

# Christian ethics and secularisation: Business as usual?

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It is now 49 years since Johan Heyns's *Sterwende Christendom?* [*Dying Christendom*] was published (1969) in which he traced the history of secularisation and its impact on the theology of his time and 36 years since the publication (1982) of the first volume of his *Teologiese etiek* [*Theological ethics*] in which he discussed the impact of secularisation on ethics. In this article, the topic of the impact of secularisation on Christian ethics is revisited. Account is taken of research conducted on the secularising impact of modernisation since then. Although empirical research points to the fact that it is not true that modernisation inevitably leads to the complete demise of religious faith and ethics, and also not that there is today absolutely no room for religious influences in the different social orders, it does not mean that it is a case of business as usual for Christian ethics. It cannot be denied that modernisation has a significant effect on the shape of Christian ethics in the contemporary world. And it can also not be denied that in most contemporary liberal democratic societies, including South Africa, the public role of Christian ethics is restricted. Some of the challenges – and opportunities – present-day realities pose to South African churches and their members are identified and discussed.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** On account of the pluralising and fragilising impact of modernisation on Christian faith, the discipline of Christian ethics should today criticise the absolutising of Christian ethical beliefs and encourage Christians to actively support consensus seeking on moral values in the workplace and in society.

## Introduction

It is now 49 years since Johan Heyns's *Sterwende Christendom? 'n Teologie in die greep van die tydsgees* [*Dying Christendom? Theology caught up in the spirit of our age*] was published (1969) in which he traced the history of secularisation and its impact on the theology of his time and 36 years since the publication (1982) of the first volume of his *Teologiese etiek* [*Theological ethics*] in which he discussed the impact of secularisation on ethics. Heyns distinguishes between 'secularisation' as a historical process and 'secularism' as an ideology that evolved from secularisation (Heyns 1969:19–22).<sup>1</sup> In the secularisation process, human beings discovered the worldliness and laws of the world and became aware of their own power to use these laws to arrange the physical world and society according to their own wishes. In secularism, the world is seen as a closed-off whole and the premise is that all problems could be solved from inside the world. According to Heyns, it could just as well be called immanentism or horizontalism, as the point of departure is that all relationships with a world transcending this reality must be regarded as completely severed (Heyns 1969:21–22; 1982:19).

What is conspicuous from a present-day perspective is that Heyns's approach to secularisation and secularism is mainly guided by a polemic intention. He wants to demonstrate that the ideology of secularism as the fruit of secularisation is totally unacceptable from the perspective of Reformed theology. Modern theologies trying to accommodate secularism thus also have to be renounced. As secularism has a truly devastating impact on ethics, any accommodation of it in Christian ethics should be avoided (cf. Heyns 1982:19–28).

In this article, the topic of the impact of secularisation on ethics and the challenges it poses for contemporary Christian ethics is revisited. The intention is to ascertain whether it is 'business as usual' when it comes to the relationship between Christian ethics and secularisation. In other

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1. This article is based on the Johan Heyns Memorial Lecture I was invited to give on 24 May 2017 at the University of Pretoria. Johan Heyns was one of my lecturers when I studied theology at the University of Stellenbosch in 1968. His *Sterwende Christendom?* was one of the books he prescribed to us as students. In 1982 I wrote a review article on the first volume of his *Teologiese etiek* in the journal *Scriptura* (De Villiers 1982:65–80). In 1994 I was after his retirement appointed as his successor in the Faculty of Theology of the University of Pretoria to teach Christian ethics.

words, the following questions are pertinent to the discussion of this article:

- Can Christian ethics still today approach the topic of the impact of secularisation on ethics in the same manner as Heyns did some 40–50 years ago?
- Can one still take it for granted that the impact of secularisation on ethics is almost exclusively found out there among non-believers and backsliders and not among those who are still church members, especially not among those who are members of the Reformed churches in South Africa?
- And is it still the appropriate Christian ethical response to the impact of secularisation on ethics to denounce and fend it off as strongly as possible and maintain the absolute validity of the ethical tradition of one's own confession?

