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The Collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989: A Historical Turning Point for South Africa, with Reference to Religion / Religious Education

Abstract

The study reported in this paper centred on the question whether the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 had any effect on the status of religion / religious education in South Africa. Although South Africa is geographically far removed from Eastern Europe, the socio-political situation in South Africa was deeply affected by the fall of the Wall, particularly by the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union. One of the upshots of the socio-political reform in South Africa after 1994 was that religion / religious education was relegated away from the public school to the private sphere of the parental home and religious institutions. This policy shift, however, might have had negative effects on the general social morality of South Africans.

Keywords: religion / religious education, South Africa, collapse of Communism, social space, morality

Introduction and problem statement

The focus in this paper is on the status of religion / religious education in a country situated at the southernmost tip of the African continent that despite the geographical distance from Eastern Europe also has felt the repercussions of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and particularly by the subsequent collapse of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics (USSR).

The research reported below revolved around the following research question: How and to what extent has the collapse of the Berlin Wall and subsequently of the USSR affected the status of religion / religious education in South Africa?

The fall of the Wall: a turning point in the history of South Africa

Obama (2018), in his address at the Nelson Mandela anniversary celebrations in 2018, correctly stated that no part of the world had been left unaffected by the fall of the Wall and the collapse of the USSR. According to him, "it seemed as if the forces of progress were on the march, that they were inexorable". During the last decades of the 20th century, he continued,

> *... from Europe, to Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia, dictatorships began to give way to democracies. The march was on. A respect for human rights and the rule of law, enumerated in a Declaration by the United Nations, became the guiding norm for the majority of nations, even where the reality fell far short of the ideal.*

The march of the forces of socio-political reform was on also in and for South Africa after 1989. That which transpired in Eastern Europe contributed to momentous socio-political changes in South Africa after that date. The fall of the

Wall and the collapse of the USSR signalled a momentous turning point in the history of South Africa in that it cleared the way for the advent of full democracy.

Conceptual and theoretical framework

The investigation reported in this paper centred on the following two key concepts: "the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 as a historical turning point for South Africa" and "religion / religious education". These concepts respectively refer to the following.

After the fall of the USSR, the leaders of the pre-1994 apartheid regime in South Africa saw their way clear to begin negotiations with the leaders of the black majority in the population. They were convinced that the threat of a communist take-over in South Africa had dissipated as a result of the USSR's demise, and that Western-type democracy would prevail after negotiations for a new political dispensation. The fall of the Wall was a double-edged sword for the South African government, however. On the one hand, fear of a communist take-over had largely vanished. De Klerk referred to the fall of the Wall and of the USSR as a "God-given opportunity" and reassured his followers that the African National Congress (ANC) would receive no more support from the Soviet Union during the ensuing negotiations about the future of South Africa (Pretorius, 2012, p. 415). On the other hand, it rendered the "apartheid" government's opposition to communism old-fashioned, thereby depriving the government from its strongest argument why Western powers should pressurise the ANC into accepting power-sharing (Giliomee & Mbenga, 2007, pp. 394-395).

The term "religion / religious education" refers to two entities, namely a *confessional* approach to the teaching of all the school subjects but more specifically to instruction in specific religions, and also to religious observances during the normal school day, such as religious holidays, opening the school term with reading from holy scriptures and prayer during assembly, and opening and closing the school day in the same manner. Both these aspects of religion / religious education underwent changes in South Africa in the post-1989 period.

Several theories come into contention when searching for a theoretical lens through which to view the problematic of this paper: complexity theory, social capital theory, ecological systems theory, the cultural-historical action theory and action theory. The choice fell on *the social space and ethical / moral function theory* as developed by Van der Walt and others (2017(a) footnote 5; 2017(b); 2017(c); 2017(d); Van der Walt, 2018; Andresen & Van der Walt, 2018; Van der Walt & Wolhuter, 2018). This theory was found to be appropriate because it hinges on two ideas that are central to this investigation, namely that events occur in particular *social spaces* (in this case, the socio-political space referred to as "South Africa" and the pedagogical space referred to as "a school") and that occurrences in such spaces always raise questions about whether the role-players in a particular space demonstrated a sense of *moral awareness, consciousness and direction*.

