

Defining Christianity's "prophetic witness" in the post-apartheid South African democracy

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Abstract

The Christian religion in South Africa has a rich history of engaging state and society on a variety of issues. These range from matters relating to governance, leadership and policy to dealing with daily moral problems experienced and expressed by society as a whole. The church¹ not only has an opinion but has also historically set itself up to be a social commentator, believing it to be its divine mandate, stemming from divine instruction to be the guardian of what it deems a sought-after universal morality. The Christian church in South Africa took a prominent social position from colonial times, right through to the end of the apartheid era. With the dawn of a secular democracy, the prominence of the church's voice and authority has come into question for a variety of reasons. This article explores some of the shifts in the Christian church's social and political standing in South Africa and asks what its contribution is going to be in the future South African secular democracy.

Introduction

In order to discuss the Christian church's "prophetic witness", I first need to define this term as it will be used in this article and will then argue how the expression of the church's "prophetic witness" will need to adapt within the new political and social environment for the church to remain true to its calling and relevant in its context.

To speak of prophecy in the Christian church, one acknowledges that the primary sources on which an understanding of the term "prophetic witness" has been built come from the prophets encountered in the Bible, especially the Old Testament. Prophets spoke on behalf of God, commenting, critiquing and instructing leadership and society on issues of spirituality, governance and justice. Christianity has traditionally referred to these ministries and, having added the instruction of Jesus in the Great Commission, adopted an understanding that the church has the divine right and mandate to speak out against that which it considers in contradiction to the Will of God. Jesus' incarnation, life, teaching, death and resurrection created for the church an understanding that it was part of and working towards the Kingdom of God in its present reality. The notion of the Kingdom of God, with Jesus as its Lord, became the ideal for the church as well as its motivating principle for engaging its world prophetically. This notion did not start with Jesus, but with the prophets of old, who sought to advance the Will of God in their own situations.

Each prophet in the Old Testament operated within their own *Sitz im Leben*: to draw parallels between their individual acts and words and those of the Christian church in South Africa would however make for a separate study. This understanding of comparing modern forms of prophetic witness with the Old Testament prophets', although used anecdotally by the general churchgoer, is too vague to capture the responsibility and duties encapsulated in the church's prophetic role. A narrower definition is therefore sought. Brueggemann defines prophetic ministry as follows:

... to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us. Thus I suggest that prophetic ministry has to do not primarily with addressing specific public crises but with addressing, in season and out of season, the dominant crisis that is enduring and resilient, of having our alternative vocation co-opted and domesticated.²

As an example, Brueggemann cites the life and work of Moses who, in his obedience to God's call upon his life, facilitated a transformative break in the consciousness and perception of the people of Israel. "The ministry of Moses ... represents a radical break with the social reality of [the] Pharaoh's Egypt ... It is clear that the emergence of Israel by the hand of Moses cannot be extrapolated from any earlier reality."³ Through his prophetic witness, Israel's reality, defined by oppression and exploitation and imposed by the dominant culture

¹ I use the term "the church" with caution. In this paper, this term is used as a generic reference, referring to a diverse community who subscribe to the Christian faith irrespective of denominational affiliation. It speaks therefore of a general ecclesiology.

² Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 13.

³ *The Prophetic Imagination*, 15.

of Egypt, was transformed into a religious reality of triumphalism (consciousness) and an identity of dignity (perception).

This is also true for the prophets who followed later in the Kingdoms of Judah and Israel, with the difference that they spoke mainly to their own structures of power. Their socioreligious practices were mostly the recalling of the governing powers, religious powers and/or society at large, to an alternative consciousness, reminding the audiences of the direction which God sought for God's people, but which they had strayed from. They did this by acting as the spokespersons of God. The words "Thus says the Lord" or "Thus says the God of Israel", which mark the engaging of the prophets with their contexts, locate the authority and mandate from which the prophets operated. Their voices were not merely their own, but they believed that they spoke on behalf of God and their words carried divine authority. The "alternative consciousness and perception" of their prophetic ministry entailed calling the people to an understanding that they were God's people and that their lives be primarily governed by the covenant made between them and God. Any new perspective, practice or understanding in their social, political and/or religious structures called for prophetic intervention as soon as these contradicted the consciousness and perception demanded by their covenant with God.

