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Crises of Life in African Religion and Christianity

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LWF Studies 2002

February 2002

edited by Hance A. O. Mwakabana

The Lutheran World Federation

Department for Theology and Studies
Office for the Church and People of Other Faiths

Contents

African Religion in Relation to Christianity:

An Overview

Crises of Life

Foreword

Ishmael Noko

As we watch the difficult situation in Africa unfold, the timeliness of this collection of essays becomes clear to us. In it, the authors share with us their theological/spiritual perspectives and insights regarding a particular phase in life—death—and its attendant rituals. Throughout history, death has preoccupied philosophers, sociologists and theologians of every culture. Death is widely feared and wise men and women have sought to encourage the acceptance of its inevitable reality. The rituals accompanying a person throughout his/her life's journey are evidence that Africans have a strong sense of life beyond all forms of human suffering and death. The authors provide reasons for why Africans have managed, to this day, to nurture an incredible sense of hope in spite of the shadows and stark reality of death. This becomes especially pertinent in light of the HIV/AIDS pandemic currently consuming Africa.

Africanists of many stripes are seeking solutions to Africa's many problems. I believe that permanent solutions can only be found if the religious and spiritual dimensions of African life are taken into consideration and I recommend this publication to anyone genuinely seeking solutions to the dilemmas Africa faces today. In reading these essays it becomes evident that trying to understand different religious traditions is a path to peace. We discover that God is first and foremost a God who loves the whole world and is therefore not bound to certain national, cultural, political and religious allegiances. Respecting the religious traditions of others, as well as our own, furthers the building of bridges of mutual trust and breaks down walls of hostility.

Preface

Hance A. O. Mwakabana

This volume documents the discussions by a Lutheran World Federation (LWF) working group on African Religion (AR) and Christianity. The group is one of many LWF working groups looking at other religious traditions, under the guidance of the LWF study program on "Theological Perspectives on Other Faiths."

Participants involved in the study on African Religion were:

Isabel Apawo Phiri (South Africa); Debela Birri (Ethiopia); Anastasia Bonifas-Malle (Tanzania); Colette Bouka Coula, (Cameroon); Zacharia Kuhuthu (Kenya); Musimbi Kanyoro (Kenya/Switzerland); Hannah W. Kinoti (Kenya); Simon Maimela (South Africa); Jackson Malewo (Tanzania); John S. Mbiti (Kenya/Switzerland); Moeahabo Phillip Moila (South Africa); Joseph Ngah (Cameroon); Ngonya wa Gakonya (Kenya); Ntate Kgalushi Koka (South Africa); Mercy Oduyoye (Ghana); Lesiba Joseph Teffo (South Africa).

The book covers the two phases of the study project. Part one of this publication, summary report from the working group on AR, outlines the objectives of the study and the perspective from which the group pursued its reflections. Moreover, it outlines key aspects of AR in relation to Christianity, and highlights the importance of African religious phenomena, which must be studied for their own sake. It raises the awareness of Christians about the reality of AR, which continues to be embraced even by those who have been converted to the Christian faith. Further, it examines the relevance of AR for Christianity in Africa.

On the basis of recommendations arising from the first part of the study, the second part focused on a specific area of theological and practical concerns. Although there are many areas of common concern for Christians and followers of AR this publication focuses on only one of these areas: crises of life, whether personal, societal or communal.

Crises of every sort face Africans in and from almost all spheres of life—at the personal as well as social level of their existence. This has sometimes created the false impression—frequently reinforced by too one-sided reports in the Western media—of Africa being a continent pervaded only by suffering. Together with representatives of AR we explored the dynamics of grief, suffering, and caring in AR and Christianity and the kind of resources available in each of the two religious traditions to deal with life's crises.

The first two essays (Kinoti and Moila) focus on the caring aspect while the next three (Kgalushi Koka, Apawo Phiri and Bonifas-Malle) discuss crises

of life in the light of the larger question of death and life after death. Mbiti addresses the question of caring for the family and community after a death has occurred while Teffo focuses on the need for a spiritual regeneration as a possible way of finding answers to some of the pressing concerns that lead to, or are part of, the crises of life. In this sense, it is argued, AR and other faiths on the continent may contribute towards promoting peace and the wholeness of life in human communities.

No claim is made that these presentations represent Christian and AR positions in a dogmatic sense. They do, however, provide insights into the possibilities for constructive dialogue between Christians and people of other faiths, and potentially to dealing better with matters of common concern. In its message, the 1990 LWF Eighth Assembly acknowledged the importance of such an approach by stressing the need for Christians to explore with people of other faiths ways in which we may undertake common endeavors for the common good of society.

All those involved in these discussions will have experienced—individually or collectively—crises of life of one sort or another. The presentations and accompanying discussions therefore were more than just a mere academic exercise. They touched on situations that are real and that matter. As such, in editing the papers for inclusion in this volume, we have sought to strike a balance between maintaining some general standard of quality and trying to do justice to the style, originality, and spirit of each particular presentation.

The study project marks a beginning, and is but one example of the many areas of common concern where Christians and followers of AR can engage in creative dialogue, both at the level of theological reflections and "dialogue of life" in more concrete, practical ways—for the common good of all. Much work remains to be done and it is therefore encouraging that a study project focusing on Christianity and AR, has been launched by the Vatican and the World Council of Churches (WCC). The LWF should now fully support the Vatican's and WCC's efforts and with them work out how the Federation can be involved in this project.

I take this opportunity to thank all members of the working group who prepared the summary report on AR, part one of this volume; those who contributed papers for the second phase of the study project, and all others who, at one stage or another, participated in the study project.

Summary Report from the Working Group on African Religion[1]

Preamble

African Religion (AR) is an indigenous system of beliefs and practices integrated into the culture and worldviews of the African peoples. Although diverse in its local manifestations, it has common basic elements which testify to its unity regionally and at continental level. Among the main beliefs of AR is the acknowledgement and affirmation of one God who is the Creator and sustainer of life and of all things. AR also recognizes the reality of the invisible world in which human life continues after death. The basis of AR lies in the strong belief in the unity of the cosmos, where religion embraces the natural and supernatural, the sacred and the secular. Religion permeates all aspects of life making the whole person a religious being in a religious world. The presence or absence of rain, the well-being of the community, giving birth to and naming a child, the cutting or planting of a tree: all come under the scope of religion. Prayer is central to AR.

The community is the core in which religion is expressed. The integrity of the community is sustained by a common understanding of moral and ethical values. Among others, these include the understanding of life as a gift to the community, which means that each member of the community is responsible for every other and obligated to provide for the welfare of the other. It is this sense of community that enables adherents of AR to care for the needy and vulnerable, such as widows, orphans, children and the old. Accountability for one's behavior, both in private and in public, is regulated by the community values.

AR is historically the original religious system of Africa. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and later Hinduism and others, have now also found a home in Africa. Statistically, it would seem that the adherents to AR have decreased due to conversions to these new religions of Africa, but in reality this is only a face value. People continue to be influenced by and to treasure AR in their total life, whether they acknowledge it or not. It is pluralistic in nature and quite hospitable to other forms of belief systems. That calls for deeper understanding of AR and its encounter with other religions, a process which has

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[1] First published in Hance A. O. Mwakabana (ed.), *Theological Perspectives on Other Faiths, LWF Documentation 47/1997* (Geneva: LWF, 1997), pp. 21–46.

already started. This study concentrates on exploring the encounter between AR and Christianity

The study of African Religion so far

Many of the general books on AR give surveys or indications of how it has been treated and presented. We can look at its study in two phases.

Starting in the 19th century, foreign missionaries, colonial administrators and overseas anthropologists gave their home countries the first inkling of AR which, as we know, they painted in the most gruesome terms, often with very wrong interpretations. Part of the problem on their part was pure arrogance, racial prejudice, misunderstanding, narrow concept of anthropology, unwillingness to be challenged and enriched by other peoples and cultures. The Western world which was the main consumer of these books, articles, verbal reports, drawings and exhibitions of stolen or otherwise acquired works of African art, accepted them naively and without raising questions about their reliability.

These popular views of the Western world about AR have not changed much, even though fewer books and articles follow the old line today. You need only to give a lecture outside the university classrooms in Europe or America and Canada to hear people remark: "But missionaries told us that Africans worshiped spirits and are very frightened of them!" "But we sent missionaries to bring God to the Dark Continent where people had no religion!" There is no need to spend our energies exposing the ignorance about AR which was transmitted in various ways to the rest of the world. It is regrettable that this early phase wrought a lot of damage in different ways, among which are that:

(a) It blocked the possibilities of cultivating a dialogue between AR and Christianity at an early stage of their encounter.

(b) It neglected the values of African religiosity which has sustained society for millennia of human history.

(c) This early phase put an unfortunate and false stigma on AR in the minds of Christians in Africa itself and abroad. Many Christians, especially the older converts and those brought up in "extreme" evangelical circles, still react negatively with regard to AR. Even today some missionaries and African Christians do their utmost to condemn it and to demonstrate how, according to them, AR is of the devil and has to be wiped out. Consequently, they create and propagate enmity among people, through dividing them according to their religion, into "good" (if they are Christians) and "evil" or "bad" (if they follow AR), something which is extremely unethical and

unbiblical. Unfortunately, many individuals, families and communities have been driven to that state of mental attitudes and social behavior.

(d) It suppressed and even silenced open discussion and objective evaluation of AR, especially among Christians. For that reason many of them are forced to behave hypocritically by leading one form of (Christian) life openly while practicing some aspects of AR in secret or during major crises in life. This is not healthy and leads to serious pastoral problems, especially in connection with sorcery, spirits, health, sickness, healing, marriage, death and social relationships.

In spite of these critical remarks which are often made and rightly so, we recognize and appreciate the value of recording and preserving African life in various forms, whatever the intentions of the missionaries and colonial rulers may have been. There were degrees of accuracy and error in transmitting and interpreting the materials they gathered. Even in that early phase there were some foreigners who saw value in AR and culture and treated them with a degree of respect. One of the greatest achievements of missionary presence in Africa was the translation of the Bible in part or in full into African languages, a task that is still going on. It was first carried out by Protestant missionaries and African converts, but in recent years Roman Catholics have joined (albeit at a low gear). Bible translation brought AR into living proximity with Christianity and paved the way for dialogue (even if it was not called so). The Bible in African languages has set alight an ever-burning fire of religiosity, fueled with firewood from both traditions. This fire is shaping African Christianity.

The second and current phase of the study of AR is one characterized by and an ever-increasing number of African scholars who research and write on AR, either in general or specifically about their own people. This started slowly but picked up momentum, especially with the establishment of departments of Religious Studies in African universities during the 1960s and 1970s. It was not an easy task at first, since a wall of resistance seems to have been erected in some academic circles.

The second phase of the study of AR has reached the point where we see new possibilities. We mention some of them:

(a) Probably the most significant impact has been to treat AR in its own right. It has won a place in the field of world religions and can be subjected to scholarly investigation like other living religions. Scholars have accumulated sufficient information on it for it to be recognized as a significant religious phenomenon in African life. It has not been wiped out by either Christianity, Islam or Western ways of life, even though all these have had their impact upon it.

(b) AR is reality on the African scene and it has exercised a tremendous impact on the cultures and the mentality of African peoples throughout their history. It is deeply rooted in the psyche of the continent (including Madagascar). Anyone doing business in Africa—whether political, economic, educational, medical, religious or cultural—has to take it into serious consideration. Africa (or the world, for that matter) cannot afford to ignore or belittle it anymore, as was done formerly.

(c) While appreciating AR as standing on its own, we recognize also that it has its own weaknesses, its shortcomings, its unanswered questions, and areas where it has not or cannot provide answers. Both paradise and hell exist in AR and in the life of the people, though these departments are yet to be clearly articulated.

(d) The way has now been opened for dialogue between AR and Christianity. Indeed, the encounter between the two has been dialogical all along, even if this process has not been recognized as such by the churches. Any encounter between religions is a meeting of people, and when they meet they engage in dialogue of one form or another. A number of academic works have been produced, dealing with what, in fact, had been going on unrecognized and in spite of attacks leveled against AR (in the early phase of its study). We take up this point for further elaboration, since it is essential background for our study group.

Recognition, discussion and mention of the encounter between African Religion and Christianity

No careful or substantial survey has been made of published materials on the encounter between these two religions. Likewise, no clear theological analysis has been made on this encounter. Furthermore, it is Christians (or Christian scholars) who have been speaking, giving our interpretation or understanding of this encounter. This means that, in effect, it is a monologue on a dialogical phenomenon. We have yet to hear how followers of AR see, experience and interpret this encounter, and the issues which they consider more important than others.

Objectives

The working group on African Religion was set up together with the other working groups on other religious traditions for the Lutheran World Federation's study project called "Theological Perspectives on Other Faiths." The

objectives of the study and the perspective from which the African group pursued its investigations are stipulated in the original draft of the study project.

[…]

Bearing in mind these general guidelines, the Africa group has sought:

a. To highlight the importance of African religious phenomena which must be studied for their own sake.

b. To raise the awareness of Christians about the reality of AR which continues to be embraced even by those Africans who have converted to the Christian faith.

c. To examine the relevance of the AR for Christianity in Africa.

This report of the Africa working group suggests aspects of a general direction of the study project. It is only a beginning and expects to be continued in the future. In addition to this document, there are papers which were presented at meetings of the Africa group in July 1993 and in August 1995. These papers and discussions have convinced the study group that AR has a contribution to make to the work and life of the whole church in Africa.

Some Areas of Theological Discourse in African Religion

The nature of African Religion

African Religion (AR) is a terminology created to cover the many manifestations of religion in ethnic or indigenous cultures of Africa as indicated in the Preamble of this paper. Like in other primal religions, one is born into it as a way of life with its cultural manifestations and religious implications. AR is an integral part of the African ethos and culture.

AR manifested itself in various forms in ancient Egypt as it does today in an agricultural festival or other celebrations in Togo. The classical models of this religion would be the Hebrew religion, as portrayed in the Hebrew Bible, Confucianism or Hinduism, except that these have extant written sources.

Although described as ethnically based, there is sufficient commonality to warrant the nomenclature "African Religion." The ontology, for example, is very much one basic system centered on God, the source of all reality. Human beings are the priests of creation. Here, reality is described in communitarian terms with God as the source of its life and cohesion.

A further perspective on reality in AR is that it is composed of a dimension that is mundane and another that is supra-mundane. These two are in constant

communication and intimately intertwined and closely related. God the Supreme Being is the source of life and exercises unquestioned sovereignty over it.

Other marks of religion such as holy places, cultic functionaries, communication with the spirit world, ethics that regulate personal an communal life are to be found in AR which is life-affirming. It projects all of creation as working together to sustain life.

The sources of African Religion

The sources of AR remained oral and experiential for millennia and generations until scholars, especially African, began to collect and to document the phenomenon. Today we have, for example, collections of prayers of AR (Mbiti) and the corpus of the poetry of the Ifa Divination System of Nigeria (Wande Abimbola). Several books, research theses and notes are also available to those who read; and other sources are available in daily life within ethnic cultures.

Names of God, names of divinities and names of human beings are all carriers of religious beliefs. Likewise, greetings blessings, prayers (incantations and invocations), songs, oracular poetry, myths and proverbs, also express religion and from them we derive an understanding of AR. Other sources include practices associated with human and natural life cycles, legends and myths.

The Role of Faith in African Religion

The Africans, like all people, often express fear which is generated by the unknown and the human inability to predict and control the future. Living close to nature, they are acutely aware of the multiple dangers inherent in human interaction with nature, other individuals and the spiritual world. Whatever threatens human survival and denies fullness of life generates fear.

In the light of such fear, however, AR affirms a belief in God, the benevolent Creator and sustainer of all life. Through this faith the people entrust their lives and future to a supernatural being who is able to protect and save life. African cosmology is deeply religious, presupposing that Africans live by faith. Believing in the existence and reality of the spirit world and spiritual being, AR holds that what happens in the spirit world affects the mundane world and vice versa.

Faith in the AR is both personal and communal; it is the basis of African hope. Expectation of the "good" from the spirit world encourages offerings, sacrifices and other religious rituals. It also encourages a communal spirit and a striving towards the common good. It is faith in the inherent goodness of humanity which makes Africans expect that when the right hand washes the left, the left hand will also wash the right.

Spirituality of African Religion

Spirituality in AR is described as "values by which a person individually or in community relates to the spiritual realm" (Mbiti). It is born out of a relationship between human beings and other realities which include God, spirits of the departed, divinities, spirits associated with natural objects and phenomena, and nature itself. Africans are extremely aware of the "triangle of reality" as a community in which they participate and to which they belong. Their spirituality is governed by the sensitivity to this reality of relationships and communication.

The relationship between the mundane and the supra-mundane is maintained through religious activities and practices like sacrifices, festivals and prayers. Of these, prayers are the most intensive expression of African spirituality. They are spiritual messages for the attention of the spirit world.

A study of prayers reveals elements of spirituality such as holiness, purity and cleanliness of heart. Prayers portray humility, faith, trust and confidence that humans have in their relationship with the spirit world. Prominent among the themes of prayers in AR are peace, love, tenderness, care and gentleness in the relationships of the human community. Praise, thanksgiving, joy at blessings received are also present in the prayers. From these, we can gather what Africans require of religion. The ultimate concern of the fullness and blessedness of life is the central theme of prayers and that for which people struggle. AR wrestles with the reality of evil, suffering and pain.

Prayers may or may not be accompanied by offerings. Sacrifices are also another avenue of communication with the spirit world in the search for life and the defeat of death. They may be accompanied by vows that involve ascetic life or other modifications of life-style.

Spirituality in AR often means the quest for freedom from negative influences, protection from evil forces or liberation from life-denying circumstances. Here, spirituality often takes the form of rituals of reconciliation as well as of those of separation. All these affirm that living as an African is living in and with the spirit world. Spirituality motivates and undergirds people to build community, to respect the individual and to develop sustainable relations with nature. It is spirituality for fullness of life lived in the knowledge that God and the world of spirits participate in our human dimension. Unity of life is hereby affirmed.

Fullness of life and celebration of life

The spirituality of AR is geared towards fullness of life that is good and meaningful. Its prayers indicate that the good life is one marked by the power to procreate, by good eyesight, good hearing, good health, wealth and prosperity

to ensure personal value and dignity. The good life is lived in the context of harmonious relations in community, and with nature and the world of spirits. Hope is related to the realization of this fullness of life, especially in the form of longevity. Longevity is crowned by peaceful death, followed by proper burial rites to ensure that one is gathered with one's ancestors in the spirit world and that one does not become a "bad ghost" haunting persons and nature.

The good life is marked by ethical propriety. Africans maintain that traditional morality sanctioned by AR ensured the integrity of the community, of the individual and that of nature. Nevertheless, there are some taboos, mores and practices that tend towards the subjection of the individual to what is less than respectful and dignifying, if not downright inhuman. These religio-cultural demands call for further investigation and critical assessment or appropriation.

To ensure fullness of life, one has to remain integrated into one's community, for it is expected that the community provides security, caring and healing. To be separated from one's community is to be counted as dead. Here is one more evidence of AR's position that life is a unity and that fullness requires wholeness.

Africans love and celebrate life in all its many aspects, including personal, communal, economic and ecological. All stages of human life are celebrated but most especially those that signify the abundance or fullness of life. Birth, the attainment of sexual maturity, and the return to the spirit world (death) are all cause for celebration. Celebrative events and festivals honor individuals, build community and revive the contact with the natural world and the world of the departed. Very often celebrations bring all together in a communal meal as the culmination. This communion with the spirit world is of cardinal significance in AR.

Since life does not always run smoothly and obstacles have to be overcome, celebrating life often means ultimately celebrating salvation. To celebrate deliverance, songs, prayers and dances—rituals of cleansing from evil, pollution and shame—are often performed. People and places bear names that signify and celebrate salvation from dire circumstances (For example, *Ohushegi* is a Yoruba name that celebrates the power of God to perform with excellence. The name means "God has done this.")

Celebrating is a way of recognizing the dependence of the human on the spirit dimension and specifically on God. It also signifies the element of communion. Sharing a meal is a demonstration of kinship and common purpose. Oneness may be celebrated in other forms, such as blood pacts or the exchange of objects. A key tenet of AR is that division diminishes life, hence wherever a larger community is created, this call for a celebration. This regular experience is provided by the elaborate celebration of marriages, and the reconciliation

of estranged persons and communities, and even ceremonial welcoming back of those who have been on a journey.

To celebrate is to affirm the priority of life over death and to tame the power of death by confining it to the process by which one moves from life in this dimension to life in the other dimension, in which the spirit beings live. Just as one's arrival in this world was celebrated, one expects to be welcomed and celebrated in the other world, for a life well lived here.

African anthropology: life in community

AR holds that life is the greatest gift which God has bestowed on humans. Hence, Africans are brought up, taught and trained to seek after and attain a life which must be enjoyed to its fullest, peacefully and undisturbed. At the same time, it teaches that human life and the pursuits of life are not attainable in isolation and apart from one's community because by definition it is a social life, a communal life nurtured and sustained by a network of interdependencies of individuals and community, individuals and the spiritual world, as well as the natural environment. Therefore, in all of life's pursuits, AR reminds individuals always to strive for the maintenance of a relationship with their extended families and clans, their ancestors, nature and God. Existing in this network of relationships, individuals cannot avoid experiencing and being influenced by the customs of their community, customs which shape and influence their own lives as much as they shape and influence the lives of their neighbors.

Beyond the communal life, however, AR teaches that spiritual powers exist which can shape and influence individual lives, for better or for worse. Therefore, it is important to seek ways and means to manipulate or control those external powers and agencies which are more powerful than humans, through practicing rituals and magical recipes and charms prescribed by religious authorities to those who feel threatened.

Problematic situations in personal and community life

Given the fact that life is one of communal interrelationships, AR acknowledges that problematic areas (sins) exist which arise when individual acts undermine the stability of people's social life together. These problematic areas might be of existential, spiritual or emotional nature. The existential problems are manifest in drought and devastating floods, hazards of life such as being bitten by poisonous snakes, struck by lightning, killed by a falling tree, or such as infertility and repeated infant deaths, general bad luck, economic insecurity, failure in business ventures. The emotional or spiritual problematic areas

manifest themselves through bad spirits and malicious persons, witches and sorcerers, and hatred or ill will towards people. These problems may arise when individuals undermine the social rank of the older members of the family, fail to support their parents—all of which could provoke the anger and curse of the departed and founders of extended families and clans. Therefore, young people are discouraged from taking actions which might offend their elders or which fail to take their interests into account.

Taken individually or jointly, these problematic areas are what constitutes "sin." Thus "sin" is any activity by which individuals attempt to destroy, to diminish and threaten the lives of the community members. Sin and evil are measured in terms of the life of individuals. Thus, manifestations of sin and evil are the refusal to love, to care for and enter into creative and life-giving relationship with other people. They are understood more in terms of a breach of loving fellowship between individuals than in terms of human transgression of some abstract divine law. Sin is an activity which threatens individuals and the stability of their communal life. AR helps its adherents to seek salvation and relief from sin and evil as defined above.

Instruments of salvation in African Religion

In order to provide salvation and relief from these social sins, AR has designed a variety of protective rituals, magical recipes and charms. These are aimed at immunizing potential victims against witchcraft, evil spirits, bad luck, infertility, thieves, and forestalling failure in life's ventures and at promoting recovery from illness and other misfortunes. So as to forestall impending destruction of individuals and their communities, purifications are used to cleanse those who are defiled. Also, religious rituals and sacrifices have been devised to make peace with the living dead (ancestors), so that they might continue to support and protect their descendants.

These rituals and religious sacrifices, individually and collectively, are believed to have proven themselves effective in saving and preserving the lives of individuals, their families and community. Indeed, the greatest attraction to the African Instituted Churches (AIC, also known as founded churches) lies in their ability to integrate African religious belief and the Christian faith. These are churches that have severed themselves from overseas mission churches and from one another. Appreciative of the fact that salvation is not complete if it fails to address their concrete, daily problems such as healing, driving away troublesome spirits and protecting individuals against evil forces through charms, the AICs openly invite members and others to bring their fears and anxieties about witchcraft, bad luck, illness, unemployment and other misfortunes to the Christian community so that they may be given

relief. The mainline churches in Africa are challenged to come to terms with the reality of African cosmology to meet the spiritual and bodily needs of their adherents. It is estimated that, if "historical "churches fail to provide holistic salvation, they will lose members to the AICs and the charismatic churches. Churches must engage in serious dialogue with AR in order to better understand African religious life and needs.

The human destiny

The problem of death and human destiny occupies a central position in many religious traditions. In the Christian faith the focus is often on the individual salvation apart from and in exclusion of one's community, because individuals' faith and response to God determine their destiny. However, it is to be recognized that theologically, the church or Christianity is community-based -on the Trinity and the church as the Body of Christ or the people of God.

This Western emphasis on individual salvation apart from the society contrasts sharply with AR, which is community-centered. Africans hold the view that individuals exist because they belong. Therefore, anxiety about individual destiny and afterlife is foreign to the African worldview. In the African anthropology individuals are assured of their afterlife because at death they are taken up by and gathered to their departed living dead (ancestors). Thus individual salvation is not possible apart from community. It is significant that even urbanized African Christians put such a high premium on being transported back to their original homelands when they die, so that they may be buried with their forebears.

Because death reunites individuals with their departed relatives, death is not perceived as the final enemy who annihilates their life. Rather, death is seen as an inevitable and natural conclusion of life, especially for those who die at a mature age; it is an ecstatic experience of fulfillment that reunites an individual with the spirits who have gone to their final home (to live forever). Because individual immortality is understood coming automatically, fear and punishments are dealt with on this side of the grave so that, at the time of death, individuals have made things right with their fellows, spirits and, ultimately, with God. Furthermore, some African peoples underline the indestructible nature of the human soul by holding that, when persons die, their spirit continues beyond death. This view rests on the premise that the human soul is a divine spark which, at death, returns to God who made it in the first place.

Contribution of African Religion

AR holds that the world and nature are good gifts that God entrusted to human beings: they provide nourishment of life, security and home for our

bodies. Since the well-being of human beings is intimately connected with the well-being of the natural environment, AR shows respect and reverence for the natural environment. This reverence and respect for nature with its wonders and mystery enabled AR to maintain certain taboos and beliefs which prevented or discouraged people from abusing nature, for example the forest and rivers. Because forests were sources of necessities of life such as food, drink, houses, wood, clothes and medicines, the cutting down of certain trees or use of certain leaves was prohibited.

However, because [of] conversions to other religions, the lure of modernism and the quest for so-called civilization and development, Africans appear to be gradually losing the respect for the mystery and dignity of nature. In consequence, they have subjected nature to gross abuses through unlimited industrial expansion and uncontrolled development.

The abuse of nature, both in Africa and the world, has cause untold ecological crises of serious dimensions. They are manifest, for instance, in health problems due to pollution of air and water through chemicals, industrial waste, overpopulation, depletion of natural resources, mass-killings of certain animal species and desertification, to name only a few examples of the abuse of nature.

In the social sphere, Africans are more and more losing the human-centered and communal orientation which was central to the religious ethos and beliefs. In consequence, Africa is experiencing serious social crises, marked by injustice and oppression, exploitation, violation of human rights, ethnic divisions and conflicts—resulting in Africans killing their fellow Africans—, civil wars and political intolerance which are creating floods of refugees.

Against this background, the teachings of some Christian groups which largely focus on the future intervention of a kind of messianic figure to rescue humans from their misery, is not realistic enough. They may succeed only in creating a dependency syndrome among Africans. Instead of challenging Africans to stand on their own feet and to tackle the socio-economic problems confronting the continent, these religious groups encourage them to pray to God to do the job for them. At worst, the dependency syndrome has encouraged African governments and citizens to beg and expect the European and American donor countries to rescue Africa from its ills. By taking a dim view of human beings and their achievements, these teachings tend to promote despair, paralysis, defeatism, moral dullness, social indifference and social irresponsibility.

The discussion of sin and salvation made clear that while AR teaches that God is the Creator and sustainer of life, nowhere does it suggest that human beings should abdicate from confronting social problems in the belief that God will solve them. It teaches that survival and salvation are brought about by human willingness to work for them. People have to take control over their

lives and responsibility for themselves and for their neighbors by engaging in activities for the welfare of the community. People have devoted much energy and resources to devise appropriate ceremonies, rituals and religious activities aimed at coping with the ills of this earthly life.

AR has encouraged people to take life into their own hands because it believed in them and their abilities to right the wrongs in their communities by healing broken relations and restoring the disturbed balance between the spiritual world and interpersonal relations. This optimistic anthropology is one of the treasures which Africans could fruitfully appropriate to regain confidence in the human ability to confront and overcome social problems. This resource challenges us to develop a theology of responsibility; to become co-creators with God, in order to transform our social and natural environment for the better. It challenges us to assume responsibility and to take our actions seriously. It reminds us that human dignity and glory lie in the responsible and creative powers locked in our nature, powers which are capable or re-ordering and transforming our communities for the sake of a healthy, sustainable, human, and just society.

The emphasis which AR puts on human relationships and the social wrongs and evils which individuals commit against others should be offered as an African contribution to Christian churches. It reminds the churches that sin is not only an evil activity which is directed against God but also has to do with social evil between individuals in society. This African insight gives greater strength to the central biblical thrust which teaches that sin is both a vertical and horizontal reality. For sin to be truly understood, the stories of Gen 3 and Gen 4 should be read together because they are two sides of the same coin, a reality which the theological emphasis on the sinful human before God has often neglected, especially in Protestant churches. By calling attention to social evils, the African insight underlines the fact that, in the final analysis, it is not the Almighty God who suffers evil directly at the hands of evil deeds of oppressors and exploiters. Rather, it is the individual who suffers at the hands of other sinful individuals. However, when individuals suffer through evil, God who is the Creator of all humans, is also offended.

The focus on social relationships by AR has also the positive aspect of reminding the churches that what is the heart of religion, especially the Bible, is not human obedience to law but life-giving relationships between God and humans, and among humans themselves. The purpose of religion is to nurture these relationships or restore them when they are broken. An appropriation of this human-centered approach in AR will help redirect theological teaching away from overemphasis on the other-worldly concerns, to the network of human relationships. These must be supported and continually transformed in order to humanize society and to enable its members to live

fulfilling lives. As theology begins to sensitize individuals about social sins, it will also challenge them to reflect morally on what they do in their relations to their human fellows.

Finally, by focusing attention on the formation of healthy relationships and the creation of life-giving structures, theology will make necessary linkages between right believing and teaching (orthodoxy), and the right doing (ortho-praxis), between faith and ethics. In so doing it would challenge believers to match their "correct" verbal profession (dogma) with their actions. By using a simple test of asking believers to demonstrate the authentic of their faith by promoting healthy human relationships in the society, the churches will at last be affirming a very deep religious insight which St. James gave to the church, when he noted that: "So faith by itself, it has not works, is dead" (Jas 2:17, 20). This is exactly what Jesus himself taught (e.g., in Mat 22:36–40; Mk 12:28–31) and the apostle John (1 Jn 3:17–18; 4:7-8, 11–11, 19–21), that whoever claims to love God must also love one's fellow humans, simply because faith and good works belong together.

