Cultural pathways and pitfalls in South Africa: a reflection on moral agency and leadership from a Christian perspective

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Abstract

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The nature and importance of moral agency for the transformation of persons and society, particularly from a Christian perspective, are discussed in this article. The focus is on cultural pathways and pitfalls with respect to the formation and exercise of moral agency on the part of individuals, leaders and communities. The six dimensions of cultural values as developed by Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000) are used as a framework to describe and evaluate mainly western and African cultural values in order to identify ways of developing moral responsibility and genuine social transformation.

Opsomming

Kulturele paaie en slaggate in Suid-Afrika: 'n refleksie oor morele bemiddeling en leierskap vanuit 'n Christelike oogpunt

Die aard en belangrikheid van morele bemiddeling vir die transformasie van persone en die samelewing as 'n geheel word veral vanuit 'n Christelike perspektief bespreek. Hierdie artikel fokus op kulturele paaie en slaggate met verwysing na die vorming en uitoefening van morele bemiddeling deur individue, leiers en gemeenskappe. Die ses dimensies van kulturele waardes, soos deur Hampden-Turner en Trompenaars (2000) ontwikkel is, word as 'n raamwerk gebruik. Veral die Weste en Afrika se kulturele waardes word hiermee beskryf en geëvalueer sodat maniere geïdentifiseer kan word om morele

verantwoordelikheid te ontwikkel en ware sosiale transformasie te bewerkstellig.

1. Introduction

In this article I seek to address the ancient and contemporary human necessity to form individuals and leaders of good character and communities in which moral values such as justice, generosity, reconciliation and peace are prominent features. Whether one is speaking of Africa or Australia, Lilongwe or London, wherever injustice, avarice, conflict and violence abound, the lives of people will be destroyed and the communities in which we live will be places of tears and conflict. The gap between the rich and the poor will widen, the environment will be further degraded and social unrest and conflict will deepen. This is certainly *not* a vision that one can look upon with glad anticipation.

Other writers have discussed ethical choices in relation to the formation of character in the context of community (Connors & McCormick, 1998), moral dialogue and formation (Van der Ven, 1998) and conscience (Curran, 2004). Elsewhere I have analysed moral and spiritual formation in some detail (Kretzschmar, 2006; 2007) and noted the differences between Christian and other approaches to moral formation and agency (Kretzschmar, 2008). The focus of this article is to identify cultural pathways and pitfalls in terms of moral agency for individual people, leaders and communities. The model of cultural value preferences as developed by Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000) is used to identify ways in which western and African cultures both enable and prevent moral agency from being exercised in society.

2. Ethics, morality and moral agency

2.1 Definitions of ethics and morality

Within moral philosophy and the human sciences generally, ethics is understood to be a critical reflection on the attitudes, interactions, decisions and actions of human beings. For example, Van der Ven (1998:8-21), influenced by Paul Ricoeur, asks which actions can be regarded as good, right and wise. Human actions include both interpersonal relationships and far-reaching social interactions such as conflicts, legislation, political governance, the activities of non-governmental agencies, and the impact of corporations.

Christian ethics both incorporates and critiques other understandings of ethics, based upon its distinctive Christian framework or paradigm drawn from the Bible, tradition, reason, the work of the Holy Spirit and experience – influenced by the cultures of its interpreters and practitioners. It is guided by norms and visions which may be similar to other ethical approaches (e.g. a longing for justice) and different (e.g. in its view of what justice is and how it may be realised). In situations of moral complexity, moral wisdom and discernment are required. Christian ethics is both deductive (moral norms and convictions need to be understood and applied) and inductive (Christians need to learn from their own experiences and be challenged by the experience and critiques of others, especially those from outside their own social circle).

The Christian moral life, then, is a life-long process of formation or sanctification. It is an invitation to be empowered by the living God to love one's neighbours, and it includes repentance, discipleship and a prophetic witness (Connors & McCormick, 1998:225-246). It is about becoming good persons and moral communities who are able to choose rightly and to live a good life. Christian ethics is concerned with moral reflections and analyses, personal motives and intentions, convictions and character, choices, actions and lifestyle. Therefore, morality must not be confused with narrow-minded, spirit-deadening moralism, well illustrated in the film, *As it is in heaven* (2004) directed by Kay Pollak. A moral life, typified in the life of Jesus, is challenging and life-changing. Paradoxically, true morality is costly, yet life-giving. It draws the human spirit towards the Spirit of God and restores the God-given humanity of individual persons. It brings forgiveness and renewal to families, reconstruction to communities, and justice to society. Without morality, deceit, selfishness and hatred destroy relationships and tear to shreds the fragile fabric of human societies.