It may be argued that modern society simply does not function in the same way any longer as the world we encounter in the Scriptures and that prophetic witness as exercised by the prophets of old would not be acknowledged or received positively in a world which demands diversity, complexity and tolerance. This is certainly true for democratic contexts. Taking Brueggemann's definition into consideration, if one were to assume that the Christian church stands for an alternative consciousness in South Africa, then what would it say? What would the church's prophetic witness be in South Africa today? If the church today had to say "Thus says the Lord", then what would follow? What authority does the church have to speak? Is there a social recognition that the church's utterances are divinely inspired or has the South African sociopolitical structure destroyed the divine platform from which the church has conveyed its message, acting as the "mouthpiece of God"? These questions became of particular importance as South Africa experienced a transition by becoming a secular democracy.

Transition

South Africa became a democracy in 1994 but, to be more specific, it became a constitutional democracy, owning a constitution that is considered to be one of the most liberal and progressive in the world. The constitution paved the way for the South African democracy also to be a secular democracy, not giving any preference to a particular religion or belief, but structuring society on the understanding that the constitution itself would safeguard the rights of each individual or group falling under its authority. The democratic system itself underwrites the authority of the constitution, making it only possible for the constitution to be altered if there is more than a two-thirds majority vote in parliament for such changes to come into effect. To speak of democracy, however, one cannot use the word as a generic term, as if all democracies function in the same manner. What kind of democracy does South Africa have? First of all, De Kruijf correctly identifies two different types of democracy operational in the world.⁴ The first is the Anglo-American model where priority is given to the rights of individuals. The second is the model offered by Rousseau, where the emphasis is placed on the general will of the population.

South Africa's constitutional democracy can be described as the balance between these two models, as it starts by establishing the basic rights of every individual and his or her respective groups. This is done in order to create a level playing field for all who form part of this democracy. Secondly, the will of the population is given authority as the country's structures are formed by the will of the population through vote, to the extent that even when the authorities make certain decisions, the population has the power to overturn such decisions through elections.

The place of the church in this democracy is interesting. First of all, the South African Constitution ensures the protection of freedom of religion,⁵ freedom of association⁶ and freedom of expression (Anglo-American model).⁷ This came with certain consequences. No longer was the church in a privileged position as during the colonial and apartheid eras, able to speak with a voice which seemed to have as much power and authority as the political powers'. The church's history in giving apartheid a theological legitimacy as well as the church's opposition to the apartheid structures and its influence in the downfall of this system is well documented. With the gaining of these constitutional rights by all religions – thereby saying that there was now an equal standing among religions – there was also a surrender of power by the church. Now the church became one voice among many, one religion within a cosmopolitan mix of faiths, persuasions and convictions which

⁴ GG de Kruijf, "The Christian in the Crowded Public Square: The Hidden Tension Between Prophecy and Democracy," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (January 1, 1991): 21.

⁵ South Africa, *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996* (Govt. Printer, n.d.), 5.

⁶ Ibid. Paragraph 18.

⁷ Ibid. Paragraph 16.

may not necessarily carry the same ideological premise as that of the Christian faith. All religions now had equal standing in their rights to exist and to express themselves. It may be argued that the church now has the unique opportunity to enter into discussion with other faith orientations, so that a collective religious voice can speak instead of divergent voices competing against one another in order to be heard in the halls of state and the streets of society. The growth of the ecumenical movement as well as of interfaith dialogue platforms are signs of religious groups seeing the wisdom of strength in diversity. This matter can be better researched and discussed in a separate paper. The surrender of its prominent position in state and society was nevertheless painful for the church.

