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Jesus, Jacob Zuma, and the New Jerusalem: religion in the public realm between Polekwane and the Presidency

Abstract

This paper explores the trajectory of religion in the public realm projected by the African National Congress after liberation (1994), focusing specifically on the period after Polekwane. The paper alludes to the rather reluctant presence of religion in the public realm under Nelson Mandela, traces the ambivalent but increasingly affirmative role under Thabo Mbeki, outlines the official ANC policy on religion in the “RDP of the Soul” document, and then analyses how these trajectories have been taken up by Jacob Zuma in the public realm between Polekwane and the Presidency. The focus throughout is on to what extent there is an emerging ANC-led ‘shape’ to religion in the public realm, and to what extent that shape extends beyond the moral to the economic-political domain.

Introduction

Given the deeply ambiguous role of religion in South Africa during colonial-conquest and apartheid, it is not surprising that Nelson Mandela was rather restrained about bringing religion into the public realm. What has been surprising is how Thabo Mbeki shifted from his predominantly negative and dismissive attitude to religion during his Vice-Presidency and the early years of his Presidency to the public embrace of religion, particularly the Bible, in his 2006 Nelson Mandela Lecture. What is perhaps even more surprising is that Mbeki’s rhetoric has been appropriated in an African National Congress official policy discussion document on religion, “RDP of the Soul”, which was taken to their Polekwane National Conference along with the other ANC policy discussion documents. What this paper explores in detail is how Jacob Zuma, having come to power at the Polekwane conference, locates himself within these trajectories and what elements from them he uses in deploying religion in the public realm between Polekwane and his Presidency.

The 52nd National Conference of the African National Congress in December 2007 in Polekwane has ushered in more than a renewal of the alliance between the African National Congress, the South African Communist Party, and the Congress of South African Trade Unions. Just as the visit of ANC President Josiah Tshangana Gumede to the Soviet Union in 1927 prompted both a vision for a united front of African nationalists, communists, and workers in South Africa, so too it prompted him to use religious imagery to imagine this alliance: “I have seen the world to come, where it has already begun. I have been to the new

Jerusalem” (ANC 1982). Polekwane has prompted, I will argue in this paper, not only a renewal of the tripartite alliance but also a new era in the ANC’s deployment of religion in the public realm.

My invocation of Gumede is not anachronistic, for in a Discussion Document of the African National Congress National General Council in 2005 on the ANC’s experience of unity and diversity Gumede is explicitly mentioned (ANC 2005:3-4), as he is in the period post-Polekwane, in an article by the ANC’s Chief Whip, Nathi Mthethwa, when Gumede is again used as an example of an ANC leader who promoted “the revolutionary alliance in South Africa” (Mthethwa 2008:5-6). And while religion is referred to only indirectly, via Gumede’s invocation of “the new Jerusalem”, religion has already made a return to the public realm of ANC politics in at least two guises, Thabo Mbeki’s embrace of the Bible in his Nelson Mandela Lecture and the ANC’s Polekwane Policy Discussion Document, “The RDP of the Soul”.

Thabo Mbeki’s Nelson Mandela Lecture

In his Nelson Mandela Lecture (2006), Thabo Mbeki echoes Gumede, referring directly to the New Jerusalem, drawing on William Butler Yeats’ poem “The Second Coming”. Mbeki appeals to his audience not to allow a “monstrous beast” to be born from South Africa’s New Jerusalem (Mbeki 2006a:13). For our country not to “fall apart”, he argues, “we must in the first instance, never allow that the market should be the principal determinant of the nature of our society” (Mbeki 2006a:14). The primary resource he invokes for both resisting the market and building South Africa’s New Jerusalem is religion, specifically the resources of the Christian Bible.

Mbeki’s speech at the 4th Annual Nelson Mandela Lecture in July 2006 includes a sustained engagement with the Bible. So much so that he felt the need to point out in the oral presentation of the lecture (though it is not included in the published version) that his extensive reference to the Bible did not mean that he was “about to become a priest” (to which this audience responded with laughter) (Mbeki 2006a, 2006b). Remarkably, given the Africanist Mbeki is, in this speech he grants the Bible precedence over the African notion of ‘ubuntu’, using the Book of Proverbs to interpret the concept ‘ubuntu’ (Mbeki 2006a:1-2), saying:

The Book of Proverbs in the Holy Bible contains some injunctions that capture a number of elements of what I believe constitute important features of the Spirit of Ubuntu, which we should strive to implant in the very bosom of the new South Africa that is being born, the food of the soul that would inspire all our people to say that they are proud to be South African!

The Proverbs say: [Proverbs 3:27-31] Withhold not good from them to whom it is due, when it is in the power of thine hand to do it. ²⁸ Say not unto thy neighbour, Go, and come again, and tomorrow I will give; when thou hast it by thee. ²⁹ Devise not evil against thy neighbour, seeing he dwelleth securely by thee. ³⁰ Strive not with a man without cause, if he have done thee no harm. ³¹ Envy thou not the oppressor, and choose none of his ways (Mbeki 2006a:1-2).¹

¹ I have inserted verse numbers for reference; Mbeki’s version is from the King James Version (which clearly appeals to his ‘classical’ ear), but does not include the chapter and

Adopting an African-American type preaching cadence, Mbeki elaborates on what Proverbs might be understood to assume of us in our current context: “It assumes we can be encouraged not to devise evil against our neighbours ...”, “It assumes that ... we should not declare war against anybody without cause ...”, and “It urges that in our actions, we should not seek to emulate the demeanour of our oppressors, nor adopt their evil practices” (Mbeki 2006a:2).

In the remainder of his speech (discussed more fully in West 2009) Mbeki will return to Proverbs 3; he will also engage with Proverbs 6:6-11, as well as Genesis 3:19, John 1:1, and Matthew 4:4/Luke 4:4. Indeed, so prolific is his use of the Bible that he feels the need to explain to his audience why he has been so persistent and insistent “on the Christian Holy Scriptures” (Mbeki 2006a:12). “Let me explain”, says Mbeki (Mbeki 2006a:12).² The crux of his explanation is that in the midst of our country’s daily economic deliberations, we must recognise “that human life is about more than the economy and therefore material considerations”; indeed, continues Mbeki, the “personal pursuit of material gain, as the beginning and end of life purpose, is already beginning to corrode our social and national cohesion” (Mbeki 2006a:12). So, Mbeki argues, “when we talk of a better life for all, within the context of a shared sense of national unity and national reconciliation, we must look beyond the undoubtedly correct economic objectives our nation has set itself” (Mbeki 2006a:12). What “our country needs”, declares Mbeki, is what Nelson Mandela called “an ‘RDP of the soul’” (Mbeki 2006a:3).

What Mbeki does through this religious intertextual exchange is to inaugurate a discussion of the relationship between materialism and idealism. Using Genesis 3:19 and Karl Marx as claims to take material concerns seriously, Mbeki goes on to argue that while material considerations are legitimate, we must not abandon aspects of idealism. Again the Bible is invoked in support of his argument, as Mbeki cites from John’s gospel: “[John 1:1] In the beginning was the Word” (Mbeki 2006a:12). Our preoccupation, Mbeki says, has been with Marx’s “Man must eat before he can think!”, whereas we should also be considering Rene Descartes’ “I think, therefore I am” (Mbeki 2006a:11). The Bible is useful in exploring this tension because it acknowledges the need for both bread and soul, body and mind/Word.

