

**African challenges**  
**Unfolding identities**

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## Foreword

The title *African challenges* cuts two ways. Not only is Africa challenged to redeem the identity that colonialism ruthlessly trampled upon. In the postcolonial era, and especially in a globalised world, all individuals and nations have to shape a new identity capable of withstanding the levelling thrust of international forces and, above all, technoscience. The background to the book is the specifically South African situation, which may be extrapolated to any number of other African countries. The specifically South African context in question focuses on the build-up to liberation from apartheid, embodied by Steve Biko (chapter 1), and aspects of that process that emerged in the course of the liberation struggle and subsequently. The first chapter on Biko and black consciousness prefigures themes that feature in the rest of the book. Liberation starts with the self, as Biko intimated – hence a matter of identity (chapter 2). No African problem may be viewed in isolation, outside the broader context; racism and ethnocentrism have to be overcome (chapter 3). It requires a hermeneutics of the self or self-understanding (chapter 4). As part of African identity and faith in self-emancipation, the key concept of African rationality and Africans' capacity to take their place as adult partners in the global household call for attention (chapter 5). African spirituality is an essential clue to African identity (chapter 6). Poverty and all its concomitants are consistent themes in all reflection on Africa (chapters 7-8). Africa's entry into the global household forms part of the Nepad programme, along with the continent's technological in(capacity) (chapter 9). The challenge of free elections must be faced to realise African ideals (chapter 10). African renaissance demands advancement in technology, which brings its own challenges (chapter 11) and threatens African personhood that must be maintained in a techno-scientific scenario (chapter 12). Finally there is an example of how African culture can be realised in a constitutional democracy (chapter 13). Biko with his hermeneutics of the self touched on all these themes.

In a globalised world all countries are part of a single household. Ideally authority in this household should be divided equitably so newcomers to the global household are empowered to play their part. Translated into global terms that means a planet without boundaries, in which governments do not have carte blanche to do as they please. That is the rationale behind the universal ethical standards articulated in human rights. The endeavour to establish constitutional democracies worldwide rests on the assumption that the will of the majority will prevail within the parameters of globally acceptable constitutions. Like any household, the South African one needs rules for

every domain: individual behaviour, the environment, fair governance and, most importantly, the distribution of state revenue. That puts economic globalisation on the agenda and, with it, the much neglected generation of red (economic) rights. The fundamental challenge facing globalisation is equal partnership, together with proportional representation and the franchise. Poverty, illiteracy, deficient military and economic clout, religion, language, culture and the like cannot be used as mechanisms for excluding some members.

Historically Africa was regarded as a child that had to be told what to do and what not to do. That was what Biko rebelled against. Africans are busy changing this perception. An example of international recognition of their identity as adult members of the human race is South Africa's inclusion in the UN Security Council. Extrapolated to our continent, economic justice means that poor countries are entitled to use their wealth and resources, both human and natural, for the benefit of their citizens. To this end the principles of corporate greed must be humanised, since they entail exporting the lion's share of profits. Third World countries need help, but not in ways that nurture dependence on foreign capital and expertise or surreptitiously feed the investors' greed.

This book seeks to prepare the ground for Africa's admission to the global household as adult members. Hence the accent is not just on factors influencing the continent's economic growth but also on African values that must not be lost as industrialisation proceeds. Reflection on Africa should be holistic: economics must not be isolated from governance, education, health, ethnic diversity, spirituality and values. Globalisation has certain implications. Pretending that the playing fields are level is naive. It requires a robust sense of self-worth to assert one's identity as a member of the household rather than a poor relation begging for handouts. Negotiators of a new world economic dispensation represent millions of people who embrace the values they propound. These include human rights, respect for others and otherness, acceptance that humankind and nature have rights that need to be propagated and protected by everybody, redressing past exploitation, and the like. Certainly we have a long way to go. What we advocate is that we apply ourselves actively to establishing such a human rights culture, for world peace and the future of our planet are at stake.

A human rights culture implies that poverty relief, good governance and ideals like regional and continental solidarity and cooperation will be realised. In this context Nepad is seen as a promising development. Africa, a rich continent, has always had to be content with the crumbs from its own laden table. Economic globalisation calls for partners without ulterior motives of self-enrichment, which seems unlikely at this stage. Hence there is

a great deal of criticism from Africans about ongoing exploitation of the continent, for instance overseas support for heads of government and rebel groups that can be bribed to promote foreign enrichment. For these reasons Africans are understandably sceptical about globalisation, which many see as neo-imperialism.

A lot of Africans believe that their spiritual values can reshape humankind. This requires respect for indigenous spiritual values, which normally permeate an entire culture and are not confined to the religious domain. They include respect for life and for the individual. One of colonialism's greatest sins was to rob Africans of their dignity, which was tied up with their place in the community. African communities were ripped apart and their culture was belittled. The book aims to highlight the distinctive contribution of, for instance, the African spirit to international human rights.

Most of the literature on Africa talks *about* Africa. A human rights culture means talking *with* Africa *in African terms*. Dialogue entails listening intently so as to understand what Africa is saying. Consequently the book also looks at hermeneutics as a technique to reach understanding. Not that a few hermeneutic manoeuvres can strip the African's soul bare and make it intelligible. African hermeneutics has a way of its own and functions in a communitarian forum. This means that understanding is a journey to be undertaken, first of all, by Africans themselves (as Biko insisted), and then in partnership with others. At the end of the journey it must be possible to speak about friendship built on mutual respect, comprehension and awareness that friendship does not mean control but mutual trust and openness to the future. Africa is by now so hypersensitive to Western interference and paternalism that it tends to reject any comment or prescription from that side.

Africa is referred to generically, which is obviously reductive. While there are undoubtedly many cohesive factors, there could well be even more features that distinguish Africans from each other. By the same token one might cite common features of Europeans, Americans, Arabs, Chinese, which is equally reductive and ignores the many exceptions. The book was written by a white African and its chapters are the fruits of several years of reflection. The theological and philosophical matrix is clearly European; the life world and day to day academic interaction is African. This results in a dual perspective, placing (South) African realities and thought in the broad context of world history and thinking. In this way the author endeavours to make a modest contribution to Africa's unfolding identity from a typically Southern African vantage point.

Chapter 1 starts with Steve Biko's hermeneutics of the self by representing him as an African Bonhoeffer who called his people to self-responsibility. The book starts with Biko, partly because he highlights the themes

dealt with in subsequent chapters, and partly because he posits a condition for partnership – non-interference by know-alls! Biko is viewed as an African Bonhoeffer, not just because of obvious parallels in their physical histories (both rose against inhuman regimes and died in prison), but more particularly because of the way they summoned their people to take responsibility for themselves. For that reason Biko turned down help offered by zealous liberals who thought they had the answers. Africa had to liberate itself, starting with a hermeneutics of the self. That entails understanding yourself within your oppressive circumstances and responding to these. The response is a first step towards self-responsibility: a cardinal aspect of people's identity is determined by their response to their situation. And a key facet of such a hermeneutics is a hermeneutics of poverty, which is crucial to the solution of that problem.

Chapter 2 takes the relative success story of South Africa's emancipation to democracy as a point of departure to examine some gains and challenges that affect various other African countries as well. One is the question of identity. Colonial history played havoc with African identity, whereas no independent nation can exist without self-respect. That presupposes identity: a self that one respects. The chapter sketches the South African transition process and the challenge to black South Africans to regain their identity and self-respect. Another challenge is to overcome the divisive elements of diversity through successful nation building. The nature of African identity is examined, along with attempts to retrieve it. This means that members of South African society must accept one another as equals, to be treated with respect for cultural, language and class differences.

Chapter 3 looks at the challenge of African diversity. Africa is not monolithic and a striving for African unity is not meant to undermine its diversity. But ethnic diversity poses problems of its own. In many instances it is a major obstacle to peace on the continent and obstructs unity. The object is not to level diversity but to deal with it equitably. Globalisation and technoscience threaten cultural diversity everywhere. Extrapolated to all communities, the ubuntu concept can help to harmonise differences. Ethnocentric prejudice is a social construct and can be changed. The biological roots of exclusive mechanisms are highlighted as a major factor in ethnocentrism. Prejudice evolved with the human race to help it cope with multiplicity and foreignness. While we can accommodate foreignness rationally, its atavistic roots live on and are conducive to ethnocentrism. Ethnotheology can help to conquer it.

Chapter 4 seeks to deepen insight into the continent's spiritual world by looking at African hermeneutics, particularly in the context of African Initiated Churches (AICs). Hermeneutics is used as a key, because it provides

guidelines to trace Africa's self-understanding as reflected in Black and African theology. To accept African traditional spirituality Christianity will have to fathom that cultural matrix. African hermeneutics presupposes prior hermeneutic self-analysis. We must understand ourselves – our values, prejudices, sentiments – and take these into account before we are able to understand each other on an equal footing.

Chapter 5 deals with African rationality. Westerners often conclude that when a cultural pattern contains elements that they find 'primitive' or 'illogical', that culture is irrational and cannot readily accommodate rational standards. This view is not only modernistic and reductive, but also uninformed. Hence one needs to take a look at African rationality to get rid of the by now archaic misconception that Africans are biologically incapable of rational thought in the Western sense. These misconceptions underlay the denigration of Africans by their erstwhile colonisers and resulted in their exclusion, by and large, from the global scientific community. Aspects of African rationality are probed, not only to understand it better but also to identify biases in the Western view of rationality. African rationality has always been *embodied*, something that has only recently begun to be explored by cognitive scientists, who are now looking for clues to the functioning of rationality.

Chapter 6 deals with the force of African spirituality. It should not be interpreted in Western religious terms. Defining religion is a daunting task in itself. It is usually done purely in terms of the tradition history of the revelational faiths: Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Although these three are all represented in Africa's monotheistic religious heritage (except for Judaism – consider the story of the South African Lemba),<sup>1</sup> the accent is not on church buildings and dogmas. Hence the term 'African spirituality' is more apposite than African religion. African spirituality is interwoven with African culture, which makes no distinction between different dimensions of that culture. While formal religion in the Western sense is firmly entrenched on this continent, there is still a crying need for these religions to assimilate more aspects of African spirituality in a common search for understanding of the unknowable. Elements of African spirituality are singled out, such as ubuntu, ancestors and life force. African spirituality featured prominently in the liberation struggle.

Chapter 7 looks at the apparently incurable problem of poverty in Africa. Endemic poverty is the basic development deficiency syndrome on the continent. In South Africa poverty relief is not only high on the agenda, but there have been paradigmatic moves to overcome it, which, if efficacious,

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1 Allegedly a black Jewish tribe in northern Limpopo, South Africa.

can provide a recipe for Africa. The secret lies, firstly, in partnership: white and black must learn to work together. Secondly, legislation is needed to replace the axiom of the rich grow richer and the poor grow poorer with that of the rich grow richer only if poverty is alleviated. That is the premise of the ANC's affirmative action programme. Some statistics are provided that reflect the successes and failures of poverty eradication in post-1994 South Africa. The real bugbear could be market mechanisms that keep the present order in place. Market mechanisms remain one of the most obdurate challenges to the human race, especially in view of the exploitation of natural resources and the environment. Hence we examine some factors in the restructuring of the African market.

Chapter 8 expands on the theme of globalisation. What are the implications of economic globalisation for normal African citizens? Globalisation has an impact on democracy. On the one hand it seeks to promote democracy, on the other it creates conditions for a post-democratic order. It jeopardises traditional democratic values. How can the individual as a member of global civic society have a hand in this?

Chapter 9 concentrates on the Nepad ideal and its invitation to global partners to join in the programme.

Chapter 10 focuses on the evolution of African democracy from the angle of power sharing problems, which are often the sequel to unsuccessful elections. African diversity requires the establish of a culture of effective power sharing. Power sharing is viewed in the context of style of government and economic realities. The case of Zimbabwe is highlighted. The question is whether there are ethical norms to provide guidelines for power sharing negotiations. It is discussed with reference to a biological hermeneutics of desire, scarcity and self-interest. The democratic ideal of citizens' involvement in processes of government is outlined in terms of Hannah Arendt's work.

Our world today can be described as technoscientific. Chapter 11 deals with the paradox that, whereas a technoscientific world order endangers African communitarian values, Africa must appropriate technoscience in order to survive in a global system. Technology is a road of no return, so we have to do everything we can to combat aspects that threaten the human spirit. Africa's appropriation of technology is considered in the perspective of ubuntu.

Chapter 12 concerns the preservation of the human person. In the final analysis every individual needs to deal with the way our technoscientific world affects her identity and personhood. What's the use of development, progress or growth if our humanity is imperilled? Will Africa's entry into a global partnership not cost more than it gives? The continent's strength is its

communitarianism. Western individualism, paradoxically, destroyed the very subjectivity it had established. The human subject is increasingly rendered redundant by the ubiquitous Subject of technology. We examine how personhood is shaped by phono-, logo- and virtuo-centrism. Whereas Africa is still predominantly phonocentric and the post-Renaissance era in the West is marked by logocentrism, everyone in our time is faced with virtuo-centrism as a result of advances in information and communication technology. Jared Diamond's work is used to account for Africa's underdevelopment, whereupon we deal with scientific and technological development on the continent. Africans are currently rediscovering their indigenous knowledge systems.

How can African personhood, so deeply imbedded in the cultures of the continent, be preserved against the corrosive forces of, for example, technoscience? Chapter 13 concludes the book with a reflection on the extent to which the new South African constitution and its bill of rights do justice to cultural values, and in how far these conflict or are in harmony with the bill of rights. The most vehement objections to the constitution come from Christian Reformed and Muslim ranks. Examples are the new system of religious education at schools and Muslim practices that are anti-constitutional. At the cultural level we look at the Swazi reed dance and Zulu and Xhosa initiation schools.

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*Journal of Theology for Southern Africa (JTSA)* 1998, 100, March, 36-60 (chapter 6)  
*Missionalia* 1997, 25(3), 285-307 (chapter 7);  
*Scriptura* 2006, 91, 43-64 (chapter 8)  
*JTSA* 2005, 123, November, 61-73 (chapter 9)  
*Hervormde Teologiese Studies (HTS)* 2005, 61/3 (chapter 11)  
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*BYU Law Review* 2006, 3, 677-698 (chapter 13).

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## Chapter 1

### Black consciousness as an expression of radical responsibility: Biko, an African Bonhoeffer

#### Introduction: Biko an African Bonhoeffer?

Black consciousness as personified by Biko represents a radical assumption of individual and collective responsibility. That is the thesis considered in this chapter. The premises of black consciousness were the total isolation of individuals and the oppressed group, and not hoping for liberation to come via some outside agency, be it divine or human. As such it represents a motion of no confidence in the assumption that people actively care about their fellow humans (of a different skin colour). Biko was the eagle who kicked out his nestling so that it could learn to fly; he was Zarathustra's prophet who encouraged the student to surpass his master; he was a Bonhoeffer who told human beings to take responsibility for themselves without hoping for divine intervention. For all these reasons black consciousness may be regarded as a beacon of African renaissance, comparable to the scientific revolution of the Enlightenment and the French and American revolutions.

Comparing Biko with a white European theologian is inimical to his thinking. After all, his whole point was that Africans should think for themselves and not always copy non-African models that are held up as the ideal. Yet the resemblances between Biko and Bonhoeffer are so striking that the comparison comes to mind involuntarily. This in no way suggests that Biko took over any ideas from Bonhoeffer. Indeed, there is no evidence that he ever read Bonhoeffer's works. He was influenced by people like Frantz Fanon, Senghor, Diop, Aimé Césaire, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael and the like. It would have been contrary to Biko's entire mindset to explicitly follow a Western thinker. But neither does it imply that he was too obtuse to learn from anybody. He learned a great deal from Western philosophers like Sartre, Bergson and others.

Naturally there are strident contrasts between Biko and Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer had far more time than Biko to put his ideas into writing. He had had the benefit of theological training, whereas Biko's student day involvement in SASO cut his academic studies short. Bonhoeffer, in his completely different context, addressed the *Bekennende Kirche*, whereas Biko's initial appeal was to black students. Whereas Bonhoeffer could fall back on established theological and philosophical precedents to substantiate his case,

Biko based his argument on practical experience and his innate sense of justice. Bonhoeffer was speaking mainly to individuals. Biko's appeal was to the black population en masse.

To return to the analogy: apartheid and Nazism<sup>1</sup> were surely two of the greatest crimes against humanity, and in that history Biko and Bonhoeffer are two of the greatest names. Both ended their lives in jail because of their defiance of the oppressor. Both galvanised their societies into courageous resistance. Both were charismatic personalities. Bonhoeffer was executed one day before the liberation of Berlin and had the opportunity to emigrate. Biko was offered an opportunity to emigrate to the USA, in which case he would probably still have been alive.<sup>2</sup> Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) died at the age of 39, Biko (18 December 1946-12 September 1977) at 31. Both managed to make a passively submissive population aware of the possibility of freedom. Biko called a suffering black populace to demonstrate publicly rather than just bemoan their lot in secret. Bonhoeffer called on the many Germans who opposed Nazism not to wait on God but to liberate themselves. Both thinkers linked human thought to human activism. Both summoned people who had been cowed into submission to responsible resistance. In a situation of state terrorism both had the guts to rebel against the powers that be, knowing full well that it jeopardised their lives – which was proved only too true. Both martyrs' protest set an example to humanity for the rest of time.

### **Identity construction through responsibility**

Both Biko and Bonhoeffer raised popular awareness of the factors that shape people's identity. For anti-Nazi Germans it was as hard to rebel against the Nazi regime as it was for South African blacks to rise against apartheid. Biko and Bonhoeffer both pointed out, not merely that it was possible, but also that authentic identity is grounded in rebellion. The difference is that while the Germans feared the regime, South African blacks, besides fearing the government, also lacked confidence in themselves.

In this respect Biko had a far more formidable task. He had to overcome not only people's fear but also their self-mistrust. This was not just psychological make believe. He was convinced that African identity stood on

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1 In this regard Woods (1987:48) says: "Not since Hitler's Nuremberg has any regime anywhere in the world inflicted so monstrous a burden of racial regulations on any community as the Afrikaner Nationalist minority government of South Africa has inflicted on the vast majority of its own citizens."

2 Biko was offered an opportunity early in 1977 to go to the USA under the auspices of the USA-SA Leadership Exchange Programme, but refused unless "America had given proof of a radically changed policy towards South Africa" (Stubbs, quoted by Wilson 1991:64; Maimela 2000:173).

solid ground; it had a rich cultural heritage to draw on: "... in essence even today one can easily find the fundamental aspects of the pure African culture in the present day African" (Biko 2004: 45).

Assuming responsibility in order to find identity probably has an individualistic bias, which undoubtedly characterises Bonhoeffer's appeal. Biko, by contrast, put the accent squarely on community identity, the hallmark of African culture. Not that Africans deny individual identity, but it is more closely linked to community identity than in European culture. In Africa pluriform individual identities are evoked by group identity.

### **Black consciousness as way of retrieving our humanity/identity**

Although one could cite plenty of parallels elsewhere, black consciousness is probably a uniquely South African development, tied to the person of Steve Biko. Nowhere except in South Africa did the degradation of black people assume such a flagrant form. Black consciousness did not evolve in isolation, however, but should be viewed in conjunction with black power, black nationalism, black identity, racial nationalism and racial internationalism.

Biko's significance lay in his ability to articulate the general sense of disempowerment, his courage to rebel against it and his charismatic power to inspire others to reach for the same ideal. Stubbs (Biko 2004:218) writes as follows about him: "And then, finally, there was the new quality that life in his company took on. It was like the Kingdom. The impossible became possible." That was symbolised by the *idea* of black consciousness. Woods (1978:33) puts it thus: "The idea behind Black Consciousness was to break away almost entirely from past black attitudes to the liberation struggle and to set a new style of self-reliance and dignity for blacks as a psychological attitude leading to new initiatives." Pityana, known for his endorsement of the maxim "Black man, you're on your own",<sup>3</sup> expresses it as follows (quoted in Woods 1978:39): "This means that black people must build themselves into a position of nondependence upon whites. They must work towards a self-sufficient political, social and economic unit. In this manner they will help themselves towards a deeper realization of their potential and worth as self-respecting people."

Although black consciousness is ascribed to Biko, he was actually only the spokesman for numbers of his contemporaries who shared the same sentiments. In many respects, however, he led the way and one could concede Maimela's (2000:346) point: "If Biko had not performed the role to

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3 In this regard, see Mosibudi Mangena 1989, *On your own: evolution of Black Consciousness in South Africa/Azania*, Braamfontein: Skotaville.

which destiny so manifestly called him, it is conceivable that the course of history in South Africa might have run along very different lines.” What singles out Biko was his courage in fearlessly taking on the prevailing system. More than that, what makes him stand out was his invocation of certain values underlying the struggle – humanity, identity, self-respect, trust in oneself, responsibility, pathos, to name but a few. The question is, once the struggle is over, does that put paid to those values? Maybe it is simply human for values to feature prominently in a challenging situation that affects a particular group and that they should fade into the background when people revert to humdrum, unchallenging living.

The school for learning values is the battle of life. The existence of a Biko who embodies values for an individual or a group does not guarantee that every member of the group will espouse those values. Biko knew this only too well and strongly condemned those whom he saw as passive on-lookers. The values he represented were shared by most of his contemporaries, since everyone suffered under a system that robbed them of their human dignity, identity and rights. One cannot expect those values to be upheld with the same fervour by a generation that grew up in the post-apartheid era. In this regard Gibson (2004:4) poses the critical question whether in South African politics today “‘faith’ in static forms such as The Party, The Struggle, The Nation, Law, Culture, and so on, [does not take over] the place of critical thought and [conceal] the true condition of men and women, suffocating what Biko called their ‘quest for a new humanity’.”

*Responsibility in the mode of a hermeneutics of the self*

Black consciousness as propounded by Biko and other leaders is more than just resistance to colonialism and apartheid. It is more than an ideology to mobilise Africans to rebel. It is rather a spontaneous expression of African humanism. Underlying black consciousness is African philosophy. Its aim was not to indoctrinate but to interpret by liberating interpretation. Liberation through understanding what is going on inside you precedes physical liberation. Assuming responsibility is impossible unless you interpret and understand your situation. You cannot pursue lofty aims without firm premises: “In our responsibility we attempt to answer the question: ‘What shall I do?’ by raising the prior question: ‘What is going on?’ or ‘What is being done to me?’ rather than ‘What is my end?’ or ‘What is my ultimate law?’” (Niebuhr 1963:63).

Hence spiritual (mental) emancipation comes before material emancipation. Maimela (2000:349) writes: “It was Biko’s insistence that human pride in *all aspects* of one’s self, one’s condition and one’s heritage are *logi-*

*cally prior* to any programme of physical emancipation or improvement in one's material situation." For Maimela (2000:350), black consciousness was based "more on spiritual than material motivation, with the movement promising the gratification of group solidarity fostering a positive self-image".

In this respect black consciousness differs from most other ideologies, which regard people purely as supporters of some cause, movement or struggle. Black consciousness does not subjugate human beings to an idea – it subjugates the idea to humans. It does not focus on people so as to use them to further somebody else's ideology; it is aimed at personal emancipation. To Biko black consciousness was not a methodology or a means to an end. Its ultimate aim was to produce "real black people who do not regard themselves as appendages to white society" (Biko 2004: 55). Stubbs rightly observes (in Biko 2004:205-6): "...perhaps the political genius of Steve lay in concentrating on the creation and diffusion of a new *consciousness* rather than in the formation of a rigid *organisation*." Black consciousness instils a critical attitude towards the world and the way it undermines personal identity, well-being and human dignity. Zithulele (2007:105) writes: "Our trial was a trial of ideas. It was about conscientising people about our philosophy, the philosophy of black people."

Black consciousness is a hermeneutics of the self. It expresses blacks' responsibility for their own situation. The word 'responsibility' is a latecomer in human history. Taking responsibility is a prerequisite for changing your lot. "The first element in the theory of responsibility is the idea of *response*" (Niebuhr 1963:61). Responsibility starts with self-understanding. It articulates the way in which we interpret our suffering, objectification, dehumanisation.

It seems to be the fate of the poor, the oppressed, the dependent to be objectified and depersonalised. The only way to rise above it is to respond by interpreting the process. Response is a function of interpretation. Niebuhr (1963:59) puts it thus: "Yet everyone with any experience of life is aware of the extent to which the characters of people he has known have been given their particular forms by the sufferings through which they have passed. But it is not simply what has happened to them that has defined them; their responses to what has happened to them have been of even greater importance, and these responses have been shaped by their interpretations of what they have suffered." This notion is echoed by Mathatha (2007:97): "Steve said we were our own liberators and because we were the ones who felt the pain of oppression, we carried the sole responsibility to bring down the system that oppressed us."

Black consciousness is a hermeneutics of the self that made blacks aware of what was going on inside them by interpreting their suffering. Not

that they did not know it – after all, the awareness was widespread. But it had to be spoken aloud and exposed for the caricature it was. That caricature was a product of the apartheid culture, in which blacks lost their human dignity and identity. Biko wanted to get people to critically interpret their response to their situation. Liberation cannot happen if you do not believe in the possibility of freedom, in yourself, and if that belief is not nourished by positive action. Biko embodied such belief.

Biko put it as follows in his response to the defence lawyer David Soggott during the 1976 black consciousness trial: “We try to get blacks to grapple realistically with their problems, to attempt to find solutions to their problems, to develop what one might call an awareness of their situation, to be able to analyse it and to provide answers for themselves. The purpose is really to provide some kind of hope” (Woods 1987:174). If people have lost all hope, what is the point of assuming responsibility for their situation?

#### **Some aspects of Biko’s hermeneutics of the self**

Biko’s hermeneutics of the self is the way he perceived his situation and reacted to it responsibly. To him black consciousness entailed the following.

##### *Facing up to loss of identity*

The issue that black consciousness confronts cannot be divorced from the black identity crisis. It is a continental symptom of colonialism. Countries were occupied by people with a different skin colour, language, religion, and arms and technology that evoked admiration, desire and fear. It was a foreign civilisation offering new experiences and promising luxuries, along with health, progress and prosperity. But participation in that culture was proscribed. The promised rewards came at a price: trading your labour, along with your cultural identity, language, customs, religion and traditions for the products of an alien culture. You become an immigrant in your own country. You no longer speak your own language, you copy the ways and customs of others in order to be accepted and find a job. You are placed in a situation where you constantly have to explain yourself and feel embarrassed about the behaviour of many of your fellow Africans. Your life begins to centre on something you have never been and can never become. It means living in a ‘no man’s land’ with no identity. Your own identity is renounced, but acquiring a new identity turns out to be as impossible as changing the colour of your skin. Dependence on the impostor culture makes you a slave who is rewarded with crumbs from a table that belongs to you. Rebellion is unthinkable because of the impostor’s military and technological superiority. It

is unthinkable because of your sense of inferiority in the face of the new culture. The latter was to become Biko's focus.

Biko turned to African culture for retrieving black identity. Maimela (2000:202) affirms it: "... he was concerned to locate the significance of African identity in Africa itself." Hence part of his strategy was to promote African culture, languages and religions. Biko (2004:47) cites the following traits: the importance attached to human beings, the capacity to talk to each other, intimacy, house visiting. Africans are not suspicious but credit people with inherent goodness; they refrain from using others as stepping stones. They are prepared to slow down progress for the sake of harmony, evidenced by the pervasiveness of rhythm and music. He refers to Africans' attitude towards property as communally owned. The accent is on the human being rather than on power. Africans are profoundly religious, reverencing both God and ancestors (Biko 2004: 49). Blacks' traditional identity was associated with community life, where they enjoyed dignity, respect, esteem. They lost all that because colonial history wrote black culture off as primitive and savage.

Black consciousness is intimately linked with the importance of dignity in African culture, a dignity arising from people's humanness and the respect to which individuals, simply and especially by virtue of being human, are entitled in the community. As Mbembe (2007:137) puts it, "it was, from the start, a philosophy of life and a philosophy of hope". Thus black consciousness was a metaphor for a new conception of life, in which every individual could share in order to retrieve their self-respect and dignity. Biko's special inspiration was the passionate conviction that a black man is as worthy as any other (Woods 1987:79). Woods (1987:59) writes: "Hence thinking along lines of Black Consciousness makes the black man see himself as a being, entire in himself, and not as an extension of a broom or additional leverage to some machine."

#### *Understanding and criticism of black fears and passivity*

Passivity is one of the response patterns of fear. Passivity can be a response, but in the apartheid context it was a non-response. Indeed, it was what the oppressors expected. Black passivity was not an outward response but an inward reaction in the form of self-contempt and self-mistrust. Biko wanted to change that.

Halisi (1991:100) assesses black consciousness philosophy in light of the fact "that resignation to racial domination was rooted in self-hatred and this had major implications: the black person's low sense of self-esteem fostered political disunity, allowed ethnic leaders and other moderates to

usurp the role of spokespersons for the black masses, and encouraged a dependence on white leadership. Conversely, a heightened sense of racial awareness would encourage greater solidarity and mobilise mass commitment to the process of liberation.”

Biko saw fear as a major factor in the paralysis of the African spirit. Apartheid politics was fear driven. Africans had every reason to fear the security forces: they were browbeaten, intimidated, detained under draconian laws (Biko 2004: 80-87). Bonhoeffer (1978:54-55) for his part writes about the weakness of human nature that surfaces in stressful times: “In the face of totally unexpected threats and opportunities it is fear, desire, irresolution and brutality which reveal themselves as the motives for the actions of the overwhelming majority. At such a time as this it is easy for the tyrannical despiser of men to exploit the baseness of the human heart, nurturing it and calling it by other names. Fear he calls responsibility. Desire he calls keenness. Irresolution becomes solidarity. Brutality becomes masterfulness. Human weaknesses are played upon without unchaste seductiveness, so that meanness and baseness are reproduced and multiplied ever anew.” Bonhoeffer is clearly referring to Hitler when he says: “In the presence of the crowd he professes to be one of their number, and at the same time he sings his own praises with the most revolting vanity and scorns the rights of every individual. He thinks people stupid, and they become stupid. He thinks them weak, and they become weak. He thinks them criminal, and they become criminal.”

Applied to the apartheid situation, many fearful blacks displayed a similar ‘docility’, ‘responsibility’ and ‘virtue’. Biko homed in on the fear underlying these attitudes, condemning it and trying to mobilise them to emancipate themselves.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Criticism of apartheid and racism*

Biko was not a racist: he combated racism. He saw ‘race’ as a social construction rather than just a biological datum (Halisi 1991:105). This complements Foucault’s view that our perception of, for instance, sexuality and madness are largely social constructions.<sup>5</sup>

Black consciousness as embodied by Biko is radical humanism. Bernard Zylstra of the Canadian Institute for Christian Studies had a conver-

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4 Biko was opposed to fear in the form of collaboration with the apartheid regime. Thus he condemned black policemen who were subservient to the system (Biko 2004:86) and criticised the Bantustans (Biko 2004:152-153, 166).

5 In this regard Appiah (1998:41) writes: “What exists ‘out there’ in the world – communities of meaning, shading variously into each other in the rich structure of the social world – is the province not of biology but of hermeneutic understanding.”

sation with Biko in July 1977, recorded in Woods (1987:115-126), in which Biko explained black consciousness. Biko (Woods 1987:116) said: “The recognition of the death of white invincibility forces blacks to ask the question: ‘Who am I?’ ‘Who are we?’ And the fundamental answer we give is this: ‘People are people!’ So ‘Black’ Consciousness says: ‘Forget about the color!’”

In this context Gibson (2002:243) cites Fanon, who “believed that getting beyond the vicious circle of dependency and inferiority was connected to a new humanism rather than narrowly racial national consciousness. At the same time this new humanism is a result of the dialectic of black consciousness; of an equality of cultures.” Cultures should coexist in mutual respect and appreciation. In that framework minorities (minority cultures) cannot dictate, because the concept is racially linked. The same may be said of ethnocentrism.<sup>6</sup> Biko (2004:170) comments as follows on minorities: “We see a completely non-racial society. We don’t believe, for instance, in the so-called guarantees for minority rights, because guaranteeing minority rights implies recognition of portions of the community on a race basis. We believe that in our country there shall be no minority, there shall be no majority, just the people.”

In the 1976 trial he told the defence lawyer Soggott: “... it is not our intention to generate a feeling of anti-whiteism. We are merely forced by historic considerations to recognize the fact that we cannot plan side by side with white people who participate in their exclusive pool of privileges” (Woods 1987:178).

The inexplicable thing about racism is that it has no eye for the individual. The individual is seen in terms of a group, which is unacceptable. It is the antipode of humanness. Bloke Modisane (1986:242) expresses it forcefully: “The white man has laboured earnestly, sincerely and constantly to deface the blacks, with the result that the black man has ceased to be an individual, but a representative of a despised race; they hate me, not as an individual, but as a collective symbol ...” One consequence is that it simply leads to inverted racism. Modise (1986:243) says: “And because man learns by imitation the system of depersonalisation has transported over to the Africans; they have been trained and conditioned to see the whites as ‘baas’ and ‘missis’, and in their collectivist reaction every white is the signal of authority, a symbol to be hated and feared. There are no individuals among whites, and by their actions the Africans do not regard them as people.”

What Biko had in mind was not a unilateral relationship on the part of whites, but certainly not on the part of blacks either. The relationship

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6 For black consciousness as a counter-ethnicity movement, see Halisi 1991:103.

between self and other had to be a healthy dialectics, but first the whites had to listen: "... but inevitably the process drives towards what we believe history also drives to, an attainment of a situation where whites first have to listen" (Biko 2004:151). African humanism in fact respects the self-other relationship in a healthy dialectics. It allows scope for hierarchy and respect, but not for the apartheid mentality of master and slave.<sup>7</sup>

A great deal has been written about the Hegelian example of the master-slave dialectics. In that dialectics neither master nor slave can have a self-other relationship. The other cannot be *other*, a *Gegenuber*, so there is no possibility of human interaction. Both master and slave lose their humanity. The slave can show no recognition. The master objectifies the slave and the slave, having been objectified, does not respond by recognising the master. Without that recognition the master is nothing, and so is the slave. Niebuhr (1963:72-73), with reference to Buber, describes the result of objectification thus: "... the I in I-It relations is not a reflexive being. It does not know itself as known; it only knows ... It values but does not value itself or its evaluations." A unilateral relationship is no relationship at all.

#### *Criticism of liberal meddling in black liberation*

This is a surprising aspect of black consciousness, which aroused liberal indignation. But the principle underlying it is in fact the very self-responsibility that is the hallmark of Biko's hermeneutics of the self. Again there are striking parallels with Bonhoeffer's thinking. Bonhoeffer (1978:217) writes: "The responsible man acts in the freedom of his own self, without the support of men, circumstances or principles, but with a due consideration for the given human and general condition and for the relevant questions of principle. The proof of his freedom is the fact that nothing can answer for him, nothing can exonerate him, except his own deed and his own self."

Biko stands white support of the struggle on its head by showing that white liberals themselves need to be liberated. And just as they cannot help him, he cannot help them. They must live up to their own responsibility: "The liberal must fight on his own and for himself. If they are true liberals they must realise that they themselves are oppressed, and that they must fight for their own freedom and not that of the nebulous 'they' with whom they can hardly claim identification" (Biko 2004:72).

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7 With reference to the 'two ways of being' (the fact that blacks have one way of being in relation to whites and another among themselves) Gibson (2002:237) observes: "Among whites, the black experiences no intersubjectivity, no reciprocity. The black is simply an object among objects."

Biko's radical rejection of liberal white support must be seen as a strategy of the liberation process rather than as inverted racism or personal aversion to whites.<sup>8</sup> Like any help, it is ultimately a matter of helping the other to help herself. For blacks to help themselves they had to sever the link with white 'liberators'. Apartheid had reduced blacks to a state of helplessness and created bonds of dependence, which had to be broken. It called for revolution: structures that kept blacks in a state of grownup children had to be demolished. Means of production, education and training, employment, the franchise, basic rights and the like must be the rightful claim of everybody who is expected to be a responsible citizen. For that black consciousness was prepared to do battle.

White liberals obstructed the growth of black consciousness. Thus Biko (quoted in Woods 1978:63) said: "... but to equip ourselves to challenge the enemy we first have to distance ourselves from the friend who inhibits us.<sup>9</sup> The liberal is no enemy, he's a friend – but for the moment he holds us back, offering a formula too gentle, too inadequate for our struggle." His stance on this issue is an example of his endeavour to get black leaders to assume responsibility for their situation themselves without 'cheap' help from liberal sympathisers. "The age of the Liberal was such that the black voice was not very much heard in echoing what was said by Liberals" (Biko to Soggot, Biko 2004:150). Hence one of Biko's first moves was to secede from NUSAS and found SASO. Woods (1978:34) writes: "It was the height of irony that the first major manifestation of Black Consciousness sprang from a black breach with one of the most courageously pro-black white youth organizations, the National Union of South Africa Students."

We have said that black consciousness is neither racism nor inverted apartheid. At face value that was how it struck white liberals. After all, they were not invited to join in the process. That was not because they were white, but because whites symbolised the crutch on which blacks depended to understand themselves and their situation and to try and change it. The white

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8 As a movement black consciousness would probably have got nowhere without aid from the University Christian Movement (UCM), the Christian Institute and the liberal white press (Maimela 2000:185). Its self-help projects were largely funded by the International University Exchange Fund (IUEF), under the supervision of Nengwekhulu (Maimela 2000:216, 218).

9 One could argue that Biko was not opposed to white liberals as persons, but to the fact that their 'zeal' from their white perspective was an obstacle to black initiative. Biko was a people person and highly critical of Westerners' personal analyses: "When you guys talk about a person, you tear him apart, analyse the way he speaks, looks at someone, thinks; you find a motive for everything he does; you categorise him politically, socially, etc. In short you are not satisfied until you have really torn him apart and have really parcelled off each and every aspect of his general behaviour and labelled it" (Biko 2004:197, paraphrased by Stubbs).

crutch implied that blacks were incapable of interpreting and changing their own circumstances. The black consciousness approach cost them dearly, because material and financial means for a liberation programme were limited and they had to forego 'white' support.

Biko was known to be a black intellectual, who envisaged a major role for intellectuals in mobilising the masses. Halisi (1991:109) mentions that Biko believed that mass education could be accomplished by committed intellectuals armed with knowledge of popular culture. Popular culture could be used to "breathe life back into the oppressed". To what extent are social interpretation, social criticism and social initiatives still confined to African intellectuals? Biko, an intellectual, was guided by other black intellectuals. He encouraged dialogue between intellectuals, both locals and those in diaspora (Halisi 1991:107).

The crucial question is: what is the eventual role of black intellectuals to be? Is it an interim or a permanent role? Does the African intellectual not fulfil the same function as white liberals once did – to think on the masses' behalf, dictate to them and decide for them? Black intellectuals (and it is not clear exactly whom that includes) have no mandate to decide on the masses' behalf. Biko would have viewed them in a ministering rather than an elitist role.<sup>10</sup> In practice it would seem that nowadays decisions are not taken by black intellectuals but by the ANC at its congresses (with its intellectual top brass), which confirms the impression of centralism.<sup>11</sup> The question (which arises in any democracy) is, how representative are decisions in fact? To what extent do they accommodate diversity and diverse viewpoints? To what extent do they empower people to take responsibility for themselves?

The task of taking responsibility for yourself can be highlighted by intellectuals but should not be left to them. Unfortunately there is an entrenched notion that intellectuals are confined to academics, which is a fallacy. The few individuals who were literate and wrote often sacrificed, because of a lack time, a lot of social exposure and grassroots intellectuals could not convey their ideas on paper. Besides, black intellectuals tended to

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10 Fortunately the proposed 'native club', which in fact had elitist and racially based undertones, never got off the ground. Jansen (2007:130) says in this regard: "The challenge ... is not to regress into some obscure nativism or race essentialism, as the morally obtuse project of the Native Club tried so clumsily to enforce."

11 The following is an example of centralism in the ANC. In his contribution to the memorial volume for Biko, *We write what we like*, Thabo Mbeki allows little scope for black consciousness as a movement that still has any influence. He adds that if they think they can still operate in opposition to the ANC, they certainly have no future. Is this not a fresh instance of disregard of the other, albeit at organisational level? The ANC has such overwhelming support at present that Mbeki's comment may be seen as threatened over-reaction.

have little contact with people at the grassroots. Ramphele (1991:163) writes: "... greater value is placed by blacks on social interaction and the serving of social networks of support. Black intellectuals are often caught between competing demands of social availability and academic life."

Biko wanted to get the masses to rediscover their identity and assume individual and group responsibility. Nobody can liberate a country without taking the populace along on the road to liberation. "Liberation is an ongoing project. No plan, no leaders, no temporary strategic necessity can take its place: 'If we stagnate it is [the people's] responsibility, and if we go forward it is due to them too'" (Gibson 2003:197, quoting Fanon).

*Criticism of religion that keeps people passive and submissive*

The importance Africans attach to religion is indisputable. That is why the colonial strategy of using the gospel as a means of taking over the continent was so effective. Religion was to provide a transcendental basis for oppressing Africa. To the white South African government their statutorily entrenched segregationist values were synonymous with biblical guidelines. God had laid down the time and place (subordination) of nations. The whites' ethos was God's ethos and Africans would err if they failed to heed it. Arguments that apartheid policy was diametrically opposed to a Jesus ethos of an option for the poor, the sick and the marginalised, that a Christian's freedom was non-negotiable, that people's persons should be respected and the like were dismissed as humanist philanthropy. The gospel that was brought to Africans so devoutly was to be the principal tool for breaking their spirit. Africans were emasculated with the sword of the gospel. In Biko's view most (black and white) South Africans' Christianity was purely formal. Christianity was linked to colonialism. "This means the Christians came here with a form of culture which they called Christian but which in effect was Western, and which expressed itself as an imperial culture as far as Africa was concerned" (Woods 1987:117) Biko had the courage to point out that this god, like the emperor, wore no clothes.

Biko devoted a surprising amount of attention to religion and churches. This reflects his keen sensitivity to one of the root causes of discrimination. After all, the apartheid regime sought to ground itself in biblical principles. Hence he saw Christianity as "the ideal religion for the maintenance of the subjugation of the same (black) people" (Biko 2004:61).

Biko considered religion to be "a social institution attempting to explain what cannot be scientifically known about the origin and destiny of man". His critique is directed mainly to the Christian church, which showed little understanding of blacks' situation and saw them purely as objects of

mission. “Stern faced ministers stand on pulpits every Sunday to heap loads of blame on black people in townships for their thieving, house-breaking, stabbing, murdering, adultery etc. No one ever attempts to relate all of these vices to poverty, unemployment, overcrowding, lack of schooling and migratory labour” (Biko 2004:61).

He criticised the church for its bureaucracy and division into innumerable denominations (Biko 2004:61). Biko sent his ideas on religion to Fr David Russell in a memorandum in 1974. We reproduce excerpts (edited by Stubbs, in Biko 2004:236-241). Biko accepts the human need for religion: “I am sufficiently religious to believe that man’s internal insecurity can only be alleviated by an almost enigmatic and supernatural force to which we ascribe all power, all wisdom and love. This is ultimately what makes us tick ... I go further therefore to believe that god has laid down for man basic laws that must govern interaction between man and man, man and creature, man and nature at large” (p 236); “Most of the time one is born into or within a particular religion and denomination and very little individual thinking is done to consider the fundamental relationship between man and God. These laws I see as inscribed in the ultimate conscience of each living mortal” (p 237-238); “My attitude to the Church – i.e. organised denominational worship – is therefore completely down to earth. I see them more as social man-made institutions without any divine authority” (p 238); the church’s conservative interpretation of the Bible makes Christ seem like a stranger (p 239); “To the revolutionary the Church is anti-progress and therefore anti-God’s wishes because long ago it decided not to obey God but to obey man; long ago the Church itself decided to accept the motto ‘white is value’ etc.” (p 241).

Biko (2004:63) isolates four criticisms of the Christian church:

1. It makes Christianity too much of a ‘turn the other cheek’ religion whilst addressing destitute people.
2. It is crippled by bureaucracy and institutionalisation.
3. It manifests in its structures a tacit acceptance of the system (i.e. ‘white equals value’).
4. It is limited by over-specialisation.

The correspondence with Bonhoeffer’s viewpoint is manifest. Biko had the same objection as Bonhoeffer to passing all responsibility to God. He refers to the prayer “Thy will be done”, commenting: “Indeed His will shall be done but it shall not appeal equally to all mortals for indeed we have different versions of His will. If the white God has been talking all along, at some

stage the black God will have to raise His voice and make Himself heard above noises from His counterpart” (Biko 2004:33).

Bonhoeffer was critical of contemporary psychoanalysis and existentialism as keys to authentic identity. Identity is born of assuming responsibility for the present situation. He was also critical of resorting to the church and dogma as surrogate protagonists of free people. Biko was critical of Christianity as a vicarious solace for human suffering. Hence he sided with liberation theologians and contributed greatly to the growth of Black Theology in South Africa. In his own words: “Deprived of spiritual content, the black people read the Bible with a gullibility that is shocking ... Obviously the only path open for us now is to redefine the message in the Bible and to make it relevant to the struggling masses” (Biko 2004:34).

Whereas Luther restored the Bible to the people by having it translated from Latin into the vernacular, theologians expropriated it anew with ivory tower theology and the idea of “Read if you like, it does not say what it says” to keep churchgoers dependent on the church’s hermeneutic hegemony. Biko (see 2004:62) rebelled against this.

In insisting on religions’ this-worldliness, Bonhoeffer proposed responsible, autonomous grappling with life’s problems as if God does not exist. This presupposes a sphere of human interaction based on Christian altruistic values like selfless love and sacrifice. Bonhoeffer (1971:360) comments: “God as a working hypothesis in morals, politics, or science, has been surmounted and abolished; and the same thing has happened in philosophy of religion [Feuerbach! – CWdT]. For the sake of intellectual honesty, that working hypothesis should be dropped, or as far as possible eliminated.” Religious meaning is to be sought within rather than above us.

### **Historical contingency of black consciousness**

Biko was a prophet who, in an age that was ripe for his message, could reflect the people’s general feeling, could use the emotion aroused by oppression to inspire them and to change things. In that sense Biko’s era cannot be repeated and in the new South Africa black consciousness may not have the same power. Thus it may not necessarily be the best symbol to inspire people to take responsibility for themselves in a situation of reconstruction and development. The ideals of black consciousness are to a large extent encapsulated in the South African constitution and bill of rights. But the constitution does not have the same impact that Biko, for one, had. Stubbs (Biko 2004:205) sums it up: “Despite the rigour there was no fanaticism ... Herein lay the weakness of the movement: it was too much the movement of an idea, too little a ruthless organised force. Its weakness, yes; but also its ultimate

strength! Being the movement of an idea, almost a mood, it was, and is, extraordinarily infectious. Individuals could be banned, detained, banished; wherever they continued, almost by the quality of their breathing, to spread this new mood of inner freedom, this refusal any more to acknowledge the rule of a minority group, the tyranny of a tragically lost, calvinist [sic] tribe.”

Many would judge – as Mbeki does – that black consciousness is no longer a real force in South Africa. That is an auspicious sign, for it proves that black consciousness has served its purpose. A new generation of black South Africans born since 1994 can proudly identify with any number of worthwhile role models. If Biko had been alive today, he could look back with satisfaction on the achievement of many of his ideals. But that is only half the story. The struggle is not over, it has merely shifted. If we take the principles of black consciousness seriously, no affluent black African can dissociate herself from the lot of blacks living in poverty. Besides, South African blacks cannot dissociate themselves from the lot of Africans beyond the Limpopo. Black consciousness was never meant to issue in inverted apartheid. Sadly, in the Hegelian dialectic the slave can assume the role of the master. Ramsamy (2002:210) says in this regard: “However, as the euphoria of liberation dies, the bitter lesson of the decolonization process is that national elites employ the same divisive techniques used by former colonial rulers to guarantee their privileges and maintain their power base.”

### **Need for a hermeneutics of poverty**

Rooting out apartheid is one thing, but getting rid of poverty altogether is quite another. Here poverty should be understood in a broad sense. Radical poverty – at any rate in the African context – is closely linked to illiteracy, disease (eg Aids), crime, corruption, alcoholism, loss of identity, subservience, dependence and lack of self-responsibility. Whereas formerly poverty and wealth related to skin colour, that link is no longer axiomatic. People earning a liveable wage soon forget what it means to have no secure income, to lack basic means of subsistence, a roof over their heads and the wherewithal to support a family. Most of the elements of black consciousness that Biko identified under apartheid apply to the struggle against poverty. The difference is that, whereas black consciousness had an identifiable enemy (apartheid, white oppression), the struggle against poverty has none. Who is to blame? The market economy, lack of skills and training, the state? Because it is difficult to personalise the enemy, it is difficult to mobilise people to combat an anonymous power.

Increasing urbanisation is leading to the breakdown of African communities’ traditional bulwarks against poverty such as ubuntu, the extended

family, the stokvel system, the church and religion. The disappearance of the fellowship typical of African humanism will be an incalculable loss. Biko rated it highly, as is evident in the following (Biko 2004: 48): “It never was considered repugnant to ask one’s neighbour for help if one was struggling. In almost all instances there was help between individuals, tribe and tribe, chief and chief etc. even in spite of war.”

The chances are that middle-class, affluent blacks will in due course display exactly the same symptoms as affluent people worldwide: lots of sympathy, occasional handouts and for the rest responsibility is delegated to the state and market forces, over which there appears to be no control.

This is not the place to deal with the issue of poverty (see chapter 7). The aim is simply to show that under apartheid the struggle against poverty and black consciousness were one and the same and that we need to look for values to deal with poverty. For that reason the principles of black consciousness can help extricate people from the web of disempowerment. Biko did not flinch from assuming responsibility and underscored the importance of discipline. More importantly, he appreciated the conditions under which responsibility and discipline applied. In his evidence at the 1976 black consciousness trial judge Boshoff asked him about a connection between crime and lack of influx control. He responded that there may be a connection, “but there is a much more fundamental reason. It is the absence of abundant life for the people who live there. With an abundance of life you get discipline, people get the things that they want. And because, of course, you do not get a society here which offers this to the people, the State introduces measures like influx control” (Woods 1987:170). The South African government could not provide the population with work, training and basic amenities, whereupon it attributed the inevitable crime rate to an inferior black culture.

To be realised black consciousness requires that all blacks on the continent must believe in themselves sufficiently to live up to Biko’s notion of self-responsibility so as to truly change their lot. Africa has the physical and spiritual resources to do so. Physically it still has vast mineral riches, and spiritually and culturally, albeit in various ways, it has resources which, Biko recognised, can help it reach that goal. Biko (2004: 32) writes: “The oneness of community for instance is at the heart of our culture. The easiness with which Africans communicate with each other is not forced by authority but is inherent in the makeup of African people ...” There are hopeful signs, like the African Renaissance, Nepad, the African parliament, the new African Union, et cetera. But they are nowhere near enough to bring about the revolution that African liberation requires. More than ever before we need to heed Biko’s cry that Africans must believe in themselves. The struggle today is more complex than the struggle of black consciousness against the apart-

heid regime. How does a rural black person combat globalisation, regionalism, lack of investment and the international community's relative aloofness from Africa (global apartheid)?

### **Conclusion: the future of black consciousness**

If black consciousness is a radical hermeneutics of the self which summons people to assume responsibility by responding interpretively to their situation, then it is not restricted to an epoch of oppression but should feature all the more prominently in an age of freedom. Freedom, no less than oppression, calls for interpretation. How does my freedom determine my mind, how do I interpret it and where does that interpretation take me? If awareness of oppression unleashes energy, awareness of freedom should generate even more energy. To my mind the future of black consciousness lies in radical interpretation of our awareness of freedom. It needs a hermeneutics of freedom. As in the case of oppression, interpretation of freedom and appropriation of the idea precedes physical freedom. What is the dialectics between the two kinds of awareness? Freedom features against a historical background of bondage, but it should not be governed by that. We all know the adage that Africa cannot for ever blame colonialism and apartheid for everything that still goes wrong. True freedom is a gift only if it translates into the realisation of possibilities than an open future offers. Freedom to which we fail to respond leaves us more wretched than oppression to which we do not respond, since unrealised freedom has no alibi. In this context the response to freedom is not to pursue personal gain but to realise the potential of all human beings.

Bonhoeffer (1978: 201, 218) linked responsibility to freedom and obedience. He writes (1978:220-221): "Obedience without freedom is slavery; freedom without obedience is arbitrary self-will. Obedience restrains freedom; and freedom ennobles obedience ... Obedience knows what is good and does it, and freedom dares to act, and abandons to God the judgement of good and evil. Obedience follows blindly and freedom has open eyes. Obedience has its hands tied and freedom is creative." Without this guideline no freedom can be legitimate.

The following quotation from Mafuna (2007:87) is appropriate: "So, the black-white problem does not want to leave us. This is complicated by the 'nouveaux riches', who are determined to climb on the shoulders of their fellow blacks. Now it is becoming a class struggle! The workers are forgotten in the scramble by the comrades. Something is needed to curb the mad drive towards success at any cost. Could Black Consciousness be the antidote? I doubt it. We need a deeper remedy than that; not palliatives. Africa (and the world) need a spiritual revolution: in politics, economics, culture, and social

relations.” On similar lines Mbembe (2007:140) asks: “Is Black Consciousness the same as ‘black economic empowerment’ or is the ideology of ‘black economic empowerment’ the new way in which the ‘black elite’ advances its narrow interests and legitimates its hegemony over the black working class and the black poor?”<sup>12</sup> Abuse of freedom and responsibility is part of the human condition and is not linked to race. The connection between personal conduct and race must be severed. Individuals are criminal, corrupt, greedy, irresponsible, lazy and the like for personal reasons, not because of their race.

The circumstances that gave rise to black consciousness in South Africa will hopefully never be repeated. Overcoming racist perceptions and attitudes is another matter. In both instances racism migrated ‘inwards’. People still think on racial lines but no longer say so out loud. We still have a long way to go! Crime, corruption, poor governance, affirmative action, black empowerment, lack of responsibility and the like still have racial connotations. Janson (2007:131) writes: “...Black Consciousness is relevant as long as white consciousness exists.” Post-apartheid white consciousness is obviously not the same as in Biko’s day. Thanks to stringent action government and the constitution have managed to curb exploitation of blacks, although much remains to be done.

The time for black consciousness may be over, but the challenge remains. Under apartheid the premise of black consciousness was to reject whites because of their ideology of dominance. Today the cause of black empowerment cannot be realised by rejection but by creating new partnerships. The accent on black consciousness does not mean that Africa can or should operate in isolation. The partnerships will in the first place be intra-African, but must also be extended internationally. Yet we know, considering the human condition, that partnerships are often accompanied by self-enrichment and self-advancement. In its way the apartheid era can also be seen as a partnership, one in which one partner walked off with the lion’s share of the privileges. The same may easily happen with economic globalisation, with Africa again coming off second best. Here Biko’s prophetic words have to be spoken to a global audience. Their purport is that there can be no future on this planet if we lose our humanity. In Biko’s view the West had already done so. He writes (Biko 2004: 51): “As Kaunda puts it, our people may be

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12 The following data from *South African Survey* (2007:57) serves as an example. For the high income bracket the situation has improved for African households, Africans receiving 13% of high income in 1998, the proportion rising to 35.7% in 2004. White households now receive a greater proportion of low incomes, this rising from 3.4 % in 1998 to 5.1% in 2004, pointing to increased poverty in this population group. Whites also earned a smaller portion of high incomes, their share of high incomes dropping from 76.7% in 1998 to 52% in 2004. Despite 5% of all African households being classified as high income, they receive 35.7% of the income in the high income group.

unlettered and their physical horizons may be limited yet 'they inhabit a larger world than the sophisticated Westerner who has magnified his physical senses through inverted [sic – invented?] gadgets at a price all too often of cutting out a dimension of the spiritual'." On the same lines Biko reasoned that in the long run Africa's special contribution in the world lay in the field of human relationships: "... the great gift still has to come from Africa – giving the world a more human face" (Biko 2004: 51).

For that reason our age desperately needs new Bikos – but Bikos with economic expertise and political astuteness, who are not scared to tackle the invisible, anonymous dragon of unjust economic structures. By way of conclusion Mandela's words (quoted by Mbeki 2007:39) are apposite: "While Steve Biko espoused, inspired, and promoted black pride, he never made blackness a fetish. At the end of the day, as he himself pointed out, accepting one's blackness is a critical starting point: an important foundation for engaging in struggle. Today, it must be a foundation for reconstruction and development, for a common human effort to end war, poverty, ignorance, and disease."

## Chapter 2

### African identity, race and justice: post-1994 perspectives

#### Introduction

Few South Africans nowadays are persuaded by the metaphor of the rainbow nation that was shouted from the rooftops in 1994. Rainbow nation rhetoric fitted the framework of Madiba magic, the world rugby cup, the 2010 world soccer cup bid and the like – but that’s where it ended. The truth and reconciliation commission came and went. But though by no means worthless, it left a lot of reconciling unfinished and since then a lot has happened that fanned the flames. South Africa’s transition is far from complete. That is because it is not just a matter of transferring political power; it also entails a transfer of economic, judicial and other forms of power. Political transformation went relatively smoothly, for various reasons.<sup>1</sup> But transition is still happening at many levels, and to many people political transition is not the most important one, although it undeniably affects all spheres of life.

In the South African context the transition initiated in 1994 was an ‘*external*’, objective event: white government was replaced by black majority rule. But that did not guarantee an ‘*inner*’ transition in people’s thinking or mentality. Black people knew they were in charge of government, whites knew they no longer were. But there was no process steering or guiding a change of mindset. That transition would require white citizens to see their black compatriots as equal partners enjoying the same rights and privileges as whites had enjoyed all along, that they should not be excluded on racial grounds and that everything should be done to level the playing fields. But such a radical shift in the white mentality would have required mentoring and reorientation projects, given the implicit assumption among whites that they were superior citizens, better qualified and with the necessary expertise to ‘make things work’. To the extent that that assumption prevailed it was dealt a deathblow in the Mbeki era. The fact was that the disempowered black population expected their lot to change dramatically. But the only agency that

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1 These include the fact that the ANC agreed to the deal because it could not match the white government’s military power at the time, and the white government accepted because of economic pressures and because they believed they would not lose too much. The outgoing white government was confident of maintaining a free market system and probably believed it could retain power through coalitions with some ethnic groups.

could concretise their hopes was government and its capacity to do so did not meet the understandably high expectations. From a white perspective one must not forget that the apartheid mentality – a mentality of exclusiveness if you will – affects all spheres of society, of which government is but one. A sense of exclusiveness may be nurtured by various aspects of an individual's existence: race, gender, culture, religion; personal space, ideas, identity; consciousness of one's dignity, superiority, training, experience, possessions; and the like. These things don't change easily, and it may be assumed that for whites they did not change all that much after 1994. It would take decades of exposure to unforeseen historical changes for the impact to register.

