

# **Religion and African Indigenous Knowledge Systems: Healing and Communal Reconstruction in African Communities**

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## **Abstract**

This article is of the view that current research and scholarship in pastoral theology in Africa is influenced by Western knowledge systems (WKS) and culture at the expense of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) imbedded in African Traditional Religions (ATRs). ATRs are contextually relevant and can be valuable to pastoral care givers. The author argues that Christian pastoral care givers can benefit from objective research of AIKS embedded in ATR and culture as this will unearth African paradigms, worldviews and the Ubuntu/ botho traditional concepts. The author looks at current research in ATR being done by Christian theologians, the training of pastoral caregivers based on western paradigms and the resilience of ATR and African culture as treasure for social construction and state construction in Africa. Western knowledge systems are different from African knowledge systems therefore WKS cannot be pre-packaged as solutions for African challenges. This article seeks to propose research and teaching in pastoral theology that can be relevant and effective for African challenges. Instead of the Christocentric form of inculturation that we currently have, this paper proposes a dialogical approach that will treat the two religions objectively through research and teaching.

**Keywords:** Indigenous knowledge systems, African traditional religion, pastoral care, culture, research and teaching, Christianity and social construction

## **Introduction**

The importation of the Christian traditional cultural religion to Africa and continuing attempt by pastoral care givers to use sermons and western cultural practices to replace or kill the indigenous traditional cultural religion and worldview of the Africans has resulted in the development of religious conflicts and syncretism (See Moyo 1988:202; Sitshebo 2000; and Hilde Antsen 1997:47). Using the Ndebele speaking people of Matabo in Zimbabwe as a case study, this paper argues that research in pastoral care and religion in general has been biased towards the Christian culture thereby undermining the potential benefits from African Indigenous Knowledge Systems that are inherent in the indigenous African traditional cultural religion. In Matabo among the Ndebele, so far, all religious related research has been published by Christian theologians who have an inherent bias of wanting to promote and protect Christian doctrines by criticizing anything from the religions of the people. In fact in most cases Christian theologians who are in the majority of cases church ministers will not want to be seen to contradict the doctrines of their denominations hence their research findings are always favouring the perpetuation of the Christian culture. Other than Christianity, all monotheistic religions have the problem of being divisive by defining outsiders as the lost other since each view itself as THE religion (Aaseng 1992: 14-18). So Christianity, Islam and Judaism are religions that protect their space by demonizing<sup>1</sup> the other.

In addition to the above it can be argued that the social effects of the church can be seen in the social practices of the church. The religious practices of the church in a society are always in dialogue or contestation with other religions located in the context of practices (Seoka 1997:1-2). Within the ambit of religious practices, practical theology is manifested through pastoral care. I view pastoral care as a ministry by the church that seeks to keep believers in the fold through indoctrination and in a way condemning other religions to the benefit of Christianity. Pastoral care is also when the church responds to the socio-economic needs of society through material and non-material means (Harris 1990).

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<sup>1</sup> Often some Christian ministers label religious representations that do not meet their understanding of their form of Christianity, as satanic or demonic.

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The thesis for this paper is that research in practical theology should focus on inculturation to develop contextual relevant religious practices that will be based on African indigenous knowledge systems that are inherent in the African cultural practices. Instead of research that seeks to discredit other religions, practical theologians should do research that seeks to promote positive dialogue amongst religions. Masoga in a paper on *The Role of African Intellectuals in the Reconstruction of the African Social Fabric* is of the view that,

African intellectuals need to understand the past systems located in different regions of Africa. The challenge is to critically look at these systems and see how they had transformed the past into different forms and how they could currently be used for addressing the ‘now’ of African problems and challenges, or how they could be criticized because they have failed to assist African aspirations in the face of colonial and neo-colonial hegemonies (Masoga 2002:309).

African traditional societies are rich in indigenous knowledge systems that can contribute to communal social constructive values and practices which can enhance the reconstruction of a health society. Care from African religions, *sangomas*, extended family networks, fear of broken relations angering ancestors and ultimately God (Magesa 2002:197), communalism and care from traditional initiation schools can still be valuable indigenous knowledge that can contribute to the healing and communal reconstruction of the African communities.

It is my contention that there is need for new research by theological institutions on indigenization and inculturation of the pastoral care ministry of the church to unearth the valuable African indigenous knowledge systems that have been so far condemned by the church yet they can be constructive for the community. The paper will look at possible research in the broad area of pastoral care, training of pastors especially in the mainline churches, communalism and the role of religion and community reconstruction, religion and moral regeneration and environmental conservation. These tenants can only be achieved where there is inculturation and not acculturation as we see today. Acculturation refers to a system or social development where an inferior group adopts the cultural traits of a dominant

powerful group through assimilation and coercion. In this article acculturation refers to directed and systematic controlled change. Acculturation links well with Ashley Crossman's understanding of forced cultural change when he says,

directed change occurs when one group establishes dominance over another through military conquest or political control; thus, imperialism is the most common precursor to directed change. Like incorporation, directed change involves the selection and modification of cultural characteristics...The processes that operate under conditions of directed change include forced assimilation—the complete replacement of one culture by another (Ashley 2002: Website)<sup>2</sup>.

Crossman's understanding seems to be the reality of the life of the church and academia in general. Civilization through formal education is the forced westernization of the African. The church is civilizing the pagan Africans hence the dominance of western culture in the life of the church.

