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The Nicene Creed in Martin Thornton's ascetical theology: Re-imaging Anglican spirituality in Africa

ABSTRACT

African Anglicans have sought to contextualise their Christian faith beyond its colonial influence, by reinterpreting their faith, tradition, and practice in authentic African ways, while remaining faithful to their Anglican heritage. This article highlights the Nicene Creed in Martin Thornton's ascetical theology and explores what contributions it might make towards a meaningful and contextual Anglican spirituality in Africa. An abridged version of Architectonic Theology is employed as the research methodology, beginning with an exploration of current African Anglican spirituality. The article then investigates the elements of the Nicene Creed in Thornton's theology. The third step highlights theological principles for a meaningful Anglican spirituality in Africa extrapolated from the Nicene Creed in Thornton's ascetical corpus. The significance of this research project provides a contextual spirituality grounded in the Nicene Creed for Anglicans in Africa that is indicative of inculturation that promotes personal, spiritual renewal, and community transformation.

1. INTRODUCTION

What does an Anglican priest, Martin Thornton (1915-1986),[1] ministering in the most Western part of England, an ancient creed from Nicaea,

1 For a concise biography of Martin Thornton, see Dallman (2015:61-64).

now known as İznik in Turkey, and Anglican spirituality in Africa, have to do with one another? An Anglican priest myself, I picked up a copy of Thornton's *English spirituality* and soon discovered in his preface that he had visited Umtata (Mthatha) in the Transkei.

I grew up in Umtata sometime after he had visited. Reading about his experience in the Transkei (now part of the province of the Eastern Cape, South Africa) in the first pages in a book on English spirituality was utterly surprising, but I immediately felt a deep sense of a kindred spirit in Thornton.

While my memory of the place remains rather romantic, as I left Umtata at the age of 10 to live in Gqeberha (previously, Port Elizabeth), Thornton offers critical insight into what it was like for him as a priest visiting the Anglican Church there. He writes how, when he visited the Umtata cathedral, the *Book of common prayer* in English was in use and Victorian hymns were sung. This, he said, was "supremely dreadful" (Thornton 2012a:xix-xx), or "ghastly dreariness" as he calls it in his book, *Spiritual direction* (Thornton 2012b:92). This sentiment is shared by Egbubu (2022:176), as if he had read Thornton's words. Thornton then went to a nearby local parish, St Cuthberts mission, where the liturgy employed the indigenous language, isiXhosa, and traditional Xhosa music. This was followed by seminars on patristic theology at St Cuthberts. He describes this experience as "exhilarating". I do not believe that it was exciting for the Englishman purely because it was a novel experience, although indeed it would have been, but because he truly felt that the second experience was more Anglican than the first. He was enthusiastic about how St Cuthberts employed cultural adaptation and practised a liturgy that was "expressed by evolution, not stagnation, by development through cross-fertilisation, not by conservative insularity" (Thornton 2012b:92; 2012a:xix-xx).

This year, as we reflect on the 1700-year anniversary of the Nicene Creed, the fruit of the first Council of Nicaea convened to respond to the Arian heresy, I was interested to observe how Thornton engaged with the ancient creed. His work barely mentions the Nicene Creed, but after tabulating all thematic references to the Creed in all six of his books republished by Wipf and Stock Publishers, one discovers that the Nicene Creed indeed features in his work, most especially through his "threefold rule of the church". Furthermore, much of his book, *Prayer: A new encounter*, focuses on how prayer ought to be grounded in the creedal doctrines. Thornton (2012c) offers his readers a fresh framework where this enriches prayer and Christian spirituality.

This article explores the ways in which the Nicene Creed in Thornton's ascetical theology[2] might help us develop a meaningful Anglican spirituality in Africa. Egbubu (2022:178) bemoans that "[i]n many ways Anglicanism in Africa remains the face of lingering colonialism and Western culture". Yet, as Georges (2016: n.p.) explains, the Gospel of Christ needs to be "incarnated into the culture" and contextualised in local contexts without lending itself into syncretism, so that it may become meaningful for the members of these Christian communities (see Ndungane 2007:22). No doubt Thornton would agree.

I employ an abridged version of "Architectonic theology" as the methodology for this article. I define it "as an application of elementary architectural design principles to engage with categories of Systematic Theology and Biblical motifs". This approach offers a creative response to public concerns and the environment or, in this case, Anglican spirituality in Africa, in a manner that is "both functional and aesthetic". Further, architectonic theology is a theology marked by the following features, namely a biblical focus, together with a synthesis of biblical teaching, creating "a harmonious and coherent whole"; a theology that relates to culture, philosophy, history, science, psychology, and other disciplines; a theology that employs local and contemporary concepts, contexts, and language, and it has a practical focus (Erickson 1998:23-24; Falconer 2019:1-2). This methodology typically has the following methodological steps:

- Step 1: Exploration of context in the current environment.
- Step 2: Exploration of context in historical theology.
- Step 3: Construction of the foundation in exegesis and biblical motifs.
- Step 4: Construction of "order and space" in dialectic synthesis.
- Step 5: Construction of "form and aesthetics" in theology (Falconer 2019:3-8).

