

THE PLACE OF AFRICAN HERMENEUTICS IN UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS OF AFRICAN THEOLOGY.

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the process of reformulating African Religion in a post-colonial and post-missionary environment with special reference to the post-Apartheid context in South Africa. Special attention is given to hermeneutical problems in this regard. The distinctive nature of African theology (taken the oral tradition into account) is indicated. African Theology is seen as the contextual formulation of African religious experience taking African Traditional Religion and Christianity as source without simply reverting to indigenisation, eclecticism or syncretism. African theologians have today become more confident about what one can call African Christianity. This means following a hermeneutics demanded by the African text, which is much broader than a certain phase in Western Biblical Hermeneutics. African Hermeneutics is a contextual hermeneutics, aware of the legacy of colonialism, the history of African oppression and exploitation, but determined to recover African identity and formulate a theology which takes cognisance of African culture and African Traditional Religions. African symbolism must replace the cultural presuppositions of Western Christianity, namely logos and ratio. The God of missionary preaching was a distant God, foreign to the history of the colonised peoples. Exploited and oppressed, they found it difficult to identify this God with the God of Exodus. The primary role of the Bible, and especially the Old Testament is seen in African religious movements as supporting the reaction and revolt of African Christians. A Western kind of individualism, typical of modernism, is foreign to African people who hold a hermeneutics of potential or initial trust because of shared beliefs, practices, conventions and traditions. African hermeneutics comes naturally in the sense that most aspects of life are integrated into a harmonious unity. Against the background of third world hermeneutics, Black hermeneutics, liberation hermeneutics and the distinctiveness of a hermeneutics of African theology is indicated. Third World Hermeneutics stresses the contextual nature of hermeneutics in Third World countries where theologians could not ignore the poverty, exploitation, illiteracy and suffering of their people. The AICs can be seen as accomplishing the task of bridging Western mainline traditions and the world of African Traditional Religion. The essay concludes with the conflicting opinions between the so-called old- and new-guard theologians.

1. Introduction

Questions abound when one takes up the topic of African hermeneutics. What is African theology? (What is Africa?) Is it possible to speak of African theology at all if one lacks an established theology as with the African Initiated Churches (AICs) or African Traditional Religions (ATRs)? What is the nature of an African theological self-understanding? This concerns the issue of African hermeneutics. If hermeneutics, however, is the science of

interpretation and understanding can there be different legitimate ways of practicing it? If not, then Western Biblical hermeneutics remains the only source of reference and interaction. This cannot be accepted and we must enlarge our understanding of theology and hermeneutics to include a holistic look at religion, religious understanding, interpretation, and communication. This does not exclude theological methods and hermeneutical rules, established to guide our interpretation. This paper will concentrate on the phenomenon of African hermeneutics as a key to understanding the present dynamics of African theology.

Hermeneutics is more than the science of reading and interpreting texts. The world of texts exceeds biblical and sacred texts or any specific literary work. It is impossible for the African to separate interpretation and understanding from all other aspects of life - and this is the concern of this article.

The three important religions in Africa are Islam, Christianity, and the African Traditional Religions. These religions could again be subdivided into a multiplicity of subdivision, traditions, and so on. One could also consider the theologies of Afro-Americans and liberation theologies from the Third World, since their hermeneutics have exerted an important influence on African hermeneutics. One could also try to give a formal description of the history and theologies of different African religions, which would not necessarily answer the question of hermeneutics. One might also try to find common hermeneutical denominators like colonialism, oppression, and poverty, with which to describe these religions. These may all be very important hermeneutical keys as the question of poverty, for example, shows. Perceptions of God, religious experience, self esteem, world-view and the like are all vitally determined by one's basic living conditions. It would seem sacrilege to expect a Western hermeneutic consciousness from people lacking the basic means of existence.

Looking at the Christian tradition one has to reckon with different cultures, the histories of the so-called mission churches and the establishment of black 'main-line' churches, or one could concentrate on those churches that have inculturated Christianity and given it a specific African identity (like the African Initiated Churches (chapters 10, 24). One has to bear in mind the influence the African Traditional Religions have exerted on AICs, and their importance for African theologians writing from a post-colonial perspective.

When one reads present-day African theologies it soon becomes clear that African hermeneutics is of a very specific kind¹ and includes the African world-view and culture, its histories and religions. African hermeneutics considers the Bible and African Traditional Religions as sources of equal importance.

Hermeneutics, as we have seen, is the science of interpretation and gets its name from the Greek myth of Hermes, the winged messenger of Mount Olympus, whose job it was to interpret (Greek: *hermeneuein*) the sayings of the Oracle at Delphi. But how are African oracles interpreted and by whom? How are African messages conveyed and received by the African people? The voices of the ancestors, mediating the will of the gods, have been muffled for many years, overwhelmed by many voices of missionaries proclaiming the one and only way to the one and only truth. Until recently this truth was accepted in Africa, with all the delights and burdens it brought. After many years of servitude and struggle, however, these yokes have been lifted and Africa is taking stock of its gods. The single truth

1 In the past little serious attention was given by African theologians to the problem of Biblical hermeneutics. Fasholé-Luke (quoted in Parratt 1983:91) indicated that historically the missionary penetration of Africa was done by male Europeans with a fundamentalist view of the Bible, and until fairly recently this factor has tended to circumscribe biblical studies on this continent.

proclaimed in Africa divides into many different church denominations and traditions, each claiming to have the correct interpretation, the best hermeneutics, the best messengers of God. One can imagine Africa's skepticism about the claims of Western hermeneutics.

From the very beginning the Christian hermeneutic tradition was inclined to find the single spiritual truth within a particular Biblical passage. We do know, however, that most texts allow for numerous interpretations, and that to accept one single truth is almost invariably a sad reduction of reality. Western biblical hermeneutics cannot be understood apart from its preoccupation with the book of the Bible, seen as the final revealed truth of God. Anyone claiming to represent the one and only interpretation of this truth could also, on this higher biblical authority, expect acceptance of his or her interpretation. But this has changed with current developments in hermeneutics and our new insights into the nature of understanding.

Even in the Western world hermeneutics has shown truth to be open, dynamic and subject to reinterpretation and recontextualisation. The so-called hermeneutical circle shows the interpretative process as an involvement in examining a certain text or event through a systematic investigation of the general and the particular, the results of which, in turn, are related to what is already known by the interpreter. This process continues in a circle, moving from one sub-process to another, until the interpreter is convinced of a satisfactory interpretation. But the process is never-ending. Understanding, the interpretation of texts, and the search for truth are continuing and open-ended processes. This implies that any final meaning keeps evading us. Our existence remains a mystery. We keep on trying to explain this mystery to which the multiplicity of texts and interpretations bear proof. No final hermeneutical method is possible. The dream of developing an ontology hermeneutics is not only impossible but contradicts the open-endedness of human nature (Ricoeur 1974:23).

But what is the case in Africa? What is the relationship between African and Western hermeneutics, if one can speak of it at all? Does Africa and the West meet in the same way as the premodern and postmodern meet?² Parratt (1983:92) urges African theologians to take the problem of a genuine biblical hermeneutics seriously, as a preparatory stage of African Theology, and argues that a good deal that passes under the name of African Theology is inadequate because it lacks a solid foundation in biblical exegesis. This does not mean that they should simply quote European scholars as authorities. He enthusiastically quotes DN Wambudta, who stresses the need for African theologians to return to the original biblical languages, and who warns against interpreting the Bible too easily in the light of African religions, rather than according to its own canons (Parratt 1983:92). This insistence has led to a reaction by many African theologians who concentrate exclusively on African Religions as their source, and discard the Bible altogether. African theologians have today become more confident about what Maluleke (1996:4) calls African Christianity. This means following a hermeneutics demanded by the African text, which is much broader than a certain phase in Western Biblical Hermeneutics. Parratt displays an insensitivity to the nature of African culture and the hermeneutics he proposes is still solidly embedded in the Western world-view, culture and literary theory, epistemology, view on the nature of truth, and so on, which have all changed since the time Parratt wrote his article.

