

## CHAPTER 8

# Radical religion and civil society: The unitarians of South Africa

*Eric Heller-Wagner*

### INTRODUCTION

In November, 1871, during the turmoil which resulted in the collapse of the First International which pitted the followers of Karl Marx against the followers of Michael Bakunin, the anarchist watch-makers of the Jura Mountains of Switzerland asked:

How can you expect an egalitarian and a free society to emerge from an authoritarian organization? It is impossible. The International, embryo of future human society, must be from this moment the faithful image of our principles of liberty and federation, and reject from its midst any principle leading to authority and dictatorship (quoted in Joll 1979:87).

South Africa has been involved for many years in a struggle of liberation from an authoritarian white minority regime. Religious organisations have been involved in 'the struggle for a democratic South Africa' (de Gruchy 1990). However, the question posed by the Jura anarchists and their answer are relevant to religious organisation and the future of democracy in South Africa. What is the relationship between how religious organisations are run, political socialisation, and the prospect of democracy in South Africa?

The Swiss watch-makers from the Jura Mountains were followers of the anarchist Michael Bakunin, and Bakunin knew:

that the methods used to make the revolution were bound to affect the nature of society after the revolution had been made, and therefore insisted that the organization of the revolutionary movement should resemble the type of social organization which the revolution aimed at establishing (Joll 1979:92).

Oppenheimer (1968:9-10) noted about participatory democracy among the New Left activists in the United States that 'a democratic society cannot be created by non-democratic agents of change'. Furthermore, participatory democratic theory states that there can be no true democracy at the national level unless there is a maximum amount of participation and democracy at grassroots level (Olsen 1982; Pateman 1970; Benello and Roussopoulos 1971; Cook and Morgan 1971; Turner 1980; Cohen and Rogers 1992).

Participation and democracy at the grassroots level involves activity within what has been called civil society - that non-governmental area of society between the family and the state. In the wake of the collapse of authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe and Latin America, there has been renewed interest in civil society as a mechanism for facilitating the transition from authoritarian rule to democracy (Shils 1991; Gellner 1991). There has also been interest in the potentially positive value of civil society in South Africa, which is presently in a period of major political transition (du Toit 1993; Narsoo 1991; Swilling 1990; Swilling 1991; Stadler 1991).

This paper takes the participatory democratic position; that is, for democracy to be effective at the national level, democratisation must occur in other spheres of life - particularly at grassroots level within the activities of civil society. Religious organisations are one of the grassroots elements of a civil society.

This paper takes the position that how religious organisations are run is part of the political socialisation process. This must be distinguished from what religious groups say about democracy. They may be very supportive of political democracy, make public statements in favour of a democratic polity and be involved in liberation activities toward that end. However, this support for political democracy in the larger society may not be consistent with the non-democratic methods of the religious organisations themselves.

This paper will describe the organisational practices of the Unitarian Church in South Africa,<sup>1</sup> a small radical religious group which was founded in Cape town



in 1867. It argues that this radical religion is an example of how a religious organisation can operate in a participatory and democratic manner at grassroots level, thus contributing to the prospect of political democracy at the national level in South Africa. This model of *participatory religious democracy* will be discussed.

## UNITARIANISM

Unitarianism is a world-wide movement present in at least thirty different countries on six continents. It is strongest in the United States, England, and Romania. Unitarianism is a non-creedal and non-doctrinal religion with roots in the evangelical rationalist tradition of the Radical Reformation of the sixteenth century (Williams 1962). The Unitarian movement was so named by its opponents for its belief in the absolute Oneness of God, in contrast with the Trinitarian doctrine of orthodox Christianity. An implication of a Unitarian conception of God is a low Christology. Unitarian beliefs about Jesus have ranged from Arian to purely humanist conceptions.

Unitarianism first developed as an organised movement in Poland and Transylvania in the 1560s. It developed in England and America in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Unitarian beliefs have changed and evolved over the past 400 years. The movement began as a Bible-based Christian heresy, but is now a much broader religion. Some Unitarians retain an undogmatic Christian faith, while others reject belief in God for a completely humanist understanding of religion.

In the introduction of his two volume history of Unitarianism Earl Morse Wilbur (1945:5) notes that his work does not so much constitute:

... the history of a particular sect or form of Christian doctrine, [but rather] a movement fundamentally characterized instead by its steadfast and increasing devotion to these three leading principles: first, complete mental freedom in religion rather than bondage to creeds or confessions; second, the unrestricted use of reason in religion, rather than reliance upon external authority or past tradition; third, generous tolerance of differing religious views and usages rather than insistence upon uniformity in doctrine, worship or polity.

David Rankin (1981:10-11), a Unitarian Universalist minister in America, has written a list of ten beliefs that Unitarians hold in common:

1. We believe in the freedom of religious expression. All individuals should be encouraged to develop a personal theology, and to openly present their religious opinions without fear of censure or reprisal.
2. We believe in tolerance of religious ideas. The religions of every age and culture have something to teach those who listen.
3. We believe in the authority of reason and conscience. The ultimate arbiter in religion is not a church, a document, or an official, but the personal choice and decision of the individual.
4. We believe in the search for truth. With an open mind and heart, there is no end to the fruitful and exciting revelations that the human spirit can find.
5. We believe in the unity of experience. There is no fundamental conflict between faith and knowledge; religion and the world; the sacred and the secular.
6. We believe in the worth and dignity of each human being. All people on earth have an equal claim to life, liberty, and justice; no idea, ideal or philosophy is superior to a single human life.
7. We believe in the ethical application of religion. Inner grace and faith finds completion in social and community involvement.
8. We believe in the force of love, that the governing principle in human relationships is the principle of love, which seeks to help and heal, never to hurt or destroy.
9. We believe in the necessity of the democratic process. Records are open to scrutiny, elections are open to members, and ideas are open to criticism, so that people might govern themselves.
10. We believe in the importance of religious community. Peers confirm and validate experience, and provide a critical platform, as well as a network of mutual support.

Wilbur (1945:11) points out that for most of Christian history 'the question of crucial importance was to be not, How does one act, what is his character? but, How does he believe, what is his creed?' However, Unitarianism:



... has throughout its whole course strenuously resisted any attempt at dogmatic fixity, has made reason its ultimate court of appeal, and has normally been hospitable to changes and re-statements in its forms of thought; being at all times far more concerned with the underlying spirit of Christianity in its application to the situations of practical life than with intellectual formulations of Christian thought (Wilbur 1945:5).

Unitarianism is essentially congregational in polity, although some regional variations do occur. There is no world organisation of Unitarians. Local congregations usually belong to national or regional associations which provide support and communication, but not ecclesiastical authority. Authority and governance remain on the local level. Most national and regional associations are affiliated with the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF). Ministers are trained, but many are part-time, earning their living outside the church.

Unitarianism is a non-proselytising religion. It maintains no mission programme to convert people of other faiths to the Unitarian religion. Its publicity policy is through attraction rather than promotion.

#### **UNITARIANISM IN SOUTH AFRICA**

This radical tradition came to South Africa through David Pieter Faure, a young South African who trained for the Dutch Reformed Church ministry at Leiden in the early 1860s. Faure embraced this radical religion, returned to South Africa and, in 1867, founded the Free Protestant Church in Cape Town (Faure 1907).

Although Faure was influenced by the writings of the American Unitarian Theodore Parker, the founding of the Free Protestant Church was independent of any existing Unitarian association in the world. Thus, the Free Protestant Church was the first indigenous religious group founded by South Africans of European descent.

A Free Protestant Church existed in Graaff-Reinet between 1870 and 1890. There were Unitarian Churches in Johannesburg from about 1911 to 1920, and in Pretoria in the 1930s.<sup>2</sup> From about 1955 to about 1970, there was a black African Unitarian Church.<sup>3</sup> Today, there are four Unitarian congregations in South Africa: Cape Town (1867), Johannesburg (1954), Somerset West (1983), and Durban (1986). Cape Town is the only Unitarian congregation in South Africa with a permanent church building, having occupied a building in central Cape Town since 1890.

