

Christian mission in creative tension with African worldview(s)

A post-colonial engagement regarding life after death and ancestry

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Abstract

Christian mission in African context, especially in the post-colonial era, can no longer afford to turn a blind eye to the fact that it co-exists with the African traditional religion(s). This article deals with the creative tension that exists between Christian mission and African worldview(s) in the area of life after death. In this article we presuppose more than a mere dialogue between ideas or individuals or denominations, but the encounter of different praxes. This article concludes that the dead in the worldviews are not dead; they continue to live in a different form and they continue to speak from the grave even though their praxes differ.

Keywords: Christian mission, African worldview, postcolonial, life, death, ancestry

1. Introduction

There is no dead-end to human life. The notion of life after death is embraced by many religious communities in the world. While we acknowledge this commonality among many religions in the world, we explore in a comparative way the encounter between the African and Christian worldviews notwithstanding different praxis that exists within these worldviews. We make use of the concept 'African worldview(s)' to define the primal understanding of how Africans have viewed their world (commonly referred to in the literature as African Traditional Religion(s)). This concept has evolved with time to a point that some African theologians prefer to use the concept 'African religion(s)'. In using the term 'Christian worldview(s)' we are aware of the distinction that exists between the biblical worldview(s) and the Western worldview(s) of Christian missionaries. We are also aware that the arrival of a Western contextualised version of the Christian faith in southern Africa more than 300 years ago has given rise to a wide variety of African Christian praxis, and one of the defining criteria by which these forms of Christian praxis can be distinguished

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is their approach to life after death, which is closely related to the question of the relation between ancestors.

In this article therefore we recognise that three (sets of) of worldviews have been encountering each other in this process: the biblical worldview(s), the Western worldview(s) of the Christian missionaries, and the African worldview(s) of the indigenous communities. It is not the aim in this article to define these worldviews narrowly; a more general approach has been adopted to highlight what is generally perceived and accepted as elements common to them all.

The common ground between the above-mentioned worldviews, with their divergent praxis, is that our dead are not dead. The dead in the African worldview(s) are referred to as the 'living dead' (see Nürnberger 2007:24; cf. Mashau 2009:118), while they are referred to as 'ancestors of faith' or the 'cloud of witnesses' in Christianity, for instance (Hebrews 12:1).

Even though there is this common understanding, the issue of life after death continues to intrigue humanity. Where have our dead gone? Can they still speak to us from the grave? If they do, in what ways do they communicate with the living? From time immemorial, African communities have also wrestled with these questions and have developed ideas, myths and rituals to deal with them. These questions remain relevant today in a generation where a substantial number of African Christians, when faced with crises, turn to their ancestors rather than to Christ as the first instance of appeal (Nürnberger 2007:68). Is this kind of practice an affirmation or a compromise or even negation of the gospel, Christ and Christianity in the African soil? Responses to this and other related questions raised above differ.

Missionaries, in the colonial era, branded the primal religion(s) as being backward and evil. Western missionaries marginalised virtually everything that had to do with the traditional African worldview. By so doing, Western missionaries failed to grasp the essence and dynamics of African culture; consequently, the deepest core of African culture remained untouched (Mashau and Frederiks 2008:115).

While the foregoing colonial narrative placed Christianity in an awkward position in its mission and dialogue with the adherents of the African traditional religion (ATR), the post-colonial engagement suggests the opposite. The resurgence of the ATR in the public sphere has opened a door for Christianity and the ATR to co-exist alongside each other, but also to engage in a more meaningful dialogue. Such dialogue is encouraged by Bosch (1991:595) in his understanding of "mission as witness to people of other living faiths". Kritzinger (2008) refers to this kind of dialogue as encounterology and this missiological paradigm guided our engagement in this research. Afeke and Verster (2004:59) concluded that it is critical to discuss this matter openly since it affects the lives of many Africans, Christians included.