The current article employs Step 1 for the first section, abridges and consolidates Steps 2, 3 and 4 for the second section, and Step 5 is used for the third section. In other words, I begin by discussing current Anglican spirituality

2 By ascetical theology I do not mean a theology of austere religious practices, but rather one's deliberate choice to respond to the "love of God by training, effort and discipline, freely undertaken", as Thornton (2012a:19) explains. He continues: "Ascetical theology is grounded on the doctrine of prevenient grace. God always acts first, so there is a sense in which everything is his direct gift" (Thornton 2012a:19). It is all about Christian progress, learning to pray better in whichever situation we find ourselves (Thornton 2012a:22). It is about achieving perfection through virtuous living, self-discipline, growing in fasting, prayer, study, contemplation, solitude, chastity (not necessarily celibacy), simple living, and so on.

in Africa. Then I highlight the themes from the Nicene Creed in Thornton's ascetical theology, which include the key Nicene themes from Scripture relevant to the discussion, together with a dialectic approach between the Nicene Creed in Thornton's ascetical theology and Anglican spirituality in Africa. Lastly, I present a re-imaging of an Anglican spirituality in Africa.

2. CURRENT ANGLICAN SPIRITUALITY IN AFRICA

In his seminal work, Oden (2007) demonstrates that North Africa played a significant role in Christianity, even before the theological contributions of Europe and North America much later. Oden (2007:9-10) argues that classic Christian thought originated on African soil. However, when we talk of African Christianity nowadays, we are generally referring to Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa. Be that as it may, the conversion and baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch (Ac. 8:26-39) was arguably the first African convert to Christianity, and from there the churches in Egypt (the Coptic Orthodox Church) and Ethiopia (the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church) flourished. Africa was also home to several prominent Church Fathers such as Tertullian of Carthage, Cyprian of Carthage, Origen of Alexandria, Athanasius of Alexandria, and Augustine of Hippo (Mwamba 2009:22; see Oden 2007). However, before we explore current Anglican spirituality in Africa, we need to consider the context, starting with African traditional religion (ATR).

Ikenya-Metuh (1990:162) explains that "traditional African spirituality takes the religious view of the universe very seriously" and, while there is belief in God[3] or the supreme being as some call him, lesser deities and ancestors serve as mediators between the supreme God and human beings. Personal worship is usually directed to these entities and rarely to God himself (Ikenga-Metuh 1990:162). The goal of the traditional African in ATR is to enhance one's life, by engaging with spiritual combat with malevolent spirits, and living in harmony with God, lesser deities and spirits, the ancestors, fellow human beings, and nature (Turaki 2020:Ch. 10; see Thornton 2010a:151; Ikenga-Metuh 1990:163-164). While African traditions place value on the individual, their membership to their community – *ubuntu* – is of greater importance (Ikenga-Metuh 1990:165). However, according to Ikenga-Metuh (1990:167),

> [t]he number of taboos, purification rites, and the heavy costs of ritual obligations the average devotee has to bear is such that it is generally considered a liberating experience to become a Christian.[4]

3 Although I have capitalised "God" when referring to God in ATR, I do not necessarily hold that he is the same God as the Judeo-Christian God. This article is not the place to explore such distinctions. I have done so elsewhere.

4 See also Turaki (2020:Ch. 6).

It is not surprising then that African Independent Churches (AICs)[5] have developed a form of Christianity that is "truly Christian and truly African",[6] embracing their traditional customs and world views, according to Ikenga-Metuh (1990:151). Resane (2020:89) explains that an AIC is

> [a] Christian church founded in Africa by Africans, without missionary influence from other continents. These churches emphasize their originality and African leadership. All AICs stress the biblical basis for incorporating African cultural norms into their worship, theology, and practices, though to varying degrees. In other words, they are syncretistic, blending indigenous African religious elements with Christian beliefs to varying extents. Unlike traditional European mainline denominations, AICs do not prioritize formal doctrine, confessions, or creeds.

Although we ought to view the African contributions to African Christian spirituality with promise, it no doubt has serious shortcomings, namely syncretism that incorporates certain parts of ATR into Christianity (Ikenga-Metuh 1990:152). Nevertheless, AICs have several rites and rituals such as anointings, giving symbolic items, prostrations, and confessions that include repentance and forgiveness. These confessions are often emotional and dramatic and are usually public. Some experiences in AICs might be considered to be mystical in some sense (Ikenga-Metuh 1990:167-168).

We ought to understand Anglican spirituality in Africa within the context of ATR and AICs, together with the English Anglican identity. Anglicanism took on a unique appearance when it settled in Africa from Britain (see Egbubu 2022:174; Wabukala 2020:17). Historically, this contextual development can be noted in the 19th century in the controversy between Robert Gray, Bishop of Cape Town, and John Colenso, Bishop of Natal (1861-1873). This illustrates contrasting theological approaches within Anglicanism and its spirituality. Gray adopted a traditional orthodox stance, whereas Colenso engaged with indigenous culture in ways that anticipated later ideas of African inculturation (Pui-lan 2012:8). According to Pui-lan (2012:8), Colenso was sympathetic towards the local Zulu culture and criticised the condescending attitude of the colonial missionaries. On the other hand, he was criticised for undermining the inerrancy of Scripture and its authority. The "Colenso Affair" raised important questions with which the Anglican Communion is still grappling (see Brittain & McKinnon 2018:138; Shaw 2012:44).

5 Also called African Instituted Churches or African Indigenous Churches (Resane 2020:89).

6 Considering the practice of syncretism, in many AICs, one might argue against the notion that they are "truly Christian".

