

# CHRISTIANITY & CRISIS IN SOUTH AFRICA TODAY

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*Geloftkierke* by Jacobo Hendrik Pierneef, 1886-1957. Pierneef was a South African artist greatly influenced by that country's dramatic landscape. A Pretorian of Dutch and Boer parentage, Pierneef is generally considered to be among the best of the old South African masters.

ON THE 12th OF SEPTEMBER 2014, a six-story church hostel collapsed suddenly in Lagos, Nigeria, killing 116 people, 85 of whom were South African. The hostel belonged to the Synagogue Church of All Nations, whose leader, Prophet T.B. Joshua, had built up a flamboyant Pentecostal-style ministry that drew adherents from across Africa. The rescue

effort was chaotic, hampered by Nigeria's creaking administration and the slow release of information. At first Nigeria declined offers of help from South Africa, and there were allegations that church workers had chased away rescuers. I was visiting South Africa at the time and witnessed the expressions of anger in the media and the hints of government frustration.

A week passed before Nigeria allowed in a team of South African experts. Soon afterwards a South African Air Force plane was sent to bring home 25 injured survivors.

One of the surprises for South Africa was the number of its people who were visiting Lagos to seek assistance from Joshua. It emerged that Joshua's

satellite channel, Emmanuel TV, had many followers in Johannesburg and other South African cities. Large groups were flying to Lagos for healing or counsel. The prophet's flashy style and personal wealth were mentioned in unflattering profiles in the media. Why, South Africans wondered, had so many of its people travelled so far looking for help? It became clear that there were other church leaders like Joshua in South Africa itself, sometimes building up huge congregations based in part on the power of their personalities. People were flocking to these African-style charismatic churches.

To group them as charismatic is only a useful shorthand. These churches could also be called independent and evangelical. The founder often has a vision or dramatic experience which he (occasionally she) regards as a call. The worship style emphasizes speaking in tongues, dramatic exorcisms, prophecy, and discernment. The Old Testament is as important as the New. Services are loud and characterized by a vivid emotionalism that utilizes faith healing and oral testimony. Numbers are hard to ascertain because the 2011 South African census did not include religion, but research suggests that Pentecostal churches are growing at around 800,000 members a year.<sup>1</sup> An earlier wave of church creation before World War II saw the emergence of the largest of them all, the Zion Christian Church, which in the census of 2001 had just under 5 million members—a million more than 10 years previously. Since the end of apartheid, the number of these churches has increased greatly. Some are small, a few dozen adherents meeting under a tree. Some are not self-starts but affiliates of Nigerian

or American ministries. The explosive growth of these churches raises questions, some unsettling, about the new South Africa, concerns exacerbated by media reports of exploitative pastors within these new congregations and of bizarre requests being made, for example: asking congregants to drink petrol or swallow a snake.

This explosive growth of an exuberant, largely indigenous Pentecostalism is one of the signs of the times. There are undoubtedly new freedom and political equality in today's South Africa, but somehow this national self-renewal is incomplete. Exploitative pastors and cult personalities often find more willing followers among the emotionally and economically vulnerable. This is no surprise: vulnerability naturally increases people's desire for divine intervention. In South Africa, this desire appears to cut across demographic boundaries. Although most of those attending these new churches are black, observers have noted that white Afrikaners are also receptive. The Springbok national rugby team is hero-worshipped by many white South Africans, so there was astonishment when it emerged that previous visitors to T.B. Joshua in Lagos had included two former Springboks.

Does all this point to a spiritual crisis in South Africa today? The question wafts unspoken from the pages of R.W. Johnson's timely book *How Long Will South Africa Survive? The Looming Crisis*.<sup>2</sup> The title says it all. Or nearly. Johnson's forensic analysis of the state of the nation views everything through a political and economic template, as we might expect from a former politics fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford. But this same analysis points

implicitly towards a vacuum at the place where morality, family life, and social conscience all interact. This vacuum means that South Africans live in a society scarred by corruption, precarious healthcare, and widespread violence—in other words, they are living a spiritual crisis, indeed. After the end of apartheid it was not supposed to be like this.