This article is an attempt to open a door for further engagement as far as life after death is concerned within the above-mentioned worldviews. It seeks to answer the questions: How can Christian churches in mission, in their encounter with the adherents of ATR(s) or African Religion (AR) on the question of life after death and ancestry, tap into the indigenous knowledge system? In the light of commonalities and differences that exist between these worldviews, what constitutes a Christian message in such an engagement? In order to answer these questions, this article seeks to outline and address the following issues: (1) African worldview(s) on life after death and ancestry; (2) Christian worldview(s) on life after death and ancestry; (3) Encounterological reflection between the ATR(s) or AR(s) and Christianity; (4) Emerging voices; and (5) Implications for mission in the post-colonial engagement.

2. African worldview regarding life after death and ancestry

2.1 Holistic view of life

African indigenous knowledge systems (myths, idioms, riddles, music, superstitions, tales, art, dancing and poetry) relate to the Africans who grew up within the context and influence of the ATR(s) and worldview (see Mbiti 1991:24–33). Through mythological illustrations and art, the existence of the world and its inhabitants are explained. These shaped their understanding and view of time and life which according to the ATR are interwoven. The African worldview and time differ from the Western Biblical worldview, which is perhaps more lineal. The Biblical view suggests that there is a beginning and a future end of the earth; whereas most of the African narratives would seek rather to emphasise the existence of humanity and their well-being. African stories have never proposed or given any hint about the world coming to an end but emphasise the continuity and interconnectedness of life; hence Oborji (2002:22, 23) concluded: “Central motivation in traditional religion is the quest for life and its preservation”. Therefore, concepts such as eschatology, judgement and retribution do not play any critical role in the African worldview. What adherents of ATR hope for in death is to join the ranks of the ancestors in the spirit-world (see Oborji 2002:23). Nürnberger (2007:25) asserts that “[t]he hope that one might have is that one will continue to be respected after one’s demise, not to fall victim to fading memories, not to become a homeless spirit because of neglect funeral rites”.

Life in the ATR is understood to be a shared experience between the living and the living dead; at the same time it is a priceless gift received from a Supreme Being. As much as *amadlozi* (ancestors) are well known to have dealings with human life, they are, however, not givers of life. They sustain and are being sustained through life. Their (spiritual) world and the (physical) world of the living are viewed as interconnected

and interdependent. It is believed that these two worlds constantly interact with each other. While still alive, one is expected to connect with the dead and when one dies and passes to the spiritual world, one is expected to maintain close bonds with the living. This understanding of time and life are interwoven and allows the living dead to reincarnate by possessing a newly born child in a particular family or during the spirit possession (*malombo*) ritual as in the case of the Vhavenda people (Mashau 2007:647) as and when there is need for such spirit possession. That particular child will carry the name of the one who possessed him or her. It is always a mystery why a living dead would reincarnate in the life of a newly born child, but this act is always believed to be vital for the clan; the child will even be respected by his or her parents.

The foregoing suggests that relationships play a vital role in the African worldview. They act as safeguards for both the clan and society. As long as there is peace, there is prosperity. These relations are measured by the unity and collaborations among the living and the interconnectedness of the living with the living dead. Mndende (2005:19) argues that, from conception to death, Africans are expected to have maintained these relationships. That will include participation in social gatherings and ritual performances. As a result, Africans perform different rituals at different occasions e.g. at the birth of a child, the giving of names, circumcision and other initiation ceremonies, marriage, funerals, harvest festivals, praying for rain and many others (Mbiti 1991:20). Rituals then act as a medium to bring these two worlds together, but also keeping the physical world intact as their relationships is repaired. It is interesting to note that when rituals are performed, women play a critical role as priestesses, just like the social and religious role played by *makhadzi* (aunt) among the Vhavenda people (see Mashau 2007:648).