There are three Unitarian ministers in South Africa - all part-time. The Cape Town minister also serves the congregation in Somerset West. In the four congregations, there are no more than one hundred active members and approximately another hundred additional people associated with the church.

The Unitarian movement founded by South Africans of European descent has been predominantly, though never exclusively, white. It has always attracted a few blacks to its congregations. Men and women of all races have been welcome to participate fully and equally in the Unitarian movement.<sup>4</sup>

The openness of belief in their religion has allowed Unitarians to explore and to utilise resources from other religious traditions, particularly non-Christian traditions. Speakers from many religious groups have spoken in the Unitarian congregations in South Africa. Teachings and scripture from other religious traditions are used regularly in Unitarian worship.

There is no national Unitarian association in South Africa. The Cape Town congregation has functioned as a loose coordinator of communication between the congregations and the national accrediting body for marriage celebrants. The church in Cape Town is associated with the IARF.

## Organisation

### *Cape Town*

The Cape Town congregation is the oldest and largest of the four. It has the most formal organisation. The original *Rules and Regulations* of the church were drawn up prior to May 20, 1870, when the first elections were held for the church committee. The church committee consisted of 6 church members and the minister. The minister served as chairman of the committee. Although the rules were quite specific about the equality of male and female membership, and thus eligibility for election to the church committee, the church committee was completely male until at least the turn of the century.

The rules were changed in 1921. The word Unitarian was added to the name of the church. The major change was that the church committee would select its own chairman from the members of the committee. Also, the chairman could not serve more than 3 years in succession. This was done as a conscious act of democratisation within the congregation. One member of the church committee noted that, as times changed, the structure of the church needed to change too. While the minister serving as chairman of the church committee may have been



appropriate in an earlier time, it was now deemed inappropriate. This change, however, was not done as a critique of how the ministers had served as chairmen of the church committee, since all had served with great restraint and fairness.

The change was both practical and symbolic. It was practical in that it allowed more participation in church leadership positions. It was symbolic in demonstrating that the laity, not the minister, ran the church. The minister served the congregation.<sup>5</sup>

About 10 years later, an attempt was made to get the minister off the finance sub-committee. Those who supported the move claimed that, since the church paid the minister's stipend, the minister sitting on the finance sub-committee represented a conflict of interest. This specific move failed but the *Rules* were changed so that the Minister was an *ex-officio* member of all sub-committees but *without a vote*. Furthermore, in practice, the minister always absented himself or herself during discussion of the stipend.

Formal membership is through ascribing to the stated purpose of the congregation:

2. **OBJECT.** The object and purpose of this association is the promotion of those aspirations summarized as 'LOVE TO GOD AND LOVE TO MAN' and expressed in the following Covenant: IN THE LOVE OF TRUTH AND IN THE SPIRIT OF JESUS CHRIST WE UNITE FOR THE WORSHIP OF GOD AND THE SERVICE OF MAN.

Formal members are those who have affirmed the covenant of the church and have signed the Register of Members. Although the minister of the church is supposed to keep this register, when I asked him about it, he didn't know where it was. He further admitted that the *Articles of Association* had not been followed very closely for years and that they were in sore need of revising. The church committee had sent the rules to a lawyer a couple of times, but the lawyer's recommendations were always longer and more complicated than the original rules. Hence, the church committee had never acted on this matter. It would appear that no one has ever complained about these rules, and there has never been a serious challenge based upon their procedures. The church committee and the congregation seem to use them as guidelines, rather than formal legal structures.

Membership is loosely interpreted. After services one Sunday morning, I introduced myself to a woman and asked her if she was a member. She replied that she didn't know. She had been coming to the church for about five years and assumed that she was.<sup>6</sup>

The church committee meets regularly. There is an annual meeting of the congregation which serves as the occasion for an evening dinner. The social time takes up most of the evening. At one such recent meeting, the official business took only thirty-five minutes, including a homily by the minister (ten to fifteen minutes), a Treasurer's report,<sup>7</sup> and the annual appeal for funds (about ten minutes).

Members must be at least eighteen years old to vote at congregational meetings. However, there are no specific rules stated in the *Articles of Association* for congregational decision-making. It is the practice of the group to avoid contentious votes and to make decisions by consensus. Consensus building is done prior to any formal meetings so that decisions or formal votes recorded in the official minutes of the congregation are often unanimous.

#### *Graaff-Reinet*

This congregation was modeled on the church in Cape Town, with its *Rules and Regulations* a direct copy. Rule one stated:

1. The Free Protestant Church of Graaff-Reinet has for its object the promotion of the essential principle of the religion of Jesus, namely: Love to God and Love to Man; and all may be admitted as members who shall affirmatively answer the following question: 'Do you believe that true Religion consists in Love to God and Love to Man, and do you earnestly desire to practice this religion in your daily life?'

#### *Johannesburg*

The written rules of the Johannesburg Unitarian Fellowship, adopted in 1963, are simpler than those of the Cape Town congregation. Rule three states:

The objects for which the Fellowship is maintained are: In the spirit of that religion which Jesus taught as 'love of God and love to man', we unite in the free and open quest for truth, goodness and beauty.



Formal members are those who have applied for membership, been received by the congregation and whose names are recorded in the records of the fellowship. The Secretary of the group maintains a mailing list of people associated with the fellowship.

While originally no office-holder could serve longer than a period of five unbroken years, the rule was changed after the first five years to allow the Secretary to continue in her position which she has held for thirty years.

The Fellowship Committee has never functioned as a formal church committee. No minutes of meetings are known to have been recorded. Minutes of the Annual Meeting are, however, recorded. It is here that officers are elected. When decisions need to be made, those present during one of the semi-monthly services of worship function as a *de facto* Fellowship Committee.

### *Durban*

The Unitarian Church of Durban has a set of printed *By-laws* drawn up by a founding organising committee. Since that time, these rules seem to have been ignored. The minister and one of the founding members consult those present at a worship service and make any type of administrative decisions that need to be made. There are neither treasurer nor financial reports. The collection is given directly to the minister. Advertisements in the newspaper are paid for by a member of the congregation.

The *By-laws* do contain a statement of purpose:

#### **Article 2. Purpose**

This Church welcomes all who seek the meaning of life. While maintaining respect for Christian tradition, it also upholds a modern religious outlook, which encourages freedom of religious thought. We firmly believe that a free religion helps to create a free people, and the free are at home in the world of nature, of ideas, of people and of the soul.

We are a community of religious seekers, united in love and truth, and the spirit of Jesus. This is our covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another to grow in mind and spirit.

Article three of the by-laws states that membership is open to all persons, regardless of race, colour, sex, age, or national origin. Voting members are restricted to those who are eighteen years old and have signed the by-laws.

The only circulated written materials of the Durban group are the printed order of service and the occasional hand-written newsletter produced by the minister. On the cover of the order of service are the following quotations, which were written by the minister and approved by a founding organising committee.

We do not ask you what you believe, or expect you to think the way we do, only that you try to live a kindly, helpful life, with the dignity proper to a human being.

Preachers here have the task of presenting religion freely, fearlessly and faithfully. Hearers have the responsibility of testing what they hear, not only with the critical mind, but also in the living of everyday life.

The members of this congregation welcome the support of all who believe that religion is wider than any sect and deeper than any set of opinions ....

### *Somerset West*

The Somerset West fellowship, which meets in a member's house, is the least organised of the four existing groups. There are no formal written rules or conditions of membership, elected officers or officials, or formal collection of money. People contribute to the cost of tea, coffee, and cakes by placing a few coins in a tea cup after the service. Since the meetings of the group involve a significant amount of open discussion, any matter a member would like to bring up could be done at any meeting.

### **Ecclesiology**

As James Luther Adams (1976:7-10) has pointed out, the Unitarian movement has held two sometimes conflicting conceptions of liberalism in tension. One is the Enlightenment philosophy of liberalism, held by John Locke and Thomas Jefferson, which stressed rationalistic individualism, protection of private property, *laissez-faire* capitalism, and the minimal state. This developed in uneasy alliance with the evangelical rationalist tradition of the Radical Reformation - which stressed the use of reason in interpreting scripture and doctrine and individual piety (though within the context of a religious community of people).



