

**A comparison between Christian and African traditional  
paradigms of reconciliation and how they could  
dialogue for the benefit of South African society**

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## **Abstract**

**This dissertation seeks to compare paradigms of reconciliation in African tradition (including African indigenous religion and culture) and Christianity, in order to enhance the reconciliation process in South Africa. The aim is to enable and promote dialogue between African tradition and Christian tradition, with special reference to the reconciliation paradigms they offer. In order to accomplish this, the first step taken is to establish what African tradition has to offer in terms of reconciliation resources. African traditional religion, philosophy and anthropology are identified as providing a conceptual basis for reconciliation. Certain African traditional legal resources as well as African indigenous ritual resources are also considered able to contribute to social reconciliation. The next step in the dissertation is to establish what the Christian faith tradition has to offer in terms of reconciliation paradigms. The following resources available to, and stemming from, Christianity are discussed: reconciliation in the Bible; the narrative of the cross and the resurrection; the inter-linked concepts of sin, repentance and forgiveness; the church as reconciling community and institution. After having elaborated on certain reconciliation paradigms lodged in both African tradition and Christianity, the next step is to explore ways in which these paradigms interact. In some respects, they are found to clash and disagree because of their differences and the discontinuities between them. Yet in significant ways they indeed connect to and complement each other. This dissertation seeks to highlight points of agreement and connection between the paradigms of reconciliation provided by African tradition and Christian tradition. Moreover, it seeks to illustrate that the two cultural and religious traditions could interact fruitfully for the benefit of South African society. A concrete example of such positive interaction and mutual enrichment is brought forward, viz. a “new” ritual of reconciliation that combines resources from both traditions.**

## Declaration

I hereby declare that this whole dissertation is my own original work, unless specifically indicated to the contrary in the text. I further declare that this dissertation has not been submitted for a degree in any other University.

Signed: Nolte-Schamm  
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Date: 2/3/2006

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I would like to draw the reader's attention to two things:

- (1) I try to avoid sexist language in my writing. Therefore, when quoting scholars who use, for example, the terms "man" or "mankind" instead of "human being" or "humankind", I have indicated my disapproval of this by inserting a "(sic)".
- (2) When quoting people whom I have interviewed, the reference includes the name of the interviewee and the date of the interview, e.g. "(Koka 07.07.2004)" or "(Ralushai 31.08.2004)".

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## 0. Introduction

### 0.1 The hypotheses, aim and objectives of this study

In this dissertation, my aim is to compare ways in which African tradition<sup>1</sup> and Christianity can dialogue with reference to notions of reconciliation, with the view of finding possible points of connection that are useful for present-day South African society in its quest for social reconciliation.

The objectives can be formulated in the following way: (1) What African tradition has to offer for social reconciliation. (2) What the Christian faith has to offer for social reconciliation. (3) Ways in which the two religious traditions and the cultures they represent overlap and possibly interact with reference to their understandings of reconciliation. (4) Ways in which the two cultural and religious traditions might interact for the benefit of reconciliation in South African society.

There are two main hypotheses underlying this study. First, that African tradition and Christianity both have resources of reconciliation to offer. Second, that African tradition and Christianity can dialogue efficaciously with reference to reconciliation in South Africa. It will be my purpose to provide evidence that supports these hypotheses.

How can African tradition and the Christian faith tradition helpfully inform the social reconciliation debate in South Africa? This is the core question I wish to address. Linked to this key problem are a number of sub-problems which need to be addressed in order to achieve a coherent and structured argument in the elucidation of the main problem: (1) What does African tradition have to offer to social reconciliation in South Africa? (2) What does the Christian faith tradition have to offer to social reconciliation in South Africa? (3) What are dissimilarities or points of conflict or opposition between African tradition and Christian tradition in terms of their reconciliation paradigms? (4) What are points of contact or areas of complementarity between African tradition and Christian tradition in terms of their reconciliation paradigms? And (5) What could be an example of integrative and fruitful dialogue between African tradition and Christian tradition for reconciliation in South Africa?

In order to find a logical opening to the main problem, a few preliminary problems must be tackled, which will provide the theoretical foundation for the arguments of this dissertation. These include (a) The nature of social reconciliation. (b) Why the topic *social reconciliation in South Africa* has been chosen. (c) Why social reconciliation in *African tradition* and *Christian tradition* has been chosen. Finally, (d) Problems and issues in the dialogue between African tradition and Christian tradition. For example, how does dialogue work, how has it worked in the past? What if the traditions in question are unequal dialogue partners? What about dialogue already begun? Why is there a need for dialogue?

### 0.2 Outline of the study

In what follows, I will sketch the outline of the dissertation, keeping in mind the aim, objectives, hypotheses, as well as the formulation of the key problem and its sub-problems mentioned in section 0.1. In this rudimentary introduction, I do not yet refer to or cite any scholars or their works. The necessary references and citations will be provided as the argument unfolds, beginning in section 1.1.

The first task will be to address the preliminary problem of what is meant by social reconciliation. Reconciliation is a word that is widely used in South Africa. It can mean many different things, and indeed its meaning is contested. It will be the task of the

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term "tradition", rather than the term "religion", because the latter is too narrow for the purposes of this dissertation. The category "African tradition" is broader and encompasses the inter-related yet distinct fields of African religion, spirituality, philosophy and anthropology, as well as African cultural legal and ritual practices. All of these aspects of African tradition will be considered in chapter 2.

first section (1.1) to identify different understandings and definitions of reconciliation that are currently in debate, as well as highlight some of the problems associated with the term. Through critical evaluation of these perspectives, and drawing from some of them, I will propose my own understanding of reconciliation and its implications. This definition or view of reconciliation will be implied throughout the dissertation when the terms “social reconciliation” or “reconciliation” are used. As a theologian and scholar of religion, I see my task as asserting that aspect of social reconciliation, which, for want of a better term, could be called the “spiritual” or religious dimension.<sup>2</sup>

The second preliminary question is: why have I chosen the topic *social reconciliation in South Africa*? What is the motivation for exploring this theme? After having argued what my view of reconciliation is, I will attempt to show in section 1.2 why it is important in South Africa to address the issue of social reconciliation.

The TRC was probably the most profound and overt sign that South Africans both need and desire social reconciliation. It is my opinion that the TRC succeeded in many significant ways to begin the journey of reconciliation among the people of South Africa. The TRC was an example of the attempt to heal a nation’s past, deal with its memories, and move on into a reconstructed future. I will argue that the TRC was partially successful in beginning the task of constructing a collective memory in and for South Africa. For this it must be lauded. However, the TRC also had its shortcomings and failures, and I will outline those that seem most obvious. The aim of this section will not simply be to show the strengths and limitations of the TRC, but to analyse what can and needs to happen in its aftermath. The TRC was the beginning of a process which needs to continue in South Africa. The work of the TRC, and other reconciliation initiatives needs to be developed, expanded, and enhanced. There is a need to provide other, perhaps more holistic and enhanced, paradigms for the process of social reconciliation in the torn and broken context of South Africa. This dissertation seeks to provide one possible way forward from the TRC endeavour. This way forward includes identifying resources from two traditions – the African and the Christian – and allowing them to dialogue with one another.

Connected to the preceding one is the next preliminary problem that has to be addressed. Why the interest in social reconciliation in *African tradition and Christian tradition*? If social reconciliation is what needs to be achieved in South Africa, the next logical step would be to consider how this can be done. In section 1.3 I explain that South Africa is a deeply religious society in which religious symbols, paradigms and practices play a profound role in the every-day life experiences of its people. Religious paradigms can be strong forces in societal transformation and/or stabilisation processes. South Africa has many different religious resources to tap into for this endeavour, which may have a great deal to offer in terms of guiding South Africans on the path toward social reconciliation.

Perhaps the two most prevalent religious traditions operating in South African society are the African tradition and religions and the Christian religious tradition.<sup>3</sup> The former have often been neglected or ignored in academic discourse concerning social

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<sup>2</sup> I will elaborate what I mean by the “spiritual” or religious dimension of reconciliation in section 1.1.3.

<sup>3</sup> I would like to acknowledge that I am aware of the dangers involved in making sweeping statements about traditions that are not, in themselves, homogenous and coherent. Of course, African tradition and Christian tradition both are ambiguous entities and cannot be assumed to mean only one thing. They are traditions with diverse, sometimes even opposite, tendencies and trends lodged within themselves. Indeed, I am aware that some scholars disparage a generic use of the terms “African tradition” and “Christian tradition”, because it suggests an essentialist position concerning these categories. The reasons why I have adopted an essentialist stance will be elaborated in section 1.5 and in chapters 2 and 3 respectively. Nonetheless, my argument will not be based on purely generic/essentialist assumptions, but will also make use of specific (i.e. non-generic) examples and case studies. For African tradition, the most elaborate non-generic example that will be used is that of a particular ritual. For Christian tradition, I will often highlight a particularly Lutheran perspective.

issues, and therefore warrant deeper investigation and study. Since African tradition has usually been on the receiving end of social, cultural and religious domination, it is a delicate task to uncover its hidden stories, and hear its silenced voices. This is why it is important to make an inquiry into this living tradition which shapes the lives of millions of South Africans. Christianity also enjoys extensive observance in South Africa, which is why it is a worthy partner in the endeavour for reconciliation. As a Christian theologian it is ultimately a matter of authenticity and conscience that I address the social problems of my country in terms with which I am familiar and in which I have my training – i.e. in Christian theology.

Before launching into the discussion of the key problem and its sub-problems, it is necessary to raise further preliminary questions surrounding the problem of *dialogue* between African tradition and Christian tradition. Sections 1.4 and 1.5 will be devoted to this topic. In 1.4 some approaches to inter-religious dialogue will be elaborated, i.e. “exclusivism”, “inclusivism” and “pluralism”. Specifically Lutheran approaches to inter-religious dialogue will also be addressed. It will be shown that religious exclusivism provides no basis at all for authentic dialogue. Inclusivism, while displaying some merits that have to be mentioned, is also a rather shaky foundation for dialogue between religious traditions. Pluralism, as the third option, can take many forms. In my discussion of it I will seek to show that some of these forms may seem helpful, but bear inherent shortcomings and possible dangers. Nevertheless, given the circumstances prevailing in South Africa, pluralism as proposed by certain scholars, seems the most viable option to choose for inter-religious dialogue. I therefore have adopted a pluralistic approach and thus conclude this section by summarising the theoretical framework and motivation for dialogue between African tradition and religion and Christian tradition.

Dialogue implies that both partners are seen and treated as entities in their own right, which means that African tradition and Christian tradition each enjoy the full rights and duties attached to their separate identities. The next question related to the problem of *dialogue*, discussed in section 1.5, involves the inequality of the dialogue partners, and, linked to that, the need for dialogue despite observed disparity. For a number of reasons, the two dialogue partners I propose – African and Christian tradition – are not “equal”. These inequalities must be highlighted in order to evaluate whether dialogue is even possible. One of these “inequalities” is related to the different worldviews that each of the partners represent. African tradition functions according to a specific cosmology, epistemology and ontology, which, it can be argued, are fundamentally different from the Christian traditions of today. The core disparity is that African tradition has in many ways a pre-modern frame of reference, while Christianity has a modern frame of reference. The cosmological, epistemological and ontological bases of how these religious and cultural traditions exist and function in today’s world is arguably different. Some would say it is a difference that cannot be bridged, which would translate to the assertion that dialogue cannot really occur in any meaningful fashion. It will be shown that despite the “worldview inequalities” that will be elucidated, dialogue is nevertheless possible and necessary.

An inherent characteristic of modern culture is its hegemony. As Christianity took on the forms and modes of modernity, it became itself a hegemonic force, as can be seen from many scholars’ work on colonial times and missions. Christianity, in adopting the cosmological and epistemological assumptions of modernity (or, rather, in being adopted by modernity), became a tradition which represented mastery and domination; it became a system of beliefs, thoughts and actions which subjugated other systems of belief, thoughts and actions.<sup>4</sup> In Africa, the religious and cultural system which became the object of such subjugation was that of the indigenous people, i.e. African tradition, culture and religion, as it was known. Christianity viewed African traditional culture and

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<sup>4</sup> This will be demonstrated in section 1.5.

its inherent religion as something to be defeated and crushed. Given this tragic history, one ought to concede without doubt that African tradition and Christian tradition are by no means equal dialogue partners – or at least have not been so far in the formal debate. Christianity has come to the “dialogue table”, if it can be called such, as an aggressor, a powerful and ruthless counterpart to African tradition. The risks and dangers of which the past warns us ought not to be the reason for not dialoguing, but ought rather to underscore the necessity for genuine dialogue.

Another preliminary inquiry concerning the problem of dialogue between African tradition and Christian tradition has to do with the realisation that dialogue between these partners has already begun, and indeed is already in full force. Dialogue is not a “new” concept, but is already practised on different levels and under different rubrics. Since the Christian traditions met the African traditions in the wake of the colonial era, much interaction has already occurred, and many approaches as to how the two traditions relate have been devised. African theologies and African Initiated Churches (AICs) indicate that Africa is already in the throes of dialogue between African tradition and Christian tradition. Through mentioning the examples of African theologies and AICs, I wish to locate my own work within the already-begun tradition of dialogue between African culture and religion and modern Christianity. My endeavour is not “new”, although the particular lens through which I want to observe the dialogue is specific, i.e. the lens of social reconciliation. I argue that the continuation and deepening of the dialogue between African tradition and Christianity in this field is a matter of agency and identity.

The above considerations are all part of the preliminary problems which have to be looked at before embarking on the journey on which this thesis seeks to travel – finding ways in which African tradition and the Christian faith tradition can helpfully inform the social reconciliation debate in South Africa. This, as stated above, is the main problem that will be addressed in the present study. In moving towards a solution of this problem, several steps have to be taken. These steps will be attempted in the form of sub-questions or sub-problems (as mentioned in 0.1).

The first question that must be posed in order to achieve an answer to the main problem is: What does African tradition have to offer to social reconciliation in South Africa? Answering this question is the task of chapter 2. Above I posited my first hypothesis underlying this research as, “African Tradition and Christianity both have paradigms of reconciliation to offer.” I launch this investigation under the premise that African tradition indeed has a repertoire of options for sponsoring social reconciliation.

Before elaborating on those elements which positively contribute (or *could* positively contribute) to social reconciliation in South Africa, in section 2.1 I will briefly sketch the relative difficulty of researching African tradition, religion and culture. Unlike Christianity, where literature abounds, African tradition has fewer literary resources to offer. This creates a methodological problem, i.e. how am I to find the information I need to answer the question of what African tradition can offer social reconciliation? What resources are available and how do I access them? I have found that my methodology to finding information on African tradition has been multifarious, i.e. I have needed to resort to many different ways of finding information. Besides through extensive literature research (mainly of theological, ethnographic, sociological and historical sources), the other method of attaining knowledge was through narrative – both stories spoken by people or embodied in rituals, customs, and behaviour. I was able to draw some valuable insights from interviews, formal and informal conversations, as well as from attending some ceremonies and observing certain practices.

What, then, are the offerings African tradition can bring to the table of social reconciliation in South Africa? Firstly, in section 2.2, I explicate elements in African religion and spirituality, African philosophy and African anthropology and self-consciousness that can be seen as promoting social reconciliation. For example, there is the philosophy of *Ubuntu/Botho*, as well as other elements of an indigenous African view

of the human person that I argue are positive offerings. Part of African anthropology is indigenous African morality and ethics, which I will also describe in this section. Underlying these rudiments of African tradition is a worldview which is inherently holistic, and therefore concerned with the reconciliation of all that is, a worldview that focuses on the interconnection of reality, and the harmonious interaction of the forces of the universe. This is a spiritual or religious conception of reality, which I argue is consistent with social reconciliation. The very cosmology that traditional Africans espouse, as well as the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of this cosmology, provides some useful building blocks, which could pave the way for a reconciled South Africa.

After charting some of the fundamentals of an African worldview and spirituality, I turn my focus on two forms of practice which flow from an African worldview and manifest it profoundly, namely legal institutions and ritual. In section 2.3 I will argue that indigenous legal institutions and procedures as found in African tradition have much to present that can be useful for social reconciliation in South Africa. In describing a number of legal procedures and processes used in indigenous African communities (and the institutions attached to these), I seek to exhibit tendencies in African traditional jurisdiction that are essentially reconciliatory. Many of these juridical procedures take on a ritual character. This leads me to the next point to be discussed in chapter 2.

Section 2.4 revolves around the topic of ritual. Ritual is possibly the most profound and original paradigm for reconciliatory practice African tradition has to offer. I have drawn together a number of rituals of indigenous origin which are practised in Africa, which could for the purpose of this study be categorised as reconciliation rituals. They are often not called as such by the communities who practise them. Rather, names given for the rituals frequently have metaphorical and linguistically symbolic origins, and would more likely be deemed rituals of cleansing or purification, cooling, healing, peacemaking, or such like. It is in these rituals, rites, ceremonies and symbolic practices that I have identified the most profound contribution African tradition can make to social reconciliation. Using the tools of ritual theory and analysis, I portray some of the most impressive of these rituals.

I do not purport to offer an exhaustive list of African traditional rites of reconciliation, but only a small glimpse of the plethora of reconciliatory rituals that exist. Also, my examples are gleaned from various parts of Africa, although my focus is on indigenous rituals practised in South Africa. What I have found is that there are symbols, symbolic actions and beliefs underlying the rituals that are common to most of the African traditions observed. These commonalities seem to indicate that some generalisations may be made with reference to "African traditional ritual practice of reconciliation". I will indeed outline some of the features which I consider to be widespread and therefore of particular significance for Africans. Some such general characteristics include, for example, the symbolic use of water, ash, fire or blood, as well as the ritual invocation of the ancestors.

The final step in this chapter on reconciliation paradigms in African tradition will be an in-depth analysis of one particular reconciliation ritual known as *Cleansing the chest of grudges* (*Ukukhumelana Umlotha/ Tlhapiso ya Dikgaba*).<sup>5</sup> An investigation of this ritual, using the methodological tools of ritual theory and theological hermeneutics, will firstly seek to highlight the main characteristics and features of an African traditional ritual of reconciliation. In other words, it will show how some particularities of these rituals may become projected onto a larger canvass into more general conclusions about reconciliation rituals in African tradition, as indicated in the preceding paragraph. Secondly, I use the *Cleansing the chest of grudges* ritual as the prime example for making

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<sup>5</sup> This ritual is definitely employed by the Zulu people, but variations of it seem also to be used by other Southern African ethnic groups.

connections between African traditional and Christian paradigms of reconciliation. (This second aspect of the analysis will be drawn to its conclusions in chapters 4 and 5.)

The next sub-problem is formulated as: what does Christian faith have to offer to social reconciliation in South Africa? Chapter 3 seeks to provide answers to this question. Again, I draw the reader's attention to my first hypothesis underlying this research, viz. "African Tradition and Christianity both have paradigms of reconciliation to offer." I therefore commence this part of the inquiry on the premise that the Christian tradition indeed has a repertoire of options for sponsoring social reconciliation. Surely, it would be a matter of writing many volumes if one were to articulate all the resources the Christian faith has to offer. Christian theologies, spiritualities, church communities and institutions in all their diversity certainly have an overabundance of capital to invest in this endeavour. It is not the aim of this study to investigate all of this capital in minute detail. Rather, I seek to highlight a number of key elements on offer from certain Christian traditions that I consider to be particularly efficacious.

Firstly, in section 3.1 I consider what most Christians would deem the basis of their faith – Scripture. I analyse the meaning and conception of "reconciliation" in terms of the Old and New Testaments, in view of illustrating both the general tendencies and the diverse ambiguities of the Scriptural notion(s) of reconciliation. My motive for deliberating the Bible is simply that it is regarded as the central guide of faith for many Christians, including those of my own denomination. Although I am not a Biblical scholar, any reflection on Christian paradigms of reconciliation that excludes the Biblical witness would be considered foundationless and vague theological conjecture. Indeed, as will be shown, the Biblical scriptures have some thought-provoking teachings and stories that may prove helpful as resources for social reconciliation.

The next "resource" Christian tradition has to offer flows from the first. It is, for Christians, the most elementary story witnessed to in Scripture – the narrative of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It will be argued in section 3.2 that a contextual theology of the cross and the resurrection, which inevitably implies a hidden God, is possibly the most profound paradigm Christian tradition has to offer to a South Africa seeking reconciliation. It provides a strong basis for social reconciliation through its message of overcoming evil of the past, being inclusive rather than separating, and fostering action and hope rather than apathy and pessimism. A theology of the cross has the potency to foster and shape a community that attempts to come to terms with its past of turmoil and trauma, and searches for ways to build a future of hope and wholeness, unity and peace. Being a Lutheran, I here glean from my denominational tradition which seeks to uphold the hermeneutics of the *theologia crucis*, as conceived first by the apostle Paul and then elaborated by Martin Luther.

Besides the Biblical witness and the theology of the cross, the third resource I will discuss is theological discourse surrounding sin, repentance and confession. It is the argument of section 3.3 that the three inter-connected concepts of sin, repentance and forgiveness are key for a Christian understanding and praxis of reconciliation. These three motifs, seen as distinct and yet forming a tightly-knit unit, are central to the Christian tradition. The doctrine of sin is valuable because it takes seriously the reality of structural and social injustice, and human beings' responsibility and culpability in it. Repentance is a significant notion because it opens up possibilities for transformation, new beginnings and actions of penance. It establishes confidence and trust which may have been lost, and seeks to make amends for sins in concrete ways. The concept of forgiveness is essential, because it allows both the forgiver(s) and the forgiven to be free from the evil which holds them captive, and enables both parties to start afresh with one another, and re-build the broken relationship between them in a spirit of hope and togetherness.

Thus far, I would have highlighted aspects of Biblical scholarship (in focussing on Scriptural resources), aspects of a hermeneutical-theological approach (in focussing on the

theology of the cross), as well as doctrinal-theological aspects (involving teachings on sin, repentance and forgiveness). In the final section of this chapter, in section 3.4, my concentration will be on ecclesiological aspects of the Christian tradition that are potentially helpful for reconciliation. Here, the assertion is that the Christian church is, or can be, a reconciling community and institution. For example, through its proclamation, celebration, liturgy and spirituality, and its practice of Communion, it can be a manifestation of reconciled existence, and promote this kind of being in the world. It is beyond the scope of this study to elaborate *all* the resources that the church has to offer. Therefore I limit my study to the few that I consider to be especially significant.

It is certainly true that the positive resources in the Christian tradition have been and can be misused and perverted, thereby effecting opposite results to those desired (i.e. disharmony and hostility). There can be and are misuses – even abuses – of Scripture, the theology of the cross, teachings on sin, repentance and forgiveness, and the practices of the church.<sup>6</sup> But the risk of possible misuse of these resources ought not to disqualify our use of them. Applied responsibly and correctly, they could amount to bold and effective contributions to social reconciliation in South Africa.

After having demonstrated some of the resources presented by African tradition (chapter 2) and Christian tradition (chapter 3), it becomes necessary to evaluate these in terms of their ability to promote dialogue between the African and Christian traditions. Therefore, the third and fourth sub-problems must be addressed at this juncture: What are dissimilarities or points of conflict or opposition between African tradition and Christian tradition in terms of their reconciliation paradigms? And, what are affinities, points of contact or areas of complementarity between these traditions in terms of their understanding of reconciliation?

As the main objectives of this study suggest, my focus is not to highlight dissimilarities and incongruence between reconciliation paradigms in African tradition and Christian tradition. Nonetheless, it is important for the sake of clarity and integrity to at least note those aspects of each of the traditions in question that seem to be in opposition to each other. In some cases it is debatable whether apparent disagreements or disparities are indeed that. However, in chapter 4 I will ascertain in broad strokes which elements of African tradition and Christian tradition in my opinion seem to be in contradiction or conflict, and which are therefore not necessarily relevant for the dialogue on social reconciliation. I merely mention them in order not to evoke the impression that dialogue between African tradition and Christian tradition with regard to social reconciliation is unproblematic and simple. Chapter 4 will firstly discuss general differences between the two traditions (in section 4.1), and secondly consider more specifically aspects of the ritual of *Cleansing the chest of grudges* that conflict with Christian tradition (in section 4.2).

The second of the two hypotheses on which this research is based states: “African tradition and Christianity can dialogue helpfully with reference to reconciliation in South Africa.” Therefore, it is imperative to pinpoint those resources on both sides that have the potential to dialogue favourably for the advancement of social reconciliation in South Africa, a task which is undertaken in chapter 5. First, in section 5.1, I seek to identify some of the basic affinities, i.e. elements shared or similar in both traditions, or those elements by which the traditions can complement each other, such as a spiritual approach to life, belief in God, the sanctity and inherent dignity of human life, the importance of community and participation, the importance of reconciliation, rituals and ceremonies as a sacramental approach to life, and the importance of narrative and the past. It will be noted that most of these mentioned points of contact are not paradigms of reconciliation *per se*, but are underlying features of both traditions that provide fertile soil for reconciliation to grow. Section 5.2 will mention some concrete examples of dialogue between African and Christian reconciliation paradigms.

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<sup>6</sup> I will refer to some possible abuses of the Christian resources in the relevant sections.

The last sub-problem that remains to be addressed is: what could be an example of integrative and fruitful dialogue between African tradition and Christian tradition for reconciliation in South Africa? The final step in this dissertation will be to draw together all theoretical conclusions to propose a concrete example of useful dialogue between African tradition and Christian tradition. In preparation for this, I will show that there are elements of concrete affinity and complementarity between a particular African traditional resource, viz. the *Cleansing the chest of grudges* ritual, and Christian resources that aim at reconciliation (in section 5.3). I will highlight in what ways the constituents of the African reconciliation ritual may connect to, correspond to, complement or be complemented by certain Christian paradigms.

In section 5.4, as a tentative and exploratory exercise, I devise a ritual which draws both from the ritual of *Cleansing the chest of grudges* and from elements of Christian ritual practice, particularly practices surrounding Ash Wednesday. In doing this, I wish to make a concrete suggestion for a shared or joint reconciliatory practice. This “new” ritual, which I call “Ritual of the ash”, may become but one creative example of African tradition and Christianity working together in faith and practice to promote social reconciliation in a country still burdened with hostility and division. Finally, in section 5.5, I summarise once again why scholarship such as is engendered in this dissertation could be of benefit for society.

In this introductory outline, I have delineated the form and direction of the argument underlying this dissertation. Through the engagement of the named preliminary problems as well as the sub-problems, I attempt to find a solution to the enquiry on how African tradition and the Christian faith tradition can helpfully inform the social reconciliation debate in South Africa. I adhere to the stated objectives of establishing what African tradition and Christian tradition have to offer in terms of paradigms of reconciliation, exploring ways in which the two sets of paradigms overlap and possibly interact, and illustrating ways in which the two might interact for the benefit of South African society. The aim – to compare ways in which African tradition and Christianity can dialogue with reference to reconciliation paradigms, with the view of finding possible points of connection that are useful for present-day South African society in its quest for social reconciliation – will be met, albeit in a limited and tentative fashion. As the reader continues perusing this dissertation, I hope s/he will be able to pronounce it as living up to the standard of its title, *A comparison between Christian and African traditional paradigms of reconciliation and how they could dialogue for the benefit of South African society*. Needless to say, the work that is commenced in this study is far from complete. It is my hope and wish that further serious theological (and other) scrutiny and analysis are applied to the topic at hand, in order that it may come to fruition, i.e. show the way to genuine and lasting reconciliation between South Africa’s peoples.



# 1. Addressing preliminary problems

## 1.1 Defining Reconciliation in the South African context

### 1.1.1 "Reconciliation" – a problematic term

It must be emphasised from the onset that there have been and are many different definitions or understandings of the term "social reconciliation". The task of this chapter is to clarify the intended meaning of this term, without necessarily assuming all of the meanings and connotations that have been attached to it in the course of South Africa's history.

For the sake of clarifying the historical and theological context of South Africa in its diversity and ambiguity, I shall briefly outline some findings of the study of Thomas Kaiser on the social reconciliation debate in South Africa (1996). In his helpful overview he traces the various views and conceptions of reconciliation that have been and are being held by different South African persons and institutions which have influenced South Africans' views on reconciliation.

Kaiser deliberates the concept of reconciliation held by the SACC, especially between the 1960s and 1980s (1996:63).<sup>7</sup> He uses Desmond Tutu as a key proponent of this line of thought (:67). According to Kaiser, Tutu (and by implication the SACC) holds that reconciliation represents the core of the Christian gospel. It is also the centre of Tutu's theology. Reconciliation means Jesus has come to re-establish friendship and community between humanity and God, between human beings, and between humankind and the rest of creation. Jesus has been sent into the world in order to reunite it. Wherever there is disunity, discord or tension, he creates the opposite (:70).

Beyers Naude, another of Kaiser's chosen SACC representatives (1996:73)<sup>8</sup>, underlines this view by maintaining that the starting point for inter-human reconciliation is the reconciliatory act of Jesus Christ (:78). A further proponent of the SACC notion, Wolfram Kistner, insists that God has already created reconciliation (:81). Everyone is already part of God's reconciliation, regardless of whether they are aware of it or not. This reconciliation was achieved in defiance of the forces of destruction. It is the guiding principle (*Richtschnur*) for all attempts to reach reconciliation between people (:85). Furthermore, Kistner is of the opinion that "justice and reconciliation are mutually interdependent", for which he calls upon the texts of 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 and Ephesians 2:11-22 (:86). Consequently, the reconciliation process involves both the liberation of the oppressed and the liberation of the oppressor (:87).

Kaiser's second concept of reconciliation discussed is the one proposed by the Belhar confession (:92), which relies strongly on the influence of Allan Boesak (:94). In this view, too, the starting point of all human endeavours is Christ's reconciliatory work. Unity is both the gift and the duty of the church of Jesus Christ (:100). Belhar furthermore places great importance on the notion of the confession (*Bekennntnis*) of the church (:103). For this reason, a *status confessionis* against apartheid is encouraged (:106).

Thirdly, Kaiser considers the concept of reconciliation in the National Initiative for Reconciliation (NIR), which is exemplified by the work of Africa Enterprise and Koinonia Southern Africa (:109). In this approach, emphasis is placed on interaction (*Begegnung*) with the other in the spirit of repentance and penance. This repentant interaction paves the way for the surprising gift of reconciliation (:112). The NIR assumes itself to be neutral, i.e. not taking sides. It seeks to adopt a mediating role (between two supposedly equal partners!), and is critical of the partisanship of the church or the option for the poor and marginalised (:113). Effectively, it proposes a "third way"

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<sup>7</sup> In 1968, for example, the SACC already drafted a document calling for reconciliation (Kistner 1999:39).

<sup>8</sup> Kistner (1999:38) also considers Beyers Naude as an important figure in the reconciliation debate.

theological approach to the problem of racism and alienation (:114). The NIR's reconciliation paradigm seeks to focus on the points of unity and sameness, not division and dissimilarity (:115). David Bosch, seen as one of the proponents of this approach, highlights the cross of Jesus Christ, and insists that because of the cross there can be no cheap (i.e. easily achieved) reconciliation.<sup>9</sup> True reconciliation is a painful process involving confrontation (:119). The NIR notion implies a critique of the Kairos document (see below) for its vehement partiality and partisanship for the oppressed (:128). However, NIR representatives later acknowledged their deficient reconciliation concept (:129). Kaiser argues that in spite of the fact that the NIR can be criticised, it cannot be denied that it helped create new communication structures, a spirit of understanding, and tolerance among the parties (Kaiser 1996:136).

Next, Kaiser describes the concept of reconciliation forwarded by the Kairos document (1996:136).<sup>10</sup> The Kairos notion implies a critique of both "state theology" as well as "church theology", which tends to avoid participation and partisanship in the struggle. It emphasises the importance of penitence (*Buße*) (:145), a clear and unequivocal demand for justice (:146), and highlights the meaning of hope and liberation (:147).

Finally, Kaiser outlines the concept of reconciliation in the Evangelical Witness in South Africa (EWISA) (1996:153). According to Matthew 5:9 Christians have the duty to be peacemakers. This insistence is underlined by texts such as 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 and Romans 5:10 (:160). EWISA charges Christians to listen to those who suffer, and to practice and encourage penance and radical repentance (*Umkehr*), which means a personal and communal transformation of old ways and a radical break with sin (:161). In general, the concept of sin is an elaborate part of reconciliation theology and process (:162).

In view of the South African situation, and how the term reconciliation has been used, some scholars have pointed out that the term reconciliation might in fact be unhelpful and even detrimental for the process of overcoming the conflicts and injustices of the past in South Africa. Tony Balcomb, for example, argues that reconciliation discourse has all too often been the standard of the "moderate", "liberal" political stance. He raises the question of whether the symbol of reconciliation has possibly been "used ideologically, that is, to sustain relations of domination" (Balcomb 1993:200).

D. Smit (1986) has also raised doubts as to whether the rhetoric of reconciliation is at all efficacious in South Africa. He has argued that "at the present stage of this ideological struggle, the symbol of reconciliation does not seem to me to have the necessary symbolic transformational power" (Smit 1986:88). However, since the time when he wrote this article South Africa has undergone profound stages. I would argue that it has shifted from an era of struggle for liberation, to an era of reconstruction<sup>11</sup>, and that therefore the symbol of reconciliation has gained (or ought to gain) more weight than ever before. Even Smit conceded in his 1986 article that in future the rhetoric of reconciliation might indeed become potent and valuable again (:88).

It is my conviction that religious symbols in general, and the symbol of reconciliation in particular, can be of value for South Africa in its phase of social reconstruction. Nonetheless I would agree that the rhetoric of reconciliation has a problematic history, and that the symbol might have to be "radically reinterpreted" (Smit 1986:85). Perhaps the former rhetoric of reconciliation has become obsolete, and a new one has to be developed in and for a South Africa which is experiencing a new set of possibilities and challenges.

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<sup>9</sup> Kistner (1999:42) also mentions Albert Luthuli's call for non-violence and freedom "as attainable through the cross".

<sup>10</sup> See Kistner for a further elaboration of the 1985 Kairos-Dokument as a milestone in the South African reconciliation discussion (1999:40).

<sup>11</sup> See Villa-Vicencio (1992), *A Theology of Reconstruction: Nation-Building and Human Rights*.

In theology, old paradigms seldom disappear, sometimes they undergo a revival, besides, theologians are committed to more than one paradigm at the same time. Any paradigm shift in Christian theology can be carried out only on the basis of the Gospel and because of the Gospel. Theology must be relevant to the changing source-cultural situation but never at the expense of God's revelation in and through Jesus Christ

asserts Mariasusai Dhavamony (1998:41). Despite its difficulties, the paradigm of reconciliation is an important one for South Africa. As a Christian theologian, I cannot neglect the complex task of critically examining this symbol which is intrinsic to the gospel message. I agree with Nürnberger that "reconciliation is a fundamental Biblical category which cannot be abandoned" (1988:7) if the task is to remain theological in its method and purpose. Of course, reconciliation may never be severed from the rest of the Christian gospel, and must be understood "in relation to other symbolic expressions like 'love', 'justice', 'peace', 'holiness', which also belong to the heart of Christianity" (Smit 1986:91). It is my suspicion that isolating the concept of reconciliation from these other fundamental Christian categories is what caused much of the confusion and damage in the first place.<sup>12</sup>

### 1.1.2 The current debate: some views and definitions of reconciliation

I shall now isolate some of the definitions and understandings of "reconciliation", as they are held by various scholars from various fields of discipline, highlighting aspects that I deem valuable and important. Then, drawing from these approaches offered and elaborated by others, I shall attempt to formulate a definition of reconciliation which will be functional for the purposes of this dissertation.

Wilmot James and Linda van de Vijver, in their exploration of different views of the TRC and its effectiveness in promoting reconciliation (2000), are convinced that memory plays a crucial role in the social reconciliation process (2000:1).<sup>13</sup> Colin Bundy, too, reflects upon the importance of narrative and memory in this endeavour. He insists that forging a new collective memory is important for a society that is divided and fraught with hostility (Bundy 2000:20). What he calls "social amnesia" ought by all means to be avoided, because it will hamper the reconciliation process. Bundy relates the formulation of a new collective memory in view of the importance of reconciliation to nation-building<sup>14</sup>.

Charles Villa-Vicencio (1995) also underlines the necessity of memory and narrative for reconciliation. In fact, he claims that "telling one another stories" is the first step towards a "theology of reconciliation" (1995:107ff). Storytelling assists us in the process of accepting and celebrating our differences of culture (:107), and enables us to understand each other well enough to co-exist, and build a common nation "in diversity and difference" (:105).

So we see that for Villa-Vicencio, reconciliation is intrinsically linked to memory, story-telling, and healing. In connection with the argument that remembering the past, and telling stories about it, is necessary for the reconciliation process, Villa-Vicencio asserts the efficacy of image-making (2000:25). He discusses the importance of images and mental pictures, and highlights the danger of selective images imprinted on the public mind. When doing the work of remembering and narrating the past, first impressions,

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<sup>12</sup> Balcomb (1993:182) and Smit (1986:89) mention how during the 1980's the "reconciliation" paradigm was juxtaposed vis-à-vis the "liberation" paradigm, mutually excluding the one from the other. I will seek to avoid this fallacy in the present dissertation.

<sup>13</sup> See Amadiume and An-Na'im and their reflections on "the power of memory" and how it impacts "strategies for achieving post-conflict reconciliation" (2000:1).

<sup>14</sup> See Ra'anani (1990) for a discussion of different concepts of nationality. Ra'anani in fact deems the term "nation-building" to be misleading (1990:14). It is beyond the scope of this study to enter into the debate surrounding nation-building.

dominant images and master texts are readily created. The danger is that in this process other images become subsumed (2000:26). Villa-Vicencio argues that for reconciliation to happen, all stories, all images, must be told and heard, none ought to be suppressed or relegated to the background.

In order to hear each other's stories, different groups in divided societies need to come together, actually learn to be in each other's company, and suffer each other's differences and incongruences. Indeed, Villa-Vicencio claims,

The difficulties of creating democracy out of a culture of gross violations of human rights are immense. It can be facilitated through what the Chileans call *reconciliencia* – a period of getting used to living with each other again. Above all, it involves being exposed to the worst fears of one's adversaries. It requires getting to know one another, gaining a new insight into what happened, as well as an empathetic understanding of how a particular event is viewed by one's adversaries. (2000:27)

Heribert and Kanya Adam, in their article, "The politics of memory in divided societies" (2000:32-47), are also of the opinion that memory plays a crucial role in reconciliation of societies. Yet memory is also fraught with controversy.

Opinions about interpretative and moral truth [of factual events] can legitimately differ, particularly in divided societies. ...it is problematic to assume a collective identity, without which there cannot be a collective memory. Only in a loose, metaphorical sense can we speak of a collective identity, a national character or collective memory. (Adam and Adam 2000:32)

Different meanings can be and are attributed to the same history (:34), events can be interpreted in a myriad of ways. This is why the task of remembering and recording history is delicate and needs to be approached with care and integrity. It is necessary if a society is to reconfigure its collective memory and social identity, and create a future that is different from the past.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, "If collective identity is to be redefined successfully, it has to be communicated by credible ideologues from the inside" (Adam and Adam 2000:45). People from within the divided society themselves, i.e. those who have lived through and witnessed the period of hostility and conflict – not foreigners, not exiles with little ideological credibility, who are possibly even seen as sympathetic to the enemy – ought to be at the forefront of creating the new common (hi)story. A new common history will, in turn, become one of the bases for a new united and reconciled society.<sup>16</sup>

In the debate about remembering the past and telling its stories in order to pave the way for a reconciled future, the question of "the truth" cannot be bypassed.<sup>17</sup> Of course, the need for truthfulness is not debatable. Yet what is truth, and who owns it? And how does it factor into the reconciliation equation? Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert, in his article "Truth without reconciliation, reconciliation without truth" (2000) claims that the truth needed for reconciliation on "a collective and social scale" "is not the truth of law

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<sup>15</sup> African theologian Kwame Bediako insists, "theological memory is integral to identity; without memory we have no past, and having no past, our identity itself is lost" (1992:237). Francis Deng (1990) similarly underscores the importance of identity in the quest for attaining peace and social stability, by illustrating a Sudanese case of ethnic conflict. "Conflict transformation is about modifying perceptions of the Self and the Other, and the relationships between them" (An-Na'im and Peshkova 2000:76).

<sup>16</sup> "South African whites and blacks ... have to live together in the aftermath of apartheid. Faced with identities inherited from the past, they must forge new and common identities" (Mamdani 2000:179).

<sup>17</sup> The Forum for the Future (FFF) is a Namibian organisation aiming at, among other things, promoting social reconciliation among the peoples of Namibia. It has devised a scheme of reconciliation based on ten "pillars of reconciliation". These pillars are leadership, unity, mediation, confession & forgiveness, democracy, trauma healing, narrowing of poor-rich gap, inter-dependence, loyalty and hard work. The ten pillars are argued to be "anchored in the TRUTH as a foundation. When viewed vertically, they become steps leading to national reconciliation" (Namibia and National Reconciliation 2003:4). Indeed, "there can be no new beginning without disclosure" (Kistner 2000:68).

and science, but the truth that comes from confiding and acknowledging, a sort of confessional truth" (:65). Even then, when such a kind of truthfulness is present, there is no guarantee that "there will inevitably be reconciliation" (:65). "It will probably take many years, if not decades, before it (reconciliation) becomes meaningful to us in our daily lives" (:71). Nevertheless, Van Zyl Slabbert insists that without truth all attempts at creating social reconciliation are doomed to failure.

Truth is connected to perception, and one always has to take account of the inevitable ambiguity of language (Villa-Vicencio 1995:112).<sup>18</sup> In telling and listening to the stories of the past, we must try to reach "beyond what is the dominant perception"; "shaped as it is by its prevailing power relations, the quest must be for a broad understanding [of truth]. It is this notion of truth that lies at the root of genuine reconciliation" (:113).

Suppressed or forgotten truth is part of the inclusive truth which must be uncovered if polarised society is to be united in the healing process. More realistically, it is only as we pursue the *possibility* of uncovering the full truth that the *possibility* of healing is there. (Villa-Vicencio 1995:114)<sup>19</sup>

John Lederach uses a helpful metaphor to elaborate the need for truth in a non-threatening way. He considers Psalm 85:10 as providing a basic paradigm for reconciliation. Here, reconciliation is the meeting point of the four axes of truth and mercy, peace and justice (Lederach 1997:28-29). "Reconciliation ... involves the creation of the social space where both truth and forgiveness are validated and joined together, rather than being forced into an encounter in which one must win out over the other or envisioned as fragmented and separated parts" (:29). This shows two of the paradoxes which are embraced in reconciliation – the reunion of harsh truth and gentle mercy and the seeking of *both* justice and peace (:31). So to Lederach, truth is but one aspect (albeit an important one) of the entire endeavour of reconciliation, and ought to be revered for its assistance in this greater venture, and not merely for its own sake.

Truth is important in the process of building a moral culture, which in turn is the main ingredient of a reconciled society, argues John de Gruchy (2000:167-171). In commenting about the TRC, de Gruchy claims

its purpose was to build a humane, just, caring, reconciling society. This was the moral justification for seeking to know the truth. It is only this kind of truth telling that sets us free to be truly human, that lays the foundation for a truly reconciled nation. If we are to build a moral culture, we need to know the truth about our past, that is, about ourselves, because without such knowledge we remain captive to our past. But what we do with the truth is the real moral test. (:169)

Indeed, remembering the truth is a moral task. It is crucial for the formation of a just society with a basic moral orientation.

Alex Boraine similarly insists that story telling and truth telling initiatives are of utmost importance for South Africa's reconciliation. However, he cautions against a romanticised image of what a "reconciled society" might look like.

To speak of reconciliation as though we can live in total harmony is absurd. The very essence of politics is based on different points of view – different values, different cultures, different arguments. So reconciliation ought to be viewed as an

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<sup>18</sup> The notion of truth, cautions Villa-Vicencio, is ambiguous since it is connected to people's (subjective) perceptions about reality (1995:112). Talk, therefore, of "pure" or objective truth ought to be avoided. Truth "may not be in the singular, but in the plural"; "there may be several versions of the truth, claims Mamdani. "Whose truth comes closest to capturing the experience of the most?" (Mamdani 2000:178).

<sup>19</sup> During a TRC hearing, a man who lost five children in an IFP attack on his home insisted, "Without truth, there can be no reconciliation.... There has to be truth and it has to be real truth ... you cannot escape letting the country know what it needs to know." (Bonner and Nieftagodien n.d.:2)

exchange of ideas in a climate of mutual respect and peaceful co-existence.  
(Boraine 2000:77)

In spite of his seemingly minimalist position, Boraine nevertheless holds that all-round social reconciliation has better chances of occurring if leaders of all camps apologised symbolically for wrongs done by the people they represent (:78). Public confession “would drastically alter the history of South Africa especially in relation to race and power” (:79). The divided nation ought also to “choose the logic of peace, abandon the logic of war” (:80), and strive toward a situation of economic justice for all if reconciliation is to become a reality.

Mary Burton agrees that memory, especially the healing of memories, is a significant factor in the reconciliation process. She suggests that NGOs, faith communities, educational institutions (like libraries or schools) and individuals all have a role to play in addressing the need of the community to be healed from its past (Burton 2000:113). Furthermore, Ciraj Rassool, Leslie Witz and Gary Minkley talk of “burying and memorialising the body of truth” (2000:115-127). Part of this endeavour includes symbolic reparation, e.g. through the building of schools and monuments, the celebration of ceremonies, the institution of a “National Day of Remembrance”, building a “national Wall of Remembrance”, and the establishment of a special archive of memories (:116-117). Museums (:118), truth monuments and commemorative landmarks (:121) may all contribute to the formation of a new national identity which does not deny the pain of the past.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, tracing the remains of persons’ bodies may be important for personal reconciliation (:125).<sup>21</sup> Exhumation, reburials, ceremonies of mourning, as well as “rituals of death and the journeys and presentations of the body” may all be helpful and indeed necessary for enabling social reconciliation (:126), because these help people acknowledge their past hurt without allowing it to dominate their future lives, and without the past overpowering or crushing them.

Recognising the past, and telling and hearing its stories, is a painful task because it has implications for the future.<sup>22</sup> Njabulo Ndebele (2000:146) explains that reconciliation ultimately relies on “our ability to face the full implications of our move towards interaction, away from the past of artificial separation”.<sup>23</sup> Moving towards reconciliation implies “the recognition of an emergent balance, which hinges on a common awareness that the survival of South Africa is a common responsibility”, “recognising a common interest to preserve an imperfect zone of stability” (:147). It takes the shape of a new binary relationship which is interactive. Ndebele further remarks that dialogue between adversaries is necessary for the reconciliation process; reconciliation is “a human project grounded in social process” (2000:152). And this social process can be bolstered and assisted by legal institutions such as the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, if conducted in a democratic environment.

Reconciliation is something to be earned by South Africans. They will achieve it through facing the uncertainties and contradictions inherent in our transformation. To navigate through a great deal of human turbulence, the Constitution and Bill of Rights provide a democratic framework within which the process of reconciliation can act itself out. (Ndebele 2000:152)

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<sup>20</sup> Examples of such landmarks are the Hector Pieterse Museum in Soweto, the Sharpeville Memorial, and the Garden of Remembrance in Tshwane.

<sup>21</sup> A family member of a victim is reported to have announced, “...even if it is his remains, if he was burnt to death, even if we can get his ashes, the bones belonging to his body.... If I could bury him, I am sure I could be reconciled.” (Rassool, Witz and Minkley 2000:125)

<sup>22</sup> “Those who want to go forward together need to walk through their histories together,” claims Müller-Fahrenholz (1996: viii). Similarly, “The emphasis must not be on repairing the past, but on preparing a better way forward” (1996:29).

<sup>23</sup> Telling their stories “is necessary for people to get rid of the burdens of the past and be able to make a new beginning” (Kistner 2000:66). See also Hay (1998:129) and Schreier (1998).

Indeed it has to be emphasised that to many thinkers on the subject, reconciliation is inextricably linked to justice, or the establishment of a just order.<sup>24</sup> Reconciliation therefore has much to do with the struggle for political rights, economic freedom and social liberation for all. The argument is that people cannot be reconciled to each other if they are not equal in a legal and social sense. Since most South Africans have not enjoyed the freedoms of a just system – neither economically nor politically – it is necessary for them first to be liberated from oppression, before they can be expected to reach out to their oppressors in a spirit of reconciliation. In other words, discourses surrounding democracy and human rights are crucial. This is one of the main arguments of Tinyiko Maluleke (1999a:237), who is an astute critic of the TRC and any reconciliation endeavour which fails to address the issue of social, economic and political liberation and justice. No doubt, reparation and amnesty – even if only granted symbolically or partially – seek to address the need for justice in the reconciliation process (Burton 2000:109-114).<sup>25</sup>

In view of the above-discussed elements of memory, social identity and political justice and liberation, it can be argued that reconciliation is first and foremost a re-establishment of relationships, a re-forging of communication and interaction between people who have been divided. In their book, *Breaking Down Walls: A Model for Reconciliation in an Age of Racial Strife* (1993), Raleigh Washington and Glen Kehrein consider eight principles for successful reconciliation between racially divided communities. Although speaking to a USA context, I believe their contribution to be of value for the South African context also. The basis of their deliberations is the Christian Biblical witness.

According to Washington and Kehrein, principle one for reconciliation is a commitment to relationship (1993:113). The establishment of renewed relationships is the heart of the reconciliation process, as well as its generator. Principle two is intentionality (:125). The people concerned must *want* to work on a new relationship, and strive towards it consciously, deliberately and voluntarily. Sincerity is the third principle, and implies “the willingness to be vulnerable, including the self-disclosure of feelings, attitudes, differences, and perceptions, with the goal of resolution and building trust” (:141). Principle four is sensitivity, which involves “the intentional acquisition of knowledge in order to relate empathetically to a person of a different race and culture” (:155). In other words, sensitivity means taking an active and concerned interest in, and making a concerted effort to understand, the others’ background, culture and history.

Washington and Kehrein’s fifth principle is an acknowledgement of interdependence. Interdependence “recognizes our differences but realises that we each offer something that the other person needs, resulting in equality in the relationship” (1993:169). Those who want to be reconciled must come to the realisation that they are in fact dependent upon one another, that their reconciliation is an enhancement – indeed the fulfilment – of their very humanity. This notion is also held by Desmond Tutu (1999:154), who explains that reconciliation is an expression of the fullness and beauty of human existence, and that humans actually deprive themselves if they refuse to embark on the reconciliation journey.<sup>26</sup> Unreconciled communities are made up of unreconciled individuals, who deny themselves the fullness and richness of their humanity.

Sacrifice, the sixth principle, “is the willingness to relinquish an established status or position to genuinely adopt a lesser position in order to facilitate a cross-cultural

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<sup>24</sup> It is lamentable that in the opinion of some, South Africa represents an example of a story “of reconciliation without justice” (Amadiume and An-Na’im 2000:3). It is contrasted to Rwanda which is considered a story of justice without reconciliation.

<sup>25</sup> Wole Soyinka speaks of the “burden of memory” that must be “exorcized through the strategy of reparations” (2000:29).

<sup>26</sup> Referring to the apartheid past, Tutu declares, “In one way or another, as a supporter, a perpetrator, a victim, or one who opposed the ghastly system, something happened to our humanity. All of us South Africans are less whole than we would have been without apartheid.” (1999:154)

relationship". Reconciliation is painful, hard work. It cannot happen if people are not willing to give up certain things. It is at this point that insistence upon justice and equality again becomes palpable. In line with the need for a context in which justice prevails is the issue of empowerment. As the seventh principle for racial reconciliation according to Washington and Kehrein, empowerment entails "the use of repentance and forgiveness to create complete freedom in a cross-cultural relationship" (:197). Washington and Kehrein do not focus primarily on economic and political empowerment. Their understanding of empowerment is rather more personal, relational and spiritual. People who have been hurt and wronged need first to be empowered – in the first place by God – to be able to confront their pain and resentment. Similarly, perpetrators need strength to face their own guilt and shame, and to come to terms with the responsibility of remorse. Such empowerment is certainly linked to "external" (legal, political, economic) empowerment, but it is also more than, or independent from, it. Indeed, people who are liberated on all external levels may still be captive to fear, anger, resentment, guilt, etc. internally. Or, some who are not (yet) beneficiaries of external empowerment and liberation, may well enjoy release from anger or hate, guilt or anxiety.

The final and eighth principle that is discussed is the notion of call. "We are called to be involved in the ministry of reconciliation, but some are gifted with a special call to be racial reconcilers" (:209). In reference to this, Washington and Kehrein refer especially to the Biblical text of 2 Corinthians 5:17-21. What is meant is that all Christians have the duty to be active in the struggle for reconciliation, but that some may have special abilities, exceptional passion or zeal for the task, and can therefore take on more active and deliberate roles in the process.

In view of the above approach suggested by Washington and Kehrein, it becomes clear that the Christian religious tradition has a lot to offer to the debate concerning social reconciliation. (This will be expounded in depth in chapter 3.) Indeed, it is the basic argument of this dissertation that religious approaches in general, and the Christian and African traditions in particular, are invaluable in the quest for reconciliatory community building. Theo Tschuy, in his book, *Ethnic Conflict and Religion: Challenge to the Churches* (1997), argues for an ecumenical approach to the problem, and evaluates the efficacy of religions working together to find a way out of social problems. He makes a strong case for "a new pattern of common action" among religions (1997:147). Tschuy asserts,

At the dawn of a new millennium the vast spiritual and intellectual resources which often lie dormant within Christianity and the other great world religions must be awakened and applied to the burning problem of ethnic conflict. (1997:146)

In his book, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (1997), John Lederach has found that so far in conflict settings there has been a lack of "adequate concepts, approaches, and modalities for intervention" (1997:16). He decries the too-heavy reliance on traditional (Western-style) statist diplomacy "despite its inadequacies in responding to the nature of conflicts today" (:16), and suggests the need for innovative methods at solving conflict (:25). Effective conflict resolution and reconciliation within a society requires an "infrastructure that empowers the resources for reconciliation from within that society and maximises the contribution from outside" (:xvi, 61).

Reconciliation is a positive response to social animosity, hostility and conflict. Lederach asserts that ethnic conflicts are "identity conflicts" brought about by the "failure of governing structures to address fundamental needs, provide space for participation in decisions, and ensure an equitable distribution of resources and benefits" (:8). He identifies characteristics of deeply divided societies. These include people seeking security and control over their situation, and the existence of a "dynamic of severe stereotyping coupled with radically differing perceptions of each other" (:3). Usually severe conflicts are "by nature lodged in long-standing relationships" and Lederach points out the typical "long-term nature of the conflicting groups' animosity, perception of enmity, and deep-



rooted fear" (:14). There is also, in cases of social conflict, a sociological dynamic of "reciprocal causation", which is explained as "the response mechanism within the cycle of violence and counterviolence" and becomes the perpetuating force of the conflict (:15). "Where there is deep, long-term fear and direct experiences of violence that sustain an image of the enemy, people are extremely vulnerable and easily manipulated," claims Lederach. Fears are used for sub-group identity formation and reinforcement. There is a clearly defined easily recognisable enemy, and certain groups hold on to the perception that survival can be secured through subjugation and domination of the other (:15).

For Lederach, reconciliation essentially means the building of relationships (1997:23).<sup>27</sup> He calls for a paradigmatic shift "away from a concern with the resolution of issues toward a frame of reference that focuses on the restoration and rebuilding of relationships" (:24). The problem in divided societies is that people are living as neighbours "and yet are locked into long-standing cycles of hostile interaction", animosity, fear and stereotyping (:23). Paradoxically, relationship "is the basis of both the conflict and its long-term solution," claims Lederach. "Reconciliation is not pursued by seeking innovative ways to disengage or minimize the conflicting groups' affiliations, but instead is built on mechanisms that engage the sides of a conflict with each other as humans-in-relationship" (:26). Engagement assumes encounter, not only knowing but acknowledging others' stories, telling and listening, and validating stories of the past (:26). Similarly, reconciliation is based on the envisioning of a shared future (:27).

Reconciliation, in essence, represents a place, the point of encounter where concerns about both the past and the future can meet. Reconciliation-as-encounter suggests that space for the acknowledgement of the past and envisioning of the future is the necessary ingredient for reframing the present. For this to happen, people must find ways to encounter themselves and their enemies, their hopes and their fears. (:27)

The "goal of peacebuilding is to create and sustain transformation and the movement toward restructured relationships" (Lederach 1997:71).<sup>28</sup> Basically, reconciliation endeavours must move their focus from issues to systems (:55). What this means is that the issue which has caused or is causing enmity ought to become secondary, while relationships ought to move into the foreground. Relationships are, in turn, the basis for the establishment of effective systems of change and sustainable reconciliation (:56). Peacebuilding is to be seen as a process (:66), made up of multiple functions, roles, and activities (:70). The process of mediation (:67), which involves intermediary roles and functions (see Lederach's list, 1997:68-69) are crucial aspects of the ultimate goal of reconciliation. Indeed, Lederach maintains, "a sustainable transformative approach suggests that the key lies in the *relationship* of the involved parties, with all that term encompasses at the psychological, spiritual, social, economic, political, and military levels" (:75).

At base, reconciliation is a "redefinition and restoration of relationships" (Lederach 1997:84), which requires a "visionary and context-responsive approach" (:85). In order to provide an environment for sustained reconciliation and peacability to thrive, an "infrastructure for peacebuilding" needs to be built. "Such an infrastructure is made

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<sup>27</sup> According to Assefa (1996:45), conflict resolution and peacemaking "involves a restructuring of relationships". Reconciliation "has greater dimensions and more profound implications" than a mere resolution of a quarrel (1996:47). It means to "walk together" again despite past hurt and hostility.

<sup>28</sup> It is important here to caution against a relational understanding of reconciliation which excludes or diminishes the need for structural transformation. While "the Christian understanding of reconciliation" focuses mainly on "interpersonal relationships", the "real structural implications" of reconciliation as elaborated in the Biblical witness are not to be ignored (Kistner 2000:64). Kistner insists that reconciliation according to Biblical Christian understanding pertains to the whole world, and "has strong structural implications, not merely interpersonal" (2000:65).

up of a web of people, their relationships and activities, and the social mechanisms necessary to sustain the change sought. This takes place at all levels of the society" (:84).

The structure of reconciliation is based on various levels of leadership – top, middle-range and grassroots (:38-39) – interacting and working together. Although top-level approaches to peacebuilding may help (:44), Lederach is of the opinion that middle-range leadership is much more influential and effective, e.g. through its involvement in and implementation of problem-solving workshops (:46), conflict resolution training (:47), and peace commissions (:49). What Lederach calls grassroots approaches (:51), or bottom-up approaches, are also invaluable in the reconciliation process. He elaborates such bottom-up approaches practised in Somalia which based themselves on traditional social mechanisms, e.g. the reliance on elders, lengthy oral deliberations, creating a forum or assembly of elders, careful negotiations over access to resources and payments for deaths to re-establish a balance between clans, etc. (:52-53). In the case of Mozambique, a national seminar was instituted at local levels. Moreover, a "Circus of Peace" accessible to all social groups was organised, as were workshops for social reconciliation and interaction (:54). Such examples show important ways "to provide an opportunity for grassroots leaders and others to work at the community or village level", claims Lederach. Notably, programs that can facilitate reconciliation "frequently work through existing networks, such as churches or health associations" (:55).

Like many of the scholars mentioned above, Lederach emphasises the importance of remembering the past, and telling stories, as well as entering in to the stories of others. Reconciliation cannot happen if the affected community does not find "innovative ways to create a time and a place, within various levels of the affected population, to address, integrate, and embrace the painful past and the necessary shared future as a means of dealing with the present" (:35). This is one of the paradoxes which are embraced in reconciliation – the paradox of the painful past interacting with a future of interdependence and mutual concern (:31). Reconciliation holds within it the hope and anticipation for a future of amicability, mutual respect, and interdependence, despite a past of pain.<sup>29</sup> Lederach argues that reconciliation processes need to include an exercise of "imaging the future". An image, a vision of a shared future is necessary for an effective peacebuilding process and time-frame (:77). "Often, long-term, future-oriented time frames are necessary, since it might take more than a generation of people to work through more than one generation's time worth of enmity." Transformation over time "implies deliberate intervention to effect change". It is "operative across four interdependent dimensions," i.e. personal, relational, structural and cultural (:82-83).

Any situation of conflict or social animosity requires, for its resolution, "adequate resources, explicit preparation, and commitment over time" (Lederach 1997:87). The resources may be subdivided into socioeconomic and sociocultural resources. Socioeconomic resources aim at "helping people, organisations, and institutions to comprehend, acquire an appreciation for, and create categories of thinking and action related to peacebuilding" (:88). Government, inter- and non- governmental organisations and agencies, and other institutions (which assist, for example, with staff, funding or programmes), generate "a widespread sense of shared responsibility for the larger, systemic dimension of contemporary conflict" (:89). In addition to the socioeconomic resources, however, Lederach highlights the resources surrounding culture (Lederach 1997:93). Indeed, he asserts, "The greatest resource for sustaining peace in the long term is always rooted in the local people and their culture" (:94). The importance of human

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<sup>29</sup> "Reconciliation is understood as a process of relationship building. Thus, reconciliation is not limited to the period of postsettlement restoration. Rather, reconciliation is seen as providing a focus and a locus appropriate to every stage of peacebuilding and instrumental in reframing the conflict and the energies driving the conflict." (Lederach 1997:151)

and cultural resources cannot be overestimated.<sup>30</sup> Lederach mentions for example the role of women in indigenous societies, clan conferences, elders, poets, traditional arts, music, drama, and children (:95).<sup>31</sup> Indigenous rituals of healing, cleansing and conflict-resolution certainly also fall under the rubric of sociocultural resources available to societies seeking social reconciliation. It is argued later in this dissertation that certain indigenous (South) African rituals could indeed be viewed as helpful vehicles in the reconciliation process. Using such rituals, for example, is a positive way of engaging “indigenous cultural modalities for achieving reconciliation” (:106).

Another scholar who has significant insights about reconciliation is Mark Hay, a South African Catholic theologian. In his book, *Ukubuyisana: Reconciliation in South Africa* (1998), he gives some helpful hints and guidelines as to what reconciliation might entail. The title word *ukubuyisana* is a Zulu term meaning “to come back to each other”, “to return to each other”, “to be reconciled” (Hay 1998:13). Hay points out from the onset that reconciliation is more than a political process. “It is one thing to change political structures, but it is another to change people’s hearts” (:13). To Hay, reconciliation is a process that has as its aim the healing of people.

Reconciliation is necessary when there has been a breach: an alienation, violence, disruption or disordering of the human relationship to God (the Transcendent), other, creation and, ultimately, oneself. Reconciliation is about transforming dehumanising situations and their personal and social consequences. Social reconciliation transpires when a community recovers its dignity and honour. The completion of reconciliation, or moment of reconciliation, is the recovery of dignity and humanity of the victim. It is when the individual recognises and accepts his/her intrinsic worth, and is able to exercise his/her human rights. For Christians, theologically, the fullness of reconciliation will be in the Kingdom or Reign of God, achieved through Jesus Christ. (1998:15)

Reconciliation comprises both personal reconciliation, i.e. restoration of an individual’s humanity, and social reconciliation, i.e. restoring social relationships. Both are intricately intertwined, so that the one cannot really occur without the other (Hay 1998:15).<sup>32</sup> Besides distinguishing between (but not separating) personal and social reconciliation, Hay also distinguishes between religiously and politically understood reconciliation. “Both national and sacramental reconciliation look to similar goals, although social reconciliation may not be seen as a religious act, or presume a belief in God. ... Although they differ in their assumptions and methods, they are not mutually exclusive.” (:16)

For reconciliation to occur, “victims need to be acknowledged”. There is also a need for reparation and “repairing the past” through exercising economic and political justice. Reconciliation involves gaining respect and recognition of cultural and religious traditions, and the histories of different peoples. “The building of a moral order will be required for a stable future,” insists Hay. Perpetrators will have to “admit guilt and make amends, express remorse and manifest collective contrition”, and in so doing take responsibility for past actions. As already suggested by others above, Hay includes in the reconciliation endeavour the healing of memories, remembering the dead, dealing with

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<sup>30</sup> By means of example, in a case study of the Rwandan genocide, Lederach quotes a peace-worker as asserting, “Culture is the only thing big enough to help” (Lederach 1997:173).

<sup>31</sup> Notwithstanding their potential helpfulness, traditional and cultural influences are not always or necessarily beneficial to the reconciliation process. Accepting all cultural resources without critical examination would be naïve. For this reason, it might be important to carry out an in-depth “cultural resource analysis” which enables “the capacity to identify cultural resources (and impediments) that contribute to (or obstruct) peacebuilding, providing building blocks for designing appropriate responses and mechanisms within a given setting”. (Lederach 1997:121)

<sup>32</sup> Kistner (2000:65) concurs that reconciliation is not an individualistic event only, and that the communal and individual dimensions belong together.

questions of forgiveness, developing new democratic attitudes, fostering a human rights culture and paying special attention to the voices and needs of women and children (:62).

Moreover,

Reconciliation will not simply happen; there are steps and rituals that are necessary to foster reconciliation. ... Redressive action is taken, often including the use of dialogue, intermediaries, and rituals. (:113)

Hay advocates the need for "some celebration or ritual to bring to an end the breach of relations and indicate that reconciliation has happened" (:113).<sup>33</sup> Although it usually rests on individual encounters, the reconciliation process "is essentially communitarian in nature". When hostility prevails, and reconciliation is not sought or achieved, "the very life and future of the community, its dignity and honour, its integrity and good functioning, its relationships and good order ... is placed in jeopardy" (:113). This suggests reconciliation is vital for the well-being of a society. Hay would probably concur that the quest for reconciliation is not optional, but necessary if South African society wants to thrive and prosper.

As a Christian, Hay includes the religious and theological aspect in his view of reconciliation.<sup>34</sup> His approach may, for want of a better term, be deemed a "spiritual" as opposed to a purely pragmatic one. He observes, "Complete reconciliation can happen only by the power of God. The loss of dignity and the crushed human spirit can only be made whole by the power of God" (:119-120). Indeed, "a simply human approach to reconciliation is not adequate" (:121), but needs to be reinforced and deepened by theological and religious notions.

Effectively, Hay proposes a definition of reconciliation that includes all the human, political, economic, social and legal dimensions, but does not deny the spiritual, religious and intangible aspects. Indeed, he argues that the "Christian message of reconciliation presents challenges which include the human pursuit of reconciliation but the human pursuit is often utilitarian and justice-oriented and the Christian message challenges us to move beyond it." Therefore, Hay illustrates and vouches for what he calls "a spirituality of reconciliation" (:152). Frank Chikane, too, emphasises "the religious dimension of the struggle for truth, reconciliation and healing", and contends that

A solely legal view of this subject which ignored any religious dimensions would so impoverish the exercise that the goal of reconciling and healing this nation would become unachievable. (1995:98)<sup>35</sup>

Wolfram Kistner (2000:63) similarly distinguishes "between a religious and a secular approach to reconciliation", the religious being "a far more comprehensive one". Yet he maintains that "at the same time there is a very close interrelationship" between the two approaches. Political reconciliation tends to rely on negotiations and diplomacy, which Kistner doubts is enough for sustained and profound reconciliation to occur between people. Political negotiations ultimately do not deal adequately with the past, and are therefore insufficient. Kistner does not deny that the political and economic dimension of reconciliation, i.e. reconciliation in the juridical sense (which may involve punishment or certain forms of compensation for an evil deed), is important. "All these are valid aspects of reconciliation, but they are not reconciliation in the religious sense" (2000:64).

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<sup>33</sup> The importance of rituals in conflict resolution is also highlighted by Volkan (1972:88), who emphasises rituals of mourning (:89). He insists that "an inability to mourn becomes a political determinant" (:90) and can hamper conflict resolution and reconciliation processes.

<sup>34</sup> Mfutso-Bengo (2001:16) similarly asserts that the origins of reconciliation are "spiritual and theological".

<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Chikane (1995:101) reflects upon the reconciliation process already begun in South Africa, "It seemed to me that the concept of reconciliation was being equated with negotiations, political settlements and so on. This, I believe, robs the word 'reconciliation' of its deeper meaning, one which includes the concept of healing." See also Mertus (2000:142-161) who uncovers some limitations of justice through judicial means.

Hay, Chikane and Kistner all seem to propose a very holistic and integrated understanding of reconciliation – one which includes the whole person, and all the different aspects of human life. Arguably, such a type of reconciliation is a greater challenge to achieve, because it is holistic and focuses on the less tangible aspects of people's personhood and humanity. It is moreover almost impossible to measure and gauge. There is no clearly identifiable "linear development" in the process of such all-embracing reconciliation, but it is rather to be likened to a "journey and discovery" (Hay 1998:129) which can be haphazard and ambiguous.

The final scholar I want to mention before I draw my own conclusions about the definition of reconciliation to be used in this thesis is Robert Schreier. Along the lines of Hay, Schreier argues that a distinction is to be made between social and spiritual reconciliation (1998:4). Social reconciliation seeks to provide "structures and processes whereby a fractured society can be reconstructed as truthful and just"; it involves theories and practices which seek to make "civil society possible" (:4). Spiritual reconciliation complements and augments social reconciliation. It is needed to "rebuild shattered lives", and implies the healing of persons. This aspect of reconciliation is a spiritual practice, according to Schreier.<sup>36</sup> For this reason he speaks of the necessity in broken societies to nurture a spirituality of reconciliation (see Hay above). Such a spirituality involves "coming to terms with a violent history" and "building the beginnings of a new humanity and a new community" (:6). It represents a potential "key to a new way of living, and how that way of living might be shared with and transmitted to others" (:5).

Essentially, Schreier is of the opinion that reconciliation cannot only include the external aspects of human life, e.g. political freedom, economic justice and legal restitution. It aims at the all-encompassing restoration of humanity (:15), the "new creation" (see 2 Corinthians 5:17) of both the victims and the wrongdoers (:17). For Schreier, therefore, reconciliation is a holistic endeavour, and it addresses persons in their entirety. It is both transformation towards justice and peace, and a process of healing and integration. It involves the past, the present and the future. It deals with political structures and economic policies, as well as with the memories, emotions, spiritualities and identities of people.

### 1.1.3 A definition of reconciliation

Drawing from the above-mentioned scholars' thoughts and experiences, I would like to determine the definition of social reconciliation which will be used in this dissertation. I strongly agree with most theorists that reconciliation in South Africa must involve, and may not bypass or ignore, legal, economic and political justice, and an attempt to equalise relationships in these terms. This is, as it were, the structural basis for reconciliation, and provides the needed infrastructure and framework for its sustainability and success. However, since this thesis is not a study in political, economic or social science, I would like to leave the intricacies of those aspects of social reconciliation to my colleagues in the said fields of research and involvement. As a theologian and scholar of religion, I see my task as assisting in the uncovering of one specific aspect of social reconciliation, which, for want of a better term, could be called the "spiritual", transcendent or religious dimension. There is, I believe, a dimension to reconciliation which both underpins and sustains, but also supersedes and enhances the structural, political reconciliation mentioned above. It is that dimension which asserts that human existence and interaction is made up of more than only economics, jurisprudence and politics, and all the tangible effects of these categories. The religious view makes room for the emotional, psychological, spiritual – indeed the numinous and supernatural – needs and tendencies of

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<sup>36</sup> Kistner (2000:66) combines the social and the spiritual to form what he calls a "comprehensive understanding of reconciliation". Such comprehensive reconciliation includes empowerment "to take up the struggle against structures of irreconcilability" – be they social or spiritual.

humans.<sup>37</sup> It makes provision for the fact that what makes human beings survive and thrive is not just their economic stability and their political security. What is just as important – though on an entirely different level – is a human being's sense of well-being in an emotional and spiritual sense, her sense of belonging to a community and participating in it in a meaningful way, his need for relational existence with and among others. How she views herself and her community, how much value he ascribes to himself and others, what kind of personhood she defines herself and her group as having, what his past experiences have to do with his present self-definition, are all important in this regard.

At base, I see politics as striving to create justice, economics as striving to set up equitable systems and resources, and social studies to establish feasible ways for people to live and work together. Religion and spirituality strive to help people know who they are, where they and their stories belong, and how they belong to each other. Religion and spirituality help to give meaning to lives, to situations and experiences. Therefore, a religious understanding of reconciliation must try, at base, to ascribe meaning to a situation, and create identity and self-knowledge within and out of that situation. In the case of South Africa, a religious or spiritual approach to reconciliation must seek to help South Africans understand and accord meaning to the past, as well as direct them towards a new and improved self-understanding and identity, fit for a future of togetherness and harmony. It has to focus on the establishment of relationships that are not merely utilitarian and conditional in character, but are the kind where people feel and know themselves to belong to one another, to be dependent upon one another, to be responsible for and to one another. Such reconciliation seeks to create a network of I-Thou relationships (to use Buber's terminology), i.e. true *community*.

In view of this, I argue that reconciliation is about dealing with the past, and finding a way forward out of its potentially debilitating clutches, into a future of interdependence, mutual friendship and respect. Of course, this future vision must include peace, justice and equality for all. Reconciliation is about determining together who we were, who we are, and who we want to be. It is about being healed from the pain of the past, and about regaining our humanity. Although economic recompense and restitution might help, it can never entirely restore somebody's crushed sense of self, heal her emotional hurt, refashion his humanity and personhood, and re-establish her trust in the goodness and intrinsic worth of humanity. Something deeper and more profound is needed. Similarly, for the many crippled identities to begin to reach out to each other in true understanding, participation and togetherness, more will be needed than, say, a programme for the redistribution of wealth, or the upgrading of the legal system. People will have to start seeing each other *as people* – with pasts, with pain, with fears, hopes, anger and resentment, as well as with the capacity to forgive and love. Seeing one another as such, and then taking the steps towards really understanding and acknowledging and honouring one another will require more than politics and economics, although the latter may certainly encourage those steps.

My proposal is that reconciliation is the genuine, deliberate, personal (though not individualistic) effort of people trying to hear the others' stories, to listen to their feelings, enter in to their experiences, and embrace them as such – complex, ambivalent, yet thoroughly acceptable and worthy. Reconciliation, therefore, is the building of relationships, relationships in which people may show their vulnerabilities without fearing that these will be used against them, relationships that are based on unconditional acceptance, trust and faithfulness. I am aware that this understanding of reconciliation is immensely challenging. It is, as opposed to a minimalist definition, maximalist – comprehensive, all-envisoning, and perhaps utopian. No doubt, such reconciliation may

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<sup>37</sup> Müller-Fahrenholz (1996:ix) advocates such a view of reconciliation by insisting, "The quest for what is truly human transcends the human race."

always remain an ideal, an unattainable goal. Yet, theologically speaking, it is to be understood as an eschatological reality, something which is to be sought after with urgency and fervency, in hope and anticipation, but – most importantly – in a spirit of faith. Such reconciliation hinges on faith in God, that God is the author and perfecter of our reconciliation, and faith in humankind, that we are created to be one, and have within us the intrinsic tendency and need to be reconciled to one another.

In conclusion, then, I define reconciliation in the following terms, referring to the scholars mentioned throughout the previous section: Reconciliation among alienated people involves remembering the past of pain and hurt (James and van de Vijver, Villa-Vicencio, Bundy, Adam and Adam, Burton). It involves the truthful telling of stories, as well as honest listening (Van Zyl Slabbert, Villa-Vicencio, de Gruchy, Lederach). Through the process of narrative interaction, identity and relationships are forged. Victims and perpetrators, harmed and guilty parties are all given the opportunity to reshape their image of themselves and the other(s), thereby establishing a new identity (Ndebele, Mamdani, Bediako, Burton, Hay). Enemies are enabled to encounter one another with the possibility of re-building their shattered relationships (Lederach, Washington and Kehrein, Hay). Reconciliation therefore has a past, present and future dimension (Ndebele, Lederach, Müller-Fahrenheit). Similarly, reconciliation has both a personal and a social dimension, both of which go hand-in-hand. Although individual people are the actors in a reconciliation process, it is not individualistic, but communal or community-centred in nature. It frequently is manifested in ritual and celebration (Hay, Schreiter). Finally, and most significantly, reconciliation is holistic. It encompasses the entire human being in society. Spiritual, religious, psychological, emotional and physical dimensions of human existence factor into the reconciliation process (Hay, Schreiter, Washington and Kehrein, Chikane, Kistner).

I would like to emphasise that the definitions of reconciliation which are grounded on theories of justice, human rights, democracy and economics are not excluded or denied here. They are, however, not the focal point of this definition which, essentially, seeks to provide a religious or spiritual (as opposed to a material, pragmatic or utilitarian) thrust to the reconciliation debate. Although it may seem vague and unscientific, my definition of social reconciliation is, essentially, that people are enabled and encouraged to become more fully human, to be who they are supposed to be as people in community.

## 1.2 Why the need for reconciliation?

South Africa is a nation traumatised by a past of racial segregation, economic exploitation, political oppression and violence. In order to start to deal with and overcome this past, South Africans must find a way of resolving their disputes of the past, of reconciling as one nation, and uniting as one people for the challenges of the future. At base, this is why I am interested in the subject of social reconciliation in South Africa. I think it is of utmost importance for the well-being of the South African people, and for the task of paving the way for a future of justice and peace.

South Africa's Interim Constitution, effective from 1993 to 1999 and entitled "On National Unity and Reconciliation", stated in its final clause, "The pursuit of national unity, the well-being of all South African citizens and peace require reconciliation between the people of South Africa and the reconstruction of society" (Cochrane, de Gruchy and Martin 1999:1). Although the dramatic changes of the early 1990s have passed, the need for transformation towards a new and reconciled society still exists. Sustained efforts at reconciliation continue to be necessary for positive nation-building, identity-formation, and overall societal healing and wholeness after the damage wreaked by apartheid.

The Zulu word *ukubuyisana* means “to come back to each other”, “to return to each other”, “to be reconciled” (Hay 1998:13). “Reconciliation is about transforming dehumanising situations and their personal and social consequences” (Hay 1998:15). It is a force that helps a community recover its dignity and honour, and human beings recover their humanity. Without reconciliation South Africa will remain impaired by its unhealed memories and disfigured by the effects of its anger, fear, guilt and shame of the past. According to Mfutso-Bengo (2001:16), the positive effects of reconciliation are felt “in all five cornerstones” of human life, viz. “religion, culture (race and gender), economics and ecology, politics”. In other words, reconciliation is needed for all these “cornerstone” aspects of human life to thrive. South African society’s religiosity and spirituality, culture and identity, economics and politics are all affected negatively by a state of non-reconciled existence. Just as persistent hostility and suspicion are detrimental to a society, reconciliation is a boon to society, and ought therefore to be sought with diligence and hope.

### 1.2.1 The TRC as a response to the problem of reconciliation

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission<sup>38</sup> was probably the most profound and overt sign that South Africans both need and desire social reconciliation. It was an example of the attempt to heal a nation’s past, deal with its memories, and move on into a reconstructed future. I argue below that the TRC was partially successful in beginning the reconciliation process by commencing the task of constructing a collective memory – and therefore a new identity – in and for South Africa.

Not only is the history of South Africa a complex one, but it is also profoundly traumatic. The trauma of the past, the morbidity of many of the actual events of the past, has produced a wide variety of memories. Different groups in South Africa have different memories concerning events – the same events – and throughout time, these memories have evolved within these diverse groups in varying ways. Different groups of South Africans have developed different stories about the same history. Part of the agenda of the TRC was to bring these different, and often divergent and contradictory, stories into the light, to illuminate the various strands of how history has been experienced and interpreted by different people. Special preference was given to those whose personal stories were imbued with particular trauma, and who had never been able to tell their stories, verbalise their memories, their understanding and perception of what happened in the past. In creating a space for the “unheard” to voice their stories, the TRC managed, if nothing more, to open the door to the possibility of a new reconstruction of the past, a new collective memory.<sup>39</sup>

As I have argued in section 1.1.2, narrative, i.e. telling our stories and listening to those of others, is very important in the shaping of a collective consciousness. A society’s self-knowledge depends on the stories it allows to dominate. The difficulty with society-shaping stories is that there are two aspects to be considered, viz. “experiences, events, evidences, and facts, and the stories that give these coherence, shape, and meaning. The question may be asked: what comes first, the stories by which we interpret and understand reality or the experiences that make up the reality?” (Balcomb 2000:53). Whatever the case, Balcomb insists that for South Africa today, the “first injunction” for establishing a collective story is to “listen” (2000:54). The “second injunction” is to “identify” – “It is not enough simply to listen to the stories of others. It is necessary to identify with them” (:55). This process “of entering into other stories may mean that my story is challenged

<sup>38</sup> The TRC consisted of a Committee on Amnesty (with three judges and two advocates), a Committee on Human Rights Violations, and a Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee (Meiring 1999:14-15; Kistner 1999:44).

<sup>39</sup> For an analysis of the concept of collective memory, and how the TRC process contributed to such a collective memory in South Africa, see my Master’s thesis (Nolte 2000). Also, for further discussions about collective memory, see Halbwachs (1992 [1941]) and Soyinka (2000).



or even shattered" (:56), which in effect constitutes an "epistemological crisis" (using a term coined by Alasdair MacIntyre) (:57).<sup>40</sup> But the "resolution of such epistemological crises is the construction of a new narrative" (:58) – which is indeed a good scenario for a society like South Africa, where it has become clear that the stories that have dominated in the past are faulty and inadequate. Therefore, according to Balcomb, the "third and final injunction" is to "recognise ... which stories mean much to which communities and why. And which stories mean nothing to which communities and why" (:59). And then indeed the community needs "to recognise which stories are looking old and haggard and are ready to die" (:60). In our quest for truth and reconciliation, a governing factor will have to be the "discovery of new stories" that can address the needs of the present and the future (:61). I argue that the TRC started this process of discovering a new South African story. It enabled this beginning by encouraging people to tell their stories, and to listen to others' stories and identify with them.

In her book, *Country of My Skull* (1998), Antjie Krog shows that people who engaged the TRC, and were willing to listen to "the other" collective memories emerging from it, were deeply challenged and ultimately changed. Krog claims that because of the narratives of those testifying in the hearings, "people can no longer indulge in their separate dynasties of denial" (1998:89). The individual groups' collective memories can no longer claim to stand on their own, they need to start acknowledging that there are other, different, strands in the South African story, of which their own may be small, problematic, or controversial.

In other words, through the TRC, people were invited to enter into dialogue about themselves and their past. Such dialogue may have been "the conversation of those who have begrudgingly come to realize that conversation is the only way out, because those who do not talk, fight" (Balcomb 1994:48), but it was nonetheless dialogue and interaction between groups of people who seldom if ever encountered one another on a footing of mutual respect and equality. An inevitable consequence of dialogue is that the stories of "the other" "stretch" us (McAfee Brown 1975:167). When in conversation, i.e. when interacting with another story, our normative story can be challenged. Other stories "both threaten and refine (even purge)" our normative stories. Effectively, through dialogue there can be and often is a construction of a new story. Therefore, exchanging stories can bring about either the validation, the destruction or alteration of one's own story (McAfee Brown 1975:168). Alternatively, "Hearing another story can force us to tell our own story in a different way" (McAfee Brown 1975:172).

Through being exposed to, and allowing herself to be challenged by, the collective memories of groups other than her own, Krog was able to start critiquing her own story; her own story was "stretched", to use McAfee Brown's term. Her encounter with other narratives helped her redefine and re-image her own story, and representatively, the story of Afrikaners and other whites who have chosen that path of vulnerability and self-examination (1998:131)<sup>41</sup>. This story inevitably involved (and still involves) the recognition of guilt, the need for remorse and repentance, and some form of reparation.<sup>42</sup> Krog's reflections illustrate that the only way forward for the purpose of real and lasting

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<sup>40</sup> See also McAfee Brown (1975:167ff).

<sup>41</sup> "When the Truth Commission started last year, I realized instinctively: if you cut yourself off from the process, you will wake up in a foreign country – a country that you don't know and that you will never understand."

<sup>42</sup> For whites self-examination involves a coming to terms with having been oppressors – perpetrators and/or benefactors – for decades. For blacks, self-examination involves a coming to terms with their having been victims for those same decades (see for example Biko 1978:29). In connection with this, see Mfutso-Bengo's (2001:92) comparison of the master complex (which involves a "superiority complex, greed, self-centred egoism, isolationism, paternalism") versus the slave complex (which involves aspects such as an "inferiority syndrome, coping syndrome, dependency syndrome, fatalism, shyness and naïve (sic), passivity, anarchy").

reconciliation among the groups of South Africa is for sincere conversation to start between the different groups and their narratives (see also Villa-Vicencio 1992:15), a process that was started with the TRC.

Bishop Tutu's appraisal of the TRC, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (1999), illustrates many instances of how in telling their stories, (mainly black) South Africans were given the opportunity to claim and own their past, to start understanding their situation – often a situation involving a lot of trauma – and to discover their identity as a traumatised, suffering people who have overcome much evil. The TRC displayed many examples of “how the act of telling one's story has a cathartic, healing effect” (Tutu 1999:226). For many, the TRC made it possible to tell their stories in a safe environment, and provided a space for them to come to terms with some of their own pain which was often suppressed. The TRC was “a place where people could come to cry, to open their hearts, to expose the anguish that had remained locked up for so long, unacknowledged, ignored and denied” (Tutu 1999:114).<sup>43</sup> Paul Verryn (1998:114) concurs with Tutu when he claims, “One of the most remarkable gifts that the TRC has given this nation has been the fact that so many people, who otherwise would not have been heard, have been given the opportunity to tell us their story. The profound healing that occurs as people tell their stories can never be over-estimated.” In view of these pronouncements, it may indeed be appropriate to ascribe to the TRC a “healing of memories”<sup>44</sup> – or the beginning thereof – for many of the victims. Indeed, one victim of apartheid who was heard at the TRC declared, “To be able to get everything off your chest brings healing ... I hope that everybody will experience this healing” (recorded in Meiring 1999:27). Piet Meiring (1999:25) relates the story of a woman whose son was tortured and killed violently by police:

It was difficult for the old mother to relate how the police eventually gave her an address where she could find her son. When she arrived there, it was the mortuary.<sup>45</sup> With her own hands she had to prepare her son's body – with the bullet wounds, a gaping wound on the back of his head, the burn marks where he was tortured – for the funeral. One could have heard a pin drop in the hall. ... “Madam, please tell me,” I asked, “you have come such a long way, over so many years, with your story. Yesterday you had to travel such a long distance to come here. All of us saw how difficult it was for you to tell the story of your son in front of all the people. Please tell me: Was it worth it?” The tear marks were still on her cheeks. But when she raised her head and smiled, it was like the dawn breaking: “Oh yes, Sir, absolutely! It was difficult to talk about all these things. But tonight, for the first time in sixteen years, I think I will be able to sleep through the night. Maybe tonight I will sleep soundly without having nightmares!”

The last example I want to mention is that of an old man – a political prisoner on Robben Island for twelve years – who was very embittered, and vowed never to forgive his perpetrators. After the TRC hearing at which he related his story “he was a totally different person. His bitterness was gone.” He said to his priest, “If I have to die now

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<sup>43</sup> Verryn (1998:113) points out that “the double insult lies in the fact that they (the victims of oppression) have been offended in the essence of their humanity through what has happened, and this has been exacerbated by the fact that their sorrow has never had a voice.”

<sup>44</sup> Father Michael Lapsley, himself a “victim” of apartheid (he was maimed by a mail bomb sent to him by the former National Party government), has started an “Institute for healing of memories” in Cape Town, which has as its main goal the reconciliation of peoples through joint honest dialogue with the past (see [www.healingofmemories.co.za](http://www.healingofmemories.co.za)). See also Kritzingner (1998:152), as s/he refers to the “reconciliation and restitution workshops” of the “Anglican project, inspired by Fr. Michael Lapsley.”

<sup>45</sup> Not surprisingly, for many the TRC implied a painful journey – a “via dolorosa” (Meiring 1999:48).

and arrive in Heaven, I will be able to forgive the perpetrators who did me wrong. I have found peace. I am reconciled" (recorded in Meiring 1999:99).<sup>46</sup>

The memories present in South Africa today are manifold, at odds with each other, and more or less traumatic in nature. I argue that the TRC at least in part initiated some ways to overcome the inevitable dilemma that this causes for the population of South Africa. The first, advocated by both Krog and Tutu, comprises active, sincere, and honest dialogue, and mutual listening among the groups whose collective memories differ and clash. In this dialogue, new stories may emerge that will portray more accurately and adequately the complexity of the South African past. As a society in deep transition and flux, South Africa cannot avoid this dialogue. "When society becomes too different from what it had been in the past and from the conditions in which these traditions had arisen, it will no longer find within itself the elements necessary to reconstruct, consolidate and repair these traditions" (Halbwachs 1992:160). In fact, South African society would not *want* to consolidate those ugly aspects of its tradition, and be proud of them, and build upon them<sup>47</sup>. "Society will then be obligated to adopt new values, that is, to rely on other traditions that are more closely in tune with present-day needs and tendencies" (:160). "Society consults other collective memories" (:156). Indeed, the second possibility on how to overcome the present dilemma in South African society is to draw upon other traditions and stories, other narratives, that are "more closely in tune with present day needs and tendencies". It will be "within the framework of [the] old notions and under the pretext of traditional ideas, that a new order of values would become elaborated" (Halbwachs 1992:160)<sup>48</sup>. It is the task of this dissertation to propose some such other traditions and stories upon which reconciliation and a new identity can be built. New paradigmatic frameworks need to be developed – or forgotten ones reinstalled – for South Africans struggling to free themselves from the bonds of the past, and yearning for a reconstructed future.

It has been proposed above that the need of contemporary South African society is to become reconciled, and start the necessary work of political, social and economic reconstruction. Inter-group dialogue, dialogue with an "other" narrative is the key to the fulfilment of this need. Sometimes, Halbwachs argues, "new ideas," new modes of operating and being in the world, "become formulated only in opposition to old ideas" (1992:85), and perhaps much of the old memories and narratives will have to be overcome or replaced by a new common collective memory. As a "new" society South Africa needs to not only consider and grapple with its past collective memories, but it also has to establish a new collective memory, which can be commonly owned. It will have to account for and celebrate the diversity of its people, restrict or marginalise no-one, and provide an identity for all. It also needs to be a "new" collective memory that equips the South African community for the struggles that lie in the future, instead of hampering its development. The new narrative of and for South Africans has to positively address their grievances and needs, not increase them.

The TRC paved the way for us South Africans to begin to "face the full implications of our move towards interaction, away from the past of artificial separation" (Ndebele 2000:146). It enabled "the recognition of an emergent balance, which hinges on a common awareness that the survival of South Africa is a common responsibility" (:147). De Gruchy is of the opinion that the TRC was a positive step in the direction of building a common moral culture in South Africa (2000:167-171). The rationale behind the TRC,

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<sup>46</sup> Kistner (2000:67) argues that the TRC indeed tried to promote a better understanding between perpetrators and victims, and facilitate forgiveness where possible.

<sup>47</sup> Halbwachs (1992:160) asserts, "Society feels hampered and restricted in institutions and ideas tailored to what its needs in the past were." It is obvious that the institutions and ideas that were forcefully dominant in South Africa before the nineties (would) hamper and restrict the society.

<sup>48</sup> "In this way the new structure was elaborated in the shadow of the old." (Halbwachs 1992:125)

he insists, was not primarily to reveal “the truth” about what happened during apartheid, but to provide a basis for a just moral order.<sup>49</sup>

The TRC offered an approach to reconstructing the past and creating a collective memory which sought to restore humanity to all groups and which sought to beckon forth a new and healed nation (Tutu 1999:34-35). Indeed one could argue that the TRC was about reconstructing the past in such a way that it may help the present South African society in its concerns and grievances. Many of those who participated in or have analysed the TRC have been challenged by the proceedings and the hearings, so that within them has occurred a slight, if not a major, shift in their understanding of themselves, their group, and the nation at large. The measures of the TRC have had the effect of preparing the reconstruction or interpretive reconfiguration of the past for many who have chosen to engage with it. According to Tutu, as the TRC attempts to rewrite history, it “offers a road map to those who wish to travel into our past” (quoted in Bonner and Nieftagodien n.d.:3). Similarly it represents a “symbolic way to close the past” (Hay 1998:135). The TRC’s

version of the truth and the past will probably become more influential in shaping public perceptions of our history.<sup>50</sup> It is for this reason, perhaps more than any other, that a critical evaluation of the TRC’s contribution to writing the country’s history is absolutely essential. (Bonner and Nieftagodien n.d.:24)

In summary, the TRC’s contribution was great in paving the way for the reconciliation process to begin. It “put on the public agenda issues like guilt, forgiveness, repentance and restitution,” claims Kistner (2000:67), thereby opening up possibilities for the different communities of South Africa to begin to acknowledge each other as somehow belonging together, and sharing a history. Indeed, the TRC represented a model of reconciliation that imparted a number of valuable results. For this, it ought to be congratulated.

### 1.2.2 Critiquing the TRC: identifying its limits

However, despite its strengths, there are a number of criticisms waged against the TRC which ought to be heard and taken seriously. In what follows I will outline in brief some of these shortcomings and inadequacies, as perceived by various scholars.

A major criticism is that the TRC did not account for the religious diversity of the South African community. Many Muslims, for example, did not identify with the TRC process and rationale, because it was conducted under subtle and sometimes even overt Christian rhetoric, and because the chairperson was openly Christian (Ntsimane 2000:25-26).<sup>51</sup> The TRC’s “Christian” *modus operandi* actually was “Western” in form and style (Meiring 1999:18-19).<sup>52</sup> “Christian” ways frequently implies “Western” ways, and are therefore considered by some – especially traditionalists – to be inadequate and even detrimental.<sup>53</sup> Radikobo Ntsimane (2000:21) says that “the TRC does not seem to have

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<sup>49</sup> The TRC succeeded in unveiling the gross picture of an unjust system (Kistner 1999:50). Indeed, “disclosing what has happened is its main contribution” (Kistner 2000:67).

<sup>50</sup> Harris (n.d.:2) suggests that the TRC authorised the articulation of a “metanarrative” of authority for South Africa.

<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, Nongogo (1998:55) laments that the TRC was “opportunistically occupied by members of the missionary churches”, and not by any African Initiated Church members.

<sup>52</sup> Pakendorf (n.d.:2) asserts that the TRC was “founded on an ethical-humanist discourse with powerful religious overtones, its ethos is essentially liberal and individualist”.

<sup>53</sup> The problem is that Christianity came to Africa in the guise of being a “civilisation”, claims Kwame Bediako (1992:226-266). From the onset in Africa, there was an association of Europe with Christendom (:228). And what Africa has had to deal with is not Christianity as such (or “the gospel”) but European ethnocentrism and its effects. This leads Bediako to see the African religious past as a theological problem (:234). Africans took on “European value-settings for the faith”; “what was observed in Africa was understood and interpreted, not in terms of Africa, but in terms of Europe” (:235). Hence, what occurred was an unfortunate confusion of Christianisation with westernisation (Bediako 1992:236).

considered the NIR's research on the different reconciliation processes in South Africa", especially those practised by various religious and cultural groups. In Zulu custom, for example, there is a particular ritual for reconciliation between disputing brothers, called *ukuthelana amanzi* (Ntsimane 2000:22-24, referring to Berglund 1976: 376-384). The Xhosa, too, have special ways and means to deal with rifts in social relationships (Ntsimane 2000:24). According to Ntsimane, the problem with the TRC is that it failed to take into serious consideration some of such "other" religious methods of dealing with social hostility and establishing reconciliation.<sup>54</sup> It is this particular criticism which is part of the motivation for this research and dissertation.

Many people participating in the TRC in fact could not identify with it, because its functioning was so foreign to them, and quite different from what they expected, or were accustomed to. To use an example, the differences between traditional African reconciliation and the TRC are significant (Ntsimane 2000:24). In traditional procedures, victims and relatives know the perpetrator(s) of the crime, the accused. The officiating mediatory persons are also known and respected by both feuding parties. Frequently, reconciliation involves self-cleansing, and rules out situations calling for cross-examination, as in the TRC. Traditional reconciliation procedure aims at the restoration of family or clan bonds, not just the exemption from prosecution. Moreover, peaceful coexistence is expected after the ritual reconciliation of feuding parties. Because the TRC proceedings were viewed as alien to traditional African sentiments, they were not fully acceptable to or accepted by many. Indeed, Ntsimane claims, "Some victims, not only those of the Zulu nation, have refused to shake hands with their perpetrators, mainly because of the lack of obvious remorse from the perpetrators, but also because they did not identify with the process" (:25).

Ntsimane poses a further critique of the TRC as being that the process did not evoke real contrition on the side of the perpetrators.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, the victimised frequently felt forced to "forgive" their wrongdoers, in an atmosphere of pressure and coercion (:30). The truth is, insists Ntsimane, "Forgiveness is elusive and it takes long to achieve" (:31). It cannot be forcibly brought about, and does not happen instantly. For this reason, too, he finds it problematic that in the case of the amnesty proceedings, it was the TRC commissioner, and not the victims, who decided on amnesty (:20).

Another theologian who articulates strong critiques of the TRC is Tinyiko Maluleke. In his essay "The Truth and Reconciliation Discourse: A Black Theological Evaluation" (1999b), he argues critically that the TRC failed in its attempt to make the stories of many blacks heard<sup>56</sup>. He insists that the "current reconciliation discourse" may have been perceived as a "silencing mechanism"<sup>57</sup> for especially the very poor black community, which was largely absent from the TRC (1999b:107)<sup>58</sup>. Ndebele (2000:143-156) even goes so far as to suggest that some view the TRC as a trick of the whites to keep the blacks at bay, under a kind of paralysed, silenced submission.

Bundy (2000) discusses the interplay of narrative, memory and power in the TRC process. He insists that it is always important to acknowledge that storytelling is a matter of power, and that it matters who tells which stories, and for what reasons. He considers whether the TRC Report may be considered an "official history", i.e. whether the TRC

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<sup>54</sup> Africans need to find norms "other than European ... for resolving conflicts". They need to rediscover the "use of indigenous cultures" in the reconciliation endeavour (Amadiume and An-Na'im 2000:18).

<sup>55</sup> Kistner (1999:41) agrees that while the TRC encouraged the disclosure of information and the acceptance of responsibility for wrong done, it did not emphasize enough the need for repentance (*Buße* in German). This aspect is sorely missing in the TRC, claims Kistner.

<sup>56</sup> Maluleke (1999a:223) insists, "the South African reconciliation debate largely excludes the Black, the poor and the marginalised – especially Black women".

<sup>57</sup> The TRC stifled social debate in the name of maintaining peace, claims Maluleke (1999a: 231).

<sup>58</sup> See also Maluleke (1999a:228). Kistner (2000:71), too, agrees that the TRC was exclusive of many South Africans.

and its report represent South Africans as a whole, and can therefore be adopted by all. In criticism against certain aspects of the TRC procedure, Bundy (2000:20) claims,

Because of its analytical deficiencies, the TRC may not so much forge a new collective memory as facilitate social amnesia. And, parented by compromise, there is a final, ironic risk. The TRC and its charismatic chairperson committed themselves to nation-building. But will the Report help to build a single nation in the longer term, or will it legitimise a lopsided structure – two nations disguised as one, a hybrid social formation consisting of ‘increasingly deracialised insiders and persistently black outsiders’?

Kaizer Nyatumba, too, views the TRC with reserve. He declares,

The country cannot be said to be much more reconciled at the moment as a result of the Commission. Indeed, it is my contention that fault lines are developing daily in our society, and that unless the new tensions are handled carefully, the once much-talked-about Rainbow Nation will prove to have been a very useful marketing tool, which was actually a charade. (Nyatumba 2000:93)

Many scholars criticise the seeming “blanket equalisation” of everybody in the TRC (Maluleke 1999a:229), and the resulting view that justice is not a necessary element of reconciliation (:237). Others bemoan the fact that the TRC confined itself to investigating only gross human rights violations between 1960 and 1994 (Bonner and Nieftagodien n.d.:1; Amadiume and An-Na'im 2000:5<sup>59</sup>). Furthermore,

the final report lacks a critical and substantive engagement with the myriad complexities that constituted the ‘context’ within which violence occurred, as well as the varied and cumulative causal processes. It opts for sweeping generalisations and its findings are invariably constructed to fit into the pre-determined categories of victim and perpetrator. (Bonner and Nieftagodien n.d.:4)

The TRC, claim certain critics, ignored local peculiarities, and fell “short of providing a comprehensive treatment of many events and of important processes” (Bonner and Nieftagodien n.d.:4). Indeed, it failed to illustrate how complex “the picture of causation” was (:5), and did not uncover the complexity of the situation which was “replete with conspiracy, complicity and betrayals” (:7). It can be argued that the “TRC imposed restrictions on itself by primarily operating within a framework defined by the dichotomy of perpetrator and victim” and thereby tended to forward a view of “mono-causality and simplicity” (:8).<sup>60</sup> Pakendorf agrees that the TRC was guilty of simplifying a complicated history. It promoted a “binarism of perpetrator and victim” which was generally “conflated with the racial divide of white and black” (Pakendorf n.d.:2).<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, there was often a focus on “personal suffering and pain, and on individual responsibility and guilt”, which tended to shrink the broader picture of systemic and structural injustice (Pakendorf n.d.:2).<sup>62</sup> The TRC focussed on individual and personal hurt and guilt, thereby diminishing the impact of structural evil. Little attention was paid to structural human rights violations such as forced removals (Kistner 2000:71). The relentless focus on individuals resulted in making systemic injustices (e.g. the crime of Bantu-education, pass laws and the homeland system) seem less conspicuous. The constant emphasis on victims and sufferers also led to the failure of adequately paying attention to those who benefited from the system and were indifferent to its malevolence.

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<sup>59</sup> The TRC had a “memory limited to 30 years” (Amadiume and An-Na'im 2000:5).

<sup>60</sup> The example of Kathorus violence in the early nineties shows that one cannot talk of simple “mono-causality” (Bonner and Nieftagodien n.d.:8ff). Kathorus suggests “a more nuanced history” where causes and contexts were multiple and varied (:10, 23, 24). The violence which occurred there was not just about a power struggle between the ANC and Inkatha, but involved other issues such as discrepancies between migrants and locals, squatters and hostel dwellers and taxi/transportation problems.

<sup>61</sup> Some argue that the TRC’s version of truth “was established through narrow lenses”, reflecting only the experiences of a small minority – so-called “victims” and “perpetrators” (Mamdani 2000:178).

<sup>62</sup> Amadiume (2000:5) claims the actual system of apartheid itself was not overtly blamed.

Beneficiaries of the system were not really called to responsibility (Kistner 1999:48). Too little focus was placed on economic injustice and the widening schism between the rich and the poor. Too little attention was spent on the urgency of social and economic reform (Kistner 1999:49).

Atrocities committed during the period from 1990 to 1994 were underrepresented and underemphasised at the TRC because some people “were especially worried that revelations of atrocities could unsettle the fragile peace that had been created in the post-1994 period”. This reflects the in-built “tension between uncovering the truth and achieving reconciliation” in the TRC (Bonner and Nieftagodien n.d.:7). In connection with this criticism, Harris (n.d.:14) notes that not all voices that spoke were taken seriously, and some were skewed and shaped to fit into the “national story”. In certain cases, people’s stories were “subjugated” in order that they correspond to the trend of the national narrative (Harris n.d.:15). People and their stories that did not fit into the “national story” were not tolerated.<sup>63</sup> Harris condemns the TRC’s attempted construction of a national narrative as contrived, and alleges,

the narrative history created by the TRC was neither real nor innocent but was a construction whose credibility depended upon the credibility of the sources and the evidence upon which it was based. The history empowered by the TRC was shaped by the commission and by requirements for nation building. The latter was dependent on the certainty of the narrative that the TRC was creating. (Harris n.d.:20)

According to Harris, the TRC was about the creation of “illusions” in the process of interpreting the past, and ought to be denounced for that (Harris n.d.:16).

No doubt, the TRC opened wounds (Amadiume and An-Na’im 2000:5). The South African “burden of memory” has not yet adequately been “exorcized” (Soyinka 2000:29). South Africa’s “crisis of identity” has not yet been solved satisfactorily (Amadiume and An-Na’im 2000:17). Perhaps Kistner (2000:71) is right when suggesting that the TRC raised too-high expectations that could not, realistically, be fulfilled by it. Part of the problem might be, as Maluleke (1999a:224) suggests, that the TRC, as an *instrument* of reconciliation, has been erroneously confused with the *process* and the *ideal* of reconciliation.

Many scholars – critics and supporters of the TRC alike – agree that there is a need for more work, as well as a wider debate, when it comes to reconciliation in South Africa (Maluleke 1999a:225). There are “a number of areas of the process of social reconciliation which still need to be pursued” (Hay 1998:164). There is no doubt that the healing process must be continued (Kistner 1999:50). The above-mentioned criticisms and challenges pitted against the TRC need to be acknowledged and taken seriously. Indeed, there is a range of other shortcomings that can be listed. Instead of considering all of them in depth, however, I would like to move toward a more creative interaction with the limitations and deficiencies of the TRC by suggesting possible ways forward. My view is that the TRC has laid a good and suitable foundation for the work of reconciliation. But this work cannot and did not end with the TRC. South Africa must build on and enhance, modify and develop what was started in the TRC process. Below are some ideas as to how the failings of the TRC can be remodelled into future challenges and possibilities for social reconciliation in South Africa.

### 1.2.3 Possible ways forward from the TRC endeavour

In this section, I seek to sketch some possible ways of expanding and enhancing the work begun by the TRC, as well as opportunities arising from the TRC process. What was started by the TRC has the possibility of developing and unfolding new horizons.

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<sup>63</sup> Kistner (2000:71) remarks that the TRC unconsciously imposed conditions of compliance on people. Those heard at the Commission had to agree with the terms of reference implied by the Commission.

Boraine (2000:76), for example, suggests that there ought to be continued “mini-commissions”, further story telling and truth telling initiatives, beyond the TRC. Not only victims and perpetrators, but also secondary sufferers and beneficiaries of injustices can and ought to become involved in the process of truth telling (Kistner 1999:47).<sup>64</sup> The stories that have shaped people’s lives should be continued to be told, heard and recorded.

From a historian’s perspective, Harris (2000:122) is of the opinion that “the material archiving of orality is a valuable endeavour, especially in a country like ours, where so many are illiterate and so many stories have been suppressed for generations”. It is indeed a valid suggestion to endeavour to record as many stories as possible about the past, about ordinary people – what they experienced and how they coped – a process that has been started in the TRC. But, Harris cautions,

no matter how hard we try, how carefully and sensitively we work, in converting orality to material custody we unavoidably relocate authority (or dislocate authority), and we separate voices from their words. This can be liberating, subversive, a fostering of contestation. But it can also be, can become, a form of dispossession. So it is imperative that we – that any society – strive to ensure that at least as many resources as are committed to archiving orality are deployed in fostering storytelling as living archive. An orality which is healthy is infinitely bigger than its material expression. We are all storytellers. Our stories sustain us, carry our values, our beliefs, our identities. Yet how readily do we – as individuals and as collectives – surrender possession of this priceless resource? We are our stories. Archiving them should be one way – a small way – in which we live them. (Harris 2000:122)

The TRC gave some people the chance to tell their stories. Their invitation to, and presence at, TRC hearings was an example of storytelling “as a living archive”. I interpret Harris to argue for more forums at which people can produce living archive material by telling their stories, and by sharing with the broader community their resources for survival. This would be, one may argue, an augmentation of what was initiated by the TRC. Balcomb argues that stories are central to the functioning of society and its self-understanding. Indeed, he insists on the “centrality of narrative as a fundamental epistemological category” (2000:54), and would therefore be an advocate of extended arenas for storytelling. Ambrose Moyo, too, pleads for more spaces in which people can narrate their experiences. He underlines the importance of storytelling, and relates it to concepts such as truth telling and confession. To Moyo, storytelling is a crucial element in the path of confession, penitence and forgiveness, which in turn are necessary for reconciliation (Moyo 2002:300).

Indeed, a continued agenda resulting from the TRC is the facilitation of encounters between people in order for them to share their stories and, with that, their lives. “Since not every case could be heard and investigated, some groups of survivors formed *Khulumane* (‘speak out’) groups where they could share their stories, gain strength from one another, and decide what they collectively wanted to say to the commission,” explains Wink (1998:49).<sup>65</sup> Some of these *Khulumane* groups remained active even after the conclusion of the TRC, as support and counselling groups, and indeed still exist today. Initiatives such as *Khulumane* remain to be relevant and important in the reconciliation endeavour, since they help to foster community and solidarity among people.

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<sup>64</sup> See also Villa-Vicencio (2000:27).

<sup>65</sup> It is true that the TRC had a limited capacity to create a space for sharing and healing for everyone. Its budgetary and time constraints ought, however, not to be interpreted as intentional exclusivism or an unwillingness to cater for all South Africans.



South Africans, like other people belonging to nations with a past of conflict and hostility, need to practise the “art of re-remembering” (Müller-Fahrenheit 1996:36-39).<sup>66</sup> This artful skill involves “deep remembering in politics and public life” (:42ff), and the establishment of collective memories (:49-59). South Africans need to continue the work begun by the TRC and seek to find answers to the questions, “What kind of language, gestures, signs and symbols will the other side understand? How can collectives be helped to engage in the art of remembering?” (:60). In answering these questions, they will have to work “toward a more precise grammar of deep remembering; in other words, the public must be trained to learn a new code of symbolic conduct that reflects our transnational values and objectives” (:64). Indeed,

The art of remembering requires a new kind of literacy that aims at developing an adequate awareness of the historical legacies of other peoples and the depth of our mutual involvement. If it is in their memories that peoples form their sense of their own selves as well as their images of others, then it is only in sharing such memories that they will be able to reach new images of togetherness and mutual accountability. (Müller-Fahrenheit 1996:64)

This is a moral and ethical task. Yet it is also a political task, as “working on such images of connectedness must be regarded as a vital component of politics. It is part of public culture and of ‘public relations’, in the best sense of that term” (:64).

Under all circumstances, working on reconciliation “with or without the TRC” will prove to be a long and gruelling procedure, “an uphill battle” (Van Zyl Slabbert 2000:72). What was begun in cursory steps – i.e. truth-telling, identity formation, the building of a moral culture, the creation of a “national narrative” or a collective memory, etc. – will have to be continued. The stories that will help South Africans find themselves and each other “will be exposed to us through research, drama, literature, journalism and film” (:71).<sup>67</sup> Van Zyl Slabbert cautions that the TRC and its initiatives – though helpful – will not be able to bring about the much-required social reconciliation without broader assistance. Since reconciliation involves justice and equality, the state, the courts, and the economic apparatus will have to be involved in the process. Indeed he warns, “If the political leadership does not want to set the example, the TRC and the courts will not be able to do it” (:71). Public figures such as politicians have to be part of the process, and indeed provide the impetus for it. They have to lead by the “awe-inspiring power of example”<sup>68</sup>. For example, they have to demonstrate through public cleansing rituals “loaded with the symbolism of atonement-forgiveness-reconciliation” that they want reconciliation to occur (:65).<sup>69</sup> Through such examples the nation will be encouraged to participate in the quest for social healing.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> In light of the pain Africa has suffered, Kiogora (1996:29) highlights the importance of Africans “re-remembering ourselves”, re-remembering “our dismembered body”.

<sup>67</sup> An example of such work includes a compelling play written by John Kani, called “Nothing but the truth”. Also, a recent movie that deals with the problem of reconciliation in South Africa is “Forgiveness”.

<sup>68</sup> For example, leaders should apologise symbolically for the evil of the past, and their possible collusion with the forces of injustice (Boraine 2000:78).

<sup>69</sup> Indeed, such public cleansing rites have already been performed, often in connection with the establishment of Freedom Park, close to Pretoria. However, I argue that the continuing need for cleansing and healing ceremonies is not yet met.

<sup>70</sup> See section 1.1.2 where I mention a number of other scholars’ views on how the work of the TRC can be furthered. For example, Burton (2000:113) highlights the role of NGOs, faith communities, educational institutions and individuals in promoting a spirit and suitable times and spaces for truth- and story-telling to occur. She considers the potential establishment of, for example, “Centres of Memory” in libraries or schools, “Healing of memories” groups or workshops, and a public reparation fund to demonstrate communities’ commitment to restorative justice. Ntsimane (2000:31) adds organised cross-cultural visits between blacks and whites to the list of suggestions for the practical furtherance of the work of the TRC on a local, informal level. Rassool et al (2000:116-117) suggest additional ways in which the work of the TRC can and ought to be developed, e.g. by organising ceremonies such as a “National Day of Remembrance”, the construction of a “national Wall of Remembrance”, or the building of a special archive. Further signs

Part of the ongoing work of reconciliation is to provide some form of restitution or compensation for victims of apartheid injustice. Meiring identifies “a humble list of needs” produced by victims who appeared before the TRC:

Nearly everybody wanted information, wanted to know what had happened to them or their loved ones, and why. Others requested that photographs and other personal possessions confiscated at the time, should be returned, or that the mortal remains of a husband or child be brought home for reinterment. Some requested gravestones, which they could not afford at the time of death. ... Others raised the point of medical care and housing, or talked about the need for a special day of reconciliation in the country. The strangest, and saddest, request came from Mrs Mhlawuli who wanted her husband’s hand, which was severed by the police at the time and kept as deterrent in a bottle of formalin, to be returned to the family. They wanted to bury it. (Meiring 1999:26)

Compensating for some of the losses and hurts people felt – be it through symbolic gesture or material recompense – may help to pave the way for reconciliation to happen.

Mark Hay, like many other scholars, insists that the TRC was important, but that its work has to be advanced. He asserts, “Reconciliation will not simply happen; there are steps and rituals that are necessary to foster reconciliation” (1998:113). Reconciliation is a journey of discovery for all who participate (:129), but this journey has to be embarked upon consciously and deliberately, and with the will to struggle and be challenged.

Hay commends the way the TRC gave South Africans a “symbolic way to close the past” (:135). He emphasises how both individuals and communities find remarkable benefit from rituals employed for this purpose. Rituals “can be important mechanisms for healing and reconciling” (:135). According to Hay, the TRC with its emphasis on storytelling was an expression of “the social dimension of reconciliation” that makes “human, ritual sense” (:93). One of Hay’s emphases in his programme for reconciliation is “the ritual development of the stages of social reconciliation.” He insists that South Africans will have to invest energy in “the emergence of local rituals which will assist the process of reconciliation” (:164-165).

In connection to his accent on ritual development, Hay highlights the church’s duty to actively support the work of the TRC (1998:158), for example through programmes or small faith-sharing groups (:159) that are based on the truth and reconciliation rationale. He suggests a specific programme stemming from his own religious tradition which could be and already is being implemented in certain Christian church communities. This programme includes a special approach to church seasons (called the “Renew approach”) based on the three moments of remembering, engaging and remedying (:159-160).<sup>71</sup>

One of the TRC commissioners, Bongani Finca, also stresses the importance of religious faith communities in the reconciliation process. Specifically, he posits that there is a special set of tasks to be undertaken by “Christians and Christian leaders” that are fuelled by the TRC scheme and *raison d’être*.

We should be the voices of the victims and participate in the therapeutic interventions that are necessary to deal with the trauma an injury caused in their lives. They need support in order to deal with the haunting memories of conflict and their experiences of dehumanisation. Only then can those memories be blessed and the heroism of the past celebrated. The church must lead the world in

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that can be established for the purpose of furthering reconciliation and healing are special museums (:118), truth monuments and commemorative landmarks (:121). Moreover, tracing the remains of persons’ bodies would be significant for the reconciliation process. Rassool et al, too, call for initiatives for exhumation, reburials, and ceremonies of mourning, as well as what they call “rituals of death and the journeys and presentations of the body” (:126), i.e. ceremonies in which bodies of deceased or missing persons are honoured.

<sup>71</sup> I elaborate on this programme in more detail in section 3.4.

the process. There is an area, which is closest to us as a church: that of reconciliation. Our country will not know enduring stability and peace until it receives wholesome healing and reconciliation. (Finca 2000:18)

Finca argues that South African Christians ought to lead by example in “reaching out to each other in a spirit of true repentance – understanding, forgiveness, love and restitution”. The Christian community should initiate programmes “within the church to build bridges, to open windows, to ventilate the house through constructive debate”, to build “bridges across racial barriers, language barriers, status barriers, wealth barriers, sexual orientation barriers, gender barriers, age barriers - to name only a few”, to become “a non-racial model that we can show to secular society” (Finca 2000:19).<sup>72</sup>

Besides initiatives arising from the TRC momentum that can be adopted and unfolded by faith communities and religious institutions, there are also “secular” aspects of reconciliation that may not be ignored, but must be nurtured. For example, “Human rights education is also a priority” (Hay 1998:160). Connected to this is the value of “reflection and education in cross-cultural richness in the Church and society” (:160). Hay claims that an important move toward social reconciliation in the aftermath of the TRC is the national fostering of a “culture of learning, teaching and serving ..., especially in our educational institutions. Our education must also facilitate a holistic view of being a person – a human way of living and a way of being decent human beings” (:160).

Finally, the importance of not separating the question of reconciliation from the question of justice must again be stressed.<sup>73</sup> The endeavours of the TRC to start a process toward social reconciliation can only be considered to have been successful to the extent they included at their core endeavours to establish justice, equality and peace.<sup>74</sup> Referring to the Kairos Document, Moyo insists that reconciliation is not possible in South Africa without justice. He strongly criticises any attempt to promote what he calls cheap reconciliation. In relation to this, he addresses the issue of land ownership as a crucial point in the discussion. With reference to his home country Zimbabwe, and South Africa, he declares, “reconciliation between black and white ... cannot be achieved without solving the issue of land ownership” (Moyo 2002:298). One could then say that what is needed after the TRC is a holistic approach to the question of reconciliation (:295), where the relationship between justice and reconciliation remains inseparable.

The TRC was not able to finish the work of creating a new and improved public ethos, a national narrative that will ensure a prosperous and peaceful future. To be sure, it may only be regarded as one (limited and fallible) impetus in the right direction. What will have to remain on the agenda of South African public life are the will and the concrete action to develop such a culture. And this will involve “walking through history together” (Müller-Fahrenheit 1996:64) – revisiting each other’s history, listening to others’ interpretations of this history, engaging in a process of rereading and rewriting history together (:65), and publicly acknowledging the histories of our country (:66), amongst other things. Part of the endeavour comprises the need for “opportunities for committed persons ... to interpret to each other how it feels to have to live with a certain history.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> South Africa after the TRC has to identify the present time as its “*kairos*, a blessed and critical moment, for the creation of local covenants and schemes of cooperation to heal the deep divisions that mark the South African society”, as a time to “work for ministries of trust” (Müller-Fahrenheit 1996:98).

<sup>73</sup> See also sections 1.1.2 and 1.1.3, where I discuss the characteristics of a viable definition of reconciliation.

<sup>74</sup> According to Müller-Fahrenheit, elements of a politics of reconciliation would include instituting the primacy of the judiciary (1996:94), restoring the face of justice (:95) by, for example, considering ways for the implementation of distributive justice mechanisms (:96), and setting up of structures of symbolic communication about truth and reconciliation.

<sup>75</sup> New schools across ethnic, cultural divides, new “educational awareness” ought to be a priority (Müller-Fahrenheit 1996:67). Furthermore, there is a need for “connecting signs and symbols”, e.g. the introduction of shared holidays and celebrations (:67), days of remembrance (:69), and the acknowledgement of sites with special historical connotations (:70).

One ought to emphasise that the suggestion is not “that people should give up their national and ethnic canopies. But people need to create some space between their canopies so that they can meet each other without ‘trespassing’,” claims Müller-Fahrenheit (1996:67). Effectively, the new guiding model in civil society should not be interpreted as a clash of stories, but their connectedness, “not insistence on separate identities but training in inclusiveness”. South Africa should strive for acknowledging unity in diversity (Müller-Fahrenheit 1996:72; see also Volf 1996:63-65). The challenge is to accept and celebrate our differences of culture (Villa-Vicencio 1995:107) and insist that we can co-exist, and build a common nation and identity “in diversity and difference” (:105).

### ***Conclusion***

In this section I have considered the South African TRC as an example of the attempt to heal a nation’s past, deal with its memories, and move on into a reconstructed future. The idea of collective memory, and the need for the creative reconfiguration of memory has been discussed. As much as I agree with Tutu, Krog and many others, who laud the TRC and its achievements, I also acknowledge the valid criticisms waged against it. For this reason, I have isolated a number of the most obvious shortcomings of the TRC. Finally, it is my contention that more has to be done in order for reconciliation to take root in South Africa, for the process which has begun in small and hesitant steps to be continued. The TRC might have been the start of great things, but they have by no means come to full fruition yet. The work of the TRC, and other reconciliation initiatives needs to be developed, expanded and enhanced. It is for this reason, ultimately, that this dissertation is being written: to provide other, perhaps to some degree more holistic and enhanced, paradigms for the process of social reconciliation in the torn and broken context of South Africa.

### **1.3 A possible way forward: identifying resources from African tradition and Christianity, and dialogue between the two**

I have argued so far that the reconciliation endeavour initialised by the TRC needs to be pursued in an ongoing way. Furthermore, new approaches at reconciliation ought to avoid making the same mistakes the TRC made. The question therefore arises in what way reconciliation ought to be undertaken in the aftermath of the TRC. As shown in the previous section, the TRC proceedings did not account for the religious diversity of the South African community. According to some scholars, the problem with the TRC is that it failed to take into serious consideration some of the “other” religious and cultural methods of dealing with social hostility and establishing reconciliation. In particular, it did not take into real consideration the value and potency of African indigenous traditions and religious practices. This is the reason why I am particularly interested in what African indigenous tradition can recommend for fostering social reconciliation in South Africa.

South Africa is a deeply religious society in which religious symbols, paradigms and practices play a profound role in the every-day life experiences of its people (Smit 1986:84). Many sociologists have argued that religion plays a crucial role in communities’ symbolic construction of reality<sup>76</sup>, and that religious paradigms can be strong forces in societal transformation and/or stabilisation processes. South Africa has many different religious resources to tap into for this endeavour, resources which may have a lot to offer in terms of guiding South Africans on the path toward social reconciliation. Claims Mbiti (1990:268-9),

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<sup>76</sup> See for example Berger and Luckmann (1967) and Geertz (1975).

Singly, jointly or in competition, the religions in Africa should be able to exert a force and make a contribution in creating new standards, morals and ethics suitable for our changing society. ... In practical terms, religion has a role to play in cultivating reconciliation, harmony, peace and security with and within oneself, the community, the nation and the universe.

Perhaps the two most prevalent religious traditions operating in South African society are African traditional religion and Christianity. According to the 2001 census, 80% of all South Africans claim to be Christian (Hendriks & Erasmus 2005:98). This means that well over two-thirds of South Africa's population considers Christianity to be a source of guidance and power in their lives. An investigation into what Christianity has to offer to the social reconciliation endeavour is justified on the grounds that a large majority of South Africans would be included in and addressed by such an investigation. 40.8% of all South Africans belong to African Initiated Churches (Hendriks & Erasmus 2005:98), i.e. churches that are strongly influenced by indigenous African cultural norms and religious practices. In other words, well over a third of South Africa's population has strong connections to African tradition, and consider it to be a source of wisdom and power in their daily lives.<sup>77</sup> An examination of African traditional resources for reconciliation is justified because such an examination would have the power to address and take seriously a large number of South Africans.

African tradition has often been neglected or ignored in academic discourse concerning social issues<sup>78</sup>, which is exactly why I find it a topic warranting deeper investigation and study. Often African traditional religion has been on the receiving end of social, cultural and religious domination, so that it might prove to be a delicate task to uncover its hidden stories, and hear its silenced voices.<sup>79</sup> (The question of the subjugation of African tradition will be discussed more fully in section 1.5.) Indeed, as some critics of the TRC indicate, the often silent or hidden resources of African tradition were not accessed and utilised adequately in the TRC process. This observation exposes an urgent need to uncover and then apply those resources African tradition has to offer, in order to enhance and diversify the South African reconciliation enterprise.

As outlined in section 0.1, the first objective underlying this study is that I wish to establish what African tradition has to offer for social reconciliation. In order to fulfil this objective, paradigms of reconciliation in the African tradition will be explored. I argued so far that there is a serious need for such exploration, since the potential resources lodged within African tradition have been underemphasised or ignored by broader South African society for far too long. It is time for African tradition to speak to the nation, and be heard. It is time that adherents and practitioners of African tradition and religion be acknowledged as equal dialogue partners in the quest for reconciliation.

From the above assertions it becomes clear that the initial task of this dissertation is to rediscover and document some African traditional ideas and practices which deal

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<sup>77</sup> "Statistically it would seem that the adherents to African religion have decreased due to conversions to these new religions of Africa, but in reality this is only a face value. People continue to be influenced by and to treasure African religion in their total life, whether they acknowledge it or not. ... That calls for deeper understanding of African religion and its encounter with other religions, a process which has hardly started" (Summary Report from the Working Group on African Religion 2002:11-12). Indeed, African religion has not been wiped out, but is alive and thriving (:13).

<sup>78</sup> Kirby (1994:67) asserts, "Western philosophical renderings of traditional African religions are only recently adding courses in African theology that are very cautiously constructed to avoid any conflict arising from the still prevalent negative interpretation." See also Mwakabana (2002:145) who highlights the need for study of African religion and its values in theological institutions.

<sup>79</sup> Since the time of the missions, Christians have "neglected the value of African religiosity", and have not actively engaged in "dialogue between African religion and Christianity". This is so because African religion was branded with a false stigma which "suppressed and even silenced open discussion and objective evaluation" (Summary Report 2002:12-13). Even today, "in some Christian circles the positive value of culture, tradition and spirituality that derive from African religion are undermined" (Mwakabana 2002:145).

with social reconciliation. South Africa may experience enrichment if it is exposed to the (sometimes suppressed, sometimes forgotten) resources of the African heritage, and has the courage to tap into these resources instead of banishing them from its auspices as “pagan”, “primitive” or simply irrelevant. Perhaps, as Jon Kirby maintains, such dialogue may encourage and free Africans “to revitalise old symbols and use them in new and creative ways” (1994:67).

Traditional (South) African society possesses ways and means for communities to work for reconciliation and establish unity and peace among divided parties. This traditional wisdom still has a place in the life of many South Africans, and indeed occupies great meaning in many communities, as the 2001 census results suggest. It will be argued that the African traditional worldview is an apt foundation for a reconciliatory view of reality. African religion and spirituality, philosophy and anthropology (exemplified in the *ubuntu* way of life) provide a myriad of reconciliatory paradigms. On a more practical and applied level, I will draw attention to certain traditional legal procedures that aim at social reconciliation, as well as traditional rituals of reconciliation. It will be shown that ritual often plays a major role in indigenous reconciliation practices, and can be a compelling resource for overcoming social enmity and strife.

The second objective underlying this dissertation is that I wish to establish what the Christian faith has to offer for social reconciliation. I contend that Christian faith has a host of valuable resources for social reconciliation that offer themselves to the process. The main reason for my choosing to discuss the Christian tradition vis-à-vis the African tradition has been pointed out above. Christianity is a strong influence in many people’s lives and therefore it warrants conscientious investigation. Another reason why I include an analysis of Christian reconciliation paradigms in this study is that I am a Christian theologian. It is my calling and my duty, not to mention my area of expertise, to promulgate what the Christian faith has to offer, especially in matters pertaining to societal wholeness. Some of Christianity’s resources for reconciliation that will be elaborated include the Biblical witness, the narrative of the cross and resurrection, the inter-linked concepts of sin, repentance and forgiveness, and the church as reconciling community and institution.

One of the hypotheses upon which this dissertation is based is that African tradition and Christianity can dialogue efficaciously with reference to reconciliation in South Africa. I am aware that in the past “comparisons” between African tradition and Christianity have mostly resulted in a denigration and vilification of the former. Christianity has been the dominant, even hegemonic, religion (see section 1.5 below). In other words, the “dialogue” that has existed between the two faith systems has so far usually been one-sided and tinged with paternalism and subjugation. It has not been dialogue on an equal footing. Therefore, the need is great for interaction between the two traditions which is *not* about domination or subjugation, competition or defamation. This dissertation seeks to contribute to such dialogue “on a level playing field”. I am convinced that such dialogue is necessary, and can contribute to the solving of some of our society’s problems. I agree with Terence Ranger (1994:276) that in spite of the differences between them, there exist “natural points of contact” between Christian and African traditional ideas and practices. African tradition and Christianity can interact in a way that enhances the overall community instead of drawing up frontier lines and establishing power discrepancies. More specifically, the two religious traditions can dialogue fruitfully with reference to social reconciliation in South Africa, and indeed have the urgent duty to do so.

## 1.4 Approaches to inter-religious and cultural dialogue: exclusivism, inclusivism or pluralism?

This thesis represents a study in religious and cultural dialogue. For this reason I find it important to outline which theoretical approaches can be used when doing such research, and which option I choose in this study. Much scholarly discussion has already ensued concerning the question of the relationship among the religions of the world.<sup>80</sup> In what follows, I will give a brief analysis of the three positions mentioned in the title of this section, as they have been elaborated by their various proponents. I will also indicate a particularly Lutheran theological approach to the subject. Finally, I intend to offer an evaluation of all of the mentioned approaches in light of their efficacy and viability for inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue. Throughout this section, I keep in mind the specific question of dialogue between Christianity and African tradition.

### 1.4.1 Exclusivism

Before the early part of the twentieth century little scientific work was done in the field of ecumenism and religious dialogue. The scene started changing only when at the 1928 World Missionary Conference in Jerusalem the rift between missionaries (i.e. those who had come in actual contact with religions other than Christianity, including indigenous tribal religions) and European theologians became evident. The former urged theological scholarship to begin to tackle the thorny issues and delicate questions arising out of Christianity's encounter with other religious systems once and for all. The 1930s, then, saw the dawn of a new direction in theology in which ecumenism and "world church" became hot topics.

Within this theological climate, but also in response to the tense European situation of the time, Karl Barth started his elaboration of so-called dialectical theology, which had a number of predecessors (e.g. the theology of Paul Althaus). This was a systematisation of, among other themes, the radicalness and exclusivity of Christianity (see for example Barth 1983 [1947]:96ff; 1960:726ff; 1955:695ff; 1959:780ff).<sup>81</sup> A common motif of dialectical theology is that Christianity is to be seen over and against other religions, that it stands in antithesis to other religious systems by virtue of its unequivocal and unique message of salvation. The implicit notion is that Christianity is not only in opposition, but also superior, to other faiths. Such Christian theological *exclusivism* was typical for that era of theological discourse in the West, viz. the 1930s to about the 1950s.

### 1.4.2 Inclusivism

Some decades later, in the 1960s, the discipline which came to be known as "theology of religion", which saw the need to grapple with more distinction and care with the question of the validity of other religious and cultural forms, established itself in an academic-theological arena which no longer felt comfortable with the stark exclusivism prevailing earlier. Paul Tillich, with his notion of the "latent church" (1986:341ff; 1981:288-300)<sup>82</sup>, and Karl Rahner, with his idea of the "anonymous Christian" (1968:545-554; 1970:498ff), were among the earliest and strongest proponents of what came to be known in the

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<sup>80</sup> This theoretical discussion has occurred mainly in the Western-Christian sphere, perhaps because Western Christendom has over the past centuries come into contact with the world's religions, and has had to come to terms with the fact that interaction between the various belief systems is fraught with challenging difficulties. In addition, Christianity, with its universal claim to truth and salvation for all humankind, and its missionary momentum, has always been compelled to prove its validity and universality, especially in the face of religions which also claim to bear universal truth.

<sup>81</sup> See also Klappert's chapter entitled "Versöhnung der Welt nur durch Jesus Christus" (1994:53ff). For a reference to Althaus, see his chapter entitled "Gegenwart des Heils in der Kirche" (1959:494ff).

<sup>82</sup> See also Lai's analysis of Tillich's theology (1994).

theology of religion as *inclusivism*.<sup>83</sup> Though not as unyielding and staunch as the exclusivists, the inclusivists also hold that at base the guiding principle for human religious life is the Christian gospel. Christianity is the centre, the blueprint, and the starting point for religious discourse. Although truth and wisdom may be found in other religions, most inclusivists hold that Christianity is the final and ultimate religion, the standard of all faith traditions. The reason why they are called “inclusivist” is because they claim – to varying degrees – that the Christian message is inclusive of other (implied is less “advanced” or “developed”, inevitably inferior) religious messages, and acts as the umbrella religion for all. The principle is not Christianity *versus* other religions (as with exclusivism), but other religions *contained in* Christianity.

### 1.4.3 Pluralism

The next approach in the discussion about religious inter-relations was pioneered by scholars such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith and John Hick. Smith and Hick were among the first to advocate what came to be known as religious *pluralism*. In contrast to exclusivism and inclusivism, pluralism speculates that Christianity is not necessarily the standard, the guiding principle, the be-all and end-all of all religion and religious discourse. Christianity is one religious tradition among many, and it is neither superior nor necessarily inferior in form and content. The crucial notion for pluralists is that Christianity ought not to be normative or the single most authoritative voice in the discussion about and among religions.

Smith, for example, in his book *Faith and Belief* (1979), argues that all religious persons have, or are members of, a system of belief. Belief is bound to time and space; it is contextual and specific to a people in a defined situation. Faith, on the other hand, transcends the given forms of belief. It is the “appreciation of the transcendent quality of this world” (:130). It equals “Truth, Beauty, Justice, Love” (:130). It is of “historical form” but of “timeless substance” (:132). To Smith, faith transcends the boundaries and limitations of the forms of belief to which one necessarily adheres as a believer. Having faith means “being aligned with the final truth of the universe” which is neither specifically Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or Christian (:138). “Faith is man’s (sic) participation in God’s dealings with humankind” (:140). It is the “strange dynamic towards becoming our true selves, or becoming divine” (:142). Smith therefore negates the universal veracity of a specific religious tradition, except to the extent to which it promotes faith in human beings – *faith* being the universal factor, and not the content and shape of the *belief* system it stems from. Religions’ ability to enable and promote faith is what makes them valid and true. Ultimately, faith is the unifying factor of all religions and religious people; religion (i.e. a belief system) is merely the vehicle toward faith. What is important to Smith is not in *what* we have faith, but *that* we have faith.

John Hick’s theory is that “the post-axial faiths constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it” (1992:235-6). He distinguishes between the “Real *an sich*” and the “real” as experienced variously in human contexts, the essence of reality and the manifestation of that essence. The Real *an sich* is the combined interaction of the “divine personae” (of the various religious traditions, e.g. Yahweh, Allah, Buddha, Modimo, Krishna) and the “metaphysical impersonae” which is common to all religious systems (:242), the personal (“God”) and the impersonal (“Absolute”) (:245). The essence of reality or Real *an sich* cannot be grasped, however all religions have their varying but valid approaches to this essential reality. Hick speaks of the various soteriological “spaces” or “ways” to the Real *an sich* (:240). In essence, he wants to postulate an ultimate

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<sup>83</sup> There were, of course, other theologians who leaned toward inclusivism, although they might not have called it that themselves. See for example Ernst Troeltsch (1925:375ff; 1925:382ff; 1972).



Reality without attributing to it any concrete characteristics (:246). As soon as it is cast with characteristics, it becomes the possession of a particular religion, and as a result loses its universality. It seems, then, that Hick's view of pluralism is that there is indeed a concept of "the ultimate", the Real *an sich*, but it is owned by all religions, and cannot be ascribed exclusively to one single faith. In fact, each and every faith tradition points to this ultimate reality in a different way, and by virtue of this gains its authenticity. In this manner, all religions are viewed as equal in a pluralistic setting because they all – through their various ways and means – represent a manifestation of and a path towards the impersonal, ultimate and essential reality of life and the world.

Aloysius Pieris' is a more recent voice in the debate regarding religious pluralism. In his article in the book *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (1992), he argues that there is to be no affirmation of supremacy of one religion over the other. The basic criterion for evaluating the potency and validity of any religion lies in its ability to act as liberative force in the lives of its adherents (1992:162-3). The core experience of most religious traditions (in the case of Pieris' particular investigation, Christianity and Buddhism) is the yearning and quest for liberation. Through the liberation offered by religion persons are transformed and enabled to transcend the given plight in which they find themselves (:163). Effectively, Pieris asserts the complementarity of religions, especially those whose core message is salvation. To argue his point, he compares the figures of Jesus and Gautama (Buddha) and finds that there exist many "parallelisms" in these founding personalities of the two great religions (:168-9). According to Pieris, "liberation is possible only through what one accepts to be the 'revelatory medium of salvation' and not the titles one gives to it" (:173). This means that it is not the title of Jesus Christ or Gautama Buddha *per se* that mediates salvation, but the kerygmatic content of the affirmations and lives of these personalities. This kerygma, which is handed down to believers through historical witness, is "metalogical, not rational" (:174), and it is to be judged for its value in terms of its ability to transform and liberate. The "fruits", i.e. the positive results of the religion's kerygma, ought to be "transforming praxis"; "liberation is the only proof of liberation" (:174). Remaining with the example of Buddhism and Christianity, Pieris concludes that the kerygmatic affirmation of both these religions is at its core salvific. Buddhism's key liberative concept is "gnostic detachment" which encourages the "transforming praxis" of "voluntary poverty" (:175). Christianity's basic message is "agapeic involvement", which leads to the "transforming praxis" of "struggle against forced poverty" (:175). Again it becomes clear that to Pieris the relationship between the great religions can be one of complementary co-operation, instead of excluding anathema.

Paul Knitter, in his article "Towards a Liberation Theology of Religions" (1992), argues along similar lines as Pieris. He posits that for Christians, the liberation theological tradition in Christianity is the most suitable basis for dialogue with other religions in the theology of religions debate (Knitter 1992:178). His approach seems to be one of "facing the common enemy", whereby we may overcome our differences and unite in the common struggle.<sup>84</sup> To him, dialogue between religions needs to happen not necessarily for its own sake, but for the sake of the collective and co-operative elimination of suffering and oppression. A worldwide problem demands a worldwide response, and it is because religion plays a huge role in social transformation (:180) that Knitter argues for the co-operation of religions on the grounds of liberative practice (:179). The endeavour for justice becomes the binding factor of the religions, and indeed the reason for their existence in the first place (:181).

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<sup>84</sup> Wollenberg (2003:9) concurs that "our need for each other and our best collective thinking (and action) are evoked strongly by what we are up against as a species". Religions, to him, have a common mission: to counter secularism and bad religion (for example, fundamentalism and other kinds of fanaticism).

Knitter claims that liberation methodology “provides a starting point for dialogue that avoids absolutist positions” (1992:181). A key methodological tool of liberation theology is to employ a hermeneutics of suspicion, to avoid ideological argumentation and to beware of status quo maintenance. This, argues Knitter, is essential when evaluating religions. He maintains that in order to accept the veracity of a religious system, one has to consider the “fruits” of its theology or doctrine, whether they contribute to the quest for world-wide liberation or not (:182). The criterion for critical evaluation of all religions, including one’s own, should be their ability to produce the “fruits” of justice, peace, and human dignity for all (“you shall know them by their fruits!” declares Knitter 1992:193). In light of this, one could argue that Knitter holds what I would call an “outcome-based” view of religion.

A further characteristic of liberation methodology is its insistence on the preferential option for the poor and marginalised. This is the basis on which religions can and ought to find their “common ground” (Knitter 1992:184). Religious dialogue should be grounded on the fact that all face the same problem, all have a “shared locus of religious experience”, namely the reality of suffering and oppression in the world (:185). To alleviate this suffering and overcome the injustices of the world ought to be the united (and uniting) aim of all religions. The point would not be to unite and dialogue for the sake of unity, but to unite and dialogue for the sake of facing a common challenge and meeting it – a challenge that in fact is external to religion (:186).