2.2 What is moral agency?

A central locus of moral agency is the consciousness, character, choices and lifestyle of the individual. In their book entitled, *The Bible & ethics in the Christian life*, Birch and Rasmussen (1989:39) stress both character formation (an ethics of being) and moral decision making and action (an ethics of doing). Together with a compelling moral vision, these constitute moral agency.

But, because moral consciousness, character, choices and lifestyle are formed in community, and because moral vision and agency require both individual and communal inspiration and application, com-

munity life forms a second locus of moral agency. The communities in which individuals live can encourage the development of moral agency (e.g. participation in a poverty alleviation program) or result in moral degradation (e.g. becoming a member of a drug cartel). Moral agency begins to emerge when individuals commit themselves to a process of moral formation (so that goodness is incarnated in them) and when they join or form groups which expect moral responsibility from them. In short, individuals both influence the morality of the group and are formed by being accountable to the group. When both moral individuals and communities are guided by a moral vision and seek to do what is right, moral agency begins to operate and take effect in society. For Christians, as noted below, relation to God is not simply a third locus, but the foundation of moral agency.

Thus, the interplay between personal moral formation and communal moral regeneration is a complex one. It is true that the moral regeneration of society is dependent on the moral formation and agency of individuals. Equally, social circumstances and events can impede or encourage personal moral formation. Further, the moral formation of individuals occurs within the context of community, as human beings are "persons-in-community" (Nicolson, 2008:1-14).

In England, for example, individuals such as William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson joined an Anglican evangelical group called the Clapham Set. This group, together with many other individuals and churches combined to fight for the abolition of slavery in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Closer to home, many individuals including prominent ones such as Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Albertina Sisulu and Beyers Naude, and groups (e.g. the African National Congress, trade unions and the member churches of the South African Council of Churches) combined to resist and overthrow apartheid.

These individuals and groups were moral agents in their societies. This does not mean that all their contemporaries regarded them in a positive light, nor does it mean that they will be judged by history as having been morally good or right in every respect. But they were moral agents in the sense that they sought to move an entire society in a new direction, based on a moral vision. With regard to slavery, the moral vision was that of the equality of humanity. Echoing Christian values, the slogan "Am I not a man and a brother?" was adopted first by the Society of Friends (the Quakers) and later by others who fought first for the abolition of the slave trade and then for the abolition of slavery itself. In the case of apartheid, many

atheists, communists, Jews, Christians, Muslims and agnostics were united by their resistance to the immorality of racism and exploitation and their vision of a non-racial South Africa.

But, care must be taken in adopting a moral vision as it can be distorted and result in huge deception and suffering for millions, as seen in the later betrayal of the hopes of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution and the growth of Facism in Germany and Italy in the 1930s. Therefore, the intention, means and end all ought to be directed to the common good. Blind adherence to visions and the leader(s) who propagate them is extremely unwise. Hence, morally mature persons who are not easily deceived, who are aware of the temptations of power and who are alert to the dangers of social engineering are in acute demand. Thus, Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000:108) speak of the social need for people who have both moral convictions and social attachment to prevent "periodic descents into barbarity". If leaders consciously enter a process of moral formation and become moral agents in their contexts, they are able to inspire and draw out the best in other people and persuade them to participate in realising a genuinely moral vision.

Moral agency is formed over a period of time. Shutte (2008a:22-32) speaks of the importance, for both the West and Africa, of forming persons who can become deciding and acting subjects. For Africans, a person who has *seriti* is respected by the community as being morally wise. Like a live electrical wire, aura or magnetic field such persons exude "force or energy" (Setiloane, 1986:13-14) in relationship with others and the world. This is a form of "personal causality" (Shutte, 2008a:30) or moral agency. What is required of "persons-in-community", then, is the growth of ubuntu, a full and morally positive humanness, leading to what Mkhize (2008:35) terms "an ethical human being".

Christian moral agents are those who are themselves in a process of moral formation. They are open to the reproof and correction of God, their conscience and the Christian community. As the redeemed children of God, Christians ought to individually and collectively act in morally healing and responsible ways. They can provide prophetic witness or counter-cultural critique (e.g. exposing and resisting deceit, corruption, injustice and the abuse of power) and constructively engage in society (e.g. reforming immoral policies and laws and acting to change oppressive circumstances). Christian moral agents, then, are individuals or groups that exercise an ethic of responsibility (Koopman & Vosloo, 2002) in order to facilitate

moral, relational development in persons and moral social transformation.

