

# The Language of Faith in Southern Africa

Spirit World,  
Power,  
Community,  
Holism



Hermen Kroesbergen

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Volume 6

**The Language of Faith  
in Southern Africa**  
**Spirit World, Power, Community, Holism**



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Volume 6

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## Spirit World, Power, Community, Holism

Hermen Kroesbergen



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## Research Justification

The aim of this book is to provide a way to do justice to an African language of faith. In systematic theology, anthropology and philosophy of religion, similar debates about how to interpret an African language of faith are ongoing. Trying to avoid the 'othering' discourses of past generations, scholars are careful to take seriously what people in Africa say without portraying people's beliefs as weird or backward. Yet, in their desperate attempts to avoid othering, these theologians, anthropologists and philosophers often painfully misconstrue a language of faith in Africa. Understanding the language of faith in Southern Africa is not an easy task. How should we take seriously the form of language that often seems so strange and different? Two schools of interpreting the African language of faith can be found in theology, anthropology and philosophy alike. On the one hand there are 'critical realists', who interpret references to the spirit world etc. as metaphors, and on the other hand there are 'postmodernists', who interpret these references as straightforwardly describing the reality in which people in Africa live. These two schools are both mistaken in interpreting African references to the spirit world as descriptions of the world. Proper attention to how this language is used shows that references to the spirit world are in fact responses to the world. I demonstrate this using the descriptive parts of African theology, anthropology and my personal experiences in Zambia as source material, and applying to it a Wittgensteinian philosophy of language which pays special attention to the meaning of a language of faith as it is constituted in peoples' day-to-day lives. I argue that, after African inculturation theology and black liberation theology, a better way to make sense of being a Christian in Southern Africa is to pay close attention to people's language of faith. The way in which people speak of the spirit world or powers in Africa appears strange to outsiders, and the sense of community and the holistic worldview differentiates the African way of life from its Euro-American counterparts. I show that when proper attention is paid to the use of concepts like spirit world, power, community and holism, language of faith in Southern Africa is neither as strange as it may seem, nor as romantic. By investigating these distinguishing concepts that colour language of faith in Southern Africa, this book contributes to future projects of both fellow theologians who try to construct a contemporary African theology and those who are interested in theology in Africa given the well-known southward shift of the centre of gravity of Christianity. These theologians are the primary target audience of this book. The questions I raise about the nature of faith in the twenty-first century, however, also have implications for wider discussions within systematic theology, anthropology of Africa and philosophy of religion. I declare that this entire study contains original research and no part of the book was plagiarised from another publication or published elsewhere.

**Hermen Kroesbergen**, Department of Dogmatics and Christian Ethics, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa



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# List of abbreviations appearing in the text

AICs	African Initiated Churches
ATR	African Traditional Religions
CCTV	Closed Circuit Television
CMs	Charismatic Ministries
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
UCZ	United Church of Zambia
USA	United States of America



# Biographical note

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From 2011 to 2017 my wife and I have had the privilege to lecture at Justo Mwale University in Lusaka, Zambia. It has been a wonderful time. I thank all the students, our colleagues and all the other people we met in Zambia for their warmth and openness and for allowing us to share their lives. It has been so interesting and I have learnt so much! This book is the result of my reflections upon and conversations about being a Christian in Southern Africa and how I can make sense of that coming from such a different context as the Netherlands.

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# The language of faith in Southern Africa

## ■ Introduction

‘Whose Christianity is normal now? And whose will be in fifty years time?’ asks theologian Philip Jenkins (2006:17), paraphrasing his Gambian colleague Lamin Sanneh. Asked like that, the answer to the latter question should be *African Christianity*. Demographically, during the past century, Christianity has shifted to the south. In 2000, the centre of gravity – the geographical point at which there live an equal number of Christians in the north, south, east and west – was Timbuktu in Mali and is still moving southwards (Johnson 2004:179). African Christianity is the new heart of Christianity. But what does African Christianity look like? What is its theology? If the future is African Christianity, then it seems that world Christianity is going ‘back to the future’. African Christianity is often portrayed as highly conservative and backward (cf. Jenkins 2006:1-17). For six years my wife and I have been teaching at a theological university in Africa, sharing our experiences with our sending church in the Netherlands. The opinions about Africa that

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we encountered during our meetings in congregations in the Netherlands often contained the word 'still' – 'in Africa people *still* believe in witchcraft, in an active spirit world, in magic and powers in words and things' or, 'in Africa people *still* have community, a sense of connectedness, vibrant new churches and an inclusive, holistic worldview'. Africa is seen as a continent that has what people in Europe used to have – both the bad and the good – and I must say that our students and colleagues in Zambia did not discourage that view. They did not deny that they believed in witchcraft, the spirit world and all kinds of special powers; in fact, they emphasised over and over again that it is all real and tried to convince us with many stories. Concerning the importance of community, the vibrancy of the church and the holistic worldview, they took pride in that, and many considered it to be a gift from Africa to the world. So, is the future of the church to go back to the beliefs and community that Europe once had, via Africa? In this book, I wish to challenge this idea, not so much because of the problematic evolutionary perspective, but because of the assumptions about what it is to believe in something like the spirit world and what it is to be a community.

The evolutionary perspective has often been criticised and rightfully so. It is arrogant and neo-colonial to assume that other cultures will go where Europe and the United States of America (USA) have gone. It is questionable whether contemporary beliefs in Africa and earlier beliefs in Europe are really that alike. It is also unlikely that other cultures will develop towards what society is like in contemporary Europe and the USA. The global revival of religion and the success of authoritarian regimes, for example, seem to point in a different direction. Notwithstanding this, I hold that there are bigger problems with the ideas that people in Africa still believe in the spirit world and powers and that they still have community and a holistic worldview than their evolutionary context.

The problems I will address in this book concern what it means to believe in witchcraft or magic. Can we even imagine what it is to believe in those things? This question applies both

to Euro-American theologians who try to prepare for the new global Christianity and to the African theologians who accept and defend that the spirit world and these powers are real. Both groups assume they know what it is to believe in such things and then try to deal with it, but I will argue that more clarity is first needed about what it means to believe in the spirit world and powers in things and words and so on. People in Africa genuinely believe in the spirit world; yet, in many respects, their lives are no different from those of Europeans who do not believe in such things. The spirit world may be very real and someone from Africa may bump into it around every corner, yet he or she is aware that his or her European friend does not bump into it around every corner. With a tree, this is different – both would bump into it in the same way. So, what is it to believe in the spirit world or not to believe in it? Similarly, what does it mean to (still) have a community? How does this fit in with the many stories from Africa about widows being robbed by their in-laws, orphans living on the street, civil wars, corruption and so on? Instead of grasping at everything positive that we can find about Africa, we need to investigate the following:

- What does community mean in an African context?
- What does it mean to be a church or ministry in Africa?
- What are the implications of a holistic worldview?

Instead of assuming that we know what it is to believe in the spirit world or what it is to have community and using these assumptions to build an African theology or a theology for what Jenkins (2002) calls the next Christendom, let us first take a step back and try to establish what believing in the spirit world and having a sense of community is. This is what I propose to do in this study. Fellow theologians who try to construct a contemporary African theology as well as those who are interested in theology in Africa, given the well-known shift in the centre of gravity of Christianity towards Latin America, Africa and Asia, are the primary target audience of this book. As renowned scholar of religion Elias K. Bongmba (2016) argues in an important recent companion to African Christianity:

The place Africa has attained in global Christianity requires new critical appreciation from scholars. Such a critical appreciation should be celebratory without being apologetic [*and*] should also raise new questions about the nature of faith in the twenty-first century. (p. 559)

Raising such new questions about the nature of faith, given the shift of the centre of gravity of Christianity to Africa, is what I aim to do in this study. As will become clear soon, the argument presented in this book also has implications for wider discussions within systematic theology, anthropology of Africa and philosophy of religion.

## ■ Two common approaches to the language of faith in Africa

When I arrived in Zambia in December 2011, the Africa Cup of Nations soccer championship was about to start. The tournament went well for Zambia and in February 2012 they were crowned champions of Africa for the first time. Zambia's success during the tournament was widely spoken about in the country – even churches could not refrain from referring to it. In fact, every Sunday pastors prayed for the country's success. They not only prayed for peace and calm among the supporters – as pastors in the Netherlands might have – but they also prayed for Zambia to win the next match and, when they won, they thanked God for Zambia's victory. Having just arrived from the Netherlands, this sounded very strange to me. Did they really think that God would intervene on their behalf? Outside of church, people complained about the juju or magic that the opponents were said to use and joked about the white shirt of the Zambian coach. After winning the first match, he continued wearing it as a kind of charm. I often wondered, do people in Zambia really believe that such things work?!

Recently, I realised that my attitude towards my Zambian fellow Christians is in many ways similar to the attitude of

my secular fellow-Dutchmen towards me as a Christian. The Netherlands is now a very secular country and, especially among my generation and the following generations, it is considered to be unusual and strange to be a Christian. Christians are often dismissed as a bit backward and silly, believing in all kinds of weird things like God, heaven, sins and so forth. Reflecting more upon it, however, such a straightforward dismissal does not work. Christians live in the same society as their secular counterparts, they live their lives in much the same way, they do not seem to be significantly less intelligent and they are well aware that their secular neighbours do not feel the Holy Spirit or see God in his creation. The case of Christians, in general, differs significantly from that of people who hear voices or suffer from hallucinations. Christians are different and strange, but they do not simply erroneously assume the existence of things that are not there. Most often, it is left at that. Christians are different – it is not exactly clear in what way – but we simply carry on. Basically, I have lived these six years with a similar attitude towards my fellow Christians in Zambia, wondering if people in Zambia really believe that soccer matches are won through prayers and magic. It sounds strange and silly to me but, then again, how was I able to share their lives for six years if they are such strange and silly people? They do not seem to be significantly less intelligent, and they are well aware that people from Europe like me do not believe in prayers and magic in that way.

I think there is something wrong with the most common approaches to these kinds of puzzles, concerning both Christians in the Netherlands and pastors in Zambia. Having experienced the situation from both sides – being considered ‘silly but then again maybe not’ and considering others that way – I wish to propose a different approach to this problem of understanding than the ones generally used in theology, anthropology and philosophy. Systematic theology, anthropology and philosophy of religion struggle to make sense of the language of faith, both in Europe and in Africa, and the same two approaches appear in all of these disciplines.

Many theologians consider themselves to be critical realists. Religious believers themselves may be certain about the realities they speak of in their language of faith, but critical realist theologians consider it their task as theologians to investigate the statements of believers as hypotheses about the ultimate reality. The language of faith should be tested and adapted in accordance with the latest state of knowledge in other areas of life and science. According to critical realists, Christians in the Netherlands experience the Holy Spirit but, actually, that is a metaphor for something like a force field in the natural sciences. Pastors in Zambia pray for their soccer team to win but, actually, that is a metaphor for raising a kind of mental power to psychologically support their team.

Other theologians question this critical realist approach. According to them – we could call them postmodernists – religious beliefs do not need to be adapted when they are in conflict with scientific statements, but they can be basic beliefs of someone's worldview. The language of faith reflects the metanarrative of the world in which believers live, and no external standard can be conceived to judge between a secular and a religious worldview. According to these theologians, Christians in the Netherlands experience the Holy Spirit, and for them that is simply reality – there is nothing miraculous about it, it is their world. Pastors in Zambia pray for their soccer team to win because in their metanarrative God straightforwardly intervenes in worldly affairs, causing one or the other team to win.

There is a huge gap between the critical realist approach and the postmodern approach that takes the religious worldview as a basic metanarrative; however, both approaches presume to know that to believe in the Holy Spirit or to pray for soccer results means that what is spoken of is somehow descriptive of something in the world out there. It must be descriptive – the words used must be a designation of some object in the world, with language as a picture of reality – and we must find out how and of what, or so it is assumed. In anthropology about Africa, we find the same assumption and the same two opposite approaches.

Some anthropologists try to understand practices in Africa that at first may seem strange to Euro-American outsiders by connecting them with practices that are more familiar. Prayers and magic in soccer can be connected with the endless debate of soccer pundits and with superstitious rituals of soccer players all over the world. Such practices indicate that the results of soccer matches remain ultimately elusive. Both the familiar practices and the practices from Africa are then interpreted as metaphorical attempts to reflect upon this elusiveness. The words and practices involved are considered to be approximating designations of an ultimately inscrutable objective reality.

However, the people involved themselves may not consider their words to be metaphors and approximations. For them, what they speak of is real. In an attempt to do justice to this latter fact, a so-called ontological turn has been proposed by another group of anthropologists. Instead of interpreting an African language of faith as metaphorical, this language should be seen as ontologically describing the reality that the people involved live in, 'Anthropologists must allow that "visions" are not beliefs, nor consensual views, but rather worlds seen objectively' (Viveiros De Castro 2011:133). If people in Africa speak of spirits influencing the results of soccer matches or of God guiding the soccer players' feet, this should be seen as part of the ontological world in which these people live. As we saw with the theologians before, both the metaphorical and the ontological approaches apply a designation-object model of language. The idea is that, in order to take someone's statements seriously, we need to consider their words as descriptions – or, at least, attempted descriptions – of particular objects in reality. In this case, the strange language I heard in churches in Zambia is either taken to be an approximation of an ever-elusive reality or this language describes in what reality people live.

In philosophy of religion, we again find similar approaches. In Continental or French philosophy, the hermeneutical or apophatic approach takes a metaphorical or critical realist stance in its critique of onto-theology, whereas the phenomenological



approach emphasises how people do not fully control their knowledge of reality but are as much grasped by and constituted by a reality beyond them – the reality described in their language is the reality in which they find themselves. In Anglo-Saxon philosophy, analytical philosophy of religion represents a critical realist approach, whereas, for example, Reformed Epistemology assumes a similar stance to that of the ontological anthropologists and the postmodern theologians.

In anthropology, systematic theology and philosophy of religion, there are similar debates going on about how to interpret, for example, an African language of faith. These debates happen both among outsiders trying to understand this language and among insiders trying to defend it. The gap between the two opposing sides in these debates is wide, yet all the approaches alluded to above share a designation-object model of language. Outsiders, for example, trying to construct a theology for the Christianity of the future feel that they must take an African language of faith to be descriptive in order to do justice to it, whereas insiders, for example, constructing an African theology using the spirit world and community as building blocks, do not question what they are. In this book, I consider the problematic underlying philosophical assumptions and show how an alternative approach is possible. Instead of shifting from a metaphorical approach to an ontological one or from a phenomenological to a hermeneutical one, a deeper shift is necessary, that is, a shift towards a different understanding of language. To do justice to the kind of reality that an African language of faith has, a different approach is necessary. African language of faith has meanings different from what seems apparent if the designation-object mould is applied. The critical part of my research concerns pointing out the shortcomings of the scholarly accounts of African language of faith referred to above, whereas the constructive part shows how paying attention to how people actually use this language opens avenues to an alternative and more adequate account of the reality implied in African language of faith.

## ■ The language of faith in Southern Africa

I heard Zambian Christians discuss among themselves the practice of praying for their national team to win. They wondered what it meant to do so if one knows that the other side will pray just as hard to the very same God. Talking to us about it, they reminded me of the octopus in 2010. I was told that their prayers and magic did not differ much from the publicity surrounding an octopus in Germany that, during the World Cup in 2010, was apparently able to predict the match results. I tried, without much success, to explain that this octopus business was nothing serious, but maybe this showed that I misunderstood their prayers and comments on magic as well. Reflecting upon this in a weblog at the time, I compared it to the game of picking petals from a flower saying 'he loves me, he loves me not' in turns. Nobody would take this as a genuine oracle predicting someone else's romantic disposition, but it is a way to deal with someone's own uncertainty about his love. In Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, I use the example of the concept of luck; if someone tells me that luck made him win this game, does this mean that he believes in the existence of some strange force out there called 'luck'? To take this person seriously, do we need to assume that 'luck' for him either metaphorically describes some elusive reality or is a force that simply exists within his metanarrative of the world? No, we do not need to assume that people who seriously and genuinely speak of luck believe in the existence of some mysterious force that happens to be untraceable for us. If we look at how people actually use language about luck, we see that people speak of luck winning them a game, when there is no force at all that makes them win. In fact, that is what it means to speak of luck. Similarly, I will argue that the meaning of references to the spirit world or to powers in things and words may remain obscure as long as we try to force this language into the mould of the designation-object model. Critical realist theologians and postmodern theologians – from both outside and inside Africa –

misconstrue African language of faith by assuming that they already know that people who seriously and genuinely speak of the spirit world must believe in the existence of some mysterious entities that happen to be untraceable to us.

In anthropology, systematic theology and philosophy of religion, similar debates about how to interpret an African language of faith are ongoing. Trying to avoid the 'othering' discourses of past generations – when people in Africa were mentally classified as 'not one of us' – scholars are careful to take seriously what people in Africa say without portraying people's beliefs as weird or backward. Yet, in their desperate attempts to avoid othering, these anthropologists, theologians and philosophers often painfully misconstrue the language of faith in Africa. To do justice to the kind of reality that an African language of faith has, a different approach is necessary. The lead question of the research in my book is, therefore, 'how do we account for the reality implied in an African language of faith?'

The three chapters that make up the first part of this book deal with aspects of the language of faith in Southern Africa that are often strange to outsiders from a Euro-American context. People in Africa regularly speak of a spirit world which they try to influence and which they assume to be responsible for everything that happens in the ordinary world. Furthermore, people in Africa appear to see power everywhere, such as in things and words, where people from a Euro-American context would not expect it. In this part, I argue that if one avoids some common but misguided assumptions about language, these aspects of the language of faith in Southern Africa are not as strange as they may seem.

In Chapter 2, I will continue discussing the meaning of prayer, in both the European and, especially, the African context. I will show how language concerning the spirit world is different from language that can be analysed with the designation-object model. In Chapter 3, differences between people who speak of the spirit world will be discussed. Being a Christian coming from the Netherlands, I do pray, also in connection with soccer

tournaments, but I would not pray for my national soccer team to win. Now, does the fact that Zambian pastors pray for victories show a difference of opinion between us? Does it mean that there is some kind of disagreement or does speaking of the spirit world work differently in this respect as well? In Chapter 4, the white shirt of the Zambian soccer coach will return. I investigate what it could mean to attribute special powers to particular objects or to particular words; speaking positively – for example, about the national soccer team – is considered to be even more important in African contexts than in Europe.

The chapters that make up the second part of this book deal with aspects of the language of faith in Southern Africa that are not so much ‘strange’ to outsiders from a Euro-American context but ‘romantic’. In Africa, it is said that people still have a sense of community that people in Europe and the USA have lost. In Africa, it is said that people are holistic; they are not burdened by all kinds of divisions and contrasts that haunt their Euro-American counterparts. In this part, I argue that one needs to look carefully at how concepts such as community and holism are used in Africa. Community in Africa – within society as well as within Christianity – means something different from community in Europe and the USA. Some challenges are resolved, but others appear. The same can be said for holism, which, in the context of faith, is most often used to refer to the blessings and salvation expected by believers. Compared to the Euro-American context, there are advantages as well as new risks – these aspects of faith in Southern Africa are not as romantic as they may seem.

In Chapter 5, discussing the meaning of community in an African context, similarities will appear between the kind of community created by a national soccer team and community in general in African society, in its organic open-endedness and continuously re-negotiated nature. Africa may (still?) have community but, in order to do justice to this concept of community, we need to be clear about its downsides as well. In Chapter 6, differences between a local soccer club and the many

vibrant new Neo-Pentecostal ministries in Southern Africa – which I will call Ministries International – will be discussed. A local soccer club consists of a group of people who are members, whereas the new Ministries International – and the older churches in response to Neo-Pentecostalism as well – are organised more like service providers. The focus is not on a group of people but more on an anointed man or woman of God and what he or she can do for you. The concept of community in this respect shifts from local congregations to the entire nation within which everyone is considered to be a Christian, whatever ministry or prophet one may frequent. Having concluded this chapter with a proposal for how to maintain unity and dialogue within such a differing ecclesial context, in Chapter 7, I discuss the often-praised holistic worldview of people in Africa, particularly concerning blessings and salvation. People in Africa do not only freely pray for their national soccer team to win; they also pray for victory in their own lives. I show how holism is not as romantic as it is often portrayed, as it easily slips into materialism; however, it is not necessarily materialistic either. The same statements may be used in expressing very different spirits, and a similar spirit may be behind very different expressions, such as that of the extravagant prosperity preacher and the humble pastor who emphasises his poverty. Often, it is not easy to differentiate between different ways in which the same words can be used. One cannot determine how someone uses his or her words by looking at those words themselves, but only by deducing this from the role that the words play in the life of this person with others. In all of the chapters of this book, I provide tools for discerning the spirit behind the language of faith in Southern Africa. Instead of assuming that we know what it is to believe in the spirit world or special powers, and what it is to have a community or a holistic worldview, we should look at how language is actually used in people's lives to try to make sense of it.

In Chapter 8, I will address the question – given all the differences that have been highlighted in this study – regarding to what extent we can still speak of one global church and where

to go from here. If we pay attention to how the language of faith is used in the lives of Christians in Southern Africa, as is encouraged throughout this book, what new possibilities and perspectives could open up for Christianity worldwide?

## ■ African theology

Traditionally, there have been two schools of theology in Africa, namely, African theology or inculturation theology north of the Zambezi and black theology or liberation theology south of the Zambezi. Both types of theology seem to be past their glory days, although their main themes – identity and justice, respectively – remain of central importance for theology in Africa (see Kroesbergen 2014a). The building of impressive systems of African theology, however, does not seem to have had much effect at the grassroots level. Many inculturation theologians have written about Jesus as an ancestor, but as the Kenyan theologian John Galgalo (2012:55) said, ‘I am yet to hear, for example, a sermon from a church pulpit that presents Christ as an African ancestor’. Liberation theologians make much of, for example, the South African Kairos document, but as post-colonial scholar R.S. Sugirtharajah quotes, the Kairos document ‘is better known in Germany than to Zulus’ (cited in Jenkins 2006:7).

In addition to the apparent ineffectiveness of these systems, theology in Africa is facing, and has been facing for a long time, an impossible choice – either it chooses to follow traditional academic theology, in which case it will take a long time and better education before they will be at the appropriate level, or it chooses to somehow be more African in both form and content, which begs the question in what way is it still theology or still recognisable as theology? In a recent compendium of theology in Africa, the author, on Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi, (Longwe 2017) encourages:

[M]ore indigenising effort. There is a need for African theological writers to produce instruction material that replaces the Western methodology of questions and answers with one of stories

and proverbs. Unless theological training becomes rooted in African culture, the African church will not be able to develop its own theology. (p. 81)

But if you replace questions and answers, or arguments, with stories and proverbs, you do not get theology; you get something else. It may be very valuable, but it is not what is currently considered as theology.

Instead of either constructing yet another African theology or abandoning the project altogether, a better way to make sense of being a Christian in Southern Africa is to pay close attention to the language of faith as it is used in this context – not grand projects but a different use of concepts is what is distinctive about theology in Africa.

As we have seen, some scholars consider spiritual language in Africa as a kind of metaphor to discuss realities for which people in a Euro-American context use their own concepts. Other scholars argue that this does not do justice to what people actually mean by their words – for them, it is real. These scholars attempt to acknowledge this by supposing that an African language of faith refers to what is ontologically true for those who use this language. I argue that both of these approaches fail to do justice to the role the language of faith plays in day-to-day life in Africa. In this book, I show that when proper attention is paid to its use, the language of faith in Southern Africa is neither as strange as it may seem nor as romantic.

## ■ Methodology

Despite the fact that this is a book in theology, most of the sources that I use are anthropological or philosophical in nature. My main aim is to show a different interpretation of the language of faith in Southern Africa. I will not use much of African theology in as far as it proposes systems of inculturation or liberation theology, as in building these systems far too often a particular

interpretation of an African language of faith is already presupposed. Inculturation theologians often assume to know what it is to believe in the spirit world and that it is real – they assume to know that community is Africa’s purely positive gift to humankind. Liberation theologians assume to know what it is that they have to liberate – after fighting colonialism and apartheid, they now fight neo-liberalism and Empire, but they do not investigate much into what the belief in the spirit world and sense of community are that they want to set free. In this book, I want to challenge the assumptions about what it is to believe in the spirit world and what it is to have community in Africa; therefore, I will merely use African theology in as far as it straightforwardly describes what is happening with an African language of faith. Parratt’s (1995:n.p.) statement from 1995 still seems to be true for African theology in its entirety, ‘in general the contributions of African scholars in the field of biblical exegesis have fallen short of their corresponding contribution to the study of African religions’. I will use African theology in as far as it provides primary source material to illustrate my different interpretations of the language of faith in Southern Africa.

The same goes for anthropology about Africa. Anthropologists often address the question of *why* people believe in, for example, the spirit world or what *consequences* this has for society. These questions miss an essential step; in asking them, anthropologists assume to know already what it *is* to believe in the spirit world. During a conference with anthropologists where I presented part of this research, one anthropologist admitted that in their work they do not even notice anymore that it is strange to believe that charcoal can suddenly turn into a corpse. In this book, I wish to challenge the certainty that we know what it is to believe in such happenings and that we can simply ascribe such beliefs to Africa. I will return to the above example in Chapter 2. Nonetheless, anthropology about Africa provides much material describing what is happening with an African language of faith and, therefore, I will be quoting a lot of anthropology throughout this book.



Together with anecdotes from my six years of living in Zambia, the descriptive parts of African theology and anthropology about Africa will provide the material I wish to interpret. The aim of this book is not so much to provide new knowledge but, rather, to propose a new way of looking at faith and its language in Southern Africa. Almost everybody will already have some idea of this phenomenon, like the congregants in the Netherlands who told us that, in Africa people *still* believe in witchcraft, in an active spirit world, in magic and powers in words and things and that in Africa people *still* have community, a sense of connectedness, vibrant new churches and an inclusive, holistic worldview. Because the aim is to provide a different interpretation of the language of faith in Southern Africa, the diversity within Southern Africa – which is surely there – will not be the main focus. I will use sources from all over Southern Africa and even from other parts of sub-Saharan Africa.

To guide my interpretation, I will use suggestions and reminders from the Wittgensteinian tradition in philosophy of religion. This school in philosophy of religion pays special attention to the meaning of the language of faith as it is constituted in peoples' day-to-day lives. By applying the Wittgensteinian approach to the religious source material from Southern Africa, I am also making a case for the value and usefulness of this approach within both philosophies of religion and systematic theology. Throughout this book, I will be addressing – implicitly and explicitly – common criticisms of the Wittgensteinian approach as well. It has been said that the Wittgensteinian approach would not provide an interpretation but a proposal for reformation – that it would not be description but prescription. Others claim that the Wittgensteinian approach would be unable to account for the reality implied in the language of faith. By offering an adequate, alternative account of the reality implied in an African language of faith, I provide a strong argument that these criticisms miss the mark.

As mentioned before, fellow theologians who try to construct a contemporary African theology and those who are interested in theology in Africa – given the well-known shift of the centre of gravity of Christianity towards Latin America, Africa and Asia – are the primary target audience of this book. Using the approach outlined in this book, they can both do better justice to the language of faith in Southern Africa and plot a way towards the future of global Christianity, beginning by taking a step back. We will start here by looking at the reality of the spirit world.



# Part One

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# The spirit world: Its reality

## ■ Introduction

Pentecostal or Neo-Pentecostal practices have become a dominant feature of almost all churches in Southern Africa. Mass prayer (a form of prayer where everyone present prays out loud simultaneously), prophecy, anointing oil and positive confession, for example, are now widely accepted by Christians in Africa. According to scholar of religion Paul Gifford (2004:x), the shift towards Pentecostalism is 'the most significant ideological reformation on the continent'. And, more recently, theologian Asamoah-Gyadu (2013) stated:

Pentecostalism has emerged as the most exciting and dominant stream of Christianity in the twenty-first century. This is especially so in the non-Western world – Africa, Asia and Latin America – which is now the heartland of world Christianity. (p. 1)

Anthropologist David Martin (2002:xvii) refers to the new wave of Pentecostalism as 'the largest global shift in the religious market place' in recent years, and his colleague Dena Freeman

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(2015:115) observes that ‘in the last 30 years there has been a massive “Pentecostal explosion”’.

Pentecostal theologian Kwame Asamoah-Gyadu (2010) explains the success of Neo-Pentecostal healing and deliverance practices by its underlying concept of ‘mystical causality’:

Many aspects of the world views underlying the practice of healing and deliverance, especially the belief in mystical causality, resonate with African philosophical thought and inform Pentecostal theology on the continent. (p. 63)

For many people in Africa, everything in life is determined by the spirit world. This means that if a person wants to get something done, he or she should try to influence the spirit world. Previously, diviners were the agents specialised in effecting changes in the spirit world. Nowadays, people can visit Neo-Pentecostal prophets as well. Elsewhere, Asamoah-Gyadu (2013:122) states, ‘Pentecostal religion in Africa is popular because it takes indigenous worldviews of mystical causality and extraordinary evil seriously’. People in Africa believe in a ‘mystical causality’ – the spirit world is seen as the cause for everything that takes place.

The Pentecostal explosion is not restricted to new churches and Ministries International, but the same spirit of Neo-Pentecostalism transforms existing churches as well. Many authors have commented upon the so-called ‘Pentecostalisation of mainline churches in Africa’ (e.g. Anderson 2013:xiv; Haynes 2015:281; Kangwa 2016). Intending to ‘keep people from leaving the missionary-established churches’ (Haynes 2015:281, referring to Cheyeka 2006), mainline churches have been forced to adapt and accommodate the spirit of Neo-Pentecostalism within their own denominations. They have found themselves challenged to ‘engage with the social, cultural, economic and political needs of the people in a way that corresponds to the African worldview’ as Zambian theologian Jonathan Kangwa (2016:11) puts it. The African worldview in this context refers in particular to the belief in the spirit world.

Scholar of religion Gerrie ter Haar (1992:119) defines the spirit world as, 'a world of invisible beings which, in the conviction of believers, can influence the lives of humans for good or evil'. What happens in the ordinary world is determined by forces from the spirit world. Renowned African theologian John Mbiti (1990:195) claims that for people in Africa there is no such thing as luck or chance, 'Nothing harmful happens "by chance"; everything is "caused" by someone directly or through the use of mystical power'. The recent shift towards Neo-Pentecostalism in Africa is often explained by the fact that Neo-Pentecostalism takes this belief in the spirit world seriously. Both anthropologists and Neo-Pentecostal theologians use this line of reasoning.

From 1960 onwards, anthropologist Robin Horton (1993) famously argued that religion in Africa, and particularly its pervasive belief in the spirit world, is about explanation, prediction and control. Despite receiving much criticism, Horton's approach is still used to account for developments in the religious landscape of Africa, such as the recent shift to Neo-Pentecostalism. Scholar of religion Paul Gifford (2004) states:

The traditional African religious imagination expects religion to perform the function (in Horton's words) of 'explanation, prediction, and control of space-time events'. The deficiencies of Western mission Christianity, which over the last few hundred years has ceased to perform this function, have led Africans to institute their AICs and more recently to turn in increasing numbers to charismatic churches, where this function is openly championed. (p. 173)

Both anthropologists and Neo-Pentecostal theologians argue that religion in Africa has always focussed on and is still focussing on explanation, prediction and control of this-worldly events (cf. Asamoah-Gyadu 2013; Burgess 2008; Faulkner 2016; Hackett 1988; Wariboko 2014). People in Africa often speak of the spirit world and of mystical causes of events and, according to these anthropologists and theologians, this must mean that they believe in spirits as some ephemeral beings and hidden



forces that explain, control and predict the world around them. In this chapter, I will argue that this perspective betrays a misunderstanding of the idea of the spirit world. In order to take references to the spirit world seriously, they do not need to be interpreted as a description of reality or an attempt to describe reality. Language may be used here in a different way.

## ■ One world

The idea of the spirit world is present in much of life in Africa, for example, in the many stories that people tell each other about witches who travel long distances in an ordinary reed basket; Satanists who cause road accidents and who, in the underworld, produce ordinary items one can buy in shops; people who can turn into animals; and so forth.

Many of these stories are quite unbelievable to listeners from a Euro-American context; but, so it is said, with the help of the spirit world, all of this is possible. Often, it is not entirely clear whether the person who tells the story him- or herself believes this particular story – it is almost always a matter of hearsay – but the stories are used to show that, *in general*, these things are real. Particular stories about the spirit world may turn out to be fabrications but, we have been told over and over again that, taken together, these stories prove that the spirit world exists and that it is responsible for everything that happens in our day-to-day lives. So, the questions – explicitly or implicitly – behind much literature on Africa remain:

- Do people in Africa really believe that some of these stories are true?
- Do people in Africa really believe that people can fly in baskets, that Coca-Cola is produced in the underworld and that people can change into animals?
- Why do they believe that and how can they believe that?

I would answer the question, ‘do they really believe that these stories about the spirit world are true?’ with a ‘yes’, if this means that I think that they are not lying. In general, people are not

wilfully trying to deceive others when they tell such stories. They are also not mistaken, in the sense that it could have been true that people can, for example, transform into animals but, as it happens, they cannot. Nor are people in Africa confused, in the sense that they are mixing up metaphorical and empirical language. Most people in Africa really believe that these stories about the spirit world are true, but we need to look at their lives to see what it *means* to believe this.

It is often difficult to find someone who would vouch for the truth of one particular story. People will say that the spirit world is real, and these kinds of things can happen, but often people are not certain about whether a specific story is true or not. This makes it harder to investigate this issue. Let us briefly consider two stories connected to the spirit world told to me by two colleagues in Zambia in a way that suggested they took these stories to be true.

One colleague told me about the bags of charcoal that one can find for sale alongside many roads in Zambia. Sometimes there are people seated next to them whom one can pay, but often the buyer is expected to leave the money for the charcoal in a tin next to the bags of charcoal and, every now and then, the seller of the charcoal will pass by to collect the money. This is obviously an easy opportunity for theft; people can take a bag of charcoal without leaving any money. Now, in order to avoid this, our colleague told me, some people use witchcraft – they put a spell over the bags of charcoal that, whenever someone takes a bag without paying for it, turns the charcoal into a corpse. The thief will arrive home and find a corpse in their bag instead of charcoal.

Another colleague told me about a pastor who used a ‘spiritual double’ to do the preaching for him on Sunday mornings. For quite some time, congregants had had the feeling that their pastor was not fully present when he was in the pulpit. His message used to be strong and powerful in the past but, of late, it felt weak and uninspired, as if he were not really there.

One Sunday morning, some congregants decided to check their theory. During the church service, they snuck out of the church and went to the pastor's mansion. They went inside and, indeed, there they found their pastor fast asleep in bed. For the past months, he had been sending a spirit form of himself to do his preaching duties for him so that he could stay in bed.

These two stories are, to me, completely unbelievable. I could not even begin to imagine that such stories could possibly be true accounts of what happened. So, were my colleagues lying? Maybe, in these particular instances, they were, or maybe they merely wanted to shock their white colleague. But, in general, most people in Africa would say that such stories *could* be true. Therefore, let us assume that these colleagues were not lying and would vouch for these particular stories; what would that mean?

I think it is important to start with what it does *not* mean. It does not mean that my colleagues and I lived in a completely different world, for we did not. We lived together for six years, on the same campus, doing the same job, working and socialising together, without any problems or, at least, without the idea of the spirit world causing any problems. We had our differences and disagreements of course, but these were no different from the differences and disagreements I would have had among Dutch colleagues. During our shared life on campus, the beliefs that seem to be present in these stories never caused any difficulties.

For example, the colleague who assumed that the charcoal in a bag could change into a corpse was not surprised to find the things in his drawer that he had put there. He did not expect things to suddenly change into something else, as the charcoal could supposedly change into a corpse. Likewise, the colleague who assumed a pastor could send a spiritual double in the pulpit never assumed the possibility of spiritual doubles in other contexts. If we saw someone in a classroom, he would never suggest that this person might be at home at the same time and that we were merely witnessing a spiritual double. In day-to-day

life, the strange stories connected to the spirit world did not make any difference. Does this mean that the people who speak of a spirit world themselves do not *really* believe in a spirit world after all or, maybe, that they only believe in it in a very limited way?

## ■ Adding a thousand qualifications?

Scholar of religion Gerrie ter Haar (1992) takes the statements about a spirit world at face value. For her, people in Africa believe in a realm of invisible entities that somehow determine what happens in the world. There are beings, called 'spirits', that determine events of the ordinary world and can, for example, also take control of people through possession. Ter Haar uses the approach of adding limitations and qualifications to explain the African belief in the spirit world. She is aware that the idea of a spirit possessing someone may sound strange to someone from a Euro-American context, but Ter Haar (1992) explains:

This is largely the result of the particular view of man which has developed in the West and which is based on a biomedical model, as opposed to the majority of human societies which accept the 'soul theory'. In the latter view human beings consist of a shell or box, termed the body, and an ephemeral substance or essence residing within, usually termed the soul. One author compares this to a car with a driver in it: the car is the body and the driver the soul. (p. 119)

This author, Felicitas Goodman, investigates spirit possession and exorcism but (Ter Haar 1992):

A major problem with studies in this field is that the available scientific tools are inadequate for investigating phenomena beyond ordinary experience. Or, as Goodman puts it, we cannot test for the presence of spirits. (p. 121)

A spirit is a being, but it is hidden and ephemeral; it cannot be tested for and it will not register on any scientific measuring equipment. Whenever people from Europe or the USA living in Africa, such as I, might expect to experience these spirits, some limitation or qualification is added to the hypothesis that there is

this world of invisible beings called 'spirits'. Witchcraft such as the kind that changes charcoal into corpses is very common but, for some reason, it is not to be expected when my colleague opens his drawer. Spiritual doubles exist but generally we do not need to check whether someone is a double or not. The hypothesis about the existence of a spirit world still stands but an endless list of qualifications is added to explain why people living in the same world do not notice it.

The problem of how to understand my African colleagues can be compared to the related problem of how to understand the fact that in our societies there are believers and nonbelievers who nevertheless share a life together. Philosopher of religion, John Hick (Phillips 1970:71), suggested that if we would ask a typical religious person, '[a]re you assuming that there actually is a Being whom you are addressing (or referring to) and who is eternal, omnipotent, and so forth?', he or she would without hesitation confirm this, as I imagine my colleagues to confirm that their stories of corpses and doubles are actually true. For Hick, this would settle the matter, as my colleagues' answer would settle the matter for Ter Haar, I suppose.

Hick's colleague, D.Z. Phillips, does not deny Hick's claim but ascribes the affirmative answer by the believer to the unstated alternative that God is an illusion. Believers would not want to say that God is an illusion and, therefore, they have no choice but to say 'yes' to Hick's question. Phillips, however, would like to continue to interrogate this typical religious person. He (Phillips 1970) expects to find that this person would, if pressed, also:

[A]dmit that the discovery of God is not like the discovery of a matter of fact and that there is no question of ceasing to exist or having existed for a certain length of time, or of having come into existence. (p. 71)

Therefore, the religious believer believes in the existence of a being, but discovering it is not like discovering other beings; its existence is not like the existence of other beings and so on and so forth. An endless list of limitations and qualifications

would follow. Would this be a promising way of interpreting belief in both the spirit world and in God? I think not.

In a famous argument, philosopher Anthony Flew (1950) used exactly this approach of adding limitations and qualifications to defend atheism. According to him, Christians, at first sight, seem to believe in an all-powerful, loving being somewhere up in the sky, but then they start adding qualifications. God is a loving God, but not in the way that he would stop an ill child from dying, not in the way that he would stop its parents from breaking down, not in the way that... and so on. The idea that God is a loving God or the idea that God exists, Flew argued, would in this way become meaningless, step by step. The belief in God, he says, is 'a fine brash hypothesis [that] may thus be killed by inches, the death by a thousand qualifications' (Flew 1950:n.p.). Every time that one tries to draw a conclusion from someone's belief in God, it is excluded by yet another qualification or limitation. In the end, there is no difference between someone who believes in such a God with a thousand qualifications and someone who does not believe in a God at all.

The African belief in the spirit world can be limited step by step in the same way, to account for the fact that people from Africa and those from Europe and the USA live in the same world. This is what Gerrie ter Haar is doing when she speaks of a belief in spirits which are hidden and ephemeral and do not show up in tests and so on. Yet, if one does so, the belief in the spirit world would die the death of a thousand qualifications as well. My colleague, who told me about the stolen charcoal that turns into a corpse, does not believe that the things in his drawer could suddenly change. He believes that the charcoal can turn into a corpse, but he is not surprised that the police never started a murder investigation for a corpse found in a charcoal bag. It does not work like that. The change of charcoal into a corpse probably cannot be investigated through scientific experiments or used for other purposes, such as the production of biomass. It does not work like that either. Likewise, for the colleague who told me about the pastor with a double, it does

not mean that he expects people with whom he is in a meeting to be at home at the same time; it does not mean that we should start courses for spirit doubles so that they can preach more inspired sermons and so on. In the end, so many limitations and qualifications will be added that there is no difference between someone who believes in the spirit world with a thousand qualifications and someone, like me, who does not believe in the spirit world at all. Adding an endless list of qualifications would, indeed, account for the fact that we live together in one world, that, in day-to-day life, the strange stories connected to the spirit world do not make any difference. Yet, Flew's concept of the death of a thousand qualifications applies here as well – all the limitations and qualifications make the hypothesis meaningless. However, African stories referring to the spirit world do not need to be interpreted as a hypothesis. Most often, they are not responded to as if they are hypotheses either.

My colleagues tell me those stories about corpses and doubles probably to shock my Euro-American prejudices and not for me to go investigate those particular cases. Among people who live with a spirit world, the story about the changing charcoal will be a warning against theft. It will not elicit questions about whose corpse it is that the charcoal turns into, but it will alert people not to steal. The story about the spirit double is, maybe, a comment on the quality of the pastor involved but would not invite queries about the nature of spiritual beings. These stories are not presented as hypotheses about the world that invite further investigations; instead, they convey the message 'do not steal' or 'this pastor has a problem'.

Do people really believe that spirits exist? Asked like that, of course they do, in the sense that they are not lying or deceiving but that does not necessarily mean that they are putting forward a hypothesis either. Do most Christians believe that God exists as a being, that people need to confess their sins for them to be

forgiven, that there is a heaven and so on? Asked like that, of course they do but imagine that we ask Christian parents what their unbelieving children are missing. Here, as I will argue, the picture becomes more complex.

When asked about their own faith, Christians may portray God as a very powerful person who can save people from particular negative experiences. Yet, if the belief in God was like the belief in other very powerful people who can save people from particular negative experiences – for example, a very qualified tax adviser who can save a person a lot of money – it would be silly not to believe. But parents do not think that their children are *silly* for not believing, they think it is *sad* that they do not believe. Parents do not think that their children make wrong calculations in not believing; they think that they ought to live their lives differently – not because it would be better for their finances or possessions but because it would be better for their soul.

When asked about their own faith, Christians may portray God as a very powerful person who allows people to be harmed if they do not follow his rules. Yet, if the belief in God was like the belief in another very powerful person who allows people to be harmed if they do not follow his rules, for example, a strange thug who attacks only people with a particular colour of clothes, then not believing in God would be a *mistake*. The parents may think that their children miss out on salvation or that their lives would be more meaningful if they had faith, but they do not think that their children are silly or making a mistake. The response of considering not believing as sad rather than silly shows that belief in God is not simply a hypothesis about what is or what is not the case. If a young child does not believe that Aunt Jane exists, her parents will consider her a bit confused; if she does not believe that God exists, her parents might get angry. We respond differently to people who do not believe in the truth of a particular fact and to people who do not believe in God.



Likewise, the belief in the spirit world is not a hypothesis. As Phillips (1970) says about people who add qualification after qualification to the belief in the spirit world or God:

Much of their misunderstanding comes from their tendency to think of religious beliefs as hypotheses, or as beliefs which wait on a further external check. Wittgenstein brings out the misunderstanding involved when he asks us to imagine how inappropriate it would be to say of someone who believes in God, 'You only believe – oh well...'. (p. 72)

Our responses to people who believe or do not believe in God or in the spirit world show that it is not a hypothesis.

Similarly, taking people seriously who speak of the spirit world does not necessarily mean that we take what they say at face value. We should not assume that they are putting forward a hypothesis about the world. Some people may be putting forward a hypothesis about the world when they speak of the spirit world, but the wider context – including the reactions towards them – will show that many people do not speak of the spirit world in this way. Generally, belief in the spirit world is *not* a belief in the existence of ephemeral beings and hidden forces to explain, control and predict the world. We need to let go of the idea that in order to take a statement seriously, it must be interpreted as a hypothesis or description of reality. Fortunately, a different direction is possible. Compare, for example, taking statements about pain or luck seriously.

## ■ A different direction

Someone who speaks of a pain in her head may very well mean what she is saying, that is, she is not lying; she is not mistaken, nor is she confused. When asked whether she really believes that there is such a thing as pain, she will answer affirmatively without hesitation. However, if we interpret her statements as referring to some object named 'pain' or as putting forward a hypothesis about such an object, we are misunderstanding her. No one

would be surprised if we did not find an object 'pain' inside it, not even a mysterious and properly qualified object. All kinds of qualifications could be added, such as 'pain is invisible', 'pain is difficult to detect by scientific measurement tools', and so on, but adding such qualifications would not be what it is to take her seriously.

When Wittgenstein (2009) makes this point concerning the concept of pain, he asks himself:

'But you will surely admit that there is a difference between pain-behaviour accompanied by pain and pain-behaviour without any pain?' – Admit it? What greater difference could there be? – 'And yet you again and again reach the conclusion that the sensation itself is a *nothing*'. – Not at all. It is not a *something*, but not a *nothing* either! (p. 304)

Wittgenstein does not want to deny that pain is real; it is just not real in the sense of an object. If it were an object, we would have to add so many qualifications that there is no difference between saying it is an object and saying it is nothing at all. It is real, but not a 'something' and neither a 'nothing'.

This may sound paradoxical, but Wittgenstein (2009) continues:

The paradox disappears only if we make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose; to convey thoughts – which may be about houses, pains, good and evil, or anything else you please. (p. 304)

Language about pain functions differently. Pain exists in the sense that people who speak of it are not lying, nor necessarily mistaken or confused. Statements about pain can be true or false. There are ways to check that, but these ways do not involve the discovery of an invisible, ephemeral substance hidden somewhere. Language does not always function in the same way. Things can be real without being objects – without being *things*, actually. This is the case for pain and guilt and responsibility, as it is the case for God and for the spirit world. The place that these words have in the wider context of our language and our lives shows in

what way they are real. An even closer object of comparison for language about the spirit world than pain language may be our language concerning luck.

Renowned anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1937) studied the belief in the spirit world among the Azande in Southern Sudan. He wrote an extensive study on their practices of witchcraft, oracles and magic. In his discussion of witchcraft, Evans-Pritchard (1937) notes great similarities between the concept of witchcraft and the concept of luck or bad luck:

It may have occurred to many readers that there is an analogy between the Zande concept of witchcraft and our own concept of luck. When, in spite of human knowledge, forethought, and technical efficiency, a man suffers a mishap, we say that it is his bad luck, whereas Azande say that he has been bewitched. The situations which give rise to these two notions are similar. (p. 148)

Now, it is the wider context in which a concept is used that gives a concept its meaning. Therefore, Evans-Pritchard's observation that the situations in which these two concepts are used are similar implies that the concepts themselves are similar as well or, at least, that they occupy a similar place in our language. To understand the implications of this observation by Evans-Pritchard, a clearer view of the concept of luck is needed. What is 'luck'? When do we speak of 'luck'? What place in our lives is occupied by the concept of 'luck'?

'Luck' is a peculiar concept. In the introduction to a recent special issue on fate and fortune of the journal *Critical African Studies* (Gaibazzi & Gardini 2015:204), luck was categorised together with fortune, chance and blessing as a 'natural or supernatural force' and a 'causative power'. Yet, there is something very misleading about this way of framing luck as a kind of power. In a recent superhero-movie, *Deadpool 2*, this was illustrated by someone claiming that luck was her superpower. Throughout the movie, she was very lucky, indeed, but considering luck as a superpower was clearly a joke. Luck is not a kind of power.

Someone may win a game by superior skill, favouritism of the arbiter, cheating or anything else. If it is said that someone wins through luck, this is not introducing another force or causative power that made someone win, but it is acknowledging that one does not know by what force or power someone won. People did not first discover a force causing this result and then, after some research, identified this force as luck. The concept of luck is used when people do *not* discover any causative force. Luck is what explains an event when *nothing* explains it (cf. Moore 1988:90, who makes the same point concerning poltergeists). To refer to 'luck' is not to answer the question for explanations, but it is a way of not asking for explanations any longer.

Consider a scenario where it is said that something was *not* because of luck after all, when someone discovered what causative factor was, in fact, responsible – for example, that he cheated. The power causing this particular outcome has been discovered and, therefore, it is concluded that it was not luck after all. This is not a shift from one explanation to another but it was not luck, *because* now an explanation has been found. This is how the concept of luck, which Evans-Pritchard considers to be very similar to the concept of witchcraft, is used.

If a lady says 'luck made me win this game', she is not describing a particular force that helped her win. In fact, the only proof she will provide for her statement is that there are no forces at all to be found which made her win. This shows that statements can be true without referring to an object. To take such statements seriously, we should not force them into the model of designation and object.

Likewise, statements the spirit world do not need to be interpreted as descriptions of some ephemeral beings and hidden forces to explain, control and predict the world. The distinction between the interpretation of references to the spirit world as descriptions and the alternative interpretation presented here can be brought out by comparing two interpretations of communicating with the spirit world, two interpretations of prayer.

## ■ Prayer

Most people in Africa are continuously aware of the connections with the spirit world. One can see this, for example, in the pervasiveness of prayer. 'Where do you pray?' is a question one often hears in Zambia. It means something like 'to which church do you belong?' It shows both the ubiquity of Christianity in Zambia – someone not belonging to any church is not considered an option – and the importance of prayer in Zambian Christianity. Prayer is an important part of everyday life in Zambia. Every meeting – whether church-related or about the draughts federation – is preceded by prayer; a soccer match between students on a Thursday afternoon is started and ended with prayers; even having a biscuit during an ordinary tea break is often preceded by a prayer. If one takes a long-distance bus in Zambia, during the first few kilometres someone will offer prayers for the safety of everyone on the bus. After receiving offerings from the travellers to make his prayers effective, this bus pastor gets out and looks for another long-distance bus. Prayers before a soccer match or biscuit may be forgotten from time to time or joked about but not so for prayers for a long-distance bus journey. In case the bus pastor happens to be absent during one of their travels, our students assure us that they pray extra hard themselves for a safe journey. One cannot embark on a long-distance journey without proper prayers. Through prayers, people in Africa involve the spirit world in almost every activity.

Prayers, naturally, also form an important part of church services, namely, prayers where the pastor prays on behalf of the congregation, communal prayers wherein the Lord's prayer is recited in unison, and what is called 'mass prayer'. 'Mass' in 'mass prayer' does not refer to the Roman Catholic holy mass, but to a great body of people. During 'mass prayer' everyone in the church prays for themselves, all at once at the same time, loud and moving around and sometimes even in tongues. Despite initial resistance, this practice, which originated in the Neo-Pentecostal ministries, has now found its way into most mainline churches

as well. The altar call is another mode of prayer in most churches in Zambia, which has found its way into the country through Neo-Pentecostal Ministries International. Even in a traditional mainline church, such as the Reformed Church in Zambia, for example, the altar call has become part of one of the prescribed orders of service. Most often, the altar call takes place after the sermon; the pastor asks the congregants who need extra prayers to come forward so that he or she can pray for them. Often, about half of the congregants come up to the pastor, and he or she and helpers pray for them. The prayer often consists of nothing more than shouting 'In Jesus' name!' while touching the foreheads of the congregants, with some of them stumbling or falling back in a frenzied rapture. Longer and more personalised prayers by the pastor are available after the church service. One can measure the success of a pastor or assess how powerful he or she is by the number of people that request the pastor to pray for them. Most often, these prayers take place in a small room next to the church immediately after the church service, although many pastors offer prayers during the week as well. These individual prayers are most often to ward off evil or other misfortunes that may have befallen the faithful, or to heal illnesses.

Prayers of protection and healing from all kinds of evils – from illness to joblessness – are of central importance for a Christian in Africa. These prayers are seen as an important way to engage with the spirit world. During my classes, teaching theology in Zambia, I often discussed prayer. I was especially fond of explaining a particular interpretation of prayer that had impressed me when I was a theology student myself. The philosopher of religion, D.Z. Phillips (1970:101-102), explained how a boxer who makes the sign of a cross before a match may do so hoping that it will protect him from major injuries, but he may also do so to dedicate himself and the fight to God, hoping that the match may be an expression of his values. A young mother may garland a statue of the Virgin Mary to solicit blessings for her child, but it may also be a sign of gratitude. Parents of a hospitalised child may pray to God, hoping that those prayers will heal their child,

but their prayers may also be a way of handing over their concerns about their child to God. Instead of pleading or bargaining with God, prayer can also be a way of surrendering oneself to God (cf. Kroesbergen 2015b). One may still express one's wishes and deepest desires in prayer but by ending prayers – either explicitly or implicitly – with 'Not my will but Your will be done', those prayers become a way of leaving those wishes and desires in God's hands. Prayer may be part of the lifestyle of someone who, despite his or her desires, hopes that whatever may come his or her way, he or she will be able to receive it in the spirit of faith.

## **My own context in the Netherlands**

To me, this interpretation of prayer as surrendering one's desires to God rather than trying to manipulate him was appealing because it explained some things about prayer that I did not fully understand. From time to time, newspapers in those days reported on research that had been conducted on whether prayers were effective, whether they helped with healing people or helped plants grow better and so on. Now, on the one hand, it was clear to me and most people around me that this kind of research was neither serious nor appropriate to what was meant by prayer in Christianity. On the other hand, such research seemed logical; if, in our prayers, we ask God to do things and we expect God to hear our prayers, what is wrong with doing some experiments? Why is engaging in such investigations not appropriate? I felt it was not appropriate, but I could not figure out why it was so. Phillips's interpretation of prayer gave me some direction for an explanation.

Even if parents pray with all their heart for the healing of their child, still those prayers might *not* be just another technique to obtain that healing. The parents will approach the best hospitals and doctors at their disposal; they will do everything they can to ensure the healing of their child; however, maybe their prayers are not just one more thing to ensure the healing of their child

but are in fact something else entirely. They know that their world will collapse if their child dies, and through prayers they may try to surrender their strong desire for the healing of their child to God. Anything can happen to their child; they know that and also that their desire may destroy them and their faith in God if their child does not survive. Therefore, they share their desire with God, they leave their desire in the hands of God, asking God to save them and to keep them, even if disaster strikes. They want to meet the situation they are facing and whatever the outcome may be, in faith. That could be what they want from their prayers, and that could be why it would be misunderstanding prayer to treat it as just one more technique to achieve what we desire, as is done in those experiments with prayer from the newspapers.

Prayer can be seen as an attempt to use God for our own goals, but it can also be seen as a way to surrender our desires behind those goals, with all their strength, to God, to leave them in his hands, to meet the situation in which we find ourselves, including all our desires, in the spirit of faith. The difficulty that we will encounter in the rest of this chapter and the rest of this book is that it is hard to differentiate between these two kinds of prayer. It is hard to discern the spirit behind a particular prayer. People may pray with all their might for the healing of their child but only to surrender themselves and their desires completely to God. Others may be calm and humble in their prayers, ending with 'Not my will but Your will be done', merely, because they assume that that is the most efficient way to influence God's decisions. In concrete cases, it is often hard to tell which is which. Simply asking someone why people pray or what they mean by their prayers will not do, unfortunately, because the meaning of people's words is not determined by what people say or how they understand their own words themselves but by the wider context, by the role that they play in their lives and that role may not be clear to the person involved him- or herself. People who pray 'God, please, I beg you to heal my child! Amen', when asked, may tell us that they are begging God to heal their child, yet it is only the wider context which shows what it means to take



them seriously. Are they begging God like they would beg a famous doctor to look at their child, or are they begging God as a form of surrendering this overpowering desire to God? Simply asking someone why people pray or what they mean by their prayers will not do because the meaning of words is not determined by what people say or how they understand their own words but by the context.

Consider, for example, the statement, 'words cannot express how grateful I am!' With these words, a person is thanking someone else. In this context, the person who receives these words does not act like someone who has not been thanked. If we ask the person who says 'words cannot express my gratitude' whether he or she is expressing his or her gratitude by these words, he or she might either be confused or say that that is not the case, because, as he or she said, words cannot express their gratitude. Yet, it is clear that by saying this within this particular context, someone *is* expressing his or her gratitude. There is no contradiction here, and nobody is saying something wrong. Within the context, saying 'words cannot express my gratitude' is perfectly fine and, as a description of how these words function in that context, to say that these words express gratitude is perfectly fine as well. To take someone seriously does not necessarily mean to take their words at face value. If someone responded to the utterance, 'words cannot express my gratitude' by saying that nobody ever thanks him or her, he or she would not be taking the speaker seriously. In fact, he or she would be misunderstanding him or her. To take someone seriously, it is important to take into account the wider context.

Whatever may be the case for a particular prayer, Phillips's interpretation of prayers would provide an answer to the question of why scientific experiments on prayer miss the point. Phillips's interpretation also answers a second and related question that I, as a theology student, had concerning prayer. During the time that I started my studies in theology, a Dutch pop group made a cover of a 1970s song in which the singer asks God to buy her a

Mercedes-Benz. That was clearly a joke, a parody of prayer, but, again, I found it hard to say exactly why it was not serious. If somebody wants a Mercedes-Benz, why can he or she not ask God for it? Why would there be rules for what people can ask from God? If prayer does not need to be interpreted as a technique to obtain things that someone wants, but if it may be a way to surrender desires to God that threaten to overpower him or her, then this begins to make sense. One may wish to have a Mercedes-Benz but it would not – or, at least, should not – be the kind of desire that makes his or her world collapse if it is not realised. To me, Phillips's interpretation of prayer as not a technique to obtain things from God but as a way to surrender oneself to God made a great deal of sense, so I shared it with my students, although they, obviously, interpreted it from their own African context.

## The African context

I have never heard an actual prayer for a Mercedes-Benz in Africa, but I would not be surprised to hear it one day. In 2000, the American author Bruce H. Wilkinson wrote a book on the prayer by a certain Jabez in 1 Chronicles 4:10, 'oh that you would bless me [indeed] and enlarge my territory!' Not much more is known about Jabez than that God granted his request. Wilkinson encourages Christians to pray like Jabez did and, despite his own warning that this does not imply asking God for a Cadillac (Wilkinson 2000:24), Wilkinson's plea has been interpreted as encouraging bold requests for material possessions. I had not heard about Jabez before coming to Zambia, but in both Zambia and South Africa I have heard people introducing Jabez as being one of the most well-known figures from the Bible. Indeed, I have often heard his prayer invoked, 'enlarge my territory!' before specifying the desire for a bigger house, promotion, a TV or a car. In this context, a prayer for a Mercedes-Benz would not immediately be dismissed as a joke. Does this show that prayer means something else in Africa? Does it mean that, in an African

context, prayer is not an expression of surrender but is a way of manipulating God and the spirit world? Now, it does, indeed, show differences between prayer in Africa and the Netherlands and, consequently, between God or the spirit world in Africa and the Netherlands, but these differences themselves can still be interpreted in different ways.

