

THE PRIVATIZATION OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH A South African Perspective

In a thesis completed in 1992, entitled 'The Privatization of the Christian faith amongst South African Baptists',⁵⁷ I argued that the Baptist Union of South Africa (BUSA) understood and practised the Christian faith in a privatized fashion. They failed fully to identify or proclaim the social content and implications of the Christian faith and they subscribed to a diluted Gospel. This resulted in them collaborating first with British imperialism and later with the Apartheid ideology. Elsewhere I have argued that the Baptist Convention of South Africa (BCSA), particularly since 1987 when it established itself as an independent body, has sought both to develop and live out a more holistic, biblical understanding of the Christian faith and its social implications.⁵⁸ Since the meeting of 180 delegates from the Union and Convention in Colesberg in May 1998, the possibility of a merger between the two groups is again a possibility. But the whole matter of theological approach will have to be fully dealt with if a genuine unity is to result.

In this paper I begin by defining the key terms used and identify what the relationship is between secularization and privatization. I then go on to explain in more detail what the privatization of the Christian Gospel involves. Finally, I note some contemporary expressions of privatization and explain the effects of privatization on the witness of the Christian church in general and the Baptist churches in particular.

SOME PRELIMINARY DEFINITIONS OF PRIVATIZATION AND SECULARIZATION

In an economic sense, privatization refers to the transfer of economic assets or operations from State to 'private' control. In this article, however, I employ the term in a theological and sociological sense. In this context, privatization means the limitation of the Christian Gospel to the private, spiritual concerns of the individual. Although the term 'privatization' is not often used within the sociology of religion, the basic understanding of religion as something which operates on a purely private and personal level frequently finds expression. Most often, the terms 'disengagement' or 'differentiation' are employed, and these are regarded as aspects of the much broader, and exceedingly complicated, process of secularization.⁵⁹

Secularization must be distinguished from secularism. Secularization has to do with the decline of the social relevance and power of the church. Brian Wilson speaks of a process 'by which religious institutions, actions and consciousness, lose their social significance.'⁶⁰ Secularism, on the other hand, usually takes the form of the intolerance of or the active resistance to a religious viewpoint or institution.

There are at least two main forms of 'disengagement'. 'The *institutional-social* type of disengagement is usually linked to the rise of the secular state. Secularization is measured in terms of the 'take-over' - abrupt or gradual - of various functions

which were previously the domain of religious institutions. This 'disengagement' argument places a lot of emphasis on the fact that so many of the educational and welfare services previously provided by the churches are now supplied by the secular state. The *intellectual-existential* form of disengagement involves the attempt to separate fields of knowledge, such as science or sociology, from the presuppositions of religious faith. The same process may be detected in other aspects of culture such as art, business, politics and social structures.

In this process of disengagement or privatization, religious authority is first opposed by the growing secular powers, then becomes more and more alienated from social affairs and is, finally, limited to the existential realm of individual persons. Amongst other things, this withdrawal results in a truncated faith and a false dichotomy between personal and social ethics. As the influence of religion becomes diminished, the social authority and power of religion is reduced and religion is restricted to the private sphere. In short, religion becomes privatized.⁶¹

Privatization, then, is both an *aspect* and a *result* of secularization. This is because privatization involves the 'disengagement' from the secular world and is a result of the withdrawal of religious thought and involvement from 'the world'. Shiner defines 'disengagement' as follows:

Society separates itself from the religious understanding which has previously informed it in order to constitute itself an autonomous reality and consequently to limit religion to the sphere of private life. The culmination of this kind of secularization would be a religion of a purely inward character, influencing neither institutions nor corporate action, and a society in which religion made no appearance outside the sphere of the religious group.⁶²

Privatization, argues David Cook, 'is a process by which there is a cleavage between the private and public spheres of life.'⁶³ In this sense, privatization is virtually synonymous with quietism (sometimes termed pietism) which refers to a type of theological praxis which fails to encompass the socio-political and economic implications of the Christian faith.⁶⁴ The term privatization is also used to mean the removal of the 'critical and creative functions' of theology 'from public scrutiny and their confinement to a narrow few in the church'.⁶⁵ A privatized religion is a form of faith in which individuals turn to religion precisely in order to either escape or to withdraw from the pressures and problems of social reality.

PRIVATIZATION AND THEOLOGY

A privatized Gospel is inherently dualistic, individualistic and vulnerable to manipulation by group interests. It dilutes the meaning of the Gospel and it restricts the application of the very concepts it claims to enshrine, namely, salvation, spirituality and the mission of the Church. Thus, a privatized Gospel both fails to bring about holistic spiritual renewal in the lives of individual believers and it is unable to promote either ecclesiastical or social transformation.