Recommendations

There are many areas of concern in the Christian-AR encounter that require further discussion at different levels of church life. While there may be an overlapping in some cases, the issues can be grouped as follows:

a. **God**: Church, creation, fulfillment, grace, hope, kingdom of God, life, love, nature, peace, revelation, Trinity, worship.

b. **Personal concerns**: Belief, blessing, conversation, death and the here-after, dedication, faith, healing, health, hope, joy, peace, personal value, dignity, prayer, salvation, sickness, sin, spirituality, wholeness, worship.

c. **Practical religion**: Catechism, teaching, religious education, ceremonies, charms, dealing with crises, disputes, economics, ethics, evangelism, evil, festivals, forgiveness, mission, morals, mystical power, oppression, politics, public ethics and morals, reconciliation (with God-self-society-time), initiation rites, rituals, service, sin, evil (sinner), crime, spirits, symbols, taboos, threats to life and property, witchcraft.

d. **Society:** Anthropology, calamity, children, church, community, conflicts, culture, disease, epidemics, environment, family, hunger, human rights, justice, land, liberation, mission, oppression, people of other ethnic groups

and nations, poverty, refugees, sexual ethics, slavery, the underprivileged (poor, retarded, outcasts), war, women.

e. **Tools**: Bible, dance, drama, literature, modern technology, music, oral tradition, sacred places, symbols.

f. **Miscellaneous areas**: Accusations, advantages, dangers, drawbacks, loss, emergencies, enrichment, fears, hostility, ignorance, judgement, prejudices, shortcomings.

This long list is intended to indicate areas in which theological questions have to be raised and looked at from the side of both Christianity and AR. Do these two religions speak the same language? Out of the long list, what are the basic and most essential elements which constitute each religious tradition? When these meet, what is the result: Is it collision or collaboration, both in theoretical terms and in practice? Where do we draw the line of collision of collaboration and on what theological grounds? To what extent do the two religions enrich and illuminate each other theologically? As African theologians we are brought up academically in the Christian tradition; how far does this factor color and unconsciously influence our interpretation of AR?

In the light of the discussions in our study group some guiding principles for practical Christian life in Africa and for further study can be formulated. Such practical areas could be in worship, liturgy, rituals, use of symbols, hermeneutics of the Bible, health matters (in the broad sense), handling family issues, evangelism, theological education, etc.

On the academic level there is the big theological question of Jesus Christ and AR. If our premise and impression is that AR and Christianity are not at enmity with each other, what are the theological consequences (of this fact, presupposition, judgment, starting point)? For a long time the two religious traditions will continue to coexist in Africa. In their encounter, collaboration may prove more productive while collision can only be destructive.

Further Steps

It is recommended:

(1) That materials of the working group on AR, as well as those arising from the planned Theology of Religions Consultation (July 1996) be made available at relevant levels, including the local churches; for example by means of cassette types, videos, drums, proverbs.

(2) That efforts be made to educate people in our churches so that they come to appreciate and accept the positive contribution AR can make in enriching our lives holistically. There are taboos and mores and practices that tend towards subjecting the individual to what is less than respectful and dignifying, if not downright inhuman. These religio-cultural demands call for further investigation and critical appropriation.

(3) That courses on AR be adequately taught in our theological seminaries and Bible schools by competent and unbiased teachers.

(4) That churches (at their theological institutions and at other study centers) make an effort to engage in the kind of research work that will help to unearth the hidden treasures in our cultural and religious heritage that can make the Christian faith even more meaningful in the African context.

Since one of the objectives of the study project is to help us in the church to understand the relationship between AR and Christianity in order to apply the gospel in a more meaningful way, we encourage the churches to make use of the result of our research. The churches are invited to engage in a dialogue on the level of the church life.

Caring in the Family and Community

Hannah W. Kinoti

Caring is loving
Listening and accepting
Caring is communicating,
Understanding and respecting.
Caring is openness,
Sensitivity and availability.
Caring is supporting,
Promoting and responding
Caring is cooperating,
Participating and sharing
Caring is bearing,
Forgiving and fraternizing.
Caring is kindness,
Sympathy and concern
Caring is needful,
Beautiful and joyful.
Caring merits thinking,
Training and targeting.
George Katholil[1]

Introduction

The concept of caring is universally present in human society. Evidently it was incorporated in creation. The Bible says that after God had created everything, "God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good." That statement surely must include the ethical endowments of the first couple, one of which was a sense of caring. Cain's retort to God—"Am I my brother's keeper?"—is interesting because it is uttered in a spirit of anger and guilt. There can be no doubt that Cain knew he was his brother's keeper since God had placed him and Abel in a family relationship. But Cain had just killed his brother out of

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[1] George Kaitholil, *Make Caring Your Target* (Mombay: Better Yourself Books, Bandra, 1997).

jealousy or, perhaps from his point of view, out of justified anger. To him, God favored Abel. Even if we do not draw any other lesson at this stage from this story, it does indicate that Cain knew he ought to have been caring for his younger brother instead of clobbering him to death. When Cain invited Abel to go out in the field with him, Abel must have followed him trustingly because, after all, theirs should have been a relationship of mutual caring.

Without belaboring the biblical story, it can be said that in human society, caring is the norm—especially in the context of local communities. In the past in African society, the local community has been ethnically homogeneous. The reality of kinship has been a strong motivating factor in people's ethic of caring. Even in inter-ethnic relationships African traditions have in the past tipped the balance towards a morality of good neighborliness rather than one of animosity. For instance, in the event of drought and looming famine the most affected communities have sought help from neighboring communities still enjoying relatively good rainfall. This kind of help was never denied.

Further, it can be observed that religion as a whole prescribes an ethic of caring for fellow human beings partly as a response to God's goodwill and care towards people. Also, true spirituality must in humility recognize that others in relation to oneself are worthy of respect, sensitivity, and understanding.

The foregoing might suggest that a discussion and reflections on the theme of caring are superfluous or uncalled for, that there are more pressing matters to consult about. However, our experience in contemporary society, globally and particularly in Africa, makes the issue of caring both vital and urgent. Much of the malaise and overt cruelty that has become our common life in Africa stems from our failure to exercise the spirit of caring.

We are surrounded by evidence of this shortcoming at various degrees of seriousness. Witness the various forms of individualism where "I, me and mine" is all that matters. Is it any wonder that untold numbers are dying of disease and hunger and lack of shelter while others live in crystal palaces in the same localities? Today no adult dares admonish someone else's mischievous child for fear of being accused of "assault." By the same token no adult feels responsible for someone else's child who may be treading a dangerous path. Africa is reputed to have the largest number of refugees and displaced peoples along with the attendant suffering. How much of this suffering of the marginalized, the homeless, the relatively and abjectly poor might be averted if only there was more caring in our societies?

Towards the Concept of Caring

Many books on "pastoral care" exist for the professional and the practitioner in pastoral care. It was disappointing, however, to turn the pages of a dic-

tionary of pastoral care and to find no article delineating care. The entry on pastoral care defines it as comprising four main pastoral functions, namely healing, guiding, sustaining, and reconciling. The article further deals with the matter of providers and recipients of care and corrects the misconception that pastoral care is the preserve of the ordained personnel in the church.[2]

Collins Concise Dictionary and Thesaurus provides a list of words that help define care. Such words include attention, consideration, regard, guardianship and keeping, ministration protection, and nursing. These are words or concepts which are oriented towards wholeness and goodwill in interpersonal relationship and community well-being.

To confine our understanding of care and caring to a few clusters of words found in a dictionary is inadequate. Living traditions in Africa show that in spite of today's concerted onslaught on Africa's culture and spirituality there is still much to be found there which can show what caring means. To give an example, Joseph Healey recounts his observations of death and dying in Tanzania where he was serving as a young Catholic priest in a rural parish. Death is a crisis people see frequently. But in the local community death is an occasion for sharing fellow-humanness in the neighborhood.

> When a child is very sick there is a certain quiet, almost a hush, in the neighborhood, like the calm before a heavy rainstorm. When I hear the crying and wailing of the women I know that death has come….The Little Brothers and I go to sit with the other men outside the house [of the deceased]. There is very little else to do. But the very sitting is a sharing in the grief of the family and an important sign.[3]

Healey learned that among the local community of the Washubi of Tanzania, heavy manual work such as digging stops for three days. Two men sleep in turns in the house of the deceased for three consecutive nights as a way of sharing the grief and sadness of the family and of diverting the sense of sadness and despair through general conversation.

Sharing in the joys and grief of others is a way of caring. Healey became curious to discover his parishioners' attitude to death—they seem to have a deep reverence for death. They were not afraid of death but afraid of hunger because hunger "makes a person helpless." One villager explained the philosophy behind the comparison between dying and dying of hunger this way:

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[2] Alastair V. Campbell (ed.), *A Dictionary of Pastoral Care* (London: SPCK, 1987), pp. 188–190.

[3] Joseph G. Healey, *A Fifth Gospel: The Experience of Black Christian Values* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1981), p. 29.

> Basic to the African worldview is the idea of *utu*, which means "personality" or "person-hood." The act of dying itself is not losing one's personhood. Dying of hunger makes a person less than human. It has the same result as slavery, inequality, or oppression.[4]

From this small window of the Washubi it is possible to see that caring must include sensitivities that define what it is to be human, including the sharing of foodstuffs to keep body and soul together. The Gikuyu of Kenya have a proverb: *ara u ndihoyagwo uhoro* (Hunger is never asked to relate its story). Another proverb says *utaana ni mituki* (Generosity is swiftness) meaning that generosity and hospitality are only such if offered quickly and spontaneously. Deliberate delay in effect means denial.

All in all we can say that qualities in individuals and communities that are life-sustaining and life-enhancing in its material, social, and spiritual aspects are underscored by the spirit of caring. Such are summarized by the biblical concept of love which is all embracing and its present in the traditional African idea of *uBuntu*.

Caring in Traditional African Society

In traditional African society, caring finds its widest expression in the kinship system. John Mbiti rightly observes that kinship

> has been one of the strongest forces in traditional African life. Kinship is a network of relationships through birth and marriage which extends to cover virtually every-one in the ethnic community as well as their totems. It is a bonding system and it dictates the proper behavior of its members.[5]

Viewed through its smaller units, namely the family and the clan, the kinship system is basically a caring institution of society. Among the Gikuyu there is a saying: *NWmba na riika itiumalwo* (The family and the age-group are never deserted). In other words it is impossible to be alienated from one's family and one's age mates. This is because ideally the family and the wider kinship network though the sub-clan (*mbari*) and the clan (*muhiriga*) are institutions that give every individual a sense of identity, belonging, and security. Likewise the age-set provided, in traditional setting, a lot of the individual's emotional needs in terms of friendship, companionship, fun, and support in the face of

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[4] *Ibid.*, p. 31.

[5] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), p. 104.

adversity or crisis. Among the Gikuyu, for instance, if a family was not happy with one of its members and decided to banish him/her from his/her home his/her own age mates queried the plan and had to be convinced that their bond-fellow deserved such drastic punishment. Similarly if age mates banned an individual from their company the family pleaded with them to reinstate him/her because the imposed solitude was sure to bring him/her to an early death. Generally, disciplining of individuals was done discreetly, to protect the dignity of both the person and the age group.

Through the crises of life the issue of caring through mutual support and building up of morale assumed heightened proportions. In my field interviews with elderly Gikuyu men and women I learned that in times of military conflict with the Maasai, warriors preferred the company not only of fellow brave warriors but also of those whose degree of compassion weighed against all considerations of personal safety and convenience. They sang in one of their military songs, *Riika mungitire na mota / Ndikae izuitiriirul thi ta* (Age mates defend me with bows [and arrows] / So that I am not demolished like a house).

Often the warrior in combat would hear the encouraging words from behind *witeithie ndanakinya* (be brave; I have arrived) meaning take courage I am here to help you. Similarly a woman in childbirth was kept company by empathetic women to ease her ordeal. Wagner-Glenn found the same empathy among the Arusha Maasai in Tanzania. She observes that a woman's emotional ties with the wives of her husband's age mates are very strong and she feels a deep bond with them. These wives are her age mates too and are a real support in her personal crises.

It is a women's age mates who grieve with her and pray with her if she is barren; it is likewise her age mates who celebrate with her at the most joyful event of her life, the birth of a child.[6]

In traditional African society custom prescribed ways of mutual care between generations. The respect and honor given to the elderly in the community ensured that the younger and more energetic members of society performed various tasks and errands for the benefit of the elderly. Various small jobs given to the elderly such as keeping an eye on a child or the tethered calves while the cattle were out grazing helped them to feel useful and appreciated.

The foregoing examples help illustrate that traditional African society was rich in ways of life enhancement through gestures of mutual care. Underlining these gestures was a system of belief about supernatural powers that sanctioned a morality aimed at promoting well-being.

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[6] Hannah W. Kinoti, *Aspects of Traditional Gikuyu Morality*, Ph.D thesis (University of Nairobi, 1983), pp. 165–166.

Caring in African Christianity

The lawyer who prompted Jesus to tell the parable of the Good Samaritan got the scriptural prescription right when he answered Jesus by saying:

> You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself. (Lk10:27)

Jesus demonstrated in the parable that the neighbor stands for anyone in need of help, attention, sympathy, and practical service. In the parable, religious leaders failed dismally for they did not know that religious piety must be given expression in humble service to other people. This parable continues to be a rebuke to our misconception about what Christianity is all about. Christianity is not a question of looking "Christian" through the guise of Western dress, church attendance, and simulated Western "Christian" life-styles. Christianity is about love for fellow human beings, and sacrificing personal conveniences to help others.

In his message about the final judgment (Mt 25:31–46) Jesus predicts that there will be two types of people facing the Shepherd as he separates sheep from the goats. Those to be rewarded are those who did mundane services.

> for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. (Mt 25: 35–36)

Conversely those under the curse of God are said to have "refused to help" in any of the above services of care. In this parable they are depicted as simply being insensitive to the shouting needs of the unfortunate ones. Of course they would have done anything for Jesus!

What can we say about Christianity's record of care of expressions of love for the neighbor? There are positive as well as negative responses to this question. In my view a critical evaluation would probably tip the balance towards the negative. There are mitigating reasons for this.

Christianity was introduced in Africa at the height of European expansionism and colonialism and conversion to Christianity was a process of submission to the new colonial order in which Africans were placed at the lowest rung of the social ladder. (In Kenya the class system took the following order: Europeans, Asians, Arabs, and last Africans.) The socio-political, religio-cultural ideology of colonialism interfered with the real gospel of Christ, which is good news about God's love and redeeming grace. Individual missionaries might have wished to show "brotherly love" and indeed some did, but prevailing

circumstances confined the kind of caring ensuing from the missionary effort to the new Christian institutions: the school, the hospital and the church. Even there segregation was the norm. In South Africa it took the extreme form of apartheid. David Barrett reports about some of the reasons that precipitated the rise of independent churches a few decades after Christianity was introduced in Africa. In the case of the Luo of Kenya the biblical concept of love was comparable to the Luo concept of *hera* and was constituted by "the love of God, love for the underprivileged, love for one's neighbor, love for the brethren."[7] This was lacking in the context of missionary paternalism and what the early African clergy interpreted as discrimination and the deliberate attempt to withhold advancement from them.

On the positive side, Christians have been known to show real concern and care for one another, especially in times of life's crises, such as marriages and funerals. In the face of national crises such as politically instigated ethnic clashes institutional Christianity has spoken out in defense of the marginalized and displaced. The militancy of some clergy and lay Christians has been interpreted as a way of caring for the voiceless and the oppressed.

The Challenge to Care

Contemporary African society is experiencing such a myriad of problems that people of goodwill from whatever religious orientation have to organize and cooperate to confront the hydra. This new call should particularly reach Christians and African traditionalists in Africa. (I would include Islam also as it is a major religion in Africa.) Those who say that African problems require African solutions have a valid point. In the final analysis, on a continent renowned for its deep spirituality religion must be seen to interpret God's love in tangible ways of caring.

African Religion (AR), in whatever modified form it is practiced, has helped keep alive some of the values that give caring a high premium. A case in point is the role of the traditional healer, long condemned by Christianity but today recognized, albeit with caution. Both the Christianity of the common man and woman and AR have restrained the speed of secularization and the spirit of secularism that have robbed some other societies of the *uBuntu* element in human relationships.

Within the context of caring and care giving Christianity and AR have a genuine meeting point. There is need for both sides to overcome ideological

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[7] David B. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa. Six Thousand Co-Movements* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968).

prejudices and suspicions. Essentially both religions operate to promote life in its abundance. The boldness of African Instituted Churches (AICs) to draw heavily on traditional African value systems is admirable. African value systems and morality are basically systems of caring through the bond of shared community life. Generally "African Christianity" whether it has facets of "historical," "mainline," or "denominational confessions," is truly a Christianity rooted in African religio-social-cultural milieu even as it is biblically informed. To put it differently, African Christians cannot deny their Africanness but they can work to shed many a baggage wrongly labeled "Christian."

The many challenges facing African society today demand a truly caring spirit among Africans themselves. Local parishes or communities of faith can and should simulate the kinship system, especially where rapid social change has diminished it.

Experience has shown that a lot of good can be done even without huge financial and material resources. Local peoples have shared out of their poverty and have sustained and strengthened each other out of a crisis. Africans need to explore the numerous ways communities and individuals can affirm, and empower each other even as they improve their resource bases.

Modern institutionalized caring in terms of hospitals, old peoples homes, orphanages and destitute children homes is a new challenge facing Africa; so are the realities of displaced peoples due to ethnic clashes and political unrest. The HIV/AIDS pandemic adds a new dimension to the challenges facing our communities. All these challenges require that both Christians and practitioners of AR be open to the dynamics of adaptation, re-education and re-dedication to a life of caring.

In conclusion, the lawyer's response after Jesus had put a human face to the idea of neighbor was that neighbor was "the one who showed him [the victim of highway robbery] mercy." We too need to hear from Christ with sensitive ears what the lawyer heard, "Go and do likewise." (Lk 10:29–37)

Health, Sickness, and Healing

Moeahabo Phillip Moila

Introduction

This essay attempts to construct a Christian theology of the healing ministry of the church. Africans have come to look at health, sickness, and healing differently and their questions and answers to health issues are conditioned or stimulated by their experience with themselves, with others and with their traditions. It is this African experience which influences their perception of the healing ministry of the church. The church's healing ministry which is commanded by Christ can only understood if the African experience of health, sickness and healing is taken seriously by the church.

Our aim is, therefore, to explore African questions and answers pertaining to health, sickness, and healing. The paper confines itself to the Zulu perception of the medical system. On the basis of this exploration I will then attempt to construct the African Christian theology of the healing ministry of the church. My assumption is that while African life is shaped by the African perception of health, sickness, and healing, the African experience of the biblical God is also capable of conditioning African perception. Once an encounter takes place between the biblical message and the African medical system a shift in the African worldview is bound to occur. As a result Africans begin to look at reality in a different way.

It is important to note that this shift does not erase the African worldview. It simply introduces something new into it and calls for alterations. In other words, the encounter brings about an improved or fulfilled African worldview affirming the view that African culture is not only dynamic but also capable of being fulfilled by the gospel message.

The African Idea of Health, Sickness, and Healing

Health

The Zulu word for health is *phila*. But *phila* means more than merely health and well-being. It also means life. A. I. Berglund explains this by saying: "When inquir-

ing about a friend's health by asking *Ni phila kanjeni* one is in fact asking about the friend's life, life understood in that wide and rich understanding that is of the Zulus."[1]

The Zulus regard *isibongo*, the clan or tribe, as the carrier of *imphilo,* life. The clan is made up of the families. As such the Zulu nation "finds its expression in the continuity of the clan."[2] This is the reason why for the Zulus life is not of an individual. Instead, "the individual is merely a carrier of life from one generation to the text."[3] Life begins with the first father of the clan and carries on through the children's children. Health means that this long chain, which is life, is intact. Each individual is a link in this long chain of generations of the clan. Hence for the Zulus the ideas of not marrying and inability to have children are dangerous because they shorten the chain, and as such destroy life.

Imphilo is of utmost importance for Zulu society. All things, therefore, in Zulu society work together "more or less merely to take care of, encourage and stabilize the life of the tribe."[4] For instance *ukulobola* is intended to secure life interests. Marriage is important because it furthers life; food, welfare, and medicines are important because they sustain life. Murder, infanticide and infertility are regarded as the worst enemies.

In short, for the Zulus, life includes the concept of health, understood in the terms *imphilo* and *ukuphila*. For instance, if you say to a Zulu *Saubona!* and he or she answers *Cha, asikoli lutho,* that means that so far the person has no suspicion that anything is hampering the normal flow of the life-force through him/her and his/her children. In other words, when a Zulu says "I'm well," or "I'm healthy," that Zulu is saying life is moving along normally—his or her relationship with his or her people, ancestors, and God is normal.

Health is, therefore, necessarily a point of departure for the medical system of the Zulu society. This is contrary to Ranger's argument which maintains that, "We are obliged to come to medical system through the door of illness and death only." For him, the notion of health is utopia and, as such, he maintains that this is an attempt to "shift the balance from natural diseases… to ancestor diseases, spirit diseases, witchcraft diseases."[5]

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[1] A. I. Berglund, "African Concepts of Health, Sickness and Healing," *Report of Umpumulo Consultation on the Healing Ministry of the Church* (Umpumulo Natal: Lutheran Theological College), 19–17 September 1967, p. 37.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] *Social Medicine,* vol. 15b (New York: Pergaman Press, 1981), pp. 431–432.

Ranger does not recognize the fact that African social structures are designed to assist individuals to overcome all things that pose a threat to health or life, an aim that is basically religious. As Bonganjalo Goba says:

> The individual depends on the corporate group. Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being, his own duties, and his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and others. When an individual suffers not alone but with his kinsmen, his neighbors and his relatives whether dead or living. Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole community happens to him as well. His life and that of the community is one and cannot be separated for it transcends life and death.[6]

Sickness

The Zulus regard sickness as a step in the direction of death, a step that clearly points to the activity of evil powers—*amandla amnyema*—active in the home or amongst the individuals of a clan. Thus sickness evokes fear because it may be a finger pointing in the direction of oncoming death.[7]

In general, sickness in Zulu society is classified into two types: natural afflictions and afflictions of the people. According to the Zulu worldview there are three sources of sickness.

> *Unhappy ancestors:* Ancestors irritated by their descendants' neglect may "remind" their descendants by sending some sickness. They know that the living will "inquire" as to the cause of the sickness. Once the inquiry is made the ancestors will reveal to the inquirer the cause of the sickness. This type of *ukugula* is not sickness unto death. It is caused by one's failure to fulfil one's obligations to the ancestors. It is cured by the performance or administration of the prescribed ritual or sacrifice, or a promise to fulfill the obligation as soon as one gets the chance.[8]

> *Angered fellow human beings* are the source of the sickness which is unto death. This is commonly called *ukufa ekuletwe umthakathi*. At stake here is not how the disease is caused, but rather with what means and by whom? The ailments caused by *ukufa ekuletwe umthakathi* include pains in the shoulders, inability to stop yawning, hiccups, incessant dreams, lack

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[6] B. Goba, "Corporate Personality: Ancient Israel and Africa," in Basil Moore (ed.), *The Challenge of Black Theology in South Africa* (Atlanta, Ga.: John Knox Press, 1974), p. 68.

[7] Berglund, *op. cit.*, (note 1), p. 41.

[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 43–44.

of appetite, love of strange foods such as bitter herbs, strange behavior in all aspects.

Nature is the other source of sickness. Nature generates sicknesses such as *umkuhlane* which includes headache, nausea, loss of appetite and vague aches. All these are viewed as belonging to the normal routine of life. Strangely enough, *umkuhlane* includes measles, whooping cough, and other children's diseases. These are accepted as being a part of humanity and should therefore be attended to as such.

For the Zulus sickness is a serious danger to life. It is perceived as the cause of anguish in a family. It dislocates both the self and the self's context. It is destructive and, as such, it must be avoided as much as possible. Its major sources are the ancestral spirits, witches, sorcerers and nature. As we have seen, sickness caused by the ancestral spirits is not fatal, but the one that emerges from witches and sorcery can be deadly. The latter aims at killing the person or persons concerned. Natural diseases are believed to be normal.[9]

Healing

Agents of healing

Agents of healing in Zulu society include the diviner or *Isangoma*, the herbalist or *Inyanga*, various combinations of diviner and herbalist, the "lightning doctor," and others.

The diviner's task is to establish, through divination, the exact source of misfortune and to prescribe the remedy or preventive measure which should be administered. The diviner-herbalist uses both divination and roots for healing. Often he is very highly respected. He gives his treatment soberly and sympathetically according to the knowledge and skill handed down to him during his apprenticeship.[10] The lightning doctor can control the path of lightning which is considered a special manifestation of cosmic power.

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[9] M. P. Moila, "The Effects of Religious and Social Systems of Northern Sotho, Tswana, Zulu and Xhosa Societies and Today's South Africa on the Church's Mission in South Africa" (Master's thesis, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1985), p. 37.

[10] Bodenstein, in Berglund, *op. cit.*, (note 1), p. 60.

Medicines and methods of healing

Medicines for both protection and healing are applied in various ways. Some are taken orally; others are applied to the afflicted parts of the body. Some may be taken by inhalation of vapors and smoke, or smoked in a pipe.

For the Zulus, healing is intended to "repair the disordered relations with the environment or with other men, the real cause of affliction."[11]

Without exception all treatment is associated with a certain amount of ritual. This is done in order to maintain the unity between God and humanity. A Zulu doctor is at the same time a priest and he manifests this link in all his healing action.

The Zulu method of healing cultivates and stresses the doctor-patient relationship. As such the *Inyanga* believes that healing can take place only if the bridge of confidence and faith has been established. The patient needs to have confidence and faith in the healer in order for him to be healed.

The Church's Healing Ministry

Old Testament

Sickness

According to the Old Testament sickness is, for instance, a consequence of sin against God (Gen 12:17; Lev 26:16, 25; 2 Sam 12:15), caused by fear of the pronounced judgment of God (Dan 5:6, 8:27, 10:8, 10:16–17; Hab 3:16) or caused by the devil (Job 2:7).

Other passages talk about the sick who simply got sick. For instance, in 2 Kings 5:1 we read that Naaman "though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy." Earlier in 2 Kings 4:18–19 it is written that, "When the child was older, he went out one day to his father among the reapers. He complained to his father, 'Oh, my head, my head!'" It is evident that the Old Testament views such diseases as natural.

Health and healing

The God of the Old Testament is a healer. Hence prophets and priests perceived themselves as agents of the healing ministry of God. They preached about healing. The following passages bear witness to this: "The Lord heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds" (Ps 147:3). "Bless the Lord, O my soul […] who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, …" (Ps 103). "Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed, save me, and I shall be saved." (Jer 17:14)

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[11] Jean Comaroff, *Barolong Cosmology: Study of Religious Pluralism in Tswana-Town,* Ph.D. thesis, (London: University of London, 1974), p. 316.

The purpose of God's healing is to restore a person's health and a person's relationship with God. Health in this sense is more than physical health. It includes normal a relationship between the person and God

New Testament

Sickness and healing

Jesus regarded healing as a normal part of his daily work. He did not make a distinction between preaching and healing. He healed all who came to him (Mk 1:32ff.; Mt 8:16ff.; Lk 4:40ff.; Mk 3:9; Mt 12:15; Lk 6:17ff.). "Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness." (Mt 9:35)

In the passage leading up the preceding verse (Mt 8:2–9:35), we are told that Jesus healed a leper; a centurion's servant with palsy; two men possessed of devils; a ruler's daughter who had died; a woman with a blood disease; two blind men; and a man possessed of a devil.

In Matthew 10:1 we read "Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cst them out, and to cure very disease and every sickness." Later, in verse 8 Jesus tells the disciples to "Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, … ." (Mt 10:8)

Method of healing

In the Old Testament either the sick asked God in prayer to heal them, or the prophets asked God to heal. The method God used is not articulated. In the case of Naaman and the boy who was raised from the dead by the prophet Elisha a specific method was followed (2 Kings 5:1ff.; 4:18ff.). But in general, God apparently healed by responding positively to the prayers of the sick.

In the New Testament, on the other hand, Jesus used a variety of methods and locations to heal the sick. He healed with power or authority (Lk 6:17ff.), by touch (Mk 1:41), by faith (Mk 5:34; 7:29; Mt 8:10). He healed a paralytic man by the forgiveness of sins (Mk 2:2ff.) and a blind man with clay and spittle (Jn 9:6). He healed in public (Mk 1:32ff.) and in private (Mk 8:23). In short, Jesus, the prophets, and later the apostles used a variety of methods for healing. The healing ministry includes all methods of healing both medical and non-medical, physical and spiritual.

The purpose of the church's healing ministry

As we have seen from the biblical passages we have looked at, the purpose of the healing ministry of the church includes the following: the restoration of a person's physical health; the restoration of a person's relationship with God; the making of human beings whole—body, soul and spirit.

The Encounter Between the Medical System and the Biblical View of the Church's Healing Ministry

Sickness and health

In the Zulu medical system sickness includes the suffering of the person concerned and the disruption of relationships between the sick person and his or her living and dead relatives. While the Bible is in full agreement with the Zulu medical system as far as the suffering of the person is concerned, it emphasizes the person's relationship with God rather than with the person's living and dead relatives.

In both cases the question of relationships is related to one of the perceived causes of sickness. The African medical system maintains that failure to approach the ancestors causes sickness; the sickness is an indication that the relationship between the sick and the ancestors is broken. Similarly, the Bible has numerous examples of diseases that were a result of sin against God. Such sicknesses are an indication that a relationship between the sick person and God is broken.

According to the Zulu medical system all kinds of diseases are an indication of unhealthy individual and communal life. If one person is sick the whole kinship is sick. The fact that the Bible talks about groups of people who took their sick to Jesus for healing shows that the Bible also perceives sickness as a communal rather than an individual problem. This means that the Bible acknowledges the fact that sickness disrupts the happiness of the whole Christian community. It is impossible for Christians to be happy or to claim to be healthy when one of them is sick.

In both the Bible and the Zulu medical system health means that both the individual and communal life are free from sickness. Health is not just about physical pain but about mental and spiritual pain of the whole group to which the sick person belongs.

In both views, sickness has specific causes. There are sicknesses which are caused by evil forces (Zulu and Bible); there are sicknesses which are caused by ancestors (Zulu); there are sicknesses which are caused by sin against God (Bible) and in some passages it is stated that theses diseases are incurable (HIV/AIDS; TB); and there are natural diseases (Zulu and Bible).

Agents and methods of healing

The Zulu agents of healing include the herbalist (*Inyanga*) and the diviner (*Isangoma*). In the Bible, agents of healing include Jesus himself, prophets and priests, Jesus' disciples and the Christian community as a whole.

In both cases different methods are applied to effect healing. In both systems a scientific approach to the healing act or medicine is not employed. Nothing is said about chemical or biological analysis and knowledge of anatomy, physiology and

pathology is not evident. Of course, the Bible does say God also heals through the physician. Luke, mentioned in Colossians 4:14 as "the beloved physician," is described as "one who continued to be a physician, not was a physician."[12] Paul affirms the use of some form of medicines by saying: "No longer drink only water, but take a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments." (1 Tim 5:23)

Not all diseases in the Bible were cured. In addition to Timothy's "frequent ailments," Paul had a "thorn in the flesh." He sought the Lord three times for relief, and received this reply: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Cor 12:9) To which Paul replied, "Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ;" (2 Cor 12:10).

Both the Zulu medical system and the Bible employ a holistic approach. In both systems the patient cannot help placing full trust and confidence in the agents of healing. Perhaps it is this confidence that brings the healing, regardless of what drugs and other treatment are given.

The Church's Healing Ministry in the African Context

The purpose of healing

The purpose of Zulu Christian healing is threefold: to restore a person's health; to restore a person's relationship with both living and dead Christians and with the Trinity (this of course means a big shift in Zulu worldview because it goes far beyond the clan and kinship and directly includes Trinity); and to make human beings whole in every part of their being—body, soul and spirit (*cf.* Mt 10:5-8; Lk 10:9).

