

From Underground Praxis to Recognized Religion: Challenges facing African Religions

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South Africa has undergone many changes, from a country afflicted by the worst evils of racism, one in which religion was one of the tools used to dehumanise the indigenous black people of the country. Not only were black people forced to make a total shift from their true humanity and to ape a “white man’s” style, they were also forced to adjust like chameleons. Blacks had to call themselves Christians in certain areas which were perceived as white man’s “sacred spaces” like the school, work place, parliament, courts, hospitals, etc. This type of behaviour was adopted to convince the white bosses that blacks were brought to a higher level of civilisation. Blacks converted and came under the control of the West. To live like “them” meant that one used a ‘Christian’ name, which was of course either English, Afrikaans, Jewish, or Italian. These were the names that our black people were misled to think were holier. Entrance to colonial institutions was only possible when a baptismal certificate was produced to show to the white government that a black person had moved from the assumed barbarism to civilisation.

At home, blacks behaved their natural ways. They had to change and practice their belief systems, but were not allowed to do so under the name of “religion” but culture. Religion, Christianity and western schooling that came with missionaries and civilisation were synonyms. The African traditional religious (ATR) practices were

condemned and forced to go underground and into internal exile. For example, traditional naming which was done in a religious way in ATR was associated with heathenism, and African names were consequently heathen.

There is no doubt that African Traditional Religion had to go underground. The religion had to suffer because it was condemned in all respects. Manona shows the way amaXhosa were cruelly treated by missionaries by citing the following examples:

In Burnshill, Rev. Laing, who served the community from 1831 to 1872, burnt boy's initiation lodges at one time and spilt beer he found being consumed by his followers. In Grahamstown as late as 1939, a white clergy threatened boys who wanted to go to the veld for initiation with excommunication. The boys defied the order and went through the full process of traditional initiation. When they came back, however, they had to make confession before they could participate in normal Church activities again (Manona 1991:36).

This account clearly shows that Blacks had to hide whatever religious practice they felt were important to perform. Girl's initiation, circumcision, polygamy, and *lobola* (so-called bride price or bride wealth) were all condemned without mercy by these European visitors. *Amagqirha* (diviners) were deliberately called witch-doctors as missionaries believed that their main duty was to smell witches. Africans had to change their attire, their make-up (ochre which in fact was later sold to them in white owned shops), their songs, the structure of their homes from round to square houses, etc.

Under such circumstances, African Religion was denied its proper place as a recognised religion, independent of Christianity. Africans had to pretend that they were Christians during the day and go underground as African religionists. Most of us had to feign a "home" church throughout life, that is, where the grand parents or parents baptised the individual even if one no longer attends the church.

of a divided South Africa, it was not surprising that it emerged as soon as negotiations between the white minority regime and the ANC under Nelson Mandela got under way. Taking into consideration the appalling history of nationalism and its excesses, Degenaar rejected the idea of a nation state with a homogenous state-defined culture. He called it the "the myth of nation-building" which ought to be relegated to the dustbin of history because it "absolutizes the sovereignty of the people and submerges the individual citizen in the romanticism of a collective personality" (Degenaar 1991:15). In its place, Degenaar argued for a "democratic culture" for the nation while other personal cultural choices should be left alone to individuals. However, Degenaar realized that democratic culture was not shared by everyone in South Africa, and recognized the need for introducing it to society. He even advocated an "extent of imposition by the state which would be needed to help create this value-infrastructure of a democratic culture. The ideal solution would be to bring about a broad basis of enforcement rather than a monopolistic imposition" (Degenaar 1991:11). Degenaar's suspicion of nationalism, notwithstanding, he too recognized the place and value of a democratic culture for South Africa as whole. Such a search reintroduced the role of democracy, and the constitution, as symbols shared by all. With respect to our general inquiry, a number of crucial questions remain. What is the nature of the community or collective of individuals that will embrace such a democratic culture? What will its symbols? As soon as we ask such questions, we realize the intractability of the national question in the midst of a democratic culture.

