

Religion and Culture: Blessings or Curses?

by Prof. Simon S Maimela (UNISA)

A Keynote Address given at the EATWOT Pan African Theological Conference, Harare, January 6, 1991

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of our theme "Culture, religion and liberation" for our continent cannot be overemphasized, because it tries to bring together the two main approaches to African theology. The first could be referred to as the "inculturation" approach which is characterized by the attempt to marry Christianity with the African world-view, so that Christianity could speak with African idiom and accent. This approach has been the most dominant in the early development of African theology. Not surprisingly, it has become almost synonymous with Africa theology. The second which could be referred to as the liberation approach was developed in the 1970s and gave birth to black theology of liberation in South Africa. This theology is characterized by its emphasis on the struggle for socio-economic and political liberation from white racial domination.

And for many years African theologians were divided along these theological approaches believing that their theological production was mutual exclusive rather than complimentary to one another. This antagonistic relationship among African theologians was best exemplified by the heavy-handed manner in which one of the leading African theologians, John Mbiti, dismissed black theology of liberation as irrelevant and unsuitable for independent Africa.¹ For, in his view, black theology was nothing but an unfortunate emotional outburst which in time would simply go away when the problem of racial oppression in South Africa is solved. Against Mbiti, there were other voices which pleaded for some meaningful coexistence and mutual enrichment between the two trends of African theology.² There were many obstacles and misunderstandings which had to be overcome before such a rapprochement was to be realized. On one hand, there were some Africans who mistakenly believed that, because they had already achieved their political independence from their colonial masters, they did not need liberation theology, most particularly black theology whose aim was to bring about liberation from white oppression. On the other hand, some black South Africans argued that they did not need the sort of inculturation theology that was being developed in independent Africa because socio-political and economic independence were, for them, a priority number one.

2. THE MEDIATING ROLE OF EATWOT IN AFRICAN THEOLOGY

The debate between the two camps, largely based on misunderstandings, raged for many years. Fortunately, the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians provided a forum where African theologians could meet and also be exposed to other forms of liberation theology, especially the Latin American theology of liberation with its emphasis on socio-economic liberation, and the Asian theology of liberation with its emphasis on both cultural, religious and socio-economic liberation. This exposure helped to bring the two camps of African theologians closer together.

Realizing that the struggle for liberation is an all embracing one, African theologians began to appreciate the fact that they live in Africa as members of one family. Therefore, even though they have been divided by artificial colonial boundaries and now live in different countries, there are certain realities that confront all Africans, namely, the socio-political and economic domination by the West. Indeed, it has become clear to most of us that the so-called independent Africa may not be free after all. African theologians have now been forced to make a distinction between political independence and socio-political and economic liberation. The latter is more difficult to achieve than the first, and it is not surprising that even in independent Africa oppression abounds. For what happened during independence was merely a replacement of one form of oppression for another, that is, a substitution of a European oppressor for an African oppressor. Consequently, if Africans are to experience authentic liberation they must go beyond replacing one oppressor for another in order to destroy the oppressive thrones themselves. In so doing they would be making certain that potential oppressors are monitored and prevented from carrying out their oppressive designs because there would be no thrones to sit on.

Also, people in South Africa have come to realize more and more that, while it is true that they have suffered under white domination for over three hundred years, it does not follow that Africans have completely ceased from being Africans. Because black South Africans were not fully Europeanized, it is not surprising that during the time of crisis in their lives they often resort to their African cultural and religious beliefs and practices. It is one of the ironies of history that the Apartheid system, which was designed to humiliate black people and trample upon their dignity, became the instrument that ensured that Africans would not succeed in running away from their cultural and religious roots. For the white

protagonist of the Apartheid regime constantly reminded Africans that they were Africans and not Europeans regardless of their educational achievements or economic status, by being legally forced to live in the African townships.

We are not trying here to give praise to the virtues of the Apartheid regime, but the point that is being made here is that South African blacks, for better or for worse, are still steeped into their African cultural and religious milieu. This has made them to increasingly appreciate their African culture and religious heritage. This, above all, has created a meeting-point between themselves and other Africans in the rest of independent Africa.