As mentioned above, the spiritual and the physical worlds need each other. On the one hand the living need the living dead for life sustainability; and on the other hand the living dead require successors for them to be kept in memory, so that they are never forgotten. For ancestors live in the memories of the ones they leave behind; and those who are not remembered after death have met their ultimate end (Nyirongo 1997:72). *Amadlozi* depend on recognition by their offspring or descendants for their continued authority, identity, relevance and belonging (Nürnberg 2007:25). Therefore, male children become great acquisitions and treasure as they provide security to carry the clan name forward. In most cases, the more sons one has the better, even if it means that one should have more than one wife. Polygamy is then not the reflection of man's pleasure and greediness but a means of assurance that the surname life-line does not cease. Therefore Africans do look towards a secured future. It is from this background that we disagree with Nyirongo who argues that Africans cannot see the future beyond two years (Nyirongo 1997:89). Van Wyk (2006:709) concurs that there is enough evidence to support the view that Africans are future-oriented.

Offspring are a hope for the future and means for survival in the millions of years to come, since there is no end time.

2.2 Death and dying as remaining at home

Life and death do not stand in opposition to each other in the African worldview(s). Life after death is without the terror of the gnashing of teeth and blazing fire as proclaimed in Christianity for centuries. If someone has violated the morals and taboos of the community, his pain is expected to be immediate in the physical life through sickness, poverty, bad luck and even death, not in the hereafter (Nyirongo 1997:71). Evil and wickedness are expected to be addressed immediately, rather than their punishment being delayed, for anything that disturbs the physical world ultimately affects the spiritual world as well. Therefore both the living and the living dead would work together in dealing with broken taboos and witchcraft.

Africans therefore believe that there is not much distinction between the physical and the spiritual world. They believe that the dead can eat food (especially meat) and drink beer even though they are believed to be living in the invisible world (Nyirongo 1997:27). Even beyond the grave, the spiritual remains in contact with the physical to share existence and space; for the family is understood to consist of both the living and the dead (Nel 2007:233).

Nyirongo (1997) argues that the dead and the living share the same level of existence since the dead live more or less the same life as when they were living in the flesh. The living and the living dead can share meals, drinks and communications (through omens, dreams, disasters or even mediums). Though a spiritual world is distinguishable from a physical one since it is invisible, the two are identical (in having mountains, rivers, livestock, family and relatives) and very close to each other (Mbiti 1991:122). Therefore, an African would pour a bit of their beer on the ground as a token to *abaphansi* (those who lie under the ground) since the *abaphansi* are part of their existential reality.

However, death is never an act of kindness. If someone dies, there should be a “traceable” reason as a cause, namely one of the following: (1) an act of witchcraft, (2) death caused by evil spirits, (3) a curse for broken taboos, or (4) natural death for old individuals (Mbiti 1991:1187). Particular rituals should be performed to ensure that the deceased will be accepted by the family *amadlozi*. A funeral acts as a rite of passage in which the deceased is in transit from the communion of the living to a communion with *amadlozi*, thereby maintaining the bond between the living and the living dead (Nel 2007:233). After a period of a month, six months or a year, there is a ceremony of *umbuyiso/ukubuyisa* to bring the deceased back home; Motlhabi (2008:36) uses the term canonisation of the deceased with particular reference to the ceremony of *ukubuyisa*. Nel explains (2007:236):

The rite of *ukubuyisa*, the bringing home of the deceased, affirms that the deceased, though dead, still belongs to, and is in communion with the family ... The rite of *ukubuyisa*, while affirming the importance of belonging, also provides a process for dealing with the disruption of the family togetherness.

As much as relationships and family were important for the deceased in their physical life, even after death, they must live with family ancestors and also be part of the family structures of the living. In a house of the living, there is a place called *umsamu* (a place facing the door in a roundavel house) which is believed to be a dwelling placed for *amadlozi*. This is a place for consultations as *impepbo* (incense) is burnt or even a chicken or goat is slaughtered. We can conclude in this instance that dying is also an act of remaining at home when rituals to bring back home the deceased are performed.

