

The problematic nature of divorcing life from life

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Abstract

This article argues that the problem of divorcing religion and society is not African by nature. The argument is based on an African understanding that both religion and politics are part of our lives. Moreover, the article argues that secularism is not a problem for a traditional African as the non-mentioning of religion does not necessarily declare a non-religious state. In essence, the article argues that the non-mentioning of religion points to the core of religion as being assumed since those members of political parties and legislatures are influenced by their worldviews.

Introduction

Since the dawn of democracy in South Africa (an event accompanied by the implementation of a democratic constitution that declared the country to be a secular state),¹ there has been statements that presuppose that religion has nothing to do with society – and, most especially, nothing to do with the political component of society. By way of background to the preceding statement, South Africa has a history of religious manoeuvring and slander. As part of this history, Christianity was applied in a way that would justify, legitimise and ordain the policies of apartheid. For the purposes of this specific presentation, however, I want to argue that the action of not mixing religion and society (politics) was influenced by the interpretation that religion (specifically African religion) could not be aligned with the “newly discovered” way of life that Christianity brought with it. In other words, Christianity represented a European way of living and of interpreting society – these behaviours were prescribed by the missionaries and labelled as “civilisation”. Tutu (quoted in Mofokeng 1988:35) argues this point stating that:

But it remains true to say that they sought to Europeanise us before they could Christianise us. They have consequently jeopardised the entire Christian enterprise since Christianity has failed to be rooted sufficiently deeply in the African soil, since they have tended to make us feel somewhat uneasy and guilty about what we could not alter even if we had tried until doomsday – our Africanness.

The basic assumption was that, in order for society to be civilised, the African concept of understanding religion as part of the fabric of society would have to be done away with. Gabriel Setiloane, a South African theologian, exposed this argument in his paper entitled “How the Traditional World-View persists in the Christianity of the Sotho-Tswana”. In it, he tells of a conversation with Mmemogolo (an old lady) he once visited and who said to him:

“To tell the truth, Moruti, ngwan’ake, the missionaries have not taught us nothing new about God and his working with man and the world”. This was the reply of an old Motswana woman to my question after a long discussion concerning Tswana herbs which she used to cure children’s illnesses. The question I had asked was: “What do you see as unique in what the missionaries have brought to us?”, all the time my purpose and aim being to assess Tswana Christianity today. “All they have taught us; the only thing they have introduced to us”, she added, after a slight pause, caused perhaps by her realisation of my astonishment at her first statement, “is *ilhabologo*” (civilisation, meaning in fact, material progress in the style of the West). This old lady was a full member of the Methodist Church in that Southern Botswana town. She was well-renowned for her zeal in the faith and her witness to the saviourhood of God through Jesus Christ, to which she was known as a powerful witness in evangelical campaigns and Easter rallies. But she secretly practiced as a herbalist, specialising in the treatment of Children’s and infants’ illnesses. “Secretly” is not quite right: in fact, it was a secret only to the local minister, who was a young man and a stickler for the “Methodist Laws and Discipline”, and who would have dragged her before the Church courts to strip her of her membership. She prized her membership. She was also

¹ A secular state is a concept of secularism, in which a state or country purports to be officially neutral in matters of religion, supporting neither religion nor irreligion.

a class leader and a committee member of the Methodist Women's Prayer and Service Union (Manyano). At first she had withheld against me, suspecting that I was a "spy" from the Church officialdom. Now that she was relaxed and able to call me "ngwan'ake" (my child), even though she still respectfully called me "Moruti" (minister, padre) she could even sadly express her disgust at the short-sightedness of the Church officialdom which was not able to see that this now "secret" activity of hers was, in fact, a form of prayer life for her and the fulfilment of her Christian commitment. For, like the other *dingaka* (medical practitioners) I had met before her, she understood her knowledge of healing and its successful practice was a "gift of God", and not just an acquired skill or wisdom (Setiloane, nd:28).

