

Is the Secular State the Root of our Moral Problems in South Africa?

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Abstract

There is widespread concern about the moral health of South Africa, a concern that extends in the eyes of some to its ruling party and some of the party's leading members. In an interview with a leading Sunday newspaper in 2006, the well-known founder of the Rhema Bible Church, Pastor Ray McCauley, blamed the secular state for our moral degeneration. Given the much publicized visit of President Jacob Zuma to Pastor McCauley's church in the pre-election period early in 2009, one wonders whether similar misgivings about the secular state might now be stirring in parts of the ruling party. I argue in this paper that blaming the secular state is spurious on ethical grounds; in an exercise of empathy required by the phenomenological method of studying religious issues I then venture some contentions that they are also spurious on biblical and theological grounds, which Christians presumably regard as decisive, and also on more generally on grounds of religious diversity, and I end by inverting the Pastor's view by arguing that it is largely the churches and politics, and not constitutional secularity, that are failing the nation ethically.

Keywords: secular state, secularism, moral decline, conservative Christianity, unethical politicians.

Introduction

Few South Africans of conscience will dispute the contention that the country has a serious problem of unethical activity, some of it criminal. Violence, murder, corruption in its various forms, nepotism, sexual abuse, price-fixing by large companies, poor service delivery by lazy officials, aspects of the arms deal, thuggery on the sports field, school teachers and nurses with insufficient concern for those in their care—the list is a long one, and may be getting even longer. Any country with a murder rate seven times greater than that of the USA, where powerful firearms can be bought easily over the counter, and where a shocking 25% of men have reportedly admitted to having raped at least once, is a country in deep trouble ethically.

These grim realities lead people of conscience to seek causes in order to eradicate or at least alleviate the problems and enable the country to raise the level of its ethical performance. This is a crucially important task, calling for the utmost care and thoroughness, for we cannot afford to misdiagnose the situation and thereby seek correction in mistaken ways. That could well make matters even worse. In this context, a special responsibility rests on those who occupy positions of influence and power in politics, education, law and, perhaps most of all, in religion. This holds especially for South Africa's Christian churches because they have the allegiance of at least 75% of the population.

In this context, the published views of one of the country's best known and most influential Christian leaders, Pastor Ray McCauley, founder of the Rhema Bible Church, come under discussion in the present paper, because he has offered a clear and emphatic diagnosis of the root cause of our moral troubles. In an interview with a leading Sunday newspaper in 2006 he attributed them to the secular state that South Africa became with its 1996 democratic constitution. But before setting forth and then evaluating this contention, three extremely important clarifications are needed.

Firstly, it is not Pastor McCauley himself or even his published view that is centrally at issue here, but the contention that the secular state is the source of our moral decay. The pastor may well have changed his mind, while the view remains an important one which I have heard voiced by others, one of whom—albeit in unpublished form and thus anecdotal—was at the time a very senior academic in a top executive position at a major South African university. Nor is it limited to South Africa or even to Africa, as

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important studies of developments over the past decade or two reveal, showing it to be present in many parts of the world, though these developments are not the concern of the present paper (Westerlund 1996; Juergensmeyer 1993).

The second clarification concerns the central term in this paper, namely 'secular' in the phrase 'secular state'. While the term is explained more fully later in the paper, an introductory clarification at this point is helpful. It refers to the stipulation in South Africa's democratic constitution of 1996 that there is freedom of belief and associated practice for all belief-systems, such as all the country's religions, and that none of them has preferential status in law (*Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, 1997, 15(1). This definition accords very well with the standard dictionary definition of secular as 'not subject to or bound by religious rule' (*South African Concise Oxford Dictionary* 2002: 1058).