2.3 Amadlozi as the living dead

God is never approached directly since God is believed to be far away (Nyirongo 1997:53). Human beings do not appeal directly to God for help, but to deities (Mbiti 1991:30). It is generally believed that when people die they become *amadlozi* (Nyirongo 1997:52). Certain conditions like old age, having had children in your life time, and living a good life are necessary requirements for one to assume a status of *idlozi*. Amadlozi are believed to be more relevant to and identical with human mysteries of everyday life. In this state of being *idlozi* (singular form of *amadlozi*), an individual is assumed to have reached a more powerful state in which they can provide gifts for the descendants even without consulting God since they are self-sufficient (Mbiti 1991:51). However, death is not welcomed as a desirable goal, except perhaps for the very old person who has grown frail and tired of life (Nürnberger 2007:25).

According to Turaki (1999:175), ancestors act as both protectors and benefactors. He argues that sacrifices, prayers and worship are accorded to them for blessings and protection as descendants seek advice, guidance, good luck and information about what the future holds. Here the unity and strength in numbers is vital, since Africans would seek to offer sacrifices to as many *amadlozi* as possible for prayers to be heard (Nyirongo 1997:52).

Nyirongo (1997:52) argues that for someone to become a mediator at least three things should first have happened: (1) they should have been good people whilst in the flesh, (2) they should have received full funeral rites³ and (3) they must have had a long life. With particular reference to *amadlozi*, the life that they continue to live after death

³ Mbiti (1991:119) argues that there are many, complex and long rituals and ceremonies associated with death. In every African society people are very sensitive to what is done when there is a death in the family. These rites and ceremonies are performed with meticulous care to avoid causing any offence to the departed.

and the role that they play to influence the lives of the living, we can conclude that there is no dead-end to the dead – death and dying bring one to another state of life where the dead are very much active. We take up this point and expand on it in the next section.

2.4 Speaking from the grave

Africans believe that death is not the end of human life (Mbiti 1991:128). The living dead are believed to be able to communicate from the grave with the living in various ways, e.g. through omens, sickness, misfortunes and dreams. With regard to dreams, Kruger, Steyn and Lubbe (2005) argue that, though they can be caused by witchcraft or sorcery as well, they are normally considered to be channels of communication between the living and the living dead. It is therefore the role of an elderly person or even a diviner to interpret and explain that particular dream to a dreamer and discuss the implications thereafter. Dreams can be indications of approval or disapproval by *amadlozi* and they may be portenders of fortune or misfortune to the descendants.

Fortunes and misfortunes are not in contrast with each other since through them both, the living dead can speak to their descendants with authority; because even good spirits can be responsible for evil against their own people when offended (Nyirongo 1997:52). Therefore, through rituals the living would seek to interact with *amadlozi* as means of thanksgiving, requests or peace-making.

3. Christian worldview(s) on life after death and ancestry

3.1 Holistic view of life

According to the Christian worldview, all of creation, including human life, came into being because of God's creative powers. It is asserted that "God's commanding omnipotence, by which he makes all things to be what they are, is the same in the beginning of creation and in every moment of the history of creation" (Wolters 1990:12). The creation mandate to humanity, to give birth and fill the earth, should be seen as the continuation of God's creative powers; hence all of human life should be viewed as a gift of God, whether Christian or not. God who created all of life continues to provide and sustain it. Human life was ordered in such a way that persons would have lived forever, but according to the Christian worldview, death came into the world after the fall of man into sin. Death is said to have entered the world through the fall of Adam into sin (see Romans 5:12).

3.2 Death and dying as going home

Death is viewed and understood holistically from a Biblical perspective. A distinction is made, within the Christian worldview between physical death and spiritual death. This distinction is captured by Nyirongo (1997:78) as follows: "Physical death is the *separation of the body* or tent from the soul and spirit (1 Cor. 15:35-58). Spiritual

death is *man's inability to please God* and hence loss of fellowship with Him (Matt. 8:22; John 5:24-25)". The physical death is experienced by all human beings (Christian and adherents of other living faiths), whilst the spiritual death is experienced by those who, out of sin, continue to disobey God. This is the kind of death described in Ephesians 2:1-3. The outcome of spiritual death is everlasting torment in hell or what is called "second death" (Nyirongo 1997:85; cf. Rev. 20:6, 13, 14; 21:8).