These theological tensions emphasise the ongoing effort in Anglicanism to balance authority and context, a struggle reflected in what is often called a three-legged stool comprising Scripture, tradition, and reason. Sometimes a fourth leg is added to represent experience. However, Holy Scripture has historically

> been regarded as the highest source of authority for Anglicans, and that continues to be the case for the vast majority of Anglicans in the worldwide Anglican Communion (Throup 2018:Ch. 4).

Wondra (2012:25) highlights a different approach, arranging a four-legged stool as follows: Scripture, tradition, theology, and reason. It is argued that these

> are the fundamentals of ecclesiology, and as understanding of them changes, so must ecclesiology. Otherwise, it will lose its capacity to spark imagination and vision of what Christian communities of faith might be like.

Nevertheless, Anglicanism in Africa at present continues to express these theological principles, together with an emphasis on faith in Jesus Christ and his cross, humility, forgiveness of sins, and living a righteous life. It also continues to engage and collaborate with other African Christian church expressions, some of which may have been AICs and other denominations influenced by them (Wabukala 2020:17). Anglicans would have worked to serve their communities together with Christians from other churches to proclaim the kingdom of God and its message of love and forgiveness (Wabukala 2020:17; Mwamba 2009:24).

Added to this wonderful collaboration, Anglicanism is diverse, even in Africa. Brandt (2007:34) highlights their mixed heritage in Anglo-Catholic and evangelical Anglicanism, not to mention ethnic diversity, differences in social status, political allegiance, and so on. According to Mwamba (2009:21-22), this contributes to an African Anglican identity crisis (see Egbubu 2022:175). However, a previous Metropolitan of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa and Archbishop of Cape Town, Njongonkulu Ndungane, offers us a more promising and biblical response to the African Anglican identity. He proclaims that Christ's redemptive work is the source of their identity. Ndungane (2007:22) states that their question

> 'Who am I?' is answered by the one whose name is I am, he is the ultimate identity, the ultimate reality, the ultimate fount of all being.

Despite his concerns with identity, Mwamba (2009:24) affirms a deep Anglican spirituality based on the teachings of Christ and assures us

> that Anglican Christians in Africa speak with one voice in professing that Jesus Christ is their Lord and personal Saviour.

Another feature of Anglican spirituality in Africa is *ubuntu*.[7] Ndungane points out that the Anglican prayer book has largely forged the identity of the worshipping community in the Anglican tradition, despite being a diverse company of believers who worship God. According to Ndungane (2007:24), this binds us together.

> When we are together in worship, we glimpse more fully the profound depths of the gospel-shaped concept of *ubuntu* – this beautiful Southern African word that says 'I am, because we are.'

Egbubu picks up on Thornton's concern when he visited Umtata. He mentions that the native worship styles are most natural to Anglicans in Africa. The English liturgy, together with its European hymns, church organ music, and so on, are inaccessible to the uneducated and rural converts. It does not have the same kind of "soul-stirring" impact as it does when

> the same theological truths [are] put into indigenous composition and vibrantly performed with a jubilant spirit accompanied by typical African rhythms and dance (Egbubu 2022:176).

My colleague Joynt edited and published a book titled, *Spiritual practices of South African clergy: State of the clergy* (2025), which explored the practice of spiritual disciplines within the various contexts of clergy from specific denominations in South Africa, namely the Wesleyan-Methodist, the Netherdutch Reformed, the Apostolic Faith Mission (Pentecostal), as well as the Presbyterian and Roman Catholic faith traditions. With a rich spiritual heritage in Anglicanism, I was surprised that it was not included in the publication. Nevertheless, the volume offers an insightful analysis with findings and recommendations.

This article, however, seeks to develop a meaningful Anglican spirituality in Africa, inspired by Thornton's ascetical theology and the Nicene Creed. I now turn to Thornton.

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7 Ndungane (2007:24) provides a beautiful definition: "*Ubuntu* means to live and care for others; to act kindly to one another; to be kind, just, fair, compassionate, trustworthy, honest; to assist those in need; and to uphold good morals. *Ubuntu* can only be experienced in rich, varied community. … We must share *ubuntu* with the Anglican Communion. *Ubuntu* is God's gift – how very good and pleasant it is when God's children live together in unity! It is like the precious oil upon the head. It is like the dew of Hermon. For there the Lord ordains his blessing – life for evermore (Ps. 133). *Ubuntu* is the work of Christ, who breaks down every barrier and destroys every dividing wall of hostility; reconciling and bringing peace; making us one with him and with each other (Eph. 2:17)".

3. THE NICENE CREED IN THORNTON'S ASCETICAL THEOLOGY

Thornton only makes a handful of passing references to the Nicene Creed,[8] and yet his literary corpus and ascetical theology is satiated with Nicene theology. Reflecting on "Thorntonian hermeneutics", Dallman (2015:28) notes that "[o]ur corporate prayer life, our experience, is bound up with the Creeds, with the Bible, with the Sacraments". Thornton (2012a:xv) argues that the creeds, presumably the Apostolic, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds, present

> the great themes of the faith – the Trinity, the Incarnation, Christology, the Atonement[9] – in living in pastoral terms, rather than as a series of metaphysical statements to be 'believed,' or accepted or assented to.

Dallman (2015:38) explains that

> at the heart of the Thorntonian relationship between prayer and the doctrine of the Trinity is what he (Thornton) calls 'the threefold *Regula*'.