Therefore, the third liberation methodological aspect argued for by Knitter in the debate about religious dialogue is that of praxis-centeredness (:188). Praxis for the establishment and preservation of humans’ very humanity and dignity is the normative criterion for judging religion (:189, 191). If this criterion is fulfilled, dialogue – albeit not necessarily dialogue through talk, but through action – will and can take place. Indeed, it is orthopraxy, not orthodoxy, which is the focal point of Knitter’s theology of religions. If it were up to him, orthodoxy would not really feature in this dialogue (:193). In fact, insistence on one’s own “correct doctrine” can be an impediment not only to dialogue with others, but indeed an impediment to faith, out of which should flow good works, or orthopraxy (:194). Knitter insists that “doing” what is good is more important than “knowing or understanding” what is considered to be right (:196).<sup>85</sup>

Although Knitter avoids as far as possible terminology that might suggest religious supremacy or exclusivism, and point to the “orthodoxy” of one particular religious tradition over and above another, he does at some point revert back to a distinctly Biblical/Christian category to argue his point. He is particularly disposed to referring to “the ineffable mystery of salvation” – which is, to him, the centre of all religion – as “Kingdom-centrism” or “soteriocentrism” (:187). Knitter would argue that the “Kingdom”, as an expression of soteriological and eschatological fulfilment, despite its obvious Christian connotations and origin, is nevertheless a category with potentially universal potency and validity, a category that includes rather than excludes other religions’ attempts at achieving liberation and wholeness for humankind.

Gordon Kaufman takes the unfolding discussion a step further. His article (1992) is a petition to Christian theology to not only listen to the voices of other religious traditions, but indeed to be challenged and transformed by them. “If Christians are to take other faiths, other life-orientations, with full seriousness, it is necessary for them to re-examine certain theological claims they often make” (1992:4). Kaufman argues against any claim to universality by a religion, but insists that religions together form an “essential oneness” of faith and experience (:5). In order to acknowledge and access this oneness, believers must “find ways of relativising and opening up [their] basic symbol system” (:5). Every religion, asserts Kaufman, has a basic “categorical scheme” which is derived from

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<sup>85</sup> The Biblical injunction, “Test everything, hold fast to what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21) seems appropriate here.

its particular historical evolutionary process (:11). The “basic categorical pattern” which informs Christianity – and indeed stems from the story of Christ and the church – hinges on the four thematic pillars of God, the world, humanity, and Christ (:10). This categorical scheme “has significantly defined and given shape to Christian understandings of life and the world” (:11). However, it is not the only, and indeed not the universally normative, scheme. In fact, when faced with other schemes of faith, it must find itself critically challenged and questioned in terms of viability and helpfulness in the search for human well-being (:11, 12).

Kaufman suggests, “Perhaps one or more of the principal categories requires drastic revision, drawing on ideas suggested by other religions or secular traditions” (:12). As it were, Christianity is but one “human imaginative response to the necessity to find orientation for life in a particular historical situation” (:12). Therefore, it must keep itself open to critique and insights from others. Openness to what other traditions have to offer presupposes dialogue with them “in their own terms”, and implies building community with them (:14). And this community, essentially, is what Kaufman considers the key issue, the central point of religious dialogue. So it is that Kaufman claims there are impressive resources inherent in other religions, and “it seems a narrow sort of self-improvement to refuse to learn from these differing ways of being human, however alien some of them may at first appear” (:4). Christians, as others, need to learn to live in and with religious diversity; positive dialogue is of great necessity in today’s pluralistic environment. True dialogue will create community and a sense of togetherness in the tasks and duties that lie ahead for humankind.

Another scholar who has grappled with the questions I am concerned with in this study is Gavin D’Costa. D’Costa (1990) critiques those scholars who deem themselves “pluralist”, and argues for a positive revision of the term “inclusivist” instead. The standard that he proposes for inter-religious dialogue is a form of Trinitarian Christology (:16). D’Costa postulates that a Trinitarian concept of God enables humankind to transcend the particularity of the revelation of Jesus Christ because it makes provision for the constant, ever-unfolding revelation of God through the Holy Spirit (:17). The Holy Spirit deepens and universalises humans’ understanding of God in Christ, yet the activity of the Holy Spirit cannot be confined to Christianity (:17). As such, “a Trinitarian Christology guards against exclusivism and pluralism by dialectically relating the universal and the particular” (:18).

D’Costa wants to avoid the exclusivist position which holds to the exclusive identification of God and Jesus Christ. Similarly, he refutes the pluralist tendency of non-identification of God and Jesus Christ. The most viable option, he claims, is to identify God and Jesus Christ, however not exclusively so. The third person of the Trinity, the Spirit, enables an inclusive view of religions. The Spirit, as it were, is active and revealed in Christianity as well as other religious traditions. D’Costa’s Christology therefore leads him to identify Jesus Christ as *totus Deus* (wholly God), yet not *totum Dei* (the whole of God) (:18). The pneumatology implied by such a Trinitarian Christology “allows the particularity of Christ to be related to the universal activity of God in the history of humankind” (:19).

One might ask why D’Costa is so intent on asserting the importance of Jesus Christ as the centre of his theology. It seems at least conceivable that a “Holy Spirit” could also become detached from the historical figure of Jesus. For D’Costa, however, the particularity of Christ is crucial, also for his pneumatological considerations. The story of Jesus Christ, which is the core of Christocentric Trinitarianism, “discloses loving relationship as the proper mode of being. Hence love of neighbour (which includes Hindus, Buddhists, and others) is an imperative for all Christians” (:19). The reason why Christ remains to be key is because Christ’s is the story of the vulnerability of the cross. “The normativity of Christ involves the normativity of crucified self-giving love” (:20).

The revelation of Christ points to “suffering service rather than manipulation and coercion” (:21).

Through Jesus’ story we are normatively shaped by the patterns of service and love encoded in his life and death, which are constantly recoded, to the extent of our participation in these patterns, by the power of the Spirit. (D’Costa 1990:21).

The Spirit of which D’Costa speaks is, indeed, a particular Spirit, namely that of God revealed through the cross of Christ. The work of the Spirit, however, is not limited to the Christian community. Indeed, anyone who acts according to the principle of self-sacrificing love, lives according to the Christian gospel, and is powered by the Holy Spirit – regardless of whether s/he is aware of it or not.

Similar to Knitter, D’Costa proposes that working together against a common enemy, i.e. labouring to stamp out injustice and oppression, “is one proper mode of interreligious dialogue for Christians” (:21). Indeed, he suggests that Christians may come to deeper Christian understandings of the Reign of God through dialogue with others, albeit only if they show a “willingness to be radically judged and questioned by the other” (:22).<sup>86</sup> “The church stands under the judgement of the Holy Spirit, and if the Holy Spirit is active in the world religions, then the world religions are vital to Christian faithfulness” (:22). Religious dialogue, therefore, is necessary for the authenticity of the gospel, and for the true faithfulness of the Christian community. It is necessary for the enhancement and enrichment of the Christian believers’ faith and praxis. D’Costa insists that we gain “attentiveness to God through attentiveness to our neighbour” (:23), since this neighbour may well disclose to us some wisdom and insight about God, the world, and ourselves to which we hitherto have had no access. The Spirit may well have revealed some depths of God to our neighbours in other faith traditions which are as yet hidden from our perception. If we do not listen to the revelation of the Spirit in and through other religious traditions, “our theologies will be impoverished to the extent that they neglect the horizons of the contemporary world” (:24). “If God has spoken outside Christianity, Christianity can only be impoverished in its own self-understanding by neglecting these testimonies” of other faiths (:25).

We would do well, therefore, argues D’Costa, to listen intently to the various “narratives of holiness” that exist throughout human religious society, and in listening allow ourselves to be transformed by the Spirit speaking through them (:24). With reference to 1 Corinthians 13:12, D’Costa explains that the entirety and depth of God’s revelation is not yet discerned fully – “now we see through a glass dimly” – but with the help of our neighbours, who also have access to revelation of the Spirit, we shall one day “see face to face” and “understand fully” (:27). As yet Christianity is “incomplete”, and needs to reach “fulfilment” (:26) – a task which it can only achieve when in dialogical community with other faiths.

Yet another scholar who has grappled with these issues is Raimon Panikkar. In inter-religious dialogue, Panikkar (1990a) asserts that there are not only the already-mentioned options of exclusivism (:19), inclusivism (:21) and pluralism – or what he calls *adjacency of the religions* (:24)<sup>87</sup>. He insists that there is a fourth, and superlative, way for religions to relate. This way is one of mutual interconnection and interweaving (:26)<sup>88</sup>. Instead of trying to shun or convert other religions (as is the case with exclusivism), or to incorporate them within one’s own (which is inclusivism’s hermeneutic), or to view them as equal but unrelated (as certain forms of pluralism tend to do), Panikkar advocates an approach which allows for mutual and genuine cross-fertilisation of religious traditions

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<sup>86</sup> In this statement we hear an echo of Kaufman’s view (see above).

<sup>87</sup> In German, “Nebeneinander der Religionen”.

<sup>88</sup> In German, “gegenseitige Durchdringung”. Panikkar does not believe that truth is one, monolithic, absolute, or hegemonic over other proposals. Rather truth is “multiple” (see Wollenberg 2003). Furthermore, truth claims are complementary/dialectical not exclusionary/binary; they are “relative but not relativistic”.

(:166-7)<sup>89</sup>. His key concept for this potential mutual enmeshment of religions is “growth” (:119ff, 142). The category of growth, i.e. growth together towards a common humanity, gives religion a forward-looking, future-oriented dimension which is crucial for human well-being and survival (:142). Growth is the main ingredient for humankind’s ongoing task of becoming more human (:158)<sup>90</sup>. And growth together (which inevitably implies *growing together*) may indeed involve true change – *metanoia* – for all involved (:147).

Panikkar suggests a number of “game rules” for religious interaction under the rubric of mutual growth. First, each dialogue partner is not to be led by a specific apologetic notion (1990b:82), nor by a general apologetic scheme (:83). This means that dialogue partners must not be in dialogue in order to sway, convince, or convert one another. Participants in the dialogue should not have preconceived ideas of what the outcome of the dialogue ought to be (:84). The dialogue is not to resemble a “philosophers’ congress” (:88), i.e. a forum where ideas are thrown around without referring them to practical life. It should also not resemble a “theological symposium” (:92), so that religions with no overt “theological” tradition are not marginalised or treated pedantically. In the discussions, participants should not in the first place have in mind the benefit of the dialogue for their own faith community; dialogue ought not to be conducted with the initial aim of furthering one’s own church, or expanding one’s missionary and diaconical services (:95). In short and at base, dialogue should be practised in faith, hope and love (:95-6) – faith in the integrity of the other(s), hope that advantage for all will flow from the encounter, and love which places the other(s) first, and which does not insist on its own ways.

#### 1.4.4 Theological grounds for dialogue from a Lutheran perspective

From a Lutheran perspective, the theology of the cross and the *Deus absconditus* (see section 3.2.1) can be seen as resources for inter-religious dialogue. The *hidden God* is an expression of the perceived absence of God’s grace. This experience of the apparent lack of grace is common to all human beings. Therefore the hiddenness of God is common ground, common “God-experience” which can serve as groundwork to engage in God-talk with other faiths. “Might not this fact – Christians’ own chronic distrust of their creator, with all its consequences, and their willingness to confess it – serve as leaven in the dialogue? Even a leveler?” asks Ed Schroeder (2003:9)<sup>91</sup>. Lutherans insist on the “obdurate hiddenness of the divine being, both because of the limits of creaturely understanding and because God’s self-disclosure (*revelatus*) is not full disclosure.” Therefore, it becomes possible to “think of the one Mystery, hidden in forms such as but also different from our familiar ones, graciously waiting to be found or, to use Heidegger’s term, unveiled” (Wollenberg 2003:5). In other words, the cross is the beginning of knowing God; but it is also the end. “Luther warns against ‘knowing’ too much about God apart from his self-definition in the cross.... Luther’s cross-theology leads then, to a kenotic, humble approach to others who traffic in the spirit. It is not that we have nothing to say but that we also have something to learn, both being tested against the gospel of the ‘crucified God’” (Wollenberg 2003:7). Therefore, “Luther’s theology of the cross is not only anthropological-soteriologically relevant, but also universal-cosmically, and thereby becomes a basis for engaging dialogue with religious pluralism in perspective of God’s work in nature through the power of the Holy Spirit” (Chung 2003:9).

<sup>89</sup> In German, “gegenseitige Berührung und Beeinflussung” (:166) und “mögliche Befruchtung” der Religionen und Kulturen (:167).

<sup>90</sup> In German, “Humanisierung des Menschen”.

<sup>91</sup> “Christians come with paradoxical God-experiences and paradoxical faith-confessions. ‘Lord I believe; help my unbelief’ (Mark 9:24). And Christians admit to being ‘simultaneously saint and sinner.’ Thus, Christians are no ‘better’ in their moral life or the strength of their faith than their dialogue partners. They might even be worse.” (Schroeder 2003:9)

We have seen that according to D'Costa the Spirit is active and revealed in Christianity as well as other religious traditions. One might argue that the Lutheran theory of the "Two Kingdoms" (see section 3.4.6) is in agreement with this notion. This theory highlights the distinction between the right hand rule of God – in our heart through the Word – and the left hand rule of God – in society through offices.<sup>92</sup> The rule and presence of God is not confined to humanly-construed religious and cultural categories and boundaries.<sup>93</sup> God rules all spheres of existence, not just those that are overtly "Christian". The secular sphere, the *regnum mundi* or left hand rule of God, is seen as a free-standing area of divine activity. Therefore, "Lutherans are less insistent that in moral and spiritual matters there must be a *difference* between the Christian position and that of non-Christians" (Edwards 2002:56).

Indeed the dual reign symbol alerts us to God's working on behalf of human weal apart from the proclamation of the gospel and right administration of the sacraments. Is it not legitimate to understand God, active in human law and government, as active in human religious systems as well? (Wollenberg 2003:5)

The Two Kingdoms theory may be a theological model for understanding people outside the boundaries of Christianity as integral parts of God's kingdom (Chung 2003:13).

The world of wisdom in the area of creation should be included under the domain of the secular kingdom. ... Luther's two kingdoms ... should be open for and integrative of the world of wisdom in other religions. ... Christians should learn to listen to signposts and lights of God as found in wisdom of other religions, in anticipation of the future of the coming kingdom of God." (Chung 2003:14)

#### 1.4.5 The approach chosen in this study: an evaluation

I now wish to consider the approaches discussed above, and assert my own stance in the debate surrounding inter-religious dialogue. The first option for dialogue, more particularly for dialogue between Christianity and African tradition, is what has been deemed *exclusivism* above. This is, in fact, not an option at all, because by its very designation it *excludes* the possibility of there being real worth, value and truth in religions other than Christianity. Not only are non-Christian religions deemed inferior, they are considered erroneous and misleading, and therefore not worthy of dialogue except perhaps to demonstrate the superiority and veracity of Christianity over and above the other religious system(s). Of course, choosing such an approach in this study would be unjustifiable. How could I talk of dialogue between Christianity and African religion if I from the onset refute, negate and judge as flawed and invalid everything that African tradition stands for? Religious exclusivism, then, is surely not the preferred approach, and is rejected as a viable option.

*Inclusivism*, at least the brands that I have briefly outlined in this section, is likewise a problematic approach to inter-religious dialogue – though theoretically a better option than exclusivism –, simply because it does not regard its dialogue partner as equal in terms of the dialogue process. Religious inclusivists listen to their partners, but maintain the right to have the final (and authoritative) word on the matter. Inclusivism can easily lead to one religion (often Christianity) acting as the guardian or "big brother" of its dialogue partner; it can evoke a form of paternalism which not seldom is the guise for religious

<sup>92</sup> This distinction is not to be interpreted as dualism. Non-Lutheran scholars also draw distinctions between the two realms. See, for example, Schreier (1998:4). Hay (1998:16), too, talks of the differences between "national" and "sacramental" reconciliation. As will be discussed in section 3.4.6, the Lutheran distinction between the secular and the sacred does not imply political quietism and non-involvement (see also Kistner 2000:63).

<sup>93</sup> Chapman (2004:13) insists that pluralism "is the social embodiment of the recognition that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God".

imperialism.<sup>94</sup> An inclusivist approach may in fact be inherently manipulative and force the ideas, values and paradigms of one (dominant) religious system onto the other(s), without necessarily being aware of its bullying coercive tendencies.

*Pluralism* in its various shades is the third approach discussed above. As I have shown, there are a number of different pluralist approaches to religious dialogue, not all of which deserve the same amount of credit.<sup>95</sup> There is, for example, that approach which, in its efforts to demonstrate the equality and identical worth of the religions involved, tries to harmonise the differences and incongruences of the different religious worldviews to the extent that it distils their message and nature almost to their defacement. The content of the religious witnesses becomes so watered-down and generalised, that it loses its unique character, and indeed perhaps the essence it represents. The religious message becomes almost banal and mediocre because it is conceptually diminished to its rudimentary elements, which in the end reveal only little of the fullness and wholeness of the entire religious symbolic world. I would suggest that both Smith and Hick are guilty of this compression and indeed relativisation of the unique and varying religious traditions. The pluralistic approaches of reducing all religious life to the categories of “faith” and “belief” (Smith), or asserting that at base all religious systems are a manifestation of humanity’s yearning for the “Real *an sich*” (Hick) are simply too simplistic to account for the richness and the depth, as well as the uniqueness and diversity, of religions. The problem is that both Smith and Hick are unconsciously captive to the idea of a universal standard by which they judge religions. They, too, practice a type of inclusivism (rather than pluralism), except that the all-encompassing umbrella worldview is no longer Christianity (or any specific unitary religion) but two different versions of the post-enlightenment Western scientific worldview. In the end, such an approach is not really respectful of the various religious traditions because – like I have shown with Christian inclusivism – it also forces all religions into a pre-defined and pre-determined mould. This is subtle imperialism; if not religious, it is cultural hegemony notwithstanding.

To a lesser extent, even Pieris, with his guiding principle of liberation, is guilty of judging religions in terms of their ability to fit into a pre-conceived pattern. This pattern, which for him is praxis-oriented liberation, echoes the basic slogans of liberation theology. Knitter similarly uses the liberationist paradigm and overtly declares that inter-religious dialogue ought to happen under the rubric of this conceptual framework. Are Pieris and Knitter therefore also to be dismissed because of their insistence on a guiding paradigm which should direct and shape religious interaction? In the case of these two scholars, I am less inclined to reject their approach. Even though they do not deny placing the endeavour of religious dialogue under a certain heading, I appreciate their approaches because both insist on the importance of the practical relevance of religious interaction in the lives of the people involved. Religions interact not for the sake of correct “doctrine” or even for the sake of understanding each other better in a conceptual and theoretical sense. Religions interact for the sake of liberative praxis (orthopraxy, or in

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<sup>94</sup> Indeed, I am sure many Muslims, Buddhists or African traditionalists, for example, would be indignant if they were to be called “anonymous Christians” (Rahner), and would categorise such terminology Christian audacity if not subtle imperialism of the Christian religion.

<sup>95</sup> Wollenberg, a Lutheran Christian, considers (2003:3), “There is, however, not just one style of pluralism. Anselm Kyongsuk Min’s helpful typology includes phenomenalist, universalist, soterio-centric, dialectical and confessionalist. The last type, represented by such scholars as John Milbank, Jürgen Moltmann and S. Mark Heim, is perhaps the most attractive for Lutherans. It defends the legitimacy and necessity of each tradition’s witnessing to its particularities, including the claim to finality, thus avoiding a judgmental exclusivism. This stance allows Christian theology to find space in itself for narratives from outside itself. Thus the truths that we are given to know, centring in Christ the incarnate Logos, are not hegemonic over or negations of truths found in other systems. Rather, in a pluralist context, all truths are placed in dialectical relationship with each other in a mutual quest for deeper insight and a broader grasp of the whole of reality.”

traditional Christian terminology, good works). In my opinion, this is a helpful frame of reference in dialogue between Christianity and African tradition because it deflects immediate attention from the theoretical bases of faith that may seem incompatible and redirects the focus onto people's practical experiences, and their actual situations of need. In this study I therefore support Pieris' notion of complementary co-operation in the quest for universal liberation and Knitter's "soteriocentrism". I agree that when there is a common challenge to be faced, even the most different of neighbours can stand together and pool resources in order to solve the problem. In terms of our overall discussion, this means that I acknowledge the possibility of co-operation and togetherness (unity in diversity) of Christian and African traditional communities in light of the common challenge, viz. the challenge of reconciling the people of South Africa.

Although I would not like to go to the point of saying that Christianity and African religion are "essentially one", as Kaufman would suggest, I agree with his basic argument that if the religions do not "open up" their "basic symbol system" (1992:5) they will suffer self-impoverishment. Indeed, I agree that perhaps some Christian categories will undergo revision and transformation when "drawing on ideas suggested by other religions" (:12). When true dialogue happens between Christianity and African tradition, both must expect to be challenged and changed. The community of those in dialogue is dynamic and evolving, it cannot remain static and unyielding.

This is, essentially, what D'Costa implies as well when insisting that different religious traditions' "narratives of holiness" have the capacity to transform those who listen to them carefully (1990:24). When Christians listen carefully to the narratives of African tradition, and acknowledge that they may indeed be "narratives of holiness", they must not be surprised if they are changed by them. Perhaps D'Costa does what I criticise and dismiss so vehemently above, namely cast all religions into a particular mould. After all, he claims openly that he adopts a Christocentric Trinitarian model for interpreting religions. And his main contention is that the Holy Spirit – which proceeds from Christ, but does not need to be labelled Christian – is at work within and through all sorts of religious traditions and communities that reflect the true nature of the crucified one, viz. self-giving, vulnerable love. Is D'Costa's view a form of Christian imperialism? I suppose it could certainly be deemed as such. It could as well be classed inclusivist rather than pluralist. Yet I tend to accept his reasoning and approach, simply because it suggests that as a Christian believer one cannot, in reality, disengage oneself from one's own religious universe of symbols.

It is, for me, an act of integrity to acknowledge (and not forcibly deny) that I do believe in the veracity and truth of the Christian gospel, and that this gospel has meaning and potency beyond the boundaries of the Christian world. As I shall discuss in a later chapter, for me as a Christian theologian, the foundation for reconciliation is the message of the cross of Christ (see also D'Costa 1990:20-22). If I were to deny this, I would not be true to my own religious tradition, and indeed to my conscience as a person of faith and as a theologian.<sup>96</sup> Dialogue with African religious traditions does not, after all, mean that I negate my own system of belief, and deny what is to me truth and wisdom. To expect a person studying another religion, be it an anthropologist, sociologist, or theologian, to suspend his/her own religious identity as if it did not exist, would simply be asking the impossible. I would argue it is not even desirable, because the richness and fullness of the fruits of the dialogue can only be tasted if all dialogue partners come to the table with their gifts and goods, their store of wisdom and "holy narratives". How can true community evolve when all involved do not come with openness, both to share and to receive?

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<sup>96</sup> The fact that I am a *Lutheran* Christian induces me, moreover, to place particular emphasis on the resources that can be gleaned from Lutheran Christianity, as I have shown in section 1.4.4 above.



Finally, in reference to Panikkar, I would like to observe that his suggested enmeshment and interweaving of religious traditions may be desirable in future. However it is not possible as a starting point in religious dialogue. If we start from a position of being intertwined it will not be possible to gauge the wisdom of the religious systems singly and on their own terms. In critical scholarly analysis it is necessary to define in fairly neat categories who the different partners in dialogue are, what they stand for, and what differentiates them. Their differences are not to be ignored or swept under the proverbial carpet from the onset, but are to be identified and investigated. With Panikkar's approach there is the danger of not really acknowledging the uniqueness and therefore the special wisdom that each partner has to offer, and of harmonising everything to the point of relativity and non-identity.

As to his rules which should govern inter-religious dialogue, I agree with him that under all circumstances dialogue should be conducted in a spirit of faith, hope and love. With this as a guide and standard, the task of dialogical interaction between Christianity and African tradition can and must bear fruit indeed. This dissertation is an attempt at showing the potential of such dialogue. My hope is that its fruit will be of value for South Africans in their quest for social healing and reconciliation.

## 1.5 African tradition and Christian tradition – the problem of dialogue

### 1.5.1 Different cosmologies, epistemologies and ontologies: premodern frameworks vis-à-vis the modern

What those who have already started the process of dialogue between the two belief systems in question have realised is that the worldview and concept of reality of these two traditions is in some respects vastly different. In his book, *Madumo – a man bewitched* (2000), Adam Ashforth describes the story of his friendship with Madumo, a black man from Soweto. The book illustrates in a riveting fashion Madumo's deep existential struggle with the indigenous African cosmology and the modern/Western worldview. When accused of witchcraft, Madumo stumbles into an existential crisis which causes him to feel torn between the two "worlds" to which he belongs.<sup>97</sup> This struggle is true for many Africans. Many feel that they are forced to turn from their indigenous ways to a Euro-centric way of doing things. For some, this is tantamount to self-denial (see Koka 07.07.2004)<sup>98</sup>.

It is often said metaphorically of African Christians that they go to church during the day, and then to the traditional healer-diviner at night. They function – and seem to be comfortable – in both worlds.<sup>99</sup> Some find it difficult if not impossible to integrate the two. A quote from African leader Kenneth Kaunda reveals what reflects the reality for many Africans, viz. that there is "tension created by the collision of two world-views, which I have never completely reconciled" (quoted in Parrat 1996:14). Desmond Tutu puts it in psychological terms when asserting that the African "suffers from a form of

<sup>97</sup> The indigenous or traditional mindset is what Kiogora (1996:24) calls the "village-level ethos". This ethos "is a living influence on modern Africa. In most rural areas, these approaches to life are still evident or in the subconscious minds of many. They even continue to influence urban dwellers...."

<sup>98</sup> "Now today the problem is that we are not resorting to our indigenous heritages and cultures. We are more taken up by the Euro-centric cultures and we have come to imitate the European way of doing things, since modernity. And that is your proof that you are civilised. So it is a pity, as you have noted, that in South Africa we are more European inclined. We are very Euro-centric, and in such a way that we have left our traditional ways" (Koka 07.07.2004). See also Kiernan (1990:10).

<sup>99</sup> According to Oosthuizen (2000:279), "many Africans in [main-line] churches do not wish to lose contact with traditional approaches because of their meaningful Christian appeal". They long to bridge the gap between the two points in tension, i.e. "the world of the modern industrial centre and the known world of the traditional disposition and orientation"; they wish to overcome the "dualism", and the "mental and ethical schizophrasia" in which they find themselves.

religious schizophrenia" (quoted in Parrat 1996:14). Placide Tempels, researching in the early half of the last century, already made the observation that many Africans return to their old religion in times of crisis in their lives (1969:17). "The majority," he claims, "remain 'muntu' under a light coating of white imitation" (:23).

For Africans, worldview, ritual and the life of the spirit form part of a whole. In this context, explain Jean and John Comaroff (1991:152), "worldview" may be described as a particular "classification of beings and forces, things and actions, space and time", in which the universe is conceived of as "a natural order of categories and conventions" which is "given tangible expression in certain mythic-ritual texts and social contexts". For the most part however, it remains "unremarked in the flow of daily life". Indeed, traditional African cosmology diffuses itself "throughout the fabric of social existence" (:152). It is not the task of this section to illustrate in detail what work has been done so far in describing an African cosmology. I will merely outline in rough strokes what is key to African thought and consciousness – some of which is considered foreign and alien to a Western worldview<sup>100</sup>, as I will argue. In chapter 2 I shall go into more depth concerning the specific religious notions functional in African tradition and religion. What, then, are the main tenets and characteristics of the "African traditional" worldview which is seemingly a great competitor and alternative to the modern Western understanding of reality?

### *Characteristics of an African worldview*

There is quite a strong notion amongst some scholars that there is no such thing as an African worldview and, indeed, that African traditional religion no longer exists as an entity in itself because of the influence of modernity, Christianity, and the West.<sup>101</sup> They reject what they call an "essentialist" approach which assumes the existence of something out there that is not already influenced by something else (see, for example, Landau 1995:168; Ngugi 1993:xvi; Aragon 1992:331).<sup>102</sup> While I accept that there has been a great deal of syncretism I reject the idea that there is no such thing as African identity, African worldview, and African religion. Many Africans would agree with me. In what follows, I attempt to show some of the characteristics of an African worldview – or "Vision of Reality", as Ogot (1972:132) prefers to call it. Certain of these characteristics may indeed be viewed as distinct from "Western" or modern cosmological views.

### *God, spirits and ancestors*

An important feature of an African cosmology is that it includes spirits, ancestors (the living dead or *badimo*)<sup>103</sup>, and those who act as religious intermediaries (such as medicine-men and -women, rainmakers, diviners) between the living and the dead and/or the spirit world. Richard Fardon (1990) considers some of the aspects of African tradition that differ from Western culture as being the acknowledgement of inhuman company, viz. the dead (1990:34ff) and animals (:39ff), the view of death and pollution (:83ff), and avenues to the dead (:90ff). Mary Douglas adds to the list of characteristic features of African traditional cosmology the belief in various kinds of spiritual beings, a supreme being or

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<sup>100</sup> Certain scholars tend to lump "Western", "European" and "Christian" together as a unit. Soyinka (2000:27) overtly speaks of the "Christian-European axis" of "cultural and spiritual savaging of the continent" of Africa.

<sup>101</sup> "The African world view, as it was known, will never be the same again," claims Tlthagale (1998:17).

<sup>102</sup> Another scholar who has a problem with the term "past" tradition or culture is Philippe Denis (see for example Denis 1995, 2000). According to him, tradition is reconstructed; it is not a fixed entity. History is in flux, tradition is "invented", i.e. it is never inflexible but ever-evolving.

<sup>103</sup> Bujo (1992:41) claims that the ancestor-cult was one of the greatest sources of conflicts between missionary Christianity and African traditional religion. Yet Africans' relationships to their deceased community members (or what Westerners erroneously called ancestor "worship") was wholly misunderstood and "wrongly approached right from the beginning," argues Setiloane (1988:17).

God (Douglas 1976:9), and natural objects associated with spirits (:10). To a traditional African, it is impossible to conceive of the world without spiritual entities, otherworldly forces, and the realm of the unseen. Whereas in the modern West people may decide to be “atheist” or “agnostic”, this is not an option in Africa. The world Africans inhabit is intrinsically religiously perceived.<sup>104</sup>

The Supreme Being or God is viewed as inhabiting the “inconceivable fringes of the world”. God is remote, impersonal, and utterly inexplicable. He/she/it is responsible for catastrophes such as drought and pestilence, and is indifferent to human intervention through ritual (Comaroffs 1991:155), i.e. is unapproachable directly by human beings. Instead, the ancestors play key roles in this respect; they are the mediators between God and living humans. God is to be approached through *badimo*, who are important members of the communal fabric (:156).

#### *Rituals, symbols, rites and ceremonies*

Ritual plays a very significant role in an African worldview. For Africans, “ritual calls forth emotions which the group believes are essential for its own continued existence and the well-being of the individual; it stabilises and channels them” (Sundermeier 1998:53). Fardon (1990:104ff) identifies rituals of death, annual rituals such as harvest dances or harvest festivals (:124ff) and rituals involving animals and shedding of blood (:148ff). Frequently inanimate objects feature in African ritual, and there may exist a different attitude towards trees, medicines, colour etc. during ritual performance (:170ff).

In African cosmology and epistemology symbols are also very important.

In Africa symbols link the past to the present; they link people to their environment, of which they are a part, and transform them. Symbols are mirrors of real life, mirrors of people in society and the cosmos. The symbol, which points beyond itself, involving many layers of meaning which cannot be grasped rationally, is the point of contact with ‘transcendence’, the channel for the powers of the other world, which in Africa is so close and so imminent. (Sundermeier 1998:51)

Symbols live from the unity of the visible and the invisible (Wagner 1976:40). “African symbol formation can be clearly shown in four areas: village architecture, sacrifice, body symbolism, and medicine” (Sundermeier 1998:42). There is symbolism lodged in bodies and their secretions, in spaces, colours, etc. (:45).<sup>105</sup> Reality becomes accessible through symbols. Furthermore, one basic characteristic that runs through all African religions is “the creation of symbols around people”<sup>106</sup> (:7).

Symbols and rituals are linked. In Africa, ritual is an especially forceful mode of action; it is skilled “work”. The Comaroffs (1991:156) define it as “the controlled and stylized manipulation of words, gestures, and substances – techniques, that is, that concentrated their properties and powers”. The effectiveness of rituals depends on the (innate and learnt) competency of ritual performers. The *ngaka*, or ritual expert, is the mediator between the domesticated and the wild, living and dead, and functions as the restorer of the integrity of the disrupted (personal and social) body. The integrity of the body in turn is based on the proper alignment of the categories of the cosmos (1991:156).

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<sup>104</sup> See also Bucker’s (1980) investigation of Shona cosmology.

<sup>105</sup> In Wagner’s analysis (1976:50) of Abaluya ritual, for example, principle symbols used in rituals are animals or parts of animals, strips of skin of an animal, meat of an animal, blood, sacrificial shrines for ancestors, stroking with a fowl, the stomach contents of animals, flour paste, beer and/or spittle. Other symbolic features may include the colour white, the right hand side, even numbers, honey, early morning (before sunrise), virginity, flowing water, certain wild plants (for example, a certain plant is considered a symbol of peace; it is drunk in a concoction “when performing rites of reconciliation”), fire and smoke, butter and shaving the hair (:51, 52). Furthermore, places may have symbolic or ritual meaning.

<sup>106</sup> “This is an element clearly distinguishing them from Indian and Chinese religions with their symbols based on cosmology,” adds Sundermeier.

Therefore one can argue that rituals in Africa are inherently communal. They serve to exert social control and uphold stability (Sundermeier 1998:53). It could be argued that the maintenance of social and natural harmony and the expression of social values occur in and through ritual (Wagner 1976:48). Indeed, "rites of reconciliation between individuals or groups (including peace-making ceremonies) ... finally aim at restoring an impaired ritual status to its normal level" (:49). Effectively, ritual has a significant social function (Taylor 1965:86).

African ritual is "ultimately directed towards new life" (Sundermeier 1998:89). Rituals are usually observed when life is under serious threat or peril, i.e. in times of crisis. They have the function of leading individuals "through the tunnel of threat into life beyond, giving them a new status in tune with the community. In this way, ritual becomes a healer for individuals and a regulator of public life. Ritual brings about change" (:92). The Comaroffs (1991:162) insist that rituals and rites "along with other symbolic action that addressed and redressed social tensions" can and do hold at bay contradictions and perceived malevolent or chaotic forces present in the world.

There are countless rituals relating to work, community and the state. Elaborate life-cycle rituals and rites of passage, which include status-changing rituals (Sundermeier 1998:56), circumcision (:59ff) and marriage (:69ff) also feature prominently in African traditional society.<sup>107</sup> Rituals surrounding death (e.g. mourning rituals) abound. Among the Lovedu, a fire ritual is performed when the queen has died. This ritual involves extinguishing all fires in the land with purificatory rain medicine from the official keeper at the capital (Krige 1976:65). There are, as well, cleansing or purification rituals which may involve propitiatory offerings, for example the ritual "washing of the village" after misfortune has befallen it (Tempels 1969:149).

In chapter 2 I will consider African ritual theory and practice in more depth and detail. Suffice it here to acknowledge the importance of rituals and symbolic actions in African ontology and cosmology.

#### *Magic, sorcery and evil*

Most Africans would agree that mystical power, magic, witchcraft and sorcery are prominent features of an African traditional worldview.<sup>108</sup> Placide Tempels describes "Bantu ontology" rather pejoratively as "the philosophy of magic" as opposed to the Western philosophy of reason (1969:39). The supreme value in African consciousness is, he argues, "life, force, to live strongly, or vital force" (:44). "Force, the potent life, vital energy are the objects of prayers and invocations to God, to the spirits and the dead, as well as of all that is usually called magic, sorcery or magical remedies" (:45). The world of life force is inhabited by God, human beings – living and departed –, animals, plants, and minerals. Since being is force, all these "beings" appear to the African as forces (:56). Sorcery and metaphysical evil are part of the world (:126), and often propitiatory offerings, ritual purification (:149), or divination (:150) are necessary to curb the evil.

Related to the forces of the unknown is the concept of *nunaga*, the skilled use of power concentrated in persons and objects. It is the ability to manipulate forces of nature, and often involves the use of medicines and plants (Krige 1976:61). Traditional doctors, *naga*, are practitioners of *nunaga*, and are either directly possessed or guided by an ancestor to identify or "smell out" evil or sorcery (:62). Ancestors therefore have a key role to play in the curbing of misfortune, frequently believed to be caused by witchcraft or sorcery. They can be approached through offerings, prayer, use of objects, or medicine, mostly through practices conducted by the intermediary, the *naga*. Ancestors may be

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<sup>107</sup> See also Mbiti (1970, 1975, 1990).

<sup>108</sup> So-called witchcraft and sorcery represented a major source of conflict between colonial Christianity and African traditional religion (Bujo 1992:41).

capricious and do not want to be neglected (:63), which is why appeasement activity is crucial.

In her book, *Natural Symbols* (1970)<sup>109</sup>, the anthropologist Mary Douglas analyses many different social groups from all over the world. Douglas' investigations lead her to conceptualise four categories of human society.<sup>110</sup> African indigenous societies fall into one of the four "types" of societies Douglas exemplifies, viz. those whose pervasive feature is a "witchcraft cosmology" (:106)<sup>111</sup>. The four basic traits of any "witchcraft cosmology" are, according to Douglas, "the idea of the bad outside and the good inside, the inside under attack and indeed in need of protection, human wickedness on a cosmic scale, and these ideas used in political manipulation" (:114).

In societies with a witchcraft cosmology, evil (as well as good) is perceived "on a cosmic scale". Evil is not only seen as individual "sin", but as a whole complex network of wicked forces acting on human beings. There is always the potentiality of a malevolent force entering a human person and misguiding her/him to do evil. It is, therefore not merely the person who chooses to be and do evil, but a transcendent force of evil which works through the person. Of course this exaggerates the implications and effects evil can have. Societies with such a world-view often accuse persons of witchcraft, sorcery and/or demon-possession. The concept of evil is so pervasive and precarious, as well as unpredictable and uncontrollable, that channels have to be found to deal with it in humanly possible terms. Therefore people are singled out and identified with this evil, because the community is thereby able to "control" the forces of evil – at least for a short while, and feel triumphant over a force which otherwise (generally) weighs down heavily on the society. Purifying a witch or exorcising a demon are ways in which a community can exert temporal control over a perceived giant power, which in turn makes the community feel victorious, relieved and strong for a little while. In such communities it indeed happens that a person acting abnormally is deemed "possessed" or "bewitched" and a social ritual is performed to exorcise or cleanse the person, and to banish – therefore temporarily control and manipulate – the evil which is otherwise dangerously uncontrollable. (*Crossing Witchcraft Barriers* 2003)

Effectively, African cosmology is "a two-tiered arrangement of unobservables" (Horton 1971:101). It represents an example of "an ordered and just world in which evil, being held to express itself largely in witchcraft and sorcery, is outlawed and criminal, and in which good ultimately triumphs" (Krige 1976:75). The greatest and most devastating source of evil is identified as witchcraft and sorcery, brought about directly by humans (:73). Among the Lovedu in South Africa, evil is associated with heat, whereby heat and cold are symbolic conceptual categories.<sup>112</sup> The proper antidote to evil is the use of cooling medicines (:69).

It must be emphasised that in all cases, "concepts of natural luck, accident, and omens are linked with human relationships" (:73). Good relations bring good luck, bad

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<sup>109</sup> See also Douglas' *Purity and Danger* (1966).

<sup>110</sup> These categories are represented schematically on a graph with two axes, namely "grid" and "group" (1970:59). The "grid" factor of a society is its level of organisation, structure and role-differentiation, while the "group" component refers to the boundaries of the society, how the "inside" and "outside" are defined.

<sup>111</sup> Such social groups she describes as having a high "group" factor, but a low "grid" factor (1970:106). Since the "grid" is low there is "ambiguity in the patterning of roles" (:107) and social structures are ill-defined. On the other hand, the "group" classification is high which implies restricted "movement in and out", and "unavoidably close" (:108) interaction among members of the community which often causes "disorderly competition", "hazards and frustration produced by fellow humans" (:109) and a "cosmos dominated by ill-will and jealousy" (:111). It is not surprising that under such circumstances (belief in) witchcraft is a widespread phenomenon. A number of communities function according to the witchcraft cosmology, some overtly – such as some African indigenous communities – and some covertly – such as certain fundamentalist religious groups.

<sup>112</sup> In fact, many Southern African ethnic groups associate heat with evil, and therefore consider "cooling substances" to be of great ritual worth. This will be discussed in more depth in chapter 2.

relations bad luck. "The Lovedu conceive *mabava* (a force which brings illness) as following automatically from the bad relationship between important kin" (:73). The removal of the source of *mabava*, which brings about reconciliation and restores social harmony, is effected by the ancestors who step in to remove the illness at the request of the aggrieved party. Forde (1976:xii), too, insists that

where guilt is ascribed to the sufferer of misfortune that misfortune tends to be attributed to supernatural beings – to gods and ancestral or other spirits, symbolic guardians of the moral order, whose anger has inflicted punishment. But where the context of misfortune does not elicit guilt on the part of the sufferer, then the injurious desires of others, of evil spirits and malevolent human beings, tend to be invoked. Where malevolence from other persons is feared, magical instrumentalities – powers of witchcraft and sorcery – can be attributed without contradiction from experience or logic.

Evil in Africa is an anthropological reality. Tempels (1969:121) defines evil thus, "Every act, every detail of behaviour, every attitude and every human custom which militates against vital force or against the increase of the hierarchy of the 'muntu' is bad. The destruction of life is a conspiracy against the Divine Plan, ... it is for that reason immoral and unjust." Evil frequently has its origins in human beings (Comaroffs 1991:190). Witches and sorcerers are seen as the prime bringers of evil (:194)<sup>113</sup>, while – on the opposite side – the defenders of morality are diviners and medicine-men and -women (:198).<sup>114</sup> These experts are people who possess "a clearer than usual vision of natural forces and their interaction", who have "the power of selecting these forces and of directing them towards a determinist usage in particular cases" and who become what they are only because they have "been 'seized' by the living influence of a deceased ancestor or of a spirit" and have been ritually initiated into a particular office (Tempels 1969:86).

Among the Tswana, sorcery is frequently associated with the bush, *naga*, in contradistinction to the town, *motse*. *Motse* is conceptually linked to civilisation, order and normality, while *naga* represents savagery, the "threatening realm of spirits, plants and animals of unruly potential" (Comaroffs 1991:153). Disruption of civilisation is caused by sorcery (*boloa*) or pollution (*bothitho*), unleashed undomesticated spirits (*medimo*) or ancestral punishment (*badimo*); lastly, if no other cause can be found, *modimo*, the supreme being, may be deemed responsible (Comaroffs 1991:157).

As in every human society, in traditional Africa misfortune demands explanation and treatment. This process involves at least one ritual expert<sup>115</sup>, who through divination identifies the cause and the circumstance of the evil. In order for evil, witchcraft and sorcery to be sought out and stifled, the community depends on medicine, and medicinal practitioners, healers or doctors. These are, to use Western categories, not only health experts, but also religious experts in that their task is not only to remedy external wounds or illness, but to assist in the re-establishment of relations between humans and sometimes spirit beings (Douglas 1976:7). Indeed observable calamities are seen as the result of disorder and malice in the spiritual sphere, and to deal only with the outward symptoms is not going to solve the underlying problem. Through "open-ended oracular conversations" healers and clients are enabled to "exchange interpretations of events and relations and thus to subsume chaotic, usually painful, experience into available symbolic categories" (Comaroffs 1991:157). Even though the procedure often involves only the ritual healer and his/her client(s), it is seen as a process directly or indirectly affecting the entire community. What happens behind the closed doors of the ritual expert's

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<sup>113</sup> Tempels (1969:126) asserts that sorcery is one of the great crimes of destruction, and represents a high form of wickedness.

<sup>114</sup> See also Danfulani (2000:97).

<sup>115</sup> For instance, *ngaka* (or *naga*) or *baroka*, a special class of "doctors of the nation" responsible for rain rites.

consulting room, is both a private and a public affair. Indeed, in Africa, there is no real distinction between the private and the public domains.

Misfortune, also that which is caused by sorcery, necessitates healing. Healing involves a practice or process “in which cultural forms may be realigned, symbols given renewed value, established practices extended or transformed” (Comaroffs 1991:157). In a context where ritual action can be either beneficent (*bongaka*) or destructive (sorcery, *boloi*), *bongaka*, or “good ritual medicine” can comprise “healing or constituting” (*go alafa*) or “strengthening, affirming, reproducing” (*go thaya*) (:157). For healing *go alafa* divination is required to define the malady and its source, and treatment to reverse the condition. The reversal of misfortune is usually focussed on personal affliction, but is nevertheless seen as crucial for regenerating the social order at large, because “affliction – whether wrought by sorcerers, vengeful ancestors, or careless polluters” is correlated with contravention of the social order; its repair inevitably involves “an authoritative reinstatement of that order” (:158). The other aspect of beneficent ritual action is *go thaya* which aims at affirming or renewing the structure of the social world primarily through fixed or commemorative rites, e.g. the establishment of settlements, redrawing of boundaries around homesteads, redefinition of status at moments of passage or celebration of the agricultural cycle. Its focus is on communal reconstruction, but also on the reconstitution of the community’s individual participants (:158).

Tempels (1969:144) agrees that emphasis on the restitution of evil represents the re-establishment of the ontological order and of the vital forces that have been disturbed – ultimately the re-establishment of life. What might have been undone through witchcraft or other forms of evil is repaired by readjustment into right and vital relationships (:154), often – as remarked above – by means of ceremonies, rituals and symbolic acts (:155), and under the guidance of a ritual expert or religious healer.<sup>116</sup>

#### *Personhood and community*

African cosmology is anthropocentric in the sense that its prime focus is on the life and being of humankind (Tempels 1969:64).<sup>117</sup> African psychology and anthropology is strongly relationship-oriented, and communal in nature (:95ff). There exists no conceptual separation of body and soul (:96). Sundermeier asserts “African consciousness lives from the law of relationships and analogous participation” (1998:49). Life

is always mediated life, pointing beyond itself. It points to the group, with which the person shares their name and being, and to god himself.... A person’s life is not confined to the private sphere, but is interwoven with the life of everybody else. The life of the whole clan is present in it, as is the life to come. (:12)

The motto in African anthropology and indeed its entire cosmology can be summarised as “I participate, therefore I am”<sup>118</sup> (Sundermeier 1998:19), and is undoubtedly a witness to Africans’ intrinsic communalism and sense of belonging to and togetherness of the group. Indeed, “the individual” is an abstraction, and an individual separated from the community is almost a non-entity (Taylor 1965:78, 83). The much-quoted slogan connected to *ubuntu* (*ubuntu ubuntu ngabantu* – a person is a person because of people) also bears witness to African communal self-understanding and identity.<sup>119</sup>

Such a communal idea of life usually involves a strong sense of order and conventionality in society. Social roles are clearly defined and kept intact, which often means that there exists a relatively rigid social as well as religious hierarchy (Tempels 1969:61; Taylor 1965:84). This pertains to gender role divisions as well (Douglas 1976:4-

<sup>116</sup> See also Maimela (1991:7-8).

<sup>117</sup> The African understanding of a person was one of the greatest sources of conflict between missionary Christianity and African traditional religion, claims Bujo (1992:41).

<sup>118</sup> This is distinctive from the Western anthropology which is based on the rationalist motto, *cogito ergo sum* – “I think, therefore I am”.

<sup>119</sup> Refer to section 2.2.3 for a more detailed discussion of these topics.

6). The good ordering and functioning of society is of utmost importance, and there are therefore a plethora of rules of behaviour, including taboos (Douglas 1976:24-26), which individuals need to obey in order to maintain good relations (between the spiritual, human and natural worlds) (:12-13). The goal of social regulations and roles is to enable and sustain harmony in the community (:14).

African traditional society thus also has set patterns of prestige and status (Wagner 1976:35), and modes of responsibility and duty (Taylor 1965:90). There is a notion held by most communities that the natural and social order form a coherent whole (Wagner 1976:43), and deviations from or violations of this god-created order calls for punishment and social chastisement. In some cases, the position of the king, queen, or chief is considered to be divinely sanctioned (Krige 1976:55). In the case of the divine and sacred queenship of Mujaji, for instance, the rain queen “is accordingly the pivot of the nodal institutions of the society” (:58) and demands tributes for land, protection and rain. In this social setting, ancestors and the rain queen share benevolent power over society, and ensure the smooth workings of the society if the people live according to the given rules and norms.

Scholars have found that there exists a connection between health and moral social order, morality and mortality (Comaroffs 1997:334), as already suggested above. Affliction is viewed in terms of prevailing social relations (:343). Ill health or misfortune and its remedy are “not limited to the workings of material substances”; indeed the chemistry of medicine extends “as well to natural and social processes” (:344). For this reason, African anthropology and sociology places great emphasis on issues surrounding health and healing. An individual’s body which is suffering from an ailment is a pointer to, or a reflection of, a greater ailment, an ailment which is (perhaps hidden, or only subtly perceivable) in the broader body of the family, clan, or community.

As alluded to above, in the case of social misfortune befalling the community, it is of greatest importance to identify which relationships have been damaged and why, and to re-forge these relationships. The assumption is, of course, that all calamity is caused by social rifts or deviations from the natural social order (i.e. behaviour that undermines this order). This is why, during or after a calamity, what is desired is “appeasement, not the hardening of animosities that accusations occasion” (Krige 1976:74). Almost all adversities befalling humans, “whether sickness, barrenness, lightning that strikes men (sic), huts, or cattle, failure of an individual’s crops, or death of his (sic) children,” are caused by “hatred and envy,” i.e. by social relationships gone awry (:75). Krige indeed claims that the greatest source of all evil among the Lovedu is “envy and jealousies” in people, and this is in line with the emphasis on the importance of good relationships between human beings (:75). Put simply, bad relations and non-fulfilment of obligations between kin causes misfortune or illness. And it is the task of legal or ritual authorities to assist in the overcoming of animosity, and the restoration of friendly and respectful relations. In the resolution of quarrels or conflicts the “fundamental objective is the re-establishment of the relations that have become broken or strained” (:77).

Forde (1976:xii) agrees that in African society “the reaction to misfortune and apprehension is to take stock of the past conduct and social relations both of those concerned and of others towards them”. In this light, it becomes obvious why in African society ethics can be regarded as being grounded on one key principle – respect for and right relationship with the neighbour (Sundermeier 1998:174). The basic ethical values are, according to Sundermeier, (1) to be “good company”, i.e. not to be a loner, but community-oriented, (2) to have reverence for humanity and display respect, and (3) to strive by all means for the power to enhance and strengthen life (:177).

Indeed, for Africans life is regarded as a sacred gift. Life belongs to God, or the Supreme Being, the creator. God calls it into being, strengthens and sustains it. It is God’s gift to humanity, and all other living beings. Yet creatures other than human beings, which “according to Bantu ideas, are lower or higher vital forces, exist in the



divine plan only to maintain and cherish the vital gift made to man (sic)” (Tempels 1969:120). Every human being “is an active causal agent who exercises vital influence” (:103), and plays a part in the maintenance and well-being of the life of the entire cosmos. Therefore one may also claim that the African is a holistic human being, who recognises and reveres the multi-dimensions of life and its profound depths (Oosthuizen 1991:39; Taylor 1965:96). Africans focus on relationships rather than on propositions (Oosthuizen 1991:40), and for this reason foster synthetic rather than analytical thinking (:41). The perceived interdependence of reality leads to a social stance of involvement and participation (:41), rather than apathy or disinterest.

#### *African traditional politics*

Krige (1976:59) asserts that the great principles of social and political obligation of the South Bantu tribes in Southern Africa involve “not force but reciprocity, not administrative machinery but ties of sentiment, not inflexible rules but agreement”. The Comaroffs argue that African political community has a “dualistic quality: structured yet negotiable, regulated by conventional rules and practices yet enigmatical, fluid, and full of internal strifes” (1991:128). For Africans, politics, the economy, spirituality, society, and cosmology are indivisible, and are all part of the entirety of the web of human interaction and cosmic existence. Therefore it is almost impossible to speak of African politics in isolation from African economics, religiosity and spirituality, personhood and society.

Most African communities have a centralised order of society, yet interpretations of that order remain fluid. An administrative hierarchy normally exists, with the chiefdom at its core as a necessary condition for civil society (Comaroffs 1991:129). The microelements of political and social life are family households (:132) and marriages (:138), the latter being very different from Western marriages in their ethos. Political life is structured on a pattern of symbolic dominance – of chiefship over periphery, agnatic politics over matrilineal kinship, cattle over agriculture, men over women, etc. – in a hierarchical, centralised society (:152ff). Human inequalities and role distinctions are grounded in natural and biological differences (:153). The world of the dead is seen as a projection of the dominant model of social relations among the living (:153). As already mentioned, the ancestors represent a communal presence. They are an active source of power and punishment in the propagation of the household, and they legitimise activities of the public domain (:154). In the case of the Tswana, the cult of the dead

made agnatic rank and royal control the elements of an inscrutable cosmic order. The *badimo* were guarantors of civil society and centralized political authority, standing in contrast to those undomesticated beings, probably known as *medimo*, left unburied in the wild. Such persons – bush dwellers and those who died “unnaturally” through violence – never joined the ancestral collectivity. They were not tied by moral or ritual links to the social world, and they acted toward the living with capricious nastiness. These undomesticated spirits came to embody *naga*: nature, unpredictable and unknown, rank and menacing. (:155)

So it is that the *badimo* are to be viewed as the guardians of *motse*, i.e. town, civil society, administrative hierarchy, ordered community, and harmonious relationships. *Medimo* are seen as a threat to *motse* – they undermine social and political stability and overall human welfare. As a result, political and social survival implies the necessity of triumph of *motse* over *naga* and *badimo* over *medimo*.

In other words, African political activity, which can hardly be separated from social, religious and economic activity, has one main underlying function: the maintenance of *motse* in defiance of and opposition to the forces of unruliness, injustice and chaos. This involves efforts to enable and uphold good and stable relationships among the members of the community. In order to maintain such stability and harmony, the forces of disorder and chaos, exemplified by unpredictable nature, menacing spirits and sorcery, have to be kept at bay. The ancestors are key to the maintenance of this subtle balance of

relations, as is the careful monitoring of human interactions and communication which implies social control and regulation.

Historically, African tribal communities have had a long history of political interaction, often based on trade relations. Various forms of exchange and alliance (e.g. through ritual experts, cattle, marital partners, military) were practiced, and in some cases there existed a complex network of links within and beyond the region (Comaroffs 1991:161). Other political-economic activity that can be evidenced is the existence of trade, tariffs, and tribute payments (:161), warfare and raiding (:164), as well as migrations (as for example during the 1820 Difaqane in South-Eastern Africa) (:167).

#### *Unity of the universe*

Africans hold that created beings “preserve a bond one with another, an intimate ontological relationship, comparable with the causal tie which binds creature and Creator”. There is constant “interaction of being with being, that is to say, of force with force” (Tempels 1969:58). Therefore, belief in a unified, holistic universe of relationships underlies an African worldview (Taylor 1965:63). Relationships among the living and the dead, the animate and the inanimate, the human and the inhuman (i.e. spirit) are part of the whole. Indeed, all beings are connected to one another and seen as kin (Taylor 1965:63). As stated, intermediaries, who communicate between different spheres of being, are necessarily part of this cosmology and its smooth functioning. Diviners, healers, and other spiritual personages are key to the interaction of the various realities (Tempels 1969:86).<sup>120</sup> In terms of beliefs concerning evil and misfortune, Tempels argues that Africans’ view is distinct from the modern scientific view (:121, 126-128, 139,141-144). Essentially, evil is injustice towards God and the natural order, often seen as a particular offence against the ancestors (:142), i.e. it is a violation of the harmony and the wholeness of the universe. Restitution of evil effects the re-establishment of the ontological order and of the vital forces that have been disturbed; it is the re-establishment of life (:144). Such a view again emphasises the holistic approach to life in African cosmology.

Sundermeier similarly insists that African consciousness is holistic, that reality is not seen as “lying beyond the material world, but ... reveals itself in it”. There exists a powerful spiritual world, “yet the wellspring of life lies in the given material world” (1998:9). The African gives priority to what is external, “because we participate in the world only through our body; our spirit is ultimately material rather than immaterial, and cannot be imagined as detached from matter”. This reveals the “multi-faceted African view of body and soul as being mutually interdependent” (:10). As a result, “A person’s life is not confined to the private sphere, but is interwoven with the life of everybody else” (:12).

Africans similarly make no division between the sacred and the profane. The dictum “where there is life, there is transcendence” points to what Sundermeier calls a “sacramental dimension to life” (:13). Further dichotomies underlying the modern Western cosmology are not present in an African worldview. For example there is no sharp distinction between church and state (Comaroffs 1991:311). Instead, in the example of the Tswana, state or “government” (*bogosi*)

evoked the total, indivisible fabric of authority that regulated social and material life – embodied in the chief, spiritualized in the ministrations of the ancestral realm, signified in the conventions of *mekgwa*, and realised in the proper conduct of all communal activity. For the Europeans, on the other hand, it applied purely

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<sup>120</sup> See also Danfulani (2000:97).

to formal proceedings in the public domain and to matters concerning the worldly authority of the ruler. (:257)<sup>121</sup>

In agreement with Tempels, Sundermeier claims that “preserving life is the real purpose of all religious activity” (1998:14). And this “life” constitutes continuity (:15), community (:17), interdependence through participation (:18-19), and potentiality – “the internal potential of life to grow, the ideal being the harmonious balance of all forces”, material and spiritual, seen and unseen, animate and inanimate (:19). The universe is the intricate net of powers and forces that struggle and interact to make survival possible. Tempels (1969:67) overstates the issue rather bluntly, “The Bantu universe is a chaotic tangle of unordered forces blindly struggling with one another.”

Africans believe there are ways of ordering the world, of making it manageable, and keeping chaos at bay. Cosmic order operates on a number of levels: (1) the social level (as has been discussed above), (2) the expressive, poetic level, which shapes the aesthetics of a society, as well as its creativity and celebration, (3) the cognitive, educational function which focuses on the maintenance of values and ancient knowledge, (4) ways of structuring space, i.e. sacred and secular, public and private, (5) the legal dimension which includes mainly uncodified law, and (6) the religious level which seeks to “make the invisible visible” (Sundermeier 1998:54-55). These dimensions of cosmic order and functioning are not to be seen in isolation from, but as intricately connected to, one another.

There are many signs in African life that point to the fact that the human being is seen as dependent upon (Sundermeier 1998:104), or rather inter-dependent with, the rest of the cosmos. For example, Sundermeier suggests that ritual slaughter, reliance upon certain medicines, and some forms of representing ancestors displays humans’ attachment to animals (:108). Totemism, too, exemplifies the perceived bond which exists between a certain animal and a clan (:114). Reliance on herbs and plants and their potency for healing and ritual implies the Africans’ respect for and connection to the vegetable world. Ancestor veneration (:120ff), spirit possession (:136), and the belief in unconstrained and unconditional beings, e.g. divinities (:148) and the all-embracing God (:159), all reveal that the African sees him/herself as part of a wider context which includes all beings.

Tempels argues that the African leitmotif, or supreme value, is “life, force, to live strongly, or vital force” (Tempels 1969:44). This means that any “illness, wound or disappointment, all suffering, depression, or fatigue, every injustice and every failure: all these are held to be, and are spoken of by the Bantu as, a diminution of vital force” (:46). Humans can renew their vital force “by tapping the strength of other creatures” (:49). Moreover, “*being* is that which *possesses* force” (:51), which means that everything that *is* can exert force (:52). As a result, the universe is a complex interweaving of forces, and not a static reality (:53).

As suggested above, these forces at work in the universe exist in hierarchy (Tempels 1969:61), the tip of which is represented by the supreme God/Spirit/Creator. The “first fathers of men” (archipatriarchs) are high up in the hierarchy, and are the most important chain binding humans to God. In rough strokes the cosmological hierarchy consists of spiritualised beings, the dead, and the living (:61). Among these three categories there are further distinctions, e.g. superior and lesser spiritual beings, malevolent and benevolent spirits, vegetable, animal and human among the living, etc. All in all, however, the created universe is centred on humans. “The present human

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<sup>121</sup> As a result, for Africans the church and royal court came to be seen as two foci of authority – both with religious and political influence (:263). No clear distinction was made, as well, between the missionary and the politician, nor, for that matter, between the missionary and the ritual expert. Church leaders’ power was seen in both religious and political terms, which often led to Africans’ failure to distinguish between religious ceremonies and political ceremonies (:260, 269).

generation living on earth is the centre of all humanity, including the world of the dead” (:64).

According to Tempels, there are three general laws of vital causality that regulate the forces of the universe as they interrelate. Firstly, a human being, whether alive or deceased, “can directly reinforce or diminish the being of another” human being (:67). Secondly, “vital human force can directly influence inferior force-beings” such as animals, plants or objects. Thirdly, a rational being can act indirectly upon another rational being through the intermediacy of an inferior (i.e. animal, vegetable, or mineral) force (:68). Vital human force does not depend upon itself, but is and remains essentially dependent upon its elders, the deceased, “so the power to know is, like being itself, essentially dependent upon the wisdom of the elders” (:73). Such relationships, “vital influences of the dead upon the living”, are a common and natural occurrence, and can be deemed the normal ordering of events in a universe where there is free-flowing interaction between all spheres of existence (:88).

Oosthuizen agrees that an African worldview is essentially “open, incomplete, changing ... it is unlimited in its qualitative varieties and is truly mysterious; this world is restless, a living and growing organism, always pregnant with new developments for the future”. It is not a closed or static system, which implies that in it “action, event, and change are emphasized more than substance and fixity” (Oosthuizen 1991:36). He adds that the “African traditional approach with its holistic emphasis has much to give to the modern world with its closed, limited, merely rationalist disposition” (:48). Indeed, African cosmology displays “sensitivity to the depth of human existence” (:49) – an existence which sees itself as part of a harmonious, unified whole, but does not necessarily regard itself as superior to or in control of this unity.

This holistic view of reality does not categorise the spheres of life as neatly as the Western mind is in the habit of doing. Religion is as much part of life as, say, politics, or the family, or health or economic matters are. It is not to be severed and categorised apart from the ordinary goings-on of society. Mulago explains that for the indigenous African

religion is a complex of ideas, feelings, and rites based on: belief in two worlds, visible and invisible; belief that both worlds involve community and hierarchy; belief in the intersection of the two worlds, the transcendence of the invisible world in no way contradicting its immanence; belief in a Supreme Being, Creator, and Father of all that exists. (1991:119)

Traditional black African religion can be regarded as based on four essential elements, “unity of life and participation; belief in the enhancement or diminution of beings and the interaction of beings; symbol as the principal means of contact and union; an ethic that flows from ontology” (Mulago 1991:120). African religion is not based on rational thought (Taylor 1965:18), but on experiences that form the core of human life and vitality (:51), experiences that involve all forms of life and existence.<sup>122</sup>

For Tony Balcomb, the value of the primal worldview lies in its “holism, spirituality, and inclusiveness” and its “epistemology that nurtures faith, encourages story, believes in revelation, and allows for flexibility and adaptation” (Balcomb 2003:14)<sup>123</sup>. He explains that the “vitalistic cosmology” found among indigenous peoples of Africa allows for the numinous, it allows “the world to ‘disclose itself to us...’”. It also allows for personification (instead of objectification) of forces in the world (:5)<sup>124</sup>. In an African concept of reality there is “unity between subject and object, observed and observer, God and world, knower and known”, interconnectedness of all being and oneness of the

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<sup>122</sup> Refer to section 2.2.1 for a more elaborate discussion of these topics.

<sup>123</sup> Balcomb (2003:6,13) indeed insists that the primal worldview critiques and challenges the modern. Moreover, he shows how aspects of a premodern frame of reference correlate with a post-modern one.

<sup>124</sup> Africans comprehend the universe and nature as “thou”, and not as “it” (:11-12).

universe (:7). It adheres to the idea of vital participation, i.e. *ubuntu* instead of the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* (:8). An African worldview is open and vulnerable with respect to the transcendent, the “other” and the novel. Humankind is considered to participate in the transcendent (:9). Alien systems of thought are absorbed instead of rejected offhand. For this reason African cosmology is often labelled syncretistic (:10; Setiloane 1986:9-11<sup>125</sup>).

In sum, unlike their modern counterparts, human beings who adhere to a primal or premodern worldview share a sense of kinship with nature. They are shaped by a sense of interdependence with all the forces of the universe. They have a spiritual view of life, and acknowledge the existence of a spiritual world of powers and beings, a personalised universe in which the “appropriate question is not what causes things to happen but who causes things to happen”. Human beings can enter into relationship with the spirit world. Yet humankind is also finite and weak “and in need of a supernatural power” (Balcomb 2003:6). Premodern people hold a belief in the afterlife and maintain respect for ancestors. They live in a sacramentally perceived universe “where there is no dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual and where the physical can act as a vehicle for the spiritual” (:7)<sup>126</sup>.

Above I have shown in form of a brief overview what some of the main themes of an African cosmology entail.<sup>127</sup> In section 2.2 I will further analyse the African traditional worldview as a foundation for a reconciliatory view of reality. Many aspects of an African indigenous worldview can be considered to be alien to modern Western thought (see, for example, Koka 07.07.2004). Christianity was, and in most cases still is, usually associated with a European (or Western) worldview<sup>128</sup>, which is the root and the offshoot alike of modernity.<sup>129</sup> This worldview is one which has been shaped by the forces of the enlightenment age<sup>130</sup>, i.e. by the conceptual ideals of rationalism, empiricism and scientific

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<sup>125</sup> Setiloane concurs that an African worldview is open and fluid as opposed to the European one. It was able to condone and absorb the symbols of the missionaries and colonisers, which often caused it to be categorised as syncretistic.

<sup>126</sup> Balcomb refers here to Turner’s six-feature analysis of the primal worldview.

<sup>127</sup> For further descriptions and discussions of an African worldview, and analyses of common African indigenous ideas about kinship, social structure, God, spirits, ancestors, myths, economics, totemism, the ancestral cult, medicine, secret societies, symbolism, the material and non-material world, diviners and sorcerers among others, see also Alverson (1978), Bediako (1995), Blakely et al (1994), Dickson (1984), Dickson and Ellingworth (1969), Fardon (1990), Mbiti (1990, 1970, 1975), Olowa (1993), Olupona (2000, 1991), Paris (1994), Pheko (1965), Setiloane (1986) and Sogolo (1994). On a slightly different level, Evans-Pritchard, in his epic ethnographic work (*Nuer Religion*, 1956) describes the inner workings of an African indigenous society and its religion. His book on witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande (1976) also gives valuable illustrations of an African cosmology. Peires (1989) also offers an insightful narrative depiction of the clashing worldviews of the West and Africa.

<sup>128</sup> “Western-oriented churches’ sympathy lies with so-called Western modern thought,” claims Oosthuizen (2000:279). Bediako (1992:228), too, asserts that Europe has generally been associated with Christendom and vice-versa. This caused an unfortunate but yet pervasive confusion of Christianisation with westernisation (:236). European ethnocentrism found its way into Christianity, and the one became the vehicle of the other. As a result, people adopted “European value-settings for the faith” (:235).

<sup>129</sup> In the remainder of this chapter, the terms “Western”, “European”, “modern” and “Christian” will be used somewhat interchangeably. This is not to suggest that Christianity is equivalent to a Western, European or modern view of the world. However, in popular understanding these categories are often confused and intermingled. It is also an unfortunate reality that the Christian religion adopted Western standards (or was adopted by the West?) and became cast in the frame of reference of modernity.

<sup>130</sup> MacMurray (1933) considers some of the “makers of the modern spirit”, starting as far back in history as Aquinas and Luther. He traces the development of modernity through Newton, Rousseau, Goethe, Darwin, Nietzsche and Marx, among others. He claims the “modern spirit has its matrix in the middle ages” – more particularly in the notions of science, humanism and mechanism. In Balcomb’s analysis, the philosophies of Descartes and Kant represent the two “pillars on which modern philosophy is built” (2003:4).

truth, and by the ideological ideals of capitalism<sup>131</sup> and individualism<sup>132</sup>. The Western worldview is considered “modernist” because of these trends underpinning it.

According to Balcomb, characteristics of a modern scientific worldview are myriad. He summarises them as “a deist theology, an autonomous ontology, a rationalist epistemology, a totalitarian politic, and an outlook incapable of conceiving of difference and diversity” (Balcomb 2003:3). Modernity has brought about the objectification and instrumentalisation of the universe, the “de-population” of “spirits, gods, ancestors, demons, and other personalised occupants of space” (:1).<sup>133</sup> God is perceived as single, simple and unchanging (:2).<sup>134</sup> The world is perceived as monolithic and mechanistic.

The Western frame of reference rests on a number of perceived social and natural dichotomies (Comaroffs 1997:70), e.g. urban/rural, rational/emotional, scientific/sensory, male/female.<sup>135</sup> For this reason, a sharp contrast is perceived to exist between nature and culture/civilisation (1997:108).<sup>136</sup> The Western segregation of “the word from the world or the concept from the concrete” are other examples of artificial dualisms underlying a modern Western cosmology, as will be elaborated below (Comaroffs 1991:229).<sup>137</sup>

The Comaroffs argue that from the early nineteenth century onwards, when African traditional culture and European “Christian” culture started interacting in South Africa, there has been growing acknowledgement of “the difference between *setswana* and *sekgoa*, Tswana and European values or ways” (1991:243). Indeed, *setswana* and *sekgoa* came to be seen “as distinct ways of knowing and being, each with its own powers and capacities” (:245). For Africans a situation of relativity of the two realms emerged. African and European cosmologies coexisted, and appeared to function parallel in the lives of Africans.

In the above paragraphs I have outlined some of the main features of an African traditional cosmology, as opposed to modern Western concepts of reality. Below I elaborate on what grounds African and European/Western worldviews differ and, sometimes, clash. Why is it that the two appear to be, conceptually speaking, worlds apart?

### 1.5.2 Further differences between the African traditional and the modern

Jack Goody (1977) is of the opinion that the main differences that exist between traditional and modern societies are “implicit in the means of communication implied in the terms ‘oral’ and ‘written’”, or, simply, the “different processes of transmission” functional in different societies (:26). Goody argues that the distinguishing terminology

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<sup>131</sup> Modernity is “deeply affected by Eurocentric forces – mercantilism, Christianity, civilization – whose very existence rested on their universalist claims and horizons” (Comaroffs 1997:6). The modern world also places much emphasis on the Protestant work ethic and embodies the spirit of capitalism (Comaroffs 1991:85). Indeed modernity can be argued to be a product of “the elective affinity, the reciprocity, between Protestantism and industrial capitalism” (Comaroffs 1997:409). Capitalism and certain brands of Protestantism, of course, are inherently individualistic. They are also based on the convictions borne by empiricism, historical positivism, and the scientific method. Moreover, modernity highly reveres the doctrine of personal self-improvement (Comaroffs 1991:67).

<sup>132</sup> The Comaroffs insist that one of the main features that underpin Western modernity is liberal individualism (1997:396). The Western view of the person is intrinsically individualistic, and is therefore contrary to the communal, inter-dependent, holistic African model. Balcomb, too, asserts that in the modern West the personal Self is seen as the starting point of all that is, not God or the community (2003:3).

<sup>133</sup> “Aristotle’s *deus ex machina* found its way into Christian tradition.” (Balcomb 2003:2)

<sup>134</sup> Such a notion of God tends to lead to faith in a unitary state and absolutist political institutions.

<sup>135</sup> “From this long conversation came the stark imaginative dualisms – white/black, Christian/heathen, *sekgoa*/*setswana* (European ways/ Tswana ways) – that developed on both sides of the frontier” (Comaroffs 1997:7).

<sup>136</sup> Such inherently racist and sexist dichotomies led Westerners to view “the dark continent” as “a woman despoiled” whereby they also “infantilized it” (:117).

<sup>137</sup> See also Balcomb (2003:2).

ought to be “oral vs. literate” rather than the habitual “traditional vs. modern” (:43).<sup>138</sup> The two “systems of thought” in question are not “competing on an equal footing” (:150) – the crux is the presence or absence of the written or printed word. “Modern” and “traditional” communities differ mainly on the grounds of the nature of human communication practiced in them (:151; Landau 1995; Dillistone 1986:76-96; Comaroffs 1991:35-36, 225-227).

Isabel Hofmeyr (1994) argues, too, that a distinguishing feature of traditional societies is their reliance on oral communication and performance.<sup>139</sup> Orally transmitted stories, for example, are viewed as “cultural capital” (:32). Hofmeyr even traces resistance to writing and literacy in her study of a South African indigenous community (:41 ff). Literacy and the written word, as brought by the Europeans, were indeed “oralised” by the indigenous people (:51)<sup>140</sup>. With reference to the import of missionary Christianity into the African sphere, Hofmeyr posits,

In bringing their everyday cultural resources to bear on the literate edifice of Christianity, people were not simply trying to make a relatively strange religion hospitable. They were also trying to protect a way of life and a system of representation. Coming from societies dominated by the politics of performance, most people were accustomed to carnivalesque cultural activities in which the body played a central part. Missionaries, by contrast, came from a world where the repression of this culture of physical carnival was recent enough to have left a climate of distaste and disgust for the things of the body. ... Hardly surprisingly, then, in their work, missionaries strove to institute the quiet, apparent incorporeality of text above the robust, physical displays of oral performance. (:51)

Western missionaries had “a textual view of the world”. A part of the reaction and defence against the Western way of being “was to give body to what the missionaries decorporealised and ... to reimmerge the book and the text into the corporeal stream of carnival and spectacle” (Hofmeyr 1994:51). In riposte to this challenge from the side of the indigenous community, colonialism imposed “the institutional weight of schooling” which was to “dampen the oral energies of a performance culture and insinuate the constraining effects of a literate, documentary culture” (:51). The result was that schools and education (especially through missions) changed the style and place of storytelling and oral performance (:52). Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the changing environment in colonial and post-colonial Southern Africa (e.g. through forced removals) effected changes in performance locality, style, and custom; the “storytelling context changed” (:99).

Hofmeyr argues that “in losing the architecture of tradition,” which was structured upon orality and performance, “many people simultaneously lost a political symbol and a source of historical memory” (:101).

Yet, these demoralising changes notwithstanding, many people have not simply abandoned traditionalism and its cultural practices. Many royal lineages, for example, have high commitment to traditional skills, and since many of these were the first to settle in new villages, they are in a position to keep alive a vestige of the large, agnatic homesteads that characterised pre-removal settlements and the cultural practices of such groups. And it is largely within these groups that one finds the few remaining practitioners of oral historical narrative. (:101)

The will and the energy to remain an oral society, and sustain oral practices, have proven themselves in numerous African communities, because stories make out the foundation of

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<sup>138</sup> See also Graham (1987).

<sup>139</sup> See also Barber and Moraes Farias (1989).

<sup>140</sup> For example, Hofmeyr claims that “elements of performance like hymn singing and storytelling played a crucial role in ‘oralising’ Lutheranism”.

a society's consciousness and identity.<sup>141</sup> Furthermore, narrative, "after all, is a form concerned with individuals not circumstances, description not analysis, and the particular rather than the collective" (Hofmeyr 1994:105). It is, in line with African cosmology, person-oriented and celebrates the centrality of the human being in close association with her/his group.

It is Hofmeyr's contention that oral communication, especially through narrative and performance, is a hallmark of African society and is the bedrock of African cosmology. She is convinced that narrative provides identity and historical understanding in African communities (:106). "Narrative, with its complex internal arrangements and systems of representation, is, in fact, capable of sophisticated, if subtle forms of social explanation, historical interpretation and cultural exegesis" (:106). This is why oral performance, narratives and stories, legends and songs, are very important to the African for his/her self-understanding, and to the outsider for his/her understanding of an African worldview. Indeed, "Anyone wishing to come to terms with popular consciousness and the role it plays in political behaviour would do well to pay close attention to words and stories, granting them an independence that is not inevitably yoked to a material base" (:181). Investigation of issues revolving around orality and the study of oral societies "compels us to leave our libraries and make journeys to meet informants, to speak to them, to hear their stories and to try to understand something of the world in which they live" (:181).

From the above one may gather, therefore, that Africans place great value on oral means of communication, as opposed to written or printed codes, and everything these imply. It is indeed one of the vehicles of their self-identification and historical consciousness, and inspires the way they view the world. Mbiti (1991:59) underlines the importance of mythology, proverbs and prayers in African traditional religious praxis. Others even argue that oral instruments of communication, e.g. the drum, can be likened to the Bible or Quran in its perceived significance and potency (Niangoran-Bouah 1991:81-92).

Mudimbe, too, asserts that in order to study African cosmology and society, one has to be aware of the various symbols and interpretations of the African past. The task is one of "naming and metaphorizing" Africa and her symbols (Mudimbe 1994:26), which are expressed not in written documents but in ancient philosophy, art, and (oral) literature (:38ff). In this context, Mudimbe raises the problem of what may be deemed the domestication and the conflict of memories in African history (:105ff). There indeed exists some "conflict between memories" – of the missionary, coloniser, and the colonised (:140), and in some cases there are contradicting and competing views of what happened in Africa, and who Africans are. The problem, of course, is that the colonisers and missionaries controlled literacy, and what was written and printed. So it is that literacy and the printing press came to suppress and dominate orality and that which was spoken and performed.

Especially with reference to the evolution of African art, Mudimbe argues that there is a struggle "between two traditions". In Africa, art – which includes not only the visual arts but also audio and performing arts – has often fulfilled the function of what in the West was fulfilled by the written or printed word. Mudimbe claims that African art forms have developed in four main categories. One is the category that signals the survival of traditional styles, second is art inspired by Christian missions (Mudimbe 1994:159), third is souvenir-art produced for consumption by foreign observers, and fourth is "an emerging new art requiring techniques that were unknown or rare in traditional African art". This fourth category brings forth specimens that are "varied in style", as it "falls between two stylistic poles, and as a consequence it avoids a close following of either" (:160). Using art as an example, Mudimbe illustrates "the complexity

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<sup>141</sup> See for example Balcomb (2000:49-62).



of the idea of Africa and the multiple and contradictory discursive practices it has suscitated" (:212), as well as the various reactions to a particular Western-shaped and Western-informed idea of Africa (:213).

Robin Horton's book, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West* (1993), is an investigation of African traditional worldviews vis-à-vis Western paradigms of reality. In it, Horton attempts to show some features of African thought and views that seem to be at variance with modern, Western concepts of reality. In his opinion, there exists an "undeniable distinction between traditional and scientific thinking" (:197). He summarises the differences as being a magical vs. a non-magical attitude to words (:223), "ideas-bound-to-occasions" vs. "ideas-bound-to-ideas" (:228), unreflective vs. reflective thinking (:229), mixed vs. segregated motives (:230), a protective vs. a destructive attitude towards established theory (:235, 245), divination vs. diagnosis in cases of calamity (:237), absence vs. presence of experimental method (:241), and tolerance of ignorance, acceptance of coincidence, chance, and probability in African tradition (:243). As argued above, Horton suggests that literacy is also a key distinguishing factor between modern and traditional societies (:250). Moreover, when talking of Western mainstream and African indigenous cosmologies, Horton insists we are talking of two principal modes of religious thought, viz. the "generalizing/theoretical" and the "particularistic/narrative" (:365).<sup>142</sup>

The main feature of Western thinking – as contrasted to indigenous thinking – is "basically the quest for unity underlying apparent diversity; for simplicity underlying apparent complexity; for order underlying apparent disorder; for regularity underlying apparent anomaly" (Horton 1993:198). The implication is that African traditional society is comfortable with apparent diversity, complexity, disorder and anomaly. According to Horton, African traditional cosmology is comparable to cultures of the early Mediterranean, Near East and Europe (i.e. "Old World traditional" cultures) (:304). Contrary to expectation, traditionalist thinking is not necessarily "closed", but displays remarkable openness to change (:316).<sup>143</sup> This suggests that an African worldview is able to incorporate, adjust, synthesise – in short, freely interact – when faced with other ways of being. It also suggests that Africans do not necessarily adopt a stance of defensiveness and exclusion when other ways of thought enter their sphere of reference.<sup>144</sup>

### 1.5.3 Historical interaction between African tradition and modern Christian culture

In a discussion of the differences between the traditional African and the modern Western worldviews, one must take account of the fact that there has in fact been much

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<sup>142</sup> See also Horton's essay "African Conversion" (1971:81-108), as well as Child and Child (1993), Olupona (2000), and Sogolo (1994). Nürnberger (2002:438) asserts, "Traditionalism perceives reality to be a complex flow of dynamistic power which can be channelled through rituals to the benefit of the community, or through sorcery to the detriment of the community. Modernity is geared to the assumption that reality is structured according to natural laws which can be researched by science and manipulated by technology. Traditionalism believes in the flow of the life force of the extended family through the male lineage, resulting in a patriarchal hierarchy. Modernity believes in the emancipation of the individual from all external authorities. Traditionalism demands submission, modernity competitiveness. In terms of social psychology, traditionalism is characterized by dependency, modernity by inferiority."

<sup>143</sup> "Despite its conservatism, such thinking has an essentially 'open' character" (Horton 1993:317). The Comaroffs (1997:27) similarly argue, "Contrary to the way in which 'non-Western' societies have been described in the scholarly and popular literatures of the West, these societies were never 'closed,' 'traditional,' or unchanging. Nor were they founded simply on kinship, communalism, ascriptive status, patriarchy, or any such 'principles.' They tended, rather, to be complex, fluid social worlds, caught up in their own intricate dynamics and internal dialectics, the workings of which had a direct effect on the terms of the colonial encounter."

<sup>144</sup> Nonetheless, African traditional thinking "tends to produce and sustain a single over-arching theoretical framework rather than a multiplicity of such frameworks" (Horton 1993:317). Although Africans seem not to be intimidated by diversity and multiplicity, they tend to hold a unified, all-encompassing view of the world and how it works.

interaction between the two, and that through this interaction they have not remained static and unchanged. Developments in African belief can be seen “as responses of the traditional cosmology to the successive interpretative challenges posed by modern social change” (Horton 1971:106). Landau (1995) discusses some of the power-relations, alliances, collaboration, distrust, misunderstandings and conflicts that arose when traditional society was faced with the mission and colonialism, using the example of the BaNgwato people<sup>145</sup>. He discusses the power interplay of the kingship, the church, and the Protectorate, but also the “subtler interplay of literacy, status, wealth and cattle, abstinence, and attentiveness to *thuto*” (1995:209), *thuto* being the practice of reading and writing.<sup>146</sup>

Instead of accepting what colonisers and missionaries brought to them lock, stock and barrel, Africans started a process of creative interaction with the new cosmology. For example, after the translation of the Bible into SeTswana,

missionaries and African evangelists began to mediate this protean text, refracturing it all over again. The Tswana activity of learning about Christianity and determining its social and political performance was then a series of collective and contradictory acts of creation. (Landau 1995:xxi)

There has been a “continuous process of reciprocal adjustment” between beliefs, ethics, and other aspects of life and conceptualisation. African cosmologies are not static, but new environments produce new symbols and new mythological justifications (Forde 1976:vii). Moreover, traditional beliefs and standards “continue to exert a powerful influence. For mythical charters and moral codes have their own cultural inertia whereby they can retard or guide adaptation in other fields” (:viii). In many African communities there has been (and continues to be) a process of transformation of what was (or is) alien, into familiar societal roles and frameworks. Landau claims this suggests a “mutable symbolic order”, a diffuse cosmology. “Historical events ... themselves constitute and reconstitute practice, language, ‘cosmology’, and Christianity” (Landau 1995:xxii). In this light, one may speak of “the reinterpretation of the past according to the fluid necessities of life” (:207).

Indeed African tradition has found new forms of expression and “new avenues of survival in the modern world” (Hackett 1991:135). Ways in which this has happened include what Hackett calls universalisation (:136), modernisation (:138), politicisation (e.g. nationalism) (:141), commercialisation (e.g. certain aspects of “the traditional” are marketed, for instance art and crafts) (:144), and individualisation (e.g. rites are adjusted for personal needs) (:145). Effectively, Hackett questions whether African traditional religion has not in fact become a form of “neo-traditional religion” (:136). Moreover, “As we appreciate more fully the historicity of African religions, their capacity to innovate, their capacity to respond even to the challenge of the macrocosmic, so we come to abandon the idea of African religion today as merely a pathetic survival” (:146). In view of this assertion, Hackett stresses “the traditionalism of contemporary ‘religious innovations’”, and the continuing strength of African traditional paradigms despite continued efforts to suppress and thwart them (:168).

“Culture is a product of a peoples’ history. But it also reflects that history and embodies a whole set of values by which a people view themselves and their place in time and space” (Ngugi 1993:42). “Cultures that change to reflect the ever-changing dynamics of internal relations and which maintain a balanced give and take with external relations

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<sup>145</sup> The Ngwato kingdom is in Botswana, and belongs to the tribe of the Tswana.

<sup>146</sup> Landau has similarly found that in early interaction between Africa and the West there was significant confusion about the value and meaning of medicine, extraction and prayer. He traced signs of congruence and divergence between, for example, the missionary and priest-healer (1995:114), and problematic translations of religious words and symbols (e.g. invoked ancestors were likened to demons, priest-healers were seen as sorcerers) (:xix). Of course this confusion witnesses to a severe clash or misinterpretation of worldviews.

are the ones that are healthy" (:xvi). It may be argued that African culture, with its underlying cosmology, has, throughout history, been able to maintain that "give and take with external relations" which Ngugi talks about. African tradition and self-understanding have evolved to meet the needs of the society as contexts and circumstances have changed.<sup>147</sup>

The coin has two sides, however. Not only is indigenous culture changed by interaction with the modern West, but Western culture and religion is also transformed by this encounter. In her examination of the transformation and reinterpretation of the indigenous cosmology and ritual of an Indonesian traditional community following Christian conversion, Aragon (1992) has shown how Christianity is indigenised by this community. I believe one can recognise parallels between indigenous Asian and African communities, and how they dealt with the impact of colonialism and the advent of Christian missions. Aragon's fascinating study is an attempt at illustrating how inculturation works itself out. Specifically, she has tried "to examine how the Tobaku have constructed a Protestant cosmology and practice with respect to their most important pre-Christian religious concepts and ritual activities" (1992:272). She has found that "the Tobaku reinterpret their own ritual practices to make them compatible with permissible Christian rites at the same time as they interpret Christian doctrines to suit their traditional moral framework" (:274). Indigenous peoples seem to reorient their rituals and interpretations (:305ff) when faced with a new view of how the world works, which sometimes leads them to Christianising indigenous rituals, or indeed indigenising Christian rituals (:305). So it is that in the case of the Tobaku, the interplay between the Western Christian and the indigenous traditional cultures resulted in the reinterpretation of thanksgiving rituals, life-cycle rituals, and funeral rites (:319). Moreover, religious practices "newly invented ... may become arenas for the reinterpretation of historic events" (:327). Aragon has effectively shown that ancestral traditions are mutable and flexible (:331), and that they have already undergone significant changes in interaction with the modern Western (specifically Christian) paradigms.

Moving our focus back on Africa, in their outstanding study of the Tswana, the Comaroffs have demonstrated that the interplay between the traditional and modern "has involved a long battle for the possession of salient signs and symbols, a bitter, drawn out contest of conscience and consciousness" (1991:4). They argue that Africans (a) succumb to, (b) resist, or (c) recast in their own image the Western symbols – or in fact do all three.<sup>148</sup>

The point is that subordinate societies also own conceptual frameworks and ideologies, as I have illustrated so far. In order to assert or defend themselves against a dominant order or group and its worldview and ideologies, they actively engage their own ideologies (Comaroffs 1991:24). The Comaroffs argue that the hegemony of Western

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<sup>147</sup> A particularly tenacious tradition that has arisen in Africa is "a patriotic national tradition developing in resistance and opposition to imperialist-sanctioned African culture. Under colonialism it was a culture which through songs, dances, poetry, drama, spoke of and reflected peoples' real needs as they struggled against appalling working conditions in the settler-occupied farms and in factories or which sang of their hopes as they took up arms against colonial exploitation and political oppression. Whether in sculpture, poetry, songs, or dances, the patriotic arts looked to the past for progressive elements in form but always injected them with a new content born of the urgent present that raised them to a higher level. At the same time, the patriotic resistance arts were not afraid of incorporating new forms." (Ngugi 1993:44)

<sup>148</sup> The culture introduced by the missionaries and colonisers from the West "took root on the social terrain of the Tswana, some of it to be absorbed silently and seamlessly into a reinvented – or, rather, reified – ethnic 'tradition,' some to be creatively transformed, some to be redeployed to talk back to the whites" (Comaroffs 1991:12). Just as colonialism itself was not a coherent unchanging system, "so colonial evangelism was not a simple matter of raw mastery, of British churchmen instilling in passive black South Africans the culture of European modernity or the forms of industrial capitalism." Instead, mission Christianity "was enmeshed, from first to last, in a complex dialectic of challenge and riposte, domination and defiance" (:12).

cultural paradigms was and remains to be “threatened by the vitality that remains in the forms of life it thwarts,” i.e. in the indigenous paradigms of thought (:25). What happened in colonial Africa was a clash of cultures which involved a plethora of “symbolic struggles” (:29).<sup>149</sup> Cosmologies, or, what the Comaroffs call “modes of representation and the diverse forms they take, are *part of culture and consciousness, hegemony and ideology, not merely their vehicles*” (:30).

The Western cosmology which Africa was faced with, and which shaped the projects of colonialism and missions, was a worldview which sought to overrun and dominate the African cosmologies. It was (and arguably still is) a hegemonic cosmology, or a “technology of control” (Comaroffs 1991:31). Just as hegemonic paradigms of structuring the world “run the gamut from overt coercion to implicit persuasion, so modes of resistance may extend across a similarly wide spectrum” (:31), and indeed in Africa they did (and do). I agree with the Comaroffs that African consciousness offered an array of such modes of resistance, and did not simply accept what the West had to offer. Instead, Africans creatively interacted with and reshaped Western ideas, and in this process various forms of new African worldviews emerged. What indeed happened, and continues to happen in Africa, is “the meshing of two social worlds themselves in motion, two worlds of power and meaning” (:39). In this light one can argue that from the onset the convergence of the indigenous African culture and modern European culture “was at once a constantly unfolding, mutating, unruly *process*, and an infinitely intricate order of evanescent, often enigmatic, *relations...*” (1997:19).

#### 1.5.4 Unequal dialogue partners? – Domination and subjugation of African tradition

As demonstrated above, the history of interaction between modern Western Christian and African traditional paradigms of thought has been a complex one, and one occurring on many different levels and under varying circumstances. The results and effects of this interaction are multifarious indeed, as the diversity of contemporary African society suggests. The greatest bane of Africa’s history since, say, the eighteenth century, is its inextricable linkage with colonialism and the cultural hegemony of the West. Colonialism “is to be understood, at once, as economic and cultural, political and symbolic, general and particular. Indeed, colonialism was intrinsic to the rise of modernity in Europe, itself a historical movement whose universalizing ethos was indissolubly material and moral, secular and spiritual” (Comaroffs 1997:409).

The colonial hegemony was supported and partly exerted by the European (and later some North-American) Christian missions (Comaroffs 1991:178).<sup>150</sup> Christianity was viewed as *bogosi*, a competing state, which threatened indigenous rulers, and “came to provide an alternative focus of political mobilization and action” (:262). Christian missionary paradigms of reality supported the colonial programme of transforming the African “savage” into a European-style Christian gentleman or lady. The Comaroffs argue that missions became “catalysts in the European domination of southern Africa – in

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<sup>149</sup> “The study of Christianity in Africa is more than just an exercise in the analysis of religious change. It is part and parcel of the historical anthropology of colonialism and consciousness, culture and power; of an anthropology concerned at once with the colonizer and the colonized, with structure *and* agency.” (Comaroffs 1991:11)

<sup>150</sup> David Barrett (1968) claims that missions can be considered a direct attack on traditional culture. He laments that mission Christianity was not true to the gospel, but represented a grave sin of whites against blacks (:154). It was “a failure in love” (:154). Through its paternalism, mission Christianity believed it was acting in love towards the African people. But it was “a kind of love that falls short of the biblical concept” (:155). Mission Christianity represented “a failure in sensitivity, the failure ... to demonstrate consistently the fullness of the biblical concept of love as sensitive understanding towards others as equals, the failure to study or understand African society, religion and psychology in any depth” (:156).

ways they rarely would have chosen” (:305).<sup>151</sup> It can be argued that the brand of Christian cosmology Africa came into contact with during the time of the missionary endeavours contributed to the colonisation of African consciousness on two levels. There was overt evangelisation, but also an attempt at subtly “revolutionising the habits of the people” by engaging Africans in arguments whose terms the colonisers regulated and whose structures bore the hegemonic forms of the colonising culture (:199). The Comaroffs assert that three crucial domains of dialogue functioned in this endeavour. These were “the politics of space” which involved establishing a colonial discourse which symbolically seized centre spaces (:200), “the battle to control dominant material and symbolic values” (e.g. the battle over water, irrigation and iconicity) (:206), and the “contest over the media through which the conversation itself was proceeding, over the very nature of language and representation” (:199).<sup>152</sup> This dialogue, practiced on many levels, was not waged on equal ontological footing (:210). Indeed, it was not a dialogue based on equality of the participants. The playing field was, so to speak, not level from the start.

In *On Revelation and Revolution, Volume Two* (1997), the Comaroffs expand on some aspects of the colonial and Christian civilising mission with its modes of subtle, indirect conversion in more detail (:119-165). They claim that the all-encompassing mission to “civilise” the African included the attempt to transform and control African agriculture (:126, 139). This agrarian revolution gave rise to a class of commercial farmers (“an assertive bourgeoisie”), but the majority became impoverished, and “an army of wage workers” was created (:164). Indirectly then, the colonisers and missions effected significant political transformations and novel class distinctions (:151). Moreover, the Western cultural hegemony had effects on markets, money, and value (:166-217), which included the meaning of, for example, cattle (:208). Because of the colonial impact, Africans were drawn into a commodity economy, which resulted in the revolutionisation of production, the introduction of money and commerce, and the rise of self-possessed labour as a virtue. Indigenous patterns of consumption were transformed (:217), and the entire economy of traditional African communities was reinvented to include migrants, merchants, and the divide between a rural and urban workforce (:249-250). Even clothing became a symbol and instrument of hegemony and cultural clashes (:222ff), as did architecture, interiority, domesticity (:274-322), health and medicine (:323-364). Western notions concerning morality, civil and legal rights<sup>153</sup> and social and political identities (:365-404) shaped a new African society – often by means of bureaucracy (:370), and always according to “the register of radical individualism” (:373). The civilising mission aimed “to implant the modernist, right-bearing subject on African soil – whether it be as Christian convert, faithful spouse, upright property-holder, nouveau-riche merchant, industrious yeoman, or disciplined laborer” (:373).

In effect, colonialism represented the “Christian campaign to reshape African personhood” (:372), by attempting to replace the old worldview with a worldview based on, among other things, “healthy individualistic competition”<sup>154</sup>, private ownership of land (:375), and the development of a class society (made up of landowners, labourers, etc.) (:379). Africans were supposed to be both citizens of the civilised world and ethnic subjects (:400), and as a result became stuck in “a universe of competing identities” (:401).

<sup>151</sup> The Comaroffs (1991:310) indeed assert that evangelists were “the human vehicles of a hegemonic worldview”.

<sup>152</sup> According to Bujo (1992:40), the Europeans’ means of subduing Africans can be summarised as (1) the drawing of frontiers, (2) the subordination of traditional chiefs and (3) the attempt at eradicating traditional religion.

<sup>153</sup> With reference to this, the Comaroffs describe the “inherently contradictory character of the colonial discourse on rights” (1997:404).

<sup>154</sup> “Colonial evangelists saw liberal individualism as an emancipation from the enchantment of custom and communalism, from the tyranny of tradition and the chiefship” (Comaroffs 1997:404).

The “politics of conversion” (Comaroffs 1991:230) engaged by colonialism in general, and the missions in particular, involved education to “awaken the intellect” of the African subject (:231). Missionaries also constantly attempted to elaborate the Christian church’s liturgical cycle in order to blend with the indigenous calendar, in order for it to be more accessible to the indigenous people (:234). Yet to the Africans, the evangelist’s message became “less and less appealing. They soon became aware that it was fundamentally antagonistic to their mode of existence” (:237). The Christianity that was brought by Western colonisers “was explicit in its attack on the entire edifice of customary practice.”<sup>155</sup> Nevertheless African communities “continued to converse with the church, not least for strategic purposes” (:238). Effectively, one can aptly describe the position of the Africans as “listening to the missionaries with one ear and tradition with the other” (:238). To some extent this is still the case in Africa, although the missionaries have been replaced by more subtle vehicles of modernity and Western civilisation, like for example the free market economy, consumerism and materialism promoted by glossy magazines, television and the advertising industry.

The colonisers became experts in the “politics of language” (:231), i.e. in employing the African language and modes of communication for their own ends.<sup>156</sup> By learning the indigenous languages, and translating key Western texts into the vernacular, the Europeans assumed that the language of the Africans could be instrumentalised for their own benefit and profit. Indeed, the colonisers subscribed to the epistemological principle that “naming and knowing the truth was a matter of managing signs and correspondences in a world of verifiable realities” (:216). Through wrong translations and misinterpretations of African ideas (e.g. translating *badimo* as “demons”), as well as through linguistic innovations to introduce the Western world into African thought patterns, colonialists became guilty of linguistic colonialism (:218, 219). And it was not long before African converts to the civilising mission “had internalised the lessons of linguistic colonialism and the bourgeois ideology that lay silent behind it” (:224).<sup>157</sup>

Notwithstanding the above, there were a number of groups in traditional society who indeed were genuinely attracted to conversion. They tended to be the marginal folk who were treated as lesser humans, e.g. the junior royals, and many women. To these, “the church presented itself as an alternative, and an altogether new, source of meaning, control, and influence”, in some ways more favourable than the mode of thought they were used to (:240). Moreover, the missions’ encouragement of music and hymn singing resonated with African sensibilities of song’s centrality in ritual and daily life (:241).<sup>158</sup>

Colonial missionaries, “speaking the language of European ethical and cultural universalism, pressed upon the Tswana a hitherto unfamiliar notion of difference” (:244). Sharp distinctions were drawn between the Western, “civilised”, “Christian” way of conduct and the African “uncivilised”, “heathen” way. Westerners’ cosmology and “rhetoric of contrast” urged Africans to abandon wholly their old (perceived inferior) ways, adopt the new (perceived superior), and not integrate the two (:244).<sup>159</sup> Yet, using the example of the Tswana, the Comaroffs claim that indigenous communities did not accept that there could only be *one* “true” way of knowing and classifying the world, one

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<sup>155</sup> “Royals were most directly threatened by such moral tirades, seeing the onslaught on rainmaking, initiation, and polygyny as a serious challenge to their sovereignty” (Comaroffs 1991:238).

<sup>156</sup> See section 1.5.2, above.

<sup>157</sup> Part of the problem was that Western rhetoric was “far removed from indigenous expressive forms” (Comaroffs 1997:239).

<sup>158</sup> Indeed, “Mission music was to be widely domesticated in southern Africa, most notably in the secessionist churches. Its cadences would be made to take on the pulse of indigenous self-assertion, to harmonize the aspirations of an independent, black salvation” (Comaroffs 1997:241).

<sup>159</sup> The colonialists attempted to replace one hegemony with another instead of allowing both alongside one another. They tried to inculcate in an African worldview “the hegemonic signs and practices – the spatial, linguistic, ritual and political *forms* – of European culture” (Comaroffs 1991:311).

absolute standard of value.<sup>160</sup> “Instead, they set about recasting the message of the evangelists into their own language of cultural relativism” (:245). The Africans, therefore, seemed to be comfortable with the coexistence and parallel functioning of the two realms of knowing, and in fact presumed “that peoples of different worlds might learn, and might incorporate, one another’s ways and means without repudiating their own” (:246). As it were, traditional modes of thought and action were never fully abandoned. Granted, there were small numbers of Africans who totally refused Christianity (*sekegoa*), or fully abandoned *setswana*, but most were “in the middle”, engaging with, domesticating and harnessing, incorporating and rejecting aspects of the Western Christian missionary worldview while all the while also remaining under the auspices of their own indigenous frame of reference (:247).<sup>161</sup>

Through the advent of the missions and colonialism in Africa, “a new world of possibility was revealed, a quiet revolution effected” (Comaroffs 1997:408). This intriguing and complex process gave rise to “cultural struggles, accommodations, hybridities, and new hegemonies” (:411). As a result, modernity took on its particular forms in Africa. The reality is that when African traditional cosmologies were confronted with Western paradigms, what ensued was an ideological struggle, waged on all possible levels – political, economic and religious, social and individual, symbolic and concrete. The Western worldview came with the mentality that it was superior, and had the right – indeed the duty – to suppress the African way. It also had a host of oppressive instruments at its disposal, so that its impact was overtly and subtly aggressive, domineering and subsuming. From this perspective, one can hardly talk of dialogue between Africa and the West being carried out on equal footing, and under circumstances of fairness and justice.

Although I have argued that Africa was by no means cowering and defenceless in this procedure of interaction, it still had to wage its cosmological and ideological war from the underside, and had constantly to deal with the disrespect and domination of its counterpart.<sup>162</sup> For this reason, because “dialogue” has seldom been friendly and respectful, but rather implied unequal power relations, the interaction of an African

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<sup>160</sup> The Tswana “world was founded on the assumption of cultural relativity and political autonomy. It certainly did not equate exchange with incorporation, or the learning of new techniques with subordination. And it expressed itself in its own imagery of personhood and property, work and wealth, social relations and modes of rule. But even when they refused the overtures of the mission in favour of their own conventions, the Africans were subtly transformed by their participation in its discourse” (Comaroffs 1991:310).

<sup>161</sup> Africans started to employ modes of “creative appropriation and defiance” which included “instances of ritual syncretism, the reconstruction and representation of the liturgy of the Holy Service” (Comaroffs 1991:248). African people became “technicians of the sacred”, “bricoleurs of the spiritual” (:250), which in turn brought about in African society a “changing religious identity” (:250). The dialectic encounter “yielded new identities, new frontiers, new signs and styles – and reproduced some older ones as well...” (Comaroffs 1997:28). In effect, interaction between the mission and African indigenous society and its worldview “was characterised by contestation and compliance, fascination and repulsion; although the churchmen were to prove more capable of imposing their designs upon the colonial field, the Tswana were hardly passive recipients of European culture. Not only did they remain sceptical of some of its ways and means, but they also read their own significance into them, seeking to siphon off the evident powers of the mission while rejecting its invasive discipline” (1997:309).

<sup>162</sup> Nevertheless, one of the subtle results of the West’s denigration of African traditions was that Africans themselves started to see their culture “as ‘savage’, ‘brutal’ and everything that is bad” (Setiloane 1988:1). Some started to mistrust their own traditions. A quote from Ulangeni, “an old Ixosa, but one living at the mission-station” (Callaway 1970:63), translated from Zulu, is enlightening: “The white man came out from a great Itongo with what is perfect. As regards the great Itongo which is spoken of by black men, they say that we black men at our origin came out with little things, which were merely sufficient for us to obtain food and to live; our wisdom was enough to enable us to help ourselves. As regards, then, that little wisdom, whilst we black men were by ourselves we used not to think we had little wisdom; we thought we had great wisdom, which Unkulunkulu gave us. But now we say it is little, because we see the great wisdom of the white men which overshadows all our little wisdom which we used to trust.” (Callaway 1970:81)

worldview with the modern Western one is still strained and complicated.<sup>163</sup> History reveals many warning signs, and cautions us not to allow dialogue to become conceptual self-aggrandisement or -justification, or ideological battle. Indeed, given our rather sordid history, much sensitivity and care is required when attempting discussion between and about the two paradigms and the societies they represent. The subject of this study is a delicate matter, and demands to be treated as such.

### 1.5.5 Dialogue already begun: African theologies and AICs

Above I have tried to show *that* African tradition and religion and (modern Western) Christianity are already engaged in lively dialogue, and have been since they first encountered one another.<sup>164</sup> In this section I wish merely to name what are in my opinion the two most overt and concrete *ways in which* this dialogue has displayed itself in recent decades, and is still continuing to do so. African tradition and Christianity have influenced each other profoundly, and still do. This fact, I argue, is shown most explicitly in (1) the history and the amazing proliferation of African theologies and (2) the existence and continuing growth of African Indigenous/Initiated Churches (AICs). These two phenomena – African theologies and AICs – are living proof of the fact that African tradition and religion and Christianity are no longer (and indeed have not been, since they first made contact with one another) entirely separate dynasties, located in isolation from one another.

It is beyond the scope of this study to investigate in detail the trends and types of Christianity operating in (South) Africa, exemplified by certain African theologies<sup>165</sup> and AICs<sup>166</sup>. Suffice it to acknowledge that there are a myriad of African theologians (and theologies) as well as of African churches and faith communities that all reflect in diverse and colourful ways how the religious tradition brought by “the West” and the religious tradition(s) indigenous to Africa have related, interacted and intermingled. To be sure, the concept of dialogue between African tradition and Christianity is not new.<sup>167</sup> Yet it is not obsolete either. Dialogue continues and needs to continue, albeit under circumstances that are more fair and free for the players involved. What this dissertation seeks to do falls into the category of African theology, contributing to the examination of one facet of the ongoing dialogue between African tradition and the Christian faith.

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<sup>163</sup> For this reason, “A consistent anti-imperialist position – that is, a position that struggles against or that exposes the continued neo-colonial control of African economics and cultures by the Western bourgeoisie – is the minimum necessary for a committed, responsible scholarship in Africa, or anywhere in the ‘Third World.’” (Ngugi 1993:87)

<sup>164</sup> It has been noted that this “dialogue” has not been conducted on a level playing field, but that it was continually strained by forces of domination and subjugation. Also, it must be acknowledged once more that it is problematic to speak of “African tradition” per se, without qualifying the term. The same holds for “Christianity”. Talk of the Christian religion as such, without reference to the place, time and circumstances of its occurrence, is a theoretical abstraction. There is no such thing as “pure” Christianity. South African Christianity is in itself a complex phenomenon, because it contains among other ingredients the influences of colonial mission theology and influences from African culture and religion. Not all Christians in South Africa “have a common understanding of what Christianity means” (Mfutso-Bengo 2001:105).

<sup>165</sup> See, for example, Bediako (1992, 1995); Parrat (1995); Mbiti (1970, 1975, 1990, 1991); Ukpong (1984); Idowu, Ezeanya, Kibongi, Sawyerr, Sidhom and Mbiti (1969); Magesa (1999); Mugambi (1995, 1997); Olupona (2000); Nyamiti (1984); Twesigye (1996); Ikenga-Menuh (1996); Mwakabana (2002); Moila (1987); Shorter (1988); Ayandele (1970); De Gruchy (1995); Roser (2000); Blakely et al (1994); Smith (1961); Gifford (1992); Schreiter (1985); Ranger and Kimambo (1972); Krüger (1989); Bond, Johnson and Walker (1979). The list of works on African theology is long. The scholars mentioned here represent but a fraction of all African theologians.

<sup>166</sup> Scholars that have researched AICs extensively and provide great insight into these churches are, among others, Anderson (2000); Daneel (1987); Barrett (1968); Oosthuizen (1986, 1992); Sundkler (1961 [1948]); Sundkler and Steed (2000); Naude (1995); Makhubu (1988); Ndiokwere (1981); du Toit and Ngada (1998); Van Vugt and Cloete (2000); Becken (1985); Thomas (1999) and Fyfe (1996).

<sup>167</sup> AICs, for example, endeavour “bringing the African value system of traditional religion into their interpretation of Christianity” (Oosthuizen 2000:281).



### 1.5.6 The need for continued dialogue – a matter of agency and identity

In the previous sections I have highlighted, firstly, that African tradition and (Western) Christian tradition adhere to different frames of reference; the premodern and modern worldviews comprise of different cosmologies, epistemologies and ontologies. I have illustrated some of these differences. Secondly, I have attempted to trace the lines of historical interaction between African tradition and modern Christian culture, elucidating the fact that this interaction has always been ambiguous and diverse. In examining the past “dialogue” between African and Christian traditions, it was revealed that it was in many respects hampered by forces of hegemony from the side of Christianity. The question was raised – and answered in the affirmative – if in fact the dialogue occurred between unequal dialogue partners. Finally, I mentioned two ways in which dialogue between African tradition and Christianity is concretely exemplified, viz. African theologies and AICs. The existence of these two developments removes all doubt that dialogue has already been well underway for quite some time.

It is my suspicion, however, that in many ways the historical and existing “dialogue” is not as fruitful and meaningful as it could be.<sup>168</sup> Moreover, Western Christianity is still greatly ignorant of African culture and its traditions (Bujo 1992:37). I am of the opinion that the need for purposeful dialogue in this sphere is not satisfied, but rather that it is becoming more and more urgent in the current South African context.<sup>169</sup> Therefore I argue that dialogue needs to be pursued continually for the sake of African agency and identity.

#### *Agency*

In an article entitled “The rediscovery of the agency of Africans” (2000b), Tinyiko Maluleke argues for a new emerging paradigm of African theology which highlights the agency of Africans.<sup>170</sup> The old paradigms in African theology<sup>171</sup> stand judged because they have not adequately succeeded in overcoming the predicament of Africa, i.e. marginalisation, massive poverty, oppression and disunity (Maluleke 2000b:26). Maluleke suggests that the failure of African theology so far lies in the fact that it has focussed too much on Africa’s shortcomings and weaknesses, and too little on its strengths and capabilities. Africa has habitually been cast as a failure and a victim. It is time that Africans move away from this perception of themselves, claims Maluleke. If Africans continue to see themselves as victims and failures, they will remain a downtrodden people.

For this reason, Maluleke proposes a new paradigm in African theology and overall scholarship which concentrates on rediscovering the agency of Africans (2000b:26). This emerging paradigm emphasises “Africa’s creative, innovative and *agentic* spirit”. Its most significant characteristic is that it takes seriously Africa’s “intellectual, material and spiritual resources for survival and resistance” (:31).<sup>172</sup> It is, however, not to

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<sup>168</sup> The reason why AICs, for example, emerged in the first place is because Africans deemed the Western model of Christianity as being incompatible with African ways, and therefore not capable of authentic “dialogue”. Moreover, they felt judged and vilified by this brand of Christianity.

<sup>169</sup> African cultures “have no basic contradiction with the democratic and humanistic cultures and values of the European and American peoples. These can hold a meaningful, fruitful dialogue. This is the dialogue and contact we must continue to aid, encourage and support by every means at our disposal.” (Ngugi 1993:46)

<sup>170</sup> According to Jahn (1961:15), adopting a process of “renewal” and change of one’s tradition is a matter of agency and self-assertion.

<sup>171</sup> They are based mostly on either the liberation metaphor (Maluleke 2000b:23) or the inculturation metaphor (:24).

<sup>172</sup> As an example, Maluleke (2000b:32) highlights the exemplary agency shown in AICs. However, he warns, one must always beware of the danger of romanticising African culture, the African poor or AICs (:34). The task is neither to romanticise nor to dismiss popular and “mystical” religious movements in

replace the older paradigms<sup>173</sup>, cautions Maluleke. There is to be no radical discontinuity with the paradigms of liberation and inculturation (:28), because these are still needed in order to avoid the danger of becoming falsely optimistic in view of Africa's troubles. Instead, the old and the new are to be used complementarily (:27).

I agree with Maluleke that the time has come for Africans (and African theologians in particular) to start to seriously consider Africa's cultural resources. This will inevitably involve dialogue – dialogue between the traditional and the modern, Africa and the West.<sup>174</sup> Notwithstanding all the difficulties in dialogue which have shown themselves in history, the challenge needs to be taken up. It needs to be taken up because Africa has a lot to offer – much more than has hitherto been realised. The resources are there, they need just to be uncovered, acknowledged and employed. It would be a tragedy if traditional Africa refused to continue the dialogue because of past victimisation. Likewise, it would be tragic if the “West” and Christianity missed the opportunity for meaningful and enriching dialogue on an equal footing because of past prejudice and failure.<sup>175</sup> Indeed, as Maluleke argues, Africa must move on from its past, and rediscover its agency and potential. It is the task of this dissertation to contribute to a small degree to unfolding the dialogue, and revealing its potential fruits. I believe it is a manifestation of African agency to delve into African traditions and Africa's cultural heritage in order to help solve the problem of social reconciliation in South Africa.

### *Identity*

Besides agency, the issue of identity is equally important.<sup>176</sup> They may in fact be seen as two sides of the same coin. For African theologian Kwame Bediako “modern African Theology emerges as a theology of African Christian identity” (1992:xvii).<sup>177</sup> Bediako insists that the agenda of modern African theology ought to entail deciphering the meaning of the pre-Christian heritage (1992:1). Theology in Africa is the attempt at rehabilitating Africa's rich cultural heritage and religious consciousness, the “endeavour to demonstrate the true character of African Christian identity” (:3). Indeed, for Bediako, discovering “the theological meaning of the pre-Christian past becomes an unavoidable element in all major African theological discussion” (:237). To overcome the African Christian identity crisis, the past needs to be recovered.<sup>178</sup> The question which then arises is, “what is the relationship between Africa's old religions and her new one?” (:239).

Bediako's prime theological concern is to unveil the past, more especially the pre-Christian past, in order to establish “lines of continuity from pre-Christian religious experience into African Christian confession” (:238). Dialogue between the pre-Christian and the Christian is necessarily part of African theology, insists Bediako. The “old religion” of Africa is an “unavoidable item in African Christian reflection and religious scholarship” (:238). The “old” religious traditions consequently are seen as a (or *the*)

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Africa (:36).

<sup>173</sup> Maluleke insists that one still ought to take seriously the recent trends in African theology. These include casting Christianity as an African religion, arguing that being African and being Christian is not in opposition (Maluleke 2000b:29), identifying metaphors of reconstruction and translation (:30), and critiquing African culture (:31).

<sup>174</sup> Jahn (1961:17) explains how neo-African culture is a culture “built on two components”, the European and the traditional African. He insists that Africa's “genuine Renaissance ... does not remain a merely formal renewal and imitation of the past, but permits something new to emerge” (Jahn 1961:16).

<sup>175</sup> According to Ikenga-Metuh and Azikiwe (2004), the greatest obstacle to dialogue is the wall of prejudice which separates the Christian from the African traditionalist.

<sup>176</sup> “Every cultural encounter stimulates comparison, demands and effects self-knowledge” (Jahn 1961:19). See also Musasiwa (2002), *The quest for identity in African theology as a mission of empowerment*.

<sup>177</sup> Schreiter agrees that theology ought to search for a new kind of Christian identity (1985:4). In view of this, he highlights the importance of “cultural analysis” in the establishment of local theology (:73).

<sup>178</sup> “Theological memory is integral to identity; without memory we have no past, and having no past, our identity itself is lost” (Bediako 1992:237).

proper source of African Christian theology (:293).<sup>179</sup> Ultimately, inquiry into these ancient traditions is done in the interest of building an African identity.<sup>180</sup>

I concur with Bediako that authentic African theology ought to involve rigorous yet respectful inquiry into the indigenous cultural and religious traditions of the past. When recovering their traditional wisdom, and using it as a resource for life, Africans gain their identity back. More specifically, when recapturing and claiming indigenous or traditional theories and practices that aim at social reconciliation, Africans regain a part of their heritage, their identity.<sup>181</sup>

In summary, I contend that “Communication between societies, difficult as it is, will not suffer – rather the contrary – from the systematic study of the mutual permeability of cultures, that is, the comparison of their different identities” (de Coppet 1992:3).

Moreover,

cultures that stay in total isolation from others can shrivel, dry up or wither away. Cultures under total domination from others can be crippled, deformed, or else die. Cultures that change to reflect the ever-changing dynamics of internal relations and which maintain a balanced give and take with external relations are the ones that are healthy. (Ngugi 1993:xvi)

It is crucial that cultures and religious traditions “reach out to one another and borrow from one another,” argues Ngugi (1993:xvi). Such contact can play a significant role in reconciliation between peoples (:42). Yet, cautions Ngugi (:xvi), it always “has to be on the basis of equality and mutual respect”, lest we again get caught in the trap of cultural domination and victimisation.

Another dimension is added by Oosthuizen (2000:279) who argues that if main-line churches “do not seriously tap the resources of African thinking in general and African spirituality in particular, the future of these churches will become bleak.” He underscores the need for the “rigorous scrutiny” of “African resources and approaches” so as to gauge how they could be employed evocatively in present-day African society (:280).

In this dissertation I argue both for the enquiry into African and Christian resources for social reconciliation, as well as the “serious dialogue between these worldviews” (Balcomb 2003:14). Both tasks are two sides of the same coin. I am interested in the actual resources African tradition and Christian tradition – separately – have to offer. As a Christian it is especially important for me to investigate with respect

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<sup>179</sup> Indeed, even in his later book (1995), Bediako is a defender of the acceptance and evolution of “African Christian theology as a new Christian idiom” (:81). And African primal imagination is to be the basis for this new theological idiom (:91).

<sup>180</sup> According to Oosthuizen (2000:280), AICs “are the children of the identity crisis; in and through them the crisis has been ameliorated and even solved. They have become masters in solving the dualism between empirical Christianity and African traditional religion. AICs are managing this dualism on their own in a masterly manner without becoming schizophrenic.” In order to overcome the identity crisis, Africans need to embark on a “mental and spiritual decolonization process”.

<sup>181</sup> In this study, not only *African* identity is important, but *Christian* identity as well. Schreier has determined “some criteria whereby Christian identity can be ascertained” (Schreier 1985:117). First is “the cohesiveness of Christian performance”. Schreier argues, “if the theological formulation finds itself clearly at odds with the rest of Christian doctrine or requires a radical shifting of large parts of it, there is a very good chance that it is not a well-formed Christian performance”. The second criterion is “the worshipping context and Christian performance” (:118). Third is “the praxis of the community and Christian performance”. Such praxis must always be in active engagement with the environment. The fourth criterion is “the judgement of other churches and Christian performance” (:119). No local church may be allowed to “close itself off from both communion and judgement”. The fifth is a corollary to criterion number four and involves “the challenge to other churches and Christian performance”. A church community’s “theology should impel it to move outward from itself”, i.e. make a contribution to the whole of the Christian family (:120).

and open-mindedness what the “other” (i.e. African) tradition can bring to the table.<sup>182</sup> In doing this kind of investigation I am engaging in dialogue with the cultural traditions of Africa, and am actually participating in a conversation which has a considerable history. I trust and hope that this dialogue will be fruitful.

This chapter (1) has examined all the preliminary problems and questions which have to be considered before delving into the actual task of this dissertation, viz. finding ways in which African tradition and the Christian faith tradition can helpfully inform the social reconciliation debate in South Africa. It is this task to which I now turn.

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<sup>182</sup> Bujo doubts whether “Europeans in Africa have really made an effort to understand and preserve the religion of Africa” (1992:37). This study seeks to respond to the challenge implied by such an assertion.

## 2. Reconciliation paradigms in African tradition, culture and religion

The first question that must be posed in order to achieve an answer to the main problem of this dissertation is, "What does African tradition have to offer to social reconciliation in South Africa?" In my introduction I posited my first hypothesis underlying this research as, "African Tradition and Christianity both have paradigms of reconciliation to offer." I launch this investigation with the presupposition that African tradition indeed has a repertoire of options for sponsoring social reconciliation. This chapter is concerned with uncovering some of these options and resources.

Before elaborating on those elements which positively contribute (or *could* positively contribute) to social reconciliation in South Africa, I must acknowledge the relative difficulty of researching African tradition, religion and culture. Literature abounds concerning Christianity. Yet relatively few literary sources elaborate on African traditional cultural thought and practice. This raises some methodological questions, which I consider in section 2.1 below. After a brief introduction to the methodology used in this study, I will attempt to answer the question of what some of the contributions are that African tradition can bring to the table of social reconciliation in South Africa. Firstly, in section 2.2, I will consider African traditional religion, philosophy and anthropology as a foundation for a reconciliatory view of reality. Then, in section 2.3, I will illustrate aspects of traditional legal procedures that aim at social reconciliation. In section 2.4, rituals of reconciliation that are practiced in African contexts will be discussed. The section on ritual will be concluded with a special case study of the *Cleansing the chest of grudges* ritual.<sup>183</sup>

### 2.1 Methodological considerations

A number of scholars have noted that there are methodological problems connected with the study of African religions and cultures<sup>184</sup> (see for example Shorter 1978:5). For example, in African studies there is the danger of generalisation, and of "asking western questions" and expecting western answers (Mogoba 1981:54). In the case of ritual studies, "the very notion of explanation" of a ritual is "subtly ethnocentric", so the problem arises "how to study ritual critically without becoming intellectually imperialistic" (Grimes 1982:8). It is the task of the researcher to be mindful of this danger of intellectual imperialism, and avoid categorising African tradition according to pre-determined (Western) presuppositions.

Furthermore, because of the long-standing history of interaction and dialogue between thousands of African religions (many of them similar but nevertheless different) and scores of different Christian denominations over the past centuries, one must be very critical of assuming the existence of "pure" or "unadulterated" African culture which can be tapped into in the present, as if it were some kind of preserved fossil of the past. African culture is no longer exactly what it was before it met with Western culture and Christianity. (This was discussed extensively in section 1.5.) Certain scholars who are influenced by postmodern thinking indeed go so far as maintaining that there is no such thing as an African worldview and that African Traditional Religion no longer exists as an entity in itself because of the effects of history. Therefore, according to Mogoba

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<sup>183</sup> By examining this particular ritual I will be moving the discussion from the generic (i.e. essentialist) to the specific (i.e. contextual).

<sup>184</sup> Geertz (1975:5) offers a definition of "culture": "Man (sic) is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun and I take culture to be those webs." Culture is an "interworked system of construable symbols" in which social events can be intelligibly described (Geertz 1975:14).

(1981:53), it is necessary to be critical about trying to reconstruct the past. The “past” is not a fixed and rigid entity, but may be described as fluid.<sup>185</sup>

Given these perspectives, some might question the validity of the kind of study I am attempting in this dissertation, and more particularly in this chapter. If there is no such thing as clearly defined “African religion”, “African culture” or “African tradition”, then do I in fact have an actual object of study? What would be the use of studying African tradition if that category is in itself meaningless or non-existent? While I concede that it is no longer what it was centuries or even decades ago, that it has undergone immense transformation since the arrival of Western cultural norms, and that it is in constant flux, I reject the idea that there is no such thing as African tradition, African religion or African culture. As far as my investigations indicate, most Africans also reject such a notion. In fact, many African scholars are at pains to point out the uniqueness and integrity of African culture and traditions, and that these represent strong forces in the lives of Africans and African societies.<sup>186</sup> Furthermore, many argue that African tradition may no longer be ignored or undermined by the rest of the world, especially theological and social-scientific scholarship. Backed by the sometimes vehement and passionate argument of African scholars (of religion, theology, culture, etc.), I wish to venture that there are indeed entities that may be called African tradition, African culture and African religion, which exist in their own right and have an own inner integrity.<sup>187</sup> Therefore, this part of my study is justified and indeed valuable. Nonetheless, in congruence with many African scholars, I also hold that African culture, tradition and religion are not monolithic and inflexible, but undergo relentless change as history unfolds – as do all other cultures, traditions and religions.

#### *A theory of interpretation*

In my work concerning African tradition, I am influenced by the methodology proposed by Clifford Geertz (1973). According to Geertz, anthropological and cultural studies are in essence interpretive. Anthropology does not make “objective observations” without dialogue taking place between the observer and the observed. Conclusions drawn from observations are always subjective and specific. In the same light, there is no such thing as a universal culture. What is “natural” for one society may be very “unnatural” for another. There is no such thing as “typical” human behaviour. Very few, if any, conclusions can be drawn from studies of a particular community or culture which necessarily pertain to and have a bearing on the whole of humankind. The same kind of action or behaviour can have different or even opposite meanings attached to it in other cultures.<sup>188</sup> To formulate *the* universal meaning for a certain behaviour or act is to disregard its multiple meanings in the face of different cultures and contexts.

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<sup>185</sup> See for instance Ngugi (1993:xvi), Landau (1995:168), Aragon (1992:331) or Denis (2000).

<sup>186</sup> See for example Appiah (1992), Ayittey (1999), Bediako (1995, 1992), Chinweizu (1987), Ephirim-Donkor (1997), Dickson and Ellingworth (1969), Gyekye (1997), Hongoze (12.01.2004), Idowu (1962, 1965) Ikenga-Metuh (1996), Isizoh (2004), Kanyandogo (2001), Khosa (1986), Koka (1979, 2004, 1998, 2003), Lumbala (1998), Magesa (1998), Maimela (1985), Makinde (1988), Maluleke (1996), Masolo (1994), Mbiti (1990, 1970, 1975), Moila (2003), Motshekga (1998), Mterwa (1996), Mudimbe (1994, 1988), Mugambi (1995, 1997), Munga (1998), Mwakabana (2002), Nambala (1980), Ngugi (1993), Nxumalo (1979), Nyamiti (1973), Oduyoye (1995), Okolo (1993), Olupona (2000, 1991), Sarpong (1975), Sogolo (1994), Somé (2000), Sono (1994), Soyinka (1999), Teffo (1999), Thagale (1998), Wiredu (1996). All of these scholars show, in some aspect of their work at least, that African culture, African tradition and African religion are realities in the lives of African communities.

<sup>187</sup> Nevertheless, they are also closely intertwined. See Mwakabana (2002:145) who refers to “culture, tradition and spirituality that derive from African religion”.

<sup>188</sup> For example, in many African cultures it is a demonstration of humility, modesty and respect to sit down in the presence of an authority figure, while in Western culture the same action is constituted as disrespect and audacity. In one culture to slap someone on the back may be an act of friendliness and intimacy, while for another it may show aggression and agitation.

Geertz (1973:20) argues that there is a difference between ultimate, absolute *Meaning*, and relative, contextual *meaning*. It is the latter which the anthropologist seeks to uncover. The question for the scholar is not one of "ontological status" but of "import", i.e. "what it is ... that ... is getting said" (1973:10). In effect, then, the meaning of a certain event can never be separated from its context. Who does what, under which circumstances and according to which frame of reference are all factors that influence the meaning of the event. Like Geertz, Gorman, too, critiques attempts to fashion universal categories and theories about cultural events, particularly ritual. "Context, in all its specificity and concreteness, is essential for ritual," asserts Gorman (1994:24). Thus it is problematic and even dangerous to generalise about conclusions gleaned from anthropology. It is equally problematic to reduce findings to "absolute" truths which deny that all human knowledge is at its base *interpreted knowledge*, and therefore constantly subject to dynamic change and growth.

Anthropologists have to acknowledge the abundant diversity of the stock of human experience and its explication, and have to carefully and respectfully find the elements of "unity" in this diversity. One cannot deny that certain broad conclusions can be made about human cultures in general. Yet such conclusions have to be reconsidered continuously in the light of ongoing intensive dialogue between the cultures at hand. "The aim is to draw large conclusions from small, but densely textured facts; to support broad assertions about the role of culture in the construction of collective life by engaging them exactly with complex specifics" (Geertz 1973:28). Divorcing the general conclusions from the specific and particular contexts is not acceptable if the anthropological task is to be done with scholarly integrity.

Despite its worth, a theory of cultural interpretation such as Geertz' is not immune to criticism. For example, "Using an interpretive framework, it might be argued, violates a ritual by imposing foreign categories on it," notes Grimes (1982:19).

All interpretive efforts are surrounded by implicit questions. This is an elementary axiom of hermeneutics. To make some of these questions explicit ensures that we have sufficient grounds for comparative discussion amid criticism. We can judge the value of such a framework on the basis of its ability to: (1) enable ritual to speak most fully for itself, (2) aid interpreters in discerning the continuities and discontinuities between their symbols and those of participants in a ritual, (3) generate helpful theories of ritual, and (4) precipitate a sense of the living quality of ritual in written accounts of them. If we are to understand a ritual adequately, the first prerequisite is as full a description as possible in the form of a monograph or film. (Grimes 1982:20)

In what follows in section 2.4, I will attempt to offer an interpretive analysis of an indigenous ritual, bearing in mind the possibilities and dangers of such an endeavour.

### ***Problems in the study of ritual***

As suggested by Gorman, the interpretive method when applied to ritual has definite limitations. According to Richard Fardon (1990:15), ethnographers studying a foreign culture, especially its ritual, encounter a number of "problems of comprehensibility", of which Fardon mentions five. First, "In many contexts knowledge and power are mutually referential. Rituals have proprietors and important 'things to know' are not freely available." In order to be part of the ritual experience, one needs an initiation for joining, or a form of entitlement. Second, "Cult rituals are hidden", which means that there are often clear insiders and outsiders. Third, "Idioms relating initiates to cults are not idioms of knowledge in the sense favoured by western academic culture". Fourth, in many cases in Africa, "knowledge of cults is partial and discontinuous because the contexts in which rituals occur are systematically insulated from one another by ownership, prerogative, difference and concealment" (Fardon 1990:16). Fifth, and this is particularly so in Africa,

knowledge is “truncated” by the reality of death. This means one needs access to the dead – i.e. the ancestors – for full information (1990:17).

Fardon argues that the difficulty with finding information on ritual lies in the fact that ritual activity represents and points to a kind of “knowledge” that is “mis-stated” (1990:5), “understated” (“tacit”, “implicit”) (:6) or “unstated”, i.e. mysterious and ineffable (:7). Traditional society’s “cultural frame” (:6) is filled with hidden meanings and secrecy (:11) to the one studying it from the outside. Students of ritual must always bear in mind that “anthropological accounts rest on the shadow side of their assertions: the absences, ignorances and unsayabilities which must exist for things to be as they are claimed” (:8). Therefore, there are limits to the knowledge offered by informants and to anthropologists (:226). Moreover, interpretations of ritual may differ. “The ‘same’ ritual may be explained, in terms of common conventions, as something rather different in two places. Its significance is not the same” (:10).

I am aware that the problems in ritual study that Fardon highlights are not to be ignored. In certain ways they apply to my situation. As a non-black South African, I am not, by descent or heritage, part of the cultures I wish to gain information about. I am a cultural outsider when it comes to “indigenous” or “traditional” culture. (I think it is fair to say that I am not an outsider to modern South African culture, at least certain strands of it. Yet this culture is not the object of my study.) As an outsider, gaining access to the relevant people is not easy. By virtue of my background, many things remain hidden. I am not able to pick up on “mis-stated” or “understated” knowledge conveyed. Moreover, certain parts of the knowledge will simply not be disclosed to me because I am considered an outsider. My insight into the cultural traditions and practices I study will therefore always remain partial and limited. I will never be able to make definitive or absolute statements about the topic of my concern. But then, “absolute” statements and “truths” need to be viewed with suspicion in any event, as elaborated above (Geertz 1973; Grimes 1982). Moreover, some may see my contribution to this scholarship with suspicion or derision. Put simply, for various reasons I am not an ideal candidate for the research of African tradition.

Nevertheless, I have launched into this endeavour. My inherent inadequacies for the task help to keep me humble and respectful. Despite all the reasons why my biography makes me a weak contender, I am confident that I still have a valuable scholarly contribution to offer. For one, this study is not only about African tradition, but also about Christianity, and the interaction between the two. As a trained theologian and pastor, my role in the latter two aspects is not contended. Secondly, I am also an academic. Grimes (1982: Preface) posits that in cultural studies there continues to be an “immense need for annotated bibliographies, fieldstudies of specific rituals, typologies and taxonomies, and more fully developed theories”. My training as a theoretical thinker provides me with the tools to produce solid, refined theoretical work. Thirdly, I am a native South African. My personal story is shaped by the stories of fellow South Africans, even if they are of different cultures. In the spirit of *ubuntu* (see section 2.2.3), I cannot and will not divorce myself from the story and identity of other South Africans. Lastly, as a South African, my passion and longing lies in finding viable options for social reconciliation in our country, especially in light of its turbulent and traumatic history. This passion includes a desire for knowledge about my fellow South Africans and other Africans, in order to be equipped for authentic dialogue with them.

Given all these considerations, this study is arguably “political”. Indeed, the problems associated with the ethnographic method lead Fardon to talk of the “politics of knowledge”. Cultural “analysis is a political act” (1990:217). As a researcher, I may never fall into the trap of believing that my analysis is “objective” and value-free. Who I am, as well as my own agendas are implicit in my scholarship. I do not try to hide the fact that I have an agenda for this study as a whole, and for this section in particular. In the present chapter, I wish to demonstrate that African tradition, culture and religion has resources



for social reconciliation. My broader aim is to show in what way certain of these resources may be utilised efficaciously for the social reconciliation endeavour in South Africa.

### *Fieldwork*

Early ethnographers such as Bronislaw Malinowski already “established participant-observation as the central methodology for gathering anthropological data” (Jeannerat 1997:5). Malinowski was against collecting “many disparate uncontextualised traits of social life and culture from various and numerous different social groupings all over the world” (Jeannerat 1997:14), but rather proposed intensive fieldwork by trained researchers. Indeed, many theoretical and methodological advances in the study of ritual are indebted to anthropology and its emphasis on fieldwork, asserts Grimes (1990:7-27). Fieldwork involves careful and non-judgmental observation, and an attempt to ascertain the point of view of the people who are being studied (Geertz 1983:55-70). However, in the last few decades a number of questions have been raised concerning the objectivity and neutrality of observation and fieldwork (Bell 1992:19-66; Wagner 1981:133-59)<sup>189</sup>. The Enlightenment ideal of neutral and value-free investigation of “the other” is seriously problematic. The absolute distinction between the observer and the observed is contrived (Auge 1982:78-100; Grimes 1982:1-17). Such a view functions to privilege the observer as a detached, thinking subject and to place the observed in the position of biased, performing object (Grimes 1990:25-51). This creates an imbalance of power and value that militates against accurate analysis. Recent ritual studies experts question whether “detached” observation is really possible and suggest that in the study of ritual, insight and understanding arise rather through participation (Grimes 1990:109-44, 210-33). The subject/object dichotomy functions to privilege the “scholar” and to devalue the “native” and what the native does. Moreover, more and more ritual experts recognise that the distinction between theory and practice is itself problematic (Auge 1982:78-100; Bell 1992:69-93). Classically, thought is valued above action, interpretation and cognition is privileged above enactment and participation, and intellectual categories are imposed on a non-intellectual event. Therefore, well-founded ritual studies call for observation that is also participation.

### *Oral research*

A significant aspect of fieldwork is oral research. Though limited, oral research is considered a very valuable method of obtaining information about a culture (Naude 1995:42ff). In traditional African settings, knowledge and history is usually transmitted orally, and not predominantly by means of the written word. Therefore, authentic ethnographic scholarship needs to inquire into a community’s narrative<sup>190</sup>, performance and oral tradition<sup>191</sup> (Belcher 1999:2). These are the groundwork as well as the key vehicles for the handing down of African traditional wisdom and knowledge. Gaining information about an African culture involves listening to what people say, to the stories they tell, without attempting to influence or censor the outcome of the conversation. Indeed, Jeannerat (1997:13) identifies listening as a primary “metaphor of anthropological analysis”. In other words, literary research is not sufficient for an in-depth view of

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<sup>189</sup> See also Auge (1982) and Marcus and Fischer (1986).

<sup>190</sup> In sections 1.1 and 1.2 I have already highlighted some aspects of the importance of narrative. For further reference, see also McAfee Brown (1975), Balcomb (1998, 2000), Hardy (1975), Hauerwas and Jones (1989) and Stroup (1984).

<sup>191</sup> Extensive scholarship is emerging in the field of orality in Africa. See for example Barber and Moraes Farias (1989), Belcher (1999), Brown (1998, 1999), Coplan (1993), Denis and Sontange (2004), Denis (2000), Draper (2003), Graham (1987), Harries (1993), Hofmeyr (1994), Mudimbe (1994), Mudimbe and Jewsiewicki (1993), Opland (1998), Shorter (2004), Tonkin (1986, 1994), Vail and White (1991), and White, Miescher and Cohen (2001).

African traditional culture. Moreover, prompting and listening to the telling of people's stories implies that fieldwork is "not unidirectional, from the researched to the researcher, but rather dialogical". Data is constructed through interactive dialogue (Jeannerat 1997:17). In this context, since knowledge is not a fixed entity "out there" to be grasped, but rather is constructed through human interaction, Grimes (1982:9) highlights the importance of "imagining" when studying ritual. The researcher must enter into the world of the person or community s/he is questioning, and can only do that through active and open-minded imagination.

In my field research, which consisted mainly of interviews and conversations (i.e. oral research), I indeed learnt the value of listening and imagining. Listening to what the people have to say, and not only for what one expects or wants to hear, is a necessary skill for the oral researcher. It happened often that the interviewee said things that I had not expected, and that changed the course of the conversation from what I had envisaged. These new courses frequently opened up new vistas for my research. Similarly, through the skill of imagining, the stories of the people take on colour and life. When, for example, asking certain interviewees about the rituals they practise, I needed to imagine what was being said in order to enter into it more fully. Through imagining, I was able to interact more closely with the interviewee and his/her narration, and understand what s/he was saying in contextual terms.

The methodology and style of a researcher's fieldstudy is "entangled" with her/his autobiography and cultural background (Grimes 1982:6). Who the researcher is influences and shapes the outcome of the study to a larger extent than was previously assumed. Kuckertz for example distinguishes between research of African religion conducted by a theologian or pastor and by a social scientist. He insists the two "differ in their goals of enquiry" and "have different tasks". The sociologist "wants to know the social derivation of religion", while the theologian seeks for "that ongoing call and challenge which is revelation as a whole" (Kuckertz 1981:12-13). The two researchers both have valid contributions to make, though they are different.

Throughout this study I have noticed that I indeed approach my work as a Christian theologian; I can do no other. As already mentioned above, my aim is not and cannot be to work as a social scientist (though I am nonetheless compelled to use the tools and methods offered by these sciences, because of their pre-eminence when it comes to field- and oral research). I am not trained as a social scientist, nor do I have the ideal prerequisites for this task. Rather, as a theologian, I bring with me a certain set of preconditions, abilities, as well as a particular agenda. Though these differ from those of an anthropologist, sociologist or ethnographer, they are nevertheless valid and useful for the production of knowledge.

### ***The methodology underlying this study***

What I have shown above is that the study of a living tradition or culture is a delicate matter, and is to be conducted with care and integrity. Fieldwork, oral research, and the interpretation of data all pose methodological challenges.<sup>192</sup> They can all be misused. The role of the researcher is at all times to be mindful of the possible dangers inherent in the methodology s/he chooses.

In terms of this part of the dissertation (i.e. chapter 2, the study of African traditional paradigms of reconciliation), my methodology for finding information has been multifaceted. I have needed to adopt a number of ways of data discovery. Besides

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<sup>192</sup> This is so for all researchers, yet in my case the challenges are particularly pronounced. As mentioned above, the fact that I am not a social scientist makes fieldstudy and oral research particularly challenging for me. Given the specific topic of my study, I am also not ideally equipped for the task. My greatest drawback is the fact that I am not a black African, and therefore do not have an indigenous African cultural heritage. This makes me an outsider to the field of my research.

extensive literature research (mainly of theological, ethnographic, sociological and historical sources), my other methods of gathering knowledge was through interviews, formal and informal conversations with relevant persons, questionnaires, as well as from attending some ceremonies and observing certain cultural practices. Both written and oral, formal and informal sources have provided the foundations upon which this section of my study is built.<sup>193</sup> Throughout, I have attempted to use the information gleaned from the various sources respectfully and with integrity, yet critically and with my own questions in mind.

