

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Problem

One of the African theologians, Kinoti (1992:73) has compared the moral crises which African Christianity is facing today to the story of a hyena who was following the aroma of meat being barbecued. When the footpath forked, he did not know which one to take. For fear of losing out if he would follow only one of the foot paths, he decided to put one leg in one footpath and the other leg in another foot path. As the paths started drifting further apart, he ended up splitting in the middle. As he aptly puts it:

Today Africa is at a crossroad and the path has forked. In terms of everyday conduct for individuals and communities there is uncertainty, disillusionment and even despair. There is much grumbling and lamentation. It is not difficult to conclude that people lament and grumble because they possess some knowledge of traditional African morality which ensured the well being of communities and individuals alike. That morality has been superimposed, and in certain respects rudely crossed, by other influences of the day and age in which we find ourselves.

Similar sentiments have been echoed by other African moral theologians. As Chipenda (1979:34) tauntingly puts it, any theology that fails to take culture seriously is doomed to failure.

The relationship between African culture and the Bible is subject to much debate (see 1965:1-20, Mbiti 1977:27f). The question often asked is whether an African Christian should use his culture and other nonbiblical materials as sources of authority in Christian ethical decision making or use Scripture only. To take African culture seriously in Christian ethical decision making seemingly does appear to contradict the Protestant doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. If the Bible should be seen as the only authoritative source for Christian ethical decision making, then African culture may not play any normative role in Christian ethical decision making. The problem we would like to address in this dissertation is therefore whether both the authority of the Bible and African culture can be taken seriously in Christian ethical decision making. The famous theologian Saint Augustine talked about ethics as love and doing what we must, i.e. freedom and bondage as key in Christian ethics. We too must look at how African Christians may make decisions in love and doing what God wants us to do.

It needs to be stated that this study is not meant to give a clear cut directive on Christian ethical decision making in Africa, but rather to elicit individual decisions by providing material for making the decisions.

## **1.2. The main argument**

Our main argument is that African Christians can take the authority of the Bible in moral decision making seriously and still hold on to some of their customs because:

First, the Protestant slogan *sola Scriptura* does not imply an exclusivistic interpretation and application of Scripture. There is always room for cultural and social factors to play a role as sources for moral decision making (Gustafson 1978:26-233).

Second, when exegesis is done from an African Christian perspective, it becomes clear that the Bible does not, in fact, unambiguously prohibit certain African customs and practices (for example polygamy). We are approaching this study as African Christians (Bujo 1987:39-130). By African Christian we mean that we are sensitive to African culture while at the same time we want to be faithful to the Christian faith.

Third, the Bible itself reflects the influence of cultural and social factors on religious and moral beliefs. In fact, the Jewish customs in the Old Testament which refer to polygamy appear to be very similar to the African customs. Thus, the diversity in the moral messages of the Bible should make us realise that, just like Africa, it too is a product of diverse cultural views.

Fourth, if the specific cultural and social context of moral decision making is not taken seriously, one can easily prescribe conduct which is harmful to the African people and could, therefore, be morally unacceptable to the Christian church. This is, for example, the case when people who were polygamists before they became Christians are asked to divorce their second or third wives before they can be accepted as full communicant church members in an African context. One has to take the consequences of what is morally prescribed in the local context into account. To ask polygamists to divorce their

other wives before they can be allowed as full communicant members is to ask them to commit a sin in order to correct another sin. Gustafson (1988:15) hit the nail on the head when he said:

We all belong to more than one community. To live by the story of only one community might impede our capacities to communicate with those with whom we share moral responsibilities who are informed by different stories and different communities.

A similar proposition is given by Birch and Rasmussen in their discussion on character ethics. Although they accept the Bible to be primary and a very important guide and source for character formation, they accept culture as another source to be taken seriously in ethics (1989:100f). One may not agree with their separation of character formation from ethical decision making, They do, however, provide insights that transcend the one-sided old view in theology which led to the dominance of one culture over the rest (for example, Western culture). Besides, even Western Christian ethical decision making is heavily influenced by secular Western culture, science and other non-biblical materials as we shall later see.

Thus the importance of the culture of the people to whom the gospel is to be preached cannot be underestimated. For this reason, the problem is assessed in the light of the general African understanding of morality. This will be done by giving examples of moral issues requiring ethical decisions. Here, we will limit ourselves to polygamy, divorce, the attitude towards the accumulation of wealth and the problem of Aids.

This does not, however, mean that these are the only problems which are causing the moral crisis in African Christian ethics. Issues like the debt crisis, poverty, child abuse, corruption, war and many others are equally very pressing. We have decided to dwell on the few mentioned above, because, in our opinion, they clearly highlight the problems caused by the absolute and exclusive use of Scriptures. Again, we do not want to say that our solution to the moral crisis in African Christianity is the only or is the final solution to the problem. Ours is rather going to be one of the humble contributions to some of the challenges facing the Christian ethical discourse in the fast changing African context.

To sum up, we are going to tackle our study by looking at the following:

- The ethical authority of the Bible and nonbiblical sources in Western Protestant theology;
- The Bible and culture as sources in African Christian ethical decision making;
- African culture as a source in Christian ethical decision making;
- Summary and conclusion: The way forward for African Christian ethical decision making.

### **1.3. Relevancy of this study**

This study is relevant in the following ways:

First, there has been an ongoing debate on this issue by a number of scholars from different perspectives. The debate on this topic shows no sign of abating. This is a clear sign that the last word has not yet been said (Bujo 1985:230). Besides, no study has specifically focussed on the authority of Scripture *vis-a-vis* non-biblical sources in African

Christian ethical decision making. This study is an attempt to contribute to this ongoing debate.

Second, there is a widespread desire for an African Christian ethic which corresponds to the aspirations of the Africans without losing the non-negotiable aspects of the gospel of Christ among African Christians. This desire needs to be met or else the gospel and the Christian faith itself will become irrelevant in Africa. Thus a relevant contextual Christian ethic is a matter of urgency in Africa.

Third, in the light of new developments in African theology and Western theology and philosophy worldwide (especially the significant contributions to ethics of A. MacIntyre, C. Taylor, J. Gustafson and others), African Christian ethics has to look at African moral problems anew in order to find out what is really Christian instead of just basing their solutions on what Western missionaries said in the past. Some old solutions to African moral problems have been found to be simplistic and unacceptable, if not imperialistic. Take, for example, the rejection of polygamists at baptism and the Lord's table.

Fourth, some of the attempts at integrating Scripture with African culture seem to be going into extremes, leading to relativism and syncretism (for example in some independent churches). There is thus a need to present "a balanced view", that takes both the primacy of Scripture and some aspects of African culture seriously in African Christian ethical decision making.

Fifth, there is very little progress on the part of the African churches to correct the errors which were made during the past. This may partly be attributed to a mentality which regards everything which belongs to the West to be good. It is also the result of the fear of African church leaders to lose Western missionary church aid. As a result, many oppressive church laws continue to hurt many innocent African converts. This study wants to challenge this *status quo* in African Christian ethical decision making.

Sixth, the arrival on the African continent of radical Pentecostalist movements which seem to have a fundamentalist and exclusivistic view of *sola Scriptura* and an apparent negative view of African culture makes this study a necessary one. All over Africa one sees new churches with names like “Pure gospel Church”, “Bible Church”, and “Living word Church”. These names surely reminds one of the Radical Reformation’s exclusivistic views on *sola Scriptura*.

Last, but not least, many African pastors in many churches in Zambia and elsewhere in Africa face similar ethical dilemmas in their ministries. This study will help to find solutions to some of the moral and ethical problems faced by Christians in many African churches.

#### **1.4. Review of related research**

Although there are a number of publications on Christian ethics in the African context, most of them seem not to be focussing on the relationship between the Bible and other



the important publications relating to the topic will be given as an indication of the work already done and to illustrate the need for a thesis such as this one.

It may be asked why these particular writings are selected for review and not others?

These particular works have been selected for the following reasons:

First, the views expressed by some of these writers, correspond directly or indirectly with our view that ethical decision making should include other sources such as culture and not only Scripture;

Second, these works have exercised great influence in the African Christian ethical debate;

Third, these writers represent divergent view points;

Fourth, some of these works contribute valuable insights on some of the topics of our study.

This does not however, mean that all the books which we will discuss in this study are included in this review. There may be other publications which also shed light on the topics that we discuss.

1. Bujo. B, *African Christian morality in the age of inculturation*, 1990, is a classic on this topic. Basically the book is about Black African ethics in the context of Christianity. It looks at general principles dealing with the autonomy of morality, the gospel, and the teaching service of the Roman Catholic Church. It gives what the writer considers to be the basic guidelines for an African morality. He considers this to be an



occasional reflection and not a detailed systematic elaboration. He writes from an African Roman Catholic tradition. This comes out most clearly in his views of Jesus as a proto-ancestor. Bearing in mind the prominent role that saints play in that tradition, the proto-ancestor theory makes a lot of sense to him, because as a Roman Catholic, belief in saints is an acceptable teaching of the church. However, belief in proto-ancestors and saints may not make the same sense to those of us who are coming from the Reformed Calvinistic background where belief in saints is not encouraged.

2. The other significant article by Bujo appeared in *Theology digest* (1985:143-146) with the title, "Polygamy in Africa: A pastoral approach". It is a short article in which he addresses the old problem of polygamy. He looks at the basis, function, the future of polygamy in Africa, as well as the Christian teaching on polygamy. He feels that polygamy should not be treated in the same way as murder or other inhuman sins. In his discussion of the pastoral approach, he rightly insists that the church should distinguish between polygamy in towns and polygamy in rural areas where the situation is different. One would surely appreciate his views on this topic, because they appear to be very much in line with what most of the African Christian scholars are pleading for.

3. Dickson K, wrote another interesting book titled, *Uncompleted mission: Christianity and exclusivism*, 1991. This is another excellent book on African theology. In as much as he appreciates the fact that many people in Africa have accepted Christ as their God and Saviour, he regrets the fact that the culture and traditions of the converts is being excluded. In this book Dickson shows how the roots of exclusivism can be found in the

Old Testament Judaism and the teachings of the Christian churches from the time of the apostles up to the Reformation period. He points out that the mission movement of the eighteenth and twentieth centuries was very exclusivistic. This he believes made the missionaries not to take the culture of the local people seriously enough and in the end it not to treat the African Christians equally as children of God. Dickson is also of the opinion that whoever thinks that these exclusivistic tendencies are a thing of the past is very much mistaken. He feels that if one opens his/her eyes wide open enough he/she will see that exclusivism is alive and well in African Christianity and that a real break from exclusivism has not yet been achieved. This he believes is because of what he calls the resilience of the church's inherent attitudes (ibid: 85-86). He is of the opinion that this is what makes mission to be incomplete. To "complete mission", Dickson offers some new perspectives, strategies and attitudes which he believes are necessary to overcome the exclusivistic tendencies which exist in Africa.

This book, with its bold and candid statements, offers yet another possible way forward for African Christian theology and ethical decision making. Dickson has clearly articulated the problem of exclusivism, its causes and possible solutions to overcome this exclusivism. However, the issue of how to solve the problem of exclusivism in ethical decision making has not been addressed in this work. It correctly pinpoints the problem of exclusivism without putting forward any solution to the problems caused by exclusivism. The problem at hand, thus remains unresolved.



4. Haselbarth. H, *Christian ethics in the African context*, 1976. This book grew out of courses in Christian ethics given by the writer in Nigeria. He tries to relate faith and action in the African context. He takes the theology of “Liberation and gratitude” as his foundation. The book puts forward a number of stimulating questions which reflect social concern and involvement in the problems of the African context. He warns the readers that his study is but a survey. He is also aware of the fact that as a missionary he is not a competent spokesman for African ethics, but he, nonetheless, feels that he can make a contribution to the ongoing debate. His hope is that more African theologians will be stimulated to write on this topic. His work is surely one of those which stimulated us to write on this topic.

5. Kato B. H, wrote a book titled, *Theological pitfalls in Africa*, 1975. This book, which is replete with Bible references, was written in order to “safeguard” what he calls biblical Christianity in Africa against what Kato calls, “the unhealthy trends in theology”. This book appears to be one of the clearest example of an anti-integration theology. He wants to champion the cause of what he feels is Scriptural truth only. He further attacks what he considers to be the syncretistic universalism of some of his African theological colleagues (ibid:83-85) like J. Mbiti, E. B. Idowu, and J. Pobee and others who he believes are promoting what he calls regional theology and universalism (ibid:6f). He even goes as far as rejecting the whole concept of African theology as it is presented presently (ibid:53f).

Although his intentions are very noble, what he has ended up doing is to put cold water on the contextual approach to African theology in general. The book shows clearly that exclusivism is very much resilient. It is therefore no surprise to see that the biggest praises for this book come from biblists and spiritualists. One of the most famous evangelical preachers, Billy Graham, says Kato has sounded an alarm and warned Christians on both sides of the argument concerning the dangers of universalism (ibid:16). He appears to have spent more time defending exclusivism of the earlier mission period. The book is thus for us no more than a good example of an exclusivistic non-integrationist position.

6. Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres' book, titled, *African theology en route*, 1979, is yet another interesting book on this topic. This book is a collection of a number of papers on African theology in general. It is an outcome of a theological dialogue by some prominent African theologians at the Pan African conference of third world theologians who were wrestling with the issue of how to make theology relevant to the poor and oppressed peoples of Africa.

The final communique (ibid:11) of this conference sums up what they believe should be a new perspective in African theology. They believe that African theology should be understood in the context of African life, culture and the creative attempt of African peoples to shape a new future that is different from the colonial past and the neo-colonial present. They believe that the task of theology in Africa today is to create a theology that arises from the context and is accountable to the peoples of Africa (ibid.).



This book offers very interesting reading, although it is not an exhaustive work on the issue of theology and culture. The writers who presented the papers at the conference gave what in the end was a cursory look at a number of pertinent issues in African theology. Besides, the fact that it is a collection of articles by a number of different writers from different backgrounds, makes the book less systematic in the way it deals with African theological issues. The book is thus an exploratory look at African theological problems. However, despite these weaknesses, the book includes some very interesting articles which we intend to use in our study.

7. Mbiti J. S, wrote an article on “Christianity and African culture” in *The Journal of theology for Southern Africa* (1977: 26-40), which is a classic on African culture and Christianity in general. He writes as one who has really wrestled with this issue at length. He concentrates on the relationship between African culture and the gospel, and African culture and church life. In passing, he has a brief paragraph on Christian ethics and values. His main argument is that culture is the channel through which the gospel is mediated. He calls culture “the crown of man”, that is something without which man is without dignity. He believes that where culture has not been taken seriously, there can be no real conversion. As he puts it: “Gospel+culture+faith produces Christianity”. The article makes the point that culture is central in the effective communication of the gospel in Africa. This work looks at Christianity and culture in general and not specifically the relationship between the authority of the Bible and African culture in ethical decision making (which is the main focus of this study).



8. Motlhabi. M. G, wrote an article on “African traditional ethics” in *The Journal of Black theology in South Africa* Vol.10, No.2 (1996) 50-73, which is a thorough piece of work. It gives the basis and basic concepts of African traditional ethics and highlights the most important aspects of African traditional ethics. Attention is given to the basic relationship between morality and religion, moral rules and the role of character building. Motlhabi ends his paper with a discussion on communalism and redistribution. He stresses the communalistic and humanistic nature of traditional African ethics. All this is done in a very limited number of pages. It is thus a very brief overview of what is a very complicated topic.

9. Rader. D. A, *Christian ethics in an African context: A focus on urban Zambia*, 1991. Rader writes out of his own missionary experience in the mission field, prompted by the frustrations he had in cross-cultural communication in urban Zambia. These problems made him realise that faithfulness to God’s word requires care in the application of the word of God to various cultures and that cultural differences require that Christian ethics be contextualised into a host culture. The book is an effort to develop Christian ethics which is appropriate to the African context, with special reference to urban Zambia and not to the whole of Zambia or the whole of Africa. Though a serious and honest attempt, one cannot help feeling it is the work of an outsider who is not really wrestling with the issues being discussed.

10. Finally, we want to refer to the book *Moral and ethical issues in African Christianity*, 1986, with J. N. K. Mugambi and A. N. Wasike as editors. It is a collection of papers by a number of African scholars, who discuss this pressing issue from different perspectives in a less systematic way. The writers strongly feel that morality is the sum total of the principles that influence or should influence the behaviour of a Christian. This volume is basically an exploration of perennial themes in African Christian theology from an African perspective. They feel the sources of Christian morality are Scripture, church teachings, reason inspired by faith and the African context, not forgetting some of the teachings of the ancestors. The book can be characterised as an exploratory attempt at the topic. The fact that it was written by a number of African scholars from different backgrounds makes it unsystematic in its flow of thoughts. All these scholars have in one way or another expressed the hope that someone will continue the discussion on African Christian ethics until finally an African Christian ethical theology which is comprehensive enough emerges. This study, while not pretending to be that final theology, is but a humble contribution towards that goal.

Thus, despite what has been written on this topic, the demand for a thorough and systematic discussion continues unabated. People continue to seek guidance. What has been written so far also shows that a consensus viewpoint has not yet been reached. The last word has not yet been said. The variety of views on this issue bears testimony to this. None of these writings has given us a detailed systematic discussion which is satisfactory to all. In addition, the explosion of knowledge, the mass of data generated by modern technology, the arrival on the African scene of some Pentecostal movements with their

exclusivistic views on *sola Scriptura* and their simplistic brand of biblicism, and the number of African scholars posing questions about the relationship between the authority of Scripture and African culture underline the need to revisit the issue as an urgent one.

### **1.5. Methodology**

The approach of this study is primarily library oriented and that it is based on the analysis of available scholarly works on Christian ethics in general and, more particularly, on Western and African moral ethics. Naturally, the abundance of writings and research on African ethics has made it possible for us to conduct a library oriented study. As African Christians, what we observe and experience in our daily walk with Christ will also be used in this study.

One of the problems of a more methodological nature which we face in this study relates to the designation “African culture” which is used through out the dissertation. Is it really possible to speak of an African culture as such or we should rather speak of African cultures because African cultures are diverse? Before we answer this question, let us first define what culture is. What exactly do we mean by the word culture? Culture has been defined in many various ways. One famous anthropologist E. B. Taylor (1958:1f) defines culture as, “a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”. Pobee (1992:58) observes the following key features of culture in Taylor’s works:

first, the fact that culture is collective tradition;

second, it is total and all inclusive in nature;





fourth, that it is not static but grows and develops through time.

We are aware of the fact that anthropologists, sociologists and philosophers like G. Parrinder (1961), J.V. Taylor (1963), A. Walls (1982), K.A. Busia (1955), C. Geertz (1973) and many others have debated the issue of the precise definition of culture. In this research, culture should be understood from its sociological use. As the sociologist Hall (1992:230) aptly puts it, “it should be understood as referring to the whole texture of society and the way the language, symbols, meanings, beliefs and values are organised”. For our purpose, this sociological meaning will suffice.

After defining what we mean by culture, let us now answer the question whether it is possible to speak of an African culture or African cultures. Is Africa not too broad a continent with too many diversities to even talk about African Christian ethical decision making as such? Prof. Idowu (Dickson and Ellingworth 1969:11), has rightly insisted that foreign investigators over-emphasize or exaggerate the elements of variations and therefore fail to see the basic unity in African culture. Despite this diversity, there are some broad common perspectives widely shared by many Africans. For example, one may single out their worldview(s). Beliefs in spirits, their views on marriage as a contract between two consenting families and not just two consenting individuals, continuation of life after death, the importance of offsprings, levirate marriages as things which may be found almost everywhere in traditional Africa are common elements in the morality of black Africa. Similarly, there is a common conviction that the world is full of

spiritual entities with differing degrees of power and authority whose presence and conduct may impinge on human life. Mbiti (1969:74ff) may be right when he says, “for African people, this is a religious universe”. In most parts of Black Africa, human misfortune and suffering are always explained in terms of this spiritual world. It is caused by a spiritual entity whose malevolence is motivated in some morally understandable way (ibid.). Any well reasoned Christian moral decision in Africa will surely have to take all these common elements into account.

It is common features like these that prompt us to speak about an African culture, or African Christian ethical decision making, even if what we are discussing does not cover the whole of black Africa. Therefore, “African culture possesses a unity in diversity of her own unique pattern different from either Europe or America” (Ekweunife 1987:5-17). This is why one can say this is a study on African Christian ethical decision making, even though the material may not cover the whole of Africa. Besides, diversity is not restricted to African alone, even Europe and America are made up of diverse cultures. We have Irish, Scottish, Spanish, Dutch, German, Italian etc, and yet we still talk about a Western culture. Thus, although Africa is made up of heterogenous elements and there are observable differences in their histories, there are some salient elements which unite Africa and provide us with a justification for speaking about an African ethics and affect moral decision making in most parts of black Africa. As the famous Ghanaian sociologist K.A. Busia (1977:3) puts it,

Africa is a vast continent, inhabited by communities that have different historical experiences. One should be chary in describing as ‘African culture’, the traditions and way of life of any one community. But we often understand the greater from the smaller, moving legitimately and logically

from the particular to the general and the experience of one African community may help us to understand by comparison and contrast, the problems of the larger whole.

Although the material covered in this dissertation may be concentrating on the Southern African Christian context from the 19<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> century, the discussions in this dissertation are applicable to much of black sub-Saharan Africa, past and present, because of the shared unity in diversity of these African people. We therefore want to agree with P.F Theron (1996:1f) when he rightly points out that:

In sub-Saharan Africa, there exists a great variety of ethnic groups and cultures with many differences between them. On the other hand, there exists some, and I think enough, similarities between them, which enable us to make some generalisations about the African traditional world views and religions. It is thus possible in my view to speak of a general African traditional cosmology and even religion, even if it is only for the convenience of literary representation.

This is surely applicable to commonalities that exist in Southern African cultures and certain salient elements which influence moral decision making.

Similarly, the world in which the modern African Christian lives is a polycentric world. Science, technical progress and other cultures have greatly influenced African culture. As Pobee (1992:30-31) puts it, over the past eleven centuries, Black Africa has been colonised by European cultures through colonialism and Christianity and Arab cultures through Islam. In addition, mass global communication (Radio, Television) has made African culture to undergo a lot of changes. It is therefore extremely difficult for the African Christians to return to that which is aboriginal. However, this should not create an impression that there is no such a thing as an African culture or cultures as such. There

are still many key elements of African culture which have resisted adulteration and still survive up to this day. These are the elements which we feel, when taken seriously, will help solve the crises in African Christian morality. Besides, even Western culture has been equally affected by globalisation and the influence of other cultures and yet we still speak of a Western culture.

As to which salient elements are common in black Africa, there is no unanimity among scholars. Some speak about things like views about God and the animistic world view, others talk about the centrality of man, communalism and the value placed on the ancestors (see for example, Pobee 1979:18-19, and Mbiti 1994: 9-39 for details). We shall discuss these salient features in our later chapter. For now, it is enough to note briefly that there is more that unites black Africa than which divides it and that there are a number of salient elements of African culture which influence moral decision making in Africa. Thus, due to what Pobee (1979:20) calls “a certain Africanness” shared by all Black Africa, we may speak about the African cultural context in distinction to other cultural contexts in the world. This is also the reason why we may safely say that the study is about the authority of the Bible and non-biblical sources in African ethical decision making, although the material used may not cover the whole of black Africa.

## **1.6. Organisation and plan of the dissertation**

This dissertation is divided into five main chapters. Chapter one deals with the introduction of the study stating the problem, main argument, relevancy of the study,

review of literature related research, methodology, organisation and plan of the dissertation.

Chapter two discusses the ethical authority of the Bible in relation to non-biblical sources in Western Protestant theology. It is important for us to understand what was meant by *sola Scriptura*. The study acknowledges the fact that many Christians accept the Bible as the primary source of authority in Christian ethics (Birch & Rasmussen 1989:158). What is disputed, however, is the issue of the relationship between Biblical authority and non-biblical sources and, in this case, African culture. It was the views of the prominent Reformation theologians which shaped most of what the early Protestant missionaries to Africa said. Some of these missionaries had a certain exclusivistic understanding of the Protestant view of *sola Scriptura* when they came to the African mission field. The consequence of such a view was a complete distrust of and reluctance to integrate African cultural values in their ethical teachings (Ilogu: 84-86).

The third chapter looks at the authority of the Bible and culture as sources in African theology. After receiving the gospel and Christianity from its roots in the Middle East, the Western missionaries brought the Word of God to Africa. Some of these missionaries who brought the gospel of God to Africa did not want to integrate the word of God with African culture. Such a negative attitude towards African culture prompted many African theologians to react against absolute and exclusivistic tendencies in African Christianity. This is why the third chapter looks at the views of African scholars on the authority of the Bible and culture as sources in African Christian ethical decision making.



Chapter four deals with the biblical and cultural basis of African Christian ethical decision making. The study finds that apart from the Bible being the primary source, there are also certain salient elements which African ethical decision making must take into account if it is to make progress in solving the crisis affecting African ethical decision making. This is why the fourth chapter looks at the biblical and cultural basis of African ethical decision making.

In the last chapter, we will summarise what has been discussed so far, explicate the findings of the study and give guidelines on what should be a way forward for African Christian ethical decision making.

## CHAPTER II

### THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE AND NONBIBLICAL SOURCES IN WESTERN PROTESTANT THEOLOGY

#### 2.1. Introduction

In the first chapter, we have introduced our study stating the problem which we want to solve, the main argument, the need for such a study, reviewed some of the literature, explained our methodology and explained the plan and organisation of this dissertation.

In this chapter, we will discuss the ethical authority of the Bible and other nonbiblical sources in Western Protestant theology past and present in order to find out what they meant by *sola Scriptura*, because it was mostly the views of the prominent Reformation theologians which shaped much of what the early Protestant missionaries to Africa said. Some of the missionaries who came to Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and thereafter, had a certain exclusivistic understanding of the Reformation battle cry of *sola Scriptura*. The consequences of such a view was a complete distrust of and reluctance to integrate African cultural values in their ethical teachings (Ilogu 1984: 84-86).

relationship between the authority of the Bible and other nonbiblical sources. It was the result of the Reformers' disgust at the Roman Catholic Church's over-emphasis on Church tradition *vis- a-vis* the authority of Scripture. The mainline Protestant theologians did not by this term want to create an impression that only Scripture and nothing else should be used in theology. Those who maintained an exclusivistic view of Scripture must therefore look elsewhere for their support.

