

CONCEPTUALISATION OF EVIL IN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY¹

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to give an account of the interaction between Christianity and African Traditional Religion found in African Christian theology. The comparison is made with special reference to the respective conceptualisations of evil present in each of these traditions. The paper commences with a brief survey of the manner in which the notion of evil features in the Christian Scriptures and tradition. A brief outline of the African world and life view is then presented in order to provide the back-drop against which an analysis of the notion of evil in African Traditional Religion can be attempted. This analysis is mainly made with reference to recent research on witchcraft and spirit beliefs and is followed by a portrayal of the interaction between the traditional Christian views on evil and those found in African Traditional Religion. This interaction exhibits the twofold structure of rejection on the one hand and accommodation on the other.

1. INTRODUCTION

Africa is a huge continent inhabited by a large number of nations and cultural groups. One of the salient features of this continent is the big variety in manifestations of its traditional religions. It is therefore more or less impossible to speak of African religion as a unitary system (Bosch 1974:38). This is not to say however that there are no features which those religions have in common. It would therefore, to a certain extent, be possible to identify a number of common denominators that would enable one to construct in very basic outline a theoretical structure that could be called African Traditional Religion, which manifests itself in concrete and contextual form in a large number of different situations. It is important to note that the task of the systematic

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theologian in this regard differs from that of the cultural anthropologist as the former is not in the first instance interested in the specific manifestation but rather in the basic pattern and principles at the basis of those religious phenomena.

It is the aim of this article to make a few remarks on the conceptualisations of evil found in African Christian theology with a view to gaining some understanding of the mutual interaction between African Traditional Religion and Christianity. In order to do this, a brief survey of the notion of evil in the Christian Scriptures and tradition will be given before an attempt is made to provide a basic outline of the African world and life view. The intention of the latter is to provide the back-drop against which a brief description of the notion of evil in African Traditional Religion can be given. The final step would then be to make a few remarks on differing responses in African Christian thinking with respect to the conceptualisation of evil against the background of that found in African Traditional Religion.

2. THE NOTION OF EVIL IN THE CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES AND TRADITION

Without being able in the context of this article to go into much detail, one could say that the Christian Scriptures teach the personal existence of an evil power called Satan who heads a host of demonic powers. Of decisive importance in this regard, however, is the fact that the existence and activities of Satan are not portrayed as an independent reality but only as back-drop for the witness of Scripture regarding the salvation that Christ brought about for humanity (Gaybba 1987:100). The light that Christ has brought into the darkness of human existence can only be seen when contrasted with this darkness. The darkness, however, is not what the Christian message is all about. For this reason one of the most prominent Protestant theologians of the twentieth century, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth, emphasised that Biblical demonology is nothing more than a negative reflection of Biblical Christology and soteriology (Barth 1954:621). For this reason it is Barth's view that Christians should refrain from constructing a *demonologia naturalis* as part of a more comprehensive *theologia naturalis* based on manifestations of demonic phenomena that Christians may occasionally encounter.

Satan and demons are not mentioned for their own sake but only as a reality that should serve to emphasise the role of Christ in the salvation of mankind. For this reason the Bible is not interested in supplying an extensive explanation of the origin of the devil. It rather emphasises the reality of this negative power that consistently tempts humans to be alienated from God (Durand 1978:92).

It is of the utmost importance to realise that this low key Biblical demonology is not intended as providing an explanation of human sin. Referring to Satan would in any case not provide a meaningful reason for sin, but only give the problem of sin a supra-human dimension. The involvement of Satan in the human condition, according to the Christian Scriptures, is therefore not intended to portray humanity as an innocent victim of a guilt that it cannot avoid. Sin remains human guilt as it implies an active acceptance of and yielding to temptation.