With the loss of power and having to share space with other voices, where was the church to go? The transition years from apartheid to democracy proved especially challenging to the church in terms of finding its new place and identity. In essence, freedom from apartheid partially achieved the "alternative consciousness" called for by the church in its struggle against this tyrannical system. Was there any prophetic activity needed with the advent of democracy, or was the church's prophetic role to change? The honeymoon period in which South Africa found itself, especially after winning the 1995 Rugby World Cup, created within many, mainly whites, the idea that reconciliation and integration were going to come naturally and seamlessly. Dare I say that the church at large also fell into the same euphoria and forgot about the role it was supposed to play in the reconstruction of a new society? It is understandable that because the church's prophetic identity had been shaped by its engaging with apartheid, the sudden absence of "the beast of apartheid" created a void in the church's life. Who was the church going to engage with? What were the new issues to address?

Exacerbating the identity crisis was the fact that so many of those in the church who fought gallantly against apartheid moved to occupy seats in government or became so close to the new ruling powers that it was difficult for the church to see the wood for the trees.⁸ Before work could start on the construction of a new society, there was the question of justice and how South Africa was to address the atrocities of the past. Enter the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This Commission was headed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and many other prominent church leaders who served as commissioners and were tasked with the role of hearing and recording the atrocities which took place under the apartheid regime, suggesting compensation as well as recommending amnesty for some of those who made the commitment to testify and confess. At first their appointment was celebrated by the church as Christians counted the heavy Christian presence as a victory for the Christian faith, but as De Gruchy correctly states, they were appointed based on their credibility in society and not merely as representatives of different Christian traditions.⁹ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission could therefore not be counted as the church's official prophetic structure in the new dispensation.

Reconciliation had to take place in the church as well. Best notes that after apartheid, the churches needed to find one another. If they were not united, then neither the church nor the nation would find reconciliation.¹⁰ The church missed this point and, as we will see later, this led to the fragmentation of, among other structures, the South African Council of Churches (SACC). This is not to say there were no calls about how the church should get involved in social engagement and share its prophetic voice. Surprisingly these calls came not from the formal church structures, but from those of commerce and politics.

At the National Conference of the SACC in 1995, Professor Wiseman Nkuhlu, then President of the Black Management Forum, stated: "... the church has a history of providing practical solutions to social and economic problems at community level ... The church is capable of reaching every corner of our country and every aspect of a person's existence. No other organ of society has the same reach."¹¹ Besides being functional in addressing socioeconomic problems, the church had another role, namely that of nation building.¹² Nkuhlu outlined what this meant:

[The church had to] be the example of peace, racial tolerance, democracy and caring;
be the instrument of understanding, healing and reconciliation;
be part of the delivery of social services;
initiate projects for social and economic development;
resolve disputes between communities and government;
fight against crime and corruption;

⁸ Peter J. Storey, "Banning the Flag from Our churches: Learning from the church-State Struggle in South Africa," in *Between Capital and Cathedral: Essays on church-state Relationships*, ed. Wessel Bentley and Dion A Forster (Pretoria: Bontshi Business Services, 2012), 15.

⁹ John W De Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, Twenty-fifth anniversary edition (London: SCM Press, 2005), 225.

¹⁰ Tom Best, "The church in Community," in *Being church in a New Land: A Selection of Papers Presented at the 1995 National Conference of the South African Council of churches* (Johannesburg: Edenvale Printers, 1995), 17.

¹¹ Wiseman L. Nkuhlu, "The church and Socio-economic Reconstruction During the Transition," in *Being church in a New Land: A Selection of Papers Presented at the 1995 National Conference of the South African Council of churches* (Johannesburg: Edenvale Printers, 1995), 5.

¹² *Ibid.* 6.

assist with the internalising of the values of society's new-found freedom.¹³

At the same event, Tokyo Sexwale, who was and who still is a senior leader in the ANC, pleaded for the church to remain vigilant in striving for human dignity, holding the new government accountable for the promises it made to deliver basic services, to be speedy in contributing to social redress and to promote the equality of all people. Sexwale asked of the church: "Please – you must squat in our offices if we are not providing shelter to people."¹⁴ He pleaded: "The church must keep as close to us as saliva on the tongue. If you forsake us, if you abandon us – we will sin; we are just human."¹⁵

These calls for the church's prophetic witness asked for the "alternative consciousness and perception" spoken of by the church, to be acted upon and (jointly) facilitated by this faith movement. The church needed to be constructive, practical and offer tangible solutions through its participation in the new democracy. It had to participate in society for the building of a new reality. Prophetic witness was hence not only about proclamation, but about "practising what you preach", while holding the powers accountable for the exercise of the hard-fought freedom. The alternative consciousness for the church, which Brueggemann spoke about, was the redress of social evils advanced by apartheid and the establishment of a nonracial, just, free and fair society.