By the term *sola Scriptura*, the leaders of the Reformation and mainstream Protestantism, wanted to emphasise the fact that the authority of Scripture stood first and foremost. This did not mean that they believed that Christians should use Scripture only and nothing else (*nuda Scriptura*). Although mainstream Reformation believed that Scripture was an infallible rule for making theological and moral judgements, they did not understand this to mean that other sources cannot play a role. In other words, they did not share an exclusivistic view of *sola Scriptura* (Pelikan 1984:265f). They accepted the fact that other sources could be used and should be used by believers (ibid), but maintained that they should be put under the supreme rule of Scripture (Williams1946:252f).

Although the magisterial Reformation did not believe in an exclusivistic use of *sola Scriptura*, and used their own Western culture and other sources in moral decision making, the views of some of the radical reformers (which were exclusivistic in their



view of the *sola Scriptura* application (George 1988:300), together with a feeling of cultural superiority on the part of the early missionaries to Africa (as we shall later see), and a certain interpretation of the doctrine of total depravity, whereby everything in African culture was seen to be evil, led some of the missionaries to Africa to adopt an anti-integrationist approach in their work of evangelising Africa.

## **2.2. The Reformation era**

The Reformation was regarded by many to be a revolution, because it sought to base Christian faith and practice directly on biblical foundations without much concern for the conservation of tradition and usages developed during the earlier periods (Beach & Niebuhr 1973:236). One of the most prominent names attached to the development of the *sola Scriptura* emphasis is Martin Luther. Let us thus start with him as the pioneer of the Reformation.

### **2.2.1. Martin Luther (1484-1546)**

Luther taught that Scripture is the *norma normans* (determining norm) but not the *norma normata* (the determined norm). His intention is clearly to safeguard the authority of Scripture from the severe dependence upon the church and its tradition. In all his debates on Scripture, Luther wanted to maintain the superiority of Scripture over anything else (LW 40: 231). By insisting on *sola Scriptura*, he meant that the Scripture should have priority over other authorities, and not an absolute exclusivistic view of the use of Scripture. Luther, thus did not want to jettison tradition, the Church, or any

other sources of authority. He merely wanted to subordinate all the above sources to the supreme authority of Scripture (McGrath 1988:14f).

These ethical teachings seem to be very close to the Roman Catholic moral teaching, which is based more on natural law than on Scripture. The only major difference is that Luther maintained the primacy of Scripture over all the other sources of authority. He also felt that the right decision cannot be arrived at by simply reading the Bible or applying statements from the New Testament or the sayings of Jesus Christ literally, because situations differ (*ibid.*). This does not, however, mean that Luther did not accept what the Bible teaches. In the same works he also said that due to sin we may err in our decisions and that is the reason why we need to take the biblical directives as our final court of appeal.

Another clear statement which explains what Luther meant with the words *sola Scriptura* is his famous statement at Worms in which he said, “unless I am convinced by Scripture and reason, I cannot and I will not recant” (George 1988:58). The fact that he talked about “Scripture and reason” is a clear sign that he was not opposed to other sources of knowledge like philosophy or reason or reason in general as long as it was utilised under the authority of Scripture. Thus Luther did not oppose other sources of knowledge as long as they are subordinate to Scripture. He was thus not exclusivistic in his views. His writings shows clearly that he used some Church tradition, his own culture and even science in moral decision making. He believed that there was no

difference between natural law and divine law. He regards natural law to be also God's will (WA 41, 639; LW 46,27).

As to the question, "How should a Christian know God's will when faced with a moral dilemma?" Luther's reply was, "Make creative decisions and use your own conscience to decide what God's demands here and now are" (WA 15,293; LW 45,245). This is a clear testimony that Luther did not really rule out the possibility of including other sources of authority such as African culture, but rather argued that the supremacy of Scripture as the primary source of authority must always be upheld.

Luther seemed to feel that although many human beings recognise God's will for themselves by listening to the Scripture, they are not legalistically bound to the heteronomous word of Scripture. As they are moved by the Holy Spirit, they live in theonomous creativity. They live in their freedom of conscience as Luther (WA 6,207) aptly put it. What is written in *Martin Luther's works vol.6*, shows clearly that ethical decision making may never be based on Scripture only. He did seem to realise that conscience too may be under God's guidance. It is thus clear that for Luther the *sola Scriptura* principle did not in any way imply that Scripture is the only source for decision making. Although Luther regarded the Scripture as the prime source in ethical decision making, he also regarded natural law, conscience, etc., as sources for ethical decision making.



## **Summary and Evaluation**

Luther's views on the relationship between the authority of Scripture and other sources of moral authority, are very much in line with the mainstream of Protestant theology (Gustafson 1978:5f; Pelikan 1984: 260-268). Although he spoke about the Scripture as the prime norm, he did not jettison tradition, culture, reason, natural law and other sources of authority, but rather brought them under the supreme authority, of Scripture in ethical decision making. Luther also acknowledged the fact that the Holy Spirit helps a Christian to arrive at an ethical decision which is in line with the will of God. However, he felt that since the natural faculties of knowledge have been affected by sin and cannot by themselves lead to proper knowledge about the will of a God, everything needs to be checked against what Scripture said (Pelikan 1984:265f). Civil authority, tradition, vocation, station and providence should also be recognised as possible sources of moral guidance, but they should be subjected to the supreme norm which is the Scripture.

However, even though Luther's views on the relationship between Scripture as an ethical authority and other sources for ethical decision making are convincing, it does not mean that we have no problems with everything that he said. For example, he appears to equate natural law with revealed law (LW vol. 6), because according to him, they were both given to us by God. This in some ways, may be regarded as a marked departure from the traditional Protestant doctrine which regards the revealed law to be much fuller and more clear than natural law.



### **2.2.2. John Calvin (1509-1564)**

If Luther is held as the founder of the Reformation, then Calvin, more than anybody else, is regarded as a systematizer of the Reformation. Although Calvin reaffirmed most of Luther's views, he further developed some of these views.

A close comparison of Luther's and Calvin's views on a number of topics shows this to be the case (Wogaman 1993:116f). Calvin shared many characteristics of Luther's ethics in his departure from medieval views on ethics, but he was more God centered in that he based his views on the sovereignty of God. For him ethics was a response to God, to glorify God and to do God's will (ibid:116). Another important feature in his views is the emphasis he placed on the third use of the law as a guide to personal and civic righteousness (Beach & Niebuhr, 1973:281). Luther only stressed two uses of the law, the political and the theological, in line with his two Kingdoms theory (Wogaman 1993:113f). Calvin's stress on sovereignty allowed him to be less afraid of sanctification and allowed him to stress good works not as a means of salvation, but as a means of making one's calling and election sure (Taylor 1984:505). While Calvin also talked about the doctrine of natural law, he subordinated natural law under Scripture as the basis for knowing the will of God (Gustafson 1978:20). This went a long way in solving the apparent contradiction between the *sola Scriptura* slogan and the acknowledgment of other sources of knowledge like natural law.

Although Calvin may seem to have shared many views on ethics with Luther, a close look at his views shows that he went further than Luther by placing greater emphasis on the perfection and completeness of the law as a perfect guideline for righteousness (Wogaman 1993:150). He was of the opinion that the sufficiency of the law goes hand in hand with the perfection and sufficiency of Scripture. His clearest views on this topic came out during his defense of the doctrine of the sufficiency and perfection of Scripture against the teachings of the Roman Catholics, the Anabaptists and the Spiritualists. Against Roman Catholics, who over-emphasised the role of tradition as a source of knowledge about the will of God, Calvin responded by proclaiming the *sola Scriptura*. By doing this, he undercut the basis for any ethical additions like monastic vows. To him Scripture was the prime sources of moral guidance (Calvin 1960:11:8f). Calvin's exchanges with the "Anabaptists and the enthusiasts" were more acerbic. He accused them of promoting lawlessness by flaunting the doctrine of the guidance of believers by the Holy Spirit without the Word of God (Wogaman 1993:147f). He stressed that the Holy Spirit spoke only through the Scripture. He called their view mere "hallucinations" (Calvin 1960:11.9f). He said: "those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught truly rest upon the Scripture"(ibid.). Further, he asserted that in Scripture: "God is dictating to us as from his own word what is good or unprofitable to do" (Calvin 1960:iv.132f). Although God spoke to Christians through the Holy Spirit at all times, he did so exclusively by means of Scripture.

This reaction of Calvin should not lead us to the conclusion that Calvin rejected the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Calvin also believed in the fact that there was utter

agreement (*summus consensus*) between doctrine and the outside grace that is preached, and the inner grace that God gives through his Holy Spirit. He believed that Scripture and the Holy Spirit worked together. Thus his harsh words were directed towards the extremists and should not to be seen as a rejection of guidance by the Holy Spirit. Calvin also agreed with Luther on vocation and station, but a closer look at his views shows that his doctrine of vocation and station carries with it the full weight of his doctrine of predestination. This comes out clearly when he said that:

each one of us in all of life's actions, should strive to look to his calling. Each individual has his own kind of living assigned to him through life... lest through stupidity and rashness everything be turned topsy-turvy" (Calvin 1948:200f).

It is equally interesting to see that his views on the three orders resemble Plato's division of society into the three classes of soldiers, teachers, and farmers. This appears to be an influence from Neo-Platonic thinking and did not depend on what Scripture is saying. Principles of guidance based on concepts such as vocation and standing seemingly are not based only on what the Bible said.

In his writings Calvin seemed to base some of his arguments on prudence, logic, and reason. For example, his teachings on usury were not based on Scripture only. Thus for Calvin too, the *sola Scriptura* slogan - though a reaction to the Roman Catholic stress on tradition - was not meant to exclude other sources of authority, but rather to subordinate everything under Scripture as the prime norm (McGrath 1988:10f). For Calvin too, Scripture was the *norma normans* (the ruling norm). Other putative authorities such as tradition, reason and religious experience were *norma normata*

(ruled norms, ie, ruled by Scripture). He thus did not deny the use of nonbiblical materials as sources of knowledge. He believed in the supremacy of Scripture rather than in its absolute exclusivity.

### **Summary and evaluation**

Unlike Luther, Calvin emphasised the sovereignty of God. He did not believe there were areas of human life in which God was not sovereign. As with regard to natural law, the revealed law and the moral teachings of Jesus Christ, he believed that all these were in significant continuity and should not be regarded to be in opposition to each other. However, he did not believe that natural law was equal to the revealed law (the Bible) but rather subordinated to it. Revealed law was in his view much fuller than natural law. He rightly stressed that the revealed law was the final court of appeal. As long as this did not imply that Scripture is the only source of moral guidance one would happily agree with Calvin in this regard. Just like Luther, Calvin seemed to acknowledge that other sources like civil authority, vocation, and station, as well as providence, are also possible source of moral guidance. He probably would not have objected to the use of nonbiblical materials like the African cultural heritage in ethical decision making but he would have subjected everything to the supreme authority: Scripture.



## **2.3. The Radical Reformation**

### **2.3.1. Introduction**

Some of the leaders of the so-called Radical Reformation, apparently appear to departed completely from the views of mainline Protestantism. They took the *sola Scriptura* slogan to its logical extreme. Some of them seem to have treated Scripture, as the only source for ethical decision making - something which the Reformers in the Magisterial Reformation did not want to do at all! These leaders wanted to reform the Christian Church by returning to the Bible on its own. They attempted to obey only what Scripture says and nothing else. They felt that convention, tradition, or any other nonbiblical material or earthly wisdom should not be used when making moral decisions. It is such a literal understanding of *sola Scriptura* which in later years disallowed African culture and other nonbiblical sources to play a role in African ethical decision making. One of the most prominent leaders of the Radical Reformation, whose legacy influenced some of the missionaries who came to Africa and still lingers on in one way or another (up to this day), is a man popularly known as Menno Simon. Let us now briefly look at some of his teachings on the relationship between Scripture and other nonbiblical materials in moral judgement.

### **2.3.2. Menno Simon (1496-1561)**

Menno Simon claimed that he was basing his doctrines only on what the Bible says. He questioned and objected to Christian doctrines like transubstantiation and infant baptism mainly because he believed that they were not clearly stated in Scripture. This comes out very clearly in a book written by Poettcker (1962:32) in which he is quoted as having said that:

Behold, my worthy brethren, against the doctrines, statements, and life just considered, imperial decrees, papal bulls, councils of the learned, long standing practices, human philosophy, Origen, Augustine, Luther..., murder means nothing; for it is the eternal imperishable word of God; for it is the eternal imperishable word of God; I repeat, it is the eternal word of God, and shall so remain.

For Menno Simon, the authority of the Scriptures was all there is. There was no need for any other authority. He urged his followers not to trust in tradition, wisdom and any other human writings. Scripture alone is all they need to know, he claimed (Wenger 1956:100-102).

Although Menno's views were developed in dialogue with the mainline Protestantism, his use and understanding of the Reformation slogan *sola Scriptura*, and his use and appeal to the Bible differed greatly from that of mainline Protestantism in the following three aspects:

Firstly, he criticised the Reformers for tempering their appeal to Scripture with what he claimed to be human traditions and vain learning. He believed that although the Reformers were right in their remarks on the nonbinding nature of extra-biblical traditions, they did not follow their own advice when debating or arguing on theological issues. They did not read and use the entire Scripture and made use of human wisdom (Wenger 1956:514f). In other words, they did not stick to the literal word of God and made use of only Scripture. Similarly, in his confession on the triune God (*ibid.*), he attempted to justify the traditional, orthodox doctrine of the trinity by appealing only to the Bible. He believed that the "plain" Scriptures were quite sufficient. He did not find any need to use creeds or confessions (Poettcker 1962:33f).

Secondly, although Menno believed that the Bible, as a whole, was authoritative, he also believed that the New Testament had a special normative status because it is the new covenant of Christ (Wenger 1956:54-55). It is the only foundation which Christ laid. Thus for Menno, the New Testament has priority over the Old Testament.

Third, whereas most of the mainline Protestants rejected the Apocrypha books, because they felt they were spurious and inferior, Menno seemed to quote these books freely and to make no distinction between their authority and that of Scriptures (Williams 1946:252).

### **Summary and evaluation**

One cannot but appreciate the zeal and respect for the Word of God Menno Simon exhibited. This zeal and respect lie behind his reaction against an over-emphasis of the extra-biblical sources of authority at the expense of Scripture.

On the negative side, he at times appears to be utopian in his views. In practice it is not easy to stick to what the Scriptures says only. Topics like the doctrine of the trinity, as the Church found out in the past, cannot be explained by just basing it on what the Bible says. In fact even the word trinity is not found in the Bible. It even appears as though Menno did not believe and accept any general revelation of God. He seemed to believe that God revealed himself only in the Bible and not outside it. This is not acceptable to us, because this is to limit God's revelation and his workings in the world to what is written in black and white. Such a view is the main cause of the neglect of the African cultural contribution to Christian ethical thinking, because African culture is usually treated as part of general revelation.

## **2.4. The age of rationalism and evangelism**

### **2.4.1. Introduction**

The era of rationalism has also been referred to as the enlightenment period (Wogaman 1993: 146f). This period offered many serious challenges to Christian theology, which in turn had a very lasting influence on Christian ethics. Western Protestant morality came under the influence of philosophers like Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche (ibid: 148). There were a number of scholars in moral theology during this period. Here one has in mind theologians like J. Butler, J. Edwards, J. Wesley and W. Rauschenbusch. We shall not be able to cover all of them. We shall select only those whose views we feel stand out as the most prominent. In our judgement, Joseph Butler and Jonathan Edwards, stand out as the most prominent and provide a very distinct contribution to our topic.

## 2.4.2. Joseph Butler (1692-1752)

Butler was a bishop of the church of England (ibid:149). He came under the influence of Rationalism and was a Rationalist through and through (Wogaman 1993:149, see also Beach and Niebuhr 1973: 328). He departed from the traditional Reformed teachings of the previous centuries. He wanted to show the reasonableness of Christianity and to present Christianity in reasonable terms. He felt that Christianity was an expression of natural religion and a new dispensation depending on revelation (Butler 1896:188f). He believed that natural religion could not have been arrived at without revelation. This is the reason why he stressed the importance of Christ and the Holy Spirit as part of the revelation of God to men (ibid:197). Butler believed that the definition of religion, whether one believed in natural religion or revealed religion was moral. In other words religion was to him, basically speaking morality. Put in another way, morality is to Butler, the basis of religion (Wogaman1993:149).

A closer look at his writings shows that he did not take the total depravity of human beings seriously. He seemed to believe that a person on his/her own has the freedom to make a choice for or against God (ibid:151). His conception of ethics did not depend on the special claims of a revealed religion. In fact, the central thrust of his ethics is benevolence to beings in general (ibid:150). He said that we are made for society and to promote its happiness (Butler 1896:369).

Where Luther and Calvin had Scripture as their starting point of their theology and consequences to virtuous actions and disagreeable consequences to vicious actions. He felt that by pursuing pleasure and turning away from pain, a human being was able to ascertain how he should act (ibid:194). He depended not solely on what the Holy Spirit or Scripture said, but on nature too, in order to know what to do in a moral dilemma (ibid:49). Butler's views seem to be a mixture of classical Greek moral theories and some Christian natural theology and logic. He felt that we could determine how we should act apart from special revelation, but the divine revelation was a check on our conclusions (ibid:146). He talked about the moral teachings of Jesus Christ as normative for Christians, because obedience to them fulfills our true nature and brought the happiness which all men sought for. He felt that what the Bible required of us was not contrary to human nature, but rather in line with human nature (Beach & Niebuhr:330). His views thus have very little which is distinctively Christian in them.

As to the question: "How did one know what to do when faced with a moral dilemma?" Butler's answer was, "listen to your natural instinct." In other words, nature too will show you what the will of God is and not just Scripture. His views are therefore a marked departure from the exclusivistic literal interpretation of the *sola Scriptura* slogan of the radical reformation.

## Summary and evaluation

Joseph Butler's views are yet another departure from the exclusivistic interpretation of the *sola Scriptura* slogan. He believed, among other things, that nature and Scripture should supplement each other. He strongly believed that in nature, God has shown agreeable consequences of virtuous actions and disagreeable consequences of vicious actions (although the virtuous actions may not be always easy to know in nature, bearing in mind the fact that human nature is not perfect due to the depravity of human being). He felt that both nature and Scripture should help in moral decision making. He thus seemed to have rightly realised the deficiency of an exclusivistic interpretation of the *sola Scriptura* slogan. In so doing, he opened the way for the possibility of using other factors like culture in ethical decision making. In this respect his views were a welcome development.

He might have had a point when he said that pleasure and pain shows us how we should live. But this guidance may not be as clear cut as he believed it to be. In some situations, what may be pleasurable may not be easy to know. Besides, pleasure may even mislead us. It may blur our capacity to be objective when facing certain issues. What may appear to be pleasurable may not always be the right thing to do. Some Nazis, for example, had taken pleasure in killing the Jews, but it was not right at all! We agree with him that although humans may know how to act apart from special revelation, they still need special revelation like Scripture to check their conclusions. Scripture should surely always remain our criterion.



human nature requires are not always contrary to each other. This is probably what the Apostle Paul had in mind when he talked about “the required things which we know by human nature” (Romans 2:14).

Despite these positive assessments, we do have problems with some of his views:

First, There is nothing distinctively Christian in his ethics. It is, in fact, a mixture of classical Greek moral theories with Christian natural theology and logic. In other words, one did not really need to be a Christian to do what Butler said.

In addition, contrary to orthodox Protestant theology, he put nature on the same level with Scripture. This may be acceptable in other Christian theologies, but not in Protestant theology. Scripture should always have authority above everything else.

Furthermore, he did not take the doctrine of total depravity of human being seriously. This comes out clearly in his discussions on practical moral issues. He seemed to believe that nature alone can lead one to know the will of God. This prompted his critics to say that his views are an indirect way of rejecting *sola Scriptura* in favour of *solus natura*. If this is indeed the case, then Butler’s views may not be a real improvement. It would be better to acknowledge nature, Scripture, the Holy Spirit and many other instances as sources of knowledge in ethical decision making, but to maintain that Scripture is our final supreme court of appeal.



### 2.4.3. Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)

Jonathan Edwards is mostly remembered as a Calvinist theologian and philosopher who was in a way Augustinian, because he argued that true virtue consists essentially in love for God, and that apart from such love other virtues are less than true. He also believed that human beings are incapable of such love apart from the aid of the grace of God (Noll 1984:147).

The views of Edwards on ethics were mostly a reaction against rationalism and the enlightenment views of his time. He defined morality in a biblical way and reacted against the preoccupation of his age with the moral capacities of human nature (see Beach & Niebuhr, 1973:386f, for details). He reacted strongly against the view that the faculty of sense, when cultivated properly, could point the way to a truly virtuous life. He contended that true virtue could only be known through God and his revelation (Noll 1984: 346). In all his ethical discussions Edwards constantly returned to the idea of the contribution of grace. He stressed that a sinner will never choose to glorify God, unless God himself changed that person's character or implanted "a new sense of the heart" (Edwards 1957a:vol. 8:400f). In order to give a philosophical defense of his views to the intellectuals of his century, Edwards (Noll1984:346), expressed his views in the following three steps:

He acknowledged a limited value in the work of the so-called new moralists, but he held that we by nature, due to God's common grace, do possess the capacity to act ethically in a qualified sense. This in a way is a recognition that other nonbiblical sources of knowledge are important to some extent. He, however insisted that the socially useful benefits of natural virtue fell far short of true virtue. The only true foundation is the regenerating grace by which God quickened the sinner. He tried to show that the picture of virtue presented by the new moral philosophers was merely a confusing description of prudence, self-seeking, and self-love.

Edwards, in all his views, strived to preserve the unique goodness of God as the sole legitimate source of true virtue. All these views are in line with the Augustinian and Calvinistic views on grace (ibid:346). Edwards, as we have seen earlier, agreed with the fact that human beings have the natural capacity for recognizing morality and following an internal "moral sense", as an expression of self-love. But such socially useful behaviour fell short of true virtue. True virtue consists in love to God and beings in general (ibid:550). Although he remained true to his view that Scripture is a very important source for ethics, he did not think that Scripture alone is the source of authority for ethics. The fact that scientists like Newton, and others, seem to have had some influence on his views is a clear testimony of this fact. He appreciated what science teaches, but he put everything it said and its authority under God and Scripture.

For him, what science says affirms God's being and activity and is not above God and what Scripture (Edwards 1957b:344f).

Lastly, although Edwards strongly emphasized *sola Scriptura* as the supreme criterion in most of his writings, in practice at least, he made use of philosophy and science to clarify his views. Edwards also held a high view of human nature as being the image of God, possessing a natural conscience and capable of moral decisions. As a result of the fact that he emphasised God's sovereignty and belittled human freedom, Edwards has often been criticised for portraying human beings as little more than puppets on a dangling string (Edwards 1969:25f). However, Edwards will surely be remembered as an American pioneer in theocentric Reformed theology and ethics. On the whole, Edwards did not seem to have believed in an exclusivistic view of *sola Scriptura*.

### **Summary and evaluation.**

Edward's works may be yet another improvement in Protestant ethical views. Although he accepted nature as a source of knowledge for theology, he rightly attributed this to common grace. This means that other sources are also important for ethical decision making, but Scripture remains supreme. His views are thus very much in line with mainstream Protestantism.

He is right in pointing to the fact that a truly virtuous life is only possible through faith and the grace of God (the other sources of knowing the will of God according to him, fall under the common grace of God). Thus, his views were more inclusive and did not stick to the literal, exclusivistic understanding of the *sola Scriptura* slogan. He therefore had no problems with including culture as one of the possible sources of authority in ethical decision making.

Although we agree with most of the things which Edwards said about the other sources of knowing the will of God, there are a few things which we find hard to accept. For example, he did not seem to take the human being's freedom seriously. Human beings appear to him to be like little puppets in the hands of an almighty God with no personal freedom and no free choice. When God created a human being, He created them with the freedom to choose. He did not create a robot to be remotely controlled. Another problem we have is that he did not clearly show to us how the other sources of knowledge or authority and Scripture could be used together in ethical decision making. He merely said we need to use both.

## **2.5. The twentieth century**

### **2.5.1 Introduction**

The issue of how to view the authority of Scripture in relationship with nonbiblical sources in ethical decision making has received more and more attention in recent days. This has been clearly demonstrated in the increase of the number of articles on the

subject by scholars over the past decades (Curran and McCormick 1984). Hartin (1986 and 1990) identifies three major approaches towards the use of the Bible and nonbiblical sources in Christian ethical decision making. These approaches can be distinguished as an ethics of laws, an ethics of encounter with God and an ethics of relations and responses. Many scholars in ethics have expressed their views on these and other similar topics. In this study, just like in any other study, one has to make a selection. We will thus look at the writings of five famous ethicists: J. Yoder, J. Gustafson, S. Hauerwas, and B. Birch and L. Rasmussen.

A question may be asked: “Why choose to concentrate on the works of these authors and not others?” We have selected these important contributors to theological ethics in the twentieth century, because, in our opinion Gustafson, Hauerwas, Birch and Rasmussen:

First, represent a different option to the traditional orthodox Protestant view in ethical decision making;

Second, introduce new insights on the relationship between the authority of Scripture and nonbiblical sources in Christian ethical decision making;

Third, continue to exercise, through their writings, a tremendous influence on contemporary Christian theological and ethical reflection;

Lastly, contribute directly or indirectly to certain topics in our study.

J. Yoder on the other hand, is included because he represents the exclusivistic view of *sola Scriptura* in the twentieth century.

### 2.5.2. John H. Yoder (1927-)

The views of the Radical Reformers appear to be alive and well in the modern Christian churches. For many evangelical Christians who are now very active with mission work in Africa, “what God says”, the “Bible teaches”, “pure gospel only”, have become very popular expressions. Such views appear to have no room for any non-biblical materials. One of the most popular modern advocates of the Radical Reformation’s views is John Yoder. Yoder is a Mennonite theologian whose ethics is based on the doctrine of *imitatio Christi* and an absolute exclusivistic interpretation of *sola Scriptura*. This doctrine is based on reading Jesus’ ethics and the Bible literally. Jesus, to Yoder, is the primary criterion of Christian ethical decision making. The humanity of Jesus of Nazareth is to him normative (Yoder 1972:15f). For Yoder everything else must be subordinated to the centrality of the guidance given by Jesus Christ. He strongly feels that the Bible is the only source for moral guidance. To drive this point home, he writes:

Our estimates of how to help history along whether they claim to be guided by prophecy or by secular common sense, are still only our guesses. They can never replace the Torah or the Incarnation as guides” (Yoder 1979:371f).

Yoder says that God gives instructions in the Bible and we must carry them out. For example, when he says “do not commit murder”, God means exactly that. We cannot relativise this ethical absolute in any other way. Like children we need to accept what he calls “God’s way” (1979; 1972). He even suggests that we do away with all sources, except Scriptures and the New Testament in particular, because it contains the examples and the teachings of the Lord

Jesus Christ. Thus his views reflect a strict form of the *sola Scriptura* principle in ethical decision making (Yoder 1971:45).