But just as the ANC victory in 1994 could not guarantee a radical 'inner' transition in the outlook of whites, it could not guarantee significant change in the concrete *external* circumstances of black people's lives, as the next fifteen years were to prove. Hence the 1994 democratic transition did not bring any radical break with the past. At most it initiated a process, the outcome and course of which no-one can predict.

Many poor people find that life has changed very little and are hoping and agitating for meaningful economic transition. Fifteen years into democracy the numbers of the poor have not declined – indeed, both quantitatively and qualitatively the situation has worsened. What is new is the emergence of a black middle class, some of whom are top earners. Sometimes members of this class are charged with corruption, nepotism, poor service delivery and lack of expertise. The same period has seen the emergence of a growing number of poor whites. They are not a separate class, but fall under the broad category of 'the poor'. That class also includes the majority of immigrants from elsewhere in Africa, millions of whom have poured into the country.

The sins of the fathers are being visited on a new generation of white children born since 1994, who are faced with affirmative action and no prospect of equal job opportunities. To many the ideal of a post-apartheid society based on respect for the person, culture and property of others is a bitter irony, given the landslide of criminals who will take a life to secure a cell phone and a few rand without batting an eyelash. The rainbow nation euphoria was short-lived. Madiba magic evaporated like mist before the African sun.

The inescapable impression is that the rainbow has only two colours: black and white, divided by an apparently unbridgeable gulf. Virtually every problem in the country is blamed on apartheid, racism and colonial history: poverty, crime, affirmative action, poor service delivery, corruption, unemployment – you name it. Blacks feel that poverty and underdevelopment are products of apartheid; whites put the blame for crime, poor service delivery and corruption on government that expediently plays the race card.

Transitions happen in many societies, albeit in different forms. Although the South African process has been peaceful, it is nonetheless revolutionary rather than evolutionary. Evolution takes too long for the expectations of the impoverished masses. In exchange for their votes that they gave to the ANC they expected their lot to change overnight. The pace of urbanisation since 1994 cannot be regarded as less than revolutionary, as must the metamorphosis of local and central government institutions, where white officialdom was replaced by black officialdom. Another revolutionary aspect is the speed with which a black middle class and a small black elite were entrenched – which is not say that the pace satisfies everyone’s expectations.

Dissatisfaction is rife across the board. Whites feel that they are unfairly held responsible for the masses of poverty stricken people in the country and that they will pay the penalty until poverty has been eradicated. Protest against various social ills has diverse sources:

- ‘sidelined’ whites who criticise government from an uncommitted periphery and blame it for everything that goes wrong;
- poor people waiting for housing, jobs and services but helpless to improve their own situation;
- employees in both the private and the public sector who strike for higher wages in the midst of an economic recession that spares nobody;
- immigrants trying to earn a livelihood and meet with xenophobic violence;
- crime which flourishes in the face of an ineffectual police service and buckling judicial system;
- a poor educational system that fails to establish a learning culture and disgorges quasi-qualified students into the market, thus lowering productivity.

For an objective picture of the current state of affairs we turn to the World Economic Forum’s (WEF) latest report on the economic competitiveness of 133 countries (issued on 8 September 2009. See *Beeld* 9/9/2009):

- In regard to security South Africa still occupies the bottom position – 133rd, also the worst in Africa – in the rank order of countries’ successful combating of crime. That inhibits business interest. The cost South Africans have to incur to protect themselves against crime and the police’s inability to do so is a major blight on the country’s international image.

- As for competitiveness in the world economy, South Africa retains its 45th position in the rank order of the 133 countries. Its best position was 27th in 2000.
- The WEF has high praise for the performance, quality and sophistication of the country's financial institutions, markets and accounting practices. This year its position in the world order has improved from a creditable 24th to fifth in the world.
- In respect of the health of its workforce South Africa still comes 127th, with a high incidence of transmissible diseases (HIV/Aids and tuberculosis). This correlates with poor health care generally.
- The WEF is also concerned about the negative impact of the country's labour law on its competitiveness. South Africa is rated between 121st and 125th for remuneration practices and employer-employee relations.

Although one could ask whether one can still speak of a transition process fifteen years after the first inclusive democratic elections and the new government has made a lot of headway, a lot of change still has to happen. But real transition requires more than black faces in the boardroom – that is only the beginning. The real task still lies ahead: development and growth. The dynamics of the South African situation entails ongoing change. Transition is multilateral. Binary opposites need to be broadened to include different perspectives, and rigid terms augmented with more flexible ones to accommodate the complexity of the process. With so many more actors and so many more issues on the agenda the South African public arena is bound to become more complex. Other actors, like the Dutch Reformed Church that largely reflected, if not dictated, public life under apartheid, have withdrawn, emigrating to a spiritual inner chamber for lack of any meaningful contribution it can make without a change of mindset.

Although the run-up to 1994 saw some agreements on the transition process, and although the new constitution is in place, many outstanding issues still call for attention. Let us consider some of these.

*Transition cannot be engineered exclusively from the top*

Real transition is not exclusively top-down but bottom-up as well. It is the result of a natural evolutionary process of interaction and critique, experience and learning. That presupposes an interactive public arena with a ferment of

ideas and criticism. (All we have at present is the media – the press, talk shows on radio and TV, cultural feasts, dialogue at trade union conferences, the ANC Youth League, etc. Unfortunately there is a dearth of inclusive discussions between different race groups and interest groups, and the voice of ordinary people is rarely heard, except by way of protest action – which hardly qualifies as rational discussion.) The ANC's style of governance has become increasingly top-down. Policy is made at regional conferences (e.g. Polokwane, December 2007). They compile the road map to be followed – something that exponents of parliamentary democracy question, considering the opposition parties' minority in the House. The ANC regional conferences are in fact supposed to obtain grassroots input, so top management is not alienated from its constituency. But in practice there is probably very little input from ordinary people and power groups are organised in lobbies, as Polokwane demonstrated. What seems clear is that the battle at Polokwane was for positions of power and profit. Indabas, which Mbeki neglected, are real opportunities to involve the ordinary people in the process. They should be more than just occasions to note complaints and demands, but should allow scope to discuss development projects, conflict resolution and the like.

Transitional models, prescriptive ideas and proposed systems proliferate in a situation of transformation, each with its own covert power strategies. Polokwane, Luthuli House – not parliament – is where policy is decided. Democracy is based on transparency and inclusive forums, not Broederbond-style undercover machinations as we saw in the apartheid era. The ANC's alliance partners, COSATU and the SACP, claim co-responsibility for Zuma's presidency, which makes them equal rather than junior partners. Does that give them the sole prerogative to co-determine policy, still excluding civil society and parliament?

Authentic transition differs from constructivism, which usually proves catastrophic. It cannot happen without inclusive consultation. In this respect the consultative style of the Zuma government is more promising than the authoritarian decision-making style of the Mbeki era.

*Prerogative of groups not to form part of transition*

Individuals also have the right not to change, not to transform, especially in regard to their religious, moral and cultural values. This is particularly noticeable in Afrikaner communities that agitate for language rights in schools and universities, where one by one traditionally Afrikaans medium institutions have had to switch to English. In an insecure situation people may overemphasise cultural values. The less threatened they feel, the easier and more spontaneous the change. Threaten a language and you provoke

fervent ‘patriots’ of the old South Africa to form all kinds of clubs and organisations.

The 21st century language militants are, to say the least, an embarrassment to Afrikaans speakers. These self-appointed ‘saviours’ of the language damage rather than promote their cause. An example is the “Prague” (Afrikaans: *Praag*) group, who use post-1994 rhetoric to cover up their pre-1994 principles. Afrikaans, being the language of the oppressor, was rejected by many blacks. Instead of making it the language of a partner and fellow citizens, it takes the form of petulant outbursts from the new ‘oppressed’. Language should invite, not repel. A language and its speakers are one. Afrikaans will not invite rapport if its speakers are nasty. Mutual respect, moreover, implies learning the language of the other party – a challenge few whites are prepared to tackle.

Of course it would be a pity if Afrikaans technical language, developed at tertiary institutions over many years, is no longer permitted in academia. But for pragmatic reasons there has to be good communication in the workplace. It is one thing to respect eleven official languages but quite another to live in a tower of Babel. The country does not have the money to give eleven languages their due at all levels, so everyone has to make sacrifices for the sake of successful development. Given the prospect of eventual African unity, we will probably have to move towards English, French and maybe a major African language as *linguae francae*. That certainly does not imply the death of indigenous languages. Afrikaans is flourishing in cultural festivals and the upsurge of Afrikaans pop songs.

Often the side effects of transition are mistaken for the transformed order it is aimed at. The Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) programme, corruption and poor service delivery, for instance, could be seen as side effects that will pass in due course. The question is, how long does one have to wait for that to happen? Problems like crime, the influx<sup>2</sup> of millions of people from other African countries, lowering standards, inefficiency of medical and other services, unemployment, vacillating educational reform and many other concomitants of the change process are alarming people. Will these partly unforeseen side effects be overcome or will they become

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2 The fact that, after the election of a democratic representative government, massive illegal immigration from African countries was tolerated and is still not seriously addressed points to more than simply inefficiency or a lack of will to curb it. It must be seen as expressive of Pan-Africanism, black nationalism and black consciousness. Africans, being accustomed to multi-ethnicity, may resent immigrants taking job opportunities, but apparently not everyone experiences cultural differences as a serious problem. Nonetheless xenophobia towards Congolese, Nigerians, etc. leads to a lot of social exclusivism, sometimes to violence. Even among local blacks there is a lot of inter-tribal intolerance. And the reasons are both cultural and economic. (See also Habermas 1994:118, 135-142.)

entrenched in South African life? Certainly they must be taken seriously, as they are symptomatic of more deeply rooted problems like illiteracy, absence of integrated community life and value systems, and an inadequate sense of identity and belonging.

Of course, the transition process also has positive side effects. Apart from living in a more just and democratic society, many people are for the first time experiencing personhood, self-respect, identity and belonging. One can also expect cultural transformation to affect the different components of the population, issuing in a reinterpretation of cultural identities. Transformation stimulates radical re-contextualisation of all cultures in the new environment.

The ideal for a new South Africa would be to reconcile the desires of the most economically and technologically efficient individuals and groups with the needs of the most disadvantaged individuals and groups (see Kristeva 1993:42).

### *Racism*

Nobody wants to talk about race and racism. Those who are too quick to play the race card usually have no real arguments to offer. After all, provable instances of crass racism can be reported to the human rights commission. There has been enough talk about racism and as far as the ANC is concerned the time has come to change things. Race rhetoric gets us nowhere: race is a given; a construction, reconstruction, deconstruction; an alibi; an advantage, a disadvantage; a political tool; a symbol of advantagement or disadvantagement; race doesn't exist, we no longer notice it; all discrimination can be traced back to race; and so on and so forth. The role of the media, which usually report only sensational incidents, must not be underestimated. We turn to media reports to gauge the level of racism, both structural and interpersonal. The outstanding feature of these reports is undoubtedly the high crime statistics and the correlation observed between robbery, assault, murder and race. Proving it is extremely difficult and the standard defence is that black on black and white on white crime are equally commonplace. Is crime determined by race or is it a matter of soft targets? Is the now banned song, "Kill the Boer, kill the farmer", symptomatic of a broad sentiment or merely political posturing? At grassroots level there is a lot of evidence of goodwill, respect for others and attempts to understand and communicate – all of which are rarely measured or reported.

One thing is certain: no-one likes to be accused of racism – it is a dirty word, like anti-semitism, Nazism, homophobia, chauvinism. After 1994 everybody all of a sudden was anti-apartheid, one could hardly find anyone

who tried to defend it. But there was no evidence of a post-racist attitude to life. New friendships and communities cutting across racial boundaries remain rare. “Blacks are interested in white power and white money, not in white friendships”; “Whites have no problem with blacks as long as ‘they’ don’t interfere with the white lifestyle and advantages”; “Whites are welcome to stay as long as they don’t think they’re doing anyone a favour”; “There are decent whites, but on the whole they’re hypocrites”. Harmoniously integrated communities combining different cultures are exceptional. ‘Post-racism’ since 1994 is based on unspoken apartheid sentiments. Merely repressing racism and all it entails to the unconscious benefits nobody.

But race is written into our thinking and language, our fears, prejudices and future expectations. It need not be verbalised to influence our attitudes. There is no difference between an apartheid mentality and a racist mentality. An apartheid mentality is marked by categorising another person racially before looking at her as an individual. As a rule our criteria are external: handicapped, aged, immigrant, celebrity, authority figure, et cetera without any knowledge of the person we are ‘categorising’. It is partly because our brains are structured to think in binary terms to facilitate our dealings with others (see chapter 4), and partly because our culture conditions us to link specific negative or positive qualities with categorical and generic labels.

Since 1994 events in this country have created new associations. We need just a few recurrences of unpleasant incidents to establish an association: that all taxi drivers are a law unto themselves and have no regard for others; that whites are targeted for extermination as evidenced by close on 3 000 (!) farm murders; that most black officials are incompetent and guilty of corruption if given half a chance; that land reform has led to the ruin of farms that were once commercially viable; that the violation of white rights does not get nearly as much attention as the violation of black rights; that whites are being disempowered systematically and are seen as second class citizens. This despite Zuma’s statement that white Afrikaners are the only legitimate white tribe in Africa, whose members do not have dual passports and have to be integrated in the process of Africa’s reconstruction. (This, not unreasonably, outraged non-Afrikaans speakers.)

Among blacks one finds similarly generalised associations: whites still enjoy a good life and care nothing about their black fellow citizens; white farmers oppress and abuse their farm workers; whites don’t care two hoots about the plight of black compatriots, only about their own advantage; under the apartheid regime there was just as much corruption and poor service delivery to townships; in the apartheid era just as many lazy, incompetent whites got civil service jobs; the lack of black expertise is a result of

apartheid; whites are still racist; whites stole the land; whites exploit blacks if they get half a chance; whites suffer from an unfounded sense of superiority; whites withhold their expertise from blacks so as to disadvantage them; blacks are disempowered – why should whites enjoy a favoured position?

At the same time there is legitimate protest against ignoring racism. Mbeki insisted that racism should be on the agenda. We kid nobody by pretending to be a post-racist society. As Ndebele (*Mail and Guardian* 24/10/09, 20) puts it: “The whites are pretending it didn’t happen; the blacks are pretending to forgive.” Racism exists on both sides, although accusations of black racism are denied because of the assumption that victims cannot possibly be guilty of the same crime. The apparent goodwill may be little more than a thin veneer, easily punctured by deep-seated racial hatred. Racism is not eliminated by tokenism or superficial interaction, and certainly not by benevolent handouts from churches, NGOs and individuals. That was a hallmark of apartheid era as well: aid was distributed to make the donors feel good about themselves and their charitable work instead of radically addressing the plight of others. The same may be said of outreach projects. A case in point was the *Koinonia* outreach programme in Mamelodi in the dying days of apartheid, when white Christians stayed in the homes of black people for a day or two. It enabled them to come to grips with the other’s life world at close quarters, listen to the stories and ‘really’ understand. But all these projects and the understanding they brought did not change the lot of black people one iota. So it makes sense when Ndebele (*Mail and Guardian* 24/10/09, 20) comments that “blacks ... simply hate to be ‘understood’”. All the understanding of yore changed nothing.

To seek to understand your opponent, enemy, terrorist, murderer is a defence mechanism. We fear what we do not understand. Understanding the other is to draw him into your interpretive framework, domesticate him. That dispels fear of the unknown. And if the act of understanding is described in a tear-jerking narrative, there is the additional bonus of feeling sorry for those people and even wanting to help them, so one becomes a liberator. The black world is sick of being interpreted, it wants to be changed. Understanding without intervening to better people’s lot comes cheap. Reconciliation in South Africa will not come cheap.

#### *Subcultures and minority groups*

Whites represent a numerical minority group (9.1%), as do coloureds (9%) and Asians (2.6%), while black groups collectively (79.3%) constitute the majority. The ANC’s basic policy is that South Africa’s socio-economic world should reflect its demography. Employees at universities, government

institutions, eventually the private sector as well (including agriculture) must mirror that distribution. (The demography is based on race rather than ethnicity, because it would be too complicated to distinguish between Xhosa, Venda, Pedi and others – a mirror image of the National Party ploy when justifying their apartheid policies.) But what is a minority? White tycoons maintain that in terms of expertise, money and economic initiative they are not a minority, although one could ask why and how they secured their monopoly. The country needs them and must be pulled in, not pushed out.

Ideally minorities in a democratic dispensation should not feel threatened. Power does not ‘belong’ to the majority but is vested in the constitution, the judiciary and various commissions that are supposed to protect their rights. In such a scenario minorities should not experience discrimination – that is the ideal. But the reality is very different.

One of the most pertinent examples is affirmative action. Along with the shocking crime rate it is cited as the main reason why whites emigrate. The problem is not affirmative action but the way it is implemented. Do BEE (Black Economic Empowerment) and affirmative action promote nation building if foreigners are appointed in preference to local whites simply because they are black? We need to find more creative ways of integrating the economically inactive without punishing and excluding people who can make valuable contributions. The present BEE programme makes whites ‘passive contributors’ to the solution of the problem, but it also makes them martyrs. They forfeit their right to equal employment. In the case of crime and land reform they are again passive ‘victims’ who are deprived of land and possessions against their will. We have to find a way of turning this around. Whites must actively contribute to poverty alleviation, job creation, affirmative action. At present the initiative is entirely in the state’s hands and the state is blamed when programmes fail. Apartheid has taught us that coercion is the worst way of getting people to do anything. If whites are given the initiative to make a positive contribution in exchange for scrapping affirmative action and putting an end to crime, we may be in for a pleasant surprise.

Black empowerment has become a symbolic requirement that has to be met. If no black South African can be found to fill a vacancy, black foreigners are favoured above qualified white South Africans – all part of the attempt to bring numeric ratios in line with black expectations. At the time of its origin in 2008 Cope<sup>3</sup> made noises about the misapplication of affirmative

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3 After Mbeki’s dismissal, Kgalema Motlanthe, ANC deputy president, was installed as president. After this ministers from the Mbeki camp, led by led ‘Terror’ Lekota formed Cope (Congress of the People) based on the principles of the Freedom Charter, which they felt were being neglected. They overestimated their following and got only 7.6 % of the vote in the April 2009 elections.

action, but it soon stopped when it realised it would cost them too many votes.

Affirmative action means that whites who are excluded from the public sector have to work out their own destiny. Prince Mashele (*Mail and Guardian* 24/10/09, 22) quotes Max Weber's observation "National ... minorities which are in a position of subordination to a group of rulers are likely, through their voluntary or involuntary exclusion from the positions of political influence, to be driven with peculiar force into economic activity. Their ablest members seek to satisfy the desire for recognition of their abilities in this field, since there is no opportunity in the service of the state." From this Mashele concludes that whites benefit most by the dividends of democracy! Obviously he will not find many whites who subscribe to his view. A more extreme version of this notion is put forward by Andile Mngxitama of *New Frank Talk* fame (*Mail and Guardian* 24/10/09, 23): "Post-1994 is a white heaven and the ANC is the guard at the door to keep the black riff-raff out. In exchange for this service the guard is permitted occasionally to grab leftovers from the rowdy white gluttony going on inside. This is called democracy."

It seems a pity that affirmative action should be applied on racial lines. After all, there are other ways to go, such as taxation, joint projects, monitored partnerships, creative employment programmes and, above all, effective schooling and training programmes. Njabulo S Ndebele confirms this (*Mail and Guardian* 24/10/09, 21): "A successful schooling system will see the end of affirmative action." He also deplures unimaginative affirmative action (p 20): "Redistribution was given priority over creation and invention. That way we reaffirmed their structures of inequality by seeking to work within their inherent logic." In the end the country pays the price, as evidenced by umpteen auditor general's reports of mismanagement of government departments and parastatals where billions of rand are squandered (cf SAA and the Land Bank, to mention only two). And that cannot be attributed to race – it is a matter of competence and experience. Experienced people that could be involved are excluded because of the colour of their skins. Are we not shooting ourselves in the foot?

Affirmative action has divisive effects. Whites feel it is apartheid in reverse (job reservation on racial grounds), blacks forfeit self-respect and credibility of the merit of their appointment and their ability to live up to it. The result is envy among successful and unsuccessful blacks, coupled with resentment among the masses who remain bogged down in poverty.

The tragedy that prevents South Africa from fulfilling its potential is mistrust. Mistrust makes partnerships impossible. It is a matter of either/or, not both/and – of exclusion, not inclusion. Whites are not to be trusted as

partners because they will try to boss their peers around and criticise them. Hence hierarchy is the only alternative, but now in reverse: the black partner must have the final say. And blacks have a perfect paradigm for doing this! The only way to overcome our divisive past is to build genuine friendships. Only friendship, with all that true friendship entails, can vanquish mistrust.

### **The identity issue**

Questions about Africa's identity frequently crop up: 'What *is* Africa?' 'Does the Africa you speak of exist at all?'<sup>4</sup> Africa is a jigsaw puzzle comprising 55 countries, thousands of ethnic groups and arbitrary boundaries inherited from the colonial period. The continent is still subject to neo-colonialism which, through technical assistance, forms of cooperation and the present debt system, leaves African people dependent on the industrialised powers. More than 50 years after decolonisation (Ghana became independent on 6 March 1957) most African countries have recovered neither their language, history and art, nor their spiritual heritage (see Reuver 1993:273-274).

President Mbeki will be remembered for his endeavours to realise African ideals of good governance, upliftment, poverty alleviation and unity. In this respect he was ahead of his time and at various levels Africa was not ready to move at his pace. But at least he put a plan on the table (Nepad) and in several areas there have been moves in the direction he pointed (the African parliament, peace-keeping force, the new African Union, etc). In the end his involvement in these projects, and his resultant absence among grassroots South Africans, cost him his job.

In African culture group identity (inherent in collective, communal participation) normally takes precedence over individual identity (Pasteur & Toldson 1982:71). Although eroded by urbanisation, group identity is still of vital importance. The question is how to accommodate a multiplicity of group identities in a process of nation building and national unification.

Against the background of colonialism and continued economic dependence on the West identity has always been an issue in Africa. The post-liberation upsurge in the quest for African identity makes sense. There is, however, no consolidated effort or fixed method in the reconstruction process. Perhaps an infinite number of uncoordinated efforts serves the purpose best. Denial of identity invariably provokes anger, and on this score Africa has every reason to be angry. Violence is seen as a way to freedom, as part of the struggle for a changed self-image, which is waged both among the subjugated themselves and against the dominator (Taylor 1994:65). The history

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4 George Haymes once said: "The African does not exist except in the minds of those who have never seen the people" (quoted by Bloch-Hoell 1992:105).

of liberation struggles testifies to this. The violent protests against poor service delivery, et cetera, by municipal and provincial authorities all over the country ever since 2007 are another case in point.

It is not clear how and to what extent African identity can be changed, recovered or reformulated. Neither is it possible to rid it of ‘non-African’ traits. The process of identity retrieval may be more or less radical, more intellectual and psychological than physical, et cetera. It concerns the African worldview, mindset, spirituality and the whole of African culture. It seems that the strongest motive behind the wish to recover African identity is the urge to rid Africa of its negative self-image, mindset of dependency, its poverty and underdevelopment. Poverty has become a very macabre facet of African identity (Pobee 1993:397; Bloch-Hoell 1992:102). Overcoming poverty is an important part of the transition process and prerequisite for its success. As Cheryl Carolus (1994:2) puts it, “The only way that we will finally bury apartheid is by the development of our people.” People who are systematically handicapped by poverty are relegated to second-class citizenship, necessitating remedial action through equalisation (Taylor 1994:38; see also Du Toit 1996b:10-37).

If identity is never static but always historically, geographically and sociologically conditioned,<sup>5</sup> hence contingent, what is the point of looking for and identifying with historical roots? The process of excavating and restoring one’s identity raises any number of questions. Is it possible to retrieve a former identity? Is it possible to determine what African identity was before colonialism? Can it be verified, and if so, can it be imposed on a community? Do the majority of people want to restore it? Root-searching and root-thinking do not impress everyone. Kristeva (1993:2-3) sees the cult of origins as a hate reaction – hatred of those who do not share my origins and who affront me personally, economically and culturally: I then move back among ‘my own’, I stick to an archaic, primitive ‘common denominator’.<sup>6</sup> This is a real danger in root-thinking. By contrast there is the idea of the cosmopolitan,

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5 The notion of personal identity, which entails personality, religious, linguistic, behavioural and sexual attributes, cannot be separated from national and ethnic identity, and represents an even more important aspect of identity than the latter.

6 Xenophobia is epitomised by the Greek myth of the Danaides. They were foreign to the Greeks because – being descendants of Hera’s priestess Io, who gave birth to their ancestor Danaüs in Egypt – they were born on foreign soil, did not speak Greek and had alien customs. The women, who were not amenable to Greek ways, were obdurate about whom they married. The Danaides refused to marry their cousins and the women ended up murdering their husbands on their wedding night. The myth symbolises the transition from endogamous to exogamous society, in which one selects a spouse from a ‘foreign country’ – outside the family, the clan, the lineage. The Egyptian Danaides testify to the beginnings of civic protection of foreigners in ancient Greece (see Kristeva 1993:17-19).

the person saying in the words of the Greek dramatist Menander: "I am a man, and nothing human is foreign to me." A biblical example is the Pauline ecclesia, where there is neither Greek nor Jew but only the new creature identifying with the death and resurrection of Christ (Kristeva 1993:20,22).

Identity is open, not essentialist. Open identity replaces the idea of a fixed and stable identity with that of a continuous, dynamic process of re-identification. This does not mean that one has no interest in identity. The very process of continuous re-identification and relating to a multiplicity of identities highlights its importance.

White identity, too, is challenged by transition. Many thinking whites are disillusioned with the highly presumptuous, modernistic claims of science, technology and the various epistemologies. There is a new awareness of the contextual, pluralistic and contingent nature of truth claims, values, lifestyles, worldviews and the like. Transition adds to this by challenging old, entrenched white mindsets, perceptions and attitudes, as well as the concomitant unwillingness to identify with and open up to Africa. The challenge entails exposure and commitment to this continent in a completely new way.

By the same token the coloured and Indian groups are also repositioning, reformulating their identities through new styles of interacting with other groups and contributing to the South African story in their own distinctive ways. The coloured community in particular is going through a difficult time. In a way apartheid hit them harder than black Africans, because by and large they shared the culture and language of white Afrikaners. After 1994 they were more or less overlooked in the restitution process and today their language, like the other official languages, is marginalised in favour of English. The Indian community has a minority of fairly affluent members, who lived relatively comfortably in the apartheid era. But the vast majority, resident in KwaZulu-Natal, suffered just as much as black South Africans and are only marginally benefiting by affirmative action.

A crucial point to consider is that the burgeoning African identity, represented mainly by the ANC leadership, does not focus exclusively on South Africa's eleven ethnic groups but also on African unity, embodied in the African Parliament, African peace-keeping force, Nepad and similar projects aimed at the ideal: a United States of Africa. Nonetheless local achievements, particularly in SadeC countries, remain of paradigmatic importance for the challenges that await us en route to the pan-African ideal.

We live in times when the advantages of diversity and pluralism are in the limelight. That requires not just tolerance, but also scope for others to differ. After all, diversity implies that not everybody shares the same

language and values, and that diversity may be the strength of a geographical group.

Although it is easy to romanticise ethnic diversity and cultural pluralism, they remain thorny issues when it comes to any kind of economic or political advantage in a shared life world. One does not need prophetic vision to predict that Africa's future and the pan-African ideal will hinge on successful management of the problems of minority groups and ethnic diversity. African identity is local and contextual, bound to issues occupying a community's mind and influencing its worldview. African identity differs not only from one community to the next, but is quite different north and south of the Sahara (Bloch-Hoell 1992:101).

#### *Characteristics of African identity*

There have been attempts to demonstrate Africa's historical importance. The oldest palaeontological finds were made here, elevating Africa to the cradle of humankind; and Egypt being part of this continent makes Western history, via Greek culture, dependent on Africa. It must be noted, however, that many of these ideas originated in Afro-American circles and may not be typical of African thinking. While the claims are of tremendous symbolic importance to some Africans, Westerners, apart from contesting their historical veracity, may simply shrug them off and say they change nothing and make no difference to the fate of Africa.

Africa does have identity. There is no need to identify African culture with ancient Egyptian culture: it has more than enough to offer and identify with. Still, African identity is pluralistic, incorporating a multitude of languages and religions, lifestyles and customs, stories and rites. This cultural wealth, with its spiritual strength and moral vigour, simply needs to be promoted and propagated and its denigration by the colonial powers combated.

Pobee (1993:388) sees the quest for identity as universal and not typical of Africa alone. A new identity is about developing a new anthropology, because the old Greek, biblical and African anthropologies have collapsed. He sees Africa as searching for a new identity alongside other continents. To Pobee this does not mean that Africa's identity is to be found solely in Africa. It does not imply wholesale acceptance of either African or European culture; it entails acceptance of what is good, presumably for the dignity and well-being of *homo africanus* (Pobee 1993:394).

As noted already, there is not just one African identity. There is no going back to some supposedly pristine Africa (Pobee 1993:390). That does not mean that Africa has to forego its identity, but Pobee locates it in the present. From his theological perspective Pobee (1993:392) considers Afri-

can identities to be tied up with the question of who people, persons, human beings are, and these questions are directly linked to their relationship with a supreme being. That relationship has been warped by colonial attitudes. For the growth of a genuine African identity, Africa must be exorcised not only of the spirit of colonialism but also of missionary paternalism. It must develop authentic African theologies to underpin African identities. For this it must turn to the religion typical of Africa (Pobee 1993:393, 395). Pobee (1993:396-398) identifies some characteristics of *homo africanus*: unity of the sacred and the secular; a communitarian epistemology and ontology; a distinct sense of finitude, bound up with Africa's vulnerability and high mortality rate; the experience of reality through song, dance and ritual; and a culture of poverty (see Pasteur & Toldson 1982:93).

Africa must reject everything that renders its spiritual resources impotent. This means that to a large extent Western rationalistic theologies and ecclesiastic initiatives must be rejected, for the difference between the spiritualities of African Initiated Churches (AICs) and black mainline churches is glaring.

Dealing with the past – whether personal or national – is an act of historical interpretation. Our identity is properly explained only when history is known: we are what we have become (Maier 1988:150). But history, being written, is fixed. It has to be remembered in order to change it. What we have become should not freeze us as if we were products of an unalterable fate.

Dealing with the past, then, is also an act of restoration and reinterpretation, through which we redefine and reshape ourselves. In this sense the past affects our present and future. Louw (1995:149ff) says that past events should become signposts, on the one hand serving as warnings, on the other as dynamic guidelines to prevent future plans from becoming fixed blueprints.

Dealing with your past is, however, proof of your courage to face the future. You want to deal with the past in order to understand and change the present and so create the future.

Memory is a prerequisite for identity. It is not only what we remember, but also how we remember, how we interact with memory that co-determines our identity. We must excavate the past, not to our detriment but to our benefit. Memory can overwhelm and depress; for others, less scared perhaps, it becomes addictive. History cannot be reduced to memory, nor can identity be defined in terms of history or memory alone (Maier 1988:149). Identity and memory are open entities that can be coloured and interpreted in diverse ways with different emphases.

The ideal is to deal with the past satisfactorily so that ex-president Mandela's words may come true: "Never, never again shall it be that this

beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another ... The sun shall never set on so glorious a human achievement. Let freedom reign. God bless Africa” (Mandela 1994:747).

The enterprise of dealing with the past must bear fruit lest we end up asking ourselves: if everything remains the same after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has done its work, why did we bother at all?

We have a long way to go before we will be able to celebrate an overarching South African identity. The new constitution with its bill of rights, the role of the constitutional court in guarding these rights, the functioning of the Human Rights Commission and the like can contribute to such an identity. But the process is frail and can easily be derailed. Nor is it clear what value such an identity really has. Certainly it is only feasible if complemented by a plurality of local identities. It is impossible, however, to avoid a clash of identities or always harmonise conflicting ones. The controversy about replacement of statues, renaming of towns, streets and buildings and so on are examples of the conflict potential of the process.

#### *A unified South African identity?*

Nationhood spread to most parts of the world after World War II. Virtually the whole world now consists of independent nation-states. After the collapse of the Soviet Union we saw the re-emergence of strong nationalisms from its ruins. Smart (see 1995:44-47) believes that intercultural contact will produce new intermediate social forms, just as contact between major religions will give rise to new variants.

But nation building raises many questions. Is it at all possible in Africa with its plurality of ethnic groups, languages and cultures? Is race or skin colour sufficient to engender the idea of a nation? Is nation building a prerequisite for economic development? Is an enveloping South African nation at all possible?

Advancement of national unity presupposes commonalities. Do they exist in Africa? There is not one Africa but many. Yet despite its many images one will always find commonalities that bind people together. They need not be linked to race or ethnicity. Shared suffering, religious interests, economic interdependence and the like can serve the same purpose. Ironically, most of the factors binding blacks together are negative: things like poverty, suffering, discrimination, illiteracy, blackness per se (seen as negative by some).

Culture is also not a self-contained whole (Degenaar 1992:7). Each nation does not have only one culture and each culture does not spawn a separate nation. What individuals produce socially does not necessarily

belong to their own culture or to all its members. Neither is diversity within a culture secondary to intercultural differences. Culture is a sign system open to other sign systems.

South Africans may never be a nation in the idealistic sense of the word, but it may become a people united by mutual values and interests. That ideal presupposes a process of bonding, commitment to values like respect, freedom, diversity, interdependence and shared sacrifices. Achieving an overarching identity in a multicultural context requires a culture of recognition. Recognition of the individual and collective other seems prerequisite for peaceful coexistence.

The danger of reducing complex issues to either/or choices is very real. One cannot categorise humans and grant legal rights and other forms of recognition to selected categories. Private/public and personal/collective identity are two of these categories. Habermas (1994:107) doubts whether an individualistically constructed theory of rights can accommodate the demands for recognition of collective identities.

*The dialogical self: more than a Romantic mould of identity*

The ideal of personal moulding emerged from the thinking of the German philosopher Herder and of Romanticism. I must be true to myself in a very personal, idiosyncratic way. I should not mould<sup>7</sup> my life for the sake of external conformity, but according to my own judgment. This became the background to the modern notion of authenticity (Taylor 1994:30-31).

But individuals do not mould themselves in isolation from their environing context. For Taylor (1994:32-33) the crucial feature of human life is its fundamentally *dialogical* character. We define our identity in dialogue with, sometimes in rebellion against, the things our significant others would like to see in us. Human beings cannot be severed from their context, individual and social. Being dialogically constituted does not mean only that I have my own peculiar way of being, but that in developing myself I must fight my family, organised religion, society, the school, the state – all the forces of convention. Dialogue shapes my evolving identity as I grow up, but the material from which I shape that identity is provided by my society (Appiah 1994:154).

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7 Herder applied his concept of the individual self not only to the individual person among other persons, but also to the 'culture-bearing' people among other peoples. Just like individuals, a nation should be true to itself (Taylor 1994:31).

*Politics of equal dignity versus politics of difference*

Appiah (1994:149, 151) links the public and personal aspects of identity. He argues that if what matters about me is my individual, authentic self, then contemporary talk of identity should include broad categories like gender, ethnicity, nationality, race and sexuality. These major collective identities demand recognition. Habermas (1994:109) maintains that marginalised cultural forms require guarantees of status and survival – a kind of collective right that shatters the outmoded self-understanding of the democratic constitutional state, which is tailored to individual rights.

The influence of the collective as manifested in, for example, national ideals, community values, a specific group mentality, and peer pressures must not be underestimated. The politics of universal dignity championed forms of non-discrimination that were quite blind to the ways in which citizens differ. The modern notion of identity has given rise to a politics of difference. Equal dignity implies recognition of the unique identity of every individual or group. This does not mean that non-discrimination requires that we make these differences the basis for differential treatment (Taylor 1994:38-39). In Appiah's words (1994:161), it is not enough to demand to be treated with equal dignity despite being black, for that would be to concede that blackness counts against dignity, hence one would end up being treated as a black. Taylor (1994:42-43) formulates the problem as follows: the possibility that the Zulu, while having the same potential for cultural formation as anyone else, might nevertheless have come up with a culture less valuable than others is ruled out from the start. Even to entertain this possibility is to deny human equality.

The demand for equal recognition extends beyond acknowledgment of the equal value of all human potential to include the equal value of what humans have made of this potential. The development of each culture or group has its own sufficient ground. Recognition cannot happen when, as in the case of apartheid, it leads to dissociation and lack of interaction. Recognition implies interdependence. Hegel's example of the dialectic of the master and the slave is a good example of a politics of equal dignity. For Hegel we can only flourish to the extent that we are recognised. Each consciousness seeks recognition from another, and this is not a sign of a lack of virtue. The normal conception of honour as hierarchical is crucially flawed, because it does not explain the need that makes people look for recognition in the first place. Those who fail to win honour in the field remain unrecognised. The winners are also frustrated because they gain recognition from losers, whose acknowledgment is, by definition, not worth having, since they are no longer free, self-supporting subjects on a par with the winners (Taylor 1994:50).

Hence the challenge is to combine the politics of equal dignity with the politics of difference, and to deal with difference, with marginalisation, without threatening diversity of viewpoints. It is an inescapable requirement, since societies are becoming increasingly multicultural and more porous. People are confronted with differences more than ever before (Taylor 1994:63). South African communities have to cope with this multiplicity. We must all guard our right to be ourselves, both on the individual and the group level, and simultaneously accept our interdependence. A natural process of exposure, interaction and evolutionary growth can ensure living differently in harmony. It is in the interest of all to protest when minorities or oppressed cultures are forced to mirror the dominant culture.

*Religion as a common, cohesive denominator*

Another answer to the question of what constitutes common humanity in a pluralistic situation may be found in religion (Pobee 1993:387). Religion, in spite of factionalism, binds most people in this country together. Religion may be more typical of African identity than anything else. It is a key factor, one which interrelates most ethnic and cultural groups on the continent. Spirituality has always been focal in, and integral to, African life. More than any other cohesive force – be it technology or the free market system, a constitution or democracy – African spirituality has unifying potential. At the same time it becomes divisive if, for example, white fundamentalism, exclusiveness and intolerance prevent white churches from opening up to African religion. The threat of Christian, Muslim and Judaic fundamentalism and exclusiveness cannot be underestimated and could derail any peace process, as developments in Somalia, Sudan and the Middle East show. A movement away from the dominance of Western theological ideas towards a rediscovery of traditional African spiritual values would give a major boost to the redefinition of African identity. Such a rediscovery and exposition of African myths and medicine, rituals and customs, community life and worldview, relationships, hopes and fears are apparent in contemporary African religious discourse and writing.

African spirituality, like African identity, is not unitary or fixed but manifold and dynamic.<sup>8</sup> Although there are many parallels between African Traditional Religions (ATRs), AICs and mainline churches, African religions remain complex, multi-layered and dynamic, with a history of contradiction, contestation and innovation (Bloch-Hoell 1992:100, 102). Religions in Africa

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<sup>8</sup> This is emphasised by the oral nature of African religion. Genuine African theology is oral theology, according to Bloch-Hoell (1992:105). African hymns, prayers, liturgies and stories are often improvised in a creative and enthusiastic manner.

are African. The Christian religion, inculturated in various forms, is a vital part of authentic African identity. Theologies devised by Africans are not entirely African, nor are theologies devised by Westerners entirely Western (Bloch-Hoell 1992:103; see also Wessels 1994:211ff). Liberation theology developed in a very specific context of interaction with and critique of Western involvement in Africa. It has influenced Western theology decisively.

The challenge is to create an environment where poly-national societies comprising free, differing individuals interact freely and influence each other in all spheres of life, where commitment to common causes does not prevent differing personal opinions and lifestyles. This would help to create a world without foreigners (Kristeva 1993:36).

Different groups have different contributions to make. There must, however, be recognition and acceptance of interdependence. The *sine qua non* remains openness, recognition, tolerance, mutual empowerment and respect. To practise such virtues is a tall order but is necessary if we are to build a harmonious nation.

### **Conclusion**

A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since 1994 and things have happened that opened up the wounds of racism anew. Nonetheless South Africa is embarked on a journey of no return and, speaking from a white perspective, those who choose not to emigrate must help to make the new dispensation work. There are many success stories that keep the flame of hope burning and the South African example has potential significance for the entire continent,

A major challenge remains working at mutual understanding and building on common ground, among which building partnerships may well be the most important. This is said in a climate in which it would seem that the youth, black and white, are drawing closer and closer together.

This chapter on identity, which has to do with self-understanding and self-interpretation, has brought us face to face with the complexity of multiculturalism and ethnocentrism. History suggests that a single ethnic group cannot dominate for too long before uniting other groups against it. The success of the South African experiment spells hope for the rest of Africa, and for the global struggle to handle multiculturalism. Perhaps an ubuntu ethic may help point the way. After all, a culture is only a culture among and through other cultures. That brings us to the next chapter on Africa's poly-ethnicity, which we approach in a cognitive-scientific perspective. The advantage of such an approach to rationality is that cultural likes and dislikes

make way for biological, corporeally focused universals, which provide a more satisfactory basis for cross-cultural comparison. It also refutes the perception, common among whites, that Africans are rationally inferior to Westerners. Such a biologically oriented approach brings us up against issues like racism, ethnocentrism and xenophobia, which we look at in the next chapter.

## Chapter 3

### African diversity: challenges in a multicultural and poly-ethnic world

#### **Introduction: instrumental reason,<sup>1</sup> globalisation and multicultural societies**

Globalised, postmodern societies are characterised by cultural and ethnic diversity. Gone are the old concepts of unity, national identity and monolithic society. Globalism has become the buzzword for diversity and the symbol of an ideal, unified world. In its current phase it enables Western nation-states to tolerate greater diversity within their borders. Most countries have to deal with multiculturalism and, depending on the context, it may be a socio-political time bomb. There are no magic solutions to multicultural and poly-ethnic diversity.

The global flow of cultures, people, technology and commodities cannot be successfully managed or controlled. National and cultural borders are being crossed all the time. Globalism, supported by technological innovations such as information technology, communication technology, video and film, has a homogenising effect on everybody. There is worldwide reaction to the influence of mass culture and its value-integrative effects. The influence of mass culture implies the arbitrary construction of identities in terms of ideologies foreign to that society. The dependence of all cultures on technology makes it difficult to counteract mass culture. Its ubiquitous presence and use, coupled with instrumental reason, identify technology as the main component of mass culture. This threatens the diversity of cultural legacies from the past. At the same time the openness of the market and the demands of technology are the best defence against the threat of fundamentalist communitarianism (Touraine 2000: 63, 196). Nowadays instrumental reason<sup>2</sup> affects

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1 Instrumental reason here is analogous to the expression 'instrumental value'. An item has instrumental value to the extent that it effectively achieves some desire or valued purpose. It is that which is good as a means to ... In the case of instrumental reason, reason is applied to that which is purposeful and a means to ... In the present context reason serves as the instrument of the market, technology and consumerism, dissociated from the world of cultures, values and meanings.

2 The modern scientific revolution (1500-1700) detached science and technology from wisdom, ethics and values, and interpreted scientific reason as instrumental reason – a version of reason which is allegedly value-free. The science-values separation guarantees the untouchable character of science. Similarly, instrumental reason is immune to unmanageable, global, cultural plurality (see also Moltmann 2002:27).

the whole world, especially when applied through techno-science and economic globalisation. Because technology and the economy are considered value-free, they can supposedly be appropriated and applied anywhere in an innocent way. Technology – especially communication and information technologies – allows for both global unity and global diversity, while economic globalism stresses the interdependence of all.

Our postmodern<sup>3</sup> age has brought with it post-democracy and post-society. Being global citizens, whose fate is determined by multinational corporations linked to neither state nor nation, calls into question what we understand by democracy. The sovereignty of states is challenged by economic globalisation. Mass culture brings with it the death of society with its endless production of replicas for which there is no original, perpetually simulated in the video-sphere (television/video/film) (see Baudrillard 1998).

Diversity in this context implies that we have lost control, that both subject and society have been decentred. Walking a labyrinth is by no means the same as managing and navigating it. Surfing the internet is merely to ride a few waves in the sea of information. Viewing the world as a global village does not shrink it to a manageable size, and regarding our culture as post-modern does not describe or fix our cultural identity.

Globalism has forced the issue of diversity on everybody. Africa is no exception. To survive economically most countries must adhere to the principles of economic globalisation. This presupposes absence of war and faction fighting, good infrastructure and telecommunications, a regional lingua franca, consensus on economic targets, and acceptance of the principles enabling all of this.

### **Multiculturalism**

The universal reality of multiculturalism<sup>4</sup> and the increasing incidence of ethnocentrism make multiculturalism a pressing social and political problem. Few countries have a good track record in this regard. This could be why South Africa's transition to a multiparty democracy was hailed as a miracle. South African multiparty democracy includes intercultural, inter-ethnic and interreligious democracy. All over the world minority groups are struggling for their rights and responding to cultural and political domination in funda-

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3 Featherstone (1995:88) regards postmodernism as 'the end of history' in the sense of the end of belief in overcoming the present in pursuit of the 'new'.

4 Culture is wonderfully complex and attuned to the environment in which it evolved. It is misleading, therefore, to think of culture as evolving from a lower to a higher level, and to entertain biological explanations of cultural diversity (Wilson 1998:201). Cultural diversity is not the consequence of genetic differences but of environmental and bio-geographic factors.

mentalist and communitarian ways, seeking identity and unity. Intra-societal subcultures further diversify and complicate the picture. A much more pluralistic pattern of relations among the world's peoples is emerging, but its form remains nebulous. Bloody conflicts between religions, cultures, regions, nationalities and ethnic groups continue.

In less than two decades we have experienced, among other things, the following: the dismantling of the Soviet Union and the rekindling of nationalist passions in Central and Eastern Europe; the fall of the Berlin wall; the Serb government's policy of ethnic cleansing after the break-up of former Yugoslavia; ethnic cleansing in Burundi; war between Christians and Muslims in southern Sudan; the Jewish invasion of Palestine; suicide bombers; the September 11 catastrophe; smouldering tension in the Arab world after the American invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. These examples relate in one way or another to terms such as 'tradition', 'identity', 'ideology', 'values', 'technology', 'economy', 'globalism', 'nation', 'culture', 'state' and 'people'. The terms have become entrenched in our vocabulary and indicate the extent to which diversity occupies our minds (see Geertz 2000:220-221). Many, if not all, cultures are threatened by diversity and its potential to cause societal disruption, individual dislocation and cultural disintegration.

Multiculturalism is more than the expression of cultural variety. The 'problem' is one of communication.<sup>5</sup> Communication presupposes the existence not only of common languages, but also of messages with different contents and forms, the possibility of misunderstanding, and the influence of prejudice. For multiculturalism to 'succeed' and stimulate peaceful co-existence, meaningful communication is essential.

Multiculturalism cannot be reduced to unrestricted pluralism. It must be defined as an attempt to establish communication between, and partial integration of, cultural ensembles that were previously separated. *Communitas*, rather than *societas*, determines society. Without an attempt at re-composition – the bringing together of diverse cultures – cultural diversity can only lead to cultural wars (Touraine 2000:179). Postmodernism has brought a re-emergence of the vernacular, of playful collages of styles and traditions. There is a return to local cultures, with the emphasis on cultures (plural) and the fact that they can be juxtaposed without hierarchical distinction

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5 For Geertz the public space is home to homo sapiens. In the public space we position ourselves and form perceptions relating to public images, without which we literally do not know how to feel. The public space shapes public imagination and sentiment – our worldview. Intra-space is the world of communication, of language raised to the level of Being. We perceive through language games, communities of discourse, intersubjective systems of reference, ways of world-making, all happening in the framework of concrete social interaction (Geertz 2000:76; Waghorne 1984:50).

(Featherstone 1995:96). This is not to say that multiculturalism equals either endless fragmentation of cultural space or a worldwide cultural melting pot. Instead it attempts to reconcile the diversity of cultural experiences with mass production and distribution of cultural goods.

Multiculturalism includes intra-cultural management and support of minority rights. Minority rights for cultural, subcultural, religious and language minorities have not received proper attention. Apart from ensuring objective rights for minority groups, attention must be given to intercultural and intra-societal relationships. Becoming acquainted with different worlds, strange customs and novel ideas is a long and arduous process. A hermeneutics of the Other cannot be 'learnt' like the hermeneutics of a text. On a cultural level we have learnt to order things in our world. We act, appreciate, detest according to our order of things. This is our value system, a system that entails strong moral convictions about right and wrong, good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable. We usually eschew what we don't like and shun anticipated unpleasant encounters. Most people would rather avoid being exposed to the challenge of diversity altogether.

#### **African unity and ethno-diversity**

Ethnicity (poly-ethnicity) is usually viewed from the biological perspective of race, while multiculturalism refers to a people's specific culture. The concepts of race and ethnicity are based on subjective belief in common descent due to similarities of physical type or custom. Culture and ethnicity help us to identify and refer to a person or ethnic group. Since a specific culture is often associated with a particular ethnic group, we become used to linking it with a particular region, language, conduct and customs. But in a globalising world language, conduct and custom are seldom peculiar to ethnicity and culture. Different ethnic and cultural groups may speak the same language, participate in the same culture and share similar customs.

Sharing of culture and custom is not the problem. The main problem with ethnicity is extreme ethnocentrism manifested in xenophobic attitudes, aggression towards other groups, discrimination, fanatical nationalism and patriotism, and ethnic fundamentalism, leading to aggression and war. Ironically, there is no thing such as culture,<sup>6</sup> race or ethnicity.<sup>7</sup> These are all cul-

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6 For Geertz (1973:44; Waghorne 1984:40) culture is nothing at all: nothing in the mind, and nothing in behavioural patterns. Culture is because, and only because, shaped behaviour is.

7 What one finds in real life is not culture, race or ethnicity, but dynamic communities. Community life, however, can become absolute. This is known as negative communitarianism, when the collective identity of a community becomes normative. If it is identified with cultural practices and political power, it results in a totalitarian society, intolerant of everything foreign. No democracy is possible in a communitarian society, since it cannot

tural constructs, often loaded with prejudice. Culture is an open process and can never be fixed; nor do race and ethnicity exist as biological categories.

The diversity of African cultures is often ignored. The differences between black cultures are as significant as those between white cultures. For many, however, there are simply too many indistinguishable ethnic groups to establish a person's ethnic identity. Africa is considered 'united' on purely racial grounds: Africans are black. Afro-Americans, when expressing their ties with Africa, identify with the idea of Africa and not with a specific African culture, ethnic group or language. African identity as black identity lies in reclaiming blackness in its positive sense in response to the negative connotations attached to it by the colonial rulers. But if race does not exist outside human perceptions, it is not 'blackness' that unifies Africa. Biologically 'race' does not exist. There is no evidence that 'racial' differences have a genetic basis. There is more genetic variation within than among races, and racial categories do not entail biological distinctiveness. As in the case of racism, ethnocentrism is an attitude. Attitudes and beliefs are evolutionary, are neutral and have no firm genetic basis (Dunbar 1987:55-56).

Both natural and cultural diversity is given. It represents the outcome of long evolutionary and cultural processes and, once destroyed and lost, cannot be retrieved. Natural and cultural diversity is the product of a complex interaction with the physical environment in which it evolved. Seen thus, Africa must value its cultural and ethnic diversity. From an evolutionary point of view diversity is celebrated and respected, since it is the successful outcome of those species that managed, over millions of years of struggle, to adapt to hostile environments. Diversity in nature is expressed in ecological balance, symbiosis and interdependence. From time to time the cultural ecological balance of human societies is disturbed and changed by revolutions.

Africa is not one, but is divided into a plurality of ethnic groups, cultures and languages. That alone makes it foolish to think of 'Africa' and refer to it as a monolithic whole. Houtondji calls this approach unanimism, which describes the strange, unwarranted assumption that all the inhabitants of the vast and varied continent resemble each other in a salient characteristic of thought or culture (Basu 1998). As the planet's oldest continent, Africa displays one of its most variegated geographies and the largest diversity of languages, cultures and lifestyles. About 1 500 languages, representing a quarter of the world's languages, are spoken in 53 African countries (i.e. an average of 28 languages per country). No other continent even approaches

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share power with any group not identical to itself (Touraine 2000:164). It fundamentalistically identifies power with one society and one culture. White Afrikanerdom under apartheid was such a communitarian society.

this degree of human diversity. Linguistic diversity is indicative of Africa's ethnic diversity (see Diamond 1998:381-384).

African cultural diversity is rooted in ethnic diversity. When ethnicity turns into ethnocentrism it becomes an unpredictable force that can devastate a country. Most African countries comprise several different ethnic groups and most of the wars that afflicted Africa in the past and are presently plaguing it are ethnically related.<sup>8</sup> Ethnic groups that lose ethnically oriented multiparty elections feel that their interests are unrepresented in parliament. What are the chances that in South Africa, for example, a member of the Venda minority group, such as Cyril Ramaphosa, will be elected as president? Will the Xhosa ethnic group, to which the first two presidents of democratic South Africa belong, be satisfied with a president from a minority group? If democratic elections produce a majority government dominated by one (or a few) ethnic groups, the legitimacy of the leaders may be questioned by ethnic minorities, especially if there has been a history of ethnic conflict. This situation encourages rebel groups to coerce followers into armed conflict, which has happened in many African states.

Ethnic conflicts and wars are not limited to Africa. Perhaps Africa suffers more from ethnic clashes because of its particularly wide assortment of ethnic groups. To what extent can the undesirable aspects of ethnocentrism be overcome, and how can African cultural diversity help with this task? To what extent will the AU programme for African unification, pan-Africanism, the African parliament and other agreements help Africa cope with its ethnic diversity?

African cultures, like European and Eastern cultures, have many commonalities. Similar environmental influences usually have the same effect on different cultures, just as environmental differences explain the differences between peoples and cultures.<sup>9</sup> Africans are historically linked by the common experience of colonialism and a common history of oppression and suffering.

Just as the physical environment has the same effect on different peoples, cultural similarities, as well as interdependence, needs and threats can lead to similar cultural patterns. A much discussed example is ubuntu, which is said to typify African cultural unity. It would be a mistake, however, to limit African society to ubuntu, or to restrict personal identity to communal identity. Identifying personhood with an individual's interaction with

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8 Interestingly, according to Silverman (1987:116), 71% of the 277 substantial wars throughout the world since 1945 have been regional or civil, involving (ostensibly) people from the same ethnic population.

9 History followed different courses for different peoples because of different environments, not because of biological differences among them (Diamond 1998: 25).

other persons does not eliminate personal identity (see Louw 2002:14,16). It simply says that personal identity is manifested in one's interaction with, and place in, one's community. Ubuntu is an ethic that developed in a context of essential interdependence and dire need.<sup>10</sup> It may well be discarded by urbanised, economically independent Africans. Ubuntu is easily romanticised by whites suffering from the isolation and fragmentation that comes with individualism. Yet ubuntu, in the sense of caring and sharing, was not foreign to white Afrikaners when they themselves were impoverished and oppressed.

Ubuntu functions as a tribal social security system. The much vaunted ubuntu system must be seen in the context of a specific tribe, clan and family. Traditionally members of the clan were dependent on each other for agricultural and general assistance (Wiredu 1992a: 201ff). Depending on the acuteness of the need or the severity of the threat, ubuntu caring and sharing principles are applied selectively. This is in line with acceptance of African diversity. In the words of Nyasani (quoted by Basu 1994:6), "The African's surrender to the 'we' is the result of an inveterate psychological disposition largely born out of a hostile environment in which he finds himself." Basu continues that it is equally illegitimate to assume that Africa *has* a collective philosophy. This assumption fails to recognise its diversity. He further distinguishes economically based European socialism from ethnically related African communitarianism (Basu 1994:8; see also Gyekye 1992b:111). The point is not that African society is predominantly collective, but that an African person should not be limited to collectiveness, any more than a Western person can be restricted to individualism. One has a right to live beyond one's culture, on the border of cultures, to transcend one's own surroundings, one's native culture and one's milieu. This is no betrayal, because the confines of culture are often too narrow for the full range of human potential.

### **Prejudice in multiculturalism and ethnocentrism**

#### *Ethnocentrism as a cultural construct and natural determination based on biological roots*

We are all ethnically bound in one way or another. It is part of our evolutionary makeup. Is ethnocentrism an idea we need to discard? Ethnocentrism is usually defined as a belief in the superiority of one's own group or race. It

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<sup>10</sup> In this regard, note Hannah Arendt's refusal to reduce human experience to the domain of needs. Human needs are socially determined and cannot be the basis for freedom. This would apply to all situations where extreme interdependence determines individual action (see Touraine 2000:132).

represents a loose cluster of traits that predispose the individual to show discriminatory preference for members of groups with close affinities to the self. In extreme forms it may involve an explicit belief that members of the 'out-group' are morally or biologically inferior (Dunbar 1987:55).

The socio-biology of intergroup relations assumes that for most of their history human beings lived in small groups, with kinship connections within and between groups. The option of discriminating against strangers in favour of kin would be preferred, because cohesive kin groups had a better chance of surviving than fragmented groups. This theory suggests an unthinking, immediate, ultimately innate dislike for people who look or seem in some way 'unfamiliar', that is, 'not family' (Reynolds 1987:212). Group survival depends on the in-group/out-group division of social reality. The in-group/out-group mechanism works especially well in times of resource scarcity and competition. The ethnocentrism syndrome relates directly to the competitive struggle of groups with incompatible interests. The existence of an out-group protects the in-group against risks of internal conflict and aggression. The renowned socio-biologist O. Wilson saw ethnocentrism as the force behind most warlike policies, as well as the irrationally exaggerated allegiance of individuals to their kin and fellow tribesmen (Van Dennen 1987:6).

Diversity may reflect our reality, but it is not necessarily our choice. As mentioned already, most people are content not to be exposed to the challenge of diversity at all. In this regard Geertz (2000:72) remarks that "the attraction of 'deafness to the appeal of other values' and of a 'relax-and-enjoy-it' approach to one's imprisonment in one's own cultural tradition are increasingly celebrated in social thought. It is an illusion that humanity can wholly free itself from ethnocentrism, or even that we care to do so; it would not be a good thing if we did. Such a 'freedom' would lead to a world whose cultures, all passionately fond of one another, would aspire only to celebrate one another in such confusion that each would lose any attraction it could have for the others, and its own reason for existing." In other words, humans need diversity and difference (with the concomitant emotions and prejudices), and diversity breeds ethnocentrism. We delude ourselves if we think that equality and fellowship will some day reign among human beings without compromising their diversity. All true creation implies a certain deafness to the appeal of other values, even to the extent of rejecting, if not totally denying, them. The alternative is integral communication with the other, which eventually spells doom for both their and my creativity (Geertz 2000:70-71).

