

Mwari the creator as insider

In this and the next two chapters I attempt to trace a profile of the AIC theology undergirding and stimulating the praxis of an earthkeeping ministry as it takes shape in the AAEC context. Inasmuch as the theological discourse represents reflections on and elaborations of trends already identified in the previous two chapters, we are not dealing with a written, fully systematised theology. Instead, our sources are verbalised and enacted conceptions and convictions which emerge spontaneously during tree-planting ceremonies and are integral to AIC *theological* praxis. Through repetition by leading figures and affirmation by participant church communities these convictions become *theological guidelines* for the core activities of the entire earthkeeping movement.

I shall also endeavour to highlight the relevance of AIC environmental theology for African Christian theology generally as articulated in the world of publications and Western-oriented academia. Black African theologians have done little towards producing a comprehensive Africanised theology of the environment. Hence the earthkeeping AICs may well provide both the incentive and the basic building stones – derived from biblically intuited and envisioned praxis – for the development of such a theology. In addition some insight will be drawn from recent works by Western theologians engaged in eco-theology. Their inclusion serves only to relate the AICs' contribution meaningfully to the growing concern about a deteriorating environment among churches worldwide.

It is remarkable how some trinitarian notions or beliefs currently emphasised by Western theologians as being pertinent to a realistic theology of creation – although varying greatly in their expression – implicitly or explicitly underlie the earthkeeping ministry and sacraments of the AICs. I shall indicate how the call for God's full presence in his creation (Moltmann 1985:13; Wilkinson 1990:280) coincides with

an outstanding feature of AAEC environmental work – that of experiencing God the Creator as insider, present in and in control of creation. To fully appreciate the significance of this theological development, the undefined but very real traditions of a remote Creator God among the Shona require brief consideration.

3.1 A remote creator?

3.1.1 The distant One of traditional religion

Traditional concepts of God in Africa have contributed to a certain remoteness and transcendence of God the Father in African Christianity. Traditionally the general image of Africa's Supreme Being was that of a *creator* who, although the *foundation* of all that exists, was not considered to be directly involved in all the day-to-day details of maintaining and controlling it. The Shona concept of *Wokumusoro* (the One above) to some extent expresses Mwari the creator's remoteness from creation. The function of organising and maintaining creation was largely attributed to the ancestors, whose veneration became a dominant feature of traditional religious activity. In some instances God's remoteness was ascribed to human error which had disrupted the divine-human relationship. Western observers in particular have emphasised *silence*, perhaps *mystery* and *detachment*, as outstanding characteristics of the traditional divinity in Africa. With the exception of Mwari, the oracular deity of the Shona, and the divinities worshipped by the Dogon, Ashanti and Ambo, the God of Africa has been characterised as a *deus otiosus* or a *deus remotus*. As Taylor (1963:85) observed concerning the apotheosis of Kyala: 'Beginning in this world as part of the human hierarchy of the living and the ancestors, they (the gods) are eventually, as we might say, pushed through the sky-light and lost sight of.'

While traditional African divinities are believed to be in touch with the ancestors, they are seldom approached directly by individuals. Even in the case of the Shona high-God cult, Mwari's oracular announcements about rain and national issues were monitored by a small number of cult officials (Daneel 1970:40f). Apart from these select few, Mwari was not usually approached by ordinary people in direct acts of ritualised worship. In all fairness it should be said that the oracle's role in *chimurenga*, and more recently also in AZTREC's activities has certainly

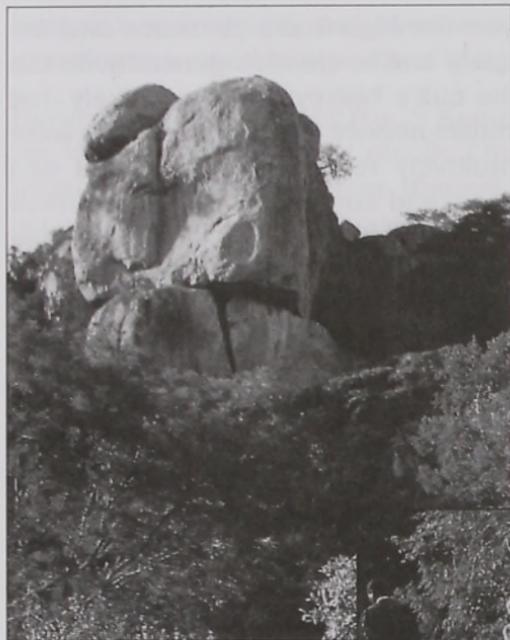


Plate 21 Mwari cult officials
approach and converse near
the Dzilo shrine in the Matopo
hills



contributed to greater emphasis on the high-God's *presence and immanence* both in African rural society and in creation generally. In the conceptual development within the cult's history it appears likely that both elements of the creator – transcendence and immanence – were present all along. The Shona intuitively felt Mwari's closeness and angered disapproval during droughts, and sometimes his involvement in the deaths of people. Nevertheless, the fact that religious ritual life in rural village society was directed largely to the more accessible spirit world, that is the ancestors, in which the Shona high-God was a pre-supposed but somewhat distant force, seems to indicate that traditionally the creator's remoteness somehow outweighed his presence.

Against this background it is understandable that Western missionaries, apart from using the traditional names of the African Supreme Being for God in their biblical translations, tended to direct their indigenising policies mainly to the accommodation or confrontation of the more dominant ancestor rituals. Thus the pertinent questions arise: Did the church in Africa succeed in drawing the remote one convincingly into the ambit of day-to-day human life? Did he/she acquire recognisable features as the insider?

3.1.2 Missionary traditions

In considering these questions we briefly look at the two most prominent missionary traditions – those of the Roman Catholic and the Reformed Protestant churches – that have played a major role in the Christianising of the Shona in Masvingo Province, where the AIC environmental theology is currently unfolding.

3.1.2.1 Accommodation and confusion

The Roman Catholic tradition of natural theology allows for far-reaching accommodation of, or adaptation to, the varied cultures of humankind. In contrast to the Reformed view of human nature as totally corrupted by sin, Catholicism holds that some uncorrupted seed is present in creation. As a result the Catholic Church assimilates what it considers to be good customs among people, not necessarily by way of radical transformation but by *synthesising* indigenous and Christian truth. Papal decrees have enhanced missionary strategies based on accommoda-

tion and assimilation and even assigned the church the function of guarding the positive aspects of indigenous culture.

During the 1960s and 1970s Fr Kumbirai, a Shona priest, spearheaded the introduction into the Catholic Church of adapted forms of communication with the ancestors (Daneel 1971:269f). Here the church's accommodation policy focused mainly on modifying and assimilating two important traditional rituals: the burial ceremony and the *kugadzira* (literally 'setting right'), the latter being a home-bringing ceremony which confers ancestral status on the deceased and thus provides the key to all subsequent rituals of ancestor veneration. In burial rituals one finds a strong emphasis on the mediatory function of the different groups of ancestors – paternal and maternal grandparents, aunts, uncles, fathers and mothers – who are all called upon to take the deceased to Mwari. In the adapted *kugadzira* ritual, the deceased's spirit is still incorporated by the living – no longer, however, into the old hierarchy of ancestors but into the heavenly communion of saints. Communion with the ancestors continues, but the protective function of the newly installed ancestor is given new content. Instead of symbolically guarding the door of the homestead of their living descendants, as tradition dictates, the ancestors are now required to intercede on behalf of the living so that God will protect them. Thus by making Mwari, God the Father, responsible for the daily protection of the deceased's living descendants and rendering them more readily accessible through a reinterpreted form of mediation, this accommodating Roman Catholic ritual, in its intention at least, seeks to overcome the traditional remoteness of God. Ritually, at any rate, he seems to have been drawn closer to daily living.

There can be little doubt about the salutary impact of these adapted rites. In rural areas the church appears to have come closer to the people; it has lost some of its alien Western character and has gained in popularity. One of the most convincing proofs that the Catholic Church had become inculturated in Shona society is its ability to maintain a reasonably stable membership, without great loss through schisms or individual defections to the AIC movement and other churches.

Yet considering the traditional religious preoccupation with ancestral involvement in everyday life – at the expense of a remote creator-God – there is considerable ground for controversy over the Christian nature

of the assimilated rituals (see for example the polemics between Rubio, Kuehne and Oscar Niederberger, in Daneel 1971:276) and for concern about interpretive confusion. In the liturgy of the burial rite, for instance, no clear distinction is made between Christian and non-Christian ancestors. All the deceased person's ancestors are addressed collectively and they are all accorded a mediating function on behalf of the deceased. Other disturbing features of the liturgy which place a question mark over the nature of the conceptual transformation achieved are the following:

- Christ is not mentioned at all. A good opportunity to contrast the uniqueness of his mediation with that of the ancestors appears to be squandered.
- Mwari's presence is presupposed, but the participants in the ceremony do not address him/her directly in their plea to the ancestors to accompany the deceased; hence in this part of the ceremony Mwari is portrayed as a passive party.
- By contrast the ancestors are active mediators on behalf of both the recently deceased and their living descendants. In such a configuration of projected roles in the world beyond, the uniqueness of Christ's mediatorship may conceivably be obscured. Mwari to some extent remains the traditionally perceived distant and mysterious figure – supreme ruler of the universe, yet crowded out by a host of active and humanly more comprehensible ancestors.

One should not indulge in glib generalisations about what could amount to a popular yet superficial accommodation strategy. Representative empirical evidence is necessary for a balanced assessment of the full impact of Rome's missionary policy on the Shona Catholic Church. Nevertheless, recent research into the spirituality of the liberation struggle has indicated a marked difference among Shona Protestants and Catholics as regards dependence on the guardian ancestors of the land and their spirit-mediums for mobilising resistance against the Smith regime. Protestants by and large considered such dependence a sort of spiritual backsliding, while Catholics tended to condone it as a form of traditional religious renaissance endorsed by their church. Several former guerrilla commanders who are active Roman Catholics tended to equate Christ's salvific work with the liberating activities of the Shona hero-ancestor Chaminuka during the strug-

gle. Although such religious differentiation may reflect the difference in official mission policies between the two church traditions, it is possible that in a protracted war situation the attention of thousands of members of both mission churches was thoroughly absorbed by the ancestors.

3.1.2.2 Discontinuity and negation

In the Reformed tradition, Calvinism took a more pessimistic view of human nature than Rome's natural theology. As a result, Reformed missionary theology tended to present individual conversion as a radical break with the past and treated the process of church indigenisation as a total transformation of all aspects of indigenous cultures and religions (Bavinck 1949:126, 174; 1954:234, 245). This approach tended to exclude adaptation in the form of identifying and incorporating constructive elements of traditional customs. Instead, it consistently promoted a policy of discontinuity which inhibited dialogue between representatives of Western and African cultures and led to a negation of indigenous practices by the early mission church policy makers.

Although Dutch Reformed missiology in South Africa was influenced by German theologians in its insistence on church indigenisation (Warneck 1897:22; Van der Merwe 1967:52), the early DRC missionaries among the Shona lacked the strong theological interest of German missionaries like Bruno Gutmann and Christiaan Keyser. Hence Revd A A Louw, the pioneer missionary operating from Morgenster, and his colleagues propagated a radical break with Shona culture to those who accepted the Christian faith. In the course of time, however, some leading DRC missionaries actually engaged in research to acquire deeper insight into traditional worldviews. This led to such valuable publications as *The Shona idea of God* by Prof W J van der Merwe, and the development by individual missionaries of an exorcist ministry which took the traditional spirit world seriously.

But the general trend was towards elimination and a measure of negation of Shona beliefs, rather than sympathetic interaction and dialogue. Attitudes to the ancestor cult, in particular, concentrated so exclusively on actual or imagined features of worship, idolatry and satanic perversion that little or no room was left for remoulding by assimilation, or for substituting parallel Christian rites within the church.

The implication of this policy was that the good news of the missionaries seldom addressed the full range of existentially significant issues in a rural subsistence economy. What was good news at the mission stations and at the schools and clinics erected by the missionaries was not necessarily good news in the villages. Religiously, church members tended to live in two worlds. They would attend Sunday services and prayer meetings at the mission station, where God indeed seemed to be present for the protection and advancement of his people. Back in the villages, however, the threat of wizardry, destructive forces and crippling droughts was as real as before. Here God did not always appear to be the insider. Because the Christian message insufficiently penetrated this world, many church members continued to propitiate the ancestors, to surround their homesteads with a 'stockade' of magically prepared objects to ward off evil, to participate in traditional exorcist and witchcraft-eradication activities, etc, in an attempt to secure their wellbeing.