Writing on Jubilee ethics, Yoder (1972) says we must live a jubiliary life every day, because Jesus came to proclaim an everyday Jubilee. He believes Jesus is proclaiming an everyday jubilee to us. To make people know what he means by this, he adds that Jesus meant his ethical teachings are should be respected by all Christians of all ages (Yoder 1971;1972).

### **Summary and evaluation**

Yoder's ethical theory appears to be a return to the "Biblical realism" of the classic Protestant conception which centers on the historical revelation of God in Christ. For Yoder, Jesus and the Biblical materials provide the Church with a norm and content. As he aptly puts it:

it is safer for the life of the Church to have the whole people of God reading the whole body of canonical Scripture than to trust for her enlightenment only certain filtering processes through which learned men of a given age would insist all the truth must pass" (Yoder 1970;1971:136).

Thus for him, the only norm for guiding the Church is the Bible and its accounts of Jesus Christ. We need to imitate Jesus (1971:121f). As Mouw (1976), however, points out, we cannot imitate Jesus all the way. Which aspects of Jesus' suffering, for example, are we to imitate? We cannot duplicate all sufferings. Can we imitate the *via dolorosa* "consistently" and "universally?" This however, may not be always practical. In his defense of *sola Scriptura* Yoder (1972:21f), appears to be very close to fanaticism.

It is equally regrettable that he speaks as though Scripture is addressing all the problems of modern man. To him, man appears to be a creature who has to obey God at all costs without any freedom or free will.

What he calls God's instructions for morality are not easy to know in a modern complex world. The contexts and situations surely differ. It is not be easy for one to literally apply the ten commandments to modern day problems like abortion and euthanasia. His strict form of the *sola Scriptura* adherence may thus not always be workable.

Despite these weaknesses, some of his views make some very interesting reading. For example, his high view of Scripture is admirable. If it can be balanced and used more cautiously, it could act as a good corrective to those who do not respect and accept Scripture as the authoritative word of God in everything. His views on the jubilee teachings of Jesus Christ are equally commendable. However, a once in a life time jubilee and not an everyday jubilee, as he proposes, would be very helpful, especially to those countries which are dying under the heavy yoke of foreign debt. If one is to take the words of Yoder seriously (1971;1972), an everyday jubilee would upset our market system. People would borrow money without paying back until the jubilee time.



### **2.5.3. J. Gustafson (1925-)**

Gustafson is one of the theologians who have greatly contributed to the growth of the ethics of character in modern Protestantism. His ethics is described to be theocentric because he puts God at the center of everything. He feels that in whatever we do it is the divine governance enabling us to be certain kinds of persons and certain kinds of communities (Gustafson 1981:2). He says, among other things, that “moral action involves the ordering and directing of existing powers in accordance with moral principles, values, ends and ideals” (ibid.:8).

Gustafson describes his ethics as an ethics which follows from the theocentric perspective (ibid:1-3). This theocentric perspective, according to him, requires that the practical moral question: “What is God enabling us and requiring us to be and to do?” be asked. According to Gustafson, God, the ultimate ordering power in the universe, the divine governance, is enabling and requiring. An ethics of “aspiration” as well as of “obligation” is therefore at stake. He talks about requiring (1975a:156-157), because he feels that God the divine governor demands some conformity. He talks about “us” , because he feels that not just individuals, but the whole community collectively, should make choices and engage in actions collectively. His emphasis on the need for making ethical decisions collectively will surely find a lot of support from African Christian theology where community is very important. In some tribes, even decisions to convert to Christianity are a communal and not an individual’s decision.

In addition, almost every ethical decision has to be sanctioned by the community. The early Christian Church at the time of the apostles seems to have had a similar strategy (Acts 17:33;25:12f).

The word “to be” in the question: “What is God enabling us and requiring us to be and to do?” which Gustafson poses above, means that the divine governor (God) enables us to be certain kinds of persons and certain communities. The word “to do” according to Gustafson, is meant to stress the fact that life is an activity and morality pertains to actions as well as to qualities of individuals and states of affairs (ibid:1-4). This is the reason why Gustafson feels that God demands certain conformity if we are to live in harmony with Him and his creation (ibid:1). Thus ethics to him is doing what God is enabling and requiring us to do. This is what makes his ethics to be distinctively theocentric.

Although this thesis wants to look at how he used Scripture in ethical decision making, it is important that his ethics be clearly spelt out in advance. This will make us understand why he treats Scriptures in the way he does. Gustafson feels that due to the possibility of differences in morality leading to civil strife and confusion, there is a proper motivation to find beliefs, values and principles by which disputes can rationally and peaceably be moderated, if not overcome (ibid:127). He thus believes, unlike many other modern ethicists (MacIntyre 1984: 3f), that there is need for a certain form of ethical principles. He thus argues for an emphasis on the prescriptive task of ethics.

His ethical analysis includes criteria for moral judgement and action on the one hand and a discussion on the nature and locus of the good on the other hand (Gustafson 1978:77f). For Gustafson, both responsibility and virtue are needed in order to recover the inner connection between the personal qualities and the conduct of the moral self.

Although Gustafson is critical of the ethics of decision and action, he feels that since all experience of God is mediated and indirect (1975a:156-157), we need to ask the question which Niebuhr (1963:6f) asks in a different way. Instead of asking what the appropriate response to God's action should be, we should instead ask, "what is God enabling and requiring me to be and to do?" This rephrasing of the question gives reason and man a greater role in knowing the will of God. It implies a bit of human autonomy and attention to character.

Gustafson is attracted to the virtue tradition in moral philosophy on account of the resources which the latter contains for a recovery of human agency and also for greater moral direction. As developed in Aristotle and Aquinas, the language of virtue stresses the interconnectedness between the character of the agent and the actions of the latter. Gustafson (1975a:45) uses the concept of character in a more general sense to include the agent's beliefs, dispositions, affections, intentions, and particularly the manner in which these are interrelated in persons. Character for Gustafson refers to the "sort of person one is", to the enduring form or shape and directionality of the self.

The agent's perspective is the most fundamental determinant of the self for Gustafson (1968:248). His idea of grounding grace and nature in the relationship of God to the whole of creation as creator and also redeemer (1978: Ch.4), is closely associated with a teleological conception of God's relation to the world, a teleological (purposive) conception of moral agency, and a tradition in which virtue is integrally related to moral choice. This may also be the reason why, in one of his books (1978:40), he speaks highly of Thomas Aquinas' views on virtue. To him, the views of Aquinas which relate virtue to moral choice were a recovery of human agency and greater moral direction (ibid.).

Gustafson's view on the use of Scripture in Christian ethics makes very interesting reading.

He believes that:

First, Scripture is a book which contains instructions through which the divine governor (God) is enabling us to be and requiring us to do (1975a:1-4);

Second, Scripture is for Gustafson a very important source material for character building (1978:77f) and for helping a good charactered person to know what to do when faced with a moral dilemma;

Third, the fact that Gustafson stresses God's action should be understood in terms of enabling and requiring us to be (1975a:156-157) implies that man and his reasoning is given a greater role in knowing the will of God. It implies human autonomy and attention to character building. Such an approach, gives room for all passages of Scripture to play a role in ethical decision making;

Fourth, he does not accept the *sola Scriptura* slogan because Scriptures are only part of God's reality and not the whole of God's reality. It is for this reason that the Bible is for him an

exclusivistic view of the *sola Scriptura* slogan. He says:

no explanation of why an individual person has certain preferences of value can avoid taking into account not only the biological drives of that individual, but also the social and cultural milieus in which he or she lives (Gustafson 1984:14).

This is very much in line with his belief in a revelation which includes culture and human reason as part of God's revelation. The whole is very important for him. Scriptures are only part and not the whole of the reality which should be taken into account in ethical decision making.

His focus on human action, which God makes possible, does seem to give man more freedom and partnership with God in creation and puts virtue and reason under God. He believes that principles or norms are much more needed in a pluralistic society than otherwise. Where you have many views you need norms and principles to help build a consensus. He insists that the Bible is an important source of morality, but not the only source.

## **Summary and evaluation**

Gustafson's moral strategy in ethical decision making is based on the question, "what are we to be and to do?"(1997:15-29). This question, to him, has a particular relevance as to how we become persons with certain characteristics and how we should make choices in particular circumstances. The answer to this question is to use the Bible and its materials, moral

intuition, the stories of the community and other laws and rules (Gustafson 1997:24-27). His views appear to be an attempt to construct a morality, partly based on reason and partly based on revelation. In addition, he insists that the Bible, biological drives, reason, social and cultural milieus are important factors in ethical decision making (1984:14). Reality, he claims, is more than Scripture. Scriptures are just part of what should be taken into account when making an ethical decision. His views may thus be suitable for addressing the crisis we have in African Christian ethical decision making.

To sum up, he is on the right track by insisting that nature, culture, reason, experience, biological drives, and Scriptures should be taken into account in all ethical decision making.

Second, he has a point in insisting that Scripture is part of the whole reality and that to base your decision on Scripture only is to base your decision on one part of reality and not the full reality. Thus ethical decisions have to be based on the whole reality (which includes culture, nature, and other factors).

Third, his views restores the importance of principles of conduct by which disputes may be resolved in a modern pluralistic society while at the same time stressing the importance of character formation in ethics. A bad charactered person may not know the will of God;

Although his views have these strong points, one cannot agree with him in some of the things which he says, namely:

First, he seems to suggest that all beliefs about God have to be treated with uncertainty, because, as he puts it, (1975a: 156-157) they are mediated and indirect knowledge about God. This view may lead to some very unfortunate consequences. For example, it may mean we cannot really know what God wants us to do. We can only guess, so to speak.

Second, his insistence that the objective and universal elements in moral judgements are grounded historically in human experience rather than ontologically in the ordering of being can be questioned. This may imply that what is right and wrong entirely depends on the human being and his historical condition. It may lead to relativism of the worst kind. It may even imply that what is right and wrong entirely depends on one's culture. If, for example, eating human flesh is right in one culture, the other cultures whose human experience differs should not criticise such a culture.

However, despite these few criticisms, Gustafson's views may provide one of the ways forward for African Christian ethical decision making.

The other important ethical theologians whose views may help provide a way forward in African Christian ethical decision making in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are Birch B. C and Rasmussen L. Let us thus discuss their views on the relationship between the Bible and culture.

### **2.5.5. Bruce C. Birch and Larry Rasmussen**

B.C. Birch and L.L. Rasmussen's views on the relationship between the biblical authority and the making of moral judgement mark yet another important development in moral theology. They believe that the Bible is not the only source of identity - shaping authority (Birch & Rasmussen 1989:141). Birch and Rasmussen strongly feel that Christian character and conduct involves many influences and sources of insight other than what Scripture alone says. They believe that in moral matters, especially, authority cannot be the sole possession of Scripture. In other words, the authority of Scripture must not be understood to be absolute or exclusive, because many other sources of influence and insight become authoritative in moral deliberations. Things like historical perspectives, social economic data, scientific data, rational arguments and an endless variety of other nonbiblical sources are authoritative in the making of moral judgements (ibid: 143).

They feel that all those people, who say that the Bible is a self-sufficient authority for Christian moral judgements, because God's will is revealed in it, are making a mistake. They are making a mistake because they are narrowing their view of God. They speak as if God ceased to be active after closing the canon (ibid: 150). In other words, they are limiting God's disclosure of the divine will to the distant past only as if God reveals himself only in the records of the distant past (ibid: 151). They are of the opinion that such a view leaves no room for the ongoing activity of God and the possibility that God might be revealed through sources other than the Bible.



What then is their solution to the problem at hand? Their solution is the following:

Firstly, biblical authority in ethical matters should be viewed in terms of primacy rather than self-sufficiency. This means that the Bible, because of its function in the church, should remain primary, but it is not totally adequate as the sole source for shaping Christian character and conduct. The authority of the Bible is thus necessary for the Christian moral life but not sufficient. It can not be relativised as simply one among many sources of ethical insights (ibid: 153).

Secondly, the Bible is the chief influence in shaping the perception and action of the church in current moral deliberations (ibid.). In fact, as a result of the Bible's unique relationship to the church, it becomes the constant source to which the church refers to in the shaping of moral character and in the making of moral decisions. For Christians no other source can claim these characteristics. Therefore, the primacy of the Bible indicates its position as the single necessary reference point.

### **Summary and evaluation**

Firstly, the view that there has to be a dialogic relationship between biblical material and nonbiblical material in moral judgements is a step in the right direction. Their views allow for the possibility of allowing African culture to play a role in moral decision making. This is surely in sharp contrast to the biblical literalists who believe in the exclusivist use of Scripture as a source for ethical decision making. Secondly, their view that a normative stand on any given moral issue can never be settled by reference to Scripture alone has merit. A normative stand on many modern moral issues is the outcome of influences from several sources.

#### **2.5.4.1. Stanley Hauerwas**

Stanley Hauerwas is yet another modern theologian who has greatly contributed to the revival of the emphasis on character in Christian ethics. Although this study wants to look at how he uses Scripture in ethical decision making, it is important for us to first understand his ethics.

Hauerwas, just like A. MacIntyre, argues for the centrality of notions of virtue in a coherent morality, and interprets the virtues in terms of the qualities necessary for the flourishing of a human community. The “community of character” in which he grounds his understanding of the virtues is the Christian tradition. He defines virtues, as qualities required enabling persons to achieve the goods, which are internal to practices, and to order the goods of various practices in relation to a moral tradition’s history of seeking certain basic goods.

His ethics is thus basically an ethics of character or virtue (Hauerwas 1975a: V11). In this ethics the moral direction is provided through the agent who is shaped by the narrative of the Christian community (ibid.). This fundamental orientation is the one, which gives form both to the agent’s being as a person and to the decisions and actions of the latter. It is for this reason that Hauerwas’ primary concern is not with action guiding rules for concrete decisions, but rather with the intentions and the virtues of the agent who is going to make decisions. Although the agency finally has to make decisions, these decisions, according to Hauerwas, are more based on the agent's sensitivity and integrity than conformity to particular rules.

Hauerwas is critical of the present Protestant ethics, because he feels that by focussing upon decisions and actions, it obscures the importance of the quality of the agent who is making the decision (1975a: vii). He rightly feels that a bad-charactered person cannot make good decisions regardless of the rules and principles, which he follows. Thus, orientation of the self towards certain ends (goals and visions) is fundamental. For him integrity and not obligation is the hallmark of the moral life (1975b: 28).

He further rejects all theories on the problems of the moral life, especially those, which purport to be universal in their validity. He feels decision making should not be given the central place in ethics because the modern world is pluralistic with no benchmarks for common reference (Hauerwas 1974: 40-49). He is thus critical of the post-enlightenment's tendencies of reducing Christian beliefs to a system of beliefs. He also rejects its rationalistic efforts to determine principles and rules for resolving moral conflicts in favour of an appeal for unity of moral character within a particular moral tradition - a narrative-determined community. He claims that the church's primary duty is not to reform the world, but to preserve its identity and integrity as a community of faith (Barbour 1981: 176).

Hauerwas' works make interesting and insightful reading. His emphasis on the fact that the character of the agent who is making moral decisions is important is justified. The fact that we are formed and shaped by many traditions, many narratives and that our decisions cannot be based on Scripture only, is very true. In fact, Hauerwas even goes on to call the *sola Scriptura* slogan a heresy and untrue, because it is to him the seedbed of fundamentalism, as well as of higher criticism (Hauerwas and Long 1989: 139). This does not, however, mean that

ne denies the importance of the Bible as a Christian moral guide. He rather sees there are limitations to the biblical authority (see Siker 1997: 114-117, for a detailed discussion on this issue).

Hauerwas feels that although the Bible as Scripture provides the most truthful, and authoritative, resource for Christian community, there are limits to biblical authority. One of the limits according to him is that the Bible has no authority apart from the community of believers.

Second, the community authorises the Bible as the authoritative word of God, meaning the church chose the books, which are in it, because they tell the story of the Christian community best. Thus the Bible has no authority apart from that given to it by the community of believers. For this reason it cannot be the sole authority for the church. In fact, he even goes further to say that not all moral advice and admonitions in Scripture have the same significance (Siker 1997:114f). We may find it very difficult to agree with him on this issue, because the church guided by the Holy Spirit accepted what they believed were books, which were given authority by God as God's word. In fact some of the books of the Bible (Exodus and Deuteronomy) are even believed to contain the actual words of God.

However, it is true to say that his stress on the character of the agent, when taken seriously, makes it possible for us to take other books of Scripture, which do not directly speak about rules and principles, seriously. Thus, the whole Bible can be used to build Christian character. He is equally right in stressing the importance of the community or society in which ethical

decisions are made. His views offer much promise for African ethics, which is communitarian in nature. It liberates Christian ethics from excessive individualism.

On the negative side, there are a few problems with some of his views. One of the biggest problems is his apparent lack of concern for rules and principles. Most moral traditions affirm that certain public rules are absolutely necessary for any good person, because, without them, strife and divisions would endanger the community's central tasks. In fact, dialogue would be almost impossible. There would be no United Nation at all! Thus to throw away liberal democracy together with some of its good things (like rules) would lead to chaos. One would also take exception to his negative assessment of the pluralistic modern world. Although it has created some divisions, it has also enabled individuals and communities from different moral traditions to communicate, co-operate and sustain each other in their traditions, by helping to establish universal moral absolutes and laws on which consensus may be built internationally. The United Nations is a clear example of this.

The choice of narration as a central Christian reflection is equally surprising. Why not poetry, creed or doctrine? One would also take exception to his insistence that the church should not try to change the world. It should just be what it is called to be. It should, as he puts it (1981: 72-86), "just be herself". This surely sounds sectarian, although he denies it. His criticism of the American Catholic bishops report on economic justice (ibid. 73- 89) makes this very clear. The church cannot shy away from involvement in world affairs. It is the light of the world.

As to how the church must be involved in society, he sounds ambivalent and vague to say the least. He offers no moral guidance for action (Hauerwas 1985: 7, 130). The sectarian nature of his views appears in his discussions of a community of character, which exists solely in abstract, appears inwardly focussed and self-absorbed. His ethic of disposition has no ethics of action.

Hauerwas criticises the Roman Catholic Bishops of United States for trying to advise the United States government because he believes that the church must just be herself and should not tell the world what to do (1981:72f)! In his famous book, *The peaceable kingdom* (1983), *he* writes about a wonderful peaceable kingdom community without addressing the norms for such a community if it is to survive as a community nationally and internationally.

### **Summary and evaluation**

Hauerwas's ethics of character, which is basically dispositions of the heart or habits, puts responsibility on the agent who is going to decide or make a moral decision. For him, moral decisions are determined by the sensitivity and integrity of the agent rather than by conforming to particular rules. The Bible is there as a source of stories which will guide the people when making ethical decisions and not as a rule book for do's and don'ts. Stories are the ones, which build character, and based on the type of character, a person makes good or bad decisions (1975a:11f). Thus morality is about developing the self- agency to help him or her to acquire a moral history which is befitting the Christian nature (ibid.) and not just a matter of ethical decision making.

The views of Hauerwas appear to contribute in some ways towards a solution to the problems faced by African Christian ethical decision making. For example, the importance of the development of character (in his ethics), instead of just concentrating on the ethics of decision making and action only, could provide a way forward for African Christian ethics. In Africa stories play a similar important role in character building although rules and principles are still important in Africa. Christian ethics should, however, be concerned with more than just character building. It is naive to think that simply because someone has got a good character he will always automatically choose what is right without the aid of rules and principles as Hauerwas appears to suggest.

Second, the importance, which he gives to the Christian community and its tradition in ethics, is a step in the right direction. It makes other sources of moral guidance and not just the Bible to be important in Christian ethical decision making. In Africa where community is a central concept of morality, the people and not the individual make the final decision. As Mbiti (1970:248-249) aptly puts it:

The people define good and evil by saying that: that is good (or evil) which tradition has defined as good (or evil). According to this definition, evil and good are relative values attributed and categorized by society, with regard to certain events, actions, and practices.

Thus his views on community although referring to the Christian community (the church), when extended to include the African community and its culture, will easily find an echo in African morality as it may allow for the possibility of the African community and its culture (and not just the Bible) to have a say in moral decision making.

Third, by taking into account the building of character, Hauerwas' ethics takes those passages of Scripture, which do not directly speak about rules and principles morally seriously. This makes it possible for one to teach morality using other passages of Scripture as "the Word of God" also.

None-the-less, we still have some reservations with some of his views. The serious ones are the following:

First, he does not seem to accept the idea of universal moral principles. Without these as benchmarks for common reference, there can be no agreement on many moral issues. In fact even dialogue would be almost impossible. Thus no principles or rules for resolving moral conflicts, and no United Nations. A world without rules and principles would have no order. There would be no debate over justice if there were no benchmarks. Dictators would be doing whatever they wanted. No one would tell them that they were wrong.

Second, his apparent lack of concern for rules and principles would surely lead to chaos and disorder in the world. Cooperation and communication between Christians and non-Christians would be impossible. In fact, if one can take some of the things, which Hauerwas says seriously, the church would end up with a sectarian monastic existence in trying to be "herself" (1981:72-86) in this plural world. The church is the salt of the world. What will happen to the world if this salt becomes isolated from it?



Even the community described in his famous book, *The peaceable kingdom* (1983), which appear to have no guiding moral norms, exists only in theory. Unlike his theoretical communities of character described in this book, the base communities of Latin America (which have norms), for example, are practical realities.

Thus, Hauerwas' ethics of character appears to correct one mistake by creating another mistake, i.e. the neglect of moral judgment. In fact, even a person of good moral character still has to wrestle with decision making. To think that simply because someone has a good moral character he or she will automatically make a good moral judgement when faced with a moral dilemma is utopian. Wogaman may have a point when in his classic book, *Christian Ethics: a historical introduction*, says, among other things that:

The debate, over whether the proper object of Christian ethics is the moral character of Christians or the ethical analysis of the decisions Christians are called upon to make, seen in the light of the long history of Christian ethics,... seems quite misplaced. Christian ethics must be concerned about both .... The being of a Christian is important... sole pre-occupation with Christian character to the neglect of either moral character or moral judgment is to collapse the mind and the will in artificial ways.... (Wogaman 1993:278f).

## **2.6. Room for other sources in moral decision making in Western Protestant theology**

Our study of the views of the key figures in Protestant theology (past and present) has shown that the best way to understand the *sola Scriptura* slogan is to view Scripture as the supreme

court of authority, but never, as an exclusive source of authority. Such a view allows the possibility of including culture as a possible source of authority. Such an understanding of *sola Scripture* offers a lot of possibilities for solving the crisis in African Christian ethical decision making. In recent years, the works of Gustafson, Hauerwas, Birch and Rasmussen, more than any other, appear to offer a more promising way forward for African ethical decision making. Their views have some very striking similarities, but also some obvious differences with African morality. The striking similarities are:

First, the views of these theologians appear to offer a “post colonial” account of theology. They react against a punctilio (too much concern with an individual’s decision) Western morality.

Second, their method of reasoning: from narrative, through community, character and virtue are similar to the African moral practice (Bujo 1990:12f).

Third, the importance given to story as a means for character building will surely find a fertile soil in the African home where values are inculcated through story telling. Setiloane (1986:2f) calls African morality a narratively based ethic.

Fourth, a community based ethic is surely familiar to Africa. As Mbiti (1977:26) put it:

African traditional life is largely built on the community. Since the Church is also a community of those who have faith in Jesus Christ, this overlapping concept should be explored much more on the African scene, particularly in terms of the family, the neighbours and the departed.

Even Hauerwas (1983:27) acknowledges the similarity of his views to the African views by borrowing the words of Mbiti (1969:108-109) saying: “I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am”. The “we” Hauerwas refers to here is the church.

Last but not least, the views of these theologians allow for the possibility of integrating African culture into Christian ethical decision making on the basis of a non-exclusivistic view of *sola Scripture*.

Despite these similarities, there are some obvious differences. For example:

The narrative on which the story of scholars like Hauerwas (1983:24-25) is based, is that of God and his people through the ages. The African narrative, on the other hand, is based on what the ancestors (the living dead) the parents, the gods and the tribe say.

Second, whereas the African community is entered naturally, by birth, for Hauerwas, the Christian community is entered by intentional activity (Richardson 1996:49).

Third, whereas in Hauerwas’s case, the saints may be universal moral examples to follow, the African ancestors may be linked exclusively to a particular family group (ibid.).

Gustafson’s views, though similar to those offered by Hauerwas, are different in some ways, and it is the views offered by Gustafson, more than those of Hauerwas, which, in our opinion, appear to offer a real way forward for African Christian ethical decision making. Unlike Hauerwas, Gustafson accepts the fact that values and principles or benchmarks are needed in

Christian ethics has a certain form of prescriptiveness in it (Gustafson 1981:127). His ethics, accordingly, provides criteria for moral judgement. This may help African Christians to develop an ecumenical view of ethical decision making and not to end up with a completely pluralistic and syncretistic view of ethical decision making.

Second, Gustafson believes that God's reality is bigger than Scripture. To base one's decision on Scripture only is to base one's decision on part (and not the whole) of reality. It is for this reason that he feels that, apart from Scripture, an ethical decision must also be based on nature, reason, experienced biological drives, and the social and cultural milieus of the place in which a Christian lives (Gustafson 1984:14f). This is exactly what this study is pleading for. It is completely unacceptable for the African Christians to base their moral decision only on what the Bible or the Western culture says. This has been the case in the missionary founded churches when, for example, they forbade people to use drums for church music, refused full church membership to people who had more than one wife, etc. Thus Gustafson's views, if developed further, could be one of the keys to the solution of the moral crisis faced by the African Christians when making a Christian moral decision.

Third, Gustafson's views are not as sectarian as Hauerwas's views, because he does not advocate for the church to be a particular community away from the rest of "the world". He wants the church to get involved in world problems and be active. It should show the way (Gustafson 1984:30f).

## 2.7. Conclusion

This chapter has shown us a number of things about Western Christian Protestant theology, and their views on the relationship between the authority of Scripture and nonbiblical sources in Christian ethical decision making:

First, most of the Protestant theologians, from the Reformation period to the present, do agree that the Bible is a very important guide to ethical decision making. The main disagreement is to the question whether it is the only guide. Many Protestant scholars feel that in ethical decision making or moral judgement, other non-biblical sources of authority like reason, natural law, context, tradition or culture, the Holy Spirit, or one's character should be used, but that Scripture should still remain the final court of appeal.

Second, even those theologians who claim to base their decisions on Scripture only, in practice at least, seem to use some non-Scriptural sources like culture, context, science, natural law, etc., when making ethical decisions.