In a very important sense, the theme for our conference tries to bring together the two African approaches to theology, by linking the African cultural and religious expressions to African struggles for total liberation from all forms of human oppression. This theme, in my view, underlines the fact that African theologians should be able to find one another and work together because total liberation is the priority number one for all Africans regardless of whether they live in the so-called independent Africa or Apartheid South Africa. Therefore, there is no excuse for us to continue living in our splendid theological isolation from one another, thus allowing our detractors to mislead us into believing that socio-political and economic liberation is more important than cultural liberation.

3. USES OF CULTURE AND RELIGION DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD

Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to take this opportunity and share with all of you the framework that has been given to those persons that have been asked to read papers at this conference. This is important because it will enable us to have a common point of departure.

In order not to perpetuate the past practice where discussions about African culture and religion hinged around describing, as opposed to transforming those phenomena, our speakers have been specifically asked not to discuss the problem of culture and religion in Africa theoretically or in generalities. For it is not sufficient to talk about African culture as if culture is a thing that exists by itself "out there." To do so is to reify culture and turn it into a thing that exists independent of the people who create or live in it. My understanding is that culture is something that is lived by people. The same is true about religion. Therefore, I specifically ask our speakers not to talk about African culture in general because I am not interested in that kind of discussion. Rather our speakers have been asked

to do situation analysis and to examine specific and concrete situations in their own countries in order to demonstrate to this conference how culture and religion in reality operate in their own specific situations. Therefore, they should tell us how culture and religion are manipulated by the dominant groups in their respective places, as these dominant groups try to influence and control the behaviour of the oppressed masses.

It was in view of the above that the opening paper by Ranwedzi Nengwekul was going to examine a very important topic, namely, the dialectical nature of religion and culture. His papers discuss the twofold manner in which religion and culture could be used: either as an instrument of oppression by the dominant groups or as a resource for resistance by the dominated masses.

In order to integrate other papers with that of Nengwekulu, the other presenters were asked to analyse how in their respective societies culture or religion has been used and is being used as an instrument of oppression by those who are in power to legitimize their dominant position. Incidentally I had a very interesting discussion yesterday during which a female participant who is a lecturer at a seminary told me something that I would like to share with you. She told me that she finds it revealing that theological students agree with her in almost everything in theological discussions when no reference is being made to the African culture. But when the theological discussion begins to touch on the relationships between man and women in Africa the problem of culture suddenly crops up. This is because it is convenient for males to use aspects of African culture in order to perpetuate their privileged status. Indeed too often culture has been used and is being used by African males in the family context, as husbands, fathers, sons, brothers etcetera, to try safeguard and perpetuate their dominant positions at the expense of females. Also, in the larger society dominant groups use the culture of the powerless and dominated masses with the sole purposes of making the victims of society accept their position of domination as well as the position of dominant groups.

A good example of how culture or religion could be used as an instrument of oppression is best exemplified by the colonial period. As we all know, colonizers came to Africa as agents of the European empires to subjugate and dominate the African people. In order to achieve their objective, they targeted the African culture for destruction, hoping thereby to destroy the African sense of history and being. By replacing African culture and religion with European culture, the colonizers believed that de-cultured African men and women would be easy to dominate and control.

In some instances this Europeanization process did succeed when some Africans began to lose their religion by adopting the new Christian religion of the missionaries. For instance, there were Africans who lost a sense of identity to a point of identifying with the value system of the colonizers. Recently a friend of mine told me that while he was in Europe he met a French-speaking African. As their conversation progressed he asked the French-speaking African what nationality he was, whereupon the French-speaking African responded by saying that he was French. The upshot of this story is that it does often happen that oppressed Africans internalize European culture fish and hook to a point where they could begin to believe that, blacks as they are like me, they are really not African but French or English. Such people would even try to imitate the mannerism of the French or the English colonial masters. Some Africans went so far as to try to change the colour of their skins by using skin-lightening creams or stretching their hair. The result of such internalization of the cultural and religious values of the colonial masters has had a devastating effect on the African personality, leading to what Engelbert Mveng refers to as the African "anthropological poverty, by which he means:

....the general impoverishment of the people. Colonialism brought about a loss of their identity and diminishment of their creativity. It indiscriminately disrupted their communal tribal life and organization and destroyed their indigenous values, religious beliefs, and traditional culture. This result of the ravages of colonialism is now maintained by economic and cultural neo-colonialism.³

Most of us still suffer from the effects of deculturation process that accompanied the colonialization of Africa.

