

# Interpreting the interpreters of AICs and other grassroots Christian communities in South Africa

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## General crisis in theology and call for change

Because of the societal changes associated with the formal demise of apartheid, theological interest in 'ordinary people' has reached not only a high point, but also a crisis point. Basic to this crisis is a double-edged uncertainty about the relevance of theology to 'ordinary people', and the latter's need for theology. This has profound implications for the social significance of theology itself, especially the so-called progressive theologies. It is for this reason that Villa-Vicencio (1994) has 'wondered' whether South African churches and theologies have been of any use since 27 April 1994.

A few theologians, church leaders and scholars of religions have expressed keen awareness of the crisis and a few proposals have been made for 'the way forward'. For Krüger (1995:3), 'all of the critical Christian theology produced in South Africa over the last twenty years amounted to a mopping up operation of a political problem'. He sees the crisis in South African theology as being so fundamental that nothing short of an abandonment of its basic premises, that is, orthodoxy, will suffice. Taking a somewhat wider view of the causes of the crisis<sup>1</sup> by linking it to the momentous events of the 1990s in Europe, the Soviet Union and South Africa, Villa-Vicencio (1992a, cf Maluleke 1994a) suggests that the new global situation requires something 'more' from both the church and theology.<sup>2</sup> This 'more', according to him, would mean that theology would include a deliberate and systematic concern for (new) issues on nation-building, human rights and the economy.

1 See also Bosch (1991), whose entire book is premised on an awareness of the global crisis, albeit for him a crisis in Christian mission. Like De Gruchy and Villa-Vicencio, he argues that the business of being Christian and/or being the church cannot simply be carried on without reference to context: historical context viewed diachronically, but also futuristically.

2 With regard to South Africa, Villa-Vicencio makes similar proposals for theology in the light of changing and changed situations (Villa-Vicencio 1992b, 1993).

Similar concerns, also placed within the framework of the new world order, are expressed by De Gruchy (1995, cf Maluleke 1995a). With specific reference to South Africa, for example, he points out that 'after February 1992 there was a need to redefine the role of the churches' (De Gruchy 1995:211). The Kairos Document (KD) excels in this kind of crisis-talk. It speaks of a crisis that is 'shaking the foundations . . . a moment of truth not only for Apartheid but also for the Church' (KD 1985:1). One of the responses to the crisis recommended by the Kairos Document is a *return to the Bible* (whatever that may mean). It is this recommended response that has led West (1991:47) to the conclusion that 'a crucial part of the South African crisis is an interpretative crisis'. 'How can unstable observers interpret unstable reality?' is one of his central questions. As West (1991:48) points out, 'A crisis of interpretation within any context eventually becomes a demand to interpret the very process of interpretation'. This is what I hope to attempt in this essay, that is an interpretation of the manner in which a few 'grassroots theologians' engage in interpretations of their chosen realities.

Drawing a distinction between 'interesting' and 'interested' readings of the Bible, Jonathan Draper concludes, 'Interesting readings abound in the New Testament Society of South Africa . . . but outside the gates stand angry [black] youth asking why they should read the Bible at all' (quoted from West 1991:51). There is a sense in which we have to become more reflective in our interested readings not only of texts but of faith contexts as well. Black and other liberation theologies recognised that the 'Christian Church has probably been one of the most powerful instruments in making possible the political oppression of black people' (Moore 1973:viii). It remains to be seen whether the church in particular, and religion in general, will continue blessing the 'well-known partnership between the gun and the Bible' (Mofokeng 1988:34).<sup>3</sup>

### Theological connection to the grassroots

As mentioned above, it is possible for theology and religion to be 'connected' to the grassroots in less than constructive ways. The quest for theological connection to either the grassroots or the 'general public', in and of itself, is

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3 The common saying about blacks having traded their land for the Bible is beautifully recounted by Rev Allen Lea (1926:17) in a hypothetical question, 'How can the white man wish us well, if whilst he gives us the Bible he takes from us land and the privilege to rise in industrial service?'

of little consequence – even if inevitable. The type and aim of connection to the grassroots is more important. It seems to me that South African theologies have reached a high point in the praxis of flirtation with ‘the people’ or ‘the grassroots’. At times like this it may be advisable to take stock of a few South African theologies that have consistently endeavoured to connect to grassroots. These are various theological approaches, all of which appealed to a public grounding of one sort or the other: black theology, African theology, contextual theologies, the Kairos Document (1985), and lately something called the theology of reconstruction.<sup>4</sup>

The question we must pursue is: In what ways are present-day Christian activists, missionaries and researchers engaging in something that is qualitatively different and better than what has been done before? Let us remember what Steve Biko said: ‘The first people to come and *relate to blacks in a human way* in South Africa were the missionaries’. Yet, while relating to blacks in this way, the missionaries were not only in ‘the vanguard of the colonisation movement’ (Moore 1973:42):

... [they] confused the people with their new religion. They scared our people with stories of hell. They painted their God as a demanding God who wanted worship ‘or else’ ... Knowing how religious African people were, the missionaries stepped up their terror campaign on the emotions of the people ... By some strange and twisted logic they argued that theirs was a scientific religion and ours was a superstition.

Therefore, we must not be satisfied with the humaneness of modern-day ‘missionaries’, be they researchers who move permanently into a squatter camp, those who fly in and out of the township, or those who take their shoes off and seek refuge in the African Zionist headquarters. If the nature of theological connection to real people and real issues is to be meaningful (and thereby saved from becoming a mere cliché), we must begin analytically and fearlessly to scrutinise the validity and worth of the very notion of theological connection to the people. Furthermore, we must

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4 Though not yet an established theological model in comparison to others, much theological discourse in post-apartheid South Africa has been frequently punctuated by expressions of the need for reconstruction, nation-building (cf Pityana & Villa-Vicencio 1995) and pluralism (cf Krüger 1995, Lubbe 1995). Two major works, so far, which have been devoted to a theology of reconstruction are Villa-Vicencio (1992a) and Pityana (1995). Sections in De Gruchy (1995) also point to a patronage of essential ideas in Villa-Vicencio (1992a).

critically examine the methods used to establish or claim connection to 'the people', and we must also evaluate the objectives of the connection.

Recognising the increasing danger of irrelevance and loss of appeal, influence and power, Christian theologies, theologians and churches have moved swiftly and variously to respond. A specific manner of response has been an increasing interest in the African Independent Churches (AICs) and in the African poor, the so-called grassroots communities. Interest in AICs and other 'grassroots' religious communities has paralleled the contributions of such progressive theologies as those cited above, which made similar grassroots claims. Whilst the formal, progressive theologies receive constant review and evaluation, observer-based theologies with an equal interest in grassroots communities seldom do. The latter are the theologies which are the focus of this study. I have chosen them for at least three reasons: to contribute to a culture of critical awareness of them; for pure personal fascination with observer-based theological constructions; and in the belief that they are attempting a refreshing variation in South African theology's quest for relevance and 'people attachment'. Furthermore, I shall, in this study, limit myself to issues pertaining to research and theological method. This means that I will not delve into the area of findings and data classification except where and when these impinge on method and vice versa.

