

**Operating in a “site of struggle”:
Church structures, theological stance
and the activist clergyperson**

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Abstract

The article proposes that one needs to understand the “action space” of an activist clergyperson in the constraints of his/her church’s structures which often form a kind of “Ideological State Apparatus” that limits activism. A more democratic church structure does not necessarily make for greater action space; nor does a liberal theology necessarily translate into effective political praxis. The article concludes with the opinion that a lot more work needs to be done on these structural issues for a better understanding of the role of clergy as activists.

Introduction

Among the many major contributions Philippe Denis has made to South African scholarship, one of his most important has been his work on South African clergy from a magisterial account of his brother Dominicans in Southern Africa (Denis 1998) through his editing of collections documenting the lives of clergy under apartheid; many of whom would have passed unnoticed otherwise (Denis 1999, 2000). Honoured to have worked with him on various occasions, I present these musings on the place of activist clergy, theological stances and religious structures as a contribution that I would hope complements Philippe’s recovery of the narrative and personal in contemporary South African church history.

One of the recurring assertions made by many scholars is that the church in South Africa is a “site of struggle” which means that one cannot talk of the church as a single political entity taking a uniform political ‘line’ on any matter. Rather activists in the churches have had to hammer out a political position, often *against* opposing positions in their institutions. This sometimes leads to the sort of political compromises to which the churches have become all too easily accustomed; sometimes to situations where the church itself is ideologically divided.

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In this article the situation shall be examined not simply as an ideological division but as a manifestation of the clash of church, state and society as political entities/ combatants and the structural implications they have for clergy in political networks both inside and outside the church.

Church, state and society as political entities/combatants

Inevitably, there is a relationship between ‘church and state’ in a society. The religious sector – for the purpose of this study it shall be confined to the Christian church – is a key element and perhaps the oldest, most long-standing component of civil society. Analytically, Smith argues that a traditional religio-political system can follow two basic models, either the organic system where religious and political functions are fused, or various forms of what he calls the church model: separation of church and government but with three variations: (A) where the “church” exercises dominance over government; (B) where government dominates or heavily influences the “church”; (C) where a bipolar balance of power exists between them (Smith 1970:7, 8, 70, *et passim*). Thus, the organic system may be typified by Iran at the height of Khomeini’s Islamic Revolution. The *Church A* system might be represented (in theory but not always in practice) by medieval Christendom.¹ The *Church B* system can be seen explicitly in such systems as the Henrican English Reformation or in the Soviet Union, while the *Church C* system represents most modern church-state relations as typified by the United States. Modern South African church-state relations have been rooted in the *Church C* system.

The church model is not without its problems. At one level it draws useful distinctions; at another it does little to explain the dynamics of church and state. It cannot explain why, for example, the separation of church and state in South Africa while at the same time the churches in South Africa adopted such differing official positions vis-à-vis apartheid, positions such as theological justification for the state and its actions (white Dutch Reformed traditions); total indifference (Pentecostal, African Initiated, some Anabaptist traditions); formal opposition but varying degrees of practical collaboration (mainstream Protestant, Roman Catholic traditions).

Veteran ANC activist and onetime Methodist minister, Cedric Mayson saw various groups *in any church*; each group either opposing or contributing to political liberation (Mayson 1984:113–121). The *Status quo group*, for whom Christianity is a civil religion upholding the traditional political and

¹ Christendom can be defined as: “a particular kind of relationship between the Church and civil society, a relationship in which the State is the primary mediation. Where Christendom is in place, the Church seeks to supplement its presence and expand its power in civil society by making use of the State” Pablo Richard, *Death of Christendoms, Birth of the Church* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1987), 1.

economic principles of the apartheid state, was anti-Communist and pro-apartheid in some form or another (including those who supported a reformist, state-instituted top-down restructuring of apartheid). They did not assist but opposed the liberation struggle actively. Next, the “*Cop-out*” group who argued that the Gospel must not be involved with political and economic issues at all conformed to society and thus did not assist the struggle. The “*Tokenist*” Group, at best political ‘moderates’, made statements concerning injustice, wanted change but had a deficient analysis of the situation.² Much of their effort was devoted to putting the church’s house in order, for example putting black clergy and laity into more leadership positions in the church. They did not particularly devote much to the liberation struggle. The “*Christian activists*” group saw the need for fundamental change in church and state and worked towards it. They contributed to liberation. Finally “*simply liberated people*” were those whom Mayson saw opposing any self-consciousness as Christians in the struggle. They had no vested religious interests; their faith simply strengthened their activism.