As Mbeki draws his speech to a close he makes one further and final reference to the Bible by way of summing up his argument for an RDP of the soul:

We must therefore say that the Biblical injunction is surely correct, that “Man cannot live by bread alone” [Matthew 4:4/Luke 4:4] and therefore that the mere pursuit of individual wealth can never satisfy the need immanent in all human beings to lead lives of happiness (Mbeki 2006a:14).

We are therefore fortunate, he concludes, because “we had a Nelson Mandela who made bold to give us the task to attend to the ‘RDP of the soul’” (Mbeki 2006a:16).

Among the outcomes Mbeki accomplishes in this speech are a severing of the RDP from the

verse references.

² As indicated above, it is at this point that Mbeki makes an aside, saying, “Do not worry, I am not about to become a priest” (Mbeki 2006b).

economic domain and its re-attachment to the spiritual domain. It is not GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution), the Mbeki driven (Gumede 2007; SACP 2006:22) neo-liberal capitalist macro-economic policy that has constructed a system which celebrates material gain. The problem, according to Mbeki, is the person not the system. An RDP of the economy has been replaced by an RDP of the soul (West 2009 (forthcoming)). A related outcome, and the focus of this paper, is the return of religion to the public realm, but narrowly construed as religion centred on the soul. The tone is erudite, but the substance is a form of evangelical Christianity, what the *Kairos Document* referred to as “Church Theology” (Kairos 1986), in which the focus of religion is the realm of morality, narrowly construed as personal morality.³

The ANC’s “The RDP of the Soul” policy document

While Mbeki’s Nelson Mandela Lecture prepared the ground rhetorically for a shift from an RDP of the economy to an RDP of the soul, the ANC policy document, “The RDP of the Soul” (ANC 2007b), turns rhetoric into policy.

“The RDP of the Soul” Policy Discussion Document was produced by the ANC Commission on Religious Affairs. Driven by the need to move our society beyond forms of religious apartheid in which religion and politics were separated and in which South Africa’s different religions remained separate, “The RDP of the Soul” set out to provide an alternative vision for the role of religion in South Africa’s public realm.⁴ However, given that “Church Theology” was the dominant trajectory within the ANC itself, among both ‘lay’ and ‘ordained’ officials, this Policy Discussion Document received little attention.⁵ It remains, nonetheless, an official document within the ANC and deserves careful analysis.

This Document’s take on religion is in some respects quite different from Mbeki’s, though there is some significant overlap, not least in the forced-removal of ‘RDP’ from the economy to the soul. The preamble to the policy document “The RDP of the Soul” makes the link to Mbeki’s Nelson Mandela Lecture clear, following the document’s statement of intent with a quotation from the lecture:

This document reviews the problems we found in Liberation, analyses them, and sets out the way of Transformation through the reconstruction and development of the nation’s spirit. For it is the spirit of South Africans that drives our political, economic and social processes.

3 This is a form of theology that is more concerned with legitimating, sustaining, and consolidating the structures that constitute the status quo of the Church and State than with the challenges, questions, and critiques posed by the pain these structures perpetrate and perpetuate.

4 Much of the analysis and many of the arguments found in this Document were presented for discussion by the ANC Commission for Religious Affairs in the November 2006 edition of *Umrabulo*, a journal of the African National Congress (ANC 2006).

5 All the information included on the production of this document and its reception and discussion within the ANC is based on discussions with and correspondence from Cedric Mayson, the Coordinator of the ANC Commission on Religious Affairs at the time.

“The question must therefore arise – for those of us who believe that we represent the good – what must we do to succeed in our purposes? ... We must strive to understand the social conditions that would help to determine whether we succeed or fail. What I have said relates directly to what needs to be done to achieve the objective that Nelson Mandela set the nation, to accomplish the RDP of the Soul”. Thabo Mbeki (ANC 2007b:1)

Liberation Brought Us a Packet of Problems

The first part of the policy document, headed “Liberation Brought Us a Packet of Problems”, analyses the “packet of problems” liberation brought the ANC, under the following sub-headings: “The RDP”, “Lack of experience”, “The Population Explosion”, “The Dictatorship of Capital”, “The Western imperialist empire”, “Corruption”, “Crime”, and “The Media” (ANC 2007b:1-3).⁶ Under the sub-heading of “The Dictatorship of Capital” the document states that “An economic system which allows dictators to administer capital without responsibility to anyone is wrong in principle for those who believe in the spirit of democracy” (ANC 2007b:1). This general ethical statement is then followed by a more religion specific statement: “To maintain that it is a legitimate human right to accumulate wealth through a system condemning the majority of our citizens to poverty is totally illegitimate. It is condemned by religious prophets, humanists and economists alike” (ANC 2007b:1-2). Already we can discern the shape of this policy document’s take on religion. First, though the Document takes Mbeki’s moral perspective as its starting point, there is definite recognition of the systemic nature of wealth accumulation. Here morality is about more than individual responsibility; morality is also about systems, especially economic systems. However, as we will see, the Document refuses to take sides on economic systems, imagining that the kind of religion envisaged in the Document will take South Africans beyond both capitalism and socialism. In this respect the argument of the Document sounds similar to the argument of “Church Theology” (Kairos 1986:28).

A second distinctive feature emerges under this sub-heading, as the Document is careful to refrain from privileging any one religious tradition. An inclusive and broad understanding of ‘religion’ is deployed here, including even “the spirit of democracy” and “humanists” in its range. The systemic dimensions of morality are developed more fully further on under this sub-heading, with the policy document declaring that “The economic problem of the poor is the spiritual problem of the rich. To move from the greed of the rich to the need of the poor we must change the system. We need a new spirit – an RDP of the soul” (ANC 2007b:2).

Under the sub-heading of “The Western imperialist empire” a third distinctive feature of this Document’s take on religion becomes apparent, which includes ways in which the United States of America both demonises Islam (ANC 2007b:2),⁷ and infects South African

6 The use of upper and lower case in sub-headings is not consistent. I have reproduced the usage in the document.

7 The only other mention of religion in any of the other twelve Polekwane policy documents is found in the Policy Discussion Document on “International Relations”, and here too Islam receives a specific mention, along similar lines: “The world is becoming divided on the basis of religion and we see forms of discrimination occurring in the name of fighting terrorism. While terrorism is the new threat to peace and stability and has to be defeated including its fundamental causes, we need to take extra care that we do not antagonise people on the basis of religious intolerance and discrimination” (ANC 2007a:4).

Christianity with its brand of fundamentalist Christianity. Under the sub-sections on “Corruption” and then “Crime”, the Document identifies a fourth distinctive features, namely, the damage done by institutionalised religion in failing to hold together the individual and the social. (Ironically, there is a tendency both in “The RDP of the Soul” policy document and in Mbeki’s Nelson Mandela Lecture of precisely the same dislocation.)

The final sub-section on “The Media” is brief, but the argument is clear. The media is often irresponsible in handling its freedom, “portraying western oppressive values, instead of the liberating values of ubuntu thinking” (ANC 2007b:3). A fifth distinctive feature in the Document’s analysis becomes readily apparent here, though it is implicit in most of the Document. The fifth feature is “western oppressive values”, with an emphasis on the first word in the phrase. The logic of the argument throughout is that lying behind and beneath the need for an RDP of the soul is the damage inflicted historically, institutionally, and psychically by western forms of knowledge and practice.