While this may be true, it remains questionable whether ethnic diversity must necessarily be accompanied by ethnic animosity for us to be true to our biological makeup and culturally creative.

*Prejudice as a coping mechanism*

We spent by far the longest period of our evolutionary past living in small groups ranging from 40 to perhaps 100 members (see Diamond 1998:267-268). To survive, we had to rely on the group's acceptance and support. Consequently we had to adapt to the group; we had to adopt its modes of behaviour and its value orientations. Today we still tend to define our personal identity to a considerable degree in terms of group membership and value orientations. Respect for one's own group implies devaluing other groups (out-groups). Undervaluing members of other groups serves our interests. This, in turn, leads to all sorts of prejudices against other groups, some of which have a factual basis. Group orientation influences behaviour, affect and cognition, all of which can support prejudice. The tendency to form prejudices against other groups remains pervasive and is difficult to overcome because of the positively experienced consequences for group feeling. We love our prejudices, because they provide cognitive support and social stability (Flohr 1987:197-198).

Prejudice has deep biological roots and probably developed in our evolutionary past as a coping mechanism in a hostile, diverse and challenging environment. In order to survive all organisms are equipped with organs, perceptual abilities, instincts, emotions and intelligence, with their physiological substrates such as the nervous system and the brain. We 'apply' our prejudices in order to cope socially. Prejudices operate instinctively. Lacking a genetically controlled orientation system similar to animals' instincts, humans rely exclusively on their own cultural inventions. Prejudice is the cultural compensation for our lack of instinctual guidance (Tönnemann 1987:177). The propensity of the human mind to think in binary terms supports the functioning of prejudices. In order to respond immediately, we intuitively categorise people, ideas and events with the help of prejudices.

That the human propensity to become attached to groups and to draw a sharp line between in-group and out-group is the product of evolutionary development sounds very deterministic. From an evolutionary point of view it makes sense to assume that at least some of the behavioural elements related to the ethnocentric syndrome have become part and parcel of the human behavioural repertoire (Tönnemann 1987:180). This is not to say that we cannot overcome our natural inclinations. The only solution for the human predicament is that humans will have to reason themselves out of the

biological impulses that lead to xenophobia, nationalism and ethnocentrism (Ike 1987:233-234).

### **Contribution of ethnotheology (ubuntu ethic) to overcoming ethnocentrism**

The problem with terms like ‘ethnophilosophy’,<sup>11</sup> ‘ethnotheology’ and ‘ethnoscience’ is that no theology, science or philosophy can be explained if there are hundreds of different versions of each. There are hundreds of ethnic groups in Africa, each with its own wisdom and indigenous knowledge systems, each of which may have its own theology, philosophy and science, making the systems incommensurable. When referring to ethnoscience or ethnotheology it is assumed that they display general, typically African characteristics. This is not to deny that different ethnic groups have their own terms, designations and versions of scientific or philosophical topics. The danger is that the identification of general characteristics can be reductive and fail to reflect ethnic diversity. It may be African science or philosophy, but it is no longer ethnic.<sup>12</sup>

The success of Western-oriented science and technology was founded on the alleged universality, neutrality and simplicity of its laws, methods and rationality. Ethnoscience, by contrast, puts all cognitive systems on a par as belief systems, thus refusing to acknowledge the epistemological distinction between scientific laws and local belief. This approach may be creative and may produce a stimulating variety of ‘scientific narratives’. Whether it would be as successful as Western technoscience is a different question. Sandra Harding (1997:45-70) supports ethnoscience by trying to prove that Western science is equally ethnocentric. She advances the following arguments: Western science is influenced by cultural and regional features; it is not human science but European science; it is not value-free but determined by Judeo-Christian belief systems; Western scientific research focused on European and not African challenges; power (military objectives) played an important role; and the science that developed was distinctly European (Harding 1997: 51,52,55,61). Without taking issue with these questionable statements, it suffices to say that European ethnicity is not comparable with the ethnic multiplicity found in Africa.

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11 The idea behind the prefix ‘ethno-’ is that African thought is communal. Ethnophilosophy assumes that there is a metaphysical system and an ideology embodied in African traditional wisdom, institutions and languages. It believes that a typical African wisdom can be distilled from African myths, folktales, beliefs, proverbs and languages (Kaphagawani 1998:89).

12 This is supported by Kaphagawani (1998: 91), who mentions authenticity and differences as problems of ethnophilosophy. The problem of differences which distinguish one African culture from another calls for specific study of such cultures.

The terms 'ethnotheology', 'ethnoscience' and 'ethnophilosophy' represent the multiplicity and diversity of local and ethnic African theologies, indigenous knowledge systems and oral wisdom traditions.

### **Ethnotheology and African altruism**

Ethnotheology, being a theology of the people for the people in their local context, can contribute to meaningful multicultural harmony in Africa. Africa's religious landscape is as diversified as its cultural landscape. African philosophy (especially in the experientially rich wisdom traditions) and African ethnotheology (in the idiom of the ubuntu ethic) can help to overcome destructive ethnocentrism. African ethnotheology, like African ethnophilosophy, is a verb, an activity and not a formal corpus of doctrinal knowledge. The fact that African tradition is still predominantly oral keeps it alive in everyday life. Ethnotheology is lived out in everyday experiences.

African culture seems remarkably altruistic. Ubuntu, being the African version of humanism, displays an altruistic ethic. African altruism parallels the biological roots of altruism. Unlike other animals, humans are characterised by openness to the world, behavioural plasticity and imperfect biological equipment. Lacking a genetically controlled orientation system similar to animals' instincts, they have to rely exclusively on cultural inventions such as ubuntu. Both selfishness and altruism are part of human nature. Conflict and cooperation between human beings form the very core of human sociality, and both have an evolutionary basis. Altruistic behaviour is biologically explicable. If selfish genes program an organism in such a way that its altruistic acts are directed to conspecifics (your fellow tribesperson) whose genes it shares by descent, then natural selection can favour this behavioural trait. Although maximising 'inclusive fitness' by supporting one's kin has been the major solution to the puzzle of altruism, it fails to explain instances of mutually beneficial cooperation between non-kin. These are explained by the concept of reciprocal altruism, when a non-related recipient of a benefit reciprocates at a later stage. Altruistic impulses, once limited to one's kin and one's own group, might be extended to a wider circle when we realise that we and our kin are one group among others. The scope of moral principles cannot be confined to just one group, for two reasons. Firstly, everyone (presumably) will be a non-member of some group and, secondly, if conduct is regulated only within groups, we still face the possibility of unrestricted hostility and conflict between groups.

### **The African story**

Culture overlaps, but is not identical with, vibrant community life. Because culture is open to change and exchange, no modern society has a truly unitary culture. A culture is constantly being transformed as its bearers reinterpret the old in the light of new experiences. Attempts to find an essence or 'national soul' are artificial because they try to reduce culture to a code of behaviour (Touraine 2000:165). African culture and polyethnicity should not be limited to some essence. Ubuntu can be seen as a non-essentialist and open meaning of African ethnic identity. This means that it must be polysemous, vague and active in ethnic sagacity, oral history, rites, rituals and custom. African ethnic identity is a narrative identity which comes to the fore in people's life stories. Personal identity is embedded in the meaning-giving life stories that make up the history of the people. Ethnic tradition and practices have a narrative history which must be known in order to understand the tradition. Ethnotheology is recounted in different stories, whose multi-interpretability in different contexts contributes to the richness of the tradition. Stories unify the significance of a tradition in a meaningful way.

### **Conclusion**

Post-apartheid society provides a social laboratory, in which the multicultural and polyethnic experiment could create possibilities of containing prejudice within acceptable parameters. The fact that white South Africans mandated former president De Klerk to proceed with his reform initiatives demonstrates that prejudice can be contained by values such as justice, human dignity and human rights. Of course, international pressure (sanctions) and the low-scale war were instrumental in the transition; other factors were that the country was running broke and morale was low. Black prejudice in post-apartheid society, as in postcolonial societies, seems to be hardening rather than abating. The effect of the TRC hearings in some cases may have been to amplify anti-white prejudice rather than facilitate reconciliation. (Keep in mind that only a percentage of atrocities committed was confessed and reported!) One can assume that the various reparation initiatives, redistribution of power and the new constitution helped to modify people's prejudices. However, enough prejudice remains to necessitate sustained, creative problem solving. The best ways to change prejudice are continued societal interaction and mutual exposure.

Thus individual self-understanding is impossible in isolation and abstraction. The self always forms part of a larger whole. For centuries black Africans were burdened with a 'self-understanding' based on other cultures'

understanding and interpretation of them. Liberation means they can now revert to a self-understanding born of Africa's continually changing cultural context. That brings us to the hermeneutic issue. In contrast to the focus on texts in the West, African hermeneutics centres on life and the community, which are under discussion in the next chapter.



## Chapter 4

### African hermeneutics and the dynamics of African theology

#### Introduction

What is African theology – what is Africa, for that matter? Is it possible to speak of African theology at all in the absence of a formal theology, as is the case with African Initiated Churches (AICs) or African Traditional Religions (ATRs)? What is Africa's theological self-understanding?

These questions call for an African hermeneutics. But if hermeneutics is the science of interpretation and understanding, can there be different legitimate ways of practising it? If not, then Western biblical hermeneutics remains the only source of reference and interaction, since it is still the dominant benchmark. That is unacceptable and we need to broaden our conception of theology and hermeneutics by taking a holistic look at spirituality, religious understanding, interpretation and communication, which does not exclude using traditional academic theological methods and hermeneutic rules to guide our interpretation. Here we concentrate on the phenomenon of African hermeneutics as a key to fathoming the present dynamics of African theology.

Hermeneutics is more than the science of reading and interpreting texts. The world of texts goes beyond biblical and sacred scriptures or any specific literary work. Africans do not separate interpretation and understanding from other aspects of life – and that is the point of this chapter.

The three principal religions in Africa are Islam, Christianity and ATRs. These religions in their turn can be subdivided into any number of denominations, traditions and variants. One could also consider the theologies of Afro-American and Third World liberation theologies, since their hermeneutics greatly influenced African thinking. One could give a formal description of the history and theologies of different African religions, which would not necessarily clarify the hermeneutic question. Or one could describe these religions in terms of common denominators like colonialism, oppression and poverty. These may all be critical hermeneutic keys, as the example of poverty shows. Perceptions of God, religious experience, self-esteem, worldview and the like are all determined by people's living conditions. It would be ludicrous to expect a Western-type hermeneutic consciousness from people lacking the basic means of subsistence.

From the angle of the Christian tradition one has to consider different cultures, the histories of the so-called mission churches and the establishment of black ‘mainline’ churches. Or one could concentrate on those churches that have inculturated Christianity and given it an African identity (e.g. AICs). One has to bear in mind the influence of ATRs on AICs and their importance for African theologians writing from a postcolonial perspective.

When one reads present-day African theologies it soon becomes clear that African hermeneutics is quite distinctive<sup>1</sup> and includes Africans’ world-views and cultures, their histories and religions. In African hermeneutics the Bible and ATRs are sources of equal importance.

Hermeneutics, we have said, is the science of interpretation. It gets its name from the Greek myth of Hermes, the winged messenger of Mount Olympus, whose job was to interpret (Greek: *hermeneuein*) the sayings of the oracle of Delphi. But how are African oracles interpreted and by whom? (One thinks of the High God oracle at Matonjeni in the Matopos in Zimbabwe.) How are their messages conveyed and received by African people? The voices of the ancestors, mediating the will of the gods, have been muffled for many years, drowned by the voices of missionaries proclaiming the one and only way to the one and only truth. Until recently that truth was accepted in Africa, along with the benefits and burdens it brought. After decades, if not centuries, of servitude and struggle these yokes have been lifted and Africa is taking stock of its gods. The single truth proclaimed in Africa has splintered into many different denominations and traditions, each claiming to have the right interpretation, the finest hermeneutics, the best messengers of God. Understandably Africa is sceptical about the claims of Western hermeneutics.

From the very beginning Christian hermeneutics tended to trace the single spiritual truth to a particular biblical passage. Yet we know that most texts allow for numerous interpretations, and accepting just one of them is almost invariably a sad reduction. Western biblical hermeneutics focuses on the Bible, seen as God’s final revealed truth. Anyone professing to present a one and only interpretation of this truth could also, on that supreme biblical authority, expect her interpretation to be accepted. But developments in hermeneutics and new insights into the nature of understanding have changed all that.

Hermeneutics has shown truth to be open, dynamic and subject to reinterpretation and re-contextualisation. What is known as the hermeneutic circle depicts the interpretive process as a systematic investigation of a parti-

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<sup>1</sup> In the past African theologians paid little serious attention to the problem of biblical hermeneutics. Fasholé-Luke (quoted in Parratt 1983:91) points out that historically missionaries to Africa were male Europeans with a fundamentalist approach to the Bible, and until fairly recently this has circumscribed biblical studies on the continent.

cular text or event, with due regard to the general and the particular, and relating the results to what is already known by the interpreter. The process is circular, moving from one sub-process to another, until the interpreter is satisfied with his interpretation. But the process is never-ending. Understanding, textual interpretation and the search for truth are ongoing, open-ended. Final meaning keeps eluding us. Our existence remains a mystery. We keep trying to fathom the mystery, evidenced by the multiplicity of texts and interpretations. There is no fixed hermeneutic method. The dream of a final interpretation of existence (hermeneutic ontology) is not only unattainable, but contradicts the open-endedness of human nature (see Ricoeur 1974:23).

What about Africa? What, if any, is the relationship between African and Western hermeneutics? Do Africa and the West converge, just as pre-modernity and postmodernism converge?<sup>2</sup> Parratt (1983:92) urges African theologians to take the problem of a genuine biblical hermeneutics seriously as a preparatory stage in African theology, and argues that a good deal that passes for African theology is inadequate because it lacks a solid foundation in exegesis. This does not mean that they should simply parrot European scholars as authorities. He enthusiastically quotes DN Wambudta, who stresses the need for African theologians to return to the original biblical languages, and warns against interpreting the Bible too easily in terms of African religions rather than those of its own canons (Parratt 1983:92). This provokes a reaction from many African theologians, who use ATRs as their sole source and disregard the Bible altogether. African theologians have become more confident about what Maluleke (1996:4) calls African Christianity. This means applying a hermeneutics demanded by the African text. Parratt displays insensitivity to African culture and the hermeneutics he proposes is still solidly embedded in the Western worldview, culture and literary theory, epistemology and conception of truth, all of which have changed since Parratt wrote his article.

But the days when Western hermeneutics/theology was normative are gone. Western theologians are looking at African spirituality with fresh interest. Not only has the religious growth centre shifted from North to South; the southern growth point also has intriguing features. It is not a duplication of Western Christianity: it has deep spiritual strength; it operates in an oral culture; it is free from Western metaphysical constraints; it offers pertinent critique of Western culture, science and technology; and it provides an alternative to Western ways of doing theology, managing to relate traditional

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2 Thornton (1996:144-145) maintains that the South African situation is postmodern rather than postcolonial.

religious ideas with those imported into Africa in interesting ways. Religion in the West has lost its innocence and has become an ever interpreting faith seeking a second naiveté (Thiselton 1992:348). Although Africa is critical of Western interests, it can offer Westerners the spiritual innocence which is still intact in African communities. The individualism typical of modernism is foreign to African people, who do not operate with a Western hermeneutics of suspicion because of shared beliefs, practices, conventions and traditions.

Hermeneutics is not a Western or scholarly prerogative. All people practise hermeneutics, since they communicate every day and are challenged to understand correctly, to relate conflicting ideas and to reformulate their thoughts when misunderstood. People practise hermeneutics when listening to the radio, reading a newspaper, talking politics, or simply gossiping! Hermeneutic activity can be refined to an art, enabling us to understand and speak more carefully. Although hermeneutics is studied by ministers of religion and theologians, it actually belongs to the community. In the African context it is the indaba of the community. It means listening to sages and asking them critical questions. It means challenging the customary system – especially if we find it oppressive or outdated. It means using traditional stories to explain present-day problems, and telling our own stories. We relate to stories since they embody our self-understanding, our fears and hopes. Through stories, no less than texts, we reinterpret and renew our existence. Existential issues have always been very much part of African self-understanding and hermeneutics.

Although people see and interpret things differently, there are always good reasons why they interpret them the way they do. Hermeneutics helps to clarify why people differ. It shows the power strategies people use to get their point accepted. It also helps them reach agreement. The task of hermeneutics is not to undermine creative and individual approaches to understanding (resulting in a one-dimensional picture), but to make us aware of our specific *culture of understanding*, of possible logical errors in the interpretive process, and of possible power strategies underlying our style of interpretation. It also helps us to understand ourselves and others and to recognise the influence of culture, religion, pre-understanding and many other factors co-determining the understanding process. Hermeneutics concerns our worldview (the way we find meaning in our lives and our world) – our understanding of God and humans, our relationship with the past and the ancestors, and how it affects us today; it concerns present difficulties in our families and communities, our suffering and hardships; it also concerns our understanding of the future and how we act to influence it. Hermeneutics concerns the language we speak, how we express ourselves and understand the expressions of others (commu-

nication); it concerns our customs and belief systems and how they influence our views, and other aspects of our lives.

### **Third World hermeneutics: Black, Liberation and African hermeneutics**

To put African hermeneutics in perspective we have to see it against the background of what is known as Third World hermeneutics, from which it developed. The term 'Third World hermeneutics' underscores its contextual nature. Theologians in these countries could not ignore the poverty, exploitation, illiteracy and suffering of the people. For them hermeneutics meant first and foremost to understand and interpret their situation. To read a text is to read life through the lens of the text. The hermeneutic process moves from life to text and from text to life. In this two-way movement texts question our lives, and our existential experiences are brought to the text. We not only understand and interpret ourselves and our world in a certain way, we are also affected and changed by the texts we admit to our lives. This applies particularly to Third World hermeneutics.

Third World hermeneutics implies that there is also a First, and perhaps a Second, World hermeneutics, from which it differs. Third World countries often found the gods and the guns, the texts and the truths of the oppressors intimidating and difficult to disagree with. Third World hermeneutics insists that to understand a text, text and reader must meet on an equal footing.<sup>3</sup> When they meet each other as free entities without the purpose of simply overpowering the other, then free discourse, critical questioning and creative interaction become possible. Third World hermeneutics refuses to meet any text like a victim approaching its oppressor. It challenges and reinterprets the text. The text is there to serve life. Third World hermeneutics recognises that texts are brought by text bearers, who structure the text-receiver relationship through the way they read, interpret, explain and preach them. Hermeneutics and the art of politics are often indistinguishable.

Third World hermeneutics refers to the way countries with a background of colonialism, exploitation and a missionary history try to

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3 This is not to ignore that texts want to convince, inspire, teach, change and influence the reader. In communicating with another I also want to convince, influence, et cetera. I cannot, however, meet a text like I meet another person. Texts tend to have the last say, as they are written and therefore fixed. My dialogue with the text becomes just another text. The textual world is therefore not fixed and autonomous but open, as is evident in the intertext (the influence of other texts on a specific text), in which texts are always in communication with each other.

understand what has happened to them.<sup>4</sup> It grew from a history of colonialism, poverty, underdevelopment, economic exploitation and cultural victimisation. 'Third World' is such a broad, complex concept that one has to distinguish between different contexts and histories. Narrowing Third World hermeneutics down to Africa does not simplify matters. Hermeneutics in Africa cannot be separated from Black Theology in America and in Africa, because of the reciprocal influence between the two continents. Although African hermeneutics overlaps Latin American and Black hermeneutics, it has distinctive features. This chapter, however, deals with hermeneutics generally in a liberation context.

Black hermeneutics, according to Thiselton (1992:419-420), refers to three distinct contexts. Black Theology in South Africa focuses on issues arising from colonial history and apartheid; North American Black Theology proceeds from the historical memory of slavery and its aftermath; and African hermeneutics elsewhere in Africa is mainly concerned with contextualisation and the relation between the Bible and African cultures. Although the Black Theology of the North American, James Cone, has influenced South African Black Theology, his context and approach are different. All these movements stress experience and struggle as hermeneutic contexts. Thiselton (1992:423) correctly points out that it is tempting but simplistic to suggest that African hermeneutics stresses contextualisation, whereas Latin Americans speak of praxis and North American Black Theology of black experience.

Although South African Black Theology took its example from Afro-American forerunners, it is predominantly a South African phenomenon, promoted by people like Basil Moore, Manas Buthelezi, Steve Biko, Allan Boesak, Frank Chikane, Desmond Tutu, Mokgeti Motlhabi and others. Many African theologians feel that Black Theology puts too much emphasis on political and economic liberation at the expense of the spiritual component. Black theologians have been equally critical of African theology, maintaining that it encourages a cheap alliance between African culture and Christ. In the apartheid era it was felt that promoting the uniqueness of African theology might support apartheid ideology. It was also feared that some indigenous church groups may concentrate on Africanisation to the detriment of the liberation struggle. Reconciliation between Black Theology and African theology was achieved at the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians in Accra, Ghana in 1977, when James Cone declared that they

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4 One example is the book by RS Sugirtharajah, *Voices from the margin. Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (1991), which looks at Africa, Latin America, India and Indonesia, amongst others.

were not as different as had previously been suggested (Schoffeleers 1988:109-110).

Developments in Afro-American and liberation hermeneutics influence African hermeneutics, and vice versa. Nonetheless Africa remains the one elliptic focus for Afro-American hermeneutics, the other being the Afro-Americans' own history and experience of enslavement. It is, however, not limited to these issues. Afro-American hermeneutics is also concerned about its place in a post-Christian, postmodern, pluralistic and global context (Coleman 1993:69). According to Coleman (1993:71-72) Black Theology in America emerged as a discipline in the mid-1960s. It underwent a second phase between 1970 and 1975, when Afro-American theologians took their case to Euro-American colleges and seminaries; a third phase when it focused on global issues affecting them; and has now embarked on a fourth, namely the utilisation of indigenous resources and interdisciplinary strategies in theological discourse. This specifically includes researching the African religious past for expressions of faith that may be translated into the present. While they concentrated on Marxist social analysis in the 1970s and 1980s, they are now developing interdisciplinary skills to examine and appropriate multi-layered discourses in the cultural history of American people by analysing what Coleman (1993:75-76) calls 'tribal talk'. This entails hermeneutic exploration of African folklore, traditions and practices.

African hermeneutics is predominantly concerned with reconstructing African theology independently of Western theological influence. It seeks to understand and interpret the religious significance of African culture and to determine the theological character of ATRs. Present-day African theologians are aware of the pressure put on African hermeneutics during the liberation period, but do not focus exclusively on it. They concentrate on postcolonial reconstruction, trying to find what is typically African and searching for an African intellectual self-definition. The quest for an African hermeneutics testifies to the need for autonomous, creative thought in an environment of political threat, economic need and pervasive Western influence. What concerns us here is developments over recent decades, during which African theologians have made a concerted effort to recover what is typical of Africa theology. They set about it in various ways. Our concern is not with those who wanted to recover African spirituality with no regard to Christian influence, but with those who took African spirituality as their point of departure. Scholars like J B Sanquah and Okot p'Bitek prepared the way by concentrating on what ATRs are about (see Awolalu 1991:129-131).

African hermeneutics obviously does not refer to just one approach to interpreting and understanding African spirituality. There are also different degrees to which theologians concede the worldview, ideas and practices of

ATRs. African theology can be practised neither in isolation, nor by ignoring the formidable presence of Christianity in Africa. It is easier to agree on commonalities like the influence of colonialism, the impact of missionary work, the common struggle against poverty, illiteracy, underdevelopment and so on, than on precisely how to integrate ATRs with African theology.

Many African theologians are very critical of the endeavour to synthesise ATRs with any other religious tradition. Onunwa (1991:120-121), for example, refers to mid-1950s and early 1960s debates, conferences and polemics on indigenisation, Africanisation, *theologia Africana* and Black Theology, all centring on practical methods to make Christianity an authentic 'African religion' by taking some elements of traditional belief systems in order to make Christianity relevant to the traditional situation. Christianity had to be interpreted in the context of Africans' traditional spiritual experience, language and culture. For Onunwa this means that these theologians subscribed to the idea of Christianity as superior to traditional religions, despite attempts to show that ATRs represent a people's search for ultimate meaning. To theologians like Onunwa it is simply not acceptable for Christians or any other interest group to use ATRs as a means to an end.

#### **Distinctiveness of African hermeneutics**

It is unwise to restrict African hermeneutics to any specific characteristic. A more precise delineation may become possible as this hermeneutics develops and is studied. It includes reaction and social criticism. For present purposes I define African hermeneutics as the effort to rid Africa of the unacceptable legacy of colonialism, to recover African traditional ideas and to indicate how these are as important a source of authentic African spirituality as the Bible.

#### *Hermeneutics without a book but not without a text: the African way of reading life*

The text that African hermeneutics tries to understand extends far beyond the biblical text and Western-style theology – it includes the African life world. Awolalu (1991:131) puts it thus: "ATR has no written scriptures or records, yet we can say that it is written everywhere for those who have eyes to see." Spirituality permeates every aspect of people's lives: riddles and proverbs, songs and dancing, rites and ceremonies, myths and folklore, shrines and sacred places, artistic designs.

African hermeneutics is an understanding of Africa by Africans for Africans. John Pobee (1996:54) quotes Éla in this regard, saying that one of

the primary tasks of Christian reflection in black Africa is to reformulate its basic faith through the medium of African culture. African symbolism must replace the cultural presuppositions of Western Christianity, namely *logos* and *ratio*. In the postcolonial era African hermeneutics seems to be more concerned with Africanisation than with liberation, although the latter still features. For Pobee (1996:57) African theology must restore the identity and ethos of *homo africanus*. There is resistance to this approach, which is seen by Muthukya (quoted by Pobee 1996:56) as heathenisation of the church.<sup>5</sup>

African hermeneutics is a hermeneutics without a book but not without a text – the text of African culture, of suffering and dependence. The Bible (a book) is read with this text in mind. As Éla (1991:259) puts it: “The colonised peoples never had a complete view of Christianity exactly because they were restricted to the ‘book’ without the ‘text’. Bereft of a historical, critical sensitivity that would relate the salvation message to a particular context of colonial domination, the missionary church kept Africans in line with taboos and sanctions instead of launching them into the historical adventure of liberation – where, precisely, the living God is revealed.”

African hermeneutics differs from Western hermeneutics, but not because rules determining understanding in one context are not valid in another. It is a question of differing emphases, a different language and culture, a different self-understanding and worldview. Hermeneutics depends on one’s specific concept of truth, the emphasis placed on the written or the spoken word, the way people integrate theory and practice, critical aptitude, and so on.

Onwu (1985:146-150) has already stressed language and worldview as specific problems of African hermeneutics. Many biblical concepts simply do not exist in African culture, or have a totally different meaning. This applies especially to the personality of Christ, who can be labelled ‘Black Christ’, ‘African Chief’, ‘Elder Brother’ or ‘Great Ancestor’. While we know that the African worldview easily assimilates that of the Old Testament, the Bible was brought to Africa framed in a Western worldview. Onwu (1985:150-153) mentions that, by the time Christianity was introduced into sub-Saharan Africa in the mid-19th century, the worldview of Christian theologians reflected the European Enlightenment. Under its influence they had already shed the biblical (also the African) worldview. They could no longer make

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5 The full quotation reads: “This is what they mean by African Christianity. No mention of the one and only saving Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ. No mention of sin. No place for the authority of an inspired Bible. Instead their arguments are based on the traditional background of the African people, their culture, customs and belief. If natural culture and religious customs are acceptable to God, why did Christ send his disciples to preach the Gospel to every creature in the uttermost parts of the earth?”

sense of biblical references to demon possession, and to angels and spiritual forces operating in human affairs. Such references, however, fitted perfectly well into African cosmology, which professes spiritual forces, both evil and good, operating in the world – a world of charms and amulets, sacrifices, ancestor veneration, witches and wizards.

#### *Protest hermeneutics*

Theological hermeneutics would be sterile if it ignored the physical constraints influencing people's experience. Africa's hermeneutics can be typified as a hermeneutics of protest against forces crippling its people. It is a reactionary hermeneutics trying to come to grips with postcolonial Africa.

Part of this process is the effort to understand and deal with the impact of a post-missionary era. For Éla (1991:257) the God of missionary preaching was a distant God, foreign to the history of the colonised peoples. Exploited and oppressed, they found it difficult to identify this God with the God of Exodus. The primary role of the Bible, and especially the Old Testament, in African religious movements is to express the reaction and revolt of African Christians.

#### *Socio-critical hermeneutics*

Thiselton (1992:379) defines socio-critical hermeneutics as an approach to texts, traditions and institutions which seeks to penetrate beneath their apparent function so as to expose their role as instruments of power, domination and social manipulation. The idea behind this kind of hermeneutics is to liberate those subjected to such power or social manipulation. Socio-critical theory provides the theoretical hermeneutic framework for liberation hermeneutics, which on a meta-critical level includes African and Black hermeneutics.

Socio-critical hermeneutics becomes imperative in a context of oppression where texts, especially religious texts, are subservient to existing ideologies. For Habermas radical critique of knowledge is only possible as social theory (Thiselton 1992:282-283). Hermeneutic understanding as social critique must test traditions in relation to their embodiment of social forces and epistemological distortion.

The real challenge for Africa is the ongoing development of an African hermeneutics and an African spirituality in which the reinterpretation and critical accommodation of African Christianity, ATRs and other relevant factors will determine the future theological profile. This may prove to be much more important to African identity than liberation theology. The pro-

cess cannot, however, be artificially instigated by a group of theologians with specific blueprints in mind.

For Itumeleng Mosala only a materialist reading of biblical texts, which takes on conflicting social and political forces and interests, can constitute a genuinely socio-critical hermeneutics (see Thiselton 1992:425). In Mosala's own words (1989:5-6): "The notion that the Bible is simply the revealed 'Word of God' is an example of an exegetical framework that is rooted in an idealist epistemology. I criticize that position in this study because it leads to a false notion of the Bible as nonideological, which can cause political paralysis in the oppressed people who read it."

Thiselton (1992:429) rightly warned against the danger that any selective use of texts to encourage the oppressed in the end mirrors the strategy of the hermeneutic method of the oppressors, who use texts to reinforce and re-affirm their corporate identity and interests.

### **Can the Bible be the *neutral* word of God?**

There is a close relation between the biblical world and traditional Africa. Parratt (1983:90) observes that the world of traditional Africa, like that of the Gospels, is one in which supernatural powers impinge on the human world in every respect, since every aspect of life is subject to spiritual powers. For him the biblical references to demon possession, the healings and miracles performed by Jesus and the apostles, fit perfectly well into the African worldview.

This is true not only of the apocalyptic background to the New Testament. The AICs in particular have a marked preference for the Old Testament. It can be ascribed to many factors, especially similarities in worldview, the Exodus tradition, the emphasis on the poor, and the fact that the Old Testament deals with so many aspects of life (social, agricultural, familial and ritual), all of them pertinent to African religion (Parratt 1983:91).

The question whether the Bible can be the neutral word of God merits special attention. Uka (1991:153ff) challenges the idea that African theology has to be rooted in the Bible and that ATRs do not have a valid theology. African theology is not theology if it is Christian or imported. He is also critical of the way African theologians in the past simply interpreted Christianity in African terms. This sentiment is underscored by Maluleke (1996:6) when he refers to Bediako, who says that the Christianisation of Africa's pre-Christian tradition could be seen as one of the principal achievements of African theology. Africanisation, however, should not be confused with indigenisation, which has already been achieved by the AICs. What is at stake is the intellectual question of how African Christianity, employing

Christian tools, can set about mending the torn fabric of African identity and hopefully point the way to a fuller, unfettered African humanity and personality. For Uka (1991:154) African theology is the theology of African Traditional or Indigenous Religions – not an African theology that tries to solve the indigenisation problems of a new, foreign religion. ATRs must be freed from those Western concepts that have restricted and imprisoned them for so long. It remains to be seen, however, how Uka will employ ‘Christian tools’ to mend African identity.

In this connection there is heated debate about the equation of the Bible with the word of God. For Maluleke (1996:12) the equation of the Bible with the ‘word of God’ is not only naive, but a dangerous form of naiveté. He sees it as debilitating for Black and African theologies and as much more harmful than the equation of either colonialism or the African past with Christianity. The reason is that this equation has been used to legitimise the demonisation of African traditional culture and religions. Equating the Bible with the word of God implies that it is possible to appropriate the Bible un-ideologically. For Maluleke (1996:11) the equation of the Bible with the word of God has been the most consistent tool in questioning the validity of both African Christianity and African theology. African theology’s reference to ATRs and Black Theology’s reference to liberation have caused both to be dismissed as lacking proper biblical grounding. This argument is fundamental to determining the nature of African hermeneutics. From an African point of view such exclusiveness has caused divided loyalties, since Africans have had to deny the importance and appeal their own traditions and customs had and still have for them. From a Western point of view it presented an opportunity to impose Western ethics, worldviews and theology on Africa. Although one could argue that the Bible is often intolerant, Western hermeneutics itself had to relativise this to accommodate the multiplicity of diverging truth claims of its own traditions.

But there is a further problem: what is the status of the Bible in Africa if it is not seen as the word of God? This again illustrates the peculiar character of African thought. The Bible is considered to be the word of God, but not to the exclusion of many ideas, customs and rites from African culture and traditional religion. Africa knows the secret of accommodating (not indigenising) divergent ideas. All things are integrated holistically. African thought does not operate on the level of Western metaphysics, where a substantial ontology determines the detached nature of things as they exist in and for themselves. One has to disagree with the oft quoted remark by Leopold Senghor that reason is Hellenistic and emotion is negroid<sup>6</sup> (see

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6 Elsewhere Serequeberhan (1994:45) quotes Senghor as follows: “White reason is analytic through utilisation: Negro reason is intuitive through participation. European is empiric, the

Serequeberhan 1994:6). Unlike the West, Africa does not opt for a Cartesian separation of mind from body, or reason from emotion. In this regard Soyinka's (1990:135-136) words ring out: "... any movement founded on an antithesis which responded to the Cartesian 'I think, therefore I am' with 'I feel, therefore I am' must be subject to dialectical determinism which made all those who 'are' obedient to laws formulated on the European historical experience. How was he to know, if the proponents of the universal vision of Negritude themselves did not, that the African world did not and need not share the history of civilisations trapped in political Manicheisms [binary oppositions]? The principle of definition in the African world is far more circumspect ..." African thought is both rational and emotional. African hermeneutics favours a relational ontology where life-giving interactions determine what is considered important and true. On this level the Bible has become important, but in a way that does not exclude the simultaneous influence of past traditions.

The continued growth of a peculiarly African Christianity does not depend on, or ask for, Western acknowledgment. The insistence on Western norms simply invites reactionary responses from scholars like Maimela, who suggests that Black theologians should unapologetically base their theology not even on a materialist reading of the Bible (cf Mosala) but on pragmatic and moral arguments that make sense to them (see Maluleke 1996:14).

For Maluleke (1996:14) the way out of the trap is to confront not only the Bible but all other sources and interlocutors of theological discourse precisely at a hermeneutic level. Canaan Banana has proposed that what he calls oppressive texts must be removed from the Bible and that the religious experiences of other peoples ought to be added to it (see Reed 1996:282-288). It should be noted that the Bible does not belong to the West. It belongs to those who read it and live by it. There is a real danger that in reacting against the abuse of any text the text may be identified with the abusers.

### **Influence of ATRs and AICs on African Christianity and theological hermeneutics**

To understand African hermeneutics and the increasing focus on ATRs we need to take a look at these religions. The statistics below give some idea of their importance. The numbers of adherents, however, do not explain their

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African mystic. The European takes pleasure in recognising the world through the reproduction of the object ... the African from knowing it vitally through image and rhythm. The African does not realise that he thinks: he feels that he feels, he feels his existence, he feels himself; and because he feels the Other, to be reborn in knowledge of the world."

influence sufficiently; the answer lies rather in the quest for African identity. A watershed in the history of ATRs was when theologians began to recognise them as religions rather than pagan cults. ATRs are the wellspring of African customs, narratives, symbols and rites, hence indispensable for developing an African theology and hermeneutics. The AICs represent the group in which Christianity and ATRs came to be integrated in a fascinating way.

Our hermeneutic concern is the way African theologians understand themselves, African religion, its place in the world of religions, and how they visualise (idealise) its future. The idea is not to idealise or romanticise ATRs, but to recognise the importance of their influence. Sarpong (1991:289) sounds a warning note when he says that, like all cultures, African traditional cultures contain objectionable elements. This is not to say that they do not and did not fulfil a social function, either now or in the past. Close examination of many an African custom, no matter how repulsive it may be to modern people, will reveal that it once played – maybe still plays – a meaningful role in the social life of the people.

*Geographical distribution of adherents of ATRs in some African countries (percentage of population)*<sup>7</sup>

There has been a dramatic drop in numbers of ATR followers since 1900, as the selected statistics below show. That is because most Africans were converted to either Christianity or Islam. Trends displayed are representative of the whole of Africa. If they continue, one would expect that ATRs will eventually cease to be significant. How is this to be understood in light of the renewed interest in ATRs and the fact that most prominent African theologians try to accommodate their ideas? It may be a mistake to expect a revival of ATRs or to think that they will eventually replace African Christianity. It could be no less mistaken to assume that they will eventually die out as an active religious force, as the statistical trend seems to indicate. Renewed interest and appreciation of ATRs may even stimulate fresh growth. Although statistics reflect a drop in numbers of adherents, they do not display their influence on African life and African theologians. One can expect that the cause of ATRs in a democratic and post-apartheid South Africa will be promoted by a renewed spirit of African renaissance. One can also expect ATR ideas to attract greater academic interest as urbanisation speeds up. Theologians favouring ATR ideas are mostly not practitioners of these

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<sup>7</sup> Data arranged by Chidi Denis Isizoh from entries in D B Barret, *World Christian encyclopaedia*, Nairobi, 1982.

religions. It is in groups like the AICs that these ideas come to fruition (see Schoffeleers 1988:114-119).

ATR ideas will be influential in the reformulation of African Christianity. They give access to African culture and provide African theologians with material to develop an African Christian theology. Schoffeleers (1988:103) points out that African religions are essentially monotheistic and in that fundamental respect fully accord with biblical revelation. He believes that Christianity can borrow appropriate ideas from ATRs, and vice versa.

Both the reliability and the completeness of the statistics below have to be viewed in light of two constraints. One is the widespread phenomenon of dual allegiance, that is people ostensibly fully committed to mainline Christian churches but with close, more or less active involvement in ATR practices. Related to this is the problem of determining allegiance to a 'religion' which is not necessarily perceived as such by its adherents, to whom it is simply a way of life and thinking – hence an absence of formalisation. In addition there are logistical problems and the fact that many ATR adherents are illiterate and cannot complete questionnaires.

The *World Christian encyclopedia* (2001:676) refers to ATRs as Ethnoreligions and gives the following statistics for South Africa: “The percentage of animists decreased from 50% in 1911 to 10.8% in 1995. Since 1945 there has been a resurgence of ancestor-veneration among the Bantu.”

#### Geographical distribution of ATR adherents

Country % of pupulation	1900	Mid-1970	Mid-1975	Mid-1980	2000
Botswana	102,900 85.7%	347,200 56.3%	362,560 52.5%	3,909,104 9.2%	4,915,003 4.4%
Congo	526,500 97.5%	79,580 6.7%	76,240 5.7%	73,240 4.8%	75,800 2.8%
Ghana	1,987,000 90.3%	2,864,000 33.2%	2,690,600 27.3%	2,451,400 21.4%	1,177,500 5.6%
Lesotho	271,200 88.9%	137,210 13.2%	100,310 8.7%	80,200 6.2%	61,000 3.0%
Madagascar	1,556,000 60.3%	3,408,050 49.2%	3859,780 48.1%	4,390,180 47%	7,591,000 42.7%
Malawi	714,000 95.2%	1,075,200 24.7%	1,059,800 21.6	1,057,400 19%	1,049,000 11%
Mozambique	2,504,900 96.4%	4,757,300 57.8%	4,832,300 52.3%	4,963,700 47.8%	6,197,000 35.1%

Namibia	129,600 91.3%	33,100 5.2%	28,300 4.0	27,800 3.5%	26,400 2.0%
South Africa	2,793,000 57%	3,889,210 18.1%	4,189,700 17%	4,534,400 15.9%	6,519,000 13.1%
Swaziland	7,9200 99%	115,700 28.3%	112,360 24%	113,490 20.9%	127,260 13.5%
Zimbabwe	479,800 96%	2,469,000 46.5	2,729,500 43.5%	3,034,300 40.5%	4,440,000 29.3%

### The quest for African identity

Many African theologians are currently engaged in formulating a truly African spirituality, based on African traditions and influenced by the history of Christianity in Africa. This is a holistic hermeneutics which wants to read the African text in its interrelated plurality in the African world. Holism does not negate differences but accommodates them. African hermeneutics is an endeavour to understand and interpret the many paradoxes – the competing, and even opposing, elements determining African life. Although some African thinkers want to rid Africa of all foreign influences, foreign gods and practices, this is not possible. Not only is it difficult to determine what these influences are and ‘excise’ them from African life; the economic and technological interdependence of all countries makes it quite impossible.

There remains, however, much to be done in regaining African identity. In pre-colonial times non-Africans wondered and wrote about African religion. Most of them saw Africans as spiritually lost, wicked and wilful sinners. African religion was negatively portrayed as ancestor worship, animism, idolatry, fetishism, paganism, polytheism and the like. During colonial and postcolonial times Africans writing about their faith were overly dependent on Western Christian ideas. Postcolonial African hermeneuticists want to rectify this situation by writing a theology of the people, by the people and for the people (see Uka 1991:161).

But is it possible to know what African identity was before colonialism, and do the majority of people want to retrieve this identity? We pointed out in an earlier chapter that the quest for African identity is part of the complex process of cultural reinterpretation, the main aim being to get rid of the negative self-image, mindset of dependency, poverty and underdevelopment. The quest for identity is often linked with a context in which that identity is threatened and disfigured. In Africa colonialism and continued economic and other forms of dependence on the West represent such threats.

### ATRs as a source of present African theology: reading the African text

As we have seen, the effort to develop and reformulate an African theology depends on ATRs, which give access to African lifestyles, myths and narratives, practices and rites, and the broad oral tradition. ATRs' worldview, their conceptions of God, nature, the ancestors, community life, medicine and healing, the past and future are the filter through which traditional Christian doctrines about God and human beings, Christ and sin, protology, eschatology and the like are reinterpreted. Besides the Bible, ATRs provide a complementary source for African theology, without which present African theology is unthinkable. ATR ideas, however, are not used syncretically or eclectically, nor does the concept of indigenisation<sup>8</sup> altogether fit the hermeneutic processes at work. The practice of using culture as a determinant of theologising is foreign to Christian theology, which professes to use the Bible as the only source of God's revelation.

To understand the development of African theology it is imperative to know the African worldview and culture, especially as represented by ATRs. A few remarks have to suffice.

An interesting question is whether ATRs have an implicit theology. Uka (1991:156-160) applies six theological criteria (identified by Macquarie)<sup>9</sup> to demonstrate their theological nature. Although ATR meets these criteria, it does so in a peculiar way requiring a specific hermeneutics. These criteria are experience, revelation, scripture, tradition, culture and reason.

- Spiritual experience: *Homo africanus* knows and encounters the mysterious dimension of life – the bedrock of African spirituality. This experience is reflected in cosmogonic and other myths.
- Revelation: African religion is no book religion. While lacking this primary theological source, it does experience revelation. The holy is

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8 Bediako (1995:82) confirms that the struggle for the indigenisation of the church by Christianising the pre-Christian heritage is over. The current debate is about the abiding relevance of the old religions in the transition to a new African Christianity.

9 One could be critical of once again using Western criteria to assess African belief. The norm remains Western even if Africans realise it in their own way. ATRs simply do not have a theology as it is known in Western Christianity. What they do have is a very rich religious experience and tradition, myths, symbols, rites and so on. In the past Westerners have interpreted these in anthropological rather than theological terms. It remains to be seen how African theologians will develop an African Christian theology which uses ATRs as one source among others. However, it is almost impossible not to equate religions with one another. It is equally impossible to use identical or analogous terms, metaphors and symbols to describe religions. This should not be accompanied by feelings of inferiority or subservience to religious traditions other than one's own.

revealed in nature, at special places, through symbols, idols and myths.

- Scripture: The text of ATR is not written. Its sources include songs, arts and symbols, wisdom sayings, myths, legends, beliefs and customs, prayers, riddles, names of people and places, et cetera (Uka 1991:157; Parratt 1983:90).
- Like their 'scriptures', ATR traditions are mainly orally transmitted from generation to generation. African hermeneutics cannot be understood without the story-telling typical of oral tradition. Oral theology has been described as theology in the open air, unrecorded theology generally lost to libraries (Uka1991:163).
- African rationality is integrated with all other human faculties. Africans believe in God and spirits, but they are not interested in rationally defining these realities and most theological terms displaying a rational preference mean nothing to them (see Uka 1991:160).

Although these factors may be present in ATRs, they do not in themselves constitute a theology. This only emerges to the extent that African theologians from a Christian background use them to formulate an African theology. Bediako (1994:94; 1995:262) emphasises that it is in African Christianity that the continent's primal heritage is likely to find an enduring place. In this sense ATR has become a *praeparatio theologia* in the African context. What remains fascinating is the often overlooked fact that ATR explains why Christianity found such fertile soil in Africa. It provided an important preparation for the gospel and forms the major religious substrate for the idiom and existential experience of Christianity in African life (Bediako 1995:82-83). This implies, on the one hand, that ATRs can no longer be regarded as 'pagan' or idolatrous. On the other hand their amenability to the gospel implies that Christianity can no longer be dismissed as a foreign religion but may be regarded as their natural complement (Schoffeleers 1988:103).

The fear that Christianity will disappear from the African continent, or be replaced by ATRs, is unfounded. One can expect, however, to find a very distinctive form of Christianity in Africa in the future. In this regard Mbiti (see Bediako 1995:82) even speaks of a new era in African theology, in which African theologians themselves realise that the Christian way of life is here to stay. The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) and the Fellowship of Mission Theologians from the Two-Thirds World are examples of this.

### **ATR ideas influencing African theological hermeneutics**

To understand the impact of ATR on African theology we draw on H W Turner's exposition of the primal worldview (quoted in Bediako 1995:93-96). The following features are mentioned with reference to, and critique of, analogous notions in the West (also in Western theology):

- There is a sense of kinship with nature, in which animals and plants, like human beings, have their own spiritual existence and place in the universe as interdependent parts of a whole. African ontology considers God, spirits, humans, animals, plants and inanimate creation to be one. To break up this unity is to destroy one or more of these modes of existence, and to destroy one is in effect to destroy them all (see Bediako 1995:102). The interdependence and interrelatedness of creation is increasingly acknowledged in the Western worldview and cosmology. This 'ecological aspect' of primal religions explains the religious approach to the position of human beings in the world as well as the appeal of natural theology, which is receiving renewed interest in the West.
- Human beings are finite, weak and impure or sinful, and in need of a power beyond their own. This is comparable to the Christian idea of the innate sinfulness of human beings, but without the associated notion of guilt.
- Human beings are not alone in the universe and must respect the spiritual world of powers or beings more powerful and ultimate than themselves. They can enter into a relationship with the benevolent spirit world, share in its powers and blessings and receive protection against evil forces. This belief can be related to Christian pneumatology, and sharply criticises Western autonomy and self-sufficiency. It is sadly lacking in Western science and technology and is prerequisite for the revival of spirituality.
- There is an acute sense of the reality of the afterlife, which explains the importance of ancestors. Openness to life after death has become foreign to the closed, rationalistic Western worldview. Belief in the ancestors has interesting links with Christology.
- Humans live in a sacramental universe with no sharp division between the physical and the spiritual. The same powers, principles and patterns run through all things on earth and in the heavens, welding them into a unified cosmic system. These ideas, too, are recognised anew by Western scientists, evident in a new biology, and renewed interest in

human consciousness and its relatedness to ideas from quantum physics (cf. the work of Pauli, Bohm and others).

- The primal religious worldview is decidedly *this-worldly*. Its this-worldliness encompasses God and humans in an abiding relationship, which is the divine destiny of humankind and the purpose of the universe (Bediako 1995:101). This holistic approach offers an answer to Western dualism and the unhealthy, often artificial separation between sacred and profane.

### **An example from *Ifa* tradition**

*Ifa* (Eze 1993:266) is a way of seeking knowledge through divination. *Ifa* (also called the Eha process) is closely connected with the Nigerian Yoruba and has occupied an important place among African people for many centuries. Its core is just over 1000 textually (sic) transmitted poems, comprising thousands of aphorisms, poems and riddles called *Odu*. *Odu* also contains an elaborate exegesis of the text. *Esu* is the *ashé* principle, or the creative Word, as revealed yet hidden in the *Ifa* text (Eze 1993:273-274). When interpreting the text the *babalawo* (Ifa diviner), under the inspiration of *Esu*, adopts a 'hermeneutic' posture depicting the way of rational reflexivity. As a way of inquiry *Ifa* values interpretation as a dialogical event, views knowledge as existential and not disinterested, sees truth not as a set of general principles universally applicable to particular situations but as a process, and regards rationality as non-hierarchical (Eze 1993:280).

Although the verses of the text are fixed, their interpretation is open. Textual objectivity is seen as submitting one's intuitions to the intersubjective process of inquiry, which may lead to a (re)birth of understanding. The meaning of a text is not imposed on the inquirer, who applies her own understanding to determine what is objectively valid. Truth is the dialogue between the text, the *babalawo* and the interpreter. *Ifa* hermeneutics accepts that our capacity for understanding is limited. It sees the nature of truth as limited, acknowledging its simultaneous accommodation of truth and untruth, concealment and un-concealment, presence and absence (Eze 1993:281-183).

### **Bridging the gap between ATRs and mainline Christianity: role of the AICs**

Sarpong (1991:288-289) says that the church has not become 'African' enough. He refers to the fascinating *Vatican Propagation of the Faith*, issued in 1659, giving missionaries in China and Indo-China the following directives:

Put no obstacles in their way; and for no reason whatever should you persuade these people to change their rites, customs and ways of life unless these are obviously opposed to religion and good morals. For what is more absurd than to bring France and Spain or Italy or any other part of Europe into China? It is not these that you should bring but the faith that does not spurn or reject any people's rights and customs, unless they are depraved, but, on the contrary, tries to keep them. Admire and praise what deserves to be respected.

AICs in South Africa comprise about 7 000 groups or churches, of which the Zion Christian Church is the largest. According to 1991 statistics the AICs in South Africa represented 31% of the black population, mainline Christian churches (excluding AICs) 34%, and ATRs and those with no religion 33%. The respective percentages for the 1980 census were 17,7% (AICs), 53% (mainline Christian) and 28,4% (ATRs and no religion). This indicates dramatic growth for the AICs, and limited growth for ATRs and those with no religion. The trend is clearly that more and more black people are leaving the mainline Christian churches for the AICs.

The *World Christian encyclopedia* (2001:678) mentions that South Africa has the greatest proliferation of separatist churches of any country in the world and gives the following statistics: "By 1904, 3 large denominations with 25,000 followers were in existence, growing to 130 bodies in 1925, 1,300 bodies in 1946 with one million adherents, 2,000 bodies in the 1950s with 1.5 million followers, and over 4,000 bodies with nearly 13 million adherents in 1995."

AICs play a very important role on the African religious scene. At this stage many African theologians see them as exemplifying the direction African religion should take, since they incorporate traditional and Christian (especially Pentecostal) ideas. Their members are predominantly disadvantaged people from the black working class.

The Bible occupies an important place in the AICs. The booklet, *Speaking for ourselves*, states: "We [the AICs] read the Bible as a book that comes from God and we take every word in the Bible seriously. Some people will say that we are therefore 'fundamentalists'. We do not know whether that word applies to us or not but we are not interested in any interpretation of the Bible that softens or waters down its message. We do not have the same problems about the Bible as White people have with their scientific mentality" (quoted by West 1991:158).

Their knowledge of the Bible is oral rather than textual. Mosala, quoted by West (1991:159-160), argues that they appropriate the Bible, not in

terms of what it says, but in terms of what it stands for – a canonical authority. Their hermeneutic approach derives from the sense of mystery generated by the authority of a basically unknown Bible. They appropriate the mysteries of the Bible and of traditional society in order to cope with their perception/sense of being as a subordinate class. The ‘mystery’ of the symbols of the Bible is important in this hermeneutics of mystification. Mosala (West 1991:160) further indicates that race, gender and class are not hermeneutic factors in the AICs’ appropriation of the Bible, while African symbols and discourses are very much part of it.

#### **Hermeneutic approaches of some African theologians: conflicting views on the source for African theology**

African hermeneutic identity depends to a large extent on the theologians practising it. Rather than concentrating on one or two names we outline the approach of some of them. African theologians, as can be expected, have different hermeneutic approaches to African religion. By and large they can be divided into two groups, known as the ‘old guard’ (including well-known theologians like E W Fasholé-Luke, Bolaji Idowu, John Mbiti, Itumeleng Mosala and Harry Sawyer) and the ‘new guard’ (including Eboussi Boulaga, Jean-Marc Elá, Ambrose Moyo, Kwame Bediako and Mercy Oduyoye) (Rogers 1994:245-246). Most African theologians involve themselves, to a greater or lesser extent, with liberation issues and the postcolonial search for what is typical of African religion. As can be expected, their theologies are dynamic, especially those of younger theologians who have had more exposure to postcolonial conditions. Their work should not, however, be pinned down to specific theological topics. As Sarpong (1991:288) points out, an African may pursue a particular course or act in a certain pattern for twenty years or more, and just when the Westerner concludes that he will continue to do so for the rest of his life, the African suddenly breaks the pattern.

Old-guard theologians took Western Christian theology, developed it on African lines and called it ‘indigenisation’. African traditional values and experiences became a passive partner, subordinate to a presumably superior Western theology. They practised a Western form of hermeneutics, which does not suit or serve the African context. The accent is on the Bible as the basic source for an African Christian theology. The Old Testament in particular is used as a source for such a *theologia africana*. Fasholé-Luke, while favouring ATR as a source of spirituality for African people, warns against the notion that ATR is a preparation for the gospel (see Rogers 1994:247). Mbiti’s approach is to take biblical themes, compare them with the African worldview and culture, and discuss whether they can be apprehended by

Africans. African concepts like time and history, for example, cannot, according to him, express the biblical understanding of eschatology. The African worldview is cyclic and the rhythm of nature ensures that the world will never come to an end. Idowu sees ATR as a *praeparatio evangelica* in the sense that he believes that God has not left himself without witnesses in any nation, and that it is therefore necessary to find out what God has done, in what way he has been known and approached in Nigerian history and what is the basis of traditional Nigerian faith for this life and hope for the afterlife (quoted in Rogers 1994:249).

The new-guard theologians rejected the indigenisation process, affirming African traditional values and eschewing what they called Western bourgeois values. Their primary work was produced in the 1980s in response to the call for liberation in South African religious circles. Ogku Kalu and Manas Buthelezi (a leading proponent of Black Theology in South Africa, along with Basil Moore) were calling on scholars to interpret the Bible from a liberation hermeneutic perspective. The contents of the biblical message must be transposed from the 1st century situation to that of the hearer in such a way that biblical situational and indigenous elements are replaced by those of 20th century South African hearers (Rogers 1994:252-253).

In 1984 the Congress of African and European Theologians was convened in Cameroon to consider appropriate forms of theology for African people. They stressed the need for a new hermeneutic biblical tradition reflecting their political realities (Rogers 1994:253-258). Theologians like Jean-Marc Elá, Mercy Oduyoye, Eboussi Boulage and Ambrose Moyo supported this approach. Boulage distrusts even the name 'African Christianity' because it symbolises African acceptance of Western domination of Africa on the social, political, economic and scientific levels. He still accepts the Bible as part of Christianity from an African perspective and favours an 'aesthetic Christianity' that responds to biblical themes of a universal nature. He sees the contribution of African Christians to African civilisation as still to come. Elá concentrates on an African reading of Exodus and is suspicious of enculturation/indigenisation. Africa has to develop its own religious models. Mercy Oduyoye stresses that Christian theology in Africa must be constructed from the vantage point of the 'underside of history'. For her the Old Testament provides the key to an authentic African theology. Moyo calls for dialogue between Christianity and ATR. ATR should not take precedence over biblical revelation. He wants to liberate the church in Africa from the white missionary establishment. The AICs are already free from this domination.

Rogers (1994:258-260) concludes that while the old-guard theologians were reluctant to enter the political arena, the new guard is strongly commit-

ted to a hermeneutics that responds to oppressive regimes wherever and whenever they occur. The old guard was open to indigenisation, whereas the new guard's style is confrontational. The old guard saw ATR as *praeparatio evangelica*, whereas the new guard considers it a religion in its own right. However, old- and new-guard theologians alike feel an African perspective on the Bible is essential to buttress a living theology appropriate to African Christian experience. ATR is considered a worthy source for understanding African spirituality.

### **Future of African hermeneutics**

An exciting, challenging future awaits African hermeneutics. One could expect the liberation theme to remain important, but to shift its emphasis to economic upliftment and African politics. The task of developing an African spirituality, integrating Christian and African traditional ideas, is far from complete.

No single hermeneutic or methodological approach seems to fit the African context. A poly-methodological and multi-hermeneutic approach seems the best way to go. In the past the search for an appropriate approach was influenced by the idea that African spirituality is so different a field that it can only be studied anthropologically because of its ethnic and preliterate context. Evans-Pritchard (quoted by Metuh 1991:147-148) warned against the danger of reductionism when using a categorical approach to study African spirituality. African spiritual concepts and categories need not fit into the familiar Western classification of monotheism, polytheism, pantheism and animism.

The vibrancy of African theology and hermeneutics will be determined not by theologians but by the spiritual reality of everyday life. That was the secret of African religion in the past and will probably be its driving force in the future.

### **Conclusion**

Like any hermeneutics, the African variety has a tradition history and *Wirkungsgeschichte* peculiar to its own contextual circumstances. From the foregoing it is evident that, through developments in African theology, it is beginning to understand African values and spirituality. A Westerner may respond that, whereas all people have a right to understand themselves in terms of their own cultural context, this understanding does not have universally valid grounds and is irrational, illogical or plain illiterate. But who decides what is rational, what norms are universally accepted and why are

they valid? That raises the question of rationality, and African rationality in particular.



## Chapter 5

### African rationality in cognitive-scientific perspective

#### Introduction: understanding African rationality

Rationality is a universal human faculty. The '*sapiens*' in 'Homo sapiens' refers to it, but it does not tell us what rationality is. The concept is complex with cultural, ethnological and philosophical aspects. For the purpose of this chapter we examine it from the angle of scientific research in Africa.

