

**HUMAN VALUES AND RIGHTS - AN  
AFRICAN ASSESSMENT IN THE SEARCH FOR  
A CONSENSUS**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper is at issue with a finding in the HSRC Report on Intergroup Relations that "important points of agreement between a significant number of churches on ... basic values" could lead to consensus on fundamental human rights in South Africa.

Assuming that, by using the word Religion, the Committee meant Christianity, the author argues - with reference, inter alia, to the Crusades and the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth century - that Christianity is itself so divided, that it could never be a unifying factor. It has become a religion of dogma and creed, rather than a way of life.

To find a common set of values, the primal world view of traditional African religion has an important contribution to offer. It teaches that the community is the centre of being, the first responsibility of every being, and also larger than the sum total of the people, fauna and flora that make it up.

The author concludes that three cardinal principles emerging from this primal world view could form a base upon which some reconciliation could be reached:

- \* belonging: humans, animals, plants - they all belong together, not in isolation;
- \* community is primary: because everything belongs, being can only be in community;
- \* participation: because all things possess vital force, they all become life forces, and participate in one another.

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The HSRC Report on Intergroup Relations comes down heavily on the conviction that in and through 'Religion' some ground for reconciliation of the various positions in South Africa can be found. The Committee professes to have found "important points of agreement between a significant number of Churches on the basic values that are essential for the survival of society" (p 72). These values, it holds, would then lead to consensus as to what are fundamental human rights for individuals and groups.

Indeed, this is the hope and prayer of every "religious" person or group of people always, and especially in a situation of crisis, which threatens to sweep all out of existence. One presumes that it was the underlying motive behind the State President's appearance at the Easter Assembly of the Zion Christian Church last year, namely, to seek out and to demonstrate the consensus between the religiosity he stands within and that of the ZCC. In fact, it was there for the first time that a White political leader of his persuasion in South Africa ever declared that "We are one people!" Not many Africans who saw that on their TV screens were taken for a ride. Therefore, it was no wonder that very soon that cordial consensus and sweet agreeableness was proved hollow by an incident which the media deftly played down:- when Bishop Lekganyane, head of ZCC, Rolls-Royced into the Union Buildings, not to return His Excellency's "Christian" visit, but to register his righteous indignation at the shooting dead by the South African Police

of one or more of his peace-loving, righteous-living congregants.

### **The HSRC Report's limited meaning of the word "religion"**

The reader of the HSRC Committee report is bound to notice the loose use the Committee makes of the word "religion," (or is it a "limited use?"). While noting that there are other religious groups represented in the South African society which need to be reconciled, namely, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews and African Traditional Religionists, the report nevertheless explicitly states that the conclusions it comes to about the possibility of consensus on basic 'human' rights are drawn from consultations restricted only to the representatives of the various manifestations of the Christian Faith. Already this is evidence of the arrogance and insensitivity of the religion of the authors (Christianity). Right at the beginning, in the choice of material for research by the enquirers, we see displayed a differentiation and prejudice as to what will be regarded as "religious" values.

This prejudice and under-estimation of the religions of other peoples is of the very essence of Christianity. While this quality - the intolerance to other expressions of religiosity - can be traced to its origins in the Middle East whose languages have provided it with vocabulary like "Kaffir" and concepts like "heathen," it has been intensified prodigiously with the spread of Christianity to, and association with the civilization and peoples of Central and Western Europe, so that as late as the 1980's Collins English Dictionary can still explain a "heathen" as "an uncivilized person."

This renders "religion" a prerogative of the "civilized people" or "the higher races" (of Europe). What the other peoples of the world practise are mere "pagan beliefs and customs." Then proselytization by the Christian therefore becomes a noble thing and brings in a brand-new word into the vocabularies of people, for example "evangelization," and the Christian faith becomes "religion," the norm, the prism through which other human religions are tested and always found wanting.