The *Regula* or rule plays a profound role in Thornton's ascetical theology, since he views this as essential to catholic spirituality, which includes the Divine Office *(opus Dei),* specifically the morning and evening prayers. It could include other prayer services, private prayer (*orations peculiares*), and the Mass, which in a sense consummates the Divine Office and personal prayer (Peters 2024; Dallman 2015:38-39; Thornton 2012a:76; see Benson 2010). Thornton (2010b:17) thinks poetically of

> the Eucharist as the living heart of the Body of Christ, of the Office as its continual beat, its pulse, and private prayer as the circulation of the blood giving life and strength to its several members.

Peters (2024:Ch. 1) argues that Thornton notes several beneficial characteristics of the threefold rule, namely that

> it is a combination of both variable and invariable practices; it has a subjective-objective balance alongside an immanent-transcendent balance and an individual-corporate balance.

Before moving to this threefold vision of Anglican spirituality, let us explore Thornton's insights, in order to delineate the larger contours of spirituality from an Anglican perspective. The rule offers us

8 For example, Thornton (2012c:35, 40; 2012a:226).

9 These are the primary ascetical doctrines of ascetical theology (Thornton 2012a:37).

> a system of prayer which translates all the clauses of the Creed into practical terms and manifests a living faith in them (Thornton 2012a:77).

The fourfold structure of the Nicene Creed aligns with this threefold rule of the church:

1. *We believe in one God.* The Nicene Creed begins with the affirmation of the doctrine of the Trinity.[10] Thornton (2010b:17) proclaims that the growth and health of a Christian believer's prayer life depends on a triune understanding of God as the "One Holy and undivided Trinity", the transcended Father, the Incarnate Son, and the indwelling Holy Spirit. The next line of the Creed tells us of the Father who is almighty,[11] that is, majestic and transcendent (Thornton 2010a:194; 2010b:6). Speaking of the Father's nature as being almighty is to speak of his aseity. "His being grounded in Himself; they spoke of God's infinity in space and time, and therefore of God's eternity" (Barth 1966:46). Our approach to the Father, as Thornton explains, is usually objective and intellectual, and while we might adore him, without the Son and Spirit, we "might sink to a legalistic moralism" (Thornton 2010a:194). It is primarily in this instance that our discipline of the Divine Office comes in as an objective offering of praise to the Father, through the Son, and in the Holy Spirit.[12] The focus is on the transcendence of God the Father. The Office is the daily prayer of the church, and thus it is corporate (communal or *ubuntu*), even when it is recited in solitude. The Divine Office is never a private affair (Thornton 2012a:274; 2012d:66).

2. *We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ*. The next part of the Nicene structure centres on Jesus Christ, the Son of God,[13] and his perfect sacrifice that was made for our salvation.[14] The Eucharist, Thornton argues, is an extension of Christ's incarnation and atoning work on the cross.[15] He is "our central ascetical focus" as the mediator (1 Tm. 2:5) and "unifying principle" between the transcendent objective reality, God the Father, and the subjective reality, God the indwelling Spirit. While the Father and the Holy Spirit are invisible[16] and omnipotent,[17] God the Son can be seen and grasped (Thornton 2010a:202, 220),[18] in both his incarnation and the Holy

10 Mt. 3:16-17; 28:19; Jn. 14:16-17; 15:26; 2 Cor. 13, 14; 1 Pt. 1:2.
11 Gn. 17:1; Ex. 6:3; 2 Cor. 6:18; Rv. 4:8.
12 See Eph. 2:18.
13 Mt. 3:17; Jn. 3:16-18, 5:25.
14 Eph. 1:7; 1 Jn. 1:7; Rev. 1:5; Heb. 10:10-12, 14, 9:12.
15 Lk. 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 10:16; Jn. 6:51-56.
16 Jn. 1:18; 1 Tm. 6:16.
17 Job 42:2; Jr. 32:17; Mt. 19:26.
18 Jn. 1:15, 20:27; Mk. 6:56; 1 Jn. 1:1.

Eucharist, or Mass, where we come to worship him (Thornton 2012a:274). In this instance, worship of Jesus finds particular corporate expression (Thornton 2010b:18).[19] The Eucharist is a re-enactment of Christ's passion, which also points to his incarnation (Thornton 2012d:47) and brings us nearer to the saints and the angelic host. While we might be separated, we find ourselves on the same "universal plane", as Thornton explains. The Eucharist "is a manifestation of his (Christ's) Presence rather than a vehicle that arranges it" (Thornton 2012d:18).

3. *We believe in the Holy Spirit.* According to Ronald (2013:Ch. 9), the early Christians found it difficult to understand and develop a theology of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, he was the last of the persons of the Trinity to receive a developed doctrine. Thornton, however, finds no problem in locating the Holy Spirit, at least in his ascetical theology in personal private prayer. The Spirit is immanent, that is, he dwells in both the church and the lives of believers.[20] He was sent to us as the comforter (Jn. 14:26; Paraclete) and embodies subjective religious experiences (Thornton 2010a:194; 2012a:274-275; Barth 1966:137). We have seen how the Divine Office is associated with God the Father, and how the Eucharist is centred on the Son, Jesus Christ. In this instance, the Holy Spirit inspires and directs private prayer (Rm. 8:26-–27; Thornton 2010b:17-18).

   And so, we have Thornton's threefold rule, namely Divine Office, Eucharist, and private prayer, mirroring transcendence-mediation-eminence. This, in turn, "points to the unity of the three-fold church; Triumphant-Expectant-Militant" (Thornton 2010b:23). This brings us to the last part of the fourfold structure of the Nicene Creed.

