Patriarchy as empire:
a theological reflection

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Abstract

"Empire" manifests itself both as an empirical reality and in its ideological claims. The paper argues that sexism, patriarchy and hierarchical societal structures still prevail in post-apartheid South Africa. The shift from the view that gendered objects were regarded as racial objects in apartheid South Africa to the view of gendered objects as equity objects in post-apartheid South Africa goes hand in hand with meaningful shifts in power. The paper further argues that the problem of the lack of engendering is inextricably linked to the intrinsically patriarchal character of South Africa. The presence of women in the ecclesial and societal structures is not an indicator of the transformation of the patriarchal anthropology in South Africa. The paper discusses the challenges with regard to gender mainstreaming in post-apartheid South Africa within the framework of post-structuralism.

Introduction

President Nelson Rohlihlala Mandela, as newly elected president of South Africa, singled out the importance of gender equality/equity at the opening of the South African parliament in Cape Town on the 25th May 1994:

> It is vitally important that all structures of government, including the President himself, should understand this fully: that freedom cannot be achieved unless women have been emancipated from all forms of oppression. All of us must take this on board, that the objectives of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) will not have been realized unless we see in visible and practical terms that the condition of the women in our country has radically changed for the better, and that they have been empowered to intervene in all spheres of

> life as equals with any other member of society (President
> Nelson Mandela, Inaugural Speech, May 1994)[1].

These words of former President Mandela emphasise the need to engender
patriarchal South Africa towards gender equality/equity. Gender equality
entails the concept that all human beings, both men and women, are free to
develop their personal abilities and make choices without the limitations set
by stereotypes, rigid gender roles and prejudices, whereas gender equity
means fairness of treatment for women and men, according to their respective
needs.[2] "Empire" refers to a patriarchal, top-down system.

> We speak of *empire,* because we discern a coming together of
> economic, cultural, political and military power in our world
> today. This is constituted by a reality and a spirit of lordless
> domination, created by humankind. An all-encompassing
> global reality serving, protecting and defending the interests of
> powerful corporations, nations, elites and privileged people,
> while exploiting creation, imperiously excludes, enslaves, and
> even sacrifices humanity. It is a pervasive spirit of destructive
> self-interest, even greed – the worship of money, goods and
> possessions; the gospel of consumerism, proclaimed through
> powerful propaganda and religiously justified, believed and
> followed. It is the colonization of consciousness, values and
> notions of human life by the imperial logic; a spirit lacking
> compassionate justice and showing contemptuous disregard for
> the gifts of creation and the household of life.[3]

Patriarchy is a social system that promotes hierarchies and awards economic,
political and social power to one group over others. Patriarchy is essentially
androcentric and hierarchical by nature. By patriarchy, we mean not only the
subordination of females to males, but the "whole structure of Father ruled
society: aristocracy over serfs, masters over slaves, kings over subjects, racial
overlords over colonized people" (Reuther 1983:61). Classical patriarchy
refers to the domination of the male over the female, children, servants and
slaves (Ackerman 1992(a):95). Patriarchy underlies all forms of chauvinism,
racial, cultural and class domination (Reuther 1983:20). Patriarchy also refers
to structures and ideologies which engender the domination and exploitation
of the weak and the powerless amongst us. Therefore patriarchy can rightly

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[1]   http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/1994/170595002.htm .Accessed 14 March 2011.
[2]   Gender Equality and Equity UNESCO 2000.
       http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001211/121145e.pdf Accessed 10 February 2011.
[3]   *Dreaming of a different world together Globalisation and Justice for Humanity and the*
       Earth The Challenge of the Accra Confession for the Churches, p2

be described as empire, *a spirit of lordless domination, created by human-kind.*

The Reformers have not done much to transform the patriarchal anthropology (Reuther 1983:97). Hamilton (1987:50) agrees with Reuther's notion that the Reformers only redefined patriarchal anthropology to suit their own particular world-view. Hierarchical dualism is the fundamental shortcoming in traditional Christian anthropology. The Reformation only brought about a few modifications of the human image. Social roles allocated respectively to women and to men in particular societies are conditioned by a variety of political, economic, ideological and cultural factors and are characterised by unequal power relations. Essentially, nothing has changed in the patriarchal anthropology (Reuther 1983:97). The churches in their discriminatory practices reflected the societies of which they were a part. There is a growing presentation of women in leadership positions in both church and societal structures. However, the presence of women in the ecclesial and societal structures is not an indicator of the transformation of the patriarchal anthropology in South Africa.