Adams (1976:8-9), writing about the religious radicals, noted that:

... rather than finding their defense in the rational individual, they typically appealed to the belief in the freedom of the spirit - 'The spirit bloweth where it listeth' - to create a new community. The Left Wing of the Reformation, therefore, also insisted that the church is a lay church; it is not to be controlled by 'officials.' Every child of God has the guidance of conscience, for the Holy Spirit is available to every child of God. But this conscience and the living presence of the Holy Spirit is found in the mutuality of community. The individual transcends himself not, in the first instance, through rational control of property, privately or governmentally, but through life with others. In this 'fellowship' the so-called minority position was to be protected in the very name of the Holy Spirit. According to this view, God works in history where free consensus appears under the great Taskmaster's eye. Thus the sanction for the maintenance of Freedom was held to be a covenant between people in community and under God. Here we see the 'gathered' church, a pattern promoting the religious pluralism characteristic of modern society. Variety was seen as the law of creation, truth to emerge in the battle of ideas among free persons in free communities.

This is the radical ecclesiology which is the basis of religious organisation among the Unitarians of South Africa. However, there is minimal direct reference to this foundation in contemporary practice.

## **Worship**

### *Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban*

The Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Durban congregations follow a simplified Protestant format with the sermon or address as the central part of the service. Communion is practised very rarely - and only recently in Johannesburg.

In Cape Town, the service is more formalised, including the use of a pipe organ, the singing of hymns, and a robed minister preaching from an elevated pulpit. The congregation meets once every Sunday, either in the morning or evening. The third Sunday of every month is reserved for 'Church in the Round'. The minister conducts a shorter service, substituting some comments on a specific

topic for the sermon. After the 'formal' service, the minister comes down from the pulpit and the congregation draws the chairs into a circle. Discussion, which may last for an hour or more, ensues based either upon the minister's comments or another topic someone would like to raise. There are some people associated with the church who prefer attending 'Church in the Round' more than the 'regular' services.

In Johannesburg, the congregation meets at a student religious centre on the campus of a university. The congregation arrange their own chairs around a lectern from which the minister presides. There is recorded music, but no singing of hymns - a matter of conflict since some would prefer to sing hymns. The group meets twice a month on a Sunday morning. There is a regular discussion service devoted a previous address or an open topic.

The Durban group meets at an old chapel near downtown which is used mostly for weddings and christenings. The chapel holds no more than thirty people seated on wooden benches built into each side wall. There is a small raised chancel at the front of the chapel which is not used during Unitarian services. The group meets twice a month on a Sunday morning. Although there is an organ in the chapel the group has not found an organist. There is no recorded music, but the group does sing Unitarian hymns (to simple and well known Protestant tunes) led by the minister. The minister wears a robe, but conducts the service and delivers his address seated at the chancel end of one of the benches.

A characteristic of the Durban group is that the minister's address is short (about ten minutes) with the rest of the service reserved for group discussion. A member of the group (and a Unitarian for many years) stated that he takes it upon himself to start the discussion period in order to 'break the ice', especially if no one else is readily forthcoming with a comment. He believes this is good modelling behaviour for newcomers who may not be accustomed to commenting on speaker's remarks in the course of a worship service.

### *Somerset West*

The group, usually conducted by the Minister from Cape Town, meets one Sunday morning a month in the home of a member. On that Sunday the Cape Town church changes its service to the evening. When the minister is unavailable, the discussion is led by a member of the group. The service consists of an opening invocation, a period of silence, perhaps a thematic reading, and some short remarks by the minister. The bulk of the time is devoted to discussion. The



meeting closes either with a short prayer or a period of silence. The host family provides tea, coffee, and cakes after the service.

### *Language*

From its inception, the Unitarian movement has attracted both English and Afrikaans speaking South Africans, having been founded by a Dutch-speaking South African. During Faure's ministry in Cape Town, and the ministries of P C Vintcent and C H V Leibbrandt in Graaff-Reinet, services were conducted in both Dutch and English. Since that time, due to the limitations of ministers from England or America, the services have been conducted only in English. One of the ministers is Afrikaans-speaking, and has conducted services in Afrikaans by special request. All church documents have been produced in both English and Afrikaans.

### *Refreshments after the 'formal' worship service*

In all four congregations, the 'formal' worship services are followed by refreshments. This can involve a simple cup of tea at the Cape Town congregation (where services are weekly) to more elaborate fare at the others (where services are semi-monthly or monthly). While not part of the 'formal' worship service, the refreshment period is part of the worship experience for Unitarians in South Africa. While other religious groups offer refreshments after their worship services, the unique quality of this event among the Unitarians is that it is attended by virtually the entire congregation. It is more a continuation of the worship service, albeit in a different style, than an optional social gathering. Regular attenders and members will apologise if they have to leave without having a cup of tea or coffee.

In contrast to the 'formal' worship service, where the minister or speaker is in control of the proceedings, the refreshment period is a totally egalitarian event. During this time, people may continue discussion which may have begun during the 'formal' worship service. They may initiate discussion with the minister or in small groups among themselves.

## **PARTICIPATORY RELIGIOUS DEMOCRACY**

The Unitarian congregations in South Africa practice what I call *participatory religious democracy*, which has its theological roots in the very beginnings of the Unitarian movement in Poland during the sixteenth century. Charles Hartshorne (1984; 1987; Hartshorne & Peden 1981) has noted that the Socinian theologians'

'process' conception of God accepted human freedom as real, thus correcting what they believed a logical flaw in the orthodox doctrine of divine omniscience. God must know things *correctly* to know them perfectly. Human decisions contributed to divine knowledge. Thus, humans became co-creators with the divine. God was no longer a distant absolute sovereign, but a partner. This doctrine of God, which contributed to their banishment from Poland as heretics in 1660, is expressed in an ecclesiology of *coarchy* rather than hierarchy.

South African Unitarians are accorded full opportunity to participate in *all* activities and decision-making processes of the church. The congregations raise and allocate their own funds, manage their own affairs, and elect their own ministers and church committee members. Because the Unitarian congregations in South Africa are small, these decision-making processes can embrace all who wish to be involved. Indeed, effort is made to encourage as many people as possible to be involved in the democratic management of the church.

This community recognises the equality of all in this process and is structured in a democratic manner so that everyone can participate as fully as possible. There is equality of the sexes and races in all matters of church life.

The modern Unitarian movement requires that each person take responsibility for the construction of his or her faith. However, this process is not done alone but in the context of community.<sup>8</sup> The minister is seen as a knowledgeable facilitator of personal and communal growth, rather than an authoritative dispenser of doctrine. The minister is elected by the congregation and serves at their pleasure.<sup>9</sup> However, the freedom of belief accorded to all Unitarians is also applicable to the minister. He or she has absolute freedom of the pulpit, which means that he or she can speak on any subject he or she wishes without interference or censure by the congregation. If a member takes great offence at what a minister says, then he or she can openly voice opposition and speak in rebuttal.

*Participatory religious democracy* is about the construction of authority. The Unitarians of South Africa offer a model of the participatory construction of authority where free and equal persons mutually determine a visible and legible authority. Unitarians in South Africa enjoy participating in a free and democratic religious organisation. Many have come from authoritarian and hierarchical religions, and have rejected this form of religious organisation. Furthermore, many Unitarians contrast the clarity of authority in their Unitarian congregations with what they perceive to be the illusory quality of public authority in South Africa, whether it be in government or mass movements.<sup>10</sup>



The organisational practices of the Unitarian congregations in South Africa represent the building blocks for a broader participatory democracy in society. These are outlined by Olsen (1982:26) in five principles:

1. All individuals must have full opportunity to participate as extensively as they wish in all collective decision making that pertains to them.
2. Participation in collective decision making must not be limited to voting, but should include a wide variety of activities requiring varying degrees of commitment and involvement.
3. Responsibility for collective decision making is to be widely dispersed, so that it is not limited to officials and/or experts but includes all persons who will be affected by those decisions.
4. Participation in collective decision making must not be limited to the political system, but should extend throughout all realms of social life, especially work organizations.
5. Participation in collective decision making within nonpolitical spheres of life will teach individuals political skills and norms and will motivate them to become involved in larger political issues.