The Role of Religion

The second major section of Document deals with “The Role of Religion”, and is prefaced with another quotation from Mbeki’s Nelson Mandela Lecture, the section in which Mbeki argues that not only do all human beings have a soul, “all human societies also have a soul” (ANC 2007b:3). The argument in this set of quotations, which are true to Mbeki’s more extended argument, is that the focus of the RDP, which committed the ANC government to “modern and effective services” for all our people (ANC 2007b:3), should not be our primary focus; there is a more urgent concern, namely the moral failure infecting our nation, and so while the government gets on with sorting out the economy, we the people must get on with repairing our individual and corporate soul.

This quotation is followed by an analysis of the colonial misuse of religion and the emergence of liberating forms of religion in South Africa, the post-liberation relapse into institutional “religious apartheid” which refuses to collaborate across different faith traditions for transformation, the malaise in traditional institutional religion and the rise of agnosticism and fundamentalism, and the prophetic signs of a cross-sectoral commitment to progressive transformation of society (ANC 2007b:3-5).

The first sub-heading in this section on “The colonial misuse of Religion” focuses on the damage done by the imposition of colonial institutional religion on Africa and Africans. The colonial and missionary enterprise “coopted” us “into western civilisation and a corrupted version of the Gospel”, undermining “the essentials of spiritual humanity proclaimed by the great spiritual leaders of the past”, none of whom “were products of western civilisation”, “not Hindus, Confucius, Isaiah, Amos, the Buddha, Jesus, or Mohammed” (ANC 2007b:3). The anti-western argument continues here, but alongside it a sixth distinctive feature emerges, namely that religion is in and of itself not bad for us. There is an uncorrupted version of “the Gospel”, with a capital ‘G’, there are “essentials of spiritual humanity”, and there are “great spiritual leaders of the past”.

The next sub-section, on “Liberating Religion”, draws attention to more recent examples of life-giving religion from our own recent past. Among these are the ecumenical and inter-faith movements of the liberation struggle, Liberation Theology itself, and various declarations (like the 1991 inter-faith “Declaration of Religious Rights and Responsibilities”)

and institutional formations (like the National Religious Leaders Forum). But, the sub-section concludes, little became of this legacy (ANC 2007b:3).

The reasons for the failure of liberating religion are discussed in the next sub-section, under the heading “Relapse”. The continued colonial practice of “religious apartheid”, with a refusal, largely on the part of the dominant Christian majority, to embrace ecumenical and inter-faith collaboration is the first reason (ANC 2007b:3). A second reason for the failure of liberating religion is that “although religious institutions are aware of agreement on the principles of spiritual values and integrity for the whole human community, many are too busy running their inherited separate activities to work out united strategies of transformation” (ANC 2007b:3). A third reason is the rampant prevalence of what the *Kairos Document* referred to as “Church Theology”, in which “Many religious communities recuse themselves from involvement in the programmes of national, provincial or local government ‘because you cannot mix religion and politics’ (a totally un-godly anti-human colonial doctrine)” (ANC 2007b:3). Along with some of the other distinctive features we have already identified in the Document’s analysis of religion in the public realm there are signs here of a seventh (closely related to the sixth). Leaning on the contribution of the *Kairos Document* this sub-section, and the previous one on “Liberating Religion”, recognises the reality of contending trajectories within a religious tradition. This is clearly articulated in the final analysis in this sub-section, when the Document argues that “There is a clear contrast between religious leaders (at all levels) who wish to present a united front for the better progress of humanity, and those who see no further than keeping their local religions going” (ANC 2007b:3-4). The Document elaborates further, and in so doing adds an eighth distinctive feature: “Many pulpits refuse to explore the spiritual unity in religious diversity which is written into our Constitution” (ANC 2007b:4). This eighth element is the implicit claim, which will be made more explicit later in the Document, that the Constitution (and government) should on occasion dictate to religion what directions it should take.

This analysis leads into the penultimate sub-section under “The Role of Religion”, headed “Right wing Fundamentalism”. Here the third distinctive feature of the Document’s analysis, introduced above, is elaborated. “The fastest growing religion in the world including Africa today”, the Document argues, “is right wing fundamentalism” (ANC 2007b:4). Right-wing fundamentalism is characterised as having its roots in anti-scientific, anti-intellectual, and Pentecostal tendencies. In terms of content it is characterised by superstition instead of faith, the narrowing of theology to proof-texts, the salvation of the individual, the pursuit of health and wealth, a focus on life after death, and the desire for a sectarian end to the world (ANC 2007b:4). The Document makes it clear that fundamentalism is found in all religions and that it breeds extremists in all religions (ANC 2007b:4). The Document devotes considerable space to this topic, concluding that “Fundamentalism is a major problem preventing transformation” (ANC 2007b:4).

The final sub-section under section 2 on “The Role of Religion” turns from right wing fundamentalism to the other end of the religious continuum, namely “Progressive Prophets”. This sub-section reiterates many of the features of religion already discussed and introduces a ninth distinctive feature, namely the significant commonalities that characterise prophetic religion across various religious traditions (including secular humanism). Central to this analysis is the notion of an emergent form of progressive religion arising from the soil of

African ubuntu but encompassing the best of each and every religious and secular-ethical tradition. This is perhaps a tenth distinctive feature in the analysis of religion in this Document, the flip-side of the argument about a damaging western legacy. If western imperialism is part of our problem, then the recognition and recovery of African conceptual resources is part of our transformation. This becomes even clearer in the third section of “The RDP of the Soul”.

Analysing the answers

The third section of the “The RDP of the Soul” Policy Discussion Document returns to the problems that “inhibit the progress from Liberation to Transformation”, and is headed “Analysing the answers”. The preamble to this section notes that to the list of problems discussed under section one, section two has added another, namely “conservative religion” (ANC 2007b:5). But the focus of the third section is on the positive factors which are a resource for transformation, the problems notwithstanding.

The argument here seems to be that “the recovery of soul” – an RDP of the soul – enables us to transcend not only the boundaries of different religious traditions but also the boundaries of different economic traditions (ANC 2007b:5). The work begun by Mbeki in legitimating the ANC government’s ideological shift to GEAR by invoking religion is now completed in this Policy Discussion Document. The lurking eleventh distinctive feature in this Document’s analysis of religion in the public realm is evident here; religion should enable us to move beyond economic contestation. Just when one imagines that the Document will break with Mbeki’s rather narrow moral trajectory, the Document balks at the economic dimension, refusing to be prophetic.

At this point in the Document the second distinctive feature, introduced above, becomes the focus. Not only is this Document careful not to privilege any one religious tradition, it goes further in advocating for the sixth distinctive feature, already discussed, namely a common substratum underlying all forms of progressive spirituality, called here “secular spirituality”. This form of spirituality “extends spiritual understanding from the religious world to the whole secular creation” (ANC 2007b:6). “Humanity”, the document argues, “is reaching for a new reality”, rooted in “the deep primal human concept of *ubuntu*”, and “given a thousand different words in a thousand different languages” (ANC 2007b:6). Secular spirituality explicitly “rejects the individualistic priorities of western civilisation as anti-human”, embracing instead, and here the Document quotes Mbeki again, “values and norms that have ... resided amongst our people and which have held together our communities from ancient times up to the present. These values [are] contained in the world view known as ubuntu” (ANC 2007b:6). “This is the spiritual truth of all humanity”, the argument of the Document concludes. “It is a basic understanding to be taken into all progressive religious, political, and economic institutions. *Ubuntu* rules” (ANC 2007b:6).