The third clarification concerns the stance that faith communities should take to the secular state, as determined by ethical principles. Should they consider it to be a moral error or should they support it as morally sound? The contention of the present paper is that they should support it, for two main reasons. Firstly, by enshrining freedom of belief and practice equally for all belief-systems, the South African secular state meets the ethical principle of justice (which is every bit as such a part of religious ethics as of non-religious ethics); and secondly, because support for the secular state is required by the so-called Golden Rule, which is taught (in either positive or negative form) by all the faiths and certainly by Christianity, where it occurs in the Gospel of Luke (chapter 6, verse 31; cf. Hick 1989:299ff). It requires that people should do to others what they wish done to themselves. Members of faith communities wish to be free to practice their religion and they want to be treated justly, so they must want the same for members of other faith communities. That is precisely what South Africa's secular state does, unlike an arrangement which gives greater, or even sole, legal status to just one religion.

What follows is divided into four sections, starting with the view that blames the secular state for South Africa's moral problems. This is followed by a section in which I argue that the view in question is mistaken. Then I outline and substantiate what I hold to be the real causes of the problem, and end the paper with my conclusions.

1. Blaming the Secular State for Moral Decay

Pastor McCauley's view appeared in published form in an interview with the *Sunday Times*, the country's largest circulation newspaper, on 14 May 2006, in the editorial pages of that newspaper (*Sunday Times*). Here are the relevant parts extracted from the interview, with the opening question repeated in italics:

Why are we Living in Such a Godless Society?

It's all relative, you know. It seems like there's a lot of chaos going on in the world. Places like France, Holland, they've been shocked by the moral fibre of their nation themselves.

... A godless society ... that's why Holland and France, being secular states, have declined dramatically in their morality. Once you become a secular state, once you get into a place that is godless, the country becomes bankrupt

Let me repeat that I am not concerned so much with Pastor McCauley's views at the time of the interview or at the present time, as with the validity of the view that posits the secular state as the root cause of the moral decay we all know to be widespread in South African society. The view set forth in that interview is however a handy, clear and concise expression of this notion, and as such provides a convenient basis for analysis and evaluation.

Before proceeding to that evaluation, it is important to note three further points. The first one is the way Pastor McCauley's view, as given in the interview, equates secular with godless, godless with being morally bankrupt and secular with moral bankruptcy. The second is to recall the visit by President Jacob Zuma's visit to the Rhema Bible Church in Randburg, Johannesburg, on 15 March 2009 and thus in the period before the April 2009 general election, and similar reported visits to other Christian churches, most or even all them apparently in the more conservative part of Christianity, by him and other senior members of the ANC (see www.mg.co.za, accessed 30 July 2009).

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A word of clarification is needed at this point about the phrase ‘the more conservative part of Christianity’ as used in the previous sentence and elsewhere in this article. I have in mind members of that faith who share most or all of the following characteristics: a belief that their religion is the only means of salvation; that Christ is the only saviour; that he was born of a virgin mother; that the Christian Bible is the sole source of saving truth and moral guidance, and even—for the very conservative—of factual matters like the creation of the universe, being inspired (even dictated, according to some of the most conservative) by God himself, so that where biblical teaching and science are in conflict, as many of these Christians maintain is the case in connection with evolution and the story of creation in the book of Genesis, the former is to be preferred. In connection with morals, conservative Christians would typically hold that abortion, sex outside marriage and homosexuality are wrong, as are same-sex marriages, that the death penalty is mandated by the Bible and thus by God, and that husbands are divinely authorized to be in control of their families.

Were the visits by important members of South Africa’s ruling party to churches whose leaders and members hold the beliefs noted above merely ways of winning votes for the ANC or might they betoken the beginnings of a new alliance between government and amenable parts of the faith community, or at least the conservative Christian part of that community, bearing in mind that the growth in church membership and attendance is there and not in the so-called mainline churches like the Anglicans and Methodists? If such an alliance is being sought by either or both sides, it has serious implications for the continuation of the secular state in South Africa. While nothing along these lines has to my knowledge been reported, it would be well to keep the mere possibility of it in mind. After all, conservative sectors of the country’s Christian churches have made no secret of their unhappiness in recent years about some of the liberal social legislation that the previous ANC governments under Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki have given the country on matters like same-sex marriage, abortion, homosexuality and the abolition of the death penalty, as is well known in South Africa.