Finally, moral agency needs to be extended to others. Christians are called to proclaim and enact the liberation of Christ. Those who are slaves, victims, and perpetual minors (e.g. women in certain cultures) are not free to decide or choose. When people are ignored, coerced and terrorised, they are dehumanised and their human agency is limited or destroyed. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, studies have shown that 60-80% of married African women who are infected with HIV and AIDS, have had only had one sexual partner – their husbands (UNAIDS *et al*., 2004:16).[1] Those who are dehumanised by others need to experience the inner moral healing and freedom that only God and a loving moral community can bring. Further, the cultural, economic and political structures that hold them in bondage need to be challenged and changed.

Space does not permit a full discussion in this article of how moral agency develops (cf. Connors & McCormick, 1998; Curran, 2004; Kretzschmar, 2007:18-36). Rather, it seeks to identify the effect of cultural value preferences (an aspect of socialisation) and the role of personal choice. In other words, what combination of cultural socialisation and personal internalisation of values affect the moral agency of people in a pluralistic society?

3. A model of cultural value preferences

Culture can be broadly understood as an integral system which exemplifies the values, beliefs, customs and institutions of a particular community, or group of communities. Culture is the way a people have organised themselves to express and preserve their identity and way of life.

Below I reflect on the development and exercise of moral agency using the model of the six dimensions of cultural value preferences as developed by Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000:11).[2] In

1 UNAIDS (United Nations Joint Programme on HIV and AIDS), UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) and UNIFEM (United Nations Development Fund for Women).

2 An earlier, ground-breaking set of categorisations was that of Hofstede (2001: 234-248) who identified the following five values: power distance, individualism versus collectivism, assertiveness versus modesty (originally termed masculine versus feminine), uncertainty avoidance, and short-term orientation versus long-term orientation.

another volume Trompenaars (1993:63-72) uses an additional categorisation of cultures that are neutral (feelings are hidden) or affective (feelings are shown).[3] In the interests of clarity and brevity I have decided to use the Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000) model, but will occasionally refer to other categories, such as "power distance" (the way in which persons at different social levels relate to each other), where it is relevant to the argument. A summary of the model that is used can be outlined as follows:

Table 1: The six dimensions of cultural diversity
(Adapted from Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000:11; cf. Schubert, 2008:57-88)

1. **Universalism** Rules, codes, laws, and generalisations. General principles, rules, and codes that apply to persons in all circumstances.	**Particularism** Exceptions, special circumstances, unique relations. Particular circumstances are taken into account when making decisions, thus exceptions can more easily be made.
2. I**ndividualism** Personal freedom, human rights, competitiveness. The focus is placed on the individual person. The interests, thoughts and decisions of the individual are of primary importance. The individual is expected to take responsibility for him-/herself and to be self-reliant. Competition is regarded as healthy, and persons need to take actions that will lead to their own development and fulfilment.	**Communitarianism** Social responsibility, harmonious relations, co-operation. The interests, thoughts and decisions of the group prevail over those of the individual. Individuals are expected to co-operate and defer to more senior members of the group, and promote the values and well-being of the group. The legacy or tradition of the society is important.
3. **Specificity** Atomistic, reductive analytical, objective. Public spaces are considered to be large and other people can be directly engaged. Individuals communicate specific information, and their reactions are shown openly and precisely, even bluntly. Transparency is important.	**Diffusion** Holistic, elaborative, synthetic, relational. Specific information is less easily shared. People tend to be indirect, tactful, and even ambiguous. Yet, multiple areas of life and personal context need to be related to in a diffuse manner. Information is not shared until trust is developed.

3 Later, House *et al.* (2004) identified nine categories: performance orientation, future orientation, gender egalitarianism, assertiveness, power distance, humane orientation, uncertainty avoidance, institutional collectivism and in-group collectivism.

4. **Achieved status** What you've done, your track record. Appointments to certain positions are on the basis of personal accomplishments. Skills and achievement are important.	**Ascribed status** Who you are, your potential and connections. A person is given a certain position based on age, or social position. Reputation and status are important.
5. **Inner direction** Conscience, convictions and virtue are located and motivated from inside. Societies tend to control their environment and nature itself can be controlled. The convictions, will and deliberate actions of people can change their circumstances.	**Outer direction** Moral examples and influences are located and motivated from outside. These societies adjust to their circumstances. The rhythms and forces of nature cannot be changed and human relationships must be valued and conflict avoided.
6. **Sequential time** Time is a race along a set course. Time is perceived as succession or a line and should not be wasted. These societies are future and goal orienttated, change is more easily accepted.	**Synchronous time** Time is a dance of fine co-ordinations. These societies are event orientated. The past is an important part of the present. Change is accepted only if this legacy is not destroyed. Time is circular, and because situations and opportunities can be repeated, actions are less urgent.