Space can be defined as the situation in which an institution and its relationships are physically located in the real world (Verburg, 2015, p. 420), in this case, South Africa. Other modalities of social life such as the ethical / moral also exist and resultantly cohere with the modality of space (Strauss, 2009, p. 763). Each societal relationship has been entrusted with a unique mandate, function, calling and purpose

in the modern differentiated society, and is supposed to discharge its function and purpose with a sense of responsibility and accountability. "Responsibility and accountability" refer to the ethical / moral dimension of its function in society. The actions and behaviour of the societal relationship as agent in its social space should be ethically / morally acceptable. This, according to Strauss (2009, p. 763), is what is referred to as social morality: the showing of the necessary respect in the course of social interaction. Each participant or agent in the social space should demonstrate care for the interests of all other people and the groups they belong to. Justice, fairness, respect for others and care are closely related to caring for others and their interests. According to UNESCO (2015, p. 24), the application of this norm or principle could lead to a better world characterised by peaceful and ethical actions and behaviour. Koonce's (2018, pp. 101, 105, 108, 111) outline of an ethic of caring in which she follows Noddings (2003, p. 24) chimes with the above, namely that it is an approach to other people from a position of critically caring, sympathy, empathy, the creation of mutual respect and understanding, thereby creating a safe and caring atmosphere and a strengthening of relationships and reciprocity. The discussion below pertains to the status of religion / religious education in the social space referred to as schools in South Africa, and particularly to the repercussions for the social morality of South Africans flowing from post-1994 policy regarding religion / religious education in schools.

Socio-political conditions and developments in South Africa before and after the fall of the Wall

The pre-1994 Constitution of South Africa (1948-1994) stipulated that the state should control and manage education for Whites. (Education for blacks, coloureds and Asians was provided, financed and controlled by missionaries and other non-governmental organisations.) Education for the White section of the population was regulated by the Act on National Education Policy of 1967 (Act 39 of 1967). The Act stipulated, in line with the Constitution, that education for White South Africans "should possess a Christian and a broadly defined national character" (Barnard, 1976, p. 8). It embodied the Christian education ideals and aspirations of the white Afrikaner population of South Africa (Whites or so-called Europeans; note: not including the so-called coloured Afrikaans speaking section of the population). The Act terminated the previous system of divided control of education; education / schooling for Whites was centralized and managed by the Minister of Education (Barnard & Coetzee, 1975, p. 179; Barnard, 1979, p. 140). Education for the other population groups was managed by separate Departments of Education. No form of religion / religious education was legally enforced by any of these other ("non-White") Departments.

The 1967 Act for Whites stipulated in Article 2(1)(a) that "education in schools maintained, managed and controlled by a State Department (including a provincial department of education) should display a Christian character, but the religious convictions of the parents and the learners should be respected as far as religious education / instruction and religious observations are concerned". Those sections of the White South African populace that were not content with this arrangement could establish, manage, control and maintain schools in line with their own views (Bingle, 1970, p. 26).

The approach to education described above did not appeal to the non-White population. For them, this approach was yet another demonstration of how apartheid was practised. The White community was accused of using Christianity (Calvinism) as "a reinforcing mechanism to the apartheid creed" (Christie & Collins, 1984, p. 161).

The move to Bantu Education based on the Bantu Education Act of 1953 therefore was opposed by the non-Afrikaner segment of the population, particularly by the English-speaking missionaries who controlled and owned the black schools. Following the passing of this Act in 1953, those ex-mission institutions which had not been closed during the transfer of control to the State were put under the control of principals and teachers who were committed to the ideologies of apartheid and Christian National Education (CNE) (Hartshorne, 1993, p. 197). The Christian ideals of an egalitarian and communal society, in which everyone aspired to a common culture which was both Western and Christian, were struck a severe blow (Christie & Collins, 1984, p. 162). While the syllabuses (of the different school, college and university subjects) as such allowed alternative interpretations, both the textbooks of this period and the teachers were strongly biased toward the CNE approach, according to Hartshorne (1993, p. 243).