The third point to note is that Pastor McCauley is not the only person in South Africa to have expressed grave reservations about the moral desirability of the secular state. In the period before the adoption of the 1996

constitution which gave us our secular state, those of us who were involved in the process of defining the place of religion in post-apartheid, democratic South Africa, will recall, as I do, that there was no shortage of support for the view that the new South Africa should be governed by Christian values. It would be very surprising if the people and organizations that held that view had vanished, leaving Pastor McCauley as the sole champion of that point of view.

The real issue, however, is not whether that view is widespread or not in South Africa; the real issue is that it exists and that it concerns a critically important problem, the problem of moral decay. If the decay really does go back to the adoption of a secular state then we must think again, but if the real cause of the problem is elsewhere, this must be made clear and attacks on the secular state firmly rebutted in the interests of valid diagnosis and treatment.

2. Why the Secular State is not to Blame

My contention is that it is mistaken to blame the secular state for our ethical problems. To explain why, I need to do two things: firstly explain ‘secular’ more thoroughly than was done above, and contrast it with a superficially similar but in fact very different term, ‘secularism’, and secondly refer back to some early aspects of the process that led, ultimately, to South Africa becoming a secular state, aspects in which I had a small hand.

I want to propose that it is absolutely essential to distinguish between a secular state and secularism or a secularistic state, and that the 1996 constitution provides the former but wisely and ethically prevents the latter from becoming the governing ideology of the country. Let me therefore define these two terms as follows. ‘Secular’ means independent of religious control of any kind; it means fairness and neutrality of stance towards them, but the neutrality is an enabling or facilitative neutrality because it provides freedom of belief and operation for all. By contrast, ‘secularism’ is a philosophy or ideology which opposes religion, deeming it to be a bad thing, at best confused and at worst deeply damaging to humanity. Classical Marxism is the best example, with its condemnation of religion as the opium of the masses—the drug that allegedly induces false consciousness about the real causes of human misery and thus an inability to deal with them. This is

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not, of course, what the 1996 constitution stipulates and is certainly not what I advocated back in 1990 and in the years that followed, and which I am here defending, again on ethical grounds. In short, people like me advocated, and the 1996 constitution provides, a secular state, not a secularistic, anti-religious state.

Returning now to the term ‘godless’, one of the expressions in the McCauley interview, secularism, as defined above, can certainly be deemed to be quite literally ‘godless’ for the simple reason that it is by definition atheistic. The same does not follow for ‘secular’. It is perfectly possible to be a theist and support a secular state, because such a state provides freedom for believers in a God to practice and propagate their faith while affording secularists the same rights. This is a far cry from the former USSR, whose Marxist-Leninist constitution made atheism the official stance of the state and in practice treated theism repressively.

This alone, I contend, refutes the view that secular means godless. But there is more to be said. According to virtually all theists, God is an infinite being and therefore present everywhere as an invisible but very real spirit. In technical, theological terms, God is omnipresent, and of course also infinitely powerful. That means that the divine presence pervades everything and that there is nothing humanity or any other agency can do to exclude or diminish it, though our freedom means that people can choose to turn their backs on it, or can be blinded to it by cultural and other forces like being force-fed religion in early childhood. It follows logically that the divine presence cannot, as such, be diminished or banished by the adoption of a secular national constitutional, or even an aggressively atheistic one like that of the former USSR. God would therefore not be absent in a secular state, making it highly problematic to speak of the secular state as ‘godless’ in the literal sense of the term.

The word ‘godless’ does however have another meaning. It can refer to a lack of moral quality. For the purposes of this paper, this is the more relevant meaning because it raises the central question of whether secular states cause moral decay. I contend, as will be clear, that this is a mistaken view and I explain why in the following paragraphs.

