Can Conviviality 'Trump' Polarisation?

The challenge to the church in polarizing times

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Introduction

- The title of my lecture is meant to bring to mind one of the most polarizing global political figures of our generation in a play on the word "trump".

- In many ways he has become the poster child for populist leaders everywhere as we see a rise in neo-liberal capitalist, facist-like politics across the globe.

- Discourse, often fueled by and connected to the religious and fundamentalist right and which excludes the most vulnerable in society such as migrants, people of colour, women and indigenous peoples and ignores the looming climate crisis in favour of extractive neo liberal capitalist motives.

- Trumps uncritical support by individuals such as Franklin Graham and James Dobson – American fundementalists with widespread evangelical support – and also Brazil's Bolsanaro's support by Brazilian Pentecostals - is particularly worrying as we seek to discern the calling of the church in times of polarization.

Intro

- At the grassroots level we see the outworking of empire as the increasing marginalisation of the most vulnerable and widening divisions between race, culture and religion.
- In this lecture I firstly seek to explore some of the thinking around the notion of polarization – also with regards to the manner in which media heightens fissures with regards to race, class and religion, followed with a distinctly South African perspective on our current political polarisation.
- I then present the notion of conviviality as a possible anti-dote to engaging faithfully at grassroots within what seems like an increasingly VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambigious) world and take this into conversations with stories from grassroots (again with a largely South African flavor) and with other theological conversation partners in seeking to discern the church's role in polarizing times.

Deep cleavages

- According to De Klerk (2016:12) "deeply divided societies are societies with deep ethnic, linguistic, regional, religious, or other emotional and polarizing cleavages.

- Citizens of deeply divided societies are segregated along polarizing lines which reduce interaction between different groups in society... and could result in different segments of society living in parallel spheres, where people are unable to think outside their own group, which could result in alienation and distrust".

- Indeed, the volatility, uncertainty and complexity and ambiguity of a VUCA world often fosters fear on the most primal level and results in individuals and groups aligning themselves with ideological, political or religious positions that most closely affirm their own in order protect themselves against 'othered' ways of being in the world and thus assume what could be termed a false sense of safety.

Question…

- Please respond on the chat:

- Name your country and briefly state what the nature of the polarization in your society is… (is it religious, ethnic, racial)

Polarisation/ Polarization

- Polarisation is most commonly discussed in the broad political sense as "the extent to which partisans view each other as a disliked group", however, in this paper we will take a broader perspective (Iyengar et al. 2012:1 in Yang et al 2016:352).

- This of course implies that there are in and out groups -dependent on which side of the fence you are sitting and also apparently on who you are listening to, too.

- Studies with regards to the influence of media argue that "rather than being motivated to avoid dissonance, people prefer like minded information as a strategy to process information with less cognitive effort" (Kim et al 917).

- Studies regarding implicit bias found for example that biases occur even among those who profess to be impartial, such as judges (or academics?) and that while "these biases do not necessarily correspond with our professed beliefs and views, they generally favour our own group and affect our actual behavior" (Wykstra 2015:143).

- Furthermore, "because likeminded information is considered more credible and convincing compared with dissonant information, people prefer likeminded news and information".

- The latter is not helped by social media such as Facebook, whose algorithms pick up your most likeminded information which in turn links to websites and adverts, which only seek to reinforce your views. This is worrying if one considers that scholars show that "selective exposure to similar points of view and avoidance of challenging information will likely hurt democracy".

- Mutz (2002) argues that, therefore that:

The need for contrasting perspectives

"Citizens need a range of common experiences to develop a broader understanding of others, and sharing common experiences with different others may lead to social consensus. By contrast if people are not exposed to others opinions, they are less likely to be aware of others legitimate rationales and even their own rationales. In addition, if people expose themselves only to similar points of view and ignore contrasting perspectives, they are less likely to be tolerant of challenging viewpoints"

(Mutz 2012)

The South African Scenario

- If truth be told, its why I continue to keep some right wing, racists as Facebook friends. In my own country, South Africa, we have seen a fragmentation of the dream of the rainbow nation.

