

The changing political face of the God squad

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Back in the bad old days of apartheid, things seemed to be a lot clearer when it came to God and politics. Leaving aside the confirmed agnostics, atheists and confused fence sitters, you were either in the Nat camp and embraced the God of 'Christian nationalism', racist and class privilege or you were in the liberation movement camp and embraced the God of social justice, racial equality and the oppressed poor.

A couple of decades on though, and the politics in the God equation has gone through quite a metamorphosis. With the slaying of the dragon of formal apartheid, the constitutional entrenching of freedom of (all) religion and socially progressive equality clauses as well as the partial breaking down of (still deeply) entrenched racial, class and gender barriers, the once clear lines of political demarcation in 'God's house' have been blurred. Much like the former 'communist era' states of the UUSR and Eastern Europe, South Africa's religious household has undergone a balkanised transformation of its own.

The once mighty South African Council of Churches which was at the forefront of political struggle and socio-economic mobilisation in the pre-1994 period has become a shadow of its former self. Many of its higher profile leaders have either transformed themselves into politicians or become societally respected, semi-retired 'elders'. While there is little doubt that the political loyalties of the SACC and its constituent bodies remain primarily with the ANC/Alliance, its base membership has largely devolved into depoliticised church units which have retreated into the relative sanctuary of individualised proselytisation and social welfare provision.

Meanwhile, the variously constituted African/ indigenous churches such as the Zion Christian Church and the Shembe Church (numerically, the largest religious collectives in South Africa), have by and large continued to formally maintain their self-contained, apolitical and predominately socially conservative character. This has clearly however, not prevented South Africa's main political party leaders (following on from their apartheid predecessors), from doing their best to woo the millions of adherents, a sizeable number whom it would appear have consistently given their political support to the ruling party.

Other believers, mostly coming out of the conservative, ex-Nat and ex-Bantustan religious fold, have decided that the best way to propagate their views/beliefs and contest what they clearly see as the undesirable moral degeneration and general secularisation of state and society is to form various political parties. Some of these parties, such as the African Christian Democratic Party, have contested every election since 1995 and although they hold a few seats in national Parliament their electoral support has never risen beyond two percent. Others, such as the United Christian Democratic Party, the Muslim Party and the Christian Democratic Party have never ventured beyond the local/provincial arena and their electoral appeal has remained miniscule.

Given the historic institutional and socio-political positioning of these, more traditional sections of South Africa's God squad, their various 'transformations' are fairly predictable. However, it is the new kids on the block, the 'independent' groupings of decidedly (politically and socially) right-wing evangelical Christians, who have engendered the most sweeping facelift on the religious-political front.

Clearly modelling themselves on, or products of, evangelical (Pentecostal) movements such as the US-based 'Moral Majority' and the Brazil-based Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG), who have successfully combined ultra-conservative religious doctrines, populist right-wing politics, missionary work, social welfare and community-based programmes as well as media-created celebrity preachers/leaders, the wealth, membership base, range of activities and socio-political influence of this section of the God squad has grown exponentially over the last several years.

Such evangelical churches have, for some time now, been drawing (by far) the largest number of participants, both rich and poor, on a week-in, week-out basis. Mass events of tens of thousands such as Angus Buchan's 'Mighty Men' gatherings and the UCKG's Soccer City 'revivals' put most political party and sporting events to shame (the annual ZCC Easter gathering at Moria aside). Add to this the twenty four hour television channels, radio stations, magazines, community 'outreach' programmes and a range of missionary activities across the country and continent and it is not difficult to understand why these 'born agains' have increasingly moved from the margins into the mainstream of society and politics.

Rather than operating within the practical confines of more 'traditional' churches and/or direct party politics, these evangelical groupings (to varying degrees) have strategically moulded themselves around a type of social movement form that cuts across a range of institutional, racial, class, national, linguistic and ethnic lines. Combined with their 'doctrinal' messages that conceptually and practically link religious piety, spiritual salvation, social conservatism and personal wealth-creation, the end product is a highly politicised and intensely personalised body collective.

From these foundations have sprung outfits such as the National Interfaith Leadership Council (NILC), formed in mid-2009 by Rhema church leader Ray McCauley. Through its tactically astute inclusion of other religious bodies, its highly publicised courting of the ruling party and cosy institutional and personal links with several leading political and business figures, the NILC has already been able to shape national public discourse and debate around changing legislation dealing with abortion and same-sex rights. In a similar vein, the Eastern Cape-based Godly Governance Network (GGN) which describes itself as a "mass movement of the Kingdom of God in South Africa" was borne out of a prayer meeting at the provincial legislature in 2000. It remains closely tied to key provincial political and business figures and its socio-political influence appears to be growing.

It is no secret that South Africa is a deeply religious society. The Human Sciences Research Council's national 'Social Attitudes Survey' in 2008 confirmed this, with eighty-five percent of respondents declaring some sort of religious affiliation and an almost equal percentage expressing "high levels of confidence in religious institutions". Yet, what the same survey also found is that a sizeable majority are "opposed to religious leaders influencing government decisions".

While many might see this as an irreconcilable contradiction, it should be obvious that the most active, visible and growing 'face' of the God squad see it as an opportunity, a challenge to forge a transformed religious politics and politics of religion. The core aim is clearly to break down the conceptual and practical as well as societal and personal walls between religion and politics, to be refashioned in their own image. To bastardise Kwame Nkrumah's famous dictum: 'Seek ye simultaneously the kingdoms of God and politics and all else shall be added to you.' It's a damn scary 'face'.