Mayson’s model – simplistic as most models are – clearly illustrates the idea of “sites of struggle” in the church; once again this is descriptive rather than analytical. Former national chaplain to the Young Christian Students (YCS) movement, Chris Langefeld points out:

A common danger facing socially committed Christians is that of expecting too much or too little of the institutional church in a process of social transformation. Both attitudes, it seems to me, are rooted in an inadequate grasp of the nature of the church as being both a theological reality as well as an institution among other institutions of civil society. Those who expect too much lay demands on the Church which it could never realistically meet. The Church is not a liberation movement, a political organisation, a trade union, or for that matter, simply an extension of the ideological apparatus of the state. Those who expect too little, on the other hand, fail to grasp the significance of the power relations embodied in the practices, symbols, structures and theology of the Church for the whole process of transformation (Langefeld 1993:15–16).

² Mayson’s assumption – which I share – is that apartheid is broadly an issue of class, not race. An end to discrimination and political rights for all, the basis of the liberal analysis, though important in itself is not the root of apartheid, which is the inequitable distribution of wealth, opportunities and resources. Despite the emergence of a small ‘patriotic bourgeoisie’/ *waBenz* class after 1994, the apartheid of wealth remains in the ‘new’ South Africa.

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He cites Cochrane who points out the wider framework. The church, he says,

... like all other sectors of civil society, is also located in a system, that of a vast web of differentiated social structures and roles ... whose role is not communicative competence but technical control. The system is coordinated through the media of money and power (Habermas). The system is the steering mechanism of society in the sense that those who wield money and structural power seek to take over large areas of life world whenever possible in order to reconstitute them in the interests of state and economic control (Langefeld 1993:29).

Such a view is not new. Marx, Engels and Lenin came to see this as indicative that the church sided with the exploiters against the workers. With more sophistication Antonio Gramsci came to see this in terms of his theory of hegemony, where "... the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as 'domination' and as 'intellectual' and moral leadership" – a double leadership that is essential if it is really to govern (Gramsci 1971:57–58). One means of achieving this hegemony is for a ruling class to manifest such leadership in civil society as well as government.

Religion and the church, it has been suggested, is a key element in civil society; a key player to be brought into a ruling class' hegemony or Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). On the ISA, Althusser asserts what he calls a "duplicate mirror-structure of ideology" which simultaneously ensures:

- 1 the interpolation of 'individuals' as subjects;
- 2 their subjection to the Subject [i.e. God];
- 3 the mutual recognition of subjects and Subject, the subjects' recognition of each other, and finally the Subject's recognition of himself [sic];
- 4 the absolute guarantee that everything really is so, and that on condition that the subjects recognise what they are, and behave accordingly, everything will be all right: Amen – "So be it". (Althusser 1971:181)

The individual is interpolated moreover as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject – in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subject "all by himself". "There are no subjects except by and for their subjection. That is why they 'work all by themselves'" (Althusser 1971:182). Religion is thus a misrepresentation, an ideology, the reproduction of the relations of production and relations desired for them (Althusser 1971: 183).

This is all very well and may be valid where organised religion is wholeheartedly part of the ISA. But accounts of revolutionary clergy and laity seem to suggest that there are cracks in the ISA and the institutions that sometimes become a rift and occasionally cause a rent in the fabric of religious institutions. This point is noted by Latin American sociologist, Otto Maduro who suggests that though the dominant class plays a dominant role and has a hegemonic strategy of domination in the church articulating an at best ambiguous and at worst overtly conservative discourse; an alternative discourse sometimes arises to challenge that hegemony and creates an alternative, liberating one. Sections of the clergy and laity can become the organic intellectuals of the subordinated (Maduro 1982:113–145).

