

Tradition, modernity and the future of African theology

Martin Ott

Rather there has been an emergence of dynamic cultural experience grounded in the immediate past and grappling with the present contemporary situation. Our culture in other words provides an orbit of meaning, one which synthesizes our past and present. It is a kind of a dialectical process which affirms and negates certain crucial and unimportant aspects of our cultural experience.¹

Bonganjalo Goba

Theology stands today between the global and the local. The global is not the same as the old universal or perennial theologies. Despite the homogenizing aims of globalization, local situations remain robust in their resistance. And there is no 'local' any more that is not touched by powerful outside forces. In fact, the local itself increasingly cannot be defined simply in territorial terms. Theology must find ways of embracing both the global and the local if it is to be a faithful and credible voice for belief.²

Robert J. Schreier

Introduction

The following ideas result from an interest in the problem of faith and culture. The driving theological motive is the conviction that the successful mediation of both is an expression of faithfulness to the gospel. The problem of faith and culture is at the center of theology. It covers the different levels of 'being a Christian' under changing social, political and economic conditions. On a more personal level, it reflects the question of how faith moulds every day life; on the level of Christian community, concepts of God, a meaningful liturgy and a clear religious language have to be addressed. On a social and political level, inculturation stretches out towards the all encompassing *shalom*, mobilising all efforts for the establishment of the kingdom of God in justice and peace, in truth and beauty. Hence, inculturation is a similar question for Christians everywhere and thus part of a contextual and 'beyond-contextual' theological discussion. The specific case of inculturation in Africa reflects one variant. This presents the challenge of developing a meaningful theology in a rapidly changing Africa.

During my research in the field of African traditional religion and Christianity I came to realize that only in the last ten years African cultures have undergone a tremendous change. But not only African cultures change. The world as a whole has changed and keeps on doing so at an incredible speed. At the same time the definitions of cultures and the attempts of social anthropology and sociology are changing.³

Local and global changes interdepend. Malawi is the best example of this. Would the political changes in Malawi (with the crucial role of Christians in these historical events) have happened without *Solidarnosc* in Poland in the early 1980s, without *glasnost* and *perestroika* in Russia, without the collapse of the Soviet Union, without the fall of the Berlin Wall, and without the end of apartheid in South Africa?

The consequences for theology in this context are obvious. In his endeavours to be 'in dialogue' with the world, a theologian might feel empathy with Sisyphus. Keeping up with the speed of events is comparable with the endless attempts to roll the ball of cultural description to the top of the hill. Alas, the results are never 'up to date'; cultural dynamics overtake academic stock-taking. The ball starts rolling down the hill where the whole manoeuvre has to start again. Yet, we do not agree with Albert Camus: Sisyphus is not a happy man.

In this continuous cultural change theologians might be tempted to give up and resort to theological navel-gazing. Some may find spiritual consolation in the total 'otherness' of God, others in the total 'otherness' of religious language and internal church activities. Other distractions are more subtle. As a *theologia perennis* is no more accessible and available, biblical studies, historical researches or sophistries in dogmatics can become domains of theological seclusion. The dangers are obvious: theologians scratch where it does not itch.

But even those who remain in the arena can not be sure that their endeavours are acknowledged and accepted. Despite impressive programmatic texts in favour of an inculturated theology in Africa as well as in Europe, the quantity of results are in humble relation to the conceptual input. Moreover, complaints are frequent, that these theologies 'have no appreciable influence in the life of the African churches'.⁴ The hypothesis is that this is due to a lack of acknowledgment toward modernity and its effect on the life of African Christians.

Inculturation — contextuality

Very often theological texts in Africa start with the following statement. 'The missionaries did so and so..., but now we Africans do so and so...'. This opening ritual of African theology reflected the period of inculturation, of contextualisation and of an increased theological self-assurance.⁵ It was a strong expression that from now on the times of theological alienation were over. Alas, this era of African theology was short. No matter how much was achieved, the golden times of contextualization are over. Inculturation in the 'old' sense of the word is out. R. Schreiter's statement at the beginning of this paper explains why the local is no longer what it was; it cannot be defined simply in territorial terms.

As attempts were made at contextual theology, different questions hindered the construction of local theologies. In Africa, these were questions like: What are contemporary African cultures all about? How can we describe a rapidly changing culture with scientific means? Why did Africa lose its culture in a period of 100 years, whereas India which was exposed to western imperialism and colonialism for 400 years, appears to be far more robust in its cultural and religious heritage? Is there a 'typical' African concept of cultural faithfulness or exchange? What are the social, psychological and political reasons for the search of cultural identity? After the 'cry for freedom', we now hear from South Africa the 'cry for culture'. Is the issue of inculturation more political and socio-psychological? By taking up the question of cultural identity, do theologians misuse the hopes of the people without being able to provide the proper answers? What is the real issue in the discussion on 'cultural crisis'?