We need to look a little closer at what the Western civilized person - this paragon of humanity - understands of his religion, Christianity. Mostly to him/her - here I mean the everyday person, and not the professors, theologians and pastors who are employed in nauseating numbers to polish and shine the article for popular marketing to ignorant and innocent "heathens" - an affirmation, acceptance and confession of dogma supposed to be derived from, and taught by a controversial man of the Jewish faith and race many centuries ago.<sup>1</sup> Although this Jesus of Nazareth is preached as "the Prince of peace" and himself quoted as having declared: "My peace I give to you," his disciples and followers through the ages have persistently lived in conflict and at war with one another, and with the world at large, so that it is the other words, also attributed to him, which seem to characterize the Faith, namely, "I have come to cast fire upon the earth.... Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? I tell you No; rather I have brought division" (Lk 12:49a, 51). Indeed, a backward look at history admits to the existence of wars and intergroup conflict before the advent of Christianity. What is disturbing is that this Christianity, which today we seek to apply as medicine to our intergroup struggles, has not done much to reduce their intensity and spread. On the contrary, because of its in-built intolerance, Christianity appears to have exacerbated war and conflict within and between groups and people. Some of the most devastating wars on earth have been fought by Christians and some of the great heroes of Western civilization have derived their fervour and drive out of their Christian commitment and conviction, that is, the Crusades and the religious wars of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. To this day Christian institutions send their agents with the armies to sustain and maintain and bless them so that they should kill others.

However much the HSRC Committee on the Study of Intergroup Relations believes it, I am not convinced that "Christi-

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1 I make no apologies for this caricature of Christianity, because I hold that the rarified article of the theological classroom and the pulpit are a luxury enjoyed by only a few, and do not really come into consideration on the market place, the battlefield or political forum, where human destinies are decided and kingdoms rise and fall.

anity" - for that is what they mean when they say "religion" - offers us any hope for use as a basis for creating the values which would help us solve our intergroup relations in this country or any other. It has become too tarnished over the years. Perhaps I should make it clear that by "Christianity" I do not necessarily mean the faith in Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ of God, but rather the various manifestations of the confessions of that Faith. The trouble with Christianity in this land, as elsewhere, is that it has ever so many expressions of itself, each with a peculiar history of its prejudices and hates; in other words, it is itself so very divided that it could never be a common or unifying factor.

In all fairness, the point needs to be made at this juncture that the weakness in Christianity, as we see it in its practice, is not genetic. It is acquired through, and because of its historical journey which brought it into union with what has been called Western civilization and its thought-world at the very beginning. With the acquisition of, and imprisonment within, and by the Graeco-Roman philosophical metaphysics and thought forms - Gnosticism and the STOA - Christianity lost the monism of its Jewish origins with its claims of wholeness and totality which I believe Jesus taught and died for. It became a religion of dogma and creeds, assensus and concepts carried in the brain and the head, rather than essentially of action and therefore "a way of life."

**Can the so-called "higher religions" offer consensus for human values?**

This hopeless prospect does not come at us only from seeking solution in the Christian faith or religion. Other so-called higher religions seem to suffer from the same inability to save. My colleague, Professor John Cumpsty, divides the religions of the world into two types: the world-affirming and the world-denying.

In world-denying religions - a typology into which most "higher" religions fall - the sincerity and depth of devotional achievement is attained by the degree to which the devotee withdraws from the humdrum world and becomes absorbed into the Divinity. The peak of unity with Divinity is outside and away from the concourse of human life and effort. This is of the essence of most Eastern religions, as well as of

Christian mysticism (it is actually this which has won the Eastern people some acceptance in Western estimation, so much so that their religiosity has even been offered a place for study in Western seats of learning). The point is that to a great extent they speak the same language as Western Christianity, metaphysics and withdrawal. We have to continue to say that Christianity only acquired the mystique of mysticism much later, and after contact with the Graeco-Roman world. I suggest that there cannot be a consensus of values of how to organize and get along with life-together as humans, across differing world views and religious spectrum out of a religion which sees elements in nature and creation 2 and even in mankind as "debased," "unclean," "profane" and "fallen." Such a religion is destined to emphasize the differences and distinctions in life. Even more tragic is the fact that such a religion is prone to promote arrogance and pomposity among its devotees, in spite of the fact that it starts off by preaching humility.

The world-affirming religions on the other hand accept all being, that is all that is as **Deo data**, "given by Divinity," and therefore good. Devotion then becomes unstinting and total self-loss in being. For instance, the words attributed to Jesus, "He that loses his life shall find it ...."

In these religions, life becomes the arena where Divinity is met and shared in. Most such religions have traditionally - because of the Western world taking to itself the prerogative of determining places for themselves and others - become classified as the "lower" religions or **Religions of the Lower Races** (the title of E W Smith's book). The most striking characteristic of this type of religion is the view of all natural phenomenon as of one origin. In that way it is already predisposed to accept co-existence between dissimilar elements as in **Ntsikana's Great Hymn**: "... who unites

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2 I have strong qualms about using the word "creation," for ATR reasons, which will become clearer later.

warring elements," or more poetically, "who gathers into one kraal both friend and foe" (A C Jordan).<sup>3</sup>

### **An African path towards common human values**

African Traditional Religion falls under Cumpsty's typology of world-affirming, monistic, primal religions (of the lower races). So also does the ancient Hebrew religion of the Old Testament on which Christianity has been based (hence, therefore, traces of animism and nature religion in the Old Testament). As we are attempting to find our way amidst all this pile of religions, we are in fact also trying to find our roots and returning to base. Recent contact with Judaism at a closer level in the last few years has only served to increase my African respect as I find in it many confirmations of the primal religion of Africa, as in the requirement of religion to be "a way of life," not dogma or words or creed, to which one has to give cerebral assensus.

