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# Reimagining mainline churches that are African

## ABSTRACT

*From the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, missionaries brought the Christian faith to Africa. Any assertion that this was necessarily all positive is, however, contested by several African scholars. The article first examines both positive and negative contributions, in terms of the cultural and socio-economic contributions of the missionaries' work in Africa. Secondly, the article proposes an argument that the initial Eurocentric culture/theology of the missionaries persists and that it is a barrier to mission. Thirdly, the article explores the challenges faced by Black African members within the mainline churches, with a specific focus on the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA) and the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA). Fourthly, the article re-imagines what the mainline African church should be. Fifthly, recommendations and conclusion are presented. To achieve these outcomes, the article uses desktop research methodology, and Edward Hall's cultural iceberg mode.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The aim and intention of the European missionaries to Africa were very clear: to civilise and to convert pagans to a religion. Two aspects must be noted, in this instance. First, conversion for the missionaries meant changing Africans altogether from their “being” as Africans, and secondly, civilisation for them meant teaching Africans Western ways, which was deemed to be civilisation. According to the missionaries, as much as “civilisation” brought the necessary development in Africa, it is also true that “[t]his



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historical reality has many consequences in the life of Christians in Africa” (Niyigena 2022:293). De Gruchy (2014:17) uses several examples to give an overview of what the mainline churches are nowadays and the phrase “Black, African mainline churches” is in line with this definition:

They have been referred to, *inter alia*, as settler, colonial, mission, multiracial and ecumenical churches. ‘Settler’ refers to their planting in South Africa as a result of European immigration; ‘colonial’ refers to their relationship to the colonial enterprise and to the colonial authorities with whom they generally had a cosy relationship; ‘mission’ refers to the fact that each of them began extensive missionary programmes amongst indigenous peoples to such an extent that today they have become black majority churches; and ‘multiracial’ describes their ethnic composition in more recent times.

The article attempts to re-imagine what the mainline churches that are African ought to be like. Camargo-Borges (2018:6) submits that, when applying imagination or re-imagination in research,

we open the opportunity to bring them into reality. Imagination also gives space to emerging processes which are seeds of ideas that, when combined together, can bring new possibilities.

Therefore, re-imagination or imagination bring to light new ideas and thoughts, the sole idea of which is

not focused on convincing through use of objective truth but through the use of imagination to appeal and create a compelling narrative that empowers new realities (Camargo-Borges 2018:7).

Dutta *et al.* (2020:1) elaborate that to re-imagine is to re-vision, re-consider, re-evaluate, re-work, re-think, re-do, re-make, and re-structure. To achieve this objective, the impact of the missionaries in Africa, civilisation in Africa, and attitude towards African epistemologies and ontology will be explored. Thereafter, the article discusses the positive and negative contributions in terms of the cultural and socio-economic contributions of the missionaries in Africa. An argument is then proposed that the initial Eurocentric culture/theology of the missionaries persists within the mainline churches. The article also explores the challenges Black African members face within the mainline churches, while also attempting to re-imagine what the mainline African church should look like and how effectively such a church could contribute to society in a broader sense. Finally, the article makes recommendations and provides a conclusion.

## 2. THE IMPACT OF MISSIONARY WORK IN AFRICA

As noted, all protestant or mainline churches originate from Europe, and were brought by missionaries to Africa. However, Niyigema (2022:289) mentions that scholars such as Jean-Paul Messina (2018:99) of Cameroon dispute this notion and argue that Christianity existed in Africa even before the arrival of European missionaries. He elaborates on this point as follows:

To affirm that Christianity was in North Africa or was still alive in Ethiopia meant to misappropriate European missionaries from their Christian identity. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, European missionaries refused to recognise that Christianity was in Africa before them to protect their supremacy and European civilisation which could not be separated from Christianity.

Having said this, one may argue that the current mainline churches in South Africa are products of colonialism or were established during the colonial periods. Henceforth, the article presents common scholarly perspectives that highlight the intricate relationship between the missionary and the coloniser. Forster (2023:5) refers to these churches as preaching and teaching what he refers to as “colonially shaped Christianity”. Masondo (2018:209) submits that

Christianity was meant to colonize the conscience and consciousness of the colonized in ways that would make them lose their indigenusness. It was meant to ‘make’ or ‘create’ the colonized in the image of the colonizer.

Masondo (2018) posits the problem that missionaries developed views about Africa using their European world view. Masuku (2023:2) goes so far as to say that missionary work and colonialism can be compared to the proverbial chicken and egg – it is difficult to determine which came first. Masuku (2023:2) further submits that

[t]o a great extent, missionaries even paved the way for colonial powers. Their presence made the colonial occupation of places in Africa simple.