It is often said that Europe and the USA are much more materialistic than Africa, yet that is not what I found in Africa. In the Netherlands, saying that one is purely interested in material things is just not done. Even if someone works purely for the money, people are still encouraged to say that they do it because they want to make a difference or help people or something like that. In Africa, desire for material goods seems to be more present and, definitely, more openly present. One can without being frowned upon say that one's goal in life is obtaining material goods, instead of self-realisation or making a difference. It is allowed to be materialistic. Within a context where people's personal desires are more and more openly materialistic, even a prayer for a Mercedes-Benz may be a form of surrendering an overpowering desire. The context determines the meaning of such a prayer and, like in the Netherlands, in concrete cases, it is often hard to tell which prayer is a form of manipulation and which prayer expresses surrender of one's desires to God in faith.

The difference in context between Africa and the Netherlands could be seen in how teaching about these two interpretations of prayer was received differently by my students from how I had received it myself. To me, Phillips's interpretation of prayer showed why scientific experiments with prayer do not make sense. My students in Africa did not even seem to think of scientific experiments as a logical approach to consider. To me, Phillips's interpretation of prayer explained why it is a joke to pray for a Mercedes-Benz; however, for my students in Africa, this would not have been as clearly a joke at all. The interpretation of prayer as surrender spoke to them differently.

For some students, Phillips's interpretation of prayer opened ways to deal with a kind of pressure they were afraid of as being future pastors:

- What if I pray for someone's healing and he or she does not heal?
- What if I pray for someone to get a bigger house, a job or a child and it does not come to pass?
- Will the people not blame me?

If prayers are not a technique to get what someone wants, then, maybe, there will be less disappointment among future congregants than the students fear. If prayers can be a way of surrendering our desires to God, then one has not necessarily failed if one prayed for something which did not happen. Prayer as surrendering to God can be a 'way out' in the complicated situations the students will encounter in their congregations.

Other students, however, saw a problem here. If they would pray for someone's healing and then add 'Not my will but your will be done' to make clear that they are surrendering their desire to God, would that not be interpreted as showing a lack of faith? Would that not be interpreted as that one is already accepting that this person will not heal? Especially prayers with people who, by all accounts, are dying are precarious, my students explained to me. If they pray for the healing of someone who has been given up on by the doctors and this person dies as expected, their prayers have failed and they have proven themselves not to be powerful men or women of God. If they pray while explicitly surrendering this person into the hands of God, then they as a pastor may be blamed for having caused the death. They spoke of death and now it happened – did they not implicitly tell the spirit world through their prayer to take this person away? It is difficult to find a way out. To see prayers the way Phillips explains them may offer a safe escape, according to some of these future pastors; however, they find it hard to see how it would work out in practice.

One student, after one of these classes, came to me with yet another concern. He understood that prayer could be a way of surrendering oneself to God and so on, and that it does not need to be a technique for healing people, but what if a person discovers that he or she has the gift to heal people, he asked. During his practical experience in a congregation, people had come to him as student pastor and asked him to pray for them. He had done so dutifully and, as it happened, one person who had been blind in one eye for more than 20 years could see again after his prayers. Another person he prayed for had been limping for almost his entire life but, after the prayers, could walk normally again. Phillips's interpretation of prayer is nice and can be helpful in some situations, the student said, but what if someone's prayer simply works?

The students' responses seem to point in the direction of prayer as a form of influencing or manipulating God or the spirit world. Firstly, the difficulties that students fear to encounter in congregations seem to be based upon expectations among congregants that their prayers *should* be able to influence or manipulate God. Secondly, this one student seems to have experienced for himself that he *can* influence God; upon his prayers, one person could see again with both eyes, and another was no longer limping. Clearly, he perceived this as being caused by his prayers. Is prayer in Africa a manipulation of the spirit world instead of surrendering oneself to God? The situation is not as clear as it may seem. As anthropologist Adam Ashforth (2011:138) notes, '[p]reconceptions about what it means to be a believer frequently obscure analysis of *how* people believe when they believe themselves to be believing something'. Here we need to look at the use, we need to distinguish between the picture and how it is used, as I (Kroesbergen 2016b:16) argued elsewhere.

During the following conversation with the student whose prayers had brought healing, the case became less and less clear. He did not retract any of his statements – he was still convinced that he had been given the gift of healing, but it was just that: a gift.

It had been *given* to him, and not to heal in general but to heal in these specific cases. He himself did not do the healing but all the glory should go to God who healed these people and who merely used him. He could not do healing at will and he could not control it. So, if he is not in control, how can we say that through his prayers he is influencing and manipulating God? If anything, it seemed like God was influencing and manipulating him. At least, that is how the student himself described his situation. If we want to take seriously what faith healers claim about their powers, should we not also take them seriously when they say 'all the glory be to God!'? Often, they will *not* claim to be very skilled practitioners in the technique of manipulating the spirit world but tell us that they are *mere vessels*, used by God. This may be mere rhetoric but if one wishes to say so, one should show why *these* statements can be put aside or reinterpreted, whereas statements about prayers as a means to control the spirit world are taken at face value.

Similarly, in the case of the congregants who might get angry at their pastor, we need to pay attention to what these people are angry about. Firstly, they are angry that what they wished for did not happen; there was no healing, no job or no child. *That* is what they do not like about the situation. It may not feel like it when someone is the pastor and is the outward target of the anger but, primarily, the people are not concerned with the pastor as a person but with this situation that they dislike. Secondly, the people may be angry with the pastor as well, *if* he or she made promises which they did not deliver upon. If they had claimed that they could organise healing or a job or a child for them and this does not manifest, the people have reason to be angry with their pastors as well. But the anger concerns broken promises. They are not angry with their pastors because they did not use a kind of technique that they could have used. They do not think that the pastor had it within his or her powers to manipulate the spirit world but refused to do so. They know that their pastor would have used the manipulation techniques if he or she had any, because he or she would prefer happy congregants over angry ones.

In short, it is not clear at all whether the student with the gift of healing or the feared angry congregants actually take prayer to be a technique to influence or manipulate God and the spirit world, despite the fact that they are speaking in ways that at first may suggest that they do. Maybe Phillips's interpretation of prayer is rather applicable to prayers in Africa after all. The way in which most people in Africa pray is different from the way I pray. The way most people in Africa speak about and deal with the spirit world is different from the way I do. The ways prevalent in Africa have not become my ways of speaking and doing. Neither do I want to suggest that I fully understand prayer in Africa, nor that nobody in Africa genuinely thinks prayers can manipulate the spirit world. Yet, I think that this latter perspective is a misunderstanding of prayer, in Africa as much as it is in Europe and the USA.

It may sound harsh but, with Phillips, I would say that it is confused and superstitious to think of prayer as a technique to coerce the spirit world. I am not saying this as an outsider from a different context but I argue that, from within our shared practice and experience, it can be shown to be confused and superstitious to see prayers as a way to manipulate the spirit world or God. It is confused because it misunderstands the sense that words like 'spirit' and 'God' have, which will be elaborated in the rest of this chapter, and it is superstitious because it conflicts with what we – including the people involved – already know about causal relations, about how healing, jobs and children come into existence. As everywhere else, there is a great deal of confusion and superstition in Africa, but the pervasive prayers for protection and healing in Africa do not need to be confused and superstitious. How believing in Africa can be interpreted in an unconfused and unsuperstitious way is what I wish to show in the rest of the first part of this book. If proper attention is paid to the context within which words like 'God' and 'spirit world' make sense, we see how their meaning excludes superstition. To take seriously what people mean by the spirit world, we should not simply take at face

value some of the things that people say relating to the spirit world but we should look and see what their words do and do not mean in the wider context of the lives of people in Africa – lives that I have shared for over six years.

## ■ Not explanation, control and prediction

At face value, African stories relating to the spirit world may seem like explanation or predictions or attempts to control reality but they are, in fact, something else. Just like 'luck' in 'luck made me win this game' occupies the place of an explanation but, in fact, is a response to the fact that me winning this game *cannot* be explained, so references to spiritual forces or mystical causes are responses to what remains mysterious.

## ■ No explanation

Evans-Pritchard (1937) gives the following example of the Azande concept of witchcraft:

An experienced potter need have no fear that his pots will crack as a result of error. [...] Yet pots sometimes break, even when they are the handiwork of expert potters, and this can only be accounted for by witchcraft. 'It is broken – there is witchcraft', says the potter simply. (p. 67)

There is no explanation for the breaking of the pot as the potter has done everything correctly, and yet it breaks; therefore, it must be witchcraft, 'the reason is known in advance'. Claiming something to be witchcraft is the default response when no practical explanation is available. If it is known in advance to be witchcraft, then it is not a reason in the ordinary sense of reasons, as, ordinarily, reasons are connected with finding out, with elaborations of how the two events are related and so on. Saying that something is witchcraft is like saying that something is luck in that it is the acknowledgement of not having a reason, of not having an explanation.



Philosopher Gareth Moore (1995) makes the same point concerning God:

We establish that God is the cause of a cure or other event when we establish that nothing was the cause. That is an important part of the functioning of the word 'God'. (p. 143)

A particular healing is considered to be a miracle from God, if it was not a particular medicine or doctor that caused the healing. If one says 'God did it', one is not claiming to have found out who did it and how – one is not putting forward a hypothesis about the mechanism – but one acknowledges that there is *nothing known* about the specific causes of this healing, so it appears only God could have done it. Moore (1995) gives an interesting example of how the Roman Catholic Church establishes whether a miraculous healing has taken place at Lourdes:

It does not seek for evidence that God is the cause of the cure, but for evidence of other possible causes, and when it fails to find them begins to think in terms of a miracle. [...] The cure is attributed to God because it is found to be attributed to *no* cause or agent, and because of the context: it takes place amid Christian worship and prayer. (p. 141)

If people say 'God did it', they mean more than that it was just luck or is inexplicable, but the context of attributing a particular healing to God shows that, beyond other things, it does mean that. The inexplicable is received as a generous gift from God for which someone is grateful and so on, but one does not explain the inexplicable, it remains just that: inexplicable.

When Evans-Pritchard (1937:70) claims that through witchcraft 'Zande philosophy can supply the missing link' in explanations, this is a strange kind of link. Witchcraft 'explains' that for which there is no explanation, for example, why the pot of an expert potter cracks or why a granary collapses exactly when certain people are seated under it. Evans-Pritchard (1965:90) holds that, '[t]he witchcraft explanation supplements that of natural causation, accounting for what we would call the element of chance', but like the element of chance or luck, witchcraft is actually not a supplementary explanation. Saying something is

witchcraft is saying that – for that aspect – one does *not* have an explanation. One has not discovered a particular cause of these events and then identified it as witchcraft, for it is known in advance that it is witchcraft. As soon as people discover another practical cause – for example, the potter was drunk or someone secretly changed the type of clay – they will say it was not witchcraft after all (except maybe in explaining why the potter was drunk at this particular time, and so forth). People speak of witchcraft – or the spirit world in general – by default, when no other explanation is available.

References to witchcraft or the spirit world are not an explanation because – like references to luck – they are used when there is no explanation for a particular event and, secondly, because they do not explain the connection between cause and effect – they have no substance. People do not discover that something is witchcraft – or luck or spirits – directly, because there is nothing to be discovered. ‘Witchcraft’ does not describe a process by which a particular situation is caused; it does not describe a process at all. It may be called a mysterious process, that is to say, it is not a process at all (cf. Moore 1988:274). It does not give us the steps.

Evans-Pritchard (1937:33–36, 464) notes that Azande connects the ideas of witchcraft and the soul – it is the soul of witchcraft or the soul of a medicine that sets out to do the witchcraft and attacks the soul of a person or the soul of an organ. Azande speak of a physical witchcraft substance in a witch’s body, but the act of witchcraft is considered incorporeal (Evans-Pritchard 1937:35).

The comparison with a soul brings out that it is logically hidden or mysterious, as a soul is *logically* hidden or mysterious as well. Gerrie ter Haar fails to realise this when she speaks of the soul as an ephemeral being. Whatever someone may find in a human body – ephemeral or otherwise – they know that it is not the soul. This is not the case because a soul happens to be hidden so very well but because the hiddenness is part of the definition or

grammar of 'soul', part of how the word is used. Likewise, whatever process one may discover, it will not be witchcraft. Witchcraft is a concept that is used when someone *cannot* conceive of the workings and processes that caused a particular event. Although, of course, someone who grasps the language will know that he or she does not even need to bother looking for such a process in the first place.

Witchcraft is not an explanation, because it is invoked when people have run out of explanations, and it does not explain anything – it does not give someone the process by which something happened. The same holds for prayers. Prayers for a good harvest do not explain the harvest, but prayers are invoked for those parts of the harvest that cannot be explained – it being more or less abundant than expected, for example. Prayers for a good harvest would not provide anything in the way of an explanation either, for no sense can be made of a causal process that connects these prayers and that result. References to the spirit world – either through witchcraft or prayers or strange stories – do not explain but rather provide a way to deal with that which cannot be explained. People in Africa do not believe that their mystical concepts provide explanations of events in addition to the ordinary explanations. The role that their practices and statements play in their lives shows that they are used exactly in those cases when explanations are not available, and they are aware of that fact. Even people who try to determine which witch is responsible for their predicament are not interested in how the actions of the witch brought it about. They look for a way to live with what has happened to them. I will return to the issue of pointing out someone as a witch below.

## No control

Concerning dangerous events in the future, Evans-Pritchard (1937:148) notices an important difference between the behaviour

of Europeans and Azande. Both do what they can practically to avoid a mishap, but the Azande also try to counteract and control it through mystical means. However, when Evans-Pritchard (1937:261) lists situations in which Azande use oracles and magic, it becomes clear that people turn to oracles, magic and other mystical practices when they cannot control the future. As Evans-Pritchard's colleague Bronislaw Malinowski (1948:31) observed that the Trobriand Islanders only use magic for open sea fishing and not for the safe practice of fishing in the lagoons. If someone finds a way to control something, it is no longer a matter for prayers or rituals. This suggests that procedures invoking the spirit world are a way to deal with situations beyond human control. Magic is needed when someone is up against the unpredictable might of the open sea or up against a spell, for example.

It has often been documented that when people fall ill, they first try to treat it themselves, and when that does not work, they go to medical doctors. Then, if that does not work, they go to traditional healers or faith healers who offer mystical or religious treatments. The do-it-yourself treatment was an attempt to control the illness. Going to the clinic was an attempt to control the illness. Does this show that going to the traditional healers is one further attempt to control the illness? Although it may be in some cases, it need not be. Compare the case of luck again. Firstly, one tries to win the game with skill; if that does not work, one tries to win the game by cheating; and if even that does not work, one needs luck to win the game. It does not follow from this that luck is another means to control the outcome of the game, in the way that skill and cheating are. Likewise, going to the traditional healers or asking the pastor to pray for them may be a *response* to having found out that one cannot control this illness. It does not need to be an attempt to manipulate the spirit world, it may be the form that surrendering oneself to the spirit world takes. It indicates that one has tried everything and now has no choice but to admit that it is not in their hands to get a grip on this illness.

Anthropologist Elizabeth Colson (2015) describes how the high god *Leza* was used among the Tonga of Zambia before the arrival of Christianity:

*Leza* was not an alternative considered during divining sessions. Drought and other community afflictions were attributed to angry *basangu* or to witchcraft. *Leza* was invoked as an explanation in such matters only if all others failed. Then people said, '*Leza*, what else?' or '*Leza* laughed'. This was an admission that the matter was beyond human understanding, that it could not be rectified by any human action. (p. 133)

This sounds similar to Evans-Pritchard describing the expert potter whose pot breaks as saying something like 'Witchcraft, what else?' Firstly, people try practical means to explain matters; secondly, they speak of witchcraft; and thirdly, if all other explanations failed, they refer to *Leza*, '*Leza*, what else?'. Colson suggests that when people speak of witchcraft, they are still on the level of explanations and what can be rectified by human action, but, in fact, they may have shifted to the level of what is beyond human control already when they start to speak of witchcraft. To say 'Witchcraft, what else?' is already to admit that the matter is beyond ordinary human understanding.

If someone goes to a traditional healer to ask the ancestors for healing, *because* he or she believes that the ancestors can heal him or her, then one would also expect him or her to stop going once someone points out that his or her belief is false. He or she would be interested in testing his or her belief before acting upon it or in gathering information from experts who have tested it through solid experiments. However, as Wittgenstein (1997:87) suggests, in religious matters it often does not work like that, 'all one can say is: where that practice and these views occur together, the practice does not spring from the view but they are both just there'. The belief that the ancestors can heal him or her and the rituals of the traditional healer are both just there. Together – this belief and this ritual – they are not treated as a theory and technique for how to

control one's health but as a way to deal with a matter that is obviously beyond human control. Practitioners of African rituals do *not* believe – or, at least, do not necessarily believe – that their rituals can control the uncontrollable, because the uncontrollable is just that: uncontrollable. The rituals are a response to this troubling part of life. Instead of simply enduring and waiting to see whether they are lucky, people commit their sorrows – concerning what is uncontrollable – into the hands of higher powers. As in Phillips's interpretation of prayer, someone who prays or has someone pray over him or her for healing is not necessarily begging God or the spirit world like he or she would beg a famous doctor to look at his or her child, for he or she might be begging God as a form of surrendering this overpowering desire to God.

## ■ No prediction

If rituals and other religious practices are not used to control the future, are they then used to predict the future? Again, if attention is paid to in which situations oracles, for example, are used, it becomes clear that they are used in situations that are unpredictable, situations where it is not clear as to what is the right way to go and where there is no rational ground to go one way or the other (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1937:261). The oracle does not add a rational ground either. For example, in the oracle of the Azande where a fowl is given poison and its survival means 'yes' and its death means 'no', it makes no sense to suppose that the survival of the fowl is connected to what will happen through any kind of traceable process.

Mark Faulkner (2016), in his contribution on 'Religion in Africa' in *Religions in the Modern World*, imagines some kind of traceable process by saying of African divination practices that:

The understanding is that the spiritual entities are manipulating an object or animal in such a way that information, which would not otherwise be available, is conveyed to the human community. (p. 280)

However, even if people believed that God was forcing the lots to fall in a particular way, that belief does not make it any more of a prediction, in the normal sense of prediction, which includes traceable connections between what is known now and the future event one tries to predict.

The philosopher Gareth Moore (1995:145–146) comments on the New Testament story of drawing lots to find a replacement for the apostle Judas, '[f]or the apostles, the process of choosing would have been the will of God *whatever* the outcome', adding that, '[h]ere, that the result expresses the will of God is related to the fact that, visibly, nobody's will determines it'. The apostles could be sure that the choice for Judas' replacement was not their own will, for they did not control the lots. They left everything in the hands of God. Moore (1995) reflects on this saying:

It might be interesting to ask why we no longer use such devices to establish the will of God, at least officially. Whatever the answer might be, it is not that we moderns have discovered that God does not after all express his will in such ways because we, unlike people of biblical times, know that God does not interfere with the behaviour of tossed coins. (p. 146)

In biblical times, people did not mistakenly believe that God influenced the stones, coins, shells or whatever someone used to draw lots; however, drawing lots showed that what they were deciding about was beyond them. Drawing lots was a way to leave in the hands of God what belongs in the hands of God.

The outcome of drawing lots does not provide some additional knowledge but shows a way forward in cases where knowledge cannot help. Oracles or divination are not so much a quest for comprehension in the presence of the incomprehensible, as anthropologist Richard Werbner (2015:304) describes African practices of divination, as they are an acknowledgement of the incomprehensible exactly in receiving a practical answer but in a clearly mystical way. His colleague Philip M. Peek (1991:199) emphasises that in African divination practices, much effort is put into showing that divination provides a non-normal knowledge.

Considering that normal knowledge is the only kind of knowledge available to humans, this should be deconstructed and reread as saying that divination provides ‘not knowledge’. Knowledge is traditionally defined as a justified, true belief, but the cases where people turn to divination are exactly those cases where there is no justification.

The aspects of the African way of life that refer to the spirit world are *not* – or not necessarily – part of attempts at explaining the everyday world, predicting it and controlling it but admissions that something is beyond human understanding and control. The spirit world does not consist of strange, ephemeral beings that are invoked to explain, predict or control the ordinary world, but people speak of the spirit world when they cannot explain, predict or control the ordinary world. To take talk concerning the spirit world seriously involves taking this aspect of talk concerning the spirit world seriously.

## **Chance everywhere**

At the outset of this chapter, we heard the African theologians John Mbiti and Kwabene Asamoah-Gyadu speak of mystical causality – for people in Africa, nothing happens by chance but everything is determined by the spirit world. In a book on *Christian Spirituality in South Africa*, spiritual directors (apparently from a Euro-America background) are warned about ‘the African attitude to causality or contingency’ (Fresen 2000:185). It is explained that, ‘[t]here is, in traditional African society, no such thing as chance. Nothing happens by chance; there is always a reason’ and ‘the concept of chance is Western’, or so we are told, whereas ‘[i]n traditional African society, there was a far greater sense of the supernatural and spirit world than there is at present’ (Fresen 2000:185–186). According to the African perspective, everything – good and bad – is determined in the spirit world. But does this really mean that chance does not exist in this worldview? Is the concept of chance really ‘Western’?



Nimi Wariboko, describing Pentecostalism in Nigeria, offers a very different perspective. He explains how politics and money in Nigeria are not based upon facts and figures but on lies upon lies. Everybody knows this and simply tries to live with it. The lies upon lies make money and politics completely unpredictable. Wariboko (2014:281) writes, '[p]ower, authority, or wealth generation take the form of enchantment as social existence is subjected to the reign of anomie, radical insecurity, and chaotic chance'. The unpredictability of fate in connection with money and power is discussed by reference to an invisible and uncontrollable spirit world, '[e]verything and everyone, the individual, state apparatus, and economic institutions, have become the perpetual playthings of the invisible forces, which are always out of reach' (Wariboko 2014:281). Insurances, probabilities and calculations do not apply, invisible forces make one win one day and lose the next day. Wariboko (2014) quotes Achille Mbembe describing this situation as follows:

Everywhere dominates the perception in terms of which money, power and life are regulated by a law of chance. Immense fortunes are made from one day to the next, without factors that have contributed to them being in any way apparent. Others disappear at the same rhythm without any visible cause. Nothing being certain, and everything being possible, one takes risks with money, as with bodies, power, and life. Both time and death are reduced to a huge game of chance. On the one hand, a strong sense of the volatility and frivolity of money and fortune imposes itself, on the other, a conception of time and value are based on the instant. (p. 281)

Everywhere dominates the perception of chance; everything is reduced to a game of chance. The invisible and always out of reach spirit world controls everything, so for us, living in the visible world everything is chance. This seems to contradict Mbiti, Asamoah-Gyadu and the book on African spirituality, quoted above. So, which one is it – do Africans not know about chance, is chance a foreign, Euro-American concept in Africa or do people in Africa live in a world in which absolutely everything is determined by chance?

Wariboko, in describing life in Nigeria, explains that everything is chance while at the same time continuous reference is made to everything being governed by the spirit world. People continuously try to control the uncontrollable, although, on another level, they are aware that it will remain just that: uncontrollable. Wariboko (2014) writes:

Time is always running out. The driver is hurrying to make extra money and driving recklessly on the road because he has charms under his dashboard that he believes are summoning invisible powers to protect him. There is not enough time for politicians to steal before the next election because their invisible godfathers (politicians, native doctors, and *babalawos*) behind the throne might not allow them back into office. (p. 287)

For now, the charms and native doctors are working in their favour, so these taxi drivers and politicians try to take advantage of that for as long as it lasts. They never know when it will end (Wariboko 2014):

No one has a mastery of her world in this highly uncertain world, so everyone resorts to the performative powers of prayers and friendship with supernatural forces. The supernatural is a technology of existence. (p. 287)

Politicians and others who are now in power pretend that they control the invisible world, that their control is what brings them power, but Wariboko (2014) notes:

The masses are always able to read the signs of invisibility for what they are. When leaders claim extraordinary virtues, anointing, or physical prowess as divining gifts or preferential support of invisible powers, no one is deceived, though all may play along. (p. 293)

Both the leaders and the people know that from one moment to the next, the spirit world may withdraw her support and favour someone else. Time is always running out; it is because everything is governed by the spirit world that – for us humans – everything is happening by chance.

Speaking of mystical causality, claiming that everything is determined by the spirit world may seem to exclude chance

but, in fact, saying that the spirit world is behind something is a way of expressing the reality of living in a world dominated by chance. Things are not determined in this world, but they are determined somewhere else, in an ultimately inaccessible spirit world.

We can compare this to how we speak about ghosts. If suddenly something moves on the table, we can check whether there was a gust of wind, an earthquake or a hidden piece of rope pulled by somebody (cf. Moore 1988:90). If we cannot find any explanation, we might say 'it was a ghost!' The ghost is not an extra explanation. We did not discover that a ghost was the explanation; in fact, we discovered that there was no explanation. That is what we mean by saying 'it was a ghost!'

The spirit world in Africa often works in the same way. 'Mystical causality' is just another way of saying 'no normal causality'. Saying that the spirit world is behind something is not denying the existence of chance, but it is a way of expressing the reality of living in a world dominated by chance and uncertainty. 'Every illness has a spiritual cause' is in many ways just another way of saying 'in the end it is just chance whether you get ill'. Christians in Africa believe that almost everything is determined by chance, although they express that belief by speaking of mystical causality and the existence of a spirit world. Speaking of the spirit world is their way of responding to a world in which there is chance everywhere and so many things cannot be explained, controlled or predicted. As I will discuss shortly, people who are suffering and ask 'why?' do not necessarily look for an explanation – what good would it do to know the cause of one's predicament? – nor has someone who says 'it was chance', 'it was God' or 'it was the ancestors' found an explanation; rather, he or she has found a way to live with the fact that there is no explanation, as will be elaborated in the section 'Response to the world'. It is a response to a world drowning in chance.

## ■ Response to the world

Having focussed on what talk about the spirit world is *not* in the previous section, ‘not explanation, control and prediction’ – that is, not explanation, not prediction and not control – in this section, we will look at what it *is*. Following Evans-Pritchard, we compared African references to the spirit world with references to luck or bad luck in Europe or the USA. To say of something that it is ‘bad luck’ is to take up a particular attitude towards something negative that has happened. It emphasises that what happened is nobody’s fault, nobody is responsible, and things can turn out differently next time. Saying something is ‘bad luck’ shows one’s response to the world, especially to the insecure or uncertain aspects of the world. Talk referring to the spirit world or God occupies a similar place in people’s lives; therefore, it should also be seen as a response to the world, albeit a different one.

## ■ A response to the uncertainty of what happens

As noted above, prayers for protection and healing are of central importance for believing in Africa. These prayers, directed towards God or the spirit world, are a response to the insecurity of the world. Someone fears bad things may befall him or her or that he or she will remain ill and so he or she calls out to God. He or she will try to do everything that is within his or her powers to avoid the evil that he or she is afraid of; he or she will try to do everything that is within his or her powers to heal; but he or she knows that he or she cannot completely control these things. In spite of all precautions, an accident can always happen. Likewise, in spite of visiting doctors or using medicines, it is always possible that healing will not occur. This insecurity is what he or she is responding to with his or her prayers. He or she could have said, ‘I just hope for the best, it is just luck whether I can avoid accidents, it is just luck whether the treatment works or not’ but he or she responds differently. He or she connects this insecurity to God,

he or she hands over his or her uncertainty to the spirit world. This is his or her response to the world as he or she finds it. As I (Kroesbergen 2014b:201) argued elsewhere, 'our different perspectives are viewpoints in the same reality'. This interpretation 'allows us to acknowledge both that our language is relative to the context in which we find ourselves and that our language deals with reality' (Kroesbergen 2014b:201). Despite the fact that it is not a description, responses acknowledge reality.

In the same way, if something positive happens in one's life, people can have different responses. Someone may have been looking for a good thing to happen in his or her life, he or she may have tried hard to achieve this, yet whether it really happens always remains to be seen. When it happens, he or she may either say 'I was lucky!' or refer to the spirit world, saying something like, 'God, thank you for everything!' This is his or her response to the good things going on in his or her life, while he or she is well aware that the results could have been very different. Talk of the spirit world shows one's personal response to the world.

## **A response to uncertainty about which way to go**

Someone may have an important choice to make, such as looking for direction as to where to go from a certain point – what kind of business to go into, for example. He or she would investigate what would probably be most profitable, which kind of business would be risky and which would not be. He or she would ask his or her friends' opinions and his or her family's opinions. He or she contemplates what kind of person he or she would like to be, what kind of dreams he or she has. He or she takes all of this into consideration, weighs all the pros and cons, and yet this process will not conclusively tell him or her as to what to do. The question of what he or she has to do has not yet been solved. There is still a leap to take. He or she could simply pick something or draw lots but he or she could also respond to this insecurity about the future by asking 'what does God want me to do?' Posing this

question will not give him or her an immediate answer, and it may or may not coincide with what, for example, his or her friends tell him or her – maybe God is using one of them or maybe one of them offers a temptation that should be rejected – yet, posing this question is a particular kind of response to his or her uncertainty of where to go.

As both ‘what does God want me to do?’ and the answers that may follow – ‘this is what God wants me to do’ – are responses, that is something personal, they are not a description of facts, as it may be a description of facts to say which kind of business is most profitable. Someone else can research what business is most profitable and tell someone but, in an important way, no one can tell a person what God wants him or her to do. In an article on making moral decisions, theologian Rowan Williams (2012:4) highlights, ‘[t]here is a significant sense in which only I can answer the question “What ought I to do?” just as only I can answer “What do I want?”’. Someone may try to tell a person that he or she wants coffee, but only that person can say for sure that he or she really wants coffee. Similarly, someone may try to tell a person that God wants him or her to start a business selling second-hand clothes, but only the person him- or herself can say that this is really what God wants him or her to do – it is his or her personal response to the world and the insecurity about the future.

In Africa, it is much more common than in Europe and the USA that pastors are asked and are willing to tell people what God wants them to do. I have seen Nigerian movies in which young women brought photographs of young men to the pastor, asking the pastor to tell them whom God wants them to marry. The idea that there is a right person for someone to marry is in itself a good example of a response to the world. Some people consider relationships as mere coincidence, while others see themselves as being meant for each other. If someone belongs to the latter category, she may be able to provide all kinds of reasons for saying that this particular person is Mr Right for her, but such reasons will

only convince someone who is already convinced that there is such a thing as 'Mr Right'. 'He is Mr Right for me, because of a, b and c' may sound like a factual statement with evidence, but, in fact, it is a declaration of love or the expression of a response to the world. It is the same when someone speaks of 'God's will' about other things in life, 'It is God's will that I should become a pastor' or 'I think this is a sign that God wants you to become a pastor' are not statements of fact but a confession and an encouragement, that is, responses to the world. This is not any different if the one who makes this statement is a pastor.

Like somebody who prays 'God, please, I beg you to heal my child! Amen', when asked, may tell us that he or she is begging God to heal his or her child, yet it is only the wider context which shows what it means to take him or her seriously. In the same way, the pastor may say that he is simply reporting a matter of fact about God's will, but the wider context will most often show that it is an attempt to convince his congregant. If a pastor tells her, 'this is the man that God wants you to marry', this is not an impersonal, unbiased description of a given fact. Statements about the will of God for someone else are – and are treated as – encouragements to look at one's options in a particular way. Someone may trust this particular pastor to be speaking on behalf of God but, again, that is not a description of facts but a statement of faith. 'This pastor truly is a man of God' is not a description or hypothesis, but it is a vote of confidence, a personal response to this pastor. The person who says this believes in this pastor. Nobody is really surprised to find other pastors who will tell her that God actually wants her to do something else. Something only becomes what God wants this particular person to do, once she has accepted it as such, once it has become her response to the insecurity of which direction to take. 'God wants me to marry this important man in the church and not my childhood sweetheart', is not – or, at least, not first of all – a description of a fact but it is a commitment, the expression of a willingness to go a certain path, a personal response. Language referring to the spirit world functions differently from other

language because of this personal aspect. It is not a description of the world but someone's individual response to it. Talk of the spirit world shows one's personal response to the world.

Sometimes, it may be difficult to recognise statements related to God or the spirit world about which way to go, as a response to the world, as they are often formulated as statements of fact about the will of God. Concerning statements about something bad that has happened, however, this may be even harder.

## ■ A response to harmful things

One of the most prominent African theologians, John Mbiti (1990), explains the African belief in the spirit world using the example of a mother who lost her child:

A bereaved mother whose child has died from malaria will not be satisfied with the scientific explanation that a mosquito carrying malaria parasites stung the child and caused it to suffer and die from malaria. She will wish to know why the mosquito stung her child and not somebody else's child. (p. 195)

The mother is not looking for an empirical answer about what caused her child to die, but she asks 'why?' in a different way. According to Mbiti (1990), the answer can be found in the use of the spirit world:

The only satisfactory answer is that 'someone' sent the mosquito, or worked other evil magic against her child. This is not a scientific answer, but it is reality for the majority of African peoples. (p. 195)

The answer referring to the spirit world does not belong to the scientific realm of explanation, prediction and control, but it is no less real for people in Africa.

About all negative experiences in one's life, Mbiti (1990) says:

For African peoples these are not purely physical experiences: they are 'mystical' experiences of a deeply religious nature. People in the villages will talk freely about them, for they belong to their world of reality, whatever else scientists and theologians might say. (p. 195)



Scientists and theologians may say that speaking of witchcraft, spirits or other mystical forces is not a proper way to explain negative experiences, but it seems, in fact, to be one of the most common contexts in which the spirit world is invoked in Africa. The spirit world is expected to explain the 'why?', albeit not the kind of 'why?' that can be answered even by science. Talk of the spirit world answers the why-question, when no answer to the why-question is available, as in the case of this bereaved mother who asks, 'why my child and why now?' To speak of malaria is not an answer, to speak of mosquitoes is not an answer but, in a different way, to speak of witchcraft of spirits is, according to Mbiti.

African philosopher Kwame Appiah (1998:1) reaches a similar conclusion, speaking of 'spiritualistic explanations'. He argues that these explanations are just as reasonable as scientific explanations; in fact, they could form an addition to the latter, as even people from a Euro-American context know these why-questions and that science cannot answer them. Appiah, hereby, acknowledges that talk about the spirit world in connection with why-questions is beyond what is meant by 'explanation' in the scientific sense but using the phrase 'spiritualistic explanations' he continues to refer to them as explanations and, thereby, might suggest that they are descriptive and factual concerning causal relationships between things. Now, somebody may think that his or her statements concerning the spirit world are of such a nature and he or she may even treat them like that in real life, but this is an example of what I would regard as confused and superstitious. It is confused because it misunderstands the sense that words like 'spirit' and 'God' have, as elaborated in this chapter, and it is superstitious because it conflicts with what we – including the people involved – already know about causal relations, about how these negative situations that evoke the question 'why?!' came about. Talk of the spirit world, even in connection with these kinds of why-questions, can be interpreted differently as well; in fact, in many cases in practice, the why-questions are used differently, namely, as personal responses to the world as one finds it.

Philosopher Rush Rhees (1969) shares some of Wittgenstein's thoughts on these kinds of why-questions:

Wittgenstein spoke of the difference between a man who when a disaster happens, asks, 'Who is responsible for this?' and the man who says 'It is the will of God' or 'It is fate.' 'It is fate' is not meant to answer the question 'Who is responsible?' The man who says it does not ask that question. (p. 16)

So, 'it is the will of God' is not an answer to the question of 'who is responsible?', but it may come to occupy the place that was previously occupied by this question. The difference between being an answer and occupying the same place, I would say, is the difference between a matter of fact and a response to the world. An answer to a question can be given by anyone, whereas a response to the world is personal – someone can only say for him- or herself that something is the will of God and, therefore, it is not an answer in the way that science answers questions. Rhees (1969) explains this when he continues:

There may be a scientific explanation of what has happened; but then 'explaining what has happened' is ambiguous. Suppose there has been an earthquake, and geologists now give an explanation of it. This will not be an answer to the woman who has lost her home and her child and asks 'Why?' It does not make it easier to understand 'what has befallen us'. And the woman's question, though it may drive her mad, does not seek an answer. 'It was fate' may come some day to take the place of asking. (p. 16)

'Why did this child die?' can be answered with 'because of malaria', but to say 'it was fate' is not an answer in the same way, because it can only be said by someone for him- or herself.

The example given by Rhees is similar to that given by John Mbiti of the bereaved mother; something bad happens – an earthquake or malaria – and science can tell one what caused it but that is not what one wants to know. Despite knowing about earthquakes or malaria and mosquitoes, one still cries 'why? Why does this happen to me? Why now?' Such a person is not looking for further scientific or empirical answers, for they know already that these will not stop their anguish. Shouting 'why?!' is often

more of an exclamation by the person suffering than it is a real question. That is why 'it was fate' or 'it was the will of God' may at some point replace the 'why?' without really being an answer, as, at that time, the question is not really there. A person cannot tell for someone else's part whether something was fate or God's will, like someone cannot take responsibility on someone else's behalf – for example, a person cannot forgive on someone else's behalf or say what one ought to do for someone else. Therefore, 'it is fate' is a personal answer that someone can only give for oneself. Any answer to this kind of why-question shows one's own personal response to the world. Yet, there seems to be something different in the Southern African context.

## ■ The Southern African context

A *sangoma* or traditional healer in Southern Africa often receives his or her vocation by falling ill him- or herself. To the question 'why did I become sick?', 'the ancestors wanted me to become a healer' may be the answer, although in the sense that it can only be the answer when the person concerned says it him- or herself – it is a response. Or there may be a severe drought, and someone discovers that the ancestors are angry with him or her, for he or she did not follow all the prescribed rituals to become a healer. 'Why is there a drought?' may be answered by 'because of global warming and so on', but on another level 'because the ancestors want me to become a healer' may be someone's answer. Someone's child may die and, after many tormented years of asking him- or herself 'why did my child die?', the ancestors tell him or her, 'it was not a punishment but an invocation; we want you to become a healer'. Such an answer is not an answer in the sense that anyone else could have given that answer for him or her; it is personal, being his or her personal response to the death of his or her child. In all of these cases, it is still possible to interpret the answers to the why-question as responses to the world, in the way I have done above, because 'the ancestors' are the answer. It becomes more difficult, however, if particular living people are involved.

John Mbiti (1990:195) says about the mother who wishes to know why the mosquito stung her child and not somebody else's child, that for her, 'the only satisfactory answer is that "someone" sent the mosquito, or worked other evil magic against her child'. A particular person plotted against her child and used the spirit world to attack it. Can this be a response to the world as well? Or is this a claim that can only be interpreted as descriptive and factual, concerning causal relationships between things? If that is the case, I would say that it is confused and superstitious, in the way discussed above. Is such a statement about evil magic done by a particular living person necessarily confused and superstitious?

Maybe it often is confused and superstitious in this way, but it does not have to be. Philosopher Peter Winch (1972) gives the example of someone he calls Robert, who uses the concept of 'punishment' in a very particular way:

[M]any of the painful and unpleasant things that happen to him which the world says are just bad luck and undeserved, will be regarded by him as just punishments for what he regards as his own wrong-doing. (p. 198)

In his use of the concept 'punishment', Robert makes a connection between the bad things that happen to him and his mistakes. He feels the bad things as punishments; to him, they are punishments. That is his response to these painful and unpleasant things happening in his life. Winch (1972) continues:

This connection that Robert sees is not a causal one. He may indeed think there is a causal connection between his wrong-doing and his afflictions, but he need not. That is to say, if someone says to Robert: 'But look, there is a complete lack of causal connection between what you did and what is happening to you now', I do not think Robert would be speaking unintelligibly or improperly if he were to reply: 'Yes, I see that is so, but it is a punishment all the same'. (p. 199)

Whether or not there is a causal connection is irrelevant to Robert; in his response to the world, he takes the bad things to be punishment. His concern is not with establishing a connection

but with his judgement of his own behaviour; he will try hard not to give cause for punishment next time.

Now, could accusations of witchcraft be treated in a similar way? The bereaved mother discovers that her neighbour has been jealous of her, because she has a child and the neighbour does not. The question of 'why the mosquito stung her child and not somebody else's child' (Morgan 2016:n.p.) is replaced by her response that her neighbour bewitched her child. Somebody might say to her, 'but look, there is a complete lack of causal connection between your neighbour's jealousy and your child's death' and she may reply, 'yes, I see that is so; nonetheless, it is witchcraft all the same'. The concern of the mother will not be with establishing the exact connection between the two events – it is still not a theory or hypothesis about matters of fact – but it will be with the jealousy of her neighbour. Most often, this connection will be through revenge, but there are other possibilities as well.

The Roman Catholic group 'Fingers of Thomas' in Zambia has a different approach. People come to them when they are struggling with witchcraft accusations or evil spirits that are sent by relatives and so on. The initiator of the Fingers of Thomas, Father Bernhard Udelhoven (2015:215), writes that they do not look at such spiritual entities 'in reified terms (as a concrete, external spirit or ghost) but see in it a description of an experience with a negative power that can create havoc'. The negative experiences are always tied to a particular relationship, for example, with the family of one's late spouse or with the jealous neighbour in the example we are discussing. Therefore, Udelhoven (2015:215) states, '[w]e address spiritual realities by addressing the relationships to which they are tied'. 'My neighbour bewitched my son. How can I take revenge?' and 'my son of whom my neighbour was so jealous has died; let me try to work on my relationship with my neighbour' are both responses to the world, but they are very different. The Fingers of Thomas pray for the evil spirit or witchcraft to go away, but, at the same time, they

work on the broken relationship to which these spiritual realities are related. They give the advice (Udelhoven 2015):

Visit the person whom you suspect. Prepare yourself to think positively about that person. Try sincerely to have positive regard for the person and understand his/her point of view. Before you see a witch, you must see an image of God in that person. You must see a person loved by God. [...] The spiritual power that develops when you do this will break all powers of witchcraft. (p. 227)

When the relationships are restored, most often, the witchcraft or evil spirits turn out to have gone as well.

I am aware that this is a very idealistic approach and that its application is, at this point, probably quite minimal, but both the Fingers of Thomas and people who seek revenge for what has been done to them are concerned with personal relationships and not with causal relationships between events out there in the world. Their ways of speaking of witchcraft or spirits are not intended as an addition to scientific descriptions of what happened in a particular case. They are not explanations, not even spiritualistic explanations in that sense, but personal responses to something bad that happened to them. When dealing with such personal responses, I would, for sure, prefer the approach of the Fingers of Thomas over seeking to harm the one with whom the relationship is fraught, but both approaches show someone's personal response to the world.

Talk concerning the spirit world cannot be *both* a description of the world and a response to the world, because it is a response to that part of the world that is beyond our description in ordinary ways. To say 'the ancestors blocked the rains' or 'my neighbour bewitched my son' is not to describe what happened but is to express an attitude towards something that is uncertain, something that cannot be described in ordinary ways of cause and consequence. Global warming caused the rains to stay away, but global warming does not explain why it did so in particular now and here. Malaria killed my son, but medical science does not explain why it killed him now and not the other children in the neighbourhood. Speaking of the spirit world is to recognise that

fact – ‘it is not the natural but rather the spirit world that is involved here!’ – and to take up a personal stance towards and in connection with that fact, either ‘we need to appease the ancestors!’ or ‘something needs to be done about my neighbour’s jealousy!’ Speaking of the spirit world is not providing some additional information about reality, but it is a personal response to the world, in particular towards its uncertainty.

In short, taking speaking of the spirit world seriously, we need to consider prayers for protection or healing, gratitude for good things in life, quests for the right way to go, and even accusations of witchcraft not as descriptions of the world but as personal responses to the world. In order to take references to the spirit world seriously, they do not need to be interpreted as a description of reality or an attempt to describe reality; rather, language is used here in a different way. People look for ways to live with what cannot be explained, what cannot be controlled, and what cannot be predicted. Invoking the spirit world is a way of acknowledging that there are aspects of one’s life that one cannot explain, control or predict.

In conclusion to this chapter, I will shortly answer two questions that often arise about the way of taking talk of the spirit world seriously that is outlined in this chapter.

## ■ Two questions

Two questions have been raised again and again in connection with the kind of Wittgensteinian interpretation of the spirit world and God that has been explored in this chapter. Firstly, people have questioned whether God and the spirit world are real according to this interpretation. Secondly, people have expressed doubts about whether this interpretation describes what religious people actually believe or whether it is a mere reinterpretation, maybe a proposal to reform religion in a particular direction. Explicitly and implicitly, both of these questions have already formed the background of the discussions in this chapter but, in conclusion, let me shortly try to answer them here directly.

## ■ Is the spirit world real?

According to African philosopher Kwame Appiah (1992:118), '[t]he evidence that spirits exist is obvious: priests go into trance, people get better after the application of spiritual remedies, people die regularly from the action of inimical spirits'. Describing Zionist Christians in Cape Town, Hennie Pretorius (2004:167) states that for them the church is 'the place of refuge, the place to grapple with the realities of the spiritual world and the sense of vulnerability that they often bring about'. In his study, Pretorius shows that, '[s]piritual forces, which could be dismissed as superstition from a Western perspective, are part of daily reality for many people' (Öhlmann, Frost & Gräb 2016:3). In this chapter, I have continuously distinguished my interpretation of the spirit world from a Euro-American dismissal of spiritual forces as superstition; however, the question may still remain whether I have succeeded to do justice to the real existence of the spirit world.

Ethicist Bernard Williams proposed an interesting test for such a situation. He intended his test to check whether a particular interpretation of Christianity, in fact, interprets Christianity. His test consists of considering whether according to the interpretation under investigation, 'God would exist whether human beings and their attitudes existed or not – even if there were no human beings or human aspirations, there would still be a God' (Williams 1968:53). According to Williams (1968:53), '[i]f it does not, then I suspect you no longer have any form of Christianity, but probably some form of religious humanism'. Within Christianity God is real; therefore, in what claims to be a description of Christianity, God must be real as well, and we can check whether God is real by asking ourselves whether the God, as outlined in a particular interpretation, would exist if there were no humans and no human responses. Even Alan Keightley (2014:122), who in general writes positively about the Wittgensteinian interpretation of religion, undoubtedly thinks that this interpretation fails the test. I, however, wish to question this outcome.



Is the spirit world as interpreted in this chapter real? Talk concerning the spirit world is interpreted as a response to the world, a *human* response to the world. Does it follow that the spirit world would not exist if humans and their responses did not exist?

There are things that only exist because people believe in them. Take money, for example – as long as people believe in the value of money, money has value, but as soon as people stop believing in the value of money, its value ceases to exist. Things are different with mountains, for example. Mountains exist whether or not there had ever been humans. Without humans, there would have been no one to call them ‘mountains’, but they would still have been what they are. Now, consider guilt or responsibility – would they exist without human beings? It would be strange to speak of *human* guilt or *human* responsibility, if human beings had never existed, but we can also think of the rain being *responsible* for erosion in a particular area. Without humans, nobody would have called this responsibility; maybe other linguistic beings existed without a notion of responsibility, and they would never have looked at the rain and the erosion in that way but, still, from our perspective, even if humans had never existed, it was really the rain that was *responsible* for the erosion. Albeit in a different way from the existence of mountains, responsibility is real and would exist whether human beings and their attitudes existed or not. Without these attitudes, no one would have identified the responsibility, but that does not make it any less real or existing.

I propose that God and the spirit world, to whom we refer to in our responses to the world, are real in a similar way. They exist even without human responses, but without these particular human responses, they would never have been identified as such. The existence of God and the spirit world are not like the existence of mountains, but the concepts of God and the spirit world refer to something that exists in reality, something that is unlike the value of money, the latter being no reality when people do not

believe in it. God and the spirit world are out there, not in the way in which a mountain is out there – they are not objects – but they are out there in a way in which guilt and responsibility are out there, even if people would give up talking about guilt and responsibility. Without humans, nobody would have called it God or the spirit world; maybe other linguistic beings existed without a notion of God or the spirit world, and they would have never looked at the world in that way, but, still, from our perspective, even if humans had never existed, it was really God who created the earth or the spirit world that is the cause of everything that happens. It is not something made up, but it is a response *to the world*, whether people take up this response or not. In this sense, the spirit world is real.

## ■ Do people really believe like this?

But do people really believe like this is another question that often comes up. In a companion to philosophy of religion, Beverly Clack and Brian Clack (2008) ask, concerning the Wittgensteinian approach:

Is it really plausible that religious believers do not think of the Last Judgement as some momentous future occurrence, or of God as some independently existent supernatural being? Do primitive ritualists not really believe that their actions will produce real results and not merely expressive symbolic ones? The Wittgensteinian account of religion may be fruitful as a blueprint for a new kind of religious faith, though if presented as a descriptive account of how religion actually stands, it seems far from accurate. (p. 127)

Clack and Clack (2008) question whether it makes sense to assume that religious people themselves take their statements as responses to the world. Do most believers not take their religious claims to be descriptions of some reality out there? If people speak of the Last Judgement, they use the words they use when they describe other future events. When people perform rituals for their crops, they seem to do that just like they do other preparations. Clack and Clack (2008) conclude that the Wittgensteinian interpretation, which takes these beliefs and

rituals as responses to the world, must be merely a new proposal for how religion could be reformed. According to Clack and Clack (2008:n.p.), the Wittgensteinian description 'seems far from accurate' in describing what is going on right now. In my opinion, however, the emphasis here should be on 'seems', it may *seem* far from accurate.

As discussed at several places in this chapter, the meaning of words is not determined by what people say or how they understand their own words but by the context. Statements, such as 'words cannot express how grateful I am!' or 'God, please, I beg you to heal my child! Amen', may seem to have a clear meaning, but if we want to take them seriously, we need to take into account the wider context, which makes things look rather different. Luck, in the statement 'luck made me win this game', occupies the place of a force that explains why someone won, whereas, instead, the statement about luck is a response to the fact that no such force could be identified. In the same way, religious beliefs and rituals may occupy the place of descriptions of future events or of preparation activities, but that does not necessarily mean that they *are* such descriptions or such activities.

Taking statements referring to God or the spirit world at face value threatens to make them superstitious, because it would put them in conflict with what we – including the people involved – already know about causal relations and so on, and it ignores the sense that words like 'spirit' and 'God' can have in the wider context as is elaborated in this chapter. As everywhere else, there is a lot of confusion and superstition in Africa, but talk of God and the spirit world in Africa is not necessarily confused and superstitious.

If the alternative is to say that spirits are illusions, then, surely, people will confirm that for them spirits are as real as their local headman. But these same people show in their lives that discovering spirits works differently, that controversies concerning spirits are dealt with differently, that reasons given for statements

involving spirits are different and so forth. Similarly, we saw that claiming everything is determined by the spirit world seems to exclude chance but, in fact, saying that the spirit world is behind something is a way of expressing the reality of living in a world dominated by chance.

At face value, it may look like people believe in God as some independently existent supernatural being or believe that through religious rituals they can empirically increase their harvest, but this would contradict what these same people know about beings and causal relationships in other contexts. Some people may, nonetheless, hold onto a superstitious interpretation of their beliefs concerning God and the spirit world but, as argued in this chapter, they might be using the very same words in a different way as well.

There remains the question whether all of this is a proposal for reformation. Am I arguing that talk of God and the spirit world should be reinterpreted and transformed towards the kind of language that is described in this chapter? The presupposition behind this question is that the original or traditional interpretation and use of speech concerning God and the spirit world is literalistic, as a hypothesis about the world. Firstly, religions were treated by their practitioners in a literalistic fashion and, over time, believers may have emancipated themselves from this by reinterpreting their beliefs in a metaphorical or allegorical way, until they may have reached the stage described in this chapter, where their religious statements constitute a personal response to those aspects of the world that are beyond explanation, control and prediction. I do not consider this picture to be very convincing.

Currently, both interpretations and uses exist. For some people, spirits are ephemeral beings that in mysterious ways empirically cause events and, therefore, can be used in explanation, control and prediction; for other people, talking of spirits expresses their personal attitude towards the uncertainties of life in the world and those things that they are

well aware of that are beyond their capacities of explanation, control and prediction. The issue is over which of these two groups represents the original, traditional kind of religious speech and which one is a later transformation thereof. Did people first believe literally until science came along and they had to reinterpret their faith? Or did people first believe in the way described in this chapter and then some of them misunderstood their own faith and started to treat 'it is God's will' or 'the ancestors blocked the rain' as quasi-scientific, causal explanations?

Given the contemporary pervasiveness of failing to do justice to talk of the spirit world by taking it at face value, I find the latter account of history very plausible. Over time, some people mistook God and the spirits for theoretical entities to explain causal chains of events. The first account of the history of faith I find much less convincing – why would people have come up with such strange entities as God or spirits, why would they not have abandoned them as they did with mistaken theoretical entities such as phlogiston, and is it not too much of a coincidence that the stories concerning these flawed theoretical entities can so neatly be reinterpreted as expressions of people's personal attitude towards the uncertainties of life in the world, beyond their capacities of explanation, control and prediction? I consider it more likely that, over time, maybe influenced by the success of science, some people mistook God and the spirits for theoretical entities to explain causal chains of events instead of having to assume that people invented strange entities like God and the spirits for explanation, prediction and control, which later happened to be understandable as a response to what is beyond human explanation, prediction and control.

D.Z. Phillips (1999:165) brings out the implausibility of the thesis that faith was originally literalistic, stating that, '[t]hey tell us that we cannot say that God dwells on high anymore. Apparently, space travel has made it impossible to speak like that'.

Science would have forced believers to reinterpret their original faith. Yet, according to Phillips (1999):

When the psalmist says that God is on high, this is not a sense to which space travel is relevant. It has more in common with the sense in which we speak of high spirits. [...] It *never* did make sense to ask of the God who is said to be on high, 'how high?'. (p. 165)

The context in which these statements are used shows that such questions are not applicable; whether or not there is space travel is irrelevant for what the psalmist is saying. Science does not force people to reinterpret the psalms – science and the psalms were always already about something else. Therefore, Phillips (1999:165) concludes, '[s]o I am not reforming anything, not going anywhere but contemplating an old, old story and seeing what gets in the way of telling it today'. Similarly, I want to encourage the perspective described in this chapter over the perspective that I would call confused and superstitious and, in doing so, I consider myself not to be a reformer but someone who is trying to take seriously the old, old stories concerning the spirit world.

## ■ Conclusion

People in Africa regularly speak of a spirit world which they assume to be responsible for everything that happens in our ordinary world. In this chapter, I have challenged the basic assumption in many attempts to take stories relating to the spirit world seriously, namely, that in order to take a statement seriously it must be interpreted as a description of reality or, at least, as an attempt to describe reality. The philosophical, theological and anthropological schools referred to in the previous chapter consider references to the spirit world as designations of some kind of objects out there in reality. Either the stories are seen as metaphors referring to elusive realities that cannot be described directly or they accurately describe reality, but it is the ontologically different reality in which the people involved live.

However, despite an often unshakeable faith in the spirit world, people in Africa, in day-to-day life, live in the same world as their Euro-American counterparts. As we have seen, references to the spirit world are not attempts to explain, control and predict the world but, rather, personal responses to those aspects of the world that cannot be explained, controlled or predicted. This alternative interpretation in no way implies that the spirit world is not real, nor is this interpretation a proposal to reform existing beliefs in the spirit world. This is an interpretation that takes stories about the spirit world seriously, both contemporary ones and those from the past. We will continue by looking at how we should interpret differences between different stories concerning the spirit world.

# The spirit world: Its diversity

## ■ Introduction

In Chapter 2, I argued that we need to see the African belief in the spirit world as a personal response to the world, instead of as a source of information about the world. I challenged the assumption that in order to take a statement seriously, it must be interpreted as a description of reality. In this chapter, I challenge another assumption concerning talk of the spirit world, namely, that there must be a disagreement between those who speak of a spirit world and those who do not or do so differently.

If we accept that stories referring to the spirit world are not descriptions of objects out there but responses to what one finds in the world, then, still, there are significant differences between different responses. To most people in Africa – including the hundreds of millions of African Christians – it is completely natural to respond to something by speaking of the spirit world, whereas to many people from Europe and the USA this does not make sense at all. Does this mean that they are disagreeing with one another?

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Scholar of religion Gerrie ter Haar (2009:34), for example, argues that the African belief in the spirit world is incompatible with the religious understanding of mainstream Christians in Western Europe. Of course, there is not one kind of Christianity, and it is important for every local manifestation of Christianity to be contextualised, but it would be problematic for the unity of Christianity and the church if some views within Christianity are incompatible with one another. How can we be one church if different segments of the church hold beliefs that cannot be reconciled?

In her book *How God Became African*, Ter Haar (2009) explores how the Christian God has been transformed in Africa. It has been reshaped according to beliefs that are deeply rooted in the continent's own religious history, such as the belief in the spirit world. She (2009) states:

In Africa, religion generally refers to a belief in the existence of an invisible world, distinct but not separate from the visible one, which is home to spiritual beings with effective powers over the material world. (p. 34)

In Chapter 2, I treated belief in God and belief in the spirit world as similar kinds of beliefs. Ter Haar (2009:34) emphasises the differences between the two, '[u]nlike probably most Western Christians, African Christians believe in the reality of a spirit world, with which they may interact freely and frequently, according to circumstances'. Christians in Europe and the USA believe in God but, most often, not in the spirit world as their African counterparts do. In this chapter, I will investigate whether this difference really is a difference of incompatible beliefs, as Ter Haar (2009:34) claims.

After introducing the difference between the beliefs of African and Euro-American Christians, I will first discuss the most obvious solution, namely, to find some kind of middle ground. Several authors, among whom is Gerrie ter Haar, try to do so, but I find fatal flaws in that approach, particularly in what kind of belief it characterises the belief in the spirit world to be. I will discuss the different-from-the-ordinary role that is played by references to

the spirit world, investigate how truth relates to such responses to the world and, finally, show how living with these differences is possible. Someone who speaks of the spirit world and someone who does not respond differently to the world, but they are not necessarily in disagreement with one another.

## ■ Spirits that can be coerced to help

According to Gerrie ter Haar (1992), it is medical science that differentiates contemporary Europe and the USA from the rest of the world. While the rest of the world – and Europe and the USA during earlier historical periods – used the model of a person as a shell containing a spirit or soul, this model is excluded in the biomedical model prevalent nowadays in Europe and the USA (Ter Haar 1992:119). It may sound strange to argue that people in Europe and the USA do not know of a spirit or soul, but Ter Haar is correct in her observation that such concepts seem to be excluded from medical science. According to her, this exclusion accounts for the incompatibility of the African belief in the spirit world and sentiments of people in Europe and the USA.

