Religion and Authority in Tatamkhulu Afrika's *The Innocents*[1]

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Religion has been – and still is – a very prominent strand in the political fabric of South African society. In the dark days of Apartheid it was used as a key ideological tool for promoting racial segregation and superiority. But religion is also a strand that has been tainted in brighter shades, serving as a beacon for the anti-Apartheid struggle as well. Tatamkhulu Afrika's *The Innocents* is a gripping novel that subtly explores the role of Islam, more in the breaking, than in the making of political authority in the late Apartheid era. As the novel unfolds, searching questions are raised about the very nature of religious authority, bringing to the work a relevance that transcends the boundaries of its very specific setting.

The story is centered around Yusuf, a devout Muslim of meager economic standing, tired of the ravages of a system that has robbed so many of equal opportunity and common dignity. Yusuf's job as a garbage collector takes him into the affluent suburbs of Cape Town where the disparity between his fellow countrymen is even more pronounced. Together with two of his fellow council workers and an ex-convict he initiates a campaign of sabotage against Cape Town's wealthy. The group hope that their actions will prove them worthy of acceptance into the People's Army.

Yusuf's actions bring to head a clash between the political authority of a repressive state and the religious authority of a faith that abhors oppression. His real dilemma, however, involves reconciling the political strategies of revolution with his intimate religious beliefs. Here again we notice the crossing of boundaries, where the divide between fiction and reality becomes somewhat porous. We know that the author is a veteran of the struggle and that the name he now uses was in fact given to him by uMkhonto weSizwe – the military wing of the African National Congress (ANC). Tatamkhulu is also very closely related to al-Jihad, an organisation of Shi'i Muslims that participated in the struggle and that is based in the Western Cape. The book makes no explicit claims of

being more than a work of fiction and must be respected thus. However, none can deny the power of fiction as a tool for socio-political critique. In this sense, the novel can be interestingly read as a commentary on the various regimes of authority embedded within the social fabric in South Africa.

At the forefront is the authority of the repressive State. We encounter the hideous face of political authority, which has no qualms about using murder and violence to subjugate citizens and bend them into compliance. In response to this is the authority of religion that motivates this small band of the faithful to challenge the State. It is interesting to note that of the four members of the group, Vincent is the only Christian. Yusuf, Mailie [Ismail] and Himma [Ibrahim] are all Muslims whose actions appear to be motivated by their strong religious beliefs. Vincent believes in the justness of the cause, voicing the authority of universal morality.

Although Islam provides the impetus for the subversion of unjust political authority, and as such is liberatory, it also demands submission to a strict morality that prohibits the killing of innocents and is therefore in a certain sense also an impediment. Maponya, who is the group's link to the People's Army is acutely aware of this and regards the group as "innocents," having never before taken a life. He questions their ability to do so, which is the key factor undermining their acceptance into the People's Army. The novel raises other intricate moral crises and we find Yusuf wavering over attacks on policemen – who are seen as legitimate targets. He recalls how a policeman had dragged his now dead father from the wreckage of the car that had killed his mother, endangering his own life in the process. "So there were good cops and bad cops and if he had thrown the grenade into a police station, as Vincent had wanted, how many good cops would perhaps have died along with the bad and the God and the Faith thus been angered beyond appeal?"

The problem is resolved when they are unable to acquire more grenades, needed for a planned attack on a police station. This prompts the conclusion that "[t]he God turned out to be less relentless than he [Yusuf] had feared, if only marginally so."

Within the house of Islam itself the novel is careful not to reduce the authority of the faith to a neat, all-embracing category, binding on all believers. Religious authority emerges as complex, largely dependent on the faith of the believer. This affords the author a fantastic opportunity to compare Islam as an ideal with Islam as a tradition. What emerges in the process is a scathing critique of the Muslim clergy who have deviated from the emancipatory ideal and who have reduced "the Faith" to mere custom and tradition: "Again and again, he [Yusuf] read the verses of the Qur'an that exhorted him to rise up against an oppressive regime, but custom deflected the words as though they were no more than straws in the wind and he felt himself slipping, farther and farther as on a dark tide, from the stern anchorages of all he believed. Frantically he thought to turn against the tide, seeing the faces, aureoled with illusory light, of the learned men, the robed, uncaring celebrants of the Faith…."

Tatamkhulu Afrika's criticisms do not end here. He is determined to unmask the hypocrisy of the religious scholars and exacts his revenge through the character of Boeta Braimah [Ibrahim]. After Yusuf has separated from his wife and left the matrimonial home, the only person who regularly visits her is Boeta Braimah, "a proselytising enthusiast of the Faith who had taught Yusuf Arabic and was almost twice her age." On the surface Boeta Braimah is harmless enough and comes across as perhaps 'too religious' for Yusuf's wife, who in no way shares her husband's devotion. Boeta Braimah is "a rotund, boisterous man with a full beard and lively brown eyes" but to the somewhat lonely Shariffa [Yusuf's wife], he "was pleasant enough company despite his penchant for quoting sacred texts and restlessly fingering his rosarybeads."

Despite being a man of scripture, Boeta Braimah's latent racism is brought to the surface when he discovers that Shariffa has hired an African boy to clean the garden. He is incensed by the "kaffir" and dismisses the whole race as "savages." He urges Shariffa to tell him to "voetsek" [fuck off] and valiantly offers to send her a "nice coloured boy" to look after her garden and yard. This is but only the surface of the man's true character.

Later on, Boeta Braimah accuses Shariffa of having taken the Gardener as her lover and attempts to rape her after enjoying the biscuits and tea she always serves him. She is rescued by none other than the Gardener, who "thwacks" Boeta Braimah across his naked buttocks with a spade as he flees from the house. The incident is both shocking and darkly humorous. One cannot fail to appreciate the parody of the man of religion who not only derives standing and authority from the faith, but also prostitutes it, transgressing its authority to fulfill his deviant desires.

The novel does not take any categorical positions on what constitutes legitimate authority and is in this way more real than most ideologies that profess ultimate truth and legitimacy. While Tatamkhulu clearly upholds the ideal of social justice and manifestly believes in the authority of the sacred text, he is honest enough to portray the ambiguities of living this ideal with the utmost of clarity. Because of this, *The Innocents* will surely remain a work of continuing relevance, impinging – as it does – on the collective conscious of all those who strive to combine faith and social justice.

[1] Tatamkhulu Afrika. 1994. *The Innocents*. (David Philip: Cape Town & Johannesburg)