In defining physical death from a Christian perspective, Grudem (1994:816) says: "Death is a temporary cessation of bodily life and a separation of the soul from the body." Metaphorically, those who have passed on are said to be sleeping (Grudem 1994:819). Bavinck (1996:55) asserts that "the whole of Scripture proceeds from the idea that death is a total break with life on the side of the grave". While the body of the deceased is buried and remains in the grave, the soul of those who die in Christ goes immediately into the presence of God (Grudem 1994:816). Therefore, life according to a Christian worldview and in line with the notion of eschatology can be categorised as life here and now and life hereafter.

Death, for those who believe in Christ as their personal Lord and Saviour, is portrayed as a passage to their eternal home. Bavinck (1996:39) expresses this idea as follows: "Christ's death and resurrection is thus the restoration of life. For those who are in Christ, death is no longer the end but a passage into eternal life." Life in Christ, without doubt, brings hope in death and dying. This is captured in the followings words by Nyirongo (1997:78):

But even though man lost the potential to be immortal, God provided him with hope. He promised to send His Son to pay for man's sin, so that anyone who believes in Him should not only conquer physical death but spiritual death as well. Though the Christian dies physically and is buried, this is not the end of his life. The eternal life he receives at conversion qualifies him to receive immortality at the resurrection.

It is this kind of understanding that gives birth to a theology of hope in the face of death and dying. It becomes clear to those who die in Christ that there is no dead-end in death. It should, however, be noted that it is not everyone agrees with this standpoint in Christianity; for instance, the Roman Catholic view of Purgatory is one such example. However, this view is not explored in this article. The following section deals with the cloud of witnesses (see Hebrews 12:1) as ancestors.

3.3 Cloud of witnesses as ancestors

Who are the "cloud of witnesses"? Are they the living dead as in the African worldview where ancestors are spoken of as the living dead? There are three distinct characteristics of the 'cloud of witnesses' as outlined in Hebrews 11 and 12: (1)

They are our ancestors of faith – those who have run the race and have now fulfilled their calling here on earth; (2) When they have passed on, they go home to be with the Lord but also join the spirits of those who have been made perfect (Hebrews 12:23); and (3) They become part of the communion of the saints. Faith in Christ connects the living and the dead. In his efforts to accommodate the practice of ancestral veneration in African Christianity, Mosothoane (1973:87) uses the concept of the communion around the Eucharist as one of the rites within the Roman Catholic Church to ensure continued communion between the living and the dead. He therefore encourages church members to participate in family rituals where ancestors are venerated as a way to continue their fellowship and honour the deceased (Mosothoane 1973:94).

While Mosothoane used the concept “communion of the saints” in this way, the Bible speaks about the “cloud of witnesses” in Hebrews 12:1 and reference is made to the departed faithful ancestors of faith (Kalengyo 2009:49), the ones with whom Mosothoane encourages direct fellowship in observing the rite of the Eucharist and ancestral veneration as noted above. Nürnberger (2007:88) concurs that “the ‘cloud of witnesses’ refers to a long list of historical figures that the author considers to be particularly outstanding examples of faith (Heb. 11)”. In the next section, we reflect on how these heroes of faith speak from their graves.

3.4 Speaking from the grave

Can the dead speak from the grave? Traditionally the ancestors as “witnesses” in Hebrews were perceived to be playing a passive role, one of aloof participants as noted by Cromhout (2012:5); but now they are said to play a very active role, one upon which we reflect (Cromhout 2012:6). Christian understanding about this matter is summed up by Nyirongo (1997:86) as follows:

When a Christian dies, *[s/he]* goes to be with the Lord (not just part of him [her], Luke 16:19-31). The fact that his [her] physical body is in the grave does not make him [her] less of a person. While *[s/he]* waits for the resurrection, *[s/he]* is conscious of himself [herself] and God’s care and presence (but has no contact with people on earth). At the resurrection *[s/he]* receives a new body, free from decay, i.e. *[s/he]* receives immortality as a gift. If there was no resurrection, the Christian would remain mortal and his [her] faith would be meaningless.