Unfortunately, the old maxim is true: It is easier to break something down than to build something up. It was easier for the church to fight against a social system than to be a major contributor in the formation of a new one. For the church to remain relevant and a major participant in the democratic society, its prophetic witness had to move from constantly critiquing to actively building a new consciousness in society. One problem the church faced was that it was still carrying the wounds of the past. Many denominations were divided along racial lines, both in structure as well as in worship. How could the church be the forerunner of reconciliation and reconstruction if the church itself struggled with the unhealed wounds of division? The church's example was paramount in the prophetic witness of calling the people of South Africa to reconciliation and unity (an alternative consciousness and perception). The struggle for racial unity in many Christian denominations is still a profound problem to this day.

Concerning the direction of the church's prophetic identity, three shifts happened after apartheid. There were the churches who rebounded against what the Kairos Document warned against, namely church Theology. Here, the prophetic voice of the church became limited to the notion of personal salvation.¹⁶ The rise of the Pentecostal movement in South Africa, which at first did not mix the gospel with politics, was largely the influencing factor. Even mainline denominations that belonged to the SACC were influenced, leading to congregations praying more about social problems than becoming actively involved in tackling social needs as a matter of faith. The second was the state-initiated establishment of the National Religious Leaders Forum, which later (in 2011) joined the National Inter-Faith Leadership Council to form the National Inter-Faith Council of South Africa. Under the leadership of Pastor Ray McCauley, this movement began to blur the lines between state and church by becoming so close to government that it even gave political parties a platform at their church services to canvas for votes before elections.¹⁷ The third is a position, mainly of the SACC partners, which called for the church to be in critical solidarity with the state. From this point of view, the church created a critical distance between itself and the state, so that it was close enough to the state to be a partner in transformation, but far enough removed to speak in criticism when needed.

From under the umbrella of the third perspective emerged the notion that the church's prophetic voice should feature in the processes of policy making. Nico Koopman's research has focused on this role.¹⁸ Developing Gustafson's ideas,¹⁹ the argument is that the church should be present in the public sphere, speak on behalf of the voiceless, tell the stories of those in need and then shape public discourse so that it can translate into policies which can be adopted in the halls of state. Edet warns, however, that similar approaches throughout Africa have actually exacerbated the problem of a diminished recognition of the church's social and political standing.²⁰ His view is that in post-liberation democracies, while it is enthusiastically present at the discussion tables, when the church tries to dictate to the state on how change is to happen its views are dismissed as uninformed or too self-centred. This was and is, in my opinion, the problem faced by the SACC. The ongoing to-and-fro between the SACC and those in political power leads more to argument than to action, resulting in

¹³ Ibid. 7–8.

¹⁴ Tokyo Sexwale, "church and State," in *Being church in a New Land: A Selection of Papers Presented at the 1995 National Conference of the South African Council of churches* (Johannesburg: Edenvale Printers, 1995), 11.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Kairos Theologians, "Challenge to the church: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa," 1985.

¹⁷ Storey, "Banning the Flag," 15.

¹⁸ Nico Koopman, "Public Theology as Prophetic Theology: More Than Utopianism and Criticism?", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 134 (July 1, 2009): 117–130.

¹⁹ According to Koopman, Gustafson's definition of the prophetic roles of the church is described in the church as those of visionaries, critics, storytellers, technical analysts and policy makers. All these roles place the church in a position of observer of what happens at grassroots level. It is my contention that the church needs to play a much more active role, associating itself with those at grassroots level, while at the same time being able to speak truth to Caesar.

²⁰ Ignatius Edet, "The Church and Corruption in Africa," *AFER* 51, no. 4–1 (2010): 648.

little practical contribution towards nation building by the church and thus diminished standing in society and marginalisation by the state.