Degenaar represents a trend that rejects the myth-making nature of nationalism, in favour of a constitutional and democratic culture of individuals. The frenzy of creating and imposing a national culture from the top has not gripped South Africa yet. To that extent, we seemed to have learned a lesson from cultural critics and modern history. However, unlike Degenaar, I do not think that the question of a national culture can be completely ignored by

focussing on the imposition of a democratic culture, however gently and subtly that would be achieved. Politics is more than a just measure of power and opportunity, and provides an opportunity for symbol-making. Human beings engage in intense symbol-making to make sense of their world and their actions therein. And therefore, we must go beyond Degenaar, and see where the national symbols have emerged in spite of a cautious regard for its imposing potentialities.

While the construction of democratic structures has rightfully been the major preoccupation of South Africans, they have also been experimenting with the symbolic definition of their unique entity. I would like to explore this experimentation by examining the metaphors that have captured the imagination of our young nation. These nation-metaphors do not have the stamp of state approval, and have been the object of critique and even ridicule. Nevertheless, as powerful images, they do express the broad tendencies of social imagination in South Africa. As symbols, they influence and determine the boundaries of an emerging, shifting nation.

1. The nation as history: The Past-Performance Test

This is the most popular metaphor used by South Africans, even though it does not have a very catchy name. The struggle for democracy in South Africa, as we know, has been a struggle waged on numerous fronts. Any contribution, however small, has since been recognized for its worth, and facilitates entry into the new South Africa. Even a pervasive, nation-gripping amnesia of events during the period 1948 to and 1990, is regarded as a sufficient pass into the nation. The past-performance test can be a powerful test of exclusion, but most South Africans have chosen not to use it that way. President Nelson Mandela, particularly, can often be heard employing this metaphor whenever he meets with a distinct group. Thus, when he addressed a conference on coloured communities in the Western Cape, he could easily and justifiably apply this test: "the community has given our nation outstanding leaders whose contri-

butions and sacrifice for the ideals of a non-racial democracy has been immense” (Mandela 1996:7). Generally, the President applies this test even more liberally.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), on the other hand, also reflects this metaphor as it tries to deal boldly with the most horrendous human rights abuses of the past. Equally magnanimous but more contentious, it too facilitates entry into the nation when it allows human rights violators to confess their crime in public. With serious violations emerging from its meetings, the TRC often tested the national symbol of belonging to breaking point. In spite of the many criticisms leveled at its performance, it has contributed to this national metaphor in both a positive as well as unexpected manner. The positive contribution of the TRC has been its ability to forge some form of reconciliation among former enemies. Secondly, in unexpected ways, its impartiality in highlighting the atrocities of the liberation movements as well as the apartheid ideologues, has produced a kind of level playing field. No matter how much is said about the equivalence of offensive and defensive violence, the TRC findings acts as a filter through which the South African nation passes.

2. The nation as symbol: the rainbow nation

Closely associated with the past-performance test is the much better known concept of a rainbow nation, first coined by Bishop Tutu. Preaching in Tromso, north of the Arctic Circle in Norway, Dec 5, 1991. He spelt out one of the powerful and enduring symbols of the South African nation

At home in South Africa I have sometimes said in big meetings where you have black and white together: “Raise your hands!” Then I’ve said: “Move your hands,” and I’ve said: “Look at your hands—different colours representing different people. You are the rainbow people of God.” And God, remember the rainbow people in the Bible is the sign of

peace. The rainbow is the sign of prosperity. We want peace, prosperity and justice and we can have it when all the people of God, the rainbow people of God, work together (Tutu 1994).

It is a metaphor that has caught the imagination of South Africans, and has been repeatedly used and exploited. The rainbow nation may have emerged after the political storm of the eighties or the tough negotiations of the nineties. It may more clearly form after a difficult TRC hearing. Probably, this seems to be in conformity with the archbishop's positive, but fully realistic, vision. On the other hand, the rainbow nation symbol has also been used and exploited in South Africa without its metaphorical power of coming after a storm. With or without a struggle or a truth hearing, we all belong to the rainbow nation of many languages, cultures and religions. This is a magical kingdom, where diversity is celebrated and consecrated. No questions are asked, and none presumably are assumed to be lurking. Immediately after the elections, South African sport achieved significant victories in rugby, soccer and cricket. Everyone rejoiced in these victories which temporarily but imperfectly symbolized the rainbow nation.