Without necessarily tying all primal religions to it, I would say that the edifice of human values in African traditional religion rests mainly on two pillars: the community and human person (*motho-umntu*).

### **The community**

African religious insight parts company with the Western view right at the beginning. The myths of origin for it, Genesis - especially among the people of sub-equatorial Africa - already see people as in community: "The first people," the

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3 Early missionary records contain untold evidence to the effect that African society in its pre-Christian form was very accommodating to foreigners. If the stories of the man-eaters of Africa were true, the frontier boers like Buijs among the Xhosa on the banks of the Great Fish River would not have been able to live. In fact, young African radical **thinkers** blame this accommodating attitude for our woes today, for example the BaRolong of Thaba Nchu helping out stranded Voortrekkers, whose descendants have taken their land and divided them.

myth relates, "came out of a hole in the ground" or "out of a bed of reeds." "They came out," the myth continues, as if to forestall the feminist, "men with their wives (women), children and animals." It is not for me to retell the myth. Enough is that I should draw attention to the various aspects thereof and their implications for our discourse, for that reveals to us a picture of the peculiar expectations of what life is all about among these people.

The primary teaching of the myth is that people have always been in community, even in pre-existence, in the "hole in the ground" (in the Divinity - for even here too, "We come from God who is our home") (Wordsworth), "**Motho ke motho ka batho,**" the Sotho way. It is only in community that one becomes human. John Mbiti, the African theologian from Kenya, has very successfully captured the idea for us all when he transposed the Cartesian dictum, "I think, therefore I am" into "I belong, therefore I am." The penetration which that statement has into every human being, not only African, is evidence of its experienced veracity.

The primary centre of being is the community; it came first, and its demands to be preserved are primary in every situation, for it is only as it is so preserved that the people who make it up can survive. There is no being nor survival in isolation. By my reading, Africans have a tremendous difficulty with the concept "individual." Does such a thing exist?

The first responsibility of every being is service towards the preservation of the community. **Baloi** - sorcerers and wizards are the terrible, undesirable things that they are and expendable, because they operate against the good and well-being of the community. Community is larger than the sum total of the human beings who make it up. It includes the animals, the flora and all natural objects. Therefore, not only people have the "right to be", but every thing that is seen on earth. In fact, natural flora, rivers and mountains could claim even prior right to existence for they came first and the first people "found them there." The BaSotho told Cassalis: "Our first parents found them there" - like Divinity, **Umvelingxangi-Hlala-Hlalha-Macholo**, "they have always been."



Already, please note, we are functioning with a different mode of assessing values - not by might or strength or ability to dominate. Here the most acceptable mode of assessing worth is the element of "primogeniture" - "who came first," or rather, "what came first?" That is first. The reason is the view that all comes out of Divinity into humanly observable existence with others, animate and inanimate, in the continued welter of that Divinity. Therefore the consciousness of being human is not really that unique something to boast about, nor to give one licence to dominate other beings, animate or inanimate, for the animals, the flora and nature generally also have their consciousness. All consciousness emanates from, and is in fact a form of manifestation of the **source of being - Divinity.**

The foregoing inevitably has to dictate attitudes of approach to other beings, human and non-human. All are charged with, and are a seat of Divinity. So they must be approached with discretion. That is why a primal person will think twice and even pray, before he/she chops a tree even for firewood or goes out to hunt for food. Wherever it is done - as it must of necessity be done - a corresponding ritual of normalization and equilibration must be performed. (Thus we may find that the much ridiculed San feasting and dancing after the kill is, in fact, a service of worship as deep in meaningfulness as the Christian eucharist.) Nothing that exists is expendable or exploitable. Life is an entanglement of interdependence, one species on another. The elimination of the one ultimately affects the eliminator. The primary law of being is co-existence:

The key to an understanding of Bantu customs and institutions would thus appear to be the fact of community, unity of life. The handing on of this life, the sharing in this one life, is the first link which unites members of the community. The fact of contributing to its transmission, sharing, preservation or extension is the second element in vital union. (Mulago, 1969).