Thomas observes the following, in terms of the relationship between the SACC, the South African political powers and society:

The lot of the SACC has not been much better. It repeatedly receded from public and church consciousness once the battle against Apartheid had been won and the new ANC government installed. While it played a significant role in resisting and undermining Apartheid, it was given no special place in the negotiations that brought Apartheid to an end. All attention became focussed on the political parties moving into the seats of power. After that had been accomplished in 1994, the SACC in common with peak church bodies in other countries, became just one more "do-gooding" organisation among many non-governmental agencies.²¹

What happened to the church's prophetic voice? Has the church forgotten how to engage with society and the state? Should it rather opt for the two other alternatives mentioned earlier in this part of the article – adopt a pious expression of spiritual devotion, or even find a comfortable place at Caesar's table? How should the church's prophetic witness be defined?

A redefined notion of "prophetic witness"

"... the church was right at the forefront; in exile, underground, in prison, we were suffering with the church right alongside of us. And so South Africa became the miracle."²² These words by Tokyo Sexwale indicate that the church's prophetic witness during apartheid was more effective as a ministry of presence than when it gave only vocal critique of the then status quo. Quoting Abraham Heschel, Chris Jones emphasises the point of the challenging characteristic of prophetic witness: "The prophet indicts those who create or benefit from oppression. The role of the prophet, as the old saying goes, is to afflict the comfortable and to comfort the afflicted. Prophets express the anger of God at injustice while communicating God's compassion to the oppressed."²³ Is this the only role for the church, or is Sexwale right to say that the church has a greater chance of facilitating change through its presence and example than through its public discourse?

The question for modern-day ecclesiology in South Africa: Is the church achieving change (or Brueggemann's alternative consciousness) by focusing on public discourse and policy making? Is it enough for the church to contribute to policy change, or should something more be done in terms of prophetic witness? I would like to argue that Koopman's emphasis on public discourse²⁴ was important during the transition period from apartheid to democracy, but that an additional step is needed now. Yes, the church needs to be vocal, especially on matters of leadership but, more importantly, the church needs to **be** an example of the change it talks about. The church's prophetic witness will only find a respected place in South African democratic structures if it is a prophetic example.

If the church's voice is not prophetic enough, then the church needs to **show** the change which it professes. To stand on the sidelines of society and shout the will of God at state and society will simply not suffice in a constitutional and secular democracy. state and society have enough voices to listen to, many of which are far more informed on certain issues than the church. Eventually one tends to stop hearing the endless bark of a small dog. What is the church to do?

First, when it comes to prophetic action, the church needs to recognise that it has a vital role to play in the building of local communities, in a way the state cannot. The state lacks the short-term capacity to reach communities and affect change at grassroots level; it is simply too far removed from people's daily realities. It has been almost two decades since the change of power and most communities still bemoan the fact that the promised change has not reached them. The church is spread wide enough and is close enough to communities to facilitate change. The work of Ignatius Swart²⁵ has explored this in detail and will not be expanded upon here, suffice to say that the changes brought about by the church's implementation of literacy programmes, food gardens, HIV/AIDS clinics, housing projects and so on cannot be ignored in the context of social transformation. The church does not commit to these projects merely because the state cannot meet these needs in a short space of time, but because of the following point.

²¹ David Thomas, *Christ Divided: Liberalism, Ecumenism and Race in South Africa* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 2002), 232.

²² Sexwale, "Church and State," 10.

²³ Chris Jones, "Versoening Is Radikaal," *Kerkbode* (Cape Town, August 17, 2012), 189, 3rd edition, sec. Aktueel, 11.

²⁴ Nico Koopman, "Churches and Public Policy Discourses in South Africa," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* no. 136 (March 1, 2010): 41–56.

²⁵ Ignatius Swart, "Meeting the Rising Expectations? On Local Churches as Organisations of Social Welfare in South Africa," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* no. 133 (March 1, 2009): 74.