A particularly poignant example of the two-world paradox of DRC members living around the rural mission stations is the relationship or, to be more precise, the lack of interaction between the Gutu mission station north of Masvingo town and the traditional Mwari cult. Having rejected the ancient cult of the Supreme Being, both missionaries and African church leaders on the whole negated it. Unaware of the resilience of the traditional system, they rarely if ever confronted the old beliefs in the ancient rain-God in sermons or discussions. Conversion and spiritual growth in the pietistic sense and upliftment of the heathen through education and medical services were uppermost in their minds, the essence of their success story. But this very success, with its overwhelming burden of administrative work, created a blind spot. Nobody at the mission station paid any attention to Vondo Mukozho, who lived on their doorstep for several decades. He was just one of the local peasants, a kind man who sometimes attended church services and showed appreciation for the excellent education his children were receiving at the mission station. But to the Gutu peasants Vondo was the senior *munyai* (messenger) of the Mwari cult in the district, a position he had held for many years. He was the one who annually collected gifts all over the district, from traditionalists, Dutch Reformed members and Catholics alike. These gifts were then presented at the distant shrines of the high-God near Bulawayo with a plea for rain. Mwari in

turn would address his/her people oracularly from the cultic caves on issues of agriculture, rain and tribal politics (Daneel 1970, *passim*).

To the peasants, therefore, prayers to the Christian God at the mission station were not enough, especially not in times of drought. Those prayers, so it must have seemed to the villagers, benefited only the mission. During droughts the missionaries' salaries continued to be paid, their schools did not close down and their good, affluent life proceeded unaffected. It was in the villages that people went hungry, that the granaries stood empty and the cattle died. Somehow the God of the white man, the one of educational and medical progress, did not cut a clear figure among the peasants. Falling back on the traditional cult did not help much to phase out the idea of a remote God either. For despite his rain-giving function and tribal political concern, the traditional Supreme Being to many remained a remote presence behind the ancestors. Mwari essentially remained the outsider – mentioned more regularly in ceremonial life than ever before but still the distant, enigmatic being, because the basic rural cosmology stayed largely unchanged. The Reformed Church of Zimbabwe (RCZ) eventually had to face the additional complication that its cultural foreignness and strict discipline, experienced by many members as a repudiation of their own cultural identity, led to alienation and the defection of large numbers of adherents, some of whom flocked into the AICs where God seemed to enter the African world more vividly and visibly.

3.1.3 African theology: inculturation and rehabilitation

Over the past three decades African theology has burgeoned in an attempt to give expression to Christianity in African religio-cultural terms, to relate Christianity meaningfully to Africans' view of reality and to integrate it with their worldview. According to Ukpong (1984:510) 'the final goal (of African Theology) is to help the African live out Christianity authentically within his cultural milieu and to integrate his religious personality'. Adopting a new theological methodology, these theologians evaluated the Bible and Christian tradition with greater openness to African culture. As the latter is allowed to determine the course of theologising to a greater extent, the result is an *existentially oriented, contextualised theology* rather than a rationally *systematised, doctrinal theology* in the Western sense.

As a form of contextualised inculturation, African theology should be characterised as *religio-cultural liberation*. It presents a new approach in the face of a history of colonial subjection, Western racism and imperialism. Enforced acculturation has caused a deep, traumatic split in the African soul – ‘religious schizophrenia’, as Desmond Tutu put it – with an accompanying identity crisis. Against this background African theology forms part of Africans’ attempt to overcome alienation from their cultural heritage. Reaction against colonial conquest provides self-respect as a necessary condition for the search for a new, liberating identity. Hence there is a preoccupation with, and a re-evaluation of, indigenous traditions – not a return to the fleshpots of Egypt, as Witvliet (1984:111) puts it, but the necessary and demanding first phase of emancipation from Western religio-cultural enslavement. A characteristic feature of this form of liberation theology is the rediscovery and appreciation of those tenets of African culture which were rejected or ignored under Western domination. *Rehabilitation of culture, tradition and history* is thus the hallmark of this first phase of liberation.

How does this rehabilitation of traditional religion affect African theologians’ views of biblical and African concepts of God? Is the *deus otiosus* brought into the inner circle of humankind or does he/she remain the remote outsider? Does Scripture remain normative or is the gospel message smothered in African religion and stripped of its own liberating power? When responding to such questions one should bear it in mind, first of all, that against the background of colonialism – which all too often was mirrored in missionary policy, praxis and attitudes – African theologians, in their reflection on traditional religion, invariably tend to be passionate apologists. They are understandably concerned with their own religious roots. What they find there shows *continuity* with the Christian faith rather than the *discontinuity* which the missionaries tended to emphasise. The God of Africa and the God of the Bible are essentially one. As Kibicho (1968:235) puts it: ‘I think it would be right to conclude that the Kikuyu conception of God compares well with the Hebrew conception of the Old Testament, perhaps at the latter’s highest level of development.’ This favourable comparison, which features in numerous variations in monographs on the African understanding of God (eg Idowu’s *God in Nigerian belief*, Danquah’s *The Akan doctrine of God*, Nyamiti’s *African tradition and the Christian God*, Mbiti’s *Concepts of God in Africa*, and Setiloane’s *The image of God*

among the Sotho-Tswana) implies rejection of the idea of a *deus otiosus* or a *deus remotus* as a misleading generalisation contrived by Western observers. Such elevation of the African concept of the Supreme Being, moreover, is based on a prefiguration paradigm in which traditional religion represents a *praeparatio evangelica* in its own right, comparable to the Old Testament. Like the latter, African religion finds its fulfilment in the gospel of Christ and does not fall under the judgment of discontinuity preached by the missionaries.

Mbiti's theology clearly reflects this trend. In his *Concepts of God in Africa* (1970) he construes a uniform concept of the African Supreme Being from the widely divergent views of some 270 African tribes. In what appears to be a gross oversimplification he combines the fragmented concepts of African religions into a systematised totality, expressed in Western categories, which reads like a textbook in systematic theology. In an article on the encounter between the Christian faith and African religion Mbiti (1980:817f) states emphatically that the God of the Bible is the same as the God already known in the pre-Christian framework of African religion. The missionaries introduced Christ as an innovation, but correctly used the names of the God already present in Africa, as it is he who is the creator and father of Jesus Christ. This God revealed himself not only on the Old Testament Mount Sinai but also on Mount Fuji and Mount Kenya. Consequently Mbiti rejects the Western theological distinction between 'general' and 'special' revelation as unbiblical. God's revelation should not be restricted to the biblical account of it. 'One important task, then,' writes Mbiti (1980:818), 'is to see the nature, the method and the implication of God's revelation among African peoples, in the light of the Biblical record of the same revelation.' By implication, therefore, the historical account of God's involvement with the people of Africa is considered to be on a par with his involvement with Israel. Thus 'salvation history' should be broadened to encompass other nations along with the nation of the Old Testament covenant, Israel. Although Mbiti does not take this argument to its logical conclusion in this article, the equation of Old Testament history with the pre-Christian history of traditional Africa – hence the prefiguration paradigm – appears to be implicit in his reasoning.

Moving beyond the prefiguration paradigm, Setiloane considers the Christian concept of God as preached by the missionaries amongst the

Sotho-Tswana to be inferior to these peoples' traditional concept of Modimo. Setiloane characterises Modimo as a near-pantheistic IT-reality, a non-personal being whose mysterious presence pervades all creation. In full support of Rudolph Otto's description of human encounter with God as an irrational experience of the *mysterium tremendum*, Setiloane (1976:85) qualifies the Sotho-Tswana's existential perception of Modimo along similar lines: 'IT is "mysterium",' he contends, 'intangible, all-pervasive, at no point capable of definition. IT is "tremendum" – "selo", monstrous, whose very name is taboo to all but the few. IT is "fascinans" – "mother", concerned for the poor and the weak, and for justice among all. And precisely because IT is concerned for justice, IT has something in IT not only of the numinous, but of the holy.'

To the missionaries who equated the holy and the moral with the Christian gospel, such a perception of God was unacceptable. According to Setiloane, however, African religion should reject the Western portrayal of the Christian God, for the West has lost the experience of God as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* and has substituted for it a *deus absconditus*, or a saviour only of individual souls. To Setiloane, therefore, the Sotho-Tswana hesitancy in the presence of the mystery, Modimo, is more acceptable than the glibness with which the Christian evangelist speaks of the 'Lord'.

Although one may appreciate Setiloane's exposure of limitations in mission theology, his appeal remains unconvincing insofar as he does not attempt a biblical appraisal of the relationship between Modimo and the Old Testament Yahweh. In this respect his theology appears to have far less of a biblical basis than Mbiti's. By carrying the argument beyond the prefiguration paradigm, African religion rather than Scripture becomes the norm for theology. The question arises whether Setiloane still operates within the parameters of a Christian theology. If Sotho-Tswana religion prescribes the actual terms of reference for theological reflection, there has been a shift to what could be termed 'African traditional theology'.

Contributions of this nature, valuable as they are in establishing an independent theological orientation by way of religio-cultural liberation from the virtual monopoly formerly exercised by Western theology, are causing some concern. Protestant evangelical theologians like Byang Kato, Adeyemu and Tienou have serious reservations about the use of

traditional religious notions as a basis for the development of an African theology. Bosch (1974:118–119) was of the opinion that 'Africa has not yet produced many scholars who are equipped to produce a truly incarnational theology emerging from a profound encounter between the Bible and the African world'. In his view francophone African theologians have been overly committed to speculative theology and anglophone theologians to apologetics. The need currently is for an African theology which takes both the biblical revelation and the African world seriously, 'an authentic theology of religions ... that moves beyond isolating certain aspects of African life and thought for which sanction from biblical revelation is then sought' (Bosch 1974:118–119). Surprisingly, this is precisely what is taking place, not in the written reflections of sophisticated African theologians, but in the spontaneously enacted theology of many AICs.

3.2 Mwari the creator as insider

In contrast to African theologians' attempts to trace a continuity between the God of Africa and the God of the Bible and to repudiate or ignore the very real dimension of God's remoteness in traditional religion, the Independents in practice appear to acknowledge both continuity and discontinuity. The Shona prophets, for example, recognise the continuing significance of the traditional high-God cult and still take seriously the remoteness of Mwari, which is also the name for God in their Bibles. Through improvised rain rituals, tradition-oriented yet radically changed, they endeavour to bring the distant God, traditionally approachable only to a few cult officials, into the ambit of daily living. This ritual attempt represents the line of continuity. For in Zionist sermons and ritual, Mwari, the distant one of the Matopo hills, is now introduced as the recognisable one, much closer to the individual than formerly.

There are several ways in which the traditional high-God was drawn close and in which his image changed the Shona prophetic communities. First of all, he was drawn close as rain giver and provider of crop and human fertility. In other words, he remained recognisable in his traditional function, the difference being that he became much more accessible than he had been through oracular pronouncements in former manifestations. In the second place, he became prominent in

adapted ancestral rituals, such as the consolation ceremony (*runyaradzo*) substituted for the traditional home-bringing (*kugadzira*) ritual. As a result of the Zionists' elimination of all addresses to the ancestors and their attempt to suppress their mediatory function, the role of Christ came to feature more prominently and was further highlighted by the iconic leadership of the Zionist bishop. This contrasts favourably with the way Christ is to some extent overshadowed by ancestral mediation, for instance in Roman Catholic rituals (above). In the third place, healer-prophets took over the position of the traditional healer (*nganga*). Their faith-healing ministry in the name of the Holy Spirit incorporates diagnostic and therapeutic activities in which traditional magic and medicine are replaced by the healing power of a manifestly present God. Fourthly, a special ministry of exorcism and witchcraft eradication brings the real African perception of evil and sin into the open and confronts it directly with the liberating and reconciliatory power of God. This prophetic ministry differs vastly from the missionaries' rejection of witchcraft and their preaching of individual immorality and sin against God, in a manner which seldom penetrated to and directly addressed the African experience of destructive evil in society.

3.2.1 The Zionist God of the crops

In the prophetic Zionist and Apostolic churches it is as the immanently present guardian and protector of crops that Mwari the creator enters peasant society most forcibly and pervasively. Prophetic intuition at this point runs parallel with what present-day Western theologians signal as significant for a theology of creation, or ecology. In his attempt to establish guidelines for such a theology Jurgen Moltmann (1985:13) stresses God's immanence in the world. 'An ecological doctrine of creation,' he says, 'implies a new kind of thinking about God. The centre of this thinking is no longer the distinction between God and the world. *The centre is the recognition of the presence of God in the world and the presence of the world in God*' (my italics).