These five principles can be combined into the following definition: *in participatory democracy, collective decision making is highly decentralised throughout all sectors of society, so that all individuals learn participatory skills and can effectively participate in various ways in the making of all decisions that effect them.* Crucial to this conception of participatory democracy is the insistence that full democratisation of decision making within all local and private organisations is a necessary prerequisite for political democracy at the national level. In Pateman's (1970:35) words: 'For the operation of a democratic polity at the national level, the necessary qualities in individuals can only be developed through the democratisation of authority structures in all political systems.'

## Problems

Participatory religious democracy poses numerous problems, including the educative claim and the nature of religious democratisation in South Africa.

### *Is the educative claim valid?*

Will democratic participation in religious organisations 'necessarily promote participation in larger community and societal affairs?' (Olsen 1982:27) Will democracy at the grassroots level inevitably lead to democracy at higher levels of society?

The experience of the *comunidades eclesiais de base* (CEBs) has been mixed in regard to the promotion of democracy in Latin America. The CEBs have operated in tension not only with an authoritarian state but also with an authoritarian religious polity. In Brazil, for example, the easing of this tension, combined with the Brazilian Church's movement away from grassroots social action to a more traditional strategy of influencing policymakers, shows that the CEBs have not been entirely successful in promoting democracy. While they are a constant threat to the structure and authority of the Catholic Church (Littwin 1989:275-276) there has lately been less reference to the CEBs in the reports of the Catholic hierarchy. Hewitt (1990) takes this as evidence that the CEBs have been co-opted by the church and are seen now as local leadership building sources rather than places of grassroots radical action. Furthermore, Hewitt notes that there are not enough CEBs to be numerically significant in national elections.<sup>11</sup>

Smith (1970:246-279) has noted that the authoritarian religious values of Catholicism, Islam, and Hinduism have contributed to authoritarian political structures in regions where these religions are dominant. However, in the case of Buddhism, non-authoritarian, individualist, and egalitarian religious values alone were not capable of creating democratic political structures. Burma is the most notable example of this. Of the four religious groups which Smith studied, none practised participatory democracy. Badie (1991:517) notes that religious belief is not a determiner of political structure. However, like Smith, he did not look at religious polity as a contributing factor in political culture.

The link between the Unitarians' practice of participatory religious democracy and their efforts toward a similar democratisation in the larger society has not been comprehensive or uniform. Many, but not all, of the voluntary associations to which Unitarians belong outside their church are run in a participatory democratic manner. However, there is very little support expressed for the extension of participatory democracy to the workplace or government.

That most Unitarians in South Africa have not seen a clear connection between the way that they run their congregations and the radical democratisation of society may be due, in part, to a class-based affinity with the Enlightenment



strand of philosophical liberalism. South African Unitarians are fairly well educated and solidly middle-class. This would tend to explain the strong identification among Unitarians with the Democratic Party, which advocates a *laissez-faire* form of political liberalism and representative democracy.

The virtues of religious individualism - including individual freedom of belief, denunciation of authoritarian and hierarchical religious dictates, and separation of church and state - are stressed more often by people in the church than the value of the individual *within* religious community.

There is also a decided ambivalence among Unitarians in South Africa about religious organisation in general. While they reject any kind of authoritarian, hierarchical, sexist, and racist, form of religious organisation, their religious individualism tends to undervalue *any* form of religious organisation. While most are well disposed toward their own participatory religious democracy, they do not see it as absolutely necessary for their personal religion. Thus, religious organisation becomes secondary rather than integral for most Unitarians in South Africa. Radical ecclesiology, with its implications for society, is eviscerated by religious individualism.

The authoritarian nature of the South African state is another reason for the weak connection perceived by Unitarians between religious and civic polities. The South African state severely restricted development of a robust and free civil society. The Unitarian congregations in South Africa have been so small that they were constantly vulnerable to immediate liquidation by the state. Unitarians in South Africa have been acutely aware of their precarious position in society. Also, being religious heretics the Unitarians could not hope to receive much support from the Christian Church, or even other religious groups. Therefore, Unitarians in South Africa *as a group* have not engaged in radical social resistance.<sup>12</sup>

However, a few Unitarians have seen a clear connection between the structure of their religious polity and democratisation in the broader society. One such Unitarian was a young woman who participated on religious principle in the mass resistance movement against apartheid at university. However, she left the mass movement because of its lack of freedom, tolerance, and participatory democracy, saying, 'The orthodox left is very rigid. If you said something with which they didn't agree, you were the enemy.' Her perception of a 'they' in the mass movement shows how she experienced it as non-participatory. She had used the standard of participatory religious democracy as practised in her local Unitarian congregation to judge the mass resistance movement - finding it wanting.

This is in line with the socialist activism of the Reverend Ramsden Balmforth, a minister in Cape Town for forty years (1897-1937). It is also in line with the sentiments of R C Steyn (1967), writing about the controversial founding of the Christian Institute and

... the vital question of real religion and the role of the Church in society. In this new struggle a church which is committed, as the F.P.U.C. is, to the redemptive concept of religion, to the idea that there is no distinction between religious and secular concerns but that religion is the leaven which must permeate the lump, has its greatest opportunity and its greatest responsibility.

Participatory democratic organisation is restricted in authoritarian states by restrictions on civil society. This suggests that the educative claim of participatory democratic theory becomes stronger with the proliferation of participatory skills and attitudes in society; that a critical mass of such groups are necessary to effect societal change. Thus, it is possible that a pervasive participatory religious democracy in society could contribute to a greater democratisation.

#### *Can religious institutions meet the democratic challenge?*

The need for the democratisation of religious organisations in South Africa has been noted in the past, but the emphasis has been cautious and moderate (Turner 1980; Villa-Vicencio 1988; Villa-Vicencio 1989; de Gruchy 1990; Cochrane et al 1991). This is somewhat surprising since these same commentators have condemned the English-speaking churches in South Africa of caution and moderation in their reaction to apartheid.

In general, there has been little study of the relationship between the structure of religious communities and political socialisation. This is an example of a larger neglect in the study of structural alternatives in society. Benello (1971:38) has noted:

While the problems of advanced industrial societies have received a good deal of attention, solutions that in any way represent structural alternatives are not considered with the same interest, in part because it is felt that the obvious issues of racism, war, exploitation, and inequality are the ones to deal with, and in part because revolution is seen as the only therapy to the more structural problems.



While this seems particularly applicable to the South African context, the claim that how a revolution is conducted will effect the future society must still be addressed. Walshe (1991:53) has noted that CEBs have not mushroomed in South Africa although 'small Christian communities' have arisen. Villa-Vicencio (1989) claims that a 'church within a church', or an 'alternative' church, has developed to challenge, 'transform and democratize the structures of the established church'. However, it seems that democratisation is secondary to solidarity with revolutionary liberation. Furthermore, there is no suggestion that democratisation within this 'alternative' church represents a model for the secular liberation organisations. The young Unitarian woman who had been actively involved in the mass resistance movement also noted that 'there is not necessarily a strong history of tolerance and democracy among oppressed peoples'. Weigel (1989:21) notes that 'Today, a liberation theology of democracy is a possibility, not a reality.'

This question challenges the credibility of many religious communities. The structure and organisation of religious communities are usually based upon some type of doctrine derived from scriptural interpretation and supplemented by traditional practices. Thus, religious organisation is considered of divine origin, or at least divine sanction. Hence, changes to most religious organisations come slowly - the ordination of women being a case in point.

Is there not a question of credibility when a religious community, which functions, formally and/or informally, in an authoritarian, hierarchical, and sexist manner, advocates a democratic, egalitarian, and non-sexist secular polity?