In 1994 the first free elections brought the African National Congress (ANC) to power. The ANC regarded itself as occupying the moral high ground. It had replaced an entrenched minority white rule that had disempowered and humiliated the black majority. With Nelson Mandela as President of South Africa, the nation had a leader of dignity, courage, and integrity who worked for reconciliation. But this moral heritage has been squandered. The South African media report almost daily on a parade of corruption scandals. Johnson's unsparing prose describes the ANC as "essentially a vehicle for personal aggrandisement through the looting of the public exchequer". It seems that under the ANC there has been rampant speculation in public office, in fact outright theft from the fiscus. One of the many examples that Johnson gives is the disappearance of funds that the government had set aside to pay for services at Mandela's state funeral: "Millions of rands ... had simply vanished ... Hardly a day went by without evidence that this or that ANC official was looting the health, education or infrastructure budget."<sup>3</sup>

The bigger picture may be even more alarming. The slim tax base is strained by parastatal industries leeching money and a bloated, unproductive public salariat (itself further undermined by nepotism). A recent



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report from Deloitte South Africa said that “South Africa’s public sector has grown ... with little perceived improvement in service delivery, law and order and administration. Our BRICS partners spend on average 25% of their total government expenditure on salaries, by contrast South Africa spends approximately 40% of its budget on salaries.”<sup>4</sup> The ballooning budget deficit will become increasingly difficult to finance. A balance of payments crisis is also likely. South Africa has been over-dependent on extractive industries and has been hit hard by the drop in commodity prices, even as it imports oil and consumer goods. The only recourse will be borrowing on the international money market. But, says Johnson, the rest of the world has already noticed South Africa’s economic difficulties, and its declining credit rating will make borrowing ever more expensive. Johnson predicts that in time South Africa will have to turn to the IMF, which will demand structural change that the ANC will probably be unable to deliver. One possible outcome is what he calls a Mugabe-style Zimbabweanisation of South Africa. If he is correct, then the ANC government is in denial, or worse, misleading the country about the true state of affairs.

The people of South Africa are under pressure. One of the striking features about South Africa today is the large number of protests over what is called “service delivery”. Money budgeted by provincial or local governments has not reached its intended targets. Many schools are without textbooks. High-density suburbs lack streetlights or modern sewage disposal. A neologism in vogue in South Africa today is *tenderpreneur*. Business people, often politically well

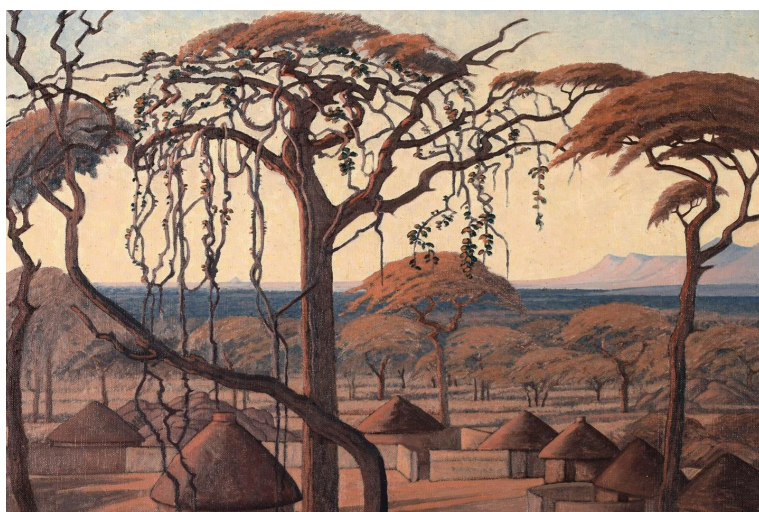
connected, make a contract to deliver services that are then supplied in part, or not at all, or at inflated prices. Mines are starting to close because of decreasing demand; international investors are skittish; and investment is slowing. Yet South Africa has a youthful population, and migrant workers are coming from poorer neighbours, especially Zimbabwe. There are high unemployment and a pressing need for job creation. This toxic brew has implications for the rest of Africa and for South Africa’s friends abroad.