My next step in refuting the view that attributes our moral problems to our secular state is to refer back to some actions I took to advocate such a state in the last years of apartheid and especially to the concern for morality

that drove those actions. This is necessary because I (and others) who were researching the relationship of religion and the state as part of early groundwork for a post-apartheid society, as part of work done for a South African Law Commission report, came to see that a secular state was the only ethical option facing the country, and therefore began to canvass support for it. The ethical grounds then identified constitute the basis of my argument against those who are now blaming the secular state.

The canvassing I personally undertook was thus based upon very careful research and reflection but its expression mostly took the form of popular press articles and broadcast media discussions in order to reach far beyond the small world of the academy. Here now is my text of an article published in a Sunday newspaper on May 20, 1990. I have added emphasis in a number of places to highlight the ethical considerations underlying my position.

The Nationalist Government for a long time looked like the Dutch Reformed Church in Parliament.

Will things be any better in a future South Africa if the ruling party is the Methodist Church or the South African Council of Churches in Parliament?

For our own good we need to debate the place of religion in the post-apartheid era. I will argue that both politics and religion will benefit if we transform South Africa into a constitutionally secular society.

This means that the apparatus of the State would be completely separate from all religious activities. Most South Africans would doubtless continue to regard themselves as Christians but State support for Christianity, or for any other faith, would cease. The constitution, the statute book, education and state-controlled broadcasting would—unlike the present—operate neutrally concerning religion.

At present the 1983 constitution provides for freedom of religion and our various non-Christian religions certainly operate without official harassment. But that same constitution nonetheless favours Christianity by declaring that South Africa will uphold its values.

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This might even seem democratic because about three-quarters of our people regard themselves as Christians. In practice, however, only one church group has had any real state influence and unofficial support—white, Afrikaans-speaking Calvinists belonging to the three Dutch Reformed churches.

Members of this elite have used the apparatus of the state—paid for at least partly by the taxes of a dissenting and mostly disenfranchised majority—to *impose* their beliefs and values on the country. Education and broadcasting are two most significant fields to have been affected over the past 40 years.

Roughly speaking there are three ways of handling the relationship between religion and the State.

At one extreme is theocracy. Here religion absorbs and wholly controls the state. Calvin's Geneva, modern Iran and the Papal States before Italian unification are well-known examples. This arrangement is compatible with *social justice* only in countries where the vast majority of the population actively supports the same religion, and there are now very few of these left apart from the Vatican and some of the Muslim states.

Given our religious diversity in South Africa a theocratic state would be a disaster and is not seriously in contention.

The opposite of a theocracy is the modern, secular state where religion is entirely independent of the State and operates through the unaided efforts of its own members, enjoying full freedom of belief. The United States, France and India are examples.

In between are the countries where a particular religious group enjoys official status of some kind, but without officially blurring the distinction between religion and government. We could call this a semi-secular system. Britain and South Africa, despite certain differences, are in this middle category, but at opposite ends both legally and in practice.

Despite all the talk about South Africa being a Christian country, which suggests that we have a large degree of religious agreement, ours is in fact a very divided society at the religious level. And its Christians are perhaps the most divided of all.

Therefore a united religious influence acceptable to most South Africans is extremely unlikely. That alone makes it religiously and politically undesirable to continue to retain our present semi-secular system. It would merely amount to *a new form of religious domination*, for example a consortium of more liberal Protestant Christians replacing the former hegemony of white Calvinists.

A secular state is also religiously preferable to its alternatives. It alone would free the churches and religions from that great underminer of true faith, pressure to conform. Nothing is more at odds with real religion than this. Anybody who has experienced compulsory church-going and the hypocrisies and resentments it breeds know that.

It is bad for religion. It fosters power rather than persuasion, spiritual flabbiness rather than true dedication, inquisitors rather than saints.

The best way to achieve *first-class status for all* at the religious level is a constitutionally secular state. Believers should be the first to welcome that arrangement and none more so than Christians: far from enjoying state support the founder of their faith was tortured and crucified by it (Prozesky 1990).

