AFRICAN CONTEXTUAL PASTORAL THEOLOGY

Julian Müller
Centre for Contextual Hermeneutics

Abstract

The first step for every theologian, and especially for the practical theologian, is to acquire a sensitivity for the socio-cultural context. In order to understand the church's pastoral task in Africa, we should first try to understand something of the African context. This article focuses on some aspects of the African context. The kind of pastoral care which tries to accommodate the context fully is described as eco-hermeneutical pastoral care. Eco-hermeneutical pastorate is a unification of two terms: ecosystemic and hermeneutical. These two terms are integrated into one term, eco-hermeneutical, in order to capture the significance of both. Firstly, 'hermeneutical', puts emphasis on the element of understanding; secondly, 'ecosystemic' refers to the widest possible system or network of systems.

1. Religious experience

What is described by Van Huyssteen (1987:177) as the context of systematic theology, is also the context of each theological discipline, and, most certainly, of practical theology. According to him, theology has a threefold context: the context of religious experience, the context of the church, and the context of theological reflection itself. Practical theology concerns all three contexts. It is a theological reflection on religious experience and on the church as an empirical phenomenon. Van Huyssteen (1987:178) refers to Lindbeck, who said:

> The primary knowledge is not about the religion, nor that the religion teaches such and such, but rather how to be religious in such and such ways.

And how to be religious is a contextual question: how to be religious in a certain community at a certain point in history. The task of theology is not only to be engaged in theoretical theological questions, but rather to help people and communities to resolve religious questions, and to open up a significant religious dimension for our life upon earth (Van Huyssteen 1987:180).

Therefore socio-cultural and socio-political structures are not of peripherical importance to theology, but of central importance. These things serve as truth structures. As Peter Berger (1969:127) points out, the sociological structures of a community make it possible or impossible for people in that community to accept certain 'beliefs' as truth or not. Thus, the first step for every theologian, and

especially for the practical theologian, is to acquire a sensitivity for the socio-cultural context.

In order to understand the church's pastoral task in Africa, we should first try to understand something of the African context. In this endeavour we have to remember that no context is static. It is always dynamic and in a process of development. The aim of this article is definitely not stereotyping people. The author is aware of the fact that rapid changes are taking place in many areas of the African life. There are quite a number of communities and a large number of people on this continent who are completely Western concerning their outlook and lifestyle. But still, the African context is unique and in many ways different from the typical Western context.

2. The African context

2.1. African traditional religion

The traditional African ontology is anthropocentric (Oosthuizen 1977:280). The human being forms the centre of all religious thinking, while a Higher Being is responsible for the existence of the world and all creatures. The community is a sacred society with the chief as a holy king who acts as mediator between God and the tribe (Parrinder 1974:67). The interests of the tribe are of primary concern. 'Good' is that which is good for the tribe, and 'bad' is that which is harmful to the tribe.

> The traditional African system is more communalistic, other directed. It places a much higher value on relationships with other people (particularly the unique value of *ubuntu* or humaneness) than Whites who tend to be more individualistically inner-directed inclined.
> (Mjoli 1987:7)

The community is a reality which is not limited by time. One remains part of the tribe even after death. The emphasis is on collective participation. Against this background the phenomenon of the worshipping of spirits of ancestors have to be understood. In African society ancestors are seen as the 'living dead', and thus as an integral part of society (Mbiti 1971: 15). For the ancestral dead are not dead in the world of the spirits, nor are they dead in the memory of living men and women who continue to remember them, and who incessantly ask their help through various acts of libation and sacrificial offering. At the stage of ancestral existence, the dead still retain their personhood and are, as a matter of fact, addressed by their various names very much as if though they were still at centre stage. Later, however, after several generations, the ancestors cease to be remembered by their personal names; from this moment on they slide into personal non-existence, and lose all that they had once possessed by way of personal identity (Menkiti 1984:160). So that death, far from being a destroyer, is a mere transition to another form of life and, therefore, to another type of relationship with all those who are, however remotely, related to each other by sharing a common ancestor (Ruch 1981:141).