I am convinced that we could benefit by approaching the topic of the impact of secularisation on ethics from the broader perspective of the contemporary impact of *modernisation* on religious faith and, more specifically, religious ethics.<sup>2</sup> One of the questions that have occupied social scientists since Max Weber is the following: 'Does modernisation have an inevitable secularising impact with regard to religious faith and ethics?' Weber was of the opinion that disenchantment [*Entzauberung*], which is part and parcel of modernisation processes, inevitably contributes to secularisation (cf. Weber 1968:594; 1992:22). Following Weber, the term 'secularisation' has been used by especially social scientists to refer to at least two developments regarding religious faith. It, first of all, refers to the exclusion of religious influences from different social orders. In this regard, it mostly refers to the separation of church and state, or, more generally – to the separation of institutionalised religion and the state. It, however, also refers to a second development, namely, the general decline of faith in the Western world, or in the world at large. When used in this sense, secularisation is often associated with the inevitability of the complete demise of religious faith on account of the undermining influence of modernisation processes (cf. Casanova 2012:19–20; Joas 2012:25–28; Taylor 2007:2).

To ascertain whether it is 'business as usual' when it comes to the relationship between Christian ethics and secularisation, I deal in this article firstly with the extent to which modernisation has a secularising impact on Christian ethics and, secondly, with the challenges the impact of modernisation today poses for South African churches and their members.

## To what extent does modernisation lead to secularisation?

The secularisation thesis that modernisation will inevitably lead to the complete demise of religious faith in the foreseeable future found its strongest support among social

scientists during the 1960s. One can even say that it was for at least two decades since then the dominant view among social scientists that the future of religious faith is bleak. The remark made by the well-known sociologist of religion, Peter Berger, in 1968 in the *New York Times* that there would practically be no religious institutions left in 2000, but only isolated believers in a sea of secularity, was typical (*New York Times* 25 Feb 1968). Today most social scientists on the influence of modernisation on religion agree that the assumption that modernisation automatically and inevitably leads to secularisation is false (cf. Joas 2012:16). Even Peter Berger has distanced himself from his earlier conclusions (Berger 2014:18–20).

One has to take into account that modernisation is not restricted to Western societies anymore, but has since the time of Weber dramatically spread to and impacted many societies all over the world. It is clear that in the interaction between modernisation processes and cultural and religious traditions in these societies, influence has not been exerted solely from one side, but has been reciprocal. Although modernisation processes have had an impact on such traditions, they have in turn significantly modified and shaped the processes. As a result, it is today more appropriate to speak of 'modernities' than of a single entity named 'modernity' to acknowledge the fact that the outcomes of modernisation processes in different societies around the world are quite divergent (Berger 2014:68–78; cf. Eisenstadt 2000:1–29).

This is particularly true with regard to the extent to which modernisation has brought about secularisation in both senses of the word. Taking the thesis that modernisation inevitably leads to secularisation in the sense of a decline of religious faith first, one has to say be said that one part of the world in which this has to some extent proved to be the case is Europe. Active participation in church ceremonies and church membership in most countries of Europe have significantly declined since the time of Weber, although to a lesser extent in Poland and Ireland. This does not, however, mean that the majority of Europeans have denounced the Christian faith. Many of them are still 'nominal Christians' in that they sometimes participate in Christian ceremonies, selectively adhere to certain Christian beliefs and have appreciation for aspects of Christian ethics (cf. Joas 2012:34–36; Taylor 2007:513–514).

Europe has rightly been called the exception when it comes to the decline of religious faith in the contemporary world. Although the USA has to a no lesser degree than Europe been exposed to modernisation, it has not experienced a significant decline in religious faith. In the same period, 1800–1950, when membership of European churches steadily declined, membership of churches in the USA steadily grew. This can to some extent be ascribed to the influx of immigrants, but should – according to social scientists – in the first instance be ascribed to the early separation of church and state, which encouraged freedom of religion and contributed to a vibrant

<sup>2</sup>According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 'modernisation' is understood, in sociology, as the 'transformation from a traditional, rural, agrarian society to a secular, urban, industrial society' (Accessed on 09 April 2018 at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/modernization>). The ongoing driving force in this process is rationalisation, especially instrumental rationalisation.

and variegated religious life (Joas 2012:36–39). In most other parts of the world, the thesis of the inevitable decline of religious faith does not apply. One of the reasons for this that social scientists have pointed out is that traditional religious people all over the world tend to have considerably more children than those who are secularised. It can thus be expected that the percentage of religious people in the world will increase in future. This is certainly true with regard to the Christian religion. For example, in Africa, the percentage of Christians has increased from 25% in 1965 to 46% in 2001. On account of statistics like these, the renowned sociologist Hans Joas even goes so far as to say that there is no reason for doubt about the survival chances of the Christian religion (Joas 2012:192–195).

