Public and religious discourse: sampling a local cuisine

by

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This brief paper is intended to be a conceptual table-setting, a guide to sharpening our knives and forks, choosing appropriate plates and cups to contain the material to be consumed at the conference and giving everything a fair salting to bring out particular flavours. While utensils have been developed in different parts of the world, and would seem useful here, we must beware of preparing for an exotic, rather than a local cuisine. Let me begin then with some "raw material", perhaps uncooked and indigestible at this stage, but reflecting local tastes.

Appetising

Attempts to confine religion to a side table, away from the main "public" meal have never succeeded in South Africa. Consider the following "menu" items:

- The pipe-bombing by Muslim fundamentalists of a cafe on the Cape Flats.
- The daily (Christian) devotional on SABC (public) radio.
- A Eucharist, said at the funeral of a prominent UDF activist in the 1980s.
- An article on housing in Challenge Magazine. [1]
- Archbishop Tutu leading a session of the Truth Commission in a worship chorus.
- An ordained minister who is now an MP speaking to a debate in parliament.
- The Preamble of the old (tricameral) South African Constitution. [2]

Like everywhere else, religion is never served up on its own. Yet the challenge I have been given is to show how "religious" and "public" discourse[3] can be related—something which at least implies they are distinguishable.

Defining boundaries between what is and isn’t "religion" or "religious" (or "religious discourse" for that matter) is difficult though doubtless crucial for any conference on religion in public life. The particular definition of "public discourse" adopted is going to influence strongly the definition of "religious discourse", and vice-versa. Moreover, it is possible that the use of the term "religion" in this discussion may therefore be different from its use in say the discussions of "religious plurality and identity in civil society". Indeed, it will be necessary for the conference to grapple with the definition of "religion" implicit not only in each concept paper, for each topic, but across the papers.

This paper, while presenting keywords such as "religion", "religious discourse" and "public discourse", is however not interested in tying them up (or down), but in opening them up to the different ways in which they may be employed, with special reference to South Africa.

Preparing the (main) dis/course

"Religion", "religions", "religious"
Religion is notoriously difficult to define. It may be understood broadly in terms of the ultimate orientations all humans qua humans not only have, but mobilise in the (re)building (religio: "re-connecting"), of communities, societies, cultures, political parties, categorical frameworks and academic conferences. Religion is at the heart of the human enterprise—we are in the phrase of Langdon Gilkey, *homo religiosus*—and is inevitably present in "the making and the unmaking of public policy" (Cochrane 1998). In this sense a great variety of things may be described in religious terms, such as nationalism (see Manzo 1996), Enlightenment rationalism, (Hart 1997) or capitalism (Walsh 1992).[4]

Particular religions, as David Chidester (1995) says, are experiments in being human; they incarnate in community (and usually within a larger social context) a particular vision of what it means to be human. Indeed all experiments in being human are religious, since they express in what Richard Rorty (Rorty 1989) calls "final vocabularies"[5] our deepest convictions about origin and destiny, creation and redemption, brokenness and healing. Such vocabularies articulate the worldview that we live out of, the horizon against which we project our actions, that place we stand when we reason (which itself is not fully understood when grasped only through reason). In that sense, all public discourse is religious discourse, and the commitment to use "discursive reason" as a norm is itself already a religious choice (for these issues see Hart and Nielson (1990). Religion is not "an" activity, but the depth dimension of all activity (insofar as it is human activity). It is not the course (not even the main course), but the act of eating.

While we might well starve to death while debating a more precise definition of the term "religion", perhaps it is best simply to assume its "everyday" sense, allowing that, at its limits, the broader definition is going to push its way in. When people refer to themselves as "religious", they usually mean that they have some connection to one of the so-called "great" religious traditions, or to a "faith community", or that they regularly engage in some practice (which could range from prayers to ancestor-rituals). At least in principle (though rarely in practice) these traditions and communities are qualified by loyalties which cut across and, at times, profess to transcend other loyalties (such as race, class, gender and nationality). I say "in principle" because in practice religious loyalty is contested amongst the others, as one among many.

While in some societies, there are specific institutions which are designated "religious", in others a distinguishing of "faith" from other institutions is inappropriate, if at all possible. Missionaries who came to South Africa in the 19th century thought religion was not present because there was no institutional or confessional form analogous to that in their own context (see Chidester 1996). We err in restricting our understanding of "religion" to the Judeo-Christian-Islamic understanding of a Supreme Being. But we also err when we align it to the Enlightenment, Kantian reduction of religion to the ethico-political sphere (Petersen 1996). This is the first move in the forced removal of religion to a private realm, eventually identifying religious belonging with matters of private taste. Sometimes African traditional religion, savoured in the home, in the kitchen, rather than in more "public" eating places, has been termed "cultural" rather than "religious", as a matter of interest to anthropologists rather than scholars of religion. Such a misrepresentation either excludes it from public discussion of religion or, perhaps worse (for Mndende 1994), allows African-Christians (the hyphen separating culture-religion), who have already a reserved place at the public table, to be its spokespersons. On the other hand, perhaps redescribing the nature of religion culturally rather than ethically (see Petersen 1996) may well give an entirely new slant on the idea of "religious discourse" and "public discourse". But that's for another paper.

