Reconstituting Religion in the Public Sphere:

Where are We Now?

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What is the public sphere like in South Africa today? In what way is it public? And what might it mean to speak of "reconstituting religion" in this public sphere? In order to answer these questions with some intelligence, we need to understand how the public sphere is currently constructed. The essay describes such a construction in terms of a shift to: a postcolonial situation; a postmodern situation; a post-resistance situation; the reality of globalization with the falling of the walls which were erected from within by apartheid and reinforced from without by international sanctions; the trouble in which resistance discourse finds itself since 1994; and the rise of a more nuanced understanding of resistance (hidden or coded "arts of resistance"). Related to these shifts, we pay attention the way in which identity and difference are implicated in each other in this context. This leads to a final, critical question, an ontological one: Who? Who is our prime interlocutor in determining our view of reality, our sense of what it means to live as a human being in *this* society? Who sets the agenda, frames the questions, offers the key categories for our understanding or our condition? Who benefits from the way in which transitional processes are conducted and new social arrangements are put in place? Who does not benefit, who suffers the consequences? More pertinently, who does so *systematically*, that is, not merely arbitrarily?

Others will be speaking about aspects of religion in the public sphere today, and I will not anticipate what they have to say. My job is briefly to sketch the field, the terrain, in South Africa today, by way of introduction to the theme. I would like to attempt this by sketching some of the primary parameters which I take to be important in defining the current terrain.

The key questions then are: What is the public sphere like in South Africa today? In what way is it public? And what might it mean to speak of "reconstituting religion" in this public sphere?

In order to answer these questions with some intelligence, we need to understand how the public sphere is currently constructed. This has historical and epistemological dimensions, and perhaps, I will also suggest briefly, an ontological one. Let me deal with each of these regions serially.

Let me begin with the historical dimension.

First: We are in a postcolonial situation. The "postcolonial" signifies a new historical epoch in SA. It is one of what Ali Rattansi calls "a set of historical epochs," beginning at the end of for-

mal colonialism. But decolonization has “very diverse histories” and occupies “disparate time-spaces,”1 and though general patterns of postcoloniality are discernible, particular analyses of the character of postcoloniality are essential.

In Africa, South Africa is the latest and last place to put behind it what was a well-developed colonial policy, learned from past experiences by Britain, France, Belgium and Portugal in particular. It consisted of direct, racialized civil rule over the urban centres on the one hand, and indirect, tribalized traditional or customary rule in the rural areas on the other hand.

This, the bifurcated state of colonial African experience, reached its apogee in the system of apartheid which, as Mahmood Mamdani has demonstrated, represents only the most developed and severe form of the nature of colonial rule in Africa. The postcolonial challenges to this bifurcated state are three, in his view, and they are highly relevant to a consideration of the place and the role of religion in public life in South Africa at this point in time. I quote Mamdani:[2]

The core agenda that African states faced at independence was threefold: deracializing civil society, detribalizing the Native Authority, and developing the economy in the context of unequal international relations.

Much of this would apply to our own transition process. On the counts of deracialization and detribalization the jury is still out, with both areas currently heavily contested and much in the public mind. Both the State President and the Human Rights Commission, among others, have taken aim at racism recently; while Constitutionally driven governance processes, such as the establishment of democratic local authorities throughout South Africa including rural areas, confront the issue of “tribal” authority.

In both cases, religious ideas and ideologies help drive those who contest this terrain. The same would apply to the question of economic development, with major tensions present across the board around macro-economic policies and programmes. The Jubilee 2000 Movement is only one pointer to the way in which religious discourse is bound up with such questions. On all fronts, we have a long way to go in practice and in theory—both secular and sacred practice, both social and theological theory.

Second: We are in a postmodern situation. We might spend hours debating the relation between postmodernism and postcolonialism. While I acknowledge its complexity and the wide range of material on it, let me suggest a basic continuity and discontinuity between the two. Postmodernism may be understood as a critique of modernity internal to its host cultures and political economies, the “West” in particular. It is a discourse which reflects the experience of those who are disenchanted with modernity or destabilized by its crises “from within,” so to speak. Postcolonial discourse, on the other hand, reflects a critique “from without,” from those who have been understand by Europeans with their sense of “modern civilization” as Other, and thus as “less than” the European. It deconstructs modernity from the side of the colonized.

[1] Ali Rattansi, “Postcolonialism and its discontents,” *Economy and Society*, 26, 4, Nov. 1997, 480-500.
[2] Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, Kampala: Fountain Publishers/Cape Town: David Philip, 1996, 287.

Whatever the limits of this still rather crude distinction, it enables us to ask in what sense post-modernity has impacted on South Africa, an ex-colony? On the one hand, South Africa has the largest body of European settlers on the continent, and they carry with them, overtly or through the effects of historical consciousness, the cargo of modernity. Thus they would understand themselves as heirs to its benefits and its crises, as facing a postmodern reality.