From my own experience in Malawi and in other African countries, I have developed a puzzling image. Whenever somebody tries to refer to the 'traditional' cultural heritage, the reaction of 'modern' Africans is: 'This is no more meaningful; this belongs to the past.' Whenever somebody refers to modernity and global networking as factors of African life today, the reaction of the same Africans is: 'No, this is western thinking, a new form of neo-colonialism. We have our own African culture and identity.' After falling into this 'cultural trap' several times, I started questioning myself: is this only a nice form of revenge toward the *azungu*, the ex-colonialists? Is it a form of protection in order not to allow 'others' to define their own culture? Or is this a specific genre of African myth production that Roland Barthes describes with the word 'dilemma'? 'Entrusted with "glossing over" an intentional concept, myth encounters nothing but betrayal in language, for language can only obliterate the concept if it hides it, or unmask it if it formulates it. The elaboration of a second-order semiological system will enable myth to escape this dilemma: driven to having either to unveil or to liquidate the concept, it will naturalise it.'⁶

Is inculturation the naturalisation of the unsolved African identity crisis, a latent constellation of a sense-producing myth? Observing the discussion on inculturation for quite a while, I have the strong impression that it is more than a theological reflection on the condition of local Christian self-assertion. In its structures the unsolved philosophical problem of the one and the many lies dormant. From the social and political edges of the discourse, questions of power and money in the church are raised. Apparently the term has become a subtle means for Africans to discuss the problem of 'Blackness' using theology. This problem seems to be the burning 'contextual' issue for many contemporary Africans. It is apparently more interesting than the 'proto-ancestor-christology' or the 'Trinity from an African ancestral perspective'. But is this issue a theological question? The expression 'trap of inculturation' used by Ken Ross to warn of any attempt to inculturate the gospel in a bygone age⁷ can be widened. If the discourse of inculturation reflects the dilemma of blackness, theologians can fall into the trap of trying to deal with a specific problem on a theological level, whereas the burning issues have to be addressed at another.

Any talk about inculturation from a theological point of view *stricte dictu* has to include the question of universality. If the Jesus of my belief has no meaning for people in other cultures, this Jesus is even too 'little' to redeem me. The redeemer of my soul has to be the redeemer of the world. The Christ for us is the Christ for all. 'For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all be made to live' (1 Cor 15: 22). Here the biblical viewpoint provides a strong argument against any particularistic approach to the Christian faith. But how then can the Christian faith contribute to or even construct a local identity, a local theology, a local church?

With regard to the complicated mixture of different levels of discussion (theological, anthropological, sociological, historical, political, etc.), theology should realise that sometimes it may be in the position to contribute to a solution to these problems, but not always. Before constructing local theologies, we need to be clear about what theology can and can not achieve, and to distinguish it from the social, the psychological and the social level of discussion.

Tradition and modernity — the case of Malawi

With regard to the demographic data such as the high level of illiteracy in Malawi (61% overall, rising to 71% for women)⁸ and the high percentage of subsistence farming (84%)⁹ the question of modernity seems to be without significance; or at least it may be too early to ask it. Moreover, how many Malawians have access to knowledge and

means of communication? But such data does not paint the whole picture. An indicator of the progress of cultural dynamics in former 'primitive cultures' is the rate of urbanisation. It is worth looking at some basic data. Between 1966 and 1987 the percentage of urban dwellers in Malawi rose from 4.5% to 8.2%. Although there are no recent figures available, one can assume that this continues to increase, especially after the end of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) government. In its transformation to a 'normal' African country, Malawi, like the rest of the continent, will probably experience urbanisation rates of 30-40%. This is what is in store. 'The population growth rates in Africa are among the world's highest, but its urban growth rates are generally twice as high. In 1970 Africa had only seven cities of more than 1 million people. If present trends continue, by the end of the century it will have 95 such cities (over 1 million), five of them with more than 5 million inhabitants. In 1970, in addition to the big cities just mentioned, there were 137 towns of 100,000 or more. If present trends continue, by the end of the century there will be 692.'¹⁰

The consequences of this for cultural and religious life have been researched and described in many books.¹¹ But Malawi has been left out.¹²

Towns are the melting pots of a society. People from different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds live together. Urban cultures destroy local ethnic identities and create 'hybrids'. They challenge the individual to survive as the significance of the individual is stressed generally. New forms of community life have to be established, a *bonum commune* has to be developed and achieved that is not based on kinship and blood relation. Automatically the old traditions are challenged, especially by the young. And the youngsters are right. They feel that the old traditions are meaningless to them and their protest against the old is a cry for psychological, social and spiritual orientation. The uprooting of cultural and religious patterns of behaviour is due to the influx of new and alien components. Here the doors are opened for modernisation and globalisation. In order to explain how modernity and globalisation have started to be essential factors for Malawi and Malawians, I give three examples:—

First example

Recently a study was commissioned by an international development agency in order to find out how important socio-cultural factors are in the process of implementing certain activities for food security. More explicitly, the role of the chief in fishing villages had to be examined. According to the 'classical' information of social anthropology, any attempts at implementing innovations would fail if the headman was not a key fig-

ure in the process of decision making and village participation. Two villages were chosen, both on the shores of a Malawian lake: one village had access to a tarred road connecting it to the district-town and the commercial centres of the country; the other village was on the other side of the lake, without a road and with little communication to the other side. As the focus of the project was on catching, processing and marketing of fish, the results were interesting. Whereas on the remote side of the lake, the chief controlled all the activities, making a good income for himself as well; on the other side, people just ignored the presence of the chief. He was 'out'. People organised themselves according to the logic of the market and the pressure of having maximum turnover and cash flow. Although a local chief was *de jure* in power, he had effectively no control over the activities in his realm.

Second example

Joseph Chakanza, a theologian, is about to publish a collection of 1,500 Chewa proverbs. This is an important contribution to safeguarding Malawian cultural heritage. Some of these proverbs had to be collected from written sources from the 1940s and 1950s; others are more recent. These proverbs are an impressive example of the richness of the Chewa oral tradition. If they would not be published it would be a loss. Hence, the collection is an important achievement in the discipline of anthropology, history and religious studies. But, how many of these proverbs are used today? And if so, by how many people? Do these proverbs reflect the life experience of the contemporary Malawians, especially of the young? And if so, to what extent?

