policies.

religion, family, business, government/military, arts/entertainment, and the media. Delegates were unified in their support of involvement at every political level, particularly in Parliament, where ‘anti-Christian laws’ are passed, according to them. There was also unanimity regarding the threat posed by liberal thought and policies and the imperative this brings to publicly vocalize their interpretation of what is not God’s will.

Very concerned that the liberal agenda had influenced liberal theology, Van Niekerk (2019b) repeated the global fundamentalist position that ‘[l]iberal includes socialism and communism. They want to take the centre and want to suppress Christian voices’. The strident opposition to liberal agendas was metaphorically cast as a cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil, with Van Niekerk (2019b) asserting, ‘We must fight this liberal humanist agenda of the devil and be ready for every attack’. Mirroring the language and strategy of the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), founded in the US in 1994, Influencers delegates agreed that this was a war between biblical values and liberal ideologies and that ‘[i]t is not enough to just win in the courts; we must change the culture’ (Badenhorst 2019b) where liberal forces encroach in state institutions, businesses, and all public spaces. The final assertion was that ‘[w]e will dominate the public square. We will make it as personal as a parent’ (Badenhorst 2019b). Here the public square is broadened to mean all spheres of society where citizens interact and communicate. The public square is where opinions are formed and where, without tolerance, conflict can arise. It is thus where inclusions and exclusions play out in everyday life and where citizens who confront discrimination and lack recourse to the formal courts find that invoking their constitutional rights is unlikely to bring resolution or protection. It is in the public square, and not the courts, where public opinion exerts its strongest influence over identity politics.

The KN’s quest for dominance as moral watchdog in the ‘public square’ warrants concern as it is a shared space where diversity and minority statuses are constitutionally and legally protected for the common good. Writing on the importance of religion in African life, particularly in politics and in the public sphere, Jon Abbink (2014:98) maintains that ‘due to either lack of interest or cautious fear of aggravating tensions or over legislating religious life, [many African states have not] effectively regulated this problem of protecting the liberty of citizens to be “spared the religious practices of the others”’. He cautions that it is this attitude that ‘allows

believers, and their elites, to constantly expand the scope of religious presence into the public domain' (Abbink 2014:98).

### ***Freedom of Religion South Africa***

It is important to provide wider detail of Freedom of Religion South Africa (FOR SA) which, notwithstanding its independent identity and agenda, is an invaluable KN alliance partner in its capacity to exert influence in Parliament, legislation, and society. FOR SA is a fundamentalist Bible-based legal advocacy organization, closely modelled on the ADF, that assists Christians worldwide in legally pursuing the fundamentalist agenda of opposing and reversing liberal policies. This organization was founded in January 2014 by Andrew Selley, lead pastor of the Joshua Generation Church and an apostle at a global partnership of churches called Four12. With Selley as CEO, included in the leadership team are executive director, Michael Swain, who assisted in establishing His People churches and Bible schools in 11 nations, legal counsel Adv Nadene Badenhorst, and attorney Daniela Ellerbeck. FOR SA has a fundamentalist Christian profile and has become the dominant Christian voice to challenge government on policy and legislation that they perceive to threaten the freedom of religion. In 2014, FOR SA succeeded in 'persuading Parliament to amend the Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill, so as to exclude churches and public benefit organisations from the application of the Act' (FOR SA 2014).

This success set in motion wide-ranging legislative challenges by FOR SA, while simultaneously advancing the KN's transformation project. Section 15(1) of the Bill of Rights provides for individual religious rights and freedom, stating: 'Everyone has the right to freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief and opinion' (South Africa 1996). FOR SA encourages Christians not to compromise any of these constitutional rights in public or political life and to strongly resist any initiatives to limit one or more of these provisions in cases where their expression is patently discriminatory. Taking this position is in line with religiously right-wing fundamentalist groups in the US whose rise can be traced to the 1979 founding of the Moral Majority by televangelist Jerry Falwell – an organization underpinned by a narrative of moral decline in US society. The organization's religious and political goals survived the demise of the movement in 1989 and were successfully reinvigorated by right-wing public advocates for conservative moral reform, who exert considerable political influence in the current US administration.