On the other hand, even those not of European or related extraction increasingly face a postmodern reality, simply because this country has been deeply industrialized for some hundred years. The *way* in which this industrialization occurred, specifically through pervasive systems of migratory labour, has left hardly a family in South Africa untouched. To this extent modernity, in particular the instrumental rationalities of the market and state bureaucracies, has left no stone unturned. Similarly, postmodern realities come rattling in to disturb the stones once more.

Here an important caution is necessary. Both the first and second moments, the postcolonial and the postmodern, may well be consciously present to the intellectual, political and economic elites rather than to the bulk of the population. Postcolonial and postmodern discourses, similarly, are likely to represent the stuff of their thinking.

We may therefore be talking here of a public sphere which contains a rather small public. By and large, this small elite does not know how to talk to the much larger citizenry who are the proto-public of the new South Africa, namely, the vast majority of Black South Africans. This small elite, who most shape public discourse, is likely to be somewhat, if not wholly, removed from the daily experience, wisdom and polity of that proto-public. For example, it is worth noting that a recent survey produced the astonishing datum that, six years into our democracy, more than fifty percent of South Africans, particularly the poorest and most rural, do not even know there is a Bill of Human Rights to which they might appeal. Yet they might well need it most.

If indeed the postcolonial and the postmodern sensibility is so limited, then the question of how we might reconstitute religion in public life is less obvious than it might seem at first sight to those who take a constitutional democracy for granted.

Third: We are in a post-resistance situation. Up until the mid-nineties, resistance, both in deed and in thought, was the dominant key among those who did not support or benefit from apartheid. Until the last minute, so to speak, no-one believed that any significant changes in our political order were on the horizon. Forms of religious resistance grew during these years, in time to gain international attention and even acclaim, not to mention a Nobel Peace Prize or two.

Once the transition from apartheid to a democratic state had begun in earnest, many of the prophetically oriented, or if you like, the progressive, Christian movements, para-church organizations and NGOs began to suffer severe problems of identity, direction and purpose—often connected to financial decline. Exceptions such as the Roman Catholic Church notwithstanding, religious groups who stood against apartheid have generally not caught up well, if at all, with a post-resistance ethos. Further, my own judgement is that secular institutions, including government, has easily outstripped the churches generally in progressive innovation.

Yet religious groups and communities are frequently doing a great deal on the ground, in one way or another. Perhaps the reality is that, under contemporary conditions, religions as such, and the practices of their adherents, are not well suited to the tasks required by large-scale, non-homogeneous states in building a new society. Perhaps secular, democratic societies are intrinsically rocky ground, if not infertile ground, for the seeds of religious engagement. Perhaps we have simply not come to terms with how our own religious convictions and practices, from whatever established tradition, might be adequately reshaped to such conditions. Or perhaps it is a combination of all these things and others.

Such thoughts, raised so vaguely, are meant to signal what I take to be the condition of religious intellectuals by and large in South Africa at this point in our time. We are vague, because we have only recently begun to grapple with these kinds of issues in an environment which is new, often still spell-bound by old slogans and theories, and with few resources and not a great deal of collaboration amongst us, except in compiling edited books and speaking on formal panels together.

Fourth: Related to the reality of a post-resistance situation is that of globalization, the new catchword. With the falling of the walls which were erected from within by apartheid and reinforced from without by international sanctions, contemporary forces of globalization have been unleashed in their full fury upon South Africans. The positive side to the opening of our borders goes with a negative, highly rapacious side.

The parallels to the experiences of contemporary Russians and other former Eastern Bloc countries are significant, I have recently discovered in a visit to Moscow. The differences, especially in the way in which religion has featured in one or the other society, are also instructive, and warrant, in my view, a detailed comparative study. But in all cases, the forces of what we call globalization—some beneficial, some benign, not a little malignant—are crucial to the outcomes of social transition.

I am not only talking here merely about what others have called the unprecedented compression of time-space which marks contemporary global technologies, processes and institutions. I think also of the extended penetration into all sectors of human life, including religion, of the principle of commodification and the modes of instrumental rationality. They produce goods unimagined even half a century ago, to be sure, but they also reconstitute consciousness (think of that contemporary model of the human being, the habitual consumer); they entrench structural inequalities, and they unevenly spreads its human costs, to the detriment of large numbers of people.

This presents to us both a material and a spiritual challenge. It requires a reconstitution of religion in public life, away from the kind of resistance, revolution and revulsion of the state which marked religious sensibilities against apartheid, to something we now struggle to define adequately.

Let me now move on from the historical shifts I have very broadly categorized as the postcolonial, the postmodern and the post-resistance epoch, to consider some epistemological shifts which are also of significance for the discourse of public life.

