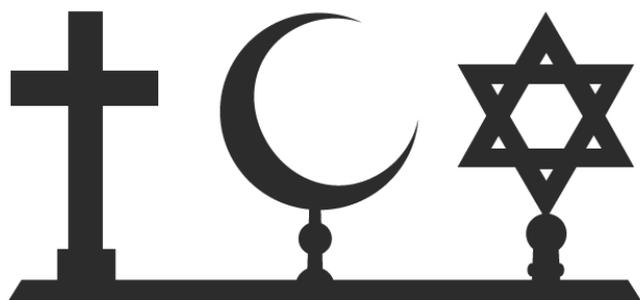


“Thou shalt not preach without being registered”

Choosing a ‘non-toxic’ response

By Mike Burnard



From News24:

‘No one in South Africa will be allowed to preach without being registered’. This is one of the recommendations submitted to Parliament by the **Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (CRL)**, *Netwerk24*¹ reported on Wednesday (12 July 2017).

The CRL revealed its report on the *“Commercialisation of religions and the exploitation of people’s beliefs”*. It started an investigation in 2015 to protect religious practices in South Africa. That, after a series of events which included preachers forcing worshippers to eat snakes, drink petrol and kiss them.

The chairperson of the CRL, Thoko Mkhwanazi-Xaluva, said in Johannesburg the aim of the investigation included making sure that “those horrendous stories aren’t sustainable”. Mkhwanazi-Xaluva said Parliament had to approve the recommendations before they could be implemented. She said the CRL recommended that faith practitioners and places of worship be registered with an accredited “umbrella organisation”. This would include the SA Council of Churches.

“The umbrella organisations will report to peer-evaluation committees who will report to the CRL. In this way, we will build up a data base of every religious practitioner and place of worship. We have to know who these people are, what they do and where.”

Mkhwanazi-Xaluva said it would help ensure that religious practitioners do not violate basic human rights, such as human dignity. *“We have to ensure that faith practices are subject to the Constitution.”*

A TOXIC COMBINATION

A Christian response

In a sermon titled **“Practising Radical Compassion”**, Richard Rohr makes the following defining statement: *“The most toxic combination in the Christian faith is **IGNORANCE** combined with **ARROGANCE**.”*

Many Christians responding to the CRL’s report on the *“Commercialisation of Religion and Abuse of People’s Belief Systems”*, display one or both of these qualities. The various posts and comments on Facebook surrounding this case reveals the ‘toxicity’ of such a lack of knowledge and arrogance.

Addressing an issue that lies so close to the hearts of millions of people requires basic knowledge, Godly discernment and Christ-like virtues. The sensitive issues of religious tolerance and freedom of association (or non-association for that matter) – central to most communities (whether Christian or non-Christian) – necessitate a ‘non-toxic’ response that will reflect the heart of a crucified Christ who never demanded His rights but died for the dignity of those He came to serve.

¹ <http://m.news24.com/news24/SouthAfrica/News/thou-shalt-not-preach-without-being-registered-says-crl-20170712>

To obtain a clearer understanding of the process and recommendations, it is critical to **ask the right questions before getting the right answers.**

QUESTION 1: *What motivated the CRL to recommend 'licensing religion' in South Africa?*



Sadly, the reason why this report was initiated in the first place was a combination of malpractice, abuse and exploitation by 'Christian' churches, accompanied by a deafening silence from the larger Christian community. Let's be honest: when we read the news reports of the 'Doom' (insecticide) pastor, we were all quick to come up with jokes and saw the incident as laughable and quite ridiculous. There was little or no weeping over this gross misrepresentation of a loving Christ. But people suffered.

The reality is that every faith community in South Africa – whether Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist or any other – suffers the consequences of people (claiming to be Christian) exploiting the vulnerable. If there is anger, it should be AGAINST the Church,

not FROM the Church. The argument might be offered that these pastors are not 'Christian' in the true sense of the word and should not be seen as Christian, but the reality is that the silence of those who do follow Christ truthfully contributed to the notion in the hearts of onlookers that Christianity is 'harmful'.

Within an African context, where poverty and spirituality are mixed in and outside the Church, the vulnerable need to be protected against exploitation, at all costs. If the Church is unable to provide this protection from false teachers and 'spiritual thugs', then the government has to intervene. And sadly, this is what happened.

How should we respond?

Not through aggressive posts on Facebook that liken the government to the Anti-Christ, but by public repentance and brokenness. How do we restore the rightful image of a loving Christ? REPENT and ask forgiveness.

QUESTION 2: *Why are Western Christians so quick to embrace a victim mentality?*

This is an equally compelling question, based on disturbing realities. Too often, we read comments from believers who enjoy the pinnacle of freedom (in the US, in Europe and in South Africa) about 'entering a time of persecution and victimisation for their faith in Christ'. In many posts about the recent ruling, the CRL's decision is linked to the 'Anti-Christ' and a time of severe persecution. This originates in an ignorant and arrogant heart.



