

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

(The creeds and doctrines of Western Christianity) do not make sense to us in Africa because they are encased in the mythology and worldview of the age in which they were formulated. Often they make no sense even to the modern Westerner with his/her scientific worldview and mythology. Hence the rebellion in the Christian West with strident calls for 'demythologisation', and 'God is dead' and 'Honest to God'. These are in fact calls for a new and more efficacious mythology. (Gabriel Setiloane, 2000:50)

The reconciliation between God and mankind, achieved by Jesus Christ – and the Church's ministry thereof – is the core of the Christian message. But, like all theological concepts, this reconciliation is described in the Bible through human language, human images and metaphors. These metaphors are not as clear and satisfactory for modern Christians as they used to be for the first readers of the Bible. For example, many images of reconciliation reflect the old Hebrew and Greco-Roman worldviews – views far removed from the twenty-first century.

Is it possible to translate the message of reconciliation into more suitable language and metaphors?

The practice of deconstruction, which developed from postmodern philosophy and epistemology, aims to do just that. Dominant discourses, which obscure other possible ideas, are deconstructed in order to discover alternatives to them. In the Western tradition of the Christian Church, the image of Jesus dying on the cross in order to placate an angry God and to pay for our sins, dominates our understanding of reconciliation. I believe that alternative metaphors and ideas of reconciliation may be pursued.

I am not the first to do so. During the past century African theologians had to interpret the Biblical message and the reconciliation of Christ as its central point in terms of their African

worldview and language. They had to be creative to formulate the message and meaning of Christ to people who were (I hope to show) not as legalistically inclined as Paul's Roman audience, people to whom punishment and wrath were secondary to simple forgiveness and restoration (Zulu, 1998:192). I hope to find inspiration and ideas from their efforts and from African religious thought as a whole.

I am anxious to see whether these alternative reconciliation images are compatible with Christianity, or better still, more true to the Christian message and better suited for use in Christian communities. To the extent that is useable, I will make liturgical suggestions.

1.1 Research problem

In my research I address the problem of the inadequate and perhaps even offensive images traditionally employed to elucidate reconciliation in Christian theology and practice. Is it possible to describe God's gracious revelation and reconciliation by means of images and metaphors more relevant and appropriate to modern people and contemporary contexts? Can Africa's theologians and religions inform and guide us in this quest?

1.2 Aim of study

I briefly summarise postmodern thought and theology in order to justify and guide my deconstruction of traditional Christian models of reconciliation. I proceed to investigate both Christian and African concepts of reconciliation, hoping to discover several alternative images of reconciliation used by African theologians and in African religions. A number of these images and ideas may be compatible to Christianity and useful in Christian communities in South Africa.

I aim thus to first describe a number of reconciliation metaphors and ideas (religious phenomenology), then to evaluate these alternatives according to their applicability to Christianity (comparative religion), and lastly to apply the suitable images to the spreading of the Christian message through preaching, teaching and liturgy (missiology).

1.3 Motivation and relevance

I hope to gain personally from this study. As a citizen of the twenty-first century, I am uncomfortable with the “bloody” explanation of reconciliation traditionally expounded by the church. I acknowledge that Christ’s sacrifice on the cross is the way in which God reconciled us to Himself, and appreciate that it is meant to be “a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles” (1 Corinthians 1:23), but I am uneasy with concepts like propitiation and sacrifice as the only possible ways in which to placate an angry God. I am even less pleased to preach it. If I could understand reconciliation by means of alternative, more humane images, it would serve both my understanding of God and my ministry.

Many liberal theologians have in the past century objected to this traditional view of Christ’s substitutionary sacrifice. The idea that the blood of a human being could be required in order to save people from the wrath of God, as someone like Van Ruler suggested with his idea of atonement, led to passionate objections (Van de Beek, 2004:36).

P. Smits wrote in 1959 that: “... if Christian faith would mean that somebody else must be killed for my sins, and that God requires that for my salvation, I refuse to accept that. It is

against all human dignity and responsibility. If that would be Christian faith, please, give my portion to the dog (*Geef mijn portie maar aan Fikkie!*)” (in Van de Beek, 2004:37).

This study is also relevant to South African society. Since the demise of Apartheid in the 1990’s, the process of reconciliation is of national importance in South Africa. Our ideas on reconciliation are fed by both an African worldview, and the Christian message of reconciliation. A closer, reciprocal relationship between the traditional African and the Christian views could only strengthen the reconciliation process in South Africa, but even more so, in *South Africans* (Van der Walt, 1992:28).

In his study of Zulu and Western Christian understandings of 1 John, Ndwandwe (2000:337) observes that religious symbols often seem to be universal, but further study reveals that different cultures interpret similar symbols differently. He recommends that the discontinuity between African and Christian symbolism be studied.