Third, although there is agreement on the fact that Scripture is the most important source of material for ethical decision making, the question of how this important source should be used in ethical decision making still remains debatable. Theologians still differ as to how it should be used. Thus, the question how Scripture does or should function in relation to other sources, still remains an open one.

Fourth, the character of the person who is making ethical decisions is as important as making an ethical decision itself. Having one without the other will not do justice to ethical decision making.

Fifth, the difficulties in reaching moral agreements in our modern pluralistic society have been recognized by most of the Protestant theologians discussed in this chapter. The way forward is to have benchmarks to help in building a consensus and to set some limits to relativism in our liberal pluralistic society.

Sixth, the important role of the community in which the individual who makes ethical decisions lives, has also been rediscovered in our modern world. Morality is not just about my individual opinion. It is also about our decision.

Seventh, this overview has shown that we are products of a long historical development. In order to know who we are and where we come from, and to understand our ethical problems better, we need to look back in history.

Last but not least, the way towards a solution of the crisis in African Christian ethical decision making, can be found in Gustafson's (1984:14f) view that we should use the whole of God's reality when making an ethical decision. By using the whole and not part of God's reality he means using Scripture, nature, biological drives, social and cultural milieus (ibid.). A decision which is based on Scripture alone is, according to Gustafson, based on only a part of God's reality.

# CHAPTER III

## THE BIBLE AND AFRICAN CULTURE AS SOURCES IN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN ETHICAL DECISION MAKING

### 3.1. Introduction

The second chapter argued that the slogan *sola Scriptura* advocated by the majority of mainstream Protestant theologians did not mean to say that the Bible only and nothing else should be used when making moral decisions. Their contention was rather that Scripture should be used as the primary source of authority in theology, but that other sources of authority may be used; though they must be subjected to the supreme authority of Scripture.

In this chapter, we wish to argue for the authority of both the Bible and culture as sources in African theology. In doing so, we will look at the views of the African scholars on the authority of the Bible and culture as sources in African Christian ethical decision making. We are also going to look at the case of polygamy and AIDS as illustrations of the dilemma caused by the neglect of culture in African ethical decision making. The views of the African theologians are mostly a reaction against the Western missionary neglect of the African cultural values. Schreiter (1991:i-vii ) aptly describes the situation by saying:

for too long, embracing Christ and his message in Africa usually meant a rejection of African cultural values. Africans were taught that their ancient ways were deficient or even evil and had to be set aside if they hoped to become Christians.

Ngugi wa Thiongo (1972:8f) is equally right when he tauntingly remarks that the European missionaries who came to Africa adopted an attitude of blanket condemnation of African culture in all its aspects. African converts were required to turn their backs on the whole of their tradition and the whole of their culture. Only then was it considered that the Christian faith had truly taken root in their souls. Although some people may feel this statement to be an over-generalisation, the experience of many African Christians throughout Africa shows that this was surely the case. Dickson (1991:12f), after looking at the history of Western missionaries to Africa, observes that the history of their missions witnesses to a wide range of exclusive tendencies. He feels that the most glaring illustration of these is the *tabula rasa* doctrine which maintains that the culture of those being evangelised cannot be looked upon in any way as a basis upon which to build. For Christianity to establish roots among the people, their culture, according to this doctrine, must give way altogether (ibid.).

Scholars in African Christian history have given a number of reasons for this attitude, some of which are as follows:

Firstly, it might have been due to the fact that the missionaries who came to Africa to bring the Word of God had a superior attitude towards the Africans to whom they were preaching the Word of God;

Secondly, it could also have been due to the fact that some of them had an absolute and exclusivistic understanding of the *sola Scriptura* slogan, although in practice, one could see that they themselves were using their own culture, science and many other sources of authority.



It was against this background that many African Christian theologians were reacting. They believed that such a mentality and such views were the main causes of the crisis in African morality. As Pobee (1992:8-22) aptly puts it, there was a “working misunderstanding” between the missionaries who preached the Gospel and the people who were evangelised and received the Gospel. The missionary and the evangelised people interpreted the Gospel in their own different ways. For us to really understand the source of this problem, let us now briefly look at what the missionaries taught on the relationship between the authority of the Bible and African cultural sources.

### **3.2. The background to the views of the African theologians: The missionary legacy**

J. Bonk (1980:230f), in his study of the missionary attitudes towards Africa, has rightly pointed out that as late as 1916, no one in the West doubted the superiority of the white race. Missionaries could not be expected to match in scientific sophistication the racist-imperialist thinking of the leading intellectuals of the time, but they could hardly have been unaffected by it (ibid.1980:299).

It is in fact common knowledge that most of the missionaries who came to preach the Word of God to Africa during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century did not allow the integration of African culture and the Bible in their ethical views. This comes out clearly in their views on issues like polygamy, ancestral worship, attitude towards lobola and sorority. Let us briefly look at some of their views in this regard, beginning with the Roman Catholic teachings.

to have more than one wife, and that this is not forbidden by divine law, let him be anathema". One wonders whether such a strong statement was based only on what these people had read in the Word of God or whether it was influenced by the Greco-Roman cultural lenses through which Scripture was read. If one really objectively reads the Scripture, it is doubtful whether one can rightly say that the Bible unambiguously prohibits polygamy. Hillman (1975:218) and Schillebeeckx (1965:23f) have raised very strong objections to this official stand of the Roman Catholic Church, because they believe that it ignores the cultural context of the African Christians completely.

Pope John 11, in his *familiaris consortio* (22 Nov.1981), complicated the problem further by saying that polygamy radically opposes the covenant of marriage life. As he puts it:

The marriage communion is contradicted by polygamy; this, in fact, directly negates the plan of God which was revealed from the beginning, because it is contrary to the equal personal dignity of man and woman who in matrimony give themselves with a love that is total and therefore unique and exclusive.

Similar disregard for the African cultural context may be seen in their condemnation of the African ancestral "veneration or worship". The Roman Catholic Church teaches that saints are in heaven where they intercede for the Church on earth (Bunjer 1969:144). These saints are not divine beings, they remain human beings (ibid.). The induction into sainthood is usually analogous to the release of the saints from purgatory (Steples 1981:28). A close look at their teachings on the topic of ancestors shows that it is very similar to the African ancestral spirits beliefs. For example:

- in both cases, there is a reciprocal relationship between the living and the dead.
- ancestors and saints function as intercessors between God and human beings.

It is ironic to see that the Roman Catholic Church does not accept the ancestral veneration and yet it has no problems with the veneration of saints who are mostly Western figures. According to La Roche (1968:298), ancestors cannot be compared to the saints because they do not meet the necessary conditions of sainthood. Who exactly makes such necessary conditions? It is interesting to note that African theologians like Bujo (1988) and Idowu (1983) appear to have no problems in adding Jesus to the list of the ancestors. They even claim that Jesus should be treated as the proto-ancestor (ibid.). It may thus be inconsistent to accept the veneration of saints and their mediatorship, but to refuse such status to African ancestral veneration. Such an approach fails to take the African cultural context seriously.

Other African cultural practices like lobola and sorority were equally condemned. They were seen as the buying and selling of the bride and as such, not accepted (Preston-Whyte 1974:188).

Thus despite the fact that in theory the Roman Catholic Church accepted integration and adaptation of certain elements of African culture, in practice, they exhibited the same exclusivist attitudes towards African culture.

Among the Protestant churches, the situation was the same as that of the Roman Catholics. On the issue of polygamy, one of the leaders of the Reformation, Melancton (Hillman 1975:221) is believed to have once written a letter to King Henry VIII of England in which he stated that, "it is certain that polygamy is not forbidden by divine law". However, despite such wise advice given by Melancton and others who shared

similar views, many of the Protestant churches went ahead and treated polygamy as though it was forbidden by divine law.

The Dutch Reformed Church of the Orange Free State (which did a lot of mission work in Central and Southern Africa), in its African mission laws and regulations number 158.5 says among other things that:

- persons who are guilty of polygamous relationships will not be allowed to participate in the sacraments for as long as they continue to live in sin;
- they cannot be elected to the church offices;
- wives who are second wives are subject to Church discipline;

All these statements mean only one thing i.e. they cannot be accepted as full communicant church members.

As for the veneration of ancestors, the Protestant churches did not even want to talk about it. It was seen as part of the pagan/heathen practices (McVeigh 1974:103f).

Similar negative views on the African practice of lobola and sorority have been expressed. The mission committee of the Dutch Reformed Church of the Cape province in 1923, decided that lobola was a sinful practice (Daneel 1971:249).

On sorority, the Dutch Reformed Church Mission Council recommended that the women in such a relationship had to be disciplined (Acts of Synod of the DRC of Transvaal 1964:102-108).

Such anti-integration resolutions were not an exception among the missionaries to Africa during the past missionary period. However, much improvement has been made to move away from these anti-integration stands in recent years.

Most of the Western Reformed and Lutheran theologians of the past saw the indigenisation mainly as claiming non-Christian culture for Christ in their concept of *possessio*. As Bavinck (1954:181) rightly observes, for the Western missionaries who believed in the *possessio* doctrine it meant that:

Christian life does not adapt itself to heathen life-styles but takes possession of them and in so doing renews them ... Christ himself takes possession of the life of the nations; he renews and restores the maimed, the distorted, the regenerate. He fills everything, every word, every custom with a new idea and a new orientation (free translation).

It was therefore obvious that, during this period, to become a Christian in Africa meant to give up completely the “pagan” ways of the ancestors and to take on the Christian ways of the West. As Idowu (1965:5) tauntingly puts it:

If at the beginning, anyone had had enough vision to suggest that while accepting Christianity, Nigerians did not need to throw away what was good and valuable in their own culture, such a person would have been accused of rank “heathenism” by the European religious educators whose set purpose was to exterminate as of the Devil anything that had no meaning to them.

What made the situation even worse was the fact that most of the missionaries who brought the Gospel to Africa at that time, whether deliberately or not, did not understand African culture and the African way of life. In Chinua Achebe’s classical book, *Things fall apart* (1958:24-25), there is a story of an elder who was asked if the missionary understands their ways. His answer was:

How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says our customs are bad; and our brothers who have taken up his religions also say

and allowed him to say, 'I do not know what I am doing when our own no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.'

Benezet Bujo in his book, *African theology in its social context* (1992:40-49) gives a very detailed discussion on how the missionaries and the colonisers showed a great lack of sensitivity towards African culture and its values. He cites their attitude towards polygamy, ancestral worship and many other African traditions. Writing in *Hearing and Knowing: Theological reflections on Christianity in Africa* (1986:48f), he observes that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Hegel in his lectures on philosophy of history paid little attention to Africa. For Hegel and others like him, Africa has shown no progress and development. The African was a natural man with an untameable nature (ibid.).

The African Christians were expected to accept and use only Western culture and obey the oppressive colonial governments. As the Archbishop of Lourenco Marques in Mozambique (Houtart & Rousseau 1971) once told his African converts:

Do not allow yourselves to be seduced or led astray by evil counselors who feed your dreams of independence or utopias of economic and cultural prosperity. As citizens of the Portuguese nation for the last four centuries, it is within the framework of that nation that you should aspire to material, cultural and moral progress by co-operating honestly with the Portuguese authorities and obeying their orders.

Similar disregard for the African cultural values was seen in the letters of F.W. Dodds (1915:524), a missionary to Eastern Nigeria when he said:

In February 1915, I arrived at Bende to attempt anew the dredging and purifying of that ugly jungle pool of heathenism, with its ooze-life of shocking cruelty, reptilian passions and spouting evil....Thus Christianity sees her domain-to-be that of lifting herself high above the secret springs of pagan's turgid streams below.

Many old secret dairies of the early missionaries to Africa are full of such derogatory remarks about the African people and their cultures. In fact words like pagan, primitive, heathen, savages were commonly used in a derogatory manner (Mugambi 1989:62f). Another clear example of a modern missionary to Africa who appears to have a similar disregard for the African Cultural values is R. Bonnke.

## **R. Bonnke**

Bonnke is believed to be one of the most famous modern preachers to have come to the African continent. His revival campaigns are believed to have touched even Presidents of many African countries and thousands of ordinary people in Africa. He claims to have preached to more than one million people since the start of his campaigns (Bonnke1992:158). For Bonnke, everything which precedes the commitment to Christ is evil. It is for this reason that he says African culture has nothing good in it (Gifford 1987:66). He says that African culture is nothing but “witchcraft” (Bonnke 1991:1-2). He appears to despise and rejects most of African cultural values (ibid.). In one of his crusades in the interior of former Zaire, he once said, “Satanic structures (which to him includes African culture) as old as hills were smashed” (Bonnke 1991:2). Another charge that many African theologians have against this famous preacher is the fact that he appears to have no interest in the lives and well-being of the people to whom he is preaching the Word of God. For example, immediately after his bicycle tour of Soweto, the riots began and many blacks were killed. His comments were that God wanted to bring the Word of God to these people before they die (Steele 1984:72). After the riots in Kano and Zaire, Bonnke seemed to have responded in a very similar fashion (ibid.). Thus the lives,

His views of Scripture are equally radical. For Bonnke, the Bible is central. It is quoted and interpreted in an unmitigated fundamentalist way (stress is on the absolute authority of Scripture as the only fallible Word of God). He claims to be preaching nothing but Scripture, which is the Word of God and not his own words. As he put it, “I am not preaching what I think, I am preaching what God said in His book” (Revival Reports1/90Ep7-12). In addition, Bonnke does not expound the text of Scripture. He reads the passages and gives what he claims to be a revelation from the Holy Spirit (ibid.7-10). Those of us who attended his services observed that he does not even seem to use any exegetical methods or even commentaries in his sermon preparation. His adherence to the *sola Scriptura* view and the literal interpretation of Scripture is therefore very obvious from this discussion.

This does not mean that all the missionaries were against the integration of African culture and the Christian faith. There were some who were pioneers of African theology and integration. One has in mind here people like Placide Temples (1954), Edwin Smith (1950), B. Haring (1994) and many who placed great emphasis on African culture. Missionaries like these, however, were exceptions and they had very little effect on the attitudes of the majority of early missionaries to Africa as a whole. It is against such a background that African Christians were reacting.

The African Christians, in the post-colonial period and the post-missionary period reacted against this missionary attitude in several ways. Some of them continued the exclusivistic



(anti-integrationist) attitude of the missionaries, while the others, who are the majority, as we shall later, adopted an integrationist attitude towards African culture and the Gospel. The last group was the radicals (mostly African theologians), who adopted an attitude of elevating the African culture to a superior vantage position. Let us now look at how these African theologians have viewed the relationship between the Bible and culture as sources for African Christian ethical decision making. Our discussion will begin with the views of the anti-integrationists who believed in an absolute and exclusivistic view of Scripture.

### **3.3. The views of African theologians on the Bible and culture as sources for African theology**

#### **3.3.1. Introduction**

Against the background we have described above African theologians felt that white people, including missionaries had not taken the black people seriously enough. As a result, they reacted in different ways. The radicals who wanted to promote the African traditional roots as the norm and criterion reacted differently from the moderates who believed in maintaining a balance between African cultural values on the one hand and Western culture and the Bible on the other hand, and the conservatives, who wanted to protect the absolute exclusivistic supremacy of Scripture. Most of the radical African theologians reacted against the failures by the missionaries to integrate African culture into Christianity by breaking off completely from the mission-founded churches and forming their own independent churches. Moderates and conservatives, on the other hand, remained within the mission-founded Churches. Dickson (1991:85) rightly insists that

anyone who thinks that the exclusivistic attitude is a phenomenon of the past and that no one today would adopt such an attitude, is making a big mistake.

He feels that exclusivism is present even today in many different forms. It is there in both independent and historic churches. This chapter will show that this is surely the case. Let us now look at the reactions of the African theologians to the teachings of the missionaries, beginning with the exclusivists (anti-integrationalists), the moderates, and lastly pay attention to the “radical integrationalists”.

### **3.3.2. Anti-integrationalists**

Recently, a strong literalist approach to the interpretation of the Bible has surfaced. New evangelical churches with exclusivistic views on the Bible and charismatic teachings are on the increase. Most of these groups completely ignore the African cultural context of the people they are preaching to. They, in fact, look at African culture to be completely evil. The most popular representative of these groups on the African scene is none other than Byang H. Kato. Let us now briefly look at some of his views on the relationship between the Bible and African culture.

Kato is one of the few famous African theologians whose views appear to be anti-integrationalist. In his book called, *Theological pitfalls in Africa*, 1975, Kato makes a claim that Biblical Christianity is under threat from universalism which he claims is an unhealthy trend in theology (ibid:2). He criticises many African theologians for what he calls spending a lot of time studying African traditional religions, which according to him should be the object of mission (Kato 1975:23f).

He even attacks the whole concept of African theology and rejects the terminology, saying it is not even the right word to be used. In this book, most of the integrationalists like Mbiti and others have come under severe attack for what he calls compromising the fundamental truths of the Gospel. The impression created in this book is that people who are involved in contextualisation in Africa are moving into universalism. It is no surprise that the highest praises for this book came from American evangelicals like Billy Graham who even wrote a foreword to this book, calling it an appropriate maiden effort (Kato 1975:1-2). The African theologians, on the other hand, criticised this book as a book based on insufficient understanding on his Kato's part (Appiah-Kubi & Torres 1979:85).

What then are his views on the relationship between Scripture and African culture? In this book, Kato gives what he calls a biblical Christianity. Such a Christianity, according to Kato, must be the one which puts the Bible at the centre and it does not compromise the biblical truth (ibid:170). In other words, it is based intirely on what the Scripture say.

On African culture, Kato (1975:175) says that it must be baptised by Christianity and not the other way round. Once it is done the other way around, compromising sets in (ibid.). He says that Africans should not lump fundamental biblical principles together with Western culture, repudiating both. We must adhere to the inerrant, inspired Word of God as the only, special source of Christianity (ibid.). This surely sounds like the absolute *sola Scriptura* view.

Kato is of the opinion that good aspects of African culture should be baptized into Christianity. As far as the Gospel is concerned, there should be no addition or

modification to it (1975:178). It is, however, strange that he accuses the other theologians who are trying to seriously relate the Gospel to African culture of being guilty of syncretism and universalism (Kato 1975:148). The Bible is for Kato God's Word, addressed to the Africans in their cultural context (Kato 1985:42-48). The list of names of African theologians whom he feels are involved with syncretism is equally surprising.

He sums up his views on the relationship between Scripture and African culture (1975:182f) by giving what he calls measures to safeguard biblical Christianity, some of which are:

- In expressing theological concepts in terms of the African situation... the Bible content should remain unchanged.
- The African problems of polygamy, family structure, spirit world, liturgy etc., need to be tackled by evangelical African theologians and biblical answers presented.
- We need an aggressive evangelism and mission programme to prevent the fall into the error of universalism.
- African traditional religions and culture should be secondary to the Word of God.
- Safeguards against syncretism and universalism should be maintained.
- Apologies against unbiblical systems that are creeping into the church should be presented.

If one reads what he has said here and read the attacks on the other African theologians who have discussed contextualisation, it is clear that he has a very high view of *sola Scriptura*.

The views of theologians like Kato are by no means an exception on the African scene. If the previous century belonged to mainline Protestantism and Catholicism, then the modern period belongs to the so-called new religious groups like: Full Gospel Church, Living Waters Ministry, Word of God Church, Deeper Life Ministry etc. According to Gifford (1992:47-83) these churches are on the increase and one of the reasons why these churches claim to be growing is because they claim to be preaching the pure Gospel, or the full Gospel. Most of these new religious groups, whose origin is believed to be the United States of America, have one common emphasis namely, the belief in *sola Scriptura*. They take what Word of God says literally and desire to do nothing but what it says. This appears to be a revival of the Radical Reformation views.

These churches, although led by Africans, seem to be different from the traditional independent African churches in that these new church groups are heavily influenced by the Western (Anglo-American culture) and appear to be strongly anti-African culture in their approaches. They use Western language (either English or French), Their organisation dress, styles, music, literature and preaching styles are strongly Western (Gifford 1992:5, 77).

Most of the traditional African cultural values are said to be evil and demon possessed according to these groups of churches. In these new religious groups, the views of Menno Simon are alive and well in Africa. Several Charismatic and Pentecostal missionaries to

Africa today appear to share such radical anti-integrationalist ideas. It is unfortunate that most of them prefer to speak, rather than to write about their views. Our personal contact with such new church groups has shown that anti-integrationalist ideas are alive and popular on the African scene.

A question may be asked as to why these African churches continue the mistakes which the missionaries to Africa made? There are a number of reasons as to why many years after independence, many African churches continue to show the same disregard for the African cultural input, some of which could be:

- The desire to remain loyal and faithful to the traditional teachings of the founding churches. In fact, many African church leaders in the mission founded churches are usually proud to be called Dutch followers, Extra-strict Calvinists, Scottish churchmen, etc. Regrettably, some are even more proud to be called these names than to be called a born again Christian.
- In some African countries like Zambia where there is a great desire to purify the nation and make it a "Christian nation", there is a desire for a return to "the pure Gospel" as the only guide to morality. Anybody speaking about the African cultural input in matters of faith, is quickly labelled a liberal Christian who wants to compromise "the Gospel of Christ". Naturally, nobody wants to be labelled as such. This is why their television station is full of American Charismatic Gospel preachers who are busy propagating the sola Scriptura slogan and are claiming to be preaching what they believe to be "the pure Gospel" without compromise.
- Although many of these African churches are independent, their theology and text books are still written and published in the so-called Western world. In the process,

what is taught in their theological schools is still in a way indirectly controlled and influenced by the West.

- Last but not least, some of the African church leaders and theologians fear losing the much needed financial support if they speak and dwell much on contextualising theology in Africa. This fear has, however, proved to be unfounded in some instances as most of the founding fathers of these churches really want their former churches to grow and become spiritually mature.

### **Summary and Evaluation**

African theologians who have exclusivistic views believe that African culture should not be used as a source in ethical decision making. They believe that using African culture in theology is simply adulterating the Gospel with paganism. In their opinion, only the Gospel should be used in theology. The rise in the number of such new movements on the African scene poses quite a serious challenge to all the efforts which are being made to contextualise Christianity in Africa. These new movements or fellowships which Waruta (1990:35) calls popular types appear to be on the increase.

However, many modern African theologians are seeking a more positive way of integrating the Bible and African culture without denying their commitment to the centrality of the Bible for ethical decision making. As Chipande (1979:71) aptly puts it, any theology that fails to take culture seriously is doomed to failure. Any conversion that does not touch the hearts and culture of the people results in a superficial conversion. The views of some of these anti-integrationists are likely to be dismissed by many African scholars. They are likely to be treated as just a continuation of the Western missionary

superior attitude towards African culture and merely a continuation of the biblicistic exclusivistic understanding of *sola Scriptura* of the Radical Reformation period.

The passionate attack which Kato and other new radical church groups make on fellow African theologians, mainline churches and ecumenical movements who are promoting integration between Scripture and African culture, shows clearly that these groups of people are really radical anti-integrationists. For this reason, it is no exaggeration to say that most of the conservative evangelicals ignore the African cultural context. They instead emphasise the eternal and universal expressions of the divine truths and usually are also blind to the cultural conditioning of the people they are preaching the Word of God to. One evangelical scholar Harvie Conn (1985:6) calls this evangelical failure of awareness our “cultural blindness”. Similarly Walker (1993:153) calls this lack of acknowledgement of the effect of cultural conditioning on the formulation of faith to be a peculiar characteristic of many Western Evangelical theology.

### **3.3.3. Radical integrationists**

The Radical Integrationists, or Radical Indigenisers of the church in Africa, as others may prefer to call them (Bediako 1996:5), have react in the way they do on the grounds that the church in Africa, as a result of its peculiar historical connection with Western cultural dominance, was failing to develop its own theology, churchmanship, liturgy, or even discipline (Idowu 1968:415-440). The radical integrationists, “appeal to their pre-christian and pre-missionary religious traditions of the past... to the realisation of the “old” religions, with their “God-given-heritage of indigenous spiritual and cultural treasures” (ibid.).



## **E. B. Idowu**

One of the most famous pace setters for radical indigenisation of the church is Bolaji Idowu. His main argument is that, as a result of Africa's peculiar dominance by the West, they were failing to develop their own theology and even discipline. To remedy this “predicament of dependence”, the church needs to build its bridges to the revelation given to the Africans in their pre-Christian and pre-missionary religions of the past.

In one of his books, titled *Towards an indigenous church*, Idowu (1965:1-20) aptly sums up his views by saying:

Is Christianity not after all a European Institution which has no beneficial relevance for Nigerians, but which has nevertheless been imposed upon them as an engine of colonial policy by their European overlords? And if that is so, what is the need for Nigerians to continue to accommodate the imposition at this time of the day when they are wide awake to their independence as a nation, when the colonial structure which it served had collapsed under the impact of nationalism (Idowu1965:1-20).

Idowu sees Christianity in Nigeria and the rest of African as being on trial. He says the crucial question is “if it is true that Christianity is a white man’s cult, a kind of imperialistic witchcraft ...its spells has now been broken; the magic has lost its power” (ibid.). He (ibid:11) feels that the church in Nigeria, and in Africa as a whole, must be indigenised. By indigenisation, he means that:

the church should bear the unmistakable stamp of the fact that it is the church of God in Nigeria, not an outreach or colony of Rome, Canterbury or Westminster Central Hall, London or the vested interest of some European or American missionary.

According to Idowu (1956:25), one cannot ignore the primal religions of Africa. His concern for liberation from cultural dominance meant total liberation from Western cultural influence.

It is true to say that African traditional religions and culture must be rehabilitated from the caricature of Western ethnocentrism, but such a pursuit should not ignore the primacy of the authority of Scripture (Turaki 1999:25). This is in fact a view that is echoed by many African theologians today. Besides, scholars like Idowu must stop speaking as if everything in the pre-Christian African cultural context was good and ideal. For example, human sacrifices to the idols can hardly be justified, from a moral point of view.

These views of Idowu found an echo in the views of other theologians like Daneel (1973;1974; 1980), who appears to us to be even more radical in his views. The other radical integrationalist theologian is G. Muzorewa. Let us now look at the gist of what he says in this regard.

### **G. Muzorewa**

For Muzorewa, African traditional religions is not just another great source, but actually the criterion for African theology. He feels that concepts of god in African traditional religions are in fact much better and broader than the Western biblical ones (Muzorewa 1985:6-9). For Muzorewa the Bible is not the norm at all (ibid. :9).

In his use of words like mediatorship, salvation, etc, he does not even refer to the uniqueness or exclusiveness of Christ and his work or salvation as presented in the Scripture. He does not distinguish between an African theocentric religion which is based

on general revelation and the Christ centred religion based on the Bible. For Muzorewa it is the traditional religions based on general revelation which should be the basis for an African theology (1985:40-85).