Then came the historical turning point signalled by the fall of the Berlin Wall. Following the struggle against apartheid and after long negotiations, the new fully democratic South Africa was born. The advent of the new dispensation in 1994 also brought a new approach to religious education / religion and education. A new policy in this regard was expected in view of the stipulations in Chapter 2 (The Manifesto of Human Rights) of the new Constitution of the Republic of South Africa promulgated in 1996. Deliberations about religion / religious education in schools took nearly a decade after the birth of the new socio-political dispensation. The *National Policy on Religion and Education* was promulgated only in 2003. The Policy currently regulates three aspects of religion / religious education: (a) Religion Education as a normal school subject (§17-53); (b) Religious Instruction (§54-57), which comes down to comparative teaching *about* religions; and (c) Religious observances (§58-65), which were to be observed equitably and equally.

Discussion and conclusion

South Africa has indeed felt the consequences of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the USSR. In part, this can be explained by the fact that South Africa forms part of a globalised, inter- and transnational world.

The problem for the post-1994 legislator in South Africa was, as Lisovskaya (2018, p. 312) asked with respect to the situation in post-1989 Russia: "… how does one bring religion … into the school of a constitutionally secular state? And how can this be accomplished in a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional society in such a way that minority rights are not violated?". As noted above, the South African legislator responded to these questions with the promulgation of the *National Policy on Religion* in 2003.

Based on developments in South Africa after 2003, one could speak of a double-sided coin regarding the place of religion / religious education in South African public schools. On the one hand, the answer must be favourable: a more socially just and equitable dispensation was inaugurated in schools after 1994, and the task of

providing confessional religious education since then has fallen where it arguably belongs, namely with the parents and the religious institutions such as churches. On the other hand, the answer must be somewhat negative: since confessional religion education has been privatised and is now out of the public arena, it is uncertain to what extent this form of education is still being provided by the parents and religious institutions, and how effective their instruction has been. There are signs that this important facet of education has been neglected, a circumstance that might have been playing into the hands of secularism (the distancing of South Africans from all forms of religion and hence from the mores [ethics and morals] that flow from religious commitment). The new *Policy on Religion* of 2003 arguably also has led to a de facto divide between the state (school) and confessional forms of religion (cf. Swamy, Paluri & Koshy, 2017, p. 4).

South Africa as a *socio-political space* has come up with a workable solution that provides a place for comparative religion / religious education, religion studies as a regular school subject and for religious observances in schools. However, the banning of *confessional* religion / religious education from the public schools remains a cause of concern. Its removal from the public school might have had negative consequences for the ethical / moral behaviour of the general population. The moral base of South African society has clearly deteriorated in the last two decades: increased anomie, widespread corruption, xenophobia, service delivery uprisings, rioting, xenophobia, strikes, an increase in crime and a general lack of social capital are the order of the day.

Thompson (2018, p. 11) correctly observed that the values that people live by are intrinsically linked to broader philosophical and religious questions. This is particularly important in a multicultural and complex social space such as South Africa where people are constantly confronted with the relativity of moral judgements (Thompson, 2017, p. 242). He (Thompson, 2018, p. 192) goes so far as to remind us of Nietzsche's challenge: in the absence of God (who might have provided a fixed set of values), by what criterion can one judge what is right? The deprivation of many children from exposure to confessional religion-based values might have been the cause of much of the social laxity that South Africa is currently experiencing. As far back as 1997, former South African President Nelson Mandela spoke about the role of religion in nation-building and the need for religious institutions to work with the state to overcome the "spiritual malaise" underpinning the crime problem. In 1998, he repeated this message with emphasis on the symptoms of the moral depravity that South Africa was suffering from (Moral Regeneration Movement, 2018). If anything, the moral decadence has increased since then, as evidenced by the work of several commissions of inquiry. A case could indeed be made for a return to *confessional* religious instruction in all schools in South Africa.

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