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Models of "happiness" – A South African perspective[1]

ABSTRACT

This article explains the complex notion of "happiness" and the variety of theological approaches to happiness. It then sketches three models of happiness in the South African context: the segregation model deriving from a specific understanding of neo-Calvinism, the traditional African model based on a communitarian notion of *ubuntu*, and the model stemming from modernity with its emphasis on individuality and rationality. The last section is not fully developed and only outlines a Christian and Biblical understanding of happiness with emphasis on joy in the Lord that stems from both the wisdom traditions and the New Testament letters.

INTRODUCTION

The topic of "happiness"[2] is quite complex and can be approached from a variety of academic disciplines like science of religion, philosophy, theology, sociology, psychology, economics and ethics.[3] In each of these there are a variety of approaches to the subject, and major developments occurred over a longer or shorter history within the various disciplines. In this short presentation, a theological and philosophical approach is adopted in an attempt to profile different models of happiness as constructed in the (South) Africa context.

Whereas "happiness" is today used in English as a broad humanistic category, referring to a positive state of mind or satisfaction with life, the term "blessedness" (*makarios* in Greek and *welgeluksalig* in Afrikaans) is normally reserved for religious use and is understood in the biblical or Christian way, namely a joyful, living relationship with God.

There are different theological approaches to the relation between happiness and blessedness. One can find a dualism or separation between the two with emphasis on blessedness as the true, God-given eschatological state to be sought exactly via a denial of earthly satisfaction and happiness. There is the scholastic division of happiness, sought by humans via their own (i.e. "natural") efforts, and "supernatural" salvation or blessedness, seen as a gift from God. At the other extreme are "prosperity gospels" that conflate happiness (interpreted as physical health/ material wealth) and blessedness. The former is seen as reward for trusting God, and the absence of happiness in this sense is seen as due to a lack of faith.

From a broadly Reformed perspective[4] (which I share), "happiness" is not to be separated from blessedness, but also not to be conflated. A separation leads to a dichotomy between

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1 English version of a German paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Gesellschaft für Evangelische Theologie, Erfurt (Germany), 22 February 2011.

2 The official theme of the conference was related to "Glückseligkeit" which is roughly translated as "happiness", though the latter does not do justice to the width of meaning contained in the German word.

3 See the discussion of Glück in *LThK* Band 4, 757-761; and Glück/Glückseligkeit in *RGG* Band 3, 1015-1021. One may discern the rise of a new trans-disciplinary field of study called "happy-ology" in which economics (fulfilment of customer desires) plays a leading role.

4 For an informative discussion on the complexities of what is meant by "Reformed", read the recent essay by Dirkie Smit (Smit 2010). He notes that interest in the Christian life in its totality "belongs integrally to the Reformed vision" (p. 13).

"ordinary life" and the "life of faith", contrary to the rule of Christ over all of reality. Such separation reduces blessedness to a purely inner and/or transcendent notion, and reduces happiness to the immanence and vicissitudes of earthly life. A conflation of the two (on the other hand) looses the critical eschatological view that always transcends our best notions of a fulfilled life. *Geluk* (happiness) stands in the middle of the Afrikaans word *wel- geluk -salig* and establishes an integral link between wellness - happiness- blessedness.

What is a model?[5] In this presentation, a "model" is an abstraction of typical features of a given reality in order to represent that reality in more comprehensible terms. Models are by nature abstractions, built on generalizations that are inferred from the most salient features of a perceived reality. Models do not stand in a direct correspondence to the reality they attempt to capture. They are not useful as empirical descriptions if such descriptions are understood in the scientist or positivist sense of the word. Models must rather be seen as heuristic tools to assist us making sense of complex realities.[6]

This work-in-progress is written from a (South) African perspective. Four models of constructing notions of happiness/blessedness are described below: the first three are drawn from our recent history, and the last model – not worked out fully here – serves as critical appraisal from a theological perspective.

2. MODELS OF HAPPINESS

2.1 The apartheid model: "Happy are those who live in blessed segregation"

The theological and philosophical roots of the apartheid model grew from significant late 19th century European thinking, interpreted from the specific social-political history of Afrikaner people in South Africa. These roots are the neo-Calvinist theology/philosophy of Abraham Kuyper; the missiological theory of Gustav Warneck; and theological Pietism (predominantly of Scottish origin).[7]

The strength of Kuyper's theology was his conviction that Christ's rule extends over all spheres of life, and that politics, education and law should all be reconstructed from a Christian perspective. (This is the reason for his late 20th century and current attraction for "public theology"). The weakness was his theology of "general grace"[8] which made pluriformity a principle of creation. This pluriformity is seen in different cultures and peoples that develop according to their own innate potential. Pluriformity extends also to the church where people with different psychological needs have the freedom to form their own churches, because the unity of the church is more a spiritual and eschatological reality. Peoples of the earth are classified in hierarchical order in accordance with their participation in God's grace, with European peoples at the top of this order due to the particular grace of God.