Muzorewa's views are really full of flaws. They are the best example of a radical reaction to Western Christianity. He also speaks as though African traditional religious views are superior and without flaws. He forgets that all traditional religions are based on general revelation, which due to the fall may not be perfect any more.

To regard the traditional religions as the dominant frame of reference for Christian theology in Africa cannot be maintained, because they do not share the same basis. One may surely not speak of a Christian theology if extra-biblical criteria are applied in such a way that the cardinal Christian doctrines become unrecognisable. His views are to some of us a reaction that has gone too far.

## **Conclusion**

The radical integrationalists emphasise the continuity between the Biblical Christianity and the African traditional religions. This group of theologians believe that the Christian faith is a fulfilment of mankind's desire. It fulfils that which people yearn for in their hearts (Bediako 1999:65). African culture provides the point of contact with Christianity as Gehman (1989:2648) puts it. However, when this point of contact is over-emphasised, it usually leads to serious consequences for Christianity, because as Gehman (ibid.) rightly points out, it has its roots in a low view of Scripture and a high view of man's moral character. While Gehman (ibid.) believes that there is a measure of continuity between

Scripture and human tradition, due to the general revelation given to all people, there is also a measure of discontinuity due to man's sinful rebellion against God (ibid:268). We must thus maintain both the continuity and discontinuity in dealing with such issues. Thus a cultural theology which emphasises the cultural element at the expense of the Biblical Word of God is correcting one error with yet another error.

### **3.3.4. Moderate Integrationalists**

This is a less radical form of integrationalism. The group of moderate integrationalists are concerned with continuity with the churches in the West, while they at the same time try to be faithful to the ancestral traditions of Africa. The majority of churches and theologians belong to this group. They believe that as the Gospel enters Africa, it becomes shaped by the African experience. In other words, they take both the Gospel teachings and the African cultural teachings seriously. This position, more than any other, provides in our opinion, the most promising solution to the crisis caused by the juxtaposition of the biblical authority and African culture. Some of the famous names attached to this group are E. W. Fashole-Luke, J. Mbiti, K. Dickson and J. Pobee. Let us now briefly discuss the views of these famous theologians on the relationship between Scripture and African culture.

#### **E.W. Fashole - Luke**

E. W. Fashole - Luke (1976:146) sums up his views on Scripture and African culture by saying, "if Christianity is to change its status from that of resident alien to citizen, then it

must become incarnated in the life and thought of Africa and its theologies must bear the date stamp of more African thinking and reflection”. He believes that the Bible is the primary and basic source for developing African theology. He ridicules those who look down on the “biblical fundamentalists”, because as he puts it (Fashole - Luke 1976;141), these groups, “underline the basic feature of the Christian faith which cannot be neglected: the uniqueness and finality of Christ’s revelation and the judgement of every other revelation, religion or culture by that criteria”.

Fashole - Luke adopts a positive and balanced approach to the role that Western culture should play in African theology. He feels that the initial resistance of Western influence to Africans was an overreaction (ibid:1430). He believes that it was a reaction against the stagnation caused by the “God is dead” movement. African Christians are in his opinion, now more positive to Western culture, because they are now able to select insights and trends which are valuable in Western culture and leave out the ones which they consider to be less valuable.

We can concur with Fashole-Luke’s emphasis on the primacy and basic nature of Scripture as a source, as long as this does not mean it is the only absolute source. His stress on the Bible as the criterion on which material from other sources like culture, science etc, can be commended. This is surely a positive corrective to both the integrationalists and the anti-integrationalists. Those who are radically opposed to the incorporation of Western cultural influence should listen to what Fashole-Luke says. Western culture is surely one of the sources of African theology, because proper theology can only be properly done in an ecumenical environment (ibid:144). Just as Western theology needs the African cultural

input to their theology, in the same way African theology needs the Western cultural input (Shorter 1972:14f). Of late, many other African scholars share similar views.

## **J. Mbiti**

Mbiti's basic point of departure on the topic of the relationship between the Gospel and culture is that the Gospel was revealed to the world in the context and language of culture and not in an empty vacuum. All the biblical statements about God were made in a particular culture (Mbiti 1977:27), that of the Jews. Since that time, the Gospel has been proclaimed and accepted within the cultural milieu of the peoples of the world. God gives us the Gospel and man gives us culture. When the Gospel and culture meet, and if Christian faith is generated, then Christianity is the result (ibid.).

For Mbiti, culture is very important. He believes that without cultural transmission the Gospel might as well have remained forgotten in Jerusalem. God has thus entrusted the Gospel into the hands of human cultures (ibid.). African culture is to Mbiti one of the cultures entrusted with the Gospel of Christ (ibid.). Thus the Gospel, according to Mbiti, does not throw away culture, but rather works within a culture. Culture is the medium of receiving, the Gospel. Without it we would not have the Gospel.

With regards to Christian values and ethics, Mbiti feels that Christian values and ethics cannot be applied or taught in a vacuum. They have to be related to the living, existential situations of the African peoples in their cultural milieu. Thus for Mbiti there is to be a positive relationship between the Bible and African culture. The Bible and African culture are allies (Mbiti 1977:36).

cultural elements and practices (Mbiti 1977:36). Culture and the Gospel are allies. Without culture, the Gospel cannot encounter people. He believes that the Gospel and culture are not mutually contradictory or in conflict, but are complementary (ibid.).

J. Mbiti offers one of the most balanced and detailed discussions on the relationship between the authority of the Bible and African culture. He rightly emphasise that the Gospel and African culture should not be in conflict, but, should rather be allies. He is also right in insisting that despite the close relationship that there should be between the Bible and African culture, the Bible should judge and evaluate African culture. In other words, the Bible is the final court of appeal, but not in an exclusive sense. The Bible needs culture and culture needs the Bible. His views are thus for the most part agreeable to us. However, other scholars like B. Kato (1975:570) attacked Mbiti's great enthusiasm in "Africanising" Christianity. His critics see statements which he made in his New Testament eschatology (ibid:103f) as evidence that Mbiti is just hiding his universalism (Kato 1975:57). However, if one takes into account what he really says, such accusations are not correct.

### **K. Dickson**

Faith according to K. Dickson must always live in constant interaction with traditional cultures. He believes that there can be no justification whatsoever for ignoring the cultural particularity of a convert by insisting on his/her adherence to a regulation which has no identifiably Christian significance (Dickson 1991:137). Dickson feels that, when

interpreting the Bible, one needs to take into account a person or people's circumstances - cultural, social, economic and political factors. He believes that without these dimensions, biblical interpretation becomes exclusivistic (ibid.).

Dickson feels that those African churches which are adopting Western oriented forms of Christianity are not doing well at all. He is of the opinion that an ideology developed in a specific cultural situation can hardly be expected to fit meaningfully into another cultural context; on the contrary, it can become a source of much confusion and short-sightedness with regard to the real needs and problems of the people (ibid:145). Thus any real interpretation of the Bible should take the African existential reality seriously.

Dickson is completely against any exclusivistic view of a Christian Faith. He feels that much of Christianity is a ghetto of believers. In other words, any Christianity worth its salt should take the Bible and culture seriously. He even believes that some messages of the Bible, if anything, impoverish Christianity (Dickson 1991:3-6).

Dickson makes some very interesting observations on the issue at hand. His criticisms of the historical (mission founded) churches is apt. For the church in Africa to be authentic, it must not be a carbon copy of Western Christianity. While he appreciates the fact that the Bible is a very important source of authority for African theology, he insists that this should not mean excluding African culture. He believes that it is an indispensable source of theologising, because it reveals what God has done. But this should include relating the biblical teaching to the circumstances of the Africans (Dickson 1978:47). Such an emphasis is indeed a positive development in Africa theology. This is exactly what Donovan (1982:127f) had in mind when he says, among other things, that the evangeliser



must approach other cultures with the conviction that God is already present within them, no matter how flawed that culture may be.

However, the precise relationship between Scripture and African culture has not been clearly defined by Dickson. He is right in warning people to guard against exclusivism, but how one should go about doing this is not altogether clear. Again, his strong attacks on Western culture and our Western theological inheritance, may create an impression that Western culture is not needed as a possible source in the African theological enterprise. Whether Africans like it or not, the Western cultural influence has come to stay. All that we need to do, is to select and leave out the Western cultural elements which hinder the growth or obstruct the growth of the African cultural contribution. After all, Christianity came to us clothed in Western culture. It is the vessel through which the Gospel came to us Africans.

## **B. Bujo**

One of the most popular ethical theologians who has seriously attempted to discuss the relationship between African culture and the Gospel, is B. Bujo. In his book *African theology in its social context*, 1992, he gives us his views on the relationship. Bujo's views offers a balance between the reformists who want to move away from the African roots and those who would like to preserve traditional African culture in a mindless fashion. He appears to be sensitive to the African culture while at the same time maintaining clearly the Gospel as an important authority. He feels that those who dwell exclusively on the African cultural heritage are ignoring the contemporary African context

(Bujo 1992:15). What we need, according to Bujo, is a new synthesis (ibid:16), because the situation in Africa today is a synthesis of cultures.

Bujo emphasises the fact that African culture is indispensable for African Christian ethics and can make a very important (ibid:17f) contribution to Christian ethics in general. He feels that when the European missionaries came to Africa, they found a working society which had moral values. Apart from advocating a synthesis between African culture and Western culture, and other cultures for that matter, Bujo feels that African theology must take the present cultural context seriously and should not remain in the old negritude movement of the past (ibid:660). As he aptly puts it, only then will African Christianity make a positive contribution to Christian ethics.

Bujo's stress on the present social context rather than sticking to Africa's primitive past is really a step in the right direction. Many other African theologians have a tendency to over-emphasise Africa's primitive past as if Africa has remained static and has not changed at all! They usually tend to have very little or nothing to say about the present modern African reality (Pobee 1992:34f).

Bujo, unlike the other radical African theologians we have discussed earlier, is candid enough to admit that African theology may learn from Western culture as long as African theology is able to distinguish between positive and negative elements in Western culture. He feels that African theology has to make a positive contribution to Christian ethics. Again, he is right in insisting that Africans do not need to change their culture in order to be called children of God, because authentic African Christianity demands that they use their African cultural heritage.

However, this does not mean that we agree with everything that Bujo says. His identification of Jesus with the ancestors, for example, is not agreeable to some of us who come from the Protestant background where the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as “the” son of God is strongly emphasised. To say that Jesus Christ should be treated as a proto-ancestor may thus be taking the whole concept of contextualisation too far.

### **3.3.5. Conclusion**

Although a few African theologians do not believe in integrating African culture with the Word of God, the majority of African theologians believe that African culture is a very important source of material in African theology. They believe that any neglect of the African cultural contribution will result in a less authentic Christianity. They equally has a point in insisting that Scripture should be taken to be the supreme criterion in African theology, African culture should still remain an important source material for African theology. The Western missionaries should therefore approach other cultures and other religions with sensitivity and respect. As Warren (1963:10) aptly puts it:

When approaching another culture, another religion,...take off your shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy or otherwise, we may find ourselves treading on men`s dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival.

It is therefore very obvious that all the missionaries who failed to take African culture seriously, forgot that God was in Africa before they arrived. The African cultural context should be taken seriously. If this is not done, it will surely result in a half baked, less mature African Christianity and moral chaos.

### **3.4. Practical examples of the problems involved when there is failure to relate Scripture with African culture**

Some of the clearest examples of how African Christians should take African culture into account when making moral decisions come out clearly when discussing the issues of polygamy and AIDS. This does not, however, mean that other moral problems are not important to us. For example, issues like poverty and economic development and education are equally important. We have rather chosen to dwell on these two issues because we are convinced that the issues of a converted polygamist and AIDS, in our opinion, give a much clearer picture of the problem we are discussing so far. Besides, African Churches have not yet found a lasting solution to these predicaments (Donovan 1978:35f, Trobisch 1978:38f, Bujo 1998:185f). In addition, in many African countries AIDS has been said to be the number one killer and a national disaster.

#### **3.4.1. The problem of polygamy**

The dilemma caused by the problem of polygamy is simply: What should a new convert who had more than one wife before he became a Christian do when he gets converted to Christianity while in a polygamous state?

This is one of the areas in which African culture should be taken into account if this question is to be adequately addressed. In Western culture, where marriage is between two people and their decision is final, divorcing is usually not much of a problem. In the African setting, however, it is not easy to resolve a problem like this one. Marriage is

not just a contract between two loving individuals, but rather a contract between two families (the wife's family and the husband's family). As a result, a converted polygamist does not have the freedom to decide on his own without the consent of the parents.

Recently, there has been a rapid growth in traditional African religions and independent churches. Cyril Okorochoa once said: The main reason why African Christians lapse into their traditional religions is because Christianity too often leaves people hanging, "rooted out of one value system and not wholly fitted into the other" (Okorochoa 1987:13). The voice of Christ is no longer heard or answered in context (ibid.:28). Another Nigerian theologian Imasogie (1983:69) has added that African Christians return to traditional practices because the "Word did not become flesh in the African environment and consequently the eternal Christ could not be existentially apprehended". Thus, when Christians revert to former practices, it is because their faith is not seen to rest on values fundamental to their identity as a people. It is finally a borrowed faith. The other reason why Christianity is believed to be failing to take root on the African continent by some African theologians (see Pobee 1992; Mugambi 1992; Nyamiti 1984 for details) is in its failure to address the moral issues which are of serious concern to the local people. Issues like: What should a man or woman do if their marriage is childless? What about polygamy?

African churches seem to continue to regard their African culture as being deficient and evil and continue to urge that those who want to join the church to break with their African cultural values. As a result, we have many false conversions. Many African converts claim to be converted and yet they still continue some of their traditional worship in private. For example, it is not unusual to have even pastors seeking protection from

witches by wearing charms or tattoos, because they believe that the Christian faith does not provide protection against witches. People who have no children by their official first wives who are known to the church, continue to have children by their unofficial wives or, if the problem lies with the husbands, relatives arrange that someone from the husband's family should sleep with the wife to bear children on his behalf. All these things are wrong, but they continue because the Christian faith does not sometimes address these issues which are of great concern to the African Christians.

As long as these moral and ethical questions which are of great concern to the African Christians are not answered, Christianity will remain a foreign religion which does not address the issues which are fundamental to the African people. Bediako (1983:34f), seeing that the missionaries in Africa insisted on European standards criteria as for genuine Christianity, asks a very legitimate question: "Is there no other way to measure emergent Christianity than by European criteria?"

One of the areas where these European criteria has been applied to the detriment of many African people is on the issue of polygamy. In order to high-light the seriousness of the moral crises caused by the neglect of certain aspects of African culture, let us look at the dilemma of Mr. Zuze Tembo, a member of the Reformed Church in Zambia congregation who had two wives. His father chose the first wife for him before he died, although he did not love her at first. According to Mr. Zuze Tembo's culture, it was a curse to reject the wife chosen for him by his parents. He had no choice but to accept what the parents said. Mr. Zuze Tembo had a serious moral dilemma. He had a fiancée at school whom he really loved and wanted to marry. He could not betray his heart by breaking his engagement to his fiancée. After consulting the fiancée, he decided to marry both of

Pastor Mmbalo, after praising God for what had happened, was saddened by the serious moral dilemma facing Mr. Zuze Tembo. According to the church teaching, which Mmbalo's church inherited from the missionaries, a converted person must completely turn from his/her traditional past as a sign of conversion. If he has more than one wife, he must divorce the other wife and remain with the first one. Mr. Zuze Tembo came to love both wives and their children. If he is to divorce one of them which one should he divorce? His parents gave the first wife to him and he could not say a. If he was to divorce one of them what will happen to his children? What are the Biblical grounds for such an action? Who is going to marry the divorced wife? For Pastor Mmbalo, this case proved very problematic too! In the light of many recent anthropological and theological studies on the issue of polygamy (Trobish 1990; Mailu 1989; Hillman 1975; Theron 1994 etc) is it correct for the modern day African Church to still withhold full church membership to people like Mr. Tembo?

This case offers us a good example of the need for a contextual theology. Opinions as to how polygamy should be handled vary greatly. There are those who want to stick to what the missionaries said, while the radicals end up adopting the African independent church way of accepting polygamy and leaving the churches of Western origin.

One Western church pastor at the Reformed Ecumenical Council meeting held in Harare (Zimbabwe) in 1988 said he could not understand the wisdom, philosophy, or sense of the African (simultaneous) polygamy. His friend who was a pastor from Malawi said to him:

“I cannot equally understand how you Western people can stay with the cruelty of (consecutive) polygamy”. He said: “When you people want a second wife you divorce the first one to make way for the second wife and so on”. What followed from the conversation was that the Western church pastor realised for the first time in his life that divorce and remarriage, although not regarded to be a serious sin in the West, was just as sinful as polygamy and may be even more cruel than the African polygamy, because the consequences are more devastating to children.

David Maillu in his book called, *Our kind of polygamy* (1988:54) asks:

Is there any reason why the African church should not encourage good and respectful polygamy as a means of giving marital happiness to the unmarried woman? If Western churches do understand the problems of homosexuals and lesbians why cannot they understand why a widow should marry the husband’s brother who has another wife and get church blessings and baptism?

Without understanding the reasons and causes of polygamy in Africa, it is not possible to do justice to a discussion on this topic. Let us therefore briefly look at what causes polygamy in Africa.

### **3.4.2. Why polygamy in Africa?**

Ergelbert Kofun (1992: 56-61) gives five main reasons for the practice of polygamy in the African tribe of the Bafut. These reasons are almost the same for the rest of Africa. These are:

- The desire for off-springs especially if the first wife is barren. To an outsider this reason may sound very weak, but in Africa, not to have children is the worst curse.



In traditional African families children are a big blessing and parents continue to exist even after death through their children. Without children they stop existing (see Blum 1989: 35 for details). The desire for male offspring in most of the patrimonial societies is a very serious one. There is a great desire for descent and there is therefore great need for those who have only female children or no children at all to go into polygamy in order to have a child (Ibid: 41).

- The need for a helpmate to assist the first wife. In many traditional African families an additional wife is an additional helper. Sometimes the first wife would even encourage her husband to get additional labour force on the farm through marrying an additional wife (ibid.:104-126).
- As a means of sharing wealth with those who do not have. In African families a rich man would be offered daughters in order to create a relationship between him and a poor family. In so doing, the rich man could share his surplus wealth with the poor families.
- Sexual gratification when one wife is ill or has given birth. In many traditional African cultures, when a woman is breast-feeding they are supposed to have no sexual intercourse until after two and a half years for fear the baby's milk may dry up. This is done as a family planning precaution for that particular wife. The husband whose sexual appetite may not cope with this long waiting period usually takes on the second wife.
- The need for a "good" housewife if the first proves stubborn and lazy or unable to perform the house work properly. It is regrettable that in the societies which are patriarchal women do the house work, cooking and feeding of the family. Failure to

do this is regarded as a serious weakness. Instead of divorcing a wife who has failed to keep the house, marrying another wife is usually regarded as the only solution to the problem.

- People may be given an additional wife as a form of payment for good work done to a particular family. For example, a witch-doctor who has cured a sick patient who cannot pay for the services rendered, may receive an additional wife from the family involved as appreciation or payment. This usually happens with the full consent of the woman.

Other African scholars give the following additional reasons for polygamy in Africa:

- Levirate (inheriting widows). In many African cultures, it is very difficult for widows to get married again. To avoid the widow going into prostitution and to leave the widow with her children out in the cold is seen as a great lack of love from the family. To provide sexually and materially for the widow, African civilisation demands that the physical and psychological needs of the widow and her children should be given priority. In cases where Levirate has been barred, the consequences have been disastrous. Property grabbing and prostitution have resulted (see Maillu 1988:12-13 for details on this).
- Moral obligation. If a man makes a girl pregnant outside his marriage, African tradition demands that he marries her. Mistresses and bastards are not welcome in traditional African societies. Every child must have a father and a mother (ibid.:16).
- In case of a wife's severe prolonged sickness and loss of sexual appetite the husband, instead of divorcing the sick wife, decides to marry another wife without forsaking the first wife.

- Sexual incompatibility and inequality. According to Maillu (1988:9-12), sexual drives differ. Some men have sex once a week, others once every other day, some fifteen times a week, etc. The natural way of solving the problem of those with high sexual drives would be to marry another wife. Usually the first wife must first give her consent.

One can add that many African mine workers in South African mines were not allowed by law to bring their wives from their homes to the mine hostels. This forced them to have one wife at home and another one near the hostels. This, according to the African tradition, is polygamy. If we say they should not have more than one wife, what should they do instead? The violence and the hatred of hostel dwellers in the townships could be partly due to lack of stable families ( SABC TV News 1992). These men usually resort to violence out of frustration and because they have no families and have nothing to loose when violence breaks out. This could also be the reason why migrant labour has resulted in the breakdown of many traditional African families, children without fathers, morals, etc.

Depending on the cultural lenses through which one looks at these reasons and causes of polygamy, one may evaluate them negatively or positively. However, we may at least be able to understand why there is polygamy in Africa, especially bearing in mind the fact that in many traditional African cultures divorce is completely unacceptable and is regarded as the most inhuman thing to do. In some African tribes the high bride price is meant to safe-guard the marriage against divorce. Whoever divorces the other loses the bride price money and the custody of the children.

### 3.4.3. Biblical condemnation of polygamy ?

Our hypothesis here is that the Bible nowhere expressly forbids polygamy and decrees monogamy as the only universally valid form of marriage. There is no single passage of the Bible that stands as a clear proof of God's intention on this matter. Anybody who wants to defend monogamy as the only universally valid form of marriage must therefore find his/her support elsewhere and not in the Bible. Eugene Hillman, writing in his classical book, *Polygamy reconsidered* (1975:139) hits the nail on the head when he says, “the Biblical texts that are usually cited to show the incompatibility of polygamy with Christianity, are usually concerned specifically with other matters”.

A number of scholars have noted a progressive tendency toward monogamy throughout the Old Testament. They cite a number of texts as indications of a positive inclination toward monogamy (Grelot 1964; Van de Putte 1964 : 107-112; McHugh 1961:24-26 ). The Yahwist account of creation (Gen.2:18-25; Gen.1:27) which is believed to depict marriage as monogamy in the beginning, is taken as self-evident. It is believed that these verses constitute a formal teaching on the essential nature and ethical structure of marriage.

The fact that the first recorded plural marriage was among the reprobate descendants of Cain (Gen.4:19,23) is also used as a sign that from its beginning it was tainted. It is also believed that the more recent wisdom literature is used to reflect a growing appreciation of monogamy (Prov.5:15-19, 31:10-31; Eccle.9:9; Ps 45:9-11; see also Grelot 1964:7f for details). Most of these passages cited, can also be interpreted in such a way as not to exclude polygamy. De Vaux (1961:25) observes that many of these texts, “yield a better meaning against the background of a strictly monogamous family”. This “background” is perhaps a postulate consciously or unconsciously present in the minds of Christians as they

read the Bible. However, the historically conditioned values and ideals that shaped the Old Testament understanding of marriage are not the traditional values and ideals of the modern Western Christian which he/she uses in making his/her judgement about what marriage is or should be. In fact, they are very far from modern values and ideals. The real background to the Biblical passages on marriage was the larger community of the family and the clan.

Marriage was not an exclusive relationship between two persons as Schillebeeckx (1965:132-133) has rightly pointed out. In addition, marriage was always presented within the framework of patriarchal values and social structures. Marriage was also mainly a social function with an emphasis on fertility. The idea that the woman was there to bear children was in the society, and certainly in the ideology of the people of overriding importance (Schillebeeckx 1965:139). This concept of marriage was congenial to the custom of having more than one wife at the same time. This was the reason why in the Mosaic law polygamy was clearly regarded as a normal and licit practice (cf. Exod. 21:10; Lev.18:18; Deut. 21:15-17). It is also true that among common people it was not rare (de Vaux 1961:25). There is no verse in the Old Testament where this form of marriage is called into question.

Those scholars who use Deuteronomy 17:17 in their defence of monogamy may not be right, because this verse seems to be an admonition against the acquisition of too many wives and not an attack on the institution of polygamy as such. It is a warning against abuse (the king taking too many foreign wives specifically because they would turn his heart towards their foreign gods as 1 Kings 11:1-8 implies). Scholars like Carlos Santin

(1969:14-20) has even suggested that the Hebrew word *nashim* (wives or women) in this verse is believed to be a mistake.

The various Biblical reactions to abuses that occurred in different periods should not be construed as revealing a divine preference for monogamy. Schillebeeckx may thus be right when he says (with reference to the post-exilic period) that: “the great evil ...was not really simultaneous polygamy” as such, but so-called “successive” polygamy. A husband was able to annul his marriage, send away his wife and enter into a new marriage” (Schillebeeckx 1965:139-140).

The Mosaic law seemed to have given equal recognition to both types of marriages. Thus although many people in the Old Testament were monogamists, there were also many others who were polygamists. Elkanah (1 Sam.1:28) and Jacob (Gen. 29:15-30) are some of the famous polygamists whose wives are given as role models in the old Roman Catholic marriage rites, for nuptial mass says, “let her be dear to her husband like Rachel”. In the Old Testament God Himself is even depicted as either a polygamist or a monogamist (cf. Jer. 3:6-10,31:31-32; Ezek 23:2-4). Thus the use of the singular word wife as a manner of speaking in reference to God’s love for his people need not be understood literalistically to mean that God is talking about the question of either monogamy and polygamy as some writers would like us to believe (see Wheeler Robinson 1964:22, 272). Thus, Ringeling (1966:87) may be right in citing economic and cultural factors, rather than religious and ethical considerations as the main factors responsible for any inclination toward monogamy in Biblical times.

Other often quoted verses “on monogamy” are Genesis 1:26-28; 2:7-25. These verses are believed to contain evident teaching on marriage: that in the beginning it was, and therefore should be monogamous. Scholars like Piet Schoonenberg (1964:111) even go further by saying that the fact that Jesus quoted some of these verses is a sign that marriage should be monogamous (cf. Matt. 19:3-9, Mark 10:2-12). A close look at the Genesis story mentioned here, shows that the exact meaning of these verses are heavily debated. Many early commentators saw in these verses androgynous creatures just as they saw monogamy there (see Schillebeeckx 1965:267-270 and von Allmen 1958:250 for a detailed discussion on this issue). Those who claim that this verse is literally advocating a return to monogamy should also accept the fact that this verse is also literally advocating a return to nakedness as the ideal form of dress.