- A nation, which has overcome the horrors of colonialism and Apartheid to achieve the dream of a bloodless transition to a democratic dispensation termed "post-Apartheid".

- To many - particularly people of colour in South Africa – the rainbow has faded and dark clouds have gathered in its wake.

- These clouds are the lingering inequality and poverty still plaguing many South Africans 25 years later as the nation was recently identified once again as the most unequal country in the world by a World Bank Report – with race skewed inequality still a key feature (Gouws 2018; Meiring, Kannemeyer & Potgieter 2018:5).

- Despite the fact that white people on average still earn up to four times more than black people and the majority of the poor in South Africa are black, the past few years have witnessed the re-emergence of the white right – possibly best represented by Afrikaans country singer Steve Hofmeyer – who claim that white people are persecuted and even experience genocide as evidenced by the murder on farms.

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SA scenario cont.

- While farm murders are horrific, they can by no means be termed 'white genocide' at this point, when compared to the high rates of murder with regards to all population groups.

- The elections held in May 2019 show a worrying trend as the Vryheid's Front Plus (a decidedly rightist party) achieved a drastic increase in votes – largely supposedly garnered from the more centrist Democratic Alliance party.

- These trends point to rising racial tensions in light also of the Black Land First movement's explicit emphasis that it was not interested in white members or voters and their leader's worrying outburst that white people will be killed for their land – a position which only fuels the white genocide narrative.

SA Scenario cont.

- What lies at the heart of the continuing and now deepening cleavages of polarization between race groups?

- According to the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation's 2014 Barometer:

"Apartheid regulated and enforced the psychological segregation of South Africa's constitutive population groups. Apart from the economic dispossession that coincided with forced removals and the enforcement of pass laws to police geographic segregation, the imposition of these laws also had a profound effect on the psyche of all south Africans, instilling a "toxic understanding" of intergroup relations"

(National Action Plan to Combat Racism 2016:23.

SA Scenario

- South Africa, is a notoriously religious nation with over 80% expressing affiliation to Christianity and also other religious affiliation (Muslim, Hindu etc) yet it remains unclear how religion (as it well does in countries such as the US or Brazil) plays any clear role in party political polarization.

- While the so-called Christian party, the ACDP, saw a slight increase in votes in the recent elections, its focus on the type of individualized moral single voter issues such as abortion, the death penalty and gay marriage appear to only appeal to a small minority of self-professed Christians if they only achieved 0.84% of the votes and 80% of the population self identify as Christians (https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/2019-south-africa-election-results-national-provincial-all-votes/).

- Christians are, therefore, just as likely (or more accurately more likely if one inspects voting statistics) to vote for any of the political parties on offer and it appears the same for other religious groups too.

- What is interesting to note is that in the SA governments National Action Plan to Combat racism – nowhere are religious groups listed as a key actor in combating and eliminating racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance (2016: 38-44).

- Civil society is indeed listed, but no reference is made to religion. This is perhaps not surprising to those of you in a secularized Western Europe, but for South Africans who still have vivid memories of the church's double legacy in both supporting and opposing Apartheid - religion can and must be public – for better or for worse.

Conviviality – 3 sources

- **The term conviviality of course relates to the term 'con-vivere', which asks "how can we live together?" and in times of polarization this is certainly a question that centers our discourse and practice (Addy 2018:3).**

- **1. Convivencia - Muslims, Jews and Catholics living peaceably**

- **2. Ivan Illich - considered conviviality to be freedom realized in personal interdependence and as such, an intrinsic ethical value**

- **3. "The sociable pleasure of people coming together and enjoying conversation and discussion in a relaxed manner, not under any constraints sharing a meal. Conviviality, therefore, relates to friendly dealings and also to relationships unconstrained by organisations or technology."**

Conviviality as challenge to boundary making

One of the ways in which polarization occurs is through boundary making and marking. This process of exclusion works according to Volf through:

"Cutting the bonds that connect, taking oneself out of the pattern of interdependence and placing oneself in a position of sovereign independence. The other then emerges either as an enemy that must be pushed away from the self and driven out of its space or as a nonentity – a superfluous being – that can be disregarded and abandoned." (Volf 1996)

Conviviality as challenge to boundary making

- In other words, those who are not likeminded and do not share our views are avoided.