The strength of Warneck's theory of mission[9] was the importance of bringing the gospel into the culture of those who were the objects of mission. He however interpreted the great commission (*ta ethne* in Mt 28:19) in ethnic terms and inferred from the history of missions

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5 For a discussion of "ideal types" (Max Weber) and "models" (Max Black, Ian Ramsey), see Tracy 1978, 22-42, especially footnote 1.

6 In the difference between models as "pictures" and as "disclosures" (Ramsey), I follow the latter conception.

7 For a discussion of these inter-related theologies and their impact on South Africa, read Naude 2010, 23-44 where extensive references to the original sources and debates regarding the interpretation of these are quoted. South African readers will find that this section covers fairly well-known ground.

8 See the three Dutch volumes published as *De gemeene gratie* between 1902-4.

9 Read especially Warneck's *Evangelische Missionslehre* (1897), volume 3 for an understanding of his theory of mission.

that *Völkerbekehrung* (conversion of ethnic peoples) was more the norm than *Einzelbekehrung* (conversion of individuals). Mission then became the spreading of the gospel to a specific *Volk* and its culture with the subsequent formation of ethnically based churches.

The strength of Pietism[10] was its strong focus on a living relationship with God, personal spirituality, and a missionary zeal. It was generally a reaction against religious rationalism and the rise of liberal and historical-critical readings of Scripture. South Africa was in the second half of the 19th century under the particular influence of Scottish Pietism (with well-known evangelical preachers like Andrew Murray). Pietism's weakness was its inability to develop a viable alternative to critical hermeneutics and the tendency to read the Scriptures literally and in an a-historical manner. With its focus on personal devotion, it was not well placed to develop an encompassing view for the social implications of the gospel, although there was after 1900 a politically naïve identification with the plight of the Afrikaner people. A strength of Pietism was its vision that mission also include social aspects like education, healthcare and even agriculture.

These three streams found fertile interpretative soil in Afrikaner thinking between 1890 and 1935, especially after the humiliation of Afrikaners in the British war (1899-1902) and subsequent rise of white nationalism (in parallel to black nationalism that found expression in the Native Congress of 1912). These theological and philosophical backgrounds collectively provided the moral legitimization of ecclesial (since 1881) and later political (between 1910 and 1948) segregation between white and black people as the best practical solution to the race question as well as an expression of God's will for the pluriformity of cultures in South Africa.

The result was that white people found their sense of well-being, social identity and fulfilment in their separation from black people. Because this separation could be ideologically founded on the Christian tradition, this social "happiness" was seen as a God- willed and "blessed" segregation. The official political edifice of this happiness was finally dismantled in April 1994, but traces of this notion are still evident in South Africa's private and public life.

It is always easier to change laws than to change hearts.

2.2 The traditional African model: "Happy are those who live in close, inter-dependent community"

South Africa is a diverse nation. Within kilometres from one another, people live not only in different physical worlds (some of this the remnant of grand apartheid), but also with different world-views. (There are still many more traditional healers in Soweto near Johannesburg than so-called "real" medical doctors). It was John Mbiti who famously challenged the Cartesian "cogito ergo sum" in the light of what he termed the African philosophy of "ubuntu". This has subsequently been explained as "I am a person through other persons" or "I am because you are".[11] The concept of ubuntu has since found wide exploration and application in theology, politics, management theory, and ethics.[12]

In highly simplified terms, ubuntu can be explained with three related terms:

Holism – understanding reality as one and not in the sense of semi-autonomous social or scientific spheres. In some traditional African languages there is, for example, no word for "religion", as this assumes an abstraction and dissection of life not present in such societies. Because traditional societies are pre-modern (or rather a-modern), the idea of private and public

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10 See Willie Jonker's very careful analysis of complexities of pietism in the history of the church (Jonker 2008) and De Gruchy's (1991:24ff) discussion of pietism as it relates to the South African situation.

11 The exact quotation comes from Mbiti's discussion of kinship, and reads: "The individual can only say I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am. *This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man*" (1969:108, my emphasis).