The prophet Jeremiah affirms the latter by emphasizing both healing and health: "I am going to bring it recovery and healing; I will heal them and reveal to them abundance of prosperity and security." (Jer 33:6)

Healing activities, agents and methods

In the Zulu Christian context, healing occurs within the church's normal work and worship. As such the services of public worship and the administration of the sacraments are an essential part of the church's healing ministry. The church also offers salvation through special healing services which may be held in the home, church or hospital. Healing ministry involves praying for the sick and thanking God for the recovery of the sick. All in the church have a gift of healing whether they are medically trained or not; all have a place in the ministry of healing.

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[12] E. S. Jones, *Mastery: The Art of Mastering Life* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1956), p. 205.

The Tasks of Christians and Church Structures

The tasks of the congregation

To hold regular prayer meetings for the sick and the medical staff of both Western and African medical systems (Jas 5:14-16).

To visit the patients in local clinics, health centers and hospitals.

To help sick people to deal with problems which sickness brings, such as transport to hospital, taking care of the children, payment of hospital fees.

To look after the sick when they return home, especially those who have a debilitating condition such as tuberculosis or paralysis.

The tasks of the individual lay Christian

To witness in and through daily life that one has been healed by Jesus Christ.

To take care of one's own health and that of the family's and to support all plans which will prevent disease.

To inform the pastor when anyone is sick.

To pray regularly for the sick.

To visit the sick in their home and in hospital.

To help the families of sick people in every way possible.

To give blood for use in blood transfusions in the hospital.

To offer voluntary service to the hospital.

The tasks of the pastor and evangelist

To inform the congregation about the healing ministry, in sermons and discussions.

To set an example of healthy living to the community.

To pray regularly for the sick and to hold meetings of intercessory prayers.

To visit the local hospital and get to know the medical staff and to work with them.

To make the congregation a healing community where human beings will find healing in the Word and sacraments especially in Holy Communion.

To encourage young people to enter the healing professions.

To call members of the congregations in the parish together for conferences on the healing ministry.

The tasks of the diocesan council

To encourage its members to be active in all things that promote the wholeness and well-being of the community.

To explore new areas where a healing ministry is required and initiate experimental and pilot projects in areas such as care and treatment of the mentally ill.

To help its congregations to be progressive in community affairs, especially in times of cultural change when there are great opportunities for the gospel to bring about improvements in society.

The tasks of the diocese

To cooperate fully with all healing agencies.

To encourage all medically trained personnel to seek their place in the healing ministry of the church and to cooperate fully in this ministry.

To encourage medical personnel to recognize that non-medical methods of healing, such as the ministry of the Word and sacraments, prayer and the laying on of hands, have their place in healing.

To evaluate critically its present medical services and institutions in the light of the total healing ministry and the services of other agencies, and to draw up a realistic development plan for the integration of these services.

To establish a diocesan healing team composed of all those involved in different aspects of the healing ministry of the church.

The tasks of theological institutions

To offer courses on the healing ministry of the church

To offer courses on the study of the origin of sin, evil, and illness to enable the church to proclaim the gospel effectively in the African context.

The tasks of the diocesan healing team

To ensure that healing ministry is done at all levels of the diocese.

To conduct weekend conferences on healing ministry in order to increase healing skills of all Christians.

Conclusion

This discussion has shown that the healing ministry of the church is imperative and that there must be a Christian theology of healing. Such a theology should be constructed in terms of the African context in order to enable African Christians and church structures in Africa to take part effectively in the healing ministry of the church.

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Caring in Burial and Bereavement

Ntate Kgalushi Koka

Death brings together the three dimensions of time: the past; the present and the future. Burial is a theater where ancient rituals and ceremonies are enacted by the living to appease the dead, and thus to ensure the future. Bereavement (care in) is: the anointing of spiritual wounds, the soothing of the mind and reinstating of hope in life with word and deed.

The Wholeness of Life

Life is a holistic form or wholeness of existence. It is a holistic phenomenon that is composed of:

The spirit (*Ka*) that constitutes the immortal aspect of our human existence. Because of its mystical divine properties, it does not die. It is eternal.

The mind (*Ba*), which is the creative spark within the human body. It is the seat of divine intelligence-wisdom (or *Thau-Thau*)—out of which flow a variety of virtues and attributes such as truth, justice, compassion, rationale, love, concern, care, and sense of sharing, which are some of the divine elements of "humanness" (or *uBuntu*).

The body (*Chat*) which is matter—a substance out of which man[1] was made. It is commonly being referred to as the "slime" or "dust" of the earth—which must return to its origin at the moment of death: "Thou art dust, to dust thou shall return."

Ka plus *Ba* plus *Cha* equals *Kabachat* and constitutes the major or essential elements of our human existence (life).

The physical body is the visible part of the human constitution. It is the "slime" of the earth (matter) out of which man was made; and it is into the "nostrils" of matter that *Thoh* (life-giver or God of life) breathed the divine element that effected the transformation of matter (man) into a "living soul"

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[1] Out of respect for the practices of African Religion the author's male specific references have been retained here and ff.

(according to the Christian doctrine). He instilled into man an element that contained the divine essence, power, "image and likeness" of the creator (*Utongo*).

Then man, as a "living soul," made in the image and likeness of God, and with the instilling of divine "intelligence/wisdom" into his soul/mind, became different from other beings and was endowed with a power that conferred on him dominion over the rest of creation, namely,

- animates and in-animates = unintelligent beings;
- modalities = abstract beings;
- localities = time and space.

It is only when the mentioned three main components of man: spirit (*Ka*), mind (*Ba*) and body (*Chat*) exist that life, which is the "wholeness of existence," starts to be.

Yet, this "wholeness" is deemed to be incomplete without the incorporation of "divinity," the "supreme being," who is the "ultimate reality" of existence, into its constitution. It is the presence of God that makes life a divine reality—constituted by a variety of beings: in the celestial/spiritual world, in the cosmos (universe), and on earth (terrestrial world).

The celestial is the world of God and his spiritual beings. In the cosmos are the planets, the moon, sun and stars—and all that constitutes the splendor of the heavens. The earth is the habitat of the created beings: humans, animals, plants, reptiles, insects, fowls, insects, rivers, stones, etc.

It is out of the concept of the "wholeness of existence" that the doctrine of "macro-microcosmic emanations" emerged—resulting in the axiom: the above is as the below, the below is as the above. This simply means that there is a "oneness" of existence between the celestial world (world of God and his angels), the spiritual world (world of the living-dead: ancestors and saints) and the mundane world (world of the living on earth).

The celestial and the spiritual worlds are invisible, while the cosmos, the mundane and their inhabitants are visible. Therefore, what we commonly call the "universe," (referring to the celestial plus cosmos plus mundane worlds),

> is a composite of divine, spirit, human, animate and inanimate elements, hierarchically perceived, but directly related, and always interacting with each other. Some of these elements are visible, others invisible. They correspond to the visible and invisible spheres of the universe: the visible world being composed of creation, including humanity, plants, animals and inanimate beings; and the invisible world being the sphere of God, the ancestors and the spirits.[2]

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[2] Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion. The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications, 1998), p. 44.

There is order and balance in the universe. Harmony reigns between the celestial beings, the cosmos and humanity. There is also a "mystical fusion" between the divine, the spirits and the living. That is, the "communion" or "intertwinedness" of the spirits, the ancestors (the living-dead) and the living, in the form of individuals, family, clan or nation, is a mystical union. This scenario creates a situation of both physical and spiritual interdependence and reciprocity between the inhabitants of both the visible and invisible worlds.

It is alleged that,

> The visible world is ONE with the invisible; [and] there is no break within the two, still less between their inhabitants, since the family, the clan and the nation extend beyond death, and thus form the invisible and most important element in the community.[3]

The creation of the "oneness of existence," where there is order and an harmonious relationship between the inhabitants of both the visible and invisible worlds, motivates a sense of mutual or reciprocal concern, care, compassion and sharing.

The existence, misfortune, or death of one of the integral units within the shared world (or community) becomes the concern of co-inhabitants of both the visible and invisible worlds. Action motivated by compassion and a sense of sharing prompt the community to a situation of sharing the burden or sorrow. No one faces it alone. No one "sings a solo song" of grief. There is always a helping hand. There is always a "breathing out and into" of the "breath" of *uBuntu/*humanness.

Death

> [Then] comes death, that inevitable and, in many societies, most disruptive phenomenon of all. [It] stands between the world of human beings and the world of the spirits, between the visible and the invisible.[4]

The destructive power of death or its effects are felt by the living, the living-dead and those in the spiritual world. It is a common phenomenon of life, yet no one gets used to it. In its ruthlessness, whether it comes through violence or natural causes, it succeeds in severing or extracting the affected individual(s) from the order and harmony of existence. There seems to be, however, a current of compromise between death and the living in that they sometimes refer to it in "kindly" terms, as the "gateway" into the spiritual world or an "exit"; etc.

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[3] *Ibid.*

[4] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), p. 149.

Yet, while death is still the "destructive" element within life, and the cause of the decomposition of matter, which is the physical body (*Chat*), it does not succeed in inflicting a dent or any harm on to the spirit (*Ka*), which is immortal and indestructible. It is our religious belief that the soul survives (the blow) and continues to live in the invisible world of the spirits—together with those who have gone before us, and are now living in the gallery of the living-dead (ancestors).

Death disturbs, or disrupts, the harmony of existence. It thus causes concern amongst the living on earth—the family, relatives, the clan, and those beings in the ancestral world. However, we realize that the mourning for the deceased becomes a paradoxical phenomenon. While wailing in sorrow for the loss of the beloved and the destruction of the deceased's physical existence, the individual, family or community are, at the same time, celebrating (spiritually) the envisaged arrival and triumphant entry of the deceased into the ancestral world—hoping that he will, one day, become an ancestor.

The paradoxical existence of "death" and "life," or what we may call the scenario of "despair and hope," (or "sorrow and celebration"), influences the mind (*Ba*)—in the determining of formulae of burial rites and ceremonies. We see here a clear act of reciprocity: The body housed the mind, and now the mind determines a divine ritual and ceremony for the dignified sacred burial of the body.

The acceptance of death as an exit or "gateway" to the spiritual world, and the "welcome" of loss with "understanding," are acknowledged and enacted in the burial rites: *Hamba Kahle* ("go well"), "Greet them where you go. We shall meet again…" (so the community sings parting songs in the full belief and hope that the deceased will meet them in the celestial world). Preparations for the "trip" to the "nether-land," with the hope that the deceased will be accepted in the spiritual world are manifested at the burial.

The generated communal concern motivates the sense of care and the process of caring becomes a shared phenomenon—where members of the family, community, clan or tribe participate in the burial. People are brought together, as members of the corporate society, to share in the pain of loss and to care for the bereaved. There is always an undercurrent feeling of "your loss is my loss, my loss is your loss"—for our interests and human experiences are intertwined.

The Burial

General

The burial of the deceased, according to the above concept of caring, becomes a communal enterprise in which each and every member of the community participates. The "passing away" of the deceased (note: not "death" in its true

sense of the word) motivates or generates a sense of: concern, care and sharing within the family or community.

In this essay burial will be examined through the cultural practices of the Vha-Lemba, people who are today scattered amongst the Zimbabweans, Vendas (Northern Province), in Ethiopia, Tanzania, Zambia, and the Chopis in Sofala (Mozambique). It is alleged that they came from the original city of Sena in Yemen. There are archaeological findings that indicate this.

> The Lemba may have followed a bright star, or previously uncharted Supernova (RX-J0852.04622) to the Great Zimbabwe where they built platforms or "observatories," e.g., the great central conical tower, to reflect the stars and other elements of the night skies, and served an astronomical ritual or calendar purpose.[5]

The Vha-Lemba are one of the Afrikan [sic] tribes who are famous for their knowledge of astronomy. They are watchers of the skies and predictors of rain and agricultural ploughing seasons through, for instance, the Tshimedzi moon and Tshilimela (the Pleiades star cluster). They are astroscientists whose advice on farming and holding of ancient festivals and ceremonies have been reckoned with. Their burial (especially of great people like elders, kings and traditional doctors) was determined by the position, or information received from the stars.

The Vha-Lemba are closely associated with the Vha-Karanga, who are commonly known as Vhashabi, meaning "traders-merchants" and "black Jews"—because of the commercial, religious, and cultural practices that they have in common with the Jewish people. Their burial rites and ceremonies are influenced and determined by their philosophical concept of life and death within the circle of the human race. They have the concept of the "primordial egg" (or circle) out of which they believe all of creation flows. This is a shared belief in Afrika [sic] especially among the West Afrikan [sic] tribes such as the Dogons of Mali, the Bambara and the Fali. To the Vha-Lemba, death is a seal of mortal life of earth, and the opening to immortal life with God.

To the Vha-Lemba, the circular hut, in which the deceased was born and lived,

- is the authentic reproduction, at the human scale, of a vast myth of origin, especially the "first egg," out of which came man's earth: the validity and equality of all those born within it;

- remains as a total representation of life within the universe—tying man to the "absolute;"

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[5] R. Wade, "The Great Zimbabwe Kingdom," Lemba, 1998, Ingwe Observatory, Pretoria, (unpublished paper).

- expresses the idea of wholeness, perfection, integrity, purity of youth and life—which are some of the attributes that the deceased must have once experienced in his life on earth;

- symbolizes the circle of the origin of humanity—into which he was born and lived and died, and out of which he is now taken with rites, ritual and ceremony to be laid at the place of eternal rest—perhaps, in a "circular" grave (as still practiced amongst the Chawe in Malawi) symbolizing the same as above.

The preparations

The deceased is laid down curled, like a child in the mother's womb. This signifies his original position—like a "germ" or "fetus" in the primordial egg (hut). He is then turned to a sitting position—facing the east—from where all humankind came (according to the Vha-Lemba faith). In the "dazzling darkness of the secret silence in the hut where death reigns, light (candle) is lit—to symbolize the "eternal" light that must lead the deceased to the celestial world. His immortal soul (*Ka*), released from the mortal coil (body/*Chat*), flies like a bird,

> first of all, wandering painful tortuous ways, peering uneasily into endless darkness…[and then] beholds a marvelous light and is received into pure places, with beautiful meadows and voices, choral singing, [drums] and dancing, and the most solemn sacred sounds and holy sights…[6]

of ancestors who are ready to receive him with open arms into their community. The soul is liberated from the shackles of mortality.

The journey

The deceased's head is shaven. He is provided with food: sorghum or millet porridge, water or beer, a clay washing bowl, a broken clay pot, an iron (spear) and stick (if a man), three stones and snuff to offer a pinch to his elders in the ancestral world.

Then the elders of the family or clan, admitted into the hut for the occasion, start talking to the deceased in turns. They tell him who they are, and who he is—according to lineage and position in the family or clan, entreating, or pleading with him to take their messages to the ancestors of the family and reminding him not to forget those whom he has left behind. They express their hope, one day, to "meet with him."

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[6] Plutach, cited in Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy (eds.), *Complete Guide to World Mysticism* (London: Judy Piatkus Publishers Ltd., 1998), p. 73.

Then a libation is poured and incense is burnt as water is sprinkled over the corpse—accompanied by the saying of the "litany" of ancestral names of those who are now in the spiritual world. This includes praise songs (*Isibongo*) of him and those living in the world of ancestors (saints).

The actual burial

Before the actual burial, the following rituals are performed:

Transformation ritual: a goat or sheep is slaughtered. It is the "goat of Mendes," or *Mundu* (giver of life). It is the "gateway to heaven." It is called *Lesiba* (feather), which he is to "wear" on his head when he appears before the elders in the ancestral world. It enables his soul's flight into heaven. It is a symbol of transformation from the physical to the spiritual "being"—ready to be admitted into the spiritual world.

The "sacred" blanket: on the day of the funeral, a black[7] (culturally) ox (for man) or cow (for female) is slaughtered—to use the skin as a "sacred" blanket to cover the deceased's nakedness when he or she appears before the ancestors.

The grave: is about six feet deep and can be circular or rectangular. On the side (inside) of the grave, an additional "compartment," like a shelf, is dug according to the size of the body of the deceased. The deceased is then laid ("shelved") in this "apartment"—with the head pointing to the north and face looking to the east—whence his life and glory came. The body is wrapped in the skin of the slaughtered ox or cow. It is the "sacred" blanket of the deceased to cover his nakedness.

The articles necessary for the "journey," such as food, water, stick, spear, certain parts of the slaughtered ox, sheep or goat, ornaments, and so on are placed ceremoniously in the grave "compartment." Then the additional apartment is sealed with reeds from the flowing river—to symbolize the evergreen life in the ancestral world.

The grave, whose floor is practically empty because of the placing of the corpse in the side "compartment" is then filled with soil.

The anointing of the body with a scented substance from natural herbs mixed with fat (oil), is the symbolic process of the embalming ritual—to pre-

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[7] All these are done to please *Mwali* (God) with whom the dead person is going to reside. Black is the symbol of "absolute darkness," "dazzling darkness" that was in "universe before the universe," "the divine mind" that effected all creation. It stands for "the God-of-Gods" who is the "first ancestor."

serve and ensure that the body remains intact for a long time, without being devoured by worms (decomposed).[8]

The ritual is carried out by two members of the family: a man and a woman, as symbols of the female (*Ntu*) and male (*Ra*) principles that are a composition of a human being (according to the law of opposites). The man anoints the right, while the woman works on the left side of the body. Then the body is laid down to eternal rest.

At the end of the burial ceremony rocks (from a mountain or river) are placed on the grave. Three rocks are placed in the center of the grave. They are symbols of the threefold principle (trinity/triune) constituted by *Ntu* (female) plus *Ra* (male) plus *Thai-Thau* (wisdom/intelligence). These are the indivisible constituents of the Creator-God, *Atum/Mudzimu/Ngai uMvelingqai/Qamata.* The three rocks at the center of the grave mark, also, the origin of a "tomb stone."

The family remains behind when the rest of the mourners leave the graveside. They stand in a circle and hold hands around the grave, signifying the circular hut that symbolized the primordial egg. The significance of this ritual is to protect the deceased in the grave from any harm.

The people go back to the house where they wash hands with aloe juice—as an act of cleansing themselves from the effects of death. They are then treated to the "funeral feast"—celebrating the triumphant departure from the "living," and envisaged welcomed entry of the deceased into the world of the living-dead.

After the burial, the family shave their heads to signify or mark a period of mourning.

If the deceased is a king or traditional doctor, the body does not go out through the main door or gate. It is taken out through an aperture (opening) on the side of the hut or main household fence. The reasons for this are: if the deceased is a king, royalty can remain within the family; if the deceased is a traditional healer, the healing powers given by the ancestors should remain within the family circle. Besides, the two VIPs must not be seen by the public. They are often buried in secret ceremonies.

Bereavement

With the insemination of the element of "quality and dignity of the human personality," (divine element) that transformed matter into a "living soul," man became conscious of the presence of a "humanness" in him, and that he holds this in common with the rest of the members of the human race.

It is this element (humanness), which is the "supreme goodness" that reflects the "image and likeness" of God in man, that makes one aware of the common

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[8] If the deceased is a member of the family, leaves of a sweet-smelling tree are squeezed to extract the aromatic juice. This is mixed with fat from an ox or cow and applied to the dead person's body (before burial).

"human" identity that we all share. It makes one realize that he is a complete "one-ness" with the "other." It is in the "other" that one sees oneself—for they share the identity of soul and humanness, *uBuntu* (Zulu), *uMunhu* (Tsonga), *Botho* (Sesotho), *Vhuthu* (Venda and Tshi-Lemba), *Unhu* (Shona), *Menswaardigheid* (Afrikaans), *Humanité* (French), *Maat* (Egyptian Hieroglyphics) and *Humanness* (English).

It is a scenario of "I" and "I"—where one realizes that "in my essential being, I (can see and) depends on the essential "being-ness" of the "other"… I find that "being-for-others" appears as a necessary condition (in life) for "being-for-myself."

It is the feeling or sense of "one-ness" with the "other" that creates the feature of conscious togetherness, or awareness of the other's well-being in society. It generates interest and concern about the "other's" physical and spiritual health, family condition, economic well-being, general happiness, and in moments of bereavement and sorrow.

The concern is a reciprocal feature. It invokes a process of interpersonal care and sharing. It makes communal bereavement a shared responsibility—for each and every individual considers him/herself and integral part of the community. Therefore, "each person's pain and sorry is my pain and sorrow." It is a matter of the scenario of:

> Harlem,
> when you bleed, my handkerchief is full thy blood;
> when you twitch with pain, I feel the sting in my loins;
> for you and me, dear brother, are but "One!"

It is complete identification with the bereaved—the same compassionate gesture of sharing pain and suffering that is extended to the victims of HIV/AIDS. It makes it possible for the community to rally around each other at the moment of "bereavement." The community is motivated by the philosophy of *uBuntu*—a philosophy which, like religion, glues the fabrics of society—family and teams—together. Without it one becomes an outcast, severed from the embracing warmth of fellow beings in the community at the time when their comforting words and "hands/help" are needed.

"Bereavement" simply means a state of loss of one's family member, a friend, relative or member of the community. The bereaved suffer from the "pangs of loss and aloneness," which can be both physical and spiritual. It is at this moment that one needs support and condolence. *UBuntu* demands that we rally to each other to share our humanness.

Solidarity with, and care of the bereaved is quite outstanding in the Afri-kan [sic] communities—whether they belong to Christianity or Afrikan [sic] Religion. The humanness inherent in them cuts across denominational, politi-cal or ethnic boundaries. Despite the socio-economic barriers that may divide

them, they feel and share the same anguish or agony of the soul—for, they are one. They gather around each other—whether it is in rural or urban areas.

Right from the moment of the announcement of death of a member, families, friends and relatives rush to the center (house) of the painful news to offer their condolences, help and comfort. They bring material support in the form of food: mealie-meal, vegetables, firewood, cans of water, even money, goat or sheep—to share with the bereaved. Right through the week (or any days before burial) comforters flow in—each person having something to say or items to offer. The bereaved are no more alone but with a "village" to help them carry the burden of the painful loss for: they are, because the community is and the community is, because they are.

They now have a "shoulder" to lean on, and a "hand" to wipe off their tears and to anoint their "wounded" souls with soothing "oil" of words and action as the number of co-mourners' increases to swell the home of the deceased. People come to clean the home, wash the deceased's clothes, slaughter what is to be slaughtered, help dig the grave, cook and serve meals, contribute tea, sugar, mealie-meal, vegetables and so on. Bereavement, in this context, is no more a "solo" experience, but a communal occasion—where people come to offer "spiritual" comfort with a song, drum and prayer that console and bring comfort to the distressed mind. The pain of bereavement becomes bearable because of the communal sense of concern, sharing and caring.

On some occasions, the Vha-Lemba and Venda cremate the body of the deceased. In that case, he body is first buried in accordance with the above rituals and ceremonies. It is then left in the grave to compose for some time. Then the bones are exhumed and cremated. The ashes are scattered in Lake Fundusi (or into any running river). This is to confirm the Vha-Venda and Vha-Lemba belief that water (*Nut/Ntu/Dzibaguru*) is the source of life. It is in the water that life exists in potentiality before it can exist in actuality. Therefore, the deceased is now sent back to his/her origins—where s/he will find the "first ancestor," (God), the ancestors and other spiritual beings wanting with compassion and love to welcome him/her with open arms.

When the child who is believed comes from the world of ancestors, is born the umbilical cord is cut and thrown into the water of the flowing river back to the ancestors—as an acknowledgement of the delivery and receipt of the child. When a person dies, the body is cremated and ashes are thrown into the running river—as a report of the return of the deceased to his place of origin, the ancestral world.

Caring During Burial and Bereavement in Traditional Society and the Church

Isabel Apawo Phiri

Introduction

The aim of this essay is to discuss the issue of care providers during funerals in contemporary African society. It will investigate the influence of African and Christian beliefs and practices in motivating the provision of care to its members in the context of death. The essay will analyze the role played by the extended family, neighbors, colleagues and the institutional church in providing care to the dead person and the bereaved family during funerals. Particular attention will be paid to women as care providers during funerals and bereavement. In the process, it will be argued that funerals provide an opportunity for African Religion (AR) and Christianity to enter into fruitful dialogue as one aspect of African theology. Examples will be drawn from the Zulu of KwaZulu-Natal, in South Africa and the Chewa of Central Malawi.

Funerals: A Point of Dialogue and Care Giving

A funeral is defined as burial or cremation of a dead person. Cremation is not part of Zulu and Chewa cultures. This became very clear to me when a friend's husband was murdered in Durban in June 2000. The wife, Lindiwe, and the husband, Sithembiso, were highly educated Zulus and had agreed that if one of them died, the living one should cremate the other. However, this verbal agreement had not been communicated to the other members of the family. When Sithembiso's body was discovered in the cane fields after 23 days, Lindiwe informed the rest of the family that she wanted to cremate her husband's remains according to their agreement. There was violent protest from Sithembiso's family, as this was against tradition. Lindiwe had been accused of having organized a gang to kill her husband and it was assumed that she wanted to destroy the evidence.

Lindiwe then agreed to a normal burial and organized a funeral service in the Anglican church in the town where they were living. That was a further point

of controversy because the relatives wanted the burial to be in Sithembiso's village, which was 300 kilometers away. This time Lindiwe and the three children put their foot down and refused to have the body taken to the village. As the church service was in progress, Sithembiso's relatives called the police. As soon as Lindiwe, followed by her husband's coffin, stepped outside the church she was arrested. The body was taken back to the funeral parlor and she remained in police custody for a week. She was not granted bail. The court case dragged on for five months. Only afterwards could she finally bury her husband in town.

Place of Burial

This story emphasizes that African funerals are community events attended by the immediate family, extended family, friends, neighbors and friends of friends. Chewa and Zulu cultures do not give a woman the power to decide where a husband is to be buried. The male members of the immediate and extended family decide where a person is to be buried.

Among the Chewa, the burial of an elderly person must take place in their village no matter how educated the person was or how long a person stayed in town or how far the village is from town or whether the person is a Christian or not. In fact as noted by Anderson:

> In the Malawi civil service, regulations provide detailed provisions for the death of a civil servant, reflecting the importance of funerals in Malawi society. Supplement 1:92.1 stipulates that the government provides a coffin and vehicles for the transporting of the corpse and the funeral party. In case of a family member, the employer provides transport only.[1]

One may ask, why it is important that burial should take place in the village. It is linked with the people's beliefs about death, life after death and the person's standing in the community. In African culture, a person must be given a proper burial and all the funeral rites must be performed in order for a proper transfer to the spiritual world to take place. The immediate and extended family take great care that the deceased "passes" from one phase of life to another. In order for the living to be healed from pain and death, they must accompany the deceased to the point where she or he joins the world of spirits. When a person dies, the person joins other relatives who have already gone before. The joining is not just in the spirit world but also there where the grave is.

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[1] G. Anderson, "Rules of Network, Kinship and Patronage: Social Security Arrangements of Civil Servants in Malawi." Paper presented at a conference in June/July 2000, p. 13.

By burying her husband in town, Lindiwe was breaking with Zulu tradition. She was also denying the relatives the possibility of performing the traditional funeral rituals that would put Sithembiso in his proper place among the family ancestors. African women theologians have also questioned the funeral rituals that dehumanize women. In "The Christian Widow in African Culture," Daisy N. Nwachuku shows that "the majority of the female subjects (78%) agreed that the African widow is still generally badly treated in the (funeral) rituals."[2]

Among the Chewa, burial is also according to clan. In Kasungu District where my father came from, they have graveyards for only the Banda, Phiris, Mbewes, etc. The Phiris were the political leaders while the Bandas were the spiritual leaders. Therefore, even after this life, it is believed that they still live in different communities. The Christian churches among the Chewa have also continued with this tradition by having a graveyard for Christians only that is still divided according to clans.

Influences on Funeral Rites

The rituals performed at a funeral will depend on the circumstances of death, age, gender, and status of the deceased. For example, in the Zulu community, all accidental deaths have a set of rituals, which are different to those performed after normal deaths. Lindiwe had to go to the spot where Sithembiso was killed carrying a branch of a tree called Umhlankosi. She told Sithembiso, "I am taking you home," and then dragged the branch to her car and drove straight home. She did not speak to anyone on the way. However, when she crossed a river, she had to inform him about it. Once home, she dragged the branch from the car to the house and then addressed Sithembiso again. "We have now reached home," she said. This ritual was performed before the day of the funeral. It is repeated after a year when the unveiling of the tombstone ceremony has been performed to bring the spirit of the person home from the graveyard.

Lindiwe was again breaking tradition because traditionally it was the first-born male child or brother of the deceased who performed the ritual of bringing home the spirit of her husband. Her argument was that her first-born child is a girl. The second child is a boy who is currently being trained as an Anglican priest and not comfortable with this tradition. Her brother-in-law was accusing her of having killed her husband. Therefore she knew that he could not bring his spirit to her home. In the end she decided that she was going to do it to honor the spirit of her husband.

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[2] D. N. Nwachuku, "The Christian Widow in African Culture," in Mercy A. Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro (eds.), *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), p. 61.

Normally a day before burial, the coffin is brought home and all the relatives and friends spend the whole night singing and mourning loudly together. The purpose of this ritual is healing. In the case of accidental deaths such as Sithembiso's, the coffin is not brought home for fear that the spirit of accidents invades the remaining members of the family. Even if the burial had taken place in the village, it could have taken place at a common burial place or within the homestead.

The Time of Burial

The time of burial is important. Children are normally buried in the morning hours and older people in the afternoon. The most senior members of the community are buried in late afternoon. The funeral parlors in Durban are now taking advantage of this cultural practice by charging less money if the burial takes place before 2 p.m. The reasoning is that the graveyard is overcrowded in the afternoons. We find that today those with little money bury even older persons before 2 p.m. Traditionally, it is a sign of respect to bury a person late in the day.

The burial of stillborn babies is different from the burial of babies who are over one month old. Among the Chewa, there is a special graveyard for the burial of stillborn babies and for children less than a month old. They are buried in the morning immediately after they died or were delivered and only women who have given birth attend the funeral. The mother is not supposed to mourn loudly for the child. The belief behind this practice is based on when a baby is thought to become a person. It is assumed that a stillborn baby, or one who dies before the naming ritual, was not a person and therefore should not be mourned. This is a very hard time for the mother who has lost a child because emotionally, as far as she is concerned, it was a person. Medicines are used at the grave in order to break the curse of stillborn or infant deaths.

In the case of twins, the Zulu put the living twin in the grave first and take him or her out and then bury the other twin. This is done for twins of any age. The ritual symbolizes that the two are connected even in burial. The living twin is symbolically buried with the other one.

The Burial Position

The burial position is also important. Among the Chewa, even now, their graves are dug straight down. Once a certain depth has been reached they continue to dig towards the eastern side. The coffin or mat is pushed to the side, which is closed-off with a mat and sticks. It is the side grave, which is called a person's home. This is also practiced in the rural Zulu areas of KwaZulu-Natal. The

position of burial reflects the people's beliefs about where people came from. It is believed that the original people came from the east and that is where one goes after this life. There is no conflict with Christianity on this issue and the African church among the Chewa and the Zulu has not rejected this practice.