Prior to reflecting on this model, some important preliminary points need to be made.

Firstly, the twelve polarities noted above are not disconnected opposites; they may function as a continuum. Thus, a person's moral decision making processes often require both universalism (e.g. the moral norm that "murder is wrong") and particularism (taking into account any mitigating circumstances). It is essential to be able to "perceive and think in both directions" (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000:3), thereby optimising the strengths of different cultures.

Secondly, these general tendencies ought not to be regarded as absolutes because cultures are not static. In many instances, certain western cultural groupings (eg. American, British, German and white South African) are representative of categories in the first column whereas African (Black South African) as well as Japanese, Chinese and French cultures are all representative of certain categories in

the second column (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000:71).[4] However, exposure to cultures different to one's own can significantly influence and alter one's cultural value orientations. Thus many South Africans have, especially since 1994, made strides in incorporating insights and values from those of different cultural groups.

Thirdly, these twelve cultural preferences cannot be said to be morally right or good in themselves. Each preference has a role to play and has developed in relation to societal circumstances and needs in different historical periods. Thus, in a fast-changing, industrial context, achieved status, sequential time and inner direction and motivation are valued because it is necessary to employ skilled staff who use time effectively and are able to control natural elements in an industrial process.

Finally, we need to ask whether a model that is based on pairs of opposites can offer insight into questions being asked within a holistic African context. Why is it the case that, despite the stress on the holism and harmony of African culture, ethics and theology (e.g. Kudadjie, 1996; Richardson, 1996a; 1996b; 2009; Kunhiyob, 2008), the basic needs of the community as a whole are not being met in many African countries (Mugambi & Nasimiyu-Wasike, 1999:4-8)? Why have leaders such as Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe been permitted by other African leaders to bring the people of an entire country to their knees? Why are many post-independent African "elites" permitted to openly pursue a greedy, selfish and sometimes corrupt lifestyle which is contrary to the values of African ethics? I argue that the Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars model not only provides insight into cultural perceptions and values, but precisely because these pairs of polarities need to be held in tension, promotes a holistic understanding of human existence.

4. Moral agency: cultural pathways and pitfalls

I do not simply compare and contrast cultural or other value orientations, this has been done elsewhere (eg. Van Rensburg, 2007:39-65; Painter-Morland, 2001:15-25). My aim is to show how these preferences provide insight on certain current events and controversies that affect Southern African societies. I also argue that cultural pre-

4 Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars hardly mention Africa. In this article I relate their model to some elements of the South African context, based on my own experience and research.

ferences should not be blindly perpetuated without considering changing social circumstances. When cultures are in collision, flexibility and mutual respect can enable such cultures to benefit from each other's insights. What is required is not simply balance, but an awareness of one's own cultural blindness and the need for a creative tension in which both polarities are valued. However, when this tension is not maintained, cultural values are inappropriately applied, certain cultural tendencies are taken to an extreme, and where these extreme tendencies are combined, the result is a moral imbalance that is detrimental to the common good of the members of a pluralistic society. Moral agents and leaders ought to be able to identify such distortions and suggest ways of moving beyond cultural impasses.

4.1 Universalism and particularism

Universalism can be a moral pathway in that it focuses on norms and values that can be widely, if not globally, endorsed. This has led to the establishment of the United Nations, the International Court that sits in the Hague and numerous codes of business ethics. For example, the third King Report on Governance for South Africa (2009:21) lists the following four ethical values as essential to good practice: responsibility, accountability, fairness and transparency. Universalism insists on equality before the law, so that all the members of a society can be treated in the same way. If universal moral norms are fairly applied, those who are rich, powerful and corrupt, for instance, will not escape justice.

Particularism can be a moral pathway in that it appreciates local customs and takes particular situations and needs into account. Considering motive, mitigating circumstances, a possible conflict of duties, a full consideration of the situation, and the possible consequences of a particular action, can mean that a wise assessment is made and the best possible action taken.

