

Research Challenges on Religion in South Africa

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The title *Life, the Universe and Everything*, the third volume of the famous four volume trilogy (sic) called the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams, recently deceased (“I love deadlines,” he said, “especially the whooshing sound they make as they go by”), is perhaps the most adequate statement of the depth and breadth of the challenges to researchers who investigate the question of religion in South Africa, or anywhere else for that matter. I argue that such research needs to focus not only on the role of religion in social transformation, but on transformations within religion itself, those that are occasioned by our current context and historical conjuncture.

The essay thus deals, after some initial comments, with brief discussions of ‘regional’ concerns about methodological/ontological issues, with hermeneutics, with practical questions, and with the present conjuncture of history in South Africa—all in order to define a field of responses to the question about research challenges on religion in South Africa.

General Comments

An advantage of scholarship on religion is that it leaves little alone. Its topical and thematic scope is virtually unlimited; its subject matter comprehends everything material as well as all that is non-material or spiritual. Though there are deeply respectable disciplines attached to it (such as comparative religion), it is not a discipline as such, but may be approached from the vantage point of almost any discipline in the human and social sciences. It even wanders easily onto the territory of the natural sciences.¹ It is intrinsically interdisciplinary, a much desired characteristic in the contemporary academy.

Limiting one’s gaze by designating South Africa as the contextual location for religion research does not reduce its scope much either. There will be as many challenges for religion research in South Africa as there are actual or potential researchers. To define what the research challenges to religion in contemporary South Africa are, we must find other ways of narrowing our focus, other ways of determining what is important, what more important than something else.

¹ The growth in interest in religion and science, partly because of the very significant funding given to this enterprise by the John Templeton Foundation, is a mark of our time. See <http://www.templeton.org/> for information and a wide range of links.

Most obviously, we will be forced to make decisions about priorities for research in relation to those resources potentially or actually available for such research.² This is a *pragmatic* criterion. Second, we might ask if there exists a significant enough audience to which such research might be disseminated³ (unless we assume that research that remains hidden from any public is sufficient unto itself, and generally, it is not). This is a *pedagogical*, perhaps an *ethical*, criterion, to which is linked an *epistemological* one: In whose interests, in relation to what power and authority, is knowledge produced?⁴ Finally, we might add an *ontological* criterion of sorts, one about body, place, space and time: What is it about South Africa at this point in time that demands our attention? To what extent does, or should, our context determine our research programmes?⁵

These and other criterion will have to be weighed in the course of planning and developing any religion research programme. Mostly, they cannot be captured *a priori*. They have to be worked out through open-ended claims or problem formulations, and persuasive arguments that demonstrate the worth of any claim or the pertinence of any problem. This is how I understand the purpose of this conference and its focus on the role of religion in transition, its identification of issues, resources and audiences in respect of the place, role or nature of religion in social transformation. My response to what I have heard is to offer my own hitchhiker's guide to the contemporary challenges for research on religion in South Africa.

As we begin this journey, one distinction seems crucial to me. It is important to focus not only on the role of religion in social transformation, but on transformations within religion itself, those that are occasioned by our current context and historical conjuncture. With this in mind, let me develop my thoughts under four guideline headings: Methodological (ontological?) issues; hermeneutic questions; practical challenges; and conjunctural forces and frameworks of relevance to the topic.

Methodological / Ontological Issues

Beginning with concrete expressions of religion in our current context, before we consider larger transformations in society, it sometimes appears that we ignore our own best understandings about religion in our theoretical search for adequate generalized concepts. By this I mean simply that we tend to speak, analytically, of religion in the aggregate, and of particular religious traditions in general. Yet we know all too well that any attempt to investigate, analyse and define religion in the context of social transformation must accept the widely differentiated, often fractured, frequently contradictory presence of religion in public life.

² These have decreased over the last few years in South Africa under the pressure of rationalization and the logic of market utility in academic offerings.

³ The costs of dissemination have grown astronomically, though the Internet does offer new possibilities for overcoming this once (and if) it is widely enough available in Africa. The audience one has may therefore not be reachable, even through the Internet (which has cost factors of its own to consider). The question of dissemination, therefore, even if it is not central to my task here, becomes an increasingly important one as one considers how best to use and direct what resources one does have.