Anthropologist Robin Horton, who wrote extensively about the differences and similarities between patterns of thought in Africa and in Europe and the USA, does not so much consider science – biomedical and otherwise – in Europe and the USA as exceptional but the kind of religion that developed in response to it. According to Horton, the kind of religion described in Chapter 2 – religion as a response to the world when explanation, control and prediction fail – emerged when science took over the role of explanation, control and prediction that religion had played before. As highlighted in the final section of Chapter 2, I do not think that the kind of religion described in Chapter 2 is a later reformation of religion. Instead of assuming that people invented strange entities like God and the spirits for explanation, prediction and control, which later

happened to be reinterpretable as responses to what is beyond human explanation, prediction and control, I consider it more likely that, over time, some people mistook God and the spirits for theoretical entities to explain causal chains of events, maybe influenced by the success of science. Despite our disagreement about its historical pedigree, Horton and I share the idea about what religion in Europe and the USA is nowadays, namely, in Horton's words (1993:155), God is seen less 'as a being who might help one control the vicissitudes of everyday life but rather as a being through whom one learns to transcend any care about such vicissitudes'. Speaking of God is to respond to what one cannot control, rather than a desperate attempt to control the world through extraordinary means. Horton tells us that this God who cannot be manipulated but to whom believers surrender themselves is the God he was brought up with in Europe. He assumes that this is the kind of God that European and later American missionaries took to Africa.

Initially, the people in Africa happily accepted this new God whose power was shown by the military power of the colonists, but soon they regretted accepting this God. They remained Christians, but they became Christians in an 'Africanised' way. According to Horton (1993), on this point there is a remarkable consensus among a wide variety of scholars on African Christianity:

By and large, they agree that the key feature of the situation is the central preoccupation of African Christians with the active control of sickness and health, fortune and misfortune. It is in this respect, they suggest, that African Christian ideas show maximum continuity with the pagan religious heritage and minimum continuity with the missionary world-view. (p. 155)

The people in Africa had been offered the God from Europe and the USA about whom Christians speak when things are beyond explanation, prediction and control, but they rejected this God and they exchanged him for the gods and the spirit world they knew – gods and spirits who help them in practical matters.

African believers, according to Horton (1993:177), ‘want, above all, to have the means of controlling events in the space-time world around them’. In a footnote, he (Horton 1993) adds that:

I shall not try to list the monographic material that either intentionally or unintentionally makes this point. To do so would be to include virtually every monograph that has successfully portrayed the indigenous religious heritage of an African people in the context of everyday life. (p. 417, n. 61)

According to Horton, every scholar on African religion agrees that people in Africa look to religion to help them in explanation, prediction and control of the world around them, in contradistinction from what people in Europe and the USA want from religion, namely, a way to *respond* to what one *cannot* explain, predict and control in the world. So, the point of radical difference between African believers and religious people from Europe and the USA is the belief in a spirit world that one can manipulate, a spirit world that one may interact with in order to use the effective powers of the spirits to influence the world around us. Christians in Europe and the USA turn to God when they face a situation that they know is beyond their control, whereas religious believers in Africa turn to God and the spirit world because they are said to assume that this is a way to control the situations they are facing, after all.

Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar (2004:123) call this latter practice ‘bargaining with the spirit world’. Christians in Africa assume that they can trade with the spirit world so that the spirit world will help them. Religious believers all over the world, according to Ellis and Ter Haar (2004):

[H]abitually leave small offerings, such as food and drink intended for the spirits of ancestors that are thought to need these for sustenance, pretty much as they did when alive. Without such attention the spirits will themselves grow weak, not to mention annoyed, and will be of less use in future. (pp. 123-124)

People provide food or drink for the spirits or something like life-force by sacrificing an animal, and in return they expect the spirits to help them. To be a believer in most parts of the

world is to use the spirit world, to engage with the spirit world in order to avoid bad things or ensure good things to happen. According to Ellis and Ter Haar (2004:124), such religious practices 'are best understood primarily as forms of exchange'. People give something to the spirits in order for the spirits to give something back to them. In accounts of classical Roman and Greek religions, in particular, the Latin expression *do ut des* [I give in order that you give] is often used to describe this kind of religious relationships between believers and gods or spirits. According to Ellis and Ter Haar (2004:125), this principle 'is common among religious believers all over the world'. This belief in spirits who can be coerced with gifts to help religious believers is the belief in the spirit world that is assumed to be incompatible with religious sentiments in Europe and the USA. How can people from Africa and people from Europe and the USA form one church together if the latter do not even believe in the existence of such spirits? One obvious way to try to solve this problem, to which we will turn now, is to put the differences aside for a moment and look for a kind of middle ground.

## ■ Looking for a middle ground

If we assume that there must be a disagreement between those who speak of a spirit world that can be manipulated to help out and those who do not speak of a spirit world at all, then it is natural to try to resolve this disagreement by looking for a kind of middle ground. Several scholars try to do so.

## ■ Suspending our scepticism

'As strangers, anthropologists cannot start with the natural attitude that takes witchcraft as reality for granted', anthropologist Richard Werbner (2015:48) observed, 'but find that they have to raise outsiders' questions, against the grain of the taken-for-granted'. As outsiders, anthropologists are sceptical about whether the spirit world and things such as witchcraft exist.

Yet, their task is to try to understand these practices and (Werbner 2015):

[T]hey cannot get very far in understanding witchcraft unless they can suspend enough of their skepticism to be able to enter into communication predicated upon its imagined realities and, from the stranger's viewpoint, fantasies. (p. 48)

Werbner describes the anthropologist as someone who is sceptical about the spirit world but tries to put that scepticism aside. For the sake of his or her research, one takes the stance of a 'suspension of disbelief'. When anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann (2018:18) speaks of anthropology's 'methodological atheism', this boils down to the same thing – whatever the anthropologist personally believes or does not believe should be suspended. It is tempting to assume that such a stance of suspending our scepticism is also required to overcome the differences between Christians in Africa and those in Europe and the USA.

As noted above, Gerrie ter Haar (2009:41) considers the African belief in the spirit world to be incompatible with European religious sensibilities, but she sees an opening in particular developments within the sciences because, '[f]or a long time, the Western biomedical paradigm and non-Western soul theories developed in opposite directions but recent developments show some degree of convergence'. Some scientific research suggests limits to the biomedical paradigm and tries to create space within the sciences for belief in spirits and spirit possession (Ter Haar 2009):

Neuro-biological research in the late 1990s suggests the presence in the human brain of what is popularly referred to as the 'God spot', a mass of neural tissue in the brain's temporal lobes (located just behind the temples) that is considered responsible for enabling human beings to have a sense of the sacred and a consciousness of deeper things in life. (pp. 41–42)

So, could the gap between Africa and Europe be bridged by letting go of the sceptical exclusion of spirits and souls, and accommodating belief in the spirit world within the Euro-American scientific perspective?

Theologian Philip Jenkins argues for suspending disbelief and opening up Euro-American frames of mind to accommodate African ideas. Jenkins became famous through his book *The Next Christendom* (2002), in which he showed how the centre of gravity of Christianity globally moves south. The majority of Christians live outside of Christianity's traditional home in Europe and the USA, and African Christians now numerically represent an important share of Christians worldwide. In *New Faces of Christianity* (2006), Jenkins continues to investigate this development and discusses how this shift of the centre of gravity may impact the theology of the global church. He describes important divergences between Christians in the developed and in the developing world, and the belief in the spirit world is one of those divergences.

Jenkins (2006:122) proposes to approach the difference between Christians in Europe and the USA and those in the southern hemisphere by putting both our beliefs and our scepticisms aside for a moment, '[w]e should proceed as if God is not a given'. If we look at the situation as if we were an objective observer, we may 'for sake of the argument, assess claims on a purely secular basis' (Jenkins 2006:122). Christians from Africa claim that the spirit world exists. Christians from Europe and the USA claim that the spirit world does not – or even cannot – exist. From a neutral perspective, however, the situation may look less hopeless and less incompatible, so Jenkins claims. Jenkins (2006:122) states, '[v]iewed more closely, global South versions of Christianity and Bible interpretation are much less archaic than they might appear, while global North assertions of rationality are more fragile'. Both sides are not as far apart once we go beyond merely asking 'do you or do you not, believe in the existence of a spirit world?' If those beliefs and scepticisms are suspended for a moment, a middle ground may appear.

Firstly, Jenkins (2006:124) observes that 'contemporary African churches proclaim a belief in supernatural manipulation but also warn against an unhealthy obsession with such forces'. Jenkins connects this with earlier stages in European history

when European churches would have taken a similar stance. This leads to all kinds of questionable evolutionary conceptions of Africa and Europe being on the same trajectory, only Africa being a bit behind, but I will leave that aside here. Jenkins is correct in noting that almost all churches in Africa are themselves sceptical about the majority of particular instances of miracles and magical interventions from the spirit world. This scepticism exists, however, most often within a context of unquestioned belief in the *possibility* of such miracles and magical interventions in those very same churches. Yet, acknowledgement of the scepticism within African churches could make these churches less estranging for Christians from Europe and the USA.

Secondly, Jenkins (2006) notes that:

[G]lobal South churches can make an excellent argument that healing – broadly defined – is central to the New Testament message, so central as to raise serious questions about just what it left after these elements are read out of the New Testament. (p. 123)

The New Testament is full of spirits, spirit possession and deliverance. Churches in Europe and the USA may want to reinterpret these stories as metaphorical or psychological, but if we read, for example, the story of Jesus sending spirits into pigs, according to Jenkins (2006:106), this interpretation is not possible because, '[t]he spirits transferred to the pigs are real, honest-to-Beelzebub demons'. If the evil spirits can go into pigs, the speaking of spirits is obviously not referring to a human psychological issue but is considered to refer to a particular reality. The Bible could form a bridge from the Euro-American conception to African conceptions of Christianity. I will return to this argument from the Bible later on.

From the other side, Jenkins (2006:125) observes that '[o]n closer examination, perhaps Euro-American proclamations of scientific objectivity are not quite as genuine as they appear'. Is it really true that Europeans and Americans do not believe in a spirit world? People in Europe and the USA 'plead and argue with cars and computers', Jenkins (2006:126) contends, so they might



believe in some kind of spirits after all. Jenkins (2006:127) holds that 'Western society possesses an ineradicable substratum of irrationality and ritualistic behaviour, which accounts for the persistent quest for solutions in cults and fringe religions, fads and superstitions'. Newspapers and social media regularly report weird, supernatural phenomena claimed by Europeans and Americans, which may show that the difference between Europe and the USA on the one hand and Africa on the other is not as wide as is often supposed. It is just that, so Jenkins (2006:127) holds, 'African churches may be more realistic in their holistic approach to human religious impulses'. Europeans and Americans have these impulses as well, but are merely denying them.

In short, if Christians in Europe and the USA put their initial scepticism concerning the spirit world aside and look at the matter objectively they will, according to Jenkins, discover that they have an opening for belief in the spirit world in inclinations to look for supernatural explanations within themselves and in the fact that belief in the spirit world is of central importance in their own Bible. They will also find that the concern about extremities and superstitious absurdities is shared by most of their fellow Christians in Africa. Therefore, Jenkins argues, it would be good for Christians in Europe and the USA to accept to some extent the existence of a spirit world within their own religious outlook. In this way, it is possible to find a kind of middle ground, which would thereby also resolve the threatening incompatibility between their own religious understandings and the African belief in the spirit world that Ter Haar noted.

These are just some examples of the common approach to look for a middle ground between African and Euro-American Christians concerning the belief in the spirit world by suspending scepticism, accommodating other models of life and looking for openings within both perspectives on the world. The attempt to resolve the threatening incompatibility within global Christianity is commendable; yet, I will argue that there is something seriously flawed about this approach.

## ■ What is wrong with this quest?

On the one hand, it is honest and open of Werbner's anthropologist to admit to his or her scepticism and then to try to put it aside; on the other hand, by considering one's own response as 'scepticism', one assumes to know something about the other position already. By suspending scepticism, someone is assuming that it is the kind of belief about which one can be sceptical or not. On the one hand, the scientists referred to by Ter Haar are very accommodating in looking for a God spot during their brain research; on the other hand, by doing so, they force spiritual beliefs into a particular frame, and they assume that religious experiences are comparable to sensory experiences. On the one hand, Jenkins is considerate and forthcoming in trying to adopt an unbiased position while assessing the claims of either side on a neutral basis; on the other hand, in doing so, Jenkins already assumes that what is at stake are 'claims' with arguments that support them. Not every statement is a statement about which it makes sense to say that one is sceptical or even to suspend one's scepticism. Not every statement is a claim which derives its plausibility from supporting arguments. If someone tells you 'I think that you should go now', what does it mean to be sceptical about that? If someone tells you 'it hurts me to see you in that situation', what is the claim here, and what are the arguments that one may consider neutrally to assess its truth?

Elsewhere, I discussed as a comparison for the language of faith the example of a widower who one morning sees the imprint of two hearts in the snow and responds by saying that this is a message from his deceased wife that she still loves him and their son (Kroesbergen 2012:24–26, 191–193). Someone may point out that there was a truck which had to turn around that morning and that the truck left those markings in the snow, but this does not need to affect the widower at all, he may still say, 'you may be right, nonetheless, these hearts are a message from my wife'. Now, a person may know that she would never say such a thing, but does that mean that she is sceptical about

what this widower says? Is this widower making claims, concerning which we can objectively assess the arguments? Of course, one may argue that the widower assumes deceased people are still conscious and active in such a way that it makes sense to ascribe to them such an act as causing this imprint in the snow, but this feels like stretching the issue. It is more likely that the widower is not interested in theories about how people may live on after death and in what way they may be able to influence worldly events. His statement about the message from his wife does not follow from such theories, but it is the response that comes naturally to him when seeing these imprints in the snow at this time and place.

Many people may not want to speak of deceased people in the way that the widower does. Someone may even think that there is something wrong with what the widower says, for example, because he is glossing over how angry his wife was with him when she died. A theoretical discussion about the nature of life after death, however, seems out of place when trying to understand what this widower tells us. One may understand it, one may even admire it, even if one oneself would never say such a thing. If we want to understand him, we should not perform an act such as suspending our scepticism, nor should we assume a neutral stance to objectively assess the arguments for and against his claim, but we should look at what role the statement plays in his life. I propose that the same holds for the African belief in the spirit world.

Anthropologist Adam Ashforth spent much time doing research in the township of Soweto near Johannesburg in South Africa. In *Madumo: A Man Bewitched* (2000), Ashforth tells the story of a friend he met in Soweto, whom he names Madumo. Shortly after their mother died, Madumo's siblings ban Madumo from his parental house, where he used to live. A prophet from the local Zionist Christian church had told his siblings that someone close was responsible for their mother's death, and they concluded that it must be Madumo. Madumo, without a job and now also without a house, finds himself in a difficult situation

and he tells Ashforth that he must find a way to appease his ancestors. 'So you blame your ancestors?', Ashforth (2000:22) asks him. 'It's not blame exactly', Madumo explains, 'it's like they are forgetting me. Forgetting me because they think I've forgotten them' (Ashforth 2000:22). When Ashforth does not seem convinced, Madumo elaborates (Ashforth 2000):

According to our tradition, you know, we must visit our ancestors' graves, at least sometimes, and make a feast. Otherwise, it's like they despair and lose their powers to protect us, their descendants. They forget you. It's like we say, when someone is run over by a car, say, we say their ancestors have forgotten them. They didn't make you aware that the car was coming. (p. 22)

If something bad happens to someone – like it is now happening to Madumo – Madumo and the people from his family and tradition say that the ancestors have forgotten them, for, if the ancestors had not forgotten him, they would have protected him. Therefore, Madumo now wants to make it up to his ancestors by making a sacrifice to them in the form of organising a feast for them with his senior relatives.

Madumo believes in the spirit world, and he believes in his ancestors being somehow responsible for his dire fate. But what kind of a belief is this? By speaking of scepticism and suspending scepticism, as Werbner does, by speaking of accommodating belief in the spirit world within the scientific worldview, as Ter Haar does, or by speaking of objectively assessing the arguments for different claims, as Jenkins does, they all make it seem like belief in the spirit world is a kind of hypothesis or theory and not a response to the world. They make it sound as if people like Madumo have a particular picture in their heads about what is going on in reality and we could now check whether this picture corresponds to the facts or not. But what kind of a picture would that be, for example, in the case of Madumo? As we have seen in the previous chapter, speaking of the spirit world should not be interpreted as a hypothesis or theory about the world.

Madumo says that the ancestors have forgotten someone if he or she is hit by a car, otherwise the ancestors would have made

this person aware of the approaching car. Does this mean that the ancestors are continuously whispering into the ears of their descendants to warn them about approaching cars and other dangers or something like that? Could we now check whether there are really these voices in the heads of all the descendants of happy ancestors? Madumo wants to make a sacrifice of meat and beer to his ancestors to appease them. Does this mean that Madumo thinks that the ancestors have a mouth and a digestive system and so on? Almost all the meat and beer will be consumed by Madumo's relatives and their neighbours – a little token of it will be left apart 'for the ancestor', but everyone would be surprised if these bits of meat and beer were to mysteriously disappear. If somebody points out that the ancestors are not eating and drinking, Madumo may say, 'you may be right, nonetheless, this is my gift for the ancestors'. Just like the widower with the hearts in the snow, Madumo does not have a hypothesis about strange things that might be happening, but when somebody is hit by a car, he simply says that the ancestors have forgotten him or her.

The same people who pray to the ancestors for rain also use irrigation systems to water their crops. People may assure us that ancestors or other spirits are real and that they are also persons, but they would not count the number of people in a village or a room differently than anyone else would. Just like, after an inspired church service, congregants may say that they could feel that Christ was really present this morning, but they would not add Christ to the list of participants. Madumo speaks of 'according to our tradition' and of what 'we say' when something happens. He knows that other people – like Ashforth – think differently, that they would not say the same things and Madumo is not surprised by that, as he would have been about a divergence in a plain description of facts. Just like the widower would be well aware that nobody else might see a message from his deceased wife in the imprints in the snow, so Madumo would not be shocked to find that other people do not speak of ancestors. Madumo himself is continuously shifting registers or changing paradigms,

speaking to his ancestors through a traditional *sangoma* at times and through Christian prophets at other times, and, at yet other times, speaking purely of witchcraft that needs to be reversed. He is not putting forward hypotheses or theories, but he is merely trying to find a way to live with his misfortune, knowing perfectly well that others – and even he himself at other times – would respond to this kind of fate differently.

Looking for a middle ground between the African belief in the spirit world and Euro-American religious sensibilities makes it look like the belief in the spirit world is a theory or hypothesis about matters of fact in the world, instead of a response to what one finds in the world. This misrepresents what the belief in the spirit world is, but it may do worse than that – it may harm this belief. Discussing the Christian belief in the Resurrection of Christ, philosopher Peter Winch (cited in Springsted 2004) states:

What would damage the integrity of such a belief is not so much a demonstration of its historical falsity as the asking of such technical historical questions concerning it in the first place. It is a belief of the sort which precludes the asking of such questions. (p. 368)

If a Christian begins to consider his or her belief in the Resurrection as a historical belief, this changes the role that the belief plays in his or her life. If the Resurrection historically happened, it is simply something that happened – it may be something extraordinary, and it may influence this person's calculations for what is the most profitable way to live his or her life, but it remains a blunt fact. As a religious belief, however, the belief in the Resurrection of Christ is something else; it commits one to certain values, to a particular way of life to follow, whatever calculations may say. Like beginning to calculate what someone puts into a friendship or relationship and what one gets out of it would itself be the end of that friendship or relationship, whatever the outcome of the calculations may be, if one starts to look at the Resurrection of Christ as a historical fact that can be used in such calculations, one has already lost the faith. Turning belief in the Resurrection of Christ, belief in the ancestors or belief in the spirit world in general into a theory or hypothesis about factual states of affairs

not only misrepresents these beliefs but, in fact, damages them. Religious beliefs play a different role in people's lives, although what people themselves say about their beliefs can sometimes be misleading in this respect.

## ■ A different-from-the-ordinary role

Robin Horton (1993:350) emphasises that '[i]n categorizing and interpreting other people's discourse, we must in the first instance respect and be guided by their own intentions'. According to him (Horton 1993:350), 'speakers alluding to spiritual beings *intend* to refer to entities "out there" in the world external to their discourse'. When Madumo, for example, speaks of the ancestors forgetting him, he means that the ancestors are really out there, awaiting him to acknowledge them by organising a feast for them. Speaking of the ancestors is not merely a way of speaking in response to the world, but it is intended to refer to actual ancestor spirits in the world external to the words that Madumo is uttering, according to Horton. In what follows, I will elaborate and apply the argument set out in Chapter 2 concerning the personal aspect of speaking of the spirit world.

Horton tells us about his experiences teaching in Nigeria. Whenever he gets around to explaining how some people consider religious language as a response to the world, not as trying to influence what is happening but as a way to deal with the fact that we cannot control many things, Horton's students are perplexed. Horton (1993) writes:

By and large, I would say, they react with sheer puzzlement at such a weird, perverse interpretation of spiritual discourse. Away from the customary politeness of the classroom, I can imagine them asking each other: can Westerners really be *this* mad? (p. 117)

Of course, people try to influence what is happening – ask them for yourself, Horton urges. Ask people why they make all those expensive sacrifices, and they will tell you that they do it for their lives to become better. Madumo does not want to organise a feast for his ancestors as a way of accepting his misery, but he

hopes that it will get him out of his misery. He gives to the ancestors in order for the ancestors to be moved to give to him – *do ut des* [I give in order that you give] or bargaining with the spirit world.

So, if *do ut des* fits what people themselves say about their religion, why do I speak of responses to the world, of ways in which one speaks to oneself knowing very well that others speak differently and so on? Am I legislating against particular descriptions of religious practices here? Am I saying that people should not speak as if they give to the spirits in order for the spirits to give to them and so on?

## ■ I give in order that you give?

At the end of a discussion about the nature of religious language along similar lines as mine in these chapters, philosopher Rush Rhees (1969) remarks:

If you ask, ‘Well, when we are talking about God, does our language not *refer* to anything?’, then I should want to begin, as I have tried here, by emphasizing something of the special grammar of this language. (p. 132)

It is important to stress that words within religion are used differently, according to different rules, for, ‘[o]therwise it is natural to think of the way in which our physical object language may refer to something’ (Rhees 1969:132). It was discussed in Chapter 2 how words like ‘pain’ and ‘guilt’ and ‘responsibility’ are used in a way that differs from physical object language; for spirits or God this is the same. Rhees (1969) concludes:

I might say that the language about God certainly refers to something. But then I should want to say something about what it is to ‘talk about God’, and how different this is from talking about the moon or talking about our new house or talking about the Queen. How different the ‘talking about’ is, I mean. (p. 132)

We use the word ‘God’ not like we use the word ‘moon’ or ‘queen’. This goes for speaking of giving to God or the spirit world in order for God or the spirit world to give to you as well. The ‘talking



about' here is different from talking about giving something to one's neighbour or the chief, hoping that the neighbour or chief will give something in return. It is not wrong to use the same words in both cases but, in understanding these words, it is important to see that the words are used differently.

If we give food or drinks to our neighbour or chief, we expect them to put it in their mouths and digest it and so on. We already noted that however genuinely one may believe in ancestors, ancestors are not thought of as having mouths and digestive systems in that way. We give something to another person because we think they need or can use that thing within their own life. In many ways, spiritual beings do not have a life of their own. When, in the Bible, Elijah challenges the priests of Baal and Baal does not seem to respond to his priests, Elijah mocks, '[s]hout louder! Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought or busy or travelling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened' (1 Ki 18:26). This would be a mockery of any spiritual being. If someone calls out to his or her living father, he may be busy or distracted – not so with spiritual beings. Whether the God of Israel or any other spiritual being, whenever someone addresses a spiritual being, it is there for that person. At least the spirit is not absent because it does need to sleep or run some errands. That does not fit with how one speaks of spirits. The talking about spirits differs from talking about neighbours or chiefs.

The same goes for the other side of the bargain. People give things to spirits in order for the spirits to give something to them, but this giving in return by the spirits is spoken of differently. Philosopher Gareth Moore (1988:204–205) notes, '[i]f I ask God for something, and get it, there is no further doubt, no question to be raised, as to whether God gave it to me', concluding that '[i]t is not that I want somebody to do something, but that I want something to *happen*'. If I want my neighbour to give me something, it matters whether it is actually him or her who is doing the giving, but this is different from what is given by God or the ancestors. We do not check whether it was really God or the ancestors who were behind it, as we might in case

we want our neighbour or chief to do something for us. In fact, we could not even check whether something was done by God or the spirits.

In a commentary on the Welsh poet R.S. Thomas, Moore's colleague D.Z. Phillips (1986) discusses the term 'act of God' as it is used in law and comments:

To those who ask, 'Who did these things? Who is responsible for them?' the answer 'God' is nearer to 'No one' than to 'Another person, far more powerful than ourselves'. (pp. 81-82)

Elsewhere, Phillips (1988:279) adds that, '[n]o one performed an act of God. That is why it is called an act of God – "It just happened. It was an act of God"'. We talk about God's action to talk about that part of an event that is beyond human actions and intentions. Humans are responsible for all kinds of things, but God is referred to particularly for those happenings or parts of happenings that are beyond human control. We do not look for evidence that the turnaround in our fate was caused by God or the ancestors. In fact, especially if we do not find evidence for what caused this turnaround of our life at all, that counts as evidence that it was an act of God or of the ancestors. It is not a problem to speak of giving things to the spirit world in order for the spirit world to give things to you, but the words here are used in a special, different-from-the-ordinary way.

## ■ The spirit world is not used as a practical tool

In his *Lectures on Religious Belief*, philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1966:53-72) discusses people believing in the Last Judgement or believing in seeing each other again after death. Wittgenstein says that by speaking in such a manner, these people are using a picture. One student protests; he feels Wittgenstein denies something with this interpretation. The student feels that Wittgenstein is denying that people speaking of seeing each other after death truly mean what they say. Now, Wittgenstein takes himself not to be denying this but only to

characterise how this person uses the words that he is using. Wittgenstein emphasises that the whole weight may be in the picture. He does not want to imply that we can do away with the picture, speaking about an attitude to life, for example, and mean the same thing. No, the picture may be essential to what this person is saying about seeing each other after death. Wittgenstein intends this explanation to convince the student that he respects that people mean what they say when they speak of seeing each other after death. I doubt whether this is possible if he retains the word 'picture'; therefore, in order to convince this student and, for example, Robin Horton and his students, let me try to describe the different use of words within religion, without words like 'picture' and 'expressing' and without suggesting to deny that people engage with the spirit world in order to get something out of it.

Let us look at an example that is not from Africa because I think that Horton's question about how to account for what people themselves say about their religion is as pressing elsewhere as it is in Africa. The example is of a Roman Catholic priest from Australia someone told me about. Whenever he was having trouble finding a parking space, he would pray to Saint Anthony, and whenever he then found a parking space, he would take this to be God's doing. Through Saint Anthony, the priest had offered God a prayer and, in response, God intervened by showing the priest a parking space.

My personal inclination in describing what is going on here would be to say something along the lines of that by praying to Saint Anthony, the priest is using a religious picture to express that he himself is not in control of finding a parking place, and by thanking Saint Anthony when he finds a parking place, he expresses his relief; the priest does not believe that Saint Anthony or God comes down from heaven to intervene in looking for a parking place in any literal sense and the fact that the priest thanks Saint Anthony when he has found a place does not necessarily imply that he considers the saint to be the explanation for him finding a parking place. In response to not knowing where

to find a parking space or to the relief of having found one; nonetheless, the priest uses the picture of Saint Anthony and God. For me, this description would clarify what is going on, but if such a description confuses others and lets them believe that I am denying things that I am not denying, then I could just leave out those words such as ‘picture’ and ‘expressing’. I can phrase what I want to say about how the prayer to Saint Anthony is used in this instance without these words as well.

The role that prayer to Saint Anthony plays in the life of the priest is very different from the role that more practical matters play. This may seem trivial, but it is important to see this. We can bring this out by imagining John who has a parking app that tells him where there is a free parking place and then comparing the use of this app with the priest’s prayer to Saint Anthony. The app and the prayer are on different planes. The differences I am going to list to show this are, on the one hand, obvious and trivial and, on the other hand, not very sharp as, in most cases, the way in which I characterise either the prayer or the app can be applied to the other as well. Yet, I would still say it is obvious that in one of the two cases, such a characterisation is merely secondary or metaphorical.

The priest thanks Saint Anthony when he finds a place. John may thank his app after finding a place as well – as Jenkins said, people plead and argue with computers – but this is thanking in merely a secondary sense. The primary use of the word ‘thanking’ is thanking a person, as in thanking Saint Anthony; thanking an electronic device such as an app is a derived use of the word ‘thanking’.

John has to recharge his phone from time to time to keep the app working. We could say that the priest recharges his prayers to Saint Anthony by burning a candle for him every Sunday in church, but that would be a secondary use of the word ‘recharging’.

When John received his app, he stopped checking the security guard’s Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) footage and calling people in different places to ask them whether there is a free

parking place nearby. The priest's prayer is not in such a way interchangeable with other responses to the difficulty of finding a parking place. If the priest starts using the app as well, it may undermine the frequency of his prayers, because he never finds himself looking for a parking space any longer, but he might continue to pray nonetheless. He may now pray that the place is nearby, for example.

A Muslim friend may tell the priest that it works even better to pray to Fatima instead of to Saint Anthony, but the priest would not change his prayers overnight; it would be a conversion if he did. When a friend tells John that another brand of parking app works even better, John may change overnight. Maybe John is very attached to his app provider, and it would be a conversion for him to switch, but this would be a conversion in a secondary sense.

John may be considered intelligent or clever for using the parking app. The priest above is said to have a great intellect, but it is not in the prayer to Saint Anthony that this intellect is shown. The priest shows his spirituality or close relationship with God by praying so often. John is not showing his spirituality or closeness to God by using the parking app.

John may experiment with his app by trying out whether it helps to connect to the satellites before he leaves home, for example. The priest may one day start addressing Saint Anthony in his morning prayers, but that would not be experimenting or trying what works – or, if it is, I would say that it is probably superstitious. The priest's prayer may be superstitious. John's use of the app cannot be superstitious or only in a secondary sense. To find out whether it is superstitious, the priest should conduct a proper self-examination. Self-examination does not play a role in John's use of the app.

I doubt that anyone – not even Robin Horton or his Nigerian students – would disagree with any of these differences. They seem obvious and trivial, yet they are important, especially if we want to account for what people themselves say about their faith

and religious practices, such as praying to Saint Anthony. If we interviewed people who pray to Saint Anthony for a parking space, we might find many people saying that they pray because they think it works, just like they would use a particular app if it works. They might say that Saint Anthony literally helps them, like an app would help them, and that God's intervention through Saint Anthony is the explanation for them finding a parking space, just like an app would explain why John finds a parking space. At first sight, such interview results would obscure the differences I summed up above. However, if we continued asking about these differences through the interview, I think most of the same people would acknowledge these differences as well.

Does this mean that these people contradict themselves? On the one hand, they say that God literally intervenes after our prayer to Saint Anthony, while on the other hand they acknowledge that there are many differences between the role that such a prayer plays in their lives and the role that a parking app would play. There may be a contradiction between the two for some people, but there may not be a contradiction for others. If there is a contradiction, then the problem is most likely with what these people said first, that it is an explanation for finding a parking space that God literally intervenes after our prayer to Saint Anthony. As far as this statement stands in contradiction to the differences highlighted above, it is false, as the practical differences listed here are much more self-evident, at least, in most people's lives. However, there does not need to be a contradiction for everyone; someone may want to speak of 'literal intervention' and 'explanation', while being fully aware that these words here are used very differently from how they would be used while referring to a technical device such as an app. For such a person for whom there is no contradiction, both interview results can be left to stand without any problem. When he says that it is an explanation for finding a parking space that God literally intervenes after our prayer to Saint Anthony, this person is aware that he uses his words in a different-from-the-ordinary way. I for myself find it useful to describe this different-from-the-ordinary way by speaking

of 'pictures', 'expressing' and 'lack of explanation', but if such words confuse him by making him think I am denying something of what he says or that I am not genuinely respecting that he means what he says, then I do not care about avoiding such words. What matters is that we look at the spirit behind the words – how they are used in day-to-day lives – such as I have done here briefly through the list of differences between the prayer to Saint Anthony and using a parking app.

I would deny that God is an explanation, if and only if it is considered to be on the same plane as practical explanations. John's app, the CCTV of the security guards or the help of someone's friend may all explain why John finds a parking place in the same way. God does not 'explain' why the priest finds a parking place. The priest's carefully looking around explains why he found a parking space, but his prayer to Saint Anthony does not explain it in the same way. The fact that there was a parking place to be found is beyond that – that is, beyond such kinds of explanations – and, therefore, that is what we can ascribe to God. God explains what cannot be explained, neither by an app, CCTV or carefully looking around. We speak of God, especially in cases where there is a lack of explanation. Now, of course, the priest does not pray to a 'lack of explanation'; he prays to God through Saint Anthony. Of course, the priest does not wish a 'lack of explanation' to intervene; he wants God to intervene. But the way in which he uses the word or name 'God' here is different-from-the-ordinary, for example, because it is used in such cases where ordinary explanations run thin.

If for some interviewee there is a contradiction between his or her own initial statement that it is an explanation for finding a parking space that God literally intervenes after his or her prayer to Saint Anthony and the differences between John's use of the app and the prayer that he or she acknowledges later on, he or she would have to retract one or the other. If he or she retracts his or her initial statement or, rather, rephrases it by adding qualifiers such as that it is 'a kind of' explanation and that God intervenes 'in a spiritual way', then he or she and I would be on the same page.

However, he or she may also retract his or her acknowledgement of the differences listed above, claiming that for him or her God's intervention really is just as real and in every way the same as a parking app would be. In that case, I would say that either he or she is confused in his or her self-perception – in his or her life, he or she shows that he or she is aware of the differences listed above and it is just out of stubbornness that he or she does not want to admit it – or he or she is correct in his or her self-description, but in that case I would consider him or her both superstitious and confused in his or her conception of how the world works. A prayer to Saint Anthony really does not work in the same way as a parking app does.

I mentioned above that the prayer to Saint Anthony can be superstitious – unlike using the app – and that it requires self-examination to find out whether it is superstitious or not. An important part of this self-examination involves tracing whether there is not somewhere inside oneself the idea that God helps in finding a parking space in the same way as the app would help. Even if someone knows that God does not work like that, he or she may still have a hidden desire that God does, and to that extent his or her prayers would be superstitious.

What people may say about their own faith in interviews should not obscure the way in which talking about God or spirits is different from talking about practical things. This goes as much for the priest in Australia offering prayers to Saint Anthony for a parking space as it goes for Madumo in Soweto considering organising a feast for his ancestors, hoping for his misery to end. What matters is the spiritual import of their words and actions, however much they may emphasise in interviews that they are not using pictures but speak the truth.

Words concerning the spirit world have a different-from-the-ordinary use. Belief in the spirit world is not a claim or theory or hypothesis, as Jenkins and others assume. Yet, these words are not merely a way of speaking either. When people say 'It ain't over till the fat lady sings', this is not a hypothesis about some fat



lady but it is merely something that people say in response to a particular situation. Madumo says that when someone is run over by a car, he and the people from his tradition say that the ancestors have forgotten this person. This is not a hypothesis or theory about beings called 'ancestors', but it is not merely something he says either. In a different-from-the-ordinary way, truth matters in responses to the world as well.

## ■ Truth and responses to the world

To treat stories relating to the spirit world as hypotheses, as somehow designating objects out there, does not do justice to how people speak about the spirit world. Everyone, including those who emphasise the reality of these stories, will recognise the different-from-the-ordinary role that is played by words concerning spiritual forces or mystical causes, as we saw in the section 'A different-from-the-ordinary role'. Yet, truth is just as important in connection with such stories as it is in hypotheses or theories about the world – however, the truth of these stories does not lie in the accurateness of their descriptions. The truth of these responses to the world is connected to the rest of someone's life. It is, as I would say, about what someone personally 'cannot see otherwise'.

This phrase derives from a legend about the Reformer Martin Luther. Martin Luther is called for a court hearing by the emperor to defend his critical stance towards practices in the church of his day. Luther is asked to recant what he has written because it opposes what the Pope and the church councils are proclaiming. Luther refuses and legend has it that he concludes (Bainton 1977):

Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason – I do not accept the authority of popes and councils for it is clear that they have erred repeatedly and contradicted themselves – my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen. [...] Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. (p. 180)

Martin Luther declared that he would only change his opinion if it could be shown wrong by scripture and plain reason – otherwise, his conscience is captive to the Word of God. It is not by his own decision, but he cannot help himself, he cannot do otherwise. It is about what he personally cannot conceive of seeing in a different way. The truth addressed in taking such a personal stance is the same as is present in responses to the world – it is connected to someone's entire life. It is about what someone personally cannot see otherwise. Let me start by using my own case as an example.

I, personally, do not speak of possession by evil spirits; I know it is important in several books in the New Testament, but it is not how I experience the world around me. I speak of heaven or that we will be in the hands of God after death, whereas I know that these notions are absent in the Old Testament. I consider the practice of slavery wrong, without question, and I do not understand what can be wrong with homosexuality. I know that in many such instances within the Bible and within both the church of all ages and the church as it is nowadays, there are people who think differently, people who say different things to themselves, people who use different pictures in what they say and do and people who maybe cannot understand how I can say the things I say, just like, in some cases, I cannot understand how they say the things they can say. I call myself a Christian and I wish to obey the Bible as the Word of God, but sometimes I follow the Old Testament, sometimes I follow the New Testament, and sometimes I speak in ways that probably the authors of both the Old and New Testaments would hardly understand.

Does this mean I simply pick and choose whatever position I like? I hope not, and I think I do not. This is where the issue of truth comes in; if it is found out – by others or by myself – that I *do* simply pick and choose, then I have not been speaking the truth. On the other hand, if I did not pick and choose, I did speak the truth, however different what I say may be from what my brothers and sisters in the church say.

A discussion about the widower's statement of seeing a message from his deceased wife in the hearts-imprint in the snow

would not be about how the imprints were empirically made but about the role that his statement plays in his life, about his motives for saying what he says and the consequences he draws from it. It is no different in the case of Madumo; a discussion about whether the ancestors are really alive in some way would be out of place, whereas him pointing to the ancestors forgetting him, without making an effort to appease them, for example, would cast doubt over the truthfulness of his statements.

As Wittgenstein (1966:56) says in connection with this, '[t]hese controversies look quite different from any normal controversies. Reasons look entirely different from normal reasons. They are, in a way, quite inconclusive'. Jenkins treats the reasons for and against belief in the spirit world as ordinary reasons, but they are of a different nature. Reasons may play an important role but, ultimately, they do not decide the matter; someone in the same circumstances may have had to decide differently without there being a disagreement between us. The widower, Madumo and I speak in the way we do because of the ways we were brought up and what matters for the truthfulness of what we are saying is the way our statements are taken up in our lives. What matters is whether I live as might be expected from someone who says they believe they will be in the hands of God after death, whether Madumo acts according to what he says about the ancestors, and whether the widower is not conveniently glossing over fights he had with his wife in what he says. That is where the truth or untruth in responses to the world can be found.

Systematic theologian Robert Jenson (2014) refers to this kind of truth or truthfulness when he admits that:

'The Lord raised Jesus from the dead' makes a judgment of value and expresses religious experience and functions as a grammatical rule and it indeed calls for a bit of conceptual working up and down. (pp. 23-24)

Someone who makes a statement about the Resurrection of Christ displays a response of faith, and it should be reflected in the rest of his or her life for his or her statement to be called true.

If someone's life does not reflect the reality of the resurrected Christ, then Christ may still have risen from the dead, but it would have a completely different meaning. Simone Weil (2002:26) reminds us, 'Hitler could die and return to life again fifty times but I should still not look upon him as the Son of God'. The belief in Hitler's resurrection would be a theory or hypothesis about what strange things happened, whereas claiming to believe in the Resurrection of Christ, however, is generally taken to be making a statement of faith. It is looking upon him as the Son of God, an attitude which should be reflected in the rest of someone's life. Yet, Jenson (2014) continues:

But what if it and propositions like it were also and antecedently *true*? That is, true in the dumb sense, the sense with which we all use the word when behaving normally, and which just therefore I cannot and do not need to analyse further, true in the sense that folk are likely to demand when they hear academic theologians and their academically trained pastors begin to talk about 'deeper' meanings and the spiritual experience that so and so was trying to express and the religious tradition carried by the text, and so on. (p. 24)

What if statements about the spirit world or statements about heaven are *also* in a straightforward sense true? What Jenson seems to mean by true – or true in the dumb sense – here is true as a theory or hypothesis about what is the case in the world. In his article, he suggests that statements concerning God or the spirit world are true in that sense as well. Yet, if they were true in that sense, major difficulties would arise.

If the statement about possession by evil spirits were true in that sense, then either Luke was right in seeing evil spirits everywhere, speaking of spirit possession and deliverance, or Paul was right in never noticing such things. If statements about heaven were true in that sense, then either the Old Testament or the New Testament was correct, and then Yuri Gagarin would have a point when he said he established that there is no heaven above after his visit to space. As Winch indicated above, if the Resurrection of Christ was a plain fact, it would become a factor that could be weighed in plotting the most profitable course in

life. It would change the character of faith. If statements of faith were true in the dumb sense, as Jenson suggests, then they would lose the point that they have. Receiving a message from his wife has the importance for the widower that it has, because it is not true in the dumb sense. Without Madumo's gratitude – or, rather, neglected gratitude – and obligations towards his ancestors, saying that the ancestors forgetting him is what causes his problems would mean something completely different.

In contrast to Jenkins and Jenson who speak of 'arguments for claims' and 'true in the dumb sense', Wittgenstein (1966) continues his comments on spiritual beliefs:

Anything that I normally call evidence wouldn't in the slightest influence me. Suppose, for instance, we know people who foresaw the future; make forecasts for years and years ahead; and they described some sort of a Judgement Day. Queerly enough, even if there were such a thing, and even if it were more convincing than I have described, belief in this happening wouldn't be at all a religious belief. (p. 56)

Religious beliefs play a different role in our lives. They colour how we look at things and respond to things. They commit us to particular ways of behaving and speaking.

Believing in heaven or the Last Judgement *as a fact* would deprive it of its moral value; it becomes a pragmatic policy to do good. If the Last Judgement were true in the dumb sense, trying to act decently becomes a matter of self-interest rather than something morally commendable. These kinds of beliefs being true in the dumb sense or true as a theory or hypothesis would not be a nice extra, but it would damage the very nature of those beliefs. For people in Africa who speak of the spirit world, this is not symbolic, it is not a scientific hypothesis, nor is it something that is true in Jenson's dumb sense. The beliefs would no longer have the importance – the spiritual importance – that they have in the lives of people. If somebody wants to know why certain things befall him or her, he or she does not want to know the empirical causes of some events but is asking a deeper kind of 'why?'. If the spirits of the ancestors exist in Jenson's dumb sense,

they would no longer function at the deeper level. If somebody wants to know what God wants him or her to do in a particular situation, he or she is not looking for the best practical approach. He or she may investigate what the costs and benefits of his or her available options are, but in asking what God wants him or her to do, he or she is not asking about that. A God who acts on that level, making a particular choice worthwhile in a material sense, would be relevant practically but would not be able to answer his or her spiritual question – what does he or she have to do, no matter what? Whatever is true in Jenson’s dumb sense cannot tell a person about that.

Concerning religious beliefs, true is what we personally cannot see otherwise and what we cannot help but live and feel accordingly. If one speaks of heaven or of ancestors, then a particular kind of life is to be expected. One may not be able to live up to these expectations, or at least not fully, but then one is obliged to feel regret and guilt for that. Religious beliefs or beliefs concerning the spirit world cannot be proven or falsified in any direct way – not in the dumb sense – and if they could, they would lose the point that they have in the lives of believers. But this does not mean that there is no issue of truth or falsehood in these matters. They can be falsified by being shown to be preposterous, for example, or fake, given how a person lives and feels at other instances during his or her life. Saying that someone’s religious statement is wrong is not to propose a different theory, but it is to either question the genuineness of the statement or to try to convert this person to another way of responding to the world. To say that the spirit world exists or does not exist is not to put forward a theory or hypothesis but it is to make a value judgement. The truth of religious statements is not in what is reasonable, nor in what one likes or wishes to be true, but in what one personally cannot say otherwise.

The kind of belief that includes belief in the spirit world is the kind of belief that reflects one’s personal response to the world, which is bound up with one’s entire life and actions. This may sound like a very Euro-American individualistic interpretation of

religious belief, but I want to dispute that it is. For Madumo, no less than for a person in Europe or the USA, what he says about his beliefs, about his ancestors forgetting him, for example, is expected to be connected to the rest of his individual life. On the other hand, my European beliefs expressed at the outset of this section – on spirit possession, heaven, homosexuality and slavery – clearly express the community to which I belong. If I had grown up elsewhere, if my life had developed itself differently, I would most likely have had different beliefs. Yet, this does not in any way tell me what I should believe – I cannot hide behind my community or background. In faith, I struggle to find what I personally cannot say and do otherwise, and I myself am ultimately responsible for that, not my community.

It is like how an anthropologist could observe that someone adjusts his or her language of love according to the particular person he or she loves at that moment. He or she, however, is not busy adjusting his or her language; he or she is expressing his or her love; he or she says what he or she cannot say otherwise. To speak of adjusting language is speaking from an outsider's perspective. As a lover or as a believer, the way someone has lived their life up to this point makes it impossible to say or do anything else, and no one else can decide what that is except for oneself. In statements of faith, one is not so much 'trying to get at the truth', but one tries to decide how to respond to the situation in which one finds oneself. One tries to see what is the right and – for oneself – only way to go.

These responses to the world are true when they are genuine in the sense of being the only possible response given the life that one has led, the way in which one was brought up, the experiences one lived through and so on. As Rush Rhees (1999) says about someone deciding whether she should leave her husband:

Now, nothing else is possible. Whatever there might have been if things had worked out differently. As things have worked out, it has got to be this. Can she be mistaken about that? I do not see that she can. That is the decision she reaches, that is all. [...] It makes no sense

to ask whether she is mistaken. By which I do not mean that she is infallible or that she must be right, I just mean that the question has no sense here. (p. 73)

In the same way, it makes no sense to ask whether the widower is mistaken about the message from his wife or not; also, it makes no sense to ask whether Madumo is correct in saying that the ancestors have forgotten him. The question of whether African Christians are mistaken or not when speaking of the spirit world is as irrelevant as asking whether Euro-American Christians are right in not speaking of the spirit world. The belief in the spirit world is a personal response to the world. It is the way in which one speaks to oneself; the picture one uses in one's actions and statements, and, therefore, it is different from the belief of people who do not speak of spirits but in no way necessarily incompatible with it. It is not true that there must be a disagreement between those who speak of a spirit world and those who do not. This does not mean that all such spiritual beliefs are necessarily compatible either, but it does mean that one can live with a diversity of responses to the world within one church.

## ■ Living with a diversity of responses

Some people speak of the spirit world when responding to the world, but others do not. These are personal spiritual responses, and it would amount to misunderstanding their spiritual character if one tried to find some theoretical middle ground between different responses of different people, or if one took their kind of truth to be the kind of truth Jenson describes as true in the dumb sense. Responses to the world are true if they are the only way in which one can personally respond to what is happening, knowing very well that other people – even in similar circumstances – would respond differently. The spiritual character of these beliefs needs to be acknowledged, and the beliefs need to be true to oneself. Yet, even if one recognises this in someone else's response to the world, there may still be an unbridgeable gap between people.



Matthew speaks of heaven while Isaiah does not, yet they worship the same God. Luke speaks of spirit possession and deliverance while Paul does not, yet they worship the same God. Augustine considers slavery to be a normal practice while people in church nowadays do not, yet, in the Spirit, they share the same table of the Lord. Behind different responses to the world, one may discern the same spirit. Yet, this works the other way around as well. Behind using the same words, one may determine very different spirits. For example, interreligious dialogue between people who share a cosmopolitan outlook presupposing the importance of human rights is often fairly easy, whereas dialogue with people who, on the face of it, share the same religion but have a more conservative outlook often proves almost impossible. Big differences in the pictures that someone uses in responding to the world do not necessarily form a stumbling block for communication or even recognising a shared spirit, whereas sharing the same pictures does not necessarily imply that people's beliefs are compatible to one another.

The kind of belief that the African belief in the spirit world comprises does not necessarily make it incompatible with Euro-American religious sensibilities, yet this still leaves open the issue of discerning the spirits behind the pictures that one uses in one's response to the world. One needs to look not so much at the words that people use but at the role that these words play in people's lives. One needs to focus on the spiritual side of what people say. There is no clear line between who worships in the same spirit and who does not, and this recognition does not need to be symmetrical either; one may acknowledge someone to be a fellow Christian who himself would not recognise the first one as Christian at all. Deciding who may be acknowledged as fellow Christians and who may not cannot be settled in the abstract but is itself a matter of faith and must be considered on a case-to-case basis. The discernment of spirits is a spiritual matter itself. In this chapter and the rest of the book, I intend to give tools to see beyond the surface language of faith in Africa and determine the spirit that is expressed in this language. Given that one must look

behind the particular pictures that someone uses in one's response to the world, we may conclude that the African belief in the spirit world is in itself not incompatible with the religious understanding of mainstream Christians in Europe. What matters is not which pictures someone uses but how one uses these pictures in response to one and the same world in which we are all living.

## ■ The belief in the spirit world responds to the same one world

At the outset of Chapter 2, we mentioned the Pentecostalisation of Christianity in Africa. Both mainline churches and new Ministries International have adopted Pentecostal ideas and practices. This Pentecostalisation is often seen as a form of taking seriously the belief in the spirit world. Within Pentecostalism, however, there appears to have been a strange shift concerning its beliefs about the spirit world. Pentecostalism started in the early 20th century in the USA as a revival movement, which emphasised speaking in tongues and other expressions of the presence of the Holy Spirit. It was a movement that often attracted black, disenfranchised people and focussed on the life hereafter when God would put things right. 'This world is not our home' was a common sentiment; life on earth was merely preparation for the glory in heaven. Nowadays, one of the often-heard critiques by Pentecostals of traditional mainline churches is the focus on heaven within the latter. Mainline churches are said to preach a spirit of poverty, with salvation as something that happens only after death, whereas, according to the new Pentecostal message, God promises health and wealth and prosperity to true believers in this world. We will return to this topic in Chapter 7. This world has very much become the home for these new Pentecostals, and that includes the majority of Christians in Africa nowadays. Previously, this world used to be mere preparation for the heavenly spiritual world hereafter; now, the spirit world is a mere tool to obtain prosperity in this material reality.

Theologian Nimi Wariboko (2014), in describing Nigerian Pentecostalism, questions this common understanding of a shift within Pentecostalism. He (Wariboko 2014) states:

To describe the Pentecostal religion as only otherworldly or this-worldly is inaccurate, and it ignores what is common to the movement before and after 1980: a common grammar of spiritual optics. This is an orientation that considers concrete, visible realities as framed, animated, and underpinned by things that are not seen. (p. 1)

According to Wariboko (2014:1), Pentecostalism has always treated the spirit world and the material world as belonging together, '[i]n it the themes of otherworldly and this-worldly spirituality are intertwined and complementary'. Before 1980, the focus was not on heaven at the expense of this world and after 1980 the focus is not on this world at the expense of the spirit world but throughout its history, Pentecostalism never separated the material and the spiritual. In the material world, the African Pentecostal sees the spirit world at work and in speaking of the spirit world the African Pentecostal talks about what is going on in the material world. References to the spirit world should not be taken as a theory or hypothesis about some other realm but rather as commenting on and responding to the ordinary everyday world. They are a response to the same one world in which Euro-American Christians who do not speak of a spirit world live as well. The African belief in the spirit world is misunderstood if it is thought of in contradistinction to the material world.

Some anthropologists have made similar observations, complaining that too often the spiritual and the material are treated as two separate realms by scholars. Tanya Luhmann (2018:81) refers to this when she remarks, '[t]he anthropological problem with god is that we treat the belief in supernatural stuff as the heart of the matter. It is not'. To believe in the spirit world does not mean to believe in the existence of some strange supernatural stuff. Luhmann's colleague Birgit Meyer (2012:113, n.21) notes that, '[e]ven in the work of many Africanists working on spirits, one finds little attempt to unpack this notion.

What spirits are, and do tend to be, taken for granted [*sic*]. As we saw Werbner, Ter Haar and Jenkins do above, talk about spirits is often assumed to be a kind of theory about mysterious entities that might be out there on some other plane of existence. However, Meyer (2012) concludes based on her research in Ghana:

[S]pirits are not so much entities in which people believe and whom they worship, and thus belong to the sphere of (African) religion. In this setting, they should rather be understood as powers that generate power. (p. 107)

Meyer (2012:107) is here drawing a contrast between religion, which she takes to involve theories about certain entities, and spirit talk, which is a response to what people see happening around them, 'Talk about spirits offers a statement about what "powers" the world'. Meyer is correct in observing that the African belief in the spirit world is not a theory about weird entities but consists of statements responding to what happens in the world. I propose, however, that religious talk is no less a way of offering such kind of statements about what powers the world. As shown in the example of belief in the Resurrection of Christ above, turning religious beliefs into a historical hypothesis about what happened to entities in which people believe is damaging the religious character of such a belief. Neither belief in the Resurrection nor belief in the spirit world indicates a belief in the possible existence of some entities, but they are responses to the same world in which everyone lives.

Anthropologist Malcolm Ruel describes how during his research among the Kuria people of East Africa, he started out assuming that their religion involved ideas about some existing supernatural beings but that, over time, Ruel (1997:6) found out that the Kuria rituals do 'not invoke supernatural beings'. Kuria people speak of spirits but in a much more down-to-earth way than he expected. A spirit for them was not a matter of belief, not 'the hypothesized supernatural counterpart to the individual person' that it is in Europe and the USA, according to Ruel (1997:7). Among the Kuria people, '[r]itual was above all the

means by which these life processes were ordered and made secure' (Ruel 1997:8). They are not interested in theories about supernatural entities but in speaking of spirits and dealing with them in their rituals. What is central 'are the natural, if abstract, qualities of life itself, of well-being, fecundity, growth' (Ruel 1997:10). Talking about the spirit world and conducting rituals invoking the spirit world is a way for the Kuria people to respond to what happens in the ordinary, natural world around them, to order it and express the meaning they detect in it.

In my opinion, Ruel is misrepresenting Euro-American religion here. In the example given above, Christians in Europe and the USA may say that the Spirit of Christ is present during their worship service but that does not involve a theory about some supernatural extra person in the room. Belief in the spirit world, both in Africa and in Europe and the USA, is not a belief in a particular kind of entity, but it expresses one's personal response to the world. It expresses what one sees behind the things that are happening to someone, what 'powers' events, what order there may be behind the chaos, and what response may be required.

When Madumo says that his misery is caused by the ancestors forgetting him, this is not a theory or hypothesis but a way to make sense of what is happening to him. He sets out to appease his ancestors because he feels he owes them gratitude for his existence, at the very least for the beginning of his existence. He offers meat and beer to the ancestors hoping things will get better in his life. Behind this is what philosopher of religion Mikel Burley (2017) considers to be the:

[P]recarious religious sensibility that is likely to be a reality for many practitioners of animal sacrifice: not a solid confidence that the ritual killing of animals will yield beneficial returns, but a sombre admission of a minacious mystery behind many aspects of life. (p. 830)

Madumo knows that he cannot control his life, that he cannot fully explain or predict it, and his sacrifice to the ancestors is the way in which this knowledge is acted out. He is not certain that

ancestors exist and that making a feast for them will encourage them to help him, nor is he uncertain about whether ancestors exist and that making a feast for them will encourage them to help him. Such a theoretical certainty or uncertainty is not what is at stake when we hear him speaking of the ancestors and see him performing the rituals. This is simply how he responds. These are the things he now says to himself; these are the pictures that he now uses in what he says and does, knowing very well that others, and he himself at other times, might respond differently to what happens.

## ■ No need for mediation between different responses

Religious beliefs and the African belief in the spirit world are not hypotheses or theories but personal responses to the world. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Lectures on Religious Belief* uses the example of considering an illness as a punishment from God, to bring out the nature of religious responses to the world and differences between different responses. Wittgenstein (1966) asks us to imagine:

Suppose someone is ill and he says: 'This is a punishment' and I say: 'If I'm ill, I don't think of punishment at all'. If you say: 'Do you believe the opposite?' – you can call it believing the opposite, but it is entirely different from what we would normally call believing the opposite. I think differently, in a different way. I say different things to myself. I have different pictures. (p. 55)

It is not a matter of 'believing the opposite', but a difference in what people think and say. Therefore, Wittgenstein (1966:55) concludes, 'I can't contradict that person'. Likewise, there are, indeed, deep differences between people in their responses to the world; people think differently, they say different things to themselves and they have different pictures, although it makes no sense to speak of a disagreement here, not in any normal sense. Madumo knows that other people say different things to themselves, even if they face similar ordeals, and they use

different pictures in their statements and actions – Madumo himself would not expect otherwise.

People respond in different ways to the world, to what is happening to them. Philip Jenkins, as we saw, tries to mediate between such different responses, between different pictures that are used. One of the arguments that he presents in favour of belief in the spirit world is the fact that the New Testament is full of stories involving spirits; the African practice of delivering people from evil spirits finds many precedents in the synoptic gospels and Acts. This is correct; however, we do not find possession by evil spirits mentioned in the Gospel according to John or in any of the New Testament letters by Paul and others. In the Old Testament, King Saul is tormented by an evil spirit, but otherwise, possession by evil spirits is absent there as well. Some Bible writers speak of a spirit world, possession and deliverance, and so on, but many others do not. In the early days of Pentecostalism, heaven played an important role, whereas nowadays in the new Pentecostalism that has taken over Africa, it is virtually absent; God is supposed to help believers in the here and now. In the Bible, we see a similar divergence of responses; in the New Testament, heaven and hell are seen as of central importance to faith, whereas they are completely absent in the Old Testament. Jenkins wants to mediate between different responses and different pictures in order to find a kind of ultimate picture. In the Bible, however, if we look at belief in spirit possession or belief in heaven, very different pictures are left standing right next to each other.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1980) notes about the gospels:

God has *four* people recount the life of the incarnate God, each one differently, & contradicting each other – but can't we say: It is important that this narrative should not have more than quite middling historical plausibility, *just so* that this should not be taken as the essential, decisive thing. (p. 36)

The gospels differ, for example, in the names that are given in the genealogy of Jesus or the number of women who visited

Jesus' tomb. Wittgenstein suggests that this discourages taking a historical perspective on the gospels. The stories in the Bible do not present themselves as theories or hypotheses about particular things that happened but are intended to build one's faith. Within the Bible, different pictures are left standing next to each other, without being resolved into one, supposedly true picture. When viewed as theories or hypotheses, all the different perspectives present in the Bible may seem incompatible but when viewed as Christian responses to the world, they do not need to be.

In discussing the making of moral decisions, former Anglican archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, reminds us that within the Christian community we always find ourselves 'belonging with Christian strangers' (2012:15). People with whom we share Holy Communion may have widely different opinions about homosexuality or the legitimacy of producing weapons of mass destruction. Remembering the Christian brothers and sisters from the past, we also belong with Christian strangers who defended the practice of slavery or considered any other form of government than monarchy to be incompatible with the gospel. Within the Bible, different pictures and responses to the world are left standing next to each other – even more so within the history of the church. Jenkins is correct to note that delivering people possessed by evil spirits is a very important part of faith for Matthew, Mark and Luke, but he forgets to mention that it is not so much so for Paul or Isaiah. If Luke and Paul represent the same church without resolving this difference in a theoretical way, why would Christians from Africa and from Europe and the USA need to resolve this now? If this difference did not make Luke's and Paul's faith incompatible, why would the African belief in the spirit world now form a stumbling block between Christians from Africa and those from Europe and the USA?