Two factors seem to arise that militate towards changes in a religious ISA. First, material conditions of life may reach such a position of crisis that no amount of state ideology or coercion can prevent radical change. The church may condemn revolution, Marxism, trade unionism and public protest as much as it likes but the material situation may become so desperate that a community might choose rather to reject the church and organised religion – out of the sense of their immediate need being much greater than some future “eternal spiritual wellbeing” – and then to proceed with militant action to ameliorate their social conditions. In some ways Thompson was faced with this possible strategy: he could have given up the Methodist ministry, even quit the Church, and gone into political work fulltime. As a fulltime activist he would have had far more space to engage in work promoting international peace and domestic liberation. He would not have had to be so careful in what he said and did. Yet he eschewed such an option mainly because it seems obvious that he actually enjoyed the mundane work of being a pastor; moreover, he saw his vocation as both minister and activist. The second strategy is for a church to reinterpret and renegotiate its religious convictions and practices in such a way that they accommodate their commitment to revolution; often with the help of organic intellectuals like liberation theologians.

This leads up to the second factor for change in a religious ISA: religion as faith statement or theology. Despite attempts to make them uniform, to define certain beliefs as binding truths (dogma), people often hold contradictory religious beliefs – belief in Christ as Lord and Saviour but also in the power of ancestral spirits, for example. Sometimes Christians may gladly profess the Nicene Creed, but hold interpretations of its contents that are vastly different from the orthodoxy of their denomination. Moreover, people believe in social contexts that are political and economic as well as social and religious. People read into their scriptures and catechisms much of what they themselves experience (*eisegesis*), a point Christian scholars now recognise more readily.

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What we are seeing perhaps is a paradigm shift in religion: the conceptual framework, “the thoughts, perceptions and values that form a particular vision of reality” and in which reality is explored has changed (Kuhn 1970[1962]; Capra 1990). Whether one likes it or not – and many conservatives in the church certainly do not like what they see and work against the new paradigm – plurality of meanings, postmodernism has become the order of the day. The clear answers of the pre-modern, capitalist and Marxist worldviews can no longer hold this pluralism. For an understanding of the political role of the church, all this has an ongoing dialectical effect. Material conditions and human consciousness challenge the church as part of the ISA. The ISA does not cave in easily and the church as ISA opposes challenges and, at times, persecutes individuals and communities that threaten it. The postmodern view, Holland suggests,

is moving towards a truly dialectical view of history as ongoing creation ... the new future emerges to challenge the present, but it remains a future rooted in the past. Reaching for the future entails tapping the past roots ... It is not a closed circle [pre-modern society], nor an ... arrow [liberal and Marxist society] but a holistic spiral, the synthesis of the great closed circle of tradition and the arrows of the forces of modernity. (Holland 1987:53, 39–61 *passim*)

Social structures are neither hierarchical nor class-based but rooted in a participatory community in the church as much as the state. Religion in this paradigm is concerned with mystery – creation and community – that moves beyond the “God-humanity” relationship (replicated with such irony by Althusser in his representation of religion as an ISA) to the significance of being part of a cosmos being permanently created and re-created by God. How convincing are Holland’s hypotheses? Do they help one understand the dynamics of church and state? To some extent he is right. To a certain degree they do help, but not without a series of caveats.

History is certainly Janus-faced; looking backwards and forwards. Yet for many on the left, looking backwards is a source of nostalgia and regret while looking forward may seem like looking into the void. The right – in church and state alike – proclaim gleefully that the socialist project (together with its theological component) is finished. The left is hard pressed to deny this at the moment without being labelled “reactionary”. Communitarianism certainly has its supporters, but whether it will translate into a resurgence of the left or a right wing consensus remains to be seen. Even Holland’s endorsement of a theology of creation cannot pass without comment. It is manifested in various contested discourses from fundamentalism to pan-

theism as well as in progressive theological discourses like feminist and liberation theology.

It should finally be noted that – contra Holland’s simplistic model – in the history of the church and religious responses to political situations, elements of all three paradigms (pre-modern, modern and postmodern) can be detected. How radical political activists in the church are treated, it seems, is determined by whether their paradigm coincides with the dominant paradigm of the institution and the epoch. Thus, in a traditional pre-modern society like medieval Christendom, a radical modernist/postmodernist like Joachim of Fiore and his followers are persecuted out of existence. In a modernising society like Reformation Europe, a proto-Marxist like Thomas Muntzer is burned at the stake. And, in an unevenly modernised but traditionally led institution like the Catholic Church in Latin America, a liberation theologian like Leonardo Boff – a radical thinker and activist priest with postmodern leanings – is effectively silenced (Cox 1988) and eventually feels it necessary to resign from the priesthood ‘to change in order to stay the same’ as he puts it (Boff 1993:144–148).

