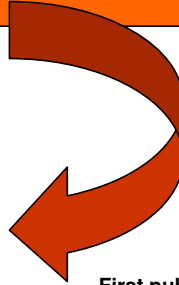
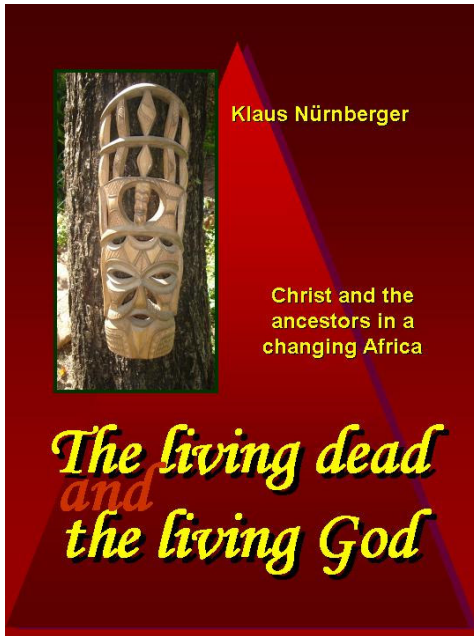


*Two fascinating chapters
taken from this book;*

*Chapter 2: Listening to African Religion
Chapter 3: Listening to the Bible*



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Description of the book: Ancestor veneration is practiced widely in Christian churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America but usually in secret. This book is a theological appraisal of this phenomenon based on a study of African Religion, the Biblical witness, the Reformation, modernity and postmodernity.

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Contents of chapter 2: The first section analyses African spirituality in depth. The relationship between the dynamistic view of reality, the communal nature of African life, the patriarchal and hierarchical structure of the community, the presence and role of the ancestors, the African Supreme Being, and the nature of sorcery and ritual is explored. In section II the question is asked whether the Christian proclamation did not miss this entire package of spiritual needs, thus leading to the irrelevance of the gospel in African life.

Contents of chapter 3: Section I and II look at the role of the Israelite ancestors in the Old and the New Testaments and asks why the biblical faith has excluded all religious authorities other than the one God of Israel. A difference is made between ancient pluralistic family religion and ultimate monotheistic state religion. Section III looks at the relationship between authority and community in the Bible. Section IV deals with the alleged otherworldliness of the biblical concept of salvation. Section V asks whether ancestors could legitimately fulfil the role of institutional authority. Section VI tackles the contentious issue of the ancestors and the communion of saints. Section VII compares the ancestors with the risen Christ in terms of death and resurrection. The final section asks how the gospel can be appropriately enculturated in Africa.

2

Let us listen to African spirituality

The task of this chapter

The approach

In this chapter I confront ‘classical’ Western perceptions of the presence of Christ with ‘typical’ African spirituality as manifest in ancestor veneration. My motive is to figure out why so many Christians in mainline churches, while they confess Christ as the Redeemer of the world, continue to appeal to their ancestors in times of distress. Who is more proximate to African Christians, the ‘risen Christ’ or the ‘living dead’? Who is more relevant? Have the mainline churches failed to address the spiritual needs of traditionalist Africans?

In other words, rather than subjecting African religion to scrutiny from a Christian point of view, I want to explore the possibility that African religion may find the redemptive performance of Christianity wanting from an African point of view. African spirituality may challenge traditional Christianity very profoundly. We have to respond to these challenges, I believe, for the sake of the integrity and appropriateness of our convictions as much as for the sake of the plausibility and credibility of our witness.

Concentrating on the essential

From the outset it should be clear that I cannot do justice to the immense variety of African religions and their endless permutations within such a short chapter. Nor is that the purpose. It is also not possible to do justice to the vast variety of approaches found in modern Christianity. That too is not the purpose.

One can argue that African religions are infinitely variable and fluid. One can argue that ‘pre-modern’ forms of these religions are no longer relevant in the melting pot of urban African culture. One can argue that the Bible is a maze of contradictions. One can argue that the controversies of the Reformation have

long since become obsolete through theological re-formulations, ecumenical agreements and common practice (Davies 1993:257). One can also argue that the entire theological enterprise has become irrelevant in the modern world.

All this is quite true, at least up to a point. There is not only one, static African spirituality, not only one biblical, Catholic or Protestant doctrine, not only one manifestation of modernity, not only one recognisable form of postmodernity. In the current spiritual situation you find a diverse spectrum of combinations, interactions, inter-penetrations, adjustments, new developments, deconstructions and simple decay.²⁸ Local and detailed analyses would be necessary to know exactly what happens at grass roots level in specific communities.

But that is not the purpose of the exercise. This is a book on systematic theology, not a book on cultural anthropology or phenomenology of religion. I concentrate on some classical interpretations of the Christian faith, and get as close as possible to some classical forms of African spirituality, because I want to get to the core of the problem. It is my task as a systematic theologian to try and figure out what makes the two sets of convictions tick, as it were, and how they respond to the spiritual needs of our various situations today.

The purpose is to cut a trail through the forest, to come up with some parameters, to understand what the ingredients of the alloy found in the melting pot could have been. The basic alternatives stand out much more clearly in such 'idealised' constructs than in the infinite variety of ecumenical harmonisations and pluralistic adaptations one finds in modern Africa today. Or to use another picture: if I want to know what I am about to drink when I have my coffee in the morning I have to distinguish between water, coffee, milk and sugar, although these ingredients can no longer be 'unmixed'.²⁹

This is particularly important in an age when we need to come to terms with the contextual, perspectival and relative nature of all human insight. Systems of meaning fulfil an indispensable role in society. To explain this, let me use another picture. Modern physics has shown that all matter, including steel, consists of nothing but magnetic fields between energy conglomerations that cannot be pinned down in time and space. But we still have to use steel to make cars as means of transport. In the same way we have to communicate meaning in practical life with concepts and patterns of thought, although all utterances can be shown to be ambiguous, problematic and ultimately indefinable.

In an intellectual climate that has become so fuzzy that one is hardly able to say anything at all without being accused of 'essentialism'; where terms like traditionalism and modernity are deemed to be nothing but ideological constructs; where one is warned not to presume that there actually exists something like that out there, it may be useful to call a spade a spade, because spades are being manufactured and used out there, and their use, abuse or non-use has consequences in the real world.³⁰

This has become an absolute imperative in a situation where at grass roots level systems of meaning have meshed into an indissoluble tangle; where there

are so many claims and counter-claims that one does not know what to believe; where people do not know how to react to suspicions and probabilities in crisis situations; where there is no compass that could offer direction in decision-making; where God is proclaimed to be a delusion and where divination and ritual healing have become a multi-million Rand industry. In short, we have to address what Ashforth has called the “predicament of not knowing”.³¹

Is an attempt to describe African religion a non-starter?

Some research findings seem to suggest that traditional African religions defy systematisation.³² Just like modernity, its opposite, African religion is pragmatic, almost utilitarian. It has no time for ontological descriptions or metaphysical speculations. Underlying assumptions remain largely implicit. Religious issues crop up in times of crisis. One explores and utilises whatever diagnosis seems to make sense and whatever prescription seems to work, trying out one possibility after the other. When life runs smoothly and there is no trouble, one is not particularly concerned about the ancestors or any other unseen forces for that matter.

However, the impression of infinite pliability is misleading. The approach of traditionalism may be exploratory and pragmatic, but only to a certain extent. As the studies mentioned indicate, the manifold manifestations of traditional religion are variations of a common theme. At the very least they are all characterised by ritual.³³ Ritual is based on a dynamistic worldview. The dynamistic worldview in turn leads to the perception that the world must be stabilised, that the flow of life must be protected and strengthened.

This perception underpins the concept of a staggered source of power and authority on which the survival and stability of the community depends in a dynamistic world, which again forms the context in which ancestor veneration has its place. It is not impossible, therefore, to observe a certain consistency in assumptions and inferences. It is also not impossible to account for the factors that may bring about variations, adaptations and accommodations.³⁴ But with that we have run ahead of our argument. So let us get into the subject matter.

Section I – The spirituality of African traditionalism

The dynamistic perception of reality

Traditionalism is found not only in Africa, but all over the world. It is immensely diverse, even on the African continent. It is also in flux, especially under the impact of Christianity, Islam and the lures of modernity. But some typical characteristics allow for a measure of generalisation.³⁵ As mentioned

above, flowers are of an infinite variety, and they are undergoing processes such as budding or decaying, but you can still tell a flower from a leaf.

According to traditionalism, reality is not composed of energy particles that follow recognisable 'laws of nature', as modern science assumes. It is constituted or permeated by uncanny forces.³⁶ Although there are considerable overlaps, one can distinguish between animism, where the emphasis is put on personalised manifestations of power (= spirits), and dynamism, where the emphasis is on impersonal power. As I use the term, animism does not refer to ancestral authority but to the basic fabric of reality. Animism is more prevalent in West Africa, dynamism among the Bantu-speaking groups in Southern and East Africa. Because of my geographical location in Southern Africa I concentrate on dynamism.

In a dynamistic worldview everything that exists harbours impersonal forces and such forces drive everything that happens. Like a vast ocean, dynamistic power can be relatively calm or in tempestuous turmoil, but it is always in motion. Power flows can go in beneficial or detrimental directions. Because these forces cannot be seen, traditionalists live in a dangerous world. To stabilise the life-world of the community, and to protect and strengthen its members, are the most pressing concerns in a traditionalist setting.

The flux of dynamistic power is channelled in beneficial directions through rituals performed in public by authorised representatives of the community. Ritual underpins all the important activities of the community. It is like the subconscious atmosphere in which the life of the community subsists. But the flux of dynamistic power can also be channelled in directions detrimental to the community through secret and wilful manipulations of witches and sorcerers. Such operations are the ultimate sources of evil in traditionalism.³⁷

Sorcery causes harm through the sporadic use of objects or substances loaded with dynamistic power.³⁸ Witchcraft is practised by people who are innately evil.³⁹ All kinds of magical manipulation can be utilised to cause harm. Human organs, corpses and excrements are particularly virulent sources of power. But not all evil is induced by humans. There can also be areas, times and relationships that are 'hot' and that must be avoided or 'cooled' off. Alternatively, they are 'polluted' and necessitate avoidance or cleansing.

Words, names, greetings, expressions and gestures are loaded with power and may have beneficial or detrimental consequences. One must be extremely careful with what one says, how one addresses certain classes of people, what the range of one's competence is in the social fabric. Verbal communication is, therefore, largely formalised.⁴⁰ One cannot play with words. Other forms of communication, such as spells, ritual strengthening, passage rites, sacrifices, praise songs and dances, are also formalised.⁴¹

The pivotal importance of the community

Dynamistic power is located in material objects, natural processes, people, communities, roaming spirits, rituals, witches and their familiars, and so on.⁴² Socially the most important positive flow of dynamistic power is the life force of the extended family, the clan, the chiefdom and the kingdom.⁴³ Life is life in community; there is no other possible life.⁴⁴ Even children are educated largely by social interaction with siblings and age groups.

A case can be made out for the assumption that the communal and hierarchical form of society is a response to the precariousness of the traditionalist life-world mentioned above. This seems to become clear from its spatial expressions. In Africa huts are round. They have a centre where the fire is located. The family sits around the fire in a circle. The circle is the most basic expression of solidarity one can find. But the circle is structured according to rank.⁴⁵ Huts are often arranged in concentric circles around a core. Alternatively, the most important place is opposite the entrance.⁴⁶

In more developed cases the concentric structure of society is reflected in the design of settlements.⁴⁷ Families are organised in clans, clans in wards, and wards in chieftainships. As one approaches the core, the necessity of respect increases. This is where the most essential deposit of power is located. As one approaches the periphery the world becomes more dangerous. There are clear demarcations between inside and outside. They can take the form of walls or fences, or they can be invisible for a stranger, but they always have the force of ritual markings.⁴⁸

In terms of time, the greatest danger lies in the possibility of extinction. The protection and enhancement of life is a communal task. The 'life force' of the clan encompasses fertility, biological vitality, social structure, status and role allocations, spiritual assumptions, and moral patterns of behaviour. Life, in its entirety, is inherited from, and owed to, one's respective parents, who have had their own parents and who are all embedded in the extended family.

The life force of the family is passed on from generation to generation along the male (in some cases the female) lineage from grandfather to father, to son, to grandson.⁴⁹ Marriages are considered to be linkages between clans, not between individuals. Young people are obliged to marry and have children for their clans.⁵⁰ Personal attraction is not always a decisive argument. Often marriages are arranged by adults while the partners are still young. Childlessness is not only a personal tragedy but a communal catastrophe.

In terms of power the traditionalist society takes the form of a patriarchal hierarchy.⁵¹ A hierarchy is, of necessity, a community. But it is a community built on levels of authority.⁵² The community is organised in concentric circles from the 'kingdom' down to the wards, the households, the homesteads of wives and the individuals.⁵³ The status and role of every member is tightly defined in terms of age, gender and seniority.⁵⁴ Individuals are not entitled to go

beyond their particular spheres of competence. In a precarious world, individual whims and desires are simply too dangerous to be let loose.

In compound societies the spiritual order reflects the social order, indicating that it is an order of power and authority.⁵⁵ The patriarchal hierarchy is characterised, therefore, by an all-inclusive social and psychological dependency structure.⁵⁶ This structure extends beyond death to the most proximate among the deceased and from there to the wider realm of one's ancestry. Theoretically it also extends to the not-yet born.⁵⁷ While everybody reaches adulthood through puberty rituals and marriage, nobody comes of age in the Western sense of the word.⁵⁸

Mythology extends this hierarchical dependency structure from the prime ancestors upward to divinities and the Supreme Being, as well as downward to animals, plants and objects. That is why the human dependency structure may appear to be the 'middle portion' of an all-embracing hierarchy.⁵⁹ However, the flow of dynamistic power does not proceed from the Supreme Being through deities, the genealogical sequence of the clan and on to animals, plants and objects. They all participate in dynamistic power on their own account, yet in different measure.

So the picture does not reflect the outcome of ontological speculations about the overall construction of reality, but a metaphorical expression of the experience of the hierarchical order of the world. There is a definite difference in dignity between the three levels. While analogy and symbolism link human life with all of reality, 'divine beings' are existentially out of reach; the life force of the clan, represented by the ancestors, constitutes one's actual life, while non-human reality is accessible and at one's disposal – with due care, of course, not to stir up detrimental power flows.

Death and the 'living dead'

Death can be defined as the loss of vitality. As such it is a serious matter, in fact the most serious matter one can think of. This is particularly true for a culture that is so intensely geared to the fullness of life. Traditionalism clearly recognises that death is the ultimate threat to life. It is immensely feared in all traditional societies, as it should be. Except in the case of very old people and infants, a death case always evokes conspicuous lamentations, painful isolation of those concerned and extensive mourning.⁶⁰

Death disrupts the social organisation profoundly.⁶¹ This is particularly serious in a situation where the life force of the community is deemed to flow from generation to generation through the male lineage. An untimely death is often perceived to be due to uncanny forces set in motion through enmity, sorcerous manipulations or witchcraft.⁶²

Death is considered to be contagious and dangerous for the survivors. The family and its sympathisers must be protected and strengthened against the vicious power of death. A corpse is ritually unclean and its handling demands

elaborate purification rituals. The continued presence of the corpse is perilous. The community must disentangle itself from the victim of death. Some rituals are designed to prevent the deceased from returning, or getting into the hands of witches.⁶³ Often the entire extended family is thrown into limbo for months until all the passage rites have successfully been completed.⁶⁴

It is against this background that ancestor veneration must be understood.⁶⁵ Ancestor veneration is not a spiritual device to secure eternal life or to play down the horror and finality of death. Death cannot be considered to be a promotion to a more glorious form of existence.⁶⁶ The after-life is not a desirable goal, except perhaps for very old people who have become tired of life and perceive themselves to have become frail and useless. Nobody looks forward to becoming an ancestor.⁶⁷

The hope that one might have is that one will continue to be respected after one's demise, not to be excluded from the community, not to fall victim to fading memories, not to become a homeless spirit because of neglected funeral rites. In a traditionalist community the need for belonging is of critical importance. In fact, belonging to a community defines the 'nature' of the human being. The human being is only a human being because he/she is part of a network of social relationships.⁶⁸

But the community is hierarchically structured. It is taken for granted in any traditionalist culture that the status of the deceased in the community must be respected and maintained.⁶⁹ Ancestors are not venerated because they have more life than the living, but because they are entitled to their position in the family hierarchy.⁷⁰ Those who have been in authority are ritually removed from the living to avoid the contagious effects of death. But then they are re-installed, usually after a year, into their rightful positions of authority through rituals called 'bringing home the dead'.⁷¹

These rituals confirm the authority and boost the power of deceased elders.⁷² They are meant to compensate for the loss of their vitality. But why should that be so important? Ancestors depend on the recognition of their offspring for their continued authority and belonging.⁷³ If they are not remembered, that is, if they are no longer respected as superiors by their descendants, they are lost.⁷⁴ Such an attitude again endangers the well-being of the living. To deny respect to superiors undermines the very foundations of the community. It is a sacred duty to uphold the hierarchical order because it is the infrastructure of communal life. All kinds of distress are attributed to irate ancestors who have not been given their due.

Just as a newborn child has to be incorporated into the communal organism through appropriate rituals, just as the adolescent has to be taken into the communal sphere of adulthood through appropriate puberty rituals and marriage, the deceased have to be re-integrated into the patriarchal hierarchy through appropriate rituals. There is no meaningful existence outside the community into which one is embedded. Not physical death removes one from

communal existence, but estrangement, rejection, excommunication, forgetfulness or neglect.

Authority

What makes the presence of persons, whether alive or deceased, awe-inspiring is their authority. Authority is ‘life force’, or ‘personality power’, or ‘weight’, that is, one’s influence on one’s environment.⁷⁵ In fact, it is authority, force, or power that defines the ‘numinous’ in general, including the numinousness located in animals and things.⁷⁶ Personal authority is based, therefore, on the degree of participation in the overall pool of dynamistic power, epitomised by the Supreme Being. It is one’s ‘weight’ or influence in the hierarchical structure of the community and of the universe as a whole that defines one’s identity and position and that continues beyond death.⁷⁷ That is why ‘the authoritative deceased’ could perhaps define the intended meaning better than the term ‘the living dead’.

It is the ‘shade’ or the ‘weight’ or the ‘impact’ of the former self that continues beyond death. In the case of the most proximate ancestors the former self has personal characteristics that are known – male or female, tall or short, typically calm or irate. This image is deeply imprinted in the subconscious of the survivors.⁷⁸ In terms of modern psychology one could speak of externalised memories, deeply engrained in the subconscious. Memories too are dynamic entities that do not simply reproduce historical facts but change, grow or diminish. In this sense the dead are indeed ‘alive’, even in modern terms. The loss of such memories of ancestors higher up in the lineage reduces their ‘weight’ – not in theory, but in practice. Because they are progressively more distant, their impact gradually diminishes.

Authority located in the lineage and the hierarchy is connected to parentage, but parentage does not have to be based on biological descent. It also allows for adoption, or for representative procreation by the brother of a deceased husband. In some cases foreigners who want to become part of a tribal formation accept the ancestors of the latter as their own.⁷⁹ It is one’s place in the overall authority structure of the community that is decisive, not biology or vitality.⁸⁰ One cannot assume a leadership position in a patriarchal hierarchy without acknowledging the superior authority of one’s predecessors in the lineage. It is from them that one has received one’s mandate or it is not legitimate.

Vitality and authority

It is not vitality that continues beyond death, therefore, but the relationships through which the powers of life are passed on.⁸¹ Those who have come before have to take the lead over those who have come later. Relationships in a hierarchy are vertical, based on differences in authority. The sphere of influence

of the deceased depends on the status they had when alive.⁸² Deceased children do not normally become ancestors, though they may be taken up into the ancestral world.⁸³ The thought that anybody was lost forever is hard to contemplate.

That is also why, just as in life, the most proximate superiors, one's parents or grandparents, are the most significant authorities when they die. Generations further up the genealogical chain become increasingly vague and irrelevant, though theoretically they should have more authority and power than those lower down. Known and relevant ancestors usually cover only five or six generations upwards in the genealogy.⁸⁴ After that they are only covered by the general category of 'our ancestors'. In short, the continued existence of the ancestors is located in their authority, not in their vitality.

Awareness of the impact of an entity is critical. That is why under certain circumstances the 'living-dead' are in danger of 'dying' in a quasi-objective sense. Yes, at least according to some African religions, the deceased can die! They can die when they become victims of a sorcerer's power, thus losing their own legitimate authority and power. They can die when they are no longer remembered and acknowledged as superiors!⁸⁵ They disappear from the scene of existential relevance when those who still remember them die out and their particular identities dissolve in the general category of 'our ancestors'. More proximate ancestors may lose their power to redeem when they have been neglected for a long time.⁸⁶

They can also die when they themselves are considered to be sorcerers. As a danger to the community, rather than a source of life and prosperity, they can be ritually 'killed'.⁸⁷ Such a death is tantamount to excommunication. This perception is not very common but it shows that the most significant and powerful constituent of this image is legitimate authority – the authority to transmit the flow of the life force of the clan flowing along the male lineage from the ancestry into the lives of their progeny.⁸⁸

It should be clear by now that the Greek dualism between a mortal body and an immortal soul, often invoked by scholars, does not capture the African approach. The human being does not **have** a body, but **is** a body. Similarly an ancestor is precisely the human being that once lived, not the spiritual part of his or her previous self.⁸⁹ The body of the deceased is buried, rots and plays no further role.⁹⁰ Yet, where ancestors 'appear', say in dreams, they appear in their full bodily form, exactly as they have been known to exist. They are not 'spirits', but 'presences' – the continuing presence of the past persons.⁹¹

Naturally traditionalists would not locate the reality, authority and power of the deceased in their minds, thus disempowering them as purely 'subjective' hang-ups. According to some observers, there is no such subject-object split in the traditionalist mind. Anything experienced 'inside' is deemed to be caused by the impact of an 'outside'. Even personal guilt is projected into an external menace of some sort.⁹² Any disaster is 'caused' by somebody or something.

Even a disease can be seen as something external.⁹³ All experiences are experiences of the impact of some outer force.

Sin and evil

It is in this communal context that the traditionalist concept of ‘sin’ has to be seen. Sin is not a direct offence against God, or a transgression of some moral law or virtue, but a breakdown of the complex structure of human relationships within the community including the ancestors. Of course, Africans recognise virtues such as reliability, loyalty, wisdom or coolness of mind. But what really matters is the health of the network of relationships.

Sin creates an atmosphere of shame, suspicion, jealousy, resentment and hostility. The most proximate relationships (parent-child; husband-wife; mother-in-law and daughter-in-law; several wives of a polygamous husband) are the most vulnerable to antagonism. A hostile attitude develops a dynamic of its own and sets evil forces in motion that undermine health and prosperity of the community as a whole.⁹⁴ Its evil effects can only be neutralised by elaborate rituals in which the offender, the offended, the living community and the deceased are reconciled with each other. As can be expected, the continued presence of the deceased is not necessarily appreciated by the living. Ancestors retain the character they possessed when alive, whether agreeable or not.⁹⁵ Often they are also treated in the same way they were treated when alive.⁹⁶ In general, they are believed to be as benevolent and strict as parents are expected to be. In some cases, they may be perceived to be outstanding moral examples.⁹⁷ They can also be loved and respected. But that is not always the case.

One does not necessarily appreciate the presence of an omnipresent and interfering superior, least of all an ancestor who has been malicious during his/her lifetime. In many cases they are feared, resented, or even scolded for their jealousy, their neglect of their offspring, their meddling, their possessiveness and their gullibility.⁹⁸ Sacrificial rituals are often a means to appease irate ancestors, or to make them go to sleep and leave their descendants in peace.⁹⁹ When the ancestors are at peace, there is peace for the living. One dare not wake them up, because that spells trouble.¹⁰⁰

Most dangerous are the spirits of the deceased who have not received a proper funeral, or who have not been ‘brought home’ in a respectful manner after the time of mourning. These deceased are denied recognition and belonging and therefore cannot find peace. They roam about and haunt the living. This phenomenon shows how powerful memories of injustice, guilt and neglect can become. That is true as much for Africa as it is for other parts of the world.

In medieval Europe, for instance, people believed that between midnight and 1.00 a.m. contact could be made between the living and the spirits of the deceased. “In the ‘hour of the spirits’ the deceased come to the living if they

have not found peace, or if no justice had been done to them, and haunt them with bad memories. The living in their turn could also conjure up the spirits of the deceased during this hour.”¹⁰¹

Collective memories can continue to haunt the living for centuries. In Northern Ireland and in the former Yugoslavia, for instance, people are re-enacting violent conflicts of centuries ago. The conflicts between Christians and Muslims during the crusades still bedevil relationships today. The conflict in Palestine between Jews and Arabs has deep historical roots and is likely to bedevil relationships for centuries to come unless a just solution can be found. Traumatic memories just do not want to die.¹⁰²

The source of all power – the Supreme Being

Ancestors, particularly those who have most recently died, are the prime religious counterparts of the living.¹⁰³ They respond to the three fundamental spiritual needs catered for by any functional religious conviction: one’s *system of meaning* (the basic infrastructure of life), one’s *acceptability* (the constitution and restoration of one’s right of existence) and the legitimacy of one’s *role and status* (= the authority to act).

Ancestors define collective and individual identity, underpin the hierarchical system, legitimate positions and uphold communal traditions. They make their will known, and express their displeasure in the form of droughts, barrenness or other mishaps in the lives of their descendants. They are deemed to be endowed with a greater control over dynamistic forces than the living, and they are expected to use this power for the protection and empowerment of their offspring. The dynamistic resources of the clan are extended, as it were, through the entry of the deceased into the sphere of the transcendent.

But ancestors are neither absolute nor omnipotent. In the first place, there are other spiritual forces around.¹⁰⁴ They can have positive or negative functions. A calamity can be caused not only by angry ancestors, but also by sorcery, witch familiars, ‘pursuing evil’, the spirit of a rain shrine, the roaming spirit of a deceased person whose funeral has not been properly conducted or a spiritual invader from abroad.¹⁰⁵

In the second place, all spiritual beings are a part of a greater pool of power that culminates in the Supreme Being. This immense, overarching and comprehensive sphere is not normally accessible to the comprehension and manipulation of the living.¹⁰⁶ The most profound layers of reality have no logical consistency. That is why notions concerning the Supreme Being are usually vague, ill-defined and contradictory. While subconsciously it is always present, one does not bother to think much about it when life continues along acceptable paths. It becomes virulent only in cases of extreme distress.

If the Supreme Being represents the Source of all dynamistic power, is ‘he’ a ‘person’? This is a topic that is fundamental for our argument, that can lead to a

lot of misunderstanding and controversy, and that needs to be analysed carefully. Let me move step by step.

Mythological personification and existential relevance

First, one has to distinguish, I believe, between the sphere of *existential relevance* in the nitty-gritty of life, on the one hand, and the *mythological canopy* that represents a more comprehensive intuition of reality on the other. Because African religion is experiential and not speculative, the sphere of existential relevance (ancestors, sorcery, witchcraft) is clear and explicit, while the mythological canopy is usually vague and variable. The reason is that myth works with metaphors that point to an elusive deeper meaning, while in the sphere of existential relevance one finds straight forward descriptive statements.

Proximate ancestors belong to the sphere of existential relevance. They have been personal participants in the network of social relationships until very recently. One knows them. They are part of the family. They are superiors. The living and the deceased communicate with each other in some form or other. One expects their support and fears their punishment.

The Supreme Being, in contrast, belongs to the mythological canopy. One does not really know 'him', but one is intuitively aware of his presence within the fabric of dynamistic reality. His impact may indeed be felt in more specific ways when one is confronted with unexpected, incomprehensible and unmanageable occurrences. On these rather rare occasions he can be addressed directly in awe or agony.¹⁰⁷ But whether he can be expected to hear such a desperate cry is another matter.

Prime ancestors and the generalising category of 'the ancestors' occupy an intermediate legendary position. A legend is a story that has some historical roots but that has become largely symbolic. A myth has no historical roots. It is a narrative that 'explains' recurrent occurrences such as night and day, drought and rain, life and death. What has ostensibly happened 'at the beginning of time' happens *all* the time. Awareness of the Supreme Being finds mythological rather than legendary expression. But the boundary between legend and myth is fuzzy. In some cases one does not know whether one is dealing with the prime ancestor or the Supreme Being.

Myths are narratives that give tentative meaning to recurrent experiences of a more general and mysterious nature. They use metaphors to express the ineffable. Metaphors are inevitably and invariably taken from daily life, which in Africa is communal life. This is one reason for the fact that things, animals and spiritual powers all assume quasi-personal characteristics in traditionalist mythology. Metaphors should not be confused with 'empirical' or 'ontological' reality. Nor do myths form a coherent system of meaning. Their function is precisely to point towards the ineffable that lies beyond empirical reality.

A myth that is found all over Africa, for example, says that in 'ancient times' (the typical beginning of a myth) the Supreme Being sent the chameleon with

the message of life to the human being, then relented and sent a lizard with the message of death. People die because the lizard overtook the chameleon. Of course, the Supreme Being does not literally ‘send’, and animals do not literally ‘carry messages’. But a profound awareness of the mysterious cycle of life from birth to death is embedded in the myth.

The upshot of these considerations is that the Supreme Being is usually mythologically personified. Because of the patriarchal background of the society, he is usually depicted as a male,¹⁰⁸ though sometimes with female connotations.¹⁰⁹ But that does not mean that ‘he’ is necessarily experienced existentially as a person in the Western sense of the word.

The ‘weight’ of a ‘person’ in the whole

That brings us to the second level of the problem. In *which sense* can the Supreme Being be considered to be a ‘person’? In the West, a person is characterised by communicative competence on the one hand and definite personality traits on the other. Both these characteristics do not seem to apply to the Supreme Being. There are virtually no immediate channels of communication and there are no definable personality traits. Because the Supreme Being is perceived to be the source or essence of all dynamistic forces in the universe, this is hardly surprising.

However, the concept of the ‘personal’ may be understood quite differently in traditionalist Africa. The individual is part of a greater structure of relationships in which each element impacts the other according to relative proximity and relative ‘weight’. The decisive ingredients are ‘presence’ and ‘authority’. One’s identity is not defined so much by one’s individual personality traits as by one’s location in the communal hierarchy and the impact of this ‘status’ on everything else in one’s life world. *Motho ke motho ka batho* (Sotho: a person is a person through persons).¹¹⁰

But this network of relationships is not restricted to the human community. In fact, there are no clearly defined boundaries between self, the other and the whole. Therefore we do not find the sharp distinction between the personal and the impersonal that one finds in Western thought patterns, just as there is no clear distinction between the immanent and the transcendent.¹¹¹ Reality is one vast system of relationships. In this sense, the whole of reality is ‘personalised’. When a calamity strikes, the first question is always, “Who did it?”¹¹²

The cause can be sorcerers, witches or their (non-human) ‘familiar’. It can be the hidden anger, jealousy or frustration of a spouse, an in-law or a neighbour, that is, a negative attitude that can take on a life of its own. It can be the wrath of the ancestors for neglect or transgression of communal norms. It can be the spirit of a deceased relative who was denied a proper burial. It can also be the Supreme Being – that vast source of power that is omnipresent but totally elusive.

In this causative sense, the Supreme Being is a ‘person’ because he has ‘weight’, immense weight. The impact of his presence can be felt in all dimensions of reality.¹¹³ In fact, all entities that form part of the network of relationships are.¹¹⁴ But one is not always conscious of his presence. In terms of communicative proximity he is ‘remote’. That brings us to the third aspect.

Communicative competence

Communicative competence is a complicated matter throughout the system of relationships. Even the words exchanged between living people cannot be taken at face value. They are always ‘encoded’. Words are not simply ‘personal’; they carry dynamistic power and must be handled judiciously. They have a ‘weight’ of their own. One cannot just speak one’s mind, express one’s feelings, or refer to facts. What matters is the effect of what is said on the system of relationships. In traditionalist cultures the interpersonal language game is highly complicated and circumspect.

Communication with the ancestors is even more difficult. One needs the services of experts (diviners) to come to know what they actually want to communicate. Again it is not ‘meaning’ but relationships that matter. In many cases not explicit words, but attitudes are communicated. Not messages but constellations of relationships are revealed by the oracle bones of a diviner. Similarly the ancestors do not seem to act, but to ‘brood over’ their offspring and this brooding has consequences. Their blessing can uplift the community, while their displeasure can upset the stability of the community.

Communication with the powers of sorcery and witchcraft is not only difficult but down-right impossible. These crafts destroy rather than maintain relationships. Such power is evil and evil is kept in secret. It is often deemed to be hidden even to the evil-doers themselves. A feeling of jealousy, hatred or frustration can set off a chain reaction of evil. The presence of evil is felt by its effects. It can be diagnosed, but not consulted.

The Supreme Being is not accessible in the communicative sense of the word at all. This is not because ‘he’ is evil, but because he is too great. His impact is too comprehensive.¹¹⁵ Communication with the Supreme Being is, in the great majority of cases, not deemed possible, not even desirable, because his ‘weight’ is too mysterious and too massive to be amenable for human understanding and manipulation.¹¹⁶

In most African Bantu religions the Supreme Being has no shrines, no priesthood, no code of law, does not speak, does not hear, makes no demands, accepts no sacrifices, does not respond to appeals, may not ‘speak our language’, does ‘not understand our problems’, and can thus hardly be understood as a person in the communicative sense of the word.¹¹⁷ Of course, there are a few significant exceptions.¹¹⁸

Although the Supreme Being is called the ‘Creator’ in many African religions, he too does not seem to act.¹¹⁹ Again we are dealing with

mythological personification, rather than the experience of an active person. The Supreme Being is the ultimate source of the whole of experienced reality. As such he is not clearly defined or differentiated from other entities. The fact that the Supreme Being is usually perceived to be high up in the sky is due to his inaccessibility, or ‘numinousness’, not to his spatial remoteness. Yet his concrete presence and weight can be felt specifically in any unexpected, unaccountable and unmanageable occurrence.

The peak of the spiritual hierarchy

African scholars can testify with great passion to the ‘personhood’ of the Supreme Being and yet agree that he is not normally accessible to direct communication.¹²⁰ One can interpret this phenomenon in two ways. First, the lofty position of the Supreme Being can be attributed to the fact that he is deemed to be the personal peak of the spiritual hierarchy. Then he is not only ‘personified’, but also believed to be a person in ‘ontological’ terms. Again, this must be interpreted in the African sense of personhood. His inaccessibility is then ascribed to the fact that, where society is organised in the form of a hierarchy, one cannot approach a superior without mediation, let alone the highest superior. The ancestors are then believed to act as ‘go-betweens’.

In spite of many anthropological findings to the contrary, the view that the Supreme Being is a person and that the ancestors are personal mediators between God and humanity is widespread at present, especially among African theologians.¹²¹ That may indeed have been the case in some instances.¹²² The question is whether it is original, or the result of Christian and Muslim influences.¹²³ At least as a *metaphor* the idea that the ancestors mediate between humans and God is quite plausible and valid in African terms because the power of the ancestors is indeed derived from the sum total of dynamistic power. But how far can the metaphor be driven?