## Who studies African Independent Churches?

### *White scholars*

Although this chapter is not meant to deal exhaustively with all studies on AICs, even in South Africa, it is possible to identify briefly the people or groups of people who have engaged in these studies. A profile of the people who write about AICs may shed much light on the evaluation of these churches. Yet it is not often in assessments of the studies on AICs that the students themselves form part of the objects of inquiry. Two of the most comprehensive attempts at a complete survey of publications on AICs are by Joan Millard (1995) and Landman, Pretorius and Rykheer (1996). Although Millard's study and survey intends to concentrate on Ethiopian-type Independent Churches within South Africa, she does include some works on and from outside South Africa as well as some dealing with Zionist AICs.

It is in the pages of the Lovedale-based missionary magazine, *Christian Express*, that some of the earliest reflections on AICs are to be found (see Cuthbertson 1991). One of the earliest writers was the Rev David Stormont, a



Trumpeters herald the new dispensation of Zion in Africa: *Ndaza* kudu-horn blower (top) and ZCC band-master (bottom) trumpeting in honour of an incarnate Christ in Black Jerusalem



teacher at Lovedale and editor of *Christian Express* – a man who experienced the Mzimba secession of 1898.

Another body that showed interest in the 'Ethiopian Movement' was (as one might expect) the all-white General Missionary Conference, which held its first meeting in July 1904 in Johannesburg. Up to its meeting of 1921, this body continued to show interest in Ethiopianism. Papers were read and statistics on the numbers of AICs were drawn. Several resolutions were taken on these churches. It may be of significance to note that during the 1926 General Missionary Conference comment was made on the 1921 Bulhoek Massacre of members of Enoch Mgijima's Israelites by police; delegates saw this as having been caused by 'fanaticism' in a separatist church.

Another body that took an interest in Ethiopian churches was a government-appointed commission, the Native Churches Commission, whose findings were published in 1925. Du Plessis (1911), a prominent mission historian whose work remains a standard reference even in our own times, refused to devote a chapter of his book to Ethiopianism. Nevertheless, Du Plessis (1911) does lament, in a note (note Y) that these churches have not 'put forth any fresh and independent effort to reach the unevangelised tribes ... [but have only] effected serious schisms in almost every church and society'.

Seeking, amongst other things, to address the preponderance of secessions from the Methodist Church, Hewson (1952) also devotes a chapter to the separatist movement. Another Methodist, the Rev Allen Lea (1926), devoted a monograph to separatist churches. In the same year the *International Review of Missions*, in a special edition on Africa, carried an article on the separatist church movement by Loram. Closer to our own times, the Christian Institute, which had established working contacts with some AICs, published a report on these churches. This report was compiled by Van Zyl (1967). A thesis on the ZCC was submitted by Kruger (1971).

However, of all the works cited above, no work published between 1890 and 1960 has had greater impact and reception than that of Sundkler (1948, 1976), a Swedish missionary who worked for several years in Natal (1937–1942) and later in central Africa (1942–1945). In the 1960s other students of AICs emerged. Two of the most notable among these are Gerhardus Oosthuizen (1968) and Inus Daneel (1974, 1988a, 1988b). Both men have a Dutch Reformed Church background. Within South Africa, I am not aware of any single individual who has produced and/or influenced the production of

more works on the AICs than (Pippin) Oosthuizen. In the 1990s we saw the emergence of Allan Anderson (1991, 1992, 1993), who elected to describe a wide range of AICs as 'African Pentecostal Churches'. It would not be inaccurate to say that Sundkler, Oosthuizen, Anderson and Daneel<sup>5</sup> remain the eminent AIC scholars of our time.<sup>6</sup>

### *Resultant profile and deductions*

What does the above overview tell us? From the earliest times, interest in AICs seems to have been a missionary preoccupation. Missionaries, missionary bodies and missionary newspapers have been by far the most interested in studying the AICs – the 1925 Native Churches Commission notwithstanding. In fact, by and large, interest in AIC studies has been very much a white male affair. Some notable exceptions are Schlosser (1958), Martin (1964) and Kruss (1985).

The reasons for missionary interest in the movement are not difficult to appreciate. The AIC movement was seen as an 'uneducated' and therefore dangerous challenge to historic missionary churches. This movement was seen as an ecclesiastical counterpart to the political 'native problem'. Interest in AICs was, therefore, neither neutral nor sympathetic. Note must be taken that, starting in the 1890s, and until 1960, almost *all* missionary comments on AICs, however researched and academic their basis might have appeared to be, were ultimately deprecatory and scathing. Even Sundkler (1948), whose work we have singled out as the most in-depth and influential, initially concluded that these churches were 'a bridge back to paganism'.

What is the meaning of such massive and durable negative evaluation? We cannot understand its meaning until we recognise that many AIC studies were not about the AICs at all – but about the researchers and their churches. To put it differently, it was not so much the AICs that were being studied;

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5 Although Daneel has concentrated on Zimbabwean AICs, he has had strong South African connections. As a professor of missiology at Unisa, he imparted a lot of his knowledge and skills to the South African AIC scene. Allan Anderson was one of his students. However, because Daneel's field research was done in Zimbabwe, we will not include him in our detailed discussions.

6 I suppose that, with his recent publications, Naudé (1995) should be counted amongst some of the up and coming AIC researchers. But we hope to discuss his contribution briefly at the end. Two other names worthy of mention are Pretorius (1993, 1995), who has done a study of some Ethiopian churches in Transkei and work on AIC historiography, and West (1975), who studied separatist churches from an urban perspective.

rather, it was 'our mission' negatively mirrored in the separatist movement. It was the white missionary establishment talking about itself, to itself and mainly for its own sake, in the face of one of the most serious ecclesiastical and theological challenges to everything that the establishment represented.

Given this conclusion, and assuming that there is at least an element of truth in my conclusion, I am compelled to put the following question to the Andersons and Oosthuizens of our time, 'In what ways (if any) have you broken with this tradition?' It is not wrong to refer to others if we are attempting to speak about and to ourselves, provided that we do so *consciously*. It is only by admitting our real purpose that we may extract the greatest benefit for ourselves from the exercise. With this in mind, we may note that a lot more benefit than meets the eye accrues to the historic mission churches (than to the AICs themselves) from studies of AICs.

#### *Blacks and AIC members in AIC scholarship*

More than thirty years ago, Sundkler (1961:16) lamented the absence of black scholars of the AICs.

I am fully conscious that my account does not reach the heart of the matter. I doubt whether any outsider can achieve that. *However sympathetic an attitude the White observer may take, he remains – an outsider.* The Bantu Churches of South Africa have not yet got – as the Negroes of the United States have – their own Richard Wright to record the rhythm of Black voices and to feel the heartbeat of the Black man's longings and aspirations (my italics).