In many ways then, the issue is not whether religion is an ISA or counter-hegemonic discourse. The real issue is that in the last fifty to one hundred years it has become both: it is a form of both social control and liberation. As such, each religious institution seems to have its Boffs, Muntzers and Thompsons as well as its grand inquisitors. Structural and power relations (how institutions are structured and who controls them) determine how paradigm shifts occur. One might paraphrase the saying of Gramsci (1971:276):³

The old paradigm is dying; the new paradigm grows parallel to the old. In this time of clashing paradigms, there arises conflict and collision.

When paradigms collide, as they all too often do, it is the minority – more often than not individuals and small groups whose religious and political paradigm is a step ahead of the institution’s – that gets hurt. It is not necessarily that the institution is wicked or evil. Institutions almost always operate as structures in linear time confronted with minorities that do not conform to the paradigm to which they almost always seem to react negatively or, at best, with patronising indifference.

³ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 276: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”

Activist clergy in political-religious networks: the churches

The previous section sets out the broad parameters of the problem of political activist clergy in an institution like the church where there is a clash of paradigms in an uneasily modernising (or postmodernising) conservative institution. This section seeks to understand the tensions in denominations and to examine the degree to which political-religious networks – churches – affect the political projects of their activist clergy.

It may seem incongruous at first to call any church a “political-religious network”. Yet the church is unmistakably political. On one level, any exercise of people, resources and power constitutes politics.⁴ Most of the ethical issues – from abortion to xenophobia – raised by the churches are political issues involving power, resources and people. Even an allegedly “personal” issue like abortion raises major political issues – not the least what constitutes justifiable or unjustifiable killing and the question of public funding of abortion clinics. When a church pronounces on such an issue, though it is certainly a moral issue, it is also deeply political.

In what might be called “classical” politics (governments, resistance to political injustice and political ideology) the churches tend to be less clear than on what used to be seen as personal morality. On one level, all churches tend to make “moral” pronouncements – as any history of church-state relations in South Africa will show. Such pronouncements on what moral theologians call “social ethics” almost always have overtly political implications though the churches normally tend to avoid being overly prescriptive or partisan.

In addition, the churches are themselves political entities in terms of the definition above: they comprise people; they have a variety of resources and they exercise spiritual power. Some are more organised than others. Here the classic example is the Catholic Church which not only has people (nominally at least, over one billion adherents), resources and power, but also has a fully functional juridical-geographical state (Vatican City) complete with a diplomatic service (Reese 1996). It has a fully organised central bureaucracy as well as local administrative units (dioceses) throughout the world. As a result, it is the most overtly “political” religious organisation in history with a global impact (Hanson 1987). Similarly, Protestant churches exercise considerable localised political influence through a structure like the World Council of Churches globally. To claim that the church is not political is at best frighteningly naive and at worst an attempt to cover up a conservative political agenda.

⁴ Here I endorse the definition of politics used by Adrian Leftwich, *Redefining Politics: People, Resources and Power* (London: Methuen, 1983).

What is *not* normally approved is clergy taking clear and partisan political positions. A priest who is an anti-abortion activist or supports broad non-partisan human rights organisations will be tolerated by church leadership.⁵ One who joins a political party or who is elected to a government generally will not. How such a minister will be dealt with by the institution depends on a variety of factors.

The point that should be made is that clergy are part of a series of mutually dependent relationships: priest/minister to individuals in a congregation; priest/minister to fellow clergy in a particular denomination; clergy to clergy across denominations; clergy to individuals outside the church and clergy to their whole denomination.

Clergy find that their position or role depends on the notion of priesthood or ministry in their denomination. In some denominations (Catholic, High Anglican, Orthodox) a cleric is seen as a mediator between the congregation and God; in more traditionally Protestant denominations the minister – the term priest is never used – is a leader of the congregation; the primary but not the sole celebrant in the community’s worship and the primary but not sole preacher and spiritual resource person.