Third example

From my very first week as a lecturer at Chancellor College, I asked students about their home and their culture. Which narratives do you remember from home? Which rituals of African traditional religion do you know? Which one did you participate in? Are you initiated? Which names for God were used in your home and when? What do you know about the different rites of passage? My experience was quite interesting. The more I asked the more a certain trend established. Very often the answers were very vague, if there was one. Students who grew up in town had no idea of even the main features of Malawian traditional religion. Very often their ancestral background reflected the whole range of Malawian ethnic groups: the first grandfather Ngoni, the grandmother Yao, the second grandfather Lomwe, the other grandmother Chewa, and so on. Sometimes students from the rural areas remember bits and pieces of the religious Malawian heritage. The culture in which the students, i.e. representatives of the

young Malawi, the Malawi of the future, live, is quite different from the Malawian culture that has been recorded by the anthropologists in their precious monographs. There is every reason to suppose that this process of cultural change will accelerate.

These three examples are visible signs of the cultural dynamics in Malawi today. As far as the main features of Malawian traditional religion are concerned, empirical data and researches confirm the trend of disintegration. The *Gule Wamkulu*, the social, political and religious fundament of the Chewa society has undergone tremendous changes in the recent years with a major loosening of its religious substructure.¹³ The Mbona Cult, the main territorial rain shrine complex in southern Malawi is in decline;¹⁴ for instance, the officials, *de facto* still in power, failed to act during the drought in the early 1990s, as did the rain shrine officials in Mankhamba, the major rain shrine of the Chisumphi cult in the central part of the country. Further research of these developments would certainly confirm the general impression that urbanisation and the African town function as door openers to modernity and globalisation. In the first example, people could run away — literally — from the influence of the village headman and from the influence of tradition. This has a symbolic meaning. What are the consequences for a new understanding of context in this process of cultural dynamics? Schreiter summarises three ways:¹⁵ contexts become ‘deterritorialized’ (boundaries of cultural distinction are boundaries of difference rather than boundaries of territory); they are ‘hyperdifferentiated’ (people refer to different worlds of meanings, there is multiple belonging); they are ‘hybridized’ (more than ever the ‘purity’ of cultures is an untenable concept). There is no doubt Malawi has already seen the dawn of modernity.

Modernity and globalisation

In the crucial phase when countries of the former Third World started to search for their own identity, the powerful and all-embracing stream of international influences distorted the young plant of self-assertion. This is what sociological discussion has called ‘globalisation’. Although globalisation means a flow of information, knowledge, trade, culture and commerce in and from all directions, the dominance of the west is obvious. But this new influence of ‘western culture’ is not comparable with the cultural imperialism of the colonial period. The great difference is that the actors and the victims are on all sides and on all continents: it is not so easy to separate the winners and the losers, the sheep from the goat. This is important to emphasise. Sometimes the former third world countries think they are alone with their laments. But globalisation ‘from below’, i.e. from the perspective of the marginalised, affects people in the west and in the north,

and in the east as well. This is one more indicator that the counting in First, Second and Third World is obsolete.

In sociology there is a serious debate on the definition of globalisation without satisfactory results.¹⁶ Without going into details, it should be noted that globalisation is not limited to economics, but encompasses all domains of human culture. Interestingly enough, the narrow economic concept of globalisation is especially popular among theologians.¹⁷ We agree with Schreiter calling 'globalisation the extension of modernity'.¹⁸ Hence, the key to understanding globalisation has to be found in modernity. I understand modernity in the sense of Kant to be the liberation of man from his self caused minority. Reason, and not tradition, is the legitimisation for the construction and acceptance of the diverse aspects of human culture. On the personal level, modernity is reflected in a high degree of self-assertion for the individual, on the political level as democracy, access to political rights for everybody and self determination by the people, on the economic level as the free flow of commerce and money.

Globalisation means the visible and worldwide extension of these 'philosophical' principles in different fields of human experience. The most outstanding examples are the use of fundamental political ideas like the division of power and democracy, and the acknowledgement of universal human rights and responsibilities.¹⁹ Globalisation means that people in different cultures increasingly share similar ideas and problems. They depend on the same decisions of international politics and on the ups and downs of international trade and commerce. And patterns of behaviour, fashions and lifestyles increasingly assimilate. Maybe the culture of the young generation with their lifestyle and values, are the best examples for the globalisation of the 'personal world'. Studies from all over the world confirm that their lifestyles assimilate more and more, and if not yet accessible, at least their dreams about their future.²⁰ From a philosophical viewpoint, globalisation is facilitated by a 'separation of time and space'²¹ or the 'compression of time and space'.²² We have to remind ourselves that space and time are according to Kant pure concepts of human reasoning and as such the deeper reasons for globalisation have to be traced in the human reasoning itself.

Theology participates in the interaction of international knowledge and communication as a 'global player'. Various authors define different instruments that theology takes up. Schreiter has defined four major global theological 'flows': theologies of liberation, feminist theologies, theologies of ecology, and theologies of human rights.²³ Chung Hyun Kyung, who calls herself an 'Asian woman, liberation theologian, eco-feminist theologian and a person, who considers post-modernity very seriously' is the prototype

global theological player. She argues in a similar way. Her criteria for applying the gospel to modern cultures are 'the promotion of survival, life-giving and nurturing, and community building'.²⁴ The most popular representative of a theological global player is Hans Küng who extends the Christian global flows toward a 'new world' ethics from the roots of all world religions. Their contribution to justice and peace should influence world politics as directly as possible.²⁵ Here the activities of the World Council of Churches and of the Vatican with their sub-organisations should not be underestimated. Both use their roles as international players in the ecclesiastical and in the political arena. Never before in church history have the network and exchange between local churches been so alive on a global level. In the case of the Vatican, some critics lament that by his travels and continuous interference with local theologies and politics, the Pope has taken up the role of a world bishop (instead of acting as the bishop of Rome, and thus undermining the position of the local bishops).