On the other hand the meeting of cultures should see a mutual coming together of cultures where there is critical engagement of both the positive and negative aspects of each culture. This is what I see as inculturation. Inculturation is when two or more cultures influence each other without one dominating the other from a class perspective. Acculturation is very difficult to experience because society is usually in a continuous struggle for dominance. However inculturation is the ideal for the church where there is respect for the other as an equal creation of God.

## **Research and Teaching on Other Religions in Theological Institutions**

This section argues that there is need for research to be done on the research being done in religious studies by Christian theologians or Christian

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<sup>2</sup> Crossman, A. 2002. *Acculturation*. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/3083/acculturation> (Accessed on 29/01/2013).

ministers so as to be critical of their voice as they deliberate on religions that their faith criticizes and seeks to destroy. How do they speak on the positives of other religions but still remain faithful and doctrinal correct in their own denominational doctrines. Secondly, when Christian senior ministers teach their junior ministers in a seminary setting about other religions, what will be the motive, what do they want to achieve? Is it to promote or to criticize the other religions? One of the key challenges is that research and general scholarship in religion in theological institutions is done by Christian scholars the majority of whom are ordained ministers of their denominations. For example in Zimbabwe at the United Theological College students graduate with a certificate in theology and one of the modules that they do is Phenomenology of Religion. For many years now this has been taught by a practicing church Minister. This minister is a product of the same college. Yes, he furthered his education at the University of Zimbabwe but again his lecturers were Christian scholars. At the University of KwaZulu-Natal students can graduate with a bachelor in Theology having done only one religious studies module, that is, Religious Studies 101. In the cluster of theological institutions in Pietermaritzburg that include St Joseph's Theological Institution, Lutheran Theological Institution, Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary, Evangelical Seminary of Southern Africa, the congregational Church House of Studies and the Anglican House of Studies all teach their trainee ministers a module on other religions. A survey in 2013 showed that all the lecturers in the above theological institutions are ministers of the church who are expected to produce good ministers of the church who can convert people to the church away from other religions.

The end result of the above scenario is that pastors who are products of the above institutions are finally deployed to parishes and congregations with limited subjective knowledge of other religions. In such a case these pastors will avoid any meaningful dialogue with other religions. We have observed this in many instances where pastoral care gives conflict with their members who on specific instances especially on rites of passage such as birth of a child, marriage and death will introduce some practices that are foreign to the church such as carrying the spirit of the deceased using a branch of a tree from the point of death to the grave (Sitshebo 2000). Church leaders do not want these branches and the conversation between the deceased and the living in the church (Sitshebo 2000). However the ministers

do not fully understand what will be happening and how this aids grieving. Ministers simply see this as paganism. The argument is that churches see traditional practices which are a wealth of indigenous knowledge as an enemy of the church yet they do not understand their enemy. Instead of pastoral caregivers learning about the cultural religious practices and use them to enhance grieving or counseling, depending on what ritual is at stake. A minister working in a variety of cultures should understand issues of cross cultural counseling for contextual relevance (Moila 1988; Msomi 1991; Nxumalo 1996;and Keteyi 1988). This will be discussed in detailed in the section on rituals and the pastoral care ministry of the church.

The second challenge based on research and teaching is basis of indigenization and inculturation. Christian theologians and pastoral care givers are the ones that determine what indigenization or inculturation means and how it should be defined and implemented. Inculturation is designed to benefit the church. In a way it is a ploy by the church to swallow African Traditional Religions instead of finding common ground for working together for the benefit of society at large. Research on inculturation should be objectively studied to see the flows of current literature biases if the teaching and research in pastoral care should be relevant to communal reconstruction in Africa.

The third challenge based on teaching is the use of language. Owomoyela as cited by Masoga asks

What is the connection between language and cultural identity?  
What danger does the continued ascendancy of European languages pose for the vitality of African languages (Owomoyela 1996:3 in Masoga 2002: 313)?

In response to Owomoyela, Masoga says,

It is a fact that language is a technology of power—language becomes an instrument of power tied to class. Since every language has words full of ideological connotation and are value laden those who learn the language absorb and interiorize the ideology of the ruling class (Masoga 2002:313).

The reality described by Masoga is very evident in the life of the church. In Zimbabwe are churches that are in rural areas where people speak the same language with the pastor but sermons are delivered in English. If not, the pastor keeps on pointing to certain concepts in English without a substitute in the vernacular. English has become a symbol of success and civilization both in the church and the community. Another challenge that demonstrates that English has overcome local languages is that if an African person makes grammatical mistakes when speaking in English he/she is ridiculed by both blacks and whites whereas if a white person makes mistakes as they try to speak an African language people sympathize with them and appreciate their effort. In Zimbabwe English has become the basic language for communication with some Africans even changing their voice tone to sound very English or more English than the English themselves. Masoga cites More who bemoans that Europe

has infiltrated Africa's secret corners: homes, meetings, social gatherings, literature, family and interpersonal relations. Europe becomes the mediator in the lives of Africans who use English—whether domesticated or not—as a medium of communication. The ubiquity of English arrests Africa's effort to overcome European power and tutelage (More 1999:343 in Masoga 2002:313).

The answer to this is for African ministers to be trained mainly in the African languages.