Relevant in the context of this article is furthermore the fact that the manner in which the Bible refers to Satan does not imply that Christianity is based on a thoroughgoing dualism in which God and Satan are pitted against each other as adversaries of equal status. The Christian Scriptures regard Satan and the powers of evil as part of creation and therefore subject to God (Kasper 1978:59).

This does not imply, however, that evil in the Christian tradition is regarded as an issue of minor importance. This can be demonstrated by referring to the last petition in the well known prayer that Jesus taught his disciples. This petition is a request to deliver us from evil. The English verb “deliver” sounds fairly mild and does not reflect the urgency that one hears in the original Greek word used in this prayer. The verb *ruomai* employed in this text means to physically draw out of danger, to rescue, to protect and save, and echoes the extensive and comprehensive endangerment which constantly threatened human existence as portrayed by the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament. These Scriptures form the back-drop against which the words and life of Christ become comprehensible.

The endangerment referred to here could be caused by evil people like enemies, oppressors, tyrants, murderers and liars or by evil circumstances like poverty, servitude, illness and other negative experiences of various kinds. What is furthermore relevant, however, is the fact that

the evil which the Christian prayer requests to be delivered from is not only something external, but also one's own seemingly incurable tendency towards evil which finds eloquent expression in the apostle Paul's exclamation "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Rom. 7:24).

I have already referred to the fact that the evil to which human existence, according to the Christian Scriptures, is exposed, does not only consist of matters, circumstances and events, but also occur in the ultimate form of an evil person, Satan or the devil. In trying to come to terms with the phenomenon of evil, the Christian tradition therefore emphasises both its personal and impersonal dimensions. The Greek patristic authors of the earliest Christian centuries favoured the idea of personal evil while the Latin patristic authors, of roughly the same period, preferred an impersonal interpretation (Lochman 1988:132). This division gave rise to the development of two different types of soteriology in coping with evil. The Greek patristic tradition, represented by authors like Irenaeus and the Cappadocian fathers, developed what the twentieth century Swedish theologian Gustav Aulén (1978:4) called the *Christus Victor-soteriology*. This theory in dramatic and even mythological terms described salvation as a victory that Christ gained against Satan by dying on the cross as a ransom for mankind. By doing so, Christ, as it were, outmanoeuvred the devil because the devil did not realise that beneath Christ's humanity his divinity was hidden and that he therefore would not remain in death (McGrath 2001:57).

Aulén's (1978:53) interpretation of the religious meaning of this theory which was originally formulated in terms which to present sensibilities must seem highly objectionable, is that it intends to show that God does not stand outside the drama that is being played out, but takes part in it Himself and attain his purpose by internal and not by external means. He overcomes evil not by an almighty command, but by putting in something of his own, through a divine self-sacrifice.

It is furthermore important to note, says Aulén, that this theory, while implying the dualistic notion of the devil being the enemy of God, simultaneously contains an idea that significantly curtails the idea of dualism. This is the idea that the devil has won certain rights over man which empowers him to demand a ransom for their freedom. These rights, however, derive from God as the devil stands, as it were,

to execute God's own judgement on sinful and guilty man. As this is the case, the devil cannot be regarded as equal to God, but remains subject to Him.

In dealing with the problem of evil, the Latin patristic authors did not emphasise so much the personal embodiment of evil, but attended rather to the disastrous effects of human sin and its implications. It was Augustine's view therefore that human sin and the punishment that it brought on itself constituted the sum-total of evil. This idea was further developed during the Middle Ages by Anselm of Canterbury. Anselm regarded sin as of fatal importance. Through his fall in sin and alienation from God man dishonoured God and this disturbed the order of creation. This order had to be restored by the punishment of sin.

In order not to destroy creation, God restored this order by having Christ substitute Himself for the sinner to pay the price of reconciliation by satisfying God's divine honour. To anybody questioning the severity of this line of thinking, Anselm would respond with his well known words "*nondum considerasti quanti ponderis sit peccatum*" (*Cur Deus Homo* I, 21). In the cross of Christ the full extent of the disaster called sin and human involvement in it becomes evident.