One of the most complex and under-researched aspects of studying clergy activists is how little work has been done on their relationship to congregations. An old but substantial exception to this is Harold E Quinley’s *The prophetic clergy: social activism among Protestant Ministers* (1974), an examination of Californian Protestant clergy in 1968.

Quinley’s study is very much a product of its times, the 1960s: the era of the Civil Rights Movement and the protests against the United States’ military involvement in Vietnam. In his book Quinley limits himself to Protestant clergy of various denominations with theological positions ranging from conservative (“traditionalist”) to the more liberal (“modernist”) in an attempt to examine clergy social activism. Historically, he says that “Protestant hegemony and alliance with the status quo started to break down by the end of the nineteenth century” (Quinley 1974:290) but strong ties still existed between the Protestant churches and the US establishment in the 1970s. However by this time

[a] substantial number of Protestant ministers at the parish level were speaking out on controversial political issues – often against the wishes of their congregations and to the detriment of their personal careers. A large majority of the parish clergymen in California campaigned actively against a discriminatory initiative proposal in 1964, about a third were active in the antiwar movement at the time of our survey, and from 10 to 15

⁵ This assumes both cases are non-partisan. Sceptics might doubt this.

percent openly supported the efforts of Cesar Chavez to organise migratory farm works in the San Joaquin Valley (Quinley 1974:292).

Quinley found that it was the theologically “modernist” clergy that were most actively engaged in protest and political activity. This link is not surprising; historically, “Modernist church leaders in the past have attempted to provide leadership in important public issues, while traditionalist churchmen have generally aligned themselves with more conservative political policies” (Quinley 1974: 293). Mainstream “orthodox” clergy could sometimes be found aligned with liberals on some issues but it seems from Quinley’s survey that liberal theology played a significant part in clergy activism which should not be too surprising: the more “transcendent” (otherworldly) one’s theology, the more likely one is *not* to prioritise “worldly” matters; the more one looks at religion as part of the human condition, indeed perhaps seeing religion as part of that human condition, the more likely one is to start seeking a “heaven on earth”.

Another point that Quinley makes is clergy-laity antagonism over clergy activism. Californian laity was generally more conservative on social issues than their minister. Moreover, they possessed substantial power in their denominations; even in those that were more hierarchical — and did not hesitate to use that power; as well as any sanctions they might have at parish level to punish clergy who had incurred their wrath. Most important was their withdrawal of financial support. Quinley comments that such a withdrawal of patronage.

[was] the most effective and unanswerable sanction available to church members who oppose ... activism. Churches are voluntary associations; in a sense, they compete with one another and with secular organisations for the loyalty and support of large numbers of the public. Any action that detracts from their ability to recruit and hold large numbers is an obvious cause for concern among religious leaders ... Protestant clergymen are highly dependent on a generally conservative and anti-activist laity. They rely on their parishioners not only to pay the churches’ bills but also for the very rationale of their existence. In California, Protestant laymen vigorously fought clergymen who wanted to develop an action-orientated ministry; we can reasonably expect that similar lay reactions took place elsewhere (Quinley 1974:298–299).

Clearly linked to this are Quinley’s findings on the option it left open to activist clergy: restrict their activism or leave the ministry. He found that

32% of activist clergy were unhappy, 45% wanted to move to another position, and 28% said that – given another chance – they would not go into the ministry again. However, it was the modernist “inactivist” clergy who were the most dissatisfied with their lives and most likely, given the chance, not to have gone into the ministry again (Quinley 1974:299–303). In contrast, Quinley found that among activist liberal clergy.

these modernist ministers found in social activism a meaningful outlet for their worldly based theological convictions ... we might say that an active involvement in social affairs indeed serves as a meaningful substitute for the loss in religious formation due to modernist theology (Quinley 1974:303).

Discontent and unease, particularly among the most liberal of the clergy, can be seen as the product of clergy-laity tensions both over activism and theological questions. Laity, even in the more liberal denominations, tended to be theologically more conservative and clashed with their ministers over decisions in their local churches. When a clergyman saw his role as a minister as a “prophetic” social activist (rooted in an education that emphasised this) this would merely intensify the laity’s tension. What gave meaning to the minister; made the average middle class layman very, very nervous.