Fifteen years later, in the preface to his second major work on Zionist AICs, Sundkler (1976:7) reiterated the same sentiments and said, 'This study is written in anticipation of one to be made some day by an African scholar living closer to the anguish and jubilation'. In one of his recent articles, Anderson (1995:286) laments that 'there is a frustrating dearth of serious research into AICs by Black South African theologians'.

It is not necessary to reiterate that AICs as a *field* for theological research has mainly been white-dominated. Nor will it be helpful to speculate about the possible reasons for this. The same 'reasons' that have kept blacks out of higher learning (including theological training), research in general, teaching at institutions of higher learning, and church leadership are probably applicable here. Nor does it follow that simply being black and

being a scholar will automatically transform one into 'an interpreter of the rhythm of Black voices'.<sup>7</sup> Research is often motivated not only by passionate interest in the subject in hand but also by adequate financial backing. If it were the case, hypothetically, that black theologians find AICs uninteresting, and not a priority from a research point of view, we would have to accept that respectfully. On the other hand, it could simply be that many existing studies of black theologians on AICs are not stimulating enough. Yet the painful point, that it is by and large whites alone who have spoken when it comes to research on AICs, must be made and taken cognisance of by both black and white theologians. In this, as is recognised by prominent white AIC researchers themselves, there is a considerable impoverishment of AIC research in general.

While there is nothing comparable to Sundkler's work (1948) amongst black scholars and church people, there are a few contributions by blacks which are worthy of note (see Millard 1995:40–49). At the sixth annual General Missionary Conference (1926), the Rev B S Diepu read a paper entitled 'Native separate church movements and their relation to the problem of evangelism'. In the *Yearbook of South African Mission* (Dexter 1927?), one of the two articles<sup>8</sup> on separatist churches belongs to the Rev L Mzimba (not the secessionist Mzimba but a son of his and a member of the separatist church). Mzimba's article (1927?) is important because it is written by an insider.<sup>9</sup> Another article of note is the one by Mayatula (1972).<sup>10</sup> This article is noteworthy for three reasons: its early date, its discussion of AICs from within the framework of black theology and because Mayatula was himself a member of a Zionist church.

Several articles by black people also appear in Oosthuizen's book (1986), which was the result of a consultation. Notable amongst these are Ngubane (1986a) and Setiloane (1986). Then there are the theses of Khuzwayo

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7 It is important to remember what Mosala once said of qualifications to do black theology. He (1989:143) points out 'that not all black people [can] do black theology and therefore black theology does not amount to any theology done by any group of black people'.

8 The other article on AICs was written by the prolific Rev Allen Lea.

9 Note that Mzimba chose the term 'African church' instead of 'separatist church' as his brief had required.

10 This paper was read at the Consultation of the Missiological Institute at the Lutheran Theological College, Mapubulo, Natal, 12–21 September 1972. The other paper on AICs in this conference was by Sprunger (1972), a white missionary. All the conference papers were published under the editorship of Becken (1972).

(1979), Lukhaimane<sup>11</sup> (1980) and Moeti (1981). In 1986 the works of Makhubu<sup>12</sup> (1986) and Vilakazi<sup>13</sup> (1986) were published. A year earlier, under the auspices of the ICT, Bishop Ngada *et al* (1985) published *Speaking for ourselves*. The year 1989 saw the publication of Xozwa (1989). Other black writers, especially those within black and African theological circles, have referred quite significantly to AICs in the 1980s – Ngubane (1986b), Motlhabi (1986, 1994), Mosala (1985). Among black writers on AICs, the work of Vilakazi (1986) appears to me to be the most comprehensive and detailed.<sup>14</sup>

### *Assessing the black influence*

While black input into AIC research is not comparable to that of white researchers, it is nevertheless significant enough to warrant attention. The monographs on AICs, especially those written by members of these churches, demand even more serious attention. It is significant that, within black theology, AICs do not seem to have attracted much attention. It was only ten years later, in the early 1980s, that AICs were identified as an area needing attention (see 1984, Black Theology Conference Report). Yet we must try to put this in perspective. Right from the onset, black theology was interested in more than one thin thread of Black Christianity (see Moore 1973). In fact everything about the lives of black people – all black people – was on the agenda. The absence of specific AIC studies in black theology is therefore not necessarily a sign of lack of interest. My guess is that AICs were included within the broad spectrum of black culture and traditional black religion. The 1984 black theology conference at Wilgerspruit, with the theme 'Black Theology Revisited', amongst other things recommended that an area

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11 Naudé (1995:28) introduces Lukhaimane as professor of history and secretary to the St Engenas ZCC.

12 A bishop in one AIC who also worked for the unity of AICs as well as the improvement of their theological education.

13 Vilakazi (1986:xv) is a retired professor of the American University in Washington, DC, and a former school teacher. He was attached to the University of Zululand at the time of preparing this book for publication. His assistants in 1981–82, Bongani Mthethwa and Mthembeni Mpanza, are both members of the Shembe Church. The basic material for this book was first collected for a thesis (?) in 1951. Vilakazi (1986:4) explains how this was done.

14 After Dr Maluleke submitted this chapter, Daneel's edited work on AIC outreach appeared in 2001. This volume contained discussions and articles by AIC leaders. See Daneel 2001a. Editors.

needing attention was 'the link between Black Theology, the African Independent Churches and African Traditional Religions'. This is the background to the articles by Ngubane (1986b) and Mosala (1985). In an article devoted to an account of the historical origins of black theology, Motlhabi (1986:50–52) devotes a considerable amount of space to the AICs. It is its holistic approach towards the black community that caused black theology to appear to be uninterested in AICs.

One is not denying that there may have been individual black theologians who were simply not interested in AICs per se – most of them having been non-members of these churches. However, the apparent absence of AIC studies in black theology must be understood within the context of the holistic approach explained above. It therefore makes sense that references to AICs began to be made only at a time when black theologians saw the need for narrower and sharper ideological clarity, that is during the 1980s (Maluleke 1995b). Given the political and ideological exigencies of these times, it was no longer enough for black theology to refer to the 'black community'. Nor could black theology be assumed to be the theology of *all* of the black community. Not all sections of the black community were the interlocutors of black theology, nor was any theology done by any black theologian necessarily black theology. It was in the process of the search for more precise interlocutors that the AICs were mentioned more frequently in black theology circles.

However, Mayatula's vision (1972:175) of young black intelligentsia '[who have their] eyes fixed towards these churches' did not produce a deluge of direct reflection on AICs. Later in the eighties, Takatso Mofokeng made references to the significance of 'popular religion' among the oppressed black people but he eschewed the AICs themselves.<sup>15</sup> It has often been said that black theologians have chastised AICs for their lack of overt political activity. Clear, unambiguous, consistent evidence of this tendency in black theology is difficult to sustain.<sup>16</sup> If black theology, and by implication black consciousness, criticised AICs, it was in the context of its critique of all '*non-whitisms*,' be they on the shop floor, in Bantustans, black politics or in black religion. If anything, the few black reflections on the AICs reveal a nuanced

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15 Mofokeng seems to have finally settled for the category of the black working class as acceptable interlocutors for his theologising.