If someone says that luck made him or her win a particular game, and someone else does not believe in luck and claims that unknown forces have let him or her win, then they are not disagreeing about facts but are merely responding to the same



situation differently. They speak differently without necessarily being unable to understand one another. There are no disagreements to be resolved by looking for some middle ground. The same applies to references to the spirit world; some people speak like that while others do not, but there is not necessarily any incompatibility between them. If one looks at the role that words play in someone's life, one is able to listen to what someone tells you despite the different images that one uses. There does not have to be a disagreement between those who speak of a spirit world and those who do not. References to the spirit world are a personal response and a diversity of personal responses in itself is not incompatible.

It makes no sense to try to mediate between different responses to the world or to assume that there must be a disagreement between them. In the Bible and in church history, different personal responses are left standing next to one another without misguided attempts to find some middle ground. Similarly, the response of someone in Africa will remain his or her response, just as the response of someone in Europe or the USA will remain his or her response. They are different, but there is not necessarily any disagreement between them that has to be resolved.

## ■ Conclusion

The belief in the spirit world is not a practical means one uses to obtain whatever one desires. It is a personal spiritual response to the world, it is the way in which one speaks to oneself, and it is the picture one uses in one's actions and statements. Such a personal spiritual response to the world, which speaks of the spirit world, is different from the belief of people who do not speak of spirits but in no way are both responses necessarily incompatible with one another. We need to look at the role these words play in people's lives. We need to listen to what people say even if they use pictures different from ours, even if they have different ways to express themselves.

In Chapter 2 I showed that, in order to take speaking of the spirit world seriously, we need to consider the African belief in the spirit world as personal response to the world; in this chapter, I argued that a diversity of personal responses – from bargaining with the spirit world to explicitly surrendering oneself to God – does not necessarily make such responses incompatible with one another. Instead of looking for a middle ground between different responses as if they were different theories about the world, we should pay attention to their different-from-the-ordinary use in everyday life and listen to what people tell us, irrespective of which pictures they use to do so.

We should not treat people as representatives of, for example, the belief in the spirit world but pay attention to each one's own idiosyncrasy. Living in a global church, which has been diverse from the beginning, mutual respect does not mean that we accept the other's pictures as his or her belief-system or theory but that we hear what someone tells us. Just like we know about the widower's love for his wife when he tells us about the hearts in the snow or about Madumo's desperation when he says that his ancestors have forgotten him, so we should not lock people up in their cultures or the images they use but open ourselves for what others want to say. Only then can we determine whether or not there is a disagreement between us. Speaking of a spirit world does not need to be a stumbling block and is in itself surely not incompatible with Euro-American religious sentiments. Listening to one another, we can live together in one global church with a wide variety of responses to God's world. In Chapter 4, we will have a closer look at a particular category of those responses to the world, namely those that speak of mystical powers in things and in words.



# Power: In things and words

## ■ Introduction

To be a Christian in Africa means to see power everywhere; power in powerful men or women of God who perform mighty deeds; power in powerful objects and charms, in rocks and trees and rivers; and power in powerful words, spells, prophecies and so on. Classic interpreters of African ways of thinking, Placide Tempels, John Peel and Laurenti Magesa, identify in all African behaviour a quest for power (see Clarke 2011:193, n. 58; Marshall 2009). Scholar of Pentecostalism Richard Burgess (2008:31) speaks of the ‘power-oriented nature of African indigenous spirituality’. And, in a study on Akan thought in Ghana, Kwame Gyekye (1987:75) notes that in African thinking ‘[e]verything is or contains *sunsum* (spirit) [...] or power. [...] It is the essence of natural objects to be active, to possess power’. Power is of central importance in Africa, and power is everywhere. Ugandan theologian Kantongole (2017) explains:

Within traditional African religious cosmology, the miraculous or extraordinary is really not surprising: it is an everyday expectation.

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Because the gods are potent forces, the whole cosmos is saturated with miraculous 'power'. (p. 120)

It is easy to dismiss this worldview as confused and superstitious as did early Christian missionaries, according to political theorist Ruth Marshall (2009, referring to John Peel, Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff's work), who often despaired about 'the prevalence of "superstition", "idolatry", and the wrong-headed endurance of the ontology of power central to African relations with the supernatural'. Marshall (2009) adds that:

[7]his position is often echoed today in studies of Christianity in Africa when observers place the accent on the 'syncretic' nature of belief, interpreting the religious shopping around, a magical materialist ontology of supernatural power, and the ritual eclecticism of practitioners as a superficial adherence to Christian beliefs. (p. 60)

The frequent references to power are one of the most distinguishing and most disturbing aspects of African Christianity viewed from a Euro-American perspective. In the Euro-American context, religion is about a system of ideas and beliefs, but in Africa, religion is often more about powers and finding out what works (cf. Bediako 1995:106; Kroesbergen 2019). It seems like a clear instance of superstition ignoring what we otherwise know about how the world works, but I will try to show in this chapter that it does not need to be like that. A practice is superstitious if it conflicts with what we – including the people involved – already know about causal relations. In the rest of their lives, people show that they know very well how a good harvest, healing, a job or children come into existence but during a spell of superstition they seem to have forgotten this. However, if proper attention is paid to the context within which the language of faith makes sense, we see how its meaning, in fact, excludes superstition. By considering it as superstitious, we place it outside of ordinary life, the life shared by people from Africa and those from both Europe and the USA alike.

African theologian John Mbiti (1990) argues about the African belief in powers everywhere:

This mystical power is not fiction: whatever it is, it is a reality, and one with which African people have to reckon. Everyone is directly or indirectly affected, for better or worse, by beliefs and activities connected with this power, particularly in its manifestations as magic, sorcery and witchcraft. (p. 193)

Living in a world where one experiences mystical power everywhere colours life in Africa and, not least of all, it colours being a Christian in Africa. As everywhere else, there is much confusion and superstition in Africa but, as I will show in this chapter, the stories about power connected to the spirit world that are told in Africa do not need to be confused and superstitious. Many stories people tell about mystical powers sound quite unbelievable. Most people in Africa themselves will be able to tell you stories of trickery and superstition where mystical powers were claimed. Yet, these powers can be interpreted as an integral part of our ordinary shared world as well.

In Chapter 6 on Ministries International, when I discuss the powerful, anointed men and women of God who are so prominent in contemporary Christianity in Africa, power as seen in people will be discussed. In this chapter, I will discuss power in things and power in words. I will provide interpretations of seeing power in things and in words that allow us to see what is not confused and not superstitious about this aspect of the language of faith in Africa. In concrete cases, it is always difficult to discern the role that particular utterances and practices play in someone's life, as mentioned in Chapter 3, but it does not need to be confused and superstitious to experience mystical powers all around us.

Firstly, I will discuss seeing power in things, reflecting upon anointing oil and anointed pens as things that are ascribed power in Christianity in Africa. Using anointing oil and handing out anointed pens are two examples of practices with powerful objects which have entered even mainline churches in Africa. Instead of being confused and superstitious, these practices may bring out the

symbolic quality of things. In the second part, I will discuss power in words, using the practices of ‘positive confession’ and ‘speaking into someone’s life’ as examples. This will highlight the contrasting material quality of words, as it is recognised by Christians in Africa.

## ■ The symbolic quality of things

People in Africa seem to see power everywhere. ‘The whole psychic atmosphere of African village life is filled with belief in this mystical power’, so John Mbiti (1990) tells us:

African peoples know that the universe has a power, force or whatever else one may call it. [...] To my knowledge there is no African society which does not hold belief in mystical power of one type or another. It shows itself, or it is experienced, in many ways. (p. 192)

Mbiti (1990) provides a long, disparate list of examples like:

There is mystical power which causes people to walk on fire, to lie on thorns or nails, to send curses or harm, including death, from a distance, to change into animals (lycanthropy), to spit on snakes and cause them to split open and die; power to stupefy thieves so that they can be caught red-handed; power to make inanimate objects turn into biologically living creatures; there is power that enables experts to see into secrets, hidden information or the future, or to detect thieves and other culprits. African peoples know this and try to apply it in these and many other ways. (p. 192)

All around them, people in Africa experience these powers connected to the spirit world.

Practices of trying to apply and use these powers spill over from African Traditional Religions (ATR) to, for example, the Neo-Pentecostal Ministries International (cf. Pretorius & Jafta 1997:217). For Botswana, scholar of religion Mmapula D. Kebaneilwe (2017) observes:

In ATR there is the use of what is commonly called *muti* [*traditional medicine, HK*] of one kind or another. For instance, a person suffering from [*an*] oppressive or obsessive spirit like that of *tokolosi*, would be given some protective *muti* to carry with them all the time, or to apply it to their bodies to chase away such a spirit. This is somewhat similar

to what one gets from many of the Fire churches [*Neo-Pentecostal Ministries International, HK*], except that in that case it is either holy water, oil or a sticker which is sometimes the picture of the Man of God. One is instructed to carry these with them all the time to chase away for instance the spiritual husband. (pp. 53–54)

A ‘spiritual husband’ is a spirit which is married to a woman, which negatively influences this woman’s contacts with real men and causes other problems. In one Reformed congregation in Zambia when asked about pastoral care, spiritual husbands were mentioned as the biggest pastoral problem in that congregation. There are spiritual powers all around people, and people use these same mystical powers – in, for example, holy water – to ward off the negative effects of these powers.

There may be power in everything – in holy water or oil and even in holy stickers – as Andy Chebanne and Malebogo Kgalemang (n.d.), scholars of religion from Botswana, note when recounting a particular Neo-Pentecostal believer named Tauestile:

For Tauestile, ‘an anointed sticker’ bearing the face of a pastor is a powerful helper and assistor. Tauestile states that he travels with the sticker in his car. And he boldly states, if ‘the devil had plans for me to get involved in a road accident, it doesn’t work’. (p. 8)

Mystical powers are experienced everywhere, and mystical powers in things are used to counter other spiritual forces, such as that of the devil. Early anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1937:475) already noticed, ‘[m]agic is very largely employed against mystical powers’. The African atmosphere is filled with mystical powers and this in itself encourages people to fill it with even more mystical powers in order to be protected against them. For Evans-Pritchard (1937:475), describing the Sudanese tribe of the Azande, this primary use of magic against magic is the main reason ‘why Azande do not perceive the futility of their magic’. One cannot tell whether the absence of a spiritual husband is because of the power of the sticker with the picture of the man of God or whether neither the spiritual husband nor the power of this sticker was ever there.



In an article on African spirituality, Patrick Kalilombe (1999) explains that the spirit world and the ordinary world are connected through things with special powers:

The background thinking is [...] that the whole world of realities – spirits, persons, objects, words, gestures – are bearers of force and efficacy at two levels: the ordinary one that is perceptible and manageable without special knowledge or power (this is what I call visible), and another that is mystical and can be perceived and handled only with a heightened perception and power. And that is what I call invisible. (p. 231)

On the one hand, there is the ordinary reality of powers – physical powers, familiar in Europe and the USA as well – and, on the other hand, there are special powers, the powers connected with the spirit world. Physical countermeasures – such as ‘Don’t drink and drive’ – are used against physical risks of accidents; spiritual countermeasures – such as the anointed sticker – are used against spiritual risks like plots from the devil. In the African worldview, power is seen everywhere but, in order to avoid confusion and superstition, it is important to distinguish these two levels when we interpret the power of anointing oil and the power of anointed pens.

## **The power of anointing oil and anointed pens**

Let me begin with something I witnessed a few years ago in a Reformed church in a township of Lusaka. The table in front of the church is packed with bottles of water and bottles of olive oil – all types and sizes are present. People are bringing more and more bottles; sometimes there is a name label attached, and often the bottles are still in the plastic bag of the supermarket where they were bought. It does not take long before the table proves itself too small, and the other bottles are deposited under and around it. In front of the table, the floor has been covered with plastic in advance.

It is ‘Big Sunday’ today in this church. The pastor has been announcing this special occasion for weeks. Some of the congregants have been fasting since the beginning of the year,

and now this period is concluded with this 'anointing service'. In the morning, there was a regular, traditional, Reformed worship service, but at around two o'clock in the afternoon the church is full again. There are about 600 people, some of them having to stand outside. Most of the congregants are women, appearing to be either below 20 or above 60 years old. Many of them have brought a bottle of water or a bottle of olive oil.

It is not customary for the Reformed Church in Zambia to have 'anointing services'. At the national Synod, a committee was instituted to draft guidelines on how to perform anointing services but some congregations, like this one, apparently already know how to do it. A few years ago, the leadership of this congregation conducted a general survey among its members; what do you think about the church, are there changes you would like to see, and so on. It turned out that many congregants attended the Reformed worship service on Sunday morning, but in the afternoon they were attending Neo-Pentecostal Ministries International in order to buy anointing oil or anointing water. They were hoping that applying this oil or this water (or drinking it) would make God bless them with prosperity or health. The leadership for this congregation felt that as their congregants were getting anointing oil and water anyway, it would be better if they offered these within the confines of their own church. So, for a number of years now, a yearly anointing service is part of the programme for this congregation.

The scripture reading that afternoon was about the anointing of King David, the two pastors present and a few others prayed over the bottles that were on and around the table in front of the church and one by one the congregants went to the front and knelt in order to be anointed. One of the two pastors applied a generous amount of olive oil onto someone's head, while he prayed for the Holy Spirit to manifest in the life of this congregant, in the powerful name of Jesus. When everybody in the church has been anointed and the anointing service is over, people go to the front again and take their bottle of olive oil or water from the table to take home to apply it themselves to whatever needs some extra blessing, some extra power in their lives. The Nigerian

Neo-Pentecostal prophet David Oyedepo (cited in Gifford 2011), founder of the Winners Chapel, says that anointing oil will:

[G]ive a man or any object on which it is poured, immunity against any form of evil, [...] it is able to raise up any dying business, resurrect any collapsing career and reverse any ancestral family curse [*and it is*] an all-purpose drug for any ailment of life [*which*] destroys all the discomforts of life. (p. 254)

All of this is not expressed explicitly during the Reformed anointing service but given the continual presence of Oyedepo in all the book stores in Lusaka, on many TV channels and through his Winners Chapel outlets in Zambia, I am sure that some of the congregants will hope that the anointing oil they are obtaining here may have similar applications.

The committee instituted by the national Synod to draft an order of service for anointing services in the Reformed Church has been given two general guidelines, namely that anointing services should be biblical and that it should be made clear that it is God who brings blessings and performs miracles and not the anointing oil in itself. There could be a bit of tension between these two guidelines; the committee should investigate whether there is a biblical foundation for allowing anointing water but, if it is emphasised that it is God who acts and not the anointed olive oil or water, then why should we limit the number of products that God can use? However, this tension may disappear once we do not look at this power wielded by God in isolation but integrate it into the context within which the Bible happens to be the norm the church tries to live by. I will return to this distinction between powers considered in isolation and powers as an inextricable part of a wider context shortly. Mentioning God and the Bible, the Synod places anointing oil in a particular symbolic context within which the anointing makes sense.

While anointing oil and anointing water are being discussed by a national committee in the Reformed Church in Zambia, another anointing phenomenon has remained under the radar so far. It is the handing out of anointed pens – which I have witnessed twice in the Reformed Church. The pastor called to the front all the pupils within the congregation who were sitting exams in the

coming week. The pastor prayed for the pupils that God may help them and that they do well in their exams and afterwards they received what was called an 'anointed pen' to use during the exams.

Anointing oil and anointed pens seem to become part even of Reformed Christianity in Southern Africa. For Ghana, we can trace the introduction of these kinds of objects with special powers into Pentecostalism in the work of Asamoah-Gyadu. In his PhD thesis (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005), based on research in the 1990s, he considers the use of things with power as a distinguishing mark between Pentecostal Ministries International and the older African Initiated Churches, for which he uses the Ghanaian vernacular *Sunsum soré*:

The *Sunsum soré* have come under incessant attack, particularly from new Pentecostal churches, for over-reliance on objects and symbols or 'extensions of faith' as some call them, as a means of contact with God. (p. 72)

The Charismatic Ministries (CMs) are criticised for attaching power to things on theological grounds (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005):

One of the outstanding features of the CMs is their teaching that God imparts his power to his people in a personal way. God's power is his personal presence that cannot be accessed merely through incantations, formulae and the application of substances. This has been one of our main criticisms of the *Sunsum soré*. (p. 159)

Yet, in the 1990s, Asamoah-Gyadu (2005) observes, the practice of powerful objects was already being adopted by the Neo-Pentecostal churches as well:

The fact that some CMs, so critical of the *Sunsum soré* usage of healing aids and substances, now occasionally stray into those areas underscores the crucial role that religion plays in the African worldview as a source of power. (p. 158)

In African religious life, power is seen everywhere, so it is almost unavoidable to adapt to such practices involving objects instilled with power (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005):

With the growing attraction of anointing services and the reliance on the value of olive oil and in a few cases 'anointing handkerchiefs', a number of CMs seem to be gradually slipping into the ways of some

of the older independent churches whose practices they continue to denounce as occult. (p. 159)

As seems to be the case for the Reformed Church in Zambia currently, the introduction of anointed objects and the condemnation of it stand side by side.

In his 2013 publication, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity*, Asamoah-Gyadu himself seems to oscillate between dismissing and accepting anointing oil. On the one hand, Asamoah-Gyadu (2013) says:

There are many circumstances in which the use of oil has been controversial, even appearing magical in the way the oil has been applied and the sorts of thing it is claimed the oil is able to do. (p. 133)

Adding that, '[t]here is danger that such rituals can lead to what might be described as obsessive-compulsive behavior. Rather than helped, people become ensnared by the pattern of rituals' (Asamoah-Gyadu 2013:141). On the other hand, Asamoah-Gyadu (2013:133) feels he has to admit that 'people are benefiting from anointing as a sacramental procedure for mediating the grace of God is also not in doubt, as testimonies from beneficiaries often declare' and he seems to speak for himself when he (Asamoah-Gyadu 2013:134) states that, '[c]ripples have walked, barren women have given birth, and various tumours have disappeared as a result of the application of oil following prayer'. Negative evaluations in the hope that the phenomenon will pass and positive evaluations of its miraculous power are still competing for prominence in Asamoah-Gyadu's work of 2013.

By 2017, Asamoah-Gyadu (2017) has to admit that in the Neo-Pentecostal Ministries International, the use of things with power has become the norm:

The major areas of contention, as far as the Christianity of the AICs was concerned, included the use of sacramental such as holy water and anointed oils as therapeutic substances. Even these have been incorporated into contemporary Pentecostalism. (p. 29)

By now, anointing oil has become so much a part of Pentecostalism that the introduction of anointing oil in mainline churches such as the Reformed Church in Zambia is seen as an example of the Pentecostalisation of Christianity in Africa. As mentioned, the Reformed anointing service described above was introduced because congregants were frequenting Neo-Pentecostal Ministries International for anointing oil and water in particular.

The use of things instilled with power, such as anointing oil and anointed pens, is spreading through almost all the churches in Southern Africa. Yet, reservations concerning the use of such 'power things' exist. Asamoah-Gyadu emphasises the importance of acknowledging that the power in question is not merely in the application of special substances but through the personal presence of God who chooses to reveal himself in these. Asamoah-Gyadu (2013) accurately notes:

The anointing is virtually synonymous with the power of the Holy Spirit. The impression one receives when participating in anointing services and listening to testimonies of what the oil has accomplished is that anointing is used in reference to the power of God in action through his Spirit. (p. 134)

There is the ordinary reality of powers – physical powers, familiar in Europe and the USA as well – but in speaking of anointing, people speak of special powers, the power of the Holy Spirit. This is power that works on a different level. So, in the anointing oil and in the anointed pens, it is God acting and not the anointed objects themselves. Anointing oil and anointed pens may be considered to possess power, but this is usually considered to be derived power on the spiritual level. In Chapter 2, I offered the reminder that most faith healers do not claim powers for themselves but say that God works through them; similarly, one will find most traditional healers claim that charms do not work in themselves but because the ancestors work through them and pastors – from Neo-Pentecostal to Reformed – who provide anointing oil or anointed pens claim that it is God who works through those objects. How can we do justice to such claims?

## ■ Things as part of a symbolic context

The name 'medicine' and an object with powers from the spirit world are often treated as synonymous in the African context. Kalilombe (1999) explains the importance of medicine in the African worldview:

Medicine is a central part of this worldview. A medicine is not, as in the West, simply a substance imbued with natural powers for healing. It is anything that activates the visible and invisible forces and enables human beings to deal with them for good or for ill. (p. 232)

In Africa, 'medicine' is not restricted to medical substances, but it is the name for all kinds of objects with special powers. Christian objects with special powers are not supposed to be called 'medicine' – to distinguish Christian from traditional African practices – but Christian objects seem to function in the same way. Anointing oil and anointed pens are meant to activate visible and invisible forces to ensure that one's application succeeds and one passes one's exam. There are supposedly mystical powers in an object that cause positive effects. In the African Initiated Churches' (AICs) use of medicines, Asamoah-Gyadu (2005) noticed something peculiar:

The power in Christ's name and the power in his blood are therefore invoked upon herbal preparations, that they might be purged of all mundane effects and that such medicines might become a source of healing also in the Christian context. (p. 44)

AICs use the same herbs and roots that are being used in ATRs but, before they use these, they pray over them, that they may be 'purged of all mundane effects'. This is like praying over a painkiller, asking God to make sure that the working substances of the pill may not be active. This practice distinguishes mystical power from physical power. This distinction is clearly present in life in Africa. People speak of powers in things, but they are well aware that these powers are of a different kind than ordinary powers.

When anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1937) describes the beliefs in mystical powers of the Azande people in Southern Sudan, he observes that the Azande make a distinction between natural and mystical powers:

Azande undoubtedly perceive a difference between what we consider the workings of nature on the one hand and the workings of magic and ghosts and witchcraft on the other hand [...] even to the Azande there is something peculiar about the action of witchcraft. (p. 81)

Despite the fact that the Azande live in a world where witchcraft is a normal, almost everyday affair, the mystical part of witchcraft is separated from the natural by Azande. Evans-Pritchard writes (1937):

I noted the same uncertainty and the same feeling that they were dealing with things only part of whose action was visible, the invisible part being accounted for by an inherent power which is mysterious not only for us but also for them. (p. 82)

The way things interact with one another is different when mystical powers are involved. As the AICs described by Asamoah-Gyadu differentiate the spiritual aspect from the natural aspect of medicines by asking God to purge the medicine of its natural powers, so too it is common practice in Africa to distinguish mystical and natural powers. The physical world in which people in Africa and people in Europe and the USA live is similar and is conceived of in a similar way as well. In their entire lives, people in Africa show that they know very well how a good harvest, healing, a job or children come into existence.

Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1993) comments on the work of the anthropologist James Frazer:

The same savage, [*sic*] who stabs the picture of his enemy apparently in order to kill him, really builds his hut out of wood and carves his arrow skilfully and not in effigy. (p. 125)



People do not consider mystical means as an alternative for natural ways of doing things, but they know that if you want to kill an enemy, you need to shoot a real, physical arrow. Wittgenstein (1993) continues:

The nonsense here is that Frazer represents these people as if they had a completely false (even insane) idea of the course of nature, whereas they only possess a peculiar interpretation of the phenomena. That is, if they were to write it down, their knowledge of nature would not differ *fundamentally* from ours. (p. 141)

The belief in mystical powers in things does not imply that people do not understand how nature works, not even that they have a dramatically different understanding of how nature works. The knowledge of nature is not fundamentally different, but in addition to natural powers, most people in Africa live in a world with mystical powers in things, as well. So, what is meant by these mystical powers?

During the 2012 African Cup of Nations soccer championship, the Zambian coach wore the same white shirt throughout the tournament. After winning the first match, superstitiously he did not want to change this shirt. Elsewhere, I contrasted this practice with the practice in some churches in Southern Africa to always wear white on a Sunday (Kroesbergen 2015a). The soccer coach would probably admit that his having worn a white shirt was superstitious and – whether or not he saw it as superstitious – the practice was based upon an assumed strange kind of causal connection between him wearing that white shirt and the results of the soccer matches. People – including the coach and the supporters – are well aware of what makes a particular team win a soccer match and of the fact that the coach wearing a particular shirt does not belong to this category. Yet, in his superstition, the coach sees some connection between the wearing of this white shirt and winning or losing the next game.

In the case of the congregants who always wear white on Sundays, things are different. Wearing white here shows a congregant's desire to be a faithful believer. The wearing of white

is an expression of him or her being a believer and is part of his or her entire life. It is not connected to a specific independently checkable fact but to an entire life and worldview. The white clothing is an expression of someone's attachment to a complete symbolic universe – this is what makes the wearing of white for the congregant not an instance of a magical superstition. Within this symbolic universe or worldview, the ancestors may give you rain or God may protect you from a road accident planned by the devil. Without the white clothing, these events would not have been gifts from the ancestors or God, so in that sense, the white clothing has the power to bring rain – namely, rain from the ancestors – or protect against accidents – namely, those planned by the devil. This power, however, does not refer to a causal connection between two separate events, but the wearing of white and the receiving of gifts from God or the ancestors are both expressions of one worldview.

The white shirt of the soccer coach is superstition because it is treated as if it had physical powers which the people involved themselves know very well do not exist. The white clothing of the congregants is not superstition because it is a symbol which represents one's worldview, a worldview that also finds expression in receiving rain from the ancestors or protection from God against the devil. In superstitions, people use objects to force God or the ancestors or the universe and so forth to give them what they want. In genuine religious practices, it is God (or the ancestors, the universe and so forth) who works through both the objects and through whatever one may receive, such as rain or protection. That is why most traditional healers claim that charms do not work by themselves but because the ancestors work through them, and that is why pastors – from Neo-Pentecostal to Reformed – who provide anointing oil or anointed pens claim that it is God who works through those objects.

If sprinkling anointing oil over one's application letter is treated in a magical, superstitious way, then there are two distinct and separately identifiable events – the act of anointing and whether or not someone gets the job. An appropriate question would be,

‘how does the anointing cause someone to get this job?’ If this person gets the job, he or she will be glad that he or she used anointing oil – he or she did the right thing; if this person does not get the job, the anointing has been proven to have been futile – it was a useless exercise.

If the sprinkling of anointing oil over one’s application letter is the expression of the entire way in which one wants to live one’s life, then one does not ask about efficacy. The anointing shows that this person wants to dedicate his or her life to God, including those things that are so important to him or her right now, such as looking for a job. An appropriate question would be, ‘how would the spirit in which one has been sprinkling the application letter show itself in response to whether or not one gets the job?’ If one gets the job, one may ascribe this to God’s intervention, thank him for it, praise him for it, testify in church about the great things God has done in his or her life. Someone else may see no connection between the anointing and the getting of the job, but for the believer, it is impossible not to see this connection. Within the spirit within which a person lives his or her life, the success of the application or the passing of the exam cannot be anything but a gesture from God.

Wittgenstein (1980:51-52) compares seeing something as a gesture from God to the statement, ‘[i]t is impossible to see the face of this dog and not to see that he is alert & full of attention to what his master is doing’. Someone who does not see it cannot use it to prove anything, but someone who sees the alertness of this dog or the gesture from God cannot see it otherwise. It requires seeing the facts in a particular light, in a particular spirit, to see that God must have had something to do with the person getting this job and, unlike in the case of the anointing as a magical or superstitious act, the focus here is on God, not on one’s own act of anointing.

If one takes the anointing act as a symbolic expression of one’s faith, and one does not get the job, the act of anointing does not prove itself to have been futile. One may be angry or disappointed

but, at the same time, one tries to see even these difficult circumstances in which one finds oneself in the same light as the light that one was invoking over one's life when one did the anointing – that is, in God's light. In time, one may even come to see somehow God's will in this now disappointing experience. The anointing shows an attitude towards life that one prays one may continue to have in both good and bad times. In that sense, the anointing can never be futile, as it may well prove to be in the case where one uses the anointing oil in a magical, superstitious kind of way.

Imagine that someone sprinkles anointing oil over his or her application letter and gets the job. In case of a magical use of anointing oil, this person may want to test whether this was a coincidence or not. He or she may want to experiment with it, try again and see if sprinkling anointing oil again secures a job for someone else as well. In case of the use of anointing oil in a symbolic context, experiments do not make sense, as the conditions that made the act of anointing significant would be lacking – the entire life of this Christian, the importance of this job application for him or her and the reliance upon God in whatever circumstances formed the context that made the act of anointing the application letter into what it was. If one tried to repeat this in order to check whether the outcome was a coincidence or not, it would no longer be an expression of one's faith, but it would be part of a (quasi-)scientific test, and it would contradict everything one, in other contexts, shows to know about how the world works.

In the case of a magical use of anointing oil, one may, firstly, assume that maybe anointing oil possesses the power that one is looking for and, secondly, decide to give it a try. In the case of applying anointing oil as an expression of one's faith in God, things are different. One does not first assent to the belief that there is power in anointing oil and then decide to use it. Rather, it is in applying anointing oil that one's belief in its power finds expression. As Wittgenstein (1993:119) says in connection with religious practices, '[a]ll one can say is: where that practice and these views

occur together, the practice does not spring from the view, but they are both just there'. The practice of anointing one's application letter is not based on the belief that anointing oil possesses power but the practice and the belief are both there, making sense only within the wider context of someone's life of faith. This power experienced in the anointing oil or anointed pen does not refer to a causal connection between two separate events, but the use of the item and the receiving of gifts from God are both expressions of one worldview. Wittgenstein (1993) continues:

It can indeed happen, and often does today, that a person will give up a practice after he has recognized an error on which it was based. But this happens only when calling someone's attention to his error is enough to turn him from his way of behaving. But this is not the case with the religious practices of a people and *therefore* there is *no* question of an error. (p. 121)

Experiments to prove that anointing oil does or does not have power do not make sense; neither does the belief in the power of anointing oil as a separate claim about reality make sense. The answer to the puzzling question, 'how can they believe that stuff about anointing oil having power and so on?', is the realisation that it does not work exactly how we might have imagined it. The belief in the power of anointing oil makes only as part of an entire symbolic context. The application of anointing oil and the use of an anointed pen during one's exam can be seen as an expression of someone's attachment to a complete symbolic universe. That these objects are indeed often used in this not-superstitious way can be seen by the way such things are treated in everyday life.

## ■ Symbolic things are treated differently

People in Africa are said to believe in mystical powers in a much more pragmatic and direct way than people in Europe and the USA do. This may be true, but it is important to see that people in Africa are well aware of the difference between the way in which mystical powers work and the way ordinary physical powers work. In 2015, the Zambian government announced a

national day of prayer as an instrument to make the economy improve. People were convinced that this would ‘work’, but we need to pay attention to what ‘to work’ means here. Without this day of prayer, a possible improvement of the economy would not be an answer to the nation’s prayers, so in that sense it works. This does not mean, however, that the government does not implement pragmatic policies to improve the economy, but the national day of prayer is not considered as one of these. The prayers are treated differently. For example, the way in which we were asked to pray for the completion of the chapel at our university was different from the way in which we were urged to save water. Even if no one doubts that prayers work, everybody is aware that they do not work in the same way as pragmatic policy measures. If there is power in objects, words and people, then it is obviously not the same kind of power that is produced through physical means. It is treated differently.

Everybody notices the difference between telling your fellow student ‘you should have joined our study group’ and ‘you should have joined our prayer group’, between saying ‘you should have studied Chapter Three’ and saying ‘you should have watched the powerful prophet T.B. Joshua on TV’, and between saying ‘you should have done all the exercises in the book’ and saying ‘you should have used an anointed pen while writing the exam’. The belief in mystical powers everywhere makes life in Africa different from life in Europe or the USA, but this does not mean that there is less clarity over what belongs to nature or the physical realm and what belongs to a different, spiritual realm. ‘She should have gone to a better hospital’ is not the same as ‘she should have asked this powerful pastor to pray for her’, ‘she should have taken her pills’ is not the same as ‘she should have prayed harder’, and ‘hard training won us the soccer championship’ is not the same as ‘we became champions because our coach kept wearing this same white shirt’.

Students do many things in preparation for their exams. They study hard, try to sleep well and so on and they may also use other tools in preparation for their exams. Imagine they have a foreign language exam, and they use a card system – they write

a foreign word on one side and its meaning on the other. They use these cards to rehearse and study for their exam. Let us now compare the use of these cards and the use of the anointed pen. We will find similar distinctions here as we saw in Chapter 3 between praying to Saint Anthony for a parking spot and using a parking app. The card system may prove to be a powerful tool in preparing for the exam, and the pen may be said to have a powerful anointing. In both cases, we can use the word 'power', but, as indicated above, people who use anointed pens also recognise that the power is of a different kind. The difference between the 'natural power' of the card system and the 'mystical power' of the anointed pen can be seen in the way the cards and the pen are used.

You may find out whether or not the card system works by trying out different methods. On the other hand, starting to accept anointed pens to write your exams or giving up using them is more like a conversion one way or the other. The card system can be wrong for someone in a way that the anointed pen is not; someone may find out that the card system does not help after all – at least for him or her – and that it is merely confusing. It would be different in the case of the anointed pen. People may stop using anointed pens at a particular point in their lives, they may consider themselves foolish to have trusted in anointed pens, but this is not exactly about 'discovering that anointed pens do not work'. It is more like changing one's entire way of looking at life.

The card system could be adjusted or improved, and one can experiment with it. Anointed pens do not work like that; one does not say that anointing only works for black pens and not for blue pens or that one should have asked Jesus to bless the pen instead of the Holy Spirit. If experimenting made sense in connection with anointed pens, people would have noticed long before that they do not work, at least not instrumentally. They would have noticed that exams written with anointed pens do not have a higher pass rate than the average. Anointed pens do not 'work', nor do they 'probably work'; people simply use them

or do not use them. It may be 'smart' to use a card system when preparing for one's exam, but it is not 'smart' to use anointed pens. It may be virtuous or expressing your strong faith to use anointed pens, but it is not virtuous or indicative of strong faith to use a card system. Both the card system and the anointed pens can be said to be powerful, but there are many differences in how a card system is used and the role that may be played by an anointed pen in someone's life. Both are treated very differently.

The prayer or the anointed pen is not an instrument to influence the course of events but an acknowledgement that one cannot control them; it tries to free a person from worries about things they cannot control by actively leaving them in the hands of God. However hard someone may have studied, however much concentration one musters on the day of the exam, it is still possible that one may fail. To use an anointed pen may be a way to deal with the part that one cannot control, to surrender that to God, instead of magically and superstitiously considering the anointed pen as a tool to control the uncontrollable after all. The preacher who prays over the anointed pens may sound like he or she tries to force God to give the pupils high marks in their exams, but he or she would also say that it is God who works through the pen, so he or she must mean something else than forcing God to do something. The prayers over the anointed pens may sound like clear attempts to influence the outcome of the exams, but the way people treat these prayers shows that often they are not. As everywhere else, there is much confusion and superstition in Africa, but the stories about power in anointing oil or anointed pens that are told in Africa do not need to be confused and superstitious.

Theologian David Crump (2006:21) opines that '[m]any prayers, like those for rain or victory in war, only allow for a pseudo-causal interpretation. Such prayers have to be abandoned as meaningless'. Yet, even prayers for rain or victory or passing an exam do not need to be interpreted in a pseudo-causal, magical way. They may be dedicating these events that matter so



much to someone, to God, leaving them in his hands. The prayers may be a symbol which represents one's worldview, a worldview that also finds expression in receiving rain from the ancestors or victory in war from God.

The prayers over the anointed pens can be an expression of an attitude towards contingencies; people know that the exams can go either way, they know that ultimately it is not in their hands – life is not fair, and sometimes the most hard-working, diligent pupils fail in their exams – and by praying they recognise this and hand their desires over to God. Through prayer, people give their desires for other things besides God – such as passing the exam – to God, so they are free to truly desire God. Anointed pens are effective if one manages to leave those desires in the hands of God, so one is free to put God first and to desire his will only. The Reformer Martin Luther (1962) interprets Psalm 127 about the workers who work in vain if the Lord does not build the house as follows:

Man must work, but that work is in vain if it stands alone and thinks it can sustain itself. Work cannot do this; God must do it. Therefore, work in such a manner that your labor is not in vain. Your labor is in vain when you worry, and rely on your own efforts to sustain yourself. (p. 325)

To prepare for an exam, you should study hard, sleep well, maybe use a card system to practise and not worry about what goes beyond that. Despite all your diligent work, you may still fail the exam, but if you have done your best, this is out of your hands. Luther (1962) continues:

You must keep these two things apart: 'to labor' and 'to maintain a household' or 'to sustain'; keep them as far apart from one another as heaven and earth, or God and man. (p. 325)

Someone works and does his or her best, but the results of their work belong to God. Using an anointed pen during the exams can be a way of acknowledging this, not to control the uncontrollable but to surrender to it, so one is only concerned with one's own part, the labour, leaving the rest to God.

If one prays all night long over one's anointed pen and uses it to write one's exam, but one does not study at all, then one is probably treating the anointed pen as a magical object in a superstitious way. Philosopher Immanuel Kant calls this 'fetish prayer' (cited in Brümmer 2008 [1984]:58), and we could call it confused and superstitious. Evangelical author Philip Yancey (2011:n.p.) comments, '[s]ome people worry that prayer may lead to passivity, that we will retreat to prayer as a substitute for action. Jesus saw no contradiction between the two'. It is one's task to study for one's exam – one cannot substitute for that by prayer or by using an anointed pen. Yet, there is something that goes beyond study and preparation, and that 'something' can be legitimately represented by an anointed pen. Through their symbolic quality, objects represent what is beyond them.

The white shirt of the soccer coach is superstitious because it is seen as one more thing that won the championship alongside hard training and good coaching, for example. The white clothing of the congregants is of a different nature because it is not one more thing in making them Christians alongside loving their neighbours and worshipping God, for example, but expresses what is important in their practical lifestyle. The white clothing is a visible sign of the same belief, which leads to them bringing their sick neighbour some soup and singing enthusiastically in the church – it expresses that they wish these physical things to be part of the spiritual aspect of their lives, of being a faithful Christian. Likewise, the use of an anointed pen by students during exams may represent what is beyond pens, studying, exams and so forth – it represents dedicating their entire lives, including their school lives, to God. The difference between tapping into this symbolic quality of things and using things superstitiously is shown in the role that these things play in one's life, it is seen in the way in which someone treats these things.

There may be confusion and superstition in ascribing power to things, but it may also be a way to consider these things as part of a symbolic context. Things are not merely things; they mean something as well. We can see this in the different way in which

things are treated. But what of those cases where things are treated differently, where they are treated as belonging to a symbolic context but clearly a wrong symbolic context? We will turn to this special case of dealing with the symbolic quality of things in the final section of the first half of this chapter.

## ■ Enchantment

Often, anointing oil is not used to give a particular object good powers – as in sprinkling it on an application letter when one hopes to get a job – but it is used to ward off evil powers that may already be perceived to be present in these things. As Chammah Kaunda (2016) observes:

Most Pentecostals in Zambia will not simply move into a new or rented house or begin to drive a car without first cleansing it and dedicating it to the Lord. In this way, it is believed, evil spirits can be exorcised from the car, house or nation, and spiritually unclean things are destroyed or burnt and the place is dedicated to the Lord through prayer in the power of the Holy Spirit. (p. 38)

The possible bad powers present in things are curbed by applying anointing oil.

Anthropologist Johanneke Kamps (2018) observes that Christians in Africa obtain much of their knowledge of evil powers in things from testimonies, in particular, testimonies by ex-Satanists. Most often, ex-Satanists are people who feel that there is something amiss in their lives and go to a pastor who diagnoses them as having been initiated into Satanism without knowing it themselves. Helped by the pastor, they reconstruct their life story, identifying the moment they were initiated – often while dreaming – and the evil deeds they committed – again, often while dreaming. Now, through powerful prayers, the pastor delivers them from Satanism and in the church they testify about their alleged former life. This life of Satanism often includes taking part in or witnessing the production of products with evil powers. Kamps (2018:231) notes, '[t]his material world is merely a mask for a deeper reality. Not only people and places are connected to the Devil but

objects – particular objects – can be evil too’ and some testimonies of ex-Satanists ‘give long lists of dangerous products, from cosmetics to clothes to hair extensions to food and drinks, and explain how they are manufactured’. The Satanic underworld produces these products to ensnare innocent people. There is evil power in these ominous things that will harm anyone who owns or uses these products. Kamps (2018) continues:

Objects may have an agency that evades human control. It requires the extraordinary disclosures of ex-Satanists and neo-Pentecostal pastors to reveal the true nature of foreign consumption goods and to prevent those products from changing not only your appearance, but your nature as well. (p. 235)

The spiritual powers of these things attack one’s spiritual being. The powers signify the symbolic quality of the things, but it is an evil symbolic quality. One needs to pray over these things or apply anointing oil to them, to change the evil attached to these items.

What is going on here? The white shirt of the soccer coach was confused and superstitious because it was treated as just one more means to causally influence reality; the white clothing of congregants was not confused or superstitious because it belonged to an entire symbolic universe. The Satanic products mentioned here clearly belong to a symbolic universe, but it looks like it is a mistaken symbolic universe. Through prayers and the applying of anointing oil, they need to be freed from their symbolic universe, it seems.

American Pentecostal theologian James K.A. Smith (2010) argues:

There is a flip side to this sense of the Spirit’s enchantment of creation: Pentecostal spirituality is also deeply attentive to what we might describe as the mis-enchantment of the world by other spirits. (p. 41)

Pentecostals and Christians (of various denominations) in Africa, in general, have an enchanted worldview; there is power everywhere, but one needs to be careful to discern what kind of power is present. There is good enchantment, where the power

present in things is the Holy Spirit – that is, where there is anointing – but there can also be what Smith calls mis-enchantment or bad enchantment, if there are evil powers present in reality.

The enchantment can be mis-enchantment. Asamoah-Gyadu gives the example of deodorant with the name ‘Voodoo’. As part of the advertising campaign, the company that produces this deodorant announced that it had Voodoo-priests praying over this deodorant. In a Euro-American context, many may consider this a kind of joke or publicity stunt, but in Africa it is different. Asamoah-Gyadu (2005) explains:

Such enchanted commodities may be considered harmless by Western consumers. For many Ghanaian Christians however, these commodities may be seen as instruments of the devil for manipulation and perversion of society, as alienating people from God and ruining the lives of the spiritually weak. (p. 192)

If one lives in a world where things have powers, even if one is not superstitious and considers these powers to represent the symbolic quality of things, then there is the risk that things have evil powers as well.

Birgit Meyer (1998a:752) describes how Neo-Pentecostals are told to pray over consumer items they have bought, ‘[t]hey were to ask God to “sanctify” the thing bought, thereby neutralizing any diabolic spirit imbued in it’. Meyer (1998a:752) describes this as disenchanting; the prayer over bought commodities ‘provides the means to transform them into mere objects to be used’. The evil power is removed from these things. The objects are stripped off their negative symbolic value.

I think it is misleading to call the process of praying over objects ‘disenchantment’ as Meyer does, or to speak of ‘mis-enchantment’ as Smith does. The objects remain within one and the same enchanted symbolic universe. The enchantment of these objects was always already a Christian one, and it remains a Christian one after people’s rituals. It is the Christian discourse that identifies these objects as Satanic in the first place, and it is

the Christian discourse that considers these objects as 'no longer dangerous' afterwards.

According to Meyer (1998a:757), '[c]onverts were no longer to allow "fetishes" to possess them, thereby drawing a strict boundary between people and things'. Yet, elsewhere in the same article, Meyer (1998a) explains that the true evil power that things were supposed to have was their symbolic quality and that through prayer this symbolic quality was not removed but transformed or redirected:

The true fetish, then, is the lust for pleasure and luxury which subverts a person's own individual will and locks him or her in the circularity of the market as the source and target of desire. Pentecostals warn young people especially that their own (sexual) desire may eventually turn against them and make them forget and forego what really matters in life: instead of preparing themselves for marriage and childbirth they live in a dream-world in which they are subordinated to spirits, bereft of a personality of their own. (pp. 769-770)

Yet, in the new setup, things are still powerful, but now the powers are powers for good, powers that help them to live in a different way, as God intended them to live. As Meyer (1998a:762) notes in the same article, '[s]uccessful preachers proudly attributed their wealth to God'. Things are not merely commodities they possess but a blessing from God which also direct them towards God. The mis-enchantment is not only removed, but it is also transformed into a good kind of enchantment; the things shift from bad to good, as their powers are redirected, within one and the same enchanted symbolic universe.

In another article, anthropologist Birgit Meyer (2010:111) notes that attempts by early missionaries to unmask traditional African charms and fetishes as objects without power were doomed to fail, as by making a show of the ineffectiveness of charms and fetishes, they instead seemed to be charging these objects with a particular symbolic power. Otherwise, one did not need to show that these objects had no power. By making an effort to demonstrate that particular objects have no power, one is attributing power to these objects, that is, symbolic power.

This process could be called 'trans-enchantment'; the objects are no longer part of the African traditional enchanted universe as 'powerful', but within the new Christian symbolic universe their enchanted value is that of 'not to be considered powerful'.

Within ATR, these charms and fetishes are considered to have powers. These may be confused and superstitious powers for some people, but I would consider it more likely that in most cases these powers are the powers of seeing the objects as part of a symbolic context. The charm connects someone with his or her ancestors, and the protection or good things that happen after starting to wear that charm are, therefore, attributed to the ancestors as well. If one belongs to this tradition and converts to a form of Christianity that does not acknowledge ancestors, the object changes its symbolic meaning; instead of being a positive reminder of the ancestors, it is now a negative reminder of a world that one has left behind. This would be a case of trans-enchantment – the symbolic meaning shifts.

In the case of praying for a new house, cosmetics or clothes, however, these objects never belonged to a separate symbolic world, but it is within one's Christian symbolic universe that these objects receive symbolic meaning. God is asked to sanctify these things for, without this ritual act, these things would have had a negative meaning from the Christian perspective. The only enchantment is a Christian one. That is the power unwillingly ascribed to objects by the missionaries who tried to prove these things to be powerless; through their actions, these objects become dangerous from within the Christian perspective. They become signs of what is evil. By being singled out for this special treatment, they receive their symbolic quality, which happens to be negative.

The deodorant 'Voodoo' that Asamoah-Gyadu mentions obviously has a symbolic value in a Euro-American context, but it is not considered as dangerous or even possibly dangerous. In the African context, however, by speaking of it as dangerous, *or by speaking of it as not dangerous*, it receives the symbolic value of at least being potentially dangerous. Now, it needs to be prayed over to neutralise its potential danger. But all of this

happens within a particular Christian framework. Outside Christianity or within a kind of Christianity in which no symbolic quality is attributed to a consumer product with such a name, its power does not exist and, therefore, does not need to be neutralised. There may be confusion and superstition in ascribing power to things such as these, but it may also be a way to consider these things as part of a symbolic context. For someone, things may not merely be things but may mean something as well, which again can be seen by the different ways in which these things are treated. By praying before entering a new house or before taking home a commodity from the supermarket, someone does not disenchant this object and, in most cases, he or she is not trans-enchanting it either. Praying over it is changing the enchanted value of something in the sense of relocating it within one's symbolic universe as something that was dangerous but is now dedicated to the control of God.

The power of anointing oil and anointed pens lies in the symbolic nature or quality of these things. Within the context of the entire faith lives of believers, anointing oil and anointed pens acquire meaning – they are treated as powerful objects in this symbolic context. Symbolically powered things can be seen to be evil, but through prayer this evil quality is neutralised, and the objects become part of a positive spiritual context. In this way, it can make sense to speak of power in things. Particular instances may be fraudulent, trickery or superstition, but speaking of such powers can be genuine and valuable as well. The power of things is in their symbolic nature or quality.

Anthropologist Robin Horton (1993:224) observes that, '[s]everal studies of African magic suggest that its instruments become symbols through being verbally designated as such'. Things may in a confused and superstitious way be treated as having powers in themselves; most often, however, especially in an African context, the objects derive their power from their place in the symbolic realm. Horton (1993) continues:

In being given verbal labels, the objects themselves become a form of language. This interpretation, which reduces all forms of African magic to a verbal base, fits the facts rather well. (p. 224)



It is the verbal quality that gives things their power in the African context. But if things derive their power from being forms of language, what do we make of the power ascribed to words? The conclusion of the first half of this chapter makes that question, to which we will turn in the second half, even more important.

## ■ The material quality of words

People in Africa live in a world full of mystical power; everything is charged with power derived from the spirit world. In the first half of this chapter, I have shown that although it may be confused and superstitious to ascribe power to things, it is not necessarily so. Things do indeed have power in as far as they are treated differently and shown to be part of a symbolic context. Things have power in a not-confused and not-superstitious way in as far as they are words. But what about the power of words? From a Euro-American perspective, there is something strange about the way in which people in Africa speak of power in words.

In a paradoxical way, the two parts of this chapter are related to one another. In Euro-American conceptions, things and words are sharply separated; on the one hand, there is the world as a large collection of inanimate things, while on the other hand there is language, the words which we use to describe this world of things from the sideline, as it were. These are the two substances that Descartes distinguished, namely, the material substance of the world and the thinking substance of the *cogito ergo sum*, which tries to make sense of the world. Two separate realms linked only through the fact that our words are intended to mirror the world of things. It has been common practice for a long time now to be critical of this Cartesian dualism, although it remains unclear what would be the alternative. Seeing power in things and power in words breaks this Cartesian scheme of reality in two opposing directions. Firstly, things are not merely things but belong to the symbolic sphere of words; secondly, words are not merely words but also have a material thing-like existence. 'Things' is not some pure, unconceptualised substratum to which

we attach words, but 'things' is itself a word; also, 'words' as a word is something – some thing – that exists in the world. Words and things are inextricably intertwined.

Malawian scholar Harvery Sindima (1990:137) criticises the 'cosmology inherited from the West; the mechanistic perspective that views all things as lifeless commodities to be understood scientifically and to be used for human ends'. This is the Cartesian divide between lifeless things and spiritual words, but in Africa things are seen differently, according to Sindima (1990:137-138), speaking of 'an alternative way of looking at the world' which 'stresses the bondedness, the interconnectedness of all living beings'. In ascribing life or power to both things and words, both categories transcend their traditional Cartesian confines, and new ways of living in this world may be opened up.

The African religious culture is often said to believe in the power of words. Words not only say things, but they are also supposed to do things, at least when said in the right circumstances. Robin Horton (1993) considers this to be a central feature of the African way of life:

A central characteristic of nearly all the traditional African world views we know of is an assumption about the power of words, uttered under appropriate circumstances, to bring into being the events or states they stand for. (p. 223)

Elizabeth Keating and Maria Egbert (2004) note that:

Many societies believe in the efficacy of language, for example, in the form of incantations that cure illness, curses, and in the ritual words to make an ordinary person into the ruler or chief. (p. 171)

The effective power of the word is assumed to make what is said come to pass. Yet, as ethnologist John L. McCreery (1995) observes:

The proposition that magical words will work only if spoken by specially qualified people, following certain exact procedures, in precisely specified situations, and that then they will work automatically, is a premise familiar from fantasy games and folktales, as well as from ethnographic studies. (p. 155)

People in Africa are thought to have such a belief in the power of words, but this belief is also considered to belong to the realm of fantasy and fairy tales.

Anthropologist of language Webb Keane (2004:433) notes that many anthropologists in their description of African rituals try to remove the belief in 'its efficacy from the domain of physical causality' in order to avoid 'the accusation of [African rituals] being bad science, of trying to accomplish material results (such as making rain) on the basis of faulty premises (the magical power of words)'. At the outset of this chapter I defined as superstitious a practice which conflicts with what we – including the people involved – already know about causal relations. In the rest of their lives, people show that they know very well how a good harvest, healing, a job or children come into existence but during a spell of superstition they seem to have forgotten this and appear to believe that rituals or magical words can bring about such things. I came across an article on the possibility of African experimental science, which includes this peculiar statement (Emedolu 2015):

[/]t might even be later discovered that some of these charged words or sounds do actually possess some vibration effects and efficacy. By some future time such words or sounds might begin to constitute interesting studies in the field of mechanics. (p. 81)

Be that as it may, for now it is simply bad mechanics or bad science, and I cannot believe that that is what people are engaged in, when they treat words carefully in such a way that it is said that they believe in the power of words. People know how the world works, and they also know very well that speaking particular words is not enough to produce a harvest, kill an enemy or bring about healing. So, what do people believe when they believe in the power of words? My suggestion is that we need to transcend the Cartesian boundary between things and words; things have power in a not-confused and not-superstitious way because they act like words and words have power in a not-confused and not-superstitious way because they act like things. I want to show this by using two practical examples concerning the belief in the power of words.

## ■ Positive confession and speaking into someone's life

Let us look at two situations in which people engaged in religious practices in Africa treat words in a particular way that may give rise to the observation that they believe in the power of words. Firstly, the practice of positive confession, which anthropologist Naomi Haynes (2014) defines as follows:

In positive confession, believers state things that they hope will happen as though they were sure things. So, for example, a woman who is trying to conceive will tell her friends that she will have a baby within the year. (p. 360)

Haynes (2014) gives an example:

Once a believer demonstrates that she knows what is rightfully hers, God is effectively forced – that is, compelled – to give it to her. As my informants explained to me, if God does not do so he will be ‘shamed’ (*ukusebanya*) before nonbelievers, something that he cannot allow. (p. 359)

If a believer says that God owes him or her something, God has no choice but to give it to him or her.

Paul Gifford (1998) describes positive confession as a central element of the popular Neo-Pentecostal concept of the prosperity gospel:

God has met all the needs of human beings in the suffering and death of Christ, and every Christian should now share in the victory of Christ over sin, sickness and poverty. A believer has the right to the blessings of health and wealth won by Christ, and he or she can obtain these blessings merely by a positive confession of faith. (p. 38)

The practice of positive confession is not particular to Africa – on a British website (Brace 2003) believers are encouraged to engage in it as well, ‘[w]e ourselves have tremendous [dynamic] power to force God to act, just as long as we are utterly positive, dogmatic, and one might say dictatorial and demanding towards God!’ – and the practice did not originate in Africa. Neo-Pentecostal preachers in the USA, such as Kenneth Hagin,

adopted the idea from the 19th-century positive thinking movement, 'if you have a positive mindset, good things will come your way'.

South African Pentecostal theologian Marius Nel (2015:163) refers to this kind of theology as 'a formula – if we know the right words, the *rhema* of God, and do not doubt, what we ask will happen mechanically and automatically'. Nel (2015) quotes Farah who criticises this way of thinking:

Any theological system that makes demands on God that are causative – that guarantees that God will always act in such and such a way due to certain prayers repeated or rites performed – is bound to eventual failure. It is, in effect, magic. (p. 165)

Power in things can be interpreted in a magical, superstitious way, as we discussed in the first half of this chapter, and the application of power in words in, for example, positive confession can easily dissolve into superstition as well.

Yet, the theology of positive confession has found many followers in Africa. Zimbabwean theologian Lovemore Togarasei (2011:348) explains the importance of positive confession for Africa in this way, 'I am convinced that if Africa has to conquer poverty, we need such a positive mindset'. Togarasei (2011:348) focusses on the mindset here, on what people believe about themselves, '[w]e need to be made to believe in ourselves and graduate from the donor mentality'. Earlier on in his article, Togarasei discussed critics of the prosperity gospel and positive confession. These critics argued and showed by their research that the prosperity gospel is not true, it is a delusion; people who do positive confessions about their financial position do not achieve a better financial position by doing so. Togarasei does not challenge these results, but he does not regard them as relevant. Following the quote above, he (Togarasei 2011:348) states, '[c]all it an "impetus for delusion," but Pentecostals believe that the gospel of prosperity is true'. Does this mean that positive confession and belief in the power of words is 'bad science', as Keane calls it, after all? Is a belief in the power of words confused

and superstitious? It does not need to be, and we can see that if we pay attention to what actually happens during positive confession in the African context.

Togarasei and others follow the American explanations of positive confession in terms of 'mindset', in which positive confessions should lead to positive thinking. However, in the African version of positive confession, there is more emphasis on the importance of the positive declaring itself, rather than on the psychological changes in a mindset that may be the result. Positive confession in an African setting is not focussed on changing one's mindset or thinking but on the *speaking* of the positive words in itself. In positive confession, African Christians 'declare and decree' many good things for themselves but, in doing so, they are not so much trying to convince themselves to think differently; the declaring and decreeing is itself the point. It is not, first of all, about changing one's own thinking; it is about saying the words. Positive confession in an African context is not about positive thinking but about positive declaring – and, I will argue, that tells us something about what is meant by the African belief in the power of words.

Connected to this practice of positive confession is the practice of a pastor or prophet speaking into someone's life. During one-on-one meetings after a church service, the pastor will often receive the request 'Speak into my life, pastor!' Prophecy used to refer to activism for social justice. A prophet used to be a political activist who speaks out against those in power. In the context of Southern Africa, the concept of prophecy has changed. Many people, nowadays, call themselves 'prophet', yet they are not engaged in social activism but present themselves as a kind of miracle-worker (see Kroesbergen 2016a). They claim to be able to speak good things into people's lives. They tell people positive things, which are then supposed to come to pass. Paul Gifford (2011:260) describes how pastor David Oyedepo of the Winner's Chapel positions himself as 'the quintessential prophet, claiming crucial significance in the victorious living of his followers. His ministry actually brings this about'. The positive things that

Oyedepo speaks can be found in the Bible, but by saying the words Oyedepo activates or charges the words (Gifford 2015):

Oyedepo, the prophet, exhibits a performative or declarative use of the Bible. For him, the Bible is a record of covenants, promises, pledges, commitments between God and his chosen, and as the anointed of God he can bring about God's promises in the lives of his followers – the abundance of Abraham, the authority of Joseph, the power of Moses, the victory of Joshua, the rule of David, the wealth of Solomon. (p. 130)

Gifford (2008:214) refers to this as a performative use of language, saying, '[a]ccording to this performative usage, scripture is not self-authenticating or self-actualizing. It is the anointed prophet of God who must actualize the biblical promise in your life'. Again, it is the actual speaking of the words that is crucial, that is what makes these promises that have been there for a long time already now come to pass in the life of this particular believer. The saying of these words by the prophet is what makes them happen. This is often connected to the personal, positive confession of the believer; upon hearing the prophet speak into his or her life, the believer has to proclaim 'I receive!' It is not enough to be convinced in one's heart, it is not enough to believe it with one's mind, but someone has to say 'I receive!' This positive confession is what activates the prophetic words, and this is what makes these words powerful.

Looking at these two examples, what does it mean to believe in the power of positive declaring, what does it mean to believe in the power of the prophet speaking into one's life? Many anthropologists and theologians have – like Gifford above – used the concept of 'performative' to describe the African belief in the power of words.

## ■ Performative or perlocutionary language?

Commenting on Ghana, theologian Clifton Clarke (2011:253) says that, '[i]n an Akan context the spoken word has performative powers or magical potency – the power to alter reality'.