Moltmann explains how the Old Testament presents Yahweh as a deity different from the world, to contrast his nature with the pantheistic matriarchal and fertility cults of the Canaanites. In this world 'God's context is transcendence, and the world as the work of His hands is turned into immanence. Nature is stripped of her divinity, politics

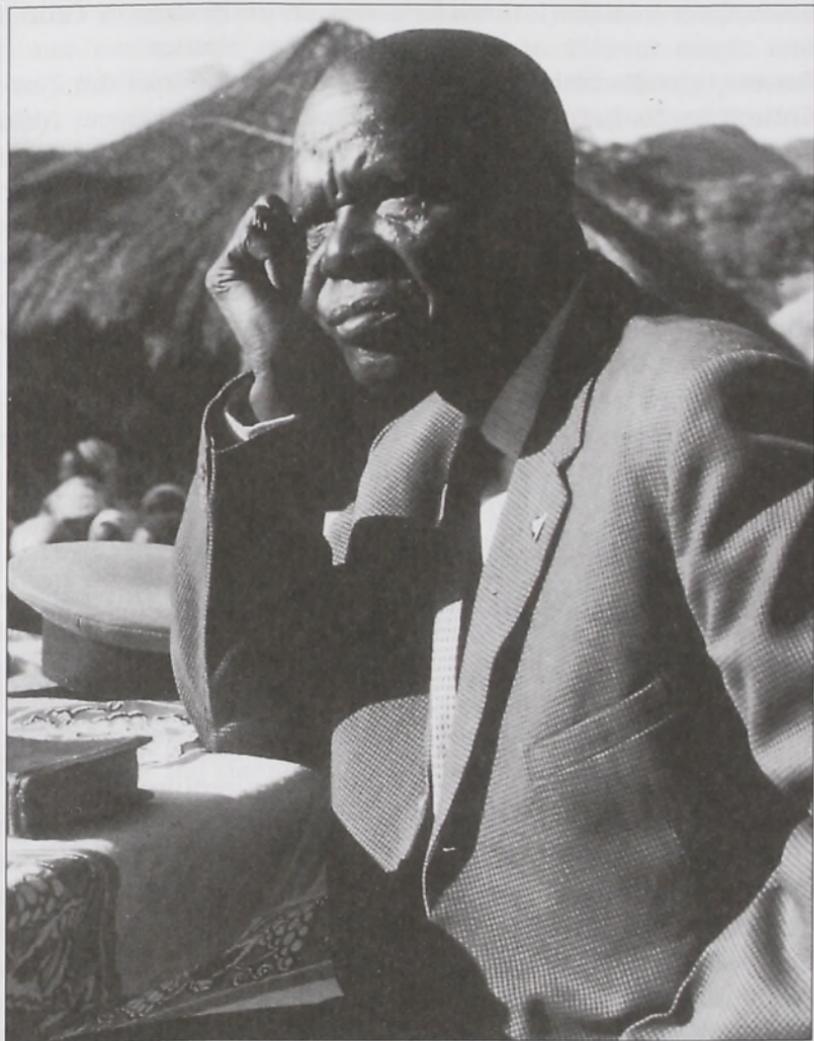
became profane, history is divested of fate. The world is turned into passive matter' (Moltmann 1985:13). This view obviously accorded with the modern processes of secularisation and seemed to justify the ruthless conquest and exploitation of nature by modern Europeans. According to Moltmann, however, a modern ecological doctrine of creation must perceive and teach God's immanence in the world: 'God is not merely the Creator of the world. He is also the Spirit of the universe. Through the powers and potentialities of the Spirit, the Creator indwells the creatures He has made, animates them, holds them in life, and leads them into the future of His kingdom' (Moltmann 1985:14).

For many years Bishop Samuel Mutendi, founder of the Zion Christian Church in Zimbabwe, expressed similar convictions at his Zion City, admittedly against a theological background very different from Moltmann's, and in ritual activity rather than in written theology. He, too, attempted to proclaim the biblical Mwari as truly present and totally involved in all of creation – in a peasant society as the God of farmers and their vitally important subsistence crops. Both Mutendi and to some extent his *Ndaza* Zionist counterparts elsewhere in the country, realised that the immanence of the ancient God of the Matopo hills was not the same as the overriding pervasive presence of the biblical God, as was increasingly manifest in the black Zion Cities and Jerusalems of the AICs. The one who traditionally had remained something of an outsider because of the predominance of tribal and family ancestors in everyday religious life had to be brought inside, into daily life! And of course in the Zionist bishop's mind nothing could be more effective than confronting and transforming the old Mwari cult.

Mention was made in volume I of how this was achieved. In contrast to the mission churches described above, Mutendi regularly preached about and even attacked the old system. Instead of relying on the cult messenger, each Zionist congregation was required to send a delegation to Zion City during the October conference to bring gifts and a special request for rain. There they could petition the Zionist 'man of God' directly for rain and agricultural prosperity. Towards the end of the proceedings Bishop Mutendi, through laying on of hands, blessed the seed to be sown by his followers and the flails to be used after reaping the crops, thus symbolically transferring the grace and life-giving power of God to the agricultural tools to be used.



Plate 22 Bishop Mutendi listens to his ministers during the 'seed conference' (*ungano yembeu*) at Zion City in 1965. Towards the end of the conference he blesses the seed to be sown by his followers with a holy staff, whereby the presence of Mwari, as God of the Crops, is emphasised



This was Mutendi's message of an immanent Christian God in creation. God as father and creator was experienced and preached as the God of ecology! In the presence of thousands of ZCC subsistence farmers the protective blessing of the divinity, traditionally called *Wokudenga* (the one in heaven), was conveyed directly to the seeds and the crops as a substitute for the generation of crop fertility by the oracular deity at Matonjeni. In a very real sense the Bishop reflected the incarnation of the biblical, ecologically active Mwari at Zion City. A subsistence farmer himself, as dependent on the agricultural economy as his followers, the Bishop identified with them totally in his petitioning of God. Unlike the white missionaries, whose livelihood at the mission station remained secure when the rains failed, the Zionist Bishop faced the same dilemma and hardships as his followers in periods of drought. When they suffered, he suffered. When they rejoiced over a bumper harvest, he led their celebration, their thanksgiving and their testimony sermons which proclaimed a caring God present in the midst of his people. Existentially, therefore, God as creator entered the lives of these Zionist peasants in the person of someone who shared their destiny, who felt what they felt, whose features they knew and who lived in their midst.

The October paschal celebration, which coincides with the onset of the rainy and planting season, is called the 'seed conference' (*ungano yembeu*). The seed to be blessed, the sermons witnessing to God's provision of rain and the members' contributions of produce from the lands of Zion City all attest and form part of concrete thanksgiving to an involved, protective God. Here the God of germinating seed, the ecological God of the crops features convincingly as the one whose body and blood redeem the entire creation. Creator and redeemer are one! The creator who gives life to the seed and guards the crops at the request of the humans he has entrusted with nature's stewardship is also the redeemer who receives the sacrifice of those very elements he has nurtured as the symbols of redemption. This integrates and sanctifies the interaction between him and all creation.

The question is whether the *ungano yembeu* should not be given a much wider ecological connotation in African theology. So far the ZCC interpretation has been limited mainly to God's providence and protection of the Zionist faithful in the coming agricultural season. The immanent creator securing life for his present flock is certainly no less concerned about the seed and crops of the future, the sustenance and

capacity of the land, the prevention of erosion and deforestation, as well as the availability of firewood for coming generations. Seen in this perspective, present ZCC leaders have ample opportunity – indeed, it is their unquestionable responsibility – to extend the *ungano yembeu* concept into a long-term ecological strategy. To be sure, recognise God as the one who blesses and germinates the seed for the coming season. But let him also be the God of the seedlings nurtured in church-initiated nurseries and the God of long-term tree crops in plantations which will one day provide investment funds, building materials and firewood for the young or as yet unborn members of humankind.

This may all sound very utilitarian, as if all church-inspired earthkeeping ultimately serves only the needs of humankind. But there is more to it than that. An image of God as the sustainer of seedlings and the gardener of as yet distant tree crops of coming generations is the true test of spiritually inspired ecological altruism. To the extent that the plantation crops not only supply the multifarious needs of a peasant society but also clothe the earth for its own sake, to that extent may we be said to respect and restore the natural and indigenous habitat entrusted to us by God.

The Zionist presentation and experience of God as insider sheds new light on the relationship between the God of Africa and the God of the Bible. It complements the written theology of black African theologians referred to above, and in some respects could even function as a corrective to the reflections of academically involved theologians. Less intent than their more Westernised fellow theologians on championing the uniqueness and legitimacy of the African religious heritage in the face of an often deprecatory missionary tradition, the AIC prophets appear to be less inhibited in presenting the uniqueness of the Christian God, who both accommodates and judges the God of Africa. In his attempts to bring God inside, the ZCC Bishop at Zion City had no hesitation in facing the conflict which his attempts at Christianising the Mwari cult and contextualising the Zionist message of God's presence had provoked (Daneel 1970:69).

The Shona prophets' attempts in this respect resemble the penetration of the Old Testament Yahweh into the Semitic world. Bosch (1974:5lf) gives a striking description of the continuity and discontinuity between Yahweh and El, a prominent Semitic God. In that assimilation and inte-

gration, too, there was continuity. 'El was king, creator and judge, the holy one, the One to whom the heavens belonged and the God of the heavenly council (Psalm 82). Yahweh absorbed all these characteristics and still emerged a uniquely different deity. Without being equated with El, he penetrated the Semitic world via El.'

Likewise, in the Shona prophetic movement, Yahweh enters a world already occupied by pre-Christian concepts of Mwari and, like El, he gives fresh content to these concepts to gain access to the Shona worldview. But there is also discontinuity, because the Mwari proclaimed by the Shona prophets makes different and more comprehensive claims on the individual than Mwari vaMatonjeni ever did.

Another point of discontinuity is that Mwari, Modimo, Nkulunkulu and other African deities try, through their representatives, to maintain themselves in opposition to Yahweh. This is not to attack the African theologians' view that the traditional God of Africa is the same as the God of the Bible. The God of the Bible indeed did not leave himself unwitnessed in Africa! But the effect of his intervention in the thought world and lives of people outside the biblical revelation is, in a Christian perspective, incomplete and in need of change. Of this the Shona Independents are aware, existentially rather than doctrinally. As a result they consciously engage in transforming the old into something new. Theirs is a ritually enacted and dramatised theology of fulfilment in which the old deity is not embraced as if he has merely donned a new garment, but in which he emerges as the one whose existence was always surmised, who indeed was always present, yet who now manifests himself as the Totally Other.

3.2.2 The immanence of the God of the trees

The earthkeeping ministry developed by the AAEC is an extension of AIC (particularly Zionist) theology with its central focus on an involved, pervasively present deity in peasant society. Mwari is the power behind all activities and developments in the black Holy City and Jerusalem headquarters of the prophetic churches. He is the one who cares for his people by providing or withholding rains. He is the provider of crops, life itself – as portrayed in Bishop Mutendi's work.

That Mwari the creator has emerged more decisively and imposingly in

both the ritual and mundane life of his people in Zimbabwe is also due to far-reaching historical processes in the country. For all their limitations, as pointed out above, the Western missions did play a cardinal role, through their religious educational endeavours, in promoting perceptions in African society of a deity immanent in all of creation, all facets of life. Their numerous schools and Bible teaching created some conceptual clarity about the ever-present biblical creator, Jehovah. During the country's protracted liberation struggle, too, Mwari did emerge in the minds of the rural masses as the God of war, the God of liberation, the one who directed – through the ancestors and Spirit intervention! – action in the battlefield. To many fighters he was the one who guided *pungwe* meetings, who inspired his 'war prophets' – both ancestral mediums and AIC visionaries – to direct military action and established a degree of justice in the midst of destructive upheaval (Daneel 1998).

Against this background and through deliberate interpretation in the AAEC local green movement as an extension of *chimurenga*, Mwari once again figures as the commanding God of war, the indomitable liberator. As the initiator of the war of the trees Mwari draws close in a very special way. In the struggle for the restoration of his creation he is not the absent, withdrawn deity, but the Old Testament Jehovah of the battlefields who summons, directs and commands his emissaries in continual interaction between himself/herself, human beings and all creaturely life.

What then are the main attributes of Mwari as proclaimed or described in the AAEC's earthkeeping ministry?

3.2.2.1 *A pervasively present creator*

Both the Ethiopian-type and the Spirit-type member churches of the AAEC regularly refer to the consistent presence of Mwari as Musiki (Creator) in creation. At the Ethiopian-type tree-planting ceremony at Revd Zvobgo's Shonganiso Mission, mentioned previously (*supra*:53, 60), Revd Mandondo showed profound awareness of divine presence in all of nature. He said in his sermon:

You will see the miracles of Mwari if you persevere (in your earth-keeping ministry). Up in the mountains I can see Mwari. In the rocks and the trees I see Mwari. There his strength and his works are

Plate 23 Revd Mandondo of the *African Reformed Church* preaches the presence of Mwari in creation (top); then leads the congregation in tree-planting (bottom)



revealed. If you go to Mount Selinda you will be shown trees called *miti mikuru* (great trees). Whose strength do those massive trees reveal? Mwari's, of course! There you will witness God's work. His work is clearly seen in the things he has created. Follow the river and observe the running waters. Whose do you think it is? Mwari's! But the works of God are now destroyed. We do not see them any longer. We ourselves are responsible for the destruction of creation. So let us restore God's works, accepting that the task is ours. Let us replace the trees we have felled. God will rejoice when he observes this (appendix II).