Hence, Schmidt (2015:n.p.) states that

Christianity can be seen as a force of pacification that helped to enable colonization and the cultural assimilation of Africans.

Muya (2023:5) notes that it was difficult to distinguish between a White coloniser and a White missionary because they had common interests. Mdingi (2023:70) highlights the following:

It has to be established that colonialism had, to a great extent, no regard not only for the humanity of Blacks but also a direct disregard for African metaphysics/ontology and conception of history. This attitude is particularly evident in the missiological enterprise that refused, to a certain extent, theological dialogue between the evangelist and the native. To grasp this properly, we must understand that the idea of God's revelation in Africa is undermined by Western theological experience.

Writing about the work of missionaries from the London Missionary Society (LMS) in Bechuanaland (Botswana), Nkomazana and Setume (2016:29) opine that the Western missionaries "made a mistake of believing that to become a Christian, Batswana had to completely abandon their indigenous cultures". Schmidt (2015:n.p.) further argues that the spread of colonialism in Africa was influenced by a philosophy known as scientific racism, a brainchild of Sean Stillwell, whose aim was to rank various human beings as either primitive or advanced. Nkomazana and Setume (2016:30-31) opine that the missionaries struggled to differentiate their missionary role and that of the colonial structure because they "did not differentiate between Christianity and their own culture". Using this scientific racism philosophy, the colonisers justified their expansion and dominance of other nations, especially on the African continent, and justified it as follows:

... the conquest of Africa was ordained by nature and science because Africans were, according to this ideology, inferior to Europeans ... colonial efforts were seen as an exercise in curing Africans of their primitiveness, and Christianity played a key role in their attempts to assimilate Africans to their presumably advanced ways of life while the African continent was being exploited for its resources. African people and their ways of life were being suppressed on multiple fronts, while the language and mentality of the time enabled the Europeans to see their efforts as 'civilizing means' (Schmidt, 2015:n.p.).

Tshaka (2015:8), focusing on the URCSA and mainline churches, in general, shares the following thought:

church orders which were hell-bent on insisting that African culture and worldviews were to be discouraged by all means necessary.

Therefore, the acceptable and dominant culture was Western instead of African and Africans had to adjust to this new reality.

Tshaka (2015:8) further argues that all Black mainline churches miss the mark in how to effectively minister to their African constituencies. This article also contends that the African world view in the mainline

churches has been overlooked and that this is detrimental to the mission of the church. Thabede (2008:233) avers that overlooking an African world view is calamitous to the mission of the church, especially in Africa, as it “informs how Africans relate to phenomena, including challenges that life presents to African clients”. Olumbe (2008:1) defines a world view as a set of assumptions and presumptions that one holds, whether consciously or unconsciously, about how one perceives reality. Olumbe (2008:1) further avers that a world view is important because it guides one in understanding how different ethnic groups interpret reality. Ferreira and Chipenyu (2021:3) note that among other consequences of ignoring the African world view is the statement that “South African Protestant churches are continually losing members, which has led to the closure of certain congregations”. Ferreira and Chipenyu (2021:4) elucidate that the biggest decline in mainline membership is in their Black membership. Part of the reason for this decline may be because its Black experiences are not considered an

important element in theological reflection and in a sense embraced the second-class citizenship tag that was given to them by the white hegemonies (Conradie 2014:11).

Conradie (2014:11) also notes that part of the decline in the mainline churches is “lack of rootedness of churches in Africa and in overcoming denominational divides imported from Europe”. This is despite De Gruchy’s (2014:20) noting that the mainline churches in South Africa have a predominantly Black membership.

With all these backgrounds, it is very clear that the former missionary/mainline churches brought to Africa not only the Christian faith, but also their culture. Therefore, the Christian faith brought by the missionaries was/is Eurocentric, and this article intends to argue that this Eurocentric culture/theology is still deeply entrenched in the mainline churches. The article aims to highlight the challenges that come with this Eurocentric culture/theology and practices within these former missionary/mainline churches. The cultural iceberg model which undergirds this article is discussed below.