This conversation between Setiloane and Mmemogolo exposes the core of the argument – that secularisation is not an African problem, but rather a western worldview that intentionally confuses the worldview of the traditional African, thus leading to the problematic nature of divorcing life (religion) from life (society and/or "state"). The conversation encapsulates the ongoing tension between the African worldview and the western worldview (that disintegrate religion and politics) in their understanding of the relationship between religion and society. Moreover, the conversation produces a link between two religions (African traditional religion and Christianity) as well as a link between religion and society (where society is seen as "civilisation" – in other words, as the material and instrumental side of human culture). Mmemogolo reflected her worldview as both an African and as a Christian. It is my intention in this article to expose what I mean by the African worldview, to show that this worldview is holistic, and to argue that divorcing religion (life) from life (society) leads to moral decay and that it has consequences for the community.

The African worldview of life

According to Mokgethi and Motlhabi (2001:80), worldview is "one main point of reference for all our lives, providing a perspective to all our existence and our deeds". Thus, a worldview is an everyday, ordinary-language description of the world. It shapes and guides our lives, helps us to understand, explain and explore the world around us and everything in it and it shows us how these are all related to each other by giving us a way in which we can see them. Furthermore, it shapes how we think and act at every moment. If one's worldview includes a belief in the sovereign God, then one will be more inclined to seek and to obey the will of that God than to follow one's own intuition. One's worldview tells one what is real, what is important, what is right, and what is wrong. Thus, those with a religious worldview might live according to a much higher moral standard than those without such a worldview. Charles Kammer's (1998:20) argument clarifies the preceding statement when he states that we obviously:

... have a number of frameworks that come into play in various areas of our lives. When in the science laboratory, we may have one framework. When we are on the golf course we have another. We do not hit the ball in order to study the effects of physical forces on its flight. Other frameworks may govern our political life, our family life.

By implication, world perception is a framework of ideas and beliefs through which an individual, group or culture interprets the world, reality and society and interacts with these. Thus it becomes clear that a worldview is a network of presuppositions which is not verified by the procedures of natural sciences, but in terms of which every aspect of human knowledge and experience is interpreted and interrelated. The number of frameworks could also be labelled as a war of pointing or a confrontation of different frameworks. By implication, this recognises that there is a reality beyond the individual and brings us to the point that Setiloane was making about Mmemogolo.

The conversation between Setiloane and Mmemogolo exposed the African worldview that religion cannot be understood outside of the society in which it is practised. This is typically African – in the African's worldview, religion cannot be divorced from society and there is thus no space for a "war of worldviews". The physical world is not the opening point or concluding objective but just a provisional existence. The real home is the spirit world, which souls periodically step out of to come to earth. Life is visible yet all too often invisible. It is physical yet profoundly spiritual. Eventually our prime abode is not here but in the spiritual realm. As I have indicated, the African worldview imposes a high extent of communication involving the spiritual and physical world. Communication between the different worlds is regular. The physical calls upon the spiritual through invocations, sacrifices, prayers and the aid of witchdoctors just as the spiritual calls upon the physical through signs, dreams, visions and witchdoctors. Some of the spirits are good and some are bad, just as some people are good and some are bad. In everything – accord must be maintained. Accord must be maintained with the spirits. It must be maintained within family units. It must be maintained within tribes. Everyone **must** be responsible in this; nothing is more important than honour. There is nothing worse than seeing family or spirits dishonoured. In

this solidarity with one another is incredibly important. Ellis and Te Haar (1998:177) expose this when they argue:

Religious belief operates at every level of society in Africa. Popular priests and prophets work in areas where the poor live, while the rich may have their own more exclusive spiritual advisors. Some religious leaders minister to both rich and poor. In most countries, plural religious allegiance is common at all levels of society, so that an individual may be a member of several religious congregations simultaneously, and in many parts of the continent may even practice religious rituals, such as Christianity and Islam, or Christianity and “traditional” religion, or Sufism and reformed Islam, as in Sudan.