The final sub-section of the third section of the Document, “Unity of the spirit is the RDP of the soul”, continues the argument of the previous sub-section, arguing that “All religions agree on the great spiritual truths which drive humanity, and we need to accept this agreement as the launch pad for new development”. Moreover, these great truths and values “arise from ubuntu” and are put “into secular expression by ordinary people in the daily life of home, work and play” (ANC 2007b:6). The RDP of the soul, in sum, the Document

argues, is characterised by compassion, cooperation, and commitment; they are “the fruit of secular spirituality, the heartbeat of ubuntu, ... the essence of the RDP of the Soul” (ANC 2007b:6). In case the more traditionally religious might balk at this secular spirituality, the Document concludes this third section of the document by stating that “None of this denies the positive role that religion can play: the value of sacraments, the message of theology, the empowering experience of communities of faith, the role of history, the proclamation of the prophets, the lives of the saints: all feed the spirituality of the human world, the secular reality in which the soul of humanity has its being” (ANC 2007b:6-7).

The Way of Transformation

The fourth and final section of “The RDP of the Soul” Policy Discussion Document charts “The Way of Transformation”. Returning to the economic RDP for the last time, the Document draws on the centrality of the “concept of struggle” in the original RDP Base Document. Though “The RDP of Soul” does not acknowledge that the core of the struggle discussed in the RDP document is the economy (Terreblanche 2002:108; Seekings and Nattrass 2006:347; Saul 2005:206-207; Legassik 2007:456-457), it takes up the language of ‘the struggle’ to urge all South Africans to join the struggle, which in this case “demands a struggle to evolve a new society through compassion, cooperation and commitment, which includes an economy designed for people not for profit, and the release of spiritual values into secular life” (ANC 2007b:7). Again, the basic trajectory set by Mbeki is maintained, but broadened. The opportunity to advocate for a structural conceptualisation of morality is declined.

In this section the Document returns to the seventh distinctive feature, discussed above, with respect to the analysis of religion in the public realm, namely that religion is itself “a site of struggle”. This was the case in the struggle against apartheid and it continues to be the case in the struggle for a new society (ANC 2007b:7). The incipient eighth distinctive feature, mentioned briefly above, now takes shape in the concluding part of this sub-section: The ANC is not a religious organisation; it fully supports the Constitutional policy of freedom of religion; it has no policy of interference with those whose religious policies are not its own. But the ANC has a major responsibility to spell out the dangers when people promote organisations which are opposed to the spiritual or material development of our people, whatever religious credentials they may claim. ... The ANC is deeply involved in South Africa’s struggle to renew and develop her soul” (ANC 2007b:7).

In this Document the ANC reserves the right to talk back to religion. But, I ask, does it accept the right of progressive prophet religion to talk back to the ANC and the state it governs on issues other than the moral, no matter how broadly defined? In other words, adopting the phrasing of this Document, may and should the “prophetic prophets”, particularly those promoting prophetic economic policy, spell out the dangers to the ANC government when they promote economic policies which are opposed to the spiritual or material development of our people, whatever economic credentials they may claim? This is the crucial question from the perspective of a prophetic religion trajectory.

To what extent “The RDP of the Soul” Policy Discussion Document has been taken up through ANC programmes is not clear, though discussions with Cedric Mayson, the past

Coordinator of the ANC Commission for Religious Affairs, indicate that not much has been done about this Document at a formal level, though the Document remains on the ANC's official website and traces of its presence can be detected in the "Resolutions" document of the ANC 52nd National Conference. But whatever the formal status of this Document after Polekwane, there has been a marked shift in religion in the public realm since Polekwane. And this brings me to the third and final part of my paper.

Jacob Zuma's deployment of religion

Both the erudite and somewhat bookish religion of Thabo Mbeki and the ecumenical secular-spirituality of "The RDP of the Soul" have been relegated to the back benches since Polekwane. Popular religion is now firmly in the front seat. Though it is too early to tell the precise shape of post-Polekwane religion in the public realm there are already clear markers.

Jacob Zuma clearly represents himself as a religious man, but in ways which are different from his predecessor and the religious policy document of his party. Zuma is in many ways quite different from Mbeki, the classically literate humanist with a feel for the language of the King James version of the Bible and a preference for the Bible's wisdom tradition, and his spirituality is also quite different from the ecumenical and secular spirituality advocated by the ANC's "The RDP of the Soul" Policy Discussion Document. Zuma is robustly Christian in his religious discourse, favouring the more Pentecostal-Charismatic and 'fundamentalist' (in terms of the "The RDP of the Soul" Policy Discussion Document) forms of Christianity, not the highly textual form of Mbeki or avant-garde secular-spirituality form of "The RDP of the Soul". But there are also areas of overlap with each of these in Zuma's deployment of religion, particularly in his scripted presentations.

Though Zuma's more casual appropriations of religion have been extensively taken up by the media, his more considered comments have not. For example, any claim that Jacob Zuma is in any way 'like Jesus' has been vigorously contested in the media. An example is when he implicitly associated himself with Jesus when he claimed that the ANC breakaway political party Cope (Congress of the People) is like Jesus' donkey. Referring explicitly to the biblical story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, Zuma went on to say "The people were waiting for the Son of Man [Zuma/ANC] who was on the donkey [Cope]. The donkey did not understand it, and thought the songs of praise were for him" (du Plessis 2008). Such remarks, however seriously intended, have led to a chorus of contributions, from supporters (Tromp and Nqiyaza 2008), opposition parties (DA 2008; IOL 2008a), cartoonists (Zapiro 2008), churches (IOL 2008b), and ordinary South Africans of different persuasions. So the media have played a role in returning religion to the public realm, albeit without any in-depth analysis of Zuma's more considered contributions. A case in point is Zuma's visit to the Rhema Bible Church (Sapa 2009).

The latter event is particularly significant because a careful reading of what Zuma said indicates that he is more nuanced about religion than the media acknowledges. Though not his dominant mode of discoursing about religion, it is in his more nuanced moments that Zuma overlaps with Mbeki and the ANC's "The RDP of the Soul" Policy Discussion

Document. Though visiting a church which the “The RDP of the Soul” Policy Discussion Document would consider ‘fundamentalist’, Zuma begins his speech on the 15th March 2009 by reminding the congregation that “Our Constitution enshrines the freedom of religion, belief and opinion. It allows religious diversity in our multicultural society” (Zuma 2009c:1). Though Zuma’s focus in this speech is understandably on the Christian faith, and though he does continue his speech by saying that “The ANC has its roots in the Christian faith”, he immediately adds that the ANC “celebrates and supports all beliefs in its broad membership and support base”. He justifies his Christian emphasis by saying that “We recognise that while there is extensive religious diversity, the majority of South Africans are Christians” (Zuma 2009c:1).

He then shifts rather abruptly to the Bible, saying that one of his “favourite books in the Bible is the Book of Exodus in the Old Testament”. That he turns to the Bible is appropriate to his context, but that he refers to the archetypal text from liberation theology in this conservative right-wing church context is either bold or naive. He quotes from Exodus 3:

⁷ The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. ⁸ So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey [New International Version].⁸

Zuma follows this quotation by following the narrative in Exodus chapter 5 where Moses and Aaron confront Pharaoh, quoting from verse 1,

"This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the desert.'" (Zuma 2009c:1)

With many members of the thoroughly “Church Theology” Rhema Bible Church probably squirming in their plush seats Zuma continues, saying that “The Exodus from Egypt has always symbolised the liberatory character of the church”. Zuma elaborates on this line of argument, saying that the story of “Moses and his mission as a man of God inspired many an oppressed people and made them realise that indeed God is on the side of the poor and oppressed” (Zuma 2009c:1). Making his audience even more uncomfortable is Zuma’s next move, in which he associates the ANC with Moses and his mission.

