Reconstructing the moral fibre

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Introduction

Our democracy, even in its infancy, is faced with the crisis of morality to such a fundamental extent that we are forced to do a thorough soul searching in order to diagnose our condition and plot a way out. Indeed much of the moral crisis is not of our particular democracy’s own making. It points to deeper questions that require serious reflection on a range of issues.

As the millennium comes to a close, it is possible to look over our shoulders to our common past, and observe a number of processes and currents that have swept over the horizon of the last three hundred years of the modern epoch.

We could then apportion blame to which social force is guiltier for the state in which we find ourselves: Science? Religion? the State? Democracy? etc.

For our purpose, a more pressing challenge is to enquire into how Religion might assist our nation to pick up the moral pieces, accept the legacy of history in both its positive and negative aspects, regroup and move forward in a strong moral charter.

Put another way: Could religion bring a prophetic word to the moral decadence that plagues South Africa as she enters the 21st century?

Fortunately, conditions for such a moral recovery exist, following the two year life of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which virtually called the entire nation to stop and and reflect on its moral record: the police and military establishments, the victims of human rights violations, the media, judiciary, business, the medical profession, NGO’s, political parties and all those affected in the human rights record of our recent past. Few nations in history have been afforded the opportunity for such a thorough going soul searching across a wide range of areas of human endeavor, and a recommitment to the high ideals of moral rectitude.

While confessions were made at the TRC, there are no mechanisms to monitor follow through. This area - developing mechanisms to press the different institutions to follow through on their moral commitments - is as good a place to start as any.

That said, I explore eight other areas of significance that organised religion would do well to give attention to in attempting to mount a programme of moral reconstruction.

1. Moral ambiguity in the public place

When religion and civil society/government talk about morality, they have different things in mind. One has a set of non negotiables received from a deity above, the other a sufficient consensus from the populace below. The one has no mandate to negotiate a moral compromise, the other is a child of political negotiation and compromise.
The one seeks an moral consensus which is enforceable by a secular, non aligned state acting as arbiter. The other is frustrated when the state fails to legislate what, according to divine wisdom, is correct.

It is vital for organised religion to appreciate the dilemmas of secular governance, and to collaborate toward an enforceable moral consensus. In part, this calls for the facilitation of a learning curve to raise the level of social and public morality. Society can get to a stage of accepting as normal certain behaviours that simply must be disallowed. The level of social tolerance for deviant, even criminal, behaviour could be low or high depending on the moral `IQ’ of a society.

It is vital to adopt a collaborative approach by all those committed to nation building: Government, NGO’s, religious communities etc. in setting up mechanisms and frame works for a moral renewal in our society.

A related area of attention is the scope of such moral concern. Organised religion, having been relegated to the private space by the political doctrine of secularisation, seems unable to think beyond the private sphere of a selected moral agenda of issues such as pornography, abortion, decriminalisation of prostitution and homosexuality. While these are important areas of concern, it seems precisely a singleminded focus on these areas that loose religion the credibility for comment in other areas. It is almost expected that the competency of religion for public comment starts and ends with narrow morals concerns.

Nor is this entirely unjustified. Organised religion does not have any serious investment in research in areas such as macro economic policy, security, environment, foreign policy etc. The task of moral reconstruction thus becomes limited by a narrow vision of morality.

2. The connection between morality and poverty

A case could be made regarding the inevitability of crime when abject poverty and massive wealth exist side by side. This is made worse by factors such as:

- A culture of entitlement where apartheid policies of the past are blamed for the predicament of many, whose hopes were for a strongly redistributive socio economic order.
- A culture of unmitigated consumerism paraded in the media and elsewhere. This tends to make the experience of poverty unbearable.

A disclaimer has to be made that the poor do not have a monopoly on crime. White collar crime and corporate corruption is rampant.

3. The postmodern identity crisis and its impact on family, identity and morality

A key foundation of morality is the institution of the family. Traditional societies had stable families that served as a base for moral formation. Along with religion, the family served a vital role in shaping public morality. Misguided legislation has compromised and undermined the role families play in moral formation. It is vital to approach the legislative task with sensitivity to the institution of the family, and all other related civil institutions.