3. The Nation as evolving: the Groot Gariep

Neville Alexander has argued against the metaphor of the rainbow nation for precisely glossing "over the contradictions that characterize post-apartheid South Africa" (Alexander 1997). In its place, he suggested that the nation should rather be likened to the Great Gariep, a river that runs from the Lesotho mountains in the east to the Atlantic Ocean in the west. Alexander dreamed of a South Africa which is like the Great Gariep constituted by the confluence of many different tributaries, which have their origin in different catchment areas and which are constantly changing and being changed both by the formation of new tributaries and by the backwash effects from the mainstream, which flows majestically into the great ocean of humanity (Alexander 1996:107).

Alexander's metaphor was generous, but wary of the divisiveness of identities that proliferated in South Africa: "discrete culture is a reactionary notion which cuts people off from others, undermining any sense of national unity and deepens the prejudices and negative stereotypes we have inherited from our colonial and apartheid past." He therefore urged that the "identities we assume should not undermine (the) ... sense of being South African" (Alexander 1997). Unlike Degenaar who suggested that a democratic culture was sufficient for South Africa, Alexander clearly saw the need for a nation. Unlike the past performance test and the rainbow nation, Alexander insisted that differences and contradictions would continue to challenge the new nation. In spite of these features, the Groot Gariep has not captured the imagination of South Africa.

Concluding remarks

The question that needs to be asked is what kind of cultural and religious diversity these metaphors prescribe or proscribe? How helpful are they for inculcating a pluralistic but democratic culture in South Africa? And more specifically in the context of this paper, if the nation is constituted in terms of South Africa's past, how will religions square up to the nation? Certainly, with the constitution and the open-ended construction of metaphors, we have come a long way since apartheid's perverse multi-culturalism. Cultural communities, identities and aspirations, however, continue to pose a deep challenge to the making of a nation even at the level of an imprecise national social *imaginaire*, and the inculcation of a democratic culture. They can represent the rocks on which nation and democracy are either firmly grounded, or flounder and falter.

Religion and culture provide the opportunity of building a better nation than without it. Culture represents, if anything else, some of the deepest fears and aspirations of people. Ignoring this diversity, or hastily ignoring its signs, can be a slippery slide to ignoring people. What needs to be applauded and protected in South Africa is

the fact that the nation-building exercise ought not to be entirely guided by the state, and certainly not be imposed by it. No doubt, the preference for a constitutional culture and the emergence of new national symbols need to be applauded and encouraged.

At the same time, the assumptions underlying the symbols and metaphors call for close scrutiny. Degenaar's belief that the emergence and even imposition of a democratic culture raises cause for concern. The suggestion ignores the impact that the cultures of South Africa would make upon democratic institutions. The two cannot simply be kept apart by force or imposition. The past performance test and the rainbow nation metaphor implied a disjunction between democratic institutions and culture. In these metaphors, nation and culture seem to be living in a world of their own, the one ascendant and triumphant and the other rich, colourful and abundant. From another perspective, the one seems powerful and supported by the state, and other either benign and redundant, or threatening and heretical. This is precisely what Dexter elsewhere in this volume seemed to have in mind when he predicted the disappearance of old identities:

there may have been Africans, Coloureds, Indians, and Whites in pre-democratic South Africa, but these categories will fade or be reinterpreted as we all become South African. Of course the residual identities will remain and sink below the surface, but they will be of no significant value against a progressive, working class biased and led, progressively gendered national project. The democratic breakthrough presented a new sacred time and new sacred space to all South Africans.

