

## HOPE OF A NEW CREATION: A THEOLOGY FROM A PARTICULARLY SOUTHERN AFRICAN CONTEXT.

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The understanding of Hope of a New Creation as expounded by Dr. Velantin-Vera is sound and in line with our Wesleyan-Holiness paradigm. She is clear in her explanation that because our Christian faith was seen, touched, and heard by the Apostles, it is alive and not merely the hope of a promise yet to be fulfilled. It is already fulfilled through the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus the Christ, lives in the present, and has yet to reach its culmination in His second coming. This hope is radical in the sense that we as Christians see in Jesus our past, present, and future as redeemed from fallenness, restored to fullness, and ultimately as a new creation in Him. This new creation does not carry with it the notions of revenge or judgment but is based purely on restoration - God restoring His image to all things. And this restoration is undeniably for the present. God's children, through the avenue of the church live as agents of equality, compassion, justice, love, and peace in a fallen world, denouncing sin and injustice, while simultaneously announcing salvation and transformation through the power of the Holy Spirit. The imperative is clear no matter how uncomfortable it makes the Christian; it compels them to live out and proclaim the message (Romans 1:15-16).

As a person steeped in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition, the above makes sense. The imperative to live out and proclaim this understanding is clear. However, I am an African challenged by precisely how this is to be done in a context where nearly every religious system in the world is represented, and where very many Africans do not care about what Asians, Europeans, or Americans think about their religious or spiritual practices and expressions.<sup>1</sup> I embrace this challenge through pastoral care that reflects the worldview of the South African culture of which I am a part. My point of departure is that because the African's worldview is primarily systemic, and deals with patterns, structures, and social relationships, my theology of pastoral care should move away from the intrinsically individualistic and person-centered approach of the West. I need to be able to incorporate the people, their events, hopes, concerns, and richness which are fundamentally communal and relational into my theology.<sup>2</sup>

### *African Traditional Religion*

If theology is going to be accepted within an African context, its first task is to understand African Traditional Religion. Unfortunately, the scope of this essay does not allow for an in-depth study of African Traditional Religion, or for a detailed discussion between the truth of the Word and the Southern African context, but a brief explanation of its major tenets should assist with gaining an understanding. It is unfortunate that African religion and spirituality is termed "traditional" as though it is outdated, or dead. On the contrary, it is a heritage from the very distant past, indigenous to the continent, transmitted orally from

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<sup>1</sup> Chidester, D., Kwenda, C., Petty, R., Tobler, J. & Wratten, D. (1997). *African Traditional Religion in ; South Africa: An Annotated Bibliography*. Greenwood; Mbiti, J. (1970). *African Religions and Philosophy*. Anchor.

<sup>2</sup> Louw, D. (1997). Pastoral Care in an African Context: A systemic model and contextual approach. *Missionalia*. 25(3). 392-407.

generation to generation and consistently upheld and practiced as a means to connect the past to their present, and the present to eternity.<sup>3</sup>

Generally African people are very religious, and loyal worshippers with strong spiritual awareness and the firm belief that supernatural or invisible realms are closely connected to their everyday lives.<sup>4</sup> According to tradition the individual can only have access to the Supreme Creator (who goes by different names) through intermediaries who are spirits of the deceased members of the family lineage, or clan.<sup>5</sup> However, this supreme being is not completely removed or disconnected from the life of the individual as is commonly believed. God, as the African understands him, is both removed and involved in the life of the individual and community, and a good relationship with the Supreme Being guarantees good health and prosperity for everyone involved.<sup>6</sup>

Contrary to popular non-African presuppositions, the ancestors who serve as intermediaries between the Supreme Creator and the people are not worshipped.<sup>7</sup> They are, though, respected and honoured by being included, consulted, and remembered when families have functions, when there is calamity, or when important decisions need to be made.<sup>8</sup> Although the predominant belief is that both good and evil spirits influence life and activities, the ancestors are seen as those who provide protection and security, and who hand out punishment when rituals related to life and events are not observed, or when taboos are violated.<sup>9</sup>

#### *African Traditional Religion and Christianity*

What needs to be accepted at inception is that many Africans who profess adherence to Christianity, or Islam for that matter, do so openly, while they secretly practice traditional religions.<sup>10</sup> This is because they do not abandon their religion completely, rather opting to embrace both cultural and Christian perspectives.<sup>11</sup> For example, they see no contradiction when they consult both Christian and traditional healers when they are sick. And it is not because they wish to be deceitful: their unique and firm beliefs regarding the role of the ancestors, combined with the “practical elements” (rituals, animal sacrifices, incantations, et cetera) and “tangible

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<sup>3</sup> Bonsu, N. (2016). African Traditional Religion: An examination of terminologies used for describing the indigenous faith of African people, using an Afrocentric paradigm. *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 9(6). Mokhoathi, J. (2017). Imperialism and its effects on the African Traditional Religion: Towards the liberty of African Spirituality. *Pharos Journal of Theology*. 98.