This 'victim mentality' is often characterised by pessimism, self-pity, resentment against another group, race or religion, and a belief system that 'everybody is against us because we are good'. It creates an 'US and THEM' attitude, blaming any and every available scapegoat (government, fate, circumstances, other people, even objects!). This often leads to conspiracy theories and a 'faith' focused on one enemy after the other. People with this mindset seldom make an effort to learn from their mistakes, to analyse what they did wrong, and to see the opportunity in the midst of the challenge. Their 'poor me' attitude may be no problem for them, but it often creates anger and resentment in others.

It is also a dangerous trend in Western Christianity that the theology of 'persecution' is preached, and even promoted, as the ultimate sign of true Christianity, when in reality, we fight for our rights and do everything possible to keep our freedom intact. For outsiders, this often gives the impression of 'schizophrenic' Christianity.

In order to bridge the concept that “everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12), the Church in the West often seeks something they don’t want and uses every opportunity to promote an ‘image of faithfulness’ while fiercely opposing it. It is true that Christianity is losing its privileged position in countries like the US and the UK. And while people in some occupations may feel under pressure to compromise their faith, we cannot say we are persecuted or face the levels of hostility experienced by millions of Christians around the world.

To embrace the victim role in this specific case, and to refer to persecution in the future, dismisses and diminishes the actual sufferings of our fellow believers in countries across the globe where persecution is the norm. This turns us into victims and results in an egocentric Western faith that is apathetic about the suffering of the global Church. This encourages Western believers to be insular and self-obsessed.

How should we respond?

The Church needs an in-depth introspection about practices in churches that are hurting people more than they are bringing people to Christ – whether it be excluding people based on race or sexual orientation, exploiting people by promising wealth and health, or simply looking down on people with a different theology. Sadly, there is a lot of animosity towards Christianity in non-believers’ hearts because of the ‘enemy image’ we so often create. Articles from the Pagan Rights Alliance (yes, they do exist) refers to Christianity as a the “stench of religious rights” (<http://www.paganrightsalliance.org/harmful-religious-practices-in-sa/>). And heaven weeps.

QUESTION 3: *Are there legitimate concerns and realistic dangers?*



Yes, there are, and in this regard, the Church in South Africa needs to join hands with **FOR SA** (Freedom of Religion South Africa), which has dedicated and committed Christian attorneys, leaders and pastors seeking Godly answers that will benefit all faith communities in South Africa.

In their press release of 11 July 2017², **FOR SA** noted the following points as the major concerns about the CRL’s proposal:

- The process followed by the CRL is deeply flawed and therefore unconstitutional and open to judicial review.
- The CRL is an institution of the State, so this proposal amounts to State control of religion.
- The “Peer Review Committee” will advise the CRL on how to regulate and license each religion – this is NOT self-regulation.
- Umbrella organisations will be evaluated on whether (or not) their doctrine and practices are “acceptable”, which is a violation of Freedom of Religion.
- The CRL’s proposal is a violation of Freedom of Association.
- The CRL will fund this structure by charging license fees, which will likely exceed one billion Rand annual income.
- The CRL has ignored submissions and alternative solutions proposed by the majority of the faith community in South Africa.

FOR SA also proposes the following “alternative solutions” to the CRL proposal:

- The CRL can (and should) refer complaints of abuses to the relevant authorities, so that the relevant laws can be enforced.
- The CRL can (and should) play a leading role in ensuring that religious leaders and their organisations understand their legal obligations.
- The CRL can (and should) assist in the necessary consultation process needed to develop a “Code of Ethics”.

² <http://forsa.org.za/press-release-concerns-and-objections-to-crl-recommendation-to-license-religion-in-south-africa/>

FOR SA concluded their report as follows:

“**FOR SA** is fully persuaded that the South African religious community is well able to self-regulate and to make the necessary adjustments to address the valid concerns expressed by the CRL’s Report. Our concern is that although the CRL’s proposal may seem benign, it clearly amounts to a power grab by the CRL to capture the religious community and bring it under the control of the State. As such, it will almost certainly turn cancerous at some point and it is widely condemned and opposed by the religious community.”

How should we respond?



INcontext International would like to appeal to our South African readers to support **FOR SA** financially³ in their endeavours to ensure that all belief-systems in South Africa, especially those of the Christian faith, maintain a position of expressing their faith within the parameters guaranteed by the constitution. They cannot do it without the support of those who share this concern.

Click here to contribute:

<http://forsa.org.za/donate/>

³ <http://forsa.org.za/donate/>