After the Lagos tragedy, the South African media began to take notice of the charismatic churches. Articles poured scorn on the more outlandish claims about some of the charismatic pastors, such as their self-serving and their emphasis on a gospel of wealth. But there was more to the charismatic churches than this. Two South African academics, Ivor Chipkin and Annie Leatt, have pointed out how these churches often form self-help networks. They can help their worshippers access NGO assistance. These churches fill the gaps created by poor governance. They help their followers “come to terms with the unpredictability of South African social life: as a citizen (or customer) engaging with the public service, the existential uncertainty generated by crime, or by sickness.” They may also assist young people unlikely to find a job in the formal economy.<sup>5</sup> Chipkin and Leatt are surprised. Surely, they ask, the state, despite its failures, is now broader and fairer in its reach than the old apartheid society? But this does not take into account the vulnerability felt by many in South Africa today. This vulnerability may explain the emphasis on exorcism that characterizes the

new charismatic churches. In addition to the economic uncertainty, South Africa is one of the most violent societies in the world, with over 17,000 murders annually. Exorcism confronts and helps worshippers come to terms with their fears. The obvious is also true, namely that adherents are often seeking a way forward by joining with others looking for a better way of life, based on the Christian message.

The charismatic churches have, therefore, become centers of power in their own right. The South African authorities have noticed this. In August 2015 it was announced that the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (known as CRL) was launching an investigation into South African religious bodies. The investigation would focus on how they collected and spent their money, and whether they abused their members’ good faith. There was some surprise at the announcement. The CRL previously had little to do, and most South Africans were unaware of its existence. It is an independent body, but its independence is open to debate because the president appoints its members. Since the investigation was launched, its chair, Ms. Thoko Mkhwanazi-Xaluva, has spoken in interviews of the need to “regulate religion”. In theory all religious groups are being investigated. But from those summoned to appear at hearings across the country, it quickly became clear that leaders of indigenous charismatic churches were the main target. It seemed like a warning shot across their bows: “Do not vie for political power.”

If this is the intention, it seems unnecessary. The black-led



A View Over Chuniespoort by Pierneef.

charismatic churches have rarely intervened in political debate. Their focus is internal, both on helping their members and on rewarding their leadership. A rare example of charismatic leadership occasionally engaging in politics is the largely white-led Rhema Bible Church. Its senior pastor, Ray McCauley, arranged for President Jacob Zuma to speak in Rhema's 7,500-seat Johannesburg church in 2009. Shortly afterwards McCauley took a key role in forming an interfaith group of leaders, which in 2011 became the National Interfaith Council of South Africa (NICSA). This organization, however, has only a small support structure and its voice is rarely heard. Its ambition to bring together social development and a renewal of personal moral values has not been realized. This would seem to be exactly what South Africa needs, given the interlocking problems of fatherless families, violence, poverty, and political corruption.

McCauley remains a prominent Christian voice in the media. He sometimes finds a balance between personal and social change that eludes others. An example might be the student protestors who in recent months

have disrupted and sometimes vandalized universities. What started as a demand for the abolition of tuition fees quickly morphed into vague but insistent demands for a 'decolonised' curriculum. In a newspaper article, McCauley wrote that student campus destruction was robbing future generations of access to knowledge and information. But, he said, his own generation was partly to blame, because it had allowed a culture of impunity to flourish which the students had now imbibed. By contrast, an ecumenical gathering of Christian leaders issued a windy statement including a call for "decolonized education": "We believe, however, that some of the methods used by students detract from their noble struggle."<sup>6</sup> They seemed not to notice that they had bought into the student narrative.

R.W. Johnson is dismissive of the mainline denominations, which he believes have nothing to say in the face of national decline in South Africa: "After 1990 the churches fell into a deep somnolence from which they could not be awakened."<sup>7</sup> It is true that with the end of the apartheid era the main Christian traditions lowered their profile. They had a mixed

record. There were leaders like Desmond Tutu, Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, whose chairing of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission helped the country confront the ugly truth of apartheid and come to terms with its evil consequences. But these churches all had substantial white membership. Their record included complacency as well as opposition to apartheid. There was a sense that in a new era what was required was not prophecy but co-operation. Even so, Johnson's strictures were not entirely accurate. At the end of 2012, a group of church leaders wrote to President Zuma, saying that too many politicians were self-serving and arrogant. They asked him: "Do you also not understand that lack of decisive action, where waste of public resources has been revealed, leads to a culture of impunity and immunity where the poorest once again become the main victims of bad governance?"<sup>8</sup> He paid little heed. For much of 2016 South Africa has been roiled by the scandal of a lavish private residence, Nkandla, built using the taxpayer's money by President Zuma in his home territory of KwaZulu Natal. Representatives of the South African Council of Churches and other faith leaders called on President Jacob Zuma to resign following the Constitutional Court's judgement against him on the Nkandla matter. The ANC reacted with fury, and its Secretary-General made veiled warnings.