2 Thornton (1996:144-145) mentions that the South African condition is more postmodern than it is postcolonial. In contemporary South Africa there are literally no names, no vocabulary, to discuss major aspects and parts of its political situation. There is no agreement on what are the boundaries of 'black' or 'white'. No one knows whether to refer to 'tribes', 'ethnic groups', 'language groups', 'peoples' or 'races'.

The time has passed, however, in which Western Hermeneutics/Theology is normative. In many instances Western theologians are looking at African religiosity with renewed interest. Not only has the religious point of growth shifted from north to south; the southern growth point also has interesting features. It is not a duplication of Western Christianity, it has a deep spiritual strength, it operates within an oral culture, it is free from Western metaphysical constraints, it renders important critique on Western culture, science and technology and it offers an alternative to Western forms of doing theology, succeeding in relating in interesting ways traditional religious ideas with those brought to Africa. Faith in the West has lost its innocence and is seen as an ever-interpreting faith seeking a second naivete (Thiselton 1992:348). Although Africa is critical of Western interests, it can offer them this religious innocence which is still intact in African communities. The individualism, typical of modernism, is foreign to African people who hold a hermeneutics of potential or initial trust because of shared beliefs, practices, conventions and traditions.

Hermeneutics is not a Western or scholarly prerogative. All people practice hermeneutics since they communicate every day and are challenged to understand correctly, to relate conflicting ideas and to express their ideas again when misunderstood. People practice hermeneutics when listening to the radio, when reading a paper, when talking politics, or when participating in gossip! This hermeneutical activity can be cultivated to become an art, enabling us to understand and speak more carefully. Although hermeneutics may be studied by a minister of religion or a theologian, it actually belongs to the community. In African context, hermeneutics is the *indaba* of the community. It means listening to the sage and asking him or her critical questions. It means challenging the system that we may have become accustomed to - especially if we find it oppressive or outdated. It means listening to the stories of our fathers to explain difficult present-day problems, and telling our own stories. We relate to stories since they embody our understanding of ourselves, our fears and hopes. Through stories, as in the case of texts, we reinterpret and renew our existence. Existential issues have always been very much part of African self-understanding and hermeneutics.

Although people see and interpret things differently, there are always good reasons why they understand what they do. Hermeneutics helps us to understand why people differ. It shows the power strategies people use to get their point accepted. It also helps us to come to agreement. The task of hermeneutics is not to undermine creative and individual approaches to understanding (and so create an one-dimensional way of seeing things), but to make us aware of our specific *culture of understanding*, of possible logical mistakes in the process of interpreting, and of possible power strategies underlying our style of interpretation. It also helps us to understand ourselves and others and to recognise the influence of culture, religion, pre-understanding and many other factors co-determining the understanding process. Hermeneutics concerns our *world-view* - that is, the way we try to find meaning in our lives and world; it concerns our understanding of God and humans, our relationship with the past and the ancestors, and how it affects us today; it concerns our present difficulties in our families and communities, our suffering and hardships, it also concerns our understanding of the fixture and how we act to influence it. Hermeneutics concerns the language we speak, how we express ourselves and understand the expression of others (communication); it concerns our customs and belief systems and how they influence our views, and other aspects of our lives. African hermeneutics comes naturally in the sense that most aspects of life are integrated into a harmonious unity.

2. Third World Hermeneutics as Black, Liberation, and African Hermeneutics

To place African hermeneutics one must remember the wider context of so-called *Third World Hermeneutics* in which it developed. The term *Third World Hermeneutics* stresses the contextual nature of hermeneutics in the Third World countries. Theological developments in Third World countries could not ignore the poverty, exploitation, illiteracy and suffering of the people of these countries. For them hermeneutics meant first and foremost to understand and interpret the situation in which they found themselves. To read a text is to read life through the lens of the text. The hermeneutical process moves from life to text and from text to life. In this two-way movement texts question our lives, and our existential experiences are also brought to the text. We not only understand and interpret ourselves and our world in a certain manner, we are also affected and changed by the texts we allow into our lives. This is especially the case in Third World Hermeneutics.

Third World Hermeneutics implies that there is also a First - and perhaps a Second - World Hermeneutics, from which it differs. Third World countries have often found the gods and the guns, the texts and the truths of the oppressors to be quite intimidating and difficult to disagree with. Third World Hermeneutics alleges that to understand a text, text and reader must meet on the same level³. When text and reader meet each other as free entities, without the purpose of simply overpowering the other, then free discourse, critical questioning and creative inter-action become possible. Third World Hermeneutics refuses to meet any text like a victim approaching its oppressor. It challenges and reinterprets the text. The text is to serve life. Third World Hermeneutics recognises that texts are brought to us by text-bearers and that these often structure the text - receiver relationship through the way they read, interpret, explain and preach these texts. Hermeneutics and the art of politics are often not to be distinguished.

Third World Hermeneutics refers to the way countries with a background of colonialism, exploitation and a missionary history try to understand what has happened to them⁴. It develops from the perspective of colonialism, poverty, underdevelopment, economic exploitation, and cultural victimisation. The Third World is, however, such a large and complex concept that one has to distinguish different contexts and histories. To narrow Third World Hermeneutics down to Africa does not simplify the task. Hermeneutics in Africa cannot be separated from Black Theology in America or in Africa, because of the reciprocal influence between the two continents.

Although African Hermeneutics overlaps with Latin American Hermeneutics, and Black Hermeneutics, there are also specific distinctions to be made. It is, however, inevitable that this chapter will refer to and deal with the whole concept of hermeneutics in the liberation context. I will try not to overlap too much with what has already been said.

Black Hermeneutics refers, according to Thiselton (1992:419-420), to three distinct contexts. Black Theology in South Africa focuses on issues pertaining to colonial history and apartheid; North American Black Theology finds expression in the historical memory

3 This does not exclude the fact that texts want to convince, inspire, teach, change and influence the reader. In communicating with another I also want to convince, influence and the like. I can, however, not meet a text like another person. Texts tend to have the last say - as they are written and therefore fixed. My dialogue with the text becomes but another text. The world of texts are therefore not fixed and autonomous but open. This comes to the fore in the inter-text (the influence of other texts in a specific text) in which texts are always in communication with each other.

4 One example is the book by RS Sugirtharajah *Voices from the margin. Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, which looks at Africa, Latin America, India and Indonesia, amongst other.

of slavery and its aftermath; African Hermeneutics in African states mainly concerns *contextualisation* and the relation between the Bible and African cultures. Although the Black Theology of the North American, James Cone, has influenced Black Theology in South Africa, his context and approach are different. All these movements stress experience and struggle as contexts of hermeneutics. Thiselton (1992:423) has correctly indicated that it is tempting but one-sided to suggest that African Hermeneutics stress contextualisation, where Latin Americans speak of praxis, and North American Black Theology speaks of black experience.

