

**HEART OF DARKNESS:  
A deconstruction of traditional Christian concepts of  
reconciliation by means of a religious studies perspective on  
the Christian and African religions**

by

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## Heart of Darkness

I chose the title of my thesis, “Heart of darkness” deliberately to challenge and deconstruct the Western notion that African religion and philosophy are somehow primitive or at most of limited significance to the rest of the world. In his novel bearing the same title, Joseph Conrad’s main character, Marlow, sets off into the “heart of darkness” of Belgian Congo, only to realise during his journey, that lightness and darkness have been somehow inverted: darkness brings about enlightenment and whiteness death and despair. I believe that African religion and philosophy can similarly lead us to enlightenment where white, Western theology has failed (Conrad, 1983; Crafford, 1996a:3; Kgatla, 1999:130-133; O’Prey, 1983:9).

Darkness indicates night, the unknown, the impenetrable, but also creativity. I see theology more as a study of darkness, than of light. God remains beyond our finest description and theologians can only blindly delight in his unfathomable depths. Theology is always temporary, conditional and incomplete (Dunne, 1978:xi; O’Prey, 1983:9).

An interesting thing happened to Marlow: He set out to discover darkest Africa and in the end discovered himself. Marlow says that his journey to the “furthest point of navigation” somehow “[threw] a kind of light on everything about me” (Conrad, 1983:32). According to O’Prey (1983:15) this night journey represents the:

... archetypal myth dramatized in much great literature since the Book of Jonah; the story of an essentially solitary journey involving profound spiritual change in the voyager. In its classical form, the journey is a descent into the earth, followed by a return to light.

I believe any quest for knowledge (and theological insight) is reflexive: when I study or investigate African religion and philosophy I also discover myself, and am changed by the “object” of my study. “Heart of darkness” indicates this intended reflexivity or feedback-nature of my study.

## Abstract

African Religion offers new images and symbols of reconciliation that may enhance existing Christian reconciliation metaphors and liturgies. Traditionally, Christians understood reconciliation through the images of either Augustine's victory model, Anselm's objective model or Abelard's subjective model. While these images offered valuable insights, they are limited and increasingly difficult to understand in our modern context.

Postmodern philosophy presents theologians with the possibility of deconstructing dominant discourses in order to consider new possibilities. This approach is eminently applicable to the traditional Christian reconciliation models. A comparative study of Western Christian and African reconciliation myths, rituals and concepts is used to deconstruct the accepted positions on the matter of reconciliation.

Interviews with four African theologians, John Mbiti, Agrippa Khathide, Daniel Ngubane and Tinyiko Maluleke, reveal that African Christians have often understood reconciliation in more and different ways than those available in traditional Christian thought. They often derived their ideas from African Traditional Religion as well as the modern liberation struggle.

In studying African Traditional Religion, it becomes clear that that African religion offers very different options to traditional Christianity with regard to its view on God, ancestors and spirits, life force, and of special importance for this study, shame, guilt and sin. African religion's this-worldly focus views reconciliation as taking place on a mostly human level rather than between humans and God. African reconciliation rituals can be classified according to the purpose or the myths behind them. Some rituals are intended to create or restore community, while others are meant to propitiate or at least transfer guilt. A third

grouping of rituals have the purpose of either expelling or accepting (and thus in a certain sense neutralising) evil (or perceived evil) in the community. Other rituals have a number of intentions, and can use unlikely rituals like open rebellion or dance to bring about reconciliation.

A comparison between two religions should treat the religions equally. An investigation that examines both the integrating and transcending possibilities of religions can highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the various reconciliation models without reference to some sort of supernatural reality. The anthropological and social sciences also offer valuable insights into the possible structure of reconciliation. And the South African context demands some minimum requirements for reconciliation in this country. When all these criteria are used to evaluate African and Christian reconciliation models, new possibilities emerge.

Different models show themselves to be useful in different contexts. Some African models can improve our understanding of reconciliation between humans and God, while others fit the social context of South Africa.

It seems that African thought and religion has a lot to offer to the study of reconciliation. The African emphasis on this-worldliness and community, the use of rituals and symbols, as well as Africa's still-coherent myths presents new and exciting perspectives. These insights and models can be incorporated into Christian liturgies and rituals that will deepen Christians' understanding and celebration of reconciliation.

## **Key Words**

African Traditional Religion, Christianity, reconciliation, missiology, religious studies, comparative religious studies, postmodern theology, African theology, myths, rituals, liturgy, this-worldly, community, ubuntu, South Africa.

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