## 2.2 African traditional religion, philosophy and anthropology: a foundation for a reconciliatory view of reality

What are the offerings African tradition can bring to the table of social reconciliation in South Africa? The sustained assumption underlying this dissertation is that it is sensible to make use of “indigenous cultural modalities for achieving reconciliation” (Lederach 1997:106). “Sociocultural resources” are almost indispensable for a reconciliation process that is to succeed (1997:94). I am of the opinion that African tradition “can be a positive leaven in the enrichment and fulfilment of human life” (Gyekye 1997:296). In this chapter I elaborate some of these resources embedded in an African worldview, which specifically can enrich endeavours toward reconciliation. (Some of the aspects associated with an African worldview have already been considered in sections 1.5.1 and 1.5.2, and will not all be repeated here.) First, I will consider some resources provided by African traditional religion and indigenous spirituality. Second, I will highlight some African philosophical resources. Third, I will elaborate African anthropological concepts – especially the concept of *ubuntu* – with the purpose of showing how these may contribute to social reconciliation endeavours. Throughout my deliberations I seek to discover resources that may be a boon to the South African context in particular. Yet this focus does not of course imply that what African tradition has to offer is only relevant to South Africa.

I am aware that drawing distinctions between the three categories of African religion, philosophy and anthropology is possibly artificial. In an African setting, all three are intricately linked and intertwined<sup>194</sup>, and an attempt at separating them from one another might in fact do them all injustice. African religion, for instance, is intimately concerned with matters pertaining to African philosophy and anthropology; and African anthropology is meaningless if severed from the context of African philosophy and African traditional religion. Despite these inherent interconnections, I have nevertheless opted for a distinction of the three categories in my work, for two reasons. Firstly, these distinctions are common in modern scholarship, and I am in good company by drawing them. Secondly, conceptual or theoretical distinctions (however vague and flimsy they might be) seek to simplify the task of analysis, which would be more complicated if African tradition was to be considered as an undifferentiated entity.

Throughout this section, I presume that certain aspects of an African way of being and perceiving the world are reconciliatory *in and of themselves*. The very cosmology

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<sup>193</sup> Please consult the Bibliography for details of these sources. Wherever necessary, I refer to both my literary sources, as well as to transcribed oral sources. In the case of interviews, I transcribed what was recorded with a dictaphone. In the case of informal conversations, I made notes, to which I also make reference occasionally. During one interview, a translator was present, in case the interviewee wanted to talk in his native tongue, Venda. The transcription of this interview only includes the English version of what was said. In the text, I refer to interviews by mentioning the interviewee and the date of the interview, e.g. (Koka 07.07.2004) or (Munyai 01.09.2004).

<sup>194</sup> See Magesa (1998:36) who overtly connects the disciplines of cultural anthropology, ethics, philosophy and theology.

espoused by traditional Africans, as well as the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of this cosmology, provide some useful tools for building a reconciled South African nation. It is my contention that an “African traditional approach with its holistic emphasis has much to give to the modern world with its closed, limited, merely rationalist disposition” (Oosthuizen 1991:48), and more specifically to the South African nation still impaired by social discord. Underlying African tradition is a worldview which is inherently concerned with the reconciliation of all that is, a worldview that focuses on the interconnection of reality, and the harmonious interaction of all that exists. According to Koka (1998:30), ultimate reality is a “Primal Unity”. The concept of *simunye* (“we are one”) further expresses the African view that all humans (and indeed all beings and forces) belong to one another and together form a whole (Koka 1998:31).

African traditional religion is part and parcel of an African worldview. Indeed, religious beliefs and practices inform how Africans view the world, and this in turn has a bearing on their religiosity and spirituality. For this reason I now turn to African traditional religion and spirituality with the intention of uncovering possible reconciliation resources within it.

### 2.2.1 African traditional religion and spirituality<sup>195</sup>

African traditional religion is considered by some to be, in itself, a “worldview”<sup>196</sup> (Hammond-Tooke 1981:22). In the example of the Pedi people, “the word ‘religion’ does not even exist in the Pedi vocabulary” (Mogoba 1981:53). This indicates that religion is about the whole of life, and not a compartmentalised aspect of it. Indeed, traditional religion is “embodied in the lifestyle of people,” claims Mogoba.<sup>197</sup>

Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician he takes it to the house of parliament. Although many African languages do not have a word for religion as such, it nevertheless accompanies the individual from long before his birth to long after his physical death. (Mbiti 1990:2)

In Africa, religion “permeates all aspects of life” (Summary Report from the Working Group on African Religion 2002:11; see also Magesa 1998:71), and has the function of preserving this life in its fullness.<sup>198</sup> African religion and spirituality reflects “the African psyche, the African worldview (*Weltanschauung*) which is essentially holistic, integrated, and interdependent. ... African traditional spirituality is above all, a spirituality

<sup>195</sup> For further reading about African religion and spirituality, consult Setiloane (1976), Magesa (1998), Mosala (1993), Olupona (1991), Taylor (1965), Mudimbe (1994), Dickson and Ellingworth (1969), Twesigye (1996), Goba (1995), Skhakhane (2000), Dlungwana (2000), Anderson (2000), Pheko (1965), Parrinder (1954, 1961, 1982), Bucker (1981), Hackett (1991), Thorpe (1991), Child and Child (1993), Zahan (1979), Paris (1994), Lowie (1925), Callaway (1970), Casalis (1861), King (1970), Eliade (1958), Evans-Pritchard (1956), and “Elements to admire” (2004) among others. It is from these authors, and those mentioned in the text, that I gather my information.

<sup>196</sup> ATR represents a worldview which is non-Western, and which explains life in mystical terms. According to Hammond-Tooke, the four main aspects of Southern African people’s worldviews and religiosity include a sky-god, the ancestor cult, witchcraft beliefs and pollution beliefs. African traditional religion is considered not universalistic, but connected to individual clans and groups; it is also not proselytising (Hammond-Tooke 1981:29). Elsewhere, Hammond-Tooke (1993:167) mentions other characteristics of African religion, such as dependence on the supernatural, belief in local and not universal gods, and membership through birth and not by choice.

<sup>197</sup> According to the official report on the Special Synod of Bishops for Africa, held in Rome in May 1994, “there seem to be sufficient common features in traditional religion in Africa to justify the usage of the appellation ‘African Traditional Religion’, in the singular. It points out that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish in this religion what pertains to religion and what pertains to culture. The same vernacular term often covers the two.” (Ikenga-Metuh and Azikiwe 2004)

<sup>198</sup> According to Sundermeier (1998:14), “preserving life is the real purpose of all religious activity”.

that relates to the whole of life" (Teffo 2002:135).<sup>199</sup> Moreover, life is held to be sacred (Sarpong 2004).

Although one might suspect that the adherents of African religion have decreased in number due to the effects of colonialism, Christian mission and secularisation<sup>200</sup>, many Africans "continue to be influenced by and to treasure African religion" (Summary Report 2002:12; see also section 1.3).<sup>201</sup> The major "dimensions of religion" that become apparent in African traditional religion (as well as in other religions) are ritual, mythology, doctrine, ethics, society, experience and the material (Matsaung 1999:46).

African religion and spirituality are closely connected; it is difficult to make a distinction between the two. Both religion and spirituality are intimately part of an African way of life. Indeed, "the spiritual dimension is part of the human personality; ... it is pre-eminently part of the African personality" (Shorter 1978:45).<sup>202</sup> Setting it against the backdrop of Africa's encounter with the West, Aylward Shorter provides an apt description of African spirituality:

African spirituality ... is essentially revolutionary. It is a four-fold revolt. Firstly, it is the revolt against materialism on the one hand and against shallow religiosity on the other. Secondly, it is a revolt against a world that conspires to dehumanize, a 'white' world in which the structures are vitiated through their injustice to the black man. It is even a revolt against the unfair structures of a 'white' church. Thirdly it is a revolt against cultural passivity, against being a mere consumer of the products of western civilization. It is a call to a new creativity that has its roots in the African past. Finally, it is a revolt against a purely internal religion, a religion that is inward looking and oblivious of the community. ... These four 'revolts' can also be expressed positively as commitments: the commitment to a world of the spirit, to man (sic) and his integral development to culture as a living tradition and to human community. (Shorter 1978:7-8)

It must be noted that despite a shared history and a vast pool of resources, the ways in which African spirituality is manifested are diverse.<sup>203</sup>

Although African religion has diverse local manifestations, one can argue that it has "common basic elements which testify to its unity regionally and at continental level" (Summary Report 2002:15)<sup>204</sup>. These common elements include belief in one God<sup>205</sup>, an

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<sup>199</sup> In an examination of traditional Pedi religion, Moila (1987:67) asserts, "The Pedi, like all African peoples, believe that humans have one common nature and that the laws of nature affect all people in the same manner." With reference to the indigenous peoples of Namibia, Buys and Nambala (2003:5) agree that the African view of life is holistic. There is no demarcation into secular and spiritual. Taylor (1965:63) insists that a holistic cosmology does not imply a romanticised view of nature, but rather a sense of kinship with nature.

<sup>200</sup> See Buys and Nambala (2003:7) as they seek to explain the apparent "trend away from African traditional religion". According to them, it is "not only caused by the introduction of the Christian faith..., but also by either internal cultural re-organization, or modern education and secularization in general." Nonetheless, according to the official report on the Special Synod of Bishops for Africa, held in Rome in May 1994, "Dialogue with ATR is very important because ATR is still very strong and widely practised in many places. For example the AMECEA (Association of Members of Episcopal Conferences in East Africa) in its report to the consultation organised by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious dialogue (PCID), Rome, held at Kumasi, Ghana, in Jan 1998, reported that over 23 million people are still adherents of ATR in its area. In Benin republic, about 64% of the population are adherents of ATR, and it is held quasi as a state religion in the country. About 12% in Nigeria, or about 12.6 million and 29.1% of the population in Ghana are still followers of ATR. The church cannot afford to marginalize these." (Ikenga-Metuh and Azikiwe 2004)

<sup>201</sup> Like many practitioners of African traditional religion, Nokuzola Mndende laments the fact that her belief system is often not recognised as a religion in its own right (Teffo 2002:136).

<sup>202</sup> Magesa speaks of "the mystique of life" in Africa (1998:77ff).

<sup>203</sup> For an overview of certain trends in spirituality in South Africa, see Worsnip and van der Water (1991).

<sup>204</sup> "Although described as ethnically based, there is sufficient commonality to warrant the nomenclature 'African Religion'." Similarly, Ofori-Attah (2003) claims, "There are variations but they are not strong

invisible world<sup>206</sup>, and unity of the cosmos (Summary Report 2002:11).<sup>207</sup> Moreover, African traditional religion is not “confined to physical structure nor is it hierarchy bound”; it is not an institutionalised religion (Teffo 2002:137). It can be deemed “pluralistic in nature and quite hospitable to other forms of belief systems” (Summary Report 2002:11-12), which makes it inherently reconciliatory and accepting of diversity and difference.

Possibly the most pronounced characteristic of African religion is that it fosters and celebrates community.<sup>208</sup> Community life and well-being is the primary focus of religious practice. For this reason, ceremonies that promote, nurture or restore community relations are very important, e.g. “celebration of marriages, and the reconciliation of estranged persons and communities” (Summary Report 2002:19).<sup>209</sup>

The flip side of African traditional religion’s preoccupation with community creation and preservation is that it despises division and social alienation.<sup>210</sup> Division or enmity between people is the result of evil or sin, and must be avoided, or, once it appears, it must be vehemently counteracted.<sup>211</sup> “‘Sin’ is any activity by which individuals attempt to destroy, to diminish and threaten the lives of the community members” (Summary Report 2002:20).<sup>212</sup> Through ritual and religious ceremony that aims at (re-)building community, the adverse effects of sin are thwarted, and social harmony is re-established.<sup>213</sup> Ritual is a way of “restoring the force of life” (Magesa 1998:175ff); its ultimate purpose is to re-establish the pristine, divine order in the universe (1998:183). Magesa (1998:208) insists that reconciliation rites in particular aim at re-establishing ties between estranged people, which is why many religious leaders specifically encourage them.

In light of this it is understandable that African traditional religion focuses much of its attention on health and healing (Moila 2002:35ff).<sup>214</sup> A definition of health in Africa is holistic and all-encompassing (Mwaura 1994:67). Physical, psychological, social, spiritual and environmental wellness is important for all members of society if it is to prosper and function well. It is for this reason that African traditional religion is not only concerned with individualistic or personal salvation, but advocates what one might call a holistic notion of salvation (Summary Report 2002:21). This holistic view of salvation of course corresponds to the generally holistic view of life, and the interconnectedness and interdependence of the cosmos at large.<sup>215</sup>

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enough to blur the common strands that give Africa its distinctive religious practices.” Religious beliefs and practices are “common threads that link Africans as a people.”

<sup>206</sup> See for example Moila (1987:71), Ofori-Attah (2003), Mbiti (1970), Setiloane (1976) and Smith (1961). God is conceived as a “vague, distant figure” (Hammond-Tooke 1993:149). God is active in creation (Buys and Nambala 2003:1). God has many attributes: S/he is personal, male and female, divine and never human, omnipresent and omniscient, s/he cannot be forced to do anything. For this reason no sacrifices are offered to God, but only to ancestors (Buys and Nambala 2003:2).

<sup>206</sup> Africans believe in the “spiritual dimensions of the world” (Moila 1987:78).

<sup>207</sup> See Mainga, Kimambo and Omari, Ogot and Gwassa (in Ranger and Kimambo 1972) for these and other basic features of African traditional religion among different African peoples.

<sup>208</sup> Kinship and community are prime preoccupations of African people (Buys and Nambala 2003:5).

<sup>209</sup> “To celebrate is to affirm the priority of life over death and to tame the power of death...” (Summary Report 2002:19).

<sup>210</sup> Hammond-Tooke (1993:89) highlights “the relative smallness of these societies” as “another important factor” when considering the need for social accord. “Particularly among Sotho and Venda, with their intimate village life, quarrels and disputes could be extremely disruptive. What was crucial was not abstract justice, but the urgent patching up of the rift.”

<sup>211</sup> Traditionally, there were three possible causes for any disruption or evil, viz. ancestral displeasure, witchcraft/sorcery, or pollution (Hammond-Tooke 1993:186). See also section 1.5.1.

<sup>212</sup> For example, violation against tribal custom and social norms is not considered sin against God but against the community (Buys and Nambala 2003:6).

<sup>213</sup> See, for example, Maimela (1991:12).

<sup>214</sup> See also Moila (1987:79), Davies (1995) and Thomas (1999).

<sup>215</sup> See also section 1.5.1.

The African concern for health becomes apparent when noting the importance of the traditional doctor, herbalist or diviner (Krige 1974:297ff; Danfulani 2000:97). These “health care professionals” indeed function as officers of religion. Among the Zulu, there are a myriad of types of such officers, e.g. stick-diviners, bone-diviners<sup>216</sup>, whistling doctors<sup>217</sup> (Krige 1974:300-302), heaven-herds<sup>218</sup> (:310), and rain-doctors (:319). Rather than divination and other “spiritual” techniques, herbalists more frequently employ (natural) medicines for the treatment of disease (:237).<sup>219</sup>

The traditional doctors’ role is to re-establish order, harmony and wellness in communities; they are generally considered the protectors of society.<sup>220</sup> They “are charged with the responsibility to see to it that things are right between the visible and the invisible world and in the visible world itself”<sup>221</sup> (Magesa 1998:71). Usually they are seen as counteracting the malevolent work of wizards and witches<sup>222</sup>, the enemies of society (Krige 1974:321).<sup>223</sup> Witches and such like are menacing as they are believed to cause disruption and destruction – to individuals as well as to society at large. They unleash chaotic forces that create cosmic imbalance and disharmony, causing illness and other forms of hardship. Ultimately, African religion is all about power – channelling or using it, or keeping it at bay. The universe is replete with forces that either have the ability to enhance life, or to destroy or diminish life. The challenge is to interpret these forces appropriately and then to use or expel them, whatever the case might be (i.e. use the forces that can increase life, and expel those that devastate life).<sup>224</sup>

Using the example of the Zulu people, Krige discusses some additional traits of indigenous religion in Southern Africa. Most significantly, the ancestor cult represents the backbone of this religion.<sup>225</sup> This is in line with the above-mentioned community-

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<sup>216</sup> See Magesa’s discussion of diviners (1998:190ff). Diviners are instruments of higher powers (:194). “Divination is the most important way of determining how to ensure the society’s collective ethical ideals” (:197). Methods of divination include (1) manipulation of certain mechanical objects and the interpretation of the results (:197), (2) observation and interpretation of behaviour of a live animal or some aspect of a dead one, and (3) possession by spiritual powers (:198). There are, moreover, two systems of divination, viz. oracular or mediumistic (:198). Magesa further elaborates on divination by mediums (:204).

<sup>217</sup> These are generally possessed by spirits, which are the source of their power.

<sup>218</sup> These use magic; their power does not stem from spirits.

<sup>219</sup> Medicine is either protective or curative or both (Magesa 1998:188). A range of forces are categorised as “medicine” – in fact, anything that promotes healing may be deemed “medicine” (:191). “Medicine underlines the interconnectedness of, and interdependence between, humanity and the rest of creation” (:189). Divination involves the use of medicinal forces. The existence of many different classes of medicines (Krige 1974:328ff) requires herbalists and doctors to have learnt their skill with diligence and care. Health professionals are indeed considered learned and wise, and enjoy great respect. Hunter (1979:389) elaborates on the peculiar potency of a chief’s medicines among certain ethnic groups.

<sup>220</sup> They are indeed considered to be religious specialists/leaders as well.

<sup>221</sup> Religious leaders have the responsibility “to ensure that the bond between the living and the ancestors remains intact and that the community enjoys the wherewithal for the preservation and continuation of life.”

<sup>222</sup> Wizards’ or witches’ “familiar” “are snakes, owls, wolves, baboons and other animals”, including the wild cat (Krige 1974:324-325). Witchcraft/sorcery is *ubuthakathi* in Nguni languages, *bokoyi* among the Sotho, Venda and Tsonga). Malevolent practices “with little animals” is considered witchcraft, and “with medicines” is sorcery. Night *bokoyi* are witches, while day *bokoyi* are sorcerers (Hammond-Tooke 1993:169). Witchcraft is the prime human embodiment of evil (Magesa 1998:165).

<sup>223</sup> “The enemies of life” include “bad actions which emanate from bad people” (Magesa 1998:150). Wrong-doing is essentially the contravention of moral codes (:153). People experience affliction as a consequence of wrong-doing (:158).

<sup>224</sup> According to Arens and Karp (1989), categories of power in African cosmology revolve around themes such as incest, myths of chaos, rituals of possession, male-female commensality, symbolism, dance, order and chaos, medicine, kingship, secret societies, witches, sacrifice, and identity.

<sup>225</sup> See for example Moila (1987:75), Ephurim-Donkor (1997), Setiloane (1978), Krige (1974:289) and Fardon (1990:34ff). There exists, in most African societies, an ancestral hierarchy. Ancestors are mediators to God. In many cases, only kings and important people become ancestors. Although they are not deified, their dignity is enhanced at death. They have great power over the living. (Buys and Nambala 2003:4) Among the

centeredness, because ancestors are considered as much part of the community as the living. In fact, they are commonly referred to as the living dead, and occupy an important role in the affairs of the community. Ancestors reveal themselves in dreams, omens and through illness (Krige 1974:288; Hammond-Tooke 1993:154). The usual means by which the living come into contact with the ancestors is through sacrifice.<sup>226</sup> Sacrifice is a way for humans to ask favours of the ancestors, to thank them for blessings, or to scold them when things go wrong.<sup>227</sup> Since their influence on the community is so strong, ancestors are approached before all important undertakings (Krige 1974:289). Usually, there is a set of predetermined procedures for sacrificial ceremonies (:292-296).<sup>228</sup> In this connection, Moila (1987:96) stresses the importance of cattle for ritual occasions.

Frequently, what accompanies religious ritual and ceremonial behaviour in Africa is music, dancing and song. These contribute to the community's sense of belonging and participation. Krige (1974:336) notes, "The dance is ... an important factor in maintaining the sense of group solidarity". Dancing occurs "whenever it is important to have social harmony at a high pitch – before a battle, at weddings, and at all the important transition ceremonies marking entry into a new group". Besides dancing, Krige highlights the significance of songs and praises in indigenous religious practices (1974:338).<sup>229</sup>

As I have shown, "African religion is a way of life" (Teffo 2002:129). This means, besides being a system of belief, it is also a system of ethics and morality, a code of conduct in private and communal life.<sup>230</sup> According to Teffo (2002:127), "traditional African ethics and religious thought" is built upon the fundamental belief in "Supreme Goodness" which is lodged in all people. This belief underlying African ethics could provide a basis for spiritual regeneration in Africa. In effect, African religion could arguably become a "building block toward an African renaissance" (Teffo 2002:137).

#### ***Why is African traditional religion a resource for reconciliation?***

According to Theo Sundermeier (1993:124ff) traditional African religion represents the clearest example of what may be called a "religion of reconciliation" (*Versöhnungsreligion*).<sup>231</sup> Religions of reconciliation are oriented toward the community; their prime focus is on nurturing relationships and restoring breaches in society. They are committed to the world in which they live, and do not seek to escape from it. Rather, their ethos is one of participation and involvement. I have argued in this section that indeed all these characteristics which Sundermeier describes are to be found in African religion.

With its emphasis on community building, and its relentless efforts in achieving social harmony and well-being, African traditional religion and spirituality certainly must be seen as a good prerequisite, if not a driving force, for reconciliatory activity. Moreover, its stress on the interconnection of all that is – seen and unseen, past, present and future – takes seriously the effects of social imbalances and hostility and indeed sees them in terms of the big picture of the entire cosmos. The need in African religion for comprehensive

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Zulu, ancestors are called *amadlozi* or *amathongo*; among the South Nguni, *amathongo* or *iminyanya*; among the Tsonga, *swikwembu*; among the Sotho, *badimo* and among the Venda, *midzimu*.

<sup>226</sup> See also Ellenberger (1992:258).

<sup>227</sup> For example in some cases the ancestors (*badimo*) require "feeding", i.e. food offerings. Adequate feeding of the ancestors leads to well-being and social prosperity (Moila 1987:94). Among the Herero, ancestors are approached at the ritual fire. Here, rituals are performed to "offer security for the family" and maintain "the heritage and traditions of the family" (Buys and Nambala 2003:6). Rituals at the ritual fire include supplications and sacrifices to ancestors, and secure the benevolence of ancestors (Buys and Nambala 2003:7).

<sup>228</sup> See also Moila (1987:82).

<sup>229</sup> See also Naude (1995:27-118) and Wells (1994).

<sup>230</sup> See Magesa (1998:38) who claims that the purpose of his work is "to reflect on the ethical perspective of African Religion". He intends "simply to indicate the fundamental elements of ethics that the religious experience of African peoples has determined throughout the ages to be proper for themselves."

<sup>231</sup> See also section 5.1.11, where I consider this issue more extensively.



well-being, i.e. well-being on a personal, physical, psychological, but also on a social, political and even environmental level, reveals its desire and propensity for reconciliation and the elimination of conflict.

The prime embodiment or instrument of African religion is ritual. Religious ceremonies “set collectivity in motion; groups come together to celebrate them” (Durkheim 1995:352). Moreover, through ritual a situation of adversity can be overcome, and collective life affirmed and re-constructed.<sup>232</sup> As many rituals and ceremonies practised in Africa show, African religion has established, and continues to practise, countless ways of actively and concretely addressing situations of social disruption and hostility. (It is to such rituals that I turn in a subsequent section.) Since African religion is about life, and how to enhance it, it will always seek to address situations that impede life, such as social enmity. Similarly, it will avoid doing things that are “just for show”. It will keep reconciliation efforts “down-to-earth” and grounded in practical reality, and avoid mere superficial façades of societal harmony.

So, put simply, African traditional religion and spirituality provide a fine set of conditions that promote social reconciliation processes. They also provide practical skills and methods (especially in terms of ritual, ceremony and celebration) that aim at restoring communal relations, some of which will be elaborated below. For this reason African religion and spirituality may not be overlooked in the quest for reconciliation in a society strongly influenced by its propositions and traditions, beliefs and practices.

### 2.2.2 African philosophy<sup>233</sup>

Closely linked to African religion is African philosophy. Both are embedded in the same conception of reality, yet highlight slightly different facets of it. African traditional thought has not always been accepted as worthy to be deemed philosophy (Gyekye 1987:3)<sup>234</sup>, a position that is however refuted by many scholars, particularly a number of African philosophers themselves (Gyekye 1987:8). Indeed, many would argue that in African society basic life patterns and ethics are derived from philosophy (Jahn 1961:116), and would therefore defend philosophy as the basis of African culture (1961:27). Using Akan philosophy as an example of African philosophy, Kwame Gyekye claims that it is intrinsically “oriented toward action and practical affairs”. Effectively one can say that there is, in Africa, an “intimate relationship between philosophy and life” (Gyekye 1987:66).

The problem is that African philosophy is not expressed primarily in written form, and therefore can be easily overlooked when comparing it to Western or European philosophy. “The most obvious and the greatest difficulty in studying or researching into African traditional philosophy stems from the fact that it is an unwritten, an undocumented philosophy,” asserts Gyekye (1987:51). Another difficulty is the diverse and sometimes incompatible views emerging from interviews and discussions (:53) which reveal the fact that there is not necessarily any unanimity of opinion in African thought (:54). Furthermore, language influences philosophical thought – it is not only a “vehicle”

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<sup>232</sup> Through religious rituals people “feel there is something outside themselves that is reborn, forces are reanimated, and a life that reawakens. . . . The renewal is in no way imaginary, and the individuals themselves benefit from it, for the particle of social being that each individual bears within himself necessarily participates in this collective remaking” (Durkheim 1995:353).

<sup>233</sup> For more information concerning African philosophy, consult for example Mudimbe (1994), Appiah (1992), Sogolo (1994), Mudimbe and Jewsiewicki (1993), Twesigye (1996), Gyekye (1997), Belcher (1999), Horton (1993), Makgoba (1999), Makinde (1988), Taylor (1965), Deacon (1996, 1997) and Forde (1976 [1954]).

<sup>234</sup> Horton is one such scholar who distinguishes between African traditional thought and philosophy (Gyekye 1987:3; see Horton 1993). African philosopher Hountondji (1996) also denies that there is an indigenous collective African philosophy. He argues that the idea of African philosophy is a nationalist reaction to colonialism. With his contentious position, Hountondji offers a critique of scholars such as Tempels and Kagame.

but also an actual expression of philosophy. Given the diversity of languages in Africa, this also affects African philosophical discourse (:29). Nonetheless, it is undeniable that African philosophical thinking and ideas exist despite the lack of written literature and despite the difficulties connected with trying to attain its formulations. Gyekye (1987:ix) insists that African

philosophical concepts, ideas, and propositions can be found embedded in African proverbs, linguistic expressions, myths and folktales, religious beliefs and rituals, customs and traditions of the people, in their art symbols, and in their socio-political institutions.

Therefore, oral literature, thoughts and actions of people, proverbs, myths, folktales, folk songs, poems, rituals, liturgies, customs, etc. can be identified as the sources of African philosophy (Gyekye 1987:13; Hountondji 1996:46ff).<sup>235</sup> Myths are prose narratives dealing with the creation of the world, God and spirits, the origin of things and natural phenomena.<sup>236</sup> Legends tell of long-forgotten tribal history, famous deeds, ancient heroes, and origins of tribal institutions. Fables are usually animal stories, but can also involve humans; they point to a moral (Lestrade 1956:292). What this shows is that “philosophy is the product of a culture.” It is not an individualistic affair<sup>237</sup>, although it is (also) practiced by individuals, and undeniably certain individuals play a large part in formulating it (Gyekye 1987:25).

Gyekye (1987:12, 32) seeks to draw a distinction between traditional and modern African philosophy.<sup>238</sup> “The latter, to be African, and have a basis in African culture and experience, must have a connection with the former, the traditional” (:12). In other words, for modern African philosophy to be authentic it must inquire into traditional African philosophy (:42).<sup>239</sup> As such, the category “African” implies an “underlying cultural identity, experience, and orientation” – a commonly shared traditional heritage (:x).<sup>240</sup> Yet African philosophy is not “rigidly monolithic” (:44).<sup>241</sup> It does not espouse a “closed” worldview, as Horton suggests, but rather represents “a philosophical mosaic” in the making (:211).

Nonetheless, many argue that there is indeed rudimentary agreement in “philosophical systems” of many African peoples (Jahn 1961:99), because certain “basic principles” of different African peoples appear to correspond.<sup>242</sup> “The common features discernible in the cultures and thought systems of sub-Saharan African peoples justify the existence of an African philosophy” (Gyekye 1987:189).<sup>243</sup> African philosophies share a

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<sup>235</sup> Oral tradition suggests an emphasis on storytelling (Jahn 1961:199), and indeed in Africa tales and fables are woven out of every-day experiences (:221). See also Villa-Vicencio’s examination of storytelling as an African resource (1997:37).

<sup>236</sup> According to Childs (1960:17), “myth is an expression of man’s (sic) understanding of reality”. See also Manyeli (1992:23).

<sup>237</sup> Here Gyekye opposes the view of Hountondji, another African philosopher.

<sup>238</sup> Yet it is not a hard and fast distinction (Gyekye 1987:32). In view of the distinction between African and other philosophies, Hountondji (1996) claims that African philosophy is called both to assimilate and transcend Western philosophy.

<sup>239</sup> In an excerpt of a poem quoted in Shorter (1978:91), poet Michel Kayoya declares, “I want my people’s children to have a true philosophy/ Their ancient philosophy renewed”.

<sup>240</sup> Nevertheless, Gyekye concedes that something can be authentically “African” without necessarily applying to all Africans. This means it is not necessary for philosophy to be shared by all Africans to be African.

<sup>241</sup> Indeed, since there is not one “unitary or uniform African perspective” (1987:189), Gyekye warns against simplistic generalisations of what is “African” (:191).

<sup>242</sup> Jahn makes this discovery with reference to the Bantu, Ruandese and Dogon people. Magesa (1998:27) similarly talk of a commonly shared “African kernel of . . . religious thought-systems and expressions”.

<sup>243</sup> Indeed, Gyekye argues that it is “legitimate and intelligible to talk of ‘African philosophy,’ the basis of which is the common or pervasive features in African cultural and thought systems” (1987:210).

Interestingly, Gyekye does not wish to create too great a gulf between African and other philosophies. He

“common denominator which allows us to interpret the whole of African culture,” claims Jahn (1961:26).<sup>244</sup> One of the aspects of this common denominator is the principle of *ntu*, connected to the idea of the unity of the universe (Jahn 1961:96-97).<sup>245</sup>

Themes in African philosophy that are shared by most sub-Saharan ethnic groups include personhood, “metaphysical thinking”, epistemology, morality in relation to community, democracy and consensus in politics, aesthetics, and art (Coetzee and Roux 1998)<sup>246</sup>. Similarly, according to Prinsloo (1998:41), “African philosophical issues” frequently revolve around “ontologies relating to the cosmos, conceptions of God, the philosophy of mind, a communalist and humanistic notion of moral responsibility, and consensual philosophy of politics”. African philosophical discourse is constructed upon established general beliefs, cultural concepts and theories, accumulated wisdom in proverbs, traditions, myths, folktales, the indigenous language(s) of an ethnic group, customs, religious and legal practices, and authorities in matters of knowledge (e.g. people, oral or written texts or institutions) (Prinsloo 1998:46-47).<sup>247</sup>

Common features in African philosophy are those “worldviews, sociopolitical ideas, values, and institutions that can with a high degree of certainty be said to pervade the cultural systems of different African peoples”. For one, metaphysics is the foundation of African ontology (Gyekye 1987:195). Africans share an inherently pluralistic ontology, which recognises and allows for other categories of being beside its own (:196). It is also a spiritualistic ontology, without denying the reality of the empirical world. Causality is a concept intimately connected to African ontology (:68,76), as are ideas surrounding destiny or fate (:104, 199), free will and moral responsibility (:119).<sup>248</sup> The predicament of evil is a genuine problem for African philosophy and theology (:200-201). In terms of epistemology, a principal “mode of knowing in African thought” is “paranormal cognition” (Gyekye 1987:201; see also Magesa 1998:192). Besides reason and experience, spirit mediumship, divination and witchcraft are considered viable epistemological categories (Gyekye 1987:202).<sup>249</sup>

Finally, the importance of oral communication – especially through storytelling – cannot be dismissed when considering African philosophy.<sup>250</sup> As indicated above, the principal modes of expression of African philosophy are oral<sup>251</sup>, i.e. involve myths, proverbs, stories, etc. To be sure, “Africa is a place of storytelling,” asserts Ellen Kuzwayo (quoted by Villa-Vicencio 1997:37). She continues, “We need more stories, never mind how painful the exercise might be. This is how we will learn to love one another. Stories help us to understand, to forgive, and to see things through someone

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affirms that African philosophy has some characteristics of its own, but that it is not to be entirely divorced from other philosophies (1987:43).

<sup>244</sup> It must be noted that not all African philosophers agree with this assertion. According to Kwame Appiah (1992:26), Africans share no common “traditional culture, common languages, a common religious or conceptual vocabulary ... we do not even belong to a common race”.

<sup>245</sup> Using Kagame’s mother tongue (Kinyarwanda), Jahn describes the different categories of Bantu languages as grouped into kinds or classes (Jahn 1961:99), all of which share the suffix of *-ntu*. The first class is that of “Muntu” or the human being. The second class is “Kintu” or thing. Third is “Hantu” or place and time, and fourth is “Kuntu” or modality. “Everything there is must necessarily belong to one of these four categories and must be conceived of not as substance but as force.” (Jahn 1961:100)

<sup>246</sup> See contributors such as Biko, Wiredu, Prinsloo, Oruka, Appiah, Teffo and Sogolo (in Coetzee and Roux 1998).

<sup>247</sup> Refer also to section 1.5.1, where I consider topics such as God, spirits, ancestors, personhood and community, African traditional politics, and the unity of the universe.

<sup>248</sup> Causation is the conceptual framework underlying African philosophy, claims Gyekye (1987:197).

<sup>249</sup> See also section 1.5.1 for a discussion surrounding the themes of magic, sorcery and the concept of evil.

<sup>250</sup> See for example Hofmeyr (1994), Belcher (1999), Denis (2000), Vail and White (1991) and Mudimbe and Jewsiewicki (1993) for their various discussions of orality, narrative and literature in African traditional contexts. See also section 2.1, “Methodological considerations”.

<sup>251</sup> In Africa there are indeed “strong living practices of oral culture – religious, mythological, poetic, and narrative” (Appiah 1992:58).

else's eyes." Africa's gift and propensity for storytelling is a boon to society in that it enables fellowship and builds community. It also serves as a medium of Africa's holistic philosophy and inclusive worldview. Telling stories broadens our personal, social and even national horizons, and breaks down barriers between people. Alternatively, *not* telling stories may hamper communal life together, because it restricts communication and mutual interaction (Villa-Vicencio 1997:37).

### ***Why is African philosophy a resource for reconciliation?***

African philosophy, like African traditional religion, provides a fine and appropriate set of conditions for a social reconciliation process. For one, it espouses a holistic and harmonious view of reality, and promotes a perception of inter-dependence, balance and mutuality of all the forces of the universe. It is therefore inherently reconciliatory and accommodating, rather than exclusive and alienating. Secondly, African philosophy is also oriented toward action and the practical affairs of life. It does not seek to theorise about things that do not have an actual bearing to and reference in people's lives. In other words, African philosophy provides for a "hands-on" approach to problems. Certainly, in the case of the quest for social reconciliation such an approach is far more profitable than an approach which emphasises theory over praxis.

Furthermore, African philosophy seeks to highlight that which is commonly shared by people. It seeks to reveal those aspects about being human and in the world that inherently links human beings to one another. It seeks to lead people towards a realisation and understanding of their traditional heritage, which in itself can be a reconciliatory experience. Owing to its pluralistic ontology, African philosophy is inherently accepting of diversity. It seeks to accommodate and harmonise what is "different" instead of discarding or disparaging it. Certainly, such inclusivism and openness must be a boon to any reconciliation process. It dictates that the "other" – be it an "other" ethnic group, an "other" worldview or religious system, an "other" way of communicating, or whatever – is incorporated rather than expelled. No doubt acceptance and incorporation are necessary prerequisites for reconciliation between formerly alienated entities.

Finally, one of the bases of African philosophy, viz. storytelling, may also be considered an important resource for social reconciliation. As I have argued in chapter 1, telling each other our stories is key to finding each other and building comradeship after a period of separation. Storytelling promotes communication and interaction – also between people who otherwise are alien to one another.

### **2.2.3 African anthropology: *Ubuntu/Botho* as reconciliatory paradigm**

An important resource for reconciliation that can be gleaned from African tradition is the African concept of humanity embedded in African anthropology (Mfutso-Bengo 2001:39-40). Possibly the most fundamental of all African anthropological notions is that of *ubuntu* or *botho*. Some argue *ubuntu* constitutes a crucial pillar of an African worldview (Battle 1997:39). As I argue here, it is a concept of reality which inherently carries with it powerful resources for social reconciliation. It is both a tool of social analysis and a way of life (Teffo 1995a). "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am," can be seen as its paradigmatic slogan (Mbiti 1969:108-109).<sup>252</sup>

A major theme of African anthropology is the sacrality of life, and flowing from that, respect for the human person (Magesa 1998:55). Human dignity "is to be preserved at all costs, for a person's dignity is part of his (sic) immortal soul or life-essence" (Sidhom 1969:110). Moreover, a person is seen holistically – as an entity with physical, emotional,

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<sup>252</sup> "We say, 'a person is a person through other people.' ... 'I am human because I belong.'" (Tutu 1999:35) According to Sarpong (2004), "The African would say: *Cognatus sum ergo sum* (I am related; therefore I am)."

psychological, spiritual and social qualities, needs and abilities.<sup>253</sup> In the opinion of South African scholar Joe Teffo (1995b), “ubuntu/botho is the common spiritual ideal by which all black people South of the Sahara give meaning to life and reality” and can be deemed “the spiritual foundation of all African societies”. Its historical origins can be traced to the ancient “African philosophy of unity in diversity” – a “philosophy of unity or oneness of the whole of creation” (Motshekga 1998:24) – which presumably originated long ago in Egypt and Ethiopia (1998:4).

*Ubuntu* is the “common denominator” of all brands of African anthropology (as well as African religion and philosophy), and can be shared among all people, insists Koka (1998:34).<sup>254</sup> As a universal philosophical concept, *ubuntu*

embraces every human being, all races and nations – uniting them into a new universal ‘Familihood’ – where individuals, families, communities and nations would discover the vital fact that: they are an integral part(s) of each other (sic). (Koka 1998:34)

*Ubuntu* “affirms an organic wholeness of humanity, a wholeness realised in and through other people” (Villa-Vicencio 1997:38). It is a “latent force” within human beings which connects them to one another (Radley 1995). Therefore, ubuntu essentially is about interconnection and relationship – relationship between a person and his/her descendants, family, clan, antecedents and God, as well as with his/her inheritance, property and its produce (Mulago 1969:138, 143).<sup>255</sup> As Sidhom (1969:102) puts it,

Existence-in-relation sums up the pattern of the African way of life. And this encompasses within it a great deal, practically the whole universe. The African maintains a vital relationship with nature, God the deity, ancestors, the tribe, the clan, the extended family, and himself (sic). Into each avenue he (sic) enters with his whole being, without essentially distinguishing the existence of any boundaries dividing one from the other.

African anthropology is about participation – the principle which illustrates the interconnection of all forces and maintains and upholds the web of relationships. It is, one might argue, the “cohesive principle of the Bantu community” (Mulago 1969:137).<sup>256</sup> Because all participate in the system of relationships, it is cohesive – solid, interrelated and unified. The “unity of life” is seen to be “the centre of cohesion and solidarity” (Mulago 1969:137).

Participation is the element of connection, the element which unites different beings as beings, as *substances*, without confusing them. It is the pivot of the relationships between members of the same community, the link which binds together individuals and groups, the ultimate meaning, not only of the unity which is personal to each man (sic), but of that unity in multiplicity, that totality, that

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<sup>253</sup> The Pedi conception of a person avers that each individual – “*motbo* – consists of a body – *mmele* – of a soul – *moya* – and a spirit – *seriti*” (Mönnig 1988:48). *Moya* and *seriti* are life-giving attributes, received from Modimo. *Moya* is associated with life itself, while *seriti* is associated with a person’s image and name (Mönnig 1988:49-50). Due to the fact that African anthropology emphasises a holistic view of the person, Taylor (1965:96) claims it to espouse a deeply Christian concept of humanity.

<sup>254</sup> For Africans, the “common denominator” of humankind is “Muntu” (Jahn 1961:18). Essential humanness or “Muntu” is a manifestation of “NTU”, “the universal force as such”. “NTU is the universe of forces” (:114). “It is Being itself, the cosmic universal force, which only modern, rationalizing thought can abstract from its manifestations. NTU is that force in which Being and beings coalesce. ... NTU expresses, not the effect of these forces, but their being” (:101). The other manifestations of NTU are Kintu, Hantu and Kuntu. Muntu is “an entity which is a force which has control over Nommo”, “the magic power of the word” (:121). Kintu is those forces “which cannot act for themselves and which can become active only on the command of a Muntu”. Hantu is “a force which localizes spatially and temporally every event and every ‘motion’” (:102). Kuntu is an action that someone performs, such as laughing (:103).

<sup>255</sup> “Two basic principles seem to underlie all the complex relationships into which man (sic) enters, namely, the principle of indwelling and the principle of interaction” (Sidhom 1969:102).

<sup>256</sup> Teffo (1994c) also forwards the notion that *ubuntu* is a cohesive moral value.

concentric and harmonic unity of the visible and invisible worlds. (Mulago 1969:145)<sup>257</sup>

The most elementary feature of *ubuntu* is its focus on community.<sup>258</sup> Community is a “fundamental human good” (Gyekye 1997:75) because it advocates “life in harmony and cooperation with others, a life of mutual consideration and aid and of interdependence” (1997:76). It fosters solidarity and participation, “fecundity and sharing in life, friendship, healing and hospitality” (Magesa 1998:55). *Ubuntu* favours communalism (community or collectivism) above individualism.<sup>259</sup> Indeed,

There seems to be a consensus among such scholars as Nyerere, Nkrumah, Senghor and a host of others that man (sic) in Africa is not just a social being but a being that is inseparable from his community. (Sogolo 1993:191)

Although “communalism” may rightfully be deemed the dominant “social theory” in Africa (Gyekye 1987:154)<sup>260</sup>, the concept of the community is not exclusive of the notion of the individual. Gyekye cites an Akan proverb to explain the relationship between the two: “The clan is like a cluster of trees which, when seen from afar, appear huddled together, but which would be seen to stand individually when closely approached” (1987:158). The fact that the clan is likened to a *cluster* of trees implies that it is indeed a unit, distinguishable as a unified whole. That it is likened to a cluster of *trees* suggests that the unit is undeniably made up of separate, autonomous entities. In other words, the community does not deny individuality, just as individuals cannot deny belonging to a community.<sup>261</sup> Gyekye (1987:210) further explains,

In African social thought human beings are regarded not as individuals but as groups of created beings inevitably and naturally interrelated and interdependent. This does not necessarily lead to the submerging of the initiative or personality of the individual, for after all the well-being and success of the group depend on the unique qualities of its individual members – but individuals whose consciousness of their responsibility to the group is ever present because they identify themselves with the group. Some writers on African social thought and practice have failed to comprehend the nature of the relation between communalism and individualism as these concepts really operate in African societies. In African philosophy, as in African life, these concepts are not considered antithetical, as they are in European (both capitalist and communist) philosophies.

What all this intimates is that in Africa community defines the person, and not some isolated static quality of (individual) rationality, will or memory (Menkiti 1979:158). “Life together is the quintessence of an African understanding of what it means to be

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<sup>257</sup> Ubuntu creates a balance of material and spiritual realities (Battle 1997:37).

<sup>258</sup> One explanation for this is suggested by ethnologists Van Warmelo and Phophi (1948:10-11), using the example of Venda society: “Struggling man (sic), beset by so many perils and hostile forces, sought security in social organization, first in the primordial unit of the blood group, then in the community of groups forming a tribal unit. If anyone was to be trusted it was the brother, the sister, the close kinsman, and so we find that the family and kinship are the basic facts of Venda life.”

<sup>259</sup> According to Taylor (1965:78ff), “the individual” is an abstraction. Humanness manifests itself (only) in community. An individual disconnected (or expelled) from community is nothing (Taylor 1965:83).

<sup>260</sup> Even in his later work (1997), Gyekye continues to defend moderate communitarianism (1997:35ff). Yet he cautions against an extreme or radical view of communitarianism as held by some Africans, where individual rights are reduced to secondary status. He affirms the importance of both communal values and individuality (1997:76). Indeed, if based on humanism, individuality and communitarianism are not in tension but rather complement each other (1997:288).

<sup>261</sup> Such a view is similar to that propagated by the Biblical witness. In Pauline thought, the faith community is considered to be a body – the “body of Christ”, i.e. it is one single interdependent unit, functioning as an autonomous entity. However, the different parts or members of the body are considered to have separate functions and purposes (gifts) which all together serve the entire body (see 1 Corinthians 12).

human" (Villa-Vicencio 1997:38).<sup>262</sup> Fellowship is considered the most important or primary human need (Prinsloo 1998:53). The suffering of one is conceived as the suffering of all. Therefore, *ubuntu* may give rise to actions of self-sacrifice by individuals for the larger group.<sup>263</sup> Freedom from want takes precedence over freedom of choice (Teffo 1994b). *Ubuntu* strives for harmony and security offered by the group (Setiloane 1976:33, 37). It "rests on the pillars of genuine caring and spontaneous sharing" (Broodryk 1997).<sup>264</sup> Given these features of *ubuntu*, one might agree with Teffo (1999:293) that its basis is love.<sup>265</sup>

According to Broodryk (1997), *ubuntu* philosophy promotes flexibility<sup>266</sup> rather than stability, it embraces plurality, and it highlights the importance of the (extended) family.<sup>267</sup> *Ubuntu* exhibits *simunye* – a spirit of oneness and inclusivity, *shosholoza* – teamwork, informality (e.g. through casual and spontaneous singing and laughing) and *toi-toi* dancing (which demonstrates a spirit of solidarity and togetherness). Moreover, the ideals of *ujima* (collective work and responsibility), *masakhane* (which means "let us build each other/build together") as well as *ukublonipa* (respect, discipline and good behaviour) are characteristics of *ubuntu* (Koka 1998:31). Stewardship and collective hospitality are further traits (Mbigi 1995). In sum, *ubuntu* nurtures and exacts the skills of how to "relate properly" (Mfutso-Bengo 2001:57).<sup>268</sup>

In discussing some of the most pertinent tenets of *ubuntu*, Prinsloo (1994) depicts a number of scholars' deliberations about the concept. For example, Khosa likens it to universal brotherhood. Chinkanda claims it is about noticing the needs and wants of others. It is the freedom of Africans to run their own affairs, insists Buthelezi. Shutte asserts it is that which is distinctive, worthwhile, good and valuable in human life. According to Maphisa, it is rationality versus violence<sup>269</sup>. It seeks to understand the frame of reference of others, suggests Makhudu. Mbigi maintains it is a code of trust, while Teffo argues it promotes the human as a social moral being. (Prinsloo 1994)

<sup>262</sup> Here is an excerpt from a poem by Michel Kayoya (quoted in Shorter 1978:91):

I wanted Africa to contribute to human values of relationship  
Of dependence  
Of hospitality  
Of the heart  
Of a hierarchy of self knowledge  
Of metaphysics  
Of mystery  
Of joy  
Of human sadness

<sup>263</sup> In connection to this see Battle (1997:6) who argues that suffering is central to African religiosity, and that therefore the theology of the cross readily takes root in Africa.

<sup>264</sup> Kinoti (2000:27-34) and Koka (2002:47ff) also see caring in family and community as a prime African virtue.

<sup>265</sup> Leopold Senghor similarly claims that love is "the essential energy" in Africa (Shorter 1978:53).

<sup>266</sup> See Mfutso-Bengo (2001:54) who argues for the "African concept of time as a philosophy of flexibility". He identifies this "philosophy of flexibility as pre-condition for reconciliation and compassion". Flexibility is seen "as a moral category ... is an act of the heart and the will. To be flexible is to have a heart which can be moved". A philosophy of flexibility opposes fundamentalism and fanaticism (Mfutso-Bengo 2001:55); it "is a fruit of encounter and leads to a reconciled society" (:56).

<sup>267</sup> Gyekye (1997:292) sees this emphasis on family and kinship relations as an "outstanding cultural value".

<sup>268</sup> Here is an excerpt from a poem by Michel Kayoya (quoted in Shorter 1978:89):

This cloak must cover our own hearts  
Our conception of ubuntu (human qualities)  
Our love of ubuvyeyi (parental dignity)  
Our practice of ubufasoni (nobility of origin)  
Our sense of ubutungane (integrity)  
The respect for Imana (God) – our father's legacy to us

<sup>269</sup> Rational behaviour is a human trait, while violent behaviour is animal. Battle agrees that *ubuntu* counters a "cosmology of violence" (Battle 1997:9).

For Nyembezi (1977), *ubuntu* is “to live and care for others; to act kindly toward others; to be hospitable; to be just and fair; to be compassionate<sup>270</sup>; to assist those in distress; to be trustful and honest; to have good morals”.<sup>271</sup> To Teffo (1995a), the most admirable qualities of *ubuntu* include “justice, respect for persons and property, tolerance, compassion and sensitivity to the aged, the handicapped and less privileged, unwavering obedience to adults, parents, seniors and authority<sup>272</sup>, courtesy, reliability, honesty and loyalty”. A person following the norms of *ubuntu* is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, affirming of others, and sees him/herself as belonging to a greater whole (Battle 1997:35). *Ubuntu* represents solidarity, collective effort, equal contribution, mutual trust, and fair discipline (Radley 1995). Every effort at maintaining solidarity, improving communication and circulation of life is viewed as an exercise in “increasing vital force and preventing the diminution of life” (Mulago 1969:149; see also Tempels 1969). At base, *ubuntu* is about practicing the skill of building and maintaining relationships (Mfutso-Bengo 2001:57).

### *The ethics of ubuntu*

In view of all the above considerations, *ubuntu* is not only an anthropological principle, but provides the basis for African ethics and morality as well. Wiredu’s assertion, “A human being needs help” is the point of departure for deliberations about ethics in Africa (Prinsloo 1998:54). *Ubuntu* is a social ethic with a reconciling vision for all of humanity (Teffo 1999:299)<sup>273</sup>. Gyekye argues that morality in Africa has a social and humanistic basis (1987:143)<sup>274</sup>. It does not originate from divine pronouncements, “but from considerations of human welfare and interests” (1987:208). All ethical and value systems exist “to reinforce unity and communal life”, to “seek to create a climate for life in fellowship” and to encourage “mutual participation, exchange and cross-fertilization” (Eiselen and Schapera 1956:270). “Good” actions are “supposed (expected or known) to bring about or lead to social well-being” (Gyekye 1987:132).<sup>275</sup> Therefore, African ethics may be viewed as a form of character ethics (Gyekye 1987:147-148).

In African society, ethics is a structured system “in the light of which each individual knows where he stands” (Sidhom 1969:112). The aim and purpose of ethics “is nothing less than the restoration of relationships within the immediate community” (:113), in view of the fact that community life is constantly threatened by disturbances and forces of chaos. Such forces are considered evil because they disrupt “the otherwise normal flow of life and force of the universe” (:113). Connected to the idea of evil (or forces of destruction) is sin. According to theologian Thias Kgatla (1992:328), Africans perceive sin as

<sup>270</sup> *Ubuntu* embraces “reconciling diversity through human encounter and compassion” (Mfutso-Bengo 2001:42).

<sup>271</sup> A good person is defined as “generous – with his (sic) time, his concerned involvement with others’ troubles, and with his worldly goods. Generosity was the chiefly virtue *par excellence* and every man (sic) strove to act like a chief. ... A good man was one who was a good neighbour. ... The virtues of the good man were ... respect for seniors, loyalty to kinsmen, assistance to neighbours, freedom from the suspicion of witchcraft, generosity, meticulous observance of custom, loyalty to the chief and political officers, kindness and forbearance.” (Hammond-Tooke 1993:99)

<sup>272</sup> Arguably, “life is viewed as a structure of roles and functions” (Sidhom 1969:106). Sidhom (1969:107) asserts that “grouping the community according to age defines the vertical as well as the horizontal relations within the community”. African society is thus fairly structured and “regimented”. See also section 1.5.1, “African traditional politics”.

<sup>273</sup> See also Kanyandago (1994:49).

<sup>274</sup> However, it does not adhere to what Gyekye calls an “antisupernaturalistic” humanism, as practised in the West.

<sup>275</sup> Hammond-Tooke (1993:97) asserts, “Moral behaviour is ... essentially concerned with ‘good’ actions.” “How did the Southern Bantu conceive of the ‘good’ man (sic)? Firstly, the good man was one who did not disturb the delicate balance between society and nature.”



a transgression of the ethical laws and norms derived from the ancestors.<sup>276</sup> Sin constitutes an offence against the human group as a whole, and still further against the ancestral spirits. Sin is inherently the destruction of the group's solidarity, so that a person sins, not against God, but against others.<sup>277</sup>

An offence is not seen in isolation from the broader context. As a result, in Africa an offender "does not stand alone in guilt". His/her family, the community, share in it (Sidhom 1969:112).

Sin is anything that causes disharmony and disturbance – be it socially, physically, environmentally, etc. It is therefore also related to illness or lack of health (Kgatla 1992:328). Taboos, prohibitions and bans are similarly to be understood in this context of counterbalancing forces that seek to diminish vital force (Mulago 1969:150). Disruption caused by sin must be counteracted through correct behaviour by setting relations right.<sup>278</sup> Such a view reveals what Adegbola (1969:116) calls an "ethics of dynamism". Or, it may be deemed an "ontological, immanent and intrinsic morality" (Kuckertz 1981:86, referring to Tempels).

#### *Ubuntu as all-encompassing ethos*

What Johann Broodryk (1997) calls "Ubuntuism" is a philosophy with tenets broadly comparable to those of socialism and democracy.<sup>279</sup> At the same time, it manifests aspects of intense humanism.<sup>280</sup> Teffo (1995a), who similarly equates *ubuntu* with a kind of African humanism, declares, "The essence of Man (sic) in African Humanism lies in the recognition of man as man – before economic, financial and political factors are taken into consideration. Man is an end in himself. He is a touchstone of value." Indeed, "Ubuntuism ... does not deal with political aspects only but is something more holistic in the sense of converging the institutional, physical, economical, financial and socio-welfare fields" (Broodryk 1997). *Ubuntu* is "participatory humanity", which strives at all times to seek consensus and unanimity among people (Teffo 1994a). *Ubuntu* ultimately prepares the way for reconciliation in the context of justice (Teffo 1994a). Wiredu (1977:49-50) concurs that a fundamental trait of "traditional culture is its infinite capacity for the pursuit of consensus and reconciliation".<sup>281</sup>

How does all this relate to the South African situation? Broodryk (1997) argues that Ubuntuism is en route to becoming "the philosophy of the New South Africa". It is "a process and philosophy which reflects the African heritage, traditions, culture, customs and beliefs", and has represented the "moral guideline of traditional life for centuries". *Ubuntu* is not an ideology, since it is universal<sup>282</sup> and does not seek to benefit certain people at the expense of others. "It is never to the detriment, or at the expense, of others" (Radley 1995). Good neighbourliness, decent behaviour, an emphasis on brother- and sisterhood and positive human relations are to be found among many Bantu ethnic

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<sup>276</sup> Good ethics and morality "is measured by conformity to tribal ethics and laws"; violation against tribal custom is not sin against God but against the community (Buys and Nambala 2003:6).

<sup>277</sup> "The social order is based on the ontological order. Every organization, political or other, which offends this principle could not be recognized by the Bantu as orderly or normal. ... The social order is founded on vital union, the growth of the inner self and the interdependence of vital influence. Ethics and law follow logically from the conception of beings and their ontic connection" (Mulago 1969:150). See also Maimela (1991:12).

<sup>278</sup> See section 1.5.1.

<sup>279</sup> It must be noted that Broodryk distinguishes between consensus and a rigid form of democracy. *Ubuntu* is in favour of the former rather than the latter. Agreeing with Broodryk, Gyekye (1997:116) asserts the democratic character of traditional African political systems. See also Goba (1995).

<sup>280</sup> See also Vilakazi (1991) and Teffo (1994c). Similarly, according to Gyekye (1997:260), Africans foster a "humanist moral outlook".

<sup>281</sup> Tutu concurs that the main thrust of *ubuntu* is for reconciliation (Battle 1997:40).

<sup>282</sup> Teffo (1995a) would say it is "transcultural" in nature.

groups in Southern Africa (i.e. Sotho, Xhosa, Shangaan, Venda etc.), claims Broodryk. For this reason, he speaks of its “universal applicability”, and its inherent compatibility with all religions. Through its ideals of sharing, respect, humanness and order, it has the force to transform South Africa (Broodryk 1997). Teffo (1994a) agrees with such a bold assertion when he states,

The ethos of *ubuntu*, that human essence by which man (sic) is prompted to do that which is honourable, correct, and proper<sup>283</sup>, is one single gift that African philosophy can bequeath to other philosophies of the world, in particular Western philosophy.<sup>284</sup>

Villa-Vicencio has encapsulated and define the concept of *ubuntu* in socio-political expressions. He maintains that South Africa would do well in establishing a “heritage which proclaims a message about human nature which provides an alternative to both western notions of individualism and ideological Marxist perceptions of collectivism” (Villa-Vicencio 1992:164). This means that South African society should strive to transcend both individualism and (rigidly Marxist) collectivism (:154ff) in order to model “a new vision of humanity,” namely “a communal vision.” It is this idea of a communal vision for humanity in South Africa that corresponds with the notion of *ubuntu*.<sup>285</sup> The interconnectedness that *ubuntu* stands for is what South African society needs. The whole community needs to be shaped into a unified, reconciled web of interdependent existence. Effectively, South Africans need to learn the “art of living together” (:77).<sup>286</sup>

The “Ubuntu Pledge” can be viewed as one example of how the philosophy of *ubuntu* has already been adopted for the social and political transformation of South Africa. The pledge pamphlet, presented by the National Religious Leaders’ Forum and supported by the Masakhane Campaign, could be obtained and signed at the voting stations during the last national elections in South Africa. It is “A pledge for a better South Africa”. The definition of *ubuntu* shown on the pledge pamphlet states: “Ubuntu means to be human, to value the good of the community above self-interest, to strive to help other people in the spirit of service, to show respect to others and to be honest and trustworthy.” Aspects of the pledge include:

I shall strive to:

Be good and do good. ...

Live honestly and positively. ...

Be considerate and kind. ...

Care for my sisters and brothers within the human family. ...

Respect other people’s rights to their beliefs and cultures. ...

Care for and improve our common environment. ...

Promote peace, harmony and non-violence. ...

Promote the welfare of South Africa as a patriotic citizen. (Ubuntu Pledge pamphlet)

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<sup>283</sup> Doing what is proper arises out of “respect for tribal law and custom” and honouring the ancestors “by living as they have lived”. Moral behaviour is demanded “within the family and tribe rather than moral behaviour in general” (Eiselen and Schapera 1956:270).

<sup>284</sup> Arguably, a form of *ubuntu* was also practiced by Thomas Merton and Martin Buber, and certain other proponents of Western humanism, who emphasised the sanctity of life. In this, Teffo (1994a) sees possible convergences for cross-cultural dialogue. Furthermore, *ubuntu* ought to be and is applied in modern “Western” disciplines, for example in business ethics.

<sup>285</sup> Moreover, such a vision can be compared to the one propagated by the Biblical heritage. Villa-Vicencio (1992:165) draws parallels between Biblical and *ubuntu* politics when he claims, “The message contained in the biblical vision of society is a message concerning the individual worth and dignity of all people, realized in community with others. More specifically, it is a heritage grounded in the story of people who are the focus of God’s special care, despite their lowly and despised status in the world – whether they be slaves in Egypt, the poor of Israel, widows, orphans, the sick or the oppressed of society.”

<sup>286</sup> Villa-Vicencio has a section in his book entitled, “Politics as the art of living together.”

Desmond Tutu is perhaps the most ardent advocate of *ubuntu* in South Africa. To him, *ubuntu* is about unifying apparent opposites, joining together instead of separating entities that are seemingly irreconcilable. *Ubuntu* offers no room for “us versus them” thinking or rhetoric. Rather, it exacts the realisation that “my” or “our” humanity “is caught up, inextricably bound up, in theirs. We belong in a bundle of life” (Tutu 1999:34-35). Therefore, with reference to the hostile divide between blacks and whites, oppressed and oppressors, victims and perpetrators in South Africa, Tutu (1999:35) boldly asserts

*Ubuntu* means that in a real sense even the supporters of apartheid were victims of the vicious system which they implemented and which they supported so enthusiastically. Our humanity was intertwined.

In view of our country’s unhappy past, *ubuntu* means the people of South Africa “are interconnected in this network of interdependence and togetherness, so that what happened to one, in a very real sense happened to them all” (Tutu 1999:127). In other words, *ubuntu* can help South Africans realise that they belong to one another (despite all outward signs of enmity and division), that they share a common history as well as a common future, and that they are dependent on each other for their collective well-being.

According to Michael Battle (1997), Tutu is a proponent of what could be called “ubuntu theology”. This is a theology emphasising that all human beings are created in the image of God. “Tutu turns the concept of ubuntu into a theological concept in which human beings are called to be persons because we are made in the image of God,” claims Battle (1997:64).<sup>287</sup> Other theologians, too, perceive *ubuntu* to be the African equivalent of the theology of the *imago Dei* (see for example Moyo 2002:298). According to Koka (1998:34), *ubuntu* is a special “embodiment of God’s ‘image and likeness’, his power and divinity in man (sic).”<sup>288</sup> *Ubuntu* highlights that “quality about a person which elevates him (sic) to a plane very near to godliness,” claims Mogoba (1981:56).

In Tutu’s view, besides stressing human beings’ likeness to God, “the reality of ubuntu is bound up in Jesus, who creates new relationships in the world” (Battle 1997:73). *Ubuntu* is seen as a metaphor for “human participation in the divine life” (Battle 1997:57). The fullness of humanity only becomes manifest in *koinonia*, in community. Indeed, Tutu declares, “God has made us so that we will need each other. We are made for a delicate network of interdependence” (Battle 1997:35). What this implies is that “human identities are uniquely made to be more cooperative than competitive” (:79).

Tutu ultimately sees “ubuntu as life in relation to God and neighbour” (Battle 1997:9). *Ubuntu* theology has the ability of restoring humanity and dignity to both perpetrators and victims of violence, and of creating a sense of mutuality among humans who are alienated from one another (Battle 1997:5). *Ubuntu* is the force that is able to bridge the terrible rifts created by the injustices and inhumanities of the past. It is in fact the force that ultimately counterbalances the evil of apartheid. South African writer Antjie Krog (2003:159) reflects, “Ubuntu. The most profound opposite of Apartheid. More than forgiveness<sup>289</sup> or reconciliation. More than ‘turn the other cheek’. It is what humanity has lost.”

*Ubuntu* theology, therefore, has many possible advantages. For one, “out of the confidence of being God’s viceroy persons in the community of ubuntu are moved to care for others” (Battle 1997:48). *Ubuntu* builds up interdependent community (:40), cherishes diversity in community (:42), encourages transformation into a new identity (:44)

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<sup>287</sup> Other African theologians agree when declaring, “We are convinced that the Bantu principle of vital participation can become the basis of a specifically African theological structure. ... Communion as participation in the same life and the same means of life will, we believe, be the centre of this ecclesiological theology” (Mulago 1969:157). However, there are also critics of Tutu’s theology, e.g. Mosala and Cone (Battle 1997:155ff).

<sup>288</sup> Indeed, in African thought, spiritual life and biological life “meet in the human being” (Jahn 1961:107).

<sup>289</sup> Deborah Matshoba, a survivor of torture during the apartheid regime, declares that “forgiveness is creating a culture of ubuntu, humanness, medemenslikheid...” (quoted by Krog 2003:157).

and integrates cultures (:45). Before the commencement of the new dispensation in South Africa, Tutu even argued that *ubuntu* theology could be a force to “overthrow Apartheid” through humanising the oppressor and establishing a sense of all South Africans belonging to one another (:47). As such, *ubuntu* theology imparts a “paradigm of reconciliation” (:80), which is sorely needed and can be adopted by South Africa. “An African sense of community includes rather than separates. Herein is a basis for building a common South Africanness – a basis for sharing stories that transcend the isolation of the past in the pursuit of reconciliation” (Villa-Vicencio 1997:39).

#### *Possible drawbacks of ubuntu*

Lest we fall into the trap of glorifying and romanticising *ubuntu* beyond what is realistic, it is necessary to at least mention some of its potential pitfalls. It is important to acknowledge that *ubuntu* can be abused (Sindane 1994). An extremist view of *ubuntu* declares that humanness manifests itself only in community, and that an individual disconnected (or expelled) from community is nothing (Taylor 1965:83). This can have two negative results. First, persons can be marginalised by virtue of their individuality. What van Niekerk (1994) calls the “dark side of ubuntu” includes harshness or unkindness against dissenting individuals, i.e. those who do not toe the line that the community dictates.<sup>290</sup> In instances where not toeing the community line involves criminal or otherwise destructive behaviour, marginalisation may be seen as a form of justifiable punishment or rehabilitation. It may be seen as therapeutic for and protective of the society, and may in fact be necessary (e.g. imprisonment of criminals or institutional rehabilitation of mentally instable people who cause harm). Yet if people are marginalised for reasons other than social disruption or danger, this is cruel.<sup>291</sup>

Although Gyekye is in favour of moderate communitarianism (1997:35ff), I have already shown that he cautions against an extreme or radical view of communitarianism as held by some Africans, where individual rights are reduced to secondary status. The reduction or obliteration of individual rights and freedoms may be deemed a second possible harmful effect of radical communalism.<sup>292</sup> The flip side of this is that individuals’ personal responsibilities and duties may also become eroded, or relegated to the background. In certain instances, *ubuntu* may bring about a clash between the sensibilities of group solidarity and personal responsibility (van Niekerk 1994). For example, in university settings an extreme form of *ubuntu* may call for a “pass one, pass all” policy. Here, the desires of the group are elevated above individual efforts, responsibilities and duties. Surely this is an extreme or wayward expression of *ubuntu* that ought not to be tolerated.

In traditional African society, social hierarchies are common (Taylor 1965:84). A person’s social status is strongly determined by his/her class, rank, age and sex (Mönnig 1988:329). These categories are socially constructed. They can be exclusive and, if applied rigorously, ruthless. Some examples: Persons belonging to a certain (low) class may never be afforded the same kind of respect and dignity from others, as persons belonging to a higher class. This may cause jealousy, resentment, and even hate. If a person of seniority abuses his/her power, persons of younger age are expected to accept this without resistance. Under such circumstances, terrible cruelty may be committed (e.g. child abuse or wife battering). Because of the hierarchy of the sexes, women are usually regarded as lower in status. This vulnerability is shown in the fact that many African women are victims of violence – domestic and institutional. Women furthermore are not

<sup>290</sup> Indeed, Africans may display the tendency to exclude outsiders, concedes Gyekye (1997:256).

<sup>291</sup> Perhaps the most extreme form of such cruelty is expressed when people are accused of witchcraft and are therefore shunned or even “hunted”, even though no clear evidence exists of their guilt (see *Crossing Witchcraft Barriers* 2003).

<sup>292</sup> For this reason, Gyekye affirms the importance of both communal values and individuality (1997:76), and sees them in complementarity rather than mutual exclusion.

allowed to participate in important decision-making processes that affect them, and are therefore sometimes misrepresented. African feminists decry the inherent sexism found in certain aspects of traditional culture, and many strongly reject it as oppressive and dehumanising.<sup>293</sup>

Since family and kin represent the inner circle of Africans' community-orientation, the danger of nepotism arises.<sup>294</sup> Nepotism, and in some cases tribalism (where one tribe provides for itself to the detriment and exclusion of other tribes or ethnicities), stems from the honourable desire to show respect and kindness to one's closest community members. Yet it unfortunately is exclusive of those who do not belong in that category.<sup>295</sup> Ultimately it is unfair to those who do not have family-, kin- or clan-members in powerful places, since they will never have representation there, and will never be able to occupy those places themselves. As potential negative outcomes of a narrow and restricted understanding of *ubuntu*, nepotism and tribalism ultimately cause hostility and ill-feeling, not to mention bribery, corruption and general break-down in the broader community.

Even the great advocate of *ubuntu*, Tutu, uncovers a weakness in it by stating that it sometimes "encourages conservation and conformity". This can stifle personal creativity and expression. For this reason, "It needs to be corrected by the teaching about [each individual's] inalienable uniqueness.... We need both aspects to balance each other" (Battle 1997:xiii). Wiredu, too, warns of the danger of *ubuntu* in potentially undermining individual freedom, especially in contexts of authoritarian political rule (Battle 1997:51). Contrary to its ethos of inclusivity and acceptance, *ubuntu* may at times become exclusive of "other" ethnic groups. For example, in the case of both the Zulu and Pedi languages, ethnic groups other than themselves are classed as non-persons (Mogoba 1981:57). "It is a great problem in Africa, and here in our own country especially, that people want to separate themselves into little groups. Such groups can become exclusive," admits Koka (07.07.2004). Yet he maintains that in fact such exclusivism is a perversion of the true African way. He ultimately defends *ubuntu* by insisting, "The notion of Africanness is inclusive."

### *Why is ubuntu a resource for reconciliation?*

Using a formulation of the Summary Report from the Lutheran World Federation Working Group on African Religion (2002:23), I pinpoint why I believe African anthropology can make a significant contribution to the problem of social reconciliation:

This optimistic anthropology is one of the treasures which Africans could fruitfully appropriate to regain confidence in the human ability to confront and overcome social problems.

African tradition focuses on social relationships, and the healing of broken relationships. In appropriating "this human-centred approach" to life (Summary Report 2002:23), South African society might be able to redirect its efforts with regard to reconciliation. Moreover, African anthropology's positive and affirming view of humankind may help to overcome feelings of disappointment in and frustration about people; it may counteract feelings of resentment, antipathy or anger, but also feelings of inadequacy, guilt and shame. It may even foster a willingness to forgive and to give someone a "second chance". Essentially, it has the potential to restore lost hope in humanity and its ability to do and be good. *Ubuntu* will expect the best, hope for the best and bring out the best in people. *Ubuntu* does not give up on people, and it does not despair in their failures and

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<sup>293</sup> See Oduyoye (1995:137), Comaroffs (1991:152ff).

<sup>294</sup> Sadly, cases of nepotism and tribalism abound in Africa. See for example Ayittey (1999) and Leistner (2003).

<sup>295</sup> Koka is one Africanist who vehemently rejects such forms of exclusivism (07.07.2004). He deems them decidedly un-African, although he grants that some Africans are guilty of them.

inadequacies. For these reasons, I consider it an outstanding resource and basis for reconciliatory endeavours in South Africa, but also in other contexts.<sup>296</sup>

According to Lederach (1997:84), in order to provide an environment for sustained reconciliation and peacability to thrive, an “infrastructure for peacebuilding” needs to be built. “Such an infrastructure is made up of a web of people, their relationships and activities, and the social mechanisms necessary to sustain the change sought. This takes place at all levels of the society.” It seems to me that the African anthropological resource of *ubuntu* provides such an infrastructure; it champions a paradigm of reconciliation which may lead South African society on the way to peace and social harmony. Moreover, one can argue that *ubuntu* creates “a spiritual culture” that has the potential to pave the way for a social scenario of co-operation and respect, harmony and peace (Koka 1998:34). Put differently, *ubuntu* promotes “an African spirituality of compassionate concern” (Battle 1997:123ff), and is therefore undoubtedly a boon to societies marked by a history of compassionlessness and indifference from the side of the powerful.

It has been the task of section 2.2 to divulge some of the tenets of an African worldview that could provide positive resources for social reconciliation in the South African context. I have considered some contributions to be gleaned from African religion and spirituality, African philosophy and African anthropology and ethics. Throughout, I have tried to demonstrate that certain aspects of these pillars of an African worldview may present a strong foundation and offer an effective impetus for social reconciliation endeavours.

### 2.3 Traditional legal procedures that aim at social reconciliation

In the previous section I considered the broader aspects of African tradition – its religious worldview, its philosophy and its anthropological assumptions – that are helpful resources in the reconciliation process. I now turn to the more specific elements embedded in this cultural tradition that could be gleaned for the purpose of reconciliation endeavours in South Africa. African societies, like all other societies, have a way of managing their affairs. When wrong has been committed, when persons or their belongings have been violated, when people disagree or fight, there are ways and means to address these matters. Legal procedures are a common feature of African communities that aim at restoring social rifts and sorting out problems. In what follows I attempt to outline the most basic forms of judicial practice in African traditional communities, in order to show in what way they might prove efficacious for social reconciliation efforts. The one form is the court procedure, heavily relying on mediation in its early phases. The other form, closely related to the former, is the palaver. After having sketched these types of legal custom, I will offer a brief evaluation of them in view of their strengths and weaknesses with relation to reconciliation in South Africa.

The question might arise as to why it is of importance at all to discuss traditional legal processes. According to surveys done in Namibia, most Africans display great loyalty towards traditional legal institutions and authorities, and show their preference for these above the Western judicial system. Contrary to the investigators’ expectations, even women and youth regard traditional indigenous legal practice as more beneficial (Hinz 2002:33). Manfred Hinz (2002:34) has found that adherence to customary legal procedures is still widespread in African communities. One reason for this is that

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<sup>296</sup> Hay (1998:136) agrees when asserting, “In South Africa today, the nation needs this, not only traditional people. ... Many people in SA have lost their *ubuntu* through the violence of apartheid and related violence and need their humanity to be restored.”

traditional-minded people are dissatisfied, disillusioned, disinterested and distrustful of the “justice system of the white man” (Hinze 2002:35). Essentially, people continue to hold their indigenous judicial system in high esteem because it is seen as establishing equilibrium and balancing social relations, i.e. it offers a viable method for establishing peace (Hinze 2002:35).

Conflict resolution in Africa is “closely related to the whole system of morality/ethics of African Religion,” claims Laurenti Magesa (1998:235)<sup>297</sup>. The “African legal system and the moral system are inseparable” (1998:237). In fact, the legal system supports the religious system and vice versa (Mönnig 1988:301). Legal processes aim at the “readjustment and restoration of relationships” (1988:308) which is, as I have shown in the preceding section, also the main purpose of religion.

When considering law and justice in an African context, one would do well in identifying the meanings associated with concepts such as “wrong”, “evil”, “crime” and “sin”. According to ethnologist Mönnig (1988:63-65), there exists in African traditional society a continuum between good (*botse*) and evil (*bobe*).<sup>298</sup> “Evil” can be divided into four broad categories. The first is *sebe*, translated as “sin”, although *sebe* arguably has little similarity to the Christian concept of sin. *Sebe* involves actions that affect life on earth only; it is any transgression against the natural order. *Sebe* “includes all wrongs perpetrated by one person against another or by one group of people against another; it includes moral faults, such as lack of respect, dishonesty, and slander. It ranges from murder and theft to discourtesy to one’s superiors.” (Mönnig 1988:65) Connected to *sebe* is *ditshila*, i.e. dirt or impurity. *Ditshila* is sometimes acquired unconsciously, as a result of pollution of which one is unaware. It is dangerous – “a contaminating condition which can infect those who come into contact with it” (Mönnig 1988:66).

The second type of evil is *molato*, translated as “wrong”. It is punishable in court, and is usually a transgression against the customary order. One of most severe cases of *molato* is witchcraft, punishable by death. Witchcraft “is not considered as a sin since it is not punishable through supernatural sanctions” (Mönnig 1988:65). Category three is *hlompsha* or *godisa*, which is habitually connected to matters of respect or honour. The fourth form of evil is *dikgaba*, which indicates a lack of equilibrium of social relations or disunity, resulting in bad luck. *Dikgaba* follows if the “supernatural bond existing between the members of a family” is tampered with (Mönnig 1988:64).

In traditional societies conflict often arises over tension in family units (Clignet 1990:65). These tensions are frequently connected with modes of production (:66), rules of descent (:67), structures of matrimonial exchanges (:69) or modes of political integration (:70). Conflict among tribes or ethnic groups occurs when they are sharing the same territory (:71), or over interethnic marriages. Ethnic, residential and occupational differentiation (:72) or social boundaries (:73) are counted among the reasons for conflict as well.

A definite feature of African legal procedures is that they emphasise the responsibility of the group rather than (only) the individual. Community rights are elevated above individual rights (Mönnig 1988:308).<sup>299</sup> As already shown, this is typical of the African anthropological ideal of *ubuntu*. For this reason, “a court would not normally support an individual against his own group” (Hammond-Tooke 1993:89).

Respect for seniors, as well as for old traditions and customs, is also important in African law. This is shown in the fact that all old men have the authority to end a quarrel between younger persons by reprimanding them. If their reprimand is not heeded, the quarrellers may be heavily punished, the reason being that they acted disrespectfully –

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<sup>297</sup> It is hard to distinguish “law” from “custom, taboos, divination, mediumship, ... and good company in general” (Magesa 1998:235).

<sup>298</sup> These are the words used in the Pedi language.

<sup>299</sup> See also Taylor (1965:78ff), Teffo (1994b) and Buys and Nambala (2003:6).

both against the old man and against the traditional custom he represents (Mönnig 1988:322).

### *Traditional mediation and court proceedings*

In traditional societies “quarrels and disputes could be extremely disruptive”. Legal institutions had the urgent task of “patching up of the rift” once one had occurred within the community (Hammond-Tooke 1993:89).

The main task of the courts, then, was not to decide an issue in terms of legal abstractions (as in the west) but to ensure that reconciliation took place. Judicial decisions were based on precedent, but legal niceties were never allowed to stand in the way of reconciliation. (Hammond-Tooke 1993:90)

Indeed, Krige (1976:77) agrees,

The fundamental objective is the re-establishment of the relations that have become broken or strained, and that objective is achieved, not so much by vindicating rules as by reconciling parties. There is indeed a tacit assumption that the social equilibrium will be maintained if personal relations are suitably adjusted. The primary task of the courts is therefore to smooth out personal difficulties rather than to settle legal issues. For in law as in life it is not the rule that is important but the personal and social relations.

These factors also influenced the organisation of the courts. Disputes were rarely purely between individuals *per se*, but rather between groups. Wrecked relationships could quickly get out of hand, causing cleavage between groups. The resolution of quarrels, therefore, was entrusted to administrative authorities. Since there was no separation between tribal administration and the judiciary, courts were part and parcel of the “decision-making bodies that assisted chiefs and headmen in the running of their wards and chiefdoms”. The same group of men who habitually met to manage matters pertaining to community also sat as a court of law. Yet court proceedings were distinguishable from other affairs of government by the terminology and code of conduct employed.<sup>300</sup> (Hammond-Tooke 1993:90; see also Schapera 1956:214-217)

In traditional societies, a judicial process is long and intricate, and follows a certain set of conventions. The formal treatment of disputes is the responsibility of the hierarchy of courts connected to the administrative areas into which the chiefdom is divided, “starting with that of the ward headman and ending with that of the chief at the capital” (Hammond-Tooke 1993:91; see also Hunter 1979:414).<sup>301</sup> The chief is aided by a small board of officials whose special task it is to direct and counsel him on the use of law.<sup>302</sup> They are expected to be present at all legal hearings to contribute continuity of experience. When the chief is young the court is very much controlled by the older, more

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<sup>300</sup> “Among South Nguni, for example, the council of men was called *ibandla*; when it converted itself into a court it became an *inkundla*” (Hammond-Tooke 1993:90).

<sup>301</sup> In the case of the Pondo, “Each headman, or chief, with the men under him, forms a court of first instance, and from the court of every headman or chief there is an appeal to the court of his immediate superior, and from thence to the court of the paramount chief” (Hunter 1979:414). “The courts of district chiefs with headmen under them, and the court of the paramount chief, are courts of first instance for the people living immediately round their great place, as well as being appeal courts for the whole district, and in the case of the paramount, for the whole of eastern or western Pondoland” (Hunter 1979:415).

<sup>302</sup> “The chief was a very busy man. He used to spend the whole day in his *lekhotla* hearing complaints, discussing matters, or trying cases; to give him his due, he was accessible to the meanest, and the complaint of a poor man would always be heard” (Ellenberger 1992:266). Indeed, the chief “must give ear to all his subjects, irrespective of rank; and much of his time is spent daily in his official courtyard” (Schapera 1956:177). Moreover, the role of the *induna* is also very significant. He is the special advisor to the chief, the chief’s “right-hand man, acting as intermediary between him and the council and tribe, and as his mouthpiece on all formal and many informal occasions” (Schapera 1956:182). In cases where there is a dispute between a chief and a member of his tribe, often a neighbouring chief is called upon to reconcile them (Schapera 1956:192).



experienced counsellors. (Hammond-Tooke 1993:91; Hunter 1979:416)

Before being brought before the courts (which are the higher instances of legal deliberation), disputes are dealt with by less formal bodies also charged with the task of settling social problems. The “court” of the local descent group is the first and most important of these informal bodies. Affairs involving the immediate family, and also the wider descent group, are examined first within these bodies<sup>303</sup>, under the leadership of the genealogically senior man. Indeed, in the elementary or compound family the regime of *patria potestas* prevails, where the father is responsible for the organised running of family matters. He also represents the family in all its external business. In all affairs that affect people beyond his own family, such as marriage, he seeks the counsel of his senior relatives. As its genealogical head, the senior male member of an extended family has extensive authority and the right to arbitration among the members of the group.<sup>304</sup> He however usually works in co-operation with other senior men of the group. Issues deliberated at this level are generally of domestic nature, e.g. quarrels between spouses, or the failure to comply with kinship obligations. This “family court” has the authority to punish members through exacting minor penalties. Nevertheless it lacks the power to implement its own decisions or recommendations by force. Essentially, it is a court of arbitration. If it fails to accomplish reconciliation the matter has to be moved up one level, i.e. placed before the headman’s court, which then acts “as a court of first instance, hearing evidence *de novo*”. In other words, serious and complicated cases go to official courts (Hammond-Tooke 1993:91; Mönning 1988:282, 315; Schapera 1956:213). Court fees consist of either a goat or sheep paid by the plaintiff to the chief to open a case (Hunter 1979:417).

The family court is considered very important. The higher court usually always inquires whether the case brought before it has been discussed by a family court.<sup>305</sup> If not, the matter is sent back to the lower, less formal levels. The court only accepts cases that have been referred to it by the lower courts. (Hammond-Tooke 1993:92; Mönning 1988:308, 311) “The principal vehicle for settling disputes outside the official courts is the mediation within or between family groups” (Mönning 1988:314). Mediation aims at finding a satisfactory compromise, and settling the quarrel as amicably as possible, thereby forestalling the need for approaching the higher court. Intermediaries or mediators therefore have “considerable political powers, as well as judicial powers” (Mönning 1988:283). They are crucial to the functioning of the process for settling disputes through “family courts”.

The method of mediation follows some simple guidelines. The wronged party sends a mediator to the accused. In Northern Sotho the name for the mediator is *mmaditsela*, meaning “road”. Metaphorically speaking, the mediator is a road between the two who are at loggerheads; s/he literally travels the road between them – “shuttling between the two quarrelling parties” – usually more than once (Kgatla 02.09.2004). The mediator is sent to show the accused that wrong has been committed.<sup>306</sup> S/he is usually a specific person in the family of the plaintiff; the position of intermediary is mostly hereditary.<sup>307</sup> The role of the intermediary is defined by certain characteristics. Generally s/he is an experienced, elderly person of high social standing who masters language and idiom well. S/he is supposed to be very tactful and diplomatic, humble and not

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<sup>303</sup> For “family matters were secret and dirty linen should not be displayed in public” (Hammond-Tooke 1993:91).

<sup>304</sup> The “jural principle that lies at the heart of these societies” is “filial piety and great respect for seniors” (Hammond-Tooke 1981:28).

<sup>305</sup> In addition, some Sotho had regimental courts which dealt with offences committed in connection with the initiation schools or regimental duties, and special women’s courts (associated with the female age-regiments).

<sup>306</sup> During the process of mediation, the quarrellers do not meet face to face (Ralushai 31.08.2004).

<sup>307</sup> The intermediary may be male or female.

offensive, not argumentative but gently persuasive.<sup>308</sup> Her/his aim is to reconcile and not to cause offence. Frequently the intermediary uses totem names and not family names when addressing the subject (e.g. "The lions have sent me..."). If settlement is not reached by the first round of mediation, the involved families may attempt this procedure again, calling upon more relatives to assist in the deliberations.<sup>309</sup> Only if several mediation attempts fail is the matter relegated to the courts (Mönnig 1988:316).<sup>310</sup> If, however, the process succeeds, the culmination of the mediation is reconciliation. Then a goat or sheep is slaughtered as a sign of celebration that the dispute has been settled. (Kgatla 02.09.2004; Mönnig 1988:282, 299; Ntsimane 2000:22)

Generally tribes maintain friendly relations with neighbours (Mönnig 1988:298). Yet at times the need arises for the settlement of inter-tribal affairs (be they disputes or other matters). In such cases, special intermediaries are elected that may serve between strangers, i.e. across cultural lines. This shows that mediators are not limited to exercising their role and duty in one ethnic group only. Inter-tribal litigations follow the same procedures as those used within a tribe, clan or family (Mönnig 1988:313).

All formal and diplomatic relations between tribes are maintained by an extensive system of appointed intermediaries (*batseta*), which functions on very similar lines to the system of intermediaries which operates in the formal relationships between *kgoros* and between these units and the chief within the tribal organization. (Mönnig 1988:299)

The process of bringing a case to court is "simple and logical," claims Hammond-Tooke. A person who feels his/her rights to have been violated would "report the matter to the sub-headman, or go with this official to the headman of the defendant's ward (if they lived in different wards) to report the matter". As soon as possible a date is agreed upon for the hearing.<sup>311</sup> The defendant and his people are charged to attend, bringing with them any witnesses they might have. The plaintiff's witnesses are also summoned to attend the hearing. (Hammond-Tooke 1993:92; Hunter 1979:415)

The matter is brought forward at the determined time "in the men's meeting place"<sup>312</sup>, a prominent feature of the homestead of the chief or headman ("usually adjacent to the cattle byre and preferably under a large shade tree").<sup>313</sup> The chief or judge, with his counsellors and close relatives sits facing the rest of the people present, all of whom are allowed to participate fully in the proceedings. Women were not permitted to be present unless they were personally involved in the case or were witnesses to the events causing the dispute.<sup>314</sup> Since attending the chief's court is a preferred pastime, many (men) come to attend hearings. The two parties directly involved generally sit in the

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<sup>308</sup> Ntsimane (2000:22) outlines some forms of traditional Zulu mediation. In the case of fighting clansmen, a third party is called in to *lamula* (bring peace through mediation). Once both parties have brought forward their case, the mediator pleads with them to settle their dispute. This ritual pleading is of great significance in the process.

<sup>309</sup> In some cases the mediator bargains for the guilty party (Ralushai 31.08.2004).

<sup>310</sup> Among the Venda, in serious cases a royal messenger is used for negotiating compensation (Ralushai 31.08.2004).

<sup>311</sup> Courts have no fixed sessions, but only meet when a case is to be settled.

<sup>312</sup> "No women attend except those bringing cases and those called as witnesses, but it is remembered that Mancaphayi, mother of Bokleni, late paramount chief of the Nyandeni, was often consulted in intricate cases by the counsellors because she was so shrewd. Women can bring cases in their own name" (Hunter 1979:415).

<sup>313</sup> In the case of the Basuto, "The *lekhotla*, or court, was a semi-circular structure, made of reeds, facing north-east or east, and with its back to the west or south-west, from which quarter comes the prevailing wind. It varied in size according to the importance of the chief. When a case was tried, the chief sat in the centre with his headmen and counsellors on either side, while the public who could not find room in the semicircle occupied the open space in front" (Ellenberger 1992:266). In some cases, ritual association with the ceremonial fire gives the court more authority (Mönnig 1988:314).

<sup>314</sup> For cases involving mainly women, there are, in certain tribes, special women's courts (Schapera 1956:213).

front, towards the middle.<sup>315</sup> In their rear is a semi-circle of people representing the general public.<sup>316</sup> Witnesses are among those seated in the public area. (Hammond-Tooke 1993:92; Ellenberger 1992:266; Hunter 1979:415-416; Magesa 1998:238-239; Krige 1974: 229-230; see also Schapera 1956:214-217)

The process starts with the judge briefly summarising the circumstances surrounding the case. Then the plaintiff is invited to formulate his grievance.<sup>317</sup> (If the individual against whom the crime was committed is no longer alive, his/her relatives or heirs take the deceased's stand (Schapera 1956:218)). "Great latitude" is allowed at this point. According to Hammond-Tooke, the plaintiff may not be interrupted or called to order, and may elaborate his/her point for as long as s/he wishes and with much emotion and dramatic effect. Hunter on the other hand asserts that any member of the court may interrupt at any point with questions. Once the plaintiff is finished with his/her speech, the defendant is called upon to respond, under the same rules. Both parties are then cross-examined, "both by the judge and his assessors and by any of those present". If there are any witnesses they are instructed to offer their contribution.<sup>318</sup> When all those involved have brought their input without disturbance or intimidation, the affair is opened up for general discussion.<sup>319</sup> Even a visitor from another district is at liberty to take part<sup>320</sup>, but most of the questions are asked by a few older men. Again, speakers are granted much leeway "to range widely and probe deeply".<sup>321</sup> The assessors then share their opinions concerning the case, "speaking strictly in ascending order of seniority".<sup>322</sup> The judge finally sums up the evidence as well as the diverse standpoints that have been put forward. If possible, he quotes certain precedents from traditional wisdom to direct the court.<sup>323</sup> Previous cases also determine the verdict. The chief's judgement is

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<sup>315</sup> In the case of the Pondo, the plaintiff and defendant sit down a little apart from the rest of the court. For the initial phase of the hearing, the witnesses are sent out of earshot (Hunter 1979:415). Among the Zulu, the quarrelling parties are seated some distance away from each other, facing the sun (Krige 1974:230).

<sup>316</sup> It is interesting to note at this point what Kgalushi Koka calls the circle structure of conflict resolution in African legal proceedings. The circle structure is opposed to a hierarchy structure, and is more conducive to achieving reconciliation among people. Koka (2003:4) translates terms such as *lekgotla* and *imbizo* as "community parliament", and insists that circle symbolism is to be found in much of African life (e.g. people seated in a circle, headbands, huts, and kraals).

<sup>317</sup> "The plaintiff stands up, uncovers his head out of respect to the court (even a woman uncovers although normally she shows respect by covering her head), unpins or unknots the fastening of the blanket on his shoulder, 'for if he left it fastened the whole case would be "tied up", and he would have bad luck', and states his case" (Hunter 1979:415).

<sup>318</sup> "Witnesses for both sides are called, one being called at a time, that they may not hear each other's evidence" (Hunter 1979:416). If a witness is unable to attend the case, s/he can send someone to narrate her/his statements on her/his behalf (Krige 1974:231).

<sup>319</sup> However, people who say things many resent are shouted down (Krige 1974:231).

<sup>320</sup> When Hunter "inquired whether persons with a case never packed the court with friends to ask the opposition awkward questions, I was told that such a thing had never been known to happen" (Hunter 1979:415).

<sup>321</sup> "The criterion used by the court was the universal one; that of the 'reasonable man'. What the judges did in trying to establish accountability was to compare the behaviour of the defendant against a generalised conception as to how a reasonable father, kinsman, neighbour would have behaved in the particular circumstances of the case – and the defendant, of course, was at pains to convince them that he *had* behaved reasonably" (Hammond-Tooke 1993:93).

<sup>322</sup> Hunter (1979:417) renders a slightly different account of the final stages of the hearing than Hammond-Tooke: "When the chief feels that a case has been sufficiently discussed he announces, or causes an *iphakathi* to announce, that 'We have heard', and the case is closed. The court continues with the next case. When all the cases that are to be tried that day have been heard, the plaintiffs, defendants, and witnesses are ordered to withdraw, and the court discusses each case."

<sup>323</sup> Indeed, customary law has been handed down by tradition. Traditional people believe the law was created when humankind was created, and that it is therefore sacred and inalienable (Mönning 1988:301). Nonetheless, there is no such thing as judgement by default, no clear-cut "law or prescription". Custom demands that all cases must be discussed separately and with care (Mönning 1988:317).

considered to be a reflection of the reasonable views of the majority, and not necessarily his own opinion. In fact, he is not permitted to give a judgement that conflicts with customary law, or against the general opinion of the court. Essentially this reflects a democratic system which attempts to gauge majority opinion.<sup>324</sup> (Hammond-Tooke 1993:93; Magesa 1998:240; Hunter 1979:416; Mönning 1988:287; Ellenberger 1992:266-267; Krige 1974:230). The final decisions of the court are legally binding (Mönning 1988:310). Given all this, traditional law is nonetheless flexible (Hinz 2002:37). Traditional justice systems can be and are adjusted and adapted to new situations – they are not as rigid as one thinks, but capable of flexibility and change (Hinz 2002:38).

According to Hammond-Tooke, the process of reaching a verdict is “sophisticated”. Heated rhetoric and incisive forensic interrogation are not uncommon. The basis of the discussion is eyewitness accounts and material evidence. The “impression made on the court by disputants (as well as knowledge of their characters)” are all considered carefully. From time to time circumstantial evidence is reckoned to be acceptable<sup>325</sup> “but hearsay evidence is treated with caution”<sup>326</sup>. (Hammond-Tooke 1993:93; Hunter 1979:416-417)

What seems to be a common feature in all such proceedings is “a concerted effort”, not only to determine guilt, but also to enable the loser to accept the court’s decision without ill-feeling or resentment. In traditional village societies it was imperative for disputes to be settled cordially, “to prevent the breach in relations from festering and causing disturbance in the future” (Hammond-Tooke 1993:93). Judges and their counsellors exert great effort to help the guilty party to acknowledge that s/he has done a wrong thing and that s/he deserves to be reprimanded for this. Similarly the accuser is encouraged to forgive the injury received. The final speeches of the judges are indeed comparable to sermons “for they are not only concerned that people should behave reasonably, but also that they should behave *generously*. Here law and morality came together” (Hammond-Tooke 1993:93).<sup>327</sup> Ultimately, the task of the courts revolves around questions of correct and honourable behaviour and trustworthiness.<sup>328</sup> Its prime concern is with morality and the overall well-being of the community. (Hammond-Tooke 1993:96; Magesa 1998:214, 238)

In traditional society, regulations and rules employed by the courts are not codified, and are less clearly defined than those in Western societies. Nonetheless, Hammond-Tooke claims it is possible to differentiate between two kinds of rules that roughly correspond with the Western notions of civil law and criminal law (Hammond-Tooke 1993:94; see also Krige 1974:223; Mönning 1988:305; Schapera 1956:204, 208).<sup>329</sup> Civil law concerns “the private rights of people in regard to personal status, property and contracts”<sup>330</sup> and criminal law considers “various actions as offences against the society as

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<sup>324</sup> However, there is always the danger of intimidation. People fear speaking against the will of the chief. Nonetheless, there are many checks on the chief’s power in order to avoid such situations. Ultimately, the community has the desire for the system to function harmoniously (Mönning 1988:287).

<sup>325</sup> For example, “being discovered at night in a woman’s hut” is deemed “*prima facie* evidence of adultery, unless there were other factors” (Hammond-Tooke 1993:93).

<sup>326</sup> “Witnesses take no oath, but are fined by the court if proved to be giving false witness” (Hunter 1979:416). “Tswana and Venda punished flagrant cases of false witnessing” (Hammond-Tooke 1993:93).

<sup>327</sup> “The law demands right and reasonable action: morality asks for right and generous action. A man should not insist on the letter of his rights, and he should be prodigal in meeting his obligations,” insists Gluckman (1963:192), referring to the Barotse of Zambia, who themselves can be deemed a Sotho offshoot.

<sup>328</sup> “Right conduct is relative always to the human situation and morality is oriented not from any absolute standards of honesty or truth but from the social good in each situation. Conduct that promotes smooth relationships, that upholds the social structure, is good; conduct that runs counter to smooth relationships is bad. Courtesy and the respect due to age or seniority are thus of greater importance than truth” (Krige 1976:78).

<sup>329</sup> Hinz (2002:36) would agree that there is a distinction between the two types, but that they are usually treated as one in court settings.

<sup>330</sup> A “well-developed concept of contract” exists among traditional Africans (Hammond-Tooke 1993:96).

a whole" (Hammond-Tooke 1993:94). Included in the list of civil wrongs are illicit sexual relations, theft, damage to property or defamation, among others. Criminal offences comprise homicide, grievous assault<sup>331</sup>, incest, rape, crimes against the chiefdom's authorities<sup>332</sup> and witchcraft or sorcery (Hammond-Tooke 1993:96; Krige 1974:224, 231). Civil law seeks to rectify the situation through compensation, such as a fine or restitution. Criminal transgressions are dealt with by punishment of the offender(s) as well as forms of reparation (Hammond-Tooke 1993:94; Ellenberger 1992:267).

In traditional courts the "accent is always on arbitration rather than on punishment" (Mönnig 1988:308; see also Hinz 2002:36). Nevertheless, courts may impose punishment or exact compensation (Mönnig 1988:304).<sup>333</sup> Sentences imposed are, however, usually mild (Ellenberger 1992:267). Frequently punishment means the infliction of similar injury on the perpetrator (Mönnig 1988:324). There is no punishment by imprisonment (Mönnig 1988:307). Reprimand is the lightest form of punishment (Magesa 1998:214). Among the Tswana and North Sotho in particular corporal punishment is used quite frequently (Hammond-Tooke 1993:96; Mönnig 1988:305). In severe cases, punishment involves death, lashing, deportation or banishment. The death-penalty was, however, seldom employed in traditional society.<sup>334</sup> Anyone who causes the death of another person has to pay ten head of cattle to the relatives of the deceased "to dry their tears" – apart from any other punishment by the court (Ellenberger 1992:270).<sup>335</sup>

In cases where material compensation must be made, it is paid to the plaintiff as well as to the court, and usually in form of an animal, food or beer (Mönnig 1988:305; Magesa 1998:214). It is seen as both remuneration (for the court officers) and as a fine or punishment (Mönnig 1988:306). Every person wronged has to be "compensated according to the nature and extent of the injury sustained" (Ellenberger 1992:269). The principle of "collective responsibility" plays a large part in traditional legal practice. If the offender is unable to make the damage payment, his/her relatives and kin are made

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<sup>331</sup> Assaults involving maiming or serious injury also came before the chief's court. Among Nguni, Tsonga and Tswana the usual penalty was a fine (of which some part might be passed on to the family) while among Venda the fine was a beast killed and eaten by the court, but among both South Sotho and North Sotho such assault was treated more as a civil offence. The reason for these differences is unclear. (Hammond-Tooke 1993:96)

<sup>332</sup> Disobedience of any order given by the chief was punished by a fine and, in serious cases of extreme insubordination, resulted in the culprit being 'eaten up', i.e. having all or most of his stock seized. Rebellion against the chief was another matter, and was regarded as one of the greatest crimes that could be committed. The offender was killed, often secretly, and his property confiscated: he had threatened the very basis of society. (Hammond-Tooke 1993:96)

<sup>333</sup> According to Krige (1976:77) "arbitration and compromise play an important role, both judicially and extra-judicially. The genius of the legal system even in its most formal aspects is the skilful use of the restitutive sanction, in its spiritual rather than its material sense."

<sup>334</sup> Yet "for all that, persons who incurred the hatred of the chief were very liable to meet with fatal accidents when they took their walks abroad" (Ellenberger 1992:267).

<sup>335</sup> "As far as homicide was concerned there were some differences between the various groups. Among the Nguni any injury to the person of any member of a chiefdom, whether male or female, was looked upon as an injury to the chief to whom, and to whom alone, reparation was due. This meant that no reparation or damages could be claimed by the bereaved family; it was the chief who had been wronged, and only he should be compensated, although he could, if he so wished, pass on a portion of the fine to them. As Schapera puts it: '... the Chief in such cases acts in his official position as head of the tribe. Homicides and assault are therefore not wrongs against him as a private person, but wrongs against the tribe of which he is the public representative.' A homicide was punished by seizure of all the culprit's property. The Venda handled homicide in much the same way as the Nguni, but the North Sotho and Tsonga insisted that the relatives of the executed murderer pay cattle to the victim's family so that they might acquire a woman to raise up seed for their dead kinsman" (Hammond-Tooke 1993:96). Similarly, Hunter (1979:417) insists that in cases of murder, assault, witchcraft and slander "the chief was held to be harmed through the death or injury of his subject." Therefore fine payment went to the chief, not to the injured party or the relatives (Hunter 1979:418).

responsible for it (Schapera 1956:219). In certain cases involving young men, lashing can be seen as an alternative to a fine or compensation payment (Mönnig 1988:307).

When dealing with sentences, the principle of revenge is not acknowledged.<sup>336</sup> Some of the TRC proceedings illustrated this African ethos. Victims who testified at the TRC seldom wanted revenge.<sup>337</sup> Rather, their needs revolved around restoration, healing and closure of the painful past. When asked what they expected to gain from the TRC process, they “produced a humble list of needs”, such as information on “what had happened to them or their loved ones, and why”, the return of confiscated personal possessions, the burial of “mortal remains” of relatives who had been killed, gravestones, medical care or housing (Meiring 1999:26).

Finally, in traditional African legal processes, the character of a wrongdoer is important for the verdict. This is in line with the principles of African traditional ethics, which may be considered a type of character ethics. If the offender “readily admits his offence, he may be dealt with lightly, and sometimes even excused altogether; whereas if he is insolent or obstreperous, ... he will be penalized more severely than usual” (Schapera 1956:218). First-time offenders are less strictly punished than habitual offenders. Moreover, a perpetrator may show regret by sacrificing a sheep, which is also seen as proof of the absence of malicious intent and the willingness to make amends (Ellenberger 1992:269). Indeed, the acceptance of wrong-doing is considered to be a form of apology. The community generally approves of a person who apologises, as well as of one who accepts an apology (Magesa 1998:214).

Traditional legal procedures as described above are practised to varying degrees in African societies. Lest one be tempted to think that such judicial processes are only used in remote rural areas, “untainted” by modern influences, I would like to note that even in South African urban areas – e.g. in townships and informal settlements – informal court proceedings draw heavily from the heritage of African traditional legal processes. Such informal court proceedings occur under the leadership of chiefs, and are often called “informal people’s court meetings”. Here, the aggrieved party and the accused meet. Many representatives from the broader community also attend the event. The matter is discussed at length, and the elders of the community contribute extensively to the verbal struggle. Often the accused are taken to a separate room and are given thrashings, while their penalty is discussed. Some argue that the use of force on the accused is to coerce them to accept guilt. It is normal for guilt to be confessed (only) after physical punishment has been extended; confession without pain is considered a sign of weakness. Frequently the penalty in civil dispute cases takes the form of compensation payments or the promise of improved behaviour. A case can be made for the effectiveness of informal extra-judiciary court proceedings under the control of tribal authorities in combating crime. (Kistner 08.10.2003)

Besides being used in townships and other secular settings, traditional law also influences African Initiated Churches. M.L. Daneel has studied some forms of judicial praxis of AICs in South Africa. Not surprisingly, AICs’ legal procedures are closely akin to the indigenous court procedures practised by traditional communities, outlined above. Indeed, Daneel (2000:242-3) has found that judicial practices are “based on emotionally assailable, traditionally familiar proceedings”.

### *Palaver meetings*

Kasonga wa Kasonga (1994) discusses another legal and ritual process which is employed in many parts of Africa to restore broken relationships and bring about reconciliation, viz.

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<sup>336</sup> However, expression of anger at witnessing a crime being committed is accepted (for example, if someone finds someone else committing rape, he may thrash him) (Mönnig 1988:323).

<sup>337</sup> Kistner (1999:42) highlights Nelson Mandela’s endeavour to link up with the age-old tradition of reconciliation instead of retribution in the 1990s.

the African palaver. Kasonga (1994:55) asserts, African palaver "is a privileged form of speech", "not uttered in a vacuum, but rather as an expression of specific life issues. It is a communal expressive language concerning itself with the search for solutions to actual life situations."

Being more than a court, the palaver, in its most popular form, functions as a way of resolving social conflicts and tensions and, for that reason, embodies reconciliatory and healing powers. It creates harmony when human relationships are contradictory to the laws of Life and, therefore, renews and consolidates the bonds between individuals. ... The palaver conscientizes the participants in response to a threat (experienced illness, theft, adultery or any transgression of social mores) and then moves the community toward a common goal such as reconciliation, liberation, and healing. (Kasonga 1994:55)

Palaver "provides a means for the group to teach and search, within the community, for new human values such as love, founded on the attitude of acceptance" (Kasonga 1994:55). Furthermore, Kasonga argues, palaver can be therapeutic for those involved because it attempts to heal wounded individuals and re-forged human relationships (:61-63). In this, it is very similar to the other forms of traditional legal practice illustrated above.

Kasonga (1994:55-56) mentions six "determinative factors" for a palaver to be held. (1) A crisis must exist. (2) Persons involved in the crisis must want a solution. (3) The relevant ancestors' presence must be invoked. (4) Members must belong to a homogeneous group (e.g. one clan or village) "in which everyone shares the same world view" and whose understanding is embodied in a common language. (5) At least one acknowledged person must play the role of the facilitator and leader in the process. (6) The audience must play the role of witness.

Five moments occur during a palaver process. The first entails "making an oath of ancestral fidelity", and usually includes inviting the relevant ancestors to be present and guide the process with their blessing. The second is "naming the crisis", i.e. divulging what the problem is. The third moment is that of dialogue and discussion, and involves a great deal of narrative interplay. Fourth is the phase of

denouement: This step marks the end of the dialogue but it is not the conclusion of the palaver. Here, it is made clear, in summary fashion, what the lesson or outcome of the process is and this outcome in fact is the view shared by all. It brings about joy and celebration through a release of tension. (Kasonga 1994:56)

The final phase of a successful palaver is celebration, usually performed in form of a communal meal, with much singing and dancing (Kasonga 1994:56). In view of these phases it becomes clear that close parallels can be drawn between African palaver and certain indigenous judicial practices described above.

### ***Evaluation of African traditional legal procedures***

Before I highlight the positive qualities of African traditional legal practice, I would like to mention what I consider needs to be treated with caution. Possibly my most serious critique against indigenous judicial custom is that it does not display gender equality.<sup>338</sup> In the court system, women are not considered legally mature. This means that they are dependent upon a willing male to make their case for them. If they are granted compensation for a wrong committed against them, it is paid to their male guardians (Mönnig 1988:320). Moreover, injury to property, defamation and seduction are seen as similar offences. In other words, "damage" done to property, a name, and a girl or woman are all deemed equally serious, which puts female persons on the same legal footing as property and a name (Mönnig 1988:324). In cases of rape, much scepticism usually exists as to whether it can really happen. Women who are raped are frequently

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<sup>338</sup> See Oduyoye (1995:137), Comaroffs (1991:152ff).

believed to have “encouraged” it.<sup>339</sup> As a result, rape is not easily tried as an offence, and if it is, men are given the benefit of the doubt (Mönnig 1988:326). All these cases indicate that women occupy a rather vulnerable position when it comes to legal custom. They are legally less powerful than men, and therefore are in greater danger of being exploited or ill-treated.

Another criticism I wage against the traditional legal system is its insistence on respect for seniors. Although this can also be seen as a strength, it has its weaknesses. In any situation where a person must be respected on account of his rank or seniority, the danger of power abuse arises. Senior counsellors presiding at court who are of malicious intent have a lot of power at their disposal to act out their malice. This puts persons on the receiving end of the verdict in a vulnerable position.

A further qualm I have with traditional legal practice is that it does not shy away from corporal punishment, lashing being the most common form. As a product of my age and society, I have become increasingly sceptical of methods of chastisement that involve physical pain. I am of the opinion that inflicting physical hurt only causes resentment in the one being hurt, and seldom if ever leads to a sense of authentic contrition or change of behaviour. Also, besides possible gratification of a need for revenge, it does not benefit anyone. It only creates more of a distance between the parties involved.

Finally, I find it problematic that legal processes are only geared to function in homogeneous groups “in which everyone shares the same world view” (Kasonga 1994:56).<sup>340</sup> This is not a weakness of the system *per se*, but it can indeed be interpreted as a potential weakness in relation to its applicability on a national level in South Africa. The simple fact is that South Africans do not all share the same world view, they do not all speak the same language, nor do they all belong to the same ethnic group. African legal practice may struggle to be adjusted to a context of cultural diversity, a context in which sameness of custom may not be pre-supposed.

Nevertheless, regardless of the drawbacks that may be identified, I argue that there are many features of the African legal system that are admirable and indeed advantageous for a social reconciliation process. Firstly, it emphasises the responsibility of the group rather than (only) the individual. In South Africa after apartheid we have a situation where too few of those guilty of injustice consider themselves culpable or even responsible. Many South Africans benefited from apartheid and ought therefore to acknowledge their guilt through participating in an offence against their fellow citizens. Yet they do not, because they do not foster a community-oriented view of reality. Under such circumstances an emphasis on community responsibility may help those thinking purely in individualistic terms to come to a realisation of their own need for involvement in reparation and reconciliation endeavours. It may dissolve rhetoric such as “It’s none of my business” or “It’s not my problem”, and encourage a more participatory and active approach.

As I have already shown, memory and narrative are of great importance for reconciliation (see section 1.1). I consider it one of the greatest strengths of the African traditional legal system that it places great value on story-telling. People involved in the case are invited to speak at length about their experiences. They are given much freedom to narrate the events as they perceived them. They are allowed to show emotion. On the other hand, people are also given the opportunity (and are expected) to listen. As much as their stories are heard, they are compelled to hear the stories of the “other” side. Perhaps the most significant reason why reconciliation in South Africa is so arduous is because South Africans have not come together enough to tell their stories, and to listen to those of others. Many South Africans do not know who “the others” really are, and

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<sup>339</sup> Customarily women must make a show of resistance when invited to have sex.

<sup>340</sup> Exclusivism of tribal rituals is “part of the human problem” of fascism (Hongoze 12.01.2004).



they base their perceptions on assumptions and stereotypes rather than on real encounters. In an African traditional setting, conflicting parties are called to tell and hear, i.e. to communicate authentically. Through communication, they get to know each other – through direct encounter. Such encounter is the foundation for the building of relationships, which in turn is a requirement for social reconciliation to occur.

African traditional legal processes are by nature participatory. This is an advantage since their very focus is on the building-up and restoring of relationships. Moreover, decisions are not made unilaterally, but by groups of people who are trusted and who bring continuity of experience. By stressing arbitration and interactive co-operation, an amicable environment is created, and the possible harshness and anonymity of Western courts avoided. People – even the defendants – feel more “at home” during African indigenous court sessions than in Western or other judicial contexts.

Mediation aims at finding satisfactory compromise, and settling the quarrel as good-naturedly as possible.<sup>341</sup> The court’s imperative is for disputes to be settled cordially, “to prevent the breach in relations from festering and causing disturbance in the future” (Hammond-Tooke 1993:93). As demonstrated continually, the main objective of the African justice system is to restore relationships and build community. Much effort is made to enable friendly relations, and prevent people from parting on hostile terms. Obviously, this is a boon for reconciliation endeavours.

Judges and their assistants try hard to help the guilty party acknowledge guilt and accept blame. Similarly the accuser is encouraged to forgive the injury suffered. Acknowledgement of guilt and forgiveness of injury are possibly the most important moments in a process of reconciliation between two parties (as will be discussed more comprehensively in section 3.3). For this reason, a system that promotes these is sure to be beneficial for reconciliation.

Most would agree that revenge and fear of retribution place great restraint on reconciliation processes. Therefore traditional courts’ accent “on arbitration rather than on punishment” (Mönnig 1988:308), on settling a matter without violence or malice, is beneficial. Moreover, the fact that the principle of revenge is not acknowledged in traditional settings may also be an advantage.

I consider it a strength of the traditional African legal system that it places much value on a person’s character. The character and behaviour of a wrongdoer are important for the verdict, as are the character and behaviour of the plaintiff. This shows that law is not divorced from morality. Judicial institutions are concerned with *people*, and not primarily with codes and norms.<sup>342</sup> The victim is deemed more important than the court’s procedure (Hinz 2002:36). *Who people are* is more important than *what they have done*, implying a deeper, more holistic understanding of a person and his/her deeds. Such a view of a legal person allows for openness with respect to a person’s ability to change and improve. It allows for spontaneity and generosity instead of rigid and strict adherence to an abstract principle. Ultimately legal processes aim at building character, instead of breaking it down. They are concerned with the moral health of society. Connected to this is the advantageous fact that traditional law is flexible; it can be and is adjusted to new

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<sup>341</sup> It must be noted, however, that some contest the view that conflict is always harmful and must be avoided at all costs. Certain management scholars, for example, do not necessarily agree that compromise is always the best option in the case of conflict. There is the view that “a moderate level of conflict” can be beneficial for a community, because it can be an “instrument of organizational innovation and change”, i.e. it can optimise “organizational performance” (Stoner 1982:408; see also Stoner and Freeman 1989:391-2; Robbins 1991:513-4).

<sup>342</sup> This resembles the “ethics of care” approach elaborated by psychological analyst Carol Gilligan (1982; see also Noddings 1984). The “ethics of care” perspective offers an alternative to the “ethics of justice” approach, more commonly employed in modern Western settings. Indeed, Gilligan’s “care” principle places great value on the primacy of relationships, the nurture and protection of relationships, on communication, contextuality, narrative and interdependence. The “justice” ethic is more concerned with individual rights, formal procedure and abstract principles.

situations and is not entirely rigid but capable of adaptation and change (Hinz 2002:38). Moreover, it deals with conflict locally, at grass-roots level. It stresses the importance of conducting proceedings in the vernacular, or at least in a language that is understood by all participants (Hinz 2002:37), thereby fostering inclusiveness rather than alienation.

The final boon I want to mention is that traditional legal procedures usually end in celebration, particularly those at the informal family level. Habitually, a goat or sheep is slaughtered as a sign of celebration that the rift has been healed, the relationship restored and harmony re-established. By sharing a meal together, those involved in the dispute show that they have buried the hatchet and that their life can now continue as before – without resentment, suspicion or enmity. Celebration as an outward sign of the restoration of relations is a good addition to a reconciliation process. It builds and fortifies a sense of community and belonging among people.

Given all the above advantages, it is safe to say that significant aspects of African traditional legal practice are indeed a positive resource for reconciliation. While it ought not to be applied without reservation, since some elements embodied in it are subject to critique, the fact remains that it offers a plethora of profitable qualities and outcomes which may enhance a reconciliation process in and for South Africa.

## 2.4 Rituals of reconciliation

“To speak of law and reconciliation in Africa is to speak of morality and ritual at the same time,” insists Magesa (1998:237). For this reason it is apt, after having considered African *legal* practices, to move to an exploration of African *ritual* practices that promote reconciliation. As suggested by Magesa, the line between the two (law and ritual) is not hard and fast. Legal practices may certainly be deemed ritual in nature, while rituals sometimes have legal implications, and may occur in judicial contexts.

Volkan (1972:87) explains the basic need for rituals of reconciliation:

Because the human mind is at least partly responsible for creating enemies, humankind must develop ways to deal with them – on a spectrum from adaptive-peaceful to maladaptive-destructive. One way to cope is to create rituals between ethnic groups or the related large groups.

Reconciliation in South Africa can be seen as a political matter. Yet “political processes are not rational exercises” (Volkan 1972:90). For people to reconcile authentically, they need to experience reconciliation. Rational cognitive processes alone do not allow for such experience. Rituals however do. Through ritual, reconciliation may attain a depth and meaning that would not be gained if it were a mere rational exercise. It is for this reason that it is necessary to tap into the ritual resources the African tradition has to offer.

In an investigation of reconciliation rites in African communities, Magesa (1998:208) has identified that reconciliation is a widespread tacit assumption of most divination procedures. Indeed, “many oracles specifically insist on ... performance of reconciliation rites”. For many communities in Africa, ceremonies or rituals of reconciliation are common practice for the orderly running of affairs. They are employed in a plethora of situations, most frequently for the re-establishment of broken relationships. Essentially, reconciliation rituals are a means to create balance when there has been imbalance in society, to harmonise what has been assaulted by disruption. Social enmity and hostility, strife and quarrelling cause imbalance and disharmony, and need to be counteracted by ritual.

In the following pages I therefore examine rituals of reconciliation as practised in African communities. In 2.4.1 I simply offer brief descriptions of a number of such rituals, without elaborating on them much. It is not my aim in this section to interpret or analyse the rituals, but merely to provide a sample which illustrates, in rough strokes, the

richness of this resource in African tradition. Section 2.4.2 will highlight some of the theoretical considerations connected with ritual scholarship. It will provide some tools for the interpretation of rituals, and outline the methodologies employed in ritual studies. In 2.4.3, I will attempt to utilise the tools elucidated in 2.4.2 for an investigation and analysis of a particular ritual of reconciliation, viz. the *Cleansing the chest of grudges* ritual.

#### 2.4.1 Brief survey of rituals, ceremonies and rites of reconciliation

In what follows, I provide a number of illustrations of rituals that are practiced in various African contexts. Although they are not necessarily called that in their vernacular, I consider them all to be rituals of reconciliation, since they all aim to make peace and restore the relationship between alienated parties.<sup>343</sup> I frequently quote scholars word for word, since I fear that by paraphrasing the practices they describe and using my own words, I risk compromising or distorting the picture others wish to paint. By using the words of actual practitioners of the rituals, or of ethnographers and ritual scholars, I avoid projecting my own (possibly false or biased) interpretations onto the renditions. First, I will outline a handful of rituals that stem from South Africa. Then I shall mention a few rituals used by Africans outside of South Africa. Finally I will discuss some *types* of ritual practised in Africa that are more indirectly related to reconciliation processes, but may nevertheless be considered reconciliatory in purpose.

##### *Ukuthelalana amanzi*

According to Berglund (1976:376-384), *ukuthelalana amanzi*, which means “to wash each other’s hands”, is one of the main Zulu traditional rituals of reconciliation. Buti Tlhagale depicts it thus:

When kinsmen are at loggerheads, a third party is called in to mediate. He or she invites them to cool the heat of anger or hatred. The divided two would be seated opposite each other. Water mixed with ash and traditional medicine would be given to each person to wash his hands. Each would then be given a chance to air their complaints or concerns. The mediator summarizes the statements of each person and asks them whether they are willing to forgive and forget. Each then takes a mouthful of water mixed with ash and spits it over his left shoulder. Thereafter the two drink beer from the same calabash. This is the communion of purification. Meat or beer is used. Such a ritual can be adapted and limited to the washing of hands. The symbolic cooling effect of water points to a spiritual disposition of reconciliation. (Tlhagale 2003)

Ntsimane’s version of the same ritual is very similar. He adds that the disputing “brothers” sit opposite one another in the sight of “the father”, i.e. he casts it purely as a family affair between male antagonists. When the brothers state their case they speak “what is in their hearts”. Ntsimane insists that the actions of speaking out, of washing and of sharing of food are essential elements in Zulu reconciliation processes (Ntsimane 2000:23). If one of the contenders refuses to reconcile, the father, who acts as the mediator, goes to consult the ancestors. Since the refuser may suffer misfortune if he persists with his stubbornness, he is sometimes put under pressure to reconcile with his brother. It is frequently the case that persons who refuse to be reconciled to their kin, especially under ritual circumstances, are ostracised by the community, and may even be considered to have a bitter heart through witchcraft<sup>344</sup> (Ntsimane 2000:24).

It seems likely that this ritual is used in conjunction with a more lengthy process of mediation, as discussed in the previous section on African traditional legal procedures

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<sup>343</sup> See for example Hay (1998:136), who shows how so-called “cleansing rituals” operate as rituals of reconciliation.

<sup>344</sup> Ntsimane here illustrates his claim by citing a Xhosa novel (*Ityala Lamawele* by S.E.K. Mqhayi) in which a man who refused to be reconciled to his twin brother was ostracised and accused of being bewitched.

(i.e. 2.3). It may be the culmination of proceedings conducted during a “family court” session. As such, it may be seen as an augmentation or proper completion of the judicial process. Notably, the key symbol used in this ritual is water, a known agent of ritual cleansing and cooling.

*Clasping hands with chyme (mosoang)*

Tlhagale (2003) describes this ritual in the following manner:

Two enemies clasp hands with chyme as a sign of reconciliation. Chyme<sup>345</sup> is used because it has the same cooling effect as water. After this ceremony of reconciliation, all eat together including the witnesses. This is ... the communion of purification and reconciliation. It is not always possible to kill an animal for the purpose of a reconciliation ceremony; a substitute with the same cooling properties as chyme may be used (water, ash, urine etc.).

Ellenberger (1992:258) offers a slightly more elaborate description of the same ritual:

On the reconciliation of two enemies, especially two chiefs, the sacrifice of a white ox was the correct thing, its colour being emblematic of the state of their hearts. When the animal was killed and opened, each one thrust his hand into the stomach and took out a handful of mosoang, then, seizing the right arm of the other near the elbow, slid his hand gently down the arm to the hand, and, grasping it firmly, said: “Re tsuarane matsoho ka mosoang” (“We have clasped hands with mosoang”). This was the binding ceremony in the act of reconciliation, and afterwards the flesh of the ox was eaten by all who had witnessed it.

*Mosoang* is a potent ritual symbol. It has the effect of purifying or “cooling” that which is considered unclean or dangerous. It may be used for a number of other rituals that are not related to reconciliation. For example,

On the occasion of two individuals contracting a close friendship, an ox was killed, and they rubbed each other’s bodies with mosoang. This was equivalent to an oath. ... It is curious to note the importance given to this mosoang in these sacrificial rites. ... At the rite of circumcision they used it as soap for the head and hands, as well as for a mass of other purposes. They also used it to smear the floors of their dwellings, and places where they stored grain. (Ellenberger 1992:258)

*The rite of “TSU”*

This is a Tsonga reconciliation ritual, the central element of which is the act of spitting.

In preparing for the rite, a herb called *mudabomu* (grass eaten by cattle) is poured into a broken shell of a fruit (*sala*). This shell is also used for drinking water. The divided brothers sit on the bare ground in the village square. The offender sips the medicine and spits it out making the sound of “tsu” and says: “This is our imprecation. We have pronounced it because our hearts were sore. Today it must come to an end. It is right that we make peace”. The other repeats the same rite and says: “I was angry but let us make peace and eat from the same spoon and drink out of the same pot and be friends again”. He breaks the shell and they then drink beer together. This reconciliation has taken place under the auspices of the ancestors. (Tlhagale 2003)

Ethnographer Hammond-Tooke (1993:162) offers a more detailed account of the ritual, naming it “The Tsonga Rite of Kin Reconciliation”.

When two brothers quarrel, when one has sworn that he will never see the other again, when there is disunion between their kraals, they may be brought to the *hahla madjieta*, not only by the fact that one of them must sacrifice for the other,

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<sup>345</sup> Chyme is the yellowish fluid found in a slaughtered animal’s stomach, similar to bile.

but simply by the advice of the old men of the family. These old men will say to the divided brothers: 'Our gods will punish you if you do not stop quarrelling! They do not like you to curse each other, being brothers. You must be reconciled to each other. Hahletelanan madjieta, viz, Perform for each other the sacrifice for imprecation'. The two brothers decide to follow the advice. The one who pronounced the imprecation prepares a decoction of a special herb called mudahomu, a word which means the grass which the ox eats, because cattle are fond of it. He pours it into a shikamba shansala, that is to say into a broken shell of a fruit called sala (*Strychnos*), as big as a large orange, and which is frequently used as a drinking vessel. Everybody meets on the hubo, the square of the village, and the two enemies sit in the midst, on the bare ground, and not on a mat. The offender lifts the shell to his lips, takes a sip of the decoction in his mouth, spits it out, making the noise of tsu. This tsu is the sacramental syllable by means of which the Ba-Ronga call their gods to the sacrifice. However, he does not pray to the spirits as is done in regular offerings. He only says: "This is our imprecation! We have pronounced it because our hearts were sore. Today it must come to an end. It is right that we make peace." The other brother, the offended one, then takes the shell in his hand, and having gone through the same rite of the tsu says: "I was justly angry because he offended me. I have been irritated myself also. But let it be ended today; let us eat out of the same spoon and drink out of the same pot and be friends again". Then he breaks the shell... and they drink beer together. In this case a true sacrifice has been performed and the act of reconciliation bears a strong religious character. The gods have been more or less summoned as witnesses, and the enemies have become friends again because they feared to be punished by the spirits of their ancestors. But should a man pronounce an imprecation against a stranger, viz, against a man who has not the same ancestors, no such reconciliation would be possible. A man's gods have no reason whatever to interfere with people belonging to another family. The religion of the Ba-Ronga is strictly a family affair. The jurisdiction of the gods does not extend further than their direct descendants ... and the moral influence is limited, therefore, to the narrow sphere of the family. (Hammond-Tooke 1993:164, citing Junod 1910:179-82)

Hammond-Tooke claims that not only the Tsonga practise such ceremonies. Rites involving confession of anger accompanied by a ritual spitting are found also among the Nguni, Sotho and Venda. In the case of all four ethnic groups, spitting is a way of "symbolising the expulsion of negative and disruptive emotions preparatory to approaching the gods".<sup>346</sup> Moreover, for the ritual to be effective, a humble and contrite heart is required (Hammond-Tooke 1993:158).

#### *Purification by fire*

Rituals of purification by fire are used when someone has been polluted, and needs to be cleansed from this defilement. For example, walking over a grave causes defilement. Purification can be achieved "by the ritual of singeing the feet of the ritually defiled person in the flame. This symbolism lends itself to being applied in similar cases of ritual defilement" (Thagale 2003). It is interesting that Thagale and others are comfortable categorising fire purification as a form of reconciliation ritual. This is so because a state

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<sup>346</sup> Among the Venda, ritual spitting is also common. When there is social strife, the clan's priest has to consult the ancestors to scold them and ask for counsel. The priest kneels by a small calabash filled with water, drinks and spits it out, reciting names of remembered ancestors, asking them, "where are you in this struggle? What have we done? Why can't we have peace?" (Ralushai 31.08.2004). The Herero of Namibia also use ritual spitting for reconciliation purposes (Wienecke 18.02.2004).

of disruption, enmity or social disharmony is in many communities seen as a state of pollution.

*Cleansing the chest of grudges*

In a paper entitled “Conflict Management and Settlement of Disputes: an Afrocentric Perspective”, presented at the Southern African Inter-Faith Peace Conference in Johannesburg in 2003, Kgalushi Koka elaborates an interesting indigenous ritual. It is a ritual ceremony for the settlement of disputes between two hostile parties, known as *Cleansing the chest of grudges (Ukukhumbelana Umlotha /Tlhapiso ya Dikgaba)*. Utilising many quotations from Koka (2003:6-8), I render a depiction of it here.

The ritual is performed outside the homestead of the persons involved, in the open. “This is to signify that the conflict or dispute is not accepted or desired within the community – as it disturbs the communal or family harmony”. It is, more specifically, conducted at a place “where ashes and dirt from the household is often poured out (or dumped) when cleaning – as symbol that the conflict is turned into ASH – which is sign (sic) the kinetic energy of the wood (energy within the conflicting persons is now burnt to nothingness)”. “Long before the gathering of the people and the starting of the Cleansing and Reconciliation Ceremony (sic). The place where the event is to be conducted, is sanctified by the presiding Elders” wearing headbands that signify wisdom. These elders say silent prayers to the Supreme God through the ancestors. They sprinkle the area with “holy” water, which signifies a purification act. The elders seated in a circle prepare themselves “to witness the case”. Koka highlights the importance of circle symbolism in this regard. The warring parties are brought in front of the elders to state their cases respectively. They are advised to be honest and open “so that the Ancestors, who are forever present, can reverse the curse that caused the conflict”. The contenders are lead by the elders to a mutual confession of guilt or profession of innocence. They are encouraged to express their hope for prospective peace among one another. Then the parties are asked to shake hands and utter forgiveness. “This opens the way for reconciliation. It must be preceded by remorse, desire for forgiveness and preparedness to reconcile.”

The shaking of hands signifies that the conflicting parties are now fused into ‘ONENESS’ – which is the symbol of return ... from ‘Separateness’ to ‘Communal’ state of life. It is the expression of Humanness (uBuntu) that cements all fabrics of humanity together: individual, families, communities. Clans and nations (sic). It is, also, the seal of peace and love.

Water is brought in a calabash “as a symbol of purification and cleansing”. “ASH is added to the water to ‘kill’ the evil spirit and curse.” The parties are asked to lick ash from each other’s right hand and spit it to the ground – “This is the emptying of bad feelings and evil spirits from their body and mind. It is the throwing out of dirt and turning it into ASH (Nothingness).” Then they wash their hands in sanctified water “as an act of cleansing themselves”. It is believed that “once the spitting, the Infinite Spiritual Awareness, the Infinite Spirit of God (sic). Will come back in the lives of the affected person – who were (sic) blind of the divine virtues living together”. The parties shake hands again “to cheer and jubilant ululation of the Elders and the on-lookers who came to witness the Ritual of Reconciliation on behalf of the community”. The warring parties are now accepted back into the community “like the ‘Born-again’ members of the community”.

Celebrated by African spiritualists, this ritual is “an Afrikan (sic) way of dealing with disputes – with intention to: effect reconciliation with oneself, ... with the other warring party, ... with the community, with God – The Creator, ... with the Ancestors.” Koka ventures to suggest that this kind of ritual could also be done on a national level with leaders or significant people present (2003:8). Furthermore, he postulates its potential significance for the Christian community, more particularly for Ash Wednesday

celebrations. Although Koka mentions these bold possibilities, he neglects to analyse and investigate them further. Exploring ways in which the *Ukukhumelana Umlotba* ritual can be appropriated and utilised with integrity and thoughtfulness remains a task yet to be accomplished. (Indeed, it is a task to which I turn my attention in section 2.4.3, and, later, in sections 5.3 and 5.4.)

It must be noted that, being used in Southern African contexts, this ritual incorporates within it a number of elements from other rituals already mentioned. One might indeed suspect that *Cleansing the chest* is a ritual which has incorporated aspects of a number of indigenous practices in one. Firstly, it makes use of water with which the involved persons wash their hands. This strongly suggests a connection with the ritual of *Ukuthelelana amanzi*. Secondly, there is a moment of ritual spitting, which reminds one of the rite of 'TSU'. Thirdly, the element of shaking hands points to of the ritual of *Clasping hands with chyme (mosoang)*. Finally, in terms of its emphasis on sitting together in a circle and talking the matter through at length, *Cleansing the chest* is similar to the *Ukuthelelana amanzi*, TSU and *Mosoang* rituals which all have a similar element of narration and verbal interaction. In fact, the stress on narration and discussion also suggests strong ties with traditional judicial practices, including the palaver (divulged in section 2.3). The presence and guiding authority of a council of elders similarly alludes to traditional legal procedure.

#### *Reconciliation in Zimbabwe*

Zimbabwean communities also use a ritual called *Ukukhumelana Umlotba*. Yet this ritual differs from the one described above.

In Sindebele, when two people quarrel one may want to apologise. He goes to the relative of the other and relates the problem, and requests the relative to mediate. A sangoma is sought to bring herbs for this coming together. The herbs, rapoko, ash and blood from the toe of a chicken, are cooked to make porridge. With one inside the gate, the other outside, the porridge is then poured on broken ground. The sangoma stands in the centre separating the two antagonists, while the two draw near and eat the porridge with the tips of their fingers. They shake hands and the sangoma takes the other muti i.e. the mixture of herbs, rapoko, ash and uncooked chicken blood and sprinkles it on them while they are shaking hands. They say to each other our enmity ends today. The sangoma breaks the gourd and goes back to his home without uttering a word to them. (Reconciliation Rituals 2003)

The fact that this depiction does not correspond with the depiction rendered by Koka (above) indicates that different practices are associated with the same name.<sup>347</sup>

Besides having their own version of *Ukukhumelana Umlotba*, Zimbabweans also practice a ritual of reconciliation called *Ukugezisana*. Like *Ukuthelelana amanzi*, this ritual involves the action of "washing each other". It is used when two people who have quarrelled want to mend the breach and make peace with each other.

The one who wants to apologise goes to an elder and asks the elder to go and seek forgiveness on his behalf. If the other accepts, the one seeking forgiveness brings a hen and they come together to the mediator. One holds the feet, while the other holds the head. The mediator takes a knife and cuts the throat of the hen and sprinkles blood on them. The other blood is put in a container of water, then the two wash their hands in it, shake hands and start talking to each other. The mediator takes the meat. The anger/hatred ends there although the injured party may ask for payment. (Reconciliation Rituals 2003)

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<sup>347</sup> In subsequent chapters of this study, my particular interest will be to deliberate on the version of *Ukukhumelana Umlotba* that is described by Koka. In choosing one version of *Ukukhumelana Umlotba* as the object of my investigations, I do not deny that other African communities may mean something different when using the name *Ukukhumelana Umlotba* for a ritual.

### *Reconciliation among the Herero*

Werner Wienecke is a former missionary to the Herero people of Namibia, and a scholar of African theology and anthropology. In an interview with him in February 2004 I asked him about reconciliation practices among the Herero. Wienecke asserts that whenever there is a possible familiar relationship between people (even strangers), reconciliation has to happen, in order to undo possible harm that has been done in the past, whether inadvertently or not.<sup>348</sup> Such “harm” may be seen to be ranging from derision or scorn spoken out against a person or group to theft, fraud or murder and other physical injury. When people realise that they are related – even if it is a remote kinship relation – they must cleanse the past which may possibly be soiled with unwholesome interaction or rhetoric, or even with violence. Reconciliation means cleansing, and cleansing has to do with the ancestors.

According to Wienecke’s observations, reconciliation between kinspeople usually takes on the form of a simple ritual. It involves both parties taking a mouthful of water and spitting it out in each other’s presence. (As has been shown, spitting is also part of the *Rite of “TSU”* and *Cleansing the chest of grudges*.) This is a cleansing ritual which seeks to cleanse all that has been said in derision or as an insult about or to the other and his/her ancestors.

Sacrifice at the ancestral fire is needed when a family relationship has been breached or ruptured. Each family has one person who is the designated heir of the ancestral fire, the cultic servant ordained for the task of tending the fire for the entire family. This person is respectfully deemed “the one who sits at the fire”, the “living ancestor”, the counsellor and mediator between the living and the dead. It is this individual who is consulted when there is disharmony in the social relationships of the kin group, if alienation between people has to be overcome. He consults with the ancestors at the ancestral fire in order to find a solution to the problem. Often, the exchange of cattle is part and parcel of a reconciliation process between alienated parties. Indeed, Wienecke emphasises the importance of cattle among the Herero. Some cattle are cultic symbols and have religious value, and may not be seen purely in economic terms.<sup>349</sup>

Among the Herero, reconciliation can only happen where there is guilt, debt or fault (“Schuld”), i.e. where someone has been wronged. The wrongdoing must be recognised, confessed and forgiven (“erkannt, bekannt, vergeben”). Wienecke comments that in traditional settings it is very difficult to broaden the concept of reconciliation to go beyond the family and clan. Those from other tribes and cultural heritages are traditionally not considered human beings. This fact is illustrated even in the Herero language, where fellow Herero are deemed persons, while non-Herero are not designated human at all.<sup>350</sup>

Palaver is also an option for resolving conflict.<sup>351</sup> Palaver sessions are at least three days in length. The guilty party is interviewed and examined. In order to procure disclosure of the facts, force and even violent punishment may sometimes be used. In the settlement of disputes, reparation payment is very important. Indeed, reconciliation is not believed to have occurred if the wronged party has not been compensated in some way.

Wienecke illustrates an example of a controversy between two Herero tribes in which murder has occurred. The normal equilibrium has been damaged through the

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<sup>348</sup> It is a fact that as a result of Namibia’s history as a German colony some Germans and Herero are related! Wienecke (18.02.2004), a German living in Namibia, insists that for this reason reconciliation between these two ethnic groups is even more crucial and important for the Herero than between themselves and other ethnic groups, whom they do not consider kin.

<sup>349</sup> See also Krige (1974:188) who elaborates on the ritual value of cattle among the Zulu.

<sup>350</sup> This also applies to the noun classes of a number of other ethnic language groups in Southern Africa, including the Zulu.

<sup>351</sup> See the previous section (2.3) on African traditional legal procedures.



murder. In order to regain equilibrium of the forces of life one of two things has to occur. There is a need for either the performance of blood revenge ("Blutrache"), or a substitutional sacrifice ("Ersatzopfer") has to be offered, which may also be in form of a ransom payment ("Auslösungssumme"). Legal and religious experts (i.e. diviners and/or chiefs) are called upon to give counsel and advice on the procedure. The entire community becomes guilty if it does not re-establish the equilibrium, and if the offended ancestors are not appeased.

A further example Wienecke divulges is that of a known criminal who has died. Even though he was despised and even ostracised from the community, his body is taken to his ancestral fire where a plea is made to the ancestors for his acceptance into the realm of the living dead.<sup>352</sup> If he is not reconciled with the ancestors, the criminal will become an evil spirit – a fate that must be avoided at all costs. Blood of a sacrificial animal is smeared on the body of the dead person before he is buried, in order to symbolically fulfil the requirement for a blood sacrifice. In a sense, then, individuals can be reconciled even after death. (Wienecke 18.02.2004)

#### *Reconciliation among the Ngoni*

Here is an illustration of a ritual of reconciliation practised in Malawi, rendered by Fulata Moyo (2004):

The Mphamba ritual is practiced among Ngoni people in Malawi. It is believed that if there is a disagreement between two parties and one holds grudges against the other, the one who is holding grudges is forced to ... fellowship with the person s/he is holding grudges with; s/he might die unless the mphamba ritual is administered. Mphamba is actually a special tree whose bulk (sic, bark) is used when dried in this ritual. The whole village gathers and the two warring parties sit facing each other and they are given a small portion of the bulk (sic, bark) to chew while denouncing their hurt feelings. While they confess their feelings, the whole village chants 'Fyaaaa, ziuluke' (Tumbuka for 'bloww, let it blow away'). Sometimes if signs of the 'mphamba sickness' is (sic) already evident, then the one who is suffering is covered in a blanket where s/he has to inhale from the boiled mphamba bulks (sic, bark). If s/he really sweats from it then s/he can now together with the other party chew a very small portion of mphamba and swallow the liquid while the village chants the final 'fya ziuluke'. If there was no real sweating, it is believed that the one who held grudges is still keeping some unconfessed grudges and that can kill him/her.

#### *Reconciliation among the Gbaya*

Markus Roser (2000), who has studied the Gbaya people of the Central African Republic, claims that transgression and forgiveness belong closely together in traditional African society<sup>353</sup> (2000:203). He describes reconciliation rites as characterising the "essence of traditional religion" since they aim at the renewal of life and seek to re-establish equilibrium in a situation where life has been diminished or threatened<sup>354</sup> (:256). Not only are they curative, but they are the very enablers of life. Frequently reconciliation

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<sup>352</sup> The appeal captures the family's wish for the delinquent person to be accepted among the ancestors despite his culpability. It may involve an imprecation such as, "This derelict is also your son!" ("Auch dieser Mißratene ist euer Sohn!").