In the above cluster of theological institutions in Pietermaritzburg, theology is done in English yet the majority of the students have English as their second or third language. Edwina Ward notes the challenge of language in doing Clinical Pastoral Supervision in South Africa in Grey's Hospital in Pietermaritzburg. She says,

...South Africans speak many different languages with eleven being recognized as official languages. An implication for pastoral ministers and supervision in a cross-cultural communication is the language difficulty experienced between supervisors and students and between pastoral counselors and clients (Ward 2003: 52).

In the teaching process students are taught in English acquiring skills and vital vocabulary in English yet they are to work in a predominantly non-English environment doing preaching and pastoral care counseling. Students can benefit from doing their training in vernacular.

UKZN needs to be commended on its language policy on teaching where the university encourages the use of English and IsiZulu. However this needs to be taken further to a level where students can have the privilege to write some of their assignments and exams in IsiZulu. Currently all theological exams are in English except translations of the bible in Greek and Hebrew. Further on the university can pilot a system where students doing isiZulu can learn in isiZulu and write their research dissertations in isiZulu unlike the current scenario where isiZulu research dissertations are written in English.

A case in point was in 2010 when I was teaching homiletics, liturgy and worship module at UKZN and LTI. I had two students who were failing to preach in English. I experimented and asked them to write and present their sermons in vernacular. The students wrote their sermons in IsiZulu. The sermons made a more sense than all the other sermons presented by Zulu and Xhosa students in English. The students are put under a lot of strain to learn English and then learn how to preach and then go back to their parishes and start struggling in translating what they would have learnt in English back to IsiZulu or any other vernacular. This is the same as what is happening at the United Theological College in Harare in that students are trained in English yet 99% of them will never be deployed in an English speaking congregation. Why can't vernacular be the medium for learning when the recipients of the education will work in a vernacular environment. Going back to the LTI scenario, oral examiners who are 99% vernacular wanted the two students to be examined preaching in English for the benefit of the 2% examiners who could not follow sermons delivered in Zulu. Theologians need to seriously consider doing research in the teaching of theology in the local languages and language symbols. Edwina Ward in her experiences in the CPE supervision of pastoral students says,

Pastoral supervision relies on the process and skills of listening and talking. The communication involves both the verbal and the non-verbal. We are placed in a predicament when the supervisor and the



student can only communicate in English as many of the students come from a wide range of backgrounds and different cultures within Africa. An added complexity arises again when both the student of CPE and the person they visit are using English to communicate and neither has English as their first language (Ward 2003: 53).

So Ward is pointing out this exact disadvantage within the process of CPE. It cannot be over emphasized that there is need for transformation in the teaching of pastoral care practitioners for effectiveness.

In saying the above I am aware of the challenges that will face the theological institutions if they were to implement the UKZN language policy that in actual fact legalizes the teaching of different modules in the university in vernacular. Theology is interesting in that despite the challenges of local languages versus English, theologians think that you can be a good theologian if you do theology in Greek and Hebrew. In this case there is a tendency of drifting away from the local language. The second possible challenge is that many theological disciples are still staffed with experienced non-vernacular speaking professors who therefore cannot teach in vernacular as articulated by Ward. However language carries a lot of symbols and meanings that at times cannot be translated into another language and still carry the same meaning. We can also not unjustly benefit a few professors and senior lecturers at the expense of many students and the communities that they in turn go on to serve. However UKZN has offered lecturers who want to learn isiZulu for basic classroom communication a module that they can do at the expense of the university.

This means to say that pastoral care givers are trained in a western environment in order to work in an African environment. Mogomme Masoga bemoans the western laden intelligentsia of African Scholars. He says

African intellectuals were trained within a context that does not take their cultural background into account. This then lead to a clash between 'the perceived to be an intellectual thought' for Africa and the 'ought to be an intellectual thought' for the continent ... intellectuals at our universities find it difficult to relate to problems African communities face ... (Masoga 2002:304).

What Masoga is describing befits many African pastors in that they have to be Europeanized to be good ministers of the church thereby losing vital contact with the cultural context of Africans whose intelligentsia is located in a western worldview while working in an African cultural context. Challenges faced by society are then misunderstood and misinterpreted resulting in a disconnection between pastors and the community. Masoga further castigates the African intellectual when he says,

Their intellectual lives aim at the protection and support of the position, institutional function and discourse of their masters (Masoga 2002:3004).

Applied to the church, this means that the church is viewed as more important than the people; ministers would rather lose the people than lose the church and its teachings. The local culture and knowledge systems are baptized to match the teachings of the church.

Research and teaching in pastoral care should be transformed to contextualize their training environment. In fact the culture of training institutions is very different from the culture of the parish setting in most parts of Africa. Instead of wanting to understand the African traditions and culture at the level of training, trainee ministers are made to understand and experience the western cultural dynamics. I see the training of ministers as part of a bigger project by the church to kill African traditional religions and culture by using transformed sons and daughters of the same culture disguised as pastoral care givers. In agreement with the above argument Johannes Seoka argues that theological education is of western orientation, uses, western spirituality and worldview to convert Africans. He says the training of ministers

... should be approached from the context of culture, if it is to make sense. The approach will emphasize culture of the people whom the gospel/Christianity reaches, thus making culture the primary factor in the method of doing African theology and spirituality. At the moment the teaching method is of Western orientation and engages African experience as an afterthought. This approach has to a very

large degree handicapped the development of African theology and spirituality (Seoka 1997:1).