With regard to secularisation in the sense of the exclusion of the influence of religion and religious ethics from the different social spheres, one has to conclude that Weber's view on the impact of modernisation is, to a certain extent, indeed applicable to contemporary societies. In most societies in which modernisation processes have exerted a significant influence, religious convictions and ethics play an insignificant role in how the economy and scientific investigation are run. Muslim societies are the exception here in that certain Islamic rules (e.g. the prohibition of usury) are accommodated in how business is conducted. With regard to the role of religion in politics, the situation is more varied. In most countries with a majority of Muslim citizens, Islamic 'sharia' law is accommodated in politics to different degrees. Some countries with a majority of Christian citizens constitutionally warrant the privileged position of the Christian religion (e.g. in Zambia).<sup>3</sup> In most countries in the Western world, however, the separation of church and state is constitutionally warranted. Some European countries though allow a certain room for the exertion of religious influence in state institutions (e.g. religious education is a school subject in most regional states in Germany) and some others still recognise a particular church as an established church (e.g. the Church of England in England).<sup>4</sup>

When it comes to the public influence of religions, one should not focus only on legal arrangements. The media, nowadays especially the social media, allow ample space for religious institutions and religious individuals to propagate their views, including views on political, economic and scientific issues, publicly. However, religious people using religious language and arguments in public to debate policy issues in Western societies must reckon with a strong liberal prejudice against doing so. The conviction on which this prejudice is based is that introducing religious arguments in debates on policy issues cannot but have a divisive influence in society.

Although one has to draw the conclusion that modernisation does not inevitably lead to the decline of religious faith or to

3.The Christian religion is recognised as the official religion of Zambia in the amended Zambian Constitution of 1996.

4.For a discussion of the relationship church-state-education in Germany, see Monsma and Soper (2009:189–197) and for a discussion of the establishment of the Church of England in England, see Monsma and Soper (2009:139–145):

the complete exclusion of religious influences from the public sphere, it cannot be denied that it has a significant effect on the shape of religious faith in the contemporary world. For the purposes of this study, I would like to refer to two major impacts modernisation processes have had on contemporary religious faith: *pluralising effect* and *fragilising effect* on account of the dominant 'immanent frame' of contemporary culture influenced by modernisation.

The pluralising effect of modernisation on religious faith has both a personal and an institutional dimension. The personal dimension has to do with the strong individuating effect modernisation processes have had in the Western world, especially after the Second World War. Charles Taylor in his monumental study on secularisation, entitled *A Secular Age*, refers to the 'individuating revolution' experienced in contemporary Western culture during the last 60 years or so. 'As well as moral and/or spiritual and instrumental individualisms, we now have a widespread "expressive individualism"' (Taylor 2007:473). This individuating revolution brought about that on a mass scale the social moorings of individuals in conforming traditional ways of living in families and local and religious communities have been severed. The causes cited are varied: affluence and the continued extension of consumer life styles; social and geographic mobility; new family patterns, particularly the growth of the two-income household; and the rise of television, to name a few (Taylor 2007:473). Globalisation in particular has played an important role in the extension of consumer life styles, especially among the youth, all over the world. The result of this individuating revolution has been the steady spread of what Taylor calls the culture of 'authenticity'. By this he means:

[...] the understanding of life which emerges with the Romantic expressivism of the late-eighteenth century, that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority. (cf. Taylor 1991; Taylor 2007:475)

This dominant contemporary culture of authenticity is based not only on the fact that we today indeed have more options when it comes to ways of living, but also on the high value put on personal choice of the way of living that suits one best. When it comes to religion, the culture of authenticity urges the individual person to not only *choose* the religious life or practice he or she becomes part of, but to ensure that it really speaks to him or her and makes sense in terms of his or her own spiritual development as he or she understands it (Taylor 2007:486).

The institutional dimension of the pluralising effect of modernisation on religious faith relates to this widespread contemporary need of individuals to seek authentic spiritual expression. In societies with a plurality of spiritual needs, one overarching and authoritarian religious institution with a 'one size fits all' approach cannot count on strong and active support. It therefore comes as no surprise that in

Anglo-Saxon countries, and especially the USA, an ever-increasing number of 'denominations', that is, voluntary religious institutions, have sprung up since the Great Awakening in England in the mid-18th century to answer to the ever-growing plurality of spiritual needs (cf. Berger 2014:42–49; Taylor 2007:448–454).