Besides, as Hillman (1975:152) puts it, just as it is now believed that Genesis does not give us any scientific account of human origins, neither does it provide a sociological description of human behaviour in the beginning. Even the often quoted reference to “one flesh” of Genesis 2:24 designates kindred (in a sense, all the members of a single kinship group have one flesh, which in the Jewish culture was conceived as a collective reality possessed by all relatives, see McKenzie 1965:280; Renskens 1964:228; Dunston 1966:491-492; see also Schillebeeckx 1965:45-49). Thus the expression one flesh “does not in any way exclude” or derogate polygamy (which by the way was permitted by the Mosaic law). Ringeling is thus right when he says: “under no circumstances is it permissible to interpret the creation accounts as proofs of a direct monogamous tendency in the Old Testament” (Ringeling 1966:81-102).

Similarly, when we come to the New Testament, as Karl Barth (1961:199) puts it, we can hardly point with certainty to a single text (in the New Testament) in which polygamy is expressly forbidden and monogamy universally decreed. Verses which are claimed to at least implicitly repudiate simultaneous polygamy, as Gloret (196:482-86) puts it, are actually emphasising something else. For example, verses like Mathews 5:31-32, 19:3-9, Mark 10:2-12; Luke 16:18 are actually talking about the indissolubility of marriage. If there is something which Jesus is actually condemning, it is “successive” polygamy and not simultaneous polygamy. He is actually against divorce, to be specific. Besides, the precise meaning of these verses on divorce has been subject to much debate. We may just be adding to the exegetical and ecclesiastical confusion by passing any opinion on them as Tasker (1961:179) has pointed out to us.

In other words, those who affirm without any hesitation that the issue of polygamy is settled by the words of Mathew 19:3-9 and its parallels may be reading too much into the passage. The only question which is explicitly and definitively answered is the question of divorce and remarriage. The attribution of an absolute prohibition of polygamy to these passages of Scripture (Ramaron 1972:247-251) may thus be reading too much into Scripture.

The best opportunity for Jesus to condemn (simultaneous) polygamy if he wanted to, was during his discussion of the Levirate marriage (cf. Matt. 22:23-30). This practice mostly involved polygamy, because among the Jews, bachelors must have been very rare indeed (de Vaux 1944:139). Thus Levirate marriages must very frequently have been polygamous. These marriages were actually enforced by law, even in cases where the brother in law of the widow was already married (Haring 1970:147). This was a very strict



law, so that whoever disobeyed it, could be punishable by death. For example Onan's sin, according to modern scholars, was not really masturbation, but refusal to perform the Levirate duty of taking his brother's widow in Genesis 38:8-10 (Grelot 1964:43 ; Chaine 1948:385-386 ). The older interpretation said Onan's sin had to do primarily with contraception (see Schaumberger 8, 1927: 212 ; De Vine 1942: 340).

One of the strongest evidences given in support of monogamy as “ the only ideal marriage” comes from the teachings of Paul. It is claimed that the use of the singular in discussing the husband and wife relationship is taken as a sign that Paul was giving divine guidance in favour of monogamy for all Christians all over the world. A close look at the world of the New Testament in general, shows that the social-cultural context of the Jewish people could be either monogamous or polygamous. However, under Roman law, no Roman citizen was allowed to have more than one wife. It seems that even if the Jews were under Roman law during this time, the Romans appear to have allowed some of the Jewish customs to continue for a while. As Hillman (1975:165) puts it:

Paul's understanding of marriage was developed in a context of Pastoral concern for Christians in a Greco-Roman world where monogamy was the socially determined form of marriage, while polygamy was legally proscribed.

According to Hillman, Paul was writing to people living under Roman law who were the colonial masters. These masters had already proscribed polygamy and introduced monogamy into the Greco-Roman world (see Lawson 1967:9-14; Bernard 1967:20 for details). This was the only legal form of marriage, although polygamy was tolerated among the Jews (Hillman 1975:20 ). It is interesting to note that the Greeks and the Romans were the founders of the so-called “only ideal” form of Christian marriage. It is therefore interesting to note that the abolition of polygamy had nothing to do with

Christian virtues (Maillu 1988:48 ). It is equally an interesting coincidence that in Africa too, polygamy remained a honourable form of marriage until the white missionaries (and their colonial masters), armed with their cultural ethnocentrism and a theology that perceived marriage from a Christian prescriptive endorsed by the Greco-Roman law of marriage made it a “deadly” sin.

In the writings of Paul, he also talks about everyone remaining in the state in which he was called (1 Cor. 7:12,17-24). This “whatever state each was called” must have concerned the state of freedom, slavery, polygamy, being single or married, circumcised or uncircumcised according to gentile or Jewish law. These new converts were not supposed to change their status in order to live as Christians. Even slaves were to remain slaves. Those married to pagans were to remain with their pagan wives, but treat them differently now that they were Christians. They should treat them in a Christian way.

Can we really say Paul could have said to a polygamist, “divorce your second wife in order to become a Christian?” Far from that, Paul would surely have said: “remain with your wives. Wives remain in your state but treat your husbands differently”. Hillman (1975:167) says that even the one wife passages of 1 Timothy 3:2,12; Titus 1:16 came from the young church’s need to accommodate itself to the ways of the foreign custom of the Greco-Roman world, which forbade Roman citizens to practice polygamy. It was therefore inappropriate for church leaders in the Roman world (bearing in mind the fact that Paul claimed to be a Roman citizen under Roman law. In other words, as a Roman citizen, monogamy was a must, he could not have said otherwise. Any advocate of monogamy who wants to use Paul in support of denying full membership to the polygamists must find his or her support elsewhere and not in Paul’s writings. It is thus

highly unlikely that Paul would have told a converted polygamist to divorce the other wives in order to be accepted as a full communicant church member. Duquoc (Techny 1968:19) was thus right in saying that it has not been pointed out often enough that there is not one word in the Bible against polygamy.

Lastly, many modern theologians do recognise the fact that theologians of the ancient Christendom, who concluded that the Bible forbids absolutely the practice of simultaneous polygamy among Christians, may perhaps have been overly influenced by their own Western cultural tradition of mandatory monogamy. The famous twentieth century theologian, Barth (1961:199f) once said: “Situations can and do arise...in which it would be sheer brutality for the Christian Church to confront men with a choice between baptism and institutional polygamy”. Sadly, this is exactly what has happened to the African converts. Similarly, Augustine in his famous apologia on the polygamy of Jacob and other Old Testament heroes and loved ones of God, explicitly says that polygamy is neither contrary to the law of nature, nor to the nature of marriage (Augustine 1956:289;407-408). However, there may be good ethical reasons for one to say monogamy provides the best possibility for real Christian love in a family. For example, it may be difficult for a husband to really love his wives as he loves himself in a polygamous family. Besides, the jealousy and hatred created by the fight for one husband, as was the case with Sarai and Haggai, may not be a good Christian testimony to the world.

The question of what is the ideal marriage has been discussed by a number of theologians. Among the theologians who have discussed this issue, the works of Buthelezi (1969:64), Weber (1966), Rahner (1966), Vorgrimler (1965) and Thielicke (1964) have been

outstanding. Their summary conclusion is that one's conception of the ideal marriage is determined by values that are emphasised in one's own culture and their economic and social status.

In other words, the pain and suffering caused to people like Mr. Zuze Tembo and other African converts by forcing them to the identification of conversion with a particular ethical decision in a matter like polygamy is uncalled for. Newbigin (1966:74) may thus be right in saying that:

All conversions have an ethical content, but conversion is an event which is more than its ethical implications. To deny this is to leave the order of grace and freedom and to go over into the world of legalism and bondage,.... To be converted is to be brought into that personal relational with God who is the author of and ground of my being ... simply to identify conversion with a decision to act in a certain way, whether it be in the matter of polygamy, or slavery or segregation, is to leave the realm of grace for the realm of law.

When proper exegesis is done, it becomes clear that the Bible does not, in fact, unambiguously prohibit certain African practices like polygamy. Besides, the Bible as we pointed out earlier, reflects the influence of cultural and social factors on religious and moral beliefs like polygamy. The diversity in the moral message of the Bible should be recognised when evaluating African Christian morality. Another example of a moral problem which clearly shows the dangers involved when the African cultural values are not taken seriously, is the problem of AIDS. Let us therefore briefly discuss this issue.

#### **3.4.4. AIDS as a moral problem which needs the African cultural input**

AIDS stands for acquired immune deficiency syndrome. Magesa (1992:200) speaks about four groups of countries in Africa where AIDS is spreading at an alarming rate.

These are:

The first group of countries which are believed to have the highest AIDS infection rate in Africa are in Eastern and part of Central Africa. The countries covered in this area are: Zaire, Rwanda, Zambia, Uganda, Kenya and Malawi (WHO report, Sept 8, 1989 : 14 ).

The second group of countries are in Southern Africa. These countries are Zimbabwe, Botswana, South Africa, Lesotho and Namibia. Angola seems to be a big exception. The infection rate appear to be very minimal in Angola ( SADC health committee report of 1998).

Apart from the high incidence of AIDS in Cote d' Ivorie, Mali and Benin, AIDS does not appear to be a serious problem in Nigeria, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Guinea and Liberia (ibid:201). Thus according to Magesa ( ibid. ), AIDS is widespread in Eastern, Central and Southern Africa, but almost negligible in Western Africa and almost non-existent in most of Arab Africa and Ethiopia ( ibid.). It must be noted that the latest reports from the news media and other bodies like the United Nations (UN Health report for 1999) show that the AIDS pandemic is affecting millions of people in Botswana, South Africa, Lesotho, Namibia and many other Southern African countries.

How does one interpret the above phenomenon? One group of people (Larson 1990:16-25) and Grmek (1990:175-181 ) attributes the spread to the advancement of modern means of communication which in turn has lead to sex-tourism. This suggestion does not, however, fully answer the question why AIDS has spread in East Africa more than say West Africa. If modernisation is the cause for the spread, why is this less in Egypt and Nigeria which are more modern than say Uganda? The other explanation given is that of socio-political upheaval in say Uganda, Zaire and Rwanda ( Larson 1990:19-23 ). While

it can be admitted that war and socio-political strife breaks down society and spreads diseases faster and wider, this explanation is equally wanting. The horn of Africa Sudan, Ethiopia and Angola, for example, have had wars for longer periods than say Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and Zambia. Why do these countries then have a higher prevalence of AIDS?

The other equally unconvincing reason given for the disparity in the spread of AIDS in Africa is the economic factor. It is said that countries with low gross national product (GNP) have many poor people who are forced into prostitution due to poverty. These poor people tend to indulge in sex-tourism and consequently spreading AIDS. Countries like Kenya and Tanzania have a large population of sex workers who in turn are spreading AIDS (Magesa 1992:204 ). However, countries like Nigeria, Somalia and Sudan have more poor people than say Kenya, Tanzania and Zambia and yet they appear to be less affected by the AIDS pandemic. It may be true to say that poverty makes people who are suffering from AIDS to die earlier than expected and that poverty may force people into prostitution, which in the end may contract the AIDS virus. However, to say that poverty and not the AIDS virus is what causes AIDS is not correct at all. If that was true, then countries which are many times poorer than say the South Africans would have had a higher infection rate than evidence suggests.

According to Magesa (ibid.) the only convincing explanation for the spread of AIDS is the religious-cultural factor. We may not fully agree with him on this, but to say that the religious and cultural factors are also involved in the rapid spread of AIDS is agreeable to many of us. Countries which do not have a high prevalence of AIDS appear to be those countries which are predominantly Muslim or non-Western Christian countries. In Muslim

Countries like Somali, Egypt and Sudan, AIDS less is prevalence. Islam does not seem to disturb the cultural values of the people it converts. It is equally interesting to note that in a country like Ethiopia, where indigenous Christianity is predominant, AIDS is less prevalent too! The countries most seriously affected by the AIDS pandemic are those which have lost the African traditional cultural values and are heavily influenced by Western Christianity and culture (ibid:215 )

Since some of the causes of the rapid spread of AIDS in Africa is linked to the continent's religious-cultural heritage, one of the solutions to the problem of AIDS may thus be found in a return to some of our traditional African cultural values which we have since lost. A change in the way we view sex and human sexuality may provide one of the solutions in stopping the spread of AIDS. A traditional African society where every woman/man had a spouse, widows and single women and men were rare, widows were taken care of through Levirate and polygamy and no sex-tourism existed, could have no AIDS at all. This is what may be needed to fight the AIDS pandemic and not condoms as the commercial advertisements want us to believe. Many Western countries and organisations are encouraging the sale and the use of condoms, even though they know for sure that this is not a lasting solution to the problem. An African Christian society where the cultural mores are respected, mixing of sexes not encouraged, private meetings between boys and girls are not encouraged, chastity, modesty and purity once enforced by our traditional African taboos is encouraged, is what may help to curb the spread of the AIDS epidemic. As Bujo (1998:188) puts it, well intended sermons, admonitions and condoms will not help much.

The disease can only be prevented and stopped by the quality of our institutions which will enforce morality (taking the traditional African cultural values seriously) and will ensure an improvement in the economy and politics as well. We need a new culture of sexuality which views sexual encounter from a communal perspective, instead of just stressing the individual's self-realisation as the highest value. This is why we concur with Bujo (ibid:187) when he says that only an African communitarian action can help curb the spread of AIDS. It is therefore an illusion to think that condoms will prevent the spread of the AIDS pandemic. The indiscriminate distribution and use of condoms will ultimately wipe out African cultural values (ibid.: 192), because it creates a wrong impression that it is acceptable to do prostitution as long as you use a condom. If we really want to stop the spread of the AIDS epidemic, we need to change our sexual behaviour and return to our African African traditional cultural values. For example, in our African traditional cultural past, there were many practices which prepared one for sexual self-discipline. There were also many taboos which aimed at curbing sexual habits and abuses. The destruction of these taboos by the early missionaries and the colonial masters has sent a very wrong message to the Africans and has contributed to the spread of the AIDS epidemic. If African cultural values were taken seriously enough, AIDS would not have reached such pandemic proportions.

It may be asked whether it is really possible to return to the traditional African cultural past which we lost. The answer is in the affirmative. Where there is a will, there will be a way. It is possible if, first of all, we really want to wipe out the AIDS epidemic and do not just want to provide cosmetic solutions to the AIDS pandemic.



way. It is possible if, first of all, we really want to wipe out the AIDS epidemic and do not just want to provide cosmetic solutions to the AIDS pandemic.

Second, the money, time and resources spent on selling condoms should be spent on teaching people the worth and richness of our traditional African cultural values and new attitudes towards sex and sexuality. Our children should be taught about sex in our traditional cultural African initiation schools and not on television and in the Western educational systems which we have. However, this does not mean that everything in our traditional cultural past was perfect. In returning to our traditional cultural values of the past, care and caution must be taken not to bring back everything, including the wrong things of the past, like aborting female children and regarding menstruation as an evil, dirty and unclean thing. It is, however, equally wrong for us to throw away the baby together with the basket (African cultural values together with the wicked things of the past).

African Christian ethical decision making will be therefore greatly enhanced if it takes African culture more seriously, and the African cultural values are not ignored under the pretext of modernisation and loyalty to the Scripture as the Word of God.

### **3.5. Examples of how African Christians should take culture into account when making moral decisions**

#### **3.5.1. The issue of polygamy**

The problem of polygamy which we highlighted on earlier in this study, gives us a good example of how African Christians should take African culture into account when making moral decisions because :

First, marriage in the African culture is a contract between two families and not just two loving individuals. Thus a decision to divorce the extra wives or not, cannot just be left to the two loving individuals. All the parties involved in a marriage relationship must be listened to - which may not be the case in the Western cultural setting.

Second, even if polygamy may be regarded as a sin by some Christians, if it is accepted in a particular cultural setting, converted polygamists (who obeyed their culture by marrying more than one wife), should be allowed to keep their other wives but not to add any additional wives, because they did not know what they were doing before they joined the Christian church. Besides, staying in a polygamous state is the lesser of the two evils (of divorce and polygamy).

Third, for the sake of security and safety of the woman and the children, even those theologians who advocate monogamy as the normative ideal, should accept the fact that the dismissal of wives, even if the material goods are evenly distributed, is a profoundly inhuman and loveless act in the eyes of African people. As Haring (1978:3f) puts it, although we need to show paternal sensitivity and firmness, at the same time we need to imitate God's patient pedagogy with Israel.

Fourth, if polygamy is a sin which must be corrected in African Christianity, is the sin of divorce more acceptable to God than the sin of polygamy? Is the sin of divorce and successive polygamy not looked at as a lesser sin, simply because the superior Western culture has accepted it as a lesser evil, since divorce and remarriage is a common occurrence even among men of God? African polygamists should not be encouraged to commit the sin of divorce in order to correct the 'sin of polygamy' (Matt 5: 27-32, Mark

10: 2-12, Rom 7:2-3, Eph 5: 22-33 all warn us against the sin of divorce). Is the sin of divorce not too unjust and cruel to the wives and their children? Will such children and wives ever grow up to love God and accept the fact that God is love?

Fifth, since the Bible does not unambiguously condemn polygamy, those people who condemn them are going beyond what the Scripture say. They are in fact reading their culture into the Bible. Besides, when we read the Bible (which was received in a particular cultural context), we find that God in His dealings with the Jews whose culture appear to be similar to African culture in some ways, seems to have tolerated the 'sin' of polygamy.

Sixth, since some of the Western churches and non-governmental organisations in Africa are urging Christians all over the world (including Africa) to show love, patience, understanding and acceptance to homosexuals, and 'successive' polygamists, why do they not urge churches in Africa to show the same acceptance to the converted polygamists? Is acceptance, love, patience and understanding not the Christian way to deal with converted polygamists in the African cultural context, as is the case in dealing with converted homosexuals and successive polygamists in the Western cultural context?

Seventh, if polygamy is contrary neither to the law of nature nor to the nature of marriage as such, as Augustine (1456: 2894) puts it, it may not be very wrong to accept some converted African polygamists into full church membership depending on their situation, context and cultural setting.

Eighth, the Christian church, while safeguarding and promoting the ideal of monogamy, should still allow people of good will to remain in the polygamous condition in which they were at the time of their calling to the new life of explicit Christian faith, just as Paul urged Christians slaves to remain in the state in which God called them but to have a different relationship with their masters. We also want to urge the converted polygamists to have a new kind of relationship with their wives and husbands.

Ninth, marriage is a pre-Christian social institution universally experienced in a variety of cultural forms. It is therefore a product of experiences and conceptualisations of the respective cultures of different people. These conceptualisations and experiences must therefore be respected as long as it does not violate the basic Christian truths. We must therefore not impose our experiences on others who conceptualise it differently. Asking converted polygamists to divorce their first wives before they are admitted into full church membership is thus imposing Western life experiences on them.

Tenth, as far as marriage is concerned, Western historical cultural experience should not be allowed to be a universally normative ideal to which the marriages of Christians in the non-Western world must conform. Christians, and preachers of the Word of God should take the cultural context of the converted polygamists seriously.

### **3.5.2. The issue of AIDS**

Another good example of how culture should be taken into account when making moral decisions in Africa concerns the issue of AIDS (acquired immunity deficiency syndrome). In a Africa, where community decisions are crucial, any attempt to combat the AIDS

pandemic must surely take the communitarian thought and action very seriously. People should make moral decisions which will uplift the wellbeing of the society even if this may mean violating the individuals sexual rights. The individual must realise that certain indecent sexual behaviours are an affront to the community. Besides, the community has the right to be protected from AIDS and its disastrous consequences. We want to repeat what Bujo (1988:187) says, namely that the prevention and stopping of AIDS does not depend solely on the individual, but on the quality of our institutions, changes in culture, economy and politics as well. No technical advice (use of condoms may prevent AIDS) nor moral admonitions alone, will wipe out AIDS. If anything, condoms make human beings to be even more deeply involved in sinful structures, and draw them into a vicious circle. Indiscriminate use and distribution of condoms will ultimately wipe out African culture (Bujo 1988:197). AIDS can only be wiped out through a complete change in our sexual behaviour and not just safe protected sex.

In addition to the change in moral behaviour, African Christian must also return to the observance of traditional African taboos and some good restraints of human passions without which the mastery of impulses can become almost impossible. In some traditional African societies like rural parts of Mozambique (which I visited) where African taboos are still respected and are still effective in regulating society, AIDS is still a strange phenomena. Sexual taboos, for example, aim at the restraining of arbitrary sexual behaviour. It was a big mistake for Western missionaries to quickly destroy and discredit the whole taboo morality without looking at the positive elements in them first, as we shall see later.

In many parts of African traditional societies, where prostitution, and sex shops are non-existent, widows and single women are taken care of through polygamy and Levirate marriages, AIDS is non-existent. In fact, even if it comes to such an area through tourists and other visitors from urban areas, it does not spread, because promiscuity, a condition on which AIDS thrives on does not really exist. The African Christians should thus stop encouraging people to rely only on condoms, because it sends out the wrong message that it is acceptable to indulge in sexual immorality as long as you use a condom. It thus promotes promiscuity. Besides, condoms may break and one could still get AIDS. They should instead use their traditional African *indaba* (the discussion forum) meetings to promote African traditional cultural values and a complete change in the people's life styles. Any cosmetic solution to the AIDS pandemic may slow down the spread of AIDS but not really wipe it out. A complete change in life style is the only lasting solution to the problem. A return to some of the basic African traditional cultural values may help to achieve that.

### **3.6. Conclusion**

This chapter has shown that some of the European missionaries who came to Africa to preach the Gospel at times adopted an attitude of blanket condemnation of African culture. Many of the converted Africans were required to turn their backs on many aspects of their traditions and their culture(s). Only then was it considered that the Christian faith has taken root in their souls.

The African Christians reacted against this contempt for the African cultural values in different ways. The first group was completely against the integration of African culture

with the Bible and Christianity as a whole. Those who were more radical, believed that the Gospel and African culture must be radically integrated. They believe African culture must be the main source for moral judgement and ethics. The moderate integrationalists on the other hand (who are the majority) believe that although African culture must be integrated with the Word of God, the Word of God must remain the final court of appeal. It must be the supreme authority. However, its authority must not be exclusivistic in an absolute sense.

This study does not in any way claim that everything in the African culture is good, or that polygamy is the ideal form of a Christian marriage at all. In fact, there are certain economical and social advantages to monogamy in the modern life style, Monogamy offers the best possibility of an ideal Christian life style. What we plead for is rather compassion and acceptance of the people who become Christians after they are already polygamists. To reject them or force them to divorce their other wives before accepting them as full church members, as is the case in many missionary founded churches, is not the best Christian solution and is too revolutionary a measure. If the Bible does not explicitly or implicitly encourage us to deny converted polygamists full membership into the church or the Lord's table, who are we to go beyond what the Bible says? Thus there seems to be no theological nor biblical justification for requiring people like Mr. Zuze Tembo, whose culture allows them to have more than one wife, to divorce the other wife before becoming a full communicant church member. If he wants to keep his second wife and especially if the second wife also wants to stay, he should be allowed to do so. The African cultural context must therefore be respected.

...ness, the same easily prescribed conduct that is harmful to people and therefore morally unacceptable (e.g. divorcing the second and third wife in an African context in order to qualify as full church members). One has to take the consequences of what is prescribed into account.

Any exclusivistic understanding of the use of Scripture is unacceptable. The churches which advocate the integration of Scripture with African culture, in the opinion of many Africans, have a holistic ministry and understand the African problems better. For these churches, Christianity becomes more and more at home on the African soil, more authentic and less superficial. African culture is thus a very important source for African Christian ethical decision making.

However, a word of caution must be sounded here. People must not romanticise African culture as if everything in it is perfect. There are many oppressive and undesirable elements in African traditional culture, for example, the circumcision of women, burial of live human beings as pillows for the dead kings, etc. In fact, African culture has undergone a lot of changes. Acculturation, modernisation and Westernisation have greatly influenced African culture. As a result, many changes in African culture have taken place. Besides, the biblical text itself is not acultural, it is rather steeped through and through in the culture and life experiences of those communities which produced them (Kraft 1987:236-237). Even the Christian faith which was brought to Africa was clothed in the Greco-Roman culture and did not exist in a cultural vacuum (Hillman 1975:67f). It is clear that the Word of God comes to people in terms of their own culture, or it does not come to them at all. Knowledge is always perceived and communicated in context. As far



as AIDS is concerned, we have argued that AIDS can only be eliminated through taking the African cultural values seriously, because there are some cultural factors which have lead to the spread of AIDS in Africa. African cultural values, taboo morality, and changed sexual life styles can lead to the elimination of AIDS and not condoms. Any simplistic solution to the problem of AIDS, which does not take African culture seriously in Africa, will thus lamentably fail.

# CHAPTER IV

## AFRICAN CULTURE AS A SOURCE IN CHRISTIAN ETHICAL DECISION MAKING

### 4.1. Introduction

The previous chapter dealt with the issue of the authority of the Bible and culture as sources in African theology. We looked at the views of African scholars on the authority of the Bible and culture as sources in African Christian ethical decision making. We discovered that most of the African Christian scholars believe that African culture is an important source material for Christian moral decision making in Africa. In this chapter, we will look at African culture as a source for Christian ethical decision making and attempt to point out the way that African Christians should follow. Apart from the Bible, it is our conviction that there are a number of certain salient elements of African culture, which must be taken into account if we are to make progress in solving the crisis affecting African Christian ethical decision making.

In our opinion, these elements are underlying the African ways of thinking, living and making moral making judgements. It is only after appreciate these factors which influence

African moral thinking that we can really appreciate the importance of African culture as a moral source. As Chikane aptly puts it (1990:11), the context of a person affects the understanding of what God is saying. Once we know and understand these key elements of African culture we will be able to know what should be accepted or not when making Christian moral judgements. This will surely help us to determine what should be adapted and accommodated in African Christian morality.

As we suggested earlier in this study, any comprehensive attempt to deal with moral judgement in Africa, would entail a study of enormous scope, embracing a great variety of materials across the vast continent. This study makes no such attempt, but in agreement with many other African scholars, it assumes that there are certain central characteristics of African morality that distinguishes it as African.

In this study we are also aware of the fact that Africa has a vast array of people. There are the traditional (rural) Africans, and the modern urbanised Africans (who in some ways have become partly modernised). The effect of the cultural elements (which we will discuss below) on the different African groups will greatly differ. For example, the rural “pagan Africans” will be much more influenced by them than the urban “pagan” will. Similarly, the rural African Christians will be much more influenced, compared to the urban African Christians. It is, however, naïve to think that the urban African Christians are not affected by these elements.