Considering these two lines of thought it is clear that in the Christian tradition the prayer "deliver us from evil" could be relevant to a concept of evil either in the sense of an evil person of ultimate dimensions or to a concept of evil as sin and the destruction associated with it. More important however than this kind of distinction is the fact that the coping mechanism that the Christian tradition suggests in both cases is the cross of Christ (Lochman 1988:133). The cross of Christ is the final demonstration in Christianity of the unfathomable mystery which is evil and which echoes through the ages in Christ's cry of desolation: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46).

3. THE AFRICAN LIFE- AND WORLDVIEW

In order to understand the notion of evil reflected in African culture, one first has to attend to a few characteristics of this culture, keeping in mind the limitations to which generalisations in this regard by necessity are subjected to.

In his influential book on Bantu philosophy Placide Tempels (1959: 43) had more than forty years ago already developed the theory that the basic structure of African thought is formed by the idea that the totality of reality consists of the interaction of forces or powers. Tempels' views have been criticised by various authors as being too generalising in nature (Dammann 1963:54; Mbiti 1970:10), while others (Brandel-Syrier 1962:iii; Magesa 1979:39) are of the opinion that his theory is helpful in supplying a practical hypothesis in terms of which a variety of phenomena in African culture can be explained. According to Tempels (1959:39), life consists of the continual increase or decrease of one's vital force. And the aim that one has for one's life is to develop the optimal vital force that one's location in the hierarchical order of reality allows. It is important to realise that African societies do not operate along egalitarian lines but according to hierarchical structures. Finding one's rightful place in the hierarchical network of powers between God, ancestors, chief, father, animals and plants means to be in possession of force. To be displaced and in disharmony with this network implies decrease and eventually loss of vital force. The main and vital aim in life is to find your allotted place in the total scheme of things.

J.V. Taylor (1963:99) in his well known book, *The primal vision*, depicted this state of affairs as follows:

Man is a family. The living chain of humanity, in which the tides of world-energy ebb and flow most strongly, stands at the heart of the great totality of being. The underlying conviction remains that an individual who is cut off from the communal organism is nothing. As the glow of a coal depends upon its remaining in the fire, so the vitality, the psychic security, the very humanity of man, depends upon his integration into the family. There are many who feel that the spiritual sickness of the West, which reveals itself in the divorce of the sacred from the secular and in the loneliness and homelessness of individualism, may be healed through a recovery of the wisdom which Africa has not yet thrown away.

What should be taken note of is that religion in the African context is not something supra-natural or metaphysical but something which is part of the natural scheme of things. It is therefore understandable that Mercy Oduyoye (2003:42) describes the pre-Christian and pre-Islamic religion of Africa as a cosmic religion with the premise that it does not claim a single revelation, nor a special messenger from God, but has grown as part of being human.

In order to understand the value system that corresponds to the cosmology that I have now attempted to describe, one should keep in mind that, according to African thinking, the created universe is centred on man. Man is the supreme force, the most powerful among created beings. In spite of the fact that God is regarded as the creator of reality, it is man that occupies the centre stage in the cosmos. African philosophy therefore has, according to most of the researchers working in this field, a radical anthropocentric focus (Van der Walt 1997:24).

It is important to keep in mind, however, that man which we are referring to here should never be thought of in the singular. For traditional African thought in fact, man never appears as an isolated individual. Every human being, every individual, forms a link in the chain of vital forces, a living link, active and passive, joined from above to the ascending line of his ancestry and sustaining below him the line of descendents. Africans are quite unable to conceive of individuals apart from their relationships (Tempels 1959:71). This is well summarised in John Mbiti's statement (1970:14): "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am". In South Africa this communality is expressed in the principle of Ubuntu to which one currently so often finds references in public communications. The cardinal belief of Ubuntu is that one can only be man through others (Mcunu 2004:18).