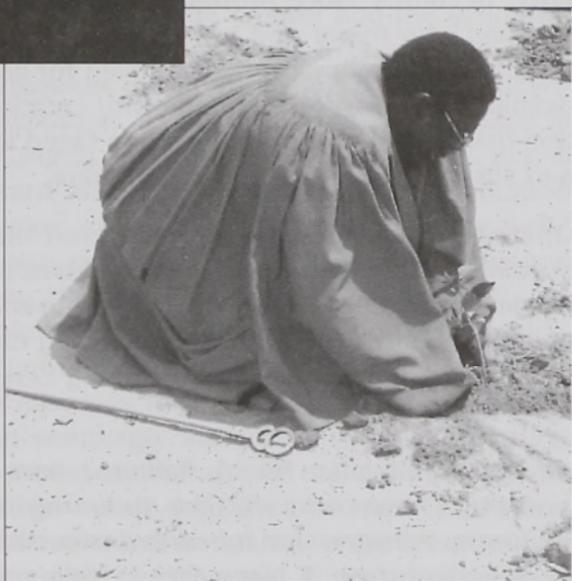
Similar convictions were expressed at numerous Spirit-type tree-planting sermons. Revd Chitapa's words at the Zionist ceremony near Bishop Marinda's homestead on 10 March 1993 is an example:

God observes whether we are true stewards of creation. If we do not obey his laws of guarding this creation, he will not bless us as he blessed Jacob with wives and livestock from his father-in-law, Laban ... If we restore the land and clothe it with trees, God will live among us. He will be near in the trees, because he does not live in a barren wasteland without trees. God lives with those people who obey his commands. He, his Son and the Holy Spirit are present in the person who does not persist with the evil of earth destruction, but who heeds God's commands regarding earth guardianship ... God dwells where the earth is restored, where there is life. Humans and trees belong together. *God is present where this is recognised (and acted upon)*. Trees and humans are one! God loves trees, God loves humans. Therefore, you from all the different churches, be united in planting trees, in restoring the earth ... Mwari speaks from trees and not from barren plains. He likes the wind and the wet places ... not deforested, desolate landscapes. And me, too, when I am up there on the thickly wooded mountain slopes where I can feel the wind and the moisture, I am happy.

Both speeches reveal a keen sense of God's pervasive presence in nature, in trees, rivers, rocks, in the wind and dampness of dense forests, of which lamentably so little is left, and in people. Although not explicitly mentioned, one finds in these speeches a recognition of the creator as mystery, the *mysterium tremendum* which Setiloane uses to qualify the Tswana's approach to Modimo (*supra*:104). The awareness



Plate 24 Bishop Marinda addresses the seedling he is planting as symbolic compensation for the evil of earth-destruction



of the creator's presence in his creation is marked by reverence, even awe. Yet despite the sense of divine mystery there is no suggestion here of pantheist-style immanence – an IT-presence as Setiloane would have it. God is indeed immanent in the trees, in the dense forests, where his majesty and power are manifest. Yet he remains a personal being with anthropomorphic attributes: the transcendent one who is not far away, yet the other in the I-Thou encounter who observes the earthkeepers, rewards them as Laban rewarded Jacob for faithful service, lives among them, calls on them to restore creation, talks to them from inside the trees (as he did when he called Moses to liberate the Israelites) and rejoices at the sight of nature's renewal.

In the mystery of Mwari's immanence, in his close association with moisture and rivers – reminiscent of his rain-giving function – and in the suggestion that he withdraws in the face of earth destruction one still finds hints of pre-Christian African notions of divinity. Yet these sermons make no attempt to proclaim an African as opposed to a biblical divinity. Mwari, in the earthkeepers' context, is basically the Old Testament Jehovah or Elohim, perceived through African eyes and understandably still interpreted against the background of African religion. As the creator portrayed in the Old Testament's Genesis narrative, Mwari revels in his creation; he rewards good stewardship and his presence becomes more pronounced and tangible in the lives of those humans who foster and preserve life. In a sense, therefore, his presence or immanence cannot be taken for granted by human beings. For despite his indissoluble bonds with creation, there is a strong suggestion that he becomes remote when faced with wanton earth destroyers and silent on deforested, barren plains.

One need only listen to the muttered dialogues with God and with seedlings as they are being planted at tree-planting eucharists to be persuaded of a general respectful awareness of Mwari's presence among participating tree planters. The following excerpts from such addresses at Bishop Chimhangwa's tree-planting ceremony in Chivi district on 8 April 1993 bear this out:

Bishop Marinda: Mwari, Father, I have come today to plant your trees. I have come with the *mutumbu* tree (see *supra*:80, 84) to pay for my transgression (of earth destruction). I place them here in your soil. You, tree, I place you in this soil. Grow! Become tall, wax

strong! Even if the hail from the heavens hits you, I want you to remain alive ... through the coming ages. My friend whom I love, I shall come to visit often to see you. Stay right here where I plant you.

Revd Solomon Zvanaka: You, tree, I plant you. Provide us with clean air to breathe and all the other benefits which Mwari has commanded. We in turn will take care of you, *because in Jesus Christ you are one with us*. He has created all things to be united in him. I shall not chop down another tree. Through you, tree, I do penance for all the trees I have felled.

Participant policeman: You, tree, are my true friend. Wherever I am I shall remember you and come and check to see if you are well. I cannot leave or forget you. *I ask God to protect you* so that you will not be eaten by the creatures of the bush or destroyed. Remember that I have felled many trees. Forgive me! That was before I was made to realise that you, tree, are my brother.

These addresses highlight significant features of both AAEC perceptions of God's immanence in creation and the development of an earth-keeping ethic. First of all, tree planting as such is qualified as a ritual of repeated and ongoing recognition of God's presence in and concern for nature. Second, the discourse with both the creator and the seedlings affirms the creator's ownership of and dominion over creation. This recognition coincides with frequent assertions in sermons and interviews of God's reign over all creation. As Revd Marinde, leading light in Bishop Hore's Zion Sabbath Church, insisted quite emphatically: 'In this war of the trees we must learn afresh that the trees and all creation *belong to Mwari*. This realisation will enable us to wage the war well.' Mwari the owner-creator is also portrayed as the one who *loves* and *cares* for creation (see Bishop Machokoto's sermon, appendix II), the compassionate being capable of protecting his creation (the policeman's words above). Third, Marinda's affirmation of God's ownership of the soil and trees implicitly assumes that Mwari constitutes the 'dialogue' between humans and seemingly inanimate entities in nature. Through trees the creator addresses and arrests the attention of the beings who resemble his image – also suggested in Mandondo's and Chitapa's pronouncements above – and in talking to the trees human beings are reciprocating, addressing God himself. When admitting eco-

logical guilt to the seedling he is about to plant, Revd Zvanaka is actually doing penance before Christ, the unifying force of all creation. And in his plea for forgiveness to brother tree the policeman acknowledges his responsibility for environmental stewardship, required from him by the protective creator. In the AAEC context friendship and mutuality between earthkeeper and tree assumes reconciliation and closeness, that is, intensified and restored encounter between earthkeeper and creator. Fourth, the establishment of a personal relationship with brother or sister tree in a sacramental context elevates the tree to a representative icon of all creation. This conscious change of attitude towards the tree gives a glimpse of the corporate will of earthkeeping churches to be reconciled with Mwari the creator and to establish wholesome, harmonious and healing ties with mother earth. The tree as *icon* represents new awareness – born of tree-planting action rather than reflection and debate – of the *interwovenness of creation, human beings and all things animate or inanimate composing the earth*. God's presence in the trees informs the tree planters of the extensiveness of creation's degradation, stimulates sensitivity to the broader picture of earth destruction, and reminds the AAEC that afforestation is but a first step in an entirely new life style. This life style comprises humankind's comprehensive interrelatedness with creation: a holistic challenge of earth stewardship which is anticipated in the AAEC constitution.

Tree symbolism, of course, is focal in ecological movements worldwide. Despite its relative isolation as a grassroots movement, the AAEC's preoccupation with trees has remarkable parallels elsewhere, particularly in eco-feminism. Says Kyung (in Hallman 1994:178) about commitment to the liberation of people and nature ...

We would share the symbol of a tree as the most inspiring symbol for the spirituality of eco-feminism ... The tree captures the life-giving thrust and power of the eco-feminist movement. Its roots go deep into the soil of mother earth, strengthening it against erosion yet sucking its life-giving moisture ... The leaves transform death-dealing, poisonous carbon dioxide into life-giving oxygen. They provide shelter and shade for the life and growth of diverse insects, plants, birds, animals and humans. Its fruit gives fruit for the body and its flower gives food for the soul. Then its leaves die and become compost to re-create the soil. This cyclic, rhythmic process of creating, nurturing, healing and re-creating life symbolises the

aspirations of cosmic spirituality of eco-feminism.

AAEC sermons, though less explicit about the cyclical processes of nature, also extol in endless variation the multiple value of trees for all creation. Invariably this imagery is used to illuminate the protection and care of an immanent creator. Kyung's quotation of Rabindranath Tagore's poem (in Hallman 1994:178) thus applies equally to the Shona earthkeepers:

I asked the tree,
Speak to me about God,
And it blossomed.

Kyung, moreover, is convinced that a combination of African and Asian indigenous spirituality with eco-feminist religiosity will 'capture a cosmic interwovenness that can become a healing and transforming experience for all of us'.

(Then nature) becomes a God-infused and God-breathed place. We begin to feel deep respect, even a sense of awe before the life-giving, yet fragile interwovenness of the earth. The earth becomes sacred ... The wind and air becomes God's life-giving breath. Then we cannot destroy earth since God is there. God is the life-giving power ... God energizes the cosmos, and the cosmos in return moves with the creator in a cosmic dance of exquisite balance and beauty. In this cosmic unfolding of ongoing creation, human beings become co-creators with God and nature (Kyung 1994:177).

What Kyung captures here in sensitive, poetic language is quite similar to what the Shona earthkeepers of the AAEC intuit, experience and verbalise, if in a somewhat more pragmatic and ideationally unsystematised manner. In both instances acute awareness of divine presence in all creation facilitates a deep understanding of the interwovenness or connectedness of all human and non-human life on earth. Without any access to the WCC's work and publications in the field of JPIC (Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation), the AAEC in its earthkeeping ministry is giving expression to the kind of insight formulated in the 1990 Kuala Lumpur report (by the subunit for Church and Society) on the relationship of God's Spirit to creation:

Because of the presence and pervasiveness of the Spirit throughout creation, we not only reject a view in which the cosmos does not

share in the sacred and in which humans are not part of nature; we also repudiate hard lines drawn between animate and inanimate, and human and non-human. All alike, and all together in the bundle of life, 'groan in travail' (Rom 8) awaiting the full redemption of all things through Jesus Christ, 'in the power of the Spirit' (Michaelson, in Hallman 1994:100-101).

Similar convictions characterise the ecological theologising of modern Western theologians. Moltmann, as we have seen, argues for an ecological doctrine of God's immanence in the world. Such immanence qualifies God not only as creator of the world but also as spirit of the universe. 'Through the powers and potentialities of the Spirit,' Moltmann (1985:14) says, 'the Creator indwells the creatures he has made, animates them, holds them in life, and leads them into the future of the kingdom.' The interconnectedness of all creation, according to Moltmann (1985:17), hinges on the interpenetration or *perichoresis* of the trinity, whereby 'God is in the world and the world in God'. Consequently there can be no such thing as solitary life. Our human bondedness with nature, through the Spirit, can therefore be described 'as a spiritual ecosystem. Through the Spirit, human societies as part-systems are bound up with the ecosystem "earth" (Gaia) ...' (Moltmann 1985:18).

The AAEC certainly has no extensively formulated ecological doctrine of creation, neither does it teach the *perichoresis* of the trinity! But the movement's biblically informed praxis of stewardship in most ways endorses Moltmann's views. Even a traditionalist headman, Mupakwa, is moved during a tree-planting eucharist at Bishop Musariri's homestead (on 17 March 1994) to call on all tree-planters: 'Come let us all move very close to Mwari, together with our land, so that our land will no longer be eroded,' and to claim that 'no human being sees all this, knows all this or controls all this (creation) ... *Mwari is the one who holds all power and controls all life on earth.*' The closeness to Mwari, which assumes human response to and ecological safety in an ever-present creator, as well as the attribution of all powers of life to this deity, rests on recognition in faith that 'God is in the world and the world in God'. And even though a well-formulated trinitarian doctrine nowhere features as a conscious goal to qualify the theological basis of the AAEC's ecological ministry, repeated references to the trinity in tree-planting sermons, songs and prayer reveal that the earthkeeping deity

is an immanent insider as Mwari-Father, Jesus Christ and Holy Spirit. Consider, for instance, the prayer of Zionist Bishop Mupure which concluded the church service and celebration of the eucharist prior to the actual tree planting at a ceremony on 14 February 1994:

Mwari of above (*Wokumusoro*), we thank you for your grace and strength. You have guided and concluded our work. Now we go to the field, the Garden of Eden, to plant your trees, together with our leaders from Masvingo. Guide us, our Lord. Bless our activities in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

To the casual observer Bishop Mupure's use of the trinitarian formula in his prayer may misleadingly appear as merely parroting something heard so often in Western-oriented mission churches. Yet the terms used here are pregnant with meaning. The concept of God as *Wokumusoro* (the one above) – quite apart from the more obvious Christian connotation of God of heaven – is still loaded with some of the traditional African connotations of a creator who distanced himself to the skies above because of his disappointment with humanity. The reference to the Garden of Eden is not only an attempt to show ecological right-mindedness and a yearning for an environment unspoilt by human greed. It also expresses understanding of the closeness of the creator, who relates as directly to African earthkeepers in his 'garden' on this continent as he originally did to Adam and Eve in the Genesis account. Bishop Mupure's sermon, prior to the prayer quoted above, actually verifies this interpretation. He said: 'Mwari the creator said to me: "The trees are your relatives, your friends." Mwari said: "Your friends (in ZIRRCO/AAEC) will help you to create a new forest with much shade against the burning sun."' So God the Father is seen as the original creator, the sustainer of all life, who is as close and accessible to humans and creation generally as he was at the dawn of creation. Indeed, this worldview allows no scope for what Moltmann calls a 'life in isolation'. Add to this the earth-healing context of Mupure's prayer: Christ was proclaimed as the vine and the AAEC churches as his shoots in a unifying struggle which spells both individual human and cosmic salvation, and the Holy Spirit was acknowledged as prime mover of the AAEC's green dream. The Spirit had actively motivated and purified the tree-planting task force via prophetically induced confessions of ecological sins during the celebration of the eucharist – and there can be little doubt that Mupure's reference to the trinity on this

occasion carries the same weight for an emerging African eco-praxis or eco-theology as Moltmann urges for appropriate formulation of an ecological doctrine of creation.