I am not sure that this view really captures the original spiritual experience of ancestry and the Supreme Being. Ancestors are not normally requested to carry the sacrifices, prayers or petitions of their offspring upwards to higher ancestral authorities, and finally to the Supreme Being. Nor do ancestors speak in the name of the Supreme Being when they make their intention or their displeasure known. In practical terms, they are themselves the authorities with whom one relates, the original authors of their messages, blessings and punishments and the final recipients of gifts and prayers.¹²⁴

The Supreme Being is only addressed in extreme crises, and then directly without mediation. Again there are exceptions.¹²⁵ I would consider this view as *mythological* if it were original, or *speculative* if it were derived from Christian and Muslim influences, as many observers believe.¹²⁶

The underlying existential experience

The second possible interpretation is based on existential analysis rather than mythology. Or rather, mythology is taken to be an expression of existential experience. It suggests that, *existentially*, the concept of the Supreme Being refers to the totality of dynamistic power that affects the living. One is aware of such an overarching canopy of power and mythology gives expression to that awareness. However, the *actual* experience of its impact is always linked to specific events that one did not expect and that one cannot grasp or influence.¹²⁷

Because one is embedded in the vast pool (or rather the ebb and flow) of dynamistic power, the Supreme Being is closer to one's skin, but one cannot approach it, make sense of it or manipulate it.¹²⁸ It is not tangible.¹²⁹ It is not an entity that could easily be distinguished from other entities or processes because it constitutes all entities and processes as their ultimate source.¹³⁰ Apart from power and majesty it has no particular 'personality traits'.¹³¹

It is indeed manifest in the authority and power of the ancestors, but it is also present in everything else that exists and happens.¹³² The fact that in times of extreme distress one can appeal directly to the Supreme Being without priestly mediation or sacred language bears out the contention that he is not part of the spiritual hierarchy but the ultimate and thus immediate Source of all power.¹³³

This interpretation accommodates the fact that the Supreme Being is often viewed as the ultimate guarantor of goodness and justice, the highest court of appeal as it were.¹³⁴ As in ancient Israel, it expresses the expectation that ultimate reality is not entirely arbitrary or evil, or alternatively, that evil in the world does not have the last word. Where this is the case, the spiritual hierarchy that includes the Supreme Being and the ancestry is often deemed to express only the positive forces in life, while the realm of witchcraft and sorcery are deemed to constitute a negative counter-power, the power of evil.¹³⁵ The Supreme Being can also sometimes even be seen as the ultimate Ancestor from whom all ancestry is derived.¹³⁶

On the other hand the Supreme Being can also be experienced as the origin of inexplicable hardship and failure. Even the power of sorcery and witchcraft can on rare occasions be ascribed to the Supreme Being. The ostensibly 'good God' is not always experienced as being entirely 'good'; neither are the ancestors for that matter.¹³⁷ The impact of superior powers on everyday life can be thoroughly ambiguous and disconcerting.¹³⁸

I have suggested in my earlier work that, at least in some African traditions, the concept of the Supreme Being resembles the Western concept of 'fate' (or 'hard luck'). Fate determines our lives, but makes no sense.¹³⁹ Existentially speaking this perception comes closer to how reality is being experienced by all of us, even in the West, than the counter-intuitive Christian proclamation that "God is light and there is no darkness in him" (1 John 1:5). In fact, this gospel message has been experienced as surprising news by many African converts.¹⁴⁰

In the West it often leads to puzzlement or cynicism: How can a loving God allow such things to happen!

The acceptance of fate leads to fatalism – which is found in many religions, including Islam, African, Greek and Germanic traditional religions. As we shall see in chapter 4, it also closely resembles Luther's concept of the 'hidden God'. Here the agony of negative experiences is much more intense because the God of the Bible is, on the one hand, understood to be a God of law and wrath against the sinner, which means that calamities may be interpreted as punishment or rejection. On the other hand, fateful experiences contradict the gospel, which says that God is a God of redemptive mercy.

In all these cases the ambiguity of the Supreme Being reflects the experienced ambiguity of reality. It cannot be otherwise if the Supreme Being represents the ultimate origin of experienced reality. This experience causes great spiritual distress. The positive image of the Supreme Being can be ascribed to the fact that humans long for ultimate truth, goodness and justice and want to believe that the very source or foundation of reality is not mischievous.

I tend to follow the second, existential interpretation, though I recognise the validity of the first in mythological terms. It is precisely this inaccessibility and ambiguity of the larger canopy of power that makes people relate to the authorities they know best because they have been their immediate superiors when they were alive, that is, the most proximate ancestors.¹⁴¹

It is indicative that among the (Nilotic) Maasai, where the Supreme Being is indeed accessible, the deceased play no role as authorities and sources of life. Mediation between the ultimate Source of blessing and the living is taken care of by living superiors and specialists. This also seems to indicate that in traditionalism the hierarchical order is fundamental, the veneration of ancestors is derived from that.¹⁴²

Important qualifications

I have used the word 'normally' a couple of times because there are both exceptions and further developments. On the one hand, there may have been pre-missionary forms of African religion that allowed for a direct and personal contact with a personal Supreme Being, or that perceived the ancestors to be mediators in the context of an all-embracing spiritual hierarchy. On the other hand, interaction with Christianity and Islam may have led to the perception that the Supreme Being is personally accessible and that the ancestors only play a mediating role.¹⁴³

Religions are not fixed and watertight systems of meaning, but subject to internal change and external impact. Moreover, if genuine, they respond to changing needs and perceptions of reality. Religious assumptions are always in historical flux, integrating elements from outside, reacting to new experiences, producing new intuitions. What matters in particular cases is not the ostensibly

‘original’ form of an African spirituality, which may or may not have been practised centuries ago, but its present, living form.

If traditionalists approach the Supreme Being on a personal basis *now*, whether directly or through the ancestors, that is what we would have to work with.¹⁴⁴ Similarly, if African Christians try to forge a new Christian identity by retrieving and transforming the ancient African tradition, this should be recognised as such and applauded. But if such efforts are to be more than ideological constructs, they must be based on the attempt to fathom *the existential experience* that underlies the concepts of the Supreme Being and the ancestors, whether in ancient or modern times.¹⁴⁵

Uncanny forces

Reality is composed of dynamistic forces. The Supreme Being, which is their source, cannot be understood, approached or manipulated. The ancestors are not omnipotent. So there are areas of experienced reality that lie outside communal insight and control.¹⁴⁶ These areas constitute the vast spheres of taboo, avoidance, ritual demarcation, pollution, witchcraft and sorcery, which play such an overpowering role in traditional spirituality.¹⁴⁷ Where theologians read too much of the monotheistic biblical worldview into pre-missionary African religion these spheres are often rather neglected.¹⁴⁸

The Western concept of ‘fate’ is also frequently connected with what ‘enlightened’ Westerners consider to be obsolete superstitions within their own ranks: astrology, reading of hands, magical practices, spiritist experiences, secretive rituals and the like. In late modernity the personal God of the biblical witness no longer makes sense, while there is widespread disenchantment with the rather pedestrian performance of science and technology in solving complex and obscure problems. We should not be surprised, therefore, that these perceptions and practices are again on the increase in secularised societies.

To gain an impression of how it all hangs together, it may be useful at this juncture to repeat what has already been said: African traditionalists live in a dangerous world. Dangerous forces must be kept at bay, individuals must be protected and strengthened, the community must be stabilised. Relationships, patterns of behaviour, procedures and basic assumptions are highly formalised and that for plausible reasons. Personal feelings and opinions are subservient to the communal structure. They are not supposed to be expressed when they endanger the cohesion of the community. One simply cannot afford deviations. One plays by the rules as much as one can.

Actions, words and even thoughts are loaded with dynamistic power that set chain reactions of consequences in motion. These can either serve or harm the community. One is not supposed to allow self-serving thoughts to enter one’s mind because they are dangerous. Because hidden emotions can lead to hidden motivations that can lead to covert actions, individuals find themselves in an

atmosphere of potential suspicion that can be aroused by any sign of dissatisfaction or hostility.

Suspicions can lead to hidden attitudes and actions. Hidden actions involve the mobilisation of dynamistic forces that can pounce upon their unsuspecting victims at any time and in any form. That is why, on the one hand, one will control one's thoughts, words and behaviour as much as one can. On the other hand one will play safe by being protected and strengthened with charms that are deemed capable of warding off any attack. All this presupposes that there are forces out there to which one is exposed and which may be mobilised by others with evil intentions.

The dynamistic view of reality permeates the ordered world of the community. The community is based on a patriarchal hierarchy that reaches beyond death into higher realms of spiritual authority. Such a system of authority exercises comprehensive control. Due to the surveillance by seen and unseen 'spies', one is never alone, not even in one's thoughts and emotions. On the other hand, living persons cannot know for sure which forces determine their lives in concrete cases of hardship, whether the anger of the ancestors or sorcery and witchcraft. There is apprehension and suspicion all around.¹⁴⁹

This situation bears some comparison with that of medieval Christianity where one did not dare to think and act for oneself. One's thoughts and actions were controlled by the earthly authority of the hierarchy with its confessional practice and its Inquisition. They were also controlled by the fear of the heavenly record keepers that would unfold their findings at the Last Judgment. The prospect of spending eternity in hell was too frightening to play with.

All this does not imply that traditionalists are by nature fearful people. That assumption would be ridiculous. On the contrary, they are normally exceptionally alert, courageous and hardy. Their circumstances force them to be. Their alertness is a response to the dangers they see themselves confronted with. In comparison, modernists are often spoilt, lax and obese. The more privileged among them have comparatively little to fear. The problem is not located in personal character traits, therefore, but in the respective life-worlds in which people find themselves.

Presence

Effective authority must be existentially present. The authority of the most proximate ancestors is present. Everything of existential importance is present. As John Taylor said, "fundamentally all things share the same nature and the same interaction one upon another – rocks and forest trees, beasts and serpents, the power of wind and waves upon a ship, the power of the drum over a dancer's body, ... the living, the dead and the first ancestors, from the stone to the divinities (is) a hierarchy of power but not of being, for all are one, all are here, all are now."¹⁵⁰

There is no distance between the most proximate of the deceased and the living in terms of space and time, only in terms of authority and power.¹⁵¹ Sacrifices are given and libations are poured out reverently at designated places and particular occasions. But the ancestors are not confined to these times and places. The social authority structure grows upward, as the elderly pass through the ceiling of death and the young replenish the living from the bottom of the pyramid. All such shifts happen in the present.

In terms of space the deceased can be perceived to have their abodes under the earth, in the sky, in the West where the sun sets, in rivers and lakes, on high mountains, in domestic shrines, in animals (snakes, hyenas, lizards, black bulls, goats), around their graves, in their huts, in the cattle pen, in termite stacks, in body parts like the head, the back, the gall or the womb, in mole holes, in a particular plant, (e.g. the *thitikwane* in the northern parts of Limpopo Province), in heaps of stones, in men and women engaged in sexual activity, in their ‘brooding’ over diviners, and in many other abodes.

In terms of time they may seem to be sleeping most of the time and one may want to be careful not to arouse them. But even when sleeping they are potentially present, ever to be reckoned with.¹⁵² One can never and nowhere completely escape their watchful eyes.¹⁵³

In terms of authority, the existential relation of the living is closest to the superior that has most recently died. The Sotho, for instance, call the most proximate ancestors by the appellation they had when alive, for instance, grandfather (*rrakgolo*) or grandmother (*koko*), or the ‘great one’ (*mogologolo*). The plural, ‘ancestors’ (*badimo*), always refers to the entire ancestral hierarchy, similar to the Catholic appellation to ‘all the saints’.

Ritual

So the ancestors are present here and now. The only rather ‘technical’ difficulty lies in the fact that they no longer possess a recognisable physical presence. As a result, communication with them is indirect – through dreams, divination, omens, whirlwinds, hail, comets, animals such as snakes, and so on. But the most important vehicle of ‘presence’ is ritual.¹⁵⁴ In a traditionalist society social life as a whole is ritualised to a very substantial extent, because reality consists of dynamistic power flows that need to be monitored and kept in check or channelled in desirable directions.

Because they are understood in terms of power relations and power flows, human relations are fairly volatile and unpredictable. So one cannot afford to leave them to chance or whim; one has to follow prescribed rules of communication and interaction. As a result, relationships are formalised to a considerable extent. It begins with the elaborate greeting ceremonials when paying a visit. In many cases the relationship of women to men located at various positions in the patriarchal hierarchy is clearly defined.¹⁵⁵ Many forms of body language or expression are taboo while others are deemed essential.

It is particularly hazardous to communicate with one's superiors. Here one's whole attitude must be one of awe and respect. At higher levels of authority, one cannot address a superior directly; one has to go through an intermediary, sometimes a whole chain of intermediaries. Greetings consist of pre-formulated phrases; particular relationships call for particular forms of address; one has to present one's concerns using prescribed vocabularies, gestures and postures; certain names and concepts are not allowed; one is not supposed to contradict a superior or express one's own opinion unless required to do so.

In short, even relations among the living are, to a large extent, 'ritualised'. As can be expected, hidden power flows may be even more precarious in one's relationships with the deceased. They have acquired a higher level of superiority. Their control over dynamistic power is enhanced. Because they cannot be seen, their reactions cannot be monitored. Their presence calls for high alertness. They 'speak' through dreams, divination, omens, whirlwinds, hail, comets, droughts, infertility or animals such as snakes.

One communicates with them through intermediaries such as clan heads, chiefs or diviners. These 'officials' are expected to know the secrets of appropriate behaviour towards the deceased and to explore their wishes and intentions. They communicate with them through rituals consisting of divination, charms, awe inspiring formulations, gestures and actions that are designed to express submission and channel concerns. On the other hand, ancestors can also be addressed in a vulgar way, if they do not seem to address the needs of their descendants. We have already mentioned that.

Past orientation

It has been argued that traditionalism has no concept of the future, only of the present and the past.¹⁵⁶ However, it is not the historical past, as Westerners understand it, that really matters. Traditionalism is geared to authority rather than time. Its orientation is upward, rather than backward or forward.¹⁵⁷ As in the biblical tradition, 'historicity' as such is of no consequence.¹⁵⁸ The concept of historicity presupposes the modern awareness of linear time and the empirical approach to reality. The 'past' of traditionalism either reflects the mythical foundations of present day life, or it explains and legitimates the sequence of generations, which again underpins the authority structure of the community.¹⁵⁹ The anticipated future is similarly a function of the continuation of the sequence of generation to the not-yet born.

However, the practical effect of upward orientation is past orientation. In an ancestral hierarchy 'higher up' also means 'earlier'. Validity is defined by what has been handed down from generation to generation.¹⁶⁰ The elderly have received the communal traditions from their forebears and are expected to hand them down to their offspring.¹⁶¹ Therefore it is the elderly that determine the life of the community while the youth has to keep quiet and obey. The younger person has 'to listen to' (= obey) the older person.¹⁶² Decisions will be taken not

so much on the basis of their probable consequences for the future, but on the basis of what has always been done.¹⁶³

The upward orientation also determines attitudes to space. It is the structured space of the village, including the graves of the ancestors, that is one's 'home' and towards which one will always tend to drift.¹⁶⁴ As we shall see in chapter 6, this has immense consequences for traditionalist cultures at a time when humanity is engulfed in a wave of accelerating socio-economic development with its constantly increasing communicative range and physical mobility across a globalised life-world.

To sum up this section, relations between the living and the ancestors display a few overriding characteristics: community, authority, power, presence, familiarity, ritual and an authority structure that translates into orientation to the past. The common denominator of these characteristics is the assumption of dynamistic power as the fabric of reality in general and the community constituted by the flow of life in particular.

Authority provides meaning, values and norms, acceptability, and the legitimacy of roles and status. Power makes it possible for ancestors to protect, bless or punish their descendents. To be effective authority and power must be existentially present. Because ancestors no longer possess a recognisable physical presence, communication with them is indirect – through natural phenomena and rituals. The predominance of authority leads to an orientation to the past and the familiar structured space.

It is this package of assumptions that the gospel would have to address if it wanted to reach African traditionalists.

Section II – The deficient impact of the gospel

The proclamation of the biblical message has had a profound impact on African religion. Obviously, this is particularly true for those who have become Christians, or who were born in Christian families. But in most cases the impact has been partial and incomplete. Some observers believe that for the majority of African Christians it is rather superficial.¹⁶⁵

The fact that many African Christians live in 'two worlds' has often been observed and lamented. However, with increasing boldness articulate Christians, including prominent theologians, confess and affirm their African traditional heritage, including ancestor veneration, and strive to incorporate it into their spirituality and their theological system.¹⁶⁶

However, should the phenomenon as such not rather haunt us Christians? If Christ is indeed the 'Son of God', God's representative and plenipotentiary on earth, and if indeed he is the 'Saviour' or 'Redeemer' of humankind, who shares God's power and love, who has even given his life for us, as Christians believe, what could be the reason for Africans to turn to other helpers instead?

The answer seems to be fairly straightforward: the Christ they came to know through the message of the missionaries, subsequent indigenous leaders, even their own reading of the Bible, does not seem to have covered their most pressing spiritual needs. Where Christ is irrelevant, a serious spiritual vacuum can be expected to open up in the consciousness of Christians, which is quite naturally filled with the authority, power and presence of the ancestors, who have always been around.

The dialogue between Christianity and African religions should not happen, therefore, at the level of ontological speculations. Nor can the problem be resolved by including the African story into the biblical story. We should also not be entangled in fruitless debates about the validity of claims to absolute truth or exclusive loyalty. The dialogue should rather focus on the redemptive projects they stand for. One has to ask what the underlying assumptions and the real-life consequences of different convictions are.

A case study

At this juncture I want to draw attention to research done by Jean Comaroff among all kinds of Christians of the Tshidi (a Tswana subgroup) just before 1974.¹⁶⁷ Here are some of the responses to her questions:

Faith in God (<i>Modimo</i>)	100 %
Modimo gives rain	96 %
God is far	94 %
God is close	6 %
Nothing can be done against drought	87 %
One can pray for rain	12 %
One thinks of ancestors in times of trouble	79 %
I don't believe in such things	5 %
Ancestors represent the living before God	79 %
Only Christ represents us before God	10 %
You can do nothing when 'bewitched'	69 %
You can apply ritual countermeasures when 'bewitched'	22 %.

The study shows the following trend among Tshidi Christians at the time:

(a) The 'Christian' God was still the traditionalist Supreme Being who is 'distant', who is responsible for cosmic processes such as rain or drought and who cannot be approached personally when calamities strike. Only 6% believed that God was close. Only 12% believed he could be called upon in times of drought, although official prayer services must have been conducted during

those times. That one could appeal to God when suspicious of being bewitched does not seem to occur to the respondents.

(b) The ancestors were still the first instance of appeal for 79% of the respondents, while only 5% maintained they had abandoned this belief. As many as 79% of the respondents believed that ancestors mediate between the living and God, while only 10% believed in Christ as the sole mediator.¹⁶⁸

(c) 91% of the respondents were willing to venture statements on measures to be taken when one was suspicious of being bewitched. 69% were fatalistic in such a case; 22% believed magic or ritual counter-measures could be applied.

(d) Yet 98% of the Tshidi population professed to be Christian.¹⁶⁹ A sceptic may ask: what is Christian about these Christians?¹⁷⁰

If mediation were important just because of social distance in a hierarchical worldview, Christ and the Holy Spirit could have done the trick. In fact they had not. Therefore the more fundamental problem seems to be the general concept of reality and the character of the Supreme Being in this context. As the sum total of all dynamistic forces he is not accessible on a personal basis. Reality as dynamistic power is more amenable to magic manipulation than personal appeal. Ancestors can only act as mediators because they have greater control over the dynamistic forces in reality.

Moreover, the study revealed that there is a hierarchy of causation. Pollution (*ditshila*) and witchcraft (*boloi*) are primary causes of misfortune. They can be counteracted by the diviner (*ngaka*). Misfortune due to transgressions by the sufferer is caused by the ancestors (*badimo*) and need rituals of reconciliation. Misfortune experienced for a longer time and by larger communities of people is caused by the Supreme Being (*Modimo*). In this case there is nothing to be done. Some think that prayer may help, but they are not too sure.¹⁷¹

On the whole “religion is seen by the Tshidi primarily as a technology, as a set of techniques and explanations of pragmatic value. It is not a metaphysical statement of the ‘true’ and the ‘right’ that is encoded in symbolic ritual actions.”¹⁷² Christian elements only widen the available options to be exploited.¹⁷³ They do not pose the question of loyalty to a transcendent personal entity with whom one has entered into a binding relationship. In this sense it is closer to modernity than the Christian faith. Christian theology has to rethink and reformulate its proclamation if it wants to respond to the spiritual needs of traditionalists as well as modernising traditionalists.

The quoted study is more than three decades old. It was also conducted in a predominantly rural or small-town area. In the meantime the situation may have shifted considerably, especially in urban areas and especially among the emergent black middle class. However, the point to be made at this juncture is that on a traditionalist home ground the impact of Christianity has been ridiculously insignificant after more than one and a half centuries of mission work by various churches following a great variety of approaches. This seems to be the situation in a great many contexts all across Africa.¹⁷⁴

The picture provided by the study of Ashforth, that was conducted in the urban melting pot of Soweto at the turn of the 21st century, is not more reassuring. We shall come to that in chapters 5 and 6. Here it is sufficient to note that even in South Africa, arguably the most modernised and Christianised part of Sub-Saharan Africa, millions of Africans still turn to hundreds of thousands of diviners and healers when in trouble, and these claim to act in the authority and power of the ancestors.¹⁷⁵

The shifts that may have taken place between then and now are selective and more in the direction of modernity than in the direction of Christianity. As in the West, the African church has become a Sunday cult or a classroom religion.¹⁷⁶ Moreover, the adaptations to Christianity may have been more formal than qualitative. One can believe in Christ in the way one always believed in the ancestors, expecting from Christ what one would have expected from the ancestors. If that happens, nothing of significance has changed.¹⁷⁷

One can also perceive Christ and the ancestors to occupy different locations in an inclusive spiritual hierarchy of authority. Again, where that happens nothing substantial has changed.¹⁷⁸ The real question is what Christ and the ancestors actually *do to us*.¹⁷⁹ “You shall know them by their fruits” (Mat 7:16). Let us confront the conventional form of the gospel with African spiritual needs as they have revealed themselves in our explorations so far.

Life in its fullness

African religion is bristling with the quest for life in its fullness. Vitality, fertility, courage, endurance, healing, ecstasy, abandonment in rhythm, dance and song – these are some of the characteristics of African cultures. Any curtailment of life is feared and counteracted. Rituals are meant to protect and strengthen. “I have come so that they may have life and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10).¹⁸⁰ African and Black theologians frequently have quoted this particular verse.

Of course, here and throughout his gospel John speaks of ‘eternal life’ in juxtaposition to the merely temporal and earthly. Does this mean that Christianity is, by definition, an otherworldly religion that has to shun the ‘desires and temptations of the flesh’? Beginning in the New Testament, this is what it has been given out to be for an awful length of time. In how far is Christianity at all capable of responding to this urge for the fullness of life?

What could ‘eternal life’ mean in the first place? Does it really entail the often-ridiculed pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die? Is a life beyond time, space and energy at all thinkable, given our modern assumptions of reality? Or does it not rather signify *authentic* life in contrast to what other biblical traditions call sin, enmity against God or the ‘flesh’? And is authentic life not identical with the fullness of life? Would a life in fellowship with the life-giving God and with each other not *have to* lead to vitality, health, peace and sufficiency in all

respects? Is life in fellowship with God only possible to contemplate in a spiritual, bodiless, worldless form?

The Jesus depicted in the Gospels was surely concerned wherever life in its fullness had been impaired through disease, moral depravation, pride, violence, conflict, ostracism and demonic powers. And the visions of a new heart, a new body, a new community, a new Jerusalem, a new heaven and earth found in the apocalyptic passages of the Bible are thoroughly this-worldly, except that they represent what this world ought to be and fails to be.

Song, dance, drama and joyful celebration could have been the most powerful agents of the gospel in a traditionalist context – and of course to a certain degree they have.¹⁸¹ But I guess that the dreary, gloomy, dragging hymns of missionary spirituality, let alone baroque organ recitals, have put off more people than they have attracted, and that not only among traditionalists but also among modernists, and more especially so among the youth. Only when choruses and dancing became acceptable did church services become more exciting. In short, we have to come to terms with our concept of salvation.

Community

Life as it is understood in Africa is life in community. Any particular part is embedded in a greater whole.¹⁸² Nothing is considered to be so devastating for life in its fullness than secret enmities, grudges, open conflict or insubordination under the communal good. Health is primarily the health of community relations. Individual disease, misfortune, barrenness, even premature deaths are attributed to diseased relationships.¹⁸³ Nothing can get better unless relationships are restored within the community – a community that extends beyond death.

Christian missions have concentrated on the ‘saving of souls’ in the last judgment, not on the building of new communities.¹⁸⁴ The emphasis was placed on the forgiveness of sins, but the concepts of sin and reconciliation were abstract and truncated.¹⁸⁵ Compared with its Christian counterpart, African traditionalism offers a much more down-to-earth, comprehensive, socially oriented and complex analysis of sin and reconciliation.¹⁸⁶ In all its forms, “...sin is inherently the destruction of the group’s solidarity, so that a person sins, not against God, but against others”.¹⁸⁷

In the Bible, sin has immediate and severe consequences in all spheres of life, from disease to drought, from barrenness to defeat in war. Whether conveyed through the gospel or the sacrament, an abstract and privatised ‘forgiveness of sins’ will hardly make a difference in terms of African spiritual agonies, whether traditionalist or Christian. Christians must rediscover the fact that peace with God can only mean peace with the Source and Destiny of experienced reality.¹⁸⁸ And, that can only mean participation in God’s creative action, redeeming love and comprehensive vision for the world as a whole and all its parts. A private salvation is no salvation at all.

However, the Christian community differs from the traditionalist community in that it is based on the emancipated responsibility of all its members. Obviously this is a contentious issue among Christians. The Catholic Church is built on the ‘divine law’ of an institutionalised patriarchal hierarchy. Protestantism had abandoned this approach in principle, but it took centuries before the alternative began to materialise – and then largely under the impact of modernity with its emancipatory agenda and its craving for uninhibited hedonism. Denominational conditions of acceptance and belonging led to the exclusion of members of rival denominations.

As far as it was locked into feudalistic assumptions, Protestants could be involved in slavery on the one hand and aristocratic arrogance on the other for centuries without apparent pangs of conscience. The Reformed tradition and its various offshoots laid heavy emphasis on the law, most drastically in Puritanism. Based on Pietism and the revival movement, virtually all missionary agencies and their ‘mission churches’ were characterised by adherence to a new law rather than the freedom of the gospel. In fact, converts were transferred from one patriarchal hierarchy to another, from one set of moral norms to another.¹⁸⁹ While moral stabilisation was an advantage at a time when the clan structure began to disintegrate, legalism was not able to cope with the escalating surge of modernity. We shall come back to that in chapter 5.

Authority

The essence of ancestral presence is authority. Is Christ the authority that responds to the fundamental spiritual needs of humankind, that provides a comprehensive system of meaning, that defines the identity of the community of believers, that lays down rules of acceptable behaviour, that allocates status and roles, that exposes evil, that punishes transgressions, that reconciles in cases of conflict, that keeps the community together? And if so, in what sense is he all that? If we cannot answer that question in terms of African spirituality, Christ will make no difference in Africa.

The first issue here is the communal aspect of authority in Africa. Authority is always the authority of those representatives of the community from whom the life of the community has been received. In which sense can Christians claim to have received their ‘life-force’ from Christ? The second issue is that the authority of Christ differs substantially from the authority of the ancestors. It is an authority that God shares with Christ and that Christ shares with us. The authority of Christ leads to freedom and responsibility rather than submission and obedience.¹⁹⁰ Is that really the case in African churches?

Power

In the Ancient Near East one finds the perception of a cosmic order, established by God, in which natural, social and moral laws are entirely

integrated. That is the presupposition underlying the view that apostasy, idolatry or moral transgressions can lead to disease, drought or defeat in battle. In terms of its dynamistic worldview, Africa similarly does not distinguish between power in nature, political power, economic power, social power, protective power, life-giving power and healing power. It is all one package.

In Africa transgressions do not only disturb personal relationships, but also set chain reactions of evil in motion that can have devastating consequences if not stopped by appropriate rituals. The roaming spirits of people who have not received an appropriate burial, or have not been 'brought home' by the family after a year or so, can pester the living. Hidden anger or jealousy can translate into the perceived 'external' forces of sorcery and witchcraft.¹⁹¹ Suspicions of witchcraft and sorcery poison the atmosphere in which the community breathes.

Missionaries have generally assumed that belief in such forces was plain superstition and should be discarded by those who confess their faith in Christ. But this proscription only drove the phenomenon underground. If a worldview as a whole does not change, the assumptions that form parts of the package can also not be dislodged. The reason for their tenacity is that they are externalised symbols of subjectively experienced forces such as hatred, anger, jealousy, failure or shame. They are not normally recognised as such by the preachers of the gospel, and thus the suffering, forgiving, reconciling, healing, restoring, transforming power of the gospel of Christ is not brought to bear.¹⁹²

The whole syndrome naturally falls outside the interest and competence of Western medical practitioners. It is really a spiritual problem, one that the Christian proclamation is tailor-made to address. However, mainline theology, even that located at African seminaries and universities, ignores the entire realm of traditionalist assumptions, including ancestor veneration, witchcraft and healing to a very large extent.¹⁹³ Instead we are dealing with the questions posed by Marx, Darwin, Nietzsche and Derrida. Fair enough, but are these the spiritual problems of the majority of Christians in Africa today?

At first sight this failure may be attributed to simple ignorance. But you do not remain ignorant of something that has become a pressing existential problem for long. Mainline theology just has had no exposure and no access to a traditionalist world populated by uncanny forces. And so the problems faced by the majority of people in Africa are never dealt with. In fact, they never enter the horizons of this theology. The same is true for secular subjects such as sociology, economics, psychology and medicine.

On the other hand, evangelistic and Spirit based movements, which emphasise the battle of God against the forces of evil, may actually reinforce the perception that these forces are a powerful reality out there and that one is constantly exposed to their malevolence and unpredictability.¹⁹⁴ Again the true roots of the fears are not understood and thus not dealt with. Post-Reformation emphases on the redeeming work of Christ in Europe also did not have the immediate effect of liberating believers from the fear of Satan and his hordes of demons and witches. On the contrary!

If this is the case, there must be something fundamentally wrong with our theology. An old Nigerian Christian is reported to have said, Christians “seem to go sheepishly in the ocean of vicissitudes in the world without something concrete on which to rely for our safeguard”.¹⁹⁵ If Christ is not in charge of the dynamistic forces that make up one’s life-world, he cannot protect, he cannot heal, he cannot give direction, he cannot establish justice and peace. It is precisely his self-giving, suffering love that could bring relief. It accepts the unacceptable, bears the implied burden, liberates from anger, jealousy and fear, transforms relationships and empowers communities.

Theology of the cross

Once we proclaim that Christ is able to overpower all uncanny forces that determine our lives, another problem arises. The African worldview does not provide for a neat distinction between a spiritual and a natural realm. Psychological forces are externalised into objective forces out there that threaten and destroy. Nature is powerful because it is permeated by dynamistic powers. Personal conflicts and transgressions bring about unemployment, disease, miscarriage, infertility, drought and other misfortunes.

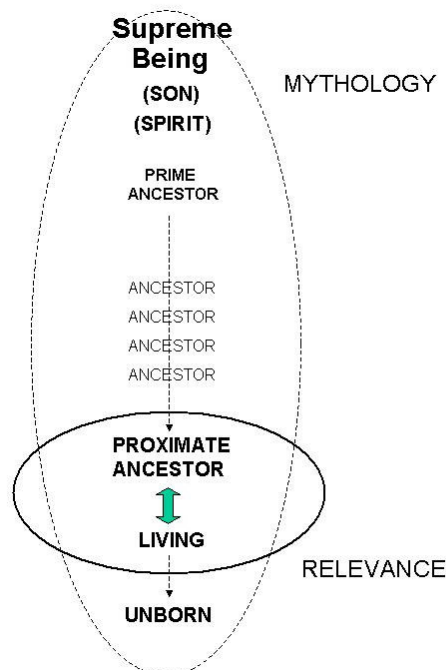
The prime motive of approaching the diviner is not to confess one’s sins and get right with God, but to obtain protection, healing, fertility and strength. The African Initiated Churches are so attractive because their office bearers respond to this need. In the Spirit Churches the Holy Spirit manifests itself ostensibly in ecstasy, healing, success and prosperity. The reality of an incurable disease must throw believers into a crisis of faith and their leaders into a crisis of authority.¹⁹⁶ That God is present precisely in affliction, suffering and death is a particularly difficult thought for traditionalists.¹⁹⁷

The answer to this dilemma should have been a profound theology of the cross. As Paul and Luther taught us, God is not only present but close to us precisely in our frustration, suffering and death. He is with the oppressed, the poor, the marginalised, the despised, the hopeless, the dying. But in the proclamation of the missionaries the cross assumed a different and otherworldly meaning: Christ died for our sins. The significance of the cross was located solely in salvation from a last judgment that was to take place beyond death. It had nothing to do with the predicaments of this life. One would have wished that Protestantism had listened a bit more carefully to the biblical witness in this respect.

Presence

In Africa relevance is experienced as social authority and redemptive power. If Christ is not relevant in these two respects, one has to find one's way through life without him. As the Ganda say, "when the leopard comes to you, the club at your neighbour's won't drive him off."¹⁹⁸ African spirituality is characterised by presence.¹⁹⁹ Presence is staggered in terms of authority. Outer spheres of presence are less relevant than more proximate ones. The question is whether it is true that "in Christ, he who is above and beyond is shown to have broken into the closed circle to become one with them."²⁰⁰

In a communal culture characterised by dependency, one is neither able nor entitled to fend for oneself without the guidance and assistance of relevant communal authorities. Where a communicative gap exists between Christ and the community, it will be filled with more proximate powers, that is, with one's living and deceased superiors. The authority of the ancestors does not seem to compete with the much higher status of Christ. One cannot even call this phenomenon syncretism or idolatry because you just respect and obey the superiors that God has placed above you.²⁰¹



Is this inevitable? In my view, we do not solve this problem by acknowledging the legitimacy of ancestral authority and power within the Christian faith, but to fill the vacuum left by the absence and irrelevance of the Christ we preach in Africa. A historical Jesus and a dogmatic Christ must become a living Saviour active in concrete situations of need. The presence of

Christ can only become manifest through the presence of those who believe in him. Simple presence is more important than talking of Christ.

God has always been out of reach. If Christ is ‘sitting at the right hand of God’ (= the Supreme Being) as part of a glorious and lofty Trinity, the peak of a spiritual hierarchy, he is also out of reach for the common people. Trinitarian and Christological dialectics are beyond the comprehension and the interest of people who are oriented primarily towards attaining the fullness of life here on earth. Even Westerners do not really know what to make of such doctrines.

In other words, our dogmatics and our proclamation have unintentionally defined Christ out of the sphere of existential relevance. Where the gospel achieved its goal God suddenly became very close and accessible. He was no longer the Source of power and life, but a person with whom fellowship was possible.²⁰² And by the same token the role of the ancestors as religious counterpart waned. What may sound like blasphemy in a hierarchical context is in fact the only appropriate approach: *we must pull Christ out of heaven and down to earth*, that is, we must discover the authority, power and presence of Christ in our lives here and now.²⁰³

And if the ‘risen Son of God’ would indeed be located again at the rock bottom of the system, washing the feet of the least of his disciples, the foundations of a patriarchal hierarchy, whether traditionalist or Christian, would begin to crumble. A bishop who gets involved in the dirt and desolation of an AIDS patient will communicate the gospel more powerfully than all his regalia – as well as all the theological volumes stacked in seminary and university libraries, including the present one.

Familiarity

If proximity in terms of time, space and power is the formal dimension of presence, familiarity is its qualitative dimension. This is probably the most important factor in socio-psychological terms. The presence of the ancestors is made possible by the fact that they were known when alive.²⁰⁴ Their offspring have inherited a vivid impression of their personalities, their statuses and their roles. For Christ to be present, he must be known. But how could he possibly be known as intimately as the most proximate among the deceased?

Traditionalism is characterised by a highly structured social space. Other people are relatively close or relatively distant to the individual, even within the same patriarchal hierarchy. Socio-psychological distance proceeds in concentric circles. Mother may be closest. Siblings are close; maternal uncle is close; granny is close. Father may not be quite as approachable as in the West. As ancestors move up the genealogical ladder, they become increasingly remote.

The most remote people are strangers and enemies. They just do not belong. Of course, the phenomenon of social distance is also found in modern societies. Sociologists have done a lot of research on peer pressure, reference groups, ingroup-outgroup relationships and significant others in Western societies. In

traditionalism, however, the primary existential relationship is that between the individual and a relatively stable and highly structured collective super-ego.