⁴ Besides being a theoretical question among social critics such as Foucault, Habermas, Spivak and Baudrillard, among others, this has been a major issue in South Africa as a result of the way in which the apartheid regime structured knowledge acquisition and dissemination in its national policies, and it remains crucial in the new policies the present government is promoting. I do not think religion researchers can ignore it.

⁵ Elsewhere, on hermeneutic grounds, I have argued that context always does determine research, even if in unacknowledged or uninspected ways (cf. James R Cochrane, *Circles of Dignity: Community Wisdom and Theological Reflection*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999). The real question then, really, is how we take into account and acknowledge the interpretive interests that direct our research, however "pure" it may seem.

The need for generalized concepts drives us in the direction of a universal view on religion, of a defined and clearly identifiable field of research,⁶ and hence on a search for the similarities and common traits of particular religious phenomenon by which we may understand something about religion in general. We cannot avoid this need, nor detract from the value of comparison and generalization. Indeed, the comparative method itself requires not just a catalogue of differences or a specification of particular identities, but some way of bringing differences and identities into relationship with one another. Deeper than that, our humanity—our existence as human beings, our living out our lives in relation to other human beings, our ontological grounding in language, and our expression of reality in languages—also prompts the search for generalizations and conceptual relationships that will bridge our alienations and misunderstandings, confront our differences and distances. The role of the notion of justice in religious understandings offers one point of reference to this search and its practical meaning.⁷

The methodological problem linked to this problem of the relationship between the one and the many in religious phenomena is just how we draw on the power of generalizability and comparison without sacrificing the crucial differences and distinctions residing in particular and concrete expressions of religion.

If for example, we ask about the character of Christianity in public life in the processes of social transformation since the abolition of Apartheid in South Africa, we would be able to make some generalizations. Two I can think of immediately are: The loss of a common and easily identifiable “enemy” in Apartheid has produced widespread difficulties in defining new identities and roles; the establishment of a secular state which constitutionally incorporates all religions and belief systems while excluding any from a defining public role pushes many churches who were used to acting in the public sphere into face difficult questions about how to do so in the light of a legally plural public realm and a loss of Christian hegemony, at least in principle.⁸

Other generalizations are possible, and are made all the time. But behind these generalizations lie crucial differences which undercut them. So, for example, the Roman Catholic Church, suppressed for many years under the strict Calvinism of the leaders of the previous regime and often attacked by the hierarchy of the Dutch Reformed Church in earlier decades (as the “Roomse Gevaar,” viz. the “Roman Threat”), now enjoys a new lease of life. Included in this lease is its capacity to draw widely and readily on its massive, directly accessible worldwide base of skills, resources and personnel, as it engages anew with South African society. Many contexts elsewhere have given the Catholic Church a deep experience of modern, pluralist, constitutional democratisation. Sophisticated materials, arguments and expertise from such contexts are easily plugged into the South African context. Not surprisingly, therefore, the public presence of the Roman Catholic Church has grown rather than receded recently. And when it comes to public debates and behind the scenes lobbying, its representatives put forward a case that is usually profound, richly informed, and clearly stated, whether or not one agrees with it. This is simply not

⁶ We may also note the (material) need that arises all too often in academic contexts, particularly universities, to justify intellectually the existence of departments of religion!

⁷ Derrida’s view of religion would place justice at the centre, in fact. See Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,” in Derrida & Gianni Vattimo (eds), *Religion*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.

⁸ These and other issues about religion in public life in South Africa post-1994 are reviewed in James R. Cochrane, “Religious Pluralism in Postcolonial Public Life,” *Journal of Church and State*, Vol. 42: 3, Summer 2000.

true for most other denominations who stood against Apartheid, at least not at all to the same level or extent.