The call “Let My People Go” is not far removed from our organisation’s vision. It is not surprising that the phrase is the title of a biography of our illustrious ANC former President, Inkosi Albert Luthuli. When our leaders in the ANC and the Church said to successive apartheid regimes: “Let My People Go”, we knew that God would be on our side until our freedom was attained. Since its formation in 1912 the African National Congress understood this liberation mission of the Church and the word of God, and aligned itself with it (Zuma 2009c:1).

Zuma goes on to instruct them about history of the ANC’s history relationship with the

⁸ Once again I have inserted the verse numbers for ease of reference. It is interesting to note the Zuma here uses the New International Version, a more modern translation than the version preferred by Mbeki. The New International Version is an overtly Evangelical translation, but whether this is a factor in Zuma’s choice is difficult to determine without more examples.

Church, citing Nelson Mandela who “traces the relationship between the ANC and the church to the 1870s when the Ethiopian Church Movement was formed as a response to the rapid land dispossession from the 1800s” (Zuma 2009c:1). The purpose of this theological history lesson becomes clear after Zuma has mentioned a number of examples “which illustrate that the historical association of the ANC and the Church cannot be doubted”, when he states, “The ANC practically derived its moral vision from the Church amongst other sources” (Zuma 2009c:1).

The “moral vision” of the Church, which according to Zuma’s historical analysis includes a profoundly political dimension, not only explains the mission of the ANC but “also explains the key role played by the religious sector in the struggle for freedom in our country” (Zuma 2009c:1-2). And it is because of this relationship between the ANC and the Church that “the post-2009 election administration”, continues Zuma, “will work for a continued partnership with the faith-based sector to give practical meaning to the ANC’s moral vision, based on our country’s Constitution”. In sum, argues Zuma, “Our moral vision embodies the values of a just and caring society” (Zuma 2009c:2). In the remainder of his speech Zuma elaborates on ways in which the ANC needs “the support of the Church and all faith-based organisations, so that together we can release our people from the slavery of poverty and its manifestations” (Zuma 2009c:2).

In general, Zuma says to the Rhema Bible Church, government “should open its doors to enable interaction with faith-based organisations on policy and implementation”. Specifically, there are “many programmes that require collaboration with faith-based organisations” (Zuma 2009c:2). These include, health, education, rural development, the fight against crime, and the creation of “decent jobs”. The first two, Zuma argues, are domains in which the Church has a long history, and he commends Rhema Ministries for their support programmes for orphans and children living in the streets. The third, rural development, is important because churches “are the only institutions that are found in every corner of the country, even remote rural areas” and are therefore key partners in the ANC’s proposed rural development initiative. The fourth programme, the “fight against crime is”, says Zuma, “everybody’s business” (Zuma 2009c:2). Significantly, Zuma says nothing more about the fifth programme, the creation of “decent jobs”.

The phrase, “decent work”, is derived from the work of the International Labour Organization, and is embedded within a careful socio-economic analysis (ILO 1999). Zuma invokes this phrase, but avoids its socio-economic implications here, for this is not the domain of religion. Instead, he continues his speech by calling for “a more active role of the Church in strengthening and deepening democracy”, including popularising the Constitution and Bill of Rights (Zuma 2009c:2). Zuma is aware that this kind of call will cause some discomfort among his audience, for he goes on immediately to recognise that there will probably be “occasional friction between Church and State”, especially concerning “[s]ome laws considered to be progressive and necessary by politicians and administrators”, including “the termination of pregnancy legislation” or “legislation for civil unions by people of the same sex”. “The solution” to such conflict, he continues, “is to have open dialogue and discussion” (Zuma 2009c:2). Zuma correctly recognises that such ‘moral’ matters will be of particular concern to this congregation. But he refuses to concede too much to this kind of Christianity, accepting that “[w]here no common ground is found, we will be able to disagree without being disagreeable” (Zuma 2009c:2).

He concludes his speech by affirming that “[w]e believe in the power of prayer” and then urging “the church to pray for peaceful, free and fair elections and a smooth transition to the new administration after April 22”, as well as “for nation building”, working together with the ANC and government “to make all South Africans feel at home in their country, regardless of colour, language, gender or creed” (Zuma 2009c:2). “Working together”, he says, returning to where he began with an allusion to the Exodus biblical text, “we can definitely do more to make South Africa a land of milk and honey” (Zuma 2009c:3).

Like Mbeki, Zuma privileges the Christian faith, drawing on the Bible, but like “The RDP of the Soul” Policy Discussion Document, Zuma acknowledges the role of a plurality of religions in South Africa’s public realm. Rather surprisingly, given the politically conservative, historically right-wing ‘fundamentalist’, stance of the Rhema Bible Church, Zuma is overt about the prophetic liberation tradition alongside which the ANC stands. Unfortunately, however, he does not follow through on this trajectory, choosing to downplay the national priority for decent work, focussing instead on narrower moral dilemmas such as abortion and same-sex marriage. Such is the dominance of the moral-religion trajectory in our country since liberation (West 2008) that Zuma, like Mbeki and “The RDP of the Soul” Policy Discussion Document, cannot even imagine the religious sector talking back to the ANC or government about economic matters!

A few days after his scripted speech to the Rhema Bible Church, Zuma was back to his more spontaneous and robust orientation to religion. In a statement released by the ANC we are told that “ANC President Jacob Zuma held separate meetings with chiefs and organised church leadership in Mafikeng today (Wednesday, 18 March 2009)” (ANC 2009). Interestingly, the ANC report emphasises and foregrounds the meeting with religious – in this case Christian – leaders, even though the meeting with traditional leaders took place first. So following the order of the ANC’s statement, we read that Led by Reverend Poet Tlhabanyane of the North West Forum of Religious Leaders, church leaders told Zuma they will ensure that between now and the election date every member of the church is encouraged to vote. Church leaders also committed themselves to help in constructing a caring society, and to fight against moral decay and all forms of abuse (ANC 2009).

To which Zuma responds, in the words of the statement, by telling the religious leaders “that the ANC was the only organisation that can claim that it was baptised when it was born”. The statement then goes on to quote Zuma, explaining why he would make such a claim: There are three main sectors that were instrumental in the formation of the organisation – they were intellectuals, traditional leaders and religious leaders. Of the 11 former leaders of the ANC, a significant number of them, including presidents Mahabane, Makgatho and Luthuli were priests. As the ANC, we’re the child of the church (ANC 2009). Linking the past with the present, the statement continues, Zuma commended the current commitment of the church leadership to the ANC, “saying it was consistent with the commitment made by their forbearers [sic] when the ANC was formed 97 years ago”. In his own words, and now directly invoking the Bible (Romans 8:31), Zuma proclaims that the support of church leaders “is an unequivocal biblical declaration that if God is for us, who can be against us” (ANC 2009).

Zuma then goes on, according to the report, to shift the focus from the ANC to society at

large, arguing that “the show of unity by churches in the meeting around common issues was fundamental, as it had a potential to unite the society” (ANC 2009). But this is not the emphasis of the report, understandably, given the priorities of the political moment, for the opening sentence of the statement reports that this diverse group of church leaders in the North West “have said they will encourage their communities to participate in the upcoming elections to ensure the victory of the African National Congress (ANC)” (ANC 2009).