African theology and contextual theology currently uses WKS and research paradigms. In this way African theology will remain subordinate to Western grounded Christian theology.

### **The Problem of Christianity Failing to Understand African Traditional Religion**

Society is losing out on indigenous knowledge systems imbedded in African Traditional Religions because of lack of objective scholarly research that seeks to understand ATRs without demonization or abuse by Christianity. Godwin Chavunduka, writing from Zimbabwean perspective says,

There has never been any genuine dialogue between practitioners of the African religion and practitioners of other religions in Zimbabwe. In fact, for over one hundred years attempts were made by Christian missionaries to destroy the African religion. They viewed the African religions as a childish religion of fear, full of black magic, sorcery and witchcraft; full of superstition and senseless taboos; a religion that encouraged people to worship their ancestors instead of worshipping God (2001:3).

The lack of objective research by Christian theologians resulted in this attitude described by Chavunduka. This kind of attitude towards ATR leads to the fact that ATR and African culture's contribution to social construction is being undermined by subjective research, yet I think there is a wealth of indigenous knowledge systems imbedded in African culture that can contribute to social construction and ultimately state formation in Africa. In agreement with Chavunduka, Christopher Grzelak in his book *The Inclusive Pluralism of Jacques Dupuis, Its Contribution to A Christian Theology of Religions, And Its Relevance to the South African Interreligious Contexts* raises interesting views of ATR and Africa in general as perceived by missionaries. Grzelak says,

One may only speculate as to whether the first missionaries who came to South Africa from Portugal in the fifteenth century, ever expected to find God in this part of the world. They believed that they had brought God to the 'dark continent' AS Africa was generally regarded at that time. During those days a Christian attitude towards other religions and believers was considered hostile and the religions were seen as a threat to the Christian faith. This also applied to the African traditional religions which were regarded as 'pagan' in contrast to the true faith (2010:186).

This attitude of viewing ATRs as worshipping a wrong God whose name is written with a small letter 'G' as contrasted with the Christian God whose name is written with a capital letter 'G' continues to this day. The enmity between the church and ATR still exists and Grzelak is of the view that this antagonism is perpetuated by lack of knowledge and therefore understanding of other religions (2010:186). It is therefore imperative for pastoral care scholars to carry out objective research to unearth the rich foundations and values inherent in ATR for social construction.

As alluded to earlier on, Christian theologians seem to allow pastoral students to study very little about other religions that are viewed as enemies of Christianity and evangelization. The studies seem to be aimed at knowing the short comings of ATR so as to use those as entry points to attack it during sermons and bible studies. In other words studies are meant to show the primitivism of other religions for purposes of benefiting Christianity. Yet if ATR is objectively researched, pastoral care can benefit from the African indigenous knowledge Systems inherent in the religion and the African culture.

Christianity seems to continue to have good sermons because of the existence of its 'enemies'. I often think that if a miracle could happen that God takes away the devil from the world, Christianity will not have an enemy and therefore it will cease to exist! What else could it talk about? Christianity had labeled and named the practices of other religions at times with critical misconceptions. For example amongst the Ndebele people of Matabo there is a tendency of talking to the ancestors for a variety of reasons such as thanks giving, petitions or to make some enquiries. This act is called

*ukuthethela* in *Isindebele*. *Ukuthethela* is not the same as *ukukhonza* which can be translated to English as to worship. However Christians have simply agreed to say people in ATRs worship ancestors (Chavunduka 2001) yet they do not, they simply *-thethela amadlozi*. The closest to this would be words such as evoke and venerate. This kind of deliberate ignorance that sounds like propaganda is perpetuated even by highly educated Christian theologians. However what is interesting is that Christians also evoke or venerate the dead almost every Sunday. If they have questions that they cannot answer they refer to the dead, for example from the bible, the apostles and everyone else who speaks in the Holy book, except may be Jesus who is said to have resurrected<sup>3</sup>.

Seoka is of the view that,

It could not have been the African people who coined the phrase 'ancestor worship', because they do not believe that ancestors can be worshiped at all. It must have been in someone's interest to demonize African culture and Religion in order to promote In order to promote that which appealed to him or her (Seoka 1997:5).

In fact Seoka should also realize that what we all comfortably call African Traditional Religion was named by Christian theologians and not the adherents of this religion. The religion did not have a name because it is a way of life. People still go *ukuyothethela* rather than go to African Traditional Religion as you would hear people saying that they are going to church. This is a symptom of a misunderstanding of African traditions and culture by Christian theologians who have chosen to be a voice for ATR yet at the same time continue to preach against it.

The misunderstanding by Christianity, based on findings by Christian researchers resulted in enmity between Christianity and other religions. Chavunduka laments the fact that the church built its membership by destroying ATR and the African culture in people (2001:3). Chavunduka says that the whole project of the evangelization of Africa was premised on

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<sup>3</sup> It is not the intention of this paper to interrogate rituals such as *ukubuyisa* (bringing the spirit of the dead person home) as a form of resurrection which is comparable to the Christian resurrection of Jesus.