During women's tree-planting ceremonies, staged by ZIRRCO's Women's Desk, the sermons of leading figures also emphasise divine presence and close identification of female earthkeepers with Mwari. At one such ceremony conducted in Chivi district on 20 December 1993, Raviro Mutonga – chairperson of the Women's Desk – preached as follows:

You women who have come to assist our Women's Club of Doroguru, don't leave before you have eaten the goat's meat we have prepared. For it is you who were called by Mwari to come and plant and water his trees ... You of the churches (women and men) came to do Mwari's bidding, to plant and water Mwari's trees ... This is not a task to trifle with. It is the work of Mwari! God looked for assistance with his creation ... So he created human beings to look after it for him. The bush with its trees and plants is much more important than we realised at first. Today we (women), having received seedlings, are the ones honoured with this task. We plant trees in the same way as Mwari did. In doing so *we draw closer and closer to him!* What do you say to that, mothers?

Response: Oh yes, it is very good!

Then followed the praise song:

I've heard your message, Lord.
I want to live with you
in the wonderful place
of your Son.

Chorus: I come, I come

To you, where there is home
Receive me
I've done your work
Lord, receive me.

Mutonga's repeated insistence on the creator's authorship of human stewardship of nature is more than just a straightforward ecological statement. In a predominantly female setting, divine affirmation of

women's responsibility, authority and status in the upkeep and restoration of creation is certainly pertinent. As will be argued below, the creator who calls women and men to be earthkeepers is also the liberator who frees women from oppression, from the negative aspects of African patriarchy, as he opens up a new avenue of emancipation for and with them. The women's recognition of the sacredness of the relationship between God and creation (an earthkeeping task not to be trifled with!), and their drawing close to the creator as his assistants or co-workers, tacitly suggest that this is the domain particularly of women, that they represent and understand the cycles of fertility and new life, the protection and nurture of life itself – symbolised by the newly planted seedlings – in a way men cannot do. Though not spelled out, the immanence and closeness of Mwari here suggest understanding of either the feminine in Mwari (which has its antecedents in the traditional high-God cult) or at least his/her overriding care for all that concerns the fertility and life of mother earth.

The words of the praise song may still echo apocalyptic expectations of heaven as the wonderful place of Mwari's Son. Yet 'home', where God is, in the context of the restoration of the world as understood by the AAEC women, could also signify a growing awareness of this-worldly salvation; being with Mwari in the kingdom, the new heaven and earth already manifest in this existence.

Anthropomorphic attributes of an immanent creator, which seldom surface in comprehensive expositions during sermons yet represent a significant dimension in the understanding and spirit of the AAEC, are those of a suffering and jealous deity who is protective of his creation in the face of its wanton destruction. Previously (*supra*:62) I mentioned Bishop Farawo's rendering of a 'garden of Eden' theology, in which a disappointed creator withdraws from creation as a result of Adam's sin. As in traditional African creation myths, God – in the earthkeeper's view – is still remote because of people's inability to respect and protect his/her creation.

Are we then, as a result of human failure, back with the *deus remotus* of old? Not really. The distance or absence of Mwari portrayed here is really a relational distance between himself and alienated human beings, flawed as they are by their disrespect for creator and creation. Consequently suffering is universal: the creator's breath in the trees

and wind is silent because of his pain; enslaved by their greed and rebellion, human beings reach out for Mwari but do not find him because they fail to lay down their axes of destruction; and the barren plains lament in the scorching sun as the dregs of fertile soil are swept away by the wind. Absolution and deliverance, it seems, are inseparably linked with restoring Mwari's creation, which will reinstate harmony and closeness between creator and the people made in his image. Hence the repeated assertions in the sermons quoted above that in planting Mwari's trees we draw close to him.

Divine immanence in an abused world spells suffering! This truth features not only in AAEC reflection and praxis, but in most modern attempts at ecological theologising. McDonagh (1985:119) says: 'The God he (Christ) reveals to us is not some immutable, primary cause beyond the flux of the Earth and unmoved by suffering and pain. He is a God who is passionately involved in his creation and wishes to see it flowering.' Wilkinson (in De Witt 1991:42) goes to the heart of the matter when he says: 'the cost of creation is the suffering of God ... He (Christ) is the Creator, but he is also the lamb slain before the foundation of the world.' To follow him – in stewardship, in earthkeeping – is also to open oneself up to death. As Bonhoeffer (1963:99) said, 'When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.' Moltmann (1985:39), in his portrayal of the travail of nature (Rm 8:19–21), states:

Anyone who perceives 'creation' in the present condition of the world begins to suffer with that creation and also to hope for it ... It (nature in this condition) is a destiny to which creation is subjected: a continual process of annihilation, an all-embracing fellowship of suffering (my italics), and a tense and anxious openness to a different future. To understand 'nature' as creation therefore means discerning 'nature' as the enslaved creation that hopes for liberty.

In Zimbabwe, being one with the 'God of the trees', being part of the fellowship of earthkeepers, means being hurt with or in Mwari at the sound and sight of chopping axes in dwindling woodlands; it means joining the 'all-embracing fellowship of suffering'. It means hours of back-breaking work in scorching sun and a feeling of powerlessness and futility when the rains fail and thousands of seedlings – representing years of toil in nurseries – wither and die. It means pain in the face of destructive opposition from those who hold salaried posts in 'con-

servation' yet have no heart for creation. It means being judged and rejected by those of the faith who seek the kingdom only in other-worldly spiritual growth and soul salvation. It also means suffering and deprivation when periodically there are no funds for salaries for diligent and faithful earthkeepers ... when the entire future of our earthkeeping movement and endeavour hinges on Western sponsors caught up in their own neocolonialist 'benevolence' and bureaucracy.

Significantly, the image of a compassionate, jealous and suffering deity implicit in the understanding and experience of the AAEC earthkeepers qualifies both Mwari's transcendence and his/her immanence. As *Wokumusoro* he remains the sovereign, transcendent being whose reign over creation is all-powerful. At no point, however, does this 'transcendent' reign exclude or obscure his immersion in creation as compassionate guardian of the land (*muridzi venyika*), the divine fulfilment of both traditional notions of ancestral land guardianship and biblically informed conceptions of environmental stewardship. Pantheistic trends in his immanence as a power or life-force in trees and other natural phenomena are offset by the decidedly anthropomorphic attributes of the ever-present gardener who dwells among us as both spirit and personal being. In their own way the Shona earthkeepers recognise the divine-human encounter at the core of all their ecological activities. Whether as tree planters they succeed or fail, celebrate or suffer, the fundamental mutuality between Mwari, the creator-guardian, his earthkeeping churches and all creatures remains. As Moltmann (1985:14) says:

If the creator is himself present in creation by virtue of the Spirit, then his relationship to creation must rather be viewed as an intricate web of unilateral, reciprocal and many-sided relationships. In this network of relationships, 'making', 'preserving', 'maintaining' and 'perfecting' are certainly the great one-sided relationships; but 'indwelling', 'sympathising', 'participating', 'enduring', 'delighting' and 'glorifying' are the relationships of mutuality which describe a cosmic community of living between God the Spirit and all his created beings.

The Shona earthkeepers derive their understanding of the transcendental otherness of the creator, in balance with his immanent presence, from intuitive readings of the creation story in Genesis which depicts

God as distinct from creation (cf Wilkinson 1991:278–280), and the prophet Isaiah's descriptions (mainly in chapters 40–43) of Jehovah's involvement in nature. Theirs is not a comprehensive consideration of the classical Old Testament texts, such as Psalms 104 and 119 and Proverbs 8 (McDonagh 1986:110; Wilkinson, in De Witt 1991:32–35), which shape the insight into God's immanence in pre-Christian Judaism. Yet their fascination with Jehovah's dealings with his people and their interpretation of the implications for the local situation show awareness 'that the Old Testament continually walked the line between an affirmation of God's holiness and transcendence and an assertion of his involvement and activity' (Wilkinson, in De Witt 1991:35).

3.2.2.2 *A summoning/empowering deity*

The excerpts from sermons quoted above and the previous chapter have indicated how the immanent creator is repeatedly proclaimed as a summoning and empowering deity. Mwari calls and commissions human beings to engage in earthkeeping; he provides the mandate, the inspiration, strength and endurance for such activity. Depending on the contexts of sermons and the motives of preachers, some variations can be discerned in the conceptualisation of the sovereignty of an all-powerful creator who has not relinquished control of creation, as well as the nature of interaction between that creator and the commissioned human keepers of creation. The following quotations are fairly representative of AAEC views:

Zionist Bishop Nhongo (interview): The war of the trees is the holy war of Mwari. Mwari commands this war. So we have to fight unreservedly.

Zionist Bishop Hore (interview): This is Mwari's war. ZIRRCOON wages it in Mwari. He controls rain and drought. Without Mwari's approval and strength this struggle of the trees will be in vain anyway.

Apostolic Bishop Wapendama (sermon, appendix 1:35; *supra*:39): He (Mwari) called his envoys to shoulder the task of deliverance (of the stricken land) ... It is our task to strengthen this mission (of God and of the church) ... I beseech you to place yourselves in the hands of Mwari. He alone can give us the strength to endure in this struggle.

African Reformed Church Revd Mandondo (sermon, appendix

II:376: If you look at Luke 23:43 you find that Jesus told one man on the cross next to him: 'Today you will be with me in paradise.' This tells us something about Jesus's power over us children of God. As a messenger from heaven he came to empower us. Whatever we do as believers depends on this power from on high, the power of heaven. No work that we do can be complete without God's approval and his empowerment. About this we can be sure: God planted trees. If we too plant trees God's power from heaven will strengthen us and our efforts will succeed. Without his power our labours will be futile. No trees will be planted.

All these statements pay tribute to the sovereignty of God. As the concerned owner of creation he is the initiator of all earthkeeping endeavour, who commands, controls, guides and directs all attempts to heal the earth, in this instance his holy war of the trees. Bishop Wapendama's suggestion that the deliverance of the land is a form of *missio dei* with concrete implications for God's church – namely shouldering the responsibility of developing an earthkeeping ministry (*supra*:39) – is also implicit in the assertions of the others. For all its emphasis on God's initiative, his calling of green fighters and his guidance and empowerment of the forces in the struggle, such a *missio dei* in no uncertain terms underscores the significance of human response and action. On the basis of God's empowerment and affirmation human earthkeepers can and must 'fight unreservedly' (Nhongo), 'ZIRRCO is the human institution which is waging a green war' (Hore), the members of the AAEC are 'strengthening the earth-healing mission' and 'enduring a demanding struggle' (Wapendama), and they will successfully plant God's trees (Mandongo). Quite clearly human beings, by virtue of being creatures of God and belonging to creation, are called upon to be its stewards and, as Mwari's co-workers, to join in the struggle for its preservation and wellbeing.

Yet there is little here to suggest that humanity shares Mwari's all-powerful dominion over creation. As earthkeepers humans have a certain privilege and responsibility for other creatures, but their mission is to serve, not to reign over creation; to wage war, not to conquer nature, but to restore it obediently in full recognition of their dependence on the strength and guidance of the creator. Considering the regular confessions of ecological sins at AAEC tree-planting ceremonies, this understanding of humankind's role in keeping and restoring creation

stems from awareness of human hubris and rebellion against the creator, as evidenced overwhelmingly by all the manifestations of earth destruction wherever tree planting takes place.

On the one hand, therefore, the AAEC earthkeepers will concur with Zerbe's observations (in De Witt 1991:85) that 'while the kingdom is fundamentally God's act of redemption, Christians are co-workers in it. Thus Paul says that while the reconciliation of the cosmos is God's ministry in Christ, this same ministry has been given to Paul and his co-workers (with reference to 2 Cor 5:17-21).' In the earthkeeping context, and despite some of the participant Zionist and Apostolic groups' strong leanings towards apocalyptic expectations regarding heaven, the AAEC will also be existentially inclined to endorse Zerbe's claim (in De Witt 1991:91) that 'the final hope of Christians is not heaven, but participation in God's restoration of all things. This is the ultimate vision that informs the present task of Christians in this world.'

On the other hand, given self-knowledge and experience of how easily the peasant's axe of destruction takes over, the co-workers of Christ, according to Revd Mandondo, will always have to accept and respect Christ's power and reign from on high as a condition for participating in the restoration of creation. As he repeatedly insisted: 'No work that we do can be complete without God's approval and his empowerment.'