One can distinguish between rationality in science and in everyday life. It does not mean that rationality in everyday life, or common sense rationality, is illogical or less important than scientific rationality. The distinction refers to the rigorous constraints that scientific method, tradition and language impose on everyday, common sense rationality.

Scientific rationality is not free from power strategies. It is usually explained so as to create the impression that its rationality, and the concomitant scientific method, are objectively and universally true and exclusive. This is not so. The idea of a single, objectively true scientific method has been deconstructed, criticised and relativised, notably in the work of Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend and Karl Popper, and through developments in quantum physics and postmodern critique. The view that rationality and science are 'true' derives from modern Newtonian science, which is empirically focused, method driven and theory laden, inductively and deductively oriented, systematising and generalising (evident in the formulation of laws). Science in this sense is foreign to traditional Africa. Most Western models treat science as a paradigm of rationality in action on the unspoken assumption that this is true rationality.

Scientific rational language and methods are actually artificial. We do not use scientific language in everyday life, nor do we act according to strictly scientific methods. Religious rationality, for example, is not less rational because it differs from scientific rationality. Scientific rationality is not the only kind of rationality in action. Culture concerns everyday life, and everyday beliefs are paradigm cases of rationality in action, since a proper model of rationality must be able to make sense of everyday life (see Stenmark 1995:3). Rationality deals in beliefs based on appropriate reasons, without which the beliefs could be considered irrational or non-rational. Some beliefs stem from emotion, faith, authority or arbitrary choice, but this does not make them irrational. There are also beliefs that are considered non-rational,

because they are matters of taste and require no reasons (Hondericht 1995:744).

Science and scientific rationality are meaningless and impossible unless they are linked to everyday life and experience. They should also be linked to the human body. Cognitive science has shown that rationality is rooted in biology and our metaphors have a physical origin. These insights have shed new light on African rationality and its impact on research in Africa.

### **Models of rationality**

There are many kinds and levels of rationality. Definitions of rationality may be reductive unless one narrows them down to a specific level and kind. One could also expect theories of rationality<sup>1</sup> to reflect the problems of their age. A historicist approach will emphasise that a theory of rationality should fit the history of its time.

Different communities have their own models of rationality. The approach, method and means that are chosen will depend on one's specific aim. In philosophy and science rationality has been formalised to suit the subjects. The scientific and philosophical paradigm of rationality has become the archetype of rationality in general. With such an entrenched view of rationality another culture's customs may easily be seen as irrational. Activities of an ethnic and cultural nature, like religious rituals, art and literature, are not universal and depend on specific histories, identities, traditions, tastes and values.

Life world rationality remains the source of scientific rationality and should be restored to its original importance. Although life world rationality may differ from one culture to the next, there are many commonalities. Hampshire (quoted in Malherbe 1995:226) distinguishes between epistemologically significant reasoning activities in a society that are usually of a uni-

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1 The debate on African rationality started in the 1960s with Peter Winch's critique of the anthropological work of Evans-Pritchard (Eze 1993:76ff). In an essay, "Understanding a primitive society", he challenged Evans-Pritchard's idea that Zande or Nuer assumptions about reality are mistaken because their ontological claims about witchcraft cannot be supported empirically. Winch indicated that it is not empirical verification that establishes what accords with reality for a particular speech community, but intersubjectively shared language. Reality is constituted by language. While Evans-Pritchard uses a modern scientific rationality model, Winch proposes multiple forms of rationality. He does not regard science as the only valid model. The rationality or otherwise of a statement or belief does not depend on whether it is scientific or not, but on its significance in a specific language game. However, Winch fails to explain how cross-cultural understanding is possible at all. Understanding an alien culture requires the creation of new genres (cf Wittgenstein's family resemblances) in order to compare what may be incommensurable (Eze 1993:93-100).

versal kind and those that do not aim at truth. Striving to attain knowledge is necessarily aimed at finding truth and uses rational means to do so.

Malherbe (1995:227ff) differentiates between three main groups of epistemic activities and three corresponding models of rationality:

- A causal law model associated with scientific activities. Scientific explanation is based on physical cause, empirical observation and a realistic metaphysics.
- A revelational model operative in religion.
- A dialectical model evident in political and legal debate.

Stenmark (1995:5ff) distinguishes between *theoretical*, *practical* and *axiological* rationality. Theoretical rationality concerns what we should believe or accept, practical rationality what we should do, and axiological rationality the values we hold. The axiom of reasonable demand accepts that one cannot demand something of a person that she cannot supply. Idealised models of rationality reject the axiom of reasonable demand. Most traditional conceptions of rationality have been too idealised and, if taken literally, imply that human behaviour is usually irrational. *Evidentialism* implies that it is rational to accept a proposition, belief or theory only if there are good reasons to believe that it is true. Stenmark (1995:6-7) expands on this in what he calls *presumptionism*, which posits that our belief-forming processes and their outputs (beliefs) should be *presumed* intellectually innocent until proven guilty. These beliefs need not be substantiated to the point where it is rational for us to believe them. Our initial attitude to beliefs should not be scepticism, as evidentialists claim, but trust.

Rationality usually concerns means to an end, its only function being to further individual and collective goals. In this approach ends and values are not of primary importance. In the words of Russell (quoted by Stenmark 1995:32), reason signifies the choice of the right means to an end, not the choice of ends. This technical kind of rationality has strongly influenced Western culture. It lacks an axiological dimension where values, ends, desires and interests are taken into account.

### **African thinking in a non-African perspectives**

We clarify by comparing. The identity of an entity is established by comparing and contrasting it with another. To distinguish, discriminate and differentiate are characteristic of rationality. What is important is to compare apples with apples. A culture cannot really be known by comparing it with another. As Sogolo (1998:221) puts it, the minds of Africans do not differ

structurally from those of Westerners. The contextual contrast between Western thought and traditional African thought rests on false premises. The truth is that both display the same basic features of the human species. The difference lies in the ways the two societies conceive of reality and explain objects and events. That is because their lifestyles differ. And for this reason alone an intelligible analysis of African thought demands the application of its own discourse, its own logic and its own criteria of rationality.

The intellectual crisis challenging African thinkers is to find what is peculiar to African culture in the aftermath of colonialism. Until now there seem to have been only two alternatives: ethno-thinking and Western ('professional') thinking. This choice affects all intellectual categories, whether in philosophy, science or religion. A good example is philosophy, where African thinkers identify themselves as either ethno-philosophers (including sage philosophers who reflect on African wisdom traditions) or professional philosophers (doing Western philosophy on African soil).

It is unreasonable to expect African scholars to re-invent the wheel by producing distinctively African philosophical or scientific methods in lieu of the existing corpus (the building blocks of which have in any event come down to Europe from earlier civilisations) or come up with revolutionary ideas in order to justify themselves as philosophers or scientists. What Africa contributes is the way it modifies and accommodates global philosophical, religious and scientific ideas. Cultures comprise more than what is encapsulated in scientific or philosophical thought. In a sense the problem is that many Africans identify science, technology, philosophy and so forth with colonialism (the Other). Science, philosophy, rational behaviour and thought are human activities, not a Western monopoly.

The problem lies in the unholy practice of comparison: comparisons are proverbially odious. African culture has been typified as cyclic and closed,<sup>2</sup> in contrast with Western culture, which is said to be linear and open.

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2 The chances of people living in traditional cultures adopting alternative ways of interpreting the world are said to be limited, since traditional cultures are closed to alternative views, whereas scientifically oriented cultures are open. In traditional cultures there is no developed awareness of alternatives to the established body of theoretical notions, whereas such awareness is highly developed in scientifically oriented cultures. In a closed society the sacredness of beliefs and anxiety about threats make people accept what everybody assents to; they have no choice, any more than they choose what language they speak. Even if they are sceptical, they can express their doubts only in terms of prevailing beliefs. A member of a traditional tribe is highly unlikely to confess ignorance about the answer to some question that the tribe considers important. This is because there are no alternatives to the established theoretical system and any hint that the system is not coping suggests irreparable chaos and arouses acute anxiety (Horton 1993:222-223, 243). This is not peculiar to African communities. In many Christian communities people cannot practise a morality or hold a belief dramatically different from that of the community without being ostracised.

These distinctions are inapposite. Africa may be typified as simultaneously pre-modern, modern and postmodern. We could also say that it is simultaneously pre-scientific (traditional), scientific (mainly Western) and post-scientific (critical, integrating many worlds). Post-scientific here refers to a critical attitude towards science, whereby aspects deemed relevant to African life are incorporated and the rest ignored. Post-scientific means integrating science with African culture in a way that does not threaten it. The post-scientific mentality may seem to accommodate the pre-scientific, but the two cannot be identified. The former critically incorporates scientific knowledge and applications and adds new dimensions. The pre-scientific mind is not unaware of relations and connections between objects in the world, but experiences and expresses them in a non-scientific way. Although the pre-scientific, scientific and post-scientific approaches are all to be found in Africa, the pre-scientific remains a very real presence and is bound to influence scientific development in postcolonial Africa.

Science is not an exclusively Western phenomenon in the sense that scientific theories and laws are Western. By the same token there is no such thing as African or Japanese science. Science is not neutral: it cannot be reduced to scientific laws, formulae, methods and theories – it is more than that. It is linked to technology, incorporated into worldviews, pertinent to societal value systems, implicit in religious beliefs. Thus it is viewed differently in a culture holding a linear, progressive worldview from one operating with a cyclic worldview. Science belongs to all human beings, although different people interpret and use it differently. It is not transcendental, incarnated immutably in a specific culture. It usually forms part of the cultural fibre of a society. Science itself does not purport to be a framework that can integrate an entire culture. Worldview and cultural values are left to philosophy, theology and the social sciences. Science and technology have meaning and underlying values of their own, but by their very nature they cannot provide a firm anchorage when it comes to existential questions. Today science and technology feature pervasively in modern societies, affecting the very essence of cultures (see Ladrière 1977:147ff). This applies to Africa as well, although in varying degrees and on specific levels.

### **African rationality**

Against this background we elaborate on the following theses. African rationality is:

- holistic
- influenced by reaction against colonialism

- an embodied rationality
- inseparable from the physical and social environment
- considered by some to be ethno-rationality.

*African rationality is holistic*

Rationality should be appraised holistically. It is codetermined by everything in a specific human context. The broad cultural setting in which rationality operates includes religion, language, politics, the economy, technology and science. Viewing rationality from a particular epistemological, logical or linguistic perspective may skew the picture for lack of the broader horizon necessary to explain that particular manifestation of it. African rationality is also holistic in that it assigns equal weight to means and ends. There are no ontological gaps between existing entities; the Western natural-supernatural dualism is foreign to it. God, humankind, the spirit world are all part of a unified totality. God's actions are not experienced as extraordinary.

*African rationality is influenced by reaction against colonialism*

The identification of science with Western civilisation bred a sense of superiority to other cultures. Hume, Kant and Hegel, for example, believed that European history was the epitome of reason and characterised non-European peoples as irrational. This attitude was only challenged in the post-colonial era, when anthropologists, African thinkers and theologians highlighted the rationality of African life and thought. Identifying science and rationalism exclusively with Western culture invites African thinkers to demonstrate and develop the distinctive character of African rationality, and feeds the urge to rid Africa of Western culture and domination.

African thinkers in postcolonial Africa are in the process of tracing their roots. On the one hand they are reacting against uncritical acceptance of Western culture, on the other it is impossible to retrieve a bygone culture. African intellectuals are engaged in archaeological excavation of a lost pre-colonial culture. Some do not search so far back but find sufficient material in present-day traditions, stories, rites, songs, dance and customs, which is symbolically and conceptually transformed and applied to current problems. Coming of age in a postcolonial era, these intellectuals are formulating African thinking in response to the limitations of Western traditions, especially the harmful legacies of modernism.

To free oneself from cultural domination one needs to establish what is constructive and what is foreign and harmful to one's own culture. Freeing oneself from foreign influences is difficult, if not impossible, because some-

one takes the decision to do so. To succeed it has to spring spontaneously from all sectors of life. Emancipation from foreign influences implies unanimity on what to keep and what to let go – and such agreement is rare. People usually free themselves from systems that were forced upon them, as happened with apartheid. The question is whether science and technology are foreign to Africa or not. If not, can they be accepted without their implicit Western cultural packaging?

*African rationality is embodied*

Westerners have become used to the stereotyped notion that the body is aligned with nature and the spirit with culture: the body is essentially primitive and the spirit essentially civilised. Contrary to this view, the body is now being re-evaluated as a cultural and historical phenomenon, as well as a biological and material one. It is not simply an object; it is a subject, and culture resides in the physical processes of perception (Csordas 1999:143-147).

Africans think with mind and body, integrating all aspects of life. Senghor (quoted by Pasteur & Toldson 1982:21) writes: “Europeans think with their head, by concepts and schemes logically connected. Africans think with their soul ... with their heart ... formed intuitively in the style of the feeling-thinking subject, that is to say, in feeling, sensitivity is thought.” That does not mean that Africans are irrational. The point made in this quotation is the *embodied* nature of African rationality, which does not hide its emotional side.

For Sarpong (1991:287) the average African is not logical in the Western sense. By and large Africans are interested, not in cause and effect, but in actual happenings. Neither do they reason along strict syllogistic lines. That does not mean they are not thinkers or are unthinking. In fact they are philosophers, philosophising in concrete rather than abstract terms.

*African rationality is inseparable from the physical and social environment*

African rationality is relational and integrative. It should be evaluated in terms of ubuntu ethics, which operates on the principle of ‘I am only because we are, and since we are, therefore I am’. This accords with the social (inter-subjective) principle of rationality, according to which a belief is rationally acceptable only if it has been exposed to or tested against the judgments of a community with relevant expertise. According to this criterion Robinson Crusoe, alone on his island, could exercise judgment but could not have achieved rationality. This is not because of some defect in his faculties, but for much the same reason as he could not play baseball, even though he could

throw balls in the air, hit them with a bat and run bases (Stenmark 1995:142, 146).

Whereas theoretical thinking in Western science is usually phrased in an impersonal idiom, African society tends to couch it in personal terms.

African rationality corresponds with the dialectic model of rationality. In the dialectical model reason is equated with reasoned argumentation and truth is attained through adjudication between opposing claims. This old Sophist tradition is exemplified by dialogue, in which mutual justification and exchange of ideas continue until resolution is reached. This is similar to African consensus politics, in which the parties state and defend opinions and expound ideas. The presupposition is that you have to acknowledge when the opposing view has been proved, rather than your own. The dialogic model of rationality is typical of African traditions, in which public, democratic debate serves as an instrument for resolving differences and clarifying issues. In the administration of justice the priority was not punishment of the offender, but redressing the wrong and making reparation where necessary. Penalties for disrupting the tribal balance were of a constructive or corrective nature. There are many variations on this dialogic theme. Examples of institutions of rational debate in South African communities include the *kgotla* of the Sotho people, the *kgoro* of the Venda and the indaba of Zulu communities (see Malherbe 1995:229-232).

*African rationality is ethno-rationality*

Is science neutral or culturally bound? Does Western rationality differ from African rationality<sup>3</sup> or is it rationally neutral? Rationality is a broader concept than science, incorporating more than cultural or academic development. It is much more interwoven with cultural aspects than is science. People of different cultural or ethnic groups may have different theories to explain the same natural phenomenon, based on the cultural, linguistic, philosophic and religious contexts in which phenomena are viewed.

The distinction between modern science and ethno-science is thorny. It presupposes that ethno-science, being local, should abandon claims to universality, objectivity and rationality. These traits are peculiar to modern science (Harding 1997:45, 51). All other claims to scientific and technological knowledge are culturally local, constituted by the cultures and practices of the knowledge projects of which they are part (Harding 1997:61).

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3 General characteristics of what is African, or for that matter, Western, don't exist. Counter examples can always be found to disprove any claim. With reference to African rationality the only thing the various peoples and cultures have in common is that they occur on the African continent.

African thinking (rationality), as ethno-thinking, recognises that it is autonomous, legitimate and rooted in Africa. It remains doubtful whether ethno-philosophy or ethno-science will have a significant impact on science or philosophy worldwide, but such an impact is not a precondition for it to be practised.

### **Cognitive science and the physical roots of rationality**

Cognitive science views rationality and understanding in a totally new perspective. Established in the 1970s, cognitive science studies conceptual systems, the cornerstone of rational functions. They include memory, attention, thought and language. Cognitive science maintains that reason is not disembodied, but results from the nature of our brains and physical experiences. It builds on and makes use of forms of perceptual and motor inference. Reason is a bodily function. Many conceptual inferences are sensorimotor. Reason is not universal in a transcendent sense. It is largely unconscious, metaphorical and emotionally engaged (Lakoff & Johnson 1999:4, 10, 20). Human categories are conceptualised in prototypes. Each prototype is a neural structure that permits us to make some sort of inference, or perform an imaginative task, relative to a category. To make sharp distinctions we develop essential prototypes, which conceptualise categories as if they were sharply defined (Lakoff & Johnson 1999:19-20).

Cognitive science stresses the importance of the embodied mind – a concept that helps us to repair the rift between ontology (what is) and epistemology (what can be known), and links mind to world.<sup>4</sup> We can only experience bodily. Our conceptual systems are grounded in our physical experience. We reason by means of our embodied imaginative rationality (Johnson 1999:81). This does not mean (see Johnson 1999:86, 90) that reason emerges exclusively from the corporeal logic and inferential structure of physical sensorimotor experience. Neither does it fall from the sky like a transcendental gift. It is a complex interaction between many physical (including brain) functions and the mind (including specific thought processes). Although the structure of our concepts and categories is codetermined by physical sensorimotor experience, the latter is insufficient to account for creative thought, which is linked to such things as environmental interaction.

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4 Lakoff & Johnson (1999, 102ff) distinguish three levels of embodiment: neural embodiment, embodiment on the phenomenological level (our awareness of mental states and the environment), and embodiment on the cognitive, unconscious level (unconscious knowledge and thought processes).

Embodied rationalism acknowledges a cardinal insight of relativism, namely that in many cases concepts do change over time, vary across cultures, have multiple, inconsistent structures and reflect social conditions. Embodied realism recognises that human language and thought are structured by, and bound to, embodied experience. Even physicists who investigate a mind-independent world can only describe and conceptualise it in terms of embodied human concepts (Lakoff & Johnson 1999:94-96, 233).

The human mind cannot exist separately from the body. Our mental processes are conditioned overwhelmingly by the body's vast input into the brain and the complex ways in which the brain processes this input. The human body is a cultural and historical phenomenon as well as a physical one. Merleau-Ponty (quoted by Csordas 1999:147) indicated that culture does not reside only in objects and representations, but also in the physical processes of perception through which those objects and representations come into being. Lakoff and Johnson (1999:53) propose an embodied realism, in which we are linked to the world by embodied interactions. This approach obviates a rigid subject-object dichotomy.

The upshot is that cognitive science offers a completely new angle on the problem of rationality. Instead of grappling with cultural differences, we can now focus on the common human attribute of embodied rationalism. This is a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach. The top-down approach focuses on cultural differences and often stumbles on incomprehensibilities. The bottom-up approach takes physical experience as its point of departure – something we all have in common. Physical experiences, captured in metaphors, determine rationality, language and concepts. Although they may be applied differently in various cultural contexts, they all have the same physical source.

The sensorimotor processes through which thought is mediated are similar for all humans. The idea of embodied rationality, albeit in a different form, is not foreign to Africa. As we have seen, Africans are much more at ease with physicality than was traditionally the case in the West. Africans do not know the Western mind-body dualism; neither do they denigrate the body or deify the mind at the expense of the physical. They take the body more seriously than Westerners do. They are in harmony with their bodies and with the natural environment and make more use of bodily metaphors in their language.<sup>5</sup> As an intersection between nature and culture, the body may indeed become a phenomenon in both the natural and the human sciences.

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5 African metaphors occur abundantly in African proverbs. Many proverbs relate to the human body and physical, sensorimotor experiences. Here are a few examples, without elaboration.

- Mosadi-tshwene o jewa mabogo (A woman, however ugly, can always be of worth).

Cognitive science denies that reality, divided into categories, exists independently of human minds and bodies. We impose a rational structure on the world. Qualifying the idea of a transcendent, fixed rational categorisation of the world leaves room for different structures, pertaining to different cultures.

Lakoff and Johnson (1999:77) identify a basic level of concepts that arise partly from our motor schemas and our capacity for image formation. Our brains are structured to project patterns from sensorimotor areas to higher cortical areas. The basic level is the highest level at which we have mental images that represent an entire category. It is the level at which most of our knowledge is organised. Metaphysical realism seems to work on this level (Lakoff & Johnson 1999:27-29). Lakoff and Johnson (1997) also identify concepts of colour and spatial relations that link up with basic level concepts (see Lakoff & Johnson 1999:23ff, 30ff). Since these are concepts about what the body does (perception, movement), they infer that the body actually shapes these concepts. The biological perspective and the focus on the importance of our sensorimotor systems explain why our concepts accord so well with the way we function in the world (Lakoff & Johnson 1999:39, 43). We acquire a large store of primary metaphors automatically and unconsciously simply by functioning in the most ordinary ways in the everyday world from our earliest years, and so we all think in terms of hundreds of primary metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson 1999:47, 59). “The cognitive unconscious is intentional, representational, propositional, and hence truth characterizing and causal” (Lakoff & Johnson 1999:116-117).

Lakoff and Johnson give some examples of primary metaphors: affection is warmth (she greeted me warmly); important is big (this is a big day); intimacy is closeness (we had been close for years but were beginning to drift apart); bad is smelly (this movie stinks); difficulties are burdens (I’m weighed down by responsibilities); categories are containers (are tomatoes in the fruit or the vegetable category?); similarity is closeness (these colours aren’t quite the same, but they’re close); help is support (support your church); time is motion (time flies); change is motion (lately my car has gone from bad to worse); purposes are destinations (he’s progressing well, but he isn’t there yet); knowing is seeing (I see what you mean); understanding is

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- Matlho ke dila ga a je sa motho (Eyes can see/look, but do not harm). The implication is that other organs can do harm.
  - Lefoko ga le boe, go boa monwana (A pointed finger can be retracted but not words once they have been spoken).
  - Ga go nko e etswang lemina (The nose is not running). Nothing is happening. When the nose runs, at least there is some action.

grasping (I grasp your meaning). In all these examples the sensorimotor experience is the source network and the subjective judgment is the target network. The inferences flow from the sensorimotor domain to the domain of abstract, subjective experience via neural connections (Lakoff & Johnson 1999:56).

Primary metaphors are building blocks for more complex metaphors like 'love is a journey'. The neural connectivity of the brain makes it natural for complex metaphorical mappings to be built out of pre-existing mappings, starting with primary metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson 1999:64). The primary metaphors, 'a relationship is an enclosure' and 'intimacy is closeness', can be combined to form the complex metaphor 'an intimate relationship is a close enclosure'. Given that in this metaphor lovers are travellers, the most natural close enclosure is a vehicle of some sort. This results in the complex metaphor, 'love is a journey'. Love is a journey; the lovers are travellers; their common life goals are destinations; the relationship is a vehicle; and difficulties are impediments to motion. This conceptual metaphor is reflected in the following conventional expressions: look how far we've come together; it's been a long, bumpy road; we can't turn back now; we're at the crossroads; we're heading in different directions; we may have to go our separate ways; the relationship is not going anywhere; we're spinning our wheels; the marriage has run out of gas; our relationship is off track; the marriage is on the rocks; our ship is sinking; we're trying to keep the relationship afloat. These are metaphoric idioms. They come with a conventional mental image and knowledge about that image. They map the source domain knowledge onto the target domain knowledge (Lakoff & Johnson 1999:68). These conventional mental images are shared by a large proportion of the speakers of a language.

The importance of this is that recognition of the embodied mind, cognitive unconscious and metaphoric nature of thought can be used to replace conventional, disembodied scientific realism with embodied scientific realism. Embodied realism rejects a strict subject-object dichotomy, since we are linked to the world through embodied interactions (Lakoff & Johnson 1999:93). Consequently embodied truth is not absolute or objective. It accords with how people use the word 'true', namely relative to their understanding. Embodied truth is also not purely subjective, since embodiment prevents that. As we have similar embodied basic-level and spatial-relations concepts, there will be an enormous range of shared truths. Social and cultural truths should also be viewed in this light.

**Conclusion**

Cognitive science does not discriminate between cultures. Neither is it determined by preconceived notions like Euro- or Afro-centrism. It challenges traditional ways of doing cultural anthropology. Viewed thus, cross-cultural communication is not an unattainable ideal. On this level of thought we can begin to speak about universals without disregarding the contextual and contingent. What needs to be done is to investigate the ways conceptual metaphors operate in different cultures; how they influence perceptions and worldviews; how they are reflected in research. African languages have a host of proverbs for living, most of them containing physically grounded metaphors. These could contribute to the corpus of examples of how physical experiences influence the way we think and do science.

One cannot generalise about Africa and Africans: we must look at the particularity of each Africa country and African person. At same time one cannot disregard the universal dimension in which all countries and human beings exist. One such dimension is spirituality. That is a hallmark of African cultures: one way or another they are all intensely spiritual. While most apparent in indigenous belief systems, it permeates African community life as a whole. It is sufficiently important to warrant a chapter on its own.



## Chapter 6

### African spirituality and the poverty of Western religious experience

#### Introduction: a new relationship between two worlds

Western oriented<sup>1</sup> religion is in flux. Cultural shifts, the influence of pluralism, critique of rationalism and modernism, and awareness of the simultaneous validity of different viewpoints are all contributing to a process of decline and rebirth. This need not be a bad thing. Evolution inevitably entails entropy (deterioration and complexification). The demise of a culture may be attributed to inherent weakness or may be seen as the exact opposite – as prerequisite for the birth and growth of a new civilisation.

The dynamics of growth, reinterpretation and redefinition is a hallmark of African religious and cultural development. We are all<sup>2</sup> in a process of cultural mutation. This includes white and black Christianity in South Africa. There has always been dynamic interaction between religion and the political powers of the day. Although the post-apartheid government is neutral towards religion, its very existence will dramatically influence black Christianity, especially the much neglected African Initiated Churches<sup>3</sup> (AICs). There is a new estimation of African primal religion and its influence

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- 1 It is difficult not to use generic terms and to avoid generalising when dealing with subjects such as African and Western oriented religion. We do so in full awareness of the complexity of the theme, the plurality of legitimate views and the contextual nature of ideas. The distinction between Western and African oriented religion, or Afrocentrism and Eurocentrism, is almost too imprecise to be useful. Not only is it impossible to distinguish strictly between Africa and the West, but no 'pure' Afrocentric or European theology is possible. In writing on the subject we need to analyse these and many other terms, so that we may fine-tune arguments, allow for exceptions to the rule, relativise absolutes and prevent misunderstanding. We shall do so as far as possible.
  - 2 This chapter deals with all the mainline Christian traditions, predominantly white but also black, African Initiated Churches (AICs) and African Traditional Religions (ATRs). AICs are classified into Ethiopian (smallest group), Zionist (largest group) and Apostolic AICs. They attract increasing numbers of black members of Western mainline churches. In 1950 75-80% of all black South African Christians were members of mainline churches, as opposed to 12-14% in the AICs. By 1991 the proportions were 41% and 36%. Nearly 20% of black South Africans belong to ATRs, according to Oosthuizen (1995:25-28,37).
  - 3 One must agree with Chidester's (1989:20) protest against the idea that AICs represent a syncretism of African and Western worldviews. A Western worldview could equally well be seen as a syncretism of other worldviews.

on African Christianity.<sup>4</sup> Indigenisation of African Christianity still has a long way to go. In the words of Bujo (1995:6), “This means that the church in black Africa cannot refrain from becoming black African. Africa is expecting a child, i.e. the local church, which will certainly be given to us, and it will be a *black* child.”

Cultural reinterpretation is, for many, an almost spiritual process. It entails insecurity, adaptation to new ideas and a new way of living, causing fear, even anger. Christian spirituality plays an important role in this process, as it concerns people’s most basic relationships. It seems to be a key factor in reconciliation, especially between different Christian churches in this country. It does, however, take time to create a climate in which people can adapt their thoughts, values and skills, adjust to a new situation and find a new mindset.

Whites must come to terms with the fact that Christianity in South Africa is predominantly a non-Western religion (Bediako 1995:viii). Western theology, as taught at universities, serves a minority of Christians in the country. This has to change.

Spirituality is basic to African primal religions, AICs and black mainline churches. African Christian spirituality has its own identity and is closely interwoven with African customs and thought. In the past Western theological hegemony led to paternalistic condescension, if not outright questioning of the legitimacy of African theologies. This is changing because of the new understanding and appraisal of African primal religions with their vibrant and powerful spirituality.<sup>5</sup> We are entering an era in which interaction between African and Western theology will be radically redefined. New openness on the side of traditional mainline Christianity and new confidence on the part of black Christianity will determine future coexistence.

In the past African theologians often contrasted African spirituality with the materialistic West. Edward Blyden (in a book published as early as 1901 and quoted by Bediako 1995:11-12) referred to the increasing materialism of Europe and to people who have lost touch with the spiritual world.

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4 Western Christianity here refers to all white and black mainline churches. African or black Christianity refers to AICs as well as black Christian adherents of mainline traditions.

5 It may be argued that African spirituality is not comparable with Western Christian spirituality, because the former concerns the spirit world of the ancestors, which is totally absent in the West. This ancestral spirit world has been assimilated into African Christianity to such an extent that the two are inseparable and African spirituality must be accepted as a genuinely indigenised form. Here I take ‘spirituality’ to mean the energy generated in the relationship with the Other/other in the holistic context of life, which includes one’s immediate circumstances. Skhakhane (1995:105) identifies the following meanings of the word ‘spirit’ in African tradition: wind; breath; qualities of, or human disposition towards, evil and good; elements which influence a society for the worse; and possession by an ancestor.

Blyden saw Africa as the spiritual conservatory of the world: "... when the civilised nations, in consequence of their wonderful material development, shall have their spiritual perceptions darkened and their spiritual susceptibilities blunted through the agency of a captivating and absorbing materialism, it may be that they have to resort to Africa recover some of the simple elements of faith."

The source of African spirituality seems to be African primal religions. In the history and phenomenology of religions Bediako (1995:105) sees them as both primary and prior, in that they are the most basic or fundamental religious forms in the overall history of humankind. Having preceded and contributed to other religious systems, they represent a common religious heritage.

When we speak of recovering ATR the idea is not that it should replace existing church structures or supersede established Christianity. What we have in mind is coexistence and enrichment of present-day religious practices. As the EATWOT declaration (*The statement* 1992) puts it, indigenous people have always been deeply spiritual and as their cultures re-examine Christianity in terms of their own traditions and struggles, they can greatly enrich the churches and their theologies: they manifest other faces of God which, through the ages, have been known to native peoples but were not appreciated by Western churches.

The African renaissance project wishes to recover Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), of which ATR forms an important part. This is not indicative of a general reappraisal of ATR in Southern Africa. But renewed interest in African religion goes beyond the reality of a changed political scene, evidenced by the fact that ATR is increasingly mentioned as the power behind the growth of Christianity in Africa, especially the AICs. Disillusionment with Western modernity<sup>6</sup> is another motive for fresh interest in African religion. Many African theologians are aware of the contribution African religion can make in their field. Despite persistent economic and political challenges a new religious vibrancy is discernible.

Serequeberhan (1994:37-38) makes the point that the aim of delving into African thought and life is not to return to some true, uncontaminated, pristine African *arche* – if that were possible or even desirable – but to make possible the autonomous and thus authentic historicity of African existence in

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6 The works of AS Van Niekerk (1992) and T Sono (1994) seek to describe African religion from a modernistic, exclusively Western perspective. This reflects the approach of most white missionaries of all denominations. Maluleke (1995:4-6) describes Van Niekerk's work as bearing all the marks of an embittered 'native-expert missionary' who has failed dismally in his mission.

the modern world. The aim is not to find the roots of African spirituality, as if this were possible for any religion, but to help us understand present factors operative in the African worldview and spirituality better.

### **African identity**

There is a new quest for African identity, prompted by the realisation that Africa has a very special power of its own which must be recovered and nurtured. The primal religions are very much part of this, hence they are pertinent to the excavation for roots.<sup>7</sup> Not that primal African religion must be promoted artificially at the expense of other forms of black religiosity, but the influence of ATRs must be recognised and appreciated.

Africa was not a-religious before the advent of Christianity. Its 'religion' can be termed 'African spirituality'. African spirituality differs from most mainline religions in the sense that it encompasses society and all aspects related to it like nature, health, the ancestors, and so forth. Africans accepted Christianity, not because of the inadequacy of their own religion, but because they could accommodate it without much tension. Accommodation of Christianity is more than what is known as acculturation,<sup>8</sup> which is often no more than a euphemism for Western religious imperialism. If the outcome does not meet Western expectations, it is branded syncretism. How far must African religion go in its interaction with Christianity before it becomes unacceptable? Why is it always a one-way traffic from Christianity to Africa, without contemplating a reverse influence of African religion on Christianity? The ongoing process of inculturation in the West, for example, is not seen as ongoing 'inculturation' but as secularism, New Age or post-modernism. These trends are not accepted as legitimate, because Christianity is considered unchangeable. Acculturation means that there is a core, a standard, against which cultural interaction can and must be measured. That

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7 'Finding one's roots' has become a metaphor for the search for belonging, identity, values and for reaction against the past when these roots were belittled. But finding one's roots is not easy. Digging up stories from the past, reviving ancestor cults, re-experiencing the collective unconscious may sound romantic, but the actual exercise could well be determined by current ideas, interests and longings rather than real desire to uncover the past. Not that one should discard these roots – and often they are not buried all that deep. Many African Christians have become religious schizophrenics, publicly rejecting traditional religion yet continuing its practices (see Skhakhane 1995:102).

8 Lapointe (1995:39) gives two definitions:

- Inculturation is the genuine and original response that a given culture makes to the first and the on-going proclamation of the gospel.
- Inculturation is a process undergone by a culture receiving and accepting the gospel, which acts as an endogenous factor and transforms it from within.

core is seen to be immutable, eternal truth. Yet there are many such ‘cores’, and they all influence the interaction.

Current definitions of acculturation and inculturation have to be broadened to incorporate the idea of cross-culturation, in the sense that the ‘recipient religion’ is not the only one that changes but that the imported new religion will also change in the process. Although this should have been implicit in the processes of acculturation and inculturation, it was not what happened in practice. Acculturation (the gospel is accepted unchanged) and inculturation (the gospel is adapted to the indigenous culture) meant that a religion like Christianity was reinterpreted in a different cultural context. These terms referred to the reinterpretation process in the receiving culture, implying that the missionary culture remained uninfluenced. White African Christians accept that black Africans will reinterpret Christianity but expect their own reinterpretations to remain unaffected. That is not possible if there is real engagement and exposure. Cross-culturation implies reciprocal influencing. When *cultures* and *truths* have contact it is *people* who meet and influence each other, not abstract, anonymous ideas or truths. Like any dynamic relationship, it changes all parties involved.

But the process is *natural* and legitimate only if people meet as equals with mutual openness and respect. In colonial history this did not happen, because white Christians saw African traditions and culture as inferior with nothing to offer, and themselves as possessing the ‘ultimate truth’, which had to be normative for all without any need for reinterpretation or change. Such an attitude precludes openness, hence credible engagement between people. The mentality of white superiority was – and to a large extent still is – informed by the Western modernistic worldview, which accepts that Western ideas, being based on science and technology (i.e. ‘truth’), are normative. That mentality is changing. Scholars of religion have come to realise that Western culture has its limitations, which includes the relativity of its presuppositions, the contingency of its views and the cultural dependence of its truths. This leads to new openness to otherness, accepting what is not familiar to one’s own customs and thought. In a multicultural society one has to recognise a multiplicity of influences operating simultaneously.

Openness and accommodation do not mean that valid differences may not be maintained. The aim is not that one set of ideas should totally replace another, but that both sets change through their interaction. Growth and development are normally triggered by outside influences, which presupposes openness to such influences. That is what evolution means. Openness to different cultures and ideas creates new levels of complexity and meaning, which open up new understanding and initiate a different kind of interaction. This ‘coming of age’ has also affected African thinkers decisively.

In the past and to this day Africa experiences itself as a rejected Third World country. But a new theology is growing in the African womb, and this time a legitimate child will be born. Before this birth can be fully celebrated, Africa will have to determine its own identity. Promotion of African spirituality will further this cause. This is no easy road. As John Waliggo (1992:170-174) puts it, there is one single root cause of Africa's suffering and that is rejection, both by powerful outsiders and insiders.

When Christianity first came to sub-Saharan Africa in the late 15th century its theology soon sanctioned rejection of Africa by supporting the enslavement of Africans. In the early 16th century when, after a thousand years of isolation, Christian Ethiopia received its first Western missionaries, they rejected its Christianity as heretical and listed a hundred errors in it. In the 17th century South African blacks were rejected as children of Ham, and so things continued throughout the colonial period. In the late 1960s, when African theologies were emerging, they were rejected by Jean Daniélou (quoted by Waliggo) as unorthodox and opposed to 'universal' theology. Waliggo ends by asking whether a white Christ can accept and liberate black Africans.

The Third Assembly of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), which met in Nairobi in January 1992, verbalised its views as follows: "The poor and marginalised groups have discovered their collective power and the impact of their corporate cry for life is opening avenues for their participation in decision-making processes" (*The statement* 1992). What the document makes clear is that African theologians are determined to establish their own religious identity in opposition to Christianity, which is often identified with Western ideals and power assaults on Africa, as happened under colonial rule and apartheid. "The indigenous people cry out to be seen and recognised, not through the images of Western mirrors, but through their own proper mirror so that others might see them as they really are and want to be" (*The statement* 1992).

After mentioning what is called a new global coalition that controls the world economy, politics and information, *The Statement* claims that this world order is anti-people and anti-life, while the spirituality and hope of the black poor lie in the power to say 'no' to death and 'yes' to life. The religious identity of Africa is formed in opposition to the ethics, free-market economy, liberal democracy and life-endangering lifestyle of the West. The oppressed in Africa are seen as a great source of new life and energy. They have a life-giving force which is limitless. This is linked, however, to a demand for their traditional rights to the land and their religio-cultural identities, which constitute this great reservoir of life. No tradition can be restored to its former

glory, but those elements which still appeal and are carriers of the people's present worldview must be cultivated. (*The statement* 1992).

The question is, how can Africa's human resources and vibrant energy be fully understood and made productive for the cultural and economic benefit of the continent – if at all? What do 'no' to death and 'yes' to life imply? 'No' to a market economy, liberal democracy, global control but 'yes' to some productive economic system, some workable form of government, some form of control? All this has to be worked out.

The religious sector which seems to have come to grips with its identity most effectively in Southern Africa is the AICs. They have resolved the dualism between Western-oriented Christianity and African traditional culture and religion. A similar mental and spiritual decolonisation process is urgently needed in other African churches (Oosthuizen 1995:29). People feel at home with Christianity when they feel that it does not alienate them from themselves or interfere with their identity (Skhakhane 1995:103).

Wiredu (1992b:67ff) points out that African Christians are tardy in reassessing Christian doctrine, because they are caught up in the Western conceptual scheme that forms the basis of Christianity. The specific content of these concepts was determined in the course of Western cultural development. They must be reconsidered and given African content. He says: "As far as concepts such as 'Being'/'existence', 'Entity', 'Nothingness', 'Substance', 'Quality', 'Truth', 'Fact', 'Reality', 'Matter', 'Body', 'Mind', 'Person', 'Space', 'Punishment', and 'Free Will' are concerned, we might as well be called Europeans." The same could be said of Western Christians, who have lived for many centuries in Africa without giving an authentically African content to concepts formed in a European context. One suspects that the question of their African theological identity has been suppressed by white theologians who, perhaps, have not yet fully arrived in Africa.

### **Africa's roots in the primal religions**

It took centuries for Western Christianity to realise that it could lay no claim to the success of Christianity in Africa. African Christianity did not mirror Western theological squabbles, or simply duplicate European cultural values as reflected in its Christian ethics, or reproduce the Western socio-political mindset.<sup>9</sup> The success of Christianity in Africa took the West by surprise.

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9 The British (around 1843) were so impressed with the Sierra Leonean, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, and the way he mastered the English language and principles that they thought him a fine example of the success of missionary endeavour. The aim of missionary work in

However, it was not attributable to missionary work and grand missionary conferences, but to the continent's primal religious background. It was a significant factor in the way Christianity was accepted, experienced and indigenised (Bediako 1995:192).

According to Bediako (1995:204, 206-207) Africans' frustration with European paternalism and missionary control encouraged the formation of AICs. These churches were free from inner dependence on European tokens of grace or favour. African Christians developed their own responses to the Christian gospel. Not what Western missionaries did, but what Africans did has proved the more enduring element in the making of 20th century Christian Africa.

### **Poverty of Western religious experience**

In the early centuries of Christianity theology was equated with spirituality in the sense that both were expressive of *imitatio Christi*. By the 14th century the two were drifting apart, to the detriment of both. The solidity and energy of theological thought depend on the spiritual experience that supports it. Theology which is not located in the experience of faith turns into a kind of religious metaphysics (Gutiérrez 1984:36-38).

Although Western Christianity undeniably has a solid spiritual core, there are many signs that spiritual claims exceed spiritual experiences. Development in theologies, in customs at grassroots level, and an interest in Eastern and other forms of mysticism have been mentioned as symptoms of Western religious poverty. It is generally ascribed to cultural changes in the West since the Enlightenment with its emphasis on reason. The accent on human beings as rational, autonomous individuals led to a closed worldview and inhibited dependence on God, belief in the miraculous and a sense of awe and wonder. The notion of Western spiritual poverty should be seen in a cultural rather than a moral context. One could expect that the West will at some stage affirm the need for a spirituality that suits the new context.

### **Western spirituality in Africa**

The spirituality of white Christians in Southern Africa may be expected largely to mirror that of the West. Western spirituality is often criticised for being inward-directed and individualistically oriented, without relating to the suffering world we live in. For a long time the Western spirituality of wealthy white South Africans was profiled against a background of black poverty,

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future had to be to produce more like him. An African clergyman and an English clergyman should be identical in everything but colour (Bediako 1995:198-199).

black oppression and black religion. From a suffering Third World perspective Westerners' detached practice of religion seems corrupt. Such a spirituality is said to have no power and therefore Africans are not surprised when Westerners look to Eastern religions, new cosmology, astrology, occult phenomena and the like for new forms of religious experience. If applied ethics is to be the barometer of Western faith, it shows preoccupation with self-centred, self-righteous, often artificial interests, while the suffering of Africa is mostly taken for granted, giving the impression that ideas are more important than people.

White spirituality must be linked to the physical realities of this country. Although spirituality may not be misused for a political or any other cause, it cannot be without a cause or some direct involvement. Gutiérrez (1984:30-32) tells how Latin Americans rediscovered their spirituality through commitment to a cause. Contact with the poor made Christians reread their own spirituality and re-experience it through the world of those who suffered. "The faith and hope in the God of life that provides a shelter in the situation of death and the struggle for life in which the poor and oppressed in Latin America are now living – this is the well from which we must drink if we want to be faithful to Jesus" (Gutiérrez 1984:32). Africa has much to offer on the level of spirituality. An open mind to, and real involvement in, the continent are preconditions if one wishes to benefit by that spirituality.

### **African spirituality**

The African spirituality that informs the religious activities of the majority of South Africans certainly does not fit the strict definition of Western-oriented Christians. It is imperative, however, for Christians of all denominations to accept that there are more ways of experiencing God, worshipping Christ, finding meaning and celebrating community life than a narrow doctrinal approach allows. Only through exposure to other forms of worship and spiritual interaction will we benefit from each other and become mutual sources of spirituality. Spirituality can be a common denominator uniting Western and African Christianity. African spirituality with its component of African primal religious ideas may turn out to be the force that unites the many African churches divided by Western missionary activities.

African spirituality as expressed by black theologians (*The statement* 1992) is the experience of the Holy Spirit moving us and our communities to be life-giving and life-affirming. African Christians celebrate their spirituality in songs, rituals and symbols, which show the energising Spirit animating the community to move together in response to God. All existence is

spiritual. Their way of life as Third World peoples is spiritual. African spirituality recognises the 'personhood' of all things in creation and therefore deeply respects nature. People are rooted in nature and live a life of interdependence with the rest of creation.

The ancestors are a key to understanding African spirituality, as they are for most Africans the true fulfilment of life (Skhakhane 1995:107).

African spirituality is closely linked to the existential needs of a people struggling to overcome oppression, poverty, exploitation and dehumanisation. In the words of the EATWOT theologians (*The statement* 1992), "it involves people's resistance to dehumanization and fulfils the quest for self-discovery, self-affirmation and self-inclusion, for in each of us in the whole human community is the urge to live fully as human beings".

### **Spiritual elements of African worldview and religion**

A worldview, according to Chidester (1989:16, 20), is not simply a way of seeing or a way of thinking, but a multidimensional network of strategies for negotiating person and place in a world of discourse, practice and association. One should be careful, however, when making general claims about the essential nature of a worldview, because worldviews are open-ended processes of negotiation and renegotiation. In the case of African worldviews the emphasis should be on what it means to be human. Consequently factors like ubuntu, the ancestor cult and temporal and spatial dynamics in embodiment should receive attention. These factors are integrally part of a lifestyle and are also in a state of flux.

We now pay closer attention to ubuntu and community life, the forefathers and the concept of power, which are all basic to the African worldview.

### **Ubuntu and community life**

African spirituality hinges on belonging. People belong to the soil (in Shona belief and language *vhu* [soil] symbolises the ancestors; see Manley 1995). People belong to one another. People and ancestors belong together. Without this sense of belonging a human is more than half dead (Alt 1995:116).

Ubuntu means participating in a common humanity (see Shutte 1993:46-51). In Africa a person is identified by her interrelationships and not primarily by individual qualities. The community identifies the person, not the person the community. His identity is his place in the community. In Africa the axiom is, 'I participate, therefore I am' (Shutte 1993:47).

Although Africans are as individual as anyone else, they are rarely individualistic in the Western sense. The extended family, at any rate in rural parts, is still a very real force in most African communities.<sup>10</sup> Human life exists only by being shared. This naturally incorporates the extended family, where life is shared with all for whom you have to take responsibility. Consequently the accent is on consensus and reconciliation. Talking till unanimity is reached is the hallmark of African democracy – which explains the resistance to an adversarial style of multiparty government (Shutte 1993:50). African religion reconciles opposites. It does not have a dualistic approach to life and the divine (Alt 1995:115).

Post-Enlightenment Christianity, by contrast, favours the individual. While confessing the communion of saints, most congregations grapple with the atomism, autonomy and independence of their members. Modernism is built on individual success, competition, a metaphysics and an anthropology of violence (Middleton & Walsh 1995:49-50). Although post-modernism claims to have decentred the autonomous self, it is not clear what, if anything, has replaced this centre. Nor does it follow that community life will be restored. The implications of the decentred self are that Western and African individuals are now influenced by a multiplicity of factors outside themselves. The Western individual has lost the autonomy the African individual never had. Not that they are now in an identical situation: Western individuals are conscious of being determined by a plurality of factors which are all relative to their specific context, while the African individual still enjoys to a large extent fixed values and a fixed truth, community life and customs. While the determinants of the experience of African spirituality are intact, to the nomadic Westerner they are lost.

### **Forefathers**

Veneration of forefathers is the best known and most powerful feature of African religion and spirituality. African ancestor cults have a remarkably uniform structure, and have been well assimilated into Christianity. Christ, by virtue of his incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension into the realm of spirit power, is seen as the Supreme Ancestor. Because the ancestors remain essentially human, and are no different after death from what they were in

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<sup>10</sup> The emphasis on communitarianism should not be seen as excluding the place of the individual. The difference is that individual identity is determined by the individual's place and role in society. Some African societies are more individualistic than others like the Akan of Ghana, the Kikuyu of Kenya and the Sukuma of Tanzania.

life, they cannot become Christ's rivals<sup>11</sup> (Bediako 1995:85, 217-218; Skhakhane 1995:107-110). An ancestor is not a nebulous being or personified mystical presence but has a name and an identity, encapsulated in the totem system.<sup>12</sup>

People do not pray to their ancestors.<sup>13</sup> The ancestor is invited to participate in a ceremony. A welcoming address is given, explaining the invitation, and then prayers are said to introduce the event for which the invitation was issued. The idea is that the ancestor participates in these prayers, directed to deities or the Supreme God (Bediako 1995:220-221).

Bediako (1995:223-230) proposes a theology of the ancestors, integrating it with the doctrine of the communion of saints. Remarkably, this doctrine is used to indicate that Christ was accepted into the local African situation, not because the missionaries introduced him in cross-cultural contact, but because Christ had already been anticipated by Africans. He was already present in the situation and then called his messengers (the missionaries – CWdT) so that, through their proclamation, he could be made ('fully' – CWdT) manifest (Bediako 1995:226). Of course, one can discern parallels between various aspects of different cultures. Whether they are really reconcilable is a moot point. Thus the salience of blood in African culture is comparable with Old Testament sacrificial practices and the New Testament emphasis on Christ's blood and sacrifice, as well as the symbolic significance of his body and blood in the eucharist. Comparisons have at most metaphoric value, because the developmental history of symbols vary from one religion, culture and era to the next.

### **Life-force, the power that determines life: a holistic approach**

Life-force is analogous to the Western concept of being, albeit not being in and for itself but as integrated with the totality of life.<sup>14</sup> A relational ontology describes this force better than a substantialist ontology. The origin of all

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11 Thus the ancestors are venerated, not worshipped. The veneration of Mary and the saints in Catholic doctrine is often cited as an analogy.

12 In an African context every human being has a totem (similar to, but not identical with, Western surnames), to preserve exogamy. It is integral to the person's identity and the connection with the ancestors. Thus women do not acquire their husbands' totems when they marry.

13 This is debatable. In spite of many similarities, African religions do differ. What is simply veneration or praying to the ancestors in one context is adoration of and prayer to the ancestors in another (see Lapointe 1995:40-43).

14 Without dwelling on the subject we could mention Western life-force thinkers: Schopenhauer's accent on the will; Bergson's *élan vital*; Nietzsche's will to power. Some of Bergson's ideas were linked to the African concept of life force by missionaries like Placide Tempels.

force, like the origin of the universe, is God. This force binds the universe and humans together in an intimate ontological relationship. The force of everything, especially living things, is continually waxing or waning. Human beings constantly influence each other, directly or indirectly, by way of the ancestors. The dead play a very important role in the universe of forces, and continue to interact causally with the living (Shutte 1993:52-54).

This force is the power behind spirituality. Without it spirituality would be dead. When it integrates humans with their fellow humans, nature and God, then spirituality flourishes. African spirituality, unlike Western spirituality, depends entirely on the other to be realised. Any act of separating oneself from others (through prayer, meditation, fasting or silence) negates the spiritual force of Africa. Spirituality reaches fruition only when one is linked into the causal chain that binds the individual, community, ancestors, nature and God together in a holistic force field. Western spirituality is fractured, diversified, decentred and individual. Westerners experience this as alienation. They have lost their awareness, their feeling of belonging and integration. They have lost their self, have become estranged from their own life force and potentialities.

For Africans the aim of life is to experience and enhance life force and become part of it. Anything that diminishes this force is evil and anything that increases it is good. In these terms apartheid was not experienced as a discriminatory political ideology, but as the evil that snatched life force away from black Africans and killed their spirituality by breaking up their community life, dividing their families, ridiculing the ancestor cult and isolating individuals. Not that post-apartheid society is benevolent to African spirituality. Not only are many of the legacies of apartheid still intact, but socially atomising forces like technology and the free market system are gaining ground.

Africans do not make the same strict division as Westerners between sacred and secular. Life is more unified, more integrated. In primal cultures reality is a network of interrelated spiritual forces, which do not restrict themselves to some terrain of life. The forefathers' presence is experienced in everyday situations. Social, psychological, religious, political and cultural aspects are all interwoven with the religious and the secular. In the traditional African world nothing is profane.

Westerners, by contrast, experience their lives as compartmentalised. The transcendent is barely discernible in the hurly-burly of everyday life. Westerners operate mostly with an immanent, closed, scientific worldview, governed by cause and effect. Spirituality, if it features at all, is confined to a carefully structured, rational worship session once a week. There is, however,

growing recognition that the secular is not so irreligious and the mundane not always rationally explicable – a fact which primal Africans take for granted.

### **Symbols of spirituality**

Contact and conflict between, and confluence of, worldviews are not chemical combinations of ‘essences’, but dramatic occasions for fresh negotiations in the symbolic arena. Symbols play a tremendously important role in worldviews. They help to carve human identity and a place for that person to stand as a human being.<sup>15</sup> Symbolic negotiation is a battlefield of symbols in which competing claims to ownership are contested. Rejection of African symbols was a familiar strategy employed by Christian colonisers. It was reinforced by subtle co-optation, through which forces of coercion or persuasion effectively alienated Africans from their traditional symbolic ground (Chidester 1989:22).

Among these symbols are the Bible, the land, community, water, healing, and religious rites, which we consider briefly.

#### *The Bible*

In South Africa the battle over the Bible – appropriated by apartheid ideologues, liberation theologians, AICs and a host of others – is one of conflicting claims to legitimate ownership (Chidester 1989:22).

Bujo (1995:7) reclaims the Bible from theologians and clergy and returns it to the people. “The question,” he says, “is who must govern the word. According to the black African consultation model, it must not be interpreted by centralized leadership, but only in community, i e by listening to one another. Not only the individual, but the church community in its manifold variety of members who have various functions and charisms is the place for interpreting God’s word. The African consultation model completes and corrects the individualistic Western-Roman ecclesiology which tends to ascribe competency in decision-making and interpretation to the church magisterium.” For him the African understanding of the family must become the basis of church life in Africa (Bujo 1995:6).

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15 Chidester (1989:21-22, 25) sees religion (or religious worldview) as the cultural process of the ‘stealing back and forth’ of sacred symbols. Stealing back and forth the sacred symbols of land, river, mountain, healing, sacrifice, dreams, ancestors and God has been one front on which AICs have negotiated power in competition with traditional African religion. Perhaps the free market is a better image than that of stealing. The religious world is a battlefield, and this battle is fought between different denominations, traditions and religions. The product best adapted to market needs and interests normally sells better in the long run and is soon followed by similar products.

In a sense the Bible is less of a problem to Africans than to white modernists. The Bible with its miracles, blessings and curses, divine interventions, exorcism of devils, resurrection from the dead, sharing the means of survival and so on fits remarkably well into the African primal worldview. It plays an important role, even among the illiterate.<sup>16</sup>

### *Land*

African spirituality is closely tied up with land. Land is the link to the forefathers, to tradition and life. Alienating people from their land causes spiritual, sometimes physical death. Violation of their space and place violates the very spiritual values that hold them together. African life force is rooted in the soil (*The statement* 1992). Land is thus a religious symbol designating belonging, community and identity. For the AICs the question 'Who owns Christianity?' recedes before the more immediate question 'Who owns Africa?'

Manley (1995:42-53) draws attention to the fact that the Western concept of title deeds is alien, if not blasphemous to the African concept of land. For the Shona in Zimbabwe, blood links human beings to the soil in an intimate identification. The soil cannot be owned. It belongs to the people; it is a free gift like life itself, bestowed by Musikavanhu, the creator God. After birth the umbilical cord is buried, thus literally 'rooting' the infant in the ancestral soil. The ancestors *are* the soil by virtue of their blood that sank into it. The chief is a guardian of the land, he does not own it. These values obviously oppose the Western view of land tenure, in which production and profit are the only prerequisites for successful ownership. Part of black land tenure is the system of traditional leadership. Although authoritarian, it serves the basic interests of those communities. Self-determination remains a key term and implies some degree of sustainability.

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16 West (1994:15-25) conducted what he calls a 'contextual Bible study' at grassroots level among ordinary people. The aim is to read the Bible from the perspective of the poor and oppressed of South Africa, to read it in the community with others (particularly from contexts other than one's own), to read it critically and to be committed to individual and social transformation through contextual Bible study. The ideological nature of the Bible and its interpretations is recognised and readers are helped to develop critical tools for their own analysis and interpretation. This method is commendable, because it recognises the place that the Bible and tradition play in local communities and, simultaneously, empowers people by broadening their perspective to include Western ways of reading texts.

*Healing*

While scientific Westerners look at illness rationally, primal people personalise and internalise the forces of evil and look outside the self to discover 'who' caused the illness, 'how' it was caused, and 'for what reason'. Africans often have disturbing dreams and become suspicious when things go wrong in their lives. This is part and parcel of their religious experience (see Alt 1995:122ff).

Some illnesses are said to be sent by the ancestors. Such ritual illness can be cured only by performing rituals. Sickness is often traced to the breakdown of interpersonal relationships. One lives healthily only in a community where everyone strives to maintain healthy relations. The healing process is humanised. Disease is not just a physical or mental condition but has a religious aspect as well. Sickness implies imbalance between the metaphysical and the human world, disturbing the flow of life force. The AICs in particular have a holistic approach to healing, including the healing of human relations on the individual and social levels (see Oosthuizen 1995:32).

Illness and recuperation are spiritual experiences. Of course, illness and healing may be experienced spiritually by Westerners as well, but then on an individual rather than a holistic level: 'God is testing (or teaching) me.' 'I am meant to grow through this experience.' 'God uses modern science to heal.' And so on. This is a very different kind of spirituality. Even among Westerners one often hears complaints that they are not treated as persons, and that their story about their illness is not important to the doctors. Clearly this is a plea for a more humane approach to medicine.

*Religious rites*

Things become real only when individuals experience them ritually in their community. This was evidenced by the emergence of new rituals in South African society during the liberation struggle.

Because harmony and integrity are so important in the African worldview, reconciliation is highly prized. Where there is disagreement or community strife, when the ancestors have been offended or an individual has been bewitched, African life is disrupted and the person may become physically ill. Reconciliation is the only way back to harmony and unity.

Liturgical rites explaining suffering, injustice and oppression have become as important as rites celebrating reconciliation. They are practised in many black churches belonging to the mainline tradition. We cite three examples.

During the struggle years it was common practice for church members to bring tokens of their oppression to the altar and tell their stories.<sup>17</sup> There are also instances where a goat was brought into the congregation, people confessed their transgressions against each other and transferred their guilt to the scapegoat, similar to the scapegoat Azazel in the Old Testament. Such dramatic reconciliatory enactments do not signify disregard of Christ's atoning work – in fact, they confirm it. Thirdly, there is a ritual in which the congregation eats a piece of meat soaked in bile. Eating the bitter meat symbolises sharing each other's suffering. This practice is commonplace in African community life, where a suitor performs the same ritual with the family of his bride-to-be. The act means that the husband will share all life's tribulations with his wife and stay committed to her, and it binds the family together.