12 See the work by Shutte 2001 on ubuntu ethics and by Ramose 1999 for a more philosophical analysis.

spheres are not as distinctly present as in post-Enlightenment societies.

Vitalism – the whole of reality is filled with life-energy (*mana*) and this surrounds each person (*siriti*) and living object. This has ethical significance: Doing good is promotion of this energy, and reducing life-energy is morally negative. Vitalism also partially explains social exchange like *lobola* (brides' "payments") during marriage, as taking a bride from one family needs to be "balanced" with some reciprocal "life" in exchange.

Communitarian-ism – life is lived in community and is characterised by abundant benevolence. "Personhood" or "individuality" is primarily a social, relational ideal. Actions are taken in consultation with and for the welfare of the community which extends beyond death to the forebears with whom there are active interaction.

This ideal-type of African "happiness" has in recent years been corrupted in (South) Africa in a variety of ways:

When the supposedly universal boundaries of *ubuntu* (humaneness) are drawn along ethnic or party-political lines, it becomes a vicious philosophy of exclusion and dehumanization. When life-enhancing social exchange is turned into corrupt buying of favour, public resources are wasted. When the social ideal of community enhancement is replaced by enrichment for powerful individuals or elite groups, poverty and social marginalisation increase.[13] When a communitarian sense of happiness turns into an ideology of communitarian-ism where dissenting voices and contrasting opinions are seen as treacherous in principle, consultation (open debate), so famous in traditional African imbizo's, dies.

This traditional African model of ubuntu (in a variety of forms) is still very much prevalent in South Africa, although it is not often "voiced" in public because many African people live in a transition between models of life, and many chart meaning by living in two (or more) worlds at the same time.

2.3 The modernist model: "Happy is the 'reasonable' man who pursues his own self-interest"

In Western philosophy "modernity" is popularly linked to Rene Descartes ("I think therefore I am") and the Enlightenment to Immanuel Kant who famously stated that the *mündiger Mensch* is someone who has escaped from his self-inflicted *Unmündigkeit.* The key to maturity is to have the courage "dich deines eigenen Verstandes ohne Leitung eines anderen zu bedienen".[14]

The "catchwords" describing modernity[15] may therefore be seen as follows:

Reason, specifically individual reason, is seen as the mark of human distinction. A strong sense of *historicity* emerged with emphasis on the fact that the past can only be unlocked by objective, rational research of the original sources. *Authority* or anti-authority meant that traditional sources of authority (the king, the church, the tradition, the Bible) were challenged in the light of personal authority (Kant: "ohne Leitung eines anderen") to make sense of reality via individual and supposedly objective reason. *Freedom,* specifically individual freedom, is understood to make choices in all spheres of life from church to politics, ethics and economics.

In this notion of happiness, the rational pursuit of self-interest (as broadly developed in modern capitalism) is seen as morally good, because – even without overt intention – this self-interest will in the end contribute to the good of all. Individualism, a distinct understanding of man as "self-made man", is the social ideal (and still very much constructed in sexist terms).

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13 See the discussion by Smit (2007, 84) on the move from ubuntu to "narcissistic individualism" in South Africa.

14 Note Kant's famous essay "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklarung?" originally published in *Berlinische Monatsschrift,* December 1784, 481-494. For a recent reprint from which this quotation comes, see Kant 1999: 20.

15 Read Smit 1998: 291-296 for a concise description of "Enlightenment".

Modernity has had ambiguous consequences for the West and for South Africa. No one can deny that modernity brought us huge progress in science and technology; economic growth; educational reform; democracies that entrench freedoms; and human rights as universal guides for political justice.

On the other hand, reason can turn into the reduced anthropology of rationalism and the reduced epistemology of scientism and empiricism. Individuality with some connection to community can turn into self-referential and greedy individualism. The healthy questioning of authority can lead in some cases to anti-authority attitudes in principle, leaving huge gaps in otherwise stable social structures provided by the state and civil society. Freedom can be reduced to rational choice economics and freedom to consume.

The onset of democracy in South Africa in 1994 can be described as a plunge into modernity. The journey into the Enlightenment that took Europe more than a century, we had and still have to travel in one or two decades. Many people in my country had to make (and are trying to make) the transition from a-modern/anti-modern to modern and post-modern world (to employ these not so useful terms) in a very short space of time and without the required social and educational support processes.

Apartheid was an anti-modern concept: In the same year (1948) that the UN accepted the universal declaration of human rights, the National Party came to power on the denial of those rights to black people, and continued to intensify these policies until at least the late 1980s. Apartheid was built on the catch-phrases of modernity, but all in an inverted sense: limitation of freedom, ideological reason and history, as well as unquestioned religious/military/political authority.