TODAY THE ANC government is worried. It is being outflanked on the left by a new party, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), which has a redistributionist platform calling for nationalization of large swathes of the economy. EFF populist actions have often grabbed



the headlines. On the other flank of the ANC, the centrist Democratic Alliance shows new vigor under its first black leader, Mmusi Maimane. In August 2016, a Democratic Alliance coalition captured the governance of three of the six largest metros in local elections. A fourth metro, the oldest city, Cape Town, was already in DA hands.

When the ANC came to power, it had resisted racism in South Africa for over 80 years, and since 1950 had led the struggle against apartheid. There was an understandable air of entitlement. Unfortunately, this has created a political culture where public office is regarded as the key to sharing the spoils. The corruption spreads far beyond the immediate politicians and sucks in many others, including salaried officials and contractors. It is the poorest people who suffer most. Moreover, South Africa is a profoundly unequal society. The wealthiest echelons are no longer exclusively white: they are now also black and (increasingly) Asian. Extremes of wealth and poverty jostle against each other. To the north of Johannesburg, you can move within minutes from the affluent, California-style living of Sandton to the *favela* of Alexandra. Outside the cities, Hoovervilles of migrant workers spring up in euphemistically named “informal settlements”. The situation is a breeding ground for crime sometimes accompanied by terrifying, senseless violence.<sup>9</sup> Wealthier residents often withdraw into gated or guarded communities. If Johnson’s prediction of looming economic crisis is correct, then the strains on South African society may reach an explosive level.

In this situation the churches have the difficult challenge

of speaking truth to power. In some ways it was easier in the apartheid era because the evil was clearly defined. The face of evil in South Africa is now more blurred. It is complicated because the personal and the social are intertwined. The climate of corruption has to be repeatedly identified and criticized, but at the individual level too there has to be a willingness to accept the challenge to integrity. Can the churches speak to this spiritual crisis? Possibly the newer, independent charismatic churches will encourage renewal at the personal level. But their witness is fragmented, and the lifestyle of their leaders is questionable. Their leaders may not want to jeopardize their rising status by criticizing the ANC and its climate of self-enrichment. The mainline denominations now have well-established black leadership and may rise to the challenge. However, a strong liberal strain in their theological heritage makes it easier for them to challenge structural sin than to speak to the need for conversion of the heart. These churches have lost market share to the charismatics and correspondingly have less public influence. They have also lost some of their self-confidence and have never quite found their place in the new South Africa.

During the apartheid years, Christian leaders opposed to apartheid often turned to the writings of the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer.<sup>10</sup> Bonhoeffer still offers wisdom in the turmoil and yearning of South Africa today, especially through his famous warning about easeful religion in *The Cost of Discipleship*:

Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the

preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.<sup>11</sup>

Those words apply as much in London and Los Angeles today as they do in Johannesburg and Cape Town. But given the looming storm clouds over South Africa, the stakes there are higher. **P**

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(Endnotes)

1 Ivor Chipkin and Annie Leatt, “Religion and Revival in Post-Apartheid South Africa”, *Focus: the Journal of the Helen Suzman Society* No 62 August 2011 page 42.

2 R.W. Johnson, *How Long Will South Africa Survive? The Looming Crisis*. London: Hurst, 2015 (also: Cape Town, Jonathan Ball, 2015).

3 Johnson, pages 59 and 102.

4 <http://sabudgetspeech.deloitte.co.za/featured/6.html>

5 Chipkin and Leatt, page 44.

6 Statement issued by Anglican Church in Cape Town following meeting of Christian and other faith leaders. See: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201610210505.html>

7 Johnson, page 128.

8 IOL (Independent Newspapers online) <http://www.iol.co.za/news/top-clerics-pen-letter-to-zuma-1439546#.UMivu4N1-So>

9 See for example the interviews in Kevin Bloom, *Ways of Staying* (London: Portobello Books, 2010).

10 See for example, John De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa: Theology in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

11 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone Edition/Simon & Schuster, 1995; first published in German, 1937) pages 44-45.