Africans celebrate spiritualities across religions, whenever fullness of life and justice are sought (*The statement* 1992).

### **Spirituality and the struggle**

Spirituality is an exceptional super-sensory awareness of a presence. This presence can be designated the Whole, the Transcendent, the Other or God. It can also come from one's interpretation of one's life experience, the life world with all its co-determinants. Spirituality links awareness of this presence with one's lifestyle. It may take the form of a demand on one's energies, the risk of commitment or giving oneself for a cause. Spirituality is inauthentic if it is divorced from life – one's own and other people's.

Awareness of presence is normally enhanced when one's own and other people's suffering and needs make a tremendous impact. This triggers involvement, creativity and transformation. An example is the suffering of the poor and politically oppressed. As Grassow (1991:52) puts it, the struggle for life, the depths of human anguish, and the experience of desolation and oppression are moments of intense spirituality, in which God is sought and discovered.

The South African liberation struggle depended heavily on African spirituality, which provided a support system that unified and strengthened those who suffered and risked their lives. The struggle made it clear that

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<sup>17</sup> In this regard Janzen (1994:181) says that in the 20th century new rituals of affliction have tended to be short-term expressions of desperation. They provided outlets for the pain and social problems of wide segments of the populace. New, permanent cults have arisen around characteristic ills, such as isolated nuclear households in urban settings, divination of problems like unemployment in proletarian settings, success in business, retention of a job or protection of wealth when acquired.

spirituality impinges on every area of life. Edwards (1991:120) speaks of a thoroughly incarnational spirituality that penetrates the whole of life, so that its effect is experienced as a new creation.

One wonders whether struggle spirituality may have dwindled after political liberation. The answer would be negative only if most of the factors that gave rise to this spirituality are still present. Spirituality cannot be neutral and poverty, crime, illiteracy and many other social evils still demand a preferential option for those who suffer (see Gutiérrez 1984:1101).

### **Conflicting worldviews and intersection of spiritualities**

Western and African worldviews undeniably differ. The way we deal with these differences is determined by racial attitudes, preconceptions and beliefs. Compared to the technological accomplishments of the West, Africa remains a slumbering continent. Westerners are sceptical of Africa's ability to attain First World standards, even under very favourable circumstances.

Horton (1993:301-346) makes a distinction – which provoked a storm of protest from African thinkers, and which he subsequently modified – between 'common-sense' or 'everyday' (primary) theory and 'theoretical' (secondary) theory as two levels of thought and discourse. Primary theory does not differ much from one community or culture to the next. In the case of secondary theory, however, differences of emphasis and degree allow startling differences in kind between communities and cultures (Horton 1993:320-321). The Western mechanistic worldview is as foreign to Africans as the African spiritual worldview is to Westerners. There is, however, a strong core of human cognitive rationality common to all cultures on earth. It hinges on the use of theory to explain, predict and control events and on the use of analogical, deductive and inductive inference in the construction and application of theory. Secondary theory depends on primary theory for its resources, although neither is less theoretical than the other. What has led to the high cognitive yields of modern science is simply this 'universal rationality' operating in a particular technological, economic and social setting (Horton 1993:342-343).

If this applies to South Africa where First and Third World rub shoulders every day, it underscores that one world does not really penetrate another. This may be attributed to the history of apartheid, but is certainly more complex than that. The real point is that Horton's secondary theory cannot influence primary theory without real contact and interaction between the primary theories of First and Third World people. Contact in community life, and especially between the spiritualities of these communities, is vital for progress on the level of secondary theory.

The radical differences between Western and African worldviews are evident in their respective theologies. As we have seen, worldviews are dynamic and, depending on the measure of mutual exposure, one would expect significant mutual influencing.<sup>18</sup> ATR has shown remarkable resistance to Western theological influence. The AICs have also maintained the basic tenets of African thought, simultaneously integrating it with Christianity (the Old Testament, Jesus the healer and brother and the Holy Spirit feature prominently). The combination of African traditional thought and Christianity seems to produce a vigorous African spirituality. This makes it an important hermeneutic key to African religious power, which calls for attention. Bediako (1995:161) feels that a theology born of community and spiritual experience can help to restore the theologies of the South (referring to Third World liberation theology), at least their intellectual frame of reference and methodology. The same spirituality that animated liberation theology has the potential to galvanise African theologies in the post-liberation era.

To avoid romanticising individual aspects of African thinking one has to probe it and relate it to all aspects of integrated African life. Comparing African and Western religious thinking remains problematic. One comparative criterion is *metaphor*. Africans often use metaphors to link traditional religion with Christian doctrines. The theology of the ancestors permeates all African religious thinking. They become part of a new metaphor: Christ, the supreme ancestor. The ancestors metaphorically explain the communion of saints and the eucharist. As Bujo (1990:127-128) puts it, the ancestral community, which embraces the living and the dead, is a mystical body. The ancestors are inseparable from the supreme being and creator of all life. Because the centrality of life is the key and because the ancestors teach Africans to master life and make it more abundant, they, like Christ, represent the proto-ancestor. Their teachings become a sacrament, in which their descendants discover history's meaning. The past, in which we are rooted, becomes salvific for the future. Family and community life become metaphors for a wide range of applications. So do the idea of ubuntu, the holistic approach to life, harmony with nature, and so on.

In relating Western theology or spirituality to those of Africa metaphor provides an intermediate field of contact that helps to create understanding and openness. A metaphoric approach does not mean that African traditional thought is seen as a primitive vestment, which must be stripped, Bultmann-style, to reveal a more acceptable, neutral concept. In fact, this approach was what promoted Western rationalism and killed its spirituality.

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<sup>18</sup> Soyinka (1990:53) affirms this with reference to Africa: "The African world-view is not, even by implication, stagnant."

**Conclusion**

African spirituality is inseparably linked with African culture. If it were to become watered down, African culture would mutate. Not that this spirituality does not have the vitality to change and adapt to changed circumstances. Like the world's religions, African spirituality meets the needs of its adherents. The needs may change and new forms of spirituality may emerge to satisfy them. Thus Westerners may feel that African spirituality is in need of such a face-lift to cultivate a mentality amenable to growth and development in a technoscientific environment. But that is for Africans to decide. Their spirituality (including ubuntu) is not a resource to be tapped opportunistically to achieve certain results.

Thus one could argue that the energy generated by the struggle should be used by the youth to get themselves qualifications, by wage earners to share with the unemployed, and by communities to make a concerted effort to speed up reconstruction and development.

Yet we cannot deny that African spirituality grew from poverty and deprivation. Conversely, affluence and the consumer society seemingly stifle the human propensity for spirituality. It does not make poverty a virtue. It still needs to be combated, as India and China are doing successfully. Africa has a long way to go. But in the process it must harness the spiritual life force that has characterised its culture over the ages. In the next chapter we come to grips with the realities of African poverty – its extent, the rhetoric, the statistics, and prospects of overcoming it.

## Chapter 7

### Empowerment of the poor: changing our minds about affluence and poverty

#### Introduction

Poverty seems to invert the evolutionist idea of the survival of the fittest to the survival of the weak, as it appears to have been an abiding presence throughout human history. Although the poor represent the evolutionarily weak, they tenaciously remain on the agenda of the human survival programme. Whatever financial system, economic model, form of government, political order and welfare schemes are in place, poverty persists. But the rhetoric of hope is equally persistent. The poor are always being promised a better future in the form of technology and progress, especially by new governments and opposition parties.

The question is, can we believe that linear progress towards better living conditions is possible? Can new systems be implemented and will they make any real difference? At present the neo-liberal free market system doubts its ability to overcome poverty. The prospects of creating wealth, let alone redistributing it, are not very bright (Taylor 1995:142). Economic reform talk usually centres on normative universal models. The political and economic worlds are closely connected, as the intertwining of economic development and liberal democracy shows. Acceptance of only some universal economic models restricts initiatives taken in an African economic reform endeavour (Fukuyama 1992:125, 205).<sup>1</sup> Economic models of whatever kind or in whatever combination are not a magic wand that does away with poverty. The relevant context, work culture, education, worldview, the country with its natural resources, infrastructure and human capital all play a vital role in effecting change.

It must be kept in mind that pre-1994 South Africa was a low income country where the economic growth rate was below the population growth rate, where the labour absorption capacity of the formal economy was plummeting, and where the gap between the expectations of the poor and the capacity of the economy to satisfy them was widening.

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<sup>1</sup> Fukuyama (1992:205) finds no economic rationale for democracy – if anything, he maintains, democratic politics is a drag on economic efficiency.

Post-1994 the masses expected the new government to actively change their situation. And, with Thabo Mbeki's economic insight and an excellent minister of finance, Trevor Manuel, government indeed achieved a great deal. Millions of houses have been built; water and electricity have been supplied to communities that never enjoyed these amenities in the past; feeding and medical care schemes have been launched; and there have been attempts at job creation.

Yet despite these initiatives the overall picture remains gloomy and, as will be seen below, the actual number of poor people has grown. Government's insistence that state and parastatal institutions, business, NGOs, and every sector of society concern themselves with poverty initially met with agreement, but contributions by these sectors are not having the anticipated impact. The high crime rate<sup>2</sup> is linked to poverty and is aggravated by rapid migration of poor people from rural areas to the cities. The politicised poor had high expectations of change, are acutely conscious of past injustices and demand reparation.

In 2008/2009 the economic recession had no more than a moderate impact on the South African economy thanks to its healthy banking sector and activity in the construction industry prior to the world cup soccer event in 2010. Despite this the unemployment remains unchanged and little has come of the ANC's election promise to create half a million jobs before the end of 2009. This is partly because the mines had to lay off thousands of workers as a result of the recession. Cosatu for its part is demanding that BEE should be applied more stringently – which would not create any new jobs but merely replace white employees with black ones. Can fresh, creative thinking alter the situation or do harsh economic realities unavoidably entail stagnation?

### **Deconstructing poverty talk**

Definitions of poverty are determined by presuppositions, which vary from context to context (see Alcock 1993:57-74). One would expect an economist, a natural scientist, a social scientist, a politician and a theologian to approach poverty differently. Needs differ from one society and one individual to the next. This influences one's view of absolute and relative poverty. Individual or social definitions of what standard of living represents poverty are always value judgments. A theory of poverty depends in part on a theory of wealth

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2 Crime cannot always be attributed to poverty. In many countries crime was rife during times of recession and expansion alike (Blackwell & Seabrook 1993:59). In South Africa crime is often the only option open to the poor, who normally cite unemployment to justify their deeds. The extent of white collar crime proves that greed, materialism and a high standard of living also cause crime.

(Townsend 1993:119, 121). Poverty should be approached holistically, which includes interdisciplinary, intercultural, international and interfaith involvement.

How serious is poverty talk? The affluent are philosophical about poverty, religiously, capitalistically or socialistically minded – but seldom really serious. It may help to deconstruct poverty talk and analyse the underlying perceptions. Our perceptions of poverty and affluence are to a large extent determined by the media, especially advertising agencies, which have not merely had a hand in shaping them but have also come to embody them. What the media say about money and the market determines our perceptions and decisions – they manipulate our behaviour. The media mediate between consumers and the financial system in determining theories, perceptions and ideas about money. The term ‘market’ not only refers to a set of economic relationships, but embraces an approach to social life in its entirety (Dodd 1995:3,16). Poverty talk is thus not at all unimportant. It reflects opinions and sentiments which are integral to economic talk as such.

Poverty talk revolves around definitions and analyses of poverty, causes of and remedies for poverty. It is discussed ‘in terms of’ rhetoric which depicts it in the light of a specific issue that must explain everything. Finding alibis and scapegoats for poverty are examples of seeing poverty ‘in terms of’.

#### *Alibis for not making progress*

Deconstructing poverty talk begins with alibis and explanations of why everything remains the same. For many this poverty talk, with its reiteration of old theories and proposals of new ones, is a sophisticated pastime and a form of escapism. The arguments, which are impressive at face value, are not raised out of concern about the problem but to indemnify and exonerate the speaker. They are designed to make the haves feel good and exonerate them: my wealth is the fruit of hard work, discipline, thrift, brains, insight into market mechanisms and the like. The poor are poor because they’re too lazy to work, cannot keep their jobs, can’t be bothered to better their qualifications, won’t plan their families, et cetera. The strategy is to put the ball in the court of the poor. End of problem: we cannot help the poor unless they help themselves.

Other rationalisations of the stalemate include the following:

- It is modernistic, idealistic and utopian to imagine that individual persons and humanity as a whole can progress to perfection through reason, science and technology. We are losing the battle against

poverty. The idea of being able to vanquish poverty and enjoy equal material status is a form of constructivism, interfering with the integrity of indigenous cultures. Poverty is often a cultural given, which only becomes problematic as a result of contact with more affluent cultures.

- Poverty must be redefined. It is more than just material want. It can also be cultural or spiritual. It is the affluent who experience no struggle for survival that have lost all hope.
- Poverty is self-perpetuating. The poor produce their own poverty. Poverty is seen as self-generative when it is re-entrenched in each new generation by transmitting the same detrimental lifestyles, attitudes and ethics.
- You need money to make money. Colonialism has cast the dice and do what they might, they are loaded against the poor.
- We have the poor because we need the poor. Structural inequality is a necessary counterpart of a system of individual incentives. There have to be jobs with differential levels of skills and earnings in order to attract people with the right ability and qualifications. Competition in the market is necessary for people to perform optimally (Townsend 1993:98). The poor are necessary for the good functioning of the market economy as we know it. 'The poor' is a metaphor for need, which is prerequisite in a market-oriented society and need-oriented economy. We sell our goods to gratify people's needs by giving them lowly paid jobs so that they can buy food to eat and liquor to mitigate their wretchedness, then we play benefactor when we give them something to eat and drink. Society itself determines the structures, barriers and lack of opportunities for the poor. In line with this approach is the belief that poverty is artificially induced and maintained. It is due to the capitalist market model, which depends on poverty to operate. Neo-classical economic theory alleges that poverty is of limited extent (Townsend 1993:98). It is not caused by scarcity but by differences in value systems and the like. The harsh reality of dwindling resources cannot be evaded and may hit us sooner than we think. Nor is it confined to oil, coal and water, although they are the resources that affect us most directly. The point is that availability of resources cannot be a yardstick for discrimination.

*Reverting to the scapegoat mechanism*

As fruitless as finding alibis for poverty is the rhetoric that puts the blame squarely on some system, person or group. Again, as in finding alibis, the

speakers may not be interested in becoming involved in change or in physically changing their own circumstances. And again, this does not deny that the statements may be true. Some familiar scapegoats are: apartheid which benefited only whites; the poor education system and lack of a learning culture; African culture which does not allow individuals to excel in their community; the high birth rate; indifference to birth control, and the capitalist system, which does not deal kindly with the uneducated poor. Human nature is often cited as the main reason for poverty. Poverty, unemployment, social evils and so on are all reflections of human weakness, of a fallible nature that is simply not perfectible (Blackwell & Seabrook 1993:38-39). This is a favourite argument in religious circles and a cheap way of opting out of the problem.

The poor themselves are blamed for their situation. They are said to accept poverty as 'natural' and tolerate it. The solution lies in helping themselves, or in changing their circumstances. Some refer to slackers who, because of some character deficiency or background circumstances, not only bring poverty upon themselves, but also lack the strength to rid themselves of it. These critics usually endorse the Protestant work ethic, underpinned by Victorian social policy.

Rhetorical alibis and scapegoating have a common denominator in that the arguments are isolated from the question as a whole. Poverty critique without penetrating statistical, holistic, societal and cultural critique is pointless.

### **Theories of poverty and modernism**

Scepticism about the efficacy of new economic theories is understandable. Economic theories do not change easily, and when they do, they simply reflect the needs, powers, perceptions and factual circumstances of their time. Although the latest phase of capitalism may see gradual acceptance of mixed economies, the chances that this will make a difference to world poverty are slim. We may see the face of poverty change over the next decade but not its impact. The overall structures of race, class and market will remain intact.

There are many theories of poverty trying to explain inequality and finding reasons why some succeed economically and others not. The underlying assumption of every theory is that poverty can be uprooted if its causes are identified and removed. The question is, is this kind of causal thinking not endemic in modernism? The very idea of worldwide eradication of poverty, its causes and effects implies a monolithic, regulated world where there is no room for cultural, contextual and personal differences.

A modernist approach with its concomitant optimism is simply not viable any more. The quick-fix recipes typical of modernism have failed too often. The West boasts about being a secular, rational society. This, it is alleged, is the basis of its vibrant economy. In a modernistic framework it was considered possible to control the negative forces engendering poverty and to uproot it through technology, education and science. Perhaps we have come of age by realising that all we can do is try to understand the contexts in which poverty occurs and the circumstances that make up each context, and then combat negative factors as best we can.

Despite scepticism about technology<sup>3</sup> as a panacea for poverty there seem to be no contenders challenging this modernistic belief. Of course, it depends what we do with technology. Advances in computer science, for example, are used to strengthen existing market structures, not to develop alternatives.

Technology is synonymous with industrial society. Poverty, it is often alleged, is the direct consequence of industrial society. The Green Movement accuses humanity of sleepwalking to extinction and tries to induce a shift of consciousness so that the planet may survive. Industrial society is a polluted paradise for a lucky minority. It must be abandoned if we want to eliminate poverty and save the planet. Industrial society has mined and ransacked most of the world's resources without catching up with poverty. It brought excessive riches to a few, while the poor have multiplied beyond number. Industrialisation seems to be an ever continuing, unstoppable process. The industrial model has been universalised and we are far from a post-industrial era. New forms of industry have simply replaced conventional ones. The cardinal raw material in the process seems to be human beings themselves (Blackwell & Seabrook 1993:8, 26, 60-67).

That is not to say that there have not been major changes in the economy in recent times. Means of production have changed enormously since Marx's day. Capital per se is the means rather than land, minerals or industry. The economy has sold out to multinationals. Their position is so entrenched that it is all but impossible to level the playing fields. They simply buy up the best intellectual capacity and expertise and use it to maintain their uncontrolled growth.

Upgrading systems and the concomitant psychology has become an addiction that comes with the product – and one cannot avoid buying into one

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3 There is a close affinity between technocracy and market capitalism. Technocratic legitimacy is based on scientific knowledge. The technocratic model of objectivity 'cannot be argued with' and in practice replaces the decisionistic model of politics (see Centeno 1993: 308, 311,313).

brand or another. Our computers and software need constant upgrading, like our cars and other consumer goods. That is what makes us a consumer society. Just to live 'normally', we need to pay for our habit as all drug addicts do.

### **Possibilities of meaningful change: preventing reproduction of poverty**

The poor must be empowered to evaluate their own context. Initiatives taken by the poor themselves prove much more effective than those taken for them. Empowerment is no longer aimed at overthrowing the system but at exploiting it and surviving within it. Gaining access to markets for poor people or expanding markets to include them is one of the new forms of empowerment. That does not rule out efforts to change the system (Taylor 1995:144-145).

The poor often devise novel social and cultural forms that allow them to survive the rigours of living on the fringes. To the extent that they manage to cope with and adapt to marginality they unintentionally reproduce the cultural dimensions of their poverty. By creating social relations that meet their needs the poor assemble a cultural superstructure that accommodates and reflects their situation (Harvey 1993:12, 26-27).

The poverty culture is thus not only an adaptation to a set of objective conditions of the greater society, but once it comes into existence it tends to be self-perpetuating from generation to generation because of its effect on the children. The child never learns to exceed the horizons of its environment. By the time slum children are six or seven years old they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture and are psychologically incapable of taking advantage of changing conditions or increased opportunities which may occur in their lifetime (Harvey 1993:31). On the same lines one could argue that the children of the rich acquire the skills and are given the support necessary to take full advantage of what the market offers. In this sense the cultures of poverty and affluence are both self-perpetuating.

### **Survival mechanisms: the ecology of the poor**

Over the years many South Africans living in rural communities, clans or in subsistence economies have adapted to straitened circumstances and developed functional support systems. The adaptation of the poor to their circumstances and the acquisition of survival skills may have a negative effect in that it lulls them into accepting their economic environment without trying to break out of the poverty cycle. The poor must come to believe in themselves. People who survived under oppressive systems, organising

themselves in resistance groups, must surely be capable of resisting and overcoming economic oppression.

Traditionally tribal peoples worldwide have maintained the resources on which they depend. They provide collectively for their own needs (Blackwell & Seabrook 1993:66-78). This is still true of many rural areas in South Africa. Government plans to make land available for subsistence farmers recognise people's responsibility to provide for themselves. There is a lot of opposition to a subsistence economy, as it clashes with a production-oriented economy and consumerism. We forget that the opposite of poverty is not wealth but sufficiency, and that the growth of freedom is not synonymous with the growth of wealth. Sustainability must be promoted. Sustainability is very different from excessive self-enrichment in a capitalist context. It means not taking from the earth, world, society, another person, from life itself more than what can be given back. It is not only in rural areas that a subsistence economy is viable. It also functions very well in townships and squatter camps, the difference being that the source of provision is much more varied. But it could be that the value of sharing and communal provision will disappear with increasing individualism and self-centred materialism.

The new South African democracy seems to regard the free market as the prime mechanism to serve the interests of the elected majority. This places severe pressure on the market, but also keeps it in place.

### **The market is a metaphysical and fictional reality**

If the market is determined by rational and psychological factors, it means that it can be different. We determine the market. Of course, it may seem to have a life of its own, as Adam Smith suggested (see Dodd 1995:2), but that is because we made the rules according to which market forces operate. Hence to some extent the market can be typified as a fictional reality – fictional because it can be disconnected from real, productive activity. Overnight price manipulation may increase wealth for some and make others poor.

An important aspect of the fictional nature of the market is its dependence on time, fashion and sudden transformations of human needs. Human needs are socially created. The state enacts laws, passes regulations and encourages conformist behaviour, which defines citizenship and hence the needs of people in their civic capacity. At all levels of human association there are powerful forces influencing the specification of what it means to be a member of society, observe social customs and enjoy social benefits. The favoured recipients of the allocative mechanism are mostly the rich and powerful. They are the ones who are well informed about the economic model and market principles that would benefit a country most. As it happens

it is also the model from which they benefit most (Townsend 1993:105-106, 121). The market is powerful but at the same time, like human beings, very vulnerable to sentiment, which is affected by factors like politics, war, agriculture and differing perceptions. That is why it is important to develop and implement a multiplicity of market models.

In the West the market is seen as 'open'. In principle it is possible for the poorest of the poor to become rich in the open market system. Most people are prepared to tolerate a system and keep on gambling what little money they have in the hope that the system will benefit them. But they do not own the slot machines.

### **The market will only be changed by a stronger overriding value**

A new market model will only be accepted and implemented if a stronger value forces itself on societies. The economic system one subscribes to cannot be separated from one's value system. To change value systems – especially on such a grand scale – seems virtually impossible. Only a stronger, overriding, negative force such as war, ecological disaster or a competing value (e.g. a more successful model) will be able to change the prevailing capitalist value system. Poverty is taken seriously by the rich when it threatens them directly. People pay meaningful attention to poverty only when forced to do so. The apartheid government, for instance, decided to negotiate a settlement only because power sharing was better than losing power altogether. However, to be taken seriously the threat must be real. In spite of so much ecology talk, for instance, very few industrialists have actually changed their production rate or methods. In the new South Africa government's BEE programme is a good example of such an overriding value, and has had some positive results.

The market operates with drives such as need, greed and the hope of success and power. Simultaneously it is very vulnerable to the possibility of a slump, inflation, politics and national and international catastrophes, which include civil disobedience and union action. It is imperative to have opposition forces to keep a system 'in balance', that is transparent and not totally dominated by a particular system or power group.

This need is evident in the reasons advanced for the worldwide recession (defined as six months of negative growth) that first showed its head in the USA in 2005 and manifested its full force in 2007-2008. Although no single reason is advanced to explain the meltdown, certain factors have been identified: lending too much money to clients who cannot repay it; inflation; sharp rise in the prices of global commodities like oil; collapse of the stock exchange; the bankruptcy of a single large corporation (the Enron scandal);

declining consumer and business confidence. All these factors suggest arbitrary and psychological causes, highlighting the artificiality and virtuality of the market. Even if the aforementioned balance existed, recessions would be perfectly 'normal' as the natural counterpoint to boom periods.

### **The market is a modernistic, regulative concept**

In *Das Kapital* (cited by Fukuyama 1992:68) Marx wrote that industrially more developed countries only show the less developed an image of their own future. Consciously or not, this was the foundational premise of modernisation theory. In spite of some theorising on possible alternatives to modernism, it was accepted that history was directional and that the liberal democracy of advanced industrial nations was its destination. But not all nations wanted to adopt Western liberal democratic principles. The developing world accused modernisation of ethnocentricity. There were no scientific or empirical grounds on which to defend the values of liberal democracy (Fukuyama 1992:69).

Neoclassical economics sees itself as scientific. Science and money go hand in hand. Without science there is no better life – a better life is life within the market (Fukuyama 1992:204; Keita 1993:121-126). The market justifies its hegemony because in the past alternatives to it proved to be economically devastating.

Poverty is endemic in the market with its capitalist economic organisation. The capitalist system requires an industrial reserve army of unemployed and underemployed people to sustain itself (Harvey 1993:12). The dual factors of chronic material need and social uncertainty it engenders are vital for the continuance of the market. The strategy of the wielders of economic power is to persuade the people needed to secure their power and riches that they benefit from this game and only this one. They are persuaded to support the structures of their own oppression. Capitalism is thus seen as the only way to utilise human cunning to benefit society. Economic globalisation may have altered the rules of the game to some extent, but basically they remain the same.

Although the market place appears to be neutral, it is not. Market forces are artificially manipulated. There is inbuilt discrimination whereby the market favours some and handicaps others. But the market is a structure – not a fixed, god-given entity. It can be changed.

Unfortunately we tend to think in terms of single-option solutions, whereas reality consists of many contexts and conditions. We are simply not yet geared to accommodate plurality. We answer, and our structures favour, the questions of a selected few. We expect to combat poverty by imposing on

a situation just a few models – as if a formal model can solve all problems! – which probably do not fit it at all.

The market is regulated – education, job opportunities, the lot. That explains why some have and some do not. One is prevented from entering by not having the appropriate passport. Passports vary from case to case: one must be in the right place at the right time, have suffrage, a certain nationality, colour, family, education, approved morals and so forth. Here one must consider the so-called internationalisation of industry. Transnational corporations have become a major force on the world scene. Half of the 100 wealthiest powers in the world are transnational corporations. In reality a third of all trade is taking place between different subsidiaries or divisions of transnationals and not among nations. The manufacture of some products is divided between countries, thus safeguarding these companies from national takeovers. Trade unions have limited power over these companies because of their diversified and manoeuvrable character.

Regional groupings such as the European Union have taken over certain powers from national governments to control national economics – but they do not have the same mechanisms of union and democratic accountability to make a difference overnight (see Townsend 1993:104-105).

### **Multiple market models**

Economic reality is diverse and should not be forced into a single model or system to which everyone must conform. A diversified economic reality with different and even opposing market models operating simultaneously accords with a postmodern worldview.<sup>4</sup>

Poverty is multifaceted. The fact that it has so many faces, contexts and causes makes it impossible to think about poverty or market models in a universal, monolithic way. The poor and their stories are as varied as the rich and their stories. Poverty is specific and unique to every situation and demands focused attention for its distinctive cultural, political and societal elements.

Acceptance of a multiplicity of models may break down the totalitarian structure of the world economy. The autonomy of the market may be overcome and the market may again come under relative control, giving politicians and interests groups some say.

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<sup>4</sup> It is doubtful whether postmodernism has significantly influenced the market. Dodd (1995: 20-22) denies that it has. For many consumerism is a clear indication of a postmodern-oriented market because of its use of signs and symbols.

**Profile of the South African labour market 1995-2006**

One of the post-'94 government's primary concerns was poverty, a highly politicised subject in South Africa. The poverty profile was largely caused by the fact that, apart from the small white segment of the population, there had been no investment in human capital in the past. In 1989 14 million people, or an estimated 38 percent of the population, were functionally illiterate (Lichthelm 1993:83-87). The short-lived Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) was introduced with the intention of involving all South Africans, rich and poor. It made way for a strategy of aggressive implementation of black empowerment and affirmative action.

But here, too, 'conflicting interests' are upsetting the applecart. The shortage of jobs meant that the only way to secure entry into the workplace for relatively large numbers of black workers was an affirmative action programme, requiring whites to take early retirement or accept packages to make room for black workers. In addition, the Black Economic Empowerment programme, aimed at a more representative business sector, compels industries to employ a quota of black workers at every level of the enterprise. This must be seen in conjunction with the land claims project aimed at establishing blacks in the agricultural sector. The underlying principle – debatable in itself – is that the country's economy must reflect its demographic ratio of 90% black to 10% white. Whereas representation makes good sense, arbitrary enforcement on quantitative lines is probably neither realistic nor desirable from the point of view of nation building.

The upshot of all these moves, in addition to an alarming crime rate, has been the emigration of thousands of white professionals, as well as many young people who cannot find jobs and see no future for themselves in South Africa. The exodus of white professionals has necessitated the 'import' of foreign replacements (eg doctors from Cuba and Tunisia). The critical shortage of experienced and qualified engineers is reflected in Escom's current (2008) electricity supply crisis after 30 000 whites left its employ as a result of affirmative action. The long-term impact on the agricultural sector will become apparent in due course.

This raises some unpopular questions. To what extent are black Africans – given the iniquitous history of black educational and other disadvantage – able to meet the technological and other needs of our sub-continent in the short term? To what extent are black Africans prepared to forego the benefits of the modern age that they cannot provide and service without outside assistance? How much does Europe owe Africa, and for how long? The boundaries are blurred, for all of us. Whites suffer from historical

conscience, blacks from historical entitlement, resulting in adversarial confrontation.

The South African bill of human rights<sup>5</sup> accepts that government has an obligation to create jobs for citizens. Whilst this has been a priority all along, the results have not come up to expectations. The strategy of creating black job opportunities by getting rid of white labour is an artificial solution that cannot lead to real growth. That only comes through an increase in DPR (domestic production rate), which depends on FDI (foreign direct investment)<sup>6</sup> and an increase in local skills and productivity.

In its first thirteen years in power the ANC faced the challenge of providing administrative leadership at the local, provincial and national levels with largely inexperienced human resources. The common occurrence of problems like nepotism, corruption and poor service delivery should be seen as part of a growth process. The creation of a black middle class leads one to expect that job creation for the majority of the poor will also be achieved. So far this has not materialised, however, and the number of poor people has increased since 1994.

#### **Profile of the South African labour force and income distribution 1994/5-2005/6 (SA Survey 2007:10)**

In 1995 people of working age (15-65) totalled 21 324 000. By 2005 the number had risen (by 39%) to 29 650 000. Those who were economically active<sup>7</sup> increased (by 65.2%) from a total of 9 713 000 to 16 047 000. The proportion of those of working age who were economically active rose (by 18.8%) from 45.5% in 1995 to 54.1% in 2005.

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5 Human rights grant people a minimum income as citizens, but they should also specify minimum rights to resources (see Townsend 1993:46). Efforts to make more land available to black farmers are an example.

6 In 2005 the African continent received record FDI inflows of \$31bn, an increase of 78% from 2004. However, these inflows were concentrated in a few countries and mainly in commodity-type industries. Also, the continent's share of global FDI remained at a low 3% in 2005. South Africa was the largest FDI recipient in the region with inflows of \$6.4bn, up from \$0.8bn in 2004, mainly owing to the acquisition of Absa, one of the big four banks, by a British bank, Barclays, for \$5.5bn. South Africa, Egypt, Nigeria, Morocco, Sudan, Equatorial Guinea, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Algeria, Tunisia and Chad attracted 86% of FDI inflows into the continent. For 34 other African countries FDI inflows remained below \$100m (SA Survey 2007:114).

7 Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) defined the economically active population (EAP) as all persons between the ages of 15 and 65 years who were working, or were unemployed.

In the same period the number of Africans of working age grew from 15 687 000 to 22 956 000. This rise of 46.3% was the largest percentage increase of any race group.

The number of economically active Africans increased by 81.3%, from 6 460 000 to 11 712 000. This means that the rate of increase of economically active Africans was roughly twice that of the population of working age, which suggests that a large number of Africans previously not economically active attempted to enter the labour market over the decade. The proportion of economically active Africans rose from 41.2% in 1995 to 51.0% in 2005 or by 23.9% – the largest percentage increase of all race groups.

The number of coloured people of working age grew from 2 486 000 to 2 714 000, an increase of 9.2%. Those economically active increased (by 24.6%) from 1 389 000 to 1 731 000. The proportion of those who were economically active rose from 55.9% to 63.8%, an increase of 14.2%. As in the African community, the percentage increase in the number of those economically active was greater than the percentage increase in the number of people of working age. Among the white population the number of people of working age increased from 2 249 000 to 3 130 000, or by 39.2%. The proportion of economically active whites increased from 60.9% to 67.5% or by 10.8% over the same period.

### **Factors inhibiting growth and job creation**

One problem is that the available work force cannot be absorbed by a fledgling business sector. This is further complicated by deficient training and skills. By the same token, although sufficient funds have been budgeted for housing and upgrading of services, the success of the exercise is dependent on inexperienced contractors, administrators and workers. Formal economies worldwide are generating fewer and more highly skilled jobs.

Various factors militate against growth and investment. Government realises that investment has to be attracted through acceptable labour laws and economic policy, but it has been none too successful in this respect. In 2006 a labour lawyer, Prof. Halton Cheadle, said South African labour law has become ‘over-proceduralised’ and ‘over-judicialised’. Prof. Cheadle was speaking at a conference on the impact of labour law on SMMEs (small, medium and micro enterprises). By way of example he pointed out that the retrenchment of a single domestic worker in an average household required the same steps as a massive retrenchment at a large multinational corporation. Ms Caralee McLiesh, senior economist at the World Bank and author of the report, said there was a direct correlation between regulatory reform and business migration from the informal to the formal sector. This, she said,

translated into job creation and a boost to state coffers. The report singled out South Africa's rigid labour laws and complex tax base as major constraints on the ease of conducting business. Stellenbosch University's Bureau for Economic Research (BER) released a report, also in September 2006, that corroborated the World Bank's findings. The BER study added that labour regulations and bureaucratic red tape, besides impairing business efficiency, posed the greatest risk to South Africa's continued high rate of economic growth (SA Survey 2007:109-110).

The BER survey revealed that the major constraints on business, in order of importance, were regulatory constraints (labour regulations and official red tape), state leadership and capacity (policy support and municipal services), infrastructure deficiencies and costs (electricity supply problems and communication costs), and shortage of labour skills (SA Survey 2007:98).

Constraints were rated as follows (survey conducted by BER, second quarter 2006 – SA Survey 2007:97). The index for business constraints ranges from debilitating to none at all:

<i>Business constraint</i>	<i>Weighted constraint index</i>
Labour regulations	18.3
<b>Electricity supply</b>	<b>16.3</b>
Official red tape	16.1
<b>Policy support</b>	<b>13.8</b>
Municipal services	12.9
<b>Highly skilled labour</b>	<b>12.1</b>
Communication costs	12.1
<b>Monopoly pricing</b>	<b>12.0</b>
Skilled labour	11.4
<b>Exchange rate volatility</b>	<b>10.0</b>
Tax administration	10.0
<b>Road transport deficiency</b>	<b>9.5</b>
Current level of the rand	9.1
<b>Barriers to entry</b>	<b>8.7</b>
Port facility imports	7.5
<b>Rail transport deficiency</b>	<b>6.0</b>
Port facility exports	4.9
<b>Semi/unskilled labour</b>	<b>4.7</b>

### **Black Economic Empowerment**

As for the local situation, government's BEE programme is an example of effective pressure on the market to let blacks share in the country's economic prosperity. The manner in which it is implemented and selective advantagement of some people, however, has caused controversy. Under pressure big business is complying with BEE requirements in order to remain in government's good books and prevent other drastic measures.

BEE statistics are as follows (SA Survey 2007:105):

<i>Black Economic Empowerment</i>		
<b>Black Economic Empowerment, 1995–2006</b>		
<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of transactions</i>	<i>Value (Rbn)</i>
1995	23	12.4
<b>1996</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>7.0</b>
1997	52	8.3
<b>1998</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>21.2</b>
1999	132	23.1
<b>2000</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>28.0</b>
2001	101	25.1
<b>2002</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>12.4</b>
2003	189	42.2
<b>2004</b>	<b>243</b>	<b>49.9</b>
2005	238	56.2
<b>2006</b>	<b>221</b>	<b>56.0</b>

Criticism here is that only a few individuals benefited – not the poor. BEE transactions favoured a limited number of blacks, some of whom became tycoons. Whereas BEE in itself is a move in the right direction, clearly it should not lose sight of the disproportionate number of impoverished people on the ground.

Statistics for household income by race are as follows (SA Survey 2007:57):

<b>1998</b>	<i>African</i>	<i>Coloured</i>	<i>Indian</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Total</i>
Low	51.0%	24.5%	14.1%	7.8%	0.3%
Low-middle	36.2%	46.9%	29.8%	17.4%	33.6%
Middle	11.5%	23.7%	43.1%	44.0%	19.0%
High	1.3%	4.8%	13.0%	30.8%	7.1%
<b>Total no. of households</b>	<b>7 264 000</b>	<b>831 000</b>	<b>262 000</b>	<b>1 795 000</b>	<b>10 154 000</b>
<b>2004</b>					
Low	35.2%	24.2%	12.2%	9.8%	29.8%
Low-middle	41.8%	40.0%	23.1%	15.8%	37.1%
Middle	18.1%	28.4%	37.4%	40.0%	22.8%
High	5.0%	7.5%	27.2%	34.5%	10.3%
<b>Total no. of Households</b>	<b>8 876 000</b>	<b>966 000</b>	<b>294 000</b>	<b>1 863 000</b>	<b>11 999 000</b>

Source: BMR, *National Personal Income of South Africans by Population Group, Income Group, Life Stage and Life Plane, 1960–2007*, Research report, No 333, 2004, p61.

The above is at constant 2001 prices.

Income per group is as follows:

Low = <R9 600 per annum.

Low–Middle = R9 601–R38 400 per annum.

Middle = R38 401–R153 600 per annum.

High = >R153 601 per annum.

In 1998 African households earned 90.7% of all income in the low income category. In 2004 African households earned 87.3% of income in the low income group. For the high income bracket the situation has improved for African households, Africans receiving 13% of high incomes in 1998, the proportion rising to 35.7% in 2004. White households now receive a greater proportion of low incomes, rising from 3.4% in 1998 to 5.1% in 2004, pointing to increased poverty in this population group. Whites also earned a

smaller proportion of high incomes, their share dropping from 76.7% in 1998 to 52% in 2004. This most likely represents a more equitable distribution of incomes rather than increased poverty for the high income white category.

The most interesting figure is that of high income Africans. Despite only 5% of all African households being classified as high income, they receive 35.7% of the income in the high income group. This corroborates earlier statistics on inequality, since such a small proportion of people receives so large a proportion of high income. Thus since 1998 a small percentage of Africans has acquired riches at a rapid rate. The same cannot be said of the lower income groups of the African population. Their incomes have made more modest gains, while many in the lowest earnings bracket have become even poorer.

Another figure of particular interest in this table is that the white population in the high income bracket no longer receives 76.7% of the wealth in that group, but only 52% (SA Survey 2007:57).

New incentives should not be limited to enabling some black people to join middle class society and appointing blacks to managerial positions. Incentives must include all people, especially those living on the very fringes of society. Poverty in South Africa is predominantly a black problem and therefore a racial dilemma, which did not concern whites in the past. The problem is that uplifting people from low income groups is beset by socio-economic stumbling blocks like illiteracy, a culture of poverty (implying no hope of helping themselves), deficient skills, crime, alcohol abuse and the like.

We are constructing a new social order, and there are some dynamic factors at work. A significant one is the trade union movement. Trade unions are among the mechanisms that brought a degree of democracy to the economic world. They introduced a culture-participatory democracy, in which workers can impose their will quite forcefully on employers and government. But we cannot simply depend on a demand culture. What is needed is a producing culture. Too much hope is still placed on inflow of capital from foreign investments. Too little progress is made with self-help programmes which can, for example, make land and other means of production available to the poor. Again, the ideal of working in partnership could ensure sharing of skills and experience so that it will not be to the detriment of agricultural productivity. Instead it would help to establish a culture of production, economic independence and responsibility. But at present there is no effective programme coordinating such initiatives.

The massive migration of blacks to the cities emphasises their desperation. Large-scale urbanisation – a worldwide phenomenon in the 1960s – was prevented in South Africa by the pass law system, job reservation, et

cetera. As far back as 1921 it was argued that blacks should only be allowed into towns as temporary workers. From 1916 to 1986, when the pass laws were formally abolished, over 17 million black people were prosecuted for being in a place without official permission (Wilson & Ramphela 1989:207-208). Mass migration to the cities has had a huge impact on urban social conditions, ranging from squatter camps to a frightening crime rate, violence and acute unemployment. The centre-periphery distinction is no longer a valid measure of poverty, because the poor, once restricted to rural boundary areas, are rapidly becoming part of the industrial and economic centre. This, coupled with immigration from other African countries, poses a challenge for job creation and the establishment of self-subsistence schemes. Poverty in the cities may become more devastating than in rural areas if urban migration continues unabated. People flee the poverty in rural areas to a different kind of poverty in the cities, which they are less capable of dealing with (Blackwell & Seabrook 1993:42-50).

One constraint on poverty alleviation remains the economy's incapacity to generate the necessary growth. Another strain on the economy is the presence of literally millions of immigrants who enter the country in a never ending stream, legally or otherwise. South Africa simply offers better opportunities than most SADEC countries and the rest of Africa.

### **Looking at the poverty scoreboard**

Statistics usually function only to confirm the impossibility of breaking the poverty cycle. Poverty statistics, moreover, tend to reflect only part of the picture. They deal with population growth, per capita income, debt, unemployment, crime and so on. On a holistic level things like education, health, social conditions, discriminatory market factors and ideologies all contribute to the specific face of poverty in a given situation. Poverty must also be seen in the light of ecology, depletion of natural resources and the negative impact of technology.

People in poverty are defined as those living in households with incomes less than the poverty income. Poverty income varies according to household size – the larger the household, the larger the income required to keep its members out of poverty. In 2005 poverty income levels ranged from R871 per month for one individual, to R3 314 for a household of eight members or more.

The figures for 1996-2005 are as follows (SA Survey 2007:64):

*Proportion of people living in relative poverty by race, 1996-2005*

<i>Year</i>	<i>African</i>	<i>Coloured</i>	<i>Indian</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>1996</b>	<b>50.3%</b>	<b>16.8%</b>	<b>6.2%</b>	<b>2.0%</b>	<b>40.5%</b>
1997	52.9%	17.8%	6.6%	2.5%	42.7%
<b>1998</b>	<b>55.6%</b>	<b>18.7%</b>	<b>6.9%</b>	<b>2.6%</b>	<b>45.0%</b>
1999	57.1%	19.3%	7.2%	2.7%	46.3%
<b>2000</b>	<b>57.1%</b>	<b>19.3%</b>	<b>7.2%</b>	<b>3.2%</b>	<b>46.9%</b>
2001	58.5%	19.9%	7.4%	3.7%	47.7%
<b>2002</b>	<b>58.6%</b>	<b>20.0%</b>	<b>7.5%</b>	<b>3.8%</b>	<b>47.9%</b>
2003	57.6%	19.7%	7.4%	3.8%	47.2%
<b>2004</b>	<b>57.9%</b>	<b>19.9%</b>	<b>7.5%</b>	<b>3.9%</b>	<b>47.5%</b>
2005	57.2%	19.7%	7.5%	3.9%	47.0%
<b>Change</b>					
<b>1996–2005</b>	<b>13.7%</b>	<b>17.3%</b>	<b>21.0%</b>	<b>95.0%</b>	<b>16.0%</b>

**Definitions, measurements and methods of approaching poverty**

There are various approaches to the problem of poverty. Each is indicative of an underlying belief system. Each has its own definition of poverty. It could be restricted to dire living conditions where the basic means of survival are absent. But poverty is also relative, as the headline differs from individual to individual – even the rich never have ‘enough’. In some cases poverty is not only material but also cultural, perhaps spiritual. In the First World materialism has been tagged as the poverty of our time. For others the problem revolves around resources rather than money. Resources will determine the degree of wealth or poverty in the future.

The very attempt to alleviate poverty implies belief that the face of poverty can indeed be changed. There is, however, a great deal of scepticism. Radical initiatives cannot be expected from the power-wielding rich, as they profit by the existing system. They are doomed to conservatism because they want to hold on to what they have. Other factors impeding change are that the poor are powerless, often uneducated, and unable to change their own future. Rapid depletion of world resources and population growth further limit the options. We cannot contemplate choosing between a high-road and a low-road future scenario. No high-road option exists.

Most approaches rest on scientific analysis of the problem. Economists rather than social scientists have dominated in the definition and measurement of poverty, leaving us stuck with statistics that merely present

results without seeking creative solutions (see Townsend 1993:44-45). Poverty talk thus remains on the level of counting and measuring. It seems to be the only handle we have on the dilemma. But quantitative measurements must be accompanied by qualitative rethinking of economic theories and policies, including our value systems and existential issues like lifestyle.

Perhaps the most vulnerable poor are children, women, the aged and the disabled (see Alcock 1993:119-198). Feminist critique has drawn attention to the fact that women are subjected to poverty on a wider scale than men despite increasing numbers of working women. Among the causes are that women's wages are often still lower than men's, that women usually take responsibility for the household while getting the smallest part of the household income, and that men reserve their surplus income for their own benefit (Alcock 1993:121-125). Despite high profile campaigns and some corrective measures, the extent to which poor families still manage to cope depends largely on the women. The ANC has put great emphasis on empowerment of women and has achieved some notable successes. The picture for South Africa is as follows (SA Survey 2007:47):

**Number of households by main source of income by race and sex, 2005**

<i>Source of income</i>	<i>African</i>		<i>Other*</i>	
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Salaries / wages	3 702 000	1 477 000	1 730 000	416 000
Remittances	636 000	801 000	51 000	30 000
Pensions and grants	975 000	1 485 000	255 000	168 000
Farm products	57 000	26 000	29 000	86 000
Other income	262 000	152 000	133 000	37 000
No income	129 000	89 000	23 000	152 000
<b>Total</b>	<b>5 772 000</b>	<b>4 035 000</b>	<b>2 232 000</b>	<b>668 000</b>

\* *Other* includes coloured people, Indian/Asian, white and unspecified population group. Figures should add up but may not, owing to rounding.

**Options for restructuring the African market**

The assets of people with an African culture, religion and survival skills should not be underestimated. These assets must be utilised to enhance human capital. Economic success presupposes good education, a health system, housing programmes, social investment, family planning services and the like (see Lichthelm 1993:107-110). African poverty must be dealt

with holistically. Income is only one aspect of poverty. There are other, possibly more important factors like education, health, social relations, emotional satisfaction and so on (see Duchrow 1995:11).

In traditional African terms land cannot be owned; it belongs to the people, a free gift such as life itself, bestowed by the creator God. Chiefs are guardians; they do not own the land and are answerable to the ancestors for their guardianship. These values obviously contest the Western view of land, which sees production and profit as the only prerequisites for successful ownership.

We must fight for a multiplicity of economic models, each with its proper context. When assessing models recognition must be given to their implicit life-engendering values. Life-threatening models should be criticised and changed wherever possible. There is a price to be paid, however. It seems we cannot have our economic cake and enjoy certain values. Acceptance of certain ecological values puts constraints on growth. We have to change our minds about poverty and affluence. A single economic system simply cannot carry us all. Some will have to survive on the lifeboat. The challenge is to adapt to a multiplicity of models and survival skills, to change unfair systems and models, to give precedence to life-engendering values and to curb cancerous growths that are deleterious to society as a whole.

### **Conclusion**

The ANC government can be congratulated on any number of economic measures to maintain a reasonable growth rate. One has to allow for the fact that the tripartite alliance is under pressure from the ANC's partners, the unions and the SA Communist Party, to meet their expectations as well. That these partners are not satisfied is evident in tensions in the ruling party that mounted dramatically towards the end of 2007, culminating in Jacob Zuma's election as the new party president. In addition the ANC is faced with poor service delivery and corruption at the provincial and municipal levels. Millions of poor people at the grassroots are staking their claims.<sup>8</sup> The private sector and high crime rate add to the demands. Escalating pessimism among whites suffering under crime and affirmative action cannot be ignored. And the influx of immigrants from Zimbabwe and Mozambique (over 5 million people) puts enormous pressure on limited infrastructure and job opportunities.

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<sup>8</sup> Fukuyama (1992:123) points out that, while voters in democratic countries may theoretically affirm free market principles, they are all too ready to abandon them when their own short-term economic interest is at stake. The ANC government clearly cannot avoid this.

In addition there is pressure from abroad, both from the international community and corporate business sectors. South Africa remains dependent on their expectations in order to attract investment. We now turn to factors affecting South Africa's role in a global economy.



## Chapter 8

### Africans as world citizens in a post-democratic world

#### Introduction: what it means to take responsibility for yourself

In certain contexts the claim that humankind has come of age is a modernist cliché. What does it mean – a democratic order? We all know that democracy is far from ‘perfect’. Do human rights, social amelioration programmes, ecological responsibility and the like amount to coming of age? Even then we are far from ‘adulthood’. Is it a matter of individual autonomy and responsibility? Again it is a moot point. Some shift is taking place in individual-group relations nonetheless, as well as the way people’s judgments and prejudices are shaped by the media, tradition, subculture and contingent circumstances. Individual morality is making way for group morality (human rights).

If coming of age means taking responsibility for ourselves and not blaming everything that happens on gods or fate, then some of us may qualify. Some can speak on their own behalf about, and try to take responsibility for, their future. Scientists have come to understand the history of the formation of our universe,<sup>1</sup> how our delicate planet evolved and how human beings with their diversity of languages, cultures and religions emerged. This knowledge makes us realise how important it is to care for our planet and preserve its environmental and ecological integrity. We have outgrown the urge to make other cultures and religions conform to our own and we appreciate the importance and power of diversity for the ongoing cultural evolution of the human race. Never before have we (in the generic sense of humankind) accumulated so much wealth and so many medical, agricultural and other technologies to deal with poverty and disease. We have acquired conflict resolution skills and have access to information and communication technology, which go a long way in obviating war and ethnic and other conflict.

Yet with all these developments humans have not become less religious. Secular, even post-secular yes, but not atheistic. Not that religion has remained unchanged. In the West a new debate on atheism has started, which might do something to combat religious fundamentalism, atavism, dogmatism and metaphysical belief systems. There is also a manifest shift, at least

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<sup>1</sup> We can now substantiate Bonhoeffer’s (1967:360) belief that “an infinite universe, however it may be conceived, is self-subsisting, *etsi Deus non daretur*”.

in Christianity, from a modernist emphasis on metaphysic 'truths' to a more naïve, experientially based religious praxis represented by what are generally known as Charismatic religions, particularly in Africa, South America and, above all, Asia. There is also an Islamic revival, especially since 9/11, which has the adverse effect of provoking increased religious fundamentalism in the USA.

Science has brought greater insight into the physical dimension of the human species: our common evolutionary past; our genetic identity and the possibility of manipulating it. At the same time we remain aware of our dependence on 'unscientific' cultural realities like values, aesthetics and religion. Even the most hard-core biologists and physicists participate in a vibrant science-religion debate and concede that, despite the 'closed' view of physics and the virtual impossibility of devising a 'theory of everything', the possibility of the existence of 'something more'/some transcendent reality cannot and should not be ruled out. For all our understanding of the physical and cultural evolution of religion we still see a lot of point in it, evidenced by the will of so many people to believe. Many have come to celebrate spiritual diversity, acknowledging that there is truth and power in other religions and ethical systems.

At the same time we have to admit that the integrity of our planet has never been in such jeopardy; poverty, illness and local wars have never assumed such vast dimensions; and religious fundamentalism and the threat of religious wars have never loomed so large as they do today. We have become societies at risk, threatened by faceless minorities who are prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice for their cause in September 11 style catastrophes. We are living in a world where grave injustices, especially in the economic realm, are the order of the day. All this casts doubt on the notion that humankind has come of age.

Human responsibility can no longer be limited to either the individual or the societal domain. Civil society cannot be viewed as distinct from global society. Global markets determine local circumstances. The fate of national governments is increasingly determined by global forces. De Gruchy (1995:59; quoting Held) comments: "The globalisation of democracy has now become essential because 'global interconnectedness' has created 'chains of interlocking political decisions and outcomes between states and their citizens, altering the nature and dynamics of national political systems themselves'." In future, therefore, the focus of democratisation will be ecumenical – which is not primarily about the church but about a just world order. But how do we perform this duty and shoulder our responsibility as world citizens?

In insisting on the this-worldliness of religion, Bonhoeffer envisaged responsible, autonomous handling of life's problems as if God does not exist. This presupposes a sphere of human interaction in which Christian altruistic values like selfless love and sacrifice function as guidelines for conduct. But we do not have the leverage, the experience or the will to save the world or to deal with global problems. Governments are in charge of international relations. But when foreign or local governments are coerced to accept trade regulations to the detriment of some of their citizens, then those citizens should act *etsi respublica non daretur*. Neither the existence of God, nor the egocentric human condition, nor the allegedly untouchable nature of the market should be an excuse for shirking that responsibility. Shouldering our responsibility *etsi Deus non daretur* today means that local civil and national interests, too, must be safeguarded on an international level. It means that the fate of other civil societies, nations and states is our concern because our fortunes are interconnected. Responsibility has become universal, for we share the same fate. Taking responsibility in an increasingly complex world, however, is easier said than done. There are no established channels through which ordinary citizens can voice their opinions or act on this scale.

To help us deal with problems of civil society today, especially on a global scale, we have to look much further than the church. In this regard Bonhoeffer's (1967:382) remark that "we cannot, like the Roman Catholics, simply identify ourselves with the church" is still very relevant.<sup>2</sup> Civil society, while it may include the church, is not limited to it. We know from the South African liberation experience how most Afrikaans speaking mainline churches toed the line of the political powers of the day. We also know that since 1994 these churches have played a minimal role in rebuilding democracy and reconstructing civil society. When it comes to global issues, churches usually work through their representatives in the designated forums, leaving their members inactive.

What does it mean for formerly oppressed black citizens to come of age and shoulder their responsibility? As Desmond Tutu (1995:96-96) puts it, "It is easy to be *against*. It is not nearly so easy to be clear about what we are *for*." It seems easier to mobilise civil society against a common threat than to

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2 Bonhoeffer was keenly aware of the temptation to hide behind church declarations without expressing our real beliefs. He says: "Karl Barth and the Confessing Church have encouraged us to entrench ourselves persistently behind the 'faith of the church', and evade the honest question as to what we ourselves really believe. That is why the air is not quite fresh, even in the Confessing Church." Bonhoeffer, *Letters and papers*, 382.

unite it for the common good. The agenda for Africa as it comes of age is totally different from that for Europe's secularist programme. The Western secularist model does not fit the African context. Africans are still very religious and make no separation between this world and the 'other'.

While not denigrating the importance of identity, the quest for African identity must be put in context. What does it mean? Africans have their land, traditions, languages, cultures, history. Does the question of African identity not stem from an impermissible ascription of identity to the continent by non-Africans? That is why VY Mudimbe speaks of the the "invention of Africa" in his book *Invention of Africa. Gnosis philosophy and the order of knowledge* (1988). The negative images of Africa that are usually propagated have to do with poverty, insurrections, coups, dictators.

Africa's 'identity crisis' is a matter of ascription. First the continent was considered not to have entered the stage of history (see chapter 10, Hegel); it was seen as primitive, savage, superstitious, characterised by sorcery and witchcraft, technologically undeveloped. Then the colonists gave it an identity by Christianising it. Still later it acquired a 'freedom identity' in the post-colonial era. The West was never interested in what Africa had to say about itself. All it cared about was identifying its wealth – minerals and markets. Nowadays the whole issue of identity has changed. It is seen as open, fluid and changeable as the metaphysical, philosophical, religious and economic systems that once governed it changed.

Nonetheless pragmatic concerns remain dominant. Currently identity appears to depend on what works in practice – and that applies globally: democracy, market mechanisms, technology, human rights, all the shibboleths of the developed world. Africa cannot but conform to the trend. But in reality African identity is largely determined by a personal ubuntu ethics stressing the individual's place and role in the community.

The chapter centres on Africa's involvement with this global identity. Pertinent issues are the identification of democracy with a vibrant economy; democracy with an independent judiciary; enforcement of the constitution; free and fair elections; anti-corruption; et cetera. Africa has the human capital and natural resources to flourish. What is needed to make that happen? To understand Africa's global connectedness we need to trace the evolution of democracy and changes in democratic values that have led to our present situation.

### **Ultimate values encapsulated in democracy**

Cultural and technological changes inevitably bring new values that change human interaction. These changes have assumed global dimensions, in-

fluencing the values of every one of us. That is why we speak of democratic rights, universal rights, environmental rights and the like.

Democracy has become the cardinal manifestation of the universalisation of human values. This was apparent in the recent war in Iraq, which was justified by the mission to establish a true Iraqi 'democracy'. Just as the importance of conveying the true gospel to 'heathen' justified colonialist wars, so the establishment of a true democracy justified the war in Iraq. What makes these 'missionary' enterprises suspect is the arbitrary and circumstantial targeting of offenders.

If democracy is the ultimate value determining all other values, then it must be critically considered – especially in Africa. In spite of its ancient Greek roots, democracy is a relatively recent form of governance. It was only after World War II that most European political systems conformed to the generalised democratic model, with its associated economic and social policies.<sup>3</sup> Today democracy is considered the only political model that ensures economic growth,<sup>4</sup> guarantees human rights and represents the people. It is seen as the cornerstone of all values of importance to society. In a constitutional democracy the basic values guiding civil society, like human rights, minority rights and religious rights, are enshrined and protected.<sup>5</sup> But democracy does not automatically bring employment and wealth.

Present-day democracy with its economic substructure (see Marx) entails a whole gamut of market principles, trade regulations, property values and employment principles. The market justifies its hegemony because in the past alternatives to it proved to be economically devastating. Democracy safeguards the economic environment (security and peace, ownership and free enterprise) and a productive economic environment keeps democracy alive (by generating income for the state). When there is unemployment, poverty and economic injustices, the state is held responsible – seldom the owners of big capital.

Yet few values ensuring economic justice and equality have been formulated and multinational corporations cannot be forced to embrace them. Tycoons are far more untouchable than political leaders. They have no fear of not being re-elected, are not answerable to public opinion, and are not

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3 De Gruchy (1995b:126) mentions that the churches of countries which opposed Nazism regarded World War II as a struggle for democracy.