Christ cannot be part of that inner circle by any stretch of the imagination. He is a stranger in all possible respects. Jesus hailed from a different culture; he spoke a different language; he lived at a different time in a different part of the world; he was confronted with a different set of problems; he presupposed a different worldview; he shared a different set of religious convictions; he was supposed to have made peace between humanity and a God with whom one never had a quarrel, indeed with whom one cannot possibly have a quarrel. There just had to be an unusual if not queer atmosphere about Christ.

It did not help that his message was brought to Africa by people of another race, coming from another continent, looking down upon one's culture, undermining one's authorities, riding rough shod over one's dignity, deprecating one's ancestral traditions, cooperating with imperial forces who wanted to take one's ancestral land. Sentimental pictures of Christ in a long white robe with Germanic facial expressions and skin colour were not necessarily conducive to the development of trust, familiarity and accessibility. Certainly Christ had to belong to the category of strangers, if not enemies. How then could he have become close to Africans under such circumstances?

Indeed how can Christ become close to anybody under any set of circumstances? If he does not, he will remain irrelevant forever. My answer goes in two directions: First, it is precisely the stranger who is able to break open the familiar; who reveals alternatives to what has always been taken for granted; who makes us critical of our own culture; who encourages us to venture into unknown territory, to consider new explanations, to experiment with new procedures, to rise above the fetters of the given, to be open for new possibilities, to move into the future.²⁰⁵ Such an encounter is frightening and any group or person that is committed to an inherited pattern will be suspicious and wary. But this is what the Christian faith is all about – the prospect of a 'new creation'.

Second, to have this effect, the 'stranger' must be present. Indeed, he must come closer to us than the most proximate social superior or ancestor. Christ can only become close to us if he becomes a reflection of our very own potential, our own 'super-ego', the authenticity of our existence, our community and our entire life-world. When Christ addresses you, and when you respond, you are confronted with the image of your own authentic being, your own authentic primary group, your own world as it ought to be – as well as the incredible gift of the possibility to attain it.

In biblical terms that is the essence of true transcendence. Transcendence is not a set of metaphysical propositions. It is not another world, another time, another power. African traditionalists have no use for such transcendence.²⁰⁶ Transcendence is the awe-inspiring awareness of the presence of that 'wholly Other' to whom one is primarily and fundamentally responsible, who opens up

the possibility of gaining the authenticity of one's life and one's life world and to whom one can entrust and abandon oneself fully.²⁰⁷

Too small a God

The mirror image of an unfamiliar God is an uncalled-for familiarity. The inaccessibility of the Supreme Being in African religion is not based on speculation or a deficient theology but on existential experience and wisdom. Wherever people are truly confronted with the 'wholly Other' they break down in 'fear and trembling'. He is the very Source and Destiny of reality, not a puppy to play with. The God of Western Christianity is just 'too small a God'.²⁰⁸ How did this come about?

On the one hand, God has become the individualised cohort of an individualised human being, juxtaposed to the world as their common field of operation. Where that is the case, he can be abandoned like a childhood friend once the lure of an emancipated selfhood becomes too strong. On the other hand the emphasis first of nominalism and then of Calvinism on the world-transcending glory of God has shifted him beyond the sphere of this-worldly relevance. In practical terms, science, technology and commerce can deal with the world without him.

The biblical witnesses are struck with awe when faced with the stark realities of experienced reality. Whether one gazes up into the starry heaven or into the unfathomable depths of the human soul, whether one is faced with the wonders of nature or the pangs of an inexplicable fate, whether one yearns for justice or the fullness of life, in all of reality one is confronted with the ineffable Source and Destiny of experienced reality.

The Supreme Being in Africa is no 'ancestor' whom one knows and with whom one can strike bargains, let alone a 'pal' with whom one can spend some quality time. 'Prayer' can never be a relaxed chatter between friends. In short, the God of modern Christianity may exist only in our pious fantasy and fail to touch the seriousness that is linked with the concept of Yahweh in the Bible or the Supreme Being in Africa. We shall pick up this problem in the last chapter.

Ritual

Ancestors are present in terms of authority; ancestors are present in terms of time, space and power; ancestors are present in terms of familiarity. Yet, ancestors are not present in their vitality, as they used to be when alive. The ontological divide between the living and the deceased must be bridged in some way or another. The same is true for the risen Christ.

Ancestors communicate through rituals. Protestants focus on the preached Word of God. Good sermons resemble academic lectures; bad sermons are plain rambling. Protestant rituals are conspicuously underdeveloped. In the Reformed tradition the atmosphere of the church service is austere. Visual

representations are taboo. The use of musical expressions is restricted. Liturgies and symbolic actions are reduced to a minimum. The Lord's Supper is celebrated only a few times per year.

Catholic spirituality, in contrast, is steeped in symbol, mystery and ritual. For many centuries the preached Word of God was virtually replaced with pictures, icons, observances and performances. Colourful garments and processions catch one's attention. The Mass is the centre of every church service. This emphasis on ritual may be one of the reasons for the greater success of Catholic missions in traditionalist societies. However, we shall ask in chapter 4 whether the Catholic ritual actually brings Christ closer to the living or not.

Lutherans occupy an intermediate position. While they insist on clarity of content, they do not spurn forms of communication other than the spoken word, as long as they communicate the gospel message. Here the question is, what is it precisely that is being communicated? This question is of particular relevance in the case of the Lord's Supper. Painful conflicts within the Lutheran family manifest the passionate concern of Lutherans for the 'correct' meaning of the sacrament. But the debates about 'pure doctrine' bypass African spiritual realities. African Christians may go to 'holy communion' for entirely different reasons than Lutheran doctrine stipulates. This is reason enough for having another close look at our tradition. We shall do so in the fourth chapter.

Orientation to the past

Ancestor veneration looks upward towards authority, but it is the authority of the lineage. So upward orientation in practical effect means past orientation. To a large extent, Christianity has also anchored its faith in the past. That too is problematic. Whether in their countries of origin or in Africa, mainline Christian churches, by and large, have been traditionalist – in many cases quite deliberately.²⁰⁹ They were geared to the Christ of the past, who soon became the Christ situated at the peak of an institutional hierarchy.

That has repercussions in all spheres of life. Doctrine and ethics were revealed and prescribed, not discovered as redemptive responses of God in situations of need. Whether in Europe or in Africa, mainline churches have recognised rather than questioned authoritarian ecclesial, communal and political structures.²¹⁰ Gender, age and rank were decisive in social organisation, whether in the church or the society at large. On medieval paintings God is invariably depicted as the very 'ancient of days'. Peter, the 'prince of the apostles', had to be a very old man with a bald head.

Christian theologians and church leaders have resisted the flow of new insights, whether emanating from the sciences or from ongoing historical experience. Assuming that their doctrines reflected 'eternal truths', they stuck to inherited vocabularies and patterns of thought. This stagnation in communicative competence also prevented them from translating the biblical message into African cultural, social and spiritual realities, thus jeopardising its

relevance. If preachers of the gospel do not become ‘Jews to the Jews’, they will also not ‘win over Jews’, nor will they be ‘participants of the gospel’ in the sense that they share God’s quest for his lost sons and daughters (1 Cor 9:19-23).

Christianity has not only failed to respond to the spiritual needs of traditionalists, but even more so to the spiritual needs of those that ‘converted’ to *modernity*, or rather those caught up in the interplay between traditionalism and modernity.²¹¹ It has also failed to respond to the needs of modern Westerners.²¹² The reason for this strange phenomenon is that it has dogmatised the valid response of the gospel to a particular situation of need and then imposed this response on a different situation of need instead of finding a new and appropriate response to the latter.²¹³

Of course, one should also mention the fact that it was not only Christian theology that missed the traditionalist system of meaning and its incarnations, but modern statecraft, justice, economics, education and medical science as well. Some of that will be the topic of chapter 6 on modernity.

Mourning

There is another aspect of past orientation that is of fundamental importance for our topic. African traditionalism understands the importance of mourning. Human relationships are real and profound, whether positive or negative. One cannot switch them off and on like machines. Modernity has ‘instrumentalised’ all human and nonhuman relationships. In consequence it has lost the antenna for this important dimension of life to a very large extent. Western Christianity has followed suit.

If I find a better-paid job, I leave and the enterprise simply finds a suitable replacement. I can move from one temporary ‘home’ to another and no tears are shed. If a relationship between a man and a woman ‘does not work out’, the partners simply ‘break up’. There may be some heartbreak, but one is not expected to take this too seriously because there are many other potential partners around. Certainly the community is not involved in such ‘private affairs’. Similarly the obligation to attend a funeral and ‘pay one’s last respect’ is a nuisance that disrupts the productive routine and robs us of our valuable time. A week later the funeral and the one buried have been forgotten.

In Africa a death throws the entire community into limbo. All work stops. The funeral is postponed so that even distant relatives can attend. The widowed spouse is supported spiritually day and night. Abundant wailing, change of attire, change of arrangements in the home and cessation of all merriment indicate that something serious has happened, that the departed was a treasured member of the community, that life cannot continue as normal. Mourning goes through various stages. It usually takes a whole year, that is, until the celebration of ‘bringing home the deceased’ has taken place. Only when the deceased have been re-established as full members of the community in the

position of authority and status due to them, life can settle down in a new kind of normality.

I am not certain that the Christian church has sufficiently catered for this need. It is true that there are burial societies that build up financial resources, that Prayer Women's Leagues provide a lot of support to the widowed, that funerals are elaborate, that people come from the ends of the earth to attend. But the hidden meaning of these patterns of behaviour seems to have been carried over from traditionalism into Christianity without profound reflection and re-conceptualisation. There may be a liturgy for the unveiling of tombstones in some churches but it is strangely empty of meaning, especially meaning connected with the re-integration of the deceased into the community.

Appreciation of the missionary venture

When spelling out these failures I am far from joining the chorus of those who condemn the early missionaries as a bunch of arrogant and paternalistic bigots, or the spiritual storm troopers of Western imperialism. In a later chapter I shall have occasion to scrutinise the validity of these accusations very carefully. I have no doubt that many things have gone wrong very badly on the mission field. The point I wish to make at this juncture, however, is that I look back into the history of missions with different eyes.

Maybe because I have been a missionary myself, I cannot help but marvel at the dedication, perseverance, patience and sacrifice that my predecessors were able to draw from their faith. In the yard of our first mission house was the grave of the bride of a missionary who died of malaria in her early twenties. I cannot help but appreciate their achievements. Where would the African church be today, indeed where would modern Africa be today, without their pioneering work in almost all dimensions of life! I am also in solidarity with my African fellow Christians who have no desire to return to the convictions of pre-missionary Africa and who hold the missionaries in high esteem.

My agenda is quite different from that of some of my angry colleagues. When spelling out the failures of the missionaries I consider these failures to be my own failures. I want to open myself to the fact that African spirituality challenges our theological approaches very profoundly; to learn from past mistakes; to serve the course of Christ better in today's world, and to help find a way into the future. Before we can suggest a theological response to African spirituality, however, we have to listen to our own tradition at least in two of its major manifestations, the biblical witness and the Reformation, and then venture into the vast field of the confrontation of traditionalism with modernity.

Let us summarise

In this chapter I tried to listen to African spirituality. The motive for doing so was to find out in which ways the Christian message failed to respond redemptively to African spiritual needs.

The first part of the chapter is a sketch of the main features of African traditional spirituality. The foundation is a dynamistic worldview. Reality is taken to be constituted or permeated by uncanny forces that can be detrimental or beneficial. The primary concern of traditionalism is to stabilise this precarious world, to form a community based on unquestionable solidarity, to maintain and strengthen its life-force and to protect its members against evil.

The life-force of the community flows along the male (sometimes the female) lineage from one generation to the other, that is, from one level of authority to the other. The result is a patriarchal hierarchy that extends upward beyond death to the deceased, and downward to the not-yet born. Every member is allocated his/her defined place in the system according to age, gender and seniority.

The ancestors are superiors whose vitality has lapsed, but whose authority and power are enhanced. Ancestors are the primary religious counterparts of the living. They watch over the inherited traditions, punish transgressors and bless their offspring. While they have more dynamistic power than the living, they are not omnipotent. The Supreme Being is the source of all dynamistic power but he is not normally accessible on a personal basis.

In the second part of the chapter I came to the conclusion that, by and large, the proclamation of the Christian gospel did not respond adequately and redemptively to the need structure of African spirituality. Here are some of the aspects that I highlighted in the discussion:

- An otherworldly concept of salvation cannot satisfy the traditionalist longing for life in its fullness here and now.
- An individualised piety, in which a lonely and bodiless soul is reconciled with a lonely and world-less God, cannot make sense in a culture where sin and redemption can only be understood in a communal sense. However, the kind of community that the Christian faith brings about may differ from the traditionalist community in decisive ways.
- Patriarchal-hierarchical authority seems to be the backbone of African spirituality. On the one hand the relation between the authority of Christ and the authority of earthly superiors is not always spelt out clearly. On the other hand the kind of authority that Christ exercises may differ fundamentally from the authority exercised by the ancestors.
- Authority is closely connected with power. On the one hand, the Christ that Africans encounter in the conventional proclamation of the gospel remains irrelevant unless he is proclaimed to be capable of liberating humans from the uncanny forces that create so much agony in traditionalist societies. On the other hand we need a theology of the cross to reassure people in

situations of unrelieved suffering and death that God is with them in the crucified Christ.

- The perception that Christ has gone to heaven where he reigns with God and the Holy Spirit makes him as inaccessible and remote in existential terms as the Supreme Being of many African religions has been.
- Even more profound is the problem of familiarity. The historical Jesus and the dogmatic Christ cannot compete with the most proximate ancestors in terms of familiarity. He will remain a stranger, even an enemy, if he does not manifest himself as the authenticity of one's very own life, community and life-world, thus opening up an alternative to what one has taken for granted.
- In an African setting the continued presence of the deceased comes about through ritual and spiritually empowered verbal communication. While Protestants have emphasised the Word of God, they underestimated the importance of ritual. In the Catholic Church rituals play a much greater role but they may not necessarily bring about the communicative presence of Christ. We shall continue to explore this aspect in chapter 4.
- Hierarchy implies upward orientation. If hierarchy is based on lineage, upward orientation becomes past orientation. By and large Christians have not been able to manifest the fact that the risen Christ is the coming Christ who lures us forward into the future, rather than subjecting us to the past.

3

Let us listen to the biblical witness

What is our task in this chapter?

A Christ who is not present is not relevant; a Christ who is not relevant is not present. In the last chapter we saw how the gap left by an absent and irrelevant Christ is filled by the ancestors who can be expected to care for their offspring and who have always been around. Should we allow the ancestors to perform their traditional functions, or should we draw Christ down from the mythological heaven into the sphere of existential relevance?

For Christians the world over the biblical witness is the foundational source of God's Word. So what does the Bible say about the role of the deceased in the lives of the living? The intricacies of biblical interpretation are not part of the agenda of this book. To cover this aspect I will frequently refer the reader to my two books on biblical hermeneutics and theology.²¹⁴ I will also not repeat the discussion with the literature found there unless additional information is called for. Here I want to concentrate on a few essential insights.

One thing should be clear: the biblical witness did not fall ready-made from heaven. Nor does it contain a perfect, consistent, eternally valid body of divine truths that is applicable for all times and situations. Instead we find a number of interlocking traditions that have emerged and evolved over more than a millennium of ancient history. The reason for this fact is simple. In all its forms the Word of God is, and has been, God's redemptive response to human needs and predicaments. Human needs and the ways how they are interpreted change from time to time and from situation to situation. And so God's redemptive response changes accordingly.²¹⁵

Without this flexibility the Word of God would have lost its relevance and redemptive power a long time ago. The gospel does not only change a particular spiritual and social situation but its particular formulation is also changed by that situation.²¹⁶ That the "Word became flesh", that is, human reality (Jn 1:14), is one of the most fundamental assumptions of a Christian theology. What is true for Christ is also true for the biblical witness. It is also true for the Christian

proclamation (1 Cor 9:19ff). It must again become true whenever the gospel reaches a new spiritual and cultural situation.

This confronts us with a number of related tasks. In Section I we explore the religious role that ancestors played in the biblical faith. In Section II we investigate the possibility of treating ancestry as a legitimate version of public authority. In Section III we try to fathom the inner rationale of the seeming intolerance of the biblical witness against other convictions. In Section IV we ask in which sense ancestors could belong to the ‘communion of saints’. In Section V we consider the meaning of death and resurrection.

In the final section we reflect on the enculturation of the message in Africa and elsewhere, again taking our clues from what happened in biblical history. In his grace God enters human reality, picks up people where they are and leads them in the direction of where he wants them to be. Biblical texts use thought patterns, insights and metaphors taken from their environments. It is the task of theology to explore in which ways their intended meaning could speak again to the vastly changed times and situations found in our world today.

Section I

The role of ancestors in ancient Israel and the early church

The importance of history for Israel

The lives of predecessors always have an impact on the lives of their successors, even after they have relinquished their positions.²¹⁷ Nobody begins from scratch. We all stand on the shoulders of those who came before us, whether these shoulders have been strong or weak. This is particularly true for the relation between earlier and later generations. Children owe their lives to their parents. They enjoy the fruit of the achievements of previous generations and they are burdened by the consequences of their failures.

To move forward we must know where we are and how we got there. It is the past that has brought about the present and that has established the parameters for our movements into the future. Our forebears must be respected for what they have done to make our lives possible. They must also be critiqued for what they have done to make our lives difficult. Their legacy must be taken seriously both ways. Without our religious and cultural heritage we lose our identity, our spiritual depth and our ethical bearings.

In the Old Testament all this is entirely self-evident. Parents must be honoured. The blessing or curse of a departing father can make or break the future of his son. The proper burial of a parent is a sacred duty. The Israelite patriarchs are examples of true faith. At the same time their mischief is exposed. Just think of Jacob’s tricks to defraud his brother and his father-in-law. The very existence of the scriptures testifies to the importance of the past

for the present. Israelite and Jewish theology has been one long drawn-out process of interpreting the existing tradition for ever new situations.

The past is also constitutive for the relationship between Yahweh and Israel. It is only here that we encounter the unique character of the ancient Israelite faith. God had taken the initiative to establish a relationship with the prime ancestors of Israel, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He had formalised this relationship in the Sinaitic covenant. Because the Davidic dynasty was deemed to be the designated leadership of Israel, it was granted a covenant of its own.

On this basis Yahweh had pledged to shower his richest blessing upon Israel. The promises of abundant progeny and a land of their own were foundational, but the envisaged blessings were comprehensive. They included abundant rain in season, fertility of the flock and the land, victory over enemies, justice for the weak and vulnerable, peace within the country, and a long life.

Israel in turn was expected to do the will of Yahweh as formulated in successive versions and extensions of the torah. The covenant included a warning of the dire consequences should Israel ignore its covenant obligations or transgress the will of Yahweh. Priests pronounced both promises and warnings, and prophets contextualised them in ever new situations.

Israel's experiences with Yahweh were recorded and referred to when the people encountered new problems. Thus the history of the people became a source of wisdom and direction. The torah developed into a primary canon to which other writings were added. The interpretation of teachers led to a secondary source of divine revelation, the rabbinic scriptures. In short, the history of Yahweh with Israel defined its identity as a people. It was recognised as the 'confession of faith' of the Jews even in New Testament times (Acts 7).

Obviously Yahweh had used human instruments in this process: the prime ancestors, Moses, Aaron, David, the prophets, some priestly authorities, sages and so on. Yet nowhere and never did these instruments of Yahweh possess any authority of their own. This is what makes the Israelite faith unique among traditionalist religions. Yahweh and Yahweh alone was the covenant partner of Israel. Whatever instruments he may have used, including pagans such as Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus, it was Yahweh, and only Yahweh, who was in charge.

The role of family ancestors

What do these observations tell us about our topic? Some scholars consider the possibility that in pre-Yahwist times the Israelite tribes may have venerated their ancestors. But there is virtually no trace left of that, whether in the scriptures or in archaeological findings.²¹⁸ Ancient Israelite family spirituality was not strictly monotheistic, but ancestor veneration played no role. The little figurines that were found in excavations depicted family gods, not ancestors. These gods were expected to provide fertility; they did not legitimate the authority of the lineage.

This is remarkable because Israel had a strong patriarchal family culture. Families were under the control of male family heads (Ex 21:2ff). Cursing or striking one's parents carried the death penalty. There are long genealogies both in the Old and the New Testament. Yet the deceased were considered to be dead. When an old man died, his bones were gathered to those of his fathers in the family grave, while his life continued in his descendants (Judg 2:10).

Parents had a divinely ordained task when alive, but their deaths removed them from the scene. They had the duty of educating their children in the faith of Israel and its historical foundations. But deceased family forebears were not deemed to be in charge of their descendants. The fact that the consequences of their lives continued to influence the lives of their children did not make them superiors. Nowhere did they function as mediators.²¹⁹

Nor were they considered to be particularly holy. On the contrary, when Israel ran into trouble, it was believed that the sins of the forebears were visited upon their offspring. Under the impact of Deuteronomic theology the forebears got a bad name as the origin of all the calamities that descended upon Israel (Judg 2:6-23; 2 Chron 29:6ff, 34:21ff; Neh 9:16ff; Jer 16:19; Ez 20:4ff; Am 2:4; Acts 7:51f). A prophet could exclaim in desperation, "I am no better than my ancestors!" implying that they were really bad (1 Ki 19:4)²²⁰

Why did family ancestors play no role? There are two reasons: (a) Israelites were privileged to have an exclusive, direct and personal relationship with Yahweh, and (b) the Old Testament faith was exceptionally realistic concerning the pervasiveness of sin and the finality of death. The metaphor of *Sheol* (= the place of the dead) had mythological connotations in the Ancient Near East, but for Israel it indicated a lifeless sphere. Once there, one could no longer see the sun, enjoy life, or praise Yahweh (Job 7:7-10; Ps 6:5; Sir 17:27f). Forebears could do nothing for their offspring and their offspring could do nothing for them. Death was the end of all relationships.

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

It is significant that in the Old Testament only the three prime ancestors of Israel, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, played a religious role. They were three because three tribal traditions were combined into one story.²²¹ They were remembered because they were taken to be the 'pioneers' with whom Yahweh had entered into a binding relationship. Their memories were historical monuments of the promises of Yahweh to Israel, but they did not function as mediators or religious authorities.

In Africa, in contrast, the ancestors are spiritual authorities, whether as mediators between humans and the Supreme Being or in their own right.²²² Moreover, it is not not the prime ancestors, but the most proximate among the deceased that are existentially the most significant.

Abraham's own ancestors played no religious role. In fact, they could be discredited as those who had lived beyond the great river and had worshipped

other gods (Josh 24:2). The most proximate ancestors of Israelite families also played no religious role. The point of remembering Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was that Yahweh had promised blessing, progeny and land to Abraham and his offspring. It was this commitment of Yahweh was still deemed valid for his descendants hundreds of years later.

Moreover, Abraham was explicitly told: “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household, and go to the land I will show you” (Gen 12:1). Just ponder the symbolic significance of this command. At the foundational beginning of Israelite history the prime ancestor was told to abandon the familiarity and security of his family structures and his homeland and move into the unknown, depending solely on the guidance of Yahweh, his God.

This radical turn from the known to the unknown, from the past to the future, from where the fathers had been to where the descendants were going to be, is echoed again in the exodus, arguably the most important narrative defining Israelite-Jewish religion. Moses is told to forget what had become and explore what was to become. Israel is told to leave a predictable situation behind and embark upon a precarious pilgrimage.

We are not surprised, therefore, that even these three prime ancestors were not feared, consulted, reconciled, or given sacrifices. On the contrary, according to the Priestly Source, making contact with the deceased carried the death penalty. Christians cannot condone the liberal application of the death sentence for all sorts of trespasses. Yet one must concede that for ancient Judaism making contact with the deceased was a serious offence. It was a slap in the face of Yahweh who wanted a direct and exclusive personal relationship with his chosen people. Deuteronomy describes Yahweh as a ‘jealous’ God.

Later a royal dynasty and several priestly dynasties developed (David, Aaron, Zadok, etc.). These dynasties confirmed the divine legitimacy of incumbents of specific offices within Israel. The promise of Yahweh to the dynasty of David was used to underpin the legitimacy of his successors. When these kings proved to be failures, the promise led to Jewish messianic expectations linked to the ‘house of David’. Priestly dynasties legitimated current priestly office bearers. But neither David nor Aaron, nor subsequent deceased members of their dynasties played a role as mediators or authorities, while in Africa the ancestors of the chiefs and kings do so.

Of course, deceased forebears did turn into demons. This view of some missionaries was derived from a de-contextualised reading of 1 Cor 10:20.²²³ The old Israelite position was simply that (a) they were sinful and mortal human beings like everybody else, (b) that death had taken them out of action, and (c) that they were not supposed to stand in the way of the direct and immediate relationship that God wanted to enjoy with his people. Israel related to the ‘living God’, not to dead people or lifeless idols.

Ancestry in the New Testament

In the New Testament this trend became even more radical.²²⁴ The sequence between forebears and descendants lost its religious importance altogether. Neither Jesus nor Paul ever married and had children. According to the introductions of the gospels of Matthew and Luke, Jesus had no human father. According to John, the same is true for those who believe in Christ (Jn 1:12f, 3:5ff). What mattered was the fatherhood of God. For Paul, the significance of Abraham lay in the fact that he was the father of faith, not in the fact that he was the biological ancestor of his progeny (Rom 4:16).

According to the Synoptic Gospels, John the Baptist said that God could make children for Abraham out of stones (Mt 3:9). The genealogies of Jesus, found in the legendary introductions to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, have a theological agenda, namely to indicate that Jesus was the expected Messiah – the ‘Son of David’, the ‘Son of Abraham’, or the ‘Son of God’. A genealogy does not channel the life force of the clan from forebears to descendants as in African traditionalism.

The title ‘Son of David’ was frequently applied to Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels because the Jews expected the Messiah to emerge from the Davidic dynasty to which powerful prophetic promises had been given. It was the promise of God that counted, not the inherent authority of the lineage. That Jesus was a ‘son of David’ did not imply that Jesus was dependent on his forebears rather than on God.

In fact, the assumption that Jesus was the offspring of David, thus subject to David, was rejected where it had lost its roots in Yahweh’s redemptive motivation (Mat 22:43ff). In the Gospel of John Jesus bluntly says, “before Abraham I was” (8:58). The Letter to the Hebrews says that Christ was like Melchizedek, “the king of righteousness and peace, who has no father, mother, genealogy, beginning or end” (Heb 7:3).

In the Gospels Jesus calls *God* his Father and the Father of his disciples. The legends of the virgin birth in the introductory chapters of Matthew and Luke want to express the conviction that Jesus did not owe his true existence to an earthly progenitor, but to an intervention of the Spirit of God. As mentioned above, John applied the motif of the virgin birth to all believers in Christ, apparently correcting a biological misunderstanding caused by the Synoptic tradition (John 1:13; 3:5ff). We shall come back to that below.

When the family of Jesus demanded to speak to him, he said that he considered only those who were obedient to God to be his family (Mt 12:46). The disciples were told not to call anybody father or lord (Mt 23:8f). Jesus would set a son against his father and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law (Mat 10:35ff; cf 10:21, 19:29). A potential disciple, who wanted to perform his filial duties of “burying his father” before following Christ, was told to let the dead bury their dead (Lk 9:59f). Taken at face value this was an incredible outrage in ancient times. However, it was not meant to condone a lack of

respect for one's parents, which was a deadly sin in the Old Testament, but a call to abandon genealogical claims that threaten to gain priority over Christ.

All these statements are incredibly harsh. They are not in line with culture, but stand against culture. But why should they do that, if God is a God of love and responsibility towards others? Because God wanted to be the sole religious counterpart of the believers! Throughout the generations this exclusiveness, this undivided commitment to Yahweh and Christ caused great agonies and conflicts, but it was always deemed essential for our well-being and salvation. Insistence on exclusive loyalty to Yahweh or Christ was deemed necessary *to transcend human loyalties that threaten to become absolute* and thus idolatrous.

As far as the vitality of the deceased is concerned, the New Testament takes death as seriously as the Old Testament. According to the Old Testament, people become human when earthly material is granted life (Gen 2:7) and people return to dust when life is taken from the organic material that makes up their bodies (Gen 3:19). In other words, they come to life and they die as complete human beings – body, soul and spirit. If God in his mercy would grant them a new life after their deaths, as the New Testament assumes, this gift would again consist of a new body, soul and spirit.

There is a fundamental difference, therefore, between the biblical notion of resurrection from the dead, the Greek notion of the immortality of the soul, and the African notion of ancestral ascendancy. Resurrection implies death of the entire person; immortality of the soul implies the presence of a divine element in the person that cannot die; becoming an ancestor implies that the vitality of the person is lost, but his/her belonging and authority are confirmed and enhanced. We shall come back to that below.

The bottom line

As far as the authority of the deceased is concerned, therefore, the messages of the Old Testament and the New Testament leave no room for doubt: nothing, absolutely nothing, should ever assume authority over God's people, or be given space to stand between God and his people. When God had made himself accessible in Christ, nothing could stand between Christ and his disciples. God is present in Christ; Christ is present in his Spirit. No further mediation is needed. You can turn to God himself, the ultimate cosmic authority, every minute of your life, anywhere in the universe, with any problem you may encounter in any dimension of life. This is typical for the biblical faith.

All this does not mean that the commandment to honour one's parents was not upheld. In the Old Testament this is entirely clear. Parents had a mandate from God, just as the state had a mandate from God. Both were meant to be instruments of God's creative and redemptive purposes in the world. Parents were to be obeyed by children who had not yet come of age. They were to be respected and loved, as all people were to be respected and loved. They had to be cared for in their old age. Those who despised or neglected them were under

God's curse. The New Testament does not question these injunctions as such, only their possible absolutisation. The point is that parents could not be allowed to stand between God and his people. And death finally removed them from the scene. Let us pursue these findings a bit further.

Section II

The inner rationale of biblical exclusiveness

The personal divine-human relationships

Is there something fundamental in the biblical faith that precludes the authority of spiritual powers other than Yahweh or Christ? Indeed there is.²²⁵ The two most basic assumptions of the biblical witness are (a) that God is the ultimate Source and Destiny of reality as a whole, and (b) that human beings are meant to live in a close personal relationship with this God. Because God is understood to be the ultimate Source and Destiny of all of reality, the integrity of the relationship between God and humans is considered to be the fundamental prerequisite for the well-being of individuals, communities and the world as a whole.

The relationship can only be kept intact if humans are in line with the righteousness of God. God's righteousness is understood as God's faithfulness to his people, which calls for the faithfulness of God's people to God. God's will can be summarised as protection and justice for the weak and vulnerable, and redeeming love for all people in whatever kind of need. The law of God consists of representative examples of justice and love, which represent basic prerequisites of human well-being.

A disturbance of this relationship is the root of all human predicaments and only its restoration can restore comprehensive well-being. Human well-being is in jeopardy when humans fall out of the intimate relation with God, that is, (a) when they fail to transcend experienced reality towards its ultimate Source and Destiny, absolutise parts of creation and relate to them as if they were divine, or (b) when they get out of step with the creative and redemptive will of their Creator in their earthly relationships, that is justice and redeeming love.

This is why the biblical faith does not tolerate the acknowledgement of spiritual authorities other than God himself. It does not matter how these authorities came to be established, what purpose they were meant to achieve, or how they are legitimated. They have no right to control human beings unless they are direct instruments of God's creative and redemptive purposes.

Human authorities must also have derived their mandate from God, otherwise they are not legitimate. They must act as instruments of the creative and redemptive purposes of God. Whenever they begin to act on the strength of their own authority and in their own interest, humankind is in trouble. When humankind is in trouble, God becomes perturbed and intolerant. God is

‘jealous’ for his people. It is the love of God that does not want human beings to be misled and abused.

Because Yahweh is the ultimate Source and Destiny of reality, he can have no rivals and no cohorts. The Israelites were told that, “I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of slavery, you shall have no other gods before my face” (Deut 5:6f). The covenant between Yahweh and Israel is exclusive.²²⁶ Similarly Christ, God’s representative on earth, does not share his Lordship with other authorities.

Originally, this did not imply that there were no other gods, only that these gods had no claim on Israel’s obedience. Later it was argued that Yahweh himself had placed these gods over the other nations as instruments of his justice, and that they were demoted because they were corrupt (Ps 82). Even later it was said that there were no such gods. The images made of wood or stone were nothing but wood and stone because the transcendent reality they were meant to symbolise did not exist (Jer 2:26-28; Is 44:9-20; Ez 20:32).

Thus fertility was not to be attributed to Ba’al but to Yahweh. The calamity of the exile was not attributed to Marduk, the god of Babylon, but to Yahweh, the God of Israel. The return to Jerusalem was not attributed to Ahuramazda, the Persian god, but to Yahweh. Under the influence of Persian religion the Jewish transcendent universe became populated with good and evil forces. But these ‘angels’ and ‘demons’ were instruments of Yahweh’s grace or wrath. They did not assume an independent authority, function or honour.

Similar observations can be made in the New Testament. The Synoptic Gospels share the Jewish tradition that includes the existence of angels and demons. This tradition does not refer to ancestors. But angels and demons are also not entitled to a role of their own. The angels serve Christ and the demons oppose him. When demons assume control over the living, Jesus drives them out. Paul assumes that other gods do not exist, that their images are idols, that pagans bring their offerings to demons, that one cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons at the same time (1 Cor 10:14-22).

The Deutero-Pauline letters claim that Christ has been seated above all spiritual forces that govern the universe (Eph 1:20ff). Christ was God’s instrument of creation at the beginning and he will be God’s judge in the end (Col 1:15-20; cf Mat 25:31ff). Christ is the first and the last, and the living (Rev 1:17-18). He claims our exclusive loyalty.

Family religion²²⁷

The exclusiveness of faith in Yahweh effectively eliminated ancestor veneration, oracles and divination in the biblical tradition. This is a simple fact that we should take note of. It becomes even more pronounced when we consider a remarkable historical development in Old Testament times. In ancient Israel there was a fundamental difference between the spirituality of

grass roots communities, especially the extended family, and the official religion of the state and its institutionalised cult.

Grass roots spirituality was geared to the needs of the family, such as the health and fertility of family members, agricultural land and livestock, sufficient water resources, protection against pests, wild animals and raiders, harmony within the community, respect for elders, property rights, truthfulness and dependability, faithfulness to spouses and so on.

There is ample evidence, both biblical and archaeological, that families had their own little 'gods'. Excavations have produced a host of little figurines, which were kept in the home. Family gods made no universal claims. They had very limited horizons; they did not reach beyond the life world of the clan; they were not jealous of the gods of other families. One could rely on them, but they were not almighty.

They were like friendly chieftains who looked after the household. They were accessible. There was a very intimate relationship between family members and their god. They were very 'human', characterised by love, faithfulness, trust, but also by anger at times when people did something foolish. They were geared to stability, tradition and authority, thus to the past. In many ways they can be considered to be the equivalents of the ancestors in African religion.

Public religion

The official cult of the nation was an entirely different kind of phenomenon. In early times the Ark of the Covenant seems to have been a powerful symbol of unity. It was successively located at various regional sanctuaries, such as Bethel and Shiloh (Judg 20:27; 1 Sam 1-3). At such places a resident priesthood, such as that of Eli and his sons (1 Sam 1:1ff), began to emerge. With the establishment of the united kingdom, a central sanctuary became important.

David laid the foundations by transferring the Ark of the Covenant and the Israelite priesthood to Jerusalem (2 Sam 6). Solomon built the temple (1 Ki 5-8). The rationale of the official cult in Jerusalem was to legitimate the authority of the king and to unite the people under his rule. When the Davidic empire fell apart into the kingdoms of Northern Israel and Judah, Northerners re-established their own sanctuaries in Bethel and Dan and no longer went to Jerusalem. Southerners condemned the Northerners as heretics and idolaters. When the Assyrians destroyed the Northern kingdom this was widely seen to be the punishment of Yahweh.