### 3. THE CULTURAL ICEBERG MODEL

This study explores Edward Hall’s theory of the cultural iceberg. As an anthropologist, Hall was mainly interested in intercultural communication (Shaules 2019:1). He is also credited for being a foundational thinker in the field of intercultural communication (Shaules 2019:1). Hall was born in Webster Groves, a town near St Louis in the USA. In his early 20s, he

worked in the construction sector where he was introduced to the Hopi and Navajo native reservations in Arizona, where his interest in human ethnic groups developed (Granata 2016:58-59). Later in his life, he studied cultural and social anthropology at Colombia University (Granata, 2016:59). During World War II, he served as a US soldier in Europe, Africa and the Philippines. Hall experienced first-hand the issues of ideological-cultural conflicts. His academic career started between 1951 and 1955, having been influenced by Franz Boas, a German academic who had studied physics and geography intensely before his groundbreaking work in the US where he became a pioneer of anthropology (Granata 2016:59).

He was specifically interested in how culture shapes the adherents' thinking, communication and values in unconscious ways (Shaules 2019:2). Hall further noted that every symbolic system, in which man lives, every culture,

promotes specific experience-shaping processes and therefore contributes to the construction of constantly original perspectives universes. As a result, the structures of experience are shaped by culture ... The entire aesthetical apparatus is shaped by culture as a kind of sensorial background, a perspective world, the foundation of habits, models of behaviour, ways of perceiving and conceptualizing reality, or the very forms of human experiences (Granata 2016:64).

According to Granata (2016:65), Hall further noted that culture goes beyond the rituals, language, *etc.* For Hall (Granata [2016:65]), culture is twofold: there is the external or visible culture which is 10% of culture, and there is the internal or unseen culture, which is 90% below the surface, hence the name "cultural iceberg". Culture signifies a system that man has developed to extend himself in his environment by acquiring the features of the culture that generated them. In other words:

As man developed culture, he domesticated himself and, in the process, created a whole new series of worlds, each different from the other (Gadamer 1966:12).

#### 4. MISSIONARY CIVILISATION OF AFRICANS

The notion of civilisation by missionaries denotes their attitude of superiority, hence they saw their mandate as being the civilisation of Africans. Pawlikova-Vilhanova (2007:257) submits an important point, namely that the missionaries themselves were products of Western Christian civilisation. Therefore, in their understanding, civilisation meant transfusing the missionary's superior culture with its conventional features

such as schools, churches, habits, and ethos that were European, to Africans. Simply put, civilisation meant changing Africans into Europeans. Hence, according to Pawlikova-Vilhanova (2007:257), a Christian became “one who abandoned [his/her] customs”. Pawlikova-Vilhanova (2007:257) elaborates thus:

In Christian mission stations, which served sometimes as a refuge for freed slaves, with their own schools, churches, hospitals, stores, and plantations, missionaries exercised a strong superintendence over the moral lives of their converts, banning polygamy, dancing, singing, ancestor-worship, and many other customs.

Ugwukah and Ohaja (2019:20) add some commendable contributions in Africa, such as banning some African practices, for instance human sacrifice, slave dealing, killing, disposing of twins, sorcery, and witchcraft, as well as bringing to Africa activities such as book publishing, the translation of the Bible into African languages, modern transport, communications, and so forth. Again, Pawlikova-Vilhanova (2007:257) submits that missionaries developed services with a liturgy translated into African languages, but these “were reproductions of the liturgy of their home church, replete with hymns”. Furthermore, missionary-built schools brought the necessary education to African communities. Most of these were boarding schools, and this was deliberate with a specific aim of removing the converts from their way of life and instead promoting their Western culture because “some missionaries believed that their converts could become genuine Christians only if they became Europeanized” (Pawlikova-Vilhanova 2007:258). The results of this approach were that Africans who attended missionary schools became part of the elite, and they despised and abandoned their traditions. According to Masuku (2023:4), the reason for this was that missionaries mixed their culture and Christianity as one:

European culture was taken to be identical with Christianity and what was not European was seen as not Christian. African religiosity and cultural standards were judged then by Western theological standards. As a result, Africans were seen as godless heathens. The African, in this sense represented the antithesis of humanity, for the standard of participation in humanity was determined by how near they stood to the European culture.

Ugwukah and Ohaja (2019:24) go as far as saying that some missionaries undermined traditional rulers and saw the mission house as being above the office of traditional ruler. African indigenous music and dancing were said to be connected to juju and witchcraft. The superiority of Western

culture, which the missionaries dressed in Christian garb, led to racism which was visible in oppressive actions towards African converts (Masuku 2023:5). Porter (1997:367) refers to this as cultural imperialism, which he defines as

the purposeful aggression by one culture against the ideas and values of another ... accompanied by political, economic, or military pressure.