The number of people in any society who may be regarded as "religious" (and therefore who are the subjects of/in religious discourse) is almost always greater, however, than the actual number of people who attend or are members of specific religious institutions (whether formal, as in large denominations, or informal, as in small Bible study groups). In addition to (and perhaps in tension with) particular institutional religions, we can also speak of "popular" and "civil" religion. There people construct their "religious" identity (and deconstruct the stable identities of the "officially" religious institutions) in interaction with radio sermons, soap operas and bumper sticker slogans, with traditional practices and pop songs. Indeed, institutions (in their quest to maintain a stable identity) are fond of condemning such "popular" (and indigestible) elements as "heterodox". Even if we define "being religious" more narrowly than "being human", then, we must see it more broadly than its institutional forms. Identifying the ways that "religious discourse" is expressed outside those institutional forms...
(and how it feeds back into them) is a great challenge (see Cochrane 1994), one in which theology may have an important "public" role to play.

Leftovers

Has not our all-too-brief attempt to measure religion for the discussion left some important groups and persons out? What of the "take-away" use of religion, its enjoyment in other public places? What of the heritage of the past, where funerals—officiated by religious leaders who were not necessarily acting as "official" representatives of a denomination or institution—were important public sites, foci for public rage, defying the religious/political boundaries which both their churches and the state wished to maintain? What of those public figures—some clergy, some lay (where those distinctions matter), who currently speak as members of political parties but also as, e.g. Christians or Muslims (though the precise understanding of the relationship between the religious and political allegiances will vary according to the person concerned)? What of those devotees who are involved in NGO and other interest groups? And what of institutions formed around religious or theological concerns (sometimes by people disenchanted with the inactivity of their faith communities), which are not (strictly speaking) "faith communities"—the Institute for Contextual Theology is one prominent example? And what of parachurch groups (such as PACSA), or Councils of Churches (such as the SACC)? Here are some important and prominent public representatives of religious interests we dare not push off to the side of our plate. The question is how to include them in the discussion, along with communities, denominations and local assemblies.

"Public"

Some people get nervous when they see religious dishes on the "public" menu. Surely, they say, such delicacies belong in the home—or at least in another restaurant, in another place, at another time? In the modern view, the "public" is a realm of order (created in the midst of chaos) separated out from the rest of society, with clear rules and boundaries—its table manners (if you will). It is defined over against "the private", the idiosyncratic, the local. The public is "the common", often evacuated of all particularity (which divides). Not all celebrants of the public see the public self as bodiless, narrative-less, context-less (and "taste-less"). Some want to recover a pre-modern model where "the public is the all encompassing community of persons who come together to debate and evaluate the effects of their associational life" (Cady 1993, 16), but these acknowledge that still "the public exercise of reason" is the condition for their contact. All are welcome to their posh eatery, but those who come must dress properly and mind their manners.

Postmodernism is suspicious of this privileging of reason over other kinds of human activity, and in particular with the connection of "the rational" and "the public" (public "man" is rational "man"). Against the shopping mall view of the public, where you always have to see the "manager" before setting up shop, a sterile "clearing" where passionless reason rules, a postmodern view envisions a "marketplace" which is rather the point at which rationalities, interests, persons, bodies, ideologies, religions and worldviews intersect, clash, interact, symbolize, dramatize, and conceptualize. Insofar as the self constitutes and is constituted by such an intersection (or intersections), then the self is always public. But how can this an-archic public (which really calls for the de-centring of "the public" and the empowering of little publics) facilitate discussion which benefits the common good? Doesn’t it leave us to our own little table-talk, with people who speak our own language?

Religious and public discourse

Publics are many, as are discourses. Any discussion of "religious discourse" and "public discourse" must avoid reducing "religious discourse" simply to the statements of faith communities emanating from denominational headquarters (and research institutes and academic conferences). We need to take into account different kinds of talk that might count as "religious" and "public": e.g. symbol, performance, reason. This is not to claim space for the "irrational", the tossers of pipe bombs into restaurants, but rather to allow for the (i)n(e)rruption of the voice of the other-than-rational, the differently-mannered. A wonderful example of this was the arrival of Bishop Legkanyane of the Zion Christian Church at the TRC faith hearings, which burst open the
"reservation of reason" with song and celebration. A counter-example at the same hearings was the way that the faith communities (even the more conservative ones) so easily adopted the meta-language of the Commission[7] to describe their activities and positions during the apartheid years (on these issues see Cochrane, de Gruchy & Martin, 1999).