It is very clear from the foregoing that the death of a Christian does not bring him or her into a state of nothingness. A Christian continues to exist in the form and state that only God is able to comprehend. *[S]*he continues to exist but the living cannot have any direct *verbal communication* and *physical contact* with the deceased as

presupposed in the African worldview(s). Any direct contact with the living is not only discouraged but sinful (see 1 Samuel 27). In their research, “Christianisation of ancestor veneration within African traditional religions: An evaluation”, Afeke and Verster (2004) came to the same conclusion.

The dead in Christ can only speak from the grave through their testimonies which were recorded whilst still alive; hence Hebrews 12:1 talks about “a great cloud of witnesses” and Hebrews 12:22-24 talks about communion with “spirits of righteous men made perfect”. We get a better understanding of Hebrews 12 when we read it together with Hebrews 11 which gives a detailed account of those who walked by faith, whose testimonies still speak to us today. The following words sum it up: “By faith Abel offered a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead” (Hebrews 11:4). Their journey of faith becomes not only a testimony but an example for the living to follow or emulate.

The cloud of witnesses is without doubt an inspiration and encouragement for Christians who are still running their race and are faced with the struggles of life like sin that so easily entangles (Hebrews 12:1-2). It is asserted that “what they have been doing in faith *in the past* is a witness to us in our present afflictions. We have access to this witness not through dreams, ecstasy, divination or special revelations, but through perusing the historical records of the Scriptures” (Nürnberg 2007:88). It can be concluded that they become true and faithful witnesses as far as our journey of faith is concerned (see Kalengyo 2009:51). Their active presence and the role that they play stems from the fact that their testimonies are very much part of the recorded word of God which is alive and active (see Hebrews 4:12). In the next section, a reflection on the encounter between African Traditional Religion(s) and Christianity worldviews is made.

4. Encounterological reflections between ATR(s) and Christianity

This section is aimed at providing an encounterological reflection between the ATR(s) and Christian worldviews regarding life after death. Similarities and differences will be mapped out to lay the foundation for emerging voices and implications for Christian mission in a post-colonial encounter between ATR(s) and Christianity.

4.1 Death, dying and ancestry

Both ATR and Christianity affirm that there is no dead-end to life. While the dead within the ATR perspective are said to be the living dead or ancestors, they are said to be “a cloud of witnesses” in Christianity and can also be referred to be as the “living dead” as is done in the ATR. The concept of the community of saints as understood by the Roman Catholic Church even makes provision for further communion

between the living and the dead to a point of seeing Christ entering and engaging the world of ancestors. This view is evident in the theology of Charles Nyamiti who developed the ancestral Christology in his effort to Christianise African religious beliefs and cultures (Akper 2007:226). Nyamiti saw Christ as the Brother Ancestor (Nyamiti 1984). It also came into being in Mosothoane's (1973) theology whereby Christians are encouraged to participate in ancestral veneration.

4.2 Ancestors

All human beings have common ancestry in Adam and Eve, the first human beings created by God. Both worldviews embrace the concept of ancestors even though there is distinction in terms of the meaning attached to the term. The understanding of ancestors as blood relatives who are deceased is found in both worldviews, but Christianity takes a step further by defining ancestry in terms of faith – historical figures like the cloud of witnesses in Hebrews 12:1 are common ancestors to the Christian community. Historical figures like John Calvin, Martin Luther, David Bosch, and Steve Biko among others can therefore also be seen as ancestors who still speak through their recorded testimonies. Those who have run their race and have kept their faith should be respected by reading their testimonies and using them as encouragement in our journeys of faith.

4.3 Speaking from the grave

Within the ATR worldview the dead continue to speak and influence the life of the living through dreams. They sometimes express their unhappiness through sickness and natural calamities, whilst within Christianity the dead cannot speak or communicate directly. It is only recorded testimonies of their journeys of faith that speak to us from the grave. Their testimonies are as powerful as true and living witnesses in [the] public court[s]. We read their biographies in the Scriptures and are encouraged to pursue and persevere in our struggles of faith today as we follow their example. They continue to give counsel to the living today through their recorded testimonies in the living word of God.