Masuku (2023:5) argues that, among other negative contributions of the missionaries, were the formation of mission stations that contributed differently to the lives of Black people, especially in their nature of being divisive. For example, those who resided in mission stations were the converted and civilised; those who did not were regarded as heathens or pagans. This brought division within families and communities. Pawlikova-Vilhanova (2007:257) asserts that the division between the Catholic and the Protestant churches was another form of division within families, as the two had different churches, schools, and so on. Muya (2023:1) argues that, for Africans, breaking ties with family is catastrophic because a family is an important network. Muya (2023:2-3) goes on to say that “[t]he family was the school of moral and religious values”. One can only imagine the devastation this division caused.

## 5. THE MISSIONARY EUROCENTRIC CULTURE/ THEOLOGY AND THE CHALLENGES OF BLACK AFRICAN MEMBERS IN THE MAINLINE CHURCHES

Ugwukah and Ohaja (2019:20) mention that one of the effects of the missionary teachings is a view that African Traditional Religion (ATR) is primitive and barbaric compared to mainstream religions such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, etc. ATR informs and influences people’s world view, shaping their uniqueness as a community. Key values include the importance of the extended family, communal living, belief in spirits, and the veneration of ancestors. They also hold that the metaphysical world communicates with them through dreams, visions, and life events whether good or bad. These beliefs, in turn, shape their rituals, including burials, marriages, and other cultural practices. Therefore, contextual theology seeks to address these lived realities of African Christians. Matters such as the causes of misfortune and sickness, the emphasis on communality, and principles such as *ubuntu* further shape and nourish their Christian faith. This is perhaps a reason why, to date, the mainline churches have,

as expected, not paid much attention to ATR. Against this backdrop, this article reflects on the negative legacy of the missionary work. Masuku (2023:1) rightly states that

in the process of good intentions, these agents also committed mistakes ... which disrupted and sometimes prohibited African religious activities in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Africa.

The next section analyses the two mainline churches conducted to demonstrate the Eurocentric culture/theology that persists within the mainline churches.

## 6. THE UNITING REFORMED CHURCH IN SOUTHERN AFRICA (URCSA)

Tshaka (2015:1) questions whether the URCSA is a genuinely Black church. As much as Tshaka (2015:1) does not use the word “African”, but rather “Black” church, his focus is on the African church, as he gives a historical background on the URCSA. He describes that this church was formed in 1994 after the merger between the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA). These groups of Reformed churches are Black/African congregations. Hence, the use of either “Black” or “African” is justifiable, even though Tshaka only uses the word “Black”. Referring to the URCSA, Tshaka (2015:5) argues that:

[i]n a context where the apartheid geography has virtually remained the same, one is bound to find a black church that insists on mimicking its Dutch Reformed heritage. This is evidenced by the liturgies, church orders, et cetera, that were simply taken from the previous era.

The central argument of this article is as follows: Churches within the Reformed Tradition, such as the DRCA, DRMC, and URCSA, have moved [away] significantly from their former Dutch Reformed Church by introduction of African drums in worship, incorporating vernacular languages, and adapting certain of their church order. However, African practices such as rituals surrounding birth, puberty, marriage, death, and widowhood as understood and practi[s]ed among Africans are still not addressed in the Church Orders, even though these congregations are predominantly Black and African, and these issues are deeply significant to them. Hence, the article argues that these churches operate as if they were situated in Europe, where such concerns are not central than in Africa, where they form an integral part of community life and belief system. The

article does not advocate for the wholesale acceptance of these practices, but rather engagement with them as lived realities that shape the faith and experience of their Black African members. Although scholars within URCSA such as Modise (2020) disagree with this notion, URCSA in 2005 deliberately had a General Synod “engaged in a debate that ended with a decision of deconstruction and reconstruction of a new ideology, namely that URCSA ought to be an African church.” Perhaps part of the challenge towards the Africanisation is the dependant syndrome that has virtually come to dictate the relationship of the URCSA to the DRC.

This is evidenced in rural communities where so-called daughter churches are still dependant on the so-called mother church for the sustenance of the local Black church. Reformed White theology continues to be the most dominant theological trajectory 20 years into a democratic dispensation. This theology continues to set the standard of “proper theology” in the South African church and society. Even though there is no unity between the Black URCSA and the White DRC, White theology is prescribed even in seminaries that belong to the URCSA. This is and always has been the state of affairs.

In addition, another scholar from URCSA, Tshaka (2015:2), has criticised URCSA because, in its theologising, and states that

these mainline churches, although all black, discounted the black experience as an important element in theological reflection and in a sense embraced the second-class citizenship tag that was given to them by the white hegemonies.