This corporate notion of humanity has far reaching implications for the value-system that is related to it. The following aspects could be mentioned in this regard: Society is not in the first instance structured in terms of rights but rather in terms of duties. In the African understanding priority is given to the duties which individuals owe to collectivity, and their rights are seen as secondary to the exercise of their duties. Special emphasis is laid on one's social responsibilities. Miserliness and self-centeredness are regarded as serious vices. Relationships between people are judged to be of the utmost importance. This gives rise to the high appreciation that is given to characteristics like courtesy, friendliness and an attitude of sympathy. According to African sensibilities, people should be valued for what they are and not for what they could achieve. Inclusivity is regarded as important. Instead of making quick decisions for the sake of efficiency, as is often the case in Western societies, Africans tend to regard meetings and extensive consultation as very important. Decisions are taken by consensus rather than by means of a vote.

The communality that we are referring to here, however, does not only have positive implications. The following negative effects should also be noted: First, it quite often leads to societal pressure not to move out of one's allotted position in the social hierarchy. Moving out of one's position is regarded as disturbing the social balance and order. Exhibiting more vital force than what is one's due, according to one's allotted social location, can be regarded as employing the procedures and powers of witchcraft. Because of the fact that only limited vital force is present in the overall scheme of things, it could imply that a person who exhibits too much initiative is impinging on that which belongs to somebody else and should be restrained or even eliminated.

Secondly, the emphasis on communality invariably leads to jealousy. Because of the fact that in an African context one evaluates developments in terms of the presence of vital force, achievement and the corresponding acquisition of material benefits are often not in the first place linked to hard work but to the unfair disturbance of the balance of power in society. This then tends to call forward the experience of jealousy that is not willing to tolerate somebody else's success.

A third implication that the application of the characteristic communality thought- and life-structure has, is the development of an ethic of shame. Because of the fact that social harmony is regarded as of the highest priority, one's behaviour should be aimed at not disturbing this harmony. If that does happen, it leads to an intense experience of shame. Avoiding shame and disharmony therefore becomes a stronger motivating force than, for example, speaking factual truth. The available literature in this regard often refer to cases or situations where an African person, instead of communicating an unpleasant truth, would, for the sake of harmony, rather avoid such a communication or rather tell what would technically be regarded as a lie (Van Niekerk 1993:24).

4. THE NATURE OF EVIL IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

All religions are involved in a struggle to explain the origin of evil and to reconcile the presence of evil with the existence of an all powerful and well-meaning God (Bosch 1987:38). In theological circles this is known as the theodicy problem; the problem therefore of justifying

the reality of God in the light of the existence and occurrence of evil. Normally theologians provide one of two answers to this question, respectively called dualism and monism. Dualism presupposes the existence of two equally powerful realities opposing one another and monism implies a single source and cause of all that happens. The latter position in the African context does not imply, however, that all evil has to issue from God directly. It could also be interpreted in such a manner that lesser deities could be used by the Supreme Being to bring about evil effects. In the latter case monism seems to be moving in the direction of dualism, without ending up in an absolute dualism (Bosch 1974:63).

In order to ascertain whether in African Traditional Religion the Supreme Being can be regarded as being the origin of evil or not, in other words, whether this tradition thinks monistically or dualistically, one will first have to make a few remarks on how it deals with the notion of God.

In line with the African life and world view, the Supreme Being in this tradition is experienced in terms of the basic cosmological notion that the totality of reality consists of the interaction of forces or powers (Van der Merwe 1981:14). Within this constellation of forces the Supreme Being is seen as having the most vital force, followed by the lesser deities, the ancestors, humans, animals and material objects. This Supreme Being is not really experienced as a person but rather as the personification of the interacting system of life forces that keeps this system intact. Although this Supreme Being is of vital importance to humanity, he is not in the forefront of their awareness. Some researchers used the term *deus otiosus* to describe this state of affairs. This is not appropriate as this term, derived from Western deistic philosophy, is not capable of describing the Supreme Being of African Traditional Religion who is not fundamentally absent but continually present and operative although he is not always perceived to be so (Nürnberger 1975:183).