Universalism also has its moral pitfalls. Those who over-emphasise and distort universalism forget the importance of cultural diversity, local insights and the freedom of other nations. For example, on the basis of perceived cultural, racial or ideological superiority, several western nations colonised much of Latin America, Africa and Asia, thereby furthering their national and economic interests and imposing their values and institutions through military, socio-economic, political and cultural means. The communist imperialism inspired by Marxism also imposed its rule on many nations in Europe and influenced some African nations. More recently, economic neo-colo-

nialism and globalisation have impacted negatively on the economies of African and other developing countries (Stiglitz, 2003:7-18), often with the connivance of corrupt local leaders. Recently, some have spoken of the richly resourced continent of Africa as being on China's shopping list (Temkin, 2009).

Particularism also has its moral pitfalls. In South Africa, a long-standing rejection of unjust laws has encouraged an ongoing rejection of even valid, jointly endorsed laws, such as traffic laws. In addition, when distorted or over-emphasised, specific circumstances and loyalty to a particular person, party or group take precedence over what is right. One recent example of this distortion of particularism was the brutal xenophobic treatment of African foreigners in South Africa in 2008. These attacks, on fellow Africans, suggested that the oft quoted moral and cultural principle of ubuntu does not extend to the entire continent, but primarily towards the members of one's own particular ethnic group, clan, family or local community.[5] Suspicion of foreigners, combined with envy, competition for jobs, criminality and dire poverty, resulted in an explosion of violence that disregarded universal moral considerations for the protection of life, livelihood and property.

When combined with a distorted communitarianism (see 4.2), the cultural preference of particularism is to bow to group interest, patronage, or the will of a particular leader or group of leaders, rather than adhere to general moral principles. Thus, particularists may be unwilling to break ranks and expose an action committed by someone from within their own group on the basis of an external moral principle.[6] One example of what may be regarded as a distortion of particularism is the decision of the NPA (National Prosecuting Agency) in April 2009, not to investigate corruption charges against Jacob Zuma, who has since become the South African President. This was after a protracted legal process dating back to June 2005 when his close financial advisor, Schabir Shaik was found guilty of corruption

5 Munyaka and Motlhabi (2008:75-83) discuss factors that have weakened the moral effect of ubuntu.

6 Important exceptions include African women theologians (Phiri *et al*., 2002) who have criticised the patriarchy of African cultures, prophets such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu who have criticised several African leaders; and activists such as Ken Saro Wiwa (Nigeria) and Wangari Maathai (Kenya). A study of leadership in Tanzania showed that younger people are also more critical of their leaders (Schubert, 2008:142) and Chitando (2008:50-56) critiques "oppressive masculinities".

and fraud. Consequently, the citizens of South Africa were left in the dark as to the innocence or guilt of Zuma.

4.2 Individualism and communitarianism

Both the individual person and the community are important in relation to moral agency. Hence I disagree with Hampton-Turner and Trompenaars's categorisations of individual*ism* and communitarian*ism*. These, I believe, are a distortion of the creative tension of a necessary focus on both the individual and the community. As already noted, the stress on the personal moral responsibility of an individual is an important pathway of moral agency, as it is primarily as persons that we perceive, decide and act. Individualism, then, is an overemphasis or distortion of the importance of the individual. Self-reliance will benefit the strong and able, but little value will be attached to the weak, old and disabled. In European, American and increasingly in African cities poor, homeless, lost and sick adults and children beg on the streets. Both their individual dignity and their sense of belonging have been drastically impaired; they have been abandoned and "cast out". In an increasingly postmodern context, mutual support and communal obligations are not emphasised.

As with individualism, communitarianism or collectivism has very definite moral pitfalls.[7] Where the acceptance of the value of the community degenerates into collectivism, it results in the interests of one group, be it defined according to ethnicity, nation, class or gender, being advantaged over another. Instead of a moral community promoting the common good, the short term self interest of a particular group is promoted. Hence countries such as Kenya, Burundi, Rwanda, Liberia and the Sudan are torn by ethnic conflict. Communitarianism further leads to nepotism (promotion of the interests of family members), "jobs for pals" (promoting the interests of friends and supporters), misplaced (blind) loyalties to clan or family members, uncritical political patronage and an absence of personal moral accountability (Kretzschmar, 2008:85-90). Powerful, small collectives (or oligarchies) protect and advance those individuals who promote their interests. Often, those at the lower levels of society will not see it as their place or role to challenge their superiors, even if they suffer at the hands of these leaders (Nürnberger, 2007:195). Consequently, the abuse of power is perpetuated.

7 Cf. Shutte (2008:27-28) for a critique of European collectivism.

Metz (2008:335-356) recognises the obligations of kinship and argues that a "moderate partialism" (which rejects nepotism but accepts affirmative action) is morally acceptable. But, he rejects "strong partialism" (which benefits close relatives and other individuals) on the grounds that it fails to benefit the community or population as a whole and leads to division, suspicion and civil unrest.

