

## **Of the Quest for Political Power and Religion**

The interplay between religion and politics never cease to amaze and fascinate.

The Jacob Zuma juggernaut, or tsunami in popular parlance, has always openly flirted with religion. Religious, and in particular, Christian rituals have surrounded him since his removal from office as Deputy President of the country. Prayers, vigils and the likes have accompanied him throughout his varied trials. On the foyers of courts of law; in churches of different magnitude; in the streets of cities, many a voice was carried to the heavens for his political salvation. Proclaiming him God ordained for the presidency of the country, these voices, often on bended knees, also condemned those who opposed his ascendancy apostate. Jacob Zuma's ordination into the ordained ministry is probably the height of this interplay. And as he straddles the country, fighting to keep the soul of the ANC entrenched in the masses of the country, the church and the usual fiery affirming Hallelujahs and strengthening prayers continue to surround him.

But he is not alone.

Keynote speakers at the convention of the breakaway party were other clergy men. Although only one spoke, the church symbolism or its actual representation was there. A church voice came and affirmed the rightness of the cause the born again charterists were fighting for. The principles supposed to define and guide ethical behaviour were laid bare. Daringly these values, steeped in the Christian tradition, were put up as mirror reflecting what is or has suddenly become all wrong in the ruling party. This voice, this message predates the convention movement. It had been proclaimed loudly and consistently by the archbishop emeritus of the church of the province. That big question is, can one so devoid of moral integrity as would a person accused of corruption and rape be while at the same time not being shy of flaunting his womanising ways, be allowed to be a leader of this our beloved country.

And it did not start now.

In times like these, when it is fighting to retain the favour of the public, the ANC is quick to remember its religious founding. It remembers that, it is was founded by men and women of the cloth and the faith; that its leaders where formed and shaped in classrooms of schools founded and run by missionaries – the same ones who left our forbearers clasping Bibles and landless as they taught them how to pray and do similar religious rituals. It wont regurgitate the names of church people who threw their lot behind the great liberation movement, at times overzealously claiming some as members beyond the grave. It occasionally knocks on the doors of one time allied – or so it is perceived, religious institutions – such as the SACC, but whose counsel it deems dispensable in political peace and prosperity times, choosing rather the charisma and glamour of charismatic churches that adorns our beautiful suburbia with all the trappings of latter day prosperity.

Pilgrimages to the bishop of the church in Limpopo are legendary. Stadia have been filled to capacity in some of the capitals of our provinces – for peace, safety, moral regeneration, and the likes. Behind it lurked prayers for political immortality, or so I imagined.

And the ANC is not alone in these religion-politics flirtations.

The other two broad liberations movements in our country have had their own flirtations with religious leaders. And this not in a manner different from the flirtations of the oppressor regimes with their own religious masters. We know about the apartheid churches. We talk less about the big business church with its blessing of the exploiters and the greedy and the capitalist as being rich because they have been blessed. And behold the emergence of the designer BEE churches all over the motherland.

What is it about the church and power?

Well power is seductive. Is it not its allure that led to the fall of humanity in the garden? And power once attained, will not be easily given up. It will do all it can to keep itself going. It can also smell vulnerability and opportunity from a long, very long way off. The seduction of the Zion Christian Church by provincial governments in the democratic South Africa; the co-option of the mainline churches – the theological literati, by the erstwhile president of the republic; the hijacking of the indigenous churches by the president elect's, or is it anointed, movement; and the paralysis of the current leadership of the current leadership of the ecumenical movement should not be seen as a mere accident of history. This is an outcome of a strategy of power holders and seekers to win the soul and minds of the religious community.

It knows that millions of South Africans define and have their lives defined by their faith and religious commitment. Power knows this to be true despite the seeming contradictions inside religious formations and the fickleness of people's adherence to religious principles. Power knows that religion offers a captive audience; it gives moral affirmation (and even cleansing); it provides a refuge in times of want; and it inspires hope, especially in situations of hopelessness. And in the masses of South Africans, it still gives identity.

Politicians know that the millions it needs to remain in power or gain power hear the voices and advise of preachers more than those of politicians. This matter even if many of the words said fall on deaf ears for the old truism about words (or is it lies) repeated often enough become taken as the truth.

And the church is vulnerable, seduced as it is by its love for power.

Quite often the church, individually and institutionally, falls to this seduction. Despite all its better wisdom it finds itself unable to resist the allure of power. Why is this so? Is it the quest for its own survival? That the patronage offered by political power can be extended to its coffers through donations and offerings at a lower level and may be larger funding for government projects and programmes.

Could it be that the present church finds the momentary glory of being feted by kings and would-be kings in resonance with glimpses of power and glory promised in the scriptures? Like Adam & Eve's luring by the snake in the Garden of Eden, it just can't say NO? Could it be that the church continues to want the power of its God for itself, that its claim to be a representative of God on earth actually means that it can

become a god of this world, and to give face to this claim it must at least be seen to be playing with the other gods of this world. And they don't come as big as political gods!

This affinity to power, this flirting with power is cancerous. It continues to eat away at the very essence and being of what it means to be church. It erodes the capacity and propensity of the church to be a servant of God committed to working for the well being of God's people who are often just voting fodder for politicians. It forfeits its mandate to speak truth to power and be an agent for justice. It undermines its ability to build the unity of our nation, across political ideologies; cultural identities and social classes.

Politicians are not wrong to court the church. It is their business to gain political power. It is their right to woo whomsoever they can in this quest.

The challenge is internal. The church must look at itself and repent from its sinfulness tendencies. It must cease to be a servant to power and return to being a servant of the living LORD through being of service to the people of God, especially the powerless, marginalised and vulnerable. And only then shall it begin to offer the witness of the oneness of the body of Christ as beacon to guide this, our beloved country, to its promised land.

And we wait and see.

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