Black Theology in South Africa, although it took its example from Afro-American forerunners, has predominantly been a South African phenomenon, promoted by people like Basil Moore, Manas Buthelezi, Steve Biko, Allen Boesak, Frank Chikane, Desmond Tutu, Mokgeti Motlhabi and many others. Many African theologians have felt that Black Theology has put too much emphasis on political and economic liberation at the expense of the spiritual component. Black Theologians have been equally critical of African theology, feeling that they encouraged a cheap alliance between African culture and Christ. In the apartheid era it was felt that promoting the uniqueness of African Theology might promote the idea of apartheid. It was also feared that some indigenous church groups may concentrate on Africanisation to the detriment of the liberation struggle. Reconciliation between Black Theology and African Theology came about in 1977 in Accra, Ghana, with the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians, when James Cone indicated that they were not as different as had previously been suggested (Schoffeleers 1988: 109-110).

Developments in *Afro-American and Liberation Hermeneutics* influence African hermeneutics, and vice versa. Africa remains, however, the one elliptic point for Afro-American hermeneutics, the other being the Afro-Americans' own history and experience of enslavement. It is, however, not limited to these issues. Afro-American hermeneutics is also concerned about its place in a post-Christian, postmodern, pluralistic and global context (Coleman 1993:69). According to Coleman (1993:71-71), Black Theology in America developed as a conscious discipline in the mid-1960s, underwent a second phase between 1970 and 1975, when African-American theologians took their case to Euro-American colleges and seminaries, a third phase when it focussed on global issues affecting them, and they have now embarked upon the fourth phase namely the utilization of indigenous resources along with interdisciplinary strategies in their theological discourse. This specifically includes researching the religious past of African people for expressions of faith that may be translated into the present. While they concentrated in the 1970s and 1980s on Marxist social analysis, they are now concentrating on developing interdisciplinary skills to examine and appropriate multi-layered discourses within the cultural history of American people, by examining what Coleman (1993:75-76) calls 'tribal talk'. This is mediated through African Hermeneutics, exposing African folklore, traditions and practices.

In the present quest for recovering African identity and redefining African Theology, one cannot ignore the important influence of Afro-Americans on African theologians. It would, however, be destructive to the development of African Theology if its agenda were to be determined by Afro-American issues, as would be the case with Eurocentric issues. The social context of Afro-Americans and their ensuing hermeneutics, trying to link with their Christian and African roots, are quite dissimilar from those of Africa. This is not to say that mutual influencing cannot be productive, as the case of Black Theology has shown.

African Hermeneutics is predominantly concerned with ways to reconstruct African Theology independently from Western theological influences. It is the effort to understand and interpret the religious significance of African culture and to determine the theological

character of African Traditional Religions. Present-day African theologians are aware of the pressure imposed on African Hermeneutics during the liberation period, but do not focus exclusively on it. They concentrate on the anti-colonial struggle and on post-colonial reconstruction, trying to find what is typical of Africa and searching for an African intellectual self-definition. The quest for an African Hermeneutics testifies to the need for thinking autonomously and creatively in a context of political threat, economic need and the presence of Western influences. This essay tries to come to grips with developments during the last two decades, during which African theologians have started to make a decisive effort to recover what is typical of Africa Theology. There are several ways in which this is done. Our concern is to deal not with those thinkers who wanted to recover African religions without taking notice of the influence of Christianity, but those who took African religious reality as their point of departure. Thinkers like J B Sanquah and Okot p'Bitek prepared the way by concentrating on what African Traditional Religions are all about (see Awolalu 1991: 129-131).

African Hermeneutics obviously cannot refer to a single approach in interpreting and understanding African religions. There are also different degrees to which theologians concede the world-view, ideas and practices of African Traditional Religions. African theology can be practiced neither in isolation, nor by ignoring the very formidable presence of Christianity in Africa. It is easier to agree on commonalities like the influence of colonialism, the impact missionary work had on Africa, the common struggle against poverty, illiteracy, underdevelopment and so on, than to agree precisely on how to integrate African Traditional Religions into an African Theology.

Many African theologians are very critical of those who endeavour to synthesise African Traditional Religions with any other religious tradition. Onunwa (1991:120-121) for example, refers to the debates, conferences and polemics of the mid-1950s and early 1960s on 'indigenisation', 'Africanisation', 'Theologia Africana' or 'Black Theology', which were concerned with practical methods of making Christianity an authentic African Religion, using some elements of the traditional religions, in order to make Christianity relevant to the traditional situation. Christianity had to be interpreted in the context of their traditional religious experience, language and culture. For Onunwa this means that they subscribed to the idea of Christianity being superior to the traditional religions, despite their efforts to show the Traditional Religions as a people's search for ultimate meaning. When Christians or any other interest group use African Traditional Religions as a means to an end, this is, for theologians like Onunwa, simply not acceptable.

3. The distinctiveness of African Hermeneutics

It is unwise to restrict African Hermeneutics to any specific characteristic. A more precise delineation may become possible as this hermeneutics develops and is studied. It includes the reactionary and socio-critical. For the purpose of this contribution I shall define African Hermeneutics as the effort to rid Africa of the unacceptable legacy of colonialism, to recover African traditional ideas and to indicate how this is as important a source as the Bible in providing Africans with their specific spirituality.

3.1 Hermeneutics without a book but not without a text: *The African way of reading life*

The text that African Hermeneutics tries to understand is much wider than the Biblical text, or Western-oriented theology, since it includes the African world as text. As Awolalu (1991 :131) puts it: "African Traditional Religion has no written scriptures or records, yet

we can say that it is written everywhere for those who have eyes to see". Religion permeates every aspect of peoples' lives and can be found in their riddles and proverbs, songs and dancing, rites and ceremonies, myths and folk-tales, shrines and sacred places, and in their artistic designs.

African Hermeneutics is a contextual hermeneutics, aware of the legacy of colonialism, the history of African oppression and exploitation, but determined to recover African identity and formulate a theology which takes cognisance of African culture and African Traditional Religions. African Hermeneutics is an understanding of Africa by Africans, for Africans. John Pobee (1996:54) quoted Ela in this regard, saying that one of the primary tasks of Christian reflection in Black Africa is to reformulate our basic faith through the mediation of African culture. African symbolism must replace the cultural presuppositions of Western Christianity, namely *logos* and *ratio*.

In the post-colonial era African Hermeneutics seems to be more concerned with Africanisation than with liberation, although the latter is not excluded. For Pobee (1996:57) African Theology must restore the identity and ethos of *homo africanus*. There is resistance to this approach, which is seen by Muthukya (quoted by Pobee 1996:56) as the heathenisation of the church⁵.

African Hermeneutics is a hermeneutics without a book but not without a text - the text of African suffering and dependence. The Bible (book) is read with this text in mind. As Ela (1991 :259) puts it: 'the colonised peoples never had a complete view of Christianity exactly because they were restricted to the *book* without the *text*. Bereft of a historical, critical sensitivity that would relate the salvation message to a particular context of colonial domination, the missionary church kept Africans in line with taboos and sanctions instead of launching them into the historical adventure of liberation - where, precisely, the living God is revealed.'

African Hermeneutics *differs from hermeneutics in the West*, but not because rules determining understanding in one context are not valid in another. It is, however, a question of different emphases, a different language and culture, a different self-understanding and world-view. Hermeneutics depends on the specific concept of truth one has, the emphasis placed on the written or the spoken word, the way people integrate theory and practice, one's critical aptitude, and so on.