Traditionally the head of the family was buried in the skin of the cow slaughtered for the funeral. Others were buried in a mat. Today, people are buried in coffins. My aunt, who was a Pentecostal Christian married to a Ngoni prince, was buried in a sitting position in a round glass coffin in a round grave. The sitting position symbolized the position of human beings in the womb where life begins. She wore a crown on her head made from the intestines of a cow and the gall-bladder of the cow was on her forehead. This symbolized that she was being sent to the other world with the respect reserved for a traditional princess. Her church conducted the funeral service. What struck me most was the co-existence of the two religions in a peaceful funeral service.

In KwaZulu-Natal relatives compete as to who can provide the most expensive coffin. This has also led to thieves stealing coffins after burial, which is the worst disrespect to a deceased. In my opinion the expensive coffin is not for the deceased but for the prestige of the living. The African church is yet to intervene.

Purification Rituals

After the burial service, among the Zulu, there is a basin of water for all the people who attended the funeral to wash their hands in. In the water is *isiqungo* (a special kind of grass) or *nomswenya* (gall-bladder of the animal that was slaughtered for the funeral). Among the Chewa, a fire is made outside the graveyard. All the hoes, spades and any other tools used to dig the grave are passed through the fire. The purpose of the two purification rituals is to ward off the spirits found in a graveyard so that the people are not attacked by the spirits of death. Food is provided at the funeral house for anyone who was at the graveyard. Isaak looks at this meal as:

> A sacrificial meal that symbolizes the victory of life over death; after lifeblood has been vivified, the body needs food. The sacrificial food is meant to reinforce vitality, restore courage, and serve as a memorial meal. At this stage the people start to talk, laugh and celebrate life. Such a meal is a life-providing banquet or perhaps, from a Christian perspective, like a Eucharist meal![3]

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[3] Paul J. Isaak, "Death and Funerals in African Societies: A Namibian Experience," in *Journal of Constructive Theology,* vol. 4, no. 1 (July 1998), p. 69.

Traditionally, the close relatives are supposed to stay with the bereaved at the funeral home for another seven days. After seven days, the Chewa visit the grave to check for any footprints of witches or animals. After praying at the grave the relatives may discuss property, children or whatever else affects the remaining people. Due to the fact that more and more people are formally employed, the period of mourning as a family has been shortened. Most relatives leave the funeral house soon after burial sometimes returning later for the remaining family rituals.

These rituals are meant to protect the living from a similar fate while, at the same time, ensuring a peaceful relationship between the deceased and those remaining in the visible world. Care is taken to do everything properly because funerals are regarded as the last ritual.

The Church: A Provider of Care

The church as an institution plays a very important role in providing care for its members during funerals and bereavement. It provides charitable support in the form of food or money at the funerals of its poorest members. Fellow church members often organize vigils where there is singing and preaching for the whole night. The singing is a form of entertainment for the mourners. The preaching is done by various people, both men and women, with the intention of comforting the mourners and of converting some members of the audience to the Christian faith. Women's organizations of the church take over tasks usually expected to be handled by relatives.

It is not surprising then that people refer to funerals as having been one motivation for them to join the church. Some may join the church because they want to have Christian songs sung at their funerals. Mothers who belong to the women's organization of the church will encourage their wayward children and husbands to keep links with the church so that when they die they may have a Christian funeral. They want a Christian burial ceremony for themselves and for the members of their family. In most African communities having a Christian funeral is prestigious and one of the advantages is that people come to sing Christian songs throughout the night. You are assured of people from your church attending your funeral. The people from the church also provide care on the night before the burial by bringing gifts of food.

In the case of Malawi, the Presbyterian churches want to see a church membership card to confirm that the person was a member of the church, before authorization is given for Christian songs to be sung at a funeral. The church authorities also take seriously the situation in which a Christian dies. For example, a church member who dies in a drunken brawl or, a married

person who accompanied by a person of the opposite sex is killed in a car accident might not be given a Christian funeral. The type of disease that a person died of is sometimes taken into account. Commenting on a research conducted in Malawi Peter Foster says:

> It was reported that a preacher had commented that it was shameful for a Christian to die of HIV/AIDS. In another case, a Christian commented approvingly of the actions of a Kenyan Anglican clergyman (reported in the Malawi Daily Times, 6th August 1993). This particular clergyman had refused to conduct funerals for HIV/AIDS victims, saying that the church encourages immorality by doing so.[4]

Because of the seriousness of funeral rites in the African communities, it is the remaining relatives who feel hurt by the negative actions of the church. It is also wrong to assume that everyone who dies of HIV/AIDS must have been promiscuous. The relatives feel that their relation has already been condemned to hell by the church authorities. It is the self-styled Pentecostal and charismatic preachers who come to take over such funerals and take the opportunity to preach to the people who come to the funerals and bury the deceased. Most often the relations of the deceased would join such a church after the mourning period. Thus funerals become a mission field to win new converts to one's denomination.

The Caring for Orphans

Another consequence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic is the rising numbers of children who have lost one or both of their parents. For the children and youths who are still going to school, both within a traditional African rural context with its belief structure and among church-going Africans, the extended family is the most important care provider. After the funeral the relatives agree with whom the children should live, at least until they finish their education. The relative who takes the children assumes the role of father or mother of the children.

In the South African black community it usual for the grandmother to use her pension to bring up such children. Due to financial hardship, the traditional extended family is passing on its role of looking after orphans to the state and the church. Yet the African church has so far not made orphanages a priority.

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[4] Peter Foster, in A. Phiri, J. L. Cox and K.L. Ross (eds.), *The Role of Christianity in Development, Peace and Reconstruction: Southern African Perspectives* (Nairobi: All Africa Council of Churches, 1996), p. 197.

Widows

If the deceased was the head of the family, the widow is expected to wear a particular color of clothes for 12 months after the burial. This as a sign that she is mourning for her husband. Among the Zulu, it is after the 12 months and after the unveiling of the tomb stone ceremony that she is allowed to wear her normal clothes and lead a normal life. Again formal employment has brought about a change in culture and the period of wearing mourning clothes has been shortened. Therefore sometimes a band on the arm is all that the woman wears as a sign of mourning.

The husband does not perform such rituals in the event of his wife's death. African women theologians condemn these double standards of African culture, which are sometimes accepted in the church without question. Kenaleone Ketshabile tells the story of a local woman preacher from the Methodist church in South Africa, whose husband had died. The church stood by her and provided all the care that it thought she needed. After three months of mourning for her husband, she started attending church services in her mourning clothes. Nine months after the death of her husband she asked if she could resume her preaching engagement. Ketshabile reports that:

> Her request to preach was not welcomed and the main objectors were male preachers. Their objection had two elements to it. First, they complained that she had not finished the traditional mourning period of 12 months. Second, they argued that it is not proper that she should stand in front of the congregation while she is still wearing the black mourning scarf. Their approach was cultural rather than theological. Out of her free will, the woman decided to wait until after the 12 months but with much sadness.[5]

This cultural practice does not take into account the widow's spiritual needs. Three months is a long time for one to miss church fellowship that would provide comfort during a difficult time. Furthermore, the wearing of a particular cloth or color does not really reflect what one is going through inside. One should be given the opportunity to wear whatever one wants and mourn for whatever period one wants.

For some women in Malawi the period of mourning is particularly traumatic because of the practice of property grabbing. Especially in the urban context it has become common practice that soon after the death of a husband, the relatives move in to take possession of the property, including the share that belonged to the wife and the children. If the widow is aware of her rights or has

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[5] Kenaleone Ketshabile, "Inculturation Revisisted: Its Religious, Cultural and Social Dynamics," in *Journal of Constructive Theology,* vol. 6, no. 1 (July 2000), p. 56.

relatives who help her, the legal system is used to provide protection. Payment of death benefits can take up to a year and often the extended family does not provide much support for the widow. If she returns to her village, there is pressure on her to re-marry. On the whole it is widow's female relatives and her women friends who give her much support at this stage.

Areas of Dialogue

Both AR and Christianity regard funerals as a sacrament involving communal rituals for the deceased and for the participants. Adherents of both faiths experience care during funerals and bereavement from members of their respective communities because it is a duty as requested by their faith. The message of Christian love motivates the women's organizations of the church and church leaders to provide care for the bereaved. In the case of AR care is provided as part of how the community has defined *uBuntu*: showing solidarity in times of need. It is also provided out of fear of the ancestors who may punish the extended family for not honoring one of them. The departed person may appear in dreams and ask the relatives to provide decent burial rituals.

Amaladoss says "interreligious dialogue can be described as the interactions between people who belong to different religions (or ideologies that function as religions)."[6] The people concerned are believers in different religions and are living together in a civil society.

> Since religion is for life, not only must believers of different religions draw inspiration from their respective religions for public conduct, but the different religions must actively collaborate, in a multi–religious public space, to provide a moral-religious base for the creation of a new society of justice and peace, freedom, and fellowship. Here the goal of interreligious dialogue is harmony, which affirms pluralism in unity.[7]

History shows us that interreligious dialogue between Christianity and AR has not been easy because the coming of Christianity and Westernization to Africa belittled African culture and AR. African people who were converted to Christianity were requested to break away from their culture in order to embrace the dominant Western civilization. For most converts this led to confusion regarding their identity. While some succeeded in completely breaking

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[6] M. Amaladoss, "Interreligious Dialogue," in Virginia Fabella and R. S. Sugirtharajah (eds.), *Dictionary of Third World Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000), p. 111.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 112.

away from African beliefs and practices, others had to develop a dual personality by finding ways of accepting Christianity without losing traditional beliefs and practices. Tutu describes the African Christian

> as suffering from schizophrenia. With part of himself [sic] he has been compelled first to pay lip service to Christianity as understood, expressed and preached by the white man. But with an ever greater part of himself, a part he has been ashamed to acknowledge openly and which he has felt that his Africanness has been violated.[8]

Fashole has also accused Western missionaries for refusing to enter into dialogue with AR, arguing that:

> Western missionaries stressed aspects of discontinuity between Christianity and African cultures and traditional religion to such an extent that they excluded aspects of continuity between Christianity and African cultures and religion. They condemned without proper evaluation African religious beliefs and practices and substituted Western cultural and religious practices.[9]

Perhaps this is where African (Christian) inculturation theology becomes relevant because it takes culture as its point of departure. Fabella has argued that:

> Basically inculturation is the mutual interaction between the gospel and people with its particular culture whereby both are enriched. It is the adaption of the gospel to local cultures…while recognizing that not all aspects of African culture are in consonance with the gospel.[10]

This essay has shown that AR is an integral part of African culture. If funeral rituals as practiced by traditional African people who are also Christians involves beliefs and practices that undermine the role of Jesus in a Christian's life, then to echo Titi Tieno, one can say "no" in order not to compromise one's faith in God through Jesus Christ. Furthermore, Mercy Oduyoye warns that African theology must not embrace African culture as one of its sources uncritically, and question the non-liberating elements of African culture.

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[8] Desmond Tutu, "Black Theology and African Theology: Soulmates or Antagonists?," in John Parratt (ed.), *A Reader in African Christian Theology* (London: SPCK, 1997), pp. 37–38.

[9] Luke Fashole in *ibid.*, p. 4.

[10] Fabella, *op. cit.*, (note 6), p. 105.

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Christian Perspectives on Life After Death

Anastasia Bonifas-Malle

"I believe in the communion of saints." The Christian church confesses the continuity of life here and beyond. It affirms the unity and the existence of a larger community of faith, the invisible and the visible body of Christ. The life and work of Jesus testify to the mortality and finitude of human beings. He took on a human form, a human body that was subject to death, and he died like one of us. In order to probe the question of the departed or life after death, we will investigate a few bibliccl trajectories from both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Although for Lutherans faith is grounded especially in the first and second articles of the creed, little is said about life after death. Most of the great Reformers such as Zwingli, Calvin, and Luther believed in the immortality of the soul. Nevertheless, they did not deal with the issue of death or life after death to the same extent as they did with other aspects of Christian faith. For instance, in his Small Catechism, Luther does not mention the immortality of the soul.

Problems Related to Death

Although some people have claimed near-death experiences, no one has actually "come back" from the dead. What we experience is the outward aspect of death. Whether watching someone on their deathbed, or helping a dying person until the last moment—these experiences do not represent the inner aspect of death. The near-death experiences give us a few helpful insights into the death struggle, and life beyond, but even these realities remain shadowy. As Ladislaus Boros put it:

> Death cannot be gone through from outside, reproduced, as it were, in vitro. Each one of us must accept it absolutely alone, must and can meet death only once.[1]

Suffice it to say that the actual realities of death are hidden from us. Thus, our curiosity, concerns, and questions about death become even more compelling. People of all ages ask questions about death. What happens when a person dies? Does death put an end to one's existence? Does death wipe out one's personality once and for all? Does a person have immortality or an immortal

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[1] Ladislaus Boros, *The Mystery of Death* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 1.

soul which cannot die? Where are the dead? Can we communicate with them? Will we be able to recognize our loved ones in the next life? Can we pray for them and to them? What and where is hell and heaven? What is the destiny of the dead, are they saved or judged? These questions cannot be pushed aside, as we are always faced with the death of our loved ones.

The sciences, philosophy, and different religions (theology) have wrestled with the question of death. This in itself is a problem, since these three areas do not conform to one another, and even among religions there is no uniformity. Each has its own understanding and explanation of human nature and its destiny. For example, medical science looks at death from the point of view of the body's physical disintegration: death comes when all parts of the body fail to function. Philosophy looks at death from a metaphysical perspective: death is the moment when the soul is separated from the body. From the scientific point of view, this may be the moment when a dying person is still struggling with life with the help of drugs or life support machines. According to philosophy, the separation of the soul from the body does not necessarily coincide with the cessation of the vital bodily functions. Religion and their theologies also have their own ways of describing death and the hereafter. To some extent these do not help answer the question of death but add more questions, doubts, and uncertainties.

Death as a Reality

We cannot talk about life after death without mentioning the actual process of dying. Since we want to look at it from a Christian perspective we will rely on what is recorded in the Bible. Death is inevitable, a mystery and threat, even though biblical traditions and Christian teachings offer a different perspective. We encounter the reality of its threat as we face the loss of family members and friends. The Bible reminds us that death is not the final word, and that consequently death is not a final step but rather a gateway into another, permanent life.

Paul Tillich remarks that,

> Death is not merely the scissors which cuts the thread of our life, as a famous ancient symbol indicates. It is rather one of those threads which are woven into the design of our existence, from its very beginning to its end. Our having to die is a shaping force through our whole being of body and soul in every moment.[2]

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[2] Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), pp. 169–170.

A Paradigmatic Shift in the Understanding of Immortality

When we talk about death or immortality, our starting point is the question of human nature, including the investigation of what we mean by "human." In other words, we are concerned with the relationship of those parts that make a human being.

> Philosophy and science, as well as religion, have long been concerned with the question of the relationship between body and mind.
>
> Perhaps the most ancient and persistent dichotomous view of man [sic] is that which sees him or her as body and mind or body and soul. There has never been agreement at this point.[3]

This trend is as old as human society as is witnessed to by the great philosophers and theologians of the early centuries. However, it is important to investigate the reality of humanness because such an endeavor will help us understand how death and life after death are portrayed from the philosophical and religious points of view. According to the Catholic Catechism the direct creation of each individual soul belongs to the deposit of the Christian faith. The Roman Catholic Church wants to assure its members that human beings are God's special creation, not the consequence of some mechanical evolution. During creation, God infused into each human being an immortal soul. This immortal soul is not just a guide to right reasoning, but it distinguishes us from animals. Above all, it assures us that we are very precious and therefore immortal. When we die, our soul continues to live forever.

Many distinguished theologians have had their doubts and reservations about the immortality of the soul. Both Oscar Cullmann and Karl Bath regard this doctrine as a source of great misunderstanding in Christianity and as having been inspired by fear. While we may conclude that by denying the immortality of the soul these theologians fell short in their faith, we must not forget that their position is based on a contemporary understanding of life rather than a medieval concept.

During the Middle Ages the concept of immortality inspired hope of a better life. Life on earth was short, rough, and not very exciting. Women did not worry about menopause or men about mid-life crisis since they seldom lived beyond 40 years. Increased life expectancy, especially in Europe and North America, but also in the developing world, has changed our understanding of life. Of course we still suffer from anxieties, fears and doubts, but we no longer yearn for our soul to be with God and to leave this sack of worms (Martin Luther). There is much to live for, and the media, scientists, governments and others are trying to make life on earth worth living. They do their best to make sure that life is

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[3] Frank Stagg, *Polarities of Human Existence in Biblical Perspective* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth and Helwys Publ., 1994), p. 56.

valued and well taken care of by individuals and the community. They detest and object to everything that puts life in danger, which in turn affects our theological statements about death and the concept of life after death.

Philosophical Background

The message of the early Christian church was influenced by Greek culture. Many theologians used the Greek language and Greek philosophy to present their arguments. Their theological understanding was influenced by Greek thought, specifically the concept of the immortality of soul. According to Plato (427?—347 B.C.) the soul is invisible, spiritual, and otherworldly; the creator of the world created each human soul. Humanity is a combination of body and soul. However, Plato put more emphasis on the soul than the body. He calls the body the prison of soul, where God will one day free the soul from this prison. The soul is the principle of life, and where there is life, there is soul. He was convinced that the soul animates and sustains life.

Plato relegated the body to second place because he believed that the body decays, unlike the soul and other eternal ideas such as beauty, truth and goodness. Plato thought of the world as a transitional place only, from which we will eventually leave as we return to the realm of the "godly" from whence we came. The soul, in contrast, is everlasting, and eternal, and cannot undergo change nor can it be dissolved. It is, therefore, immortal.

There is another basis for believing in the soul's immortality. Since the soul remembers the eternal ideas of truth, goodness, and beauty, and longs to enact them, its memory cannot stem from this imperfect, ever-changing world. Rather, eternal ideas must be recollections from an earlier state of the soul's existence. Plato concluded, therefore, that the soul must be pre-existent and also immortal.

This view was also held by Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), who concluded that the human being consists of an inferior body and a superior soul. Apparently Aristotle regarded the two as complementing each other.

> Aristotle thought of man [sic] in terms of "compositionism," man [sic] as "a single integral substance" rather than two. He saw mind and body as complementing one another in closest union and not having separate existence in living persons. Body and soul or matter and form went together, the soul giving life, unity, and purpose to the body.[4]

Descartes (A.D. 1596-1650) did not acknowledge the unity of the body; he saw mind and soul as two distinct entities, completely separate from one another

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[4] *Ibid.*

except for the elusive point of contact which he likened to the relationship between horse and rider.[5] Aristotle denied the unity of personality and sees the body as a machine-like structure. The German philosopher, Immanuel Kant (A.D. 1724-1804), believed that the body dies while, even if unprovable, the soul will continue to live forever.

The debate on the relationship between the body and soul or mind continues greatly to influence the Christian understanding of life here and after.

We may wonder why so many philosophers spent so much time and energy wrestling with the question of the immortality of soul. Maybe as human beings they were touched by the same motivation that leads many Christians to accept the concept of the immortal soul. When we see life with its ambiguity, incompleteness, and injustice, and our inability to do something about these realities, it is only natural to assume that there is something beyond that will balance everything out, that will restore justice and lead all things to their intended perfection and completion. The idea of immortality points out the contradiction we experience in our lives. It can be regarded as an inborn idea of the human mind. But what does the Bible say about the immortality of the soul?

The Old Testament Understanding of Immortality

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word, *nephesh*, (soul) is used 775 times. *Nephesh* does not mean soul as an entity separate from other parts of the humanity. A human being does not have a *nephesh* but is a *nephesh* (living soul). In the creation story, we read that

> the Lord God formed man [the person Adam] of dust from the ground, and breathed into his [Adam's humanity] nostrils the breath of life and he [Adam] became a living being [*nephesh*]. (Gen 2:7)

This text also makes very clear the reality of human existence. Only by God's action does a living human being come into existence. *Nephesh* is not something that distinguishes a human being from other living beings. For example, Genesis 2:19 reminds us that every beast of the field and every bird of the air is a living creature (*nephesh*).

Besides *nephesh* another word often used that corresponds to *nephesh* is *leb* (heart), which is also considered as the seat of emotions. The major difference between *nephesh* and *leb* is that the heart is used particularly with reference to human beings whereas *nephesh* can be applied to both God's

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[5] *Ibid.*

human and non-human creation. The Old Testament also speaks of *ruah* or spirit. Its meaning extends from breath, wind, and mind to that which gives life to the body and to creation (Gen. 2:7; Ps 33:6). It is by the breath of God that creation came into being. Like the heart (*leb*), the spirit is considered the seat of emotions, the intellect and understanding (*cf.* Gen 41:8; Job 32:8). As Hans Schwarz put it, "For the Israelites the Spirit was perceived as God's comprehensive enabling, enlivening, and sustaining power."[6]

New Testament Teaching on the Soul and Immortality

The New Testament's approach to immortality is more positive. It was written in Greek. Exposure to Greek thought influenced Christian teachings which, as a result, integrate some of the teachings of Greek religion and philosophy.

The Septuagint translated the Hebrew *nephesh* as *psyche*, the Greek term for mind, self, or personality. The Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles give the impression that the meaning of *psyche* is close to *nephesh. Psyche* denotes the natural physical life. In Matthew 6:25 when Jesus told his listeners, "do not worry about your life…," he used *psyche* for life. In Mark 10:45 Jesus refers to his own life as *psyche* in order to be a ransom for many. In the Synoptic Gospels, *psyche* does not only indicate the natural life, but extends to life after death (see Mk 8:35ff.). In the Gospel of John, *psyche* and *zoe* are used interchangeably to refer to both physical and eternal life (Jn 12:25ff.). However, John uses *psyche* to refer to physical life and *zoe* to eternal life.

When Jesus speaks of eternal life in John 3:16; 10:10, and elsewhere in reference to himself or to his followers, he uses *zoen* (*cf.* Jn 6:53; 6:54; 7:12; 10:28). In the account of the death and resurrection of Lazarus, John uses the noun and the verb form of *zoen* to speak of Jesus and of his followers. In John 11:25 we read, "Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life (*zoe*). Those who believe in me, though they die, shall live.'" According to John, the continuation of life is a process that is beyond us; it is initiated by God through Jesus' own life and death. The God who gives us the gift of life in creation is the same God who recreates us by giving us the gift of eternal life through Jesus, God's son.

Schwarz has summarized this succinctly:

> We do not possess eternal life, nor is any part of us eternal. Yet, and this is the great promise and expectation, if we share our life, God will continue giving us life (*pysche*) and will preserve our life (*zoe*) into eternity. We could sum by saying that life (psyche)

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[6] Hans Schwarz, *Beyond the Gates of Death: A Biblical Examination of Evidence for Life After Death* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981), p. 28.

is always a gift of God and this usually means physical life. But life does not find its fulfillment in the material, in health, wealth, and beauty. Since it is continuously given by God, it need not annihilated by death, the boundary of material being. As God's gift, life can continue beyond death and it can even result in new life. [7]

Thus, the New Testament view of death and life after death has undergone a significant paradigm shift in the life and death of Jesus Christ. This paradigm is seen more clearly in the resurrection of Christ. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus become a foundation for and light by which Christians view and shape their human lives. The Gospels and the Epistles witness to the triumph of Christ over death, thus transforming death into a way and means of entering life eternal.

Furthermore, the New Testament does not teach that there is an independent soul or spirit in human beings that by its very nature is immortal. The word immortality is used only twice in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 15:53, Paul states that "this mortal body must put on immortality" in the resurrection. In this case, immortality is something that we do not possess, it is a gift of life promised at resurrection. The other instance is in 1 Timothy 6:16 where God alone is said to have immortality. So when we die, there is nothing of our own that survives bodily death, as most philosophers would assume. The Christian doctrine of creation forbids setting body and soul into an antithesis of evil and good, or mortal and immortal.

The Biblical Teaching on Death

The biblical teaching on death is varied and complex. According to the early Old Testament testimonies, life is only meaningful here on earth. A human being can enjoy and experience full life in relationship with God and others before the grave. Beyond the grave there is no life, no hope, no continuity, no praise of God. The psalmists cry:

> Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise up to praise you? Is your stead-fast declared in the grave, or your faithfulness in Abaddon? Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your saving help in the land of the forgetfulness? (Ps 88:10–12)

In Psalm 6:5 the Psalmist petitions: "For in death there is no remembrance of you, in Sheol who can give you praise?" Death according to this view is the end of all life, the end of existence (*cf.* 2 Sam 14:14; Job 7:21; Ps 39:13). Death was the end of God's activity and relationship with a person and the end of a human being's relationship with God. Therefore, human beings were

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[7] *Ibid.*, p. 32.

to live life to the full and to die of old age. As in African societies, dying at a young age was regretted and lamented as a great loss of life. The psalmist in Psalm 102:23–24 laments and pleads with God, "do not take me away at the mid-point of my life." Because of this understanding it was expected that a person left children in order to continue life and the family name.

The perpetuation of name was an essential element since it was part of the blessing bestowed upon children before an elderly person dies.

> The absence of one of these conditions—e.g., when one dies in the prime of life (Isa 38:10), or childless (2 Sam 18:18)—made death a problem which Israelite faith endeavored to resolve.[8]

The Old Testament says very little about the entering into a beautiful destiny after death, speaks little of the eternal bliss, or the coming home to God, or being united with the divine. Contrary to the ancient Near Eastern and African traditions, the Old Testament lacks elaborate myths about the nether world, the world beyond this one. Hans Schwarz comments, "The Old Testament views life as God's gift. In death this gift is missing and the stream of life does not penetrate the realm of death."[9]

Death is also viewed as the opposite of life. *Nephesh* characterizes life, and death is sometimes represented as the disappearance of this *nephesh* (Gen 35:18; 1 Kings 17:21; Jer 15:9; Jn 4:3). It is however, inadequate to look at this view in its literal sense, since such language in the Old Testament can also be figurative. As we have seen earlier, *nephesh* is not independent of the body, but dies with it (Num 31:19; Judg 16:30; Ezek 13:19). "No biblical text authorizes the statement that the "soul" is separated from the body at the moment of death."[10]

Some Old Testament Shifts in the Understanding of Death and Life after Death

The 8th-century prophets Amos and Hosea saw God's realm as extending to Sheol, where Yahweh controls the forces of death and uses them to serve the divine will (*cf.* Am 9:2; Hos 13:14; Isa 29: 19; see also Ps 139:7ff.). Here

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[8] George Arthur Buttrick (ed.), *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. A-D. (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 802.

[9] Schwarz, *op. cit.*, (note 6), p. 118

[10] *Ibid.*

Israel's understanding of life and death underwent a paradigmatic shift. In this respect, the view that Yahweh has entered the domain of death means that Yahweh is able to depose the power and forces of death.

After the Babylonian captivity, there was again a major shift in the understanding of life and death. During exile Israel had been exposed to Eastern religious ideologies which challenged its basic dogmas. With the loss of kingship, the temple, and even the land, the hope of the Messiah dimmed. If God was to continue to work in the lives of the people, then it must be in a different way.

Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones (Ezek 37) characterizes the possibility of life after death. Daniel also saw such a possibility in asserting the resurrection of the dead and the destiny of the righteous and the wicked (Dan 12:1–3). The force of this new shift came not only from the Israelites' exposure and encounter with other religions, but also from the conviction that Yahweh is the God of the living, and the giver of life.

The expressions of hope and of God's concern for life after death is built into God's dealings with Israel as is made evident in the history of the relationship between God and the people. In this relationship, God's saving activity assures us of God's ultimate salvation. This expectation does not work in and of itself; it works within the wider framework of all of God's activity toward Israel.

When we discuss the Jewish view of life, we have to take into account the whole history of the Jewish people and not just a certain period.

> To take the Hebrew view of the pre-exilic period as necessarily the only valid norm for what constitutes the "Jewish mind" is obviously one-sided. That a particular view was held at certain period, especially if it is earlier in time, does not of necessity demand the value-judgment that it is normative for all later developments.[11]

As is true of any human society, ideas and concepts held in Jewish history were open to change and reinterpretation. Thus, later Jewish thought no longer viewed death as being only the end of life but rather as a continuation of life. There was a possibility for life after the grave.

This view eventually led to the idea of salvation beyond death, salvation that would be effected by Yahweh through divine agency. Even places like Sheol or Hades came to assume some significance in the understanding of life after death:

> When we come to the end of the Old Testament we notice a much more elaborate understanding of what happens after death. Now Sheol (or Hades as it is translated

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[11] Russell Foster Aldwinckle, *Death in the Secular City: Life after Death in Contemporary Theology and Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 73.

in the Greek Old Testament) is often thought of as a "multi-chambered abode" to accommodate the different kinds of the pious and the godless.[12]

Sometimes a distinction is made between Hades and Sheol. Hades is understood to be the place of the godless while Sheol is understood as the abode of the righteous. Furthermore, it was also believed that those who fear God would go to heaven and the idea of the judgment of the godless was associated with this kind of teaching. The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus points to the Pharisees' belief that,

> souls have power to survive death and that there are rewards or punishments under the earth for those who have led lives of virtue or vice: eternal imprisonment is the lot of evil souls, while good souls receive an easy passage to new life.[13]

On the whole the New Testament teaching on the destiny of the dead shares the above apocalyptic view of eternal life for the righteous and eternal judgment for those who are wicked or those who do not believe, as the evangelist John would put it.

Where are the Dead? Transition or Finality

An ambiguous subject in the New Testament is the dichotomy between what might be called transition versus finality. While the New Testament uniformly affirms that all human beings will die, the New Testament teaching of what comes after death is confusing.

At one point, the New Testament says that the dead go to a waiting place until the Day of Judgment. In this respect, it shares the idea of Hades as a waiting room where the dead sleep. In John 5, Jesus says,

> Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. […] for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation. (Jn 5:25; 28f.)

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[12] Schwarz, *op. cit.*, (note 6), p. 122.

[13] Josephus, "Antiquities of the Jews," in *Josephus in Nine Volumes*, 9:13, quoted by Schwarz, *op. cit.*, (note 6), p. 123.

John's vision at Patmos in Rev 1:18 portrays Jesus as one who has keys for both heaven and Hades.

> Hades as an abode is an interim arrangement in which the souls are received upon death and from which they are delivered at the resurrection (Rev 20:13f.: here death and Hades can even be used synonymously indicating their intimate connection and their interim character).[14]

In Acts 2:31, Luke writes that David foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of Christ, "He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption." St. Peter points out that Jesus went and preached to the spirits in prison (1 Pet 3:19). These last references account for the inclusion in the Apostles' Creed of Jesus' journey to Hades: "He [Jesus] descended into hell." This statement, however, does not simply point to the presence of the transitional place and time for the departed; it emphasizes that death or Hades no longer has power over humanity.

Other passages of the New Testament indicate that death is a person's final destiny. In the parable of Luke 16:19–31 both Lazarus and the rich man found their destinies right after they died. There was no interim period or place for either of them. Again, in Luke 23:43 Jesus promised the criminal on the cross, "today you will be with me in Paradise."

The two models pose a great concern: where are the dead and what happens to them and when? Will they be waiting until the day of judgment is announced, or will they find their destinations right away, to either eternal blessedness or eternal rejection?

Any attempt to understand these seemingly contradictory teachings must, as Martin Luther pointed out, take into consideration our human limitations. Luther's solution was for people to stay as close as possible to God's self-disclosure as reflected by biblical witnesses.[15] Luther believed that the post-death interim period is not a neutral one; it presupposes our being accepted or rejected by God. He regarded this as the condition where the dead are unconscious of what is happening to them until the day of resurrection. His image of death was likened to sleeping. He often tried to observe himself falling asleep but never succeeded; what he remembered was awakening. He says,

> In a similar way as one does not know how it happens that one falls asleep, and suddenly morning approaches when one awakes, so we will suddenly be resurrected at the Last Day, not knowing how we have come into death and through death.[16]

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[14] Schwarz, *op. cit.*, (note 6), p. 124.