It is in this situation that Deuteronomy was written. The battle cry of the Deuteronomic movement is found in the so-called Sh'ma found in Deuteronomy 6:4ff: "Hear, o Israel, Yahweh is your God, Yahweh alone. You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might." The Deuteronomic exhortation has two important dimensions: the exclusive commitment to Yahweh alone, and the meticulous observance of the

law of Yahweh. No other loyalties or authorities were to be tolerated in Israel. Some scholars assume that Deuteronomic theology may have been based on the model of pacts concluded between Assyrian emperors and their satraps, who demanded absolute obedience and exclusive loyalty from the latter.

But that can only be part of the explanation. There was an inner rationale in the instructions. Deuteronomy 18:9ff lumps together child sacrifice, divination, sorcery, interpretation of omens, witchcraft, casting of spells, being a medium or a spiritist, and consulting the deceased under the one great heading of pagan practices that are detestable to Yahweh. Israel was to fear no power, nor to use any power that was not the power given by Yahweh. No secret knowledge was to be sought. The knowledge of Yahweh's promise, as formulated in the covenant, and the knowledge of Yahweh's expectations, as formulated in the torah, were to be sufficient for life.

When Assyrian domination declined, king Josiah of Judah tried to re-establish the Davidic kingdom. Deuteronomic theology served as the religious basis for the unification of the people under his rule. The existence of a great number of religious loyalties, spread over his entire territory, was counterproductive in political terms. Israel was to worship only one God in one sanctuary. The people were no longer supposed to worship and bring sacrifices in their villages, nor at regional sanctuaries, but only in Jerusalem.

Josiah enforced this principle ruthlessly. All Northern Israelite, Canaanite and syncretistic cults were liquidated. Local spiritual leaders lost their property, status and security. Israelite priests who had served in Judah were transferred to Jerusalem. Those found in Northern Israel were executed. Local sanctuaries, altars and 'high places' were desecrated and demolished (2 Ki 23). These acts earned him the praise of the Deuteronomic movement (2 Ki 22:2). But for critical observers it is clear that political power was the prime motive behind these drastic and despotic actions.

Yahweh was considered to be the sole ruler of the universe. His presence for humans (= his 'name') was to be located in the Jewish temple on Mount Zion. His rule was to be executed in the Jewish capital by the Jewish king, who was considered to be the 'son of God', that is, the representative of God on earth. This model was not unique to Israel. It is found the world over, even in Africa, where chiefs function as representatives of the ancestors. It does not always help to desacralise human authority by ascribing it to God, because God's authority is used precisely to legitimate earthly authority.

Claims to divine authority had been formulated by builders of empires in Egypt and Mesopotamia before the Davidic empire. The Pharaoh too was considered to be the 'son of God', in this case the sun god Re. But in contrast with the Egyptian example, the Israelite king was nothing but a human instrument of Yahweh, not an emanation of the Deity.²²⁸ The Davidic dynasty claimed divine legitimacy for the king by stating that he was adopted by God at the time when he was enthroned. He had no divine ancestry. He possessed no divine qualities.

But God himself had placed him in the Israelite capital to rule over the world. He was entitled to subdue all nations, with force if necessary. God himself did not tolerate any insubordination (Ps 2). Of course, these exorbitant claims were part of a ritual that was meant to underpin the authority of the king over his own subjects, whether by appointment or conquest. The Jewish kings never tried to subdue the entire world. They also never had the means to do so.

The fate of the family cult

At least since the time of Josiah, local forms of worship, geared to local needs and conducted by family heads or local priests, were suppressed. Worship of Yahweh implied regular pilgrimages to Jerusalem for fixed annual festivals. Only designated priests officiating at the designated place were entitled to conduct sacrifices. Family altars were declared illegal, as were ancient regional sanctuaries such as Bethel and Beersheba.

The emphasis of the institutionalised cult was placed firmly on obedience. Obedience to God translated into obedience to the king, to the priesthood, to the torah. The Deuteronomic history writers of the post-exilic period pass judgment on the kings according to their loyalty to Yahweh and their obedience to the torah. The message was clear: apostasy and disobedience had led Israel into catastrophe and could only lead into further catastrophe.²²⁹

One could argue, therefore, that the rigorous monotheism that emerged in the biblical faith was occasioned by political ambitions or necessities. State theology was designed to legitimate state authority. It demanded strict obedience to a fixed code of conduct. It had universal (rather than local) claims and aspirations. It formulated a clear-cut doctrine. It was intolerant of other beliefs. It removed God from immediate access. Only priests could mediate between God and commoners. Only one sanctuary was allowed to exist.

Was monotheism a situational and temporary stance?

All this is a far cry from the family spirituality discussed above. In retrospect these developments may seem to be highly problematic. Political expediency should not determine personal spirituality, should it? Fact is, however, that the Jewish faith as such became fiercely monotheistic and remained so ever since. Both the Christian faith and the Muslim faith followed suit.

After the Babylonians had put an end to the Davidic kingdom and the Romans had put an end to the sanctuary in Jerusalem, not only royal, but also priestly dominance collapsed. The sacrifices were discontinued. The locality of religious devotion changed from the homestead, on the one hand, and the centralised temple on the other, to the community hall, the 'synagogue'. The law of Yahweh, the torah, became the unifying factor. The leadership of the community was now in the hands of the *rabbi* (= teacher of the law). The early

church followed the model of the synagogue, except that the risen Christ took the place of the torah as the focus of faith and devotion.

If monotheism had been a temporary phase in the history of Israel, it would have collapsed at this stage. But even during this time the personal, communal and local piety of Judaism was geared to Yahweh and Yahweh alone. There must have been an intrinsic reason for that and indeed there was. Yahweh was deemed to be the Source and the Destiny of reality as a whole. He had established his people, Israel, and he had entered into a covenant with them. He had determined what ought to be. He had a vision for reality as a whole. An undisturbed relationship with him was the prerequisite of human well-being.

If one assumes that the present scriptures are constitutive for the biblical faith, early Israelite family religion cannot be considered to be canonical. This observation is important for our topic. As mentioned above, the relaxed and pluralistic stance of Israelite ‘family religion’ is similar to African ancestor veneration in many ways. It is appealing to a postmodern culture. It creates space for all kinds of relationships to all kinds of spiritual beings.

But such ‘inclusiveness’ seems to undermine the rationale of the biblical faith. What exactly is this rationale? Not abstract metaphysics, but the commitment of this faith to salvation. Salvation means the restoration of humanity in the context of a restoration of reality as a whole to what it was always meant to be. Biblical faith is faith in a God who has committed himself to the comprehensive well-being of the universe in all respects. It should never be undermined or diluted by dependence on spiritual authorities that stand for provisional, partial, private, sectional or particularistic interests.

Christian re-enactments

It is sobering to see how Israelite history repeated itself in Christian history. This seems to indicate that there is an underlying motive that reappears again and again, the motive of power and glory. Both family and state religion were responses to concrete needs, the needs of the nomadic or rural family (later the local community in the Diaspora) on the one hand, and the needs of an overarching power structure on the other. This contrast also developed in the medieval church and it persists in the Catholic Church even today.

There is a powerful and centralised authority culminating in the papal office and localised in the erstwhile capital of the mighty Roman Empire. The Vatican is a sovereign state; it has a powerful bureaucracy; it has universal claims. It has a very elaborate and ostensibly immutable body of doctrines, ethical teachings and ecclesial laws. Its authority cannot be questioned by anybody. Deviations of spiritual leaders from official doctrines are met with harsh disciplinary measures. During medieval times heretics were tortured and burnt on the stake.

As the king was taken to be the representative of Yahweh in Psalm 2, the pope is considered to be the representative of Christ, the universal king, here on earth (*vicarius Christi*). His official pronouncements are deemed infallible. He can judge everybody and cannot be judged by anybody. There were times when the popes even claimed political authority over the world as a whole. Such claims to world domination clashed with similar claims by the emperors and wars were fought over the issue.

On the other hand, individual and communal spirituality finds expression in countless local cults, usually in the form of the veneration of 'saints'. In contrast to the reforms of Josiah, the Catholic Church sanctioned and encouraged the spirituality of the simple people. In Europe legendary heroes and mythical figures became saints.²³⁰ In Latin America, West African cults thrive under cover of the veneration of saints. In Africa the Catholic Church seems to be battling whether it should be supportive of ancestor veneration.²³¹ This strange inconsistency certainly helped the Catholic Church to remain popular with grass roots masses.

The Reformers rejected both the universal authority of the pope and the redemptive role of the saints.²³² As far as they participate in the new life of Christ through faith, all believers are representatives of Christ; all believers are priests; all believers are saints. Deceased saints are, at best, examples that one could emulate. At worst, they have been used to lead the innocent to gross superstition and money-spinning deception. They may also have entered the calendar because they had been ethnic heroes before, rather than particularly holy people.

The Reformers insisted that Christ was present in the Holy Spirit; that he spoke through Word and sacrament; that he was accessible as personal Saviour to each and every individual. No other mediation was required. Spiritual, ecclesial and political authorities were only legitimate as representatives of Christ, the great Servant. They were meant to serve their subjects and not to impose their rule (2 Cor 1:24; Mk 10:35-45). But Protestantism has not abandoned the rigidity of doctrine and the intolerance of other faiths. Nor was it able to transcend political power structures.

Religious imperialism?

Given its redemptive content, can the biblical faith be anything but monotheistic? Can the recognition of other spiritual authorities at all be harmonized with faith in Yahweh, the God of justice, and in Christ as God's instrument of redeeming grace on earth? In an age of increasing pluralism, interfaith communication and postmodern relativity Christians can no longer avoid this question. What is the biblical answer?

The exclusiveness of the biblical God can be condemned as an expression of religious presumptuousness and imperialistic designs. If that were true, it would make dialogue with other convictions impossible. Arrogance and contempt of other convictions have indeed characterised the Christian faith on a vast scale in the past. We have to ask ourselves very seriously whether this attitude belongs to the essence of the Christian faith, or whether it is an aberration.

There is no doubt in my mind that such an attitude diametrically contradicts the Israelite law, at least to the extent that this law is based on justice. It certainly contradicts the Christian gospel. The gospel of Christ proclaims God's unconditional, suffering, redeeming, and transforming acceptance of the unacceptable into his fellowship. The Spirit of Christ involves us in God's redeeming acceptance of the unacceptable. Tolerance and dialogue are built into the heart of the gospel message. In Christ, God has become a 'Jew to the Jews'. After the resurrection of Christ, he also became a Gentile to the Gentiles. A true missionary will join him in doing so (1 Cor 9:19-23).

But that does not mean that we should abandon the foundations of our faith. Nothing is gained if we fail to manifest the profile of the Christian gospel. Certainly other convictions such as Islam or Buddhism would not follow suit if

we did.²³³ The God in whom we believe invites us into his fellowship and claims our undivided loyalty because he has a vision of comprehensive well-being for the whole of his creation. He wants to liberate us from parts of his creation that have turned into oppressive and life-threatening powers. He wants to redeem both Christians and people of other faiths from detrimental assumptions, attitudes and patterns of behaviour.

Certainly God can use other convictions for his creative and redemptive purposes and, according to the biblical witness, he has always done so.²³⁴ Examples are texts such as Romans 13, Psalm 82 and Ephesians 1, to which we shall presently come. It is also acknowledged in many biblical texts that other convictions contain valid insights. The biblical authors had no scruples in taking over elements they deemed valid and useful from their religious and cultural environments, be it Canaanite, Babylonian, Persian, or Hellenistic. *That certainly was not the problem.*

What the prophets castigated was injustice, idolatry and a divided loyalty, not useful insights and revealing metaphors. The underlying rationale of biblical intolerance is located in the concern for the righteousness of God, that is, his creative and redemptive intentions for humankind, not in dogmatic purity. “God shows no partiality, but in any nation those who fear God and do what is right are acceptable to him” (Acts 10:35). More than that, the gospel picks up people where they are, scrutinises their insights and transforms them into more appropriate insights – whether they become baptised church members in the process or stay in their faith own communities.²³⁵

If one takes the law as an expression of God’s justice, and the gospel as an expression of God’s suffering, redeeming acceptance of the unacceptable, and both as an expression of God’s vision of comprehensive well-being, Christians are certainly entitled to, and capable of, entering into constructive dialogue with other faiths without losing their spiritual bearings.

Whatever is in line with the redemptive intentions of God, as manifest in the law on the one hand and the gospel on the other, is also acceptable from a Christian point of view. However, there can be no compromise concerning the underlying vision of comprehensive well-being. To become acceptable, spiritual authorities have to subject themselves to this ‘cosmic court of law’ and demonstrate that this is indeed what they stand for.²³⁶ And this criterion must be applied as ruthlessly to the Christian faith in all its different versions as to any other religious conviction.

Taking other convictions seriously

This approach differs fundamentally from the idea that the other religions are a ‘preparation for the gospel’.²³⁷ This idea degrades other convictions. Other religions have a rationale of their own; they uphold their own sets of assumptions; they must be taken seriously in their own right. As such they are confronted with the criterion of truth implied in the Christian gospel.

This confrontation is not ‘confrontational’. It does not malign the convictions of others; it proposes an alternative response to the underlying spiritual need. It can do so only if it deems the Christian response to be more in line with the redemptive intentions of God. Of course, other religions are bound to do the same with the Christian faith from their own point of view, and they are entitled to do so. There is no ‘objective’ proof for the validity of a truth claim.

To formulate and live out such a response, the Christian partners must have entered the spiritual world of their counterpart to such an extent that they begin to be tempted by the plausibility and power of their convictions.²³⁸ In such encounters, Christianity can learn from the insights of others and discover dimensions of their own faith that were obscure before. This has happened throughout the formation of the biblical witness and there is no reason why we should not continue with it.

Christianity can condone, and learn from, traditional family solidarity; respect for those from whom one received one’s life and culture; compensation for past wrongs and reconciliation between enemies; confession of sins committed against the deceased while they were alive (to gain peace of mind);²³⁹ mediation of the gospel through a living community, and recognition of the fact that our deceased fathers and mothers in the faith continue to belong to the ‘communion of saints’.²⁴⁰ We can also concede that pre-Christian ancestors have served the function of upholding a social order that is comparable with the law of Israel or any other ethical mindset.²⁴¹

As far as they are in line with God’s creative and redemptive intentions, these aspects of African spirituality do not compete with faith in Christ but challenge and enrich it. As I will argue below, absorption of valid insights is not the same as syncretism.²⁴² Before we come to that, let us consider another aspect of the problem: institutional authority.

Section III

Authority and community

Authority and community in Africa

The overwhelming significance of the ancestors in African spirituality rests upon the fact that they exercise authority over the living. They do so as guarantors of the integrity of the community. The integrity of the community is a necessity because life in a dynamistic world is precarious. Power flows are volatile and unpredictable. Beneficial power flows must be enhanced; detrimental power flows must be neutralised or channelled into positive directions.

Over countless generations the community has found structures, procedures and patterns of behaviour that are deemed safe and beneficial. If the community wants to survive and prosper these traditions have to be respected. Individual

initiatives and arbitrary behaviour are too dangerous to be entertained. It is the task of the ancestors to channel the life force of the clan into the next generation and to keep the latter on track.

There are cases where ancestors are purely self-interested and do not care much about morality.²⁴³ But normally the ancestors are guardians of the tradition. They punish transgressions by means of calamities.²⁴⁴ Any transgression of the tradition endangers the integrity of the community. It is also a sign of disrespect for those who are called upon to enforce the tradition.

When calamity strikes it must be established what the cause of the problem is and the situation must be rectified. Traditionalism tends to ascribe the cause of a calamity to human relationships that have gone wrong. A transgression causes fissures within the community, including the deceased, and can only be healed by restitution and reconciliation in the context of the entire community, including the ancestors. This takes the form of ritual slaughter, eating and drinking. There is no doubt that communal cohesion is one of the outstanding characteristics of African pre-modern culture and religion.

Because human life is life in community, ancestral authority is authority in community. Ancestors have no authority as solitary individuals but only as mediators of the life force of the evolving clan. There is no relation with the ancestors that is not, by definition, a communal relationship. As the often-cited adage goes: A person is a person through persons (Sotho: *motho ke motho ka batho*).²⁴⁵ This is also true for the ancestors.

Authority and community in the Old Testament

What is the biblical counterpart? In the Old Testament Yahweh is the Source of all power. As such he is a person who enters into a personal relationship with human beings. All authority belongs to God, the Creator and Master of the universe. He defines which kind of life is authentic and blesses those who conform to his criteria. So human life and prosperity depend on a healthy relationship with God, the Source and Destiny of reality.

By the time of Deuteronomy, a powerful emphasis was laid on the righteousness required by the law of God in the context of the covenant between God and his people. The covenant constituted the fellowship between Yahweh, the God of Israel, and the people of Israel. The torah (= law) spelt out the relation between God and his people as well as the relation between the members of the people of God.

Righteousness in the eyes of God was defined as exclusive loyalty to Yahweh as well as loyalty among the people. It was all one package. Idolatry and injustices destroyed the covenant relationship and thus the possibility of authentic existence. Obedience was, therefore, of the essence. God would bless the obedient and curse the disobedient. Blessing and curse were spelt out in concrete detail (Deut 28 or 30:15ff). The biblical faith became a religion of the law.

In subsequent centuries the Jews, whether they fulfilled the requirements of the law or not, were subjected to one imperial regime after another. This fact caused endless spiritual agonies. Did God fail or did Israel fail? The prophetic and Deuteronomy schools proclaimed Israel guilty. As a result serious believers tried to fulfil the law to the letter. But it was of no avail. The imperialists prospered; their victims suffered. Justice was not seen to be done. A rebellious mood developed against the Deuteronomic explanation of suffering in some circles. The book of Job expresses the agony of those who felt that God has let them down.

However, for the Jews it was inconceivable to give up the notion that Yahweh, their God, was a God of justice. If punishment and reward did not materialise before death, then they would have to materialise beyond death. God was the Giver of life, and death could not thwart his intentions. This certainty led them to the notion of the resurrection of the deceased to face the 'last judgment'. Each individual person would face a God who would decide over his/her everlasting fate. As an unintended result, the communal and this-worldly concept of salvation found in the Old Testament changed into individualism and spiritualism.

A new kind of community in the New Testament

The New Testament presupposed these developments. Its concept of salvation was informed by the concept of the last judgment. Salvation no longer meant this-worldly prosperity, but rescue from the wrath of God in the last judgment. By that time it had been realised, however, that all human beings were lost in sin. They all fell short of God's expectations. In contrast to Jewish certainties, Jesus, Paul and John taught that salvation was not based on our excellent disposition or moral achievement, but on God's redeeming grace.

The 'good news' in the New Testament said that God accepted sinners into his fellowship just as they were, but with the intention to redeem, empower and transform them from within. The conditional acceptance of the covenant made way for unconditional acceptance in Christ. The cross of Christ was taken to be a sign that God wanted to transform, not to judge and condemn. The law was suspended as condition of acceptance. Repentant sinners were forgiven and accepted into the fellowship of God.

A heavy conflict ensued over the issue which brought Jesus to the cross and Paul into prison. As a result, the new wine was poured into old wineskins. The legal formulation of the gospel as the justification of the sinner by grace accepted in faith, not through fulfilment of the law, was a response to the legal frame of reference that the biblical faith had inherited from Deuteronomy theology. To do justice to the new approach, the gospel must be translated from legal terminology into communal terminology.

When we do that the gospel proclaims *God's suffering, redeeming, transforming acceptance of the unacceptable into God's fellowship*. The parable of the prodigal son (or rather the parable of the father and his two lost sons) in Luke 15:11ff gives communal expression to the gospel. Instead of taking his aberrant son to task, the father throws a party to which even the slaves are invited. The ring at his finger restores him to the dignity of a son and the new clothes signify that he has changed. The elder son who insists on the family law excludes himself from the party.

This is how the gospel created a new kind of community in New Testament times. Believers shared God's suffering acceptance of others who may have been unacceptable to God and to themselves, but again in the expectation that God's acceptance and their own would redeem and transform them. To be more precise, God accepted believers *through* the acceptance of the community of believers. In fact, God's fellowship was none other than the community of believers. One could not sit at the family table of God without those who had also been invited. The cross signified God's suffering acceptance in Christ and believers became bearers of the cross of Christ.

So all those who wished to enter were invited, regardless of their moral history, gender or ethnic identity. Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slaves and free people, former sinners and former keepers of the law became equally acceptable (Gal 3:26-28; Eph 2:11-22). The church was the 'Body of Christ' whose different 'members' served and enriched each other with their gifts (1 Cor 12). They proclaimed and lived out the gospel of acceptance. They celebrated acceptance in baptism and the Lord's Supper.

For our topic this also means that reconciliation of an isolated individual with a lonely God is a fraudulent kind of reconciliation. It is the community against which sin has been committed. It is the community to which sin is confessed, which pronounces absolution in the name of God through its ordained representative, which accepts sinners back into its fellowship and which is willing to suffer the consequences of their wrongdoing. The presence of Christ is, in Pauline terms, the presence of the whole of Christ – the Head and the Body – its suffering, redeeming acceptance of the unacceptable.²⁴⁶

The Lord's Supper must again become what it is meant to be: a joyful celebration of a fellowship based on God's suffering, redeeming, transforming acceptance of the unacceptable. The unconditional nature of God's acceptance liberates all believers from all their spiritual and social bondages and involves them with all their gifts in God's redemptive enterprise. It cuts across all boundaries set up by gender, family, clan, ethnic, racial, class or age loyalties. Paul derives the freedom of a Christian directly from the gospel itself. Gal 3:23-4:7 is the classical text in this regard. In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, no slave or free, no male or female.

If we do not regain the sense of a living, reconciling, sharing community we have no message for Africa. However, such a community must be based on gospel foundations as spelt out above.

A new kind of authority

The new kind of community implies a new kind of authority. Authority takes the form of an emancipation and empowerment of all believers. We all receive the Spirit. We are all authorised to proclaim and live out the gospel. In Christ we all become sons and daughters of God. We are all representatives of God on earth. We all participate in God's creative authority, God's redeeming concern and God's comprehensive vision for the world. This new kind of authority is characterised by voluntary and dedicated service rather than domination.

Western Christianity can certainly learn from African communalism that sin and reconciliation belong to the community. But the Christian community differs fundamentally from a traditionalist community. The traditional community is based on the tight network of a patriarchal hierarchy in which individuals have their precisely defined statuses and roles. Every member is subject to superiors. The system extends beyond death to the deceased. Authority permeates the system as a whole. Nobody ever comes of age.

This structure cannot transcend itself towards a higher authority. It has become absolute. The Supreme Being may be perceived to be the ultimate peak of the pyramid, but he is too remote and inaccessible to play a role in practical life. At best he legitimates the hierarchical structure. There is no way the authority of the system as such can be questioned. The church of Christ could never have come into being on the basis of this model. The Reformation could also never have materialised.

However, initially the biblical faith had its own kind of authoritarianism. In Psalm 2 we find the prototype of religiously based domination. Here the king is adopted by God as his son, that is, his representative and plenipotentiary on earth. As the representative of God on earth the king is entitled to subjugate and impose his authority upon all nations. Those who disobey the king, disobey God. To rebel against the king is futile and fatal. God simply laughs at them while the king smashes them to pieces with an iron sceptre like pottery.

This model was taken over from Ancient Egyptian political ideologies. Here the Pharaoh was deemed to be the son of the sun-god Re. We find similar models in other cultures, for instance, in China and Japan. The fascist and Stalinist dictatorships of the 20th century are secular examples. In terms of social structure, the papacy too is still an absolute monarchy. This does not imply, of course, that all popes must of necessity be dictators. We must distinguish a social structure from the attitudes and motives of its office bearers. You can have pretty authoritarian leaders in ostensibly democratic structures and vice versa.

So is all this legitimate in terms of the biblical witness? The Israelite prophets attacked the idolatry, injustices and ruthlessness of the kings, but they did not give up the model as such. A king would come, they said, who would be

a true representative of God on earth. His justice would be so impeccable that he no longer needed armies to impose his will. This vision led to the messianic expectations on which the New Testament was based.

The followers of Jesus recognised in him the messianic king who was to rule over the universe. But the content of this cosmic rule was turned upside down. According to Mark 10:35-45 (par), Jesus describes the model depicted in Psalm 2 as *pagan*. Christ rules by being a servant to his followers and his followers can only lead others in humble service to them. Authoritarian domination is no longer legitimate from a Christian point of view.

The ancient royal title, ‘Son of God’, which was applied to Christ, meant that the king was God’s representative on earth. In Christ we are all sons and daughters of God. So we are all God’s representatives on earth. As believers we participate in God’s own creative authority, redemptive love and comprehensive vision for the world.

For Paul, the gospel implies the total freedom of every believer from the authority of any other believer, or indeed from the authority of any other human being, including past generations. No office bearer and no social formation have the right to dictate to the conscience of a Christian. Christians are adult and emancipated sons and daughters of God who should reject any attempt to enslave them again (Gal 3:23-4:11; cf Phil 3:4-11; Lk 14:26; Mt 8:21f).

Section IV

Otherworldly salvation

Biblical origins

Authority and community are pivotal for the traditionalist concept of salvation. There is no true life outside the patriarchal hierarchy. Both community and authority refer to a reality experienced here and now. There is no other world, no other time, no other power. Dynamistic reality may be mysterious, unpredictable and unmanageable at times, but it is not otherworldly.

We have seen how in the biblical tradition the emphasis on the justice of God led to the concept of the last judgment and that the concept of the last judgment again determined the concept of salvation. It began when prophets announced a reversal of the miserable fate of Israel in the near future. Idolatry, injustice, humiliation and subjugation would be eradicated. There would be a new heart, a new community, a new political order. Israel, the people of God, would reflect the glory of Yahweh before the nations.

When the great ‘Day of the Lord’ did not arrive, these glowing expectations were not dampened but radicalised. Death was no obstacle for the justice of God. The present shape of the world was not the final product of God’s creative and redemptive activity. Something entirely different was going to be put in

place and that very soon. A new day was on the point of breaking forth. Present agonies were considered to be nothing but birth pains of a new age.

Again this total reconstruction of the universe never materialised. As a result the apocalyptic expectations, which were originally entirely this-worldly, turned into something 'out of the world'. The last judgment was to come beyond death and beyond the end of history. This 'otherworldliness', often ridiculed as the 'pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die', proved to be one of the greatest obstacles to the relevance of Christianity in post-biblical times.

The contention of the Gospel of John that the last judgment takes place whenever we meet with Christ here and now (Jn 3:17ff; 5:24) is a highly significant development within the New Testament. Equally important is the contention of the 'Deutero-Paulines' (Eph and Col) that Christ has already been enthroned above all cosmic powers and that believers are already with Christ in the heavenly places (Eph 1:20ff; 5ff; Col 1:15ff; 2:12ff 3:1ff). Obviously the categories of time and space have been reinterpreted in both cases to show the significance of what happens in Christ here and now.

However, these theological initiatives have not prevented the otherworldly orientation of the Christian faith. To assess biblical developments in terms of their consequences we have to recap this history very briefly.

The medieval church

The church continued with the otherworldly concept of salvation. Paradoxically it amalgamated this concept with the aspirations of the leadership to gain authority, power and glory on par with those of the mighty Roman Empire. Moreover, it soon lost New Testament insights about God's redemptive intentions. As in Judaism it concentrated on personal righteousness before God as defined by the law of God, heavily augmented by the laws and doctrines of the church. The last judgment figured prominently in theology and spirituality. Prospects for the afterlife were gloomy. At best, believers would face a purgatory after death, where moral impurities were supposed to be burned out; at worst, they would face eternal condemnation and everlasting pain.

With these notions, the leaders of the medieval church created and exploited the mortal fear of the hereafter among its believers. The agonies of hell were anticipated in the ascetic behaviour of serious believers. Heretics and witches were subjected to torture and burning on the stake. It was taught that the saints had heaped up a deposit of merits that could be bestowed upon believers by the hierarchy. The pope could dispense special amnesties called indulgences. The Mass was taken to be a sacrifice given to God on behalf of individuals to relieve them from the pains of purgatory. The priest was expected to 'read the Mass' on a daily basis, for himself and for others, even when he was all on his own. The participation of other believers was not deemed necessary.

The Reformation

The Reformers rejected the idea that the Mass was a sacrifice given to God by humanity. On the contrary, they argued, the Lord's Supper celebrates *God's sacrifice to humanity*.²⁴⁷ Luther described the Mass as the "Babylonian captivity of the Church" from which it had to be liberated. But the horror of the last judgment was still fundamental for the Reformers' concept of the gospel. The gospel was understood as God's forgiveness of the sins of

repentant individuals. Forgiveness did not restore community, but it created community. The church was defined as a community composed of forgiven sinners.

Here we find an important dialectic. On the one hand, Luther emphasised the strengths and beauties of community. He believed in a chain reaction of sharing: between God and Christ (*communicatio idiomatum*), between Christ and the believer (the ‘merry exchange’), between one believer and another and between believers and the world. He spoke with tongues of angels about the church as a fellowship sharing everything spiritual and material. On the other hand, in birth and death you are on your own. In the last judgment you are on your own. In baptism, absolution and the Last Supper you are on your own. You are the solitary sinner who has to account for your life before God and receive the gift of grace.

Modern developments

It is hard to censure either of the two emphases: the importance of the community, or the importance of the individual. During the age of Pietism and the Enlightenment, however, Luther’s dialectic between individual and community changed into fully-fledged individualism and spiritualism. In Protestant hymnals, for instance, everything revolves around the ego: my God, my Saviour, my soul, my sin, my salvation, my afflictions, my faith, my hope. The pronouns ‘we’ and ‘our’ hardly ever occur. In a typical ‘communion service’ individuals ostensibly buried in their own remorse, go forward to receive the sacrament with stooped heads, looking neither left nor right, and go back in sombre mood, avoiding any eye contact emanating from the pews, greeting nobody. There is no fellowship, no celebration and no joy.

The party of the Father welcoming the prodigal son in which even the slaves participated, the kingdom of God depicted as a great banquet to which even the tramps on the road side are invited, the idea that the angels in heaven rejoice when a single sinner repents, the fact that the Jewish Passover was a communal ritual and that the Last Supper was a community meal of Jesus with his disciples – all this was forgotten.²⁴⁸ In short, the Western eucharistic practice is an aberration. As if sin against God was not always also a sin against fellow human beings, the community, the society, the coming generations, or the natural world!

The practice is obviously alien to African concepts of life. Ancestral rituals require the presence and co-operation of the family or clan, headed by their respective authorities.²⁴⁹ In Africa, there is no sin that is not a sin against the community. There is also no notion of a last judgment beyond death, simply because there is only one reality, the present one.²⁵⁰ Transgressions are sorted out here and now, within the community, and under the auspices of the ancestors. There is no guilt and no reconciliation outside the social relationships in which one is embedded. Fellowship, binding agreements and continuing solidarity are established by sharing a meal with each other. “Nothing establishes mutual commitment to each other within the community more profoundly than the common meal.”²⁵¹

Section V

The institutional authority of the ancestors

As some African scholars emphasise, the condemnation of ancestor veneration by the missionaries as idolatry or demon worship may have been too rash in very many cases. Such missionaries took their clues from the crass stance of the biblical witness, as they understood it, but they did not always

consider alternative possibilities that may have been in line with the biblical witness.

We have already come to the conclusion that, on a personal basis, believers in Christ are supposed to be mature, free and responsible sons and daughters of God. They are to be subject to nobody but Christ, the great Servant (Gal 3:23-4:7; 5:1; 5:13; Mk 10:41ff; Jn 13:12-17). While they are grateful for what God has done for them through their parents, care for their elderly and respect their forebears, they find their own way into the future in the power of God and in responsibility before God.

However, can ancestors perhaps be linked to the Christian concept of the 'office' of secular authorities? Ancestors have fulfilled the role of parents when they were alive. Authorised by their own ancestors, they have kept the community together, given moral guidance, demanded respect, called people to responsibility and safeguarded the social order. All this is true for any culture in the world. In traditionalist societies this function continues, not only beyond the coming of age of their descendants, but even beyond their own deaths. Is this appropriate in terms of the biblical witness?

According to Romans 13:1-7, public offices are established by God himself to overcome evil and further the good, whether they are Christian or not. One could argue that this is only true for political structures here on earth. However, in the Ancient Near East the term 'secular authorities' not only included living kings and emperors but also the transcendent 'principalities and powers' that underpinned their authority. In fact, all state authorities have a religious or ideological substructure.

Can the collective concept of 'the ancestors' (as opposed to a particular deceased father, grandmother or maternal uncle) not be regarded as an 'office' or a 'principality' that is used by God to keep order, contain evil and further the good? In practical life they actually function as such among traditionalists. Why should Christians not simply acknowledge that fact? Is an Islamic state not a state just because it is built on Islamic law?

In such an eventuality the same criteria would have to apply to the ancestors that applies to earthly and heavenly rulers in the Bible. They would have to be selfless servants of their subordinates. Their task would be to protect, support, liberate and empower their subjects. As far as they did that, they would have to be respected and obeyed. But as far as they acted in their own authority and in their own interest, they would not be legitimate in terms of biblical assumptions and would have to be subject to critique.

Psalm 82 is a revealing text in this regard. God, the cosmic King, presides over a heavenly 'cabinet meeting', that is, a convocation of the gods whom he had installed as regional governors to see to it that justice is done (v. 4). As it turns out, they have failed to do so (v. 2 and 5). In consequence, the 'foundations of the earth are shaking' (v. 5c). The divine king deposes them and condemns them to death (v. 7). In the mean time suffering humanity cries to God asking him to take over direct rule over them (v. 8).

It is remarkable that the gods are not deposed here for metaphysical reasons. The argument is not that there can only be one God, but that the other gods fail to implement the redemptive intentions of God, in this case to secure justice for the weak and vulnerable. As instruments of God's justice they are acceptable. Of course, Israel was not placed under the rule of such another god. The Israelites were the people of Yahweh himself and subject to nobody else. For Israel to acknowledge the authority of other gods was deemed to be idolatry and severely punished. Yet when in a foreign country, they could serve the regime that was in power there. Joseph and Daniel are good examples.

A New Testament parallel to Psalm 82 is found in Ephesians 1:20-23. Here it is Christ who has been enthroned as the cosmic King by God. Existing transcendent authorities (= the rulers and gods of antiquity) are not automatically deposed, but they are subjected to the criteria of his rule. This time the criterion is not justice according to the torah, but the self-giving service of Christ culminating in the cross. As in Romans 13 and Psalm 82, the question is not whether they are Christian, but whether they conform to the redemptive purposes of God in Christ. To be legitimate, ancestors would have to fulfil this requirement.

Again believers fall under God's direct rule through Christ. They are not supposed to pay homage to the other principalities and powers. The church (the Body of Christ) is the new humanity that represents Christ (its head) in the old world of cosmic forces. Its purpose is to make the purposes of God known to these pagan authorities (Eph 1:22b and 3:10). It cannot be taken for granted that pagan authorities even know of their divine purpose.

In a world of sin this 'prophetic ministry' is a precarious matter. Believers have to fortify themselves spiritually against formidable adversaries (Eph 6:12-17). Both Psalm 82 and Ephesians 6 show that those whom God has put into authority tend to grab power and do what they like with it. They fail to fulfil their divine mandate. Therefore the general trend in the Bible goes towards the vision of a direct rule of Yahweh, not only over Israel but also over the rest of the world. He is the ultimate King and he is expected to take over control (Ps 82:8; 1 Cor 15:24; Rev 21:23f.).

The provisional nature of institutional authority

Christian eschatology has always considered the state to be a provisional arrangement to keep order until the Lord comes. What has changed in the New Testament is not God's Lordship but its particular quality. It is not simply God as the Giver of the torah who is the Lord, but the God who gives himself in the crucified Christ. In this sacrificial event God's redemptive intentions have found their highest expression. The coming King would be the One who had re-interpreted the God of Israel as a God of self-giving, suffering, redeeming and transforming love.

The apocalyptic world-view has come and gone, but the assumption that all human authorities are provisional harbours two enduring insights. In the first place it makes it possible to scrutinise their legitimacy and exercise the prophetic ministry over against them. We have dealt with that above. In the second place it shows that their mandate is limited in terms of time.