De Maria (2008:357-374) also notes the powerful kinship obligations owed by Africans to their "primorial public".[8] He speaks of the West African context, which is characterised by "the crisis of the African state; the underpayment of public servants; and the stream of foreign aid ending up in elite coffers" (De Maria, 2008:370). Quoting other writers such as Ekeh (1975) and De Sardan (1999) he argues that there is "no shared and internalised conception of the public domain" (De Maria, 2008:370). This lack of moral recognition of a civil public means that many individuals share the perception that personal benefits can legitimately be squeezed out of public coffers and offices.

These insights of Metz and De Maria concerning cultural and kinship loyalties and the dangers of "strong partialism" are important. They reinforce the argument of this article that cultural values that are distorted and inappropriately applied to a 21st century African context exacerbate rather than solve political and economic problems. Their insights also act as timely warnings to South Africans.

4.3 Specificity and diffusion

Specificity is a moral pathway in the sense that issues are clearly identified and analysed. For communication, being clear and direct is important. Because the power distance in the West is generally less than is the case in Africa, specificity is permitted, even encouraged. In terms of moral agency and transformation, clear, accurate analysis and the communication of what is wrong and who is responsible is necessary before change can be effected.

Diffuseness is a moral pathway in the sense that it can enhance human relationships and trust. In Africa, a direct and blunt way of speaking would be considered to be rude, discussion tends to be circular with tact and indirect comment being valued and con-

8 De Maria (2008a:357-365) is very critical of the interests and perceptions that drive western critiques of corruption in Africa.

frontation avoided. In a small, closely knit community, this preserves harmony.

Specificity becomes a pitfall when it is unwise and insensitive. For example, in a conflict resolution context, it is important to say the right thing in the right way at the right time. As the book of Proverbs puts it, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. The tongue of the wise dispenses knowledge, but the mouths of fools pour out folly." (Prov. 15:1-2.)[9] Similarly, in a counselling context, specificity may need to be softened and certainly reserved for the right moment. When linked to individualism, specificity damages social relationships and trust and, when linked to outer direction (see below), overly technocratic perceptions of reality ride roughshod over human needs and relationships and over creation as a whole. Thus, moral agents need to choose their words well and act both rightly and wisely in order to advance the good in a social arena or moral insight in an inter-personal situation.

Diffuseness also has its pitfalls. In a situation of conflict, clarity and speaking out may be vital to its resolution. Sometimes, confrontation is necessary to bring healing to relationships or radical changes in social perceptions and practices. Diffuseness prevents truth being spoken in dysfunctional families, thereby allowing violence and sexual abuse to be perpetuated. It permits silence about HIV and AIDS infections, causing the virus to spread quickly through the population. Diffuseness, when linked to particularism, as in the case of Zuma as previously noted, confuses and obscures issues rather than identifying and solving them.

When combined with a great power distance, communitarianism, and a shame orientated culture, diffusion serves to protect from exposure even those leaders in government, business or civil society that have been proven to be corrupt and incompetent. To add insult to injury, they are often quietly transferred to wreak havoc elsewhere, promoted or given a golden handshake. Members of universalist, individually orientated and specific cultures regard this as lack of responsibility (refusal to acknowledge guilt), accountability (being answerable) and transparency (being open).

9 All biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

4.4 Achieved and ascribed status

Achieved status focuses on competence and skills which make the maintenance of large and complex social organisations possible. Hence, in western cultures one's suitability for a job is assessed mainly on the basis of qualifications, skills and experience. In short, competence is more important than connections. (This does not mean that "jobs for pals and relatives" does not occur, but it will not be publically defended). Achieved status becomes a moral pathway if leaders respond to dire social needs, acknowledge that they are responsible to perform specified tasks and exhibit professionalism and commitment. In an African context, competent, committed and honest public officials can make a huge difference to the lives of millions of people and prevent a country from becoming a "failed state", as in the case of Somalia.

Ascribed status can be a moral pathway in that parents, children, friends, the sick, handicapped and aged, for example, will be valued for who they are rather than what success they may have achieved in life. Ascribed status takes into account the dignity, wisdom and contribution of ordinary people and it values families, communities and relationships.