In attempting to answer the question whether African Traditional Religion is monistic or dualistic one could refer to various Northern African cultures in which the idea of a lesser deity of evil nature clearly plays a prominent role. The evil deities Eshu and Marcardit, believed in by the Nigerian Yoruba and Sudanese Dinka people respectively, are cases in point (Van der Merwe 1981:21). The South African mis-siologist David Bosch (1974:67) is of the opinion, however, that these

cases do not point to dualism but rather to monism as these deities are seen to remain under control of the Supreme Being. The tendency towards monism seems to be even stronger further south in Africa. The statement of Placide Tempels (1959:53) in which he said "it seems to me necessary to reject as foreign to Bantu philosophy the idea of good and evil as two forces" still proves to be valid. In African thinking both good and evil are caused by the same Supreme Being. As has been indicated above, the theodicy problem generated by this position is solved by projecting the evil dimension of the Supreme deity on a lesser deity in such a manner that the involvement of the Supreme Being is maintained. This tendency will be emphasised when in due course we discuss witches and sorcerers as embodiment of evil par excellence in African religion. These evil beings are regarded as receiving their power from the Supreme Being (Van der Merwe 1981:79).

A remarkable relationship between the Supreme Being and evil can be seen in the manner in which the notions of transcendence and immanence function in African Traditional Religion. We have already mentioned the fact that the presence of the Supreme Being is not constantly in the forefront of the believers' awareness. M.J. McVeigh (1974:133) convincingly developed the theory that the root cause for the high God being pushed to the periphery of human consciousness is not the emphasis on his transcendence but rather his immanence. An all encompassing nearness seems to be the fundamental characteristic of God in African thinking. However, a Supreme Being that is the origin of both good and evil, is extremely difficult to live with. This led to the attitude that the transcendent far-away God is good and that the immanent nearby God is bad. To be too near to God is dangerous. This insight seems to be confirmed by the view that one finds in various South African cultures like that of the Xhosa, Tswana and Southern Sotho peoples, namely that mental disorder is the result of direct exposure to God and his power. The Xhosa people call a person suffering from insanity "a man of God" (Van der Merwe 1981:24).

Because of the fact that the High God is seen as the source of good and evil, he is experienced as unpredictable and dangerous which leads to a certain fatalism being characteristic of African religion. And this in turn has as the result that in African thinking God is regarded as good when he does not involve himself in human affairs, remaining a distant

and transcendent being. The religious awareness and cultic activity of traditional African believers therefore focus more on intermediary agencies like ancestor spirits, witches and sorcerers than on the Supreme Being. The latter is only approached when involvement with all these intermediary figures has exhaustively proved to be unproductive. And such an approach of the Supreme Being is furthermore not effected directly but through the ancestors.

It is well known that in Africa the ancestors are traditionally regarded as being part of the living community. The living and the living-dead, as John Mbiti (1969:84) calls the ancestors, are seen as being mutually dependent. The living keep the ancestors in remembrance and make sacrifices to them, while the ancestors are expected to protect their kinspeople. The relationship is not really cordial and is often, but not exclusively, characterised by fear. Too much intimacy to the ancestors is not desirable and contact with them is really only necessary in times of crisis. Adversity is often experienced as punishment by the ancestors for being neglected or because some societal rule or taboo had been violated.

In the study of the phenomenon of evil, cultural anthropologists quite often one-sidedly concentrate on witchcraft. David Parkin (1988:2) is therefore correct when he maintains that witchcraft is only one of many perspectives on good and evil and can therefore not claim a privileged place in analysis. As we have already indicated, witchcraft is one of the contexts in the African scene where the phenomenon of evil is most conspicuously manifested.