Onwu (1985:146-150) has already stressed the problems of language and world-view as specific problems of African Hermeneutics. Many biblical concepts simply do not exist in African culture, or have a totally different meaning. This especially concerns the personality of Christ, who can be labeled Black Christ, African Chief, Elder Brother, and Great Ancestor. While we know that the African world-view easily assimilates the Old Testament world-view, the Bible was brought to Africa & aimed in a Western world-view. Onwu (1985:150-153) mentions the fact that, by the time Christianity was introduced into Sub-Saharan Africa in the mid-nineteenth century, the world-view of the Christian theologians was reminiscent of only the biblical one. Under the influence of the Enlightenment they had already outgrown the Biblical (as well as African) world-view. They could hardly still make sense of the biblical references to demon possession, and to angels and spiritual forces operating in the affairs of human beings. These, however, fitted perfectly well within

5 The full quote reads as follows: 'This is what they mean by African Christianity. No mention of the one and only saving Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ. No mention of sin. No place for the authority of an inspired Bible. Instead their arguments are based on the traditional background of the African people, their culture, customs and belief. If natural culture and religious customs are acceptable to God, why did Christ send his disciples to preach the Gospel to every creature in the uttermost parts of the earth?'

African cosmology, which believed that spiritual forces, both evil and good, operated in the world - a world of charms and amulets, sacrifices, ancestral worship, witches and wizards.

3.2 Protesting hermeneutics

Theological hermeneutics would be sterile if it ignored the physical constraints influencing peoples' experience. African Hermeneutics can be typified as a hermeneutics of protest, against factors crippling its people. African Hermeneutics is a reactionary hermeneutics, trying to come to grips with post-colonial Africa.

Part of this process concerns the effort to understand and deal with the impact of a post-missionary era. For Ela (1991 :257) the God of missionary preaching was a distant God, foreign to the history of the colonised peoples. Exploited and oppressed, they found it difficult to identify this God with the God of Exodus. The primary role of the Bible, and especially the Old Testament, in African religious movements is to express the reaction and revolt of African Christians.

3.3 Hermeneutics of sociocritical theory

According to Thiselton (1992:379) sociocritical hermeneutics can be defined as an approach to texts, traditions and institutions which seek to penetrate beneath their apparent function to expose their role as instruments of power, domination and social manipulation. The idea behind this kind of hermeneutics is to achieve the liberation of those over whom power or social manipulation is exercised. Sociocritical theory provides the theoretical hermeneutical framework for liberation hermeneutics, which includes on a metacritical level African and Black Hermeneutics.

Sociocritical hermeneutics becomes imperative in a context of oppression where texts, and especially religious texts, are subservient to the existing ideologies. Radical critique of knowledge, for Habermas, is only possible as social theory (Thiselton 1992:282-283). Hermeneutical understanding as social critique must test traditions in relation to their embodiment of social force and epistemological distortion.

The real challenge for Africa is the ongoing development of an African Hermeneutics and an African religion in which the reinterpretation and critical accommodation of African Christianity, African Traditional Religions, and other factors of importance, will be determinative of a future theological profile. This may prove to be much more important to African identity than Liberation Theology was. This process cannot, however, be artificially constructed by any group of theologians with specific blueprints in mind. One can expect this process to develop spontaneously, being unflanked by developments within the African Initiated Churches. These developments may be similar to religious developments all over the world where one finds the accommodation of a multiplicity of religious styles existing in juxtaposition.

For Itumeleng Mosala only a materialist reading of biblical texts, which takes up the conflicting social and political forces and interests, can constitute a genuinely sociocritical hermeneutic (see Thiselton 1992:425). In Mosala's own words (1989:5-6) 'The notion that the Bible is simply the revealed "Word of God" is an example of an exegetical framework that is rooted in an idealist epistemology. I criticize that position in this study because it leads to a false notion of the Bible as non ideological, which can cause political paralysis in the oppressed people who read it.'

Thiselton (1992:429) rightly warned against the danger that any selective use of texts to encourage the oppressed in the end mirrors the strategy of the hermeneutical method of the oppressors, who use texts to re-enforce and re-affirm their corporate identity and interests.

3.4 Can the Bible be the *neutral* Word of God?

There is a close relationship between the biblical world and that of traditional Africa. Parratt (1983:90) has remarked that the world of traditional Africa, like that of the Gospels, is one in which supernatural powers impinge on the human world in every respect, since every aspect of life is subject to spiritual powers. The biblical references to demon possession, the healings and miracles performed by Jesus and the apostles, fit perfectly well into the African world-view.

However this is true not only of the apocalyptic background of the New Testament. It is the AICs, in particular, who have shown a considerable preference for the Old Testament. This can be ascribed to many factors, especially the similarities in world-view, the Exodus tradition, the emphasis on the poor, and the fact that the Old Testament deals with so many aspects of life, like the social, agricultural, family and ritual aspects, all important to African religion (Parratt 1983:91).

Special thought should be given to the question whether the Bible can be the neutral word of God. Uka (1991:153f~ challenges the idea that African Theology has to be rooted in the Bible as well as the idea that there cannot be a valid theology of African Traditional Religions. African Theology is not theology if it is Christian Theology or imported theology. He is also critical of the way in which African theologians in the past simply interpreted Christianity in African terms. This sentiment is underscored by Maluleke (1996:6) when he refers to Bediako, who said that the Christianisation of the pre-Christian tradition of Africa could be seen as one of the most important achievements of African Theology. Africanisation, however, should not be confused with indigenisation, which has already been achieved by the African Initiated Churches. What is at stake is the intellectual question of how African Christianity, employing Christian tools, can set about mending the torn fabric of African identity and hopefully point the way to a fuller and unfettered African humanity and personality. For Uka (1991:154) African Theology is the theology of African Traditional or Indigenous Religions - not the African Theology that tries to solve the problems of indigenisation of a new and foreign religion. African Traditional Religions must be freed from those Western concepts which have for a long time restricted and imprisoned them. It remains, however, to be seen how Uka will employ 'Christian tools' to mend African identity.

In this connection a debate is raging concerning the equation of the Bible with the Word of God. For Maluleke (1996:12) the equation of the Bible with the 'Word of God' is not only naive, but a dangerous form of naivete. He sees this equation as being debilitating for Black and African Theologies and as much more harmful than the equation of colonialism with Christianity, or of the African past with Christianity. The reason is that this equation has been used to legitimate the demonisation of African traditional culture and religions. The point is that the equation of the Bible with the Word of God implies that it is possible to appropriate the Bible un-ideologically. For Maluleke (1996:11) the equation of the Bible with the Word of God has been the most consistent tool in questioning the validity of both African Christianity and African Theology. It is African Theology's reference to African Traditional Religions and Black Theology's reference to liberation that has caused both to be dismissed on the basis of lack of Biblical grounding. This argument is fundamental in determining the nature of African Hermeneutics. From an African point of view, this exclusive stance has caused divided loyalties since Africans have had to deny the importance and appeal their very own traditions and customs had and still have on them. From a Western point of view it has offered the opportunity to impose Western ethics, world-view and theology on Africa. Although there is a case to be made that the Bible is

often intolerant, Western hermeneutics itself had to relativise this to accommodate the multiplicity of diverging truth claims from its own traditions.