In western societies, where success, fame and youthful attractiveness are admired, the moral pitfalls of achievement-orientation are that ordinary, older and unattractive people may be viewed as worthless, has-beens. In a "lean and mean" business environment, employees are easily dismissed. Companies prefer to employ staff on a contract basis, yet expect commitment and production on a 24/7 basis. An over-emphasis on achievement can turn individuals into labour units and workaholics. This contributes to an insecure, threatened and uncaring work environment, the disappearance of genuine family life, huge stress, and resultant mental and other health problems. Combined with individualism, a distortion of achieved status exhibits a lack of appreciation for whole human beings, a balanced life, and a sense of communal belonging.

Where ascribed status has been combined with communitarianism and affirmative action, as in South Africa, the pitfalls are obvious. Especially in the civil service, being black and/or well connected is often regarded as sufficient qualification to obtain a particular job, even if one has neither the education, training, skills, experience or competence to do the work at hand. Under the guise of transformation, the field is wide open for nepotism and favouritism. The effect on the delivery of services, for example, in the police service,

hospitals and local government has been disastrous. For instance, of the 283 local municipalities in South Africa, only 2% received a clean audit report for 2009 (Hofstatter, 2010). Government officials often fail to deliver basic services and frustrate the efforts of those who are struggling to survive and those seeking to assist them. This leads to protests such as those of the inhabitants of the town of Balfour in Mpumalanga, especially during August 2009, against lack of efficiency and delivery on the part of elected local government officials (Anon., 2009).

In moral terms, when wrong actions or irresponsibility are rewarded, and honest, committed service is ignored or punished, individual moral consciousness, relationships and society begin to disintergrate. Contrary to the goals of an African ethic, trust and co-operation are replaced with suspicion and manipulation, and social conflict replaces community co-operation.

4.5 Inner direction and outer direction

Inner direction focuses on personal responsibility and is based on a perception of the world as a place that can be managed and changed. Those western societies that have formed relatively stable politico-economic entities, and have established a degree of mastery over natural forces, tend to be inner directed. Water can be pumped to where it is needed, houses can be heated and people can be inoculated against diseases. Such successes create "can do" societies which believe that difficulties can be overcome by the consistent and personal application of knowledge, technology and effort. A focus on inner conscience, virtue and initiative creates the possibilities for prophetic critiques and counter-cultural initiatives. In terms of moral agency, this confidence and hope are important to sustain moral effort in difficult circumstances.

Whereas in western societies, the self is seen as something private inside one, in Africa

> … the self is *outside* the body, present and open to all. This is because the self is the expression of all the forces acting upon it. It is not a thing, but the sum total of all the interacting forces (Shutte, 2008b:90).

Thus, those in outer directed cultures recognise that one is not always in control of one's natural environment; one responds to external events. Events such as floods and droughts occur, and have to be survived rather than controlled. The experience, wisdom

and needs of the group guide action. Sometimes dysfunctional social systems or institutions have to be endured and it is the social resilience of the bond of the group that make not only survival but continued humanity and generosity possible. Together with affectivity, the small but important joys of life like laughter, human togetherness, a meal, a warm bed, music and dance can be enjoyed and the suffering of the present can be temporarily forgotten. Together with the perception of time as synchronous, the hope that things will change and improve, provide the necessary strength to overcome suffering.

Inner direction can be distorted in that action and power are valued above being and mutual respect. As noted earlier, when combined with a distorted individualism and specificity, inner direction has resulted in the destructive exercise of power and knowledge. Unconsidered and selfish industrial and technological processes, for example, have resulted in life-threatening, global environmental degradation. In moral terms one species is selfishly and short-sightedly consuming the environment and well-being of every other living specie. In Christian terms, this is a distorted view of God, humanity and creation.

In outer directed societies, the focus is on being and there is insufficient stress on doing. Because of the perception that one's life is affected by circumstances beyond one's control, there is little initiative to make things happen. This leads to a more passive approach to life which is a serious obstacle to moral agency, and which impedes taking personal and communal responsibility. In a traditionalist setting, where authority is stressed, innovation and independent action may be regarded with suspicion. "One is not supposed to take responsibility beyond one's strictly defined sphere of competence." (Nürnberger, 2007:176, 190.)

When combined with ascribed status, obtaining a job becomes the pinnacle of achievement, not the responsibilities attached to that job. Telephones, for example, can ring for over an hour in government offices, because a sense of personal responsibility, initiative and commitment are absent. When combined with a distorted communitarianism, children are socialised to conform. As adults, they may become passive and fearful, and wait for instructions. However, from a Christian moral perspective, both sins of commission (what we do) and sins of omission (what we fail to do) render us morally culpable before God.