Unseen powers play a major role in religious experience. Animism (the religious concept which gives everything a soul and therefore magic power), is a reality. That's why the Medicine Man plays such an important role in the African community. His task is to influence the spirits positively on behalf of the tribe, and to get what is needed from the spirits when the tribe experiences difficulties. The poem *If*, by Jared Angira, introduces one to this African world where every object and every event has a meaning of its own.

IF

a squirrel crosses my way
while on a trip
then luck is mine
but when it's a cheetah
or wild cat that crosses there
I turn and go back.

I knock my right foot on stone
while on a trip
I melt in joy
since I shall be overfed
but when it's the left
I turn and go back.

I slip in my shirt
the inside coming out
I jump in merriment
for I shall be overfed.

the first being
I meet in the feeble dawn
is an old woman
I turn to my blanket
it's all ill luck.

I dream my relative dead
in midst of sweet slumbers
I wake in joy
knowing he's overfed
the previous night
and if I dream I am dead
I rejoice
for growing an inch.
and if I dream of my ideal girl
then I lose hope
the answer is no.

I wake up in die morning
and find my teeth shaking

> and loose
> surely I know
> they went eating excreta
> while soul courted in fairyland.
>
> A hen crows
> it must be killed
> bad omen
> a dog howls
> instead of barking
> the village owner
> is at death's door
> and if I walk on my head
> then I am dead.

2.2. An African world-view

2.2.1. African experience of time

In Africa time moves backwards (Mbiti 1971:15-21). Future is only potential time and is seldom longer than two years (Okere 1983:10). The past is of more importance that the future. People are living in the present and the past. They have only a two-dimensional concept of time, an indefinite past and an intensely active present (Okere 1983:1). It is therefore quite normal to have knowledge of up to five generations of one's ancestors.

2.2.2. African community life

Man is defined by reference to the environing community. Menkiti (1984:157) refers to John Mbiti who said that the African view of the person can be summed up in this statement:

> I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.

For the African mind, man never appears as an isolated individual, as an independent entity. Every man, every individual, forms a link in the chain of vital forces, a living link, active and passive, joined from above to the ascending line of his ancestry and sustaining below him the line of descendants. (Van der Walt 1988:8).

2.3. The historical context

2.3.1. Colonialism

Next to traditional African life and religion, colonialism and its results is one of the major factors which determined the Africa of today. During the second part of the 15th century, contact with the West had already started - not primarily because of

the efforts by Africa and, many would say, not to the continent's profit. The main aim of contact with Africa was exploring the continent in search of slaves and minerals.

The two centuries during which the slave-trade flourished, was a dark period in the history of Africa. This was followed by the 19th century which brought with it the annexation of colonies by European countries like Portugal, Belgium, Germany, Britain and France. Their motive was mainly economical. Today Africa sees this venture as aggressive and exploitation. Without taking the existence of tribe units and other realities into consideration, these external powers went about and drew lines as boundaries between countries and peoples. Had they been more sensitive to the realities of Africa, much suffering could have been avoided.

2.3.2. Missions in Africa

Together with the colonization came the missionaries and mission societies. From the North, the Roman Catholics; from the South, the Missionary Societies and later the Dutch Reformed Church; from the East, the English and German missionaries; from the West, Africa Inland Mission and missionaries from France (Crafford 1990:35). Both Christianity and Islam (which was introduced to Africa in 640) brought the people of Africa before a new choice. Many Africans were converted to Christianity and today it remains a significant force on the continent.

2.3.3. Ideologies

Capitalism was one of the main 'presents' of colonialism and just as Africa was adapting to it, communism and Marxism swept through the continent. At first, Third World countries were impressed by these new ideologies because it looked as if they could only improve upon capitalism (Du Preez 1988:7-9). The disillusionment came later, and as national consciousness dawned on Africa, a new African socialism developed (Van der Walt 1988:17) [1].