Firstly, a privatized theology is inherently *dualistic* in that it separates reality into

different spheres whereby the influence of religion is thought to bear upon the private but not the public sphere. Dualism operates on several levels: between the spiritual and the material; the secular and the sacred; the saving of souls and social involvement; or theological statements and political activism.

Dualism results in an artificial separation between personal and social ethics. A dichotomy is created between 'secular' concerns, on the one hand, and 'spiritual' concerns on the other. Thus, to 'save souls' is the mission of the Church, but to engage in the active, structural transformation of society is not conceived of as part of the Church's mission. At most, the duty of the Church is conceived of as verbally proclaiming the social implications of the Gospel to the governing authorities. Thus, to encourage the spiritual growth of individuals is laudable, but to seek to improve the material lifestyle of communities by restructuring the educational system, the laws of the country and the economy, is seen as unnecessary, even counter-productive, to the essential task of converting individuals. The 'social Gospel' is seen as a threat to the 'real Gospel'.

A further important element of privatization is the *spiritualization* of the Gospel. For example, much of the Old Testament, as well as the Luke 4.18-20 passage, is spiritualized, whilst passages such as Matthew 25.31-46 are generally neglected. Poverty, blindness, hunger and thirst are understood in terms of spiritual needs. Sin is primarily conceived of as alienation from God; salvation therefore only means 'getting right with God'. Consequently, sin and salvation are treated as having exclusively vertical (God-human) implications.⁶⁶ Reconciliation between people, if touched upon at all, is largely restricted to inter-personal or inter-family categories, and seldom extended to social categories. Exploitation, discrimination, and injustice are, thus, social rather than religious problems. This leads to a restricted, one-dimensional form of faith that falls far short of the holistic spirituality of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.⁶⁷

A further aspect of privatization is a lack of *contextual analysis*. Theological doctrines (such as justification by faith) are isolated from their original socio-historical context and uncritically imposed on the present context. This lack of contextual awareness can be seen also in popular theology such as pulpit preaching. Within a privatized understanding of the Christian faith, sermons are seldom related to concrete personal or social realities.

All of this reinforces the *individualism* that is so characteristic of privatization. Drawing on Western philosophy in which the individual is given pride of place, individualism falsely assumes that the evangelical emphasis on the personal appropriation of the Gospel of salvation implies that the implications of salvation are purely personal. This concentration on individual ethics has precluded the development of an effective Christian social ethic. Embedded within this privatization of the Christian Gospel is also an unwillingness, or inability, to recognize the ideological content within any conceptualization of the Christian Gospel. Self-interest, group allegiances, and social conditioning are not taken into

account, and the myth of a 'pure' Gospel is simply perpetuated.

A critique of privatized religion is neither a criticism nor a rejection of personal salvation. It is not the value and importance of the personal appropriation of the message of salvation that is at issue here. What is at issue is the fact that for so many Christians, this is where their faith ends. But, as shown in Ephesians 2.8-10, good works must inescapably follow conversion, and where else are good works performed if they are not performed in the context of social reality? An essential aspect of the problem is that the very doctrines of sin, salvation, the church, and mission are privatized. Consequently, the social aspects of these doctrines are virtually unknown to many Christians. Tragically, salvation is understood primarily (if not exclusively) as the justification and sanctification of the individual. Even conversion is conceived of as beginning and ending with the individual's relationship with God. But conversion is not something that only affects the internal and spiritual aspects of the converted person's nature; it must also affect the physical and social aspects of the person. Moreover, these converted persons make up a large community. This should mean that the social influence of Christians should include not only the impact of individual Christians (in various spheres such as the home, education, industry, agriculture, etc.) but also the *combined* effect of group strategies and the moral force of the Church as an institution. Privatization, however, has deprived the Christian churches of the cumulative social impact of their members.

Traditionally too many Christians have all too readily accepted the naïve dictum: 'the renewal of the individual automatically reforms society'. This dictum is, however, inadequate because it seriously underestimates the power of corporate evil. Sin is to be found not only in the personal lives of individuals, but also in the structures of society which have been developed and established by sinful humanity. Both individual and corporate sin have to be radically dealt with before society can even begin to conform to God's perfect will for it. For this reason, philanthropic acts, while good and essential, are insufficient as a means of dealing with the sin that pervades the entire structure of life. The inadequacy of the view that the renewal of the individual automatically reforms society is further demonstrated by the South African situation. In a country in which the majority of the population claimed some sort of Christian allegiance, the evil policy of Apartheid was propagated for over forty years.