Traditional African philosophy was/is an a-modern concept: Communities are built on high regard for tradition and authority figures with limited freedom-in-community; notions of individuality are strongly embedded in community, and forms of "rationality" exist that contrast significantly with the individual, enquiring reason of Descartes, Kant and the experimental reason of modern science.

Yes, some embraced the enlightenment and could make the transition fairly smoothly. Others found that their model of happiness, identity and well-being was severely challenged, and in some cases shattered. This led to social bewilderment and anomie (Durkheim), exhibited in the excesses of modernity:

Leaders in the struggle for liberation now declare they did not join the struggle to be poor – they have embraced the self-made man image and ideal. Anti-colonialists now live with purported political freedom, but with the irony of colonised minds and attitudes. People who wish to reject apartheid and its horrible past, need to reconstruct happiness and well-being under the constraints of deconstructing everything that formerly provided social coherence. Some succeed; others take their flight into internal or actual physical migration.

The religious results vary and brought intense pluralism to the fore. The two extremes are (on the one hand) those who embrace traditional piety and spirituality in evangelical and Spirit churches, and those (on the other hand) who for the first time in their social context can openly question the rationality of religious beliefs as such, and turn to scepticism or even atheism.

Today "happiness" in South Africa is in flux. Models can in theory be neatly distinguished, but in practice people and communities can and do migrate between models and even live in contrasting models at the same time. What is not uncertain is that the onset of the modern idea of happiness has had a profound ambiguous social effect. The big question is whether the negative consequences of a "modern" model can be turned around by recourse to the liberating tradition of modernity itself.

On the other hand, one must understand that South Africa (and most of sub-Saharan Africa)

is not a secular society in the European sense of the word. Religion is valued and is publicly displayed and practised in organs of the state even where a constitutional church-state separation is in place. This opens the possibility that the critical Christian notions of blessedness and happiness have some potential to guide the future of this country and continent.

2.4 A Christian model: "Blessed is the man who finds his joy in the law of the Lord …"

Others at this conference will discuss the complex array of biblical notions of *Glückseligkeit.* For this short paper, a few broad lines are drawn, knowing that the very notion of a "biblical" or "Christian" understanding is itself a field of strong contestation, and accepting that ideology can blind people to call something "biblical" or "Christian" that is not in line with ecumenical understandings at all.

One could follow a traditional Trinitarian line of thinking and design a notion of blessedness and happiness with reference to human beings in relation to the triune God (leaving aside for the moment the important theme of "happiness" in the non-human creation):

God/creator: Humans are made in the image of God and live in close union with God (happiness/paradise), but step out of that relation (Gen 3-11), and are thereafter called to be God's people (Gen 12) that finds joy in the law of the Lord (Ps 1) and wisdom/happiness in the knowledge of the Lord (Prov 1).

Christ/re-creator: Humans are restored with God and with one another by the *Heil* that Christ brings to the world. The faithful find joy in the Lord, irrespective of the situation (Phil 3:1, 4:12-13, 1 Pet) and are blessed in service of others, especially the weak and the marginalised (Mt 5; 25).

Holy Spirit/sanctifier: Humans are holy in Christ (1 Cor, 1 Pet), and they grow in blessedness and happiness as they walk in and bear the fruit of the Spirit, amongst which are love, happiness and peace (Galatians 5), as well as unity amongst diverse peoples of faith (Eph 2 and 4).

The theological task is now to interpret and re-interpret these broad theological themes (and the many biblical notions of *Glückseligkeit*) for specific contexts like South Africa or Germany with all the complexities in these countries. It is not possible to give a full account of this task here. In a context dominated by the global catch-phrases of modernity, it must be proclaimed and defended that it is reasonable to belief in God and that rationality itself needs a broader definition; that true freedom[16] is found in Christ and service to others, in particular the weak; that the law and the gospel are inspirational moral codes of happiness and blessedness for individuals and society; and that Scripture/tradition (reinterpreted and subject to historical criticism and ecumenical consensus) remain sources for ecclesial, social, and personal orientation.

In a world seeking happiness, blessed are those who find their joy in the law of the Lord and meditate on that law day and night.

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16 For a convincing theological-ethical interpretation of "freedom" in a modern context, read the many contributions by Wolfgang Huber, *inter alia,* Huber 1985 & 1990, and note the appropriate title of the Festschrift at his 60th birthday published in 2002 as *Freiheit verantworten.*

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TREFWOORDE
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