The old identities will certainly give way to the powerful new South Africa, but identities and cultures will not necessarily march, single file, into the rainbow nation or the Great Gariep. As the "life-form" of an individual and community, culture is more pervasive, dynamic and powerful than the metaphors and Dexter would wish. Alexan-

der's Great Gariiep metaphor goes some way towards accepting the power and dynamism of culture. However, in spite of his metaphor, Alexander himself wishes to see the emergence of a national culture in the absence of which South Africans will "imbibe willy-nilly all manner of ethnic and racial allegiances or sub-identities as their ideological life-blood" (Alexander 1996:105). He warned that non-racialism during the apartheid era was only a "comfort zone" and the "cosmopolitan ambience (which) enveloped ... leadership" while "the masses had always in one degree or another the identities described for them in ruling class ideology" (Alexander 1996:106).

In my view, Alexander is mistaken about South African cultures on the sideline of national politics. If they failed to fit non-racialism neatly, they ought not to be confused with wholesale acquiescence to apartheid ideology. The greatest challenge posed by culture to a state, even a democratic state, is one that had already surfaced in the struggle against apartheid South Africa. When apartheid imposed its cultural model on South Africa, the liberation movements challenged the state with their non-racial and Africanist alternatives. Some groups, however, responded with a complex cultural complex intervention in this political battle. At once affirming and rejecting apartheid, some cultural expressions were trapped between acquiescing to the power of a repressive state, and self-expression. This dilemma should not be mistaken for its depth and its evanescence. It will be with us for some time.

Anti-apartheid activists have often mistaken cultural expression in their black and white world of the liberation struggle. Cultural expression in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa seemed to be saying that there was more than politics to their social existence. Their responses took the form of cultural and religious distinctiveness. This is what made sense to millions of South Africans during apartheid, and will continue to do so in post-apartheid South Africa. In any society, people are not totally and completely consumed by issues and concerns that affect national leaders and their paid servants (intellectuals). If we sometimes see culture simply as a

means by which, as Alexander fears, “identities undermine (the) ... sense of being South African”, then it may only be because culture is not necessarily only committed to the national project. Beyond the national project, culture must show us something beyond the nation and beyond the here and now. And therefore, I cannot agree with Dexter’s prediction that the multiple identities of South Africa will disappear.

Like Dexter and Alexander, I do see the emergence of a South African culture. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is part of it, and so are the rainbow and Gariiep metaphors. But we would be fooling ourselves if we think that these are the sum total of cultural expressions in South Africa. They may only be the lowest cultural denominators that engage the new nation, but it would be a pity to close the cultural construction of South Africa around the nation. There is surplus value to the cultural projects of any group of people, temporarily imagined as a nation. I conclude with an apt remark from Andre Brink, who calls us to listen to the multiple stories of South Africa:

... history, even in the most traditional sense of the word, is not composed only of texts (written and other wise), but strung together from silences ... Throughout the apartheid years, whole territories of silence were created by the nature of the power structures that ordered the country and defined the limits of its articulated experience (Brink 1996:241).

At the very least, a democratic South Africa should allow these silences to be heard unhindered, even if they sound heretical to the nation.

Notes

- 1 E. J. Hobsbawm (b. 1917), British historian. Lecture to the American Anthropological Association (published in *Anthropology Today*, Feb. 1992). The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations is licensed from Columbia Univer-
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The Congress tradition, represented chiefly by the African National Congress, insisted on a shared South African experience as opposed to the divisions imposed by the state. Congress history in cultural perspective may be seen as a particularly powerful testimony of how the apartheid divisions were denied and superseded. While apartheid was obsessed with racial categorization, the Congress movement insisted on non-racialism as the cornerstone of liberation and South African identity. Its landmark documents, like the Congress of the People at Kliptown in the 1955, inscribed a new South African identity. Reflecting on this new shared identity, a recent member of the South African parliament and member of the ANC, Philip Dexter, has this to say about the attempts to divide the South African people:

The state may have defined people as White, Coloured, Indian and Bantu/Black, but the liberation movement allowed all to begin to see themselves as South African. The period of our history that culminated in mass defiance of the official definition of identities reached an unprecedented level in the 1980s. Through organizations such as trade unions, the UDF and in underground and exiled structures of the ANC and SACP, people lived their lives as South Africans.³