Gender mainstreaming in post-apartheid South Africa

After a long struggle against an oppressive system of government, characterised by institutional racism, patriarchy and oppression, a new democracy was ushered in on 27 April 1994 with the mandate of advancing the country towards a democratic, non-racist, non-sexist society. The emphasis in post-apartheid South Africa is on deracialisation and the engendering of all institutions towards gender mainstreaming. South Africa faces severe challenges in this regard. The question is: How do we respond to various problems of domination: subjection to social and political forces such as patriarchy and/or empire?

In apartheid South Africa, gendered objects were isolated socially on racial lines. The first democratically elected government of South Africa inherited apartheid policies and institutions that had resulted in inequalities between class, sex and race and extremely skewed access to employment. The apartheid era's structures and policies were blatantly anti-poor, racist and sexist. South Africa is today in a transitional phase, especially with regard to the transformation of gender relations. The government of South Africa has enacted legislation and ratified international and regional instruments, formulated policies and passed bills which have a direct bearing on gender. However, the equality provisions of these laws and policies have yet to become a reality. Despite the establishment of a new meaning and culture by these laws and gender policies, the primary form of gender inequalities was maintained. Amongst these laws, policies and bills are:

> The adoption of a new Constitution for the Republic of South Africa, the Bill of Rights, the adoption and commitments to the implementation of the Beijing Platform of Action at the February 1996, the White Paper on Affirmative Action in the Public Service, the Employment Equity Act, the Promotion of Equity and Prevention of Discrimination Bill, the Domestic Violence Act, 1998 (Act 116 of 1998), the Recognition of Customary Marriages Act, 1998 (Act 120 of 1998), the Employment Equity Act of 1998 (Act 55 of 1998) and the Termination of Pregnancy Act (Act 92 of 1996).[4]

With the above laws and commitments, the government took the needs and aspirations of women, and particularly those from the designated groups, into account. These legislative, international and regional instruments aim at the protection and promotion of women's rights as human rights. Equality of all persons, women and men, as well as the principles of non-sexism and non-racism is among the values enshrined in the Constitution of South Africa:

> Everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law. Equality includes the full and equal enjoyment of all rights and freedoms. To promote the achievement of equality, legislative and other measures designed to protect or advance persons or categories of persons disadvantaged by unfair discrimination, may be taken (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996).

The government has ratified the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA), the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and other international instruments. The Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) proposed gender mainstreaming as a key strategy to reduce inequalities between women and men.[5] The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action recognises that women's rights and empowerment are a requirement for advancement of all humanity.[6] The thrust of South Africa's national gender machinery has been on mainstreaming the gender programme into existing government priorities. The emphasis falls on the all-encompassing control on gendered objects through the judicial system. Through this interrelation of

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4   Beijing platform report SA first progress report 2000.
     http://www.info.gov.za/view/DownloadFileAction?id=70483. Accessed 10 February 2011.
5   Gender Equality and Equity. May, 2000.
     http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001211/121145e.pdf. Accessed 10 February 2011.
6   South Africa's Compliance with the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action March 2010. http://www.pmg.org.za/files/docs/100721bpfa.pdf Accessed 10 February 2011.

gender laws and policies, the rise of the modern individual emerges in post-apartheid South Africa. The government's commitment to the promotion of gender equality/equity has also been demonstrated by the establishment of comprehensive national machinery for the advancement of gender equality/equity in South Africa composed of key structures such as the Office on the Status of Women and the Commission on Gender Equality.[7] It aims at creating a non-sexist and non-racist society. Non-racism and non-sexism form the cornerstone of South Africa's transformation project. Customary, cultural and religious practices are therefore subordinated to the right to gender equality/equity. Notwithstanding the passing of progressive legislation in line with our constitution and international commitments, real gains in gender equality/equity are still slow to materialise and the engendering of society at large is still lagging behind. Legislative reform has provided the building blocks for a gender equitable society. However, challenges exist in ensuring that these constitutional, legislative and policy imperatives are translated into substantive improvements in engendering the society. On the one hand, women have been accepted in leadership positions in both church and society during the past decade, but on the other side, dominant discourses are keeping women in submissive roles. The majority of the feminist or gender conscious women involved in the women movement in apartheid South Africa were drawn into the electoral system as members of parliament and/or as commissioners. The inclusion of women in decisionmaking structures, however, did not change the dominant discourses which imprisoned women in submissive roles in societal structures.