This phenomenon, which is of course by far not only found in Africa, can in the African context be related to the African life and world view according to which the totality of reality consists of the interaction of forces and powers. In terms of this world view, witchcraft can be described as the activities of witches and sorcerers

who are people with the mystical ability to manipulate the forces of life to do harm to human beings or their property (Van Wyk 2004: 1210).

One should distinguish between witches and sorcerers. Witches who, in African awareness, are mainly but not exclusively older women, are credited with the ability to free their spirits from their bodies at night

and in this disembodied form harm people by magic procedures of various kinds, either by directly causing illness or death or by using animal familiars like baboons, owls, snakes or cats to effect their evil purposes. These evil deeds are usually not performed by solitary individuals but by groups of evil spirits acting in unison. Two remarkable things about these witches are that they are often not aware of what they are doing, on the one hand, and that they do not use medicines or other magic objects like charms or amulets, on the other. The usage of these kinds of objects is characteristic of the work of sorcerers who are mostly men performing their evil deeds during daytime with deliberate intent. This implies that a sorcerer would be able to stop being a sorcerer while witches who are under control of their evil spirits cannot do so of their own accord.

Characteristic of witches are that they are usually not publicly known. This complies with the general insight in the science of religion that the "evilness of evil cannot be identified" (Van Wyk 2004:1213). The implication of this is that quite often a certain fatalism in connection with witchcraft develops in African society. When evil is among you, but you do not know what it is, then nothing can be done about it (Van Beek 1994:207-212).

However, this does not mean that no attempts are made to identify and eliminate witches. The result is that people exhibiting unusual personal features, extraordinary behaviour or excessive power, in other words people who disturb the balance and harmony of power relations, which are so important in African society, are easily accused of being witches.

African society developed various agents whose task it is to defend society against witchcraft. These are known as herbalists, witchdoctors and diviners. Natural and supernatural means are employed to counter witches and sorcerers. White magic is used to conquer black magic. From time to time even human body parts are used to gain the desired effect. It is a tragic fact that the procedures to defend society against the evils of witchcraft quite often lead to witch-hunts and witch-killings. In this way people who are presumed to be the friends of society are "the very people responsible for maintaining a vicious circle of revenge and counter-revenge" (Van Wyk 2004:1219). It remains a perplexing and most disconcerting phenomenon that, even after the political trans-

formation in South Africa, the volume of witchcraft related crime does not seem to be abating (Niehaus 2001:2; Bähre 2002:329; SANPAD 2003:3). This could to a certain extent but not exclusively be attributed to the uncertainties related to a period of political transition. Various authors are of the opinion that it would not be possible to deal decisively with these issues if their religious and theological dimension are neglected (Van Wyk 2004:1202). We therefore now turn to the response of African Christian theology to the problem of evil.

5. THE RESPONSE OF AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Having given an account of the notion of evil present in the Christian Scriptures and tradition as well as in African Traditional Religion, the question that in conclusion should briefly demand our attention, is to what extent it would be possible for present-day African Christians to deal with the notion of evil in their indigenous religious tradition in such a manner that continuity with the overall Christian tradition can be maintained.

This issue is dealt with in the modern African theological discussion in various ways. In the context of this article I would like to attend to two of these options which happen to be diametrically opposed to each other. The first approach radically rejects the traditional African reference to the Spirit world while the second approach attempts to re-interpret the traditional African position so as to provide an intelligible witness to present-day Africans.

The first approach then is that of radical rejection. This tendency started developing as a mechanism by which the initial Christian missionaries, especially those influenced by revivalist theology, attempted to distinguish Christianity from traditional African religion. The initial form that this distinction took was the demonisation of traditional African religion.

Missionaries spoke about the devil and the demonic realm as a way of setting Christianity apart from traditional religion. To them Christianity was good, while traditional religion belonged to the devil (Akong 2001:18).