- This form of boundary making elevates us and dehumanizes the other in such a way that those who do not share our political views, social identities or religious identity (or other identity markers) are "othered".

- Convivial thinking requires, however, that we work for peace and reconciliation, but that this work recognizes the need to acknowledge and value diverse ways of thinking and being in an effort to restore trust and conviviality (Addy 2019:5).

- In this way seeking conviviality is not merely seeking tolerance of the other – it is also a "step towards resolving intolerance through dialogue and practice".

- It is possibly even an acknowledgement and identification of the implicit bias that drives "othering" as starting point.

- This is hard work and will require courageous, faithful Christ followers who faithfully continue to push in and engage tough issues around race, class, religion and gender for example in the face of fear driven needs to feel safe.

Student protestors, Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University

Conviviality as challenge to boundary making

- In what was termed by many as a polarizing engagement during the #Feesmustfall student protests at our university (and in the context of our own faculty of theology), is for me an excellent example of what seeking conviviality through dialogue could start as.

- **In a tense, yet open, dialogue with students at our faculty around transformation a student called Jeffery Ngobeni burst out in anger: "we loved white people, but they didn't love us back".**

- I remember the moment like it was yesterday and while many white people in the room only heard anger – I heard pain, I heard rejection, I heard socio-economic suffering...The core of his pain was at the core of human experience – our need to be loved.

- **He wasn't asking for the soft version of love**. The kind of love offered by our Truth and Reconciliation Commission's reconciliatory apologies, where white people were called on to apologise for the sins of Apartheid, but not challenged to address the socio-economic injustices that were its fruits.

- He was getting to the heart of neighbourly love in South Africa.

- He was challenging us: what does it really mean to love our neighbour in a context of inequality where most black people are poor and most white people are middle class to rich? What will it cost? That is at the heart of restorative justice in SA.

- In this case, love for the so called "other" may look like confrontational, polarising dialogue but really it is the most radical form of working our way towards neighbourliness of the kind that cannot push the other aside – it is a call for neighbourly interdependence, which takes the first steps towards conviviality as life together.

- Looking back on this encounter, it becomes clear to me that this seemingly polarizing confrontation crossed boundaries and challenged us to become the robust faculty we are today – as we learn from each other how to become better neighbours, who cross from tolerance to embrace.

Church, koinonia & conviviality

- Addy (2019:1) notes that unlike the term koinonia, which has a possibly closed connotation as it most popularly refers to fellowship within the body of believers, the notion of conviviality asks for more porous boundaries that extends to common action with others in society in order to work for the common good.

- In a recent Masters class with ordained ministers from several denominations, it became clear that one of the reasons why they struggled to engage the issues of community, was that they centered their thinking in terms of church, rather than Kingdom.

- Some, despite, years of theological education and ministry recognized with great dismay that they had in fact equated the Kingdom with the church.

- The community was seen as "out there" and the church was centered – a problematic ecclesiology which failed to recognize that the Kingdom invites all towards the restorative action of shalom and that the church is the open armed servant of the Kingdom in this response to the world.

Conviviality as invitation to reciprocity and power sharing

Conviviality as invitation to reciprocity and power sharing

- What has become clear in the relationships between powerful populist presidents, such as Trump, Bolsanaro and even South Africa's own corrupt former President Zuma and church leaders, is that their alignment with the fundamentalist church is rooted in power.

- Both parties seek power – religious entities seek the influence that political ties bring and political entities seek the legitimacy that religious affiliation often provides. Empire demands religious justification and uses god-talk to "call up a conjured reality of evil on the other side" (Boesak 2009:60).

- In fact, just last year Rev Franklin Graham (son of Billy Graham) called for a day of prayer for Trump describing it as a type of "spiritual warfare," necessary because Trump's many accomplishments "make him very unpopular with the Devil and the kingdom of darkness." (https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/franklin-graham-has-played-his-ultimate-trump-card/2019/06/03/22a50b18-862b-11e9-98c1-e945ae5db8fb_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.a5e427af6892).