When reading the URCSA Church Orders (or in Afrikaans *Kerkorde*), there is no mention of the African understanding of funerals, weddings, or even African traditional rituals. It is noted that a Church Order cannot encompass all the discussions on Africanisation or the extent to which the church has progressed in this regard. However, this article argues that the Church Order should at least reflect an acknowledgement of such world view. According to Granata (2016:65), Hall further notes that culture goes beyond the rituals, language, etc.

Monhla (2014:4) argues that one of the problems of the Christian faith has been bias towards the Western epistemologies instead of the African epistemologies in terms of issues of truth and knowledge. In his Masters dissertation, titled “Africanization within the URCSA: A critical focus on how the Church Order relates to African marriages”, Monhla (2014:4) focuses on Africanising URCSA Church Orders regarding African marriages. His point of departure is that URCSA emanated from the Dutch Reformed

Church (DRMC) and came into existence in 1994 after the amalgamation of the DRCA and the DRMC. Therefore, in his research, he traces the current URCSA Church Order as having its origins and influence from the DRCA. In his argument he posits that Christianity has been Westernised, focusing on marriage. What is referred to as a Christian marriage is, in fact, a European marriage with a white wedding, officiated by a single clergyperson, with a reception including a certain number of guests held thereafter (Monhla 2014:71). The point that Monhla (2014:71) makes is that an African marriage is not about an individual; it is rather a communal affair. Monhla (2014:95) concludes his research, stating

... that Africanization is possible and must be actively sought also within the context of church law and polity is necessary and relevant. It was revealed in this project, that the current church order of the URCSA does not provide a conducive context for Africanization.

Having said this, it should be noted that progress has been made regarding marriages in URCSA, where traditional African marriages are recognised, and members are encouraged that such marriages be blessed in the church and registered with the relevant government department. Modise (2020:8) disagrees with both Monhla (2014) and others and argues that URCSA is both an African and a Reformed Church. He submits that, within the URCSA Church Order, the three African beliefs of community, *ubuntu*, and *ujamaa* are highlighted. As much as Modise (2020) makes valid points in his arguments the reality is that he is an academic; he can theologise and highlight the three points he is making. However, it takes a scholar to do such: what he is pointing out is not as clearly stated on URCSA's Church Order, hence his colleagues within the URCSA hold a different view when they state that "URCSA is not an African church in the real sense, as it ought to be". It is obvious that, if his views were as clear as he submits, his colleagues in the URCSA would probably agree with those views. Again, what has prompted the article in question is a conversation that took place in the URCSA General Synod 2005, in which Prof. Mazamiza advocated that "URCSA ought to be an African church" (Modise 2020:2). It therefore seems that the notion that URCSA is an African church is Modise's view, rather than that of URCSA.

Again, the African world view is more than community, *ubuntu*, and *ujamaa*. According to the literature review so far, it seems that the assumption is that the African world view is irrelevant, despite the mainline churches ministering to an African majority. The question arises as to whether URCSA's Church Order addresses issues such as the ancestors, marriage and lobola, polygamy, bereavement rituals, circumcision, and

a call to being a traditional healer (*Sangoma*), or *ukuthwasa*, etc. What does the absence of these issues in the URCSA Church Orders say about how URCSA values African epistemology and ontologies? This is despite URCSA existing in Africa and having a Black African membership.

## 7. THE METHODIST CHURCH OF SOUTH AFRICA (MCSA)

The MCSA, as we know it today, originates from Britain, precisely from the British Methodist Church. The MCSA shares its heritage with churches such as the Anglican Church, the Church of the Province of South Africa, the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa, and the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa, which are known to be English-speaking churches (Leleki 2003:65). The MCSA gained its independence from the British Methodist Church in 1927. However, at that time, the MCSA was fragmented into different districts such as the District of the Cape Colony, the District of the Orange Free State, and the Transvaal Mission. In 1932, all these Methodist groups came together as one denomination (Leleki 2003:18-22). It should be noted that the Methodist family is vast and varying, depending on many historical factors. Therefore, for this focus article, it should be noted that the MCSA refers to the MCSA connexion<sup>1</sup> that covers six countries, namely Mozambique, Lesotho, Swaziland, Botswana and Namibia, although its largest membership is in South Africa. The origin of this Methodist witness originates from the Wesley brothers, namely, John and Charles.