In spite of Dexter's enthusiasm about the past, this was not an uncontested cultural response. From 1959, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) insisted on a broad Africanist approach to liberation. Suspicious that non-racialism was itself a form of cultural denial of Africanness, the PAC espoused a culture of African authenticity. In the 1970s, the Black Consciousness Movement under the leadership of Steve Biko advanced the cause of Africanism. Black pride and black authenticity became powerful political symbols with a deep cultural resonance. The Africanist specificity was a widespread cultural movement that gave a great sense of pride to the oppressed people of South Africa. It enjoyed support from a cross-section of

the people, and continues to do so. As a cultural orientation, if not a political alternative, it continues to enjoy support in the country. Nevertheless, whether the non-racialism of the ANC or the Africanism of the PAC and BCM, culture became a political weapon in South Africa. This was not surprising; it was a natural and logical response to the cultural politics of apartheid.

In addition to being a response to apartheid, culture was also affirmed by many other South Africans who were not directly involved in liberation movements. Displacement and forced removals were often the direct cause of increased cultural practices. Religion, in particular, became the preferred means of expressing an identity in these periods of extreme uncertainty and fear. This kind of cultural assertiveness was viewed with great suspicion by the liberation movements who noted its affinity with the apartheid regime. The proliferation of African Independent Churches, Islam, and Hinduism, for example, seemed to complicate and muddle the project of liberation. Thus, for example, Tamil and Muslim religious identities were sharpened among Indians in the apartheid townships compared to the mixed ghettos of Johannesburg (Randall/Desai 1967:6). Similarly, African Independent Churches were equally suspected for preserving the status quo.

A second look at these cultural practice reveals, not pure political subjugation, but a deeply independent expression that defied the apartheid state. Itumeleng Mosala, one of the foremost Black Theologians in South Africa, was correct when he alerted the liberation movements as well as scholars of religion in South Africa that the AICs were not simply the romantic expression of the “mythical, monolithic, time-less African culture” but the “religious-cultural organisations of the descendents of former African pastoralists” whose “only available means of self-defense (was) cultural-ideological” in the face of deprivation (Mosala 1985:111). Similarly, Islamic identity among South African youth living under apartheid was an implicit rejection of the apartheid identity of Indian, Coloured and African. To some extent, the United Democratic Front (UDF) of

1983 signaled a departure in liberation politics when it recognized that the cultural pluralism of South Africa could be galvanized against apartheid. The UDF was an alliance of civic, religious and cultural groups to oppose the apartheid state. Unlike the ANC, the UDF implicitly recognized the uniqueness of cultural groups in South Africa. Some may still regard it a political tactic of the ANC to lead the groundswell anti-apartheid sentiment, but the UDF was more. I see its emergence as a symbolic departure from a deeply ingrained suspicion that cultural pluralism was working in the interest of the apartheid state.

Culture was certainly a deeply contested terrain in apartheid South Africa. Cultural diversity for apartheid ideologues meant the subjugation of backward cultures by one supposedly advanced one. For the liberation movements, the culture of non-racialism rejected the apartheid cultural project. Africanists insisted on the particular geographical and historical ingredients of this liberatory culture, while many people on the ground turned to a host of expressions to overtly and covertly subvert the apartheid project.

Religion and culture in post-Apartheid South Africa

With this brief analysis, I want to proceed to an examination of the place of cultural groups within democratic South Africa. Since 1994, it has become commonplace to speak about South Africa as a fundamentally pluralist nation. Thus, it was with a sense of great joy and pride that we can cite the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, as adopted on 8 May 1996 and amended on 11 October 1996, declaring South Africans as “united in ... diversity”. The document ensured

“freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief and opinion,”

and accepted the right of forming religious communities:

“persons belonging to a cultural, religious, or linguistic community may not be denied the right with other members of that community:

- (a) to enjoy their culture, practice their religion, and use their language, and
- (b) to form, join and maintain cultural, religious and linguistic associations and other organs of civil society”

Clearly, the constitution made a distinction between belief and practicing that belief in a particular community. It enshrined the freedom of both individuals and communities as long as they were not “inconsistent with any of the provisions of the Bill of Rights.” The new constitution clearly established a framework for ensuring recognition and freedom of religious expression. Thus, when African Traditional Religion representation has tended to be ignored, even during the inauguration of the first state president, the constitution and the democratic culture of the country were successfully invoked.