Finally, Quinley suggests that Protestant ministers in the 1960s were a product of their times – the turbulent 1960s. He suggests:

Along with such societal alterations, periods of intense political turmoil also have an impact on the thinking of individuals and on the structure of society. Many persons acquire a different understanding of the world around them (their political consciousness is raised), and groups to which they belong become coloured by external political events (they become politicised). Clearly we have depicted in this study some of the individual and institutional consequences of this period of intense political concern and involvement. Protestant clergymen were well aware of the issues troubling American society in the 1960s and were generally responsive to them. They involved themselves in these issues to an extent that was uncommon, if not unprecedented, in American history.

The church itself, furthermore, was rent with the divisions and the antagonisms caused by this rise in ethical and political consciousness. The clerical response to the events of the period deepened theological divisions that had existed among church leaders for the last half-century or more, causing new conflicts between the modernist clergy and their

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parishioners. Next to the university, it would appear that no other institution in American society was so greatly affected by the political climate of the period (Quinley 1974:304) .

Protestant churches, he concludes, run a double risk of being so directly involved (through their activist clergy) in political events that they risk losing their traditional religious foundations;⁶ conversely, of being so parochial in their interests that they become indifferent to social ethics. Quinley's study is important because it includes the “link”, however tenuous, between activist clergy and parishioner disapproval of the clerics' activism as well as the disjunction in needs and expectations of the role of the minister between minister and congregation.

The problem with Quinley's study is that it makes a number of broad assumptions that should not be seen as “normative” for all clergy activists. Though he does qualify his broad statements, pointing to some statistical anomalies, his study assumes a traditionalist-modernist theological continuum that to a striking degree mirrors the conservative-radical political spectrum. This raises a number of problems.

First, it is by no means clear that one can easily categorise “traditionalist” to “modernist” clergy theologically. Traditionalism can mean a range of things *in a denomination*. Tradition often means the dominant tradition. Thus, a liberation theologian can with justification appeal to a tradition in a denomination to justify action on behalf of the poor. Likewise, tradition can mean the official line on a matter in a church–, an official line which can often change. Thus, we find in the 19th Century Catholic Church an official condemnation of liberal democracy, with its official endorsement a century later. Similarly, some “Traditionalists” should be seen as antiquarians, rejecting what they perceive to be innovation and “liberalisation” in the church. It is not easy to categorise clergy with any consistency theologically. Most clergy think and act along a continuum of liberal-conservative: one may be a committed socialist economically; a defender of human rights *and* militantly anti-abortion (eg the former Catholic Archbishop of Recife, Brazil, Dom Helder Camara). Likewise one might be a High Church Anglican –

⁶ By this he seems to mean traditional *parochial* foundations - prayer, sacraments, rites of passage (baptism, weddings, and funerals), community building. There are those (myself included) who would hold that prophetic socio-political action on behalf of justice is also part of this traditional religious function: “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appears to us as a constitutive dimension of the presenting of the Gospel or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation”. Synod of [Catholic] Bishops, *Justice in the World* 1971, para.6, in: Peter J Henriot, Edward P De Berri & Michael Schulteis (eds.), *Catholic Social Teaching: Our Best Kept Secret* (New York: Orbis,1987), p62. Many statements of the Protestant and Orthodox World Council of Churches would concur heartily.

strongly committed to very formal liturgies; a firm believer in Christ's real presence in the Eucharist – and also a democratic socialist opposed to hierarchicalism; a defender of gay rights and supporter of women's ordination.

Liberation theology itself is a case in point. Committed to radical socio-political solutions to poverty in the world, it roots itself both in established Catholic Social Teachings and often fairly literalist, almost pre-critical biblical scholarship. Apart from its big name, published theologians (many of whom are products of liberal Western scholarship) and the vast majority of those who adopt liberation theology in Christian based communities in Latin America, Africa and Asia operate out of a radically conscientised but often fundamentalist biblical hermeneutics. On another level as academe – and now pastoral ministry – discovers the delights of such methods as “reader response criticism” in exegesis, we see the emergence of a new, postmodern, second naiveté that takes “popular” exegesis/eisegesis, returning via the “scientific” to the level of saving story seriously.⁷