Describing African Pentecostalism, Asamoah-Gyadu (2013:127) observes that, 'in charismatic Christianity, words are widely believed to have performative effect. It is believed that what a person speaks during the routines of life will come their way eventually'. Ruth Marshall (2009) speaks of the Nigerian Pentecostals' belief in "power in the word," particularly the name of Jesus, has properly performative force of its own'. Scholar of religion Stephen Hunt (1998) describes the underlying worldview as follows:

Words therefore are agents in themselves [...] Words can alter the very reality that they describe [...] [*Pentecostal Christians*] imbue religious language with distinct qualities of power. In this way ritual language has 'real' power in that it can affect the world of everyday life. (p. 277)

Interpreting the ritual practices of the Limba in Sierra Leone, anthropologist Ruth Finnegan (1969) wonders:

If, as appears, the Limba lay even more stress on the performative aspects of words than do the English, is this something that can be generalised more widely? [...] Is this, perhaps, the truth that lies behind the old and, as I think, often naive assumptions about the supposed savage reliance on the 'magical power of words?' (p. 550)

The African belief in the power of words is interpreted by these scholars as an acknowledgement of the performative power of words.

Do people in Africa believe in the performative power of words? The concept 'performative language' was coined by J.L. Austin (1962) in *How to Do Things with Words*. Africans were assumed to do things with words or at least to try to do things with words, so the connection was made easily – with the welcome side effect of not exoticising Africans, for Austin used the phrase 'performative language' to describe Euro-American practices with language. Africans may be doing more with the performative side of language, as Finnegan suggests, but we do not need to ascribe to them utterly foreign and false ideas about how the world works. This interpretation of the African belief in the power of words avoids ascribing confused or superstitious beliefs to people in Africa.



Many interpreters, however – anthropologists and theologians, Africans and non-Africans – use the phrase ‘performative’ and add a footnote referring to Austin, without appearing to have actually checked what Austin means by ‘performative’. Austin (1962) begins by noting that we do not always use language merely to describe something but sometimes speaking particular words actually does something. Saying ‘I name this ship Santa Maria’ is not the description of a process that takes place independently of these words, but speaking the words is itself naming the ship. Saying ‘I promise...’ is not a comment on something that happens out there but the saying of these words is to make a promise. Starting from these observations, Austin distinguishes three aspects of language that, according to him, are present in every utterance. There is the locution, the meaning of a statement; the illocution or the performative force of a statement, the activity that someone performs in speaking the words in themselves; and the perlocution, the intended causal effect of saying these words. The performative aspect is what a person does in saying the words, either naming, promising, describing or threatening, and so on. To identify the performative aspect, Austin (1962:61) proposes what has become known as the ‘hereby criterion’ – one can add the word ‘hereby’ to the sentence in which the performative action is made explicit. Instead of saying ‘I name this ship’, one could say ‘I hereby name this ship’; instead of saying ‘I promise’, one could say ‘I hereby promise’; and instead of saying ‘the table is black’, one could say ‘I hereby describe the table as black’, showing that ‘describing’ is the act performed in saying ‘the table is black’.

The perlocutionary aspect is different – it is not something that is done by uttering the words themselves, but it is something that someone hopes will happen after uttering these words. As Austin (1962) describes:

Saying something will often, even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons: and it may be done with the design of, intention or purpose of producing them. (p. 101)

If I say ‘come over here!’, then I hope that the words will make you move in this direction, but it is not the words in themselves that do so – what the words themselves do is merely invite you to come over here. One could rephrase the statement by saying ‘I hereby invite you to come over here’ but not ‘I hereby make you come over here’. One hopes that the other comes but the words in themselves do not do the coming of the other. The coming of the other is the perlocutionary aspect, the intended causal effect and not the performative aspect, that is, what is done in the saying of the words itself.

Many of the scholars who speak of Africans believing in the performative power of words actually seem to be speaking of the perlocutionary aspect instead of the performative aspect of language. Anthropologist Kathrien Pype (2015:359) says that ‘[f] or African Pentecostals and Charismatics, sounds and words have performative power; they can transform material reality’. If it were truly performative, one would not say ‘*can* transform reality’ but ‘*do* transform reality’. Saying ‘I name this ship Santa Maria’ is not something that *can* name the ship, it *does* name the ship. Pype (2015:359) continues by noting how words used in singing ‘are considered the most efficient devices for diverting the soul away from material reality and directing it towards the Divine’. But again, this is the intended causal effect – the perlocutionary aspect – and not the performative act in the uttering of these words. Scholar of religion Elijah Obinna (2016) refers to his colleague Afe Adogame’s observations about the beliefs of African Christians, ‘[t]hrough the performative force of ritual speech and action, benevolent forces are attracted, while malevolent forces are repelled’. But this attraction and repelling is the intended causal effect of the words and, therefore, the perlocutionary force and not the performative force.

Pentecostal theologian James K.A. Smith provides an interesting interpretation of the perlocutionary effect of speaking in tongues. He describes the practice, common in Africa as well as in the USA, of congregants who gather around a fellow believer

who is in need of intercession. Many of the intercessory prayers are done in tongues, Smith (2010:143) transcribes an example, *Hack shukuna ash tuu kononai; mee upsukuna shill Adonai*; etc. What is being said here? Smith (2010:144) proposes that '[t]he question we should ask is not, "What does this prayer *mean*?" but rather, "What does this prayer *do*?"'. One of the answers Smith (2010:145) provides refers to the way in which such prayers in tongues may open someone up to God's surprising intervention, 'The prayer often has the perlocutionary effect of encouraging openness to such interruptions'. In a footnote, Smith (2010:145, n.53) admits that another intended perlocutionary effect of praying in tongues may often be 'to "appear spiritual" to those gathered around', but the opening up to whatever God may have in store fits nicely with the surrendering to God whatever happens, that was discussed above. Yet, many scholars of African Christianity mix up the perlocutionary and performative effects.

This may seem like a minor slip of the pen that is easily repaired. Simply read 'perlocutionary' where it says 'performative' – 'for African Christians words have a perlocutionary power'. However, perlocutionary force concerns the intended causal effect and, therefore, if we change that, we may be back at ascribing African Christians strange ideas about causality. We may be back to ascribing confusion and superstition to people in Africa in as far as they believe in the power of words, as perlocutionary acts refer to the intended *causal* effect of words. If someone asks a question, they may intend to elicit an answer from the person they are speaking to. The giving of an answer, however, is a separate act, for which to happen depends upon more than the words themselves in two ways:

- the addressed feels the force of the perlocutionary act not directly but only through belonging to the same symbolic universe as the speaker
- the addressed must be willing to comply with what the speaker intends.

The perlocutionary effect is the intended causal effect of saying these words, but the effect is not brought about by something in

the words themselves but only through the wider symbolic context within which intention makes sense. Austin speaks of the consequential effects on fellow speakers. If the intended effect is accomplished, it is because of the symbolic or logical connection between the words and their effect, not because of some mysterious, magical, causal connection.

Philosopher of religion D.Z. Phillips (2003) explains this using Wittgenstein's ideas:

Wittgenstein distinguished between a magical and logical view of signs, the former being the view that the meaning is in the sign itself, in the mark or the sound, instead of in its use. (p. 197)

In the first half of this chapter, we saw that the power in an anointed pen derives from the entire symbolic context within which the pen is used. Similarly, words do not contain power in and of themselves. Phillips (2003) continues:

If I beckon and you walk toward me, it is easy to think that there is a power in the words which *makes* you come. The beckoning becomes a kind of magic. Of course, in fact, you come when I beckon because you know what the gesture means and you obey it. It is part of the life we share together. (p. 197)

The power is not a *thing* that accompanies the word in itself, but the power is there through the mediation of the entire symbolic universe within which the words are spoken. Yet, one may be easily confused about this fact (Phillips 2003):

If I am in the grip of a longing for the absent one, and I beckon in a ritual for the absent one to *return*, I *may* feel that there is something in the beckoning which will make him return. He'll return as the result of the ritual beckoning. Magic will make him return. If I am in the grip of this conviction, it is not a mistake, but a confusion. (p. 197)

It is not as if the power could have been in the words, but happens to be mediated through the symbolic universe; the power itself is of a different kind. Explaining the African belief in the power of words by referring to perlocutionary acts does not solve any problems but implicitly ascribes confused and superstitious ideas to people in Africa. Keane (2004) said:

The performative approach to ritual seemed useful in explaining several things about ritual. One is that by removing its efficacy from the domain of physical causality, ritual escaped the accusation of being bad science. (p. 433)

Shifting to belief in a perlocutionary force would bring us close to assuming some false ideas about how the world works. The perlocutionary force of words depends upon both symbolic mediation and the willingness of the listener. If the power could conceivably have been in the words themselves, then we would be back at the experiments with anointed pens which were dismissed as magical, superstitious 'bad science' above. So, is the African belief in the power of words confused and superstitious after all?

## ■ The material quality of words

Anthropologist of language, Webb Keane (2004:453), is aware of the common confusion of the performative and the perlocutionary force of words in the study of African cultures and he adds that even those anthropologists and theologians who interpret African ritual as actually performative face a different problem, 'the performative approach is also subject to an important criticism. In many cases, the practitioners themselves do not see their rituals as achieving their effects simply by convention'. There is much more to be said about this accusation – I will address the way in which rituals are supposed to achieve their effects in Chapter 7 – but interpretations along the lines of performative force are easily considered to be treating something as 'not real' or as 'not taking people seriously'. However, ascribing to people obviously false ideas about how the world works does not appear to be taking people seriously either. I want to propose here a different interpretation of the belief in the power of words, which is performative in an Austinian sense but yet also different and which avoids treating this African belief as confused and superstitious.

We noted that in positive confession in an African context, the actual saying of the words is of central importance. It is not about being convinced or using words to convince oneself, but about

the actual uttering of the words, the positive declaring. Similarly, the promises of the prophet speaking into people's lives have already been made by God long before – they are recorded in the Bible – but what matters is that the anointed man of God now speaks those words. It is about the actual uttering of the words, speaking into someone's life. I want to suggest that this is so important because the words when spoken acquire a certain material quality.

Anthropologist Jon Bialecki (2015:96) summarises his colleague Simon Coleman's idea that for Pentecostals, 'there is a sensuous aspect of language, where it is circulated and treated as an almost material thing'. Words are an object in themselves and do not merely describe the world – they are a part of the world. Asamoah-Gyadu (2013:35, [*author's added emphasis*]) observes about African Pentecostals, 'we are dealing with a stream of Christianity that believes very much in the power of the *spoken word*'. And Kenyan theologian John Gallegos (2014:51) explains, 'the "Word of the Lord" is not encountered in the written, static word, but in the spoken "Word of the Lord" delivered by the anointing of the Holy Spirit'. What is central is not words, as such, but the *spoken words*; by being spoken, words become part of the inventory of reality. Scholar of religion Paul Landau (1999:8) remarks about spoken words, '[t]heir reified forms, as detachable signs, possess them, but spoken words themselves are not those signs; they are part of the world they fleetingly exist in'. Words comment on the world but, as *spoken words*, words are themselves part of the world as well.

Austin tried to get philosophy away from looking at language as merely describing the world. Not every sentence we utter is a description of something out there, we also do things with words. This doing things with words has often been interpreted as using words to change something in the world, for example, by those scholars referred to above who say Africans believe in the performative power of words, where they actually meant the perlocutionary force of words. In descriptions, words are like a commentary from the sidelines – they are not part of the world

themselves but they are merely mirroring what happens out there in the real world. In active words, language is still seen as being on the sidelines – words are influencing what happens in the world, but they are themselves still not on the playing field. Firstly, words reflect reality; secondly, words influence what happens in reality – the words ‘Come over here!’ may contribute to a change in someone’s position in the world – but, thirdly, words themselves are also part of the world. Words themselves have a material quality about them. Words that are said cannot be unsaid, however desperately a person may sometimes want to unsay things that he or she has said. Once uttered, the words are themselves part of the reality we have to deal with. If someone says, ‘I am not saying that your hair looks bad’, it has already been said. Words are part of reality.

In psychology, people sometimes speak of the Rumpelstiltskin principle (Van der Geest 2010); if someone is afraid of something, he or she should name it and, thereby, allocate it and deal with it. Naming something helps to diminish one’s fear. Conversely, however, there is sometimes the opposite effect; someone might feel slightly uneasy but once he or she has said that it is *fear* of this or that, it has become a particular fear, it has gained reality. The words make it more real, something that one has to deal with. The words create the fear out of what was merely a slight uneasiness. This may be behind the practice common in Africa to not discuss things people disagree about. By not talking about it, they do not allow it to gain more reality than it has when it is simmering underneath, unmentioned.

Another common practice in Africa that is explained by paying attention to the material quality of words is to never say ‘no’ to a request that has been made. When a person asks someone to do something and they know they cannot or will not do it, what would harm their relationship with that person the most, saying ‘yes, I will do so’ although they know it is not true or saying ‘no’? Considering the material quality of words, saying ‘no’ harms relationships. If someone says ‘yes’ in such a way that the other recognises that they are not actually going to do it, then at least

in the spoken reality, they have not denied this person anything. Words are part of reality too, and we should be careful in what we bring out or do not bring out into the world by saying something.

The idea of positive thinking is that what matters is someone's mindset. Someone's mindset should be positive, and one can use words from the sideline to influence that reality. The African version of positive declaring acknowledges that the mindset is not all that counts; just as important are the words that are spoken themselves. To say 'I am a winner' may or may not change your psychology, but what you have definitely done is to say the words 'I am a winner'.

It has puzzled me that prophecies in Zambia are always positive. Firstly, I cannot imagine someone asking Jeremiah or Amos to speak into their lives; these biblical prophets would surely have found something bad to comment upon. Secondly, I considered prophesying to be a description of the future of someone's life; every life has its ups and downs, so how can it be that the future of these people are always promised to be positive? But the prophetic speaking into someone's life is not descriptive, it is not a sideline commentary on what will happen; the prophetic words have a reality in themselves, 'the prophet said I will be rich'.

An understanding of the material quality of words, understanding that words are not merely reflecting the world and acting upon it from the sidelines but are themselves part of the world, explains to some extent what can be meant by saying that the African religious culture believes in the power of words. Words not only say things or do things, words *are* things – and African religious culture may be more aware of this than people in Europe and the USA are.

## ■ Conclusion

To be a Christian in Africa means to see power in objects, such as anointing oil and anointed pens. To be a Christian in Africa means



to see power in words, spells and prophecies – therefore, seeing power in one’s confessions, they had better be positive – and to see power in the words that a pastor speaks into the life of a believer. It is easy to dismiss such beliefs about power as magical superstition, and many cases will indeed boil down to trickery or superstition, but I have tried to show that speaking of such powers can be genuine and valuable as well.

Many churches distribute anointing oil, which is said to be able to heal people, to bless a house or, when sprinkled over someone’s application letter, to ensure that he or she gets the job. Likewise, anointed pens are handed out to students before their exams, apparently to help them to pass the exams. Such practices may seem strange but are less so, if we compare them with the crowning of a king, the baptism of a ship or the fuss made over the loss of a wedding ring. Taking into account the lessons from Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, we may observe that nobody assumes there is some mysterious power object inside a crown, a bottle of champagne or a wedding ring and that there may very well be people to whom one or more of these practices mean nothing. The power in these objects is the kind of power that belongs to the spirit world; the power in these material objects derives from their extra-material symbolic quality. In the first part of this chapter, I investigated how the power in anointing oil and anointed pens can be interpreted in the same way and how to differentiate this from a superstitious concept of power in things.

People in Africa are also said to believe in the power of words. In the second part of this chapter, I have used the practices of positive confession – what one says will come to pass – and speaking into one’s life – the pastor who can speak good things in one’s life into existence – as examples. Using Austin’s speech-act theory, several scholars have written that people in Africa believe in the performative power of words, but we have seen that, actually, the power assumed in the practices that scholars have in mind is the perlocutionary or causal power of words. This would imply, however, that people in Africa have a superstitious, magical view instead of a symbolic view of power in words.

It is clear that in speaking of the power of words in practices like positive confession or speaking into someone's life, people are not using a logical or symbolic conception of language. I argue, however, that this does not necessarily imply that they use a superstitious, magical concept either. Beyond the logical and the magical view of signs, the belief in the power of words may reflect an awareness of the material quality of words. Words do not only reflect reality and influence reality but are themselves also a part of reality. Words, once spoken, cannot be unspoken; they are part of the reality we have to deal with, having a material reality of their own. I have shown how interpreting the belief in the power of words in Africa not as superstitious but as referring to the material quality of words explains several common practices in Africa, such as the hesitance to say 'no', the fact that the overwhelming majority of prophecies are positive and the fact that positive confession in Africa is more about positive declaring than it is about positive thinking. The belief in the power of things and the power of words may be superstitious, but it does not need to be. It may highlight real aspects of all of our lives – the symbolic quality of things and the material quality of words.

The three chapters that make up the first part of this book have dealt with aspects of the language of faith in Southern Africa that are often strange to outsiders from a Euro-American context. People in Africa regularly speak of a spirit world, which they try to influence and which they assume to be responsible for everything that happens in our ordinary world. Furthermore, people in Africa appear to see power everywhere, such as in things and words, where people from a Euro-American context would not expect it. In this part, I have argued that if one avoids some common but misguided assumptions about language, these aspects of the language of faith in Southern Africa are not as strange as they may seem. In the next part of this book, we will turn to aspects of the language of faith in Southern Africa that are often romanticised, such as the sense of community and the holistic worldview.



## Part Two

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# Community: In society

## ■ Introduction

In Africa there is still community, it is often said. 'Community' is a concept that is used to paint a rosy picture of life in Africa, especially in contrast to the developed world. It is often thought that in Africa, people still care for one another. Rather than Descartes' statement 'I think, therefore I am', in Africa it would be more fitting to say 'I am, because we are' – people are people through other people. The 16th-century British poet John Donne wrote a book entitled *No man is an island*, the likely origin of that same famous statement – if his heirs received a penny for every time this statement was used in a sermon, they would make a good living out of the Zambian sermons alone. Sermons in Africa are sprinkled with these kinds of proverbs about community, like 'I am because we are' or 'united we stand, divided we fall'. Community is considered to be an important, positive identity marker for life in Africa. In Europe and the USA, Africa's sense of community is used to criticise one's own individualistic society; in Africa, the love for community is a source of pride and encouragement.

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Once, in a class in Zambia, I asked what topic would be central to a confession or statement of faith nowadays in the African context. I expected to hear about, for example, the problem of suffering or the meaning of life, but the large majority of the students wanted to write about unity among people, about how all Christians form one community together and how there should be respect, love and cooperation. Tribalism and the divide between the rich and the poor were seen as the major threats to the church. To be one community was the highest value, albeit an endangered value. The community with solidarity, respect and humanity is considered by many to be the treasure of Africa and is the gift that Africa could give to humankind (Boesak 2015[1976]:152).

The Nigerian philosopher Polycarp Ikuenobe (2006), in his study *Philosophical Perspectives on Communalism and Morality in African Traditions*, argues that:

Excluding the colonial and imperialistic factors, which are the major sources of social problems in Africa, for the most part, communities in African cultures are relatively stable and are peaceful *internally*, because of the communal principles and structures, which shaped the dynamics of family and the different ways of life. (p. 308)

Ikuenobe (2006:303) highlights the great value of Africa's concept of community, although he is aware that '[s]ome people may argue that my analysis of communalism in African cultures and my identification of its advantages involves [*sic*] a romanticization of African past', and he admits:

It is pertinent to say that *the whole* of African past may not be that glorious but this does not mean that there were no glorious *parts* of African past. In the same vein, although African communalism has its problems, this does not mean that it does not have its advantages. (p. 303)

Despite Ikuenobe's (2006:308) assurance that he attempts 'not to paint a picture of an absolutely rosy traditional African communal society', in his book he attributes all the negative sides of contemporary society in Africa to traditional communal values and ethos having been 'contaminated or adulterated by the

extreme Western liberal and individualistic values'. In my opinion, Ikuenobe is falling prey to romanticising African cultures here, and his italicised comment that the peacefulness of communities in Africa is an *internal* peacefulness already indicates where the picture might be less rosy – who is included in the community and who not? In this chapter, I will analyse both the advantages and the challenges of the African concept of community.

Different choices and differences in emphasis distinguish community in Africa from the concept of community in Europe or the USA, but this different concept has its own advantages and disadvantages. It has its own appeal and its own risks. To counterbalance the dominant rosy picture of community in Africa, in this chapter, I will especially elaborate on those risks that are unavoidably connected to this concept of community as it is lived in many parts of Africa and beyond. In the first part of the chapter, I will explore the risks involved for society as a whole, and in the second part, I will focus on the consequences of the concept of community in Africa for the individual living within such a community.

## ■ Social harmony as greatest good

The community in Africa has a natural, organic feel about it. People care for one another and help each other without any questions asked – it is simply what people do. Harmony within the community seems to be everyone's top priority. Former Archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu (1999), explains:

Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum* – the greatest good. Anything that subverts, that undermines this sought-after good, is to be avoided like the plague. (pp. 31–32)

An organic community of care and harmony, what more could one wish for? There is indeed much to say for such a caring, harmonious community, but it is not all sunshine. In many ways, community in Africa leads to harmony, friendliness and



genuine community. However, if social harmony is the greatest good, other things no longer can be the greatest good, such as truth and justice, acting morally upright or maintaining institutions.

Once I asked a student to give an example of the great care for community in Africa, and she told about a shopkeeper who was suddenly accused of being a witch. Everybody in the village, even people who never had had anything to do with this shopkeeper, joined together and, as one community, they lynched this supposed witch. Does this show a sense of community? It is a very particular sense of community. To me, it does not feel like a rosy kind of community. Should they not have included the shopkeeper in the community as well? Yet one may argue that the community in the story is more inclusive and harmonious than other kinds of community.

If the community included everyone in the village, simply because they lived there, then, for sure, in a situation such as the one described, social harmony would be very low because both the accusers and the person accused of witchcraft are included in one and the same community. There is surely a deeper kind of harmony among the people who unite to fight the witchcraft in their midst.

In Europe or the USA, although people are not easily accused of witchcraft, people may also feel maltreated by a particular shopkeeper and unite to try to do something about it or claim restitution, for example. It would be strange to join such a claim-group if someone him- or herself is not a victim of the malpractices of this shopkeeper, so in that sense the African community is wider and more inclusive.

I can see some kind of harmony and inclusiveness in the community illustrated by the story, but, to me at least, the story also shows that these are not altogether positive.

## Inclusiveness

Community in Africa has often been described very positively. South African professor of psychology Nhlanhla Mkhize (2008:39)

defines the term 'community' in traditional African beliefs, saying, '[t]he term "community" refers to an organic relationship between individuals'. There is not a formal but a natural connection between people, and through this organic link the needs of one person are felt by everyone else in the community, '[a] sense of community exists if people are mutually responsive to one another's needs' (Mkhize 2008:39). According to economic anthropologist Karl Polanyi (1968:163), this organic sense of community solves many socio-economic problems, because '[t]he individual in primitive society is not threatened by starvation unless the community as a whole is in like predicament'. Among Africans, he (Polanyi 1968:163) says, 'whoever needs assistance receives it unquestioningly'. Ikuenobe (2006:296), in his description of community as a treasure of Africa, states that '[t]here is a general attitude of caring and the willingness to help'. And ethicist Benezet Bujo (2010) explains that this is the case because:

This community forms an organic whole. [...] It is not based on some kind of contract, but rather on deep bonds rooted in a covenant. The covenant is generally grounded in a 'natural' blood relationship with extended kin. (p. 80)

Someone is not part of a community through formal rules or contracts, but through natural, organic relationships such as family ties. He adds that in the African community, one does not even need to be able to express and assert oneself. Those who cannot or cannot yet speak are nonetheless part of this warm, comforting community.

Many authors highlight how the inclusive character of the African concept of community goes even further. The Kenyan theologian Laurenti Magesa (2010) states:

'Community' in African indigenous thought is inclusive, embracing the total of creation: living human beings, the 'living dead' or ancestors, the yet-to-be-born, and also tribal land and property. The individual stands, morally and spiritually, before and in the midst of the totality of this community. (p. 71)

The community goes beyond merely the people present; it includes people from the past and the future and even the physical

environment. That is the community of which an African is a part. Mkhize (2008:38) calls this 'a holistic conception of life, cosmic unity entails a connection between God, ancestors, animals, plants and inanimate objects, and everything that is created'. In the African community, all reality forms one harmonious whole.

Black theologian Bonganjalo Goba (cited in Parratt 1995) connects this concept of community with the way in which the people of Israel lived, united and rooted in a covenant:

As in Israel the concept of corporate personality manifests itself in everyday relationships, so also in Africa most communities are held together by a web of kinship relations, and within these relationships every form of evil that a person suffers, whether it be moral or natural evil, is believed to be caused by a member of the community. (p. 93)

Ghanaian theologian Kwesi Dickson (1984) makes the same comparison:

The African view shares something with the Israelite conception: the land, in African as well as Israelite thought, is the basis of group consciousness. Not only is the land not to be defiled, but it also plays a part in the African's awareness of group consciousness. (p. 165)

The land is part of the community or, rather, Dickson (1984:165) says, '[t]he land, then, was the basis of the people's identity'. These statements may stretch the point a bit, both in the case of Israel and in the case of Africa, but the Holy Land as a focal point is very important in the Bible, and during conferences of the Association of Theological Institutions in Southern and Central Africa, I have come across several papers (in particular from Zimbabwe) highlighting the importance of the land, whatever the theme of that conference may be. The land holds the community together and connects the people with their forefathers and with those who will come after them. Being in that place together is what makes the community. The land is not merely one entity among others that make up the community, but the land is what brings these specific entities – people, ancestors, nature and so on – together into one organic unity.

Everyone and everything is included or, rather, could be included. To begin with, people will always find themselves having

been raised, formed and moulded by such a community. Mkhize (2008) states:

In traditional African thought, human beings are born into a human society and hence the communitarian and concrete (as opposed to abstract) view of the self [...] Personhood is defined in relation to community. (p. 39)

Nonetheless, in order to remain included, one has to allow the community to continue moulding oneself, one's ideas and one's conscience. Ethicist Bujo (2010:85) notes, '[i]ndividuals only become persons if they do not isolate themselves but act together with the entire community'. The community is inclusive and forms one big organic unity based purely on living on this soil, but, within this community, people are obliged to allow being included. The community can include everyone and everything, but individuals can resist such an inclusion. The community forces individuals into line. The elders of the localised community as the custodians of its practices and values safeguard the inclusion of everyone in the organic whole, for example, through the practice of the palaver.

Bujo (2010:82) defines palaver as 'the traditional council that deals with community matters'. At a palaver, every individual is allowed to speak his or her mind. As was already mentioned, even people who are not able to speak belong to the community of the palaver. Bujo (2010:84) states, '[i]n Africa, the palaver is to embrace everybody and to establish meaning even through the symbolic actions and gestures of those who lack the standard level of language'. Everybody is a part of the discussions concerning all issues that concern the community and the palaver is not finished until everyone agrees on the matter. Palavers are used to re-establish the community after a crisis or when there is the threat of a crisis. Decisions are taken as one organic whole. Palavers intend to realign everyone in the community, making sure that everyone moves in the same direction and shares the same common values. Congolese political scientist Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba (1985) states:

The palaver requires of and provides to each community member the right to carry out, and the obligation to be subjected to, *an integral critique* of/by everyone without exception. It inaugurates, if

only temporarily, an egalitarian collective dictatorship (=communal organic centralism). (p. 12)

Everybody can and has to speak their mind, but, in the end, everyone has to agree as well. To be included in the end, everyone needs to submit to the general feeling of the group as voiced and represented by the elders of the community, during the special occasions of palavers and in day-to-day life.

Bujo (2010:86) explains, '[t]he process of subjecting an individual's conscience to regular evaluation by the elders effectively "normalizes" it, and it becomes part of the collective communal conscience'. The price of inclusion is to allow one's conscience to be *normalised* and to submit to a collective dictatorship or indoctrination, as Ikuenobe (2006) notes:

This kind of [*mora*/] attitude is something that one must acquire on the basis of indoctrination, imitation, experience, and rational understanding. With the example of my own experience, I would say that I was initially indoctrinated into the communal ethos or values, and I imitated other people who behaved in this way. (p. 299)

Within the inclusive African concept of community, the community itself forms the central frame of reference for one's moral stance. The community itself becomes one's director and counsellor as Kenyan theologian Benjamin Kiriswa (2002) notes in his description of pastoral counselling in Africa:

Everything revolved around the community where human relationships, conduct and moral integrity were *constantly moulded, checked and controlled*. In cases where there were misunderstandings or broken relationships that could lead to distress or sickness, the community determined the process of guidance and counselling. The *community became the 'counsellor', 'healer' and 'advisor'*. (p. 26)

The community has the final say in right and wrong.

Kiriswa (2002) observes a problem with this, however:

African traditional counselling is unique in that it is an affair between the individual and the community and *counselling sessions are public*. Too much emphasis is laid on the role of the community at the expense of the individual's freedom and responsibility. (p. 104)

If the community has the final say in right and wrong, then an individual's freedom and moral responsibility are sacrificed. Truth and truth-finding may likewise suffer if too much emphasis is placed on the community as the final court of appeal in moral issues. Caribbean ethicist John A.I. Bewaji (cited in Bewaji & Ramose 2003), for example, goes as far as to claim that:

It is clear that part of the problem that has destroyed the African moral fabric is the presumption of innocence till proven guilty, deriving from the idea of a longsuffering deity of Christendom and the elevation of individual rights to the detriment of social and communal rights to peaceful existence! (p. 399)

If the community feels that someone has done wrong, then this person has done wrong, irrespective of what his or her own conscience says or what can be proven. The price for the inclusiveness of the African community is that one cannot step outside of it, either by taking a private differing stance of conscience or by requiring external, objective proof. Anthropologist Robert Thornton proposes to refer to this as the burden of Ubuntu. Ubuntu can be translated as humanness. Former archbishop Desmond Tutu (1999:34) called Ubuntu 'a central feature of the African *Weltanschauung*'. A human being is not primarily an individual, but he or she is primarily part of a community. The concept is connected to the ideas of community and harmony. Thornton (2017) writes:

The pressure to conform to the principles of equivalence, jealousy, respect and suffering make Ubuntu, or the notion of 'African community', unbearable. We might call this the 'unbearable burden of Ubuntu'. (p. 147)

Everyone has to conform. The community forces everyone into line.

Obviously, everywhere exist cases where someone is clearly guilty but it cannot be proven, so the culprit goes unpunished. In a community that treats social harmony as its greatest good, however, this would not happen – if everyone knows someone is guilty, the person will be punished whether it can be formally proven or not. It is easy to imagine cases where this calms the community and comforts the victims, but it is a high price to pay

if one has to sacrifice truth or at least the ability to make a distinction between what the community *thinks* is true and what *is* true, in order to calm the community. The inclusiveness of the African community implies that the harmony of that community is valued above everything else. But if social harmony is the greatest good, then truth and the formal procedures required to investigate truth may have to be cast aside.

## ■ Harmony of the community as a moral principle

What does a moral life look like when the harmony of the community is considered to be the central value? In 2007, Thaddeus Metz, an American philosophy professor at the University of Johannesburg, published an article entitled 'Toward an African Moral Theory' in which he sought to construct an African theory of right action based on the concept of Ubuntu. In day-to-day life in Zambia, I have never heard anyone using the word 'Ubuntu' nor any of its cognates, but as a theoretical concept it refers to the often discussed positive evaluation of community in Africa.

Metz (2007:n.p.) considers Desmond Tutu's work as 'the most promising theoretical formulation of an African ethics'. Tutu used the African concept of Ubuntu to defend the ideas of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Inspired by Tutu's work, Metz (2007:334) defines Ubuntu as a basic moral value, stating, '[a]n action is right just insofar as it produces harmony and reduces discord; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to develop community'. He adds that the harmony that is sought after in African ethics implies a combination of emphasis on an identity shared by members of a community and caring for other people out of goodwill. If Ubuntu is some people's basic moral value, then in all their actions they strive for an inclusive, harmonious community where people care for one another.

In his article, Metz lists 12 moral intuitions that, according to him, any ensuing African moral theory should be able to account for, as they are deemed uncontroversial by Africans. According to

Metz (2007:338), ‘both Westerners and friends of *ubuntu* equally hold the following to be wrong: (roughly) killing, raping, lying, stealing, breaking promises and discriminating’. conversely – and this interests us here (Metz 2007):

[M]any friends of *ubuntu*, but comparatively fewer Westerners, uncontroversially find the following to be morally impermissible to some degree: decision-making in the face of dissensus, primarily retributive punishment, intensely competitive economics, a rights-based allocation of wealth, isolation from a community’s way of life, and failure to procreate through marriage. (p. 339)

From this list, we can see that an African moral outlook based on the concept of Ubuntu is uncomfortable with majority votes; we see that Africans would rather keep on talking until everyone agrees. Reconciliation outweighs retribution – as is illustrated in the already mentioned Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa – and cooperation is valued above competition in Ubuntu-shaped societies.

Many of these particular moral judgements that Metz in his list connects to Ubuntu have bearings on well-known features of life in Africa; overt politeness, indirect communication, the importance of honour and the importance of chatting and relationships are all visible in the moral judgements that Metz mentions. Metz’s definition of Ubuntu and his list of moral intuitions bring together many of the characteristic features of life in Africa.

The first time I discussed Metz’s article in a class in Lusaka, students started to explain and emphasise that they as Africans really shared the moral intuitions about harmony of the community as the ultimate value. The following years I tried a different approach, adding many more possible moral intuitions and letting them choose from the long list those they shared and those they did not share. The results were considerably different. The condemnation of all the practices that are morally condemned in both Africa and the developed world received full support from everyone; however, the specifically African moral intuitions required more nuance. Only about half of the students opposed using punishment as retribution, instead of punishment purely in



as far as it supports the wellbeing of the community. Hardly anyone opposed voting as a means of making decisions, distributing goods based on what people earned or competition in the marketplace. When asked about these issues, many students said that these moral intuitions had changed over time – their grandparents would definitely have had a different view.

There was one specifically African or Ubuntu moral intuition that a large majority of the students shared unambiguously, and that was that it is wrong to isolate oneself from the group. If the community engages in sports activities, it is morally wrong to stay at home and read a book just because someone prefers to be alone. It is wrong to separate oneself from the community – at least in theory. During most official sports activities at the university, only half of the students show up. Yet, it shows something about the moral importance of the community in African society that, in theory, isolating oneself from the community is unanimously considered as morally wrong.

## Hiding behind the community

If the social harmony of the community is the central value, what consequences follow from this for everyday life? Let us consider the case of a churchgoer who is accused of witchcraft and then denied access to Holy Communion. Is it morally justified or not to deny access to someone because of such an accusation? All kinds of moral, religious and cultural arguments could (and should!) be examined in a discussion about this situation. But what if someone brought up Ubuntu or community as a moral value to determine whether the denial was justified or not?

Ubuntu is often presented as descriptive rather than moral in nature, namely, human beings cannot exist as individuals apart from the community of which they are a part. Community or Ubuntu comes first – individuality is derived from it. I guess people present Ubuntu in this way to show that it is natural and not exotic to stress the importance of the community or of Ubuntu. When in explaining Ubuntu one refers to something

factual, however, its moral value is diminished to 'Ubuntu or charity is good or important' is no longer an absolute judgement of value but a mere rephrasing of a statement of fact. The fact that community is important does not justify the judgement of value that community should be regarded as important, in the sense of *morally* valuable.

Someone could say, 'witchcraft is proof of someone's lack of Ubuntu, therefore he can no longer be part of the community' or 'respected and powerful people in the community would not appreciate the presence of this churchgoer, therefore to maintain social harmony in the community, access should be denied' or 'Ubuntu means that every human being should be accepted, therefore the exclusion is morally wrong'. But is the concept of Ubuntu or community used as a genuinely moral concept in these arguments? I will discuss four ways in which Ubuntu can be used in a less than moral way. In these cases, the concept is misused to hide behind the community.

## Giving in to power

Firstly, Ubuntu can be used cynically. In the case of the alleged witch who is denied access to Holy Communion, a minister may accept this exclusion because she knows that if churchgoers were made to choose they would listen to powerful people within their own community rather than to the pastor who, most often, is coming from somewhere else – however sound her moral arguments may be. The minister may use Ubuntu to justify for herself that she does not even begin such a moral discussion. She uses Ubuntu to refer to the present power constellation within the community. As a misuse of Ubuntu, this is a cynical, cowardly, conservative and resigned use of Ubuntu. Ubuntu is not used as a genuine moral concept, but rather is used as a concept to prevent morality from taking off at all, 'moral arguments will not bring about any real changes, so do not even go there'.

This use of Ubuntu values power more than goodness. Philosopher Rush Rhees argued against the idea that someone

should submit to God because he is more powerful than the devil – if sheer power is the only difference between God and the devil, Rhees (1997:36) hopes to have the decency to say ‘go ahead and blast me away then’ to this God. Decency is a moral term, whereas power – and Ubuntu as connected only to power within a community – is not.

## ■ Looking for the best policy

Secondly, Ubuntu can be used to describe the desired end of moral actions. A minister may use as a maxim, ‘if people act morally, a harmonious community, Ubuntu, will be achieved’. In the case of Holy Communion, this minister attempts to estimate which action would most probably lead to a harmonious community. She may argue that the churchgoer who is accused of witchcraft should be excluded in order to prevent agitation within the community. Another minister may argue that the churchgoer who is accused of witchcraft should be accepted for in the long run this would lead to a more welcoming, harmonious community. Because of Ubuntu one minister says ‘yes’ or because of Ubuntu the other one says ‘no’. However, in both cases they use Ubuntu as a factual description of a desired state of affairs, rather than as a moral concept itself. The minister who argues ‘yes’ and the minister who argues ‘no’ have a factual, empirical disagreement rather than a moral disagreement. They disagree about what is the best way to a given end. The one minister does not reach another approach because she has obtained another moral outlook, but only because she assesses the factual results of certain actions differently.

A minister who introduces Ubuntu as the desired end in a discussion on excluding a churchgoer, who is accused of witchcraft from Holy Communion, hides her genuinely moral stand. Ubuntu as a desired state of affairs is not a moral category properly. It is a misuse of Ubuntu as a genuinely moral concept. The two misuses of Ubuntu that have been discussed so far – Ubuntu interpreted as cynical or as a factual end – derive from

presenting Ubuntu as a descriptive term, rather than a moral term. The next two possible misuses of Ubuntu are connected to the community as getting in the way of making genuinely moral decisions.

## ■ Avoiding punishment

Ubuntu can be used in such a way that it appears immature. Listening to the community is the way to learn morality. A child (or someone who is new within a certain community) has to rely on what the community thinks in order to learn to judge accordingly. However, when someone grows up, he learns to judge for himself. He has to learn to take responsibility for himself, rather than refer to the community. When someone would refer to what the community, in the guise of Ubuntu, says, to claim something is good or evil, he seems to have remained immature.

In his classic description of African theology, John Mbiti (1990:202, referring to Evans-Pritchard) states that for the Nuer-people ‘something is evil because it is punished [by God]; it is not punished because it is evil’. This looks similar to the way a child learns; at first, he learns to avoid punishment, and later he learns to judge what is good and evil by himself. Philosopher Simone Weil attacked the idea of God as a kind of policeman in the sky; if someone avoids evil only because otherwise God will punish her, she does not act morally but prudently (cf. Weil 2002:171). A child may learn morals this way, but at some point she has to learn to act morally of her own accord.

The difference between immature and mature morality is present in African morality as well. A child learns to use concepts like Ubuntu by listening to his family. As a grown-up and a mature moral person, he will use these concepts for himself. The mature, genuinely moral concept of Ubuntu is related to ideas like ‘listening to your family’, but the *content* of this mature concept should not be conflated with the *form* moral education of children – in Africa and in Europe or the USA – takes.

People in Africa may learn to behave morally through, what political scientist Ali A. Mazrui (1966:137–138) calls, ‘the African fear of being rejected or disapproved of by the community’ and the underlying ‘individual’s need for communal belonging’. However, as long as this fear and this need remain the focus, the action is not yet a *moral* action, and the person does not yet take personal moral responsibility.

## ■ Avoiding shame and dishonour

Ubuntu, as the opinion of the community, is sometimes used in a way that seems to obscure personal responsibility entirely. Laurenti Magesa (2010) seems to do so when he claims that ‘[i]mmersion into the life of the world through participation in your community is the very core of African indigenous spirituality and morality’, and concludes from this that in the traditional spirituality of Africa:

The question is not directly what God wants of me, but what the community through our tradition expects of me. In wrongdoing I do not stand guilty before God, first of all; rather I stand ashamed before or in the midst of my community, one that is directly injured on account of my behaviour. (p. 71)

Kenyan theologian John Galgalo (2012:25) notes that a commonplace idea in Africa is that ‘what is right with the community must be right by God’. The opinions of the community count as the opinions of God and, therefore, what makes something wrong is that within the community it brings shame and dishonour.

Stealing in itself is not wrong as long as it does not hurt the community. It is wrong to tell people that someone of one’s own community steals because this hurts the community. However wrong a chief or manager is, people should never criticise them, for then and only then the entire community is put to shame. Shame is more important than guilt; honour is more important than truth. I would argue that this discourse of Ubuntu and shame is parasitic on a genuinely moral discourse. They presuppose moral

values but are not moral values themselves. For, if it brings shame on a community when it becomes public that someone is a thief, somewhere stealing in itself must be regarded as wrong – otherwise, why would people bother about theft?

In the case of the minister who has to decide whether or not she accepts the exclusion of someone accused of witchcraft from Holy Communion, people may discuss what it does to the image of the community when it becomes public that an alleged witch participated or was excluded. There is nothing remarkable about such discussions. However, to suggest that there is not anything beyond the image, to suggest that only honour is important and truth is irrelevant, that is misusing the concept of Ubuntu. The moral image of the community presupposes the actual moral behaviour of the community. The honour of a community presupposes the actual respectability of the community. These are not factual or moral statements, but it is a matter of logic or understanding. Otherwise, we would not know what words like ‘image’ and ‘honour’ mean. These words presuppose and are parasitic on what is actually the case and on true respectability. Genuinely moral discourse discusses these latter realities.

People may discuss whether or not it is opportune to make public some mistake, but these are discussions about policy. What is a mistake and what is not a mistake is the subject of moral discussions. If someone uses Ubuntu in a *moral* discussion, questions involving policy and shame are irrelevant, as are questions involving the best way to some factual end or power constellations.

Harmony of the community can be used as a moral principle, but it can easily be used to disguise the refusal to take moral responsibility as well by hiding behind the community. If social harmony is the greatest good, then one risks losing the ability to distinguish between ‘doing the right thing’ and ‘doing what is the right thing according to the community’. But what is this community?

## ■ The concrete community

Former President of the USA Barack Obama's (1995) grandfather in Kenya used to say:

The white man alone is like an ant. He can be easily crushed. But like an ant, the white man works together. His nation, his business – these things are more important to him than himself. He will follow his leaders and not question orders. Black men are not like this. Even the most foolish black man thinks he knows better than the wise man. That is why the black man will always lose. (p. 417)

The white man, Obama's grandfather says, works for his nation or his business, for an institution or an idea. For him, the community is something that goes beyond the concrete people present. He is willing to take the risk of being crushed personally because the cause for which he works is greater than he himself or even greater than all the people currently present. Obama's grandfather contrasts this with the way black people treat community. Even if community in Africa includes ancestors and those yet-to-be-born, it is still thought of in terms of concrete people and not as an abstract idea or institution.

If we take, for example, a local congregation, then what is the community we should care about? Should we care about 'the congregation of Hatfield' or should we care about John, Pete and Mary who right now happen to make up the congregation of Hatfield and maybe their future children? Is the community this collection of individuals or is it some kind of idea that goes beyond these particular people?

The first president of Zambia, Kenneth Kaunda (1973), suggests that he would opt for the community as a collection of concrete individuals:

No earthly idol, whether the state, the family or anything else, ought to take priority over respect for mankind. [...] No injunctions of old creeds, religious, political, social or cultural, are valid if they diminish Man. (p. 103)

The value of a person should never be diminished; therefore, no ideas of state, family or congregation should ever be placed

beyond actual people. Kaunda (1973:103) adds, '[t]he life of Man is to be held sacred, preserved, ennobled and uplifted'. No individual should ever be placed below some abstract idea.

Kaunda (1973:104) continues, '[a]ll this I believe with an intensity that moves me to terrible anger when I see Man misused, degraded and abandoned to the mercy of impersonal forces'. An impersonal force – such as, for example, the idea of 'the congregation of Hatfield' – should never take precedence over the actual people that make up a community. Kaunda (1973:104) considers this to be Africa's contribution to morality the world over, 'Africa's gift to world culture must be in the field of Human Relations'. In the traditional communities in Africa (Kaunda 1973):

Human need was the supreme criterion of behaviour. The hungry stranger could, without penalty, enter the garden of a village and take, say, some peanuts, a bunch of bananas, a mealie cob or a cassava plant root to satisfy his hunger. His action only became theft if he took more than was necessary to satisfy his needs. (p. 104)

It should not be about property rights or distribution of goods based upon who has earned what but the concrete people that make up our human communities should be placed at the centre. This is what Kaunda (1973) calls 'Zambian humanism', which has often been treated as an elaboration of Ubuntu as a moral principle, as discussed above:

The high valuation of MAN and respect for human dignity which is a legacy of our tradition should not be lost in the new Africa. However 'modern' and 'advanced' in a Western sense this young nation of Zambia may become, we are fiercely determined that this humanism will not be obscured. (p. 22)

The social harmony between concrete people should be treated as the greatest good in this concept of community. Concrete people – MAN – should always be considered above abstract ideas. A human being should not be willing to risk being crushed for the sake of a nation or a business or an idea because, as human beings themselves, they are worth more than all these abstract notions.



According to the African concept of community, one should care more about the actual people of a community than about the community's idea that they happen to represent. Just like I did with Metz's moral intuitions about Ubuntu, I decided to try this out and see whether this matched with the choices my students in Lusaka would make. I presented five dilemmas where the students had to choose between the community as a set of concrete individuals or the community as an ongoing, abstract idea. Imagine you arrive newly as a pastor in a congregation and you find that they have six mangoes. You can eat them or plant them. All the members of your congregation want to eat the mangoes because they are hungry, planting requires valuable water and they themselves will never eat the mangoes from the trees they are planting. Yet, two-thirds of the students would decide to plant. Next, you notice a hidden conflict smouldering in your congregation, namely, do you leave it to avoid conflict or will you force people to talk about it? A large majority decides to talk about it. Most students opt for renewing the church council from time to time, even if it causes discord. Yet, when a new songbook has to be bought, they would opt for the vernacular one the majority prefers, just like most students would opt for keeping the traditional name of a congregation if the majority opposes a modernisation.

The outcome is not clear. Sometimes the students follow the opinion of the people present, while at other times they seem to see it as their task to serve the community in the sense of something more abstract. Social harmony can sometimes be sacrificed if it is good for the congregation as an idea. Yet, Obama's grandfather and Kaunda bring out an important consequence of the traditional concept of community in Africa – if social harmony is the greatest good, then concrete individuals cannot be sacrificed for abstract institutions or ideas. People cannot be ants. People are treated as more important than truth and procedures to discover truth, more important than acting morally and doing the right thing in a higher sense, more important than a nation or congregation or project as an idea. This is a wonderful thing in that it bestows great dignity upon people, but it involves risks as well.

I will shortly discuss two of these risks. Firstly, hospitality may betray 'immediatism' and, secondly, justice may lose out to reconciliation.

Hospitality is often seen as a central aspect of the African concept of community. Kenyan theologian Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator (2008:87) in his *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* speaks of 'the African experience of community and family life, which promotes the values of hospitality, sharing, solidarity, welcoming, and so on'. During our six years in Zambia, we have often experienced the welcoming hospitality of people in Africa for ourselves. People who sometimes have so little themselves ungrudgingly share what they have. Yet, there can be another side to such hospitality as well. In the novel *Lower River*, Paul Theroux describes someone who after many years visits the small Malawian village again where he used to volunteer as a teacher. The village has not changed much and he is warmly welcomed, but, after a while, he feels that what is actually happening is that he is being fleeced. He is kept in the village until the last bit of usefulness is drained out of him. Looking around, he observes that this has been done before (Theroux 2012):

That seemed a feature of life in the country: to welcome strangers, let them live out their fantasy of philanthropy – a school, an orphanage, a clinic, a welfare center, a malaria eradication program, or a church; and then determine if in any of this effort and expense there was a side benefit – a kickback, a bribe, an easy job, a free vehicle. If the scheme didn't work – and few of them did work – whose fault was that? Whose idea was it in the first place? (p. 113)

Outsiders are welcomed hospitably in the community; whatever project they propose is greeted enthusiastically but, in the end, all that seems to matter is what people can get out of it. They care little about education, Euro-American medicine or Christianity, but only about what they can get out of it if they play along. Anthropologist Adam Ashforth's friend Madumo visits his village and finds himself in a similar situation (Ashforth 2000):

'I mean, it's a jackpot for these people [*in the village*]', said Madumo when giving me his account of the feast. 'You know, when you're from Joburg people just can't understand that you don't have money.'

They thought that I'm working and I was there to give them money and what what. So my cousins there, they were wanting everything. Money for cigarettes, beers. I had to leave those shoes, the white ones. The other pair of jeans. My red jersey. They all wanted something out of me, those cousins'. (p. 237)

The hospitality is there; people are genuinely glad to receive visitors. But they do not care about higher ideals or even about something as abstract as family ties – at least, not in any other way than to what extent they can benefit from it. Journalist Anton Harber, in a book on life in the Johannesburg township of Diepsloot, encounters the designation 'immediatism' to describe this approach to life. People working for a Non-governmental Organisation (NGO) active in Diepsloot tell him (Harber 2011):

[T]here was extreme individualism – with people just wanting to hustle something for themselves – and sometimes a mob response, reacting with aggression as a group when there was a difficulty'; also what they called 'immediatism' – the tendency to do something with immediate benefit – like help oneself to T-shirts – without thinking of the consequences. (p. 208)

The community that exists is not some abstract idea but only the community of the mob, as the mob that lynched the shopkeeper mentioned above. To care only about people, and not about ideas, results in a lifestyle where all that matters is how one can get something out of something or someone immediately. People from the NGOs are welcomed not because the people from Diepsloot share the long-term hopes and ideals of these outsiders, but merely for the immediate benefits they try to reap. The idea of community as consisting of concrete people easily turns hospitality into such a kind of immediatism.

Another risk of this concept of community has to do with reconciliation and can be shown by the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. In defending the work of this commission, Desmond Tutu made the concept of Ubuntu well known worldwide. The idea of the commission was that offenders of the apartheid regime could get amnesty in return for telling the truth about their trespasses. This way the new South Africa was to be reconciled and could start with a clean sheet. Tutu linked the

emphasis on reconciliation and the future of the entire community to the African concept of Ubuntu. It was choosing the future over fairness, choosing the concrete people who had to build up the new country over the abstract idea of justice. There is something beautiful about this, but it asks one to pay a price as well.

The idea of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission sounds very noble and good, good for everyone, not just for people in Africa. Does it even need the concept of Ubuntu to support it? Some people have accused Tutu of using the African concept of Ubuntu only to wrap un-African, Christian values and the UN Declaration of Human Rights, as a marketing strategy to sell these values to his fellow Africans (Wilson 2001:13). I think these people do not do justice to what is remarkable about the idea behind the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Amnesty can be a way to move on, to maintain the community and harmony within it. It is a live option. It produces harmony and reduces discord, as Metz put it in his definition of Ubuntu. It is a way to keep the community together, and without the community we would not be who we are. Opting for amnesty could be a cynical submission to powers present in society – the oppressors may still have economic power, but it need not be cynical. Opting for amnesty could be a pragmatic choice, it could be immature or a way to prevent dishonour – it might even be all of these for some people, but this need not be the case. I believe in the genuinely moral motivation of Desmond Tutu to propagate and chair South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Yet, it was and is clearly not the only way conceivable.

In his memoir in which he focusses on his work as Chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Tutu (1999) writes:

*Ubuntu* means that in a real sense even supporters of apartheid were victims of the vicious system which they implemented and which they supported so enthusiastically. Our humanity was intertwined. (p. 35)

This is not expressing un-African, Christian values wrapped up in an African concept. Tutu calls the perpetrators 'victims'. In a way, he says that they are innocent. This may help to build a new

society – *No Future without Forgiveness*, as Tutu's book (1999) is called – but hesitancy in accepting this approach is understandable as well. Both victim and oppressor may feel there is something wrong about just letting pass the evil that has been done. I wonder whether the approach of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission takes both the pain of the victim and the responsibility of the perpetrator seriously. To grant amnesty to the oppressors may be a way to declare them to be of unsound mind; they cannot be held responsible for their actions. From a different moral outlook, one might consider punishment even as a way of showing respect. To take someone seriously, to respect his responsibility, may be considered to be more valuable than social harmony; the approach of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission seems to endanger these important things.

The first part of this chapter showed in different ways that sacrificing truth, goodness and institutions may sometimes be too high a price to pay. The mob that attacked the shopkeeper accused of witchcraft, mentioned above, may have been an organic, internally harmonious whole, but proper procedures to establish whether the shopkeeper really did something wrong were forfeited. People in the mob were not free to make their own decisions on what was the right thing to do. They had to follow the general feeling of the group if they wanted to remain included in the community. The feelings of the concrete individuals who made up the mob clearly outweighed the abstract idea of 'the village' as a community, which might be in danger if the shopkeeper can be lynched without due process. Yet, within the community of concrete people, there is a certain harmony and togetherness. However, in the next section of this chapter, it will be shown that living in this harmonious, organic community may not be as pleasant and easy as it sounds.

## ■ Vulnerable individuals

What is it to live as an individual in the kind of community that has been described in this chapter so far? Firstly, I will explore what it means if, as is often the case in Africa, the community is

not based upon individuals but, the other way around, the individuals derive their very being from the community. This different concept of the individual implies a particular vulnerability of people. Secondly, it often puts immense pressure on individuals. It is the community that decides for people what is right and what is wrong. Thirdly, the continuous group pressure to comply with the values and feelings of the community leads to a tendency to keep checking each other and be suspicious of one another. In this way, individuals are so closely connected yet still make up a community of people who are always prepared to find out that one's neighbour does not truly belong to the community after all. It becomes a community of strangers. In the final section of this chapter, I will use an example to show the choices made in African communities compared to those in Europe or the USA have their own advantages and disadvantages, their own appeal and their own risks for the individuals living in these communities.

## ■ Exposed individuals

In 2001, the late South African philosopher Augustine Shutte wrote *Ubuntu, An Ethic for a New South Africa*, as a sequel to his *Philosophy for Africa* (1993). Shutte responds to the so-called 'moral vacuum' in South Africa after apartheid and argues that the African concept of Ubuntu can help here. He (Shutte 2001) begins by exploring the metaphysical background of Ubuntu:

Reality, in traditional African thought, is not seen as a world of things but as a field of forces interacting. In this universal field humanity occupies the central place. Each person is a focus of shifting forces, changing as they change, existing only as part of the different relationships that bind us to others. (p. 12)

In the way of thinking common in Europe and the USA, people tend to look at the world as a collection of things and persons within time and space, whereas the relationships between them are seen as secondary. In African thought, it is the other way around. Things and persons are only secondarily derived from the field of relationships and interactions.

Shutte (2001) continues:

European culture has taught us to see the self as something private, hidden *within* our bodies. [...] The African image is very different: the self is *outside* the body, present and open to all. This is because the self is the result and expression of all the forces acting upon us. It is not a thing, but the sum total of all the interacting forces. (pp. 22-23)

In African thought, the self is not a kind of thing; it is a focal point within a field of shifting forces. Shutte (2001:23) mentions 'the African idea of persons: persons exist only in relation to other persons'. He (Shutte 2001:n.p.) relates this to the famous African saying that is referred to in every text about Ubuntu, 'a person is a person through persons'.

Taking into account the metaphysical background of Ubuntu that Shutte outlined, it is clear that this saying is not just an exaggeration or a matter of speech. A person is not just a person through other persons, because without other persons someone would be pitiful or reprehensible or something else. Without other persons, he would not be a person at all! As Christian Gade (2012:492, referring to Ncgoya) explains about the worldview implied by Ubuntu, '[t]his worldview advocates a profound sense of interdependence and emphasizes that our true human potential can only be realized in partnership with others'. Connections to other persons are not added extras to an individual; an individual is an individual only because of these connections. In Europe or the USA, someone may be praised for relating so well to other people. In doing so, it is presupposed that he could have refrained from these relationships. In African culture, without relationships, someone literally would not be someone.

It follows that good relationships, community and harmony within it, are even more important within African cultures than they are in cultures from Europe or the USA. Naturally, Africans regard an action as right just insofar as it produces harmony and reduces discord within the community as was discussed above, for without the community someone would not exist. In African cultures, a person would not even be someone without

good relationships. Therefore, taking care of good relationships, community and harmony within it – taking care of Ubuntu – is not just recommendable, but it is a matter of life and death. Risking good relationships within the community would be risking one's own existence. Individual freedom and self-expression may be valuable, but if good relationships do not exist, someone's self does not exist, and they would be worthless.

The fundamental importance of relationships in communities such as those in Africa can also be seen in the practices surrounding giving. In African societies, if a person gives something to someone, it is not about the value, but it is about becoming part of a community. In Europe and the USA, if a person gives something to someone, he or she may expect something of similar value in return some day. The value of the gifts is important. Money can be described as a way of registering the gifts – material gifts, labour or time – people give to each other. To have money means to have the right to receive a certain amount of gifts. The ideal is that the amount that everybody receives and gives is in balance. Giving takes place between pre-existing individuals.

Anthropologist Marcel Mauss (2002) described a different practice of giving, which he named a gift economy. In the gift, as Mauss describes it, people are not merely trading a commodity, but they invest something of themselves. The gifts are an expression of the relationship, and a collection of such relationships makes up a community. Within this community, people who are in need are being helped by people who are able to provide for others. What matters is not the value of what someone gives or receives; neither is it important that there is a balance between what someone gives and receives. All that matters is that everybody within the community who is in need is helped. A gift creates a relationship of mutual indebtedness.

Ikuenobe (2006) states:

In most African cultures, when one has a problem, one is not likely to hide it or try to deal with it solely by oneself. Usually, you tell family, friends and neighbours, and everyone will come to your aid and offer help. (p. 294)



In most instances in Europe and the USA, helping someone out is praiseworthy; it is going beyond what is required. However, in the African concept of culture, it is simply part of being within that community, it is automatic. Once, during our time in Zambia, we were about to take a trip with some colleagues, and there were allowances provided to pay for our lunches. Our Zambian colleagues requested to be given that money when we had actually started off, otherwise a relative with a broken fridge or a similar problem might pass by before we left and the money would have to be given to him. Helping others in that way is not something noble, but it is simply unavoidable. Being part of a community is regarded as more important than to be involved in individual matters, however important they may be.