Prozesky (1990:129-134) has noted that 'Christianity does not set forth a *clear*, egalitarian view of human existence.'<sup>13</sup> Nor does Christianity, the largest religious group in South Africa, set forth a clear view of democracy. The proclamation that Jesus Christ is Lord has, at the very least, hierarchical political implications. Prozesky notes, moreover, that the elitist and exclusivist doctrines of salvation create a spiritual apartheid. He asks, 'How can we condemn political apartheid and condone spiritual apartheid?'<sup>14</sup> The same question can be applied to democracy. How can we condemn authoritarian, hierarchical, and sexist political structures while defending those same processes in our religious organisations?

## CONCLUSION

This paper has described the organisational practices of Unitarian congregations in South Africa, calling their method of governance participatory religious democracy. The Unitarian congregations in South Africa are independent and

congregational in polity, democratic in governance, inclusive and non-racial in membership, and open in doctrine and practice. The trained ministers all have full-time work outside the church. Leadership is shared and participatory. Consensus is used for decision-making. Services of worship regularly include time for members to respond openly and directly to the speaker's address. The congregations host non-Christian speakers and promote multifaith activity. These practices are an example of the kind of participatory democracy needed at the grassroots level of civil society to build democracy at the national level.

It was suggested that the educative claim of participatory religious democracy becomes stronger as it becomes more prevalent in a society, and that the restriction of civil society also restricts the development of participatory democratic processes.

Participatory democratic theory also suggests that religious organisations need to democratise themselves to facilitate the democratisation of the broader society. This poses a challenge to most religious organisations in South Africa.

The elections will not bring democracy to South Africa. To be effective, democracy must be built from the ground up. And so the question posed by the Jura anarchists at the beginning of this paper remains a challenge to the religious organisations in South Africa: 'How can you expect an egalitarian and a free society to emerge from an authoritarian organization?' (quoted in Joll 1979:87).



## APPENDIX

### From Article II of the Bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association in North America

#### Section C-2.1 Principles

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:

- \* The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- \* Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;
- \* Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- \* A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- \* The rights of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- \* The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- \* Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

The living tradition we share draws from many sources:

- \* Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life;
- \* Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- \* Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- \* Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbours as ourselves;
- \* Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against the idolatries of the mind and spirit.

Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

### Section C-2.3 Non-discrimination

The Association declares and affirms its special responsibility, and that of its member societies and organisations, to promote the full participation of persons in all of its and their activities and in the full range of human endeavour without regard to race, colour, sex, disability, affectional or sexual orientation, age, or national origin and without requiring adherence to any particular interpretation of religion or to any particular religious belief or creed.

### Section C-2.4 Freedom of Belief

Nothing herein shall be deemed to infringe upon the individual freedom of belief which is inherent in the Universalist and Unitarian heritages or to conflict with any statement of purpose, covenant, or bond of union used by any society unless such is used as a creedal test.



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The information concerning the Unitarians of South Africa in this paper was derived from an in-depth study of the group in 1993. Research methods included review of historical documents, participant observation, interviews, and a survey questionnaire.
- <sup>2</sup> These congregations were the efforts of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association in London working through the congregation in Cape Town. Very few records of these congregations have survived and very little describing organisational practice.
- <sup>3</sup> The Rev E L Seleso, a former Methodist minister from Lesotho, founded the first congregation, originally known as the Bantu Unitarian Church, in the Free State border town of Wepener. Another congregation was founded in the Orlando Township of Johannesburg. The Rev Seleso, who had doubts about some of the central doctrines of orthodox Christianity, came up with idea of Unitarianism by finding the word in the dictionary. Unlike other African Independent Church leaders, the Rev Seleso initiated contact with the predominantly white Unitarian movement. He saw an advertisement in a Johannesburg newspaper about the meetings of the Johannesburg Unitarian Fellowship and wrote to the group. The minister in Cape Town at the time, the Rev Victor Carpenter, visited the Wepener congregation at least twice in a five year period. He appears to have been the only Unitarian in South Africa interested in the Black movement. After the Rev Carpenter returned to the United States in 1967, contact between the two groups was lost. The Rev Seleso died and the African Unitarian Church disbanded. There are very few written records of this church and no materials describing organisational practice.
- <sup>4</sup> The three ministers currently serving the four Unitarian congregations in South Africa are male. However, there is a woman Unitarian minister living in South Africa who is not seeking settlement, but who has preached at a Unitarian congregation. There was a woman Unitarian minister who served the Cape Town congregation with her husband between 1937 and 1940. Also, the Unitarian congregations in South Africa have hosted numerous visiting women Unitarian ministers from overseas, including what the Unitarians claim to have been 'the first woman ordained as a Minister of Religion to preach in Cape Town' - The Rev E Rosiland Lee in December 1922 (Free Protestant (Unitarian) Church, 1922). Women in the Unitarian congregations in South Africa participate fully in all activities of the church including taking services and leadership functions.

Black people have participated fully in the worship and leadership of the congregations. Although the Unitarian movement founded by South Africans of European descent has yet to ordain a black minister, at least one black American Unitarian minister has visited South Africa.

5 The Rules did allow the minister, who was an ex officio member of the Church Committee, to be selected Chairman. However, in practice this has never happened on a permanent basis.

6 Such informality of membership can be abused. The Rev Allen Kirby, presently minister of the Unitarian Church in Adelaide, South Australia, and former minister of the Unitarian Church in Glasgow, Scotland, noted that there was an attempt to infiltrate and take-over the Glasgow congregation by the local Communist Party branch - apparently to gain control of a building in downtown Glasgow (personal communication).

7 The treasurer of the church is a chartered accountant and a business executive. The financial reports of the church are professional and audited.

8 Unitarianism is, in many ways, a very 'privatised' religion. However, it continues to take social form, adhering to James Luther Adams' (1976, 57) 'aphorism that, no matter how good an idea, "if it does not incarnate, it will dissipate"'. In this manner, Unitarianism is similar to what Ritter (1980, 26) has called 'communal individuality'.

9 A Unitarian minister can be dismissed by the democratic action of the Church Committee and congregation on grounds that his or her teachings or moral life are inconsistent with the views of the members of the church.

10 See Sennett (1980, 165-190) for a discussion of legible, visible authority and the illusory quality of authority in modern society.

11 Lehmann (1990) claims that what is needed is not a proliferation of base communities, but rather a way of making them more effective. However, he is speaking from a development perspective and does not address the political socialisation aspect of participation.

12 The banishment and complete destruction of Unitarianism in Poland in the seventeenth century involved the complicity of other Protestant churches with the ruling Catholics. Both deemed the Unitarians heretics, and thus no support for the Unitarians came from any quarter.

13 This is similar to Lategan's (1991) claim that Christianity, particularly Protestant Calvinism, has a 'low anthropology' which is pessimistic and views 'otherness' (as manifested in racial and cultural diversity) as a threat rather than an opportunity to learn and grow.

14 During the early 1960s, the Free Protestant Unitarian congregation in Cape Town attempted to find a public hall in the city area in which to hold their annual Sale of Work. No one would hire the congregation a



hall for such a multi-racial activity. The major English-speaking Christian church in the city had advertised that anyone having such a problem could hire their hall. The Unitarians applied and were refused with the terse comment that 'anyone' didn't mean Unitarians.

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## CHAPTER 9

# Pronouncing truth, exploiting belief: The place of the African diviner in religion and society

*J P Kiernan*

This paper concerns itself with the role of the diviner in African traditional religion, a topic important for two reasons. First, diviners seem to constitute one strand of 'traditional' religion which has survived the onslaught of modernisation, urbanisation, and Christianisation; they represent a flourishing institution.

Secondly, despite being in demand, diviners generally receive 'bad press' and enjoy a poor public image outside of African society. By contrast with other religious specialists, they are regarded as weavers of spells, purveyors of superstition, agents of sinister forces. And of course, there is the firm 'put-down' of labelling them 'witchdoctors'. Hopefully, this paper will convey a clearer understanding, free from such bias, of the social significance of diviners and of what it is that they are called upon to do.