[15] See Schwarz, *op. cit.*, (note 6), p. 128.

[16] Luther, *WA 17.II*, p. 235, (Fastenpostille, 1525); see also Schwarz, *op. cit.*, (note 6), p. 128.

Luther does not delineate the exact time and procedures of sleeping and waking up of the dead. Rather,

> We shall sleep until he comes and knocks at the tomb and says: "Dr. Martin, get up" and I will rejoice with him eternally.[17]

Christians believe in the resurrection of the body and everlasting life. They do not dwell on the polarities between death and resurrection. Anyone who is in Christ is already a new creation and "if the spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies." (Rom 8:11) God's saving work is not limited to or bound by time or space. Furthermore, our perspective of time and space differ from that of God who is our creator, and who gives creation time and space. Schwarz's comment is worth noticing when he says

> As people cross the borderline of time at different points, it is legitimate to say with the New Testament writers that the dead sleep until judgment day. But in God all the different points of time coincide. In his eternal presence there is no distinction between past, present, and future. Such distinction exists only for us time-bound creatures, not for the creator. When through death we cross borderline of time, we encounter God's eternal presence. We are then co-eternal not only with God but also with human creatures. Regardless of when we cross this line we will appear on the "other side" at the "same moment" as everyone else.[18]

Although Schwarz speaks of our confrontation with God in death as final judgment, the Apostle John puts that confrontation right after our encounter with the Lord of life (Jesus) here on earth. After Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus, Jesus clearly says that the Son of God came into the world to save it and not to judge it. Nonetheless, he continues to show that those who believe in him are not condemned and those who do not believe are already condemned. (Jn 3:17–21)

Do the Dead Have Inherent Powers?

The Old Testament is very specific in relegating all powers to Yahweh. The Israelites did not ascribe any powers to the departed nor did they regard death

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[17] Luther, *WA 37*, p. 8, (Sermon of Sept. 1533); see also Schwarz, *op. cit.*, (note 6), p. 128.

[18] Schwarz, *op. cit.*, (note 6), p. 129.

in itself as having special powers. The Old Testament refutes any consultation of mediums and wizards.

> Now if people say to you, "Consult the ghosts and the familiar spirits that chirp and mutter, should not a people consult their gods, the dead on behalf of the living, for teaching and instruction?" Surely, those who speak like this will have no dawn! (Isa 8:19–20)

When King Saul out of desperation consulted the witch woman of Endor, he was condemned and rejected by God. (1 Sam 28) The Israelites were called to address Yahweh, the living God and the God of the living instead of addressing the dead.

In the last article of faith in the Apostles' Creed we confess, " I believe in the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints … ." The Bible, especially the New Testament, refutes the existence of the living dead. In fact, in the transfiguration story, Jesus' disciples could see their master communicate with the Old Testament heroes (Mk 9:2–8; Mt 17:1–8; Lk 9:28–36). The writer of Hebrews affirms that the great cloud of witnesses (Heb 12:1f.) surrounds us (Christians). John's vision at Patmos gives us an idea of the presence of many departed people (Rev 14:1ff.; 20:11–12). In Revelation 20:11–12 he saw the dead, "great and small" standing before the judgment seat of God. In this respect, the New Testament converges with African Religion (AR) in that the dead people live and are able to communicate with the living world. It is also fair to say that the New Testament does not pay special attention to this fact because of its focus on Christ's role as the only mediator (Heb 10:11ff.).

However, the New Testament is silent concerning the status and powers of the departed. Churches may pronounce certain individuals to be saints, but we Lutherans do not ascribe any powers to these departed people. We believe in the continuity of life, in the community here and beyond. The departed have no mediatorial role, such as that taught by the Roman Catholic Church. Christ alone is the mediator between God and people; whose life and work broke the barriers of enmity between the Creator and creation. He is, therefore, our shalom, as the writer to the Ephesians puts it:

> For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for though him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then

> you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; (Eph 2:14–21).

Christ has therefore taken the role of mediator. The saints are not granted any special powers or attributed specific functions that the living do not possess. In this way, the departed and the living are made one household, in other words, citizens in the household of Christ.

"A Person who Eats Alone Dies Alone"[1]: Death as a Point of Dialogue Between African Religion and Christianity

John S. Mbiti

Introduction

The topic of death is complex and gigantic. Each African people and community has its own concepts and practices. This essay concentrates on a select number of themes dealing with death that confront both Christians and followers of African Religion (AR).

I use the term AR to refer to the traditional religious system which evolved without a founder, without written scriptures and centralized institutional organization. AR has provided the concepts and practices connected with death, but there are modifications and adaptations resulting from contact especially with Christianity and Islam. Death as a theme provides us with a concrete area where interreligious dialogue is taking place.

Mythological Origins of Death

African explanations of the origin of death have circulated orally from generation to generation. We take a few examples of these explanations and then make some general observations.

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[1] The title of this paper comes from an Akamba (Kenya) proverb, used to highlight the value of sharing both joy (food) and sorrow (death). If there is no fellowship, no sharing of food during one's life, there will be no sharing of grief and bereavement at one's funeral. Happiness conquers grief and fellowship defeats separation by death. This is a revised and shortened form of my essay, "An den Knochen kannst du erkennen, wo der Elefant verendet ist. Der Tod in der afrikanischen Religion und Kultur," in Constantin van Barloewen (ed.), *Der Tod in den Weltkulturen und Weltreligionen* (Munich: Diederichs, 1996), pp. 201–207.

Myth 1: From the Asu (Tanzania): The Lamb and the Lizard as Messengers

There are two versions of this myth.

The first version says: After God had created man,[2] he found that he had one more thing to place in his [man's] life. That is: his life destiny. So God asked man: "How would you like to die? To die like a pot which, after it has fallen down on the ground, breaks into pieces and that becomes the end of its life; or like a moon which goes for a while, but comes back again anew?"

Man replied: "I would like to die like a pot."

The second version says: After man was created, God wanted to put in him his life destiny. But he had two messages from which man had to choose how he would like to die. These were: To die like a pot, or to die like a moon. The condition was that the first message to be delivered to man would be the one to be accepted. So, God sent two messengers—the lamb and the house-lizard (*kiraro na nkanda*)—to deliver the messages.

The lamb was given the message of dying like a moon, while the lizard was to deliver the message of dying like a pot. Both of them were commissioned to carry their messages to man as fast as they could, each one taking its own way.

On its way to man the lamb stopped in order to eat some grass. As a result, it was late to deliver the message and the lizard became the first to do so. When the lamb came to man, it was told that the lizard's message had already been accepted. Thus, the lizard's message became the way man was to die even to this day.[3]

Myth 2: From the Nupe (Nigeria): Tortoises, Men, and Stones

God created the tortoise, men, and stones. Of each, he created male and female. God gave life to the tortoises and men, but not to the stones. None could have children, and when they became old they did not die, but became young again.

The tortoise, however, wished to have children and it went to God (to ask for children). But God said: "I have given you life, but I have not given you permission to have children."

Nevertheless, the tortoise came to God again to make its request, and finally God said: "You always come and ask for children. Do you realize that, when the living have had several children they must die?"

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[2] Wherever possible the author has tried to keep away from specific gender terms, but in some cases has used "man" generically to cover both male and female. Quotations remain in their original wording.

[3] K. Cuthbert Omari, *God and Worship in Traditional Asu Society. A Study of the Concept of God and the Way He was Worshipped among the Vasu* (Erlangen: Verlag der Evang. Luth. Mission, 1990), pp. 97f.

But the tortoise said: "Let me see my children and then die." Then God granted its wish.

When man saw that the tortoise had children, he, too, wanted children. God warned man, as he had the tortoise, that he must die. But man also said: "Let me see my children and then die."

That is how death and children came into the world. Only the stones did not want to have children, and so they never die.[4]

Myth 3: From the Efe (Pygmy, Democratic Republic of Congo): The Forbidden Fruit

God created the first human being with the help of the moon. He kneaded the body out of clay; then he covered it with skin, and at the end he poured blood into it. He called the first man Baatsi. Then he whispered into his ear, telling him to beget many children, but to impress upon them the following rule: "From all trees you may eat, but not from the Tahu tree."

Baatsi had many children and he made them obey the rule. When he became old, he retired to heaven. His children obeyed the rule, and when they grew old they, too, retired to heaven.

But one day, a pregnant woman was seized with an irresistible desire to eat the fruit of the Tahu tree. She asked her husband to break some for her, but he refused.

But when she persisted, the husband gave in. He crept into the forest at night, picked the Tahu fruit, peeled it and hid the peel in the bush.

But the moon had seen him and she told God what she had seen. God was so angry, that he sent death (as a punishment) to men.[5]

Myth 4: From the Fulani (West Africa): God defeats Death

At the beginning there was a huge drop of milk. / Then Doondari (God) came and he created the stone. / Then the stone created iron; / And iron created fire; / And fire created water; / And water created air. / Then Doondari descended the second time. / And he took the five elements

And he shaped them into man. / But man was proud. / Then Doondari created blindness, and blindness defeated man. / But, when blindness became too

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[4] Ulli Beier (ed.), *The Origin of Life and Death* (London, Nairobi, Ibadan: Heinemann, 1966), pp. 58f.

[5] *Ibid.*, (note 4), p. 63. Other myths can be found in H. Abrahamsson, *The Origin of Death* (Uppsala ,1951); H. Baumann, *Schöpfung und Urzeit im Mythus der Afrikanischen Völker,* 2nd ed. (Berlin: Reimer, 1964); John S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1979). Most works of anthropology and AR on individual peoples give accounts of the mythological origin of death.

proud, / Doondari created sleep, and sleep defeated blindness. / But, when sleep became too proud, / Doondari created worry, and worry defeated sleep. / But, when worry became too proud, / Doondari created death, and death defeated worry. / But, when death became too proud, / Doondari descended for the third time, / And he came as Gueno, the Eternal one. / And Gueno defeated death.[6]

This small selection of myths about the coming of death into the human world represents a wide spectrum of attempts to explain this mystery. What these and other myths say forms a fundamental approach to death in African societies. Out of these and other mythological stories we can isolate some background (working) points. Afterwards we will look at the biblical myth (story) about the coming of death upon human persons.

Working points

1) It is clear that life and not death was the original and potential state of the human condition. In the Asu myth (1), death is presented as part of life. But there was a choice that human beings could make concerning the manner of dying— either permanently or repeatedly. The better choice would have been to die and to come back to life like the moon. In that case, death would not have become an enemy of life, but a temporary change, which would come and go in a rhythm of dying and rising, getting old and being rejuvenated. The second choice, symbolized by the breaking of a pot, has no hope in it: it is a decision with permanent consequences. And that is what the lizard communicated. In a sense, death came by chance, through the faster movement of the lizard. To a certain degree, both the lamb and the lizard are to blame—one for taking the message too slowly, the other for taking it too quickly. That means, the origin of death was a dilemma.

2) In some of the myths, the coming of death is attributed to creatures other than human persons. Some talk about the message from God, which got falsified, or arrived too early or too late, or was replaced by a message affirming death (myths 1 and 2).

3) In other myths, the first human beings were responsible for the coming of death. They disobeyed God's rule, or they accidentally did the wrong things. In such myths there are three fundamental concepts:

> Death is seen as one of the consequences of the separation between God and human persons. It is then an ontological phenomenon pointing to the

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[6] Wole Soyinka (ed.), *Poems of Black Africa* (London, Nairobi, Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1975), pp. 57f.

distinction between God who is immortal and all-powerful, and human beings who are mortal and have limited power. Death is an ontological limitation to the creatures that have life.

There is a moral dimension to the coming of death, in some of the myths. Human persons were given instructions, regulations, or commandments by God, by which they could live in their original state. Disobedience or disregard of these, as in the Pygmy myth (3), resulted in death as a disciplinary measure—the way children may be disciplined, while the parents still love and care for them. In the Fulani myth (4), the whole ethical basis of creation is undermined or compromised, and death comes as the final consequence. Following humankind's creation, it is human beings who make the first moral blunder as the myth tells us: "But the man was proud." Pride infected the whole of human life. First the man became proud and reaped blindness. Then God created blindness to put human persons on proper rails, but blindness itself became morally lame and suffered the consequences. The chain reaction went on until finally death came on the scene. This picture is an ugly sequence of moral degeneration.

There is a positive moral cause of death represented in the Nupe story (myth 2), in which the love of life itself is greater than the fear or consequence of death. Tortoises and human beings choose to multiply, to bear children, in contrast to stones, which have no such desire. It is the love of children, the power of recreation, which actually causes death to both animals and human beings: "Let me see my children and then die!" There is no moral breach here, there is no disobedience on the part of animals and human beings. Instead, they all want to propagate life, even if in so doing they pay the lesser price of dying. Love and death stand next to each other and rub shoulders. Death cannot catch up with the rate of producing children, the power of recreating and multiplying life through birth or other means of propagating life. Love is greater or stronger than death. Love does not fear death. Even though stones do not die in the same sense as humans and animals, they also do not love and cannot bear biological children.

In this Nupe myth, death is more or less a gift of God, but with less value than life itself. Tortoises and humans had the possibility of getting old and changing to become young—each individually undergoing the same process over and over again. But the multiplication, the increase of life through children was better than the life of waxing and waning like the moon. "Let me see my children and then die!" These are joy and grief in one packet. Death has no ultimate power over life. These children will see their own children and die...

and their children will see their own and die...without end. Genuine love of life means loving and reproducing even if at the cost of oneself. This link between the living and those yet to be born is a very deeply felt bond in African society.

4) God is behind whatever caused death to come to the world. God is seen as the creator of both life and death; seen as the one who, in various ways, permitted death to function, or used it for particular intentions. God is ruler over life and death. Death has no power before God. In the Fulani myth (4), God is elevated as the one who defeats death. Life (in God) is stronger than death. The myths justify God's work in creating and allowing death to come to the world. This is a basic form of theodicy in AR.

5) While the myths show that the coming of death is regrettable, there runs through them the indication that, life is not vanquished by death in an absolute sense. The gift of reproduction is a clear countermeasure against death. In the Fulani myth, God comes to the world for the third time, "as Gueno, the Eternal one. And Gueno defeated death." In this myth, creation is rescued from destruction by death or by lesser forces (functions) such as sleep, worries, blindness and pride. God and not death, has the final say and bringing life in its fullness at which point death becomes unknown, and the forces which lead to it are consequently subdued.

6) An analysis of creation myths indicates that, after the creation of human beings, God put them in a state of bliss, happiness and close (family) communion with him. He gave them one or more of three gifts, namely: (a) (conditional) immortality; (b) resurrection if they died; and (c) rejuvenation if they became old. He provided them with the necessities of life and they lived more or less in paradise. They were very close to God and the earth and the heavens were united. For various reasons, the separation of God from human beings took place, and the heavens and the earth were also separated. While this was an ontological separation, it brought serious consequences to human beings, including the loss of the three main gifts, the coming of hunger (famine), suffering, disease and death. In this case, death has to be seen in the wider framework of ontology.

A biblical story

Against this set of African myths on the coming of death into the world, and our analysis of them, we present the biblical story (Gen 2:15-3:19), on which a great deal of Christian theology has been built:

> The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the

garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

"This at last is bone of my bones / and flesh of my flesh; / this one shall be called Woman, / for out of Man this one was / taken."

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate." The Lord God said to the serpent,

"Because you have done this, / cursed are you among all / animals / and among all wild creatures; / upon your belly you shall go, / and dust you shall eat / all the days of your life. / I will put enmity between you and / the woman, / and between your offspring and hers; / he will strike your head, / and you will strike his heel." / To the woman he said, / "I will greatly increase your pangs / in childbearing; / in pain you shall bring forth / children, / yet your desire shall be for your / husband, / and he shall rule over

you." / And to the man he said, / "Because you have listened to the / voice of your wife, / and have eaten of the tree / about which I commanded you, / 'You shall not eat of it,' / cursed is the ground because of / you; / in toil you shall eat of it all the / days of your life; / thorns and thistles it shall bring / forth for you; / and you shall eat the plants of the field. / By the sweat of your face / you shall eat bread / until you return to the ground, / for out of it you were taken; / you are dust, / and to dust you shall return."

There are some parallels between this biblical story and African stories. Both life and death originate from God. However, in the biblical account, the coming of death is attributed partly to persons (male and female, Adam and Eve), and partly to the serpent. In some African stories, the first persons are responsible and in others, animals are to blame. In both biblical and African accounts, God mercifully lets persons continue to live, albeit no longer in paradise or in direct contact with the creator. African stories emphasize the ontological separation between God and persons: death brings out ontological limitation of the creatures. The biblical story is interpreted (by Western and Eastern theologians) to emphasize the ethical separation—the famous (or notorious) Fall of humankind takes place.

Expressions About Death and Dying

The causes and meaning of death

African peoples consider death not so much in its mythological dimensions as in its actual occurrence. That way, they accept it as part and parcel of life, and attempt to come to terms with it in various ways. Yet, paradoxically, every human death is thought to have external causes, making it both natural and unnatural. People must find and give immediate causes of death.

By far the most common cause is believed to be magic, sorcery, and witchcraft, found everywhere though with varying degrees of emphasis. Someone is often blamed or accused of using one of these means to cause the death of another person. The formal curse is greatly feared and believed to bring death to the person concerned. The departed (whom we call the living dead) and spirits are another cause. This applies to those of a given family, who may have been offended before they died, may not have been properly buried, or may bear a grudge against someone. However, there is little evidence to support the belief that the departed actually cause death. If a family feels that its living dead are dissatisfied, it immediately takes measures to harmonize or reconcile the situation, and avoid its deterioration to the point of actual death.

Intermediary agents are brought into the picture to satisfy people's suspicions and to act as scapegoats. Nonetheless, certain deaths are can only

be explained by attributing them directly to God. These are those for which there is no other satisfactory explanation, for example, the death of old people (natural death), through natural calamities, or where a person may contravene an important custom, taboo, or prohibition. Even when God is seen as the cause, he is not blamed for it. People accept it as the will of God.

At least one cause of death must always be given for virtually every death in society. This means that paradoxically, death is acknowledged as having come into the world and remained there ever since, yet it is unnatural and preventable on the personal level because another agent always causes it. If that agent did not cause it, then the individual would not die. Such is the logic and such is the philosophy concerning the death among human beings.

Questions arise here, concerning facing and coping with illness, sickness, and misfortunes. All these come upon both Christians and followers of AR. Are there common explanations and on what basis would these be valid for each tradition? On the question of treatment: do the different religious traditions have to follow exclusively their own ideas and methods? On what theological grounds can Christians go or decline to go to traditional doctors (medicine men or women, or diviners) for treatment, exorcisms, and handling of questions connected with witchcraft? On what basis can both Christianity and AR share in responding to this vast area of people's health concerns?

Speaking of actual dying

The terms used to describe the phenomenon of dying reveal various concepts about it. For example, among the Basoga (in Uganda), when a person has died, people say he (or she, here and throughout) "has breathed his or her last;" "he has kept quiet;" "he has gone;" "he has gone down to the grave;" "our friend was told by death to tie up his or her load and go;" "he is dry as if from yesterday;" "life was snatched into two like a bristle stick;" and—if it is an old person from another family, they say, "it is fair, he has died, he has eaten enough."

Concerning the death of a murderer or a witch, they say let him (or her, here and throughout) "go, he has finished his job, another mouth has gone away." Concerning someone who is not liked, people say that death (*walumbe*) "has beaten" him or her; "has made him finish food;" "has made him sleep or lie down;" "has made him dry;" "has stiffened him;" "has made him quiet;" "has sneezed him;" "has made him go far away;" or, "death has cut him down" or "forced him down." There is a kind of mixture or paradox here, between "rejoicing" and "regretting" someone (else's) death.

Among the Abaluyia (in Kenya) death or dying is described as "sleeping" (for an old person, who dies peacefully); "falling by oneself" (if it is through suicide); "stepping into the sheet" (since the body is wrapped or covered with

a skin or banana leaves before but not for burial); "wearing a sweater" (if killed by another person); "going to the place of the dead;" or "going home." For a hated person, the phrase often is "looking for an exit" or "lifting the leg."

The Akamba (my own people, in Kenya) use the following terms: "To follow the company of one's grandparents;" "to go home;" "to stop snoring;" "to be fetched or summoned;" "to empty out the soul;" "to sleep forever and ever;" "to dry up, wither, or evaporate;" "to pass away;" "to be called;" "to reject the (living) people;" "to reject food;" "to be received or taken away;" "to return or go back;" "to terminate, be finished or end;" "to have one's breath come to an end;" "to depart or go;" "to go where other people have gone;" "to leave, forsake or abandon;" "to collapse, come to ruins;" "to become God's property;" and "to have a miscarriage" (for a person who dies at an early age)."[7]

A few conclusions

Similar terms can be quoted from other parts of Africa. From these we can draw a number of conclusions.

1) Death is conceived of as a departure and not the annihilation of a person. He or she moves on to join the company of the departed. The only major change is the decay of the physical body, while the spirit moves on to another state of existence. Here, both Christians and traditionalists are more or less in agreement. In Christian theology, death is viewed christologically, relating individual deaths to that of Jesus Christ's and the conquest he wrought over death. Death is conquered by life in Christ, resurrected life. The christological element is a radical thought on the African scene.

2) Some of the words describing death imply that a person goes "home." This means that the present life is like a pilgrimage: the real home is in the hereafter, since one does not depart from there. There is a real cessation of the physical part of the person at death which "sleeps" but never to wake up again. The other part goes home and never returns to the physical form.

To some extent, these are common sentiments in the actual lives of people, both among Christianity and AR. Whereas there is no (clear) "heaven" to which the departed go, according to AR, Christianity (as popularly propagated) promises heaven for the departed (faithful). Or at the worst there is hell (fire) awaiting or threatening the "unbelievers." What are we to do with these discrepancies?

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[7] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford, 1990), pp. 151ff., cited here with slight changes.

3) Death is cruel; it "stiffens," "cuts down," or "evaporates" a person, even if the person continues to exist in the hereafter. This cruelty of death comes out in funeral dirges. A vivid example of this may be cited from the Acholi from Uganda, who sing:

> Fire rages at Layima, / It rages in the valley of river Cumu,
> Everything is utterly destroyed; / Oh, my daughter,
> If I could reach the homestead of Death's mother,
> I would make a long grass torch; / If I could reach the homestead of Death's mother
> I would utterly destroy everything. / Fire rages at Layima.

The struggle between human beings and death is portrayed in another dirge:

> Behold Oteka fights alone / The bull dies alone.
> O men of the lineage of Awic / What has the son of my mother done to you
> That he should be deserted / Behold the warrior fights single-handed.
> My brother is armed with bows and barbed-headed arrows,
> He fights alone, not a single helper beside him;
> My brother fights alone, / He struggles with Death.[8]

This same sense of man's helplessness in the sight of death, can also be seen in an Akan (Ghana) dirge:

> We are bereft of a leader, / Death has left us without a leader...
> He has died and left us without a leader. / Alas, mother! Alas, father!
> Alas, mother! Alas, father!... / We are being carried away.
> Death is carrying us all away...[9]

Thus, death is a bitter monster before which human beings are utterly helpless. Relatives watch a person die, and they cannot help him or her escape death. It is an individual event in which nobody else can interfere or intervene. This is the height of death's agonies and pain, for which there is neither cure nor escape, as far as African concepts and religion are concerned. At a pastoral level, Christians would sing and pray to accompany the dying and the burying process. This provides a point of reference—Jesus Christ—to comfort, to give hope, to dampen the grief and raise expectation of "being with the Lord in heaven." I do not find

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[8] J. Okot p'Bitek, "The concept of Jok among the Acholi and Lango," *The Uganda Journal*, vol. XXVII, no. 1 (1963), p. 20.

[9] J. H. Nketia, *Funeral Dirges of the Akan People* (Accra, 1955), pp. 122f.

parallel sentiments in AR, though, of course, people accompany the dying and do everything possible to lessen pain and comfort one another.

On what basis can Christianity and AR together moan someone's death and accompany the bereaved? What concepts can be used as points of reference in dealing with the event of death? Which funeral concepts and practices can be borrowed and used from both traditions—simultaneously, jointly or consecutively?

Announcements of Death and Memorials

Let us first look at two some examples of death announcements published in Kenyan newspapers. What we see here is a clear mixture of concepts from both AR and Christianity. Fictitious names are substituted here for persons, places, occupations, dates and times.

Example 1:

> (Photo of the departed)
> The death has occurred of Timothy Giceru Maina former chairperson of Rhubarb Growers' Association. Husband to Jane Muthoni and Silvia Wambui. Brother to Rebecca Wanjiru Wainaina and stepbrother to Mungai Kimotho. Father to Kaggia, Ngechu, Kuria, Nancy, Lucy, Mwaniki, Mwangi, Muthoni, Gatimu and Grace. He hails from Kamwana Village, Magutano Location, in Muhogo District. The body will be removed from Muhogo Hospital Mortuary on 18/9/95 at 8.00 a.m. The burial will be on Friday, 19/ 9/95 from 2 p.m. at his Farm Ugwaci Village, Mugeni, Muhogo. Friends and relatives are meeting daily for fund raising at Ndege Sita Hotel from 6.00 p.m. May the Almighty God rest his soul in everlasting Peace. Amen.[10]

Example 2:

> (Photo of the departed)
> Born 1949—Died 1/8/1995
> The death has occurred of Isabelle Achola Omondi after a long illness bravely borne. She was the wife of the late Mzee Zakayo Omondi, and daughter of the late Mr. and Mrs. Frederick Okullo of Kandaria Nyakacheh. Mother to Crispas Wosita Omondi, Grace K. Omondi, Lilian Dawo, Moses Ochieng Omondi of Flower Suppliers Ltd., Mary Odoro of Zigzag Technical Institute, Dorcas Atieno Owuor, Pamela Odera of Customs Department at Kitabu Light Craft Airport, Monica Ongwae and Rose Oreko. Sister to Miriam Ouko and David Abayo, among others. Mother-in-law to Anna Moraa of

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[10] *The Daily Nation*, Nairobi, 9 August 1995, p. 32. Not the real names.

Okech Red Girls' School, Tabitha Nyang'acha of T.S.V., Fiona Akinyi of A.B.C.D.E., Job Ogetonto, Patrick Opiata Onyango of Runyenjes County Council, Jacob Okumu of Mount Sitima Development Authority, Stephen Otieno of Nuts and Screws Supplies, Ltd., Aggrey Muriuki of P.U., Jeremiah Alila of Fishers Junior High School. Auntie to Pamela Odero of W.A.C. Industries Ltd. and Ayiecha Orare of Boot Repairs (K) Ltd.

The cortege will leave Odera Mortuary—Sukuma on 11/8/95 in the afternoon for Orateng'. Funeral service and burial will take place at her home in Didima, S. East Agachi, Saseno District on 13/8/1995 at 1.00 p.m.

"I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in me will live, even though He dies." St. John 11:25[11]

Death and funeral announcements in newspapers, on the radio, and television reveal a lot about concepts of death. The two examples cited above are representative and we can draw the following conclusions:

1) The dead are still part of the wider family. They are referred to as: "Son/daughter of, brother/sister of, wife of, husband of (one or more wives), brother-/sister-in-law, daughter/son-in-law of, cousin of, nephew of, niece of, step brother/sister of, mother/father of, grandmother/father of, great grand father/mother of, aunt/uncle of..." Even relatives who have already died years before are mentioned, with the prefix "of the late..." In polygamous families the two or more wives are mentioned. In August 1995, I counted 38 names of brothers and sisters of the dead person in one newspaper announcement. The feeling of belonging to a wide network of family members, not to mention friends and other relatives, is deeply ingrained—among followers of AR and of Christianity. In fact on that basis alone, it is not possible (or necessary) to distinguish which concepts come from where.

2) It is extremely important that, when a person dies, there are relatives who will continue to remember him or her. To die without close relatives, especially without one's own or adopted children, is considered to be very unfortunate since one would simply be forgotten. Nobody wants to be forgotten immediately upon dying. To be remembered by the living means continuing to live among one's relatives even if one is physically dead. Keeping the dead in memory is a strong counter-measure against death. It is a form of limited immortality. Death does not destroy the ties of blood, love and kinship. As such it can be accepted, however painful and shocking it may be. Death provokes sorrow, but reminds those who remain, that life is not annihilated—it goes on. To see the descendants gives joy even at the funeral.

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[11] *The Daily Nation*, Nairobi, 10 August 1995, p. 34. Not the real names.

3) Furthermore, people take it for granted that the dead continue to live in the hereafter. This is a fundamental belief in AR, and Christians share it. Many of the death and funeral announcements add short prayers or similar statements, including those cited below. These prayers and biblical verses stem from the Christian tradition and scriptures. They are not found in AR, but they serve sentiments that are common to both religions. For the Christian, they express clear hope, peace, assurance, even "joy" (satisfaction) when the eyes of faith (belief) look beyond death and see life (with the Lord, in heaven, in eternal peace, "till we meet again"). This is a clear contribution to African religiosity in the face of death:

"Blessed are those who die in the Lord."

"Come, and let us praise the Lord together."

"God gives and takes away." (*cf.* Job 1:21)

"Happy/Blessed are they, who die/sleep in the Lord." (Rev 14:13)

"I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies." (Jn 11:25)

"Man of courage, rest in peace."

"May the good Lord rest your soul in eternal peace."

"May the Almighty God rest his/her soul in everlasting / eternal peace. Amen."

"Rest in peace till we meet again."

"The Lord giveth, the Lord takes away. Amen." (*cf.* Job 1:21)

These expressions of sentiments towards the departed come largely out of the Christian tradition and are published by the (small) number of those who read and write, and can afford to pay for an announcement in the mass media. Most people die and are buried without published announcements, but word of mouth spreads fast, far, and wide. These sentiments are not foreign to traditional expressions in AR. Such expressions are more in funeral rituals and other acts of remembering the dead. Among these is the tradition of burying the dead in the house, or in the compound where they lived. For that reason, it is always mentioned in the funeral announcements where the deceased would be buried: "At his/her farm nearby;" "At her/his parents' home;" "At her husband's farm;" "At his/her home;"

"At Mutuni village (her/his home)." Occasionally people are buried in common cemeteries in towns and cities, if they die there and if it is impossible to transport their bodies home (due to lack of money, distance, poor roads, or because no close relative gets to know immediately of their death in the big cities).

4) It is important that a person is buried at his or her home compound or village. This cements the ties between the departed and the living. Family ties continue to function between the visible and invisible worlds. The living walk on the graves of their dead relatives. It is thought that the dead continue to be interested in the welfare of their living families. It is easier and more practical to remember the dead if they are buried on the family compound. For this reason, when a family migrates to another place and builds a home there, parts of the dead relatives may also be transferred to the new home, such as skulls, earth from the grave, bones, potsherds, or articles that may have been kept on the grave. The latter is practiced more from the side of AR than of Christianity, though there would be nothing theologically untenable about it.

Cases come up in which controversies or even physical fights arise concerning where to bury the body. This may occur among relatives such as, for example, the two or more wives of a dead husband. These, and or their children, may each wish to have his body buried in her particular land compound; or parents who may wish their dead son or daughter to be buried in the parents' own compound. Such cases are eventually brought to court for settlement, during which time the body remains unburied, in the mortuary, for several months until the dispute is settled. But, does this painful eventuality occur more among Christians than pure followers of AR, who, over generations has paved a clear path to follow? Or is it that here we see conflicting practices and views between the two religious traditions? This sensitive issue needs closer scrutiny and clarification.