The African worldview has a strong influence and shaping power on the African in that it unifies his or her thoughts and life. It exists at the foundational level of culture and at the core of the same cultural expressions. This means that it permeates everything that a people think and do by redefining reality, truth and values. Based on this conclusion, it becomes evident that society in Africa cannot be fully understood without reference to the religious ideas that serve as the basis for the African worldview, even though “... many reviewers and other readers choose to describe such ideas as manifestations of ‘superstition’ or ‘the occult’” (Ellis & Ter Haar 2007:386). In addition, failure to take a worldview into consideration leads to a failure to understand that a worldview bridges the gap between the objective reality outside people’s heads and the culturally agreed-upon perception of that reality inside their heads. It is for this reason, then, that we need to take the advice of Ellis and Ter Haar (2007:386-387) that: “We argue for a different point of departure. In order to understand the relationship between religion and politics [society] in Africa, we suggest, it is more fruitful to take Africans’ own views of reality as a starting point. Generally speaking, these include both material and immaterial realms”.

We shall take this bold move with a full understanding that “the West or Europe may be able to set clear lines of demarcation, and explain what they mean when they use the word ‘religion’” (Setiloane nd:31). For Africa, religion or religious consideration enter into and influence all spheres of life. Therefore, can we speak about “The Wholeness of Human Life” (Setiloane nd:31)? Samuel Pang (nd:457) exposes the concept of “wholeness”, quoting Manas Buthelezi as he does so:

Buthelezi emphasises [that] the African has a sense of the wholeness of life, and their religions are characterised by it, since there is no separate idea on life and religion in traditional society. In the concept of “the wholeness of life”, the whole being of man, the living or dead, is a participant of the active presence of the Creator of life.

The traditional African wants life in its fullness and as completely as possible. He or she has a need, therefore, to appease the powers that command the power of life. For example:

The ancestors are believed to be those who have died, who exist in some usually undefined and unknown place to which the living have no access. There they look after their descendants’ welfare, and expect their cooperation in return. They have power to both help and harm their wards - although most people in our research believed that the ancestors’ function was to help and **not** to harm their families. Several of our respondents felt quite strongly that the ancestors never harm their wards; they are only there to help them and protect them. They only passively bring harm, by withdrawing their protection when their instructions have not been carried out (Anderson 1993:26).

Thus, the divorcing of religion and society translate to moral failure (in other words, the problematic nature of “divorcing life from life”). This will be argued in the next section.

Divorcing religion from life leads to moral failure

No one can dispute that religious expression and influence in public life is diminishing. Steve Hayes (2012:1) exposes this arguing: “Religion is in decline, according to a global survey. The study found only 59 per cent of the world’s population identify themselves as religious. The study found 13 per cent identified as atheist, with a further 23 per cent as ‘not religious’.” Religion is becoming more privatised,² compartmentalised, and separated

² Senokoane and Kritzinger (2007:1713) warned against the privatisation of religion (Christianity) by arguing that: “If we as Christians, who make up a statistical majority of 70% of South African society, do not commit ourselves to significant processes of people-centred development, anti-racism and church-re-unification, but continue in our lukewarm and comfortable private Christianities, we should not be surprised when South African society at large leaves us behind or even spits us out”.

from the real world. Religion in general, but mostly African-religion,³ has been boxed as uncivilised, outdated, and irrelevant. The South African government, politicians, and courts have become increasingly hostile towards religious convictions and expression in public places. Public prayer is forbidden in public institutions like schools. Freedom of religion has become freedom *from* religion. Separation of religion and state has become separation of God and society. And then people are surprised by the day to day corruption, especially of our politicians and public officials⁴. In his farewell address to the people of the United States of America, President George Washington stated: “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports and great pillars of human happiness. Let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion.”⁵ For this explication it will be important to understand society in dialectical terms (Dialectics as a method of thinking and interpreting the world of both morality and religion) because it is a human product, and nothing but a human product, that yet continuously acts back upon its producer. It has no other being except that which is bestowed upon it by human activity and consciousness. Yet it may also be stated that human beings are a product of their society. It is within a society, and as a result of social processes, that the individual becomes a person, that he or she attains and holds onto an identity, and that he or she carries out the various projects that constitute his or her life. Human beings together shape tools, invent language, adhere to values, devise institutions, and so on.