The shift from the view that gendered objects were regarded as racial objects during apartheid South Africa to the view of gendered objects as equity objects during post-apartheid South Africa goes hand in hand with meaningful shifts in power. Attempts were made in both church and society to organise aspects of gendered objects through numerous regulations and administrative control. The emphasis falls on the all-encompassing control over gendered objects through the judicial system. Through this interrelation of gender laws and policies, the rise of the modern individual emerges in post-apartheid South Africa. Gendered objects are constituted by appellation, description, judgment and/or explanation by the laws and policies on gender equality/equity in post-apartheid South Africa. Gendered objects are divided, diagnosed, regrouped and/or classified through a network of laws and bylaws. The idea with the legislation is to engender the national transformation process. Engendering aims towards the achievement of equality of opportunity, in access to and share of employment opportunities, services and

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[7] http://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/upload/South%20Africa/South_Africa_MDG_midterm.pdf.
  Accessed 10 February 2011.

resources. However, the transformation of the society by gender mainstreaming still lags behind.

Despite having a Constitution that entrenches equal rights, discriminatory practices, structural inequalities, cultural factors, prejudices, patriarchy and sexism are still prevalent in South Africa. Women are still scarce in the upper echelons of society. The incidence of gender-based violence continues to escalate to alarming proportions. Unequal power relations between men and women in society and at home lie at the heart of this violence. The high incidence of rape cases, as well as other forms of physical and psychological abuse of women and girls, is evidence of this. One expects that paradigm shifts with regard to gendered objects should have taken place by now in post-apartheid South-Africa. However, subtle forms of sexism are still discernible. Despite the enacted legislation, ratification of international and regional instruments and formulation of numerous gender policies, the engendering of society has not advanced at the desired rate. The dominant discourses which imprisoned women and men remain the same. Essentially, nothing has changed. No major paradigm shifts with regard to gendered objects have come to pass. Only a few modifications of the human image have taken place. The root cause of gender injustices lies in the patriarchal structure of our society. Therefore, the structural and underlying causes of subordination and discrimination should be emphasised in the engendering process. Legislation is not enough to promote gender equality/equity or to transform the patriarchal nature of our society. In carrying out the mission of God today, we are challenged to transform society intrinsically. The root cause of gender injustices which lies in the patriarchal structure of our society should be addressed. The foundational patriarchal, sexist, biased categories of gender analysis should be replaced with new, holistic images. Gender analysis is a tool to diagnose the differences between women and men regarding their specific activities, conditions, needs, access to and control over resources, and access to development benefits and decisionmaking. It studies the linkages of these and other factors in the larger social, economic, political and environmental context.[8] I for one believe that discriminatory practices cannot be redressed simply by the development of laws on employment equity and the submission of recommendation to Parliament or other legislature with regard to gender equality/equity, but it should rather be redressed through the deconstruction of the sexist and racist bias of our society and the replacement of the sexist and racist foundational categories of our society with an egalitarian, non-sexist foundation.

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[8]   http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001211/121145e.pdf . Accessed 10February 2011

The deconstruction of patriarchy *and* empire

Societal patriarchy has ramifications for ecclesiastical patriarchy. For example, the inclusion of women into clerical-patriarchal structures will not engender the transformation of the patriarchal model of the church, Fiorenza (1993:230) rightly asserts. The dehumanising effects of patriarchal structures include, according to Fiorenza, racism, sexism and colonialist imperialism. Patriarchal domination and dehumanisation should be overcome. Conceptual categories create the presuppositions on gendered subjects. Hall (1991:209) defines gender as the social organisation of the relations between the sexes, and regards gender as the constituting element in all social relations. Whereas sex roles are God-given, gender roles as human constructions can be changed. Sex roles are biologically determined, while there are gender roles that are socially, historically and culturally constructed.