If Paul's injunction in Romans 13 had no time limit, should Jewish Christians continue to placate the Egyptian Pharaohs who had oppressed their ancestors a millennium and a half earlier and who claimed to be immortal? Should they continue to be subject to the Davidic dynasty, to which divine promises had been attached, but who often proved to be corrupt and idolatrous? Should they be haunted by the pagan oppressors of their forebears (the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Hellenists and Romans)? After all, God had placed these authorities over them, had he not?

The idea is absurd. Only contemporary authorities have a divine mandate and should be respected as such. This is also true for the authority of parenthood as an office. Already the Old Testament considered ancestral authority to be part of a past age and its perpetuation was explicitly forbidden. Modern society has gone much further: authority has assumed emancipatory and democratic connotations. As history moves on, some institutions do outlive their usefulness. Has ancestral authority indeed become obsolete and counter-productive? For many it has not, for others it has. Let us look at a biblical example.

In Jeremiah 35 we have the account of a strange sect, the Rechabites. Their ancestor had commanded his descendants not to be involved in the cultural transition from a nomadic life to a settled agricultural life. They were never to build houses, never to sow seeds, never to plant vineyards and never to drink wine, which was treasured as the fruit of the vineyard in ancient times. They were to remain nomads, live in tents and tend their flocks for ever after. As a result, their culture stagnated at an early stage of Israelite history. They were simply left behind.

Obviously Jeremiah does not argue that the Israelites should follow the Rechabites in obeying their ancestors, but rebukes them for not being committed to Yahweh, their God, as fiercely as the Rechabites were to their ancestor. Jeremiah took it for granted that the Israelites had been entitled to go forward into the promised land, cultivate the soil, bring first fruits to Yahweh and "rejoice in all the good things that Yahweh had given them" (Deut 26:1-11).

Jeremiah went even further. He sent a letter to the exiles urging them to make themselves at home in the foreign land, build houses, plant gardens and eat from their fruit. He also warned them not to listen to the prophets and diviners who wanted to make them believe that the old order would soon be restored (Jer 29:1ff). In short, they were to move forward, not to hanker backwards to a situation that had ceased to exist. Believers of all ages did not always follow this critically important injunction.

When the Jews became fixated to the past as a result of their painful history, their religious tradition stagnated as well. Spirituality focused on the meticulous observance of an ancient code of law that was itself the product of human history. The practice of boiling a kid in the milk of its mother, for instance, was forbidden in the torah, probably because it had been a pagan fertility rite (Ex 23:19). But the Canaanite fertility religion is long dead and gone and nobody would think of doing such a thing today. Yet orthodox Jews are still forbidden to mix milk dishes with meat dishes, just because the torah says so. Similar rigidities can be observed among Christian and Muslim fundamentalists of various kinds the world over.

Leaving the past behind

But why should deceased instruments of God (especially prophets, apostles and saints) not be consulted? Why do we still read Jeremiah, Paul, Augustine, Thomas, Luther and Calvin, if the deceased were not allowed to speak to us? The simple answer is that their spiritual legacy can warn, enlighten and strengthen us, but if they take over control and suck us into their past, they make us incapable of facing the future.

Let us look at the only instance found in the entire Bible where somebody tried to consult the spirit of a dead person (1 Sam 28). Samuel had guided King Saul while he was alive. After the death of Samuel, Saul was spiritually orphaned. In his indecision and insecurity he sought to speak once again to the deceased Samuel when a crisis situation emerged. He had to do so in secret because he had himself laid the death penalty on the practice. When Samuel was conjured up by a diviner, the first thing he did was to rebuke Saul for having aroused him. He knew that he was not supposed to have done it.

But that is not the most important facet of the story. What really matters is that, instead of opening up a new future for Saul, the encounter with the dead prophet sucked him back into the past. Being dead, Samuel could only repeat the curse he pronounced when he was alive. Could Saul not have been forgiven, blessed and restored in his authority, if he had come to Yahweh himself in penitence and faith? According to the Old Testament, this has happened countless times. Instead he got stuck in the past and could no longer face the future with confidence and courage.

Consulting the deceased perpetuates and empowers the past. Modern psychology understands that, when we allow memory to get on top of us, the past develops its own power and obstructs our way into the future. Many age old conflicts find no resolution because they are kept alive by institutionalised collective memories. The tensions in Northern Ireland and the former Yugoslavia, for instance, perpetuate the conflicts of past centuries. Ironically Saul was ostensibly required by Yahweh to wipe out a little ethnic group that was believed to have obstructed the passage of the Israelites to the promised land many, many centuries before. What a terrible legacy!

The same is true at the personal level. In the West there are widows who are guided by what they think their deceased husbands would have done. For a time this may give them some kind of stability in a traumatic period of life. But when they continue to depend on their deceased husbands they are unlikely to react responsibly to new challenges and opportunities. I sometimes asked my African students whether my father, who had never seen a computer in his life, would be able to help me with a computer problem. They always rejected the idea as ridiculous. Should I then stop using my computer, or should I not rather stop consulting my father about my computer? More seriously, should I cease to be an ordained pastor because my father wanted me to become a farmer?

It is true that the deceased should be respected. Their witness can transmit the good news to us, their good example can inspire us, their wisdom can inform us, their mistakes can warn us. We should thank God for everything he has done through our forebears. On the other hand they should not be allowed to dominate our behaviour, draw us back into their situations, their problems, their patterns of behaviour, and their frames of reference. We are adults. We are responsible for our own lives. Our ancestors should not prevent us from finding our own way into the future.

This is even true for Jesus. In a remarkable text Paul says that, while we have known Christ 'in the flesh', we now no longer know him as such. Christ and his followers are 'a new creation' (2 Cor 5:16ff). He refers, of course, to the eschatological future into which Christ has risen and in whose new life believers are privileged to participate. Christians do not believe in what scholars call 'the historical Jesus', nor do they believe in deceased apostles or saints. While the historical records show them who Jesus was, they believe in the risen Christ, the Christ who is to come, the Christ that liberates and empowers us rather than enslaving us, the Christ that opens up the future for us, rather than throwing us into the prison of the past. That seems to be the core of the matter.

Section VI

Do ancestors belong to the communion of saints?

God's unconditional acceptance of the unacceptable

In the last two sections we have come to the conclusion that ancestors are not supposed to lord it over the living. But does this also mean that they do not belong to Christ? Here we have to deal with the concept of the 'communion of saints', which is often quoted in this connection. Again, we go step by step.

In the first place, we must distinguish between the rejection of convictions that the biblical faith considers to be detrimental to salvation, on the one hand, and God's suffering, redeeming acceptance of the unacceptable into his fellowship on the other. The law of God exposes anything that is in the way of

the redemptive intention of God, but people are accepted into God's fellowship in spite of being unacceptable, precisely because God wants to redeem them.

This means that those who are under the spell of ancestral authority are accepted into God's fellowship without condition, but in the expectation that, in the fellowship of God, they will be liberated, empowered and transformed into mature sons and daughters of God. Their dependence on ancestral authority is not condoned but suffered and ultimately overcome in Christ.

In the process of redeeming and transforming acceptance the previous spiritual formation will be screened, not by an ecclesial inquisition, but by the Spirit of God through regular exposure to the Word of God. What is acceptable in terms of God's redemptive intentions will be confirmed and integrated into the new mode of being; what is not will be filtered out. We are all "growing into the full maturity of Christ" under the impact of the Word of God – and that is a process in time (Eph 4:11-13).

There is no question that this actually happens in most mainline churches, but it usually happens under cover. People are not free to speak about their ancestral convictions because they are afraid of being disciplined, ostracised or despised. This is an indication that the communities concerned have not really internalised the fundamental nature of the gospel of Christ. They continue to operate in terms of God's conditional acceptance based on the fulfilment of the law. Where this is the case the problem that needs to be addressed is not the syncretism of those to be accepted, but the legalism of those who are supposed to accept.

What about the fate of the deceased who did not believe in Christ?

If those who believe in ancestors should be accepted because God accepts them in Christ, can one also argue that God will accept the ancestors themselves, even those who did not believe in Christ, or who never had a chance of coming to know Christ? If Christ stands for God's unconditional, suffering acceptance of the unacceptable, could the ancestors not also find a place within the fellowship of God, whether they were believers or not?

This is an old problem about which countless believers have agonised throughout the ages.²⁵² Today many Africans and Asians would like to give a positive answer to this question. In Africa exclusion from the community is a horrific idea, tantamount to a death sentence. A lonely person or an excluded person is not a member of the community but a witch.²⁵³

Two theological issues are at the core of the problem: the seriousness of God's redemptive will and the depth of his mercy. For the biblical witness participation in the creative authority, redemptive concern and comprehensive vision of God, as revealed in Christ, is the inner criterion of fellowship with God. As far as I can see, it is a non-negotiable assumption for the biblical faith. If we *fail* to attain righteousness due to our human weakness, God's mercy will find a way to make us acceptable. That is what salvation in Christ is all about.

But what of those who consciously *refuse* to be part of God's redemptive project?

One could argue that they have defined themselves out of the fellowship of God. They will not be forced to be where they do not want to be. On the other hand, those who have practically lived a life that was in line with God's redemptive intentions, or those who would have wanted to be part of it, if they had only encountered it in a clear and credible form, have consciously or unconsciously identified themselves with it and will most certainly not be cast out, even if they had not managed to go very far with it in their lives.

The text I find most helpful in this regard is the parable of the last judgment in Mat 25:31ff. This text does not speak of explicit faith in Christ, but of human relationships in general. Christ is the Judge. He does not ask whether people have said 'Lord, Lord' to him, but whether they have treated those in need with loving care. If they had, it was as if they had done it to Christ himself, because Christ had identified himself with a needy and lost humanity.

In other words, the criterion suggested by this text is not whether those who face judgment were Christians, but whether they were in line with the redemptive intentions of God in Christ. That is what "there is no salvation except in Christ" means (Acts 4:12). It follows that if our ancestors, whether they were Christians or not, had exercised their authority in line with the motivation of Christ, they would not be rejected by Christ, the ultimate Judge.

There are other texts in the Bible that go in the same direction. Old Testament prophets make it clear that it is being in line with God's righteousness that counts, not formal membership in the people of God. Prophets also attest to the acceptability of some 'pagans' such as King Cyrus, who was used by God although he "did not acknowledge" Yahweh (Is 45:4-7). In the New Testament Jesus commends the faith of the centurion (Mat 8:10). Peter discovers to his surprise that "there is no favouritism in God, but all those who fear him and live out his righteousness in all nations are acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34).

The authority of the deceased

If those who practice ancestor veneration are accepted by God, and if the deceased ancestors may be acceptable to God, must ancestor veneration itself not also be acceptable? No, that does not follow. We must distinguish between the *belonging* of deceased believers and deceased potential believers, on the one hand, and their *authority* over the living on the other. If God accepts sinners in his mercy, whether alive or deceased, this does not imply that they are entitled to exercise authority over the living after their deaths. We have dealt with that above. Nor does it imply that the living can have fellowship with the deceased. This is the aspect we turn to now. Let us look at some biblical texts.

The apostle Paul

In his earliest letter, Paul says that when Christ comes in glory the dead will rise, those still alive will be transformed, and the whole crowd will then go with Christ to heaven (1 Thess 4:13-18). It is clear that during this time Paul shares the fervent apocalyptic expectations of the early church. He presupposes that he will still be alive when Christ comes in glory.

He wrote this passage to comfort believers who grieved about those sisters and brothers who had passed away. He wanted to allay the fears of his congregants that the deceased might be left behind in their graves when Christ returned in glory. This clearly shows that neither the congregation nor Paul assumed that the deceased were alive at that point in time; otherwise resurrection at the end would be a meaningless idea. Deceased believers *have* been, and *will* be active members of the ‘communion of saints’. At the present moment, however, they are ‘asleep’.

There is no question that deceased believers continue to belong to Christ. Paul is convinced that “neither death nor life ... neither the present nor the future ... will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38f). But time must be taken into consideration: “In Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the first fruits, then, when he comes, those who belongs to him ...” (1 Cor 15:22f). For Paul the future of deceased believers is clear, but at present they have been taken out of action.²⁵⁴ We can think of them in gratitude for what they have been and in hope for what they will be, but nothing more.²⁵⁵

What about the present nature of the communion of saints? In 1 Corinthians 12-14 and Romans 12 Paul speaks of the community of believers as the ‘Body of Christ’. Christ is here seen not so much as an individual but as a new and authentic communal reality. This new reality is also referred to as ‘the’ Christ (1 Cor 12:12). The members of this Body are empowered with a variety of ‘gifts of the Spirit’ to serve each other, build up the community and witness to the world. But this is said of those members who are alive; the deceased do not enter into the picture. If Paul thought the deceased were to be included among those whose gifts and services should be recognised and utilised by their peers, he would probably have mentioned it here.

Is this stance only due to his preoccupation with the apocalyptic distinction between this age and the age to come, which can be replaced with other ways of expressing the difference between what is and what ought to become? Or is there an inner rationale behind the text that is indispensable for the Christian faith? Seemingly there is.

In a late letter Paul contemplates the possibility that he himself may soon have to die. He assumes that he would join Christ at the point of his death. There is no mention in this text of the second coming of Christ. He simply says that it would be better for him to depart and be with Christ. However, for his

congregations it would be better if he ‘remained in the flesh’ because then he could still serve Christ and serve them (Ph 1:21-24).

The implication is that he would be of no further use to them if he died. If he had thought he could become a mediator for his congregations or serve them in any way after his death, he would have said that it were better for them if he departed than if he stayed. His continued belonging to Christ after his death is taken for granted, but his ‘utility’ for the survivors is not. There is no place for the mediating role of the deceased in the theology of Paul.

He also does not say that they should not grieve because they will continue to have fellowship with him anyway. If Paul had believed that there could be an unbroken fellowship between the living and the deceased, he would not have said in the same letter that the death of Epaphroditus would have added another sorrow to his burden (Ph 2:25-30).

The great crowd of the redeemed in Revelation

To get further clarity on the issue, let us turn to the most explicitly apocalyptic book in the New Testament, namely Revelation. Here we find mention of great crowds that would glorify God and Christ in the eschatological future. The aim of the author was to strengthen the faith of believers afflicted by persecution. He used metaphors and pictures taken from a late Jewish tradition that had been informed by Persian mythology. According to Parsism, world history was heading towards a great showdown between the forces of good (the god *Ahuramazda* and his army of angels) and the forces of evil (the god *Angra Mainyu* and his army of demons).

Those who had stuck it out with Christ, the author wanted to say, who had persevered in great suffering and who had washed their garments in his blood, would be shown to belong to the community of saints (Rev 7:1-17). In the meantime the deceased who “died in the Lord” could “rest from their works” (Rev 14:13) because their works would follow them to the last judgment.

These texts speak of the eschatological future. They also speak of tenacious believers, not of the deceased in general. They speak of those who have suffered for Christ, who had resisted Roman spiritual oppression. They also do not expect believers to submit to living or deceased authorities. Nor do they expect martyrs to have authority over the living. Nor is there mention of a presence of the deceased in this world, or of continuing fellowship between the deceased and the living, or of their possible function as mediators.

The cosmic Christ in Ephesians and Colossians

Apocalyptic is only one way of presenting the confrontation between what has become and what ought to become found in the Bible. The expectation that Christ would return in glory was soon disappointed and believers had to adjust their worldview. One way of doing so was to change the location of what ought

to be from the future in time to a heavenly space ‘above’. In Paul’s early letters the rule of Christ is a future event; in the letters of his disciples (the so-called Deutero-Paulines, Colossians and Ephesians), it is a present though hidden fact. Let us briefly recap what we have discussed in an earlier section.

According to these letters, Christ has already been enthroned “in the heavenly places” (*en tois epouraniois*) as the cosmic Ruler – far above all principalities, powers and authorities (Eph 1:20ff). The cosmic forces that determine the lives of people on earth are now under his judgment and direction. Only what is in line with the self-giving redemptive will of God as manifest on the cross of Christ is legitimate. If ancestors were such life-determining powers, they too would be subject to that criterion.

Apart from being enthroned above the powers as the Ruler over the cosmos, Christ is also depicted as the Head of the Body of Christ, that is, the church (Eph 1:22b). The text says that believers in Christ have been “raised with Christ” into his elevated position (Eph 2:5f). That means, among other things, that they are subject to nobody but Christ. The Body of Christ is located within the power sphere of the spiritual forces governing the universe, but it is not supposed to be subject to these forces. Its function is to inform these forces of God’s purposes (Eph 3:10). Because the latter will attack believers, they have to fortify themselves spiritually against them (Eph 6:12-17).

Where would the ancestral hierarchy fit into this scheme of things – the Body of Christ, or the cosmic powers? I think the answer is pretty obvious. The Body of Christ is composed of those who were formerly “dead in sin” (Eph 2:1f), but have now been “raised with Christ” (Eph 2:5f). In the Pauline literature resurrection does not mean the continuation of human social organisation and its structures of authority beyond death. Resurrection means the eschatological transformation of what human beings and their life worlds have become into what they ought to be.

Believers have not reached perfection here on earth. But as far as the risen Christ becomes present and active in them, they are part of the new life of Christ, thus ‘risen’. This manifests itself in the fact that the Body of Christ is composed of people from formerly antagonistic camps, in this case Jews and Gentiles (Eph 2). Gender, seniority, ethnic identity and genealogical derivation play no role any more. So resurrection is not the same thing as bringing home the dead, which is meant to be a reintegration of the deceased into their legitimate position in the patriarchal hierarchy.

The Deutero-Pauline letters also speak of ‘spiritual gifts’. These gifts are now concentrated in apostolic proclamation, prophesy, pastoral ministry and teaching. Their function is “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ”, to lead to unity of faith, to lead everybody to the full maturity of Christ (Eph 4:11-16). Note that it is living members of the Body that are given these gifts and it is living members of the Body that are to become mature, bound together in love, and empowered to serve. Again the

deceased have no authority. In fact, they never enter into the picture. In 1 Peter 4:10-11 we have the same kind of tradition.

The cloud of witnesses in Hebrews

The Letter to the Hebrews also describes a present, or rather an eternally present reality, namely the priesthood of Christ. In the final chapters of the letter the author turns our attention to the past. Here we have the picture of the “great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us” (12:1). This picture is particularly popular among those who want to see the deceased included within the community of believers – whether saints or ancestors.

In fact, however, the ‘cloud of witnesses’ refers to a long list of historical figures that the author considers to be particularly outstanding examples of faith (Heb 11). The reason for this enumeration of trustworthy and powerful servants of God is to encourage believers to “lay away every weight”, to abandon the sin that “clings to us”, and to persevere in following Christ who suffered and was glorified (Heb 12:1-2).

According to Hebrews, they are not witnesses in the sense that they are *now* hovering around us in some way, watching what we are doing. Rather what they have been doing in faith *in the past* is a witness to us in our present afflictions. We have access to this witness not through dreams, ecstasy, divination or special revelations, but through perusing the historical records of the scriptures. There is nothing in the text to suggest that these deceased believers were now alive and present; that they could communicate with the living; that we could appeal to them for help or guidance; that they could mediate between the living and the living God.

Least of all do they automatically include all those who happened to be genealogical forebears of the believers. They are historical examples of outstanding faith, which can inspire and strengthen us in our own situation – nothing more and nothing less.

Being with Christ in the Gospel of John

John’s Gospel follows not an apocalyptic, nor a cosmic, nor a historical, but an existential approach. Here Jesus says that he would go to prepare the place for his disciples (Jn 14:2f); that it was to their advantage if he went to the Father, because only in this way could the Spirit come (Jn 16:7); that the Spirit would give them what belonged to Christ (Jn 16:14). He would “not leave them orphans” (Jn 14:18), but come to them in his Spirit. He had to become the seed that would fall into the ground to bear much fruit (Jn 12:24). When he had been raised he would draw all people to himself (Jn 12:32).

Here a deceased person is indeed deemed present in the form of a spirit. But this is not just any spirit; it is the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of God’s self-giving, redeeming love as manifest on the cross of Christ. And the rationale of this

presence is that we all become what Christ is, namely sons and daughters of God (Jn 1:12; 3:3-10). Again there is no mention of the deceased in general, or of saints, or of ancestors.

To sum up this section, it would seem that the discourse about the present place and function of the deceased – whether saints or ancestors – lies outside the horizons of the New Testament. Yes, as far as they were believers they cannot be separated from Christ. As far as they belonged to Christ, they will belong to Christ. But the idea that they might play a role in the lives of the living is foreign to the New Testament.

Again this does not imply that the deceased are demons; that they are lost in eternity; that God never used them for his creative and redemptive purposes when alive, or that they could not be part of the *communio sanctorum* if they had been believers. It only means that they are dead. But what about Christ – has he not risen from the dead? And is the same not also true for the ancestors?

Section VII

Death and resurrection in the biblical witness

It is important for our topic to understand how the biblical tradition arrived at the conviction that the dead would rise again. The old Israelite faith was exceptionally realistic about the finality of death. Yahweh was deemed to be the living God, the God of life, the God of the living. It is he who gives life; it is he who takes life (Job 1:21). The ongoing relationship of this God was with the family, clan, tribe or nation, not with the individual as such. The life of the individual was a fleeting phase in the life of the clan. After his/her death the clan would continue to live under the living God and that was what mattered.

Because it was life that mattered, the old Israelites expected to see good days if the relationship with Yahweh was sound. Yahweh was a righteous God who punished the unrighteous and rewarded the righteous. However, as history unfolded, things did not always work out that way. When one ancient Near Eastern empire after the other swept over the people of God; when their country, their capital, their political order, even their temple were destroyed; when they were carried to foreign lands, exiled, oppressed and enslaved, their faith was put to the test. The book of Job bears testimony to the agonies of these believers.

We cannot go into detail and I refer you to what I have written in other contexts.²⁵⁶ There were those who insisted that Israel was to blame for its woes. There were those who maintained that Yahweh was acting unjustly. There were those who thought that Yahweh's ways were too great for us to understand. There were also those who tenaciously believed that ultimately Yahweh would reward the steadfastness of his people and punish the evildoers. But what if the oppressors lived and died in glory while their victims lived and died in humiliation and suffering?

Yahweh was a God of righteousness – that assumption was non-negotiable. For God, the Giver of life, death could not be an obstacle. If justice were not seen to be done in this life, then it would have to materialise beyond this life. People would rise again to face judgment. Those who were righteous would receive their reward; those who were unrighteous would receive their punishment. The ancient Egyptians already had a notion of a judgment beyond death centuries before. It is also found in other ancient cultures. But in Judaism acceptance of this assumption emerged gradually and remained contentious for a long time.

Some insisted that “those who go down to *Sheol* (= the place of the dead) will never come up again” (Job 7:9ff). “The dead do not live, the shades do not rise” (Is 26:14). The dead do not experience the wonders of God, or praise him for his creation (Ps 88:10ff). The dead do not remember God (Ps 6:5). Even their remembrance among their survivors would not endure (Eccl 2:16). Whether you do right or wrong, you still end up in death (Eccl 9:1-4). There is no point in arguing about death because death is a decree of God that cannot be escaped. “Whether life lasts for ten years or a hundred or a thousand, there are no questions asked in *Hades* (Sir 41:3f). In short, the deceased are dead and gone.

Others, such as Wisdom of Solomon, angrily maintained that it is only the unrighteous that insist on the finality of death. They wanted an open space for their evil deeds, or rather a good argument to defend their unrighteous lives. God did not create death, the author says, he wanted his creatures to live; righteousness was immortal. We were made in the image of God’s own immortality. Humans invite death when they commit sins. It is their own fault. Death is the wages of sin. The link between righteousness and prosperity, on the one hand, and between unrighteousness and suffering on the other, is forcefully asserted, although its manifestation is extrapolated to a sphere beyond death (Wis 1-3). The point to be made here is that justice or righteousness is the central concern of Jewish spirituality, not the prolongation of life as such.

In Paul’s theology we have another version of the assumption that the deceased shall rise. In line with an Old Testament tradition he assumed that death was the result of sin (Ps 90:7-12). Because we are all sinners, we all have to die. In death God does away with a creature that did not turn out as it was intended to be (cf Jer 18:2ff). So death itself is God’s final judgment. However, in Christ his infinite grace has found a way to grant us a new life, a life characterised by righteousness and fellowship with God. While we go through life into death, Christ takes us through death into a new life.

By identifying with the death and resurrection of Christ, Paul says, we can participate in the transition from death to the new life already now (Rom 6). John’s Gospel takes this idea further. He maintains that the last judgment actually takes place here and now when we are faced with the decision to believe in Christ or not. Those who do not believe in Christ are already condemned. In fact, they condemn themselves to death by rejecting the life that

Christ offers. Those who believe in Christ have eternal life already, even though they may die (Jn 3:17-21; 11:25).

We can see, therefore, that belief in the resurrection was rooted in the assumption that Yahweh was a God of righteousness and justice, not in a desire to continue life indefinitely. It was also not rooted in the assumption that the dead have a role to play as authorities and supervisors of the living. Ancestor veneration is based on an entirely different rationale. In the Bible it is God's own righteousness that is eternal and we have a share in God's eternity as far as we participate in God's righteousness. That is why Christ lives and that is why those who are 'in Christ' can hope to live although they die (Jn 11:25).

Formal similarities: the spiritual presence of a bodily past

The passing on of a deceased person from this life into the realm of ancestry, on the one hand, and the gift of an entirely new life by God, on the other, are two conceptualisations of what happens beyond death, each with its own rationale. Yet there are formal similarities that can illuminate both convictions.

According to African traditionalism, the bodies of the deceased are buried and decay. Yet when ancestors 'appear', say in dreams, they appear in the bodily form that they possessed when alive. It is the concrete person that exercises authority beyond death, not some purely spiritual entity without shape and character. Human reality is bodily reality.²⁵⁷ To exercise authority the ancestors have to be remembered as the bodily concrete persons that they had been when alive. Ancestors higher up in the genealogy, who are no longer remembered by name, merge into a large unknown pool of ancestral authority.

In African spirituality the ancestor is not a corpse that has risen from the grave.²⁵⁸ In fact, some ethnic groups make quite certain in their funeral rites that such a 'resurrection' will not take place, for instance, by cutting the sinews of their calves, or binding hands and feet of the deceased.²⁵⁹ A potential resuscitation is considered to be dangerous, firstly because of the possibility that a corpse could be hijacked and used by evil forces for its own purposes, and secondly because it would cause major disruptions in the social fabric after the latter has been rearranged. It is the authority that the living persons once had, not their bodily presence, that continues to have an impact after their deaths.

In the same way Christ walked the streets of Palestine, was born and grew up, ate and drank, preached, assembled followers, healed people, was captured, accused and condemned by concrete authorities, was tortured, ridiculed and executed. He had a definite human identity and profile. The cross of Christ was not a sham, as the Gnostics maintained; it was for real. In it believers see the ultimate enactment of God's redeeming love. That is why we cannot do without the narratives concerning the earthly Jesus. Our sharing of the cross of Christ and our participation in his redeeming action are also meant to be for real.

Christians must come to terms with the fact that their faith too does not imply that the corpse of Jesus has come to life again. Unfortunately this is difficult for many believers, because the metaphor of resurrection was communicated in the legends of the empty grave, of Jesus eating with his disciples, of Thomas putting his hand into the wounds of Jesus in some New Testament traditions, and so on. These narratives seem to suggest that it was the original body of Jesus that was resuscitated. But this is ‘theology in story-form’. Taking this language literally would defeat the underlying intention of the narratives.

The intended meaning of both metaphor and legend was that God’s self-disclosure as a God of suffering, redeeming and transforming love in the concrete human existence, work and proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth had now become universally valid and accessible. The risen Christ stands for the new human being who lives in fellowship with God and in whose life God acts redemptively. Because they considered Jesus’ interpretation of the God of Israel to be dangerous to faith, the enemies of Jesus tried to take him out of action. And indeed he died as a solitary individual.

But now he lives, Christians proclaim, so that all of humanity can share in his new life (Jn 12:24, 32). That is the indispensable content of the Easter message, the message with which the Christian faith stands or falls (1 Cor 15:14). This message is conveyed in a number of legendary forms in the New Testament that cannot be harmonized with each other and need not be.²⁶⁰ The legend of the virgin birth is a similar case.²⁶¹ It is a metaphor meant to express the conviction that Christ’s life was from God, not from his natural descent or environment. It has no other agenda.²⁶² There are many alternative metaphors in the New Testament that express the same concern but in different linguistic forms.

To mistake such narratives as historical and biological facts would lead to quite unacceptable theological consequences. If the earthly body of Jesus had come back to life, he would have had to die again. He would have continued to be a Jewish *rabbi* walking the streets of Palestine with a human ancestry, a limited life span and a limited audience. He could not have ‘appeared’ and ‘disappeared’ among his disciples (Jn 20:19ff; Lk 24:13ff).

He could not have ‘gone to heaven’ to ‘sit at the right hand of God’. He could not be present where ‘two or three are gathered in his name’ (Mt 18:20). He could not be with them as they go and make disciples of all nations ‘up to the end of the age’ (Mt 28:20). He could not have become the ‘eternal priest’ that the Letter to the Hebrews speaks about. He could not have worked through millions of his followers throughout the centuries, accepting what they do to his needy brothers and sisters as done to him (Mt 25:31ff).

The risen Christ as a spiritual reality

So the risen Christ has to be seen as a spiritual reality and Paul says as much. “The Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom ... all this comes from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:17f). Similarly the Spirit of

Christ that permeates the ‘Body of Christ’ is called “**the** Christ” in 1 Corinthians 12:12f. “Once we knew Christ in fleshly form, but this is no longer the case ... anyone who is in Christ is a new creation” (2 Cor 5:16f). Whereas the first Adam became a “living soul”, the second Adam became a “life-creating Spirit” (1 Cor 15:45).²⁶³ “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God!” (1 Cor 15:50).

In the Deutero-Paulines, believers, who have been dead in sin, have been raised with Christ and enthroned with him in the “heavenly places” (Eph 2:4-6; Col 3:1ff). Obviously we are not physically ‘in heaven’. The text refers to a spiritual, not a bodily transformation. What happens after our physical deaths is not within the horizon of the argument. Death and resurrection are metaphors to express the transition from an unauthentic to an authentic life through participation in the new life of Christ.

This is equally clear in John’s Gospel. Seen against the background of Jewish eschatology, rather than Platonic metaphysics, ‘eternal life’ means ‘authentic life’. According to Jewish eschatology, all people will rise again after they have died so as to face the last judgment. It is those who are found righteous that will live with God in his eternity. It is righteousness that defines ‘eternal life’, not biological survival. According to John’s Gospel, this last judgment takes place already here and now as we encounter Christ. Those who believe in him, who accept him, who share his new life in communion with God, are not condemned but “have eternal life” (Jn 3:16-19; 5:24). That refers to their lives here and now and it is valid “even if they die” (Jn 11:25f).

The resurrection of Christ makes the new life of Christ in fellowship with God universally accessible. In John’s Gospel Jesus makes that clear when he compares the loneliness of the single kernel with the abundant fruit the grain can deliver when it falls into the soil and dies (12:24). “It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless” (6:63). “When I am raised from the earth I will draw all people to myself” (Jn 12:32). When “lifted up” Jesus would not leave his disciples orphans, but come even more intimately to them, namely in the Spirit (Jn 14:18). It would be good for him to leave because otherwise the Spirit would not come (Jn 16:7).

With his terms ‘from below’ and ‘from above’ John emphasises the incongruence between an earthly and a spiritual understanding of the gospel. The metaphors of bread, light, flesh, door, shepherd, and so on, are all taken from ordinary life and transcended towards a spiritual meaning (for instance in Jn 6:52-65). The *spiritual* significance of Jesus is already claimed for his life on earth, when it is said that Jesus came from the Father, does the will of the Father and goes to the Father.

Paul similarly distinguishes between the fleshly status of Jesus and his spiritual status (Rom 1:3f). Paul insists that the body that is sown is not of the same quality as the body that is raised. It is not a fleshly, but a “spiritual body”. This ‘body’ is imperishable, glorious, powerful, while the former body is perishable, dishonourable and weak (1 Cor 15:42ff). Although we knew Christ

according to the flesh, Paul says, we no longer know him in this way. And so we should not see each other in this fleshly way any more either (2 Cor 5:16). In faith we are “being transformed into the same image from glory to glory by the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:17). He died for us, so that we can live for him (2 Cor 5:15).

In other words, the transformation of Christ from the crucified *Rabbi* to the risen Lord takes concrete shape in our own transformation. And, according to the Deutero-Paulines, the growth of the Body of Christ into the full maturity of Christ is an ongoing task for which the church has been given its spiritual gifts (Eph 4:1-16).

The upshot of these observations is that, when Jesus was on earth, his ministry was limited by time, space and human power, but now the new reality he represented has become valid and accessible for all human beings at all times and in all situations.

The emphasis on the body

If resurrection is a ‘spiritual affair’, why then insist on the resurrection of the *body*? ‘Spirit’ has the connotations of consciousness, memory, authority or motivation. But consciousness, including memory, is stuck to concrete life. In Paul and John ‘spirit’ is not the opposite of ‘body’; it is the *authenticity* of bodily and worldly reality. This is not an ontological, but an eschatological difference. We are not yet what we are supposed to become. The new life and the new world are ‘spirit’ because they are outstanding. They are ‘real’ to the extent that the vision of what ought to be has a transformative impact on our lives here and now. In faith we already participate in what ought to become.

The point of ‘the resurrection of the body’ is that a spirit without bodily concreteness has no reality in this world. Paul and John both reject a Gnostic interpretation of the coming of Christ into the world according to which the divine logos never touched earthly ground. The divine logos had to “become flesh” to be effective in this world (Jn 1:14; 1 Jn 1:1ff). Christ had to enter the world of human sin to overcome sin from within (Rom 8:3). He was “made sin for us” so that in him we might become righteous (2 Cor 5:21). If Christ had not been a true human being, we would not be able to become true human beings by participating in his new life either.

Similarly both Paul and John are careful that the spiritual interpretation of the resurrection does not lead to Gnostic conclusions. According to John, the risen Jesus allows Thomas to put his fingers into his wounds, which could only be the wounds inflicted to his body on the cross. Similarly according to Luke, the risen Christ convinced the disciples that he was not a ghost by allowing them to touch him and by eating with them (Lk 24:36-43).

According to Paul, all those who rise will rise in a new body, which will be a “spiritual body”, that is, an eschatological or authentic body (1 Cor 15:42-44). We will be transformed into the image of Christ, who is the Spirit (2 Cor 3:18).

When we die, we will not be “unclothed” but “overclothed” (2 Cor 5:1-5). We will not all die, but we will all be transformed when our perishable body will take on imperishable qualities (1 Cor 15:51). We can see that Paul cannot envisage a new life without a new body; yet the new life is a spiritual life.

Because Christ had become a concrete reality in this world, believers have the possibility of manifesting the Spirit of Christ within their own concrete human existence. By identifying ourselves with Christ in baptism our own sinful life is crucified with Christ so that the new life of Christ can manifest itself in our mortal bodies (Rom 6). It is precisely the ‘bodies’ of believers that are members of the ‘Body of Christ’. As husband and wife become ‘one flesh’ so Christ and the believers become ‘one spirit’ (one eschatological reality) and the body becomes the temple of the Spirit (1 Cor 6:15-19).

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ permeating, liberating, empowering and transforming the “Body of Christ”, that is, the concrete community of believers (1 Cor 12). The life of the risen Christ transforms our lives from a life ‘according to the flesh’ into a life ‘according to the Spirit’ – but all that while we are still normal human beings. There is no other human life but bodily human life. All this may seem to be contradictory, but only because the metaphors used are meant to express the fact that the ‘spiritual’ (= the eschatological or authentic) manifests itself in bodily concreteness, otherwise it would have no reality.