The question does arise whether this emphasis of God's sovereignty does not obscure human responsibility or become an excuse for not facing up fully to the harmful effects of human abuse of nature. Consider, for instance, the observations of a villager at Bishop Musariri's tree-planting ceremony (17 March 1994): 'God is the one who holds all power and controls all life on earth. All things (that happen) are done to human beings by God. These people of ZIRRCO were sent by Mwari. Our elder, Muchakata, was sent by Mwari. Consequently he founded *Fambidzano*, then lifted up (literally *kusumudza*) this earth-keeping movement.'

Although Muchakata is given some credit for starting the two movements, the focus is entirely on Mwari's power and control over all existence. Does this allow sufficient scope for critical assessment of human endeavour? Is Mwari's overriding and, by implication, orchestrating power not in reality a convenient excuse for a fatalistic attitude to an environmental situation which in many respects already appears

beyond redemption? And does this not land us back in the one-sided network of relationships in creation identified by Moltmann, in which the divine power 'makes', 'preserves' and 'maintains' instead of manifesting itself in the mutuality of the cosmic community?

These questions arising from the statements of earthkeepers may indeed cause concern. It is easy enough, in the midst of repeated recognition of Mwari's sovereignty, to praise the founder and the earthkeeping movement as genuine manifestations of the *missio dei*, without assessing critically the nature of an evolving ministry of stewardship. By politely placing Muchakata on a pedestal and blaming 'Mwari's droughts' generally for some of our tree-planting failures, insufficient attention may be paid to obvious flaws in the implementation of some of our programmes, such as poor planning of what trees to plant in particular soil types and not allowing for lowveld or highveld conditions when locating woodlots, imperfect preparation of holes prior to planting, inadequate protection of woodlots against goats and other livestock, and insufficient watering and aftercare of newly planted seedlings. There is a real danger that well-intentioned Christian earthkeepers may rejoice in the celebration of each new ceremony year after year, yet resignedly shrug their shoulders whenever tree-planting results are substandard.

Even within the earthkeeping movement there is some awareness of and reaction to fatalism. At a traditionalist ceremony in Chivi district in which a large contingent of AAEC representatives participated, an elder called Muzenda made a strong plea for self-determination:

My friends, if we want to make progress (in clothing the earth with trees) we have to push ahead ourselves. It is pointless to sit around and wait for a single liberator who will change things for us. We cannot sit with our hands folded, waiting for a Messiah, Jesus Christ. *Hakuna!* Nothing (of the kind)! Let us stand up on our own! On our own we must promote this cause of earthkeeping. Let us evaluate our own progress ... Grandfather Chaminuka (addressing spirit-medium), today you have trodden on us (ie arrested our attention) so that we may act and be recognised. Remain steadfast, *sekuru* Chaminuka! The land is yours.

Despite this elder's obvious loyalty to the ancestors as the motivating force behind environmental reform, his basic motive was not to antagonise Christian participants or reject beliefs in a messianic Christ.

Instead, he was attacking the fatalism of those Christian believers who were using messianic or apocalyptic expectations as a convenient excuse for ignoring or judgmentally rejecting earthkeeping endeavour. Against this background and by way of appealing to the senior guardian ancestors as the traditionally recognised owners of the land, Muzenda was advocating total commitment and acceptance of human responsibility for the environment. He was implying: 'No easy religious cop-out! Let us do the job and assess the results for ourselves!'

On the other hand, AAEC leaders participating either in traditionalist tree-planting ceremonies or in Christian ones with a large component of traditionalists do not hesitate to proclaim a universal divinity whose summoning and empowering outreach extends to *all humankind*. At a ceremony at his homestead on 17 March 1994 Bishop Musariri, patron of the AAEC, said in his sermon:

These two people, the chief and the priest, appear before Mwari as a pair. They are the caretakers of creation, appointed by Mwari. God chose them as guardians of creation. They lead the people according to Mwari's guidance ... (In conclusion) ... We are messengers of Mwari, guardians of his creation. Whatever criticism people level at me, this is the task I represent. We shall not waver! Not here at our dwelling place, or in the household of Mwari!

By proclaiming chief and priest God's chosen guardians of creation, Musariri was asserting divine legitimation for both earthkeeping movements: AZTREC of the chiefs and mediums, and the AAEC of the priests and prophets. By assuming that these movements are united in the ecological struggle Musariri is not only justifying current trends of mutuality and the formation of a common front in ZIRRCO's war of the trees, but is also hinting that Mwari's sovereignty overrides humanly created divisions and the conflicts of religious pluriformity. The creator is calling and empowering all his people – at any rate those who are religiously divided in the local situation – and with a kind of comprehensive ecumenism he sweeps religious animosities aside in the interest of a higher purpose: the restoration of creation. *Chief and priest, traditionalist and Christian, are equals, caretakers of creation, in the presence of Mwari!*

Musariri is not necessarily implying complete religious relativism or, with his open, reconciliatory stance, compromising the uniqueness of

his own Zionist Christian faith. He is in fact aware that he can be and has been criticised on this score, hence his insistence that he, as patron of the AAEC, and his fellow earthkeepers will not waver, either in the rural villages or in the church, the household of God. The basis for such single-mindedness and courage, it would appear, lies in accepting that he himself, the priest Musariri, is called and guided by Mwari to act as caretaker and guardian of creation. He accepts, as pointed out above, that the task involves suffering.

Yet other angles emerged when Zionist Bishop Chimhangwa preached at an AZTREC tree-planting ceremony in headman Gwenyaya's ward in Chivi district on 27 August 1993. He started off by looking for some point of contact to establish identification and rapport with a predominantly non-Christian audience. 'The apostle Paul,' he said, 'met the people while they were doing their *jukwa* dances. First he danced with them, then said: "Now listen to me while I explain to you the message of Jehovah." Likewise, we do not create conflict at a meeting like this. Each matter receives attention in its own right ...'

Having established that he was not there to condemn the traditional dances in honour of the ancestors and *shavi* spirits, Bishop Chimhangwa continued:

I am here to tell you what Jehovah says in Genesis 2:5. Jehovah, Mwari, placed a human being in the garden of Eden to look after it. In accordance with this message I tell you, headman Gwenyaya, that *I am commissioned by Mwari the creator to keep his laws for the trees*. Jehovah, Mwari, says: 'These trees planted here today are your kin (*hama*), your friends.' The creator says these trees will provide in all your needs. You will have the protection of shade against the sun and you'll have fruit to sustain you. The trees will also provide food and protection for birds and animals ... So this is a great task we are performing here. This is not a gospel (of God's earth-keeping laws) to trifle with. It requires us to persevere in tending the (creator's) trees, even if the water gets scarce.

The Bishop's introduction was aimed at establishing goodwill between himself and his audience by indicating what Paul, the apostle, would possibly have done in a Shona traditionalist context, namely participate in the traditional dances prior to presenting his own specifically Christian message. Chimhangwa, of course, does not enter into a typi-

cally Pauline discourse by dealing with traditional religious tenets in any depth. He goes straight to the heart of the matter by appropriating a biblical mandate as earthkeeper on the basis of the Genesis story. On account of the call to stewardship in Genesis he considers himself commissioned by Mwari, specifically to act as a custodian of the creator's laws governing the trees. As a divinely commissioned ecological law enforcer Chimhangwa challenges his audience to see the trees they plant in a new light – as relatives and friends. He implies that by respecting the trees they are taking the creator seriously. Such cosmic interaction can only stimulate responsible and persevering aftercare of the trees planted, thus enhancing earthkeeping results and promoting mutuality and harmony in the cosmic community.

This, then, is an attempt, through identification with non-Christian earthkeepers, to witness to the call and laws of the biblical Mwari as an active participant, a commissioned and empowered missionary and/or green law-giver in an all inclusive *missio dei*. To sum up Bishop Chimhangwa's proclamation: first, witness to the summoning creator in a pluriform religious setting; second, the assumption that divine authority bonds people of all faiths together in the earthkeeping struggle; and third, uncompromising conviction that Mwari's commission and environmental laws require total commitment from all human stewards of creation.

How do the earthkeeping women respond to Mwari's authority? At a tree-planting ceremony at Doroguru on 20 December 1993 Raviro Mutonga of the Women's Desk said:

Nobody thought that this land right here is a place where trees will be planted. I myself thought it was a field in which I'll plant groundnuts this season. But see what Mwari does. He said: 'No groundnuts will be planted here! You will plant my trees!' People confuse each other by saying: 'ZIRRCOON orders the planting of trees.' *I tell you: this is the work which Mwari commands us to do!*

We read from Isaiah 41:19 and 20:

I will put in the wilderness the cedar,
the acacia, the myrtle and the olive ...
that men may see and know,
may consider and understand together

that the hand of the Lord has done this,
the Holy One of Israel has created it.

So we women here today have a great task, in fulfilment of the prophecy in Isaiah. The trees we plant here are the ones mentioned in the Book.

Ms Mangombe, one of the leaders of the Doroguru club, had this to say in affirmation of Mutonga's views on female earthkeepers: 'We as women are the first (after the problem caused by Eve in the garden of Eden) to return to this task of tending Mwari's garden. We women are chosen by Mwari for this important task and will be honoured for it. When planting Mwari's trees as a woman, *ordained by Mwari to do so*, I have to do it dressed in my church uniform. These are not in the first place my trees, or ours. It is God who waters or kills. He causes the trees to wither and die, or he provides life through rain.'

Both speakers invoke the commissioning authority of Mwari to claim a unique responsibility for women as earthkeepers. Mutonga combines her assertion that Mwari, and not ZIRRCON, commands tree-planting by citing a biblical text which attributes prophetic expectation of environmental improvement to God's initiative and glory rather than to people's. Mangombe assigns women a unique role as God's stewards in creation by alluding both to Eve's original rebellion against Mwari – as if saying that being the first to rebel, the first to repent establishes a kind of female prerogative in earthkeeping matters! – and to Mwari's special choice and ordination. To Mutonga, identification of the trees planted with those mentioned in the Book (the verses quoted from the Bible) probably means elevating the women's land-healing contribution on that day above the assertive and sometimes self-congratulatory patriarchy of ZIRRCON's male leadership. Mangombe's insistence on planting trees in her church uniform may have similar connotations: not only to honour and respect the commissioning creator, but also to earn recognition and respect in the male-dominated earthkeepers' world for the outstanding ecological contribution women have made all along, often without any acclaim.

It is not farfetched, therefore, to suggest that in the women's world under consideration the commissioning deity is in fact a *God of empowerment and liberation*. There have been no deliberate attempts to flout ZIRRCON's male authority, and Ms Mutonga operates with great poise

and dedication within the parameters of the earthkeepers' leadership hierarchy. She is also fully aware that the movement's male leaders publicly acknowledge Mwari at all times as the prime mover and final authority of all ecological endeavour, citing the same biblical texts as she does. Nevertheless, there is a subtle difference here. For despite all their appeals to divine inspiration and guidance, the male earthkeepers have in fact been centre-stage in virtually all tree-planting ceremonies. They spend hours introducing mainly male dignitaries attending these ceremonies, extolling the achievements of male figures in building the movement, claiming impressive statistics of trees planted without always giving full recognition to the impressive work of women as caterers, nursery keepers and tree planters, and allowing women proportionally much less time than men to give speeches or sermons at gatherings.

Small wonder, therefore, that at ceremonies staged by ZIRRCO's Women's Desk Mwari *will* emerge as a liberator whose special calling validates and elevates the roles of earthkeeping women. Liberation from male domination, non-recognition and marginality, even if not yet complete, is the existential reality of women appearing proudly in their neat church uniforms at the behest of Jehovah of the Book, he who makes it possible for women to be emancipated, powerful and influential earthkeepers in their own right.

Finally, for all the women's sensitivity to and need for emancipation and justice, the image of God as one who empowers and liberates applies to the entire movement. In the understanding of the earthkeepers, the growing trees and their spreading shade are literally liberating the barren earth from the life-sapping blaze of the sun. To thousands of peasants who have no place in the halls of fame and power in the cities where national history appears to be made, taking a hand in the environment in a way that matters means liberation from obscurity and powerlessness. Pioneering an earthkeeping ministry and a new African theology in the often despised and rejected world of the AICs means being liberated to experience ecclesiastic recognition, maturity and growth. To the politically and religiously somewhat marginalised chiefs, spirit-mediums and commoner traditionalists in modern society, liberation means greater influence and meaningful service both to the devastated land and to rural society. Somehow Mwari the liberator calls and empowers the downtrodden, the poor, the oppressed, the margin-

alised and faceless masses to rise on behalf of the voiceless creatures and overexploited matter of this earth; and in so doing to find healing, wholeness and fulfilment.

3.2.2.3 *Rain-giver and judge*

Steeped in Old Testament narrations of God's dealings with his people, the AAEC leaders' sermons paint a picture of intensely rewarding and/or retributive interaction between Mwari and the people living on his land. Whenever people do not repent or follow the divine commandments, God – as in Israel – ravishes the land through war, pestilence, drought or floods. And when harmony is restored, the suffering is replaced by wellbeing and abundance. 'Once Israel has repented of its infidelity to God's commandments and returned to the right path, God will restore its fortunes. Then the land will flourish with abundant rain and bountiful harvests. The people will return from exile to its lands and restore its ancient cities. It will prevail over its enemies and reduce them to servitude, or, in a more universalist vision, the other nations will stream to Zion, be converted to its God, and peace and justice will prevail throughout the earth' (Ruether 1992:66,67; with reference to Zch 14:12–20 and Is 2:2–4).

