

Christ in the Context of the African World View

Koos van Rooy

The topic on which I was originally asked to speak was formulated: “Christ and the African Mind”. I had several reservations about this formulation. In the first place, I could just imagine how our African brothers would react to this. I can already hear them protesting against what they would surely experience as a paternalistic attitude: “What is wrong with the African mind? In what respect does it differ from the white mind? Do you ever consider discussing the topic: Christ and the white mind?”

Secondly, what does it mean? Surely it cannot refer to the *mechanics* of the minds of Africans, since we would all agree that the mind of an African works the same way, physically, as that of any other people.

When I consulted about the topic with the chairman, it became clear that what was really intended, was the topic as stated here, to wit: “Christ in the context of the African world view”.

I am grateful for the opportunity of discussing this with fellow evangelicals, since I have experienced it as a frustrating exercise to speak of these things in the company of liberal ecumenical theologians, who do not recognise the radical difference between a person in his “natural” state and a regenerated person. If we accept the authority of Scripture, we would all agree that Christ is a stranger in the cultural context of any natural people untouched by the transforming grace of the Holy Spirit.

The Strangeness of Christ

Christ is an offence to Jews, foolishness to Greeks (1 Cor. 1:23), a coward to Germans, too emotional for the English, too practical for Indians, too impractical for Americans, too conciliatory for Afrikaners, too unpliant for Africans, and, because of the message of the cross and cross-bearing, just plain unacceptable to all of them. Christ can never be anything but a stranger in any unregenerate culture. I am therefore not going to ask: *How does Christ fit into an African culture?* (He does not!), or: *How can Christ be Africanized?* (He cannot be Africanized, Europeanized or Americanized and still remain the genuine Christ!). What I am going to try to demonstrate is how a genuine encounter with Christ will change the African world view.

The African World View

Despite the inroads made by the Christian faith and the influence of western society, the traditional African world view is still alive and kicking. I intend to discuss the following aspects of the African world view as they affect its response to Christ:

- * the idea of the limited good,
- * vital force,
- * the hierarchy of forces, God, spirits and mediators,
- * the impersonal god,
- * the manipulation of power,
- * eschatology, the resurrection and our final destiny,
- * taboo and holiness,

- * sin and guilt, judgement, propitiation and reconciliation,
- * salvation.

The Idea of the Limited Cosmic Good

I have elsewhere demonstrated the importance of this principle, which amounts to the following: There is only a limited amount of good (that is: life force, good luck, prestige, influence, children, possessions) in the cosmos. Each person is allotted a fixed quantity of this good. It can only be increased at the expense of someone else, by way of black magic, ritual murder or theft.

The response of the person of Christ to this idea is manifold.

In the first place, he is the expression of God's unlimited, boundless love. The biblical idea of "good" in this sense is Christ himself, being filled with the Holy Spirit and becoming like Christ (See Luke 11:13 as compared to Matthew 7:11 [the Holy Spirit is the summary of all that is good]; see also Romans 8:28 [becoming like Christ is the highest good, the greatest bliss]).

In the second place, life in Christ is unlimited. In his own words: "I have come so that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

Thirdly, in Christ one does not increase one's vital force by taking it away from someone else, but by surrendering one's life to Christ. In order to live and bear fruit, one must die to the world (John 12:24); in order to have, one must give away (2 Cor. 9:6-8).

Vital Force and Power

Closely related to the idea of the limited good, is the concept of vital force. Vital force is the main manifestation of the cosmic good. Maintaining or increasing one's vital force is one's main object in life. Decrease of vital force is the greatest fear. Magic is the most important means of either increasing one's own vital force or taking away that of one's enemies.

According to Scripture, Christ is our life. See Philippians 1:21; Col. 3:4. The only way to have life, is by trustful surrender to him (1 John 3:14; 5:12). In Africa, the process of the decrease of one's vital force ends in death, and after death the process is not halted, but seems to continue until one vanishes into oblivion and is no longer remembered by any of one's descendents. Paradoxically, important ancestors, chiefs and heroes seem to increase, if not in vital force, at least in the power they exert on the living. A person who trusts in Christ, however, has life eternal from the moment of faith and the new birth (John 5:24; 6:47). On the one hand, by being united to Christ he shares in the death of Christ, so that one may rightly say to him, "You have died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (Col 3:3). On the other hand, that person has also risen together with Christ (Col. 3:1). He shall never die (John 11:25-26). Life is obtained by dying to oneself, the world and one's own desires, and sharing in the life of Christ. Without this process of dying, which is the outcome of true faith, there is no new and eternal life.

The Hierarchy of Forces, God, Spirits and Mediators

According to the African world view, every person, living being or object is a force. These forces exist in a strict hierarchical order, which can be compared to a ladder. At the top of the ladder stands God, in whichever way he is conceived by different peoples. Under him are the first chiefs and ancestors, followed by the great living chiefs, their senior subjects, the family heads, and down the ladder with senior wives, junior wives, senior children, up to the youngest child of the commoner. Animals and even inanimate objects have their own place in this hierarchy.