Peter Berger is of the opinion that the pluralising effect of modernisation on religious faith also inevitably brings about the fragilising of such faith (Berger 1994, 2014; Berger & Zijderfeld 2009). The reason is that pluralisation 'relativizes and thereby undermines many of the certainties by which human beings used to live' (Berger 2014:9; cf. Berger & Zijderfeld 2009:25–48). It certainly undermines the *taken-for-granted* nature of one's own personal version of religious faith, as the constant exposure to individuals and groups who have versions of religious faith different from me, or do not believe in God, inevitably brings about doubt about my own faith (Berger & Zijderfeld 2009:89–119). Berger (2014) concludes:

In terms of religion, ours is not so much an age of unbelief as an age of doubt. Thus the management of doubt becomes an important task, both for religious believers and for religious institutions. (p. 64)

Charles Taylor also points out the fragilisation of religious faith brought about by modernisation. He, however, has a slightly different understanding of 'fragilisation' as Berger (Taylor 2007):

I mean by this that greater proximity of alternatives has led to a society in which more people change their 'positions', that is, 'convert' in their lifetimes, and/or adopt a different position than their parents. Life-time and intergenerational switches become more common. But this has nothing to do with a supposed greater fragility of the faith they end up (or decide to remain with), as Berger seems to imply. On the contrary, the faith arising in this contemporary predicament can be stronger, just because it has faced the alternative without distortion. (pp. 833–834, n 19)

The fragilising of religious faith also for Taylor relates not so much with the mere existence of a greater variety of personal beliefs, but the predominance of an 'immanent frame' in contemporary culture. In the 'enchanted' Middle Ages in Europe, faith in God was taken for granted as the presence of God in the world was experienced as real, and everyone shared the convictions that the good of society depended on faithfulness to God, and that moral virtues and rules were prescribed by God. The different structures we live in today – scientific, social, technological, moral and so on – constitute rather an immanent frame in that they are part of a 'natural' or 'this-worldly' order which can be understood in its own terms, without reference to the 'supernatural' or the 'transcendent'. This does not necessarily imply that we are living in what Taylor calls 'closed world systems', in which religious faith does not make any sense, as atheists would claim. Taylor is rather of the opinion that the order in which we are living in today leaves the issue open: whether, for purposes of ultimate explanation or spiritual transformation

or final sense-making, we might have to invoke something transcendent (Taylor 2007:594; cf. also: 539–556).

What are now the conclusions one can draw from this discussion on the present-day validity of the secularisation thesis for the room there still is for religious ethics to play a role in contemporary societies? The precise answer to this question will differ from society to society. I have to suffice with a few general remarks:

- Modernisation has not rendered religious ethics obsolete in contemporary societies. There are still a great many people who live their lives in accordance with strong religious ethical values. Frameworks of religious beliefs about God, the world and human beings, of which their religious ethics forms an integral part, even today help them to make sense of the world in which they are living and provide a sense of ethical meaning to what they do in life.
- The pluralisation typical of modernisation, however, has an effect both with regard to the content of religious ethics and the manner in which people hold religious ethical beliefs. With regard to *content*, one has to accept that a spectrum in terms of closeness to a particular religious ethical tradition is found. On the one end of the spectrum is the religious ethics of those who diligently attempt to remain faithful to a particular religious ethical tradition of the past. On the other end of the spectrum one finds the religious ethics of those who have to such an extent – intently or inadvertently – taken over ethical values from other religious or secular groups they are exposed to that they have great difficulty with the coherent integration of these values into their own religious ethics. In between the religious ethics of those is found who to a greater or lesser extent revert to ethical 'bricolage', that is, select certain ethical 'bricks' or elements from other ethical traditions, and to a greater or lesser extent successfully integrate them into their own religious ethics (cf. Stout 1988:74–78). Also with regard to the *manner* in which people hold to their religious ethics there is a spectrum in terms of certainty. On the one end of the spectrum are those religious people who are very uncertain about their ethical values, even to the extent that they experience serious doubt. On the other end of the spectrum are those fundamentalist religious people who aggressively ward off any personal doubt or outside criticism of their own religious ethical values by declaring these values absolutely correct, and those of other religious or secular groups absolutely wrong. In its dogged, deliberate attempt to restore certainty, contemporary religious fundamentalism or neo-traditionalism differs from religious traditionalism in pre-modern societies with its taken-for-granted certainty (cf. Berger 2014:32). In between the doubters and the fundamentalists are those religious people who to a greater or lesser extent have certainty about their own ethical values and are tolerant over against the ethical values that other groups – whether religious or secular – adhere to.
- One can, however, ask whether the claim that religious ethics still has validity for many people in contemporary

society does not only hold for the private sphere of personal relationships. Is it not so that as soon as religious people operate in one of the differentiated social orders like the economy, science and politics, and make use of modern technology, they have to leave behind their religious language and religious ethical values and have to switch to exclusively secular discourse? Peter Berger seems to suggest this when he writes (Berger 2014):