Similarly the missionaries came as agents of the dominant West to promote European culture, economic and religious imperialism. They went out of their way to suppress and condemn African religion and culture as the work of the Devil.⁴ Africans were frightened with hell-preaching sermons and called upon to embrace the new Christian religion. What is significant here is that the kind of Christianity that was preached was *one which was designed to make the colonized Africans docile and perpetual students of their European masters*. Hence the leadership position was largely restricted to the Europeans. Even when the church leadership passed on to the *indigenous people little was done to do away with European domination of the African churches* because the whole hierarchical structure of Bishops, which is regarded as the guardian of Christian faith through its monopoly of training pastors and priests, is designed to perpetuate European domination and church structures. Using the power of money and theological training, European churches

continue to exercise their influence through those structures. Not surprisingly most African church leaders tend to be theologically more conservative than their European counterparts, believing that such conservatism will win them applause from their European handlers. And some of us who happened to have African leadership in the churches know from experience that African church leaders could be worst oppressors than the European missionaries. In both secular and ecclesiastical realms we have a situation where Africans have merely substituted colonial or missionary oppressor for African oppressors, the difference in the latter case being only the ecclesiastical garbs. Here again the mistake of those who fought against missionary domination and oppression lay in the fact that they did not destroy the thrones themselves from which secular or religious oppressors exercise their power.

4. RELIGION AND CULTURE AS RESOURCES FOR RESISTANCE

It was against this background of both cultural and religious domination that African resistance groups, during the struggle for independence, began to promote the philosophy of Negritude, African culture and African socialism. In South Africa, people began to talk about Black consciousness through which they promoted positive African self-respect. One important characteristic of this self-affirmation is best expressed in the saying: Black is beautiful. To give but a few examples of how religious and cultural phenomena could be used as resources of resistance, let me share with you the experience of my people in the nineteenth century struggle against British imperialism. Historians tell us about one young African prophetess Nongquase, who invoked the African traditional religion by telling the oppressed blacks to obey certain rituals so that the ancestors might help them drive away the white settler colonialists into the sea. Of course, the outcome was not as she had prophesied because the ancestors did not intervene to drive white colonialists into the sea. But the fact that she did not succeed does not cancel the fact that she was trying to use African culture and religion as resources for resistance against colonial domination and oppression. Her story, in my view, demonstrates the fact that there exist certain aspects of African culture and religion which could be used by the underdogs in their struggle against their oppressors. In so doing, the oppressed groups reject various forms of cultural expressions or religious uses by the dominant group. Instead oppressed groups often adopt those aspects of their culture or religion which are deemed useful for their cause of struggle to strengthen and reinforce their own resistance against class domination.

In the religious sphere, many Africans resisted conversion to Christianity. Even those who embraced the new Christian religion expressed their resistance to total conversion by continuing to prac-

tice African traditional religious rites alongside Christianity, a practice commonly known as syncretism.⁵ Those of us who have the experience of serving in African congregations as ministers of religion could testify to the shock we often experience by the heavy of African traditional rites at funerals. For instance, when a person has died, it is not uncommon that traditional rituals which help facilitate the passage of the dead into the world of the spirits (ancestors) are conducted in addition to the Christian burial rites. In such cases we often see relatives of the deceased throwing some clothes, blankets or other articles in or on top of the grave even as the minister of religion is busy fulfilling the Christian part of the burial. Similarly, when a child is born into a Christian family, the African parents do not hesitate to turn to the diviner or medicine man or woman so as to acquire charms or medicine that will help avert disease, potential witches or evil spirits which might threaten the life of the child. At the same time the African parents will proceed with the usual Christian rites of baptism et cetera. Recently I was pleasantly surprised to learn that, if some of our young people did not have good sleep or have a problem, they would go to the graveyard in early hours of the morning carrying buckets of water which they poured on the graves of their parents or grandparents, before going to church services.

