

The Star

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Development and morality

The idea of moral regeneration is not new. Between the two world wars, and particularly after the second when the fear of nuclear destruction was widespread, a movement called Moral Re-Armament gained fairly wide currency. MRA emphasised surrender to Jesus and the pursuit of four moral goals: purity, unselfishness, honesty and love. Now South Africa has its own visionaries, including Deputy President Jacob Zuma.

There's always been plenty of evidence to show why human beings should get more moral. Here at home, findings of the Human Rights Commission tell us that a third of all South African children are sexually abused and that our rape statistics are among the highest in the world.

But it's not the need for moral regeneration that needs proving. It's rather the whys and wherefores, and particularly the hows, that should concern us. Of course, we all have our own pet theories – most of them religiously based.

A glance at MRA history reveals that in spite of its religious basis, the movement did not long survive the death of its earthly founder. Does this lead us to the disturbing conclusion that religions no longer determine (although they state and restate) the ethical basis of our behaviour? After all, while millions of us persist in abusing both women and children, we are nevertheless a deeply religious nation.

Perhaps we should look in another direction entirely. Since the end of apartheid, South Africa has been obsessed with economic development. Think of the RDP and Gear, and now the President Mbeki's Nepad. Vital as is the need for such development, there may well be a growing side effect. A Mozambican economist said recently that South Africa has become a nation of capitalists. No prizes for remembering what Karl Marx said about the capitalist imperative towards ownership – including the ownership of women and children.

Surely, therefore, we need to see whether our myriad development programmes can't somehow be imbued with a deeper behavioural corollary than simply grabbing as much as one can for oneself.