

## CHAPTER 3

# ORIGINS OF THE MORAL REGENERATION INITIATIVE: 1997-1999

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### **Mandela and religious leaders**

The origins of the Moral Regeneration Movement (MRM) can be traced back to a meeting between then-President Nelson Mandela and key South African religious leaders in June 1997. The meeting took place at the suggestion of various ANC officials, and was arranged by the ANC's Commission on Religious Affairs, a party structure which had been set up in exile and which continues to operate. At that meeting Mandela spoke about the role of religion in nation-building and social transformation, and the need for religious institutions to work with the state. He also described the 'spiritual malaise' underpinning the crime problem:

Our hopes and dreams, at times, seem to be overcome by cynicism, self-centredness and fear. This spiritual malaise sows itself as a lack of good spirit, as pessimism, or lack of hope and faith. And from it emerge the problems of greed and cruelty, of laziness and egotism, of personal and family failure. It both helps fuel the problems of crime and corruption and hinders our efforts to deal with them.<sup>14</sup>

Mandela then called on the religious leaders to get actively involved in a campaign that was subsequently to become the moral regeneration initiative:

We ought to be able to co-operate to transform the spiritual life of our country. Within our own constituencies, we seek to answer these problems - but we need to seek a more comprehensive answer. Specifically, can we devise a way for the leadership of all religions to come together to analyse the cause of this spiritual malaise, and to find a way of tackling it? And can this be done as a matter of urgency?<sup>15</sup>

It was perhaps Mandela's own status as a moral icon that enabled him to tackle the tricky matters of spirituality and morality, and throw down such a gauntlet to the most senior religious figures in the country. One of the consequences of Mandela's meeting with religious leaders was the establishment of a permanent body for interaction between them and the

government – the National Religious Leaders Forum (NRLF). This body still exists, facilitating annual meetings between the president and religious leaders.

Mandela began using the phrase ‘moral regeneration’ in early 1998:

To find a lasting solution to all these challenges requires a community spirit among all of us, a New Patriotism which is finding root within the populace. We must build our nation into a community of citizens who appreciate their civic duty as each one of us improves our well-being. We must be ready to give back to society part of what we gain from it. ... we need a campaign of moral regeneration. As we reconstruct the material conditions of our existence, we must also change our way of thinking, to respect the value and result of honest work, and to treat each law of the country as our own. This is our call to all South Africans to firm up the moral fibre of our nation.<sup>16</sup>

In these early references to moral regeneration, morality was alluded to fairly loosely, linking it to citizenship and patriotism, with few concrete suggestions of what could be done to rebuild the moral fibre.

### The moral summit

What followed from Mandela’s call to religious leaders was a series of workshops between religious and political leaders, culminating in a ‘Moral Summit’ attended by both religious and political leaders.<sup>17</sup> The Moral Summit took place in Johannesburg in October 1998, and was addressed by Mandela, who made explicit the kinds of problems the moral regeneration campaign should tackle. All these problems were, in fact, crime problems:

The symptoms of our spiritual malaise are only too familiar. They include the extent of corruption both in public and private sector, where office and positions of responsibility are treated as opportunities for self-enrichment; the corruption that occurs within our justice system; violence in interpersonal relations and families, in particular the shameful record of abuse of women and children; and the extent of tax evasion and refusal to pay for services used. ...

Mandela also alluded to the challenges the campaign would face in gathering support:

It was to be expected, given our past, that we would encounter problems of this [moral] kind; but not, I believe, how great they would

be. Nor that it would be as difficult to mobilise our society in a united effort to eradicate the problems.<sup>18</sup>

At the Moral Summit, the NRLF issued a variety of documents, including a Code of Conduct for Persons in Positions of Responsibility.<sup>19</sup> This was aimed at furthering the ‘good morality’ campaign among elected representatives, government, legislative and public service officials, and those in authority in political, economic and civil organisations. The Code was signed individually by each of the religious leaders; but it is unknown whether it was adopted by any other of the target groups.

Significantly, much of the background and preparatory work for Mandela’s initial meeting with the religious leaders and the subsequent summit between a wider spectrum of religious leaders and political parties was done inside ANC (political party) structures, rather than through government. This enabled the necessary degree of flexibility, but perhaps also led to the initiative not being institutionalised in government.