Others were working along similar lines. The ANC, I have been told, took up the issue and supported the call for a secular state in the new South Africa. The faith communities were, however, divided. My own activities revealed strong support from liberal Christians and from leading Jewish, Muslim and Hindu figures. It also revealed opposition from others, mostly from conservative parts of Christianity who relied heavily on the fact that Christians were and remain a large majority in the country. This reality was held by people of that persuasion with whom I engaged to justify making the new South Africa a constitutionally Christian state. (I cannot recall any of those who wanted a Christian state admitting that there are in fact many Christianities, ranging from extremely conservative fundamentalists to extremely radical people, with many intermediate positions. How fair and honest was it for anybody to claim to speak for all our Christians, given such divisions, I often wondered.)

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In any event, the upshot was the 1996 constitution which ushered in our present secular state, which is now under fire from some as the alleged source of our moral problems.

It will be apparent from the emphasized phrases in the press article quoted above that I appealed mostly to ethical values to justify my advocacy of a secular state. The first one is to *problematize imposition and domination*. While I did not analyze these two evils further in that press article, I will do so now. They are evils because they violate the right of people to equality of treatment and therefore to respect. When somebody or some organization presumes to impose a view on others, that is an offence against the dignity of the recipients of the imposition, and therefore unethical.

The second ethical value is *social justice*. I was saying that we needed an arrangement that was *fair and just* to everybody, that this could not be achieved by giving any religion (or non-religious philosophy) legal status above that of all others, but that a secular state could provide that justice because it treated all faiths and philosophies even-handedly. Indeed it would treat everybody alike as first-class citizens. That made it just.

In the third place, I appealed to the principle of *inclusivity*, by calling for first-class status for everybody, which can only be provided by a secular state. I will return to inclusivity as a Christian ethical principle later in this paper.

These were and remain the main ethical grounds in favour of a secular state, except for a further one to which I now turn by drawing attention to the nature of such a state as explained in my press article and as enacted in the Bill of Rights, chapter 2 of our 1996 constitution, in clauses 9 and 15 which deal with equality and freedom of belief.

The operative phrases in my press article are that a secular state is *neutral* with regard to religion (or any non-religious belief-system), that it is *even-handed* towards them all, that it *favours none*, and that it provides *freedom of operation* to them all. It is important to emphasize these features of the secular state because a widespread confusion appears to have arisen, namely that a secular state is somehow opposed to religion and morality and is even godless, as we see from Pastor McCauley's expressions.

The terms 'neutral' and 'even-handed' express two features of how a secular state relates to religion, and both of them reveal that it does so justly

and thus ethically. The third term, ‘freedom of operation’, takes us from the state to religion itself, and is ethically crucial. It means that in a secular state all religions have full scope to operate, which includes teaching their ethical values, obtaining radio and television time, building great new places of worship, and so forth. That cannot happen in a secularistic state, or is made extremely difficult. How many new cathedrals were built in the USSR under Stalin, for example?

By giving all religions the same right to freedom of operation, a secular state acts justly and ethically, unlike a religiously-defined state (or a secularistic state) in a country with a diversity of faiths, which cannot do justice even-handedly towards them all because it privileges one of them for no objectively good and just reason.

Returning now to the viewpoint expressed in Pastor McCauley’s 2006 press interview, I want to argue strongly against the view expressed there that godless means unethical. It is simply incorrect to think that those who do not believe there is a God are therefore lacking in morality. Even a cursory personal familiarity with atheists shows that they are capable of the highest ethical standards. The best example is the Dalai Lama, for Buddhism is a non-theistic faith. The same holds for secular humanism, which is forthright in advocating strong ethical values, as I have shown elsewhere. (Prozesky 2006: 43ff.). What this reveals is not only that it is incorrect and unfair to depict the secular state as necessarily unethical; it is also incorrect and unfair so to depict a secularistic state like Castro’s Cuba.