In this more unscripted encounter we find Zuma somewhat playfully but not inappropriately claiming religious sanction for the political movement of which he is the president. He combines, rather skilfully, history and scripture to make his point, showing himself familiar with biblical imagery and biblical texts. But he also recognises the importance of the church more broadly; the “commitment” of the church to the ANC is significant, but so too is the potential of the churches, when united around common issues, to unite South African society. The statement also makes it clear what the central concerns of the church are (and should be?), namely, constructing a caring society, fighting against moral decay and all forms of abuse. Quite what is intended by “all forms of abuse” is not clear, but the emphasis on the churches’ role in constructing a caring and moral society is.

Once again there is resonance here with both Mbeki and “The RDP of the Soul”, both in terms of the primary task of religion and in terms of a collaborative division of labour between the church and state.

I will not dwell on the encounter between Zuma and the traditional leaders which took place earlier on the same day and which is reported on in detail, albeit secondarily. What is significant about the meeting between the traditional leaders and Zuma, who was “welcomed by Kgosi Montshiwa of the Barolong to ululation by the assembled community”, is that it follows a similar format to that of the meeting with the church leaders (ANC 2009). There is a similar invocation of the past, with Zuma arguing that the ANC “is an organisation of traditional leaders” since the very formation of the organisation in Bloemfontein in 1912 (ANC 2009); there is similar invocation of ‘religious’ values, in this case the specific value of “dignity”, which is key to “the common struggle of the ANC and traditional leaders” as they “reclaim the dignity taken over centuries by the colonial and apartheid regimes” (ANC 2009); and there is a similar reminder of the task, in this case of traditional leaders, to support the ANC and “to fix this country”, which includes the “important role of holding the government accountable by criticizing us when we go wrong” (ANC 2009).

Again, there are echoes here of Mbeki and “The RDP of the Soul”, specifically concerning the importance of African ‘dignity’ as a foundational, perhaps even religious, value. This said, there is no extended understanding of African (Traditional) Religion as a substantive religious resource in its own right, nor is there any recognition of the role of Christianity in denigrating and destroying African dignity as an alliance partner of colonialism and apartheid.

Zuma, it would seem, holds religion, ordinary religion, in higher regard than either Mbeki or

“The RDP of the Soul”. In these relatively unscripted meetings, while clearly calling for an ongoing alliance with religion in which the political party plays the primary role, Zuma also allows for religion to have a public role in talking back to the party and state, though the parameters of this zone of contestation are not pushed much beyond the moral.

In a wide-ranging speech a week later (24 March 2009), at the KwaZulu-Natal Progressive Professional Forum, Zuma explains more fully his understanding of the domain of religion, focussing on the churches. Moving from sport to religion, Zuma says:

You would have seen us visiting various churches and meeting with religious groupings. We are doing this to deepen partnerships with interfaith forums to promote social education for moral regeneration, religious tolerance, social cohesion and development. We will be visiting more churches soon to cement this partnership with faith-based organisations (Zuma 2009b).⁹

The areas in which religion can talk back to power seem fairly clear here. Again, they do not seem to include, for example, the economy; this becomes even clearer when Zuma immediately continues his speech by turning to economic transformation, addressing not the churches, but the “professionals and businesspeople” present, summoning them to play key roles “in various programmes of transforming our country” (Zuma 2009b). Earlier, in referring directly to the economy, and specifically to “the recent turmoil in world markets”, Zuma had stated that “the ANC will intervene to ensure that Government, together with labour, business and other sectors work together to develop practical solutions” (Zuma 2009b). He turns then to sport and then to religion, without clarifying whether the religious sector belongs within these “other sectors”. If it does, it has a fairly clearly demarcated zone of contribution.

Some weeks later (on the 12th of April 2009), ANC President Jacob Zuma accepts an invitation to the Easter service of the International Pentecost Church. That he accepts an invitation to a Pentecostal church is itself significant, as it is somewhat at odds with the orientation of ANC’s “The RDP of the Soul” Document and therefore represents something of Zuma’s own religious orientation, and, perhaps, something of the ANC strategy, post-Polekwane. Significantly, however, Zuma does not use this opportunity to give thanks for the formal withdrawal of charges against him, which took place five days earlier on the 7th April 2009.¹⁰

Adeptly, Zuma begins by formally acknowledging “the Comforter”, the Holy Spirit, before going on to acknowledge the pastor, the leadership of the ANC, and the congregation (Zuma 2009d). His personal engagement with the event is clear, for having recognised that this “is a special and very sacred weekend for thousands of believers in our country”, he goes on to

⁹ In another speech, this time to the sports and musical legends, he again reports that he has met with religious leaders, among a list of sectors, including “business groups, professionals, women, youth, workers, Afrikaners and other minority communities, traditional leaders, religious leaders and various others” (Zuma 2009f).

¹⁰ Neither does he use the opportunity in his remarks on the 7th April to make any reference to God’s part in the formal withdrawal of charges; see (Zuma 2009h)

add, more personally, “I feel extra privileged and blessed to be invited on my birthday to share this occasion with you” (Zuma 2009d). His use of the phrase, “I feel ... blessed”, demonstrates some familiarity with this form of Christianity. However, he quickly shifts to a more inclusive and ecumenical-interfaith mode of discourse, saying, In our country the Easter weekend is a solemn period as our people mark the weekend in various forms. It is the commemoration of the Passover for our Jewish compatriots, the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ for the Christians and the Ratha-Yatra or Festival or Chariots by our Indian brothers and sisters to name a few (Zuma 2009d).

He goes further, following the inclusive trajectory of “The RDP of the Soul”, by invoking the Constitution. “This weekend”, he argues, “allows us to showcase our Constitution and the diversity it promotes”. He then elaborates:

The Constitution states that government may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on grounds including race, gender, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth. Our Constitution also declares that everyone has the right to freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief and opinion (Zuma 2009d).

We are “a very free society”, Zuma continues, because of “the struggles of our people over decades”, and because “our new nation was founded on reconciliation and forgiveness in 1994”. “Nation building, unity and reconciliation”, he insists, “will continue to be the cornerstone of the new administration after elections” (Zuma 2009d). He then issues a call to those gathered, saying, “All South Africans must feel they are an important part of our country, because they all have a role to build our country. We have to build a united compassionate and caring nation. As people of God, we must be ruled by love and forgiveness, as well as unity and mutual respect” (Zuma 2009d). This call “[o]n this Easter Sunday”, he goes on to argue, now addressing his Christian congregation directly, “draw[s] inspiration” from Matthew 18:21-22, which he quotes: “Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times’”. Similarly, he continues, “We are also guided by Romans Chapter 12, Verse 9, which says: ‘Don’t just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honouring each other’”. Commenting on this text, and perhaps also imparting a lesson from his reaction to the formal withdrawal of charges against him five days earlier, Zuma says that “Hate is an intense and all-consuming emotion. It takes over your whole being as you plot against your perceived enemy. On the other hand”, he continues “love and forgiveness are liberating emotions”. Turning, perhaps, away from the personal to the national, he concludes his commentary on these biblical texts by saying, “If we allow these positive emotions to govern our lives, and work in unity, the load will be lighter, and we will be able to build a caring society and a prosperous nation” (Zuma 2009d).