Finally on this point, there is also a serious theological problem arising with the connection between theological liberalism and radical political activism. At its most liberal, theology starts to operate without its fundamental assumption – the existence of God. If one cannot say that “God is on the side of the oppressed” and hence not on the side of the oppressor – because God's very existence is in doubt – the effectiveness of a radical religious project aimed at liberation is seriously impeded. Theological liberalism, taken to its logical non-realist conclusions, may undermine its very purposes. For a person engaged in both a theological and political struggle; the idea that one has to be so sceptical is self-undermining.⁸ Thus, one submits, theological liberalism taken to its logical conclusion is not a guaranteed factor correlating to radical clergy activism. The degree of liberalism is in question: it would seem basic to any clergy activist's position that he/she: (a) believes in God's existence; and (b) believes that God is angered by injustice.

The second claim that Quinley makes – that activist clergy are regularly opposed by laity who is politically more conservative than their ministers – seems far more convincing. Here too, however, it is not that clear-cut. Many Christians operate out of a paradigm of church that was politically

⁷ In true post-modern fashion seen as almost indefinable, RRC as it's sometimes called entails taking seriously what the reader, with all his/her personal and collective ‘baggage’ derives from a text. See: The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), esp. pp. 24-26.

⁸ On the question of non-realism and political theology in South Africa, see: Ronald Nicolson, “Real Evil needs a Real God? Non-Realist Theology in the Third World”, *Heythrop Journal* 36 (1995), pp140-152; my response to Nicolson's non-realist view is in: “Does a Real Albert Nolan Need Don Cupitt? A Response to Ronald Nicolson”, *Heythrop Journal* 38 (1997), pp180-190.

quietist, where politics was somehow a dirty word that was not to be pronounced in church. Formed under the status quo paradigm – religion as the ideological state apparatus, part of the hegemonic consensus – they simply internalised that paradigm and, not being as theologically up to date as their clergy, they never moved on. Confronted with a “new” minister, they react against the minister without thinking through the new position. Some who may well be in full political agreement with the activist cleric feel somehow that Sunday service is ‘time off’ from the political, a well-earned break from the struggle, and find a strongly political sermon an intrusion on their private time with God.

For others who are themselves part of the political system or class under attack from the minister consciously want *their* church to spiritually nourish and uplift them where they are. "Getting political" for them means taking a political stance that offends their own, usually when that stance is of the left and they are of the right or vice versa. A common discourse is to blame the minister, sometimes arguing that he is not really a minister but a Communist in a clerical collar who should be denounced to the church authorities!

In South Africa, moreover, where the church (with the exception of the African Initiated Churches) has historically been financially controlled by a wealthy white middle class and, to a large degree, the clerical and lay leadership comes from the selfsame background, the latter political attitude has had a major impact on the “prophetic” (ie political) dimension of the ministry.

Church structures and the potential for clergy activism

The one area that Quinley completely overlooks in his study is that of the relationship of church structure to the availability of political action space for activist clergy. Churches are often extremely different in how they are structured. They might best be seen structurally as operating along a continuum between extreme poles of Network and Hierarchy.

| STRUCTURES OF THE CHURCH | | | | | | |
|---|------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| Network | Hierarchy | | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 1. Absolute Network: completely autonomous network of small religious communities (probably non-existent). | | | | | | |
| 2. Strongly Autonomous Network: strong autonomy but communities linked by a limited structure running finances and administration (not doctrine or worship). | | | | | | |

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| <p>3. Autonomous Network: strong autonomy but with a more influential financial/administration co-ordinating structure.</p> <p>4. Semi-Autonomous Network/Hierarchy: strong localised autonomy but with a clear leadership that co-ordinates and to some degree inspires/directs.</p> <p>5. Semi-Autonomous Hierarchy: Leadership exists but its powers over local community are limited.</p> <p>6. Non-Absolute Hierarchy: Clear hierarchical structures and leadership, strong emphasis on unity tending towards uniformity, but not absolute as such.</p> <p>7. Absolute Hierarchy: Complete hierarchy where everyone has a specific position and where all doctrine and worship is uniform and subject to highest personal authority (probably does not exist).</p> |
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Most Christian denominations of any size or significance tend to be located between categories 2 and 6. An examination of the structure and polity of the Methodist Church would probably suggest that it occupies somewhere between positions categories 3 and 4; the Anglican Church would be situated mainly around category 5 with the Roman Catholic Church at category 6.