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the conquest of ATR and African culture (2001:3). This aspect has been achieved and ultimately African indigenous Knowledge systems have been replaced by Eurocentric Western knowledge systems<sup>4</sup>. Chavunduka says missionaries would,

... transplant a Christian faith with all its European cultural background, imagery and orientation: They did not see any need for entering into any dialogue with the practitioners of the African religion and other community leaders (2001:3).

Failure to dialogue with the practitioners of ATR and African leaders, in my view is what resulted in misconceptions about ATR.

Chavunduka further argues that the war against ATR and African culture by missionaries was assisted by colonial masters who joined hands with the church. This is seen in the fact that;

With the assistance of the colonial administrators it was decided that African shrines or places of worship were to be destroyed; their spirit mediums or religious leaders were to be ignored and where possible they were to be stopped from organizing and conducting their religious services; Christians were to be discouraged from consulting African traditional healers; Zimbabweans were told that participating in any traditional rituals of a religious nature was a sin (2001:3).

Africans are a religious people as can be seen in the next case study of the Ndebele people. The understanding of the ATR basis of Africans' faith can contribute to social health and community building. Any form of community and nation building that can be aligned to religion and the African world view is bound to fare better than the western founded African nations.

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<sup>4</sup> Professor Godwin Chavunduka was the former vice chancellor of the University of Zimbabwe. He was one of a few professors who was openly an African traditional healer and spirit medium who defied the church despite getting education through the church. Chavunduka also started a school for the training of African Traditional healers and herbalists in Bulawayo. Chavunduka is now resting with his ancestors.

## **Research by Pastoral Theologians on the Religiosity of Africans and the Resilience of ATR and African Culture**

Pastoral theologians can benefit from understanding the sources of the resilience of ATR and African culture. Lan David says that the church and the colonial government failed to destroy ATR and African culture as evidenced by the fact that people still go to several shrines for worship around Zimbabwe, spirit mediums are very active conducting services, ‘... the detail of their ritual practice has remained consistent in a most remarkable way’ (1985:227). So despite the onslaught against ATR by the church, ATR has survived the test of time. Africans are very religious and in their religiosity still seek solutions and guidance from ATR despite being Christian converts. Current research by African theologians has the urgent task of unearthing and preserving that which African Christians are seeking for which they are not able to get from Christianity. In this section I will use the example of the Ndebele people of Matabo in Zimbabwe.

Pastoral theologians can uncover through research the religiosity of the Ndebele and the depth of their resilient culture. I have argued elsewhere that the Ndebele people are religious beings<sup>5</sup> who find it difficult to make a distinction between their Ndebele culture and African Traditional Religion(s)<sup>6</sup>. The Ndebele are religious beings in that religion permeates one’s life from the womb until life after death. There is no life outside the influence of religion. Religion ‘...is the total traditional world view with all the values and beliefs’ (Gehman 1989:18). In most cases religion means the

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<sup>5</sup> This is true of many other tribes in Zimbabwe in particular and in Africa in general.

<sup>6</sup> The ATR(s) is difficult to be classified as a single religion amongst the Ndebele in that each family would have a family priest, usually (but not always) the male head of the family who performs family rituals and communicates with the ancestors who in turn convey the petitions and thanks giving to God. Families at times have a spirit medium (s) who does not necessarily deal with issues of the whole community. But there are also community leaders at different levels such as kraal heads and chiefs and kings who communicate with ancestors on behalf of people under their leadership.

presence and the influence of God, ancestors and the spirit world. For the Ndebele it is difficult to pick out behavioural patterns which a Ndebele person can then say this is culture and this other one is religion. In fact what we have is a human being living their life in a particular way which makes them who they are. It is then up to those interested in categorising issues to say this is religion and this other is culture. This religion does not need to convert or proselytise, one is conceived and born into the religion (Bozongwana 1983). It does not wait for a person to grow up so that they can learn how to read about the religion from some kind of 'Holy Book'; its strength is that it is a lived religion.

The Ndebele cosmology is composed of both visible and invisible spirit beings which have influence on the living human beings which are appeased using rituals and living life according to acceptable social norms and values, which can be described as a cultural way of life or religious way of life of good relationships (Bozongwana 1983). Mbiti says that human life is composed of life forces that people constantly interact with influencing the course of human life for good and for evil (Mbiti 1970). In the Ndebele worldview the unborn, the living-living and the living-dead are all part of the constellation of the living spirits (Marova 1999). A Kenyan scholar, Ndeti argues that the community

... extends beyond the living members of the clan and tribe. It incorporates those who have died and those who are yet unborn. (The individual) is a physical representative of the dead, living and unborn. Thus (the individual) is a community incorporating three principles - life, spirit and immortality (Ndeti 1972:114).

Masamba says,

By virtue of being part of the extended family and living in the proximity of God the creator, the ancestors are endowed with special powers. Therefore they enable the birth of children and protect the living family members from attack by malevolent spirits. As those who sanction the moral life of both individuals and community, the ancestors punish, exonerate, or reward. Thus the health of the living



depends to a great extent on their relationships within the extended family and with their ancestors... (Masamba ma Mpolo 1981:24).