2.3.4. *Uhuru*

The liberation of Africa started on 6 March 1957 with the independence of Ghana under Nkrumah. Thereafter all the African colonies followed, with Namibia to be the last on 23 March 1990. In many of these countries a black dictator came to power and thus only the colour of the oppressors changed. Today most African countries are struggling with a weak infrastructure, political instability, poverty, health problems, etc.

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1. African countries are searching for their own way in the jungle of ideologies ... African countries are faced with a difficult task. How should they unite the different tribes and languages in their territories? How should they organize their economies? Should they choose Marxism or Capitalism? They want to go their own way and declare: 'African Socialism - a Third way' (Hirmer 1982:78).

2.4. African holism

As has been illustrated, the African experiences solidarity with his community. But the solidarity goes even beyond the purely human sphere, to the plants, animals and to the soil. These make daily life possible by providing food, clothing, shelter, medicine and the raw materials for many other needs. A solidarity which create a harmony with nature which our modern city-dwellers have lost long ago and which our ecologists are desperately wishing to re-introduce (Ruch 1981:141).

According to Anyanwu (1981:87-90) the African is engaged in interaction between various vital forces. Everything in the whole universe is linked together. Interactions between man and man, man and nature, man and God, are those between vital-forces, souls or powers. Superior or higher forces directly influence lower ones, while the lower ones have indirect influence on superior ones. The standard of good behaviour depends on maintaining, respecting and strengthening the relationships between vital-forces in the universe. Everything the African thinks about or feels has to be in the image of a living force interacting with other living forces.

Man is man by virtue of the way he is situated in the world, the way in which he is the centre of the world, outside the world or on the periphery of the world. He is man by the way he acts, reacts or is acted upon by events, that is, the way he is interwoven into the multiplicity of events. The ideal of the African culture is co-existence with and the strengthening of vital force or vital relationships in the world and universe.

Because everything is a vital force, or shares in this force, the African feels and thinks that all things are similar, share the same qualities and nature. It does not mean that the African does not know the distinction between a tree and a goat, a bird and a man. Rather, the ontological relationships among life-forces do not permit him to see things in isolation. In fact, he denies the existence of an individual as an isolated entity unrelated to others. He affirms the ontological relationship as the ultimate nature of things.

3. Pastoral theology in an African context

The concepts of wholeness and community-directedness which are part and parcel of the African mind, make it quite clear that pastoral care can only be defined in holistic terms within this context. By refering to Clinebell (1984:31-4), I would advocate 'holistic pastoral care' for Africa. He shows that pastoral care, as understood in the New Testament, is the task of the whole congregation functioning as a caring, healing, growth-enabling community. This general ministry should provide a warm, caring interpersonal environment which becomes crucial when people are going through losses and crises. Being in such a network of mutual nurture can help prevent crises from escalating.

The more modern term for this kind of pastoral care is ecosystemic pastoral care, or, as I altered it in another article (to be published in 1991 in *Acta Theologica*), eco-hermeneutical pastoral care. Eco-hermeneutical pastorate is a unification of two terms: ecosystemic and hermeneutical. These two terms are integrated into one

term, eco-hermeneutical, in order to capture the significance of both. Firstly, hermeneutical, puts emphasis on the element of understanding; secondly, ecosystemic refers to the widest possible system or network of systems.

The underlying trend in this kind of pastoral care is the attempt to understand [2]. This article is in itself an hermeneutical endeavour. But the aim of pastoral care can never be only to understand. The aim is growth. And in order to facilitate growth, it should employ the whole ecosystem. As Clinebell (1984:31) puts it:

> The aim is to enable persons to increase and balance growth in all six aspects of their lives, namely
>
>> Enlivening one's mind
>> Revitalizing one's body
>> Renewing and enriching one's intimate relationships
>> Deepening one's relationship with nature and the biosphere
>> Growth in relation to the significant institutions in one's life
>> Deepening and vitalizing one's relationship with God.
>
> Pastoral care and counselling are effective to the extent that they help persons increase their ability to relate in ways that nurture wholeness in themselves and others.