There is, however, more to the issue. What then is the status of the Bible in Africa if it is not to be seen as the Word of God? This is once again the peculiar character of African thought. It does consider the Bible the Word of God, but not so as to exclude many ideas, customs and rites from African culture and traditional religion. Africa knows the secret of accommodating (not indigenising) divergent ideas. In a holistic manner all things are integrated. African thought does not operate on the level of Western metaphysics, where a substantial ontology determines the detached nature of things as they exist in and for themselves. One has to differ from the oft-quoted remark by Leopold Senghor that reason is Hellenist and emotion is Negroid⁶ (See Serequeberhan 1994:6). Africa does not separate in a Cartesian manner the mind from the body, or reason from emotion - as is often done in the West. African thought is rational and emotional. African hermeneutics favours a relational ontology where life-giving interactions determine what are considered important and true. On this level the Bible has become important to them, but in a way that it does not exclude the simultaneous influences of past traditions.

The continued growth of African Christianity in its peculiar way does not depend on, or ask for, Western acknowledgement. The insistence of Western-determined normativity simply invites reactionary responses as in the case of Maimela, who suggested that Black theologians should un-apologetically base their theology not even on a materialist reading of the Bible (as Mosala does), but on pragmatic and moral arguments that make sense to them (see Maluleke 1996:14).

For Maluleke the way out of this trap is to confront not only the Bible, but all other sources and interlocutors of theological discourse precisely at a hermeneutical level (*ibid*). Canaan Banana has proposed that what he calls 'oppressive' texts, must be removed from the Bible and that the religious experiences of other peoples ought to be added to the Bible (see Reed 1996:282-288). It must be stated that the Bible does not belong to the West. It belongs to those who read it and live from it. The danger is real that in reacting against the abuse of any text, the text may be identified with those misusing it.

4. The influence of African traditional religions (*atrs*) and the African initiated churches (*aics*) in co-determining African Christianity and theological hermeneutics

To understand African Hermeneutics and the reason why it focuses increasingly on the ATRs, attention must be given to these religions. To determine their importance, statistical information is given below (23.4.1). The numbers of their adherents, however, do not seem to explain their influence sufficiently; the answer can rather be found in the quest for African identity (23.4.2). A watershed point concerning the importance of the ATRs was reached when theologians began to reckon them as a religion and not as pagan (23.4.3). African Traditional Religions are the mainspring for African customs, narratives, symbols and rites, indispensable for developing an African Theology and Hermeneutics (23.4.4). The African Initiated Churches represent the group in which Christianity and African

6 Elsewhere Serequeberhan (1994:45) quotes Senghor as follows: "White reason is analytic through utilisation: Negro reason is intuitive through participation. European is empiric, the African mystic. The European takes pleasure in recognising the world through the reproduction of the object ... the African from knowing it vitally through image and rhythm. The African does not realise that he thinks: he feels that he feels, he feels his existence, he feels himself and because he feels the Other, to be reborn in knowledge of the world."

Traditional Religions came to be integrated in a fascinating way. This will be dealt with shortly (23.4.5). Our hermeneutical concern is the way African theologians understand themselves, African religion, its place in the world of religions, and how they visualise (idealise) its future. The idea is not to idealise or romanticise the ATRs, but to recognise the important influence they have. Sarpong (1991 :289) sounds a warning note in this regard when he says that, like all other cultures, African traditional cultures contain several objectionable elements. This is not to say that they do or did not fulfil a social function now or in the past. A careful examination of many an African custom, no matter how repulsive it may be to modern people, will reveal that it once played - or even now plays - a meaningful role in the social life of the people.

4.1 Geographical distribution of adherents of African traditional religions in some African countries (percentage relative to the population of each country)⁷

There has been a dramatic drop in numbers of followers of the ATRs since 1900, as the selected list of statistics below shows. This is because most Africans were converted to Christianity or Islam. Trends displayed are representative of the whole of Africa. If these trends continue one would expect that the ATRs would eventually become totally insignificant. How is this to be understood in the light of the renewed interest in the ATRs and the fact that most prominent African theologians try to accommodate the ATRs ideas in their work? One would perhaps be wrong to expect a revival of the ATRs, or in thinking that they will eventually replace African Christianity. It would perhaps also be a mistake to assume that they will eventually die out as an active religious group, as the statistical trend seems to indicate. Renewed interest and appreciation for the ATRs may even stimulate the ATRs' growth. Although statistics reflect a drop in numbers of adherents to the ATRs, they do not display their influence in African life and on African theologians. One can expect that the cause of the ATRs in a democratic and post-apartheid South Africa will be promoted by a renewed spirit of nationalism. One can also expect ATR ideas to become more of an academic concern as the process of urbanisation speeds up. Theologians favouring ATR ideas are mostly not religiously observant in the ATR context. It is in groups like the AICs that these ideas come to fruition (see Schofieles 1988:114-119).

ATR ideas will be influential in the reformulation of African Christianity. They give access to African culture, and provide African theologians with material to develop an African Christian Theology. Schofieles (1988:103) stated that African religions are essentially monotheistic and in that fundamental respect fully in accordance with biblical revelation. He believes that Christianity can borrow suitable ideas from the ATRs and *vice versa*.

7 Data arranged by Chidi Denis Isizoh from the entries made in D B Barret, *World Christian Encyclopaedia*, Nairobi, 1982.

GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF ADHERENTS TO ATRs

| Country | 1900 | Mid-1970 | Mid-1975 | Mid-1980 | Projection for 2000 |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| Botswana % of population | 102,900 85.7 | 347,200 56.3 | 362,560 52.5 | 3,909,104 9.2 | 4,915,003 4.4 |
| Congo % of population | 526,500 97.5 | 79,580 6.7 | 76,240 5.7 | 73,240 4.8 | 75,800 2.8 |
| Ghana % of population | 1,987,000 90.3 | 2,864,000 33.2 | 2,690,600 27.3 | 2,451,400 21.4 | 1,177,500 5.6 |
| Lesotho % of population | 271,200 88.9 | 137,210 13.2 | 100,310 8.7 | 80,200 6.2 | 61,000 3.0 |
| Madagascar % of population | 1,556,000 60.3 | 3,408,050 49.2 | 3,859,780 48.1 | 4,390,180 47 | 7,591,000 42.7 |
| Malawi % of population | 714,000 95.2 | 1,075,200 24.7 | 1,059,800 21.6 | 1,057,400 19 | 1,049,000 11 |
| Mozambique % of population | 2,504,900 96.4 | 4,757,300 57.8 | 4,832,300 52.3 | 4,963,700 47.8 | 6,197,000 35.1 |
| Namibia % of population | 129,600 91.3 | 33,100 5.2 | 28,300 4.0 | 27,800 3.5 | 26,400 2.0 |
| South Africa % of population | 2,793,000 57 | 3,889,210 18.1 | 4,189,700 17 | 4,534,400 15.9 | 6,519,000 13.1 |
| Swaziland % of population | 7,9200 99 | 115,700 28.3 | 112,360 24 | 113,490 20.9 | 127,260 13.5 |
| Zimbabwe % of population | 479,800 96 | 2,469,000 46.5 | 2,729,500 43.5 | 3,034,300 40.5 | 4,440,000 29.3 |

4.2 The quest for African identity

Many African theologians today have taken up the task of formulating a truly African religion, based on African traditions and influenced by the history of Christianity in Africa. This is a holistic hermeneutics which wants to read the African text in its interrelated plurality in the African world. Holism does not negate differences but accommodates them. African Hermeneutics is an endeavour to understand and interpret the many paradoxes – the competing, and even opposing, elements determining African life. Although some African thinkers want to rid Africa of all foreign influences, foreign gods and practices, this is not possible. Not only is it difficult to determine what these influences are and ‘extract’ them from African life – the interdependence of all countries on economic and technological levels makes this simply impossible.