THE EFFECTS OF PRIVATIZATION

Ironically, this withdrawal into the private religious sphere results in both spiritual poverty and *de facto* support for the *status quo*. Thus, in the case of the Baptist Union of South Africa, particularly during the years 1820-1990, with few exceptions, this Baptist tradition did not actively relate or promote the Christian faith in relation to the dominant social realities of the day. Other than offering some verbal and written criticisms of the ideology and outworking of Apartheid, such as

inferior education, economic exploitation, the dispossession of land, denial of human rights, and political oppression, this group did not actively resist Apartheid. Even in its own church structures, the Baptist Union practised segregation in the form of separate theological colleges, assemblies, and ministerial lists and pension policies. Nor were black Baptist churches member churches of the Union in the same way that white churches were. On the contrary, they were part of an 'association' that was only nominally under the Union umbrella. Rather than witnessing to or challenging 'the world', Baptists almost entirely conformed to South African patterns of social prejudice and structural exploitation. On several occasions leaders of the BUSA have publically confessed to the Union's complicity with Apartheid.

Whereas the dominant Baptist tradition in South Africa, as represented at least from 1820 to 1990 by the Baptist Union, has operated largely within a privatized understanding of the Gospel, the Baptist Convention, certainly since 1987, has sought to develop a more holistic understanding of the Christian faith. Once it was institutionally separated from the Baptist Union, the Baptist Convention was able to begin to identify its own theological vision. This is most clearly reflected in its Mission Statement:

The Baptist Convention of South Africa is a fellowship of member churches whose mission is to develop and proclaim a holistic, Afro-centric, and participatory understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and thereby equip its constituencies to facilitate the dynamic transformation of societies. (In Hoffmeister & Kretzschmar, 1995:1)

Further, the emphasis of the Convention on the renewal of theological education, leadership development, church development, black economic empowerment, and national reconciliation clearly reveals its holistic understanding of the Christian faith. So, too, do the themes of the four Winter Schools of Theology.

Privatized understandings of the Christian Gospel are common within the African context, not only amongst Baptists. This was certainly my observation at the Second Pan-African Christian Leadership Assembly held in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1994. Also, where Baptist churches were formed as a result of mission work done by foreign mission agencies, which themselves espoused privatization, there has often been a huge chasm between faith and life.

This privatized understanding of the Christian faith results in both an intellectual and institutional 'disengagement' of the Christian faith. Consequently, many churches have little contact and less credibility with other social institutions. This results in their message becoming outdated and irrelevant and unable to engage with or challenge intellectual paradigms or social institutions. Socially, far too many Baptists are distanced from the exploitation, poverty, fear and lack of opportunity that is the daily experience of many people. This results in a purely inward-looking faith that lacks conviction, commitment or compassion. Where Baptists have practised an 'intellectual disengagement', they have lost credibility and the opportunity to interact with those who create the intellectual paradigms that are so

influential in our world.

If Baptists - within South Africa and beyond - wish to develop and proclaim a faith that is biblical, credible and effective, we may need to re-think what the Christian faith is all about. If we desire to pursue 'justice, mercy and faithfulness' (Matthew 23.23), we may need seriously to investigate our attitudes, convictions and actions, lest we discover that we are following in the footsteps of the Pharisees instead of those of Jesus Christ.

NOTES

- 1 'With particular reference to its nature, extent, causes and consequences', PhD dissertation, University of Cape Town, 1992; published as *The Privatization of the Christian Faith: Mission, Social Ethics and the South African Baptists*, Legon Press, Ghana, 1999.
- 2 See Kretzschmar, 'The Neglected Heritage: An examination of the Anabaptist roots of the South African Baptist Churches', *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 16:2, 1990, pp.135-159, and 'A Theology of Dominance: An alternative history of the South African Baptist Union', in (eds) D. Hoffmeister and B. Gurney, *Barkly West National Awareness Workshop*, 1990, pp.24-32.
- 3 For a discussion of differentiation, see M. Hill, *A Sociology of Religion*, London 1975, p.239, and L. Shiner, 'Towards a Theology of Secularization', *Journal of Religion*, October 1965, 279-95.
- 4 D. Lyon, 'Secularization: the fate of faith in modern society', *Themelios* 10:1, 1984, p.17; B. Wilson, *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, Oxford and New York 1982, p.149.
- 5 A similar definition of this process of privatization (or 'disengagement') can be found in Hill, *op.cit.*, p.238.
- 6 Shiner, *op.cit.*, p.212.
- 7 D. Cook, *The Moral Maze*, London 1983, p.6.
- 8 The modern use of the term 'pietism' is confusing because it often fails to note that the seventeenth-century pietism of von Zinzendorf in Germany and Fox in England sought to apply the Gospel to the broader social ills of their times.
- 9 See R.A. McCormick and R.P. McBrien, 'Theology as a public responsibility', *America*, 28 September 1991, 184-9, 203-6.
- 10 This practice is not restricted to Baptists: see A. Nolan's discussion in *God in South Africa*, Cape Town 1988, pp.108ff.
- 11 Cf. E. O'Connor, *Journey Inward, Journey Outward*, New York 1968; K. Leech, *An introduction to Christian Spirituality*, London 1980.

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