### DIVINERS: SERVANTS OR CENTRES OF BELIEF?

In attempts to understand diviners, their place in society and their contribution to it, most writers on the subject set out to situate the diviner within the prevailing belief system. Typically, the collective religious beliefs of a given population are meticulously and systematically set out, beginning with a discus-



sion of the perceived existence of a Supreme Being, followed in descending order by lesser spirits, human ancestral spirits, and finally by living religious specialists, such as diviners, who act as mediums between the mystical domain and temporal secular events (see Berglund 1975; Bucher 1980; Hammond-Tooke 1975; Krige 1962).

Not only are diviners situated at the bottom of the mystical chain, but they are seen to be subordinate to it: essentially they are the servants of the belief system. Nowhere is this more clearly articulated than in the manner of their selection. They are popularly held to be smitten by a mysterious affliction, the only effective therapy for which is their consent to take on the role of public servant by undergoing training and initiation as a diviner. In this way, they are depicted as being the passive recipients of a call which they may not refuse; they do not choose to become diviners, they are chosen - whether they like it or not.

Similarly, in their consultations as practising diviners, they are believed to succumb to trance, a state of dissociation in which they are implicitly caught in the grip of forces beyond themselves, so that they neither act nor speak of their own volition but become the unconscious mouthpieces of spirit voices. It should be added that neither of these conceptions, that of a mystical calling and of being invested with mystical status in the course of ritual, is by any means confined to African diviners. The details may differ, but in their essentials they characterise the distinctive aura of religious specialists everywhere.

The point is, however, that these form the makings of a religiously-centred and driven model of how things work; the belief system is primary, the functionary is derivative; he or she is a necessary appendage to complete the requirements of the belief system, rather than the other way around.

I want to stand this model on its head and to reverse its emphasis. Rather than being the tame and disinterested servants of the belief system, diviners are relatively freewheeling agents who enjoy great latitude of action in regulating and controlling beliefs in practice. Instead of being at the tail-end of the belief system, as it were, they are at the very heart of it, as the spider is at the centre of the web (there are no overtly sinister implications in this metaphor). As much as the diviner is reliant on the belief system, the structure of belief is even more dependent on the diviner. It is he/she who activates it, performs it, dramatically enacts it, educates people in its complexities, and repeatedly demonstrates its relevance and efficacy.

In a very real sense, the belief system is an extension of the specialists who operate it. Take away the religious specialist and the beliefs are liable to wither

in disuse. The practice of religion crucially depends on the effort of its specialists to sustain it, and religion in Africa is no exception to this. And the religious specialist is committed to uphold belief and to propagate its practice, not merely or primarily because he/she is captive to it, but because, even more significantly, his/her professional status and pre-eminence in the community stands or falls by its observance.

Like any religious specialists, diviners are in the business of making religion work and it works only to the extent that they succeed in making it work. They make it work because it is in their professional self-interest to do so. They would be out of a job if they failed, an incentive that tends to concentrate the mind. As the operators of religion, they make use of a powerful resource - belief itself. In this model, it matters little that belief is a non-empirical immaterial resource. Like any other resource, it is hoarded, refined, added to, dispensed, and exchanged for other rewards; Above all, it is controlled and monopolised by an elite, entry to which is stringently regulated. Diviners are certainly selected, but not, as we shall see, in the manner suggested by the religious model.

Initially, this second approach may seem an unfamiliar (and even somewhat repugnant) way of looking at things. Although I am talking about diviners, there are much broader issues at stake here. For a start, there are implications for the functioning of religious specialists everywhere in different religions and societies. Beyond that is a consideration of professionals in a more general sense. All professionals claiming command of a specific expertise subscribe to an ideology of selfless public service, but that is all it is - an ideology, a creed or ideal - and it does not eclipse enlightened self-interest, ambition, and self-advancement; often enough the first can serve as a cloak for the more ruthless prosecution of the second. Although the service ethic may be a more pronounced component of some professions, religious specialists among the foremost, the religious professional is no exception to being susceptible to the lure of careerism.

The crux of the problem is the composition of society itself and the problem of achieving social or sociological explanation. Society is an amalgam of individuals who co-exist in a state of mutual tolerance. As members of society they contribute to the achievement of common goals, while as individuals they are essentially self-seeking. A balance, therefore, has to be struck between individual self-interest and the common good. Ideologically, the social collective endows self-sacrifice in the public interest with special approval and esteem, and socially condemns, and may even coercively restrain, unmitigated selfishness. What this means in practice is that society is organised in such a way that the individual is most conspicuously rewarded, and achieves personal aggrandisement, by at least a semblance of public service - which is why the most esteemed professions



strongly accentuate the service ethic. Paradoxically, then, self-seeking individualism is best satisfied by being, to some extent, confined within a profession of service to the common good.

## APPROACHES TO SOCIETY: NORMATIVE AND ACTIVITY MODELS

Social anthropologists distinguish two different models to make sense of what is happening in society. These are the normative model and the activity model, the one being a 'model for' behaviour, the other a 'model of' behaviour (Holy and Stuchlik 1981). In different ways, each of these accounts for human behaviour at the social level. The normative 'model for' is a conceptual framework, consisting of ideas, values, rules, and beliefs, which provides guidelines for action; it is a 'model for' behaviour - what is to be followed, what should be done, what ought to be the case. It is often expressed as 'this is how we do things here', when what is meant is 'this is how we like to do things here'. It is essentially an actor's model. How we actually do things here may be very different and this introduces us to what is essentially an outside observer's standpoint - the construction of a 'model of' behaviour, which focuses on real situations and actual performance.

The difference between the normative and performative models is the difference between what actors say (even believe) they are doing and what they are seen to be doing. In effect, human behaviour carries two different sets of meaning: the first largely ideological and symbolic, the second predominantly empirical and analytical.

Take sorcery/witchcraft as an example. The normative model says the chain of events runs as follows: (1) you offend your neighbour and give him/her reason to hate or envy you; (2) your neighbour's anger is translated into wishing you ill, either by forming an intention to harm you or by using medicines for the same purpose; (3) This wish, intention, or action results in your illness or other personal misfortune. This is the believed sequence, entrenched in the actor's cognitive system. Conversely, if you lead a blameless life, you will not attract sorcery and you will remain healthy.

The performative model says that the actual sequence is the other way around: (1) the illness or misfortune is first experienced; (2) it is then interpreted as having been sent by a sorcerer; (3) the sorcerer is then identified as a disaffected neighbour (see Gluckman 1970:323). So instead of *alleged* events (social strain) leading to mystical intervention leading to real experience, the reverse is what actually happens - real experience unveils a mystical cause which is traced to a supposed social source.

The two stages of causal interpretation, subsequent to the real experience of misfortune, are of course the work of a diviner, but it is possible to apply much the same kind of analysis to the 'calling of, or to the making of, a diviner. Instead of the 'call' originating on the mystical level among the ancestors, who then communicate their wishes to the candidate by afflicting him/her with a mysterious ailment, what actually happens is that a persistent nervous disorder is interpreted by an established diviner as being sent by ancestors to indicate their choice of this candidate. It is in fact the consulting diviner who pronounces on the suitability of the candidate to go forward for training; it is simply a form of professional recruitment.

Hence, the mystical 'call' is no more than the symbolic idiom in which this human selection is expressed. And of course, the act of selection, translated as 'calling', is not sufficient in itself to guarantee entry into the divining ranks. Not every candidate succeeds in withstanding the rigours of professional training, not the least of the obstacles to be overcome being the considerable financial outlay demanded by the divining schools. While many are called, not all are eventually chosen, and their elimination owes more to human shortcomings than to mystical intervention.

Similarly, the performative model forces us to review the significance attached to trance in the repertoire of the practising diviner, although it is a technique not uniformly resorted to by all diviners throughout Africa. When local diviners go into trance, it is supposed that they become unconscious and oblivious mediums of ancestral designs, and that they surrender any personal control over the outcome to their mystical manipulators. It is the power of ancestors that yields diagnoses and solutions, not the expertise of the diviner; the role of the diviner is reduced to that of an inanimate conductor.