<sup>353</sup> "Im traditionellen afrikanischen Kontext gehören Schuld und Vergebung zusammen, ... während im Westen Schuld mit Strafe und Sühne in Verbindung gebracht wird."

<sup>354</sup> Versöhnungsriten "zielen auf die Erneuerung des Lebens und wollen das aus der Balance geratene Gleichgewicht der Kräfte für die Gemeinschaft wiedererlangen und damit die Bedingungen für die Weitergabe des Lebens ermöglichen."

rites take the shape of cleansing rituals (:257). For example, one cleansing ritual is portrayed as a washing off of the curse which has brought calamity (:259).<sup>355</sup>

Among the Gbaya water plays an important role in cleaning rituals, as does tree bark, mud, the place of the washing and leaves. All these are utilised for the “washing away” of curses (Roser 2000:269). In some cases fire is used as a sign that the “dirt” of the “curse” is “burnt away” (:216). Both the invocation of ancestors as well as prayer to the Christian God feature in Gbaya reconciliation rites (:272). Many reconciliation rites make use of meals or meal symbolism (:263).

One example Roser considers is the rite of the “drinking of blood” (2000:264). Representatives of the enemy parties lead their groups to a river valley which is the designated area for reconciliation rituals. There one of the leaders strikes off a forked branch of a particular bush which symbolises curse and calamity. The two fighting parties assemble on opposite sides of the river. The two representative leaders, as substitutes for their whole group, descend into the river, wading toward each other. Once they have reached each other they tear the forked branch in two by each holding on to one side. The torn branch is then dropped into the river so that it can drift away downstream. While they tear the branch, the leaders speak the words, “The evil that has divided us is overcome. Now we can again eat and drink together, and marry each other.” All concerned go back to the village to share a meal together. During the meal members of the different groups offer each other food and drink saying, “We have drunk the blood!” which is metaphorical language meaning, “We have forged a covenant together”. Words of goodwill, peace and reconciliation are exchanged by all.<sup>356</sup>

Roser (2000:263) claims,

Bei diesem Ritus geht es um Versöhnung, die eine neue Verbindung, eine Allianz ermöglicht, die zwei vormals zerstrittene Parteien oder Individuen mit gegenseitigen Verpflichtungen fest aneinander bindet, ihre belastete Vergangenheit bewältigt und damit eine neue Zukunft erschließt.<sup>357</sup>

The “drinking of blood” is symbolic: blood is where the soul is found, and mutual drinking is a gesture of solidarity and familiarity. When two parties have been fighting and blood has been spilt, they do not share meals together, nor is there any sexual contact (or marriage) between members of the two warring groups. The “curse” of the inability to socialise<sup>358</sup> is believed to rest on the groups. This curse must be broken for the enemies to be able to socialise again. The non-socialising mode is considered to be an “illness” which must be healed, “grime” which must be cleansed. Through the rite illustrated above the curse is lifted, the illness defeated and the dirt washed away, so that the two groups can once again live and interact together peaceably and harmoniously. (Roser 2000:264)

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<sup>355</sup> Roser (2000:262) mentions a cleansing ritual which is performed for the reintegration of released prisoners (but unfortunately does not describe it further).

<sup>356</sup> “Es führen die Vertreter der jeweiligen streitenden Partei ihre Gruppe in den Galeniewald eines Flußtales, den klassischen Ort für die Reinigungs- und Versöhnungsriten. Einer der beiden Anführer der Gruppen schlägt eine Astgabel eines [bestimmten] Strauches [der Fluch symbolisiert]. Die beiden Gruppen stellen sich auf den gegenüberliegenden Seiten des Flußtales auf. Ihre beiden Anführer steigen stellvertretend in den Fluß, zerreißen die Astgabel über dem Wasser und übergeben sie den Fluten. Entscheidend sind dabei die Worte, die sie sprechen: ‘Das Böse, das uns trennte, ist überwunden. Jetzt können wir wieder miteinander essen und trinken und uns gegenseitig heiraten.’ Alle Beteiligten kehren zurück ins Dorf und teilen eine gemeinsame Mahlzeit. Gegenseitig reicht man sich Speise und Getränk und spricht dazu die Worte: ‘Wir haben das Blut getrunken!’ oder frei übersetzt: ‘Wir haben einen Bund miteinander geschlossen!’ Worte des Friedens und der Versöhnung werden ausgetauscht.”

<sup>357</sup> Freely translated this means that “this ritual is about reconciliation which enables a new union, a new alliance, that firmly joins two previously warring parties or individuals by means of mutual commitments, copes with a burdened past and thereby opens up a new future”.

<sup>358</sup> “Fluch der Gemeinschaftsunfähigkeit” (Roser 2000:264).

The same ritual is used not only for the settlement of conflict between two quarrelling groups, but also to form stronger ties between two clans. In the case of the latter, the words spoken are, "We forge this covenant to be strong together, to depend on one another in danger and adversity". Roser has ascertained that this rite has also been used to reintegrate liberated slaves into the community. (Roser 2000:265)

What makes the ritual of the "drinking of blood" notable is that it attempts to deal with the past as well as focus on the future. The past is not denied, but it is also not dwelt upon. The aim is to create new ways of living together which free the people from the past of enmity. Roser (2000:266) contends that the focus is not on the blame or guilt of any party, nor is confession of guilt highlighted. The thrust of the ritual is future-oriented reconciliation and the enablement of harmonious social interaction<sup>359</sup>.

#### *Reconciliation among the Ijaw*

In the book *Reconciliation: The Continuing Agenda* (1987), Kathleen Hughes contributes a description of a reconciliation ritual practised among the Ijaw people of Nigeria. In the delta area of Southern Nigeria, on one particular day annually, everyone in the tribe wades into the local river. As all tribespeople stand in water that is about one meter deep, they start shouting scornful abuse, profanity and insult at one another. Both accusations as well as mud and water are hurled at each other for all the grievances that have occurred throughout the year. This "mutual vilification goes on for as long as necessary" (e.g. an hour or so). Beside insult and verbal attack, there may be some humour and teasing; mostly it is an exercise in high drama. Once the remonstrances have died down, all people duck under the water to be totally submerged for a moment. They then emerge to the surface, each having collected a handful of mud from the riverbed below. The party then walks out onto the river shore. There, a large cloth has been spread on the ground. As each person passes it, s/he throws the mud (and in some cases little stones) from the river onto the cloth. Everyone watches as a designated leader ties the four corners of the cloth into a knot. The knotted cloth is then tied between the horns of a goat tethered to a tree nearby. This animal is subsequently driven into the bush with "the filth and garbage of the year" fastened between its horns. Only after the conclusion of all these occurrences can the festivities begin. From that time forth, the tribespeople make no more allowance and show no tolerance for accusations, reproach or ill-feeling among each other based on incidents of the past. "Nothing of the previous year can ever again be said." It is as if the judicial and interpersonal slate has been washed clean, and the whole community recommences its life and interaction with a conceptual *tabula rasa*. "In the water there is a total levelling, a quite amazing chapter of faults, a ritual purging and the annual beginnings of new life." (Hughes 1987:115)

#### *Further rites and rituals connected to reconciliation*

For some Africans, rituals connected with death are often categorised as potential rituals of reconciliation. Death, argues Krige, "strikes at the very foundations of society by threatening its cohesion and solidarity"<sup>360</sup>. Therefore, "death and mourning ceremonies ... provide a powerful means of reintegration of this shaken solidarity of the group" (Krige 1974:159). Seen on a national scale, "an inability to mourn becomes a political determinant" (Volkan 1972:90), which is why Volkan argues for the implementation of rituals of mourning for reconciliation processes. Rudolph Hongoze, too, insists that rituals surrounding mourning, bereavement and burial are "rituals of solidarity" (12.01.2004).<sup>361</sup>

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<sup>359</sup> "Nicht Schuldzuweisung oder -eingeständnis, sondern die nach vorne gerichtete Versöhnung, die neues Zusammenleben ermöglicht, steht im Mittelpunkt."

<sup>360</sup> A grave "attack on social solidarity ... takes the form of death" (Krige 1974:160).

<sup>361</sup> See also Sundermeier (1998:77-92) for his discussion of mourning rituals in African societies.

Among the Southern Nguni people, bringing home the spirit of a deceased person (*ukubuyisa*) is an act of reconciliation between the family members and the deceased (Lamla 1981:16-17). Indeed, one way of translating the word used for this ritual, *ukubuyisa*, is "to reconcile". The deceased, during the performance of the ritual, is finally incorporated into the group of the ancestors, and may come to rest. By implication, the whole family and extended kin of the deceased also reach a state of peace about the death. Nxumalo (1981:71) claims that the ritual of "bringing home the dead" is an important ritual done in honour of the deceased. "The main value expressed by the rite of *ukubuyisa* is that the dead must not be forgotten. Lineage, community and continuity of the family bond are further values."

According to Krige, whose study focuses predominantly on the Zulu, *ukubuyisa* can be held three to four years after death. It is never performed for women, and is considered most crucial for important, senior men. At the ceremony "the name of the deceased is included in the praises of the ancestors for the first time after his death" (Krige 1974:169). Hammond-Tooke (1981a:24) differs with Krige in that he places the *ukubuyisa idlozi* ritual at one year after death. Another ritual performed shortly after death is also included as a ritual of reconciliation.

Some elements of rituals after death include a cow of accompaniment, the washing of spades, burning of the rags (which represent the mourning attire of the loved ones), the slaughtering of an ox, and the presence of the family's male heirs (Lamla 1981:16-17). Nxumalo elaborates the *ukubuyisa* ritual further. Medicine with white foam (which is a symbol of purity) is prepared in a clay pot. Family members drink the medicine and are induced to vomit, in order that the pollution of death may be removed. Through this act, family members are considered to be purified from the pollution of death. A goat is slaughtered. Nxumalo insists that a goat is the best sacrificial animal for this purpose because it bleats at death. This bleating is interpreted as being the "call" or "invitation" to the deceased to join the living dead (Nxumalo 1981:71).<sup>362</sup>

Besides mourning and other rituals surrounding death, rituals of repentance may also be considered as belonging in the category of reconciliation practices. Among the Mpondo of South Africa, there is a ritual which involves an afflicted person performing "the dance and song of contrition". When afflicted with any form of hardship believed to have been mandated by the ancestors, a person is supposed to show remorse to his/her ancestors for whatever s/he may have done to insult or anger them (Hammond-Tooke 1993:166). If a person's affliction is connected to any ill-feeling (e.g. anger, jealousy, etc.) toward kin, this is to be addressed as well, "for the confession of anger in the heart towards kin is essential before the ritual can be effective" (Kuckertz quoted in Hammond-Tooke 1993:157).

Magesa (1998:212-213) also highlights the importance of dance in reconciliation rituals.<sup>363</sup> Dance is employed to ward off destructive forces; it is therapeutic and it is "an expression of rejecting anger and embracing communion". Indeed, for the Taita people of Kenya, reconciliation is often related to "casting out of anger" by means of an "anger-removal rite". In this ritual, one is encouraged to "acknowledge divisive anger and resentment in one's heart and cast them away". Moreover, the ritual is meant to "deflect anger of mystical powers and establish harmony and beneficence" (Magesa 1998:209). The ritual is presided over by an elder. The enemies squat facing each other, mutually exchanging words and gestures that show the will to cast away their anger and reconcile (*kutasa*). As a sign of casting away their anger, they pour (or throw) out cane juice, beer or

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<sup>362</sup> Nxumalo (1981:71) is of the opinion that this traditional ritual can be (and is sometimes) performed in conjunction with Holy Communion. The Christian rite is then elucidated as being a mass for the remembrance of the dead. The *ukubuyisa* rite and the rite of Holy Communion can be supplemented by a homily on death, resurrection and eternal life. Nxumalo contends that this would "inspire the whole celebration with a Christian spirit".

<sup>363</sup> See also Hay (1998:136).

water. The ritual is sealed by sharing food and drink (Magesa 1998:210).

In his book *Ukubuyisana* (1998), Mark Hay outlines a traditional Zulu ritual “related to the idea of cleansing”, called the “washing of the spears” (*ukuhlajwa kwemikhonto*, or a ritual cleansing also called *inblambuluko*).<sup>364</sup> This rite dates “back to the time of Shaka Zulu in the eighteenth century when there was a ritual cleansing ceremony after war or killing” (Hay 1998:136). Arguably, it is a form of ritual that reconciles certain people – in this case warriors gone off to battle – with their communities (after the battle has ended). It seeks to stifle inappropriate violent actions and enable normal, peaceable relations.

It was a ritual cleansing of the “spears” to remove the urge to kill. Before the battle or war the *nyanga* (or herbalist) would prepare a concoction of medicine or herbs, called *intelezi*, to remove the fear to go to war. There was the belief in African worldview that after war the warriors needed to be cleansed in order to stop their urge to continue to kill. The effects of the *intelezi* needed to be removed before the warrior could return to the village. (Hay 1998:136)

Hongoze (12.01.2004) is of the opinion that “rites of passage contribute to reconciliation in Africa”. He also calls these rites of passage (i.e. those surrounding birth, initiation, marriage and death) “rituals of incorporation” or “rituals of co-operation”. Rites of passage assure people’s peace with themselves and with the community; through them people become accepted and acceptable. As such, Hongoze promotes them as reconciliatory – they reconcile people with their roots, their traditions, their communities. Without them, people are not reconciled. Mfutso-Bengo (2001:39-40) agrees when pointing out that traditional initiation ceremonies constitute the basis of reconciliation in African tradition. They help people in “acquiring a reconciled corporate identity”. Indeed, he sees initiation ceremonies “as means to reconcile and humanise”. Underlying such ceremonies is a “reconciling pedagogy”, which stresses that the building and maintaining of relationships is a learnt skill.<sup>365</sup> Through initiation, people learn the art of how to “relate properly” (Mfutso-Bengo 2001:57).<sup>366</sup>

Certain rituals of reconciliation and integration are sometimes mistakenly seen as “rituals of rebellion,” asserts Magesa (1998:212). In his own context he has identified ritual transvestism and asexuality, ritual “killing” of a new chief when installed, ritual hostility between social groups before a marriage, and ritual use of obscene language as constituting “liminal situations whose final purpose is equilibrium in society and nature” (Magesa 1998:212).

Significantly, reconciliation in Africa is frequently associated with healing. In a study of an African Indigenous Church in a Cape Town township, Linda Thomas has found that healing is a central religious activity in African traditional church settings. When there is conflict between people what is needed is healing – of the individuals, the relationships and the community at large (Thomas 1999:80). In her book, *Under the Canopy: Ritual Process and Spiritual Resilience in South Africa* (1999), she describes the liturgy of a service of healing in an AIC. Throughout, the ritual is marked by the use of metaphorical language. The liturgy begins with an invitation by the minister, “It is time to go to the lake” (“the lake” being a symbol of the place where healing occurs). A hymn is sung. All present drink “blessed water” and receive prayer. The congregation moves to an area where a cross in form of a fluorescent light bulb is surrounded by a blue and white

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<sup>364</sup> See also Hunter (1979:408). This ceremony is no longer widely practised, remarks Hay (1998:136).

<sup>365</sup> African traditionalist Albert Munyai (01.09.2004) also stresses the importance of initiation. Since “we are living in a dangerous world” the children must be instructed to protect themselves. We must be instructed “to create peace in our hearts”, to live “spiritually”, to “listen to our ancestors”. Munyai insists that religious instruction brings consistency and stability to life. Peace in people’s hearts is the basis for peace in our country.

<sup>366</sup> As a Christian, Mfutso-Bengo tries to cast Jesus as an initiation master and mediator of reconciliation (2001:86).

canopy. The congregants walk under the cloth of the canopy. At the other end each person is blessed (with the laying on of hands) by the church's ministers and their spouses. Also in the holy area stands a large container of water. The church is sprinkled with this "healing water" for "cleansing and benediction". The water may also be used for drinking, vomiting, bathing, and enemas (Thomas 1999:74-75). Blessed water is employed to cleanse impurity or fight evil spirits, and so it has multiple religious functions and bears a number of symbolic meanings (Thomas 1999:76).

Finally, I would like to mention the traditional cleansing rite performed at the launching of the Garden of Remembrance in Freedom Park<sup>367</sup> (in Pretoria) in March 2004, because it may also be considered a ritual of reconciliation. On opening the park and its shrine<sup>368</sup>, South African president Thabo Mbeki and poet Wally Serote "performed a cleansing ceremony in the garden. They knelt at the centre of the *isivivane*, and Mbeki lit *impepho*, or incense, and drank traditional beer with a traditional spoon" (Phahlane 2004:13). Traditional healers "bowed down and clapped their hands in a rhythmical staccato". A speech about future joy, hope, reconciliation and prosperity was delivered by the president. Newspaper reporter Charles Phahlane alleges, "As Mbeki and Serote stepped out of the *isivivane*, a mist encircled the shrine and seemed to signify the setting free of the spirit from pain. Lifted by the healing process, a man broke into a traditional stick-fight dance as he celebrated freedom" (2004:13).

### **Conclusion**

In this section I have provided a broad overview of reconciliation rituals in Africa. (I acknowledge that it is by no means an exhaustive list of reconciliation rituals that exist in Africa.) First, I considered five rituals of South African origin. Then I depicted how reconciliation is ritually performed in five other African contexts. Finally, I briefly mentioned some other rituals practised in Africa that may be seen as reconciliatory in a more indirect fashion, i.e. rituals of mourning and laying the dead to rest, rituals of repentance, anger, initiation, cleansing after a battle, rebellion and healing. In conclusion one must say that Africa in general, and South Africa in particular, have much to offer in terms of rituals and practices designed to foster social reconciliation. Schreier (1998:13) indeed argues that ritual expression of reconciliation takes on "a pattern re-enacted in myriad variations throughout the world". It is not the task of this section to evaluate the significance of the above-mentioned reconciliation rituals. I have merely shown *that* there are "myriad variations" of such rituals, and *what* some of them look like. It will be the task of the subsequent chapters to analyse in depth one particular ritual of reconciliation mentioned here, evaluating it for its potential value in a social reconciliation process in South Africa.

Nonetheless, from this broad overview, certain common features and tendencies can be identified that may be regarded as advantageous for a reconciliation process. In an article posted on the worldwide web called "Elements to admire in African Traditional Religions" (2004) many features of African ritual are commended. Firstly, rituals "form an essential part of social life", i.e. they build and restore community relations. Not only is the community of the living considered in ritual, but the living dead are also considered to participate. The "seasonal cycles and the stages of life are sanctified by ritual action." Moreover, "Ritual attention is given to crisis situations." Africa has "many rites of purification of individuals and communities", and the sick "are healed in rites which involve their families and the

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<sup>367</sup> Freedom Park is "destined to be a monument for the new SA – a place to recall the past and to celebrate the strength of all the nation's people." It signifies unity and "community of interest", "bonding all in one" and "rooting out racial animosity" (Phahlane 2004:13).

<sup>368</sup> The *isivivane* shrine in the Garden of Remembrance is to be considered a holy place, a destination of pilgrimage for all South Africans (Phahlane 2004:13).

community". In most cases, "religious sacredness is preserved in ritual". Through ritual, the "whole person, body and soul, is totally involved". Ritual encourages "co-responsibility" so that "each person contributes his share in a spirit of participation". Symbols used in ritual "bridge the spheres of the sacred and secular and so make possible a balanced and unified view of reality". In sum, rituals in Africa are "rich and very meaningful" (Elements to admire 2004). Given the extent of the list of positive attributes associated with rituals in general, one can deduce that some (if not all) of them hold for specific rituals of reconciliation as well.

A further boon that can be mentioned in connection with indigenous rituals is offered by Ntsimane (2000:24). He claims that in traditional settings where reconciliation rites are conducted, victims of human mistreatment (and their relatives) know the perpetrator(s); the reconciliation process then is personal. Similarly, the officiating mediatory persons are known and respected by both feuding parties. Traditionally, rites of reconciliation aim at the restoration of family or clan bonds, not merely at the exemption from prosecution for the perpetrators. Peaceful coexistence is expected after the reconciliation of feuding parties. Though harmonious relations cannot be implemented by force, they are indeed observed, promoted and monitored by the broader community.

I agree with Ntsimane that these are advantages that can be associated with traditional reconciliation rituals. Yet there is also a shadow side. As noted by a number of scholars (e.g. Hammond-Tooke, Munyai, Ralushai), an indigenous ritual is – and can be – performed only within the limits of the particular ethnic group whose heritage it stems from. According to some, rituals are clan- or tribe-specific, and have no potency or meaning beyond the bounds of that community. Of course, this characteristic, if generally valid, would be a disadvantage in the endeavour for overall social reconciliation in South Africa. Nonetheless, not all scholars view traditional rituals in this way. Tlhagale and Koka for example allow for the appropriate and meaningful use of traditional rituals in contexts that are far wider than the one clan or tribe. In fact a number of scholars see no problem in adapting African rituals to serve communities that are not only African in their membership.<sup>369</sup> This discussion will be continued in subsequent chapters, however, for while it goes beyond the scope of this section, it is far too important to ignore.

#### **2.4.2 The importance of ritual: ritual theories**

It is the argument of section 2.4 that one of the most profound contributions African tradition has to offer for social reconciliation in South Africa is ritual. More particularly, rituals of reconciliation are powerful means of bringing about social reconciliation. African tradition has a great resource in terms of such rituals, as has been illustrated in the preceding section (2.4.1). It is beyond the capacities of this study to analyse all the reconciliation rituals that have been described. For this reason, I have chosen one of the rituals from the collection of rituals described in the previous section which I will examine in more depth. In order to do this work of analysis, I need to apply tools of ritual interpretation. In the present section I therefore intend to outline a number of these tools and methods that will then be applied to the chosen ritual in the following section (2.4.3). I will also elucidate on what premise my ritual analysis takes place, which assumptions I adhere to, and which ritual scholars' insights inform my investigations. Of course, it is not possible here to consider all positions and scholarly theories that exist. Instead, I show in rough strokes what some of the main ritual theorists have said about ritual and its significance for human society and interaction. In what follows, then, I chart a number of

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<sup>369</sup> Egbulem (1996), Lumbala (1998), Somé (2000) and Tlhagale (2000) are scholars who already use elements of African traditional reconciliation rituals for communities that are by no means necessarily only African.

ritual theories and methodologies, which provide the basis and hermeneutical tools for the analysis of the ritual of *Cleansing the chest of grudges* in the subsequent section.

#### *The field of ritual studies*

According to Ronald Grimes (1982: Preface), "Ritual studies is a field, not a single, prescribed methodology." As shall be shown, a plethora of methods can be adopted to study rituals. Under all circumstances, in ritual studies field study is encouraged for two reasons: "(1) because ritual is the hardest religious phenomenon to capture in texts or comprehend by thinking, so we need to encounter it concretely, in the field, or our study of religion suffers; and (2) because our predecessors in the study of ritual, liturgists and anthropologists, have emphasized first-hand participation and participant-observation, respectively" (Grimes 1982:1). Ritologists are "people who study ritual" (:2). It is crucial that one should pay much attention to "the cultural and religious horizon" of the ritologist (:155), since this will inevitably influence how s/he observes, records and interprets the ritual. The manner and style of ritual interpretation is dependent upon "conscious and unconscious, intellectual and emotional, bodily and attitudinal aspects of a participant observer" (:2).<sup>370</sup>

Grimes suggests a set of categories that are important when studying ritual. They include the identification of ritual space (1982:21), ritual objects (:23), ritual time (:24), ritual sound and language (:26), ritual identity (i.e. roles and offices) (:28), and ritual action (:30). When asking ritual participants questions about the ritual, it is necessary to note that this "is nothing more than a device to elicit full descriptions and call attention to the constituents of a specific rite. Responding to it provides at best a description, not an interpretation, of a ritual" (:32). Ultimately, analysing and studying ritual requires careful observation, respectful participation (where possible), thoughtful interpretation as well as creative imagination.

There are a number of approaches that can be taken when doing ritual studies. Grimes mentions some of these options, and mentions which ritual scholars have adopted which in their investigations (Grimes 1982:32). First there is the approach of describing the ritual's phenomenology – its themes, processes, and types (done, for example, by Eliade and Van Gennep). Second, one can seek to identify its underlying structures – as a symbol system (Geertz), as gestural grammar (Birdwhistell), as metalanguage (Bateson), as performative utterance (Austin), as logic (Cassirer and Langer), or as deep structure (Levi-Strauss and Leach). A third option is to consider the social functions of ritual (Durkheim), ritual "co-variants" (Douglas), processes (Turner), and roles (Goffman, Schechner). It is this third approach that I will use most extensively in my investigation. Fourth is the option of considering how the ritual relates to individual and group psychology, thus regarding the ritual as portraying a set of archetypes (Jung, Neumann), maze ways (Wallace), compulsions (Freud), developmental stages (Erikson), or games (Huizinga, Neale, Caillois). A fifth approach is explaining it as an ecological (Rappaport) or biogenetic (d'Aquili) operation. A sixth alternative involves tracing the precedents and consequences of the ritual historically and theologically (Bouyer, Jungmann), and seventh is the approach of entering into imaginative, sympathetic participation with the ritual and concentrating on its style of constructing life-worlds (Ricoeur, Gadamer, Palmer) or ultimate realities (Tillich, Berger). This seventh approach is also used by myself with some preference. Certainly, it becomes apparent that a number of these "interpretive strategies overlap" (Grimes 1982:33). In what follows, I shall point to some of them in more detail.

A final point that must be raised here is that there is, as in any field of study, a traceable progression in scholarly thinking concerning ritual. In its beginnings, scholars such as Gluckmann found that although ritual is widely practiced, it does not affect

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<sup>370</sup> Refer also to section 2.1.



anything in the lives of people; it is not “real” and makes no “actual” difference. Berger and Luckmann adopted this approach too, though not as rigidly as Gluckmann. The view that ritual did not actually change people or communities was soon challenged by scholars such as Turner and Douglas, who concluded from their findings that ritual really does effect change in societies and individuals. Bell took up this view as well. The end of the sequence is represented by scholars such as Grimes. Given this evolution of ritual theory, one might argue that it is unjustifiable to jumble various scholars’ insights into one, simply because their premises are different almost to the point of incompatibility. Nevertheless, I choose to combine scholars’ theories in this study, because I consider them all to have valuable insights to offer to the topic, regardless of their initial presuppositions.

#### *Some definitions*

Victor Turner (1967:19) defines ritual as “prescribed formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings and powers”. Ritual performances are stages in greater social processes (Turner 1967:45) and are as complex and varied as the society in which they are practised. Mary Douglas (1982:55) describes ritual as “a form of restricted code”. This restricted code is used to pass on information and to uphold a particular social form. Therefore it is a system of discipline as well as of interaction. A restricted code can only emerge when members of a group know each other so well that they share a common set of assumptions which do not need to be made explicit (Douglas 1982:55).<sup>371</sup> Rituals are therefore not “universal”, but bound to a specific context and social group. However, different groups may (learn to) share a ritual if it addresses “common concerns”.<sup>372</sup> According to Grimes (1982:67), ritual occurs when “animated persons enact formative gestures in the face of receptivity during crucial times in founded places”. Danfulani (2000:98) claims, “ritual is a prescribed formal behaviour, a sequential stereotype of activity involving symbolic gestures, words, and objects performed in sequestered places and designed to influence supernatural entities or forces on behalf of the actor’s goals and interests”.

#### *Hidden meaning*

It must be stated from the onset that rituals are not simple and unambiguous subjects of study. There exists a complex relationship between the apparent purpose and the unconscious aims of a ritual. Not everything in ritual processes is obvious at first glance. Some occurrences are rather obscure and unintelligible, shrouded in mystery. Richard Fardon (1990) argues that ritual activity represents and points to a kind of “knowledge” that is “mis-stated” (1990:5), “understated” (“tacit”, “implicit”) (:6) or “unstatable”, i.e. mysterious and ineffable (:7).<sup>373</sup> Sperber talks of “tacit knowledge – that is to say, that which is not made explicit”, and of “unconscious knowledge” (1975:x). This knowledge contained in ritual is the basis of a society’s “doxa” or “cultural frame” (Fardon 1990:6), but it is a cultural frame filled with hidden meanings and secrecy (:11) to the one studying it from the outside.<sup>374</sup> Students of ritual must always bear in mind that “anthropological accounts rest on the shadow side of their assertions: the absences, ignorances and unsayabilities which must exist for things to be as they are claimed. Yet systematic

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<sup>371</sup> “The more a capacity is shared the more we are likely to apply a metaphor of depth to it – on the argument that its very shared quality makes it difficult to frame or reflect upon it.” (Fardon 1990:218)

<sup>372</sup> Douglas makes her case by illustrating a situation (between pygmies and Persian nomads) in which two different peoples have come to adopt certain of the same rituals which deal with their common concerns in a shared context (1982:55).

<sup>373</sup> Durkheim insists that religious practices such as rituals have “invisible influence over consciousnesses” and “a manner of affecting our states of mind” (1995:364).

<sup>374</sup> Sperber, too, explains that symbols remain shrouded in obscurity (1975:23).

attention is rarely given to these ethnographic non events" (Fardon 1990:8).<sup>375</sup> Fardon (1990:217) asserts, "Accounts of knowledge and their shadow accounts of ignorance are mutually defining." Moreover, interpretations of ritual may differ, claims Fardon. "The 'same' ritual may be explained, in terms of common conventions, as something rather different in two places. Its significance is not the same" (Fardon 1990:10). Perhaps the most striking hidden quality of ritual is that it suggests and portrays in a subtle fashion the interrelatedness of all that is (Fardon 1990:225).<sup>376</sup>

#### *The body and the senses*

Grimes (1982:60) alleges,

Even rituals such as meditative ones, calculated to deny or overcome the tangible, use the body in order to effect this denial. And even when the body is decorated or mutilated with tattoos, circumcisions, and subincisions, or is so heavily draped and costumed that it becomes a thing, it remains the central, concrete fact of ritual. The study of ritual fails, then, if it ignores the tangibility and subjectivity of ritual enactment and only objectifies.

Ritual creates "a world of gestural construal, a world enacted, a world bodied forth" (Gorman 1994:22). This world is experienced through sight, sound, smell, taste and touch, as well as through emotions and feelings; it is experienced through the body and the senses. Its meaning is discovered in, by and through enactment and embodiment, performance and gesture (Grimes 1982:19ff). Therefore, ritual action is "thick with sensory meaning" (Grimes 1982:59)<sup>377</sup>.

Rituals involve the human body, and therefore are frequently concerned with bodily functions or secretions. Douglas analyses the importance of body symbolism in ritual. She insists that the human body and how it is used in ritual is a map of the structures and rules, fears and dangers present in society. The body, and how it is used, is an indicator of society's values and norms. When analysing a ritual, one does well in observing with care the human bodies involved, and how they are used and manipulated. This will give the analyst a good indication of the self-identity of the society in which the ritual is enacted. Douglas (1992a:128) contends,

rituals enact the form of social relations and in giving these relations visible expression they enable people to know their own society. The rituals work upon the body politic through the symbolic medium of the physical body.

Douglas further argues that there is "concordance between symbolic and social experience" (1982:64). The body is considered a ritual medium through which ritual truth is expressed. The human body "is always treated as an image of society" and "there can be no natural way of considering the body that does not involve at the same time a social dimension" (Douglas 1982:70).

According to Harvey Cox (1970:73), ritual is "embodied fantasy". It allows people to get in touch with their bodies, their senses. One way of exploring bodily and sensory experience is through dance and movement, elements that feature prominently in certain rituals (:50). Especially ritual that involves celebrating and feasting – including moving, dancing, eating, etc. – affirms the human body, and seeks to overcome repressive behaviour (of both the individual body and society) (:55). Such ritual "provides a set of connections through which emotion can be expressed without being repressed" (:72).

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<sup>375</sup> In ritual "there are religious depths ... that cannot be fathomed by the analysis of observational data." Symbols "have a fathomless lucidity of meaning which men (sic) of every grade of cultural complexity can grasp intuitively if they wish." (Turner 1962:172)

<sup>376</sup> This may be a reason why ritual is such a common and significant feature of African society in particular, which fosters a view of the world as an inter-related web of forces.

<sup>377</sup> "A ritual enactment is not an ordinary action like changing a tire, nor is it an imitation of an action such as pretending to die on a stage. Rather, it is a kind of action which is in a category distinct from either of these. It is action thick with sensory meaning." (Grimes 1982:59)

Undoubtedly, religion in Africa is not a matter detached from the body and the senses. Sundermeier (1998:10) asserts, "We participate in the world only through our body; our spirit is ultimately material rather than immaterial, and cannot be imagined as detached from matter" (see also Appiah 1992:112). For this reason religion is demonstrated and lived out through the body and the senses, more particularly by means of ritual. Arguably, life gains a "sacramental dimension" through ritual (Sundermeier 1998:14). Emile Durkheim also alludes to the inherently sacramental nature of ritual. He asserts that through religious rituals human beings

feel there is something outside themselves that is reborn, forces are reanimated, and a life that reawakens.... The renewal is in no way imaginary, and the individuals themselves benefit from it, for the particle of social being that each individual bears within himself necessarily participates in this collective remaking. (Durkheim 1995:352)

The human bodies that take part in rituals actually undergo real change or "renewal". According to Turner (1962:171), rituals are "perceptible to the senses" and possess "the power both of effecting and signifying sanctity and righteousness". They contain symbols that are not merely considered to be "speculative or theoretical signs", but "efficacious and practical signs, as instrumentalities", since they not only point to changes of moral and social status, but also actually effect them. Therefore, rituals are not simply "performance" or recitation, but are in fact lived reality.

#### *Actions, not words*

Rituals are events; they have lifespans. Only secondarily do they reside in texts, scenarios, scripts, or rubrics. Thinking of them as unchanging is a half-truth. They are not artifacts. They are not structures in the sense that a building is a structure. They are structurings, as a dance is. They surge and subside, ebb and flow. One can infer the structure of a ritual. But the inference is not the event. A ritual structure, like a ritual text, is a residue. And texts ... are monuments. Rituals deteriorate. Entropy is the rule; therefore, they must be raised up constantly from the grave of book, body, memory, and culture. Rituals have lifecycles and lifespans. They occur. They do not merely recur. (Grimes 1982:57)

Ritual is a "paralanguage" – expressed not primarily in words but in gestures (Parkin 1992:11, citing Levi-Strauss 1977). Because ritual is fundamentally about physical action, "with words often only optional or arbitrarily replaceable", "it can be regarded as having a distinctive potential for performative imagination that is not reducible to verbal assertions" (Parkin 1992:11-12). The power of ritual, therefore, lies in its actions and not its words.

A notable number of scholars have attempted to understand ritual as a form of communication. Yet this communication is not, in the first place, verbal. Ritual is considered a symbolic statement or encoded presentation which acts out or stages an already existing social message.<sup>378</sup> Through their referential quality rituals point to meaning existing outside of themselves, and manifest this meaning in enactment and gesture. In order to understand them, one is required to "break their symbolic code" (Gorman 1994:23). The work of the ritologist is to reflect upon what is happening during a ritual process. However, "ritual itself is not reflection" (Gorman 1994:24). Analysts will never entirely be able to "know" what happens during a ritual and categorise it in clear linguistic terms. This is so because "there is a knowing that comes through the senses –

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<sup>378</sup> "Ritual is culturally defined communication rendered by a community's goals. In addition to expressing a group's collective values, ritual secures results beyond the original expressive intention of participants. Moreover, it serves adaptive purposes, including techniques of reversal wherein acts not condoned in nonritual space are performed. Ritual, like all ceremonial rites, is both action and assertion. When ritual and religion are joined, human drama unfolds, building a relationship between people and their beliefs about the supernatural." (Thomas 1999:62)

smells, textures, sights, sounds, tastes – that is not ultimately translatable into a linguistic idiom” (Gorman 1994:25).

However, “Ritual actions are not without sense just because those doing them cannot say what the actions mean,” argues Grimes (1982:60). Certain rituals (like church liturgies or civil ceremonies) “may have verbal meanings codified or separable from their actions”, but this is not so for many indigenous peoples’ rituals. Ultimately, rituals are “deeds; they are not just colourful or oblique ways of ‘saying’ something” (Grimes 1982:60).

#### *Ritual space and time*

According to Grimes, ritual occurs “during crucial times”, in “crisis moments in histories and life cycles” (1982:65). Ritual also occurs “in founded places”, i.e. in places especially set apart or prepared for ritual. “Ritual place is a matrix of ritual life. It is a generative centre, though it may be geographically on the edges.” During rituals there is often the “establishment of perspectival boundaries”, where the distinctions between inside/outside, hidden/revealed, open/closed, front/back become important (Grimes 1982:66). Danfulani (2000:89) similarly observes the existence of “ritual time”, which is a special time designated for special religious ceremonies and experiences.

#### *Separation*

The existence of ritual space and time points to the next aspect of ritual I wish to highlight. Rituals are perceived as occurring separate from ordinary life proceedings. In his book, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969), Turner elaborates three distinct stages of the ritual process. The first phase of a ritual process is the stage of separation. During separation the individuals who are undergoing or participating in the ritual are “separated” from normal life. This separation often involves a move from one space (place) to another, as mentioned above. The “normal” space – understood not only in concrete, but also in sociological, psychological and spiritual terms – is characterised by structure. The new “ritual” space, into which the participants move during the separation stage, is set apart (“holy”), i.e. is not subject to the structure and control of “normal” space. Separation is the phase at which structured reality is deliberately (or unconsciously) left behind and a realm of structurelessness is created and entered into. Ways in which separation occurs are, for example, movement to a special place (e.g. a mountain, a riverbank, a temple, a circumcision school, or the altar in a church), or change of appearance (e.g. wearing other or no clothing). Other signs of separation are, for example, festive decorations, or special music that is played. The participants as well as the onlookers in a ritual need to be adequately prepared for the change that is going to take place during the next phase. They also need to realise that what is about to happen is “special” and different from ordinary every-day experiences. Therefore, communities go to great lengths to make the separation phase elaborate and obvious. (Turner 1969:94)

#### *Liminality or marginality*

According to Turner, the second, and most significant, phase of the ritual process is called “liminality” (1969:95).<sup>379</sup> The liminal stage commences once separation has successfully taken place. The participants are now no longer in the “normal” state of being, i.e. the state characterised by structure and order, but are in a state of suspension from all social norms. For this reason, Douglas views ritual as recognising and utilising “the potency of disorder” (1992a:94). “In the disorder of the mind, ... ritual expects to find powers and truths which cannot be reached by conscious effort.” Ritual is a time of abandoning rationality and control, and is a force for potential energy and power virtually inaccessible in the ordered world (Douglas 1992a:94). Through ritual, one “ventures beyond the

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<sup>379</sup> Turner also explores this state of liminality extensively in some of his other works (1967, 1968, 1974).

confines of society" (1992a:95). Outside these margins of social reality ritual participants find themselves on the threshold of becoming "new" persons, and undergoing that change of status which will allow them to re-enter into structured society as transformed people. Liminality is therefore the space (not only in terms of locality) where this transformation happens.

In view of their transforming potential, Kgalushi Koka claims rituals have "a psychological and spiritual impact" on the affected parties as well as on participating witnesses. With special reference to reconciliation rituals, Koka argues that ritual participants

feel that they have gone through a process of mental purification and spiritual cleansing – as well as transformation that would enable them to embrace each other in a new forum of peace; and to view themselves and others with new attitude in a socio-spiritual 'born-again' scenario. To them, a new world with welcoming peaceful environment (sic) and cordial relationship has opened. (Koka 2003:6)

Transformation "implies deliberate intervention to effect change". It is "operative across four interdependent dimensions," i.e. the personal, relational, structural and cultural (Lederach 1997:82-83). Perhaps ritual can be seen as such a "deliberate intervention" on the part of a community to effect change in people who require it. Schechner coins the word "transformance" to suggest the change-evoking possibilities of ritual (Grimes 1982:57). Ritual is "transformative drama", to use Linda Thomas' term (1999:117). Yet one needs to be aware of the hazardous nature of marginal states, as Douglas points out. She asserts (1992a:96), "Danger lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable."

Besides being a phase of transformation, liminality is a "statusless" reality for those participating in it. It is therefore characterised by a form of equality and sameness of all participants, regardless of their social position in ordinary life.

#### *Social structure, order and balance*

For people who inhabit the state of liminality, social norms are suspended; the obligations and privileges of their social standing are meaningless; the hierarchy of power, the structural system of their normal state of existence does not affect them. Those who together participate in liminality portray what Turner calls "communitas" (1969:96, 131). The type of communitas which occurs during ritual is deemed "spontaneous" or "existential" (1969:140).<sup>380</sup> Communitas is essentially a structure-less society, where individuals relate to one another in terms of Martin Buber's "I-Thou" relationships. Hierarchy, order, rules and structure are not what sustains and nourishes communitas. The social "laws" that are in place in an ordinary life situation (e.g. that the ones who are

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<sup>380</sup> Communitas can also become "normative" when the state of liminality is made the norm by a particular community. An example of such artificially created communitas ("artificial" because it is not the natural process of a community to remain in a state of liminal spontaneous communitas for a long period of time) is the Franciscan community of the thirteenth century (Turner 1969:145). It is interesting that at the latest when the initiator or founder of such a community passes away, a form of structure needs to be established. Human beings seemingly cannot do without some kind of structure or order. Even if the desire for a structure-less and status-less community is very heart-felt – as it was in the case of Francis – structure and order creep in at some stage. So, communitas in a pure sense cannot be or occur for very long. The liminal character of communitas at some point requires some form of aggregation, i.e. return to the norms and social value structures of the rest of society. Rituals, and communitas, are therefore necessarily "exceptional" and "extra-ordinary" in sociological and anthropological terms. By implication this means that to try to forcibly live a life of seclusion or separation from the world is not only very difficult, but it is almost impossible. Communitas is desirable, but it is also not an ordinary state of being. It is at odds with ordinary ways of being in the world at large because it functions according to different criteria entirely. Communitas can be entered into and enjoyed at special times, but since it is not the "way of the world", it cannot be where human beings reside.

high up in the social hierarchy have power over those of lower status) are non-functional during *communitas* – and indeed defied by it. In fact, a hallmark of *communitas* seems to be that existing social norms are in some cases turned on their head, so that, for example, the weak are seen as powerful, and the influential are regarded as insignificant.

So, the liminal stage of ritual seems to counteract or negate society's norms and structures, i.e. it appears to defy the status quo. However, according to Turner (1969:94), it is ironic that ritual actually serves to maintain a balanced form of the status quo. Ultimately liminality is temporally restricted, and inevitably social normality is re-established. Through "reaggregation or reincorporation" there is a ritual return to the structured, orderly, stratified norms of societal life. The people who, during liminality, were all regarded as equal, and who were status-less, return to reality as members of a community, bound by social laws and rules of custom, and again part of the structured network of relationships called society. They have left the egalitarianism and solidarity of *communitas*, and are back in the real world which is based on defined roles and patterned order and organisation.

It seems, then, that in Turner's analysis, rituals are instrumental in changing the status of individuals in society, and perhaps of putting right something that was socially out of joint, without changing the core structures of society itself. The participants in the ritual are changed, but not the structures and orderings of the society at large. Those who partook of the ritual are changed in order to (again) "fit" within the social mould of their society. In essence, therefore, ritual helps to maintain and to strengthen the status quo, the general structure and order of the society, although at first glance it seems to defy society's hierarchy and structures. It may therefore be said simply that ritual plays an important part in the structuring of sociality (Fardon 1990:27ff). This includes maintaining and enhancing good relations between different groups in a community.

Max Gluckmann (1962:14-15) also focuses on the social aspect of ritual and comes to the conclusion that rituals are "to be understood in terms of the social relations which are involved" in them. Issues surrounding social organisation and political power fuel the need for ritual. Gluckmann insists that society is a network of offices and positions, a set of linkages between statuses and roles. Ritual "establishes and maintains this network" (1962:17). To use the term coined by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966:104ff), one could argue that ritual is employed for "universe maintenance".<sup>381</sup>

Like a number of other scholars I have mentioned, Meyer Fortes (1962:55) is of the opinion that ritual is used in bringing about status changes. Through ritual individuals and groups can achieve incorporation into "a new field of social structure, or conjecture of social relations" (:56). Fortes insists that "ritual institutions fulfil critical integrative functions in primitive societies". Rituals are "the cement of the social fabric" (quoting Malinowsky) and contribute to the beneficial functioning of economics, the juridical system, and morality (Fortes 1962:83).

In ritual, performance of actions occurs according to social roles. Ritual actions "express and amend social relationships so as to secure general blessing, purification, protection, and prosperity for the persons involved in some mystical manner which is out of sensory control" (Gluckmann 1962:24). For this reason Gluckmann argues that there is, in most indigenous societies, a "ritualisation of social relationships" (:24). Because roles in society are seen as a web of complex moral inter-relatedness (:29), a delicate balance of these roles must constantly be maintained, and harmful disturbances must be kept at bay (:30). Rituals "of all kinds are associated with efforts to ensure success and avoid disaster" (:31). They are employed to redress the equilibrium at any alteration of social dispositions, or to establish a new equilibrium in changed relations, to achieve re-

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<sup>381</sup> Similarly, Helga Dickow makes the case that there is a need for ritual and symbol in the establishment and maintenance of civil religion (1996:29). See also section 3.4.7.

aggregation or aggregation (:38).<sup>382</sup> For this reason one often sees rituals arising out of a need for conflict resolution (:39).<sup>383</sup>

Kgalushi Koka (2003) is of the opinion that ritual represents one of the most profound means for resolving social conflicts. With special emphasis on reconciliation rituals, he argues that ritual effects “oneness” (i.e. unity and solidarity) of a people. By reaching the hidden recesses of human consciousness, it has the ability to activate a sense of guilt and remorse. It enables confession, readiness for absolution, and a preparedness to make peace. It generates a desire to reconcile physically and spiritually and thereby assists in bringing about transformation from the past to the future. Its aim is to bring about harmonious and peaceful co-existence (Koka 2003:5-6).<sup>384</sup> Essentially, ritual seeks to build community.

The Comaroffs (1991:160) agree that ritual has the role of expelling incongruity and disharmony in society. Its function is to bring order and calm into a situation of upheaval. Although ritual procedures cannot “banish all contradictions” from the world of indigenous Africans, they can and do “hold them at bay”, “along with other symbolic action that addressed and redressed social tensions”. Therefore, ritual is seen as “a vital force in constructing and transforming the social and natural universe”. As the “supreme cultural product” of indigenous African peoples, ritual plays “a major part in ... managing the tensions and ambiguities inherent in their political communities” (Comaroffs 1991:160). The Comaroffs however caution against an all too simplistic understanding of ritual and its functions by maintaining that

ritual is never merely conservative. It is not simply an adhesive that holds together authoritative social arrangements and institutions. Under certain conditions, its power may be called upon to illuminate, interpret, and counter dissonance in the lived environment. ... As new contradictions and unfamiliar cultural forms were implanted into their social context, Tswana increasingly invoked traditional ritual itself as a symbol of a lost world of order and control. (Comaroffs 1991:160)

There is indeed another side to the coin of ritual’s social functions. It not only serves to maintain and uphold social norms and customs. It not only seeks to uphold the status quo, and unquestioningly accept the powers and circumstances that be. Ritual is also used to question, challenge and destabilise. Curiously, ritual is both about maintenance *and* change, preservation *and* deconstruction, upholding authority *and* testing it. Linda Thomas, who in her book (1999) deals with “ritual process and spiritual resilience” in an AIC in South Africa, asserts that certain rituals are developed “to reorient, and in a sense, reinvent ... social reality” (Thomas 1999:116).<sup>385</sup> In her observation, rituals “performed in sacred space empowered people when they entered secular space”; symbols used in rituals “served as hermeneutical text to understand the world in which members lived their lives” (:116). For this reason Thomas is of the opinion that certain rituals have the ability to empower those with little socio-political power. Ritual can be a form of agency to transform a life situation which the socially disadvantaged lack in other areas (:82). Furthermore, it promotes collective self-identity, often in the face of external pressures (:84). Thomas goes as far as saying that some

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<sup>382</sup> Given these observations, it is not surprising that African communities, in particular, make such extensive use of ritual. In their desire for social harmony and equilibrium, they employ a myriad of rituals that aim at promoting just that.

<sup>383</sup> See also Danfulani (2000:99).

<sup>384</sup> To illustrate his point, he divulges an example of a ritual ceremony for the settlement of disputes between two warring parties, known as *Cleansing the chest of grudges* (Koka 2003:6-8), which has been elaborated in the previous section, and will be analysed in the subsequent section.

<sup>385</sup> Gluckmann warns that rituals “tend to drop into desuetude in the modern urban situation where the material basis of life, and the fragmentation of roles and activities, of themselves segregate social roles” (1962:38). He seems to say that rituals are incompatible with modern life (:37), and are in danger of fading into oblivion. Thomas’ study among many others disproves this assumption by showing how in fact ritual is alive and well – even in modern urban settings.

rituals (notably rituals of healing), as practised by indigenous churches in Africa, represent “a counterhegemonic force” (:122) and are therefore a power to be reckoned with, even politically. Dillistone (1986), too, highlights the aspects of ritual behaviour that seek to promote social change rather than stability. Many scholars, he concedes, give impressive testimony to the existence and value of the type of ritual that brings coherence and stability to a society. “But symbolic forms are also needed for social experience in time, for change, for interaction” (Dillistone 1986:108).<sup>386</sup> These Dillistone regards as “historical symbols, as shaped, patterned, formed by critical events in social experience”<sup>387</sup>. The point is that every society needs an amount of structure as well as “anti-structure” (Dillistone 1986:114).<sup>388</sup>

Symbolic rites are needed to ensure a safe passage and a happy return. Thus there are on the one hand symbolic forms necessary for the maintenance of the regular health and ordered existence of the whole society. These constitute a kind of intellectual framework, subject to only minor deviations or adjustments from generation to generation. There are on the other hand forms necessary to rouse and encourage and provide a sense of purpose for those facing unknown hazards, whether in individual or community life. Such forms are more variable, more related to the emotions and dependent more upon charismatic leadership. (Dillistone 1986:111)

From the arguments elaborated above, it follows that rituals are generally communal in nature. Another way of putting it is that rituals “set collectivity in motion; groups come together to celebrate them” (Durkheim 1995:352).<sup>389</sup> Sundermeier (1998:53) claims, “Ritual calls forth emotions which the group believes are essential for its own continued existence and the well-being of the individual; it stabilises and channels them. In this respect it has a controlling function.” Like other scholars already mentioned, Sundermeier agrees that rituals design ways of ordering the world, making it manageable and keeping chaos at bay. More specifically, ritual has six dimensions. The first is its social function. Second is its expressive, poetic dimension, which assists in shaping the aesthetics of a society, and implies creativity and celebration (Sundermeier 1998:54). Third is the cognitive, educational function, which seeks to imbue moral values and ancient knowledge. Fourth, ritual provides ways of structuring space, and both distinguishing and inter-relating the sacred and the secular. The fifth dimension of ritual is its legal dimension, whereby it assists in establishing a rule of (uncodified) law. Sixth is its religious dimension, which seeks to “make the invisible visible” (1998:55). Essentially, all six of these dimensions are ultimately of social concern, and serve to edify the community at large.

#### *Types of ritual*

One of the fathers of ritual and religious study, Emile Durkheim (1995:301 ff), establishes two main categories of what he calls “principal modes of ritual conduct”, viz. the “negative cult” and the “positive cult”. The “negative cult” includes practices surrounding taboo and prohibitions (:304), contagion, and bringing together and mixing

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<sup>386</sup> Such rituals and symbols have the ability to “stir to action” or “bind together” a social group (Dillistone 1986:219).

<sup>387</sup> Here, Dillistone seeks to stress that Douglas’ focus on *natural* symbols, in her book of the same title, needs to be counterbalanced by a recognition of *historical* symbols and rituals.

<sup>388</sup> See also Turner (1969). In connection to this, Dillistone (1986:122) advocates both traditional symbols, which hold things together and “innovative symbols” which bring “together representatives of different cultures and for the expansion of new perspectives in all cultures”.

<sup>389</sup> After much study of sacrificial rites in particular, Durkheim (1995:340-341) concludes that sacrifices are an expression of communion with those for whom the sacrifice is made (i.e. gods, ancestors, etc.). Sacrifice therefore is an intrinsically social ritual, concerned with a communal meal – involving not only the living human participants, but also those others who are invited to be present at the event.



opposites (:329).<sup>390</sup> The forms of “positive cult” he investigates are (1) sacrifice (:330ff), (2) “mimetic rites” (:355) and (3) representative or commemorative rites (:374). Much of his investigation focuses on sacrificial rites. “Mimetic rites” are those in which people ritually imitate animals (:355). Representative or commemorative rites are ceremonies whose purpose it is “to join the present to the past and the individual to the collectivity” (:382); they are a “means by which the social group reaffirms itself periodically” (:390). Particular forms of representative or commemorative rites are so-called “piacular rites”. These are “sad ceremonies” which serve the purpose “to meet a calamity or to remember and mourn one”. The term “piaculum” suggests the idea of expiation but is broader than that (:392). Rituals of mourning fulfil a social obligation of lamentation (:401) and are seen as a way “to turn aside an evil or expiate a misdeed” (:409).

Theo Sundermeier (1998:77-92) places special emphasis on rituals of mourning. These “are understood as social and legal institutions which regulate the position of the survivors and restore the damaged equilibrium of the community” (:77). Applying Kübler-Ross’ theory about the stages of mourning to a Pedi mourning ritual (:78-87), Sundermeier (1998:78) observes,

Rituals are an elementary, non-verbal means of communicating spiritual tension. Not only is a personal problem ‘expressed’ and thereby given spiritual relief, but people around are drawn into the problem. A community of mutual experience comes into being, giving support to individuals so that the pain can begin to heal. If the emotions necessary for healing are absent, then the ritual has an activating function. It calls them up, and at the same time subdues them.

Furthermore, mourning rituals “are a means of defence” against evil forces which are thereby kept at bay; they are “rituals of separation”, have a “healing function” and represent “a coping strategy”. Mourning rituals are “rituals of re-birth. The dead are prepared for new birth and so are the survivors, who are born into a new status in society.” Therefore, such rituals are “ultimately directed towards new life” (Sundermeier 1998:89)<sup>391</sup>. Indeed, Sundermeier (1998:92) argues that

Rituals are mainly observed when life is most seriously threatened, that is, in times of crisis. ... [They] lead individuals through the tunnel of threat into life beyond, giving them a new status in tune with the community. In this way, ritual becomes a healer for individuals and a regulator of public life. Ritual brings about change.

Further types of ritual investigated by Sundermeier are rites of passage which include rites of hierarchy or status-change (1998:56), circumcision (:59ff) and marriage (:69ff).

To differentiate between different types of ritual behaviour, Grimes defines a number of “modes of ritual sensibility”. These include “ritualization, decorum, ceremony, liturgy, magic, and celebration” (Grimes 1982:35). “Ritualization” processes tend to be “seasonal, agricultural, fertility, divinatory, and healing ones, because they make explicit the interdependence of people with their physical environments and bodies” (:37). They are rituals with “inescapably biological and natural” roots (:39), and include mannerisms and gestures. “Decorum” belongs mainly to “civic and social life” (:39), like the formalities of, for example, greeting, departing and tea drinking. “Ceremony” is “intentional” and includes “labour rallies, political fanfares, coronations, inaugurations, convocations, Olympic games, and courtroom sessions” (:41). “Liturgy” is described as “any liturgical action with an ultimate frame of reference and the doing of which is felt to be of cosmic necessity”. In liturgy “we wait upon power”. It is “a structured waiting upon an influx of whole-making (holy) power” and is inherently a “spiritual exercise” (:43). According to Grimes, examples of liturgy include meditation, invocation and praise. “Magic” is “pragmatic, ritual work” (:45), like healing and fertility divination.

<sup>390</sup> See Fardon (1990:83ff, 107ff) for rituals surrounding death and pollution.

<sup>391</sup> “Each life is directed towards death. But new life grows out of death, both here and in the other world. Only through death is there life. That is why participants die the ritual death” (Sundermeier 1998:91).

“Celebration” brings a “ludic element” to ritual (:47); it is “expressive play” (:48), and finds manifestation in carnivals, birthdays and feasts, among others.<sup>392</sup>

In his later work (1990), Grimes expands on his findings, and specifies different types of rituals more precisely. Rituals may be categorised as

- performed, embodied, enacted, gestural (not merely thought or said);
- formalized, elevated, stylized, differentiated (not ordinary, unadorned, or undifferentiated);
- repetitive, redundant, rhythmic, (not singular or once-for-all);
- collective, institutionalized, consensual (not personal or private);
- patterned, invariant, standardized, stereotyped, ordered, rehearsed (not improvised, idiosyncratic, or spontaneous);
- traditional, archaic, primordial (not invented or recent);
- valued highly or ultimately, deeply felt, sentiment laden, meaningful, serious (not trivial or shallow);
- condensed, multilayered (not obvious; requiring interpretation);
- symbolic, referential (not merely technological or primarily means-end oriented);
- perfected, idealized, pure, ideal (not conflictual or subject to criticism and failure);
- dramatic, ludic [i.e., playlike] (not primarily discursive or explanatory; not without special framing or boundaries);
- paradigmatic (not ineffectual in modeling either other rites or non-ritualized action);
- mystical, transcendent, religious, cosmic (not secular or merely empirical);
- adaptive, functional (not obsessional, neurotic, dysfunctional);
- conscious, deliberate (not unconscious or preconscious) (Grimes 1990:14)

In an examination of a number of indigenous societies, Gluckmann (1962:2-3) came to the conclusion that the main categories underlying rituals are separation (e.g. at funerals), transition (e.g. at initiation) and incorporation (e.g. at weddings).<sup>393</sup> Gluckmann found that each ceremony has “specific protective, propitiatory, acquisitive, purificatory, productive, and/or predictive purposes, according to its situation in social life” (1962:4). In Gluckmann’s analysis (1962:23), rituals can be distinguished as four kinds or types. First, there are rituals of magical action, which include the use of mystical powers. Second are rituals of religious action, which in Africa usually involve the cult of the ancestors. Third is substantive or constitutive ritual “which expressed or altered social relationships by reference to mystical notions”. Rites of passage are typical for this category. Fourth are factitive rituals which increase the material well-being or strength of the group.<sup>394</sup>

Umar Danfulani (2000), a scholar of ritual practice among some peoples of Nigeria, highlights divination as a major ritual category. The communities under his scrutiny made extensive use of divination for “individual and communal affliction, conflict, and crises caused by both spiritual and human agents”. Divination here includes “redressive rites needed to avert, remedy, and exorcise affliction,” especially ill health (Danfulani 2000:88). The diviner conducting the ritual makes use of oracular speech<sup>395</sup>,

<sup>392</sup> See the insightful table on modes of ritual sensibility (Grimes 1982:50).

<sup>393</sup> These categories are indeed reminiscent of Turner’s phases of the ritual process. However, Gluckmann applies them to different rituals in their entirety, whereas Turner uses these categories to describe the process of each and every ritual.

<sup>394</sup> See also Fardon (1990:83ff) for an investigation of kinds of ritual.

<sup>395</sup> According to Jahn (1961:124), “since man has power over the word, it is he who directs the life force. Through the word he receives it, shares it with other beings, and so fulfils the meaning of life.” All activities

ritual actions, and designated paraphernalia<sup>396</sup>. “The statements of the diviner are considered efficacious through the meaning they convey” (:99). Danfulani has found that the communities he analysed perform a number of rites for national calamities (e.g. famine, drought, pests) “to remove the calamity, purify the land, and guard against future occurrences” (:91). Under certain circumstances the people make use of rites for invoking a deity to avenge injustice (:95).

In most cases, affliction is removed and health and well-being restored through redressive sacrificial rituals of reconciliation. The ... diviner acts as the mediator between the victim of affliction and the afflicting agent by penetrating into the spirit realm and returning with an intelligible etiology of the ill health. The ... diviner recommends that what should be done to restore health and well-being. From the ritual process of ... divination, therefore, a normal pattern of interaction is resumed between the individual and the spirit realm, and with fellow human beings. (Danfulani 2000:97)

Therefore, as has already been discussed above, certain rituals are “mechanisms for reducing, excluding, or resolving social conflicts in society” (Danfulani 2000:99).

Although ritual action can be distinguished as either beneficent or destructive, my focus here is on the beneficent category of rituals. According to the Comaroffs (1991:158), beneficent ritual (*bongaka* in SeTswana) contains two classes of rites, viz. “healing or constituting” (*go alafa*) or “strengthening, affirming, reproducing” (*go thaya*). For *go alafa* divination is required to define the malady and its source, and then treatment is needed to reverse the condition. It is focussed on personal affliction, but nonetheless is seen to regenerate the social order at large. *Go thaya* affirms or renews the structure of the social world through fixed or commemorative rites, e.g. the establishment of settlements, redrawing of boundaries around homesteads, or redefinition of status at moments of passage. It frequently links up with the agricultural cycle. While its focus is on communal reconstruction, it also seeks to restore individual participants.

Rituals of healing are of particular importance in Africa.<sup>397</sup> In her study of “some aspects of healing methods among black South Africans” (1986), Vera Buehrmann notes that common features in healing procedures involve purification, exorcism, confession and catharsis, dream interpretation, and ritual ceremonies involving lengthy incantations (1986:106). Healing aims at restoration of the balance of relationships. Healing ceremonies frequently involve dance (:111). The personality and attitude of the healer play a role in the efficacy of the process (:108). The healing rite often includes “open-ended oracular conversations” which allow “healers and clients to exchange interpretations of events and relations and thus to subsume chaotic, usually painful, experience into available symbolic categories” (Comaroffs 1991:157).

Healing rituals are sometimes specifically aimed at promoting reconciliation.<sup>398</sup> The category “reconciliation rituals” is not clearly defined and watertight, but rather

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of human beings and all movements in nature “rest on the word, on the productive power of the word, ... which is life force itself” (:126). African medicine is always connected to the word, or “*Nommo*” (:127). “All magic is word magic, incantation and exorcism, blessing and curse” (:132). There is no harmless or noncommittal word; every word has consequences. The word binds, and a person is responsible for his/her word (:133). Humans have dominion over things through words (:135). Ultimately, *Nommo* is “a procreative force” which can transform a thing into an image; the word creates an image (:151).

<sup>396</sup> For example, Pa diviners make use of pebbles (i.e. shuffling and casting of pebbles, inscribing pebbles, interpreting the message of the pebbles) (Danfulani 2000:99ff). Other paraphernalia used during divination procedures in Africa may include bones, shells, animal teeth or claws, feathers, stones or sticks.

<sup>397</sup> See for example Thomas (1999) and Davies (1995). See also sections 1.5.1 and 2.4.1. “Healing was, and remains, a context in which cultural forms may be realigned, symbols given renewed value, established practices extended or transformed” (Comaroffs 1991:157).

<sup>398</sup> See Hay (1998:137), who is of the opinion that rituals of reconciliation indeed “help victims and communities mourn, heal, confront the past, exorcise the evil of the past, celebrate forgiveness, etc.” On the other hand, reconciliation rituals also enable perpetrators “to express repentance, remorse, contrition,

encompasses a range of ritual practices. According to Cas Wepener (2004c:11), the various types of “reconciliation rituals” may be distinguished as protest rituals, confession rituals, therapeutic or cleansing rituals, acceptance or forgiveness rituals, reintegration and unity rituals, and rituals of reparation.<sup>399</sup> Nonetheless, a single ritual may be so versatile that it incorporates several of the distinctive features of reconciliation mentioned by Wepener (such as confession, as well as cleansing or acceptance etc.).

#### *Participants*

Of course, human beings are the prime participants in ritual. As elaborated above, it is human society and sociality that is the focus of most ritual occurrences. Yet besides human beings other “beings” also share in certain rituals. According to Fardon, rituals frequently involve “inhuman company”, both in the form of the dead (1990:34ff) and in the form of animals (:39ff). Communication with the dead (:90ff) is not uncommon in rituals, especially in African indigenous settings. Indeed, “superhuman agency” is a distinctive attribute of religious ritual (Lawson 1993:197), and is exemplified by the ancestors, gods, God, spirits or impersonal forces, etc. Plants, inanimate objects such as minerals or stones, medicines, colour etc. are also considered active participants in some rituals (Fardon 1990:170ff).

#### *Ritual experts*

According to Jean and John Comaroff (1991:156), ritual in African societies is an especially forceful mode of action, it is skilled “work”. In ritual one can observe “the controlled and stylized manipulation of words, gestures, and substances – techniques, that is, that concentrated [the ritual performers’] properties and powers.” The effectiveness of a ritual is believed to deepen as the (innate and learnt) competencies of ritual performers increase. The *ngaka* or ritual expert, acts as the mediator between the “domesticated” and the “wild”, the living and the dead. He or she is therefore also viewed as the restorer of the integrity of the (personal and social) disrupted body, as the integrity of the body is based on the proper alignment of the categories of the cosmos (Comaroffs 1991:156). Through ritual, and with the help of a ritual expert, disruption is set right, harmony is restored. Any form of calamity demands an explanation and, ultimately, a remedy.<sup>400</sup> The treatment process involves a ritual expert (or more) who either performs divination of the

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etc.”. In general, rituals are required which “express justice, reparation, reconciliation, hope, human dignity and honour.” Such rituals must be employed “at the national, local and individual levels”, in order to have the desired positive impact on the whole of society.

<sup>399</sup> “Die tipes wat hier onderskei kan word, alhoewel uiteenlopend in hoe hulle daar uitsien en nie opgedeel in waterdigte kompartemente nie, behels:

Protesrituele – optogte; geskryfte soos verklarings; handelinge van onthouding soos vas, nie koop nie of sanksies

Belydenisrituele – verbale skuldbelydenisse; dokumente soos skulderkennings en verklarings; tyd vir stilte

Helings- of terapeutiese- of reinigingsrituele – uitpraat; vertel van stories; die maak van kunswerke (klei; papier; gedigte ens.); plak van papiertjies teen kruis en verbranding daarvan; eksorsismes soos byeenkomste op plekke waar ongeregtigheid plaasgevind het

Aanvaardings- of vergifnisrituele – omhelsings; handeskud; gebede; rook; seën; handewas; gebruik van kristalle

Herintegreerende- of saambindende rituele – saam eet en drink; verklarings; register van versoening; simboliese begraving; besprinkeling (met byvoorbeeld bloed); dans

Reparasierituele – simboliese gradeplegtighede; teruggee van eiendom

Elkeen van hierdie tipes is ‘n soort wat pas binne die repertoire van versoeningsrituele, alhoewel daar in elke tipe op ‘n ander aspek van die proses van versoening gefokus word.” (Wepener 2004c:11)

<sup>400</sup> Social and personal disruption can be caused by sorcery (*boloi*), pollution (*bothitho*), unleashed undomesticated spirits (*medimo*), ancestral punishment (*badimo*), and lastly, if no other cause can be found, by God (*modimo*) (Comaroffs 1991:157). See also Booyens (1986:117-122).

cause and circumstance of the calamity or takes on the role of mediator in the ritual process.<sup>401</sup>

*Bridging past, present and future*

Two elements of ritual that are dealt with extensively by Harvey Cox in his book, *Feast of Fools* (1970), are festivity and fantasy. According to Cox, festivity and fantasy enable humans to “appropriate an extended area of life, including the past, into its own experience” (:7). Through festivity and fantasy human beings learn to deal with their past and find a good way forward into the future. This is an important feature of rituals also. Ritual celebration is a way in which we learn “to affirm both life and history without being suffocated by them” (:32). Furthermore, festivity “remains one of the few human actions where we keep our two environments in proper tandem” – the mundane and the divine, the transcendent and the physical (:47). Essentially, festivity is required for healthy human and social life.

For Cox, festivity is “closely related to memory, and fantasy is more akin to hope”. Both together are needed for a sense of origin and destiny, and of not being trapped “in an ephemeral bubble” (:8). In a world of constant change “both festival and fantasy are indispensable for survival” (:12). Festivity and fantasy are necessary to avoid a society from becoming “alienated from its past and cynical about its future” (:13).<sup>402</sup>

Rituals “link human beings to their story, and give them a past and a future” (Cox 1970:14).<sup>403</sup> Fortes (1962:66) claims that rituals, and the rules, injunctions and prohibitions under which they function, appeal to certain founding myths of the society.<sup>404</sup> Rituals need stories – myths – to sustain them, and they in turn sustain the stories upon which they are built. Rituals together with myths play a crucial role in the shaping and sustaining of human identity. As mediators of social identity, rituals point to a society’s collective memory.<sup>405</sup> Myths can be seen as contributing to a community’s collective memory.<sup>406</sup> Both myths and rituals involve the use of archetypal images (Grimes 1982:153, referring to the ritual studies approaches of Jung and Eliade). Rituals contribute to “image making”<sup>407</sup>, as indeed they also draw from the images and myths underlying societies’ self-definition.

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<sup>401</sup> See Lederach (1997:67-69) for an exploration of the process and mediation, which involves intermediary roles and functions.

<sup>402</sup> See the discussion on collective memory in sections 1.1 and 1.2, as well as James and van de Vijver (2000), Bundy (2000), Adam and Adam (2000).

<sup>403</sup> Sperber (1975:145) claims, “The cyclical movement of cultural symbolism might seem absurd if it were not precisely for the constructive character of remembering. Indeed, it is not a question here of the endless quest for an impossible solution, but rather of a repeated work of re-organisation of the encyclopaedic memory. Each new evocation brings about a different reconstruction of old representations, weaves new links among them, integrates into the field of symbolism new intonation brought to it by daily life: the same rituals are enacted, but with new actors; the same myths are told, but in a changing universe, and to individuals whose social position, whose relationships with others, and whose experience have changed.”

<sup>404</sup> Fortes (1962:78) cites an example of a founding myth which functions to sustain and give credence to the rite of renewal of a chief’s office.

<sup>405</sup> See Adam and Adam (2000).

<sup>406</sup> For an examination of the role and function of myth, see Childs (1960) and Manyeli (1992). Examples of important myths in South Africa are the Basotho myth of Kholumo-lumo (Manyeli 1992:33; see also Casalis 1861:347-349), the myth of Litaolane, the myth of the Lizard and the Chameleon (Manyeli 1992:110), “The metamorphosis of a maiden” (Casalis 1861:344ff) and “The little hare” (Casalis 1861:350ff).

<sup>407</sup> See Villa-Vicencio (2000).

Cox (1970:15) asserts, "A race that has lost touch with past and future through the debilitation of ritual, revelry, and visionary aspirations will soon shrink to a tribe of automatons". The loss of festivity "severs man's (sic) roots in the past and clips back his reach toward the future. It dulls his psychic and spiritual sensibilities" (:26). Ritual celebration both "restores us to a proper view of history-making" and assists us in "finding our way forward" (:32).

There is a festive way of appropriating the past, a way that accepts the past without being bound by it, that views past history not as a prison to escape or as an antique to be preserved but as a dimension of reality that enlarges and illuminates the present. (Cox 1970:32)

Fantasy like festivity reveals man's (sic) capacity to go beyond the empirical world of the here and now. But fantasy exceeds festivity. In it man not only relives and anticipates, he remakes the past and creates wholly new futures. Fantasy is a humus. Out of it man's ability to invent and innovate grows. (Cox 1970:59)

Part of this process involves what Cox describes as "symbol formation and myth creation" (:67).

It is ritual which imparts both the structure and the circumstance for the expression of fantasy. In ritual human beings enact the dreams and hopes of the community to which they belong. "Ritual is social fantasy" (:70-71). Of course there is always the danger of ritual becoming ideological (i.e. oppressive) or idiosyncratic (i.e. exclusive, benefiting just one group), cautions Cox (:71). Rituals "laden with doctrines" become rigid and less accommodating (:73). For this reason Cox advocates the invention of rituals; "living liturgy" has its origins "not [only] in the churches but in the world" (:81). Nonetheless, rituals "must have a social dimension" as well as "a historical dimension" (:73).

Ritual "transforms the inchoate into the expressive" (Cox 1970:73). Its grand task is to "lure people into festive fantasy, put them in touch with the deepest longings of the race, help them to step into the parade of history, and ignite their capacity for creation" (:81). Effectively, Cox advocates the use of ritual in a creative and celebratory fashion. Ritual, as the base for festivity and fantasy, has great potency for identity formation, society-building and moral formation. For this reason much effort and thought needs to go into the establishment of efficacious rituals.

What Cox suggests is comparable to what Hobsbawm and Ranger term the "invention of tradition" (1993) – i.e. the creation of new or renewed rituals that both draw from the past and cater for the present and future needs of our societies. Old rituals may also be re-shaped to suit a new context.<sup>408</sup> "Invented tradition"

is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1993:1)

Inventing traditions is a process of "formalization and ritualization characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition". It occurs in rapidly changing societies, where old categories are no longer valid, and must be readapted (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1993:4). Robin Horton (1971:106) interprets developments in African belief and ritual "as responses of the traditional cosmology to the successive interpretative challenges posed by modern social change". In situations of rapid social change, ritual is particularly important for the establishment of new traditions, since it enables the

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<sup>408</sup> "Rituals are events; they have lifespans. ... Thinking of them as unchanging is a half-truth. They are not artifacts. They are not structures in the sense that a building is a structure. They are structurings, as a dance is. They surge and subside, ebb and flow. ... Rituals deteriorate. Entropy is the rule; therefore, they must be raised up constantly from the grave of book, body, memory, and culture." (Grimes 1982:57)

formation of a new identity.<sup>409</sup> It cannot be denied that African society (especially in South Africa) is rapidly changing and in flux. For the above-mentioned reasons suggested by Cox, Hobsbawm, Ranger and Horton, South Africa may provide fertile ground for the “invention” of rituals. (This will be discussed in more depth in section 5.4.)

### *Symbols*

“Ritual entails symbolism,” insists Kwame Appiah (1992:113). An essential component of rituals are symbols. The “symbol is the smallest unit of ritual which still retains the specific properties of ritual behaviour: it is the ultimate unit of specific structure in a ritual context” (Turner 1967:19). Paul Ricoeur defines symbol “as any structure of significance in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates, in addition, another meaning which is indirect, secondary and figurative and which can be apprehended only through the first” (1974:12). Rollo May determines human beings to be uniquely “symbol-using organisms”, a fact which distinguishes them from the rest of nature (May 1960:20).<sup>410</sup>

Clifford Geertz insists that “culture” is “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men (sic) communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life” (quoted in Dillistone 1986:114). In Geertz’s view, the interpretation of cultures “is basically an interpretation of symbols” (Dillistone 1986:115). It can be said that sacred or religious symbols serve to construct as well as exhibit a society’s ethos – “the tone, character and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood – and their world-view – the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order” (Dillistone 1986:115, quoting Geertz).

According to theologian Paul Tillich (1960:75), the following are the main characteristics of a symbol: (1) A symbol is figurative: “This implies that the inner attitude which is oriented to the symbol does not have the symbol itself in view but rather that which is symbolized in it.” (2) It is perceptible, which implies “that something which is intrinsically invisible, ideal, or transcendent is made perceptible in the symbol and is in this way given objectivity” (:75). (3) A symbol has “innate power” – it has “a power inherent within it that distinguishes it from the mere sign which is impotent in itself” (:76). (4) It is acceptable as such. This means that “the symbol is socially rooted and socially supported. Hence it is not correct to say that a thing is first a symbol and then gains acceptance; the process of becoming a symbol and acceptance of it as a symbol belong together” (:76).

Tillich (1960:77) claims that religious symbols hold all these characteristics, but that they are distinguished from other symbols by being representations “of that which is unconditionally beyond the conceptual sphere, they point to the ultimate reality implied in the religious act, to what concerns us ultimately” (see also Dillistone 1986:20). Karl Rahner (quoted in Dillistone 1986:135) indeed claims that the entire theological enterprise “is incomprehensible if it is not essentially a theology of symbols”. For Rahner, the symbol is not to be seen separate from that which it symbolizes; rather, the thing symbolised becomes “present” in and “united with” the symbol (Dillistone 1986:135). A religious symbol is a representation of the sacred in the context of the secular world. The symbol thereby “participates in the sacredness” and may itself become regarded as sacred (Dillistone 1986:143; see also Eliade 1979:445).

Therefore, religious symbols stand for the transcendent. They bring together and hold together “some familiar aspect of human experience with that which is beyond

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<sup>409</sup> Adam and Adam (2000:45) for example claim that the practice of rituals creates social identity.

<sup>410</sup> Mulago (1969:137) highlights the place of symbol in vital participation. Symbol is used to enter into contact with other living beings and strengthen union (:150). Indeed, “Symbolism ... makes this communion-in-participation perceptible and tangible” (:158).

experience of expression". Symbol unites the human quest with the greater, "even the ultimate, reality" (Dillistone 1986:20, referring to Tillich's theory).<sup>411</sup> Ultimate reality which a symbol testifies to cannot be regarded in a detached, disinterested manner. Using the Christian symbol of the cross as an example, May (1960:16) argues that such a symbol "presents a picture in which some decision, some orientation toward movement, some action is called for". If you are genuinely confronted with a symbol of such calibre, you are obligated to "take some stand with regard to it" (May 1960:17). Symbols therefore evoke an existential reaction in those who allow themselves to be drawn in by them.<sup>412</sup>

"Symbols *connect*," declares Dillistone (1986:226). They have a spiritual dimension by connecting people with the transcendent, a social dimension by connecting people with each other, and a psychological dimension by connecting people with themselves (Dillistone 1986:231). In other words, a symbol is "a bridging act" – bridging the gap "between outer existence (the world) and inner meaning" (May 1960:22). It draws out "inner reality" and thus enables human beings "to experience greater reality in the outside world as well" (May 1960:45). Symbol is the manifestation of "the confrontation and communication of an inner with an outer reality" (Kahler 1960:53). Just as rituals do (see Cox's examination of ritual, above), symbols "point to the past, present and future", the immanent and the transcendent (Turner 1962:172). Sundermeier (1998:51) alleges that also and particularly in African societies,

symbols link the past to the present; they link people to their environment, of which they are a part, and transform them. Symbols are mirrors of real life, mirrors of people in society and the cosmos. The symbol, which points beyond itself, involving many layers of meaning which cannot be grasped rationally, is the point of contact with 'transcendence', the channel for the powers of the other world, which in Africa is so close and so immanent.<sup>413</sup>

Types of religious symbols include "objective religious symbols" and "self-transcending religious symbols" (Tillich 1960:89). The first level of objective religious symbolism includes "the world of divine beings" (:89), while the second level has to do with "characterizations of the nature and actions of God" (:91). The third group encompasses "natural and historical objects that are drawn as holy objects into the sphere of religious objects and thus become religious symbols" (:92). These third level objective symbols can be characterised as "pointing symbols" since they belong to a category of signs and actions that "contain a reference to religious objects of the first level" (:93). Pointing symbols "are transitional in character" (:94). Significantly, Tillich identifies a conceptual connection between symbols and sacraments (1978:130ff). A sacramental symbol "can be a medium of the Spirit" because "it participates in the power of what it symbolizes" (1978:130).<sup>414</sup>

In Africa, symbols are created "around people". "This is an element clearly distinguishing them from Indian and Chinese religions with their symbols based on cosmology" (Sundermeier 1998:7). Symbolism is "an instrument of social communication" (Sperber 1975:xii). Just like rituals, symbols stir people up, they "instigate social action" (Turner 1967:36). Furthermore, they refer both to "the basic needs of social existence" and to "shared values on which communal life depends"

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<sup>411</sup> Symbol "brings together the various unconscious urges and desires, or both a personal depth on one hand and an archaic, archetypal depth on the other; and it unites these with conscious elements in the ... day to day struggles with ... problems" (May 1960:15). Furthermore, "symbols and myths are an expression of man's (sic) unique self-consciousness, his capacity to transcend the immediate concrete situation and see his life in term of 'the possible,' and that this capacity is one aspect of his experiencing himself as a being having a world" (May 1960:33).

<sup>412</sup> Symbols are "engaged existentially" (Dillistone 1986:143).

<sup>413</sup> See also Manyeli (1992), who discusses in particular the religious symbols of the Basotho.

<sup>414</sup> Mulago (1969:158) asserts that "sacramentalism" is the "culmination" of symbolism, and "extends and perpetuates the Holy Humanity of the Word".



(Turner 1967:37). They are associated with powerful conscious or unconscious emotions and wishes of the group, as well as individuals in it (Turner 1967:32). For this reason symbols and symbolic action found in ritual processes can have a strong psychological impact on people and societies.

In most African contexts, "symbol formation can be clearly shown in four areas: village architecture, sacrifice, body symbolism<sup>415</sup>, and medicine<sup>416</sup>" (Sundermeier 1998:42). These categories can be expanded to include symbolism surrounding space, colour and certain bodily secretions<sup>417</sup> (:45). According to Dillistone, further examples of very widespread symbolic forms entail food (1986:33, 34), the land, earth or soil (:45), clothing (:49), light and darkness (:57), fire, water (:63) and blood (:67). Other important symbols that shall be elaborated in more detail in subsequent sections include heat and cold, washing, saliva and spitting, clasping hands, ash, bile, etc.

Symbols point to facts that are relatively unknown or unobvious, but are nevertheless "postulated as existing" (Turner 1967:26)<sup>418</sup>. The structure and characteristics of ritual symbols may be deduced from three categories of data: "(1) external form and observable characteristics; (2) interpretations offered by specialists and by laymen; (3) significant contexts largely worked out by the anthropologist" (Turner 1967:20). It can be said that, firstly, symbols have exegetical meaning, as interpreted by indigenous informers, where the focus is on what is *said* about the ritual symbols. Secondly, symbols have operational meaning. Here the focus is on what is *done* with them and is an attempt at equating the symbol's meaning with its use. Symbols also have positional meaning. Here one examines how they relate to *other* symbols belonging in the same complex or *gestalt*. The assumption therefore is that symbols frequently occur in clusters and configurations (Turner 1962:125). Each symbol "in such a configuration brings into it a penumbra of associations derived from its use in other kinds of ritual, and even, in some cases, in pragmatic activities" (:173). Each station in the ritual process can be deemed "an anchoring element in a complex, each of whose items has to be interpreted and related to the whole". On each level of the occurrence "semantic complexities ... combine into a simple sacramental process" (:173).

Each ritual has its senior or "dominant" symbol, which not only plays a crucial role in the achievement of the purpose of the ritual, but is in fact regarded as an end in itself (Turner 1967:20). Dominant symbols have three basic properties. First is the property of "condensation", which reveals the fact that "many things and actions are represented in a single formation". Second, the dominant symbol represents "a unification of disparate significata" (Turner 1967:28). This means, in other words, that symbols are "multivocal or polysemous, e.g. they stand for many things at once" (Turner 1962:125). The diverse "significata" a symbol refers to are held together by inter-linking themes and associations. The third property of a dominant symbol is that it has "two clearly distinguishable poles of meaning", viz. the "ideological pole" and the "sensory pole" (Turner 1967:28). The ideological pole of the symbol refers to "components of the moral and social orders", i.e. it deals with arranging social norms and values. The sensory pole represents the natural and observable elements of the symbol, i.e. it arouses desires and feelings (1967:28). Since both poles are found in the symbol, it "brings ethical and jural norms of society into close contact with strong emotional stimuli" (1967:30). Both poles of a symbol can be ambiguous. For example, on an ideological level, the symbol of wine can both imply celebration and joyfulness as well as loss of control and excess,

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<sup>415</sup> See also Dillistone (1986:33) who argues that "the body is a superb symbol, of wholeness, of variety-in-unity, of proportion".

<sup>416</sup> Medicines as symbolic factors represent "the field in which analogies are cumulatively condensed into effective symbols" (Sundermeier 1998:46).

<sup>417</sup> See also Douglas (1992a), and the section on *The body and the senses*, above.

<sup>418</sup> This distinguishes symbols from signs. According to Jung, a sign is "an analogous or abbreviated expression of a known thing" (Turner 1967:26).

possibly even leading to danger. On the sensory side, the symbol of light can bring about positive associations such as brightness and warmth as well as negative connotations such as exposure and hazard (e.g. in the form of lightning).

Symbolic action bears a plethora of meanings on different levels. Turner (1967:40-41) argues that sometimes, because of their complexity, ritual symbols' meanings may conflict with each other or even contradict each other. He speaks of the "discrepancy between *significata* as a quintessential property of the great symbolic dominants in all religions" (:43).<sup>419</sup> A symbol may in one context mean one thing, and in another context another thing, which might entirely disclaim the meaning it had in the first context. Sometimes the conflict is even more obvious when the different clashing meanings attached to the symbol are perceived within the context of the very same ritual. For example, blood can mean both life, vigour and energy, but it can at the same time imply death, destruction and pain. It can be associated with cleansing as well as with pollution. Similarly, water can suggest both purification (when seen as a ritual cleansing or cooling agent) and danger (when associated with drowning).

All the contradictions of human social life, between norms, and drives, between different drives and between different norms, between society and the individual, and between groups, are condensed and unified in a single representation, the dominant symbols. It is the task of analysis to break down this amalgam into its primary constituents. (Turner 1967:44)

There is an intricate intertwining of the explicit and the submerged, the observable and concealed patterns of meaning of a symbolic ritual (Turner 1967:46). According to Tillich, a symbol functions to make accessible to human perception that which could not be grasped otherwise (Dillistone 1986:124). For Turner, it is of great importance to try not to separate the different levels of meaning from each other, but to allow the symbol to exist and communicate in its entirety – with its contradictions and complexities. Indeed, the whole context in which the symbol functions ought to be seen as an interacting whole, and the symbol ought not to be severed from its system of thought and life praxis (Turner 1967:43). Similarly, the concrete, tangible or material aspect of a symbol ought not to be separated from the spiritual or intangible. Kahler (1960:70) explains,

The *symbol* is something concrete and specific that is intended to convey something spiritual or general, either as an indicating sign, i.e., an act of pointing, or as an actual representation in which the dynamic division of the sign is abolished: that which points, that which it points to, and the act of pointing, have become one and the same. The Greek word *ymballein*, from which 'symbol' derives, means: 'to bring together,' or, 'to come together.' The symbolic *sign* brings together, the symbolic *representation* is a coming together, to the point of complete fusion, of the concrete and the spiritual, the specific and the general.

Ricoeur (1974:12) argues that interpretation of symbols consists in "deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning".<sup>420</sup> This position is debatable. Scholars like Dan Sperber insist that symbols are not to be – and indeed cannot be – "decoded" (1975:12ff). Instead, interpretation is a matter of "improvisation that rests on an implicit knowledge and obeys unconscious rules" (:xi). The assumption underlying this theory is that there are limits of exegesis (:17), and that symbols remain shrouded in obscurity despite attempts to understand them (:23).<sup>421</sup> Sperber is in fact very sceptical of the supposed ability of some to "interpret" symbols objectively. He insists that "symbolic knowledge" is to be

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<sup>419</sup> The symbol is multivalent, "expressing variant, even seemingly contradictory aspects of the sacred" (Dillistone 1986:143; see also Eliade 1979:445).

<sup>420</sup> "Symbol and interpretation thus become correlative concepts."

<sup>421</sup> This is the so-called "cryptological view".

distinguished from “encyclopaedic knowledge” (:91), and that the latter cannot grasp the former in a comprehensive or satisfactory way. The most fascinating cultural knowledge is inferred or implicit knowledge – knowledge that is not obviously revealed. This hidden or “unconscious knowledge” cannot be acquired “by rote”; each individual must reconstruct it (:x). The basic data for this knowledge are intuitions, i.e. “judgments that the members of a cultural group systematically express without elaborating on the underlying argument” (:xi). The consequence is that even symbols must be “symbolically interpreted” (:47).<sup>422</sup>

It can be argued that “ritual is enacted analogy” (Sundermeier 1998:37). The argument here rests on the assumption that underlying Africans’ consciousness and self-identity is the principle of relationships and analogous participation (:49). For African peoples, “Analogical unity is the formal principle of coping with the world. Analogies are condensed into a unity in the [ritual] symbol, making reality transparent enough to handle” (:38). Symbols help articulate reality; reality becomes accessible through symbol. “Just as symbols live from the unity of the visible and the invisible, so they embrace the realms of dreams and poetry” (:40).

With relation to symbols, Sundermeier uses the concepts of “functional analogy” and “homeological analogy”.<sup>423</sup> The functional analogy theory states that things which have the same function are related to each other, e.g. different parts of a slaughtered animal symbolise different social functionaries. Homeological analogy presumes that things which are similar in form and colour have an analogous power relationship to each other, e.g. red earth or molten iron can be related to menstruation; a phallus shaped container refers to the phallus (Sundermeier 1998:33). Furthermore, Sundermeier mentions a number of aspects of African ritual and symbolic behaviour and thinking, for instance the phenomenon of “taking a part for the whole”, e.g. where hair from a person symbolises the whole person (:34). The rule of “condensation” points to situations where one and the same element is used for different, even contradictory, analogies, e.g. red blood can signify either good (e.g. in the case of blood shed at birth) or evil (e.g. in the case of blood shed during murder) (see also Turner, above). The principle of “displacement” refers to instances where non-essentials are moved to the centre and the endeavour comes across like a hoax (:35). With “inverse analogy” opposites are held in tension, e.g. where beauty is depicted through ugly, evil-smelling plants. “Dramatisation” means rituals involve movement (:37). Through the use of ritual symbols, goals are reached peripatetically. Sundermeier (1998:49) explains,

Analogous thinking means approaching from different angles. Since what is in front of you is not simply an object, but you already participate in it, you have to approach it from various angles. Like an animal stalking its prey you slowly circle around the goal, drawing nearer all the time. Access becomes easier through movement.

The combined elements of ritual action and theory mentioned above illuminate that “there is method in apparent absurdities” (Sundermeier 1998:36).

As a final observation, symbols tend to undergo “evolutionary process” (Kahler 1960:53). If a symbol is not to lose its vigour and potency it must be constantly re-adapted and re-interpreted within new contexts. In fact, certain situations may not only require the revision of old symbols but also the invention or creation of new symbols (as well as rituals) in order to appropriately and relevantly address certain issues that may arise in new contexts.

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<sup>422</sup> Sperber distinguishes sharply between “rational” and “symbolic” “modes in cognitive processing” (Boyer 1993:26).

<sup>423</sup> Perhaps there is a correlation between Sundermeier’s theories of analogy in ritual symbolism and Durkheim’s two principles governing “sympathetic magic”. According to Durkheim, magical practices are ruled by two main conventions, viz. (1) “Whatever touches an object also touches everything that has any relationship of proximity or solidarity with that object,” and (2) “Like produces like.” (Durkheim 1995:360)

In this section I have attempted to illustrate a number of ritual scholars' views and theories concerning the topic at hand. I have highlighted several of the aspects of ritual and symbol that I suspect are useful for a creative and in-depth analysis of ritual practice. The ritual I have chosen to analyse in depth, using a number of the insights and methods outlined above, is the *Cleansing the chest of grudges* ritual. It is to this ritual of reconciliation that I now turn.

#### 2.4.3 Special case study: *Cleansing the chest of grudges* ritual

In the previous section I have demonstrated a number of scholars' insights and theories concerning ritual. Now I turn my attention to one of the reconciliation rituals described in section 2.4.1, the ritual of *Cleansing the chest of grudges* (*Ukukhumelana Umlatha/ Tlhapiso ya Dikgaba*), which I want to examine in detail. In this section I therefore investigate and illuminate this ritual in light of some of the methodological theories and insights outlined in section 2.4.2, in order to highlight in what way it is and can be utilised as a ritual for the promotion of social reconciliation. For a description of the ritual, please refer to section 2.4.1 or to the paper by Kgalushi Koka entitled "Conflict Management and Settlement of Disputes: an Afrocentric Perspective", presented at the Southern African Inter-Faith Peace Conference in Johannesburg in 2003.

Koka's paper (referred to as Koka 2003) serves as one of the primary sources upon which my deliberations are based. Another primary source from which I glean insight for interpretation is an interview held with Koka at the *Karaites Institute of Afrikology* in Johannesburg, on 7 July 2004 (referred to as Koka 07.07.2004). Since Koka is both a ritual participant as well as a scholarly observer, his insights into the ritual are multi-faceted. I contend that Koka's interpretation of the ritual at hand is a matter of "improvisation that rests on an implicit knowledge and obeys unconscious rules" (Sperber 1975:xi). He utilises "symbolic knowledge"<sup>424</sup> when rendering his analysis of the ritual (Sperber 1975:91), i.e. the ritual is "symbolically interpreted" (:47). His tools for interpretation rely on inferred or implicit knowledge – "unconscious knowledge" – which cannot be acquired "by rote". Such "unconscious knowledge" is reconstructed again and again in new contexts (Sperber 1975:x). It appears to me that as a participant-observer, Koka's basic data for explaining the ritual and its symbols are intuitions, i.e. "judgments that the members of a cultural group systematically express without elaborating on the underlying argument" (Sperber 1975:xi). This is what makes his contribution so valuable and interesting.

#### *Historical roots of the ritual*

When asked what the historical roots of this ritual are, where it comes from and which ethnic group practises it, Koka (07.07.2004) answers that it is "basically African". He remarks, however, that the Zulu people are known to perform the ritual most overtly. For instance, it was recently used to settle a dispute between King Zwelithini and Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi.

Now these two quarrelled. And when they quarrelled they were either going to divide the Zulu tribe into two, because then there would have been a war between them. But then they resorted to an ancient settlement of disputes ritual. And this ritual is the "licking of the ash". ... And that ended the dispute between Chief Mangosuthu and King Zwelithini. (Koka 07.07.2004)

The ritual is considered to be "really really very ancient". It is used on the high level of diplomacy between chiefs (as the example Koka mentions testifies), in which case it is considered "a very very special occasion". Yet it is also employed on a lower level, when there are "quarrels amongst the families"; it is considered to be able to settle disputes

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<sup>424</sup> According to Sperber, "symbolic knowledge" is to be distinguished from "encyclopaedic knowledge".

between families. Similarly, it can be a powerful means to reconciliation “amongst the youths who could be fighting each other”, e.g. in gang rows. “We can bring them together and settle their quarrel through that,” insists Koka. So, it seems the ritual is versatile and far-reaching in terms of its realm of application. It is not limited to particular contexts, and is not restricted by categories of age, seniority or rank. It is similarly not only practiced by men, but also by women. It is “not exclusive to men”<sup>425</sup>. (Koka 07.07.2004)

In the interview, I ventured to ask whether the ritual of *Tlhapiso ya Dikgaba* is an African ritual in a narrow sense, i.e. whether it is and can only be used by Africans, or whether this ritual can possibly be appropriated by people of other cultures and religions. Koka answered that he believes it can be used by all who want to use it. His reason, “Because African religion is the mother of all religions. Even Christianity originated from African religion. ... There is no contradiction between African religion and Christianity.”<sup>426</sup> The problem comes when people have exclusive practices.” He went on to explain that African ritual practice is not inherently exclusive but inclusive.

When asked how frequently the ritual is still practised, Koka claims it is not done very often any more “in the modern times. But it would be very ideal if it could be applied even now.” Indeed, Koka laments the fact that people with traditional roots and an indigenous heritage are trying to sever themselves from those traditions. He encourages a move towards reconnecting to those traditional roots “just by applying it”, i.e. by simply practising, “applying”, the rituals of old. (Koka 07.07.2004)

#### *Analysis of the ritual*

Rituals “set collectivity in motion; groups come together to celebrate them” (Durkheim 1995:352). This is fundamentally the case with *Cleansing the chest of grudges*. It is a ritual revolving around people, communities, and is certainly not a private affair. Employing Durkheim’s categories of ritual, this ritual would probably be regarded as a form of “negative cult”, since it includes practices surrounding contagion or pollution, and the bringing together and mixing of opposites (1995:329). However, this ritual also displays elements of Durkheim’s “positive cult”, more specifically sacrifice (:330ff), and representative or commemorative rites (:374). Sacrifice occurs in this ritual, albeit in a covert fashion. Representative or commemorative rites are ceremonies whose purpose it is “to join the present to the past and the individual to the collectivity” (:382). Arguably, *Cleansing the chest of grudges* fulfils these functions, and can therefore also be seen as a commemorative or representative rite.

Grimes’ “modes of ritual sensibility” include “ritualization, decorum, ceremony, liturgy, magic, and celebration” (1982:35). I argue the ritual at hand is an expression of three of these modes. First, it is “ceremony” because it is “intentional” and displays tendencies of “political fanfare”, as well as the solemnity of “inaugurations or convocations”. Its ceremonial nature further can be seen in its resemblance to “courtroom sessions” (:41). Second, *Cleansing the chest of grudges* is a form of “liturgy”, because it reveals “an ultimate frame of reference”. Doing the ritual “is felt to be of cosmic necessity”. Furthermore, in this ritual there is “a structured waiting upon an influx of whole-making (holy) power” which makes it inherently a “spiritual exercise” (:43). Thirdly, especially the final stage of our ritual is “celebration”, because there is certainly a “ludic element” in the process of eating and feasting together (:47).

In many cultures, fighting or quarrelling is considered “as being destructive of the proper ritual condition of the village” (Douglas 1992a:152). A social dispute is deemed

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<sup>425</sup> “Although, there is no intermixing between women and men. That is our culture. But it does not mean that women are playing a lesser role. Because, after all, these two come from the same family.”

<sup>426</sup> See also Kaufman’s theory of the “essential oneness” of all religions (1992:5), discussed in section 1.4.3.

dangerous because it threatens the delicate social harmony of the group.<sup>427</sup> Such a “dangerous situation ... has to be handled with washings” (Douglas 1992a:157). The ritual at hand is an example of such a ritual which involves washing or cleansing, i.e. the banishment of a force of destruction which in this case is social enmity. To use the terms of the Comaroffs (1991:158), this is a beneficent ritual (*bongaka* in SeTswana), which might be counted both as “healing or constituting” (*go alafa*) as well as “strengthening, affirming, reproducing” (*go thaya*). According to Gluckmann’s classes of ritual, *Cleansing the chest of grudges* probably counts as a ritual of transition (e.g. similar to initiation) as well as of incorporation (e.g. like a wedding) (1962:2-3). In rites of transition participants undergo social and relational change during the course of the proceedings.

Arguably, it is a ritual “which expresses or alters social relationships by reference to mystical notions” (Gluckmann 1962:23). Because roles in society are seen as a web of complex moral inter-relatedness (:29), a delicate balance of these roles must constantly be maintained, and harmful disturbances – such as a quarrel or fight – must be kept at bay (:30). Rituals such as this one are employed to even out the social equilibrium when it has been altered or breached (:38). For this reason, this ceremony can be understood as a ritualised form of conflict resolution (:39). It is, like similar rituals of its kind, a “mechanism for reducing, excluding, or resolving social conflicts in society” (Danfulani 2000:99).

To use the term of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966:104ff), one could argue that this ritual is employed for “universe maintenance”. It can be seen as a ritual which “establishes and maintains” the delicate social and political network of the community (Gluckmann 1962:17). In other words, it is a ritual designed to create harmony where there has been rupture, to balance the status quo where it has become unbalanced because of rivalry. The social universe of the participants in the ritual has come under attack; the evil of enmity and resentment has crept into the system and has caused social disarray. For this reason, it is necessary to do something to maintain stability and restore harmony.

On the other hand, ritual is also “a counterhegemonic force” (Thomas 1999:122). There are aspects of ritual behaviour that seek to promote social change rather than stability. Besides bringing coherence and stability to a society, rituals are “also needed for social experience in time, for change, for interaction”<sup>428</sup> (Dillistone 1986:219). Arguably, as much as *Cleansing the chest of grudges* seeks, ultimately, to uphold social order and concord, it is also a ritual seeking to bring about change – indeed the transformation of a situation of enmity and the persons involved in it.

When analysing this ritual, certain interesting observations can be made. Using Victor Turner’s theory, it becomes apparent that all three stages of the ritual process occur during the ritual (1969:94). The first, the stage of separation, is achieved by a number of incidents. Firstly, the ritual takes place outside the household, in the place where the ash and other household refuse are thrown. It is not held in normal living space, but is literally and symbolically “outside”, and therefore separate from where the ordinary affairs of the household are conducted. It is in fact a space set apart – indeed “holy”, to stretch the meaning of that term. Secondly, there are elders, i.e. special authoritative persons who here act as ritual experts, who prepare the setting. The ritual is an occurrence that is separate from normal affairs because it requires special preparation by special office-bearers. The presence and role of the elders contribute to the separation phase. Thirdly, the distinctive actions of the ritual experts contribute to the stage of

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<sup>427</sup> “Rituals are mainly observed when life is most seriously threatened, that is, in times of crisis. ... [They] lead individuals through the tunnel of threat into life beyond, giving them a new status in tune with the community. In this way, ritual becomes a healer for individuals and a regulator of public life. Ritual brings about change” (Sundermeier 1998:92). See also Comaroffs (1991:160).

<sup>428</sup> Such rituals and symbols have the ability to “stir to action” or “bind together” a social group (Dillistone 1986:219).

separation. The ritual space is “sanctified” by the presiding elders who wear headbands. The elders perform the skilled “work” of ritual experts by means of “the controlled and stylized manipulation of words, gestures, and substances” (Comaroffs 1991:156). Through their dress and behaviour (i.e. saying prayers to the Supreme God through the ancestors and sprinkling the area with “holy” water) they contribute to creating a space of separation.

The second phase of a ritual, according to Turner, is the liminal phase. This is the stage where transformation occurs, and where the participants of the ritual are no longer what they were before the ritual began, nor are they yet what they will be after it has ended. Participants are “entities in transition” (Turner 1969:103)<sup>429</sup>. Transition or transformation “implies deliberate intervention to effect change”, argues Lederach (1997:82-83). It is “operative across four interdependent dimensions,” i.e. personal, relational, structural and cultural. What this means is that a ritual which seeks to bring about transition does so not only on a personal level (i.e. not only the individual participants are transformed), but on a more holistic scale. Indeed, relationships, structures, even cultures are transformed. In terms of the ritual at hand, during the liminal period, the participants are no longer simply enemies, whom Koka terms “quarrelling parties”, nor are they yet at peace or reconciled. They are in the phase of liminality, “in between” and in transition. To use another of Turner’s expressions, they are in the process of status change – in this case, from being enemies to being friends. Indeed, rituals have to do “primarily with one’s status in the world” (Gorman 1994:24). Turner (1969:95) asserts that ritual participants, “as liminal beings”, “have no status, property, insignia”, in short, there is “nothing that may distinguish them” from one another. Furthermore, the liminal phase “represents partly a destruction of the previous status” and a preparation for participants “to cope with their new responsibilities” (Turner 1969:103).

The liminal phase is a phase of struggle. For Mary Douglas, who would call the liminal stage a phase of “marginality”, liminality is also intimately linked to (potentially perilous) power. “To have been in the margins is to have been in contact with danger, to have been at the source of power” (Douglas 1992a:97). The participants who are in a state of liminality are in a precarious but powerful situation. They have the power to reshape the destiny of their groups, more specifically in this case, to transform the current situation of enmity to concord. Human action in ritual can “unleash spiritual powers” which are potent forces for social change (Douglas 1992a:98). But, if this power exerts itself negatively, it may have dangerous consequences for the whole group. Indeed, a failed reconciliation ritual may intensify and deepen the rifts already present between people.

Transformation that occurs in the liminal phase implies a renegotiation of what reality is supposed to be and will be like once the correct ritual procedure has come to fruition. For the contenders in this ritual, the struggle is portrayed by their verbal intercourse. They are required to state their cases respectively. They are placed under pressure to be honest, lest the ancestors punish them. Dishonesty is further considered a social disgrace, and a hindrance to authentic community. As it were, the opponents are given an opportunity to tell their stories, and in so doing, to confess their resentments and their wrongs. Douglas (1992a:136-137) insists,

There are two distinct ways of cancelling pollution: one is the ritual which makes no enquiry into the cause of the pollution, and does not seek to place responsibility; the other is the confessional rite.

Arguably, *Cleansing the chest* is a form of confessional rite, where the word<sup>430</sup>, or speech, is of central significance.

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<sup>429</sup> “Liminars” is what Turner terms “persons undergoing ritualized transitions” (1969:143).

<sup>430</sup> I remind the reader of the importance of the (spoken) word in African settings. According to Jahn, the

As already elaborated in sections 1.1 and 1.2, confession in the context of storytelling and remembrance is crucial for a reconciliation process. Villa-Vicencio underlines the necessity of memory and narrative for reconciliation. In fact, he claims that “telling one another stories” is the first step towards a “theology of reconciliation” (1995:107ff). Storytelling enables us to understand each other well enough to co-exist, and build a common nation “in diversity and difference” (:105). Truth in storytelling lies at the root of genuine reconciliation (Villa-Vicencio 1995:113; see also Boraine 2000:78-79). Ndebele (2000:152) similarly contends that dialogue between adversaries is necessary for a reconciliation process; reconciliation is “a human project grounded in social process”. Confession is moreover an important aspect of healing of memories.

Lederach emphasises the importance of remembering the past and telling stories, as well as entering into the stories of others. Reconciliation cannot happen if the affected people do not find “innovative ways to create a time and a place, within various levels of the affected population, to address, integrate, and embrace the painful past and the necessary shared future as a means of dealing with the present” (Lederach 1997:35). Reconciliation is the meeting point of the four axes of truth and mercy, peace and justice (:28). Therefore, suggests Lederach, reconciliation “involves the creation of the social space where both truth and forgiveness are validated and joined together, rather than being forced into an encounter in which one must win out over the other” (:29).

Throughout the *Cleansing the chest* ritual, the element of publicity is of fundamental importance. Public ritual practices make “reality transparent enough to handle” (Sundermeier 1998:38). By publicly appearing before the gathered community and the elders, the feuding persons expose – not only to themselves, but also to the whole community – the reality of enmity or hostility between them and those they represent. The feud between them is made transparent and obvious to the community, as is their intended reconciliation. What might have been an impalpable and somewhat obscure force in the community becomes overt and definable – therefore manageable – through ritual. The ritual in fact functions to “make the invisible visible” (Sundermeier 1998:55); it “transforms the inchoate into the expressive” (Cox 1970:73). Reality becomes accessible through ritual and symbol (Sundermeier 1998:38). The unspoken-of (yet powerful) state of enmity is revealed, and therefore loses some of its mystical stronghold over the people. Therefore the ritual and symbolic interaction of the feuding parties in public helps articulate reality for those who participate in and observe the ritual.

Public confession demands a large amount of effort, and represents emotional and psychological exertion. Through this, transformation occurs. After the telling of their stories and confession, the parties are asked to shake hands and utter forgiveness for each other’s wrongs. Just as public confession is a potent force in social reconciliation, public forgiveness is, too. In fact, as will be argued in section 3.3, confession (as an aspect of repentance or transformation) and forgiveness are two sides of the same coin. If people confess their wrongs to each other, but then neither gain nor offer forgiveness, this can almost be seen as thwarting the good intentions underlying the confessional rite. If the element of public forgiveness is lacking this may upset the whole procedure, and indeed may cause the entire venture for reconciliation to topple. One notices how indeed the ritual is both potentially powerful and dangerous, as Douglas has argued.

The act of forgiveness may already be seen as the third phase of the ritual process, the “reaggregation or reincorporation” phase (Turner 1969:94). Koka remarks, “The shaking of hands signifies that the conflicting parties are now fused into ‘ONENESS’ – which is the symbol of return ... from ‘Separateness’ to ‘Communal’ state of life (sic)”

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“power of the word ... is life force itself” (1961:126); *Nommo* is “a procreative force” (1961:151). There is no harmless or noncommittal word; every word has consequences. The word binds, and a person is responsible for his/her word. (Jahn 1961:133) Humans have dominion over things through words (Jahn 1961:135).



(2003). In other words, the liminal phase of transformation, which included the struggle of story-telling and confession, is concluded with the stage where the ritual participants adopt a new status (i.e. of friends, no longer as enemies). They are subsequently readmitted into normal society after their feud (Fortes 1962:55).

The liminal and the reaggregation phases are sometimes inter-woven, and not altogether clearly distinguishable in actual ritual proceedings. In my opinion, liminality is still at work in the next step of the ritual, where water is brought in a calabash and ash is added to it "to 'kill' the evil spirit and curse" (Koka 2003). When ash is taken and licked this seems still to be a liminal act, i.e. an act done for the sake of transformation of the people involved. Just like the verbal confession part, this is also behaviour which represents struggle. It represents doing something in humility and respect of the other. It probably takes courage and willpower to perform this ritual gesture.

The body, and how it is used, is an indicator of society's values and norms. Douglas (1982:70) argues that the human body "is always treated as an image of society" and that "there can be no natural way of considering the body that does not involve at the same time a social dimension". Therefore the humble and even humiliating action of licking ash from the hand of another has social meaning. It signifies the willingness and ability of both parties to show vulnerability and to be humbled before the other. This humility and remorse is a necessary social condition for reconciliation and acceptance of each other. In order to achieve reconciliation, participants show through their bodily actions that they are prepared to surrender their pride and honour in order to restore good relations. It is interesting that some scholars and theologians argue that personal sacrifice is important for a reconciliation process. Such sacrifice could (and often does) involve "the willingness to relinquish an established status or position and to genuinely adopt a lesser position" in order to enable a new relationship (Washington and Kehrein 1993:197). The element of sacrifice in this ritual may be just that, and is presented as displaying humility in word and deed. Sacrifice here means giving up one's sense of pride and letting go of all smugness, accepting the role of the fool.

Furthermore, licking another person's hand is an act which is not "normal", but still belongs in the space and time which is separate from every-day existence and interaction. Douglas would call licking another's hand "anti-social" behaviour. Such behaviour "is the proper expression" of the "marginal condition" of the participants; it belongs to the state of marginality (Douglas 1992a:97). As it were, through this ritual action, one "ventures beyond the confines of society" (1992a:95). Using Turner's term, such behaviour is liminal in nature. The same is true for the participants' action of washing their hands in sanctified water "as an act of cleansing themselves" (Koka 2003). As part of the behaviour that effects the status change, it belongs in the phase of liminality and transformation. Without the licking of the ash and the washing of hands, the change-over from rivals to comrades is not accomplished.

Spitting may be interpreted as "a form of restricted code" (Douglas 1982:55). A restricted code can only emerge when members of a group know each another so well that they share a common set of assumptions which do not need to be made explicit (Douglas 1982:55). To people who are not familiar with the symbolic action of spitting, it may seem strange and peculiar. Ritual is indeed a "paralanguage" – expressed not primarily in words but in gestures (Parkin 1992:11). Some ritual gestures may appear odd under normal circumstances.

"No experience is too lowly to be taken up in ritual and given a lofty meaning," claims Douglas (1992a:114). Small gestures, like the shaking of hands, licking of ash, spitting and washing of hands, bear significant meaning. Great meaning is attached especially to actions which involve body parts, where human beings use their bodies.<sup>431</sup>

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<sup>431</sup> Douglas (1992a:121) argues, "body symbolism is part of the common stock of symbols, deeply emotive because of the individual's experience".

Douglas insists that the human body is a “symbol of society”, that “the body is a model” representing what happens on the larger scale of society (1992a:115)<sup>432</sup>. Gestures, movements or actions done by human beings in a ritual state point beyond themselves (beyond even those human beings involved directly). They reflect the problems, needs and desires of the society at large. For this reason, what happens to the bodies that are directly involved in the ritual intricately affects the society which they represent. Effectively, if two persons are reconciled through the ritual of *Cleansing the chest of grudges*, the groups or communities they overtly and covertly stand for are also reconciled. Koka (07.07.2004) explains,

Now when two people are quarrelling, that quarrel spreads like ripples, like ripples of water. Therefore people are in a circle. That circle is that everybody is touched, is affected, by that particular dispute. Therefore, when you settle it, you lick ash and you shake hands. Like ripples it spreads over to the whole community. And therefore the community becomes participants in what is happening.<sup>433</sup>

Indeed it is then not simply a ritual between individuals – although individuals are the main actors in the drama. It is a ritual implying and benefiting all who consider themselves related to the situation (either by family, clan, ethnic group or circumstance) or whose identities are somehow interwoven in the event. One of the “rules” governing magical practice in African thought in some way also underlines this assertion. A part represents the whole; what is done to a part of something, implies it being done to the whole (Sundermeier 1998:34)<sup>434</sup>. Therefore, if a part of the community (i.e. a small unit comprising of two people, or two families) is quarrelling, the whole community can be said to be quarrelling. If this small unit is reconciled through the public means of a ritual, the whole community benefits from this reconciliatory rite.

In all actions that occur in the liminal phase it is notable that equality among the liminars reigns supreme. No one participant is treated better or worse than the other. All are put on an equal footing, and have to perform the same things. No one is given special preferences, regardless of their social standing in non-ritual time and space. This is a characteristic of liminality, because in the liminal phase status roles that apply in normal time are eradicated (Turner 1969:96, 131; see also my discussion on liminality in section 2.4.2). In liminality, people confront each other as equals, no matter what their status differences under ordinary circumstances may be. For this reason, even a king or a chief may not refuse to do such humble acts as kneeling down and licking ash from another’s hand. In ritual time, all are treated with the same amount (or lack) of respect and dignity. There exists what may be called “communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders” (Turner 1969:96).

Interestingly, this idea of ritual equality may be a particular boon to the reconciliation process. Maluleke (1999a:237), for example, argues that people cannot be reconciled to each other if they are not equal in a legal and social sense. It is necessary for adversaries to first become equal before they can be expected to reach out to one another in a spirit of reconciliation. This is so because reconciliation is inextricably linked to justice, and can only be achieved with the establishment of a just order. In liminal ritual space, this “just order” is created symbolically, so that the ones who seek to be reconciled do so on a level playing field. Perhaps the “equality” of ritual participants is one of the most ingenious characteristics of ritual reconciliation.

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<sup>432</sup> “Just as it is true that everything symbolises the body, so it is equally true (and all the more so for that reason) that the body symbolises everything else” (Douglas 1992a:122).

<sup>433</sup> Using the example of Buthelezi and Zwelithini, Koka (07.07.2004) elucidates, “When the two leader are quarrelling it is possible that the people even kill each other on the streets. But when the two do this ceremony it means that the whole followers (sic) are within that. They become participants by extension by the two representing them.”

<sup>434</sup> See also Sundermeier’s theories concerning analogous behaviour in ritual practice (1998:33ff).

Because of their equal status in ritual, Turner argues participants experience “communitas” during the liminal phase (1969:96).<sup>435</sup> They are, during that limited period, mutually bound together by the strong bond that is created by their liminality. Communitas is a sign of anti-structure. The structural standards and social norms that exist outside of liminal time do not apply; they are abolished for this stage of the ritual process. Turner claims, “communitas emerges where social structure is not” (1969:126). Communitas “has an existential quality: it involves the whole man (sic) in his relation to other whole men” (Turner 1969:127). Therefore, participants may experience a heightened sense of togetherness, fraternity and community during this phase. Especially with regard to rituals that seek to achieve social reconciliation like this one, such an experience of communitas may be instrumental in bringing about the motions of reconciliation and peace-making. In a state of liminal communitas, participants may well be more open to brotherly (and sisterly) compassion, forgiveness and longsuffering.

With the second and final shaking of hands, the liminal phase is brought to a close. Now the partakers have come to the end of the struggle to become new persons in relation to each other. The transformation is achieved, the irreversible change to their status has been made. The relationship which before was based on enmity is now restored to partnership or friendship, i.e. mutual acceptance of each other. The establishment of renewed relationships is the heart, as well as the ultimate aim, of the reconciliation process. As I have affirmed in my definition, reconciliation essentially means the building of relationship (see section 1.1.2; see also Lederach 1997:23). In that sense, this ritual fulfils the requirement for reconciliation. The “cheer and jubilant ululation of the Elders and the on-lookers” (Koka 2003) is a sign that the stage of transformation, which has led to the establishment of a new relationship, has successfully been completed.

The last stage of the ritual process, which was proleptically hinted at at the first handshake, now takes on its full measure. Reaggregation occurs when the two parties are accepted back into the community “like the ‘Born-again’ members of the community” (Koka 2003). As “new” people, they rejoin the community, and are readmitted into the normal affairs of the society. Although it is not explicitly stated, such ceremonies are usually concluded with a communal meal, where the aggregation of the ritual participants is expressed in celebratory terms. Often an animal is slaughtered on such an occasion – an action symbolising the participation and blessing of the ancestors at the event.<sup>436</sup> By eating together, the participants demonstrate that they have entirely changed their social status concerning one another (i.e. that the transformation phase has indeed been successful, that they are now no longer enemies, but friends) and that they are fully integrated back into normal society. In African terms, eating together is a sign of trust and of belonging together. People who do not trust each other and do not consider each other as belonging together, abstain from eating together. Therefore, enjoying a meal together is a sign of the culmination and consummation of the reconciliation process.

#### *Symbols and symbolic actions*

In terms of symbolism, *Cleansing the chest* is rich and multivalent. At first there is the symbolism of the place where the ritual is held. According to Grimes (1982:65), ritual occurs “during crucial times”<sup>437</sup>, i.e. in “crisis moments in histories and life cycles”, as well as “in founded places”<sup>438</sup> (1982:66). At the beginning of this ritual one can observe the

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<sup>435</sup> The type of communitas that occurs during ritual is deemed “spontaneous” or “existential” (Turner 1969:140).

<sup>436</sup> See for example Durkheim’s interpretation of ritual sacrifice (1995:340-341).

<sup>437</sup> Danfulani similarly observes the existence of “ritual time” (2000:89), which is a special time designated for special religious ceremonies and experiences.

<sup>438</sup> “Ritual place is a matrix of ritual life. It is a generative center, though it may be geographically on the edges” (Grimes 1982:66).

“establishment of perspectival boundaries”<sup>439</sup> (Grimes 1982:66), as a distinction is set up between non-sanctified and sanctified space, as well as between polluted and unpolluted, marginal and ordinary space.

Indeed, Sundermeier (1998:42) argues that among other things village architecture plays a crucial role in ritual enactment, and has powerful symbolic potential. As suggested above, the place where the ash is deposited is a place symbolising the dirt of the household, i.e. that which is not desired in normal living space (Koka 07.07.2004). It is a place symbolising that which needs to be purged and abolished from society. Just like the ashes and the refuse of a household must be done away with once it has served its use, the quarrelling and fighting of the disputing parties must be done away with. It (the quarrel or fight) is no longer desired in the household, and the community wishes for it to be expelled from its living space. Without even having begun the ritual, all who participate know intuitively – by the place it is conducted at – that it has to do with the ridding of something undesirable. The place of the ash does not only symbolise the discarding of something no longer acceptable; it also symbolises the purification and cleansing of the community. When refuse and ash are discarded there, the household is cleaned and made wholesome for ordinary living. When the quarrel is “discarded” there, relationships and community are ritually cleansed.

The symbolism connected with the elders is significant. Elders represent those in the society who have authority and whose judgement about an issue is respected (Comaroffs 1991:156). They are ritual experts. As ritual experts, the elders are instrumental through ritual to repair “breaches of the social order”, which implies “an authoritative reinstatement of that order” (Comaroffs 1991:158). When elders conduct the proceedings of the ritual it illustrates the importance of the event, and the gravity with which the society ought to view it. Elders furthermore symbolise the unity and communal bond between the people. As representative figures, elders hold together the group and give it a kind of unified identity. The elders’ presence says that the matter at hand is one concerning the well-being and unity of the whole group. One could argue that the presence and performance of elders is a form of legitimation of the whole event. Legitimation explains the institutional order by “ascribing cognitive validity to its objectivated meanings”. It justifies why things are done in the way that they are done “by giving a normative dignity to its practical imperatives” (Berger & Luckmann 1966:93). I suggest that the elders represent this legitimation of the ritual and provide it with decorum and potency. One may even go as far as declaring that elders and ritual experts are possibly what Berger and Luckmann would call “full-time personnel for universe-maintaining legitimation” (1966:118)<sup>440</sup>.

As Koka (2003) notes, the wearing of headbands by the elders is symbolically significant as well. The circular headbands signify wisdom, sovereignty and integrity. Wisdom is needed to guide the ritual participants toward what is right. Integrity is needed to make sure that no trickery or deception is used, which would aggravate the ancestors and cause havoc. Sovereignty is needed for good and strong leadership throughout the affair. So the guiding and judging, mediating and arbitrating role of the elders is important as well as their figurative and symbolic presence.<sup>441</sup>

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<sup>439</sup> Here, distinctions between inside/outside, hidden/revealed, open/closed, and front/back become important.

<sup>440</sup> According to the Comaroffs (1991:156), ritual in African societies is an especially forceful mode of action; it is skilled “work”. In ritual one can observe “the controlled and stylized manipulation of words, gestures, and substances – techniques, that is, that concentrated [the ritual performers’] properties and powers”. The ritual expert is therefore also viewed as the restorer of the integrity of the (personal and social) disrupted body, as the integrity of the body is based on the proper alignment of the categories of the cosmos). Through ritual, and with the help of a ritual expert, disruption is set right, harmony is restored.

<sup>441</sup> For the importance of mediation in reconciliatory processes, as well as intermediary roles and functions, see Lederach (1997:68-69).

Rituals bear “reference to beliefs in mystical beings and powers” (Turner 1967:19). They frequently involve “inhuman company” (Fardon 1990:34). Prayers to the ancestors and the Supreme Being have the function of making the participants aware of the broader significance of the event. The powers at work during the ritual are “more than human powers, though they are invoked and channelled by the representatives of the community” (Turner 1969:106). Not only the gathered visible company is concerned with the problem at hand, but also the invisible company. The living dead, as well as the keeper and sustainer of all life (God) are present and watching.<sup>442</sup> Rituals generally “point to the past, present and future”, the immanent and the transcendent (Turner 1962:172). The invocation of God as well as the ancestors is a reminder that the temporal and spatial context of the ritual is far broader than what living humans can fathom. These non-human participants and onlookers are important to include in the ritual, for they give the whole endeavour depth and meaning beyond the limits of the visible community which is gathered. Their presence sets the ritual in a greater social, even universal, context. It illustrates to all participants how much is at stake – that indeed the quarrel has had negative effects rippling outward beyond human evidence.

“Holy” water also has symbolic significance. Tillich (1960:75) insists that one of the main characteristics of symbols is that they are figurative. “This implies that the inner attitude which is oriented to the symbol does not have the symbol itself in view but rather that which is symbolized in it.” Water has potent figurative associations. It has, among others, the function of cleaning, which reflects its primary ritual effect here (Hammond-Tooke 1993:182-183)<sup>443</sup>. Being sprinkled all over the place where the ritual is to be held, the water effects the preparation and purification of the area for the ritual act. It also “cleans” (purges or exorcises) the area of a bad spirit (or spirits), which might hinder or undermine the effectiveness of the ritual. The holy water further is a symbol indicating that the place is being prepared and cleansed not only for the living but also for the ancestors and God, who are special guests and participants at such an event. This act of preparation is considered respectful and necessary for good relations between the living and the dead. The sprinkling of water further connotes an act of separation from the ordinary (as mentioned above), and introduces the separation phase of the ritual.<sup>444</sup>

Koka highlights the circle as an important symbol in African rituals. It is depicted in the use of headbands (by the elders) and by sitting in a circle.<sup>445</sup> The circle represents

<sup>442</sup> As has been shown in preceding sections (1.5.1 and 2.2), the ancestors in African thought are believed to be as much part of human society as the living. They are participants in the events on earth, and are not to be understood as strangers to the affairs of the living. To speak of a communal affair means necessarily to include the ancestors (as well as, for that matter, the unborn), because they are undoubtedly part of the larger community.

<sup>443</sup> Water is one of the dominant purifying substances in many Southern African communities, along with “chyme, ash and soot (or charcoal)”. Water can be substituted by other liquids (e.g. beer, grual, saliva, urine) that have the same cooling and cleansing properties (Hammond-Tooke 1993:183). Several African indigenous rituals indicate that water is of central importance for ritual cleansing. See also section 2.4.1.

<sup>444</sup> Koka describes another situation in which holy water was sprinkled in the context of a religious ritual. “Some time ago we had a service at the Cathedral in Pretoria. Tutu was there. All the other churches were there. The Hindu, the Moslems, the Christians. They all took part in the reconciliation ceremony there. Now when it was the turn of the African traditional religion, I did not get up to make a speech. No, I took *impepho* – the incense – and gave it to a young boy to walk around with in the hall. So it was burning. And I took – what you call – the ox’s tail and sprinkled water. All over the cathedral, everywhere. Now all the people were there. Tutu and the others. And they were not saying ‘this should not be done here, in a church’. Afterward they said to me, ‘it was good that you did it’. This is the African way, the incense and the sprinkling of water. It is done for purification. And when it is done, all people are purified, and they are cleansed. You cannot any longer say, ‘you did wrong’. Through the purification we have all become one. The past can no longer have power over us. We are moving out of the past as one purified people. ... And it was like that. We all came out of that service and we were together. We were happy.” (Koka 07.07.2004)

<sup>445</sup> As discussed in section 2.3, African traditional legal courts also usually involve a circular (or semi-circular) seating structure (see Hammond-Tooke 1993:92; Ellenberger 1992:266; Hunter 1979:415-416; Magesa 1998:238-239; Krige 1974: 229-230).

closeness, oneness, and unity. In this case, it means that the elders to whom the case is brought are of one will and purpose, of one mind and heart. For the sake of unity and harmony, togetherness and peace, they will do their best to resolve the conflict they are faced with in form of the two defendants. The circle structure is a symbolic defiance of both individualism and hierarchy, but implies egalitarianism, fairness and harmony.

Shaking hands is a common symbolic action. It is a sign of greeting. Originally, it showed that the hand with which a weapon would be clasped was empty, i.e. that the one offering the hand had no intention of harming the other person. It is therefore a symbolic peace offering, and also a sign of trust and non-aggression.<sup>446</sup> The two parties shaking hands are willing to come together in a spirit of peace and co-operation. The hand offered also signifies acceptance of the other, since the one offering the hand is willing to touch the other. The other is not considered harmful or impure, but is worthy of being touched.<sup>447</sup> Offering one's hand means one is not afraid of being defiled by the other.

It ought to be mentioned at this point that the human body itself can be viewed as a symbol. Douglas (1992a:128) speaks of "the symbolic medium of the physical body".<sup>448</sup> The bodily senses therefore play a crucial role in ritual. The ritual "world of gestural construal, a world enacted, a world bodied forth" (Gorman 1994:22), is experienced through sight, sound, smell, taste and touch, as well as through emotions and feelings (Grimes 1982:19ff). Admittedly, ritual action is "thick with sensory meaning" (Grimes 1982:59). Ritual is fundamentally about physical action, "with words often only optional or arbitrarily replaceable" (Parkin 1992:11-12). The power of ritual, therefore, lies in its actions. In *Cleansing the chest*, the centrality of the human body, as well as the use of the senses, and the importance of gestures and deeds, becomes apparent. Through drinking, spitting, or clasping of hands, ritual participants *do* symbolic actions, but their bodies themselves *are* in fact also symbols in a greater process.

For a second time in the ritual, water is used. This time it is not sprinkled, but brought in a calabash. It is, like the water that was sprinkled, "a symbol of purification and cleansing" (Koka 2003). Some ash is added to the water "to 'kill' the evil spirit and curse" (Koka 2003). Symbolically, the water with its cleansing and healing powers, kills any malediction which was present. Ash itself is also seen as a purifying agent, and therefore adds to the cleansing and purging ability of water (Hammond-Tooke 1993:183). Later on in the ritual process, participants wash their hands in the water "as an act of cleansing themselves" (Koka 2003).<sup>449</sup> Washing of hands bears significant meaning. The impurity and dirt of the dispute is washed off. The participants rid themselves of the spirit of disagreement and fighting. They distance themselves from it, and it has no authority over their lives any longer.

Besides water, the most potent symbolic object used in this ritual is surely ash itself. It is, in my opinion, the "senior" or "dominant" symbol, which not only plays a crucial role in the achievement of the purpose of the ritual, but is in fact regarded as an end in itself (Turner 1967:20).<sup>450</sup> Gorman (1994:25) asserts, "there is a knowing that comes through the senses – smells, textures, sights, sounds, tastes – that is not ultimately

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<sup>446</sup> Notably, in the ritual of *Clasping hands with chyme (masoang)*, hand-shaking is central as well.

<sup>447</sup> In many religious traditions, including the Israelite tradition of the Old Testament, touching something that is considered impure leads to impurity, and is taboo. People therefore avoid touching other people or objects that are "impure", for fear of contamination. Touching something or someone without reservation is a symbolic sign of acceptance of their purity and their social tolerability.

<sup>448</sup> "The body is a superb symbol, of wholeness, of variety-in-unity, of proportion," claims Dillistone (1986:33,34). Moreover, in Africa symbols are created "around people" (Sundermeier 1998:7).

<sup>449</sup> Notably, this gesture is also very central in the *Ukuthelana amanzi* ritual. This might imply that certain ritual elements that are deemed very important occur in different variations in different rituals.

<sup>450</sup> I acknowledge that some scholars may disagree that ash is a dominant symbol. Yet as I argue, without it this ritual loses much of its purpose and thrust. It might be argued that *coolness*, inherently associated with ash, is in fact a dominant symbol.

translatable into a linguistic idiom". Therefore it might not be possible to grasp in its entirety what occurs when participants see, taste, smell and touch the ash. The parties are asked to lick ash from each other's right hand and spit it to the ground. Koka (2003) explains, "This is the emptying of bad feelings and evil spirits from their body and mind. It is the throwing out of dirt and turning it into ASH (Nothingness)." It may be interesting to note that several African societies, among them the Nguni, consider pollution ("dirt" or "darkness") to be eliminated by the use of "emetics and laxatives", i.e. by ingesting substances that cause a kind of bodily emission (Hammond-Tooke 1993:19). Spitting can therefore be seen as an emission of "dirt" in response to the ingestion of a purifying emetic substance – water mixed with ash.<sup>451</sup> Therefore, viewed symbolically, this rite of reconciliation "which enacts the burial of the wrong" has "the creative effect of all ritual" (Douglas 1992a:136). It can "help to erase memory of the wrong and encourage the growth of right feeling." Through this ritual a moral offence (i.e. quarrelling and social enmity) is interpreted as a pollution offence "which can be instantly scrubbed out by ritual" (Douglas 1992a:136).<sup>452</sup> What was once a moral vice has been turned into "nothingness" through the motions of the ritual which dealt with it as if it were a form of pollution.

In my opinion, ash represents a number of things. Its meanings are manifold, as is the case with all ritual symbols (Sundermeier 1998:51). Condensed within it is "a unification of disparate significata" (Turner 1967:28). Sometimes, as in the case of this symbol, there may even be some "discrepancy between significata" (Turner 1967:43; Sundermeier 1998:35). The first symbolic meaning attached to ash is its purifying quality. Among many African peoples, notably the Sotho, pollution is conceived of as "heat". In order to overcome the ill effects of pollution, so-called cooling rituals have to be performed. Among the "dominant cooling substances" are water and ash (Hammond-Tooke 1993:19). Hammond-Tooke (1993:183) suggests that "perhaps the most interesting symbol of all" is that of ash – "denatured fire and thus the 'opposite' of heat". Water mixed with ash can be seen as a particularly potent cooling substance, since it combines two of the most significant symbols of cooling. Cooling substances can be drunk in infusions, used to wash with, poured onto shrines, or boiled and their fumes inhaled (Hammond-Tooke 1993:19, 182-183). In the ritual at hand, two of the methods of using cooling substances are employed, viz. drinking it as an infusion (and then spitting it out), and washing with it.

The second meaning associated with ash seems to contradict the first, but in fact complements it. Ash, besides being a purifying agent, is a form of refuse.<sup>453</sup> According to Douglas (1992a:97), dirt is a typical symbol used in rites such as this one. Dirt, in this case symbolised as ash, is undesirable, and needs to be thrown out of the household, out of every-day living space. It has no use any longer, and therefore has no place in ordinary time.<sup>454</sup> Furthermore, ritual dirt may symbolise that which has "pollution powers" (Douglas 1992a:113, 129ff). Therefore, the ritual takes place where the ash and refuse of the household is thrown out. Similarly, the ash mixed with water is spewed out, i.e. it is symbolically undesirable and harmful. So, the seemingly opposite poles of meaning of ash are brought together in the pollution-purification interface. In Koka's interpretation, the quarrel between the two parties certainly had the effect of polluting the society; for this

<sup>451</sup> The ritual of *TSU* is another example where spitting is very significant. Certain elements of *TSU* may indeed be compared to *Cleansing the chest*.

<sup>452</sup> See also Fardon (1990: 83ff, 107ff), in his discussion of rituals surrounding pollution and death. Similarly, according to the Comaroffs (1991:157), social and personal disruption can be caused, among other things, by pollution (*bothitbo*). See also Booyens (1986:117-122).

<sup>453</sup> See Sundermeier's explanation of the rule of "condensation" which involves situations where one and the same element is used for different, even contradictory, analogies (1998:35).

<sup>454</sup> One can see Sundermeier's "functional analogy" theory at work here (Sundermeier 1998:33). The functional analogy theory states that things which have the same function are related to each other.

reason the ritual is called a ceremony of *cleansing* and reconciliation. Douglas (1992a:135) claims, “rites of reversing, untying, burying, washing, erasing, fumigating, and so on” are usually the remedy for undoing the effects of pollutions. By having a feud, the quarrellers brought the curse of pollution over themselves and their communities – a curse which must be broken through cleansing. That which has become polluted and defiled by incorrect and dangerous social behaviour must be rectified through ritual and symbolic action. The ash is both the symbol of that which cleanses, as also the symbol of that which needs to be cleansed or expelled. In his discussion about purity, Countryman (1991:17) points out that “dirt that lies outside ... is both a residue and also a reservoir of power, whether destructive or creative”. As becomes clear in this ritual, the ash is considered both undesirable (refuse) as well as a potent force of purification, and necessary for the successful accomplishment of the reconciliation rite.

As a third characteristic, ash symbolises that which once had life, but is now dead. It once was burning wood, full of energy and vigour. Now that energy has been expended, and what remains is lifeless and impotent. A case could be made that the theory of “inverse analogy” (Sundermeier 1998:37) applies here: something which is lifeless and extinguished (ash) represents something which is (or was) full of life and flaming (a feud or quarrel). To refer again to the concept of pollution, ash is the “opposite” of fire. It is the “opposite” of heat which signifies pollution (Hammond-Tooke 1993:183). Koka (07.07.2004) explains,

Now ash comes from the wood. We know that the wood has got kinetic energy.<sup>455</sup> As long as that energy is still in the wood, it burns out. But when it burns out, it comes out into ashes. It means that energy is dead. Therefore they take it to say: with this licking of the ash, they are showing you that the energy that is between you and makes you to quarrel, to clash with each other, they are burning it out. So they take the ash, and each one licks it from the other’s hand. And they take it in their mouth and spit it out. Now they spit it out at the place – at home you don’t throw the ashes where you have visitors, you throw it outside. Outside the household. That is where they throw it out. Which means: the burnt energy the energy of the quarrel within yourself is burnt out. And they throw it out into the ash field. And then that is the end.

So it turns out that ash is a strong symbol to use for such a reconciliation process and the settlement of disputes. The ash reminds participants of the burning wood, the burning of their anger and resentment against each other. The fighting and quarrelling made them “burn”, and expend much negative and destructive energy. But now the wood has burnt down, it no longer has energy to offer. The quarrelling which once was like a burning fire has died down, it has lost its life, it has become like ash. Similarly, like ash it has no purpose or use. It must be expelled, because indeed if it is not it will continue to pollute the household.

I have demonstrated that ash represents a whole interlinked “system of meanings” (Turner 1967:21) which together account for the richness and complexity of the ritual. It seems to me that in the ritual of *Cleansing the chest of grudges*, ash implies three things: (1) The harm and pollution caused by the quarrel has been purified or “cooled” by means of the ash. (2) The ash, like the quarrel, is a form of refuse and must be rejected, and expelled from society. (3) Since ash, which is no longer fire, has “lost its life”, it is a symbol of the quarrel which has ended. As a main symbol, ash therefore stands for “multivocal or polysemous” connotations (Turner 1962:125) and cannot be limited to bearing one meaning only. Its sensory pole brings about disparate feelings; its ideological pole points to the (diverse) meanings elaborated above. The symbol of ash, and the symbolic action attached to it, is probably the most overt example in this ritual of “knowledge” that is “mis-stated” (Fardon 1990:5), “understated” (i.e., “implicit”) (:6) or

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<sup>455</sup> Interestingly, Sundermeier asserts that rituals “convert latent power into kinetic energy” (1998:53).



“unstable”, i.e. mysterious and ineffable (:7).<sup>456</sup> The knowledge concerning the ash is part of the society’s “cultural frame” (Fardon 1990:6), but to the one studying it from the outside it is a cultural frame filled with hidden meanings and mystery (:11). It is important not to separate the different levels of meaning from each other, but to allow the symbol to exist and communicate in its entirety – with its contradictions and complexities. The system in which the symbol functions ought to be seen as an interacting whole (Turner 1967:43). Having noted all the associations attributed to the symbol of ash, it becomes clear that in it there is indeed a “coming together”<sup>457</sup> of many strands of import.

Finally, cheering and ululation from the onlooking participants symbolises the involvement of the broader society in the event of reconciliation. Indeed, the dispute and ill-relations between the two active ritual participants did not only affect the two of them negatively; the whole community was suffering from it. Its negative force had rippled into the wider community (Koka 07.07.2004). Therefore, the ritual was not only beneficial for the two main actors, but for the communities they were part of as well. It is for this reason that the community shows its active involvement and participation in the occurrences by crying for joy and creating a festive and celebratory mood. The community itself feels relieved and released from the bond of the quarrel; the curse has been lifted, the contamination cleansed. Harmony has been restored – not only to the relationship between two people, but also to the whole web of relationships to which they belong. The enthralled participation of the onlookers suggests that this ritual is in fact a communal one, and not individualistic in nature. It again becomes clear that *Cleansing the chest of grudges* plays an important part in the structuring of sociality (Fardon 1990:27).

According to Cox (1970), festivity is an important part of life.<sup>458</sup> Essentially, festivity is required for healthy human and social interaction, and is an important feature of rituals also. Ritual feasting is a way in which we learn “to affirm both life and history without being suffocated by them” (Cox 1970:32)<sup>459</sup>. Festivity helps the community avoid becoming “alienated from its past and cynical about its future” (:13). Through feasting together the community demonstrates that the past (of quarrelling, hostility and estrangement), though it exists, has been overcome. It has shaped but not warped the community. This past can be embraced because it no longer has a negative stronghold on the people. Celebrating together is a sign that the dispute has been overcome, and that a new leaf can be turned over in the story of the life of the community. Indeed one can argue that this ritual is a manifestation of agency to transform a destructive life situation (Thomas 1999:82). Something insidious and treacherous has been transformed; it has been made controllable, its threat has been overcome. Indeed, it has been turned into something pleasing, namely comradeship between former enemies.

As we have looked at the configuration of symbols and symbolic actions which make up the *Cleansing the chest of grudges* ritual, it is important to keep in mind that, according to Turner (1962:173), each station in the ritual process can be deemed “an anchoring element in a complex, each of whose items has to be interpreted and related to the whole”. On each level of the occurrence “semantic complexities ... combine into a

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<sup>456</sup> See also Durkheim (1995:364) who insists that certain elements in ritual have “invisible influence over consciousnesses” and “a manner of affecting our states of mind”. Similarly, Sperber (1975:x) talks of “unconscious knowledge” and of “tacit knowledge – that is to say, that which is not made explicit”.

<sup>457</sup> Kahler (1960:70) explains, “The Greek word *symbollein*, from which ‘symbol’ derives, means: ‘to bring together,’ or, ‘to come together.’ The symbolic *sign* brings together, the symbolic *representation* is a coming together, to the point of complete fusion, of the concrete and the spiritual, the specific and the general.”

<sup>458</sup> Important aspects of celebration include moving, dancing and eating (Cox 1970:55). Food especially has strong symbolic significance in certain rituals (Dillstone 1986:33,34). Indeed, food plays a central part in festivities in African settings. Frequently, a goat or an ox (or even a chicken) is slaughtered for such ritual celebrations.