Now, the assumption might be that the most effective clergy activists would be most able to function in categories 2 to 4; the idea being that the greater the autonomy of the local church community, the better for activism. In an ideal situation where the majority (preferably the overwhelming majority) are sufficiently conscientised or share the same political perspective as the minister this would be true. But Quinley has implicitly shown that this is not always the case: laity is often more conservative than the minister. In a non-hierarchical religious network the minister is simply at the mercy of the congregation for political, spiritual and financial support. In a congregation where the minister is not at the mercy of the congregation the activism space is greater.

Ironically it would seem that a “democratic” church is, in fact, a potentially worse place for an activist clergyman to be than a hierarchy. Insofar as the minister is not dependent on the favour of his congregation for his activities a more hierarchical church structure – where the institutional leadership assigns and directs clergy to minister to particular congregations – seems much more conducive to activist ministers.⁹

It is not quite that simple, however. Under these circumstances a new set of factors come into play. The clergy activist is no longer totally dependent on the congregation but on the disposition of those in the religious

⁹ Of course one of the best structures for activism is a religious organization created precisely for activists (e.g. the Christian Institute or the South African Council of Churches from the late 1960s onwards). Such organizations offer the best ‘action space’ but often at the cost of distancing members from the wider Church community, cf. Borer (1998).

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hierarchy *above* him. One variable of this would be the number of hierarchical figures above him: the more there are, ironically, the less likely it is that they will all agree about the cleric's activities. This is good for the minister in that at least some will be supportive; bad, because it means that it will almost be impossible for a wholehearted endorsement of the clergy activist's activities. A second factor is the period of incumbency of such a leadership: a long incumbency of a sympathetic leader (eg a radical bishop) is the best possible scenario; a similar situation under an unsympathetic leader strongly impedes clergy activism.

To illustrate this, consider the example of the Catholic Church in Brazil in the 1970s to mid-1980s (Burdick 1993; De Kadet 1970; Lernoux 1982; Lowy 1996; Mainwaring 1986, *inter alia*). The country is divided ecclesiastically into dioceses (administrative regions) each under the authority of a bishop who is chosen ultimately by the Pope on the advice of the Bishops' Conference (the regional authority). Once chosen, the bishop is responsible for his diocese until retirement (75 years of age) unless transferred to another diocese or told to retire early by Rome. Each bishop is autonomous in his diocese (in the limits imposed by church law). An activist priest in a diocese led by a progressive bishop, for example in São Félix de Araguia under the openly socialist mystic Bishop Pedro Casaldaliga will find himself in a fairly safer position vis-à-vis activism than one in a very conservative diocese for example Diamantina under Archbishop Geraldo Sigaud. Similarly, at times when the Bishops' Conference has a majority of moderate to progressive bishops, the action space is greater than when it is weighted towards the conservatives.¹⁰

It is clear that a more hierarchical church structure does not eliminate all difficulties for activist clergy. There is usually a distinct political tension which operates in the church in the local congregation and positions of leadership. Churches are perhaps conservative by nature and they tend to ape the political status quo. In this they do seem very much to fit into the ruling hegemony of the day though not in as total a way as some Marxist theorists would like to claim.

Conclusion

In a sense, what this article has tried to do is revisit the return to the personal subject – the activist clergyperson – by trying to set him/her in the theological and political constraints of the Church. By comparing the praxis of liberal North American Protestant clergy and (mainly Catholic) liberation

¹⁰ This has started to happen. Under the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI conservative clergy have been elevated to the episcopate more regularly than progressives. Older progressives like Helder Camara have retired or died. The current political tone of the Brazilian Bishops' Conference is fairly conservative.

theologians in Brazil, I have found that paradoxical democratic church structures and liberal theology do not always provide action space for activist clergy. There are far more complex forces at work, often based on the good-will of congregations and religious superiors (a point which is further born out in a recent Philippines study of activism in two Catholic dioceses: Moreno 2006) This seems to be true in the South African case as well – and accounts for the all too frequent struggles our own clergy experienced with their institutions and congregations during the apartheid era (Examples of such struggles are readily found in their published biographies and personal papers and indeed in quite a few of the studies done by Philippe Denis and those he has mentored (most recently recounted in Mukuka 2008).

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