4 Democracy and wealth may be synonymous in established, rich democracies in the West, but emerging democracies lack the resources, wealth and expertise accumulated over many years in the West.

5 It must be remembered that civil society is composed of many diverse elements, and is divided between supporters of different and opposing social and political programmes. It is not inherently egalitarian but rather a reflection of divisions in society itself.

accountable for their deeds or the values they hold. It is difficult for civil society to criticise them, since they are the ones who provide employment, secure economic growth and pay large taxes to government. Besides, we all live according to the same principles of profit making and free enterprise that vouchsafe them their money. The challenge is to rethink the system that has made these vast economic inequalities possible. In this regard John Dewey pointed out that democracy does not amount to much if it does not mean a “democracy of wealth” (quoted by De Gruchy 1995b:24). In the long run democratic societies won’t survive unless they eliminate extreme inequality and poverty.

Because of the link between economic growth and democracy, democracy came to be accepted as a precondition for economic viability. In Africa, as in Eastern Europe, countries were forced to institute multiparty systems to qualify for Western development aid, in the belief that multiparty democracies would create wealth (De Gruchy 1995b:179).

#### **Evolving nature of democracy**

De Gruchy (1995b:7) distinguishes between democracy as a system and the democratic vision. The democratic vision entails a society in which all people are truly equal, yet difference is respected; a society in which all people are truly free, yet social responsibility rather than individual self-interest prevails; a society which is truly just, hence the vast gulf between rich and poor has been bridged. Even if this vision could be realised, it may change little in many countries around the world because of poor economic conditions. It could only be realised through a fundamental, global economic restructuring which deals with issues like debt relief, even distribution of technology and wealth, and trade reform.

Although democracy may be considered the ultimate, nonnegotiable Western value, it is an open and evolving system. It is not some timeless value that can simply be applied in all contexts, regardless of differing historical, cultural and religious backgrounds. Democracy is at most the best of imperfect systems of governance. A vital democracy must be dynamic to try and improve on proven past failures. To quote De Gruchy (1995b:21): “Democracy is rather an ongoing quest for justice, and therefore one whose success is contingent upon development of moral people who are able to participate fully in the body politic ... Thus participatory democracy becomes a way of life, critically complementary and essential to representative government and the state, rather than simply a means to protect self-interest.” Accordingly De Gruchy (1995b:38) reminds us that democracy tomorrow will not, and cannot, be precisely the same as democracy today or in the past.

Because of the close link between democracy and the economy economic models and conditions are open, even volatile. Changes in democratic forms of rule will impact on the economic system and vice versa. Changes in democracy globally can be attributed to changes in economic relations. These changes are so influential that one could speak of a transition from democracy to what may be called post-democracy.

*The 'post-democratic' era*

By 'post-democracy' we mean that the terms on which democracies are operating in an increasingly globalised world are changing so rapidly that the values usually associated with democracy are threatened. Traditional democratic values included national sovereignty, the autonomy of the state and representative democracy. In the past democratic values coincided with those of a relatively homogeneous civil society. Diversification of values inevitably means that more and more minority groups find that their specific moral preferences are not respected by the state. For many of these minority groups the democratic system has lost its legitimacy. They find themselves in a post-democratic world.

The USA's African foreign policy has changed in keeping with the new approach in the West, manifest in the diminishing role of the welfare state. The four decades between 1950 and 1990 were the era of the welfare state in the North Atlantic countries. The state was assumed to be responsible for its citizens' access to basic social services such as health, housing, sanitation, water supply, public education and affordable public transport. The 'welfare' state did not evolve from altruism: it was a response to socialism. This is why the end of the Cold War coincided with the end of the welfare state (Mugambi 2002:86). State welfare as the social dimension of capitalist states became less of an issue, given the proven failure of socialism in the Soviet Union. As a result donor aid to Africa (which can be seen as another dimension of the welfare state) made way for free market principles. The USA's new African foreign policy, formulated in the Clinton era, is marked by a switch from donor funds to investment funds. Foreign aid will no longer come to Africa in the form of donations, but through investment by private companies.

*Democracy and a global civil society*

Acting responsibly has thus become more complex, since it involves action in the local as well as in the global sphere. By joining forces a massive, non-profit or global civil society has acquired greater leverage to deal with global

issues.<sup>6</sup> Although a global civil society may share some common values, these values are secular and can no longer be said to express the concerns of any specific religious tradition.<sup>7</sup> It is meta-religious values that codetermine and influence global decision making. These values may overlap those propagated by Christian institutions like the World Council of Churches or ecumenical bodies like the Parliament of the World's Religions, but are not necessarily the same.<sup>8</sup>

Although Africa, and in particular South Africa, are influenced by economic globalisation, it lacks the means to participate meaningfully on a global scale because it lacks the leverage of a trade bloc. An interactive African economy is still under way and that must first be achieved at a regional level before a unified economic entity like the European Union can be possible.

Can we still get away with the outdated democratic values as defined by De Gruchy? De Gruchy (1995b:219-220) mentions four cornerstones of South African civil society: the tradition of ubuntu, the liberal democratic tradition, the democratic experience in the liberation struggle, and the democratic tradition and practice in religious communities, including the church. While there is no denying the importance of these cornerstones, we cannot rely on them to make Africa part of the global order. To do so we need a new culture in civil society.

It must be realised that this process cannot be left to government. The press, interests groups, cultural organisations and NGOs must all contribute. While the sectors of civil society that were active during the anti-apartheid struggle were predominantly white, the picture changed after 1994 when a growing number of nonracial NGOs, a non-profit sector and a voluntary sector were formed to assist civil society in dealing with societal issues.<sup>9</sup>

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6 Examples of powerful global movements already in place include the World Social Forum, UNO with its various institutions, Transparency International, CIVICUS and the CivWorld Campaign.

7 Note that there is no secular moral consensus. In this regard Konrad Raiser (2001:20) says that the Universal Declaration on Human Rights was presumably understood by its authors to express such a basic moral consensus. It articulated the basic moral values of Western bourgeois culture which, in the course of the Enlightenment and secularisation, became detached from the authoritative precepts of a morality grounded in church and religion. Meanwhile progressive individualisation of living conditions and the overwhelming power of utilitarian thinking have eroded this moral consensus as well.

8 It is noteworthy that a group like Kairoseuropa judges the injustices caused by economic globalisation with its detrimental effects on Africa so harshly that it constitutes a *status confessionis* (see Duchrow 1995:203-210).

9 Franklin Sonn (2001:16), former South African ambassador in the US, sounds a pessimistic note in this regard when he says: "The biggest concern that intellectuals in South Africa have at the moment is the survival of democracy. Because of that concern, there is increased control over civil society. In fact, civil society is less free today than under the apartheid

With the end of apartheid and the institution of a democratic government, many donors shifted their funding to the new government, especially its Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) projects. These were seen as responding to the urgent developmental tasks facing the new democracy, and government as the effective agency to execute them. While much of the donor support was distributed further by government and reached civil society organisations, some of it found its way into the state coffers and never left them. The result was a deteriorating funding environment for NGOs. With the demise of the RDP civil society organisations began to take the initiative more vigorously, forming coalitions to deal with crucial issues like health (the Aids pandemic), job creation and the establishment of small black businesses, labour unions, cultural alliances, youth groups, human capacity building, anti-corruption initiatives, security and crime prevention drives, service groups, and so on.

To facilitate the development partnership between government and NGOs government urged them to form an umbrella body that would allow an effective flow of communication and interaction between them and government. NGOs favoured an umbrella organisation that would strengthen and unify their voice in the political arena. Thus Sangoco was established in August 1995. Its main tasks are to broaden the scope of civic participation, to mediate between the community and the state, and to intensify multilateral exchange of ideas.<sup>10</sup> A number of interest groups, like the South African

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regime. We have less access to resources for NGOs than under apartheid.” The background to Sonn’s statement is most probably the political report delivered by president Mandela at the December 1997 African National Congress (ANC) conference in Mafikeng, North West province. The basic tenor of this speech was government hostility towards all forces independent of its control. Mandela’s remarks must be seen against the background of the transition period. With the ANC power base now well established, one can expect a much more accommodating attitude towards NGOs. See in this regard the work done by the Community Agency for Social Enquiry (CASE) and Sangoco.

10 Recent debates about the role of the state among the ANC and its alliance partners – the SACP and Cosatu – reveal that an emphasis on the state as the guiding force in the economy and society remains central to their thinking. Frequently qualified as ‘the developmental state’, ‘the new democratic state’ or ‘the national democratic state’, this conception of the state is not essentially different from the one commonly propounded in those circles in the 1980s. State-directed development is still seen as the best way forward. Alliance partners sometime make concessions to the reality of the state’s limited capacity to transform society and control the economy under conditions of globalisation. They frequently mention the need to involve the populace in the process of governance. Popular participation is seen, however, as a way of bolstering the role of the state under ANC leadership, rather than as (potentially) contradicting, challenging or forcing it to rethink its policies. In view of this the focus on participation does not reflect recognition that civil society forces may play a progressive role, independently of or even in opposition to the ruling party.

Council of Churches (SACC) and the Southern African Poverty Network (SAPN), focus on the problem of economic globalisation.

While Africa may contribute only modestly to the formation of global values, there are hopeful signs that it is serious about establishing these values in Africa. Living responsibly will have a different meaning for every individual, society and nation and will face different challenges in different contexts and times. That African challenges are taken seriously offers hope, not only for Africa but also for the continent's increased contribution to a better world.

### **Universalisation of values in an ecumenical context**

Churches and religious groups have always been active in sectors of civil society. They have also taken the lead in dealing with ethical issues on a global scale. The churches in the ecumenical movement have become aware of their status as a minority in a pluralistic religious world. This inhibits any universal claims to a Christian ethic. Hence ecumenical efforts have been rechannelled towards reconstructing and safeguarding criteria and values which are decisive for preserving the life of human beings and nature. They are calling for a new global system which is oriented to the demands of justice and the spiritual multiplicity of human societies, and which takes account of the realities of life. Here the issue is clearly not just one of basic values but of developing a new way of life, a culture of nonviolence and reverence for life, of dialogue and solidarity, as exemplified by the Earth Charter presented in The Hague in 2000 (Raiser 2001:21, 24).

Hans Küng drafted a "declaration toward a global ethics" which was presented to the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1993. This was expanded at the 1999 meeting in Cape Town. It stressed that there could be no survival without a global ethic, no world peace without religious peace, no peace among nations without dialogue between religions. However, not only the world's religions but also world politics, the world economy and science need to have a basic ethical orientation (Hasselman 2001:26, 31, 35). Examples of the global interaction of religions with the corporate world are the efforts of Hans Küng and the Global Ethic Foundation, as well as the World Faiths Development dialogue, which interacts with the World Bank and transnational businesses in order to find guidelines to deal with global ethical issues (Gebhardt 2001:53).

The threat posed by economic globalisation ushers in a new phase of religious interaction. There is more at stake than just religious idiosyncrasies. One should not, however, lose sight of religious diversity and the fact that different cultures and different societies interpret nature, human nature and

human needs differently. In this regard Schüssler Fiorenza (2001:79, 82) suggests that we should accept a plurality of moral judgments, without abandoning transcendent moral judgment to individual choice or ethnic values. This would result not so much in a world ethic as in dialogue, in which reflective judgment and diverse conceptions crisscross in moral reasoning and argumentation.

Schüssler Fiorenza's remarks do not lessen the need for urgent action in this regard. Present global economic values and practices critically affect civil societies and their ability to take responsibility for their own circumstances. As we have seen, most civil societies are affected by the ramifications of economic globalisation. This calls for universal guidelines, which must be codetermined by all religions, cultures, nationalities and ethnic enclaves. In this sense they would reflect meta-Christian values. In the words of Hans Küng (2001:88), "The global market calls for a solid framework within the political order, a global market framework which the market itself cannot provide and which in turn calls for a global ethic." Since one cannot separate the economy from other spheres of life, a universal ethic would affect non-economic sectors as well.

Küng (2001:100-102) rightly points out that we need not start from scratch, but can simply revisit values formed in many traditions in various cultures and religions. These values include people's responsibilities towards each other. He identifies four directives to be found in all the religious and ethical traditions of humankind. They are: responsibility for a culture of non-violence; solidarity and a just economic order; tolerance and a life of truthfulness; and the responsibility of equal rights and the partnership of men and women.

This echoes Bonhoeffer's axiom (1967:382-383): the church is the church only when it exists for others. The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not by dominating but by helping and serving.

### **Conclusion**

Africa's performance at the global level depends on its ability to put its own house in order. The task confronting it is such that the two processes should run concurrently. It cannot wait for continental peace, stability and progress before tackling the global challenges. The process of continental cooperation and development was given a great boost when South Africa became a constitutional democracy in 1994. One of the most auspicious attempts to enable the continent to compete with other continents was the Nepad initiative, in which Thabo Mbeki played a leading role. It was not, however, the first

project of its kind and is unlikely to be the last. Still, it represents a major endeavour to bring about a concerted drive against poor governance, corruption, underdevelopment, poverty and disease. That is the focus of the next chapter.

## Chapter 9

### Global partners for local initiatives: Nepad<sup>1</sup> in the era of globalisation

#### Winners and losers in the globalisation race

Andrew Oswald of Warwick University in the United Kingdom carried out an experiment to find out how willing we are to disadvantage others even at a cost to ourselves. In his experiment participants played an anonymous betting game on computer terminals. The money they were given to play the game, along with any winnings, was theirs to keep. As they played, the screen showed exactly how much money the other players were winning. In the end players could secretly burn away other players' money, but only if they burned 25 percent of their own money as well. Of the 116 participants, all of whom played several games in anonymous groups of four, almost two thirds chose to burn other players' winnings. In effect the losers, apparently motivated by a kind of perverse logic and driven by envy and resentment, punished the winners. Oswald (2002:17-18) claims that this behaviour is a drive, not a cool-headed, rational choice.

The September 11 Al-Qaeda suicide bombers probably knew that the Americans would find out who they were, but they were prepared to sacrifice lives, not only of innocent human beings but also their own. Are the twin drives of envy and resentment a natural evolutionary legacy – survival of the fittest and revenge of the weak? If so, what can be done to prevent a scenario of losers take all, which means that we all lose? Poverty makes peace impossible. In this regard September 11 represents a universal symbolic turning point, triggering a rethink of economic and power relations (Neuland et al. 2002). A seemingly untouchable, technocratic, wealthy nation is under threat from a handful of people. The motives of the Al-Qaeda bombers undoubtedly included rage against poverty and global injustice.

Leaving Oswald's findings aside, the fact of the matter is that the vast gap between the rich and the very poor makes the world an unsafe place to live in. It is in the interests of wealthy individuals and nations to take the plight of the poor seriously. At present the world operates a trade regime in which the poor nations are destined to become poorer. What seems to matter to the affluent nations, according to Mugambi (2002:87), is that Africa

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1 New Partnerships in African Development

always remains the loser, and then ‘donations’ are showered on its peoples with much fanfare in the media. Africa, and many other Third World countries, are ‘losers’ in the globalisation race. Nepad represents a serious effort to change this scenario and to bring about the ‘rebirth’ of Africa. The Nepad policy document (article 50) states: “The African Renaissance project, which should allow our continent, plundered for centuries, to take its rightful place in the world, depends on the building of a strong and competitive economy as the world moves towards greater liberalisation and competition.” Nepad is sold to the world as a strictly African initiative aimed at taking the continent’s destiny into its own hands – a portentous and noble motivation. But is this a purely African initiative? No, say many critics, who regard the plan as just another trick played on Africa by the world economic powers (which include the US government, the US Federal Reserve and a host of international organisations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation).

The African Renaissance initiative depends, to a large degree, on Africa’s economic revival. As for uplifting the global poor, the UN Development Programme’s *Human development report* (1999) indicated that the gap between the wealthy and the poor within and among countries is widening steadily, and it named inequities in the global trade system as one of the main reasons. World trade promises growth, but in many instances it simply increases poverty. As noted already, there is no systematic correlation between increased economic liberalisation and greater equality. Although the prospects of Africa’s economic recovery are hampered by structural obstacles inherent in economic globalisation, paradoxically globalisation seems to offer the only way forward.

### **Globalisation**

Globalisation represents a phase in the seemingly inevitable evolutionary development of capitalism and modern technology. Although the process appears to be irreversible, its outcome is not predetermined and present-day protests against the harmful side effects of economic globalisation may steer it in a direction that is more acceptable to poor countries. Long-term harmful side effects in particular must be controlled if economic sustainability is to be maintained.

Economic globalisation (sometimes referred to as corporate-led globalisation) has several key ingredients that impact adversely on poor countries. They are: corporate deregulation and unrestricted movement of capital; privatisation and commodification of public services and other global and community resources (e.g. bulk water and genetic resources); integration and

conversion of national economies (including some that were largely self-reliant) to environmentally and socially harmful export-oriented production; promotion of hyper-growth and unrestricted exploitation of the planet's resources to fuel this growth; dramatically increased corporate concentration; undermining of national, social, health and environmental programmes; erosion of the sovereignty of democratic nation-states and local (African) communities by global corporate bureaucracies; global cultural homogenisation; and intensive promotion of unbridled consumerism.

Where does this leave Africa? Poor countries/continents suffer most from globalisation. It will take ages for Africa to form even six successful trade blocs, given the absence of stable governments, peace, infrastructure, expertise and capital. In this light Nepad should be seen as a brave first step in that direction.

### **Is Nepad just a dream?**

Nepad centres on African ownership and management. The African Union (AU) forms part of this initiative and visualises becoming the first effective pan-African initiative to deal with African affairs. Through this programme African leaders are setting an agenda for the renewal of the continent. South Africa can only be effective in international forums if it acts in partnership with others. In the long term it is hoped that the Nepad project will contribute to that.

Thabo Mbeki's role in launching Nepad was inestimable. But does Nepad have any future following his resignation at the end of 2008? Despite its unfeasibility at the moment it offers guidelines for African development by Africans themselves with due regard to the challenges of globalisation. But how can South Africa effectively take the initiative in such an endeavour when local circumstances are so unfavourable? The South African government's key priorities are to empower people through better schooling, skills development, extending municipal infrastructure, targeting support for industrial clusters, small business development, strategic trade linkages, and extending electrification and telecommunication networks. Notwithstanding millions of rand ploughed into such projects over the past fifteen years there have been no noteworthy successes. The educational scene remains deplorable, electricity supply is inadequate, municipal infrastructure development is all but non est, and unemployment and poverty are sky high. All that despite the revenue that the most powerful economy on the continent could generate.

South Africa is barely able to improve its unemployment and poverty statistics or meet urgent shortfalls. Then what are the chances of developing

at least the Sadec region as a first phase of the Nepad plan? Mbeki himself was none to successful in settling the Zimbabwe dispute and Sadec apparently lacks teeth to make the peer review process work. ‘Silent diplomacy’ may be the best way, but judging by its fruits its prospects as a strategy for settling African disputes appear none too rosy. It is also hazardous to tie such a comprehensive development plan to one individual, since it may well come to nought when that person goes. In many areas Mbeki’s Nepad ideal met with international support.

Nepad is accused of selling out Africa to multinational corporations, the Bretton Woods institutions, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. One could argue against this. It must be seen as a regional effort to enable the African continent to become a worthy role player on the global scene. The plan is criticised for being conceptualised by a few individuals without consulting the African people. Nepad must still be sold to Africans. There is also the question of leadership. Is the plan viable in light of Africa’s ethnic and linguistic diversity, lack of democracy and good governance, limited communication infrastructure and low education level? Nepad has also come under fire from major labour unions in South Africa and Nigeria, particularly for its support of privatisation. Nepad presupposes that Africa can guarantee stable governance. Developments in – to mention just a few – the DRC, Côte d’Ivoire, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Chad and Kenya over the past decade, and the apparent inability of the AU, UN and African leaders to mend matters make it unlikely that Nepad will get off the ground in the foreseeable future.

Nonetheless it would be foolish to write off the Nepad concept altogether. Let us consider some aspects of it.

### **Africa and economic globalisation**

Nepad’s stance on the global revolution can be summed up as follows (applicable articles in brackets):

- While globalisation has advanced at the expense of Africa’s ability to compete, Nepad holds that the advantages of effectively managed integration present the best prospects for future economic prosperity and poverty reduction (28).
- The locomotive for these major advances is the highly industrialised nations. Apart from them only a few countries in the developing world play a substantial role in the global economy. Many developing countries, especially in Africa, contribute passively, mainly by way of their environmental and resource endowments (31).

- In part Africa's inability to avail itself of globalisation opportunities is a result of structural impediments to growth and development in the form of resource outflows and unfavourable terms of trade. At the same time the Nepad document recognises that lack of political and economic leadership in many African countries impedes the effective mobilisation and utilisation of scarce resources in productive areas of activity in order to attract and facilitate domestic and foreign investment (34).
- In order to attain these ideals Nepad assigns a high priority to true democracy (79), the development of capacity-building initiatives (83), and improved public financial management (91).

The Nepad document takes cognisance of problems relating to globalisation. The agenda is based on national and regional priorities and development plans that must be prepared through participatory processes involving the people (47). One can only hope that African countries may gain greater negotiating clout on a regional basis to ensure access for their products to international markets.

A number of issues need to be re-negotiated to change the negative impact of globalisation on poor countries. The elimination of agricultural subsidies in the West, for example, would boost farming incomes and profits in poor countries. Another example is TRIPS (Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights). The TRIPS agreement severely hinders or prevents local firms from absorbing those modern technologies to which foreign corporations have intellectual property rights. This curbs the adoption of modern technology by domestic firms in developing countries, resulting, for example, in soaring medicine prices. Paradoxically, countries in the North are increasingly using biological materials and resources from the South to patent biological materials (bio-piracy) (Khor 2001:43,47). Particular attention is devoted to Africa's debt problem. An international mechanism for fair sharing of the burden between creditor and debtor countries, and between international private creditors and domestic private debtors, must be devised. Khor (2001:63) suggests that credit-giving financial institutions should share the loss when borrowing companies get into difficulties. The volatility of exchange rates, which contributes to overall financial instability, is a major problem. The shifting of speculative capital around world financial markets exploits currency, interest rate, bond rate and stock market changes.

The world economy is assuming totalitarian dimensions. From an ethical point of view the creation of a socio-ecological economic democracy seems a good alternative (Duchrow 1995). The ideal to create a life-sustaining economy must be pursued vigorously. Paradoxes in the evolution

of a global economy may have been unintended, but need to be dealt with. Perhaps these paradoxes relate to the paradoxical nature of humans (including their needs and greed) – which does not mean that the status quo must simply be accepted. Needs (and greed) are the most stubbornly unknown of all the unknowns that economists deal with (Baudrillard 1995:69). Globalisation cannot be understood without tenaciously questioning human motives and driving forces.

The Nepad idea can be considered a symbol of Africa's coming of age. It represents the African spirit and focuses on the plight of Africa, African identity and African culture. The crux of the concept is its African ownership, Africa taking responsibility in order to meet the legitimate aspirations of its people. Nepad is firmly committed to the democratic model. The Nepad policy document (article 94) recognises the need for African countries to pool their resources in order to promote regional development and economic integration on the continent, both of which enterprises will definitely improve Africa's international competitiveness. The basic tenor of the Nepad document is the realisation of the ideal of African unity and regionalism (see articles 45, 69, 84, 95). This would give Africa greater economic leverage in the global marketplace. To some extent Africa's limited economy makes it less vulnerable to exploitation by multinational corporations. This is expressed in article 93: "Most African countries are small, both in terms of population and per capita incomes. As a consequence of limited markets, they do not offer attractive returns to potential investors, while progress in diversifying production and exports is retarded. This limits investment in essential infrastructure that depends on economies of scale for viability."

Nepad centres on African ownership and management. African leaders are using the programme to set an agenda directed to renewing the continent of Africa. It is based on national and regional priorities and development plans that must be prepared through participatory processes that involve the people of Africa (Nepad, article 47). Nepad is one link in a chain of projects to manage the African continent. It must be viewed in conjunction with the African Union (AU),<sup>2</sup> the Pan-African Parliament, the African

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2 When the Organisation for African Unity (OAU) was established it was more concerned about achieving liberation from colonialism than about dealing with internal contradictions. Thus Libya and many other dictatorships were happy participants in OAU events. When South Africa became free the OAU goal of liberation from colonialism was achieved and new challenges emerged, which the AU has to face. The African Union differs from the OAU not only in the absence of anti-colonial rhetoric, but also in its emphasis on democratic government on the continent, with regular, free and fair elections. Articles 17, 18 and 19 of the Constitutive Act of the AU respectively refer to the Pan-African Parliament, the Court of Justice and financial institutions – all important symbols of a uniting continent. While the AU deals with political matters, Nepad deals with collective economic issues affecting the

Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, and the Peace and Security Council of the AU. Nepad had its genesis in the OAU Extraordinary Summit held in Sirte, Libya in September 1999. The OAU summit in Togo in July 2000 mandated presidents Bouteflika of Algeria, Mbeki of South Africa and Obasanjo of Nigeria to engage the developed North with a view to forming a constructive partnership for the regeneration of the continent. On 11 July 2001 the AU Summit of Heads of State and Government in Lusaka adopted Nepad as Africa's principal agenda for development (in the form of Declaration 1, XXXVII).

The expected outcomes of Nepad<sup>3</sup> are:

- economic growth and development, and increased employment
- reduction of poverty and inequality
- diversification of productive activities
- greater African economic integration

To understand the Nepad document in a postcolonial, globalised world we have to consider the fate of the welfare state in the West and how this affects Africa. One of the main consequences of globalisation is the transformation of the national industrial and welfare state into a competitive state. Let us take a brief look at it.

### **Open regionalism versus new regionalism: new regionalism as an alternative to globalisation**

The neo-classical globalisation model represents open regionalism, which can be regarded as antithetical to globalisation. Gibney (quoted by Odén 1999:177) defines open regionalism as a policy directed to the removal of trade, investment and technology barriers (with due regard to GATT restrictions), expanding sub-regional trade agreements and working towards mutual, non-discriminatory access to economies elsewhere.

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continent (Yoh 2002:139). The AU is supportive of and complementary to Nepad, whose success depends on political stability, peace, democracy and good governance, and respect for human rights. The AU will foster these values. At the UN meeting in New York (September 2002) Amara Essy, interim president of the AU, protested that Nepad seems to be operating parallel to the AU. This is not the case. There is remarkable accord between all the documents on African policies. They include Nepad; the Constitutive Act of the AU; the protocol relating to the establishment of the Peace and Security Council of the AU (released 9 February 2002); the consensus statement; and the way ahead of the UN Economic Commission for Africa (released 8 March 2002).

3 See "Background to Nepad" [[www.au2002.gov.za/docs/background/Nepad.htm](http://www.au2002.gov.za/docs/background/Nepad.htm)].

An alternative view of globalisation, aimed at eliminating the drawbacks of open regionalism, is new regionalism, advocated by the World Institute for Development Economics Research (Wider) of the United Nations University, Helsinki, Finland. Wider accepts that regionalisation projects will fall within the framework of globalisation, but claims that such projects constitute a permanent part of the global system rather than a temporary sequence in the globalisation process, as traditionally claimed by supporters of open regionalism (Odén 1999:162).

New regionalism views globalisation as a package rather than a single policy. In this sense it accommodates the comparative advantage model, since each country makes a unique cultural contribution that cannot be 'marketed' like economic commodities. New regionalism goes beyond the free market idea, and includes the economy, politics and culture. It respects the ambition of creating territorial identity and regional coherence. Given the polarising effects (at both a global and a national level), new regionalism is sceptical about economic globalisation as an ideology. It maintains that there is room for weaker regional blocs on the periphery, and that these blocs should be regarded as permanent participants in interregional discussions and negotiations (Odén 1999:165). According to Hettne (quoted by Odén 1999:166) new regionalism is emerging in the grey zone between the free trade area model (trading blocs as a decentralised GATT system) on the one hand, and the fortress isolationist model on the other. New regionalism may, in fact, provide solutions to many of Southern countries' problems. For example:

- Self-reliance has not been viable at a national level, but may be feasible at a regional level (collective self-reliance).
- Collective bargaining at a regional level may improve the economic position of Third World countries in the world economic system.
- Collective strength might make it easier to resist pressures from Northern countries.
- Certain conflicts between and within states may be more easily resolved in a regional framework

At present new regionalism is very much in a draft phase and must still prove itself. It is a long-term vision and it may take some time for Africa to become a region that is in a position to take advantage of the benefits listed. The fact remains, however, that the various economic 'tectonic plates' are moving into regions and the challenge facing Africa is to speed up its own process of regionalisation.

### **Nepad and African regionalism: more than just economic values**

Regionalism (large political/economic formations) as a preferred defensive competitive strategy is the outcome of the new phase of territorial rationalisation (Palan 2000:158-159). Previous efforts at regional integration in Africa have been hampered by many obstacles, including economic failure, failure to abide by treaty obligations, conflict, and failure to resolve political differences. There has been some progress towards regionalisation: Africa's commitment to a common market and dismantling internal trade barriers is now reflected in a number of regional and sub-regional agreements and institutions such as the Lagos Plan of Action, the Abuja Treaty, and the establishment of Regional Economic Communities (RECs). The Nepad document (article 94) recognises the need for African countries to pool their resources<sup>4</sup> in order to improve regional development and effect economic integration on the continent, both of which are bound to improve international competitiveness.

The underlying tenor of the Nepad document is the realisation of the ideal of African economic unity and regionalism. Article 45 claims that democracy is spreading across the continent, and that this trend has the backing of the AU, which has shown new resolve in dealing with conflict and is now prepared to censure deviations from the norm.<sup>5</sup> In addition African governments are much more resolute about regional and continental goals of economic cooperation and integration. This has helped to consolidate the gains of economic turnaround and reinforces the advantages of interdependence.<sup>6</sup>

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4 Africa has identified six RECs: the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU); the Economic Union of Central African States (Eccas); the Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas); the Inter-Governmental Authority for Development (Igad); the Common Market of Eastern and Southern Africa (Comesa); and the Southern African Development Community (Sadec).

5 The Zimbabwean negotiations proved this resolve to be quite meaningless.

6 Article 69 singles out increased African integration (on various levels) as one of the significant outcomes of Nepad. As for democracy and political governance, article 84 says that countries participating in the political governance initiative will devote their efforts to creating and strengthening national, sub-regional and continental structures that support good governance (currently a rarity in Africa). According to article 95 Nepad focuses on the provision of essential regional public goods (e.g. transport, energy, water, ICT, disease eradication, environmental preservation, and provision of regional research capacity) and the promotion of intra-African trade and investment. The focus will be on rationalising the institutional framework for economic integration by identifying common projects that are compatible with integrated national and regional development programmes, and on harmonising economic and investment policies and practices. Article 96 deals with Nepad priorities of capacity building as the way to improve the effectiveness of existing regional structures and as a means of rationalising existing regional organisations. It envisages the

Hettne (1999:17) identifies five world order values linked to the regional phenomenon: peace and security; development; human rights; ecological balance; and democracy. All these values feature prominently in the Nepad policy document. Nepad can therefore be said to be more than an economic strategy. It concerns the African spirit, the plight of Africa, African identity, and African culture.<sup>7</sup> Its core value, as noted already, is its African ownership, which must be retained and promoted in order to meet the legitimate aspirations of African peoples.

Nepad, moreover, is more than an economic upliftment strategy. It concerns African identity, self-respect and accountability. Economic strategies in First World countries, and the initiatives of multinational corporations, are not linked to issues such as identity, human rights and human values, democracy, honesty and the like. The African initiative seemingly differs from exclusivist concerns of profit and economic greed.

**The quest for African identity and Africa's ethnic diversity may impede global economic efficacy**

In Africa ethnicity is both a cultural strength and (seemingly) an economic weakness. While it is the backbone of African diversity, it is also responsible for ethnic clashes and wars. African regionalism – if successful – may help to overcome the damaging effects of ethnic diversity by exposing groups to each other and uniting them through common concerns. African ethnicity is apparent in ethno-science (indigenous knowledge systems), in ethno-philosophy and sage wisdom, in ethno-hermeneutics in religion, and in traditional customs. Although economic globalisation transcends nationalism and

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African Development Bank playing a leading role in financing regional studies, programmes and projects. Regarding upgrading and developing African infrastructure, article 99 says that the plan will focus only on sub-regional or continental infrastructures. Article 106 deals with facilitation of cross-border interaction and market enlargement. Article 108 envisages the use of ICT as a way of integrating Africa with the new information society, using the continent's cultural diversity as leverage. Article 116 deals with the management of water resources as the basis for national and regional cooperation and development.

7 Concerning African culture, note Nepad's article 143: "Culture is an integral part of development efforts on the continent. Consequently, it is essential to protect and effectively utilise indigenous knowledge that represents a major dimension of the continent's culture, and to share this knowledge for the benefit of humankind. The New Partnership for Africa's Development will give special attention to the protection and nurturing of indigenous knowledge, which includes tradition-based literacy, artistic and scientific works, inventions, scientific discoveries, designs, marks, names and symbols, undisclosed information and all other tradition-based innovations and creations resulting from intellectual activity in the industrial, scientific, literary or artistic fields. The term also includes genetic resources and associated knowledge."

regionalism has replaced localism, ethnicity remains an important factor in human identity. It determines people's attitudes, practices and beliefs. But it may also thwart the cooperation and trans-ethnic guardianship required by Nepad.

### **Conclusion**

Although economic globalisation benefits the rich and does not significantly benefit the poor, the extent of Africa's poverty and need is such that the quickest and most effective way must be found to alleviate the situation. Existing foreign investment in Africa cannot be terminated. The global economic ship will have to be rebuilt, so to speak, while still afloat. The debt relief/abolishment request from African countries must continue to receive serious attention.

It is improbable that the authors of the Nepad document had the new regional model in mind when they were drafting it. Nepad testifies to genuine concern for the plight of Africa. To address this, the authors came up with a model to unify Africa as an economic and cultural region. In our opinion this is a long-term solution and should operate in tandem with short-term initiatives that suit each specific region.

Nepad should not be seen as the best and last attempt to achieve African development and cooperation. At most it points the way to go. A lot of water will pass under the bridge before its ideals are realised. Cash donations are not a condition for success – development in other areas are as important. First there must be a popular will to form part of regional development, and successes on the regional level may take Africa to the other pan-African ideals. Countries will have to invest heavily in education and training of technicians capable of realising the dream.

Regional development in its turn depends on stable government of the countries constituting that region. If one looks at Sadec as an example of progress at a regional level, there are many challenges, successful elections being a fulcrum. We consider that next.



## Chapter 10

### Fair elections and an ethics of power sharing in Africa

#### Introduction: African elections and power sharing?

Elections in Africa's young democracies are increasingly marked by controversy – that is, if a country is lucky enough to have elections at all. Often the victorious party is accused of corruption and election fraud, the outcome is refuted, there is a stalemate. The peaceful way out is via the negotiation table and an attempt to thrash out some kind of power sharing deal. Having an election is easy. The problem comes when the result is not accepted and it becomes a matter of time before violence erupts or governments are toppled. An analogous example: when money runs out one simply prints more money, as happened in Zimbabwe. Printing money is easy enough. But problems arise when there is no economy to back the currency. So elections have to be viewed in a broader context to come to grips with the problem. Elections and power sharing agreements appear to be inescapably linked. One cannot avoid the impression that many elections expose the underlying tensions, divisions and dissent in African democracies. Are these attributable to diversity, ethnicity, nepotism, oppression, dissatisfaction with the form of government? Do some African countries merely accept democratic government because it favours a numerically preponderant group? These issues are examined by focusing on power sharing in Africa and the ethics (if any) underlying it. The assumption is that an elected government is committed to a numerically dominant group and to privileging that group.

If the 21st century is to be the age of Africa, taken to mean the age of Africa's Renaissance, then it will certainly have to be a tale of successful power sharing. Unless a culture of fair elections and fair power sharing deals are established, Africa's development is foredoomed. Successful power sharing between opposing groups in African countries and effective involvement by African regional councils, the African Union (AU) and the like are preconditions to realise the dream of a united Africa. Of course, Africa is not the only continent where regional conflicts erupt regularly.<sup>1</sup> African conflicts may be unique (in that postcolonial growth is a common denominator), but

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<sup>1</sup> Classical recent examples are Northern Ireland, Bougainville (the largest island in the Solomon Islands archipelago in Melanesia), Southern Philippines, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia and Moldova. For an authoritative recent discussion, see Weller & Metzger 2008: 59ff; 125ff; 161ff; 193ff; 243ff; 265ff; 307ff.

all conflicts are marked by contingent historical circumstances. It is not tautologous to say that conflict usually relates to transitional processes. One thinks of the wars that preceded the birth of European states, regional conflicts following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and African conflicts associated with the postcolonial era. In other words, conflict is not typical of the continent's entire history. It is a growth process triggered by a particular historical event.

The history of democracy in Africa (and elsewhere) cannot be viewed in isolation. Nor can one advance abstract ideas about the kind of ethics that ought to underpin power sharing without considering the specific context. It would be absurd to expect fair elections in African countries if the country and the groups involved are trapped in a situation where ethical values such as those contained in human rights simply do not exist. Hence the article will deal with such real forces as the operation of power, economic power and the like. The approach is not to propound ethical ideals as a solution to fair elections and the problems of power sharing, and certainly not to moralise about these. Indeed, there are ample grounds for scepticism about the notion that ethics plays any role in democracies. In our context an ethics of power is a square circle. It seems that the only ethics those in power know is an ethics of self-preservation and survival.<sup>2</sup> Usually they negotiate only when their power is threatened to the extent that the only options are: negotiate or abdicate. The success of negotiations depends on the pressure put on the wielder of power to negotiate and the cost of refusal to share power. They would rather share power than lose it altogether. Naturally any form of power sharing implies loss of power. Often power sharing is preceded by bloodshed and devastation of human lives, the economy and infrastructure. Revolutions rarely leave scope for power sharing – they simply get rid of the remains of past institutions. It is exceptional for power to be handed over without bloodshed or prior struggle, be it rhetorical or physical.

Ideally value systems should be imposed 'from below' (and that is not confined to a cross on a ballot paper). What is needed is a culture of human rights, anti-corruption, freedom and democracy that is shared by the majority of interest groups. Only then can free and fair elections be expected. But we know only too well that in situations of extreme poverty, inadequate

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2 As a rule we focus on political power sharing, but power is shared in every area of human life, from marriage and the family to the workplace, the economy and culture. Gender equality, a major issue in our time, was a long struggle that eventually culminated in power sharing, and the struggle continues. Religious revolutions like the 16th century Reformation have to do with truth as power, and because truth cannot be shared, revelational religions that lay claim to truth will not permit power sharing. Religions and ideologies do not negotiate about power. Successful power shifts determine changes in human history at every level. Cultural revolutions are a result of power sharing or takeovers.

schooling and health services, poor infrastructure, inequality and absence of democracy it would be unrealistic to expect such a culture and value systems, let alone their enforcement, to emanate spontaneously from below. In a nutshell: elections and power sharing in Africa are problematic mainly because the power (resources) to be shared is too little. This is concomitant with a lack of developmental expertise and will, as well as incapacity to apply financial resources effectively. There is simply not enough capital and infrastructure to extend the benefits stipulated in bills of basic human rights to the popular masses. That is why minorities and disempowered groups are usually marginalised. The rights of a minority group, for instance, are not unimportant because they are few. They are important, because individual rights are important, and if a number of individuals constitute a majority it gives them no right to discriminate against members of minority groups. Hence the entrenchment of individual human rights in a constitution and a bill of rights is a cornerstone of any democracy. Africa's ethnic, cultural and religious diversity inevitably puts the issue of minority rights on the agenda.<sup>3</sup>

It seems unlikely that ethical guidelines will be imposed by African societies exclusively 'from below', as the Zimbabwean case demonstrates.<sup>4</sup> Such guidelines have to be offered in tandem with initiatives 'from above' or 'from outside'. These are principles entrenched in a constitution as part of a democratic order; spelled out in international human rights; set by international monetary agencies and umbrella bodies like the United Nations and the African Union; required by regional bodies like ECOWAS and SADC (Southern African Development Community); proclaimed by the media, et cetera. But experience has taught us that even initiatives 'from above' have limited impact and usually evoke criticism.

In this article ethics is viewed in terms of the 'human condition' (which is in part biologically determined) as well as actual African circumstances. This entails linking our knowledge of conflict with our knowledge of human biology: the human condition of selfishness and self-interest resulting from desire and concomitant comparison with others; survival impulses and self-protection; a perennial sense of unfulfilment, combined with the experience of scarcity.

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3 With reference to Sachs, Maphai (2004:12) writes: "Dealing with minority rights ... what is normally regarded as minority rights are often nothing more than temporary, utilitarian confidence-building mechanisms."

4 Apart from the fact that people on the 'underside' see themselves as powerless and voiceless, even those who are in a position to protest do not really react. Niebuhr (1960:31) writes: "An irrational society accepts injustice because it does not analyse the pretensions made by the powerful and privileged groups of society. Even that portion of society which suffers most from injustice may hold the power, responsible for it, in reverence."

### Anatomy of power

To probe the problem of successful democracies we need to take a fresh look at power. As our world becomes more complex, so the structures in which power is entrenched become more intricate. That is evidenced by the plethora of laws and rules that regulate human behaviour in sophisticated, industrialised countries, for instance the absurd number of legal claims by people who feel that their personal rights have been infringed in some way. Ironically, the very freedom of the individual breeds such a host of regulations that freedom becomes a dead letter.

Being human means having power and being subjected to power: “[P]ower balances are an aspect of all human relationships” (Elias 2005:222). But what are the limits to power?<sup>5</sup> As societies become more complex, clear-cut norms fragment into multiple beliefs and uniform ethical standards into a diversity of ethical views that are taken to be the best option for now. Our world is changing too rapidly to put our trust in just one set of guidelines. Post-Foucault, we mistrust society’s perception of normality, because behavioural codes are laid down by institutions of power.<sup>6</sup> Maybe what this adds up to is that human beings cannot be trusted and that their lives need to be monitored Orwellian style. That does not apply only to the lower professional echelons but all the more to those in managerial positions who handle huge amounts of money, evidenced by the Enron affair<sup>7</sup> in America

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5 Hume (1968:150ff) lists various forms of human power: natural (our natural abilities); instrumental (wealth, friends); success; nobility; eloquence; and so on. But the principal form of power is that of government: “The Greatest of humane Powers, is that which is compounded of the Powers of most men, united by consent, in one person, Naturall, or Civill, that has the use of all their Powers depending on his will; such as is the Power of a Common-wealth...” (Hume 1968:150).

6 Hume (1978:475) was critical of a causal connection between virtue and what is considered natural: “... nothing can be more unphilosophical than those systems, which assert, that virtue is the same with what is natural, and vice with what is unnatural ... ‘Tis impossible therefore, that the character of natural and unnatural can ever, in any sense, mark the boundaries of vice and virtue. Thus we are still brought back to our first position, that virtue is distinguished by pleasure, and vice by the pain, that any action, sentiment or character gives us by the mere view and contemplation.”

7 The Enron affair was a financial scandal involving Enron Corporation (trading in gas and electricity) and its accounting firm Arthur Andersen, that was exposed in late 2001. After a series of revelations involving irregular accounting procedures conducted throughout the 1990s, Enron was on the verge of bankruptcy by November 2001. Enron filed for bankruptcy on 2 December 2001. As the scandal emerged, Enron shares dropped from over US\$90.00 to less than 50¢. Enron’s plunge occurred after revelations that much of its profits and revenue was the result of deals with special purpose entities (limited partnerships which it controlled). The result was that many of Enron’s debts and the losses that it suffered were not reported in its financial statements. In addition, the scandal caused the dissolution of

and in similar scandals in recent times. For that reason individuals need to be constantly vigilant against swindles in the workplace, in commerce and advertising, investment schemes, new legislation, or at a personal level by friends or relatives. The modernist notion that we are evolving morally into a society of civilised people of integrity appears to be illusory. As soon as societal stress levels rise even slightly – and they are already excessive – violence erupts. Ethical distribution of power presupposes a society of equals. If there are flagrant racial, religious, cultural and ethnic differences, the chances of power abuse are even higher, because people are more inclined to abuse power towards outsiders belonging to some or other interest group. The pursuit of a balance of power is not confined to the political arena where our rights are determined at macro level: it affects every facet of our lives.

Some see this as inherent in human nature, which is marked by a struggle of all against all and survival of the fittest. Others feel that view is too deterministic, arguing that we are not victims of our nature but are capable of achieving altruistic goals counter to nature: “Now coming back to the question with which we started, the nature of normality, we have come close to identifying it with the highest excellence of which we are capable. But this ideal is not an unattainable goal set out far ahead of us; rather it is actually within us, existent but hidden, as potentiality rather than as actuality” (Porter 1988:183). Such an approach, however, is incongruous in situations of extreme stress, in which ‘normality’ is in fact a war of everybody against everybody. In nature the law of survival applies marginally less in an ecologically balanced environment.

**Fair elections and successful power sharing in the African context: models of governance, diversity, economic determinants and values**

Power sharing, before and/or after elections would appear the best approach currently available to handle conflict at a regional, national and international level. The alternatives range from prolonged civil war or terrorism, to civil disobedience, to inevitable impoverishment and economic depression, to the eventual collapse of the country. But power sharing is not always successful. The common lot of power sharing deals appears to be that they are short-lived. There is too much reliance on rhetorical persuasive powers to sell a solution to political opponents with the aid of foreign and other mediators. Lasting peace is only possible if the diverse people in a country take ownership of a culture of power sharing. Establishing that culture is an ethical

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Arthur Andersen, which at the time was one of the five largest accounting firms in the world.

matter. Without ownership of the value system underlying a country's government and the concomitant ethical principles it remains just a strategy to buy time for the warring parties.

But who or what determines the formulas underlying peace and power sharing? After all, the answers are not made up round the negotiation table. At most these are compromises based on existing principles and advantages that some parties already enjoy. It is commonly expected that democratic principles, human rights as spelled out in existing (idealised) constitutions, economic realities, and international considerations will be taken into account – although it rarely happens. Experience has taught us that power sharing negotiations are not that simplistic. Groups in power would hardly accept value systems that limit or take away their power, while minority or disempowered groups readily accept any value system that promises them power. The premise is that there are no trans-national, trans-religious or trans-cultural norms that can be authoritatively invoked to resolve conflict. In practice it is usually pragmatic, utilitarian norms that save the day.

The complexity of each and every instance of power sharing must not be used as an alibi for a fatalistic belief that 'nothing will ever change' (the reason for Mbeki's silent diplomacy approach in Zimbabwe?). The best we can do is to support a system that keeps negotiations as transparent as possible; to screen all direct and indirect role players, their motives and ulterior motives; to urge African leaders to adapt accepted, uniform guidelines and enforce them as far as possible (e.g. those contained in the AU guidelines and the peer review mechanism); to spell out the rights of all parties, both majority and minority ones; to take optimal account of the tyranny of systems (democracy, economic globalisation) and their influence; to speak on behalf of the voiceless who suffer most; and not to countenance the aspect of the human condition that lies at the heart of the problem: self-interest and limitless economic greed.

We now turn to factors that determine successful elections and power sharing in Africa.

### *Models of governance*

Is there an Africa-oriented power sharing that will work for Africa, whereas some other variety will work only for Western and Eastern countries? It could be federalism or consociationalism, a liberal or a constitutional democracy, or whatever model. The answer certainly does not lie in any one model. Africa is too diverse for that. Since the 1990s there has been a trend away from one-party states to a form of democracy and power sharing. The process is still in its infancy and is marred by election fraud, intimidation of oppo-

sition parties, misuse of a salaried army or freedom fighters, nepotism, patronage by those in power, and the like.

A point to bear in mind is that democracy should not be considered an irrefutable answer to the problem of good governance. Nor must we assume that if democracy is in place and power sharing negotiations are moving on accepted lines, all will be well and prosperity is assured. Below we shall look into criticism of democracy as a suitable model for Africa. Commenting on this style of government Lumumba-Kasongo (2005:2) writes: "It is argued that no contemporary nation-state, individual or social class has a monopoly over democracy and that democracy and its processes are historically and socially learning processes or cognitive human experiences." He is critical of liberal democracies that do not always keep their promises (Lumumba-Kasongo 2005:6-10), yet he admits: "Africa will not be able to progress collectively and sustain its progress without some kind of democracy" (Lumumba-Kasongo 2005:5). But democratic institutions are not a magic wand. They must be workable and that requires many assumptions. Lumumba-Kasongo (2005:11) quotes Julius Nyerere: "For democracy means more than voting on the basis of adult suffrage every few years; it means (among other things) an attitude of tolerance, and willingness to operate with others on terms of equality ... The nation's Constitution must provide methods by which the people can, without recourse to violence, control the government, which emerges in accordance with it and even specify the means for its amendment."

We must remember that the tribal system has prevailed since pre-colonial times up to the present, especially in the countryside. Under that system people are accustomed to care and personal attention. Tribes are relatively small, dispersed and interdependent. Social, economic and ruling functions are in the hands of the chief and the people. That is why, without romanticising them, principles like *ujaama* and *ubuntu* worked. In a national democracy people expect the same care and personal attention to which their parents and ancestors were accustomed, but these things are foreign to an impersonal democracy. In mass society *ubuntu* sentiments have degenerated into an ethics of 'we vote for you, you look after us'. A culture of critical involvement for the sake of the common good is still in its infancy. The public action of trade unions and their ilk is largely prompted by self-interest: "Even today, most South-Africans, of whatever color, do not consider that they can do much, if anything, about influencing the law, let alone change it. They go to the polls once in five years, cast their vote for a party, and leave the rest to the politicians. If things go wrong, this is blamed on government, but they, the citizens, feel they can do nothing about it until the next election, especially as, under the system of Proportional Representation, they have no

immediate contact with or recourse to a member of Parliament to act as a local sounding-board for their complaints or opinion” (Van der Ross, quoted in Kumalo & Dziva 2008:178). Hence in the view of these authors South Africa does not have a living democracy, because the people “wait for delivery of services as promised, and so the government is seen as a delivery mechanism and not as a system of participation in the governance of the country”.

We need an entrenched system of checks and balances when dealing with human power relations. The best way of ensuring ethical power sharing negotiations and multiparty government is an effective culture of human rights. Politicians may be a-moral, but political practice is not. Jackson-Preece (2008:628) says: “The salience of the rights discourse, and indeed the domestic and international standards it evokes, is an important reminder that politics is normative as well as instrumental. International agreements, state structures, public policies, and so forth entail moral issues ...”

### *Diversity*

An ethically cohesive force in a pluralistic democracy like the South African one is the constitution with its bill of rights. The challenge is axiological: to create values that serve the interests of all people. That can be done via a constitution, which is legally enforceable and has the protection of a constitutional court. If the constitution is refined to curb power abuses (corruption, nepotism, party-centrism), it could be one of the best instruments to make power sharing work. Is that the solution to power sharing in Africa? Under a constitution power is shared, the poor are defended, minority groups are given rights, et cetera. It has the advantage that it has symbolical value, provides guidelines and is accessible to all.<sup>8</sup>

In a sense an ethical link is presupposed by the nature of most African conflicts, be they religious (Sudan; Somaliland), ethnic (Ruanda; Benin),<sup>9</sup>

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8 ‘Liberal democracy’ does not respect absolute majority rule (except when electing representatives). The ‘liberty’ of majority rule is restricted by the constitution. Real power is actually in the hands of a relatively small representative body. Can the Polokwane meeting (December 2007) be seen as a relative small oligarchy deciding on behalf of all about the road ahead?

9 The influence of African ethnicity on conflict is a controversial issue. A safe answer is that it may play a role along with a host of other factors, to be identified in each local context. With reference to Cameroon, Belinga (2005: 46) sees ethnicity as co-determined by colonial interests: “(E)thnicity draws its ‘credibility’ from a manipulated perception of ethnicity, an offshoot of colonialist anthropology that construed ethnicity as the unmistakable bedrock of determination of social ethos in Africa.” Referring to a study of Benin, he maintains (p 67, n 11) that ‘the project ... show(s) that ethnicity can provide a sound basis for a lasting democracy’.

racial (Zimbabwe, South Africa) or economic (Nigeria). One could add other causes of conflict such as the absence of a democratic order, nepotism, corruption or dictatorships, all of which presuppose an ethical orientation. African history has proved that religion and its potential contribution to ethical guidelines fan conflict rather than resolve it,<sup>10</sup> despite the fact that by and large Africa is one of the most religious continents in the world. Differences may not be conveniently elevated to ineluctable fate, which often serves as an alibi for exploitation and oppression.

Is South Africa, a deeply divided society, more divided than other African countries? Deeply divided countries are marked by disparities in race, religion, ethnicity, language (culture) and wealth. South Africa has all these features. Its relative success is attributable to established infrastructure, human capital and investor confidence, its unique constitution and a relatively strong economy. These building blocks must be preserved and developed. Most other African countries lack these advantages.<sup>11</sup> But more important than the advantages are the will and, especially, the goodwill to make a system work.<sup>12</sup> Africa can accommodate its differences and turn cultural and ethnic diversity into a source of strength.

#### *Economic determinants*

Economic factors are crucial in the establishment of a democracy. Reflection on a governmental model for Africa should not focus only on ethnic groups (important as they are), but should also consider classes and especially major economic inequalities. These can become an instrument for manipulation

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10 In regard to the two major religions on the continent, Christianity and Islam, Jansen (2004:68) writes with reference to Mamdani: "Islam and Christianity have one thing in common. Both share a deeply messianic orientation. Each has a conviction that it possesses the truth. Both have a sense of mission to civilize the world ... Do you convince others of the validity of your truth or do you proceed by imposing it on them? The first alternative gives you reason and evangelism; the second gives you Crusades."

11 O'Leary (2008:48) writes: "The division of power, and competition for power, are intelligent principles. But, on their own, they are unlikely to calm deeply divided territories. Indeed, the combination of the division of power and the competition for power may be conducive to the oppression of national, ethnic, and religious communities. The competition for power expresses or creates majorities – and such majorities may be constructed from national, ethnic or communal cleavages. Majorities from the same community may win control over offices and governments – even if the powers of those offices and governments are divided and checked – and then propose discriminatory public policy and conceptions of merit."

12 Kofi (2005:90-96) mentions, for example, Africa's enormous capacity to flourish. Although economists may be critical of his optimism, I don't think his appraisal of Africa's potential is mistaken.

in elections. Liberal or constitutional democracies build on these inequalities. The problem is that they pretend everyone is equal, but that is not so. We are all equal before the law, but not in the economy. According to the constitution we are all entitled to freedom and respect, but I cannot change overnight so I can exercise that freedom. The absence of a successful economy that can accommodate most citizens makes the civil service (backed by military power) with its fairly guaranteed income an ideal to strive for. So instead of governing in the sense of ordering society, self-enrichment becomes an end in itself.

If there are only enough job opportunities for 10 to 20 percent of a people's labour force, problems like power abuse, corruption and nepotism are bound to arise.<sup>13</sup> Even in South Africa, an economic and infrastructural paradise compared to most African countries, these evils feature, because with an unemployment rate of 23 percent in 2008 scarcity remains crucial.<sup>14</sup> That is why, despite non-discriminatory constitutional guidelines, black empowerment and job reservation are practised, which those who are excluded consider discriminatory. The premise seems to be that because economic and other resources are inadequate, fair power sharing principles go by the board. That implies that in most African countries economic development has to proceed by leaps and bounds before one can expect them to enter into equitable power sharing agreements that will ensure freedom and equality. Obviously this is a catch 22 situation, for economic growth is only feasible given stable democratic government and an established human rights culture. One ethically questionable solution is to encourage Eastern countries like China and India that are increasingly interested in investing in Africa without setting criteria for, for instance, observance of human rights (China, at any rate, is not known to have an established human rights culture). But could that not be a solution – to tolerate discrimination and oppression until such time as the economy has improved to the point where the cake is big enough for everyone to have a slice? Or will it be a case of the

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13 In a context of scarcity and lack of basic amenities, coupled with diversity and a perception that certain groups are privileged above others, freedom fighters are understandable. Arms that are obtained are used to secure rights (economic advantage) for them or some particular group. Much of South Africa's crime problem is also attributable to this.

14 According to Statistics SA's latest Labour Force Survey (2009) South Africa's official unemployment rate fell in the fourth quarter of 2008, mainly due to the construction industry adding jobs and the fact that 97 000 unemployed people gave up looking for positions. On 2 March 2009 the Pretoria-based agency said that the unemployment rate fell from 23.2 percent in the third quarter of 2008 to 21.9 percent of the labour force in the fourth quarter. At the end of last year the number of unemployed people totalled 3.873 million. The total number of employed people increased by 189 000 to 13.844 million. However, the total labour force was down by 59 000 to 17.718 million. (See SouthAfrica.info, <http://www.southafrica.info/news/business/227129.htm>).

larger the cake, the bigger the slice of corrupt individuals among those who cut up the cake? For the poor all it ever means is the proverbial crumbs from the table ...

The point is that voting for a government in a situation where most people enjoy relative prosperity and rights, are informed and have the will to change things is very different from voting for a government that simply does not have the means to provide jobs, education, medical care, security and an income. In such a situation of critical scarcity power groups, discrimination, corruption and oppression are well-nigh inevitable.

Thus the link between ethics and fair governance shifts entirely to an economic and developmental level. It shifts to the arena of big money lenders and donor countries, where ethical principles, if any, are determined unilaterally. The absence of democratic rule in many African countries can be explained on similar lines. Western countries that take the moral high ground and decry African practices do very little about the roots of the problem. It is not just a matter of corrupt individuals but of the absence of basic material conditions for democracy.

Can scarcity and underdevelopment be seen as the sole cause of all discrimination? What about African values and African spirituality? Are the values cherished by a society and the sacrifices people are prepared to make not worth far more than economic 'growth' based on the exclusion of minorities and disempowered groups? The ANC was not liberated from apartheid but by apartheid. It is *because* they experienced apartheid that they can declare with one voice that the sun will never again rise on such unfreedom and injustice, yet we know it still rises on grave injustices every morning ... Racism and discrimination, however justified it might appear to be (e.g. affirmative or any other racially based action), cannot be smuggled in by the backdoor. That makes a farce of the liberation struggle. Thus ethical guidelines are a must in power sharing agreements – despite scarcity!

Whilst the importance of economic factors is acknowledged, economic models remain unimpeachable, just like governments' self-interest. What underlies power sharing is not ethical guidelines but the 'value system' of self-interest. In this respect Niebuhr (1960:84) many years ago recalled Washington's words: "No state ... has ever entered a treaty for any other reason than self-interest ... A statesman who has any other motive would deserve to be hung." Niebuhr contemplates the puzzle of the self-obsession and selfishness of nations. He draws his examples almost exclusively from the Christian West. What applies to negotiation between countries applies equally to contending interest groups within a country.