What also needs to be understood is that society is rooted in the phenomenon of externalisation meaning a world that not only derives from the human being, but that comes to confront him or her as a facticity outside of him or herself. The human-produced world becomes something “out there”. It consists of objects, both material and non-material, that are capable of resisting the desire of their producer. This reality in Africa is called religion and religion is that human enterprise by which the sacred cosmos is established. What is meant by sacred here is a quality of mysterious and awesome power (God, ancestors and spirits). It is power other than human power, and yet it is still related to the human being and is believed to reside in certain objects of experience such as the spirit. Ellis and Te Haar (2007:387) expose this arguing: “To judge from the available evidence, religion in sub-Saharan Africa is best considered as a belief in the existence of an invisible world, distinct but not separate from the visible one, that is home to spiritual beings with effective powers over the material world.”

This adds to the argument that: “All evidence points to the fact that most Africans – like most people on the planet, for that matter – understand and interpret the world partly through the prism of religion. In other words, religion, whatever else it may be, is a mode of apprehending reality” (Ellis & Te Haar 2007:387). To break away from this system – or to be converted to another system – means that one is cut loose from the connections that make life complete, meaningful, and safe. On a deeper level, the sacred has an opposed category, that of chaos. By implication:

The shift away from tradition, say modernisation theorists, has drastic negative repercussions for religion. Religion everywhere has played an integral role in traditional societies. To move toward modernity, therefore, political leaders must displace the authority of religious leaders and in other ways devalue the importance of traditional religious institutions. “Secularisation” thus refers to the fact that religion comes to have a less prominent, less influential position in modern societies, or to the fact that it retains its influence only by conforming increasingly to such norms as rationality and relativism or by making compromises with, science, economic concerns, and the state (Wuthnow 1991:3).

But traditional African understanding of politics is different. In the words of Agnes Donohugh (1935:329-330):

Because of the wholeness of life to the African mind the chief embodies spiritual and economic values as well as spiritual and economic values as well as those pertaining to the prerogatives of his political office. He is the “father” of his people, sometimes the mediator between the people and the spiritual beings, the holder of the land by virtue of the stewardship; he exercises by permission of the spiritual forces, and through him the well-being of the people is assured. Because of this and other factors, a degree of loyalty is engendered which assures almost

³ African religion by definition is that include belief in a supreme being, belief in spirits and other divinities, *veneration of ancestors*, use of magic, and *traditional medicine*. The role of humanity is generally seen as one of harmonizing nature with the supernatural. Traditional African religions have been passed down from one generation to another orally and can be found through art, rituals and festivals, beliefs and customs, names of people and places, songs and dances, proverbs, and myths.

⁴ Gitari (1996: 99) argues against the danger of divorcing religion and politics stating that: “Politics is so important that it should not be left to politicians alone. Christians must not be spectators in the political arena. We must preach the sanctity of human life, that a human being is made in the image of God and has an intrinsic dignity for which he must be respected and not exploited or eliminated”. See Senokoane and Banda (2009).

⁵ Washington, G. The Farewell Address, 1976. <http://www.restoring-america.com/Documents/George%20Washingtons%20Farewell%20Address.pdf> accessed 12 December 2012, p 1.

undisputed control. Instead of destroying all this with the deposing of the chiefs, could not these loyalties be transferred?

The failure to not approach God or ancestors directly and present their case, it becomes difficult for them to break ties with the system. Those who seek to make it on their own without this established hierarchy do not have a chance. In addition, not remaining in the system is seen as the highest immorality. It is for this reason that:

Another professor of theology in an African university, a Christian minister, born and raised in a manse, relates how, on returning home after studies in the USA and at Oxford, his parents slaughtered a beast and, in the traditional fashion, called the whole family to welcome him back. This ceremony, called in Sotho-Tswana, *Pha Badimo*, thanksgiving to the ancestors, presupposes their presence, and it is they who, in fact, welcome back the returning member of the family. “If I had said ‘No’ to this”, the professor goes on, “I would have been understood to disown myself and my family, living and deceased” (Setiloane nd:33).