From a wholly different quarter, Pentecostal and evangelical movements, many with the origins in the United States of America, are also swarming across the country and taking on public issues as never before. Usually, the approach we see here is much more conservative if not reactionary, viewed against the constitution and ethos of the new South African state. But it has vitality, in the literal sense that large numbers of people “come alive” and are frequently mobilized around issues such as Christians regard as important, particularly as it concerns public morality (the restriction in our constitution on discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is one good example, the abolition of the death penalty another). Problematic as some of this may be from the point of view of the state, it has clear positive aspects too, among them the capacity of such churches to mobilize people for practical activities the state would like civil society to undertake more fully, and their ability to work at the level of character and virtue in building the basis of the “moral fibre” the present government regards as crucial to the survival of democracy in South Africa.

In another direction, churches such as the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), long viewed as apolitical if not sometimes collaborative with the Apartheid regime, also take on a new face and a public role that many must now consider surprising. The ZCC, for example, took a wholly unexpected position at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Faith Community Hearings: First by ritually demonstrating its conviction that their leader (Bishop Lekgenyane) stood in authority above the chairperson of the TRC Hearings, who happened to be Archbishop Desmond Tutu; and second, by arguing that it had not been apolitical in the least, but had in fact set out to protect and maintain important African Christian ways which, if you please, it was now ready to offer back to the nation in its search for a new, Africanized identity.⁹

During this same period, the ecumenical churches and agencies, whose presence seemed so profound and overt in the latter stages of the struggle against apartheid, have suffered a serious loss of influence and voice in the public square. The religious activists associated with the ecumenical movement have found it particularly difficult to redefine their role or to restructure the organizations they inhabit, in the shift from an anti-apartheid struggle to a plural, open democracy. From being decisive voices with strong cries and a powerful rhetoric in the public arena, they have become weak ones, often complaining and reactionary rather than constructive and proactive, often marked by somewhat anachronistic rhetoric. Thus, there is good reason to believe that the Rhema Church, once an enemy of the ecumenical movement, now has more influence at the highest levels of public life—government included—than does the South African Council of Churches (though these shifts are too dynamic to capture in fixed claims). Here I am generalizing of course, dangerously so (there are signs, for example, that the South African Council of Churches may be finding its feet again), but many people I know whose context this is have confirmed this impression. It reinforces my main point: When one probes particularities, then generalizations about religion in South Africa become increasingly shaky.

⁹ A valuable discussion on this may be found in Robin Petersen, “The AICs and the TRC: Resistance Redefined,” in J. Cochrane, J de Gruchy & S Martin (eds). *Facing the Truth: South African Faith Communities and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. Cape Town/Athens, Ohio: David Philip/Ohio University Press. 1999, 114-125. For a more general theoretical investigation see also Petersen’s *Time, Resistance and Reconstruction: A Theology of the Popular and the Political*, PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 1996.

The methodological issue here must be confronted squarely, but I suspect this can only be done by way of “no way,” that is, by way of an aporia. Methodologically, this means that attempts to harmonize the one and the many—generalized concepts and understandings with particular religious phenomena—are inherently false, if it means forcing the particular into the general (a totalizing move) or reducing the general to the particular (a reductionist or relativizing move). The trick, if there is one, is to hold the two in clear and permanent tension, to leave the gap between them. In turn, this is the spur to further thought and investigation—an emancipatory gesture; and the barrier to theoretical closure—against systematic distortion and hence, against fundamentalisms of any kind (intellectual, ideological, confessional, practical).¹⁰

Besides the philosophical question of the one and the many, there are also sociological issues which impact upon our methodological framework for understanding religion. One I would like to highlight, given our focus on social transformation, concerns the way in which religion enters into the public sphere. Here I turn to the helpful thoughts offered by William Everett on forms of religious presence in public life in our contemporary world.¹¹ He distinguishes three forms, each with its own limits and possibilities: communal, institutional, and associational.

Summarizing my reading of Everett, communal forms of religion are almost always bound by blood relations and kinship structures, and most often orally transmitted and structurally fluid in that they are not expressed through formal public institutional identities but through the rhythms of daily life.