- In this case the enemy is all those that oppose Trump, and Boesak (2009:60) notes that:

"since the enemy is not humans, but "evil", any and all means are justified; there is no possibility for error on the side of those who represent goodness. This theological stance harbours within itself another ideological trait: it closes itself off from all self-criticism or correction. It ascribes to itself an attribute only ascribable to God: that of sinlessness".

Conviviality as invitation to reciprocity and power sharing

- We are called to resist these forces of empire that often seek to marginalize the poorest and most vulnerable and claims to be all powerful (and I quote now from the Accra Document, paragraph 10):

- "based on a false premise that it can save the world through the creation of wealth and prosperity, claiming sovereignty over life and demanding total allegiance, which amounts to idolatry. Like Moloch it demands 'an endless flow of sacrifices from the poor and creation'" (Boesak 2009:60).

- The development praxis of conviviality provides one such way in which we can resist at grassroots as it recognizes the interconnectedness of justice and dignity for all, based upon the understanding that Jesus was in the midst of those who were suffering from injustice and marginalization and indeed challenged the powers that be even unto death (Addy 2017:20).

- It is also a praxis that upends the way in which power is usually practiced amoungst the "least of these". More often than not, in working with marginalized groups such as migrants, asylum seekers, the unemployed, vulnerable women and children and other oppressed groups, there is the tendency to respond with charitable action of the kind that "projectises" their marginalization and poverty – leading us to once again separate them from ourselves and make them objects of charity dependent on our power to give.

- In reflecting on the concept of conviviality from a theological perspective we must therefore "move firmly away from the concept of working for other people, or the church for others, but rather with other people "– the church with others" (Addy 2017:19).

"We need to move away from simply well meaning actions for other needy people towards sharing life, based on empathy, reciprocity and presence...seeking conviviality implies that openness to the 'other' is a condition for our faithful Christian living as persons or as congregations. The people of God are those who can work with the marginalized other without wanting to dominate." (Addy 2017:19)

Conviviality as invitation to power sharing

- This action works against the second aspect of exclusion as identified by Volf (1996): "Second, exclusion can entail erasure of separation, not recognizing the other as someone who in his or her otherness belongs to the pattern of interdependence. The other then emerges as an inferior being who must either be assimilated by being made like the self or subjugated to the self".

- It recognizes that we are "we too are needy, with self-sufficiency giving away to solidarity… we are all beggars" (Hermann 2011:272).)

- This relates to the call for interdependence within the notion of conviviality as conceptualized by Illich and also links to the African notion of Ubuntu – "I am because we are "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu.

- My humanity is tied to yours and therefore exclusion and inequality is not an option.

- The oppression of Empire through assimilation and subjugation of those deemed inferior by the system cannot stand where my humanity is bound to the so called other. My wealth and prosperity and that of the earth is bound up in relation to you – and we are called to work together for the good life.

"The spirit of Ubuntu – that profound African sense that we are human only through the humanity of other human beings – is not a parochial phenomenon, but has added globally to our common search for a better world"

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela

#HeritageDay

Conviviality as an invitation to power sharing

- Conviviality also calls for interdependent solidarity in standing against the forces of Empire to "stand where God stands" (Belhar Confession, Article 4) "namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others".

- Simanga Khumalo (2018:161) points out that part of practicing Ubuntu is that "we take sides with those that are in need, we support strangers by sharing our humanity with them and thus restoring their own humanity in the process".

- In religiously driven development praxis that acknowledges the need for a pilgrimage of justice and peace, convivial praxis also seeks to confront the economic and political power structures that produce injustice.

- This, too, can be viewed as polarizing and risky, but confronting power for the sake of the other makes moral demands.

Conviviality as life together

- Last year when I started writing this paper for a conference, our Muslim community was celebrating Eid and I reflected on the notion of hospitality through what we in the Cape call the 'Boeka table'.

- This is a long table often set on the streets of communities and where everyone in the community is invited to break the fast with the Muslim community during the month of Ramadan.

- An act, which in one community riddled by gangsterism and poverty, was said to bring a cease fire of warring gangs.