Those who comply and cooperate do not suffer. Those who do not comply and cooperate, however, suffer the consequences. In actuality, divorcing life (religion) from life (society) leads not only to immorality: the effects of immorality lead, in turn, to poverty. This point is argued in the next section.

Divorcing religion from life (society) affects and breaks the community

As I have indicated, an immoral act produces evil as its consequence⁶. Death in the spiritual life is synonymous with material poverty. Past and present, good and bad – as well as emotion and reason – are all part of a whole reality, “The main point here is that the African’s ‘world’ of witchcraft (I use this word without the derogatory sense it often carries in the literature of Western scholars) and related ideas concerning the cause and cure of illness, does not leave him when he enters the city” (Setiloane nd:35).

In the traditional African worldview, ancestors continue to be present and are actively included in the daily life of individuals and tribes. African people have always believed in the existence of a spirit in every individual human being and that it continues to exist after death. The spirits of the dead are close to the physically living. The spirits, in a way, remain “living” and retain their personal identity. They are the “living-dead” and they continue to influence the world of the living. This presence of the living-dead is felt throughout Africa in spite of Christianity and Western sophistication. Setiloane (nd:33-34) attests to this, saying:

It is presupposed and taken for granted in all meetings between Africans- as when I was pick-pocketed on a Johannesburg suburban train. I felt the hand slip into my back pocket where I had paper money. The train was packed, and I cried out “Who is that?” When I was able to turn round the money was lying on the floor of the compartment. No one could be charged with having done it. I was glad I had my money back. So were my fellow travellers. They congratulated me: “Badimo ba gagu ba na le uena” – your ancestors are by your side. In spite of the fact that I was in my clerical attire as it was Sunday morning and I was on my way to lead a service, they did not say, “Your God, or your Christ was at your side.”

Family ancestors receive credit and are called upon at the important moments of life such as birth, puberty, marriage, death, and risk (such as in the case of Setiloane). This communion between the living and the ancestors is even expressed in day-to-day prayers; prayers for the sick, prayers at deliverance, prayers for the livestock, daily prayers and so on. The divorcing of religion and life shuts out this relationality (which brings prosperity, security, and happiness) and, in their place, brings misery. Ancestral veneration is believed to ensure that harmony and balance are maintained in the community. The ancestors – who are seen as the intermediaries between the living and God – play an important role in maintaining the community and its well-being. By not worshipping the ancestors and by not acknowledging them in their daily affairs, constitute capital offense leading to punishment. The living is expected to atone for any wrongdoing on their own part and failure to acknowledge such transgressions or to atone for them leads to disaster. Should the descendants not meet these demands, it is believed that the ancestors will withdraw their protection from their descendants and that this will result in affliction. Ellis and Te Haar (1997:225-226) expose this scenario stating:

⁶ Senok[o]ane (2008: 179) argues that immoral act or a non-participation into what is perceived as moral leads to consequences that eventually affects the whole community when stating that “...failure to participate in cleansing ceremony, brought bad-luck or bad-spell to the individual, the whole family and the community”.

In most religious traditions, there are also other techniques which the living can use to influence or communicate with the invisible forces which they believe to have a bearing on their lives, such as through the use of instruments such as candles, incense, prayer-wheels, protective objects and so forth. When significant numbers of people believe in the efficacy of certain techniques or rituals, it is possible, then, to consider these techniques and/or rituals as components of a specific religious system. In general, the collective performance of such actions is deemed to enhance their effectiveness. Collective performance of rituals or recital of prayers also has the effect of emphasising the communal nature of the participants and the ties of belief binding them together. Some authors, in fact, hold that religion may be defined principally as an element which binds the community of believers. In any system of this sort, where the aim is to harness the power of the invisible for human purposes, religious experts or authorities may emerge who are regarded as having a special role in mediating between the visible and the invisible worlds.