Modern science and technology necessarily operate within a discourse that is strictly 'immanent' – 'as if God does not exist'... The secular discourse exists both in the subjective minds of individuals, who have learned to deal with zones of reality without any supernatural presuppositions, and in the objective order of society, in which specific institutions also function without such presuppositions. (p. 52)

Berger adds that although this is happening all the time, it does not necessarily undermine the faith of contemporary religious people. They have become used to the code switching and manage to live quite comfortably in both a secular and a religious world. In my opinion, one should not, however, take this to mean that religious people alternate between two strictly separated worlds: a private religious world and a public secular world. They do not leave their religious beliefs behind in the private sphere of their personal relationships when they operate in the workplace. Their religious beliefs give meaning to what they do in the workplace and their ethical convictions inform their attitude and behaviour over against fellow employees and clients and the manner in which they do their work. When asked by their superiors to do something that clearly contravenes their religious ethical convictions, they will most probably offer resistance. I agree with Nancy T Ammerman's comment on Berger's simile of code switching (Ammerman 2014):

...I suspect it may still draw too clear a distinction between codes and the fields they belong to. Sometimes people are aware of moving back and forth, but just as often they seem to occupy a single location that is both secular and sacred at the same time. (p. 103)

- It cannot be denied that religious people, at least in the Western world, are confronted with sets of secular moral values in politics, the economy, science, in the workplace and in the public sphere in general and often have to comply with these values. One should, however, take into account that the moral values prevalent in these spheres have in the case of the Western world to a considerable extent been shaped by the Christian religion. Even if they are shorn of religious connotations, many of these secular moral values exhibit a strong resemblance with traditional Christian ethical values. In his book *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor convincingly argues that the Modern Moral Order prevalent in the Western world today is to a large extent the outcome of developments within Christendom especially since the Reformation (Taylor 2007:159–171, 184–185, 514, 531–533). Although there has been, over the last few centuries, a retreat of 'Christendom' – that is a civilisation where society and culture are profoundly

informed by Christian faith – it is not surprising that moral values central to the Modern Moral Order like justice, equality, freedom, beneficence, peace and hard work resemble moral values central to the Christian religious tradition. It is thus mostly not so difficult for contemporary Christians in the Western world to relate to such 'secular' moral values when they operate in the workplace and in the public sphere and even personally re-infuse them with religious meaning.

## Challenges the impact of modernisation on Christian ethics poses to churches and their members in South Africa

Which challenges does the impact of modernisation on Christian ethics pose to churches and their members in specifically South Africa? And how should they respond to these challenges?

I want to start off with two general remarks. The first remark is that we have to say that it is not 'business as usual' when it comes to the challenges churches and their members today have to face in this regard. At the time Heyns wrote about secularisation and secularism, the South African society was not only politically isolated, but also to a large extent shielded against far-reaching cultural influences because of modernisation. The Afrikaans churches played a dominant role in society and exerted a strong influence on the nationalist government to maintain Christian ethical values in broader society. A strategy bent on completely fending off all secularisation influences from the church made sense in such circumstances. Today we are living in a secular state in which the separation of church and state is dictated by the constitution, in which the Afrikaans churches have almost no public influence and in which people are on account of globalisation much more exposed to cultural influences related to modernisation (cf. De Villiers 2005:521–535). As churches and their members cannot avoid the pluralising and fragilising impacts of modernisation on Christian ethics, a new approach is needed that will take into account fundamental changes that have taken place in the meantime. The second remark is that in South Africa churches and their members have to deal not only with the pluralising impact of modernisation, but also with the pluralising outcome of the meeting and interaction of Christian and traditional African religious beliefs and practices. When it comes to the pluralising impact of modernisation not only on Christian ethical views in indigenous churches, but also in many mainline and Pentecostal churches with a majority of African members, the situation is quite complicated. As I am not an expert on these churches, I do not want to claim that my discussion of challenges in all respects also applies to these churches.