    This understanding of gender implies that the sexual subject existed before the social relations. This means that socially constructed men and socially constructed women stand in relation to one another. In a post-structural theological anthropology there is no individual, pre-existential sexual object that exists before the discursive construction of sex. Butler (1990:24- 25) writes "gender proves to be performative - that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender ... gender is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' which are said to be its results.". Gender and sexuality are discursively constructed. The post-structural insight is that the sexual subjects are constituted in and by the discourse. In a post-structural approach the emphasis, however, should fall on the fact that all knowledge is sexually constituted. The concept of gender flows from theoretical frameworks attempting to understand and unravel social and cultural dynamics which determine patterns of gender relations and roles in society. The gender concept does not refer to a women's issue, but is a transformational concept seeking to be inclusive of women and men; seeking to understand and make visible the patterns of inequality and differences based on socially defined ideas and beliefs. Gender is an inclusive concept. The concept includes both women and men. Whilst "sex" refers to a person's biological make-up, gender describes their social definition and the roles that society assigns them. Gender-biased values and perspectives legitimise the unequal roles assigned.

    Both ecclesiastical and societal patriarchy operates with the concept of the two natures of humanity, according to which women and men are by nature essentially different from each other. Traditional theology combined such a male/female dualism with a body/spirit dualism (Fiorenza 1993:97). Fiorenza (1993:140) understands patriarchal sexism as structural sin and evil

power institutionalised in oppressive societal and ecclesial structures. The tyranny of the dualistic, anthropocentric, patriarchal-theological anthropology should be deconstructed and replaced by new holistic images which emphasise the whole humanity of both sexes (Ackerman 1992(b):14). Western dualism is not only limited to sexuality, but is further projected sociologically as class, racial and ethnic dominance. In a dualistic anthropology the differences between groups of people, between black and white, male and female, are being accentuated. These projections eventually become internalised, so that a fixed social order of relationships and roles results (Graff 1995:26). Therefore we should move away from a dualistic, hierarchical, anthropocentric, androcentric, patriarchal framework of thinking to a holistic integration of body and mind. A relational anthropology stands opposed to alienation, spiritual deprivation (the privatisation of spirituality), apathy, sexism, racism and classism among others. "Relationally as basis for a transformative anthropology is thus concerned with our relationships with ourselves, with one another, with God and with our environment" (Ackerman 1992 (b):23). All human constructions of thought are relative and fallible, the communal inter-dependence of both sexes and the equality of all regardless of race, sex, colour, descent or culture should be accentuated in a transformative anthropology. Patriarchal, sexist, hierarchical, dichotomous, dualistic images should be replaced with holistic images of humanity. New holistic images should be found that can accentuate the entire humanity of all people regardless of race, class or gender (Ackerman 1992(b):14). The emphasis falls in such an anthropology on the deconstruction of hierarchical gender constructions by shifting and transferring binary oppositions, for example man/woman, white/black, culture/nature, strong/weak, head/help, father/mother, head/assistant, superior/inferior, body/soul, equal/supplement. The usage of the post-structural theories on language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions in order to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change should be promoted: "The post-structural insight is that gendered subjects are constructed in and through discourse rather than having 'discourse' somehow laid on top" (Pitt 1998:198). Language has the capacity to constitute social and cultural realities (Ackerman 1992(a):69). Therefore the language of domination and of oppression – sexism, racism, classism, colonialism, militarism – should be downright rejected. The language we use when we speak or write does not only have grammatical and/or orthographical implications but also reflects the social reality around us. Judith Butler (1990:519) affirms that the phenolmenological theory of "acts", espoused by Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and George Herbert Mead, among others, seeks to explain the mundane way in which social agents *constitute* social reality through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign. The language utilised in the policies and legislation mentioned above does not only

constitute the behaviour of people, the dignity of people and the structures in church and society, but it reflects also the social realities and the dominant discourses in post-apartheid South Africa and constitutes these discourses simultaneously. There is a continuous interaction between our use of language and the social structures within which we live. We should therefore be cautious not to denigrate those who are not in power. The deconstruction of "a reality and a spirit of lordless domination" requires viable partnerships of women and men at a transformational level and at multiple other levels. Patriarchy in church and society should be rejected as a structural sin. Post-structuralism deconstructs biological essentialism – a shift away from the essential female nature takes place. Individuals therefore have no essential, coherent and unique nature. A post-structural anthropological theology moves from the presupposition that the dichotomy between the sexes, the dualism between men and women which associates the mind with everything male, and the body with everything female, is constituted by the dominant discourse (Pitt 1998:402). Berman (1988:298-299) asserts that post-structuralist deconstruction might allow for an analysis of the self from a feminist perspective that questions even the biological distinctions between female and male.