The process of internalisation

The examples of theological flows in the 'global village' reflect only the outward responses toward the challenges of modernity and globalisation. Alas, theology deals with the intellectual and spiritual meaning of reality. We have to address the problem of modernity from its 'internal' aspect. What does it mean from an intellectual and spiritual viewpoint that modernisation has changed the life experience of man, and therefore the way God is addressed and encountered? The Christian faith is due to its incarnate and historical structure essentially linked to the life experience of the people. God does not reveal himself outside history. The experience of God is 'affected' by the changes in human life and culture. The focus here is a *theological* assessment of tradition, modernity, and globalisation. Moreover, the christian gift of discernment of spirit is needed to distinguish the different levels of culture in order to discover the 'will' and the 'presence' of God.

In this philosophical and theological approach it is crucial to consider that the visible features of cultures are an expression of an interior experience of the human person. Reality does not exist, it is perceived. This change of perception is primarily an interior reality. Hence, I suggest approaching modernity and globalisation in an ongoing process of internalisation. As the German philosopher Rombach states: 'The whole does not occur as the whole but in every person; this is the very hermetics of being'.²⁶ The whole of human and cultural development has to be mediated and integrated in the human personality. Unless I am not able to admit that culture is a part of my personality, it seems impossible to proceed. It is this radical integration of the outside world into

human interior world that finally leads and enables a theological understanding. As our discussion will demonstrate, this provoking statement applies to African life experience as well. It is based on the presumption of God's hidden presence in history, or more precisely, in the belief that the risen Christ is present and active. But whereas this approach seems acceptable in the fields of certain African traditions, African Christians doubt that modernity is an integral part of contemporary African culture. But even African history is not fully integrated in the process of internalisation yet. Generally, the African church has not analysed and reflected on the history of slavery and colonialism in the light of the gospel and its significance for the African church's development.²⁷ It is this *memoria passionis* which provides the 'material' for actual meaning and the necessary transformation of an internalised history into the future of African Christianity.

The process of internalisation finds its biblical starting point in the sermon of the mountain where Jesus calls for a radical self-assessment and self-analysis of consciousness before criticising the 'outer' world. 'Why do you observe the chip in your brother's eye, but do not consider the beam in your eye?' (Mt 7: 3). His challenge to remove first the beam in 'your own eye' applies certainly to all levels of encounter including the encounter of faith and culture. Alas, our inner world is more than complex and any internalisation has to take that into consideration. Here we do not have the time to develop a genuine theology of internalisation. For the purposes of this discussion we draw attention to the role of symbols. Their use in public life and their rooting in the human psyche connect the outward and the inward shape of reality. As much as symbols are condensed signs of reality, they are the way the human psyche can perceive and express reality. In symbols, the window toward the transcendent world is open; in symbols, the world becomes transparent for the invisible. In such a way, discovering Christ in the world we discover him in our soul, or by discovering him in ourselves we are linked to the world. Sometimes I have the impression that a general critique of modern times, of modernity and globalisation by theologians is an expression of unbelief, as if Christ has disappeared from this world. And again, if this criticism is connected with a retreat to the olden golden times or in an individualistic understanding of 'my soul', theologians will have created a double world. The future of Christianity in a globalised world is a mystic experience. Internalisation, meditation and prayer are the means to heal the world and to avoid the ugly cleavage of the sacred and profane that so many Christians lament if they look only at the visible side of reality. At the deepest level, the process of internalisation of reality can be considered as the realisation of an christomorphic lifestyle. In him 'the image of the invisible God, the first-born of creation, all things in heaven and on earth were created, the visible and

the invisible. '[...] He is before all things and all things stand in him.' (Cor. 1: 15). It is exactly in the way of 'understanding' how all things stand in him that Christians realise their imitation of Christ.

The significance of universality

It is an expression of that mystical and cosmological experience that Paul expresses in 1 Cor. 15. His own experience of the risen Christ was widened and finally brought into the context of a meaning that burst all particularisms of religious meaning. This kind of universal truth is neither identical with the scholastic term of the *transcendentalia* nor with the global theological flows of contemporary 'international' theology. Here the Christian faith has discovered a dimension of reality that transcends the given boundaries of local and contextual significances. Universality in that christocentric sense serves as a notion to describe all those phenomena in the field of truth, values and religious meaning that are accessible and acceptable to all cultures. Of course I do not agree with Lyotard that this is a master discourse (*meta-récit*) that has become obsolete in times of post-modernism.²⁸ If we adhere to the importance of universal truths then this is because it reflects an experience of faith. Admittedly this is a very weak argument in academia, but we can link it up with the basic concepts of an intercultural philosophy.²⁹ Even here, where the mono-culturality of (western) philosophy has been replaced by a 'philosophy of interculturality' the necessity of a common *logos* in all cultures is emphasised. Here the use of the term 'logos' includes the classical understanding in greek philosophy as well as the 'logos of heart' by Blaise Pascal, the *logos* of mystic experience and the *logos* of a transcultural affinity to similar experiences. Otherwise any commensurability of cultures wouldn't be possible. This common capacity grounds lastly in the common *humanum*.³⁰