In a constitutional democracy, or a liberal democratic order in general, where some formal means of representation in a pluralist context is vital to an effective public presence, such forms of religion have a hard time being noticed, even if they have considerable currency among the populace (as is the case in South Africa). They are forced, if they want to make their presence publicly felt, to *find* some institutional form by which to represent their interests and lifeworld in public; but this is both difficult and counter-intuitive for them. It also inevitably, and inexorably, means a transformation of their own history, traditions and practices, an often painful process filled with arts of resistance to the process. The alternative—disappearance from the public sphere and marginalisation in society—is possible and often actual, but also fraught with difficulty, not least that of keeping alive the very things one seeks to protect as society continues to change around one. At the same time, the “hidden transcripts”¹² that such forms of religion often represent may be the source of future eruptions into the public sphere, with significant social impact. These issues are very much under-researched in our context to date, as far as I know.

Everett’s conceptualization of institutional forms of religion refers to a formal establishment of a particular religious tradition in relation to the state. The Church of England, or the Roman Catholic Church in some contexts, would represent such forms of religion. Islam in other contexts may play the same role. Generally, however, Everett believes such forms of religion are on the decline and have been for some time. The relationship between the Dutch Reformed Church (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk or NGK in particular) in South Africa during the apartheid era

¹⁰ For a profound discussion of the role of aporiai in theology, and in religion generally, including this particular aporia of the one and the many, see Douglas McGaughey, *Pilgrims and Strangers: On the Role of Aporiai in Theology*, Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1997.

¹¹ William J. Everett, “Religion in Democratic Transition,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 104, July 1999, 64-68.

¹² James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven, CO: Yale University Press, 1990.

comes closest to an institutionalised form of religion, though it never had the formal status of an “established” religion. In the present context it does not seem possible that we will see an established religion again in South Africa, as long as we retain some framework that separates religion and state in our constitution. And just such a framework, which might be regarded as a global trajectory everywhere (even where it is resisted), militates against established religions.

The key sociological form of religion that is left, and the one that is most pertinent to the kind of society we are building, is the associational pattern. It is worth quoting Everett’s own description of this pattern:¹³

[It] emerges when religion is separated from the state and other coercive structures. It rests on the voluntary commitment and effort of the individuals and groups that make up that religion. This approach both assumes and creates religious pluralism, as people create differing religious associations according to their beliefs, interests, languages, customs, and ethical values.

The associational form, if you like, is the one most congenial to democratic constitutions, the one fostered by such constitutions. It most easily meets the criterion of finding an accountable and visible basis for representing itself in the public sphere under conditions of plurality and democratic processes of decision-making in modern, large-scale societies. Even where scale is not so significant, and homogeneity in society more likely, the dynamics of globalisation—particularly mobility, in the form either of free travel or necessity-based migration (for political or economic reasons)—are tending to break down all attempts to protect or enforce homogeneity, even within individual families.

At another level, the separation of religion and state characteristic of democratic constitutions tends to push religion, in its associational forms, into a private sphere of narrowly defined individual or group interests. This may well lead to a retreat from public life altogether, to insular, parochial forms of religion which sit comfortably within a plural democratic society but have little to do with it otherwise as long as they are “free” to continue as they are. The result is at best a diminishing role for religion in civil society where this happens, or at worst the founding of reactionary enclaves that may at some stage work against society when they feel threatened.

These thoughts, inspired by Everett’s distinctions, themselves not without controversy, suggest that the ways in which a particular religious form or pattern limits or enhances access to and entrance into public life, and how it engages with public life, need considerable probing and testing well beyond what has already been done in South Africa. This I would pose as another challenge to our research on religion in relation to social transformation.

A penultimate methodological issue, one fortunately more often than not now treated seriously but still worth repeating, concerns the effect of change on all forms of religious community, tradition and engagement in public life. This is quite simply the question of history as a methodological aspect of understanding religion; and with it, the recognition of otherness or alterity (within a tradition, or between traditions) as a crucial construct of any view on religion.

¹³ Everett, “Religion in Democratic Transition,” 66.