16 Daneel's evidence for black theologians' disdain for AICs is very tenuous; in fact, anecdotal (see Daneel 1984d:65).

approach and assessment of the AICs – critical at points but deeply reflective, respectful and certainly not dismissive.

Similarly, it may be argued that insofar as black theology addressed issues around the spiritual and socio-political state of black people in general, AICs, as one of the sub-texts, were not and could not be excluded. More significantly, to be critical of AIC praxis is not tantamount to dismissing it.

That whites had shown a marked fascination for and interest in AICs and not for the larger reality of black Christianity might itself have acted as a deterrent for black theologians. To a certain extent, it must be admitted that for black theologians and black intellectuals, AICs have never been anxiously regarded as a problem area (cf Sundkler 1948:13) needing attention to the extent that they have done so over so long a period in white academic and missionary establishments. Sometimes white research into AICs has been used as a tool to prove how their resultant theologies are closer to the black community and, therefore, better than the Western-type academic black theology.

In a recently published book, Naudé (1995:125) praises the value of listening and being present in the construction of local theology, 'To listen is in a certain sense an art in which not many Western (and liberation!) theologians, including myself, excel'. In his response to my review (Maluleke 1994b) of Philpott (1993), Professor James Cochrane challenged me for suggesting that Philpott had ignored the input of black theologians (intellectuals) in his study, '[A]re black intellectuals sitting in universities wiser and more important [than such grass-roots communities as represented by the squatters at Amawoti]?' he asks quite angrily.<sup>17</sup> However, the question should not be posed in an *either/or* but in a *both/and* manner. The black theologians sitting at universities *and* the grass-roots communities are important. It is curious, however, that white liberation theologians 'sitting at universities' find it necessary to bypass the thinking of black theologians 'sitting at universities', while focusing exclusively on the so-called grassroots communities,<sup>18</sup> European political theology and Latin American liberation theology. Yet, the same white theologians expect black theologians to read, appreciate and benefit from South African white liberation theologies.

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17 James Cochrane responded to my review in a letter of *Missionalia*, the journal in which my review was published.

18 This was one of my fundamental criticisms (1994b) of Philpott (1993).

### *A black theological perspective – Mosala*

Could the AICs become serious interlocutors for black theology? There was a time in the early 1980s when Itumeleng Mosala, provoked by Karl Marx's condemnation of religion as an opium of the people, even toyed with the idea of embarking on a major study of the AICs – an idea which had the support of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). The idea of a major study did not materialise but Mosala (1989b) did some preliminary research in the African township of Mangaung near Bloemfontein. On the basis of this research, he compiled an essay-type report on AICs and the Bible.

In terms of basic research methodology, Mosala's research was very similar to those of white researchers on AICs. Focusing on two different congregations of the same African Independent Church (Mosala 1989b:9), he used interviews, questionnaires and participant observation. However, Mosala departed from the approaches of white researchers in terms of the theoretical framework and starting points. Operating from a Marxist and historical materialist perspective, Mosala (1989b:5) intended to go beyond a treatment of these churches in terms only of their spectacular features so as to avoid multiplying the confusions and extending the mythologies (Mosala 1989b:4). He used a cultural studies paradigm which was strongly undergirded by a historical materialist emphasis. Culture is here understood in a historical materialist sense so that the connection between culture and material existence makes culture in class-structured societies necessarily class culture (Mosala 1989b:5). For Mosala, therefore, culture is much more than a set of ephemeral behaviours and habits. From this preliminary research, Mosala makes a few tentative proposals. I will consider only those that are relevant to the subject of this essay.

Mosala regards AICs as a sub-culture within a *dominant* and a *parent super-culture*. The dominant super-culture would be mission Christianity as represented in mainline churches and African culture. The parent culture which Mosala posits as equally important is the black working class to which the majority of AIC members belong. It is in his differentiation between dominant and parent cultures that Mosala departs from the theoretical frameworks of many AIC scholars. Many missionary AIC scholars, who also regard AICs as representing a sub-culture, would only recognise the dominant cultures as a resource in their interpretation of AICs and not the parent culture. On this point there has been (one may add) little difference between black and white AIC scholars. Mosala laments the neglect of the working-class parent culture in AIC studies. In other words he hints that

neither the Africanness nor the Christianness of AICs can fully explain them. Thus he pushes for interpretations of AICs that will include the variable of the working-class roots of many of their members. However, in the context of the brief report, Mosala does not elucidate or show the implications of the inclusion of this variable. His own attempt in Mangaung is too elementary and too brief. However, his call for variation and further problematisation of the theoretical frameworks and interpretative categories used in the study of AICs is perhaps his key contribution to methodology of AIC studies.

## Research methods on AICs and other grassroots communities

### Method – a sample

In this part of the study I shall try to describe the research methods used by AIC and other grassroots scholars. I shall do so without being too overly concerned with either correct nomenclature or semantics. To make the study more concrete, I shall use the works of selected researchers for information and illustration.

#### *White AIC scholars*

Initially, white AIC scholars did not deem it necessary to conduct specific and deliberate research into sectarian and separatist churches – especially the Ethiopian churches. Many of these churches broke from mission churches and the writers would be missionaries who had actually experienced the secessions (for example Stormont, to whom we referred above). The leading secessionists would also be known to the missionaries. In fact, Mzimba (1927?:90)<sup>19</sup> indicates that the 'secessionist movement' was not given much lasting chance by the white missionary establishment. A focused study of these churches, therefore, was out of the question. If this was the attitude towards Ethiopian churches, how much more so to the numerous, unknown Zionist churches? It is against this background that the ignorant, yet harsh, comment of the Missionary Council referred to above (about the Bulhoek Massacre) must be understood.

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19 To quote from Mzimba (1927?:90), 'It is strange to say at the beginning of the African movement, it was to last three years at the outset, as predicted by some. It was claimed that another fifty years were needed before the Natives could be able to begin to work out their own salvation. Now after forty-two years, it is said twenty-five more years are necessary.'

### *Government commissions*

Although the government's intentions were probably less than noble, it must be given credit for the earliest, most systematic and deliberate study of separatist churches through its Native Churches Commission – a commission whose report was published in 1925.<sup>20</sup> Even prior to this commission, there had been another one, the 1903–1905 Native Affairs Commission.<sup>21</sup> The chief research tools of these government commissions were verbal interviews and questionnaires. It appears that the commissioners moved from district to district and conducted interviews with individuals who were deemed relevant to the matter under investigation. The following categories of interviewees emerge: 'loyal Black mission members', newspaper editors, white missionaries and Independent Church leaders (cf Millard 1995:67f). A significant omission in the interviewee profile is the category of ordinary members of the separatist churches. Many questions can be asked about such matters as the legitimacy of the all-white male commission, the legitimacy of its objectives in conducting the interviews, the validity of the commission's almost exclusive reliance on (recorded) interviews, the choice of interviewees and the authenticity of the evidence presented before them – at least by some of the groups they interviewed. However, the unmistakable method employed must be acknowledged as such.