However, cultural issues cannot be confined to constitutional courts. The Constitution is not a magic wand that will instantaneously create a perfect democracy with a democratic culture. The cultural question may appear to be quite trivial while many other issues confront the new country like rising joblessness, inadequate housing for millions of people, and economic growth to sustain development. Culture, however, as the “form of life or the life-style of a community” affects the deepest fabric of societies and communities (Degenaar 1991:9). Culture and religion create meaning and significance in life. They are the webs of significance that humans necessarily spin, as the noted American anthropologist Clifford Geertz would have it (Geertz 1968:19). If culture resides at the centre of being humanity, it is not something that can take second place to other more ‘real’ needs.

On the national cultural level, the question of the South African nation has naturally come to the fore. Considering the history

That is the main reason why Christianity is falsely portrayed as the majority religion in the country. It means that one can be Christian even if s/he does not attend church, or does not even believe in Christianity. One is Christian because s/he was baptised as an infant who could not even make choices.

African Religion in Western Scholarship

Though Africans were forced into this new religion (Christianity), they did not stop practising their ancestral rituals. Some missionaries like Callaway and Cook, and some anthropologists, noticed that Africans gave some importance to these rituals. These individuals became sympathetic towards the religion and started to see some traces of religion in the practices of “these people”.

Its own practitioners have not documented African Religion. It is an oral tradition, with an emphasis on practice more than written “scriptures.” African Religion fell in the hands of western scholarship who used foreign terms to define the indigenous religion. The religion had to be defined not on its own terms, but from Christian dogmas. African Religion had to define itself from Christian fundamentals like scriptures, special days of worship, trinity, resurrection, eschatology, etc. Failure to comply with these criteria meant failure to be classified as religion or being denied having any belief beyond this world. Okot p’Bitek criticises the way African Religion had been Hellenised by the use of terms such as omnipotent and omniscient. He urged, instead, the use of ordinary terms like “great” and “old”. Okot goes to the extent of advising that these outside layers should be removed before African Religion is suffocated (p’Bitek 1970:105).

African Christian scholarship emerged after it clearly became evident that most Africans had never disassociated themselves with their ancestral practices. The major problem even with these studies is that though these scholars agreed that African Religion existed, it was regarded as a preparation for evangelisation.

Black Theology or African Theology

Christians have always defined African Religion, who for that matter never fully classified it under 'theology' but under culture. At most, it had to be regarded as *praeparatio evengelica*. Though Black theologians had been claiming to fight for the total liberation of black people from the evils of racism, they overlooked a very crucial point, which is the foundation of every human liberation, that is, the liberation of the soul.

African theologians like Kurewa, Mosala and Maimela miss the point by describing theology in Christian terms only. Kurewa defines African theology as follows:

African theology (is) the study that seeks to reflect upon and express the Christian faith in African thought, forms and idiom as it is experienced in African Christian communities, and always in dialogue with the rest of Christendom (Kurewa 1975:36).

Maimela, when criticising the white racist Church had this to say:

Theology has to ask whether the gospel has been misused to support a morally questionable social system? It has to ask whether it is possible to reconcile the consequences of a divisive policy with the Christian message which proclaims that God in Christ has ushered in the state of fellowship of peace and reconciliation among human beings (Maimela 1987:150).

Maimela here clearly shows that theology was always Christian. In other words, he refers to his fellow Christians, the group that does not even go to Church. Similarly, Mosala believes that:

Black Theology's exegetical starting point expresses itself in the notion that the Bible is the revealed "Word of God". The task of a black theologian is to recognise "God's Word" to those who are oppressed and humiliated in this world. (Mosala 1986:177).