This exposes the interconnectedness of two inseparable dimensions in the African worldview: the visible world and the invisible world. That interconnectedness can also be seen as interdependence whereby the quality of life of the ancestors depends on the actions of the people and the quality of life of the people depends on the actions of the ancestors. Failure to recognise this interconnectedness leads to the problem of divorcing life (religion) from life (society) and then to a conclusion that there is no separation between religion and society in traditional Africa, the matter to be argued in the next section.

Religion and society as inseparable in traditional Africa

Based on the understanding that we are made by our worldviews it has to be clarified that where a state or country (a political society) purports to be officially neutral or secular in matter of religion, supporting both neither religion nor irreligion, this stated position might not necessarily represent the truth. A secular state claims that it treats all its citizens as equal, regardless of religion, and also claims that it avoids preferential treatment – yet the absence of a state religion does not guarantee that a state is secular because African worldview is religiously orientated. While it is true that a secular state does not have state religion (or some equivalent belief structure), the absence of a state religion does not guarantee that a state is secular. This argument is supported by Emilio Gentile (2006:1) who states: “In politics, however, the term ‘secular religion’ is often adopted as a synonym for civil religion or political religion.” This fits the description of traditional Africa as exposed by Mmemogolo in Setiloane:

Thus, religion and politics become two facets of power that are in constant interaction. This is not always evident to observers of African politics, as African countries since colonial times have been officially governed through institutions based on a Western model of separation of church [religion] and state. This institutional architecture of government has tended to obscure the reality of spiritual power in Africa’s public life. Like politicians the world over, Africa’s political leaders spend most of their time in the pursuit or distribution of material resources, and their cultivation of spiritual power is usually more private than public. But, in any event, cultivating spiritual power is a vital component of a political career, as is widely attested by the popular media and radio trottoir (Ellis & Te Haar 2007:390-391).

This is the point that was made by Mmemogolo in Setiloane when she is quoted as saying that missionaries taught us only one thing; tlhabologo (civilisation; material progress in the style of the west). However, what is very clear is that religion and politics (society) do co-exist. By unpacking and exposing the traditional African worldview:

One notes, on close inspection, that the artifices [religion, politics and society] are used to wheedle crowds are more or less alike at all times and in all places, since the problem is always to take advantage of the same human weaknesses. All religions, even those that deny the supernatural, have their special declamation style, and their sermons, lecturers, and speeches are delivered in it. All of them have their rituals and their displays of pomp to strike the fancy. Some parade with lighted candles and chant litanies. Others march behind red banners to the tune of the “Marseillaise” or the “International” ... All religions and all political parties which have set out with more or less sincere enthusiasm to lead human being towards specified goals have, to varying degrees, used methods similar to the method of the Jesuits, and sometimes worse ones...In our day sects and political parties are highly skilled at creating the superman, the legendary hero, the “man of unquestioned honesty”, who serves, in his turn, to maintain the luster of the gang and brings in wealth and power for the sly one to use (Mosca in Gentile 2006:4).

Gentile quoted Mosca to prove that modern politics over the past two centuries has often taken on the features of religion, claiming as its own the prerogative of defining the fundamental purpose and meaning of human life. In this way it has proved, once more, the relationship between the two and, in essence, that the two are concerned with the affairs of the city. Divorcing the two is thus at the heart of creating the problematic nature of divorcing life from life.

Conclusion

This article has exposed the important role that historical contexts play in demonstrating the correlation between religion and politics – it has done so, however, without disputing that there are others who reject the relationship between religion and politics, believing that morality can be understood without any religious background or belief. These opponents claim that a distinct line separates religion and politics. Nevertheless, these individuals still have the capacity to believe in morality and obey the tenets of civil law without ever holding a religious background. Nonetheless, this article reveals that the African worldview allows society to form a code of conduct for its people – and that this code allows them to obey the religious teachings that present human beings with a clear distinction between right and wrong.

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