### *Allen Lea*

Then came the work of the Rev Lea (1926), the earliest monograph by a white missionary into the AICs. As indicated in the prefatory note, Lea regarded the government commission into separatist churches (1925) as an important inspiration not only for his own interest in the separatist movement but to many scholars. Material from the commission findings is acknowledged by Lea as an important source of information for his own work. In essence, Lea's is a literature study using all written information available to him as well as his own experience as a practising missionary. To that extent, it is an academic inquiry into separatist churches. In the book

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20 According to Lea (1926:13), this commission was occasioned by the Bulhoek Massacre. His own verdict on the Bulhoek Massacre is as follows: 'The tragedy of Bulhoek in May 1921 is a sad instance of the blending of a poor understanding of the Christian Religion with a foolish desire to get rid of the White man' (1926:15).

21 Both commissions were instituted for reasons of control due to fears around what was perceived to be a growing anti-white feeling among the natives. The 1925 commission was specifically triggered by the Bulhoek Massacre.

itself, there is little concrete evidence that he has 'gone far afield' (Lea 1927:75) in his investigations. His book is a considered and informed appraisal of the commission's findings. While not based on any robust empirical research method, Lea's book, as also his numerous articles on the subject, biases notwithstanding, is based on a recognisable literature research methodology. Also, Lea's reliance on published information to strengthen his arguments in the writing of this book cannot be read to mean that he engaged in no empirical observation of the phenomenon he is discussing. His ambivalent but generally condemnatory conclusions are clearly informed by more than just what he has read.

### *Sundkler and his legacy*

The research methodologies of modern-day white AIC scholars show that there is much that these scholars hold in common. My focus here will be mainly on Sundkler, Oosthuizen, Anderson, Naudé and, though not dealing with AICs specifically, Philpott. In matters of methodology, Sundkler<sup>22</sup> is the archetype in white AIC research.<sup>23</sup>

The first thing to note about Sundkler's methodology is a clear focus. 'This study pertains almost exclusively to conditions within one South African tribe, the Zulus' (Sundkler 1948:14). He even regrets this as being too wide and thereby being methodologically hazardous. Sundkler ascribes the conclusions to 'my own direct observations in the field, together with local observations over a period (1941–1945) made by my Zulu assistants' (Sundkler 1948:14). This is the gist of his research methodology. This direct observation is combined with rigorous literature studies. Sundkler is quick to point out that his conclusions were not dependent only on the formal direct-observation. He cites the entire span of his missionary activity in South Africa (1937–1942) as being part of his learning period about AICs. 'I

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22 On the cover of the 1948 edition of his *Bantu Prophets*, he is introduced as the author of the 'Centenary History of the Swedish Missionary Society [who] after having served with the Mission in South Africa, took charge of the orphanage mission in Tanganyika. He has been a lecturer at Uppsala University since 1945 and has now been appointed as the new research secretary of the International Missionary Council'.

23 While it is true that Sundkler is a pioneer in AIC research, he was definitely not a pioneer in the research methodology itself. It must be remembered that many of the missionaries who constructed the orthographies of local languages (eg Moffat, Paul and Henri Berthoud, Eugene Thomas, H A Junod, etc) had been in the business of scientific and participant observation amongst the locals for a long time. We shall return to this theme.

had daily opportunities of coming into contact with the leaders and common people of the Independent churches,' he writes (Sundkler 1948:14). Other occasions for observation were created by the arrangement of meetings between AIC leaders and mission church pastors and evangelists, and the attendance by Sundkler at preaching and purification services and other meetings of the Independent Churches 'whenever my own regular mission work allowed me' (Sundkler 1948:15).

How was Sundkler received amongst the AICs? 'Almost without exception, my African assistants and I were received as honoured guests at their church services' (Sundkler 1948:15). What about his Zulu assistants? These were mainly drawn from his students at the Lutheran college in Natal.

After some initial training in the art of observation and note-making, they were in two consecutive years, 1940 and 1941, posted in different areas of Natal and Zululand, for a period of some weeks at each place. Detailed life stories of local leaders and ordinary church members were recorded, church services, dreams and visions related. All their notes were, as in the case of my own field work, written in Zulu (Sundkler 1948:15).

Finally, Sundkler was keenly aware of his value premises or what he called 'the problem of bias'. He says hypothetically, for example,

What would have been the outcome of this investigation if the observer had been, let us say, a Pentecostal soul winner, or an African nationalist, or a sociologist who would not necessarily have to be a professing Christian? ... The writer's valuations and ideals enter into the investigation – from the collecting of the material itself, which is the fundamental stage, to the final stage (Sundkler 1948:16).

Sundkler moves then to explicitly state his value premises. He is aware that 'I am myself, both as a Protestant missionary and as an investigator, a part of the problem, and I affect its future development by my missionary activity or inactivity'. One can hardly get a clearer awareness of the nuances of interpretative problems than in Sundkler. The following are the value premises that Sundkler (1948:17) admits to: in his observations, he evaluates the AICs 'in terms of continuous principles which have been delivered to the Church'; and he also assumes that enforced racial discrimination was a factor in the emergence of AICs.



Robed *Ndaza*, Zionist bishop promotes office-bearer to higher position in the church's leadership hierarchy

## *Oosthuizen*

As indicated above, Oosthuizen<sup>24</sup> has written and influenced the writing of much research into the AICs. We shall pick up on only one of his earlier works, in which he gives a fairly clear indication of his research method. Oosthuizen introduces himself as a minister of the Reformed Church and first full-time lecturer in Christian theology at the University of Durban Westville. In a study on pentecostalism in the Indian community, Oosthuizen (1975) describes his method. He describes his acquaintance with the Indian community of metropolitan Durban right from his arrival there in 1968. From 1970 onwards, he conducted regular visits to and interviews with members of Indian Pentecostal churches. These contacts established a position of confidence 'between a White Dutch Reformed University lecturer and White and Indian Pentecostal pastors' (Oosthuizen 1975:2). Oosthuizen indicates that he conducted fieldwork over a period of two and half years. The chief tool of research seems to have been 'an extensive questionnaire on Indian culture and the Pentecostal churches ... as well as one on statistics'. The distribution and use of questionnaires were delegated to a senior student of Oosthuizen's who

... together with the investigator contacted various students and individuals in the different churches to assist in the interviewing of individual Pentecostal members, lay workers and pastors. Each questionnaire took about 4-5 hours and sometimes much longer as the interviewer had to explain the meaning of certain questions to some of the semi-literate members.