Until now the history of Africa has been written by Whites. As the Report we are dealing with observes, historiography, especially in this part of the world (Africa), leaves much to be desired, not necessarily intentional, but simply because we

are all conditioned and observe reality from a specific orientation. It is not true that the whole country was occupied by savage tribes, preying on one another. When Moffat finally stumbled upon the Batlaping, who were not a very highly considered group of Tswana people on the west of the land of the Tswana (near present-day Kuruman), he found in them:

"...a people unaccustomed to the control of other powers ... they were remarkable for their barbarous independence and national pride."

Their king Molehabangwe "appeared from universal testimony to have been a superior man, distinguished as statesman as well as warrior, whose kindness to strangers was proverbial..."

He "...was able to count fourteen considerable villages, the farthest distant about one and half miles; and I was informed there were many more towns I could not see." (Moffat).

The people of Africa lived in harmony with one another, otherwise they would not have survived: they co-existed with one another, accepting one another's right to be, belonging together, trading and inter-marrying with one another. When the White man came on the scene he was accepted just as another - indeed a peculiar species, but one with the others. That is why the trekboer and the missionary were able to settle among the people. In fact, *Difaqane* (Infecani) were a direct result of the introduction of this foreign element into the community of the peoples of Southern Africa, an element which was functioning on totally different rules of the game of life, disregarding the principles of co-existence, and the sanctity of being, and bent on domination, because at the heart of its Genesis-myth is written in that he shall "have dominion" over others. The accommodating, all-absorbing African monistic worldview opened the door for the subsequent easy conquest and subjugation by the Whites. Each group was functioning with different value systems: for example, a point of great discontent to this day, which, with all the reforms noised about, the Whites never seem even to think of reviewing, lies in the systems of land tenure!

### African traditional estimate of the human person

Human values cannot but be affected or even determined by the prevailing assessment, within the group under consideration, of what the Psalmist (8:4a) voices when he asks: "What is man...?" As can be guessed from the foregoing discussion on Community, African traditional view or estimate of **motho (umntu)** - the human person - is that of belonging and relationship. The human person is not a closed-in, self-containing, self-determining entity (individual?) of the Western world view (psychology?) derived from Greek Platonic metaphysics. Rather, **motho-umntu** conceptualizes a dynamo, generating and outgoing, relating and participating force or energy or power. Therefore, the observation of any human community at any one time - remember community encloses more than just the human elements - will reveal a cauldron of activity of relationships and interaction as human forces, indeed as well as non-human ones, interacting with one another. Fr Placide Tempels's **Bantu Philosophy** could find no better expression descriptive of this phenomenon out of his rich Thomistic Philosophical background than "force vitale." Quite correctly, he traced the "force vitale" to a **source** which he saw as in constant connection and contact and relationship, re-enforcing, vitalizing, that is, the real and original of the genre **force vitale**, out of which all life emanates. An amazing similarity between this expression in Western terms of African being; and the experience in Judaism expressed in the "I-Thou" concept taught by Martin Buber. But even Placide Tempels had not really arrived at the heart of African meaning yet. It took an African, raised in the same Thomistic philosophy of Placide Tempels, but observing and speaking out of the conditioning of his Africanness, Monsgr Vincent Mulago, to capture the fluidity and the dynamism involved in the African experience of being. He describes it as **participation vitale**:

This participating seems to fulfil the function of integrating particular beings and placing them within the whole plan of the visible and invisible world, so that each reality finds its place and its truth in its connection and relationship with the whole. Participation may help to meet the need for a doctrine more deeply rooted in concrete and universal life, more sensitive to all experiences of humanity, more

responsive to the aspirations of the human soul and human thought.

For our purposes, it is enough to note that whatever else we can derive from primal African religious conceptions of being, it is always in community of beings in vital participation. It is worthy to note that Vincent Mulago's observations, as indeed Placide Tempels's, were not a theoretical formulation knit and wound up in a theology or philosophy classroom, but rather the result of field research in process of seeking how best to minister to an African community (in Burundi).

One further unique element in this primal African world view is the understanding of the "with-it-ness" of the Divinity in affairs. (I cannot say human affairs because there is always more than the humans present in community and It's (Divinity's) sphere of activity is much larger, deeper and wider than the human and its interests.) Divinity is not something out there, to be reached out to at set times when expedient, or in specially erected shrines and temples. It is here and now, in every-one and in every-thing and every moment. There is no escape from it. It is second nature - no, it is nature itself! The understanding is that all life is charged with **vital force** so that everything is sharing (participating) in the Life of the Force. The poor Westerner has attempted to describe this phenomenon in many ways in different places: theology, philosophy and social anthropology. He has put all kinds of names to it: manna, animism, Pantheism, dynamism, etc. Perhaps the nearest appropriate term is that used by Bishop John Robinson, namely, **Pan-en-theism**, a concept which these days seems to appear more easily among high calibre scientists (Alister Hardy: **The Biology of God**, and Teilhard de Chardin) than be entertained by theologians and scholars of Religion.