That having been said, I would like to briefly discuss the appropriate response to two challenges that churches and their members face in South Africa – fully aware of the fact that what I have to say might be more applicable to some churches than to others.

## Challenges regarding the pluralising and fragilising impacts of modernisation on Christian ethics

During the last two decades, the dramatic pluralising and fragilising impacts of modernisation on the Christian ethical stances of individual Christians in South Africa could be clearly detected, at least in the Afrikaans churches of which I have first-hand experience. It is not only the case that a whole spectrum of views can today be found among individual Christians on 'big' ethical issues, such as same-sex relationships, cohabitation, divorce, abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, climate change, animal rights and affirmative action, but also that they differ quite significantly on what an appropriate personal Christian lifestyle entails.

This, of course, creates challenges for churches. Apart from the fact that they lose members who move to other congregations and denominations where they feel more at home, they have to appropriately deal with the diversity of views on ethical issues and personal lifestyle among their own members. It is difficult to meaningfully preach on ethical matters without annoying at least some members. The temptation is therefore to avoid preaching on such matters, or to do so in such a vague or abstract manner that very little ethical orientation is provided. It is also difficult to take a clear common stance on important ethical issues in society, or to undertake joint projects based on ethical concerns as the necessary ethical consensus is lacking. As could be experienced in the Dutch Reformed Church with regard to the issue of same-sex marriages during the last few years, the churches also often experience a strong polarisation of stances on ethical issues among their members. The groups opposing one another tend to mobilise support for their own views and campaign against those who express different views and to regard their own views as absolutely correct, and condemn those of their opponents as absolutely false.

I will suffice with two proposals on how churches and their members, in my opinion, ought to deal with the pluralising and fragilising impacts of modernisation on Christian ethical views. The first proposal is that they ought to take a *stance against ethical absolutism*. The point of departure in all discussions on ethical matters ought to be that one should never absolutise the correctness of one's own moral convictions. Absolutising one's own moral convictions on a particular ethical issue inevitably leads to demonising the view of the opponent as absolutely false or even heretic and excludes fruitful discussions or negotiations as the willingness to change or moderate one's own views is absent from the beginning.

With that I do not want to deny that being a religious person goes hand in hand with having strong convictions. However, what I would like to suggest is that we should distinguish between *convictional certainty*, that is having strong convictions, and *epistemological certainty*, that is claiming that these convictions are without any doubt correct. In my opinion, we should affirm that the first generally applies to ethical

convictions held by religious people, but deny that the second also applies to such convictions. Convictional certainty applies in that religious beliefs, whether ethical or not, lay a certain claim on, ask a certain personal commitment from believers who hold them that is existential and unconditional in nature. Having convictional certainty on a particular ethical view does, however, not imply the epistemological certainty, in the sense of epistemological infallibility, of this view. It is thus quite possible to have convictional certainty on the view, while at the same time acknowledging its epistemological fallibility, thus admitting that, in principle, it is correctable.

This distinction between convictional and epistemological certainty does not imply ethical relativism. It is not based on the assumption that no truth claim can be made for the ethical view on which one has convictional certainty. I would be the first to admit that it does not make sense to have convictional certainty on a certain ethical view, if one does not at the same time believe this view to be true or right. Such a truth claim can, however, go hand in hand with the admission that one does not have infallible access to the truth and, therefore, can only make truth claims provisionally. Should convincing arguments against an ethical view one claims to be true be forwarded, one should be willing to change or even abandon it.

An important implication of this view is that Christians ought to be much more tolerant over against fellow Christians who have views on ethical issues that differ from their own. This tolerance should not be misunderstood as indifference. Christians ought not to be indifferent over against fellow Christians who are members of the same body of Christ. Their tolerance should rather be based on the acknowledgement that we are all truth seekers who only have limited access to the truth and constantly need to test our own ethical views against the arguments of those who differ from us. We should therefore preferably avoid mobilising support groups for our own ethical views and campaigning against groups having different views, but rather actively engage in constructive critical discussions with those having different views. Congregations and church denominations have the responsibility to preach tolerance among Christians who differ from one another on ethical issues and to encourage and organise occasions for fruitful debate on such issues.