<sup>459</sup> “There is a festive way of appropriating the past, a way that accepts the past without being bound by it, that views past history not as a prison to escape or as an antique to be preserved but as a dimension of reality that enlarges and illuminates the present” (Cox 1970:32).

simple sacramental process". Indeed, it is my contention that this ritual is sacramental in nature. Through ritual, life gains a "sacramental dimension" (Sundermeier 1998:14). Durkheim (1995:352) also alludes to the inherently sacramental nature of ritual.

According to Turner (1962:171), rituals possess "the power both of effecting and signifying" sacredness. Ritual symbols are not merely considered to be "speculative or theoretical signs", but "efficacious and practical signs", since they not only point to changes of moral and social status, but also actually effect them. Moreover, human beings who take part in ritual undergo real change, or "renewal" (Grimes 1982:60). In ritual (especially in religious ritual) people are brought in touch with "the ultimate reality", that which "concerns us ultimately" (Tillich 1960:77; see also Dillistone 1986:20). Tillich argues for a conceptual connection between religious symbols and sacraments. A sacramental symbol "can be a medium of the Spirit" because "it participates in the power of what it symbolizes" (Tillich 1978:130). Therefore religious ritual symbols stand for the transcendent. They bring together and hold together "some familiar aspect of human experience with that which is beyond experience or expression" (Dillistone 1986:20, referring to Tillich's theory).

A broad understanding of sacramentality is that during the process of the sacrament, something (or someone) really and actually changes through benevolent yet mysterious<sup>460</sup> intervention from God. A sacrament is not merely a sign, but an actual event imparting blessing and grace. It is not merely an outward performance, but an inner, life-changing experience. Sacramental experience is salvific, i.e. redemptive and restorative. There is a fundamental and essential transformation which occurs when a human being undergoes a sacramental ritual. Just as many Christians believe that baptism and partaking of the Lord's Supper essentially brings about change in them and in the community, it can be argued that *Cleansing the chest of grudges* has a similarly momentous effect on its participants. Something in their very essence, in the basis of their humanity and human interaction is transformed and indeed healed, redeemed and revived. Going through the motions of the ritual is not merely an "act" or performance, but an existential experience of transformative proportions. This means that the elements and gestures used in the ritual are not mere signs, but potent mediators of change and renewal.

### **Conclusion**

I have shown that *Cleansing the chest of grudges* is an African indigenous ritual with much meaning and potential power. It can and ought to be used as a valuable resource in the quest for reconciliation in South Africa. It is one of the offerings that can and ought to be gleaned from the African traditional heritage. I agree with Lederach (1997:16) when he decries the too-heavy reliance on modern (Western-style) statist diplomacy in communities' endeavours for social reconciliation, "despite its inadequacies in responding to the nature of conflicts today". There is an urgent need for innovative methods at solving conflict in our communities (Lederach 1997:25). Ironically, turning to our indigenous traditions and cultural heritage of the past may provide more appropriate "innovative" methods than modern diplomatic paradigms do. Effective conflict resolution and reconciliation within a society requires an "infrastructure that empowers the resources for reconciliation from within that society and maximises the contribution from outside" (:xvi, 61). *Cleansing the chest of grudges* is such a resource from within African society, drawing from indigenous African tradition.

Although similar riches may well be gathered from ritual analyses of other reconciliation rites (for example those mentioned in section 2.4.1), it is not the aim of this study to do so. Instead, in subsequent chapters I aim to show – using one main example – how the use of traditional resources, in dialogue with the Christian faith, may be

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<sup>460</sup> The Augustinian understanding of a sacrament highlights the element of mystery. A sacrament is an event orchestrated by God for humanity's benefit.

advantageous and useful for reconciliation in South Africa. *Cleansing the chest of grudges* will, in the final chapter of this work, serve as the prime example for making connections between African traditional and Christian paradigms of reconciliation. It will serve as the basis for the “invention”<sup>461</sup> of a new ritual of reconciliation for South Africa which accommodates the traditional and the Christian, the indigenous and the modern.

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<sup>461</sup> See Cox (1970:81) and Hobsbawm and Ranger (1993:1) with their deliberations surrounding the invention of new traditions and ritual enactments of such traditions.

### 3. Reconciliation paradigms in Christianity

I again draw the reader's attention to my first hypothesis underlying this research: "African tradition and Christianity both have paradigms of reconciliation to offer." My premise is that the Christian tradition indeed has a repertoire of options for sponsoring social reconciliation. After having discussed some resources offered by African tradition in the previous chapter, I now turn to the resources lodged in Christian tradition. In this chapter I therefore attempt to answer the question, what does the Christian faith tradition have to offer to social reconciliation in South Africa? Surely, it would be a matter of writing many volumes if one were to articulate all the resources the Christian faith has to offer. Christian theologies, spiritualities, church communities and institutions in all their diversity certainly have an overabundance of capital to invest in this endeavour. It is not the aim (nor is it within the capacity) of this study to investigate all of it in detail. Rather, I seek to highlight a number of key elements on offer from certain Christian traditions that I consider to be particularly helpful in the struggle for reconciliation in South Africa.

In section 1.5 I have already shown that the terms "Christianity" or "Christian tradition" are in fact problematic. Christianity is not a coherent monolithic entity, but a conglomeration of many strands of tradition, with a myriad of theological, ecclesial and other peculiarities. What people mean by "Christianity" can be vastly different depending on their various contexts and backgrounds. Therefore it is an ambivalent category. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that in spite of its ambivalence and diversity, Christianity is a powerful force in the context of South Africa, and in the lives of many communities and individuals. Therefore, it cannot be dismissed as a source of assets for this study. Moreover, as a Christian and a theologian it is an imperative for me to refer to my own tradition, faith, and knowledge system when undertaking an inquiry of this kind. If I did not do this, I would implicitly profess myself to be "neutral" and "dispassionate" about the object of my study. Yet it is a known truth that we are always subjective by virtue of the fact that we are home to (and bound by) a specific context that shapes and informs us. I must acknowledge my own identity in endeavouring this study, for it is only in taking a stand that one has a position from which to engage with others in authentic discussion.

I therefore affirm that my stance in this inquiry is that of a Christian, more particularly a Lutheran with a German background, native to South Africa. I am, further, a theologian. For theological analysis one needs a frame of reference and certain criteria. The choice of criteria one uses is again informed by one's context and identity, and one's school of thought. Given my own context and identity, I acknowledge that the shape and direction of my argument and discussion is strongly influenced by who I am as a person and as a scholar. The reader will, for example, notice that my particular Lutheran heritage will become apparent in this chapter, especially in section 3.2. I am of the opinion that locating oneself reveals one's inherent limitations. Yet it also makes for honest and authentic dialogue, without the pretence of "neutral" distance.

In this chapter, I consider a number of resources in the Christian tradition that I consider to be potentially (and in some cases actually) helpful for social reconciliation processes in South Africa. First, I will uncover a few pointers arising out of the Biblical heritage (in section 3.1). Second, in section 3.2, I will demonstrate in what way the story of the cross and resurrection can be a helpful paradigm for reconciliation. Third, section 3.3 will offer a discussion of the notions of sin, repentance and forgiveness as valuable notions in the reconciliation debate. Finally, I will examine the church as community and institution with the potential of promoting reconciliation (in section 3.4).

### 3.1 Reconciliation in the Bible

#### 3.1.1 The Bible as resource

In this section, I consider the Biblical witness as a dominant resource offered by the Christian tradition, with the aim of gleaning some contributions for social reconciliation from it. The Bible is what a vast number of Christians<sup>462</sup> would deem the basis of their faith. My motive and justification for choosing it as one resource and object of this study is simply that it is regarded as the central guide of faith for many Christians, including those of my own (Lutheran) denomination.<sup>463</sup> In the case of most Protestants or evangelicals, when grappling with a question of a theological or religious nature, they feel compelled at some or other stage to consult the Scriptures and ask “what the Bible has to say” about the matter. No matter what hermeneutics are employed (i.e. *how* the Bible is used<sup>464</sup>), the fact *that* the Bible is used is key. For reasons of continuity with my tradition and heritage, as well as for reasons of solidarity with my fellow-Christians, I am obliged also to ask “what the Bible has to say” about reconciliation, and indeed how it is or can become a positive resource for social reconciliatory practice. In the eyes of many Christians and theologians, any reflection on Christian paradigms of reconciliation that excludes the Biblical witness would be considered foundationless and vague theological conjecture. Therefore, although I am not a Biblical scholar *per se*, I analyse the meaning and conception of “reconciliation” in terms of the Old and New Testaments, in view of illustrating both the general tendencies and the diverse ambiguities of the Scriptural notion(s) of reconciliation. As will be shown, the Biblical scriptures have some thought-provoking teachings and stories that may prove helpful as resources for social reconciliation. This section is therefore sub-divided into two: First, I uncover what might be gleaned from exegetical work concerning the term and use of reconciliation. Second, I highlight a number of narratives of reconciliation found in the Bible, which are and may be used as guidelines or blueprints for reconciliatory practice.

#### 3.1.2 “Reconciliation” – some exegetical considerations

There is some confusion surrounding the use of the term reconciliation in the Bible. Cilliers Breytenbach (2000) cautions theologians not to make the mistake of ignoring the difference between the Greek terms *ἰλασμοί* (*hilaskomai*) and *καταλάσσω* (*katallasso*). In the English language, the meaning of these two terms is frequently simply collapsed into one, while in the Greek world (and, as we shall see, in the ancient Hebrew world as well) they were not considered identical, but had different thrusts and spoke to different contexts.

*Hilaskomai* can be most accurately translated as “to make gracious, to make acceptable, to atone”<sup>465</sup>, yet it is also translated as “to reconcile”. It is connected to the noun *hilasmos* which means atonement or atonement offering<sup>466</sup> (Breytenbach 2000:1685). In the Old Testament this term is used in connection with the wrath of God, and frequently also with cultic practices and/or purification offerings. In Hebrew, the word is

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<sup>462</sup> Especially and overtly those of the Protestant traditions. Yet Catholic and Orthodox Christians also consider the Scriptures to be a prime source of revelation. In fact, in all of Christianity Scriptures are fundamental to the faith of the church. The New Testament canon was deliberated and fixed before the fourth century CE, and most of the disputes that formed the bases for the early Christian councils (e.g. of Nicaea, Constantinople, Chalcedon) had to do with interpretations of Scripture.

<sup>463</sup> See Article 21 and the Conclusion of the *Augsburg Confession* (1530), Article 28 of the *Apology to the Augsburg Confession* (1530), and the Epitome of the *Formula of Concord* (1577), for a discussion of the authority and centrality of Scripture. All of these documents are part of the *Book of Concord*, which is historically the primary confessional document of most Protestant churches.

<sup>464</sup> See, for example, West (1995).

<sup>465</sup> In German, “gnädig machen, sühnen”.

<sup>466</sup> In German, “Sühnung, Sühnopfer”.

related to the words used for purity and cleanliness, as well as sanctification. In most cases of its cultic use the term occurs in connection with the temple cult.

When used independently from cultic occurrences, the term is seen in association with works of righteousness or good deeds done in obedience to the law of God, such as almsgiving, generosity, acts of restitution, study of the law, fasting, and prayer among other things<sup>467</sup>. In general, repentant action and suffering are seen to have an atoning function. God can be appeased, influenced, and even swayed through atonement offerings. People may be released from the consequence of sin (which is punishment) by doing works of righteousness and adhering to the law – a process which represents atonement.

Contrary to early religious ideas, in which atonement is primarily achieved through correct action from the side of human beings, the New Testament displays a different understanding of atonement, i.e. that atonement is orchestrated by God. It is no longer human beings who have to achieve atonement through righteous deeds, but God who does the work of atonement. Breytenbach argues that the New Testament emphasises a theocentric notion in which God is the initiator and executor of atonement. The cross of Jesus Christ becomes the location of God's atoning action. The cross as a public event is to be seen in contrast to the atoning symbolism contained in the temple's holy of holies. Nevertheless, it must be underlined that atonement terminology (i.e. related to *hilaskomai*) is scarce in the New Testament – it can be found only in Hebrews 2:17 and 9:15, 1 John 2:2 and 4:10<sup>468</sup>, and possibly Romans 3:25. It is noteworthy that Paul, the New Testament's most prolific theologian, uses the term only once in his entire body of text. (Breytenbach 2000: 1685-1691)

Breytenbach argues that for the Greek, late-Jewish, Roman and Germanic religions reconciliation (as *hilaskomai*, i.e. atonement, expiation or propitiation) usually means the appeasement of angry deities by means of human actions. As we have seen, even the Old Testament shows signs of such thinking. However, in view of the New Testament (re-) interpretation of the term, Breytenbach argues that the Biblical witness as a whole is fundamentally different from, and stands in stark contrast to, Gentile notions of atonement. The story of the Old Testament shows how the people became increasingly aware of the pervasion of sin, and therefore increasingly aware that in order to be free from its power, God – as opposed to humans – had to take on the initiative, since humans were simply too weak and incapable. Gradually, therefore, the idea of God as the gracious donor of atonement, instead of its angry and demanding recipient, establishes itself in Scripture. Atonement effectively becomes seen as a gift of grace and salvation instead of as a demand or a punishment<sup>469</sup>. (Breytenbach 2000:1692)

One could identify two primordial meanings of reconciliation, both of which have influenced Biblical notions of the concept, and in turn have been informed by the evolving Biblical religion. Firstly, it can mean the “redemptive event in which man (sic) is freed from the deadly effects of his sins”, and secondly, “the process by which alienated people are brought together in concord. In this use, reconciliation is associated with the liberation of man (sic) from the conflicting political and social forces that determine his life” (Breytenbach 1986:2). In the Bible, the Greek term *katallasso* is to be distinguished from the term *hilaskomai* considered above. Both are used in contexts that pertain to reconciliation. However, the word-family stemming from *katallasso* is more strongly oriented towards the profane, while *hilaskomai* has more overt connections to the sacred. As we have seen, it concerns itself primarily with humans' relationship with God, and in

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<sup>467</sup> “Liebeswerke, Wohltätigkeiten, Almosen, Wiedergutmachung, Studium der Tora, Fasten, Gebet und v.a.”

<sup>468</sup> In the Johannine epistle the word “propitiation” is used.

<sup>469</sup> “Gott ist also nach biblischem Verständnis nicht der zürnende Empfänger, sondern der heilschaffende Spender des Sühne geschehens. Sühne bedeutet dann für die betroffenen Menschen nicht Strafe sondern Heil.”

what way that relationship is upheld. *Katallasso*, on the other hand, is used to describe the reestablishment of friendly relations between or among enemies, while the related term *apokatastasis* signifies a partial or universal recovery of a former condition (of well-being and harmony), i.e. healing of an illness, revision of a government order, truce after a war, etc. (Breytenbach 2000:1773).<sup>470</sup> It is to the term *apokatastasis* – recuperation, restoration or recovery<sup>471</sup> – that I now turn.

In the Old Testament the term means to bring something into its initial, former state of being. It was primarily used in the realm of medicine, and was connected to healing and human health. Gradually its spectrum of meaning grew to include the general improvement of a situation, the (re-)establishment of a governmental system, and the re-acceptance of someone into his/her office or occupation. In all these profane meanings it is nevertheless in the Old Testament always considered God's work, indeed God's power, which enables the reconstitution of circumstances from less favourable to more favourable, from brokenness to original wholeness. The New Testament uses *apokatastasis* in the context of healing the sick, but also (in Acts) in the context of the eschatological liberation of Israel, and eschatological expectations in general. Frequently, it is used to show the total re-ordering of the world – i.e. all things and relationships – when Jesus the Messiah comes again. The early church father Origen also uses the term in medicinal contexts, as well as in terms of the political and cosmic recovery of all created beings so that a harmonious, holistic order of the universe may be established. (Breytenbach 2000:1774-1776)

Another term derived from *katallasso* is the noun *katallage* which means "exchange", as well as "reconciliation"<sup>472</sup> (Breytenbach 2000:1777-1780). It is used to describe a situation of change, exchange or substitution, from a state of enmity and hostility to the original state of peace and friendship (see also Klein 1999:70). Originally, it is a term most often used in the sphere of politics and diplomacy, and gains most relevance in contexts of war or social upheaval. In some cases in the early Greek world, *katallage* is also used in relation to political amnesty. Significantly, however, it is *not* used in the realm of religion or sacred affairs. This means it is never used in connection with atonement terminology (i.e. *hilaskomai*).

The most assiduous New Testament writer, Paul, uses the words related to *katallasso*, not *hilaskomai*, when expounding his doctrine of reconciliation. For this reason, Breytenbach makes his case that the Pauline understanding of reconciliation does not root itself in the priestly atonement tradition (where the focus is on the sacred, rather than the mundane), but stems from the profane traditions surrounding reconciliation among warring groups. In effect, in the New Testament the term "reconciliation" (*katallasso*) which traditionally was used for inter-human relationships, becomes annexed for theological purposes, i.e. it is extended to include relationships involving God. In *katallassein/katallage* Paul "took over a completely profane concept" (Breytenbach 1986:3) and changed it to mean something both profane and sacred (Klein 1999:68). Paul's adaptation of the idea of reconciliation transferred a diplomatic term to the realm of religion, and reinterpreted it. This reinterpretation was built on an understanding of the cross of Jesus Christ. Therefore, for Paul "reconciliation is no longer a political concept, but it denotes the new peaceful relation between God and the justified sinner"

<sup>470</sup> *Katallasso* "drückt die Wiederherstellung des früheren guten Verhältnisses zwischen verfeindeten Menschen oder Bürgern von Stadtstaaten oder Völkern aus. ... Es drückt im profanen Leben die Vermittlung einer positiven Veränderung eines negativ belasteten Verhältnisses im Sinne der Amnestie aus, während *apokatastasis* eine partielle oder universielle Wiederherstellung des früheren Standes zum Inhalt hat."

<sup>471</sup> Breytenbach translates it broadly as "Wiederherstellung".

<sup>472</sup> In German, "Austausch, Versöhnung". It further means "the action in which a peace treaty comes into being" and "change from war, hostility or enmity to peace and concord between nations, states and peoples" (Breytenbach 1986:3).

(Breytenbach 1986:3). For this reason, in the Pauline corpus it frequently also occurs parallel to the concepts of justification, redemption or liberation, or Christ's work of salvation (Breytenbach 1986:2).<sup>473</sup>

In Paul's writings one sees how a profane understanding of a concept is theologised, i.e. how a term relating primarily to human-human relationships is broadened to include the human-divine relationship. In 2 Corinthians 5:18 God is depicted as the subject of reconciliation. The term *katallassein* is transferred onto the (theologically perceived) situation of alienation and broken relations between God and humankind because of sin.<sup>474</sup> In consequence, in the New Testament "reconciliation" usually has theological significance, even though the roots of the word are not theological. Reconciliation occurs through the salvific work of Christ. It is an act of God, a gift for humankind and all of creation. It implies a state of peace between God and humanity, and among all God's creatures. It is the prerequisite for salvation, and the basis for God's all-encompassing reconstruction ("new creation") of the universe.

It needs to be emphasised that for Paul reconciliation inevitably has a strongly social and ecclesial thrust. Paul did not theologise the concept to the extent that it lost its concrete relevance for inter-human relationships. Through the cross God creates a new humanity, one church. "The reconciliation with God, which is the work of Christ, entails the reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles. Old differences become irrelevant" (Breytenbach 1986:4). Thus, for Paul reconciliation between God and humanity cannot be seen as separate from, and unrelated to, reconciliation between human beings. The one has effect on the other, and indeed the one testifies to the other and gives it tangibility and concreteness. Indeed, it can be argued that for Paul theological statements are at the same time ecclesiological and anthropological statements. His theology is never only about vertical relations (i.e. God and humans), but also about horizontal relationships.<sup>475</sup> Strictly speaking, such a connection of the sacred and the profane, the human and the divine, echoes the Old Testament worldview that all relationships, be they human or divine in nature, are intertwined and together form part of the interconnected web of existence, and that indeed one's relationship with God affects and informs one's relationships with others and vice versa.<sup>476</sup> Indeed, reconciliation is understood in ethical-ecclesiastical terms, not only in dogmatic or theoretical terms (Stückelberger 1988:434ff).

In his discussion of the term reconciliation in the Bible, H-G Link (2000:1780-1783) agrees with Breytenbach that the two Greek terms *hilasmos* and *katallage* in fact have nothing in common. Nevertheless, in ancient Germanic judicial thinking they became intertwined, so that (sacred) atonement and (profane) reconciliation have become scarcely separable concepts and their distinction becomes fuzzy – even until today. *Hilasmos*, translated in the Latin Vulgate as *expiatio*, means cultic atonement through offerings and sacrifice, whereas *katallage* (Latin: *reconciliatio*) denotes the (non-religious) reconciliation of hostile parties through mutual transactions. Early translations into the vernacular, including the Luther text, unhelpfully collapse the two terms into one.

Link further argues that to Paul reconciliation means something different from the ancient Jewish understanding thereof. Pauline reconciliation is not subject to the cultic understanding of atonement, but is a concept that has its roots in every-day secular life.

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<sup>473</sup> The originally profane term of *katallage* takes on theological soteriological connotations in the New Testament (Klein 1999:69). Unfortunately, this development spurred the growth of a trend toward the individualisation of the concept of salvation.

<sup>474</sup> In this context, the *presbeis* – "emissary" ("Gesandte") – gains an important role in mediating an offer for reconciliation, and in sealing a reconciliation agreement.

<sup>475</sup> Seen under the rubric of soteriology (i.e. God's work of salvation) the vertical and horizontal axes always stand in close connection to one another (Klein 1999:75).

<sup>476</sup> Although, as I have expounded above, the Old Testament does also distinguish between different types of relationships, i.e. sacred or profane. It is effectively a question of distinction, and not separation, of the two.



Like Breytenbach, Link insists that the Pauline understanding is associated with the ending of hostility, and the establishment of peace. Nevertheless, the Pauline reconciliation concept (re)interprets the ancient concept of atonement, and transforms it to connote the renewal of the covenant between God and humans. For Paul, atonement features in the idea of reconciliation are not primary, but have the minor function of serving the more universal and holistic concept of reconciliation, i.e. bringing into harmony all relationships – between God, humans, nature and the universe. Indeed, the breadth of Paul's view of reconciliation is expressed when he likens it to life after death and an entirely new created order (see Romans 11:15).

I have suggested above that reconciliation is a deeply ecclesial concept, at least for Paul. Indeed it can be argued that New Testament reconciliation is manifested and realised in concrete terms (Link 2000:1780-1783). It is not merely a spiritual act in the sense that it is divorced from practical life. Ephesians 2:15ff is an illustration of how it is an aspect of life together in a Christian community, a congregation. It is, further, a term used for the establishment of right relationships in the world, i.e. a reconciled divine-human relationship necessarily must have favourable effects on human-human relations.

This is why Paul speaks of the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18). This ministry involves the active engagement of Christians as mediators of reconciliation, as God's helpers, as Christ's representatives, as participants in the work of furthering God's reconciliation in the world. In Colossians, the call to this ministry expands indeed unto the edges of the cosmos. Ultimately, the ministry of reconciliation is exemplified by the life (and indeed, the death) of Jesus, and is therefore very much praxis-oriented and "this-worldly".

Breytenbach (1986:12) argues that nowadays "there is no such thing as the Christian doctrine of reconciliation". The "Pauline theology of reconciliation was dramatically reinterpreted" in post-first-century times, so that it is difficult to talk conclusively of *the* Biblical paradigm of reconciliation. Therefore, it becomes necessary to formulate a contextual understanding of reconciliation for our time and situation. Nevertheless, there are some pointers that can be identified in the Biblical heritage. Most importantly, the New Testament proclaims that since reconciliation has come through the cross of Christ, "there can be no reconciliation without confrontation" (Breytenbach 1986:15, quoting Allan Boesak). This means that essentially there can be no reconciliation without liberation (Kaiser 1996:183). According to the Biblical tradition, reconciliation is about concrete relationships in concrete settings. Therefore it must be seen within a context of justice and peace. Moreover, argued from the ecclesiological Pauline idea of the church as one body, reconciliation is unification. "As long as the church stands in the tradition of Ephesians 2:15-16, it cannot accept the fundamental irreconcilability of people, unless it is prepared to deny its very 'raison d'etre'," insists Breytenbach (1986:16). Reconciliation to God and reconciliation of opposing groups are both fruits of the cross, and belong intimately together.<sup>477</sup>

Breytenbach claims there are four main lessons to be gleaned from the Biblical tradition, namely: (1) Reconciliation is God's deed through the cross of Christ; (2) reconciliation to God entails the creation of a new humanity within the church through the renewing and unifying power of the death of Jesus Christ (Breytenbach 1986:19); (3) reconciliation is not confined to the church, but God reconciled the whole of humanity, the entire created order, to Godself (2 Corinthians 5:19)<sup>478</sup>; and (4) the reconciliation of the cosmic and celestial forces<sup>479</sup> is an anticipated eschatological reality (Colossians 1:20)

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<sup>477</sup> "It is undoubtedly true that reconciliation and new creation (Paul) ... cannot be separated" (Breytenbach 1986:17).

<sup>478</sup> "People who want to confine the idea of reconciliation to the relationship between God and the believers, have very little support from early Christian tradition."

<sup>479</sup> Breytenbach includes this to mean ideological, political forces, such as, for example, white domination and black aspiration, capitalism and socialism.

(Breytenbach 1986:20). Reconciliation means being forged by the Spirit into a new humanity (Ephesians 2:15). What matters is not our heritage by birth (i.e. race, nationality, culture, gender, etc.) but our belonging to the body of Christ through the power of the Spirit (Breytenbach 1986:21).<sup>480</sup>

Another exegete, Christoph Klein (1999:58), argues that the Christian Scriptures deal with three aspects of reconciliation, viz. the justice aspect, the cultic aspect, and the christological aspect<sup>481</sup>. The justice aspect concerns itself first and foremost with human relations. Reconciliation is viewed as a balancing-out of human relations. The concepts of paid ransom or satisfaction<sup>482</sup> (e.g. Exodus 21:30; Numbers 35:31), and the exchange of goods feature particularly strongly in justice-oriented acts of reconciliation between two human parties. Frequently, when an injustice has been committed, vengeance is not annulled, but punishment is replaced by another "achievement". Restitution money or compensatory payments<sup>483</sup> are involved instead of personal punishment. The offender pays a ransom, intended to signify a kind of "penance payment", rather than suffering physical punishment (Klein 1999:59).

Scholars argue that the practice of exchanging goods, which effectively caused the cancellation of punishment, was a way of avoiding violence and aggression in justice procedures in old Israel. The reconciliatory re-balancing of relationships was so encouraged to occur through non-violent means instead of bloody vengeance (Schenker 1981:55). Adrian Schenker (1981:56-59) discusses (Old Testament) texts that mention *Kofar*-money (ransom money, compensation, gifts)<sup>484</sup> as a way of settling social disputes (e.g. Proverbs 6:35), where payment of debt is encouraged instead of the execution of the full legal punishment.<sup>485</sup> Other texts also discuss the lightening or forgiving of debt through material compensation, or the handing over and acceptance of compensatory gifts as a seal of reconciliation. In Genesis 32:18-33:4, for example, reconciliation happens when Esau accepts the gifts Jacob offers. Through his acceptance he abrogates his right to avenge and punish Jacob. Here we see the exchange of gifts as an alternative to punishment and vengeance. In many cases in the Old Testament, gift exchange actually constitutes reconciliation (Klein 1999:61; Schenker 1981:61-68).

In 2 Samuel 21:3 "atonement" means as much as compensation, balancing, or ransom payment. In fact, in the Old Testament atonement frequently means the material equalising or balancing of relations which avoids punishment or brutal vengeance. It is originally linked to the juridical system of ancient Israel. It is only later in Israel's history that the term atonement adopts cultic connotations, and changes into a term pertaining to the sacred (rather than the profane), as shall be illustrated below. In most cases, the practice of atonement among humans is considered the primary means for avoidance of retributive violence, as seen for example in 2 Samuel 21. (Klein 1999:61; Schenker 1981:77)

Alternative punishment in the form of atonement (understood as recompense or restitution) is voluntary; the victim may demand the full measure of punishment. The initiative for non-violent atonement has to come from the victim. The perpetrator has no right to demand the softening of his/her punishment. However, it is considered better

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<sup>480</sup> Breytenbach emphasises the importance and power of the heritage gained by baptism in contrast to the heritage gained by birth. People are not to be considered "according to the flesh" (i.e. according to their birth). See 1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:28.

<sup>481</sup> Unlike the justice and cultic aspects of reconciliation in the Bible, the christological aspect is to be found predominantly in the New Testament (Klein 1999:58). It is expressed through the story of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. Since it is of fundamental importance for the Christian witness, I will deal with it more extensively below, and most expansively in section 3.2.

<sup>482</sup> In German, "Lösegeld" or "Sühnegeld".

<sup>483</sup> "Schmerzensgelder" or "Kassationszahlungen".

<sup>484</sup> "Abfindungssumme, Vergleichszahlung".

<sup>485</sup> See also Numbers 35:31.

for the victim not to react to injustice with more bloodshed and aggression, but rather in the spirit of reconstruction and amity (Schenker 1981:77). The perpetrator may, however, try to appease – and thereby sway – the victim by offering reparation and gifts (:78). All in all, openness and willingness to reconcile – on the side of both the wronged and the wrongdoer(s) was considered a virtue, a godly characteristic (:79), and in line with the concept of divine justice.

According to Klein, the second type of reconciliation in the Bible is connected with cultic practice. It is argued that this cultic aspect is a later development in Israel's religious history, and evolved in the age of the priestly rule. The cult focuses on humans' relationship with God, rather than on their relationships among each other. Here reconciliation is placed in the context of cultic atonement practice. "Im Kultus der Versöhnung wird der rechtliche, sozusagen der profane Brauch des Vergleiches zwischen Menschen aufgenommen und auf das Verhältnis zwischen Gott und Mensch übertragen" (Klein 1999:62). Sacrifice is regarded as an act of substitution<sup>486</sup>, which in turn establishes atonement between God and the people. The people's purification is usually a sign of atonement practice (see Isaiah 6:5-7) (Klein 1999:63; Kaiser 1996:183).

In connection with the cultic aspect of reconciliation it becomes important to mention the liturgy of atonement. This liturgy is used in the Old Testament to demonstrate and celebrate God's reconciliation in the old covenant<sup>487</sup> (Schenker 1981:81ff). In the Old Testament one can trace the evolution of the great Day of Atonement (see Leviticus 16), which became an annual festival signifying God's renewed and ongoing reconciliation with the entire nation (Schenker 1981:111-116). Various liturgies of penance in the Old Testament are connected to the Day of Atonement, and include fasting as a sign of repentance, i.e. of turning back to God (Baumgartner 1998:33; Kaiser 1996:183).

Cultic balancing of relationships (between God and the people) usually had to occur through mediation, i.e. it necessarily involved a mediator<sup>488</sup> (Schenker 1981:87). It also involved the use of what Schenker calls "Pfänder göttlicher Versöhnlichkeit" (pledges offered for the assurance of divine reconciliation), which included blood, incense, silver, fine flour<sup>489</sup>, sin and guilt offerings<sup>490</sup>, gifts and sacrifices to people<sup>491</sup> and/or to God<sup>492</sup>, or burnt offerings<sup>493</sup> (Schenker 1981:95-105).

Turning again to the New Testament, one can list further elements of reconciliation practice encouraged by the early Christian witness, for example Paul's concept of fellowship or communion (κοινωνία)<sup>494</sup>, the notion of brotherly and sisterly love (φιλαδελφία)<sup>495</sup>, fraternity (αδελφοτης)<sup>496</sup>, as well as the exchange of the "holy kiss"<sup>497</sup> (Klein 1999:73-74). Significantly, the frequently used metaphor of the "one body" (e.g. 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4), which refers to the community of the faithful bound together by Christ, is another fine example of unity in the spirit of reconciliation promoted in the New Testament. Without a doubt, the New Testament bears witness to

<sup>486</sup> "Ersatzleistung".

<sup>487</sup> In the diverse texts of the Old Testament the terms "reconciliation", "forgiveness" and "atonement" are not easily distinguishable, and are used almost interchangeably. All three terms, however, have in common that they occur in connection with the divine covenant. Hence Baumgartner (1998:32) argues that Old Testament reconciliation is a component, an effect, of the people's covenant with God.

<sup>488</sup> For example Moses (see Exodus 32:30), certain judges, priests and prophets.

<sup>489</sup> E.g., Leviticus 5:11-13, 17:10-12, Exodus 30:11-13a, 15, 34-38.

<sup>490</sup> *Chatat* and *ascham* offerings in Leviticus 4-5, Numbers 5:5-8, 15:22-31.

<sup>491</sup> See for example Genesis 32:20, 33:4,8-11.

<sup>492</sup> Exodus 23:15, 34:20.

<sup>493</sup> Leviticus 1:4.

<sup>494</sup> See for example 1 Corinthians 1:9-10.

<sup>495</sup> Romans 12:10; 1 Thessalonians 4:9 and Hebrews 13:1.

<sup>496</sup> 1 Pet 2:17 and 5:9.

<sup>497</sup> Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12 and 1 Thessalonians 5:26.

the fact that hostility and division among people ought not to remain unaddressed. Especially the epistles abound with strong arguments and exhortations made to promote unity and togetherness among people who by their birth and situation were different from, and even hostile to, one another.

Ephesians 2:14ff is a noteworthy example of a text in which the situation of human division and alienation is addressed rather explicitly. The Pauline writer argues that through Christ, those who are and have been hostile towards one another (in this case, the Gentile and Jewish Christians) are “made one”, Christ has “broken down the wall of division/partition” between the two parties. Through the cross both “are reconciled unto God in one body”, their enmity has been abolished (“slain”, see 2:16). This reconciliation, which occurs in and through the cross of Christ, creates a situation of belonging together, of being “fellow-citizens”, belonging to the “household of God” (2:19). In verse 22, it is said that the two groups are “built together” (to form a temple, a habitation for God’s Spirit), i.e. are forged together in a common duty, for a common goal and purpose.

A further pertinent example of a text in the epistles that addresses human division is 2 Corinthians 5:16ff, frequently referred to as the “song of reconciliation” (Kaiser 1996:183). Seen again in the context of Christ’s saving work on the cross, Paul urges his readers to not “know” any person “according to the flesh”, i.e. to not consider and evaluate people according to their externally perceived characteristics (e.g. nationality, family, race, gender). The qualities in people that are so often the cause of dispute and hostility – like cultural background, social class, or race – are considered ineffectual and of no consequence. They can therefore no longer create partitions between people. In Christ, all have been made new, and therefore all are equal (5:17). Since “all things are of God”, and God has reconciled humanity to Godself “by Jesus Christ”, people have become heirs to “the ministry of reconciliation” (5:18), and are called to live and proclaim the “word of reconciliation” (5:19). The main work of God is to reconcile humans – to Godself and to one another<sup>498</sup>. In this text, humans are entreated to take on their role as “ambassadors for Christ” (5:20), to be “workers together with him” (6:1), which primarily involves broadcasting the word of reconciliation and implementing the ministry of reconciliation. 2 Corinthians 5 is a call to live a reconciled and reconciling life, a transformed and transforming life.

Treatises on and calls to reconciliation are responses to real contexts of social enmity. Addressing conflict or hostility between people or groups is a fairly common theme in Scripture. Actual situations of social conflict mentioned in the New Testament include, for example, the dispute surrounding the apostle’s council in Jerusalem (Acts 15; Galatians 2:1-10) (Stückelberger 1988:434), the many conflicts in Corinth concerning among other things Paul’s authority and apostleship, the propagation of heresies, massive divisions between Jews and Gentiles (2 Corinthians 5), the plight of the Jerusalem congregation (:436-7), and various social disputes in Rome, Ephesus, and Colosseae (:437-9). Although it is seen in connection to concrete situations of human conflict, reconciliation is in many cases regarded as an eschatological event, a characteristic of the anticipated Reign of God. It is not yet fully achieved, but stands in the eschatological tension of that which is “already, but not yet”. Reconciliation is one of the aspects of eschatological fulfilment, and of abundant “eternal” life. It is an ingredient of anticipated dynamic new life. Therefore it can be argued that there is a strong prophetic force in the call for reconciliation (Stückelberger 1988:351). The eschatological thrust of reconciliation implies standing in active, hope-filled conflict with the powers of evil, and in openness towards God’s moving spirit (:353).

As Klein’s rubric of the justice aspect of reconciliation suggests (see above), reconciliation in the Bible often appears in relation to the theme of peace and justice.

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<sup>498</sup> These two aspects of reconciliation are seen in indissoluble unity.

Peace and justice are, like reconciliation, crucial components of the Old Testament concept of Shalom, or the New Testament idea of the Reign of God, both of which are metaphors for a state of comprehensive well-being. So it is that the God who brings about reconciliation is a God of peace (1 Corinthians 14:33), who strives to establish peace on earth (Luke 2:14), and encourages humankind to be at peace with God (Romans 5:1). This God urges people to proclaim the gospel of peace (Ephesians 6:15), and to renounce war and enmity and choose reconstruction by “beating swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks” (Isaiah 2:4). It is indeed a God who blesses the peacemakers of the world (Matthew 5:9). There is no indication whatsoever that (social) justice and (social) reconciliation are to be seen as opposites. Indeed, one can safely assume that they are indeed intimately connected. (Klein 1999:86-88)

It has been argued that reconciliation as a concept or theme is referred to abundantly in the New Testament as well as in the Old Testament, and indeed has much to say to situations of division and hostility among human beings (Baumgartner 1998:34). Yet I have also tried to show that “reconciliation” is in fact a complex term to elaborate. It is not a clear and simple task to unravel “what the Bible says” about reconciliation, because the term itself is fraught with difficulty and multifarious layers of meaning. Certainly, some points of significance can be inferred from a study of the use of the term, as has been attempted above. Yet one must be cautious about “an unreflected usage of ‘reconciliation’” (Breytenbach 1986:17). Since the term is deeply attached to Paul’s explanation of the saving effect of Jesus’ death, one would do well in considering in more depth the significance of the narrative of the cross for the reconciliation question. (This will be carried out in section 3.2.) Breytenbach (n.d.) suggests leaving aside the Biblical notion of “reconciliation” altogether, and focussing instead on the term “forgiveness”. He holds that forgiveness is a more helpful New Testament theological term in the debate about social reconciliation, because it can be assessed with more exegetical clarity and firmness – unlike the complex and partially misleading and ambiguous concept of reconciliation. Indeed, Breytenbach (n.d.) claims that the idea of forgiveness is a better (i.e. more authentic and unambiguous) Christian contribution to the discussion concerning social reconciliation in South Africa. Indeed, for this reason I will turn my attention to the concept of forgiveness in section 3.3.

Having explored in rough strokes the terminology as well as some of the theological assertions concerning reconciliation in the Bible, I now wish to consider some of the *stories* that illustrate situations of reconciliation, and that foreground certain theological views of reconciliation by means of narrative depiction. In most cases in the Bible, reconciliation is talked of descriptively in pictures and stories instead of dogmatically in formulations and precepts (Klein 1999:58), although even the latter may not be ignored. Therefore, the Christian heritage has a rich store of “grand stories of confession, forgiveness, reconciliation and truth” (Botman 1996:37) to offer. Balcomb (2000:51) insists that “for any knowledge to be meaningful it must be placed in the context of a story”. He even suggests that “no facts, propositions, dogmas, or doctrines have meaning unless they are put into the context of a story”.<sup>499</sup> Since I agree with the “centrality of narrative as a fundamental epistemological category” (Balcomb 2000:54), I now turn to some of the prominent stories found in the Bible that deal with reconciliation among human beings. I do not attempt to look at the plethora of stories of reconciliation exhaustively, but merely wish to point out a few selected examples.

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<sup>499</sup> See also Hauerwas and Jones (1989).

### 3.1.3 Some stories of reconciliation in the Bible

#### *The story of Jesus' life and ministry*

Perhaps the most profound foundation for a theology of reconciliation to be found in Scripture is the story of the central figure in Christian faith himself, Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>500</sup> The story of Jesus arguably represents the Christian "master text"<sup>501</sup>, and demonstrates Klein's (1999:58) third aspect of reconciliation in the Bible, viz. the christological aspect. Stückelberger (1988:370ff) argues that the great narrative of Jesus expounds the three key interwoven themes of liberation, judgement and reconciliation. According to Stückelberger (1988:396), there exists a dialectic relationship between liberation, judgement and reconciliation in Jesus' life and ministry. Conceptually speaking, liberation represents the thesis, judgement the antithesis, and reconciliation the synthesis. As it were, reconciliation is considered impossible without liberation and judgement.

The first moment, or the thesis, signalled by Jesus' life action is liberation.<sup>502</sup> There are endless examples of Jesus' efforts to liberate people – from exploitation, oppression, gender and racial bias, their own guilt and sin, tradition and custom, etc. Liberation from social hostility and lack of community was also one of Jesus' prime targets in his ministry. So it is that he encouraged liberating table-communion among unlikely participants (e.g. Mark 2:15, 6:39-41; Luke 7:34-36, 12:37, 14:13-15) (Stückelberger 1988:379), liberating justice and equality, especially for "sinners" and tax-collectors (e.g. Matthew 20:1-15; Luke 1:48,52) (:381), and liberating boundary-crossing, i.e. actions which revealed that social, religious, racial, national, ideological, class, gender, familiar or temporal boundaries no longer separated and alienated people from one another (e.g. Luke 10:29-37) (:383). Moreover, Jesus promoted liberating freedom from self(-involvement) and egocentrism, liberating abstinence from retaliation or aggression (e.g. Matthew 10:14, 16, 23; Luke 22:49-51, 23:9; John 7:30, 10:39, 11:54), and the liberation from compulsion, entailing discerning and awaiting the right time (*καιρος*) for things (:385).

Juxtaposed to the elements of liberation, Stückelberger identifies judgement in Jesus' life praxis.<sup>503</sup> Judgement stands in antithesis to liberation, and yet is as much a component of ultimate reconciliation as liberation is. It can be seen in Jesus' admonition to choose what is right, even when it leads to disagreements (e.g. Luke 12:51). The law is not neglected by Jesus (see Matthew 5:17-20), but is seen as an instrument of liberation, and ultimately, reconciliation.<sup>504</sup> So it makes sense that Jesus is the herald of both the beatitudes and the woes, since these are to be seen in relation to each other (Stückelberger 1988:387). Jesus also promotes judgement as disclosure of injustice (John 3:19; Hebrews 4:12) (:388), and even puts forward the notion that judgement is grace insofar as redemption is the goal of judgement (John 3:17, 12:47; Luke 9:56). Indeed, Jesus can be identified as standing in the prophetic tradition of the just judge (Isaiah 1:17, 11:3f) (:390), since he does not shrink from judging the rich and the Pharisees when it is necessary (Luke 6:24, 12:15, 19:8; Matthew 6:21, 24) (:393). As a judge of their self-centredness, he further calls oppressors to solidarity with the oppressed (:395).

The synthesis of liberation and judgement in Jesus' life praxis lies in his reconciliatory activity. Stückelberger identifies one of the main elements of this activity as being reconciling forgiveness (Matthew 9:2, 5, 18:21-22; Mark 2:5-7; Luke 5:20, 7:48). A

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<sup>500</sup> Although the Bible depicts at least four versions of the story of Jesus (i.e. in form of the gospels), I nevertheless wish to refer to them in a combined fashion as *a* story.

<sup>501</sup> See Villa-Vicencio's discussion of the existence of "master texts" for the social identity and collective memory of a group (2000:25).

<sup>502</sup> See also Kaiser (1996:204) who insists that in Christ liberation and reconciliation coincide and cannot – may not – be separated.

<sup>503</sup> "So wie das Gericht Voraussetzung und Bestandteil der Versöhnung ist, so ist die Befreiung Voraussetzung und Bestandteil des Gerichts."

<sup>504</sup> See also 2 Corinthians 3:9.

further practice in Jesus' ministry that promotes reconciliation is non-violence (Matthew 5:38-42), whereby it is an active/suffering, not a passive/accepting sort of non-violence (Stückelberger 1988:403). Jesus also practised and called for reconciling love of one's "enemy" (Luke 6:27f; Matthew 5:43-48) (:405), which often included taking the first step toward communion with that person (Matthew 5:39-42), and prayer for that person (Matthew 5:44). Jesus' entire life was devoted to proclaiming and living reconciling peace (:407), a peace which was inevitably connected to an order of liberation and justice (Isaiah 42:1-4; Luke 4:18-21; Ephesians 2:14) (:409). The path of his life, which included liberation, judgement and reconciliation, culminated in the cross. Liberation, judgement and reconciliation were therefore brought to fulfilment in the cross, argues Stückelberger (1988:410ff). The importance and efficacy of the narrative of the cross will be illuminated in the subsequent section (3.2).

#### *Old Testament stories of reconciliation*

The Old Testament abounds with stories and symbols of reconciliation. In the following paragraphs I will mention some of the key narratives that deal with issues pertaining to reconciliation.

A definite sign of reconciliation between God and humanity is the *rainbow*. The most famous passage in which it is described is Genesis 9:13-14, embedded in the story of Noah, where it is linked to God's covenant of peace with "the earth", i.e. with the entire created order. The original meaning of the metaphor was that the sign of war – the war-bow – was hung up in the sky, i.e. not used for war, but removed from the hands of warring parties (Stückelberger 1988:351). The rainbow is therefore a symbol of the cessation of war, and the beginning of new, peaceful relations.

The story of *Cain and Abel* (Genesis 4) is probably one of the most arresting stories of brother hate which leads to estrangement from God. It shows how human relationships gone sour also lead to schism with God (Klein 1999:32ff). Where sin is not checked, enmity and possibly fratricide are the result. The result of the tragic conflict between two brothers is punishment, exile and curse (4:11-12). The simple lesson of this ancient story is that refusal to reconcile, and persistence in hostility, leads to fratricide and its effects; failure to reconcile has negative consequences, while reconciliation has positive consequences (Klein 1999:34).

The novella of *Joseph and his brothers* (Genesis 37-50) is a further Old Testament story of reconciliation. It portrays the overcoming of estrangement between brothers (Klein 1999:34ff; Schenker 1981:15ff). For reconciliation to occur, the perpetrators of injustice (the brothers of Joseph) need to experience a change of heart (42:21). The prerequisites for forgiveness and reconciliation are both repentance<sup>505</sup> from the side of the guilty, and willingness of the victim to forgive and abstain from retribution (45:5). Repentance involves recognition of having done injustice, and an acceptance of blame. Not seldom it may even involve fear of retribution, as in the case of the brothers (45:3). Ultimately, repentance must lead to transformation towards a position of solidarity (see Judah's protection of Benjamin and Jacob in chapter 44) and a new disposition concerning the relationship to the victim. According to Klein (1999:36),

Die beiden Elemente – die Vergebungsbereitschaft statt der Rache bei dem Geschädigten und die innere Umkehr vom Unrecht durch Gesinnungswandel und eine neue Einstellung zum Gegenüber auf Seiten der Schuldigen – müssen zusammentreffen, um Versöhnung möglich zu machen.

In this story there is no talk of punishment out of vengeance. Although rightful punishment of injustice and malicious deeds is common in the Old Testament, the story of Joseph tries to forward a higher ideal. It tries to show that punishment is not helpful in the struggle for reconciliation, and that it certainly is not a virtuous option once

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<sup>505</sup> In German, "Umkehr".

forgiveness is pronounced (Klein 1999:37; Schenker 1981:38-9). Essentially, the sign of reconciliation is that the situation changes from alienation to harmony (see 45:15). In the Joseph story this movement toward social harmony does not involve revenge or punishment. Concrete acts of penance<sup>506</sup> or atonement are not demanded, however repentance<sup>507</sup> and a willingness to suffer for the wrongs committed is encouraged (Schenker 1981:40).

The intriguing story of *David and Uriah* (2 Samuel 11-12) is an example of a situation in which mutual human reconciliation is no longer possible (Klein 1999:37ff; Schenker 1981:41ff). David and Uriah cannot be reconciled because Uriah is dead (on account of David's instructions). However, the need for forgiveness and release from sinful unjust actions remains, and becomes the topic of this narrative depiction. Although David cannot become reconciled with his victim, he nevertheless needs to be freed from his guilt, released from his act of injustice, "reconciled" as it were with the past. The challenging words spoken by the wise man Nathan become the catalyst for David's repentance (see 12:1ff). In this story we learn that only after he has shown regret for his evil deed is forgiveness possible (Schenker 1981:52). Only once recognition and acceptance of guilt of the unjust deed is achieved by the perpetrator, i.e. once he has been led to regret and compunction, does the death penalty fall away (12:13,16-17) (Klein 1999:40). Indeed the just punishment is not exacted because of David's repentant spirit. Nevertheless, the damage caused by the perpetrator ought to be addressed – and redressed – as far as possible. Since complete restoration of the former state is not possible in this case, David has to bear the consequence of substitutionary compensation<sup>508</sup> (Schenker 1981:53); he has to undergo some suffering (see 12:14ff). "Statt Wiedergutmachung, die an dem Geschädigten nicht mehr möglich ist, wird hier ersatzweise eigenes Leiden gefordert" (Klein 1999:40). In effect, what is expected of the perpetrator is indirect restitution (Schenker 1981:53), because direct restitution is no longer possible under the given circumstances.

It can be argued that this narrative shows the two moments of regret. The first is deliberately and consciously facing the past to ascertain the level and amount of harm done. It may involve being made aware of one's iniquity by another party (e.g. Nathan). The second is looking to the future, acknowledging responsibility for restitution, and taking on the task of correcting the injustice done (Schenker 1981:52). The story of David further wants to show that fleeing from the consequences of unjust action is not possible. Sooner or later the injustice committed will come back to haunt the perpetrator (Schenker 1981:53), and its adverse effects will become manifest. Ultimately, wrongs must be redressed in order for reconciliation to occur. Part of reconciliation is the amendment of a state of injustice.

The *year of Jubilee* (Leviticus 25:10-17) is an Old Testament institution which was introduced for the sake of equalising social relationships and overcoming social injustices which caused division and hostility. It tried to create economic and social circumstances conducive to amicable and peaceful human interaction. Every fifty years the people were to balance out all unequal relations, e.g. between landowners and tenants, employers and employees, natives and foreigners, debtors and lenders. God explicitly admonishes the people to refrain from oppressing one another (25:14,17), and to abolish the grounds for exploitation, thereby reconciling opponents and effecting a situation of social harmony and peaceful equilibrium.<sup>509</sup> "The Jubilee was a proclamation of renewal: the restoration

<sup>506</sup> "Buße".

<sup>507</sup> "Reue und Umkehr".

<sup>508</sup> In German, "eine Ersatzleistung tun, ein Opfer bringen, eine andere 'Wiedergutmachung' auf sich nehmen".

<sup>509</sup> Such policies are also often reflected in the prophetic writings and in some historical texts. Nehemiah 5:1-19, for example, seeks to "help the wealthy (creditors) to recognize that they are indebted to the poor and that it is their moral responsibility to restore both the capital or the means of production plus a



of people, of social relationships, of nature itself. It has a critical and prophetic potential," explains Nissen (2003:8). It was an expression of an "oikoumene of solidarity" (Raiser 1991:63-65, 86-87).

#### *Reconciliation stories in the New Testament*

Like the Old Testament, the New Testament boasts a multiplicity of stories and symbols that are connected with reconciliation. I have already explored in rough strokes the focal point of the New Testament, namely the great story about Jesus the Galilean. Besides this story, and in many cases woven into this story, are other narratives of reconciliation. Below I mention but a few.

The *parable of the two sons* (commonly known as that of the "prodigal son") in Luke 15:11-32 is one of the most overt invitations to reconciliation in the New Testament (Klein 1999:41ff). It displays reconciliation after alienation between the father and the son, and it challenges and encourages reconciliation between the two brothers. In this parable the reason for reconciliation is not, as in many Old Testament stories, correct and repentant action from the side of the wrongdoer. It is rather the love of the father to his sons, their belonging to his household and their participation and ownership in his wealth and estate that is the basis for reconciliation<sup>510</sup> (Klein 1999:44). The radical notion that there are and can be no prerequisites for reconciliation is suggested here. It is a gift, beginning with forgiveness offered by the person who has been wronged. The father awaits the sinner with open arms before he can even begin to show any remorse (although one could argue that his return is in itself a sign of compunction).

In this parable it is not easy to label who is the victim and who the perpetrator. In a sense, the perpetrator has become a victim, and is at the mercy of his "victim" (i.e. the prodigal son, who has offended his father, becomes dependent upon the father). The one who has been wronged is in a more powerful position than the wrongdoer. These power-dynamics, of course, have an impact on the process of reconciliation. What stands, however, is the fact that here reconciliation starts from the side of the stronger one, from the one who is in the right; the first step needs to be taken by this one (Klein 1999:45). The initiative for reconciliation comes from the one who has been harmed by the actions of the other. Paradoxically, the wrongdoer has also been harmed by his wrong actions. It becomes clear that both parties have suffered from the wrong done by the one, both are affected by the wrong done by one. And both crave the unity and harmony of a restored relationship.

The *parable of the "wicked servant"* (Matthew 18:21-35) is also a story about reconciliation. It is, however, about reconciliation denied (Klein 1999:46ff). Here we see the basis for reconciliation among human beings to be self-received forgiveness<sup>511</sup> (Klein 1999:48). The forgiver is capable and willing to forgive because he has himself been forgiven. Being freed from one's own debt is the propeller and the guiding force for one's own generosity and ability to grant forgiveness. Forgiveness of one's debtor ought to occur seventy-seven times – a number which is used symbolically to mean without limit, always, without questioning. Interpreted in a theocentric way, this story tells us that once God has forgiven, we can and also ought to forgive. As it were, reconciliation with our neighbour is seen as the fruit or effect of reconciliation with God (Klein 1999:49). Viewed anthropologically, this parable suggests that forgiveness can only take place between people if it is mutually and generously offered.

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substantial amount of the interest gained over the year. This was a basic step in the restoration of broken relationships and bringing about reconciliation" (Moyo 2002:297).

<sup>510</sup> "Es ist die Sohnschaft der Söhne, das Vatersein des Vaters, die die Grundlage der Versöhnung bilden, die dort nötig wird, wo Entfremdung eingetreten ist."

<sup>511</sup> The Greek term for forgiveness (ἀφίημι) means to "let go of", "give away" (Klein 1999:50).

It seems that the *parable of the "clever manager"* (Luke 16:1-8a) opposes the pronouncement about reconciliation conveyed through the parable of the "wicked servant". It proclaims that victims forgive their perpetrators *in order that* God may forgive<sup>512</sup>, not *because* God forgives. The logic of the process of reconciliation seems reversed. Here, reconciliation with one's neighbour is, as it were, a prerequisite for reconciliation with God (Klein 1999:57). If humans do not show willingness to reconcile and forgive, then God will not show forgiveness either. Perhaps the two parables' pronouncements are not, however, to be seen as opposites, but rather as two sides of the same coin.<sup>513</sup> Seen together, they assert that reconciliation is a gift *and* a requirement, it is grace *and* law, it is offered freely *and* achieved through hard work. Indeed, Klein would argue that the Biblical witness testifies to reconciliation as both a gift and a call or duty<sup>514</sup>. Similarly, it is both a state and a process, being and becoming<sup>515</sup>. Reconciliation is a gift which inevitably requires effort; it requires the transformation of people through self-judgement, acceptance of guilt, and repentance (Klein 1999:45).<sup>516</sup>

Besides the three parables mentioned above there are many other accounts in the New Testament which witness to inter-personal reconciliation. For example there is the story of the foot-washing in John 13:1-17 (Klein 1999:72), Jesus admonishing his disciples in Matthew 18:15-17, and the story of Zacchaeus' repentance through public confession and restorative action in Luke 19:1-10 (:85). Let it at this point suffice to say that the New Testament has a number of examples of stories that address the topic of reconciliation, and that much insight can be gleaned from these stories. There is, however, diversity, and even some ambivalence and discrepancy, in the Biblical witness regarding reconciliation. One would do well not to try to harmonise the different stories as though they all had one and the same message, since this would do injustice to the fact that the messages the Bible conveys about reconciliation are multi-faceted and varied.

The richness of the Biblical tradition regarding social reconciliation has merely been hinted at in this section. It is beyond the capacity of this investigation to exhibit all the allusions to the theme of reconciliation mentioned in the Bible. Through a brief overview of certain exegetical issues surrounding the terminology, as well as a cursory appraisal of some narratives of reconciliation, I have identified key elements of what Christian Scripture has to bring to the table. In the following sections, some of the motifs I have touched on in this section will be evaluated in more depth.

### 3.2. The narrative of the cross and resurrection as basis for Christian notions of reconciliation

The next "resource" I want to elaborate that Christian tradition has to offer flows from the first. It is, for Christians, the most elementary story witnessed to in Scripture – the narrative of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>517</sup> It is indeed the "central narrative

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<sup>512</sup> See also Mark 11:25.

<sup>513</sup> In both cases, forgiveness and reconciliation are closely connected (Klein 1999:71).

<sup>514</sup> It is "Gabe und Aufgabe".

<sup>515</sup> "Zustand und Prozeß", "Sein und Werden".

<sup>516</sup> In order for forgiveness to be granted, Luke 17:3f emphasises the importance of remorse, while in Matthew 18:21 there is no need for remorseful action on the side of the sinner (Stückelberger 1988:400). This ambiguity suggests different traditions running parallel in the New Testament. Stückelberger, however, posits that repentance, remorse, transformation and reparation – as much as these are important co-themes to forgiveness and reconciliation – are results or effects of forgiveness, not prerequisites for it (1988:401). Forgiveness, he argues, is consistently considered a gift of grace, not an achievement.

<sup>517</sup> See Root (1989:263-278) who discusses how soteriology may take on a narrative structure and shape.

of the Christian faith" (Richardson 2001:52).<sup>518</sup> Many scholars agree that Christian reconciliation praxis must involve, at its most basic level, a christological starting point (Kaiser 1996:193). It will be argued that a contextual theology of the cross and the resurrection, which inevitably implies a hidden God, is possibly the most profound paradigm Christian tradition has to offer to South Africa seeking reconciliation. I will show that the cardinal story of the cross and resurrection is a powerful "external narrative", or "master text"<sup>519</sup>, that may be helpful in coming to terms with the complexity of the South African past and present context. It provides a strong basis for social reconciliation through its message of overcoming evil of the past, being inclusive rather than separating, and fostering hope rather than apathy and pessimism. A theology of the cross has the potency to cultivate and shape a "community of character"<sup>520</sup>, a community that attempts to come to terms with its past of turmoil and trauma, and searches for ways to build a future of hope and wholeness, unity and peace. Being a Lutheran, I here glean from my denominational tradition which seeks to uphold the hermeneutics of the *theologia crucis*, as elaborated first by Paul and then by Martin Luther.

From the perspective of an overtly Christian theological worldview, it may be argued that the story of South Africa is one particular story of the cross. The original story of the cross shows us that Jesus is the champion and the epitome of the crucified people of the world. His story and their stories are a scandal to the world. They appear utterly absurd. Yet to those who believe, these stories represent "the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18), albeit a hidden power. The power lies therein that the word of the cross conveys God's compassion and care for the oppressed, God's solidarity with them, God's relentless protest against the evils (and evil-doers) of the world, and God's struggle with us for life and against death. The God of the cross is the God of the resurrection, and therefore the God of hope and victory over evil, injustice and despotism. Despair and suffering no longer have the final word, but they are the locations of God's revelation and God's divine solidarity, protest, and promise. Thus God is a trustworthy God, a God whom especially crucified peoples can rely on and believe in (also, and in our case, the crucified ones in South Africa).

It is my contention that the God of the cross is a God who suffers, a God of solidarity and protest, and a God of resurrection and renewal. In view of this, a theology of the cross is an appropriate and powerful theology for crucified peoples in general, and for South African "crossbearers"<sup>521</sup> in particular. It is also a powerful paradigm for reconciliation in South Africa, as I argue in this section. Indeed, it is faith in the God of the cross and the resurrection that enables reconciliation among people who are and have been separated and alienated from one another.

South African theology must seek to contemplate a way of being able to place the experienced suffering of this nation in a context that does not crush and debilitate, but rather frees and heals people from the past. This is a crucial prerequisite for social healing and reconciliation. Suffering of all kinds (i.e. physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual) has pervaded many South Africans' lives, and shapes how they view themselves, their community, and the world. If people do not find any sense of purpose and meaning in their suffering, they will be crippled by it – even when reflecting on it in retrospect. They will not be able to overcome the sense of hopelessness and pointlessness that overwhelms them in their state of suffering. Therefore, an interpretation of suffering, and how God fits into the equation, becomes necessary for helping communities to conquer their tribulations with vigour for life, and a positive spirit

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<sup>518</sup> It certainly can be seen as one of history's "grand stories" of "forgiveness, reconciliation and truth" (Botman 1996:37).

<sup>519</sup> See Villa-Vicencio's discussion of the existence of "master texts" for the social identity and collective memory of a group (2000:25).

<sup>520</sup> This is a term used by Stanley Hauerwas (1986).

<sup>521</sup> This a term used by Mofokeng (1983).

for the future. An efficacious interpretation of people's past suffering helps them to identify themselves as "a nation of survivors" rather than "victims" (Tutu 1999:78), and enables them to make the first step necessary for social reconciliation. Desmond Tutu, in a speech at the end of one of the days of Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings, declares, "We have been silent and we have stared the beast of our dark past in the eye. We have survived the ordeal and we are realising that we can indeed transcend the conflicts of the past" (1999:78). This is only possible if the anguish is dealt with in a way that provides meaning, and an incentive to move on into a brighter future with resilience and purposefulness. Here it is argued that the story of the cross is a helpful tool in this endeavour.<sup>522</sup>

In section 3.2.1 I will outline the theology of the cross as passed down from the stories of Jesus, the treatises of Paul and the deliberations of Martin Luther. This theology provides the groundwork for my subsequent sections. I then, in section 3.2.2, attempt to show, on the basis of my knowledge of the theology of the cross, how the Christian God is the God revealed in the story of the cross. In section 3.2.3 I aim to identify the story of the cross and resurrection in the story of South Africa, while in section 3.2.4 I argue that the story of the cross and resurrection is a viable external narrative for South Africa. Finally, section 3.2.5 is about remembering the cross as a step towards reconciliation. Throughout, my ultimate purpose is to show in what way the narrative of the cross and resurrection (i.e. a contextual theology of the cross) can be a helpful resource for South Africa in its quest for reconciliation.

### 3.2.1 The theology of the cross

It seems obvious that the story and the symbol of the crucified one, as expounded in the Bible, are in some way constitutive and normative for a Christian theology of the cross. The crucified one – both the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith – is at once the basis and centre for a theology of the cross. Tracing the theological concept of the crucified one begins with the historical Jesus.

#### *The historical event of the crucifixion of Jesus*

Christians who want to remain faithful to their faith heritage "need historical reference points sufficient to provide them with a guiding vision, which is different from that of the dominant culture, which can know little more than political expediency and the absence of conflict" (Richardson 2001:52). The nature of the Christian religion is such that it bases itself on acts of God in history. For this reason, it is necessary to consider the central figure (Jesus) and event (the crucifixion) of the Christian story historically.

Theologians and Biblical scholars agree that it is one thing to talk in theological terms about Jesus, and quite another to talk about Jesus in historical terms (Crossan 1996:215-220)<sup>523</sup>. It is beyond the scope of this study to engage in the discussion concerning the historical accuracy of the New Testament narratives that tell of the death of Jesus by crucifixion. Rather, I would like to assume for the sake of argument that the historical Jesus, who for many has become the Christ of faith, was executed on a cross. I will not dispute the historical veracity of this assumption, but rather investigate what such an assumption (which is indeed an integral part of the Christian religion) means for people's faith and theological deliberation today.

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<sup>522</sup> I wish to remind the reader of my definition of reconciliation, outlined in section 1.1.3. In this dissertation I do not focus on the *political* (which includes the judicial and economic) components of reconciliation, since such reflection is beyond my area of expertise, and would make this study far too extensive. Therefore, in this section, my primary aim is not to make concrete practical suggestions concerning possible political applications of a theology of the cross (e.g. what the cross might mean for issues surrounding human rights, democracy or economic justice).

<sup>523</sup> Crossan illustrates the distinction between historical versus theological scholarship concerning Jesus.

According to Martin Hengel, death by crucifixion was, during the time of Jesus' earthly life, a "barbaric form of execution of utmost cruelty" (1997:114). Crucifixion was considered one of the most severe punishments executed at that time. According to Roman law, crucifixion as the "supreme penalty" was reserved for the absolutely unforgivable crimes of rebellion against the Roman State and authority, "violent" crimes and robbery (Hengel 1997:138ff). Moreover, crucifixion was deemed the "slaves' punishment," i.e. for slaves who tried to escape from their masters, showed any form of rebelliousness, or attempted to kill their masters (:143). John Crossan adds that crucifixion was "particularly reserved for slaves, bandits, rebels, or anyone designated to be dishonored to their level" (1996:163). Only in rare cases were Roman citizens executed by crucifixion – generally, this penalty was considered too gruesome for persons of Roman birth (who were deemed inherently superior because of their Roman heritage) (Hengel 1997:143).

Hengel concludes that crucifixion "is a manifestation of trans-subjective evil, a form of execution which manifests the demonic character of human cruelty and bestiality" (1997:179). Indeed, there is no doubt that the death we believe Jesus to have died was one of extreme pain and humiliation. He died the death of a criminal of lowest and worst reputation, someone "considered a ... nobody" (Crossan 1996:161). He died being publicly scorned, mocked and disgraced. It becomes clear that "the earliest Christian message of the crucified messiah demonstrated the 'solidarity' of the love of God with the unspeakable suffering of those who were tortured and put to death by human cruelty" (Hengel 1997:180).

It is significant that the one whom we call the Son of God, the Chosen One of God, the Lord and Saviour, the Incarnation, died a violent death, as a despised criminal, at the hands of human authorities. He died an unjust death at the hands of an exploitative, oppressive state. This death, more than any other, displays the weakness, the scandal, the gruesome reality of the cross. It is true that "the particular form of the death of Jesus, the man and the messiah, represents a scandal which people would like to blunt, remove or domesticate in any way possible" (Hengel 1997:182).

Not only did the manner of Jesus' *dying* involve immense pain and suffering, but the context in which he *lived* was also one of hardship and anguish. His (low) social status and his deep compassion for the poor and oppressed led him to see and participate in the pain of harsh daily living.<sup>524</sup> Unjustly high economic taxes crippled many in Judea, and led them to poverty. Poverty, as we know even in the contemporary setting, causes all sorts of other social and psychological evils, such as poor health care, sub-standard education and housing, gangsterism, violence, crime, despair, hopelessness and inferiority complexes. Jesus saw all this, and indeed lived with it and through it, because most of the people he associated with were those who suffered from these grievances. We can therefore say that Jesus was, in life, as well as in death, a "crossbearer" – one who bore suffering and strife, hardship and pain. Both his profound compassion for people who were oppressed and in anguish, and his vehement protest against the forces that caused the oppression caused him to be a man of the cross, literally and figuratively. In acknowledging the historical Jesus of Nazareth as the key figure of our faith and theology, we have to locate the reality of the cross in his person. A theology of the cross, from a Christian perspective, starts with the story of the man Jesus – a man who at the hands of an oppressive and unjust system died a violent death as an innocent victim.

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<sup>524</sup> Nolan (1992:35) explains, "The English word "compassion" is far too weak to express the emotion that moved Jesus. The Greek verb *splagchnizomai* used in all these texts is derived from the noun *splagchnon*, which means intestines, bowels, entrails or heart, that is to say, the inward parts from which strong emotions seem to arise. The Greek word therefore means a movement or impulse that wells up from one's very entrails, a gut reaction. ...English translators ... do not capture the deep physical and emotional flavour of the Greek word for compassion."

### *The Pauline heritage*

We can say more about how the story of the historical Jesus was appropriated and interpreted by the early believers, because we have a strong witness in the New Testament. Since dealing with all Biblical references to the cross is beyond the scope of this study, I have chosen to mention one which, in my opinion, is of central significance. It is my contention that the Pauline text of 1 Corinthians 1:17-2:5 is pivotal in understanding some of the essentials of the cross of Jesus Christ. That is, this particular text is foundational in the articulation of a theology of the cross. In this passage, Paul highlights the key thematic paradoxes of wisdom-in-foolishness and power-in-weakness, as well as the motif of the hiddenness of God in the cross of suffering. Simon Maimela (1993:62) states that

in the same way in which he developed the doctrine of justification by faith in critical opposition to the doctrine of justification by works in Rom 1:17ff, Paul developed the theology of the cross in 1 Cor 1:1ff against human wisdom and indirect knowledge of God that might be gained from human contemplation of God's works of creation.

In light of the emphatic nature of the message of 1 Corinthians 1, the cross is clearly central to Paul's understanding of Christian life and conduct. James Dunn (1998:208) claims that "the centre of gravity of Paul's theology is to be found ... in the death and resurrection of Jesus". It is this passage's "demand that theological reflection begin with the message of the crucified Messiah" that makes it "a disconcerting one" (Cousar 1990:27). Indeed, the cross can be argued to be the foundation of the church. Not only is it the "historical foundation" (Penna 1996:45), but the word of the cross is considered to be the "perennial origin and verification of the Church" (:52).

From the onset of this passage, Paul makes clear that a distinction exists between "eloquent wisdom" (1:17) and the message of "the cross of Christ." He asserts that wisdom, as ordinary people perceive it, stands in opposition and contrast to the word of the cross. In 1:18, this discrepancy is shown even more starkly. The word of the cross is described as "foolishness" ("folly")<sup>525</sup> to those "who are perishing". In his elaboration of the motif of wisdom (1:19-20), Paul concludes with a rhetorical question which affirms that God has "made foolish the wisdom of the world". The antithesis of the world's wisdom and the word of the cross is made explicit. Implicit in this argument is that "the world" considers the word of the cross to be foolishness, but, ironically, *its* wisdom is what is actually foolish from the point of view of God and the cross (and those "who are being saved"). Later, in 1:23, the word of the cross is explicitly stated to be "foolishness to the Gentiles". Throughout, it becomes clear that for Paul, the unfathomable wisdom of God, which is deemed foolishness by the world, is "not merely superior to the world's but as belonging to an entirely different order. ... The single most fundamental theological conception here ... is the existence of one God whose reality transcends and surpasses all other realities" (Furnish 1993:67). What "the preaching of the crucified does is to reveal the radical discontinuity between God and the world" (Cousar 1990:30).

The fact that the opposite of the wisdom of the world is the word of the cross, i.e. "Christ crucified" (1:22), indicates that "specifically the *crucified* Christ discloses the nature of God's power and wisdom. The cross is thus definitive for a properly Christian understanding of God" (Furnish 1993:68). Paul wants to emphasize that it is exactly in and through the weakness, hideousness and seeming hopelessness of the cross of Christ that God reveals God's power. The paradox is that what seems weak is indeed most powerful. What is needed to have such a discerning perception is the lens of one "who is

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<sup>525</sup> Hengel (1997:107ff) argues that the religious tradition of Docetism was "a way of removing the 'folly' of the cross." The theology of the cross in its starkness was too offensive; it had to be domesticated and softened.

being saved". One "who is perishing" cannot understand this ostensible contradiction. Faith, therefore, is the key to perceiving God's veiled revelation.

It is interesting to note that in both 1:23 and 2:2, Paul uses the perfect tense for the word "(to be) crucified" (εσταυρωμενον). The use of this verb tense, instead of the more widely used imperfect or present tenses, signifies that Paul wants to communicate that "Christ in fact continues to be crucified" (Furnish 1993:68). Greek scholars agree that the perfect tense is usually used to convey that an action which took place in the past continues to have effect and impact in the present. In connection to this, Paul elsewhere makes his profound theological assertion that to be a Christian is to *participate* in the death (and resurrection) of Christ.<sup>526</sup> As the body of Christ, believers are constantly being crucified, so that, in a theological sense, Christ himself never ceases to be crucified.

### *Luther's theologia crucis*

The Pauline pronouncement of God's hidden power-in-weakness and wisdom-in-foolishness is exactly where the Lutheran dogmatic-theological tradition of the theology of the cross roots itself. Luther, an ardent scholar of the Scriptures, grappled with the entire Biblical corpus to reformulate those aspects of Roman Catholic theology and praxis of the late medieval age which he found to be problematic. His exposition of Paul's focus on the folly and offence of the cross drew him to perceive God's presence in invisible and unexpected places. Luther insisted that the theology of his time employ an alternative hermeneutics for understanding God's revelation than was common. This hermeneutics is what came to be known as the *theologia crucis*, the theology of the cross. (Blakely 1999:55)

Luther coined the term in 1518 and used it in various contexts (Lohse 1999:36). Bernhard Lohse argues that the *theologia crucis* was directed primarily against proponents of scholasticism and the humanism of Erasmus (Lohse 1999:36).<sup>527</sup> It is in Luther's theses for the Heidelberg Disputation that the theology of the cross took on precise formulation. The four articles of the Heidelberg Disputation that are generally acknowledged to be the basis and centre of the *theologia crucis* are the nineteenth to the twenty-second. They read,

That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened [Rom. 1:20]. ... He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and cross. ... A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is. ... That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is puffed up, blinded, and hardened. (LW 1:52-53)<sup>528</sup>

For Luther, the theology of the cross is not "a chapter in theology but a specific kind of theology" (von Loewenich 1976:18). The cross, as it were, is the crucial focal point of all theology, and indeed must inform and shape the entire theological enterprise. The theology of the cross can therefore not be located neatly in one of the traditional categories of theology, i.e. soteriology or Christology. Rather, it pervades all of these categories and shapes how we deliberate, argue and act theologically. Walther von Loewenich (1976:18) insists "it belongs to the doctrine of the work of God in the same way as it belongs to the doctrine of the work of Christ".

Essentially, the cross provides the appropriate lens through which to do theology. Lohse (1996:39) quotes the following "trenchant formulas" which summarise "the

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<sup>526</sup> See for example Romans 6:1-11; 2 Corinthians 5:14-15; Galatians 6:14.

<sup>527</sup> The *theologia crucis* became the theological standard and academic ensign of the Wittenberg University. See also Blaumeiser (1995:44).

<sup>528</sup> When quoting Luther, I always use the American Edition of *Luther's Works*, abbreviated as "LW". I also mention the volume in which the quotation occurs, as well as the page references within that volume.

significance of the cross for the Wittenberg theology he represented” from Luther’s *Operationes in Psalmos*:

“CRUX sola est nostra theologia,” or “Crux probat omnia,” which means that “the cross puts everything to the test,” “preserves everything,” or, “only the cross is judge and witness to the truth.”<sup>529</sup>

Although it is clear that Luther here employs his familiar mode of slight exaggeration to make a polemical statement against his doctrinal opponents, we have to acknowledge that he is quite intent on unequivocally emphasising the cross as the basis and focal point of all deliberation about God and theology. One could argue that the main theological accent of the Protestant Reformation, the doctrine of justification, is intricately linked to deliberation about the cross. The cross is the most radical sign that God is willing and able to accept unconditionally those who are unacceptable.<sup>530</sup> God does not agree with or approve of the cross. It is utterly atrocious – even and especially to God – because it witnesses to the depravity and sinfulness of human existence.<sup>531</sup> Despite its connotations and what it reveals in terms of human fallibility and evil, God identifies with the cross, and turns it into a sign of grace and salvation. In essence, God’s identification with the cross (and the crucified) is a manifestation of God’s acceptance of the unacceptable (Nürnberger 2001:143). This is, in turn, the essence of the doctrine of justification by grace.

Without the lens of the cross, which Luther insists is the proper approach to theology, one risks falling into a theology of glory.<sup>532</sup> The *theologia crucis*, which is fundamentally a theology of a hidden, invisible God (the *Deus absconditus*) is defined in its antithesis to a “theology of glory” (*theologia gloriae*) which depicts God as visible and overt (von Loewenich 1976:27ff; Gritsch and Jenson 1976:47; Asendorf 1970:13). In line with Paul, Luther considers there to be such a thing as “wisdom-in-foolishness”, and even goes a step further in defying those who do not hold to this kind of wisdom, but who “see the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man” as being “completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened” (*Heidelberg Disputation*, LW 1:52-53). Kazoh Kitamori claims that “in fact Luther’s *whole theology* rests in the concept of the ‘hidden God’” (1965:106). In Kitamori’s terms, the theology of glory seeks to advocate “a God who has no pain,” whereas the theology of the cross can be equated with a theology of the pain of God (1965:22). The theology of glory does not distinguish between the hidden and the revealed God, whereas the theology of the cross insists that God is essentially hidden (Gritsch and Jenson 1976:154). Even though Luther distinguishes between the hidden and the revealed God, he considers even the revealed God to be a “clothed” God who “wraps himself up in his word. ... God must conceal himself in the word in order to be able to reveal himself” (von Loewenich 1976:33). As it were, the concept of the hidden

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<sup>529</sup> Blaumeiser (1995:91ff) also considers Luther’s *Operationes in Psalmos* in depth and discovers that this commentary strongly forwards the theology of the cross.

<sup>530</sup> Nürnberger (2001:143) asserts, “Wenn Gott sich mit Christus, dem Menschen, der sich ganz mit dem von ihm verkündeten Gott identifiziert hat, ganz identifiziert hat, ist das Kreuz Christi eine einmalige, radikale und grundlegende Manifestation der Bereitschaft Gottes, die Unannehmbaren bedingungslos, leidend und heilend anzunehmen.” Similarly, Blaumeiser (1995:44) claims, “...es geht darum in der *theologia crucis* gleichzeitig um das Problem des christlichen Lebens bzw. der Rechtfertigung. Beide will Luther entschieden im Kreuz bzw. im gekreuzigten Christus zentriert wissen.”

<sup>531</sup> The cross is surely the ultimate example of human cruelty, injustice, mistrust, hate, etc. which makes it a potent symbol of humanity’s sin. The cross, as far as it exemplifies suffering, is one of the marks of inauthentic existence, i.e. existence after the fall; it is intrinsically a sign that things are out of joint, perverted, and not as they are supposed to be according to the will of the good Creator. The reality of evil and suffering defies the potential for which life was created. It stands in contrast to it. The cross is hideous in that it exemplifies strife and hardship, despair and isolation, oppression, exploitation and injustice, rather than authentic existence in wholeness.

<sup>532</sup> In contrast to justification by grace, a theology of glory implies that humanity is able to achieve salvation by good works, and by “free will”.



God means that revelation fundamentally is only possible in concealment; even the revealed God is camouflaged and not devoid of secrets. The theology of the cross is an attempt to challenge and root out faulty images of God (explicated by a theology of glory), especially those urging the attainment of human righteousness based on free will and good works (Asendorf 1970:13).

In an attempt to summarise Luther's theology of the cross, N Jane Blakely (1999:56) writes,

Weaving together the foci of theses 19 and 20 [of the Heidelberg Disputation], and reflecting on the work of various scholars, I propose the following to be the four key elements of the theology of the cross: a). God is hidden from humanity-- except in the cross. b). God's revelation hidden in the cross stands in antithesis to speculation about God. c). God is known in suffering. d). Knowing God through suffering and the cross is a matter of faith.

Comparing Blakely's concise analysis of Luther's *theologia crucis* and Paul's understanding of the cross and God, it becomes apparent that they correspond in many crucial ways. Both theologies essentially encapsulate the concept of the hidden God known in and through the cross (i.e. suffering). It is the *Deus absconditus* that is the Christian God, the God of and in Jesus Christ (Gritsch and Jenson 1976:154). Luther posits that already the Old Testament suggests that God is hidden.<sup>533</sup> In the New Testament, this theology is forwarded intimately by narrative and theological reflection about the cross of Jesus Christ.

In explication of Luther's argument that God is hidden from humanity, except in the cross, Alister McGrath (1985:149-150) explains,

Revelation must be regarded as indirect and concealed ... although it is indeed God who is revealed in the passion and the cross of Christ, he is not immediately recognizable *as God*. Those who expect a direct revelation of the face of God are unable to discern him in his revelation, precisely because it is the *posteriora Dei* which are made visible in this revelation. In that it is God who is made known in the passion and cross of Christ, it is *revelation*; in that this revelation can only be discerned by the eye of faith, it is *concealed*. The 'friends of the cross' know that beneath the humility and shame of the cross lie concealed the power and the glory of God.<sup>534</sup>

David Steinmetz (1993:24) further explains that there are two senses in which Luther can speak of the hiddenness of God. He can speak of a God who is hidden outside of revelation, unknown and as unrevealed unknowable, and a God who hides himself within his revelation, undisclosed in the very act of disclosure.

It is precisely in "the things we regard as the counterpart of the divine," i.e. weakness, suffering, foolishness, that "God has become visible" (von Loewenich 1976:21).<sup>535</sup> All the things that "in our opinion have nothing divine in them but rather point to man's trouble, misery and weakness" are the things that God chooses to be manifest in and through (von

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<sup>533</sup> Isaiah 45:15 declares, "Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself" (LW 31:53). See also von Loewenich (1976:27 and 38ff), where he discusses Luther's lectures on Isaiah. See also Fretheim's *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (1989).

<sup>534</sup> The term "posteriora Dei" (LW 31:52) is translated as "the back parts of God," i.e. that vision of God which gives us but an incomplete and indirect knowledge of God.

<sup>535</sup> The theology of the cross turns what we expect on its head. Things are the opposite of what we think or perceive them to be. So it is that in *Fourteen Consolations* (LW 42:141) Luther argues that "Jesus Christ, God's Son, has ... consecrated and hallowed all sufferings, even death itself, has blessed the curse, and has glorified shame and enriched poverty so that death now is a door to life, the curse a fount of blessing, and shame the mother of glory."

Loewenich 1976:29).<sup>536</sup> Furthermore, McGrath considers Luther's paradoxical claim that God is revealed in the (humanly perceived) debacle of the cross,

A fundamental contention of the *theologia crucis* is not merely that God is known through suffering (whether that of Christ or of the individual), but that God *makes himself known* through suffering. For Luther, God is active in this matter, rather than passive in that suffering and temptation are seen as means by which man is brought to God. (McGrath 1985:151)<sup>537</sup>

Luther's theology of the cross is clearly a theology of revelation (von Loewenich 1976:19). However, how God reveals Godself to us is unexpected and veiled – it is indirect and obscure. Indeed, a direct knowledge, a viewing of God's face, is denied us. "This really means that we know God not on the basis of works, but through suffering and the cross" (von Loewenich 1976:19, 21; Kitamori 1965:25). Therefore, we recognize and have knowledge of God "only in suffering and the cross" (von Loewenich 1976:20). What exactly is "the cross" and what does it show? Luther declares that there is "nothing else to be seen than disgrace, poverty, death, and everything that is shown us in the suffering of Christ" (von Loewenich 1976:20).<sup>538</sup> That is why we can say, with Luther, that God becomes "hidden in sufferings" (von Loewenich 1976:29).

For Luther, the "cross" and "suffering" do not refer primarily to the cross and suffering of Jesus Christ. He wishes to point out that God is revealed in the cross(es) of Christians (Blaumeiser 1995:121)<sup>539</sup>. "The cross of Christ and the cross of the Christian belong together."

That is to say, the cross of the Christian corresponds to the cross of Christ. To know God "through suffering and cross" means that the knowledge of God comes into being at the cross of Christ, the significance of which becomes evident only to one who himself stands in cross and suffering. (von Loewenich 1976:20) Indeed, in his *Admonition to Peace* of 1525 (LW 36:5ff) Luther at some point states boldly and in no uncertain terms, "Suffering! suffering! Cross! cross! This and nothing else is the Christian law!" (von Loewenich 1976:29).

One might be tempted at this point to accuse Luther of religious bigotry and exclusivism. Why, we might wonder, does Luther refer only to the suffering of Christians? Is God not manifested and present in the cross(es) of non-Christians? Since these were never questions Luther dealt with overtly, seeking conclusive answers from his work in this regard is speculative. The only point of interest to us in this issue is that he sometimes talks of the hidden church as being those believers who are not obviously and overtly Christian (von Loewenich 1976:126)<sup>540</sup>. He concedes to the fact that a "heathen is just as much a man or a woman – God's good creation – as St. Peter, St. Paul and St. Lucy, not to speak of a slack and spurious Christian." Furthermore he acknowledges that

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<sup>536</sup> The fourth article of the *Heidelberg Disputation* (LW 31:39) declares that "the works of God are always unattractive and appear evil." Elsewhere (LW 7:175), Luther goes so far as asserting that "we should know that God hides Himself under the form of the worst devil."

<sup>537</sup> Kitamori (1965:21) elaborates the notion that on the cross, God "fights" with Godself. This is indeed an image of an active God, struggling with the pain of the world. Kitamori would argue that it is in God's struggle with Godself that God experiences pain "for humanity".

<sup>538</sup> In *That a Christian Should Bear his Cross With Patience* (1530), Luther contrasts a Christian with an unbeliever. A Christian is not convinced by what can be perceived with the senses, but "disregards what he can see and holds to the word." The Word, therefore, stands in opposition to what is visible. (LW 43:186)

<sup>539</sup> Blaumeiser insists, "Wo Luther von 'Kreuz' oder auch von 'Kreuz Christi' spricht, meint er nur selten das Kreuz Jesu. Worum es ihm geht, ist vor allem *unser Kreuz* bzw. das Kreuz, das Christus uns auferlegt. Als Umschreibung für dass, was gemeint ist, findet sich bisweilen die Wendung 'Kreuz und Leiden' (*crux et passio*), andere Male hingegen die Wendung 'Kreuz und Tod' (*crux et mors*)."

<sup>540</sup> Von Loewenich also discusses Luther's notion of the "hiddenness of Christian life" (1976:114ff). Elsewhere (1976:36,48ff) he mentions Luther's distinction between the true and the false church.

there are “plenty of Christians – and indeed the greater part of them – who are worse in their secret unbelief than any Jew, heathen, Turk, or heretic” (LW 45:25)<sup>541</sup>.

Nevertheless, even if Luther’s deliberations concerning *whose* cross reveals God might be incomplete, I would like to extend his theological point further. I would like to contend that it is in any “cross” which is caused by exploitation, oppression, abuse, or any form of injustice that human beings experience that God reveals Godself.<sup>542</sup> God is present when people suffer from mistreatment and violation, regardless of whether they are Christians or not. In my opinion, the point is that God’s preference is not for Christians over non-Christians. God’s “preferential option” in terms of where and how God is present and manifest, is not for those who are “properly religious”, but rather for those who suffer and struggle, for those who are on the underside. In essence it is not necessarily those who bear Christ’s name on their lips that are the vessels of God’s revelation and the residences of God’s presence, but those who bear Christ’s cross in their lives (D’Costa 1990:21-22). Luther argues that “Jesus Christ ... has consecrated and hallowed *all* sufferings” (*Fourteen Consolations* (1520), LW 42:141-142, my emphasis). Indeed, a true Christian is one who is “drawn into” the event of the cross (von Loewenich 1976:113), i.e. participates in suffering. The call to believe in the God of the cross, the hidden God, and the call to participate in this God’s cross, is certainly not only a theoretical concept.<sup>543</sup> It is a call to a life of “discipleship in suffering” (von Loewenich 1976:117). Luther confidently urges believers, “Christ’s passion must ... become a pattern for your entire life” (*A Meditation on Christ’s Passion* (1519), LW 42:13). The life of the sufferer is, in a real sense, a (if not *the*) manifestation of God’s presence in the world. Suffering is the location of the hidden God. Because God conceals Godself in the cross and suffering, the only path by which to know God is through trusting in the promise of God’s love and grace even in the midst of suffering.<sup>544</sup> This spells hope for those who suffer because it implies God’s closeness and solidarity with sufferers. Not only is God *with* sufferers, but God prefers to be *revealed* in their suffering.

Essentially, “the Christian’s life according to the theology of the cross is nothing else than a ‘being crucified with Christ’” (von Loewenich 1976:121). Being crucified with Christ manifests itself in that, according to Luther, a person “incurs the enmity of the world” (von Loewenich 1976:122). Indeed the cross is “not self-imposed” but is “imposed upon a person” (*That a Christian Should Bear His Cross With Patience* (1530), LW 43:183); it is a consequence of becoming vulnerable to the world. Luther pronounces, “Taking up the cross is by nature something that causes pain” (LW 43:184). Moreover “such a cross and pain is necessary; it must be known as such and really bear down painfully, as does some great peril to one’s goods and honour” (*Sermon on Cross and Suffering*, LW 51:198). Luther connects suffering very closely and intimately with devotion to Christ. A suffering person is a person who follows in Christ’s footsteps, and therefore is a true disciple of him. Luther makes his point by exaggerating, “if anyone does not wish to bear the cross which God places upon him, ... he must know that he cannot have fellowship with Christ or share in any of his gifts” (LW 43:185). In other words, those who do not suffer are not in Christ’s fold, and are denying him, while those who suffer are in God’s special favour.

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<sup>541</sup> *The Estate of Marriage* (1522). In a letter written to the monk Georg Leiffer in Erfurt in 1516, Luther asserts, “Das Kreuz Christi ist über die ganze Welt hin verteilt. Einem jeden kommt zu allen Stunden sein Teil davon zu” (quoted in Helbig 1961:24).

<sup>542</sup> Kitamori (1965:62) would argue that both believers and unbelievers bear the pain of God.

<sup>543</sup> Von Loewenich (1976:113) reminds us that Luther’s theology of the cross “cannot be dismissed as the brooding product of a lonely monk (i.e. Luther himself), but it proved its worth for him when he stepped forth into an unprecedented battle. Luther practiced his theology in the face of death.”

<sup>544</sup> See for example *A Sermon on Preparing to Die* (LW 42:114), *Comfort When Facing Grave Temptations* (LW 42:183ff), *A Letter of Consolation to all who Suffer Persecution* (LW 43:61ff), or *Comfort for Women who have had a Miscarriage*, LW 43:247ff).

The unexpected nature of God's revelation, both in the cross of Christ, and in the sufferings of those who participate in the cross of Christ, can rightfully be called scandalous. Such theology can easily be deemed foolishness by worldly standards (Gritsch and Jenson 1976:47). As we have seen, 1 Corinthians 1 proclaims that the wisdom of God appears foolish to human beings. Humans are at least profoundly uncomfortable with, if not entirely dismissive of, the doctrine of the hidden God, and the theology of the cross that goes with it. It seems like weakness and folly, rather than power and wisdom. It is problematic to us humans because it insists that God is at work there where we would least expect God. As God was with the crucified Messiah, God is with the lowly and weak, the downtrodden and oppressed, the hungry and violated of the world. And these are the ones with whom God prefers to commune and in whom God is made manifest to the world. This is a scandal because it breaks down all our artificial perceptions of how the world works; it demands a radical paradigm shift and ethical conversion. It demands that we see the sufferers of the world in a new light. It demands that we recognize and seek God on the cross, in frailty and weakness.

In essence, the theology of the cross summons us to see God revealed in the opposite of what we expect. Luther spoke of God's revelation concealed *sub contrario*. The insistence on God's *sub contrario* revelation in turn led Luther to distinguish between the alien (or alienating) work of God, or *opus alienum*, and the actual, proper work of God, or *opus proprium* (Blaumeiser 1995:173). The *opus alienum* is that which seems to portray God as a wrathful, punishing God (Blaumeiser 1995:175)<sup>545</sup>. The *opus proprium*, which is hidden, points to God's love and compassion, and brings about grace and salvation. The cross collapses the two into one: it seems to be a work of punishment, but is actually a work of grace.<sup>546</sup>

In light of this, one might argue that the theology of the cross may equally be called a theology of the resurrection. Luther's theology of the cross never dismisses, denies or denounces the importance of the resurrection (Asendorf 1970:14-17; Lohse 1996:39). Cross and resurrection belong together, and should never be separated. In fact, the experience of the cross pervades the experience of resurrection, and vice versa. According to Luther, the Christian participates in the resurrection experience of Christ in an equally profound way as s/he participates in the death of Christ. In *Fourteen Consolations* (LW 42) Luther indeed juxtaposes seven images of evil or calamity with seven images of blessing, making it clear that they belong together in the tightly-woven tapestry of life experience.<sup>547</sup> The cross does not and cannot stand without the resurrection, suffering is not without blessing.

The resurrection proclaims that the *opus proprium* supersedes the *opus alienum*, the *verbum gratiae* sounds out louder than the *verbum legis*. In opposition to the word of law, the word of grace has the final word, although the two cannot be separated. The resurrection attests to the fact that the "proper work" of God is to bring about grace and salvation. The scourge of the cross is not the only word, nor is it the final word of God. In fact, the

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<sup>545</sup> Blaumeiser calls this "das Zerstörungswerk". However, "Gottes Zerstörungswerk" always aims at ultimately bringing about justification for the lost.

<sup>546</sup> The distinction between the *opus alienum* and the *opus proprium* also points to the distinction between the *verbum legis* (the word of law) and the *verbum gratiae* (word of grace). The word of grace is usually concealed under the word of law (Blaumeiser 1995:175). It becomes clear how deliberation about the cross is inevitably also deliberation about the doctrine of justification.

<sup>547</sup> Moreover, "The sweet mercy of God the Father shines more brightly ... and is able to comfort us in every distress. ... Therefore, ... our very own lives, led through so many evils and dangers, would, if considered properly, abundantly commend to us the ever present and most tender goodness of God, which, far beyond our thought and feeling, carried us in its bosom. ... Why, then, are we so anxious about a single peril or evil, instead of leaving the caring to him, when our whole life witnesses that he has rescued and delivered us from so many evils without any effort on our part?" (*Fourteen Consolations*, LW 42:131-132)

cross can be seen as the “preparation for grace” (Blaumeiser 1995:175)<sup>548</sup>, of which the resurrection is the visible manifestation and fulfilment. However, we human beings live in and with the dialectic tension that exists between God’s foreign, alienating work and God’s actual work, God’s wrath and God’s love, law and grace. Therefore, we also find that the Christian life entails a constant tension between the cross and the resurrection (Blaumeiser 1995:271)<sup>549</sup>.

It is beyond the scope of this study to investigate all Luther’s texts that exhibit the theology of the cross. For an overview of the most significant passages, see Blaumeiser (1995), who includes Luther’s *Commentaries* and *Lectures on Psalms*, his *Exposition of the Magnificat*, *Lectures on Romans*, *Lectures on Hebrews*, and the treatise *On the Freedom of a Christian* in the list. Further writings which promulgate the theology of the cross include the famous treatise pitted against Erasmus, *The Bondage of the Will* (1526)<sup>550</sup>, the *Treatise on Good Works* (1520)<sup>551</sup>, and his *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527-1530, LW 17:131ff)<sup>552</sup>. Some of the “less theological” texts (i.e. addressed to ordinary laypeople, not particularly to students of theology) also betray Luther’s utter conviction in the main tenets of a theology of the cross, for example *A Meditation on Christ’s Passion* (1519) and the treatise on *Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague* (1527)<sup>553</sup>.

From the above discussion of Luther’s *theologia crucis*, framed in considerations about the historical event of the crucifixion of Jesus and the Pauline-Biblical heritage concerning the word of the cross, we can deduce that a theology of the cross is indeed foundational for Christian life and thinking. In what follows I will attempt to analyse

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<sup>548</sup> “Gottes Zerstörungswerk ... ist – so heisst es mehrfach – ‘Vorbereitung auf die Gnade’ (*praeparatio ad gratiam*). Das Zerstörungswerk ist also weder das letzte noch das eigentliche.”

<sup>549</sup> Blaumeiser talks of “Leben aus der Spannung von Furcht und Hoffnung”.

<sup>550</sup> Here, Luther alludes to the fundamental tenets of the theology of the cross. In the following passage, he expounds on an aspect of the hidden God (LW 33:62-63): “Thus God hides his eternal goodness and mercy under eternal wrath, his righteousness under iniquity. This is the highest degree of faith, to believe him merciful when he saves so few and damns so many, to believe him righteous when by his own will he makes us necessarily damnable, so that he seems, according to Erasmus, to delight in the torments of the wretched and to be worthy of hatred rather than of love. If, then, I could by any means comprehend how this God can be merciful and just who displays so much wrath and iniquity, there would be no need for faith.”

<sup>551</sup> Luther here explains how God can only be perceived in suffering, and through faith (LW 44:28): “The great thing in life is to have a sure confidence in God when, at least as far as we can see or understand, he shows himself in wrath, and to expect better at his hands than we now know. Here God is hidden, as the bride says in Song of Songs [2:9], ‘Behold, there he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows.’ That means he stands hidden among the sufferings which would separate us from him like a wall, indeed, like a wall of a fortress. And yet he looks upon me and does not forsake me. He stands there and is ready to help in grace, and through the window of dim faith he permits himself to be seen.” What can humanly only be described as God’s wrath actually turns out to be a mysterious vehicle of God’s compassionate presence. In spite of evidence to the contrary, in spite of difficulties, calamities and hardship, faith maintains that God *is* a God of grace and compassion. Despite evidence to the contrary, God is for us and not against us. This, in essence, is the theology of the cross.

<sup>552</sup> Here, the theology of the cross is shown in Luther’s explication of the wonderful, incomprehensible works of God. God works in ways that are beyond human reasoning and understanding, too awesome for us humans to comprehend. Here, the emphasis is not so much on God’s revelation in lowliness and suffering, but in God’s revelation in deeds that are too great for humans to grasp. Therefore, it is a revelation to which we have no access (except through faith), and therefore remains hidden. One of Luther’s favourite motifs of recognising God in the opposite of what is expected appears abundantly in these lectures.

<sup>553</sup> This is, in my opinion, a good instance of the *theologia crucis* put into practice, translated into a concrete situation. In this treatise, Luther forwards the notion that Christians ought to – and by faith are enabled to – put their lives at risk for the sake of their neighbours who are suffering. We are called to enter into suffering, take suffering upon ourselves, for the sake of other suffering persons. Luther speaks to a situation where people were fleeing their homes, their towns and cities, out of fear of contracting the plague. In many cases, they left ailing friends and even family members to die alone in squalor and agony. Luther urges Christians, instead of fleeing in fear, to go to their “sick neighbour close at hand. Go to him and serve him, and you will surely find Christ in him” (LW 43:130).

whether and in what way the pronouncements of a *theologia crucis* are helpful to the context of South Africa, especially in view of its endeavours for social reconciliation.

### 3.2.2 God revealed in the story of the cross

The narrative of the cross stresses the Incarnation. It portrays God as a God who is fully *in* the world – this world of violence and suffering. It also shows us that God is a God who suffers – even unto the bitter end. Jesus' God is mysteriously and paradoxically revealed in the calamity of the cross of violent oppression, injustice and death. The story of Jesus, his life, death and resurrection, displays the identity, the character and integrity of God. The writings of Paul show that God – God's identity and God's purpose – is revealed in the crucified Christ (Cousar 1990:27)<sup>554</sup>. Indeed, "the cross of Christ for Paul has indispensable significance for epistemology. God is to be known precisely in the message of the cross" (Cousar 1990:42). New Testament texts, especially the Pauline epistles, "persist in viewing the death [of Jesus] theonomously and as an event of revelation. In and through it God's character as a righteous and loving God is displayed. God is no more fully known than in the crucifixion" (Cousar 1990:109). This assertion is echoed by Luther's *theologia crucis*. Jon Sobrino, one of the leading Latin American liberation theologians talks, too, in epistemological terms when claiming that we "know" God "on Jesus' cross" (1998:246).<sup>555</sup> Indeed, it is the experience of suffering and victimization that becomes the "setting for God's revelation" (Sobrino 1998:251). Surely, the majority of the people of South Africa who have encountered the physical, psychological and spiritual violence of apartheid, can identify and resonate with this image of God, the God of Jesus Christ who is present in suffering caused by violence and domination.

The cross demonstrates that God is a God of love. God's willingness to suffer is proof of God's love for the world. Jürgen Moltmann (1974:230) argues,

Were God incapable of suffering in any respect, and therefore in an absolute sense, then he would also be incapable of love. If love is the acceptance of the other without regard to one's own well-being, then it contains within itself the possibility of sharing in suffering and freedom to suffer as a result of the otherness of the other. Incapability of suffering in this sense would contradict the fundamental Christian assertion that God is love.<sup>556</sup>

Dorothee Sölle contributes to this argument by talking of the helplessness of God. She holds a rather revolutionary theological position when declaring,

In all religions, a question mark has been set against the omnipotent and serene gods by the sufferings of men. But only in Christ does the concept of a suffering God appear. Here alone is it the suffering of God which is shouldered by a man. Only in Christ does it become clear that we can put God to death because he has put himself in our hands. Only since Christ has God become dependent on us. Christ did not identify himself with a calm spectator of all our troubles. Christ, by his teaching, life and death, made plain the helplessness of God in the world; the suffering of unrequited and unsuccessful love. (Sölle 1967:151)

Sölle explicates the total and utter risk of God in coming to the world in Christ. In being fully human, Christ is dependent on humans. "Christ puts himself at risk – his

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<sup>554</sup> Cousar refers to 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5.

<sup>555</sup> "The essence of Jesus' passion history is the assertion that this one whom God forsook himself becomes God" (Sölle 1975:147).

<sup>556</sup> Similarly, William Placher (1994:18) insists, "God suffers because God is vulnerable, and God is vulnerable because God loves – and it is love, not suffering or even vulnerability, that is finally the point. God can help because God acts out of love, and love risks suffering. A God defined in terms of power is precisely not a reliable rescuer, because power provides no guarantee of concern, and power, in the way most cultures have most often used the word, too often grows out of fear of vulnerability that makes the reaching out in love, with all the risks entailed, impossible."

life, his work, his cause – by making himself dependent on us,” and opening himself up to the possibility of suffering (Sölle 1967:123). The cross can be considered an inevitable consequence of God’s giving Godself over to the world in love. “There is unwilling suffering, there is accepted suffering and there is the suffering of love,” explains Moltmann (1974:230). The latter seems to be the love displayed by God in Christ’s cross. God takes calamity and death upon Godself because it seems to be what happens to those who truly love. Misery and hardship are the cost of true love and commitment. So it is that Sölle speaks of God’s “painful love” (1975:44).<sup>557</sup>

If God experiences death in Godself, God can be, and indeed is believed to be, in radical solidarity with those for whom suffering, death and any kind of hardship is a reality. God is as dismayed and troubled by the terrifying consequences of being in the world fully and totally. God weeps and suffers and even dies because of the evil of the world, and thereby shows God’s full and utter solidarity with, and love for, those who suffer unjustly (Sölle 1975:81; Nolan 1988:138). “God is on the side of the victim, he is hanged” (Sölle 1975:148). Viewing the suffering and death of Jesus as the scandalous consequence of incarnation, i.e. as total and radical solidarity with the world, means advocating what Sölle calls a “radical theology of the cross” (1975:31).

The cross of Jesus displays “the love of God in solidarity” (Sobrino 1998:248; see also Mofokeng 1983:97; Placher 1990:18). This is the essence of what many liberation theologians proclaim to be the core of the gospel. Some theologians consider the cross to be “the ultimate test of Jesus’ love for the oppressed” (Mofokeng 1983:32)<sup>558</sup>. “God suffered on Jesus’ cross and on those of this world’s victims by being their non-active and silent witness” (Sobrino 1998:244). It is in this silent suffering *with* the victim(s) that God demonstrates God’s radical, incarnational solidarity with their plight of suffering, oppression and abuse. South African theologian Takatso Mofokeng (1983:97) posits that

God is present on the cross and suffers with and in Jesus, the committed poor. He is truly himself here, when and as he is in the deepest solidarity with suffering humanity and as such with the entire creation. This means that the cross manifests in full the theological dimension of Jesus’ history....

The cross, then, demonstrates that suffering of any sort becomes God’s own suffering. For many South Africans – of whatever religious background – the suffering they experience(d) is (was) the suffering that is caused by sinful human institutions and structures, policies and actions. This is the suffering of a cross of oppression and injustice. According to Mofokeng, the fact that God is on such a cross is a message of hope, solidarity and purpose that is craved by downtrodden people. If God were absent from the cross this would be a

betrayal of the poor and oppressed, a betrayal of those people in the world who are hanging on the cross and crying out for liberation. God’s absence from the cross is their silencing. They are removed from the focus when the cross of Jesus is removed from the centre and also when God is removed from it. (Mofokeng 1983:93)<sup>559</sup>

Besides showing radical solidarity with those who suffer, God also demonstrates radical protest against the evil and violence that causes their (and therefore God’s own)

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<sup>557</sup> In this view, the death of God (i.e. of Christ) is a tragedy even for God, a tragedy to which God exposes Godself by the mere fact of becoming human, and immersing Godself in the world. It is something about which even God weeps and laments, something that causes even God to despair and become hopeless (see Mark 15:34).

<sup>558</sup> “God’s love for man (sic) proved to be so intense that it endured the test of ultimate violence (death by crucifixion)” (Mofokeng 1983:34).

<sup>559</sup> Mofokeng further remarks, “The consequences of the betrayal we referred to are a development of a mystic of the cross, masochism or worse still, a refusal to engage in the struggle for liberation that involves suffering and the cross with an excuse that one is already suffering and thus carrying the cross of Jesus.”

suffering (Park 1993:124)<sup>560</sup>. The potency of the theology of the cross is therefore not only in that it pronounces God's *suffering with* the victims of this world, but also God's *protest with* those victims, and *against* the perpetrators of suffering. This message is not one of quietism and passivity, one that declares that it is acceptable to suffer because God is with you when you do. Rather, it is one of compassionate empathy as well as resistance, one that declares, "suffering is terrible, but God is with you and in protest cries out with you for deliverance".

Divine solidarity therefore does not only provide a sense of comfort and support, a sense of not being (left) alone in the midst of despair, although these are crucial for those who are faced with the desperation of suffering. Divine solidarity also provides a sense of protesting indignation, a sense of wanting to fight the forces of evil and injustice which are responsible for the suffering.

Christian faith can proclaim that the suffering God of the cross is the God of South Africa, because the cross of Christ has become our own, or rather, our crosses have become Christ's own. Yet it is important to establish a transition from the first point of significance of Jesus Christ's story of suffering (namely, solidarity for comfort and protest) to the second, which is the transformation that it effects.<sup>561</sup> According to Leonardo Boff (1978:118), suffering, in its apparent meaninglessness, can have "a secret and ultimate meaning". This ultimate meaning was, in Jesus' case, the resurrection into new life. The resurrection of Jesus, "the human archetype," means that suffering and death no longer have the final word. Sobrino echoes some of Luther's pronouncements regarding the theology of the cross when he reflects (1987:150),

The resurrection is the prime affirmation of Paul's doctrine that where sin has abounded, grace is superabundant. But this superabundance of grace serves only to underscore the enormity of the sin of the murder of the Just One.

The evil of Jesus' violent persecution is defied. The protest of his death is answered. This is the promise of the story of the cross and the resurrection<sup>562</sup>, and it is a promise that enables us to hope against all hope that God, in God's love and compassion for us, can and will continue to bring about new life. At base, the resurrection indicates in no uncertain terms that God is a God of justice.

Jesus' resurrection is not only a symbol of God's omnipotence, then – as if God had decided arbitrarily and without any connection with Jesus' life and lot to show how powerful he was. Rather, Jesus' resurrection is presented as God's response to the unjust, criminal action of human beings. ... Pictured in this way, the resurrection of Jesus shows *in directo* the triumph of justice over injustice. It is the triumph not simply of God's impotence, but also of God's justice.... Jesus' resurrection is thus transformed into good news, whose central content is that once and for all justice has triumphed over injustice, the victim over the executioner. (Sobrino 1987:149)

Lest we fall into the trap of believing that the theology of the cross focuses only on the gloom and despair of the cross, we do well in considering Luther's understanding of the resurrection. Luther scholar Ulrich Asendorf insists that the story of the cross is also the story of the resurrection (1970:14-17). The theology of the cross "may not be seen, say, in opposition to a theology of the resurrection" (Lohse 1999:39). In fact, the experience of the cross pervades the experience of resurrection, and vice versa (Asendorf

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<sup>560</sup> Park depicts the cross as "the symbol of God's protest".

<sup>561</sup> "The promise of resurrection is the future hope of the Christian gospel; yet, there is more. That future resurrection can be present in faith now because the Easter Christ is present in faith. ... The Christ present to faith has already died, so his death becomes our death. The Christ present to faith has already risen from the dead, so his resurrection becomes our resurrection" (Peters 2002:274). Peters here refers to Luther's notion of the "happy exchange" ("fröhlicher Wechsel") between Christ and the sinner (see *The Freedom of a Christian*, LW 31:351).

<sup>562</sup> See Thiemann (1989:320-347) for his discussion of the gospel as narrative promise.



1970:17)<sup>563</sup>. For Luther, the Christian participates in the resurrection experience of Christ in an equally profound way as s/he participates in the death of Christ. Therefore, not only do we share the struggle and pain of the cross of Christ, but are graced with the victory and glory of the resurrection as well, and – sometimes, paradoxically – simultaneously (Asendorf 1970:15)<sup>564</sup>.

Charles Cousar (1990:91) notes, “a Good Friday divorced from Easter ceases to be good. The gloom and darkness that surround Jesus’ death loom heavy without transcendent power.” It is true that without the resurrection, the death of Jesus would truly be a meaningless, absurd reality. It is the resurrection that “anchors the promise of God’s future” (Cousar 1990:99). The resurrection of Jesus is a sign that God is able to overcome suffering, and indeed, through suffering, is able to transform a given situation of despair or hardship.<sup>565</sup> Carol Jacobson would argue that Jesus’ death and resurrection is not only *revelatory*, but bears *effective* significance as well. She affirms (1997:82),

The resurrection of Jesus reveals the divine purpose of creation, namely its ongoing transformation into the fullness of God’s presence. Furthermore, the resurrection is the first tangible, historical evidence that the transformation is already begun and is now well underway.<sup>566</sup>

It is as though the desolation itself provides the basis and the ground for the germination of a wholly new experience. The experience of the new life after death could only work itself out through the anguish of the death itself.<sup>567</sup>

In the Bible, the theme of suffering is usually coupled with the theme of hope. It is believed that this hope can transcend situations of suffering so as to bring about something marvellous. Sobrino (1987:154) claims that the resurrection is a lasting sign of “the stubbornness of hope” for the crucified people. Faith in the resurrection generates stubborn hope that “at bottom, good is more real than evil, although the latter inundates us; grace is more real than sin, although it does not cease its death-dealing” (Sobrino 1987:153). Social unity and reconciliation is more real than hostility and division. Resurrection hope is the “deepest intuition of the crucified in the present, however this intuition may be constantly threatened by resignation, scepticism or cynicism” (Sobrino 1987:153). The resurrection is a symbol of hope that declares, “the pain of God, immanent as it is in man’s reality, nevertheless transcends it” (Kitamori 1965:102). The God who is with us in our pain is also the one who “resolves our pain and heals our wounds” (Kitamori 1965:21).<sup>568</sup>

The resurrection allows us to believe not only in the loving compassion of God, as shown by Jesus on the cross, but also in the power of God to overcome evil and injustice.<sup>569</sup> The cross without the resurrection would assure us of God’s unfaltering love for humankind, but it would not indicate God’s ability to defy the forces of peril in the

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<sup>563</sup> “Luther ... hat offenbar Kreuz und Auferstehung niemals als Nacheinander, sondern in ihrer ständigen Durchdringung verstanden.” “Ebenso ist Luther’s Auferstehungstheologie zugleich Kreuzestheologie.”

<sup>564</sup> “Es ist nicht allein der Kampf und Streit Christi, in dem wir hineingenommen werden, sondern auch sein Sieg....” Furthermore, Luther argues in *Fourteen Consolations* (1520), “But just as these evils are common to all men, so also are the blessings of salvation under these evils common to all” (LW 42:129).

<sup>565</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1970:20) declares, “Ich glaube, daß Gott aus allem, auch aus dem Bösesten, Gutes entstehen lassen kann und will.”

<sup>566</sup> In her conclusion she writes, “Resurrection is not a personal reward for Jesus. Rather it is the incontrovertible indication of the future of the whole world. This future, the concrete transformation of the world into the ‘glorious body of God,’ which begins with the bodily resurrection of Jesus, is salvation, both ours and the whole world’s.”

<sup>567</sup> See John 12:24: “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

<sup>568</sup> See for example Luther’s *Treatise on Good Works* (LW 44:28).

<sup>569</sup> “God’s omnibenevolence is demonstrated by his empathic love in the cross; and God’s omnipotence is demonstrated by his power over death, the power of creation and new creation” (Peters 2002:282).

world. What good is a loving God, who in the end has no power to save us from evil? In his characteristically poetic manner, Sobrino (1987:153) declares,

The cross says, in human language, that nothing in history has set limits to God's nearness to human beings. Without that nearness, God's power in the resurrection would remain pure otherness and therefore ambiguous, and for the crucified, historically threatening. But with that nearness, the crucified can really believe that God's power is good news, for it is love. Jesus' cross continues to be the most finished expression, in human language, of God's immense love for the crucified. Jesus' cross says, in credible fashion, that God loves human beings, that God pronounces a word of love and salvation, and that God personally utters and bestows the divinity itself as love and as salvation. Jesus' cross says that God has passed the test of love, and now we may believe in God's power as well. ... Once God's loving presence on Jesus' cross has been grasped, God's presence in the resurrection is no longer pure power without love, pure otherness without nearness, a *deus ex machina* without history.

In effect, Sobrino argues that it is the cross that gives credibility to the resurrection. Similarly, the resurrection ascribes meaning to the cross. Just as a theology based only on the cross is problematic and indeed dangerous, so also is one based only on the resurrection. Only because God proved God's ultimate "nearness" to humankind in and through the cross, does the power displayed by the resurrection become edifying and life-promoting. Again we see how important it is never to forget the cross in the story of the victory of the resurrection. The resurrection is indeed only good news because of the solidarity, protest and loving compassion God shows in the cross. The resurrection seen through the lens of the theology of the cross enables Christians to proclaim in faith,

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. (2 Corinthians 4:10)

### 3.2.3 Identifying the story of the cross and resurrection in the story of South Africa

The reality of the cross is very apparent in the story of South Africa. This is why a contextual theology of the cross – an inculturated narrative of the cross, as it were – is a very appropriate tool for making sense of the plight of South Africans. The cross, in its terrible and miraculous way, shows us that God is in the brokenness and woundedness of our story. It also points toward an Easter experience of resurrection and new life, hope and wholeness. Many ugly decades of the cross in South Africa want to be overcome. Apartheid, and all its abominable offshoots, wants to be overcome. The problems and pain of the aftermath of an oppressive, exploitative, life-denying system want to be overcome. The crucified people of South Africa are yearning for the resurrection, and anticipating the rolling away of the stone in front of the tomb. Most of us South Africans want to grieve about our past, undo its lingering evils, and move on toward a brighter future. New life awaits. As a crucified people,

we still hope in Christ's resurrection, but we do so not because the final Christ has withdrawn us from the complexities of the world and the risks of history, but because the provisional Christ hangs on the cross of reality even to the end of man's (sic) days. ... Jesus became the Christ of faith, whose cross on Golgotha now casts its shadow over the whole world. In the symbol of the resurrection, this shadow of the cross so imprinted itself in reality, that it can never again be forgotten as the key concept for the objective onlooker and as the possibility of life for those who accept this identification of another with themselves. (Sölle 1967:126)

The story of the cross and resurrection heralds the beginning of new life for a (re)new(ed) community, under new conditions – the perfect requirements for a reconciled South Africa! It is up to us South Africans to jointly define and determine what our new life will look like, what and how our “resurrected body” will be. Hopefully, our Easter story will be shown to be a story of reconciliation and hopefulness for the future, a story of wholeness and well-being, which nevertheless never forgets the gross atrocity of the cross.

As we anticipate our resurrection we would do well in remembering, however, that redemption toward wholeness is “not a perfectionistic once-for-all event but an unceasing process” (Sölle 1975:108). The term “resurrection” is here used in a symbolic fashion. It signifies the renewal, rebirth, or reconstruction which occurs after a debilitating, traumatic, or life-threatening event. Our resurrection experiences of renewal, healing, reconstruction, and reconciliation will always be provisional and incomplete. The cross will always be part of our story, not only of the past but also of the future. Our hope for renewal is not to be confused with a spiritualised eschatology, which awaits an other-worldly, escapist salvation, a heaven that has no relation to the world we live in. Instead, our hope is firmly rooted in the cross, and is therefore ever-cognisant of the real, tangible, this-worldly reality of evil, injustice and suffering.

It is suggested here that South Africa’s story is a story of the cross. According to Christian hope, this makes it a story of the resurrection also. Within the story of the cross lie the seeds for our own story of resurrection, a resurrection involving societal reconciliation, reconstruction and nation-building. In his book, *A Theology of Reconstruction* (1992), Villa-Vicencio attempts to elaborate what reconstruction could or should mean in the particular context of South Africa after apartheid. Many times in his analysis, he refers to imagery of rebirth and new life to describe what is currently happening in our country. The necessary prerequisite for rebirth to occur is death of the old and obsolete. “The old is dying even though the new is not yet born” (Villa-Vicencio 1992:2). Indeed, “most South Africans are aware that something different must be born if the country is not to be torn apart by competing ideologies” (:6). Such a liminal situation of crisis “demands creativity and change as the only reasonable basis for a peaceful co-existence” (:2). It is important that the “old” which is dying not be forgotten, and swept under the proverbial carpet. The ways of the past are not the proverbial sleeping dog which we should best not disturb. Seeking renewal and rebirth must include acknowledging, remembering and embracing the reality of the old.<sup>570</sup> Tutu (1999:31) urges that “we look the beast of the past in the eye” because “far from disappearing or lying down and being quiet, [it] is embarrassingly persistent, and will return and haunt us unless it has been dealt with adequately.” Similarly, “if we ignore history we are not only condemned to become its victims, but also fail realistically to assess the resources available from which to create a new future” (Villa-Vicencio 1992:49).

A new future – renewal – “occurs ... (without insinuating that there is any ‘quick-fix’ solution) ... where ideologies crumble and failure is acknowledged,” argues Villa-Vicencio (1992:49). Rebirth occurs where the cross is embraced, and where the bitter struggle of the past as well as the hardships of the present are not forgotten, denied or dismissed. Indeed,

Seriously to anticipate a post-apartheid South Africa and realistically to share in the process of creating a liberating and healing culture of human rights in South Africa, requires that the reality of the past and the pathos of the present specifically inform all that is undertaken in an attempt to create a new future. In other words, in looking forward to possibilities, we are obliged to do so

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<sup>570</sup> Kaiser (1996:196) speaks of the need for “anamnetic solidarity” in South Africa, i.e. a kind of solidarity among people which seeks to remember and not forget or ignore the past.

retroactively, remembering past failures and mistakes and present challenges.  
(Villa-Vicencio 1992:6-7)

In previous sections I have already noted the importance of memory for the process of reconciliation. Remembering the past for victims and the oppressed involves painfully baring one's vulnerability of the past. For the oppressor, remembering past failures and mistakes involves admitting responsibility for others' suffering, an acknowledgement of having done wrong, of having become guilty, of having contributed to evil and injustice. This aspect of remembering is challenging since it exacts repentance. Repentance is not only self-examination that evokes a sense of remorse, but must become apparent in practical and concrete ways, for example through acts of penitence. This will, however, be explored more deeply in the subsequent section (3.3).

A theology of the cross encourages us to recognise and embrace the cross of our history (and of our present time), and, as we proclaim in the Nicene Creed, to "look for the resurrection" that follows this cross. It is the story of the cross that enables us to look forward with hope and vision, and start to adopt a story of reconciliation, or, in Villa-Vicencio's words, a theology of reconstruction. A theology of reconstruction is, as it were, rooted in the (theology of the) cross. The cross, or memory thereof, propels us toward a theology of reconstruction. Villa-Vicencio (1992:15) asserts that "a theology of reconstruction is essentially a remedial and compensatory theology. It has special responsibility to put right past wrongs." The theologies of the cross and the reconstruction are of a sort, because both take seriously the fact that God is present in our struggle, and labours with us to create something new out of something destructive and life-denying.

### **3.2.4 The story of the cross and resurrection as a viable external narrative for South Africa**

It can be argued that there is a need for our society to find a workable "narrative" which can bring together the different existing identities, stories, and heritages under a canopy of mutuality and belonging together.<sup>571</sup> An "external narrative" is not linked in any specific, historical way to the actual history of South Africa. It has an identity apart from, and external to, the history of South Africa. It can, however, be appropriated by South Africa(ns), and become a South African narrative. Owing to its relative universality and pervasiveness, the Christian narrative of the cross and resurrection could also be called a "metanarrative". Yet I choose to call it "another," an "external," narrative in order for it not to evoke the connotation of religious and cultural imperialism.

Stanley Hauerwas vehemently insists that a narrative is important for sustaining a community. He posits (1986:99), "What is peculiar about Christians' convictions is not that they involve a narrative, but what kind of narrative they involve." An "umbrella narrative" shared by all South Africans would have the ability to form identity and cohesion as a group. It would, in the words of Hauerwas, create "character".

The development of character involves more than adherence to principles for their own sake; rather, it demands that we acquire a narrative that gives us the skill to fit what we do and do not do into a coherent account sufficient to claim our life as our own. Such narratives may of course be false and as a result produce false character. Indeed, an indication of a truthful narrative is one that remains open to challenge from new experience. That is why a truthful narrative

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<sup>571</sup> See for example Balcomb's analysis of the importance of narrative for social well-being in his article, "The Power of Narrative: Constituting Reality through Storytelling" (2000:49-62). Balcomb argues for the "centrality of narrative as a fundamental epistemological category" (:54). One could also talk of "dominant images" and "master texts" that function to create social identity and collective memory (see Villa-Vicencio 2000:25).

necessarily must be one that can provide integrity in a manner that does not deny the diversity of our lives. (Hauerwas 1986:151)

In his book, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (1999), Desmond Tutu seems to suggest the Christian gospel, especially the narrative of the cross, as a vehicle for understanding the traumatic story of South Africa. It is the Christian gospel story, embedded in the Christian community, which has been part of his personal narrative throughout his life, it has sustained him and provided him hope and courage in the times of despair. He has seen it engender hope, courage and vision for people who otherwise would have been crushed by the forces of hate, fear, degradation, hopelessness, etc. It is for this reason that he – consciously and perhaps unconsciously – weaves the gospel message of the cross and the resurrection into his discourse and reflections about the TRC and the future of South Africa.

In his narrative weaving together of all the strands of the disjointed, ambiguous South African story, Tutu employs a lot of traditional Christian language, imagery, and symbolism.<sup>572</sup> He places the earthly events of the TRC in a divine-cosmic context, and sees it as the work of God through human agents. It is, in his conception, a *kairos* event which is effective in the “cosmic movement towards unity, towards reconciliation, that has existed from the beginning of time” (Tutu 1999:212). He speaks of the coming reign of God where, as it was in paradise, the lion and the lamb shall play together, the lion here referring to the oppressor and the lamb to the victim – a radical metaphor or reconciliation if ever there was one. His view of the present and the future is essentially eschatological. Yet it is not other-worldly or escapist. It is rather a present-oriented eschatology, where glimpses of the Rule of God (the Kingdom) can be seen even now. The Kingdom is a reality that is “already but not yet,” it “is coming, and now is”.<sup>573</sup>

The story and theology of the cross, interpreted contextually in light of the South African experience, may be regarded as a valuable “external narrative”<sup>574</sup>. It can be argued that the centre of Tutu’s external narrative is the cross of Christ. He contends that it bears penetrating symbolic significance in the context of South Africa. Christians talk of the *scandal* of the cross<sup>575</sup>, which pronounces that through Christ’s death and resurrection brokenness and evil can be transformed into good. It is the message of the cross that evil can be overcome. The despair, the hopelessness and the evil of the past can be overcome.

There is a movement, not easily discernible, at the heart of things to reverse the awful centrifugal force of alienation, brokenness, division, hostility and disharmony. God has set in motion a centripetal process, a moving towards the Centre, towards unity, harmony, goodness, peace and justice; one that removes barriers. Jesus says, ‘And when I am lifted up from the earth I shall draw everyone to myself,’ as he hangs from his cross with out-flung arms, thrown out to clasp all, everyone and everything, in a cosmic embrace, so that all, everyone, everything, belongs. None is an outsider, all are insiders, all belong. (Tutu 1999:213)<sup>576</sup>

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<sup>572</sup> Halbwachs (1992:102) speaks of the importance of symbols in a comprehensive collective memory. The cross certainly is a strong symbol, capable of great good (yet also, unfortunately, capable of great abuse).

<sup>573</sup> See for example Mark 1:15, 12:34; Luke 10:9, 11, 17:21, and 21:31.

<sup>574</sup> Richardson (2001) would prefer to call the guiding Christian story a “narrative of peace”. “This narrative not only requires ongoing telling and re-telling, but also embodying and displaying in a community of peace. Indeed, a proper telling of the narrative requires its social embodiment in such a community” (Richardson 2001:52). The “Christian ontology of peace ... is to be able to provide for the moral formation of Christians who, in this society with its particular history, must be able to remember, tell, embody and display the Christian narrative” (:55).

<sup>575</sup> See 1 Corinthians 1-2.

<sup>576</sup> “The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ puts the issue beyond doubt: ultimately goodness and laughter and peace and compassion and gentleness and forgiveness and reconciliation will have the last word” (Tutu 1999:215).

The unfathomable evil and baseness of the cross is the path which God chooses to renew, transform, heal and reconcile the world. The newness of existence which Christ achieves for us on the cross, the result of the struggle of the cross and the victory of the resurrection, is a gift open to anyone.

Tutu makes it clear that the gospel of the cross is not, and can never be, exclusive. It is radically inclusive, even of the unacceptable, the shameful, the wicked.<sup>577</sup> The scandal of the cross is that it is the ultimate expression of “the will to embrace the enemy,” asserts Miroslav Volf. “At the heart of the cross is Christ’s stance of not letting the other remain an enemy and of creating space in himself for the offender to come in” (Volf 1996:126). This message of inclusiveness is a profound one for the modern South African society, which has been segregated for years, and which has been ruled by hostility and categorical exclusiveness for years. The inclusive nature of the story of the cross may indeed be Christianity’s most profound contribution to the debate concerning reconciliation.

However, the work of God on the cross was painful, hard work.<sup>578</sup> Therefore “true reconciliation is not cheap. It cost God the death of His only begotten Son” (Tutu 1999:218). This assertion is used by Tutu to both warn and encourage the South African people. From a Christian perspective, the work of reconciliation is not, will not be, easy. It involves exposing “the awfulness, the abuse, the pain, the degradation, the truth” (Tutu 1999:218); and it is risky. Nevertheless, it is the gospel of the cross and the resurrection “which renews and restores” what has been injured “by sinful people and destructive structures” (Villa-Vicencio 1992:185). This gospel

casts the biblical notion of reconciliation in a new light. From the point of view of the oppressed, theological talk of reconciliation can only be understood in the context of self-empowerment. It is in removing the barriers that divide people (cultural, social and material) that reconciliation can realistically take place between the former oppressed and former oppressor. (Villa-Vicencio 1992:185)

In light of his theology of nation-building and reconstruction, Villa-Vicencio (1992:185) insists that reconciliation requires a radical changing of people’s hearts and minds, in order for a new and healed nation to be born.<sup>579</sup> Indeed, resurrection to reconciliation involves radical change, it involves the painful work of the cross and reawakening thereafter. It cannot be attained by effortless, quick means. For many, it implies becoming vulnerable to themselves, their own group, and the “other” group(s). It may include loss and mourning. It may involve bringing about changes in one’s life, as a practical consequence of true repentance and contrition. However, there is always the hope that all, “despite the awfulness of their deeds, remain children of God with the capacity to repent, to be able to change” (Tutu 1999:74). “Ultimately, no person or situation in this theology is an irredeemable cause devoid of all hope” (Tutu 1999:75).

At the centre of Tutu’s understanding of the Christian theological narrative is, therefore, the message of hope – hope for forgiveness, healing, joy, reconciliation for individuals and the whole community. The future is not necessarily gloomy, but has possibility and exciting, wonderful potential. When we deal with the cross of the past – “all of the past” – we “make the future possible” (Tutu 1999:226). And this activity of working out our common past (with its various interpretative slants) is like “looking the

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<sup>577</sup> See also Nürnberger (2003:9-25) who argues for “the gospel of God’s unconditional, suffering, redeeming acceptance of the unacceptable as the foundation of Christian unity”. Moreover, the cross “takes sin and suffering unto itself” (Peters 2002:281); it is the symbol of God “taking evil and evil’s guilt into the divine life”. Indeed, the cross shows that “evil belongs to the drama of the world, a drama in which God struggles with and for the world” (Peters 2002:282).

<sup>578</sup> Sölle speaks of God’s “painful love” (1975:44).

<sup>579</sup> “Revolution and political transition creates the possibility for change but offers no guarantees. A theology of nation-building is about making change possible. The gospel is about the creation of new people, fully human, living in harmony with the purposes of God for all God’s people” (Villa-Vicencio 1992:185).

beast in the eye” and tackling it, in order to “help us regain our humanity” and have our “dignity rehabilitated” (Tutu 1999:170).

It has been argued that the external narrative which Tutu employs in reflecting upon the situation of the people of South Africa, is at its heart informed by the Christian theology of the cross. Its message spells hope and reconciliation, and it provides a conceptual way forward for the South African population out of the abyss of despair, despondency, indifference and pessimism. It is therefore a helpful narrative, and capable of effecting much good for the people.<sup>580</sup> Even though it is, in terms of its religious-historical roots, a “Christian” story, its power is not confined to remain within the sphere of Christendom.

Hauerwas claims that the Christian narrative of the cross is formative and normative in the construction of a social ethic for a “community of character.” He insists (1986:44),

Jesus’ universality is manifested only by a people who are willing to take his cross as their story, as the necessary condition for living truthfully in this life. As his cross was a social ethic, so they become the continuation of that ethic in the world, until all are brought within his Kingdom.

Hauerwas’ description of the Christian community could also be applied to the South African community. If South Africans are “willing to take his (Jesus’) cross as their story,” they will be able to see the glory of being “brought within his Kingdom”. The cross *is* a social ethic, and societies that are shaped by the cross – whatever form or shape it takes in their context – bear witness to the cross of Christ. By virtue of being “crucified people” (Sobrino 1998:254ff; Nolan 1988:49-67<sup>581</sup>), or “crossbearers” (Mofokeng 1983), they reveal the presence of God in the world. They also manifest in their very bodies the profound depth of God’s solidarity and protest against the powers of injustice and evil. The promise they have is of the saving event of resurrection. They, being people of the cross, have the promise of resurrection, renewal, rebirth into transformed reality – a glimpse of the “Kingdom” (Hauerwas 1986:44).

I am not suggesting that all South Africans ought to adopt the Christian faith and start thinking in terms of Christian theology in order for real reconciliation to be achieved, and neither does Tutu. Yet Christians see the value of the Christian gospel – its inclusiveness, its ability to deal with evil and suffering, and its message of hope – in advocating and sustaining the effort toward reconciliation and unity among the groups in South Africa. In inter-religious dialogue surrounding the question of reconciliation, the point is for the different partners to bring to the table their contributions for a fuller, more profound and wholesome concept and praxis of reconciliation. I think the Christian narrative of the cross bears such exciting potential.

Christianity’s story of the cross, as an external narrative, can be anyone’s and everyone’s story, and by its potential universality it can bridge the gaps and chasms which have occurred and widened through human history. Its message is a reconciling force because it is able to cross the boundaries and the limitations of the various ethnic, racial, cultural, and even religious groups. It is Halbwachs’ contention that it is a normal occurrence in a society to seek unity (1992:182).<sup>582</sup> It seems, then, that a narrative which

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<sup>580</sup> The fact that the suggested narrative is a succinctly religious one may cause some to become suspicious, because of the often inherent exclusivity and bigotry of religion. But Halbwachs sees no problem with a religious collective memory. He posits (1992:186), “the remembrances to be found at the basis of religion are not deformed or distorted but better illuminated, to the degree that they are linked to the present and that new applications can be found for them.” As such, the theology of the cross can be applied to any situation where there is a sense of suffering, despair, hopelessness, and fear of the future.

<sup>581</sup> Nolan’s chapter, “A Crucified People”, explains how the South African people can (also) be deemed a crucified people.

<sup>582</sup> It is for this reason that “society tends to erase from its memory all that might separate individuals, or that might distance groups from each other” (Halbwachs 1992:182).

seeks to provide a basis for unity and reconciliation, e.g. the Christian theology and story of the cross, has a good chance of surviving, and helping the community grow, into what Hauerwas calls a “community of character” (1986), i.e. a community which is reconciled and united in its task of facing a challenging future.<sup>583</sup>

In sum, the story of the cross enables us to proclaim that God is present in our South African story, our history. God, albeit the hidden God, is there throughout it all. Indeed it becomes necessary to proclaim that

God suffered under apartheid. He suffered with the voiceless and oppressed. He suffered hardships in the townships, together with the unemployed and the despised, the hungry and the illiterate. He suffered from detention without trial, from torture and kidnapping. He suffered and died in bomb blasts and necklacing. ... He suffered because his Word was gagged and confined to high metaphysical and deep spiritual spheres, without ever being truly revealed in apartheid in South Africa. (du Toit 1998:48)

The solidarity and protest of God, as well as God’s resurrection power (i.e. God’s power to create life in the face of death), are important elements of a theology of the cross for South Africa – during the years of the political struggle against apartheid, and now in the struggle against less clearly definable forces that cause hardship. (Corruption, persistent injustice and racism, poor housing, health care and education, rampant criminality, and a general sense of despair and pessimism are examples of ongoing problems that present-day South Africa is facing. All these grievances have their roots in the injustices that have pervaded South Africa’s history. The perpetrators and oppressors are, however, no longer as clearly identifiable as they were under the apartheid system of government. In addition to intra-governmental problems, South Africa is fighting the more subtle but terrifyingly pervasive global forces of injustice and exploitation, e.g. economic globalisation, the assault of Western dominant cultural paradigms such as consumerism and materialism, and ecological depletion.)<sup>584</sup>

I believe that the theology of the hidden God and the cross is an important way for South Africans to come to terms with their past and face their future. However, it must be noted that the *theologia crucis* can and has been abused. Simon Maimela (1993:60) cautions that this theology should not be used to encourage victims of injustice and oppression to “carry their cross of suffering with dignity and without complaint as Jesus Christ carried his”, thereby remaining passively quietist in their hardships. The theology of the cross can too easily become another oppressive tool with which to silence and subdue victimised people.<sup>585</sup> This is surely *not* its intention, although even Luther himself came dangerously close to misusing it in his *Admonition to Peace* (LW 46:17ff) and his treatise *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants* (LW 46:49ff).<sup>586</sup> Maimela (1993:61) correctly cautions that the theology of the cross can be a “double-edged sword which could either be a blessing or a curse”. He insists that it depends on who is expounding the theology, on whose behalf, and for whose benefit. For those who have been and are sufferers, it is a liberating, life-giving theology if it is acknowledged that the cross is

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<sup>583</sup> See also Kaiser (1996:185-188).

<sup>584</sup> Ambrose Moyo (2002:298) reminds us that “creating a just society ... is what the death and resurrection of Christ is all about.” In other words, the theology of the cross closely linked to ethics (Althaus 1966:27).

<sup>585</sup> At this point it is important also to mention a feminist critique of the theology of the cross. Brock and Parker (2001:44) disparage it for what they consider its sanction of the use of violence, and its endorsement of passivity in the face of injustice. They are particularly critical of Moltmann’s theology. See also Cloakley’s nuanced feminist discussion of Paul and Luther’s views about death of Jesus (2002), and Juergensmeyer’s discussion of religious violence (2001). Carr (1988) and Engel (1990) also elaborate their disapproval of the cross. I acknowledge that these criticisms must be heard. Yet I suspect that those who so flagrantly disapprove of a theology of the cross hold a false or distorted view of it.

<sup>586</sup> See also *Against Insurrection and Rebellion* (LW 45:57ff).



an expression of God's solidarity with the poor and oppressed, taking their side, accompanying them in their search for their humanity, and assuring them that the crosses they bear at present will not be in vain but will be rewarded with victory – in the same manner that Jesus triumphed over evil by his resurrection from the dead. (Maimela 1993:61)

For those who still experience the calamities of the cross, or perhaps have become crossbearers only after the establishment of the new dispensation, the good news stands. The cross can enable them to see God revealed in their hardships – as a comforter, a healer, a friend and an angry protester. The cross can propel them into active defiance and elimination of their own and others' suffering, knowing that the God of justice is on their side. The cross can become their hope for the impending resurrection – whatever shape it may take for them – which God has promised in Jesus Christ. The message of resurrection is proclaimed even to those for whom the cross primarily spells judgement (because they are crucifiers rather than crucified). Their "resurrection" will spring forth when they have found the courage to repent and turn away from being crucifiers; grace will answer their repentant response to judgement (see section 3.3).

### 3.2.5 Remembering the cross as a step towards reconciliation<sup>587</sup>

It has been argued that the story of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus the Christ is a significant contribution from the side of the Christian faith in finding a solution to the problem of alienation and animosity, hurt and trauma in our country. For decades we have struggled with lopsided and unjust power relations. A severely stratified society, our nation has been divided on all grounds imaginable – race, gender, class/economic standing, educational advancement, cultural heritage, religious affiliation, etc. Usurping and abuse of power occurred in the political, economic, and cultural arena. There were many who could easily identify with the crucified Christ on grounds of their own violation and oppression at the hands of an unjust system which tenaciously claimed its power and wisdom according to worldly standards. As a land and people ravaged by the forces of injustice, domination and violence, it is difficult not to see in South Africa(ns) the story of the cross. How can this story of crucified ones be a story of hope and healing, of reconciliation among violators and the violated? As I have shown, Christian faith proclaims that the mystery of grace which is to be found within the cross is a hidden wisdom and power.<sup>588</sup> The work of discerning the grace even and especially in our cross is necessary because otherwise we will continue walking our path of collective unrighteousness and oblivion. If we do not do the profoundly challenging work of discerning the grace and the hope that resides in our cross (not denying the judgment that it necessarily also represents to some), we will be doomed to perpetuate its stronghold on us. We must hear the word of the cross as one that can reconcile and heal our divided, wounded nation. We yearn for the promise of grace and peace and hope that is hidden in the cross. After all, the cross of Christ has become our own, or rather, our crosses have become Christ's own.

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<sup>587</sup> In sections 1.1.2 and 1.2.2 I have acknowledged the importance of issues surrounding justice, politics and economics (e.g. human rights and democracy) in the reconciliation debate. (See, for example, my references to scholars such as Villa-Vicencio, Maluleke, Ndebele, Burton and Soyinka.) Yet my purpose in this dissertation is *not* to focus on the practical and concrete political aspects of a reconciliation process, but to consider conceptual theological and cultural aspects that might helpfully promote and contribute to the process. Therefore, I do not see it as my task to suggest definite political, legal and economic applications that might flow from a theology of the cross. I am aware that my position in this regard may be seen with criticality, especially by those whose approach in scholarship emphasises praxis above (and before) theoretical reflection (e.g. those who operate from a strict liberationist footing.)

<sup>588</sup> Lois Malcolm (2001:189) identifies the "challenge of hiddenness language: to confess to the goodness of reality and God's redemptive purposes for it even when it is hidden by the brokenness and horrors of life."