The solution probably lies not only in exploring the symbols, but also the myths that produce them. A deeper understanding of both myths and symbols would help African people and Christians understand one another better. I hope to reveal the myths behind African reconciliation symbols and rituals, which may help South Africans to become reconciled with one another.

At present, reconciliation is a buzzword, studied and promoted worldwide. But I am not so sure that the traditional African understanding of reconciliation has been fully explored and applied to either reconciliation between God and humans or to the intended relationship between humans themselves. I am convinced that the significance and applicability of African theology and religion’s contribution (with its emphasis on this world and the

importance of the community) is not limited to South Africa, but can deepen our universal understanding of reconciliation, just as some Eastern ideas have made a world-wide impact.

Fourthly, liturgical guidelines and rituals, derived from African customs, are sorely lacking in our South African churches. While some individual churches and clergy have managed to make some headway in the development of reconciliation rituals, most churches have yet to do so. We need more reconciliation rituals that will facilitate reconciliation on the personal, congregational and national levels.

1.4 Research method

As for method, I study the available literature on African religion and thought. My research therefore, firstly comprised a literature study. I studied numerous sources to come up with African reconciliation models. Some of my sources were freshly written by young African theologians, while I also considered the valuable insights of older authors like John Mbiti and Gabriel Setiloane. I read the myths and legends of Credo Mutwa and the old, but fascinating anthropological account of Junod.

I am aware of the recent debate as to whether white theologians can and should study African theology (Van Niekerk, 1999:115-122; Crafford, 1999:122-127; Van Rooy, 1999:127-130; Kgatla, 1999:131-137). Kgatla distinguished between outsider (“topsiders”) and insider (“undersiders”) approaches to African religion, and concluded that an insider view is preferable: “Africa must be allowed to speak. Outsiders should learn to listen” (1997:633). While I take Kgatla’s concerns seriously, I cannot but explore African religion

as an outsider. I therefore follow a reflexive or feedback approach, as I will explain in the next chapter.

I also conducted a number of interviews with prominent African theologians: people who have wrestled with the message of Christianity in an African context, and who have given liturgical expression to this process. I chose to do the interviews not only to gather more information, as the best insights into African theology was generally available in the literature, but also to be guided and tested by these theologians who have more experience in the re-interpretation of the Western Christian message into a non-Western culture. I shared with them my concerns and questions and they contributed greatly to my overall understanding of African religion and philosophy.

I then devised a number of criteria to compare and evaluate old and new reconciliation methods and identify suitable African reconciliation models.

1.5 Outline

1.5.1 Chapter 1: Introduction

In my introductory chapter I deal with the relevance of the study, the research problem, aims, motivation and method, as well as a number of departure points and limitations of the study. These include my basic presuppositions.

1.5.2 Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

In the second chapter, I review postmodernism and postmodern theology, and determine their impact on a study of religions. I give an account of my views on a number of issues such as the validity of comparative religious studies, the insider/outsider problem and religious naturalism. From the postmodern perspective, I also consider a number of concepts which I will use in this study, for instance myths and rituals.

1.5.3 Chapter 3: Traditional Christian Images of Reconciliation (A Systematic Theological Perspective)

To introduce the subject, I give an overview of Christian understandings of reconciliation. As this is a study in Religious Studies and Missiology, and not a systematic theological exposition, I do not examine the various views but merely give a summary of how Christian theologians have explained the concept of reconciliation. It includes Augustine's victory theory, Anselm's objective theory of *satisfactio vicaria*, and the subjective reconciliation theories of Abelard and others, modern ideas as well as Biblical alternative descriptions of reconciliation.

1.5.4 Chapter 4: African views on Reconciliation (Phenomenology)

In Chapter Four I explore African ideas of reconciliation. I give an account of the creative work of African theologians in both mainline and independent churches, describing their views on reconciliation, images they formulated and rituals employed and envisaged.

I proceed to investigate the world behind their theology, and the philosophy informing African theology. I group the different methods of reconciliation in Africa. Some ideas are close to the Christian objective theory (for example the widespread use of scapegoatism) and some are quite different (the images relating to the ancestors and the family).

1.5.5 Chapter 5: Religion and Reconciliation: Comparative Analysis (Comparative Religion)

Before I can evaluate the African concepts of reconciliation, I have to develop criteria for this evaluation. I draw these criteria from the insights of Religious Studies, as well as from anthropological and sociological considerations. The South African context also dictates to a large extent what new reconciliation models should look like. I list and investigate the prerequisites for reconciliation as determined by a number of prominent South Africans.