Life amongst the Ndebele is highly rooted in this kind of cosmology and worldview, making it very difficult to separate culture from religion and god. Laleye (1981) is of the view that the African traditional cosmology is dynamic. It recognises and integrates the duality of the mind and body, magic and rationality, order and disorder, negative and positive powers, and individual and communal consciousness (1981). All this is lost in Christianity because western trained ministers just like university intellectuals being described by Masoga

... find the African symbolic universe and cosmology limited to pre-scientific thinking. There is no significant recognition of the fact that all science needs to depart from and infuse local culture and that these perspectives on the scientific enterprise are indissoluble. For instance, they fail to recognise that their usage of western concepts and instruments of learning and research derive from and implicate western culture. They do not see any relevance in pursuing 'African things'. Research skills are monopolised and the definition of African science is raped. Africa is deprived of its science and prevented from having her knowledge(s) recognised in the public scientific domain (2002:304-305).

Family relationships, communal relationships and relationships with strangers are part of the religious observances to continual appease the spirit world. When things do not work out in life one is forced to seek an understanding of their relationship with the spirit world. This understanding of God and ancestors borders around theology of retribution. God and ancestors are happy and they bless those who relate well to others and the environment. On the contrary those who do not relate well will be cursed through misfortune and ill-health. The church has failed to take away this worldview from the people of Matabo or it can be argued that the European (Western) cultural/religious captivity of the African church has failed in Matabo. Instead, for example, the Lutheran church in Zimbabwe, we have the Lutheran Church of Zimbabwe.

## **Research on Christianity by Adherents and Sympathisers of ATR and African Culture**

Another challenge related to the castigation of ATR by the church is that the few adherents of ATR who can do research are also seeking revenge against Christianity by centering their research on the short comings of Christianity. This kind of research is not helpful to society but is very vital for the church to realize that others can see its short comings.

The first point of note is that research by some ATR scholars (Chavunduka 2001; Dolamo 2008; Mbiti 1969; Mugambi 1976; Berglund 1976; Nsibande 1992; and Aaseng 1992) brag of the fact that Christianity has failed to kill ATR despite resolute attacks through sermons, Christian education and collaboration with colonial governments in banning some ATR shrines and practices. Chavunduka says, '... the church and government leaders failed to destroy the African religion and culture completely during the last century' (2001:1). As noted earlier, Africans are very religious and still adhere to their culture, Chavunduka argues that,

... many Zimbabweans who became Christians did not resign from the African Religion nor did they abandon African Culture completely; they have maintained dual membership. Many Christians in Zimbabwe continue to participate in traditional religious rituals; they continue to consult traditional healers; many Christians believe in witch craft, some even practice it or attempt to practice witchcraft (2001:4).

This kind of research exposes the fact that Christianity is not able through its western based pastoral care systems to respond to the care needs of an African whose challenges are at times based on African paradigms as witchcraft. Christianity is still being serviced by ATR with regard to healing and care. What kind of pastoral needs and healing can the pastoral care ministry of the church learn from ATR and African culture? Why are Christians still going back to ATR for care and healing? What is it that Christianity does not have that ATR offers those in need of care and healing? This calls for research on the AIKS used by ATR in care and healing.

Chavunduka (2001) also argues that ATR is a hospitable religion

which does not fight other religions and that is a value for community construction. One can build a nation and a state through hospitality rather than fighting others. Christians who participate in ATR care and support systems are welcomed by ATR care givers while the same are ridiculed by the church for worshipping idols and ancestors. Chavunduka postulates that

Dual membership is made possible by the nature of the African Religion and the African culture itself. The African religion is a hospitable religion which accepts the fact that other religious systems are equally valid, or even more so. The African Religion is prepared to embrace other beliefs and practices as long as the necessary cultural adjustments are made to accommodate them (2001:4).

If ATR is accommodative as described by Chavunduka then Christian theologians can learn from these how to do inculturation where both religions benefit instead of a situation whereby one religion seeks to swallow another. There is need for research that can lead to mutual dialogue between Christianity and ATR.

My own observation is that the militancy of the church is not only against other religions such as ATR. The sermons of the church are also directed against other denominations. There is serious war between denominations. Each denomination views itself as THE Church and the best against all others. One no longer sees conversions of people from other religions but transfers of people from one denomination to another. So the church is not tolerant of a different view hence Chavunduka's argument that the church is divisive and therefore it is not good for social construction and thinks that 'The African Religion can, therefore, facilitate inter-religious dialogue' (2001:4) better than Christianity.

Research has also shown that Christianity is not a communal religion (Aaseng 1992; and Chavunduka 2001) as it separates the believers from the non-believers despite the fact that it is based on building a kingdom – which is a community. Emphasis on individual conversions and a personal saviour separates believers from the community. Aaseng says,

the practice of many early missionaries to concentrate on individual

conversions, drawing individuals away from their society, was counterproductive. It cast the missionaries in the role of disturbers of the community or as interested only in misfits or outcasts (1992:15-16).

When one believes, then one is no longer like the heathen members of one's family. In some cases you can see members of the same family going to different denominations. Sunday is one of the most segregated days because of the church. The church is interested in building itself, at times at the expense of the community but ATR is not interested in building itself, it builds communities. ATR encourages adherence to the family as the basis for the worship of God through family ancestors, then the immediate community and the rest of society. This connectedness is being fragmented by the church through denominations fighting for membership. ATR does not fight for membership; it builds families and communities (Chavunduka 2001:5). Pastoral care for the community can learn how to build communities by using some of the values inherent in this African value of community connectedness. This connectedness is helpful when people experience suffering and trauma as will be shown in the next section.