4. *We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.* This part is unique, because it is not a member of the Trinity and is thus excluded from the rule. Thornton (2012a:275) proclaims that the threefold rule nevertheless,

> [e]mphasizes our membership of the threefold Church; our real communion with the saints and with the Church Expectant. It prevents 'earth-bound' religion and, coupled with the Kalendar (*sic*), forges a sacramental relation, not only between matter and spirit but also between time and eternity; It thus perfects our prayer by making it part of the prayer of Christ to the Father. The Office in particular gives pastoral expression to the unity of the Church Militant. It is that which binds individual Christians into a corporate whole, thus expressing what Baptism and the Eucharist create.

19 This is not to mean that worship of Jesus Christ cannot be done asides from a Eucharistic celebration or in private, to the contrary.

20 Rm. 8:9; 1 Cor. 3:16, 6:19; Eph. 2:22.

The rule of the church keeps the local church alive and provides a "creative channel of grace within a community" (Thornton 2012a:276). Thornton (2010a:59) provides a helpful illustration, "the Church is truly Apostolic", because the apostles were its seed, in a similar way that a plant may be considered a seed in its developed form, or an adult is an infant in a developed form.

Thornton argues that, while Christians might adhere faithfully to the Nicene formulae of the Trinity, no matter how loyal we are to the trinitarian theology of the creeds, we naturally tend towards viewing the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three separate divine beings. This is true, especially when the doctrine of the Trinity is notoriously difficult to grasp. Thornton asserts that the experience of God must, therefore, be "trinity-in-unity, transcendent, immanent, mediatorial" (2010a:192). In this way, a person may maintain orthodox trinitarian belief and experience the Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in a manner that leads to a "unified experience of the undivided Trinity" (see Dallman 2015:38-40; Thornton 2010a:192-193; 2012b:68). This finds expression in the Eucharist-Office-private prayer framework forming "one whole balanced organic life" (Thornton 2010b:18). In addition to the fourfold structure of the Nicene Creed, Thornton highlights other Nicene elements in his writings, namely creation, redemption, incarnation and atonement, resurrection and ascension, worship, and baptism.

- *Creation.* I have already identified that the first person of the Trinity is associated with transcendence, he is "the Father, the Almighty, *maker* of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen" (my emphasis) and then speaking of the only Son of God, who is "of one Being with the Father; *through him all things were made"* (Nicene Creed; my emphasis). Thornton (2010a:194) proclaims that the "word 'God' immediately suggests the notion of the Father as omnipotent Creator and supreme Being".[21] The primary distinction between God in ATR and the Christian God is Christ. Even Thornton picks up on this explaining that Christ Jesus is revealed to us through the Holy Scriptures (which are obviously absent in ATR), the Sacraments, and creation. These reveal Christ in various ways, providing us with a fuller understanding of who God is in Christ (Thornton 2012a:113). The revelation of Christ in creation is twofold. First, his participation in creation as the creator,[22] and secondly, his participation in the created order itself through his incarnation as a man.[23]

21 Incidentally, though Thornton means nothing of it, "supreme being" is a common reference to God in Africa; Gn. 1:1; Neh. 9:6; Is. 40:28.

22 Jn. 1:1-3; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16-17; Heb. 1:2-3.

23 Mt. 1:18, 20-21; Jn. 1:1, 14; Gl. 4:4; Phlp. 2:5-8; 1 Tm. 3:16.

- *Redemption.* The Nicene Creed affirms that "[f]or us and for our salvation he (our Lord, Jesus Christ) came down from heaven".[24] Ortiz and Keating (2024:105) point out that this highlights three elements. First, *those* who will receive Christ's atoning work, "us". Secondly, the purpose of his atoning work, "for our salvation", and thirdly, "the opening act of that work", that is, that he came down from heaven.[25] Thornton (2010a:194) provides another perspective, although not in contradiction to Ortiz and Keating:

  > If God is immediately apprehended as the Incarnate son, a sense of communion, *rapport,* and finally love will be the forefront of the soul's experience. Such a soul is likely to be widely sacramental, probably imaginative and meditative rather than intellectual, and possessed of instinctive understanding of sin and redemption.

  This understanding and reliance on God necessitates an acceptance of original sin and, in turn, our actual sin, and therefore, a dependence on redemption provided by the Incarnate Son. Jesus achieves redemption by his triumph on the cross, according to Thornton (2010b:7),[26] and Christ has the power to do so, because he is perfect God and perfect man (see Ratzinger 2000:230-235).[27]

  > [T]his redemption is the source of our identity – our true names, our true roots, our true role in life … Even now, though we see in a mirror dimly, the light of Christ's redemption is already shining (Ndungane 2007:22).

- *Incarnation and atonement.* Christ Jesus was made incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the blessed Virgin Mary and was made man,[28] according to the Nicene Creed (see Thornton 2010b:8-9). Then we are told that "for our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate".[29] The two go together, both in the Creed and in Thornton's ascetical theology. The atoning work of Christ is implied in the words "For our sake", also found in 2 Corinthians 5:21:

  > *For our sake* (ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν) he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (ESV; my emphasis).