Due to the African's unique lookout on life, this is the only way in which pastoral care can be administered effectively. The whole African society, living and living-dead, is a living network of relations almost like that between the various parts of an organism. When one part of the body is sick, the whole body is affected. When one member of a family or clan is honoured or successful, the whole group rejoices and shares in the glory, not only psychologically (as one would rejoice when one's local soccer team has won a match) but ontologically: each member of the group is really part of the honour (Ruch 1981:143). Therefore, any treatment to an individual requires the co-operation of the family, and at times the active treatment of others in the family is necessary (Bührmann 1984:25).

4. Pastoral care in the South African context

South Africa had already begun to move into a new era, the post-*apartheid* era. This new era has been characterized by big changes taking place. In a time of change

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2. The term hermeneutics is closely associated with Hermes in Greek mythology. Hermes, the messenger of the gods, has the task of transmitting divine communication into a form which can be grasped by human intelligence. Thus hernemeutics have to do with the process of understanding and of making a message understandable in the communication between two totally different worlds. Not only the different world of an ancient text, but also the different world of another person (Osmer 1990:223).

emotions of ambivalence, anxiety, and insecurity are very common. Thus, the need for good pastoral care increases. A detailed analysis of the situation has to be done in order to stay within the framework of eco-hermeneutical pastorate. Such analyses are being conducted on various levels and by different disciplines [3]. Instead of trying to give an overview of these researches, which are mostly speculative, I would rather try to develop the model of eco-hermeneutical pastoral care further, and while doing so, at certain stages refer specifically to aspects of the new South African situation.

4.1. A model for pastoral care in post-*apartheid* South Africa

Bons-Storm (1989:85-121), with reference to Gadamer and Tracy, developed a most useful model for pastoral care. Her model is mainly an hermeneutical model and it operates in the field of the individual pastoral counselling situation. To my mind it can be adapted to an eco-hermeneutical model and thus be utilized on the ecosystemic level. These insights, complementary to Bons-Storm's model, will be developed in the following paragraphs.

A hermeneutical approach is an approach which tries to understand, or an engagement in the process of understanding the people concerned and the significance of God's will for these people. An eco-hermeneutical approach is an endeavour to understand a person in the context of the ecosystem in which he functions.

In eco-hermeneutical pastorate we work with two texts. We try to understand people as 'texts' (here we can refer to the well-known expression of Anton Boisen that in counselling the partner should be read as 'a living human document'). We listen to them and pay attention to their stories. On the other hand, we try to understand the gospel in its significance for a specific situation. The aim of interpretation is to understand what this text means for people living their lives here and now within a certain ecosystem.

Such an eco-hermeneutical pastoral process should develop through the following stages:

1. The interpreter (pastor) should be aware of the existence of a *Vormeinung*, a *Vorverständnis* in regard to the 'text' (people). Such a *Vormeinung* can even develop into a prejudice. A serious question is whether one can indeed be freed from such prejudices? Everyone is formed by his or her own socialization and culture. The interpreter (pastor) is burdened by the traditions in which he/she grew up. It would be an illusion to think that one can be totally free from these things and take a neutral stance. The solution is to bring *Vorverständnis* and prejudice to the conscious level. It is usually the unconscious prejudices which hinders openness to the text, and in this case to the other.

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3. Except for the numerous newspaper and magazine articles which nowadays are published almost every day, quite a number of books have already been published on the topic of the new of post-*apartheid* South Africa. These books are marked by an * in the bibliography.