The differences between an ancestor and the risen Christ

The formal similarity between an ancestor and the risen Christ lie in the ‘spiritual’ presence of a ‘bodily’ reality. Only when we recognise this formal similarity will the real differences between the ancestors and the risen Christ come to the fore. These differences lie in the respective content of *what they actually stand for*. In other words, the differences do not lie in some ontologically conceived, objective existence or non-existence of the two entities, but in *what they actually do to us*. It is here that the real alternatives come into play. Let me summarise some of the most important.

(a) Becoming an ancestor is a passage into the past, even though this past has power over the present. The resurrection of Christ is a passage into the future of God, even though this future can gain power over the present. In Paul’s terminology, the ancestor belongs to the genealogy of the first Adam, the genealogy of the ‘flesh’. Christ became the second Adam, the ‘new creation’, the spiritual human being (Rom 5:12ff). Resurrection is an eschatological concept. African traditions have no eschatology in the biblical sense of the word.

(b) This explains why ancestors suck us back into the past, while Christ lures us into the future of God. The power of the ancestors lies in the power of memory. The power of Christ lies in the power of anticipation.

(c) Ancestors stand for authority; Christ stands for the freedom and responsibility of mature sons and daughters (= representatives) of God.

(d) Ancestors stand for ethnic traditions inherited from the past; Christ stands for God's vision of comprehensive and universal well-being.

(e) The supervision of the ancestors covers their descendants, the family, the clan, the organised community. The new life of Christ can be accessed by the whole of humanity.

(f) The authority of ancestors is confirmed and strengthened by their clans through appropriate rituals. The community of believers manifests the redemptive action of Christ through the proclamation of the gospel when it is made valid, accessible and effective by the Holy Spirit.

(g) The ancestral spirit is the spirit of the clan that keeps its members on track. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ that permeates the Body of Christ – a spirit that liberates, motivates, transforms and sends us out into the world as instruments of God's redemptive designs.

(h) Most important in terms of the theology of Paul is the fact that death is the wages of sin and resurrection the gift of a righteous life in fellowship with God. Christ became 'sin for us', died as such and rose into a new life, so that we would become righteous by identifying with his death and resurrection. African traditions do not normally foresee such a transformation. Although there are exceptions, ancestors normally remain what they have been when alive.²⁶⁴

Section VIII

The enculturation of the message

So far we have made two observations. On the one hand, it is difficult to find a place for ancestor veneration in the biblical scheme of things. On the other hand, African insights, worldviews and metaphors can indeed illuminate and enrich the biblical message. This should not come as a surprise. Throughout its history the biblical faith absorbed, reformulated and integrated insights, worldviews and metaphors from its religious and intellectual environment – Canaanite, Babylonian, Persian, Hellenistic and Roman. This process did not come to an end with the closure of the Canon. Greek, Roman and Germanic thought patterns and practices continued to impact Christian spirituality and theology throughout the ages. Even the Enlightenment did.

We must say this even stronger. Wherever the gospel enters into a new religious and cultural situation, it becomes 'incarnate' in that situation. It does not fill a vacuum, but enters into an existing structure of assumptions, values and norms and transforms it from within. Put differently, God finds people where they are and leads them in the direction of where he wants them to be. The classical example is the entry of a gospel that was originally conceptualised in Jewish terms into the Greek mindset. It took on a new shape and character so

different from the original that many Jewish Christians could not see that it was the same gospel they believed in. We shall come back to that below.

The point to be made here is that the process of absorption and incarnation (= enculturation) is legitimate in terms of the biblical witness. There are scores of biblical examples for this phenomenon. Creation narratives are found all over the Ancient Near East – as they are in Africa.²⁶⁵ The story of the great flood is equally common. The Passover ritual seems to have had pre-Israelite roots. The Mosaic covenant was modelled on Ancient Near Eastern contracts. Some of the laws found in the torah have parallels in the Code of Hammurabi. The sacrifice of the first-born was taken over from the Canaanites (the Phoenicians).²⁶⁶

The idea that the king was the ‘son of God’, as found in Psalm 2 and subsequently applied to Jesus as the messianic king, has Egyptian roots.²⁶⁷ The Canaanite priest in Jerusalem, Zadok, retained his function under David. The Zadokites subsequently replaced the Yahwist priests, the Elites, as the dominant priesthood in Jerusalem.²⁶⁸ The temple in Jerusalem was built by Canaanite artisans. Israel learnt a lot from the Persian concepts of history and eschatology in the development of Apocalyptic, which became the worldview of early Christianity. The latter was soon replaced by the Hellenistic dualism between matter and spirit. That an extraordinary person must have had a supernatural birth and the power to perform miracles are motifs that have many Ancient Near Eastern parallels. And so we could continue.

Outside influences often led to syncretism and idolatry. They were vigorously attacked by the prophetic and Deuteronomic movements and gradually filtered out. The result of this process was the integration of elements from the religious environment without compromising Israel’s intense loyalty to Yahweh, the God of Israel. The world as a whole was understood to be the world of God.

All this was not a series of unfortunate accidents but a necessary process. Only in this way could the biblical faith retain its vitality.²⁶⁹ The Gospel of John speaks of the incarnation of the Word of God (Jn 1:14). That does not only apply to the person of Christ, but to all forms of the Word of God. Paul says that only by becoming a Jew to the Jews could he become a participant in the gospel of Christ (1 Cor 9:19-23). In Christ God had become a Jew and changed the character of the biblical faith from within.

Absorption or syncretism?

This absorptive and incarnational capacity of the biblical faith must be distinguished from syncretism.²⁷⁰ Syncretism denotes faith in more than one divine partner, for instance Yahweh and Ba’al. Absorption and incarnation, in contrast, meant that Yahweh integrated the functions of Ba’al as a god of fertility, while Ba’al himself was vehemently rejected as a possible god of Israel.

As mentioned above, absorption and integration did not always succeed; interaction with other convictions indeed led to apostasy or syncretism. But

prophetic and Deuteronomic theology fought a relentless battle against apostasy and syncretism. Syncretism is resisted by the biblical faith; incarnation and absorption are natural characteristics of the biblical faith.

This implies, on the one hand, that all spiritual entities, including those encountered in Africa, must either be instruments of God's creative and redemptive intentions, as manifest in Christ, or become illegitimate from a Christian point of view. Christians cannot deviate from this expectation without giving up their identity. On the other hand, this does not mean that everything found in other convictions must be discarded or condemned. Whatever is in line with God's redemptive designs can be appreciated, confirmed, even adopted by Christians as an instrument of God's creative and redemptive intentions.

It also does not follow that absorption and incarnation are tantamount to domination of one faith by another – the 'colonisation of consciousness'. Ideologies that legitimate power structures do impose their convictions on others; faith does not. The gospel is preached. Those who hear respond in faith, or they do not. A promise is made; it is either trusted or not.

Faith cannot be imposed by violence, oppression or brain washing techniques. Powerful people, Christians as well as non-Christians, have often tried to do this and such attempts are indeed found within the biblical witness. But that does not make them practically viable, let alone acceptable. Imposition is a violation of faith. It makes true witness, dialogue with others, and a free decision based on conviction impossible.

Dialogue between different convictions about what the concept of God, or its equivalents, should stand for, what this God is intending to do in particular contexts, and which values and norms should be binding for all members of society is indispensable within a pluralistic context. We have to correct each other and enrich each other. We have to find common ground, otherwise social intercourse and cooperation becomes unbearable or impossible.

There should be no problem with using African insights, worldviews and metaphors to express the biblical message in an African context. On the contrary, this is absolutely indispensable. Initiatives in this direction should receive our critical support. 'Critical' support means that we remain alert to problems that require attention wherever enculturation takes place. There are at least three of these: maintenance of the intended meaning, logical consistency and hidden syncretism. Let us have a brief look at each of them.

The maintenance of the intended meaning

We can speak about God and our relationship to God only in metaphors, that is, pictures taken from earthly life.²⁷¹ This is the case because God is not part of experienced reality but its Source and Destiny. All theological concepts such as father, son, spirit, christ (from Greek *christos* = the anointed), creation, heaven, judgment, law, grace, justification, righteousness, body, blood, church (from Greek *ekklesia* = assembly), ascension, right hand, and so on, are words

taken from ordinary life and used as metaphors for God and his creative and redemptive activity in the world.

We must use metaphors; we have no choice. But the use of metaphors causes problems that we must be aware of. The first is that one can confuse a metaphor with what it is intended to refer to. If a lover calls his beloved ‘honey’, he does not mean to say that she actually *consists* of honey. ‘Honey’ is a metaphor that refers to her attractiveness for him. That is self-evident. But when we speak about God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, we can easily assume that there must be a real father, a real son and a real, but separate spirit out there. In fact, however, these metaphors are intended to refer to an intended meaning.

The use of alternative metaphors can throw light on the intended meaning. A young man can call his girl friend ‘my little bird’ in addition to ‘honey’. In the same way we can say that ‘God’, who is the ultimate power behind experienced reality as a whole (instead of ‘Father’), has revealed his redemptive intentions in the life and ministry of Jesus (instead of ‘Son’), and the community of believers is privileged to become involved in God’s redemptive presence, activity and vision (instead of ‘Spirit’). What have we done? We have expressed the ‘Trinity’ in another set of metaphors without losing the intended meaning.²⁷²

The second problem is closely connected with the first. Because metaphors refer to something beyond themselves, their applicability is strictly limited. One cannot deduce from the word ‘honey’ that the lover considers his beloved to have gooey characteristics and that she must better not be touched but secured in some sort of container. The only characteristic the picture is meant to refer to is ‘sweetness’ – and even that is a metaphor. In the same way we cannot deduce from the metaphors of Father and Son that there must also be a divine mother in heaven, or that the Holy Spirit might be the mother in a divine family.

Speculation

We call the confusion between a metaphor and the meaning it refers to ‘reification’ (= treating concepts as if they were real entities). Theology has often reified concepts and used them as points of departure for deductions concerning the nature of God – not in his relationship to us, but all by himself in heaven. It is often said, for instance, that God in himself is not lonely, because there must be close communion between Father, Son and Spirit.

The Bible says that there is a relationship between God and Israel, between God and Jesus, between God and us, between God and his creation, but not a relation somewhere within God all on his own. Such speculations may again lead us into logical inconsistencies that we cannot resolve. The classical Trinitarian and Christological doctrines are only plausible when we understand them as metaphorical reflections of an underlying meaning. Once we take their metaphorical wording literally, they become not only contradictory, but idolatrous.

Throughout the ages theologians have mistaken their metaphors for eternal truths. Because they differed from one theology to another, endless conflicts, ruthless persecutions and destructive wars were the result. In modern times mainline churches, Evangelicals and Pentecostals still exclude each other because they believe that their respective version of the Christian faith is the truth and nothing but the truth.²⁷³ All this could not possibly have been in line with the intention of God as manifest in the suffering, forgiving, redeeming, reconciling and transforming love of Christ.

To overcome this disease we have to make quite certain that our language about God remains provisional and tentative. It must remain based on the faith experiences that it is intended to express. We must deny ourselves the luxury of hovering off into the thin air of speculation. In the Ancient Near East the king was perceived to be the ‘Son of God’, that is, the representative of God on earth, thus the bearer of divine authority (Ps 2). This title was applied to Jesus along with other royal titles such as Son of David, Son of Man, Messiah, etc. In other words, Christ *is* not some kind of divine son of a divine father in the ontological sense of the word, but the phrase ‘son of God’ is a royal title derived from the Old Testament and its Ancient Near Eastern environment to *express* the way God used and uses Jesus for his redemptive purposes.

Using African metaphors

Applied to our topic this means that we must explore what both the biblical and the African metaphors we are using *originally stood for* and whether these distinctive referents are compatible with each other. Every concept and metaphor is able to convey a host of different meanings, a phenomenon called ‘polysemy’ in hermeneutics. But this fact should not make us believe that all these meanings are legitimate from a theological point of view.

If one calls Christ an ‘ancestor’ in an African environment, for instance, Christ will be understood by the ordinary folk as a deceased father (or mother). A deceased father is somebody who wields control over the family. Both the metaphors of ‘king’ and ‘ancestor’ denote authority or leadership. So in this respect they seem to be compatible with each other.

But in the biblical original, authority was redefined from that of an oppressive ruler to that of a liberating and empowering servant. In other words, the royal metaphor was turned on its head. People will not easily remember this transformation when Christ is proclaimed king of the universe. The original meaning of royalty tends to persist in their minds. When Christ was proclaimed the cosmic ruler in the Greek-Roman world, it did not take long until he assumed the authoritarian characteristics of a Roman emperor. This can easily be seen on depictions of Christ belonging to that period in history.

The image of the heavenly emperor was again used to legitimate his representative on earth, the Roman emperor and his ruthless rule. Moreover, many Christians throughout the ages concluded that they must subjugate the

earth in the name of its heavenly king. The wheel of history had turned right back to Psalm 2 and its Egyptian sources. As mentioned above, the pope too claimed to be the representative of Christ, the cosmic king, on earth. Forgotten was the reversal of the model in Mark 10:35-45 (par) and its implications for relationships between believers.

Something similar may happen when Christ is proclaimed to be an ‘ancestor’ in Africa.²⁷⁴ Would it be possible to redefine ‘ancestor’ unmistakably in terms of the ‘Suffering Servant’, the manifestation of God’s unconditional, redeeming and transforming love, the one who liberates and empowers, the one that is available for the weak and suffering here and now? Perhaps it is. The message that Christ, the great Servant, is the divine model of authentic ancestorship could be of incredible importance for psychological and social transformation in an African context.

The question is, however, whether ordinary church members would buy into this understanding or whether the original meaning of ‘ancestor’ would persist in their minds. As we have seen, this normally happens. Understood as an ancestor, Christ could probably not take the place of those most recently deceased, thus as the most proximate ancestor, but rather as a prime ancestor – who is important as the founder of the genealogy, but who is remote in existential terms. He would have to be the ‘ancestor’ of the ‘new clan’, of all people, not only of the ‘blood brotherhood’ of the existing family, yet be as close to the individual as the most proximate ancestor used to be.²⁷⁵ All this is a tall order.

Logical consistency

To communicate meaning, metaphors must make sense. To make sense there must be some kind of logical consistency. In the Bible we find a vast diversity of metaphors that do not necessarily dovetail with each other. As long as we understand that metaphors are tools used to bring across a theological meaning there is no problem.

In the Old Testament Yahweh is called a shield, a fortress, a king, a potter, a jealous husband, a judge, a creator, a lion, and so on. In the Gospel of John, Christ is called the ‘word’ (logos), the son, the shepherd, the vine, the light, the door, and so on. How can a shepherd also be a door to the sheep? How can a word also be a son? That is not the point. All these pictures are nothing but linguistic tools to spell out the significance of Christ for our faith. As such they do not contradict but augment each other.

As mentioned above, the problem emerges when devotional, homiletical or pastoral language changes into ontologically conceived dogma. Metaphors are reified into static ontological structures and deductions are made which are then taken to be eternal truths. Originally they may have been valid responses to valid questions that had to be solved within a particular worldview. But frozen into an eternal truth they may fail to convey their essential meaning in new

situations. They may even fail to communicate anything at all.²⁷⁶ They typically answer questions that nobody asks. That is as true in Africa as in modern Europe or America.

They also run into logical inconsistencies. This has happened on a large scale when the gospel was translated into Hellenistic thought patterns. The classical doctrines of the Trinity and Christology are so incomprehensible to uneducated believers because they are expressed in the form of ontological facts rather than metaphorical expressions pointing to an underlying meaning.

How can a divine father generate a divine son without a divine mother? How can the son be a son without being subservient to the father? How can the spirit of god be a divine person distinct from a god who is also spirit and a person? How can the son of god also be the word of god? How can three divine persons have communion with each other without being three gods? How can a person have a divine father and a human mother without becoming a half-god? How can a human male with XY chromosomes have a divine father that cannot have XY chromosomes? How can a person be born, walk on this earth, eat, sleep, suffer and die if he is god? I have placed all these concepts in lower case to indicate that they are metaphors that carry particular meanings, and not ontological realities. Once one recognises that, the ancient doctrines make perfect sense. Here is not the place to explain that.

A statement that is not plausible does not communicate. So the laity is puzzled. When simple folk cannot make sense of doctrines they ignore them.²⁷⁷ Theoretically they are regarded as revealed mysteries that simply have to be believed. Never mind that a 'revealed mystery' is a contradiction in terms. If God wanted to reveal himself, he would certainly be able to speak a language that we can understand. In the New Testament 'mystery' refers to the Israelite past as a tentative premonition of what was going to happen in Christ.

For non-believers, the outcome is worse. Enemies of the Christian faith gleefully point out the nonsense they contain. As Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims rightfully maintain, every child knows that 1+1+1 cannot be 1. They conclude that Christians are not really monotheists, but polytheists, thus heretics. They ostensibly also deify a human being, which is blasphemy. Secularised people simply dismiss the entire dogma as a bunch of irrationalities of a bygone age – and who could blame them! If we do not get clarity on our use of metaphors we lose the credibility of our message.

Logical coherence in African terminology

Why do I mention all this? Simply to demonstrate that when we introduce new metaphors into the Christian language we must not repeat old mistakes. We must try our best not to create even greater confusion, but to arrive at greater simplicity, clarity and consistency. Certainly the concept 'ancestor' is closer to African audiences than the Greek concept 'logos'. There is at least a possibility that this simple term could bring clarity into the Western conceptual jungle inherited by African Christians.

However, preachers on the ground may find it difficult to know which African formulations would make sense to the congregations and which would simply confuse them. This problem is compounded when the new concepts used are not found in the Bible, and when they have been taboo in African churches since missionary times. Not to get into trouble with their congregations, preachers may be inclined to continue with the inherited metaphors to which, for better or for worse, the congregations have become accustomed.

But say these difficulties can be overcome; do they make sense in their own right? Let us look at some examples. Some African theologians have proposed that Christ should be seen as a ‘brother ancestor’.²⁷⁸ For simple folk, the ‘brother’ part of the metaphor may denote his equality or solidarity with other siblings, while the ‘ancestor’ part of the metaphor may indicate his authority. This may seem to be in line with the biblical idea that Christ is the ‘first-born’ among many brothers and sisters. But is the combination of the two metaphors logically coherent?

In the English language, the concepts of ‘brother ancestor’ and ‘sister ancestor’ harbour conceptual contradictions. An ancestor is a forebear. A father is not normally perceived to be a brother. An elder brother can represent the father, even take the place of a father, but that does not make him a father. To call a father a brother may entail the same kind of transformation of assumptions that we have mentioned in the case of king and servant above.

The problem may disappear when the word for ‘ancestor’ in the vernacular denotes authority rather than parenthood. To make that clear, let us look at an example. In the Sotho languages the words used for ‘parents’ (*batswadi*), or for ‘fathers’ (*bontate*) differ from the word used for ‘ancestors’ (*badimo*). The latter word is used in the plural and refers to the entire ancestral hierarchy. This clearly denotes superiority or authority.

The most proximate ‘ancestor’, who is the most relevant deceased in existential terms, is not normally addressed with the singular of this term (*modimo*), but with the appellation that was used when he/she was alive, for instance, grandfather (*rrakgolo*) or grandmother (*koko*). In the same way an older deceased brother or sister could presumably be addressed as he/she was addressed when alive, namely as ‘my great one’ (*mogolo wa ka*), that is, ‘my elder sibling’. In all these cases seniority or superiority is clearly indicated.

It would seem, therefore, that in the Sotho languages the combination ‘brother ancestor’ would not work very well if it referred to family relationships. However, the Tswana (a Sotho ethnic group) can also address a living superior of high standing with the singular of the term normally used for ancestors (*modimo*). This again shows that the term stands for superiority rather than parenthood. Here the term ‘brother ancestor’ would at least be intelligible, although it would be slightly unusual.

This example shows how important the original meaning of the vernacular is in the utilisation of metaphors. We always have to ask what kind of meaning is

being conveyed to the listeners. It also shows that when we apply the word ‘ancestor’ to Christ, we are busy with a metaphor taken from ordinary life, rather than an ontological reality. Its application to real forebears or superiors is, of course, not a metaphor.

Are the original metaphors any better, or do they cause just as much confusion? The biblical appellations to Christ (Messiah, Son of David, Son of God, Son of Man) were royal or messianic titles that also did not fit the humble *Rabbi* that preached in Galilee very well. Royal titles also do not fit into modern democratic assumptions. In modern times a king is nothing but a ceremonial figurehead. Certainly that is not how Christians see the role of Christ.²⁷⁹

Nor do they fit in with the Christian conviction that Christ is a Redeemer (English, ‘Saviour’; German, *Heiland*). In ancient times, of course, the king was indeed seen as a potential redeemer simply because he had power and was expected to be a graceful ruler.²⁸⁰ That is no longer the case. God’s Spirit denoted God’s creative and redemptive presence.²⁸¹ Today the word ‘spirit’ has different connotations. All these examples show how easily our language can be misunderstood. We have to make certain that the meaning intended by the metaphor is brought to light and not obscured.

The ongoing task

These considerations are not meant to discredit genuine attempts to express the gospel of Christ in African terms of reference. On the contrary, we must “become a Jew to the Jews”; otherwise we cannot consider ourselves to be “participants of the gospel” (1 Cor 9:19-23). The gospel must become incarnate in any culture that it reaches or it will fail to transform it from within. The use of metaphorical terminology taken from the lives and environments of the people for devotion, preaching and pastoral care is both legitimate and indispensable. There are very good examples to go by.²⁸²

There is nothing wrong if a preacher says, for instance, “Some of you may believe that your ancestors are in charge of your lives and help you in times of distress. But the *real* ‘ancestor’ who controls and redeems the lives of Christians is Jesus Christ.” Such pastoral language does not formulate a dogma with ontological pretensions, but tries to communicate a meaning.

So the plurality and inconsistency of metaphors as such is *not* the real problem. The *real* problem arises when metaphors are reified and used as building blocks for a logically constructed system of meaning with ontological pretensions. As long as a metaphor remains transcendent to its referent, and as long as this referent serves as a criterion for the range of meanings that can be derived from the metaphor, there should be no problem.²⁸³

Hidden syncretism?

Conceptual problems can be sorted out. There is a basic question that is by far more tricky: if Christ is our ancestor, will he *replace* all other ancestors, or will he *confirm* the power and authority of the ancestors over us? And if he confirms the power and authority of ancestors over us, will *they* then become the existentially relevant authorities for us, rather than Christ? It happened both with the hierarchy and the saints in the Catholic Church. It happened with the secular authorities ever since Constantine, even in Protestantism.

Therefore at least the Protestants among us have reason to be wary of according a mediating function to the ancestors. I think the biblical examples quoted above have shown that, while our God may use earthly instruments for his creative and redemptive purposes, he wants to enter into a personal, direct and exclusive relationship with us at the transcendent level. Nothing should come between Christ and us. The challenge is to widen our horizons sufficiently to cover the whole of created reality, including the deceased, in our perception of God's own creative authority and redemptive activity. Only in this way can our theology become inclusive without becoming syncretistic.²⁸⁴

Let us summarise

The biblical witness is the foundational source of the Christian faith. We have to come to terms with the fact that there is no trace of ancestor veneration in either the Old or the New Testament. This is surprising because in many other ways the Israelite culture was traditionalist, patriarchal and powerfully geared to what God had done to the Israelite fathers in the past. Yet the deceased were considered to be dead. They had no presence and no authority over the living. Attempts to consult them were deemed to be idolatry. The New Testament goes even further: any significance attributed to biological derivation is discredited.

We tried to understand the inner rationale of this stance. The biblical faith is based on the conviction that God, the ultimate Source and Destiny of reality, wants to enter into a personal, immediate and exclusive relationship with humanity. The biblical God is characterised by his commitment to justice, redeeming love and comprehensive well-being. Because God is the Creator and Redeemer of all people, an undisturbed relationship with God is deemed to be the prerequisite for human well-being and earthly integrity. No other spiritual power should be allowed to interfere with this relationship. While God uses earthly instruments for his creative and redemptive purposes, these tools of God should never develop a significance and an authority of their own.

Concerning the place of ancestors in the biblical scheme of things we came to the following conclusions.

(a) Unconditional acceptance. God accepts us into his fellowship although we are not acceptable. He suffers what is unacceptable in us to change us from within. Ancestor veneration as such should not be condoned, but those who are

under the spell of ancestral authority should be accepted into the fellowship of believers without being put under pressure. Exposure to the Word of God will hopefully liberate and empower them to become adult sons and daughters of God who take control of their own lives and who are ultimately responsible to God and to nobody else.

(b) The community of saints. Deceased believers have belonged to the Body of Christ in the past and will belong to the Body of Christ in the eschatological future. Nothing can separate them from the love of God that is in Christ. However, for the present they have been taken out of action and can play no role in the lives of the living.

(c) The fate of non-Christians. Deceased and living non-believers can also belong to Christ. This does not depend on their acceptance of doctrinal propositions, but on the question whether their intentions have been (or still are) in line with the creative and redemptive will of God as manifest in Christ. Because such questions are entirely outside our reach, they should be left to God, who has both the power and the will to redeem.

(d) Community and authority. Community is fundamental for the biblical faith. But it is a different kind of community because God accepts the unacceptable into his fellowship to change them from within. Authority too is changed from the authority of an individual and oppressive ruler to the authority of Christ as a self-giving Servant of his people, an authority shared by the leader with his followers.

(e) An otherworldly concept of salvation. The biblical emphasis on God's capacity and intention to bring about a world without idolatry, injustice and suffering led to radical expectations that turned otherworldly when they were not fulfilled within the expected time. The Christian faith must regain the communal and holistic concept of Israelite future expectations if it is to have a message for Africa.

(f) Secular authority. God uses spiritual formations and social institutions for his creative and redemptive project in this world, whether they are 'Christian' or 'secular'. The state, the economy and the family are cases in point. Religious and ethical traditions keep communities intact and individuals out of mischief. Parents fulfil an indispensable function in this world, regardless of whether they are believers or not. They should be respected and obeyed by their minor children. They should be cared for by their adult offspring until they die. However, all these authorities are answerable to God and subject to critique and transformation. Their mandate is limited and certainly does not extend beyond death.

(g) We should respect our forebears and thank God for everything that he has done for us through them. Once deceased, however, they can do nothing for us and we can do nothing for them. Our primary, direct counterpart is the living God himself, who has made himself known in Christ and is present among us in the Holy Spirit.

There exists an interesting formal similarity between the traditionalist concept of an ancestor and the Christian concept of the risen Christ, namely the continued spiritual presence of a deceased bodily person. While it is the spirit that matters, it is the body that makes an entity real in this world. This means that both a biological interpretation of the resurrection and a Gnostic spiritualisation of the risen Christ are out of place.

Only when this formal similarity is recognised will the qualitative differences between an ancestor and the risen Christ come to light. It is these differences that really matter. The decisive question is not whether they ‘exist’ and in what form, but what they stand for and *what they do* to us. We have summarised these differences at the end of section VII and do not have to repeat them here.

Concerning enculturation, the biblical authors have freely used metaphors, insights and patterns of thought found in their religious environment to bring across their message. This has often led to syncretism and idolatry. However, in biblical times the trend has been to transform them, clean out what was not compatible with exclusive loyalty to God and integrate them into their perception of God’s creative and redemptive intentions. On this basis there should be no problem with using African concepts, insights and patterns of thought in the church’s message.

However, when expressing the gospel in situational and contextual terms we should try to avoid past mistakes. Metaphors taken from the environment and used for preaching and pastoral purposes should not be turned into doctrines about the ontological nature of God. Such speculative constructs can easily obstruct the communication of the gospel rather than facilitating it.

Metaphors may not be reified (= treated as if they were real entities out there) and given out as ‘eternal truths’. Deductions from such assumed truths can easily hover off into the otherworldly sphere of speculation. Because this happened in classical theology, the classical Christian doctrines about God became unintelligible for most people. Preachers and theologians should aim at consistency of the metaphors they are using so that the latter do not create greater confusion rather than greater clarity.

- ²⁸ Taylor distinguishes those who are still “happily rooted in a traditional worldview, those who cling to it with a sense of guilt, those who are at one with the certainties of the old European Christendom and the growing minority who are taking account of contemporary secularism” (2001:151).
- ²⁹ Magesa, who follows a similar approach, believes that the underlying motivations of African Religion do not change. Influences have been superficial, he maintains (1997:14ff 32). I do not think that such a bedrock is beyond impact and change, but it is worth looking at what exactly has persisted for millennia and right through the colonial impact.
- ³⁰ For the debate see, for instance, Ashforth 2005:116ff.
- ³¹ Ashforth 2005:128ff., 230.
- ³² For the following see Joan Comaroff 1974, chapters VII and VIII, and Appendix B.
- ³³ “... the primary role and objective (of Tshidi religion) was the provision of adequate explanations and ritual techniques to cope with the demands of irregularities in everyday life” Comaroff 1974:356.
- ³⁴ Comaroff herself attempted to provide a “systematic cosmology” (1974:254ff).
- ³⁵ For an overview see Hammond-Tooke 1974:318ff.
- ³⁶ It is hardly appropriate to believe that traditionalists have “a wider understanding of the laws of nature” (Moila quoted in Kahakwa 2003:60). Traditionalism and modernity have two different ways of interpreting reality.
- ³⁷ “...there exists a spiritual power which can be tapped licitly or illicitly. The elder can tap it by way of the ancestral spirits to uphold his authority. The witch can tap it by his/her evil powers. But the source of the spiritual power tapped is the same” (Brain 1973:122-133).
- ³⁸ Among the (Nilotic) Maasai, blessing and curse take the place of ritual and sorcery in the mediation of good or evil forces (Richebächer 2003:95ff).
- ³⁹ Hammond-Tooke 1986:161,162; Berglund 1976:266; Hiltunen 1986:156.
- ⁴⁰ Sundermeier 1998:21ff.
- ⁴¹ That is the reason why, in Sundkler’s words, “religion is not so much thought out as danced out.” “For the Haya, existence consisted not of religion and other activities, the one separated from the other, but religion was the totality of life with one dimension, ritual, dominating all else” (Sundkler 1980 as quoted in Kahakwa 2003:44-45).
- ⁴² Of particular interest in this regard is the mirror or the photo, with which the personality of a human being could be captured and exposed (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:185ff), the written word, which made the Bible so important in African Christianity (1991:192f), as well as body parts (1991:193). Body parts like hair and fingernails, but also human excrements, must be carefully disposed of, lest sorcerers and witches lay their hands on them. Certain body parts are considered to be potent magical ‘medicines’, which is the motive for ritual murders that occur even today in parts of the Limpopo Province in South Africa. As I have experienced, the “body and blood of Christ” in the bread and wine of the Eucharist could easily be understood as powerful magical medicines by traditionalists.
- ⁴³ The individual knows that he/she is “embedded in a current of life that has always run through the family. The individual is nothing but the receiver of life who is obliged to hand it on” (Sundermeier 1998:15).
- ⁴⁴ Cf the revealing title of the German version of Sundermeier’s book (1998): “Only together are we able to live”.
- ⁴⁵ “The perpetuation of a centralised, hierarchical society involved the symbolic assertion of the chieftainship over the domestic periphery, agnatic politics over matrilinear kinship, cattle over agriculture, men over women, and so on. Indeed, this pattern of

symbolic dominance was an essential component of the prevailing hegemony; that is, of the representation of the universe as a natural order of categories and conventions” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:152)

- ⁴⁶ See the confrontation between the round culture of the Tswana and the square culture of the missionaries attributed to Newtonian physics by Comaroff & Comaroff (1997:127ff. 1997:279ff.) As an employer I have often been frustrated by the indifference of traditionalists to straight lines. However, African artisans who have internalised the rules of modernist techniques can be exceptionally precise in their work.
- ⁴⁷ For the social and the spatial order among the Tswana see Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:129ff (building on Comaroff 1974). For Zambia see Taylor 2001:61, referring to Dorothea Lehmann’s *Christians of the Copperbelt* (London: SCM Press 1961).
- ⁴⁸ Even among the semi-nomadic Maasai there is a definite spatial centre – the cattle pen – and a dangerous periphery - open nature outside (Richebächer 2003:86).
- ⁴⁹ According to Setiloane ancestors of the female lineage are as important as those of the male lineage (1976:22). Yet it is significant that males represent this lineage.
- ⁵⁰ In many cases family heads may arrange marriages without the consent of the future spouses (Coertze 1990:144f for the Bafokeng).
- ⁵¹ To call this system an ontocracy is a misnomer (van Leeuwen as quoted by Bediako 1997:137). The ontological hierarchy found in Hellenism is based on concepts, while the patriarchal hierarchy of traditionalism is based on authority.
- ⁵² Hammond-Tooke 1986:160.
- ⁵³ For an example see Setiloane 1976:22.
- ⁵⁴ For the elaborate seniority principles of the Nyakyusa in Malawi see Wilson in Radcliffe-Brown and Forde 1970:131-139.
- ⁵⁵ The pantheon of the Haya in Tanzania came about when a group with a hunter culture was conquered by a (Bantu) group with an agricultural culture, that was again conquered by a (Nilo-Hamitic) group with a pastoral culture. The merger between these entities resulted in a feudal society where the pastoralists formed the aristocratic elite. The spiritual realm includes a hierarchy of founder heroes at national and clan levels as well as ancestors at family level. Each level has its respective human mediators – the king who is also the national priest, the clan-priest, and the family elders with priestly functions. The whole system falls under a Supreme Being (*Ruhanga*, *Katonda* or *Rubaho*). He can be approached in great distress; he is mentioned in the cult together with the lesser spirits, but he is normally distant in existential terms. To the pantheon also belonged deified nature spirits – the spirit of water, rain and wind, the spirit of hunting, travel and forests, the spirit of the heavenly realms and stars, or the earth and fertility (Richebächer 2003:36-57). The patriarchal-hierarchical system is typical for most kinds of traditionalism. Even among the (Nilotic) Maasai, who do not practice ancestor veneration at all, a very developed patriarchal-hierarchical order obtains (Richebächer 2003:87ff).
- ⁵⁶ “The unbroken hierarchy from the homestead head down to the youngest child is reflected in a continuum of authority and obedience which unites all members into a single labour force ...” (Kuckertz 1990:198). This is why “the nominal and adjectival form, *-kulu*, often carries the sense of ‘adult’, ‘grown-up’ or ‘mature’ but it also appears frequently in kinship terms and other words denoting relative status, meaning ‘elder’, ‘senior’ or simply ‘big’ in the sense of socially important” (Ruel 1982. <http://lucy.ukc.ac.uk/ERA/Ancestors/>).
- ⁵⁷ “This interplay of dependence and responsibility, of filial duty and authority, is not limited to the bond between child, father and grandfather. Those two central links are reduplicated in a chain that stretches out laterally in long lines of brothers, uncles, aunts

and cousins, backwards along the line of the ancestors to the legendary founder himself, and forwards down the lineage of the unborn ... (The human being) is literally a family tree, a single branching organism" (Taylor 2001:64).

⁵⁸ "Everything you do is governed completely by the will of the spirits, which behave according to the laws of the community" (S P Lediga in Oosthuizen 1968:129).

⁵⁹ Sundermeier 1998:20.

⁶⁰ For an example see Setiloane 1976:68f.

⁶¹ For the Herero in Namibia see Malan 1995:98ff.

⁶² "The cause (of untimely death) is always witchcraft or sorcery and hence viewed with extreme suspicion and anxiety" (Berglund 1976:80f). Among the Mamabolo (Northern Sotho) the question of who caused the death only does not occur when the deceased had reached old age. Then he has been 'called by' the Supreme Being (Häselbarth 1972:30).

⁶³ "Returning to life would be witchcraft at its worst" (Kuckertz 1990:230).

⁶⁴ Häselbarth renders an exceptionally detailed account of the extensive and profound death rituals found among the Sotho, in this case the Mamabolo (1972:29-79).

⁶⁵ Hammond-Tooke 1974:324ff.

