CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Reason for this study

The current emphasis on African theology in Africa as a whole and particularly in South Africa since 1994, reflects a yearning to find a culturally relevant way of expressing spiritual life. Prior to South Africa's first democratic elections and the installation of the African National Congress government under President Nelson Mandela, the church in South African had understandably focussed on political issues rather than issues of cultural conflict. Thus, Black Theology dominated in South Africa, while African Theology held sway in the rest of Africa. Since 1994, South African theology has become more in step with the rest of Africa. There is an increase in desire among Christians to rediscover their spiritual heritage, which includes that of pre-Christian Africa.

In the South African context, and especially within the Anglican Church, Celtic and African forms of spirituality are sometimes understood as vying for dominance. Others attempt to collapse the two into one form of spirituality, denying that there is any substantial difference between them. It is possible that Celtic and African spiritualities could be complementary in developing spiritual depth amongst Christians in South Africa. Both are ancient forms of spirituality with hidden depths yet to be explored and documented. The purpose of this study is to explore what they have to offer, inter alia with reference to the following three areas of concern: oral communication, environmental concerns and the role of women in church and mission.

It has become a truism to say that South African society is in transition. While this may be used as an excuse for lack of progress, it is obviously true that we have seen earth-shaking changes since 1994, and many changes are yet to come. Change is, on the one hand, refreshing and exciting. On the other hand, it may lead those affected by it to feel threatened and insecure. As a result, there is widespread searching for a belief or belief system that will serve as a spiritual anchor. This searching is found among people from all religious traditions, and even from no religious background at all.

In addition, the world at large perceives itself as being in a state of transition. This is evidenced by the great amount of mindless hysteria which arose with the approach of the year 2000, including both positive and negative expectations. Expectations included the end of the world, or the dawn of a wonderful new era of spiritual enlightenment[1].

The dramatic events of September 11th 2001, with the destruction of the World Trade Centre and partial destruction of the Pentagon, and the resulting wars in Afghanistan (2001-2002) and Iraq (2003) have forever altered not only the economic and political climate of the world, but also the consciousness of individuals. The placid self-sufficiency which formerly dominated Western thought and life is replaced by insecurity and doubt, as well as a search for deeper spiritual meaning in life. The desire for recovery of the spiritual predates these events, but they gave this search a new impetus.

The uncertainty has led people on the one hand to seek new ideas, and experiment with new beliefs and practices. On the other hand, it has led people to search for their historical roots, in terms of culture, philosophy and religion. While this tendency was present before these events, it has intensified in recent years and become more widespread than ever before. Johnston (1995:29-30) describes the contemporary situation for both Africans and Westerners today as follows:

> Faced with a cultural revolution that is causing a spiritual upheaval of unparalleled magnitude, Christianity is in the process of extracting itself from one culture and putting down roots in another. African Christians are aware that they are Africans…Postmodern western Christians are aware that they are postmodern people. All love and cherish a 'heritage' which they will not, and cannot, deny. All are faced with problems of inculturaltion – of translating the message of Jesus Christ and the person of Jesus Christ into a new world. All realize that this calls for dialogue; and all know that dialogue is hard work.

In these words, Johnston has captured the dilemma facing the church in Southern Africa. On the one hand, the church is aware of its African heritage, and the need to reintegrate elements of African culture previously alienated from Christian worship. On the other

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1 There were fears that computers, and all technology dependant on them, would cease to function at midnight on December 31st 1999. This would usher in a period of chaos, social breakdown and even mass starvation. People began stock-piling non-perishable foods in their homes as a precaution. The panic around this date quickly vanished when it was found that all such fears were groundless. Life continued as before.

hand, the church cannot simply return to a pre-modern African cultural environment, because this environment no longer exists. A church which simply seeks to return to its cultural past, or that of its surrounding context, will be irrelevant to people today, who are influenced by the modern and postmodern Western world views. The church in Southern African today needs to find ways of relating to both a traditional African world view and a world view influenced by the changing Western world.