All of this is quite consistent with the belief system, or normative, model, which upholds the sovereignty of ancestral guidance. But if ancestors were really all-powerful and capable of capturing the sensibilities of diviners at will, they would not be restricted to humanly defined situations, nor would diviners need to be coached in the technique of succumbing to their control. We know that ancestors enter into the activity frame by prior human arrangement; it is people who decide the time and place, and even duration, of their (ancestors) intervention by approaching and entering into a consultation with a diviner. The trance is not imposed from above, as belief would have it; it is carefully set up and orchestrated on the ground. Similarly, we know that diviners are trained in the technique of going into apparent trance, as they are in the art of interpreting dreams. The technique is learned, humanly transmitted from adept to novice, and bought - like any other form of expertise.



This is not to deny that some form of euphoric dissociation does take place, but it is carefully cultivated and nurtured by known stimulants, such as prior fasting, smoke fumes, drumming, and dancing. Furthermore, the disorientation is not such as to render the diviner entirely witless. Zionist prophets, who draw upon a similar technique to convey inspiration by the Holy Spirit, have time and again assured me that they do not lose consciousness nor do they become unaware of what is happening around them (Kiernan 1990:174). They retain their self-possession and are in complete control of what they are doing. In effect, the performative model, based on such evidence, indicates that the diviner's trance is a voluntarily induced state of partial dissociation, which is a device for underscoring belief in the ancestors and for investing the diviner's own calculated utterances with superior authority, although that authority is far from unchallengeable, as we shall see.

### THE DIVINER AND THE BELIEF SYSTEM

There is a sense, therefore, in which the diviner may be said to exploit belief, though not in any perverse or devious way. To say that this is true of all religious specialists is not to accuse them of bad faith. I am employing 'exploitation' in a much more neutral sense than it is commonly accorded. Belief is the diviner's stock-in-trade; it is the fundamental resource on which his/her livelihood depends. Like any precious resource, it is not to be frivolously squandered, but rather is to be conserved, reinforced, refined, and prudently deployed; in brief, it is to be fully exploited, or used, to the best advantage of the user.

Of course, the diviner also exploits the belief system to justify what he/she is doing, to give legitimacy to the divining profession as, for instance, respect for the law legitimises the legal profession. Thus, while the diviner controls the utilisation of the belief system, that control has to be exercised in such a way as to provide its own justification.

Consequently, the diviner's dominance is neither absolute nor exclusive. The diviner is not a mere guardian and promulgator of the belief system; if the belief system is not to be a dead letter, it must be operated in such a way as to continually demonstrate its relevance to the critical concerns of ordinary people. It must be seen to be a living faith, applicable to the lived experience of the common man or woman. And this is a fallible exercise which the diviner must undertake.

The diviner may hold the key of access to a special body of truth, but he/she does not enjoy *carte blanche* in dispensing that truth, and is not entirely free to

pronounce the truth for any given set of circumstances. A statement of the order, 'Having consulted my principals, this is the only true verdict for the problem you are experiencing, take it or leave it', may backfire badly because a dissatisfied client may very well choose to leave it or reject it. If he does, it is the diviner who loses out and whose credibility is dented. Note that it is not the belief system itself which is challenged in this way, but a particular rendering of it by a specific operator. The belief system remains intact; it is the diviner who has failed to direct it. 'This diviner has failed us; let us find a diviner who really possesses insight and understanding.'

A diviner well knows that too many failures, too many dissatisfied customers, can ruin his/her reputation and undermine his/her professional competence. Hence, diviners are particularly attentive to the nuances of their clients' (believers') situation and to the complexities of the social symptoms, in order to produce a measure of fit between what the belief system allows and what the clients perceive to be their needs. Consequently, specialist and client enter into a protracted process of negotiation in order to establish within the parameters of shared beliefs a truth that is both palatable and actionable.

### **STRADDLING THE SPHERES: THE DIVINER AS KNOWLEDGE BROKER**

From the perspective of the performative model, the diviner is best understood as a kind of broker - a knowledge broker. Brokerage is the facilitation and management of relations across a pronounced division between two disparate spheres of human interest and action, such as exists for example between the village and the central state bureaucracy (see Perry 1973). It presupposes not only dissimilarity between the two spheres, but also some distance verging on remoteness, and inefficient, or at least imperfect, communication between the two. They are not mutually intelligible to one another or they transmit confused messages which have to be broken down. The broker occupies a position which is marginal to both spheres, enjoys equal access to both, forms a bridge between the two, and provides a channel of communication between them. In short, the broker combines several roles, those of gate-keeper, middleman, mediator, and interpreter.

Similarly, the diviner is strategically placed between two very different spheres of knowledge and action - peripheral, but accessible to both. There is the sphere of mystical thought and activity, which is constituted by the belief system, and in which the ancestors are deemed to hold sway. In contrast, there is the sphere of social thought and action within which the living interact with one another in cooperation and conflict. There is of course direct communication between the two, but it is usually cryptic and enigmatic.



The living offer periodic sacrifice to their deceased ancestors to express care and respect, and in order to ensure continued ancestral protection. But how can they know that the sacrifice has been accepted and that the desired results will be delivered? An ancestor may appear to his descendant in a dream. What message was he trying to convey, a blessing or a warning and, if a warning, against what or whom? If the even tenor of life is disrupted by affliction or misfortune, this too has mystical import. The ancestors have dropped their guard; was it to punish me? If so, why? Does somebody in the community wish me harm? Where did I go wrong? Did somebody else step out of line? Where are the social fault-lines to be found and how can they be repaired? These are all vexing questions which emanate from the intrinsic opacity of communication between discrete spheres of knowledge. Clearly, there is need for a broker, such as the diviner, to link these separate fields and to introduce clarity where obscurity reigns.

It is the diviner, as broker, who brings the knowledge of ancestors to bear on the knowledge of social relations and opens up the social world to the realm of ancestral influence. In this way, the diviner can be regarded as a 'fixer' (in a purely descriptive rather than a morally pejorative sense). He or she fixes the breakdown in communication by fitting meaning of one kind to meaning of another, thereby constructing a match or fusion at specific junctures between diverse systems of meaning. How does the diviner accomplish this? How is the fix made?

Typically, most of the diviner's work is instigated by clients who are anxious to make sense of, and come to terms with, some particularly puzzling or harrowing experience. Ostensibly, they are asking the diviner to divine the truth of their situation. 'What is the true state of my affairs as a fully social person with obligations to the living and the dead?'

Granted that this encounter between client and diviner is designed to get at the truth, what kind of truth is being sought and ultimately pronounced? Is it some kind of objective, impartial truth, such as might be rendered by an acutely analytical mind or by a mind fortified by an extrinsic source of revelatory insight? Or is it rather a more subjective version of truth which is reflective of the current needs and interests of those most vitally concerned? Is it a truth fearlessly uncovered without favour, however inconvenient it may be (the kind of truth that academics claim to strive for), or is it a truth of convenience, constructed to suit dominant contextual values and interests (the kind of truth that academics all too often arrive at)? The answer is that it can be either; which, will depend on the purpose that 'truth' is meant to serve. However, there is no implication that the diviner is an honest broker in the one case and dishonest in the other, as long as he/she achieves the designated purpose of the inquiry.

What the diviner sets out to do is to translate knowledge acquired in one sphere into knowledge intelligible to, and in the language of, the other. This involves processes of decoding the mystical communication and encoding it in clear language. For this purpose, he/she employs a coding device in the form of a symbolic apparatus or paraphernalia - similar, perhaps, to the way Christian ministers may resort to the Bible under similar circumstances.

Let us attempt to reach a clearer understanding of this whole process. First of all, the diviner comes to the consultation armed with his/her exclusive resource, a secret and hidden knowledge which is inaccessible to others present. In most societies, secret knowledge endows its possessor with a profound and ambivalent potency for either good or bad. Its explosive potency resides in its undeclared purpose, since nobody knows for certain to what uses it may be put, or who may be affected by it (see Sansom 1972:222).