The church needs to be clear about what it sees as the "alternative consciousness". Its prophetic action stems first of all from its belief in God and what it means for people to live with dignity and wholeness. When the church takes action and builds a school in a community where there is a need for education, it is effecting change of consciousness and perception; but it does so because of its core beliefs that the action forms part of its missional calling, not because of commitment to achieving the promises of the state. Sometimes the church's "alternative consciousness" is aligned with the ideals of the constitutional democracy. Certainly resonating with the message of the Christian gospel is the ideal expressed by Nelson Mandela, when he said: "Never, never and never again, shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one over another."²⁶ The church cannot be silent in the face of headlines about schoolchildren not receiving their textbooks or government leaders' excessive spending on personal indulgences, all in contradiction of the tenets not only of South Africa's constitutional democracy but also, and even more so, in violation of the belief in human dignity espoused by the Christian religion.

Besides bearing the torch for what the church believes to be God's South African dream, constantly invoking the lessons of history and challenging injustices, the church needs to take Sexwale's and Nkuhlu's pleas to heart. The church's prophetic witness cannot be reduced to verbal pronouncements, whether as sermons, public discourses or statements. These are important, but not enough. Acts must grow from the church's prophetic witness, becoming acts of protest. By "protest" I refer to the Latin *pro testare*, meaning "to stand for the truth". If little or nothing is happening to create structures that will help people find dignity, then the church, as an "act of protest", needs to be at the forefront of meeting these needs. It is not as if the church has no examples of how to achieve this.

Take the example of the transformation brought about by the Methodist movement in 18th century England. Structures established by this movement ranged from Sunday schools (where people learnt to read and write in church on Sunday, rather than in today's familiar formal schoolroom), free clinics, the first building societies, labour unions and many other structures not only transformed civil society and challenged the state, but made the church relevant to its context in both work and word.²⁷

I am of the opinion, and I agree with Barth's perspective, that the church is concerned not so much with maintaining a democratic structure as with building a community from the premise of its commitment to the Kingdom of God. Considering all these points, the church's prophetic witness can make a tremendous difference where and when the church chooses to become more than a community of prayer. Can this be done in a democracy? Some suggest that the state model which benefits the church to fulfil this role is in fact democracy.²⁸ "Democracy ... is of value only because of the opportunity it offers to the church for political participation as an institution and as a community."²⁹ Perhaps this sounds a bit patronising but, yes, democracy affords the church a place to exercise its prophetic witness with freedom. It is up to the church to take this challenge and run with it.

This said, the church is not called simply to live as an alternative community to the state in a democratic context. It is not diametrically opposed to the state. The distance between church and state also finds places of integration. "The state is the Christian's state too!"³⁰ So too is society the Christian's society. Placing church and state in opposition does justice to neither the reality of the church nor the state's. This is a topic for another article. For now, I propose that prophetic witness in the new South Africa should be a balance between prophetic proclamation and prophetic action, but mostly that the church's prophetic witness in the South African democracy is a call through word and example to the reality of human dignity, justice and community among all its people. This not only speaks of the "alternative consciousness and perception" advocated by Brueggemann, but will also ensure the church's relevance when it stands equally among other faith convictions.

Conclusion

In this article, I highlighted the fact that the church's standing in society has changed with the advent of a secular, constitutional democracy. This means the church has had to concede its prominent place in society, sharing it equally with all religions and belief systems as dictated by the South African Constitution. Furthermore, I argued that this change has had an impact on the church's understanding of its prophetic witness in South Africa. Taking from Brueggemann's definition of prophetic ministry, the current prophetic role of the church is twofold. First of all, it needs to be the voice of the voiceless and speak for justice. Secondly, and more importantly, the church's prophetic witness should focus on its ministry of presence, being the change which is sought in the democratic South Africa. It does these two prophetic activities, not out of its devotion to the Constitution which governs the South African democracy, but because it so happens that the "alternative

²⁶ Quoted from Nelson Mandela's inaugural speech.

²⁷ See Wessel Bentley, "The Formation of Christian Leaders: a Wesleyan Approach," *Koers* 75, no. 3 (2010): 551–566.

²⁸ De Kruijf, "The Christian in the Crowded Public Square: The Hidden Tension Between Prophecy and Democracy," 27.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 28.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 30.

consciousness" which it stands for seems to be in harmony with the ideals espoused by the current constitution. So doing, it must be ever vigilant in order to guard against this prophetic witness being co-opted and domesticated for the sake of power.

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