The media in the new South Africa have consciously promoted a pluralistic approach to religion, an acceptance of a South Africa composed of numerous cultures and religions, all of which have a right to be heard and to express their unique life view. The church must surely welcome the openness to religious expression and broad tolerance, which contrasts sharply with the restrictive approach of previous South African government structures. However, a policy of pluralism gives the Christian churches a new challenge to address. How are we, as Christians, to relate to adherents of other faiths? What do we have to say to them about revelation and salvation through Christ?

The rise of African Theology, and the search for an African Spirituality is a response to the present day African context. It is also clearly linked to the resurgence of interest in the long-neglected Celtic Spirituality and associated forms of worship. However, the two developments are not to be identified, as is popularly assumed in the South African Anglican Church. The relationship between Celtic and African Theology and Spirituality requires further research and definition.

We live in a time when people are exploring alternative forms of religion and spirituality, developing syncretistic systems. Lyon summarises this trend as follows:

> Among those dissatisfied with conventional churches, it may mean
> exploring spiritualities that have long been excluded from the range
> of options, centring possibly on goddesses or witches, or, more
> likely, the sacralised self (1998: 289).

Many secular spiritualities, promoted in popular literature, focus on self-actualisation techniques, or ways to live more fulfilling lives, without reference to God or religion. This trend includes works about popular psychology and philosophy as well as religion. Both Celtic and African forms of thought and expression are often employed in this search for spiritual development or fulfilment. There are also more openly religious approaches,

which aim to direct an individual to fulfilment, enlightenment or a new experience of God, within a particular religious tradition. Many of these searches, however, are based on desire and fantasy rather than historical fact, and should be approached with caution.

It is important for contemporary Christians to be able to identify what is of relevance and value to their lives from the traditions of the past. Ideas of lasting value will influence not only the thoughts and emotional life of Christians today, but also their actions, and therefore not only the nature of the church, but the wider life of society.

Relativism rules in present-day society (Sinkinson 1998:154), due to the widespread denial of absolute truth, and resulting insistence that all religions and philosophies have an equal claim to truth. This often has the effect of trivialising religion or making religious belief a purely private option with no relevance to life and society. It is this attitude which allows a person to practise his or her religion, while failing to live out its requirements in private life. Thus, a man may be a religious leader, while abusing his wife and children in the privacy of his own home, or indulging in acts of violence, perjury or embezzlement, or even participating in a corrupt and oppressive government.

One result of the philosophical shift to postmodernism in the West is that the old distinctions between religion, psychology and philosophy have been blurred or obliterated altogether. This is not altogether a negative development, as it leads to a more holistic approach to knowledge and to life issues.

1.2 Problem to be Investigated

The desire for a historical depth and tradition behind spirituality is also found among many of those around the world who are searching for their roots in the Celtic tradition. At the same time, many contemporary scholars have dismissed the interest in both Celtic and African forms of spirituality as a fad or fashion, which will soon pass, as people move on to the next fashionable set of ideas. It is my contention that, although this may be true for a section of the church, both these traditions contain elements which are of value to the church at large, and should as such be recognised and preserved. Both Celtic and African Spiritualities contain elements of depth which cannot be dismissed as a fashion which will soon pass.

This study will show that ancient forms of spirituality, in particular African and Celtic forms, are deeply relevant for issues faced by the contemporary church, specifically in the South African context, but possibly also with a more general application. The study will show that it is possible to separate the fruits of pure romanticism and cultural nostalgia from genuine theological insights which will make a contribution to church and community life today. This study will also explore ways of using Celtic and African spirituality to strengthen the teaching and worship of the church, not merely the devotional lives of individuals. There is a need to recover this corporate dimension of spirituality in the church today.

The current fascination with forms of spirituality which originate outside the Western church tradition is closely linked to the New Age Movement. As such, it is often coupled with a rejection of Christianity as a whole, and especially the institutional church. Therefore, this study aims to show that both Celtic and African spiritualities have relevance for the church, and are entirely compatible with Christian teaching and practices. A related mistaken idea, often expressed in Africa, is that African Christianity is radically different from Western expressions, and fundamentally incompatible with traditional church structures and teachings. African spirituality has much to teach the world-wide church, and many of its insights and practices can, and should, be incorporated into the life and teaching of the church.