When it comes to Africa it is no secret that the West's economic interests and its hold on the continent play a major role in negotiations. If

divisions are economically profitable, they are supported, and vice versa. There are also deeply rooted sentiments that can sway negotiations one way or another.<sup>15</sup> Whilst in no way suggesting that Zimbabwe's president Mugabe obstinate stance is wise or commendable, his pertinacity in sticking to his programme in the face of Western condemnation is noteworthy. The underlying sentiment<sup>16</sup> to free Africa from all 'outside interference' is probably the reason for the support he receives.<sup>17</sup> Whether the sentiment is sustainable considering the consequences, is another matter. Even if his protest was justified, the method he adopts is catastrophic for his country and his people. Besides, he did not get on that high horse until he lost the referendum and his monopoly on self-enrichment was in jeopardy. If SADC leaders were to speak out openly in favour of the sentiment about Western power groups' unfair interference and expectations and Mugabe's injudicious manner of resolving the problem, it could have a great impact. The Zimbabwean saga is by no means concluded and the situation remains dire.

#### **Importance of historically seminal ideas**

Africa's position in world history today must be seen in the context of a historical interpretation of Africa that was to determine Western interaction with the continent over many centuries. That interpretation antedates colonialism, the slave trade, economic exploitation, discrimination and the rest of it. The map of Africa drawn by colonial powers persists to this day. The situation of African countries is a result of the imposition of economic models and styles of government. The state of present-day Africa is part of this *Wirkungsgeschichte*.

Without harking back to the history of Idealism one could say that some events may be considered historically seminal in that they determine the course of history (corresponding to the notion of an axial period). There

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15 Kofi (2005:236-7) comments on Mugabe: "Firstly, he seems obsessed with British prime minister Tony Blair, making of him an ever-lurking, omnipotent phantom. The way Mugabe rants when talking about whites reveals deep trauma suffered under the racist regime of Ian Smith..."

16 Kofi (2005:227) cites Mugabe (*The Zimbabwean*, 1 April 2005): "Zimbabwe is for black people, not white people. Our party must continue to strike fear in the heart of the white man, our real enemy." That after singing the whites' praises in the late 1980s (Kofi 2005:227). Kofi (2005:231-237) points out the irrationality of the land grabs and Mugabe's discrimination against his own people, citing Soyinka who calls Mugabe "a disgrace to the continent".

17 Mugabe was given a hero's welcome on his arrival at president Zuma's inauguration ceremony. Kofi (2005:228) cites a survey of readers of the London based *New African* in Augustus 2004 in which they had to name 'the greatest 100 Africans of all time'. Mugabe came third, after Mandela and Nkrumah!

also individual acts that are turning points in history (Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon; the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914, which triggered World War I); De Klerk's Rubicon speech in February 1990; 9/11, etc). The aim of citing these facts is to counteract the perception that Africa has no evolutionary history, that futile conflict is the hallmark of the continent, that Africa never acts but only reacts.<sup>18</sup>

The establishment of a democratic order in South Africa in 1994 may come to be seen as such a turning point in African history. The changes it has already wrought in a scant fifteen years support this belief (see Kofi 2005: 97ff;100), as do the growth of intra-African trade, peace-keeping forces in African countries, contributions to the African parliament and the AU, initiatives like Nepad and the promotion of the African Renaissance, and the burgeoning idea of a United States of Africa.<sup>19</sup> Hence we are looking for an event or a process (for which the continent is ready and of which many will take ownership) that will in fact bring about an African Renaissance. Kofi (2005:86) visualises it as an economic plan: "Africa needs a 'Marshall Plan', a Mandela Plan, or a Nkrumah Plan." To him this entails more than just injections of foreign money, but requires initiatives in Africa's internal structuring.

Hegel linked the development of Spirit with the historically laborious establishment of the notion of freedom. He saw the zenith of this process in the German monarchy. "The East knew and to the present day knows only that *One* is Free; the Greek and Roman world, that *some* are free; the German World knows that *All* are free. The first political form therefore which we observe in History, is *Despotism*, the second *Democracy* and *Aristocracy*, the third *Monarchy*" (Hegel 1956:104). Africa's struggle was and remains a freedom struggle. That freedom is impossible without economic freedom. Ethics and an ethic of freedom – basic to all negotiations – depend on the achievement of conducive external conditions. That co-determines what we mean by fair government.

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18 This perception is probably stronger than we think. Does it originate from Hegel? In his *The philosophy of history* (1956:99) he says: "At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it – that is in its northern part – belong to the Asiatic or European World."

19 Although at present it looks as if Nepad has been nipped in the bud and the African Renaissance has yet to enter the world arena, it is early days. The ideas have been established and the signs are there: the idea of a united Africa, a single currency, intra-African trade, exploitation of the continent's vast economic potential, et cetera (see Kofi 2005:70,73, 87, 90-96).

### **Just forms of governance and the biologically determined human condition**

The 21st century will be, inter alia, the age of biology, just as the 20th century was the age of physics. We are increasingly aware that we are driven by evolutionary forces like self-preservation, self-interest and greed. Because human nature (the human condition) cannot be harnessed, these forces are not taken into account. Nonetheless greater insight helps us not to fatalistically acquiesce in the unavoidability of human nature and what it entails. Hence this reflection on how to give ethics its proper role in power sharing.

Ultimately, it seems our biological ontology takes precedence over any moral ontology. In times of need and want only very exceptional people transcend self-interest and self-preservation. Nonetheless our biological orientation is governed by socio-cultural forces. Cynically we might observe that the concept of people as political animals simply means animal politics. Thus it seems meaningful to try and interpret human behaviour and value systems in terms of evolutionary, more specifically biological ethics. That is evident in the saying that people will not be guided by justice and fairness if their desires dictate otherwise and they are able to satisfy their desires without adverse consequences. Johnson (1993:234) puts it thus: “Contrary to extreme relativistic charges, moralities are not radically incommensurable forms of life. The fact of our embodiment guarantees this much. We all have bodies that have at least a core set of universal needs and desires. Beyond that small core there may be broad variations across cultures. Still, we all need love, shelter, food, and protection from harm. We all feel pain, joy fear, and anger. There are certain basic-level experiences we all have ... That is why there are prototypes of *the bully*, *breach of promise*, *the good samaritan*, and *exclusion from the group* as basic human experiences ...”

Much has been written about people’s biologically driven egotism and the Christian virtue of altruism. In practice this usually amounts to the weaker party having to display the altruism. Niebuhr (1956:76) points out the limitations of Christian morality to have any social benefits worth mentioning: “Slavery, injustice, inequality of wealth, war, these all were accepted as ordained by the ‘natural law’ which God had devised for man’s sinful state”. He attributes the defeatism of religion to “a too consistent God-world, spirit-body dualism, in which the fact that natural impulses in history, economic and political life move under less restraint of reason and conscience than in the private conduct of individuals” (Niebuhr 1956:78). This is in keeping with the general trend described in his book, namely that whereas morality is still feasible at an individual level, it soon evaporates at the level of larger groups, classes or nationalities.

But even at an individual level personal advantage takes priority over the advantage of others, especially when there is no particular bond with the other. To abuse power if you think you can get away with it appears to be an irresistible temptation. The problem is mostly that the party that wins the election and forms a government appropriates surplus power. That means greater power than ordinary people possess. Surplus power entails exceeding one's given capacity and, on the basis of one's status, demanding more than one is entitled to. By virtue of winning in an election members of that party or group are privileged. In the name of public safety innocent people, or ones who pose no real danger to the state, are detained. In the name of free market systems people are exploited beyond reasonable profit margins. On grounds of religious authority people are reduced to morally constrained automatons. On grounds of so-called accepted political policy they are deprived of their right to comment critically on decisions.<sup>20</sup> On grounds of protracted negotiations they are subjected to years of exploitation and wretchedness, as happened in Zimbabwe. Citizens' credulity, civil obedience, loyalty and defencelessness are all exploited. Corruption is simply the belief that corrupt, self-interested actions will remain hidden and we will get away with it.

One way or another, human rule over their fellow humans – be it a monarchy, an aristocracy or democracy – is always flawed. Hannah Arendt (2005:237), referring to Hobbes and the sovereign European nation-state, writes: "Today we ought to add the latest and perhaps most formidable form of such dominion: bureaucracy or the rule of an intricate system of bureaus in which no men, neither one nor the best, neither the few nor the many, can be held responsible, and which could be properly called rule by Nobody. (If, in accord with traditional political thought, we identify tyranny as government that is not held to give account of itself, rule by Nobody is clearly the most tyrannical of all, since there is no one left who could even be asked to answer for what is being done. It is this state of affairs, making it impossible to localize responsibility and to identify the enemy, that is among the most potent causes of the current world-wide rebellious unrest, its chaotic nature, and its dangerous tendency to get out of control and to run amuck.)"

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20 An example is the emphasis on secrecy in many negotiations. Negotiators must be trusted to do the best thing in their communication. Details and norms that were observed cannot be disclosed because of the sensitive nature of the negotiations. That implies that criticism by an uninformed public is not permitted. By the same token secret cultural organisations (cf the Broederbond and Mbeki's proposed Bantu Club) can see what is good for the 'people' and what guidelines need to be followed.

The great value of Hannah Arendt's work was that she showed that the state is not entitled to its power and that it only has that power because it received it from the people (Arendt 1958: 200-203). She had lived through a period when the German people were whipped up by an ideology, and although most people let themselves be carried away, many who realised the dangers involved simply looked on helplessly. She distinguishes between power and strength. Whereas strength is something you possess, like muscular strength, power is something you are given, which is vested in you and which you can just as quickly lose. "Power is always, as we would say, a power potential and not an unchangeable, measurable, and reliable entity like force or strength ... Only where men live so close together that the potentialities of action are always present can power remain with them ... For power, like action is boundless: it has no physical limitation in human nature, in the bodily existence of man, like strength. Its only limitation is the existence of other people, but this limitation is not accidental, because human power corresponds to the condition of plurality to begin with. For the same reason, power can be divided without decreasing it, and the interplay of powers with its checks and balances is even liable to generate more power, so long, at least as the interplay is alive and has not resulted in stalemate" (Arendt 1958:200-201). Thus those in power often lose power (that is popular support) and stay in power because all that remains is brute military force. "From this results the by no means infrequent political combination of force and powerlessness, an array of impotent forces that spend themselves, often spectacularly and vehemently but in utter futility, leaving behind neither monuments nor stories, hardly enough memory to enter into history at all" (Arendt 1958:202).

To Arendt a plurality of figures in the public arena of the marketplace is the only way of actualising freedom and responsibility. As a rule that is what monarchs suppress, because a plurality impedes the notion of just one sovereign. Arendt (1958:220-221) writes: "The most obvious salvation from the dangers of plurality is monarchy, or one-man-rule, in its many varieties, from outright tyranny of one against all to benevolent despotism and to those forms of democracy in which the many form a collective body so that people 'is [are] many in one' and constitute themselves as a 'monarch'." Even Plato's ideal of the philosopher king falls in this category: "But they all have in common the banishment of the citizens from the public realm and the insistence that they mind their private business while only 'the ruler should attend to public affairs'" (Arendt 1958:221). Arendt wants to restore the say of thoughtful, involved citizens. Most people, usually in situations of oppression, believe that when they lose political power, they lose all power. That is a reduction. The citizen's most basic right is the franchise and it does

not leave her voiceless. But the ruler or monarch is not solely to blame. He would have no power if he had not received it. Government remains an inescapable necessity because human, biologically structured desire puts people in a state of constant warfare over which they have no control. The only way to channel that energy appears to be to incorporate desire positively in the economic warfare. But underlying the system we still have human desire in the form of greed and power through self-enrichment.

Analogous to Arendt's notion that people's rule over other people is simply perpetuated in new, equally unsatisfactory ways, Foucault examines domination and the exercise of power via *biological power*. In what we have said so far the accent was basically on thinkers who look to human nature to account for the phenomenon of power and mode of government. This line of thinking can be extended to Foucault's work. Governments, social contracts and all that have to do with human vulnerability and the human quest for security. We vacillate between nature and culture, between our biology and our sociology. To governments human biological vulnerability to the constant threat of death is advantageous. The fact of death underlies societal strategies: "The old power of death that symbolized sovereign power was now carefully supplanted by the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life" (Foucault 2005:81). Fear of death and the instincts of self-defence and self-preservation are among the most powerful drives of all living creatures. Hobbes (1978:188) sees 'use' of the fear of death as instrumental for government strategy: "The Passions that incline men to Peace, are Feare of Death", and only the sovereign, with whom individuals form a social contract, can protect them against untimely death. Only the sovereign who holds human lives in his hands can exercise authority and prevent them from making constant war on each other. Hence power and fear are interdependent. Without fear those in power cannot rule. Fear of those in power (tyrants) keeps them in power.

#### **Ethics and human desire: between scarcity and abundance, democracy and economy**

Towards the end of Plato's *Symposium* Socrates narrates his experience with Diotima to explain who Eros (love) was. In teaching him about love she showed that Eros cannot be divine because he "has no portion in what is either good or fair". He is in fact a great spirit (*daimon*), a medium for God's interchange with humans. He was begotten by Poros, the god of plenty, who was seduced by Penia (poverty) when he was drunk after a feast of the gods in honour of Aphrodite's birthday. Hence Eros is Aphrodite's follower and attendant. And because of his parentage "he is always poor, and anything but

tender and fair, as the many imagine him; and he is rough and squalid, and has no shoes, nor a house to dwell in.” He takes after his father: always plotting against the fair and the good; bold, enterprising, strong, keen in the pursuit of wisdom, fertile in resources; a philosopher at all times, an enchanter, sorcerer, sophist. He is alternately alive and flourishing when he has plenty, and dead at another moment. So he is never in want and never in wealth, always in a state between ignorance and knowledge. Gods do not seek wisdom, for they are wise already. Neither do the ignorant, being self-satisfied in their ignorance. The only ones who desire wisdom are “those who are in a mean between the two; Eros is one of them ... for his father is wealthy and wise, and his mother poor and foolish”.

The story symbolises the human condition. Eros is the symbol of desire which is always vacillating between fulfilment and unfulfilment. That reflects the human condition: humans not only vacillate between scarcity and abundance, but are dissatisfied even in times of plenty and, like Eros, are continually seeking fulfilment – as the history of desire in human life shows. It is the driving force in human initiative and determines, *inter alia*, the economy. As in Eros’s case, desire is mainly that of the individual, and each person has to find her own strategies to find fulfilment. Does that mean we are biologically determined and driven to constantly seek fulfilment, new resources to perpetuate the process? That would mean that we are destined to exhaust our planet’s limited resources prematurely. What applies at an individual level also applies to society, to corporates and governments, all of which translate life into the fulfilment of insatiable desire.

The harsh biological reality is that we have managed to create a culture of scarcity in an environment of plenty, which has to serve as a driving force for development and economies. Scarcity provides the basis of the struggle. The human problem, unlike that of species in a given ecological environment, is that we manufacture scarcity. It is often induced artificially through market manipulation, advantaging some individuals, ethnic groups, races, trades and professions, cooperation in the form of conspiracies that benefit the few. The strategy of surplus power applies particularly to the economy in the form of surplus capital, when services and goods are sold at far more than they are worth to optimise profit. Surplus power and surplus scarcity coexist.

A successful market economy presupposes democracy. Democratically elected governments serve the market, for that is what ensures jobs and affluence for their constituency. The market has a missionary bent. It continually needs new proselytes: a stagnant market is doomed to failure. Poor, economically struggling countries have to observe the values of democracy and economic globalisation or stay poor. One reason for Africa’s suffering

and poverty is that it does not meet the condition for a sound market economy, namely democracy; affluence means democracy. One can add a rider: democracy presupposes competence – including simulation of market mechanisms.

The desire for high self-esteem leads to comparison with others who have more than me, hence the sense of scarcity inherent in mimetic competition. The rich never have enough and the poor appear unable to break free from the poverty cycle. Galbraith refers to a ‘built-in’ kind of economic principle that tells people when they have enough. We appear to have lost that: “What is called economic development consists in no small part in devising strategies to overcome the tendency of men to place limits on their objectives as regards income and thus on their efforts” (quoted in Baudrillard 1998:73; also see Niebuhr 1956:44, Girard 1987).

Whereas scarcity is always manufactured to stimulate desire (for I don’t desire what is readily available, only what is scarce and unique), we are now confronted with scarcity that threatens to assume global proportions – not only scarcity of natural resources, but also of water and a people-friendly climate. Capitalism – until recently the norm for economic models – shares the illusion that endless natural resources will always be there for never-ending exploitation.

### **Conclusion**

The premise in any reflection on fair governance must be that a clinically objective assessment of power is impossible. Any such assessment is based on conditions such as popular conviction, economic and political models, religious doctrines, cultural traditions and the like, which are already established in our thought patterns and which govern our consciousness. Besides, there are no unimpeachable, transcendent norms to serve as a blueprint, because every age has to allow for its own contingent historical circumstances.

Despite cynicism about the role of ethics, fair elections and power sharing deals, the ideal has to be pursued. The human condition of egotism and desire makes systems of checks and balances all the more important. The impact of historical axial figures and events must not be underestimated. Direct and indirect public involvement in fair government must be maximised. All is not gloom and doom on the African continent. We need more of the realistic optimism of a writer like Kofi to put us on the road to victory. Hope of a successful African Renaissance starts with the empowerment of every individual.

“Civilization is not a gift, it is an achievement – a fragile achievement that needs constantly to be shored up and defended from besiegers inside and out” (Taylor 1994:72).

## Chapter 11

### African technology with a human face

#### **Introduction: Africa confronting global technology**

From a First World perspective Africa may not have much to contribute to the present technological debate. Poverty and illiteracy put it on the receiving end. Not only are technological goods, when available, accepted and used somewhat uncritically, but the continent also falls victim to abuses such as dumping of outdated military hardware and toxic waste. Africa seemingly suffers from an inferiority complex because of its technological disadvantage. This is exacerbated by those in power, who interpret technological superiority as moral superiority and look down on the poor and the weak.

Many African thinkers are critical of Western technology, promoting African indigenous knowledge systems instead. This does not reduce Africa's dependence on science and technology. Traditional African culture and worldviews ostensibly hamper the effectiveness of science and technology. Africa knows science and utilises technology in a unique way. It knows them and at the same time relativises them in favour of traditional customs, which may strike the Western mind as mythic and primitive. Africa has a special contribution to make to the technology debate. It can also learn a lot from negative technological experiences of highly industrialised countries. This is particularly important in light of renewed efforts to alleviate poverty on the continent through ambitious economic growth strategies.

#### **Metaphysical foundations of technology**

Technology comes with its baggage of values.<sup>1</sup> These values change dynamically with new technologies and recipient generations. To understand it one has to fathom its underlying metaphysics, ethics and value systems. Although technology may seem to be the antipode of metaphysics, it entails a very distinctive metaphysics of its own. Barbour (1993:41) maintains that the most fundamental ethical convictions, such as the value of the individual and

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<sup>1</sup> The values underlying technology can be interpreted positively and negatively. They are interwoven with worldview and perception of reality. On the positive side technology is action to master things by means of reason, to account for what is subconscious, make quantitative what is qualitative, make clear and precise the outlines of nature, take hold of chaos and put order into it (Ellul 1964:43).

respect for nonhuman nature, are dependent on one's understanding of ultimate reality. Consequently ethics cannot be divorced from metaphysics. Since ethics and value systems are linked to basic metaphysical tenets, the metaphysics and value system behind 'Western' and 'African' oriented technology must be investigated.

### **Western metaphysics and technology**

Western metaphysics developed from its Greek roots, through the Heideggerian reinterpretation, to a post-metaphysical position with the critique of Hegelian idealism. It is characterised by a highly reflexive, philosophical and rational approach, linking thought on primal causes to human existentials. In spite of its highly abstract character and search for an ontological first cause, Western metaphysics, in the wake of natural science and developments in the humanities, realised that totalising thinking was no longer possible, and that the ideal of unity was unattainable (Degenaar 1996:5-27; Habermas 1998:36ff, 116ff). This was emphasised by developments in the natural sciences where phenomena are increasingly traced to more fundamental structures whose depth matches the range of explanatory theories. These structures, however, fall outside the referential network of a totality. Neither do they shed light on the individual's position in the cosmos or the architectonics of reason within the system. In addition metaphysics had to come to grips with the fact that essences elude the nature of knowledge, as they elude the theory of natural law (Habermas 1998:35). However, the end of each metaphysical system marks the start of another.

Escalating entropy inevitably increases complexity. Complexity and multiplicity, both natural and cultural, make it possible to discern patterns and identify commonalities. In spite of the critique levelled at essentialist thinking, worldviews tend towards unifying ideas and values. Despite increased complexity in the sciences, a multiplicity of truths and values, and the interaction of diverse cultures, we keep mapping our world in unifying explanations and theories. In this regard Habermas (1998:38, 49-50) stresses the continued importance of the concepts 'whole' and 'unity' for humans in general. These concepts operate in the life world. The life world is always intuitively present to all of us as a totality that is unproblematic, not objectified and pre-theoretical – a sphere that is taken for granted, the sphere of common sense. For Africans it is this life world that counts, and they find it immaterial whether the meaning-giving vehicle is myth or science.

Developments in New Cosmology, especially advances in biology, suggest ideas for a present-day ontological model. In these disciplines we expose primal causes, explain ontology ('being', *to óv*) and venture to

advance a ‘theory of everything’. Ironically, metaphysics (what exists alongside the physical) turned into physics, to which technology is inseparably linked. Reductionism, immanentism and a one-dimensional worldview are some of the possible outcomes of a strictly scientific worldview.<sup>2</sup> Our concern is that such a worldview may impact negatively on personhood, spirituality, values and ethics. The security offered by technological advances contributes to secularisation of the idea of divine providence; communication technology gives omnipresence a new meaning; and consumerism affects our relationship with nature (see Baudrillard 1998:67ff on consumerism).

For many, life without technology is unimaginable. We have become totally dependent on it. Ironically, this total dependence gives people a feeling of independence and deliverance from transcendent bonds. The question of meaning-giving values that will fill this spiritual void remains unanswered. Hence the metaphysics and value systems underlying the present technocratic order need to be revisited.

### **Heidegger’s critique of technology**

Heidegger’s thinking about technology is sobering. According to him the pre-Socratic Greeks experienced Being authentically as *physis*, a self-blossoming emergence of things, a process of arising, of emerging from hiddenness. Truth (*aletheia*) is the unconcealedness of beings. The human task is to guard the truth, to remove the obstacles to things’ emergence from concealment. However, once the Greeks, inspired by their own wonder at the world around them, began to explore it, it was not the process of emergence, Being, which absorbed them but the things (objects, beings) that had emerged. This put an end to great Greek philosophy and ushered in metaphysics, commencing with

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2 Referring to Max Planck’s notion that what is real can be measured, Heidegger (1977:169), interprets science as the theory of the real, determined by the “objectness of what presences”. He reminds us, however, that theory never outstrips nature and therefore never finds a way around it. What physics represents is indeed nature itself, but undeniably it is only nature as the object-area of science. Scientific representation is never able to encapsulate the coming to presence of nature, for ‘objectness’ is, antecedently, only one way in which nature manifests itself (Heidegger 1977:173-174). Heidegger (1971:62) not only identified the restricted scientific grasp of nature but limited science to this scope: “Science is not an original happening of truth, but always the cultivation of a domain of truth already opened, specifically by apprehending and confirming that which shows itself to be possibly and necessarily correct within that field. When and insofar as a science passes beyond correctness and goes on to a truth, which means that it arrives at the essential disclosure of what is as such, it is philosophy.” It is this distinction (which is still applicable) that necessitates, for example, the science and religion dialogue. The impact of science has become so significant that it must inevitably include questions like truth and values.

Plato. Though Plato, Aristotle and their successors still talked of 'Being', it was not Being as originally experienced, but 'being-ness' – the general properties and causes of beings. Being was no longer appreciated as the ineffable source of beings. It became the conditions necessary for us to perceive things instead of the source of those very conditions. Being, once transformed into being-ness, withdraws into concealment.

In the realm of 'beings' reality is construed as so many objects standing over against subjects, whose mission is to accurately represent these objects, primarily through the methods of mathematical physics. It was in the unconditional dominion of calculating reason that the Nietzschean will to power found its fullest expression, which is where technology arrived (Cooper 1996:63).

Heidegger interprets the term 'technology' to include objectified nature, the business of culture, manufactured politics and the gloss of ideals overlying everything (Cooper 1996:63-64). Technology is a mode of revealing and comes to presence in the realm of revealing and un-concealment where truth happens. This essential technological domain is consonant with Greek thought, but it simply does not fit modern machine-powered technology (Heidegger 1977:13). The revealing brought about by modern technology he calls 'enframing' (*Ge-stell*) (Heidegger 1977:20-21). Enframing reveals the essence of technology as standing reserve. The earth, for example, reveals itself as a coal mining district and soil as a mineral deposit. What is unlocked (mined) is transformed (refined); what is transformed is stored (packaged); what is stored is distributed (commercialised); and what is distributed is continually switched about (endless cycle) (Heidegger 1977:14-17).

What is real – being – is thus transformed into and revealed as standing reserve. But humans, who organise the revealing, have no control over concealment, in which at any given time the real manifests itself or withdraws. On the contrary, humans themselves become part of the standing reserve (objectification), a resource esteemed only for its potential contribution to the technological process (Heidegger 1977:27). While technology is the logical outcome of humans' desire for self-assurance, for subjugating everything to themselves, it has come to dominate them. They have become helplessly caught up in the total mobilisation that technology requires if it is to forge ahead (Cooper 1996:65). Thus it has become a process in which machines alter our existence. Humans have become self-estranged. In Heidegger's (1977:27) words, present-day people no longer encounter themselves (i.e. their essence). They are so intent on heeding the challenge of enframing that they do not apprehend it as a claim. They fail to see themselves as addressees, hence fail in every way to hear in what respect they exist. Thus they never encounter themselves.

Revealing concerns nature, above all, as the chief storehouse of the standing energy reserve (Heidegger 1977:18, 21). Enframing is the mode of revealing that holds sway in modern technology and is not in itself technological. Things are what they are by virtue of the uses to which they can be put for human purposes. Scientific truth has become equated with the effectiveness of scientific products. Scientists are wretched slaves to the hegemony of technology (Cooper 1996:65). Technology supersedes every other possibility of revealing, since every potential rival gets sucked into it (Heidegger 1977:28). Rideau (1967:121) observes that every machine comes into being as a function of every other machine, and all machines on earth, taken together, tend to form a single, vast organised machine, a single gigantic network girdling the earth. Unlike nature, technology recognises no self-limiting principle in terms of, for instance, size, speed or violence. It therefore does not possess the virtues of being self-balancing, self-adjusting and self-cleansing (Schumacher 1973:136-137).

We are dominated by a way of thinking that rules out other ways of thinking and relating to nature. For example, the experience of art becomes technologised – not because we have no interest in paintings except for their market value, but because they are on standing reserve as things producing a ‘yield’ in the form of thrilling sensations or relaxation from the pressures of the workplace. Consequently everything in life is ‘levelled’ and made monotonous (Cooper 1996:66). Wilkinson (translator’s note in Ellul 1964:x) sees technological society as descriptive of the way in which autonomous technology is taking over the traditional values of every society, subverting and suppressing them to produce, in the end, a monolithic world culture in which all non-technological difference and variety are mere appearance.

The loss becomes clear when Heidegger (1977:34) considers what *techné* meant to the early Greek philosophers. In Greece the arts soared to the acme of revealing granted them. They brought the presence (*Gegenwart*) of the gods and the dialogue of divine and human destinies to radiance. And art was simply *techné*. It was a single, manifold revealing. It was pious (*promos*), that is, accepting the dominion and safekeeping of truth.

In the West philosophers have come to doubt the wisdom of *techno sapiens*. World War II was followed by widespread technological revulsion. For all the technological advances we have made little headway in eradicating poverty, securing peace or limiting growth at the expense of the environment. Yet despite these bad experiences, technological advances, especially in biology and medicine, are exhilarating and challenging. Developments in these and other fields are changing our value systems and call for careful consideration. It seems easier, however, to develop new technology than to influence its impact on human values. The values that new

technology inevitably brings along need not be accepted fatalistically. But we don't have an impressive track record in co-determining these values, as evidenced by the negative outcomes of technology. Heidegger's critique of technology seems to have been prophetic.

The underlying human values in Western technocratic societies are basically selfish. This include a desire for security, thirst for knowledge, love of material goods, enjoyment of comfort and exercise of power (see Montgomery 1980:82-83). Technology in the West is certainly not pursued primarily because of its inherent truth but rather for its innate benefits. Human societies have been influenced and changed greatly by technological inventions and the ensuing benefits (see Gyekye 1997:31ff; Mungazi 1996:xix-xxv). To Westerners both utopia and apocalypse lie in science and technology. Together they promise longevity and health, but at the same time predict ecological disaster and the possibility of human self-extinction.

The notion of created co-creators stresses not only our responsibility for technological developments but also our obligation regarding their effect on humans and human societies. We have to decide on appropriate technology and guard the sanctity of the human person. Here the African example may be instructive.

#### **African metaphysics, myth and technology**

Unlike the Western world, Africa has no explicit metaphysical tradition. African metaphysics is embedded in myth. Western metaphysics deals with ontological questions pertaining to the nature of being. It uses logical argumentation, not empirical means. African metaphysics, by contrast, when dealing with first principles in the natural order, is pre-eminently empirical, including both sensory and super-sensory experience. African ontology postulates a unitary cosmic order in which all beings, from the lowest to the highest, have a place. For Africans there are no ontological gaps between existing entities. As Dukor (1989:389) puts it: "African ontology is panpsychic. Everything that exists has a spiritual cause. And these spiritual causes are ultimately manifestations and servants of God. It has been observed that when Western science talks of forces, Africans prefer to talk of spirits and gods ... It seems that science and spiritualism overlap in African culture."

**‘Being’ as life force (*seriti, isithunzi, maemo*)<sup>3</sup>**

The mythological model is characterised by a belief in a dynamic force in the form of a personal god or spirit or other agencies, like witches, charms and herbalists (*sangoma, nyanga*, etc.) for explaining reality. This dynamic force permeates everything. African metaphysics finds ‘real being’ in life forces. The concept of life force is analogous to the Western concept of being – not in the sense of enframing but being as integrated in the totality of life. Life force is not life itself but that which makes life possible and happy. Lack of life force is lack of life. Ultimately life force comes from the supreme being, God, but it is mediated by many agencies. It is not readily at your disposal, you have to wait on it. Analogous to Heidegger’s notion of *aletheia* as the revealing of Being, life force is the opening up of life space and possibility. Life force is a happening, not something tangible. It is explained by a relational rather than substantial ontology. It affects the individual as much as it affects the community. When the individual experiences life force it flows into the community, and vice versa. Lack of life force in the life of an individual is detrimental to community life, just as the ailment of a specific organ affects the organism.

The origin of all force, like the origin of the universe, is God. This force binds the universe and all humans together in an intimate ontological relationship. It permeates animate and inanimate matter (analogous to, but not the same as animism). Being-ness or being is life force. It is important to Africans to live in harmony with the forces that control all spheres of reality. That is why they set great store by harmonious relations with their social and natural environment. Survival is ensured by living in harmony with nature, the ancestors (relatives who have passed away) and one’s fellow human beings.

Many believe that there is nothing that this life-giving power cannot overcome. In order to receive life force the community has to observe certain norms, rites and traditions – and we must remember that rites and rituals are techniques (see Maboea 2002:12). If, for example, the ancestors are not remembered, they may withhold their blessings, which impairs the individual’s life force. The force of everything, and especially that of living beings, is constantly waxing and waning. Since life force is mediated by others, the

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3 A fascinating aspect of African thought is the concept expressed by the Sepedi word ‘*seriti*’ and corresponding terms in other indigenous languages, which can be rendered by words like ‘power’, ‘energy’ or ‘force’. The Zulu equivalent, *isithunzi*, means shadow as well and refers figuratively to a person’s dignity and standing in a community. In Northern Sotho the word ‘*maemo*’ indicates the presence of a person, the specific ‘aura’ she radiates.

individual is dependent on good, appropriate relations in order to receive it. Evil forces are as real as life force and are similarly mediated by agencies. Human beings continually influence one another, directly or indirectly, by way of unusual forces through the ancestors. These forces can be manipulated and employed for both good and evil purposes. Natural and other catastrophes are attributed to evil forces, even if the observed empirical cause is self-evident. For the African person the aim of life is to experience and enhance life force and become part of it. Anything that diminishes it is evil and anything that increases it is good.<sup>4</sup>

### **Life force and technology**

What does this mean for the African view of science and technology? Africans do not spurn science and technology. The continent's relative technological 'innocence' is largely due to limited exposure. The question is whether the much needed economic development and concomitant technology will inevitably destroy African community life with its values of caring and sharing. At present African values are life-oriented and not technocentric. Many Africans doubt whether technology makes any ultimate difference to human life – fellow humans do. Humans are not necessarily in control of technology. The use of science and technology to improve quality of life is counteracted by the belief that supernatural forces beyond human control are in charge of our destiny. Technology may be 'used' by life force to our benefit or detriment. Practical issues are dealt with on the basis of this mythical-metaphysical worldview. The Aids pandemic, for example, is attributed to the fact that you are not always in control of your life and cannot prevent what comes your way.

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4 A concrete example of the mythological worldview is attitudes towards witches. A report (ordered by Prof. Victor Ralushai, MEP, published in 1996) on the killing of witches in South Africa's Northern Province (now Limpopo) revealed that from 1994 to 1996 more than 300 alleged witches were either burnt at the stake or stoned in this province alone (*Beeld*, 23 March 1996). The general belief about witches is that they are evildoers responsible for most of the disasters a community or extended family experiences. It was believed that the lightning that killed some soccer players in Nigeria was caused by witches. Illness and even natural death are often ascribed to witches. Witches, it is believed, can incarnate themselves in animals or in other forms, move from place to place in an instant and harm people in their non-physical forms. The fact that these acts contravene natural law does not seem to impair belief in witches. No event, not even repeated failure, will be accepted as evidence against the system (Wolpert 1993, 52). Belief in witchcraft does not take cognisance of the metaphysical nature of the entities involved. Witchcraft cannot be scientifically investigated, since by definition it is not perceptible to human senses (Sogolo 1993:93).

Technology in traditional African societies is part of their indigenous knowledge systems. This technology is peculiar to Africa and foreign to the Western mind. Traditional African medicine is an example. According to Maboea (2002:81) disease is viewed as both a physical condition and a spiritual matter. Health depends on being in harmony with spiritual powers and finds expression in harmonious social activities. The metaphysical powers of the invisible world influence the powers of the visible world. Traditional healers are respected for their ability to maintain a proper balance between metaphysical and physical forces. Traditionalists maintain that what destroyed African society more than anything else was the rejection of their traditional ways of showing respect to their parents and ancestors. Disharmony between the two worlds brings disease and misfortune. Medicine (*muti*), usually obtained from trees, shrubs and herbs, is inherently potent or becomes so when traditional healers utter ritual language over it. Medicine is used to heal physical disease, restore social harmony and, destructively, to harm or even kill people. Medicine and the 'technology' associated with it are embedded in the whole of African life. It is not simply a drug to be taken but a process of social and interpersonal restoration that must take place.

Some Africans still live in two worlds. Western technology goes hand in hand with traditional technology, in spite of the huge difference between them. The difference between Western and traditional technologies is that traditional 'technology' is integrated with beliefs, customs, values and social life. Western technology is used expediently, but lacks the 'spirit' which characterises traditional technology.

#### **Ubuntu: interpersonal identity**

Without romanticising the African context one could say that the way science and technology are used to maintain healthy personhood and social harmony is exemplary. The African concept of ubuntu – 'a person is a person through other persons' – is a case in point: personhood is defined through other persons, not technology.

Ubuntu moderates individualism and stresses that social interrelations and responsibilities are preconditions for human life. It contrasts with the Western approach to nature, which is essentially rational, pragmatic, fragmented and instrumental. Whereas thought and reason in the West are often detached from culture, community and natural environment, the ubuntu ethic is the exact opposite: people are interdependent and co-responsible for one another and the earth. The traditional African worldview is not geared to economic progress, competition and individual achievement, but to sub-

sistence agriculture, social harmony and communal dependency. Individual economic initiatives are viewed with suspicion.

Ubuntu means participating in a common humanity. As such, it can be understood as the African version of the common good. In Africa a person is identified by his or her interrelationships and not primarily by individual qualities. The community identifies the person, not the person the community. Traditionally, for Africans to be human is to participate in life and respect the conditions that make life possible. To participate in life means ultimately to participate in the fellowship of the community. African community-based society is not communal or collectivised but is more reminiscent of an organism. Collectivised society inevitably places the emphasis on individuals and their needs. African society emphasises solidarity rather than activity, and the communion of persons rather than their autonomy.

Ideally ubuntu exemplifies an ecologically intact system and has great potential to foster ecological values at all levels (even though it is already heavily eroded by elitism, urbanisation and technology). Owomoyela (1996:118) calls this African totemism, in terms of which humans identify with nonhuman beings that impose a duty towards the universe, resulting in reverence for nature.<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

In Africa technology still has a human face. The general feeling of many Africans is that high technology, mining and industrial activities and so on have not improved their lives or significantly reduced poverty. Traditional technology, imbedded in all facets of life, still imparts meaning in large parts of rural Africa. Nonetheless many urbanised Africans have been alienated from traditional practices and disregard African indigenous knowledge sys-

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5 The way in which ubuntu can influence people's relationship with the environment was evidenced by the work of ZIRRCO (Zimbabwean Institute of Religious Research and Ecological Conservation) in the 1990s. During the liberation war the spirit mediums had played a pivotal role. In 1988 they, together with AIC bishops, were mobilised in a new war against deforestation, soil erosion, pollution of water resources and related ecological ills (Daneel 1995:88ff). Most of these problems could be addressed by large-scale tree planting. The war of the trees was declared to clothe the barren earth. The bishops invented new liturgies, reinterpreting conversion and baptism in relation to environmental stewardship, introducing public confession of ecological sins, and celebrating tree-planting eucharists to integrate earthkeeping at a congregational level (see Barbour 1993:77ff for a sacramental view of nature). Nurseries were established where thousands of trees were grown and people were conscientised by way of African religio-cultural holism. In South Africa the AICs, comprising about 50 percent of the black population, would be ideal groups to foster ecological awareness and action. They worship out in the open and regard nature as their sanctuary.

tems. The more they are exposed to high technology, the more they experience its side effects. But Africa can still point the way to systems that give a human face to new technologies, ensuring the integrity of personhood and society.

Human life without technology is unimaginable. The life-engendering evolution of our cosmos would have been impossible without what can be defined broadly as a technological process. If God as the archetypal technologist laboured mysteriously for many millennia to produce intelligent life, that life may not be endangered by the conscious misappropriation of human technology. Technology is part of the history of the development of life. We invest human values in the technological choices we make. These choices must accord with basic life-preserving values to maintain the integrity of creation. The maxim should be that respect for life presupposes reverence for life, harmony with our environment and fellow human beings. The African value system, embodied in mythological and metaphysical systems, incorporates these ideas to some extent by subjugating pragmatically oriented technology to human life. Science and technology are integrally part of God's ongoing creation. Human wisdom must grow along with technological ingenuity, manifesting God's action in the world. Only then will technology be fully embedded in the history of human salvation.

That brings us to the theme of the next chapter: the place of human beings in a technological milieu. Technology has a dynamics of its own and apparently evolves as an autonomous force. Technological evolution does not wait for cultural evolution to catch up and shape values that can assimilate the impact of its new artefacts. Instead it is driven by the values inherent in profit making and enrichment by industries that are constantly evolving new products (computers, cars) to exploit popular consumerism.

It would be naive to expect Africans, in the face of the availability of technology, not to display the same profligacy as people elsewhere. If development is irrevocably tied to a technoscientific order, urbanisation and all the attendant problems, we cannot ignore the threat it poses for personhood and community life. African values have been under huge pressure from centuries of colonialism, post-colonialism, wars, poverty and insecurity. Yet it has shown remarkable resilience. We now turn to the impact of technology on personhood and the human response to it.



## Chapter 12

### Technoscience and personhood in Africa and in the West

#### Search for personhood in a technoscientific<sup>1</sup> environment

It is part of human nature to question human personhood. What it means to be human and what constitutes personhood has to do with ultimate questions like ‘Why are we here?’, ‘What are we destined for?’ and ‘What should we do?’

Our answers to these questions cannot be confined to metaphysical, ideological, philosophical or religious convictions that ignore the way our physical and cultural environment codetermines the views we hold. Significant changes in that environment inevitably pose new questions to personhood and modify the answers we give. Technoscientific developments have had such an impact on humankind that human personhood is questioned in radically new ways. The question, ‘What is a human person?’ is still asked, but cannot be answered in terms of a cultural environment that no longer exists. Taylor (1989:27) considers this an identity crisis, an acute form of disorientation, often expressed in terms of not knowing who one is or where one stands. For many there is no longer any real meaning-giving horizon.

Innovations in science and technology are so dramatic that they can be said to have introduced a third axial age, in the sense of a period of creative and radical cultural change in human existence. The first axial era refers to the major philosophic and religious traditions, which emerged round 800-200 BCE. It was a period of prosperity and concentration of wealth, which stimulated new ideas. The second axial era started in the 15th century with the dawn of modernism. The latest axial age is marked by increasingly explosive scientific and technological developments, as well as economic and cultural interpenetration and interaction (Gillette 2002:462-463). Teilhard de Chardin envisioned a future axial period that will transform individual consciousness into global consciousness, not in the sense of some homogenised or vapid obliteration of individuality, but as the fruition of the person in and through mutuality (Shafer 2002:131). But how many of us would see the current axial era as the realisation of the Teilhardian vision?

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘technoscience’ connotes the crumbling of traditional boundaries between science and industry, between science and its applications, and between pure science and applied science.

If our axial period, characterised by globalism, information technology, the market and technocracy, changes the cultural and physical environment, it will also change the experience of human personhood. We already have a sense of loss of control and of being increasingly objectified in a technoscientific environment. Technology has literally placed us at the helm of our destiny. The question 'What is it to be human?' can no longer be isolated from the question 'What is it to possess technology?' We not only possess technology; we also serve, replicate and improve it. Everyone is shovelling coals of progress into the locomotive of society without knowing where it should be going. Our salvation lies in production and production secures the future (Moltmann 1971:25). Our technological world has become the dictating subject and humans 'format' their lives to its demands. The human subject has been lost.

In his anthropology of science Michel Serres (quoted by De Beer 2001:205-206) highlights the fundamental importance, not of human subjects, but of technological things and their defining effects on subjects. As a result humans are positioned differently with respect to things. Science always deals with objects. But how does the object relate to humanness? The question concerns the primitive experience through which the object constitutes the human subject. We usually accept that the subject builds the object. We are never told about the way the object creates the subject. It is this reversal of the traditional subject-object relationship in anthropology of science that provides us with a key to the anthropology of cyberspace as well. In the light of cyberspace with its collective intelligence, *anthropos* can no longer be understood as an individual, a mono-culturally thinking, knowing and acting being, but as a collectively knowing, thinking, socialising and acting being. In the realm of 'fractal subjectivity' we have to reinterpret human subjectivity and what it means to be human. De Beer (2001:219) reminds us that it is no longer only language that speaks in us, as Heidegger maintains; the world speaks in us, the environment speaks in us, things speak in us.

In our axial era human subjectivity can be defined as nomadic, fractured, conditional, and simultaneously interdependent (part of a network/collective intelligence) and technologically integrated. This engenders uncertainty and risk, as well as knowledge and creativity. Humans as God's created co-creators are in a process of redefining and recreating themselves through their creations. We cannot avert the influence our technologies exert on us and we are challenged to maintain what constitutes basic humanity.

Developments in science and applied science or technoscience, as well as economic globalism, are perhaps the cardinal factors changing our environment. While these developments have unobtrusively changed our world-

view, we are slowly becoming aware of this new worldview's influence on our lives. In this regard Moltmann (2002:134) remarks that a step forward in any sphere of life throws the life system of the whole off balance. So whenever an individual bit of progress is made, the balance has to be restored. The speech symbols, legal codes, morals on which we used to depend and the conditions of production must all be organised afresh. Although many people are not conversant with all the details of our scientific worldview, they live in a world steeped in technoscientific products and are determined by these. But science has a tendency to demythologise and the narratives of our lives have not remained untouched. Our bodies and health, our subjective inner experience, our prejudices and beliefs, our relationships, even death have all been demythologised. The world has been disenchanted and our lives are devoid of fiction (see Gauchet 1997:62-64; Taylor 1989:51-52).

**Change in the human techno-cultural environment and its influence on personhood: from phonocentrism to logocentrism to virtuoctrism**

The interdependence of organisms (including humans) and the environment is biologically given. The history of human culture shows that change in the natural and cultural environment has a determinative influence on people's worldview and self-interpretation. In the case of humans environmental influences have shifted from the predominantly physical to the cultural environment.

People are constantly redefined by their interaction with and response to the environment. The cultural environment acts as a feedback system, since humans are influenced by their own creations. The feedback system, like a steam engine, depends on a sensor that measures the pressure and slows it down when necessary. Today microprocessors are used as software to regulate the hardware. Humans represent the software monitoring system of their own technology and must know to slow down when the system overheats or runs out of control (Davies 2000:114).

Technology (applied science), language, the written word (books), and virtual technologies like television, film and the internet are among the principal developments in the cultural environment that have influenced the history of human societies. (The development of language and writing skills is part of technological progress.) In view of the changing cultural environment we examine the transition from an oral culture (phonocentrism), to a book culture (logocentrism), to a virtual culture (virtuoctrism), because it reflects some of the most dramatic developments that have changed the

experience of personhood. The role played by science, philosophy and religion is subsumed in these three phases.<sup>2</sup>

The notion that changes in the cultural environment have had a decisive impact on personhood does not imply that our physical or cultural environment should be seen deterministically. Such a view must be opposed as much as that of social constructivism. Human behaviour cannot be adequately explained as a mere reaction to environmental stimuli; rather the nature and meaning of these stimuli are created in psychocultural processes, which entail an interrelationship of complex influences (Reynolds et al. 1987:90). Apart from genetic and environmental factors we must always reckon with the human spirit, supported by values and manifesting in human choices. The way bio-geographical factors codetermined the development of African culture will also be dealt with.

### **Phonocentric presence of the human person<sup>3</sup>**

To be a person is to act on the world as a stage. It means to be present somewhere in space and to present yourself by communicating with the Other/other. Greek mythology is marked by an absence of individuality and interior mental life. The ancient Greeks' environment was sociocentric (similar to many African societies today) and comprised the interpersonal (communicative), social, natural and supernatural. This is symbolised by their concept of a person. The Greek word '*prósopon*' (face) and the Latin word '*persona*' refer to the mask that Greek actors wore on stage. In this section the concept 'mask' is used metaphorically for the division between inner and outer world. In the Greek context the mask typifies the role and character that the actor is portraying. He could not play his role simply by wearing the mask. Mask and the discourse sounding forth (*per-sonare*) together constituted that role. Personhood and character became known through the actor's deeds as well as his words. Premodern personhood was phonocentric and was inconceivable in the absence of the individual's corporeal, speaking presence.

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2 A number of other categories can be used to demarcate the development of human culture: mythical – substantialist (modernism) – functional (technology); premodern – modern – postmodern; agrarian – industrial – electronic.

3 The word 'self' is used in many different ways. Theological perspectives differ from philosophical, psychological, sociological and anthropological perspectives. These perspectives (in the human sciences) can be subdivided according to specific subdisciplines. Recent developments in the biological sciences have opened up new perspectives, which impact on views in the human sciences. Cognitive science is an example of an approach that includes both the physical and human perspectives. Here the concept of self refers to its historical development (Taylor 1989:32ff), against the background of recent developments in biogeography, cognitive science and information technology (perspectives from virtual reality). Note that the concept of self is nonessential, constructed and constantly shifting.

This presupposed that the person was versed in a language and could create social, geographic, religious, private, public and other spaces by means of language. The self is inseparable from existence in a space of moral issues, where identity, prejudice and values play a role. We exist in a space of concerns, says Taylor (1989:35, 51, 112).

Premodern people have an uncanny knack to see when someone is cheating (see Peterson 2003:163-167). This is because facial expression, tone of voice and body language verify the speaker's sincerity. It assumes the integrity of the human person, in which case inner and outer worlds are not differentiated. Mind and body are one and what occupies the mind is displayed by the body in the process of communication. This differs from the Aristotelian idea that the body and its emotions must be contained by reason in the same way as a rider reins in a horse.

The person and what she says is one. This contrasts with the Western notion that the inner world of consciousness and thought is separate from the way the person presents herself in the world. Phonocentric personhood places the emphasis on what happens between 'masks' and not on what goes on behind the mask. The Western person, by contrast, lives in two worlds: predominantly in the world behind the mask (the private, self-conscious world) and, somewhat artificially, in the world in front of the mask (the public, social world).

In this regard Teske (2000:198) mentions that the Ilongot do not recognise an autonomous self apart from outward behaviour, and the collectivist Ifaluk regard any reference to unique, autonomous behaviour as excessively egocentric. Traditional Hindu culture defines the self fluidly in and through others rather than sharply differentiating self from them. The Western personality, on the other hand, is self-centred. The Western mind is analytical, discriminative, differential, inductive, individualistic, intellectual, objective, scientific, generalising, conceptual, schematic, impersonal, power wielding, self-assertive, and tends to impose its will on others (Robbins 1996:66-67).

To be a person is to be a subject presenting oneself in dialogue. This typifies personhood as phonocentric. African oral tradition is still predominantly phonocentric. Verbal communication and bodily presence convey what life is about and outweigh the written text, which communicates in the absence of the author (speaker). African tradition is perpetuated through proverbs, whose existential use makes the wisdom of the forefathers come alive. The indaba (consultation) process is used to resolve differences. Dialogue continues until people find each other. Idea and person must be one. When the interlocutor is present it is difficult to lie, since my body language, voice or emotion may betray me. If the interlocutor is absent, what is said about

him may be pure gossip, and when he presents himself through the written word there is no way of determining whether he speaks the truth.

### **Logocentrism: virtual-textual presence of the author**

Phonocentrism was followed by logocentrism, in which the written text took the place of the absent other (speaker, narrator), representing her exact words. The incarnation of the person in the written word ensured that her wisdom, knowledge, experience, will and wishes could be preserved and summoned up whenever the reader wished. This was not new to believers, since in many religions divine authority came to be vested in scriptures and in Christianity the invisible God came to dwell among earthlings as the Logos. According to Christian doctrine God is known through his explicit revelation in the Bible. The word is the mode of God's presence among believers.

At the time of the scientific revolution, however, the Bible was in the hands of the church and was written in Latin. The text was the mode in which God was present, but humans did not typically present themselves by means of the written word. Then the invention of the printing press made it possible for them to do so. This revolutionised self-understanding. Not only could people express themselves in written words; nature could be revealed through mathematical symbols and formulas as well. All this happened during the scientific revolution, which marked the beginning of modernism.

### *Logocentrism, mathematical scientism and the history of separation in modernism*

It is not by fluke that the rise of modernism (1500-2000) coincided with the so-called Copernican revolution, the invention of the printing press and the ideas and work of individuals (most of whom lived in the same century) like Gutenberg (1400-1468), Luther (1483-1546), Descartes (1596-1650), Galileo (1564-1642) and Hobbes (1588-1679). The Copernican revolution, together with the communication revolution (printing press) and economic revolution (16th century expansion of the marketplace), marks the beginning of a process which was to end in the detachment of wisdom and truth from personhood; the detachment of humans from nature, science<sup>4</sup> from theology and, eventually, natural science from all the other sciences (Jacob 1997:19-20). The scientific revolution (1500-1700) is epitomised by the Copernican revo-

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4 The word 'science' in its modern meaning is a latecomer, dating from 1840 (Barzun 2000:191). Science was initially not restricted to a particular kind of knowledge and simply meant whatever was known.

lution, which replaced Aristotelian natural philosophy and the Ptolemaic geocentric paradigm with a heliocentric worldview.

Gutenberg's invention of the printing press introduced the written word as a cultural artefact that was to determine most people's everyday life. It prompted the translation of the Bible and classical texts into the vernacular and rewarded those who became literate. The written word conveyed a virtual world in which the reader could participate and share. The life, work and thoughts of another person were accessible to those who could read the text. The written word also helped to separate authors from their words. Humans, like God, could be present elsewhere through a text.

*Galileo and the separation of humans from nature through mathematics*

The significance of the Copernican revolution lies in the change of the human cultural environment wrought by the introduction of the virtual presence and understanding of nature in mathematical terms. In much the same way as we come to know God and other people through written texts, nature could be known through mathematical symbols and formulas. The word as text, known in the Middle Ages as the authoritative word of God, was venerated by the people and imbued with mystery, power and authority. Now that word was incarnated in the secular world. Although the medium of the text could express both God and nature, both religious and secular texts, all texts were not the same. Physical science developed a different language – a different book with different codes – from that of theology and the human sciences.

Galileo expressed his view of the autonomy of science in his *Dialogue on the two great world systems* (1632). God is the author of the book of revelation and the book of nature. In principle the Bible and science cannot contradict each other. They are simply different approaches to the same reality. The Copernican revolution laid the foundations for classical mathematical physics, which culminated in the Newtonian laws. Mathematical physics depicted science as a self-explanatory system with its own laws, methodology and language. It did not need spirits, mysticism or superstition to explain its subject. This mechanical world picture left no place for purpose, quality or religion.

The symbolic representation of nature through mathematics led to its objectification and subjugation to human beings. Humans came to confront nature as an enemy that needed either conquering or taming – through science. By the same token humans (including their inner world and subjective ideas) could be objectified in the texts that mirrored them. Their inner world of thought could be studied, analysed and known, regardless of their intended meanings.

Luther's translation of the Bible into German and the printing of many German copies enabled individual believers to gain knowledge of God and salvation without the mediation of the church. As a result the late medieval experience of group subjectivity made way for individual subjectivity. Luther emphasised the connection of *individuals*, as believers or unbelievers, with God, the world and *themselves*. This was an important development complementing the act of reading, in which a text related to the inner self and inner consciousness. Luther's doctrine that certainty was to be found in faith alone (*sola fidei*) reverberates in the Cartesian belief in *res cogitans*. This certainty was the ground of self-consciousness, the key to all epistemological and moral worth, and the very foundation of personhood.

The Middle Ages were predominantly communitarian and the self did not exist apart from communal consciousness. Medieval culture was phonocentric and God's wisdom was phonocentrically mediated by the clergy. Luther challenged the authority of the clergy and shifted it to the written word. The individual was severed from the medieval, corporate church community by the emphasis on personal belief independent of the vicarious belief of clerical leaders. Certainty of faith had to be recovered through personal faith in God's grace.

#### *Descartes and the mind-body separation*

Descartes's distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* made it possible for the individual to find certainty in the act of thinking (reason). *Being* retreated to the inner world of thought behind the mask. Reason takes consciousness as its point of departure to describe the individual's own experiences. Through introspection and thought my reality is created. Descartes is the founder of modern individualism, because his theory throws the individual thinker back on his own responsibility. The Cartesian quest is for a scientific order of clear, distinct knowledge in universal terms which, where possible, would provide a basis for instrumental control. Knowing reality implies having an accurate mental representation of external reality as perceived (*adequatio intellectus et res*). This conception of knowledge seemed to be unchallenged and unchallengeable once an account of knowledge in terms of a self-revealing reality, like Platonic ideas, was abandoned. The idea of an order of ideas that *we find* was replaced by the idea of an order of ideas that *we build* (Taylor 1989:144ff, 182): I have no knowledge of what is outside me except by means of the ideas I have in me (ideas being mental constructs). Certainty comes from the way matter is presented to us in a certain light, which makes it so real as to be undeniable.

Cartesian mind-body dualism generated a number of other dualisms, such as neutral scientific truth and human subjective truth; fact and value; internalist-externalist view of science; and physical science and life sciences. Cartesianism represents a process of division, dualism and fragmentation that continues to challenge present-day personhood. Westerners may be so at home with their Cartesian identity that they are oblivious of it. Geertz, for example, describes the Western image of the self as rather peculiar in the global cultural context (quoted by Robbins 1996:66; see Teske 2000:198). In the West the person is conceived of as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgment and action organised into a distinctive whole and set contrastively against other such wholes and against a social and natural background. The Western conception of an individual is constituted by a set of cultural roles and practices, struggling to come to terms with embodied consciousness and with our social and environmental entrenchment.

In spite of endless dialogue we are still struggling to unify the self; in spite of a renewed emphasis on embodiment we still struggle to come to terms with our bodies; despite the efforts of cognitive science we struggle to harmonise physicality with mind and spirituality. The post-Cartesian age is said to be anti-dualist and pro-integrationist. There is even a possibility that in evolutionary biology, cognitive science and neuroscience morality, spirituality, religion and values may be seen as coming from 'below' and need not be ascribed to a transcendent cause (see Wilson 1998:261).<sup>5</sup>

Despite all the theories, some of which tend towards neo-Cartesianism (Du Toit 2002b:8-12), we must maintain the physical, bodily and environmental framework of consciousness. If the human person is reduced to an emergent reality of consciousness, we are back in a neo-Platonist framework. The human person is embodied consciousness. We are not only influenced by our environment, but in a real sense we become our environment. The environment influences our thinking, but in a real sense it becomes our thinking (Peterson 2003:43-44). The challenge is to keep the world of physicality in balance with the inner world of thought.

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5 Plato's soul has been replaced by the autonomous self, which in its turn is disappearing before the postmodern return to the whole, embodied person. Consciousness has in many ways taken the place of the soul as the prime locus of identity. Consciousness, however, cannot be divested of the human person as embodied and socially determined consciousness (Peterson 2003:24, 70). In our time consciousness (the thinking self) is interpreted in physical terms. In cognitive science the question of how exactly mind (consciousness) supervenes on the physical brain has not been resolved satisfactorily.

*Hobbes and the separation of the sovereign (king) from the people*

Hobbes's philosophy is built on the deductive method of geometry and on Galileo's concept of motion: "... that which is really in us, is motion, or endeavour, which consisteth in Appetite or Aversion, to or from the object of moving" (Hobbes 1968:19, 25, 31, 118ff). Not unlike Descartes and Luther, who found the essence of humanness in the inner subjective world of thought and faith, Hobbes found it in the inner world of urges, motion and drives, which could only be controlled by the state. Unless controlled humans live a life that is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. Therefore government (Leviathan) must be strong. The absolute is a sovereign and the commons saw Leviathan as the justification for an absolute parliament – which is exactly what still rules England today.