Having noted this brief background of the MCSA, it is interesting to note that the MCSA church polity or the Methodist Book of Order (MBO) exists only in English, even though the vast majority of the members are not English-speaking. Within the MBO, matters such as an African understanding of marriage, funerals, and traditional rituals do not feature at all. In short, the African world view is non-existent in this document. This is against the backdrop that the MCSA exists in Africa, its membership is Black, African, and it has had its independence from the British Methodist Church since 1927. Worse still, in 2023, the MCSA Doctrine, Ethics, and Worship Commission (DEWCOM) released a discussion document as per the direction of the conference on *Ukuthwasa*<sup>2</sup> or the initiation process of

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- 1 Connexion is a uniquely Methodist term that refers to a network of classes, societies, and annual conferences. This stems from Wesley's system to organise Methodists for efficient communication, accountability, and development.
  - 2 *Ukuthwasa* is a Nguni term meaning a calling by the ancestors to become a traditional healer.

becoming a *Sangoma*. This conversation is taking place within the MCSA, 96 years after the MCSA became wholly African. This affirms Tshaka's (2015:8) notion that Black experiences have been on the periphery and remain unimportant elements of theological discourses. These reflections underpin Shingage's (2023:122) view that

[a]lthough the colonial era has been declared something of the past, coloniality still manifests in different parts of the global village ... This will also give Africans the power to articulate their own challenges and solutions, based on the African ethic of *Ubuntu*.

The analysis of the two churches, namely the URCSA and the MCSA, demonstrates that the mainline churches in South Africa are still tied with the shackles of their colonial backgrounds. They still speak English and there is still a great need to speak a language that relates to their Black, African membership. Perhaps Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015:489) has a point when examining the analysis of the two mainline churches:

Schools, colleges, churches, and universities in Africa are sites for reproduction of coloniality. We so far don't have African universities. We have universities in Africa. They continue to poison African minds with research methodologies and inculcate knowledges of equilibrium. These are knowledges that do not question methodologies as well as the present asymmetrical world order.

The question, therefore is, are mainline churches African churches? If so, what is African about their theology, doctrines, and polity? So far, literature reviewed shows that these churches still have a long way to go.

## 8. THE IMPACT AND CHALLENGES OF MAINLINE CHURCHES IN SOCIETY

This article emphasises that mainline churches cannot ignore African experiences if they aim to make an impact on their Black and African membership. Unfortunately such an oversight renders mainline churches irrelevant to African societies and their challenges.

Edward Hall uses his iceberg model to argue that culture is complex and needs deep understanding instead of focusing on the external, which is merely a reflection of much broader cultural influences and beliefs. Culture is more than the use of vernacular languages, African drums in worship, or church uniforms, and so forth. Issues such as the understanding of community, *ubuntu*, *ujamaa*, marriage, funerals, and so on are informed by much deeper cultural beliefs. Therefore, mainline churches should engage

and invest in understanding African epistemologies that are deeply embedded in their world view. Hence Yeboah *et al.* (2024:85) elucidate that

indigenous African religious beliefs have had a significant impact on African mental matrixes, which in turn has affected the practice of Christianity.

The matrixes mentioned by Yeboah *et al.* (2024:85) are what Hall refers to as the invisible or inner parts of the iceberg, which need deeper understanding. Yeboah *et al.* (2024:85) show how central religion is to Africans because it affects their social lives, political systems, cultures, and economic activities (Yeboah *et al.* 2024:86). For Yeboah *et al.* (2024:86), the contributory factor to the challenge that African Christians have with their Christian faith and ATR is

the misconception of African beliefs and their disbelief is an initial problem that the first missionaries created, and it became possible because the missionaries were ignorant of the African worldview.

Pillay (2017:1) avers that the church is a transformation and change agent. The question is: How can the church be an agent of transformation and change if it ignores the realities of its constituency? Thabede (2008:234) posits that different groups in society each have their own world view, something which is very critical in all communities. Thabede (2008:243) defines a world view as

the way a person tends to understand his or her relationship with social institutions, nature, objects, other people, and spirituality.

The African world view is religious: it permeates all aspects of life (Chalk 2006:146). This African world view is embedded in the ATR, which is the context from which African philosophy, anthropology, soteriology, and ethics emanate. Therefore, to fully understand African people, this aspect of their lives cannot be ignored. Hence Pawlikova-Vilhanova (2007:258) posits that

[a] struggle continues on the African continent among African Christians and theologians for an Africanization of Africa's Christian experience by securing the roots of Christianity in the African context.