The many legislative challenges and legal cases undertaken by FOR SA on grounds of threatening religious freedom are available in the document library on their website (FOR SA 2018) and indicate the breadth of their advocacy to limit anti-discriminatory legislation. A concrete example of FOR SA's opposition to the limitation of Section 15(1) rights is in their targeting of the LGBTQ+ community. In unison with the wider KN, FOR SA publicly takes the fundamentalist position that homosexuality is a sin in the eyes of God, and they debunk the science of gender differences. Badenhorst (2019a) has publicly argued that 'Jesus can set people free from a lifestyle of homosexuality just as he can from any other immoral lifestyle or sin' and, on his Christian Consensus in SA Facebook page, Van Niekerk (2019c) gave an ambiguous push back on criticism, saying that '[w]e love them with the love of the Lord Jesus Christ but need to take arms against a liberal onslaught'. The love that Van Niekerk espouses is qualified with a 'but' that indicates the primacy that fundamentalists give to engaging in the battle against the threat of liberal forces. Globally, South Africa ranks high in legal constitutional protection for the LGBTQ+ community, as Section 9(3) includes the prohibition of unfair discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation (South Africa 1996). However, as FOR SA and the wider KN resist any initiatives to curtail their right to speak on the 'immorality of homosexuality', protections in society are alarmingly low and high levels of discrimination, persecution, and even violence<sup>10</sup> are commonly experienced (Other Foundation 2016).

A recent case that indicates how religious freedoms are weaponized, is the January 2020 refusal by the owners of a wedding venue, Beloftebos, to host the 2021 marriage celebration of a same-sex couple. The refusal was based on the religious beliefs of the owners that 'we do not host weddings between couples of the same gender' (Koza 2020). The case was confirmed as the second such incident referred to the SA Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) concerning Beloftebos. The wide media attention drawn to this case included legal opinions on the possible outcome, should the case be brought before the Equality Court. According to De Vos (2020) – a constitutional scholar – the owners are incorrect in assuming 'that the right to freedom of religion always (or at least usually) trumps the right not to be

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<sup>10</sup> Section 10 of the comprehensive study undertaken by the Other Foundation and the HSRC (Other Foundation 2016) testifies to the high levels of violence against gender non-conformist individuals.

discriminated against'. His point was ratified by Commissioner Gaum of the SAHRC in a radio interview where he said that Section 15(1) rights are general 'but cannot be exercised if they cut into equality protection' and that 'public businesses are not protected' (Gaum 2020). He does not foresee that the position taken by Beloftebos will succeed in court, and that the prohibition on exclusions based on religious beliefs soon 'will apply to all businesses in the country' (Gaum 2020). FOR SA are supporting the owners of Beloftebos and, in the same radio interview, Swain held to their argument that this is not unfair discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation but is rather based on the owners' right to religious belief that marriage is between one man and one woman, before God<sup>11</sup>. What he does not raise are the non-derogable rights to equality and human dignity and, as cases such as these are increasing, it is vital that the state provides clarity on the limitations to religious rights when these rights are infringed upon. What is not publicly or in the courts made clear is that churches are not of one voice on this issue. There is a significant diversity in the inclusions and exclusions that they exercise religiously and socially towards a constitutionally protected community that falls within their own membership as much as within and across all religious, racial, and cultural communities. However, support for FOR SA and the KN position is extensive and, in concert with the goals of the 7MM, autonomous groups continue to work within their own sphere of influence and have widespread local and global support for their strategies to limit the rights of minorities across a variety of categories.

## **Questions for a Constitutional Democracy**

Parliament issued a document titled *How our democracy works* in which they included the core value that '[d]emocracy is about balancing the rights of the majority with protection for minorities' (South Africa n.d.). In a

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<sup>11</sup> FOR SA and the FPI have lobbied against a proposed investigation into the colonial Marriage Act 25 of 1961 by the Ministry of Home Affairs with the intention of drafting a single marriage law based on principles of equality. They have similarly opposed an amendment to Section 6 of the Civil Union Act (17) of 2006 that allowed state marriage officers to refuse to marry same-sex couples on grounds of religious conscience. To their objection, the Civil Union Amendment Bill was approved by the National Assembly in December 2018.

constitutional democracy, this is achieved by limiting majority rights ‘by legal and institutional means so that the rights of individuals and minorities are respected’ (Centre for Civic Education n.d.). These provisions in the new Constitution were sacrosanct to a fledgling democracy, but it failed to anticipate changing circumstances in which such protections would be subject to religious contestation. Among many of the unanticipated issues that later warranted state intervention were the addressing of the high rate of teenage pregnancies, high levels of abuse against women, the marginalization and abuse of the LGBTQ+ community, the right for same-sex couples to marry, and women’s rights to the safe termination of pregnancy.

South Africa’s Constitution must therefore be viewed as an aspirational framework for a new nation, intending on overcoming its discriminatory past through guaranteeing future rights to equality and human dignity as the nation continues to evolve. Fundamentalism, by being uncompromising on its position on personal morality, women’s rights, gender rights, and traditional family structures, aims at reintroducing discriminatory measures to all who do not conform with its worldview. Section 36 of the Constitution includes a Limitation of Rights, ‘only in terms of law of general application to the extent that the limitation is reasonable and justifiable in an open and democratic society based on human dignity, equality and freedom’ (South Africa 1996).