24 Jn. 3:13, 16-17, 38; Phlp. 2:6-8.
25 1 Tm. 1:15; Heb. 2:14.
26 Jn. 12:31-32; Col. 2:13—5; Heb. 2:14-15; Rv. 5:9-10.
27 See Anselm of Canterbury's (2016) *Cur Deus Homo*; (Jn. 1:1, 14, 10:30; Col. 2:9; Phlp. 2:6; Tt. 2:13; Heb. 1:3.
28 Mt. 1:18, 20, 22-23; Jn. 1:14; Gl. 4:4; Phlp. 2:6-7.
29 Mt. 27:24-26; Mk. 15:15; Lk. 23:23-25; Jn. 19:16.

The mention of Jesus' crucifixion and vicarious sacrifice is evidently the means of Christ's atoning work (Thornton 2010a:30), as we read in 1 Peter 2:24:

> He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed[30] (ESV).

Thornton views the church and its sacraments as an extension of Christ's incarnation and atonement. Thornton (2010a:29) argues that

> the life and function of the Church must follow the same pattern, the same overall principles, that are to be found in the earthly life of Jesus.

It is not surprising then that he expects our ascetical patterns to "grow out of the application of the fundamental Christian doctrines of Incarnation, Atonement and the Holy Trinity" (Thornton 2010a:138).

- *Resurrection and ascension.* After Christ's atoning work on the cross, the Nicene Creed declares that he rose on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures[31] and ascended into heaven to the right hand of the Father.[32] Thornton (2012b:75) affirms that, because of Jesus' resurrection and ascension, we will ascend and enjoy resurrection with him,[33] highlighting the end of the Creed: "We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come".[34] The incarnation and the atoning work on the cross, and the reconciling humanity to God all lead to resurrection and ascension (Thornton 2010a:30).
- *Worship.* The third part of the fourfold structure of the Nicene Creed teaches that together, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are worshipped and glorified.[35] Thornton (2012a:276) argues that the rule of the church promotes spiritual health which helps resolve a series of paradoxes, synthesising the objective and subjective parts of the faith, along with "the speculative and affective, discipline and freedom, the quest for grace and the use of free will". It engages with the entire person, body, mind, and spirit, and reason, imagination, and emotion, and so on. Through the rule, the whole person worships God.

30 See Rm. 8:32; Gl. 3:13; 1 Jn. 3:16.
31 Lk. 24:6-7, 24:46; Ac. 10:40; 1 Cor. 15:3-4.
32 Lk. 24:50-51; Ac. 1:9-11, 2:32-33; Mk. 16:19; Rm. 8:34.
33 Rm. 6:4-5; Eph. 2:4-6; Col. 2:12, 3:1.
34 Jn. 5:28-29, 6:39-40; 1 Cor. 15:20-22; 1 Th. 4:16-17.
35 See Mt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14; Rv. 4:8-11.

- *Baptism.* Finally, the Nicene Creed acknowledges "one baptism for the forgiveness of sins", which is consistent with the teaching of the New Testament,[36] only that the New Testament also associates baptism with

  > the reception of the Holy Spirit; salvation; participation in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; and incorporation into the body of Christ on earth (Ronald 2013:Ch. 13).[37]

  Consistent with his Anglicanism, Thornton (2012a:101) also picks up on the notion that "we are incorporated into Christ at Baptism, that we share in his Sacred Humanity"[38]. Despite our own efforts, through the sacrament of baptism, we can be assured of God's grace[39] and that we are raised in supernatural life (Thornton 2010b:66, 131).[40]

Thornton's ascetical theology is deeply trinitarian, and he is clearly conscious of the theological statements in the creeds, notably the Nicene Creed, and develops his theology and praxis accordingly. With Thornton's contribution in mind, we can proceed and construct a meaningful Anglican spirituality in Africa inspired by the Nicene Creed.

4. RE-IMAGING AN ANGLICAN SPIRITUALITY IN AFRICA

With the shift in Christianity from the West to Africa, it is not unlikely that, currently, the vast majority of Anglicans are African. Theological diversity has always been an identity of Anglicanism, and this is no different for Anglicanism in Africa, especially when it sought to understand itself in its own spiritualities, cultural contexts, and traditions (see Bujo 2006:70). It is, therefore, beneficial to contextualise Anglicanism in Africa beyond its colonial imperatives in a way that is meaningful towards African Christian spiritual formation and yet acknowledges the global Anglican distinctives, and Christian orthodoxy (Egbubu 2022:175; Ikenga-Metuh 1990:151). The question is: How might Anglicanism take Africa seriously without falling into syncretism (Mburu 2019:8-9; Kunhiyop 2012:xiii-xv). I believe that the answer is to address African realities while embodying the Nicene Creed together with an ascetical application of the church's threefold rule (Mburu 2019:5-8; Georges 2016; see Ikenga-Metuh 1990:152). The following is an example of what that might look like, at least in part.

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36 Mk. 1:4; Ac. 2:38, 22:16; Eph. 4:5.

37 Mk. 16:16; Ac. 2:38; Rm. 6:3-4; Col. 2:12; 1 Cor. 12:13; Gl. 3:27; Eph. 4:5.

38 Jn. 6:53-56, 15:5.

39 Eph. 2:8-9; Tt. 3:5; Rm. 5:15.

40 Rm. 6:3-4; Col. 2:12; 1 Pt. 1:3.

1. *Holism and the threefold rule.* The regula in Anglican worship enjoys both objective and subjective aspects, ensuring a holistic approach to Christian spirituality. In other words, it engages the entire person, body, and spirit. This threefold rule highlights the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the unity of the threefold church (triumphant, expectant, and militant) shaping our spiritual life on earth, not only forming a holistic balance life in the Eucharist, the Daily Office, and private prayer, but also addressing the African concept of holism, the intertwining realities of the spiritual and the physical (Ikenga-Metuh 1990:162). This structured framework acknowledges that the spirit world is not an abstract notion, but a day-to-day living reality.