Like Paul almost two millennia ago, and Luther five centuries ago, I would like to argue that the theology of the cross is (or perhaps ought to become) Christians' theological and pastoral standard. All thinking and acting on behalf of Christian faith should be done through the lens of the cross. The cross helps us view our world, our situation, with realism. The cross reminds us that there is darkness, gloom and despair in our world, in our country. The cross is such a scandal that we cannot turn our back on the agonies and the suffering of the Crucified One, and the countless other crucified ones and crossbearers of our country. The cross forces us not to avert our eyes from injustice and abuse, because it is glaring in its profound hideousness, because the cries of the One and the ones in pain cannot be ignored. In our country – and indeed in many parts of the world – the cross is central to our experiences. The cross demands repentance and transformation, but also brings these about.

In its mysterious way, the cross is both a symbol of defeat and terror, and of victory and joy. In South Africa, we need to recognise in what ways we are (and have been) defeated. We are often defeated by fear, pride, jealousy, hate, anger, all of which lead to social evils such as racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of violence. In terms of these, we stand judged. We often feel defeated by our country's past of turmoil and pain. Our country's story of the cross overwhelms us and leads us to despair. However, the cross may also have the function of heralding victory. It is time that we recognise the signs of the resurrection coupled with the cross. It is time that we roll away the stone from the tomb of our (past and present) tribulation, nevertheless not forgetting our cross and the crosses of those still suffering.

Thus, for South Africans the story of the cross can have three significant meanings. First, the cross, and our memory of the cross, reminds us never to forget those hanging on it, i.e. never to ignore the plight of the crucified and the crossbearers. Second, God does not allow the story to end with the cross – there is resurrection after the cross. Third, the cross borne by the majority of the South African people was not in vain, because it can retrospectively be seen as a special location of God's compassionate presence, God's solidarity and protest in history. This is not to deny the gross atrocity of this cross, and that it was (and still is!) truly evil and undesirable in every way. However, it is through this cross that God chooses to identify with the people of South Africa. It is through this cross that God is revealing Godself as a loving One. Through this cross God is working out something new, creating a community more beautiful than can ever have been imagined, a society with the marks of the new life of the resurrection.

In our discussion about the need for renewal and resurrection in South Africa we are constantly brought back to the cross. It has been my argument that for renewal – i.e. rebirth and resurrection after the cross of apartheid – to occur, the cross needs to be embraced. South Africans, in their quest for healing and wholeness, need to acknowledge and grapple with their cross. It is in coming to terms with our cross that we will be able to recognize the hope (i.e. the potential) and actuality of new life. Theology can help us, in our "quest for human wholeness in all its possible dimensions," to "make sense ... of the history of struggle for ... liberation and national reconstruction" (Cochrane, de Gruchy and Martin 1999:23-24). Furthermore, "responsible nation-building theology" needs to be mindful of the fact that "to forget the lessons learned in the bitter years of suffering and oppression is to perpetuate the cycle of hatred and repression" (:30). In South Africa a fundamental part of embracing the cross means to engage in remembering the terror of the past. "The hermeneutical relationship between past and present is a dynamic liberating exercise," insists Villa-Vicencio (1992:27). It seems that authentically contextual theology must locate itself at the interface between the past and the present/future, and encourage the creation of something new and life-giving from that critical determining context.

Will we South Africans embrace our cross, remember it, struggle to overcome it, and actively look for the resurrection that is waiting to show itself? I would argue that the

only way forward for the purpose of real and lasting reconciliation among the groups of South Africa is for sincere conversation to start between the different groups and their passion narratives (Villa-Vicencio 1992:15). On the part of white South Africans this dialogical intercourse will at first involve more listening than speaking, because it is largely the formerly oppressed groups' stories that have not been publicly told or heard. And through such active, empathetic listening whites will inevitably find themselves shaken, challenged to their core, as Antjie Krog reveals in her book *Country of my Skull* (1998). The conversation, the interaction between the narratives, will involve bittersweet change for many whites, as it probably will for black South Africans, too. It will also involve a deep sense of being called to repentance. Yet it is my conviction that reconciliation can only be achieved through engaging in this kind of dialogue (Kaiser 1996:196). If this "cross" of painful dialogue is embraced, the resurrection occurrence of social reconciliation may become attainable.

### 3.3. Sin, repentance and forgiveness

In his treatise *On the Councils and the Church* (1539, LW 32), Martin Luther elaborated seven marks of the church.<sup>589</sup> One of these "marks" or features is the so-called *office of the keys*. The terms most intimately related to the office of the keys are repentance, confession and forgiveness (or absolution). The third Christian resource for social reconciliation that I consider is what the church calls the office of the keys, which involves theological discourse surrounding sin, repentance and confession. The discussion concerning the theology of the cross (see section 3.2) already alluded to the centrality of these three interconnected concepts. I argue that these three motifs, seen as distinct and yet forming a tightly-knit logical unit, are key for a Christian understanding and praxis of reconciliation. The doctrine of sin is valuable because it takes seriously the reality of structural and social injustice, and human beings' responsibility and culpability in it. Repentance is a significant notion because it opens up possibilities for transformation, new beginnings and actions of penance. It establishes confidence and trust which may have been lost, and seeks to make amends for sins in concrete ways. The concept of forgiveness is essential, because it allows both the forgiver(s) and the forgiven to be free from the evil which holds them captive, and enables both parties to start afresh with one another, and re-build the broken relationship between them in a spirit of hope and togetherness. In the attempt to demonstrate how the office of the keys can be a valuable resource for the South African situation, I will elaborate the concepts of sin, confession/repentance and forgiveness/absolution separately.

#### 3.3.1 Sin

##### *Sin: a Lutheran confessional perspective*

In what follows, I give a brief overview of the doctrine of sin as can be gleaned from the main Lutheran Confessional Writings<sup>590</sup>, since it is these writings that provide the basis for my own theological reflection on the subject.

In the third article of the *Apostle's Creed*, we confess, among other things, "I believe in ... the forgiveness of sins...". If this confession has found its way into the shortest and most widely used credal formula, it must be considered foundational. The

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<sup>589</sup> The first is that it is a community based on the proclaimed word of God. The second and third features of the church are the sacramental practices of baptism and the Lord's Supper. The office of the keys is characteristic number four, while the ministry to serve on behalf of and in the name of Christ is fifth. Prayer, practical service and catechesis represent the sixth mark. Finally, Luther emphasises "the cross" as a peculiar feature by listing it separately as number seven.

<sup>590</sup> For references to the Lutheran confessional writings, see *Unser Glaube: Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (1991).

*Nicene Creed* mentions sins but once – “I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins” – and connects them with “remission” (which can be understood as forgiveness) which occurs most prominently during baptism.

The *Augsburg Confession*<sup>591</sup> (1530) mentions the subject of sin on various occasions. It affirms the existence and potency of sin, and suggests that a doctrine of sin is therefore foundational for our soteriology and doctrine of God. In Article 2 the *CA* defines what original sin is. It is the desire to do and be evil, inherent unbelief, and the inability to release or free oneself from this state. Article 19 claims that the origins of sin lie within the evil will of humankind, and under no circumstances with God, which affirms that the evil which is associated with sin is located within humankind.

In part 3, Article 1 of the *Schmalkald Articles* (1537), the concept of original sin is again deliberated. Here, the connection between the original state of sin is connected more overtly with the acts of sinful behaviour that are likened to fruits that “grow from” the sinful tendency of our nature.

Die Früchte dieser Sünde (Ersünde oder Hauptsünde) sind dann die bösen Werke, die in den zehn Geboten verboten sind, wie Unglaube, falscher Glaube, Abgötterei, ohne Gottesfurcht sein, Vermessenheit, Verzweiflung, Blindheit, und kurz gesagt: Gott nicht kennen oder achten. Ferner: lügen, bei Gottes Namen schwören, nicht beten, nicht anrufen; Gottes Wort nicht achten, den Eltern ungehorsam sein, morden, Unkeuschheit, stehlen, trügen usw.

In this paragraph, the point is strongly made that to diminish sin and render it and its effects harmless is a fallacy which should be avoided. Sin is indeed a great peril for humans, and should be treated as such.<sup>592</sup> Humans are encouraged to be ever mindful of their sinfulness and unacceptability before God.

It becomes clear that such a view of humanity is a negative one. Humans are not inherently good, but inherently evil (or at least have the inherent capacity and desire to be evil, rather than to be and do good). It appears that in the Confessional Writings little distinction is made between *being* and *doing*. It is as though the state of existence (original sin – *being*) is inevitably and necessarily linked to *doing* evil. *Sin* and *sins* are therefore collapsed into one, or at least they are not sharply distinguished.

The *Apology to the Confessio Augustana* (1531) elaborates and expounds some of the theses put forward in the *CA*. So it is that in Article 2, the concept of original sin is clarified further. Original sin is the lack of goodness and the tendency towards evil (“Mangel am Guten und Hang zum Bösen”), which is inherently part of human nature. “Denn wir behaupten, dass wir von Geburt die Begierde (*concupiscentia*) haben und dass wir nicht wahre Furcht und Vertrauen gegenüber Gott zustande bringen können.” Original sin is not, however, a burden laid on us by fate. It is an offence. This suggests that humans are responsible for their inherent depravity and vice, and stand accused of it.

Furthermore, original sin is lack of the fear of God and trust in God. It is “radikaler Mangel an Urgerechtigkeit (*caerentia iustitiae originalis*) und radikale Begierde.” Human beings lack “original righteousness” which is only in God. Instead, sin is “a form of alien unrighteousness” in human beings (Peters 2002:276)<sup>593</sup>. Although original sin is forgiven at baptism, iniquitous desire (“Begierde”) remains even after the accomplishment of this sacramental act. Therefore, sin and sinfulness remain throughout the person’s life. Moreover, it needs to be emphasised that we cannot release or free ourselves from the power of sin. Release from this pernicious state is always and alone the gracious and

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<sup>591</sup> Referred to from now on as *CA*, which stands for *Confessio Augustana*.

<sup>592</sup> In his treatise “The Bondage of the Will” (1526), Luther pronounces the enormity of the power of sin.

<sup>593</sup> Peters’ term “alien unrighteousness” represents a clever juxtaposition to Luther’s term “alien righteousness”. Through Christ’s work of salvation we adopt Christ’s righteousness, i.e. an “alien righteousness”. Peters tries to argue that through original sin, we adopt an “alien unrighteousness”.

merciful act of God. In Article 4 of the *Apology* it is stated that mercy and grace are greater and more powerful than sin.

Article 12 posits that an exact account of all sins is not necessary during penance. The satisfaction of Christ (“Genugtuung” – *satisfactio*), not human satisfaction, eradicates the punishment for sins and eternal death. In other words, no human acts of contrition or works of righteousness can remove the power of sin over us, nor harness the punishment that we deserve for our sins. It is all up to the mercy and grace of God through the atonement of Christ, to forgive us and to release us from the bondage of sin. The paradox seems to be that while we are forgiven at baptism, we continue to sin, and continue to need forgiveness. This forgiveness is sought through penance and granted through Communion.

Article 19 asserts that the origin and cause of sin lie with the devil and human beings. Possibly this assertion is made to counter any suggestions that God may be the cause of sin and evil.

Article 24 claims that the Lord’s Supper does not procure or effect grace “automatically” (*ex opere operato*). Through Communion a person does not automatically achieve the forgiveness of venial and mortal sins [i.e., “der lässlichen Sünden und der Todsünden (*venialia et mortalia peccata*), der Schuld und der Strafe”]. The great prerequisite for forgiveness to be granted is faith.

In part 3, Article 2 of the *Schmalkald Articles* (1537) law and sin are overtly coupled. This paragraph asserts that the law has (at least) two functions. The first function of the law is, “um der Sünde zu steuern durch Drohen und Schrecken der Strafe und mit Verheissen und Anbieten der Gnade und Wohltat.” The second function or “use” of the law consists of revealing to the human being “wie sehr tief und abgründig seine Natur gefallen und verderbt ist. ... Dadurch wird er erschreckt, gedemütigt, verzagt, verzweifelt; er wollte gern, dass ihm geholfen würde...”. Part 3, Article 3 affirms that the law effects penitence and compunction.

In response to the question of what may count as sin and what may not, this document declares,

Evangelische Buße disputiert nicht darüber, was Sünde oder nicht Sünde sei, sondern sie wirft alles in einen Haufen, indem sie sagt, es sei alles, und zwar durchweg, Sünde bei uns. Was wollen wir lange untersuchen, einteilen oder Unterschiede machen?

In other words, it is essentially not important to distinguish the sins from one another, or even to distinguish what is sin and what is not. Rather, it is necessary to admit that one is sinful, that there are most definitely many sins in one’s life, and that one cannot eradicate them oneself, but needs the grace of God to be forgiven.<sup>594</sup>

Luther’s *Small Catechism* (1529) attests that salvation involves, among other things, release from sins. In chapter 2, Article 2 (“Von der Erlösung”) it is stated that through the work of Christ human beings are redeemed from the power of sin, “erworben, gewonnen von allen Sünden, vom Tode und von der Gewalt des Teufels”. It is clear that in this context sin is not equated with death and the devil, but is regarded as an evil force in humans’ lives, and as a force to be overcome. The effects of sin, death and the devil are collapsed into two outcomes: despair and damnation.<sup>595</sup>

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<sup>594</sup> I personally find the lack of distinguishing sin from general human trouble problematic. Feeling the effects of (someone else’s) sin is not the same as sinning.

<sup>595</sup> Again, an inadequate distinction is made between sin and what is here called the “power of the devil”. I would posit that they need not be the same, since the “devil” may be a force that functions outside of a person, while sin functions within a person. In other words, there must be a differentiation between causing harm (sin) and being the victim of harm (work of the devil). Should humans be blamed for the work of the devil, or even for the sins of other people, and harm done by systems and structures, policies and mechanisms? These forces of evil and trouble are not all the same, and should not be collapsed into one; nor should they be treated as the same thing.

Although in his *Large Catechism* (1529) Luther refers to sin occasionally under the rubrics of the Lord's Prayer and baptism among other things, I am most interested in what he has to say about sin in relation to Holy Communion. In the chapter "Vom Sakrament des Altars", he asserts, "Je weniger du deine Sünde und Gebrechen fühlst, desto mehr hast du Ursache, zum Sakrament hinzugehen und Hilfe und Arznei zu suchen." This seems to indicate that the more unaware you are of your sins, the more power they have over you, and the more you require to be released and forgiven.

In view of the Lutheran confessional writings, it is clear that sin and sinfulness point to the depravity and vice(s) of the human beings concerned. When someone goes to penance, or shows remorse, it is always for his/her *own* sins, because s/he has recognised that s/he is by nature evil, and has done evil. Sin is therefore an occurrence intrinsic to a human being; it is personalised. This narrow understanding of sin that is conveyed in the church's confessional writings, which is also still largely present in (Lutheran) congregations, is to me a matter of concern. Most people equate sin with personal morality, or the lack thereof. I propose that the conception of "sin" be broadened and diversified. "Sin" should not be seen only in personal individualistic terms. It should be expanded to include social and structural sin, sin committed, and sin suffered. It should not just focus on that which perpetrators of crime do, but include the suffering victims (albeit without putting them in the same category as the perpetrators<sup>596</sup>).

Some scholars<sup>597</sup> even go as far as proposing that the term "sin" should be done away with altogether, because it bears much baggage which is simply at odds with our broader soteriology, and with the pastoral situation of our communities. To a modern person, terms such as "alienation", "injustice", "self-involvement", "brokenness", "despair", "woundedness", "shortcomings", "hard-heartedness", "vulnerability" or "received and/or afflicted hurt" may make more sense than the term "sin". It can be argued that such terms may indeed be more theologically sound as well.

Without refuting the tradition I come from and hold dear, I would therefore like to suggest a broader, more holistic view of sin. This view is indeed underpinned by the core teachings of the Lutheran confessions, but stands in critical dialogue with the more problematic tendencies of the old tradition.

#### *A holistic concept of sin*

In its effort to struggle with the reality of pervasive suffering and injustice, the Biblical tradition developed a number of possible "answers" to the question of *why* evil exists in the world. It is indeed a primordial question, which is asked by most religions and ideologies that grapple with issues that concern human life. Perhaps the most remarkable "solution" posed by the Biblical faith is that of the fall, and connected with it, sin.<sup>598</sup> The doctrine of the fall declares that humanity is not what it ought to be, since it has "fallen" from the state of authentic, full existence in communion and covenant with God. According to Christian belief, God created the world and all that is in it in God's image, and it was "very good" (Genesis 1:31), and God avowed God's creation to remain "very good." It was due to humans' inability to acknowledge the godliness of God, the humanness of themselves, and the perfect unity of the two, that this state of "very goodness" was lost, or compromised (see Gen 3). It is not that humans have lost their God-like image, but they have become distant from the connection to God, which is the source of "very good" existence. As a result, the world is not a "very good" place, because it has

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<sup>596</sup> It is not my intention to suggest that victims of sin are not themselves sinners. Of course they themselves become guilty of sinning against others. My concern is when victims of sin are subtly or even overtly made to feel co-responsible for their perpetrator's sin. In so doing the distinction between doing and receiving is blurred, which is unjust and pastorally insensitive.

<sup>597</sup> For example, Professor Gary Pence of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, whose lectures and seminars on "Abusive Religion" I attended in 2000.

<sup>598</sup> See Conradie (2005:16-17) as he outlines a number of contemporary theologians' perspectives on sin.

been and continually is perverted by the evil which results from a lack of connectedness and union with God. This state of separation from the true source of life, this perverse existence apart from the Creator and the Creator's purposes, is in theological language called "sin." Already in the Old Testament the seriousness of sin is underlined (Taylor 1952:23). Humanity is considered to have "lost" paradise (i.e. the state of comprehensive well-being and harmonious existence), and "fallen" into sin.<sup>599</sup>

The above seems to suggest that sin is, in most Biblical writings, an allegory for a life lived in the realm of separation from God (Cousar 1990:57)<sup>600</sup>. It is an allegory for human nature in its desperation, despair and isolation.<sup>601</sup> It is a metaphor for existence fraught with injustice and woundedness. Some theologians express the idea of sin as "the great adversary of God and humanity, and this is a way of speaking of the destructive forces that emerge from the broken relationships between Creator and created which attempt to bring life down to nothing" (Fiddes 1989:134). Villa-Vicencio (1992:162) explains,

'Sin' is a descriptive word used in the Bible to identify a perversion of people's relationships with God, with one another and with the natural world of which they are an inherent part. It involves living a life of enmity, of violation and inhumanity. It is the incapacity to be fully human.

I find this theological metaphor of sin and the fall helpful in understanding – or in describing – the state of existence in which we humans find ourselves. The doctrine of the fall, and its result of a dominion of sin, proclaims that the state in which we live is not "very good" (see Genesis 1:31); it is not authentic, divinely ordained, abundant, intact existence. It is not what God wills our reality to be. Injustice and resulting suffering, as one of the core marks of inauthentic existence, i.e. existence "after the fall" or "in sin", is not a desired reality, and it is not part of abundant living. The reality of evil that causes suffering (i.e. sin) defies the potential for which life was created, and stands in contrast to it.<sup>602</sup> Therefore it must be defied, challenged and resisted, so that life that is meant to be "very good" may be reclaimed and lived. Sin is hideously exemplified in strife and hardship, despair and isolation, oppression, exploitation and injustice. This is why sin is an apt explanation and description of our reality.

For South Africa, sin was exemplified in apartheid, and all the ways in which racism, sexism and greed came to bear on the people of this country. Evil can be identified as the systemic structures or patterns of oppression in economic, political and social life. In this view, sin is defined as "those free, discrete acts of responsible individuals that create or reinforce these structures of oppression" (Engel 1990:155). Structural sin, bolstered by selfishness, self-preservation, greed, apathy, hate, etc. was (and is) a major cause of what may be deemed racial division, social hostility or enmity among groups. According to Hay, sin is not individualistic. There are social consequences of sin. Therefore, sin can be and has been experienced corporately (Hay 1998:90).

Sin continues to exist, even after the abolition of apartheid. The tenacity of a system that so successfully subjugated and exploited so many people lingers. South Africa still is faced with injustices (e.g. unequal housing, health care, education and job opportunities) – some of which are the dregs of apartheid, some of which are newly established. Sin, therefore, seems to be a helpful metaphor for much of the social

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<sup>599</sup> In the New Testament the word translated as "sin" is ἁμαρτία (*hamartia*), which means "missing the mark", i.e. not reaching that which had been wished and hoped for or had been intended, but falling short of it.

<sup>600</sup> Cousar argues that Paul, the author of many of the epistles in the NT, declares sin to be "a dominion under which humanity exists" (see Romans 3:9). This dominion is the antithesis to the dominion of Christ, which is reconciled existence in love, peace and harmony.

<sup>601</sup> The *Evangelischer Erwachsenen Katechismus* (EEK) speaks of the essence of sin as "Die Macht der Verhältnislosigkeit" (2001:173).

<sup>602</sup> See for example Levinson's *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (1988).

disruption and hurt that exists in our country. Sin is also the cause of disunity, disharmony and social tension in our country. Unreconciled existence (also in the social, inter-personal sphere) is a manifestation of sin. It is through sin that relationships are breached and community is ruptured. There is an intricate connection between sin and broken community (Bonhoeffer 1986:69-76).

Biblical Scriptures show us that sin is part of human history; it affects all people at all times, in all places. The story of the fall, and the expulsion from Eden illustrates how sin has been part of human reality since primordial times. Sin is not God's creation, neither is its origin in God (Riedel 1987:39), but it is rather lodged in the state of human existence. The doctrine of original sin<sup>603</sup> is an attempt at elaborating this view.<sup>604</sup> The Biblical witness professes the effect of sin to be separation of humans from God, and as a result the separation of humans from each other. The metaphor of "paradise lost" illustrates this assertion with grandiosity.

Estrangement between humans is at core a reflection and manifestation of the estrangement between God and humans (Rogness 1970:34).

The tragedy of man (sic) is that reconciliation with his fellow men is always partial, even at best. He needs a forgiveness in the center of his being, and from the heart of the universe. He needs to understand that his offences against his fellow men, in the final analysis, are a sin against the God who gave life to all men. (Rogness 1970:33)

Indeed, "It is only in relation to God that man attains that stature of a sinner" (Rogness 1970:45), though his/her sin is mostly directed against fellow human beings. Sin is ultimately the rejection of God, and "rejection of God is rejection of the brother," claims Rogness (1970:46). Through sin, human relationships and community and unity are corrupted. Genesis 4 illustrates how sin corrupts the relationship of humans with the earth, and with each other. Similarly, sin is the cause of great catastrophes (Genesis 6 – Noah and the flood). Sin and its consequences escalate, sometimes into unmanageable proportions (Genesis 11 – tower of Babel). Ultimately, sin destroys and disturbs relationships – those existing between God and humans, among humans, and between humans and the rest of creation. Sin is omnipresent, i.e. all humankind is under its power, and it has, according to Biblical narratives, potential to become a political force if political rulers do not obey God (see Isaiah 2, 7, 31). Sin is manifested in human terms (Romans 3:23), and the human being is the archetype sinner (Romans 5:12-19). The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23), which means that ultimately sin leads to the annihilation of life (Riedel 1987:40-43). From all the above it is thus apparent that the Bible has an essentially holistic understanding of sin.<sup>605</sup> It is "an awful reality that exerts a profound influence on life in both social and transcendent ways. Sin against God invariably has an impact on the human being himself or herself, as well as on others and on creation at large" (Müller-Fahrenheit 1996:5).

Sin is both seen as a state of existence and as concrete deeds that infringe upon or destroy life. One could argue that sin is the mark of a state of basic human hopelessness; it is both the cause and effect of enmity and division (Ephesians 2:11 ff), mutual hostility

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<sup>603</sup> "Ersünde" in German implies that sin was inherited, and that therefore it is innate to humans. Another word used in German for original sin is "Ursünde", which connotes the ancient, primeval nature of sin. See Romans 5:12, 19, as well as the Lutheran confessional writings mentioned above.

<sup>604</sup> Shriver (1995:22) offers an original definition of original sin. "Whether in families that impose the faults of a previous generation upon their children or in political communities that do the same, we never have the luxury of a truly fresh choice of the battlefield of our own struggle with evil." Original sin is "not a single event in some prehistory but an event truly historical in the sense that every generation both inherits and repeats it".

<sup>605</sup> It is interesting in this regard to consider the categories of guilt expounded by Karl Jaspers (expounded by Meiring 1999:62-63). They include criminal guilt (harming another), political guilt (i.e. thwarting of political responsibility), moral guilt (acting against one's conscience, or not doing anything in a situation of injustice), and metaphysical guilt (i.e. guilt before God).



(Galatians 5:20), enslavement under the yoke of the law (Romans 2-8), alienation (Ephesians 2:12), and dependency upon passions and lusts (Romans 1:18-32) (Baumgartner 1998:35). Metaphors or similes for sin include dirt or being unclean or impure, missing the goal, treading the wrong path, insurgence or rebellion, a burden, a weight on one's conscience, deafness (to the call of truth or justice), emptiness or moral void, impermanence and vanity of human existence (Ruhbach 1986:42). Sin is usually equated with egotism and self-involvement. Luther uses Augustine's apt expression when he describes sin as the state and tendency of us human beings to be "turned in upon ourselves (*homo incurvatus in se*)"<sup>606</sup> (Peters 2002:276).<sup>607</sup>

### 3.3.2 Repentance and confession

#### *Repentance as metanoia*

The Christian tradition identifies sin as the cause and reason for injustice and evil. Of course, Biblical faith also offers a way out, a remedy for sin. The first step involved in this remedy is repentance. The New Testament speaks of *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*), which is a rich term signifying a process or action of turning around, changing direction, being existentially transformed, turning away from evil toward good. Since "evil is not merely a characteristic of the deed, but also of the will and mind of the doer" what is needed is "a new heart and a new spirit" (Levinson 1988:39). *Metanoia* is a change of heart.

Beverly Roberts Gaventa explores the various understandings of conversion divulged in the New Testament. Paul sees *metanoia* (here translated as "conversion") as a life-long process (Gaventa 1986:45). He also insists that conversion is not a human effort, but essentially God's initiative (:44). Furthermore, repentance or "turning about" to Paul is not an "individualised interpretation of transformation", but it is always transformation towards and into the body of Christ, the community of believers, "into a community of mutual responsibility and commitment" (:46). In fact, Paul's preoccupation with the community of believers and the interdependence among its members is the basis for much of his theology, including his theology of conversion. Conversion is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end which is the calling of the entire Christian community. It is not just about the personal self and God, but also about the personal self in relation to God and her/his fellow human beings.

Similar to Paul, the author of Luke-Acts also seems to indicate that *metanoia* is never a (selfish) goal in itself. It is always conversion "in order that", and therefore conversion stories are always about *beginnings* and not about endings. Conversion is a means to the growth of the gospel, and therefore even for Luke it is not an individualistic occurrence (Gaventa 1986:92). Although Luke describes conversion experiences with more detail, he is not preoccupied with the events themselves. He does not, according to Gaventa, portray or advocate an "ideal" or "typical" *metanoia* experience, "no conversion ... establishes a pattern that is followed by later believers or is appealed to in preaching" (:124). It appears it is not the *how* and *when*, but the *that* and "*in order that*" of *metanoia* which is important.

Just like Paul, who advocates a radical transformation of a person who "puts on Christ" and renounces the "old nature" (i.e. sin), Luke illustrates real fundamental change in those undergoing a spiritual about-turn. *Metanoia* is not a sentimental relationship with Jesus, but rather it is a radical change of will, attitude, behaviour, perspectives, patterns of thought and action (Gaventa 1986:150,152). Even the evangelist John and the writer of First Peter consider "new birth" to be a discontinuity from the past that is essentially ethical, social/communal and soteriological, not only private and emotional (:143). In fact, true *metanoia* is holistic, and reaches all realms of the person's existence, or else it is a sham. Repentance and turning to Christ involves becoming a "whole person", a person

<sup>606</sup> In German, "Verkrümmung auf das Selbst".

<sup>607</sup> See also Gutiérrez (1990:15), who describes sin as "a self-centred turning in upon oneself".

moving from “disintegration” and alienation (from the self and the world) to “integration” of the self in the world (Harran 1983:30). Similarly, according to Hay (1998:87) personal conversion may not be regarded as a private affair. It is the process of turning from sin to God and the community.

Seen from the point of view of the Christian Scriptural heritage, the call to repentance is key to gaining authentic and abundant life (see Matthew 3:2; Mark 1:4, 15). The gospels are full of stories of individuals or groups who are confronted with the reality of the power of the God’s Reign in Jesus Christ, and on account of that encounter undergo *metanoia*. The disciples, Zacchaeus, Nicodemus, many sick, lame and possessed people, as well as people of low social standing (e.g. prostitutes, tax-collectors, “sinners” in general) were brought to repentance because of their encounter with Jesus, which led to immediate or subsequent changes in their lived realities. They became “new” people. John’s gospel states it unequivocally in the narrative of Nicodemus’ spiritual rebirth: “Unless one is born anew (from above), one cannot enter the Kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

*Metanoia* or “turning to God” is akin to theological expressions such as “dying” to sin (Romans 6:11), being “raised” to new life in Christ or in the Spirit (Romans 6:4), the “death” of the “old Adam” (1 Corinthians 15:22), “clothing” oneself with Christ (Galatians 3:27), receiving “justification by grace” (Romans 4:25), becoming “righteous”, being “born again/from God/from above” (John 3:3), acceptance (or re-acceptance) into the “Kingdom/Reign of God”, incorporation into the “body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12) or the “family of God”, etc. All of these are rich and in some respects enigmatic expressions. Each of them has profound meaning, and they altogether seek to express, in religious language, what the deep, existential nature of *metanoia* is about. Not one of these formulations can totally and completely capture what happens when a person encounters God in Christ and is compelled to be transformed, to turn from sin and evil towards God and good.<sup>608</sup>

*Metanoia*, therefore, is much more than simply discontinuing some or other sinful behaviour. However it includes that as part and parcel of the broader circumstances arising out of being deeply and intrinsically changed. *Metanoia* is a denunciation of life in separation from God and alienation from the neighbour; it is an affirmation of the will to live life with God and in harmony with the neighbour. Such a transformed life necessarily implies a rejection of sin – both sin as a state and as behaviour.

#### *Confession and penitent action as signs of repentance*

Sin and evil always demand an active response, claims Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This response must involve repentance and/or lament and protest (Bonhoeffer 1986:69-76). Repentance has to lead to change. It is, ultimately, a demonstration of the will to turn away from sin and destructive behaviour patterns of the past. Repentant action is a sign of avoiding “cheap grace” and therefore cheap reconciliation (Moyo 2002:300). Ambrose

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<sup>608</sup> Christian theologians have tried to “translate” religious language into more accessible (often popular psychological) formulations, more or less successfully. For example, Thomas Merton tried to explain how the religious dialectic of transcendence and immanence interacts within human beings when they meet God. On the one hand they seek “self-renunciation”, “annihilation or disintegration”, “loss of self” in the face of God’s awesome transcendence and “otherness”. Yet on the other hand they seek “self-recovery” and “reintegration” in the face of encountering God’s immanence or “closeness”, even within themselves (Merton 1978:265ff). The “loss of self” is equated with “spiritual death”, dying of the “old Adam” or dying to sin, while “reintegration” is the “new life” found in Christ and through the Spirit (1978:269). Hans Küng’s definition of conversion shows how “turning” from evil towards God must be seen as an inherently religious and spiritual affair, rather than just a psychological occurrence: “Conversion is fundamental and total orientation of man’s life toward God: an undivided heart in the last resort serving not two masters but only One” (Küng 1978:273). Similarly, Augustine expressed *metanoia* as the “directed movement of hopeful pilgrimage toward rest in God”, and a turn away from the “disquietude” of the “miserable restlessness of a fallen spirit” (Harran 1983:26, 27).

Moyo (2002:294) points out how actions of repentance are crucial for the establishment of justice in South Africa. He mentions the example of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-9) to illustrate how repentance often requires public confession of sin, as well as some or other act of restitution or reparation (Moyo 2002:296-7).

From earliest Christian history, repentance has usually included confession of sin(s) (see for example Mark 1:4,5).<sup>609</sup> Ruhbach (1986:43) is of the opinion that the language of confession is always concrete, yet also always inadequate, tentative and incomplete. A sense of shame is part of the procedure of confession. Confession acknowledges the destruction of or harm done to a mutual relationship, and its purpose is to open the doors to a new path – the path of repentance (transformation) and new beginnings (Ruhbach 1986:43). Primarily, confession is encouraged and practised for the re-establishment of personal relationships, and the mending of the net of relations in a community (Ruhbach 1986:43; *Evangelischer Erwachsenen Katechismus (EEK)* 2001:590<sup>610</sup>; Washington and Kehrein 1993:113). Therefore, it is arguably a necessary part of a reconciliation process.

Ways in which sin and past transgression can be dealt with vary. Odermatt identifies the following four approaches: First is the “analytical” approach which is considered creatively retrospective. It involves looking to the past, interpreting history (Odermatt 1986:33), critical reflection and analytical questioning of this past, and an attempt at understanding our sin in its context. Second is the “paratactical” approach which implies a moving forward without really making an issue of the sin. It is seen not as a form of denial or repression, but as a way of focussing on the present situation instead of dwelling on the past and stagnating in it (:34-35)<sup>611</sup>. A third approach to dealing with sin is silence. Here, the confessor is not forced to justify or explain his/her iniquity; instead there is silent acknowledgement of the wrong that has been done (:36). Fourth is a “future-oriented creative approach”, which stresses creating new beginnings, fostering a way forward out of the state of sinfulness (:36). It is my contention that all four aspects suggested by Odermatt have their place in processes of repentance, depending on their context. All of them may be valuable in the different stages of confession and repentance that must occur in South Africa, if reconciliation is to be authentic.

The Christian tradition has unique possibilities for creating “time” and “space” for people to deal with their past, both in a community as well as in a private setting. It can provide a forum for truth- and storytelling, which implies confession (Moyo 2002:300). Confessional rites enable the confessors (and those listening or watching) to remember, and then reveal and know the truth.<sup>612</sup> The truth about a situation in which sin and injustice happened is brought into the open, it can no longer be denied or silenced.<sup>613</sup> This is important for reconciliation to occur in a divided society. According to de Gruchy (2000:169), the purpose of telling the truth in a context of confession is

to build a humane, just, caring, reconciling society. ... It is only this kind of truth telling that sets us free to be truly human, that lays the foundation for a truly reconciled nation. If we are to build a moral culture, we need to know the truth

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<sup>609</sup> A beautiful example of confession and penance in the Old Testament is found in Psalm 51.

<sup>610</sup> “So eröffnet die Beichte insgesamt einen Raum, in dem das Selbstverhältnis, das Gottesverhältnis und die Beziehung zum Nächsten wiedergewonnen werden.”

<sup>611</sup> See for example Luke 7:37-50; John 9.

<sup>612</sup> Vosloo (2001:26) cautions against “a static view of repentance and forgiveness. Such a static view disconnects repentance and forgiveness from the past and the future, from memory and hope. ... No reconciliation, justice or peace through repentance and forgiveness are possible without truthful memory and hopeful vision.”

<sup>613</sup> In the Christian tradition “both truth and forgiveness are validated and joined together, rather than being forced into an encounter in which one must win out over the other or envisioned as fragmented and separated parts” (Lederach 1997:29).

about our past, that is, about ourselves, because without such knowledge we remain captive to our past.

In order to reveal the truth of the past, painful remembrance may be required. To remember is often the first step to healing, and this is why it is deemed by some to be a moral task with great significance for society.

Confession enables us to look honestly at the past. It sheds light on that which otherwise might remain shrouded in secrecy and obscurity, and as such continue to terrorise those under its reign. Transgressions that are not revealed tend to keep a stronghold on those who perpetrated them, as well as those who suffer(ed) under them.<sup>614</sup> People become burdened by their guilt and shame, or by their victimhood. Through confession, instead of denying, ignoring or justifying our transgressions or hurts, we become free to address them and thereby let go of them. Scholars like Lederach emphasise the importance of remembering the past, and telling stories, as well as entering into the stories of others – all of which are aspects of confession.<sup>615</sup> Reconciliation cannot happen if those concerned do not find “innovative ways to create a time and a place ... to address, integrate, and embrace the painful past and the necessary shared future as a means of dealing with the present” (Lederach 1997:35).<sup>616</sup>

Hay (1998:129) elaborates three temporal categories which sum up the dynamics of the process [of reconciliation] in three imperatives: *remember, engage, and remedy*. These imperatives point to and connect the past, present and future. Once again, the use of these temporal categories does not suggest a linear development in the process of reconciliation, as much as provide a sense of journey and discovery.

The first imperative, i.e. to remember, inevitably involves storytelling (Hay 1998:129). As the story unfolds, the confessor acknowledges guilt, and admits to sin. It becomes a reality, albeit a past reality, from which s/he can no longer hide. Confession is a form of denuding oneself<sup>617</sup> which can be upsetting – both for the victim(s) and the perpetrator(s) (Müller-Fahrenholz 1996:25-26). But in telling the story of calamity and culpability, the confessor may start to experience a release from its bondage. Through her/his confession, s/he is led away from self-involvement and from exaggerated vexing self-analysis which can easily become a vicious cycle<sup>618</sup> (Ruhbach 1986:44-45). “There is something profoundly vicarious in a genuine act of confession; for it brings the unspoken – and unspeakable – words of all into the open,” claims Müller-Fahrenholz (1996:29).

Confession ought not to be empty talk, but ought to include a willingness to suffer the consequences of the sins confessed.<sup>619</sup> Such consequences may involve performing works of penitence or satisfaction (“Bußwerke”) (Sattler 1998:86)<sup>620</sup>. “Tatbuße” – repentant action – has to address the sin it seeks to overcome adequately and

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<sup>614</sup> Confession effects “liberation from the armour of insensibility and defiance in which we had encased ourselves; a liberation which sets us free to achieve self-respect and to assume responsibility for crimes and failures to act. ... A person who does this admits his guilt and complicity ... becomes free from alienation and the determination of his actions by others; he comes to himself, and steps into the light of a truth which makes him free and brings him into a new comradeship with the victims – readiness for reconciliation.” (Shriver 1995:85, quoting Moltmann commenting on being a German after World War Two)

<sup>615</sup> “The most sober – and hopeful – form of international remembrance is forgiveness, that long, many-sided, seldom-completed process of rehabilitating broken human relationships” (Shriver 1995:168).

<sup>616</sup> The Christian tradition fosters a vision of comprehensive reconciliation, “of a common future in Christ” (Vosloo 2001:37).

<sup>617</sup> In German, “Entblössung”.

<sup>618</sup> “Indem er seine Schuld losläßt, wird er davon frei gesprochen [immer nur von sich selbst zu sprechen] und braucht nicht im Teufelskreis der Selbstbespiegelung zu bleiben. Hierin liegt der Sinn des Biblischen Wortes der Wiedergeburt.”

<sup>619</sup> Indeed, Kistner (2001:2) argues that there cannot be reconciliation without the perpetrator(s) seeking forgiveness and showing remorse for the injustice done.

<sup>620</sup> Terms more commonly used for such deeds of penitence are “compensation”, “reparation”, “recompense”.

appropriately, and must be adjusted to the given context (Sattler 1998:109).<sup>621</sup> If done under the right circumstances, penance in action can free people from the debilitating clutches of an unreconciled past, and open up the future for new possibilities. Therefore, it has therapeutic character. It is intrinsically hope-filled, because it enables new beginnings and transforms us to be new creatures in a new kind of community<sup>622</sup> (Sattler 1998:111).

Public confession “would drastically alter the history of South Africa, especially in relation to race and power,” claims Alex Boraine (2000:79). He is of the opinion that all-round social reconciliation has better chances of occurring if leaders of all camps apologised symbolically (i.e. confessed publicly) for wrongs done by the people they represent (2000:78).<sup>623</sup> Moreover, in a context where we are primarily concerned with social and structural sin, as in South Africa, Hay (1998:90) maintains that “to use the term social sin implies that we need to speak of public penance, public atonement and public reconciliation”. Van Zyl Slabbert (2000:65) claims that the truth needed for reconciliation on “a collective and social scale ... is not the truth of law and science, but the truth that comes from confiding and acknowledging, a sort of confessional truth”. This implies an openness to the past, and a willingness to hear one’s own and others’ stories of pain. “Those who want to go forward together need to walk through their histories together” (Müller-Fahrenheit 1996:viii).

I have already discussed the need for South Africa to continue the process of repentance and confession started during the TRC endeavours (see section 1.2.3).<sup>624</sup> Disclosure of sin is not enough. People need to be encouraged to accept guilt and repent for their actions through compensatory action (Kistner 1999:51, 55). In order to truly be healed and reconciled as a nation, South Africans need to encounter one another in a spirit of *metanoia*. This *metanoia* will be regarded as “cheap” if it is not accompanied by confession and action, i.e. by deeds which seek to demonstrate contrition, regret and apology.<sup>625</sup> True repentance and confession involves more than just words, but includes reconciliatory works of penance.

#### *Confession and repentance in the context of social justice*

Although they are often seen as a private and individual matter, repentance and confession in fact go hand in glove with the battle against injustice and the transformation of structures and systems of injustice (Böhme 1986:53). Just as sin is not just a private affair (see above), the overcoming of sin must also be seen in a broader (social, political, economic, not just personal individual) context. Böhme (1986:56) insists that if the private and public, personal and social dimensions are not connected, the danger of practising what Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace” becomes a reality.<sup>626</sup> Wolfram Kistner (2001:2) insists that there can be no reconciliation without justice; authentic reconciliation necessitates a redress of past injustice. Indeed, according to the Biblical witness,

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<sup>621</sup> In South Africa, changing the living conditions of the victims of violence is a form of reparation which must be offered by those who became guilty of human rights abuses, suggests Kistner (2001:3).

<sup>622</sup> See 2 Corinthians 5:18-20.

<sup>623</sup> Shriver (1995:113), too, asserts the significance of the “symbolic, representative role of politicians in the enactment of a political form of forgiveness. An indefinite but real network of victims and agents calls for that role”.

<sup>624</sup> In fact, it can be argued that the TRC did not go far enough at all with the process. According to Kistner (1999:41), the TRC was helpful in encouraging people to reveal and disclose information and accept responsibility. Yet it failed in calling people to true repentance. Its inability to promote repentance was one of its main weaknesses.

<sup>625</sup> Superficial reconciliation is based on “cheap grace” which expects absolution without true repentance and a change of heart and behaviour (Kistner 1999:52).

<sup>626</sup> For a closer examination of the term “cheap grace” see Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Widerstand und Ergebung* (1970).

repentance and confession are not to be individualised and privatised, nor to be divorced from concrete, daily-life matters of social justice (Shriver 1995:210).

The God of the Bible is essentially a God of justice.<sup>627</sup> The Christian faith is adamant about God's radical and ever-remaining demand for justice (Riedel 1987:53). Yet it must be emphasised that God's justice is not primarily of a punitive sort; rather, it envisages the reconciliation of the entire world. It is concerned with the personal and individual, but also always with the broader picture of social and cosmic well-being. God's justice requirement is, effectively, the catalyst for the call to what Riedel calls "double repentance" which urges people to turn towards God, which is at the same time a turning towards the neighbour<sup>628</sup> (Riedel 1987:55). It can be argued that in this context forgiveness and absolution lead to reconciliation, which is a fulfilment of God's law, an occurrence of divine justice or righteousness<sup>629</sup> (Sattler 1998:108). Therefore, repentance effects the overcoming of sin, and implies the reconciliation between sinners and God, and between sinners and those victimised by sin (Schlemmer 1998:137-9). Repentance and confession can implicitly be seen as factors in the quest for social justice.

#### *The practice of confession and penance in church history*

The history of penance in the church can be traced from the early centuries, where we have the most overt references to it by the Shepherd of Hermas, Tertullian, and Cyprian.<sup>630</sup> Different reconciliation practices ensued in different regions of the early church (Hay 1998:106). One such practice is the so-called "order of penitents". This order was developed between the second and fourth centuries, and formalised by Tertullian (:107). The "order of penitents" was a form of canonical penance for "grave sin: sins such as murder, adultery or apostasy. These sins were seen to be grave because they significantly disrupted social and ecclesial or church life" (:106). The *agere penitentiam* was frequently deemed the sacrament of reconciliation, or "second baptism". It included the following elements: public confession, "wearing penitential clothing such as sackcloth and ashes", "limits to diet, with strict fasting on certain days", "lamentation", "prostration in front of the presbyters", and/or "kneeling before the entire community of the Church" (:107). Its duration could be up to seven years. The aim of the order of penitents was not only to assuage victims and re-integrate offenders. Its prime focus was to repair and re-establish relationships in the community and establish harmony.

The integrity of the community was preserved by a number of actions and dynamics, for example; by the public acknowledgement of sinful behaviour; through excluding the penitent while providing a means of healing the brokenness of the penitent; and by establishing a pattern of action for the community to assist the penitent while preserving the unity of the community. (Hay 1998:108)

Here, confession was not seen only as a private affair, but as something involving the whole community as well. However, this "order of penitents disappeared and was eventually replaced by the practice of the Celtic church with its stress on individual confessional practice" (:108). Both the Tertullian and the Celtic orders gradually fell into disuse, the more formalised and regulated they became.

In the Middle Ages it was mainly the mendicant monks who preached and taught penance, frequently in the context of pastoral care and counselling (Bill 1986:58-66). In the early middle ages confession was a less psychologised, personalised and individualised affair than it is today. It was seen as a method of social control (Klein 1999:169). This is

<sup>627</sup> See, for example, Deuteronomy 10:18; Psalm 33:5; Amos 5:24; Matthew 5:20, 43-48; 1 John 2:7.

<sup>628</sup> See the double love-commandment, Matthew 22:36-40. See also Psalm 51:6; Isaiah 1:16.

<sup>629</sup> "Wenn es stimmt, daß die Leidenschaft Gottes das Heilsein der Menschen und der gesamten Schöpfung ist, dann sind alle Taten mitmenschlich-geschwisterlicher Versöhnung auch dann eine Erfüllung des Gebotes Gottes..."

<sup>630</sup> The practice of penance was used as a "reconciliation ritual" from the time of the early church, argues Wepener (2003a, 2003b, 2004a).

still its prime function, argues Klein. The supposed purpose of penance is the behaviour patterns that it instils: the repentant party is to demonstrate both a change of heart (i.e. will, mentality) and of conduct (i.e. action and behaviour) (Klein 1999:170)<sup>631</sup>. Indeed, in the different stages of church history penitent *action* (“Bußleistung”) enabled the compensation for evil done to others, and demonstrated the importance of the duty of restitution (:170). At various times and in varying degrees, confession was practised both publicly and privately, for known as well as for personal and unknown sins (:211). Throughout, penance was seen as the most overt “act of reconciliation” between God and an offender, and between offending and offended (human) parties (:228ff). In cases of grave transgression, persons were commonly expected to do penance under fear of the prospect of expulsion from the community and excommunication from the church (:229). According to Shriver (1995:49), the centuries 500 to 1500 CE witnessed the gradual increase of “the sacramental captivity of forgiveness”, i.e. penance progressively became to be seen as private, secret, and divorced from secular life.

In Lutheran tradition, the conceptual basis, and indeed the prerequisite, of any form of repentance is the Incarnation of Christ, ending in the cross. God’s radical act of “turning to” humankind paves the way and calls for humankind’s “turning to” God (Harran 1983:21). Perhaps Luther’s most significant and radical perception on *metanoia* is his insistence on it being God’s work entirely.<sup>632</sup> God brings about a person’s “change of heart”, even the preparation towards it (Harran 1983:185).<sup>633</sup> This reveals the classical Lutheran understanding of repentance as *passiva contritio*, which means that remorse and contrition is experienced “passively”.<sup>634</sup> God is active in the process of salvation and forgiveness, while human beings are passive. Forgiveness cannot be attained or actively achieved through human endeavour. Only once forgiveness has been granted and spoken, can and should the penitent become active to change. Repentant action therefore is a result of forgiveness, and not a prerequisite for achieving it (Petsch 1996:225).<sup>635</sup>

Furthermore, in Lutheran teaching it is not we ourselves who come to the recognition of our needs, failures and sinfulness, but God who points these out to us through the law (Harran 1983:186). In the light of the law, we stand condemned. Yet in the light of the gospel, proclaimed as the word of the cross, we are saved from this condemnation, and our *metanoia* is effected. This is, in brief, the nub of the theology of justification by grace alone.<sup>636</sup> One can say, therefore, that in Lutheranism (and also later forms of Protestantism) the centre of Christian repentance is a human being’s encounter

<sup>631</sup> “Das Bußinstitut ist ein organisiertes System der sozialen Kontrolle. Die Verhaltensmuster, die über das Mittel des Sakraments den Gläubigen auferlegt werden, sind jetzt unter Umständen wichtiger als das Bekenntnis von Todsünden und lässigen Sünden.”

<sup>632</sup> God initiates and completes reconciliation in us through Christ (Schreier 1998:14).

<sup>633</sup> In “Confession concerning Christ’s Supper” (1528), Luther insists, “I herewith reject and condemn as sheer error all doctrines which glorify our free will, as diametrically contrary to the help and grace of our Savior Jesus Christ” (LW 37:52-53). See also Luther’s treatise “The Bondage of the Will” (1526).

<sup>634</sup> Luther protested against the idea of *activa contritio* because it implied trying to “produce” forgiveness instead of “receiving” it (Petsch 1996:227). Luther was a proponent of the doctrine of “justification by grace alone, through faith”, which rejects any form of so-called “works righteousness”. Of course, this doctrine is a reaction against those pre-Reformation Roman Catholic practices which implied that human beings were capable of “achieving” God’s grace through their own actions, e.g. by buying indulgences.

<sup>635</sup> Nonetheless, for repentance to be authentic, the Lutheran tradition emphasises the need for *conscientia cruciatus* of one’s faults, i.e. a sense of conscious agony about one’s wrongs, a deep-felt contrition, a deeply distressed conscience. Therefore repentance cannot really be seen as “passive” only, but has the element of “active” conscientisation of one’s wrongdoing. “Buße steht vielmehr am Schnittpunkt zwischen Passivität und Aktivität” (Petsch 1996:228).

<sup>636</sup> According to Lutheran theology, righteousness, i.e. salvation and transformation, is entirely God’s work and effected by God’s grace alone – humans play no part in it whatsoever. Karl Rahner, a modern Catholic theologian, differs from Luther in this respect. Contrary to Luther, Rahner (1978:204) insists that repentant transformation “is a fundamental decision” and a “response to God’s call”. Yet he shows ambiguity in this point because while he insists that conversion is “freely performed” it is also “experienced as a gift” (:206).

with Christ, and more specifically with Christ on the cross. As such the cross is the most important symbol of Christian transformation; indeed *metanoia* is unfathomable if it were not for the cross.

For Luther, repentance came to be seen as a way of life<sup>637</sup>. The first of the *Ninety-five Theses* (1517) unequivocally states that “the whole life of the faithful [is] to be an act of repentance” (LW 31:25). Repentance was considered the continual turning away from self-involvement to God, the relentless change in direction – from the path of sin to the path of righteousness. It involved a process of existential transformation – from being a sinner to being saved, from being guilty to being forgiven, from living in fear of God’s wrath to living under grace and with hope (Harran 1983:20). Luther insisted that humans should “persevere in conversion” (:186). By implication this means that even after a formal moment of “turning to God”, i.e. of repentance, the process of transformation continues. In fact, Luther’s deliberations imply three different “types” of conversion in a person. They are (1) the “unrepeatable entrance into Christian life through baptism”, (2) the “repeatable event of contrition and penance” and (3) a “dramatic personal transformative event” (:22). Repentance involves the recognition and acknowledgement of one’s sinfulness, and the act of will and decision to undermine sin in one’s life by all means, through the transforming power of God (Ruhbach 1986:38).

Luther rejected the tradition of compulsory penance, which had by that time become established in the medieval church. He further abandoned the notion that all trespasses had to be recounted during confession.<sup>638</sup> In his opinion the best way of doing penance was through private confession (“*Einzelbeichte*”)<sup>639</sup>, “for here God’s word and absolution are spoken privately and individually to each believer ... and also for comfort, counsel, and guidance” (*Confession concerning Christ’s Supper* (1528), LW 37:58; see also *EEK* 2001:596). While in Roman Catholic thought the office of the keys is seen as “divine institution”, Protestants see it as an “ordinance” (Brakenhielm 1993:81). This implies a difference in the understanding of the weight of the office. So it is that Luther insisted that *any* Christian may absolve another from sin, not only a clergyperson (Brakenhielm 1993:81).

It is lamentable that a general loss or diminution of traditions of penance can be identified in modern Protestant churches (Ratzmann 1998:22).<sup>640</sup> Depending on the church tradition in question, and in which context it is functioning, penance may take on varying forms, i.e. it may occur privately, publicly, in prayer, in liturgical style or freely (Ruhbach 1986: 46-47). It may be prepared or premeditated and formalised, or be practised spontaneously and informally. In contrast to the Catholic church, which stresses three to four aspects of penance (*viz. contritio cordis, confessio oris, satisfactio operis*, and absolution), the Protestant tradition practises a condensed or simplified version which includes only confession of sin and absolution (Ratzmann 1998:16), i.e. the need for contrition of the heart and deeds of redress are relegated to the background. In the Lutheran church today penance is usually formalised as part of the liturgy during ordinary worship services (“*allgemeine Beichte*”, *EEK* 2001:592). Confession of sins here takes on the form of a general liturgical prayer. Another option is participation in a special liturgical service of penance (“*Beichtagende*”). There is also the option of participating in a (liturgical) order of private confession (Ratzmann 1998:27; *EEK* 2001:592). This is,

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<sup>637</sup> See Luther’s *Confession concerning Christ’s Supper* (1528), where he insists “forgiveness of sins is not to be expected only at one time, as in baptism, ... but frequently, as often as one needs it, till death” (LW 37:58).

<sup>638</sup> Luther vehemently attacked the Catholic church of his time, especially its practice of penance. The *Ninety-five Theses* (1517) are an example of his offensive against the selling of indulgences. It was in fact Luther’s disagreement with the penitential system and its theological presuppositions that initially sparked the Reformation.

<sup>639</sup> See Luther’s *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), LW 36:86ff.

<sup>640</sup> For a further investigation of practices in different churches (*viz. Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Orthodox*) involving repentance, confession, and forgiveness, see Schlemmer (1998).



however, seldom used. The most frequently used form of private penance takes place during an informal pastoral conversation between the confessor and the minister of absolution (“Einzelbeichte”, Ratzmann 1998:20).<sup>641</sup> It is probably fair to say that all forms of penance practised in the Lutheran tradition today tend to be individualistic in nature.<sup>642</sup> Even in public forms of penance, the focus is on the individual and his/her sense of remorse or guilt. Much emphasis is placed on private sins, and little on social or structural sins. Lamentably, this is true for most contemporary churches.

#### *Insights from the Catholic tradition*

In the Catholic tradition in particular, much theological discussion exists concerning the rite and practice of repentance. This is so because the Catholic Church holds that penance is one of the seven holy sacraments.<sup>643</sup> Penance includes acknowledgement and acceptance of guilt (Isaiah 6:5; Luke 5:8), accepting one’s alienation from oneself (1 John 1:8), and, if possible, identifying the actual concrete sins one has committed in thought, word and deed (James 4:17; Halkenhäuser 1998:115). Ideally, *contritio cordis* (contrition of the heart), *confessio oris* (verbal confession), *satisfactio operis* (redressive deed(s)) and absolution are moments necessarily belonging to the process of repentance (Ratzmann 1998:16).

It is possible to distinguish between four types of penance. First, there is what may be deemed “heart-confession before God”, *confessio fidei*, or faith confession (exemplified in Luke 18:13, 1 John 1:9ff, and some confession psalms). Second, there is public confession, which is practised communally (exemplified in Old Testament liturgies of repentance, Joel 2:21ff, Mark 1:5, Acts 19:18ff). The third type is the *confessio caritatis*, a kind of reconciliatory confession towards the neighbour who has been wronged. It is also termed the confession of love (“Liebesbeichte”) and is illustrated in Matthew 5:23f, 6:14, and 18:35. Fourthly, there is the counselling conversation, *mutuum colloquium et consolatio fratrum*, described in James 5:13ff, involving mutual confession and prayer in a private environment (Halkenhäuser 1998:118). Over and above these four modes of penitential behaviour, hearing the proclaimed word (see John 15:3), prayer (especially the fifth plea in the Lord’s prayer), participating in the Lord’s Supper, and performing works of service and charity (i.e. *diaconia*; see Matthew 25:34-40; 1 Peter 4:8; James 5:20) also signify penitence to a certain degree (Halkenhäuser 1998:119).

Hay (1998:74-103) further describes the practice of reconciliation in recent Roman Catholic teaching. Specifically, he argues that the church possesses ritual resources which “might serve social reconciliation in order to assist pastors and church workers ministering in post-apartheid South Africa” (:18). He claims that these resources which the church has to offer could “provide a basis for developing the dynamics of a pastorally suitable process of reconciliation” (:20). Hay insists that a process of reform has started since the Second Vatican Council in terms of sacramental reconciliation, which has resulted in the display of “concrete, lived and pastoral concern related to reconciliation” (:82). A “clearly stated communal dimension to the celebration of the sacraments” has

<sup>641</sup> One example of how private penance can be conducted is given by Luther himself in his *Small Catechism*, under the heading of “Vom Amt der Schlüssel und von der Beichte”. See also Luther’s *A discussion on how confession should be made* (1520) and *The Sacrament of Penance* (1519).

<sup>642</sup> The discussion surrounding penance in *Leitlinien Kirchlichen Lebens* (2003:127ff) focuses exclusively on the individual, and not on the community at large. Moreover, penance is seen predominantly in terms of an individual’s pastoral counselling needs, and not in terms of public responsibility or social justice.

<sup>643</sup> For Lutherans, penance is not a sacrament, but rather “nothing else than the practice and the power of baptism” (Luther, *Confession concerning Christ’s Supper* (1528), LW 36:60). The *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520, LW 36) stipulates that a true sacrament is (1) instituted by Christ himself, and (2) a word (of Christ) accompanied by an outward sign. According to this rule, Luther initially conceded that, beside baptism and the Eucharist, penance was the third sacrament. Later on he changed his position by stating that penance was not a sacrament in its own right, because it had no outer or external sign. For Luther it became but a manifestation of the sacrament of baptism.

evolved (:82). The church concedes that the historical context of a situation requiring reconciliation is to be taken seriously, and that the “communal dimension of reconciliation is not exclusive of the individual dimension” – a false opposition of the two is to be avoided (:82). Moreover, the concept of sin has become broadened to include “social sin”, which has become part of official ecclesial vocabulary surrounding reconciliation. It can be observed that many different forms of penance have emerged in the Catholic church since Vatican II – in liturgy and the Eucharist, particularly in grassroots communities – and that progressively more emphasis is placed on the process nature of conversion and consequently of reconciliation (Bill 1986:65).

### 3.3.3 Forgiveness

In the Christian tradition, the response to repentance, frequently coupled with confession and deeds of contrition, is forgiveness or absolution. Forgiveness is believed to have consequences for the present and future, i.e. it releases the confessor from the bondage of a burdened conscience, but also urges him/her to change his/her ways and not continue with sin<sup>644</sup>. Many Christians claim that forgiveness of and absolution from confessed sin ought to lead to sanctification<sup>645</sup> in the repentant sinner. Sanctification is the embodied manifestation, the concretisation of justification and forgiveness in a person’s life.<sup>646</sup> It may also be likened to the “fruits” or the result of having been reconciled to God. Therefore, one might reason that life lived in a spirit of confession (and which hence enjoys the benefit of absolution) gains a new form – an existence which Ruhbach (1986:45) would argue is permeated and infused by Christ, the prime forgiver and reconciler.<sup>647</sup> Another way to put it is to say that those who live in and with Christ “exist eschatologically” because they are freed from sin (Schmithals 1968:317).<sup>648</sup>

Arguably, the “special genius of the Christian story is to communicate and administer ... forgiveness” (Richardson 2001:45).<sup>649</sup> Luther declares, “In the Christian Church, wherever it exists, is to be found the forgiveness of sins, i.e. a kingdom of grace and of true pardon” (*Confession concerning Christ’s Supper* (1528), LW 37:58). Certain theologians regard forgiveness as the clearest “sign of reconciliation” between the wronged and the wrongdoer(s) (Böhme 1986:57; Riedel 1987:56). It can be said that “the power of forgiveness is used to make reconciliation possible” (Hay 1998:120)<sup>650</sup>.

Of course, one has to be cautious of not misusing the concept of forgiveness. There are a number of examples of such “distortions in church history” (Müller-Fahrenholz 1996:9) which ought to be warning lights to us as we seek to elaborate the value and efficacy of the tradition of forgiveness in the church for South African society. Firstly, we must avoid using “forgiveness as a tool of power-politics” (:9).<sup>651</sup> Some critics of the TRC have already accused it of being such a tool, by pressurising people into

<sup>644</sup> John 8:11: “I do not condemn you. Sin no more.” Forgiveness can imply “changing the future behaviour of enemies” (Shriver 1995:82).

<sup>645</sup> Interestingly, in German the word used for sanctification is “Heiligung”, which belongs to the same semantic word family as “Heilung” – healing, and “Heil” – well-being, salvation and redemption.

<sup>646</sup> See Romans 12:1-2; 2 Corinthians 5:17, 7:1; Galatians 5:22-23; Colossians 3:5-15.

<sup>647</sup> See Ephesians 4:23-24, 2:10; Colossians 2:10-13, 3:10.

<sup>648</sup> Yet it is dangerous to assume that human beings can ever overcome their tendency to be sinners. Despite *metanoia*, despite being made whole by God, they remain sinful. There exists a dialectic tension between being righteous and being sinful. Lutheran theology teaches that humans are *simul iustus et peccator* – at the same time justified and sinners.

<sup>649</sup> The normal human responses to wrongdoing include terror, vindictiveness, retaliation, punishment, restitution, protest, or passivity (Shriver 1995:31). This shows what a ground-breaking, avant-garde option forgiveness is. Indeed, history has shown that empowerment to forgive and move on with the enemy has often stemmed from the church and the Christian faith (:179).

<sup>650</sup> Nevertheless, I agree with Hay when he cautions that “forgiveness is not the only dynamic necessary in the process of reconciliation”. This has been elaborated above, in sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.2.

<sup>651</sup> See also Brakenhielm (1993:5) who cautions against using forgiveness as a “tool for power”.

“forgiving” perpetrators though they may not have been ready to do so. Secondly, “the verticalist reduction”, which denies that a higher dimension (God) is involved in the process of forgiveness, ought to be prevented (:12).<sup>652</sup> The third danger which Müller-Fahrenheit cautions about is “the fixation on the sinner”, which often leads to (self-)pitying behaviour instead of constructive effort to overcome the effects of the sin (:13). It may also lead to indifference and unresponsiveness to the victims of sin.<sup>653</sup>

“The single most important concept in biblical Christianity is forgiveness,” claim Harvey and Benner (1996:25; see also Breytenbach 1986:17). New Testament scholar Vincent Taylor agrees when identifying “forgiveness and reconciliation as the heart of the gospel” (1952:223). Indeed, according to the Biblical witness, the goal and aim of penance is forgiveness and, with that, the opportunity for a new beginning (see Psalm 32:5; Mark 1:4; James 5:16; 1 John 1:9). Penance and forgiveness is a metaphorical and symbolic partaking in the death and resurrection of Christ – which ultimately heralds new life (Ezekiel 33:11; Psalm 103; John 10:10; Romans 5). Indeed, the Biblical witness is unequivocal in its pronouncement that renewed life springs forth from forgiveness.<sup>654</sup> This rehabilitated life involves a sense of being at peace with God (Romans 5:1), ongoing regeneration and sanctification (Ephesians 4:22ff), edification to go the next step in faith and boldness (John 8:11), acknowledgement of one’s duty toward one’s neighbour (Matthew 6:12), and a strengthening of one’s sense of community and belonging to the church of God (Halkenhäuser 1998:116-7). Forgiveness may also put an end to loneliness and emotional isolation – both for the offender and the injured party (EEK 2001:589)<sup>655</sup>.

In the Old Testament, the background of forgiveness is to be found in the tradition of the covenant. In relation to forgiveness, God “blots out” and “no longer remembers” sin, “imputes no iniquity”, “cleanses”, and “hides his face from sin”.<sup>656</sup> God also “heals”, “returns to” and “restores” sinners and evildoers.<sup>657</sup> Although forgiveness is a free gift, humans must fulfil certain requirements, i.e. “repentance, confession, penance, recommitment”, sometimes submit sin offerings, or demonstrate a “changed heart”. There are often mediators of God’s forgiveness. Both individuals and groups can be forgiven, and forgiveness may be offered privately or publicly. Frequently, the nation as a whole is forgiven. Yet there are also instances where individuals receive absolution. (Brakenhielm 1993:59)

In the New Testament, both conditional and unconditional forgiveness are attested. Conditional forgiveness requires conversion and repentance (see for example Mark 4:12; Luke 17:3-4; Matthew 6:12-15, 18:23-35). Unconditional forgiveness is immediate and without precondition (yet sometimes repentance is considered an inevitable consequence of having been granted forgiveness). It comes to those “who know themselves to be totally without claim and pretension” (see for example Luke 15:11-35; Mark 2:1-12). In the parable of the prodigal son, for instance, forgiveness is God’s own action (Brakenhielm 1993:60). Jesus conferred the task of mediating God’s forgiveness (see John 20:23; Matthew 16:19), a responsibility which became known as the office of the keys (Brakenhielm 1993:62). For Paul, forgiveness and justification belong

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<sup>652</sup> Hay insists that for “the Christian who wishes to pursue the path of reconciliation ... a simply human approach to reconciliation is not adequate” (Hay 1998:121).

<sup>653</sup> Brakenhielm lists other possible criticisms against forgiveness. First, he notes that damage done cannot be undone by forgiveness. He asks whether it is not foolish to think that forgiveness can change anything (:6). Moreover, he contends that forgiveness has few if any social effects (:8). Finally, he sees in forgiveness a form of “cheap grace” (:11). I do not agree with the assumptions underlying these criticisms. Neither does political philosopher Hannah Arendt, who “identified forgiveness as one of two human capacities that make possible genuine social change” (Shriver 1995:6).

<sup>654</sup> Forgiveness is restoration and reclamation; it is return to life (Bersin 2000:151).

<sup>655</sup> “...nicht nur die eigene Schuld macht Menschen einsam, sondern auch die Unfähigkeit, anderen zu verzeihen.”

<sup>656</sup> These are examples of what Brakenhielm calls “negative forgiveness”.

<sup>657</sup> These are examples of “positive forgiveness”.

together. Yet the concept of justification is broader than that of forgiveness – only *sins* are forgiven while the *whole person* is justified (Brakenhielm 1993:61). Shriver (1995:38-45) claims that forgiveness served as a means for “community building in the New Testament”.<sup>658</sup> Moreover, forgiving one another became an aspect of community discipline in the early church (see Matthew 18:12-25; 1 Corinthians 5:9-13; 2 Corinthians 2:5-10).

The Bible is full of stories of forgiveness. In section 3.1.3, I have already mentioned Genesis 37-50, which dramatically portrays the overcoming of estrangement between Joseph and his brothers. In this story, the brothers’ crime or guilt is not belittled or ignored, but taken seriously (Harvey and Benner 1996:33). Forgiving is not equal to forgetting (:49)<sup>659</sup>, excusing (:50),<sup>660</sup> ignoring, nor necessarily to offering unconditional trust (:51). The story cautions us not to adopt what Müller-Fahrenheit calls “futile approaches to guilt”. One such approach is “trivialization” of guilt, where crime becomes viewed as a mere “error” (Müller-Fahrenheit 1996:17). Another vain approach is “fighting guilt with guilt”, which inevitably sets in motion a “downward spiral of revenge” (:18; see also Volf 1996:121). Lastly, guilt ought not to be dealt with as “in the courts of justice”, since there the emphasis of the process is on punishment, and not on healing (Müller-Fahrenheit 1996:20-21). Forgiveness in the Joseph narrative is displayed as a decision of the wronged party to relinquish the demand for punishment of the perpetrators.<sup>661</sup> Moreover, the story demonstrates that the first step towards reconciliation is the victims’ willingness to forgive (Kistner 2001:3).<sup>662</sup>

It can be argued that in the Bible the term “forgiveness” implies much more than just settling a dispute and certainly does not mean sweeping conflict under the proverbial carpet. We are warned that “forgiveness can never replace justice” (Müller-Fahrenheit 1996:viii); yet indeed true “forgiveness goes beyond justice” (:ix; Volf 1996:123).<sup>663</sup> Forgiveness means something much more all-encompassing and life-changing for both the forgiver and the forgiven than a mere cancellation of debt.

The Bible understands forgiveness as a process which includes both the perpetrator and the victim. Forgiveness can occur when the perpetrator asks for it and the victim grants it. This mutuality is basic to an understanding of the biblical concept. Both sides are changed by this encounter. ... Forgiveness frees the future from the haunting legacies of the past. (Müller-Fahrenheit 1996:4-5)

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<sup>658</sup> Repentance and forgiveness aims at “the restoration of communion and the healing of brokenness, not the claiming of the freedom to live apart” (Vosloo 2001:27). According to Volf (1996:31), forgiveness is a sign of “embrace”, the overarching theme of Christian faith. Embrace stands in opposition to a stance of “exclusion”.

<sup>659</sup> “In forgiving, we do not forget; we remember in a different way” (Schreier 1998:66).

<sup>660</sup> In forgiveness, “the cruelty of the original crime has not been cancelled” (Shriver 1995:28).

<sup>661</sup> The Biblical witness seems to show that God is against human vengeance (Shriver 1995:23).

<sup>662</sup> Indeed, forgiveness may figure “not only at the end, but the beginning of the arduous process of social reconciliation” (O’Neill 2000:16). According to Shriver (1995:27), the Joseph saga is a “long-drawn-out process of forgiveness”. “Undertows of fear, suspicion, and guilt will tug at this reconciliation down to the very end of the story. In this dramatic moment all the dimensions of forgiveness between humans have at last emerged: painful, judgmental truth; forbearance of revenge; empathy and compassion; and a new solidarity between enemies. But ... their convergence can be difficult, long delayed, and forever imperfect.” The Joseph story demonstrates how both judgement against evil and forbearance from revenge are necessary for forgiveness (Shriver 1995:193).

<sup>663</sup> Volf, too, insists that forgiveness is not a substitute for justice. “Forgiveness is no mere discharge of a victim’s angry resentment and no mere assuaging of a perpetrator’s remorseful anguish, one that demands no change of the perpetrator and no righting of wrongs. On the contrary: every act of forgiveness enthrones justice; it draws attention to its violation precisely by offering to forego its claims. ... Moreover, forgiveness provides a framework in which the quest for properly understood justice can be fruitfully pursued” (Volf 1996:123). “In the presence of God our rage over injustice may give way to forgiveness, which in turn will make the search for justice for all possible” (Volf 1996:124).

According to the gospels, one of the main elements of Jesus' activity was proclaiming forgiveness (particularly in view of the coming Reign of God; see Matthew 9:2-5, 18:21-22; Mark 2:5-7; Luke 5:20, 7:48). Throughout the New Testament, believers are urged to follow the example of their Lord and forgive one another (2 Corinthians 2:10; Colossians 3:13), and not to avenge themselves when wronged (Romans 12:17). We are encouraged to settle disputes peaceably (Matthew 5:23-25) instead of harbouring resentment. Indeed, believers are cautioned not to make light of the responsibility and authority attached to forgiving others (John 20:23; Matthew 18:15-19). In order for forgiveness to be granted, Luke (17:3f) emphasises the importance of remorse, while in Matthew 18:21 there is no need for remorseful action on the side of the sinner (Stückelberger 1988:400).<sup>664</sup> This ambiguity suggests the existence of several different traditions running parallel in the Christian Scriptures. The process of reconciliation is not always the same. One cannot assume that the path toward reconciliation is uni-directional and clear-cut, and it is not always certain whether there are conditions attached to the granting of forgiveness.<sup>665</sup>

Given the plurality of our context, in certain situations it may be necessary to grant forgiveness before remorse is shown. In other instances the opposite may be true, i.e. that forgiveness is only granted once the wrongdoer has shown compunction. According to Schreiter's analysis of reconciliation processes, social reconciliation usually involves repentance before forgiveness, which culminates in reconciliation. Personal reconciliation on the other hand follows a different order of events, i.e. reconciliation occurs before forgiveness, and repentance is the consequence (Schreiter 1998:64). Whatever the case, it is clear that the process of reconciliation may take different shapes and routes, and that the moment of forgiveness may figure "not only at the end, but the beginning of the arduous process of social reconciliation" (O'Neill 2000:16).

Stückelberger (1988:401) is of the opinion that repentance, remorse, transformation and reparation – as much as these are important co-themes to forgiveness and reconciliation – are results or effects of forgiveness, not prerequisites for it. Forgiveness, he argues, is consistently considered a gift of grace, not an achievement. As a Lutheran, the teaching of *sola gratia* induces me to agree with this assertion that forgiveness – when granted by God – is unconditional and occurs apart from "good works". Forgiveness from God cannot be "achieved" – i.e. attained through deeds – it can merely be accepted as a gift. Nevertheless, the question even for Lutherans is how and when do "good works", in this case deeds of repentance, feature in the process. If they are not a requirement for forgiveness, they surely ought to be a result or consequence of it.

According to the parable of the "wicked servant" (Matthew 18:21-35) forgiveness of one's debtor ought to occur seventy-seven times, i.e. a number which is used symbolically to mean without limit, always, under all circumstances, and without questioning. This kind of spirit of ceaseless forgiving is supposed to be the basis for congregational practice of penance and reconciliation (Klein 1999:49).

Mit Versöhnung meinen wir den Prozeß dieses immer neuen Vergebens, der aus der Haltung, Einstellung und dem Akt der Vergebung folgt. Er folgt nicht immer

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<sup>664</sup> Two other examples of forgiveness granted unconditionally are to be found in John 7:53-8:11 (the story of the adulterous woman) and Luke 15:11-32 (the story of the prodigal son). Taylor (1952:8) posits that frequently in the Bible (though not always), the condition for forgiveness is repentance. It is debatable which tradition in the Bible bears more weight: either the one where forgiveness is granted unconditionally, or the one where forgiveness is granted on condition of repentance. As the Biblical witness is ambiguous in this regard, scholars also disagree. Frequently, our church theological traditions guide us as to which option we place our stress on. Most Lutherans certainly opt for the "forgiveness granted unconditionally" approach, while most Catholic and certain Reformed Christians adopt the "forgiveness after repentance" option.

<sup>665</sup> Brakenhielm (1993:39) points out that one ought to distinguish "between setting up conditions for a person to *grant* forgiveness, on the one hand, and setting up conditions for forgiveness to be meaningful to the one who *receives* it, on the other".

der Vergebung; er ist möglich, wo sich Vergebung bewährt, wo sie den Vergebungsprozeß durchsteht und aushält, wo sie beständig bleibt. Denn die Entzweiung ist eine Wunde, die im Moment der Vergebung geheilt scheint, aber immer wieder aufbrechen kann. Für die Versöhnung braucht es Zeit, sie muß aus dem Herzen kommen, aber sie muß auch das Herz bestimmen.... (Klein 1999:51)

Nevertheless, the practice of penance and forgiveness within the community is no replacement for justice (Klein 1999:50). "Forgiveness cannot reinscribe victimhood," insists O'Neill (2000:15). As already mentioned, by forgiving, justice is not overlooked or ignored, but restored (Klein 1999:51; Volf 1996:123-4).

In most cases in the Bible, forgiveness and reconciliation are closely connected (see Matthew 18:35; Mark 11:25; Luke 24:47) (Klein 1999:71). Forgiveness is both "a stage antecedent to reconciliation" (Taylor 1952:3), and brings about "full restoration to fellowship" (:1). In the sayings of Jesus, forgiveness effects the "cancelling of obstacles to reconciliation" (Taylor 1952:11), i.e. forgiveness paves the way for the rehabilitation and restoration of broken or wounded relationships between people (EEK 2001:590, 591).

The Greek term for forgiveness (*αφιημι*, *aphiemi*) means to "let go of", "give away" (Klein 1999:50), and points to release from something burdensome or troublesome. The Biblical witness casts light upon a number of favourable consequences of forgiveness. Forgiveness produces "a sense of cleanness"<sup>666</sup> (Psalm 51:2, 7), "a sense of guilt decisively removed" (Micah 7:18-19), "a sense of healing and emotional release" (Malachi 4:2), "a new clarity of mind about God's purpose" (Ephesians 1:18-19), and "a new unity between persons" (Psalm 133) (Harvey and Benner 1996:25). Indeed, the Christian tradition proclaims, "Forgiveness is a freeing, empowering, refreshing, healing and joyful experience which is capable of transforming all of life" (Harvey and Benner 1996:26).

On the other hand, absence of forgiveness produces "a clinging sense of uncleanness and lostness" (Isaiah 64:6), "a sense of unresolved guilt" (Psalm 51:3), "a continuing sense of woundedness and longing for healing" (Psalm 38:8), "darkness of mind and confusion about God's purpose" (Isaiah 44:20, 59:9-10), "a growing disunity between persons even within the Christian fellowship" (Galatians 5:15), and sometimes "chronic anger" against oneself, other persons, the situation or even God (Harvey and Benner 1996:26, 27). However advantageous it is to be released from sin and guilt, it cannot be denied that forgiveness is difficult; it is not "cheap". Both for those granting forgiveness, as well as for those receiving it, it can be a painful and taxing task because it requires emotional and spiritual effort. It is therefore not inappropriate to speak of the "hard work of forgiveness" (Harvey and Benner 1996:37).

The paradigmatic and foundational example showing that forgiveness is not cheap is the cross of Christ (EEK 2001:177-178).<sup>667</sup> The story of the cross is probably the most central of Christianity's "grand stories of ... forgiveness, reconciliation and truth" (Botman 1996:37). God's forgiveness of humans is shown through Jesus' death on the cross. His death and resurrection is the reconciliation of the world (2 Corinthians 5:19) which leads to personal and world peace<sup>668</sup>. God initiates and completes reconciliation in us through Christ's cross (Schreier 1998:14), as I have argued in section 3.2.<sup>669</sup> So it is

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<sup>666</sup> Bersin (2000:150) insists that forgiveness is purification.

<sup>667</sup> See section 3.2 for a deeper analysis of the narrative of the cross and resurrection, and its meaning for reconciliation.

<sup>668</sup> "Versöhnung bedeutet eine Umwandlung, eine Erneuerung des Gesamtzustandes der Beziehung Gottes zur Welt und damit zu den Menschen: Frieden. Versöhnung ist die Folge der in Jesu Tod triumphierenden Gerechtigkeit Gottes. Friede ist die Gestaltwerdung der Versöhnung, die Leuchtkraft der triumphierenden Gnade Gottes" (Riedel 1987:58).

<sup>669</sup> "At the heart of the cross is Christ's stance of not letting the other remain an enemy and of creating space in himself for the offender to come in". The scandal of the cross is that it is the ultimate expression of "the will to embrace the enemy" (Volf 1996:126).

that the cross becomes the sign of God's grace in forgiveness and reconciliation. In Jesus Christ's cross God becomes vulnerable to the world, the battlefield of sin<sup>670</sup>. And the resurrection signifies God's triumph over the forces of sin, evil and injustice in the world (Riedel 1987:57).<sup>671</sup> For Christians, therefore, the cross is the principal metaphor for God's forgiveness of humankind, and the basis for a theology of forgiveness.<sup>672</sup> Moreover, the duty of forgiving others is linked with divine forgiveness (Taylor 1952:15).<sup>673</sup> Although the crucifixion and resurrection is seen as a once-off salvific event with proleptic consequences, the all-encompassing reconciliation of the world has not yet been completed, but remains an eschatologically anticipated ideal. In this eschatological view, the continued ministry of reconciliation is a necessity (2 Corinthians 5:18). The ministry of reconciliation relies on the activity of humans, although it is, of course, propelled by God, based on the salvation already achieved through Christ. A fundamental charge of the ministry of reconciliation is to proclaim forgiveness (Colossians 2:13,14) and herald new beginnings (2 Corinthians 5:19). Its object is to witness to freedom from sin (Romans 6:14), separation, alienation and enmity (Riedel 1987:59), and usher in a new creation (Romans 6:6-11; Galatians 2:19) (Riedel 1987:60). Indeed, viewed eschatologically, the Christian is an unfinished person, someone who has not yet reached fulfilment (Philippians 3:12), but for whom there is always hope for change and the promise of improvement (Riedel 1987:68).

Hay (1998:92) insists,

Forgiveness celebrates God's action towards the individual, but also towards the community. Within this celebration the community mediates and celebrates God's forgiveness and shares this with each other and those who become part of, or return to, the Church.

Life with God through forgiveness in Jesus Christ "must be proclaimed as the church's unique message" (Rogness 1970:18), and must be seen as one of the most prominent ways for human beings to reach reconciliation in themselves and among each other. Forgiveness, justification, reconciliation, fellowship, sanctification and atonement can, from a Christian perspective, all be seen as part of a whole – they are all moments in the salvific process (Taylor 1952). In this holistic view, forgiveness of sins dictates "a new and radical style of life" (Rogness 1970:55). It implies fundamental transformation

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<sup>670</sup> "In der Allmenschlichkeit der Sünde, die als Unentrinnbarkeit des Todes offenkundig wird, ist die Gottheit des Schöpfers herausgefordert, der das Leben seiner Geschöpfe will" (Riedel 1987:57).

<sup>671</sup> Certain Christian traditions place great emphasis on the concept of Christ as substitute, who died on behalf of us, and for our transgressions (see 2 Corinthians 5:21; Gal 3:13; 2 Corinthians 5:14). See also the *EEK* (2001:177).

<sup>672</sup> As Christ took the cross upon himself, we are called to "take up our cross" (Mfutso-Bengo 2001:83). Jones (*Embodying Forgiveness*, 1995:xii) asserts that forgiveness is "an embodied way of life in an ever-deepening relationship with the Triune God and with others". Moreover, forgiveness needs to be learnt (Vosloo 2001:28), cultivated as a habit of the church (Jones 1995:xii). Vosloo (2001:29) speaks of the "craft" of forgiveness which involves "the lifelong process of unlearning sin".

<sup>673</sup> "If I believe that God forgives me, a fundamental change is introduced not only in my life but in my total worldview. I cannot at one and the same time believe in God's forgiveness and be hardened against other persons whose life is under the same grace that mine is" (Brakenhielm 1993:91). "With a view to the relationship between faith in God's forgiveness and fundamental human values, the answer is that this faith contributes to making the implications of some fundamental human values both clearer and more explicit. Faith in God's forgiveness underscores the value that forgiveness can have both in personal and social – including political – life" (Brakenhielm 1993:92). Deborah Matshoba, a survivor of torture in South Africa, overtly connects forgiveness to the cross of Jesus Christ. She declares, "For me reconciliation is 'uxolelwano'. When Jesus Christ was on the cross, he said: forgive them, because they don't know what they are doing ... that is how I understand it – forgiveness is creating a culture of ubuntu, humanness, medemenslikheid..." (quoted by Krog 2003:157).

(Kaiser 1996:186).<sup>674</sup> Rogness asserts, "Forgiveness is both the gateway to God and the climate of the life with God" (1970:14).

According to Brakenhielm (1993:2-3), there are three basic forms of forgiveness, viz. forgiveness of individual human beings, a group's forgiveness and divine forgiveness. He insists that forgiveness is an ambiguous term, and that there is "not one single concept of forgiveness but many". Forgiveness is a "remotivating act" which "aims at avoiding an undesirable situation by stimulating the emergence of a new and more desirable situation" (Brakenhielm 1993:15). Brakenhielm distinguishes between negative forgiveness and positive forgiveness. Negative forgiveness can be described as "release from bitterness and hatred, freedom from guilt, liberation from a wrongful lifestyle, and remission of punishment", i.e. it is escaping or avoiding something, a plea for *release from something* (:27). Positive forgiveness involves seeking to gain access to something, a plea for *freedom to do, have or be something*. It usually implies "restoration of a broken moral relationship" (:29)<sup>675</sup>. Here, "the one who forgives affirms the value and worth of the forgiven whose value and worth ... was brought to question". Therefore, positive forgiveness is about the re-establishment of dignity and humanity (:30). Nevertheless, "one cannot always identify forgiveness with abstaining from all anger" (:41). Forgiveness suggests both "moral criticism *and* the effort to affirm the recipient's worth as a human being" (:41).

Brakenhielm considers the multidimensionality of the concept of forgiveness, and identifies ten aspects of forgiveness that may alter how it is practised and perceived. He acknowledges that (1) the "passing of generations and the sheer passing of time can be a natural means of forgiveness" (Brakenhielm 1993:52).<sup>676</sup> (2) Forgiveness may depend on the degree of indulgence of the excuse that is offered or accepted, or (3) on the degree of admission or acknowledgement that wrong has been committed. It further depends on (4) the degree of "betterment or improvement that is displayed or observed", (5) the degree of desire and will to avoid hatred and animosity (:53), (6) the degree of "effort put forth to be free of or gain freedom from a destructive life-style", and (7) the degree of remission or punishment sought or awarded (:54). Forgiveness is moreover determined by (8) a striving to be free of or freed from guilt, (9) by the "degree of striving for creating confidence and building trust", and (10) by the "degree of desire for fellowship or community in a moral and personal sense" (:55). Shriver adds four more dimensions of forgiveness to the list: Forgiveness involves (1) making moral judgements of an enemy's behaviour (Shriver 1995:7), (2) abandonment of vengeance (although this does not necessarily imply abandonment of all forms of punishment), and (3) empathy for the enemy's humanity. Finally, forgiveness aims at the renewal of human relationships (:8).

In his deliberations about forgiveness in the political sphere, Brakenhielm asserts, "any number of factors can limit the application of forgiveness in political life", for example violence and coercion, or the policies and actions of political parties, groups or states, etc. "But this does not imply that forgiveness must be reserved as an ideal that is limited to the private sphere" (Brakenhielm 1993:56). Forgiveness is more difficult to realise in politics than in private life because modern society tends to display "many characteristics that restrict forgiveness". Nonetheless, "these hindrances" must not be

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<sup>674</sup> Kaiser insists that transformation is part of reconciliation. This transformation is brought about by forgiveness: "Auf dem Hintergrund, dass ihr tiefster Grund die Vergebung ist, die vergangene Sünde und Schuld umwandelt, enthält die Versöhnung die eschatologische Verheissung einer zukünftigen, alle Verhältnisse umfassenden, durch die Macht der Menschen nicht mehr zu zerstörenden und auf Einigung zielenden Verwandlung" (1996:186).

<sup>675</sup> It can mean "the reestablishment of a moral – though not necessarily a personal – relationship" (Brakenhielm 1993:31).

<sup>676</sup> It seems true that forgiveness and reconciliation require considerable time. "Yet this in itself is a great, dangerous fact, for ... time alone does not change anything in human society." In fact, time can erode memory which is so vital for the forgiveness and reconciliation process (Shriver 1995:88).



elevated “into absolute roadblocks for political applications” (:57). There are ways in which the difficulties of forgiveness in political life can be overcome. Often, argues Brakenhielm (:57), the “struggle for social justice with a religious reservation” fosters a spirit of forgiveness within a nation.

It has already been suggested that forgiveness is a controversial topic, especially in a context where sin and injustice took on enormous socio-political dimensions, such as in South Africa under apartheid. Nevertheless it is indisputable that from a Christian theological perspective, forgiveness is a key element of reconciliation, which may not be ignored in a discussion concerning Christian reconciliation paradigms. Indeed, we have seen that many theologians consider the concept of forgiveness to be the most authentic and compelling Christian contribution to the debate surrounding reconciliation. Desmond Tutu is one of these ardent advocates for the necessity of the Christian practice of forgiveness for purposes of social reconciliation. In his book, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (1999), Tutu insists that if the victimised forgive the perpetrators of the past they are not only liberating the oppressors from their burden of guilt and enabling them to regain their dignity. Forgivers also create a way of being inwardly reconciled to their past as victims, and open up avenues for their own healing and for the restoration of their personhood which was crippled by their victimisation. Both the seeker and the granter of forgiveness affirm the human worth of the other (Brakenhielm 1993:43).

To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is the best form of self-interest. What dehumanizes you, inexorably dehumanizes me. Forgiveness gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanize them. (Tutu 1999:35)<sup>677</sup>

In fact, Tutu argues that without forgiveness, neither blacks nor whites will be liberated from their ugly past. Mutual and reciprocal forgiveness is an act of “setting each other free” from the bondage of evil, and the stronghold memories of the past may have on us (Müller-Fahrenheit 1996:24; Kistner 2001:3). “Forgiveness is an act of freedom” which frees us from the power of the past (Schreier 1998:58).<sup>678</sup> Walter Wink forwards the same argument when he insists that victims themselves are liberated from the terror of their victimhood by forgiving their aggressors. According to Wink (1998:15),

forgiveness does not mean that we condone or accept the behavior of the perpetrator. The victim does not turn a blind eye to the crime, but rather frees herself from ongoing psychological torture, thus clearing a path by which she can seek justice that is motivated, not by revenge, but by the pursuit of universal change and transformation. Harboring enmity and seeking revenge only perpetuates the power of oppressors to lord it over their victims long after the deed was done. Thus, at the most fundamental level, forgiveness spells liberation for the victim.

In forgiving, victims are set free from the burden of the crime which was committed against them.<sup>679</sup> Both victims and malefactors need to be shaken by the terror and weight of the crime, and then be given the opportunity to move on. “Forgiveness seeks to

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<sup>677</sup> “I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be” (Shriver 1995:203, quoting Martin L. King in 1961).

<sup>678</sup> Courage to embrace diversity and pluralism is part of forgiveness (Shriver 1995:227). We need to acknowledge and learn “that strangeness is more gift than harm to our humanity” (:233).

<sup>679</sup> Wink (1998:15) relates an experience that illustrates his convictions: “In 1998 I led a workshop on non-violence with a group of South African church leaders, half of them black. Every black person there had been tortured, and all had forgiven their torturers. One reason why they might have done so is admittedly pragmatic. Hatred destroys the soul, and no matter how deserving of revenge the enemy may be, to continue to carry the desire for vengeance is simply to roast in your own fire. Forgiveness lifted a huge burden off their souls. It freed them from the crushing weight of a rage that could destroy them. For their own sakes they needed to forgive, so that their souls could soar free of the power of the past to consume them, beyond the power of the torturer to continue to dominate their minds.”

prevent the perpetuation of the cycle of violence,” claims de Gruchy (2000:171).<sup>680</sup> Moreover, “questions of forgiveness and reconciliation concern not only those directly involved but also those on whom the impact is ‘only’ indirect” (Müller-Fahrenheit 1996: viii).

It is Tutu’s conviction that South Africa’s sin of the past – apartheid – victimised both whites and blacks, though in very different ways, so that both need to be healed from it. “In one way or another, as a supporter, a perpetrator, a victim, or one who opposed the ghastly system, something happened to our humanity. All of us South Africans are less whole than we would have been without apartheid” (Tutu 1999:154). In order for our society to become whole again, in order for it to be reconciled, forgiveness is crucial. And the message and practice of forgiveness, alongside the call for and practice of repentance (which includes the confession of sins), is a significant resource offered by the Christian faith.

Arguing for the significance of the act of forgiveness, some medical and psychological researchers have in fact identified a “close connection between forgiveness and health” (Harvey and Benner 1996:28)<sup>681</sup>. “Forgiveness is necessary for freedom from the exhausting attempt to construct and maintain a ‘balance of payments’ kind of relationship between culprit and victim” (:61). Forgiveness has a healing quality for those involved. Indeed, “forgiveness of guilt and healing of suffering are inseparably bound together in a process.... This healing encounter opens up new and constructive alliances” (Müller-Fahrenheit 1996:viii). For this reason the ministry of forgiveness ought to be “a pastoral priority” (Harvey and Benner 1996:68), and indeed the church would do well in revisiting the role of forgiveness in pastoral care and counselling (:87ff, 98).

In the South African context, the question has been and must be asked: Can there be forgiveness without honest repentance and confession? Furthermore, is reconciliation a necessary corollary to forgiveness? (Moyo 2002:294). These questions are debatable, and indeed different scholars and ordinary people have different views.<sup>682</sup> In the paragraphs above devoted to Biblical perspectives on forgiveness, I have already mentioned the difficulty of finding consensus among the different views and approaches. There are those who insist that repentance is a prerequisite for forgiveness, while others maintain forgiveness is the catalyst for repentance. Different Biblical as well as dogmatic traditions place different emphases. Without wanting to resolve the tension that resides in the question, perhaps it may suffice to claim that forgiveness is, in the end, a “hard-work miracle” (Harvey and Benner 1996:30). It takes effort, *and* it is a gift. These two qualities of forgiveness are in dialectic tension; both together point to the truth. Forgiveness granted is a free gift, but it is not “cheap”. It requires hard work and constructive effort. Perhaps it is healthiest for us South Africans to opt for neither approach to the exclusion of the other. There are certainly instances when people can and will forgive only when repentance is shown and demonstrated by the wrongdoer(s). But other situations exist where forgiveness is granted without prior penance and remorse. Both ways are part of the South African, and indeed the human, experience.

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<sup>680</sup> Forgiveness “does not negate moral accountability but it has greater transformative power than vengeance” (de Gruchy 2000:170).

<sup>681</sup> See also the *EEK* (2001:178), where a direct correlation is established between sin and illness. When sin is seen as an illness, forgiveness is the restoration to health. Similarly, Mpolo (1994:31) insists that healing professionals have a duty to lead governments and churches toward “repentance, confession, mutual forgiveness, reconciliation and more supportive solidarity”.

<sup>682</sup> Müller-Fahrenheit (1996:28) is of the opinion that confession is indeed necessary for forgiveness to occur. The question may then be asked: If repentance/confession and forgiveness belong together unequivocally, is the order of their occurrence important? Must confession occur *before* forgiveness can happen? Or can repentance be the result of received forgiveness? This question resembles the one discussed above, whether forgiveness is granted *as a result of* repentance, or repentance is *induced by* forgiveness.

### **3.3.4 Conclusion: practicing repentance and forgiveness in South Africa**

The Christian tradition is both called and equipped to “foster a spirit of confession within its congregations and call them into a community of repentance and forgiveness” (Assefa 1996:52). It is the prerogative and duty of Christian communities to witness to a process of repentance and forgiveness in society at large. (This process necessarily involves uncovering sin.) To use Richardson’s image, the Christian church has the potency to be a “healing virus” which “infects” society with “forgiveness, healing and reconciliation” (2004:20). It has been the task of this section to demonstrate that Christianity has significant offerings to share in terms of approaches and methods of repentance and forgiveness (Ruhbach 1986:38). Although Christianity cannot prescribe to society how reconciliation is to be achieved, Christian communities have a rich store of resources which they can display to broader society, as living examples of how it can be done. More specifically,

The Christian understanding of repentance, forgiveness, and reparation is of fundamental importance in helping to shape the national consciousness of what is required for healing the land, genuine reconciliation, and building a moral and democratic culture. (de Gruchy 1997:27)

In terms of what confession and repentance may mean for South Africa’s endeavour to be a reconciled nation, a concrete suggestion is that it helps us South Africans to deal with our sinfulness. Past (and present) injustice (or sin) needs to be recognised, admitted and addressed – not swept under the proverbial carpet. In a process of confession, the confessor (or perpetrator of sin) is given the opportunity to face his/her guilt in a “safe” environment, and the community is given the chance to be liberated by telling and hearing the truth. Moreover, through the processes of uncovering sin, confession, repentance and forgiveness, people’s dignity is restored, broken relationships are healed, and the well-being of the community is enhanced.

Repentance and confession has been ritualised and formalised in the Christian tradition. Confession or repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation and making a new beginning are all core themes of every Christian worship service, claims Kistner (2001:3). Indeed, one could argue that the church has the potential to offer “a path to reconciliation through its liturgical and ritual tradition” (Hay 1998:121). Over the centuries, Christianity has produced a myriad of rites and practices that aim at addressing sin, and effecting repentance. Some of these liturgical practices have been mentioned above. It is my contention that the rich store of rites of repentance available in the church may be useful in devising efficacious ways for reconciliation to occur in South Africa. Not only are there many practical traditions that may be employed for the benefit of the process, but also many “human resources”. Priests, pastors or ministers are trained and ordained to set in motion and preside over processes of penance and absolution. In fact, the office of the keys can be extended to all Christians, who are professed to have the authority to absolve repentant persons from their burden of guilt if they have confessed it (see John 20:23, Matthew 18:18).

Of course, the Christian practice of confession and penance, though significant in church history, has lost much of its impact, and has fallen into limited (and indeed in some cases questionable) use in recent centuries. Therefore it is important to acknowledge the need for rejuvenating these practices, or adapting them to suit the given situation of need. This may involve trying out new modes and ways of expressing penance (Schlemmer 1998:143-5), including non-sacramental forms, and forms which are not necessarily bound to occur in a particular setting (e.g. inside a church building, or during a worship service) and which may include new symbols and unconventional ritual elements (Schlemmer 1998:146-7).

In this section I have investigated some notions concerning sin, repentance and forgiveness. These three motifs are central to the Christian office of the keys. Indeed, repentance and forgiveness are central to a Christian understanding of reconciliation after a period of strife or alienation. I have argued that seen in relation to one another, they provide an efficacious paradigm that may contribute helpfully to the quest for reconciliation in South Africa.

### 3.4 The church as reconciling community and institution

In previous sections it has been argued that the Christian tradition has much to offer in the debate surrounding social reconciliation in South Africa. First, I investigated possible resources gleaned from Christian Scriptures. Then I elaborated what I consider to be the *primary contribution to the discussion, viz. the Christian narrative of the cross and the resurrection*. Subsequently, I argued for the efficacy of the additional Christian notions of sin, repentance and forgiveness, and the practices surrounding these. In this section, I wish to forward the argument that another prime resource that Christianity has to offer is the community it engenders. Lederach (1997:84) argues that in order to provide an environment for sustained reconciliation and peace to thrive, an “infrastructure for peacebuilding” needs to be built. “Such an infrastructure is made up of a web of people, their relationships and activities, and the social mechanisms necessary to sustain the change sought. This takes place at all levels of the society.” I argue that the church can provide such an “infrastructure” through its “web of people, their relationships and activities” and its already existent “social mechanisms”. Indeed, besides its theological and ethical teaching, of which I have investigated but a small piece in preceding sections, Christianity’s *main contribution is its very embodiment, its manifestation in communal terms: the church*. My assertion is that the *Christian church is (or can be) a reconciling community and institution*. For example, through its proclamation, celebration, liturgy and spirituality, its practice of penance and Communion, and its influence on morality in society it can be a manifestation of and witness to reconciled existence. Below I will argue that *the church, as an institution and a community of persons, bears a number of possibilities for enabling and promoting social reconciliation*.

“In Christianity, the notion of reconciliation ... is key to understanding the ministry and mission of Jesus, and therefore of the ministry of the church” (Hay 1998:119). It has already been argued that *the event of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is, to Christians, the impetus for reconciliation among humans*. This reconciliation is to *occur first among believers, i.e. in the congregation* (Stückelberger 1988:433). As we have seen, reconciliation is usually understood in ethical-ecclesial terms – not primarily dogmatic or theoretical categories, especially by Paul (:434). Reconciliation is not just a dogmatic theological concept, but also a category of social ethics (Baumgartner 1998:38). It is the church’s *duty and call to break the walls of division that exist among people of different backgrounds and cultural heritages* (Ephesians 2:14); indeed one may argue that reconciliation is the *magna charta*, the central aim, of the Christian community (Lochmann 1977:91; Baumgartner 1998:37). This duty *exceeds the bounds of the church, since the church is called to be the instrument of reconciliation in the world* (2 Corinthians 5:19) (Lochmann 1977:92). *Shalom, i.e. comprehensive well-being which includes all of creation, is the ultimate goal and aim of reconciliation* (Baumgartner 1998:53), and therefore becomes the goal and aim of the church. The ministry of reconciliation is, like all other God-willed activity, seen as the work of the Holy Spirit who enables and equips the community for this task (Stückelberger 1988:450). *Similarly, all reconciliation endeavours by the church are seen as part of the primary service of love towards the*

world – love being perhaps the most notable Biblical category of Christian life<sup>683</sup> (Stückelberger 1988:464).

The church of Christ has a concrete call and sending message<sup>684</sup>. As those who have experienced reconciliation (i.e. the “saved” and “converted”), Christians are to participate in God’s work of reconciling the world<sup>685</sup>. In this way, the church as a community offers and actually becomes a “place/space of reconciliation” (Baumgartner 1998:37). Indeed,

The message of reconciliation and forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ is at the core of the life and ministry of the Church. The Church is that instrument through which God chooses to be reconciled with creation as a whole, but more so with people, and to reconcile people with one another regardless of race, color, or creed. (Moyo 2002:294)

In this communal light, reconciliation necessarily becomes not only a religious category, but gains political, social and economic significance as well. H.J. Ulrich (1997:13) insists,

Versöhnung erscheint nun nicht mehr als exklusive Heilshandlung Gottes, sondern als eine nach dem Modell zwischenmenschlicher Versöhnungsbemühungen gedachten friedensstiftenden Maßnahme Gottes, welche umgekehrt menschlichen Bemühungen um zwischenmenschliche Aussöhnung und die Herstellung politischen oder sozialen Friedens als Vorbild und Motivation dient.

According to Klein (1999:17), in the church reconciliation is perceived and practised under the New Testament rubrics of μαρτυρία, λειτουργία and διακονία<sup>686</sup> – witness or teaching, celebration or liturgy and service or practical ministry (see also Baumgartner 1998:41ff). It is the church’s duty to witness to the hope, the new creation, the anticipated eschatological Reign of justice and peace promised by God (Stückelberger 1988:444). In view of the Biblical tradition, the church is a manifestation of the new covenant<sup>687</sup> offered by God, a pledge in which God reconciles Godself with the world, and wills the inner reconciliation of all things. In the context of this covenantal relationship of reconciled existence, the church testifies to the ultimate fulfilment and fruition of God’s covenant, the promise of comprehensive reconciliation of all creation (Stückelberger 1988:446-9).

In the middle ages, the church drew on six institutions for reconciliation purposes, i.e. baptism, the Eucharist, preaching, penance, the veneration of saints and pilgrimages. All of these were seen as “reconciliation rituals” (Wepener 2003a, 2003b, 2004a), and are, to varying degrees, still viewed as such today. It is beyond the scope of this study to elaborate *all* the resources that the church has to offer for achieving reconciliation. Therefore I limit my study to the few that I consider to be especially significant. In his treatise *Of the Councils and the Church* (1539), the reformer Martin Luther elaborated seven “marks” (i.e. characteristics or traits) of the church. The first is that it is a community based on the proclaimed word of God. The second and third features of the church are the ritual practices of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. The office of the keys is the fourth characteristic, while the ministry to serve on behalf of and in the name of Christ is fifth. Prayer, practical service and catechesis represent the sixth mark. Luther emphasises “the cross” as a peculiar feature by listing it separately as number seven. In section 3.2 I

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<sup>683</sup> See John 3:16; Matthew 22:36-40.

<sup>684</sup> Peacemaking and reconciliation “are mandates and not merely options for the Christian church” (Assefa 1996:51).

<sup>685</sup> “Die Christen sollen als ‘conversi’, als Bekehrte und Erlöste, an diesem Versöhnungshandeln Gottes in der Welt und für die Welt mitwirken” (Baumgartner 1998: 37).

<sup>686</sup> In German, “Zeugnis/Lehre”, “Feier” and “Dienst/Praxis”.

<sup>687</sup> The first testament/offer of reconciliation is narrated in Gen 6:18, 9:8ff. Subsequent offers of reconciliation occur in Sinai (Exodus 34:27), with Joshua (Joshua 24:1), in exile (Jeremiah 31:31), and then finally in the New Testament Lord’s Supper texts.

already elaborated the seventh mark, “the cross”, while section 3.3. represented a discussion of the fourth mark, the office of the keys. Below I will discuss some of the remaining marks of the church, and explicate how they might be seen as helpful in the endeavour towards social reconciliation in South Africa.

### 3.4.1 The Eucharist

Within the church community, the ministry of witnessing to God’s reconciliation is manifested in the practice of eucharistic communion (Stückelberger 1988:442).<sup>688</sup> Many theologians are emphatic about the reconciliatory character of the Eucharist (Klein 1999:222ff; Ruhbach 1986:48; Seitz 1986:69-71). It is considered to serve “as model and source for the body of Christ to embody reconciliation” (Vosloo 2001:40). Not surprisingly, Holy Communion is frequently deemed the “sacrament of reconciliation” (Klein 1999:226). The communal nature of the Eucharist bears reference to political, economic and social human interaction (see Matthew 5:23; 1 Corinthians 10:16ff, 11:20-22; Galatians 3:28), and is therefore a reflection of these dynamics present in the gathered community (Klein 1999:223). According to Scripture, reconciliation with the neighbour is a prerequisite for participation in the Eucharist, but also its consequence. A “holy kiss”, i.e. a kind of physical act of acceptance of the other, is the outward sign of that reconciliation between people.<sup>689</sup> The invitation for forgiveness and reconciliation to occur among those around the table is implicit, because God’s gift of forgiveness, celebrated at Communion, is seen as having been granted first and thereby having provided the impetus for inter-human forgiveness (see Matthew 5:23f).<sup>690</sup> In the Eucharist, Christians remember Christ’s broken body, and participate in its brokenness. Indeed, we, too, are a “wounded body”; we can find healing through remembrance of the wounds of Christ, and hope through the resurrection (Vosloo 2001:40).

Christians believe that, as one of the main features of liturgical-sacramental worship, the Eucharist entails the renewal of personal and social life (Klein 1999:224). This means, the sacrament actually engenders the reconstruction of social relationships, and builds community among participating people.<sup>691</sup> According to Luther, the realisation or accomplishment (“Werk”) of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is the communion of saints – the embodied church, where each member belongs to the others. The Holy Supper and the corporeality of the community in the body of Christ represent a unit, and the Supper “is a spiritual force against the ‘tendency (Neigung) toward anger, hate, pride and impurity, etc., that attack us because we live’” (Dalferth 2003:2, quoting Luther). Holy Communion is “a sign that the fight against sin is not something individual, but is the fight of Christ and his saints” (Dalferth 2003:2).<sup>692</sup>

Silfredo Dalferth claims the Eucharist is the “structural centre” of the church (2003:16). It is the most powerful outward sign that people are, in Luther’s terms, *simul*

<sup>688</sup> Wepener (2003a, 2003b, 2004a) argues that the Eucharist has been used as a reconciliation ritual from the time of the early church.

<sup>689</sup> This is reminiscent of Volf’s theology of “embrace”. Embrace stands in opposition to a stance of “exclusion” (Volf 1996:31). Through the scandal of the cross, Christians are invited to “embrace the enemy” (:126).

<sup>690</sup> Stückelberger (1988:442) insists that the table communion of the Lord’s Supper is inevitably partisan, because it demonstrates solidarity with the victims of injustice. Chung (2003:15) claims, “The real participation in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is identical with real participation in the fellowship with Christ and his poor brothers and sisters in the sense of Christ’s universal presence with them.” (Chung 2003:15)

<sup>691</sup> “To be Christian means ‘crossing the boundary’” that exists between oneself and another (Mfutso-Bengo 2001:83). According to Washington and Kehrein (1993:113), the most important principle for reconciliation is commitment to relationship. The establishment of renewed relationships is the heart of the reconciliation process, as well as its generator.

<sup>692</sup> See van der Water (1991:92ff) as he elaborates a Christian spirituality surrounding the Eucharist. Here, the Eucharist is seen as a ritual of protest and liberation.

*iustus et peccator*, both just and depraved, saints and sinners at the same time. The Eucharist represents to its partakers justification and sanctification by Christ. Indeed, Holy Communion is the ultimate sign of God's unconditional acceptance; all – even the “unacceptable” and excluded<sup>693</sup> – are welcome.<sup>694</sup> “Hate, indifference and conditional love must be condemned in the name of God. Even Judas ... was invited to the Lord's Table” (Dalferth 2003:17). Moreover, in reference to Jesus' parable of the great feast, Dalferth (2003:16) explains, “The symbolism of the banquet of the Kingdom of God is included in the Supper. The full and complete reconciliation of God in Christ with the world is translated as a historical reconciliation between the unreconciled and the excommunicated.” Since God invites people to the Table unconditionally, it is the duty and the gift of the church to do just that – go beyond the conditions imposed by human beings, overstep humanly construed boundaries, and share the common gift.

Holy Communion, despite different churches' theological understandings of it, is a sign of ecumenism, of unity among believers. Dalferth insists that the Lord's Table is only one. And so, those sharing the Meal are proclaimed to be one, and are encouraged to embody that unity. Furthermore, theologians agree that Communion is an eschatological sign of, and an invitation of movement towards, a unified humanity in Christ<sup>695</sup>. It is not simply a moment, but the axiom of an entire ethic – the convergence of all Jesus' activity – and was “instituted by Christ to unite unreconciled extremities through its ethic. The basis of human reconciliation is the prior reconciliation between God and humanity separated in the extreme of sin and self-glorification” (Dalferth 2003:16). Effectively, when people partake of the holy Meal, they are drawn into reconciliation with all others at the Table, namely the host (God) as well as the other guests (human participants).

### 3.4.2 Proclamation

One of the main tasks with which the Christian church is charged is the proclamation of the Word of God. This proclamation may also be seen as an element of (or medium toward) reconciliation.<sup>696</sup> The most traditional way in which proclamation occurs in the church is through preaching (Klein 1999:234; Baumgartner 1998:45). Preaching repentance has an ancient tradition, beginning in the Old Testament (for example, many of the prophets, like Jonah) and strongly influencing the New Testament (e.g. sermons of John the baptiser, Jesus himself, Peter and Paul, etc.) (Klein 1999:235-6). Preaching peace and love may also be regarded as a vehicle towards reconciliation (Klein 1999:240ff). Both the proclamation of law (i.e. the demand for justice and, implicitly, judgement) and gospel (i.e. the gift of new beginnings, forgiveness) – to use the classical Lutheran distinction – are important and efficacious tools in promoting actions towards social reconciliation.

Proclamation does not, however, only involve homiletics and speech from the pulpit. It also features in Christian teaching and catechism (Ruhbach 1986:45; Hay 1998:153), i.e. in church-related instruction which may occur in settings such as Sunday school, confirmation class, adult formation or Bible study groups, or in Christian education in schools (i.e. in form of Religious Studies or guidance counselling). Proclamation in terms of education includes a range of subjects. Hay (1998:160) asserts,

<sup>693</sup> Among these must be included even people who by worldly social standards are outcasts, e.g. murderers, torturers, traitors. For more discussion about what it means to be “unacceptable” see Nürnberger (2001, 2003:9-25). See also Volf (1996) for deliberations concerning “exclusion”.

<sup>694</sup> This means that at base Holy Communion is not primarily about judgment and exclusion, but about forgiveness and inclusion. Luther declares that it ought not to torment consciences, but rather console and make content those who partake of it.

<sup>695</sup> See Dalferth's chapter, “Eucharistie als Weltversöhnungsereignis” (1996).

<sup>696</sup> According to Wepener (2003a, 2003b, 2004a), preaching has been one of the “reconciliation rituals” employed by the church even before the Reformation.

Human rights education is also a priority. ... To this could be added reflection and education in cross-cultural richness in the Church and society. The country needs to produce people of integrity. The culture of learning, teaching and serving is to be fostered nationally, especially in our educational institutions. Our education must also facilitate a holistic view of being a person – a human way of living and a way of being decent human beings.

The church can and does, through proclamation in its teaching ministry, contribute to this task of education (Hay 1998:153). Moreover, the proclamation of God's Word of justice, wholeness and peace may also, for example, ensue in the form of public petition-prayers (Stückelberger 1988:507), in counselling situations (Klein 1999:248), or small faith-sharing groups (Hay 1998:159).

### 3.4.3 Celebration and ritual

In section 2.4.2 I have already elaborated the significance of ritual and celebration in the life of a society in general, and for reconciliation purposes in particular. Here I contend that the Christian church is a generator and embodier of such ritual and celebration, and has some resources to offer in this regard. It may be argued that the divine service practised in church is a kind of celebration or "feast of reconciliation". Some claim that the heart of Christian moral formation lies in the celebration of worship, and that the church as moral community is shaped by practices involving worship, exemplified in worship services (Best and Robra 1997:66-69; Battle 1997:83-122; Kistner 2001:3).

Symbolic acts that occur in services, which have a reconciliatory function and character (e.g. laying on of hands, greetings of peace, the holy kiss, embracing, confession and forgiveness formulae, benediction, etc.) should gain more value and emphasis in church services (Klein 1999:261). In this way, the Christian community may be seen as a community on the ongoing journey of reconciliation, and therefore as an example to a divided society. This presupposes that the liturgy is viewed primarily as a communal act, not as clerical performance in which the gathered community remains passive and with a spectator stance (Klein 1999:263).

The church's liturgical heritage of mutual confession of sins, mutual pronouncement of forgiveness, and/or collective confession before God through communal prayer (Klein 1999:265) may prove to be a helpful model for reconciliation praxis in the broader society.<sup>697</sup> Other liturgical models of reconciliation feasts may be identified in orders of service designed in the Taizé community in France, for example (Klein 1999:266). Indeed, "it is the church that offers a path to reconciliation through its liturgical and ritual tradition. The path of sacramental reconciliation presents a valid and concrete method of achieving reconciliation. It not only requires that the demands of justice (satisfaction) be fulfilled, but seeks to provide a way to incorporate the individual into the community again" (Hay 1998:121).

Festivities and celebration are often ritualised institutions. It can be argued that rituals

hold our lives together, whether they be a simple meal or a national event. They can link us to the past, contextualise our present and show the way to the future. Ritual is a way of acting where an individual and a community celebrate in a cultural and human way who they are through symbol, word, space and gesture. In ritual we remember our story and express our belief about ourselves, the numinous and the mystery of life, so that we can live with meaning, dignity and social cohesion. (Hay 1998:135)

Furthermore,

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<sup>697</sup> See section 3.3 for a broader and more detailed discussion of the role of confession, repentance and forgiveness.



Both individuals and communities find tremendous benefit from the many unrecognised rituals that we employ each day. Particularly in the social sphere rituals can be important mechanisms for healing and reconciling. Catholic liturgical and ritual expertise can make a significant contribution in this area. In social reconciliation it is important to seek out, identify, use, develop and share the rituals that accompany the different dynamics of the process. ... There needs to be some symbolic way to close the past. (Hay 1998:135)

Hay argues that the church, with its emphasis on liturgy and celebratory worship services, can contribute much to the development of rituals of healing and reconciliation. For example, church communities may become instrumental in cultivating "cleansing rituals" or "rituals around death", for example "by holding symbolic ceremonies in communities to remember those who have died" (Hay 1998:136)<sup>698</sup>. Ritual can be an efficacious vehicle through which repentance and forgiveness can be achieved.<sup>699</sup> Helping people to repent, confess their guilt, and forgive their offenders is one of the church's greatest gifts to society, as has been discussed in section 3.3. Indeed,

the ritual celebration of reconciliation can transform our human narrative of sin, alienation and brokenness into restored relationship with God and others. It is this ritual celebration which is to be a powerful means for reconciliation in the Church that can be adapted and shared with society to assist the process of social reconciliation in South Africa. (Hay 1998:82)

Although there is much potential in what the church has to offer,

The development of rituals of reconciliation is still in its formative stages. Rituals will need to be found to help victims and communities mourn, heal, confront the past, exorcise the evil of the past, celebrate forgiveness, etc. Perpetrators will need rituals to express repentance, remorse, contrition, etc. Rituals will be needed to express justice, reparation, reconciliation, hope, human dignity and honour. There will be a variety of rituals needed for use at the national, local and individual levels. The ritual challenge is great. (Hay 1998:137)

It is the task of the church – and within its capability – to rise to this challenge, and bring what it has to offer to the dialogue table. Indeed,

In spite of the many unresolved issues and tensions around the sacrament and the notion of "reconciliation," it must be stated that there is a wealth of solid theological, spiritual and pastoral insights, that if embraced by the whole Church, would lead us to be truly a community of reconciliation for our own members and in mission to the world. (Hay 1998:82)

Above I have shown how emphasis is placed on the significance of Christian rituals occurring in the context of divine service. Klein (1999:250) moreover argues that reconciliation is not only achieved in the church through holy acts and the liturgy of the Word and sacrament. Besides these, non-liturgical, non-formalised celebration and feasting can also be regarded as aspects of reconciliatory praxis (Grimes 1982:35; Cox 1970:32; Sundermeier 1998:54). Klein (1999:252) insists that in cases where there is a religious dimension to celebration and festivity, this festivity is a witness to God's presence in a sinful and evil world, and God's promises for the future. Under the auspices of the church community, and incorporated within the life of the church, reconciliation feasts may become part of a heritage and culture of reconciliation, especially if enhanced by the use of signs, symbols, or meaningful (ritual) gestures, e.g. touch, communal drinking or covenanting signs (Klein 1999:254). In order to illustrate his point,

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<sup>698</sup> "Another ritual developed by B. Tlhalagale, who used some Catholic ritual resources, is a ritual cleansing from the evil of apartheid. It is a powerful and deeply moving ritual which leads the community through an inculturated African cleansing ceremony. During apartheid many South Africans used the ritual of toyi-toying as a ritual of protest and resistance. What is the new ritual dance that is needed?" (Hay 1998:136)

<sup>699</sup> Confession or repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation and making a new beginning are all core themes of every Christian worship service, argues Kistner (2001:3).

Klein (1999:258) mentions that in church history there existed festivities that promoted penance and reconciliation traditions, for example the feast of fools in the middle ages which comprised of a celebration surrounding a mock court case and judgement against evildoers (see also Cox 1970:3). Indeed, one could well argue that there is a need to rediscover festivity and celebratory practices in the church (Klein 1999:260). Needless to say, such an endeavour would require much imagination and creativity. Yet once such celebrations once more become part of the church's repertoire of practices, the church may well have yet another resource to offer to society seeking social reconciliation.

#### 3.4.4 Spirituality

Although it is difficult to separate the concept of "spirituality" from general church life, and in particular church worship and celebratory practices, I would like to name Christian spirituality as a distinctive resource which could be of value in the service of social reconciliation.<sup>700</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1986:100-139) insisted that especially in situations of social upheaval and turbulence, the church has a calling to be a spiritual<sup>701</sup> community – led by the Spirit of God to embody spiritual diversity, spiritual communion, and spiritual unity (*Geistvielfalt, Geistgemeinschaft, Geisteinheit*) and cultivate a spirituality that engenders what Christ is all about. Arguably, if seen as such a spiritual community, the Christian church could be (and is) a bearer and fosterer of "a spirituality of reconciliation" (Hay 1998:152) in society. What avenues does the church employ to nurture such a reconciliatory spirituality among its members, and, potentially, within broader society?

Through employing spiritual formation resources, the church can help its own members to establish a personal piety and spirituality which emphasises the values of reconciliation and peaceable co-existence and communication. In the Catholic tradition, personal and group piety is often shaped by adherence to a pattern of "seasons", a programme of spiritual formation practices and exercises. Hay elaborates an example of such spiritual formation for and within the church through three distinct sets of seasons:

Following the Renew approach of seasons, a number of seasons could be prepared on reconciliation for members of the church to follow. The seasons could be patterned on the three major moves in reconciliation: remember, engage and remedy. The first group of seasons around remember could focus on narrative or storytelling. This would be linked to the story of salvation, which is about redemption and reconciliation. There are many Biblical stories which could be easily incorporated. In the Biblical story we can see our human story transformed. Both stories are shared and prayed over. The prayer dialogue draws us to encounter God and each other. Other seasons could deal with God's plan of reconciliation; the Christian journey as ongoing conversion; the Christian dynamics of social reconciliation; the importance of truth in reconciliation; the significance of being created in God's image; the impact of social sin; etc. (Hay 1998:159)

The second group of seasons could deal with the call to engage the consequences of remembering. It is here that we specifically learn the patterns of reconciliation and exercise the spirituality of reconciliation, particularly compassion for victims. Healing rituals, healing of memories, recovering human dignity and honour, confession, repentance, learning to confront one another in charity, dealing with guilt and shame, and forgiveness are all dimensions of this group of seasons. One

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<sup>700</sup> Worsnip and van der Water (1991) offer an overview of certain trends in spirituality in South Africa: There are, for example, spiritualities of liberation (e.g. de Gruchy 1991:5ff); spirituality connected with the Holy Spirit and gifts of the spirit (Balcomb 1991:78ff); spiritualities concerning protest and celebration; and spirituality surrounding the Eucharist (van der Water 1991:92ff).

<sup>701</sup> "Spiritual" not meaning "other-worldly" in terms of being divorced from human reality and daily life, but meaning being motivated by the Holy Spirit to become engaged and committed in the world and its troubles.

again, these seasons are linked to the Biblical story, particularly gospel stories such as the prodigal son. In this stage the community supports, affirms, and helps the individual to become reconciled. The use of appropriate rituals and symbols (both individual and social) are critical for this second stage for the season cited.... (Hay 1998:159-160)

The third group of seasons would be focused on remedy. God's vision for humanity would be the pivotal point of this group of seasons. These seasons would focus, in the light of Biblical and ecclesial teaching, on areas such as the following: Christian moral living; human rights education; just economic sharing; the social teachings of the Church; reparation; family life; supporting the rule of law; etc. Of particular concern to the Catholic bishops is moral reconstruction. (Hay 1998:160)<sup>702</sup>

In general, the church has a task of nurturing the "fruits of the Spirit" which are "love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23), i.e. forming persons with the will and ability to establish and maintain wholesome relationships. Furthermore, developing a Christ-like spirituality involves developing a disposition which is merciful, kind, humble, meek, patient, charitable, and which "forbears" those who have done one wrong and forgives those with whom one has "quarrels" (Colossians 3:12-14)<sup>703</sup>. True Christian spirituality is by nature conciliatory and peace-loving, relationship-building and rift-healing. If the main tenets of such a spirituality could be shown in word and deed through the community of the faithful, this would indeed be a powerful witness, and a real contribution to any social reconciliation process.<sup>704</sup>

### 3.4.5 Ecumenism

Church ecumenical work can be argued to be reconciliatory in nature and purpose (Stückelberger 1988:512).<sup>705</sup> Ecumenism and co-operation among the various Christian denominations has been a driving force in the establishment of structures, institutions, programmes and forums for cross-cultural dialogue and reconciliation (Stückelberger 1988:525). For this reason Kistner (2000:69) insists that reconciliation "demands an ecumenical endeavour". Indeed, a "particular challenge to the churches is promoting vigorously a lived social teaching and action towards ecumenical unity and inter-religious respect, dialogue and cooperation", because this would empower members of the church to be agents of reconciliation (Hay 1998:62). The church needs to work on fostering reconciliation among the various denominations "since an unreconciled church can hardly be a credible reconciler of others" (Assefa 1996:52).<sup>706</sup> If faith communities work together ecumenically, the disjointedness and isolation of reconciliation endeavours may be overcome, and a more effective network may be established in which resources are pooled and abilities shared (Kistner 2000:74).

Part of the task of ecumenism is the rethinking and reformulating of theology (Hay 1998:147) in order for it to become more inclusive and welcoming of diversity. Similarly, steps toward inter-church dialogue would also open avenues for inter-religious

<sup>702</sup> In the past few years, ethical practice and moral behaviour have become important themes in South Africa. Since the institution of the National Religious Leaders Forum (which meets every six months), "moral regeneration" issues enjoy significant focus in religious circles, and indeed also in political organisations such as the ANC Religious Commission.

<sup>703</sup> See also Matthew 7.

<sup>704</sup> Indeed, many Christian people have already displayed their willingness and ability to reconcile by their very life-styles – because they have internalised the spirit of Christ and thereby display a Christ-like spirituality. I would argue that prominent personages that fall under this category include, for example, Desmond Tutu and Michael Lapsley.

<sup>705</sup> Notably, Fleinert-Jensen (1994) connects Christian ecumenism to the theology of the cross.

<sup>706</sup> Arguably, the very fact that the Church has allowed itself to become fragmented into ever more denominations (and sects) may not augur well for its credibility and role as a reconciler.

dialogue, and the willingness to learn from believers from other confessions and faith traditions (Hay 1998:150, 62; Kistner 1999:55). Theo Tschuy (1997:147) similarly argues for an ecumenical approach to the problem, and evaluates the efficacy of religions working together to find a way out of social problems. He makes a strong case for “a new pattern of common action” among religions. Certainly, lived openness to “the others” is a strong witness to social reconciliation which the Christian community could offer. (See also section 1.4.3; D’Costa 1990:21; Knitter 1992:187; Kaufman 1992:14; Panikkar 1990a:147.)

### 3.4.6 Political involvement<sup>707</sup>

I am not in favour of the view that the work of the church is the same as the task of politics.<sup>708</sup> As a Lutheran, I value the distinction between the two “regiments” or “kingdoms” of God – the spiritual and the worldly.<sup>709</sup> This distinction does not, however, mean that the church is apolitical or “neutral”, and should keep out of worldly matters. On the contrary, Luther’s two kingdoms/regiments theory may be a helpful tool for fostering a healthy relationship between the church and secular society, the state, or the “world”. According to this teaching, the realms of the church and the state are distinct, but not separate. The church operates mainly in the spiritual realm of life, and is the prime instrument of God’s “right hand work”. The state and worldly powers and authorities are the instruments of God’s “left hand”. God’s right hand work centres in the gospel, i.e. in categories of gift, grace, promise, and love. God’s left hand work centres in law, i.e. in categories of order, justice, judgement and duty.<sup>710</sup>

The point is that Lutheran teaching places both realms under God’s authority. The same one-and-only God operates on two distinct levels, with two kinds of works – law and promise, care and redemption, wrath and love, demand for justice and gift of grace. Both the care for creation (its method and instrument being law) and the redemption of creation (its method and instrument being the gospel) are the will and the work of God. And for this work God has employed people: people of the state/worldly authority for the care of creation, and people of the church for (the proclamation of) redemption of creation. In the worldly realm and through politics, economics and secular society, God acts as the world’s critic and judge to care for creation. In the spiritual realm and through the church’s gospel message, God acts as the world’s lover and redeemer. God works not only in the spiritual domain of *ecclesia*, but also in the secular domains of *oeconomia* and *politia*. And this is why Christians ought to see themselves as active instruments in both domains. Indeed, since the two realms are under divine sovereignty, the Christian may not in good conscience neglect either one of the two, but must take his/her role in both seriously.

Christians are members of what Luther called the three “estates” of earthly life – church, economy and politics/the state, and by virtue of their membership in these they have a God-given duty to act with conscience and responsibility for the best possible functioning of these estates. For this reason, Lutheran Christians have to agree that “those justified by God cannot rest until Christ’s vision of the justice of God is realized. Being justified by faith in Christ means you commit yourself to working for justice for all

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<sup>707</sup> As I have already elucidated, my task here is not to offer concrete political methods and schemes, i.e. *what* to do in a political sense. Rather, I seek to elaborate theological underpinnings that point to the need for political involvement, i.e. I mainly wish to show *that* the church has a role to play in politics.

<sup>708</sup> Indeed, history warns the church of “ambiguous alliances” with the state which are detrimental to society (Magesa 1996:74). Moreover, there is a real danger of the “abuse of ecclesiastical power and support of authoritarian regimes”, especially in Africa (Magesa 1996:77).

<sup>709</sup> This distinction is not to be understood as dualistic. Refer to my comments in section 1.4.4. See also Schreier (1998:4) and Hay (1998:16).

<sup>710</sup> Luther further distinguishes between different “uses” of the law, one of them being the civil, political use, which seeks to make known and condemn unrighteous action.

of God's people" (Moyo 2002:298). Indeed, by being active in the worldly realm, and taking political responsibility to heart, the Christian is a medium of God's left hand rule and in fact "participating in the justice of God" (:298). This participation in the work of divine justice demands the striving for vertical and horizontal right relationships (:298).

It follows from the above that Luther's political idea involves critical constructive participation, critical passive resistance and critical active transformation (Altmann 1992:82-83), thereby closely relating<sup>711</sup> the spiritual with the worldly kingdom and admonishing both to stand in line with God's struggle against evil (Moltmann 1984b:134).<sup>712</sup> Indeed, Luther spoke of serving God within the world ("weltlicher Gottesdienst"), and included prophetic *diakonia* of the poor and weak – creating a just social economic order – under this rubric.<sup>713</sup> Indeed Luther's two-kingdoms teaching could provide a sound basis for the church's involvement for the establishment of "efficacious social welfare policies" to name but one example (Lindberg 1933:127).

I would like to argue that the practice of *diakonia* is one of the contributions the church has to bring to the social reconciliation struggle, and it is one way the church can demonstrate its active and concerted involvement in a social-political situation. The Lutheran World Federation understands "diakonia as the ecclesiastical substantial feature, an expression of the Church's essence. Diaconical work is the way in which diakonia in a specific time and a specific context is practised" ("Diaconia" 2002:2). The Biblical terms of *diakonia* and *koinonia* are seen as closely related. *Diakonia* can be deemed the church's prophetic action of transformation (Nissen 2003:1), holistic ministry in light of Jesus' liberative praxis, service in view of the eschatological Kingdom, and proclamation in action (:3). Church *diakonia* has the call to effect a "decentering of perspective", as it is presently known and legitimised (Moxnes 1988:168). In economic terms, it is to witness to an alternative model for giving and receiving, where a benefactor mentality is replaced by a new horizontal solidarity model (see Mark 12:41-44; Matthew 25:31-46; 2 Corinthians 8-9). At base, church diaconical action has to provoke economic equality, fair balance, and distributive justice (Theissen 1999:91-93), all of which are important foundations for social reconciliation.

As discussed already in section 3.1.3, the Biblical idea of the *year of Jubilee* testifies to an "oikoumene of solidarity", a community based on sharing in solidarity (Raiser 1991:63-65, 86-87). "The Jubilee was a proclamation of renewal: the restoration of people, of social relationships, of nature itself. It has a critical and prophetic potential," claims Nissen (2003:8). Hay (1998:161), too, contends that the "concept of the Biblical jubilee" represents a "call to be a transformed society". Moreover, "a sharing in Christ" leads to sharing with each other. This is what Paul calls "fellowship" or community (*koinonia*).<sup>714</sup> The community in question is one "which includes both material and spiritual things" (Nissen 2003:7). In the spirit of true *diakonia* and *koinonia*, "the church is called to identify, warn against and oppose the powers of death and sin, without counting the cost" (*Hannover Report* 1996, paragraph 15). Some argue that the church stands for the conscience of the nation, and fills the role of the critical and prophetic proverbial watchdog over the powers that be (Dickow 1996:215).

Effectively, I have argued that the church cannot take a neutral stance, even on issues surrounding social reconciliation, because it is a community that is called and enabled by God to function within both the secular and spiritual realms of life. Prophetic witness by the church may involve taking on a watchdog function in society, and getting involved politically and socially at a national level (Stückelberger 1988:441; Hay 1998:155-

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<sup>711</sup> Distinguishing, but not separating, connecting, but not collapsing.

<sup>712</sup> Arguably, such a view is not in opposition to a liberationist approach which favours praxis above theory.

<sup>713</sup> Luther's radical attack of unjust socio-economic structures can be traced for example in his works, *Brief Sermon on Usury* (1519), *Trade and Usury* (1524) or *Admonition to the Clergy to Preach Against Usury* (1540).

<sup>714</sup> Fellowship is closely linked to forgiveness, sanctification (i.e. living a virtuous life) and reconciliation (Taylor 1952).

6).<sup>715</sup> In reference to the social reconciliation debate, the church's duty to be and perform *diakonia* and *koinonia* includes addressing inequalities, imbalances of social and economic relations, and political injustices. The church and the religious leaders may, for example, have to "realize that it is their duty to call upon those who have acquired riches through the exploitation or impoverishment of others ... to voluntarily return some of the wealth they control to its rightful owners" (Moyo 2002:298), and thereby contribute to the creation of a reconciled society. And if, as is to be expected, the rich do not follow the church's call to "voluntarily return" unjustly acquired wealth, the church may have to exert pressure on political authorities to implement such just action in policy and politics. If justice cannot be achieved through the gentle persuasion of the gospel, i.e. God's right hand, then God's left hand rule through law and order, state and policy will have to be employed. Even and especially here the church's prophetic watchdog role may become a crucial one in the endeavour to "create an environment where reconciliation is possible" (Moyo 2002:299). Indeed, the church's prophetic social duty in the world of politics and secular policies may have to include admonitions for "restitution or reparations by supporting different initiatives such as debt cancellation" (Moyo 2002:299) and other issues that infringe on the well-being of society.

Part of the church's reconciliatory activity, and a concrete contribution it can offer to social reconciliation, is challenging and critiquing unjust behaviour and social policies.<sup>716</sup> The church, as a witness of God's reconciliatory activity in the world has a social ministry which may include being present in a conflict situation, and when witnessing injustice, proclaiming the liberation, judgement (disclosure and condemnation of injustice), and reconciliation of Jesus (Stückelberger 1988:441). The church may also have a role in politics as a mediator (Magesa 1996:90) or through the "creation of a favourable conducive mediation environment" (An-Na'im and Peshkova 2000:77)<sup>717</sup>. The process of mediation, which involves intermediary roles and functions (see Lederach's list, 1997:68-69), is crucial in reaching the ultimate goal of reconciliation. Stückelberger (1988:468) distinguishes between partisan mediation, neutral mediation, or independent mediation as possible ways in which the church can promote social reconciliation among hostile groups.

Methods or instruments of power which the church possesses which can be helpful in political processes of reconciliation can be distinguished as direct and indirect methods. Stückelberger lists some direct assets as being economic/financial abilities (1988:531), the number of church helpers (i.e. "manpower"), organisational structures that are already in place, location of churches within the given contexts of need, and the strength of the church being community-based, and a grass-roots level organisation, i.e. in touch with the basic experiences of people (:532). Indirect tools for reconciliation which can be employed in the secular realm may include proclamation, conscientisation or conscience-building and ethical formation (:533). The latter would involve education for democracy, petitions, demonstrations, protest actions, public hearings, rallies, opinion

<sup>715</sup> One may well talk of the church's commitment to the "politics of reconciliation" (Mfutso-Bengo 2001:59).

<sup>716</sup> Hay (1998:62) considers a number of elements necessary for developing the dynamics of a suitable process of reconciliation. These include "ensuring the honour and dignity of victims through establishing a common memory of the past" and "a recognition and respect for human rights and allowance for structures to be established so that the human rights abuses of the past will never be repeated." Perpetrators will have to "admit guilt and make amends, express remorse and manifest collective contrition", i.e. take responsibility for past actions. The healing of memories, remembering the dead, dealing with questions of forgiveness, developing new democratic attitudes and fostering respect for human rights (with special focus on women and children) are all elements of the social reconciliation agenda (Hay 1998:62). It is the church's duty to strive for the implementation of this agenda.

<sup>717</sup> Mediation and conflict settlement "can and must be done by *whatever* forms of civil society organizations exist in each society. This includes community-based councils of elders, market women's groups, farmers' associations" (An-Na'im and Peshkova 2000:86-87), and, arguably, church groups.

polls and other initiatives (:534), solidarity with those who suffer (:536)<sup>718</sup>, effectively opposing injustice through vocal and public partisanship (:541). Of course, as has been indicated, dialogue with, and admonition of, those who have social responsibility is a significant role the church can fulfil (:549ff), as is diaconical service and pastoral counselling (:575), as well as providing forums for confession of sins and forgiveness (:582). Moreover, the church community has resources for practically assisting victims of human rights abuses (Hay 1998:154), e.g. by helping them through bureaucratic processes, and providing material stability for those in destitution. Finally, political or social involvement of the church in South Africa could mean to actively support ongoing secular or religious reconciliation and truth-telling initiatives or programmes (Hay 1998:158), for example the Institute for Healing of Memories<sup>719</sup>.

Kistner expounds the list of “political” tasks of the church. Inter alia, it is to reveal indifference to and compliance with unjust structures (2000:66). It is to encourage its members to take responsibility and become accountable and committed to the people of South Africa. It is to advocate the practice of voluntary economic restitution.<sup>720</sup> Furthermore, it must facilitate encounters between “perpetrators and victims”, whites and blacks, rich and poor, and thereby provide a setting for interaction and healing to occur between the alienated groups in South Africa (Kistner 2000:69).

### 3.4.7 Influencing moral culture

Closely related to the above deliberations concerning church political activity and the fostering of a “spirituality of reconciliation”, is the Christian community’s ability to influence and shape society morally and ethically, and promote a culture of reconciliation in society (Klein 1999:18; de Gruchy 2000:167-171). The gospel urges and empowers Christians to have an alternative vision for life – in contrast to, say, some current secular visions of the world which are based on pessimism, anxiety and apathy, or self-preservation, domination and exploitation. The church is a community which bears – and struggles to embody – the message of hope in seemingly hopeless situations, healing in broken situations, joy in situations marked by despair, peace in situations of war and enmity and, of course, unity and reconciliation in situations of mutual suspicion, hostility and division. This message, or what Richardson (2001:55) calls the “Christian ontology of peace”, and its communal manifestations, is a strong force for the positive shaping of the national ethos.<sup>721</sup>

I argue here that owing to its very foundation, the church can provide the impetus and driving force in society for developing a culture which fosters such values as patience, mutual concern, justice and equality, reconciliation and peace. This is indeed good news *par excellence*. Perhaps the greatest gift the church has to offer is guidelines to an exemplary embodiment of a whole and reconciled community. It may lead by being an example, not primarily by offering a program. Indeed, a number of Christian ethicists are of the opinion that the Christian community has a unique gift to give in that it can show the world how wholesome community *can* be, and indeed is *intended* to be by the Creator. This gift is not, one should insist, generated from within the church itself, but is a fruit of the gift which God has first given. In other words, the church, far from being perfect, can by no means pride itself in being “better” than other communities. However, if it is faithful to its message, and allows itself continually to be challenged and shaped, chastised

<sup>718</sup> This involves advocacy for the marginalised (Magesa 1996:91). For genuine social reconciliation to occur, “victims need to be acknowledged” (Hay 1998:62).

<sup>719</sup> See the institute’s web-site at [www.healingofmemories.co.za](http://www.healingofmemories.co.za).

<sup>720</sup> There is a need for “repairing the past” through exercising economic and political justice (Hay 1998:62).

<sup>721</sup> The ontology of peace needs “narrative display and communal embodiment”. “The challenge to Christian theological ethics in South Africa ... is to be able to provide for the moral formation of Christians who, in this society with its particular history, must be able to remember, tell, embody and display the Christian narrative” (Richardson 2001:55).

by and conformed to this message, it indeed has the potential to point toward the goodness, peace, wholeness – reconciliation – which God has in store for all of creation. Indeed, the eschatological vision God has for the world is the driving force for the church to strive for a just and intact society here and now (Stückelberger 1988:467).<sup>722</sup> In order to exemplify a community with an eschatological vision of wholeness for all of creation, and foster a culture of reconciliation in society, the church must encourage all kinds of reconciliation praxis to occur regularly and deliberately<sup>723</sup> (Klein 1999:19).

In an interesting study of South Africa up until the mid-1990s, Helga Dickow (1996) investigates whether a new civil religion is in the process of being created in this country. By civil religion she means a religious support and legitimisation of politics (1996:13), as is arguably in existence in the USA (:18) and Israel (:21), and was the driving force of the Boer republic (:23). According to Dickow, the establishment of civil religion is only possible in secular states – i.e. in contexts where there is a deliberate separation of religion and the state (:26). Civil religion is not the same as state religion, but serves the need for specific ideology in times of political crisis, as well as the need for new identity formation in times of transition (:27).<sup>724</sup> Civil religion exists alongside institutional and traditional forms of religion, but is distinct from these. Churches and religious organisations may support, reject or ignore it. One of its main characteristics is the propagation of religious archetypes (such as the Old Testament paradigms of “God’s chosen people”, “exodus”, “wilderness”, “promised land”), and it commonly elevates key persons to positions of martyrs or prophets or other specially gifted ideals (:28). Civil religion is not a static ideology, but needs an array of adaptable rituals and symbols to maintain itself (:29). Its main functions usually include legitimisation<sup>725</sup>, mobilisation and integration (except if it is used for purposes of segregation, as was the case with Afrikaner nationalism during apartheid rule) (:30, 125-131).