Even if agreement can be achieved about this fundamental position, the process of globalisation brings forward more practical questions: Are there insights, values and statements that are universally true and thus apply to people in different cultures? I want to take a clear position here: even if certain statements like universality of human rights or the unconditioned dignity of the individual, are formulated in a certain cultural context, their 'truths' are not limited to the context of their origin. The fact that democracy was 'invented' in Greece does not make democracy a greek, western or european value. Democracy is a 'universal value' that does not belong to anybody but to the whole mankind. The question where it was formulated first is an issue of minor importance. Here the discussion mixes up the levels very often. For instance, the way colonial powers behaved has to be distinguished from the values the western civilisa-

tion officially stuck to (and failed to do so). This insight becomes crucially important in theology. Western theology is Western theology in a geographical sense, only when it reflects contextual aspects which are only relevant for Christians in the western hemisphere. But certainly in western theology aspects of the Christian faith have been discussed which are relevant to other cultures; these themes are 'universal' as they do not belong to a certain (western) culture even if they might have been brought to attention there for the first time.

Here the integration of theology in an international network of reflection and of self-assertion of faith becomes crucial. Knowledge by nature is universal because it tends to be shared, to be discussed, to be challenged and to be brought into a wider framework. This is why the highest institutions of knowledge-sharing are called 'universities'. There is by definition a necessity of human reasoning to widen the horizons, to burst provincialisms and to search for new insights. Globalisation is a chance for Christians, for theology and the churches to profit from experiences of Christians from other parts of the world.

Globalisation has to be distinguished from universality. The latter is an expression of the fact that the Christian message with its central idea of the one God in three persons indeed claims to have significance for all cultures beyond philosophical trends like inculturation and contextualisation, modernity and globalisation. Christian theology has an ever valid objective to proclaim the universal relevance of God and the revelation in his son Jesus Christ. Emanuel Lévinas, the French Jewish philosopher made an interesting statement: 'Monotheism is not a divine arithmetic. It is a gift, may be "super-natural" one, that enables to consider human beings as equal beyond the diversity of historical traditions which are continued by each individual. Monotheism is a school of love towards the foreigner and a school of anti-racism. [...] Because the monotheistic religions proclaim the word of the one God, the Greek universalism could effectively spread within mankind and slowly will lead it towards unity. It's not the economic powers that bring people together, but the "monotheistic force".' And interestingly enough, the Jewish Lévinas continues: 'Islam has understood better than any other religion that a universal truth is far more valid than any particularism.'³¹ It is a great challenge to respond to Lévinas' statement from a Christian point of view. According to my assessment the doctrine of the triune God provides a depth of meaning that has not yet been exhausted by the Christians. In God himself the solution of the problem of unity and diversity is rooted, or in a more practical sense, that the one and universal truth is linked up with historical experiences 'in the local'.

Some ideas for a theological meditation on modernity

It remains an ever-present challenge to construct a contextual theology under changing conditions. But how can inculturation 'as the ongoing dialogue between culture and faith' be constructed? How can faithfulness to the past be combined with honesty to the present?

A first response needs to be based on the new results of social anthropology. Here a differentiated understanding of cultural dynamics has been developed, as 'closed' ethnic groups were no longer available. In recent years, social anthropology has provided many fresh and surprising insights. Many of them are useful in a theological discussion. Here the contributions of authors like Lutzbetak³² or Shorter³³ are important. But the rapid changes require a deeper analysis. Statements like 'Malawians are by nature religious' have to be used cautiously.³⁴ They tend to neglect or camouflage real events. Sunday service attendance in towns, moral behaviour, substitute 'religions' like sports and leisure activities give evidence for first signs of secularism in Malawi.³⁵ Even in Malawi, religion as a cultural phenomenon has become 'hyperdifferentiated' and 'hybridised'. Looking at this empirical data the discussion whether Malawi should be called a 'christian' country is, apart from other objections, inappropriate.

With the occurrence of urbanisation, theology has to struggle with an old problem. In its history Christianity very often considered itself as a religion from and for the peasants, or at least people exposed to the peasant life. The fact that the provincial Jesus was killed in the capital Jerusalem left deep roots in the Christian experience of symbols with regard to town and countryside. Even the fact that the biblical story starts in a garden and ends in a town, celestial Jerusalem, could not do away with resentments of the Christians against wicked town life where there is temptation. But urban life has started to change African societies and African churches fundamentally.

By their sociological shape rural societies tend to be conservative and reluctant to face cultural dynamics. The Malawian church is mainly a peasant church, and thus shares the problems of a rural society. Here a simple but crucial question has to be answered by all those who are in theology: Do we serve the future of christians or do we preserve the past of Christianity? Of course this requires self-criticism for all those who produce and offer theology in Malawi. The Christian faith is a faith of innovation and of continuous creativity. There are the main characteristics of the Holy Spirit who makes everything anew. I say this as somebody who supports the recent attempts of incultur-

ation in Africa: we have to examine whether we christians are once again in the position of being conservative and traditional, in the bad sense of the word, under the guise of Africanisation.

Urbanisation and alienation from the countryside do not on their own change the way people work. The shift from field to office, from manual labour to intellectual enterprise marks an important change in religious experience as well. The future fights of mankind will not be struggles without, but within. I stick to this statement even in a context where the struggle for the physical survival seems so dominant and obvious. Questions of identity and of spiritual orientation are as important as a full stomach. Theologically this leads us into the field of how the perception of reality is internalised. I want to demonstrate this with a few examples.