Lastly, if we are to really understand the present moral decision making of African Christians, we must relate it to the primal values of the African people (Oduyoye1986:23f). Without doing this, Christianity will not take root in Africa and may eventually be discarded altogether. Thus, unless the gospel is dynamically related to the people's cultural values, it will not take root and may eventually be discarded. This is why this chapter wants to look at some elements of African culture which influence African moral decision making. In the course of our discussion, the influence of these elements will become apparent. Some of the elements, which we will look at in this study, are: the humanistic perspective, concept of taboo, communalism, character and conscience, the role of ancestral spirits, the role of witches and witchcraft. Let us start our discussion by looking at the humanistic perspective.

## **4.2. Salient elements of African culture which influence Christian ethical decision making**

### **4.2.1. The humanistic perspective (*umunthu*)**

A Bantu morality, which is humanistic (based on ubuntu), is believed to be different from the Western secular humanism (Kaunda 1968:6f). It has been said to be fundamentally anthropocentric and religious through and through (ibid.). The fact that Africans generally see evil as coming from humans and not from God, make critics to see African morality to be horizontal, i.e., only applicable to the relationship between humans. This could also be the reason why the ancestral spirits play a very significant role. Opinions may differ on this issue (Gyekye 1987:133, Wiredu 1980:4f). What may not be disputed, however, is the idea that the ultimate goal of traditional African morality is the promotion of human

welfare. Anything, which promotes human welfare, is considered to be good. What does not, is bad.

According to Gyekye (1987:132), in Akan moral thought, for example, human welfare was considered to be the sole criterion of goodness. Thus what was good was “that which was benefiting the human being” (Wiredu 1980:6). Similarly, a person possessing qualities like kindness, gentleness, incorruptibility and conformity to the accepted communal customs, is generally considered to be a person or *ubuntu*. Among the Tswanas, for example, a person who did not do good things or did not display good behaviour was said not to be a person at all (Motlhabi 1991:59).

Any exclusively humanistic emphasis with regard to morality leads to a horizontal morality, i.e., to a relationship between humans only and not to God. This could be the reason why some African Christians do not fear doing evil when they think that they are not being seen by others. Others, on the other hand, fear the dead ancestors and some supernatural beings (Gyekye 1987:133). This fear of the supernatural or the ancestor has prompted some scholars to stress the fact that moral obligations towards God are not totally absent in the African worldview.

Among the Ba-illa of Zambia, norms and customs of the community are derived from God, although He does not play a direct role in over-seeing moral conduct (McVeigh 1974:92). Similarly, among the people of Ituri/ Zaire in the Bunia region, people are not allowed to use the name of God in vain, because it is regarded as being disrespectful (Buyo 1987:50).

Thus, the religious perspective is surely part of the African morality. Many Africans would like to do that which promotes *ubuntu*, as well as that which the gods and ancestors require them to do or not to do. The living “*mntu*” is thus by divine will the norm of the ontological, natural or customary law given by the ancestors.

#### **4.2.2. The concept of taboo**

A taboo is a powerful prohibition, cultural or individualistic, leading to strict avoidance of the forbidden act, object, person or place. Avoidance is usually maintained by fear of a particular punishment from some supernatural beings. H. Webster (1942:viii) sums up a taboo as a prohibition which, when violated, produce automatically in the offender a state of ritual disability “taboo sickness”, which may only be relieved, when relief is possible, by a ceremony of purification.

Among the Bantus of Botswana (ibid.: 370) the word “taboo” is sometimes used to refer to the term “unlucky” with reference to certain situations or happenings. In some other tribes like the Kikuyu of Kenya, on the other hand, “ill luck” is clearly distinguished from taboo (ibid.). There seems to be nothing specifically religious or ethical in some Bantu conceptions of taboo. It seems to lie outside religion and outside morality, it is seen as a notion of unluckiness among people. However, the negative rules which the taboo prescribes, after being accepted as being binding by the larger community, may gain the inviolability and the sacredness which other customs enjoy. Such taboos may thus become religious and moral (Parsons 1915:41-57). Prohibitions, which make some sense, are usually retained as religious interdictions, as moral precepts or as legal enactments. The

role played by taboo as a socialising force should thus not be underestimated even if a person's taboo relate only to himself/herself.

The observance of taboos imposes some good restraints on human passions and requires the mastery of self-regarding impulses which otherwise would be irresistible. Where taboos are communally observed, their disciplinary function is more manifest. Among some of the Bantus of Zaire, for example, the violation of taboo or taboos by anyone is believed to entail misfortune for everyone. As they put it, "one man becomes the curse of a hundred" (Webster 1942:373). Any rushed abandonment of taboos usually leads to disastrous consequences. When the missionaries came to the Bembas of Zambia, they taught the people that no "supernatural" punishment would follow infraction of some of the old taboos. As true as this message was, it unfortunately made the Bembas to feel that they have now been freed from the usual moral restraints and were free to indulge in many things that were previously forbidden (Richards 1932:131). This inevitably led to severe moral chaos, because nothing was put in the place of taboos to restrain the people.

One early missionary to the Maories once said, "the *tapu*" (taboo) in many instances was beneficial. Considering the state of society, absence of law, and the fierce character of the people, it formed no bad substitute for a dictatorial form of government, and made the nearest approach to an organised state of society" (Taylor 1901:172).

The violence, crime and lack of respect for human life in some places of South Africa today could surely be attributed to the breakdown of traditional moral restraints like taboos.

The abolition of the death penalty, as good as it may be, may be sending a similar wrong message to the criminals. They may be interpreted to mean that violent crime is no longer a serious punishable offence. Besides, the fear of the death penalty, which restrained many from committing serious crimes is no longer there to restrain them. Similarly, in the areas of Africa where traditional African taboos were enforced by elders, chiefs, the ancestral spirits and other gods are gone, and no other valuable restraining principles have been put in place, moral decay has been the logical result.

What one is supposed to do and not do is already laid out by the tribe through taboos. The enforcement of such laws is by means of self-enforcement and enforcement by the community, the ancestors, and the gods. Taboo is thus a powerful moral impulse for the good. Instead of condemning them, if they can somehow be amended, by removing all the superstitions in them and moralising them, they may play a very important role in African ethical decision making.

In other words, taboos are a very important element of morality in most African cultures. They are seen as practical and effective ways of dealing with ethical matters. According to Idowu, taboo embraces everything that is regarded as an offence against other persons, as well as against divine and ancestral powers (Idowu 1962:148). Besides, taboo morality instils within the African “an innate sense that there is a distinction between good and evil, right and wrong, clean and unclean”. A person is therefore not free to do as he/she pleases and knows that there are consequences to his deeds (Mcveigh 1974:95). The most serious criticism of taboo is that its magic wand is fear: Fear of the consequences, fear of the



offended spirits and the ancestor and other gods. The problem with taboos as moral guides is that the motives for doing right or good are out of compulsion and the aversion of punishment and not out of free choice. This makes the moral status of taboos to be questionable as a moral guide. There are thus several other things, which taboo morality enforced, which may not be helpful to African Christian moral decision making. For example illogical explanations as to why people should do or not do certain things in life. In fact, these illogical explanations are the main reasons why taboos have lost their credibility.

### **4.2.3. Communalism**

In Africa, communalism is the essence of morality. According to Ilunga (1974:127) a community is made up of past, present and future generations. What a person does affects other members of his/her community (Mbon 1991:102). Therefore, its effects on the entire group (ibid.) determine the rightness or wrongs of an individual's behaviour. The Chewa people of eastern Zambia have a proverb, which says, *munthu ni munthu cifukwa cha anthu* (literally meaning: "a person is a person because of others"). Thus the community is of great importance. With specific reference to moral decision making they say, *nzeru za weka anaviika nsima mmadzi*, meaning: "anyone who puts much trust in his own intellect in his judgements, will end up putting a delicious meal in dirty water" (making it unfit for eating). Thus the gist of communalism teaching is that a person's worth, value, and wisdom comes from his/her membership of the community and not from him alone as an individual (Kasenene 1994:141).

Here what is right and wrong does not depend on a person's judgement only, although the final decision remains his/hers. He/she can choose to obey what the community prescribes or refuse to obey and follow his "own heart". He/she still has to listen to what the community prescribes and face "the long arm" of the community. In short, any moral decision must take into account what the community prescribes and not just what the individual thinks is right (Motlhabi 1991:69). This has prompted some critics to say that personal choice is not given much worth. The individual's choice is not given the respect it deserves. These critics may have a point. An authentic choice is always the one in which one chooses on his or her own. Loyalty to the tribe or clan community may sometimes lead to tribalism and nepotism. This has proved to be a real problem for many of the African elites. Misuse of public transport to serve or help relatives and members of one's own clan is a common occurrence throughout Africa.

Perhaps some of the problems faced by some new black government leaders in South Africa today, could be directly or indirectly due to this conflict between the demands of their tribe and clan on the one hand *vis-a-vis* the demands of their political parties and the general public. Relatives may be expecting to be given good jobs even if they do not have the right qualifications. This may be the reason why tribalism is the biggest problem in Africa and is usually regarded by many to be the main cause of civil wars in Africa. For example, the war in Angola may not be just about democracy *vis-a-vis* dictatorship. It could also be one large tribe, the Ovimbundu (UNITA's tribe), which feels threatened and marginalised versus the rest of the tribes in Angola.

With regard to the accusation that the individual's rights not being respected, scholars like Mbon (1991:102) and Gyekye (1987:155) have rightly pointed out that the individual is not left out or undermined, because as a member of the community, his/her welfare is mainly served by the welfare of the community as a whole. As Gyekye puts it, the common good is "not conceptually opposed to the individual's good" (Gyekye 1987:159). Similarly, community love needs not lead to tribalism, favouritism, misuse of public property and other injustices. The problem is: if morality in Africa as such means to be loyal to what your tribe requires, what is the moral basis for being fair to all people in a culturally plural society like South Africa?

There has to be a balance between community expectations and the requirements of public office. They should learn to keep these two spheres separate and serve all the people fairly, as this is what is expected of them. They should learn to respect public property and not to use it to serve their clans. The people who expect a lot from them must also be taught to realise that they should not expect too much from a person who has a government post and is serving the public, because whatever he has, belongs to the public and he/she is there to serve all the citizens without discrimination.

#### **4.2.4. Character and conscience**

Morality does not always depend on principles and rules to carry out moral obligations. In African communities, character building also plays a very important role in moral guidance. Gyekye (1987:147) claims that character, *suban* in the Akan language, sums up the whole of Akan morality. Similarly in the Yoruba tribe, the word *iwa* is very important

to Yoruba morality (Idowu 1963:154). The well-being of the people on earth is believed to depend on their character (*iwa*). It is also believed that Ela, son of Oludumare (God), taught the Yoruba people that they need good character in order to live in peace on earth. This was the reason why he gave them moral sense to distinguish right from wrong. This moral sense is known as *ifa aya* “conscience” (Abogunrium 1989:267-268). This may be the reason why there is a close relationship between character and conscience in Africa.

When a person has no character, it means she/he does not have good morals and is thus lacking a good conscience. A person with good character will be known through his/her conformity to the rules of the community (Gyekye 1987:149). Character is very fundamental to the African. A person is judged to be good or bad based on his character. It is therefore no surprise that a good character is believed to be of greater worth than possessions (Abogunrium 1989:271). This may be yet another reason why African children used to spend many hours in the evenings with their grandparents who trained them in character formation by using stories and taboos. It is a pity that the modern day African child who lives away from grandparents has lost this important medium of instruction. Instead, the television has become the main moral teacher (the main instrument for character formation). The consciences of children are formed by the television programmes, which are not always good teachers of character formation. This may be the main reason why African Christians are experiencing severe moral crises.

#### **4.2.5. The role of the ancestral spirits**

Most of the Africans believe that misfortune is never a ‘natural’ occurrence. People do not just fall ill, suffer hardship, poverty, famine or die due to natural causes. There is a spiritual entity at the basis of any misfortune. Suffering is believed to be caused either by lineage spirits or by witches. Africans cannot understand their experience without reference to religious beliefs wholly permeated by vivid judgements of right and wrong (Green 1983:6f).

Among the popular spirits today are the ancestral spirit mediums. The mediums are believed to represent the unassailable moral judiciary. Through possession, the mediums are believed to get the status of an objective judge, because what they say is believed to have been passed on to them by the dead ancestors. This is believed to be the reason why the mediums seem to possess a personal charm, psychological discernment and a keen moral insight in moral judgement. Whether the medium can really communicate with the dead ancestor or not is subject to much debate in modern Africa.

Without going into this debate, it is important to note that if one reads the Bible in 1 Samuel 28:6-26, King Saul is believed to have asked a medium to help him speak to Samuel who was already dead. It is said that the medium managed to do exactly that. Biblically speaking, this is possible, although God does not allow his people to do this. If Scripture directly forbids communication with the spirit of the dead then it must not be accepted in African Christian ethical decision making.

Under normal circumstances, the success of a spirit medium rests very much on his/her ability to sense and to articulate the latest communal moral judgements (Green 1983:12). Since the medium is usually able to articulate the inner moral feelings of a group, he/she serves as the voice of collective moral judgement, expressed as the spirit's will, although most of the time it is not the dead spirit who speaks at all. If one is convinced that the spirit mediums are the best voice of the collective moral judgement, then it may be acceptable to seek moral advice from the spirit mediums as long as the Scripture does not unambiguously proscribe such a practice.

To be credible a spirit medium must avoid corruption and misconduct. His judgement must not contradict the communal sentiments and the dictates that help shape human destiny. This does not in any way mean that what the mediums say is absolutely true. Mediums are sometimes as corrupt as any other ordinary medicine man. Even their moral advice may not be always true. For example, when the South African national team was playing soccer in the African Nations cup, the acting national team coach (Jomo Sono) is believed to have left Bokina Faso to come and consult the *isangoma* (medium) on the outcome of future games and to seek guidance on some crucial decisions to be made (S.A.B.C Laduma sports news of 26th August 1998). Contrary to the predictions of the mediums the South African national team ended up losing the games. The mediums exonerated themselves by saying that the team did not follow the exact instructions and the rules given to them by the *isangomas*. This was their lame excuse. In spite of these weaknesses, the mediums play a very important role in the ethical decision making of many Africans. Many liberation movements in Southern Africa were believed to have been

spearheaded and lead into battle by the spirit mediums. Ethical decisions on when to attack, moral conduct while in the bush were believed to have been done under the guidance and advice of the spirit mediums. Their knowledge of the veld may have given them the expertise, which the fighters who were mostly coming from township areas were lacking. Thus ancestral spirits represent the archetype of moral conduct in the African setting. Witches and sorcerers on the other hand, represent the antitype and these should be discouraged at all cost.

#### **4.2.6. The role of witches and witchcraft**

Apart from spirits, witches form the first resort in most of the explanation of suffering. In all African communities, witches are hated and inverted human beings. They are the opposite of normal human personality. They are, in all respects, the personification of moral evil. They also help to explain the suffering that defies clear moral explanation and spare the ancestors and gods the blame for wrong doing. They help to explain the morally inexplicable. How then does this relate to moral guidance? In many African societies, up to this day, witchcraft plays a direct role in upholding and enforcing the moral order. Evans Pritchard, for example, says that among the Azande:

The notion of witchcraft is not only a function of misfortune and of personal relations but also comprises moral judgement ...Zande morality is so closely related to these notions that it may be said to embrace them. The Zande phrase, it is witchcraft, may often be translated simply as it is bad (Green 1983:54).

Similarly, among the Shona of Zimbabwe belief in witchcraft encourages good social behaviour. Any anti-social behaviour leads to suspicion of being labelled a witch, and

consequently makes the average Shona adult to choose good in preference to evil, out of fear that he may be labelled a witch. Although fear may not be the best motivation for moral conduct, it still helps to check immoral behaviour. For example, in many parts of Africa, people are fearful of denying hospitality to a stranger for fear that the visitor may turn out to be a witch. Similarly, a polygamist would fear to display partiality because the other wives may bewitch him (Green 1983:16). It is interesting to note that even in the Old Testament, fear played a similar important role in checking immorality.

In the economic sphere witchcraft fear ensures that wealth is shared and redistributed fairly. Excess wealth not shared in the community invites witchcraft (ibid.:65-66). Sometimes too much wealth is seen as a sign of its owner being a witch. Witches are believed to exchange their own children's flesh for riches and other favours (Green 1983:66). Witchcraft is a double-edged sword. Immoral behaviour can be a sign of witchcraft or it can stimulate the wrath and resentment of witches. Either way, the net effect is a strong encouragement to morally upright conduct (ibid.:18).

Witches, therefore, help to define moral conduct and explain misfortune. The fear of witches may also be partly responsible for checking economic exploitation of the community by the individuals who fear that if they become rich they will be bewitched. Depressing, however, is the fact that people do not want to develop economically for fear of being regarded as witches themselves, i.e., being accused of having used witchcraft to accumulate wealth, or even for fear of being targets of witches themselves. These beliefs in witches and witchcraft are among some of the main contributing factors to the under-



development prevalent in Africa today. People fear to work hard, because if they get rich, witches will get to them. Besides, there are many quarrels and fights which originate from what is done and said by witches, because as instruments of the devil, sometimes they sow seeds of hatred and enmity in many African tribes. Witches and witchcraft must therefore not condoned in African Christian moral decision making.

### **Summary and evaluation**

Our study has shown that the salient elements of African culture affect the ethical decision making process of many African Christians in a number of ways. The humanistic element determines what is good. Anything, which promotes human welfare, is considered to be good, that which does not is bad. A person who does not do good is in fact said not to be a person at all. Anything that promotes the human well being (*ubuntu*) is good. African Christian moral decision must take this into account.

Taboo morality, on the other hand, imposes some good restraints on human passions. Violation of taboos by anyone was believed to entail misfortune on the doer and the whole community. Any rushed abandonment of taboo morality usually leads to moral chaos as was the case with the Bembas of Northern Zambia. One may not agree with everything taught in the taboos. Some elements of in the taboos may even be based on superstition and force. What cannot be disputed, however, is the fact that taboos affected and still affect the moral judgements of many Africans and must be taken seriously in any African Christian moral decision making.

Communalism is yet another salient element, which we looked at. In Africa, communalism is the essence of morality. What a person does, affects the entire group. Therefore, its effects on the entire group (Mbon 1991:102) determine the rightness or wrongs of an individual's behaviour. He cannot always do things as he/she pleases. On any moral decision, the opinion of others is essential. Thus, any moral decision must take that which does the community into account prescribe. As we pointed out earlier, the individual may sometimes suffer oppression and abuse in these societies. It may sometimes even lead to tribalism. What is important to us is, however, the fact that the individual must listen to what the community says and respect their opinions in his/her moral decisions.

The role played by the fear of the ancestral spirits (who are the living dead) cannot be underestimated. The belief and fear of the ancestors permeate the religious beliefs and judgements of many Africans, their views on what is right and wrong. Through the spirit mediums, who are believed to be the representatives of the ancestral voice, moral decisions are passed on. Whether such communications do really take place or not is an issue here. The fact remains that the spirit mediums are the best expounders of what the community morally prescribes. An African Christian moral decision must take their role and their capable discernment and what they say seriously. However, we may not appreciate the fact that they claim to consult the dead when giving their moral advice.

Last but not least, the role played by the belief and fear of witches and witchcraft in African society may not be underestimated. Decisions to marry or not, make economic

progress or not, education etc, are affected by the fear and belief in witches. Despite all the negative connotations, which such beliefs have, they help to check immorality and encourage good behaviour in many African communities. Any moral decision, which neglects to address the fears raised by such a belief, will be less authentic in the African context. We may not agree with much of what witches and witchcraft stands for, but the fact that such beliefs affect the moral decisions of the African Christians is beyond doubt.

### **4.3. The extent to which African culture should be taken seriously**

This study has shown clearly that there are two common mistakes, which Christians make when discussing this issue. The first mistake, is the one, which we highlighted, in the second and third chapters of our study. We showed how some Western missionaries to Africa had an absolute exclusivistic understanding of the *sola Scriptura* slogan of the Reformers. They believed that Scripture alone should be the source of authority in African theology. Advocates of such a view ignore culture completely. Moral decisions in this view are supposed to be based only on what the Bible says and nothing else. The cultural context of the people being evangelised is ignored completely. Such a view will in fact make it difficult for the Word of God to become part of the people. In fact no human being can really rid himself of his reasoning faculties and the linguistic skills of the culture in which he acquired them and in which he continues to make sense for himself. It is in fact naïve to think that moral decisions can be made in a vacuum. Such a view excludes African culture, reason, science, etc, as sources in moral judgement. Our study has shown clearly that this is a big mistake. Any authentic moral decision must be based on the whole of God's reality, including African culture. A decision which is based on only

what the Bible says is a decision based on only part of God's reality. Such a view does not help at all. It will surely lead us nowhere.

The second mistake is the result of a reaction. As a reaction to this view, some African scholars have proposed a view, which elevates African culture above the Scriptures. In this view African culture becomes the supreme norm on which moral decisions are to be made. This group elevates African culture and makes it the supreme moral norm. Culture is indeed an important source in moral decision making. However, to do that is to replace an infallible norm with a fallible norm. As we earlier pointed out, in Christianity, it is Scripture alone which should be the only criterion by which everything else is to be judged. Thus replacing an exclusivistic view of Scripture with an exclusivistic view of culture is a reaction, which has gone to the opposite extreme, leaving the truth somewhere in between. For us, the truth can be found somewhere in between the two extremes. Culture should be taken seriously, but not at the expense of the Word of God. We should allow Scripture to stand in judgement over any culture. It must be allowed to be a supreme norm without being exclusive. Excluding African culture in moral judgement is thus unacceptable. Culture should be allowed to play an important role, but not at the expense of Scripture.

The way and extent to which the African cultural elements we discussed earlier influence African Christian moral decision making is subject to much debate. It is true to say that there are differences and similarities between traditional African ethical decision making and African Christian ethical decision making. As the biblical culture and African culture

interact, it is unavoidable that they influence each other (Ela 1988; Bujo1990; Wilson 1971).

The differences between traditional African ethical decision making and African Christian ethical decision making can be seen in the heated debates that exist in churches on issues like rituals, initiation ceremonies, marriage ceremonies etc (Shorter 1973:10f). The similarities can best be seen in the work done in the Independent Christian Churches as shown by Daneel (1980), Ela (1988), Bujo (1990) and many others. Thus the influence of the salient elements on African Christian ethical decision making cannot be denied. What may be disputed however, is the extent and ways in which these salient cultural elements influence African Christians, because not all the elements mentioned above influence African Christian decision making in the same way.

#### **4.4. Practical examples of how African culture should be taken into account when making moral decisions**

The key elements discussed above and many others, still exercise a lot of influence in ethical decision making in Africa (both among Christians and non-Christians). Apart from the issue of polygamy, there are many other moral issues in which culture must be taken into account when making moral decisions. Failure to do this, would result in having less authentic decisions. To illustrate what we mean by this, let us look at the following moral issues:

First, marriage and divorce;

Second, childlessness;

Third, attitude towards accumulation of wealth.

#### **4.4.1. Marriage and divorce**

As we earlier pointed out, marriage in the African traditional setting is mostly a contract between two families (the boy's family and the girl's family) and not just between two consenting individuals. However, the influence of Western culture has brought some changes in some circles. This has resulted in a shift toward small nuclear families all over Africa (Haselbarth 1976:67f). This does not in any way mean that the clan ties and influence are completely broken in modern day African marriages. People in Africa do not encourage divorce, because they feel that it affects both society and the children. As a result, the parents who are party to the marriage contract, do not take divorce kindly. They believe marriage should be for life, for better or for worse. Unfortunately, this may even be the case when the marriage has completely broken down. Among the Ngoni of eastern Zambia, they even have a proverb, which says that "a Ngoni daughter does not move out of a marriage". This is the main reason why a high bride price is charged to anyone who wants to marry their daughters.

Where the clan (or parents) have contributed towards the marriage of a young couple, it cannot be expected from them to be silent on the issues of divorce or childlessness. Unfortunately this may sometimes lead to some very negative consequences for the newly weds. The newly weds may even fail to please all the people in the family, leading to a lot of misery and tension. It is thus naive to think that one's Christian marriage in Africa will be based purely on Western Christian principles. It is equally unacceptable for the

community to expect the newly weds to fulfil all the expectations of each and every clan member.

It is obvious that in the West the individual and his rights are above those of the community. Ethical decisions on marriage (like who to marry and when) are not as complex as those of an African Christian. When individuals want to divorce they may easily do so. This is not the case in an African setting, where the consent of the clan members may not be easy to get. This may be one of the reasons why there is a high divorce rate in the West compared to the traditional African setting.

Christian ethics must take these cultural factors very seriously if it is to become meaningful to the modern day African Christian. If these salient elements are ignored in the name of Christianity and modernity, Christianity will never be at home in the African setting. It will, without any doubt, become irrelevant. Thus in any decision the communal aspect is crucial to an African Christian and not just his or her individual needs and wishes as is the case in the West.

This should not however create an impression that everything in African traditional marriage can be acceptable for African Christian ethical decision making. There are some aspects of African marriage customs, which may be in direct conflict with biblical teachings. For example:

- it may not be in line with the biblical norm of love to force a young girl to get married to an old man whom she does not know or love at all;

- charging people high bride price as though one is selling his/her daughter may not be unacceptable practice either;
- to compel a childless couple to divorce or marry a second wife may be equally contravening the biblical teaching that children are a gift from God and that marriage is marriage with or without children;
- forcing children into early marriages because the family is poor and it needs money is tantamount to slavery and unacceptable for African Christian morality.
- forcing a newly wed couple to please everybody in the clan simply because he /she has married in that particular clan is surely asking too much from the young couple. In fact, this is one of the main reasons why some marriages fail in Africa. A person cannot please everybody;
- lastly, to force a Levirate marriage on people who do not want it, may not be an acceptable practice in the African Christian church, because people should not be forced into marriage.

Therefore, any uncritical acceptance of the African moral values would be unacceptable to the African Christian ethical decision making.

#### **4.4.2. Childlessness**

Procreation is an essential part of marriage in the African setting. Without children a marriage is believed to be incomplete, or not a marriage at all (Bujo 1987:106-114). To be childless was and still is regarded as the worst curse. The shame of being mocked by others is extremely unbearable. Children are the ones who carry on one's name, inherit



one's property and so on. The crisis that childlessness brings in an African Christian home is more serious compared to Western Christian circles. In some areas of Africa there are no children for the childless couples to adopt. This is due to the fact that the extended family system takes care of the orphans. In addition, the parents who contributed towards the marriage of the couple may not accept their daughter or son to remain childless for the rest of his/her life. It is equally saddening to note that in Africa a marriage without children is not regarded as a full marriage. Contrary to what the Scriptures say, it is regarded as an incomplete marriage.