On top of these, Oosthuizen also conducted personal interviews with members and pastors. Like Sundkler and his helpers, Oosthuizen and his assistant were 'often invited to speak at the services we attended and through participation ... were accepted as members' (Oosthuizen 1975:3). The key for Oosthuizen, as it had been for Sundkler, was participation. Indeed he summarises his method as the drawing up of an extensive questionnaire and the selection of field workers who conducted the interviews; observation-participation; and the collecting and analysing of written documents. The groups interviewed were pastors and ordinary members of selected Pentecostal churches. It does appear, however, that

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24 Since 1984 Oosthuizen, who started his teaching career at Fort Hare, has been director of the Research Unit for New Religions and Independent Churches attached to the University of Zululand.

pastors were the main target group (Oosthuizen 1975:7). Even theological students were visited. Particular attention was given to the background of the interviewees. Members were interviewed both in their homes and at church services. Oosthuizen points out that Pentecostals would not allow one merely to be an observer; such a person would be stigmatised as an upstart, or a secret service agent, so that 'the greatest problem for the researcher is the handclapping and this is often done so energetically that one feels guilty in not taking part' (Oosthuizen 1975:8). Furthermore Oosthuizen acknowledges 'socio-cultural differences between himself and the specific groups' (Oosthuizen 1975:9), but he is quick to add that 'my interest in their religious expression overruled cultural differences'. About the reliability of his assistants, Oosthuizen points out that on the whole '[they] never tried to impress me about the Pentecostal churches to which they adhere, except to give as much relevant information as possible'.

Of the dangers of participation Oosthuizen is very aware, for example he cites too much involvement as a possible hindrance to objectivity. He also hints at the necessity to limit one's participation only to certain things. Oosthuizen also admits that he approached the research with a specific hypothesis or assumption, namely that 'Pentecostalism has the ability to give satisfaction to a specific socio-economic layer of uprooted people, which Protestantism and Catholicism fail to give to the same extent'. While Oosthuizen's research method is comparable to Sundkler's, his research hermeneutic differs from that of Sundkler in a few critical areas.

### *Anderson*

In all three of his studies on African Pentecostal Churches (APCs) (1991, 1992, 1993), Anderson starts by confessing that he is not an African, but he quickly adds that 'if African is meant to signify love for the continent and people of Africa or commitment to an African ideal, then I would include myself in this category' (Anderson 1991:2). Furthermore, Anderson reveals that 'my entire adult life (since 1968) has been spent in the Pentecostal Charismatic movements'. In his two later studies (1992 & 1993) he is at pains to explain his research methodology, but not so with his earlier work. It appears, therefore, that though building on his life-long interest and involvement in the AICs, his earlier work (Anderson 1991) was not based on a consciously articulated methodology.

It is in his second major work that Anderson describes his method as that of participant observation, pointing out that he has 'been a participant observer

in African Pentecostal Churches for over two decades'. He also describes himself as a member of an APC who is also involved in theological education. His works are the fruit of participant research conducted at Soshanguve, a township on the outskirts of Pretoria. With the help of assistants and questionnaires, and proportionate random sampling, Anderson was able to interview a reasonably representative portion of Soshanguve residents. Another tool used by Anderson was a tape recorder. As an appendix to his book, Anderson (1992) attaches the questionnaire that was used.

For his third monograph Anderson conducted a second-phase research into Soshanguve. Unlike the earlier one, which he describes as being more quantitative, the second one was designed to be more qualitative. 'We wanted people to talk about their churches and their convictions rather than answer a stereotyped questionnaire' (Anderson 1993:9). The assistants were armed with less structured but probing questions plus tape recorders. The same assistants would later translate the interviews into English. The 'dominant theme of the interviews was the accommodation and confrontation between the churches and the African Traditional world view'. A distinct bias in Anderson's research, which sets him apart from West (1975), was that, instead of concentrating on interviewing the leaders, he interviewed ordinary church members.

#### *Philpott and Naudé*

Neither Naudé (1995)<sup>25</sup> nor (even less so) Philpott (1993)<sup>26</sup> is an AIC researcher in the strict Sundklerian tradition. However, I consider them relevant to our discussion on three counts: they are part of the 'madness' of empirically based theological interest in 'grassroots' communities: a ZCC peasant congregation for Naudé and an urban squatter community for Philpott; both intend to make at least a methodological contribution towards a genuinely 'South African liberation theology arising out of the religious experiences of ordinary oppressed people' (Cochrane in the Foreword to Philpott 1993); and both represent, in my opinion, the most sophisticated ideological awareness of the merits and the demerits of participant-observer-based research theories and methodologies within South Africa.

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25 See my review of this book in Maluleke (1996).

26 Philpott (1993:40) does indicate the preponderance of Zionist churches in Amawoti and what he calls popular religion. See my review of this book in Maluleke (1944b).

Philpott's monograph was originally submitted for a postgraduate academic degree, whereas Naudé's is post-doctoral. The former was a relief worker in a squatter area, whilst the latter was a lecturer at a university situated near the peasant community on which his research was based. The methodological similarities between the two studies are striking. Both authors worked with a select group within the chosen communities, a Bible study group for Philpott and a ZCC congregation for Naudé.

### *Philpott*

Philpott identifies his research method as falling within the participatory paradigm – an 'approach for research committed to social change and redressing of the power relation between researcher and researched' (Philpott 1993:15). He introduces participatory research as having developed in reaction to positivistic and empiricist research paradigms of the late fifties and sixties. These traditional research models were, according to Philpott,

... based upon the idea of controlled and objective measurement, classification, and interpretation of data in relation to hypotheses and theories. The researcher is required to be a value-free observer, and the results are regarded as objectively true facts concerning the reality which has been studied (Philpott 1993:21).

The above is what Philpott's research intends not to be. Philpott advances three reasons for the inadmissibility of the old research models, namely the impossibility of an objective researcher; the impracticability of the assumption that 'small sections of social reality can be isolated and experimented with, without the interference of outside conditions'; and the awareness that traditional research tends to empower the researcher and perpetuate the powerlessness of the researched.

How does participatory research remedy the situation? Philpott describes his research method as 'a process in which the community participates in the analysis of its own reality in order to promote a social transformation for the benefit of the participants, who are the oppressed' (Philpott 1993:21). Furthermore, this 'process' is said to consist of three components: social investigation, education and action. Here are some of the characteristics of participatory research (Philpott 1993:22):

- The problem under investigation originates from the community.

- The ultimate goal is structural transformation.
- There is an involvement of the researched in the control of the research process.
- It focuses on oppressed groups.
- It tends to be qualitative rather than quantitative.
- The researcher and researched work as equals.
- Accountability is to both the 'scientific' community and 'grassroots'.

Philpott is keenly aware of three 'crucial themes' in all research, namely participation, knowledge and power. It is significant that he emphasises participation, not so much of the observer (which is built in anyway) as of the researched in all levels of the research process. The crucial question is how Philpott went about applying the above insights in the conduct of his Bible study group meeting at the Amawoti squatter camp.

His research was conducted over a period of four years (July 1988 to December 1992). From 1989 Philpott, a 'white and privileged theologian and researcher' (Philpott 1993:18), together with his wife, took up residence at the Amawoti squatter camp. During this period 'the researcher was involved in a wide range of community activities through the Ilimo Community Project' (Philpott 1993:19). Philpott's research focus was a Bible study group consisting of community members 'who were also staff members of the Ilimo Community Project' (Philpott 1993:19). Whilst living in the Amawoti squatter camp, Philpott was approached by a group from the community '[who] initially expressed interest in discussing questions which they had concerning Christianity' (Philpott 1993:25). The final Bible study group consisted of staff members in the community organisation which was headed by Philpott.