- Conviviality as "the sociable pleasure of people coming together and enjoying conversation and discussion in a relaxed manner, not under any constraints sharing a meal. Conviviality, therefore, relates to friendly dealings and also to relationships unconstrained by organisations or technology".

- In sharing meals and life together, there is also an element of the potential for live giving fun – of sharing cultures through the adventure of food and drink. A foretaste of the feast table set for all

Conviviality as life together

Conviviality as life together

- The notion of hospitality is closely tied to that of conviviality, but Addy (2017:19) notes that while "a hospitable attitude may be a precursor to conviviality... it still implies that that the one offering hospitality defines the terms of the relationship. If one is a guest one is expected to leave and if one stays and becomes a member of the community, hospitality in its original meaning ends!"

- Addy is, here, possibly referring to the kinds of hospitality that "keep people needy strangers while fostering an illusion of relationship and connection. It both disempowers and domesticates guests while it reinforces the hosts power, control and sense of generosity" (Pohl 1999:120).

- Conviviality as life together invites the kind of hospitality that recognises these power dimensions: "if we are hospitable, we can welcome the stranger and maybe learn something, it may change us or not. If we work for conviviality we do not reckon with the 'other' leaving and therefore we have to live together" (Addy 2019:6).

St Peters Community Supper

Conviviality as life together

- An initiative in my home city of Cape Town, which has stood out for me as a local congregation's engagement in crossing boundaries of power, race and class in a convivial manner has been the St Peters Community Supper.

- St Peters is an Anglican Church situated near the inner city, which hosts what they call a community supper each week, which brings together church members and street people from the surrounding areas for a meal of equals. Each week between 80-120 people come together to eat a meal (Aldous 2018:102).

- A recent PhD by an Anglican priest friend on the supper argues that during Colonial times and Apartheid "we had no shared rights and no shared human identity"

- and that "ethnocentrism, or our status as oppressor or oppressed precluded a shared human identity", but that "these former categories are being erased, or certainly blurred at the Supper as people share a meal" (Aldous 2018:161).

Conviviality as life together

- He notes that while this is not instantaneous, one of the values of the meal is openly stated as 'we work at equalizing power' – this is not a charitable meal for the homeless, but rather a meal of equals where they 'become neighbours and friends by hearing each other's stories" and sharing the love of Jesus (Aldous 2019:162).

- P11 says, 'what I appreciate mostly of the community dinners that for the hour that I am here then I am human… there are people who are interested in me.' [P11:2] (Aldous 2018:).

- He also notes in his study the need for privileged white people to stop claiming "claiming an 'innocence' and an unawareness of what happens when white people position themselves in a space" – in drawing on Boesak's earlier work over 40 years ago – he calls on them to make a "deliberate effort is to be made to eschew innocence and give power away" (Aldous 2018:165).

- To be in terms of Philippians 2 – kenotic/self-emptying. Living together, often requires that we empty ourselves of our prejudices and blind spots and expose ourselves to others worlds and ways of being and doing in the world.

- For South Africans (and perhaps in many other contexts) at least, this is one of the first steps towards less toxic intergroup relations.

Liturgy after the liturgy

"In the Eucharist we express gratitude for the food and drink we have to share – and implicitly for the work of those who produced it. But we share equally, which is a powerful symbol contrary to the usual pattern of sharing resources in everyday life. It is not surprising that the Eucharist is the central act of the Christian liturgy, because it makes visible our conviviality with each other and with God in Christ. We recognize that God is present in the world and active with all people and we are invited through the Eucharist to share the liturgy after the liturgy in which we re-enact the symbolism concretely in compassion for the other."

(Addy 2017:20)

In polarizing times, we are challenged to share the liturgy after the liturgy – to share the grace we have received in concreate and sacrificial ways. I wonder, coming from a country where Sunday is the most segregated time of the week, how our understandings of Eucharist can draw us into convivial sharing of life together across lines of class and culture?

Conclusion

- Questions to reflect on:

- Do you think the way conviviality is described here could be applied in your context?

- What stood out for you from your own context in terms of the lecture?

- How can religious actors in your own context promote conviviality in the context of development work at grassroots?