South African churches and their members should, however, not suffice with preaching and practicing tolerance and encouraging constructive debate on ethical issues. They are also called to help alleviate the plight of the marginalised in society, to take a critical stance against injustice and to take an ethical stance on what ought to be done to overcome injustice and enmity and enhance the preservation of the natural environment. In order to fulfil this calling, a certain consensus on ethical values in a particular congregation, church denomination or ecumenical organisation is needed. In the past, say, 50 or 60 years ago, such a moral consensus could more or less be taken for granted. There was no need to deliberately seek and negotiate it. Today this is, as a result of

the pluralising impact of modernisation, no more the case. And this is where my second proposal on the appropriate response of churches comes in. The second proposal is that churches and their members should make much more of a deliberate effort to reach agreement on ethical values.

The obvious starting point is to seek agreement in ecumenical organisations, church denominations and congregations on the fundamental ethical principles that should guide personal and joint decisions on actions, as well as on the fundamental Christian virtues that individual Christians should strive to embody and churches should strive to instil in their members. These searches for agreement could only succeed if all stakeholders are in one way or another involved, have the opportunity to make inputs and buy into final agreements. It is also of vital importance that deliberate efforts should be made to keep the commitment to ethical principles and virtues on which agreement has been reached alive among constituents. It could, among others, be done by regularly preaching on the meaning of the fundamental principles and virtues and their practical implications. But, of course, reaching agreement on and building commitment to a set of guiding ethical principles and virtues should only be the starting point for initiating effective charity and advocacy projects in congregations, church denominations and ecumenical organisations.

By making these proposals I am not implying that there are no successful initiatives in South African churches to curb ethical absolutism, promote tolerance and launch charity and advocacy projects based on moral consensus. I do, however, want to stress the importance of such initiatives in countering the pluralising and fragilising impacts of modernisation on Christian ethics in the South African context.

### **Challenges regarding the impact of modernisation on the public role of Christian ethics**

Also in South Africa many contemporary Christians have to deal with the daily reality of working in organisations that are secular in nature. They spend a considerable part of their waking hours in such secular working environments. In spite of this, my impression is that little attention has been given to sermons, Bible studies and discussion groups in congregations on the Christian meaning of their work, the problems they as Christians have to face and the ethical responsibilities they have to fulfil in the workplace. I still remember the response of a church member who came to me after a sermon on the Christian meaning of work I delivered in our congregation many years ago. He said to me: 'I was waiting for this sermon for more than 20 years'.

In my opinion, church denominations and congregations have a huge responsibility to provide opportunities on a regular basis to their members to reflect on the Christian meaning of the work they do and the ethical responsibilities they have with regard to it. They have in this regard a rich tradition of Christian ethical reflection to draw on.

As someone from a Reformed tradition I would like to highlight the view of the Reformers Luther and Calvin that secular work, and not only spiritual work, is a calling from God (cf. De Villiers 2004:901–908). The implication of this view is that Christians should realise that they are also serving God by doing their secular job well, in both a moral and functional sense of the word.

I believe that even today Christians can give meaning to their daily jobs and do their jobs in a morally responsible manner by drawing on their Christian beliefs, including Christian ethical principles and virtues. This does, however, not imply that they should only recognise Christian ethical principles and virtues and reject all secular professional and ethical guidelines that are recognised by others in the workplace. To do that would again boil down to absolutising Christian moral principles and virtues. They should, in my opinion, rather endorse the ethical and professional codes that apply to their workplace in as far as they do not contradict their own Christian moral principles and virtues. And they should enthusiastically contribute to the effective application and continuous improvement of such codes.

Why should they be strongly motivated to do this? I believe that especially those of us who are Reformed Christians today still have the responsibility to serve the coming of God's kingdom in this world. This is a conviction I share with Johan Heyns in whose theology the notion of the kingdom of God plays a central role. We should, however, realise that we, as a result of modernisation, today live in a different world. We can no longer like our Reformed fathers, and many generations of Reformed church leaders after them, on account of Article 36 of the Belgian Confession, insist that governments should promote the kingdom of God by rooting out false religion and supporting the true Christian religion. Today to insist on this in radically pluralised democratic societies like our own would be totally unrealistic. In fact, the only way a monolithic society based on the ethical principles of a particular Christian confession could today be established is to abolish democratic principles and practices, and to revert back to the autocratic suppression of all other belief systems.