Christian Grounds for Supporting a Secular State

Given my personal background of an earlier and very deep immersion in Christian theology, my campaigning for South Africa to become a constitutionally secular state was also motivated by what I saw as theological and religious grounds for such a state. In turning now to such grounds, from a present position outside the world of theology, I do so by means of the phenomenological method used in religious studies and in my present field of comparative applied ethics. This means empathetically and imaginatively seeking to enter the world of the insider, attempting to see issues as such an insider might see them.

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Four arguments arise from this exercise, strongly suggesting that Christians (and members of any other faith) should be the first to embrace the secular state, not oppose it.

The *first* religious argument concerns the very nature of belief itself. All believers know that faith cannot be compelled. They know that compulsion or even the milder problem of pressure to conform is deeply alien to genuine belief, as distinct from pretended belief. As I said in my *Sunday Tribune* article, pressure to conform ‘fosters power rather than persuasion, spiritual flabbiness rather than true dedication, inquisitors rather than saints’. When a single faith enjoys exclusive constitutional and legal superiority in a country with many faith traditions, the door opens to pressure to conform in order to get ahead, to avoid marginalization, or even to avoid victimization and persecution on religious grounds. And it is restrictive and unfair towards other traditions.

The alliance between a dominant faith and the power of the state is a formidable one. How can such pressure be ethical? By contrast, a secular state removes such pressure from the workings of the state, and creates a free space where faith can flourish on its own terms and through its own virtues.

Related to the argument just given is the way state power in religion decreases the space for a vital part of a strong ethic—the role of the prophet who speaks truth fearlessly to power. This is my *second* faith-based reason for supporting the secular state. There is of course no denying that in situations of great state control and even state-caused evil, we find such prophets, bravely speaking out against such evils, like Moses and the Pharaoh, Nathan and King David, Albert Luthuli and Beyers Naude against the apartheid state, usually suffering the consequences, which can be very grave. Luthuli’s freedom of movement was restricted and his achievements mocked, as I myself heard, to mention just that, and Naude suffered exclusion from and rejection by his mother culture and faith world.

Society needs more than these rare, magnificent moral and spiritual heroes; it needs plenty of prophets. When a religion allies itself too closely with the state and enjoys constitutional superiority, the prophetic voice weakens because pressure rises. Similarly, shrewd politicians are at times adept at manipulating believers who drop their critical guard towards them, as Gifford has shown in his work on Christianity in Africa (Gifford 1996:

204ff). Ethics then suffers. Is this not exactly what happened under apartheid? Do we not see signs of it in post-apartheid South Africa? A group of religious leaders, led, incidentally, by Pastor McCauley, met President Jacob Zuma shortly before these words were written, a meeting reported in the press under the interesting but possibly misleading heading of 'McCauley gets even closer to Zuma' (*Cape Times* July 29, 2009).

My *third* faith-based argument focuses on the nature of a perfectly loving God, a notion obviously shared by our Christians. What would such a God want from South Africa or any other country but the highest standards of justice, generosity of spirit and action, respect, freedom and concern for others? And would such a God not want these things for everybody, for a love that excludes even one of us is not a perfect love? Lest this seem more philosophical than theological or biblical, let me make clear that it was in fact the New Testament in Luke 15: 4ff that first showed me that total inclusivity is integral to the ethic taught by Christ, for it tells of the person who does not rest till all 100 of his sheep are in the fold, and extends the point to God in heaven. Ninety-nine percent is not good enough, let alone 75%. It will already be clear from these arguments that a secular state accords far better with the nature and will of such a God than any other kind of state.