Through his discussion of fundamental moral intuitions, Metz showed *how* many of the different characteristics of life in Africa are connected by the underlying moral value of Ubuntu or community. The metaphysical background that Shutte outlined clearly shows *why* Ubuntu or community is important for being a person or individual in Africa. Without the community there would not even be an individual. Within the community there is a 'mutuality of self-creation', as anthropologist Robert Thornton (2017:3) calls it in his description of traditional African healing practices in South Africa. Thornton (2017) elaborates the metaphysical view of Ubuntu we saw in Shutte:

All persons stand not merely in relation to others – as friends, enemies, kin, spouses, colleagues and even strangers – but are also inescapably exposed to each other. It is this exposure or vulnerability to others that can ultimately weaken life itself and lead to illness, disease, misfortune and death. Each person is therefore an 'exposed being'. (p. 3)

The relationships make and continue to make a person a person and, therefore, a person is completely dependent upon these relationships. Everybody is continuously exposed to the people around them in what Thornton (2017:202) describes as 'an existential condition of personhood as "patient" rather than

“agent””. Everyone is always ‘vulnerable’ and ‘susceptible to the other’ (Thornton 2017:220). The other makes the person and can, at any moment, break him or her.

In describing how the traditional African community helps to overcome individual sadness, Kenyan ethicist Richard N. Rwiza (2001) describes this vulnerability or being exposed as being naked:

The community has power over people. Their strangeness is undone, as they are not different. They are no longer a secret but open to the investigation by the community. Whereas in rural life the individual is ‘naked’ before everybody else, in the African city one is ‘locked up’ in a universe of one’s own. (p. 30)

And Bernard Udelhoven (2015), in a handbook on pastoral care in the face of witchcraft and spirits in Africa, describes this as:

In Africa, where human life is fundamentally understood as ‘being with’, the quality of life is evaluated in terms of belonging (especially to the family) and relationships. The soul is also experienced in its connectedness and interdependence on others. If the family is well, the soul is well too. If obligations to the family are not met, the soul cannot be well. (p. 195)

Spatially, he (Udelhoven 2015:197) describes the being exposed of the individual in Zambia as that ‘[i]n Zambian understandings, the soul points outwards mainly, not inwards’. To see someone’s soul, in conceptions from Europe and the USA one looks deep inside a person; in African conceptions, the soul is seen in the relationships with others outside, ‘[w]here a sense of belonging is paramount for a person’s self-awareness (*being* means *belonging*), inner drives or struggles also develop within specific relationships’ (Udelhoven 2015:197). The most personal aspects of an individual are to be found not inside but in the relationships with important others, which means that these most personal aspects of an individual are continuously exposed to influence by others as well – both positive and negative influence.

Udelhoven gives a telling and recognisable example of how it works to be such an exposed individual and how this contrasts

with individuals within a Euro-American concept of community. A parishioner had asked her priest Udelhoven for some holy water to heal sores in her mouth. She explained (Udelhoven 2015):

There is something wrong in this neighbourhood. The woman who rents next door is a prostitute. Always new men come to see her. You see, the children play here. Last week, we know she had a secret abortion. That day, after she greeted me, these wounds started in my mouth. (p. 204)

She had been exposed to the assumed immorality of her neighbour and, according to her, that caused the mouth sores. She understands that for a white man, such as Udelhoven, this may be hard to follow, so she continued (Udelhoven 2015):

Your skin is white – for you, these things cannot touch you, they have no effects on you. But we Africans, we are black. That is why I became sick! Holy water cleanses from inside. (p. 204)

The wounds in her mouth came through spiritual exposure to the immorality of her neighbour, so she needed a spiritual means to heal them – in this case, Udelhoven's holy water. However, she is aware that this kind of spiritual exposure does not apply to white people such as Udelhoven himself.

In reflecting upon this event, Udelhoven (2015) observes:

Referring to our racial differences was a joking way of making a point about our different levels of understanding. Beneath the joke, she also expressed that 'being black' brought with it a specific vulnerability. (p. 204)

Being part of a community in the African sense means to be exposed to others and their moral behaviour. Udelhoven (2015) remembers:

In other conversations, 'being black' had expressed a race-specific exposure to witchcraft attacks and to destructive forms of jealousy. In this particular conversation, the relational soul was affected by the behaviour and pollution arising from the neighbour's house. (p. 204)

The African community is not made up of separate individuals who engage in relationships, but relationships themselves first

constitute the individual. The soul itself is relational in nature and always automatically exposed to the people around. This is an expression of what community means in this African context, although the parishioner is aware that these things work differently for people with different concepts of community. Udelhoven (2015) concludes:

I, the white-skinned friend, was evidently not sensitive to these issues and would not be affected – I was not part of the social web of belonging, in which the morally wrong acts of one person, however secret, may affect everybody else. (p. 204)

The exposure to others, and their moral or immoral behaviour, makes the suspicion of others and the removal of sinners or suspected sinners from a community such as the shopkeeper accused of witchcraft that was discussed above, a natural consequence. The vulnerability to the others around a person, who influence someone's very soul, also makes group pressure felt even more directly. This is to which I will turn now.

## ■ Group pressure

Ethicist Louise Kretzschmar (2010) comments on the brutal xenophobic attacks on African foreigners in South Africa in 2008:

These attacks, on fellow Africans, suggested that the oft quoted moral and cultural principle of ubuntu does not extend to the entire continent, but primarily towards the members of one's own particular ethnic group, clan, family or local community. (p. 577)

Not everyone belongs to the community, as was already clear from the example about the villagers who turned on their own shopkeeper who was accused of witchcraft. Kretzschmar (2010) calls this limited conception of community, which includes some but excludes others, 'collectivism' or 'communitarianism':

Where the acceptance of the value of the community degenerates into collectivism, it results in the interests of one group, be it defined according to ethnicity, nation, class or gender, being advantaged over another. (p. 578)

In an article on African philosophy, Gathogo (2008) concludes that:

Ubuntu primarily expresses itself well in the provision of assistance to our people by whom one may mean, the members of the blood relatives, tribe mates, clan mates, political campmates, social camp mates and so forth. (p. 47)

Ubuntu in such a fashion means caring for one's own people, however one may define 'one's own'. Kretzschmar (2010) contrasts such a limited use of community with a use which implies a more abstract and formal concept of 'common good':

Instead of a moral community promoting the common good, the short-term self interest of a particular group is promoted. Hence countries such as Kenya, Burundi, Rwanda, Liberia and the Sudan are torn by ethnic conflict. (p. 578)

If social harmony of a particular group is the greatest good, then more general notions such as the nation-state or a formal concept of 'common good' without the organic processes of inclusion and exclusion are sacrificed.

Kretzschmar (2010) continues:

Communitarianism further leads to nepotism (promotion of the interests of family members), 'jobs for pals' (promoting the interests of friends and supporters), misplaced (blind) loyalties to clan or family members, uncritical political patronage and an absence of personal moral accountability. (p. 578)

Instead of regarding such practices as evidence of the restricted use of Ubuntu and the African concept of community, they can also be seen as the logical outcome of such a concept of community or, at least, a risk inherent to it. A bureaucratic, formal and procedural concept of community has its own risks – like coldness, treating people as numbers and having to let criminals go free if their obvious guilt cannot be proven – but patronage and nepotism are risks that come naturally to a more organic concept of community, where social harmony among concrete people is the greatest good. A professor from a central African country once told me that he would gladly help a fellow tribesman to enrol at his university by jumping the queue and skipping procedures; his tribe

helped him to get where he is, so he wants to do something in return. This confession was clearly intended to provoke me as a white man but, nonetheless, it reveals how what is conceived as wrong from a particular perspective looks different from within the concept of community prevalent in Africa. Kretzschmar does not show any consideration for nepotism and ‘jobs for pals’, and she (Kretzschmar 2010:578) concludes, ‘[c]onsequently, the abuse of power is perpetuated’. If one wants to live in such a context, it is hardly possible to step out of such a system.

The Nigerian author Teju Cole (2007) living in the USA describes how he encountered corruption on a trip back to his home country, starting already at the Nigerian embassy in the USA where he says:

‘Well, I’ll insist on a receipt’. – ‘Hey, hey, young guy, why trouble yourself? They’ll take your money anyway, and they’ll punish you by delaying your passport. Is that what you want? Aren’t you more interested in getting your passport than trying to prove a point?’ [...] For each transaction, there is a suitable amount that helps things on their way. No one else seems to worry, as I do, that the money demanded by someone whose finger nurses the trigger of an AK-47 is less a tip than a ransom. I feel that my worrying about it is a luxury that few can afford. For many Nigerians, the giving and receiving of bribes, tips, extortion money or alms – the categories are fluid – is not thought of in moral terms. It is seen either as a mild irritant or as an opportunity. (pp. 12, 20)

Corruption has become such a large part of daily life that it is often no longer considered to be wrong, but merely a simple fact of life.

Cole (2007) continues by connecting the corruption to a broader feeling within Nigerian society:

It occurs to me that the barely concealed sense of panic that taints so many interactions here [*in Nigeria*] is due precisely to the fact that nobody is in control, no one is ultimately responsible for anything at all. Life in Nigeria requires constant vigilance. (p. 113)

Everyone is constantly pushed around, and this undisguised presence of power beyond anyone’s control makes it impossible to even consider doing good for its own sake. Undisguised power

may crush someone anytime, for no reason. People are too busy trying to survive, having to be vigilant all the time, so doing good is luxury they cannot afford, Cole suggests.

Ikuenobe (2006:293) writes very positively about the advantage of communalism, 'it specifies the obligation of everyone to participate in the social affairs of the community'. Yet, he (Ikuenobe 2006:301) also has to admit that as a consequence:

One may argue that the African communal system has its problems in terms of the tremendous pressure and responsibilities it places on people. [...] [7]he social pressure on people [...] is enormous. (p. 293)

Individuals are in their very core exposed to everyone around them, and their inclusion in the community is continuously at risk; so, every person has to determine what the community requires from him or her and submit to it. Everybody is continuously checking and being checked and kept in line.

Anthropologist Dena Freeman describes how joining a Pentecostal church could sometimes be the only way out. As a believer, a person is no longer part of the traditional African community, and Jesus will protect him or her against the forces – both spiritual and physical – that want to keep him or her in check. She (Freeman 2015) quotes a farmer who joined a Pentecostal church to gain freedom from the pressure of his traditional community:

Before there was no way out. You had to follow *dere woga* [*traditional practice*]. There was no other option. You can't stop *dere woga* unless you believe. The community will force you back. The only way out is to believe. Then Jesus helps you and then you have peace. (p. 121)

The group pressure within the traditional African kind of community is enormous. Pentecostalism stands in an ambiguous relationship to the traditional African worldview; it presents itself as a complete break with the past (Meyer 1998b), yet in its structures and concept of community there are many affinities between traditional African conceptions and Pentecostal religiosity. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the Pentecostalisation of religion in Africa, in many ways, is an adaptation to a more traditional African kind

of community. Pentecostalism may free people from the pressure of the African community, as Freeman suggests, but it replaces it by a very similar kind of group pressure at the same time.

Barack Obama describes the kind of group pressure that we find in different African communities clearly, although he is not writing about Africa but about growing up in Indonesia with his American mother and his Indonesian stepfather Lolo. Lolo had thought he could make his own choices in life, but now the government forces him back into line by brute force to the horror of Obama's mother (Obama 1995):

Power. The word fixed in my mother's mind like a curse. In America, it had generally remained hidden from view until you dug beneath the surface of things; until you visited an Indian reservation or spoke to a black person whose trust you had earned. But here power was undisguised, indiscriminate, naked, always fresh in the memory. Power had taken Lolo and yanked him back into line just when he thought he'd escaped, making him feel its weight, letting him know that his life wasn't his own. That's how things were; you couldn't change it, you could just live by the rules, so simple once you learned them. (p. 45)

Power is so pervasive in Indonesian society that people cannot even think about choosing to do good for its own sake; they simply have to do what keeps them alive, they have to do what forces beyond their control make them do.

Obama (1995) describes how his mother tried to teach him 'the virtues of her American past', honesty, fairness, straight talk and independent judgement:

Honesty – Lolo should not have hidden the refrigerator in the storage room when the tax officials came, even if everyone else, including the tax officials, expected such things. Fairness – the parents of wealthier students should not give television sets to the teachers during Ramadan, and their children could take no pride in the higher marks they might have received. Straight talk – if you didn't like the shirt I bought you for your birthday, you should have just said so instead of keeping it wadded up at the bottom of your closet. Independent judgment – just because the other children tease the poor boy about his haircut doesn't mean you have to do it too. (p. 49)



For his stepfather, Lolo, these values were unattainable. In Europe and the USA, it may be very hard to act out of pure honesty and fairness, but outside Europe and the USA it is completely impossible, Obama suggests. Even if, in some way, honesty and fairness may be the ideals for people outside Europe and the USA, yet they have become quite meaningless because the forces that push people around are so powerful that even thinking about them can be a fatal letting down of their guard. The only way to survive is to accept the reality where straight talk and independent judgement are forever out of reach. Obama (1995:50) calls Indonesia 'a land where fatalism remained a necessary tool for enduring hardship, where ultimate truths were kept separate from day-to-day realities'. So, maybe ultimate truths – such as that it is good to be honest and fair – exist in Indonesia just as well as in the USA, but in Indonesia they are completely separated from day-to-day reality. The undisguised presence of power makes it impossible to even consider, for example, virtue as its own reward.

Yet, I think that Obama here paints a picture of Europe and the USA that is too rosy – fairness and independent judgement are practically impossible there as well, and a picture that is too pessimistic and fatalistic about the world beyond Europe and the USA. Maybe it is even more difficult to do good for its own sake outside of Europe and the USA, but that does not mean that one should give up on that ideal. As the Kenyan philosopher Henri Odera Oruka (1997:23) pointed out, calling a dictator an 'African democrat' is not a way to respect and honour Africans, it is downgrading them. Calling corruption the 'African way of delivering services' is not modest but is itself arrogant. It is only fair to judge people by the same standards as we judge anybody else. This is especially so if, as I would argue, these people share these same standards themselves in their practices; for example, Africans have no less understanding of Hollywood movies and pop songs, which express the ideals of pure love and what is genuinely good, as this is present in African songs and stories as well.

Living in such a community – as a fundamentally exposed individual suffering from enormous group pressure – presents different risks than living in a different kind of community, but that does not mean that one has to accept unfairness or to consider taking moral responsibility as impossible.

In Africa, there is still community, it is often said. In contrast to the individualistic developed world, in Africa people still care for one another. In many ways this is true; however, this is not necessarily experienced as something positive. People have no choice but to help each other because they are continuously exposed to one another and they are kept in line through group pressure. Truth is always beyond the horizon; through group pressure, social harmony will not be damaged by disruptive truth-seeking. Group pressure, in turn, often makes people in Africa more suspicious of one another, as will be shown in the next section.

## A community of strangers

In the text where he calls social harmony the greatest good in African societies, Desmond Tutu (1999) begins with this definition:

A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs to a greater whole and is diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are. (p. 35)

In many ways, the individuals within the community informed by Ubuntu are open and available to others, yet I have my doubts about ‘not feeling threatened that others are able and good’, both in how this fits theoretically with the concept of community I have been describing here and practically, from living in Zambia.

What Ali Mazrui (1966:137–138) called the ‘individual’s need for communal belonging’ creates ‘the African fear of being rejected or disapproved of by the community’, for who knows whether he or she will still be included in the community tomorrow? A risk implied in the organic groups that are organised around the

African concept of community is the continuous insecurity of the group. This insecurity makes the people in the community vulnerable and suspicious of one another.

Quite often we experienced things in Zambia or heard stories about events, which made us wonder how these things are possible in a society that takes so much pride in caring about community. Anthropologist Anthony Simpson (1998), having taught for many years in Zambian high schools, wrote:

'Africans' are said [*by Zambian students*] to be greedy and heartless, a deceased's relatives arriving at a funeral only to 'grab' everything and leave the widow 'naked'. 'Africans' are said to be 'naturally jealous' of the success of fellow Africans, a jealousy often expressed in backbiting and in witchcraft, and when they suffer, they are said to desire company in their suffering. An often-heard student remark is, 'We Africans – we don't love one another'. (p. 219)

How can the same people say that they do not love one another and that community is most important to them? People being so jealous, so suspicious of one another, people being dropped out so easily – I do not dare to claim that these things happen more in Africa than in Europe or the USA, but for me they contradict a sense of community in a way that they do not seem to contradict community as it is lived in Africa.

If the shopkeeper, who has been serving the village for many years, can suddenly turn out to be a witch, maybe someone's neighbour can as well. Or maybe someone's neighbour will think that you are. A large majority of the people in Southern Africa believe in witchcraft and Satanism, and most people know people in their environment who have been accused of witchcraft or Satanism. The jealousy that Simpson noticed can easily take the form of witchcraft accusations, for how did your neighbour manage to be successful where you yourself failed? Maybe he caused you to fail. A Nigerian pastor (cited in Gifford 2014:127) explains that, '[w]e must distrust everyone with whom we live and work. In particular, African family structures are the source of most ills'. Someone's own kin, the basis of the community to which one belongs, may be out to get you, they may be taking

advantage of you for their own benefit. Anyone, who is not within the average range of success, wealth, health, is suspect – they may be a threat to the community, they may endanger the balance within this organic unity of the whole and need to be expelled, in service of the greater good of social harmony.

Robert Thornton (2017) observes:

Ideally, when this ‘evil’ is identified, evil-doers in the community, like the bad blood or witches’ familiars in the body, are driven out in order to cleanse the community. In practice, however, this is often impossible. (p. 145)

The story of the lynching of the shopkeeper is not a story of what is common practice – fortunately, I would say – but it is – unfortunately – a story of what is considered as the ideal. Most often, people have to live with those whom they suspect to be witches. As Thornton (2017:145) continues, ‘[t]he enemies of The Good in the community are always part of the community’. The community is never pure, which merely adds to the uncertainty, ‘[t]he boundaries of the community – who is in and who is out – are negotiated and negotiable in all instances’ (Thornton 2017:147). People never know who belongs to the community and who does not.

Anthropologist Ilana van Wyk (2014) coined the phrase a ‘church of strangers’ to describe the successful Brazilian Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. Within this Neo-Pentecostal church, members are encouraged to distrust everyone, even their fellow congregants, even their pastors. Everyone may be possessed by evil spirits and out to get you. Van Wyk (2014) uses the phrase ‘church of strangers’ to describe what is particular about this church:

What had most tongues wagging in Durban was the fact that Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG) members did not congregate for church festivals or funerals, nor were weddings or baptisms celebrated as community affairs. (p. 213)

Yet, despite the fact that other churches and Ministries International congregate for festivals and funerals and celebrate

community affairs, in many ways these other churches and Ministries International in Southern Africa are churches of strangers too. The distrust of people close to you that fuelled witchcraft accusations in the villages has been transferred to church life, in particular, within the influential spiritual warfare theology of a global battle between good and evil – you never know who is on the side of the enemy.

In discussing the relationship between the all-pervasive force of Pentecostalism and the state in Nigeria, political theorist Ruth Marshall (2010:201) concludes that, 'Pentecostal practices of faith do not lead to the creation of a unified community or identity'. There is a mutual distrust built into the Pentecostal worldview, as it is in the African concept of community described in this chapter. Anthropologist Harri Englund (cited in Englund & Leach 2000) notes in connection with Malawi:

The congregation can always have those who only fake born-again ecstasy, from one's neighbor on the church bench to the pastor who is leading the sermon. Satan's presence among the born-again is especially disturbing, albeit not thought to be uncommon. (p. 236)

Everyone who seems to be a member of the community can, in actual fact, be there to destroy the community. The even more troubling fact is that they may not even be aware this themselves (Englund & Leach 2000):

A person does not have to be a self-conscious witch in order to be discovered a subject of Satan. On the contrary, the experiences of cleansing that often accompany the process of being 'born again' gain their force from the realization that the person had been constituted by evil spirits all along. (p. 236)

One can never be sure who is truly a member of the community or who is there in secret, maybe even unknowingly, as what the people in the congregation of Chinsapo and Englund (cited in Englund & Leach 2000) describe as a practitioner of 'black people's medicine':

Inspired and guided by Satan, the practitioners of 'black people's medicine' are ubiquitous, found everywhere from the wealthiest

suburbs to the poorest villages. A great uncertainty often permeates the life-worlds of Chinsapo's Pentecostal Christians, casting doubt on the morality even of members of one's own congregation. This uncertainty accounts for the fact that the devil cannot be unambiguously localized. (p. 235)

People always have to be on guard; they never really know who the people in their community are deep inside. The community is basically a community of strangers. Everyone – even oneself – can turn out to not really belong to the community after all, and that is a serious matter.

Pentecostal theologian Nimi Wariboko (2014:269) speaks of 'the very Pentecostal penchant to see a demon under every rock, behind every unsaved face'. In explanation, he (Wariboko 2014:268) quotes political theorist Ruth Marshall, '[b]ecause there is no authoritative way to identify the source of supernatural power, converts cannot be sure that they or their neighbors are free from satanic influence', who adds that this implies that:

[7]he exhortation to 'love thy neighbor as thyself' is overcome by the necessity of discerning, convicting and overcoming the evil the neighbour may be harbouring with or without his or her knowledge. (n.p.)

One might have to love one's neighbour, but those whom one thought of as one's neighbour may in actual fact be a demon in disguise. Anthropologist Adam Ashforth (2000:251) sees the same insecurity about the people with whom one lives in non-Pentecostal African communities as well, '[b]ecause of witchcraft, a presumption of malice underpins community life'. Often, the African community turns out to be a community of strangers, for someone never knows who the person next to him or her is – one does not even know whether it is a person.

Ikuenobe (2006) states that:

Some essential features of the idea of communalism in African thought include the normative conception of personhood and the dependence of moral personhood on the community. This dependence implies that one acquires personhood by being integrated into the community and being morally educated and socially responsible about the

communal ways of life and values. The normative idea of personhood emphasizes the primacy of social responsibility as a precondition for an individual's right, freedom, and autonomy. (p. 291)

In addition, ethicist Benezet Bujo (2010:85) formulates a common interpretation of the idea of Ubuntu, '[i]ndividuals only become persons if they do not isolate themselves but act together with the entire community'. Nigerian philosopher Ifeanyi Menkiti (1984:172) explains 'in the African view it is the community which defines the person as person'. This may all sound harmless, but it can have grave consequences; if only the community defines a person as person, then someone who does not act together with the community is not even a person! In a sermon I once witnessed in Zambia, it was said that such a person is an animal or lower than an animal.

Ethicist Bewaji (cited in Bewaji & Ramose 2003), in discussing African philosopher Mogobe B. Ramose's concept of Ubuntu, is aware of this consequence:

In the analysis of Ramose, it is possible to dispose of humans who have not become persons or who have lost personhood without feeling that we have done any infractions to our humanity or to that of the 'thing' or 'it' of our novel creation. (p. 395)

Humans who are not part of the community are not real people, for according to him (cited in Bewaji & Ramose 2003), quoting Menkiti:

Without incorporation into this or that community, individuals are considered to be mere dangles to whom the description 'person' does not fully apply. For personhood is something which has to be achieved, and is not given simply because one is born of human seed. (p. 395)

Consequently, 'it is not enough to have before us the biological organism' (Bewaji & Ramose 2003:395–396); this does not make someone a person, does not make someone worthy of the respect a person deserves.

Bewaji (cited in Bewaji & Ramose 2003) is acutely aware of the risk of such an extreme interpretation of persons and nuances as found in this extreme position of Ramose:

It is clear that in no African society (nor in any sane society one would expect) would it be true that strangers can just be killed or

dispossessed in virtue of not having been initiated into local cultural lore. They surely may not be able to hold positions of office in many cases, or get properly integrated as would be the case in any community, not only of humans but also of animals. (p. 396)

Someone who does not submit him- or herself completely to the community has fewer rights, but is not devoid of rights (Bewaji & Ramose 2003):

Having committed some offence is also indicative of a loss of respect and position in the commune of humans. But this is no way of saying that such persons are non-persons and could be killed or dispossessed without due process. (p. 396)

However, we encountered the same Bewaji above seriously impairing such 'due process' by criticising the principle of 'innocent until proven guilty' as a 'Western abomination' which destroyed the African moral fabric.

For every individual there is a pervasive insecurity about whether one truly belongs to the community. One may turn out to be unknowingly possessed by evil spirits, one may be a witch or one may commit an offence which results in the loss of one's position in the community. Scholar of Ubuntu Christian B.N. Gade (2012) interviews the Zulu prince Bekithemba Mchunu, who claims about a murderer or rapist that he:

[/s] not considered to be a human being *at all* by the way that he is behaving towards other people [...] the community will say – they even say it: You are not a human being. You do not deserve to be with us. They would say that. Even today, such cases do happen. They [*the community members*] can go to the extent where they kill a person. We have had some cases where a person is stoned, where a person is killed. (p. 498)

Through one's actions, someone can be shown to not be part of the community and therefore to not be a person, not to have the rights of a person (Gade 2012):

People will take the law into their own hands. They would kill that person for the sake of protecting *ubuntu* because that person has lost humanity. He is no longer a person. He is regarded as an animal because what he is doing is not accepted. (p. 498)

As was the case for the shopkeeper accused of witchcraft, falling outside of the community means falling outside of the category



of humans, and in the name of that same community and humanness, one might even suffer deadly consequences. Being part of the community is of crucial – even vital – importance, but everyone can fall out of it at any moment or turn out to never have belonged to it at all.

In the Reformed liturgical order of service, during worship the congregants collectively confess their sins and afterwards are proclaimed to be forgiven for their transgressions during the liturgical absolution. In Zambia, I have often heard this liturgical absolution being expressed as that Jesus now welcomes us back again into the community of believers. The implication is that as soon as we sin, we are no longer part of the community of believers. As Bewaji (cited in Bewaji & Ramose 2003) stated for African societies in general, '[h]aving committed some offence is also indicative of a loss of respect and position in the commune of humans'. The community itself may be harmonious and organic, but the individual lives in a continuous uncertainty about whether one's brother or sister – anyone or even oneself – is still part of that community.

Many risks inherent to the Euro-American way of organising society are avoided in a natural way in African communities. However, as this chapter has shown, the picture of the African community is not rosy either. The concept of community lived in many parts of Africa implies its own different risks. To conclude this chapter, I will use an example to show that the choices made in African and Euro-American communities have their own advantages and disadvantages, their own appeal and their own risks.

## Relationships over freedom

This example regards something I experienced when I visited an institution in the Netherlands where people who need extra care can enjoy their holidays. Volunteers are present to help them out with everything they need. Sometimes people need so much care that there are as many volunteers as there are guests. Every guest had his or her own volunteer who helped him or her out during

the entire holiday. Although I admire this institution and the many volunteers, the fact that every guest has his or her own volunteer made me feel uncomfortable as well.

One of the guests had a private conversation in a separate room, but his volunteer interrupted them, complaining that the guest should have told her that he was going to sit apart, that she had lost him and so forth. Upon hearing this, the idea of each guest having his or her own volunteer gave me a bit of an icky feeling. This volunteer seemed to be patronising her guest. I find it hard to blame her. It must be a very difficult situation to be someone's personal volunteer; either one patronises him or – anxious to avoid patronising – one may act like a slave or a tool at the guest's disposal. I would feel very uncomfortable in such a relationship, both as volunteer and as guest. The risks are high for the volunteer to put himself above the guest or, instead, below. The risks are high for the volunteer to violate the personal boundaries of the guest or let him violate one's own. I imagine the relationship between volunteer and guest is very risky and difficult.

I was told that in other weeks there were as many volunteers as guests as well, but then some volunteers prepared the food for all the guests, some volunteers helped every guest with their support hoses and so forth. There was division of labour. I for myself would feel far more comfortable in this situation, both as volunteer and as guest. The division of labour diminishes much of the riskiness in the relationship between volunteer and guest. The guest does not receive the volunteer as a person above or below him, and the volunteer is responsible for a task and not for the guest as a person. As a volunteer I deliver help with support hoses; as a guest I receive this help. I would prefer this both as guest and as volunteer, but someone living according to the concept of community described in this chapter might not.

Kenneth Kaunda (1976:27), the first president of Zambia, wrote how shocked he was to discover the phenomenon of homes for the elderly in Europe and the USA. He regarded these institutions as a disgrace showing lack of respect. Of course, such institutions

sometimes are an expression of disrespect, but I would say that they could be an expression of respect as well. Just as in the cases at the institution I described, homes for the elderly may diminish some of the risks of patronising or acting like a slave. The relationship between those who take care of the elderly in homes and the elderly themselves is professional instead of personal. A professional relationship – the division of labour in the case of this institution – protects a person's boundaries, both the boundaries of the professional or volunteer and of the one who needs care. A professional relationship safeguards a certain equality; the professional or volunteer is not above or below the one in need. For myself, I would prefer a *professional* relationship; it would make me feel more comfortable. However, thinking about community in Africa, I imagine that someone could say people should prefer a *personal* relationship no matter what.

A professional relationship may protect people's boundaries, but it does not create harmony and community – it risks being cold. Metz's definition of Ubuntu leads one to opt for a personal relationship, whatever the risks of such a relationship may be. The metaphysical background that Shutte outlined shows that without personal relationships, someone would not be a person at all – let alone have boundaries that could be protected by professionalism. Getting involved in a personal relationship may imply risks like patronising or slave-like behaviour. A professional relationship is clearly defined, whereas a personal relationship is more open and, therefore, more vulnerable to the many risks discussed in this chapter. Nevertheless, from the Ubuntu point of view, these risks have to be accepted because a personal relationship is always to be preferred over a non-personal relationship. It might even be argued that a professional relationship does not protect people from the risks of patronising and slave-like behaviour, but is a way of combining both; the professional patronises by hiding his personal self from the relationship, whereas at the same time he obeys like a slave. Whatever the risks involved, one should never hide behind professionalism or division of labour

but always look for a personal relationship, according to the African moral outlook.

I would feel more comfortable to be a volunteer or a guest in this institution under the conditions of division of labour. Nevertheless, I understand the other approach expressed by Kaunda as a very real option. Both concepts of community and personhood have their own advantages and disadvantages, their own appeal and their own risks.

African people often come across as extremely polite, especially in comparison to Dutch people. When I think of the situation in the institution I sketched, I can imagine this: if someone wants to take the risks of violating personal boundaries, because one wants a personal relationship instead of a (quasi-)professional relationship, politeness is a way to diminish these risks. The indirect ways of communication that are commonly ascribed to Africans may be a way to avoid violating personal boundaries. The exposed nature of the self in an African type of community explains why Africans do not like to say 'no' as discussed previously; saying 'no' is taking the risk that the relationship breaks down, and without relationships, someone becomes nothing – quite literally.

Honour is important for Africans. From a Euro-American point of view, honour is something additional; a person is who she is irrespective of all her skills and accomplishments, although it would be nice if others recognised these and honoured her. From an Ubuntu point of view, honour is not something additional – honour is synonymous to who someone is. Within the African conception, the 'self is the result and expression of all the forces acting upon [people]' (Shutte 2001:22-23). These forces are not additional to a thing-like self, but are what makes up this self. From a Euro-American point of view, it may seem preposterous not just to want to be good but to want to be honoured for it as well. It may seem exaggerated to want to have power and to be honoured as someone powerful as well. From an Ubuntu point of view, without this honour someone would not have real power at all, without honour someone would not exist at all.

As a result, to diminish honour is a punishment in itself. If someone admits in front of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that he has done evil deeds, this dishonours him and brings shame on him, which is a very real kind of punishment from the Ubuntu point of view.

In the example of the institution providing holidays for people with special needs, we saw that division of labour feels natural and comfortable from my Dutch moral outlook, but is dangerous or wrong from an African perspective. Division of labour may get in the way of the all-important personal relationships. The clear-cut professional relationships in Euro-American society are a way to avoid certain risks. In the case of the institution, I mentioned the complaint about patronising and slave-like behaviour, but other risks are excluded by professionalism, division of labour and division of powers as well, like nepotism and corruption. A price is, however, paid to avoid these risks. In Euro-American societies, people tend not to have personal relationships with their governments, policemen, bosses and so forth. From an Ubuntu point of view, this price is too high. Personal relationships are essential; therefore, professionalism, division of labour and division of powers are regarded as suspicious and the risks of nepotism and corruption are accepted. Nepotism and corruption may be wrong, but abandoning personal relationships would be even more wrong, for without them the person would not exist at all.

Shutte (2001) gives a beautiful illustration of African people preferring chatting and laughing to working. A convent contained both African and German sisters. Both thought of the other group as bad sisters. The German sisters regarded the African sisters as lazy, whereas for the African sisters 'their idea of a good sister was one who, once she had fulfilled her basic community duties would spend the rest of the time in conversation' (Shutte 2001:28). Both groups had a different idea about what the community was. The German sisters attempted to uphold the community by creating resources. The African sisters attempted to uphold the community by chatting and laughing. Euro-American reality consists of things, whereas Ubuntu-like reality consists of relationships.

Finally, let us return to the case of a churchgoer who is accused of witchcraft and therefore is denied access to Holy Communion. Is it morally justified to deny access to an alleged witch? From a – genuinely moral – Ubuntu point of view, this question cannot be answered in general. The only possible answer could come from the community; until everybody involved in this community agrees – the congregation, powerful people and powerless people, the minister and the one accused of witchcraft himself – the question cannot be answered. Everybody has to agree. The minister may explain that Jesus stood up for the outsiders and would stand up now for people who are accused of witchcraft, but if she concludes that the person accused of witchcraft should be accepted before everybody agrees, then she turns him into an object instead of a person within relationships. The minister may say that the one who is accused of witchcraft should decide for himself, but then the minister himself becomes less than a person – she would act slave-like, to use the phrase out of the example of the institution above.

Everybody has to agree. There are many risks involved in this, as we have seen. These risks should be acknowledged. This does not mean giving in to them. It means fighting them whenever they appear. From the African community point of view, people have to talk to everyone and to trust that within the community the risks are restrained well enough. No matter what, people have to keep talking. People have to keep open the chances of good relationships, for they are what makes up reality, within life in Africa at least.

## ■ Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the concept of community as it is lived in society at large in Africa. To be a community means something else in Africa, compared to what it means in Europe and the USA. Some challenges of the Euro-American society are resolved, but others that are nearly absent in Europe and the USA appear. The group structure in Africa is organic instead of

formal and, thereby, in a way warmer. However, the organic nature of community does not allow for individual idiosyncrasies or for attempts to objectively check the opinions of the group. The group is a moral community, but individual moral responsibility and discernment are not encouraged. Concrete people are more important than institutions, which has obvious advantages over the opposite arrangement that sometimes can be found in Euro-American societies, but it hinders long-term projects.

On an individual level, within the African concept of society, people are valued as more than a cog in the machine, and they belong to their neighbours in a more natural and deeper way, but, in other respects, they are also more vulnerable. Undue group pressure and a continuing insecurity about whether oneself and one's neighbour still belong to the group are challenges that come with the African conception of community. In the Euro-American setup of society, individual freedom is often encouraged at the cost of relationships. Within the African community, the opposite risk is more prominent. Social harmony is treated as the greatest good at the cost of other goods.

In Africa there is still community, it is often said. In contrast to the individualistic developed world, in Africa people still care for one another. In many ways, this is true. Risks inherent to the Euro-American way of organising society are avoided in a natural way in African communities. However, as this chapter has shown, the picture of the African community is not rosy either. The concept of community lived in many parts of Africa implies its own different risks. In the next chapter, I will focus on how the African concept of community has changed the concept of church. The shift from churches and congregations to men or women of God and Ministries International is an adaptation to the community as a community of strangers, as discussed in this chapter.

# Community: In Christianity

## ■ Introduction

Community in Africa is not as romantic as it is sometimes portrayed, as we saw in the previous chapter. The concept of community present in Africa has both its own advantages and its own risks. It is only to be expected that the African organic concept of community – over against more formal conceptions in Europe and the USA – results in different ways of organising faith communities. In this chapter, I will argue that a particular shift in Christianity in Southern Africa since the 1990s is an adaptation of the organisational structure of the church in line with the concept of community present in Africa.

The shift I am speaking of is the shift in Southern African Christianity from churches with congregations or parishes to prophets with ministries. Many people have observed a mushrooming of churches since the 1990s, but it would be more accurate to speak of a mushrooming of ministries. A quarter of the 82 churches that Bernhard Udelhoven (2010:app.) registers in

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one compound or township in Lusaka refer to themselves as ‘ministries’, and when Austin Cheyeka in *One Zambia, Many Histories* (2008:156-157) gives a sample of the many new charismatic churches that have been founded in the 1990s in Zambia, 80% of them call themselves ‘ministry’ instead of ‘church’. Studies from Kenya, South Africa and Ghana tell the same story (Anderson 2005:68; Asamoah-Gyadu 2013:180; Gitau 2017:111; Parsitau & Mwaura 2010:98). If we want to do justice to their self-identification, the mushrooming of churches, in fact, constitutes a shift towards ministries – or ‘Ministries International’, as I will call them, because many ministries add the adjective ‘international’ to their name as well.

The use of the word ‘ministry’ or ‘ministries’ to indicate not just a function of the church but an entire church-like organisation is not new and did not originate in Africa. Directly or indirectly, the multitude of new Ministries International in Africa are inspired by their American counterparts. Nonetheless, this shift is more than a superficial shift of fashion in naming the church. I will show that the type of religious community represented by the Neo-Pentecostal Ministries International entails a move within Christianity towards the concept of community described in the previous chapter. The shift towards the model of Ministries International described in this chapter can be found not only in new ministries and churches but also in older mainline churches.

In this chapter, I will contrast the model of contemporary Ministries International to an ideal type of religious community that was introduced by the Protestant missionaries, namely, congregations as nuclear family type of gatherings where one meets fellow believers on the basis of a priesthood of all believers. In the first part of this chapter, I will highlight that Ministries International function very differently. The purpose of religious meetings is different – it is not about shared worship and dedicating oneself but about obtaining a particular religious service fulfilling one’s individual need. The role of the pastor is different – he or she is not merely the facilitator of communal worship but is the service provider, indispensable and treated as

such, ‘the big man of the big God’ (Kalu 2008:103). Within the model of Ministries International, ecumenism is not some high, unreachable goal – as it generally is among classical denominations – but it is an already assumed fact; ‘we are all Christians’. This shows the different role that community plays in the religious configuration in which Ministries International function. Political developments in several Southern African countries can be seen as adaptations to this change in the type of religious community. In the final section of this chapter, I reflect upon the theological consequences of this shift in the type of religious community. Given that the church in the new heartland of Christianity no longer consists of churches with congregations, what does this mean for unity and dialogue in the church as a theological ideal? I will propose that instead of fighting rearguard battles trying to return to churches and congregations, the ideal of unity and dialogue itself should be re-conceptualised.

## ■ **The purpose of religious meetings: From shared worship to obtaining a service**

### ■ **‘Not really communities’**

In Europe and the USA, the church is sometimes considered to be a last stronghold of ‘community’. Yet, in Africa, where ‘community’ is said to be of central importance, a number of scholars observe the church to be lacking in community. Scholar of African religion Paul Gifford (2004), for example, writes about the many new Ministries International:

One must bear in mind that many of these churches are not really communities or fellowships at all. Some are, and many more began like that, but just as many now are composed of clients of a particular ‘Man of God’. (p. 175)

The new churches or Ministries International themselves are not really communities – at least, not in a sense recognisable to scholars used to the concept of community which exists in

Europe and the USA. Birgit Meyer (2004:463) notes that many of her fellow anthropologists are biased in thinking that religion should offer 'a secure place to feel at home'. In Europe and the USA, religion may provide a sense of togetherness that is scarce in the rest of the society, but in Africa religious meetings are not really about community in that way. As Zambian Pentecostal scholar Madalitso Banja (2009:56) complains, 'the church has become a loose collection of people who share similar beliefs instead of a closely knit family that cares one for the other'. Ministries International are not closely knit social institutions; trust is not cultivated and people seem to constantly move from one Ministries International to the next. Unlike the ideal type of missionary congregation as a nuclear family, a community where the focus is on meeting one's fellow believers, Ministries International are not really communities like that.

When we visited the Neo-Pentecostal Winners Chapel International Ministries in Lusaka once on a regular Sunday, we were encouraged several times to 'try going out to the Winners chapel for three months and you will see that it has effect in your lives!' This was said a number of times in the sermon and often repeated during the time for testimonies. This way of addressing churchgoers is very different from the traditional beginning of a sermon in Reformed churches, 'congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, brothers and sisters'. Asking people to try out that church for three months, on the one hand, seems to encourage commitment but, on the other hand, it explicitly addresses us as passers-by. It assumes we are there for the first time, checking out whether this church would be something for us. Addressing people as brothers and sisters and a congregation, on the other hand, is like speaking to an in-crowd, people who belong together and have been together since time immemorial. Of course, by speaking to outsiders, the Winners Chapel also sends a message to its insiders – 'you are part of a church that attracts new followers' – and by addressing insiders, Reformed congregations also send a message to outsiders – 'here you can really belong to a group' – but the explicit addressee and the topic of the address

show a difference in emphasis. In congregations, people are assumed to belong to a particular family of people as brothers and sisters, whereas in Ministries International people are assumed to be going around in search of a particular service as consumers.

Ministries International are not social institutions where someone belongs to a group, but everyone is invited to try out what works for them, so many people are shopping around from one Ministries International or pastor to the next (Van de Kamp 2010:164). For a while, people may be very committed, but this is in a patron-client relationship to their pastor (McCauley 2012:13), rather than as a member of a closely-knit nuclear family type of group. The goal of frequenting a particular Ministries International is to increase the 'wealth and well-being of the individual instead of the collective' (Gordon 2012:306). The health and wealth that are promised in many Ministries International and that people dream about are not health and wealth for an entire community, but first of all prosperity for oneself personally and one's own family. Ministries International themselves do not provide a substitute family as is done in the ideal type of a congregation.

A characteristic element of the liturgy in Ministries International is mass prayer - 'more time is devoted to this type of prayer than to any other activity', anthropologist Naomi Haynes (2017b:37) notes for Pentecostal services on the Zambian Copperbelt. Mass prayer illustrates that these Ministries International are 'not really communities' as Gifford (2004:175) indicates. Mass prayer (or 'collective-personal prayer', as it is called by Haynes [2017b:37]) is a form of prayer where everyone present prays out loud together. Individual members are called upon by the liturgist or anyone leading the group or the worship service to pray simultaneously. In a gathered congregation, one can hear many loud voices speaking at the same time. Some might be heard crying; some seen beating their chests, walking back and forth; and some repeating the same phrase over and over again. One hears a cacophony of requests made to God in all kind of

languages – English, vernacular and even tongue-language. Mass prayer is intended to give individual believers the opportunity to seek God for personal requests which cannot be treated collectively. Those who are present do not pray together because, as Haynes (2017b:40) quotes a Pentecostal believer, '[h]ow, she asked, does that person know the problems I have? How can he pray for me properly?' These praying individuals are individuals within an African type of community and, therefore, exposed individuals as described in the previous chapter, with 'a kind of permeability' as Haynes (2017b:36) describes it in the context of mass prayer, but *individuals* nonetheless. People do not pray together as one community, but everyone individually brings his or her concerns before God. It is not a community in the sense of a worship group.

## ■ No worship groups

When people from Europe first encountered the people living in Southern Africa, they found no religion among them. Nowadays, it is often repeated that Africans apparently are 'notoriously religious' (Mbiti 1990:1) but, anthropologist David Chidester (1996:19) observes, until the 19th century, travellers noted that, 'indigenous southern Africans had "no appearance of any religious worship whatever"'. Even when religion was discovered in other parts of the world that used to be considered as being without religion, Southern Africa continued to be seen as being without religion. They did not even worship idols or fetishes as the people in West Africa. At some stage, it was said that people in Southern Africa worship the ancestors but this was later corrected into saying that Southern African people merely 'venerated' ancestors. Again, Southern Africans were left without religion or, at least, without worship. The debate continued.

In emphasising the practical nature of religion in Africa, some scholars observed that '[m]any of the languages in Africa do not have a word or vocabulary for "religion" as a body of knowledge or an ideology' (Clarke 2014a:34). Religion in Africa was so

practical and so much a part of everyday life that people from Europe did not recognise it as religion. The extremely pragmatic approach of pre-colonial African religions became, in European analyses, nothing more than ‘magic’ or ‘superstition’ but definitely not ‘religion’ (Platvoet & Van Rinsum 2003:18). Yet, anthropologists Jan Platvoet and Henk van Rinsum (2003) conclude:

They took sweet revenge, however. The traits marking religious practice in pre-colonial societies continue to deeply determine the pragmatic plural religious allegiance of many Christians and Muslims in modern Africa. (p. 18)

And, indeed, as I will discuss in the next section, the Ministries International reflect the pragmatic emphasis that is often ascribed to pre-colonial African religions.

Another reason why early travellers did not find religion in Southern Africa was that they did not find the type of religious community that they associated with religion. There was no nuclear family type of gathering where a group of people strengthened each other’s belief. There were rituals but they were *ad hoc* and primarily for individuals. There were no really religious communities, and there was not really something recognisable to European eyes as ‘worship’. There were no congregations in the European sense.

In his study of the South African Ngoma healing tradition, Robert Thornton (2017) highlights the same point when he discusses why the Southern African *sangoma* practices were not recognised as religious by foreigners using European definitions of religion:

Southern African ritual systems were not organised in that way. Specifically, they lack a congregation as a ‘moral community’, even though there is a common set of beliefs and practices. (p. 56)

There were no congregations or equivalents to congregations in Southern Africa, and that is an important reason why missionaries and others from Europe did not see religion. Thornton (2017:59) continues, ‘*sangomas* are not priests as they do not lead a congregation. They provide individuated services to clients,

drawing on a broadly construed cultural tradition'. With the Ministries International, Southern African religion returns to a kind of religion without congregations. There are no worship groups, because the purpose of religion is to obtain an individual service from either the *sangoma* or – within a Ministries International – the pastor or prophet. The community here exists on a different level; the entire society is the religious or moral community, as I will argue below.

In communal worship, it is important to check whether people really belong to the group or not. In ATR, there was no question about truly belonging to the group or not; one lived where one lived and as such the person was automatically part of the system and he or she visited this or that diviner whenever the need arose (cf. Ruel 1997:199). Religion in Africa traditionally is not about worship but people live in a world where one sometimes invokes help from the beyond.

African theologian Samuel Waje Kunhiyop (2012:180) notes a 'decline of the practice of church discipline in recent years. One major cause is the rise of assertive individualism. Within a community, discipline makes sense'. But with the Ministries International, as with the *sangomas*, there is not really such a kind of community. Kunhiyop (2012:183) continues to warn, '[a]ny church that ceases to exercise discipline will simply cease to exist, as it will have nothing to hold it together'. This is true, but in the type of religious communities exemplified by Ministries International, this kind of 'holding together' no longer matters; there is no worship group to be held together, but within the wider community of society as a whole some individuals offer religious services to those who may need them. Everybody belongs to the ritual system (cf. Ruel 1997:199), and if someone does not like what this prophet tells him or her, one tries the next Ministry International to see whether that pastor or prophet can fulfil one's needs. The primary form of social organisation in Ministries International is the hierarchical link between the pastor and the believer, as will be discussed below. This relationship is strictly top-down and authoritarian, but it is not forced or

involuntary. People themselves look for the relationship with a pastor that provides for them the connection with the spirit world that they are after.

## ■ Focus on needs

Many scholars on Pentecostalism and Pentecostals themselves have noticed the pragmatic nature of African religion which has been taken up by the Neo-Pentecostal Ministries International. People are not looking for a community but for whatever can help them (Onyinah 2007:314) and address their practical needs (Cheyeka 2015:241). People look for religious services from their pastor who, as a parent, offers to take care of them (Haynes 2017a:107).

The focus on providing a service to meet a particular need is arguably one of the main reasons why the name ‘ministry’ has been adopted by most new churches in Africa. ‘Ministry’ means ‘service’ and was originally used to name specific segment of church work, such as ‘youth ministry’ and ‘ministry through music’. In the work of the Ghanaian theologian Kwame Asamoah-Gyadu, the tension between this original use and the current practice to use Ministries International as the name of an entire church is not completely resolved. On the one hand, Asamoah-Gyadu consequently speaks of CMs when he discusses Neo-Pentecostal churches – and rightfully so, as many of them use ‘ministries’ instead of ‘church’ in their self-designation. On the other hand, when Asamoah-Gyadu (2005) begins to explain what ‘ministry’ means, he says:

Within a single local Charismatic church, one may find various team ministries such as praise and worship, healing and deliverance, counselling, welcome and ushering, video-recording and tape-recording, publications, prayer force, youth and children. (p. 98)

In Ministries International, the word ‘ministry’ is still used in this practical way; most often, the ‘single local Charismatic church’ that Asamoah-Gyadu mentions, however, is not called ‘church’ but ‘ministry’ or ‘Ministries International’.



In evangelical and Pentecostal circles in the USA, there has been a long tradition of naming a church-like organisation 'ministry'. There are different reasons behind this trend, both in the USA and in Africa where this trend was copied. South African Pentecostal theologian Marius Nel (2018:1) mentions in an article on Pentecostal church architecture, 'the eschatological urgency of their task' and the Pentecostal's 'anti-church feelings' as reasons. When the Pentecostal movement grew and megachurches were erected, these buildings were 'meant to look as "unchurchy" as possible in order to remove any barriers to evangelism' (Nel 2018:2, n.4). Nel (2018) notes that new Pentecostal groups preferred to see themselves:

[A]s a movement rather than a church because 'church' reminded them of the traditional churches that they had left with what they perceived as its mustiness, rigidity, formality and its attachment to tradition. (p. 5, n. 14)

Choosing against using the name 'church' in all of these cases means choosing against building a formal organisation. One wants to be a movement instead of a structured organisation. This matches with the African concept of community, discussed in the previous chapter, where someone is not part of a community through formal rules or contracts but through natural, organic relationships. It matches with the character that Ministries International want to display.

In his book *Reinventing American Protestantism*, Donald Miller (1997) uses the name 'New paradigm churches' for churches that do not want to be institutionalised churches. Asamoah-Gyadu (2005) recognises many of Miller's stories, for example:

One leader of a former charismatic non-denominational fellowship [...] telling his first few members to 'stay plugged' into their churches as his initiative was only meant to provide Bible study to supplement their growth. [...] Under pressure from the members the leader eventually gave in and incorporated the fellowship as a church body. (p. 114)

According to Asamoah-Gyadu (2005):

If the story of the transformation or incorporation of this fellowship into a church were told in Ghana, very few people, if any, would believe that the actual incident took place in Albuquerque, New Mexico. It replicates the stories of many CMs across Ghana. (p. 114)

And it replicates the stories of many Ministries International all over Africa.

According to Asamoah-Gyadu (2005:97), the term 'ministries' 'defines the ecclesiology of these new independent churches'. Asamoah-Gyadu does not elaborate on this point, but at least we can note that using the term 'ministry' divides people into two categories, namely, those who provide a service and those who obtain this service. People may belong to either category at different times and places, but the inequality is already given in the name 'ministry'. In concrete cases, there may be more inequality in some congregations than in ministries, but in the model that Ministries International portray, the inequality is already given, whereas in the congregation model, equality is envisaged as the ideal. The focus in Ministries International is on needs of someone that need to be met by someone else.

When anthropologist Bernhard Udelhoven (2010:2) investigated the number of churches in one particular township of Lusaka, he noted that the boundary between ministry as a specific service provided by a church and ministry as a new church is not always clear. He (Udelhoven 2010) describes how one may fluidly transform into the other:

Since a ministry is performed often in a team, and since the team can be growing, also a ministry may develop into a church. Sometimes a ministry is the occasion for a person to recognise his/her talents to be a pastor and subsequently start an own church. The terminology used in Bauleni for a church, a fellowship and a ministry can be fluid. Many churches furthermore use the term 'Ministry' in their own name (for example 'Jesus Harvest Outreach Ministries'). (pp. 2-3)

‘Ministries International’ has, in fact, become the default name for many people who start their own church in many parts of Africa.

During the six years in Zambia, I noticed that there are two basic types of stories for how new Ministries International start. Firstly, as in the cases described by Udelhoven, there are founders of Ministries International who set up a social service project, while remaining within their own church or Ministries International. Over time, however, the ministry grows and quite naturally develops into a separate, independent Ministries International.

Secondly, there are founders of Ministries International who want to meet a particular need within their church or Ministries International. The leadership of their church or Ministries International is experienced as not accommodating enough towards them, offering that particular service, and one begins one’s own Ministries International to cater for people who need that particular service. In both types of stories, the Ministries International are focussed on the needs of the people; a new Ministries International is needed in order to fulfil people’s religious or social needs. Let me give some examples of these two types of stories.

One of the new charismatic churches of the 1990s that scholar of Pentecostalism Austin Cheyeka (2008:157) mentions in his sample of new charismatic churches in Zambia is Jesus Cares Ministries. This Ministries International is founded by the current Minister of National Guidance and Religious Affairs in Zambia, Reverend Sumaili. In an interview (Mwenda & Goma 2017), she explains that she had a successful career in banking but felt a calling to reach out to poor orphans living on the streets in Zambia. Helping orphans took up more and more of her time, so she decided to leave banking and founded Jesus Cares Ministries. This Ministries International advertises itself as a faith-based NGO, but through the combination of handing out food and preaching, with more and more focus on the latter and the founder being ordained as a pastor by the Bread of Life Ministries,

it is understandable that Cheyeka lists Jesus Christ Ministries as a new charismatic church. Many new Ministries International churches in Zambia share a similar history; they start out delivering a particular social or diaconal service, being a 'ministry' in the traditional sense, bringing together people from different denominations for this purpose but becoming much like a new denomination themselves – according to the founders, most often 'under the pressure from the members', as Asamoah-Gyadu (2005:114) phrases it.

The founder of another Ministries International explains, '[y]es, I am in ministry but originally it was not intended to be a church as it is today, it was not even intended to be a ministry' (cited in Kroesbergen 2018b:339). She also wanted to help street children. She organised a bed, a bath and food for a few days for them as a relief and organised Bible studies for them. When the focus shifted more and more to the Bible study, it turned into a Ministries International and she became a pastor. Her sister (cited in Kroesbergen 2018b) founded a different Ministries International, which took a different turn:

[S]he does not believe in congregations, she helps women and children, she believes in supporting pastors, whereas God has put me in a congregation, gave it to me to open churches. (p. 337)

Her sister organises help for vulnerable women and children, and she herself organises places for people to hear the Word of God.

The second group of foundational stories for Ministries International concerns the felt need for particular types of worship. In a historical overview of Pentecostalism in Zambia, Chammah Kaunda (2016:16) mentions Apostle Robert Bwalya as one of the earliest converts to Pentecostalism in Zambia, '[h]e converted in 1975 and was expelled from the United Church of Zambia (UCZ) for trying to introduce Charismatic worship at a local church at which he was pastor'. Bwalya wanted to offer services to people whom he felt were not catered for in his own church. He founds his own church and immediately names it a 'ministry'; he (quoted in Kaunda 2016)

even refers to it as a ‘ministerial ministry’, probably referring to both ‘ministry’ as the new name used for church-like organisations and ‘ministry’ in its traditional use:

In [...] 1977, I started a ministry called Christ Gospel Center Ministry in Nfuwe. Christ Gospel Center Ministry was the first, what I mean by the first, first ministerial ministry in Zambia to be registered under the society act as one of the Pentecostals. (p. 16)

Right from the start, Pentecostals in Zambia used the name ‘ministry’ to refer to their organisational structure, and this Ministries International was founded to provide for those Christians who needed ‘charismatic worship’.

Another founder of a Ministries International told me that he felt limited in exploring different forms of worship in his former church. He started a new Ministries International when he was denied a preaching position in the Ministries International in which he grew up. Many people legitimise this mushrooming of Ministries International as a form of evangelism; if people do not like one Ministries International, they have plenty of others to choose from. Another founder of a Ministries International explains (cited in Kroesbergen 2018b):

Sometimes somebody receives a pastoral calling, but the way he approaches it is different from the church where he is – and, well, you cannot ask the founder of a ministry to change his ways, so then God must be genuinely calling this other person to start on his own. (p. 339)

In the end, there will be a Ministries International for every type of help or sermon or worship style that one may desire. Different Ministries International do not so much represent different theologies or doctrines (Englund & Leach 2000:235, f.n.10), they simply cater for different needs of different people, and when someone discovers a new need that is not yet addressed properly, he or she starts his or her own new Ministries International. In both types of foundational stories for Ministries International, the focus is on the needs of believers. The assumed purpose of religious meetings is not shared worship but to deliver and obtain a service.

The ideal type of a congregation brought by the missionaries consists of a group of people who are all brothers and sisters and who share their lives together in worship to God. They meet regularly to dedicate themselves to God and each other. The ideal of a Ministries International is a perfect match between someone's religious needs and the service he or she obtains. There are many different Ministries International to choose from, so one can always find the kind of preaching one appreciates, the kind of worship one likes and the kind of social service one needs. Ministries International look more like a service provider or business than like a traditional church congregation. The change from congregations to Ministries International is a change in the purpose of religious meetings from worship and dedication to God and each other to a religious service delivery. The change towards Ministries International is also a change in focus; instead of concentrating on the internal relationships within a particular group of worshippers, it is now about what the particular pastor can provide.

## ■ The role of the pastor: From facilitator to big man

### ■ Authoritarian big man

In the ideal type of the congregation of the Protestant missionary churches, the pastor is seen as a servant; he or she facilitates people to get closer to God, exemplifying Martin Luther's concept of the 'priesthood of all believers'. The pastor is not someone who has a special connection to God, and if people assume that he or she does, then it is the task of the pastor to find ways to open people's eyes to the truth that God is already available in Christ; they do not need a priest or man of God to mediate between them and God. Through the strong influence of Pentecostalism in Sub-Saharan Africa, this ideal of leadership based upon servanthood and the 'priesthood of all believers' has often changed radically in the new Ministries International and in mainline churches as well.

Nowadays, the focus is not on the equal access of every congregant to God but on the person of the pastor – often referred to as ‘man of God’ or ‘woman of God’. This is the one who is linked to God, this is the one who prays to God, and this is the one who delivers God’s good gifts to the ordinary congregants. Scholar of religion Paul Gifford (2011) describes how:

[/]ncreasingly, success and prosperity come through the anointing of the ‘man of God’: pastors increasingly claim the ability to enhance the prosperity of their followers, and often make themselves indispensable. (p. 251)

The man or woman of God is a man or woman of power who bestows power upon his or her followers. Through the anointing with the Holy Spirit, the man or woman of God has special powers that people, in the context of African religions, are after. Scholar of Pentecostalism Allan Anderson (2004; cf. 1993:29) observes that:

In many cultures of the world, where the religious specialist or ‘person of God’ has the power to heal the sick and ward off evil spirits and sorcery, the offer of healing by Pentecostalism has been one of its major attractions. (p. 211)

Pastoral leadership according to the model of Ministries International is accompanied by signs and miraculous events that should prove that this pastor is really a ‘man or woman of God’ anointed to bring good things from above. The pastor knows everyone’s passport number and favourite colour and sometimes does some miraculous healings. Being a pastor should be affirmed and reaffirmed by proof that this man or woman of God is authorised by God himself.