## **Research on Suffering and Trauma in African Communities**

Suffering and trauma in Africa is a reality that cannot be denied. There is so much poverty, disease, wars, unemployment and crime. In such contexts, instead of religious cold wars, religious care systems should join forces in trauma counseling and care. Pastoral care theologians and practitioners cannot ignore the care approaches used in ATR. Motsi and Masango have come to a conclusion that,

Trauma issues and trauma treatment have become topical in Africa as a result of the political, social and economic instabilities that are common in the region. From a pastoral care perspective there is need to review and raise the philosophical argument about the relevance of humanitarian intervention, specifically in regard to the approach and treatment used. The Western medical and psychiatry fields view a person on the basis of an egocentric approach, but their African counterparts do so from a socio-centric perspective (2012:1).

The argument by Motsi and Masango bemoans that unilateral use of western approaches to trauma counseling among Africans. The church is the main culprit as it equates western paradigms to gospel holiness and African paradigms to sinfulness and paganism. Individuals are part of a whole; they find meaning in the bigger whole. If such issues as poverty, suffering and crime could be viewed from a communal perspective they could bring about contextual meaning to Africans.

In the African concept of being community the success of one member of the community is the success of the whole community. The poverty and suffering of one person is a communal issue and solutions usually come from the whole community. In some communities in Zimbabwe especial amongst the Karanga of Mberengwa, crime is also a communal issue in that if one member of a given community commits a crime, the whole community is ostracized. For example if a family member commits murder the whole extended family participates in paying for the deceased in fear of the avenging spirit of the deceased which will attack the whole extended family (Sitshebo 2000: 30-36). In most instances the whole village amongst the Karanga will be related in one way or the other thereby forming a huge extended family system. In such a case the whole community is concerned about the welfare of each other as well as guarding each other from committing criminal acts that can put the whole community into trouble.

The gap between the rich and the poor, the extremely happy and the extremely sad can be bridged. Tinyiko Maluleke is of the view that, ‘... theology retains a unique role to play in (a) acknowledging, (b) valorizing, (c) interpreting and (d) enhancing the agency of African Christians in their daily struggles against the cultural, religious and the economic forces of death which seek to marginalize them (2000:22)’ resulting in suffering and trauma. Research can enable pastoral care and counseling to capitalize on AIKS that can unearth the old ways for social construction. From an African perspective pastoral theology can begin to enable people to understand that any individual challenge is equally a community challenge.

The above understanding is completely divorced from the western culture as observed by Motsi and Masango.

Western philosophy, on the other hand, says a person is simply composed of soul and body and that trauma is a thing of the mind.

Therefore, redefining trauma in light of this African worldview is critical and will enhance our caring of the many traumatized millions who desperately need help on this continent (Motsi and Masango 2000:1).

The concept of the individual and the community is further elaborated by Dolamo who says, ‘African culture and religion emphasizes the importance of community but also the indispensability of its individual members’ (Dolamo 2008:234). The community is a communion of individuals who are willing to be in experiential communion, be it in joy or in suffering. For example among the Ndebele if a family member kills a person, the reparations are not faced directly by the individual murderer but by the whole family. Similarly when one is getting married the whole family participates to the extent of contributing financial, material and emotional. Mbiti captures this very well when he says, ‘I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am’ (Mbiti 1969:11). This is where the church can learn not to lift the individual over the community.

Communal responsibility has the potential for community members positively guiding each other to avoid communal punishment. This is part of the AIKS that pastoral theological research and teaching should unearth and promote. In fact ‘pre-packed universal interpretations, definitions and approaches to psychological suffering do not bring the necessary help’ (Motsi and Masango 2000:2). Losi has come to the conclusion that, ‘the belief in science and in the power of the international scientific community is so strong that it tends to marginalize local knowledge’ (2000:10). Losi has a point in saying that AIKS is being overshadowed by western knowledge systems that are the basis for church based counseling yet AIKS can be more contextual relevant to African needs. For the Christian pastoral theology which is individual based counseling (Ward 2003:54) to benefit Africans there is need to understand that in the African worldview,

we cannot understand a person as an individual, and we cannot have personal identity without reference to other persons ... the notion of being together is intended to emphasize that life is the actuality of living in the present together with people (Sindima in Magesa 1997:53).

For Africans life, sickness, misfortune, trauma, happiness and death is a,

continuum of social, cosmic, personal and communal events. When one breaks the moral codes of society then the ties between oneself and community are also fragmented. Thus in the case of illness, it is not the individual who is seen as needing healing but the broken relationships which need to be healed (Ward 2003:55).

There is richness in the above understanding which needs to be exploited for the benefit of society if the above networks can be reawakened society can be healed of many ills and communities can be redefined and reconstructed. In ATR and African culture there is a history of care conducted by spirit mediums, priests, elders, community traditional leadership, *izinyanga* and diviners. Knowledge imbedded in this history is yet to be tapped. This calls for research in IAKS embedded in the African care systems, religious systems and cultural systems for the training of pastoral care givers. The individual to be *umuntu* should be imbedded in community. Community connectedness builds *Ubuntu/botho*. A community with people with Ubuntu is what both Christianity and ATRs are aiming for. Dolamo thinks that if the African community and in turn the state and the constitution could be grounded in the concept of community African countries can overcome some of its challenges.