The diviner's secret knowledge is assumed to be a revelation from the ancestors which in its pure form is unutterable. This revealed knowledge remains silent and unspoken; though it may be outwardly signified, as in a trance, it is essentially non-verbal knowledge. 'Trance' has a double significance here: as the ancestor possesses the diviner, the diviner possesses what is known to the ancestor. The appropriation of this knowledge places the diviner in an initially commanding position. The situation is full of portent, possibility, and expectancy; everything depends on how the diviner employs this unverballed knowledge.

The second stage is the introduction of non-verbal symbolic patterns; the received message is apparently scrambled, so that while it attains visible form, it remains unspoken and unintelligible. This may be relayed through the diviner's paraphernalia; namely, the elements in the diviner's basket, whether stones of different colours, bones, or an assemblage of diverse objects. It might even be the haphazard tracks left by nocturnal animals on a predefined piece of ground (Peek 1991:198). Alternatively, in the absence of an apparatus or the use of external signs, the diviner may proceed through a series of monosyllabic utterances, each inviting a response, so that the transmission occurs in verbal form, but remains vague and inchoate.

The symbolic ingredients of the diviner's paraphernalia each has its own meaning - though very imprecise. More correctly, each is a template of multiple generic meanings, which renders it polysemous (Turner 1967:284), but collectively these semantic elements form a kaleidoscopic microcosm of social reality. They are like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle which may be put together in several ways. When these objects are thrown in the air, they form an apparently random



arrangement on the ground. As I have said, the message has been scrambled, though it is now out in the open for all to see, and anything is still possible.

The third step is to unscramble the communication, to decipher it and render it intelligible. This the diviner begins by proceeding, with some deliberation, to discern a pattern in the spatial relationship of the fallen symbolic objects. He/she may even neaten and give greater definition to the existing arrangement by eliminating pieces at the margins, by moving others closer together, or by arranging them in straight rows (Shaw 1991:145-146). At any rate, the diviner partly recognises and partly imposes some sort of order within, or upon, the dispersed objects. The fact that each object carries several meanings still allows a range of permutations, though a preferred or stronger meaning may be suggested by the objects' juxtaposition with others in the pattern.

However the sense of the symbolism is being organised and shaped in the diviner's mind, nothing of it is yet spoken; it remains unverballed and secret, accessible only to the diviner. If the diviner is working without an apparatus, the interrogatory technique, eliciting client response to apparently random stimuli, will point out several paths for the diviner to follow, while eliminating others. In either case, the diviner is left with numerous options to choose from.

The purpose of filtering the refinement of secret knowledge through stages of diminishing mystification is not only to reinforce belief in the diviner's extraordinary powers, but is also to provide the diviner with an opportunity to observe the client's behaviour with a view to arriving at an assessment of his/her situation - an assessment which is facilitated by the diviner's local knowledge, often a quite sophisticated grasp of the interplay of social relationships at local level. This 'sizing up' of the client and his/her entourage is necessary because the next stage of the consultation is a crucial one.

The diviner must now assay an interpretation of the client's dilemma by shifting sharply from the revelatory mode to a more analytical one, from hidden knowledge to visibly unspoken or cryptic knowledge, to knowledge articulated in clear intelligible speech. Far from being dogmatic, the diviner's interpretation is exploratory, couched in suggestion and innuendo, and experimental in that it does not exclude trial and error. If the client raises an objection, puts forward a counter-argument, or otherwise registers dissatisfaction or sullen dissent, the diviner must re-enter the symbolic pattern to extract a more acceptable interpretation.

Nevertheless, acceptance is not usually a contentious matter, if only because the diviner rarely delivers the verdict in any precise form. Typically, it could amount

to no more than an assertion that 'somebody in your household (workplace, neighbourhood, village) is a bad person'. Although the diviner at this stage is engaged in redefining persons and events, he/she will refrain from closer identification, leaving the precise identity of a malefactor or offender to be determined by the client. This caution is born of a reluctance to stir up conflict, because the diviner is in the business of repairing ruptured relations rather than of exacerbating estrangement.

Not every stage in this process is scrupulously included in every consultation. In matters of small moment, the diviner may move directly from hidden inspirational knowledge to the delivery of a verdict. The weightier and more full of consequence the problem is, and as the span of those interested in it or affected by it increases, the more public and open to scrutiny and resistance the consultation becomes, and the greater the recourse to symbolic sifting and analytical probing. In extreme cases, where whole communities are involved in detecting the perpetrator of an act, analytical discourse can assume primacy over the revelatory and symbolic modes.

In such open consultation, male participants, as the guardians of public morality, will predominate. The consulting diviner is very likely to be male, and the outcome will be the establishment of an objective and precise truth, pinning the blame on the actual perpetrator or most transparent suspect.

Such public performances have become a rarity in Southern Africa, with the early disintegration of such communities under the protracted impact of migrant labour, the more recent upsurge of political violence, and the flight of frightened refugees. The rapid emergence of urban encampments without a clear community identity has also contributed. Under these circumstances, the divining business flourishes in private practice, where the clients are mostly women concerned with problems relating to pregnancy, birth, and infant nurture, and the diviners are mainly female.

## CONSTRUCTING TRUTH

In all consultations of a private or semi-private nature, the purpose is not to uncover the objective truth of the situation, or what really happened. There is no such objective truth to be discovered. Who or what caused this illness? Nobody really knows. Even medical doctors, steeped in the tradition of empirical diagnoses, are not always sure. And the diviner's truth rests upon an empirically unsubstantiated belief in sorcerers and ancestors.



So the diviner's truth cannot reflect reality as it happened. Rather, the aim of the consultation is to satisfy the client with a version of events as they should have happened - or as we would prefer them to have happened. What is it that best serves the interests and requirements of this client (his/her dependents, her kin, her neighbours) at this particular juncture of her life? Since this is not a mere pandering to the client's selfish interests, expressed or otherwise, there is an element of objectivity in this assessment. In addition, the diviner may have broader interests to protect and may wish to consider which communal or collective values are presently at risk and in need of reinforcement, such as respect for authority vested in elders or the support of women in marriage. He/she must marry these diverse interests and, if necessary, package a compromise which the client must be led to accept as being in his/her best interests.

In fact then, the diviner is creating or constructing truth as a convergence of diverse interests, and is enlisting the client as a partner in this enterprise. The truth that emerges must be a shared truth, and the client's assent is more than a whim; it is a vital ingredient of a negotiated order. It is apparent that the divining technique is so designed as to lend itself to the fashioning of this kind of educed truth. It should be equally clear that the diviner cannot be dismissed as a religious poseur, cynically manipulating belief to fabricate falsity.

## **AUTHORITY AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION**

There are just two further points to be noted. Firstly, as the guardian and operator of the religio-moral system, flexibly applying it to a variety of real conditions and experiences, the diviner becomes the arbiter of change in the religious system of ideas. As ongoing social and economic changes overtake society, the diviner must continue to show the relevance of the belief system to transformed circumstances of life-style. By and large conservative in outlook, diviners will use the belief system to counter and resist creeping or radical change, but once the transformation has been accepted as inevitable, divining practice will reflect some corresponding trimming or adjusting of religious values, if only by way of a change in emphasis. The point is that this adds another level to the complexity and sensitivity of the divining process.

Secondly, the diviner is more than just an honest broker, or a fixer in the best sense of that term, fusing different types of knowledge, merging different kinds of interest and absorbing new developments. The performative utterance, or the pronouncement of the truth by the diviner, is no mere embellishment of what has been transacted in the consultation. It sets a seal upon it by transforming social reality to the form required of it. The diviner's pronouncement expresses

and fixes the authorised version of what must have really happened (Shaw 1991:150). It authorises the redefinition of persons, situations, and events, providing an objectification of what has transpired.

The function of the diviner is to draw upon his/her mystical resources to lead people to the discovery and acknowledgment of the desirable truth, and to stamp that truth with the authenticity of reality, so that others may with confidence act upon it.



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