#### **What life values can be derived out of the African world view?**

Summed up, I believe that we who come from out of a primal world view, bring a totally different expectation from our life-together into the discussion with people who claim as their base a Graeco-Roman metaphysical background. Two hundred years of Christian missionary brainwashing has not erased it altogether. (This is subject matter for another long

treatment. Suffice it to say that that fact is something to be applauded!) Instead, in the face of a crisis of destruction of the things it owes its being and origins to - community, **botho** - the understanding of human-ness - and the consequent disregard of Divinity (the abomination of Desolation standing in the Holy Place!), Africans are driven to look for moorings out of their past. And... who does not do that in a time of crisis?

It must be observed by us peddlars of religious insights and motivations, that the idea of human rights in the modern world is of secular origin. It was the United Nations, after the world had been driven to the brink of destruction (again by Western inhumanity!), which first came up with a set of these inalienable rights for every human. It is worthy of noting that it was congregated "humanity" - **batho** - people, and not churches, nor religionists who devised this set of principles for co-existence. Coming out of differing cultures and world views and religions, they sought and found a common base. Considering the sophistication of the people who participated in the exercise, it is amazing how fundamental and down to earth these principles have turned out to be.

As has been pointed out from the very beginning, I discount "Christianity" as it has been handed down to mankind by the West - and that is about all there is of it still left, except in the Eastern Orthodox Churches! - and conclude that it cannot bring forth a consensus of values which would be acceptable to all humanity for life-together, either in this country or on this earth. To find a common set of values, we shall all need to go further back, and dig out of our common primal experience of being human (that is our common factor!). What were the values which guided human discourse and traffic before they became "Christian"? Unfortunately, Western humanity, because of its checkered history, has gathered a great deal of lumber, which it calls by various names: "Christianity," "civilization," and has developed a sad amnesia as to its origins. It has become difficult, therefore, to find common ground for discussion about a common human escape door in this world. To do it on Western world view terms sounds so hollow and artificial, therefore, until we have all been stripped of our subsequent acquisitions and face each other in our primal nakedness. Naturally, those who have acquired most of this lumber on the human road will be the greater losers. Hence their constant insistence that all dialogue and discussion be on their terms, which

they declare are "civilized," or "Christian," but are in fact superficial, contrived and therefore self-defeating in their purposes!

In returning to our primal world view, three cardinal points emerge as forming a base upon which some reconciliation of the various strands of our life-together could be reached, that is, the total community of being:

a) **Belonging**

The principle is that everything and all belong: humans, animals and flora. Whatever is, belongs. There is no being in isolation. All belong together because (and this is the religious element to it!) all being inheres in the **source of being** - **Die Quelle des Lebens**, the Germans say - **force vitale**. Out of this and in this too, paradoxically, all comes and is held together.

b) **Community is primary**

Because of a) therefore, being is and can only be in community. Single things (persons and things animate and inanimate) belong to communities, and communities of these singles to even larger communities of communities, in spiralling circles like those on a placid pond into which a stone is thrown. (This becomes very clear when one studies any African social system, see G M Setiloane: **Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana**, ch 2, Social Organisation.) Disturbance at any one point disrupts the whole. Therefore community needs to be guarded very jealously in order that the life of all the elements that compose it can be preserved. Community, however, does not exist of itself (nothing exists of itself!), but does so, so that it can pass on the principles of being which are inevitably connected by the principle of belonging to other wider circles, so that together they form one great symphony of being.

c) **Participation**

We only need to mention this to conscientize the plastic, statically conceiving Western mentality to what appears so difficult for it to grasp. It has already come out in the last two principles: because things possess **vital force**, they all become life forces and react to and interact with one another; that is, they participate in one another. Life is dynamic participation, a constant and ever self-generating

interaction within the equally dynamic participating and interacting **force vitale**:

Participation is the element of connection, the element which unites different beings as beings, as substances, without confusing them. It is the pivot of the relationships between members of the same community, the link which binds together individuals and groups, the ultimate meaning, not only of the unity which is personal to each man, but of that unity in multiplicity, that totality, that concentric harmonic unity of the visible and invisible world. (Mulago).