Without entering into the debate as to whether the syncretistic practices are right or wrong, let it suffice to say that the incidences I have referred to are, in my view, expressions of resistance to total conversion to Christianity that is devoid of African cultural underpinnings. It is this kind of resistance to Western cultural and religious imperialism that led to the break away of the so-called African Independent Churches from the white denominations in the nineteenth century. These break-aways were nothing but attempts by Africans to resist Western domination.

5. USES OF CULTURE AND RELIGION IN THE BIBLE

Having briefly outlined how African culture and religion have been used either as instruments of domination or as resources of resistance, we want to briefly discuss the problems relating to the uses of scriptures. May I mention in this connection that those persons who will be presenting papers directly with the biblical material have been specifically asked to examine more closely how religion and culture have been used as instruments of oppression or resources for resistance. By way of anticipating what they would be discussing, I wish to look at certain texts in the Old Testament which best exemplify the dialectical nature of culture and religion as instruments of oppression or resources for resistance. In the Old Testament, we find an interesting story in the book of Kings where there was a struggle over the land.⁶ Here the dominant group,

represented by the king and his wife, wanted to use their cultural and religious arguments as well as political position to legitimate their disposition of the poor person. In response, Naboth appeals to a certain interpretation of culture and religion which formed the core of Israelite social ethics and justice, namely, that a family property could not be taken away or alienated from their owners however lowly they might be. In appealing to this interpretation, Naboth managed to reinforce his resistance against king Ahaz's attempted dispossession of the poor Israelite. In this argument, the Scriptures tell us that Naboth won over the king much to the displeasure of Jezebel who refused to take the defeat lying down. Rather she wove up a devious plot to murder Naboth, thereby accomplishing her initial wish of wanting to take away the poor person's land.

Anyway, the struggle between Naboth and king Ahab seems to prove the warning of the prophet Samuel against the creation of a monarchy in Israel. Samuel had correctly forewarned Israel that a monarchy would have its own political economics with farreaching consequences for the nation because it would lead to the creation of classes in society. There would be the noble class, the king's counsellors, the army generals, the courtiers and so forth — all of whom may want to be rewarded. For all these privileged classes would claim certain rights and favours from the king because of special duties they believe they perform for the royal family and the nation. Indeed, there would be nothing unusual in such an arrangement because, as we all know in our own time, if a military coup is staged in a country, the person who becomes the new ruler would tend to surround himself with the military folks. His first act of appreciation is often expressed through dishing out better salaries and privileges for the military, thereby gaining favour with those who put him in power. In the light of the above, king Ahab was thus merely using his class position in his dispossession of Naboth. There are many examples which Old Testament scholars could cite to give their papers depth and content. One such example is the conflict between Jewish tribal exclusivism which was used to sanction the dispossession of the Canaanites, as opposed to the universalism of God's love which is forcefully expressed in the book of Ruth and the book of the prophet Jonah.

With regard to the New Testament uses of culture and religion, there are numerous examples which one could cite. First, there is the story about Jesus's continuing debate with the Jewish ruling classes of his time. In these debates, we are told that Jesus would often quote some Jewish tradition such as "you have heard that it was said that 'eye for an eye, and 'tooth for a tooth,' but I tell you.."⁷

Second, there were many discriminatory relationships between Jews and Samaritans based on culture and religion reflected in the story of Jesus's discussion with the Samaritan woman at the well. During this discussion Jesus ended up turning the Jewish traditional belief about Samaritans on its head. In addition, there are strands in the Gospel tradition which clearly express themselves against the uses of religion and culture to oppress the so-called gentiles, women, slaves et cetera. Their clearest expression is found in St. Paul's letter to the Galatians where it is argued that for those who are baptized into Christ there is "neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female" because they are now all one in Christ Jesus.⁸

Third, other misuses of Jewish culture and religion to legitimize the oppression of the outcasts in society such as the lepers, the publicans, and the so-called sinners or harlots could be used with great benefit by New Testament scholars to demonstrate the twofold manner in which both culture and religion are often used to reinforce or resist domination.