Fifth: Resistance discourse has been in trouble. From 1989 onwards it became clear that resistance or "liberation" might no longer be adequate terms for what was now required of the churches, or of other faith communities for that matter. Attempting to draw upon its own "prophetic" tradition, but recognizing that many of its members were now in government, the South African Council of Churches soon began to speak of acting in "critical solidarity" with the government. This is certainly something other than resistance. My own view, incidentally, is that solidarity is reserved, theologically speaking, for those who suffer, who are on the margins of the steering mechanisms of power and money. We would do better to speak of something like "critical engagement" with the new government.

Sixth: Another epistemological shift has seen the rise of a more nuanced understanding of resistance. Several analysts and intellectuals in recent publications have attempted to recover those hidden or coded "arts of resistance" (Scott) which were not theoretically considered previously, when resistance was defined as overt, politically conscious activity carried out on the public stage. Then we neglected what happened off-stage and trivialized what happened through coded language and practice.

We need redescriptions of resistance and power, and that would mean a reconceptualization of society itself. This would include a move away from analyses predicated upon all-encompassing social theories, what Lyotard called theories shaped by impossibly "grand narratives." In turn we might then open up space for reinscribing the practices of religious people and faith communities in society in ways that set aside crude notions of hegemony or of consciousness.

Seventh: Related to this shift, we would need to pay attention once more to adequately understanding the way in which identity and difference are implicated in each other. This is particularly so in respect of the weakness of a theory which tries to absorb all of reality into a picture of what is the "same" (such as in classical Marxian theory of the centrality to all social phenomena of the mode of production, or the classical view of bourgeois theorists on the hidden hand of the market as the arbiter of human exchange and ultimately human interaction).

Here we face a particular challenge as South Africans, given that apartheid, the very thing we have rejected, championed and was predicated upon a proclamation of difference. Conversely, those who struggled against apartheid built an identity of sameness—captured most clearly in the ubiquitous naming of fellow travellers as "comrades." Precisely out of the praxis of struggle arose an inter-faith movement, a very particular branch of the World Conference on Religion and Peace for whom the term "solidarity" meant a great deal.

Yet now we face a situation where old comrades and jaded solidarities no longer meet each other, where previous compatriots contend against each other around particular policies or social goals. Or where comrades in power fear difference, as a potential source of division, and react by attempting to reassert sameness.

Further, the pressures of a secular constitutional democracy are telling. Religious communities and individuals must come to terms, for the first time in this country, with a society formed on the basis of a plurality of identities, and a rejection of any alliance by the state with any one particular religious identity. Often they do not.

Thus a mood of general retreat from the public sphere into confessional sanctuaries has all too frequently accompanied the transition process in South Africa. Others who had little presence, or a muted presence on the public stage in the past have come to the fore, with their own particular agendas, sometimes against others who share the same religious tradition.

Eighth: Let me add, finally, one ontological parameter to the matrix of forces of processes at work in shaping the public sphere. It has to do with the question: Who? Who is our prime interlocutor in determining our view of reality, our sense of what it means to live as a human being in *this* society? Who sets the agenda, frames the questions, offers the key categories for our understanding or our condition? Who benefits from the way in which transitional processes are conducted and new social arrangements are put in place? Who does not benefit, who suffers the consequences? More pertinently, who does so *systematically*, that is, not merely arbitrarily? By whom, through an encounter with which Other, are we ourselves partially constituted in our own identities, such that new understanding and breakthroughs in community, in reflection and in practice arise? Who is excluded in the process, defined out of the public sphere, or the nation?

Here we touch on a range of vital questions that signal the practice and experiences of subjugation, marginalization, xenophobia, exclusivity, and the like—all of which have great potential to undo this democratic experiment, and all of which are intrinsic to virtually any religious concern for the healing of human beings, the transformation of the present, and the redemption of the world.

These questions implicitly and explicitly challenge our identities, introduce instabilities through the presence of greater differentiation, and inhibit clarity in understanding our particular role in the public life as a faith community or religious person.

In conclusion, let me note that there are inevitably a range of other parameters I might sketch in describing and analysing the kind of public sphere for which religion must reconstitute itself in South Africa today. These might include the pragmatic questions of how we deal with the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the widespread poverty that makes this epidemic and many other diseases—physical or otherwise—so difficult to combat. There are undoubtedly also other ways of describing or analysing what I have chosen to address.

Nevertheless, given these limits, the historical and epistemological issues I have pointed to are echoed in many recent statements, essays and debates in South Africa. They are highly likely to be crucial in determining adequate answers, which does not mean complete answers, to what might it mean to speak of “reconstituting religion” in the public sphere in our time and in this place. Perhaps naming them in this way will help others locate what will still needs to be said about this question, and its implied practical tasks.