There is consequently no unqualified defense for all freedoms, but a lack of clarity from the state on where partisan interpretation and exercise of these rights could, or should, be limited. Any initiative by the state to do so has been branded as an attack on the churches<sup>12</sup>. Referring to Section 31 of the Bill of Rights, which provides rights and freedoms to religious communities, Joel Mokhoathi and Nasila Rembe (2017:3) correctly note that the Constitution ‘does not set any boundaries or make provisions in the case of

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<sup>12</sup> This claim was extensively raised in the context of the 2016 investigation by the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (CRLRC), whose final report to Parliament was titled *Commercialisation of religion and the abuse of people’s belief systems* (Mdakane 2017). The scale and complexity of this investigation place it beyond the scope of this essay, but it must be noted that fundamentalist sectors list the CRLRC recommendation to regulate religions as the greatest threat to religious freedom. However, without serious consideration of their proposals, religiously based discrimination is likely to increase.

practices that infringe on the law by religious establishments’ nor on ‘how the state is to be involved when the practices that are conducted by religious institutions impose on or violate the rights of others’. However, it is not only religious institutions that can infringe on the law but also the exercise of individual rights on grounds of religious freedom in businesses and throughout civil society, where the particular influence of KN affiliates has steadily been exerted. If, as Gaum states, public businesses are not protected by what are ‘general rights’ in Section 15(1), then this should be officially clarified and a statement to this effect be made public.

Through its harnessing by fundamentalist Christian organizations, ‘freedom of religion’ is now a global, inherently politicized movement, as the control of government is critical to broader social transformation. What is at play is the relationship between religious freedom and constitutional anti-discrimination guarantees. Understanding this is contingent on establishing who makes the call, in what context, and to serve what ends and whose agenda. Ahead of endorsing piecemeal religious freedoms to groups that mask the wider intent to marginalize and exclude citizens who fall outside the boundaries of their religious and/or moral convictions, the state should, as Thomas Berg (2018:205) reasons, ‘develop proper principles for determining the boundaries of religious freedom versus societal interests and others’ rights’.

There are difficult decisions at play for a hard-won democracy and, in view of prevailing circumstances, it is increasingly important for the state to also make a justifiable and coherent argument as to why religion should be a privileged category and secure legal protections not afforded to all citizens. A concrete example is FOR SA’s challenge against the Prevention and Combating of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Bill for not providing satisfactory exclusions for speech based on religious beliefs. The latest revision of the Bill includes a religious exemption clause, with the deputy minister of justice indicating to the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Justice that this ‘would probably only protect speech from the pulpit – not speech by individuals’ (Ellerbeck 2019).

Following Mogoeng, FOR SA argues that every individual has the right to speak their religious truth in all circumstances. In a society where religious and non-religious citizens are equally impacted by legislation, on what constitutional grounds can some individuals be given exclusions not provided for all? Grounds for concern are also the privileging of text-based

religions that conform to pulpit-preaching structures at the expense of religions such as Hinduism, modern Paganism, and traditional/indigenous African religions, which one must assume would be disqualified from claiming such rights. As cases such as these become increasingly frequent, it behooves the state institutions involved to take as their starting point the non-derogable rights of all citizens to equality and human dignity<sup>13</sup>, irrespective of their majority or minority status. Religiously based discrimination and exclusions impinge on these rights all too frequently in society and, should they find a place in state-sanctioned policies, invite the bigger question of the nation's current status as a constitutional democracy.

## **Conclusion**

The fundamentalism discussed in this essay is a form based on the developments within Evangelical-Charismatic Pentecostalism in the US and mirrors its denouncement of liberal protections found in a constitutional democracy that are framed as a global agenda to impose liberal values throughout society<sup>14</sup>. Its uprooting is critical in fulfilling the NAR goals of the Dominion Mandate and the 7MM. To this end it is unambiguously political, as state bodies are primary impediments to transformation through their promulgation of anti-discriminatory legislation and policy. The fundamentalist sector holds an ambiguous position in arguing vociferously that government should refrain from interference in the religious sector, while simultaneously appealing to government and the courts for exemption from, or the repeal of anti-discriminatory legislation, and to be accorded the liberal rights to unlimited religious freedoms, irrespective of the social needs being addressed.

The KN and the now dominant NAR-leaning megachurches in South Africa have a close family resemblance to their American founders in that they tend to attain power in times of actual, or perceived crises in society.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Statutes of the Republic of South Africa (1996), Table of Non-Derogable Rights, Section 37(5).