2. *Ubuntu and the Daily Office.* The threefold rule forms the structure of Peters' book, *Anglican spirituality*. He argues that "[o]ver the centuries the collective nature of the Christian faith has eroded into an unhealthy individualism". Yet, he points out that Anglican spirituality seeks to resist individualism and instead strives towards keeping "a balance between the corporate and the individual and the subjective and the objective". Peters (2024:Ch. 5) asks probing questions such as "Does Anglican spirituality contribute to the building up of the catholicity of the Christian faith?" and "Does it enable the church to accomplish her divine mission?". His book argues that it does. Furthermore, as Thornton argues, the Daily Office emphasises belief in one God, specifically God the Father, that is not to say that the persons of the Son and the Holy Spirit are absent from the Office; they are not. Of course, we recite the Nicene Creed that tells us about the Father who is almighty, that is, majestic and transcendent. The Daily Office is also said within the context of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, whether they are said with others in person or privately on one's own. Either way, it is not a private affair. Instead, it unites individual Christians, binding them into a corporate whole.

   Communal prayer from an Anglican tradition when compared to the African perspective is nothing short of *Ubuntu*: "I am, because we are", reflecting the communal nature of African life and faith (Mburu 2019:37; Ndungane 2007:24). It provides a spirituality of communal belonging. The Daily Office is not merely a private ritual; rather, it provides strength, renewal, and transformation for ourselves and for the Christian community. Like *Ubuntu*, we grow and are nurtured in this liturgical and praying community.

3. *Sacrifice and eucharistic spirituality.* The Nicene themes (incarnation, atonement, and redemption) of our Lord, Jesus Christ, are all explicit in the Anglican Eucharist. As Thornton (2010a:220) argues, the Eucharist is an extension of Christ's incarnation and atoning work on the cross. The Eucharist is central to worship and community life and has a profound

relationship to Christ's sacrifice in Anglican theology (Peters 2024:Ch. 3). It is not a repetition of Christ's sacrifice, as Article XXXI of the Thirty-Nine Articles states:

> The Offering of Christ once made is that perfect redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction, for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual; and there is none other satisfaction for sin, but that alone.

However, the Eucharist is a "sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving". It is the church's sacramental participation in Christ's one, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, where believers are united with Christ and receive the benefits of his saving grace. McDermott (2024:148) explains,

> [a]ccording to historic church teaching, in the Eucharist, we are lifted up out of linear time and placed into sacramental time, where we become contemporaries of Jesus in his passion and resurrection … in this sacrament we participate in Christ's present offering of his own life (Rm. 5:10) and passion to the Father for the sake of his body, the church. This is why the letter to the Hebrews speaks of Jesus 'now' appearing 'in the presence of God on our behalf" (Heb. 9:24) with his blood sacrifice of himself (Heb. 9:14, 26). In the enacted drama of the Eucharist, the church not merely remembers Christ's past redemption but mysteriously participates in its ongoing enactment. The past becomes present.

The mediation of Christ is, therefore, made present in the Eucharist. The celebration of an Anglican Eucharist shares the following notable touch points with ATR:

- *Mediation and intercession.* Sacrifice in ATR usually requires the mediation of intermediaries such as the ancestors, spirits, traditional priests, diviners (*e.g.* Sangomas), traditional healers, chiefs, rainmakers, and so on (Agbonkhianmeghe 2008:22; Mbiti 1975:153-164; 1989:67-71). In the Eucharist, however, the priesthood of all believers offers intercession, led by the priest, while Christ Jesus remains the sole mediator (Turaki 2006a:39-45).
- *Blood in the sacrifice.*

  > Blood plays a significant symbolic role in traditional African life in general. Ritual sacrifices and the use of blood are believed to empower those who perform them. The Sacrificed meat or food is eaten in a prescribed manner, and so is the blood (Turaki 2006b:92, 93).

  Wine is consecrated as Jesus' blood in the Eucharistic prayer.

- *Sacrificial language*. While ATR has no set or written sacrificial language in its practices, it no doubt uses such language. Sacrificial language, on the other hand, is found in the Eucharistic liturgy, evident for example in the preparation of gifts (offertory), the eucharistic prayers, the *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God), and the post-communion prayer in the conclusion.
- *Communal participation.* Sacrificial ceremonies are usually communal ceremonies in ATR. Likewise the Eucharist is celebrated before a congregation of believers.
- *Spiritual presence.* A spiritual presence usually accompanies ritual sacrifices in ATR, whether they are offered to God,[41] the ancestors, spirits, or lesser deities. Whilst acknowledging a diversity of perspectives in Anglicanism, it is generally understood that Jesus is truly present in the Holy Eucharist, often referred to as "real presence".
- *Sacred space and time.* African culture is diverse (Mwamba 2009:21-22). Generally speaking, sacrifices take place in certain sacred places at certain times. Likewise, the Eucharist is usually celebrated in a chapel, parish, or cathedral, but there are exceptions such as, for example, at the bedside of an ill person. The priest may celebrate the Eucharist any time, but it is almost always celebrated on Sundays, the Lord's Day.