This is the focus of the Shona earthkeepers' attention: establishing, as God's people, new forms of *eco-justice* in the already existing dispensation of his kingdom, and in so doing 'achieving' a meaningful and prosperous life, at least relatively free from Mwari's judgment. The AAEC is not unaware of the New Testament texts dealing with the passing away of heaven and earth. But caught up in the afforestation struggle with all its practical and ethical demands on the earthkeepers involved, they understandably prefer passages from John (Rv 11, 19) which reserve judgment for those who destroy the earth, interpretations which insist that those who disrupt the union (of earthkeepers) in Christ (Jn 15) – the creator and real Earthkeeper – will be punished, and Pauline texts which underscore the restoration of the present world, to passages which imply judgment and complete destruction of the earth as a condition for radical apocalyptic replacement (Zerbe, in De Witt 199:90). Eternal life in heaven for individual believers after death is certainly not a lost dimension. Yet in the earthkeepers' world salvation is already seen and felt where nurseries and woodlots symbolise reconciliation between the God of Zion and his people, whose regular

tree-planting rallies reveal the saviour's presence in his black Zion Cities and Jerusalems.

That Mwari features pre-eminently in the tree-planting context as the rain-giver, the one whose blessing and/or judgment can be gauged from seasons and harvests, is a sure sign that the traditional African concept of the oracular deity is still influencing the understanding of Mwari-Jehovah who reveals himself in the pages of Old and New Testaments. This again reminds us of the conceptual interaction between the Hebraic Yahweh and the Semitic El as the former entered the latter's world (*supra*:110–111). It is to be expected that in a peasant society, where a subsistence economy hinges entirely on good rains and harvests and where for centuries the creator-God's most convincing act of salvation – despite his/her earlier remoteness – was to provide life-giving rain, such notions of God will persist and dominate, also in indigenous Christian circles.

To some extent Mwari the rain-giver is focal because of AZTREC's pre-occupation with Mwari the high-God at the Matopo shrines and the constant contact of AAEC participants, through close cooperation with the traditionalist movement, with the roots of the African faith. Note, for instance, the introductory remarks and conclusion of Chief Chivi's tree-planting ceremony at headman Gwenyaya's village – a ritual attended by large factions of both traditionalists and AIC Christians (27 August 1993). After invoking the ancestral landowners the traditionalist elder Mazodze said: 'We have started here by addressing the ancestors, but we have not yet prayed. So I give Bishop Chimhangwa an opportunity to pray. In so doing we place our tree-planting work at both (religious) ends. *We indeed tell the ancestors but we also pray to Mwari*' (my italics).

Although Mazodze was referring to the Bishop's Mwari of the Book, the implied cooperation between Mwari and the ancestors subtly evoked the image of the traditional rain-giver. The *mafukidzanyika* (earth-cloth-ing) beer libation resembles the traditional rain rituals (*mikwerere*) too closely for the *mudzimu*-Mwari interaction inherent in it not to remind one of the rain-giving Mwari vaMatonjeni.

Chief Chivi's closing prayer had a similar bent:

We thank you, Musikavanhu (literally 'creator of people'), you creator of all things. We your children whom you have permitted to live

in your garden, are doing this (tree-planting) here for you. This task is accomplished by your children and grandchildren. See with your own eyes. See tomorrow, as you provide rain to water your trees. This we ask of you so that you will be mindful of our efforts tomorrow (in the future).

The chief adopted the Christian mode of approaching God through prayer. But it was no coincidence that he used the traditional name for God, Musikavanhu, who in earlier years was the rain-giver in the territorial cults of eastern Zimbabwe. To Chief Chivi this is the Jehovah of the Book, the same one Bishop Chimhangwa had appealed to. Yet as Musikavanhu he emerges in African garb: a father of children and grandchildren, concerned with African community life – the living and the living dead – and the God of peasants whose delight in proper earth-care will be reflected in the coming rain.

A perusal of AAEC sermons shows the extent to which Mwari the rain-giver preoccupies the minds also of Christian earthkeepers. Causality characterises the divine-human core relationships: the rain-giver responds directly with reward or judgment to his earthkeepers' performance! 'Trees bring life ... trees bring rain,' Bishop Wapendama said. 'But since the trees have been felled in great numbers and the plains are naked, people nowadays are wondering whether floodwaters are not the water of Noah of long ago' (appendix 1:356–357).

To a mind-set where deforestation and desertification provoke divine judgment of a severity comparable with the deluge of Noah's time, tree protection and tree planting appear to be the only means of appeasing the wrath of Mwari. Said Wapendama in another sermon: 'I shall take responsibility for planting many more trees. I tell you, Mwari will give us plentiful rains because we are paying for the *ngozi* (vengeful spirit) which we have provoked through tree destruction.'

And yet the problem of how to interpret and accept chastisement remains when drought brings endless suffering. Having lost most of his livestock and all his crops during one of the most severe droughts in Chivi district, Bishop Chimhangwa grappled with the Old Testament narrative of similar occurrences in Israel at a tree-planting ceremony at Bishop Machokoto's village. Having likened the plight of his wife trying to find water with that of the Israelites when their water cisterns were empty (Jr 14:1–4), he said: 'My wife asked me whether we could grind

the 50 kilograms of mealies which we had bought for planting into meal. She did this because we could not find mealie meal anywhere. That same day Minister Musika was at our village to assess the drought situation. The famine there is now so bad that the tortoises start climbing the trees.’ In his appeal to his audience to save some water for the trees they had planted, Chimhangwa suggested that there was some consolation in knowing that others (the Israelites particularly) had also suffered with empty water cisterns. However, this did not deter him from voicing frustration, even lament and defiance in the face of the relentless drought:

We ploughed our lands and planted our maize and groundnuts. But there are no crops. Is that not a painful experience? If God were a person, don't you think I would have questioned him about this? Ah! It is impossible to question God! Peace to you, people of the Lord (appendix I:371–372).

These words echo anguish and impotence at the chastisement meted out by the rain-giver who, in his mysterious, seemingly capricious way, appears to have turned his back on his troubled people – a desperate reality underlined on the barren plains of Chivi by the shimmering sun, cloudless skies and ‘tortoises climbing the trees’.

ZIRRCO's more educated theologians – Bishop Marinda, Revd Zvanaka and myself – are contributing to this trend in an attempt to promote contextualisation of the emerging AIC earthkeeper's theology in Shona peasant society. Partly to coax our fellow earth stewards into greater effort and dedication, partly because of our own belief in a rewarding/judging deity, the causality in divine-human encounter is often proclaimed or implied. Note, for instance, Reuben Marinda's wording of the liturgy for the tree-planting eucharist:

Let us make an oath today
that we will care for God's creation
so that he will grant us rain –
an oath, not in jest
but with all our heart. (*Supra*:76–77)

The words ‘so that’ link God's rewarding rains directly with the earthkeepers' intentions and action in caring for creation. Mwari the rain-giver also features strongly in the sprinkling of holy water in new wood-

lots prior to planting. The church leader performing the ritual refers to the water of purification and fertility as a prayer to God, a symbol of rain.

The ritualised prayer to God is obviously for rain, so that the tree planters' labours may be blessed and the earth may heal. Are we dealing here with a narrow, even a manipulative perception of the deity which obscures the realisation that God's pervasive presence extends to all the richness of his creation? I do not think so. What else can an earthkeeper pray when commitment and perseverance culminate in entrusting carefully nurtured seedlings to the soil and life-giving rains are crucial for the next phase of greening God's earth?

At Bishop Mupure's tree-planting ceremony on 14 February 1994, Revd Solomon Zvanaka did not hesitate to interpret the severe droughts in Zimbabwe in the 1980s and early 1990s as acts of God's judgment. He asked his audience:

Have you not noticed that our country has turned into a desert? Where did you ever experience a drought where all the waterholes dry up and even the donkeys die? Even the wild animals of the bush die in large numbers. We have never seen anything like it. We, the caretakers of creation, have brought this on ourselves. Had we but followed Mwari's commandments to care for the earth, such devastation would not have occurred. But we failed in our duty as keepers of the land, indulging as we did in overexploitation. *Consequently Mwari brought the whip to us (Mwari hwatipa shamhu) and punished us severely ...*

However, if we gather as we have done here, if we repent and ask for God's mercy, he will heed our plea as he did with Israel (Is 41:17):

When the poor and needy seek water,
and there is none ...
I the Lord will answer them,
I the God of Israel will not forsake them.

Revd Zvanaka then went on to list some of the most important conditions in an earthkeeper's code which could help avert the retaliatory anger of the creator. First, Mwari requires a contrite heart, followed by willingness to repair the ecological damage of the past; second, God's

wisdom and guidance should be requested for all tree-planting activities; third, the church ministers and their followers have to admit that their ministry includes earth-care no less than the conversion and spiritual nurture of people – and that they are as guilty as anybody else of the deforestation which has provoked God's wrath in the form of terrible drought; and fourth, people of all religious persuasions have to unite in caring for the creation. Heeding this earthkeeper's credo undoubtedly was a condition for Mwari the rain-giver's reward in the form of seasonal balance and a return to agricultural equilibrium.

A similar note was struck in one of my sermons in 1991 at the First Ethiopian Church headquarters in Bikita district. With reference to the promise of the God of Israel that rivers and fountains will appear in the wilderness (Is 41), I applied the text literally to the local situation:

We see here at Norumedzo that what was promised by Mwari has happened right here. Is it not so that you have more plentiful pools and springs of water than at Masvingo? It seems as if sinners (earth destroyers) abound in Masvingo, for it is not raining there at all. Perhaps the people do not want to repent and confess their sins. So Mwari is disciplining them (giving them *shamhu*, the whip). There is no water. Out here you are blessed by Mwari, who has given you rain. Peace to you!

The reference to the 'sinners of Masvingo' included an element of banter and jest at my own expense and that of other members of our team who were also from drought-stricken Masvingo. Yet the undertone of causality in the divine-human encounter, the hint that humanity somehow has to 'earn' environmental salvation, is unmistakable. The entire audience knew that it always rains more in mountainous Bikita than in the flat immediate environs of Masvingo town. The ecological contrast, however, between drought-ridden Masvingo and the lush, wooded slopes of Mount Norumedzo was too stark not to tempt me to capitalise on it by portraying an involved creator who could respond with either devastating anger or rain-giving celebration to the varying humanly induced conditions on his earth.

Is this a flawed, one-sided, even heretical tree-planting theology in the face of the flux of seasons and the need to build peasant morale and motivation against heavy odds? Certainly, if one measures the inconsistencies, pragmatic motives and variations of an unwritten theology of

green action against the Reformation's neat formulae of *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide* – scripture, divine grace and faith as the sole guidelines for Christian life and sound doctrine. We of the AAEC are indeed running a risk, at least at times, of losing sight of God's grace as we attempt to regiment the green forces by postulating a rewarding/judging creator.

The danger of succumbing to a kind of earthkeepers' self-righteousness, of trying to wrest from God some sort of this-worldly salvation based on human performance and merit is not illusory. In our attempts to accommodate and unite with our traditionalist fellow fighters we may also place too much emphasis on the rain-giver in his/her African garb – the oracular deity who provides or withholds rain in direct response to the annual pleas and gifts of regional constituencies at the Matopo shrines. Nevertheless, the centrality of scripture in all AAEC deliberations, and numerous landmarks of experience along the route followed by the Shona earthkeepers (eg a rebellious and suffering bishop in the midst of drought admitting humbly that it is impossible to question God) permit the conviction that, despite imperfections, the truth will be served.

3.3 Mwari: father and/or mother?

To what extent does AAEC theology display similarities with eco-feminist and other modern earth theologies in which the predominantly male deity of the Judaeo-Christian worldview is either replaced by Gaia, the ancient Greek earth goddess, or amplified by much greater emphasis on the female attributes of the Christian God? To answer this question we need to look at some of the characteristic features of such theologies.

Eco-feminism links the modern environmental crisis with male domination of women over the centuries. In Western male-dominated cultures males allegedly feared the dark, fertile, intuitive powers of the universe. This fear, it is argued, is manifested in patriarchal attempts to control both women (eg in the medieval witch hunts in Europe) and nature. Biblical religion appears to be hierarchic and patriarchal because of a history of Israelite confrontation with the female element in Canaanite fertility cults (McDonagh 1994: 114). Whatever the reasons

for the proclamation of a male deity mainly by male priests and clergy, women's insight has been marginalised and their role suppressed. Thus, as Wilkinson (1991:194) says: 'Ecofeminists urge the rediscovery of an ancient alternative, which they believe to have preceded patriarchal theism: that is, a worship of the goddess, which does not exalt warfare and domination, but instead led to a nurturing culture in which men and women lived together in equal and complementary partnership.'