<sup>14</sup> On December 10, 2019, Van Niekerk uploaded a YouTube video titled 'Build-up to 2025: Exposing the liberal agenda' in which he offers a history of the liberal agenda as a global act of social engineering to change society (Van Niekerk 2019g).

Locally, the years of Zuma's presidency provided them, on the one hand, with a ready acceptance of a politicized evangelicalism in government and in public spaces while, on the other, the crises of alleged state capture, rising crime rates, and unemployment justified their narrative of a moral collapse. A NAR spokesperson confided in me on June 13, 2019, stating: 'The worse this all becomes, the better for us'. The financial resources of the global movement are applied to assisting Kingdom initiatives around the world in exerting an influence in all seven spheres of society to fulfil their conviction that establishing 'heaven on earth' is mandatory for the return of Jesus.

Notwithstanding the global commonalities, democratic South Africa has its own unique history that makes the rising influence and power of NAR churches, including the KN alliance, of deep concern. Interestingly, its accelerated growth is facilitated more in democratic societies that protect religious freedom and diversity than under authoritarian regimes. Herein lies the conundrum for government and official bodies, now facing direct challenges related to contested interpretations of constitutional religious rights and freedoms. The pervasive and accelerated influence of fundamentalist rhetoric in the public square should be a national topic of discussion as it is here where action is being undertaken as a battle to be fought against secular and liberal forces and where constitutional rights to equality and human dignity are most commonly infringed upon. These factors make it imperative that the state should deliberate on what Jurgen Habermas described as the 'precarious delimitations between a positive liberty to practice one's own religion and the negative liberty to remain spared of the religious practices of the others' (in Abbink 2014:98).

This calls for a resetting by the state of its relationship with religion, which has shifted substantially since 1996. To date, President Ramaphosa has made few consequential statements on religion. However, interestingly, he was the keynote speaker at the joint celebration of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Rhema Church and Pastor McCauley's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday (Ramaphosa 2019). The religious landscape of South Africa is diverse and plural and, although Christianity holds a clear majority, this can only be understood in its own plurality of beliefs, expressions, and positions taken on politics and issues of personal morality. While NAR-influenced churches now dominate the religious landscape, they cannot be construed as being the voice for all Christians, many of whom are critical of their teachings and Dominionist agenda. The relative silence of mainline churches and minority religions on the critical issues

being raised has added to the strength of the theologically fundamentalist sector that distances itself from the relativity that they fear in interfaith engagements, and resists inclusion of other faith traditions, even at times in political/official engagements. In many religion-state dialogues, the right to equality of minority religions has become increasingly marginalized, as have the rights of non-religious citizens.

The scale of influence of the combined fundamentalist movement has had unintended consequences, and although South Africa is unlikely to be fully transformed into a Kingdom Nation, it is a religious force now at the forefront of influencing national politics and legislation and exerting influence in public spaces. As the critical issues of sexual orientation, women's legal rights over their bodies, and the reality of alternative family structures are open targets for discrimination on the grounds of religious freedom, it is the constitutional infringement of some citizens' rights to human dignity and equality, the exclusions that they experience in society, and the consequences which can be violent, that are most alarming.

This does configure a crisis that was set to intensify in 2020 until the global Covid-19 pandemic interrupted a series of planned KN events. At the end of 2019, Van Niekerk (2019d) announced his belief that 'God's people are waking up to the liberal onslaught [and that] 2020 will be the year where we become more organised in our influence in society'. The only major local event of 2020 was, however, the Kingdom Come SA conference held in February by Bethel Church of California<sup>15</sup>, while the international GO 2020 evangelical campaign (GO 2020 2020), set to pursue a global Dominionist agenda, was suspended. All KN movements nonetheless remain focused and active on online and digital platforms and FOR SA has sustained its visibility in the courts and with state institutions on matters pertaining to all spheres of society and relevant to all citizens.

The negative implications of a fundamentalism that is extremist, uncompromising and purposefully organized, making inroads throughout society, should not be underestimated, as they erode the very foundations on which our democracy was established. There is an imperative for access to information on the agenda of this movement to be widened and for

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<sup>15</sup> The Kingdom Come SA conference held in Johannesburg from February 27-29, 2020, was led by Bill Johnson, NAR pastor of Bethel Church, California. On the invitation, the reformation of society is listed as a goal (Crumpton 2020).

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government to seek clarity on the limits of religious freedom, and to once more reflect on the threat to transformation posed by fundamentalism as it did in 2007. Failing that, our constitutional democracy will no longer live up to the aspirations of the Constitution to liberate all citizens from South Africa's dark history of discrimination.

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