Like Mbeki before him, Zuma draws adroitly from the Bible, using the Bible to set up the remainder of his speech, which emphasises unity, both national unity and marital unity, the basic building-block of society (see below). Like “The RDP of the Soul”, Zuma points to the central values of the Constitution and a caring society. But like them he seems to separate the role of faith communities, that of building a unified and moral society, from the role of government, that of building the economy and democratic institutions, for he goes on in his

speech to shift his focus from the faith community he is addressing to the ANC, reminding them of the progress “we”, the ANC has made “in tackling the apartheid legacy, building our economy and sustaining economic growth” (Zuma 2009d). In addition, he assures them, “We have built democratic institutions that serve the interests and safeguard the rights of all South Africans”. Indeed, “Recent events have shown have shown the capacity of these institutions to effectively perform their Constitutional mandate, even in the face of heated political and legal disputes” (Zuma 2009d). Finally, he concludes, “the ANC remains the only party that is able to mobilise a broad cross-section of society in the reconstruction and development of South Africa. We will continue to work with every sector and every group in society” (Zuma 2009d).

He then turns, as I have indicated, to “the couples who will be joined in holy matrimony today”, shifting from the institutions of the state to the institutions of the church, stating, “The institution of the family is the rock upon which nations are founded” (Zuma 2009d). I quote here the concluding paragraphs of his speech in full, for they portray rather powerfully Zuma’s understanding of the relationship between church and state.

May God bless the unions and provide you with the love and strength to build strong families out of which we will strengthen our communities and our nation.

We are aware that we need to strengthen the family as an institution. Families will be under pressure due to challenges such as the looming job losses arising from the global economic meltdown. Our families are also under pressure due to societal ills such as alcohol and substance abuse, domestic violence as well as crime that affects our society. We will have to prioritise programmes that will strengthen families and empower them to deal with such societal ills. We must also work with communities to eradicate the scourge of crime so that families can live in peace and harmony.

My message to the couples comes from the Corinthians, Chapter 13, Verses 4-7, which says: "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres".

Let us build happy, stable families and communities and a united, prosperous nation. Working together we can do more to build a united, caring and more prosperous nation (Zuma 2009d).

There is nothing here of the role of the state in restricting the negative features of fundamentalist forms of religion, as envisaged by “The RDP of the Soul”; instead, the state ought to provide an enabling social environment for the family. The role of the church is to co-operate with the state, but within the fairly circumscribed moral domain of forgiveness

and love. While the focus of the state is structural matters, the focus of the religious community is personal matters.

On the same day Zuma also addressed the Muslim community in Mayfair, Johannesburg. Speaking at the Sultan Bahu Fete, Zuma commends the faith community for their fund raising activities in support of “noble causes”, such as “raising funds for an orphanage”. Commending Muslim organisations more generally for their support of “the underprivileged and people in distress”, Zuma goes on to quote from the Qur’an:

The Holy Quran, Chapter 2, Verse 215, underscores the role of community work; “They ask you, O Muhammad, what they should spend in charity. Say: ‘Whatever you spend with a good heart, give it to parents, relatives, orphans, the helpless, and travellers in need. Whatever good you do, God is aware of it’” (Zuma 2009j).

As he has done with other faith communities, Zuma reminds his audience that “South Africa is a secular state where all citizens enjoy the right of worship and freedom of religion. We developed a Constitution together as South Africans, which recognised our diversity, and guarantees equality of all religions and culture” (Zuma 2009j). As he has done with other faith communities, Zuma recognises and acknowledges the contribution of that faith community to the struggle against apartheid and towards a better society. He does this here at some length, recording the Muslim contribution from their earliest arrival in South Africa. However, the emphasis seems to shift during this recitation of the Muslim contribution to “a better society, free of racism and apartheid” (Zuma 2009j). What begins with religion turns to culture:

We underline the fact that during the apartheid years, Muslims, like many other cultural groups in our country, rose to the call to unite in struggle against oppression and racism. In many parts of the country, Muslim communities stood side by side with Africans to oppose and fight the Group Areas Act and many other racist laws (Zuma 2009j).

Incorrectly assuming that there are no Muslims who are ‘Africans’ (in post-apartheid’s nomenclature), Zuma goes on to reiterate the contribution of Muslims to nation building. When he turns to the forthcoming elections he outlines the five-fold priorities of “the ruling party”, and then goes on to call, not for a religious contribution but, for “a strong common national identity” (Zuma 2009j). Muslim ‘ethnicity’ rather than Muslim ‘religion’ seems to be the issue here. “We need”, says Zuma, to develop a common understanding of what image we want to project of our country. We must work hard to market our country and send out positive messages about South Africa to the world and to our own people, to be able to achieve the economic growth we desire, and create decent jobs. Every South African must be an ambassador of this country, regardless of colour, race or creed. We need to cover ground lost in the last few years, and undo the negativity that was becoming entrenched. We need to begin to change mindsets about South Africa inside the country and in the world. We have a good product to sell (Zuma 2009j).

He goes on to address the related, in his view, issue of post-election opposition in parliament, implying that his audience might stand in political opposition, perhaps because of their ethnicity, to the ANC. “It should be possible”, he argues, for those in opposition “to promote unity and patriotism”, “to have issues on which we can project a united voice to the world, and on which we can all put South Africa first” (Zuma 2009j).

I mention this rather strange shift from religion to ethnicity to indicate that Zuma's grasp on religion outside of Christianity may be rather limited. My supposition is borne out by Zuma's speech a few days later to the India Christian Community in Phoenix, Durban on the 14th April 2009. Ignoring their Christianity, Zuma engages with their ethnicity. He commemorates the unity of Indians and Africans in the liberation struggle and calls for the joining of Indian and African hands in building the nation. However, there is no recognition at all of the role of religion in mobilising Indian involvement in the liberation struggle. The closest he gets to any engagement with religion is when he invokes the memory of "Mohandas Karachmand 'Mahatma' Ghandi", though there is little recognition of what makes him a "religious figure" and no understanding of the role of religion in Ghandi's anti-colonial and anti-racist political engagement (Zuma 2009k).

In both this speech to the Indian Christian community and in his earlier speech to the Muslim community Zuma is able to understand how their ethnicity enables participation in the liberation struggle, but he is unable to understand how their religion enables participation in the liberation struggle. Religion, for Zuma, belongs to another realm, that of the moral not the socio-political. And when he cites sacred texts, whether the more familiar Bible or the less familiar Qur'an, he chooses texts, like his predecessor, with an overtly moral message. While Zuma understand the role of ethnicity in contributing to public political consciousness, it seems he cannot understand the role of religion in contributing to anything other than the public moral consciousness.