1.5.6 Chapter 6: Reconciliation Models and Rituals (Comparative Religion)

I continue to evaluate the African (and traditional Christian) views on the basis of their usefulness and compatibility to Christianity. I believe some African views reaffirm the popular objective reconciliation theory; while others reinforce lesser known or ignored Biblical alternatives, while still others promise new and imaginative ways to understand reconciliation. From this evaluation I uncover new models for both my personal understanding of reconciliation, and models suitable for use in the wider South African context.

1.5.7 Chapter 7: Contours of a New Understanding and Praxis of Reconciliation (Missiology)

I then summarise what I believe to be Africa's contribution to the study of reconciliation. Focussing on liturgy, I make some concrete suggestions on the basis of the study by proposing new ways of speaking of, understanding and doing reconciliation. In this way I hope to improve the church's understanding of its message and mission of reconciliation, as well as present new promising ways of conducting its ministry of reconciliation.

1.5.8 Chapter 8: Concluding Reflections and Remarks

Finally, I reflect on the validity of this kind of study. I address possibility of using the concept of deconstruction and Religious Studies in a theological study. I conclude by making suggestions for further investigation.

1.6 Departure points and limitations

1.6.1 Disciplines of study

This is a study in the areas of **Religious Studies and Missiology**, and I will limit myself to these disciplines. Where necessary I will state or summarise the labours of other theological fields (e.g. Systematic Theology, New Testament and Old Testament), but detailed investigations of these disciplines are outside the scope of my study.

1.6.2 Reconciliation and Salvation

For the purposes of this study I take **reconciliation, salvation and redemption** all to indicate a restoration of the relationship between humans and God or the relationships between human beings. Although these words are not always used as synonyms, they indicate a similar meaning when they are used to describe Jesus' work in this regard.

1.6.3 “God” and “gods”

In literature on African religion, **God** is sometimes called “God”, “gods”, “Deity” or “deities”. I will follow the authors' use in quotations, but otherwise will use the term “God” for all of these other denotations referring to divinity.

1.6.4 Missiology

Missiology is in the words of Bosch (1978:240) the “theology of the church-crossing-frontiers”: it studies the communication of the gospel to people outside Christianity, the establishment and building up of new churches, it addresses relevant social, political and economical issues, and it concerns itself with the theology of other religions and dialogue with people of these different religions and ideologies (*theologia religionum*). Missiology is a branch of Christian theology, and thus looks at the world from the perspective of commitment to the Christian faith, but it nonetheless critically appraises every manifestation of the various aspects of the church's mission (Bosch, 1991:9; Crafford, 1996b:221; Kritzing, 1987:5; Schmidt, 1988:20).

My study is in the first place a Missiological study. I am a Christian and I look at the world from a Christian perspective. In my study I examine how the gospel can be communicated by using new and different myths, models and rituals. I hope to add to Christians' understanding of African religion and critically evaluate previous attempts at inculturation, in order to nurture and deepen Christians' faith.

1.6.5 Religious Studies

I secondly also make use of the insights in the area of **Religious Studies**. The various sub-disciplines in the field of Religious Studies do not proceed from some divine revelation, and do not accept any religion as its norm. They simply try to understand religious phenomena and manifestations from within their specific context (*theologia religionum*) (Crafford, 1996b:221; Krüger, 1995:12; De Bruin, 2000:14, Schmidt, 1988:20).

According to Krüger (1982:8):

Practitioners of this discipline usually distinguish its method from theology, in that they take theology to be a normative discipline, deliberately advocating true religion, whereas science of religion describes, understands and explains religious phenomena.

This means that I will have to suspend my Christian convictions in the chapters where I take the Comparative Religion perspective. Still, even though my analysis in these chapters is not done from a theological perspective, I am aware that other suppositions and values may influence my study of religions (Derrida, 1998:6; Schmidt, 1988:20).

The Study of religion can be done historically or comparatively. My approach will be the latter. I will also try to go beyond mere description and try to evaluate Christianity and

African religion, but stop short of a comprehensive enquiry into religion (Krüger, 1995: 77-78; Schmidt, 1988:xiii, 20).

1.6.6 The relationship between Missiology and Religious Studies

In this study, I utilise Religious Studies as an *ancilla theologiae*, in other words, I use the insights of Religious Studies and Comparative Religion in service of Missiology. Thus, my primary concern is Missiology and theology. Still, Kritzingler (1985:xvi) writes that Religious Studies can play both a helpful and a challenging role in relation to Missiology. This is exactly what I try to do: I use the insights and tools of Religious Studies to compare and assess the two religions' concepts of reconciliation. But I also expect that my comparative study will challenge and reveal inadequate traditional Christian concepts of reconciliation. This is necessitated by a postmodern theology as I will show in the next chapter.