

From many gods to one God to no dominant religion

Historians call the fifth century BC the “Axial Age” because of the similarities that ran from Greece at the west end through to China on the east end. Socrates is the best known philosopher in Greece, which was itself once only an outpost of an ancient empire up the Nile valley. Isaiah is the best known prophet from the Middle East at that time, as monotheism began to replace the pantheon of gods and idols. These deities had different names in Egypt, Greece, Persia and India, but the trending was to see a single Supreme spirituality. Completing this axis were Siddhārtha Gautama (a.k.a. the Buddha) in India and Confucius in China – all more or less concurrent.

To a great extent this “axis” still defines the values and spirituality that are near and dear to our Sapiens species. Of course there have been newcomers like Islam, but it also preaches justice, mercy and compassion – deriving from the character of Allah. Similarly, the many gods and idols of the Middle East prior to Mohammed were being replaced with a new impetus including education and urbanization.

For the most part, the next 2200 years was an age of despots, all across this axis. Except for Solon’s short-lived experiment with Democracy in Athens, which was later attempted in Rome, only to be corrupted, and thus crushed by the Caesars. Democracy re-emerged in the “New World” (America) then bounced back to Europe in the French Revolution. Now it is regarded as the state-of-the-art political system, bolstered by the rise of Humanism as a new force in terms of values and spirituality. In today’s world the notion of “rights” is replacing the axial concepts of justice, mercy and compassion.

This makes sense because of the gradual dwindling of despots, brought to you by constitutional democracy. In theory at least, all women and men are created equal - so no one is born to rule. There goes the divine right of kings and royal families; even kings can be put in jail. There goes paternalism; there goes capital punishment; there goes the inerrancy of Scripture. Bye-bye authority; hello relativism and inclusion.

But it’s strange, this rhetoric of “diversity”. Because about half of the species that ever existed on Planet Earth are now extinct. Including several other human species. And our Sapiens species is largely to blame for this narrowing down of biodiversity. What we are doing to the rhino this year, we have done to countless species over the centuries.

The problem is that we champion “human rights” but don’t want to know that rights have limitations. Two other R-words come to mind – respect and responsibility. Just as an over-emphasis on Justice caused so many despots to forget about mercy and compassion, so we get run-away cases of rights that are not tempered with respect and responsibility. This is the role of prophets – to speak to rulers about power-abuse. In South Africa, it has fallen to the Judiciary and to Civil Society to put the brakes on a run-away train called State Capture, whose next whistle stop is Dictatorship. We are already a “despotic democracy” according to the [Washington Post](#).

If you want a Bill of Rights you also need a Pledge of Tolerance.

I have been impressed by two recent speeches made by the incorruptible Julius Malema. He spoke to the Property Owners Association and scolded them for not having done enough about land reform and restitution. We had previously heard his party’s platform about land *invasions*. Then recently he spoke to business leaders saying that “the business sector needs to disrupt its greed”.

I thought of another spokesperson for landless citizens going to the Pharaoh to say: "Let my people go"; I thought of the prophet Nathan going to tell a Zapiro parable to King David.

So let me get a bit prophetic. I think that Socrates, Isaiah, Gautama and Kongzi would all agree that a ruler should be evaluated - not by his conquests or GNP - but by the way he has treated widows, orphans and foreigners who occupy some space in his constituency? I think I can include Mohammed as well, although he wrote the Koran over a thousand years later? But he was also trying to move his constituency past a pantheon of lesser gods and idols into monotheism.

Maybe we have a new Humanist Axis today? It seems that we would rather evaluate rulers by how they treat LGBTQI+. Do we sanction same-sex marriage? How do we deal with discrimination – by race, gender, HIV status, age? Are we politically correct?

Values and spirituality are shifting again. But this is a journey for us, we haven't reached the new destination yet. It is a work-in-progress. Some are faster than others to get into the new groove.

One perennial debate has been whether to deploy non-violent pacifism, civil disobedience, or "just war" thinking - whose latest variation was "liberation theology". As change agents. To confront injustice.

One African ruler took in an orphan and raised him along with his own son. Perhaps he wanted to show that he was not only the despot but also merciful and compassionate? Or to role-model inclusion? But that adopted son took exception to the way his race was being treated by the military, and even killed a law-enforcement officer. He had to flee. He became the Desert Pimpernel. He organized a resistance movement from his base outside of Egypt. And eventually his liberation movement succeeded. But a lot of lives were lost in the struggle. Moses redefined what it meant to be a ruler. He even did the unthinkable and introduced a Code - that also applied to the rulers!

David is the other model. He would not harm the king. He rather fled to the bush and started a non-violent resistance. He was defiant but pacifist. Loyal opposition. He became a lightning rod for discontent which formed a Coalition of the Wounded. In due course, he replaced the ruler.

I have to be careful with my metaphors because a recent court decision states: "the State should not be seen to be picking sides in matters [of] religion, neither vis-à-vis 'non-believers', nor vis-à-vis other religions".

Yet I remember an article called *The Myth of the Secular State*: "To continue to pretend that Nigerian political history can be explained without considering the relationship between religion and politics is wrong. To explain religion away as something irrelevant and anachronistic is even worse..."

Simeon O. Olesanmi ended his article on this note: "Every society engages in an enterprise of world-construction and religion occupies a distinctive place in this enterprise."

The Moral Regeneration Movement is re-awakening. There is suddenly a lot of talk about recovering the values of Oliver Tambo. Let's face it, great ANC leaders like John Dube and Albert Luthuli were church leaders too. The rejection of the Stalwarts is disappointing; it looks like their call to re-visit the party's core values is a revelation that greed has taken over sacrifice as the new modus operandi.

We have to be realistic. Buddhism was not theo-centric, it had already moved past polytheism and monotheism into a different realm. It can similarly be argued that Humanism and Marxism are secular

religions. So the apparent “progress” just replaces ancient faiths with more scientific ones. But they cannot escape being called belief-systems.

The genius of the space created for Traditional Leaders in the Constitution is *inclusion* - that can hold us to our roots. But in some countries where Human Rights have become the dominant agenda, even Christian beliefs and customs are getting the squeeze. Who would have thought?! I am left wondering about this, in a no-man’s land between the Axial Age and Humanist Nirvana...

What kind of new South Africa are we really building?