In a wide-ranging speech to an ANC rally five days later, on the 19th April 2009, Zuma briefly mentions religion. Zuma speaks powerfully about what "we" (the ANC) will and must do in the days that lie ahead and what "we" (the ANC) have done in laying the foundation of the Constitution. He then calls on various sectors of society to take up various tasks. When he comes to the religious sector he says, "We call on all South Africans of all faiths and convictions to join us in building a nation founded on the principle and practice of ubuntu. We must build a society in which each of us finds our humanity in the humanity of others; in which each of us bears responsibility for the dignity and well-being of each other (Zuma 2009a). This is an important and appropriate call to make on religion, but it excludes any recognition that religion might speak into other dimensions of life, such as the economic. Ironically, the "liberatory character" of religion invoked in his address to the Rhema Bible Church, replete with citations of appropriate sacred texts, is generally detached from its economic and political dimensions.¹¹

In his final speech on the journey between Polekwane and the Presidency, on the occasion of his inauguration as the fourth president of the Republic of South Africa, Zuma assures the South African people that "We seek a vibrant, dynamic partnership that is enriched by democratic debate that values diverse views and accommodates dissent". "Therefore", he continues, "we need to make real the fundamental right of all South Africans to freely express themselves, to protest, to organise, and to practice their faith" (Zuma 2009e). This is an

¹¹ However, in his ANC election victory press statement on the 25th April 2009 he does thank "religious leaders" among many others for their inputs into the Manifesto of the ANC, upon which the ANC has campaigned and been successful (Zuma 2009g).

interesting and suggestive set of clauses, though quite what their relationship to each other is not that clear. But it may indicate that Zuma acknowledges a more prophetic role for religion in his presidency, including perhaps some engagement on the economic and/or political front.

I cannot complete my analysis without reference to two further speeches. In his “State of the Nation” address to parliament on the 3rd June 2009 he does not specifically refer to religion, but in the spirit of the secular-spirituality of “The RDP of the Soul” he calls upon members of parliament as follows: “Honourable Members, since 1994 we have sought to create a united cohesive society out of our fragmented past. We are called upon to continue this mission of promoting unity in diversity and to develop a shared value system, based on the spirit of community solidarity and a caring society” (Zuma 2009i). But later that month, on the 24th May 2009, he is more overt, visiting yet another Pentecostal church, the Grace Bible Church in Pimville, in order to thank congregants for the ANC election victory (Zuma 2009i). Accompanied by the Chairperson of the ANC in Gauteng, the Premier of Gauteng, and the Mayor of Johannesburg Metro Council, Zuma is clearly at home in this environment. He begins as follows:

I am honoured to be here with you today, to share in the fellowship, communion and the grace of Our Lord, Jesus Christ. We felt it important to visit today to show our deepest gratitude for all the support and the prayers we received during the campaign. We are taught in the scriptures to give thanks. Thessalonians Chapter 5 verse 18 states: “In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God.”

We are naturally inspired to be in Soweto, one of the most visible symbols and sites of our struggle for freedom. Most importantly, we are pleased to share in the fellowship with congregants of the Grace Bible Church, a parish that is associated with progress and achievements. Our election campaign, inauguration and transition have been successful due to the fact that we are blessed by the religious sector throughout the country. The ANC has its roots in the Christian church and has also always been closely linked to other faiths (Zuma 2009i).

He assures the congregation that the new administration will work hard, “so as not to disappoint you”. Furthermore, he continues, “We want to keep the channels of communication open so that you can be able to reach the Presidency timeously to raise issues and alert us to any problems or development needs” (Zuma 2009i). Though the focus seems to have shifted here from the congregation as religious people to the congregation as citizens, Zuma does return to religion again, when he discusses the formation of his Cabinet. “We have formed a Cabinet”, he says, “that is truly representative of the demographics and geographical spread of our population. We have priests and lay people, we have people from different faiths and religious beliefs, non-believers and believers. We have women and men, Africans, Whites, Coloureds and Indians” (Zuma 2009i).

Zuma seems to be making a number of points here (as elsewhere). First, the religious sector, particularly the Christian church and especially the Pentecostal-Charismatic sectors of the church, are an important foundation force in the establishment of the ANC. Second, this sector continues to play a supportive role in sustaining the ANC in government. Third, the

ANC recognises that this foundational and sustaining support requires some reciprocity, and so the ANC is open to the concerns of the religious sector, though these concerns are generally expected to cluster around the moral rather than the economic or political. Fourth, the religious sector must recognise, however, that the ANC includes, is constituted by, and serves a diverse array of other citizens as well as them. Finally, and this becomes clear as Zuma concludes his remarks to the congregation, the ANC should expect that the church will continue to support it, notwithstanding its concerns. “Please pray for the Cabinet as well as provincial executives and all spheres of government”, Zuma asks of them. “We cannot govern alone. We need a strong partnership with the faith based sector and all stakeholders. We derive our wisdom and strength from you, our people. We must therefore continue to work together to do more to build a better life for all” (Zuma 2009i).

Jacob Zuma has clearly brought religion back into the public realm. In his unscripted and more personal engagement with religion, Zuma demonstrates a comfortable grasp of evangelical Christianity, leaning in the direction of its more Pentecostal-Charismatic forms. Here he can be playful, spontaneous, and show something of his own personal spirituality. In his choice of religious sites he tends to favour Christian faith communities, preferring Pentecostal-Charismatic churches. Here, it would seem, is a constituency in which he not only feels comfortable, but which he considers politically important. But in his scripted engagements with religion he leans more in the direction of “The RDP of the Soul”, being sensitive to and drawing on ecumenical and interfaith perspectives. There are even hints of more a prophetic, liberation-type, trajectory here. Overall, I would argue, Zuma locates himself and his deployment of religion in the public realm within the broad band of Church Theology, an evangelical form of theology in which the primary terrain of religion is personal morality.

Post-Polekwane religion and the New Jerusalem

The 52nd National Conference of the African National Congress in December 2007 in Polekwane has prompted a new era, it would seem, in the ANC’s deployment of religion in the public realm. What was absent in Nelson Mandela’s project, what began to be a resource in Thabo Mbeki’s administration, and what was placed within a policy framework in “The RDP of the Soul” document, has taken on flesh in Jacob Zuma. He embodies religion, particularly Pentecostal-Charismatic (perhaps even African Independent) Christianity. And in this respect he fits more firmly than his predecessors within the African landscape. For there are signs that under the leadership of Jacob Zuma, the ANC will endeavour to coopt the vast swath of evangelical-Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity that pervades and cuts across the myriad of Christian churches of all kinds in South Africa.

While the ANC’s struggle against apartheid drew forth and formed alliances with prophetic forms of Christianity (including individuals like Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak, sectors of the mainline churches (Cochrane 1987), and ecumenical institutions like the South African Council of Churches) (de Gruchy and de Gruchy 2004), and while Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki’s attempts to build a post-apartheid community and state, respectively, sought to coopt these prophetic forms of Christianity within the concept of “critical solidarity”

(Mabuza 2005), Zuma seems to be building an alliance with the broad spectrum of evangelical-Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity.

Paul Gifford has written at length about alliances between these forms of African Christianity and African nation-states across the continent (Gifford 1998, 2004, 2009). From the side of the state, such forms of Christianity are attractive alliance partners, given their reluctance to engage with the state on structural matters, such as economic systems. The state is content to cede the moral terrain to this religious sector, which would include the condition of the nation's soul, provided of course this was understood as the collective personal morality of the nation (see Zaphiro 2009).

From the side of these forms of African Christianity, though they are reluctant to enter the political arena and hardly have a socio-economic agenda (Gifford 1998:341), such forms readily embrace the African political elite, whether in Jerry Rawlings' Ghana (Gifford 1998:57-111), Yoweri Museveni's Uganda (Gifford 1998:112-180), Frederick Chiluba's Zambia (Gifford 1998:181-245), or the Kenya of Daniel arap Moi and his successors Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga (Gifford 2009). This is a "domesticated Christianity", which while taking on diverse roles, the one public role it does not conspicuously play is to provide a serious challenge to the economic and political realm (Gifford 2009:215). This Christianity is focussed on the personal, not the structural; "it is not concerned with a renewed order or any 'new Jerusalem'" (Gifford 1998:339).

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