This hierarchical structure of the cosmos and society has important implications for religious views. In the first place, *ethics* are largely determined by this structure. What is right or wrong is largely determined by keeping in mind the hierarchical structure, that is, knowing one's own place and keeping to it, and observing the taboos connected to it. The moral element of obedience to the personal will of a personal God, and love for this personal God and for one's neighbour, is to a large extent displaced by this structure. God is conceived in many different ways by different peoples in Africa, but all of them share this one aspect, that God is very remote, and is hardly interested in the doings of humans on earth. Questions of right or wrong do not concern him, as long as we observe the rules of seniority and taboo.

Furthermore, *interaction* among the different steps of this hierarchical ladder is more or less limited to the adjoining steps. A commoner has no direct access to the paramount chief, and much less to God. The rare cases where individuals sometimes address the supreme God of creation are exceptions to this rule. Normally "water does not run past a hole", that means: One does not communicate directly with chiefs and with God, but by way of intermediaries.

What are the implications of this for the view about Christ Jesus? I would say that this explains why such a large percentage of African church members do not take their refuge in Christ in times of trouble and distress, but rather invoke the help of the ancestor spirits. Those are near them in the hierarchical ladder. They are supposed to be interested in the weal and woe of the living. Christ is too remote, with God the Father, far above mortals. Logically he can only be approached through a long series of intermediaries. What is more: He cannot be expected to intercede with God the Father on behalf of us for our sins. What are our sins? They are transgressions against the laws of seniority and taboo, which bring automatic retribution with them. They cannot be forgiven. Punishment might at its best be forestalled by magical means. Actually, religion in Africa, like in the the ancient Near East and among our Greek, Roman and German ancestors, was not the joyful, loving service of a loving and faithful God, but rather a form of magical manipulation of the gods. In this magical world view, therefore, Christ as mediator has no place and function. In order to understand his ministry, the world view must change first.

Scripture breaks through this world view and fundamentally changes it. Jesus Christ does the unthinkable. He disregards the order of hierarchy, bridges the vast chasm between God and us, and becomes one of us, subject to all our sufferings and weakness, even our death. He becomes like one of the lowest among us, washes the feet of his disciples, and leaves that action as an example to them (John 13:14-15; see also Mt. 20:25-28).

As for being the Mediator, Jesus Christ, being truly God and truly man, is the only one through whom we have access to God. This access is direct. No intermediaries are required.

This truth should be driven home to church members in Africa before they can be truly Christians, because otherwise Christ will never make any sense to them.

Another theme which is of the utmost importance when the gospel of Jesus Christ confronts the people of Africa, is that of Christ the Conqueror. There are so many fearful spiritual powers in Africa: malevolent spirits, demons, witches. But Scripture teaches us that Christ, in whom “all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form”, has “disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Col. 2:9,15). And this he did as the outcome and inevitable result of his self-humiliation, about which we read in Philip. 2:6-11. All authority has been given to Him (Mt. 28:18), and we who yielded our lives to Him in faith, share in that victory, being the body of which he is the head (Eph. 1:22-23). For this reason there is a general feeling among committed Christians that witchcraft and malevolent spiritual powers are harmless against them.

The Impersonal God

The Bantu languages do not distinguish between “person” in the sense of “a personal, possibly spiritual and superhuman, being” and “a human being”. In those languages, a person means “a human being” and nothing else. To say that *Unkulunkulu ngumuntu* means that God is “a human being”, not “a personal being”. This complicates the matter of expressing in Bantu languages the idea of “a personal God”. The matter is complicated even further by the fact that some languages such as Sotho and Tsonga use impersonal grammatical concords for God.

Although in most African cultures God is conceived in vaguely personal terms, and in some cases even in explicitly personal terms, there are a number of peoples among whom the original concept of God is that of an impersonal power. Striking examples are that of *Modimo* of the Sotho/Tswana peoples, for which even in Christian Bible translations the impersonal grammatical forms are still used, and *Imana* of Rwanda and Burundi. Christian theologians such as Gabriel Setiloane argue very strongly that this impersonal concept of God is more acceptable than that of the Bible. Setiloane goes so far as to speak of God as *IT*. He agrees with John Robinson that God is not a personal Being, but rather the impersonal “Ground of our existence”.