Perhaps academics avoid essentialist arguments about particular religious phenomena (though I am not always sure of this), but beyond the pretty small and mostly self-contained walls of the academy in South Africa, the idea that religions and religious phenomena can be captured by reference to some essential, unchanging characteristics of a culture or a people is still deeply entrenched. That this is so militates against the impact of good research we might do in the academy. But it also has practical effects which should be of more interest to the academy than they often are. For example, after the impact of the events of September 11, 2001 and the United States led “war against terrorism,” one frequently hears and reads crude statements about the “essentially hostile” character of Islam among those who do not understand it, particularly from more conservative Christians of one kind or another. This is not a healthy situation, and it cannot be a matter of indifference for the academy, even as it indicates that what religion scholars know about difference, alterity and change in their study of religion has not been transmitted or disseminated effectively within society.

Finally, when dealing with methodological concerns about religion and social transformation in a postcolonial African context under conditions of modernity and the democratic nation-state, it seems to me we have a lot to do yet on the question of religion in civil society. I am aware that the idea of civil society is contested, and that at least some conceptions of it are regarded as outmoded or incoherent. If civil society is understood primarily as the corollary of the classical liberal notion of the state, with its function being to act as a safety net to catch those hurt by the ‘unfortunate’ negative effects of the capitalist market economy (Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson), then Adam Seligman’s dismissal of the idea as of any relevance for our contemporary world makes sense.¹⁴

If, however, we follow the more nuanced view on civil society proposed by Cohen and Arato,¹⁵ developed within the framework of Jürgen Habermas’s critical theory of system imperatives, lifeworld interests and regulatory institutions under conditions of advanced capitalism, then it makes a great deal of sense to reassess the role of religion in civil society. Even then, however, the history of civil society in Africa is so conflated with the imperial enterprises of “civilizing Africans” that caution is necessary.¹⁶ Within the South African context, the most recent attempt to do so contains numerous essays which may act as an impetus to further research—both in filling the gaps and extending the investigations—and I will simply refer to this work here as a further pointer to the research challenges we face.¹⁷

Hermeneutic

A number of interpretative issues present themselves in our consideration of research challenges to religion in social transformation, in the South African context as much as anywhere else. Space does not allow me to develop them extensively here, but perhaps it will serve some purpose to identify them briefly. All, in themselves, offer significant possibilities for further re-

¹⁴ Adam Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society*, New York : Free Press, 1992.

¹⁵ Jean Cohen & Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992.

¹⁶ See, in particular, Mahmood Mandani’s critique of the notion of civil society in Africa and its part in the colonial project through mechanisms of direct and indirect rule in Africa, in *Citizen and Subject: contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996.

¹⁷ James R. Cochrane & Bastienne Klein (eds), *Sameness and Difference: Problems and Potentials in South African Civil Society*, Washington D.C.: Center for Philosophy and Values, 2000.

search and, indeed, I would go as far as to say that whatever research on religion in social transformation is done will have to come to grips with one or more of these issues along the way.

The first concerns the question of where the public and the private begin and end. The hermeneutic aspect of this question has to do, among other things, with the challenge presented by the gendered construction of reality. Under conditions of modernity, exceptions notwithstanding, the “private” has generally been constructed as the realm of the woman, and the “public” as that of the man. Alone, this suggests a hermeneutic of suspicion about the distinction between private and public. The remarkable attempts by the African National Congress (ANC) in particular to change this reality in the formal negotiations process which produced our new democratic state have offered us a new opportunity to reconsider these dynamics anew,¹⁸ though the earlier commitments have not been followed through as strongly as many women would like. More importantly for our purposes here, religious factors often intrude on this terrain, more often than not in the direction of a reconstitution of patriarchy. The hermeneutic challenges are self-evident.

But the distinction between the public and the private, as it is most commonly experienced within modernity, is also suspect anthropologically. It may work in law in a fairly precise way, but it does not have any precise boundary in what happens in the lifeworld of peoples. Things that appear private often have public impact, albeit in hidden or coded ways, and there is not doubt of the impact of the public on the private in most people’s lives. Where does one draw the edge? What appears to be a privatised Christianity among conservative Evangelicals is apt to become just as public when people are mobilized around particular interests and concerns, as noted before.