Dickow claims that up until the new dispensation was introduced in the early nineties, South Africa had the peculiar situation of hosting two competing civil religions at the same time – Afrikaner (or white) nationalism, which legitimised apartheid, and the civil religion of the liberation struggle, which legitimised anti-apartheid action. Since the historic changes of 1994, South Africa experiences the need for working out an integrating kind of new civil religion, since both the old forms have become obsolete and no longer serve a valid purpose (1996:31, 135).<sup>726</sup>

Dickow makes a number of suggestions for the positive establishment of a new, integrating, reconciliatory civil religion in South Africa, which would function as a legitimising force for a new unified and reconciled South African identity. For such a new civil religion, religious archetypes will need to be cultivated which incorporate themes such as the juxtaposition of despair and hope (Dickow 1996:141), perseverance (:142) and the reality of suffering and overcoming it (:143). Archetypal metaphors proposed by Dickow include the Biblical motifs of slavery in Egypt and subsequent liberation (:141) and the tower of Babel (:145). A new civil religion might well develop legitimating thematic symbols such as not obeying unjust laws (with reference to Romans 13) (:147), the submission of secular authority to sacred authority (:149), the Bible as foundation (:150), apartheid as a form of evil and sin (:151), a preferential option for the poor and oppressed (:153), and Jesus’ life and ministry as demonstrating the vision of an integrated society, of reconciled enemies living together in peace (:157). As I have indicated in

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<sup>722</sup> See for example Dalferth’s discussions concerning, “Die Sendung der Kirche in der Welt” (1996:309ff), “Eschatologie und gesellschaftliche Utopie” (:297ff), and “Liebe innerhalb gesellschaftlicher Strukturen” (:293ff).

<sup>723</sup> Versöhnung ist ein Prozess “der immer wieder, ständig, regelmäßig gepflegt und bewirkt werden muß”.

<sup>724</sup> See also Villa-Vicencio (2000) and Adam and Adam (2000) as they discuss the need for social identity, collective memory and image-making in South Africa.

<sup>725</sup> See also Berger & Luckmann (1966:118).

<sup>726</sup> See also Villa-Vicencio’s *A Theology of Reconstruction* (1992).



section 3.2.4, the story of the cross and resurrection also has potential for becoming an “external narrative” to be adopted by all South Africans.

Beside new archetypal themes and founding symbols, a new civil religion seeks key figures as agents of it (Dickow 1996:158). Similarly, rituals and events become important for the maintenance and growth of the new religious culture, e.g. celebrating days of remembrance, petition and prayer events, organised feasting or fasting (:163)<sup>727</sup>. Dickow is confident that ancient Christian rituals may be helpful to this effect if rediscovered, reinterpreted and contextualised for the new situation. “Die Benutzung eines urchristlichen Rituals zur Durchsetzung politischer und gesellschaftlicher Veränderungen reicht weit über seinen ursprünglichen Gehalt hinaus” (:166).

Every civil religion necessitates a vision for the future (Dickow 1996:168), and a conceptual reconstruction of the past (:170).

Ein wesentliches Merkmal einer civil religion ist die Berufung auf eine gemeinsame Geschichte. Das Bewußtsein einer gemeinsamen – durchlittenen oder auch erfolgreich überstandenen – Vergangenheit wirkt verbindend für die Generation, die in der Regel diese Geschichte gar nicht miterlebt hat. In Südafrika gibt es noch keine gemeinsame Geschichte, wohl aber sind bereits die Umrisse einer neuen Historiographie zu erkennen. (Dickow 1996:170)

This is why it is of utmost importance for South Africa to work on establishing a common history, a collective memory<sup>728</sup>. “The building of a moral order will be required for a stable future,” argues Hay (1998:62). Dickow (1996:172-173) suggests that the TRC and its aftermath represented a good start to this endeavour, and that therefore the TRC process can be viewed as a stepping stone leading to the formation of a new civil religion in South Africa. It is the task of the religious communities – especially the churches – to continue this work of fostering a new morality and ethos for South Africa.

An example Dickow cites which in her opinion could be (or become) an element of a new civil religion is the institution of a national church service of reconciliation. She specifically refers to some features of the 1994 National Service of Thanksgiving (1996:229) as offering potential ingredients for the founding of new civil piety. Significant themes that were addressed at this national service included the following: “a common history unites us”, “apartheid was overcome through the help of God” (:229), “common suffering unites”, “we are different people, but one nation” (:230), remembering “the martyrs”, “the watchdog role of the church continues” (:231) and “God blesses Africa” (:232). According to Dickow, these motifs and themes provide a basis for a new civil religion in service of a new South Africa. Ostensibly, they are drawn from and rooted in the Christian heritage, and can therefore be fostered particularly easily by the church.

It is Dickow’s contention that there already exists a strong social and religious basis for an integrative civil religion in present-day South Africa (1996:235): In the mid-1990s, a survey revealed that 65% of South Africans agreed with the key statement, “I believe that God has offered all South Africans, black and white, a covenant for peaceful existence in a united nation” (:262). 87% of South African society believed that “peace and togetherness (living together) are possible” (:264). Effectively, Dickow explains that the results of the survey suggest that a new civil religion is plausible for SA, and that society already tends in that direction (:265).

The point of the above investigation is to show that the church and the Christian heritage has already shaped, and continues to shape, moral culture in South Africa. It is a force in the formation and cultivation of a culture of a certain ethical calibre. It is an influence on South African society’s evolving self-consciousness and identity. The question is, however, whether this can be deemed a positive contribution by the church to

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<sup>727</sup> Dickow suggests the invention and propagation of a “feast of the rainbow nation” (1996:227).

<sup>728</sup> See Halbwachs’ *On Collective Memory* (1992). See also sections 1.1.2 and 1.2.1 for more in-depth discussions about the need for fostering a new collective memory and national identity in South Africa.

social reconciliation. Arguably, it can. If the developing moral culture, the new civil religion, indeed succeeds in establishing social reconciliation and peaceful harmonious relationships, the church's association with it may surely be seen as favourable. However, if South Africa's "culture" or "ethos" evolves into an adherent of globalised capitalism, consumerism, secularism, materialism and all the other unfortunate "isms" that accompany these, I doubt whether the church's contribution to *such* a social ethic could be deemed positive and helpful. Perhaps on this point the verdict is still uncertain, and it remains to be seen if the church's influence on moral culture really is a sufficiently strong positive force. Perhaps the argument of some ethicists, who oppose the concept of civil religion and instead vouch for the motto of the church as counter-cultural community (e.g. Hauerwas), will be found to have more clout in the debate surrounding the Christian community's contribution to social reconciliation.<sup>729</sup>

#### 3.4.8 Some examples of reconciliatory practice

The involvement of the church in the reconciliation process in South Africa has a remarkable history.<sup>730</sup> According to Wolfram Kistner (1999:38), it started in the 1960's with initiatives of church leaders such as Beyers Naudé and other resistance leaders. In 1968 the South African Council of Churches (SACC) drafted a document calling for reconciliation (:39), and in 1985 the famous "Kairos Document" was drawn up (:40). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission represents the most recent national endeavour for reconciliation, and was indeed supported strongly by churches and church leaders.

In the aftermath of the TRC, several new initiatives have been formed for the promotion of reconciliation in South Africa. Certain churches have, for instance, started undertaking healing seminars. These seminars generally fall into one of three categories: (1) They may seek to bring together victims and perpetrators, in order for them to encounter one another in a spirit of openness and fellowship; (2) they may aim to provide a "safe place" for survivors and other traumatised persons, and facilitate the establishment of support groups, or (3) they may target the former beneficiaries of the apartheid regime by guiding them toward recognition of guilt and repentance through education and conscientisation (Kistner 1999:55-56).

A number of churches of evangelical denominations have united in establishing a fund for the support of survivors. CARI (the "Christian Anti-Racism Initiative for Gauteng and Beyond") is a group in one of the provinces that organises seminars on racism and how it can be combated, with the aim of working toward an egalitarian, reconciled society. Institutions exist that develop ideas and strategies for just distribution of land (e.g., "The Covenant and Land Programme of the SACC" initiated in 1998). ESSET (the "Ecumenical Service for Socio-Economic Transformation")<sup>731</sup> is an organisation that attempts to promote economic justice, which it is hoped will contribute to the building of peace and reconciliation (Kistner 1999:56, 62). The National Religious Leaders Forum, in which a number of Christians participate, also has reconciliation and moral regeneration on its agenda.

These are some concrete examples of how the church in South Africa is (directly and indirectly) working to foster social reconciliation in a country burdened by a past of injustice, inequality and separation. Nevertheless, the need for reconciliation persists; the healing process must be continued deliberately (Kistner 1999:50). Indeed, "the real work now must be picked up in the religious communities," argues Kistner (2000:70). The problem is that many of the resources the church has to offer are under-used or mis-used.

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<sup>729</sup> Indeed, the debate among theologians and ethicists on whether the church ought to represent opposition to the state, or should work together in harmony with the state, is controversial and multi-faceted, and cannot be elaborated in detail here.

<sup>730</sup> See section 1.1, and Kaiser (1996:63ff).

<sup>731</sup> Its offices are located in Khotso House, Johannesburg, and it was established in 2000.

The church is therefore urged to “re-examine its worship practice” (Kistner 2000:72).<sup>732</sup> Examples of church resources that “have to be corrected in church life” and ought to be employed more effectively are the rites of confession, Holy Communion and baptism. The healing ministry, including counselling, ought also to be revised and improved (:68). Furthermore, there is a need for teaching and education in the church to be stepped up. Issues such as civil responsibility, economic justice and human rights may not be left out of catechetical syllabi (:72). Churches are called to witness to a reconciled society by facilitating meetings of encounter between formerly alienated groups. People from different backgrounds ought to worship together – pray, sing, dance, celebrate and grieve together (:73). Reconciliation work can be promoted by building congregational partnerships, i.e. linking together congregations with different experiences, and by implementing inter-cultural small groups (:74).

Given the South African context, it is clear that the challenge to the church to use her assets for the promotion of social reconciliation is increasing rather than diminishing. It is up to the church to recognise the rich resources she has, and offer these with vigilance and joy.<sup>733</sup> A TRC commissioner poses the challenge:

So what role do we as Christians and Christian leaders see for ourselves? ...

There is an area which is closest to us as a church: that of reconciliation. Our country will not know enduring stability and peace until it receives wholesome healing and reconciliation. ...

Are we reaching out to each other in a spirit of true repentance – understanding, forgiveness, love and restitution within the church itself? Is there an active programme within the church to build bridges, to open windows, to ventilate the house through constructive debate? Is the church building bridges across racial barriers, language barriers, status barriers, wealth barriers, sexual orientation barriers, gender barriers, age barriers – to name only a few? Is the church really becoming a non-racial model that we can show to secular society? (Finca 2000:18-19)

In this section I have suggested that the church, as community and institution, has the potential to be a significant force for healing and reconciliation in a divided society. Through its practices of the Holy Supper, proclamation, celebration and ritual, as well as through its spirituality, its ecumenical work, its involvement in politics and secular issues, and its ability to influence civil culture, it has much to offer. However, being simultaneously justified and sinful, it has to struggle constantly with its own depravity and corruption. At no time have I wanted to imply that the church has any claim to being perfect or “better” than any other group. However, owing to its foundation of the gospel of good news in Christ the Reconciler, I have argued that in terms of its eschatological vision and thrust, it does have some possible pointers for the reconciliation of the world at large, and among human beings in South Africa in particular. The ministry of reconciliation is at the very centre of its being, which makes the church a special instrument of God’s mission to heal and reconcile creation. I agree with Moyo (2002:300) when he contends,

Theologically speaking, reconciliation can be defined as God’s initiative in restoring relationships between God and humankind and between people. God has given that mission to the church, which is called upon to support and strengthen human initiatives towards reconciliation by bringing a religious face into the process through active participation.

<sup>732</sup> See also Hay (1998:137) and Klein (1999:261).

<sup>733</sup> Mfutso-Bengo (2001:17) defines these resources that may play a significant role in building the nation as “meditation, mediation, negotiation, demonstration of faith, love and justice, denunciation of evil, annunciation of good news of liberation, reconciliation and salvation”.

### ***Conclusion***

In this third chapter of my dissertation I have highlighted aspects of Biblical scholarship (by focussing on Scriptural resources), aspects of a specific hermeneutical-theological approach (in focussing on the theology of the cross), doctrinal-theological aspects (involving teachings on sin, repentance and forgiveness) and ecclesiological aspects (which cast the church as reconciling community and institution). All of these have been explicated in light of their potential and actual usefulness for social reconciliation endeavours. I have indicated how these aspects of the Christian faith tradition indeed represent possible helpful paradigms of reconciliation that can be used as resources for this purpose.

#### 4. African traditional and Christian reconciliation paradigms in dialogue: differences, discontinuities and points of conflict

In chapters 2 and 3 I established some of the resources for reconciliation presented by African tradition and Christian tradition respectively. The next step is to evaluate these resources in terms of their ability to promote dialogue between African tradition and Christian tradition, as well as their capacity to work together efficaciously for social reconciliation in South Africa. I propose that chapter 2 represents a thesis, chapter 3 its antithesis, and chapters 4 and 5 the development of a synthesis. A synthesis seeks to accommodate the best of both points of view, but it inevitably involves tension.<sup>734</sup> This is why an attempted synthesis between African and Christian paradigms of reconciliation cannot avoid recognising the tension that exists between them.<sup>735</sup> In this chapter I offer a succinct appraisal of some of these points of tension.

As evident from the objectives, the aim of this study is not to highlight dissimilarities and incongruence between reconciliation paradigms in African tradition and Christian tradition. Nonetheless, it is important for the sake of clarity and integrity to at least note those aspects of each of the traditions in question that seem to be in opposition or conflict with each other. Therefore, I will ascertain in broad strokes which elements of African tradition and Christian tradition disagree or clash, and which therefore are not necessarily efficacious for dialogue concerning social reconciliation. I mention these disparities in order to avoid the impression that dialogue between African tradition and Christian tradition with regard to social reconciliation is unproblematic and simple. Effectively, in this chapter I endeavour to answer the third sub-problem underlying this research: What are dissimilarities or points of conflict or opposition between African tradition and Christian tradition in terms of their reconciliation paradigms?

Arguably, what I am attempting to do from this point forward is an exercise in African theology. In section 1.5.5 I demonstrated that African theologies are evidence of the fact that dialogue between African and Christian traditions is already in process. My work represents a small contribution to the multi-faceted endeavour that is called African theology. The question that has dominated much of African theological discourse is whether and how the African religious heritage can relate to Christianity. Is Christian tradition intrinsically “foreign” to African tradition, and vice versa, or can the two dialogue and interact in a way that enhances both? In what way are the two traditions in “continuity”, and in what ways are they in “discontinuity”? Can they be “synthesised”? Can Christianity be “inculturated” and “indigenised”?<sup>736</sup> Many African theologians are of the opinion that there are aspects of continuity, as well as discontinuity, between African tradition and Christianity (Paris 1994:37). Despite many consistencies and points of accord between the two (which will be the focus of chapter 5), there are also “elements of discontinuity and of alienation” which need to be assessed carefully (Parrat 1995:135).<sup>737</sup> It is to these that I now turn. Since it is beyond the scope of this study to indicate all

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<sup>734</sup> The following pertinent questions must be asked: “When these two religions meet, what is the result: Is it collision or collaboration, both in theoretical terms and in practice? Where do we draw the line of collision or collaboration and on what theological grounds? To what extent do the two religions enrich and illuminate each other theologically?” (“Summary Report” 2002:25)

<sup>735</sup> Those aspects of both traditions that are problematic may also not be ignored. Certain traditional resources are not always or necessarily beneficial to the reconciliation process. For this reason, it is important to conduct an in-depth “cultural resource analysis” (Lederach 1997:121). The goal of such study is to identify and acknowledge detrimental aspects of a culture, as well as its positive aspects (*Crossing Witchcraft Barriers* 2003:32).

<sup>736</sup> Typical themes in African theology indeed pertain to theories of continuity and discontinuity, synthesis, inculturation and indigenisation. See for example Parrat (1995), Bediako (1992), Sawyerr (1968), Paris (1994), Dickson and Ellingworth (1969), Ikenga-Metuh (1996), and Bond, Johnson and Walker (1979).

<sup>737</sup> In some cases one may even identify strict camps of opposition (Sawyerr 1968:135).

possible aspects of discontinuity between African tradition and Christianity, I shall limit myself to those that arise out of an assessment of the reconciliation paradigms discussed in the previous chapters.

In section 4.1 I highlight what I consider to be general or broad differences between the two traditions regarding reconciliation. I discuss these differences under the following headings: understanding of “religion”, different sources, view of God, religious practitioners, leadership and gender, views of the person and community, exclusivity or inclusivity, meaning of “reconciliation”, understanding of “sin”, understanding of “forgiveness”, motivation for doing reconciliation, what is authoritative in a reconciliation process, the actual reconciliation process, the role of rituals, and ritual practices. In section 4.2 I move from the general to the particular. Here, I elucidate specific aspects of the ritual of *Cleansing the chest of grudges* that conflict with Christian tradition. From the outset, I wish to acknowledge that my method and style of this analysis, as well as my choices inherent in it, are “entangled” with my autobiography (Grimes 1982:6), i.e. my cultural, religious and scholarly background.

## 4.1 General differences

### 4.1.1 Understanding of “religion”

In African tradition, religion is about the whole of life, and not a compartmentalised aspect of it (Mbiti 1990:2). It “permeates all aspects of life” (“Summary Report” 2002:11; see also Magesa 1998:71). Moreover, “the spiritual dimension is part of the human personality; ... it is pre-eminently part of the African personality” (Shorter 1978:45). According to Shorter, African religion displays a “commitment to a world of the spirit” and “to human community”. These commitments imply a “revolt against materialism” and “against shallow religiosity”, “against cultural passivity” and “being a mere consumer”. It rebels against “a purely internal religion, a religion that is inward looking and oblivious of the community” (Shorter 1978:7-8). These characteristics are not shared by many forms of modern Christianity, which often reveal a lack of commitment to “the spiritual” and to human community, and show signs of “shallow religiosity”, “passivity”, “consumerism” and an emphasis on “internal religion”. This is so because Christianity has allowed itself to be deeply influenced and shaped by modern Western civilisation (see section 1.5).

African traditional religion is not “confined to physical structure nor is it hierarchy bound”. Essentially, it is not an institutionalised religion (Teffo 2002:137). In contrast to this, Christianity is strongly institutional, although there are also strands in it that are non- or anti-institutional. By virtue of its history, Christian tradition is very much defined and upheld by its institutional structures, which are physical, organisational and administrative, theological and dogmatic, etc.

African traditional religion can be deemed “pluralistic in nature and quite hospitable to other forms of belief systems” (“Summary Report” 2002:11-12), which makes it inherently reconciliatory and accepting of diversity and difference. This is not so with Christianity in its classical sense. Although there are more recent trends in the Christian tradition that allow for and encourage ecumenism (see section 3.4.5) and religious pluralism (see section 1.4.3), this is not the norm. More typically, Christianity defines itself as a religion which stands over and above other religious systems, and considers “outside” religious influences to be detrimental to it. Christianity frequently considers itself to be the primary (and perhaps even exclusive) bearer and upholder of truth.

In the case of African traditional religion, the category “African” implies an “underlying cultural identity, experience, and orientation” (Gyekye 1987:x). Those

belonging to African culture and practising African religion share a common cultural (ethnic) heritage, geographically largely confined to sub-Saharan Africa. This is not the case with Christianity. Christians do not necessarily share a common ethnic identity, and do not belong to one cultural group. This means that Christian tradition is not and cannot be defined according to one particular set of cultural parameters; it is not and can never be limited to one cultural sphere. While it may indeed be regarded as an African religion, it is not *only* that, but also is an Asian, European and Latin American religion. To state the obvious, Christian tradition spans a broader spectrum, and is therefore constantly faced with other or new cultural paradigms, and in need of being inculturated in novel contexts.

As we have seen in sections 1.5.1 and 2.2, the ancestor cult represents the backbone of African traditional religion.<sup>738</sup> The ancestors are considered as much part of the community as the living, and occupy an important role in the affairs of the community. In Christianity, ancestors play a far lesser role.<sup>739</sup> Possibly the closest equivalent to the ancestors in African tradition (in terms of their fundamental significance) is Jesus Christ in Christian tradition. In many ways, Jesus is to Christians what the ancestors are to African traditionalists. A number of African theologians have attempted to address the problems surrounding ancestor veneration, but in my opinion they have not been solved satisfactorily.<sup>740</sup> It must be acknowledged that the ancestors still represent a bone of contention in the dialogue between African tradition and Christianity (Parrat 1995:135).<sup>741</sup>

#### 4.1.2 Different sources

African tradition, religion and culture is based on an “unwritten, an undocumented philosophy” (Gyekye 1987:51). In African tradition significant knowledge is passed on orally.<sup>742</sup> This trait distinguishes it from Christianity which is strongly informed by literary traditions. Indeed, one of the primary sources of “knowledge” and revelation in Christian tradition is a written document, the Bible (see section 3.1). Other writings which influence and shape the Christian tradition include treatises composed by church fathers and mothers, theological discourses<sup>743</sup>, and canon law. The literary ethos of Western

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<sup>738</sup> See for example Ephirim-Donkor (1997), Moila (1987:75), Setiloane (1978), Krige (1974:289).

<sup>739</sup> Tihagale (1998:5) is of the opinion that the Christian concept of God “has dethroned the ancestors from the human-made pedestal. The belief in the power of the ancestors to inflict pain or to enhance life, the belief that they can control the destiny of human beings, has been radically adjusted.” Through influences from Christianity, the godlike status of the ancestors has been reduced so that they can no longer be seen as the “cornerstone of the African’s religious consciousness, though they remain an essential part of it” (:6).

<sup>740</sup> See for example Bujo (1992), Parrat (1995:122-136), Nyamiti (1984), Schreiter (1992), Bediako (1992) and Nxumalo (1981).

<sup>741</sup> Africans’ relationships to their deceased community members has been misunderstood by Westerners and “wrongly approached right from the beginning,” argues Setiloane (1988:17).

<sup>742</sup> In Africa there are indeed “strong living practices of oral culture – religious, mythological, poetic, and narrative” (Appiah 1992:58). See also Hofmeyr (1994), Belcher (1999), Denis (2000), Vail and White (1991) and Mudimbe and Jewsiewicki (1993) for their various discussions of orality, narrative and literature in African traditional contexts.

<sup>743</sup> A major current source of Christian tradition is what may be called Western theology, i.e. theology shaped and informed by Western cultural paradigms. According to Parrat (1995), Manas Buthelezi for one has formulated some key problems with and critiques of Western theology which need to be heeded in the development of other (especially African) theologies. Western theological approaches tend to neglect the existential dimension of humanity; “wholeness of life, the problems of powerlessness and poverty, of racism and brotherhood – are normally not the concerns of Western theology” (Parrat 1995:169). Rather, the West favours an intellectual approach, where defence of creedal and ecclesiastical statements becomes the primary focus, and not the lives and troubles of ordinary people (:169). Moreover, Western theologies frequently assume that theology can be uncommitted, apolitical, and uninvolved in the “world” (:186). These shortcomings of Western theological tradition ought to be (and are) avoided and counterbalanced in African theology.

civilization has for centuries been the most important vehicle for the spread of Christianity.

What this implies is that Christianity has a strong historical thrust. Historical occurrences and their literary transmission form the basis of Christian faith. As I have argued in section 3.2, the life of Jesus, and more specifically the historical event of the crucifixion of Jesus (and of course its narrative propagation through Scripture), is foundational to Christianity. Such a historical dimension, inherent to the Biblical faith, is missing in African traditional religion. Moreover, “the lack of a historical founder in African religions represents a serious element of discontinuity between African religion and Christianity” (Parrat 1995:80).

#### 4.1.3 View of God

For a number of African theologians, the God of African traditional religion is the same as the Christian God (Bediako 1992:284, referring specifically to Idowu). Certainly, as scholars such as Mbiti (1970)<sup>744</sup> have shown, the African traditional Deity and the Christian God share a number of central characteristics, and thus may arguably be deemed one and the same.<sup>745</sup> Indeed, many African theologians are fervent in their “quest for an integral picture of the redemptive activity of God, in view of the fact that God is One and universal” (Bediako 1992:435), i.e. in their efforts to demonstrate that there is no difference between the God of African tradition and the God of Christianity. I however have reservations about an all-too-simplistic attempt to harmonise or even equate the African traditional characteristics of God with the Christian-Biblical characteristics of God.

Despite the fact that qualities of God such as omnipotence, omni-presence, benevolence and uniqueness correspond in both traditions, I hold that there is one important difference. In Christianity, the determinative factor for who God is and how God is to be viewed is the crucifixion (and subsequent resurrection) of Jesus Christ. The cross of Christ “has indispensable significance for epistemology. God is to be known precisely in the message of the cross” (Cousar 1990:42). The cross as the “central narrative of the Christian faith” (Richardson 2001:52) radically shapes the Christian concept of God. I have demonstrated this in section 3.2. The story of the cross and the resurrection boldly proclaims to Christian believers that despair and suffering are the locations of God’s revelation and God’s solidarity, protest, and promise. Despite its negative connotations and what it reveals in terms of human fallibility and evil, God identifies with the cross, and turns it into a sign of grace and salvation. In essence, God’s identification with the cross (and the crucified) is a manifestation of God’s acceptance of the unacceptable.

According to the *theologia crucis*, God is fundamentally hidden (the *Deus absconditus*).<sup>746</sup> A “theology of glory” (*theologia gloriae*) promotes faulty images of God by depicting God as visible and overt (von Loewenich 1976:27ff; Gritsch and Jenson 1976:47). In Kitamori’s terms (1965:22), the theology of glory seeks to advocate “a God who has no pain”, whereas the theology of the cross can be equated with a theology of the pain of God. The unexpected nature of God’s revelation, both in the cross of Christ, and in the sufferings of those who participate in the cross of Christ, can rightfully be

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<sup>744</sup> See also Smith (1961), Ezeanya (1969), Idowu (1962; 1969), Tiraki (n.d.) and Nyirongo (n.d.).

<sup>745</sup> See for example Idowu (1969), where he explores characteristics such as God’s uniqueness (:26), God’s unitary control of the universe (:27) and God’s universality (:28). The core characteristics of God include omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, transcendence, immanence, incomprehensibility, mysteriousness and immutability (see Mbiti 1970).

<sup>746</sup> God is revealed *sub contrario*. The *opus alienum* is that which seems to portray God as wrathful, punishing and destructive (Blaumeiser 1995:175). The *opus proprium*, which is hidden, points to God’s love and compassion, and brings about grace and salvation. The cross collapses the two into one: it seems to be a work of punishment, but is actually a work of grace.



called scandalous. Indeed, the cross is the scandalous consequence of God's incarnation.<sup>747</sup> Such theology can easily be deemed foolishness by worldly standards (Gritsch and Jenson 1976:47).

Indeed, a God who displays weakness and "helplessness", who is put to death "because he has put himself in our hands", a God who has "become dependent on us" (Sölle 1967:151) certainly does not resemble the African traditional God. To Gabriel Setiloane (1979:60), who represents an African traditional view of God, the Christian God "could easily die because he is so small and human".<sup>748</sup> Setiloane (1978:411) insists that the African concept of God (*Modimo*) is a "wider, deeper and all-embracing concept" than that held by Christianity. The African God "could never die because it has no human limitations, and it is so immense, incomprehensible, wide, tremendous and unique" (Setiloane 1979:60). What Setiloane is trying to argue is that the Christian God is unlike the African (and more particularly the Sotho-Tswana) God in that the former lacks supreme omnipotence, displaying frailty and helplessness on the cross (Parrat 1995:71).

It seems, then, that to African traditionalists, the idea of God revealed in suffering and weakness is intrinsically foreign. Such an idea represents a point of discontinuity with African indigenous belief. Effectively, the most important and central event of Christian faith, i.e. that we "know" God "on Jesus' cross" (Sobrino 1998:246), is at odds with African traditional views of God.<sup>749</sup>

Further assertions about the Christian God can be deduced from the story of Jesus (his life, death and resurrection). For example, God is experienced as a person, God is personal. This stands in contrast to the African Deity, who is impersonal. Although he/she/it may be personified, he/she/it is not experienced as a person. The African God has no heart, and therefore cannot be moved by human petitions. This is not the case for the Christian God. Indeed, the Christian God is approachable<sup>750</sup>, while the God of African tradition is remote and inapproachable. The only way God is and can be "approached" is through the ancestors, who act as mediators. In Christianity, the cross of Christ does away with the need for mediation between humans and God. Finally, the God of the Christian tradition is a trustworthy God. The cross was "the ultimate test of Jesus' love" for humanity (Mofokeng 1983:32)<sup>751</sup> – a test which God passed. In the cross, Christians see a clear demonstration of the fact that God does not betray those who suffer, but can be trusted to take up their cause.<sup>752</sup> The African tradition does not view God as particularly "trustworthy". Rather, God is seen as unpredictable and capricious. As the master of all forces – even the forces of chaos and destruction – God is at times even perceived as volatile. Ultimately, the African traditional God is not much concerned with the affairs of humankind, and does not get involved in them. This quality is contrasted to the relentless involvement of the Christian God in the lives of human beings, as portrayed by the Bible. Given all these factors, it becomes increasingly difficult

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<sup>747</sup> The cross of Jesus displays "the love of God in solidarity" (Sobrino 1998:248; see also Mofokeng 1983:97; Placher 1990:18).

<sup>748</sup> See also Setiloane (1976).

<sup>749</sup> Nonetheless, it can be argued that the cross of Christ may be seen as a (if not *the*) point of convergence of Christian and African paradigms of reconciliation. (This will be investigated in chapter 5, however.) In Parrat's opinion, the cross is "the basis of an ethic for Africa"; it has the capacity and the power to "bring the ancestral ethos into dialogue with the Christian faith" (1995:132).

<sup>750</sup> "The cross says, in human language, that nothing in history has set limits to God's nearness to human beings" (Sobrino 1987:153).

<sup>751</sup> "God's love for man (sic) proved to be so intense that it endured the test of ultimate violence (death by crucifixion)" (Mofokeng 1983:34).

<sup>752</sup> If God were absent from the cross this would be a "betrayal of the poor and oppressed, a betrayal of those people in the world who are hanging on the cross and crying out for liberation. God's absence from the cross is their silencing. They are removed from the focus when the cross of Jesus is removed from the centre and also when God is removed from it" (Mofokeng 1983:93).

to speak in unqualified and simplistic terms of one and the same concept of God in African tradition and Christianity.

#### 4.1.4 Religious practitioners

In African tradition, religious practitioners, such as traditional doctors or diviners, “are charged with the responsibility to see to it that things are right between the visible and the invisible world and in the visible world itself” (Magesa 1998:71).<sup>753</sup> Their role is to re-establish order and harmony, and they are generally considered to be the protectors of society. The universe is replete with forces that either enhance or destroy life. It is the role of the religious experts to interpret these forces appropriately and then to use or expel them for the good of the community.<sup>754</sup> Therefore, they are believed to have the ability to channel (metaphysical) power, to exploit it or keep it at bay. The characteristics associated with religious experts or leaders in African tradition do not correspond to those associated with experts in Christian tradition.<sup>755</sup> The latter are not considered to have the ability to channel the forces of the universe, nor are they expected to do so. They are not experts in mediating between the visible and the invisible, and do not function as protectors of society. Generally, they are not more “powerful” in terms of supernatural occurrences than the ordinary members of Christian communities.<sup>756</sup> In the case of church ministers (priests or pastors), their role is to proclaim the Word of God (i.e. teach and preach), administer the sacraments (i.e. preside over ritual), and to serve their congregations. They are also involved heavily with planning, organisation, management and administration. Generally, Christian leaders work within clearly-defined ecclesial structures and parameters. Their “powers” and abilities are not (necessarily) of a supernatural kind.

#### 4.1.5 Leadership and gender

Religious practitioners in African tradition may be either male or female. However, the other type of “expert” in matters pertaining to the settlement of social disputes, the “legal expert”, is almost never female. In families, matters of social conflict are taken up by the genealogically senior man. As we have seen in section 2.3, the regime of *patria potestas* prevails, where the father is responsible for the organized running of family matters (Hammond-Tooke 1993:91; Mönning 1988:282, 315; Schapera 1956:213). More severe cases of dispute are brought to the higher courts, which are led by male counsellors, and ultimately, a male chief. Court procedure occurs “in the men’s meeting place” (Hammond-Tooke 1993:92).<sup>757</sup> Not only is gender important in decision-making, but also seniority. When the chief is young the court is subtly controlled by the older, more experienced counsellors. (Hammond-Tooke 1993:91; Hunter 1979:416). In Christian tradition, leadership has also mostly been in the hands of (older) males. Yet this is rapidly changing so that in many Christian communities no distinction is made between young or

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<sup>753</sup> “Religious leaders have the responsibility to ensure that the bond between the living and the ancestors remains intact and that the community enjoys the wherewithal for the preservation and continuation of life” (Magesa 1998:71). Moreover, the ritual expert is viewed as the restorer of the integrity of the (personal and social) disrupted body, as the integrity of the body is based on the proper alignment of the categories of the cosmos (Comaroffs 1991:156). Through ritual, and with the help of a ritual expert, disruption is set right, harmony is restored.

<sup>754</sup> The religious practitioner such as the “diviner acts as the mediator between the victim of affliction and the afflicting agent by penetrating into the spirit realm and returning with an intelligible etiology of the ill health” (Danfulani 2000:97).

<sup>755</sup> See Landau (1995:114), who traces the divergent roles of the missionary and the traditional priest-healer in colonial Africa.

<sup>756</sup> According to 1 Corinthians 12, “there are varieties of spiritual gifts”. A Christian religious “expert” is not guaranteed to have a particular spiritual gift, but it is up to “one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.”

<sup>757</sup> “No women attend except those bringing cases and those called as witnesses” (Hunter 1979:415).

old, male or female leaders or “experts”. Provided they have a “calling” and have undergone the required training, all are capable of leading a church – regardless of their age or sex.

As shall be elaborated in section 4.1.15, African traditional leaders of reconciliation often take on mediatory roles (Kgatla 02.09.2004; Mönnig 1988:282, 299; Ntsimane 2000:22). As mediators they facilitate between the two disputing parties, and often even plead and implore on behalf of the wrongdoer for the wronged to be merciful. Mediators occupy a very active and involved position in the process of reconciliation. In rituals of Christian tradition, on the other hand, leaders do not usually fulfil a mediating function. Rather, they are administrators of the rituals, and possibly also act as pastoral counsellors to those who are emotionally troubled by the events.

In African tradition, legal and religious experts are called upon to give counsel and advice on the reconciliation procedure. Their wisdom in legal matters is respected. This is not so for Christian leaders. Being trained in theology and church administration, they have no overt legal or political power, nor is their “knowledge” of these things particularly respected. They are called upon for leadership in theological, ecclesial and pastoral issues, but not in matters pertaining to the law and the juridical process. These differences in the roles of leaders in African tradition and Christian tradition point to a fundamental separation of religious and secular life in the case of Christian tradition, and an inextricable integration of religious and secular life in African tradition.

#### 4.1.6 Views of the person and community

Although there are many similarities between an African traditional and Christian concept of the human being (which will be elaborated in chapter 5), I am compelled not to ignore the points of discrepancy that exist between the two concepts. African tradition claims that there is “Supreme Goodness” which is lodged in all people (Teffo 2002:127). *Ubuntu* highlights that “quality about a person which elevates him (sic) to a plane very near to godliness” (Mogoba 1981:56). Africans therefore foster a very optimistic anthropology; *ubuntu* expects the best, hopes for the best and brings out the best in people. Christian tradition holds that human beings are subject to original sin – the desire to do and be evil, inherent unbelief, and the inability to release or free oneself from this state (see section 3.3.1). Instead of highlighting the inherent goodness in human beings, Christianity often emphasises the sinful tendency lodged in human nature. Humans are by nature “fallen”, and need to be redeemed or saved from this fallen state in order to be and do good.<sup>758</sup>

The most elementary feature of *ubuntu* is its focus on community. African tradition favours communalism (community or collectivism) above individualism. We have seen that African legal procedures emphasise the responsibility of the group rather than (only) the individual, and that community rights are elevated above individual rights (Mönnig 1988:308). In Christian tradition the community is also very important.<sup>759</sup> Yet much of Christian rhetoric also focuses on the individual, and the individual’s relationship with God. In many Christian circles, much emphasis is placed on individuals’ personal encounter with God – a personal relationship with Jesus – or individuals’ personal decision to follow Christ. As a result, many aspects of Christian teaching and practice, including sacramental ritual, highlight the individual above the group.

Arguably, the African elevation of community may lead to a glorification (almost a veneration) of it. Indeed, Teffo argues that *ubuntu/botho* is “the spiritual foundation of all African societies” (Teffo 1995b). Thereby the community is raised to a pedestal of almost immaculate proportions. The community, it seems, can become seen as the focal point and source of all spirituality. In the Christian tradition, the community is seldom seen as

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<sup>758</sup> See Conradie (2005:16-17) for an insightful appraisal of different theologians’ views on sin.

<sup>759</sup> Christians see themselves as members of the body of Christ, all belonging together in Christ (see 1 Corinthians 12).

something to be venerated, but as a fallible, sinful vehicle of God's grace. Christians' source of spiritual life is not the community, but the Spirit of Christ. The community is not in itself "spiritual" but is encouraged to cultivate a spirituality that engenders Christ (Bonhoeffer 1986:100-139). The Christian community is founded upon Christ, who is its ideal and source of power. It lives in anticipation of the Reign of this Christ. In African tradition there is no such source upon which the community is founded, but the community itself is the people's source of power.

In African traditional community, unwavering respect of and obedience to adults, parents, seniors and any kind of other authority is expected. This implies a stratified, even hierarchical, structure underlying the society (Sidhom 1969:106; Mönning 1988:322). According to Christian tradition, the ideal community is one where social standing, rank, gender or seniority are not determinative. Through baptism "into Christ", "all are one in Christ" and there is "neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female" (Galatians 3:27-28). Christian community is (or ought to be) devoid of all social stratification based on external qualities (such as age, rank, culture or sex), but strives for equality among all (Breytenbach 1986:21). It is moreover a community which seeks to serve, regardless of who serves whom and who is served by whom. In fact, to serve others is considered more honourable than to be served.<sup>760</sup> Jesus is the prototypical servant, who did not regard himself higher or more worthy than children, women or social outcasts.

#### 4.1.7 Exclusive or inclusive?

Certain African traditional practices can arguably be considered exclusive. It often appears that the parameters that determine inclusion or exclusion are defined culturally or ethnically. If you are not "African" by ethnicity or culture, African tradition is not "yours"; it does not apply to you, and you have no claim to it. In matters of religious practice, the boundaries that exclude "others" are sometimes even more narrowly drawn. In the case of one ethnic group in South Africa,

A man's (sic) gods have no reason whatever to interfere with people belonging to another family. The religion of the Ba-Ronga is strictly a family affair. The jurisdiction of the gods does not extend further than their direct descendants . . . and the moral influence is limited, therefore, to the narrow sphere of the family. (Hammond-Tooke 1993:164, citing Junod 1910:179-82)<sup>761</sup>

In the particular case of the *Rite of 'TSU'* (outlined in section 2.4.1), some scholars claim that the ritual has no effect if done with a stranger, i.e. a person whose ancestors belong to a different clan (Tlhagale 2003). The point is that in African tradition familiar, kinship or clan relationships are of primary importance. In some cases, people from other tribes and cultural heritages are not considered human beings, a fact usually implied in language structure (i.e. noun classes). A person "belongs" (i.e. is included) by virtue of her/his cultural background, ethnicity or lineage. Persons of other ethnicities are excluded.

In contrast to this, Christian traditional practices may be deemed fundamentally inclusive. When it comes to participation in religious events and practices, it is not a person's heritage by birth (i.e. race, nationality, culture, gender, etc.) that matters but her/his belonging to the body of Christ through the power of the Spirit (Breytenbach 1986:21). "Belonging" to the group is determined by baptism, and baptism can be performed over anyone. Ultimately, what binds people together in Christian tradition is not their ethnic heritage, but their common belief system. To use Christian jargon, people

<sup>760</sup> Jesus said (in Luke 22:26), "Let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves." See also Matthew 20:28 and 23:11. In many instances, Jesus attacked the honour-shame culture of his day (Schreier 1998:60).

<sup>761</sup> This is, for example, also the case among the Herero (Wienecke 18.02.2004). Wienecke comments that in traditional settings it is very difficult to broaden the concept of reconciliation to go beyond the family and clan. See also Kasonga (1994:56).

belong together because they together form the “body of Christ”, and share the path of following this Christ as disciples.<sup>762</sup>

In African tradition, the “narrative”<sup>763</sup> to which all members adhere to is the narrative of culture and ethnicity, of family, clan, lineage and tribe. It may aptly be described as an “internal” or “inherent” narrative, and is therefore implicitly exclusive. In Christian tradition, the “narrative” underlying the Christian community is the narrative of faith, depicted in Scripture and in the events of history. The cardinal narrative is, as I have argued in section 3.2, that of the cross and resurrection. I claim that this narrative is a powerful “external narrative” (see section 3.2.4). An “external narrative” (or “metanarrative”) is basically inclusive. It is universal and pervasive, i.e. it is not bound to one single cultural group.

Previously, I have tried to show that the gospel of the cross is not, and can never be, exclusive. It is radically inclusive, even of the “unacceptable” (where “unacceptability” may be defined in any terms whatsoever, e.g. social, moral, ethnic, etc.).<sup>764</sup> The scandal of the cross is that it is the ultimate expression of “the will to embrace” those on the outside (Volf 1996:126). Christianity’s story, as an external narrative, can be anyone’s and everyone’s story, and by its potential universality it can bridge the gaps and chasms which have occurred and widened throughout human history. Its message is a reconciling force because it is able to cross the boundaries and the limitations of the various ethnic, racial, cultural, and even religious groups. One manifestation of this inclusivity is the nurturing of ecumenism, which involves both inter-church as well as inter-religious dialogue (see section 3.4.5).

#### 4.1.8 Meaning of “reconciliation”

In section 3.1.2 it was discovered that Christian Scriptures deal with three aspects of reconciliation, viz. the justice aspect, the cultic aspect, and the christological aspect (Klein 1999:58). I see many resemblances between the justice and cultic aspects of reconciliation in Christian tradition and African traditional reconciliation endeavours. These shall be discussed in chapter 5. Here, I however wish to highlight that which does *not* correspond in Christian and African tradition concerning the meaning of reconciliation. What is unique in Christian tradition is the christological aspect of reconciliation. As elaborated in previous sections, reconciliation is God’s deed through the cross of Christ (Breytenbach 1986:19). God is no longer the wrathful and demanding recipient of human atonement (as in the case of the cultic understanding of reconciliation), but the gracious donor of atonement. Atonement effectively is seen as a gift of grace and salvation instead of as a demand or a punishment (Breytenbach 2000:1692). Therefore, reconciliation “denotes the new peaceful relation between God and the justified sinner” (1986:3). It is frequently understood in relation to the concepts of justification, redemption or liberation, or Christ’s work of salvation (1986:2).

In Christian tradition the concept of reconciliation is therefore theologised; a term relating primarily to human-human relationships is broadened to include the human-divine relationship. Reconciliation always has theological significance, because ultimate

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<sup>762</sup> Notwithstanding these assertions, it is ironic that in practice African communities often show great hospitality towards outsiders or foreigners, while Christian communities frequently display quite exclusive tendencies in their conduct towards outsiders.

<sup>763</sup> Societies have (and need) workable “narratives” in which they find their identities, and in which they are brought under a canopy of mutuality and belonging together. See for example Balcomb’s analysis of the importance of narrative for social well-being in his article, “The Power of Narrative: Constituting Reality through Storytelling” (2000:49-62). Balcomb argues for the “centrality of narrative as a fundamental epistemological category” (:54). One could also talk of “dominant images” and “master texts” that function to create a social identity and collective memory (Villa-Vicencio 2000:25).

<sup>764</sup> See Nünberger (2003:9-25) who argues for “the gospel of God’s unconditional, suffering, redeeming acceptance of the unacceptable as the foundation of Christian unity”.

reconciliation occurs through the salvific work of Christ. It is an act of God, a gift for humankind and all of creation. It implies a state of peace between God and humanity, and among all God's creatures. It is the prerequisite for salvation, and the basis for God's all-encompassing reconstruction ("new creation") of the universe. In contrast, in African tradition reconciliation does not intrinsically have a theological meaning. It does not imply the work of God. Rather, African tradition sees reconciliation primarily as a social and anthropological category, and deals with it in those terms (Mulago 1969:137; Koka 1998:31; Mbiti 1969:108-109). Reconciliation is about the restoration of inter-personal, human-human relationships, and not about keeping intact or restoring relationships between humans and God.

Reconciliation for Christians entails the creation of a new humanity (Gaventa 1986:143; Ruhbach 1986:43). Yet frequently this new humanity is discussed in terms of the "body of Christ" or the church. Traditionally, therefore, the Christian notions of reconciliation have a strong ecclesiological thrust. The one church is the most overt manifestation of social reconciliation (Stückelberger 1988:433; Richardson 2001:55). In African tradition it is not the ecclesial (church) community that is the focus of reconciliation, but rather the family, clan or indigenous cultural/ethnic community.

Although the church is the basis for reconciled human existence, reconciliation is not confined to the church. Christians believe that through the cross God reconciles the whole of humanity, the entire created order – to Godself and to itself. The reconciliation of the cosmic and celestial forces is an anticipated eschatological reality (Colossians 1:20) (Breytenbach 1986:20). Therefore, the Christian vision of reconciliation can be deemed not only unequivocally inclusive and all-encompassing, but also inherently eschatological (Schmithals 1968:317; Sattler 1998:111). In contrast, in my investigations I have not been able to trace an eschatological thrust in African traditional notions of reconciliation. Although it might be implied, there is not at first glance an eschatological dimension to reconciliation. As asserted above, reconciliation primarily has social and practical implications. Just as it is not explicitly related to God (theology), it is not overtly related to eschatological fulfilment either.

#### 4.1.9 Understanding of "sin"

In African traditional understanding, "Sin' is any activity by which individuals attempt to destroy, to diminish and threaten the lives of the community members" ("Summary Report" 2002:20). We have seen (in sections 2.2 and 2.3) that *sebe*, translated as "sin"<sup>765</sup> in one of the South African language groups, involves any deed or behaviour that affects communal life adversely. *Sebe* "includes all wrongs perpetrated by one person against another or by one group of people against another; it includes moral faults, such as lack of respect, dishonesty, and slander. It ranges from murder and theft to discourtesy to one's superiors" (Mönnig 1988:65). The African "ethics of dynamism" demand that disruption caused by sin must be counteracted through correct behaviour by setting relations right (Adegbola 1969:116).

Sin constitutes an offence against the human group as a whole, and still further against the ancestral spirits. Sin is inherently the destruction of the group's solidarity, so that a person sins, not against God, but against others. (Kgatla 1992:328)

In distinction from this, Christian tradition sees sin primarily as separation and alienation from God. It is considered to be an offence against God, and God's purposes for humanity.

'Sin' is a descriptive word used in the Bible to identify a perversion of people's relationships with God, with one another and with the natural world of which

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<sup>765</sup> Mönnig argues that *sebe* in fact has little similarity to the Christian concept of sin.

they are an inherent part. It involves living a life of enmity, of violation and inhumanity. It is the incapacity to be fully human. (Villa-Vicencio 1992:162) The primary and underlying separation from God results in the separation of humans from each other. This means that estrangement between humans is a reflection and manifestation of the estrangement between God and humans (Rogness 1970:34). Indeed, "It is only in relation to God that man (sic) attains that stature of a sinner" (Rogness 1970:45). In Christian tradition sin is therefore understood chiefly in theological terms, while in African tradition it is a predominantly social category.

The cause of sin in Christian tradition is foreignness from God, a state of alienation from God. People are "in sin" (or exist as sinners) because of the breached relationship between them and their Creator. This state of "being sinners" causes sinful behaviour. People "sin" because they are not in relationship with God. Sin, therefore, is first and foremost considered a transgression against God, from which inevitably flow transgressions against other people. In comparison, African tradition perceives sin "a transgression of the ethical laws and norms derived from the ancestors" (Kgatla 1992:328).<sup>766</sup> A person's level of good ethics and morality "is measured by conformity to tribal ethics and laws" (Buys and Nambala 2003:6). This suggests that the cause of sin is not a breached relationship with God, but violation against tribal custom. Since customary laws come from the ancestors, one could argue that a violation of these is a sign of a breached relationship with the ancestors. Ultimately, transgressions do not represent offences against God but against the community, including the community of ancestors.

Sin in African tradition is usually associated with human *action* and conduct that threatens the well-being of society. It involves "doing" wrong, rather than "being" wrong. Christian tradition, though it also sees sins as wrongful actions or deeds, stresses that sin essentially is a state of being. It is therefore understood primarily in ontological terms, and only secondarily in terms of behavioural conduct, as in African tradition. To Christians, the term "sinner" refers to a person's status rather than to her/his actions (although the status inevitably determines what actions are performed; i.e. a sinner inevitably performs sinful actions).

African tradition often associates sin with pollution. According to Mönning, *ditshila*, i.e. dirt or impurity, is closely connected to *sebe*. *Ditshila* can be acquired unconsciously, through pollution causes of which one is unaware. It is "a contaminating condition which can infect those who come into contact with it" (Mönning 1988:66). Although Christian tradition also uses terminology surrounding pollution (such as "uncleanness", "impurity" or "dirt") when describing sin (see section 3.3.1), it does not consider this pollution to be acquired through contact with other pollutants – through carelessness, unconsciously, or by chance. Sin is an internal state, and not to be likened to a disease that can be caught.

Although in Christian tradition sin is essentially (supposed to be) seen in terms of its universal dimensions and effects, it is in practice often individualised and personalised, and seen as something internal.<sup>767</sup> In many cases, the focus is on the sinful individual and his/her internal guilt, rather than on sinful systems, structures or policies and communal guilt. Personal culpability and responsibility is highlighted above systemic or group culpability, a fact which is implied by the typical modes of repentance and confession that are used (see section 3.3.2). In African tradition, on the other hand, sin is seldom considered in personal and individual terms only. An offence is not seen in isolation from the broader context (Sidhom 1969:112), but has bearing on the entire net of forces at

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<sup>766</sup> "The enemies of life" include "bad actions which emanate from bad people" (Magesa 1998:150). Wrongdoing is essentially the contravention of moral codes (:153). People experience affliction as a consequence of wrongdoing (:158).

<sup>767</sup> I lament this fact in my critique of the Lutheran dogmatic tradition concerning sin in section 3.3.1.

work in the world. Sin is not only a personal reality, but also a social, political, spiritual, physical and metaphysical reality. This of course corresponds with the African traditional holistic view of life, and the interconnectedness and interdependence of the cosmos at large.

In African tradition, “law and morality” belong together (Hammond-Tooke 1993:93). This means that the concept of “sin” is intimately linked to breaking the law, disobeying rules. African tradition differentiates between two kinds of rules that roughly correspond with the Western notions of civil law and criminal law (Hammond-Tooke 1993:94; Krige 1974:223; Mönnig 1988:305; Schapera 1956:204, 208).<sup>768</sup> Again we see that for Africans, sin is not primarily a personal category, but a social – even legal – one. If seen in judicial terms, sin must be dealt with by means of courts of law, and their procedures and policies. Courts may impose punishment or exact compensation (Mönnig 1988:304). Civil law seeks to rectify a wrongful situation through compensation, such as a fine or restitution. Criminal transgressions are dealt with by punishment of the offender(s) as well as forms of reparation (Hammond-Tooke 1993:94; Ellenberger 1992:267). Sin is seen as both spiritual and secular. When dealing with sin, the spiritual and secular dimensions are collapsed into one. This is why there is no distinction between a “religious” (or spiritual) and a “secular” (or “legal”) approach to dealing with sin.

In Christian tradition, the “spiritual” and “secular” realms are seen as distinct (though not separate).<sup>769</sup> Sin is primarily seen as religious or spiritual wrong. Therefore, it is not treated in terms of judicial practices. The Christian church does not identify itself as a legal body, but as a religious one; its office is spiritual and not secular. Luther’s “two kingdoms” theory states that God rules the world through God’s left hand (i.e. through civil authorities) and through God’s right hand (i.e. through the gospel). God’s left hand work centres in law, i.e. in categories of order, justice, judgement and duty. God’s right hand work centres in the gospel, i.e. in categories of gift, grace, compassion and love. The church, as the prime instrument of God’s right hand work, operates mainly in the spiritual realm of life. The state and other worldly powers and authorities are the instruments of God’s “left hand”. In Christian understanding, the church is *not* responsible for sorting out legal matters. The law courts are considered the right place for dealing with criminal and civil offences; the church is the right place for dealing with sin. This distinction of the secular and spiritual realms in Christian tradition is foreign to African tradition, which fuses the two into one.

In Christian tradition sin is primarily handled by means of the office of the keys, an office presided over by the church (see sections 3.3.2 and 3.3.3). The church has no right to impose punishment on a sinner, or demand compensation or restitution for a victim (though it may suggest these measures). This is so because it is, by definition, not a legal body with legal powers and functions, as I have shown above. The church’s duty is to pronounce absolution, i.e. grant forgiveness, to anyone who confesses, regardless of whether or not compensation has been made for the sins committed. Ultimately, the church is not empowered to exact judgment over a person, or enforce recompense, because it believes that the ultimate verdict is up to the mercy and grace of God. It is God who forgives and releases us from the bondage of sin; the church is merely a conveyor of God’s grace. Therefore, in Christian tradition reconciliation, after sin has been committed, may occur without outward signs of amends or retribution.<sup>770</sup> In

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<sup>768</sup> Hinz (2002:36) would agree that there is a distinction between the two types, but that they are usually treated as one in court settings.

<sup>769</sup> Refer to my appraisal of the Lutheran theory of the “two regiments” in sections 1.4.4 and 3.4.6. The reason modern Christianity distinguishes between (and often separates) the two “realms” may also be a result of having embraced, and being imbued by, the modern secular worldview (see section 1.5.1).

<sup>770</sup> The legal and cultic understanding of reconciliation attested to in the Biblical witness has been superseded by the christological understanding, which is elevated to the position of prime importance



African tradition, on the other hand, reconciliation is not believed to occur if the wronged party has not been compensated in some way. There must be an outward sign which demonstrates that the offending party wishes to atone for its sin.<sup>771</sup> If possible the wronged party must also show its acceptance of the atonement action, and offer forgiveness. This reveals, again, the social and external nature of how sin is perceived in African tradition, which may be contrasted to the spiritual and internal nature of how sin is perceived in Christian tradition.

#### 4.1.10 Understanding of “forgiveness”

In Christian understanding, forgiveness requires *metanoia* – “a new heart and a new spirit” (Levinson 1988:39). *Metanoia* is “fundamental and total orientation of man’s (sic) life toward God” (Küng 1978:273).<sup>772</sup> Therefore, repentance and forgiveness is seen in theocentric terms. Moreover, it implies change, transformation towards and into something *new*. In African tradition, “repentance” does not mean a turning toward God. Rather, it means a turning toward the community, and toward the moral laws and customs of the ancestors. It is therefore understood in anthropocentric or socio-centric terms. Instead of being made *new*, a person who repents and is forgiven is restored back to the *old* – i.e. the state of harmony and order provided and maintained by the ancestral customs and norms. In African tradition, the goal of repentance and forgiveness is getting back in line with traditional customary law and the state of existence associated with that.

In Christian tradition, forgiveness is a concept intimately connected to Christ and the cross. “Forgiveness is both the gateway to God and the climate of the life with God” (Rogness 1970:14). God initiates and completes reconciliation in us through Christ’s cross (Schreier 1998:14). So it is that the cross becomes the sign of God’s forgiveness and reconciliation. The story of Christ’s cross is the story of God’s radical act of “turning to” humankind which paves the way for humankind’s “turning to” God (Harran 1983:21). For Christians, therefore, the cross is the principal metaphor for God’s forgiveness of humankind, and the basis for a theology of forgiveness.<sup>773</sup> Moreover, the duty of forgiving others is linked with divine forgiveness (Taylor 1952:15). Therefore one can argue that Christian tradition forwards a theological and indeed theocentric notion of forgiveness. Forgiveness always involves God, and is never only a human occurrence. Indeed, God is the main actor in a reconciliation process involving forgiveness. In African tradition, on the other hand, repentance and forgiveness are not connected to an act of God. God is not necessarily involved in a process of forgiveness. Rather, it is a purely human affair; forgiveness for an evil deed must come from the wronged party, not primarily from God. The ancestors may be included in rites of forgiveness and reconciliation, but God is not. Indeed, forgiveness is seen in anthropological and social terms, but not fundamentally in theological terms.

According to Christian tradition, forgiveness from God cannot be attained or “achieved” through correct behaviour or right actions – it can merely be accepted as a gift. As a Lutheran, the teaching of *sola gratia* induces me to assert that forgiveness –

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(Klein 1999:58). Nonetheless, authentic repentance may involve performing works of penitence or satisfaction (“Bußwerke”) (Sattler 1998:86), which often include public confession and some form of compensatory action (Moyo 2002:300; Ruhbach 1986:43; Kistner 1999:51, 55; see section 3.3.2).

<sup>771</sup> Among the Herero, for example, there must either be blood revenge (“Blutrache”), or a substitutional sacrifice (“Ersatzopfer”) has to be offered, which may be in form of a ransom payment (“Auslösungssumme”) (Wienecke 18.02.2004).

<sup>772</sup> A fundamental orientation toward God inevitably implies transformation towards and into the body of Christ, the community of believers (Gaventa 1986:46).

<sup>773</sup> See Mfutso-Bengo (2001:83), Jones (1995:xii), Vosloo (2001:28-29).

when granted by God – is unconditional and occurs apart from “good works”.<sup>774</sup> (Nonetheless, much emphasis is placed on repentance and penitent action. The question is just whether repentance is a prerequisite of forgiveness or a result thereof. I have argued in section 3.3.3 that the latter option more closely resembles an authentic Christian approach.) In African tradition, since forgiveness is fundamentally a human affair<sup>775</sup>, the human need for compensation, reparation and possibly even revenge is taken more seriously. People are not expected to forgive if proper restitution has not been offered (be it actual or symbolic).

Forgiveness seeks confession in Christian tradition. Church history reveals a strong heritage of confession of sins as a practice related to obtaining or granting forgiveness. Confession usually implies *speaking* – stating and admitting the truth in verbal or literal terms. In African tradition penitent *action* is considered more important than truth-telling<sup>776</sup>, because actions speak louder than words. Compensatory action (symbolic or concrete) can therefore be interpreted as “confession”, even if no verbal apology has been made.

Although verbal confession has a strong tradition in Christianity, it has increasingly become an individualised and sacramentalised practice. Over the ages, the increased “sacramental captivity of forgiveness” (Shriver 1995:49) resulted in the phenomenon that penance progressively became to be seen as private, secret, and divorced from secular life. Moreover, Luther overtly elevated the importance of private confession (“*Einzelbeichte*”) above other forms of confession, such as public or liturgical confession. Since the Reformation, therefore, confession is predominantly associated with situations of pastoral care and counselling. Forms of penance practiced in the (mainly Protestant) Christian traditions today tend to be individualistic in nature and form. Even public forms of penance focus on the individual and his/her sense of remorse or guilt. Also, much emphasis is placed on private sins, and little on social or structural sins, when confession is made. In contrast to this, African tradition highlights the importance of forgiveness as a public, social and secular affair. An offence is not seen in isolation from the broader context of community life. As a result, an offender “does not stand alone in guilt”; his/her family, the community, share in it (Sidhom 1969:112). Similarly, therefore, forgiveness is not only the affair of an individual, but must emanate from the whole community which the individual represents. Forgiveness implies the participation of the group, and not (primarily) the inner absolution of an individual.

The Christian practice of confession and penance is generally confined to ecclesial institutions, norms, structures and policies. It is lamentable that Christian traditional forms of confession are usually bound to “church” settings (i.e. they occur in a church building or pastor’s office, (priest’s) confessional, or during a worship service). One may argue that Christian confession practices are being held captive by the church. For this reason, there is a dire need for new modes of expressing penance (Schlemmer 1998:143-5). Christian tradition needs to broaden its repertoire to include non-ecclesial, non-sacramental forms of confession, penance and absolution, which may include new symbols and unconventional ritual elements (Schlemmer 1998:146-7). In African

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<sup>774</sup> In the light of the law, we stand condemned. Yet in the light of the gospel, proclaimed as the word of the cross, we are saved from this condemnation, and our *metanoia* is effected.

<sup>775</sup> In human and social terms, forgiveness is often seen in relation to a person’s honour or shame. Jesus’ preaching on forgiveness was an attack on the honour-shame culture of his day (Schreier 1998:60). In Christianity, what is at stake with forgiveness is not a person’s honour or shame, but her/his relationship with God and his/her fellow human beings.

<sup>776</sup> “Right conduct is relative always to the human situation and morality is oriented not from any absolute standards of honesty or truth but from the social good in each situation. Conduct that promotes smooth relationships, that upholds the social structure, is good; conduct that runs counter to smooth relationships is bad. Courtesy and the respect due to age or seniority are thus of greater importance than truth” (Krige 1976:78).

tradition, confession, repentance and forgiveness are practiced in a plethora of ways. They are not confined to ecclesial norms, forms and situations. They are by nature “grass-roots” and community-based, and not linked to an institution. Therefore, they are less rigid and fixed, and more flexible and adaptable, than Christian traditional forms.

#### 4.1.11 Motivation for engaging in reconciliation

In Christian tradition, to be reconciled is to “exist eschatologically”, because one is freed from sin (Schmithals 1968:317). The goal and orientation of Christian life is the eschatological Reign of God. The ideal for which Christians strive is yet to come, and therefore their lives gain an intrinsic future-orientation and thrust. For African traditionalists, there is no eschatological Reign of God toward which life is geared. Therefore, reconciliatory actions do not wish to usher in such an eschatological reality, but wish to provide an avenue for upholding (or returning to) the traditions of old. The ancestral ways are what give African traditionalists their stability and strength, which is why they form the foundation of all reconciliation attempts. Christians, on the other hand, base their reconciliation endeavours on an eschatological vision of comprehensive well-being. Put in simple terms, African tradition seems to be basically backward-looking (i.e. it looks to its ancient traditions, to “how things were” or ought to remain), while Christian tradition seems to be fundamentally forward-looking (i.e. it looks to God’s future for the world, to “how things shall be”).

The motivation for reconciliatory practice in Christian tradition is intrinsically theological. More specifically, it is christological. Christian reconciliation praxis must involve, at its most basic level, a christological starting point (Kaiser 1996:193). Christ’s work of reconciliation on the cross is the original and archetypal paradigm for Christian reconciliation endeavours (see section 3.2). It is because of Christ’s cross that Christians are obliged to be people of reconciliation. The story of the cross and the resurrection compels them to become ambassadors of Christ and ministers of reconciliation.<sup>777</sup> Alternatively, in African tradition, there is no “master text” or quintessential story that lies at the heart of people’s quest for reconciliation. Even if there were one, it would most certainly neither be christological nor broadly theological in form or content. In African tradition, communities do not strive for reconciliation because of their “calling” to do so; they do not act in obligation to a principal narrative of their faith. Rather, they strive for reconciliation because it is important for the safety, survival and well-being of the community. While reconciliation is, first and foremost, a matter of (divine) duty and calling for Christians, it is a matter of survival and (social) necessity for traditional Africans.

In accordance with Christian tradition, reconciliation is the *magna charta*, the central aim and purpose, of the Christian community (see section 3.4). Christians strive for reconciliation not only within their own communities (i.e. within the church), but are called to be witnesses and ministers of reconciliation to the whole cosmos. The Christian vision of reconciliation therefore encompasses the whole world, and does not confine itself to one particular community. In contrast, although reconciliation endeavours are also very important in African tradition, one could argue that they cannot be deemed the *magna charta* of African traditional societies. Moreover, in African tradition reconciliatory endeavours do not typically include people of “other” ethnicities and cultures, but are normally confined to mono-cultural settings. This seems to belie the fact that African traditional cosmologies are inherently inclusive and all-encompassing.

The Christian understanding that reconciliation ought eventually to involve the whole of the cosmos again points to the primary story of the cross and resurrection. I have argued that this story is a powerful “external narrative” which is not limited to one

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<sup>777</sup> It is the church’s duty and call to break the walls of division that exist among people of different backgrounds and cultural heritages (Ephesians 2:14).

single human context, but may be owned by any human community anywhere.<sup>778</sup> As such it has the inbuilt capacity to overcome human differences and boundaries. As I have shown, African tradition does not have one primary “narrative” upon which it builds all its reconciliatory theory and praxis. The story of the cross and the resurrection is not at the heart of African tradition. Instead, the African traditional notion of *ubuntu* is a paradigm which may display the potency to bridge gaps between human beings – no matter who they are. Of all resources in African tradition, *ubuntu* could therefore perhaps be called an African “metanarrative”, or “external narrative”, to be employed for the sake of social reconciliation. However, even if it is true that both Christian tradition and African tradition seemingly each have a resource which potentially can overcome all human boundaries, these resources are not the same. Though similar in intention, the Christian narrative of the cross and resurrection and the African paradigm of *ubuntu* are not equivalent.

#### **4.1.12 What is authoritative in a reconciliation process?**

In African tradition, authority in reconciliation procedures is lodged in the oral traditions which encompass indigenous legal and ritual customs and laws, taboos and prohibitions. These oral traditions are rooted in and specifically drawn from ancient African cultures. Authority to preside over reconciliation processes lies in the hands of traditional leadership – both religious experts and tribal judiciaries (see section 2.3). The needs of the community also determine the reconciliation process, and the outcome is frequently based on community consensus.

In Christian tradition, the Bible is regarded as the central guide of faith and life (see section 3.1.1). In contrast to African tradition, Christianity therefore relies heavily on literary resources. These resources have (mostly) come into existence outside Africa in terms of their cultural origins. Indeed, Old Testament stories of reconciliation reflect aspects of ancient Semitic culture, while reconciliation stories in the New Testament draw from the Jewish and Hellenistic cultures of the first centuries CE.<sup>779</sup> The Christian heritage has a rich store of “grand stories of confession, forgiveness, reconciliation and truth” (Botman 1996:37), many (but not all) of which are to be found in the Bible. As I have demonstrated in section 3.2, the story of Jesus arguably represents the Christian “master text” for reconciliation. It is the main authority underlying Christian reconciliation endeavours. Therefore, the “living Word” of Scripture and of Jesus Christ himself provides the frame of reference for reconciliation in the Christian tradition.

#### **4.1.13 Reconciliation process**

In African traditional legal practices, heated rhetoric and incisive forensic interrogation is part of the reconciliation process. Much stress is placed on arbitration and interactive co-operation. The chief’s judgment reflects a democratic system based on consensus which attempts to gauge majority opinion (Hammond-Tooke 1993:93; Mageša 1998:240; Ellenberger 1992:266-7). In Christian tradition, reconciliation processes (e.g. confession and absolution, the Eucharist) seldom involve “forensic interrogation”, arbitration and interactive co-operation. Majority opinion also does not count as much as the “opinion” of ritual leaders and normative Scriptural references and principles.

In most reconciliation processes in African tradition, the presence of the relevant ancestors must be invoked (Kasonga 1994:55). Usually, those participating in the process must belong to a homogeneous group, e.g. one clan or village, “in which everyone shares

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<sup>778</sup> The cross *is* a social ethic (see Hauerwas 1986:44), and societies that are shaped by the cross – whatever form or shape it takes in their context – bear witness to the cross of Christ.

<sup>779</sup> Biblical scholarship and theological treatises, too, bear the mark of many different cultural and historical contexts.

the same world view” and where everybody’s understanding is based on a common language. At least one acknowledged person must play the role of the facilitator and leader in the process; this person is often an “expert” of sorts, e.g. a traditional doctor, diviner, chief or chief’s counsellor. Moreover, the audience must play the part of witnessing to the whole procedure (Kasonga 1994:56). In contrast, in traditional Christian reconciliation procedures, it is not the ancestors that are invoked, but God. The participants do not have to belong to a homogeneous group (i.e. share the same culture and ethnicity) for the process to be efficacious. Christian reconciliation rites are not confined to a particular ethnic or cultural context, but may draw from and be inculturated in any culture. Furthermore, there does not always have to be a “facilitator” to the process. Confession and absolution, for example, may occur without the presence and aid of a facilitator or “expert”. Often in Christian reconciliation processes, there is no “audience” which acts as witness, since reconciliation is frequently done privately and not publicly. If there are witnesses present, they are normally part of the church or congregation under whose patronage the reconciliation rite is conducted.

Reconciliation processes in Christian tradition almost always occur under the auspices of the church. The church as reconciling institution has a mandate to perform the ministry of reconciliation. The church has a plethora of methods or instruments available for conducting this ministry (see section 3.4). Direct assets include the church’s economic and financial abilities, the number of church helpers (i.e. “manpower”), and already-existent organisational structures. Indirect methods that the church employs for reconciliation include diaconical service, pastoral counselling, providing a forum for confession and forgiveness, and influencing moral culture. The church has the ability of providing metaphors for a new “civil religion” – metaphors which are drawn from its Biblical and ecclesial heritage (see section 3.4.7). There are a myriad of examples of how the Christian tradition has already demonstrated its fortitude and determination to engage processes of reconciliation. Examples of reconciliatory practice include propagation of reconciliation theologies by theologians and church leaders, healing seminars, establishing funds, seminars on racism, and various SACC programmes (see section 3.4.8). The point is that the Christian tradition has a heritage of employing the organisational, strategic and institutional means at its disposal for reconciliation processes. African tradition, on the other hand, seems to operate on a less formalised, less institutional level. Its reconciliation endeavours are less “organised” and more spontaneous and *ad hoc* by nature and in form. The methods and instruments that are at its disposal are not linked to global structures and institutions, but reveal “grass-roots”-type capacities and interests. African traditional approaches, for example, do not usually involve organised programmes, seminars or articulated theologies.

One of the methods used in Christian tradition is to influence moral culture through propagating an eschatological vision for the world. This vision of God’s Reign is the church’s driving force for striving for a just and intact society here and now (Stückelberger 1988:467). In order to exemplify a community with an eschatological vision of wholeness for all of creation, and foster a culture of reconciliation in society, the church seeks to encourage all kinds of reconciliation praxis to occur regularly and deliberately. In African tradition, there is no eschatological guiding vision or future-orientation which drives the community towards implementing reconciliation processes. African traditional communities rather operate according to the laws of causality (Tempels 1969:67ff; Gyekye 1987:68, 76) which dictate that “if something happens, then we must react”. It may be fair to say that African traditional reconciliation approaches are reactive rather than pro-active, i.e. they respond to a given situation of conflict or strife as it arises. The eschatological vision which guides Christianity evokes pro-active behaviour. African tradition, on the other hand, does not have a “deliberate” agenda or sense of duty to improve the world. Therefore, it does not devise strategies and programmes proactively, but rather acts if and when the need arises.

#### **4.1.14 The role of ritual**

In African tradition, reconciliation inevitably implies the need for ritual (Magesa 1998:237). Ritual has the role of expelling incongruity and disharmony in society. It is my contention that African tradition usually focuses on the social aspect of ritual. Rituals “form an essential part of social life”, i.e. they build and restore community relations (“Elements to admire” 2004). They normally “set collectivity in motion; groups come together to celebrate them” (Durkheim 1995:352). The community of the living as well as the living dead are considered to participate. Many rituals are “mechanisms for reducing, excluding, or resolving social conflicts in society” (Danfulani 2000:99). Moreover, the “whole person, body and soul, is totally involved” in ritual (“Elements to admire” 2004). In distinction from many other cultures, African symbols are created “around people” (Sundermeier 1998:7). Symbolism in African tradition is “an instrument of social communication” (Sperber 1975:xii). Symbols and rituals stir people up, they “instigate social action” (Turner 1967:36). Ritual encourages “co-responsibility” so that “each person contributes his share in a spirit of participation” (“Elements to admire” 2004).

In Christian tradition, ritual arguably does not occupy as revered a place as it does in African tradition. Since the Protestant Reformation, many Christian denominations have become suspicious of ritual and have reduced their use of it to a minimum. It is safe to say that in Christian tradition ritual is not the primary approach used in reconciliation endeavours. Yet there are of course some Christian rituals that are used for reconciliation purposes, e.g. the Eucharist and certain forms of penance and confession. In contrast to African rituals, they often emphasise the individual, personal and internal aspects of reconciliation rather than the social and communal aspects. Regrettably, the social dimension, which is so pronounced in African rituals, has faded into oblivion or insignificance in many Christian rituals. Though some rituals in Christian tradition are intended to effect social reconciliation (e.g. the Lord’s Supper and confession and absolution), they are habitually used (only or mainly) for personal gratification and edification.

In Christian tradition, reconciliation is associated with the cross of Christ, as already discussed. When likening it to the resurrection, reconciliation comes to be seen as involving radical change, the painful work of the cross and reawakening thereafter. Reconciliation therefore cannot be attained by effortless, quick means; it is not “cheap” (Kistner 1999:52; Tutu 1999:218; Sölle 1975:44). It is about painful transformation which may require laborious effort. Perhaps the insistence on the pain and effort involved in reconciliation (shown in the story of Christ’s cross) denies any path of achieving reconciliation that could be deemed quick and easy. Perhaps the Christian tradition is suspicious of any method of attaining reconciliation that supposedly happens in a matter of minutes (as with some rituals). It may be that the scepticism of the West, which has strongly influenced the Christian tradition in recent centuries, forbids Christians to accept that authentic reconciliation can indeed occur through ritual. Ritual reconciliation may therefore be regarded as a “quick-fix” solution to a problem which requires more deliberate exertion in order to be adequately addressed.

#### **4.1.15 Ritual practices**

As we have seen in section 2.4, religion in Africa is not a matter detached from the body and the senses. In African tradition, rituals involve the human body, and frequently are concerned with bodily functions or secretions. Rituals create “a world of gestural construal, a world enacted, a world bodied forth” (Gorman 1994:22). Therefore, dance, gesture and movement are common elements of ritual in an African setting (Magesa

1998:212-213; Jahn 1961:62).<sup>780</sup> Indeed, ritual is fundamentally about physical action, “with words often only optional or arbitrarily replaceable” (Parkin 1992:11-12). The power of African ritual, therefore, lies in its actions and not its words. Usually, rituals are exercises in high drama.

This is not the case with rituals in Christian tradition. Christian rituals usually “have verbal meanings codified or separable from their actions” (Grimes 1982:60). Moreover, the words spoken during ritual are often considered to be more important than the actions performed. Compared with African rituals, Christian rituals make far less use of the body and the senses, and therefore appear to be less bold and dramatic. Traditionally, dance and vigorous movement are atypical components of Christian ritual, and even gestures are relatively demure. Generally, in Christian tradition human physicality is downplayed, while (incorporeal) spirituality is elevated to primary significance. Indeed, the emphasis on embodiment in Christian reconciliation practices is deficient.

In African tradition, celebration and festivity are embraced as part of the ritual of reconciliation. Once people have been reconciled, they celebrate, sing, dance, eat, play and have fun together. The traditional Christian denial and suppression of the body and the senses has led to the diminution of festivity and merriment, since these are associated with excessive bodily gratification and pleasure, as well as with recklessness and decadence. Therefore, there is a need to rediscover festivity and celebratory practices in the church (Klein 1999:260), which is linked to a need to overcome the sense of censure connected to joyful celebration.

We have seen that in African tradition the ancestors have a strong influence on the community of the living. Ancestors are approached before all important undertakings (Krige 1974:289). The customary means through which the living come into contact with the ancestors is sacrifice (Ellenberger 1992:258), which is why sacrifice plays such a significant role in many rituals.<sup>781</sup> Usually, there is a set of predetermined procedures for sacrificial ceremonies (Krige 1974:292-296; Moila 1987:82).<sup>782</sup> In Christian tradition, the ancestors cannot be considered to have as great an influence on the community as in African tradition. Ancestors are not central to many rituals, and are therefore not usually invoked for purposes of reconciliation.<sup>783</sup> In fact, in some (Protestant) Christian traditions, communication with or through the ancestors is disparaged and even prohibited. Furthermore, there is no ritual in Christian tradition that includes sacrifice to the ancestors. Though there are traces of sacrificial theology in certain conceptions of the Eucharist, it is never deemed to be a form of sacrifice to ancestors. In the few cases where Christianity makes room for sacrifice<sup>784</sup>, it is always sacrifice connected to God or Christ, never to the ancestors.

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<sup>780</sup> Dance represents “correct embodiment of the spiritual reality” (Jahn 1961:68). Jahn also highlights the use of drums during cleansing ceremonies (:72). In contrast to Western dancing, African dancing is symbolic, paradigmatic and illustrative (:85).

<sup>781</sup> Sacrifice is a way for humans to ask favours of the ancestors, to thank them for blessings, or to scold them when things go wrong. For example in some cases the ancestors (*badimo*) require “feeding”, i.e. food offerings. Adequate feeding of the ancestors leads to well-being and social prosperity (Moila 1987:94). Among the Herero, ancestors are approached at the ritual fire. Here, rituals are performed to “offer security for the family” and maintain “the heritage and traditions of the family” (Buys and Nambala 2003:6). Rituals at the ritual fire include supplications and sacrifices to ancestors, and secure the benevolence of ancestors (:7).

<sup>782</sup> In connection to this, Moila stresses the importance of cattle for ritual occasions (1987:96).

<sup>783</sup> In Roman Catholic tradition, the ancestors may be deemed significant, at least when they are considered to be saints, or fathers and mothers in the faith. Nonetheless, the weight of their role is not to be compared to that of ancestors in African tradition.

<sup>784</sup> Burkert (1972) has shown how ancient Greek sacrificial practices influenced early Christianity. See also Parrat (1995:90).

This leads to another difference that can be identified between ritual practice in African tradition and Christian tradition. In African tradition, reconciliation rituals normally include a third party whose role it is to mediate between the wronged and the wrongdoer. Mediation is a primary feature in African traditional reconciliation endeavours (see sections 2.3 and 2.4). Both living mediators (e.g. elders, ritual experts, court officials) as well as ancestral mediators are called upon to convene in situations of social dispute. In Christian tradition, mediation is not considered as important as in African tradition. Although indeed priests, ministers and counsellors are seen as mediators in certain reconciliation rites, this is not their primary function. In the case of Holy Communion, for example, the priest or pastor does not “mediate” between God and the congregation, but rather administers or “presides over” the gifts of the sacrament. In cases of confession, the priest or minister is not the mediator between two parties, but acts as comforter, supporter and conveyor of the divine gift of forgiveness. Although in certain Roman Catholic strands of the Christian tradition Christ, Mary or even the saints are viewed as mediators between living humans and God, this belief is not common to all of Christianity. Moreover, the role of Christ is usually much more than mediator. In confessional rites, Christ is the one who forgives. In the Eucharist Christ is the host. In all reconciliation endeavours, Christ *is* the reconciler; he does not merely *mediate* reconciliation but actually brings it about.

In a traditional African setting, “symbol formation can be clearly shown in four areas: village architecture, sacrifice, body symbolism, and medicine,” claims Sundermeier (1998:42). These categories can be expanded to include symbolism of space, colour symbolism, and the symbolic nature of certain bodily secretions (:45).<sup>785</sup> In the case of Christian rituals, village architecture does not play a great role, if any. Instead, church architecture may influence ritual actions, e.g. the location or design of the altar in the church. As demonstrated above, sacrifice is also not typical in traditional Christian rituals. Body symbolism is part of certain Christian rituals, yet it is less explicit than in African ritual contexts. Medicine *per se* is not used in Christian rituals, although one might argue that for some communities the bread and wine of Holy Communion serve the same purpose as “medicine” does in African rites.

There are a number of specific symbolic elements in the African traditional rituals of reconciliation I mention in section 2.4.1 that do not occur in Christianity’s rituals.<sup>786</sup> For example, the element of ritual cooling is not to be found in Christian rituals. Christian rituals do not make use of water mixed with ash either, nor of purification by fire, or of mixed herbs, animals’ blood, or of the land, earth or soil, or of the exchange of cattle. Tree bark, mud, leaves, medicine which induces a person to vomit, and a goat which is driven into the bush are also not elements to be identified in traditional Christian rituals of reconciliation. The ritual constituent of spitting<sup>787</sup> does not occur in Christian tradition either, nor does water used for drinking, vomiting, bathing, and enemas. As already illustrated above, Christian rituals do not necessarily involve “inhuman company” in form of ancestors, nor ever in the form of animals (Fardon 1990:34ff).

<sup>785</sup> According to Dillistone, further examples of very widespread symbolic forms entail food (1986:33, 34), the land, earth or soil (:45), clothing (:49), light and darkness (:57), fire, water (:63) and blood (:67).

<sup>786</sup> It is not the objective of this chapter to highlight those elements of African rituals that *do* correspond with Christian rituals, such as water used for cleansing, ash, clothing, meals or meal symbolism, the use of ritual space and the metaphorical use of blood. These complementary ritual elements will be the focus of discussion in chapter 5.

<sup>787</sup> In African tradition, spitting is a way of “symbolising the expulsion of negative and disruptive emotions preparatory to approaching the gods” (Hammond-Tooke 1993:158). “Tsu is the sacramental syllable by means of which the Ba-Ronga call their gods to the sacrifice” (:164, citing Junod 1910:179-82).



### **Conclusion**

In the above paragraphs, I have isolated a number of general and underlying aspects to be found in African tradition that are at odds with the Christian tradition, and vice versa. Some of the discrepancies mentioned are incidental, and have purely been elaborated for the sake of comprehensiveness. These include, for example, differences in ritual process and practice, different ritual symbols, different sources and different roles attached to religious practitioners. Other discrepancies and discontinuities that exist between African tradition and Christianity are more fundamental, and may represent points of real conflict in the dialogue between the two traditions. Such points of conflict, for example, arise out of different concepts of God, different understandings of sin and reconciliation, different motivations for doing reconciliation, and different sources of authority underlying the quest for reconciliation.

I now move on to a discussion of discrepancies and points of conflict that appear when the African traditional ritual of *Cleansing the chest of grudges* enters into dialogue with Christian tradition. In chapter 5, I will attempt to show that this dialogue can be, at base, fruitful and efficacious. Yet here, in order for my overall assessment to be balanced and not be deemed partial, I show those elements in *Cleansing the chest of grudges* that do not fit or agree easily with Christian tradition, but rather need to remain open to challenge and questioning.

## **4.2 Aspects of the ritual of *Cleansing the chest of grudges* that conflict with Christian tradition**

### **4.2.1 Origin and source**

Most important rituals to be found in Christian tradition have fairly clear historical or narrative origins. For example, the Eucharist is linked to the last Passover supper Jesus shared with his disciples. Baptism is linked to the baptisms done by John in first century Galilee. The practice of repentance and confession has its origins in stories of the Bible. The African traditional ritual we are discussing here does not have a definite origin. In fact, its origin is unknown, because it cannot be traced back to a specific event. The ritual is considered to be “really really very ancient”; yet there is no historical epoch or event attached to it (Koka 07.07.2004). This is an obvious difference between this ritual and Christian rituals. A primary reason for this difference is that Christianity has evolved as a written tradition, while African tradition is oral (see sections 1.5.2, 1.5.3, 2.1 and 3.1.1).

When interpreting Christian traditional rituals, there is a great store of literary sources that can be consulted. Primarily, the Scriptures bear witness to the origins of the rituals. Yet there are also multiple secondary sources that deal with the meaning and use of the rituals over the centuries of their existence, e.g. theological treatises, devotional or liturgical manuals, etc. In other words, knowledge about any traditional Christian ritual rests on a reserve of accumulated literary (as well as oral) sources of information that can be accessed relatively easily. When considering *Cleansing the chest of grudges*, there are no such sources to be consulted. Since he cannot refer to a collection of literary sources when explaining the ritual, Koka’s interpretation of it is a matter of “improvisation that rests on an implicit knowledge and obeys unconscious rules” (Sperber 1975:xi). Christian rituals, in contrast, may be interpreted using explicit knowledge or “encyclopaedic knowledge” (:91). Koka’s tools for interpretation rely on inferred or implicit knowledge – “unconscious knowledge” – which cannot be acquired “by rote”. Such “unconscious knowledge” is reconstructed again and again in new contexts (:x). Much more so than when Christian rituals are explained, the basic data for Koka’s explanation of the ritual

and its symbols are intuitions, i.e. “judgments that the members of a cultural group systematically express without elaborating on the underlying argument” (:xi).

#### 4.2.2 Frequency of use

According to Koka (07.07.2004), *Cleansing the chest of grudges* is not performed very often any more “in the modern times”. It seems to have fallen into very limited use. The reason for this is that it has apparently not been employed consistently on a regular basis. While this is true of some traditional Christian rituals (e.g. the feast of fools), most of the important rites have been performed for centuries, and continue to be practiced repeatedly in church settings all over the world. Some ceremonies, like those surrounding Advent, Christmas or Ash Wednesday, are performed only once every year, since they are attached to the church’s liturgical calendar. Yet others, like the Eucharist, baptism and confession, are regularly incorporated in worship services.

#### 4.2.3 Gender and leadership

When performing the ritual of *Cleansing the chest of grudges*, women and men are kept separate.<sup>788</sup> This is not so in the rituals of Christian tradition. Men and women have equal access to the rituals performed in church, and may participate in them together. Although Christian tradition is far from having rooted out sexism from within its ranks, there is at least no rule that men and women are to be treated separately – or differently – when it comes to the church’s rituals.

Moreover, in *Cleansing the chest of grudges*, leadership is male. The elders who preside over and mediate the ritual are men. Although I am not certain, I doubt whether women may lead such a ritual (Koka was not explicit in his explanation of gender roles). In Christianity, on the other hand, most larger Protestant communities allow for both male and female leadership of church rituals<sup>789</sup>, though, to be fair, one has to acknowledge that there is still an extra-ordinary predominance of male leadership in church institutions. Yet, in terms of presiding over and administering the sacraments and other rites, gender roles have in theory been equalised.

The role and duties of the leaders in *Cleansing the chest of grudges* are also rather different from the role and duties of leaders in Christian reconciliation practices. In this ritual, the elders have a guiding and judging, mediating and arbitrating role. In Christian rituals, the leaders are not so much judges and mediators as they are administrators. Instead of arbitrating and negotiating, they direct or “manage” the (liturgical) flow of the ritual itself, and at times play a counselling role as well.

#### 4.2.4 Public or private?

Reconciliation in African tradition is not a private affair. This is demonstrated clearly in the *Cleansing the chest of grudges* ritual. The fact that it is held in the village points to its being a community-centred event. Moreover, the circle structure underlying the ritual also points to its focus on the unity of a group. The ritual is performed not only for the personal benefit of the two individuals who are at loggerheads. Rather, the entire community that each of them represents, as well as the community of ancestors associated with these, is involved and in fact has a vested interest in the proceedings. The ritual is meant to (and does) affect the whole community. It is therefore an inherently communal, social and public experience. In fact, the element of publicity is of fundamental importance. The feud between two people or families, and its ultimate

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<sup>788</sup> According to Koka (07.07.2004), “there is no intermixing between women and men. That is our culture.”

<sup>789</sup> This is of course neither true for the Roman Catholics, nor for a number of smaller evangelical denominations. Yet most international Christian bodies and institutions are adamant about equalising gender discrepancies in the churches, enabling female leadership and generally improving the rights and opportunities of women.

resolution, is made transparent to the community by means of the ritual. Effectively, if two persons are reconciled through the ritual of *Cleansing the chest of grudges*, the groups or communities they overtly and covertly stand for are also reconciled.

In the Christian rituals and paradigms discussed, the personal aspect often takes precedence over the communal, the private over the public. In Christian tradition, most reconciliation rites have become excessively individualised, and have lost much of their social and public character and influence. This is so, for example, with confessional rites, as well as with the Lord's Supper. Even devotion to the cross of Christ is considered by many to be an inward and personal experience, rather than a communal and external one. The public and communal nature of *Cleansing the chest of grudges* is a challenge to the individualist tendencies apparent within Christian tradition.

In African tradition, the restoration of human relationships is the heart, as well as the ultimate aim, of the reconciliation process. This is shown also in *Cleansing the chest of grudges*. Because of its inclination toward individual and private concerns, Christian tradition often struggles to focus on inter-human relationships. Reconciliation endeavours frequently become a private matter between the wrongdoer and his/her victim, or even only between the wrongdoer and God. The broader context of the community is not always taken account of sufficiently. Therefore, in practice, the focus of reconciliation is often not the mending or re-establishment of human relationships, but the alleviation of personal guilt, and the restoration of the human being's relationship with God. Christian reconciliation rites would do well in learning from African tradition, and its emphasis on inter-personal ("horizontal" as opposed to "vertical") relationships, and the restoration of community.

#### **4.2.5 The body and the senses**

In *Cleansing the chest of grudges*, bodily actions are important – possibly more important than the words being spoken during the ritual. Participants engage in taking ash in their hands, and then licking ash from each other's hands. They wash their hands, and shake hands. Finally, they share a meal together. All these actions involve the use of the senses, and imply bodily movement and gesture. Indeed, "the symbolic medium of the physical body" (Douglas 1966:128) is expressed elaborately in this ritual. Christian reconciliation rituals, in contrast, place far less emphasis on the use of the body and the senses. Though gestures and movement occur, these are not considered to be the most striking and noteworthy features of the rituals. Instead, the verbal formulations attached to the gestures appear to bear greater weight. (E.g., the "words of institution" at the Eucharist bear more profound theological weight than the actual breaking of the bread and the pouring of the wine. Similarly, the words of absolution are perceived to have greater effect than the (optional) gesture of laying on of hands or the embrace of the enemies during the rite of confession.) In general, in Christian rituals what people *do* is less important than what is being *said*; pronouncements are more important than actions. It appears to be the other way around in African rituals, also in the ritual of *Cleansing the chest*.

#### **4.2.6 The ancestors**

In *Cleansing the chest*, the presiding elders invoke the ancestors to participate in and guide the proceedings. The presence of the ancestors is considered to be crucial for the orderly and right running of affairs during the ritual. Without wanting to elaborate on the theological implications of this statement, suffice it to say that in Christian reconciliation endeavours the ancestors are not implored to participate. Even if they are, their participation is not deemed decisive for the success of the ritual. They have no power to direct or influence the ritual, even if they are considered to be present. The only "inhuman company" (Fardon 1990:34) that matters in Christian endeavours is God. As such, God – and not the ancestors – is the ultimate judge, arbitrator and director of the events. It depends (only) on God whether the ritual "succeeds" in its endeavours or not.

#### 4.2.7 The necessity of human action

Through the *Cleansing the chest of grudges* ritual a moral offence (i.e. quarrelling and social enmity) is interpreted as a pollution offence “which can be instantly scrubbed out by ritual” (Douglas 1966:136). What was once a moral vice has been turned into “nothingness” through the motions of the ritual which dealt with it as if it were a form of pollution. In other words, it seems as though the “cleansing” brought about by means of the ritual is necessary for the wrongs to be cancelled, the “sins” to be forgiven. This implies that the rectification of the situation could not have occurred without the ritual, or that it would not occur unless the ritual was performed.

As a matter of principle, Christian tradition denies the need for any human accomplishment (including ritual) in order to achieve forgiveness of sins. According to the theology of the cross, Christ’s death rubs out all human offence once and for all. No human action can purport to effect the same. Of course, this theological assertion may suggest that ritual in Christian tradition has no use and may as well be done away with completely. Yet this is not so. The only difference is that rituals, as actions performed by humans for humans, cannot effect or bring about the gifts of grace which only God can bestow. In the final instance, God orchestrates human beings’ salvation, forgiveness and reconciliation; humans cannot orchestrate it themselves. Through ritual, humans merely participate in the work of God, and enact and embody the salvation granted by God. They are not the “makers” of their own welfare (be it reconciliation, forgiveness or whatever), but the recipients of it.

#### 4.2.8 Confession before forgiveness

The ritual of *Cleansing the chest of grudges* clearly determines the need for confession to take place before forgiveness can be granted. The wronged party only offers forgiveness once full disclosure and confession has occurred. One may argue that this sequence of events clashes with certain strands of Christian tradition. I have argued in section 3.3.3 that there are divergent trends within Christian tradition concerning when confession ought to or can be made. My own Lutheran heritage claims that repentance (which involves confession) is usually a consequence of having received forgiveness; it is not a requirement. Effectively, the order of the ritual action as it stands should be reversed, so that confession or penitent action *follows or results from* forgiveness. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that even in Christian tradition the norm for ritual reconciliation is that forgiveness follows repentance. In so doing, repentance appears to be the prerequisite for forgiveness.<sup>790</sup>

#### 4.2.9 The sacramental nature of the ritual

Through ritual, life gains a “sacramental dimension” (Sundermeier 1998:14).<sup>791</sup> I have argued in section 2.4.3 that the ritual of *Cleansing the chest* is an example of how “semantic complexities ... combine into a simple sacramental process” (Turner 1962:173). It is my contention that this ritual is indeed sacramental in nature. This fact may signify a bone of contention in the dialogue between the two traditions. Although it is not my intention here to debate Christian sacramental theology, I feel obliged to mention that in Christian tradition, very few – and very specific – rituals have the revered title of “sacrament” reserved for them. The Catholic tradition lays claim to seven sacraments, all of which are implied in Scripture. They are all considered signs of grace from God. The Protestant traditions, which hold only two sacraments, have a narrower understanding of sacraments, claiming that a sacrament must be instituted by Christ. Indeed, in Christian tradition, a

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<sup>790</sup> The point is that Christian ritual practice in this case does not overtly point to a theology of *sola gratia*, viz. the doctrine of justification by grace alone, apart from works.

<sup>791</sup> Durkheim also alludes to the inherently sacramental nature of ritual (1995:352).

sacrament is a very specific and very sacred kind of ritual. The criteria for what constitutes a sacramental act are strict and clearly defined. All the sacraments can be traced back into the far reaches of church history. Given this closed and restricted understanding of what a sacrament is in Christian tradition, Christians may regard "another" ritual which purports to have sacramental potency (like *Cleansing the chest of grudges*) with scepticism and doubtfulness. Can it be accepted as a gift of grace from God? Can it have potency and effect comparable to the known sacraments? Can the definition of a sacrament be opened up and broadened to include other rituals? These are indeed challenging questions which arise out of dialogue between African tradition and Christian tradition concerning the ritual of *Cleansing the chest of grudges*, especially in view of its sacramental qualities.

#### **4.2.10 Exclusive or inclusive?**

As I have already mentioned above, most African traditional rituals are designed to deal with inner-group situations. Their use is normally limited to settings in which all people participating share the same worldview and possibly even the same cultural background and ethnicity. The "criterion" for effectively employing the rituals is, therefore, cultural homogeneity. In Christian tradition, the condition for participation in Christian rituals is not linked to ethnicity or cultural heritage. Rather, for people to participate authentically they need to have faith. Faith in God and in the potential efficacy of the ritual is the "criterion" for participation. However, in many Christian contexts that I am familiar with, there is no attempt at trying to gauge whether participants in church rituals in fact have faith or not. Faith is an assumed prerequisite, and since faith cannot be proven, one may say the Christian rituals are, in most cases, open to anyone who wants to participate in them, and whose conscience allows them to. The difference between the conditions for use of sacred rituals in African tradition and Christian tradition may well become an obstacle to dialogue.

Nonetheless, when asked if *Cleansing the chest of grudges* is culturally exclusive or inclusive, Koka (07.07.2004) answers that he believes it can be used by all who want to use it. His reason, "Because African religion is the mother of all religions. Even Christianity originated from African religion. ... There is no contradiction between African religion and Christianity. The problem comes when people have exclusive practices." In other words, although traditionally African rituals were meant for Africans only, their horizon is broadening to allow for others to participate and make use of them. This observation spells hope for continued fruitful dialogue between the African tradition and Christian tradition, especially in view of ritual expression of reconciliation.

#### **Conclusion**

This section has dealt with points of conflict that arise when the indigenous African ritual of *Cleansing the chest of grudges* enters into dialogue with Christianity. There are a number of factors which are problematic since they represent a clash of the two religious traditions in question. It is important to be mindful of these (potential) bones of contention. Inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue is fraught with difficulties and dangers that may not be ignored if both dialogue partners are to remain authentic in their positions.

Nonetheless, this chapter does not wish to propose a final word on the matter. Rather, it is the overarching argument of this dissertation that, despite certain difficulties and points of conflict (some of which have been illustrated here), dialogue between the reconciliation paradigms offered by both African tradition and Christian tradition is and can be fruitful, and that such dialogue can lead to ways of jointly addressing the problem of social reconciliation in South Africa in a helpful way. The next chapter will focus on those points in which the two sets of reconciliation resources overlap and positively interact for the benefit of South African society.

## 5. Points of contact or complementarity between African traditional and Christian paradigms of reconciliation

I agree with Ranger (1994:276) that in spite of the differences between them, there exist “natural points of contact” between Christianity and African tradition.<sup>792</sup> The aim of this section is to seek an answer to the question, “What are the affinities, points of contact or areas of complementarity between African tradition and Christian tradition in terms of their reconciliation paradigms?” The second of the two hypotheses on which this research is based states, “African tradition and Christianity can dialogue helpfully with reference to reconciliation in South Africa.” Therefore, it now becomes imperative to pinpoint those resources from both sides that have the potential to dialogue favourably for the advancement of social reconciliation in South Africa. In isolating the elements from both traditions that bear affinity and can prospectively make positive contact, or that can enhance and complement each other, I seek to create a basis for a joint endeavour – i.e. an endeavour owned and supported by both African tradition and Christian tradition – for social reconciliation in South Africa.<sup>793</sup> A concrete example of a possible joint endeavour will be suggested in section 5.4.

I seek to identify some of the basic affinities, i.e. elements shared or similar in both traditions, or those elements by which the traditions can complement each other, such as a spiritual approach to life, belief in God, the sanctity and inherent dignity of human life, the importance of community and participation, the importance of reconciliation, rituals and ceremonies as a sacramental approach to life, and the importance of narrative and the past.<sup>794</sup> It will be noted that most of these mentioned points of contact are not paradigms of reconciliation *per se*, but are underlying features of both traditions that provide fertile soil for reconciliation to grow. They are, in both traditions’ cases, fundamental cosmological and epistemological characteristics which lie beneath even the more specific reconciliation paradigms evaluated in this study (e.g. the theology of the cross for Christian tradition, and African legal institutions for African tradition).<sup>795</sup> From the analysis of the broader affinities and points of complementarity between African tradition and Christian tradition, it will indeed become clear that certain of the particular reconciliation paradigms I have divulged display a likeness or complementarity with one another. Effectively, I will show that certain resources from Christian tradition connect rewardingly to certain African traditional resources.

### 5.1 Basic affinity between the African and the Christian: general points of contact or complementarity

#### 5.1.1 A spiritual approach to life

African tradition and Christianity share a spiritual approach to life. Both believe in the existence and the power of the sacred (Isizoh 2004). They hold that the secular is infused by the sacred, the physical by the metaphysical. Indeed, metaphysics is the foundation of

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<sup>792</sup> It is possible to draw “lines of continuity from pre-Christian religious experience into African Christian confession” (Bediako 1992:238).

<sup>793</sup> Refer to section 1.4.3. Scholars such as Knitter (1992:178-180, 186), Pieris (1992:162-163) and D’Costa (1990:21), also argue for inter-religious dialogue based on participation in joint endeavours.

<sup>794</sup> See Grimes (1982:142), who argues that many scholars of ritual posit “a fundamental, intercultural continuity underlying a surface of diversity and change”.

<sup>795</sup> It must be noted that a number of the elements I list in this section are part of *other* traditions and cultures too, not only Christian and African.

African ontology (Gyekye 1987:195).<sup>796</sup> This is also true for Christianity. “Africans celebrate and communicate with the mystery of the sacred in their midst” (Tlhagale 1998:2).<sup>797</sup> They recognise the existence of a spiritual reality that transcends what is visible and natural. In this, they are akin to Christians (Tlhagale 1998:3). African traditionalists live in a universe “where there is no dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual” and where “the physical can act as a vehicle for the spiritual” (Balcomb 2003:7; see also Mulago 1991:119). Similarly, one can speak of the African “commitment to a world of the spirit” (Shorter 1978:7-8), a commitment shared by Christian tradition<sup>798</sup>. Both African tradition and Christianity therefore pose a challenge to “the modern naturalistic view of the world” which “still grossly underrates the forces of the spirit” (Jahn 1961:118).

An allowance for and faith in the spiritual realm leads to a kind of prophetic view of the world. Teffo (2002:142) argues that religions such as African traditional religion and Christianity share a “prophetic dimension” which allows them to emanate “healing power” and an “ability to reconcile and unite community”. This is so because belief in the sacred and the spiritual rules out a purely rational, empirical and materialist understanding of the world. In fact, embracing the spiritual implies a holistic view of reality which seeks to integrate the natural and the supernatural, the material and the mystical, the sensory and the super-sensory.

### 5.1.2 Belief in God

It need not be belaboured that both African tradition and Christianity believe in God, or a Supreme Being. “African philosophical issues” frequently revolve around concepts of God (Prinsloo 1998:41). The core of Christian theology is God and God’s relationship with the world. Although certain African traditional and Christian conceptions of God – who God is and what God does – may be seen to be different (as I have argued in section 4.1.3), it cannot be denied that the acknowledgement of the existence of God (more specifically *one* God or monotheism) indicates a point of contact between African tradition and Christian tradition.<sup>799</sup>

### 5.1.3 The importance of narrative and the past

In sections 1.1 and 1.2 I highlighted some aspects of narrative (see also McAfee Brown 1975; Balcomb 1998, 2000; Botman 1996; Hardy 1975). I have shown that both African tradition and Christian tradition place much value and emphasis on narrative. Stories are an important mode of communication and epistemology for both of these traditions. As shown in section 2.2, African tradition strongly cultivates the art of storytelling, and indeed has relied on narrative for its propagation and survival (see for example Hofmeyr 1994; Belcher 1999; Denis 2000; Vail and White 1991; Mudimbe and Jewsiewicki 1993; Ward 2003:54).<sup>800</sup> This reliance on stories is also to be found in Christianity (see sections 3.1 and 3.2). In most cases in the Bible, reconciliation is talked of descriptively in pictures and stories instead of dogmatically in formulations and precepts (Klein 1999:58). In section 3.2 I argued more specifically that the most significant paradigm of reconciliation

<sup>796</sup> A major theme in African philosophy is “metaphysical thinking,” argue Coetzee and Roux (1998). See contributors such as Biko, Wiredu, Prinsloo, Orika, Appiah, Teffo and Sogolo (in Coetzee and Roux 1998).

<sup>797</sup> An African worldview is open to the transcendent, and humankind is considered to participate in the transcendent (Balcomb 2003:9).

<sup>798</sup> See for example the following Scriptural references: Isaiah 19:3; Matthew 8:16; Mark 1:27; Romans 7:14, 12:1; 1 Corinthians 2:13-15, 10:3, 12:10, 14:37, 15:44-46; Ephesians 6:12; Galatians 4:3; Colossians 2:20; Hebrews 1:14, 12:9.

<sup>799</sup> Nsiku (2002), for example, argues that both African tradition and Christianity see “reciprocity of communication between God and human beings” (:113). Similarly, God can be seen “as communicator in both contexts” (:122).

<sup>800</sup> African tradition adheres to an “epistemology that ... encourages story” (Balcomb 2003:14).

in Christianity is the narrative of the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Besides these foundational stories in Christianity, the recent interest in narrative theology also displays the trend in Christian tradition to rediscover the importance of narrative (Stroup 1984; Hauerwas and Jones 1989; Sauter and Barton 2000). Narrative theology stresses “events before ideas”, “stories before propositions” (Balcomb 1998:12) and “integrating before disintegrating” (:16). Essential skills that are practised in narrative theology are “telling, listening and comparing” (:12).

Related to an emphasis on narrative is an emphasis on the past. Events of the past, whether historical or mythic, provide the conceptual basis for both Christian tradition and African tradition. In the case of Christianity, the historical narrative of God’s people (beginning with the Israelites, continuing through the early Christian communities, up until the present) is the foundation of revelation and faith. Similarly – though these narratives are not written but oral – in African tradition the customs and precepts that have been handed down by the fathers (and mothers), and are presided over by the ancestors<sup>801</sup>, represent the backbone of faith and life. The traditions from the past and the occurrences of history play an important role in both Christianity and African tradition. This quality connects them.

#### 5.1.4 Inclusiveness

One of the essential features of an African traditional worldview is “inclusiveness”, which stems from an “epistemology that ... allows for flexibility and adaptation” (Balcomb 2003:14). Alien systems of thought are absorbed instead of rejected offhand.<sup>802</sup> Such a frame of reference makes African tradition welcoming and accepting of “the other”, and therefore inherently capable of fostering mutuality and reconciliation. Although traditionally Christianity has not displayed as much flexibility and openness with regard to “others” – be they “other” religions, thought patterns, cultures, customs or traditions – this is changing. The recent trend in Christianity toward ecumenism, i.e. inter-denominational and inter-confessional dialogue and co-operation, displays a growing witness within the Christian tradition to unity and reconciliation (see sections 1.4.2, 1.4.3 and 3.4.5). More and more, certain strands within Christianity are moving toward a mentality of including rather than rejecting, reconciling with rather than separating from, foreign influences.<sup>803</sup> The theological basis for such developments is elaborated by theologians like Moltrmann (1985:205), who insists that according to Biblical thinking the universe is “an open system”, “a participatory system” and an “anticipatory system”. All creatures share in the “fellowship of creation” (:186) and are dependent upon one another for their well-being (:187).<sup>804</sup> African tradition’s intrinsic inclusivism and Christianity’s emerging openness represent a point of contact between the two. Or, one could argue

<sup>801</sup> The ancestors need not represent an insurmountable “problem” to Christian tradition. According to a number of African scholars, the ancestors may be seen as a boon for the Christian church at large. “The place and significance of ancestors in the African world-view actually offers opportunities for ‘filling out’ some dimensions of spiritual experience and historical consciousness which are inherent in the Christian religion,” argues Bediako (1995:212). For this reason, African Christians ought not to avoid the challenge of moving “towards a theology of ancestors” (:223).

<sup>802</sup> For this reason African cosmology is often labelled syncretistic (Balcomb 2003:10). Setiloane (1986:9-11) concurs that an African worldview is open and fluid, as opposed to a European one. It was able to condone and absorb the symbols of the missionaries and colonisers, which often caused it to be labelled syncretistic. See also Jahn (1961:117) who shows how in Africa strange and new cultures are “accepted and assimilated”. African tradition is co-operative and not vengeful or hateful of Western culture (:235); it is indeed “patient towards foreign gods” (:236).

<sup>803</sup> Christian scholars who advocate such inclusion of and openness toward others have been mentioned in sections 1.4.3, 1.4.4 and 3.4.5. They include, for example, Knitter (1992), Kaufman (1992), D’Costa (1990), Panikkar (1990a, 1990b) and Tschuy (1997).

<sup>804</sup> Kistner, too, insists that reconciliation according to Biblical Christian understanding pertains to the whole world, and “has strong structural implications, not merely interpersonal” (2000:65).



that African tradition's inclusiveness helpfully challenges the traditional exclusiveness of Christianity.

### 5.1.5 The cross

A particular possibility for inclusiveness and acceptance of "the other" offered by Christianity is the theology of the cross.<sup>805</sup> In my opinion, the cross itself can be seen as a point of contact between African tradition and Christianity. In section 3.2.1, I contended that God reveals Godself in "the things we regard as the counterpart of the divine" (von Loewenich 1976:21), i.e. weakness, suffering and foolishness. God's "preferential option" in terms of where and how God is present and manifest, is not for those who are "properly religious," but rather for those who suffer and struggle, for those who are on the underside. In essence, it is not necessarily those who bear Christ's name on their lips that are the vessels of God's revelation and the residences of God's presence, but those who bear Christ's cross in their lives.<sup>806</sup> Suffering and hardship is the location of the hidden God. Indeed, the experience of suffering and victimization becomes the "setting for God's revelation" (Sobrino 1998:251).<sup>807</sup> People who endure a plight of suffering, oppression and abuse can identify and resonate with this image of God, who is present and in solidarity with those who suffer (Mofokeng 1983:97).

The reality of the cross is very apparent in the lives of many Africans, including South Africans. African peoples have experienced and continue to experience unequivocal hardship and suffering. Their lives are and have been under relentless threat of destruction and chaos (Ayittey 1999). Poverty, slavery, injustice, wars, tyranny and disease are but a few of the hardships many Africans face in their lives (Kinoti 1997:15ff). It is because of the hardships they have suffered throughout the past centuries that I venture to deem Africa a continent of "crucified people" (Sobrino 1998:254ff; Nolan 1988:49-67) or "crossbearers" (Mofokeng 1983). Their lives reveal the (hidden) presence of God in the world. Therefore, Africans are people of the cross, because the cross of Christ has become their own, or rather, their crosses have become Christ's own.<sup>808</sup>

The cross *is* a social ethic, and societies that are shaped by the cross – whatever form or shape it takes in their context – bear witness to the cross of Christ (Hauerwas 1986:44). Christians proclaim the cross and seek to live by its standard. Without necessarily seeking to do so (and indeed without necessarily being aware of it), many Africans also live by the standard of the cross, because of the intensity of hardship they bear. In a peculiar and hidden way, it is the cross which connects Christians with all who are afflicted, which includes the majority of African people.

As a "metanarrative" or "external narrative" (see section 3.2.4), the story of the cross and resurrection may be counted as a story of inclusion and embrace. The cross is the ultimate symbol of accepting the unacceptable (Nürnberger 2003:9-25), of embracing the enemy (Volf 1996:126). The message of the cross is that Jesus "hangs from his cross with out-flung arms, thrown out to clasp all, everyone and everything, in a cosmic embrace, so that all, everyone, everything, belongs. None is an outsider, all are insiders, all belong" (Tutu 1999:213). As the basis and frame of reference of Christian tradition, the cross and the resurrection compel Christians to accept and welcome all that which is deemed to be on the outside and on the underside. Through employing the theology of the cross, Christianity begins to draw in the outsiders and the marginalised, instead of

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<sup>805</sup> Indeed, Fleinert-Jensen (1994) explains Christian ecumenism in terms of the cross.

<sup>806</sup> See also D'Costa (1990:20ff).

<sup>807</sup> The experience of the cross is "not self-imposed" but is "imposed upon a person" (LW 43:183); it is a consequence of becoming vulnerable to the world. Being crucified with Christ manifests itself in that a person "incurs the enmity of the world" (von Loewenich 1976:122).

<sup>808</sup> More particularly, I argue that the people of South Africa represent a crucified people (see section 3.2.3, as well as Nolte 2000:75-89).

forcing them out. In so doing, it may display similar features as African tradition does, viz. inclusiveness, incorporation and acceptance.

African theologian Kwesi Dickson affirms the importance of the cross for Africa (1984:185ff). Dickson sees the cross as signifying the death of a prominent member of the community, and therefore as an event of fulfilment. From an African perspective, the cross is thus seen to be “an event that heals and confirms relationships within society (cf. 1 Cor. 10:16-18)” (Parrat 1995:90). Furthermore, in African theology,

The death and resurrection of Jesus can be understood within the context of African ancestors. Just as Jesus’ life confronted and challenged the society of his time, so his death restored order to society, for because of it and its results he now acts within society through those who represent his being in his spirit. (Parrat 1995:116, referring to Vincent Boulaga’s theology)

As such, the cross is frequently interpreted as a perfect sacrifice, since Jesus, who lived an exemplary life, is acknowledged as a (or the) primary and perfect Ancestor (Parrat 1995:90).<sup>809</sup> Given these insights, it can be argued that even in African theological discourse, the cross of Christ may be seen as a (if not *the*) point of convergence of the Christian and the African. Indeed, to Parrat (1995:132), the cross is “the basis of an ethic for Africa” since it has the capacity and the power to “bring the ancestral ethos into dialogue with the Christian faith”. Diverse other African theologians have asserted the significance of the meaning of the cross for Africans (see for example Maimela 1993; Nyamiti n.d., 1984; Mwombeki 2003), which points to the fact that it may indeed be a bridging factor between African tradition and Christianity, and a point at which the two may connect.

### 5.1.6 Involvement in the world

Both traditions in question emphasise involvement in the affairs of world, instead of escape from or rejection of the world (like, for example, Buddhism).<sup>810</sup> In African tradition, this involvement is centred upon the ideals of participation and interdependence. In Christianity, involvement roots itself in the doctrine of God’s involvement and intervention in the world and the Incarnation.

For Lutheran Christians, God’s concern for the world and God’s creative involvement in it provides the framework for the “two-kingdoms” theory. As shown in section 3.4.6, this theory teaches that the realms of both the church and the state are under God’s control, and therefore subject to God’s concern and involvement. Because of this, Christians are called to be actively concerned about both domains. This activity ought to manifest itself as constructive participation in both the spiritual, as well as the secular realms (Altmann 1992:82-83; Moltmann 1984b:134). Luther’s two-kingdoms teaching thus represents a motivation for the church’s involvement in the world. The manner in which Christians are obliged to involve themselves is through active service, or *diakonia* (δῆλον) (Baumgartner 1998:41ff). *Diakonia* can be deemed the church’s prophetic action of transformation in the secular and spiritual domains of life (Nissen 2003:1).

Similarly, African tradition does not renounce or reject the “secular” world. The most overt reason for this is because in an African worldview, the secular cannot be easily distinguished – and may under no circumstances be seen as separate from – the spiritual (Comaroffs 1991:311). The spiritual infuses and pervades the secular. For this reason, that which by Western or modern standards would be deemed “secular” (e.g. politics, material wealth, agriculture) is considered as important and worthy of human concern as

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<sup>809</sup> Either Jesus is the ancestor, or God is the Ancestor, with Jesus being God’s primary descendant (Parrat 1995:94-95). See also Bujo (1992) for an elaboration of African ancestral theology.

<sup>810</sup> See Sundermeier’s distinction between religions of reconciliation and religions of salvation or redemption (1993:124ff).

that which is classically “spiritual” (e.g. religion). Indeed, humankind is considered to participate in the transcendent (Balcomb 2003:9). Every human being can enter into relationship with the spirit world (:6).

For Africans, reality is not seen as “lying beyond the material world, but ... reveals itself in it”. Although a powerful spiritual world exists, “the wellspring of life lies in the given material world” (Sundermeier 1998:9). Therefore, in African tradition priority is given to that which is concrete and external, “because we participate in the world only through our body” (:10). Active involvement in the material world is the only way a human being can be properly “spiritual” or religious. For this reason, participatory action is keenly stressed (Oosthuizen 1991:36).

### 5.1.7 Centred on the human person

As I have argued in previous sections, African tradition places overt and fundamental value on the human person (see section 2.2.3; Magesa 1998:55; Gyekye 1987:208; Teffo 1995a). In fact, one could say that it is an essentially anthropocentric religious and cultural system, in that matters pertaining to the human being at all times take centre stage. One of the major themes elaborated in most African philosophical treatises is the concept of the human being and personhood (Coetzee and Roux 1998)<sup>811</sup>. Moreover, symbols in Africa are created “around people” (Sundermeier 1998:7).

I have indicated in section 4.1 that such exaggerated anthropocentrism is not a typical feature in Christian tradition, but that Christianity rather reflects stronger tendencies towards theocentrism. Instead of placing the human being at the centre of its worldview, Christian tradition places God at its centre. Nonetheless, Shorter (1978:7-8) insists that the Christian tradition fosters a relentless “commitment to man (sic) ... and to human community”. Indeed, Christianity also places much emphasis on the human person. This is so because the God upon which Christian theocentrism is focussed is a God whose prime concern is with humankind, a God who became human. God’s persistent focus is humanity and its affairs. The Christian God is believed to intervene and participate unwaveringly in the life of human beings for the sake of their salvation. God is primarily concerned with the well-being of humanity. For this reason, it is fair to say that in Christianity much focus rests on the human person – if not necessarily from the side of humans themselves, but definitely from the side of God.

### 5.1.8 The sanctity and dignity of human life<sup>812</sup>

Considering the above point, it comes as no surprise that both African tradition and Christian tradition place great emphasis on the sanctity and dignity of human life. A “concept vital to African traditional religion is that of respect for sacredness of life. Life is held to be sacred” (Sarpong 2004). “There is respect for the dignity of man (sic); each man has his own inalienable *chi* (‘selfhood’, ‘destiny’)” (“Elements to admire” 2004). Africans appreciate life as a gift from God (Isizoh 2004). In Christian tradition, too, human life is considered very precious. Psalm 8 declares that a human being “is little less than God” and is “crowned with glory and honour”. One of the creation myths propagated by Christian tradition affirms that human beings are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) and that they are created “very good” (Genesis 1:31). In both African tradition and Christianity, therefore, human beings are of infinite worth and possess inherent inalienable dignity. For this reason, human life is affirmed.<sup>813</sup> It is sacred and

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<sup>811</sup> See contributors such as Biko, Wiredu, Prinsloo, Oruka, Appiah, Teffo and Sogolo (in Coetzee and Roux 1998).

<sup>812</sup> Both traditions in fact value *all* life – indeed all of creation – including animals, plants and the inanimate. Yet such other life forms are not the focus of this discussion.

<sup>813</sup> In the NRSV Bible the word “life” occurs 749 times. “Live” occurs 640 times, “lives” 226 times and “living” occurs 296 times. This illustrates a strong emphasis on life in Christian Scripture.

should be nurtured and protected. Everything that threatens to destroy human life is considered evil.

The dignity of human existence is in African tradition encapsulated in the philosophy of *ubuntu*, the manifestation of African traditional anthropology. In section 2.2.3 I have highlighted a number of characteristics of a worldview infused by *ubuntu*. It is a worldview which bases itself upon the concepts of the centrality of the human being, and the dignity and worth of the human person. Comparing African anthropology with an authentically Christian anthropology, Taylor (1965:96) insists that there is strong congruence between the two. In fact, he claims the African view of humanity and personhood to be intrinsically Christian.<sup>814</sup> I would agree with Taylor that *ubuntu* resembles authentically Christian anthropology.<sup>815</sup> *Ubuntu* is about acceptance and inclusion; it is about embracing human beings instead of rejecting them.<sup>816</sup> This is, of course, the core of the Christian gospel. For this reason, I venture to assert that a positive anthropology is a major point of connection between African tradition and Christianity. This resemblance provides a helpful horizon for dialogue and interaction between the two faith traditions.

### 5.1.9 Morality and right actions

Following from the above-mentioned aspect of convergence between African tradition and Christian tradition is the shared stress on the importance of morality and right actions. A key theme in African philosophy, according to Coetzee and Roux (1998), is morality in relation to community. Prinsloo (1998:41) agrees, "African philosophical issues" frequently revolve around communalist and humanistic notions of moral responsibility (see also Gyekye 1987:119). Many positive aspects of African culture are to be found when investigating African ethics and value systems (*Crossing Witchcraft Barriers* 2003:33). As we have seen in sections 2.3 and 2.4, legal procedures and ritual practices respectively ultimately aim at building character, instead of breaking it down.<sup>817</sup> They are concerned with the moral health of society, and not only with individual persons' welfare.<sup>818</sup>

In Christian tradition, the Biblical term *hilaskomai* is in the Old Testament seen in association with works of righteousness or good deeds done in obedience to the law of God (see section 3.1.2). Many New Testament writings stress the importance of leading a godly life, and behaving in a way that is ethically upright and blameless.<sup>819</sup> The "fruits of the Spirit" include "love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). This list of virtues closely compares to some lists of virtues ordained by *ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* is "to live and care for others; to act kindly toward others; to be hospitable; to be just and fair; to be compassionate; to assist those in distress; to be trustful and honest; to have good morals" (Nyembezi 1977; see also Mfutso-Bengo 2001:42; Battle 1997:35).<sup>820</sup> To name a further example, the *ubuntu* virtue of hospitality is not just to be identified in African culture, but is to be found in Christian thinking as well

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<sup>814</sup> Similarly, according to Battle (1997:64), Tutu "turns the concept of ubuntu into a theological concept in which human beings are called to be persons because we are made in the image of God."

<sup>815</sup> Villa-Vicencio (1992:165) draws parallels between Biblical politics and *ubuntu* politics.

<sup>816</sup> For example, African palaver is "founded on the attitude of acceptance" (Kasonga 1994:55). Moreover, "Ubuntu ... is never to the detriment, or at the expense, of others" (Radley 1995).

<sup>817</sup> In view of this, African ethics may be viewed as a form of character ethics (Gyekye 1987:147-148).

<sup>818</sup> The task of the courts, for example, revolves around questions of correct and honourable behaviour and trustworthiness. Its prime concern is with morality and the overall well-being of the community (Hammond-Tooke 1993:96; Magesa 1998:214, 238).

<sup>819</sup> See for example Klein (1999:18), de Gruchy (2000:167-171), Richardson (2001:55) and Stückelberger (1988:467).

<sup>820</sup> A good person is defined as "generous – with his (sic) time, his concerned involvement with others' troubles, and with his worldly goods. Generosity was the chiefly virtue *par excellence* and every man (sic) strove to act like a chief. ... A good man was one who was a good neighbour" (Hammond-Tooke 1993:99).

(Vosloo 2004:82-85)<sup>821</sup>. Ultimately, Tutu sees “ubuntu as life in relation to God and neighbour” (Battle 1997:9). Life in relation to God and neighbour is, essentially, the same point of origin for Christian thinking concerning morality and ethics.<sup>822</sup>

According to Teffo, the ultimate basis of *ubuntu* is love (Teffo 1999:293).<sup>823</sup> As seen in Galatians 5:22, the first on the list of desirable Christian virtues is love.<sup>824</sup> Many would agree that love represents the most notable Biblical category of Christian life (Stückelberger 1988:464).<sup>825</sup> Hence one can argue that emphasis on ethical practice and morality in general, and the pursuit to manifest love in particular, are points of contact and even convergence between African tradition and Christian tradition. Both African tradition and Christianity stress the importance of “being a good person” and “doing the right thing”, which suggests that both traditions share certain general trends in ethical thinking and behaviour (though of course there may be nuances in the concrete manifestations of these ethics).

#### 5.1.10 The importance of community and participation

Both African tradition and Christianity place a great deal of importance on community and participation. For Africans, it is of utmost importance to belong to a group, and to participate in the affairs of that group. Koka (1998:34) speaks of the concept of “Familihood” which bears much weight in African experience (see also Isizoh 2004). In an African worldview, the forces in the world are personified instead of objectified (Balcomb 2003:5)<sup>826</sup>. Everything and everyone is interconnected; there is no separation and alienation but “unity between subject and object, observed and observer, God and world, knower and known” (:7). The idea of vital participation overrules the Cartesian notion of *cogito ergo sum* (:8). Instead, “The African would say: *Cognatus sum ergo sum* (I am related; therefore I am)” (Sarpong 2004). Interconnectedness, vital participation and an emphasis on community is part and parcel of the African ethos of *ubuntu*.

In his theological deliberations, Tutu often establishes a connection between *ubuntu* and Christian ecclesiology (Battle 1997: xv, 81).<sup>827</sup> Elements such as inter-dependence, belonging, togetherness, unity and mutuality within a group, which are aspects of *ubuntu*, are also aspects of an ideal Christian community (i.e. church or congregation). Inter-dependence is an ideal illustrated in Paul’s first epistle to the Corinthians, chapter 12, by the image of the members (literally, the body parts) of the body of Christ<sup>828</sup>. Various New Testament writings highlight the importance of unity and mutuality, and the need for nurturing and protecting relationships within the church. In order to stress the aspect of belonging to one another, writers often refer to the church as a family; members are encouraged to consider each other as brothers and sisters. The call to participate within the community according to one’s capacities is also stressed time and again. The community of faith – its growth, well-being and edification – is the focal point

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<sup>821</sup> Vosloo elaborates the concept of hospitality with reference to the Trinity.

<sup>822</sup> See Matthew 22:37-39: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

<sup>823</sup> Leopold Senghor similarly claims that love is “the essential energy” in Africa (Shorter 1978:53).

<sup>824</sup> See also 1 Corinthians 13.

<sup>825</sup> See John 3:16; Matthew 22:36-40; Romans 5:5. See also references to brotherly and sisterly love (φιλαδελφία) in Romans 12:10, 1 Thessalonians 4:9 and Hebrews 13:1. Luke 6:27ff and Matthew 5:43-48 point to the necessity to love one’s “enemy” (Stückelberger 1988:405). Most importantly, the love that Christians are to manifest is a reflection of God’s love for humankind. God’s love for the world (John 3:16) is the foundation for humans’ acts of love.

<sup>826</sup> Africans comprehend the universe and nature as “thou”, and not as “it” (Balcomb 2003:11-12).

<sup>827</sup> Damian Lwasa also recognises convergence and correspondence between African traditional and Christian community styles (cited by Shorter 1978:141).

<sup>828</sup> “...the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body...” (1 Corinthians 12:12)

of many canonical and extra-canonical discourses. Indeed, one can argue that the ethos of the Christian faith is inherently communal. It is about participation in the life of Christ, which manifests itself in participation in the body of Christ, viz. the church (see section 3.4).

In Christian tradition, the Christian is defined in and through the body of Christ, i.e. the community of the faithful. In African tradition, the individual person is defined in and through his/her community (Menkiti 1979:158), be it his/her community of origin (i.e. ethnic or kin group) or the community s/he is part of by virtue of circumstance and choice (e.g. work, residential or faith community, etc.). Just as the category of an African person is considered to be empty or meaningless without reference to a group, the category of a Christian is hollow without reference to a Christian community. Therefore, the stress on community and participation, which is to be found in both African tradition and Christianity, may be deemed a significant point of connection between the two. Indeed, the two traditions may complement one another in this regard.<sup>829</sup>

#### 5.1.11 The importance of reconciliation

According to theologian and religions scholar Theo Sundermeier (1993:124ff), a distinction is to be made in religious studies between “religions of reconciliation” (*Versöhnungs-religionen*) and “religions of salvation” (*Erlösungsreligionen*). Religions of salvation are oriented towards the individual; they are potentially elitist, apolitical, rejecting the material and this-worldly, and aiming at escape from the world. Religions of reconciliation, on the other hand, are oriented toward the community. Their prime focus is on nurturing relationships and restoring breaches in society. They are committed to the world in which they live, and do not seek to escape from it. Rather, their ethos is one of participation and involvement. Given these characteristics, Sundermeier claims that the clearest example of a religion of reconciliation is traditional African tribal religion.<sup>830</sup> The religion of the Old Testament is, similarly, a religion of reconciliation, because of its focus on abundant life for the community of the living. Although the idea of salvation is prominent in Israel’s religion, salvation is always related to the building-up and re-establishment of the community. Indeed, salvation endeavours are permeated and driven by the quest for reconciliation. Given this historical and spiritual foundation, the Christian religion is also a religion of reconciliation. Not only by virtue of its origin, but also by virtue of the ministry and proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth, and by virtue of the interpretation of his death and resurrection by Paul and the Pauline School, Christianity can be categorised as a religion of reconciliation.<sup>831</sup>

Indeed, in previous chapters I have illustrated that both Christianity and African tradition are intrinsically concerned with reconciliation. For example, in section 2.3 I demonstrated that African traditional legal processes primarily aim at the “readjustment and restoration of relationships” (Mönnig 1988:308).

The main task of the courts, then, was not to decide an issue in terms of legal abstractions (as in the west) but to ensure that reconciliation took place. Judicial decisions were based on precedent, but legal niceties were never allowed to stand

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<sup>829</sup> For example, the tendency of traditional Africans to place most of their focus on the well-being of their own clan is challenged by the “all-inclusive approach” of Christianity (Tlhagale 1998:12).

<sup>830</sup> See also my deliberations in section 2.2.1. According to Sundermeier, the clearest example of a religion of salvation is Buddhism.

<sup>831</sup> It is only in the later writings of the New Testament that there is a shift from a reconciliation understanding to a salvation understanding. This meagre New Testament witness, which claims Christianity as a religion of salvation, became the base for a growing emphasis on the salvation aspect, and waning interest in the reconciliation aspect lodged within the message of Jesus. Through the inculturation of the Christian message in the Hellenistic world, among other reasons, Christianity came to be viewed more and more as a religion of salvation, and less and less as a religion of reconciliation. In other words, the aspect of individual redemption became elevated above the aspect of communal well-being and restoration.

in the way of reconciliation. (Hammond-Tooke 1993:90)

The abundance of and significance attached to various types of rituals of reconciliation also suggests the emphasis in African tradition on the restoration of relationships and the maintenance of social harmony (see section 2.4). Religious and legal practices serve the purpose of creating a liveable space for community to thrive and prosper; hence its focus on reconciliation. In the same way, I established in section 3.4 that reconciliation is the *magna charta*, the central aim, of the Christian community (Lochmann 1977:91; Baumgartner 1998:37). In Christian tradition, various aspects of the three-fold ministry of proclamation, liturgy and active service (Baumgartner 1998:41ff) were highlighted as resources promoting reconciliation.

Given the above analysis, I state the obvious by claiming that African tradition and Christian tradition share a significant base: they are both traditions stemming from and espousing religions of reconciliation, to use Sundermeier's term. The foundation as well as the driving force of their existence is determined by one and the same intrinsic purpose, namely reconciliation. This is not only a point of contact, but indeed common ground which may offer amazing potential for the joint quest for social reconciliation in South Africa.

### 5.1.12 Fostering a spirituality of reconciliation

It is my contention that both African tradition and Christianity seek to foster a spirit of reconciliation among their adherents. Both aim to instil in their proponents a sense of unity and mutual care, albeit in rather distinctive ways. African traditionalists would argue that "rites of passage contribute to reconciliation in Africa" (Hongoze 12.01.2004).<sup>832</sup> Rites of passage assure people's peace with themselves and with the community; through them people become accepted and acceptable. As such, rites of passage reconcile people with their roots, their traditions and their communities. Moreover, they help people in "acquiring a reconciled corporate identity" (Mfutso-Bengo 2001:39-40). Underlying such ceremonies is a "reconciling pedagogy", which stresses that the building and maintaining of relationships is a learnt skill.<sup>833</sup> Through initiation, people learn the art of how to "relate properly" (Mfutso-Bengo 2001:57).

The role fulfilled by rituals of passage in African tradition may be compared to the ministry of proclamation, or μαρτυρία (*marturia*) (Baumgartner 1998:41ff), in Christian tradition (see section 3.4.2). Christian proclamation occurs in many instances of life-changing events in the lives of Christian believers, e.g. birth, baptism, confirmation, marriage and death. It becomes manifest through preaching, counselling, teaching, and the celebration of rituals. Proclamation is also a key element in the formation of Christian spirituality among members of the Christian community (see section 3.4.4). Spiritual formation in Christian tradition involves the cultivation of the "fruits of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22-23), i.e. the formation of persons with the will and ability to establish and maintain wholesome relationships. Moreover, Christian spirituality aims to establish a sense of corporate identity and belonging together (as do rites of passage in African tradition).

Effectively, both African tradition and Christianity seek to nurture within their adherents a sense of unity and belonging together, as well as a sense of being "good" human beings. In their distinctive ways, African tradition and Christian tradition both aim to foster among their people "a spirituality of reconciliation," to use Hay's term (1998:152). I argue that both traditions have the will and the force to promote a culture of reconciliation in society (see Klein 1999:18; de Gruchy 2000:167-171). This is a strong

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<sup>832</sup> Hongoze calls rites of passage, such as those surrounding birth, initiation, marriage and death, "rituals of incorporation" or "rituals of co-operation".

<sup>833</sup> African traditionalist Munyai (01.09.2004) also stresses the importance of instruction during times of passage.

point of convergence between the two, and may potentially enable fruitful dialogue in terms of social reconciliation. The different methods employed in each of the traditions may complement the other. The underlying purpose of both is the same, viz. nurturing a reconciliatory spirituality among its members.

#### **5.1.13 Reconciliation as the re-establishment of relationships**

In both African tradition and Christian tradition, reconciliation is understood to mean the establishment and restoration of relationships.<sup>834</sup> According to Christian tradition, especially the justice and the cultic aspects of reconciliation elaborated in the Bible (Klein 1999:58) are seen in terms of bringing about balance and equilibrium in human relations. Both Greek words used in Biblical scriptures to denote reconciliation focus on restoring relationships, as I have shown in section 3.1.2. *Katallasso* was traditionally used to describe the re-establishment of friendly relations between or among enemies (Breytenbach 2000:1773). *Apokatastasis* refers to recuperation, restoration and recovery. Moreover, for Paul, reconciliation inevitably has a strongly social and ecclesial thrust; it is understood in ethical-ecclesiastical terms (Stückelberger 1988:434ff).<sup>835</sup> It is associated with the ending of hostility, and the establishment of peace (Link 2000:1780-1783).

African tradition also perceives reconciliation as being the reconstruction of social relations, and in fact manifests this belief even more strongly and concretely than Christianity. This has been amply verified in previous sections.<sup>836</sup> Therefore, it is safe to acknowledge their shared emphasis on the restoration of human relationships as a point of convergence between African tradition and Christian tradition.

#### **5.1.14 Reconciliation as holistic and inclusive**

A further point of contact which may provide a shared foundation for dialogue between African tradition and Christianity is that they both consider reconciliation to be an all-encompassing concept. I have argued above that for Christians reconciliation is not confined to the church (see sections 3.2.2, 3.2.4 and 3.4). Christians believe that through the cross God reconciles the whole of humanity, the entire created order, to Godself and to itself (Breytenbach 2000:1774-1776). Indeed, the reconciliation of the cosmic and celestial forces<sup>837</sup> is an anticipated eschatological reality (Colossians 1:20; Breytenbach 1986:20) so that, ultimately, God's reconciliation must spread to all people and living beings. Therefore, the Christian idea of reconciliation can be deemed intrinsically inclusive and holistic.

Reconciliation in African tradition also involves the entirety of life, since all of life is inter-connected and inter-dependently related (see for example Taylor 1965:96, 63; Tempels 1969:144; Mulago 1991:119; Teffo 2002:135; Mwaura 1994:67; "Summary Report" 2002:21; Oosthuizen 1991:39; Sarpong 2004). Reconciliation between two

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<sup>834</sup> For Washington and Kehrein (1993:113), the first principle for reconciliation is commitment to rebuilding relationship.

<sup>835</sup> For example, Ephesians 2:15ff is an illustration of how reconciliation is an aspect of life together in a Christian community, a congregation. See also Paul's concept of fellowship or communion (κοινωνία – 1 Corinthians 1:9-10), the notion of brotherly and sisterly love (φιλαδελφία – Romans 12:10, 1 Thessalonians 4:9 and Hebrews 13:1), fraternity (αδελφοτης – 1 Pet 2:17 and 5:9), as well as the exchange of the "holy kiss" (Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:12 and 1 Thessalonians 5:26) (Klein 1999:73-74). Significantly, the New Testament frequently uses the metaphor of the "one body" to illustrate the need for reconciled existence (e.g. 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4).

<sup>836</sup> Refer to chapter 2. Also, see for example the following: Sidhom (1969:102, 113), Adegbola (1969:116), Gyekye (1987:154), Mfutso-Bengo (2001:57), Shorter (1978:91), "Summary Report" (2002:19), Kasonga (1994:55), Wienecke (18.02.2004), Koka (2003:6), Fardon (1990:27ff), Coetzee and Roux (1998), Hinz (2002:35), Mönnig (1988:308), Hammond-Tooke (1993:90), Schapera (1956:214-217), Comaroffs (1991:111), Sundermeier (1998:49).

<sup>837</sup> Breytenbach includes this to mean ideological, political forces, such as, for example white domination and black aspiration, capitalism and socialism.



persons, families or groups is therefore viewed as something that always and inevitably has bearing on the whole cosmos, as well as on the complex of metaphysical forces. I see this inclusive and holistic perspective shared by both traditions as a positive point of contact and potential mutual enhancement.

#### 5.1.15 Non-violence

Both African tradition and certain Christian traditions' emphasis on avoiding violence in the quest for reconciliation – and indeed seeking peaceful settlement of conflicts instead of bloody vengeance – represents another point of contact between the traditions at hand. We have seen that in African traditional courts the “accent is always on arbitration rather than on punishment” (Mönnig 1988:308; see also Hinz 2002:36 and section 2.3). When dealing with sentences, the principle of revenge is not acknowledged. African traditional rituals of reconciliation also always seek to attain harmonious and peaceful relations, rather than to incite violence and retribution. Punishment frequently takes the form of compensation payments, but seldom includes bloodshed.

In Christian tradition, according to the Old Testament's justice aspect of reconciliation (Klein 1999:58), the practice of exchanging goods as a compensatory measure is elevated above any form of aggression. Material compensation is always seen as the better alternative to punishment and bloody vengeance (Klein 1999:61; Schenker 1981:61-68). As such, the reconciliatory re-balancing of relationships is encouraged to occur through non-violent means instead of violent retribution (Schenker 1981:55). Although church history has shown that Christianity has not always lived by its dictum of non-violence and peacability, the Christian tradition can nonetheless be regarded as a tradition that at heart seeks to prevent violence and bloodshed instead of promoting it.<sup>838</sup> This is ostensibly true for African tradition, too.<sup>839</sup> In my opinion this aversion to violence and desire to create peace and harmony is shared by both Christianity and African tradition, and indeed provides a helpful basis for their continued dialogue in pursuit of social reconciliation.

#### 5.1.16 Reconciliation as purification

In both African tradition, as well as Christian tradition, reconciliation is sometimes conceived of as cleansing or purification. In African tradition, many practices that aim at restoring social harmony involve ritual and symbolic elements of purification or washing. They are frequently considered to be rites of cleansing.<sup>840</sup> This is so because social enmity or strife is often perceived to be a form of pollution or uncleanness.<sup>841</sup> Indeed, Douglas (1966:136) asserts that anything that disrupts social cohesion and well-being may be interpreted as a pollution offence “which can be instantly scrubbed out by ritual”.

Although the emphasis on reconciliation as purification is not as strong and pervasive as in African tradition, Christianity also has a tradition that associates enmity or alienation with impurity. Especially the cultic aspect of reconciliation (Klein 1999:63), advocated mainly in the Old Testament, is concerned with people's purification in order to eradicate the pollution caused by sin. Dirt or being unclean or impure are metaphors for alienation (or rather, sin) that are often employed in Christian tradition, not least

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<sup>838</sup> See Battle (1997:142).

<sup>839</sup> The ethos of *ubuntu* counters a “cosmology of violence” (Battle 1997:9).

<sup>840</sup> Cleansing is indeed important in African rituals of reconciliation. A prime example is the ritual of *Cleansing the chest of grudges* (Koka 2003:6), in which the cleansing element is already mentioned in the name of the ritual. For further references to correlations between reconciliation and cleansing in an indigenous context, see Thagale (2000, 2003), Danfulani (2000:91), Wienecke (18.02.2004), Douglas (1966:136-137), Buehrmann (1986:106), Fardon (1990:83ff, 107ff), Gluckmann (1962:4), Durkheim (1995:340-341) and Roser (2000:257).