There remains, however, much to be done in regaining African identity. In pre-colonial times, non-Africans wondered and wrote about African religion. Africans were seen mostly as spiritually lost, wicked, and willful sinners. African religion was negatively portrayed as ancestor-worship, animism, idolatry, fetishism, paganism, polytheism and the like. During colonial and post-colonial times Africans writing about their religion were over-dependant on Western Christian ideas. A post-colonial African Hermeneutics wants to rectify this situation by writing a theology of the people, by the people and for the people (see Uka 1991 :161).

But is it possible to know what African identity exactly was, before colonialism, and do the majority of people want to restore this former identity?⁸ These are difficult questions and one realises that the quest for African identity is a focal point of the very complex process of cultural reinterpretation. It seems that the strongest rationale behind the wish to recover African identity is the urge to rid Africa of its negative self image, mindset of dependency, its poverty and underdevelopment. Poverty has become a very macabre part of African identity (Pobee 1993:397).

The quest for identity can often be linked to a context in which people's identity is threatened and disfigured. In the case of Africa, colonialism and continued economic and other forms of dependence on the West can be named as such threats. Anger has always been a result of the denial of identity. Africa has reason, in this regard, to be angry. Violence is seen by some as a way to freedom, as part of the struggle for a changed self image, which takes place both among the subjugated and against the dominator (Taylor 1994:65). The history of liberation struggles testifies to this.

From a Western perspective the search for African identity may be experienced as inconvenient as it inhibits the process of development. This is because the promotion of African culture is wrongly perceived as preventing the development of a technological society. The lack of technological advancement must be ascribed, rather, to the general underprivileged background of black communities and the absence of proper education from the pre-school level onwards. There is a strong recognition that Africa needs development and this seems to be impossible in isolation from Western aid, ideas and involvement. Apart from this, the question must be answered whether development - which is inconceivable without science, technology and industry - can be purely African. If a so-called Afrocentrism (there are many African identities) is to be promoted, this cannot be done by isolating Africa.

The recovering of African identity is often described with the metaphor of finding one's roots. Finding one's roots is determined by what one is looking for, and how one appropriates what one finds. The quest for identity is in many cases (such as in South Africa) highly politicised and cannot be completed without dealing with the past. Although the past can never be restored, it remains important for understanding oneself in the present. 'Root thinking' can give direction to the present. There may be recognition, insight and identification when encountering one's past. Root thinking can be stimulated, but should not artificially be enforced upon communities. To a large extent Africans need not excavate too deeply to find its roots. It can simply affirm and appropriate these roots. The African worldview is oriented more towards the glorious, perfect, primordial state of the past and less to

8 Root-searching and root-thinking do not impress everyone. Kristeva (1993:2-3) sees the cult of origins as a hate reaction. Hatred of those others who do not share my origins and who affront me personally, economically, and culturally: I then move back among 'my own', I stick to an archaic, primitive, 'common denominator'.

an unknown, uncertain future. The world of the ancestors is always the best, closer to the perfect origin and it therefore has more potency than the present or the future. The best in life lies in the past, the world of the ancestors and the origin. Anything passed down from the ancestors - such as culture, religion, and technology - must be maintained and protected and passed on to the next generation. The moral obligation to retain and continue traditions and conventions overrides the desire for change (Turaki 1991 : 134-135).

Western identity is an open identity. This excludes the idea of a fixed and stable identity and replaces it with the notion of a continuous and dynamic process of re-identification. The Western notion of identity must be linked to mentality or attitude, which indicates the volatile nature of Western identity. This does not mean that the West has no identity or that it is not interested in identity. The very process of continuous re-identification and relating to a multiplicity of identities emphasises its importance.

To Pobee this does not mean that Africa's identity is to be found solely in Africa. The search for African identity is not wholesale acceptance of either an African or a European oriented culture; it is an acceptance of what is good, presumably for the dignity and well-being of *homo africanus* (1993:394). There is not one African identity⁹. There is no going back to some supposedly pristine African (Pobee 1993:390). Pobee finds Africa's identity in present characteristics. African identities are tied to the question of who people are, and these questions are directly linked to their relationship with God (1993:392). This relationship has been inhibited by colonial attitudes. For the growth of a genuine African identity, Africa must be exorcised not only of the spirit of colonialism but also of a missionary paternalism. Africa must develop authentic African Theologies (1993:393, 395). Africa must find its identity in the religion typical of Africa. The development of authentic African theologies is a necessary undergirding of African identities (1993:395). Pobee identifies some characteristics typical of *homo africanus* (1993:396-398): the view of the sacred and secular as one; a communitarian epistemology and ontology; a distinguished sense of finitude, bound up with Africa's vulnerability and high mortality rate; the experience of reality through song, dance and ritual; and the culture of poverty (see Pasteur & Toldson 1982:93).

Africa must reject all factors that render African spiritual resources impotent. This means that, to a large extent, Western rationalistic theologies and ecclesiastic initiatives must be rejected, for the difference between the spiritualities of the African Initiated Churches and black mainline churches is conspicuous.

4.3 The ATRs as source of present African Theology: reading the African text

As we have seen, the effort to develop and reformulate an African Theology depends heavily upon African Traditional Religion which gives access to African lifestyles, myths and narratives, practices and rites, and the broad oral tradition. The ATRs' world-view, their view on God, nature, the ancestors, community life, medicine and healing, the past and future, and so forth, all provide the lens through which traditional Christian doctrines about God and human beings, Christ and sin, protology and eschatology and the like are being reinterpreted. Apart from the Bible as source for African theology, the ATRs provide the complementary source, without which present African theology is unthinkable. ATR ideas

9 This complicates the quest for African identity, especially in the light of its ethnic and cultural nature. African identity is local and contextual, bound to issues occupying a community's mind and influencing its world-view. African identity differs not only from community to community, but is quite different north and south of the Sahara (Bloch-Hoell 1992:101).

are, however, not used in a syncretistic or eclectic manner, nor does the concept of indigenisation¹⁰ simply fit the hermeneutical processes active in African theology. The practice of using culture as a determinative factor in formulating theology is foreign to the history of Christian theology, which alleges to use the Bible as the only source of God's revelation.

To understand the development of African theology it is imperative to know African world-view and culture, especially as represented by the ATRs. A few remarks will be made in this regard.

An interesting question is whether an implicit theology exists for the ATRs. Uka (1991:156-160) applied six determinative theological criteria (which Macquarie identified¹¹) to African Traditional Religion, to indicate its theological nature. Although African Traditional Religion fits these criteria, it does so in a peculiar way, which requires a specific hermeneutics to accompany this theology. These criteria are experience, revelation, scripture, tradition, culture and reason.

- *Religious experience*: The African as 'homo Africanus' knows and encounters the mysterious dimension of life - which forms the basis of the religion. This experience is reflected in its cosmogonic and other myths.
- *Revelation*: African religion is no book-religion and lacks this primary theological source. Africa is not, however, without its experience of revelation. The holy is revealed in nature, at special places, through symbols, idols and myths.
- *Scripture*: The text of African Traditional Religion is not written. Its sources include songs, arts and symbols, wisdom sayings, myths, legends, beliefs and customs, prayers, riddles, names of people and places, et cetera (Uka 1991 :1 57; Parratt 1983:90).
- Like scripture, the *traditions* of the ATRs are mainly *orally transmitted*, from generation to generation. African hermeneutics cannot be understood apart from the story-telling typical of its oral tradition. Oral theology has been described as theology in the open air, unrecorded theology, generally lost to libraries (Uka 1991 :163).
- African *reason* is integrated with all other faculties of the human being. The Africans believe in God and spirits but they are not interested in rationally defining these realities, and most of the theological terms, displaying a rational preference, mean nothing to them (see Uka 1991 :160).