South Africa is a meeting place of African traditionalism and Western linear thinking. With the abolition of *apartheid* and the development of a more open and integrated society, greater understanding, more interaction, and even more conflict are bound to be part of society. Trans-cultural church work and pastoral care will be much more on the agenda than in the past. The problem of prejudice should be addressed. Although the pastor and partner come near to each other in a counselling situation, they may still be lacking a real touch of communication. Only when we are willing to talk to each other from the centres of our personalities (Bons-Storm 1989:97), and honestly bring our prejudices in the open, can a true pastoral situation of understanding develop. There can be no real communication between population groups in South Africa without the willingness to verbalize prejudices. It is the church's pastoral task to facilitate a process where people can have mutual trust and therefore the frankness to express their prejudices.

2. The interpreter (pastor) should open him/herself to the stimuli of the text (people). A positive effort should be made in order to let the 'text' speak to you. This may bring about even a negative reaction, like shock. But these kinds of reactions are necessary in order to bring prejudice to the conscious level.

Even in a post-*apartheid* South Africa it would still be possible to avoid real revealing contacts with people of other groups. The pastor and church can only be effective when there is a purposeful action to open up to other people, to listen to their story. Of course everyone has his own story, but in the past we as South Africans have often felt threatened by each other and, because of our fear, experienced an unwillingness to listen to each other's story. Instead, we were over keen to tell our own story, to defend *apartheid* on the one hand and to accuse on the other hand. We will have to learn to listen. Listening is 'growing old together for a time' (Schutz, quoted by Bons-Storm 1989:103). Only by really listening and taking the other one's story seriously, can all the prejudices come to the fore. Then we will start to realize that the other person is someone else with his own past which took place in another environment - someone with his/her own ecosystem.

3. At this stage (and only now!) it becomes possible to have a true *Gespräch* between the interpreter (pastor) with his/her conscious *Vorverständnis* and the text (partner) with its theme. Without steps 1 and 2, it is impossible to have a true counselling situation.

Such discussions shouldn't take place only on the personal level with personal problems in mind. The church should facilitate negotiations and discussions between groups on various subjects. Pastoral care shouldn't only be put into the therapeutic compartment.

4. The hermeneutics of suspicion are next. In the communication process, one has to be aware of distortions caused by ideology, racism, sexism, etc. In the interpretation of the 'text', these distortions which occur on both sides, should be carefully considered in order to establish good communication.

This argument is of the utmost importance to the South African situation. The separation of societies, for decades long, has been so effective that people are

captured by stereotypical perceptions of each other. Communication can only take place if we can become consciously aware (on all sides) of these ideological distortions.

It may seem that this kind of suspicious listening is quite the opposite of the above argument, which stressed openness, but that is not the case. The aim is rather an openness to the whole of the other person, also to ideological or psychological distortions. But on this point it is important not to make the other person an object for analysis. With this danger in mind, we have to be suspicious in our listening in order to detect signs of ideological distortions. The reality in South Africa is that because we are all so captured within our own environments, we do suffer from distortions, which have to be exposed. It is of great importance that the pastor should not only be suspicious when listening to the other person's story, but also when he is listening to his own story! He must become aware of his own ideological and psychological distortions.

5. Not only the content of a text is of importance, but also the structure in which it exists. Content and structure form such a unity that it is only possible to understand when these two elements are equally valued and handled. In communication, the structure in which someone is wrapped up must be taken seriously. Here we think of non-verbal body language, clothing, make-up, etc. In South Africa we have a kaleidoscope of cultures. We have to accept that communication is a 'packaged deal'. A person's cultural background and tradition is part of the content of the message which he/she is trying to convey. In order to come to a genuine understanding, the non-verbal messages should be as closely observed as the verbal ones. The message always comes to us packed in signs, images, language, etc. A very practical problem in South Africa is language. The *lingua franca* will almost certainly be English. Therefore a major part of the people have to communicate in a second language, which is also, for the sake of pastoral understanding, second-best. Afrikaans, which is widely understood by the black community, has unfortunately been discredited as the language of the oppressor. Speaking Afrikaans can in many cases be a package with which one is burdened and which influences the message in such a way that it is being misunderstood.

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