The *fourth* faith-based reason for supporting the secular state arises from a centerpiece of Christian ethics, to which I have already made reference, the so-called Golden Rule of Luke 6: 31: 'Do to others as you would have them do to you'. Believers want to be treated as first-class citizens, like everybody else. They want to be treated fairly and without unjust discrimination against them. They want fairness and non-discrimination for their fellow believers. The Gospel tells them to want the same for others, which in this context means that Christians must want these things for Jews, Muslims, Hindus, African traditionalists and all others, including secularists. That is precisely what the secular state ensures. That is precisely what is denied when a single faith, no matter how numerically dominant, has exclusive, or even just superior, legal and constitutional rights not enjoyed by other faith traditions and philosophies.

The Real Root of the Problem of Moral Decay

If our constitutionally secular state cannot be blamed for the serious moral problems around us, what is the real cause? Here we need to guard against superficial, short-term thinking and heed the wisdom of the old saying that while the mills of God grind slowly, they grind surely. The mills of goodness, the moral mills, also grind slowly but surely. Therefore we need to look much further back in time than the 1996 constitution. Here Pastor McCauley was correct when he said earlier in the 2006 press interview that South Africa has inherited some of its evils from the past, like violence and conflict.

How far back should we go? I shall argue that we must go back to the beginning of European settlement and conquest, which ushered in over 300 years of conservative Christian religious and political hegemony in an arrangement which is the very opposite of the secular state.

What did that hegemony do to morality and to Christianity for that matter? I contend that it gravely compromised and weakened both. Instead of the moral values of equality and respect for all, it gave us domination, discrimination and an ugly sense of superiority by most whites that has yet to vanish. Instead of an abundance of ethical prophets it gave us an abundance of obliging bed-fellows. Instead of a Christ-like love, the hegemony gave us pass laws, broken families, mass removals and murders in detention. None of that began in 1948 when Dr Daniel Malan's National party came to power or in 1910 when the former Union of South African came into being as a sovereign nation; it was happening during the preceding centuries of colonial control imposed by people from Christian Europe.

That centuries-long dispensation of white Christian domination means that by 1994 we inherited a profoundly damaged culture, not just politically and economically damaged, but—perhaps above all—ethically and spiritually damaged.

In all fairness we must allow for this dreadful reality when asking what has happened to morality since 1994 and especially since the adoption of the 1996 secular state. The first post-apartheid, democratic government faced a veritable moral mountain. The many measures taken since then to remove unjust discrimination, redress past evils, recognize human rights and freedoms, build houses, lay on piped, clean water, provide social grants for 12 million poverty-stricken people and promote gender justice must all be

applauded. So must the efforts of our under-resourced but dedicated Moral Regeneration Movement staff be applauded, and all others who work for moral upliftment such as our feminists. But an ethic of honesty also obliges us to speak out about corruption, murder, rape, robbery, cronyism, AIDS denialism, the arms deal and other serious evils, some of them involving our politicians and people in public service, at times very highly placed. Is it not clear that a contributing cause of our moral evils is from this world of politics, government and public service, including the moral failure of uncaring school teachers and the bigoted principals who continue to treat their brand of Christianity as it was treated under apartheid, as if it were the state religion? Is it not perfectly clear that the fault is not the secular state?

In addition, we will find another contributory cause of our moral problems in the faith community itself, and here I restrict myself to Christianity as the tradition I know from within and best, and as by far our numerically dominant faith tradition. In the words of a friend who is an ordained Christian minister with admirable struggle credentials and a huge passion for ethics, I ask, ‘Where have all the prophets gone?’ Why, apart from a handful of heroic Christian figures, men and women, do we hear so little about the really serious ethical problems of our time, if not because the ethical input from this quarter is simply not good enough?

Conclusion

The secular state gives ample scope for religious ethics to flourish as a national force for good. It is not flourishing. That is not the fault of the secular state. It is the fault of political players, Christian religious players and others who influence us, who seem to think that massive, macro-ethical problems like ours, with their long and ethically undermining history, can be met with merely micro-ethical thinking and action.

What the rest of us must therefore take to heart and act upon is that morality is far too important to be left to politicians, priests and pastors—or far that matter, professors. It is the privilege and responsibility of us all.

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