Although these factors may be present in the ATRs, they do not as yet constitute a theology. This comes only to the fore to the extent that African theologians, coming from a Christian background, use these ideas to formulate an African theology. Bediako (1994:94; 1995:262) underscores the idea that it is in African Christianity that the primal heritage in Africa is likely to acquire a more enduring place. In this sense the ATR has become the

10 Bediako (1995:82) confirms in this regard that the struggle for the indigenisation of the church by the Christianisation of the pre-Christian heritage has passed. The debate will now rage over the abiding relevance of the old religions in the transition to the new Christianity in Africa.

11 One could be critical of the approach to once again use Western criteria against which to measure African religion. The norm remains Western even if African religion fulfils it in a peculiar way. African Traditional Religions, simply do not have a theology as it is known in Christianity. What they do have is a very rich religious experience and tradition, myths, symbols, rites and so on. These have been interpreted in the past by Westerners in an anthropological and not theological manner. It remains to be seen how African theologians will develop an African Christian theology which uses the ATRs as one source among others. It remains, however, almost impossible not to compare or equate religions with one other. It is just as impossible not to use identical or analogous terms, metaphors, symbols and so on to describe a specific religion. This should not be done with a feeling of inferiority or subservience to religious traditions other than one's own.

praeparatio theologia in the African context. What remains fascinating is the much-overlooked fact that ATR explains why Christianity has found fertile ground in Africa. The ATR has been an important preparation for the gospel in Africa and forms the major religious substrate for the idiom and existential experience of Christianity in African life (Bediako 1995:82-83). This implies that, on the one hand, African Traditional Religions can no longer be regarded as 'pagan' or idolatrous, and on the other this propensity of the ATRs for the gospel implies that Christianity can no longer be dismissed as a foreign religion and could be regarded as a natural complement of indigenous religious traditions (Schoffeleers 1988: 103).

The fear that Christianity will disappear from the African continent, or be replaced by the ATRs, is unfounded. One can expect, however, to find in future a very unique form of Christianity in Africa. In this regard Mbiti (see Bediako 1995:82) even speaks of a new era in African theology, in which African theologians themselves realise that the Christian way of life is in Africa to stay. The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) and the Fellowship of Mission Theologians from the Two-Thirds World are examples of this.

4.4 ATR ideas influencing the hermeneutics of African Theology

To understand the impact of ATR on African theology reference is made to the nature of the primal world-view as explicated by HW Turner (quoted in Bediako 1995:93-96). The following features are mentioned with reference to and critique of analogical notions in the West (and in Western theology):

- A sense of kinship with nature in which animals and plants, like human beings, have their own spiritual existence and place in the universe as interdependent parts of a whole. African ontology considers God, spirits, human, animals, plants, and inanimate creation to be one. To break up this unity is to destroy one or more of these modes of existence, and to destroy one is in effect to destroy all of them (see Bediako 1995:102). The idea of the interdependence and inter-relatedness of all of creation is increasingly acknowledged in Western world-view and cosmology. This 'ecological aspect' of primal religions explains the religious approach to the placing of human beings in the world. This attitude explains the appeal of natural theology, which is receiving renewed interest in the West.
- Human beings are finite, weak and impure or sinful, and stand in need of a power beyond their own. This conviction can be linked to the Christian idea of the sinful nature of human beings, but without the associated notion of guilt.
- Human beings are not alone in the universe and must respect the spiritual world of powers or beings more powerful and ultimate than themselves. Humans can enter into a relationship with the benevolent spirit-world and share in its powers and blessings and receive protection against evil forces. This belief can be related to Christian pneumatology, and sharply criticises Western autonomy and self centeredness. This aspect is sadly lacking in Western science and technology and is a prerequisite for the revival of spirituality.
- There is an acute sense of the reality of the afterlife, which explains the important place of ancestors. This openness towards life after death has become foreign to a Western closed and rationalistic world-view. The belief in the ancestors has interesting links with Christology.

- Humans live in a sacramental universe where there is no sharp division between the physical and the spiritual. One set of powers, principles and patterns runs through all things on earth and in the heavens and welds them into a unified cosmic system. There is also a new appreciation for these ideas in the Western world. A new biology, and a renewed interest in human consciousness and its relatedness to ideas from quantum physics, have brought this to our attention. The work of Pauli, Bohm and others testifies to this.
- The primal religious world-view is decidedly *this-worldly*. This *this-worldliness* encompasses God and humans in an abiding relationship which is the divine destiny of humankind, and the purpose of the universe (Bediako 1995:101). This holistic approach proposes an answer to Western dualism and the unhealthy and often artificial separation between the holy and the profane.

4.5 An example from the Ifa-tradition

Ifa (Eze 1993:266) is a process of seeking knowledge through divination. *Ifa* (also called the Eha process) is closely connected with the Nigerian Yoruba and has occupied an important place among African people for many centuries. The core of *Ifa* is a literary text comprising thousands of aphorisms, poems and riddles called *Odu*. *Odu* also contains elaborate exegesis on the text. *Esu* is the ashé principle, or the creative Word, as revealed yet hidden in the *Ifa* text (Eze 1993:273-274). When interpreting the text the babalawo (*Ifa*-follower) adopts a "hermeneutic" posture depicting the way of rational reflexivity, under the inspiration of *Esu*. As a way of inquiry *Ifa* values interpretation as a dialogical event, views knowledge as existential and not disinterested, does not see truth as a set of general principles universally applicable to particular situations, sees truth as a process, and regards rationality as non-hierarchical (Eze 1993:280).

Although the verses of the text are fixed, their interpretation is open. Textual objectivity is seen as submission of one's intuitions to the intersubjective process of inquiry, through which a possible (re)birth of understanding may occur. The meaning of a text is not imposed upon the inquirer who brings his/her pre-conceptions to determine what is objectively valid. Truth is the dialogue between the text, the Babalawo and the interpreter. *Ifa*-hermeneutics accept that our capacity for understanding is limited. It sees the nature of truth as limited, acknowledging its simultaneous accommodation of truth and untruth, concealment and unconcealment, presence and absence (Eze 1993:281-183).

These principles are sound and in line with some of the latest ideas found in Western hermeneutics. The advantage of *Ifa*-tradition, however, seems to be the existence of a rich textual tradition absent in many parts of Africa. The history of African Biblical hermeneutics seems to lag behind the insights produced by *Ifa*-hermeneutics.

4.6 Bridging the ATRs and mainline Christianity: The role of the African Initiated Churches (AICs)

Sarpong (1991: 288-289) says that the church has not become 'African' enough. He refers to the fascinating *Vatican Propagation of the Faith* issued in 1659 to missionaries in China and Indo-China, giving the following directives:

Put no obstacles in their way; and for no reason whatever should you persuade these people to change their rites, customs and ways of life unless these are obviously opposed to religion and good morals. For what is more absurd than to bring France and Spain or Italy or any other part of Europe into China? It is not these that you should bring but the

faith that does not spurn or reject any peoples' rights and customs, unless they are deprived, but, on the contrary, tries to keep them. Admire and praise what deserves to be respected.