<sup>841</sup> For further references to pollution see for example Durkheim (1995:329), Douglas (1966:113, 129ff), Hammond-Tooke (1993:19, 183) and Booyens (1986:117-122).

because they have a basis in Christian scriptures (Ruhbach 1986:42; Harvey and Benner 1996:26, 27).<sup>842</sup> To be purified or cleansed is metaphorical language for being forgiven (Brakenhielm 1993:59).<sup>843</sup> Therefore, rhetoric surrounding purification and cleansing is not foreign to people belonging to the Christian tradition.<sup>844</sup> It is, for them, often brought into association with reconciliation (mainly in the form of forgiveness). Therefore, practices revolving around reconciliation are sometimes seen as rites of cleansing.<sup>845</sup>

Since both African tradition and Christianity are familiar with the metaphorical concept of reconciliation as cleansing, this may also be seen as a point of connection between the two, both in terms of their conceptual frameworks and in terms of their practices surrounding reconciliation.

#### **5.1.17 The role of mediation**

In African tradition, the role of mediation in reconciliation processes is great. Mediation usually occurs by means of a mediator who is figuratively seen to be a road between the two parties that are at loggerheads (Kgatla 02.09.2004; see also Mönning 1988:282, 299; Ntsimane 2000:22). By mentioning a few instances in section 4.1, I showed that mediation is not a primary aspect of reconciliation procedures in Christian tradition. In contrast to African tradition, Christianity does not consider ancestors, for example, to have the capacity to mediate. Christian tradition also does not regard mediation as the primary function of religious leaders, nor of religious rituals. Nonetheless, I would like to argue here that inasmuch as African traditional and Christian notions of mediation do not concur on all levels, there are also points of contact with reference to mediation. There are, after all, currents in Christianity that indeed advocate mediation as part of reconciliation. For example, the modes of cultic balancing of relationships (between God and the people, as well as between people) championed in the Old Testament usually took place by means of mediation, i.e. they necessarily involved a mediator (Schenker 1981:87). Many important men and women of faith in the Bible were considered to be mediators.<sup>846</sup> Pauline theology also implies mediation as belonging to reconciliation.<sup>847</sup> Paul's second letter to the Corinthians 5:18 for instance claims that Christians mediate God's reconciliation in and to the world. Most significantly, as I have demonstrated in section 3.4.6, the church is seen to have a mediating ability and office (Stückelberger 1988:468; Magesa 1996:90; Lederach 1997:68-69; Mfutso-Bengo 2001:17).<sup>848</sup>

African tradition and Christianity both recognise the need for mediation in certain reconciliation endeavours. The mode and manner of this mediation, and the theoretical framework underlying these, may differ. Nonetheless, it can count as a point of contact and potential dialogical interaction that both traditions are familiar with, and not disapproving of, mediation when it comes to reconciliation. Mediation may, therefore, be considered an area of complementary enhancement of the two traditions.

#### **5.1.18 The concept of wrongdoing**

Both African tradition and Christianity have strong and elaborate teachings associated with wrongdoing. According to ethnologist Mönning (1988:63-65), there exists in African traditional society a continuum between good and evil. Concepts such as "wrong", "evil",

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<sup>842</sup> See also Gunton (1992:58) who describes sin as "to pollute and to be polluted".

<sup>843</sup> See for example Leviticus 14; Numbers 19:9; 2 Kings 5:10-14; Job 11:4, 33:9; Psalm 51:7,10; Proverbs 10:9; Isaiah 1:16; Ezekiel 36:25; Hebrews 10:22.

<sup>844</sup> See Bersin (2000:150).

<sup>845</sup> See for instance Wepener (2004c:11) and Countryman (1991).

<sup>846</sup> For example Moses (see Exodus 32:30), certain judges, priests and prophets.

<sup>847</sup> Other New Testament writers refer to Christ as the mediator of reconciliation. See for example 1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 8:6, 9:15, 12:4.

<sup>848</sup> This may happen through the "creation of a favourable conducive mediation environment" (An-Na'im and Peshkova 2000:77).

“crime” and “sin” have great relevance in African traditional life, and Africans expend much energy in containing and counteracting the effects of these. This corresponds with Christian tradition, which has always been adamant about highlighting the precariousness of evil and wrongdoing. According to Christian tradition, sin is a great peril for humans; to diminish sin and render it and its effects harmless is a fallacy which should be avoided (see section 3.3.1). According to Villa-Vicencio (1992:162), sin is the incapacity to be fully human. Such an idea is also reflected in African tradition, where wrongdoing is both the cause and effect of the diminution of humanity, the loss of human life force.

As in African tradition, where evil and wrongdoing are not considered primarily in individualistic categories, the Christian concept of sin is also not only a personal or individualistic category, but indeed includes social and structural dimensions. Through sin or wrongdoing relationships are breached and community is ruptured. Wrongful behaviour results in broken community (Bonhoeffer 1986:69-76), i.e. in disunity, disharmony and social tension.<sup>849</sup> One can therefore argue that the social orientation of the concept of wrongdoing is to be found in both Christianity and African tradition. The belief that wrongdoing is an evil against humanity and society is shared by both traditions in question, and therefore represents a further point of convergence between the two in view of their reconciliation paradigms.

In view of the arguments forwarded in section 4.1.9, it becomes important to note that discourse concerning sin or wrongdoing may in fact rather be viewed in terms of complementarity instead of similarity.<sup>850</sup> The African focus on sin as a social category may be seen as complementing (more recent Western) Christianity’s emphasis on sin as personal guilt, and vice versa. When African tradition and Christian tradition dialogue, the public and private, communal and individual aspects of wrongdoing may merge to form a richer and more holistic concept. The dissimilarities between the two traditions mentioned in section 4.1.9 therefore may be seen in positive terms as points of complementarity instead of mutual exclusion.

#### **5.1.19 Repentance, confession and forgiveness**

I have shown that in African tradition acknowledgement of guilt and forgiveness of injury are very important moments in a process of reconciliation between two parties who are at loggerheads (see Koka 2003:5-6; Buehrmann 1986:106; Wienecke 18.02.2004; Moyo 2004). Rites involving confession of anger or of guilt – often accompanied by ritual spitting – are found among many African peoples, including the Nguni, Sotho and Venda. For such rituals to be considered effective, a humble and contrite heart is required (Hammond-Tooke 1993:158). Making apology as a sign of repentance is considered important by many in African tradition.<sup>851</sup> The community generally approves of a person who apologises, as well as of one who accepts an apology (Magesa 1998:214; Kasonga 1994:55, 61-63).<sup>852</sup> Furthermore, I have established that the African traditional legal system places great value on storytelling, as a form of confession, as a requisite for an effective reconciliation process (see section 2.3; Hammond-Tooke 1993:93; Magesa 1998:240; Hunter 1979:416; Mönning 1988:287; Ellenberger 1992:266-267; Krige 1974:230).

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<sup>849</sup> Christian theologian Leonardo Boff (1997:81) refers to sin as “the disruption of universal connectedness” – a definition which closely resembles an African understanding of sin.

<sup>850</sup> Indeed, Maimela (1991:12) suggests that in African tradition and in Christianity sin has both a “horizontal” and a “vertical” dimension, i.e. wrongdoing or evil are seen in the context of human-human relationships as well as in the context of the divine-human relationship.

<sup>851</sup> In certain cases, the acceptance of wrongdoing is considered to be a form of apology.

<sup>852</sup> Lumbala (1998:68) contests this view by claiming that the concepts of pardon and forgiveness are “hardly present in our traditional rites”. For this reason, Christian teaching and practice surrounding forgiveness may enhance traditional reconciliation practices. Lumbala therefore stresses complementarity rather than affinity between African tradition and Christianity with regard to forgiveness.

The above-named African traditional practices correlate with the basic tenets of Christian reconciliatory praxis surrounding repentance, confession and forgiveness, and indeed complement them. I have argued in section 3.3.2 that in Christian tradition confession and penitent action constitute overt signs of repentance (Moyo 2002:296-7; Ruhbach 1986:43; Kistner 1999:51,55; Sattler 1998:86). Confessional rites involve truth- and storytelling and remembrance (Hay 1998:129). As in African tradition, regret and compunction are considered to be important aspects of authentic repentance leading to reconciliation (Klein 1999:40; Bonhoeffer 1986:69-76).<sup>853</sup> Repentance is a step towards the healing of breached relationships, and therefore aims at restoring a person to “a community of mutual responsibility and commitment” (Gaventa 1986:46).

In Christian as in African tradition, the answer to confession and repentant action is forgiveness.<sup>854</sup> Forgiveness is “a stage antecedent to reconciliation” (Taylor 1952:3)<sup>855</sup>, and brings about “full restoration to fellowship” (:1). It brings about the re-establishment of dignity and humanity (Brakenhielm 1993:30)<sup>856</sup>, and aims at the renewal of human relationships (Shriver 1995:8). Both of these statements are considered to be true in African tradition as well. It therefore seems fair to claim that both Christianity and African tradition place much value on the merits of repentance, confession and forgiveness for the purpose of social reconciliation. Though these categories may be more explicitly named and promoted by Christianity than by African tradition, they are nonetheless essential elements of both traditions’ reconciliation processes. Therefore, the practices of repentance, confession and forgiveness are points of contact between African tradition and Christian tradition. The various styles and methods of how repentance, confession and forgiveness are practised may indeed complement the two traditions respectively.

#### 5.1.20 Rituals, ceremonies and performance: a sacramental approach to life

I have shown in previous chapters that African tradition and Christianity both make use of ritual and celebration for social reconciliation purposes, albeit to varying degrees and in different ways. A number of similarities, and therefore possible points of convergence or complementarity, are traceable when comparing African traditional and Christian rituals. The list below draws attention to some of these aspects that are shared.

(1) Rituals involve “superhuman agency” (Lawson 1993:197; Fardon 1990:170ff). It is true for both African traditional and Christian rituals that they include reference to and reverence for superhuman beings. For Africans, the ancestors and possibly other spirits are included in ritual affairs. For Christians, God – in form of the Creator, Redeemer and/or the Spirit – is included. Both traditions agree that rituals always involve beings and entities that are beyond the human, the sensory and the material.<sup>857</sup>

(2) Ritual action is “thick with sensory meaning” (Grimes 1982:59), and divulges a plethora of hidden meanings. Both rituals in African tradition and in Christian tradition are never “simple” or one-dimensional. They are always multi-faceted and rich in meaning and interpretation. In this research, the main example used to illustrate this with

<sup>853</sup> The Christian concept of *metanoia* is seen in connection with a radical change of will, attitude, behaviour, perspectives, patterns of thought and action (Gaventa 1986:150,152).

<sup>854</sup> I have tried to indicate that the “special genius of the Christian story is to communicate and administer ... forgiveness” (Richardson 2001:45). Moreover, Harvey and Benner (1996:25) claim, “The single most important concept in biblical Christianity is forgiveness.” Taylor (1952:223) agrees when identifying “forgiveness and reconciliation as the heart of the gospel” (see also Breytenbach 1986:17).

<sup>855</sup> O’Neill (2000:16) insists that both conditional and unconditional forgiveness may occur “not only at the end, but the beginning of the arduous process of social reconciliation”.

<sup>856</sup> Forgiveness suggests both “moral criticism *and* the effort to affirm the recipient’s worth as a human being” (Brakenhielm 1993:41).

<sup>857</sup> Indeed, a number of African theologians claim that ancestors can “be readily embraced within the framework of the universal Church and be included in the communion of saints” (Shorter 1978:131, quoting Harry Sawyerr).

reference to African tradition is the ritual of *Cleansing the chest of grudges* (see section 2.4.3). Though I have not elaborated it in as much depth, the Christian ritual of the Eucharist is an example which also displays the multiple layers of meaning lying behind ritual action (see section 3.4.1).

(3) The body and the senses play an important role in ritual.<sup>858</sup> Turner (1962:171) insists that both Christian rituals and African traditional rituals are “perceptible to the senses”. This is more obviously the case in African traditional rituals, which frequently incorporate more than one of the senses (see section 2.4.1).<sup>859</sup> For example, smell and taste is used in the *Rite of “TSU”*, as well as in the sharing of a meal as a conclusion to a ritual. Touch is important in *Clasping hands with chime (mosoang)*, *Ukuthelalana amanzi* and *Purification by Fire*. Hearing is important because music, singing or chanting often forms part of ritual celebration. The body is moreover used for gestures such as shaking hands, spitting, kneeling, bowing, squatting and dancing. Though the use of the body and the senses is more limited and reserved in Christian tradition, it is present in most rituals. For example, during the Lord’s Supper, participants taste bread and wine. Kneeling or other bodily gestures, such as holding hands, may be part of certain rituals. Touch is important in certain rites that involve blessing or healing. In this aspect of ritual behaviour, i.e. use of the body and the senses, Christian tradition may well be complemented by African tradition.

(4) Rituals involve actions, not only words. In African tradition, rituals usually display more action than speaking. Actions such as clasping hands, washing, drinking, spitting, embracing, dancing, etc. are considered very important, perhaps even more important than words being uttered.<sup>860</sup> In Christian tradition, ritual actions are not as pronounced as in African tradition, and words are frequently considered more powerful than actions. (For example, the words of absolution during a rite of confession are deemed more significant than the action of laying on of hands for a blessing.) Nonetheless, there is no ritual without action, even in Christianity. In the example of the Eucharist, the ritual has no potency if the bread and wine are not actively shared. The fact that both Christian tradition and African tradition value ritual action provides a point of connection between the two. This connection also opens avenues for enabling complementarity. With respect to ritual action and performance, African tradition has a lot of resources with which Christianity may be enhanced or complemented. At the same time, the formalised and liturgical use of words may be a contribution offered by Christian tradition that has the power to enrich African modes of reconciliation practice.

(5) Rituals occur in ritual space and during ritual time. For African tradition, I have demonstrated this by example of the *Cleansing the chest of grudges* ritual (see section 2.4.3). In the case of Christian rituals, it is also true that they occur in ritual space and during ritual time. Ritual space and time is often prepared and created by lighting candles, by playing music, by singing or by silence, by the use of special garments (e.g. a priest’s robes), etc. The fact that in most cases Christian rituals occur in church buildings or in other designated sacred places (e.g. under a tree or on the banks of a river) reveals that the rule of creating ritual space for the performance of ritual is adhered to.

(6) In most rituals, the three stages of separation, liminality and re-aggregation (Turner 1969:94) become apparent. If one were to analyse all rituals in African tradition as well as in Christianity, I argue one would be able to trace Turner’s phases of ritual process in most, if not all, of them. I have illustrated their occurrence in the ritual of *Cleansing the chest* in detail. In the cases of the Christian rituals of Holy Communion and

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<sup>858</sup> Connected to this, ritual “provides a set of connections through which emotion can be expressed without being repressed” (Cox 1970:72).

<sup>859</sup> In African traditional ritual the “whole person, body and soul, is totally involved” (“Elements to admire” 2004).

<sup>860</sup> Nevertheless, Jahn (1961:121) emphasises “the magic power of the word” in African tradition.

penance, to name two examples, there are also stages in the progression of the rituals that may be interpreted in terms of Turner's stages.

(7) Ritual performances are part of greater social processes (Turner 1967:45). It is the case in both African tradition and Christianity that ritual plays an important role in the structuring of sociality (Fardon 1990:27ff), though this may be more overt in African traditional rituals.<sup>861</sup> For many traditionalist communities in Africa, ceremonies or rituals of reconciliation are common practice for the orderly running of affairs. Social enmity and hostility, strife and quarrelling cause imbalance and disharmony, and need to be counteracted by ritual. Indeed, reconciliation rites may be described as the "essence of traditional religion" since they aim at the renewal of life and seek to re-establish equilibrium in a situation where life has been diminished or threatened (Roser 2000:256). Not only are they curative and restorative, but they are also the very enablers of life.

In both African tradition and Christian tradition, rituals seek to maintain and enhance good relations between different groups in a community. They serve to restore structure, order and balance, and to effect "oneness" (Koka 2003:5-6), i.e. unity, solidarity, harmony and peaceful co-existence, within a group.<sup>862</sup> To use the term of Berger and Luckmann (1966:104ff), one could argue that ritual is employed for "universe maintenance". Rituals have social functions. Yet I have argued in section 2.4.2 that there are two sides to the social functions of ritual: It not only serves to maintain and uphold social norms and customs, but in fact also seeks to challenge and transform them. Ritual is both about maintenance and change, preservation and deconstruction, upholding authority and structure and testing it (Dillistone 1986:114).

Referring to the example dominating this study, *Cleansing the chest of grudges* displays social functions on many levels – both in terms of maintenance and change. Christian rituals used for reconciliation purposes similarly have the function of restoring and preserving the community and its customs, as well as challenging the status quo and bringing about transformation of human beings, communities and structures. Apt examples illustrating the veracity of this assertion include certain forms of penance and confession, as well as the Eucharist. Regrettably, Christian rituals appear to have become increasingly more privatised and individualised in terms of how they are understood (e.g., the Eucharist is frequently interpreted as a private affair between God and an individual).<sup>863</sup> Yet extreme individualisation and privatisation is not an inherent or authentic part of these rituals, but rather an unfortunate result of the effects of modernity and Western cultural imperialism on Christian tradition (see section 1.5). Indeed, neither rites of penance nor the Lord's Supper were ever meant to become divorced from their intrinsic social and communal purposes. In Holy Communion, Christians are not only personally, individually reconciled to God, but are also drawn into reconciliation with all others at the Table (Dalferth 2003:16). The social dimension of rituals is present in Christian rituals, yet it has been suppressed and diminished. For this reason, rituals practiced in African tradition – with their emphasis on sociality and community – can positively complement Christianity. African rituals may enhance Christian tradition by refocusing it on the importance of the well-being of society, and releasing it from the clutches of modernist individualism.

(8) Through ritual, life gains a "sacramental dimension" (Sundermeier 1998:14; see also Durkheim 1995:352). A ritual which is sacramental is not merely an outward

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<sup>861</sup> In Africa, rituals "form an essential part of social life" ("Elements to admire" 2004).

<sup>862</sup> Peaceful coexistence is expected after the ritual reconciliation of feuding parties. Though harmonious relations cannot be implemented by force, the broader community sees its role as enabling, nurturing and maintaining peaceable relationships (Ntsimane 2000:24).

<sup>863</sup> Tlhagale (2003) insists that reconciliation rituals such as Holy Communion "are social in their character and in their effects. They are not a private affair. The community bears witness to the act of reconciliation. This reconciliation has an impact on both the individuals and the community. This dimension appears lost in the current church practice."

performance, but an inner, life-changing experience. Sacramental experience is salvific, i.e. redemptive and restorative. There is a fundamental and essential transformation which occurs when a human being undergoes a sacramental ritual. For reasons mentioned in section 4.2.9, I hesitate to mark out simplistic connections between African traditional rituals and Christian rituals that have the status of sacraments.<sup>864</sup> Nevertheless, it is fair to say that both Christian and African traditional rituals not only *point to* changes of moral and social status, but also actually bring them about; they possess “the power both of effecting and signifying sanctity and righteousness” (Turner 1962:171). Rituals in both African tradition and Christian tradition actually transform people and situations (Thomas 1999:117); human beings who take part in them undergo real change, or “renewal” (Grimes 1982:60). Through ritual people are brought in touch with “the ultimate reality”, that which “concerns us ultimately” (Tillich 1960:77; 1978:130). In comparing Christian sacraments with traditional African ritual, Turner (1962:172) asserts that they both point to the immanent and the transcendent.

Christians believe that partaking of the Lord’s Supper essentially brings about change in them and in the community. Through it, lives are changed, situations are transformed. Indeed, many Christians believe that by the power of the ritual (or rather, by the power of God acting through the ritual) life itself is enabled and enhanced. As I have argued in section 2.4.3, *Cleansing the chest of grudges* has a similarly momentous effect on its participants. The sacramental dimension of life revealed in and communicated by ritual represents a point of contact between African tradition and Christianity. It may also be seen as an area of potential complementarity, whereby the sacramental practices of one tradition may enhance and deepen the other tradition, and vice versa.

(9) Ritual brings about a change in status (Fortes 1962:55). This point is closely connected to the previous one. Many African traditional rituals of reconciliation mentioned in this study are instrumental in changing people’s status from being enemies to being peers, from being persons of anger to being persons of peace, from being persons of ill health to being healthy persons, etc. Christian reconciliation rituals, such as Communion and penance, also change people’s status, e.g. from being guilty to being released from guilt, from being enemies to being reconciled, etc. (It must be noted though, that the most obvious status changes are not usually connected to reconciliation rituals. Rites of passage in both African tradition and Christian tradition are more typical examples of rituals that effect status changes, e.g. rituals surrounding birth, initiation and marriage in African tradition, and baptism, confirmation and marriage in Christian tradition.)

(10) Rituals bridge the past, present and future. They “affirm both life and history” (Cox 1970:32), and “link human beings to their story, and give them a past and a future” (:14).<sup>865</sup> This is so for rituals practised in African tradition and in Christian tradition (Turner 1962:171)<sup>866</sup>. The African ritual of *Cleansing the chest* aims at reconciling people to their history of enmity and finding a way forward out of it. It seeks to link this past to the present, without allowing the past to “suffocate” (Cox 1970:32) the present. It is a form of healing the past, in order to step into the future without the burdens of the past. The Eucharist has a comparable function in that it enables people to remember the story of Jesus, connect his story to their own story, and move on from there into a future of hope.<sup>867</sup> Similarly, rites of confession seek also to connect people to the past in order

<sup>864</sup> A broad understanding of sacramentality is that during the process of the sacrament, something (or someone) really and actually changes through benevolent yet mysterious intervention from God. A sacrament is an event orchestrated by God for humanity’s benefit.

<sup>865</sup> Ritual celebration both “restores us to a proper view of history-making” and assists us in “finding our way forward” (Cox 1970:32).

<sup>866</sup> Turner asserts that African rituals, “like the Christian sacraments, ... point to the past, present and future”.

<sup>867</sup> See McAfee Brown (1975) and Vosloo (2001).

to overcome it and in order to enable release from its adverse effects in the present (see sections 3.2.2 and 3.2.3).

The above list demonstrates that both African tradition and Christianity highlight the importance of rituals and celebration, and that both share a basic sacramental approach to life. In this, they are similar, and open to complementing each other (instead of rejecting each other) as dialogue partners in the debate surrounding social reconciliation. It has become clear from the examples used that for Christians celebration and ritual most frequently is practised under the rubric of *λειτουργία* (*leiturgia*) (Baumgartner 1998:41ff), one of the aspects of the life and ministry of the church (see section 3.4.3). Great significance is attached to Christian rituals occurring in the context of divine service, for example the Eucharist, confession and baptism.

Beside liturgical forms of celebration, non-ecclesial, non-formalised rituals that seek to establish social reconciliation are also acknowledged to have potential significance (Klein 1999:250; Sundermeier 1998:54; Cox 1970:32; Grimes 1982:35). Such "reconciliation rituals" may include protest rituals, confession rituals, therapeutic or cleansing rituals, acceptance or forgiveness rituals, reintegration rituals, and rituals of reparation (Wepener 2004c:11). It is in this area (of rituals that do not form part of official church liturgy) that Christianity may be complemented and enhanced by what African tradition has to offer. Indeed, Christian tradition may find itself greatly enriched if it continues to tap into the resources offered by African tradition. Such resources include various types of "death and mourning ceremonies" which "provide a powerful means of reintegration of the shaken solidarity of the group" (Krige 1974:159; see also Sundermeier 1998:77-92).<sup>668</sup> Ritual "casting out of anger" by means of "anger-removal rites" (Magesa 1998:209) may also be a gift from African tradition that has the potential of enhancing Christian ritual praxis in connection with social reconciliation. In African contexts, celebration associated with reconciliation usually involves the sharing of a meal, as well as much singing and dancing (Kasonga 1994:56). These festive elements may also complement Christianity in its social reconciliation endeavours.

The point is that since both traditions considered in this study acknowledge and support the use of ritual, they can indeed work together in this respect, enhancing and complementing each other through continued dialogue. Hay (1998:137) insists that especially in Christian tradition,

The development of rituals of reconciliation is still in its formative stages. Rituals will need to be found to help victims and communities mourn, heal, confront the past, exorcise the evil of the past, celebrate forgiveness, etc. Perpetrators will need rituals to express repentance, remorse, contrition, etc. Rituals will be needed to express justice, reparation, reconciliation, hope, human dignity and honour. There will be a variety of rituals needed for use at the national, local and individual levels. The ritual challenge is great.

Arguably, in order for Christianity to rise to the challenge, it ought to open itself up to accepting modes of reconciliation practised in African tradition (Klein 1999:17; Dillistone 1986:122). Perhaps African and Christian rituals should be "combined"<sup>669</sup> to promote reconciliation, whereby both are given the chance to "complement" the other (Hongoze 12.01.2004).<sup>670</sup> However, the problem with rituals is that they normally adhere to what Douglas calls a "restricted code". A restricted code is shared by members of a homogenous group who share a common set of assumptions about life and the world (Douglas 1970:55; see also Fardon 1990:218). Rituals are therefore not inherently

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<sup>668</sup> Indeed, Mbiti (2002:83ff) argues that death itself can be seen as a point of dialogue between African religion and Christianity.

<sup>669</sup> Many AICs are indeed proficient in "combining" Christian and African ritual elements into one.

<sup>670</sup> However, "some traditional rituals may need to be discouraged", for example, if they violate human rights (Hongoze 12.01.2004).



“universal”, but bound to a specific context and social group. For this reason one may raise the question whether it is even possible for cross-fertilization to occur between African traditional and Christian ritual practices. Douglas herself answers the question by asserting that different groups may (learn to) share a ritual if it addresses “common concerns”<sup>871</sup> (1970:55; see also Koka 07.07.2004).

As such, the openness of both African tradition and Christianity to ritual and celebration provides the framework for the invention of innovative rituals. According to Cox (1970:81), “living liturgy” has its origins “not [only] in the churches but in the world”. Cox’s suggestion of devising new rituals using the old is comparable to what Hobsbawm and Ranger (1993) term the “invention of tradition” – i.e. the creation of new traditions that both draw from the past and cater for the present and future needs of our societies. This “invention” of traditions may involve a re-shaping of rituals to suit a new context.<sup>872</sup>

Cox (1970:73) cautions that rituals “laden with doctrines” are less accommodating than those that are not. Since it is fair to say that the rituals practised in Christianity are more prone to be “laden with doctrines” than the rituals practised in African tradition, the onus and challenge on Christianity to open itself up to outside influences is great. Indeed, history has shown that Christian tradition is far less accommodating and accepting of African influences than African tradition is of Christian influences (see sections 1.5 and 2.2.1). Therefore, it is up to Christianity to demonstrate its willingness to learn from and be re-shaped by African tradition, if dialogue between the two is to be mutual and ultimately fruitful. The challenge is for Christianity to open itself increasingly to liturgical inculturation, transformation and appropriation.<sup>873</sup> Shorter emphasises the need for local churches to become “seriously committed to inculturation”.<sup>874</sup> Such a commitment requires that “experts ... be designated to offer the necessary stimulus for community creativity”, which may for instance be accessed by means of workshops or committees for liturgy (Shorter 1988:264).<sup>875</sup> Tlhagale (2003) is also in favour of the appropriation of some indigenous rites of reconciliation for use in the Christian church, or for use in society at large. By allowing African tradition to influence and inform Christian reconciliation rites, and vice versa, new theological and liturgical vistas could emerge that might have the capacity to “enrich and deepen the meaning of a rite” (Tlhagale 2003).

### 5.1.21 The importance of symbols

Connected to the aspect of ritual is that of symbol use and symbolism (see section 2.4.1). Both African tradition and Christian tradition utilise symbols, and indeed place great value on them.<sup>876</sup> According to Turner (1962:171), both have symbols that are not merely “regarded as speculative or theoretical signs, but as efficacious and practical signs, as

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<sup>871</sup> Douglas makes her case by illustrating a situation (between pygmies and Persian nomads) in which two different peoples have come to adopt certain of the same rituals which deal with their common concerns in a shared context.

<sup>872</sup> “Rituals are events; they have lifespans. ... Thinking of them as unchanging is a half-truth. They are not artifacts. They are not structures in the sense that a building is a structure. They are structurings, as a dance is. They surge and subside, ebb and flow. ... Rituals deteriorate. Entropy is the rule; therefore, they must be raised up constantly from the grave of book, body, memory, and culture” (Grimes 1982:57).

<sup>873</sup> See for instance Chupungco (1982, 1989, 1992, 1996), Egbulem (1996), Lumbala (1998) and Niangoran-Bouah (1991).

<sup>874</sup> “A short definition of inculturation is: the on-going dialogue between faith and culture or cultures. More fully, it is the creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and a culture or cultures” (Shorter 1988:11).

<sup>875</sup> Roser (2000:273) agrees that inculturation in terms of rituals is a task of the church. See also Mugambi (1995), Ikenga-Metuh (1996) and Wepener (2004c).

<sup>876</sup> For the importance of symbolism in African tradition see Sarpong (2004). In the case of Christian tradition, the use of symbols can be traced back to the Old Testament. Ancient Israelite cultic reconciliation (Klein 1999:58) made use of symbols such as blood, incense, silver, fine flour, fire, sin and guilt offerings, gifts and sacrifices to people and/or to God, or burnt offerings (Schenker 1981:95-105).

instrumentalities, as they not only indicate changes of moral and social status, but also effect them.” The mere fact that symbols are important in both traditions already points to a further point of convergence and possible complementarity between the two. Moreover, there is some correspondence even in *specific* symbols. Water, for example, is a symbol of great magnitude in both African tradition and in Christianity. Ash, too, bears symbolic meaning for both traditions. Further examples of symbols that are accepted and used by both African traditionalists as well as Christians include blood, food and drink, incense, light and dark, fire, the use of colour, shapes (such as the circle), clothing, music, silence, washing, etc.

Symbols undergo an “evolutionary process” (Kahler 1960:53). If a symbol is to not lose its potency it must be constantly re-adapted and re-interpreted within new contexts.<sup>877</sup> Just as in the case of ritual, symbols and symbolism need to be inculturated. In Tlhagale’s opinion (2003), the process of inculturation challenges any “restrictive interpretation of symbols”. When allowed to dialogue with Christianity, symbols used in African tradition “are given a meaning beyond the clan. The process of adaptation will uproot them from – indeed free them from – the narrow interpretation in order to relocate them within in a broader cultural context”. In Tlhagale’s opinion (1998:7) “cross-cultural symbiosis through the process of enculturation” can be seen in the reinterpretation of symbols, for example the use of drums during the consecration of the Eucharist, in order to create a spiritual atmosphere and to acknowledge the divine presence. What this means is that if Christianity allows itself to be influenced and transformed by African tradition, and vice versa, this can spell mutual enrichment and a broadening and deepening of their use of symbols. Therefore, dialogue with reference to symbols and symbolism may indeed establish points of convergence, and highlight possibilities for complementarity between African tradition and Christian tradition. Mutual enrichment in terms of symbolism and symbol-use may also point to efficacious dialogue in view of social reconciliation.

### **Conclusion**

In this section I have named a number of aspects on which African tradition and Christian tradition agree, or at least share a degree of similarity, with reference to their paradigms of reconciliation. These points of contact or convergence may in some cases be described as points of complementarity, which represent an enrichment or enhancement of either or both of the traditions. Given the number of aspects mentioned here, and acknowledging the fact that this list is not exhaustive, it becomes clear that there are avenues for fruitful dialogue. African tradition and Christianity can dialogue helpfully in terms of certain elements within their own traditions surrounding reconciliation. This does not, however, deny the fact that there are points in which the two traditions clash, as has been elaborated in chapter 4.

In this section I have sought to establish that there are sufficient grounds for asserting the potential complementarity of and/or affinity between African traditional and Christian reconciliation resources. There is a potential foundation for joint endeavours, a platform upon which fruitful dialogue can take place. In section 5.4 this dialogue will move from the general to the specific, by considering in what way dialogue between African tradition and Christianity may become efficacious in terms of a particular ritual. Yet before I venture into that uncharted territory, I will first mention and briefly describe a few examples of other concrete cases of dialogue that already exist. These examples

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<sup>877</sup> In the case of certain AICs, rituals demonstrate “how western Christian power symbols have been mobilized to make strategic claims on traditional symbols of power” (Chidester 1989:25). Similarly, Thomas (1999:120) insists that the “condensation of symbols, or ‘bricolage,’ depicted a boundless redeployment of signs and practice” in AICs. According to the Comaroffs (1992:5) “saturated signs” such as the cross, the book and the coin “were variously and ingeniously redeployed to bear a host of new meanings”.

show that indeed dialogue is already well underway, and that African tradition and Christian tradition are already working to find joint solutions to the problem of social reconciliation by tapping into their own and each other's traditional resources.

## 5.2 Examples of dialogue between African traditional and Christian reconciliation paradigms

The task of this section is to illustrate, by citing a number of examples, that dialogue between African tradition and Christianity in view of reconciliation is already under way. The most overt manifestations of this dialogue are rites and rituals that draw from both traditions. I refer to some of these rites in order to show that dialogue is possible and that interaction between African tradition and Christian tradition can bring about valuable methods and approaches for the pursuit of social reconciliation, and that a number of these approaches are already being used by South Africans.

In a book entitled *Inculturation in the South African Context*, Buti Tlhagale (2000:110-114) describes a number of rites that seem to effectively connect facets of African tradition with Christianity. Himself an African, and a (Roman Catholic) Christian, Tlhagale appears to be able to merge these two heritages successfully to the advantage of both. Though they are not overtly called that, I consider some of Tlhagale's "alternative rites" to be rites of reconciliation. Outlined below are five of these rites, all of which are designed to be practised by African Christians in South Africa.

➤ One of the African Christian rituals mentioned by Tlhagale is a "cleansing rite using fire" (2000:110). It includes the use of methylated spirits burning slowly in an open bowl. Participants file forward to hold their hands over the fire momentarily. The minister prays for cleansing and repentance. The prayer includes phrases such as: "burn down the walls of division among us", "grant us courage to embrace the truth", "drive out our ghosts of the past", and "renew the zeal in us to build a new South Africa". The idea of being cleansed by fire is typically African, as various rituals of *Purification by fire* indicate (see section 2.4.1; Tlhagale 2003). As we have seen, the Herero also make use of an ancestral fire in order to reconcile people to one another (Wienecke 18.02.2004), as do the Gbaya (Roser 2000:216).

➤ A "cleansing rite with water" (Tlhagale 2000:110-111) involves the use of a basin filled with water and a towel. The minister prays over the water for God to "remove the heat of our heart", "soothe our injured feelings", "remove the anger of yesterday", "cleanse us from true and false accusation", "cleanse the stains of our own wrong doing", and "wash away the bloodstains of those who died unjustly". "With this water, give us a fresh start to build a new community" is one of the final supplications of the prayer. Participants then wash their hands in the water. The use of water and the washing of hands is characteristic of a number of African traditional reconciliation practices, including *Ukutbelelana amanzi* (Tlhagale 2003; Ntsimane 2000) and *Cleansing the chest of grudges* (Koka 2003:6-8). The Gbaya (Roser 2000:264) as well as the Ijaw (Hughes 1987:115) also use water in their reconciliation rituals (as indicated in section 2.4.1).

➤ A "cleansing rite using bile/gall" (Tlhagale 2000:112) includes a prayer of the following words: "Lord God, with this bile anoint the wounds brought about by the division among us. Christ have mercy. Let this oil soothe the pain that has left us haggard and wasted. Lord have mercy. With this oil let our faces become radiant with hope. Christ have mercy. ..." The bile is then used to mark participants (for example, it is applied to their heads, foreheads or hands). Bile is a traditional African symbol used for reconciliation, as the ritual of *Clasping hands with chime (mosoang)* (Tlhagale 2003; Ellenberger 1992:258) shows. The bile or gall is compared to "oil" that is used for "anointing", a symbol frequently employed by Catholic Christianity.

➤ A “cleansing rite using a goat” is also described by Tlhagale (2000:113). “With hands outstretched over the head of a live goat” the minister prays the following: “Upon the head of this animal I put the sins of the division among us. Christ have mercy. We promoted division based on the colour of our skin. Lord have mercy. We despised, suspected, hated and even persecuted those who differed from us. Christ have mercy. ... We now ask for forgiveness and reconciliation. Christ have mercy. ... Let this animal carry away our wrongdoings. Christ have mercy.” After the prayer has been spoken, the goat is led out of the church. Using a goat is reminiscent of the Old Testament tradition of the scapegoat (see Leviticus 20:20-22). Yet it is also an African approach employed for reconciliation purposes, as the Ijaw rite of reconciliation (described by Hughes 1987:115) indicates.

➤ Finally, Tlhagale (2000:113-114) outlines a “libation rite”.

Beer, blood or water mixed with mealie meal in a calabash will be used. Spears or knobkerrie, wooden shrines, guns or any appropriate symbol is out in a blanket, quilt, etc. on the floor. As the minister says the following prayer, his or her helper pours the libation slowly on the symbols representing the ancestors and the spirits of those who died unjustly whether as victims or defenders of the apartheid government. ‘As we pour out this libation, we call upon you, our ancestors, to be present at this ceremony of reconciliation. We invite the spirits of all who have died before their time as innocent victims of human blindness, all those who died because they unknowingly defended a cruel political order. We call for God’s strength to face one another as members of his family. We ask Jesus Christ, the atonement of our sins, to plead for us with the Father. We invoke the Spirits of our ancestors to intercede on behalf of our new nation. ...’

This rite makes use of certain traditional African ritual elements. Nonetheless, like the rituals mentioned above, it is explicitly Christian in terms of its address of Jesus Christ. Hence, it is indeed an example of the fusing of two religious and cultural heritages. Another way of describing it is to say that it is a manifestation of the Christianisation of African ritual resources, or the inculturation of Christian reconciliation.

Below are further examples of dialogue between Christianity and African tradition with reference to social reconciliation in South Africa, becoming concrete by way of ritual practice.

➤ A reconciliation service held during the time of the TRC is described in outline by Piet Meiring (1999:89). Part of the ritual involved a prayer in which God was implored to “purify” the “hearts” of South Africans. There was a burning flame at the front of the hall, toward which participants walked in pairs. As they arrived at the flame, they moved their hands over the flames as a gesture of reconciliation, and then they embraced.

➤ A ritual performed in the late 1990’s which featured both Christian and African traditional elements is recounted by Koka (07.07.2004):

Some time ago we had a service at the Cathedral in Pretoria. Tutu was there. All the other churches were there. The Hindu, the Moslems, the Christians. They all took part in the reconciliation ceremony there. Now when it was the turn of the African traditional religion, I did not get up to make a speech. No, I took *impepho* – the incense – and gave it to a young boy to walk around with in the hall. So it was burning. And I took – what you call – the ox’s tail and sprinkled water. All over the cathedral, everywhere. Now all the people were there. Tutu and the others. And they were not saying ‘this should not be done here, in a church’. Afterward they said to me, ‘it was good that you did it’. This is the African way, the incense and the sprinkling of water. It is done for purification. And when it is done, all people are purified, and they are cleansed. You cannot any longer say, ‘you did wrong’. Through the purification we have all become one. The past can no longer have power over us. We are moving out of the past as one purified

people. ... And it was like that. We all came out of that service and we were together. We were happy.

➤ On 27 July 2003, a *Symbolic Reparation, Cleansing and Healing Ceremony*<sup>878</sup> was held at Polokwane Showgrounds, organised by the Limpopo Department of Sports, Arts & Culture.<sup>879</sup> The motto of the ceremony was, "Cleanse and heal the nation, build the future for generations to come!" (*Symbolic Reparation* pamphlet 2003). The showground at which the ritual was held was an open space, oblong in shape. Tents were set up for VIP guests, while performers and ordinary members of the public were seated on grandstands. In the middle of the open space there was a large table covered with a white tablecloth, which was used during the ceremony for the signing of a declaration. Close to the table a large cross, about two metres high, was erected on the open field. One could also see a large boulder, and seven sacks of earth placed in a circle around the boulder. A Maroela tree sapling stood on the boulder. The boulder came from Mapungubwe, an area that has been declared a national heritage site and was supposed to represent the Province of Limpopo and the African civilisations coming from this area. It was to be used as a foundation stone of a building in Freedom Park. The sacks of earth, each containing earth from different areas of the province, were to be used to plant the Maroela tree in Freedom Park.<sup>880</sup> The ethnic groups present included Venda, Shangaan, Swazi and Pedi, among others.

The ceremony programme included two main parts. Part I consisted of "Cleansing and Healing rituals". The first of these rituals were performed by traditional healers, starting at half past five in the morning. From 10:00 hours onwards, the programme included musical and/or dance performances by choirs and groups representing different organisations and churches<sup>881</sup>, prayers led by various faith-based institutions (including Islam and Christianity among others), a welcoming address by the Executive Mayor of Polokwane Municipality, and a speech on "The Purpose of the Occasion" held by the CEO of the Freedom Park Trust.

Part II consisted of "Symbolic Reparation". School children came forward to read a declaration which was translated into all official languages of the Province. Aspects of the declaration involved "a commitment to break with the past", lament about moral decay in our nation, acknowledgement of a legacy of various wars in our country (e.g. slavery, resistance wars, the 1899-1902 Anglo-Boer war, the First and Second World Wars, the liberation struggle) and the need for reconciliation in light of all of these wars. The declaration mentioned the atrocities of the "past which we are burying here", and it encouraged all to remember those who suffered for the sake of justice. Furthermore, the declaration insisted that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, and pleaded for continued efforts to uphold peace, freedom and justice. After the reading of the declaration in many languages, a keynote address was delivered by the Premier of Limpopo.<sup>882</sup> The declaration document was then placed on the table with the white tablecloth and delegates were asked to approach the table from their seats and sign it. The delegates meeting at the table to sign greeted each other, shook hands or embraced.

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<sup>878</sup> The details of this rendition were provided by a friend, Caroline Jeannerat, who was present at the ceremony, and who also happens to be an ethnographer studying certain aspects of Venda religious faith. During a meeting with her, she offered me a verbal eyewitness account of the proceedings.

<sup>879</sup> A similar "cleansing, healing and symbolic reparations ceremony" was held in Cape Town in November 2003. It was "part of the buildup to the opening of Freedom Park in Pretoria.... Similar events have already been held in other provinces." "Events like these are opportunities for the government to thank people who paid the cost for apartheid". Speeches "of symbolic reparation" were held (du Plessis 2003:2).

<sup>880</sup> These symbols were explained by Premier Ramathodi after his official keynote address.

<sup>881</sup> Traditional healers informally joined in the performances (especially with the Apostolic church group). Yet they were a bit disgruntled that they had not been explicitly invited to perform at this point.

<sup>882</sup> See Ramathodi's address which can be found posted on the web-page of the Limpopo Provincial Government.

They were representatives of political, civil and religious organisations.<sup>883</sup> Next, a vote of thanks was offered by the Executive Mayor of the Capricorn District Municipality. Part II was concluded by singing the national anthem.

➤ Another exciting example of a reconciliation ritual which amalgamates aspects of African tradition and Christian tradition was devised and performed by students of the School of Theology at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg in 2003, as an assignment in the New Testament Studies Honours course on ritual theory and practice (offered by Professor Jonathan Draper).<sup>884</sup> This ritual is meant to start thirty minutes before sunrise, when it is still dark. A minister and four elders (referred to as E1, E2, E3 and E4) are seated in the front row of a church; the rest of the congregation sits in the pews. The two persons who are at loggerheads (called Khawulani and Abner) sit among the congregation on opposite sides of the room. What follows is a word-for-word rendition of the liturgical order of the ritual, as designed by the students (Lütge 2003):

*Song: Ligwalise izwi lakho*

(Minister goes forward and faces the congregation, with two elders on either side)

Minister:

Good morning. Welcome to this reconciliation service. We are here to confirm and celebrate the reconciliation of two people who have been divided, even hostile towards each other. In the first hymn, we have sung about the waste that is caused by conflict and unrest and we have prayed for deliverance. We know from the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus taught that where there is such conflict, anger, there should be reconciliation. He said, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'Whoever murders shall be liable to judgement.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister." It is such reconciliation that we want to confirm and celebrate today. With this in mind, we welcome especially, Khawulani and Abner.

(E1 and E2 go to Khawulani, E3 and E4 go to Abner, and accompany them to the front; the two participants are to stand in the front pew, each on different sides, facing the altar)

Minister:

Khawulani, are you here today to confirm your reconciliation with your brother Abner?

Khawulani:

Yes.

Minister:

Abner, are you here today to confirm your reconciliation with your brother Khawulani?

Abner:

Yes.

Minister:

Then I invite you to come forward and to stand in front of the altar, facing each

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<sup>883</sup> The institutions represented included CONTRALESA, Khulumani, House of Traditional Leaders, COSATU, Veterans of the liberation movement, AZAPO, PAC, SANCO, ANC, NNP, DA, FF, UDM, SACP, Provincial Police Commissioner, The Freedom Park Trust, Limpopo Forum of Institutions Supporting Democracy, a number of faith-based institutions, and Provincial Government.

<sup>884</sup> I received a copy of the order of the ritual from a fellow theology student who had participated in the design of the ritual. His name is Udo Lütge.

other.

(Participants go forward.)

Since we know there was a conflict between you, let us bring that conflict into the open, into the light of truth, so that you know the truth and it can set you free.

Khawulani, would you tell us your view of the conflict.

Khawulani:

[Older brother; the daughter of his younger brother has been married; *lobola* was paid to younger brother; Older brother helped pay for her education, is also oldest, so should receive the *lobola*.]

Minister:

Thank you. Now that you have shared that with us, would you come forward to wash your hands in ash and water to symbolize that your anger has burnt out and your hatred has been cooled, and that you now wash it from you.

(Participant goes forward and washes hands.)

Abner, would you tell us your view of the conflict.

Abner:

[Younger brother; daughter has been married; *lobola* was paid to younger brother; she is his daughter, so should receive the *lobola*.]

Minister:

Thank you. Now that you have shared that with us, would you come forward to wash your hands in ash and water to symbolize that your anger has burnt out and your hatred has been cooled, and that you now wash it from you.

(Participant goes forward and washes hands.)

So we now know what the conflict between you was. *Lobola* was paid for a family member - Abner, your daughter - and both of you felt you had valid reasons to lay claim to this *lobola*. (Describe conflict.) This must indeed have been a deep conflict. Could you tell us how the conflict was resolved? How were you reconciled?

Abner and Khawulani:

[Realised that the family was being split; decided to divide the *lobola* and share it equally amongst each other; each then gave one cow to be slaughtered for a reconciliation feast.]

Minister:

Thank you for telling us your story. Can I ask you now, before all the people, Khawulani, are you willing to forgive and forget?

Khawulani:

Yes.

(Goes forward; takes a mouthful of ash and water and spits it out over his left shoulder; gives white beads to E1.)

Minister:

Abner, are you willing to forgive and forget?

Abner:

Yes.

(Goes forward; takes a mouthful of ash and water and spits it out over his left shoulder; lights candle and gives it to E3.)

(Khawulani kneels before E1; Abner kneels before E3; E1 goes to Abner and hands the white beads to him; E3 goes to Khawulani and hands lit candle to him.)

(Khawulani and Abner stand and face each other.)

Khawulani:

With my gift of white beads I acknowledge my contribution to the conflict, I ask your forgiveness and pledge to live my life in love and peace. I am reconciled to you, as I am reconciled to God through Jesus Christ.

Abner:

With my gift of a lit candle I acknowledge my contribution to the conflict, I ask your forgiveness and pledge to rekindle warmth and light in our relationship as brothers. I am reconciled to you, as I am reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. (Embrace each other; then kneel next to each other in front of the altar; E1 - hand on Khawulani's left shoulder, E2 - hand on Khawulani's right shoulder; E3 - hand on Abner's left shoulder, E4 - hand on Abner's right shoulder; minister lays hands on their heads.)

Elder 1:

Paul writes: if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, we will be saved by his life. (Romans 5:10)

Elder 3:

Paul writes: but now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. (Ephesians 2:13-14)

Elder 2:

Paul writes: So if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. (2 Corinthians 5:17-18)

Elder 4:

Paul writes: He, Christ, himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Colossians 1:17)

Minister:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you. Go in the peace (+) of the Lord.

*Song*

*Communion*

Minister:

Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night when he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples and said: take and eat, this is my (+) body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.

In the same way he took the cup after the supper, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them and said: Drink of it, all of you; this is my blood (+) of the new covenant, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.

I would like to invite you all forward to welcome back Khawulani and Abner as reconciled members of this congregation by sharing with them the meal of communion.

(Minister hands bread to Abner, saying "Body of Christ, given for you". Abner breaks off piece and, saying "Body of Christ given for you", puts it in Khawulani's mouth. Abner hands bread to Khawulani, who does the same to Abner.

Khawulani hands bread to E1 saying "Body of Christ given for you". E1 breaks piece, hands bread on, then eats bread. This goes on around the whole group. The same is then done with the wine, saying "Blood of Christ shed for you".)

*Prayer*

Minister:

Lord we give thanks to you for you are good and your love endures forever. Thank you that we could share this meal together. Thank you that we could celebrate the reconciliation of Khawulani and Abner. Thank you that you have reconciled us to you, through your Son. We ask that you go with us now - let us leave here with your blessing and let us live in your peace. And so we pray the



words that you taught us: Our Father...

The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord look upon you with favour and give you his peace. Amen.

To end off, let's sing one more song together. After that, feel free to congratulate Abner and Khawulani, to speak to them, and remember that afterwards you are all invited to a feast in the hall to celebrate. Let's sing...

#### *Song*

This ritual incorporates many elements from African tradition, such as the presence of elders, the role of the leader of the ritual as mediator, the use of water for cooling, washing of hands and spitting, ash, fire (in form of a candle), white beads, the use of story-telling, the slaughtering of a beast, etc. Indeed, many of the symbols and actions are strongly reminiscent of the *Ukuthekhlana amanzi*, *Cleansing the chest of grudges* and *Purification by Fire* rituals (described in section 2.4.1). These indigenous African resources are merged with typically Christian resources, such as prayer, confession and absolution, Scripture readings, kneeling, blessing, the use of ash and water, the lighting of candles, and the celebration of Holy Communion. The African traditional and Christian approaches and methods are artfully interwoven to create a symbolically rich and evocative ritual. It is a fine example showing how resources from the two traditions can complement each other to form something new and salient.

➤ Anne Hope (1988) has compiled a large number of interesting rituals designed for North-American action groups wishing to be in solidarity with the victims of apartheid. All of these rituals have been invented with reference to the South African context of the 1970's and 1980's, especially the plight of South Africans suffering under apartheid and their struggle for freedom and justice. Therefore, the themes of these rituals are based on liberation, remembrance, lament, grief and commiseration, protest and solidarity. Arguably, some of these rituals use African as well as Christian resources, approaches, methods and symbols. Ritual resources used include readings (of stories, poems, Scripture) for liturgical recitation and reflection or discussion. Simple gestures and symbols are also used, e.g. lighting of candles, blowing out of candles, switching off of lights, making a fire, standing around a burning fire and placing logs on it, watching the fire burn to cinders and using ash to mark a cross on the foreheads of participants as a sign of repentance or culpability (Hope 1988:22). Furthermore, some of the rituals involve a litany of confession of sins (:34), a litany on human suffering (:88-89), a litany of "thanksgiving for a long list of brave Christians" (:104-107), storytelling (:58), the use of pictures for reflection and meditation or discussion, theatrical dialogue pieces or short plays, "symbolic action" (e.g. the staging of being arrested and detained by police) (:90), "guided action-meditation" (:96), biographies (:68ff, 79ff) and music.

➤ In section 2.4.1 I mentioned the widely-practiced ritual of *ukubuyisa* which involves "bringing home" the spirit of a deceased person as an act of reconciliation between the family members and the deceased (Lamla 1981:16-17). Nxumalo (1981:71) is of the opinion that the *ukubuyisa* rite can be performed in conjunction with Holy Communion, and this does in fact happen. The celebration of the Lord's Supper is then understood to be a mass for the remembrance of the dead. Sometimes, the combined ritual of *ukubuyisa* and Communion is supplemented by a homily on death, resurrection and eternal life. Nxumalo contends that this is done in order to "inspire the whole celebration with a Christian spirit". Certainly this practice exemplifies an amalgamation of both Christian and African traditional rites surrounding death, mourning and reconciliation.

➤ Moving beyond South Africa towards Central Africa, Roser (2000) has studied a number of Christian occasional service liturgies which incorporate African traditional elements. For example, a Christian liturgy of mourning has been invented which relies

strongly on an indigenous mourning ritual (the rite of *Washing away our sadness*) practised by the Gbaya (2000:299). Similarly, Gbaya Christians have incorporated elements from their traditional heritage to create a new ritual for the burial of children (:314), and another for releasing people from the fear of an evil curse (:330). All of these rituals may contribute to social healing and reconciliation. The incorporation of African traditional and Christian elements in ritual relies on a process of active and deliberate inculturation. Inculturation involves drawing parallels between words and symbols used in the two traditions (:332). For the Gbaya, for example, peace is signified by coolness; therefore, the “prince of peace” is symbolised by something that has a cooling effect (:334). The Christian symbol of the cross is connected to a wooden agricultural implement that weighs down heavily on the bearer, while the title “Lord” is connected with a great chief (:336). Jesus Christ is compared with the “*sore tree*”, a traditional symbol of coolness, reconciliation and peace (:344-345). Roser fervently advocates the creative assimilation of African indigenous rites (:339), and the integration of ritual elements into Christian tradition (:340). He acknowledges that some symbols and practices remain ambiguous and problematic. Yet others open up new theological perspectives, and the possibility of richer rites and liturgies (:343).<sup>885</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this section has been to show in broad strokes that the task of finding points of contact and complementarity between African tradition and Christianity in view of their endeavours for reconciliation has already begun. Especially in the areas of ritual and liturgics, great strides have been made to dialogue fruitfully. By no means is the above list of examples comprehensive. Yet it does indicate that dialogue is possible, and that the task of finding areas of complementarity or similarity between reconciliation paradigms in African tradition and in Christian tradition is a worthy scholarly venture. This scholarly venture will be continued in the next section, by using the African traditional ritual of *Cleansing the chest of grudges* as a platform for dialogue between African tradition and Christianity.

### **5.3. A specific case of affinity between African tradition and Christianity: points of contact between *Cleansing the chest of grudges* and Christian reconciliation paradigms**

The last sub-problem that remains to be addressed is, “What could be an example of integrative and fruitful dialogue between African tradition and Christian tradition for reconciliation in South Africa?” The final step in this dissertation will be to draw together all theoretical conclusions to propose a concrete example of useful dialogue between African tradition and Christian tradition (see 5.4 below). In preparation for this, I will here attempt to show that there are elements of concrete affinity and complementarity between a particular African traditional resource, viz. the *Cleansing the chest of grudges* ritual, and Christian resources that aim at reconciliation. I will highlight in what ways the constituents of the African reconciliation ritual may connect to, correspond to, complement or be complemented by certain Christian paradigms.

The task of section 4.2 was to show up aspects of *Cleansing the chest of grudges* that conflict with Christian tradition. I suggested that certain of these points of conflict in fact testify to the fact that the two traditions involved may be positively enhanced and complemented by each other, because their differences sometimes highlight each other’s

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<sup>885</sup> Shorter (1978:25) mentions further examples where traditional and ecclesial rites have been married to form new rituals, especially in the former Zaire and Tanzania. For more examples, see Gwassa (1972:215).

shortcomings. Therefore, chapter 4 already raised the possibility of Christian tradition both complementing and being complemented by the ritual of *Cleansing the chest* (see especially sections 4.2.4, 4.2.5 and 4.2.10). This section partially continues the work of illuminating in what way such complementarity can occur.

In section 5.1 I have highlighted a number of *general* points of contact and complementarity between African tradition and Christianity. Many of the aspects mentioned there also apply when conducting an analysis of the ritual of *Cleansing the chest* from the perspective of Christian tradition. Here I wish to show epigrammatically how some of these aspects that are general points of contact between the two traditions can also be seen as *specific* points of contact when considering the ritual of *Cleansing the chest*.<sup>886</sup> Not all of the common aspects examined in 5.1 will be discussed here, in order to avoid too much repetition. Shared paradigms such as a spiritual approach to life, involvement in the world, the sanctity and dignity of human life, the concept of wrongdoing and reconciliation as the re-establishment of relationships will not be discussed again, since these obviously inspire both the ritual of *Cleansing the chest* and Christian reconciliation endeavours. Rather, in what follows, I focus on those elements of potential affinity or complementarity that seem to me to be the most overt and potentially evocative for future dialogue.

### 5.3.1 Ritual space and time

As I have elaborated in section 2.4.3, *Cleansing the chest* makes elaborate use of the categories of ritual space and time. The ritual is performed outside the homestead of the persons involved, in the open, more specifically at a place “where ashes and dirt from the household is (sic) often poured out (or dumped) when cleaning” (Koka 2003). In other words, it is performed in a ritual space which bears rich symbolic meaning. It is true that in Christian tradition rituals are also performed in ritual spaces that bear symbolic meaning for those participating.

Moreover, the presence of elders with their special garb and their special behaviour also indicates ritual time. In Christianity, the presence and attire of the leaders, as well as their behaviour, can also be important for creating the preferred ritual atmosphere. Therefore, I see the use of ritual space and time as a shared foundation upon which dialogue can take place.

### 5.3.2 The presence of God

To state the obvious may not be avoided if it is an important statement to be made. In his description of the ritual, Koka (2003) emphasises the fact of God’s presence throughout the ritual. Along with the ancestors, God is invoked to participate in the ritual. Of course, the presence of God is a non-negotiable reality in Christian rituals. I suggest that belief in God and belief in God’s presence and guidance during ritual represents a strong foundation for dialogue concerning this ritual.

### 5.3.3 Repentance, confession and forgiveness

A compelling aspect of connection with Christian tradition displayed in *Cleansing the chest* is the practice of repentance, confession and forgiveness.<sup>887</sup> The hostile parties both state

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<sup>886</sup> Using a study of the Gurmanceba of Bukina Faso as his example, Cartry (1992:26) tries to “trace the lines linking common components” in ritual. In his investigations, he discovers what “lines” can be drawn “from one rite to another”. Similarly, Platenkamp (1992) marks out the connection between pre-Christian and modern-day Christian rituals among the Tobelo in the Northern Moluccas of Indonesia. Indeed, the exercise of tracing what connections exist between different rituals has been done by many ritual and religious scholars alike.

<sup>887</sup> Schreier (1998:13) argues that there is a pattern underlying rituals of reconciliation all over the globe, which can be outlined as follows: (1) There is accusation of wrongdoing. (2) There is acknowledgement and apology in some formal way. (3) Apology is accepted. (4) The wrongdoer(s) is/are ritually reintegrated

their case, i.e. tell their side of the story, in the presence of the elders. By telling their story, they are led to confess their guilt or their innocence. Whatever accusations, hurts, fears and other emotions have become pent up in them may be spoken, and thereby released. Moreover, they are encouraged to express their hope for prospective peace among one another. Then the parties are asked to shake hands and utter forgiveness.<sup>888</sup> Indeed, this phase of the ritual can easily be likened to a confessional rite in which both parties are given the opportunity to vent their anger and frustration, as well as offer their apologies. Repentance occurs on a verbal level, in that opponents show their regret for any wrongdoing that has befallen the other. The confessional is consummated by mutual forgiveness.

This practice of ritual repentance, confession and forgiveness connects very closely with the Christian paradigms of repentance, confession and forgiveness (see also section 5.1.19), and therefore offers an excellent platform for co-operative dialogue.

### 5.3.4 The cross

Though it is not overt, I nevertheless argue that the cross in its hidden form is to be discovered in the *Cleansing the chest* ritual. As discussed at length in section 3.2.1, the cross of Christ points to the hidden nature of God's grace. The cross is a symbol of God's revelation *sub contrario*, i.e. in unexpected and unanticipated ways and places. In other words, God is at work in ways that may not be overtly "Christian".

Moreover, God is "hidden in sufferings" (von Loewenich 1976:29).<sup>889</sup> Suffering is the location of the hidden God. The lives of those who suffer are the manifestation of God's presence in the world. It is not necessarily those who bear Christ's name on their lips that are the vessels of God's revelation and the residences of God's presence, but those who (metaphorically) bear Christ's cross in their lives. Part of "bearing Christ's cross" means showing weakness and humility, being capable of repentance and remorse and being willing to forgive one's adversaries. All these elements (i.e. humility, repentance and forgiveness) are cultivated and displayed in the ritual of *Cleansing the chest*.

The cross is the ultimate symbol of accepting the unacceptable (Nürnberg 2003:9-25), of embracing the enemy (Volf 1996:126) and of including the outsider (Tutu 1999:213). In *Cleansing the chest*, participants humble themselves before each other and adopt a stance of acceptance of one another, despite their unacceptability. Enemies are led to embrace one another and to include each other in their lives again. Indeed, the ritual breaks down "dividing walls of hostility" – something which Christians believe is accomplished by Christ's cross (see Ephesians 2:13-16).

What all this suggests is that there are traces of a theology of the cross to be identified in the ethos underlying the ritual of *Cleansing the chest*. This is why the cross can be seen as a point of contact and possible dialogue between African and Christian reconciliation endeavours (see also section 5.1.5). It may in fact be seen as a powerful guiding force for reconciliation, shared by both traditions (albeit more explicitly manifest in Christianity than in African tradition).<sup>890</sup>

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into the community, signifying forgiveness. Sometimes a probationary period and ritual punishment precedes full reintegration. Both African and Christian approaches to reconciliation appear to adhere to this rudimentary pattern.

<sup>888</sup> Forgiveness is about the re-establishment of dignity and humanity; "the one who forgives affirms the value and worth of the forgiven whose value and worth ... was brought to question" (Bräkenhielm 1993:30).

<sup>889</sup> I argue that it is in any "cross" which is caused by exploitation, oppression, abuse, or any form of injustice that human beings experience that God reveals Godself. Kitamori (1965:62) would indeed argue that both believers and unbelievers bear the pain of God.

<sup>890</sup> Indeed, to Parrat (1995:132), the cross is "the basis of an ethic for Africa" since it has the capacity and the power to "bring the ancestral ethos into dialogue with the Christian faith".

### **5.3.5 Reconciliation as purification**

*Cleansing the chest* is a ritual of purification and cleansing. This aspect is highlighted frequently by Koka (2003; 07.07.2004). As I have shown in various sections above, purification is a central element of many African traditional reconciliation paradigms. Christian practices that aim at reconciliation also frequently make use of the rhetoric of purification (see sections 3.3 and 5.1.16). When reconciled, Christians believe they are cleansed of their sin and iniquity. Their guilt is “washed away”, their hearts are “purified”. The language of purity is deeply lodged within Christian tradition, which is why the idea of reconciliation as purification is not foreign to adherents of Christianity. It may indeed be a point of contact between Christianity and the ritual of *Cleansing the chest*.

### **5.3.6 The importance of community and participation**

In *Cleansing the chest*, the participation of the community is of great importance. Under no circumstances can it be conducted in private, without the involvement of the broader community. This focus on the community and participation is an element of *Cleansing the chest* which can complement and enhance Christianity in its reconciliation paradigms. Christian tradition is, at base, also a tradition centred on community and involvement (see section 5.1.10). The church is considered to be a community of participation in the work of Christ (see section 3.4). Christian rituals usually occur in community settings, i.e. during worship services. The insistence on community participation in *Cleansing the chest of grudges* compares amicably to the insistence in Christian tradition on group sharing and involvement in church rites.

### **5.3.7 The importance of ritual and a sacramental approach to life**

As has been elaborated in section 2.4.3, *Cleansing the chest* has a strong sacramental thrust. Participants are truly changed when undergoing this ritual. Their status changes, they become new people. Indeed, Koka (2003) uses overtly Christian language to describe their status change: they are “like the ‘Born-again’ members of the community”. For Christians, the effects of certain rituals, be they sacraments or not, are believed to go very deep as well (see section 5.1.20). Especially rites of repentance may create in participants a sense of renewal and release from the past that is comparable to becoming “born again”.

In *Cleansing the chest*, the community meal shared after the completion of the formal ritual has sacramental significance as well. Sharing a meal together as a community is a sign that the dividing walls of hostility have truly been broken down, and that trust and faithfulness are again possible among members of the community. Christians, too, place much importance on the sacramental community meal, which usually takes the shape of the sacrament of Holy Communion, but can also be practised in form of an Agape feast or more informal gatherings which involve communal eating and drinking.

This expectation and belief that actual change can occur by participating in ritual, this sacramental approach to life displayed in the ritual of *Cleansing the chest*, is a point of contact that opens up the possibility of fruitful dialogue with Christianity.

### **5.3.8 The use of symbols**

I have ascertained in section 5.1.21 that both Christian tradition and African tradition place great emphasis on symbols and symbolism. Indeed, when considering the *Cleansing the chest* ritual, direct affinities can be established between its symbols and symbols used in Christian tradition. The most important example is water. In *Cleansing the chest*, water is a purifying, cooling substance which has the potency to wash away the defilement of hostility, and cool the fire of anger and vengeance. It also cleanses participants from the evil of their guilt. Water used in Christian tradition has much the same ritual functions. This is why it is a symbol which connects the two traditions, and represents a point of affinity between Christianity and the ritual of *Cleansing the chest*.

Similarly, ash is a potent symbol. It is used by Christians in Ash Wednesday services, signifying repentance and purification as well as preparation for lent.<sup>891</sup> Therefore the use of ash may also be seen as a point of connection between Christianity and the ritual at hand. The same may be said for the symbolic gesture of shaking hands, the symbolic meaning attached to ingesting food and/or drink in a ritual environment and the symbolism surrounding the attire worn by ritual experts.

These similarities in symbol use represent compelling points of connection between the ritual of *Cleansing the chest* and Christian resources employed for reconciliation.

### **Conclusion**

In considering in outline those aspects of *Cleansing the chest of grudges* that correspond with Christian tradition (i.e. do not clash with it), I have prepared the ground for the invention of a new ritual which can be deemed both “traditional African” and “Christian”. I have demonstrated that there are a number of elements that either share affinity or can be used complementarily to enhance and enrich both traditions. In using these shared or complementary elements for the purpose of a new ritual, I am trying to respond creatively to the need for reconciliation practices that employ both African traditionalist and Christian elements. While catering for proponents of both these traditions, such practices indeed draw the two traditions together for a joint endeavour. My attempt wishes to represent an active and concrete way in which the two traditions can dialogue efficaciously for the sake of social reconciliation in South Africa. Ultimately, the invention of a ritual which taps into two religious traditions and tries to enhance both at the same time is an exercise in African theology and African ritual and liturgical studies.

## **5.4 Weaving together African traditional and Christian reconciliation resources – an attempt at devising a “new” ritual of reconciliation**

In section 2.4.1, when outlining the ritual of *Cleansing the chest of grudges*, I mentioned Koka’s suggestion of using this ritual for the Christian community, specifically during Ash Wednesday celebrations. Although hinting at such a bold possibility, Koka neglects to investigate it further. Therefore, exploring ways in which *Cleansing the chest* and Ash Wednesday rituals can be integrated with integrity and imagination remains a task yet to be accomplished. It is to this creative task that I now turn, using Koka’s suggestion as the starting point for my deliberations.

In this section I attempt to devise a “new” ritual of reconciliation which makes use of elements from the African traditional ritual of *Cleansing the chest of grudges* that coincide with or complement Christian paradigms of reconciliation, particularly practices surrounding Ash Wednesday. These shared or complementary elements which have been outlined above include the presence and participation of God, the practice of repentance, confession and forgiveness, acknowledgement of the cross, the understanding of reconciliation as purification, the focus on community and participation, a sacramental approach to life, and the use of specific symbols (such as water and ash). In order for the “new” ritual to be firmly rooted within both African tradition and Christian tradition, the shared and complementary resources from these traditions will represent its backbone. In other words, the new invented ritual must include at least all of the elements mentioned above. In order not to confuse it with either *Cleansing the chest of grudges* or with an Ash Wednesday service as such, I will call the new ritual *Ritual of the ash*.

The invention of the *Ritual of the ash* is a somewhat daring attempt at making a concrete suggestion for a shared or joint reconciliatory practice. It may signify a small

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<sup>891</sup> See how Hart (1987) asserts the need for a renewal of Christian forms of penance, especially during the Lenten season.

step towards real co-operation and interaction – dialogue in praxis – between African tradition and Christian tradition with reference to social reconciliation. The *Ritual of the ash* may become but one manifestation of African tradition and Christianity working together in faith and practice to promote social reconciliation in a country still burdened by human hostility and division.

#### 5.4.1 Justification for the “invention” of a ritual<sup>892</sup>

One of the best reasons why it is justifiable to do what I intend to do here, i.e. “invent” a ritual, is that rituals are by their very nature entities of human creation (Geertz 1973:169<sup>893</sup>; Berger & Luckmann 1966:51<sup>894</sup>). Though they may refer to or be believed to originate from the super-human or metaphysical realm, they are, undoubtedly, human constructions. As such, they are changeable. “We can no longer assume that all forms of ritual are static” (Grimes 1982:57). Rather, ritual “encompasses numerous forms of ritual change” including “the process whereby rituals give birth to other rituals”.<sup>895</sup>

Rituals are not ‘givens,’ because we just as surely create them as we receive them from traditions and revelations. ... Rituals transpire (trans, spirare = to breathe across). Like breathing, ritual fluctuates in frequency, force, and volume according to its cultural context. ... Ritualizing is the action by which we mediate what is given and what is made, what is involuntary and what is chosen. ... Rituals are events; they have lifespans. ... Thinking of them as unchanging is a half-truth. They are not artifacts. They are not structures in the sense that a building is a structure. They are structurings, as a dance is. They surge and subside, ebb and flow. ... Rituals deteriorate. Entropy is the rule; therefore, they must be raised up constantly from the grave of book, body, memory, and culture. (Grimes 1982:57)

What I will do in this section is to “raise up” ritual elements from the “grave of book, body, memory, and culture” of both African tradition and Christian tradition in order to allow for a new form to evolve. The emphasis in ritual scholarship “is now upon what flows and changes; innovation, not duration, becomes the keynote.” Ritual is “best viewed as a process, not an enduring system or set of types” (Grimes 1982:147, referring to Turner’s ritual theories). Therefore, devising innovative possibilities for ritual practice is acceptable – even beneficial – from a scholarly point of view.

Another validation for ritual innovation and creativity is that it can positively address a number of criticisms that are waged against classical Christian liturgies. Grimes (1982:4) suggests that a number of Christian rituals “fail gesturally, posturally, and ‘actionally’”.<sup>896</sup> One problem he highlights is that “Christian ritual tends to idolize the so-called ‘higher’ senses, namely, speech, and secondarily, vision”. Words overwhelm most liturgical events, while the “tactile, gustatory, and kinesthetic aspects of liturgy” are obscured. Another problem is the under-emphasis of the “dramatic qualities” of rituals (Grimes 1982:5). It is important to address these weaknesses lodged in Christian liturgy. One way of doing this is by allowing Christian liturgies to come into contact with

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<sup>892</sup> For some preliminary assertions on the “invention” of modes of social structuring and imagination see section 2.4.2, as well as Cox (1970:81), Kahler (1960:53) and Horton (1971:106). Refer also to the term coined by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1993), the “invention of tradition”, which involves the creation of new or renewed rituals that both draw from the past and cater for the present and future needs of our societies.

<sup>893</sup> Ritual is part of culture. Culture is human-made, and therefore subject and open to change (Geertz 1973:169).

<sup>894</sup> As social beings, humans are responsible for their world, their social reality. They actually construct their social environment (Berger & Luckmann 1966:51).

<sup>895</sup> The forms of ritual change Grimes refers to are: “(1) the historical development, or revision, of a ritual, (2) the phases internal to a particular rite, (3) the ‘processing’ of persons by a ritual, (4) the changing relations between rituals and their social context, and (5) the process whereby rituals give birth to other rituals...” (Grimes 1982:57).

<sup>896</sup> With regard to this, see West’s compelling distinction between “embodied theology” and “articulated theology” (2005:26-35).

elements from other traditions' rituals and liturgies, in order that they may be enhanced and complemented by them.<sup>897</sup> Indeed, Christian rituals become richer in terms of gesture, action, drama and sensory involvement of participants if they appropriate and integrate resources from African tradition.<sup>898</sup> I would agree with Dillistone (1986:122) that there is a need for both traditional symbols, which hold things together, and "innovative symbols", which bring "together representatives of different cultures ... for the expansion of new perspectives in all cultures."<sup>899</sup>

Clifford Geertz (1973:169) has found that some rituals have meanings which seem no longer to be suited to the social context in which they occur. Their meaning does no longer correspond to or connect with the social circumstances, but reflects a thought-world and social structure of a bygone age. According to Geertz, such outdated and in some ways obsolete rituals should be overhauled in order to gain relevance once more. The implication is that it is not only possible, but also necessary, for communities to adapt and adjust – indeed, reinvent – their rituals in order to suit the social context. In order for rituals to not lose their value and potency, they need to change and bend according to the needs of society.<sup>900</sup> This study is conducted under the premise that the social context of South Africa demands that the religious communities rethink and rework how they promote or "do" reconciliation. Part of this rethinking and reworking involves reviewing their rituals, and allowing them to be transformed by the new context, which is marked by pluralism and inevitably involves religious dialogue.<sup>901</sup> Indeed, it is a matter of religious and ritual integrity to allow for and encourage changes in ritual modes of sociality and religiosity.

According to Berger & Luckmann (1966:89), the danger with very ancient and established traditions (like African tradition and Christianity) is that they become "reified". Reification means that the institutional and social elements of that cultural tradition become rigid and inflexible, and adopt an aura of infallibility. The more static, rigid and fortified an institution becomes, the less it tolerates difference, challenges, plurality and open dialogue. A reified tradition is so concerned with keeping up its barricades that it blocks out influences from the outside and suppresses dissenters from within. Under such circumstances, change becomes increasingly difficult to implement. Yet it is exactly those traditions which have become reified that need to be released from their own shackles. Rigidity and uncompromising dogmatism will eventually cause the tradition to decay and collapse. Therefore, it is for its own good if a reified tradition is challenged by other symbolic universes. Indeed, since social institutions and traditions "are historical products of human activity, all socially constructed universes change, and the change is brought about by concrete actions of human beings" (Berger & Luckmann 1966:116). Despite human institutions' tendency to become reified and rigid over time, they also always have the potential to change and transform according to the situation and the needs of the people who inhabit them. By active human agency and participation, change *can* occur. Indeed, for the sake of the survival of ancient traditions, change *must*

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<sup>897</sup> Liturgy scholars such as Fenwick & Spinks (1995), McKenna (1997) and Walton (2000) would concur that Christianity needs ongoing liturgical and ritual renewal.

<sup>898</sup> African liturgists that would agree with this assertion are Chupungco (1982, 1989, 1992, 1996), Egbulem (1996), Lumbala (1998) and Niangoran-Bouah (1991).

<sup>899</sup> Indeed, Cox (1970:81) asserts that it is high time that "churchly rituals" and rituals from other cultural backgrounds "find or at least touch each other".

<sup>900</sup> According to Aragon (1992:305), indigenous peoples in particular seem to reorient their rituals and interpretations when faced with a new view of how the world works. This sometimes leads them to Christianising indigenous rituals, or indeed indigenising Christian rituals (Aragon 1992:305).

<sup>901</sup> As elaborated in section 1.4.3, scholars such as Panikkar (1990a:147), D'Costa (1990:24) and Kaufman (1992:12) agree that authentic dialogue implies transformation.



occur.<sup>902</sup> This change is best achieved through dialogue and exchange. In other words, when two traditions dialogue and interact in order to form something new together – like the proposed *Ritual of the ash* – this is a matter of agency for the survival and thriving of both.

For the above reasons and others, many scholars are of the opinion that the use of indigenous and ancient rituals can be beneficial for modern communities, including Christian communities in modern contexts.<sup>903</sup> Malidoma Somé (2000), for example, advocates the power and efficacy of African indigenous rituals for the Western world. He compares the West to a “machine world” (Maschinenwelt) which needs the force of the “anti-machine” (“Antimaschine”) to become more human again.<sup>904</sup> The “anti-machine” is traditional ritual (Somé 2000:33). According to Somé, modern Westernised life needs to find its way back to ritual (2000:139).

Similarly, Platenkamp (1992) traces the connection between pre-Christian and modern-day “church” rituals among the Tobelo in the Northern Moluccas of Indonesia. His findings show that the Tobelo have (successfully) integrated the two traditions, and that the way in which they have been integrated has occurred in and through ritual.<sup>905</sup> Ritual seems to be a way to make the connections, to overcome the discrepancies, and concretise affinities between the pre-Christian and Christian approaches.<sup>906</sup> Utzschneider (1996:96), too, insists that rituals of ancient and other traditional civilisations ought not to be deemed “pagan” – and therefore unworthy of study in Christian theological circles – but ought to be assessed theologically for their potential efficacy and “fruitfulness”. Just as indigenous rituals can enhance Christian rites, “Christian dimensions of ritual can add depth, universality, and compassion” to celebrations that are not Christian in origin (Cox 1970:81).<sup>907</sup> In other words, dialogue and interaction is a two-way street that benefits both dialogue partners.

Becker (1996) identifies the theological potential in reconciliation rituals of traditional communities. He investigates the example of the *Böro N’adu* festival of the people of Nias<sup>908</sup> (1996:191). This festive ritual aims at reconciling all people to one another – including families, clans and tribes, the living and the dead – as well as human beings to the rest of the world (i.e. the mineral, vegetable and animal worlds, as well as the unseen realms of life). It is a ritual seeking to promote comprehensive reconciliation and harmony (:197). Becker is of the opinion that certain rites practiced by traditional communities “mirror” the Christian message of reconciliation, and could therefore represent tangible ways of inculturating the gospel (:201). As such, ancient rituals provide a religious base-experience (“religiöse Basiserfahrung”), which provides the hermeneutical framework by which reconciliation is understood, experienced and lived out (:202).

The intrinsic inclusiveness of ritual is another reason why conducting dialogue between African tradition and Christian tradition in terms of ritual is an efficacious

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<sup>902</sup> Already during colonial times, Africans started to employ modes of “creative appropriation and defiance” which included “instances of ritual syncretism, the reconstruction and representation of the liturgy of the Holy Service” (Comaroffs 1991:248).

<sup>903</sup> See for example Driver (1991).

<sup>904</sup> This correlates to the “deterioration and breakdown of the central symbols in modern Western culture” (May 1960:22) and the “decline of religious symbols” in modern society (Tillich 1960:94).

<sup>905</sup> Similarly, Jahn (1961:60) refers to the phenomenon of “fusion” of different rites in Africa.

<sup>906</sup> See also Aragon (1992:274) who illustrates how the Tobaku of Central Sulawesi “reinterpret their own ritual practices to make them compatible with permissible Christian rites at the same time as they interpret Christian doctrines to suit their traditional moral framework.” Indeed it is not uncommon for traditional peoples to reorient rituals and their interpretations to suit the given context (Aragon 1992:305ff). Rituals “newly invented ... may become arenas for the reinterpretation of historic events” (:327). Part of this reinvention of rituals involves the Christianising of indigenous rituals (:305).

<sup>907</sup> These Christian dimensions “are only properly introduced however, if they unlock, challenge, and reassure. Otherwise they can become theological nightsticks” (Cox 1970:81).

<sup>908</sup> Nias is an island near Sumatra.

endeavour. Baumann (1992:110) has shown that “many rituals are and can be open to outsiders. They may even be addressed to the outsiders. People can adopt others’ rituals and genuinely participate in them. Outsiders can participate in others’ rituals without necessarily giving up their own identity.”<sup>909</sup> In Baumann’s findings, rituals display such great inclusiveness that even persons from different religious backgrounds can become involved in them. Such an assertion questions the idea of “ethnic uniformity” in ritual (:112) as well as the concept of assumed “homogeneous ritual communities” (:113).<sup>910</sup>

In view of the above arguments, I feel justified in attempting the invention of a new ritual which is inspired by existing rituals from both African tradition and Christianity. This new ritual, the *Ritual of the ash*, could indeed prove to be an example of fruitful interaction between the two traditions, for the benefit of South African society. It is intended to be an example of a joint endeavour to address the problem of social strife in South Africa. It is my hope that it will indeed become an example of an enriching practice for both Christianity and African tradition, in which mutual complementary enhancement takes place.

## 5.4.2 *Ritual of the ash*

### 5.4.2.1 The aim of the ritual

This ritual aims at establishing reconciliation between people who have become estranged because of mutual enmity or hostility.<sup>911</sup> It aspires to bring about and portray the symbolic healing of relationships that have been breached or have become strained, due to the effect of certain events or situations. Persons who participate in the ritual are encouraged to allow themselves to be transformed from a state of enmity or indifference toward the other(s) to a state of acceptance and embrace of the other(s). Through this ritual, the possibility of “starting anew” as friends or comrades should be created (instead of continuing on a path of mutual hostility and rejection). Put simply, the ritual aims at restoring relationships to the extent that goodwill, mutual concern, and a sense of unity are fostered, and that attitudes of exclusion, antagonism and resentment are overcome.

### 5.4.2.2 The place of the ritual

*Cleansing the chest* is performed outside the homestead of the persons involved, in the open. The symbolism connected to the place where the ash is discarded is of great import (see section 2.4.3). Ash Wednesday celebrations are habitually held in the sanctuary of a church. Of course, this is also a place laden with rich symbolic meaning and associations. Both these ritual spaces (i.e. outside a homestead or in a church) are therefore apt for the performance of the *Ritual of the ash*.<sup>912</sup> I suggest that the place for conducting the ritual be determined by the following factors: (1) the preference of the direct participants (i.e. those who intend to be reconciled to one another), (2) the willingness of the owner(s) or caretaker(s) of the place to have the ritual take place on their premises, (3) the accessibility of the place (i.e. is the location known to the community, can it be reached by public transport), (4) the practical suitability of the place (i.e. is it large enough for the number of

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<sup>909</sup> Moreover, ritual can be used “to convey a message across a cultural cleavage to ‘others’ or to an outside ‘public’” (Baumann 1992:98).

<sup>910</sup> Douglas (1970:55) and Koka (07.07.2004) agree that rituals are not necessarily exclusive to one group. Rather, they can be inclusive of different social groups, especially if these groups share a common goal.

<sup>911</sup> Reasons for enmity between people are innumerable. For example, specific cases of hostility may be the result of theft of or damage done to property, fraud, quarrels concerning inheritance, unlawful occupation of land, defamation of a person (or family, clan, or ethnic group), adultery, or various forms of violence or maltreatment. Inter-personal hostility in South Africa can frequently be seen as the result of racist policies and unjust political and economic structures. Sometimes, tribalism, nepotism and sexism are also the cause of enmity between groups.

<sup>912</sup> If the two opposing parties cannot agree upon either of these settings, a third, more neutral, place could also be an option.

people who wish to attend, is it practicable for the ritual to be conducted efficiently).

If members of the community attending the ritual are not familiar with the reasons for the choice of the ritual space to be used, i.e. if they do not know the symbolic meaning attached to the ritual space, this needs to be explained to them. Such an explanation cannot, of course, unlock the depths of the mystery of the ritual, but may help members to understand on a cognitive level what the potential significance of such a ritual space could be. An explanation may also avoid misunderstanding in members who do not have access to the relevant cultural resources to draw any symbolic conclusions about the place of the ritual.

#### 5.4.2.3 The time of the ritual

No particular requirement is set for the ritual of *Cleansing the chest* in terms of when it is supposed to occur. Rather, it must be arranged as the need for it arises. Ash Wednesday services are conducted on a particular annual date, six weeks before Easter. The *Ritual of the ash*, as the product of cross-fertilization between these two rituals, need not be bound by either precedent. I suggest that it be used both as the need arises (i.e. if there is a concrete situation of social enmity that needs to be addressed), and in a routine manner (i.e. on a set day of the year). Communities that seek to adopt the *Ritual of the ash* as their own may consider celebrating it yearly on the Day of Reconciliation (i.e. 16 December), or on Heritage Day (24 September), or possibly even on Ash Wednesday (which is determined by the Christian liturgical calendar).

The time of day for conducting the *Cleansing the chest* ritual as well as Ash Wednesday ceremonies is not fixed.<sup>913</sup> Therefore the time at which the *Ritual of the ash* is performed ought not to be rigidly set. It should be determined by factors similar to those mentioned above, viz.: (1) the preference of the direct participants (i.e. those parties who are in conflict), (2) the willingness of the owner(s) or caretaker(s) of the place to have the ritual take place on their grounds at that time and on that date, (3) the practicability of the time (i.e. can the community wishing to attend do so on that day and at that time, e.g. is public transport available, does it not clash with people's work time and is it safe for participants to attend at that time).

#### 5.4.2.4 The ritual "experts" or leaders

In *Cleansing the chest*, the elders take on the role of ritual experts or leaders. It is under their guidance that the ritual is conducted. Ash Wednesday services are usually conducted under the leadership of the minister, priest or pastor of the congregation involved. In some cases, elders, deacons or lay-ministers may also lead the service. In the *Ritual of the ash* the place of the ritual expert or leader may be taken by any or all of the above. The only decisive factors that should be taken into account are (1) that the person(s) leading the ritual are acknowledged and accepted as respectable leaders by both opposing parties and the community at large, (2) that they are familiar with the procedure of the ritual and are capable of performing the necessary gestures and articulating the necessary words with conviction, and (3) that they agree with and feel comfortable with the ritual theologically and ritologically, so that they can conduct it with solemnity and sincerity. It would be desirable for a combination of leaders from both African tradition and Christian tradition to conduct the ritual together, for instance two representing each religious heritage. Moreover, it is important that *both* primary ritual participants and their communities are represented by the elders who lead the ritual, i.e. the elders may not necessarily be a homogeneous group but must reflect the (cultural, religious, racial and even political) diversity of the participants and their communities. In the liturgical order (rendered below), I will assume the presence of four elders, yet the number may be larger or

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<sup>913</sup> Although it must be noted that many African traditional religious rituals are performed early in the morning, before or during sunrise.

smaller.<sup>914</sup> The elders will be referred to as E1, E2, E3 and E4 in the liturgical order of the ritual.

#### 5.4.2.5 The ritual participants

Like the ritual of *Cleansing the chest*, the *Ritual of the ash* is conducted for the sake and benefit of a community that has become affected by a situation of social hostility and strife. The prime actors or direct participants in the ritual are representatives of the two opposing factions, one from each. They are either most directly involved in the dispute or the ones who have been entrusted with the role of representing their party. As I shall demonstrate below, the whole group of people participating in the ritual is indeed drawn into the proceedings and is in no way to be considered passive or uninvolved. Yet the focus of much of the ritual remains on the two key persons, much like it is in *Cleansing the chest*. These two persons will be referred to as X1 and X2 in the liturgical outline.

X1 and X2 should each have two so-called “support persons”, who literally and figuratively remain at their side throughout the ritual. Each pair of support persons ought to be chosen either by X1 and X2 respectively, or by the factions, parties or communities that they represent. The role of support person will generally be filled by a family member, close friend or trusted mentor of each of the two key persons, X1 and X2.

It must be noted that the ritual is not “secret”, but that all who wish to attend and witness it are welcome to do so, although the majority of the participants will probably be persons from the communities represented by X1 and X2. The sole criterion for possible exclusion from the ritual is if a person wilfully disrupts the process in order to undermine the efficacy of the ritual.

#### 5.4.2.6 Ritual elements and use of symbols

Drawing from the ritual of *Cleansing the chest* and from Christian paradigms of reconciliation (some of which are evident in Ash Wednesday services), I propose the following to be useful and potent symbols and actions to be incorporated in the *Ritual of the ash*:

- special attire for the leader(s)
- water
- ash
- circle symbolism
- the cross
- prayer
- references to or readings from the Bible
- sipping and spitting
- story-telling / confession
- acknowledgement of guilt / repentance
- proclamation of forgiveness / absolution
- clasping/shaking hands or embracing
- singing and dancing
- Holy Communion or the sharing of a meal

As I have tried to show in previous chapters and in section 5.1, most of these ritual elements are either shared by both African tradition and Christianity, or have the ability to complement the other.<sup>915</sup> Even if not actually part of their heritage, none of these

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<sup>914</sup> For reasons of practicability, the number of elders should, however, not exceed six.

<sup>915</sup> Thagale (1998:13) is of the opinion that the use of African traditional symbols is entirely permissible in Christian rituals (e.g. sprinkling or pouring of libations, the invocation of ancestors), but that they should all be “linked to the word of the Gospel, so that the ceremony clearly bears a Christian stamp”. Thereby, Christianity “would enhance the existing meaning, or better still, give a new meaning to the ritual.”

elements can justifiably be rejected outright by either of the traditions; none can justifiably be considered to cause offence. Nevertheless, the inclusion of certain of these aspects may be considered problematic by staunch adherents to either of the traditions. (For example, African traditionalists may be uneasy about the use of the sign of the cross and the Eucharist; Christians may have qualms about some of the prayers offered and the ritual gesture of spitting). Be that as it may, as an attempt to be a manifestation of dialogue and concrete interaction between the two traditions in question, the *Ritual of the ash* is compelled to indeed incorporate significant and meaningful aspects from both, without shying away from the possible consequences of such a bold endeavour. The tension and questions arising out of concrete dialogue cannot be avoided, but must be anticipated and confronted. To do what I propose here, will require, from the communities representing Christianity and African tradition, courage and a willingness and determination to dialogue together despite the risks involved.

#### 5.4.2.7 Preliminary preparations for the ritual

Before the *Ritual of the ash* is performed, a few preliminary preparations must be made.<sup>916</sup> Firstly, I suggest that X1 and X2 be offered one or more sessions of counselling by one or more of the elders. Such sessions may be done with X1 and X2 separately, or with both together, depending on the situation. The aim of the sessions should be for X1 and X2 to be able to express their feelings and come to terms with their emotions concerning the problem at hand. It should be expressed clearly by both X1 and X2 that they actually *wish* for the ritual to be performed before arrangements are made for it. Secondly, all direct participants, i.e. X1 and X2, the four support persons and all the elders must be duly informed about the process of the ritual, so that they enter into it without any sense of bewilderment. X1 and X2 respectively should be talked through the procedure in detail, and should be told in advance what they will be expected to do and say at what time. Thirdly, all elders should prepare themselves well in order that the ritual may run smoothly. If possible, the elders should meet in advance to discuss the liturgy and perhaps practice it together.<sup>917</sup> Fourthly, someone (probably one of the elders) should make sure that the venue, time and date of the ritual are clear, and that all items needed for it are going to be available. Fifthly, it should be arranged that a meal be available to conclude the ritual, either for the whole gathered congregation or for the families/communities surrounding X1 and X2 only. X1 and X2 should be approached regarding the preparation and the financing of the meal.<sup>918</sup>

#### 5.4.2.8 The process of the ritual

Weaving together various elements of both African tradition and Christian tradition, with special reference to the ritual of *Cleansing the chest* and Ash Wednesday rites, and with reference to several of the ritual theories elaborated in section 2.4.2, I suggest the process of the ritual to be as follows:

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<sup>916</sup> How and by whom such a ritual will be initiated will vary according to the given context. Since in many cases the actual "enemies" are unlikely to themselves take the initiative, possible intermediaries might have to take the initial steps of setting the process in motion. This would indeed be in line with the African culture of mediation (as discussed in section 2.3).

<sup>917</sup> Certainly, given all the preparing and rehearsing, there is a danger that the actual performance of the ritual might lack sincerity and spontaneity. Nonetheless, in my experience, if no preparations are made (or if they are made in a sloppy fashion), the greater danger is that the participants will be bewildered, and therefore distracted, throughout the ritual. Moreover, without prior rehearsal, the ritual leaders may themselves be confused and thereby might contribute to a general state of uncertainty and disorder, which would diminish the effectiveness of the ritual in participants' experiences.

<sup>918</sup> Of course, excessive financial burdening of any one individual or family should be avoided. Nevertheless, as we have seen in African tradition, offering a meal (e.g. in terms of a slaughtered animal) is considered to be a form of reparation or making amends. If wrong has been done, then there is a need for compensation to be made. Providing a meal could be a respectable way of offering such compensation.

### *Stage 1: Preparing the ritual*

At one end of the space designated for the ritual there is a table which signifies an altar. Placed on the altar is an image of a cross or a crucifix. Candles lit on the altar are optional. If Communion is to be celebrated (see stage 11, below), items used for Communion, viz. a jug of wine, a cup or chalice and a loaf of bread ought also to be placed on the altar. Also placed on the altar is one large container (a bowl or calabash) filled with water, one small empty container (a cup or traditional spoon/ladle), as well as a four small bowls containing cold ash. In front of the altar, about two metres away from it, six chairs or mats for sitting are placed in a circle facing each other, with gaps of about half a metre between them. The altar and the six chairs or mats in front of it represent the main focus of the ritual. Those presiding over the ritual, i.e. the four elders, wear symbolic attire determined by the customs held by the communities they represent.

### *Stage 2: Blessing the ritual space*

The elders prepare the place where the event is to be conducted by silently sprinkling the entire area using water from the large bowl on the altar. They use either their fingers or the traditional utensil used for the purpose of blessing (viz. an ox's tail).

### *Stage 3: Gathering the participants*

As the people start gathering, ushers assist them in seating themselves in a semi-circle half-surrounding and facing the altar and the six chairs or mats. The idea is for all participants to be able to see and hear everything that is done at all times. The elders stand, forming a semi-circle around the altar, facing the gathered community and the six chairs or mats. A song or chorus may be sung.

### *Stage 4: Introduction*

Elder 1 greets the congregation and launches the official proceedings by enunciating the following (using either these exact words, or words to the same effect):

**We are gathered together here today to witness to reconciliation, and to celebrate this reconciliation. It is through sin and wrongdoing that we as human beings become estranged from each other. We become guilty of mistreating one another and causing divisions between ourselves and our brothers and sisters. In order for this division to be overcome, we must come together in a spirit of repentance and allow ourselves to be washed clean of the defilement of our sins.**

**Many stories told by our ancient fathers and mothers reveal how important it is for us to overcome our enmity and live together in harmony. The story of Jacob and Esau, the story of Joseph and his brothers, the story of the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, and many other stories show us what it means to accept and love each other, to be one.**

**It is the will of God that in Christ we are reconciled to one another.**

**It is the decree of our beloved and respected ancestors that we reach out to one another in harmony and peace, and cleanse ourselves of the animosity we carry in our hearts.**

**As we begin this ceremony together, let us ask God to guide us on this path of purification.**

Elder 2 offers the following prayer aloud:

**Gracious God, Giver of life, our Reconciler and Healer.**

**We come before you in humility. We have allowed division and hostility to grow among us. We have become guilty before you and before each other. Allow us to witness today the power of your reconciliation. Help us to take steps to heal the rifts in our relationships. Help us to move into your presence so that we may again move toward each other with open hearts and open**

**arms of embrace. Give us the grace to accept each other as sisters and brothers, despite our faults and differences. Give us the strength and the will to overcome our inner prejudices, our resentment, our indifference and our disillusionment.**

**Be present now to bless us and guide us in this service of reconciliation.  
Amen.**

**Elder 3 reads the following passage from the Bible:**

**Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:16-20:**

**From now on we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.**

**So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!**

**All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.**

**So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.**

**Yet another passage is read by Elder 4:**

**Similarly, hear the words of Paul from Ephesians 2:13-22:**

**But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.**

**He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.**

**So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.**

**So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.**

#### **Stage 5: *The adversaries meet***

**Elder 1 mentions that there is a specific case of conflict between two individuals, families or communities that is to be addressed now. S/he explains that the two individuals (or two representatives of the two families or communities) have requested to undergo purification in order to be reconciled to one another, which is the reason for conducting this ceremony at this time. These two individuals, X1 and X2, are then called upon by name to come to the front and seat themselves opposite each other on one of the chairs (or mats) placed in a circle. The elder should point out which chair/mat should be occupied by whom, in order to avoid that they sit with their backs to the congregation. Both are to be accompanied by two other individuals from "their side", who are to assist and support them throughout the proceedings. (When called upon by an elder, all four support persons approach the circle of chairs or mats together. They sit on either side of "their" representative. Ideally, the elder calling upon them should call them by their names.) Now all six chairs or mats are occupied, and both the elders and the congregation have a clear view of the circle.**

**Elder 2 announces:**

X1 and X2 are now sitting in a circle, facing each other. In order for them to come together today, they have to acknowledge each other as equals, and as persons. I therefore ask both of you, X1 and X2, to look each other in the face and pronounce to each other, "I see you."

X1 says:

X2, I see you.

X2 says:

X1, I see you.

Elder 2:

Thank you. Now you have acknowledged each other. Now you are before each other as human beings.

Stage 6: *Mutual repentance and confession*

Elder 3 offers the following prayer:

God of Peace

You see these six people gathered here before you and this congregation. You see X1 and X2, and know about the conflict and strife that lies between them (and their families/ communities). You know their hearts and minds. Enable them now to repent and confess, in order that they may be freed from the burden of their enmity. Enable them to see each other and hear each other. Enable them to forgive.

Cleanse them and purify their hearts and minds, so that they may overcome their resentment and their guilt. Reconcile them.

Amen.

Elder 4 declares:

X1 and X2, you have come here today to overcome your hostility toward each other. You now sit facing each other. You have friends sitting next to you for support. The community gathered here supports you. God supports you. I now ask you – in the presence of this congregation and in the presence of God – to tell us your story in all honesty and humility. Tell us and each other what has happened that has caused you to become adversaries.

Elder 4 gestures to X1 to begin. X1 then relates his/her side of the story of strife. If s/he hesitates or struggles, any of the elders may encourage her/him by asking relevant questions or prompting her/him. If anything is unclear or incoherent, the elders may ask for clarification, albeit never in an accusing or mocking tone. (The intention is not for it to be an interrogation or cross-examination. Rather, the confessor must be enabled and encouraged to share her/his story without feeling pressurised or judged from the onset. Throughout X1's narration, neither X2 nor her/his support persons are to comment on what is being said. The congregation, too, ought not to vocalise any comments or questions. Only X1 is to have the platform, with possible guidance from the elders. The role of the elders is to be "neutral" and mediate instead of taking sides and judging.)

Once X1 is finished, and indicates this to the elders, Elder 4 declares:

X1, we have heard your side of the story. It is important that you, X2, have also heard it. If you have, and if you acknowledge it, please say to X1, "I have heard you."<sup>919</sup>

X2 says to X1:

X1, I have heard you.

Elder 4 then gestures to X2 to recount her/his side of the story of conflict. The same rules apply here as with X1's narration.

Once X2 is finished, and indicates this to the elders, Elder 4 declares:

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<sup>919</sup> This is reminiscent of what is done in some African traditional court procedures: "When the chief feels that a case has been sufficiently discussed he announces, or causes an *iphakathi* to announce, that 'We have heard', and the case is closed" (Hunter 1979:417).



X2, we have heard your side of the story. It is important that you, X1, have also heard it. If you have, and if you acknowledge it, please say to X2, "I have heard you."

X1 says to X2:

X2, I have heard you.

A short song or chorus may be sung.

Elder 1 declares:

We have heard both your stories. We have heard your sorrows and your pain, your anger and resentment. We lament that through all of these events you have become so estranged, and that the harmony between you has been shattered.

Yet we believe in God who reconciles. We believe that this God enables and encourages you to be reconciled to one another. For this to occur, you must repent and confess in whatever ways you have become guilty, in order that you may become free from your burden.

I therefore ask you both to confess your wrongdoings clearly and simply.

X1, what do you wish to confess to X2, to this congregation and to God?

X1 confesses her/his guilt in the matter. S/he may state her/his willingness to make amends for her/his wrongdoing, and offer some form of compensation.

Elder 1 asks X2:

X2, what do you wish to confess to X1, to this congregation and to God?

X2 confesses her/his guilt in the matter. S/he may state her/his willingness to make amends for her/his wrongdoing, and offer some form of compensation.

#### *Stage 7: Mutual forgiveness*

Elder 2 pronounces:

It takes courage to confess one's sins. We acknowledge that it has not been easy for you to do this. But repentance and confession are rewarded with forgiveness.

In Jeremiah 33:8 God declares, "I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me."

Moreover, the disciple Peter once asked Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" And Jesus answered him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." (Matthew 18:21-22)

It is the way of God to accept the sinner and to forgive. We, too, should accept our wrongdoers and forgive, even if this is a difficult thing to do.

I now ask you, X1 and X2, do you wish to break down the dividing wall that lies between you? Do you forgive each other? If so, I ask you to look each other in the face and declare, "I am prepared to start anew. I want to rebuild our relationship. I forgive you."

X1 says to X2:

X2, I am prepared to start anew. I want to rebuild our relationship. I forgive you.

X2 says to X1:

X1, I am prepared to start anew. I want to rebuild our relationship. I forgive you.

Elder 3 and Elder 4 move towards X1 and X2 respectively, and stand behind them. Elder 3 places his hand on X1's head or shoulders, saying:

It is God's promise to forgive those who ask for it. I hereby pronounce that you are forgiven, and absolved from all your sin. God embraces you and accepts you. Amen.

Elder 4 places his hand on X2's head or shoulders, saying:

**It is God's promise to forgive those who ask for it. I hereby pronounce that you are forgiven, and absolved from all your sin. God embraces you and accepts you. Amen.**

**Stage 8: Purification (phase 1)**

**Elder 1, standing behind the altar, lifts or points to the large bowl (or calabash) of water, explaining:**

**This bowl is filled with water. Water is a symbol of life. It refreshes us. It cools us. It cleanses us. It washes away impurities. It can therefore also wash away the impurity of our iniquities and faults. It can wash away our hate and anger, our fear and our enmity. It can wash away everything that pollutes us from within and diminishes life.**

**Elder 2 lifts one of the small bowls of ash, explaining:**

**This container is filled with ash. Ash is what is left after a fire has burnt down. It is fire which has "lost its life". The fire of hate and quarrelling and hostility between us has burnt down and is now lifeless. It has become ash. Therefore, this ash is a symbol of purification. The pollution caused by our strife and enmity is cleansed.**

**Elder 2 adds some of the ash to the water in the large bowl, gently stirring it and explaining:**

**Ash is mixed to water as a sign that all resentment and all guilt are now dissolved. This water mixed with ash is a potent symbol of the ending of strife and division. It is a symbol of our cleansing.**

**Elder 3 takes the empty cup or traditional spoon/ladle, dips it into the large bowl of water mixed with ash and takes it to X1. S/he gives it to X1, saying:**

**Take this cup to X2. Let X2 take a sip of this water mixed with ash, and then spit it to the ground. Thereby s/he will be cleansed, and the evil of your enmity is expelled.**

**X1 goes to X2, gives her/him the cup and watches as s/he takes a sip from it and spits it to the ground. X1 then returns the cup to Elder 3.**

**Elder 3 again takes the cup, dips it into the large bowl of water mixed with ash and takes it to X2. S/he gives it to X2, saying:**

**Take this cup to X1. Let X1 take a sip of this water mixed with ash, and then spit it to the ground. Thereby s/he will be cleansed, and the evil of your enmity is expelled.**

**X2 goes to X1, gives her/him the cup and watches as s/he takes a sip from it and spits it to the ground. X2 then returns the cup to Elder 3, who places it on the altar.**

**Elder 4 then takes the large bowl of water and ash from the altar and steps into the middle of the circle, saying:**

**As a sign of being released from the bondage of animosity and as a further sign of being cleansed, I ask you now to wash your hands in this bowl of purifying water and ash.**

**X1 and X2 stand up, walk to the elder standing in the middle of their circle, and simultaneously dip their hands into the bowl to wash their hands. Thereafter, they shake hands.**

**Once they have returned to their seats, Elder 4 calls upon the four support persons to approach the bowl and wash their hands. They, too, all shake hands.**

**A song or chorus may be sung as Elder 4 returns the bowl to the altar.**

**Stage 9: Purification (phase 2)**

**Now Elder 4 invites all present to join in the rite of purification by coming to the altar and washing their hands in the bowl of water and ash. They may come forward singly or in pairs. While this is happening, meditative chants or choruses may be sung, or music**

may be played softly.

Once all who wish to have come forward to wash their hands have done so, Elder 1 prays:

**We thank you, dear God, that you have cleansed us, that you have washed us clean and removed all those things that pollute our lives – our animosity, our prejudice, our wilfulness, our selfishness, our guilt.**

**Thank you for granting us forgiveness and giving us a fresh start.**

**Allow us now to embrace your forgiveness and go forth into our lives and into the world with the knowledge that we are free and redeemed.**

**Amen.**

*Stage 10: The mark of the cross*

Elder 2 says:

**Paul declares in 1 Cor 1:17 that “the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God”. Moreover, in his letter to the Ephesians 2:16, he proclaims that Christ reconciles all those who are divided “to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death their hostility through it”.**

**God has brought us together and reconciled us to each other. God has broken down the walls between us and within us. As a sign of being reconciled persons – reconciled to God, to ourselves and to each other – we can receive the mark of the cross.**

Gesturing to the cross on the altar, Elder 3 continues:

**The cross is God's most overt sign of reconciliation; it is God's sign of acceptance and love. As we receive the mark of the cross on our bodies, we are reminded of the cross which Christ bore, in order to bring about reconciliation for the world. We are drawn into the fellowship of this Christ, who has called us to be ministers of reconciliation. With the cross on our bodies, we are branded as believers in a God who wishes to bring peace and reconciliation into a world of strife. As we receive the mark of the cross, we acknowledge God's work in our lives and in this community – God's work of mending relationships, of healing wounds and of renewing us as people.**

**I invite you now to receive the mark of the cross – on your foreheads or on your hands. Each of us elders will be ready to mark you with the cross, using ash. Please come if you wish.**

Each of the elders takes one of the small bowls of ash from the altar. They then disperse in different directions toward the seated congregation, taking up stations there among the people. (One elder may first attend to X1 and X2 and their friends, who are still sitting in the circle, before moving closer to the crowd.) People can then approach the elder located nearest them. Standing or kneeling in front of the elder, congregants indicate where they want the mark to be placed (usually on the forehead, the head, or the back of the hand), and then the elder uses her/his finger to draw a small cross of ash there. As s/he applies the ashen cross, s/he may speak a word of blessing or encouragement to the person, or simply say, “You are marked with the cross, the symbol of life, love and reconciliation.” If elders see people who are elderly or disabled (i.e. who might struggle to come to them) in the crowd, they may approach them and ask if they would like to receive the mark of the cross.

While this is happening, a contemplative hymn or chorus may be sung, or music may be played in the background.

*Stage 11: Celebrating the Holy Supper*

This is an optional addition to the *Ritual of the ash*. The decision of whether it is performed or not should be left up to the discretion of those organising the ritual. For reasons mentioned in section 3.4.1, I consider Holy Communion to be of value for

reconciliation endeavours. Nevertheless, there may be reasons why certain communities may want to decline from using it in this context. Certain Christian traditions consider the sacrament of the Table to be for Christians only, i.e. exclusive to Christianity. Some denominations' official stance is that members of that particular denomination may only partake of the sacrament if presided over by a member of their own clergy.<sup>920</sup> For reasons such as these, the use of Communion may stir up some jarring emotions and create doubt and questions in some Christians' minds. If the organisers suspect that including the sacrament in the *Ritual of the ash* might cause more harm than good, and create discord instead of harmony, then it ought rather not to be included.

#### Stage 12: *Dismissal*

The ritual is concluded with a final blessing spoken over all who are present. The elders speak the following benediction formula (or one with similar content):

Elder 1:

May you go forth as people who have experienced the love of God.

Elder 2:

May you go forth as people who have witnessed the reconciliation of God.

Elder 3:

May you go forth as people who have been forgiven and healed, empowered and restored.

Elder 4:

Go now in peace to love the Lord and to serve the world.

In the name of God our Creator, Christ our Redeemer, and the Spirit our Comforter (+). Amen.

#### Stage 13: *Celebration and feasting*

Jubilant singing and dancing marks the end of the ceremony.

Either X1 or X2, but preferably both, publicly invite those present to share a meal with them and their families/communities. If it is not possible that the entire community participate in a meal with them, then at least the smaller family units of X1 and X2 should make a point of sharing a meal together, as a sign of sealing the process of the ritual.

#### **Conclusion**

The *Ritual of the ash* is an example of a ritual which has been invented, drawing from both African tradition and Christianity. It has been my intention to weave together elements from the African traditional reconciliation ritual of *Cleansing the chest of grudges* (discussed toward the end of chapter 2) as well as a number of Christian reconciliation resources (considered in chapter 3). More specifically, certain Christian ritual elements surrounding Ash Wednesday were also taken into account.

The final objective underlying this dissertation is to illustrate ways in which African tradition and Christianity might interact for the benefit of South African society. The *Ritual of the ash* is supposed to be such an illustration. It is designed to exemplify a creative and concrete manifestation of dialogue between the two traditions with special and specific reference to social reconciliation. Since *Cleansing the chest of grudges* is a ritual indigenous to South Africa, and Christianity is a religion widely practised by many South Africans, it is justifiable to deem the *Ritual of the ash* to be implicitly South African. Yet it need not only be South African, but could also be adopted and adapted by other African peoples.

Effectively, the *Ritual of the ash* is an attempt – admittedly, as yet theoretical and

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<sup>920</sup> This is true of the Catholics, as well as of a number of other smaller church groups. The reasons for such exclusiveness in some cases are based on doctrinal differences between the different Christian denominations surrounding the Eucharist/Communion/Mass. Yet more frequently it is because of internal or inter-church politics that certain denominations practice "closed" Communion.

tentative – at dialogue between African tradition and Christianity in South Africa for the sake of finding a common way forward with regard to the problem of social alienation and discord. It seeks to show, at least on a theoretical liturgical level, that dialogue with reference to finding joint solutions in the quest for social reconciliation is possible, and needs only to be persistently fostered and concretised. One of the ways of fostering such dialogue is by continuing to mark out ritological and theological connections, and creatively using the resources at hand. This is what I have attempted to do here experimentally.

## 5.5 Why this kind of dialogue is beneficial

I have now completed all the phases of this study, as set out in the introduction. As a final step, I wish to reiterate concisely the purported usefulness and aim of this dissertation within the larger framework of theology and religious studies. Therefore, in this closing section, I outline once again what I consider to be the efficacy of dialogue between two interlocutors such as African tradition and Christianity. I show how such dialogue as I have attempted in this dissertation serves to enhance both traditions in question. Furthermore, I demonstrate how this study attempts to promote the processes of engaging in the work of inculturation, embracing agency, and fostering a new African spirituality.

### *The efficacy of dialogue*

In South Africa, we have to realise “that conversation is the only way out” of our social problems, “because those who do not talk, fight” (Balcomb 1994:48). According to McAfee Brown (1975:167), the Christian story is in constant dialogue with other stories. When comparing stories, our normative story is challenged (:167). Other stories “both threaten and refine (even purge)” our normative story, which sometimes results in the construction of a new story. Through dialogue one’s own story may either be validated, destroyed or altered (:168). Moreover, “Hearing another story can force us to tell our own story in a different way” (:172). In this dissertation I have tried to create a platform for the story of Christianity to dialogue with the story of African tradition in the specific field of social reconciliation.

Dialogue takes various forms. It entails not merely doctrinal discussions involving experts only, it includes also spiritual sharing, active collaboration in life situations, and especially the sharing of life’s experience by simple ordinary adherents of ATR and Christians. . . . Dialogue may be expressed in four ways – dialogue of life, dialogue of deeds, dialogue of specialists, and dialogue of religious experience. (Ikenga-Metuh and Azikiwe 2004)

According to Ikenga-Metuh and Azikiwe, special persons may be designated for the task of conducting and nurturing dialogue. As a theologian in Africa, I see it as my task to enable and promote such dialogue through my scholarship.<sup>921</sup>

### *Enhancement of each other*

I agree with de Coppet (1992:3) that “communication between societies, difficult as it is, will not suffer – rather the contrary – from the systematic study of the mutual permeability of cultures, that is, the comparison of their different identities.” Indeed, though some might disagree, I do not consider either African tradition or Christian tradition to “suffer” from this study of “mutual permeability of cultures” and their

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<sup>921</sup> Such scholarship could also be interpreted as an attempt to establish a place for Christianity in an increasingly pluralist post-modern context. For a discussion of the role of Christianity in a post-modern environment, see Bruce (2000).

comparison, but rather to be enhanced.<sup>922</sup> Both African tradition and Christianity mature and flourish by communicating with one other, and by allowing this communication to lead to self-examination and transformation.

A comparison between African traditional and Christian reconciliation paradigms has shown that there are several points of convergence or affinity between the two (see sections 5.1 and 5.3). In some cases, these points of convergence translate into complementarity between the two. An investigation of those elements in the two traditions that do *not* seem compatible, and seem rather to be in conflict (see chapter 4), can sometimes point to potential complementarity as well. (Inadequacies within the one tradition may be overcome by the other; gaps in the one may be filled by the other.) Complementarity means that while the two paradigms in question are not identical, one or both of the traditions in question may be enhanced, enriched or improved by interaction with the other. Sarpong (2004) insists that “interaction or dialogue between Christianity and African traditional religion” may result in “the enrichment of Christianity itself” (see also D’Costa 1990:22-23).<sup>923</sup> In fact, a number of resources lodged in African tradition “can be a positive leaven in the enrichment and fulfilment of human life” (Gyekye 1997:296).<sup>924</sup> Similarly, African culture can be enriched by the Christian gospel (Ilhagale 1998:13). The church in Africa has the power “to adapt” some aspects of African tradition “and re-interpret them in Christian categories, and ennoble them” (Isizoh 2004).

What I am suggesting is that doing the kind of work attempted in this dissertation can be a boon to both evolving African tradition and culture, as well as to Christianity. More than *learning about* each other, the two traditions involved can *learn from* and be complemented by each other. Since the ultimate endeavour of this dissertation is not to carry out dialogue merely for the sake of dialogue, but indeed to carry out dialogue for the sake of social reconciliation in South Africa, I would like to go as far as saying that African tradition and Christian tradition need to dialogue together in order to forge a partnership against social hostility and for social reconciliation. The idea of partnership between religious communities for the purpose of achieving a shared external goal has been elaborated by Vähäkangas (2003).<sup>925</sup> According to Vähäkangas, partnership instils a spirit of repentance and change of mind within both partners (2003:8). The Biblical concept used to describe partnership is *koinonia*. It implies

a deep relationship of sharing freely what one is, and subsequently what one has. In spite of sharing what one is, one retains one’s identity. This is actually the prerequisite for sharing what one is: without me being me, I cannot share myself. Consequently, partnership presupposes poverty in the sense of needing the other. Partnership takes place between equals: ...there is no subordination.... Partnership means total commitment, which is costly. It means taking up the cross with others. Partnership is also mutual: it cannot mean only one party taking up the other’s cross. Finally, in spite of the cross connected with total commitment to the partner, partnership is ultimately rewarding. (Vähäkangas 2003:9)

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<sup>922</sup> I concur with Shriver (1995:233), “that strangeness is more gift than harm to our humanity”.

<sup>923</sup> The “roots” of African culture are important, and the church ignores these “at her peril” (Shorter 1978:24).

<sup>924</sup> “Something worthwhile can be mined from the African cultural ore that can then be hammered out on the anvil of the African goal, experiences, and aspirations in the modern world. Ways may have to be found for translating the positive traditional values and institutions into the functional idiom of modern circumstances” (Gyekye 1997:295).

<sup>925</sup> See also Kaufman (1992:12), Panikkar (1990a:147) and D’Costa (1990:24), considered in section 1.4.3.

### *Engaging in the work of inculturation*

This study is an attempt at engaging the process of mutual enhancement and enrichment. Another word that can be used for such a process is inculturation.<sup>926</sup> An African theologian who has dealt extensively with the question of inculturation is Aylward Shorter.<sup>927</sup> In a web-article entitled "Inculturation of African Traditional Religious Values in Christianity – How far?" (2004), Shorter insists, "the short answer to the question-title of this paper: 'How far?' is simply: 'The sky is the limit, as long as the authentic demands of both faith and culture are respected'."

In a true inculturation ... there are no winners or losers. Inculturation means the presentation and re-expression of the Gospel in forms and terms proper to a culture. This process results in the reinterpretation of both, without being unfaithful to either. Anything less, is not inculturation. In other words, it would be a syncretism<sup>928</sup> and not a synthesis – the juxtaposition of non-communicating meanings. (Shorter 2004)

If the Christian transformation of culture is undertaken in earnest, then the possibilities are virtually endless. What matters is to remain faithful to the tradition concerning Jesus and to the authentic values of African religion and culture. That fidelity can only be ensured by a profound acquaintance with both the Christian tradition of faith and with African cultures. To this – it goes without saying – must be added a genuine faith in the process of inculturation itself! (Shorter 2004)

I have, in this study, demonstrated my faith in the process of inculturation. I have taken seriously both African tradition and Christian faith and teaching, allowing both to make an authentic contribution to the debate surrounding social reconciliation. Although the beginning stages of my work represented a juxtaposition of the two traditions in terms of their reconciliation resources, I have in the latter stages illustrated ways in which they can interact. As soon as such interaction is nurtured and encouraged, inculturation starts to happen. The Christian gospel becomes Africanised, and African tradition and culture become Christianised. Inculturation cannot be forced, nor has it been my intention to do so. I merely argue that since both African tradition and Christianity are living traditions, their interaction with one another inevitably brings about change in both. What is important, however, is to monitor that change, and analyse whether it is change that benefits and enriches society rather than repressing or injuring it. Indeed, inculturation involves discernment (Tlhagale 1998:17). In chapters 4 and 5 I have attempted to discern in what ways Christian tradition and African tradition can dialogue efficaciously, but also what potential pitfalls lie in the way of genuine dialogue.

African Biblical scholar Justin Ukpogon (2000) outlines the historical development in the methods of Biblical interpretation in Africa. According to Ukpogon, phase one of this progression of approaches consisted of various types of comparative studies, using the framework of comparative religion. This involved finding continuities and discontinuities between the Bible and African culture (2000:5). In phase two "the African

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<sup>926</sup> See Shorter (1988). "Inculturation ... is the transformation of a culture by faith and the cultural re-expression of faith by culture. We can appreciate, therefore, that inculturation is not a set of unrelated, piecemeal adaptations. Rather, particular instances of inculturation must reflect a Christian approach to a whole culture" (Shorter 2004). Inculturation is about acknowledging African culture "as a medium of communicating the gospel message" (Tlhagale 1998:1).

<sup>927</sup> Other contemporary African theologians that have dealt with the question of inculturation include Ikenga-Metuh (1996), Mnyagarwa (1986), Kanyandogo et al (2001) and Munga (1998).

<sup>928</sup> Thomas (1999:83) claims that "syncretism" is an unfortunate and inappropriate term. "First, the syncretism motif is an etic explanation postulated by outsiders examining a 'foreign' or 'culturally different' phenomenon. Second, as an etic category, syncretism carries an overtone insisting that Christianity is the benchmark against which other religious expressions can and should be measured. This elevates Christianity to the status of a pure form that is not itself a product of syncretism. Third, syncretism is a pejorative paradigm when used to explain the emergence of the African indigenous churches...." For a further study on syncretism and religious synthesis see Stewart and Shaw (1994).

context is used as resource in the hermeneutic encounter with the Bible” (:7). This phase involved evaluating the encounter between African tradition and the Bible, seeking to make theological assertions about this encounter (:9). Gradually, African tradition came to be seen not just as a preparation for the gospel but also as providing “indispensable resources in the interpretation of the gospel message and the development of African Christianity” (:11). Phase two saw the emergence of liberation hermeneutics, e.g. black and feminist theologies, and the crystallisation of methodologies of inculturation and liberation (:12-13). Phase three, reflective of the 1990s, is seen as more assertive and proactive than the first two, “daring to make an original contribution”. Here, *inculturation and liberation methodologies are carried forward, but with a new orientation, viz. a focus on ordinary readers. Contextual Bible study in which the African context is the subject of interpretation becomes dominant in this phase (:15). Inculturation hermeneutics now seeks to adopt a holistic approach to culture, and there is an emphasis on religio-cultural aspects (:16).*

Arguably, Ukpong’s analytical framework can also be applied to the discipline of African theology, not only African Biblical scholarship. In view of this, I locate my work in this study within Ukpong’s framework. Although my work might appear to fit squarely into phase one, it is actually also a product grown from phases two and three. Throughout this dissertation I have emphasised that I consider African tradition to provide “indispensable resources in the interpretation of the gospel message and the development of African Christianity” (Ukpong 2000:11) – a theoretical base of phase two. Moreover, I also deem my work to be located within phase three, because it may be considered pro-active in offering “an original contribution” (Ukpong 2000:15). Indeed, as I have explicated above, I see this dissertation in line with the evolution of inculturation theology, bearing in mind ordinary followers of African traditional religion and Christianity, and how they understand and practise their faith. Inculturation has been and remains to be immensely important for African Christianity. It is through the creative work of inculturation that the riches of African tradition are made accessible to Christianity, especially in the field of ritual.<sup>929</sup> Indeed, inculturation promotes “the kind of research work that will help to unearth the hidden treasures in our cultural and religious heritage that can make the Christian faith even more meaningful in the African context” (“Summary Report” 2002:26). Similarly, inculturation brings about the theological enhancement of African tradition and religion.<sup>930</sup>

There are a plethora of examples of theologies of inculturation which seek to make the Christian message relevant to Africa in its given contexts, but which also allow the given African context to inform and shape the Christian message. Besides the development of theologies of inculturation, Balcomb (1996:18) insists that there is also an urgent need for “theologies of nation building, identity construction, reconciliation, public accountability, and tradition consolidation” in Africa. This research has sought to contribute to the emergence of such theologies, as well as extend the work of inculturation theology.

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<sup>929</sup> Roser (2000:273) insists that inculturation through the integration of community-building rituals is the urgent task of the church. “Die Chance, die in den Versöhnungsriten für die Konfliktbewältigung ... steckt, macht deutlich, wie dringend die Aufgabe der Inkulturation für die Arbeit der Kirche ist” (Roser 2000:272). Similarly, Thagale (2003) outlines examples of African traditional “rites that are open to change while retaining the essential meaning of the rites. These rites, once they are purified, they (sic) are capable if transmitting the Christian message. ... Inculturation is therefore a process that identifies, purifies and translates concepts that are best suited to communicate Christian experience.”

<sup>930</sup> Refer to my discussion in section 1.4.5 of the theoretical approach chosen in this study. See also West (2005:26ff) who explains how “embodied theology” can enhance “articulated theology”.



### *Embracing agency*

Connected to the idea of inculturation is the concept of agency. In section 1.5.6 I explained why doing the kind of work exemplified in this dissertation is a matter of agency and identity. It is an undeniable fact that traditions and cultures are in flux. They are not static or immutable; change is inevitable.<sup>931</sup> Yet the direction of this change is within the control of the society it affects. Society can influence in what way its traditions change and adapt to the currents of history. Transformation over time “implies deliberate intervention to effect change” (Lederach 1997:82-83). Human beings can and must become agents in generating the kind of change to their traditions which they want to adopt and be heir to.<sup>932</sup> Balcomb concurs when asserting that we are called to consciously “decide about” our traditions, and not just accept them as the products of fate. What this implies for the new South Africa is that traditions, “both religious and cultural, are being taken out of the closet of the past, dusted off, inspected, and reasserted” (Balcomb 1996:18).<sup>933</sup> This is an exercise in agency in securing the future, and in the establishment and nurturing of a new and authentic South African identity.<sup>934</sup> I venture that in this dissertation certain paradigms of reconciliation stemming from Christian tradition as well as African tradition have been extracted from “the closet of the past, dusted off, inspected, and reasserted”, in order to contribute to fostering reconciliation.

Furthermore, “Christianity has to come to terms with the cultural revival in Africa, or face extinction” (Shorter 1978:24). This means that the discipline of theology, as well as many other areas of scholarship, must exert themselves in finding helpful and authentic ways of engaging the forces of change. Particularly “modernistic western churches” face the challenge of adopting a “new theological paradigm”, because if they fail to do so they may fall into a rapid decline (Hendriks and Erasmus 2001:64; see also Battle 1997:33). Mainline churches no longer enjoy dominance in terms of numbers and influence, but instead are increasingly confronted with diversity and pluralism (Hendriks and Erasmus 2001:65; Chapman 2004:10; Barrett 2004:30), which often include African traditional cultural and religious influences. For this reason, the task of engaging “the other” is not only a matter of agency and identity, but indeed of survival – especially for Christianity in Africa.<sup>935</sup>

### *Fostering a new African spirituality*

There is evidence that African culture is undergoing a kind of “spiritual rebirth” (Jahn 1961:237).<sup>936</sup> Throughout this process of rebirth, there is a need for fostering an “authentic African spirituality” which is “relevant to present-day Africa” (Shorter 1978:74, quoting Magesa). According to Shorter (1978:24), there are two dangers inherent in the quest for cultivating an authentically African spirituality. The first danger is attempting a

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<sup>931</sup> Aragon (1992:331) has indeed found that ancestral traditions are mutable and adaptable. Shorter (1978:24) verifies this by pronouncing that African tradition “is a living tradition”. Nxumalo (1981:65) agrees that since African religion is alive and well, study of it is not about exhuming an ancient past, but about analysing the present.

<sup>932</sup> This agency involves acknowledging and applying Africa’s “intellectual, material and spiritual resources for survival and resistance” (Maluleke 2000:31). It involves “reaffirmation of the African genius” (Teffo 2002:141).

<sup>933</sup> “New sets of truths cannot simply be juxtaposed to ‘old truths’, which supposedly have been rendered redundant or inadequate because of their encounter with Christianity. The new truth has to engage the old truth in its limitedness, or otherwise the African soul will be ripped of its heart and rendered incapable of accepting a new heart” (Tlhagale 1998:15).

<sup>934</sup> Noko (2002:7) declares, “I believe that permanent solutions [to Africa’s many problems] can only be found if the religious and spiritual dimensions of African life are taken into consideration.”

<sup>935</sup> Indeed, Christianity “can only be impoverished in its own self-understanding” by neglecting other faiths’ testimonies (D’Costa 1990:25). See also Kaufman (1992:5) and section 1.4.5.

<sup>936</sup> Africa is in a phase of “religious renaissance” (Teffo 2002:142). See also Makgoba (1999).

“revival of pre-Christian paganism”. “This is certainly a danger but it is more likely to be the outcome of a refusal to enter into dialogue with African religious traditions than of conscious encounter with them.” The second danger is “archaism, the fear that the Church, in trying to become more African, will revert to a moribund culture that has no relevance in the modern situation”. These dangers notwithstanding, it is important to continue on the path of forging an African spirituality.

Mfutso-Bengo (2001:164) argues for the adoption of what he calls a “new, appropriate and applied spirituality” for Africa, viz. a “rainbow spirituality”. Rainbow spirituality “is a fruit of the internalisation of the African cultural values”, including African humanism, communalism, a life-centred philosophy and a theistic worldview (:171). Yet it is also informed by Christian paradigms. To be sure, the rainbow is a sign of reconciliation in the Bible (:172). Moreover, Mfutso-Bengo speaks of the “rainbow experience of Pentecost as a sign of harmony in diversity” (:173). Effectively, the rainbow is a symbol of “reconciled corporate identity”, “religious reconciliation”, “political, cultural, racial and gender, economic reconciliation”, “reconciled bio-diversity and ecological balance” (:166). A rainbow spirituality is “not dualistic” and fosters “neither harmonisation nor polarisation”<sup>937</sup>, i.e. the diversity of cultures is seen not as a threat but as an opportunity and a *charism* (gift). The theology supporting a rainbow spirituality “is a narrative and symbolic theology” (:170). A rainbow spirituality shapes and transforms a society into a “rainbow nation”, i.e. a nation which functions on the basis of “reconciled diversity” (:187).<sup>938</sup>

Mfutso-Bengo’s rainbow spirituality is but one example of a spirituality that can be cultivated by African societies.<sup>939</sup> It is also an example of a spirituality that draws from both African tradition and Christianity, and may be embedded in both. What I have done in this dissertation resembles one of the steps that are necessary in forging an “authentic African spirituality”, to use Magesa’s phrase (in Shorter 1978:74) – a spirituality which resembles a rainbow spirituality in terms of its inclusiveness, its openness and its celebration of unity in diversity.

Having highlighted a number of reasons why studies like this one can be beneficial for societies such as South Africa, I wish to conclude this penultimate chapter of my dissertation. With this research I have tried to provide a few pointers and tools for comparing two cultural-religious traditions, with the aim of allowing them to interact fruitfully with reference to the problem of social conflict. My hope is that work such as this will continue to be undertaken, in order to assist South Africa (and possibly other nations) in the task of overcoming the social discord of the past and establishing reconciliation.

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<sup>937</sup> Teffo (2002:142) also insists upon the need for avoiding “religious polarization”.

<sup>938</sup> Interestingly, Mfutso-Bengo calls on African nations to see South Africa as a pertinent example of a rainbow nation (2001:97).

<sup>939</sup> A “rainbow spirituality” could be what infuses a new “civil religion” for South Africa (see section 3.4.7; Dickow 1996).

## **6. Conclusion: the schematic line of argument guiding the dissertation**

In this dissertation I have considered two great religious and cultural traditions, namely African tradition and Christianity. Most African societies are infused by an “ever-burning fire of religiosity, fuelled with firewood from both traditions” (“Summary Report” 2002:14). It is for this reason that I have focussed on the two mentioned traditions which both seem to impact the lives of many Africans in a great way. Some argue that “no careful or substantial survey has been made of published materials on the encounter between these two religions. Likewise, no clear theological analysis has been made on this encounter” (“Summary Report” 2002:14). This dissertation can be seen as a response to this perceived deficiency of substantial surveys and theological analyses. It has been an attempt at conducting a considerable survey of what resources or paradigms of reconciliation can be gleaned from each of the traditions. Moreover, it has sought to provide a clear theological examination of the encounter between the two sets of reconciliation resources, deliberating in what ways they clash and in what ways they correspond to or complement each other. Throughout, my aim has been two-fold: firstly, to unearth and inspect paradigms of reconciliation lodged within the two traditions and secondly, to discover in what ways these paradigms and resources stemming from the two traditions could possibly dialogue helpfully for the benefit of society, more specifically South African society. This two-fold aim is implied by the title of the dissertation: “A comparison between Christian and African traditional paradigms of reconciliation and how they could dialogue for the benefit of South African society.”

My premise for this study has been that South African society is still plagued by social discord and conflict, and that the need for social reconciliation has not yet been addressed satisfactorily. The legacy of the past, which includes racial, economic, political and other forms of segregation and oppression, has not been overcome, and the quest for building a “rainbow nation” of harmony, peace, mutual cooperation and goodwill must still continue. Ultimately, this dissertation seeks to illuminate one possible way forward for societies such as South Africa. It seeks to show how two major traditions at work within society, viz. Christianity and African tradition, can be employed in order for a joint endeavour for social reconciliation to take shape. I will now reiterate schematically the line of argument guiding the dissertation.

By way of introduction, Chapter 0 pronounced the hypotheses, aim and objectives (section 0.1), as well as a succinct outline of this study (section 0.2).

Chapter 1 was devoted to addressing preliminary problems. First, in section 1.1, I attempted to define the term “reconciliation” in the South African context. The problematic nature of the term was considered in section 1.1.1. Section 1.1.2 outlined some features of the current debate surrounding reconciliation, and offered a summary of some views and definitions. In section 1.1.3 I then attempted to articulate my own definition of reconciliation, by drawing from those mentioned in the previous section.

In section 1.2, I deliberated the need for reconciliation in South Africa. Here, I investigated certain aspects of the TRC (1.2.1). Section 1.2.2 examined a number of criticisms waged against the TRC, with the aim of identifying its limitations and shortcomings. Section 1.2.3 established the need for further reconciliation efforts after the TRC endeavour. A possible way forward was outlined in section 1.3, namely identifying resources from African tradition, and dialogue between African traditional religion and Christianity.

Since dialogue between religious and cultural traditions can take many forms, I had to elucidate which approach I would adopt in terms of this dialogue between African tradition and Christianity. Section 1.4 considered three different approaches to inter-religious and cultural dialogue, viz. religious exclusivism (1.4.1), inclusivism (1.4.2) and

pluralism (1.4.3). Section 1.4.4 offered a discussion of theological grounds for inter-religious dialogue from a Lutheran perspective, while section 1.4.5 articulated the approach chosen in this study by way of evaluating the available approaches.

Section 1.5 considered specific problems in connection with dialogue between the African and Christian traditions. First, in section 1.5.1, I considered how the two traditions engender different cosmologies, epistemologies and ontologies, and function according to premodern and modern frameworks respectively. In section 1.5.2 I elaborated further differences between the African traditional and the modern. Section 1.5.3 illustrated trends in the historical interaction between African tradition and modern culture, while section 1.5.4 reflected upon the domination and subjugation of African tradition, and the fact that African tradition and Christianity could therefore not necessarily be deemed equal dialogue partners. In section 1.5.5 I argued that dialogue has in fact already begun, and that the best examples of this dialogue are African theologies and AICs. Finally, in section 1.5.6 I established that the need for continued dialogue, despite difficulties, is a matter of agency and identity.

Chapter 2 revolved around the identification and elaboration of reconciliation paradigms to be found in African tradition, culture and religion. In preparation for this task, in section 2.1 I considered which methodological approaches I had employed in the study. Section 2.2 was a discussion of African traditional religion and spirituality (2.2.1), philosophy (2.2.2) and anthropology (2.2.3), and in what way these serve as foundations for a reconciliatory view of reality. In section 2.3 I elaborated African traditional legal procedures that aim at social reconciliation. Section 2.4 consisted of an investigation of rituals of reconciliation to be found in African tradition. More specifically, section 2.4.1 represented a survey of rituals, ceremonies and rites of reconciliation. Section 2.4.2 deliberated the importance of ritual by discussing a number of ritual theories. Section 2.4.3 offered a detailed analysis of a specially selected case study, viz. the *Cleansing the chest of grudges* ritual.

In Chapter 3 I illustrated a number of reconciliation paradigms in Christianity. An outline of Biblical notions, theologies and stories of reconciliation was given in section 3.1. Section 3.1.1 discussed the Bible as an important resource in Christianity. Section 3.1.2 considered the terms used for “reconciliation” exegetically, while section 3.1.3 mentioned a few stories of social reconciliation in the Bible. Section 3.2 demonstrated in what way the narrative of the cross and resurrection can be seen as a basis for Christian notions of reconciliation. First, I offered an examination of the theology of the cross (3.2.1). Then I argued how God is revealed in the story of the cross (3.2.2). Section 3.2.3 demonstrated how the story of the cross and resurrection can be identified in the story of South Africa. In section 3.2.4 I argued for the story of the cross and resurrection as a viable external narrative for South Africa, and in section 3.2.5 I showed how remembering the cross could be viewed as a step towards reconciliation. In section 3.3 the concepts of sin (3.3.1), repentance and confession (3.3.2) and forgiveness (3.3.3) were considered as jointly forming a further Christian reconciliation paradigm. This section was concluded with section 3.3.4, which discussed the implications of practising repentance and forgiveness in South Africa. In section 3.4 I considered the fourth Christian paradigm of reconciliation, namely the church as reconciling community and institution. I highlighted as particular “church” resources the Eucharist (3.4.1), proclamation (3.4.2), celebration and ritual (3.4.3), spirituality (3.4.4), ecumenism (3.4.5), political involvement (3.4.6) and influencing moral culture (3.4.7). I ended the section by mentioning some examples of reconciliatory practice conducted by church communities and institutions (3.4.8).

After having discussed the two traditions’ reconciliation resources separately, in chapter 2 and 3 respectively, I moved on to the next main task of the dissertation, which was to allow these separate resources to dialogue and interact. Chapter 4 therefore was an assessment of African traditional and Christian reconciliation paradigms in dialogue, more particularly an examination of differences, discontinuities and points of conflict between

them. In section 4.1 I pointed out some general differences between the traditions and their reconciliation resources, such as their understanding of “religion” (4.1.1), their reliance on different sources (4.1.2), their view of God (4.1.3), religious practitioners (4.1.4), leadership and gender (4.1.5), views of the person and community (4.1.6), whether they are exclusive or inclusive (4.1.7), the meaning of “reconciliation” (4.1.8), their understanding of “sin” (4.1.9), their understanding of “forgiveness” (4.1.10), their motivation for engaging in reconciliation (4.1.11), what is considered authoritative in a reconciliation process (4.1.12), the reconciliation process itself (4.1.13), the role of ritual (4.1.14) and differing ritual practices (4.1.15).

Section 4.2 represented a discussion of aspects of the particular ritual of *Cleansing the chest of grudges* that conflict or are at odds with Christian tradition. These aspects included dissimilarities in: origin and source (4.2.1), frequency of use (4.2.2), gender and leadership (4.2.3), differences in matters considered public and private (4.2.4), the body and the senses (4.2.5), the ancestors (4.2.6), the necessity of human action (4.2.7), the sequence of confession and forgiveness (4.2.8), the sacramental nature of the ritual (4.2.9) and whether the ritual is exclusive or inclusive (4.2.10). Chapter 4 effectively showed up elements within the two traditions that are at variance. It was indicated that some of these incongruences did not necessarily highlight inherent incompatibility, but rather pointed to potential complementarity between the two sets of resources.

In chapter 5 such points of potential complementarity, or points of contact, became the focus of my deliberations. This final chapter of the dissertation elaborated points of connection or mutual enhancement between African traditional and Christian paradigms of reconciliation. Section 5.1 sought to demonstrate general points of contact or complementarity between the African and the Christian traditions, for example a spiritual approach to life (5.1.1), belief in God (5.1.2), the importance of narrative and the past (5.1.3), inclusiveness (5.1.4), the cross (5.1.5), involvement in the world (5.1.6), being centred on the human person (5.1.7), the sanctity and dignity of human life (5.1.8), the emphasis on morality and right actions (5.1.9), the importance of community and participation (5.1.10), the importance of reconciliation (5.1.11), fostering a spirituality of reconciliation (5.1.12), reconciliation as the re-establishment of relationships (5.1.13), reconciliation as holistic and inclusive (5.1.14), non-violence (5.1.15), reconciliation as purification (5.1.16), the role of mediation (5.1.17), the concept of wrongdoing (5.1.18), a stress on repentance, confession and forgiveness (5.1.19), the use of rituals, ceremonies and performance and a sacramental approach to life (5.1.20), and the importance of symbols (5.1.21). In section 5.2 I depicted a few examples already in existence which illustrate dialogue between African traditional and Christian reconciliation paradigms.

Section 5.3 investigated a specific case of affinity between African tradition and Christianity by discussing points of contact between the (South) African ritual of *Cleansing the chest of grudges* and Christian reconciliation paradigms. These points of contact or complementarity revolved around issues such as ritual space and time (5.3.1), the presence of God (5.3.2), repentance, confession and forgiveness (5.3.3), the cross (5.3.4), reconciliation as purification (5.3.5), the importance of community and participation (5.3.6), the importance of ritual and a sacramental approach to life (5.3.7) and the use of symbols (5.3.8).

In section 5.4 I attempted to weave together African traditional and Christian reconciliation resources in order to create a “new” ritual of reconciliation. After first justifying the “invention” of a new ritual in section 5.4.1, I moved on to developing the new *Ritual of the ash* in section 5.4.2. In a description of the *Ritual of the ash*, I considered the following: the aim of the ritual (5.4.2.1), the place of the ritual (5.4.2.2), the time of the ritual (5.4.2.3), the ritual “experts” or leaders involved (5.4.2.4), the ritual participants (5.4.2.5), ritual elements and use of symbols (5.4.2.6), preliminary preparations for the ritual (5.4.2.7), and the process or liturgical order of the ritual (5.4.2.8). In conclusion of

chapter 5 I briefly restated why I consider the kind of dialogue attempted in this dissertation to be beneficial (in section 5.5).

It is my hope and wish that this work will provide a stepping-stone towards joint endeavours – in scholarship and in praxis – between African tradition and Christian tradition and theology, with special reference to addressing the problems surrounding social discord and racial hostility in South Africa and in other African contexts.

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