I have indicated that the realm of formal law may be an exception, that is, may be a place where the distinction between private and public is held with some precision. But philosophically even here there are hermeneutic questions to be asked. For example, one of the most important aspects of religious sensibility is its focus on the personal, on the character and experience of persons. What does it mean when, in law, a corporation is designated now as “a person,” able to claim the same rights under law as are real persons? How does this alter perceptions, worldviews? Does it have links to the penetration of the market into lifeworlds? Does it reflect a priority of ownership over human being? Do the rights of persons become subsumed under the rights of the “free” market? This kind of question has been asked, for example, by Franz Hinkelammert in his essay on human rights and the market in *Globalization and Its Victims*.¹⁹ Though we are dealing here with law specifically, it is clear that any research on religion in social transformation will have to consider what has happened and is happening to our understanding of the human being as person, with major ethical and practical implications in respect of a renewed investigation of the relationship between law and justice as well.

A second category of hermeneutic questions emerges around the issue of violence. Why is this of particular relevance to religion research? Simply because violence is inherent in all religious traditions. Violence is signalled as an honourable thing in many religious traditions, for example in

¹⁸ The ANC was the prime mover in getting a decision by the parties to the process that fifty percent of each delegation would consist of women as a matter of principle, and the principle was enforced throughout.

¹⁹ Franz Hinkelammert, “Globalization as Cover-up: An Ideology to Disguise and Justify Current Wrongs,” in Jon Sobrino & Felix Wilfred (eds), *Globalization and its Victims*, Concilium (5), 2001, 25-34.

sacrificial practices and understandings (it is not coincidental that feminist and womanist theologians have raised serious questions about sacrificially defined Christologies). Violence is also signalled by way of the inclusion of the one who belongs and the often complementary exclusion of the whom who does not. The need for boundaries, borders, limits, by which some are defined as belonging and others excluded has its justifications; but it also has its place in the legitimation of violence against the other because they are other.²⁰ Even the notion of hospitality, Derrida has reminded us, embraces an implicit hostility should the other breach the boundaries of hospitality, which are seldom if ever wholly transparent and are always one step away from fear (of the other); and we may say the same for the very notion of community, in its etymological roots linked to communes, common defense or munitions (against the other).

In short, the question of identity/difference and its relation to the other, in which one may place further questions about hybridity of identities and internal difference (within the one person or community) and about the distinction between one tradition and many traditions even within one religion, can never be removed from any interpretation of religion in social transformation. It is too central, rooted as it is in the very ontology of religion and religious experience.

Two further hermeneutic issues I would like to note, though I will not address them in any length here, have to do with truth and experience. Religion, in general, tends to propagate, even if it does not mean to, the notion of one truth. In some cases, this truth has a more inclusive character (as in Hinduism), and in others a radically exclusive character (as among those Christians who claim that there is only one truth against which all other claims to truth must pale or be condemned outright). Here I want only to point again to the work of Douglas McGaughey on the aporia of truth,²¹ and in particular, to his suggestion (for which the reader must turn to him, I regret) that correspondence or nominalist theories of truth, dominant in Christianity through much of its history in the West at least, are wholly inadequate. Hence, doctrinal claims do not represent reality, but rather they project a reality based on some or other paradigmatic assumptions which are all too often left unquestioned. Yet there is no a priori reason why they should not be questioned, and in any case, no direct, unmediated, or absolute truth available to us except by way of “not knowing,” which McGaughey rightly calls “faith.” This is the aporia of truth, and it would certainly be of considerable value in religion research to investigate and probe it further, if for no other reason that the kind of social transformation I take this debate to be about in South Africa requires a setting aside of absolutes in any form, and hence of fundamentalisms of any kind (not only religious either).

The implication of these suggestions for our understanding of experience is that it takes place in the gap between imagination and practice, between thought and action, and in doing so, it literally locates truth in experience thus understood. But experience “thus understood” should not be reduced to what McGaughey calls “actuality,” what is, as if this was the real and the only real, a fallacy of the nominalist approach and of all approaches that fail to understand the role of what is not. Rather, one needs to grasp “possibility” as constitutive of truth, indeed, as the motor of human imagination by which truth is mediated. This is inherently a transcendental claim, albeit one which lies not merely in the structure of the mind (a Kantian tendency) nor in primarily in mate-

²⁰ For a powerful analysis of this dynamic, see Sudhir Kakar, *The colors of violence: cultural identities, religion, and conflict*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

²¹ Douglas McGaughey, *Pilgrims and Strangers*, op. cit.

rial history as time changes (a Marxian tendency), but in the very structure of human being or becoming as spiritual and material simultaneously. It is the emancipatory structure of our existence by which we may and do transcend the actual in order to imagine and embody new possibilities. If we are to understand religion in social transformation, then it seems to me that this realization must play some hermeneutic role in whatever interpretations of religious phenomena we undertake.