The AICs in South Africa comprise about 7 000 groups of churches, of which the Zion Christian Church is the largest. According to the 1991 statistics the AICs in South Africa represented 31% of the Black population, the mainline Christian churches (excluding the AICs) 34 %, and the ATRs and those with no religion 33%. The respective percentages for the 1980 census were 17,7% (AICs), 53% (mainline Christian), and 28,4% (ATRs and no religion). This indicates a dramatic growth for the AICs, and a limited growth for the ATRs and those with no religion. The trend is clearly that of more and more black people leaving the mainline Christian churches for the AICs.

The AICs play a very important role on the African religious scene. They resemble at this stage, for many African theologians, the best example of the direction in which African religion should develop since they incorporate traditional and Christian (predominantly Pentecostal) ideas. They include predominantly disadvantaged people from the black working class.

The important place the Bible takes among them is well known. The booklet *Speaking for Ourselves*, states: 'We [the AICs] read the Bible as a book that comes from God and we take every word in the Bible seriously. Some people will say that we are therefore "fundamentalists". We do not know whether that word applies to us or not but we are not interested in any interpretation of the Bible that softens or waters down its message. We do not have the same problems about the Bible as White people have with their scientific mentality' (quoted by West 1991:158).

Their knowledge of the Bible is of an oral nature. The Bible as text makes no sense to them. Mosala, quoted by West (1991:159-160), argues that they do not appropriate the Bible in terms of what it says, but in terms of what it stands for - a canonical authority. Their hermeneutical weapons are drawn from the sense of mystery generated by the authority of a basically unknown Bible. They appropriate the mysteries of the Bible and of traditional society in order to cope with their perception/sense of being as a subordinate class. The 'mystery' of the symbols of the Bible is important in this hermeneutics of mystification. Mosala (West 1991:160) further indicates that race, gender and class are absent as hermeneutical factors in the AICs appropriation of the Bible, while African symbols and discourses are very much part thereof

5. Hermeneutical approaches of some African theologians: conflicting opinions on the source for African Theology

The African hermeneutical identity depends to a large extent on the theologians practicing this hermeneutics in doing their theology. Instead of concentrating on only one or two names we will try to give a picture of how some of the players approach the task. African theologians, as can be expected, differ in their hermeneutical approaches to African religion. Although it is a generalisation, one can distinguish two groups, referred to as the 'old guard' (including well-known theologians such as E W Fashole-Luke, Bolaji Idowu, John Mbiti, Itumeleng Mosala and Harry Sawyer) and the 'new guard' (including such theologians as Eboussi Boulaga, Jean-Marc Ela, Ambrose Moyo, Kwame Bediako and Mercy Oduyoye) (Rogers 1994:245-246). Most African theologians involve themselves, to a greater or lesser extent, in liberation issues and the post-colonial urge to find what is typical of African religion. As can be expected, their theologies are dynamic and this comes especially to the fore in the work of younger theologians more exposed to post-colonial conditions.

Their work should not, however, be pinned down to specific theological topics. As articulated by Sarpong (1991:288), the African can pursue a particular cause or act in a definite pattern for twenty years or so, and when the Westerner concludes that he will continue to do so for the rest of his life, the African suddenly breaks this pattern.

Old-guard theologians have taken Western Christian Theology, developed it in African terms, and called it 'indigenisation'. African traditional values and experiences have become a passive partner, subordinate to presumably superior Western Theology. They practice a Western form of hermeneutics which does not suit or serve the African context. They stress the centrality of the Bible and see it as the basic source for the development of African Christian Theology. They see the Old Testament, in particular, as a source for developing a *Theologia Africana*. Fashole-Luke, while favouring African traditional religion as a source of nourishment for African people, warns against the notion that African traditional religion is a preparation for the gospel (see Rogers 1994:247). Mbiti's approach is to take biblical themes, compare them to the African world-view and culture, and discuss the question whether biblical themes can be apprehended by Africans. African concepts like time and history, for example, cannot express the biblical understanding of eschatology. The African world-view is cyclical and the rhythm of nature ensures that the world will never come to an end. Idowu sees African traditional religion as a *praeparatio evangelica* in the sense that he believes that God has not left himself without witness in any nation, and that it is therefore necessary to find out what God has done, in what way he has been known and approached in Nigerian history and upon what, traditionally, Nigerians base their faith now and their hope for the afterlife (quoted in Rogers 1994:249).

New-guard theologians of the 1980s reject the indigenisation process, affirming African traditional values, avoiding what was called Western bourgeois values. Their primary work was produced in the 1980s, in response to the call for liberation in South African religious circles. Ogku Kalu and Manas Buthelezi (one of the leading figures in promoting Black Theology in South Africa, along with Basil Moore) were calling for scholars to use the hermeneutical perspective of liberation when interpreting the Bible. The content of the biblical message must be transposed from the first-century situation to that of the hearer in such a way that the biblical situational and indigenous elements are replaced by those of the twentieth-century hearer in South Africa (Rogers 1994:252-253).

In 1984 the Congress of African and European Theologians convened in the Cameroon to consider the appropriate forms of theology for African people. They stressed the need for a new hermeneutic biblical tradition reflecting the political realities (Rogers 1994:253-258). Theologians like Marc Ela, Mercy Oduyoye, Eboussi Boulage and Ambrose Moyo supported this approach. Boulage distrusted even the name 'African Christianity' because it symbolised African acceptance of the domination of Africa by the West on social, political, economic and scientific levels. He still accepts the Bible as part of Christianity from within an African perspective, and he favours an 'aesthetic Christianity' that responds to biblical themes of a universal nature. He sees the contribution of African Christians to African civilisation as still to come. Ela concentrates on an African reading of Exodus and voices his suspicion against enculturation/indigenisation. Africa has to develop its own models of faith. Mercy Oduyoye stresses that Christian theology in Africa must be constructed from the vantage point of the 'underside of history'. For her, the Old Testament provides the key to an authentic African Theology. Moyo calls for dialogue between Christianity and African traditional religion. ATR should not take precedence over biblical revelation. He wants to liberate the church in Africa from the white missionary establishment. The AICs are already free from this domination. Rogers (1994:258-260) concludes that while the 'Old Guard'

theologians were reluctant to enter the political realm, the 'New Guard' is strongly committed to a hermeneutic that is a response to the current 'oppressive regime' where and whenever it occurs. The 'Old Guard' was open to indigenisation whereas the 'New Guard' follows a style of confrontation. The 'Old Guard' saw African traditional religion as *praeparatio evangelica*, whereas the 'New Guard' considers the ATRs in their own right. However, both 'Old' and 'New Guard' theologians agree that an African perspective on the Bible is essential to buttress a 'living theology' appropriate to African Christian experience. African traditional religion is considered a worthy source for understanding African religiosity.

6. African Hermeneutics into the future

An exciting future, presenting many challenges, awaits African Hermeneutics. One could expect the liberation theme to remain important, but shift its emphasis to economic upliftment and African politics. The task of developing an African Religion, integrating Christian and African traditional ideas, is far from complete.

No single hermeneutical or methodological approach seems to fit the African context. A poly-methodological and multi-hermeneutical approach seems the best way to go. In the past the search for an appropriate approach was influenced by the idea that African religion is so different a type of study that it can be studied only anthropologically because of its ethnic and preliterate context. Evans-Pritchard (quoted by Metuh 1991 :147-148) has warned against the danger of reductionism in using any categorical approach to study African religion. African religious concepts and categories need not fit into the well-known Western ideas of monotheism, polytheism, pantheism and animism.

The vibrancy of African Theology and Hermeneutics will be determined not by the theologians, but by the spiritual reality of everyday life. This was the secret of African religion in the past and will be its force in future.

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