Announcements of "in loving memory" refer to the dead who passed away several years back. They show that the dead are still remembered and loved. Burial rituals may last over several months or even years, according to AR, in some societies. Parallel to these, but also different from them, are remembrance services, for Christians, in churches or in the homes of the departed.

Example:

> In Loving Memory: Photo and name of the departed.
>
> Days and nights have turned into twenty-four years today. Since you slipped out of our hand and the Lord took you to glory, our tears have not dried up. You were the family pillar—a source of strength to us. We shall always cherish the love you had for all of us. Loved and dearly missed by your loving wife Hannah Kioko, children, grandchildren, great grandchildren and friends. There will be a thanksgiving memorial service at his farm, Matuuni near Kalunge Trading Centre, Musingi District, on Sunday, 20 August 1995.[12]

Words of affection and love may be added.

Example:

In Loving Memory: Photo and name of the departed.
The late Naomi Katuku Kiema: Two years ago you said good-bye and slipped away. / Today it seems only yesterday. / When together we laughed and loved. / It seems like just the other day. / That you died and we cried. / But fond memories of you stay. / And console us each day. / Till we meet some day at God's bridal parade. / Rest darling in eternal peace.

Or:

Father, nine years ago you physically departed from us. Although physically gone, spiritually you are always with us. Affectionately remembered by your family, relatives and friends. May the Lord rest your soul in eternal peace.

Or:

Darling sweet Kalekye. It is two years since you left us in confusion, disbelief and with no good-bye. We remember and dearly miss your love, compassion, humility and kindness which our hearts loved and memories will forever linger on. The loneliness you have created in our hearts will remain forever. Fondly remembered by your loving husband Clement, children, relatives and friends. There will be prayers at Clement's house, at Kabete Road on 19/8/1995 at 11:00 a.m. to arrange for the laying of the cross ceremony on 17/12/1995 at the graveside near Kaliluni High School, Mutomo... Rest in peace till we meet again. Amen.
    You are always in our hearts. Rest in peace until we meet again (after 4 years).[13]

These sentiments show clearly that there are elements in a person which death does not destroy. These are spiritual values like love, kindness, compassion, helpfulness, justice and uprightness. They are timeless values. They continue to link the departed to the living, the spiritual to the physical, the visible to the invisible worlds. Such values are clearly common to both AR and Christianity.

Funerals

There are elaborate funeral ceremonies all over Africa, some lasting over several years. Nomadic and pastoral peoples tend to be less attached to the burial places

[12] *The Daily Nation*, Nairobi, 10 August 1995. Not the real names.

[13] All from *The Daily Nation*, Nairobi, 1 August 1995, p. 29. Not the real names.

of their departed than are agricultural peoples. Traditional practices are inclined nowadays to be supplemented or elaborated by Christian (and Western) practices, so that new forms of funerals develop with time. We take a few examples from eastern and southern Africa to illustrate various practices and concepts.

Examples from eastern and southern Africa

Part of the funeral ceremony among the Vasu people of Tanzania proceeds as follows:

> Before taking out the corpse, a sacrificial animal was needed. Generally it was a goat; but sometimes even a sheep was accepted. After the animal had been obtained, it was killed and its stomach contents (*mafumba*) mixed up with grounded ficus tree leaves. The mixture was thrown to the people who lived in that house of the dead person without any utterance of words. The Vasu say that the purpose of such a ritual was to enable people of that house to meet other people. It was a belief among them, that without undergoing such a ritual, they would bring some misfortunes to the other people they would meet. It was a way of chasing death away from the people and purifying them, for they had been defiled by the act of having a corpse in their house...
>
> Another restriction which family members in the house of the deceased had to observe was not to bring in or take fire to another house. They had to get their own fire by the traditional method of rubbing two sticks (*luhindi*) to get their fire. This meant that, after death had occurred in a house, people of that particular house were separated from the community for a while until the period of such restriction had ended.
>
> Generally, the dead were buried in a house. The grave was dug in an inhabited house (very rarely in some clans was the grave prepared in an uninhabited house). It was prepared in such a way that it would make it easier for the people later on to get the skull out without problem.
>
> There were two ways of preparing the grave... .The first one was to dig a big hole in the rear section of the house (*mwendeghu*) where the corpse would be set upright while the head was left appearing outside the ground. The head was supported with two sticks placed on each side of the neck and it was then cemented very carefully with cow's dung.
>
> This act of cementing the corpse with cow's dung served two purposes. First, it prevented the bad smell from spoiling the whole house and area if all the skull was not covered properly. Secondly, it enabled the skull to get off its hair and skin much more quickly. There was checking now and then to ensure that the skull was properly cemented. If some few cracks were found on it, it was recemented. This was done so until the time for removal of the skull (which later would be taken to and preserved in the sacred place of skulls—a cave set apart within the clan's land)…
>
> The second way of preparing the grave was much easier. The corpse was placed on the ground by the wall in the rear section of the house, and was cemented very carefully

and heavily with cow dung. It was done in such a way that the grave looked like part of the house. A stranger, unfamiliar with this procedure could not notice the grave.[14]

In southern Africa the customs go like this:

> The day of the burial is the busiest day and the climax of all the preparations. On this day there are more people than in all the previous days. The beginning of the day is marked by two main activities performed early in the morning: the digging of the grave (rural areas) and the slaughtering of a beast. The coffin would be ready by now. To lessen the work, usually the beast is killed the day before, but the grave is not dug, "*Lebitla ga le lale*."
>
> Early in the morning men go to the graveyard to dig the grave. Every man looks upon this as his duty. There is no compulsion; it is done voluntarily, especially when the man connected with the burial is a responsible personality who has helped others in their burials. This is a most important day, even some shopkeepers close their shops to attend the burial.
>
> At home, before the coffin is moved out, time is given for people to come in—one by one—to have a last glimpse of their departed friend or relative. If there are many people this may be a long process done immediately before departure to the church or graveyard, as the case may be in different places. Almost every woman carries a bunch of flowers to put on the grave; the men's duty is to carry the coffin and to cover the grave. In some places the flowers are augmented with crockery and the like to put on the grave, even money or drinks are left on the grave.
>
> By the graveside, care is taken to provide time for one to put a handful of earth in the grave before it is covered… Men usually wait for women to finish and they do it by means of shovels covering the grave. In some places they do it by hand as the women.
>
> Back home where the meat from the slaughtered beast is, are two basins of water at the entrance, one for men and the other for women. Everyone must wash his or her hands before entering the house. All wash from the same water. There are many views to explain the origin of the act of washing hands. Some claim that originally it was a means of identifying the culprit responsible for the death. Another view is that this is done to wash death and its power lest one take it home with him. The popular view at our place is that they do it to prevent the sickness called '*Lewatla*', i.e., an acute stomachache experienced after burials…
>
> After the burial most people return to their homes, but there is always a fair number remaining longer…[15]

From funeral rites and methods of disposing of the dead body we catch other glimpses of African concepts of death.

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[14] Omari, *op. cit.*, (note 3), pp. 187f.

[15] Missiological Institute, Umpumulo, report on "Concepts of Death and Funerals Rites" (Mapumulo, Natal, South Africa: Lutheran Theological College), pp. 99f.

Other glimpses of African concepts of death

Burial is the most common method of dealing with the corpse, and different customs are followed. Some societies bury the body inside the house where the person was living at the time of death. Others bury it in the compound where the homestead is situated; others bury the body behind the compound; and some do so at the place where the person was born.

The graves differ in shape and size: some are rectangular while others are circular; some have a cave-like shape at the bottom where the body is laid; and in some societies the corpse is buried in a big pot. In many areas it is the custom to bury food, weapons, stools, tobacco, clothing and formerly one's wives, so that these may "accompany" the departed into the next world.

Yet, in other societies the body is kept somewhere like in a small hut, either indefinitely, or for some months or years after which the remains are taken out and buried. In a number of societies, the skull or jaw or other part of the dead person is cut off and preserved by the family concerned, with the belief that the departed is "present" in that skull or jaw. In any case, this portion of the dead person is a concrete reminder to the family that the person continues to live on in the hereafter.

These methods of disposal apply to those who are adults, or die "normal" deaths. Children, unmarried people, those who die through suicide or through animal attack, and victims of diseases like leprosy, smallpox or epilepsy, may not be given the same or full burial rites. However, modern change tends to make burial procedures more even or similar for everybody.

Again it is clear that people view death paradoxically: it is a separation but not annihilation, the dead person is suddenly cut off from human society and yet the corporate group clings to him or her. This is shown through the elaborate funeral rites, as well as other methods of keeping in contact with the departed, which we shall discuss below.

Death becomes, then, a gradual process, which is not completed until some years after the actual physical death. At the moment of physical death the person becomes a living dead: he or she is not alive physically, nor dead relative to the corporate group. But, as far as the living who knew him or her are concerned, the deceased is kept "back" in their present dimension of time, from which he or she can disappear only gradually. Those who leave nobody to keep him or her in that time dimension, in reality "die" immediately. That is a great tragedy, which must be avoided at all costs.

In the area of burial procedures, it is seems that AR exercises a stronger impact than "Christian" or "Western" procedures. At best, practices from the two traditions are combined. Some of the "modern" funerals turn out to be very expensive, and hence a financial burden to the family concerned. Is there some need here, to articulate some theological guidelines for (Christian) funerals?

The Departed and the Hereafter

Where do the living dead go?

According to AR the hereafter is thought to be very similar to the present life. It is invisible but close to the present. In some areas the departed are thought to remain in the neighborhood of their human homesteads. They retain their personal identity and are still part of their human families. Some think that the land of the departed is in the woods, forests, river banks or hills somewhere in the same country where the departed lived. In other parts it is thought that the land of the departed is situated underground, or in desolate places away from their former homesteads. In this case they have to travel there—a journey which may take several days or months. Provisions are made for the journey or for the start of life in the hereafter—so that items like food, weapons, utensils, tools, clothing and even ornaments are buried with the dead in some societies. In very few cases, the world of the departed is thought to be in the sky, and they may be associated with the moon and stars (but not with the sun as it is too hot, even for the spirits!). Life in the hereafter continues generally and specifically for human beings the same as it did before dying. Funeral rites cement the separation, so that the departed cannot return to relive the life they had before. They are spirits and live in the spirit world even if they may visit the world of the living.

Interaction with the living dead

We have seen that it is very important for the departed to be remembered by the surviving members of their families. As long as they are remembered by name, the departed enjoy a form of temporary immortality. If they appear to their relatives in dreams or visions, they are recognized by name. This continues for up to four or five generations, as long as someone can still remember them by name. This is the group of spirits for whom I have coined the term the living dead. They are physically dead, but they are alive as spirits and in the personal memories of their family. They manifest their presence through dreams, visions, and possessions. Even some sicknesses and mental disturbances may be attributed to the living dead, who thereby wish to communicate something to their family, like reminding it to fulfil promises or observe some instructions given before death, or encouraging it to make a major or right decision. Usually a diviner may be consulted, to help clarify the wish of a particular living dead.

In AR, family members acknowledge the ongoing presence of the departed through offerings of small bits of food, (libation) drops of water or beer when people eat, drink, observe family rituals and perform ceremonies. Sometimes the names of the departed may be mentioned in prayers, asking them to forward

requests to God. People may address the spirits of their departed relatives directly, or even rebuke them. People may express gratitude to them (and to God) when, for example, a child is born to a couple after waiting for a long time, or when one meets good luck unexpectedly. This is a way of sharing joy with the departed. All these expressions of contact with the departed show clearly that the two worlds, the visible and the invisible, are very close to each other, and that death does not destroy contact between them.

In African Christianity we do not find clear-cut expressions of acknowledging the ongoing presence of the departed. Yet, the wish seems to be there, but people are "afraid" or "unsure" to express it outwardly. This is another area where theological guidance is needed. It is not enough to repeat the words of the Apostles' Creed, that "we believe in the communion of saints." How is or should that communion be expressed in the African context? Can the departed be included in the liturgy (both eucharistic and other forms)? Can rosters with names of the departed be kept in the parishes, and the names read out once or several times a year, so that collectively they are "remembered" by the congregation? What about remembering them at a personal and private level—can we formulate prayers that mention the departed and address them? After all, is it not a church tradition to honor and "pray to" saints? Surely the departed belong to the generic term of "saints", and the term is not confined to those who have been officially canonized—and in any case many churches do not canonize anybody.

Reincarnation

There is a form of partial reincarnation in the sense that some physical human features or characteristics of the departed may reappear in their descendants. This happens also while they are still alive, and it is a purely biological occurrence, which takes place not only among people but also in other forms of life. In any case, a person who does not bear children cannot pass on his or her biological or genetic characteristics. The living dead do not lose their being, in order to be reborn as new or different persons, even if part of their personality and physical features may be inherited by their descendants. They continue to exist as spirits and nobody expects automatically to be reborn in the world of human or other physical beings.

Common spirits and their final existence

Eventually the living dead disappear beyond the reach of being remembered or recognized personally. They become common spirits, and more or less lose touch with their human families. In the eyes of human being, these spirits lose their personal identity, since nobody recognizes them any more by name. Nobody remembers them at meal times, or during offerings. They withdraw

from human activities and are fully integrated into their spirit communities. Some may enter or be associated with natural objects like trees, lakes, rocks, mountains, forests and waste places. People would generally fear such spirits, since they do not know them personally by name—they are strangers. It is said that sometimes the spirits may possess the living in disturbing and unwelcome forms such as for example, causing people to act violently, to walk on fire, to run away from their home or to lose control of their senses. In other forms of spirit possession, however, people speak in tongues and adopt the character of the particular spirit possessing them, and may foretell the future. Diviners and doctors consult these spirits in diagnosing and treating illnesses, in counseling, or in other divination activities like detecting thieves and witches and foretelling individuals their future or what awaits them in a particular undertaking.

AR does not say what finally becomes of human spirits. In very few cases, it is thought that after death the spirits appear before God who passes judgment upon their lives—in which case the bad are punished and the good go into a happy state of existence. The majority of African peoples do not know or postulate what ultimately happens to the souls or spirits—whether they vanish, or continue forever. However, nobody wishes to think that he or she would vanish into non-existence.

The living dead in Christianity

These concepts from AR linger on among Christians. They do not feel comfortable to abandon them altogether, and yet many have a disturbing association with what has been termed "heathenism." Christians widen the concepts to include the idea of heaven, and many entertain generous fancies about "life in heaven," which they feature in physical and geographical forms. To a certain extent the Bible encourages such images, such as when it says that "they shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more… and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." (Rev 7:16-17) In Revelation and other texts the Bible promises "a new heaven and a new earth," (Rev 21:1) in which God will be with his people, and "he will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." (Rev 21:4) This is a clear elevation of the final state of the departed, and something to which people can easily hook their hopes and fantasies. Biblical insights take African concepts a step further.

The end of the world

AR does not entertain the concept of the end of the world or the universe, since God, their Creator sustains them. Christianity proclaims an end of the world, and African Christians have taken up this concept in a literal way. They tell and are

repeatedly told in sermons, that the end of the world is near. Christians expect the return of the Lord Jesus "at any time." They have to discern the (apocalyptic) signs of the end—such as wars, earthquakes, famines, eclipses, and natural calamities. While there are biblical texts that support these ideas, their interpretations differ considerably. On the African scene they require careful theological attention, to find their meaning that is consistent with the message of the Bible as a whole.

A "good" death

In both AR and Christianity, the spirits are ontologically closer to God than are human beings. In this case, death is a phenomenon that leads from one form of existence to another. That can be regarded as something to be desired or calmly awaited. This might happen when people reach the point of being "tired" of life, a ripe old age, or suffering to such an extent that (natural) death becomes a solution to or release from their suffering. What is a "good" death, in the eyes of both AR and Christianity?

Some deaths are, however, difficult to understand or integrate into either the traditional or Christian worldview. For example, society strongly abhors suicides and treats them as if they pollute and bring impurity upon common life. Formerly, in some places people who committed suicide were not buried or only received a quick burial just to get rid of their (stinking) bodies. Their families feel embarrassed and ashamed. It is often explained that curses or the use of strong magic causes them. These thoughts circulate both in AR and Christianity. What are (viable) theological views in this difficult area of human experiences?

Death in large numbers

Death caused by natural calamities like famines, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, or epidemics like small pox (formerly), cholera or HIV/AIDS, although difficult to explain, is more or less accepted. People search for ways of preventing or reducing its devastation and examine their conscience to find out what may have led to these disasters. Explanations like moral laxity, sin (for Christianity), the breaking of taboos, or failure to observe traditions thought to uphold society, may be put forward as the reasons. It is not easy to give satisfactory theological explanation for such "natural calamities" although epidemics can be prevented or reduced through human effort.

But large-scale killings of people by fellow human beings are unjustifiable. Colonial builders and rulers killed thousands in Africa and elsewhere. For example, in 1904 the Germans committed genocide against the Herero people of Namibia (South West Africa), wiping out between 75 percent and 80 percent. The apartheid regime in South Africa tortured and killed thousands before it

was replaced by African rule in 1994. The military regime of Idi Amin Dada in Uganda (1971-1979) killed about 200,000. In Rwanda from April to July 1994 more than a half million people perished when its citizens slaughtered one another. On 7 August 1998, Muslim terrorists blew up buildings (almost simultaneously) in Nairobi (Kenya) and Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), killing some 250 innocent people and injuring 5,500 more. This was a severe blow to African notions and experiences of death and dying, in which there is some warning, preparation, and opportunity to visit or accompany the sick and dying. It was a brutal and alien death, which robbed people of the familiar or traditional process of sickness, dying, death, and burial.

The most stunning genocide in all history was the one committed by the Nazis in Germany, who eliminated six million Jews and other "unwanteds" in 1938-1945. Such ghastly and staggering killings paralyze religious and moral sanity. Both AR and Christianity are impotent and powerless to understand or explain them. Such killings will haunt human conscience for a long time and their scars upon 20th-century history may never be erased. Death has been colonialized, politicized, ethnicized, militarized, ideologized, globalized, even religionized, and heavily equipped with such destructive power that its natural character has been distorted almost beyond recognition. For many millions of people in the 20th century, "natural" or "normal" death was a luxury beyond their reach. Why? Neither AR nor Christianity accepts terrorism or genocide as a virtue. Everyone has a right to die with dignity. I plead for the human right of people to die a natural death.

Conclusion

There is no conclusion to death, since it is itself the conclusion of physical life. However, it can be made more palatable to avoid the state in which "a person who eats alone dies alone." If we eat together, we can also happily die together—whether according to AR, Christianity, or other religious traditions. There is in each person something exceedingly valuable, wonderful, and inde-structible. Human life is a mystery, which cannot be erased by death. It makes reasonable sense to imagine or dream that, the mystery of life is shrouded with further mystery in, through and beyond death. Both Christianity and AR attempt only to scratch the top layers of this mystery. At many points they can dialogue together and exchange valuable insights, just as their followers share the common experiences of birth and death.

Death in African Proverbs as an Area of Interreligious Dialogue

John S. Mbiti

Introduction

In the closing decade of the 20th century, I carried out some work on African proverbs. They address a vast range of themes and concerns. Out of a collection of some 30,000 proverbs, I shall here examine a small selection that speaks about death. It comes from the Oromo of Ethiopia and Kenya, the Akan of Ghana and the Lugbara of Uganda. These proverbs enable us to enter "the world of death" in the lives of the people. Death comes to all, and it is in "the world of death" where religions meet at a deep level—of the body, soul and spirit, for the individuals and the communities concerned.

Proverbs are public property of the community, and we find countless numbers of them in all the 2,000 languages of Africa. They are short, easy to remember, and concentrated in meaning. Some are carved or painted on wood, calabash, or stone, and others may be used in rituals. Different occasions and purposes stir or animate persons to employ proverbial sayings.

It is obvious that people will talk about death, because it is a topic with which every society has to live. What do the Akan, the Oromo, and the Lugbara say about it, through their proverbs? What picture of death do they paint? The Oromo and the Lugbara live in neighboring countries of eastern Africa; thousands of kilometers separate them from the Akan on the West Coast. However, death speaks a common language and distance has little or no relevance. People have generally similar emotions, reactions, and attitudes to it. I take the "message" of these proverbs to represent proverbial wisdom and ideas from all over the continent, whatever local differences there might be.

The Fear of Death

As can be expected, many proverbs address the fear of death. So, in the face of death the Akan praise bravery: "A brave person is not afraid of death (or should not be afraid of death)."(1)[1] Bravery conquers fear, even the fear of the

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[1] Here and ff. numbers in parentheses refer to the list of proverbs at the end of this essay.

greatest enemy of life: death itself. The proverb aims at encouraging, challenging, and supporting people when one day they may face their own death or that of someone close to them. Bravery reaches its height when placed close to death. If you find yourself next door to death, if you can get so near to death, and not lose your senses, not tremble or try to run away, then you are truly brave, strong, fearless. Bravery is a virtue, in contrast to fearfulness, and death is the ultimate point of reference against which bravery is measured.

Speaking to the same idea, the Oromo would say: "A man dies once."(2) Once and only once, comes death. The implication is that a person should not be afraid of dying since that happens only once. Whatever the experience of death might be, it is not repeated. Once is enough and it is the end of it. Death cannot scare you with repeated visits. So, don't be unduly afraid of it: that is the message of this proverb.

Yet, while bravery is praised as a challenge to the fear of death, there can also be a foolish form of bravery. For that reason, the Oromo warn against a meaningless demonstration of bravery: "The day it wishes death, the goat licks the nose of the leopard."(3) For a goat to lick the nose of the leopard is an act of foolishness. It is not prompted by bravery. The two should not be mixed. Such an act leads to sure death. No goat has ever licked the nose of the leopard and lived to tell the story.

A goat is pictured here as a symbol of utmost foolishness, if or when it does not distinguish the enemy from one of its own kind. The goat stands here for persons. This is a literary form of proverbs and folk stories, which substitutes animals, birds, insects, or other objects for persons. That way, nobody in the community will be named; nobody will be directly identified and, therefore, made responsible or made an object of ridicule, or gossip. Nobody in the community will take another person to task or to court, accusing them of maligning them or smearing their names. In this and similar cases, proverbs act as shields to protect people from one another. And yet, where necessary, everyone will know to whom particular folk stories or proverbs are directed.

This proverb is an open and gentle way of telling someone to be brave but not foolish, to be daring but not careless. Each person should recognize death for what it is, namely: death is nothing less than death. It is the enemy of enemies. But one does not provoke it unnecessarily or foolishly. One does not rush into the teeth of sure death. Certain acts, certain places, certain weather conditions, and so on, are clearly dangerous and will undoubtedly lead to death. Society knows what actions, places or animals are deadly. Only foolishness can descend so low, can be so lacking in understanding. Bravery is good, it may challenge death through daring acts and get away with it; but extreme foolishness kills without hesitancy. The goat and the leopard are not friends, neither are foolishness and bravery. Some circumstances of death can be avoided. The proverb urges persons to avoid the rash act of a person who does not fear death. It appeals for wisdom, discretion, and caution.

On the other hand, this proverb can also be applied to discourage suicide. Generally, our societies scorn suicide. In the past, the corpse of a suicide case would not be buried in some communities; or it would be buried without full ritual and formalities. Through the application of this and similar proverbs, someone would be told, in effect, that such and such acts lead to sure suicide, even if they may appear like acts of bravery. In that case, appeal to the anathema of suicide serves to save the would-be victim—at least in theory. The community may even step in, to rescue a goat from literally "licking the nose of the leopard."

At the other end of the same road cowardice is strongly attacked. So, the Lugbara would say: "The coward died because of cold water."(4) This proverb, put as it is in form of a one-sentence story, does not refer to a particular historical event. It is in a literary form, which enforces its message. Cowardice took a concrete form and became an actual event, but an event without historicity. Intense cowardice took on a living form in an imaginary and nameless person. The coward merely came in contact with cold water and died. It was not the water as such that killed him or her, but the cowardly fear, the complete absence of minimum bravery. His or her cowardice was so great, that any little excuse—like the touch of cold water—was enough to lead to the grave. Under normal circumstances water is harmless. Indeed, it supports life. But severe cowardice changes everything into danger. In this imaginary case it turned harmless water into an agent of death. The concentration of fear translated into such intensive cowardice, that cold water took away life. There was no apparent danger on the part of water, so to speak. It was not a flowing river, it was not a storm, it was not raging ocean waves, it was not the depth of a lake, it was not boiling water, and it was not freezing water that killed the coward. It was simply the fear of cold water.

There can be no greater cowardice than that. Cowardice is painfully shameful. Therefore, society puts its effort into combating this kind of cowardice, starting particularly among its young members. The proverb would obviously be applied to young people, in order to give them courage during the early years, to face difficulties, and undertake challenging adventures. Older or more daring youths would laugh at those who seem timid and afraid. These would be a lot of cowards who might fear to die if they dared to do the simplest things in life. With this proverb, they are encouraged to pick up courage, to take on at least the most minimal risks, to accept simple activities with other youths. This is a community-building proverb, aimed at cultivating normal life in which the average person participates without undue fear of death, in which nobody would feel ashamed to do what others normally do. It instills the virtue of courage into young people, so that they may lead a normal life in the community. The proverb does not call for straining oneself more than others would do. That is left for the virtue of bravery, which demands more than just average strength and challenges. But it calls for responsible judgment and decision taking.

On the other hand, the Oromo use a proverb that says: "A corpse does not fear the grave." (5) This is an expression of desperation. A desperate person will be indifferent to the inevitability of death. The situation could be a hopeless one like severe sickness, suffering, or accident. It can also apply to a person who is involved in dangerous actions that are most likely to lead to death. The person may feel that there is no escape, just as a corpse has no way of escaping the grave. In such a situation, death is almost a *fait accompli*. For the person concerned the proverb can be a call to show courage and be ready to face death without any false hope of escaping it. It is a brutal acceptance of death at the door. It is an ironical "yes" to death.

Perhaps an elderly person would use this proverb to dispel (to a large extent) the fear of death. The person would be saying: "My death is so near and so sure to come, that there is no point in being afraid of it any more. I accept it without a struggle; it is as if I am already dead. I cannot refuse death, as that would be meaningless." The proverb calls for maturity in facing and accepting inevitable realities, even the bitter reality of sure death. To take the reality and fear of death seriously but bravely, the Lugbara point out that: "Death needs a strong heart." (6) This is necessary in order to face it calmly and courageously, and yet not lightheartedly. By its very nature death is deadly and fearsome. It kills everyone, therefore face it not only with fear but also with courage. How do we handle situations of sure death—for the person as well as the family and friends concerned? Where do we draw strength to face situations of desperation precipitated by potential or sure death?

Another proverb addresses itself to the problem of facing sure death. "What one fears is death; and yet what is inevitable is death." (7) This is more for the coward. Death is inevitable, no matter how much a person may fear it. So, there is no advantage in being a coward—because that does not save a person from death, which is inevitable. The proverb speaks to a dilemma. On the one hand, it names the fear of death and accepts that fear. On the other, it is a reminder of the obvious that, what is feared will finally come to pass. A person has to live with this dilemma: fear and reality. A person may rightly fear, but has no control over what will eventually take place. By naming the nature and source of fear, one can better deal with it, since it comes from the unavoidable.

As a way of comforting people, or driving out their fear of death, an Oromo proverb asks rhetorically: "It is astounding: for fear of death should one spend the night without sleep?" (8) This proverb says that there is no reason that a person should unduly worry about that which is to come, even if it is as serious as death. Do not spend sleepless nights worrying about death just because one day it will come. Get good sleep and dream more than you can remember. And when you wake up, get on with your work, your plans, and your life!

This idea of getting on with life, instead of worrying about death, is expressed firmly in the Oromo proverb: " 'I am here, I am thinking, and my skin is already on the market,' said the duiker." (9) Here, through the voice and action of the duiker—a small animal fairly common in eastern Africa—people are encouraged to make plans for their lives, to dream about their lives, to hope, to look towards the future, even if death is sure to come. One should not live as if one were already dead, as if the duiker's skin was already being sold in the market place even before it died. The fear of death should not be an obstruction to life. Therefore, make plans for your life even though death is always at the door, even though you cannot avoid that your skin will, one day, be sold in the market place—the market place of the worms!

Having the courage to live without the fear of death is put in an Oromo proverb-story, which tells that: " 'The one who died does not have something frightening,' said the woman as she hung a lion's claw around her neck." (10) This points to the fact that one lives with death hanging around one's the neck. The dead lion could do no harm, not even to women who normally do not carry weapons to defend themselves against dangerous animals. Symbolically everyone carries the claws of a deadly animal in life, and should not fear that animal. Likewise, death is truly frightening, but one should not unduly fear it. Here the lion symbolizes death, but for periods of time death becomes inactive in order to let people live—to let them wear its claws around the neck for a while, so to speak. We cannot get rid of the claws, but should not worry, even if one day, they will pierce the woman's neck and strangle her. Claws speak of danger and death, but people can put up with them as they carry them around everywhere, and get on with their lives.

This proverb has another application and meaning, namely that a dead person is no longer feared, just as one can wear the lion's claws without fear. For all practical purposes, the fear of the lion is over, when it dies. Fierce people need not be feared after they have died. They and their deadly power become neutralized by death. In this case, death is an equalizer. It erases the power of even the most fearful persons.

The Cruelty of Death

Various proverbs speak to the cruelty of death. In one of the Akan proverbs, death is personified as a monster that knows no parental love, and shows no mercy even towards children. It is the most monstrous personification of cruelty itself. Nothing can be worse. So, the speakers put it to the hearers' imagination to visualize the encounter with death: "If death (personified) comes to kill you and you call him father, he will kill you, and if you call him mother, he will

kill you." (11) In African ethics, the killing of one's own children is the worst form of cruelty imaginable. To kill a person deliberately is terrible; to kill a blood relationship is worse; to kill one's own children is beyond imagination. Death does not care about any of these levels of interpersonal relations. It is simply cruel, bitter, merciless, and lacking in feelings. You cannot relate to death as one might relate to father or mother, brother or sister. In an underlying sense, the proverb speaks to the bonds of love between parents and children. Death knows no such bonds, except the forces of destruction. No matter how well a person may plead with it, no matter how the person calls it, it will do its duty and go; it will still destroy the person, without regret.

A Lugbara proverb also personifies death as a monster and draws out its cruelty by declaring that: "The teeth of death are sharp." (13) By focusing on its teeth, the bite of death is exposed dramatically. Its sharp teeth dig deeply and spare nobody. One bite is enough to finish a person.

The Lugbara expose this point further, by making reference to friendship. They say categorically: "Death has no friends." (12) Like people in every society, the Lugbara treasure friendship. But death does not make preferences, does not favor anyone, and does not treat anyone like a friend. It is cruel to all people, it is enemy to all, it is the contrary of friendship. This is extremely harsh, bitter, inexorable. Death is insensitive, friendless, and monstrous. It handles everyone without special consideration.

The cruelty of death is so strong that it actually causes people to worry. There are different forms of dying. Some are more cruel than others, even if the end result is the same. Therefore, an Oromo proverb clearly differentiates between small problems of life and the weighty matter of death. "'The cruelty is death,' said the dwarf ('I worry about death, not my height')." (14) Whatever the physical stature of a person might be, it should not be reason to worry, compared to the cruelty of death. One can cope with physical disadvantages or differences, but one cannot avoid the terror and cruelty of death. That is cause for major concern. If you are going to worry put first things first.