⁶⁶ According to Nyamiti, death leads to the 'supernatural condition' of both the ancestors and of Christ (1984:26). "Now, in the African mind the death of an ancestor is not an end in itself; it is the door to a higher state of ancestorship. This agrees with the biblical teaching according to which the Lord's death was the gate to his glorification" (1984:81). Nyamiti comes to such a conclusion because he ontologises the two phenomena. However, they express two completely different existential concerns. Ancestor veneration re-affirms the authority and status of the deceased in the hierarchy, while the resurrection of Christ affirms the validity of the interpretation of the God of Israel by Jesus as a God of mercy in the face of the catastrophe of the cross. In Paul's terms, we identify with the death and resurrection of Jesus to anticipate our own deaths as the wages of sin and our own resurrection as the gift of a new life in fellowship with God (Rom 6). See chapter 3.

⁶⁷ Except for very old and mature people, it is hardly correct to say that "death is accepted as both natural and inevitable ... an ecstatic experience of fulfilment" (Maimela 1985:74). The Zulu do not mourn old people when they die but understand that they have 'passed on' after completing their role in life, but a premature death is a catastrophe. Sorcerers have "killed him and all the children he carries inside himself" (Berglund 1976:79ff).

⁶⁸ *Motho ke motho ka batho* (Sotho: the human being is a human being through human beings). "The human being is not a being that rests in itself and subsists for itself, but it is constituted by relationships" (Sundermeier 1998:12).

⁶⁹ "The ancestors were the domesticated dead of the settlement. Their world was a projection, on a spiritual plane, of the dominant model of social relations among the living" (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:153 for the Tswana). For the Lovedu see Krige & Krige 1965:238. For the Mamabolo see Häselbarth 1972:66ff.

⁷⁰ Kahakwa 2003:66, quoting Moila 2002. The Tswana use the same term for ancestors (*badimo*) as they use for living superiors (Setiloane 1976:21; Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:154). A young missionary, Heinrich Voges found himself being addressed on occasion by elderly people as *modimo wa me* (my superior). The term can be applied across the spectrum, from living superiors to ancestors. The usage of the term for living superiors also occurs occasionally in the case of very old persons among the Lovedu (Krige & Krige 1965:240) and the Zulu (Berglund 1976:89). To deny superiors authority, whether alive or dead, is a sacrilege that has grave repercussions. A son who runs away from home is pursued by misfortune (Tswana: *dikgaba*, or less appropriately

madimabe) until he is reconciled with the family (Dehnke 1974:6f). In the Western case, when a person is “running away from family obligations” he/she becomes “petrified by an unbearable, diffuse, objectless guilt” (Schützenberger 1998:23).

- ⁷¹ Meyer Fortes speaks of “discorporation” on the one hand and the “establishment of continued relevance” as a regulative focus on the other (Bediako 1997:218f).
- ⁷² “The living man is happier than the departed because he is alive. But the departed are more powerful” (Taylor 2001:104 quoting Alexis Kagame).
- ⁷³ “It is true of them as of the living that they are because they participate.” Taylor 2001:105.
- ⁷⁴ “The cult joins the ancestors with the present. It protects them from disappearing into oblivion, and it guards the living by preserving all the threads of their existence” (Kgatla 1992:44 quoting Smith 1950:108). Similarly Munyika 2004:177; Cole 1997:408f; Berglund 1976:91.
- ⁷⁵ In Sotho, this special quality of a person is called *seriti*. “An important, commanding person is believed to have a strong *seriti* ... Consequently, it is not everybody who becomes an ancestor ... the rest sink into oblivion after their death.” (Kgatla 1992:41-43 for the Pedi. Cf Setiloane for the Twana 1976:42, Häselbarth 1965 for the Mamabolo; Berglund 1976:84-88 for the Zulu, Munyika 2004:176ff for the Owambo). *Seriti* can be ‘light’ or ‘heavy’ (indicating influence) and ‘good’ or ‘bad’ (indicating impact on the community). Setiloane likens it to a magnetic field that can also surround animals and things (1976:42f). It is participation in the network of dynamistic power that is epitomised by *Modimo*.
- ⁷⁶ According to Setiloane, a representative is ‘identical’ with what he/she represents. At his/her own level every person represents the whole of the structured community and must be treated with respect (1976:21). Among the Ilyamba, a matrilineal society, the brother of the mother is the prime authority – whether in life or after his death (Richebächer 2003:64).
- ⁷⁷ Setiloane 1976:64.
- ⁷⁸ Note the same stem in the Zulu words *umzimba* (= body) and *inzimba* (= a person’s social status, dignity and prestige, thus social impact). The ‘personality’ of a person is the bodily person as it appears in ordinary life and in dreams of the deceased. The bodily size of a ‘big person’ can carry prestige and dignity (Berglund 1976:84). The prestige of a clan is something different. It is called *isithunzi*. It is transferred from the ancestors to the foetus at conception and it leaves the corpse at death to return to the ancestors. This collective ‘power’ can be weak or strong in an individual (1976:86f).
- ⁷⁹ Setiloane 1976:24.
- ⁸⁰ For a debate on ancestral authority see the instructive article of Calhoun 1980, as well as further discussions on <http://lucy.ukc.ac.uk/ERA/Ancestors/>. The debate overlooks the fact that in a hierarchy all relationships are based on status, role and thus authority.
- ⁸¹ According to Boszormenyi-Nagy, it is recognised even in the West that “... through them, our ancestors pass life - their life - on to us, and we hand it down to our own descendants” (Schützenberger 1998:17).
- ⁸² “A spirit has no power to command or torment those of a higher status than itself” (Stayt 1968:259).
- ⁸³ According to Kahakwa, among the Haya even deceased children can grow, mature and be promoted to adulthood and ancestorship (2003:58). This is unusual.
- ⁸⁴ For the Nguni see Hammond-Tooke 1986:158ffp; for the Pedi, Mönnig 1967:57; for the Ovambo, Hiltunen 1993:34. Mbiti suggests that the dying process of the most proximate 5-6 generations of “living-dead” is not yet complete. But the decisive factor that causes their ‘survival’ is *authority* operating through memory. Fading memories are fatal for

existential relevance. “Not the personality as such is transformed into the disposition of the ancestor, but the juridical status of authority, such as that of a father, which continues to exist irrespective of the good or bad characteristics of the deceased while still alive” (Häselbarth 1972:73 for the Mamabolo). “What is being worshipped (sic) is not the total personality of the deceased, but a jural principle that underlies the society, viz. the importance of paternal authority and filial piety” (Fortes 1965 in Hammond-Tooke 1974:330). Similarly Sundermeier 1998:126f.

⁸⁵ Among the Zulu, a deceased in the process of becoming a shade (that is between burial and home bringing) can be ‘finished off’ by sorcerers or witches digging up the grave and manipulating the corpse for their own purposes. In this case the shade ‘dies’. In other words, evil, working through dynamistic power, can interfere with authority. But shades can also be “dying of hunger”, when they are forgotten by their descendents, which is an evil committed not by sorcerers and witches but by the progeny (Berglund 1976:81).

⁸⁶ Ashforth 2005:203.

⁸⁷ Among the Venda an ancestor can be accused of being a sorcerer (*muloi*). Then he/she is ritually ‘killed’ and gotten rid of (Stayt 1968:252). In olden days sorcerers and witches were executed. Execution means excommunication. In the case of a deceased there is nobody to be executed because the person is already dead. So ritual ‘killing’ eradicates the authority status of the deceased in the community.

⁸⁸ See Sundermeier 1998:127ff for the debate about “what actually constitutes an ancestor”. Sundermeier ultimately locates the significance of ancestor veneration in the African longing for life (135f), but he also emphasises that ancestor veneration does not imply that death is denied or bypassed (122f). In fact, the ritual of ‘bringing home the dead’ does not restore vitality but belonging and authority.

⁸⁹ “When a Zulu is sick it is the whole man that is sick ... Suggesting that the spiritual components of a human are invisible caused amazement among many informants ... The shade is the man, not a part of him” (Berglund 1976:82).

⁹⁰ Among the Zulu the ‘dead man’ is like a stone or clay. “His body is no good any more” (Berglund 1976:78).

⁹¹ Mtuze argues that the word ‘spirit’ is inappropriate for ancestors; they should rather be called ‘presences’. It is as full persons that they continue to exist – not in their earthly vitality, yet also not in some spiritual dimension stripped of its bodily concreteness (2003:5, 8, 48ff). Mtuze also maintains that they are ‘presences’ of God. That too makes sense if one remembers that God stands for the source of all dynamistic power (Mtuzé speaks of pantheism). I would ask, however, whether it is then appropriate to call harmful and negative forces ‘spirits’ (2003:5, 54ff etc). (a) Are they ‘personalities’ that are independent of bodily concreteness? (b) Mtuzé’s distinction between presences and spirits falls into the categories ‘beneficial’ (therefore manifestations of God) and ‘detrimental’. “(I)t is evident that *Thikoloshe* cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, be associated with the deity” (2003:56). But then ancestors would not be able to cause harm, be negligent, greedy, etc. And the concept of God would then only cover whatever benefits the community and could no longer be considered to be ‘pantheistic’. But Mtuzé’s terminology is not consistent. Harmful spirits are also called ‘presences’ at times.

⁹² Taylor 2001:120f.

⁹³ “(A) man’s brooding anger or envy very quickly can take on an existence and vitality of its own” (Taylor 2001:25). See his chapter on “turning inside out” (2001:22ff). To understand African spirituality we must “abandon our image of a man whose complex identity is encased within the shell of his physical being, and allow ourselves instead to

visualize a centrifugal selfhood, equally complex, interpermeating other selves ...” (2001:27).

- ⁹⁴ “Witchcraft is the active embodiment of that brooding anger ... The universal dread of it comes from the knowledge that when anger of that kind goes forth from the heart it quickly passes the point of recall. It is at large in the world with an autonomy and power of its own” (Taylor 2001:130).
- ⁹⁵ “The terms malevolent and benevolent indicate that spirits retain their earthly characteristics and personality” (Kahakwa 2003:50). Spirits love their possessions when on earth, and sometimes demand them from the living (Kahakwa 2003:51f). “Ancestors, though immaterial, retain their bodily senses and appetites ... “ (Ashforth 2005:232). Among the Ilyamba the world of the deceased was perceived to be a replica of the world of the living (Richebächer 2003:64).
- ⁹⁶ Taylor 2001:108.
- ⁹⁷ For the Akan see Ephirim-Donkor 1997:7, 139f; for the Zulu, Berglund 1976:260f.. For the Lugbara, the Luhya, the Dinka and the Akan, where a leader can even acquire something like ‘sainthood’ or ‘apotheosis’, see Taylor 2001:94ff.
- ⁹⁸ Magesa 1997:49. Parrinder 1962:59ff. “You son of So-and-So, why do you kill us your children? ... Here is your beast. Take it. Look after us as we are looking after you ... You are greedy, you are always ready to find fault” (Parrinder 1962:64 quoting Kuper on the Swazi). “You are useless you gods! You only give us trouble! For although we give you offerings you do not listen to us!” (Parrinder 1962:64f quoting Junod on the Thonga). “Death confers power, a power on which the social order is based it is precisely ancestral caprice and power that draws the perpetual astonishment of the living they never cease to speak with amazement of how insufferably greedy and demanding the dead are” (Cole 1997:410 on Madagascar). The Iraqw in Tanzania “rather grudgingly give to their ancestors what they were entitled to anyway” (Richebächer 2003:77; 111). Among the Zulu ancestors can on occasion be called ‘cannibals’ if they have consumed too many cattle sacrificed to them (Berglund 1976:92). For the Venda see Stayt 1968:240. Evans-Prichard’s observation that the Nuer perceive themselves to be obliged to fulfil all the demands of the deceased and do not bear grudges against them (Sundermeier 1998:147; in the German original 173) must certainly be qualified.
- ⁹⁹ Cole speaks of the “desire to honor ancestors and the wish to avoid them” (1997:406). For the Zulu see Berglund 1976:127ff; for the Pedi Mönnig 1967:60; for the Southern Sotho Casalis 1965/1861:237ff, 249; for the Iraqw Richebächer 2003:77. See also Mbiti 1969:84; Wanamaker 1997:287.
- ¹⁰⁰ See for instance Krige & Krige 1965:231 for the Lovedu.
- ¹⁰¹ Moltmann in Moltmann and Sundermeier 2006:15 (my translation). This (European) parallel is remarkable in various ways: (a) in medieval Europe there was a keen awareness of *linear time* (fixed hours), which is not necessarily found in African traditionalism. This may reflect the impact of Greek philosophy or Christianity. (b) Particular times can have a *particular quality*, which is typical for traditionalism. (c) It is *the past* that haunts the present, especially a past of unresolved conflict or injustice. The past is never really past. Everything is (potentially) present. That again is typical for traditionalism.
- ¹⁰² Although the Justice and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa has been criticised on many counts, it was an absolutely essential process. Where historical injustices and conflicts are not addressed they continue to haunt the population for generations to come.

- ¹⁰³ Mugambi begins his depiction of African religion with the concept of God, then follow spirits and angels, then ancestors and saints (2002:59ff). The same is found in Parrinder 1996. The order should be the other way round. Ancestors are not just “another category of beings who were believed to inhabit the world” (2002:66) but the decisive religious counterparts of the living.
- ¹⁰⁴ For a summary see Hammond-Tooke 1974:321ff, 335ff. For the Haya see Kahakwa 2003:49ff.
- ¹⁰⁵ Nature spirits are rare in Southern Africa. “Nature spirits and hero-gods have no place in the Lovedu sceme of things.” Krige & Krige 1965:231. According to Kirsch (2004:702), the Tonga in Zambia distinguish between ancestors (*mizimu*), rain shrine spirits (*basangu*), prophet spirits (*bamiba invula*) and foreign spirits (*masabe*). The *masabe* are a relatively new phenomenon (Hammond-Tooke 1986:162f). A similar phenomenon is found among the Venda (Stayt 1968:302). According to Shoffeleers (2000:14ff), the Maravi in Malawi distinguish between personal and territorial spirits, royal ancestors, the spirits of the rain cult, and spirits of witches, even spirits of colonial officers. Because the origins of a calamity are not easily discerned, people may try out one avenue after the other until help is found. For the Owambo see Munyika 2004:174ff. For the Haya see Kahakwa 2003:46ff.
- ¹⁰⁶ For the dialectic between *presence in terms of impact* and *remoteness in terms of accessibility* see Taylor 2001:52ff. Most sources confirm the remoteness of the Supreme Being in terms not of presence but accessibility. The impression that the African Supreme Being was devoid of immanence may have been interpreted in terms of European Deism by some missionaries (Mugambi 2002:76), but it was due to his existential inaccessibility.
- ¹⁰⁷ Among the Tswana there are a few legendary prayers directed to *Modimo* (Dehnke 1968:2; Smith 1961:121). The Mamabolo pray to *Modimo* in extreme distress (Häselbarth 1972:133). Mönnig says that the Pedi do not pray to *Modimo* (1967:47). However, sources from all over Africa testify to the fact that in extreme situations the Supreme Being is indeed addressed directly. Whether one can expect to be heard is another question.
- ¹⁰⁸ Mönnig says that *Modimo* is perceived to be male (1967:45). That is not surprising in a worldview based on patriarchal hierarchy. But the power underlying all of reality must include female characteristics. Smith (1961:122) and Dehnke (1968:2) speak of legendary prayers where *Modimo* is addressed as *Mme* (mother). There are other such instances all over Africa. The male character of *Modimo* is due to mythological personification: *Modimo* can have a son (e.g. *Kobeane*) without implying that this son must have a divine mother. *Modimo* can have lots wives and lots of cattle without implying that the Basotho believe in goddesses. Such a logic would confuse the metaphor with its intended referent.
- ¹⁰⁹ *Nzua* of the Ilyamba (Tanzania) is a goddess whose breasts provide rain (Richebächer 2003:62f). *Nyame* of the Ashanti may be deemed to be the great Mother who gives life to all (Parrinder 1962:33).
- ¹¹⁰ ‘Personality’ in the Western sense of the word would come closest to the Tswana *seriti* or the Zulu word for ‘shades’, but not in the sense of ‘having a particular character’. Both these terms are linked to the specific impact a person makes on the observer, his/her ‘weight’, or his/her awe-inspiring presence, or his ‘image’. *Seriti* is strongly associated with the actual appearance, shape or body of a person, as it impresses its personality power on the observer. It has the same stem as *moriti* (shadow). Similarly the ancestors are called ‘shades’ (*idlozi* but also *isithunzi*) among the Zulu. ‘Shade’ is a shadow, a reflection in water or in a mirror, or a photo. Psychologically speaking it is

the person as a whole in its bodily concreteness that passes into collective memory, not a disembodied soul. Both terms are not applied to the Supreme Being. The latter cannot be a shade, because he does not have a definable shape or function in the hierarchy. Yet his ‘weight’ is felt in all of reality.

- ¹¹¹ “... the stress in the primal religious world-view is decidedly *this-worldly* ... (but) this *this-wordliness* encompasses God and man in an abiding relationship which is the divine destiny of humankind, and the purpose and goal of the universe” (Bediako 1997:101). The second part of the quotation on destiny, purpose and goal obviously reads a Christian motive into African religion. Also that “God has never left man and never been far removed from man” is, of course, a Christian conviction. African mythology, with its keen awareness of the dismal state of the world, strongly denies this (Taylor 2001:52ff.).
- ¹¹² “The appropriate question is not ‘What caused this or that?’ but ‘Who did it?’” (Bediako 1997:94 quoting Harold Turner on primal religion).
- ¹¹³ That *Modimo* (Sotho/Tswana) has something to do with power or impact can be gathered from the root. The root *-dzimu* is common in Bantu languages. In Sotho/Tswana, it is shared by the words *badimo* in the personal *mo-ba* class (ancestors / superiors), *godimo* (above) and *legodimo* (sky). As in many worldviews “high” is a spatial metaphor for anything important, excellent, powerful, authoritative, numinous or inaccessible. When used for the Supreme Being it stands in the singular of the *mo-me* class, which is often used for something charged with power like *mollo* (fire), *motse* (village), *moya* (wind, breath, spirit), *molato* (transgression). Sometimes ancestors are called *medimo*, perhaps denoting their impact. Among the Venda this is the normal form (*midzimu*). In Northern Sotho there is also the word *sedimo-tlou* (mighty like an elephant) for a whirlwind, and in Southern Sotho the word *madimo* for cannibals. The root suggests something uncanny, unpredictable, outrageous, potentially dangerous, awe-inspiring.
- ¹¹⁴ That *Modimo* belongs to the ‘impersonal’ *mo-me* noun class is therefore not a conclusive argument that he is not a person in the African sense of the word. Even the ancestors can be called ‘*medimo*’ on occasion. Noun classes are not water-tight compartments. The *mo-me* class is also occasionally used for persons, e.g. *moditi* (initiator) or *motswalle* (friend). The *le-ma* class is also used for persons, such as *lehodu* (thief) or *lekgowa* (a white person).
- ¹¹⁵ Taylor enumerates myths and daily expressions from all over Africa that testify to his omnipresent impact on the one hand and his inaccessibility on the other (2001:52ff).
- ¹¹⁶ For the dialectic between presence and inaccessibility see Taylor 2001:52ff. Non-accessibility is metaphorically described as ‘God has left us’. The myth that God has withdrawn, usually due to human mischief, can be found all over Africa.
- ¹¹⁷ The Supreme Being of the traditional Sotho/Tswana religion (*Modimo*), for instance, is not experienced as a person in the communicative sense of the word (Setiloane 1973, 1976:77ff; Nürnberger 1975). Sundermeier’s statement “God speaks – not aloud and directly, but through the world he does speak” (1998:170 – my translation) begs the question: what does ‘speaking’ mean? Of course, the ‘weight’ of *Modimo* has an impact that can be interpreted. But that is an experience quite different from that of the “Word of God” found in the biblical tradition. Setiloane refers to an “IT” when he speaks of *Modimo*. In olden times it could be referred to as a ‘thing’ (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:155). This does not mean that he cannot be a ‘person’ in the African sense of the word. Even when *Modimo* was called a thing, this ‘thing’ could be ‘something personal’.
- ¹¹⁸ The personal relationship between *Mwari* (the Shona Supreme Being in Zimbabwe) and ‘his’ people or ‘his’ land is an exception to the rule (Daneel 1970). The *Mwari* cult has

influenced the concept of *Raluwhimba* used by the neighbouring Venda (Stayt 1968:230f). Taylor mentions a few other such cases: the Ashanti, the Dogon, the Ambo (Owambo) “and perhaps three or four more” (Taylor 2001:55). The Ilyamba in Tanzania direct sacrifices and prayers to *Nzua* (Richebächer 2003:62f), yet she (sic!) is still hidden and inaccessible. Munyika disagrees with Estermann that Kalunga of the Owambo was “less concerned with the well-being or misery of mortals”, arguing that he provided the world for humans to live in. Yet he says that the Owambo were not bothered “that this deity is invisible and remote” (2004:159). Being Creator of the world, thus the possibility of human existence, is not the same thing as personal care for humans.

¹¹⁹ When asked what *Modimo* does, an old Tswana diviner told Dehnke: “*Ga a dire sepe, go a diragala*” (Tswana: he does nothing; it happens) (*op.cit.*).

¹²⁰ According to Munyika, *Kalunga* of the Owambo is not experienced as a person, but he is definitely not a non-person or a thing. He can never be an IT (as Setiloane has suggested). He is not ‘dumb and deaf’. To think otherwise would degrade him to a ‘false god’ (personal communication; for a full discussion see Munyika 2004:148f; 157ff). Sundermeier and Daneel expressed similar sentiments, though they agree that Christian or Muslim influence may have made itself felt.

¹²¹ In cases of calamity, Mugambi says, diviners “investigate who offended God, the spirits and the ancestors”, which implies that all these entities belong to the same category of spiritual beings (2002:62). Bediako, in contrast, is critical of such attempts to streamline African religion so that it becomes congruent with Western concepts of God (1997:98ff).

¹²² Setiloane quotes a source where a young man “wishing to make an approach to *Modimo*” approaches his elder brother, who approaches his father, who approaches his grandfather and so on until someone is reached who can address *Modimo* directly (1976:65). Yet Setiloane emphasises the fact that *Modimo* is not a person in the Sotho-Tswana context. In other words, this procedure indicates a hierarchically structured universe of power conglomerations which do not need to be personal in the Western sense of the word. Another question is, of course, whether this actually happens in practice and is not pure mythology. J Comaroff reports that even for Christians among the Tshidi *Modimo* cannot be approached because he ‘speaks another language’, he ‘will not understand my concerns’, that communion with *Modimo* just ‘does not make sense’ (Comaroff 1974:268ff).

¹²³ The exceptional closeness of the Haya creation myths to Genesis 2, for instance, seems to indicate foreign influence. The human being is moulded out of clay, the breath of life is breathed into it and the son of God has a hand in creation (Kahakwa 2003:90). Compare this with a metaphorically home-grown creation myth found in Malawi: *Chiuta* (the Supreme Being) first lived above the earth, which was dry and lifeless. One day the heavens opened and *Chiuta* descended to earth in a torrent of rain together with the first human couple, the animals and the first agricultural tools. The earth began to flourish and there was plenty of food. This ‘paradise’ came to an end when fire was invented and a veldt fire ensued that drove some animals away from humans in disgust, other animals to humans for protection and, most importantly, *Chiuta* back to heaven. Departing, *Chiuta* decreed that humans had to die and get back to *Chiuta*. Many other home-grown myths of creation and the departure of the Supreme Being due to human failure exist (Parrinder 1962:40ff).

¹²⁴ Hammond-Tooke quoted by Wanamaker 1997:288. Taylor 2001:52ff. Sundermeier (1998:124f). The latter quotes the example of the Ngoe: the chain of ancestors reaches up to the prime ancestor *where it stops*. At the central ancestral festival the Supreme Being is never mentioned. Sundermeier believes that the view that ancestors act as

mediators may reflect adaptations to Islam and Christianity. Buti Tlhagale also believes that the view is not original (personal communication 22-09-06).

- ¹²⁵ As mentioned above, Taylor enumerates the Ashanti, the Dogon, the Ambo “and perhaps three or four more – in which the Supreme God was actively worshipped ... with a cult and a priesthood ... but in the great majority no shrines are raised to him and no sacrifices offered” (2001:55). Later he adds the cult of *Mugwe* of the Meru in Kenya (2001:80, 93ff). We mentioned the Shona cult of *Mwari* and its Venda offshoots, the Haya cult and the Iraqw cult of *Looa*. “The rituals celebrated by kinsmen are directed to the shades, not to any Supreme God” (Taylor 2001:54, quoting Monica Wilson on the Nyakyusa).
- ¹²⁶ The early work of Mbiti is a classical example of interpreting African religion in Western theological terms. Mtuze has great appreciation for Mbiti’s work. But African spirituality does not systematise its views, because it does not speculate as traditional theology does.
- ¹²⁷ *Kalunga* of the Owambo is believed to be the source of all dynamistic power, including ‘vital force’ (*oonkondo*), whether in humans, animals or plants (Hiltunen 1993:34). The same is true for *Modimo* of the Tswana (Dehnke 1974) and *Mwari* of the Shona (Daneel 1970:17) and most other African religions (Parrinder 1962:33ff).
- ¹²⁸ Mtuze 2003:51. Horton argues that ancestors are linked to small-scale societies, while the Supreme Being gains prominence as horizons widen (Hammond-Tooke 1986:165). However, the presence of the Supreme Being is keenly felt even in small communities, especially when conventional ways of tackling calamities fail. In such cases, the Sotho would exclaim: *Modimo o gona, ga re kgone selo!* (Now God is here, there is nothing we can do!).
- ¹²⁹ As Setiloane puts it, it is an “existential response to the ‘mysterium’”. “The Sotho-Tswana make statements about Modimo; but they are statements of here-and-now response, not attempts to make rational sense of IT”. The Supreme Being may be too dignified, or too ‘weighty’, even to be mentioned by name in some cases (1976:85). One can only stand in awe before such a mysterious and ineffable entity; one has no way of dealing with it. It was seldom ever referred to. *Modimo* belonged to the “inconceivable fringes of the world” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:155. See the ample anthropological research quoted there). Of course, the word “fringe” is hardly appropriate. *Modimo* is all over.
- ¹³⁰ Mtuze speaks of ‘panentheism’ (2003:8). The modern concept of ‘energy’ would come close to this view if one ignored its ‘natural law’ implications and added a hierarchical structure. In a sense ‘energy’ is also ‘one’; it is also ‘source’; it is also present always and everywhere; it is as such also intangible but has countless manifestations, the higher the ‘voltage’ the more so; it is also the presupposition of every event and every action; it is also associated with the sky, the earth, the ‘abyss’.
- ¹³¹ A clear exception is the goddess *Looa* of the Iraqw in Tanzania whom you can approach in the silence of your heart when in distress (Richebächer 2003:81).
- ¹³² “Complaints and wishes are not directed to the world-order itself ... With one’s personal cares and wishes one turns to the ancestors” (Janheinz Jahn, as quoted by Taylor 2001:56). The ‘world-order’ may be a term more applicable to the Greek ‘logos’ than to dynamistic reality with its undefined character, but it expresses the fact that a personal entity with defined personality traits is not envisaged.
- ¹³³ “God is the last resort of the desperate, when all else has failed. Then, despite his greatness and distance, he can be appealed to directly, without special formulas or intervening priests or godlings” (Parrinder 1962:39).

¹³⁴ A person of high integrity can be called *motho wa Kgobe* (person of God). *Kgobe* is one of the proper names for *Modimo*. When a person who is up to mischief cannot be dealt with through family, clan or tribal court procedures, a Mosotho could say *Modimo o tlo go bona* (literally: *Modimo* will see you or visit you = *Modimo* will deal with you). Also among the Iraqw the supreme goddess *Looa* is a guarantor of justice (Richebächer 2003:80). Among the Yoruba *Olorun* is the creator and final judge (Parrinder 1962:34).

¹³⁵ Obviously this is the view taken by Mtuze (2003:45, 56). Similarly Magesa: “To associate God with anything that is not good, pure, just and honorable is ridiculous” (1997:41). Mugambi maintains that “God was conceived of as a person concerned and interested in the affairs of man” (2002:62). The view must certainly be qualified. Magesa’s proposition that, while nothing happens without God’s knowledge or permission, God is never blamed for misfortune, is not true for a number of African religions. One has to distinguish between the concept of the Source of reality and the concept of the good and the just, both of which can be covered by the concept of God. This fact has given rise to the difficult problem of theodicy in the biblical tradition. The message of the New Testament is that, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, “God is light and there is no darkness in him” (1 John 1). The Source of reality is *proclaimed* to be for us, with us and not against us, not even in death. That is not necessarily the case in African religion.

¹³⁶ Magesa 1997:39ff.

¹³⁷ The ‘*shadow*’ can be a symbol of the “evil influence of a person or an event which attacks the life-force of another” from within. The same idea is conveyed in the metaphor of ‘*weight*’. After a death the children of the deceased are “ritually protected from being trampled down by the angry shade”. Another widely used metaphor is that of ‘*heat*’, another ‘*dirt*’ (Taylor 2001:125-12128). Of course one would not easily identify ancestors or the Supreme Being with dirt. That would explode the feeling of awe and respect. Yet the ambiguity of superiority, authority and power is keenly felt. Metaphors defy systematisation into ontological systems. They express existential experiences.

¹³⁸ As the Source of experienced reality the Supreme Being is inherently ambiguous and has to be. *Modimo* of the Sotho/Tswana has a light, positive side as well as a dark, negative side to it. It may be the personification of all justice, truthfulness and purity; it may be above all inter-tribal quarrels; it may be immovable in its positive ‘intentions’; it may uphold traditions and taboos; it may be a source of reassurance in cases of misfortune or injustice (Kgatla 1992:40; Setiloane 1976:83). But it can also be the impenetrable source of predicaments that cannot be attributed to the wrath of ancestors or sorcery. It is likened to a thunder cloud which is brilliant white on top and threateningly dark at the bottom, the source of life-giving rain and death-dealing lightning (Dehnke 1974:3). When death is ascribed to *Modimo*, people try not to mourn (Setiloane 1976:80). “IT controls everything, even in the last resort natural disasters and the wickedness of ‘*baloi*’ (sorcerers) ... it is not simply a source of order, but requires that man – whether by practical or ritual acts – shall restore that order when he has disturbed it” (Setiloane 1976:82f). Sure, but is it *Modimo* who “requires” the restoration of a pre-existing order, or is it the necessity to maintain the social cohesion and the stability of a cosmic reality that is not automatically guaranteed by *Modimo*? The longing for a resolution of this ambiguity among the Sotho/Tswana may be found in the legend that humans “were led out of the earth” by a one-legged agent of the Supreme Being who stands for unity, justice and benevolence and to whom the deceased return (Setiloane 1976:34). Taylor maintains that the accessibility of God was one of the great surprises of the biblical message to Africa, the other being the implication that humans are all one family (2001:79ff). Similarly Casalis. The (non-Bantu) Nama, on the other

hand, have taken these two aspects apart: the good god (*Tsui-llGoab*) is the Creator of all good things, while the bad god (*//Gaunab*) is author of misfortune, disease and death (Malan 1995:125f). For a similar division between good and evil among the Lugbara see Middleton 1965:63. Another example is the dualism between the just and merciful goddess *Looa* (working from above and expecting no sacrifice) and the wicked and hated god *Netlanqw* (working from below who has to be kept happy with sacrifices) of the Iraqw in Tanzania (Richebächer 2003:77, 80). This kind of dualism is also found in the ancient Parsist distinction between *Ahuramazda* and *Angra Mainyu*, the Hellenistic-Gnostic distinction between spirit and matter and the dualism of popular Christianity between God and the devil. These dualisms are much easier to understand than the biblical dialectic between God as both Source and Destiny of reality. That the Creator is also a Redeemer is a contrast statement, a protest against experienced reality.

¹³⁹ Sundermeier disputes my contention that *Modimo* is the equivalent of the Western concept of ‘fate’ in the case of the Sotho-Tswana (Sundermeier 1998:168). Setiloane speaks of *Modimo* as an IT, yet he seems to bear Sundermeier out. The same unresolved ambiguity is found in Munyika’s description of *Kalunga* (of the Owambo): he/she is perceived to be the source of all power, thus as ambiguous as Luther’s *Deus absconditus*, with whom personal relationships are not possible because “he is not a person”, yet he communicates by proxy and indirectly (Munyika 2004:148f; 158). On the other hand, Buti Tlhagale believes that “interaction with Christianity and Islam has made this God real” (personal communication 22-09-06). Many observers have expressed similar sentiments. This difference of opinion is probably due to a semantic problem. I distinguish between the mythological personification of the Supreme Being (which is pervasive in African traditional spirituality) and the existential experience of the Supreme Being, which is impersonal (Nürnberger 1975). Existentially we are all (!) confronted with the ineffable, the unpredictable, the ambivalent, the demonic, but also the unavoidable and unalterable, whatever names we attach to that experience. Westerners too personify such experiences. They too may ‘cry to high heaven’ in times of crisis or chaos without being too certain that the cry will be heard. The word ‘fate’ is derived from Latin *fatum*, which is a divine decree or intervention. Issued by whom? The German word *Schicksal* means something ‘sent’. Sent by whom? Such personifications even occur in secular disciplines, for instance the expression “an act of God” in the legal profession, or the use of “God” for the reliability of natural causality by scientists like Einstein (“God does not play dice”). None of these personifications imply that God is existentially experienced as a person. Moreover, as I suggested earlier, the Western distinction between ‘personal’ and ‘impersonal’ may not do justice to a dynamistic worldview and the formalised relationships within a hierarchical communal order. Munyika similarly argues that “worship” and “veneration” are European terms that simply do not fit the Owambo spiritual experience (2004:178).

¹⁴⁰ Taylor 2001:56ff.

¹⁴¹ Among the Ilyamba (Tanzania) the brother of the mother is the main authority already in this life and then also when deceased (Richebächer 2003:64). Authority just does cease when death occurs.

¹⁴² For the Maasai see Richebächer 2003:94-97. “There is no (African) society with ancestor veneration in which the elders are not also venerated. But there are indeed societies without ancestor cults where elders are held in highest esteem.”

¹⁴³ “Let us never underestimate the magnitude of this revelation” even “among those who have not become Christians” (Taylor 2001:56).

¹⁴⁴ “So an over-protective enthusiasm for an endangered culture may merely turn it into a museum piece” (Taylor 2001:151). Similarly Richebächer 2003:105 and many others.

- ¹⁴⁵ Richebächer says that Nyamiti's concept of ancestry has been "radically modified" if compared with the actual religious practice in different small scale societies (2003:285). Seemingly Nyamiti is not interested in the correspondence between actual ancestor veneration and his Christology.
- ¹⁴⁶ Diviners are called in to establish both ancestral displeasure and the activities of sorcerers and witches in cases of misfortune. But the question is not asked why the ancestors could not protect their offspring against such forces of evil. Similarly the question why an omnipotent and benevolent Supreme Being (assuming that he were really perceived as such) would not intervene is never asked. In the biblical faith theodicy has always been an agonising question, in Africa it has not (cf also Joan Comaroff 1974:395ff.)
- ¹⁴⁷ The idea that dynamistic power "rests" in the things until they are activated by human agency (Sundermeier 1998:30ff) is problematic. In the first place dynamistic power is volatile. It is actually or potentially in flux. As such it can be channelled by human agency, but also by other causes. In the second place there are fateful conditions and occurrences that cannot be ascribed to, or controlled by, human manipulations. These lead to fatalism. As Sundermeier observes "The unstructured world is dangerous because it is chaotic" (1998:54). The meaning of ritual is to structure reality and make it more dependable. Hiltunen distinguishes between religion, which maintains the lineage, and magic, which sustains or destroys life (1993:35). But ancestors can also sustain or threaten life. Ritual gives ancestral authorities their due, while sorcery and witchcraft manipulate spheres of life that do not seem to be under ancestral control. Both presuppose a dynamistic worldview.
- ¹⁴⁸ Bediako 1997:97f. However, he refers to Idowu's and Mbiti's treatments of subordinate deities and other spiritual beings found in West Africa, rather than sorcery and witchcraft.
- ¹⁴⁹ "Truly witchcraft is the basic fear of all my people, and you will never understand the Temne people unless you believe this", said a Temne Christian "who might be speaking for every tribe in Africa" (Taylor 2001:132).
- ¹⁵⁰ Taylor 2001:43. "The core of Africa's wisdom is that she knows the difference between existence and presence" (2001:135).
- ¹⁵¹ "None of my informants had any idea where (the ancestors) were to be found, though some guessed that they might be on the top of very high hills, others suggested the sky, while some stated that they might be underground. The location of these settlements is of no interest to the people at all, my questioning did not elicit any curiosity. Some informants were annoyed, because it is said that the shades must be everywhere if they are to observe the behaviour of their descendants; hence an attempt to locate their villages in space might lead to contradictions" (Rehfish, F. 1969 on the Mambila in Northern Nigeria <http://lucy.ukc.ac.uk/ERA/Ancestors/>). When I asked a Mosotho: "where are the ancestors?", he replied, "Yes indeed, where are the ancestors! In a dream I was told that I would become rich, and look, I am as poor as ever." The spatial abode was of no concern to him, the effectiveness of their intervention was.
- ¹⁵² Ephirim-Donkor 1997:139. Setiloane compares them with "the intangible all-pervasiveness of vapour which reflects the intimate presence of 'badimo' at every point in life" (1976:64).
- ¹⁵³ "There is no existence of the survivors separated from that of the shades, nor a realm of the shades separate from the living" (Berglund 1976:197). In some cases the ancestral prescriptions and taboos are only binding on ancestral land. When abroad, you follow the rules that obtain there (Cole 1997:420). However, this may be an accommodation to necessities encountered by migrant labour in a commercialised and pluralistic situation.