Yeboah *et al.* (2024:86) submit that the westernisation of Christianity is always a challenge, especially within the mainline and Pentecostal traditions. There is a dire need for Africans to contextualise their Christian faith within the African religio-cultural cosmology. This article aims to highlight this as an issue that needs attention.

The vast majority of Africans, as much as they identify as Christians, still believe in witchcraft, and this calls into question the practices of healing services in mainline churches. Some people believe that, when they experience misfortune in their lives, be it financial, health-wise, or social, it may be a result of witchcraft. Such beliefs are informed by ATR. There are many cases in Black communities where marriages have come to an end because of a suspicion of witchcraft, or where conflicts have been caused among siblings, or between children and their parents. Another aspect that is a challenge in African societies is their belief in ancestors or the living dead, whom they believe are involved in their everyday lives. They believe that ancestors speak to them through dreams, visions, and animals that are their totems.

A further aspect that is informed by ATR is African people's understanding of funerals, rituals, and weddings. As an illustration of this aspect, the researcher, whilst a full-time minister in Limpopo province, was asked to conduct a wedding where the groom was deceased and in that wedding the deceased was represented by his son. This is a cultural practice if the couple did not have a white (Christian) wedding, and the ceremony is conducted to appease the spirit of the deceased. If such a wedding is not conducted, the deceased person's children are forbidden to marry until such a ceremony is conducted. As a clergyperson, it was very challenging to conduct such a wedding. How would one conduct such a wedding, especially considering the Christian understanding of marriage? This wedding was prompted by ATR beliefs: it is a ritual that is conducted to put the living at ease as they appease their ancestors. The ceremony is meant to give them closure and reassurance. One can see that this is a Christian ceremony where the services of a Christian minister are required, but at the same time this is an African ritual. The challenge in this regard is that in such instances the MBB or Church Order is silent.

## **9. RE-IMAGINING WHAT THE MAINLINE CHURCH THAT IS AFRICAN SHOULD BE LIKE**

It is a no-brainer that mainline churches in South and Southern Africa have contributed immensely to sectors such as education and health, as well as towards other social issues such as the fight against apartheid, poverty, abuse of the vulnerable aged, orphans, HIV/AIDS, and so on. However, the Black African mainline churches should not only concern themselves with the socio-economic and political challenges that Africans face. They should engage with ATR, which informs how their members think and view life. For example, in many African families, there are conflicts

during times of bereavement, especially if the deceased is a man. The wife or wives are generally accused of murdering their deceased husband, irrespective of how the husband may have died, and in retaliation, the husband's family would confiscate the assets of the deceased. Curran and Bonthuys (2005:627) elaborate on this challenge, explaining that African widows, especially those living in rural areas, are very vulnerable, and there are situations

where heirs have claimed property which widows have amassed during their marriages to the deceased and have maltreated widows to evict them from the family homestead.

This is a pastoral matter that requires the church's intervention. Understanding the African world view and how it informs the vast majority of African beliefs can help equip the church to best minister and intervene in such matters affecting its Black constituency. Perhaps Tshaka (2015:2) has a point in terms of lack of insight or interest in the African world view when he states:

This is seen also in the theological education curricula of the URCSA. The centres for the theological formation of the URCSA are located at Stellenbosch University, Free State University as well as at the Northern Seminary which has affiliations with both the University of Pretoria and the University of South Africa. Curricula at all these centres remain Eurocentric with African and black theologies falling into a category called Third-World theologies.

What Tshaka says also applies to the MCSA's training of its clergy. Perhaps these institutions do not equip the clergy with the necessary lenses through which to understand and address these African issues. An example given earlier of the abuse of the bereaved during the time of bereavement also applies to orphans, where members of their families take their inheritances and evict them from their parental homes. It should be noted that this heinous behaviour is not necessarily what ATR advocates for. If the mainline churches are truly African, they could actively engage such matters head-on. This does not mean that they should agree with everything ATR teaches, but they should at least acknowledge and guide people as churches that exist in Africa. As noted in the iceberg model, Hall observed that culture is twofold: there is the external or visible culture, which is ten per cent of culture, and there is the internal or unseen culture, which is 90 per cent below the surface, hence the name "cultural iceberg" (Granata 2016:65). If the church ignores African realities, it risks its members creating their own theologies that may contradict the church's doctrines and teachings. An example of this is recorded by Dreyer and

Sekhejane (2022:1), who note a growing phenomenon within the MCSA, where parents of stillborn babies request ministers to baptise them. It is obvious, in this context, that baptism is understood as an ancestral ritual. Dreyer and Sekhejane (2022:10) showcase how embedded African cosmology is among Africans:

Refusal by religious leaders or pastors to baptise a baby is seen as an intentional devaluing of the baby's worth.