The fathers of the African Synod (and Pope John Paul II who published the results as his post-synodal exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*) speak about 'positive values of the African culture' which are 'truly a providential preparation for the transmission of the Gospel' (No. 42). In detail the text mentions a profound religious sense, the role of the family, love and respect for life, veneration of ancestors, sense of solidarity and community life (No. 43). The way these values can be integrated into the Christian faith are an outstanding example of how modernity and Christianity transform African societies. These values are doubtless rooted in the African worldview, i.e. in a certain social set up where they are significant. But what happens if this social set-up changes? Can values just be applied in another social context? The respect of elders certainly is one of these values. Here young people rightly question: Why should we respect elders who do not deserve to be respected at all? Why should we pay respect to irresponsible elders, to drunkards and idiots? What about hospitality? Is it alright to welcome visitors, relatives, friends and foreigners? But if we are exploited, if hospitality is abused, we are no longer ready to grant it. What about our obligations to the extended family? Do we really have to stick to this African prime value, if the economic success of an individual is punished by the egalitarianism of the group? What about the use of old African myths, narratives and proverbs in the sunday service? Where is our language? Where are our symbols picked up by the pastor?

What happens here is that criticism of African values becomes an open issue. Certainly mechanisms of criticism were effective within African traditions themselves. But young people use new arguments, questioning the meaning and the use of traditional values from outside and against their own tradition. Before accepting the 'positive values of the African cultures', there needs to be analysis, examination and a personal

decision made. This is exactly what modernity and Christianity is all about. This is how rejection and integration can be understood in terms of a rite of passage. The main objective is to confront the traditional values with the challenges of modern life and to internalise their valuable essence in the Christian belief. This rite should enable man to use values that correspond with reality and put him into the position to act according to the situation and in freedom. Only this process of internalisation will give the African worldview and African values a chance to remain significant. Internalisation liberates the individual and the communities from a mere legalistic and exterior application of cultural patterns. This transformation is an expression of the liberating effect of the Christian faith; it provides a chance that cultural dynamics become rooted in the deepest levels of human perception.

The most exciting role in this process of challenging the African tradition from a Christian point of view is certainly kept by the women theologians. Phiri in her meditation on the role of (African) women in the Gospel of Luke chooses not a single example where the gospel confirms African values (as the Fathers of the African Synod did). Her conclusion is: 'In four of the passages [in Luke] referred to [...], the women concerned stood up against tradition to claim that which they knew was theirs [...] African women need to make a decision for themselves if they have heard the voice of God calling them to liberation from oppression from their cultural and church traditions.'³⁶

Apparently young people and women have a stronger sense of the liberating or oppressing aspects of cultures. How theology and Christianity as a whole react is of crucial importance. The question is: will the Christian churches either by their natural conservatism, or by their rural shape or by the application of a false concept of Africanisation be once again the vanguards of traditionalism, defenders of the past? Or are they ready to pave the way for the future, where the Christian faith will have an effect on culture. It is exactly this kind of ongoing critical dialogue between faith and culture that is needed.

Our discussion has led us to a crucial point in the field of tradition, modernity and globalisation. The catchword of 'internalisation' indeed indicates an important direction of African theology. Internalisation is a spiritual response to tradition and modernity where the manifold features of the outside world are integrated with human experience and thus are brought before God. Prayer is the 'modern' way to surrender a scattered world to God. The future of the Christian experience will be a mystic one. Here the *memoria passionis* and the *memoria liberationis* of the world is focused on God. This gives way to a Christianity that renounces the shape of a moralistic or political institu-

tion; it is moreover a community of believers that opens the windows to the mysterious reality behind all realities — the invisible presence of God. It is only with this mystic christian introspection that African Christianity can drink from its own wells and has the spiritual justification and the credibility to speak up against injustice, lack of freedom and human rights violations in society.

How this critical factor of internalisation affects the communal expression of faith like religious language, liturgy, models of parishes and of Christian communities and the public appearance of the Christian churches can be demonstrated by an example. It was one of the moving moments of the African Synod, when the Nigerian bishop Albert Obiefuna linked the discussion on inculturation to the genocide just happening in the 'Christian' country of Rwanda (over 70% are 'nominally' Christians). He lamented that in Africa 'the blood of family, clan and tribe was thicker than the water of baptism'.³⁷ This is a shattering warning of attempting to identify the Christian faith with national and cultural features. At the same time it indicates the direction inculturation needs to go in. The significance of traditional values should be understood where they link up the human heart, psyche and soul. This is the place where any talk about conversion makes sense. As far as the classical domains of inculturation are concerned, a strengthened approach has to be envisaged now under a spiritual and symbolic relecture.

Challenges for the development of theology in Africa

We want to summarise our reflections with some suggestions for the development of African theology:

1. In the context of a continent-wide search for an African identity, theology first has to reflect on its limitations and what is possible. Misplaced or high expectations can spoil good theological achievements. African theology is not a panacea for diseases on and of the continent.
2. As far as the impact of modernity is concerned it seems to be a priority to acknowledge reality. Modernity and globalisation are already influencing Malawi, whether one likes it or not. Africa and Malawi are on their way to becoming part of the world society.
3. A genuine theological assessment of God's activity in history first questions spiritual significance. Only this *memoria passionis* and *memoria liberationis* will enable the necessary criticism of tradition, modernity and globalisation from the perspec-