In many African cultures childlessness is accepted as the only legitimate reason for someone to divorce his or her partner or to go into polygamy (ibid:111). Ethical decision making on such an issue is not similar to the Western setting as the factors that are taken into account may differ. It is equally unfortunate that while the rest of the world is enjoying unprecedented progress in helping childless couples to have children, these benefits have not yet reached the rest of Africa. Many childless couples would have greatly benefited from these services.

We may not therefore accept the ridicule and harsh treatment of people who have no children. Children are a gift from God to the couple. Marriage should be respected with or without children. Such aspects of African culture surely need to change. Allowing childless couples to adopt or get children from their relatives and treat them as their own would be the most appropriate way to deal with childlessness.

#### **4.4.3. Attitude towards accumulation of wealth**

The Western world, on the whole, appears to have a positive attitude towards the accumulation of wealth. According to Redmond Mullin (1983:82f) the majority of Western Christians have always possessed wealth or wanted to possess it, whether in humble or extravagant measure, and have at the same time recognised at least notionally its power to corrupt. Some have regarded accumulation of wealth as part of our duty to create as much wealth as possible or even as a sign of God's favour and blessings. Poverty on the other hand, is seen as punishment for sloth and immorality. To drive this point home, Richard Baxter (1673:2f) once said, "to choose the less gainful way when God has showed a lawful way to make money, was refusing to be God's steward". Or as Columbus (1446-1506:1f) put it, "gold buys heaven." Similar views can be found in *The Evangelical Magazine* of 1804 (Norman 1976:33). Calvin, whose views are believed to be one of the foundations on which modern capitalism is based (Weber 1930:24f) seems to have had a similar positive attitude towards wealth (Lessnoff 1994:42-58; Calvin 1813, vol.11:164; Weber 1930:20-254).

The only real dissenting voices against such an attitude came from the puritan movement. The puritans, who wanted to purify the soul from any corruption, believed that wealth seeking was an activity liable to be perilous to the soul of man. It may lead one to fall prey to sins like idleness, extravagance and debauchery. One such a dissenting voice is that of William Perkins (1609, vol. 11: 146). He believed, among other things, that one should

not make it his/her calling to seek wealth. Perkins, however, added that “if God gives abundance, when we neither desire nor seek it, we may partake of it, hold it as God’s stewards”. Perkins was therefore not really against having wealth as such. Thus in the West wealth has been considered by many to be a gift from God to be used rightly and not to be avoided (Lessnoff 1994: 56f). It is against such a background that a positive attitude towards wealth developed.

In sharp contrast to such an attitude, the African culture does not seem to have a positive attitude towards wealth. In many parts of Africa to have wealth is seen to be a bad thing. In a community full of poverty and misery a person who becomes rich, is the object of much suspicion. He/she is suspected to have used magic and witchcraft in order to acquire wealth. In the Copperbelt province of modern day Zambia, for example, such a person is usually suspected to possess a snake (*cilomba*) which steals wealth from other families and gives it to the one who owns it. Worse still, the person who becomes rich always lives in fear of being bewitched (being a target of witchcraft who will kill him because of jealousy). Thus in many parts of Africa, people may not want to work hard in order to become rich, because of the fear of being bewitched, being targets of witches or even being accused of being witches themselves. Although one should avoid generalisations, it is true that the decisions of many African Christians on issues like: “What type of car should I buy? What type of house should I build?” are heavily affected by the fear of witchcraft and witches.

There are a number of Western cultural practices which African culture should emulate if it is to make economic progress. For example, its respect for individual property and good

Christian work ethics, etc. African Christians should promote hard work and encourage ingenuity. Some of its cultural customs tend to encourage laziness. For example, it is not in line with the teachings of the Apostle Paul to allow unemployed dependants to be for ever parasites at the house of one working class family member. An economy cannot develop when more than half of the population are unproductive and live as parasites on the few working class family members.

The mentality that people who are rich are rich because they have used witchcraft and people's fear of becoming rich, because they can be bewitched, are also unfortunate. These are some of the things, which hinder economic progress in Africa. These are things, which must change if Africa is to make progress materially and spiritually. In doing this, care must be taken so that we do not throw away the baby with the bathwater, i.e. what is good with what is good.

The occurrence of and belief in witchcraft is universal in Africa. It is no exaggeration to say that one cannot understand many aspects of African human behaviour in a wide range of social situations without a fairly extensive knowledge of their ideas regarding good, evil and causation. In Western society, witchcraft is no longer held in awe in the same way as in Africa. It is regarded as superstition, a product of ignorance and error (Middleton 1963:1f). Furthermore, failure to understand the role of these beliefs in the context of the lives of those who hold them, is often at the basis of naive statements that the African mind is primitive and incomprehensible. The fear of witches and witchcraft encourages people to decide to do good and not what is morally unacceptable for fear of being

regarded to be a witch or for fear of being bewitched by witches. Thus despite the negative functions that witches have as personifications of evil, they play a very important role in African moral decision making. A man/woman who receives a visitor at night and is struggling with the decision whether to give shelter to the stranger or not, for example, may be forced to show kindness for fear of being bewitched by the stranger or even be regarded as a witch himself/herself. Even a decision to build a new house or not, or to accumulate wealth, may be influenced by the fear of witch. Belief in witches helps to check greed and ensures equal distribution of wealth.

Despite some positive evaluations, which we have highlighted above, belief in witches and witchcraft still remains the single most outstanding hindrance to spiritual and material progress in Africa. It is in many ways contradicting the biblical message of love and respect for the neighbour and his property. It contravenes the law which says that we should not covet the neighbour's property, and so on. Its devastating effects make it completely unhelpful to African Christian ethical decision making. Although on the other hand, according to Evans-Prichard (1937:166,201) it, "provides natural philosophy by which the relations between men and unfortunate events are explained and a ready and stereotyped means of reacting to such events". Such a contribution should be taken account in explanations from science and Christianity. Although the reality of witches and witchcraft may be subject to much debate as McVeigh (1974:167) puts it, and that there may be some positive functions of this belief, the negative effects of such a belief far outweigh the positive and it must be done away with if Africa is to make real moral progress.

## **4.5. Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have shown that there are certain salient elements of African culture which influence African moral decision making. The cultural context of the people to whom the Gospel is preached must be taken into account if one is to minister effectively. Conversion to Christianity should not always imply the rejection of the African traditional cultural values like respect for elders, no sex outside marriage, etc. Only those customs and values, which are irreconcilable with the Christian faith, should be rejected. On the other hand, elements of African culture, which do not contradict Christianity, should be incorporated into christianity. There are a number of salient elements which influence African ethical decision making, which, when over-looked, will lead to decisions which are less authentic. If Christianity is to effectively minister to the African Christians, African culture must be taken seriously. Failure to do so will lead to a superficial ministry and a superficial conversion of the Africans. In places where this has not been taken care of, the African Christians have even left the missionary founded Churches and formed their own (independent) Christian churches or even accepted Islam, which they feel administer to their spiritual and moral aspirations. To solve this problem, African culture should be taken seriously while at the same time being subjected to biblical critique. In other words, the supreme Word of God should be allowed to be the criterion with whereby to judge African culture is judged.

# CHAPTER V

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS: THE WAY FORWARD FOR AFRICAN CHRISTIAN ETHICAL DECISION MAKING**

Several significant findings have emerged from this study. It has shown, among other things, that the majority of mainline Protestant theologians, past and present, have accepted the Bible as a very important source for Christian ethical decision making. They do not understand the *sola Scriptura* in an absolute and exclusivistic sense, but they also believe that in ethical decision making other things like reason, natural law, the context, tradition or culture, the Holy Spirit, the character of a person and many other things should, be taken into account. Scripture, should however, still remain the final court of appeal, but not the only source. Such a position provides room for the use of other sources as moral guides for ethical decision making and takes the context in which moral decisions are to be made much more seriously, while at the same time not rejecting the unique normative function of the Scriptures.

There are, however, a few who maintain an absolute and exclusivistic view of Scripture. They be regarded as conservative, radical anti-integrationists. J. Yoder (1972) is an example. They say that the Bible presents a perspective on ethics, which appeals to modern times without any modification. It alone should be used in moral decision making. No other non-biblical sources should be used. Although such theologians were and are in the minority, their influence in African Christianity has been far-reaching. Most of the missionaries to Africa appear to have had very similar views.

This is very clear from the contempt for African culture, which they had as our study has shown.

It is clear from our investigation that those theologians who understood and interpreted the *sola Scriptura* slogan in an absolute and exclusivistic sense and believed that African culture should not be used in theology and ethical decision making, are departing from what the mainline Protestants meant by *sola Scriptura*.

Our study has also found that some of the missionaries who brought the word of God to Africa adopted an exclusivistic view of Scripture as a moral source. This was clearly demonstrated in their blanket condemnation of African culture in all its aspects. As a result, they did not allow the integration of African culture with the Bible in their moral teachings. Admittedly, this could also have been due to other factors like a superior attitude towards the Africans and a certain understanding of the total depravity doctrine by which they looked at African culture as completely depraved. It was against such a background that the African theologians are reacting. Their reaction has mainly been in three ways. We have the conservatives, who want the church to continue with the exclusivistic view of using the Bible as the only source of authority in everything including moral judgements. They feel that any departure from this view would lead to universalism and relativism. The second group is made up of moderates, who maintain that the gospel is always received in a cultural context. It is always preached and received in a cultural milieu. Therefore, the culture of the people to whom the gospel is to be preached is very important for moral judgement. Christian values cannot be applied in a vacuum. It is therefore imperative that there has to be a positive relationship between Scripture and African culture. As J. Mbiti (1977:36) aptly puts it,



they are allies and not foes. In moral judgement, African Christians must thus use the Bible, their culture, Western culture, science and many other sources. This study has found that this is the view of the majority of the African theologians.

The radical integrationalists, on the other hand, believe that there is continuity between Scripture and the human tradition due to the general revelation given to all people. These radicals usually tend to overemphasise the African cultural element at the expense of the Bible. The radicals also tend to view the African cultural elements as the norm for the Africans. People like G. Muzorewa (1985:6-9) even rejects the Bible itself as a norm. These views are usually a reaction against Western cultural dominance. Just like any other reaction, they tend to go too far to the opposite extreme leaving the truth somewhere in between. This to us is correcting one error with yet another error. By looking at a moral problem like polygamy in Africa, this study has shown how culture may function as a source in African ethical decision making.

Finally, the study has discussed African culture as a source in Christian ethical decision making. Some salient cultural elements, which we believe should play a role in African ethical decision making, have been discussed and the extent to which this African culture should be taken seriously has been looked into. What then is the way forward for African Christian ethical decision making? The way forward for African Christian ethical decision making should be the following:

First, sola *Scriptura* need not be interpreted in an absolute and exclusivistic sense. As J. Gustafson (1963:22) has rightly pointed out, “an authority can be unique without being exclusive. The Bible has such a status.... Thus for Christian ethics, its authority is inescapable without being absolute.” If understood in this way, there is room for

African culture and other social factors to play a role in African Christian ethical decision making.

Second, when exegesis is done in a responsible manner, it becomes clear that the Bible in fact does not unambiguously prohibit certain African customs and practices (e.g. polygamy).

Third, the Bible itself reflects the influence of cultural and social factors on religious and moral beliefs. The diversity in the moral message of the Bible should be recognised when evaluating African customs.

Fourth, if the specific cultural and social context of moral decision making is not taken seriously, one may easily end up prescribing conduct that is harmful and therefore unacceptable to the people (e.g. divorcing the second and the third wife in an African context). One has to take the consequences of what is morally prescribed in a specific cultural context into account.

In the light of the above findings an African Christian who wants to make a moral decision must proceed to make his/her decision in the following way:

First and foremost, he/she must be able to know exactly what the problem is. After gaining clarity on what the problem is, he/she must consider all the factors that are involved in that particular moral problem. Since we have said that the Bible is our primary source and the criterion against which everything else, including culture, must be judged, the African Christian must look at what the whole Bible says (Old Testament and the New Testament) on the issue at hand. For example, in the case of our example

of a converted polygamist *Mr. Zuze Tembo*, we have found that the Bible does not unambiguously condemn polygamy. Even our Lord Jesus Christ does not anywhere unambiguously condemn polygamy. Any African marriage teaching must take the cultural values into account. In many African contexts, it may be better to accommodate polygamy, because of social, economical, cultural and even religious reasons. We include religious reasons because in Christian ethics, “the principle of choosing the lesser of the two evils” may be applicable in the case of a converted polygamist. It may be more harmful to the family to encourage a converted polygamist to divorce the other wives in order to correct the lesser “sin of polygamy”. (Trobish 1978:233-235). A faithful, converted polygamist may be better than divorce, adultery, destitute widows and street kids. It is shocking to see that most of the churches, which do not accept converted polygamists as full church members, appear to be more tolerant to adulterous Christians.

In addition, in Africa, where the community is very important, it is unrealistic for any individual Christian to base his/her decision only on what the Bible or Western culture says, because what an individual does usually affects the entire community. An African Christian who has to make moral decisions in this area that, Christian moral decisions will have to take into account the effects of his/her decision on the community as a whole. One should not make a decision just because such a decision is accepted in the Bible or simply because it pleases you as an individual. One has to listen to what the community prescribes. There is power in community and in communal wisdom and not in individualism. Two are better than one. Even the toughest moral dilemmas will become lighter when people unite and seek advice from the larger support group. Again this does not mean that one has to uncritically accept everything which is

prescribed by the community. For example, when one is a public worker it is common for members of one's tribe to expect him/her to give employment opportunities to them even if they do not have the necessary qualifications. Many African tribes have a proverb, which says, "blood is thicker than water". Which refers to those who are not your relatives or tribesmen as water and blood which is more precious refers to one's relatives or tribesmen. This practice, more than any other, is the most main cause of the failure of most African government institutions, because people who do not have the right qualifications are employed and put in places where they cannot deliver the goods. In other words, one is not supposed to listen to everything which is morally prescribed in one's culture. One has to be selective even if such an action will mean that his/her kinsmen for doing this will reject one. Tribalism and nepotism will have to be rejected by African Christians. They should remember that according to the Bible, we are all one, created in the image of God. Whatever belongs to the public is there for all the citizens without any discrimination.

In our fourth chapter we have said that the issue of witches and witchcraft is retrogressive and needs to be rejected outrightly. It causes more harm than good. The positive elements in which are out outweighed by the negative and disastrous consequences, which this belief brings to the African people. Some people even refuse to work hard to get rich, because they fear that they will be bewitched or will be accused of being witches themselves. People kill each other as a result of the belief in witches. It creates hatred between people and not love. We therefore feel that it should be fought vigorously and discarded at once. All seriously minded African Christians must reject it. It must be done away with at once.

The role played by the supernatural on the other hand should not be underestimated. Ancestors and spirits mediums surely play an important role in any moral decision. For example the spirit mediums are believed to represent the unassailable moral judiciary in many moral issues. Many Africans cannot understand their experience without reference to the religious beliefs wholly permeated by vivid judgements of right and wrong (Green1983: 6f). The moral implications for an African who wants to make moral decisions in such a context are far-reaching. As we earlier pointed out in this study, spirit mediums are usually the custodians of the community wisdom and community morality. Sometimes this makes them the trustworthy judges of what may be right and wrong in a particular moral problem. Many people who have been involved in the liberation wars in southern Africa testify that spirit mediums lead them through the most dangerous areas of the bushes. They helped them to avoid ambushes etc. For young town conscripts who did not know the bushes, “the wings” of the spirit mediums were their only survival. Although these spirit mediums claimed to have lead these forces through receiving visions, dreams and instructions from their dead ancestors, this might not have been the case. The fact is that the spirit mediums knew the bushes very well. They spent most of their time in the bushes collecting herbs. This also enabled the spirit medium to act as a medical doctor for the guerrillas who did not always have enough medicines. The spirit mediums also knew how to interpret cries and flying patterns of birds. This is how they could easily tell that the enemy is near or that there is an ambush ahead of them.

Another positive contribution of the spirit mediums to the liberation wars in Southern Africa lies in the fact that they controlled the moral conduct of the fighting forces. Women were usually not raped, because sex during or before the war was considered to

be bad. It would lead to misfortune and even death. In fact no wicked acts were accepted. After any military defeat they always forced the combatants to publicly confess and repent any evil which they might have committed before or during the battle. According to a former guerrilla combatant, the crimes which the spirit mediums declared would lead to defeat were crimes like killing old people, unarmed civilians, women, children, the lame, birds like eagles and vultures, pythons etc. Most of these prohibitions really make good moral and ecological sense even in war.

Again this should not create an impression that one should blindly accept everything which these spirit mediums say to you. In the Rhodesian guerrilla war, for example, some of the spirit mediums did not accept any lame or one-eyed man to go into battle, because they believed this was an ill omen. One guerrilla commander had to over-rule a spirit medium on this issue, because his top marksman was a one-eyed comrade who was very good at shooting targets, which were far away.

It is clear from these examples that sometimes it may make sense to consult the spirit mediums, as long as what they tell you to does not conflict with the basic teachings of the Bible. One should not obey them, however, if they prescribe something which is against what the Bible says. The case of discrimination against the disabled people is a good example.

Ancestral spirits are yet another force to deal with on the African scene. Beliefs and judgements of many Africans, their views on what is right and the belief and fear of the dead relatives permeate wrong. The spirit mediums are believed to be the voice through which the ancestors speak (give moral guidance). Whether such communications take

place or not is subject to another debate. As the custodians of the traditional cultural moral values, it seems that the spirit mediums will surely be in a position to really know what the ancestors want. Take for example the case of a young educated African Christian who is facing unexplainable misfortunes and conscience is not at peace. If he goes to the spirit medium he is told that he is having problems because he did not perform a ceremony of putting a stone at the parent's graveyard. If he goes ahead and puts a stone at the graveyard what biblical principal is he really violating? If such an action would really help to bring his mind at rest. What is wrong in going ahead and doing exactly what the spirit medium says? Besides, what really is the difference between what he is doing and the Western tradition of unveiling the tombstone? Is such an action really different from the memorial service?

If the spirit medium tells the troubled person, described above, to sacrifice one of his, daughter's in a ritual killing that would be something completely different. That would be in direct conflict with the scriptural teaching which says: "Thy shall not kill". Then one should not accept the moral advice of the spirit medium.

The influence of African taboos on morality too should not be underestimated. As we earlier pointed out, a taboo is a powerful prohibition, leading to strict avoidance of the forbidden act, object, person or place. Avoidance is maintained by fear of a particular punishment from some supernatural beings.

According to Webster (1942:viii) a taboo is a prohibition, which when, violated, produce automatically in the offender a state of ritual disability which may only be relieved by purification. In African morality, taboos impose some good restraints on

human passions and are required for the restraining of evil which otherwise would be irresistible. Many Africans fear breaking taboos, because it causes automatic punishment on the wrongdoer. Thus an African Christian may or may not make certain decisions for fear of the retributive consequences of certain taboos. Taboos are thus a valuable restraining principle which, when rashly abandoned, would lead to moral chaos and moral decay. They are a powerful impulse for the good. A Christian may therefore respect the things that are morally proscribed in the taboos of a particular culture while at the same time being careful not to accept all the reasons given for the moral prohibitions. For example:

- One of the popular African taboos says, “do not kill vultures because the rain will not fall”. This may sound like a useless superstition to an outsider. This does not, however, make the moral prohibition false. Ecologists have proved beyond any doubt that if certain species are eliminated, there will be ecological disasters like lack of rain, etc.
- Another taboo says that a menstruating woman should not cook food for visitors or else she will make them sick. This taboo is aware that in many traditional African homes, water was a very rare commodity. It may not have been possible for people menstruating to maintain the hygienic standards necessary. For fear of passing on diseases like cholera and AIDS women in such a condition should not prepare meals. This may not be applicable today. However, the need for high standard of cleanliness during such periods is still a necessary requirement.
- The taboo, which prohibited sex before marriage, simply meant that it is best for one to wait until the right time to have sex or else one ruins his or her future.
- Pregnant women were not allowed to eat eggs for fear that they might have problems when giving birth. At first sight, this may sound completely rubbish.



However, modern science has proved that eggs are very high in cholesterol and too much eggs may cause high blood pressure and other kinds of diseases. Thus what Western science is discovering today, did the Africa people already discover long time ago.

Disobedience of most of the traditional taboos has unfortunately lead to the same disastrous consequences, which the African forefathers, who formed taboos, were afraid of. African Christian moral decision making must take the influence and effects of taboo morality seriously into account for it to minister effectively to the African Christians. Failure to do this will lead to less authentic decisions.

However, we have to admit that some of the taboos were really retrogressive and should not be used and accepted in African Christian ethical decision making. For example, women and children were not allowed to eat certain parts of a chicken for fear that they might have children without hair and children might have no hair, etc. Taboos like this one were motivated by greed on the part of the African men and should not be accepted today. We should therefore not take all the African taboos seriously. Care should, however, be taken not to reject all the African taboos. Doing so is throwing away the baby together with the dirty water.

This study has great implications for African Christian ethical decision making. It calls for an appraisal of the whole African Christian moral decision making. In fact, some decisions made in the past, which did not respect the African cultural values, may even need revisiting. For example, the whole issue of stopping converted polygamists from being accepted as full communicant church members. Many African theologians today

are arguing that we need to take the African cultural values seriously in all our moral judgements (Hartin 1992:65-73; Bujo 1985:230f; Mbiti 1986:30f). Until this is done, the moral crisis in African Christianity will surely not end. We therefore concur with Gustafson's argument that any decision which is based on Scripture only, is a decision based on only part of God's reality, because the reality of God is more than that which is written in Scripture. Scripture must remain for us the primary source without excluding other sources like African culture. Any authentic moral decision will surely have to take into account the whole of God's reality. This reality must surely include African culture.

Many issues with which we struggle today simply were not present in biblical times. Contraception, genetic manipulation, easy abortion, prolongation of the dying process, women's liberation, sexual responsibility in democracy, complex economic problems, pollution etc., are unique to the modern era. It is therefore true to say that a solution to such problems may not be found in Scripture only as the exclusivists want to make us believe. Many other factors, like science, will surely have to play a role.

Similarly, a solution to the crisis found in African Christian ethics may be found in utilising the views of Gustafson and others that emphasise the importance of the community and its stories, which mould a person who is to make the ethical decision. They are right in insisting that we do not need to make a choice between character ethics and ethics of duty. They rather stress both and insist that there is still need for some form of prescriptiveness because, in this fallible world, benchmarks cannot be ignored. Since moral judgements are in a way expressions of the character of the person who offers it, and depictions of character vary to some extent among cultural groups, it is logical to say that the gap between the world of the African and the world

of the Bible may only be bridged by taking the context of the African people seriously.

Our study has revealed that the importance of the context in which the gospel of Christ is preached and Christian ethical decisions are to be made, cannot be ignored. Any morality, which does not take the cultural context of the people, receiving the gospel, seriously, will surely create many crises.

In order to highlight the crisis faced by African Christians, when making Christian ethical decisions, the example of *Mr. Zuze Tembo* and the problem of AIDS was given. One of the areas in which Christianity, as presented to Africa by the West, lacks sensitivity to the African cultural context is manifested in the issue regarding polygamy. Our study has concluded that:

First, the Bible nowhere expressly forbid polygamy and clearly decrees monogamy as the only universally valid form of marriage;

Second, there are many cultural and social factors, which should be taken into account when looking at the issue of polygamy in Africa;

Third, it is contrary to the gospel of love to demand that people who were polygamists before they knew Christ, should first throw away their wives (except for the first wife) before they are to be admitted as full communicant church members. Besides, even if polygamy was a wrong thing to do, correcting one mistake with yet another mistake, that of divorce, will surely not make it right.

Christ was definitely against divorce in all his teachings, as we earlier pointed out. However, in saying this, we do not in anyway intend to suggest that polygamy should be accepted as an alternative form of Christian marriage. We still believe that

adopted Western life styles). What we are rather pleading for is love, tolerance and compassion for those people who have been called to Christ while in a state of simultaneous polygamy just as many Western Christian scholars today are pleading for love, compassion and understanding for those people who are involved in consecutive polygamy and homosexuals. The famous theologians Karl Barth (1981:1998 ) may thus be right in calling the practice (which is common in missionary-founded churches) of requiring polygamists to divorce their other wives before they can be admitted for baptism “sheer brutality”.

In our study we also problematised the issue of AIDS and showed, among other things, that:

Firstly, the main causes of the rise in the spread of the AIDS pandemic are social and cultural in nature. We have argued that the countries, which have lost the African traditional cultural values in preference to the Western Christian ethical values, have the highest AIDS infection rate. The disease is almost absent in the Arab Islamic North, traditional African cultural societies, and in countries which have followed the traditional African Christian countries like Ethiopia. This for us is an indication that the neglect of the African traditional cultural values and the embracing of Western Christianity is indeed one of the main causes of the spread of the AIDS pandemic.

Second, the AIDS epidemic can only be eliminated and prevented through changing our modern Western culture, the economy, sexual views and sexuality. It is therefore an illusion to think that condoms are an ideal help against the spread of the AIDS

scourge. Thus an African Christian spirituality, in which the African cultural mores are respected, mixing of sexes is not encouraged, private meetings between unmarried boys and girls are not encouraged, chastity, modesty and purity once enforced by the African taboos, is the only lasting solution to stop the AIDS pandemic.

It is therefore essential that African Christians should be encouraged to use their African culture, Western culture, the Bible, science, reason, nature, etc., in their Christian ethical decision making. Out of all these sources, it is only the Bible, which should be our Supreme Court of appeal. We want to caution against over-emphasising the African cultural element as if it is perfect and a divine thing. Every culture must be subjected to the biblical critic. This is why we say the solution to the moral crisis in African Christian moral decision making today can only be found by taking into account, what Gustafson calls “the whole of God’s reality”, while maintaining the supremacy of the Word of God as the final court of appeal, a norm above all norms.

Lastly, we do not intend to end this study without a look into the future. There are several avenues, which this study has opened up:

First, there is need for a detailed study of other African Christian moral issues in which traditional African morality should also be taken seriously when making moral decisions, because in our modern plural world, cultures are always changing and adapting as they interact with each other;

Second, the precise relationship between African culture and the Bible needs to be studied further. For example, what are the non-negotiable truths of the Word of God and what are the negotiable ones? In other words, how does one distinguish between

the non-negotiable truths of God and the negotiable ones when trying to contextualise the gospel in Africa?

Third, there is need for a further study on the precise relationship between traditional African culture and the modern urbanised African Christians who appear to be standing with one foot in the modern Western culture and the other foot in traditional African culture. The African Christian are not fully incorporated into the Western culture and are not fully incorporated into the traditional African culture. This tension in which many modern urbanised African Christians live, creates a number of serious moral crises for African morality. The way to relate the modern African cultural values to that of Scripture still needs to be worked out.