Cruelty is so strongly associated with or symbolized by death, that the Oromo explain that: "The person who is cruel dies twice (by his cruelty he has already died socially, and later he dies a natural death)." (15) Cruelty is death itself and a cruel person is already dead in his or her community. Physical death only confirms the social death. This proverb is a fight against cruelty in society. Cruelty can be waged through words and deeds against family members, neighbors, the weak and unknown people, as well as against animals. Cruel people have no place in the community; they are dead socially. In the end, death will deal with them the same way as they have dealt with others—and show no mercy. There is no place for cruelty in society, as that amounts to double-death.

The Impartiality of Death

For all its cruelty, death has some "positive" aspects to it. One is its impartiality. This aspect comes out in a considerable number of proverbs. The thought behind it is to give comfort, consolation, and a feeling that all people are treated equally. There is justice in death, so to speak. In this sense, death "cares" about all people.

However, the impartiality of death causes problems, as the Lugbara point out, that: "It is the good man who dies." (16) It is acceptable that death shows no partiality. But society judges its members. Accordingly, some people are "good" while others are "bad," some people have more good deeds to their credit while others have more evil deeds to their name. Death does not make this kind of distinction. But, while it kills both good and bad persons alike, people regret it, nevertheless, that a particularly good person dies. This is a loss to the community. While people receive the death of a good person with sorrow, they may receive the death of a bad person with relief and greet it with some rejoicing.

Two proverbs from the Lugbara underscore each other in speaking about the impartiality of death. One states simply that: "Death has no eyes." (17) Is this another way of personifying death and saying that it is either blind, or has never had any eyes? The proverb does not indicate what sort of creature this is, that has no eyes. Normally a person, a dog, or a sheep with no eyes provokes pity, understanding, sympathy and a readiness to help them. But there is no pity or sympathy towards this eyeless creature called death. In spite of having no eyes, it still functions effectively in taking away people, without distinction. It works blindly, but sees what to do in taking away everyone.

For this reason, the Lugbara say further: "Death does not know a chief." (18) This follows logically. Since death has no eyes, it will not distinguish between rulers and the ruled, the rich and the poor, the old and the young. It visits them all. Social status does not ward it off. It will not necessarily strike where people might want it to strike. Similarly, it will not spare public figures that society esteems and values. The highest person in the political hierarchy meets death as surely as any other person. Death equalizes persons and treats them alike.

When the Lugbara assert, also, that: "The sorcerer dies too" (19), this is specifically in connection with the evil elements in society. The chief in the previous proverb is, at least theoretically, the emblem of good order, peace, security, unity, guidance, and general welfare in society at large. The witch and the sorcerer, on the other hand, are the emblem of destruction, malice, fear, distrust, and evil in general. They, like thieves, are the most disliked persons in society. Rightly or wrongly they are attributed with causing misfortunes, bad luck, and ill health in the broadest sense. This includes actual sickness, barrenness, some forms of spirit possession, accident, and death. It includes

unfruitful fields and animals, unsuccessful undertakings like business and journeys. The role of the witch or sorcerer answers to the important question that society asks. "Why?" Why did my child drown in the lake, and not the child of another family? Why did our football team lose the match, and not the other team? Why did our daughter not qualify to enter the university, when she sat the examination like everyone else?

The number of why questions is endless. The easy answers point often to the witch, the sorcerer, and those who use evil magic against the community. Thus, the witch and sorcerer are destructive figures in society. They are attributed with acting as if they had unlimited power over the lives and welfare of other people. This proverb tells that even these evil persons die. It is of some consolation to the community. Death does not exclude anyone, not even those who are suspected of helping it to kill someone else. Death is the killer of killers.

The proverb is a strong warning to sorcerers and witches. Yet, it is a warning in the empty air because nobody wants to identify themselves as a witch or sorcerer. Everyone wants to say that it is another person who is a witch or sorcerer. But from time to time a community may focus its attention on one person and publicly warn or condemn that person. If people feel that he or she has not stopped practicing sorcery and witchcraft after the warning, they stone or beat the person to death. But ordinarily, the witches and sorcerers are an integral part of the community, and people put up with them with reasonable tolerance. I would even venture to say that, somehow society seems to need them, as a regular way of explaining or coming to terms with health problems, misfortunes, accidents, and death. Paradoxically, society hates sorcerers and witches, but it cannot do without them, unless it finds other satisfactory ways of explaining the question of evil (misfortune, bad luck and suffering).

Death is also impartial towards different classes of people. Even those who, in effect, serve death by handling funeral formalities are also subjected to death. So the Lugbara observe that, at the funeral the distinction between the living and the dead, is a temporary one, since those who bury others will also die. "'Not-dead' is beating the drum at the funeral of 'Already-dead'." (20) Those who perform death formalities also become its victims. The people who beat the drum to announce someone's death, or to accompany funeral activities, will not be spared by the death they in effect serve. Another day the same death-drums will be played by someone else to mark their own death. Death shows no favors and rewards nobody who might serve it in any way.

The same final fate awaits those who are highly positioned either by society or by their own achievement. They may or may not be proud, arrogant, and haughty. But being positioned above other people does not put them out the reach of death. The Oromo take the vulture to symbolize persons and thereby avoid naming particular individuals in society. The use of animals, birds,

insects and spirits (or ghosts) is a widespread literary device in different parts of Africa. They say: "Though it flies and circles, the vulture dies on the ground." (21) Death brings down even those who may live or behave arrogantly above other people. To be positioned or to live above others may not be evil in itself, but it is not to be removed from death. It treats such people the same way as those who are walking on the ground. There are seemingly no heights beyond its reach, just as there are no depths it cannot fathom. The manner of life that one leads does not avert death indefinitely. Success, achievement, or an otherwise natural positioning does not keep out death. Those who die in such a high position fall to the same ground, where other people die. Death reduces everyone to the ground. It grinds everyone into dust. But the proverb is also a directive or appeal to humility. There is room for humility even among the famous, among the highly positioned or successful. Those who do not voluntarily display humility or modest manner, death will do it for them.

This idea of death's impartiality is brought out in another but contrasting situation in society, namely that of master and servant. Traditionally, some families have or had domestic servants, and in some cases slaves. So, one Oromo proverb states: "The death which came for the family head, will not settle for the slave." (22) The ruling class, the powerful, or the rich would have preferred to protect themselves and say something like: The death of the slave (servant) should come instead, in order to spare the master. But this is not the method by which death functions. It is impartial. Therefore, when it comes for the master, it cannot be bought off with being given the slave or servant instead. Each individual must face his or her own death, when it comes. Neither queens nor masters can persuade it to take someone else, not even the lowest person in the community. The victims of death cannot be exchanged in any absolute way—even by the cleverest form of forgery.

One painful area of death's impartiality is shown in connection with people's ages. This is brought out vividly in another Oromo proverb that states: "While the old ox remains the calves die." (23) The proverb addresses itself to a very bitter reality in African society. Infant mortality formerly struck virtually every family. It has been somewhat reduced through modern medicine, prenatal and child care for those who can afford it. Figures from 1991 show some countries with more than 130 infant deaths per 1,000 live births. Infant mortality may be receding but it is not a forgotten threat. This proverb is a painful reminder of that reality. Death will take away babies and children, but leave the elderly. It does not choose by hierarchy of status or age. It does not count the days and years of people's lives. It does not show respect to children by letting them live out their lives, in contrast with elderly people whose life has unfolded over many years. It acts in unexpected ways, following what may look like the laws of chaos rather than of logic or good order.

An almost fatalistic concept is ventilated through the Oromo proverb, which states that: "Being a good man does not save one from death." (24) A good person in society is one who may exhibit qualities and values such as kindness, friendliness, politeness, or respect towards other people. Other characteristics are being generous, hospitable, peaceful, truthful, helpful, not quarrelsome, hardworking, obedient (in the case of children), caring for one's family (and relatives), not squandering the family's wealth (possessions), taking care of one's elderly parents, and keeping the community-building traditions of society. The proverb says that even if a person exhibits these elements and is really good, death will not show favor. Being good does not save a person from death. In effect, you cannot save yourself. Death is impartial towards such a person and will take him or her as readily as if the person were not at all good. The good person dies like the witch or sorcerer. However, the proverb should not encourage people to act contrary to these values or disregard them. It addresses itself to deeper ethical issues of good and evil in the world.

Death as Inclusive

The idea that death is inclusive complements its impartiality. Some of the proverbs carry that double meaning. The Akan have a pictorial way of making the point, through the adinkra symbol showing the ladder. Keeping this sign in mind, they say that: "The ladder of death is not climbed by one person alone." (25) Since the adinkra symbols are normally stamped on clothes that people wear, they are silent communicators of different truths, views, opinions, and community wisdom. To wear a cloth bearing the adinkra of the ladder is to remind oneself and other people, that everyone must die, everyone must climb the ladder between this and the next world. To climb the ladder of death is compulsory for everyone.

A Lugbara proverb states the same idea, but less pictorially. "Death does not leave anyone." (26) There is no failure on the part of death, so as to leave anyone untouched by it. It does not forget anyone. It does not miss anyone. It performs a thorough job of taking away. In the previous proverb about the ladder of death, the person symbolically plays an active role of having to climb the universal ladder. In the second proverb it is death, which is exclusively active in taking everyone away. It is mercilessly persistent.

Indeed, this is precisely what another Lugbara proverb states: "Death does not exclude anyone." (27) With death there is no discrimination, no segregation, no privileged preferences. It treats all persons the same and equally. In a pictorial and perhaps also brutal way, another proverb states that: "The earth opens its mouth for all." (28) Here, you do not immediately get the feel-

ing of dying. The earth is ready to bite, to chew, and to swallow. There is no urgency about this. It can happen almost whenever you are ready. It is as if opening its mouth will lead to some kind of shelter, and anyone who does not go in is the one who is actually in danger of death. There is a place on the earth, for all. The grave will be dug in the earth, symbolizing the mouth of the earth. Nobody is denied entry into the grave.

Another form of the inclusiveness of death is expressed in the Oromo proverb that: "The one to die and the one to kill him or her will find each other" (29). The killer will die after killing another person. Here, it is simply a matter of time. Finally, they will see each other in death, in the afterlife. The proverb has a deterrent message to it. Murder does not end with the death of the victim. The murderer and the victim finally end up together, in the grave. However, the proverb does not indicate what happens, when the killer and the victim find themselves together in the end. Are they conscious of their existence? Will they talk with each other? Will the victim take revenge? Is the death of the killer a form of punishment for his or her crime? The proverb does not address itself to these questions. In any case since the killer suffers the same fate as the victim, this is a form of justice by implication, although the killer would die even if he or she had never committed the crime.

God and Death

In a good number of proverbs, God is linked with death, especially in an attempt to explain the mysteries of death. The link is also in search of consolation and succour in time of bereavement. When people turn to God, they are acknowledging that God is even more powerful than death. It is a confession of people's trust, faith, and hope in the one who is not subject to death. In a sense, death drives or turns people to God in the time of their greatest weakness.

So the Akan would take courage and face life without a strong fear of death. They say: "If God does not kill you, you do not die." (30) Death is subject to God. We can go on living and leave the end in God's hands. As long as he does not will your death, you just go on living and death will not kill you on its own. God has ultimate power over both life and death. It is as if God does the actual killing of a person, when that happens. People may hate you, people may even plan and attempt to kill you, but in the end, only God can allow your death. This concept fits in well with the Akan notion that,

> what makes a person a living human being is the part of God which they call okra. And when the okra leaves the body, it returns to where it came from... to (God) the source of life. [They also believe] that every person enters this world with a destiny

or mission appointed by God, and that a person's life in the world is an unfolding of this destiny.[2]

In another proverb, they say categorically: "God's destiny assigned to you cannot be changed." Is this a form of caring, loving "fatalism"?

The proverbs associating God with death enforce people's confidence, that death acts on a secondary level, and only when and where God permits. Yet, paradoxically, God is not held directly responsible for individual deaths. Other (human) agents cause death directly (such as thugs, terrorists, soldiers, executioners, poisoners, murderers, assassins and even lovers), or by using witchcraft, sorcery, magic, formal curse and, in some cases, spirit agents are thought to be at work. The breaking of taboos can also cause sickness leading to death. Nevertheless, these become effective only when the author of life permits it to terminate.

The point is brought out strongly by another Akan proverb, which states that: "It was none but the creator (*Odomankoma*) who made death eat poison." (31) This dramatizes the power of God over death. It says in effect, God forced death to eat poison, that is, to kill itself and, therefore, also die. This is a forceful way of saying that God is stronger than death and keeps it under control. No human power can force death to commit its own suicide. What does this proverb point out or say about Christian resurrection?

Because people's lives originate from God, it is assumed that they will also return to God when they die. For that reason, the Akan would draw consolation in time of bereavement from the proverb that simply declares: "The person has become God's property." (32) Death is not an ultimate annihilation of the person. It is not a final ruination in the sight of God. The dead person is secure, being in God's keeping, albeit we may not know in what state. God takes back what is God's own, even if God is not the active agent in bringing about death. The analogy of the deceased being God's property means also that their value before God does not diminish or end with death.

In almost the same words the Oromo express this concept of continuing to be with God after death. They say: "Even if the prophet died, to the Lord he remained." (33) That is a word of condolence, of hope, of looking beyond the grief and despair caused by death. It is applicable to everyone, even if not everyone is a prophet or esteemed in the community. God makes no distinction.

Since God is stronger than death, people can live with confidence and not be unnecessarily afraid of death. For that reason, the Akan have another adinkra symbol, which proclaims the proverb: "I will only die, if God dies." (34) That

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[2] Kofi A. Opoku, "Hearing and Keeping: Akan Proverbs," in John S. Mbiti (ed.), *African Proverbs*, vol. 2 (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 1997), p. 65.

essential part of a person, the okra, which originates from and returns to God, cannot die, cannot perish since God, its source, cannot die. This proverb makes death a transitory phenomenon. The okra has immortality by virtue of being God's property. For that reason, the Akan exchange condolences in form of the proverb: "When a person dies, he or she is not really dead." (35)

That the concept of death is under the will of God is articulated in the Oromo proverb, that: "What God sends from heaven reaches the earth." (36) While nobody can die unless God wills it, nobody can stop death once God has permitted it to strike. It becomes unavoidable. The descent of death upon a person cannot be stopped, as another proverb attests: "The death that has come to a soul cannot be prevented by a wise person." (37) Human wisdom, human achievement, or human power cannot neutralize the gravitational force of death once it is set in motion. Naturally, medical care, good health, precautions, and so on, can keep death at bay—but not indefinitely. Death can only be apparently or temporarily delayed, it cannot be ultimately prevented.

But while human agents can and may delay death, it is ultimately God, who is effectively responsible for delaying it, by healing the sick and making them recover even when they have been close to death. Two Oromo proverbs remind people about this sustaining power of God: "The beating of God breaks and heals the strong man." (38) While human agents like witches and sorcerers may be held responsible for people's illnesses and misfortunes, and while traditional or other doctors carry out treatment, there is a real sense in which God is ultimately and paradoxically responsible for both illness and healing. For those people who experience or interpret sickness as a form of punishment, it is, nevertheless, God who heals them. For that reason another Oromo proverb states categorically that: "God at the same time (brings) wounds and healing." (39)

These two proverbs, among others, speak to an underlying form of theodicy in African society. Whatever pains the people may endure, whatever wounds may be inflicted upon them, whatever tears they may shed, they regard God to be ultimately good. He (she) may appear to wound (by allowing illness, barrenness, calamity, drought, famine, accident, human injustice, or even death), but in his (her) goodness he (she) heals, saves, restores the people and rewards them with his (her) goodness. Healing or saving is the final word, and it comes from God. He (she) defeats death and "forces it to drink poison." His (her) healing reaches beyond death, and restores life, resurrects life, affirms life.

Death and Salvation

Some proverbs point to ways of finding salvation or escaping from death at least temporarily. These may be contrasted with proverbs that emphasize

that there is no escape from death. The two concepts take paradoxical but not contradictory positions. Let us look at Oromo proverbs addressing this theme.

"The one who refuses advice, will not refuse death" (40), is a proverb to remind people that, accepting advice might save from death. Some dangerous circumstances that lead to death can be avoided or their danger reduced, if people take advice from someone with better knowledge, or someone who has experience in handling such situations. Advice can also come in the form of a warning, with the implication that, if one does not heed the warning, death can befall the person. Advice is valuable help in preventing unnecessary death, even if death may still come through other ways. This is "saving advice," which is "caring advice." It derives from the community wisdom, experience and knowledge. Every community will have a large store of advice to minimize death. However, some advice can be restrictive to people in search of knowledge, doing experiments, or making risky undertakings. Naturally, when a person dies in spite of advice and warning, people tend to blame the deceased by saying: "We told him (or her), but he (or she) did not listen!" Or: "It is his (or her) fault!" Such deaths are also more painful than normal deaths, because family members and friends will, with regret, say or wish: "If only they had listened to our advice, they would still be alive."

Often there is no possible salvation from death. This bitter truth is stated in the proverb: "Pleading does not save a man from death." (41) One may beg and plead with death as much as one will, but this will not save the person in any permanent way. Death does not know sweet words or flattery or anger. It cannot be persuaded. It cannot exchange its role with that of absolute salvation.

Yet, according to another proverb, one must also struggle, fight back, defend oneself against death when possible. It calls for action: "Saying, 'Don't aim the spear at me!' does not save a person from death." (42) There is a battlefield, when death is near. It is more than just words. It demands action to ward off death, to keep it at bay as long and as far as possible. Dying should not be made easy. You do not just beg to live, but you work out your escape, you participate in the realization of salvation from death. This is relative salvation. Yet, it does not always result in success. So, when an "unsuccessful attempt to assist another person is made," the Oromo might quote the proverb: "Take hold there, don't touch me here! A person is not saved from death." (43)

As an encouragement in times of suffering, one may apply the proverb: "Great trouble does not become death; out of it comes (it becomes) news." (44). The idea here is that current suffering passes away, and later becomes a good story. Even under severe suffering, relative salvation is possible. This is a word of encouragement, of support, of caring for the sick. How can we draw a line between relative and absolute salvation?

But, final salvation remains with God. This is conveyed in the proverb, which we have already considered: "At the same time God brings wounds and

healing." (39) Healing is the last word and it comes from God. It is a saving word. Once God has healed, the person is saved from death. This proverb is contrasted with human limitation, in the proverb: "Being a good person does not save one from death." (24) Ultimate salvation is God's work alone. The deeds and character of persons cannot save them, however good they might be. Everybody dies, whether good or bad. This proverb also points to modesty and humility, in view of human limitations. God is the ultimate author of salvation from everything that harms or threatens to destroy life, and from death itself. How does the content of African myths of creation relate to Christian theology of God, creation, sin and salvation? How do we explain the traditional Christian notion of salvation, in the light of these traditional ideas about death, healing and saving?[3]

Conclusion

Technically, there is no conclusion to the theme of death. It can conclude us, but we cannot conclude it in any absolute sense. We have looked at only a fraction of proverbs from the Oromo, Lugbara, and Akan peoples, regarding such a sample as representative of Africa as a whole. In bringing our reflection to an end, we look at a summary of the picture of death that emerges from the proverbs, and the questions it poses for dialogue between African Religion (AR) and Christianity.

Death is accepted as being inevitable. In fact, the highest number of proverbs speaks to this concept. For example, the Akan point out that: "An elder may be strong and healthy, but does not live for a thousand years (forever)." (45) The Oromo simply say: "Old age and death one cannot pass by." (46) Dozens of proverbs describe death as being unavoidable, uncheatable, unchoosing, unexpected, uninvited, unpredictable, unpreventable, unsatisfied, unsparing, and unwanted. Others speak about death in terms of time, pointing out that it has its appointed day for everyone. There are some that indicate the paradoxical link between birth and death.

The proverbs we have explored did not concern themselves with the mythical origin of death, or life after death as such. Naturally there are others that address themselves to themes like threats to life, sickness, actual dying, and the spirits. Our choice explored the nature of death, and how people experience it in reality. In a sense, they prepare people to accept death, to live with death, to get beyond the death of others, and to face it when it comes. Some proverbs even contradict each other, since there are different facets of death. The

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[3] See the myths discussed in the previous essay, "A Person Who Eats Alone Dies Alone: Death as a Point of Dialogue Between African Religion and Christianity."

proverbs keep death alive in people's conversation; and yet do not let it remove their sanity so as to overwhelm them in daily lives. There is laughter, there is feasting, there is celebration behind death's back, even there where death has struck. One person dies, but others remain and still more are born. Through death, one keeps quiet forever; but also through birth, another raises the voice. And this is an apparent paradox that comes out prominently in the Kiswahili proverb that says: "*Kwenye mauti kusi sauti*. Where there is a corpse there is no sound. The place of death is silent." (47) This is true. Yet, paradoxically, death has not been able to annihilate human life, to bring it to an ultimate standstill.

Proverbs point to the mental and emotional world in which people live and act. They have a key place in the encounter between the traditional worldview—AR—and Christianity. Side by side with Christian teaching and preaching, proverbs bring theological insights in dealing with death among Christians and followers of AR alike. In the face of death, these traditional insights do not melt away. Instead, they remain and function side by side, or in integration with Christian insights. This comes out in facing themes like the fear, the impartiality, and the cruelty of death. They pose questions such as: What is the specifically Christian dimension to death, and how do we weave it into this traditional dimension as revealed through proverbs? Which proverbs, sayings, and formulations from the Bible can be utilized in conjunction with the traditional ones, in the caring ministry, in accompanying the sick, in supporting the dying, in comforting the bereaved, in remembering the departed?

How do we prepare people to face death in the family and their own? Proverbs can be a call to show courage and readiness to face death without any false hope of escaping it. This is a brutal acceptance of death at the door. It is an ironical "yes" to death. What is a specifically Christian "yes" to death? How do we handle situations of sure death—for the person as well as the family and friends concerned? Where do we draw strength to face situations of desperation precipitated by potential or actual death?

The fear of death should not be an obstruction to life, a truth taught by some of the proverbs. Yet, how do we cultivate the courage to live without the fear of death? What are Christian points of reference in facing death? As our Lord Jesus faced his death, we see him struggling with fear in the Garden of Gethsemane.

> He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake." And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want."
>
> (Mk 14:33ff. Parallel passages are Mtt 26:36ff., and Lk 22:39ff., who tells us that "there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him.")

The link between AR and Christianity takes shape in the form of people's search after consolation and succour in time of bereavement. Death finishes life as we know it. When in both religious traditions, people turn to the same God, they are acknowledging that God is even more powerful than death. It is a confession of their trust, faith, and hope in the One who is not subject to death. In a sense, death drives or turns them more intimately to God in the time of their greatest weakness. See how profoundly Jesus prayed in Gethsemane. What differences and commonalities do we see in turning to God, among followers of both religions, since they seek the sustaining power of the same God?

Proverbs bring out the question of immortality, by virtue of people being God's property, or deriving from God. How do we understand this notion, in both AR and Christianity? Does the traditional view open the doors for the Christian view? Where do the two traditions meet and part company, merge or contradict?

There is a battlefield, when death is near. What is the Christian view of this battlefield? Again we can look at the case of our Lord Jesus before his own death, and thus treat the battlefield christologically.

The proverbs indicate that even under severe suffering, relative salvation is possible. They also point out, that final salvation remains with God, as the Savior from everything that harms, threatens to destroy, and from death itself. This is a word of encouragement, of support, of caring for the sick. How can we distinguish between relative and absolute salvation? What form of salvation does AR entail?

Proverbs have shaped people's thinking and worldview for generations, and they continue to do so. They have a degree of authority in society. To what extent are proverbs that arise out of AR, acceptable in Christian life and teaching? By what criteria do we judge them, or attribute authority to them? Do they present a picture of death, among other things, that is acceptable to Christian taste? Does the world of proverbs, change when religions meet in people? To what extent can we, as Christians, use proverbs and proverbial wisdom in dealing with death, in lending support to the gravely sick, in caring for the bereaved, in thinking about and remembering the departed?

In thinking of the place of traditional proverbs in Christian life and theological reflection, we can determine four groupings. (a) Those that are acceptable *in toto*, without distinction between AR and Christianity. These illuminate and enrich Christian thought and life. (b) Those that are acceptable in part, and do not seriously contradict Christian sensibility. (c) Those that can be rejected altogether, as they may be deemed to be of no value for, or contrary to Christian understanding. (d) Those that can be replaced or modified by Christian and biblical proverbs.

In the field of proverbs there seems to be fertile ground in the encounter between Christianity and AR. The Bible includes an innumerable number of proverbs and the world of the Bible greatly resembles the traditional African world. On proverbs the two speak a fairly common language, on many and different themes of life.

On the overall value of proverbs in Christian life, we remind ourselves about how often, our Lord Jesus used proverbs—expanded to become parables—in his teaching. It is reported that: "Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing." (Mtt 13:34f., *cf.* Mk 4:33f.).

Proverbs Cited:

1. "A brave person is not afraid of death (or should not be afraid of death)."

2. "A man dies once."

3. "The day it wishes death, the goat licks the nose of the leopard."

4. "The coward died because of cold water."

5. "A corpse does not fear the grave."

6. "Death needs a strong heart."

7. "What one fears is death; and yet what is inevitable is death."

8. "It is astounding: for fear of death should one spend the night without sleep?"

9. "'I am here, I am thinking and my skin is already on the market,' said the duiker."

10. "'The one who died does not have something frightening,' said the woman as she hung a lion's claw around her neck."

11. "If death (personified) comes to kill you and you call him father, he will kill you, and if you call him mother, he will kill you."

12. "Death has no friends."

13. "The teeth of death are sharp."

14. "'The cruelty is death', said the dwarf ('I worry about death, not my height')."

15. "The person who is cruel dies twice (by his/her cruelty the person has already died socially, and afterwards dies a natural death)."

16. "It is the good man who dies."

17. "Death has no eyes."

18. "Death does not know a chief."

19. "The sorcerer dies too."

20. "'Not-dead' is beating the drum at the funeral of 'Already-dead'."

21. "Though it flies and circles, the vulture dies on the ground."

22. "The death which came for the family head, will not settle for the slave."

23. "While the old ox remains the calves die."

24. "Being a good man does not save one from death."

25. "The ladder of death is not climbed by one person alone."

26. "Death does not leave anyone."

27. "Death does not exclude anyone."

28. "The earth opens its mouth for all."

29. "The one to die and the one to kill him or her will find each other."

30. "If God does not kill you, you do not die."

31. "It was none but the Creator (*Odomankoma*) who made death eat poison."

32. "The person has become God's property."

33. "Even if the prophet died, to the Lord he remained."

34. "I will only die if God dies."

35. "When a person dies, he or she is not really dead."

36. "What God sends from heaven reaches the earth."

37. "The death that has come to a soul cannot be prevented by a wise person."

38. "The beating of God breaks and heals the strong man."

39. "God at the same time (brings) wounds and healing."

40. "The one who refuses advice, will not refuse death."

41. "Pleading does not save a man from death."

42. "Saying, 'Don't aim the spear at me!' does not save a person from death."

43. "Take hold there, don't touch me here! A person is not saved from death."

44. "Great trouble does not become death; out of it comes (it becomes) news."

45. "An elder may be strong and healthy, but does not live for a thousand years (forever)."

46. "Old age and death one cannot pass by."

47. "*Kwenye mauti kusi sauti*: Where there is a corpse, there is no sound (The place of death is silent)."

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Remaking Africa Through a Spiritual Regeneration

Lesiba Joseph Teffo

Introduction

The aim of this essay is to argue from an African perspective for the moral regeneration of Africa through the adherence and accordance of greater recognition to and practice of African Religion (AR). It will be argued that people are religious by nature, and since people are made in the image "of God," they have the potential and the capacity to recreate Africa, turning it into an hospitable paradise. The contradictions that exist, political and religious, are self-made. Therefore, human beings can overcome them if they transcend into the realm of religion and allow rational belief and faith to guide and inform thoughts and actions.

The "Supreme Goodness" or a "humanness" that was instilled or breathed by God into all people, regardless of ethnicity, race, color or creed, constitutes the very being of humankind. All human beings, emanating from the "One" or the "Immovable Mover," were endowed with divine intelligence or wisdom. This quality is responsible for rationality in the human mind, which effectively determines all human characteristics. It affects our personhood, personality and social relations.

All human beings, emanating from God, are imbued with equal "goodness." This "goodness" guarantees the existence of the quality and dignity of life. But, sadly, we sometimes find that these qualities are non-existent or not as operational as we would like them to be. The safety, comfort, and harmonious co-existence of the human species as envisaged from the time of Adam are not realized. Why is this so? Several factors can help explain the scenarios, and in the same vein some can indicate to us the way forward, the way to the promised land. Traditional African ethics and religious thought will be our beacons. Whereas South Africa will be our focal point in this essay, the issues explored are in consonance with many situations on the African continent.

The Formation of Moral Values

The philosophical usage of the concept "value" often causes confusion. A working definition is essential. The concept is often used in political and economic terms but we shall confine ourselves to its religious and ethical or moral use.

It is often the case that philosophers use "value" as an abstract noun to cover only that to which such terms as "good," "desirable," or "worthwhile" are properly applied. Though "value" is described in various terms, all of them may be reduced to "goodness."

Lewis enunciates a variety of goodness: a) utility or usefulness for some purpose; b) extrinsic or intrinsic instrumental value, or being good as a means to something desirable or good; c) inherent value or goodness, such as the aesthetic value of a work of art in producing good experiences by being contemplated or heard; d) intrinsic value, or being good or desirable either as an end or in itself, which is presupposed by both b) and c); e) contributory value, or the value that an experience or part of an experience contributes to a whole of which it is a part (not a means or an object).[1]

Of significance to this essay is the kind of value or goodness that belongs to a virtuous person, to good motives, or morally approved traits of character. There are indeed several factors that affect personal moral formation and transformation. Moral formation and transformation can take place at the level of an individual, organization, or institution. For example, contemporary African society is greatly concerned over standards of public and personal morality, matters such as corruption, violence, sexual abuse, and the lack of accountability by public servants. All these attest to a decline in society's moral values and standards. Hence a clarion call from various quarters for a moral regeneration. There is universal agreement that there is a problem. However, nobody has much of an idea about the measures needed in order to encourage the formation of such values, or how to transform behavior morally, especially in a multifaith continent. The heterogeneity of our continent makes it all the more complex. In pluralistic societies people are shaped by various value systems, whether Islamic, European, or African.

The capacity for moral formation and regeneration is innate in human beings. It will develop if carefully nurtured. Childhood is the earliest and easiest stage for nurturing moral formation. The difficult stage commences at young adult life, and also older adult life. This process of moral formation does follow a fixed and rigid pattern of behavior. As a result childhood experiences and orientation do not render adults immune to moral regeneration

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[1] P. E. Edwards (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan Press, 1967), pp. 229–230.

with attendant enhanced moral practice. To this end, religious conversions are eloquent examples of such changes in young and mature adult life. Mature adult life is accompanied in ethical and legal terms by freedom of choice, and the ability to distinguish between what is right and wrong, and between good and evil. Children can be guided towards becoming good citizens, whereas adults can transcend their situation as informed by their free will. Accordingly, therefore, moral regeneration is not a hopeless task. It only needs to be anchored in stronger moral foundations.

Our argument in this essay essentially aligns itself with ethical relativism. We reject moral absolutism and view with suspicion attempts at formulating a universal ethics. Similarly, we reject all forms of biological determinism. We concur, though, with Thomas Hobbes that a human being is born good by nature, and that a person is only corrupted by other persons. Moral character can be influenced by education and socialization, and indeed by other forces and personalities.