4.4 Sin, death, and eschatology

There is agreement between religious communities that subscribe to the two worldviews that sin is the root cause of death; and therefore punishment is recourse for one's transgressions or sins. However, sin (such things as human pride, dishonesty, envy, lethargy among others) is more a matter of transgressions against the community (and applies to instances where one has been caught in the act of transgression) in the ATR, while it is more about doing or not doing what God requires in one's life (going against God's commandments) in Christianity.

No judgement is known in the African worldview even though punishment here and now should be meted out by seniors in the community or by ancestors who will do so by bringing misfortune to the offender. A Christian worldview, on the other hand, talks about punishment here and now as a corrective measure (Godly discipline); with God's judgement in hell as the final penalty for human transgressions or sins. Nyirongo (1997:86-87) captures this notion it as follows:

When a man dies without Christ, his soul goes to hell (Rev. 21:8). Whilst waiting for the resurrection he is in torment, fully aware of himself, but cut off from God's love and fellowship. Like the Christian, he has no contact with people on earth. He does not have any further opportunity to repent. At the resurrection he receives a body fit for eternal torment in the lake of fire.

4.5 Ancestry and mediatorship

There is need for a mediator in both worldviews (ATR and Christianity). Ancestors, especially those who are perceived to be of high ranking, are said to qualify as mediators between man and God in the ATR, while in Christianity Christ is seen as the only mediator between man and God.

4.6 Eschatology

The concept of eschatology exists in both worldviews to a varying degree. Death and dying as "going home" is common to the two worldviews, but the meaning attached to them is different. While ATR understands going home in the literal sense (going home where one's umbilical cord is buried), Christianity talks about home as "to be in the presence of God after death" or "to be with the Lord" (see Philipians 1:21; 2 Corinthians 5:8). Those who die far away from home, in the African worldview, are brought back home through rituals conducted like *ukubuyisa*. This allows the deceased to join the ranks of his ancestors in peace. Joining one's ancestors marks the beginning of a new life in the spiritual world. Christians, on the other hand, look forward to eternal home where they will receive eternal life. It is correctly asserted that: "Christian eschatology, then, moves in all three times: past, present and future. The reign of God has already come, is coming, and will come in fullness" (Bosch 1991:508).

4.7 Celebration of life

In both worldviews, life is celebrated and rituals are conducted. Ancestors are intermediaries and benefactors of such activities (rituals conducted to celebrate life) within the ATR, while Christianity seeks to benefit its adherents in all respects. The celebration of the death of Christ when celebrating the Holy Communion is one

such example. Jesus Christ's death is celebrated because it is the means through which Christians attain life in abundance.

5. Emerging voices

Children are not important in the two worldviews with regard to death, life after death and ancestry; a male child is appreciated in the ATR for selfish purposes (that of keeping the family name) whilst the Christian faith completely excludes children from fellowship except for those who administer infant baptism (whether it be in a way of creating the church for children within the church and or by not allowing them to participate in the Holy Communion). The position of children requires serious attention. The initiation to the life process within the ATR can be turned around and given a transformative meaning with the baptism and or confirmation of children in the life of the church at infancy. Children's lives should be dedicated to God and celebrated.

The role of women in the ATR, especially when they serve as priestesses to officiate in ancestral ceremonies is something that the Christian worldview can learn from and be inspired to build a case for female pastors in the life of the church (this applies to those Christian churches which exclude women from office). This will require a serious transformative encounter with male-dominated structures without pitting the two genders against each other.

Commemoration and celebration of the contribution made by those who have gone ahead of us must form an integrative part of our interpretation and application of the concept "communion of the saints" without our revering or worshiping those saints. Storytelling can be used as an antidote to the deafening silence in African churches about the contribution that our own ancestors have made in their journeys of faith. We should learn to appreciate their testimonies, but not as a way to overshadow or replace the redemptive narrative of Jesus Christ. Our narratives should build on the work of faith that God has already accomplished for us. In this instance, we affirm that there is indeed no dead-end to life after death.