Should "religious discourse" be subject to the norms/canons of rationality (even practical reason) in order to qualify as "public discourse"? Does religious discourse qua religious discourse inhabit a different "plausibility structure" (Berger 1967), and if so, does that mean that its delicacies can only be enjoyed at exclusive restaurants or private parties? Or are we not at the point where we need to differentiate particular religious institutions and traditions from each other (and again subject to the problematics above) and their different plausibility structures which may or may not "fit" particular constructions of the public? And what of the heterogeneity within and between religions? Is it fair to reduce the many religions within the category "religion" to merely different flavours of the same product? Should "religious discourse" not give way to religious discourses and the discourse of particular religions, just as "public discourse" must give way to public discourses and the discourse of particular publics?

Religious discourse and theology

All this sounds good in principle. But in practice, even a postmodern view of public/publics may still allow the strongest voices to dominate. It may invite all and sundry to the table, while favouring those who already have the power to gain access, or who (by virtue of their history) have "reserved seats". Those communities on the margins may not be able to make their voice heard—not to mention the marginalised (Blacks, women, gays) within "mainstream" faith communities. It is here that Cochrane's (1999) idea of theology as facilitating an irruption of marginal voices into the public/publics becomes important. Theological discourse is not reducible to religious discourse (Cady 1993, 165f.) but, on this view, provides a means of stirring marginal voices into the public/publics stew. And yet the ambiguity of all this is whether in so doing marginal voices are not thereby blended-in, co-opted into the mainstream; whether they don't lose their particular flavours.[8] This is the risk of "public theology", its challenge, its possibility.

Digesting (in)conclusions

This paper has been an attempt at a digesting of the issues concerning religious discourse and public discourse, to provide a digest, to put them "in a nutshell" (c.f. Caputo & Derrida 1997). But (as anyone who has ever tried it will testify) nutshells are difficult to "get down". In the interests of non-closure (and of opening up our discussion), here are some unresolved fragments:

- What are the limits or constraints on our defining of "religion" for the present discussion? Do we need to work with one definition? Does talking of it in relation to the public/publics necessitate understanding it in terms of its ethico-political forms? How do we make space for a plurality of religions which embraces relatively undifferentiated communal/traditional forms?
- What or whom is meant by religious or faith communities? Whom do they represent (both professedly and actually)? To whom are they accountable (especially for their always pious and often penitent pronouncements)?
- What is religious discourse? Is it simply the discourse of religious institutions, differing in content from other institutions but not in form? Is it discourse about religion or religious matters? What (if we answer negatively) are its forms, and are its public forms different from its non-public forms? What are its modes of expression?
- Is religious discourse already public, or does it need to be translated into a "public language"? If so, who will translate it and with reference to what norms? Who decides what the norms are? Are (all) faith communities bilingual (speaking one language to insiders and another to outsiders)?
- How does the non-speaking "religious" other join the "public/religious discourse" table, with its exclusive manners and haute cuisine?
- What is the role of (public) theology in all this? Of Christian intelligentsia (who may not be theologians)?

Of Christians in NGOs? In government?

Notes

[1] Challenge is a magazine of Christian public opinion in South Africa. [Back to text]

[2] The Preamble began "In humble submission to almighty God…” [Back to text]

[3] Though there may be some overlap, I am using the term "discourse" in its more everyday sense of "talk" than in the highly specialized, Foucauldian sense of a technical field of knowledge, utilized by specialists, caught up in the exercise and legitimation of power relations. Religion and power issues do however call for specialized exploration (See e.g. Chidester 1995). [Back to text]

[4] In October 1987, on the day of the stock market crash, one Toronto newspaper had a single word written in thick type across its entire front page: "ARMAGGEDON". [Back to text]

[5] I say this without implying an application to religion on Rorty's part, nor embracing his supposition that such vocabularies are necessarily private and deeply idiosyncratic. [Back to text]


[7] So that even conservative-evangelicals were describing themselves in terms of the language of "oppression" and "liberation". [Back to text]

[8] Perhaps a better image than stirring them into a stew would be tossing them into a salad. [Back to text]

[9] A brief introduction to some of the issues concerning Christianity in transition in South Africa may be found in my article "Christians in Society: Where Are We Now?".

References


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