In this context, it seems to me that a particular kind of experience is crucial—the experience which is counterfactual to the actual, which confronts the given, especially the given which is imposed by power or authority on others. I take this to be what Per Frostin called “contrast experiences” that become the crucial interpretative loci, that require of one to become conscious of who one chooses as one’s primary interlocutors in searching for understanding.²² When it comes to social transformation, the contrast experience of those who are poor, or marginalized, or otherwise diminished in society, seems to me central to the hermeneutics of religious interpretation and of our capacity to understand what religion may or may not mean in the process of social transformation.

Practical Issues

From all these various methodological and hermeneutic concerns one may move now to the practical issues that present particular challenges to us in our research on religion in social transformation in South Africa. These are commonly understood as ethical demands, either in and of themselves, or because our own religious convictions demand it, or because our understanding of the links between knowledge and power provokes us as academics to respond from our base of power. I will simply list the matters I take to be at the forefront of such challenges at the moment; but I do so in the hope that what I have said to this point will inform any response we might make to the practical challenges.

The list, I think, in most people’s minds, would include the impact and powerfully divisive reality of poverty in our context, to which one may attach the tasks of reconstruction and development—a reality so pervasive and so pregnant with implications for all aspects of our life together in society, that it must be mentioned first.

Within this context, we may think of the practical challenges posed by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, by the enterprise of grounding democracy in our institutions and daily practices, by the huge backlog in education and the immense implications a lack of good education has for the future of our society, by the need to ground our democracy in the development of personal character or what others have called “moral fibre,” by the changes in our understanding of sexuality and sexual orientation, by racism, and by patriarchy and gender discrimination generally.

No doubt there are others we might list, and other ways of describing what I have listed. These, however, seem to me to be fundamental, in the sense that the foundations of our living together, if we take the generous, open-ended and progressive character of our national constitution as a starting point, lie in coming to terms with this set of issues above all. Each of them presents immense challenges—intellectual as well as practical—and each represents therefore a significant

²² Per Frostin, *Liberation Theology in Tanzania and South Africa: a first world interpretation*, Lund, Sweden : Lund University Press, 1988.

reference point for the kind of research on religion in social transformation that must be done, if it can be done.

Conjunctural Issues

Another aspect of a grounded or contextualized view of religion in social transformation that requires considerable research, if for no other reason than its conjunctural importance in the history of the development of our society at this point in time, concerns the much debated issue of globalization.

Again, I will not pursue this in detail here, both because space precludes it and because I have begun this task elsewhere and will be continuing it over the next period of time myself. Suffice it to say that South Africa has come upon the globalized world, post-1994, in much the same way that the countries of the former Soviet Union have—through the collapse of artificial barriers to globalization which protected us somewhat from what many other peoples and countries around the world were experiencing. We are beginning to understand this experience differently as we struggle with our new or renewed membership of regional and international bodies, with the impact of international financial and trade obligations upon us, with debt (internal and external, the latter most strongly in countries surrounding us that may be seen as part and parcel of our economic sphere of activity), with financial capital and its virtual economy, with global cultural homogenisation which in an apparent paradox goes along with the marketing of what is local or indigenous, with open borders and transnational crime, and so on.

Globalization itself is both a contested concept, and may not be a concept at all. It has many interpretations, some of which deny its reality except as a slogan to cover particular interests. Each interpretation offers insights into what we are dealing with in our time in our local, national, regional and international political economies. Whatever we may call this—and I see no particular reason to avoid the term globalization in this respect, provided one is aware of its malleability and imprecision and provided one is willing to give an account of what one does in fact mean by it—we are faced with how we deal with the relation between globally distributed forces or powers and local ones.