The discourse on gender mainstreaming is characterised by a dichotomy between body and soul, matter and spirit, reason and passion, man and woman and thought and feeling. Bipolarity exists. We should therefore deconstruct these conceptual categories. We should diverge from the dichotomy between the sexes which associates power with everything male, whilst simultaneously associating the body and emotions with everything female. A move from a dualistic, patriarchal, anthropocentric anthropology to a relational, transformative anthropology should be emphasised in. According to Ackerman (1992(b):21-23), a relational anthropology stands opposite alienation, spiritual deprivation (the privatisation of spirituality), apathy, sexism, racism and classism. There is a need for the formulation of a more appropriate theological anthropology. New holistic images should therefore be found that can accentuate the entire humanity of all people regardless of race, class or gender. The humanity of all people created in the image of God must be accentuated in the discourse. Men and woman stand as equal partners next to each other in their relationship to God and are jointly bearers of the image of God (*imago Dei*). According to Graff (1995:1950), reaffirming that every human person is created in the image and likeness of God and endowed with invariable human dignity is not enough. The symbol of basic human dignity is intended to give rise not only to right thinking, but to right relation. A more congruent, holistic understanding of humankind is needed. Central to the Christian vision on human life is the notion that every human being is owed dignity, being created in the image of God. The principle of human dignity rests on a foundation of faith which affirms that God is the source and creator

of all life. Dignity has its strongest roots in Kant's moral philosophy that affirms the *inherent worth* of human beings. In our reflecting on the *imago Dei,* the emphasis should fall, amongst others, on our common humanity. We should move towards a relational, transformative anthropology, where the complete humanity of all people, regardless of race, sex and class, is intercepted. Attitudes and structures that oppress, suppress or marginalise human beings should be transformed in what Buckley calls a transformative person-centred model. In the transformative anthropological model the emphasis falls on the unity between the two sexes (Buckley 1979:40-59). By promoting gender equality and equity, the church advocates a new partnership between women and men, girls and boys: a partnership based on mutual respect. The model strives for the transformation and transcendence of gendered roles as well as the transformation of social structures and not only for the rescinding of biological differences as in the single nature model. A transformative move from a dualistic, patriarchal anthropology to a partnership relation between men and women is presupposed in the transformative model (Buckley 1979:59). Abusive relationships should be replaced with partnership relationships. Holistic images should be found that can accentuate the entire humanity of all people regardless of race, class or gender. The patriarchal anthropology should therefore be deconstructed and replaced with an inclusive theological anthropology in which the communion of both sexes is underscored. Affirming human dignity can be done by transforming asymmetrical power relationships; integrating gender considerations and concerns into action; empowering gendered objects with critical analytical skills to gain self-confidence in order to take control of their lives; addressing the structural and underlying causes of subordination and subjugation. A relational anthropology stands opposite sexism, racism and classism. Both church and society need a new understanding of gendered objects, still noting sexual diversity, but where variety is not exalted. Such anthropology stands in opposition to a dualistic view of humankind.

Conclusion

The paternalistic, patriarchal anthropological framework of thinking should be replaced with an inclusive theological anthropology in which the communality of both sexes is emphasised. The dualistic, dichotomous, patriarchal, anthropocentric, hierarchical foundational basis of ecclesial and societal anthropology should be replaced with an inclusive, holistic, relational, egalitarian, transformative anthropology. A more congruent holistic understanding of humankind is needed. The dignity of all human persons created by God as well as their universal and inviolable rights and duties should be affirmed. Both women and men should identify with the struggle for societal and ecclesial equality/equity. Holistic images should be found that can

accentuate the entire humanity of all people regardless of race, class or gender. The communal interdependence of the sexes, the equality of all people regardless of race, sex, colour, descent or culture is accentuated. The patriarchal anthropology should therefore be deconstructed and replaced with an inclusive theological anthropology in which the communion of both sexes is underscored. It is not enough just attacking concepts like patriarchy, racism and sexism. Rather, these should be deconstructed, and replaced with partner-ship relationships which are non-hierarchical by nature. In doing so the *lordless domination, created by humankind* would be overthrown and replaced by, as suggested by Fiorenza (1993:105), a "discipleship of equals".

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