4.6 Sequential and synchronous time

Westerners have a strong sense that "time is flying" and that it ought to be used well. This results in efficiency. Their days are conceived of as consisting of a certain number of hours, minutes and even seconds. Having been exposed to industrial processes, complex systems of administration, written communications and precise scientific analysis in their cultural experience, many are familiar with planning and executive responsibilities. What our societies need are leaders that can both plan for the long term and aspire to be responsible (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000:330).

Africans have a far better sense of the present moment and of circular processes of time. Much time is spent in developing or nurturing family and other relationships. Important (and recurring) events such as births and weddings are celebrated at length with verve and joy. Events and relationships can be fully enjoyed without a sense of needing to rush off to complete some or other task.

In moral terms, when the preference for sequential time is over-emphasised, human beings become slaves to time. Life becomes rushed and processed rather than savoured and enjoyed. Living under pressure, the vital question of "what is the moral value of what I am doing" may not even be asked by Westerners. In their focus on *chronos* (measured time) they may not notice the *kairos* (a key moment) and be unable to stop, as Jesus did, and meet the needs of those He met while "on the way" (eg. Mark 5:21-34; 10:46-52; and John 4:4-10). When combined with being reserved and a cultural neutrality (when reason is separated from emotion), Westerners can be experienced by those from affective and synchronous time cultures as cold, uncaring and purely task-focused.

The perception of time as purely synchronous can also lead to moral distortions. Relaxed and lengthy conversations replace service delivery, diligence and professionalism. Deadlines are not met and goals not achieved because the focus is on the present moment and not the sequence of events. Hence planning, managerial efficiency and organisational processes are neglected. When linked to ascribed status, services are not delivered to needy people, business contracts remain unfulfilled, jobs are lost and endless numbers of people are unjustly treated, frustrated or ignored.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that in order for the moral transformation of persons and the moral renewal of society to take place, attention needs to be given to what moral agency is. For a Christian, moral agency is the desire to be a good person and, enabled by God, the growing ability to do what is right, both in one's personal life and in one's social interactions and responsibilities.

Both western and African societies are immersed in a moral crisis. Moral uncertainty, the abuse of power, and the failure to act in morally appropriate ways are common. A nuanced analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of both western and African cultures must be embarked upon if culture is to help rather than hinder in the construction of moral persons and communities.

The twelve cultural values and tendencies discussed above reveal that each can be a moral pathway. However, these values need to be equally appreciated, held in a creative tension, and wisely applied given the needs of different circumstances. When these tendencies are over-emphasised and thereby distorted, a moral imbalance results. Even more important, when distorted value preferences are combined with other distorted preferences, moral breakdown is the result.

From a Christian perspective, universal moral norms and values need to be balanced by a consideration of particular circumstances. To achieve moral renewal in society it is necessary to develop individual moral character, convictions, commitment, courage, decision making and action, guided by a moral vision. Equally, commitment to genuine community and the growth of moral communities that can nurture individuals and give rise to concerted moral action are vital. Specific cultures are concerned with truth and a clear perception of the realities of life whereas diffuse cultures seek to promote harmonious relationships. But no individual or community can thrive when relationships are abused or destroyed or where confusion and manipulation are promoted. What is required in our society is a focus on achievement, knowledge and skills for the performance of tasks on the one hand and, on the other hand, to ascribe value to people as human beings created in the image of God, however marred that image may have become. Inner direction is crucially important in the formation of moral agency because personal responsibility and initiative are required. In addition, the recognition within outer directed cultures of communal belonging, group wisdom and an awareness of the rhythms of creation are vital.

However, it is necessary to counteract passive dependency on authoritarian leaders. Finally, two of the words commonly used for *time* in the New Testament, *chronos* (sequential time, e.g. Luke 1:57; 8:27) and *kairos* (the appointed, proper, opportune or synchronous time, e.g. Mark 1:15; 13:33; 1 Peter 5:6) indicate the importance of both perceptions of time.

This means that cultural tendencies and values need to be held in tension to ensure the common good rather than the benefit of a few. Certainly, cultural value distortions need to be exposed and resisted. Both African and western cultures can benefit from self critique and external critique. The danger is defensiveness and "denialism", where all aspects of one's own culture are romanticised and protected. Individual Christians and the churches as local, national and international moral communities can play a significant role in both exposing cultural distortions and promoting cultural values that are morally beneficial to the societies in which we live.

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Key concepts:

Christian ethics
culture
leadership
moral agency
moral communities
moral values

Kernbegrippe:

Christelike etiek
kultuur
leierskap
morele bemiddeling
morele gemeenskappe
morele waardes