Over against this, one could cite the Magnificat which expresses a liberative aspect of religion which could be used by the underdogs to resist their domination and oppression at the hands of the powerful. In a similar vein, liberation theology has appealed to Jesus' first sermon to construct a picture of a caring and liberative God who has taken the preferential option for the oppressed and downtrodden.⁹

Fourth, the story about Jesus' feeding of the multitudes gives a clear expression of the twofold uses of culture and religion in society. On one hand, there is a suggestion by Jesus' disciples that the masses must be told to go away and purchase food for themselves since there were not sufficient loaves of bread and fish to feed the masses. The assumption here is that the masses must accept the logic of the existing unequal distribution of economic resources which benefits the capitalist few whose goods must be bought by the underprivileged masses. On the other hand, Jesus uses Jewish cultural and religious arguments to make an important ethical statement, namely, that sharing in situations of human need is the best solution because sharing makes it possible for everyone to have something to eat. After Jesus' death and resurrection, the book of Acts tells us how this new social ethic was carried to its full expression by the early church.¹⁰

The above examples taken from the biblical material, I believe demonstrated the dialectic nature of both culture and religion as instruments of domination and resistance. By lifting up the twofold

uses of culture and religion, my aim is to highlight a very problematic dimension in the Judeo-Christian tradition which stems from the historic alliance between religious authorities and the ruling classes in most societies. That alliance runs like a red thread through the pages of both the Old and New Testaments and has continued throughout the history of the Church. Invariably this relationship has often implied a co-operation of religious authorities so that they might construct theology in the service of the state. This misuse of religion is made possible by the fact that the Bible itself is a problematic book, and anyone can find material to support almost any cause. Let it suffice here to mention but two main trends in the Hebrew Bible that lend themselves to the use of religion either as instrument of oppression or a resource for liberation. On one hand, there is the so-called royal trend in which religion is being systematically used to legitimate the Israelite ruling class, as opposed to the prophetic trend which tends to appeal to the covenant tradition to promote the causes of the poor and the marginalized. On the other hand, there is Mosaic trend which, taking its cue from the story of God's appointment of Moses to liberate the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, suggests that God is the God of the poor and the downtrodden." Both traditions exist side by side in the Hebrew Bible. Therefore, as we read the Bible we should not forget the fact that it does not have a single message. Consequently, we are thus called upon to make some choices between different biblical messages, because we simply cannot read the Bible as if it has the same message, representing one trend. Rather, because there are contradictory messages, representing different theological trends in the Bible, we must make up our minds regarding which aspects of its traditions or messages we want to appeal to in order to authorize our theological propositions. Put somewhat differently, while the Bible is there for us as Christians to use, we have to recognize the fact that the rich and powerful read different messages from the Bible, messages that differ from those which are read by the oppressed groups. Put more crudely, different people read the Bible using different social lenses, depending on their "locus" in society. Therefore, it should not surprise us that the dominant groups would most likely appeal to and find in the Bible messages that favour them, while the dominated groups appeal to different texts which support the cause of their own struggle for liberation.

5. THE CHURCH'S PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POWERFUL

In view of the above, it became natural that, when Christian religion became the official religion during the time of Constantine, religious authorities, as part of the dominant class, tended to side with the ruling elites. It was in response to the Church's attempted theological legitimation of the privileges of the dominant few at the expense of

the dominated masses that, as far back as the Middle Ages, we have instances of some Christians who banded together to form a sectarian group to revolt against the social and economic deprivation of their group in society. This tradition of revolt against unjust material relations and their theological justification surfaced prominently in the sixteenth century under the leadership of Thomas Muntzer.¹² Furthermore, prior to the Reformation the urban classes were against the religion of Rome and the feudal social order that it sanctioned.¹³ It were these underprivileged groups that supported Luther and other Reformers largely for economic reasons, because they had hoped that the new religion would overthrow the unequal material relationships. This is evident from the fact that as soon as it became clear that the Reformation of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin was for the kings, princes, and the middle-class and not for the underdogs, new religious splinter groups emerged to champion the Reformation of the working classes, the disinherited, economically poor and oppressed. Therefore since the sixteenth century we have had, for instance, in England denominations of the poor and the socially deprived classes such as the Baptists, Quakers, Methodists, Salvation Army, Jehovah's Witnesses et cetera.¹⁴ It was therefore logical during the French revolution that both the clergy and ruling class would be roundly condemned as oppressors, because the oppressed masses were keenly aware that the church leadership had for too long taken a preferential option for the mighty and powerful.