Now from a pure philosophical angle, disregarding God’s revelation about Himself in Scripture, this approach is possible. But the moment one starts listening seriously to God’s revelation in the Bible, it becomes impossible. Quite apart from the strongly personal representation of God in the Old Testament, the revelation in Jesus Christ highlights the personal character of our God. Jesus Christ is a person. If He is “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Heb. 1:3); “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15); if “all the fullness of the Deity lives in Christ in bodily form” (Col. 2:9); if it is true that “anyone who has seen Jesus Christ has seen the Father” (John 14:9); and if it is therefore true that Jesus Christ is the perfect revelation of the Father, then God can never be conceived in impersonal terms. However inadequate our conception of God may be, we have to take this revelation in Jesus Christ seriously and think of Him in personal terms: our Father, who gave his only Son to die for us, because he loves us, is grieved by our sins, and rejoices in our well-being.

Since God is personal, he expects us to seek personal fellowship with Him. This is the essence of true religion. Without this personal fellowship, we may be Christians in the cultural sense, but we cannot call ourselves genuine Christians.

The Manipulation of Power

Like in the ancient Near East, religion in Africa is to a large extent interwoven with magic. Communication with spirits is a form of magic, and on the other hand the magical rites for putting a curse on someone else is often accompanied by a prayer to one's ancestors as an essential part of it. Religion is therefore usually a form of manipulation of powers rather than of obedience to God and communion with God. African people are impressed by power, positive as well as negative power, white as well as black magic. For the same reason, African church members seem to be obsessed with power. People expect and demand power rather than saintliness from their leaders. Leaders should be able to heal the sick and protect them from magic. Having many wives, although diametrically opposed to Scriptural requirements for Christian ministers, is regarded as a sign of power and therefore a recommendation rather than a disqualification of a person as leader of the church.

Against this background, Christ's weakness and poverty make no sense. A weak, poor and suffering Saviour is an embarrassment. In all fairness one should realise that the apparent power and affluence of white Christians, whom African Christians are inclined to take as role models, unfortunately serve to strengthen that perception. Yet, in order to be truly Christian, African church members need to understand and accept for themselves the principle that Paul laid down: "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10b). One needs to be stripped of one's own power in order to be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. But then white Christians should also live lives which reflect the same attitude.

Granted that the apostle Paul claimed to present the gospel of Jesus Christ "with a demonstration of the Spirit's power" (1 Cor. 2:4). However, this power was not the power of a strong, dominant personality. It was God's power manifested in his weakness, when he came to the Corinthians "in weakness and fear, and with much trembling". In the light of this, we should be very cautious of the so-called "power evangelism". There might be a strong element of temptation, and if driven too far, even of paganism, in it.

Eschatology and our Final Destiny

In Bantu Africa, there is no sense of separation between good and evil people at or after death. All chiefs are still chiefs in the spirit world, witches are still witches, thieves are still thieves. The whole family is transposed to another sphere, in another form of existence, without separation or retribution. One of the best ways to ascertain to what extent an African Christian has reoriented his world view towards Scripture, is to ask him the question: what becomes of someone after his death. If he answers, "A person goes to God", or: "to his ancestors", the chances are that that person has not yet grasped what the Christian teaching about salvation is all about. If, on the other hand, the person answers the question by first posing the question, "What kind of a person? A believer or an unbeliever?" one can be fairly sure that this person has grasped what salvation means, and therefore also what Christ and his death means. The fact is that many African Christians, including many leaders of churches, still think and teach that every one except the very bad ones is saved, not on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ, but against the background of the African idea of the basic

unity of the people, as manifested in the African idea of an unbroken line after death. So even in the eschatology there is no real place for Christ and his saving work. To integrate into their faith texts such as the parable of The rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16), and of the Narrow and the Wide Gates (Matthew 7:123-14), is very difficult for African Christians who still stand with one foot in their traditional world view. Judgement is, however, an integral part of the apostolic teaching of the time to come. It cannot be ignored in Christian teaching.

All of us are aware that modern, liberal Christians hold to the same universalistic beliefs. However, the background in their case is not the traditional African idea of continuity, but a conscious rejection of the plain teaching of Scripture about eternal punishment, as being “inhuman” and offensive to the thoughts of the unregenerate person.

There is in Africa outside the influence of the Christian gospel no trace whatsoever of the idea of *the resurrection of the body*. The future of humanity is pictured as a rather sad, vulnerable existence in a shadowy spirit world. Many sincere Christians from Africa are shocked when they finally, after many years of hearing the gospel, suddenly realise that, because Jesus conquered death, believers actually have a hope of resurrection of the body in a glorious state.

The preaching about the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ should take this problem into account and address it, especially at Easter, which is regularly observed in almost all Christian denominations. In the apostolic preaching, this is the climax of the gospel message. Africa will remain spiritually impoverished if this truth is not understood and the teaching of the rich fruits of the victory of Christ over death and our being resurrected to a new life remain unintegrated into their faith.