Instead of taking for granted that the coming of God's kingdom could only be served by *Christianising* society, that is, by converting all citizens to the Christian faith and by insisting that in all social orders (politics, the economy, science, etc.) only Christian ethical principles should be recognised, we should acknowledge that it could also be served by the recognition of shared moral values that express negotiated agreement on the values that enhance the flourishing of all living creatures, or to put it less idealistically, to a better life for all. Although the coming of God's kingdom entails more than the flourishing of living beings, it is certainly part of what God intended. The words of Jesus in John 10:10: 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full', among others, provide a concise formulation of the intent of the coming of God's kingdom that commenced

in his own life and ministry. To put it unequivocally: God wishes the flourishing of living beings on earth and also expects Christians to support initiatives that contribute to it, be it Christian initiatives guided by distinctive Christian values or secular initiatives guided by purely secular moral values.<sup>5</sup>

If we have to acknowledge that the coming of God's kingdom can today also be served – and maybe better served – by reaching agreement on secular moral values enhancing the flourishing of all life on earth, and by actively supporting initiatives based on these moral values, churches and their members in South Africa have the responsibility to come out stronger than up till now in support of agreements on shared moral values and projects based on such agreements. Not only in the workplace, but also in their churches, in organisations of civil society, in school managing boards and in political parties Christians should be on the forefront of those who work for the achievement of agreements on shared moral values, or if you wish, moral covenants. And instead of taking a neutral stance over against moral covenants already concluded, in that they are not distinctly Christian, they should unashamedly regard the promotion of such secular moral covenants as their Christian responsibility. Of course, such support for secular moral covenants should not be granted unconditionally. It should only be granted in as far as the fundamental Christian moral values are not contradicted and there is sufficient resemblance with Christian moral values.

In this regard I wish to remark that it is a pity that some South African churches have preferred to take a neutral or, at the most, a lukewarm stance over against the Bill of Rights in the South African constitution. I fully realise that human rights have been controversial in church circles for quite a long time. Since the Second World War, however, many ecumenical organisations and church denominations have come to the realisation that Christian beliefs contributed to the development of human rights and that there is considerable resemblance between Christian ethical beliefs and many human rights. The notion of human rights also needs not to be regarded as something contradicting the Christian emphasis on human duties (cf. De Villiers 2000:212–224). These ecumenical organisations and church denominations have therefore become ardent supporters of human rights. Maybe as a result of the fact that opponents of the policy of separate development and the theological justification of this policy often based their criticism on basic human rights, especially the Afrikaans churches were slow to come to the party. It is true that an Afrikaans church like the Dutch Reformed Church in the report 'Church and Society' of 1990 took a more positive stance over against the idea of human

5. Miraslav Volf argues in his book *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World?* both that "[g]lobalisation will be able to contribute to "improving the state of the world" only if visions of human flourishing and moral frameworks shape it" (Volf 2015:24) and that globalisation needs the world religions to deliver it from its shadows in that they (Volf 2015):

can situate the pursuit of life that goes well into a more encompassing account of flourishing life in which life being led well has primacy over life going well and life feeling good; they can help generate both a healthy sense of contentment, even joy, and foster commitment to global solidarity, thereby helping to achieve a greater measure of global justice. (pp. 55–56)

rights as such and in its newest 'Church Order' of 2015 expressed its support of the 'South African Charter on Religious Rights and Freedoms'. One would, however, have wished that the Afrikaans churches had also more intensively reflected on the stance they should take and the responsibilities they have over against specifically the Bill of Rights in the South African constitution. One of these responsibilities is, in my opinion, to encourage their members to actively support the Bill of Rights – not only those human rights listed in it that coincide with their own personal and group interests, but the Bill of Rights as a whole.

## Conclusion

I hope that it has become clear that it cannot be business as usual when it comes to the consideration of the impact of secularisation on Christian ethics. Firstly, we have to approach the topic differently than previously by taking a wider perspective of the impact of modernisation on Christian faith and ethics. Secondly, the secularising impact of modernisation is not something predominantly found out there, among non-believers and in other parts of the world. Our discussion of the pluralising and fragilising impacts of modernisation on Christian ethics has shown that this impact is also found in the South African society among church members. In South Africa modernisation has also contributed to the curtailment of the public influence of Christian ethics. Lastly, we have to acknowledge that a strategy of denouncing and fending off and claiming the absolute rightness of our own Christian ethical views is inadequate. The disruptive and limiting impact of modernisation on Christian ethics in our own context underscores the need for finding different ways of maintaining the validity of Christian ethical values and their influence in the wider South African society.

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