The Bible study group met weekly and conducted their Bible studies in a discussion group format rather than one in which the researcher preached (Philpott 1993:26). After meeting for a period of three months, without focusing on any particular theme or passage of the Bible, the group took a break for two months. After this they met again, this time with a clearer focus. Biblical passages about Jesus were to be their focus and the 'researcher identified the kingdom of God as a central theme of the studies, particularly as presented in the parables' (Philpott 1993:26). To record the

proceedings, one of the group members took verbatim notes in shorthand. These were later interpreted 'and analyzed by the researcher' (Philpott 1993:27).

Approximately seventy Bible discussions were recorded. Of these, the researcher 'selected thirteen which he judged to be most useful for his particular study' (Philpott 1993:20). Members of the group were given some opportunity to comment on the researcher's analysis, but despite this feedback, the analysis of the data was understood to be the role of the researcher. Of what use were the findings of the study (Philpott 1993:27)? During a period of violent upheaval in the community, a pamphlet 'containing the group's reflections on the Lord's Prayer was produced' by members of the Bible study group for use by church groups in and outside Amawoti. An Easter march which was video-taped was also organised by the Bible study group. T-shirts with sayings from the group discussions were also produced. On the researcher's part, the research was used for writing a thesis (Philpott 1993:28). He also used the findings to 'develop a debate with other theologians, predominantly those with similar commitments to the poor and their limitations' (Philpott 1993:20).<sup>27</sup>

### *Naudé*

In 1989, Naudé, a university lecturer in theology, gained access to a small congregation at Itsani – 'a peasant village about 15 km from the Sibasa-Thoho-ya-Ndou area' (Naudé 1995:28). He was assisted by John Mulago (interpreter), Phineas Mudau (the local pastor), F K Maselesele (translation and transcription), and Prof Koos van Rooy (comments and corrections on the transcribed and translated text). To collect the data, tape recorders and a video-camera were used. This was done over three sessions on Sundays 5, 12, and 19 November 1989.

Like Philpott, Naudé's research methodology has a heavy and explicit theological agenda. His concern was to incorporate the 'unwritten theology of millions of people ... onto a broader, ecumenical framework'. For him, therefore, the singing, peasant members of the Itsani ZCC congregation,

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27 It is statements like this that provoked my concern (Maluleke 1994b) that Philpott's promise would have been better fulfilled by more explicit reference to black and African theologians.

28 Following Ninian Smart, Naudé (1995:1) highlights seven interrelated dimensions of religious experience, namely the doctrinal/philosophical, practical/ritual, experiential/emotional, narrative/mythic, ethical/legal, social/institutional and the material dimension.

near Venda, were poet-theologians engaged in a *multi-dimensional*<sup>28</sup> religious experience. For Naudé therefore, it is crucial for a researcher into religious communities to grasp the epistemological significance (and problematic nature) of religious experience in its multi-dimensional totality. Once this has been grasped, one or more dimensions may be selected for data collection and another may be assumed as a methodological starting point. For example, in his study of the hymns of the rural ZCC congregation, Naudé derives his research material from the narrative dimension (singing, prayer, preaching, etc) and yet as a methodological starting point he chooses the experiential dimension. Note how his epistemological ideology affects Naudé's (1995:8) definition and aim of his research:

This study is a study in Christian theology. It seeks to understand phenomenologically the meaning of the positive, mediated, communal, religious experience of a small African congregation. Through an analysis of the narrative dimension (freely sung hymns), and implying the other dimensions of a religion, this study attempts to construct the poorly developed doctrinal aspect. I hope that this will illustrate a doing of systematic theology on the basis of experientially transmitted oral theology and that this will enhance the African voice in ecumenical dialogue.

Assuming that the experiential is an important window into religious experience, Naudé briefly reviews the 'experiential quality of three major theological currents' (Naudé 1995:8ff), namely post-Enlightenment European theology, liberation theology and African theology. He sees recourse to experience (rather than rationality) as being the common denominator of all these theologies. However, he points out that, of the three theological trends, African theology relates uniquely to experience in that 'it does not react to a preceding form of rationality . . . [and African theology] must be seen as a pre- or rather non-Enlightenment context' (Naudé 1995:19). For Naudé therefore this pre-enlightenment experiential African theology is an alternative to the dominance of Western and liberation theologies, both of which basically and merely respond to the experiential poverty of the Enlightenment.

What I have described above are the theological and ideological presuppositions with which Naudé approaches his study of the hymns of a rural ZCC congregation. It is against this background that we must understand his characterisation of the Itsani ZCC congregants as poet-theologians, bathing

in an authentic religious experience, but unable to develop the philosophical-doctrinal dimension of this experience.

Yet another important theoretical consideration with which Naudé struggles is what he calls an 'oral hermeneutic'. Accordingly, he (Naudé 1995:32) laments the absence of

... orality as a hermeneutical category ... from systematic theology. This holds true for traditional Western theologies as well as for African theologies of inculturation. Even specific work done in the field of the African Independent Churches (hymnal or sermon analyses) lack an overt sensitivity for the specific oral quality of the material.

Thus, for Naudé, sensitivity to the epistemological difference between orality and textuality must guide researchers of oral communities – even if the orality in such communities is not primary orality. For example, sensitivity to orality at the Itsani congregation enabled Naudé to be attentive to such things as the call-response structure, recurring formulas and the participatory style in the singing of the Itsane ZCC congregation (Naudé 1995:35f). One advantage of oral research which Naudé highlights is that the biasing effect obtaining from the interviewer feedback and reinforcement is greatly reduced – that is, because hymns were the basic object of study, the group could not be induced to 'produce data beyond their means' (Naudé 1995:43). However, Naudé is only too aware of the limitations of oral research. For example, even oral research relies on literacy, recording, note-taking, *inter alia*, as well as on the ultimate process of interpretation. The writing down of oral tradition is, therefore, a paradox (Naudé 1995:43). Similarly Naudé points out the difficulty of 'representing a total performance in textual form' (Naudé 1995:47).

## An evaluation

- One thing which our survey communicates rather well is that theological interest in grassroots communities in South Africa has a tradition of more than a hundred years. In the nineteenth century alone, countless fieldwork, observation-based researches were conducted amongst grassroots communities. The foci of these researches included such areas as the classification of African fauna and flora, the collection of native proverbs and idioms, and the classification of Bantu languages,



In all AICs no celebration and proclamation in worship is complete without prayer



folklore, folk-songs and customs. Some of these observer-based researches, done more than a hundred years ago, are still useful today.

