HUMAN RIGHTS: A CHANNEL FOR SALVATION?

ABSTRACT
In the light of many severe social-economic and health problems many South Africans today experience a situation of helplessness and despair. In the face of these problems we ask whether there is a better solution than leaving the country and starting a new life elsewhere. If Christianity still has anything to say regarding these social-economic problems it must be the belief in salvation – salvation from a situation of helplessness and despair. The belief in salvation should appeal to and inspire people and therefore trigger change-oriented action. But does it happen in practice? To gain insight into this question we did empirical research among two groups of youths: a group of grade 11 students at some private (Catholic and Anglican) schools, and a group of grade 11 students at Afrikaans-medium public schools whom we investigated in a comprehensive survey research project, about their belief in God’s salvation in the past, present and future, as well as in his salvation in both their personal relations and local and global communities. The question is whether this belief has an effect on their human rights culture, which theoretically can be positive or negative, or lead to no effect at all. The conclusion of this research is that their belief in divine salvation has a non-exclusive, differentiated positive effect. The effect is non-exclusive, because other religious factors like an open type of religious socialisation, ritual praxis and church participation, and more especially non-religious factors like gender, home language, political and cultural orientations also have an effect, sometimes even a stronger effect. The effect is differentiated, because only their belief in God’s salvation in their personal life and their own communities has a positive effect on their human rights attitudes, whereas the other modes of God’s salvific activity have a clearly ambivalent (positive/negative) effect or even no effect at all.

Introduction
People who find themselves in a situation of helplessness, frustration and disillusionment cannot always resist the temptation to retire to their corner and throw in the towel. That happens even when such feelings are short-lived, but even more so when they are a permanent state of mind because the underlying factors appear to be, or actually are, unalterable. This applies all the more when they affect not just one person but an entire group, community, a whole population. In that case the sense of helplessness and impotence may spread like an oil
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slick and there seems to be no agency or institution that can put a stop to it, let alone turn the situation around.

That is the situation in South Africa today; at any rate, that is how it is experienced by many groups. After the victory of democracy over the hegemony of the apartheid regime and the triumph of two successive free elections, the country appears to be plunged – at least in the experience of many communities – in an atmosphere of despair, even apathy (see Pieterse 2001, 97). Is there a better solution than leaving the country and starting a new life elsewhere? This is a realistic option only for a small minority of whites who can pride themselves on a good education (albeit at the expense of the whole population) and professional job experience. For other whites, either middle class or even underclass, the emigration option would be short-sighted if not socially cruel. And this applies even more to millions and millions of black people who are not just an underclass but a caste of downright untouchables. People to whom summer means rain drumming on the leaking corrugated iron roofs of their shacks and trickling in rivulets down their backs, who in winter have to protect their naked bodies with scanty garments against the biting cold, may well become cynical about the total lack of compassion and empathy concealed in the proffered prospects of distant lands and brilliant careers.

Will things ever come right for South Africa? Is the call for reconciliation – reconciliation with the past, reconciliation between ethnic groups and within groups, reconciliation with oneself – not a total illusion? How can there be reconciliation when one is faced with an Aids epidemic which devours everyone who is young and promising around it, with no adequate medical help being offered or even available? How can there be reconciliation when one sees the degrading, even defiling poverty around one, the result of far too much for a small minority and far too little for the vast majority? (See Pieterse 2001a, 30-70.) How can there be reconciliation if one is confronted every day with mind-boggling crime statistics – theft, rape, murder – that fill people with a profound sense of insecurity? (Van der Ven & Pieterse 1998.) How can there be reconciliation in the face of massive unemployment which makes young men and women feel they are wasting their lives and dissolving into a void? Is there still hope?

If Christianity still has anything to say, it must be the belief in salvation: salvation from a situation of helplessness and despair. But the message cannot and must not be an instant, facile solution, as though the truism “it will turn out all right in the end” will be realised through direct divine intervention, either now or hereafter. If Christianity still has anything to say, it is because the belief in salvation, as we apply the definition of religion by Geertz (1969), conveys an appealing perception of the world and human life (Christianity as a model of