In the traditional Southern African village, hierarchical relationships are central to social life, within the family, the village or wider set-ups (Haynes 2015:284). People find their place in society by acknowledging who is placed above them as the big man. This scheme of hierarchy is now replicated in the new Ministries International. Paul Gifford (2004:175) observes that in

these Ministries International, '[i]t is widely evident that there has been a move away from egalitarian tendencies to a more authoritarian ethos'. As regarding Malawi, Rhodian Munyenymbe (2011) observes that:

Due to the sense of power that accompanies famous Charismatic ministers it often happens that a personality cult develops around a certain Charismatic leader or leaders as if they have special rights to speak and act on behalf of God. (p. 129)

He (Munyenymbe 2011:129) uses pastor Mtuwa as an example, 'Pastor Mtuwa argued that his understanding of church administration was that no one is entitled to question the pastor'. In the same line, Kenyan theologian Samuel Waje Kunhiyop (2012:168) states that in the new Ministries International, 'power usually resides in the founder. [...] The founder directs the church according to how he or she feels led, often in a dictatorial fashion'. Finally, theologian Nimi Wariboko (2014), in his study on Nigerian Pentecostalism, compares the pastors of Ministries International to leaders in other African institutions:

The institution is often embodied in a single person: the pastor, president, or governor. Leaders are often characterized by vulgar, exuberant, exaggerated displays of power to 'absorb' the institution they lead into themselves and to create the maximum distance between them and the governed. (p. 284)

Religious leaders in Ministries International are placed high above ordinary people. In his article 'Africa's new big man rule? Pentecostalism and patronage in Ghana', John McCauley (2012:1-2) sums up a long list of scholars who similarly note, 'Pentecostalism mirrors traditional big man rule'. Ministries International are led by authoritarian big men – or women sometimes. It is the task of these big men or women to take care of the flock but, in return, the believers' strict obedience to their authority is required. The mutuality and reciprocity that exist in this relationship never take the form of equality or interchangeability. How does this fit with the egalitarian side of Neo-Pentecostalism that is often highlighted as well?



## ■ And egalitarianism?

Many scholars of Pentecostalism – particularly those who self-identify as Pentecostals – see in the Pentecostal movement a *democratisation* of access to the sacred and a radicalising of the principle of the priesthood of all believers. Pentecostal scholar Asamoah-Gyadu himself (2013:59, 63) speaks of such a democratisation, and he (Asamoah-Gyadu 2013:7, 26, 65) quotes his colleagues Anderson, Spittler and Miller who do the same. According to Asamoah-Gyadu (2013:60), ‘Pentecostalism remains a grassroots lay-oriented movement. Often the preferred designation is “pastor”, which places the emphasis on functionality rather than position’. In the leadership theology that Asamoah-Gyadu (2013:75) identifies as Pentecostal, the focus is on laypeople and high, resounding titles should be avoided. He emphasises that the pastors are not seen as experts in a democratised church. The pastor is not a mediator with the spiritual realm, according to Asamoah-Gyadu (2013:76). He (Asamoah-Gyadu 2013) states:

The religious innovation of the Charismatic Ministries is thus the democratisation of religious experience. Theologically, the Charismatic Ministries emphasise that the experience of the Holy Spirit is personal and direct and does not need to pass through any priestly filter. (p. 74)

And he (Asamoah-Gyadu 2013:76) adds that the Neo-Pentecostal theology also gets rid of “cultic” centres, and substances as sources of spiritual power’; there are no holy places and no special objects of power.

Neo-Pentecostalism represents, according to Asamoah-Gyadu, a focus on laypeople, no high titles, no mediators to the divine realm and no special spiritual objects. This would indeed represent a democratised theology of leadership, and it would match the ideal type of the congregation with priesthood of all believers. But I see in the new Ministries International a movement away from such a conception of religious community, and this can be shown by Asamoah-Gyadu’s own work as well.

In Chapter 4, we noted the tension in Asamoah-Gyadu's work concerning objects of power. On the one hand, he sees Neo-Pentecostals as people who desist looking at substances as sources of spiritual power but, on the other hand, he (Asamoah-Gyadu 2013:139) quotes approvingly that, 'God sometimes chooses to use physical things as means of transmitting his power'. Whoever wants to buy anointing oil or water is welcome to come, of whatever church they are a member. Contrary to what Asamoah-Gyadu sometimes claims, that Neo-Pentecostals do not believe in special spiritual substances, these substances which would transmit divine powers are one of their primary selling points, as was discussed in Chapter 4.

According to Asamoah-Gyadu, Neo-Pentecostalism does away with high titles and prefers to simply use 'pastor', but that is not what I observe in Neo-Pentecostal Ministries International in Africa. Asamoah-Gyadu (2013:152) himself justifies the use of high titles, claiming that it is, in Nimi Wariboko's words, 'the "playful act" of Pentecostalism', profaning the sacred. Maybe all the high titles are just a joke – and surely our students in Zambia were often joking about them – but, in most cases, I do not see who is laughing. I have noticed the people in Southern Africa to be very persistent in using someone's title, not in the least the Neo-Pentecostal bishops, archbishops, apostles and prophets of Ministries International.

Asamoah-Gyadu (2013:67) admits that, '[c]oncerns were being raised about the personality cults' and '[a] number of early charismatic leaders had now taken on episcopal titles'. He (Asamoah-Gyadu 2013:68) quotes Ghanaian Pentecostal author Eastwood Anaba, who speaks of "superstars" who claimed to be God's special vessels' (cf. Bongmba 2016:557). But, according to Asamoah-Gyadu (2013:69), this is just a matter of backsliding to the old mainline churches' ways. He holds that despite the ideal type of a priesthood of all believers, mainline churches have always been very hierarchical and authoritarian (Asamoah-Gyadu 2013:77; cf. Galgalo 2012:105). To me, this does not seem fair to

the mainline churches here but, on top of that, Asamoah-Gyadu misrepresents Neo-Pentecostal Ministries International and those influenced by it.

Instead of a focus on laypeople, no high titles, no mediators to the divine realm and no special spiritual objects, Neo-Pentecostal Ministries International display a focus on the powerful man or woman of God, adorned with many high titles, who is the mediator to God's realm, either directly or through objects he or she has blessed. In an earlier study, Asamoah-Gyadu (2005) worried about:

An overemphasis on 'seeing the man/woman of God' because he or she is perceived as the custodian of spiritual gifts devalues the theological import of the *ekklesia*, the regular local assembly of God's people as an inclusive and participatory fellowship of the saints. (p. 94)

But this overemphasis on the man or woman of God is exactly what is happening in the contemporary Ministries International. Lay people and the local assembly of God's people are not what is central but the big man or woman of God (cf. Ogungbile 2014:139). In his description of Pentecostalism in Zambia, Chammah Kaunda (2016) observes that:

An authoritarian hierarchy has replaced its formerly egalitarian structures of government, and personality cults centre on 'the man of God' or 'big man' syndrome. A preoccupation with titles has grown up, especially those of apostle and bishop, and with honorary doctorates and professorships. This is a clear departure from the relational orientation within which Pentecostalism emerged, where people viewed themselves as brothers and sisters. (p. 32)

Scholar of African Pentecostalism Ogbu Kalu (2008:137-138) explains how 'by the 2000s, Pentecostal practice shifted further to full-blown episcopacy', adding that this often happened 'under the banner that even God himself is not a democrat'. Even if some Neo-Pentecostal Ministries International started out in a quest for more spiritual democracy, the model of Ministries International, as it is present in Southern Africa nowadays, is far from democratic.

If there was ever a movement of copying the hierarchical structures of mainline churches by Neo-Pentecostal Ministries International, currently the movement seems to have reversed; mainline Protestant churches are copying the hierarchical structures of Neo-Pentecostal Ministries International. Among Reformed and Presbyterian students of theology, it is common to address one another as ‘man or woman of God’ or ‘bishop’ – sometimes jokingly but sometimes treating these titles very seriously as well – and there seems to be some embarrassment over the fact that the heads of their churches are merely called ‘moderator’. In Protestant churches, one finds the same queues of congregants after a worship waiting to be prayed for by the pastor as in Ministries International and nobody seemed surprised when, during a Reformed church service in Lusaka, an elder in the announcements encouraged people to touch the man of God or even his wife to receive some of his special powers.

Instead of looking for who is copying who, however, I argue that it makes more sense to speak of a tension between both hierarchical and egalitarian tendencies within the traditional African types of religious community (cf. Haynes 2015:273). This tension is present in Pentecostalism as such but even more so in the African reception of it, reflecting traditional African types of community, in which there is a tension between the absolute power of the big man who requires strict obedience, on the one hand, and more democratic movements such as holding palavers to come to decisions discussed in the previous chapter, on the other hand. In the shift from the ideal type of congregations to the model of Ministries International, there is a shift back to the African concept of community, including the tensions within this concept.

## **Anointed man of God**

‘Instead of portraying themselves as a local community of worshippers’ or as churches, Neo-Pentecostal groups present themselves as Ministries International, ‘as service providers’,

which 'offer ministries to [whoever] in the world wants to obtain them' (Kroesbergen 2018b:n.p.). In a study on Zambian Pentecostalism, Madalitso Banja (2009) observes that many Neo-Pentecostal:

[M]inistries [*influenced by Nigerian Pentecostals*] usually revolve around an individual pastor. Literally everything starts and ends with the pastor. Consequently such a pastor yields unquestionable power. Congregants usually hold him in high esteem but this ultimately degenerates into hero worship. People begin to look to the pastor and not to God. This gives birth to a 'personality cult'. (p. 19)

The focus is completely on the pastor and his special anointing.

In an influential study on African Pentecostalism, Ogbu Kalu (2008) connected the Neo-Pentecostal pastor and his supposed anointing to earlier African stereotypes:

The pastor, especially the 'powerful man of God', took over the local image and idiom of the big man [...] As God was praised, so was His visible viceroy on earth. The image and idiom of the pastor as a superhero was derived and translated from the indigenous language and perception of the hero as someone who was chosen and anointed by the gods. The pastor replaced the witch doctor. (pp. 113-114)

Just like traditional religious functionaries in Africa used to do, the pastor has a special connection to the divine realm and uses that to solve the problems of ordinary people. Nigerian scholar David Ogungbile (2014:138) sees a continuity here with African traditional beliefs, '[t]heir lives' testimonies create an aura of mystery, honor, respect, and dignity for which their audiences treat them as they would sacred specialists in African indigenous religious traditions'. Everything in their lives sets these anointed ones apart from the rest, the ordinary people, their clients, and so on.

However, the focus on anointing creates a democratic opening as well. Paul Freston (1998:352) notes concerning Pentecostalism in Latin America, '[l]eaders may not be democratic, but they come from the same social class'. People attending Ministries International and the prophets and pastors do not belong to the

educated class. Within these Ministries International, however, a new class differentiation takes place. At the end of the day, there are leaders who are anointed and ordinary flock who are not, the people who have been given the power to minister and the people who receive this ministry. People may belong to either category at different times and places, but the inequality is already given in the name 'ministry'. Ministry may be done between equals and reciprocally, but during the act of ministry, one person is ministering to the other, and the other is merely receiving. Asamoah-Gyadu (2013:74) observes that '[l]eaders in the Charismatic Ministries are expected to possess what Ghanaian charismatics refer to constantly as "the anointing"', adding that 'the anointing is not restricted to pastors or leaders but is available to everybody who is in ministry or serves God's people in any capacity'. The only way, however, in which this anointing is open to everybody seems to be that you do not need education. The fact that the leader is unschooled does not make this division any less sharp. The anointed people may not be educated but the structure is no less a structure of mediation. To know about one's destiny and to hear from the supernatural realm, one needs these specially anointed people to inform the ordinary ones (Asamoah-Gyadu 2013:131). This seems to create a very separated and hierarchical place for these 'religious functionaries' (Asamoah-Gyadu 2013:143).

God can anoint anyone. One does not need to have obtained an academic degree. The power of the pastor comes directly from God and not through the bureaucracy of a particular institution. If God anoints someone, this person is a pastor - or prophet or archbishop and so forth. If God has really anointed this person, then he or she deserves to be held in such high esteem as the Neo-Pentecostal pastor is held. Cameroonian theologian David Ngong (2014a) observes:

Even in what is seen as orthodox Pentecostalism in Africa, there is significant veneration of the leaders. Because these leaders are seen as uniquely endowed with the Spirit of God, their followers show them deep respect. Some may even say that these leaders are taking the place of Christ in the lives of their followers, because the power

these leaders manifest is sometimes seen as coming from the leaders rather than from the Spirit of Christ. Thus, the danger of confusing leaders of Pentecostal groups with Christ is one that is common to all of Pentecostalism. (p. 89)

While Ngong considers it to be a danger and confusion, once someone is anointed, he fulfils the role of Christ or God in the lives of his followers. The role of the pastor in Ministries International is more democratic than in typical congregations, because anybody can become anointed and become pastor; however, once someone is the pastor, it is more authoritarian at the same time, because this person is not merely a facilitator, but he or she represents God himself to his or her clients.

As David Ogungbile (2014:138) says about the leaders of Neo-Pentecostal Ministries International, 'they assume the status of and are addressed as "Papa" by the old and young. Members become very committed to them and are always ready to "surrender their all"'. In South Africa, there has been significant criticism in the media for a Neo-Pentecostal pastor who asked his congregants to drink petrol but if God tells someone to drink petrol, why should he or she not drink petrol? Andy Chebanne and Malebogo Kgalemang (n.d.) describe the underlying attitude as follows:

The man of God is endued with supernatural power and is constructed as one closer to God. All these constructs enable the man of God to perform miracles and supernatural healing experiences and prophetic deeds. The man of God dominates the minds and consciousness of his followers. He holds the stage and every detail revolves around him. The man of God has such power over his followers that he can command his followers to do anything and they follow suit. (p. 7)

The man of God is seen as a stand-in for God and the entire service focusses on him.

Now, do people really believe that these anointed men or women of God can represent God himself in such a direct way? According to Asamoah-Gyadu (2005:93), '[t]he quantitative

proliferation of independent churches by itself raises suspicion about the motives and claims to being called into ministry by many of the founders'. However, suspicion about the motives and claims of particular pastors does not necessarily discredit the belief in such a special anointing in general. About witch doctors, in his classical anthropological monograph, Evans-Pritchard (1937:193) noted that most Azande would tell you that 'many, even most, witch-doctors are frauds' but that this in no way diminishes their faith in witchcraft. Anthropologist Robert Thornton (2017:186-187) in his recent study on *sangomas* in South Africa mentions that a young *sangoma* was telling him that according to her, most traditional healers (and biomedical doctors alike) were 'fakes'. Nonetheless, this did not stop this *sangoma* from being a *sangoma*. In Zambia, I found the same pattern concerning the belief in Neo-Pentecostal prophets – stories about the tricks they use are well known and often shared; people would say that most Neo-Pentecostal prophets are frauds, but that in no way diminishes their faith in the powers of prophecy. The idea seems to be that most Neo-Pentecostal leaders may be frauds, but if this one is really an anointed man or woman of God, then he or she deserves no less than the position of complete dictatorial authority. If he or she turns out to be a fraud, one simply hops to the next Ministries International to see if that one is the genuine article.

Within Ministries International, the role of the pastor has shifted from being a facilitator in a nuclear family type of group who worship together to being the big man or woman who through his or her special anointing can connect people with the divine realm. For their clients, their power is almost absolute – if he or she is anointed, why should they not be treated as Christ? – the broader context, however, limits their hierarchical powers. They operate in a wider community of the type described in the previous chapter and thereby in an open, ecumenical space in which they have to compete with others who claim to be anointed.



## ■ The meaning of ecumenism: From unreachable goal to assumed fact

### ■ International community

Scholar of religion Elias Bongmba (2016:557) observes that '[t]he growth of Pentecostalism is redefining ecumenism across both the Catholic and Protestant spectrum'. His colleague, J.N.K. Mugambi (2016:250), expects that, 'African Christianity will evolve new ways and means of ecumenical interaction, bypassing the Europe-dominated norms that have predominated during the twentieth century'. As the meaning of community within Christianity changes, the meaning of ecumenism changes as well. The community is no longer local, as it used to be in African Christianity. Bongmba (2016:557) notes for African initiatives in Christianity that, '[a]t the beginning, these churches emphasized the importance of African culture as an important ingredient in the development of a vital African church'. This localised, grounded concept of a church community is not what we find in the contemporary Ministries International. Ministries International see themselves as operating in a broad, expansive field, an international field as their name indicates. Anthropologist Birgit Meyer (1998a) observes that:

Interestingly, the Pentecostalist churches place much more emphasis on Christianity being a 'world religion' than the former mission churches whose theologians currently attempt to Africanize Christianity. The Pentecostalist churches have little interest in typically African forms of expressing faith. (p. 760)

Elsewhere she (Birgit Meyer 2004:453) notes, '[w]hat is distinctly new about PCCs is their propagation of the Prosperity Gospel and their strong global inclination'. The new Ministries International focus on service delivery to provide for the need of their clients who are longing for prosperity and they consider themselves to be international, as is often reflected in their names (Birgit Meyer 2004:453). The framework within which Ministries International operate is international. That is where the belonging is, that is where the envisaged community is. It is not about the village or

tribe, not about the nation-state or continent. Clients of Ministries International belong to the world community.

Asamoah-Gyadu (2005:27) similarly notes about CMs, '[t]he CMs are very keen to reflect their international character and connections'. A common feature of the meeting places of Ministries International is the display of flags of countries from all over the world, where these Ministries International have clients as well, either through relatives living over there or even merely through a short visit during a business trip by one of the people connected to that Ministries International.

African theologian Samuel Waje Kunhiyop (2012) notes that:

The concept of the church as a community also resonates with Africans because [of] the scope of this community. It includes all believers worldwide and each local community (church) and is also connected to the past (believers who have died) and to the future (those who have yet to be born). (p. 146)

Kunhiyop does not have Ministries International in mind here, but by speaking about the worldwide scope of the community as it resonates in Africa, he highlights an aspect of the African concept of community that may be confusing from a Euro-American perspective. In the Euro-American context, a community is seen as local, particular and specific. A community can, however, also be wider and more open-ended, even international; this is the community as envisaged by Ministries International. Ministries International are not closely knit social institutions built around trust and togetherness – which is the ideal type of congregations – but the scope of Ministries International is wider, more inclusive, more diverse and wider, in line with the concept of community explored in the previous chapter. Political theorist Ruth Marshall (2010) observes in Nigeria that:

Nigerian Pentecostals are part of a transnational community without a 'proper place', that in many ways goes beyond the 'proper' or the 'authentic' altogether, and the closure they imply. Being Pentecostal does not furnish a distinct identity, nor does it imply a necessary institutional identification – as Pentecostals say, 'we don't go to Church, we are the Church'. (p. 209)

The community of the church is not limited to a neighbourhood or even a particular nation state or continent. The cosiness associated with a congregation in Europe and the USA where the church is sometimes considered to be the last stronghold of 'community' is not part of how Ministries International wish to portray themselves. Lateral relationships between people who frequent a particular Ministries International are there, of course, and they can be an important part of their attraction, but the focus is both more limited, as discussed in the previous section, on the hierarchical tie of believer and prophet, and wider, on the entire world. The world is their parish, as is the title of a book by David Martin (2002) on Pentecostalism, 'Pentecostalism in Southern Africa [...] sees the "world" as a place to move into and "possess" for Christ' (Anderson 2016:328). The self-identification as Ministries International reflects an important aspect of the model of Christianity in contemporary Southern Africa. The envisaged community is not restricted but is global.

## ■ We are all Christians

In the ideal type of the congregation, the members of the groups are each other's equals; everybody is on the level of a priest and, ideally, there is no hierarchy. The group is a group of equals; however, as a group, one is bound to consider oneself superior to other groups, and one is a member of this particular community because this community is the best or comes closest to the truth. One's own group is higher than all the other groups. This is what makes ecumenical dialogue so difficult. If one's own denomination has the correct theology, how could one ever join together with that other denomination with an inferior theology? Ecumenism has often been proven to be a high, unreachable goal.

Early Pentecostalism was clearly not ecumenical either; however, in the contemporary context of Neo-Pentecostal Ministries International in Africa, we see a new kind of grassroots ecumenism arise. A traveller to Zambia in the 1920s writes about the early indigenous evangelists (cited in M'Passou 1983):

As they discovered one another they found that their old denominational labels meant hardly anything at all. They were just Christians. [...] [*the labels were*] historical accidents in which they found themselves involved in without understanding them. (p. 2)

This same feeling is widespread in contemporary Zambia as well, where people say things like ‘we are all Christians’, ‘we serve one God’ and ‘the issue of denomination matters less, the relationship with Christ is all that matters’ (cited in Kroesbergen 2018b:343). Many new Ministries International have developed out of interdenominational fellowships, of which it is said, ‘interdenominational fellowships strengthen the unity of the church’ and ‘interdenominational fellowships make people understand that Christianity goes across the boundaries of denominations. Christ is the common denominator’ (cited in Kroesbergen 2018b:343). The founder of a Ministries International explains why she does not consider the wide variety in churches and ministries to be a problem, ‘[i]t is just one church; there are different names but it is just one body for those who teach the truth’ (cited in Kroesbergen 2018b:337). What matters is that someone is a Christian, their denomination is irrelevant.

This can be seen in a remarkable perspective on splits and schisms that exists within Ministries International. It is said that ‘fission seems to be intrinsic to Pentecostalism’ (Meyer 2004:453) and Korean Pentecostal scholar Wonsuk Ma (2009:51) expresses a common sentiment when he writes, ‘[t]he ever-increasing number of Pentecostal-charismatic congregations from splits remains as a testimony against its spiritual tradition’. Splits are often seen as a problem, and they are often accompanied by many grievances, but there are other perspectives as well. Splits can be seen as a break in the community, but they do not have to be considered in this way. In fact, splits can belong to the type of community that the church has. Pentecostal scholar Madalitso Banja (2009:56), whom I quoted above as being critical of the shift from ‘a closely-knit family that cares one for the other’ to ‘a loose collection of people who share similar beliefs’, does not consider the mushrooming of ministries as necessarily bad, as

long as one aims at ‘the wellbeing of the larger church. It must be acknowledged that even through church splits the work of God has been multiplied’ (Banja 2009:63-64). The larger church is what matters – thinking about Christianity should not be based upon denominations and groups but upon that wider category. Scholar of religion Paul Gifford (1993) comments on this kind of theological reflection on the church that he encountered in Liberia:

According to this ecclesiology, the true church is made up of all born-again believers, and has nothing to do with these organized bodies traditionally called churches. To start a new cell of born-again believers is not seen as severing communion with any church, but as a step towards fulfilling the great commission, an act of great virtue, and regarded as such even by those with whom one used to worship. From this perspective, the concept of ‘split’ is not very helpful. (p. 138)

Splits may be planned, as Asamoah-Gyadu (2005:115) describes; they may be part of a strategy. As I (Kroesbergen 2018b) have noted elsewhere:

[M]any Zambians do not feel that the many new ministries are breaking down the unity of the church. Instead, a common perception is that the ministries are simply expanding the range of worship and ministry styles that are on offer. (p. 342)

Splits are sometimes seen as a form of evangelism, as a student in theology preparing to become a pastor in a mainline church explains, ‘[i]t is good that there are many churches, because then we can reach out more; it is evangelism through decentralisation’ (cited in Kroesbergen 2018b:339). Within the context of Ministries International, the multitude of churches and ministries are sometimes considered to be a good thing and not as a problem that needs to be solved.

Malawian scholar Rhodian Munyenembe (2011:110) concludes that ‘the Charismatic movement is enhancing ecumenism without actually bringing denominations together’. Asamoah-Gyadu (2013:10-11) states, ‘[t]he essential nature of Neo-Pentecostalism is “trans-denominational” because the Holy Spirit is understood

“to transcend denominational walls”’. Denominational boundaries do no longer matter, not because they have been removed or bridged but because these boundaries themselves are no longer felt to be relevant. Asamoah-Gyadu (2005:117) writes approvingly, ‘[o]ne of the most important achievements of the CMs therefore has been to break the influence of the “brand loyalty” Christianity associated with existing denominations’. Ministries International have rendered denominations, denominational boundaries and, thereby, splits and schisms irrelevant.

In the context of Ministries International, ecumenism is no longer a high, unreachable goal, but it is an always already assumed fact; we are all Christians, so what does it matter that he goes to this Ministries International and she frequents those prophets? In the previous chapter, we saw that community in Africa is a concrete community. Community is not about institutions, ideas or formal criteria but simply about the actual people who are gathered together in one place. Here we see this concept of community applied to the church. People who find themselves in the presence of others, thereby, are an instance of the one big global community. Who belongs to the church cannot be determined by a formal criterion such as who has this or that membership card or who subscribes to this or that statement of faith. The church is not a particular group or set of groups but is much more inclusive – it is whoever happens to be there. As Clifton Clarke (2014b:10, referring to Kalu’s perspective) states, ‘[t]he focus should be on the people who have assembled’ and ‘[i]nstitutions are only important to the extent that they serve the people’. The church is not an institution or, at least, its constitutional aspect is not what matters. Institutions are always merely secondary compared to the concrete individuals who make up the community, as we have seen argued by former Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda in the previous chapter. As Clarke (2014b:10, still referring to Kalu) continues, Christianity in Africa goes ‘beyond the restrictive walls of institutional and denominational confines’ and ‘calls for a wider understanding of the church’. Seen from the perspective of community lived in

Africa, ecumenism is not some high, unreachable goal but is an always already assumed fact – we are all Christians. Kalu (1988) himself says about the African perspective on the church:

It assumes that as the spirit of God broods over the whole inhabited earth human beings would increasingly recognize the divine presence and their lives would be changed in the encounter. (p. 19)

Within this ecumenical perspective from grassroots level, everyone is included in the community of the church – the spirit of God broods over the whole inhabited earth.

This ecumenical perspective may be expressed by ‘We are all Christians’, but it may even extend to include people who are not Christians. In 1994, the Roman Catholic Church organised what was called the ‘Synod of Hope’ to discuss Christianity in Africa. That the church should be seen as a family was one of the main conclusions. Ugandan inculturation theologian John Walligo (2010:42) summarises, ‘the Church-as-family must always be at the service of the entire community in Africa’. The church should not merely serve its own members, nor exclusively Christians but the entire community. Walligo (2010:42) continues, ‘the bishops wanted to use the African family as a model or the model for being and living Church. This model includes everyone, baptized and non-baptized’. Non-Christians belong to the envisaged community as well.

Kenyan theologian Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator (1996:269) highlights that community in Africa is about a relationship ‘from which no one is excluded’. The community is those concrete people who happen to be together and have to deal with one another. Orobator (1996:278) continues, ‘the expansive African community or family is essentially *ecumenical*: It embraces “members of all faiths”’. The ecumenism that follows from applying the African concept of community to the church includes even people from other faiths. Cameroonian theologian David Ngong (2014b:204) argues that from an African perspective, living together is always already presupposed, ‘traditional African societies are open to other views, even to

other gods'. Kenyan scholar of religion J.N.K. Mugambi (2016) describes:

In African Christianity it is common to have within the same family relatives who have opted to join (for various reasons) different denominations (even religions!). When they meet for family functions they pray together, without religious conflict. (p. 239)

At grassroots level, ecumenism is an always already assumed fact. In the model of Ministries International that currently exists in Africa, all kinds of worship forms are available – relatively peacefully co-existing. Asamoah-Gyadu (2017:38) speaks of a 'religious buffet'.

Through the rise of Ministries International in Africa, denominational boundaries do not only shift but, more importantly, obtain a different meaning. As I (Kroesbergen 2018b) have shown elsewhere using the case of Zambia as an example, Christian ecumenism has been transformed from state-backed high-level institutional discussions to a grassroots type of ecumenical spirit in a Neo-Pentecostal style. More and more Christians in the officially declared 'Christian nation' Zambia engage in multiple devotions; they combine attending mainline church congregations on Sunday morning with obtaining services from prophets or pastors in Neo-Pentecostal Ministries International in the afternoon. In Zambia, this is often referred to as 'double membership' (Kroesbergen 2018b:332), and already since the 1950s, Asamoah-Gyadu (2005:39) notes the same trend in Ghana going under the name of 'plural belonging' or 'double insurance'. Being a Christian has changed from fellowship in a closely knit family type of community into an individualistic quest for blessings in patron-client relationships between pastor and believer within the universal community of spiritual seekers. This new way of being a Christian renders the traditional boundaries between denominations fluid, whereas within denominations differences among Christians multiply. Boundaries between denominations are no longer boundaries between different groups of people but between service delivering Ministries International with ever-changing groups of clients.



Such boundaries no longer invite attempts to overcome these boundaries through theoretical dialogue, because at the grassroots level the boundaries are not experienced as problematic. In fact, at the grassroots level, the ecumenical feeling that 'we are all Christians' – or maybe even 'we are all human' – dominates. Grassroots ecumenism and the rise of Ministries International with the accompanying Pentecostalisation of all churches in Africa have caused a shift in the concept of ecumenism and of religious boundaries itself.

## ■ Choosing one's dependency

In his provocative study *Give a Man a Fish*, anthropologist James Ferguson (2015) challenges the cliché that instead of giving a man a fish, he should be taught how to fish himself. In the context of Southern Africa, Ferguson notes, to '[t]each a man to fish is just a good way of creating an unemployed fisherman' (Ferguson 2015:95). The Euro-American ideal of independence through providing for one's own income is unreachable in the contemporary Southern African economical setting, and therefore, Southern African countries have decided to shift towards direct cash transfers in the form of social grants. It makes people dependent, but scholars and activists should no longer be afraid of dependency; Ferguson (2015:236) argues that dependency is the solution, '[m]oving today may be less about getting or losing your job and more about finding a place where you have people who can care for you'. Freedom does not come from independence but from a plurality of opportunities for dependence (Ferguson 2015:310). Hierarchical dependence is the principal mechanism for achieving social personhood within the Southern African context. People are incorporated into the community, and being someone continues to imply belonging to someone, to be taken up in 'personalistic relations of dependence' (Ferguson 2015:311). Both the economic situation and the traditional Southern African form of society make it undesirable to strive for independence for people. It is unrealistic to strive for independency, and it does

not fit the Southern African concept of personhood either. The ideal in Southern Africa is not to be independent but rather to find someone reliable upon whom one can be dependent. This does not necessarily impede someone's freedom because everyone has a choice in the patron to whom they entrust themselves. Ferguson (2015:345-346) concludes that within the Southern African context, 'the task is not to eliminate dependence but to construct a desirable form of it'.

The economic situation that Ferguson describes is remarkably similar to the religious situation after the rise of Ministries International. Christians no longer strive for the independence of being their own priest within a priesthood of all believers, but they submit willingly to the absolute authority of the big man or woman of God. They strive to be incorporated in the global community of people of God through a hierarchical tie to their pastor or prophet. Yet within this dependency, there is still freedom, namely, the freedom to choose to which big man or woman of God someone turns with his or her religious need. As Kenyan scholar of religion J.N.K. Mugambi (2016) observes:

In most nations of Tropical Africa it is normal to find almost all possible forms of ecclesiastical structure and liturgical expression, all co-existing within a small area, both rural and urban. (p. 241)

The freedom in the context of Ministries International is that individuals can choose on which prophet or pastor they are going to depend.

Anthropologist Naomi Haynes (2014:360) sees the relationships between church leaders and laypeople reflecting 'the importance of "dependence" in southern Africa [...] by connecting religiously superior pastors and prophets to the believers who depend on them for access to spiritual resources'. The individual freedom is not in independence or in a priesthood of all believers but in the ability to determine one's own dependency through one's own choice.

Christians in Africa are not trapped in a particular group but move freely in their quest to find the service deliverer who can address their religious need. This need includes the submission to an authoritarian big man or woman of God, which appears to be undesirable from the perspective of the ideal type of an egalitarian congregation with a priesthood of all believers. Yet, in regards to the authoritarian big man, Naomi Haynes (2015:287) notes, 'this arrangement reflects exactly what they want from their religious adherence: an established hierarchy of charisma that facilitates relationships of religious dependence,' arguing that:

[F]or all that Pentecostal worship underscores the capacity of this religion to create hierarchical ties, it also contains within itself the tools to replace existing relationships with new ones as necessary. (p. 287)

Within the worldwide ecumenical community, people choose their dependence.

Anthropologist John McCauley (2012) notes for Ghana:

Internal competition among Pentecostal big men also replicates the horizontal competition evident in the conventional patronage context; patrons seek the biggest following possible to meet their clients' desire for a leader with external renown, leading to jockeying amongst Pentecostal pastors that mirrors the efforts of competing ethnic-based big men. (p. 13)

Neo-Pentecostal pastors of Ministries International are extremely authoritarian big men or women, anointed to almost take the place of God, but individual believers have freedom in choosing which of these big men or women they allow to fulfil their religious needs. Through church-hopping or the possibility of church-hopping, believers still have their freedom, the freedom to choose which anointed man or woman of God is going to be their representative of Christ himself in that instance.

The situation is a situation of dependency, but it is a situation in which both sides – as patron and client – are bound together. Believers submit in complete obedience to their pastor or prophet, but he or she must ensure that their

followers do not go to the next pastor or prophet. There is a kind of independence in the fact that believers can choose their own dependency.

## ■ **The government adapting to the shift in type of religious community**

In recent years, there have been calls in several African countries, such as South Africa, Zambia, Botswana and Kenya, to 'regulate' religion. These calls are in more than one way related to the rise of Ministries International on the continent. The government commission in South Africa that investigated this matter from 2015 to 2017 wrote in their report (CRL Rights Commission 2017) that the occasion for their research was:

[R]ecent controversial news reports and articles in the media about pastors instructing their congregants to eat grass, snakes, drink petrol or part with considerable sums of money to be guaranteed a miracle or blessing. (p. 6)

Pastors of Ministries International can ask all kind of odd things from their clients both because of their alleged anointing and to prove that anointing. The government commission (CRL Rights Commission 2017:6) is, on the one hand, worried about the commercialisation of religion given with the rise of Ministries International, but, on the other hand, their recommendation to regulate religion or encourage religion to self-regulate is in itself a sign of an adaptation to a kind of commercialisation. As the government deals with a plurality concerning religion, we see that it does not consider itself to be dealing with different segments of society and their representatives but rather with a collection of spiritual service providers and their clients.

Religions are not treated as associations of people but as institutions that offer services to clients in the way commercial institutions do. Interestingly, in describing their work, the commission speaks of 'traditional healers, spiritual leaders, religious leaders and *their* religious communities' (CRL Rights

Commission 2017:5, my emphasis, HK), instead of the other way around – communities and *their* leaders. Religion does not consist of groups of people, who hire someone to facilitate their communal activities; rather, religion is treated as leaders who have followers or clients. These recent developments are an adaptation by the government to the shift in type of religious community given with the rise of Ministries International, which has been described in this chapter. The clearest example of this is what has happened in Zambia.

In 1991, President Frederick Chiluba declared Zambia a Christian nation, thereby acknowledging the ecumenically wide conception of a religious community within which ‘we are all Christians’. Zambia is not declared a nation of different religious groups – Catholics, Reformers, Pentecostals and so forth – but Zambia is declared a religious nation. Whether one visits this Ministries International or frequents that prophet or belongs to yet another church is not that important; everyone is Christian and obtains the services that match their religious needs wherever they can find them. Significantly, the declaration was applauded by the Neo-Pentecostal Ministries International and criticised by the traditional missionary churches who upheld the ideal type of congregations. Despite the protest by their representatives, many members in the traditional missionary churches, however, share the feeling ‘we are all Christians’ and do not oppose the declaration of Zambia being a Christian nation. The type of religious community that it represents fits the perspective of people connected to Ministries International and mainline churches alike. By being in Zambia, everyone is included in the ecumenically open ritual system, and within that system, individuals obtain the religious services that they need.

In 2016, President Edgar Lungu introduced a new government ministry in Zambia, the Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs. This was presented as complementary to the declaration of Zambia as a Christian nation. Again, this

development was criticised by the leadership of the traditional missionary churches with their ideal type of congregation but applauded by many Ministries International.

One task for the Ministry of Religious Affairs is to deal with 'interdenominational dialogue', but its first task is to deal with 'Christian affairs' in general (Sumaili 2017:1-2). The ministry's work does not focus on how to deal with different religious groups of people but on how to regulate those who present themselves as service providers for the community of the entire Christian nation of Zambia. As in the case of the South African commission, in this move towards regulation, the ministry speaks of religious leaders and *their* churches, instead of speaking of religious communities and *their* representatives. In a declaration to Parliament, the minister (Sumaili 2017:5) stated that her ministry 'will bring various instruments before Parliament aimed at enhancing accountability and the integrity of people of the collar and their churches and organisations'. The 'people of the collar' are treated as patrons to particular sets of clients. In an interview, the new minister said she wants to flush out false prophets. She presents herself as a regulator and church-mother-bodies as branch organisations where she wants to encourage self-regulation. She (cited in Mwenda & Goma 2017) says:

[F]irst we should start with the mother-bodies themselves, are they fit to be a church-mother-body? Do they have systems of accountability in place? Accounting systems? Staffing? The equipment? The records, do they have an effective board? All those things and then they have to now apply those systems to their members. (n.p.)

The kinds of things that are mentioned here make it clear that churches are not seen as groups of people but as service providers. The accountability of these pastors or service providers should be in order, their staffing, equipment and so forth. The religious community is not seen as a well-defined group of people with a shared commitment or activity like a soccer club, but the religious community includes everyone by definition in Zambia as a Christian nation. Churches or Ministries International offer services to members of this wide community in the same way as

a hairdresser provides services to the public. As the government deals with the plurality surrounding religion, it is not dealing with different segments of society and their representatives but rather with a collection of spiritual service providers and their clients. The move towards 'regulation' shows that the government does not consider pastors as group representatives or community leaders but as entrepreneurs who offer particular services to the entire community that is represented by the government.

In the African way of thinking, churches and ministries are considered to be healing sites, healing and religion belong together. This attitude may be reflected in the fact that the government does not address pastors as community leaders who represent a particular group or neighbourhood, but pastors are treated more like medical doctors as well. Doctors provide services to the community, and in their hospitals, one will find a gathering of people, but these people do not form a community in themselves, nor would the government ask doctors to speak on behalf of this haphazard group of people in their hospitals.

The way in which the Government of Zambia deals with religion illustrates the new Africanised type of religious community. The urge to *regulate* religious leaders on behalf of society instead of *consulting* them to hear about the wishes of a particular segment of society demonstrates that the government presupposes a Ministries International model of the church as described in this chapter, rather than the ideal type of the congregation. The basic religious community is not a particular group organised through formal rules or contracts but the entire nation. In the context of this wider community, temporary gatherings surrounding particular service providers emerge through natural, organic processes. Within this context, ecumenism is an assumed fact – all Zambians are by definition part of the Christian nation. Members of this wide community look around to see where they can obtain the religious services that satisfy their needs. Ministries International with their prophets and pastors provide these services, and the government assigned

the Minister of National Guidance and Religious Affairs to regulate this marketplace of religious service providers on behalf of the common people who make use of these services.

## ■ **Unity and dialogue in the church as theological ideal**

In 1996, the Kenyan theologian Orobator (1996) complained that:

With very limited exception African ecclesiologists adopt a facile and descriptive approach. Their treatment of ecclesiological themes lacks analytical and theological depth and weight, making their work hardly distinguishable from that of anthropologists, sociologists and ethnologists. (p. 279)

Without entering into the discussion of whether this judgement was fair or is still fair, I have to admit that so far these two chapters on the concept of community have been largely descriptive. I doubt that I can provide the 'depth and weight' that Orobator is looking for, but, in this final section, I wish to make some theological proposals for how to deal with the Africanisation of the type of religious community described in this chapter.

Unity and dialogue in the church have traditionally been theological ideals to strive for. This has been done in many different ways, both worldwide and in Africa. As I (Kroesbergen 2018b) have described elsewhere, if we look at the past century, we see that in the 1960s, institutional ecumenism was the dominant form of ecumenism. Different churches tried to solve their differences in doctrine in order to promote unity and dialogue. In Zambia, for example, a number of Protestant mission churches joined together to form one new church, the UCZ. In the 1980s, the goal of ecumenism shifted towards working together in common social, political and economic struggles. In many African countries, including Zambia, the churches as a united force played an important role in the transformation towards a multiparty democracy. The rise of Ministries International afterwards made both institutional dialogue on



doctrinal issues and institutional cooperation on sociopolitical issues nearly impossible because, on the one hand, the number of institutions exploded, which rendered dialogue and cooperation highly impractical, and, on the other hand, the value of institutions diminished. Political theorist Ruth Marshall (2009) states:

Pentecostalism, perhaps more than other form of Protestantism, provides the contemporary archetype of Christianity as ‘a community without an institution’, but a community of a new type, in keeping with the forms of diffuse, individualized, virtualized and non-isomorphic forms of connectedness in our globalized world. (p. 208)

Through the Pentecostalisation of Christianity in Africa across the board, most African Christians now live their faith in ‘a community without an institution’. On top of that, as noted above, at grassroots level, ecumenism was no longer seen as a high, almost unreachable goal but was considered to be an already assumed fact, ‘we are all Christians’.

Instead of fighting rearguard battles trying to return to churches and congregations, we might accept this shift in type of religious community described in this chapter and ask what this means for unity and dialogue in the church as a theological ideal. The African concept of community should not be seen in a romantic light – it has its own problems and risks – but, given that the church in the new heartland of Christianity no longer consists of churches with congregations but of religious service providers and their Ministries International, how could we now re-conceptualise the ideal of unity and dialogue in the church?

## ■ A community of pilgrims

In his African American systematic theological work, *We have been believers*, James H. Evans Jr. (2012) proposes two concepts to think through what it means for the church to be a community in the African American setup. I think these concepts are useful in dealing theologically with the Africanisation of the type of religious community described in this chapter as well. The first concept that Evans (2012:147) considers to be important is

‘Victor Turner’s concept of “communitas”’. Anthropologist Turner (cited in Evans 2012:147) derived this concept from his study of pilgrimages, ‘[i]n his work as a cultural anthropologist, Turner observed among religious groups who made pilgrimages a distinctive type of social bond’. Pilgrims meet each other along the way; they did not plan to be there together, but they just find themselves in each other’s company because they are *en route* to the same goal. Evans (2012:147) quotes Turner, according to whom *communitas* ‘remains open and unspecialized, a spring of pure possibility as well as the immediate realization of release from day-to-day structural necessities and obligatoriness’. *Communitas* seeks ‘to extend its influence throughout whole populations [...] a living model of human brotherhood and sisterhood’ (Evans 2012:147). The wide, inclusive, ecumenical perspective on community that was discussed above can be found in the *communitas* among pilgrims. Institutions still exist, but their value is diminished. Denominations may still be there, but they are not as relevant as before, because in the current concrete circumstances we are all simply pilgrims. Evans (2012) continues quoting Turner:

Social and cultural structures are not abolished by *communitas* and anamnesis, but the sting of their divisiveness is removed so that the fine articulation of their parts in a complex heterogenous unity can be better appreciated. (p. 147)

The community of the pilgrims is a community of communities, as Orobator characterised the African concept of community. ‘Differences are accepted or tolerated’, Evans (2012:148) concludes his quotations from Turner.

The second concept that Evans (2012:148) proposes as the foundation for an African or African American ecclesiology is the German theologian Emil Brunner’s notion of *ekklesia*. Evans (2012:148-149) describes that, ‘[i]n this ideal community, the bonds are not formal or structured, but are free-flowing, other-centered expressions of *agape*’. The relationships are not formal but relationships happen in a natural, organic way between concrete people who find themselves making up the community

at that time and place. To meet some formal requirements is not what matters but to be other-centred, to listen to others and always choose for relationships with others, as was discussed in the final section of the previous chapter. Within the *communitas* of pilgrims or the *ekklesia*, formal institutions have lost their value. The *ekklesia*, like the band of pilgrims, is a community without an institution. Evans (2012:149) quotes Brunner, '[t]he brotherhood can *have* laws and institutions but it can never regard these as belonging to its *essence*. But, above all, it can never *understand itself as an institution*'. The institutions do not matter that much. Along the way, the individual Christian may listen to this fellow traveller or to that one – weak forms of institution may arise, but these are secondary.

Nimi Wariboko in his study on Nigerian Pentecostalism emphasises the non-institutional aspect of community as well. In discussion with political theorist Ruth Marshall, who, according to Wariboko (2014:169), 'presupposes that a community or the notion of a community must be based on some essence, idea, or project', Wariboko (2014:199) introduces the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of 'the inoperative community'. Nancy criticises romantic pictures of community as a harmonious and caring group of people with a single goal in mind helping each other to reach that goal. These kinds of romantic communities are without exception placed in a lost past or a forever retreating future, according to Nancy. We might add that these romantic communities can also be placed in unreachably faraway places like Africa, given the similar romantic concept of community that was critically discussed in the previous chapter. 'Inoperative community' is Nancy's alternative conception – it is a community that is not built upon a shared project to work on (Wariboko 2014:200). Community is not about a higher purpose around which a group of people gather, he holds, but what makes a community is simply the coming together.

According to Wariboko (2014:200, 170), Nancy 'argues that community is not about communion, an essence, but about being-together, being *ex-posed* to one another', it is 'an unbounded

community'. There are obvious similarities here with the inclusiveness of the African concept of community discussed in the previous chapter, made up of exposed individuals with not only their close relationships but also the risks of group pressure and a lack of freedom. Wariboko (2014:199) recognises in Nancy's inoperative community the kind of community that is present in Nigerian Pentecostalism, '[c]ommunity does not constitute a higher identity for the Pentecostal subject'. The community as lived in Africa is not built on an overarching institution or idea but consists of the concrete people who make up that community. Therefore, in a sense, Wariboko (2014:199) argues, 'Pentecostal community is always coming, always marking its passage without ever fully presenting itself, always a coming about'. The unity is never there but merely present as an obviously unreachable final state, when one's Ministries International will be truly international.

The band of pilgrims mentioned above is a good example of a community based on such an elusive idea of unity. One may feel close to some fellow pilgrims along the way, but it makes no sense to start trying to formulate in what idea or doctrine this unity consists. It is clear that no one has an overview of all the people on the way – behind and in front – and tomorrow the company in which one finds oneself might be very different. Wariboko (2014:199) continues, quoting Nancy, '[i]t is this "infinite resistance to everything that would bring it to completion" that defines Pentecostal spirituality, subjectivity, and community'. Unity is something that is perpetually coming. Unity cannot be presupposed for the different groups or denominations – one may try to formulate what is the Reformed position on a particular topic, but tomorrow one will find a Reformed brother or sister who holds the opposite; or one formulates what position a Roman Catholic would never hold and right behind this person is the Roman Catholic who defends just that position. Unity is not the basis of groups or denominations, nor is unity a workable ideal to strive for. Community is not a project, it is not built around a work; community as it is lived in Africa in general and in its faith after the shift towards Ministries International means to simply

find oneself in the presence of others. As discussed in the previous chapter, there is no higher goal than simply the social harmony within the community. The individuals who make up the community do not connect with each other through formalised relationships but directly, openly and vulnerably.

Orobator (1996:270) quotes approvingly Douglas Waruta's description of the African perspective on the church as a community of faith where the presence of God is experienced 'not through some documents or traditions but in the context of [...] community life and existential realities, with little regard or references to external validating authorities'. Concrete people and their mutual relationships take precedence over ideas or formal criteria in an Africanised type of religious community. The church is not like a closely knit nuclear family but like the open African concept of the extended family, which the theologian Zablon Nthamburi describes as 'a participatory community where discipline, self-control and tolerance make it possible for all members to work together for the Kingdom of God' (cited in Orobator 1996:271). The church is a wide, ecumenical and open-ended community along the way. Individual believers shift from a dependency upon this person to a dependency upon that prophet to find whoever moves them forward. The concrete community of the people who find themselves in each other's presence keep each other in line through discipline, self-control and tolerance and through jealousy and suspicion, as described in the previous chapter, moving and trying to maintain social harmony among the people who happen to be present.

The unity of the church is Victor Turner's *communitas* of pilgrims. As for pilgrims, institutions are of merely secondary importance; as in Emil Brunner's *ekklesia*, the unity of the church is not a project but forever given in simply being together and forever absent as an external idea, as in Jean-Luc Nancy's inoperative community.

Given this situation, unity in the church is not something to be sought in institutional dialogue on doctrinal issues; unity in the

church is not something to be sought in institutional cooperation on sociopolitical issues, but unity in the church is simultaneously given and absent in a dialogue on faith between individual believers in their encounters as pilgrims along the way. In the final section of this chapter, I will elaborate on this faith dialogue, which in the current circumstances should carry the weight – and lightness – of unity and dialogue in the church as theological ideal.

## ■ Faith dialogue

Among the people of the church as a wide and open-ended community of pilgrims, there are many disagreements and other forms of disunity. People belong to many different denominations and frequent many different Ministries International. If we pay attention to the actual practices and beliefs of people, many other forms of disunity and unity appear. Charismatic interdenominational fellowships unite people who feel they are closer to one another than to many who belong to their own churches. There are fellow pastors in my own denomination who seem farther from me than many people from other churches. Not focussing on institutions and denominations helps us to see the opportunities and challenges of ecumenism at a deeper, more real level. Now how should we deal with the disunity that we find on that level? How can we work ecumenically with the differences on that level? The former Anglican archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, provides an interesting suggestion in this respect in his opening article in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics* (2012).

According to Williams (2012:8), in the Christian context, we should try to receive every action of one's fellow believers as their 'gift to the life of the Body'. It is a gift in the sense that it is given within a network of relationships at a specific time and place. Someone should try to see if one can treat the action of the other as a gift to that same Body of Christ to which this person him- or herself belongs as well and try to receive it in such a manner, for both are part of that same wide community.

There are cases when this can be very difficult. Williams (2012) gives a personal example:

I believe it is impossible for a Christian to tolerate [...] the manufacture [...] of weapons of mass destruction [...] And having said that I believe it is impossible, I at once have to recognize that Christians do it; not thoughtless, shallow, uninstructed Christians, but precisely those who make themselves accountable to the central truths of our faith. (pp. 9–10)

Williams still completely disagrees with these fellow Christians, but he tries to receive their actions also as gifts to the Body of Christ. He still argues with all his might against their position, but he tries to see whether they can maybe teach him something nonetheless.

Interestingly, Williams uses the community as it stretches out over time to make his point. Just like we are historically in one and the same communion with Christians who defended slavery, so there are contemporaries with whom we completely disagree, but with whom we share communion nonetheless (Williams 2012):

I may understand at least in part why earlier generations considered slavery to be compatible with the gospel [...] I may thus see something of what Christ meant to them, and receive something of Christ from them, even as I conclude that they were dangerously deluded in their belief about what was involved in serving Christ. (p. 13)

These people, who held such – from our perspective – extremely wrong positions, belong to our community, so why would one even consider excluding a brother or sister with whom we have a much milder disagreement? A Christian, according to Williams (2012:15), is committed to ‘belonging with Christian strangers – past, present and future – do we think often enough of our communion with Christians from the future?’ It is easy to recognise here the African concept of community discussed in these two past chapters:

- the community that includes the living-dead or ancestors on the one hand and the yet-to-be-born on the other

- the community also that because of this inclusiveness in many ways is a community of strangers, as was discussed in the previous chapter.

Nonetheless, it may be the case that, says Williams (2012:10), ‘my inability to recognize anything of gift in another’s policy, another’s discernment, might make it a nonsense to pretend to stay in the same communion’. Sometimes we have to say that we cannot recognise someone as fellow Christian or fellow pilgrim on the way any longer but this is a radical step, which should not be taken lightly. Looking at Bonhoeffer who reached this point over the issue of anti-Jewish legislation during the Nazi regime, Williams holds that we can never determine this boundary in advance. There are no general and abstract answers in this respect, no formal rules or no external ideas, which determine who does and who does not belong to the community. Yet, according to Williams (2012):

[T]here are times when the risky decision called for is to recognise that we are no longer speaking the same language at all, no longer seeking to mean the same things, to symbolise or communicate the same vision of who God is. But that moment itself only emerges from the constantly self-critical struggle to find out who I am and who we are in and who we are in and as the Body of Christ. (pp. 12-13)

There can be a time that unity is no longer the goal. As Williams (2012:14) writes, ‘[u]nity at all costs is indeed not a Christian goal; Christian unity is “Christ-shaped” or it is empty’.

Just like Jesus vehemently opposed the Pharisees and Paul often stressed unity but maybe even more often denounced false teachers within the same Christian communities, so we should not make ecumenical unity our main goal. Nonetheless, we should try to hold on to it as long as possible, trying to receive the other’s action or discernment as his or her gift to the Body of Christ. If we see that the other also tries to follow God’s directions, if the other also seriously attempts to listen to the Bible, if the other also with all his or her might wants to be obedient to the living Christ, maybe we will still differ, but we should remain in communion. Williams (2012) refers to the ‘grammar of obedience’ that we should recognise in the other:



So long as we still have a language in common and the 'grammar of obedience' in common, we have, I believe, to turn away from the temptation to seek the purity and assurance of a community speaking with only one voice and embrace the reality of living in a communion that is fallible and divided. (p. 12)

So, Williams proposes to use two criteria. As long as people speak the same Christian language and as long as we can see that people genuinely try to obey Christ, we should not break communion with them, however different and – in our eyes – wrong they may be.

I think this is a useful approach that can help us in many differences in the church, especially in the church as the kind of religious community described in these two chapters. It may show a way to more ecumenical unity despite our differences, our conflicts and our brokenness. This approach is an opportunity for ecumenism on a deeper level than cleverly crafted theological documents or praiseworthy social action. However, there are some issues and challenges here. Let me mention four examples from where I am, personally, at the time of writing. The first two are of cases in which my fellow Christians may not recognise the grammar of obedience in me, where they may rightfully say that I am not seriously engaged in trying to be obedient to the Bible.

There are cases in which it will be difficult for others to see in me that I seriously try to be obedient to the Bible, cases where I personally would not engage in trying to provide a faithful exegesis of the Bible, either because these cases are too serious for that – strange as it may seem – or because they are too trivial. An example of a case that is too serious for me would be the allowing of women in the pulpit. I feel that I would betray my female colleagues if I would try to prove that the Bible allows them to be pastors. For me, that is something that does not need proving – just like I would not feel very safe around someone who does not kill me because the law says 'thou shalt not kill'. If that law is the *reason* that someone does not kill me, I would think there is something very wrong. Similarly with women in the pulpit, if proper exegesis is the *reason* that someone allows women in

the pulpit, I think he or she is questioning the certainty of that fact in a way that to me feels unacceptable. I see the Spirit at work in many of my female colleagues just as well as in men. I do not think that I defend this position because of pressure from my culture. It does not feel that hereby I am compromising the Bible in any way. I do not feel the need to engage in serious exegesis about this point. I am also suspicious that the people who oppose women being allowed in the pulpit are making a political rather than a religious point. Here the challenge is to hear what people say even if the pictures they use may disguise that, as discussed in Chapter 3.

Yet some people in my own church – and definitely some people in the wider community of pilgrims on the way – are opposed to women in the pulpit. Asking them to see the seriousness of my position, they will not be able to see me engaging in serious Bible study on this point. For me, the matter is beyond that. So, could someone see the grammar of obedience in me? Maybe, but this could be difficult because I do not wish to engage in serious biblical exegesis on this point.

On the other end of the spectrum is drinking alcohol. To me, that is not a religious or even moral issue at all, whereas many of my fellow believers in my own church vehemently oppose it. To me, this is not an issue at all of serious Bible study, not because it is so serious or so important but because it is so *not* important to me. So, how could I ask a fellow Christian to see the grammar of obedience in me in this respect? There will not be much to be seen.

From the other side, something that I find hard to accept as a gift to the Body of Christ is the authoritarian approach of pastors in Ministries International that was discussed above, the anointed man or woman of God who appears to occupy almost the place of Christ. As David Ngong (2014a:89) observes, ‘the danger of confusing leaders of Pentecostal groups with Christ is one that is common to all of Pentecostalism’. Can I recognise a group where the leader is confused with Christ from time to time still as

Christian? Many of these anointed pastors may not recognise me as Christian or not as a real Christian at least, can I then still accept them as a gift to the Body of Christ nonetheless?

Another example of where I find it hard to see the grammar of obedience, even in many colleagues in my own church, concerns the quest for health and wealth through Christianity. If I hear a preacher merely mentioning the words 'prosperity' or 'breakthrough', whatever he or she says about it, I feel a huge gap opening up between us, whereas I suppose that other congregants – maybe those frequenting some Ministries International – will feel very much spoken to. The so-called holistic emphasis on prosperity and success, which I will continue to discuss in Chapter 7, makes it often very hard for me to recognise someone as a fellow Christian – is this still worshipping the same God, or is this worshipping any God at all? If success and prosperity are what someone wants, is this person trying to be obedient to Christ, to be faithful to the Bible? I find that very difficult to see. I try to hear a gift to the Body of Christ in these sermons, but it is difficult for me to see that they are trying to follow Christ here. So, being ecumenical here is a very hard job, within the wide community of Christian pilgrims and, in this case, even among fellow pastors in my own church.

Yet Rowan Williams' approach of looking for the grammar of obedience in fellow Christians and accepting actions as a gift to the Body of Christ when we are able to recognise this obedience even in believers with whom we wholeheartedly disagree is helpful. It provides a way to uphold unity and dialogue in the church as a theological ideal within the context of the type of religious community currently lived in Africa. This approach can provide a way to ecumenically live with our differences without hiding or denying them. However, there are challenges as well, cases where I think fellow Christians may have a hard time recognising obedience in me and cases where I have a hard time recognising obedience in others. I gave four examples, but these are still general; when we meet from person to person at a specific

time and place, only then may we be forced to decide whether or not we are speaking the same language, seeking the same things, worshipping the same God and can continue to travel together or not.

## ■ Conclusion

The church in Africa is flourishing and vibrant, but its churches and Ministries International are different from their Euro-American counterparts in more ways than just their flourishing and vibrancy. In this chapter, I have shown how the African concept of community described in the previous chapter is reflected in Christianity in Southern Africa. Churches in Southern Africa are not or are no longer worship communities in the Euro-American sense of the word, as can be seen in the recent shift from churches with congregations to prophets with Ministries International. New churches pop up every day in Southern Africa; however, often they do not call themselves a church but rather Ministries International. These ministries are focussed on their founding man or woman of God or prophet and the ministry or service that he or she can deliver for the participants. The Ministries International are not communities, in the sense of local groups of people, but they are universal service providers for whoever needs that particular religious service from this anointed man or woman of God. Churches and Ministries International do not need to bother about ecumenical dialogue or cooperation, because at the grassroots level people already feel ecumenical. We are all Christians, whether we go to this Ministries International or frequent that prophet.

Ministries International have Africanised the type of religious community in Africa, changing the purpose of religious meetings from shared worship to obtaining a service, transforming the role of the pastor from facilitator to big man or woman of God and redefining ecumenism from an unreachable goal to an already assumed fact.

The religious community in Ministries International is not a formal club of which one can be a member; it is not a well-defined group of people with a shared commitment or activity like a soccer club, but the religious community includes everyone by definition and, from time to time, individuals obtain religious services from this or that provider like the people in a town from time to time visit this or that hairdresser. Pastors have become more like doctors with hospitals than like community leaders who represent a group or neighbourhood. Christians submit to a particular authoritarian religious service provider, but they can choose which service provider they want to submit to. The religious community stretches beyond particular pastors or Ministries International, and within that wider community of strangers, people keep each other in check to ensure that the social harmony is never threatened.

Ministries International are organic and fluid, and those who lead them need no formal qualifications, merely God's anointing. More and more people feel free to choose wherever they want to attend a religious meeting, but within the context of such a meeting one submits completely to that particular a man or woman of God, for they are considered to be chosen by God himself. It leaves believers free and vulnerable to abuse at the same time. There is an ecumenical, wide and open-ended community of Christians beyond restricting and divisive institutions, but this means that the advantages of formal institutions such as education and legal security are lacking as well.