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<sup>4</sup> Chimhanda, F. (2013). Relevance of theology in relation to spirituality: an African Bantu perspective. *Scriptura* 112, 1-17. <http://scriptura.journals.ac.za>; Bonsu 2016; Khoaseb, M. & Thesnaar, C. (2019). Holistic Christian spirituality during times of illness and crisis: a hermeneutical pastoral perspective. *LitNet Akademies*. 13(3).

<sup>5</sup> Ross, E. (2010). Inaugural lecture: African spirituality, ethics and traditional healing – implications for indigenous South African social work education and practice. *SAJBL* 3(1); Khoaseb, M. & Thesnaar, C. 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Khoaseb & Thesnaar, 2019

<sup>7</sup> Mbiti, 1970.

<sup>8</sup> Ross, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Khoaseb & Thesnaar, 2019, Ross 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Mokhoathi, 2017

<sup>11</sup> Khoaseb & Thesnaar, 2019

results” they experience from traditional practices make them wary of only trusting Christianity or Islam.

The challenge in this regard is that theology as it is generally expounded tends to confine itself to ideas, emphasizing either the scholarly or spiritual aspects.<sup>12</sup> It rarely touches everyday life and the issues that Africans deal with and try to find meaning about as they believe they find through their ancestors.<sup>13</sup> The response to this challenge resides in ensuring that theology is seen to be as much interested in real life as it is in correct belief because the fundamental nature of religion or spirituality for the African, is that belief and real life are intimately related.<sup>14</sup>

*Bridging the Divide Between African Traditional Religion/Spirituality and Christianity*

As Africans, we can either accept an uncontextualised theology or give serious thought to how it is accepted by those from among us who do not hold our views. African Traditional Religion will not give way to Christianity, and neither will it die a silent death. My suggestion is that we begin the process of asking questions and starting conversations with African Traditional Religion leaders, experts, and followers in our geographical areas that lead to understanding.

As part of our responsibility to clothe the gospel in cultural terms and contextual African life issues, I agree with Knoetze that dialogue is important.<sup>15</sup> In this dialogue, as adherents to the Wesleyan Holiness paradigm we are compelled to be open about the co-existence of different faiths, beliefs or convictions about God and creation, even if it threatens our long-held beliefs about the “exclusiveness” of Christianity.<sup>16</sup> In this process we should be committed to listen to and learn from other faiths, beliefs, or convictions while we hold steadfastly on to our own. But because we understand that no one enters any dialogue without preconceptions, there can be no power positions - no “haves” or “have nots”, no “higher” or “lower”. This means that there must be true compassion for devotees to African Traditional Religion in a search for meaning, as opposed to asserting our own views and or theology. Compassion should also awaken in us the realization that God uses many ways to make Himself known and that our perspective is not necessarily the only one. In doing this though, we must not deny the tensions between different beliefs and views because the point is to embrace the differences as an avenue to reach understanding even though participants may have secondary motives.

We do this by telling our story. Although the subject of Dr Daniels’ paper is our story of eschatology and how it has varied in emphasis over two centuries, our story of God and His dealings with mankind is valuable. Herein lie the issues like justice and peace, concerns for the ecology of the earth, the preservation of unique human cultures, and their creations that Dr Daniels says get overlooked in our view of eschatology. These are important aspects of African Traditional Religions, and they form a consistent whole in its narratives. An understanding of Dr Daniels’ proposal of new creation eschatology communicating that God’s grace is sufficient reason for us to participate in the renewal of creation helps us find common ground with African Traditional Religion. And so, our dialogue will include relating our story of participation with God in maintaining creation, justice, and peace. These are elements that resonate with African

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<sup>12</sup> Kunhiyop, S. (2012). *African Christian Theology*. Zondervan.

<sup>13</sup> Mbiti 1970

<sup>14</sup> Kunhiyop, S. (2012). *African Christian Theology*. Zondervan.

<sup>15</sup> Knoetze, J. (2021). Reformed theology in dialogue with a spirituality of creation within the context of religious pluralism in Africa. *HTS Theological Studies*. 77(4). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6336>

<sup>16</sup> Mokhoathi, 2017

Traditional Religion understanding of the place of the individual and community in life and the world, and thus allows for commonality in the search for mutual understanding. However, the common ground may not be very large and the paths relating to soteriology and eschatology will diverge. But it is in uncompromisingly telling our story and respectfully listening to differing views that we build bridges so that the Holy Spirit “reanimates all that is dead and brings it to new and everlasting life” (Daniels, 9).

### *Conclusion*

Our Wesleyan Holiness theology of Hope of a New creation is ably and soundly articulated by Dr Valentin-Vera. Our theology will not mean much though, to an African person who holds to their traditional religious beliefs, if it is not translated into the contexts that they understand and live in. To this end, we must clothe our theology in African terms and culture by first, learning to understand African Traditional Religion, second, doing theology in their context (serving without prejudice) and third, entering meaningful dialogue about what it means to share our faith on the same platform as African Traditional Religion without notions of superiority or inferiority. God receives the glory through our willingness to live and serve together with those who believe differently from us.