4. *Ritual and sacramental imagination.* ATR has no shortage of rituals that are usually enacted through sacrifices, offerings, liberations, divination rituals, rites of passage, and cleansing rituals to bring about spiritual change (Mbiti 1975:20). Some of these rituals may include mystical experiences (Ikenga-Metuh 1990:167). The purposes of ATR rituals are to communicate with the unseen spiritual world, seek healing and protection, mark the stages of life (*e.g.* the initiation of male circumcision into adulthood), thanksgiving, seeking blessings, and restoring harmony (Ikenga-Metuh 1990:164).[42] Like the rituals of ATR, the sacramental rituals make use of music and liturgical expression. These rituals along with sacrifices are usually burdensome for the individual. In fact, Ikenga-Metuh (1990:167) writes:

> The number of taboos, purification rites, and the heavy costs of ritual obligations the average devotee has to bear is such that it is generally considered a liberating experience to become a Christian.

The primary sacraments, the Eucharist and baptism, provide a rich tradition of Christian ritual in the Anglican Church, along with the sacramental rites, confirmation, marriage, ordination, confession and absolution, and

41 Supreme being as he is sometimes called in ATR (Mbiti 1989:58-60).

42 Incidentally, Thornton (2010a:3, 31, 125, 159-161, 170, 177) talks about this from an Anglican perspective in his *Pastoral theology*.

anointing of the sick. Not to mention the various festivals, services, prayers and blessings. Sacraments are not simply private rituals; they are a means of grace offering the Christian community vital strength and renewal. Living out the sacramental life is deeply imaginative, especially when it provides us with a tangible way of understanding sin and redemption. Baptism, for example, joins us to Christ, uniting us with other believers, as the Nicene Creed states: "one baptism for the forgiveness of sins". Egbubu (2022:175) points out that "[t]he Anglican Church's practice of infant baptism finds affinity with African communal life".

5. *Vital force and the power of the immanent Spirit.* The vital (life) force is a significant concept in ATR. It is the spiritual power that sustains life and all that exists and it weaves everything together into a connected manner, both physical and spiritual. It is a dynamic force that promotes the fulness of being. Yet, it is an impersonal force (see Bujo 2006:81; Turaki 2006b:89-90, 93-95). The Nicene Creed, on the other hand, proclaims: "We believe in the Holy Spirit". Unlike the vital force, the Holy Spirit is a person and is the Lord and giver of life (Job 33:4; 1 Cor. 3:17; Jn. 6:63). He is immanent and dwells with the church and in every Christian believer. Prayer is a spiritual act, so the Holy Spirit also empowers us in our life and our personal prayer (Rm. 8:26-27; Eph. 6:18; Jude 1:20).

6. *Ancestorhood and the resurrection.* The ancestral cult is a primary aspect of ATR in many African cultures. However, Agbonkhiamneghe (2008:75) points out that

> [t]his does not mean that all Africans form the same concept of ancestor. Divergent concepts of the meaning and role of ancestors exist among the vast and complex cultural entities of the continent.

Generally, if one dies after having lived a good moral, social, and faithful life in one's community, one is promoted to ancestorhood. It is said that the ancestors are the "living-dead", and that they apparently continue to live among their community until the last of the living forgets them. Then they transition to the nebulous abode of spirits of which nothing is known (Mbiti 1989:2526). The Nicene Creed, however, provides a far more hopeful reality: "We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come." This hope is filled with imagination and expectation as we read in 1 Corinthians 15, not to mention that our Lord Jesus Christ has already been bodily resurrected as an example of what we might expect in our resurrection. According to Ikenga-Metuh (1990:167), the idea of rising to new life in Christ appeals to many African Christians (see Agbonkhianmeghe 2008:111). Added to this is the hope of the world to come, paradise, and the renewed creation.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

After an orientation to Martin Thornton, I presented a brief overview of the current situation of spirituality in Africa and reflected on Anglican spirituality on the continent, for which there has been, regrettably, a paucity of academic work. The omission in Joynt's (2025) recent publication, *Spiritual practices of South African clergy: State of the clergy*, is a case in point. Inspired by Thornton's ascetical theology and the Nicene Creed, this article sought to show how Anglican spirituality, if appropriated contextually, may indeed be meaningful to Africans. I did this first, by drawing out the themes of the Nicene Creed from Thornton's work, indicating that, while he rarely references the Creed itself, his theology is certainly anchored in the Nicene Creed. This was achieved by mapping out Thornton's theology on the threefold rule of the church onto the fourfold structure of the Nicene Creed and analysing how they align with one another.

Secondly, I developed six dialectic themes from Thornton and the Nicene Creed and explored how they address African spirituality. These themes included holism and the threefold rule; *Ubuntu* and the Daily Office; sacrifice and eucharistic spirituality; ritual and sacramental imagination; vital force and the power of the immanent Spirit, as well as ancestorhood and the resurrection. This pointed out that Thornton's ascetical theology and his threefold rule of the church – the Eucharist, the Daily Office, and personal prayer – along with the Nicene Creed, in dialogue with African spirituality, provide us with a rich opportunity to reimagine an Anglican spirituality in Africa, in a way that explains the Gospel of Christ in a manner that is "incarnated into the culture" and contextualised in local contexts without lending itself to syncretism (Georges 2016).

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