- ¹⁵⁴ For an analysis of ritual among the Tswana see Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:156ff.
- ¹⁵⁵ Among Nguni groups, for instance, in-law relationships are subject to elaborate rules called *hlonipha* (Krige 1965:30f). “A rigid etiquette of *hlonipha* (respect or shame) is demanded from a wife in her husband’s home (*ekhakhake*). She is prohibited from using the names, or words similar to the principle syllable of the names, of her husband’s nearest senior male relatives – his father’s father, his father, his father’s senior brothers, his own senior brothers – living or dead. If she forgets, she is threatened that her tongue will rot, and if she continues to speak the forbidden sounds, she is sent to fetch a fine from her family” (Hilda Kuper on the Swazi in Radcliffe-Brown and Forde 1970:93 (cf 105). Similar taboos exist among the Nyakyusa in Malawi (Wilson in Radcliffe-Brown and Forde 1970:126ff.)
- ¹⁵⁶ Mbiti 1969:15ff; 24. “Time does not grow into the future, but into the past” (Sundermeier 1998:25). Mugambi questions the appropriateness of this view (2002:80).
- ¹⁵⁷ Note the Pedi expression “he ‘young gods’ pray for us to the ‘God of old’” (*badimo babafsa re rapeleleng go Modimo wa kgale*). However, the ‘God of old’ is the ‘great-great God’ (*Modimo Mogologolo*). Time is an expression of status (Van Wyk 1973:411).
- ¹⁵⁸ African theological students are not necessarily interested in the empirical possibility of miracles, or the historical reliability of the documents, but in the redemptive power of the biblical Jesus and the risen Christ (cf Richebächer 2003:296ff). In the Bible the guiding principle is not the ancestral hierarchy but the “great deeds of Yahweh” in the history of his people. But the memory of these deeds is constantly adjusted to respond to the changing needs of new situations (Nünberger 2002:92-99). Historicity in the modern sense of the world is not part of the agenda.
- ¹⁵⁹ From an empiricist point of view, “in an oral society what cannot be recalled is wasted” (Ong as quoted by Canonici, N 1994. The trickster in Zulu Folktales, *Alternation* Dec 1994, p 43). From a dynamistic point of view the power of forgotten ancestors has not disappeared from reality, but it has moved out of comprehension and reach, thus into the sphere of mythology. Mythology tries to explain the cosmos but it is not necessarily relevant for daily life.
- ¹⁶⁰ This is even the case where the Supreme Being is perceived in personal terms. Mwari, the high God of the Shona in Zimbabwe, is the “champion of traditional law and custom ... the bulwark against foreign influence” (Daneel 1970:36, 83ff).
- ¹⁶¹ Veikko Munyika maintained that the lack of writing and reading skills made it imperative to depend on the memories of the elder generation. Knowledge handed over to the new generation empowered rather than oppressed them. This may be true, but the question is why such skills have not been developed or adopted by traditionalist cultures. Contacts with scripted cultures existed for centuries before colonialism. Written records and reading skills have an immediate emancipatory effect because the new generation can investigate the tradition and come to its own informed judgements.
- ¹⁶² Kuckertz 1990:197.
- ¹⁶³ Cf Sundermeier 1998:25ff.
- ¹⁶⁴ Sundermeier 1998:27ff.
- ¹⁶⁵ “African traditional religion is the religion practised by the majority of Africans, nakedly (i.e. overtly) in most cases, but also in some cases under the veneer supplied by Westernism and Arabism” (Idowu as quoted by Bediako 1997:116).
- ¹⁶⁶ There is a difference between the attempt to Christianise the African religious past and the rejection of Christianity as inappropriate for Africa after the 1960s (Bediako 1997:76ff.). More recently African Christian theologians, especially in the Catholic Church, have become quite bold in confessing their African traditional convictions. For examples see Magesa 1997:4ff. Although he is a Catholic theologian of rank, Magesa

wants to show that “the main principles constituting African Religion remain the force behind African religiosity and identity, the source and basis of religious meaning.” (1997:xiii). He is convinced that his own ancestors “have watched the progress of this endeavour constantly from start to finish. May the book be an offering and libation to them. May they see to it that it contributes to the life force and resilience of the African people” (1997:xvi). According to some reports a Catholic archbishop recently suggested that gifts to the ancestors should become part of the liturgy of the Mass (Elsener 2001:49). Bediako also reports the inclusion of the ancestors in the Anglican liturgy in Kenya (1997:229). Long before that Taylor wondered whether it was not “time for the Church to learn to give the Communion of Saints the centrality which the soul of Africa craves? Neither the inhibited silence of the Protestants nor the too-presumptuous schema of Rome allows African Christians to live with their dead in the way which they feel profoundly to be true to Man’s nature” (2001:112). I hope that my analyses will shed some light on this question.

¹⁶⁷ Comaroff J 1974. Mission work commenced just after 1800 (1974:54). At the time of the research there were 9 mainline churches with a membership above 200 and 46 churches with a membership below 200, thus 55 in all, in the area. The Methodists were the largest group with 2830 members followed by the Roman Catholics with about 1000 members. Classical Protestants (Reformed and Lutheran) together numbered about 1031. 300 responses were processed. There were almost no statistically significant differences between the three types of churches investigated: A = mainline churches, B = independent churches following mainline patterns and C = Zionists and other more ‘syncretistic’ churches.

¹⁶⁸ Interestingly the ancestors are not only seen as mediators but also as representatives, messengers or angels of God. All these are utilisations of Christian concepts.

¹⁶⁹ Comaroff 1974:89.

¹⁷⁰ “The existence of vernacular Bibles ... creates the likelihood that the hearers of the Word in their own languages will make their own response and on their own terms” (Bediako 1997:62). Sure, but is the response necessarily Christian? Can it not also be geared to an Old Israelitic rather than a New Testament content? Or simply recast the message in an African religious mould, so that nothing of existential relevance really changes?

¹⁷¹ Comaroff 1974:307.

¹⁷² Comaroff 1974: 307

¹⁷³ Comaroff 1974:304-307

¹⁷⁴ “He can believe in his own religion without necessarily practising it, and at the same time be a practising Christian” (M Gelfand on the Shona, quoted by Taylor 2001:10ff.)

¹⁷⁵ Ashforth 2005:7ff, 196ff.

¹⁷⁶ Taylor 2001:4ff., Mugambi 2002:91. Ironically, the class room religion is not the religion of Westerners either. It is not true that “Christ has been presented as the answer to the questions a white man would ask, the solutions to the needs that Western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European world-view” (Taylor 2001:7). In fact it misses both cultures!

¹⁷⁷ “As the needs, cravings and hopes remain unchanged, so also the basic ideas regarding the character of the universe, of its forces, their possibilities and the modes of their operation, have been preserved intact. In point of fact this turning away ‘from idols to serve the living and true God’ (in the Spirit churches) does not appear to be essentially different from the usual practice in African religion whereby a *go* or fetish which has plainly failed to meet the requirements of its supplicants, is abandoned in order that another one, believed to be more effective, may be embraced” (Baëta quoted by Bediako

1997:63f). We shall return to this ‘pragmatism’ in chapters 5-7. Baëta confirms the impression that Christianity has not really changed the structure of African religious assumptions. So, has it reached its goal? What happens when the Christian God also fails in terms of the ‘requirements of the supplicants’? Is modernity not the most effective ‘god’ in this regard?

¹⁷⁸ Note the common view that God was in African religion prior to the proclamation of the gospel and that the latter only added the name of Christ “that final and completing element that crowns their traditional religiosity and brings its flickering light to full brilliance” (Mbiti as quoted by Bediako 1997:118). However, it is one thing to say that African religion had found its own answers to the spiritual problems of traditionalists, such as the disturbance of relationships, and that God has always used these insights to keep the community intact and individuals on track. It is quite another thing to say that Christ is just added as the previously missing pebble in the mosaic. As argued in chapter 3, the pre-exilic Israelite faith already represents a radical departure from traditionalism.

¹⁷⁹ The use of the vernacular in theology, however desirable or indispensable it may be, will not do the trick on its own, as Bediako seems to suggest (1997:72f). Responding to actual spiritual needs, the gospel must transform the entire system of presuppositions, not towards a Western worldview, but in the direction of God’s redemptive vision.

¹⁸⁰ Mageša has even used a reference to the text in the subtitle of his book (1997)

¹⁸¹ Setiloane 1976:156ff. For a detailed analysis see Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:236ff.

¹⁸² Setiloane 1976:32.

¹⁸³ “Premature deaths are almost always presumed to result from some sort of malicious human action classified under the general rubric of witchcraft ... ‘There is no such thing as an accident in this place’” (Ashforth 2005:80).

¹⁸⁴ Mugambi 2002:37.

¹⁸⁵ It is hardly surprising that the early Tswana perceived missionary preaching as mere “talking”. Alternatively they made sense of it in starkly pragmatic and physical terms (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991). On the other hand there are instances where evangelistic revivals led to a discernment of personal sin and a spirituality based on the heart, notably among the Haya (Richebächer 2003:149ff).

¹⁸⁶ According to Dehnke (1974:6f), the Tswana distinguish between a filthy deed (*sebe*), a wrong act (*boleo*), the atmosphere of hostility created by such a deed (*bosula*), the chain reaction of evil set in motion by disrespect (*dikgaba*) and sorcery (*boloi*). According to Kgatla (1992:45ff), the Northern Sotho distinguish between something bad (*sebe*), a transgression leading to a court case (*molato*), an intended misdeed (*bobe*), impurity (*ditshila*), the condition of impurity (*makgoma*) and taboo or avoidance (*seila*). Sorcerers and witches typically attack the pillars of social life, especially healthy relationships to seniors (Hammond-Tooke 1986:162).

¹⁸⁷ Kgatla 1992:328. Cf Maimela 1985:68f. For the Owambo, see Munyika 2004:212ff.

¹⁸⁸ “God is the Author of the moral law because he is the Victim of every breach of it. Every conflict is against him; all the brooding anger from the heart of Man, let loose as an independent force of destruction, falls upon him. At the heart of the totality stands the cross, cosmic because it is the Creator who hangs upon it” (Taylor 2001:134). Cf the meaning of divine sacrifice in Nürnberger 2004:166ff or 2002:279ff.

¹⁸⁹ “Did the change of religion not mean for the Iraqw a change of taboos rather than freedom from taboos?” (Richebächer 2003:173). People often did not want to join the church because all they found there were “a new set of community rules and foreign laws and their drastic interpretation by church authorities and the painful experience of inter-denominational conflicts” (2003:177f). “The (traditional) structures of obedience based on fear were subconsciously transferred to the spirituality of the new religion”

especially when human institutions and hierarchies were not seen as functional arrangements to serve each other in the Body of Christ, but steps to be taken on the way to Christ the monarch (2003:179).

¹⁹⁰ Mugambi recognises that “Jesus Christ is the head of the Church in a very different sense from that in which the ancestors of traditional African communities are heads of such communities” (2002:67). But he does not spell out the inner rationale of this difference.

¹⁹¹ Taylor 2001:131.

¹⁹² “Anglican authorities ... are useless when someone is bewitched, and their church services offer little comfort to someone ... who finds herself in the middle of an occult war zone. They offer no rituals to heal the effects of witchcraft or protect against occult attack.” Ashforth 2005:84. See also 176ff.

¹⁹³ This may be changing. See for instance the two special issues of the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* on HIV and AIDS (125 and 126 / 2006). In assessing these attempts, however, it is imperative to distinguish clearly between the basic assumptions of traditionalism, modernity and postmodernity.

¹⁹⁴ Ashforth 2005:190.

¹⁹⁵ F O Isichei of Asaba, quoted in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol VII/1975 173.

¹⁹⁶ Haddad 2006:86f.

¹⁹⁷ Richebächer 2003:228ff.

¹⁹⁸ Taylor 2001:1.

¹⁹⁹ See the remarkable chapter on presence in Taylor 2001:1ff.

²⁰⁰ Taylor (2001:57). Taylor is concerned that in fact “too often the dichotomy has remained unbridged” because “the Incarnation has been presented as an isolated crossing over rather than the closing of the gulf.” After a “quick recognition” the new insights are “rejected, or at least relegated to the edges of awareness as the old picture of things reasserts itself. If the fatherly presence of God is stressed, and the compassion of Jesus, they are fitted into the category of the hero-gods; if the transcendent greatness is emphasised, God goes back behind the clouds, as irrelevant as he was before” (2001:81). I cannot express it better.

²⁰¹ There is no competition between the Supreme Being and the ancestors; in cultic terms the ancestors are on the side of the living (Richebächer 2003:279ff).

²⁰² Richebächer 2003:225ff.

²⁰³ “He that should come, the Emmanuel of Africa’s long dream, is, I believe, this God who has been eternally committed to, and involved in, the closed circle, even to the limit of self-extinction” (Taylor 2001:58f).

²⁰⁴ As mentioned above, the Basotho call the most proximate ancestors by the appellation they had when alive, for instance, grandfather (*rrakgolo*) or grandmother (*koko*). The plural ‘ancestors’ (*badimo*) always refers to the whole ancestral hierarchy.

²⁰⁵ See the interesting reflections on Christ as an alien visitor by E B Udoh 1988 (*Guest Christology: An interpretative view of the christological problem in Africa*. Frankfurt, Bern, NY: SIGC 59). Unfortunately I was not able to see his work before going to the press. I depend on the summary offered by Richebächer (2003:305f).

²⁰⁶ “The Christian, with his theology grounded in the doctrine of the transcendence must pass through an agonizing abnegation if he is to understand imaginatively how essentially this-worldly is the closed circle of being which is the African world, and how little it needs a transcendent God” (Taylor 2001:56). I can add that it is precisely this (illegitimate) grounding of theology in an imaginary otherworldliness that made it miss the real challenges posed by Christian existence, whether in traditionalism or modernity.

- ²⁰⁷ “Our relationship to God is not a ‘religious’ one to the highest, most powerful, best being conceivable – that is not transcendence – but our relationship to God is a new life in ‘existence for others’, in participation in the being of Jesus” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer as quoted by Taylor 2001:58).
- ²⁰⁸ Setiloane 1976:229.
- ²⁰⁹ Cf Ludwig 1999:43ff for Tanzania and Munyika 2004:262ff for Namibia.
- ²¹⁰ According to Ludwig (1999:193ff et al), the church in Tanzania followed and supported each stage in the evolution of political ideology. The indigenous Lutheran leadership introduced the office of the bishop explicitly to conform to the model of the traditionalist chieftainship (1999:47ff). With notable exceptions, the church in Germany also maintained its authoritarian political stance right up to the Nazi catastrophe (cf Nürnberger 1991). In all such cases the notion of the coming of Christ in glory to set up a new heaven and earth no longer functions as an existentially challenging part of Christian spirituality. Eschatology is reduced to what happens after death.
- ²¹¹ Inspired by Gell (1992:176ff), I would distinguish between (a) expectational time (the past is left behind, the future lures us forward), (b) hierarchical time (what has been there before determines what follows), and (c) time spans filled with different experiential qualities and contents, such as times of loneliness, festivity, work, play, etc. Modernity clearly focuses on the first, traditionalism on the second type, while all human beings distinguish between the respective qualities of different times. When in the ecstasy of love one may have the feeling that time has come to a standstill. When in the Intensive Care Unit one may have the feeling that ‘the minutes are dragging’. When we are very busy, time ‘flies’. It would be a fallacy, however, to substitute the quality of time for ‘linear’ or ‘mechanical’ time. An hour is an hour and a day is a day, whether we are in joy or in agony, whether the time drags or flies, whether we are dead or alive. The discovery of linear time is one of the great discoveries of humankind. It makes it possible for us to optimise even the quality of time. In my first parish I would arrive at an outstation at the scheduled time for the Sunday service, say 10.00. Nobody would be there. ‘In time’ an elder or two would pitch up and we would have a long conversation. The service would start, perhaps, at 11.30 when sufficient people had arrived to sing a hymn. The last parishioners would come at the end of the service, fully satisfied that they had caught the blessing and were therefore part of the occasion. That it was Sunday, and that on a Sunday there would be a service, had been the only parameter of importance. An immense amount of ‘linear time’ expired that could have been filled with ‘quality time’. Having internalised modernist assumptions, I was exasperated. Fill it with meaningful conversation, community, ecstasy, festivity – anything treasured by traditionalists – but do not let it pass unutilised! As an old man in the Kalahari is reported to have said: “Sometimes I sits and thinks; sometimes I just sits”.
- ²¹² Many Christians of the second and third generation feel that “any High God is too separated from the world and (they) turn, in an emergency, to the diviners and safety-doctors and paternal shades which their fathers trusted. God, in spite of grace, has not been inside. Now Africa’s century of acquiescence is coming to an end ... If God remains ‘outside’ much longer, Africa’s this-worldliness will turn to materialism” (Taylor 2001:57). I am afraid that during the four decades since Taylor made these perceptive observations his prophesy has come to full realisation.
- ²¹³ Karl Barth’s concept of divine revelation as opposed to human religion, formulated in par 17 of his *Church Dogmatics* and brought into the missiological debate by Hendrik Kraemer (Bediako 1997:133ff) was itself a redemptive response to the theological and spiritual uncertainty caused by modernity (inadequately addressed by 19th century

liberal theology). When transferred into the African mission field it sends precisely the wrong message (Nürnberger 1970 13-43).

²¹⁴ Nürnberger 2002(a) and 2004. See especially chapters 2 and 3 in both books.

²¹⁵ “We are not in the business of cloning, for true family likeness is an elusive common ingredient diffused throughout a richly varied whole” (Taylor 2001:155). Exactly, but we must specify what this ingredient is.

²¹⁶ Mugambi 2002:1ff.

²¹⁷ Bediako 1991:224ff.

²¹⁸ Luther observed that “there is no example, no story in the Scriptures from which we learn that the saints (= believers) sought information from the dead”. According to Luther the only exception, the conjuring up of a prophet in 1 Samuel 28, was not only a blatant case of disobedience, but also a transparent deception of the devil. It was not the real prophet who appeared but a hallucination (Luther’s Works 36:196; 52:180).

²¹⁹ Turaki 1968:168.

²²⁰ The Deuteronomic interpretation of Israel’s history tried to explain why Israel, which should have been blessed, was almost totally destroyed by the Assyrians and the Babylonians. The exilic prophets tried to do away with the idea of guilt being passed on from generation to generation (Jer 31:29; Ez 18:2) and the book of Job protested against the interpretation of history that attributed calamities to sins. But the tradition and its refutation persisted right into New Testament times (Acts 7:51ff; Jn 9:1ff).

²²¹ For detail see Alt 1989:1ff; Schmidt 1983:10ff; Thomson 1992:119.

²²² For detail see Nürnberger 2002(a):141-143 or Nürnberger 2004:73-75.

²²³ “There is evil and fear and malice enough (in Africa) without adding to their force by confusing good and bad” (Taylor 2001:20). See also the explosive debate between Musa Dube and Eric Hermanson on the translation of *badimo* as demons rather than ancestors in the old Setswana Bible (Maluleke 2005:361ff).

²²⁴ See Nürnberger 2002(a):152ff, or Nürnberger 2004:79ff.

²²⁵ Brueggemann 1997:413ff.

²²⁶ For detail see Nürnberger 2002(a):295ff.

²²⁷ For what follows refer to chapters 4 (for family religion) and 7 (for state religion) in Gerstenberger 2001; also to Nürnberger 2002(a) or 2004 chapters 7 (for the Israelite Patriarchs), 9 (for royalty) and 10 (for the priesthood), and to Brueggemann 1997 chapters 20 (for the torah), 21 (for royalty), and 23 (for the cult).

²²⁸ Brueggemann 1997:818.

²²⁹ Wolff in Brueggemann and Wolff 1982:83ff.

²³⁰ The ‘cult’ of Mary may have historical roots in the cult of a popular goddess such as *Artemis* or *Diana* in Asia minor during early Christian times. This may again point to an archetypal need for a female manifestation of beauty, purity and humility. It is not by accident that Mary had to remain a youthful virgin in the estimation of her devotees, in spite of biblical suggestions that she was a married woman who had a number of children.

²³¹ See the discussion by Elsener 2001.

²³² It may be true, as Mugambi suggests, that the Reformation “was the process through which the cultures of western and northern Europe were rehabilitated into contextualized local churches, as a reaction against the imperial Roman Church” (2001:xxxii), but it was a deeply spiritual and theological rationale that made this contextualisation possible and that needs to be retrieved in mainline churches.

²³³ “Thus it by no means follows that unilaterally abandoning historic Christian claims would lead others to do likewise, though even if they did that would be no less damaging to the prospects of pluralism” (Sanneh 1993:182).

- ²³⁴ Richebächer quotes a Haya convert who had heard the hero-ancestor *Wamara* say through an ecstatic fit of his uncle: “I have died myself and cannot save you from death” (2003:150).
- ²³⁵ Mugambi 2002:1-10.
- ²³⁶ “Acknowledgement of Yahweh requires reordering of everything else” (Brueggemann 1997:747-750).
- ²³⁷ Maluleke is correct, I think, in his critique of this approach (1998:130ff).
- ²³⁸ In Walter Freytag’s words, “you have not really understood another religion until you have been tempted by the insights of this other religion” (quoted by Taylor 2001:16).
- ²³⁹ For an example of dealing with “avenging spirits” in Zimbabwe see R Veller in Wulfhorst 2005:113ff.
- ²⁴⁰ I shall argue in the next chapter that deceased believers belong to the *past* of the communion of saints, just as unborn (potential) believers belong to the *future* of the communion of saints, but not to its *present*.
- ²⁴¹ Bediako believes that the question is not whether pre-Christian ancestors are part of the communion of saints, but whether God has left himself without testimony during pre-Christian times (1997:223ff). In my view one has to distinguish between (a) the fact that God can use any established metaphysical and moral system of assumptions to stabilise or prosper human existence and communal cohesion, (b) the fact that there were and are many ‘saintly’ people before and outside the church and (c) the question whether those who never belonged to Christ nor wanted to belong to Christ – in spite of whatever excellence and insight they might have achieved - can be considered to be part of his ‘Body’. I am also as hesitant to speak of pre-Christian prophecy of what was going to happen in Christ in the case of African religion as I am in the case of the religion of ancient Israel. While there may be a historical development towards the Christ-event as its culmination, an unbiased reading of the texts does not confirm the idea that the ‘law and prophets’ have predicted what was to come in Jesus of Nazareth. African traditionalism is also not really a parallel to the faith of ancient Israel. Are there unconscious doctrines that make us want to claim all this? I would simply say that in Christ God has finally revealed and enacted his will to respond redemptively to all human needs wherever they occur. This does not imply that he never acted before or outside Christ, but indeed that Christ has become for us the benchmark of what can properly be considered to be redemptive.
- ²⁴² Mugambi senses this difference throughout his work (e.g. 2002:68f).
- ²⁴³ Krige & Krige 1965:241 for the Lovedu.
- ²⁴⁴ It may be true that, in an encounter with the ‘spirit’, the human being encounters him/herself as one having a bad conscience (Sundermeier 1998:148). However, in Southern and Eastern Africa this is only true for the ancestors, not for nature spirits. And ‘bad conscience’ may not be interpreted in a Western psychological sense as one’s awareness of internalised values and norms. It is, rather, fear of the consequences of an act that might disturb relationships and upset balances of power.
- ²⁴⁵ Setiloane 1976:32. The saying is usually quoted in Zulu or Xhosa. Theron attacks the African proverb saying that it denies human dignity to all those who have not had the privilege of communal relationships (the foetus, the orphan, the mentally handicapped, etc). This verdict is hardly justified. African communities have an incredible capacity to tolerate, accommodate and support those who are deprived of normal bodily or mental functions. Each human being is entitled to his/her status and role in the social system regardless of his/her level of performance. The merits of Theron’s other verdict may have to be considered: “The proverb simply side-steps the slow Western development of the idea of personal responsibility ... The proverb teaches Africans to evade

responsibility, rather, to hide behind the collective decision of the tribe” (Theron 1998:35). Here the question would be how personal responsibility is defined – as submissive duty or empowered initiative. We shall come back to that question in chapter 5.

²⁴⁶ Cf the reflections of the Reformed theologian J J von Allmen as quoted by Davies 1993:52f. The Catholic theologian Nyamiti includes not only deceased saints in the fellowship (1984:103ff), but also the unredeemed believers still suffering in purgatory (1984:121ff). I have problems with these assumptions, but the point of ‘community’ is taken. Similar sentiments are expressed by Bediako, Mosothoane and others.

²⁴⁷ The Mass is still taken to be a sacrifice given to God: “Taking part in the Eucharistic sacrifice, the source and summit of the Christian life, (the faithful) offer the divine victim to God and themselves along with it” (*Lumen Gentium*, Flannery 1984 (1975:362). From a Protestant point of view one has to say, in contrast, that believers are involved in God’s sacrifice to humanity, that is, in God’s suffering, redeeming, liberating, empowering, transforming action in the world (Nürnberger 2002(a):274f, 279ff; or Nürnberger 2004:161-163, 166-169).

²⁴⁸ Davies 1993:90ff.

²⁴⁹ Kuckertz 1990:246.

²⁵⁰ Mugambi 2002:83; Maimela 1985:74.

²⁵¹ Häselbarth 1972:49 (my translation).

²⁵² “But what of the person whose identity is not separable from the total organism? Can one who knows that he and his grandfather and his grandsons are one person, one blood, one spirit, come into Christ without them?” (Taylor 2001:84, cf 113ff). “But must such communion be limited to the Christian dead? That must remain a crucial question for Africa, awaiting the study of her future theologians. We dare not dogmatise in such a realm. Yet I believe the question is closely linked with (the question,) must the Christian be extracted from the solidarity of Man?” (Taylor 2001:116). I agree with Taylor that “the relationship of the New Mankind to the Old (is) one of excruciating tension but not of separation.” The question is what that might mean in theological and practical terms.

²⁵³ Taylor 2001:131ff.

²⁵⁴ Wherever an intimate communion is envisaged between living and deceased believers, whether in Catholicism or African theology (e.g. Bediako 1997:103f), the linearity of time, or the difference between present, past and future, is not taken seriously. This is not a modernist hangup; it is deeply ingrained in the biblical worldview. Pre-exilic Israelite faith never mixed up past, present and future, nor did prophesy, nor did apocalyptic literature.

²⁵⁵ Obviously this approach differs from Taylor’s understanding of Holy Communion: “Like the bloodstream of that body (of Christ) the quiet flow of mutual love and prayer moves freely between all the members, unhindered by any barrier of space and time or death, and all our caring for each other and all our thankfulness for one another becomes part of the perfect intercession and adoration which Christ our Head is offering ... to the Father” (2001:116). I composed a communion song some years ago which says: “Lord, let the bloodstream of divine love pulse through the members of your crucified body. Lord, let the spirit of your concern penetrate places of great anguish and violence. Lord, let the power of your new life open the sluice-gates of your glorious future”.

²⁵⁶ Nürnberger 2002(a):224ff; 330-340 and 2004:133ff; 184-189.

²⁵⁷ “When a Zulu is sick it is the whole man that is sick ... Suggesting that the spiritual components of a human are invisible caused amazement among many informants ... The shade is the man, not a part of him” (Berglund 1976:82). Among the Pedi ancestors are addressed with open eyes – it is not an ‘inner’ communication (van Wyk 1973:416).

- ²⁵⁸ “Returning to life would be witchcraft at its worst” (Kuckertz 1990:230).
- ²⁵⁹ Van Wyk 1973:412 and others. Another measure to prevent a return is to carry the deceased out feet first or through a hole in the wall that is closed again (1973:417).
- ²⁶⁰ In some accounts Peter was the first to encounter the living Lord (1 Cor 15:5); in others it was Mary Magdalene (Mk 16:9; Jn 20:11ff); in others it was she and “the other Mary” (Mt 28:1); in others a third women, Salome was present (Mk 16:1); in others there were a number of women (Lk 24:10). In some the women told the men; in others they were too afraid to do so (Mk 16:8). In some Jesus encountered the disciples in Jerusalem; in others they were told to meet him in Galilee. In some there was a young man at the empty grave; in others two men; in others an angel of the Lord (Mt 28:2); in others two angels (Jn 20:12). It is clear that constant retelling of the story led to various versions, but the central message “Jesus lives” remained the same in all of them.
- ²⁶¹ The legend of the virgin birth is ‘theology in story-form’. The Council of Chalcedon stated that Christ has a divine and a human nature, each complete in itself, neither mixed with each other, nor separate from each other. Stripped of its ontological trappings, we can say that the true God acted redemptively through the true human being. This is indeed what the legend and a number of other metaphors want to express. Interpreted in biological terms, they lead to biological nonsense and theological heresy.
- ²⁶² Mark has no nativity, nor has John or Paul. This suggests that “the nativity of Jesus was not necessary in showing that Jesus was the Son of God ... the relationship between Jesus and God is manifested most clearly in His ministry, rather than in the nativity story” (Mugambi 2002:54).
- ²⁶³ Literally a “living soul”. Note that in Hebrew the word for “soul” (*nephesh*) does not denote the spiritual quality of a human being, but a living human being as opposed to a dead body.
- ²⁶⁴ As mentioned above, Nyamiti believes that the ‘supernatural condition’ of both the ancestors and Christ is the consequence of death (1984:26; 81). However, that death is an automatic transition to a more glorious life is not true for the biblical faith, nor in line with African religion.
- ²⁶⁵ Genesis 2:4ff utilises ancient rural mythology such as the tree of life. Gen 1 seems to be a critical response to the Babylonian creation myth, the *enuma elish*. Some creation narratives (e.g. Is 51:9, Ps 74:12ff) contain the motif of the slaying and splitting of a primeval beast. See Nürnberger 2002(a) or 2004, chapter 12 for detail.
- ²⁶⁶ See Nürnberger 2002(a) or 2004, chapter 10 for detail
- ²⁶⁷ See Nürnberger 2002(a) or 2004, chapter 9 for detail.
- ²⁶⁸ See Nürnberger 2002(a) or 2004, chapter 10 for detail.
- ²⁶⁹ Elsewhere I have argued that the law of entropy used in physics is able to explain this dependence of a living tradition on the ‘import’ of energy from its environment (Nürnberger 2002(a):79-82).
- ²⁷⁰ “In short, the challenge is that of relevance without syncretism” (Bediako 1997:85). Mbiti and Bediako are clear that their prime commitment is to Christ mediated through the Holy Spirit (1997:217). But the question is how this works itself out in grass roots spirituality.
- ²⁷¹ “Within any culture, language is used in religion and theology in a special analogical way – similar to the way in which symbols are used” (Mugambi 2002:58).
- ²⁷² Cf Sanneh’s reflections on the significance of the translation of the Bible into vernacular languages (e.g. 1993:139-151). The task of translating the Bible into different languages “gave culture and language a penultimate character, allowing them to be viewed in their ‘instrumental’ particularity”, rather than being seen as eternally and universally valid formulations (1993:146) “A missionary tradition like Christianity has

to face the challenge of recasting symbols in terms meaningful to target audiences, and thus rejecting literalness” (144f). This has the effect of de-absolutising traditional theological terminology, showing that various metaphors can point to the same intended meaning and discovering new aspects to this intended meaning. Of course, this view is controversial (Maluleke 2005).

²⁷³ Mugambi 2002:20f.

²⁷⁴ Suggested, among others, by Sawyer (‘eldest brother’), Pobee, Nyamiti, Bediako.

²⁷⁵ Richebächer 2003:309f.

²⁷⁶ “When ... I had to teach about the Trinity to African teacher-trainees, I found that the analogies I had heard about in Sunday and primary schools were useless and confusing. It seemed that I could not even use any artificial teaching aids to explain the doctrine of the Trinity” (Mugambi 2002:74).

²⁷⁷ As mentioned above, I cannot help but ask whether Nyamiti’s (really impressive) dogmatic construction would make sense to rural Africans with a traditionalist background. Instead one could say that, just as an ancestor visits us in the form of a snake, the merciful God visits us in this human being, and we gain access to his presence through sharing his spirit of redeeming love. Then there are no unnecessary riddles.

²⁷⁸ Nyamiti 1984 is, of course, the classical example.

²⁷⁹ The title *Mukama* (= king) seems to be appropriate to characterise the role of Christ among the Haya (Richebächer 2003:307f), while the title ‘ancestor’ is not (2003:311f). The same is true for the Ilyamba, the Iraqw and the Maasai (2003:321, 327, 339). The title *Kgosi* (= king, chief) works among the Sotho/Tswana, but only as long as ‘kings’ are bearers of authority in real life. Again the title ‘ancestor’ (*modimo*) seems to be problematic.

²⁸⁰ The liturgical expression *Kyrie eleison* (Lord, have mercy) was originally a cry with which the population of a city greeted a visiting emperor, expecting him to be merciful and generous towards his subjects.

²⁸¹ See my essay Nürnberger 2002(b).

²⁸² For instance Mugambi 2002:74ff.

²⁸³ Polysemy means that the same word, phrase or sentence can transfer a plethora of meanings. This can lead to arbitrariness in interpretation. In postmodern hermeneutics it is the metaphor itself that limits the polysemy of the text. The word ‘shepherd’ can only accommodate a particular range of meanings, but these are all deemed to be legitimate. In my view the exact opposite should be the case: it is the intended meaning that should limit both the meanings read out of a particular text and the range of metaphors that can be used. Because the intended meaning includes freedom and responsibility, for instance, the shepherd metaphor should not suggest that believers are nothing but dumb sheep who are lost unless they blindly follow a leader (Nürnberger 2002(a):45-50 and 111-117).

²⁸⁴ Let me quote two theologians from opposite sides of the theological spectrum who have achieved inclusiveness without syncretism, each in his own way. Nyamiti (1984) is an African Catholic theologian. He incorporates African ancestral traditions in the mystical Body of Christ under the proviso of participation in ‘habitual grace’ (1984:86). Christ is the Son of God and as such the manifestation of divine perfection. This implies certain boundaries, or at least certain transformations of what does not fit: “In spite of the positive values in (ancestral veneration), this form of worship is deeply bound up with many elements incompatible with Christian faith ... in Africa ancestral veneration has usually tended to overshadow and even replace the cult due to God” (1984:140). So the validity of the metaphor is subject to the transformation of its original meaning. Moltmann (1990) is a Western Reformed theologian. His topic is not ancestral authority

but social and ecological equity. For him the risen Christ is the cosmic Christ, who is none other than the Christ who moved into solidarity with the downtrodden. Again this implies limitations and transformations of the metaphor. In both cases no part of created reality can take the place of the Creator who manifested his redemptive intentions in Christ.