To that extent, current theological interest in grassroots communities based on fieldwork is, quite literally, nothing new. If something considered new is being advanced by current scholarship, the onus is on that scholarship to demonstrate it. One is simply pleading for humility and continuity here. In AIC studies, for example, it is often assumed that, simply because early studies (for example Lea 1926) were largely unsympathetic, these studies are necessarily inferior to current studies which take a sympathetic (advocacy) view of these churches. Just because early researchers held unsympathetic, almost hostile views on AICs and other grassroots communities, it does not necessarily reduce the validity and 'excellence' of their research methods and their academic inquiries. If the motives of erstwhile researchers were inspired by the need for control, how much purer are those of modern grassroots researchers?

- Contrary to perceptions, which I cited in the above survey, I personally doubt if the difference between liberation theologies (that is, black and African theologies) and white AIC scholarship is that the former are more Western oriented than the latter. What can be more Western than conducting empirical researches in controlled environments, galvanised by questionnaires, tape recorders, a team of assistants, and video cameras? There is a sense in which this is more Western than good old and common literature studies. The difference between the two approaches, if there is any, must be sought elsewhere, I think.

This false difference being perpetuated by a number of AIC scholars, as I have indicated above, is the cause of much unnecessary theological upmanship. One is not banishing constructive theological rivalry. In the polarised South African situation it would be impossible not to have theological rivalries. It is healthy for theologies to have critical relations. But such relations should not be based on the assumption of false differences. The difference between liberation theologies and AIC theologies is not, in my opinion, necessarily one of quality. Contrary to many claims, it is not as if the one is more genuine and local, whilst the other is less so. Grassroots-type theologies have actually been at their best when they have explored continuous rather than discontinuous relations with other theologies. A good example of this is Daneel's

(1984d) point of departure, namely that all African theologies are concerned with liberation. The avoidance of intellectual black thought in observer-type theological research is short-sighted and dangerous. I have felt for a long time, for example, that too large and too artificial a wall is often built between AICs and other black churches. The reality is that growing sections (for example worship) of traditional black churches – the so-called mission churches – are becoming AIC and Pentecostal in both theology and praxis. It therefore does not make sense to be too rigid in separating Mission Churches and AICs.

- Between Philpott and Naudé we have (participant) observer-based research methodologies at their most critical and most sophisticated. In this case one may only express a wish that all observer-research theologians may take careful heed of the valuable reflection of these two authors. Yet the myth of objectivity continues to plague many observer-research theologians. All too often, the researchers try hard to persuade us that they are letting the sources speak for themselves, when their own voices are actually drowning the sources. Let this be established once and for all: the sources can speak for themselves only before we lay our hands, eyes and minds on them!

Even for Philpott and Naudé, their well-thought-out theoretical reflections on methodology are more easily said than done. Philpott's promise of involving the community in the entire research process goes up in smoke. What Philpott gets out of his research project in Amawoti is qualitatively more than the community benefits from him. A careful reading of Naudé reveals that he is listening more to himself and his academic colleagues than to the ZCC peasant congregation. How much could he see and hear after three brief visits? Besides, his findings are greatly marred by gross mistranslations and misspellings of African languages.

- Genuine humility and genuine modesty must inspire all theological research. The tongue-in-cheek confession that one is 'a white and privileged theologian and researcher' (Philpott 1993:18) is quite patronising and superfluous to the integrity of one's research. White researchers must meaningfully identify specific shortcomings such as language, fear, racism and privilege and then go on to show and take practical steps to remedy these shortcomings, if they are genuine

shortcomings indeed. For example, what have those who lament the absence of blacks in AIC scholarship done to remedy the situation?

- This humility must also extend to the value of the research findings. Grassroots theologians must lower their expectations of what their researches can attain either for theology or for the communities being researched. Except for Inus Daneel, few grassroots theologians have genuinely fallen in love with the researched. As Daneel has demonstrated with his lifelong commitment to Zimbabwean AICs, our research can ultimately only be truly empowering to the community if we make lifelong commitment to being perpetual students with those communities. In the forewords of some grassroots-type studies, one reads many a superlative phrase and sentence. Yet, if we were to be honest, most of these researches have benefited the researchers much more than they will ever benefit the researched.
- More reflection on the evaluatory process within grassroots research must be done. My impression is that apart from blindness to biases, some researchers tend to fail to differentiate between the tools used in evaluating and the data unearthed in the investigation. However refreshing and amazing the unearthed data may be, we seldom use (only) the same data to evaluate itself. It is often only by going outside the data that we are able to interpret and process the data meaningfully. This going out and the tools we go out to fetch are seldom the subject of inquiry. Although the data uncovered and collected by various grassroots theologians differ, my reading reveals very little innovation with regard to the tools of interpretation. Most AIC researchers will go to the world of African traditional religions, as constructed by the researcher concerned, for tools of analysis and evaluation. But why should the world of African traditional religions take precedence over other possible frames of reference in the valuation of AICs? And why should we accept an empirical researcher's construction of this world, especially since this was not part of the empirical research findings?
- The race, class and gender elements in the existence or establishment of research-attracting grassroots communities must be acknowledged and confronted. In other words, the race-class-gender-*ladenness* of the research process must become a conscious subject of reflection. Almost without exception, so-called grassroots communities consist of black people. This is the reason that white researchers have self-consciously

had to deal with the questions, 'What am I, as a white person, part of the oppressor group, doing amongst black people? What right do I have to be here? Will I cope with being here? Will I understand what happens here?' If erstwhile white researchers could brush these questions aside on the basis of either a white-man's-burden missionary conviction or belief in scientific objectivity, both these premises are so weakened that they are unable to offer complete solace for modern researchers. That the researchers and the methods are overwhelmingly white whilst the researched are overwhelmingly black is a serious methodological issue needing considered attention and not cliché-type excuses. We must constantly ask ourselves, 'What is going on here?' To that extent we may need to be analytical even of the well-publicised hospitality of grassroots communities to researchers.

The point I am making is that researchers – all researchers – are not neutral observers and collectors of data. Nor are they viewed as such by the 'grassroots' communities in which they work. To that extent therefore, no one is 'qualified' to do grassroots research. But none less so than the researcher who is unconscious of the race-class-gender-*ladenness* of his or her research activity.

- The question of theoretical frameworks and interpretative strategies and categories raised by Mosala is crucial. AIC researchers must bid farewell to their purported theoretical innocence and theoretical indifference. They cannot present AICs from the point of view of the 'ordinary members' of these churches. Researchers must therefore be upfront and thoughtful about their interpretative strategies. Are African culture and mission Christianity the best or only categories against which these churches can be studied? Unfortunately even these categories are often approached and discussed in stereotypical, unproblematic, uninnovative ways so that they end up 'multiplying the confusions and extend[ing] the mythologies'.
- Finally, are grassroots researches of any value for South African theology? Most definitely. Theology is not and should not be a closed system. It cannot afford to be a closed system during our times. For this reason, the double-edged uncertainty with which I opened this essay is a necessary one. What I must point out, however, is that there is no such thing as a purely grassroots theology, devoid of intellectualism. Therefore the difference between what I have called grassroots theologies and

other theologies is often only the normal differences of emphasis, commitment and bias.

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