### The ‘RDP of the soul’

By the following year, Mandela was calling for the ‘RDP of the Soul’ – referring to his government’s Reconstruction and Development Policy (known as the RDP). In his opening of Parliament address in February 1999 (just ahead of the country’s second democratic election), Mandela attempted to give more clarity to the moral regeneration initiative:

South African society needs to infuse itself with a measure of discipline, a work ethic and responsibility for the actions we undertake. ... related to this is the reconstruction of the soul of the nation, the ‘RDP of the Soul’: by this we mean first and foremost respect for life; pride and self-respect as South Africans ... It means asserting our collective and individual identity as Africans, committed to the rebirth of the continent; being respectful of other citizens and honouring women and children of our country who are exposed to all kinds of domestic violence and abuse. It means building our schools into communities of learning and improvement of character. It means mobilising one another, and not merely waiting for government to clean our streets; or for funding allocations to plant trees and tend schoolyards. These are things we need to embrace as a nation that is nurturing its New Patriotism. They constitute an important environment for bringing up future generations.<sup>20</sup>

The references to the RDP were perhaps intended to appeal to that section of the ANC electorate that had been fervent supporters of government policies in the early years of the new democracy; but who were becoming sceptical, fearful and cynical in the face of rising crime rates and ongoing inefficiencies in the criminal justice system. Although the RDP itself had been abandoned in favour of the GEAR economic policy, the term had retained positive meaning in the popular discourse.

The examples of morally regenerative activities cited by Mandela were, importantly, not limited to crime prevention or treatment of victims of crime; but referred more broadly to civic duties as being socially and morally beneficial. The rhetoric of this early phase of the campaign was motivated by the new government's need to inculcate social responsibility, and a new approach to the citizen-state interface among its electorate, which had emerged from a deeply divisive social system and a hostile relationship to the state.

### **ANC views on moral regeneration**

The ANC (rather than the religious leaders who had been asked by Mandela to tackle the problem of spiritual malaise in South Africa) was strongly responsible for the formulation of the concept of moral regeneration in its early incarnation. There were two main aspects to this: religious and political.

One of the key sources of the moral regeneration initiative within the ANC was undoubtedly the initiative taken by its Commission for Religious Affairs to promote the re-examination of spirituality and morality as part of social transformation and the transition to a 'better life'. As has already been described, the ANC Commission was responsible for arranging Mandela's 1997 meeting with religious leaders, which gave birth to the moral regeneration campaign. Subsequently, the Commission drafted a statement that was issued by the ANC's highest policy-making body, the National Executive Committee, to coincide with the 1998 Moral Summit. The statement is characterised by a grand rhetoric, unsurprising perhaps, given its origins among left-leaning preachers, but somewhat out of step with the sober, bureaucratised voice of the ANC government at the time:

Both religious and political attitudes in South Africa are being reassessed in ways which promise a critical and constructive relationship for the nation. Transition is thus, by its nature, a situation of flux. Hope and anticipation walk side by side with uncertainty,

insecurity, and fear. Some seek to manipulate it for their own immoral purposes. The process of changing from an immoral to a moral society presents many opportunities for exploitation by those who are confused, those who wish to manipulate the situation for their own advantage, and those who are wilfully corrupt, criminal and violent. It throws up people of great vision and commitment, women and men infused by the spirit of ubuntu, who put their energies and enthusiasms into the collective good of the nation. Others, still dominated by the self-centred individuality of the past, will practice violence and conflict, corruption and immorality, hypocrisy and selfishness. They are victims of the struggle to build a moral climate, and the sooner we drive the nation through the storm to the other side, the better.<sup>21</sup>

The other aspect of the ANC's contribution to the early formulations of the moral regeneration initiative was related to the concept of African Renaissance, which was strongly promoted by, and associated with, Thabo Mbeki. One of the key sources for the ANC's African Renaissance discourse is a piece by Pixley Ka Seme which was delivered at an early ANC conference:

The African already recognises his anomalous position and desires a change. ... Yes, the regeneration of Africa belongs to this new and powerful period! By this term regeneration I wish to be understood to mean the entrance into a new life, embracing the diverse phases of a higher, complex existence. The basic factor which assures their regeneration resides in the awakened race-consciousness. This gives them [Africans, inserted] a clear perception of their elemental needs and of their undeveloped powers. It therefore must lead them to the attainment of that higher and advanced standard of life. ...The regeneration of Africa means that a new and unique civilisation is soon to be added to the world. ... The most essential departure of this new civilisation is that it shall be thoroughly spiritual and humanistic - indeed a regeneration moral and eternal!<sup>22</sup>

This excerpt, in the prose of its time, marries the concepts of African Renaissance, pride in African-ness, and a new morality. The same themes were picked up, decades later, in a more contemporary ANC publication, issued by its Commission for Religious Affairs just prior to the 2004 general election:

But we are Africans! Whether by origin or settlement, millions of us have our own unique spiritual experience, derived from two sources.

Most people have their roots in traditional African beliefs, rooted in the substratum of basic human spirituality which pre-dates the emergence of all religion. ... The other unique spiritual experience we share is the struggle for liberation. ... Traditional belief and liberation theology both uncover the vital force at the heart of humanness. They are holistic, and see faith and politics as one entity, two sides of the same coin. Both express a communal spiritual awareness which had no need to become a religion: an expression of community-building relationship. ... This caring communal approach is the answer to corruption, crime and violence. Morality is not individual goodness, but a co-operative project of survival. It recovers a community consciousness which thrives because people feel involved with one another.<sup>23</sup>

These somewhat essentialist references to African spirituality were, intended, no doubt, to woo both religious believers and secular socialists into the moral regeneration initiative, and to provide a spiritual reading of the ANC's 2004 Election Manifesto. However, while there is undoubtedly value in referring to, and reclaiming, historical traditions of African spirituality, the way in which this is done is often mythical, suggesting rather unrealistic images of harmonious pre-modern societies and idealised notions of communal social harmony. No reference is made to dynamics of conflict, difference and change which would be present in any community.

What has been striking about the way that ANC leaders refer to the moral regeneration issues is that they most often strongly link moral degeneration to crime, or cite crime as a result of this degeneration. A more recent address by Mbeki reiterates that the causes of moral degeneracy are historical, but also adds a warning about the new ethos of greed and entitlement:

[I]llegitimate rule, the perpetuation of an anti-social human order, and the elevation of the acquisition of money and wealth into the highest of the social values towards which our people should aspire, have combined to produce the social ills of corruption and crime.<sup>24</sup>

The reference to the culture of enrichment is a theme that has recently gained prominence in the ANC-led tripartite alliance. This is significant because it shows the development of the analysis of moral malaise from one that was purely historical—looking at pre-transition South African history for the causes—to a more contemporary and nuanced analysis.

## Moral regeneration was an ANC initiative

One of the important aspects of the moral regeneration initiative in this early phase was the ambiguity in the relationship between the ANC as a political party, and the ANC as the majority party in government. Some of this ambiguity related to the fact that the initial 1994 Government of National Unity was, symbolically at least, a coalition across parties, and the ANC was not the sole 'ruling party'. (This position altered when the coalition collapsed in 1996). Another aspect was the changing relationship of the ANC to 'civil society' in the post-transition period, where the ANC in government was now the state but previously had operated together with many civil society bodies in opposition to the (apartheid) state.

The role of the ANC in the initial meeting between Mandela and the religious leaders was significant – the meeting was arranged by the ANC on Mandela's behalf, and not by the President's Office. It took place at the ANC headquarters, not at a government building. Unsurprising, perhaps, given that the moral-religious initiative was conceptualised by political activists who were accustomed to designing political and ideological 'campaigns', its early form resembled that of many other ANC-led campaigns involving a wide range of political and religious role players both from within the party and outside of it.

Although Mandela was able to insert the moral regeneration concepts into the governmental terminology of the day—linking it to the RDP, the government's Masakhane Campaign and the NCPS<sup>25</sup>—it was only in the second term of ANC government that the moral regeneration movement was formally adopted as a government programme. This may have been the result of a wait-and-see attitude to the initiative, or to a more profound scepticism among key ANC thinkers about how appropriate this somewhat vague and overtly religious initiative would be to the programme of a social democratic government concerned largely with the practicalities of social and economic development.