Taboo and Holiness

In Scripture, there are two aspects of holiness. There is the idea of dangerous spirit power, of the “*numinous*”. But closely related to it there is the other aspect of the same concept, to wit: *moral perfection*. In Scripture, these two aspects are closely related. God’s holiness means that he is sinless, and that he hates sin, therefore it is dangerous for a sinner to approach him. A sinner deserves to be consumed in the fire of God’s holiness, not in the first place because of his lowly position on the hierarchical ladder, but because of his sinfulness and moral imperfection. Before the Fall, there seems to have been no fear of the presence of God. God used to visit his children “in the evening cool” (Gen. 3:8). After the Fall, man realises that he is naked and hides from God. God has become a danger.

In Africa, there is no trace of a moral element in those concepts that approach the biblical idea of holiness. God’s holiness means that he is dangerous and unapproachable, not because of the sinfulness of man, but because God is so high up on the hierarchical ladder, and we so low down. Here, only taboo comes into play, not God’s moral perfection or man’s imperfection.

The same one-sided or even false idea of holiness can be perceived in some of the African independent churches. Shembe in Kwa Zulu is venerated as a very holy man. When at a gathering of the congregation an object representing the late Isaiah Shembe is carried

through the gathering, the whole assembly prostrates itself and calls out, “Uyingwele! Uyingwele!” (“He is holy, holy!”). But this “holiness” is pure taboo, spirit power of seniority; the element of moral perfection is entirely absent. The same idea is expressed when all visitors are required to go barefoot when visiting Ekuphakameni, the holy place of Shembe’s AmaNazaretha.

In Jesus Christ, especially in his death on the cross, God’s holiness is illustrated in an incomparable way. Christ was crucified because of God’s abhorrence of sin. But the aspect of divine love, which according to Hosea and the New Testament is a very important aspect of God’s holiness, is also manifested in an incomparable way in the cross of Christ.

It follows as a matter of course that the teaching about God’s holiness, who so hates our sin that he could not forgive it unless his beloved Son paid the penalty for it on the cross, must be a very prominent theme of gospel teaching in Africa. Actually, this is the aspect of the Christian faith which has been most prominent during genuine revivals, in times when the Holy Spirit worked mightily in the world and in the church. He first convinced the world of sin and righteousness and judgement before a holy God (John 16:8).

But if God is holy, he also demands holiness from us: “Be holy, because I am holy” (1 Peter 1:16). He is concerned about our life-style. Holiness means growing to be like Christ in his love and purity.

Sin and Guilt, Judgement, Propitiation and Reconciliation

As has already been pointed out, in Africa, sin and guilt against God is more or less limited to transgression of taboos. There is another very important aspect of sin, which does have a relational character, and that is the question of offences in the human sphere, in inter-personal relations. *Ubuntu*, the correct attitude to one’s neighbours, prescribes that one must be friendly, considerate and respectful towards one’s family and the neighbours from one’s own group. Stinginess, greed, ambition, inflexibility and a quarrelsome nature is unacceptable. Sin which results in guilt almost exclusively consists of transgressing against these norms of inter-personal behaviour.

Expiation, propitiation, forgiveness and reconciliation is limited to the human sphere, and in this context there is no need of a divine mediator like Jesus Christ. Disturbed relations between humans can be restored by humans and by human penalties.

Taking this into account, it becomes clear that the holiness, righteousness and judgement of God, against whom sin is committed in the first place (See Ps. 51:4!!), is a very important aspect of the Christian message for Africa -- just as important as it is for a modern Europe for which religion and even God himself seem to have become a consumer article which can be used or discarded as suits the consumer. Preaching the holiness of God is the way in which the Spirit of God convinces us of sin and guilt, and by which he leads us to the point where we realise our lost condition before a holy God, so that it becomes unbearable for us to live without Jesus Christ, his sacrifice and forgiveness by his blood.

Salvation

In Africa, *salvation* means to be saved from immediate threats of danger and sickness -- everything which threatens to diminish one's vital force. The means of salvation is either magical manipulation of forces, or in the case of threats which have no hidden cause, help from one's friends.

Again, it becomes clear that against this background Jesus Christ has no function. Only if in the communication of the gospel is it made clear that our greatest need is not physical healing or protection against black magic, but to be reconciled to God, then the message about Jesus Christ and his sacrifice will become meaningful.

Breaking down in order to build

At the calling of Jeremiah God gave him the command *to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant (Jer. 1:10)*. When the gospel of Jesus Christ confronts any culture, it first uproots and tears down, and only afterwards builds and plants. It tears down the old ideological framework, and replaces it with a new, biblical one, with Christ as its centre.

There are indeed some positive points of contact. These are not to be found in interpreting Christ as the Great Ancestor Spirit, as some scholars would like to do, but indeed as our Great Brother (Heb. 2:11-12). In Africa, brotherhood and rank within this brotherhood is very important. According to the gospel of Christ, we have our own relation, our brother, with God in heaven. He is the firstborn from death, and therefore will always be our senior Brother, yet our own.