Citizenship of marginal/subjugated voices

by

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In South Africa the past is complex, controversial and emotionally loaded, as can be seen from the recent TRC hearings. Religions, and Christianity in particular, are an essential part of the country’s disputed legacy. They brought good and bad things. The religious sphere cannot be isolated from the socio-political sphere. Both experienced the same contradictions and divisions. A debate on the place of religion in the public sphere cannot avoid the question of how we relate to South African history.

But what is history? What is the past? Referring to history or to the past is a highly problematic exercise. It is about collecting memories. Said otherwise, it is about listening to the voices of those who made the past. But whose memories? Whose voices? The "marginal" and "subjugated" voices often remain unrecorded and for that reason they tend to be overlooked.

The past and its related concepts – history, legacy, memories, voices – are problematic for two reasons.

A. A divided past

At the world level, South Africa is a marginal country, both geographically and politically. In all sectors of life – economy, politics, culture, religion – it is controlled, directly or indirectly, by decision-making instances located elsewhere. This is also true for Christianity. Christianity is an imported religion, brought into the country by missionaries sent and funded by churches based in Europe or in Northern America. But is also an indigenous religion, preached, practised and reflected by indigenous people, not only in the context of the AICs but also in the mainline churches. Christianity is a religion in tension.

The fact that South Africa is at the periphery of the world gives a particular significance to the issues of power, domination and hegemony. These issues are also relevant in First World countries, of course. The difference is that in a country like South Africa power, domination and hegemony always have a two-fold dimension:

- external, that is between the centres of power outside the country, its agents or allies within the country and the dominated;
- internal, that is between competing actors within the country.

In South Africa, division and conflict literally dominate the past. Suffice it to mention the three tragedies that shaped the country’s history:

- slavery
- colonialism
- apartheid.

The fact that the subject matter of South African history is power struggle and division explains why it is so
divisive. How can masters and slaves share the same views of the past? The same can be said of the missionaries and of their black converts despite the fact that the former preached a message of love and fraternity. After three or more generations of evangelisation the situation is of course different, but the ambiguous nature of Christianity remains. The AICs’ owe a large part of their success to their (apparent) independence from missionary sources.

B. Accessing the past

Conventional history assumes that the past is accessible provided that the necessary documents are available and that these documents are examined critically. Once these two conditions are met, the historians give a fairly accurate, if not objective, account of the past. Even if they do not admit it fully, their ambition is to write history, as Ludwig Ranke wrote a century ago, "wie es eigentlich geschehen ist".

This project raises a number of difficulties.

(i) Oral and written sources

Conventional history almost exclusively relies on the use of written sources. In a predominantly illiterate society this means that the point of view of the majority will never be taken into consideration, or if it is, it will always be seen through the eyes (or the pen) of people in situation of domination. In Africa such histories almost inevitably reflect "the view from the district commissioner's verandah or the mission compound"(Gwynn Prins).

(ii) Restructuring the past

Oral history methodology has its own pitfalls. When asked to tell their stories informants reconstruct, rather than describe, the past. Sometimes they do it on purpose, as these multitudes of newly-born freedom fighters who were nowhere to be seen during the apartheid days. More often they adjust and transform their stories unconsciously. Memory does not work like a camera. Our experience of the past is incoherent and fragmented. An informant is always tempted to fill the gaps in order to make his story comprehensible and logical. If he was in a situation of authority, he tends to embellish the past. The dominated will underestimate his role in order to fit the image he thinks he has to give of himself. Another problem is the tendency informants have to make use of literary sources, e.g. newspapers reports, when asked to tell about their experience. They are adamant that they witnessed the event about which they are talking. In fact they were not.

(iii) Oral performance

Let us assume now that those difficulties are solved and that the informants reflect a more or less accurate view of the past in their testimonies. Are their stories transmittable? There comes another difficulty. Telling a story and writing it are not the same thing. The poor and the oppressed have a lot to say. If the right context is provided, they may be willing to speak. And then? For their voices to be heard in a broader context than an interview situation or a TRC hearing, something needs to be transmitted. Unfortunately the intonation, the gestures, the attitude of the informants are almost impossible to record. Compared to the oral performance, the written transcripts of their stories look desperately flat. Unless use is made of a video-camera equipment, which is often unpractical, the power of their testimonies will be lost for ever.

(iv) Between past and present

Conventional history assumes that provided the right methodology is followed the past can be reached out.
But what is the past? The idea that academic history or story telling produces a reflection of the past is deceitful. The past is not something we can go and fetch like a can of beer in the fridge. It is a construct. A human being cannot survive without some sort of representation of where he comes from. This image he has of his origins is constantly reinvented according to the circumstances to which he is confronted. Memory is a dynamic process. This applies to individuals as well as social groups. In a divided society like South Africa the process is further complicated. The South African nation may one day acquire a more unified view of its past, but this will take time. Each new set of events transforms the view we have of our past. Religious history follows the same process. The current debate on the secular state, for instance, will force historians and witnesses to reconsider their views on the role of religion in society, both in the present and in the past. Thus it is not only the wounded memories of apartheid which shape the understanding of religious history in South Africa, but the more recent controversies on issues like abortion, homosexuality, Pagad and religious instruction in schools.

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