Despite the protest of the oppressed groups against the misuse of religion in support of the ruling elite, the tension between theological trends which support the dominant classes and those support the struggle of the dominated classes has continued through the history of the church. It is not surprising therefore that during the nineteenth century missionary evangelizing activities went hand in glove with the colonization of Africa by Western countries. It was during this period that a colonial theology of oppression was developed to give religious sanction for the sociopolitical and economic bondage to which the people of colour were subjected by the Western Christian empires. There are two distinguishing features of this colonial theology. First, it teaches the oppressed people about an authoritarian God, who, as the Supreme Being in the universe, establishes classes in every society. Thus this God insists that there will always be the rich and poor in every society, because this God accepts poverty as part of the divine will for the underdogs, especially the people of colour, while wealth is given to the mighty and powerful who happen to be white Christians.

Second, it spiritualizes the gospel and emphasizes a sharp separation between the bodily and spiritual needs of the oppressed people. Hence, this colonial theology permitted the missionary fervour

of saving "individual souls" and the continued support of European subjugation of the people of colour as well as the plundering and expropriation of their land and mineral resources to exist side by side. This theology taught both the imperial oppressor and oppressed that life on earth, especially for the people of colour, was a preparation for the life hereafter. Refusing to focus concretely on what is wrong in the sociopolitical and economic relationships missionary theology, at the service of imperial policies, taught the oppressed people about the individualistic sins of the heart, the inevitable rottenness of human life in our fallen world, and human hopelessness in the face of sin — all of which made human brotherhood and sisterhood, even among those who call themselves Christians, unrealizable on this side of the grave. Not surprisingly, white missionaries, who seem to have been more impressed by the spiritual sins or vices to which African "savages" had succumbed rather than by the social evils under which they were subjected to by colonialists, saw as part of their duty to warn the oppressed against worldly desires of comfort, political freedom, self-fulfillment and economic equality with their white masters.

6. THE CONTRIBUTION OF AFRICAN ANTHROPOLOGY TO CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

In the light of this reductionism of colonial theology, which tends to limit the application and relevance of the gospel to the so-called individual or spiritual sphere and claims that individuals could be saved in the midst of broken human relationships and socio-economic injustices in which the dominant West allows the African people to waste away under the crushing burden of oppression and exploitation, I believe that African theologians have a contribution to make by drawing from the insights of the rich African anthropology. It is common knowledge that African anthropology, as opposed to the otherworldly Christianity to which our people were converted, is human-centred and socially oriented. Accordingly, individuals were continually reminded that a fulfilling life cannot be lived in isolation from their human fellows. Rather life is possible only in communal relationships in which individuals try to strike balance between the private life and the social life, thus maintaining the network of relationships with their fellows so that every person is provided with a space to breathe and live a meaningful life. This human-centred anthropology is best expressed in Nothern Sotho, when it is said: *Motho ke motho ka batho*, which means a human being is human only because of others, with others and for others. Hence it was important to teach people to avoid dehumanizing and bad relationships, by refraining from activities that are injurious to our human fellows or threaten to undermine the social fibre and stability of the community.

The interesting aspect of this African anthropology, in my view, lies in its understanding of sin and evil which are believed to manifest themselves in the human attempt to destroy, to diminish and threaten the life of the individual of our human fellows. In other words, sin was not understood primarily as a problem between the individual and God, a problem that could be solved if the sinner makes things right with God and yet is allowed to continue to oppress one's fellow human beings and thereby destroy their lives. Rather sin and evil were measured in terms of the life of individual human beings who suffer injustice, oppression, and destruction at the hands of their human fellows. Put somewhat differently, sin and evil were understood more in terms of the breach of loving relationships between human beings. Thus sin and evil manifest themselves in the lack of love in interpersonal relationships, through the state of absence of brotherhood and sisterhood. This is because sin and evil are understood more in terms of the violence and destruction that people do to or perpetuate against one another than in terms of the human transgression of the divine law against God. For Africans were smart to know that in the final analysis it is not the Almighty, self-sufficient God who suffers injustice at the hands of human exploiters of their fellows. Rather human beings are the ones who suffer evil in the social sphere. However, because human beings suffer evil at the hands of their human fellows, God who is the Creator of all human beings is also offended by the deeds of those who perpetrate evil in society. For Africans, therefore, the primary issue was a social one, namely, how do we, as individuals and communities, live with one another? In this African anthropological perspective, it is impossible to escape the consequences of one's actions in relation to our neighbours, by simply running to a church to confess one's sins so that the priest could pronounce absolution in order to assure the evil doer that things are fine before God. No, the issue was taken a bit further when the sinful person was forced to come to terms with the consequences of his or her actions by being called upon to pay reparations for the wrongs he or she had done to his or her fellows.