As Henri LeFebvre has put it, “The worldwide does not abolish the local.”²³ Wilson and Dissanayake see the local as “spaces of contested identification and belonging.”²⁴ Others speak of the power of the virtual in reshaping our conceptualisation of ourselves or our world (Baudrillard perhaps most provocatively),²⁵ or of the new forms of distributive power that permeate global relations (particular through market mechanisms), or of the importance of understanding the major impact that contemporary forms of mobility are having on our societies, communities and families (through affordable travel by those who can afford it, or through migration of huge numbers of people who seek to escape political threats or economic disaster).

Indeed, globalization as the “triumph” of the neo-liberal market ideology and practice (no doubt a temporary triumph, if it is not already over in some crucial respects that have yet to reveal

²³ Henri LeFebvre, *The production of space*, Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1991.

²⁴ Rob Wilson & Wimal Dissanayake, *Global/local: cultural production and the transnational imaginary*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.

²⁵ Baudrillard, Jean, *The Gulf War did not take place*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

themselves fully) cannot be separated from the other major reality of the twentieth century—the increasingly uneven economic development of countries and of groups within particular countries, to which an increasing collection of statistics testify.²⁶ This signifies power, dispersed unevenly, against which other, often local forms of power struggle (the Mama Wata movement originating in West Africa is one such form, the Taliban another, each very different from the other in their expression of power), or in harmony with which they distribute themselves (well exemplified in Beliefnet, the Internet site by means of which one can link to the religious experience or tradition of one’s choice or even tailor one’s own religion). Here there are local imaginaries of a religious kind in a contest with transnational imaginaries, the parameters and character of which is still not well understood as far as can tell. This presents another important research task: the studying of religion as “appropriating, altering or resisting” globalization or, in other terms, as engaging with globalization through “linkage, disjuncture and fracture.”²⁷ In our own country, it is clear that we will need to link our investigations into globalization with the initiatives associated with the call for an “African Renaissance,” itself a response to globalizing forces even as it is filled with ambiguities that still need to be analysed.²⁸

Conclusion

Finally, then, it seems to me two important overarching issues should be part of any research on religion in transformation, in South Africa as elsewhere:

1. The role of social movements and local sites of struggle, including the ambiguity of religion itself in this
2. Finding ways of bringing into some relationship with each other all of the issues and problems listed above, so as to maximize our understanding and capacities for response and to minimize the costs of fragmented understandings or knowledge and disjointed or even destructive activity.

The view I have presented is certainly broad and somewhat eclectic. I hope to suggest, in this way, that we have much to clarify about religion in South Africa in the context of transition; but also that clarity will grow only as we take into account the complex interrelationships of a variety of factors and variables in our investigations. This in turn calls for a much stronger collaborative ethos and practice, I believe, than we have at present, across the board.

Douglas Adams, whom I cited at the outset, besides his *Hitchhiker’s Guide*, also wrote detective stories of a different kind. His detective, Dirk Gently, investigates reality on the principle that everything, simply everything, is interconnected, and that one can begin one’s investigations wherever one wants and they will lead in the right direction as long as one recognizes the connections. One will get there sooner or later but assuredly, with greater assuredness in fact than the rigid follower of a logical system who is constrained from thinking outside of its logic. Adams’ second principle is that what seems impossible is the best place to begin, rather than what seems obvious. Only then will new insights emerge.

²⁶ See, for example, the 2000 United Nations Human Development Report.

²⁷ Wilson & Dissanayake, *Global/local*, op. cit.

²⁸ See James R Cochrane. “Globalization, ‘African Renaissance’ and Contested Identities,” paper delivered to the Fifth International Philosophical Meeting on the Clash of Civilizations East and West, Moscow, April 2001, for an attempt to unpack some of these ambiguities.

Adams encapsulates these principles in his hilarious stories. They seem to me as good a guide in our responses to research challenges on religion in South Africa as any other might be, and better in generating new insights that will take us beyond existing paradigms as we seek to fathom new possibilities for ourselves, our society and our world on the back of our investigations. With that heretical thought, let me conclude.