Religion and the African Family

Writing about AR is much easier today than it was in the past. Authors are no longer urged to defend the existence, relevance, validity or otherwise of AR. Their challenge is to write in such a way that they remain authentic and loyal to their culture. Effectively, these writers are obliged to engage in some form of corrective narration of history. They try to speak, project culture, and write history from an African perspective. They write as they live and understand themselves, and indeed they are better qualified to do this than any foreigner.

When the word religion is mentioned, what comes first to the minds of people in Africa are Christianity and Islam. The rest of the religions, including AR are perceived as appendages. Various means and methods were employed in the past that enabled Christianity and Islam to enjoy over-emphasis. But such emphasis led to the denigration of African values and the attendant change of behavior patterns.

As Islam and Christianity spread throughout Africa a "skokiana" (concoction) of cultures was born. This was not peculiar to Africa. In fact when different cultures meet they often result in a synthesis that inevitably projects one of the merging cultures as superior or prominent. There is nothing inherently wrong with this process. What needs to be managed though, is the assertion and imposition of a culture on a people that is not congruent with their existential experience. No culture is without a religion, and no foreign religion should strive to replace any indigenous religion. If missionaries and colonialism could have acted with this natural wisdom in mind, Africa would have probably suffered less harm than it did.

As John Mbiti observes, AR tends to pervade every facet of African life, unlike religions such as Christianity which were often seen as having very limited relevance and relationship to daily life.[2] AR is a way of life. The pervasiveness of AR can be discerned in the terms of explanation given for difficulties at childbirth, treatment of infertility, systems of respect among family and kin members, seclusion of mothers after birth, sexual abstinence rules and circumcision rite.[3]

Where outside religions first came into contact with the continent's indigenous religions, conflict and confusion ensued, and neither systems retained its original state. Many African religions blended with Christianity and Islam, and contemporary African societal organization is still underpinned by religious beliefs and practices. One must also keep in mind, as we continue our discussion, that no one group or historical moment can lay claim to ownership of the rich and vital religious message about the redemption of humanity. The message is elastic, omnipresent, and transcultural.

What Went Wrong?

History attests to the fact that white people of European descent landed on the shores of South Africa in 1652. At that time religious belief and practice underpinned and characterized the entire social organization. Offerings to the ancestors, the pouring of libation, and varied and numerous rituals and rites were performed on a regular basis. Circumstances dictated what the appropriate practice was to be. The same can be said for Islam and Christianity. Indeed there was relative peace and tranquillity prior to the historical contact between the races, and the various religions provided guiding principles towards a good life.

The monsters that set the cat among the pigeons were slavery and colonialism. The conditions under which both the master and the slave lived destroyed their humanity. The master's humanity was corrupted to a point where he could no longer appreciate the humanity of any person other than one of his own race and color. Similarly, the humanity of the victims was eroded by constant torture and humiliation. In the ensuing struggle for liberation, the just war theory was invoked by all combatants who believed that the end justifies the means. While the merits of this position are not the subject of this article, it is necessary to point out the context that led to the moral rupture of the African societies, especially during the wars of independence and thereafter.

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[2] See J. S. Mbiti, *African Philosophy and Religions* (London: Heinemann, 1969), p. 23.

[3] D. Kayongo-Male and P. Onyango, Th*e Sociology of the African Family* (New York: Longman Publishers, 1984), p. 45.

In South Africa, for instance, immoral attitudes were embodied in the old apartheid regime. Consistent with racist tendencies that accompanied slavery all over the African continent in the past, whites in South Africa thought themselves superior. Blacks were taught to perceive themselves as inferior and subservient. Such repugnant views were encapsulated in the law of the land. Religion was misused and violence was accepted. The insights of African traditional spirituality were frowned upon and rejected. Dubious, and at times blatantly false, theological and sociological attitudes were advocated and embraced without question. The critical inquirer risked earning the wrath of the master.

In all African countries the advent of liberation was greeted with euphoria. But it soon dissipated as societies realized that things were not developing as hoped. Corruption, rape, professional criminality and gangsterism, wanton violence, theft, bribery, nepotism, extortion, drugs, hijacking, and so on, led to the decay of the moral fiber and the attendant offensive and criminal behavior.

The politicians did not help the situation in any way during their campaigns for political office. Often they romanticized and exaggerated what liberation could and would yield. People were made to believe that the white people would not only vacate the parliamentary building but everything they occupied and owned, and that would be done overnight. The truth is that in many instances the opposite happened. The elected officials uncritically embraced capitalism and the trappings that go with it. At the grassroots, politicians were perceived as being aloof and nonchalant in relation to the plight of the people. Hence the expression in South Africa that life was better under apartheid, leading to talk about an alternative to the existing African National Congress (ANC) led one.

Capitalist dictatorship, accompanied by the arrogance of power, evinced an insatiable lust for wealth. It promoted individualism and the avaricious amassing of personal wealth rather than a collective commitment to the uplifting and development of the whole society. In many ways these developments went contrary to the expectations of the electorate, the toiling masses that hoped that liberation would alter their lot. Suddenly money was equivalent to God and beame the measure of everything. All socialist, communalist and communist tenets that underpinned the struggle for liberation were swept under the carpet.

Stiff competition in the race for wealth led avaricious people to use devious means to enrich themselves. Seldom was morality involved in the ruthless scramble for wealth. If we want to turn the tide, this is precisely where we should begin. We shall not promote a moral and vibrant society while the foundations and the worldview that inform our conduct are repugnant. We must begin now to fashion a new world order anchored in noble principles.

The principles that should guide and inform our conduct may be legal, ethical, moral and religious. For our purpose, the religious principles are pertinent. During the wars of independence, religion and religious leaders

played vital roles. While religion could be abused and misused by the clergy, as was the case during the apartheid regime, good religious leaders often emerged to take the mantle of leadership, to lead "the children of Israel" to the promised land. Some of them were compelled and driven by their consciences, and made small contributions at high personal risk and cost. Nonetheless, their interventions often made a profound difference. This they could achieve because they enjoyed a higher moral ground than the politicians.

However, after independence in 1994, the religious leadership vacated the scene and never returned to assist in the transformation, reconstruction and development of the society. In various ways and on many levels religions exhibit a dearth of leadership, and an unacceptable reluctance to play an active role in rebuilding the nation. Those who still try, regrettably, often harbor political ambitions using the pulpit as a passport to parliament. We shall return to this aspect later.

Towards Religious Diversity

Thomas Hobbes averred that a human person is born good by nature. A person is only corrupted by another person. The absence of intersubjectivity therefore creates an impression of a utopian paradise on earth. Community or social interaction is the possible condition for conduct and behavior not consonant with God's original plan. God endowed the human being with the faculty to distinguish between right and wrong, good and bad. The human spirit in us often informs us to strive for the highest good and promote the greatest pleasure to the greatest number. The fall of the human person or the frailty of the human spirit is no excuse for us not to try and transcend our situation.

In an endeavor to realize the "highest good" human beings sought systems, instruments and policies that would enable them to achieve. I submit that ethics, morals, religions and legal systems are, *inter alia*, intended to help humanity create a paradise on earth. Consistent with the theme of this article we shall focus on indigenous religions, the complementary role of other systems notwithstanding.

Religion is a vexed phenomenon in the world and as such is constantly contested and reinvented. Africa became the center stage at the advent of colonialism where all alien religions played themselves out in the attempt to obliterate or dominate indigenous religions. As from 1652, South Africa experienced a myriad of religions, mainly from imperial, commercially adventurous countries. Today, in the 21st century, we have black Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Rastafarians, and more. At the same time there is a proliferation of independent churches rooted in African culture and led in the main, if not exclusively, by blacks.

South Africa is a kaleidoscope of religions. With the new constitution guaranteeing freedom of religion and association one can expect constant renewal and proliferation, especially as the African renaissance advocacy begins to define the agenda for Africa. South Africa gazes on this galaxy of religions and the religious revolution that is taking place with awe, and anxiety. It is this anxiety that prompts me to suggest a way to harmonize all these competing religions, whilst at the same time according indigenous religions space and time to flourish.

Religious Rapture in Africa

Africa has a tattered image and a tormented soul. It must be asserted at the onset that had the African continent not been subjected to the most heinous experiences, namely, slavery and colonialism, the continent would be different from what it is. Given its glorious historical past, the continent might have been currently setting the global agenda for development. But, given reality, discourses around Afrocentrism, Africanity, and African renaissance are aimed at redefining Africa and locating it in a global context. Indeed, as Africans

> we would not talk of freedom, if there was no prior condition in which this was denied; we would not be anti-racism if we had not been its victims; we would not proclaim Africanity, if it had not been denied or degraded; and we would not insist on Afrocentrism, if it had not been for Eurocentric negations.[4]

As I have already said, whenever I talk about Africa in this essay I should be understood to be referring to the entire continent. I do not, therefore, subscribe to the prejudicial view that often excises Egypt out of Africa, and presents it either as part of Europe or Asia. In fact, part of our aim is to attempt to reconcile theoretically the geographic divisions that are often the source of cultural chauvinism, political conflict, and racial prejudice. One of the implicit missions of African philosophy is to contribute in no small measure towards the mental liberation of the Africans. Bantu Biko realized that gullible blacks accepted without critical reflection the super-imposed idiosyncrasies of the alien other. Some blacks went out of their way to deny themselves (alienation). They, in a Hegelian sense, became alienated from themselves. Hence their attempt to define themselves in concepts and criteria foreign to their own culture. It is sad that some blacks still identify with such demeaning thoughts. Modern African philosophers are trying to redefine his-

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[4] A. Mafeje, "Africanity: A Combative Ontology," in CODESRIA Bulletin 1 (2000), p. 66.

tory and give self-esteem, pride, and hope to fellow blacks. Blacks have a lot to be proud of and celebrate.[5]

Martin Luther King stated on Chief Albert J. Luthuli, Human Rights Day, December 10, 1962, that "throughout recent anthropological discoveries, science has substantially established that the cradle of humanity is Africa." The earliest creatures who passed the divide between animal and humans seem to have first emerged in East and South Africa. Professor Raymond Dart described this historical epoch as the moment when humankind "trembled on the brink of humanity."[6] The 1998 archeological discoveries in the Free State under the aegis of Wits University further confirms this view.

A leading African philosopher, Cheikh Anta Diop, alluding to the preceding sentiments, submits that

> it is around 1525 B.C. that Egypt was conquered by Cambyses, the Persian King. The command that Cambyses gave was to destroy everything that revealed the greatness of Egypt. The temples were torn down and the libraries were destroyed. ... Cambyses also destroyed all of the Egyptian intelligentsia. The Egyptian priests fled to western Asia. They were the highest order of scientists and men of knowledge. And this is the process by which historical memory was lost and the people regressed… Africa was dominated in modern times by slavery... Africa was completely disorganized... The essential social cell was destroyed.[7]

Diop alludes to how a civilization was falsified, but spread anyway. Africans, as they went into the diaspora, took their religions and sciences with them and continued to practice them. Naturally, after the original contact as a result of slavery, colonialism, and other imperial cultural practices, indigenous religions could never remain the same, both in the diaspora and on the mother continent. Whatever change they underwent, there remained a substratum that continued to distinguish them as African. Their existence served a human purpose then, and they still do today. For now an invitation is being extended to other established or mainline religions, to pause and reflect, and explore those values still inherent in indigenous religions and glean from them with the view to infusing them in contemporary society to enable it to cohere and flourish in the midst of endemic crises in the world.

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[5] D. J. Louw, "Towards a Decolonised Assessment of the Religious Other," in *The South African Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 18 (1999), p. 391.

[6] I. van Sertima (ed.), *Great African Thinkers. Cheikh Anta Diop*, vol. 1 (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1986), p. 304

[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 348–349.

Religion and Cultural Relativism

According to Aristotle, the most distinct trait of a person is that he or she is a rational animal. Descartes concurred with Aristotle in his conclusion that a human being, in contrast to things or objects, is a *res cogitans* (a thinking thing). If a human being is definable only in terms of his or her ability to think, what is thinking? What constitutes or influences thought? Culture. What is culture then? There is no conclusive definition of the concept and as a result we shall allude to descriptions that are relevant for our purpose.

Human beings, like all other primates, are cultural animals, that is, their behavior or characteristics are determined by their culture.[8] Several factors assist in defining culture, but religious belief is among the most pertinent. We proceed from the standpoint that all religions are not susceptible to conclusive empirical or scientific proof. We contend as do other religions that AR is ultimately accepted on the basis of faith rather than incontrovertible truth and positivistic evidence. African spirituality is primarily a reflection of the African psyche, the African worldview (*Weltanschauung*) which is essentially holistic, integrated, and interdependent. According to P. E. Edwards, African traditional spirituality is above all, a spirituality that relates to the whole of life. It engages with the spectrum of energies that comprise the vitality of human living. The meaning of misfortune, as well as of the right and good, is sought across the levels of existence. Human life and the material are celebrated but are not other than spiritual. Respectful connection of person with person (as in *uBuntu*) and with the earth gives meaning to human life, but so does connection with the invisible supra-empirical realms. Land, health and vitality, human progeny and ancestors, community and harmonious relationships between and across all levels of reality—these and many other factors together comprise an integral, holistic engagement with all the domains of reality, seen and unseen, as an accepted pragmatic whole.[9]

As we continue to focus on the religions on the social terraces of South Africa, the picture emerging is similar to other countries in terms of historical developments. The religious contours change in consonance with historical epochs. The first real outside religious contact occurred in South Africa when the Christian Bartholomew Dias arrived in South Africa on 12 March 1488. More than 160 years later, in 1652, the Dutch East India Company arrived in the Cape, also carrying with it the teachings of Christianity. Religions such as

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[8] M. W. Makgoba (ed.), *The African Renaissance: The New Struggle* (Cape Town: Mafube/ Tafelberg, 1998) p. 100.

[9] Edwards, *op. cit.*, (note 1), pp. 86–87.

Buddhism, Rastafarianism, Hinduism, and others, also found their way into South Africa.[10] As a result of these religious interaction, religious diversity was entrenched and it flourished. In some instances religious imperialism raised its ugly head. Sadly in the process lives were lost.

Indigenous religions had to adapt to changing circumstances and in the process some withered away whilst others survived, albeit in different guises. Dias, in performing the first known Christian act on our shores, was certainly not interested in looking for evidence of religious activities or beliefs. The San and the Khoi as the indigenous inhabitants of the Cape observed their own religious beliefs and practices. Nevertheless, wearing racial blinkers Dias could not discern or detect anything religious in the social organization of the inhabitants.

As colonialism was dismantled, the search for an authentic African identity began in earnest. In the course thereof African Instituted Churches (AICs) were born. Clearly, lest we confuse issues, what was born was not the religions, but formal religious practices consonant with modernity, with very clear African features. Indigenous religions traceable to antiquity were given space and time to germinate and flourish. Statistics suggest that indigenous churches are the fastest growing churches on the African continent, Latin America, and perhaps in the whole world.

Neo-cultural imperialism should not obscure the fact AR does not owe its existence to Christianity. African Christian apologists tend to subjugate AR to Christianity. Therefore, for this religion to be "liberated," African Christian priests, preachers, and congregants, should rid themselves of "mental colonialism." They should perform "mental exorcism." That does not suggest that they should renounce and denounce other religions. However, for them to earn universal respect, they will have to put their culture first. No reasonable person can show you respect if you define yourself through a culture or yardstick other than your own. The constitution says, "Everyone has the right to freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief and opinion."[11]

South Africa is a religious rainbow nation. However, in this rainbow of mainly imported religions, the indigenous ones suffocate. To this end, the political elite have been instrumental. Often, the politicians rebuff and denounce the exponents of these religions as opportunists and late-comers into politics. In this connection Nokuzola Mndende writes:

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[10] G. J. A. Lubbe, "Religious Pluralism in South Africa," in C. W. du Toit and J. S. Kruger (eds.), *Multireligious Education in South Africa—Problems and Prospects in a Pluralistic Society* (Pretoria: UNISA, 1998), p. 3.

[11] Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 110 of 1996.

> Through their chairperson, the African Traditional Religion (ATR) practitioners requested an appointment with Reverend Mankhenkes Stofile, at the time premier of Eastern Cape Province. They complained that ATR was not recognized as a religion on its own, that ATR was always regarded as a preparation for conversion to Christianity and was always treated as being under the umbrella of Christianity. But the reverend refused to listen to them. Instead of giving them an opportunity to explain themselves he told them that they did not know what they want, and that he had advocated for African Religion as far back as 1972 before it became fashionable in South African universities (his letter dated 16 October 1996). He felt comfortable as an ordained Christian minister to be an authentic voice for ATR, denying the religion freedom from the yoke of Christianity and because of his power he succeeded.[12]

The exponents of AR pleaded with the African governments to honor the spirit of the South African constitution by according this religion an honorable place under the sun. For instance, AR should be given an opportunity to be broadcast by the South African Broadcasting Corporation.

AR is not confined to physical structure nor is it hierarchy bound. It is not an institutional religion. AR is a practiced rather than a book religion. President Mbeki's enthusiasm for the African renaissance will probably enhance the prospects of genuine recognition of AR in some countries. At least at Mbeki's inauguration one minister, Ntate Kgalushi Koka, represented AR during prayers. One wonders how the clergy of the mainstream religions felt at that historical moment.

The multifaith approach in transforming society, can only help resuscitate the fractured moral fiber of our society. Central Africa is rich in religious diversity, and to some extent it remains loyal to its heritage. My personal observations in Ghana and in the Republic of Benin have convinced me that AR has a vital role to play even in modern times. Endemic political violence and sexual abuse could be addressed and eradicated, if we were to revisit our rich religious and moral heritage. Certain cultural taboos and rituals if upheld would significantly reduce the level of criminality. To achieve this, we need the political will from our leadership. The Arabs and Indians are uncompromising in their religious patronage, hence their high moral standards.

In this connection Mndende writes :

> In the South African situation religious recognition seems to be a matter of money is thicker than blood; the wealthier the religion the more space it receives, the poorer

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[12] N. Mndende, "The Teaching of African Religon in School," in Toit and Kruger, *op. cit.*, (note 10), p. 115.

the religion the more extinct or undermined it becomes, no matter how indigenous it may be. This becomes clear when a member of the Gandhi family, the Dalai Lama, Farrakhan, a Rabbi, Michael Jackson, Bill Cosby or a member of the royal family visits the country. Full recognition is publicly acknowledged but AR and African royalty are ignored and regarded as non-progressive and primitive.[13]

Such facts should spur Africans toward introspection. A spiritual regeneration could serve as a major building block toward an African renaissance. What is required is an attitudinal change, a paradigm shift. Africans should take pride in their cultural heritage and begin to recognize and support humble efforts towards an African indigenous religious renaissance. Africans should desist from this condescending attitude towards their culture. G. J. A. Lubbe writes:

> As for the present, one needs to take cognizance of the fact that African religious views have not been discarded. In fact, one may even talk of resurgence of African religious beliefs and practice. Vivid proof of the continuing influence of African religious views is to be found in the process of cross-fertilization between the African ethos and Christianity in South Africa. The result of this process has manifested itself in the emergence and growth of the so-called African Initiated Churches in which many Africans found comfortable religious homes. [14]

Themes and Features in African Religions

In general, there are common features that typify AR. Though some of these traits have been adulterated due to contact with other religions, some have withstood the test of time. In many respects these features influenced and continue to influence our thoughts and actions. The list that follows is not exhaustive, nor are the issues elaborately and conclusively discussed. The nature of the paper does not permit that.

UBuntu/Botho

The African people believe in the idea of distinct inner quality that makes the human person humane. The absence of this quality relegates one to the level of sub-human beings or animals. All human beings are endowed with this quality. In African languages the collective noun for describing this is

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[13] *Ibid.*, p. 118.

[14] Lubbe, *op. cit.*, (note 10), pp. 4-5.

uBuntu, which cannot be translated into English without adulterating its authentic meaning. Pertinent features characterizing these qualities are human sympathy, willingness to share, forgiveness, and justice.

UBuntu/Botho is the human quality reflecting and at the same time underpinning the dignity of the human personality. It is a cohesive moral value inherent in all human persons. It is an expression of the "Supreme Goodness" in all human persons. It is a modality of being. It is also a philosophy that is underscored by the maxim, "You are because I am, and since I am, therefore you are." Thus, the being of one person is contingent upon the being of another. In biblical terms, it is espoused as, "thou shall love your neighbor as you love yourself." The German philosopher Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative in consonance with the philosophy of *uBuntu* says: Act according to that maxim that you can at the same time will it to become a universal law; whether in your own favor or that of another never treat the other as a means but always as an end.

Human relations

Human relationships are based on an hierarchical as well as a clan systems. Each social setting will prescribe a particular way of relating to one another in accordance with prevalent customs, norms and values. Respect for the elders, aged, and handicapped underpins indigenous religious practice.

However, this aspect of respect should not be upheld in a manner that is contrary to the constitution. The South African constitution provides that no individual shall be discriminated against on the basis of age, sex, creed or color.

Supreme being and ancestors

The ancestors are the "living-dead," our departed parents and elders through whom we communicate with God-Modimo. In some Christian denominations, especially the Roman Catholic Church, believers are taught they can reach God by way of the Virgin Mary. Africans do not worship the dead; they revere them, they accord them due respect. It is a time-tested African tradition to greet, communicate, or offer anything to the chief or king or any person with similar office or standing, through a mediator. To the king you go through the elders or councilors. Therefore, in African culture we often invoke the intercession of the ancestors as we advance our offerings to the Most-High.

It is a deliberate and intentional distortion of a people's culture to say Africans worship ancestors, deities, or individuals. Africans do not wish to equate ancestors with Christian saints; the comparison is dangerous and misleading. It smacks of mimicry. AR must be explained and practiced in its

cultural context. AR should not seek to be legitimized through a foreign test or yard stick. Anyway, if you look at many religions, similar charges were made in the course of their development. The ancestors are experienced and best qualified to communicate their prayers to God. Our African ancestors daily kneel before the shining face of God, the First Cause, Atum/Qamata/Mudzimu/Eloihim, to present our petitions for truth, justice, wisdom, righteousness and peace in our human existence, dealings and relations.[15]

B. J. van der Walt's observation should amplify these sentiments:

> It is a fact Western Christians (such as missionaries) often had the attitude that people of Africa, who adhere to traditional customs, were always wrong and the whites always right. Such people did not see the wealth of African culture... The theology of such missionaries is also in error, because they deny God's creational revelation to the African. Before they even had contact with the Bible, God already spoke to the hearts and consciences of the people of Africa. That is why they are usually, as far as interpersonal relationships are concerned, superior to the Western.[16]

Of primary importance in this connections is to recognize and accept the close relationship between the living family and kin members and ancestors. Kayongo-Male and Onyango write:

> This perhaps explains the elaborateness of ceremonies connected with every stage of the family life cycle, since ceremonies often enabled the living to maintain ties with non-living family and kin members. The idea of a person's life continuing, even after death, as long as the family remembered him or her, was common. It helps us understand why even when a man died, it was important for him to have children born in his name (as in the custom of levirate); these children would be thought of as his and would keep his memory alive. When misfortunes arose, people often atoned to the dead, assuming that the dead were angered by some behavior of their living relatives. Maintenance of family shrines was believed to discipline peaceful continuance of family life. Ancestors were believed to discipline family members who neglected familial duties or acted disrespectfully to older members.[17]

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[15] K. D. Koka, "Highlights and Crises of Life: Afro-Religious Perspective." Unpublished paper.

[16] B. J. van der Walt, *The Liberating Message: A Christian World View for Africa* (Potchefstroom: PU for Che, 1994), p. 213.

[17] Kayongo-Male and Onyango, *op. c*it., (note 3), p. 45.

Sacred places

Some of the identifiable features of the Christian churches are physical structures, crucifixes, and liturgies. Indigenous religion has its own features, like religious mounds. These are hill-like land projections often along the road. It is customary to pause and bow with respect when passing by because it is often believed that such mounds are sacred since the ancestors used them as resting places, or places of "offerings." Such mounds are sacred places where one could kneel and communicate with the ancestors. This is still happening, although in a modified sense. Similarly, you find things like Legwame/Lehwana—an onion-like plant —often in the middle of the homestead. This plant marks a spot where the family often brings prayers or gives thanks to the ancestors. For example, if there were to be a wedding feast in the family, information would be relayed to the ancestors at such a spot, and blessings would be expected from them in turn. So, there is always a reciprocal communication. It is at this point where libation (traditionally beer with snuff) is poured in order to appease the ancestors. Lamenting the foreign onslaught on AR, Kayongo-Male and Onyango write:

> With little knowledge of the values of the Africans, many of the early missionaries denounced the sacrifice to ancestors, magic, betrothal of children, inheritance of widows, polygamy, many types of songs and dances, initiation ceremonies and bride wealth. Such denunciation over time did undermine traditional customs and beliefs which had projected married life and kingship relationships.[18]

Towards a Religious Renaissance

Under the present global conditions, an African renaissance as espoused by Africans must entail a reaffirmation of the African genius. Given numerous and varied distortions of the history of Africa, African renaissance must in a poignant way entail a conscious and uncompromising rejection of the past transgressions, a determined negation of the Eurocentric African renaissance discourse. Afrocentrism can be regarded as a methodological requirement for decolonizing knowledge in Africa or as an antidote to Eurocentrism through which all knowledge about Africa has been filtered.

    The standard and somewhat dubious criticism that AR is not formally structured is, to my mind, an invitation to leaders and adherents to this religion

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[18] *Ibid.*, pp. 46–47.

formally to constitute themselves. Once united they will have an influence and impact as they canvas for equal treatment with other main-line religions. Black scholars, academics, intellectuals, and theologians should devote ample time towards the development of AR. Blacks certainly owe it to themselves. However, this call should not be perceived as a subtle attempt to create an African religion that would play a role similar to the one once played by the Dutch Reformed Church during the apartheid regime. That was unacceptable and abominable. Similarly, such religions should never be tempted to go to bed with the government, and to refrain from being on the side of truth for the sake of political expediency. The supreme aim of religion, I believe, is to reconcile people to God. To this end, churches should serve as midwives.

The religious community should dedicate itself to a religious renaissance. It should try to give a spirit, a dynamism of love to this fabric of humanity. Similarly, it should avoid religious polarization. In this connection my mind goes back in history, "to the days and years and centuries when religion was perhaps used even for unpeaceful purposes. People today are still afraid of this."[19] A. Mazrui goes on to state that,

> religious tensions in Europe between Catholics and Protestants first culminated in the Treaty of Augsburg in 1555. There was a fusion of religion with sovereignty in this treaty as the religion of the prince was deemed to be the religion of the principality, the king's faith was the faith of the kingdom. This famous doctrine was expressed in the words *cuius regio eius religio*.[20]

Furthermore, and in reality,

> the decision to equate the religion of the king with the religion of the kingdom was a principle of no interference in the different princes internal religious affairs. But this *modus vivendi* broke down. Europe underwent the agonies of the Thirty Years War. And out of that war emerged the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which laid the foundations of modern state system and the principles of modern conceptions of sovereignty. This secularization of allegiance (to the state rather than through the church), which came with Westphalia led to the secularization of identity—and nation and races became more visible than religious communities.[21]

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[19] H. Camara, "Religions and the Need for Structural Change in Today's World," in A. J. Honer (ed.), *Religion for Peace: Proceedings* (New Delhi: Raman Printers, 1973), p. 157.

[20] A. Mazrui, *Cultural Forces in World Politics* (London: Heinemann, 1990), p. 19.

[21] *Ibid.*

The Prophetic Dimension of Religion

The prophetic dimension of religion, its healing power, and its ability to reconcile and unite communities should be embraced. Archbishop Helder Camara captured my attention when he wrote:

> And in that spirit I would like to think that all of us who are here and all of the religions that we represent are not going to think of dialogue just in terms of confrontation of religions, but also and chiefly of working side by side, as one terrific army or phalanx confronting man's [sic] problems today and converging on the future of humanity "ahead" of us which we all want and the future "beyond" as true religionists. That is our perspective, that is our dimension, let us go to it with spirit and courage.[22]

The continent should seek to redefine itself, and be loyal to its history. We are confronted with a potential cultural realignment of forces in the wake of the decline of ideology. For example, Russia, which was once religiously intolerant, is becoming less so. The same applies to the United States, in respect to racial intolerance. So each one, each nation, if it is to have eternal peace, ought to listen to the imperatives of the day. One can never earn respect from others if one defines oneself in terms of a foreign culture. As we move into a new millennium, we need to promote the flourishing of traditional religions. We need to engage in rigorous scholarly exploration of these religions. We need to make a start now. To this end I would expect the South African government to recognize all major religious holidays as alluded, or else, if it is a truly secular state, annul all Christian holidays. Equity demands nothing less.

Religions as Resources for Promoting Peace

The social and economic conditions of contemporary Africa are the direct result of colonialism and alien capitalist policies that aim to enrich the West at the expense of indigenous African people. In a society laced with scarcity and abject poverty, moral rectitude is often the first casualty. Moral and ethical issues tend to be relegated to the periphery as people eke out a living by all means possible. Therefore, those who are striving for a moral redemption and the promotion of peace in Africa should always contextualize their efforts and programs. All the religions of the world have the inherent capacity to eradicate evil, to triumph in the face of despair and hopelessness. AR, in

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[22] Camara, *op. cit*., (note 19), pp. 157–158.

particular, being in many respects a way of life, if accorded appropriate status and prominence can assist in alleviating the vicissitudes of life.

The advent of slavery and colonialism were in many respects responsible for the demise of the social fabric of the African community. Men and women have struggled for justice on the continent for decades by non-violent means. Prominent men of letters and the cloth took up the cudgels to fight against racism and apartheid. "When Mahatma Gandhi launched his first 'Satyagraha' in South Africa early in the 20th century, Count Leo Tolstoy recognized it as the most significant moral movement in the world."[23]

The religions of the world, numerous and diverse in their content and form, can and must play a role in the promotion of peace and the universal brotherhood-sisterhood of the world. Humanity is called upon to reject, resist, and fight evil; many faiths, Christian and Moslem, Hindu and Jewish, Parsi, Sikh, and AR, should form the vanguard. It behooves all religions to uphold their faith and demonstrate their conviction and commitment by engaging in concrete positive actions that are aimed at promoting peace and wholeness in human communities. Religions have a moral duty to cease any cooperation with the forces of evil. In doing this, religions would be midwives for peace in the human family's universal order of things.

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[23] E. S. Reddy, *Apartheid, the United Nations and the International Community* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishers, 1986), p. 120.

Concerns

At its meeting in Nairobi, Kenya, November 2000, the study group expressed some concerns regarding the importance of African Religion (AR) for Africa and beyond and the need to profile AR in every possible way. Both AR and Christianity are challenged by the many problems facing daily life in Africa. Among others, the following concerns were put forward:

In some Christian circles the positive value of culture, tradition and spirituality that derive from AR are undermined. Constructive dialogue can only take place in an atmosphere of mutual respect. It is crucial that neither religion is placed in a position of superiority or inferiority.

The study group appreciates the detailed studies of AR taking place in different regions. These studies contribute toward building up solid teaching materials in African institutions of learning. The collection, analysis and interpretation of these resources contribute to a deeper understanding of the overall religious life of the people.

There is a need to study AR and its values in theological seminaries and Bible schools. Wherever possible, this should be based on scholarly work carried out largely, if not exclusively, by Africans themselves. The aim would be better to understand African heritage and to relate it to Christian teaching and life.

The study group feels that the meaningful caring of persons in crises demands sensitivity regarding the teachings of the church about sin, heaven and hell, as well as an awareness of gender considerations. Resources on how best to respond to various forms of crises of life in the African context can be found in both AR and Christianity. These resources should be further explored and, as appropriate, utilized for the common good in the church and in society at large.