This African anthropological perspective on sin and evil has much to teach Christians and can help us better understand some aspects of sin in the Bible. For as I have pointed out earlier on, most of Western theology has not fully understood the problem of sin because their tendency to define sin in the light of Genesis 3, thereby losing sight of the fact that Genesis 4 has also to be taken into account in one's understanding of sin. Indeed, any attempt to understand sin exclusively in terms of its vertical or horizontal dimensions can only result in a distorted notion of sin. For as African anthropology reminds us, it is impossible to relate to God alone at the exclusion of our fellow human beings. For the divine and human realities are

interrelated. This is confirmed by the central biblical message which clearly teaches us that sin is both a vertical and horizontal reality. It is for this reason that when Jesus was asked: "What is the great commandment in the law?" he flatly refused to be drawn into some kind of theological reductionism that restricts the only to the human condition before the righteous God. Rather Jesus reminded his listeners that God's law has two dimensions: The first is that we must love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind. The second, as important as the first, is to love our human fellows as ourselves.¹⁵ Jesus was thus restating the summary of God's law as set out in the Torah.¹⁶ God's law, Jesus reminded his listeners, intends to regulate the multiple network of relationships into which all human beings find themselves between God and human beings, and among human beings themselves. In other words, Jesus reminded his listeners that they do not have to choose between faith and ethic because a healthy relationship among human beings and between human beings and God are both necessary, as Genesis 3 and Genesis 4 clearly points out.

Similarly, by focusing on the centrality of these relationships, African anthropology has a contribution to make to Christian theology, by reminding theologians, that any good theology should make the intrinsic link between right believing and right doing — none of which can stand on its own without the other. For as Jesus reminded his religious contemporaries right belief (orthodoxy) and right doing (orthopraxis) belong together; both are equally important tests of the authenticity and integrity of any true religion and piety. Here African anthropology and central biblical message converge in teaching us that faith without good works is dead.

In conclusion, it seems to me that, despite the fact there are aspects in African culture and religion which we must identify as oppressive, there is also a lot that we, as African Christians, can use to highlight certain passages in the Scripture and thereby enrich Christian Theology.

1. John Mbiti, "An African Views American Black Theology" in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, Gayraud S Wilmore and James H. Cone (eds.), Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979, pp.477-482.
2. Desmond M Tutu, *ibid.*, pp. 483-491.
3. Cited in Per Frostin in *Liberation Theology in Tanzania and South Africa*, Lund: Lund University Press, 1988, p.15. Also see Frostin, *ibid.*, p.205 (footnote 72).
4. Simon S Maimela, "Salvation in African Traditional Religions" in *Missionalia* 13:2, August 1985, pp. 64-65.

5. Ibid., pp. 71-73.
6. 1 Kings 21:1-28.
7. Mat. 5:21-48.
8. Gal. 3:26-28. Also see Col. 3:11; Eph. 2:11-22.
9. Lk. 4: 16-21.) Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-5:10; 6:1-7.
10. Walter Brueggemann, "Trajectories in Old Testament Literature and the Sociology of Ancient Israel" in *The Bible and Liberation: Politics and Social Hermeneutics*, Maryknoll:Orbis 1983, p. 313.
11. H R Niebuhr, *The Social sources of Denominationalism*, New York: Meridian, 1965, pp. 33-59.
12. Mat. 22:36-40; Mk. 12:28-31.
13. Dt. 6:5, 10:12; Lv. 19:11-18.