4. The market culture

The market culture which is dominated by a cynical, ungodly liberalism, itself a product of the now discredited modernist rationalism has devastating effects on public morality. The profit motif has become sacrosanct, and before it, what is left of social morality must bow. It seems ludicrous for example, that television and the entire entertainment industry trades in as much violence and promiscuity as it does, and yet expects peace and good morality. Or maybe it does not expect it! The joke is perhaps on those who are looking for a better society and yet have not figured out what they are to do with a market running rough shod over the most sacred values of community and nation building.
In any case, the market is a powerful river running downstream, holding as much promise for life as it does for death. One could put forward the case that it is mostly for death! Can it be managed and exploited for the common good? Maybe.

Firstly a full audit on its moral, social, cultural and material costs need to be done a communicated and made available to all, especially the masses of the people. This deficit to be controlled and kept as low as possible, since it seems that it is a permanent, perhaps defining feature of market economics.

Is such control wishful thinking, shot through with a bit of socialist nostalgia?

There must be a way of involving the masses by informing them about what is at stake, seeking their collective resolve and participation in pursuing a better vision for the future. A moral reconstruction must consciously seek to win the commitment of the population, and not just the elite.

Which leads to the next concern...

5. The role model played by those who hold public office

Our social elite, in public office mostly, have created the illusion that there is a gravy train to be had by the lucky! This has translated in certain instances to crime, such as the cash heists by former freedom fighters angry in not being allowed into the train. A signal of austerity would have been better communicated from the top down, and would have made sense to other sectors of society, such as labour, the unemployed etc.

Relatedly, what is the moral significance to society if people holding public office are known to be corrupt? Such as those given amnesty by the TRC, or simply those known to South Africans as having been responsible for acts of gross human rights violation and political violence as a means to ensure their political survival?

It needs to be said that beyond the merits or demerits of amnesty, South Africans have an obligation to build a morally strong nation. Leaders need to be selected with greater care with that in mind.

6. Can the post modern state be taken seriously in the face of free market economics and globalisation?

We live in a globalising context in which the power of the state is increasingly undermined by forces beyond its control. While these forces are largely economic and geopolitical, they constitute the structure in which morality is given or stripped of meaning. It is therefore the case that to conduct dialogue on moral reconstruction with the state is not nearly as fruitful as it used to be three decades ago. Some things have changed drastically enough for the religious community to consider reconceptualising their prophetic ministry not so much in church - state terms, but in terms of how they are to be involved in the struggle for cultural renewal, where the state is but a small fraction of the problem. The entire cultural project that involves the arts, media, law, business, politics etc needs to be considered.

The answer then for moral renewal lies in rediscovering the ordinary person as a subject of moral renewal and history making. Hope will have to come from below.

For the major religions, evangelism takes all the more primacy in that it invites the ordinary person to reconnect with the Creator, ponder seriously the moral decadence in which they are culpable, and to select a course of action that seeks an alternative to the corrupt givens of this world.

7. The media

The media, we are told, reflects reality as it is. So we are expected to watch it and see ourselves reflected there. In that way we are formed in the moral image selected by the journalist. Yet instead of reflecting reality, the media also creates reality. It is for this reason that it was correct that the TRC also heard
submissions from the Media on the role they played during the crucial years leading to the end of apartheid.

The media needs to understand its role as being a partner in nation building, including moral reconstruction. Can it, when it considers itself for the most part to be accountable to its shareholders?

**Conclusion**

There is a sense in which the effort toward moral renewal in the 21st century cannot simply be a return to things as they were before the dawn of modernity. There are no bridges to the past. Nor are those desirable.

What is clear is that we do need divine intervention if we are to find our way out of the moral humility, rather than conceited self-confidence, earnest prayer, rather than efficient planning and organisation, diligent commitment and hard work, rather idle intellectualisation, are a necessary posture for all of us.