It is not clear whether Mosala recognises that a large percentage of the oppressed he is referring to do not believe the Bible as the Word of God, or even that the majority of the oppressed can't even read the Bible. It is humiliating to most ATR adherents to use the foreign text as a point of departure for the liberation of the oppressed in South Africa. The Bible itself is oppressive as it forces us to believe in foreign ancestors like Jesus, Paul, and Peter. All these Black theologians who believe that black liberation originated from the Bible wield double-edged swords. They are liberation fighters of black Christians but oppressors of their fellow black brothers who suffer the worst oppression as members of ATR.

Yet, another group of scholars like Setiloane, Bolaji Idowu, and Samuel Kibicho has called for the suspension of any evangelical or missionary motives when African theology refers to ATR (Maluleke 1997:11). African Religion had to suffer a further redefinition by black theologians who believe that their academic research skills and their African roots could be used efficiently to convince their unbelieving white Christians that Christianity originated in Africa or Africa had a great influence on Christianity. Unfortunately, it is not the interest of African Traditional practitioners to find out what is African in the Bible or in Christ, or to christianise Africa or to africanise Christianity. Their main aim was and still is to practice their religion without prescription from any form of Christian imposition. Kibicho confirms this when he said "there is full salvation in African Traditional Religion independent of Jesus and his redemptive work." Kibicho laments over colonisation by saying:

The worst type of colonial enslavement is the cultural-spiritual one, where the colonised is given a distorted image of himself and of his God by his oppressors and he accepts that image, and continues with it unquestioningly despising himself, his culture and his religion and slavishly applying the culture of his colonisers. (Zvabva 1991:76).

Most Black theologians who claims to be good Samaritans to African religion are unfortunately suffering from this colonial enslavement which makes them think that theology means Christianity, and Christianity is the extension of ATR.

African Religion and the New South Africa

It becomes so painful when people speak of democracy in the New South Africa. Yet, this so-called democracy is based on the minds that had suffered from colonialism and racism. It is very painful when the black leadership itself sees racism as having destroyed only the economic side of the black people, and turning a blind eye to the fact that Christianity nearly destroyed the identity of the black people. For African Religion, it is not enough to think that one is liberated when s/he can rub shoulders with a white person, live in a white suburb, speak colonial language/s through the nose, drive a posh car, and occupy a senior position in the work place previously owned by whites. To add insult to injury, one has to ascribe to a foreign religion that played a major role in dehumanising the black person in the country.

The Bill of Rights proclaims freedom of religion in theory, yet its implementation only refers to the religions that were shipped into the country. The indigenous religion must still accept the colonial labels of “primitive” and “outdated” unless under the cloak of Christianity. This is seen by the adherents of ATR as another form of colonisation, which can only be erased by de-colonising the African mind so that she can respect what her ancestors did for her, and not to place her ancestors on a lower level to foreign ancestors.

It is a pity that our black government itself only pays lip service to those who were in the lowest level during the colonial and apartheid times, by oppressing them. The government silences these people by marginalising them in any religious participation in national activities. The leadership has taken over from their colonial counterparts by telling those who claim to be non-Christians that what

they call African Religion is nothing else but culture. This becomes clear when ATR adherents are not part of the rainbow but are somewhere outside. The footsteps of the religion are clearly audible from the black people, and there is ongoing debate in Churches about inculturation. The negative side of this new mission is that this debate is regarded by ATR adherents as another form of evangelisation whereby these Christians, instead of preaching inculturation among their members, mainly preach it to ATR people by saying that "the church has accepted African rituals, come and join us, you are now free."