- tive of the marginalised ('globalisation from below'). Lamenting and fleeing into the seclusion of a theological ebony tower does not result in anything.
4. As far as the strengthening of local identities is concerned, there is no way to bypass the individual: the dialogue of culture and faith, the internalisation of tradition and of the Christian faith, is realised in the individual, or it is not. Only the individual can convert, only here can the blood of tribe be transformed into the water of baptism.
 5. The encounter of God and world, of faith and culture in the human experience of faith leads us in the very mystic dimension of theology. Liturgy and Bible reading, silence and dance, the hidden Christ in our soul and in the history invite us to celebrate the presence of the Holy in our midst.
 6. The 'old' man, the 'African soul', tradition survive only in introspection. This leads us into the field of symbolic experience of reality. African values, customs, behaviours and so on are appreciated because they are reconciled with reality and with the religious expressions of the human soul (and not because they are African). This is when tradition become a source of self esteem and self orientation ('to drink from own wells').
 7. African theology has to find its way between two points of orientation: the local and the global. At the same time it is a journey between Skylla and Charybdis: but in contrast to Odysseus, African theology is not allowed to close its ears with wax. It has to listen to the luring sounds that might attract it to the rock on one side and the whirlpool on the other.
 8. The African Church has to come up with a meaningful theology that is relevant to the local in the global; beside the 'old' companion social anthropology new partners are invited for co-operation, especially sociology and psychology.
 9. After the end of theological conformity a new era of post-metaphysical metaphysics will dawn. Here the issues of the supracontextual identity of the Christian faith have to be discussed. The old conviction of *nexus mysterium* invites and challenges contributions from the African theology to the 'universal' theology. Their contributions enrich the human endeavours for a deeper understanding of the Christian faith (see Jn 16: 13).
 10. The identity of the people of God has been and remains an identity in awakening, in exodus. The development of a global, contextual and internalised theology will help us to rediscover our responsibility for one another in one world.

Notes

1. B. Goba, 1988. *An Agenda for Black Theology: Hermeneutics for Social Change*. Johannesburg: Skotaville Publ. p.14.
2. R. J. Schreiter, 1997. *The New Catholicity. Theology between the Global and the Local*. New York: Orbis. p.ix.
3. Schreiter, 1997. p.46.
4. C. Nyamiti, 'African christologies today', in R. J. Schreiter (ed.), 1991. *Faces of Jesus in Africa*. London: SCM, p.18; see also K. K. Ross, 'Current christological trends in Northern Malawi', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 27 (1997), No. 2, 164.
5. For example the final communique of the historic Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians (17-23 December 1977) in Accra, in Appiah-Kuni, K. and Torres, S. (eds.), 1979. *African Theology En Route*. New York: Orbis, p.193.
6. R. Barthes, 1972. *Mythologies*. Norwich: Granada Publications Ltd, p.129. Quot. acc. to F. Abodunrin, 'Blackness: faith, culture, ideology and discourse', Faith and Knowledge Seminar No. 60, (unpubl. typescript, 6/1998), 4. University of Malawi.
7. See K. K. Ross, 1997.
8. N. Tembo, 'Adult education in Malawi', *Saturday Nation*, 2/13, 29 March 1997. p.9.
9. See the data in A. Erhard, 1994. *Malawi. Agrarstruktur und Unterentwicklung*. Innsbruck: Verlag des Instituts für Geographie der Universität Innsbruck. p.157.
10. A. Shorter, 1991. p.8.
11. See the bibliography in Shorter, 1991. p.149.
12. For the impact of urbanisation on Muslim women, see Mirriam M. C. Banda, 'The role of Muslim women at Ndirande and Kachere mosques, Blantyre City,' B.A.(Theology) Dissertation, University of Malawi, 1996; for the Christian faith, see Lucy K. Kapito, 'Women in African instituted churches in Ndirande and Mbayani townships, Blantyre City', University of Malawi, B.A. (Theology) Dissertation, 1995.
13. See D. Kaspin, 1993. pp 34-57.
14. See A. Kalembe. 'Mbona Cult and Mang'anja chiefs of the Lower Shire: their relationship, then and now'. Dissertation for partial fulfillment of BA (Theology), 21/10/1997. Chancellor College, University of Malawi, unpubl. typescript, 9.
15. Schreiter, 1997. p.26.
16. See M. Waters, 1995; M. Featherstone (ed) 1990; J. Friedman, 1994.
17. See K. C. Abraham, 1996.
18. Schreiter, 1997. p.4.

19. At the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the declaration of the UN human rights charter the InterAction Council presented the 'Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities' to the public. Among the authors there are prominent names like Helmut Schmidt, Michael Gorbatschow, Malcolm Fraser, Jimmy Carter, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, Kenneth Kaunda and Lee Kuan Yew.
20. I just came to know about a current research proposal of J. Seebode at the University of Berlin on the interface of anthropology of youth, modernity in Africa and the impact of globalisation. A similar study is under way at the University of Edinburgh: 'Post-colonial Innovations: The Making of Moralities in South-Central Africa' by Prof. Werbner.
21. A. Giddens, 1990. *The Consequences of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press. p.16.
22. See Schreiter, 1997. p.11.
23. *ibid.*, p.15.
24. C. H. Kyung, 1996.
25. H. Küng, 1991. *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethics*. New York: Crossroads; H. Küng and K. J. Kuschel, 1994. *A Global Ethics: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions*. New York: Continuum.
26. H. Rombach, 1983. *Welt und Gegenwelt. Umdenken über die Wirklichkeit: Die philosophische Hermetik*. Basel: Herder. p. 162.
27. See P. Hönermann, 'Afrikanische Themen in Rom. Theologische Reflexionen aus europäischer Sicht', *Theologische Quartalschrift*, 174 (1994), 177-84.
28. J. F. Lyotard, 1992. *Das postmoderne Wissen*. Ein Bericht, Bremen/Wien, 14. But even from a logical point Lyotard's statement is weak. The contention that there are no 'universal' meta-discourses claims 'universal' significance; unfortunately this is symptomatic of a Masters thesis.
29. See the outlines of an intercultural philosophy in R. Fornet-Betancourt, *Filosofia Intercultural*, Mexico 1994.
30. See J. Estermann 'Interkulturelle Philosophie und Mission. Wege zwischen Fundamentalismus und Globalisierung', *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft*, 53 (1997), No. 4, 294.
31. E. Lévinas, 'Monotheismus und Sprache', in E. Lévinas, 1992. *Schwierige Freiheit*. Frankfurt:M., Surkamp. p.126.
32. See L. J. Lutzbetak, 1996. pp. 292-373.
33. Among Shorter's many publications, the following are worth looking at: 1991. *The Church in the African City*. New York; Orbis; 1996. *Christianity and the African Imagination. After the African Synod. Resources for Inculturation*, Nairobi: Paulines Publ.; and Onyancha, E., 1997. *Secularism in Africa. A case study: Nairobi City*. Nairobi: St. Pauls Publ.