Dolamo further says that the project of moral regeneration will have to be carried out in the African paradigm of community and ‘*Ubuntu/botho* as its organizing principle’ (Dolamo 2008:235). In agreement with Dolamo, Teffo says,

The cycle of violence and criminality, which has plagued South Africa during the past few years, could be drastically reduced if we were to restore our moral fibre. To this end, the philosophy of *Ubuntu/botho* could assist us. A cohesive moral value that is inherent in all mankind (sic), one revitalized in our hearts and minds it would go a long way towards alleviating moral decay (1999:149).

Pastoral care and counseling can be able to contribute to fight against moral decay, corruption, self-centredism, violence and crime if pastoral care

through counseling and sermons could use African paradigms of being community and Ubuntu/botho.

## **Research on Indigenization and Inculturation: Challenges and Possibilities**

Research so far seeks to fit African Culture and Traditional practices into the broader Christian agenda. Christianity cannot change as it is based on revealed truth therefore other religions have to fit into Christianity and Christian theology and not the other way round. So far pastoral care and counseling theological research is seeking for doctrinal gaps where African Traditional Religious practices can be accommodated without adulterating doctrines. In fact the ideal is when the church will manage to destroy all other movements and win all people to itself as articulated in the great commission of the disciples by Jesus,

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age’ (Matt 28:16-20 -RSV).

The Christian theological paradigm of indigenization and inculturation is in dire need for transformation to allow for a new approach that does not seek to benefit Christianity at the expense of ATR, instead one which allows Christianity to die so that it can resurrect with a new paradigm. A Christian paradigm that can value human beings of all cultures over and against religious ideologies. In this case Christianity will not be more important than people, instead it is a means for growth and transformation of both the individual and the community without westernizing its converts. Aaseng (1992:15) says that the inculturation has to start with the African person and the African culture as gifts from God instead of the current scenario where they are viewed as paganism.



For good inculturation to take place there is need for both religions to expose themselves to each other fully. There is need for objective research by both Christianity and ATR on the other to identify benefits for a dialogical approach to social care and counseling. Pastoral theologians need to research and teach their pastoral care students the realities of ATR rather than studying it for the sake of castigating it. I like Simon Kofi Appiah's definition of Inculturation when he says '... as a general and basic principle of all religious experience, we can describe the phenomenon of inculturation as the process by which religion assumes cultural embodiment' (2012:254). This means to say that Christianity in this case should be able to embody African culture. Such things as rituals, language and symbols should be directly linked to the local culture. Unlike the current situation where training of pastoral care givers is done in English. The language carries symbols and nuances that are at times very difficult to translate to a local language meaning to say Christianity is not able to communicate in the local language. Appiah says,

Some elements of culture that help to make religion a lived (human) experience are myths, signs and symbols, language and ideas, historical accidents, and behavioral patterns, intuitions and institutions about the origins and purpose of life, death and hereafter language (2012:255).

In agreement with Appiah, Bate says

every culture has its way of explaining the way the world is and of determining the fundamental powers or forces in the creation and substance of life. The myth gives the symbolic narrative or story about these truths. So myths tell us about the realities within a culture: like ancestors, sin, demons, or witchcraft depending on which culture we are part of...Part of identifying and describing a culture is identifying these symbols, rituals and myths (2002:23).

If the identified elements are to be understood by pastoral theologians there is need to understand them from their cultural perspective and this call for the retrieving of AIKS. The challenge of current research in Christianity and

inculturation is that it is based mainly in missiology. The church seeks to convert people and their cultures. Appiah argues that, ‘The culture concerned is challenged and renewed by the values of the gospel’ (2012:255). This is the bias of current research by pastoral care theologians; they want to transform culture so that it suits the Christian gospel. There should be room for the gospel or Christian tradition (which is in most cases Western culture than gospel) to be challenged and renewed by the local culture. This calls for an objective dialogical approach between Christian theologians and ATR specialists in a given culture to do research and allow the two to objectively influence each other.

## **Conclusion**

This article argues for the centrality of an African worldview in pastoral care and counseling. This can only be achieved if pastoral care theologians can participate in an objective dialogue with specialist in ATR and African culture. If this dialogue between Christian Pastoral Theologians and ATR is to be fruitful for society, it must be bilateral.

Pastoral care and counseling is yet to benefit society fully through understanding ATR imbedded in ATR and African culture. The training of ministers will be richer if it is developed through using personnel equipped with objective knowledge of ATR. Adherents of ATR can offer seminars to students of pastoral care instead of biased senior pastors. At UKZN students of pastoral theology doing a B.Th. can be exposed to at least three modules at every level of religious studies to equip them with deep knowledge about ATR and African culture. This can alternatively be applied in the envisaged

Bachelor of Arts in theology degree to respond to challenges of restructuring the current B.Th. which might require an extra year to fit in the extra modules. In the process these would be pastors may realize the positive aspects of ATR and African culture which can enhance their pastoral care and counseling. They may as well attack ATR, as ministers tend to do, from an informed perspective.

In view of this paper one realizes that there is room for partnership in the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics between theology and religious studies. There is a possibility for cross teaching in areas of care. There is need for the study of care systems in ATR and African culture to be

taught together with care systems from the Christian culture. Both forms of care are needed in our communities today. Good individual care, family care and community care systems can help to create a healthy nation which can ultimately result in good state formation.

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