It is also interesting to notice that the coming out of the cocoon of African Religion has brought about a change in preaching style from fundamentalist Christians. They seem to be entering a battlefield portraying a God who is always angry and insulting. It has become a common practice with religious debates at the South African Broadcasting Corporation that some religious personnel within the radio stations are invited simply to insult ATR beliefs in ancestors. Reverend Jonga of Umhlobo Wenene (previously Radio Xhosa), for instance, invited Rev. Baloyi to his programmes who severely attacked ancestors as demons. Moreover, when he was asked about my call to rediscover African Religious Heritage, he told the listeners that I was a devil worshipper. On another occasion, on October 28 1997 to be precise, the same Rev. Jonga invited another pastor from Pietermaritzburg who also told the listeners that he has come to tell them that ancestors were demons who were thrown out of heaven by God because they had sexual intercourse with girls. This pastor produced profuse Biblical references (Gen. 6:1, Ps. 115:17, Lev. 20:6,9, 1Sam 15:26,35) in order to show that ancestors were "Satan's angels." In addition to Umhlobo Wenen station, Radio Sotho and Tswana also called the ancestors 'demons'. When these incidents were reported to the management, they have not been taken seriously. The usual response is that "it is what the Bible, which is the word of God, says."

The strange thing is that ATR programmes are strictly moni-

tored for offending Christianity, not even a mere mention of missionaries is allowed. I interviewed two Xhosa Christian ministers on the issue of the amaXhosa Cattle killing of 1857 whereby the ministers themselves accepted that the incident was a Christian propaganda to convert amaXhosa. After the programme there was an outcry from an organisation of ministers, the Fraternal, in the Western Cape, who wrote a letter to the station manager to inform him that if he keeps this woman (myself) "there will be bloodshed in the Western Cape". When Christians complain, the managers do not hesitate to reprimand ATR, but when ATR complains it's not a serious issue.

The Bill of Rights opens some space to encourage adherents of African Religion to stand up on their own and claim their right to practice their religion independent of Christianity. It is time for scholars and adherents of African Religion to resist any definition of their religion by outsiders who want to evangelise.

Towards an Authentic African Liberation Theology

It has been clear that the theologies that are now existing are Christian theologies. The time has come that those who are adherents of ATR exclusively should define themselves without seeking justification from colonial history. They should explain their boundaries of belief system before intellectual and religious smugglers who claim that because they are African, they have a right to misrepresent African Religion, and misinform the world that ATR without Christianity is history.

It is time that ATR scholars fight for the inclusion of the subject in the education system's multi-faith programme in its proper way. ATR scholars should not think that their liberation struggle will be a bed of roses or will be delivered to them on a meat platter. It will be a serious struggle because the enemy has changed colour, and also involves professions of some people who were and are still the agents of evangelisation. But it must also be born in mind that not

all Black theologians are part of an opportunistic agenda. Some see the truth that it is not necessary for Christianity to seek converts. Setiloane puts it like this:

If then, we maintain that we have a higher understanding of Divinity than obtains in western Christian theology, why are we continuing in the Christian fold? I must confess that nowadays I find an ecumenical Bible study session with my western Christian theologian brothers and sisters rather irksome and boring. The question is not only why do we remain in the Christian fold, but as one young West African Christian said to me in Basel: "Why do we continue to seek to convert to Christianity the devotees of African Traditional Religion?" (Setiloane 1979:64—5).

Professor Setiloane understands the problem and does not want to impose Christianity onto some people he believes have a genuine religion. It would also be unfair for ATR people not to understand some valid reasons that some Black theologians have, and the situations in which they find themselves. Setiloane further explains his position by saying:

I am like someone who has been bewitched, and I find it difficult to shake off the Christian witchcraft with which I have been captivated. I cannot say I necessarily like where I am. (Setiloane 1979:65).

To conclude, it is time that Black theology in South Africa be redefined from within. Black theology should not only try to challenge racism in religion but should also challenge the religion which was also brought together with racism. It is the Bible which brought the idea of a white God, God speaking and revealing himself to white people, with a white incarnate Jesus. Why do these fellow black activists try to find some black colour in a book which was written by whites? Why can't they reclaim what they were taught by their forebears, as Kibicho believes, that in African Religion they

will find full salvation without the saving powers of Jesus.

If black theologians were honest about their feelings about African religious practices and if ATR adherents can be confident of their religious beliefs, African Religion can shift from the margin to the centre. The co-operation between these two groups could expose the government, the black elite in particular, not to betray their black folks under the false pretence of theoretical democracy.

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