Eco-feminist critique has certainly sharpened the attention and sensitivity of Western theologians to both the masculine and feminine attributes of God and people. In an article entitled 'The Spirit of God's femininity' a leading figure in the Roman Catholic *Theologie Nouvelle*, Yves Congar (cf McDonagh 1994:116), traces the feminine attributes of God to the Old Testament prophets and wisdom literature. In support of this view McDonagh (1994:117) claims that the holistic view of God as Father and Mother evolves from the Old Testament wisdom literature specifically into the New Testament understanding of the Holy Spirit:

She is the principle of communion, binding all reality together. The Holy Spirit is the source of all unity. All attraction, all bonding, all intimacy and communion flows from the Spirit ... In her the whole universe is linked together in one nurturing, enveloping embrace. She is the one who inspires all fruitfulness and creativity - which are the signs of true bonding and intimacy. From her comes the great urge to heal what is broken, re-unite what is separated, and recreate the face of the Earth (McDonagh 1994:119).

In the Protestant tradition others, like Moltmann, refrain from depicting God as Mother, yet show great understanding for the holistic interrelatedness between God, humanity and the natural environment, which includes emphasis on an immanent and nurturing deity in creation and references to the earth as Gaia (Moltmann 1985:18).

Then there are theologians who are sceptical about the effectiveness of reinterpreting the divine in terms of a gender switch. Ruether (1992:4), herself an eco-feminist who agrees with much of the criticism of patriarchy and understands the reasoning behind the introduction of Gaia as a new focus of worship, warns that 'merely replacing a male transcendent deity with an immanent female one is an insufficient answer to the "god-problem"'. Instead, she convincingly insists that we need a

new vision of 'a source of life that is 'yet more' than what presently exists', a vision of 'how life should be more just and more caring' (Ruether 1992:5).

Wilkinson (1991:278, 279) cautions that, although the characterisation of God as mother highlights important biblical notions of divine nurturing and care, such a definition 'makes it easier for us to make the dangerous mistake of equating God with the earth, creation with Creator – and the Creator's immanence is not of that sort'. Arguing on the basis of the Genesis narrative that the creator is distinct from creation and not to be confused with it, he quotes extensively from Rudy Wiebe's novel, *My lovely enemy ...*:

When man speaks of 'God as Mother' her acts usually become so closely identified with nature – the physical world everywhere – that he forgets the image-ness and begins to think the words as physical actuality ... But God subsumes and is far beyond both Nature and Image. So it is better to contemplate the concept of GOD THE FATHER because no natural father brings forth any life by himself. You are then forced to contemplate the creation of the world not as an act of physical birth out of God's womb (as ecofeminists tend to imply), but rather as the act of being spoken into existence by Words coming out of God's mouth (Wilkinson 1991:279).

The AAEC's environmental theologians largely lack the sophistication and exposure to eco-feminist literature to deal explicitly with the wide range of definitions and subtle distinctions. Our earthkeepers' reading of the Old Testament seldom focuses on the wisdom literature in such a way that Mwari Musiki (God the creator) is portrayed as a female deity. We have indeed mentioned above that Mwari is immanent, the insider whose Spirit is in the trees and who therefore suffers when trees are felled. But he is also the Other, a personal being distinct from the animate and inanimate objects of creation, who is present among his people and addresses them. And in this role he is regularly referred to in sermons as Mwari Baba (God the Father), Mwari Jehovah (God Jehovah), the masculine protector, keeper and particularly father of all creation. The Apostolic, Zionist and non-prophetic preachers of the AAEC would therefore tend to concur with Wilkinson and Wiebe's understanding of a masculine creator-deity – an understanding which is so richly differentiated, however, that it does not preclude some femi-

nine allusions or comparisons when it comes to explaining Mwari's love and care for the environment.

In Shona traditionalist religious imagery the obvious parallel with Gaia, the Greek earth goddess, would be the creator as Dzivaguru (the great pool), a portrayal which has distinct connotations of femininity, fertility, potency, the mystery of life-force – in short, Mother. I have also indicated how the feminine attributes of the creator and rain-giver in the traditional cult at Matonjeni are in a sense reinforced by a female oracular voice addressing people from the shrines and by women occupying key interpretive positions during rituals (Daneel 1998:178f). Yet in the ongoing dialogue between AZTREC traditionalists and AAEC Christians the latter's insistence on proclaiming Mwari of the Bible and the conscious retention of a specifically Christian message of good news largely preclude references to Dzivaguru. Their motivation would resemble that which inspired the transformation of the Semitic divinity concept of El in the polemic between the Judaeo-Christian Jehovah and the Canaanite fertility cults.

Belief in a male deity need not, of course, exclude imaginative, inculturated reinterpretations of an earthkeeping deity, whose injunctions and care for creation derive from similar sentiments and solutions as those of the eco-feminists. Not only have the AAEC teachings of an involved creator contributed to greater awareness and acceptance of a sympathetic and nurturing dimension in divine-human stewardship; the AAEC has also launched programmes which promote women's empowerment and autonomous social organisation. Hence it is making a contribution, even if only a modest one, to overcoming oppressive patriarchy. A few examples will suffice.

At a tree-planting ceremony at Bishop Farawo's village on 7 February 1994 Bishop Marinda likened the work of the creator to the role of a *vatete* (paternal aunt):

As we have heard today Mwari built a treasure of trees and wildlife into creation, of which we as people are the guardians. We, the people, said, 'We have been given this wonderful world by our Father Mwari.' Then we promptly forgot our responsibility as the protectors of creation. We became hosts to the *shavi* (alien spirits) of destruction. We destroyed the peace between ourselves and the creation for which we had to care. We were like lost children, claiming riches

from their father, spending it all carelessly and then returning empty-handed.

This world, as created by Mwari, can be compared to a virgin. You look at a girl who wants to marry. When this change in relationships is at hand her *vatete* comes to adorn her with beautiful clothes. Her dress is decorated with beads. And when you see her, her skin glistens like that of a python. You know when you see a young woman clad like this that she is a virgin. She is a woman betrothed in an undefiled state. When she bears a child, say at Chief Ziki's homestead, the people will say: 'That one belongs to the chieftaincy.' But of the child born from the bush it will be said that the mother just arrived there with a stomach protruding like this (gesture of hand) in pregnancy.

God is the *vatete* who showed and gave us this world in all its splendour as a virgin: with its awesome, towering rocks, its densely leaved trees, laden with all kinds of fruit to feed humans, birds and animals. God provided the abundance we are now trying to restore. We have carelessly spoiled the virginity of the earth, that which Mwari, our *vatete*, gave us. What we strive for is to give the earth back its virginity. Through the destruction of nature we have spoiled our relationship with created things and with our *vatete*, thereby causing the *ngozi* spirit (of vengeance) to rise. How do we repair such a breach in relations?

Audience: We pay!

Marinda: That is what we have come to do here today. We have come to pay with trees in order to restore relations with our *madzibaba* (fathers) and our *vatete*, Mwari.

We see the remnants of the earth's virginity in the wooded mountains. This world was ever so beautiful before we messed it up. The forests were thick. It harboured klipspringer, duiker, rabbits, rock rabbits, all of them in or near these mountain ranges. But these animals are all gone because we have destroyed their habitat. Maybe we will all end up living in the mountains when the plains are empty ...

In the context of Shona kinship ties, Marinda's use of the *vatete* analogy to clarify Mwari's intimate, protective bond with creation is apt. The paternal aunt is the guardian of the procreative powers in the patriline

of her brothers and father. By virtue of her bride price (*roora*), which assists a selected brother (the special tie is called *chipanda*) to pay *roora* for his wife, the *vatete* becomes 'owner' (*vamwene*) of that brother's offspring and has special authority over them. This authority includes safeguarding the virginity of her nieces, instructing and caring for them, and presenting them as virgins at marriage. Customary law stipulates that the *vatete*'s significant role be honoured by the inclusion of *ngombe yovutete* (the aunt's cow) in the bride prices of the nieces in her care. Even after her death the *vatete* continues her important duties. If disturbed or dissatisfied as an ancestor she can prevent pregnancy by 'grabbing the womb' of a niece, an affliction which can only be remedied if the *ngombe yovutete* is produced and properly sacrificed in honour of the *vatete*.

Against this background, Mwari the *vatete* is woven into the intimate fabric of family life. He is more than just a remote, universal source of fertility. From within family life he/she takes care of procreation as the legitimate owner (*vamwene*) and custodian of those members of the family whom she has specially taught about the beauty and sanctity of life. As *vatete* Mwari could 'grab the wombs' of the female stewards of creation so that they, together with their menfolk, will suffer until they – the entire human family – do penance through sacrifice, in this instance by clothing the barren land. When Mwari presents the virginity of creation as utterly beautiful to the family of human beings, as the custodian aunt presents her *mhandara* (virgin) to her own family and in-laws, the beauty and importance of all creation acquires new meaning: softer, warmer and perhaps more vulnerable to greedy exploitation, more in need of trustworthy custodians who understand the fragility and sanctity of the earth's virginity before the seasons of conception, birth, maturity, reproduction, death and new life, are full.

As Reuben Marinda's sermon indicates, Mwari is basically Baba, Father, but he sees with the eyes and feels with the caring being of a *vatete* – perhaps a bit more authoritatively than a mother would do to her offspring, yet with greater tenderness than the seniority, status and power of structured patriarchy tend to allow for.

The other example involves the role of women in ZIRRCO's Women's Desk. Here too, the vocabulary in women's sermons still largely reflects a masculine deity. It is not so much a matter of Mwari's gender. Instead,

the crux of the good news is what Mwari as a just deity does for an abused earth and oppressed women. The women concerned experience engagement in earthkeeping and tracing Mwari's acts of justice in much the same way, albeit more intuitively, as Ruether envisages the search for a new life which should be more just and more caring (*supra*:135).

Note, for instance, how Raviro Mutonga, chairperson of the Women's Desk, starts one of her tree-planting addresses:

We women have our own things here. I am so happy because we know these things (mobilising empowerment, the ceremony itself, the new woodlot, caring for it, etc) really are ours. How satisfying to know that no human being will be coming to interfere, to ask what it is we are doing (ie exclusion of domineering male authority). You fathers who have come here today are in support of *our* endeavours. You have come here out of genuine interest ...

These words preceded Mutonga's claim quoted previously (*supra*:132), that the original mandate for earthkeeping comes from Mwari and not from ZIRRCO. The inference clearly is that Mwari is attributing a special responsibility for earth-care to women, that the men attending the women's ceremonies recognise this, and that justice is done by empowering women to play a leading role in the healing of the earth. Mutonga's introduction confirms feelings of self-worth, dignity and a sense of destiny among the neatly uniformed female tree planters as they set an example of committed, orderly and emancipated militancy in the green struggle.

Ms Mangombe's prayer, which concluded the ceremony, sums it up:

We thank you, Lord, for mercy bestowed on us women. You have bestowed a sevenfold grace on us. We were an oppressed tribe (*rudzi*), always criticised even to the end of our days. A woman was given little space, even within her own home. A woman was not even allowed to step outside and to communicate freely with other people. A woman was not allowed to undertake a journey without her father or husband following with a *tsvimbo* (club). A woman was not allowed to attend court proceedings. A woman was never allowed to hold a high position (literally 'to sit on high seats'). But we now see with our own eyes, Lord, that you change all this; as you yourself have said: 'Let the old things go by. Set your minds on the



Plate 25 Women tree-planters accept the presence of men but assert their emancipated status as earthkeepers on the basis of their own interpretation of a divine mandate for eco-stewardship as found in Scriptures





Plate 26 Women assert themselves as earth-keepers. Ms Raviro Mutonga, chairperson of ZIRRCO's Women's Desk, reminds the members of a Women's Club of their new status and responsibilities (top). Women also take leading roles during *maporesanyika* tree-planting ceremonies (bottom)

new things that will appear these days!' We place these new things in your hands, Lord, as we ask you to bless the Women's Club at Wadzanai Doroguru. You have allowed us to plant trees and vegetables as you planted in your own garden, Eden, where you allowed your representatives to live. We thank you that you have reintroduced that privilege for us women, we, the stewards of your creation. We thank you for male support; for the good men who have dug the holes for our trees. Bless the people (of ZIRRCO) whom you have sent here. Bless them as they traverse all of Zimbabwe to plant trees. Mwari, let this task have your full endorsement ... Strengthen us in our earthkeeping quest and let the message in the sermons keep motivating us. Amen.

In this prayer Mwari is not explicitly called 'Mother', but in the thought world of the women tree planters he/she certainly is the God of mothers, the one who liberates women from bondage and sets them free to serve 'Eden', the earth, from a position of dignity and equality with males. There is no overt militancy, as if all existing patriarchal structures should be destroyed before women can come into their own. Instead there is assertive, courageous activity born of the conviction that Mwari is near and that he/she guides the struggle of restoring the earth in a new era of equality and justice. The prayer includes a vision of earthkeeping throughout the country and suggests gender harmony in a cause which ideally should transcend oppressive hierarchical authority in a new communion of all-important yet humble service.

I have highlighted only one or two features of what could be termed a contextualised form of African eco-feminism. For now the story of women earthkeepers is being enacted at the grassroots by the growing membership of some 80 rural women's clubs. Hopefully the creative theology implicit in such development will yet be documented by these women themselves to enrich and give impetus to the labours of healing mothers of Eden worldwide.