6. Implications for mission in a post-colonial engagement

The foregoing discussion has implications for post-colonial engagement between the ATR and Christianity in mission, namely:

- The concept of ancestry within the ATR can no longer be branded as pagan; however, we need to engage critically the ATR in the area of ancestral veneration and worship.
- "Ancestry" is a term that can easily be understood by Africans when efforts are made to explain their identity and role from a Biblical perspective. The com-

mon ancestry of all humanity in Adam can be used as a basis to point out to our common ancestry of Jesus Christ.

- Ancestors should therefore be acknowledged, respected and commemorated; but not worshipped because only God is worthy to be worshipped. Any worship, except for one directed to God, is idolatry.
- The gospel should have liberating power to the indigenous knowledge system regarding ancestry, especially when the incarnational approach to the encounter between ATR and Christianity is embraced.
- The concept of death and dying as going home, which is more common among adherents of ATR, should be used to explain the concept of going home to be with the Lord in Christianity.
- We need to use the concept of the communion of the saints in Christianity to enhance the concept of fellowship and celebration of life and the death of Christ as our mediator before God. Although ancestors are sometimes feared because they can cause calamities, saints are always positive intercessors and are never feared.
- The issue of sin and judgement should be brought into the equation in the Christian dialogue with the adherents of the ATR. The concept of embracing the here, the now and the hereafter is critical on this matter. But what is more critical is not only to bring in the horizontal dimension of sin (taboo); we also need to bring in the vertical dimension of sin wherein God receives central attention.
- The primacy of the Word of God in communication should receive due attention over communication through dreams, sickness and calamities which Ancestors do in the ATR.
- Opening of a direct line to God – access to the divine Presence, and the nearness of God to all of us – should be communicated.

7. Conclusion

Life after death is a reality for all in the praxis of both African and Christian communities. Death is viewed not as the end of life but as a passage to another form of life. For both worldviews, those who exist in the spiritual world share their existence with those who live in the physical world; that is *amadlozi* in African worldview and the cloud of witnesses in Christianity. Both religions share a mutual belief in the co-existence of the two worlds and agree that death is not the end. Therefore, in their encounter, it has become clear that Christianity and ATR(s) agree that there is life after death. This similarity does not take away distinctions between the two, since adherents of the ATR(s) believe that one dies and joins the spiritual world which is very much intertwined with the physical; while Christians believe that one dies to be with the Lord as they wait for the *eschaton*, or, in the Roman Catholic view, go to purgatory.

The concept of ancestry can be used in both Christianity and the ATR(s). For the latter, it refers to common ancestors in terms of blood relations, but for the former, it is used to refer to historical figures who were champions of faith. For ATR(s), the usage of the word “ancestry” denotes both the name and the concept. As a name, it points to the specific beings, the deceased; and as a concept, it denotes devotion and reverence to the deceased’s family relatives. But in Christianity, being an ancestor does not imply any devotion or supremacy but points towards the person being a good example for other Christians.

Therefore, as much as there are distinctions between these two worldviews, they share some similarities. The belief in life beyond the grave and the notion that that life is everlasting is the common ground which missionaries could have searched to find, for there is no doubt that Christianity, in its mission, can still tap into the indigenous knowledge system as espoused by ATR(s). This is an important point because the ATR(s) in strong or diluted form still live within African Christianity. Contributions made by the ATR(s) may help in shaping both mission and missiology in the post-colonial era. The notion of life after death would help in making Christianity relevant to Africans by addressing their hopes and fears. In this case, the understanding of life after death can build on what already exists and at the same time it will allow space for a contextual African Christianity (and mission) which will always connect with its own past (or “depth” or “inside”) and negotiate the continuing role and place given to (or received from) ancestors. We can therefore conclude that our dead are not dead.

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