Thus, the purpose of this thesis is to show that Celtic and African spiritualities have relevance to the problems facing the contemporary church in Southern Africa. It will be demonstrated, contrary to claims in popular literature, that the beliefs and insights of Celtic and African spirituality are compatible with Christianity and the church, and could serve to enrich the life and worship of Christians, individually and corporately.

1.3 Method Utilised

The method used will be phenomenological[2], combined with a theological dimension. The theological meaning behind a cultic practice, for example, is not artificially separated from the description of that practice, but is considered an integral part of its meaning and

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[2] The Phenomenological method is defined as " a method of philosophical inquiry concentrating on describing the essence of objects as they present themselves to human consciousness" (Deist 1987:129).

significance. A historical dimension to this study will also be included. In order to understand the present interest in and experience of African and Celtic spirituality, it is necessary to study the historical background out of which these two systems have come [3]. It could be argued that the inclusion of theological and historical analysis renders this study no longer phenomenological, but the three dimensions of research are interrelated and to eliminate any one of these would be to lessen the value of the study.

The topic therefore necessitates both a diachronic [4] and a synchronic [5] approach. African spirituality is clearly a major influence on the lives and ideas of contemporary Africans, so that much of the discussion of African spirituality is concerned with extant ideas and practices. However, the study is also concerned with past beliefs and rituals of Africa, so that there is a historical dimension to this study. Celtic spirituality is rooted in the distant past of Britain, Gaul and Ireland, although the influence of Celtic spirituality is increasingly felt in the lives of contemporary people, both Christians and Neo-Pagans. The study of beliefs and religious practices of the past is necessarily diachronic.

Insights from other disciplines will be utilised. In particular, relevant historical, anthropological, literary and sociological information will be collected, as well as data from communication studies and linguistics, and, of course, spirituality. This study will build upon the work of both feminist (European and North American) and womanist (African and African-American) scholars, although there is a greater concentration on feminist literature.

1.4 Demarcation of Research

Following on from the present chapter, this study offers a survey of relevant literature on the subjects of Celtic and African Spirituality (Chapter 2). This is followed by a discussion of the meaning of spirituality as a concept, and specific context-related issues concerned with spirituality, as well as influences on contemporary spirituality, such as the emerging

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3 This study will include the analysis of songs, sermons and Celtic poems and blessings, ancient and contemporary, in order to discover truths and values celebrated in both traditions. In many cases, the literature of both traditions is originally oral, and only secondarily preserved in literary form. Very little of this literature was originally produced in English, and therefore the use of translated texts has been necessitated. See also 3.1

4 A diachronic approach involves studying a phenomenon in the context of its historical development.

5 A synchronic approach studies a phenomenon as it exists at a particular time, without studying its historical development.

postmodernist culture (Chapter 3). The recent acceptance of spirituality as a field of study in many academic institutions around the world., will also be examined briefly. This has been a very interesting recent development in academic theology, and has proved a very popular subject for study and discussion. There is a growing interest in the academic study of spirituality in South Africa, and a number of academic institutions are having difficulty keeping up with the demand for courses in this area.

The discussion of Spirituality as a concept is followed by an in depth discussion of Celtic Spirituality (Chapter 4) and of African Spirituality (Chapter 5). The collected data and relevant literature will be discussed, together with their historical background. In addition to studying texts produced in African and Celtic cultural settings, the study will explore the approach of both traditions to contemporary challenges which face the church today.

In Chapter Six, Celtic and African spiritualities are compared and contrasted, and four areas in particular are shown to have a clear message for the church in the twenty-first century. These areas are ecological concern as a dimension in spirituality, the use of oral and symbolic communication, the role of spiritual powers and the position and role of women in the church.

In Chapter Seven, the specific relevance and application of Celtic and African Spiritualities to the contemporary Anglican church is discussed, and this is followed by a concluding chapter (Chapter 8), in which the threads of this study are drawn together and the conclusions reached are explained in the light of their relevance for today.
We will now move into a survey of the relevant literature, in Chapter 2.