34. See the opening statement of J. Amanze in his monograph on the Bimbi cult (manuscript in preparation for publication in Kachere series). This slight variant of the famous statement of J. S. Mbiti 'Africans are notoriously religious' (in *African Religion and Philosophy*. Nairobi: East African Educ. Publ, 1969, p.1.) has been challenged from the anthropological viewpoint (see Mary Douglas 'The idea that primitive man is by nature deeply religious is nonsense', in *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*. London: Barrie and Rockcliff, 1970, p. ix); cultural dynamics will hopefully lead to further differentiated insights.
35. See the most recent study on secularism in Africa by A. Shorter and E. Onyancha, 1997. *Secularism in Africa. A Case Study: Nairobi*. Nairobi: St. Pauls Publ.
36. See I. A. Phiri, 1997.
37. See A. Shorter, 1996.

References

- Abraham, K. C. 1996. Globalization: a gospel and and culture perspective. *International Review of Missions*, 85, 338, 85-92.
- Balcomb, A. O. 1996. Modernity and the African Experience. *Bulletin for Contextual Theology in Southern Africa and Africa*, 3, 2, 12-20.
- Estermann, J. 1997. Interkulturelle Philosophie und Mission. Wege zwischen Fundamentalismus und Globalisierung. *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft*, 53, No. 4, 285-298
- Featherstone, M. (ed) 1990. *Global Culture. Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*. London: Sage.
- Friedman, J. 1994. *Cultural Identity and Global Process*. London: Sage.
- Goba, B. 1988. *An Agenda for Black Theology: Hermeneutics for Social Change*. Johannesburg: Skotaville Publ.
- Kaspin, D. 1993. Chewa vision and revisions of power: transformation of the Nyau dance in Central Malawi. In J. and J. Camaroff (eds) *Modernity and its Malcontents. Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 34-57
- Kyung, C. H. Women as agents in the transformation of religion and culture. *Journal of Constructive Theology*, 2 (1996), No. 1, 51-64
- Lutzbetack, L. J. 1996. *The Church and the Cultures, New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology*. New York: Orbis. 7th edit.
- Maluleke, T. S. 1997. Half a century of African christian theologies. Elements of the emerging agenda for the twenty-first century. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 99, 4-23

- Mensen, B. (ed.) 1996. *Afrika zwischen Tradition und Moderne. Akademie Völker und Kulturen*. St. Augustin, Nettetal: Steyler.
- Münch, R. 1998. *Globale Dynamik, lokale Lebenswelten. Der schwierige Weg in die Weltgesellschaft*. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp.
- Mtetwa, S. 1996. African spirituality in the context of modernity. *Bulletin for Contextual Theology in Southern Africa and Africa*, 3, No. 2, 21-25.
- Phiri, I. A. 1997. Women in the Gospel of Luke: an African women's perspective. *Journal for Constructive Theology*, 3, No. 1, 43-52.
- Pobee, J. Theology in the context of globalization. *Ministerial Formation*, 79 (Oct. 1997), ed. by World Council of Churches, Unit I: Unity and Renewal, Ecumenical Theological Education, Geneva, 18-26.
- Ross, K. K. 1997. Doing theology with a new historiography. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 99, 94-8.
- Schreiter, R. J. 1985. *Constructing Local Theologies*. New York: Orbis.
- Schreiter, R. J. 1997. *The New Catholicity. Theology between the Global and the Local*. New York: Orbis.
- Shorter, A. 1991. *The Church in the African City*. New York; Orbis.
- Shorter, A. 1996. *Christianity and the African Imagination. After the African Synod. Resources for Inculturation*. Nairobi: Paulines Publ.
- Shorter, A. and Onyancha, E. 1997. *Secularism in Africa. A Case Study: Nairobi City*. Nairobi: St. Pauls Publ.
- Suess, P., 1997. Kontextualität, Identität, Universalität. Der Streit um das Inkulturationsparadigma. In Lienkamp, A. and Lienkamp, C. (eds) *Die 'Identität' des Glaubens in den Kulturen. Das Inkulturationsparadigma auf dem Prüfstand*. Würzburg. 309-28.
- Waters, M. 1995. *Globalization*. New York: Routledge.

DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS AND THEOLOGY STUDIES
CHANCELLOR COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF MALAWI
P. O. BOX 280
ZOMBA
MALAWI