Obviously, the silence of the church on this matter may even endanger the lives of its clergy: if parents feel so strongly about the baptism of a stillborn baby, imagine their reaction to a minister who refuses to baptise their baby due to this practice being in breach of the theology of baptism.

The other challenging aspect is the African understanding of healing. For Africans, sickness and diseases are not only physical but can also be spiritual. Forster (2023:12) ponders on this when reflecting on this experience, asserting that "I became aware that members of my congregation would undergo two religious ceremonies for births, marriages, and deaths." In research he conducted in collaboration with African academics in the field of theology and psychology, Mashabela (2017:2) concludes that:

South African history events reveal that the ZCC, as the popular faith character and one of the AICs' movements, has seriously taken into consideration the needs of African healing and cultural context in South Africa. Africans have always believed in healing; not just healing, but an African understanding of healing, which is mostly associated with *boloyi* (witchcraft).

Edwards (2010:212) elucidates that, in Southern Africa, healing is understood as based on ancestral consciousness, beliefs, and practices recognising the interlinking oneness of the Spirit. Forster (2023:12) recalls an incident he had while he was Dean of Students in a Methodist Seminary called John Wesley College, in Silverton, Pretoria:

I recall that a member of our seminary student community was unwell at a certain point. We had arranged a special service to pray for her in our regular Tuesday morning chapel service. But that same evening I noticed that another service was taking place. When I asked another congregational member about it, he informed me that it was an African traditional ceremony involving candles and water.

For this reason, Coertze (2005:44) suggests an open conversation about the spirit world that affects a number of issues such as health, witchcraft, divining, and so on. The second aspect raised by Coertze (2005:47) is the

ancestors. This is another critical issue in which the church can engage and advise where necessary. African people are generally vulnerable to abuse because of their world view. Hence, it is easy for African communities to be exploited by, for example, being fed grass, rats, snakes, petrol, and so on (Resane 2017:1). Another aspect to note is that, amid a dwindling economy in South Africa, male circumcision and *ukuthwasa* have become lucrative businesses among African communities. Banwari (2015:286) notes the high cost of traditional circumcision, in the region of thousands of Rands. As much as this is an African traditional ritual concerning the family, the church is in a better position to intervene in these matters.

## 10. RECOMMENDATIONS

This article recommends that the mainline churches should engage with both the African world view and ATR, and where possible, incorporate helpful practices within their polity and doctrines. It does not ignore the headway different mainline churches have made in terms of their Africanisation processes. However, the reality is that the African world view still needs to be embraced and the emphasis is on church order, the authoritative document in every denomination. The article does not necessarily suggest that the church should agree with the African world view, but it should at least engage with it. For example, it could consider which traditional rituals are acceptable and which are not acceptable in the church; what the view of the church is when it comes to lobola; what the view of the church is if a person feels called to be a traditional healer and to join the ministry at the same time; whether such a person should be allowed to practise as both a *sangoma* and a minister, for example. Furthermore, important documents such as MBB or the Church Order should also be written in the African languages of the places where they are located and exist.

Lastly, Shingange (2023:120) suggests a Christian shift of power dynamics between Westerners and Africans and proposes the need for decolonisation. As much as he is referring to the reading and interpretation of the Bible, he has a point as far as the mainline churches are concerned. If they aim to make a difference in African people's lives, they should decolonise their theology and polity, to speak to African challenges.

## 11. CONCLUSION

This article attempted to argue that selected mainline churches are not fully African. While this article acknowledges that change takes time and that some churches such as the URCSA Synod of the Free State and Lesotho are at different stages with their Church Order translated into both Afrikaans and Sesotho, the core issue lies with the content of these documents, as highlighted earlier. This is not the case for most of the churches, including the MCSA across all its districts. The article demonstrated this, by tracing the origins of these churches and the mistakes made by missionaries along the way. It is true that the missionary and colonial background of these mainline churches have made both positive and negative contributions to African communities. The paper also reflected on how the historical background of these mainline churches has impacted, and continues to impact on them nowadays, by analysing this impact on two mainline churches, namely the URCSA and the MCSA. The article further attempted to re-imagine what an African mainline church should be like. At the core of this re-imagination are embracing and engaging African experiences in both their theology and politics. The article also emphasised and argued that the mainline churches cannot expect to make an impact if they continue to ignore the embodied experiences of their Black African members, who are often left to their own devices without the guidance of their churches.

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