This approach was not restricted to missionary theology, but happens quite often to be characteristic also of some present-day Charismatic churches in various African countries. They also tend to demonise and then exorcise traditional spirit beliefs. It is a development, however, that renders an unexpected result. The big emphasis that the Charismatic churches put on the devil creates what can perhaps be called a “cult of devotion to the devil”. And in the African context this awakens the need in traditional African circles to re-employ the mystical procedures that they used to protect themselves with in such circumstances. In this manner, these Charismatic churches paradoxically stimulate a response that they originally intended to prevent, while it furthermore stimulates the development of a dualism that is traditionally alien to Christianity in that it devaluates the power of God as it puts the devil’s power on a par with that of God (Akrong 2001:20).

A third dimension in the rejection of the traditional African spirit beliefs is supplied by allowing modern Western secularism not to explicitly deny these beliefs but to simply ignore them, presupposing that witchcraft related issues are merely developmental problems which could exclusively be solved by processes of educational and economic development (SANPAD 2003:32). Without a doubt development in these fields are of vital importance, but whether a total neglect of the religious and theological aspects of the problem is conducive to its solution is doubtful (Van Wyk 2004:1224).

There is a further argument in favour of rejecting the traditional spirit beliefs that operates on a totally different level, as compared to the previous ones, and that is the argument that traditional spirit beliefs would be implausible in terms of modern foundationalist epistemology which developed in line with the European enlightenment project. However, this argument did not prove to be so convincing as it originally seemed. Since the demise of the enlightenment canon of human rationality which initially developed in concert with Newtonian mechanical cosmology, the predilection of African thought for personal rather than mechanical explanations of observable phenomena gained in plausibility to such an extent that John Pobee (1979:100) from Ghana can conclude that the mechanical and personal explanations of reality are not contradictory. A philosopher like Kwasi Wiredu (1998:198) adds to this the suggestion that the personal rather than mechanical explanations

which Africans tend to give to phenomena and the acceptance of the reality of the spirit world that this implies, may even be helpful on a conceptual level in that it could help solve some of the logical problems related to the Christian understanding of evil. What he has in mind, is what we have earlier on already alluded to, namely that accepting the notion of lesser deities, as in African Traditional Religion, would be helpful to solve the theodicy problem, because evil will then be attributed to them and not to God.

Reasoning along these lines, we have in fact already explained the second approach which is gradually gaining support in African theological circles and that is the conviction that

there is no good reason why Christian theologians cannot simply accept the traditional African scheme of the so called unseen world including their traditional mechanisms in dealing with it (Brand 2002:48).

This would of course require careful theological deliberation to establish coherence with the main tenets of Christian doctrine. But in principle that should not be impossible.

An example of how this could be done is supplied by the innovative way in which the doctrine of the *descensus ad inferos* is interpreted by a number of African Christian theologians (Van't Spijker 2003:504).³ According to this approach, the notion of salvation is not only a matter of the forgiveness of sins as emphasised by the tradition of the Latin West, but also and foremost a matter of Christ's victory over the powers of evil. Christ did not only die for our sins, but He also descended into hell to demonstrate his power over the living and the dead. When the African context contributes towards the emphasis on this aspect of the Christian notion of salvation and towards the revitalisation of this long neglected article of the faith, we are reminded that the *Christus Victor* idea is an important one in the New Testament. In this way African Christian theology contributes towards reconnecting the ecumenical church with a vital element of the Christian faith that played a dominant role in the first ten centuries of Christian history.

3 I thank Dr. Gerard van't Spijker who, during the conference on Religion and Evil, drew my attention to this development.

This could finally suggest that a solution to the persisting scourge of witchcraft related catastrophes in Africa should not exclusively be expected from secular processes like educational and economical development, but that well founded and responsible theological considerations and corresponding pastoral procedures should at least not summarily be discounted (Lagerwerf 1985:57; Ganly 1985:350).

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