This development in political science complemented the promotion of individualism in religion. The human person was individualised as a citizen with individual rights and responsibilities. The social community was replaced by impersonal society, in which all are the same. The state was also symbolised by an individual (the sovereign/ruling party), who negotiated political life with its citizens. The universality of reason and ethical individualism merged into the idea of society that was freely organised by the law. This view of society was as successful as Luther's view of Christianity, and when it matured it led to unprecedented development and growth that allowed the West to conquer the world.

The question is whether the tradition of dualism has really been overcome. In a sense Cartesian dualism has been exacerbated by the advent of virtual reality.

**Virtual experience of personhood**

In our world today virtuo-centrism seems to replace logocentrism and to restore a more sensual experience of the other I meet through the medium of film or in cyber space. 'Sensual experience' as used here may stimulate the senses, but it remains disembodied. It imitates relationism, since it interacts with the other, but the other is only virtually present. Virtual reality, which first entered the world through the written word, became more sensuous and corporeal by restoring the visual image and spoken word. The written word is incarnated in an animated spoken word through the presence of the virtual image on the screen. Communication technology and computer science expanded the scope of virtual reality. The other became present in a more sensual, personal way. This is a revival of phonocentrism, but on a virtual level. Body, mind and spoken word are reunited in virtual mode. Less is

asked of the imagination and greater impact is made on our senses. Television de-contextualises events, which should be placed in a historical context if they are to be understood, and transforms them into human situations which evoke elementary reactions of sympathy or antipathy (Touraine 2000:47).

Mass culture and the revolution of information technologies have invaded our inner space and now overload our consciousness. The limits of space and time, which separated speakers from their written words, are overcome in the virtual, 'personal' presence of the other. Seriality is replaced by simultaneity, evolution by diversity, and distance by proximity (Touraine 2000:47). The 'other' is here without being present, but the presence is unilateral and monological without real interaction.

Virtuocentrism might introduce a new experience of self, in the sense of virtual solidarity and unity between humans which transcend local, national and cultural limitations. This becomes possible because of a global consciousness effected virtually by the media and telecommunication technology. We are citizens of a cyber world in which we can share the local and personal well-being of everybody else on the planet. On a global level we are all affected by markets and currency fluctuations, economic growth and natural disasters. The planetary nature of our fate and the emergence of 'universal values' like democracy and human rights give a new sense of commonality and interconnectedness. The 'global self' has extended its corporate body to include the distant other, who can become an intimate confidant. It also includes technology as an extension of our corporate experience.

But how real is this virtual brotherhood, and what prevents us from sharing these experiences with a robotic other? It is not a big step from virtual interaction to interaction with thinking machines. Ironically, the idea of thinking robots is a return to Aristotle's animated soul, the only difference being that we are responsible for the infusion of animus into inanimate matter (computer robots) and not into the world soul. Kurzweil anticipated computing power one hundred times that of the human brain by the year 2029 and the gradual interfacing of human minds with computers. Human beings will increasingly abandon bodies altogether (except when they really need them) and live in virtual communities linked by enormous networks (Peterson 2003:217). While this seems cyber-utopian, theoretically it may become possible. The upshot is that the virtual dimension of our lives (as well as nature) is expanding. If we have limited control of technology, then we will not have much say in the development of a different mode of personhood.

### **The essentialist person and shifting identities**

The human person, like any living organism is open to continuous change within itself, in its environment and in its multifarious relations. The 'I', the self, the person, is in fact a kind of ongoing process, developing across time and emerging as a result of innumerable brain and bodily processes (Peterson 2003:85). In this regard Hefner (2000:74) talks about the image of a God *meme* (*meme* is a 'cultural gene'), which determines humans as relational, open and accountable in the world: a relational rather than a substantive ontology determines our being in the world. This may include our individual, conscious spirituality, but exceeds it as well. Personhood is a process of emergence.

For many the very idea of personhood is essentialist and therefore untenable. Rorty, for example, sees the person as decentred with no underlying, coherent essence. Rather than unified and consistent, the self should be conceived of as a bundle of conflicting "quasi-selves, a random and contingent assemblage of experiences" (Featherstone 1995:45; see Fukuyama 2002:151-153). Underlying identity talk is the notion that questions of moral orientation cannot all be solved in universal terms (Taylor 1989:28). But how can we talk of the integrity of our lives if we have no idea what it is? How can we talk of the integrity of creation without a firm vision of what it should be? The integrity of the human person is a perpetual challenge to the way we assume values in order to make sense out of our lives. This inevitably gives our lives a narrative form, enabling us to orient ourselves to the good (the values we hold): narrative, culturally and historically rooted, unified by tradition and community, a *sine qua non* of both identity and moral spiritual life (Teske 2000:193; Taylor 1989:51-52).

The idea of personhood has been challenged in postmodernism by the notion of the death of the modern subject.

### **Demodernism and the challenge to restore the subject**

Demodernism is modernism gone wrong. The term expresses the loss of control that modernism entails. Two reasons can be singled out for this loss of control: the role that instrumental reason came to play (its objectification in our technological world) and the global market (unrivalled power of economic globalisation via communication and information technology). The human subject loses identity in this instrumental world. It is struggling against the triumph of the market and technologies on the one hand, and communitarian, authoritarian powers on the other (Touraine 2000:89).

We are unable to integrate and unite the factors and values that determine our lives. Modernism still managed to integrate technology, society and religious or moral beliefs, but this has become impossible in demodernism. Having control over their world turned individuals into subjects who could meaningfully relate to God, fellow citizens, and the world according to more or less accepted standards of knowledge, custom and norms. Now duty and a sense of duty have been replaced by pursuit of happiness. Modernity has humanised transcendence. The disenchantment of the world and the decline of religion have resulted in the deification of humankind and have produced new transcendental values (the market) that are imposed as forcibly as the old (Touraine 2000:61-62).

Modernity was built on principles of order and the integration of the individual in society. It rested on the pillars of rationalism and ethical individualism (Touraine 2000:44). Modernity's strongest assertion was that we are what we do. Identity comes through my place in society, which is determined by my contribution according to my vocation and skills. In demodernism we have lost the stage, the public square, the social market where we could act according to our authority, competence and convictions. The life world has become virtual in a global market, which replaced modernist society with its normative principles, common good, general and national interests, and tradition (Touraine 2000:19, 37, 39, 48). We have become citizens of the virtual sphere. The world of markets does not establish a social system, nor does it allow a social life apart from a virtual one. The dissociation of the market economy from cultural life spelled the end of the modern subject.

The way out of demodernism and the restoration of the subject is to restore the subject as an actor in community life without compromising personal freedom. This is not simply a return to modernist communitarianism, where community life can become a prison of petty bourgeois values. The individual can be transformed into the subject only if others are recognised as subjects as well, which makes the subject a co-subject in communal life (Touraine 2000:13, 14, 80). This is what one still finds in Africa, but in a context far removed from what we have discussed so far.

### **Science and personhood in Africa**

#### *Influence of the biogeographic environment on human development*

Before we consider the impact of the cultural environment on human selfhood in Africa we need to comment on the influence of physical, biogeographic factors. Human development proceeded differently on different continents. We have to look much further back to find the causes for present-

day disparities among the world's peoples, which are rooted in prehistory. To grasp something of personhood and science in Africa, non-Africans must rid themselves of the prejudice, so prevalent in colonial times and even today, that Africa is inherently culturally backward, scientifically inferior and economically incompetent. Instead they should study the biogeographical factors that codetermined it.

In the centuries after 1500, as Europeans became aware of the wide differences in technology and political organisation around the world, they assumed that these arose from differences in innate ability. Darwinian theory meant that explanations were recast in terms of natural selection and evolutionary descent. Technologically primitive peoples were considered evolutionary vestiges of human descent from apelike ancestors. The displacement of such peoples by colonists from industrialised societies was seen as survival of the fittest. Once genetics was discovered the explanations were recast once again in genetic terms. Europeans came to be considered genetically more intelligent than Africans and other 'less developed' people. But there is no evidence of differences in human intelligence that parallel differences in technology. Peoples who until recently were technologically primitive routinely master industrial technologies when given the opportunity to do so. Stone Age peoples are on average probably more rather than less intelligent than industrialised people because of the environmental challenges they face (Diamond 2000:18-19).

The biogeographic reason for differences in development and affluence between peoples can be summarised in four points:

- The first is continental differences in wild plant and animal species available as starting materials for domestication. This is crucial, because farming is essential for production of surpluses to feed large populations. The availability of sufficient food ensured military advantage even before ancient peoples developed any technological or political advantage. The rise of economically complex, socially stratified, politically centralised societies beyond the level of small nascent chiefdoms depended on food production. Most animal and plant species are unsuitable for domestication. Food production was reliant on relatively few species of livestock and crops. On each continent animal and plant domestication was concentrated in a few especially favourable homelands accounting for only a small fraction of the continent's total area. The failure of the Khoisan and Pygmies to develop agriculture was due, not to their inadequacy as farmers, but to the accident that southern Africa's wild plants were mostly unsuitable for domestication (Diamond 2000:389).

In the case of technological innovations, and political institutions as well, most societies acquire much more from other societies than they invent themselves. Migration within a continent contributes importantly to the development of its societies, which in the long run tend to share each other's advances. Societies initially lacking advantage either acquire it from societies possessing it or are replaced by these societies. Africa is not without its technological inventions, but its relative isolation cut it off from Eurasian developments. Copper smelting had been going on in the West African Sahara and Sahel (sub-Saharan region) since at least 2000 BCE. Iron-smelting techniques in sub-Saharan Africa were so different from those of the Mediterranean basin as to suggest independent development. Diamond (2000:394) mentions that African smiths discovered how to produce high temperatures in their village furnaces and manufactured steel over 2 000 years before the Bessemer furnaces of 19th century Europe came into use.

A domesticated animal is defined as an animal selectively bred in captivity and thereby modified from its wild ancestors for use by humans, who control its breeding and food supply. Among the ancient big herbivorous species only fourteen could be domesticated. The wild ancestors of thirteen of the Ancient Fourteen were confined to Eurasia, which is the world's largest landmass and ecologically very diversified. Sub-Saharan Africa has only 51 potential species to domesticate, while Eurasia boasted 72. Africa's landmass is smaller and ecologically less diverse than Eurasia (Diamond 2000:159-160). Although some of Africa's wild mammals could be tamed, they could not be domesticated. When Eurasia's Major Five domesticated mammals reached sub-Saharan Africa they were adopted by diverse African peoples wherever conditions permitted. Those African herders gained a huge advantage over African hunter-gatherers (Khoisan) and quickly displaced them (Diamond 2000:163).

- A second set of factors is diffusion and migration rates, which differed greatly among continents. They were most rapid in Eurasia because of its east-west major axis and its relatively moderate ecological and geographic barriers. This favoured the movement of technology, crops and livestock, which depends greatly on climate and hence on latitude. Diffusion was slower in Africa and the Americas because of those continents' north-south major axes and geographic and ecological barriers. As one moves along a north-south axis, one traverses zones differing greatly in climate, habitat, rainfall, day length, and diseases, crops and livestock. Crops and animals domesticated in one part of

Africa had great difficulty moving to other parts. Pottery, recorded in the Sudan and Sahara around 8000 BCE, did not reach the Cape until the Common Era. Cattle, goats and sheep had already reached the northern edge of the Serengeti in the third millennium BCE, but took more than 2000 years after that to cross the Serengeti and reach southern Africa. Egypt's wheat and barley never reached the Mediterranean climate of the Cape until European colonists brought them there in 1652 (Diamond 2000:399-400).

- A third set of factors concerns diffusion between continents, which determines the build-up of a local pool of domesticates and technology. Lack of contact and communication limited progress to those societies who benefited from positive biogeographic circumstances.
- The last set of factors is continental differences in area or total population size. A larger area or population means more potential inventors, more competing societies, more innovations available for adoption. Societies that refused to adopt new inventions were simply overtaken by those with improved technological skills.

#### **Science and technology in Africa**

African technology dates back to the very distant past, whereas science in the Western sense was absent. Africa always had agriculture, medicine and weapons, but its knowledge did not develop along the lines of 'Western' science. One cannot infer from this that Africans were innately incapable of the reflexive thinking basic to science. What can be said is that science in the limited, modern Newtonian sense – empirically focused, method-driven and theory-laden, inductively and deductively oriented, systematising and generalising (formulation of laws) – is a relatively recent development and during that period was absent from Africa (Du Toit 1998:12). Scientific interest in any community depends on its exposure to a culture of science, the extent to which it reaps the benefits of science, and the accessibility of scientific study. Most of these factors were lacking in black communities in pre-1994 South Africa.

Western technology goes hand in hand with traditional technology, in spite of the huge difference between them. The difference is that traditional technology is integrated with a people's beliefs, customs, values and social life. Western technology is conveniently used, but lacks the 'spirit' which characterises traditional technology. In Africa technology still has a human face (see chapter 9).

Africa can be typified as simultaneously premodern, modern and post-modern. That is to say, it is simultaneously prescientific (traditional), scien-

tific (mainly Western) and postscientific (critical, integrating many worlds). Postscientific here refers to a critical stance towards science, accepting aspects that are deemed relevant to African life and ignoring the rest. A post-scientific stance critically incorporates what is scientific and adds new dimensions. Prescientific peoples, though often aware of the scientific element, have not developed it. Although one may be able to find prescientific, scientific and postscientific elements in Africa, the prescientific mindset is still notably present and will significantly influence scientific development in postcolonial Africa (Du Toit 1998:15).

Western culture with its individualism, rationalism and modernism has left its mark on the way science has been and is still practised in African societies. Science is not a transcendental entity which is 'incarnated' unalterably in a specific culture. Usually it becomes part of the cultural fibre of a society. It does not purport to provide a framework for the entire culture. This was left to philosophy and religion, indicating the importance and effects of science on worldview. Philosophers like Hume, Kant and Hegel believed that the history of the Western world was the epitome of reason and characterised non-European forms of life as irrational. This attitude was only challenged in the postcolonial era when anthropologists and African thinkers and theologians set out to demonstrate the rationality of African life. Many urbanised Africans have been alienated from traditional practices and spurn African indigenous knowledge systems. The more exposed they become to high technology, the more they experience the harmful effects associated with technocratic culture. Africa can lead the way in developing systems that give a human face to new technologies, ensuring the integrity of personhood and society.

It is not clear whether Africans will be able to give science a specific African identity. This may be codetermined by how it is integrated with the African worldview. Africa's experience of science has not been overwhelmingly positive. The introduction of Western technology has often been detrimental. 'Western' science introduced a split in African personhood as well, although differently from the way it happened in the West. Many Africans had to earn their living in a Western, technoscientific workplace. Schools and universities teach 'Western' science, hospitals and doctors practise 'Western' medicine. Many Africans who converted to Christianity still cherish beliefs and perform rituals that are part of ATR. This split in everyday experience is expressed by the distinction made between Africa by day and Africa by night (referring to the Westernised lifestyle in the workplace and the African-oriented lifestyle at home). While Africa by day is increasingly influencing the African worldview, the need remains to experience Africa by night, where religious rituals (especially funerals), initiation rites

(for the young), sangomas (for ailments and to combat bad people and spirits) and the ancestors help to make life whole again.

For Sarpong (1991:287) ordinary Africans are not logical in the Western sense. By and large they have no interest in cause and effect, only in actual happenings. Neither do they reason along strict syllogistic lines. This does not mean that they are unthinking or unintelligent. In fact, they are philosophers philosophising concretely, not in abstract terms. African thought is commonsensical. The principle tool of common sense is induction, putting two and two together. Common sense thought looks for antecedents of a happening amongst events adjacent in space and time. By contrast, modern scientific theory with its array of causal connections is staggering to the eye of common sense. Horton cites the diagnosis of disease in traditional African communities as an example of how common sense looks for explanations in the immediate environment. Sick people in Africa consult diviners about the causes of their illness. Usually the answer they receive involves propitiation of a god or other spiritual agency. The diviner must also give an acceptable explanation of what moved the ancestor or agency to intervene – usually some event in the world of visible, tangible happenings like human hatreds and jealousies. The explanations not only entail a leap from common sense to mystical thinking, but also from common sense to theory. Common sense and theory play the same complementary roles in everyday life. The relations between common sense and theory in traditional Africa are thus essentially the same as in Europe, according to Horton (1993:200-215). ‘Everyday’ and ‘theoretical’ are a false antithesis.

#### **African science developed as indigenous knowledge systems integral to African culture**

The African worldview rejects the instrumentalism embedded in the separation between subject and object, and emphasises interconnectedness, harmony and balance rather than dualism.<sup>6</sup> In this regard Ntuli (2002:53) remarks that the Newtonian worldview typifies these opposites par excellence by offering us a world of positive/negative, either/or and yes/no options. It completed the separation between thought and feeling, in which thought was given priority over feeling. The Augustinian notion that we truly know only when we love links knowledge with love (emotion). For the African, to remove oneself emotionally from something or someone is to view that thing or person instrumentally as something one can use and exploit. To separate

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<sup>6</sup> See Soyinka (1990:136, 138) for his condemnation of ‘Manicheisms’ (binary antitheses).

oneself from the phenomenal world is to objectify that world – something Africa rejects (Ntuli 2002:54).

Technology in traditional African societies is part of what is known as indigenous knowledge systems (IKS). This is a technology peculiar to Africa and foreign to the Western mind. Although African IKS should not be seen as a replacement of natural science or technology, they are an important aspect of the restoration of African identity and serve this purpose. Not that they cannot contribute significantly to economic sustainability and growth, but the most remarkable feature of IKS is their integration with African cultural life. In this respect IKS illustrate how knowledge of local environmental and technical know-how – in other words, African science – is integrated with the meaning-giving values that form part of the African spirit.

The resurgence of the IKS debate must be seen in the context of the African Renaissance project and the Nepad programme. Different approaches to and themes in IKS can be discerned:

- The first approach concerns the symbolic worth of IKS in restoring African identity, dignity and autonomy.
- The second concern is to maintain intellectual property rights and ensure that the profits to be made from IKS (e.g. medicinal herbs) remain in African hands.
- The third approach, linking up with the first, concerns the question of IKS and language and the possibility of introducing IKS on a more formal level into secondary and tertiary education. This phase is important, since it entails issues like language, epistemology, and the interaction between IKS and Western natural science.
- A last concern is the formal development of IKS in the reconstruction of Africa. Here IKS will have to go hand in hand with available technological products like telecommunication, medicine, agriculture, engineering, as well as economic skills.

African peoples are wary of any system or policy that will make them dependent, as affluent cultures are, on technoscience. Will dependence on technology destroy the African spirit? Our present interest, however, is how African science in the form of IKS determines African personhood and how African personhood may be influenced by increased exposure to a technoscientific environment.

We have said that the most important aspect of IKS is the way they are embedded in local cultural tradition. In the African worldview everything is an interconnected system. Nature is full of interacting forces. Participation in the movement of these forces takes place through rituals based on expla-

natory myths. All major events in life are ritually mediated, from birth to initiation, marriage and funeral rites. In all of these Africans listen to their mentors, including the forefathers, sages (council of elders), mentorship programmes (*amaqhikiza* system), and wisdom encapsulated in proverbs and narratives from oral tradition. In this system rebirth is essential to Africa. That is why the Renaissance programme (to be distinguished from the Enlightenment Renaissance, which refers to the rebirth of the classics) is not foreign to Africa (Ntuli 2002:58-61).

Diamond (2000), as noted above, has convincingly shown how many technologies developed because of favourable environmental factors. Unfortunately African thinkers associate Western science with the legacy of haughtiness, control and oppression that characterised the colonial view and administration of Africa. Statements by philosophers and sociologists like Kant and Levi-Strauss about the savagery of African culture, and the experience of colonialism and apartheid all contributed to ambivalence about Western science. Not that science should be let off the hook for the way it was implemented in Africa, especially since Western science has tried to be neutral and free from religious, ethical and political control.

But there are still other explanations for the state of science and technology in Africa. The broad biogeographic perspective proposed by Diamond and discussed above may help us to understand disparities in the development of different cultures. There is also the adverse experience of colonisation. Biogeographic influences are, of course, not the only determinants of technological development in different cultures. One should consider cultural influences, as well as personal choices and values influencing the development and acceptance of new technology. When people's cultural values prohibit the acquisition of new technology they will obviously lag behind in the human race for power and control. Diamond (2000:257-258) gives a good example of this. By 1600 the Japanese, who had acquired firearms from Portuguese adventurers in 1543, had greatly improved gun technology. After this period the samurai-controlled government restricted guns, because they threatened the art and skill of samurai fighting. It was only in 1853 that the visit of commander Perry's US fleet bristling with cannon convinced Japan of its need to resume gun manufacturing.

Diamond (2000:247-249) identifies four factors that influence the acceptance of technology by a people. The first is the relative economic advantage compared with existing technology. Second is the social value and prestige of new technology; third, its compatibility with vested interests; and lastly, the exposure to and use of new technology. What is not mentioned is the economic capacity to acquire new technology and the existing infrastructure to integrate it – both of which are often lacking in Africa.

### Conclusion

Will Africa be able to avoid the detrimental features that technoscience displays in affluent countries? African history followed a different route from that of industrial countries. We have traced some developments of personhood in technoscientific countries and viewed them stereoscopically. We have also considered some traits of African personhood. The present threat of technology in the form of instrumental reason and the market is clear; it poses a potential threat to Africa as well. This must be addressed in an African version of the science-religion dialogue, which cannot be postponed until technoscientific values have superseded indigenous values. Technoscientific values are already well rooted in Africa. South Africa, for example, can be typified as both a Third and a First World country, sharing both the versions of personhood we have discussed.

Western values are not normative. What is mostly taken to be universal just happens to be Western. Universals in this sense involve the projection or over-generalisation of (Western) local beliefs (Robbins 1996:65). Geertz (2000:73, 226-227) warned that difference must be recognised explicitly and candidly, not obscured with offhand talk about Confucian ethics or Western tradition, Latin sensibility or the Muslim mindset, nor with wispy moralising about universal values or dim banalities about underlying oneness. Local differences must not be seen as the negation of similarity, its opposite, contrary and contradiction. They must be seen as constituting it – locating similarity and concretising it. What unity there is and what identity will have to be negotiated, produced out of difference. There is growing awareness that universal consensus on normative matters is not in the offing. The idea that the world is not moving towards essential agreement on fundamental matters favours localism. Africa's striving for regional development is in line with this.

Nevertheless it is accepted today that whatever one's civilisation or belief system, certain values like freedom and equality are universal and may not be transgressed by any government or code of law (Touraine 2000:167-168). Our world has to a large degree identified nonnegotiable aspects of personhood which must be protected in spite of cultural and religious differences. The generally accepted traits of personhood are expressed in relatively fixed values like democracy, freedom of association and freedom of speech, complemented by ideals like the right to health services, education and employment. To this we may add meaningful relations with our environment, our fellow humans and God. This seems to guarantee the integrity of the human person, no matter what exact form it assumes.

The African integrity of the human person is unique and challenges technological societies to reconcile their technology with a humane lifestyle. For affluent countries the challenge is to regain personhood by becoming acting subjects again through meaningful communitarian life, as Touraine has shown. Communitarian life, illustrated by the ubuntu system, is one of Africa's strengths. Although the system is not without flaws, prejudice and fundamentalism, it remains an impressive model of meaningful human relationships.

The final chapter examines a concrete example of what happens to human values in a technoscientific context such as South Africa. The country offers a good example of the way a diversity of (often conflicting) values can be balanced in a liberal democracy. The South African constitution must not only offer scope for the harmonious coexistence of different races, cultures, worldviews and religions, but must ensure that the rights of every individual, group, culture and faith are secured inasmuch as that is possible.

## Chapter 13

### African customs and human rights in South Africa after 1996: responses and challenges

#### Introduction

The new South African constitution permits secular administration of human rights, provided dialogue about those rights is sensitive to the challenges presented by the universality of human rights, living law, and the integration of sacred and secular in African culture. Our thesis is that the bill of rights in the new South African constitution institutionalises the moral and judicial rights of human beings in a way that makes far better sense in an African context than the standard Western approach of the mainline churches. African morality and belief systems are essentially *secular*.

First we consider how the previous constitution entrenched the religious values and moral norms of mainline (especially the three white Reformed) churches to the exclusion of those of the indigenous population. We make the point that the new constitution is so intent on eradicating the injustices of apartheid that it includes human freedoms like abortion and gay rights, which conflict with the ethos of more conservative groups.

Next we look into secular as distinct from religious human rights. The secular bill of rights in the constitution, while adequately protecting religious freedom, also redresses real-life inequities in areas like employment, health care and housing in a way ecclesiastic rhetoric did not. Thus black Africans experience it as more efficacious.

We then turn to three challenges. The first is the Western orientation of the constitution that disregards the collective nature of human rights in an African context. The second is that 'living' (i.e. unwritten) law, which underlies traditional African society, does not really feature in the constitution, despite some lip service to it. The third is that the African worldview makes no distinction between sacred and profane (religious and secular). As a result it amounts to a secular religion, which is congruent with a secular bill of rights.

#### South African history

There was a strong alliance between politics, law, religion and Afrikaner civil religion in pre-1994 South Africa. "Afrikaner civil religion, ... which promo-

ted in particular the three Afrikaans Reformed Churches, offered religious justification for whites' and Afrikaners' self-assumed position of superiority in relation to the 'non-white' population and thus for the policy and ideology of apartheid ... South African statut[ory] and common law have shown (and still show) a Christian bias" (Du Plessis 1996:441-466, 443). The churches, specifically the Reformed traditions, provided the theological justification for racially discriminatory laws. Reformed churches were favoured by the apartheid government: "Legislation of a not so overtly religious nature, such as the infamous Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act<sup>1</sup> and the controversial section 16 of the Immorality Act,<sup>2</sup> were enacted at the behest of, amongst others, the Afrikaans churches in an attempt to prevent 'miscegenation'" (Du Plessis 1996:447). Some laws had a specifically Christian bias, like section 42 of the Publications Act 22 of 1974, which introduced blasphemy as a criterion for censorship; section 9 of the National Education Policy Act 39 of 1967, which prescribed a Christian orientation in education; and some Sunday observance laws.<sup>3</sup> These laws catered for the religious and cultural preferences of the ruling white minority. Thus section 9(7) of the Blacks (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act 25 of 1945 prohibited blacks from attending church services and functions in urban areas occupied by 'non-blacks' (Du Plessis 1996:446). White churches did not oppose this law, suggesting that they condoned and supported it.

It must be remembered that in apartheid South Africa the religious and secular spheres were closely linked. The preamble to the 1983 constitution explicitly acknowledged the rule of the Christian God. In practice the system resembled a theocracy as expressed in the Calvinist Belgic Confession accepted by the Afrikaans Reformed Churches.<sup>4</sup> This is positively expounded in a theology of the kingdom of God, which gave Christians a mandate to embody God's reign in societal structures (De Gruchy 1991:246). Calvinism sees politics as a religious vocation:<sup>5</sup> the Christian state has to support the church

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1 Act 55 of 1949.

2 Immorality Amendment Act 21 of 1950.

3 In the Belgic Confession, one of the three creeds of Afrikaans Reformed churches in South Africa, state authority has the duty to promote true (i.e. Christian Reformed) religion and to eliminate all idolatrous forms of religion (see *Confessio Belgica of Guido de Bres*, 1561).

4 See note 2. Article 36 of the *Confessio Belgica* reads (freely translated): "It is not only their [i.e. civil government's] task to give attention to good governance, but also to protect the holy proclamation of the Word of God in order to counter and eradicate all idolatry and false religions and to destroy the reign of the anti-Christ and to promote and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of Jesus Christ." This is defended by Reformed theologian Coetzee (2002).

5 This sense of vocation can only be understood properly against the background of Afrikaner Calvinism. With reference to the Sauer report (mandated by DF Malan in 1947) Giliomee (2003:477) quotes: "It was decreed by God that diverse races and *volke* (peoples) should

in its mission. It is well known that Reformed theologians provided theological legitimation for the apartheid ideology for many years. It was firmly believed to have been preordained by God that whites, who represented the 'only true' religion and civilisation, had to colonise Southern Africa 300 years ago to evangelise its people (Du Toit 1997). Unfortunately the structures that were erected were almost exclusively for the benefit of whites.<sup>6</sup>

The new South African constitution, adopted in 1996, is hailed as one of the most liberal in the world.<sup>7</sup> Its emphasis on human dignity, freedom, equality and individual rights contrasts shrilly with the preceding history of apartheid. The South African constitution deals with the segregation and dominance of white Christianity by displaying sensitivity to linguistic, cultural and religious rights, which will probably receive much attention in the years to come.

### The South African constitution

The new South African constitution includes provisions regarding discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender which displease many Christian and Muslim citizens. In addition it allows abortion, provoking strong

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survive and grow naturally as part of a Divine plan... The Gospel has to be taught to all *volke* and population groups as part of the calling of the Christian church ..."

- 6 The Kairos document, made public on 25 September 1985, condemned 'state theology' and the 'false peace' and 'counterfeit reconciliation' of the 'church theology' preached in so-called 'English-speaking churches' (see Du Plessis 1996:447-448). The Dutch Reformed Church, the largest white Reformed church, has not accepted the Belhar confession, which remains a major stumbling block to unification with the Uniting Reformed Church comprising the Reformed black and coloured communities. At its convention in Ottawa in August 1982 the World Alliance of Reformed Churches declared a *status confessionis* (i.e. a conviction carrying the status of confession) with reference to the situation in South Africa. At its October 1982 synod the (predominantly coloured) Dutch Reformed Mission Church responded by accepting and declaring a *status confessionis*. This became known as the Belhar Confession, comprising three articles of faith dealing with lived unity, true reconciliation and sympathetic justice. The white Reformed church has difficulty accepting a fourth confession (see Botha & Naudé 1998). The Kairos document was one of the most influential critiques of apartheid directed to South African churches. It was written by various theologians (see Kairos Document 1986). The document criticises both state theology and church theology and challenges the churches to proclaim a prophetic theology. "Our services and sacraments have been appropriated to serve the individual for comfort and security. Now these same Church activities must be reappropriated to serve the real religious needs of all people..." (Kairos Document 1986:29).
- 7 See "SA ruling may allow gay unions" on <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4055549.stm>; infra Part II.B. For an overview of the 1996 constitution and a brief history of the passage process, see generally Lucrecia Seafield (2003:295-336).

opposition from Christian groups. Other provisions on bodily integrity conflict with the traditional practices of the indigenous African population.

The bill of rights in chapter 2 of the new constitution also guarantees human dignity and security of the person.<sup>8</sup> In particular, section 12 states that “[e]veryone has the right ... not to be treated ... in a cruel, inhumane or degrading way [and] ... the right to bodily and psychological integrity, which includes the right ... to security in and control over their body”. Some traditional African practices (e.g. virginity testing and genital mutilation, discussed below) might be considered to contravene these provisions.

Section 9 of the bill of rights also demands equal treatment of women. It states that “[e]veryone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law”. In the same section discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, pregnancy and marital status is prohibited. The post-apartheid South African constitution is the first constitution in the world to outlaw discrimination based on sexual identity.<sup>9</sup> In 2002 the Constitutional Court interpreted this provision to allow child adoption by gay couples. Since then gay rights groups have been advocating legalisation of gay marriages. These efforts have been successful, as evidenced by the Constitutional Court’s decision legalising same-sex marriage in South Africa.<sup>10</sup>

The 1996 constitution permits abortion. Relying on provisions regarding human dignity, equality, reproductive rights and bodily integrity, the South African legislature passed the Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act, which “extends freedom of choice by affording every woman the right to choose whether to have an early, safe and legal termination of pregnancy according to her individual beliefs.”<sup>11</sup>

8 S.A Constitution (1996, ch. 2, § 10, 12).

9 See S.A Constitution (1996, ch. 2, § 9(3) (1996) (“The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including ... sex ... marital status ... sexual orientation”).

10 *Minister of Home Affairs v. Fourie*, Case CCT 60/04 and Case CCT 10/04 (1 December 2005).

11 Preamble to Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act 92 of 1996 [hereinafter *Pregnancy Act*], on <http://www.info.gov.za/acts/1996/a92-96.pdf>. The Act authorises abortion only at a woman’s request during the first twelve weeks of gestation (*Pregnancy Act* 92 of 1996, §2(1)(a)). Between the thirteenth and twentieth week abortion is legal if a medical practitioner also finds that the continuation of pregnancy might harm the mother physically or mentally, that the foetus would run a substantial risk to “suffer from a severe physical or mental abnormality”, that the mother conceived via rape or incest, or that “the continued pregnancy would significantly affect the social or economic circumstances of the woman” (*Pregnancy Act* 92 of 1996, §2(1)(b)(i)-(iv)). After the twentieth week of gestation the Act allows abortion if two medical practitioners or a medical practitioner and a midwife conclude that continuation of pregnancy would threaten the mother’s life, “would result in a severe malformation of the foetus” or “would pose a risk of injury” to the unborn child (*Pregnancy Act* 92 of 1996, §2(1)(c)(i)-(iii)).

### Secular human rights and religion

The theologian Alasdair MacIntyre (quoted in Stackhouse & Healey 1996:488-489) considers belief in human rights similar to “belief in witches and unicorns. ... Natural or human rights are fictions.” Stackhouse and Healey (1996:489), on the other hand, view human rights as “cultural by-products of socio-evolutionary processes ...[H]uman rights ... are seen to be an historical artefact, pertinent only insofar as social conditions stand at a particular stage of development, and subject to disappearance if those conditions do not obtain or eventually pass away.” If human rights are fictitious, the idea of ‘religious’ human rights would be doubly so because of the metaphysical dimension of belief. Sinful humans have no rights before God.<sup>12</sup> South African Reformed churches were not happy about the promotion of human rights and opposed it.<sup>13</sup>

Others argue that religious human rights are self-contradictory. Ironically, “human rights thinking set out to protect the outcome of the ‘religious debate’ ... but it has ended up ... distorting it” (Evans 2000:190). The difficulty is that “religious belief becomes acceptable only to the extent that it poses no challenge to the accepted orthodoxies of ... [the human rights] framework” (Evans 2000:182). Thus the human rights debate, by raising issues like gender equality, racial discrimination and homosexuality, which are still contentious in many religions, influences the outcome of the religious debate (Evans 2000:190).

However, human rights can be administered effectively in a secular framework. Secularism does not exclude religion, but offers alternative ways of exercising morality and beliefs outside the confines of formal religious structures. In a secular society religion has no monopoly on the value systems underlying human rights, hence people can honour and hold the same value without basing it on religious principles. The fundamental value of respect for human life, for instance, can be based on various religious texts as well as

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12 See WD Jonker, a prominent SA theologian (Du Toit 1984: 48). Jonker explains that the idea of human rights is unacceptable to conservative Christians because of its liberal, humanistic background: it dates to the Enlightenment and the American Declaration of Independence (1776). According to Jonker it is unbiblical and revolutionary in its rejection of divine authority instituted by God. Everything a human being has comes as an undeserved gift from God – the idea of a ‘right’ stems from the glorification and autonomy of humans.

13 “There exists in our country – and definitely also in church circles – an explicit dislike of the concept ‘human rights’ and what it stands for. Two reasons can be given ... The first is that it is identified with the United Nations and the World Council of Churches, and the worldwide campaign against apartheid” (Du Toit 1984:47; freely translated). One must remember that some churches opposed the idea of individual human rights, since they were seen as conducive to deviation from church doctrine (see Coertzen 2005:88).

on secular philosophical or sociological premises. Although the history of religions abounds in examples of human rights violations, most religions have contributed to good interpersonal relations, which form the basis of human rights.<sup>14</sup>

Thus the values advocated in the secular sphere are not necessarily opposed to religious values, although they may differ. While many Christians invoke the Bible as the source of their values when commenting on a specific right, the secular voice invokes the constitution (enacted by positive law). From the perspective of local black Christians their plight might have been addressed from the pulpit, but without making any real change in their lives. Effective change eventually came about as a result of secular values entrenched in the constitution, not of Christian values propagated by churches.<sup>15</sup>

A discourse based on secular values is also more effective, because Christian values have no legal force whereas human rights, protected by the bill of rights, do have judicial clout. Besides, Christian values may differ from one denomination to the next, leading to doctrinal strife, whereas human rights are less ambiguous. Thus churches would retain a significant role in the public sphere if they engage in serious dialogue with 'secular' proponents of human rights (recognising that few black people make a sacred-secular distinction).

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14 Examples can be cited of both the positive and negative use of religion to accomplish goals: "God's law has been the source of justification for genocide crusades, inquisitions, slavery, serfdom, monarchy, anti-Semitism, anti-Catholicism, bigotry against Muslims, genocide, against native Americans, homophobia, terrorism, and many other wrongs. God's law has also been cited in opposition to these evils. Today God's law is invoked both in support of terrorism and in justification of the war against terrorism." See NGTT 88 (2005:24).

15 The African National Congress (ANC) has taken the only noteworthy initiative to involve religion in addressing the problems of crime, violence and corruption. See <http://www.anc.org.za>. The ANC propagates moral renewal in its booklet 'The moral renewal of the nation' (see <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/misc/moralrenewal.html>). On 24 June 1997 Nelson Mandela addressed religious leaders in Johannesburg, stressing that all sectors of South African society, including the religious sector, have to collaborate "to bring about social transformation through the reconstruction and development of our country. ... Government alone cannot bring about this change". In view of the fragmented, uncoordinated efforts so far, he asked them whether there is not "a way in which the participation of organized religions in our programme of reconstruction and development can be strengthened ... through cooperative endeavours with each other and with government and community". He pointed out that "the ANC recognizes that social transformation cannot be separated from spiritual transformation" and proposed that all religious leaders should gather within the next two months to "analyse the cause of this spiritual malaise, and to find ways of tackling it". He promised that the ANC stood ready to assist such an endeavour (Phalamani, *Magazine of the ANC Commission for Religious Affairs*, April 2004, 7-9).

In any case there is little difference between secular and religious human rights, and religious rights may become obsolete.<sup>16</sup> Freedom of speech, freedom of association and freedom of conscience implicitly protect religious freedom, although it may become difficult to apply these rights in the light of religious diversity. In this regard Evans (2000:181) points out that at present most countries have multi-faith societies and therefore “a variety of competing dialogues between the State and religious communities”. These competing dialogues will crystallise either in complicated laws regulating differences, or in a system of secular rights that deal generically with religious rights. One could say that religious rights are reduced to the function of regulating religion insofar as it affects the public sphere where different religions and groups compete for domination (e.g. education, decisions affecting ethically based laws and religious participation in public ceremonies).

The term ‘post-secular’ refers to the fact that the secular realm is characterised by values, ethics and spirituality exercised in different societal and interest groups. Du Toit (1997:47) alleges that “contemporary religious experience has shown how inadequate and misleading is the strict separation of the sacred and the secular. It is characteristic of this age that people encounter the sacred as the deepest dimension of significant secular experiences, namely the pivotal points of their history, personal and social. There is religious meaning in man’s vocation to become fully human.” With reference to Gehlen he says: “There is a strong feeling that religion should be community-based and not institutionally mediated. Arnold Gehlen has already indicated that the holding power of institutions over the individual is weakening on a global scale (he called this process de-institutionalism). The institutional fabric, whose basic function has always been to provide meaning and stability for the individual, has become incohesive, fragmented and thus progressively deprived of plausibility” (Du Toit 1997:10).

## Challenges

### *Universal versus contextual rights*

The values upheld by the new constitution reflect the global development of a human rights culture with a strong Western bias. In this regard Van der Ven

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<sup>16</sup> Churches that were antagonistic towards human rights have tempered their response. Jonker (Du Toit 1984:50) confirms that the world church is practically unanimous that human rights cannot be dismissed or neglected by Christians. From the churches’ side one could expect comment on secular rights and dissent from certain rights like legal abortion on demand, gay rights and advancement of women in all spheres of life, but not a total dismissal of human rights.

(2005:35) asks why Western countries “try to ‘convince’ developing countries of the meaning and usefulness of human rights, and why they urge developing countries to apply human rights the way they are applied in Western countries: what economic and/or political interests are at stake?” Among the many possible reasons economic globalisation and world peace stand out. The progress of globalisation presupposes shared global values to sustain worldwide commercial success. Not that universal values leave no room for culture-specific values: there is not just one worldview, but many conceptions of the good life and a variety of norms and values. “It could indicate imperialist tendencies if we try and put an end to such pluralism by imposing our own worldview and set of values and norms ... on all people, including adherents of other religions and people with different lifestyles” (Van der Ven 2005:49). The question is to what extent the South African constitution incorporates universal values and to what extent these represent and accommodate ‘authentic’ African values.

Van der Ven (2005:141) critically questions whether “the West [is] not try[ing] to sell its own, thoroughly contextual notion of society and the state – a notion based on human rights – to the rest of the world as a universal concept? Is universality not just a Western ideology camouflaging an underlying neo-colonialism?” Similarly, many fear that “the doctrine of human rights [increasingly] claim[s] to be the single universal framework within which all views must fit. One might say it has all the hallmarks of a proselytising religion and advocates the adoption of a particular worldview which does not necessarily reflect the views of individuals in some religious cultures” (Evans 2000:183).<sup>17</sup> Thus the application of the human rights framework spelled out in the 1996 constitution may be problematic in view of the unique context of South African society and culture.

An example of such conflict is the collective experience of South Africans as opposed to the individual nature of human rights. What takes precedence, the horizontal dimension of the community as author of its own laws, or the vertical dimension of human rights? Human rights in traditional Africa do not stem from the individual but from the community (Howard 1990:162). African values are experienced collectively. Wa Mutwa (Van der Vyver & Witte 1996:439) says that although many of the rights enumerated in human rights law pertain to individuals, they only make sense in a col-

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17 This is not an exclusively Western concern. The problem surfaces wherever one group tries to strengthen its hegemony (Van der Ven 2005:143). Broadly speaking, it confronts any effort to reconcile universalism with particularism, globalism with contextualism, and historicism with transcendental ideals. The list could also include ethnocentrism, in-group and out-group thinking, proselytisation, expansionism and imperialism (Van der Ven 2005:143, 152, 203). For the dynamics and evolutionary history of the societal in-group and out-group mechanism, see Du Toit (2004b: 246-248).

lective, social perspective.<sup>18</sup> The individual's morals, attitudes towards life, death and identity derive from this collective, historical construction of reality.

*'Living law'*

Codified law is foreign to traditional Africa and was only introduced with colonialism. Traditional African societies are oral communities regulated by unwritten law.

Unwritten ('living') law is still vibrantly alive in these societies. In a traditional African context taboo takes the place of law. Taboo is unwritten law, guarded by tradition. By infringing a taboo the offender may incur an automatic penalty;<sup>19</sup> but the spirit of the culprit may be 'too strong' to be affected by the penalty, in which case it falls on the innocent. To prevent harm to the innocent, the society to which the offender belongs inflicts the penalty for infringement and thus satisfies the power whose wrath is incurred. The point is that the entire community is involved in the violation and imposition of a moral law (Webster 1910:795).

In some cases "the unwritten law is sufficiently strong to resist being incorporated into written law [of the ruling elite] because of the risk of being adapted to it" (Van der Ven 2005:207). This has occurred to some extent in South Africa, where "indigenous law and institutions have ... shown remarkable resilience in the face of imposed state law ... and they continue to uphold their own regulations and mechanisms of conflict management and conflict resolution" (Van der Ven 2005:207). It is well known that South Africa has parallel systems of law, medicine and religion (e.g. what is known as 'religion by day' and 'religion by night', observance of both Western and African burial rites). Especially in rural areas like Venda, Eastern Cape and KwaZulu Natal tribal systems and indigenous practices are still observed.

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18 But see Howard (1990:162), where she argues that even if Africans "value their group identity more than their individual identity, this does not invalidate the applicability of human rights to present-day African society".

19 Hutton Webster (quoted in Thorpe 1992:114-115) explains that "the breaking of taboo is commonly regarded as the vengeance of an outraged spirit or deity, who visits with sickness, disease, or death the guilty individual ... Taboo (or tabu) is a Polynesian word which means that a person, word or action is to be avoided ... Fear of pollution may also provide a good reason for designating something as taboo ... usually anything involving blood is taboo ... a corpse is taboo. Thus the principle of life itself is recognized as sacred. To treat it lightly is dangerous and polluting."

Some examples of living law are the regulative actions of the courts of ward heads, chiefs' courts and people's courts in the townships. Examples of living law in both indigenous and religious communities are marriage law, family law, property law, law of delict and succession law (see Ayittey 1991:30-38). Living law is supported by the South African constitution in section 15, which deals with freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief and opinion.<sup>20</sup>

*No separation between religious and secular*

For religious freedom, religious rights, human rights and law to be relevant to the African context the South African human rights discourse must allow for non-separation of religious and secular. To what extent does the Western relation between law and religion reflected in the South African constitution accord with African religion and culture?

Africans do not experience a sharp division between sacred and secular. The spirit world mirrors the material world, which is not divided into different spheres. African spirituality is often practised in the shadowy realm of the in-between. There is no space for that realm in formal societal and religious structures or in technocratic, daylight reality. It nevertheless influences Africans' longings and decision making. In the words of Ellis and Ter Haar (2004:99), "the tendency for politicians to seek spiritual power, and for spiritual leaders to develop substantial material power, shows distinctive patterns in continuity with systems and ideas rooted deep in Africa's history".

African spirituality can only flourish when a person is linked into the causal chain that binds the individual, community, ancestors, nature, world and God together in a single, holistic force field. Life is integrated. For primal humans<sup>21</sup> reality is a network of interrelated spiritual forces. These forces are not restricted to a particular realm. The forefathers operate in everyday life. Religious and secular reality intermingle in the social, psychological, spiritual, political and cultural spheres of life. In a traditional African context nothing is profane.

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20 Ch. 2, §15 (1996): "This section does not prevent legislation recognizing  
 (i) marriages concluded under any tradition, or a system of religious, personal or family law; or  
 (ii) systems of personal and family law under any tradition, or adhered to by persons professing a particular religion."  
 Available on <http://www.info.gov.za/documents/constitution/1996/96cons2.htm#15>.

21 It would be difficult to find Africans representing a 'pure' primal (i.e. traditional) worldview. However, many aspects of the primal worldview, operative a hundred years ago, are still found, especially in ATRs (see Du Toit 2000b:55-59; Thorpe 1992:1-10).

Westerners' lives, by contrast, are neatly compartmentalised. The transcendent is barely discernible in the hurly-burly of everyday life. On the whole the history of scientific development reinforced the opinion that Westerners operate with an immanent, closed, scientific worldview governed by cause and effect (Du Toit 2005: 22-23, 58).<sup>22</sup> Spirituality – if it features at all – is confined to a structured, rational worship session once a week. There is growing recognition, however, that the secular is not entirely irreligious and the profane not always readily explicable in rational terms – which the primal African takes for granted.

But the traditional spirit world has lost much of its original morally neutral character as a result of factors like the 19th century evangelisation of Africa, the institution of a secular state and the loss of esteem for village elders and notables who officiate in traditional religious cults. It has even acquired a negative status and is seen as inherently evil by African Pentecostal and other groups (Du Toit 2005:94). While this does not mean that the spirits no longer exert tremendous influence on Africans, it supports the idea of a secular African spirituality. Many of Africa's new religious movements are attempts to revive these sources of power. They seek to re-conquer the public sphere with a spirit idiom to address social evils (Du Toit 2005).

The non-separation of religious and secular suggests that a secular African spirituality would be the best way to accommodate a human rights discourse. The term 'secular religion', as used here, refers to the integral nature of African traditional values and morality that are part of everyday life and not confined to religious or denominational compartments (Nze 1996:167), where religious and societal concerns, religion and tradition, sacred and secular are seen as one. John Pobee (1993:391; also see Du Toit 2003:173-183) reminds us that African cultures have a religious epistemology and ontology, questions that Western cultures treat as philosophical rather than religious.

Developments in South Africa since 1996 increasingly show that much of the black African response to issues concerning religious rights comes from secular society rather than the church, suggesting that Africans do not distinguish between religious rights and human rights and find religious rights irrelevant in the absence of basic human rights. Thus secular human rights are more apposite to the African context than the right to religious freedom and offer a better language for articulating African values and morals. In view of this the provisions of the new constitution may be

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22 Although the overall drift of this statement is acknowledged, the current science and religion debate testifies to an insistence on maintaining supernatural values in an increasingly technoscientific world (see Du Toit 2005:129-144).

successfully implemented in South Africa through a discourse on secular human rights.

### **Responses to the new constitution**

Let us consider the responses to post-1996 constitutional development by the AICs, Reformed mainline churches, the Muslim community and African culture.

#### *AIC response*

The AICs, the most numerous religious groups in South Africa, did not respond to the constitution, probably because they have no positive history of protection by religious rights.

Issues raised by blacks pertain to the 'secular' sphere. They include health, unemployment, housing, land distribution, the place of women in government and society, and violence (Maphai 1994:66-91). Although most of these issues surface in black religious communities, blacks consider the bill of rights rather than religious rights to have an impact on their lives.<sup>23</sup>

#### *White Reformed response*

Many white Reformed believers are dissatisfied with the way religious freedom was subordinated in policy making on religious studies as a school subject (see Coertzen 2002a: 202-203). The 1999 document on religious education in South African schools made provision for "educating learners to be religious" or "educating learners about religion and religions".<sup>24</sup> It was decided that only the last option would be adopted in religious education on all levels of tuition (Coertzen 2002b:191-194). Government's decision is in line with the ideal to further tolerance and understanding among South Africans, especially concerning religious differences. While one can assume that instruction about other religions will not necessarily happen in religious activities elsewhere or at home, government could ensure that it takes place

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23 Some of the key provisions of the bill of rights deal with housing, health care, sustenance and social security. For example: "Everyone has the right to have access to adequate housing" (SA Constitution ch. 2, § 26(1)). "Everyone has the right to have access to health care services, including reproductive health care; sufficient food and water; and social security, including, if they are unable to support themselves and their dependants, appropriate social assistance" (SA Constitution ch. 2, § 21(1)(a)-(c)).

24 Section 57 of the South African Schools Act; see also National Policy on Religion and Education 6-8 (2003). The 1999 document is referred to in point 6 of the National Policy on Religion and Education.

in schools. The South African Council of Churches, contrary to the official model, supports voluntary religious activities in schools:

Religion is not simply a topic for study. It is also an integral aspect of culture. There must be time for religion within the course of the school day. Confining the practice of religion to extra-curricular activities marginalises and devalues belief. Outside of school hours, religious activities inevitably compete with other extra-curricular options. This can create undesirable hierarchies of faithfulness where those who take part in religious activities see themselves as more devout than their classmates. We believe that further consideration must be given to the relegation of religious activities to extra-curricular hours and to the standing of religious youth organisations in schools (<http://www.sacc-ct.org.za/releducat.html>).

White Reformed believers argue that furthering tolerance and understanding among religions is wrong, because according to article 36 of the *Confessio Belgica* the state must create a space for the Christian church to fulfil its mission of proclaiming God's word.

In modern cultures religious education occurs in churches and at home. The school environment is seen by the South African government as a place for general religious education, furthering understanding and tolerance. Point 30 of the National Policy on Religion and Education states: "Schools should also show an awareness and acceptance of the fact that values do not necessarily stem from religion, and that not all religious values are consistent with our Constitution." In addition the preferential position of the Reformed churches under the apartheid system of religious education will not be possible in the new dispensation.<sup>25</sup> This is confirmed by Kader Asmal, former minister of education, in his foreword to *National policy on religion and education*: "The Policy recognises the rich and diverse religious heritage of our country and adopts a cooperative model that accepts our rich heritage and the possibility of creative inter-action between schools and faith whilst,

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<sup>25</sup> Christian National Education was part and parcel of apartheid government and was effectively implemented for many years, benefiting the Reformed traditions. For background, see De Gruchy 1991. In addition to this, Giliomee (2003:468-469) writes about Christian National Education policy: "It proposed schools that accepted the Holy Scriptures as their foundation, used mother tongue (Afrikaans) as the medium of instruction, and promoted the 'national principle', which meant that 'love for everything that is our own, with special reference to our country, our language, our history, our culture.'"

protecting our young people from religious discrimination or coercion.”<sup>26</sup> The policy opts for the model of a modern secular state, describing it as a state “which is neither religious nor anti-religious, in principle adopts a position of impartiality towards all religions and other worldviews.”<sup>27</sup>

Apart from religious education, the abolition of the death penalty, abortion on request, gay rights, business on Sundays and the legalisation of gambling<sup>28</sup> are among the main causes of discontent among some Christian believers. According to Coertzen (2002a: 202-203) the Reformed view is that society must follow biblical guidelines when deciding on these issues. This, of course, is not possible in present-day South Africa where government does not accept any religion’s norms and values. Although the values of different religions overlap significantly, they cannot be promoted in the name of a specific religion. Hence the secular (neutral) domain is where such matters must be decided.

#### *Muslim response*

Responses from the Muslim community concern the role that religious moral norms are allowed to play in society. According to Moosa (2000) the bill of rights restricts religion to the private and individual spheres. “As soon as these freedoms are translated into practise [sic], in the form of religious observances at schools or religion-based family law codes, then such actions are subject to conditions and limitations. ... [Religion in the public domain must] comply with administrative procedures such as obtaining permission, ... a notion of equitable practice, and be voluntary” (Moosa 2000:120). Moosa, then, regards the bill of rights as dualistic in distinguishing between religion as belief and religion as practice. This problem is “a binarism which contrasts religion with non-religion, the private with the public and the secular with the sacred” (Moosa 2000:120).<sup>29</sup>

An example of how the bill of rights restricts religion to the private sphere is that of Muslim women adhering to Islamic law in South African society. The constitution prohibits unfair discrimination based on gender and

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26 *Religio* 1, October 2003, 24.

27 *Religio* 1, October 2003, 25 (point 3).

28 An open letter to the president appeared in *Die Kerkblad* (103(3103):1-34), but evoked no response. If their point is to be taken, can there be any argument against governments implementing shari’ah law? See Coertzen 2002a :202-203. It must be remembered that Coertzen is a theologian of the *Gereformeerde Kerk* – the smallest of the three Afrikaans Reformed Churches.

29 For an example of the negative Muslim view of law in general, see Lari (2000:27): “Legislation can belong, then, only to God.”

sex.<sup>30</sup> Muslim succession law, on the other hand, discriminates against women with respect to inheritance (reference is made to the Qur'an, which stipulates that a Muslim woman generally inherits only half of what her male counterpart inherits).<sup>31</sup> To Muslims Islamic law is not subject to censure on any ground whatsoever. Thus, according to Rautenbach and Goolam (2000:125), "[i]t may be argued that women who choose to participate in cultural life ... cannot contest the constitutionality of any rules that are characteristic of such a culture". This implies "that women who choose to live according to a religious legal system are subject to the laws of that system regardless of their social position within that system" and objecting to such a view "would deter the transformation of all spheres of South African society based on equality and human dignity". This is another example of how difficult it is to adhere to minority values in a religiously and culturally pluralistic context, especially when they contradict the broader values enshrined in the constitution and bill of rights.<sup>32</sup>

#### *Traditional African response*

Some of the responses to the new constitution from the traditional African community involve section 12 of the bill of rights in chapter 2 of the 1996

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30 Section 9 of the bill of rights stipulates: "The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth."

31 In the Qur'an Surah Al Baqarah (chapter 4, verse 11) prescribes:  
"Allah commands you in respect of your children's inheritance  
To the male a share equal to that of two females..."

32 The South African Law Reports (October 1997 (4)) records the case *President of the Republic of South Africa and another v Hugo* 1996 (4) SA 1012 (D) (1996) (6) BCLR 876. It concerns special remission of sentence granted to certain categories of prisoners (all mothers in prison on 10 May 1994, with children under the age of twelve years). In the application before Magid J, "the respondent (male) sought an order declaring the Presidential Act unconstitutional ... as it unfairly discriminated against him on ground of sex or gender and indirectly against his son ... because his incarcerated parent was not female". In his judgment O'Regan J concluded "that the discrimination caused by the President remitting the sentence of mothers of young children but not the sentences of fathers of young children was not unfair". The imprisonment of the respondent resulted, not from the President's act in denying them remission of sentence, but from their having been convicted of criminal offences. In our view the fact remains that Hugo was not granted his request because of his gender – which is what discrimination on grounds of gender is all about. However, circumstances may influence the decision that discrimination can be 'justified'. The following quotation suffices: "that goal (equal treatment) could not be reached by insisting upon identical treatment in all circumstances ... A classification which was unfair in one context might not necessarily be unfair in a different context."

constitution, which reads: “Everyone has the right to bodily and psychological integrity, which includes the right (1) to make decisions concerning reproduction; (2) to security in and control over their body; and (3) not to be subjected to medical or scientific experiments without their informed consent.”

Some argue that the Zulu custom of virginity testing infringes this provision. Virginity testing is a custom the Zulu have in common with their closest tribal cousins, the Swazi. “In both nations, only virgins are supposedly allowed to take part in the ‘Reed Dance’ to ensure that it remains ritually pure.” Virgins participating in the dance “have to be tested by elderly women days before the pilgrimage to Enyokeni” where the reed dance takes place. “Those who pass the test, [participate in the dance] and are lauded by their community as *izintombi nto*, pure maidens. ... [B]y remaining pure, the maidens are free from unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. ... This ancient Zulu practice ... was revived by King Zwelithini in 1984.” The Reed Dance “has become a point of controversy between cultural groups and traditionalists on one hand, and human-rights groups and feminists on the other”.<sup>33</sup>

The bill of rights section on social, cultural and religious practices condemns anyone who takes part in what it calls genital mutilation and calls for prosecution of such people under criminal law.<sup>34</sup> Those opposed to the bill argue that it is insensitive to African customs and culture; that it undermines “the very diversity on which [South Africa] prides itself”, and that it applies double standards, as it allows male circumcision practised by Xhosa, but not virginity testing practised by Zulu. Concerning initiation rites for young Xhosa males, “[t]he [b]ill gives young men the right to refuse to undergo traditional initiation rites but does not ban circumcision itself. ... In the Eastern Cape alone, more than 250 deaths in circumcision schools and at least 221 cases of genital amputation have been recorded in the past [ten] years.”

### Conclusion

The world may see significant changes in the South African Constitution and its bill of rights in reaction to the challenges and responses of various religious groups described above. Progressive resolution of these challenges will depend on the ability of African traditionalists to make themselves heard,

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<sup>33</sup> Murphy, “A time of testing for virginity”, *LA Times*, 15 July 1999, on <http://www.aegis.com/news/lt/1999/LT990702.html>. See also Gleimius, Mthimunye & Subanyaoni 2003; *Challenge* 82, Oct. 2005, 9-10.

<sup>34</sup> See Children’s Bill (B70) of 2003.

the success of the African Renaissance and cultural projects generally, and the will of the African people to have their spiritual values influence societal structures. To succeed, this process will need to keep in step with developments in global human rights, as well as with the responses of mainline African religions. One can only hope that it will benefit Africans and further their spiritual integrity.



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