Within this context, relationships are informal and institutions have lost their value; the community of the church has become a diverse, multifaceted band of pilgrims, all journeying, however imperfectly, together towards God. If we accept the shift in the religious community that occurred with the rise of Ministries International in Southern Africa – which, given global developments, might foreshadow the future of Christianity as a whole – then ways need to be found to enable and encourage a

dialogue of faith within this wide band of pilgrims. As long as Christians share a common language, a common desire to obey Christ, and are able to receive each other's actions and opinions as a gift to the Body of Christ, genuine faith dialogue should still be possible and unity in the church as theological ideal is not entirely lost, although its meaning has shifted. Formal connections or doctrinal agreements can no longer form the basis of a dialogue of faith, but recognising a shared language and a shared commitment to be obedient to Christ might be its starting point. Within a substantial dialogue about faith during the chance encounters among pilgrims – which is neither based upon old institutions nor a prelude to new institutions – Christians can discover moments of the unity of believers that Jesus prayed for. In the next chapter, however, we will consider a concept that might provide difficulties within such a dialogue, namely, holism, in particular concerning blessings and salvation.



# Holism: In blessings and salvation

## ■ Introduction

In this chapter, I will turn to the concept of holism. Within theology in Africa, the term 'holism' is used for many different things. It is used to refer to the unity between the spirit world and the material world, to the power that is present in things and words as much as it is in people and to the emphasis on community instead of on the individual – all of which have been discussed in previous chapters. Most often, however, it is used to refer to salvation or the blessings that believers may expect as a reward for their faith. Holistic salvation is said to be not only about spiritual matters but also about material ones – the entire human being should be saved here and now. African Traditional Religions used to focus on ways of helping people and solving their problems and that is what many Christians in Africa expected from their new religion. Christians in Africa look for holistic salvation, not only their souls should be saved but also

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their bodies or, rather, first of all their bodies. What matters, first of all, is to live a happy life here and now.

Despite the fact that traces of this perspective can be found in the Bible and the Christian tradition as well, there appears to be a big gap here with the traditional Christian mainline perspective on salvation. Salvation from sin, restoration of one's relationship with God and a future in heaven are concepts which seem central in classical Christianity, but which do not seem to play a big role for Christians in Africa. If this is a genuine shift, it would be of central importance for the nature of Christianity; if someone is not interested in deliverance from sin, spiritual salvation and the restoration of his or her relationship with God, is he or she still what traditionally was considered to be 'a Christian'? Does being a Christian in Africa mean to be disconnected from mainline Christianity or – put the other way around, given the numerical shifts in global Christianity – has the traditional Christian perspective on salvation become obsolete in what is becoming the new mainstream Christianity, Christianity in Africa? These questions will be critically discussed in this chapter by focussing on the meaning of the holistic blessing that Christians in Africa supposedly expect.

Firstly, I will show how pervasive the concept is that religion in Africa is about a quest for holistic salvation. I will then begin to investigate the possibility that there is a different spirit behind this materialistic approach to Christianity by introducing a distinction between causal and conceptual connections. After this, I will apply the idea of conceptual connections in providing an alternative interpretation of the most prominent exponent of the quest for holistic blessings, the prosperity gospel. The implications of this reinterpretation for what it means to be blessed will be explored next. I will continue by investigating how it can be determined, in the kind of life people live, which spirit is behind the prevalent quest for holistic salvation within Christianity in Africa. Finally, I will argue that the spirit behind the talk of holistic salvation cannot be a bit of both – materialistic and spiritual.

## ■ The quest for holistic salvation

The focus of African theology or the theology of inculturation has often been on liturgy and other kinds of presentation of theology, rather than on the content of theology. In an overview of contextual theological methodologies in African theology, Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator (2010:7) states that in 'the methodology of inculturation', '[t]he focus was to use songs, colours and liturgical gestures drawn from the host cultures'. The idea was that the message of Christianity is clear, so now theologians have to look for the best way to communicate that message to this particular culture. The bread of Holy Communion that was used in the original context was the local staple food, so if Christians want to have a Southern African kind of Holy Communion, maybe they should use *nshima* or *pap* – the local staple food – instead of bread. The forms change, but the content or the message remains the same.

More and more, however, this kind of inculturation was considered not to go far enough. One should not only enculturate the forms but also the message itself. This is where the holistic concept of salvation comes in. In this context, it is often said that the African worldview is holistic. In particular, people in Africa are said to have a holistic view of salvation. Salvation is not only about spiritual matters but also about material ones – the entire human being should be saved.

Now, the word 'holistic' is actually a bit of a euphemism. It implies that people in Africa want to save both soul and body, but, actually, as scholars of religion Andre Corten and Ruth Marshall-Fratini (2001:7) observe, they do not care very much about the soul-aspect, '[s]alvation is now absolutely this-worldly, and the evidence of new life has become as much material as spiritual'. The focus is not on the continued existence of the soul after this life but purely on this world. Describing South African Zionists, D. Hammond-Tooke (1989:136) notes that their 'main characteristic is a view of salvation as primarily concerned with health and vitality in the here and now'.

For Nigerian Pentecostals, anthropologist Richard Burgess (2008:44) argues that '[p]rosperity teaching in Nigerian Pentecostal discourse is partly a reaction to the "poverty" gospel that has characterized much of Christian spirituality'. Here Burgess echoes a sentiment that can be heard in many Neo-Pentecostal sermons throughout Africa; a major problem with traditional mainline churches is alleged to be that they would preach that poverty is something good and noble. Similarly, anthropologist Birgit Meyer (2004:459) observes that many Neo-Pentecostal churches 'represent prosperity as a God-given blessing and resent the mainline churches for legitimizing poverty by referring to Jesus Christ as a poor man'. The idea is that people in Africa know about poverty already from their own experience, so in religion they look for a different story, for a way out.

Pentecostal theologian Kwame Asamoah-Gyadu (2010:63) observes that '[r]eligion in Africa is [...] a survival strategy'. This is why African people are attracted to Neo-Pentecostalism (Asamoah-Gyadu 2010):

[A] successful implementation of a healing and deliverance ministry, it is believed, paves the way for good health, success and prosperity in life. In short, Pentecostals preach a holistic concept of salvation. (p. 65)

Holistic or physical salvation is what people in Africa want, so they go to churches that offer such salvation. What is particularly attractive for Africans in Neo-Pentecostal practices, according to Asamoah-Gyadu (2013:63), is the resonance with a 'problem-solving approach to religion', which is said to have a long history on the continent.

Even if the African view is holistic, including both spiritual and material aspects, the emphasis is on material salvation first. In a textbook on African theology, John Parratt (1995), quoting Charles Nyamiti, states that:

African religion tends to be materialistic, for 'the African approaches God not chiefly in order to gain eternal life but rather to gain natural benefits demanded by human condition here and now'. (p. 76)

The important thing is that salvation materialistically improves someone's life in the here and now.

In a study on Reformed soteriology in Malawi, Handwell Yotamu Hara (2008) confirms this when he describes that:

In the old days, stress was laid on the appeasing of the spirits so that the people lived in peace. Salvation meant security or freedom from the troubles caused by these spirits. In this case, salvation had no connection with sin and man's reconciliation with God. It referred to man's relationship with his fellowmen and with ancestral spirits. Every person who was at peace with his fellowmen and his ancestors lived a happy life. (p. 139)

Salvation means to be at peace and live a happy life. Hara (2008) continues:

If anyone seeks to find the notion of salvation in the traditional Malawian (religion) beliefs, he will find that it is man's safety from physical danger and the security of all that keeps him alive, no more and no less. (p. 139)

To say that salvation in the traditional African worldview is holistic seems to be just a polite way to tell Christians from Europe and the USA that people in Africa think differently about salvation. It is not so much holistic but materialistic.

Hara (2008) himself, however, argues against this perspective:

Since the preservation of good health is all that is meant by salvation in traditional Malawian beliefs, there is nothing said about the restoration of man to his original state, it is right to say that the traditional beliefs fail to mediate salvation. (p. 169)

What is missing, according to Hara (2008:157), is the issue of sin, '[s]ince African understanding of salvation mainly refers to deliverance from physical evils, the question of sin is of less concern'. Here he quotes John Mbiti (1973), who states that:

Even if the question of sin features a great deal in missionary or historical churches, it is highly doubtful that African Christians understand its centrality in the New Testament teaching about atonement and redemption. A great deal of what is said about being 'saved from sin' is simply parrot-type indoctrination from the bringers of the Christian message. (p. 408)

Salvation from sin does not play any role for people in Africa because what they care about is salvation in their physical life. As John Parratt (1995:89) states, '[t]o view salvation as primarily deliverance from physical evil is to lead, in Mbiti's words, to "the eclipse of the atoning passion and the minimizing of sin"'. And as Kofi Appiah-Kubi (1981) adds:

The Euro-American Christian teaching on sin is such that it tends to be completely meaningless to the African; peaceful living with one's neighbors is far more important than any Western Christian teaching about sin. (p. 57)

All the talk about a holistic concept of salvation in the African worldview seems to boil down to a lack of interest in deliverance from sin and restoration of one's relationship with God, except in as far as such a relationship brings material blessings to the believer. All that really matters is to live a happy life here and now.

African theologian Laurenti Magesa (2010) traces this difference between the religion of many missionaries and that of the Africans to the difference between guilt cultures and shame cultures:

Salvation and redemption are categories relevant to guilt cultures, indicating the guilt from human sinfulness before God. In the shame cultures of Africa, however, the issues that prevent fullness of life are a result of humans failing to behave well before others. These issues include practical matters that bring pain and suffering, such as witchcraft, disease, lack of offspring, and disharmony among people and between human beings and the rest of creation. (p. 75)

Shame cultures do not think in terms of guilt before God that needs to be appeased; all they care about is the fullness of life and being respected in the community. 'What drives African indigenous spirituality', Magesa (2010:77) continues, is 'to obtain abundant life in this world, and in concrete terms'. The wholeness and salvation that one looks for is the abundance of life, not redemption from sin.

The general perception is that religion in Africa is about a quest for holistic salvation in the sense of an abundance of life in the here and now. This raises the question: why would someone

want to be a Christian if one is not interested in deliverance from sin, spiritual salvation and the restoration of one's relationship with God? Or, if someone does not care about that – which is this person's own choice in life – why would someone call him- or herself a Christian? In this chapter, however, I want to investigate the possibility that there is a different spirit behind this apparently materialistic approach to Christianity. Maybe it is not primarily the content but the imagery between traditional Christianity and Christianity in Africa that differs. We need to listen to what people say even if they use pictures different from ours, as was argued in Chapter 3. We should pay attention to the spirit behind the pictures, the probably different-from-the-ordinary way in which the pictures are used in everyday life, and listen to what people tell us irrespective of which pictures they use to do so. To see how there may be a less materialistic spirit behind what the many scholars quoted in this section observed, we need to make a distinction between causal and conceptual connections.

## ■ Causal or conceptual connections?

Do people in Africa practise religion because they expect holistic blessings from it? Does religion for people in Africa consist of a set of practices that can be used in order to obtain some material goods for their lives in the here and now in return? The scholars quoted in the previous section assume so. Yet this presupposes that the connections between people's religious practices and what happens to them afterwards are considered to be causal – religious practices cause physical wellbeing and abundance of life. In Chapter 4, it was discussed how seeing causal connections where there are none is a form of confusion and superstition, yet the connections between people's religious practices and what happens afterwards could also be connections of a different kind.

Imagine someone is cooking a meal for someone special. Just when a roommate is passing by, she exclaims that she hopes that the meal will be delicious and her roommate tells her, 'Be careful

what you wish for, for you may receive it'. And, indeed, he was right – she gets what she wished for, but not really what she wanted, as the special person for whom she cooked the meal finds it so enchantingly delicious that he does not notice her any longer. Now not only is she in an unfortunate situation – the special person does not notice her – but it is also a situation that she herself wished for. That the situation is what she herself said she wanted makes it worse; it makes it harder to bear this unfortunate situation and even makes her feel a bit guilty about it. The wish has changed the situation – which happened to be an unfortunate one – into a fulfilment of her wish at the same time.

Now, compare this with her roommate telling her, 'be careful with the curry paste, it may overpower all the other flavours in the sauce!' Again, he is right. The curry paste overpowers all the other flavours, and the meal turns out to be awful. Her own action of adding too much curry paste ruined the meal, and she feels guilty about it.

In both situations, the lady performed an action with the intention of producing a good meal to impress her special friend; in neither case did it go as planned, and in each situation she feels guilty because her own action, despite her having the best intentions, was connected to the unfortunate outcome. But the *kind of* connection between her action and the outcome is very different in these two cases.

In the case of adding the curry paste, there is a causal relation between the two events. A causal relation presupposes two separate events. The two events themselves are understandable on their own terms. It is clear what it is to add the curry paste, and it is clear what it is for a meal to taste awful. Firstly, there is the adding of too much curry paste, then there is the meal, which tastes one-dimensional. One may suspect that there is a relationship between the two events – one causing the other – but it is possible that it is later discovered that the curry paste was not the problem after all. The two events are separate, so they do not need to be related but we suspect that there is a relationship.

The relationship between the two events is *external*: it is a relationship between two events that are understandable as separate events. Through experiments, one could try to find out whether or not one is right in suspecting a causal relationship between two separately understandable events.

In the case of wishing, this is different. The wish changes the meal afterwards in a direct or internal way – through someone's wish, the meal becomes either 'the fulfilment of her wish' or 'not what she *really* wished for'. The event of the delicious meal being 'what you wished for' cannot exist without the other event, that is, the lady wishing the meal to be delicious. It makes no sense to imagine experiments to check whether it was really her wish that turned this meal into something that either she wished for or not, because the meal being something she wished for or not does not make sense on its own. It is internally connected to her making the wish. In this case, there are not two separately understandable events. In the case of adding the curry paste, there is a causal or external connection to whether the meal will be good. In the case of making the wish, there is an internal or conceptual connection to what the meal will be to her, namely, either the fulfilment of her wish or not.

Wittgensteinian philosopher of religion D.Z. Phillips (2001) gives the following example of an internal connection:

If I dream of the death of someone I dislike, and am told the next day that he died that night, I may well feel ashamed of my dream. What the dream becomes changes its aspect. I may not think that there is a causal connection between the dream and the death, but I see a moral connection between them. (p. 254)

For the person dreaming like this, the death has become something different. It has become the fulfilment of a more or less conscious wish. The dream did not cause the death in any direct way, but it changes the nature of that death. The outcome is different, now it is not merely a death but a subconsciously wished-for death. Not all connections must be causal, such conceptual or internal connections are just as real and are in the flow of people's lives often even more important.



There are some similarities in the contrast between external or causal relationships and conceptual or internal relationships that I am referring to here and the contrast between instrumentalist and expressivist interpretations of rituals that is common in anthropology and philosophy of religion. According to the instrumentalist interpretation, practitioners of religion use rituals as instruments to obtain goods that they desire. According to the expressivist interpretation, practitioners of religion merely express their wishes and desires in their rituals, without any further objective. The distinction between external and internal relationships that I am drawing here is different, because by acknowledging internal relationships, we see that rituals do, in fact, change reality – despite what expressivists would say – but not in an instrumental or causal way – despite what instrumentalists would say. By wishing for a good meal, the lady in our example goes beyond merely expressing her feelings because she changes the character of the meal, but she does not do so in a causal or instrumental way. According to an introduction to Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion (Clack 1999:67), Wittgenstein holds that 'talk of God is in some manner expressive of feelings, attitudes and emotions'. This does not fit with Wittgenstein's emphasis on internal connections. Rather, when someone says that she hopes that the meal will be delicious, her intention is not to express something of her feelings, she is not concerned with her desires first of all, but she is concerned with the meal. She says that she hopes that the meal will be delicious because she wants the meal to be delicious. Her focus is on the meal – the outside world and not on the wellbeing of her inner ruminations – the person inside. Similarly, when she adds more curry paste, she is also concerned with the outside world – the quality of the meal in this case – but at the same time, she may be expressing something about herself. For example, it may reveal that she likes spicy food, or perhaps that she has a daring personality. Forcing these actions of hoping for a good meal and adding curry paste into the framework of expressive versus instrumental – or 'anthropocentric' versus 'cosmocentric', to use anthropologist John Skorupski's terms (1976:25) – misses the real difference between the two

actions, the distinction between causal and conceptual connections between these actions and the outcome.

The same applies to familiar African religious practices; although a prayer for the rains to come, for example, expresses someone's desire and what is important in his or her life as the expressivists may emphasise, a prayer for the rains to come is also directed towards the rains to actually come as may be the instrumentalists' focus. However, this still leaves out the more important question about what kind of connection there is between the people praying for rain and the rain itself. Is the connection a causal one, the prayer making the raindrops fall? Or is the connection a conceptual one, the prayer changing the falling raindrops into an answer to the people's prayers?

Philosopher Brian Clack (2002:16) discusses the example of Frazer's account of a rain-king. According to Clack, the people involved must believe that the rain-king can actually cause the rain to fall because if the rain does not fall, they go as far as to even kill the rain-king. But, as his colleague Lance Ashdown (2004:139) points out, this does not prove anything, '[w]hat we know is that when a drought arises, the king is put to death'. The killing of the rain-king may be – to use anthropologist Max Gluckman's phrase (1972:45) – an 'occult exaggeration of moral responsibility' for failing to cause rain or it may be a dramatic, gruesome part of the ritual itself, which still may be either causally or conceptually related to the outcome. People may invest greatly in performing their rituals, they may even go as far as sacrificing lives, but this still does not tell us whether or not they assume that there is either a causal, external or a conceptual, internal relationship between their ritual and the result.

Anthropologist Robin Horton and others have pointed out how much people are willing to sacrifice for the rituals to prove that they really intend for these to be causally effective. Horton (1993) states that:

In our studies of religious life world-wide and down the ages, cases like this, in which men and women are seen to be so obviously

‘putting their money where their mouths are’ in relation to statements about gods or about God, form the bulk of our records. (p. 116)

People do not only speak of gods or spirits, but they act upon their words as well. Horton (1993:115) says about the religious person, ‘[w]e see him engage in crippling expenditure on sacrifices designed to appease the deity, restore the sick child to health, and ensure the well-being of himself and his family’. If it were only a verbal response to what is happening to someone, why would people go to such lengths in making real sacrifices and so on? For Horton (1993:115), it is clear that ‘it had all been literally rather than figuratively intended’. However, this still leaves open the possibility that the ‘literally intended’ connection is a conceptual or an internal, rather than a causal, one.

In a way, an internal connection is not really a connection at all because the two sides cannot be thought of independently. Philosopher Denis McManus (2010) gives the following illustration of this:

In the *Wizard of Oz*, the Straw Man imagines being able to tell us ‘why the ocean’s near the shore’. Is there something here that he needs to learn? There is, but it is not what he thinks it is. What he really needs to learn – what ‘getting a brain’ might let him see – is that there isn’t a why – not because it’s a mystery or because the ocean sometimes isn’t near the shore! (p. 62)

The ocean and the shore are not two independent entities that accidentally happen to be related; rather, one would not be what it is without the other. Similarly, the wish and the wished-for meal are inseparably linked. To even consider an investigation whether one – the wish – caused the other – the wished-for meal – would be as much a misunderstanding as it is to investigate why the ocean is near the shore.

When asked why they perform the ritual, people will say that it is because they want rain or other material blessings. This may have counted as support for the instrumentalists versus the expressivists, but saying this is compatible with both options in

the distinction I am proposing. The following three characteristics of what people say and do concerning their rituals and religious practices, however, suggest that the connection in the case of African religious practices is most often a conceptual or an internal one, the kind of connection that is obscured completely by the traditional distinction between instrumental and expressivist interpretations of religion. I will return to the rain rituals as an example.

Firstly, people explicitly admit that they do not have the slightest idea of how the ritual causes the rain (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1937:463). This could best be explained by interpreting the relationship as conceptual – there is no ‘how’, because the connection is immediate. Just like stealing makes someone a thief, not because it changes him by some mysterious process, but in the act of stealing itself someone becomes a thief. For a causal connection, one should expect more in kind of the steps through which the ritual and the effect are connected, whereas no such thing can be expected of a conceptual connection.

Secondly, the importance of purity – the taboos that belong to rituals – points in the direction of a conceptual connection. As anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) argued, rules concerning purity are not pragmatic in the sense of primitive hygiene regulations but are connected to one’s moral and conceptual outlook on the world. In a causal relationship, the person performing the act is irrelevant, and it is all about the connection itself. In a conceptual relationship, the person is important, for the person should be worthy to receive the rain as a gift from the gods. Before the ritual, people take care of their purity and, after the outcome of the ritual has become clear, the nature of the outcome will likely trigger more reflections upon one’s moral purity and relationships as well. If the rains are not as good as one hoped, most often the rituals and religious practices themselves will not be investigated, as would be expected if these practices stood in causal relationship to the outcome. What is investigated are the moral circumstances of the

practitioners, as fits with assuming conceptual connections, which are not a matter of 'all at once' but are connected to an entire life.

Thirdly, rituals and other religious practices are generally treated as something one does not experiment or play around with. In a well-known transcript of a conversation between the explorer and missionary David Livingstone and a rainmaker, Livingstone suggests that the rainmaker experiments with his rituals. The rainmaker is astonished, '[w]ho ever thought of making trial of starvation?' (Livingstone 2010:248). Rain-making is not something one should play around with. For the people involved, it is more than a pragmatic, instrumental practice. Rain-making and rain are bound up with their entire lives. The pragmatic approach suggested by Livingstone, which assumes there to be a causal relationship that can be adjusted and re-adjusted, is not even considered as an option. One does not play around with such things because they are too important; they are internally, conceptually or morally connected to their entire life.

In a small experiment in Britain, more than half of the students did not want to push a pin into the eye of the picture of their mother they had just drawn (cf. Phillips 2001:176). Not because they feared some weird causal connection between this drawing and their mother but because they felt a moral connection – you simply do not do that.

Scholars like Evans-Pritchard (1937:475–478) and Gifford (2015:96) provide long lists of reasons why people do not notice 'the futility' of their mystical practices, yet these rituals are 'not futile' or 'effective' in a conceptual and moral way, rather than in a weird causal way. Like a mysterious process is actually not a kind of process as was discussed in Chapter 2, the mystical causation, which would be present in magical rituals, is actually not a kind of causation. People participate in religious or magical rituals because they want to facilitate particular outcomes, but these practices do not bring about these outcomes in a causal way; rather, they bring them about in a conceptual way. This means that people do not participate 'in

order to' reach that conceptual outcome either, for that would still be too external. People do rituals simply because that is what these people do – it is part of who they are and what they value. To even consider an investigation whether one – the ritual – caused the other – the blessing – would be as much a misunderstanding as it is to investigate why the ocean is near the shore. People's religious actions are not futile but actually change the character of whatever may befall them, yet not in the simplistic and materialistic way assumed by the scholars discussed in the previous section but in a conceptual way. As we will see now, this idea of conceptual connections even provides a convincing way to reinterpret the most prominent exponent of the quest for holistic blessings, the prosperity gospel (cf. Kroesbergen 2014c, 2017).

## ■ The prosperity gospel

Scholar of religion Paul Gifford (2004:171) says about African Neo-Pentecostalism with its prosperity gospel, 'this Christianity is about plenty, victory, success'. New Testament scholar Dustin Ellington (2014:29) defines the prosperity gospel as '[t]he gospel of health and wealth proclaims that God promises physical healing and financial prosperity in this lifetime to those who trust and follow God's ways'. During prosperity gospel services, people are invited to pay seed money or seed offerings to God through the pastor and they are promised health and wealth in return. This may sound like a clear and extreme example of a pragmatic, instrumental kind of religion, and often the pastors proclaiming this kind of gospel encourage rather than question such an interpretation. However, if we apply the distinction between conceptual and causal connections, even the prosperity gospel does not need to be considered as a materialistic type of Christianity.

First of all, it is important to pay attention to what exactly is promised in the prosperity gospel, namely, health and wealth *from God*. This 'from God' clause may be an important part of the goal. It is as gifts from God that believers want to receive health and

wealth. Anthropologist Martin Lindhardt (2015:315) observes that in their sermons 'Pentecostals recognize that the powers of witchcraft are in fact superior to the power of God in terms of generating fast wealth', and Birgit Meyer (1998a:764) observes the same in Ghana. Leaving aside the remark on witchcraft, this shows that it is not simply fast wealth that adherents of the prosperity gospel are interested in, 'they insist that money given by God is legitimate, long-lasting and free of the dangers and immoral aspects that haunt wealth generated through occult alliances' (Lindhardt 2015:315). So, the goal people are after is 'legitimate money' and what they regard as legitimate money is 'money given by God'. Similarly, discussing the situation in Zambia, anthropologist Naomi Haynes (2017a:12) argued that what Pentecostals are after is not for their life to be 'moving' like everybody else but 'moving by the Spirit'. 'Moving by the Spirit' or 'money given by God' is not something that can be acquired by doing just anything – one cannot use whatever pragmatic means available may be most effective – but can *only* be acquired through a relationship with God in prayer and sacrifices. Those religious rituals do not have a causal but a conceptual and moral relationship to the 'money given by God' that people are after. The purpose of the rituals is indeed plenty, victory and success, but plenty, victory and success *as blessings from God* – it is what God promises them.

Neo-Pentecostal rituals express that all worthwhile things come from God. The 'coming from God' here is not to be interpreted as some hidden process. If someone says that she started a roofing business and became rich because God blessed her, she is not giving an explanation of how she became rich but she acknowledges that she received this money as a gift from God. Her born-again nephew may have started a roofing business as well and did not get rich. Her neighbour who is into witchcraft may have started a roofing business and did get rich. Saying that God blessed her, the lady is not explaining these differences but she is merely stating that she acquired her wealth in – compared to her nephew – not fully explainable but – compared to her neighbour – morally acceptable ways.

The blessings are definitely more than symbolic; they have a real power to transform people's lives (cf. Hackett 1988:326), but it does not follow from this that the religious practices connected to them are instrumental in character. From the belief that success and prosperity come from the heavenly realm, it does not follow that people could *use* those spiritual realities. African religion may be 'power-oriented', as Richard Burgess (2008:31) notes, but it is a particular power, not just any power, that is sought after – in rain-making rituals, it may have been the power of the ancestors of one's tribe – and in Neo-Pentecostalism, it is the power of the Holy Spirit. For Neo-Pentecostals, wealth is not a commodity they possess but a blessing from God and directed towards God through 'seed offerings'.

Seed offerings, paying tithes and other gifts while being promised a manifold return, have been interpreted as investments, in a capitalist sense (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000:315; Ukah 2005:263), but many scholars found Marcel Mauss' concept of a gift economy more applicable (Coleman 2004; Haynes 2017a; Lindhardt 2015). Mauss argued that a gift creates a relationship of mutual indebtedness. Some scholars argued that through seed offerings, believers 'trap' God, as Y. Droz and Y.N. Gez (2015:304) phrase it, into a similar relationship of mutual indebtedness. As shown in Chapter 3, however, it makes no sense to use God or bargain with God in such a way. In the Maussian gift, the people invest something of themselves; it is not merely a commodity but an expression of the relationship. Martin Lindhardt (2015:317) observes this in the Neo-Pentecostal practices as well, '[t]hrough [...] prayers, human qualities and desires are transferred to the money and by accepting it God also receives part of the essence or soul of the giver'. Likewise, describing a Neo-Pentecostal church in South Africa, anthropologist Ilana van Wyk (2014:236) states, 'monetary sacrifices became tangled up with the essence of their givers, with their intentions, and with the words spoken in their giving'. People give themselves in seed offerings and giving oneself can never make sense pragmatically, because even if there are returns on the investment, there is no one left to



receive them. This does not matter, however, because all that matters is what is given by God anyhow. Together the seed planting and the beliefs surrounding it are treated not as a theory about how to control, manipulate or trap God but as a way of dealing with the fact that health and wealth and everything else important are free gifts or blessings from God, ultimately beyond human control. In seed offerings, people give themselves or, rather, they express the desire that their life *be* a sacrifice to God.

This is an interpretation of the prosperity gospel that I, with my European background, can recognise; so why does the prosperity gospel so often appear strange to me? The desire for one's life to be a sacrifice to God can be expressed in different ways. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul says, 'I will boast in the things that show my weakness' (2 Cor 11:30). This sounds very different from the successful preachers who proudly attribute their wealth to God, but it may express a similar moral or religious stance. Compare how Socrates told his judges, 'a good man cannot be harmed'. He knew he would be executed shortly afterwards, so apparently he used the word 'harm' in a different sense. He would only consider it as 'harm' when he would no longer be a good man. Socrates could have expressed a similar sentiment, saying 'a good man is indifferent to harm' using the ordinary sense of 'harm'. Prosperity preachers say, 'a true believer cannot be poor'; mainline churches preach, 'a true believer is indifferent to poverty'. This may express a similar moral or religious stance, although it would be connected with a very different imagery; one would expect the prosperity preacher to show his wealth and the mainline preacher to show his indifference to wealth. A different image is used to express the same or at least a similar faith; the same or a similar spirit is behind very different expressions.

Practitioners of African rituals and other religious practices may appear to believe that their practices are purely pragmatic means to obtain health and wealth, but if one takes into account the role that their practices and statements play in their lives, it turns out that this is not necessarily their belief. Seed offerings

do not need to be considered as investments awaiting materialistic blessings in return, but the offerings and the blessings may be internally related. To consider an investigation into whether the seed offerings caused the blessing would be to misunderstand the character of this religious ritual. Taking part in prosperity gospel practices changes the character of whatever may befall people but in an internal, conceptual way, not in the simplistic and materialistic way assumed by the scholars discussed at the outset of this chapter. In spirit, there may not be so much difference between saying ‘a true believer is indifferent to poverty’ and saying that ‘a true believer cannot be poor’. The prosperity preacher with his designer clothes and glamorous house and car may look very different compared to the mainline pastor who takes pride in his humble presentation and abode, but if the spirit behind both self-representations is a shared redefinition of ‘blessedness’, then both of these true believers may be considered blessed.

## ■ What does it mean to be blessed?

Paul Gifford (1998) summarises the theology of the prosperity gospel as follows:

God has met all the needs of human beings in the suffering and death of Christ, and every Christian should now share in the victory of Christ over sin, sickness and poverty. A believer has the right to the blessings of health and wealth won by Christ, and he or she can obtain these blessings merely by a positive confession of faith. (p. 39)

Because God saved humankind through Jesus Christ on the cross, believers are said to have a right to blessings. But what are these blessings? Does salvation bring the blessings of health and wealth, as prosperity teachings seem to claim or could ‘blessings’ in this context actually mean something else as well, in line with the alternative interpretation of the prosperity gospel presented in the previous section?

In the Bible, there are many statements such as ‘[b]lessed is the man who fears the Lord’ (Ps 112:1), ‘[b]lessed is the man who

trusts in you [o Lord Almighty]' (Ps 84:12), '[b]lessed is the man who trusts in the Lord' (Jr 17:7) and '[b]lessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked' (Ps 1:1). These sound more like 'a true believer cannot be poor' than like 'a true believer is indifferent to poverty'. A true believer cannot be poor, a true believer will always be granted blessings, blessed is he or she who fears the Lord. Yet, there remains something strange about these statements; if one applies the ordinary sense of what it means to be blessed, they are obviously false.

If to be blessed means to be wealthy and healthy and those kinds of things, the statements do not agree with reality. Throughout history, there have been many people who were very God-fearing and trusting in the Lord, and who were nonetheless poor or ill. So, at face value, the statements are simply not true.

It is not exceptional to have statements which, taken at face value – as literal hypotheses or theories about reality – are obviously false. Such situations occur often in language. Take, for example, the statement that the late president of Zambia, Michael Sata, was a King Cobra. Taken at face value, this is obviously false. Sata did not belong to the species *Ophiophagus hannah*. So, one has to look for either an explanation – it is true but seems to be false – or for an alternative interpretation – it means something else. A possible explanation would be that he really was a venomous snake – the statement is literally true – but some witch transformed him to look like a human being. The problem with this explanation is that even Sata's followers sometimes referred to him as King Cobra, whereas they would probably not have been his followers if they believed he was a bewitched snake. Instead of coming up with explanations of the statement that Sata was a King Cobra, one could also apply different interpretations. The statement was not meant to explain to which species Sata belonged, but it was a metaphorical way to say something about his character. That he had 'a sharp tongue', for example, but again, in the literal sense, this statement is obviously false and so one will look for alternative interpretations. It is common practice in using language; either one comes up with an

explanation for the cases in which it does not seem to apply, or one finds another interpretation of the meaning of these statements.

So, what about the statement that the man or woman who trusts in the Lord is blessed? What does this statement mean, if one takes into account that throughout history many people really trusted the Lord but were not blessed in the sense of being healthy and wealthy? What does this statement mean, if one takes into account that the majority of African Christians, including those who are adherents of the prosperity gospel, do not belong to the most healthy and wealthy people in the world? Both the saints from the past and the African Christians of the present seem to falsify the statement. God does *not* bless those who trust in him with health and wealth.

To solve this, there are two options, namely, either to continue to take the statements from the Bible at face value but add explanations for those cases which seem to falsify it (like in the example above, saying that Sata really was a cobra but witchcraft deceived people to think otherwise), or to provide another interpretation for the biblical statements that the man who trusts in the Lord is blessed (like in the example above, saying that Sata was a cobra in the sense that he had the proverbial wits of a cobra). Prosperity teachers often seem to take the first option, but I will argue for the second option – I take the second option even to be the spirit in which the statements of prosperity teachers should be taken.

Prosperity preachers often present explanations to make sense of such – at face value – obviously false statements as ‘a true believer cannot be poor’ or ‘blessed is he who trusts in the Lord’. They explain that, historically, people who trust the Lord really do or did have access to all the health and wealth we normally associate with the word ‘blessed’, but until the 20th century these believers were not aware of this, and so they forgot to take it. Health and wealth were available for them as they trusted the Lord, but they did not receive it, because Satan blinded them to this truth.

One problem with this explanation is that it still needs an alternative interpretation of the statement. Satan may have blinded the great majority of believers up until today, but he did not blind these believers to the statements themselves. Believers throughout the centuries have read the statements such as 'blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord' in their Bibles, although they did not take these statements literally in the sense in which the prosperity preachers do. So, what did all these believers read in 'blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord'? How did they interpret it, when they saw that their lives made it impossible to accept the statements at face value? The explanation that prosperity teachers provide to explain why the saints from the past were hardly ever healthy and wealthy still requires an alternative interpretation of 'blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord' as well.

But first, how do prosperity preachers explain the fate of contemporary African Christians? Why has the level of health and wealth of Africans been in decline during the time when Neo-Pentecostalism in Africa was growing? Prosperity preachers do not say that their followers are healthy and wealthy, which is obviously not true, but they say that they will be healthy and wealthy very soon. Every year I spent in Zambia, I was promised during church services, on radio and on TV, that this year would be my year of glory, of breakthroughs and victorious living, of blessings of health and wealth. It is always in the future, the very near future but still the future. Prosperity teachings often criticise mainline theology for being otherworldly – blessings will come later, in heaven – claiming that they themselves are *this-worldly*, but actually their theology is more what could be called *future-worldly*. Very soon the blessings will come, yet for most people it always remains 'very soon', never becoming 'now'.

So, in fact, the prosperity preachers are giving an alternative interpretation to 'blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord'; they interpret this to mean 'blessed with health and wealth will very soon be the man who trusts in the Lord'. In what follows, I want to suggest an alternative interpretation, which retains the present tense of 'blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord'

so making it even more this-worldly than prosperity theology because, according to my interpretation, the man who trusts in the Lord is now *already* blessed. I argue that the way in which most believers – knowingly or unknowingly – have read and are still reading the biblical statements about being blessed is that these statements are statements about what it is to be blessed. These statements explain who should be regarded as ‘blessed’.

In prosperity teaching, trusting the Lord and obeying his commands are presented as ways to access his blessings of health and wealth and disobedience blocks these blessings somehow. Statements such as ‘blessed is he who trusts in the Lord’ are taken as guidelines for how to become blessed, where it is assumed that everybody already knows what it is to be blessed, namely, to be healthy and wealthy in a straightforward worldly sense. In the alternative interpretation, I propose statements like ‘blessed is he who trusts in the Lord’ are not guidelines, but they are statements about the meaning of the word ‘blessed’ as it is used in a Christian context. These statements tell us who should be called ‘blessed’ in a deeper sense, namely, that those who trust in the Lord should be described as ‘blessed’.

My contention is that most believers read these statements in this way already, without even realising that it is an alternative interpretation of an – at face value – obviously false statement, just like people use expressions such as ‘having a sharp tongue’ most often without being aware that one applies an alternative interpretation to that – at face value – nonsensical statement. Only when someone points out that a tongue is not literally sharp do people become aware that they have given this statement an alternative interpretation. The same holds for the statements under discussion here.

Now, prosperity teachers are making us aware that we do not take statements such as ‘[b]lessed is the man who trusts in the Lord’ (Jr 17:7) at face value, so let us look more closely at the

alternative interpretation that, in my opinion, most believers throughout history have applied and which is even presupposed by the prosperity teachers' own explanations. To understand this alternative interpretation, it may help to compare it to the analysis of similar statements by philosophers, such as the one by Socrates referred to above.

In addition to 'a good man cannot be harmed', Socrates is claimed to have said that the just man is happier than the unjust man. This statement may be taken to explain to people why they should be just rather than unjust – being just makes one happier. But is that true? Can philosophers like Socrates show why it is better to be just than unjust in this way? It seems like this needs a great deal of explanation. Throughout history, many just people have suffered, often *because* they exemplified justice, and many unjust people seem to have enjoyed the spoils of their injustice; they are rich and they laugh and seem happy in every respect. Now, of course, Socrates is aware of this and yet he says that the just man is happier than the unjust man. What does he mean?

Philosopher D.Z. Phillips (1988:242) tells us we are misled if we take Socrates to argue for *why* people should be just. Socrates is not trying to demonstrate why justice is better than injustice. He is not using a neutral conception of happiness to judge between justice and injustice but, according to Phillips (1988:242), Socrates is saying, '[l]et justice be your conception of happiness'. Another way in which Phillips (1988:242) rephrases Socrates' statement is, '[h]appy is the man who is just' and that makes clear the similarity to 'blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord'. Socrates is asking people to look at happiness in a different way; do not call the man who is laughing and having a good time 'happy' but call him happy who is just! Use a different definition of what it is to be happy. In the same way, the statement 'blessed is he who trusts in the Lord' is proposing to use a different definition of 'blessed'. This statement could be rephrased as 'let trusting the Lord be your conception of blessedness!'

In his article 'Can a Good Man be Harmed?', the philosopher Peter Winch (1972:193-209) investigates such re-phrasings. Winch does not discuss Socrates' statement that a just man is happier than an unjust man, but he mentions the similar statement by Socrates from the *Apolo*gy, 'a good man cannot be harmed'. Socrates is about to be condemned to death by a panel of judges for confusing the youth of Athens and introducing new gods. In his *Apolo*gy, in his defence Socrates (cited in Winch 1972) tells his judges:

But you, too, my judges, must face death with good hope, and remember this one truth, that a good man cannot suffer any evil either in this life or after death, and that the gods do not neglect his fortunes. (p. 193)

In other words, a good man cannot be harmed. Whatever happens to someone, he should not consider it 'harm' or 'suffering evil' as long as he is a good man. No longer being a good man, only that should be considered harm. Let 'remaining good' be your conception of 'not being harmed', whatever may happen to your body!

Winch (1972:193) connects this with the idea that 'it is worse for a man to do than to suffer wrong'. In the gospels, Jesus expresses this idea when he says (Mt 5):

If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. (vv. 29-30)

If one does evil, one damages one's own soul, and if souls are at stake, what else matters? Socrates offered himself up to be a martyr for his ideas, and the ancient Christian martyrs did the same for their faith. Their government gave them a choice, 'either you deny Christ and you live or you do not deny Christ and we will burn you to death - which do you choose?' From an outsider's perspective, one might say that they chose death - they let



themselves be burnt to death. But who would choose death?! Of course, they did not wilfully choose death; of course they chose life, but the choice they saw before them was a different one from the one that the government tried to force on them. For them, the choice was not 'deny Christ and live or be a witness to Christ and die'; for them, denying Christ would have been the real death. From their perspective they chose life, the real life, life with Christ, whatever the consequences. The story of the gospels as a whole explains that people can nail one's body to the cross, but there is something to a person that cannot be damaged. If someone reads 'blessed is he who trusts in the Lord' as an encouragement for what one should consider to be blessings, then one can be despised, punished, tortured and killed, but one would still consider oneself to be blessed as long as one trusts in the Lord.

At this point, however, Winch (1972) introduces 'a certain sort of "tough-minded" philosopher' who would raise a question:

If the words in [*such statements*] are being used in their ordinary sense, then they express a straightforward empirical falsehood; [*these statements*] can only be true by virtue of an eccentric use of such words as 'harm', 'safe', 'punishment', and then they are true by definition and in a merely 'trivial' way. (pp. 194-195)

If the statement 'a good man cannot be harmed' is not telling us what events will happen and will not happen to good people but only proposes a different way to use the word 'harm', what good does such a statement do? Someone can use these words differently if he or she likes but that is not how people normally use these words. If 'blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord' offers a new definition of the word 'blessed', that is fine, but then one still does not know how to become blessed in the ordinary sense, that is, blessed as healthy and wealthy. If the statement is about one's conception of blessedness, then it is still possible that someone who trusts the Lord is ill or poor, or dies at the cross or on the stake. In that case, 'blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord' is true by definition, because it is nothing more than a strange new definition.

People can introduce all kinds of strange new definitions if they want to. For example, people could decide to use the word 'yellow' to talk about the prosperity gospel and 'red' to talk about more mainline Reformed theology. People could agree on this rule and tell each other, 'the prosperity gospel is yellow'. Okay, if that is the rule, then it is a true statement to say that the prosperity gospel is yellow; but, the statement does not say anything, neither about the prosperity gospel nor about the colour 'yellow'. It is true, yes, but only in a trivial way. It is just a strange new way of speaking. To say 'the prosperity gospel is yellow' may help strangers to understand what these people mean when they say 'the sermon this morning was a bit orange' – namely, that the sermon was a bit in between prosperity and Reformed teaching. But, still, 'the prosperity gospel is yellow' is only true in an arbitrary way, only true because these people made a choice to use this strange new rule. It is merely true by definition. It is not true in any other way that the prosperity gospel is yellow. Is saying 'blessed is he who trusts in the Lord' merely true in such an arbitrary, trivial way as well? Is it nothing more than a strange new way of speaking that one may adopt if one wants to?

Winch admits that the 'tough-minded' philosopher has a point here, but he adds that there might also be an important difference. Statements like 'A good man cannot be harmed' or 'blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord' could, according to Winch (1972:195), 'strike someone with the force of a discovery. Or, if the word "discovery" seems too securely tied to the realm of empirical truths, let us try "revelation"'. To some people, it may come as a revelation to hear Socrates say that the just man is happier than the unjust man; to some people, it may come as a revelation to hear the psalmist say that blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, in a way in which it is not a revelation to say that the prosperity gospel is yellow. One would not say, 'wow, yes, you are right, the prosperity gospel is very yellow!', whereas someone might say, 'wow, yes, you are right, the man

who trusts in the Lord, is truly blessed!’ In this way, the statements from the Bible and Socrates are more than just proposals for strange new ways of speaking. But what is the difference? What is revealed in the statements from the Bible or Socrates?

It is difficult to express this in other words than the words that have already been used; it reveals that the man who trusts in the Lord is the one who truly deserves to be called blessed, whatever his status regarding health and wealth. It provides a different perspective of life and a different kind of life, and it is living life in a different spirit. To those for whom this different life is a revelation, its value is obvious; they have been converted to this way of life. To others, those who are not converted, it will remain a strange and different way of looking at the world, whether one personally respects this strange way or not.

Statements like ‘blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord’ or ‘a true believer cannot be poor’ can be interpreted in a purely materialistic way as proposing a particular way to obtain worldly goods. If these statements play that role in someone’s life, I must say that I cannot see them otherwise than as confusions and superstition for, in real life, faith has not proven to be the most effective way to obtain health and wealth for most people. Statements like ‘blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord’ or ‘a true believer cannot be poor’ can, however, also play a different role. They can propose a different definition of blessings and poverty; blessings and poverty as internally, conceptually connected to trusting in the Lord and being a true believer or not. These statements express the internal relationship between people’s religious practices and the outcomes they experience in their lives. If the spirit in which these statements are absorbed into someone’s life is like this, then this should be visible in a different kind of life. That is the topic to which we will now turn; how can the kind of life that people live show which spirit is behind the prevalent quest for holistic salvation within Christianity in Africa?

## ■ A different kind of life

Some people may, in a confused and superstitious way, bring seed offerings to prosperity preachers in the same way as they would invest money in a risky enterprise, hoping that it will bring them good returns. In these cases, the action and the outcome are related causally. People may also bring seed offerings as a way of giving themselves to God; they have invested themselves in the money and their sacrifice changes the character of whatever may happen to them afterwards. Everything in their lives now becomes a matter of grace, as D.Z. Phillips phrases it. Phillips (1986) writes:

Grace is the givenness of things under a religious aspect. Under a secular aspect it may be called luck. In the acceptance of things as the will of God, the self ceases to be the centre of the world. The self is sacrificed to God. (p. 87)

As discussed in Chapter 2, there is a similarity between the role that is played by ‘luck’ in people’s lives and the role played by references to the spirit world or God. What a non-believer calls luck, the believer will often refer to as a gift by grace. It is a way of accepting – even loving – whatever comes one’s way. Phillips (1986:89) continues by speaking of ‘a love of the world in a mode of acceptance of all things from God; a love which puts itself and not man’s worldly ambitions as the central concern’. Religious practices are not focussed on someone’s personal ambitions, on what one might get out of something but on God and the love for God. If oneself is the centre of one’s world and all one cares about is what one gets out of something, then failure will lead to disappointment. In a religious sense, however, failure is not even failure but a gift from God. Genuine religion, as Phillips (1986) describes it, allows for:

[A] celebration made possible even when plans and projects failed; the celebratory rite depending on an acceptance of things as God’s gift, an acceptance which transcends success and failure by embracing them. (pp. 159-160)

The believer sacrifices him- or herself to God and everything afterwards becomes a gift from God. Everything will represent

the grace of God, and it will be experienced as a blessing from God. 'Blessed is he or she who trusts in the Lord' within such a way of life is not a guideline for how to obtain blessings – should I invest in this risky enterprise or in that man of God? – but redefines what it means to be blessed in the life of this believer. Now, how can we see in someone's life whether 'blessed is he or she who trusts in the Lord' plays the role of a – I would say, misguided – guideline or the role of a redefinition of 'blessing', which reveals an entirely new way of living?

Someone for whom 'blessed is he or she who trusts in the Lord' or 'a true believer cannot be poor' represents a new way of life does not strive for the blessings of worldly health and wealth but for what he or she now considers to be the one and only true blessing, namely, being close to the Lord. Such a person dreams new dreams. Some people will be healthy and wealthy and others not, but as long as one is close to the Lord that does not matter. Why are some believers healthy and wealthy, and others not? That is something that is up to God. As Broad (as cited in Rhees 1997:308) summarised the book of Job, '[y]ou can't argue with someone who has created a hippopotamus!' It is none of one's business or concern why some people are healthy and wealthy, and others are not, because all one is concerned about is trusting in the Lord, for that is what one considers to be truly blessed.

Abraham, Solomon, Job and many others in the Bible were rich, at some point in their lives, but their riches did not seem to be something they cared about much. All Abraham wanted was to have an heir and he had to wait 100 years. All Solomon asked for was wisdom and Job never asked God to return to him anything of his previous wealth. If someone does not care about wealth, maybe God will give it to him or her but this person does not care one way or the other. If someone cares about wealth, then surely the devil would approve of it being given to him or her, because it will stand between this person and God. The way in which someone deals with his or her richness or poverty shows what it means to be blessed in his or her life.

This does not mean one should only be concerned with salvation in heaven, in life after death. One should not care much about life after death at all. Believers trust that after death they will be in the hands of God, so all will be well; they do not need to know anything more. They are concerned with doing good and being close to Christ, and the only reward they are interested in is exactly that: doing good and being close to Christ. The good things in life they receive as a completely undeserved blessing from God – all good and important things in life are given to people from beyond, always completely unearned – and Christian believers try to see the negative things as a blessing from God too, as a punishment, a trial, a lesson or just something horrible they have to endure without losing their faith. Seeing God in all things, this is already heaven on earth, even if sufferings may befall someone. This is truly this-worldly instead of the prosperity teachings' future-worldly promises.

The perspective described here means that many events in life will be valued differently. In Acts 5, Peter and other apostles are arrested for preaching the gospel. An angel frees them, but in accordance with God's will they continue preaching in the Temple, so they are arrested again. Peter declares, '[w]e must obey God rather than men!' (Ac 5:29). Peter urges people to follow God's way of looking at things, to follow God's concept of what it is to be blessed. Peter and the other apostles are flogged, but they do not complain. They continue to thank God. They even rejoice, it is said, 'because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name' (Ac 5:41).

Even in a crisis, even while enduring physical suffering, these disciples continue to thank God. People may have taken it to be a shameful disgrace that God did not rescue them, that God let them be flogged. But they themselves do not see it as proof that God has abandoned them; they do not take it to be a sign that they are no longer among God's people, instead they thank God even in this suffering, 'because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name'. They leave it in God's hands

how to deal with their circumstances. One moment Peter and the other disciples were miraculously freed from prison; the next moment they were captured again and flogged. But they rejoiced in the Lord nonetheless, giving him thanks in all things, because they knew they were blessed.

Like Christ saved the world on the cross, turning a curse into a blessing, likewise believers living in the spirit of 'blessed is he or she who trusts in the Lord' are not blessed *despite* dire circumstances but *especially* when they are in dire circumstances. God is in fact concerned with the whole person, mind and body, holistically, which means that if he asks someone to share the fate of the poor or the fate of the ill, he expects this person to share it completely, mind and body.

Someone might say that nobody wants to suffer, but this is simply not true; it is not true that everybody wants to be healthy and wealthy. Fortunately, many people choose jobs in which they can serve Christ over jobs which bring more money or less suffering. The martyrs even chose death over life because they regarded dying with Christ to be more truly living than living without Christ. Believers do not dream about health and wealth – all they dream about is being obedient. Once they are able to do so, they regard themselves as blessed, not in the future – as in the future-worldly portrayals offered by many prosperity preachers – but in the actual here and now. A believer does not have a right to blessings at some point in the future but is blessed right now, simply by being a believer. Believers are saved from sin and worldly desire. They no longer want all those things that the world wants; they want whatever God wants for them and people living in the same spirit count them as blessed because they trust in the Lord.

We can discern the spirit behind statements such as 'blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord' or 'a true believer cannot be poor' by looking at what people care about in their lives. Are such statements misguided descriptions of a causal relationship between trusting in the Lord and not being materially poor, or do people take them to be new revelatory definitions of what it means to be blessed or to not be poor?

The Reformer Martin Luther (2007) describes the latter spirit, saying:

Now I would advise you, if you have any wish to pray, to fast, or to make foundations in churches, as they call it, to take care not to do so with the object of gaining any advantage, either temporal or eternal. You will thus wrong your faith, which alone bestows all things on you. (n.p.)

What matters is faith and not the advantage – temporal or eternal – that it may bring. The focus of everything a believer does should be on his or her faith, on being close to God. Just like we would not say that someone truly loves another person when he or she wants to obtain particular benefits from that relationship, so someone does not truly love God if he or she wants to be rewarded for it.

Someone might say that everybody does things because of the rewards he or she expects to receive in return but that is not true. Fortunately, true friendship and true love exist. Friendship or love based upon what one gets out of it is not true friendship or true love. As soon as one starts to calculate what he or she can get out of it, true friendship or true love is over – whatever the outcome of the calculations may be. Likewise, doing good because you expect a reward is not really doing good at all. The only reason for doing good should be that one wants to do it. The Bible says in many places, such as in Deuteronomy, that if a believer obeys, he or she will receive blessings and this is surely true. But if someone truly obeys God, all one ever wishes to receive is to be close to Christ and to serve God, and that is definitely what this person will receive.

Philosopher of religion Gareth Moore (1988:143) emphasised the same point when he said, '[t]o seek a reward from God for your good deeds is simply to give up the business of seeking rewards for what you do'. Believers do not look for rewards. Moore admits that many of Jesus' parables speak of rewards but, Moore (1988:145) argues, 'the language of rewards is being used in order to encourage people to forget about all rewards'. The man who sells everything he owns to buy a pearl of great value has not discovered a better investment; rather, he has discovered that all his investments do not matter compared to this one most



precious thing, the kingdom of God. A believer does not do things in order to obtain rewards but has stopped looking for rewards.

In their good deeds – and in their seed offerings, as argued above! – people sacrifice themselves, no longer treating themselves as the centre of the world. In fact, they give themselves so, in a way, they are not even there any longer to receive any returns. They no longer care about themselves but about the things that God cares about. In his parables, Jesus offers his disciples not a good investment opportunity but tells them that all other things are worth nothing compared to being close to God. Moore (1988) continues:

A man may want to get to heaven by, among other things, forgiving those who wrong him, but that means that *he does not want to get anywhere* by forgiving others. (p. 177)

Someone who forgives another may do so for many reasons – needing the other's cooperation on a different matter, wanting to get rid of one's own anger and frustration, wanting to show a third person how generous he or she is and so on – but if one forgives someone because one wants to get to heaven, this is different. Heaven is not something to get in exchange for one's actions but to be concerned about heaven means not to be concerned about all those other things, those worldly things. All the worldly blessings one may get are pleasant, but, in a way, they do not count for someone who considers the one who trusts in the Lord to be blessed. In that case, doing what God wants you to do is its own reward.

To live according to 'blessed is he or she who trusts in the Lord' or 'a true believer cannot be poor' as new revelatory definitions of what it means to be blessed or to not be poor shows itself in what one cares about, that is, it shows itself in that one does not ultimately care about rewards and worldly goods but only about trusting in the Lord and doing his will. Being poor or rich should not be that important. If someone is rich, he or she thanks God for the good things in their life and takes care not to

fall into the temptations of pride or holding on to things one is meant to share. If someone is poor, he or she thanks God for being able to share the fate of those whom Jesus called 'blessed' in the Beatitudes, and for that, they are spared the temptations of wealth. Jesus showed that he was concerned about hungry people by feeding them and about ill people by healing them, but he was more concerned about people's souls. He did not build granaries or hospitals or plant vineyards, but he healed some sick and turned some water into wine, as outward signs of the inner salvation he came to bring to everyone.

Beyond 'blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord', the Bible says things like 'give and you will be given' and it *is* good to give but that should be truly *giving*. Giving expecting to receive more in return is not what is called 'giving', it is 'investing'. Someone who truly gives, gives without expectations. So this person will not be disappointed, if he or she receives nothing in return. This true giving should definitely be encouraged, and if someone gives like that, he or she will be given, namely, they will be given because they are a giver – what more could one possibly want? God promises that if believers care first about the kingdom of God, then they will receive all other things as well, all the desires of their hearts. If people truly care about the kingdom of God, all the desires of their hearts are no longer to be rich, healthy and free from suffering; now all they desire is to be close to Christ and to serve God and that is what they will receive completely, without a doubt.

D.Z. Phillips (2005) expresses this attitude by saying of religion:

It is not a matter of thinking of God as an agent among agents who says, 'If you do x, I'll do y'. An eternal covenant offers a conception of human life, such that anything that may happen within it is understood in a certain way. (p. 162)

To live according to 'blessed is he or she who trusts in the Lord' or 'a true believer cannot be poor' as revelatory redefinitions is not to possess a good policy for investments but is to look at

life – with all its ups and downs – in a particular way, to value things differently and to receive them as gifts from God. True belief, Phillips (2005) continues:

[D]oes not depend on one's life's events taking one course rather than another, since it sustains the believer no matter what course it takes. This does not mean, of course, that the believer does not care about what happens, but that he has something in which he stands even in the dark days. (p. 186)

There is something that is more important than whatever bad things may happen. The one who lives according to 'blessed is he or she who trusts in the Lord' possesses something 'the world cannot touch', namely, trusting in the Lord, whatever happens, for that is what one considers to be the real blessing. Its value is something that stands, even if everything else falls. Sometimes people are rich, sometimes people are poor, but a true believer cannot be poor, because he or she considers him- or herself rich in being a true believer, whatever may happen to his or her material possessions.

If someone says 'blessed is he or she who trusts in the Lord' or 'a true believer cannot be poor', we should not ask how he or she can say something that is so blatantly false, but we should look at what it is that the speaker commits him- or herself to. If we do so, we will find that these commitments are similar to those that I (Kroesbergen 2018a) identified elsewhere to be present in feeling absolutely safe, the commitment:

[/]s not a commitment to a prediction about what will or will not happen in the future, but it is a commitment to understand and want others to understand one's actions in a particular light, the light of God being with someone so one needs to fear no evil even though one walks through the valley of the shadow of death. The commitment [...] is not presupposing any moral or religious achievements, but is to wish to surrender oneself to God's goodness with all one's moral successes and failures. And, finally, [...] there is the commitment to feel care and love as well, as far as grace allows it to the person. (p. 202)

This is the kind of life that people live, if the spirit behind the prevalent quest for holistic salvation within Christianity in Africa is such as explored in this chapter.

Yet, this still leaves the question of how to discern what someone ultimately values in life. How can we see whether someone lives the different kind of life portrayed in this section? This is difficult to determine, often even for the person him- or herself. On a broader level, about African Christianity in general, it is still more difficult.

On the one hand, as mentioned previously, people in Africa seem very materialistic; desire for material goods is more present and, definitely, more openly present than in Europe, for example. People in Africa openly say that one's goal in life is to obtain material goods. It is allowed to be materialistic. This seems to invite taking the quest for materialistic salvation at face value. On the other hand, people in Africa seem to be more willing to accept whatever comes their way than Europeans are. People wait for hours for a bus to arrive or leave, people wait for days at government offices or hospitals, without getting angry. People smile and are happy, they accept it as simply the way it is, just like most people accept corruption by politicians or police officers. It is what they are used to, so most people do not expect anything different. This attitude has been called fatalism and has been blamed for the lack of development in Africa – if people got angry more often, perhaps there would be more incentive to change things for the better – but a more positive reading is possible as well. People accept everything as grace, as the givenness of things according to the will of God; they celebrate even when plans and projects fail, because they accept things as God's gift. This would point in the direction of a spiritual interpretation of the quest for holistic salvation as it is explored in this chapter.

If we look at the practices surrounding the prosperity gospel itself, we find a similar ambiguity. These practices also seem to point in two directions at once. On the one hand, everything seems blatantly materialistic, from the glamorous clothing and lifestyle of the pastor to what is promised in the sermons and what people say about what they expect to be blessed with very soon now. On the other hand, if we do not listen to the words or,

if we pretend not to understand the words that people say and simply look at what happens in order to deduce the meaning of what is going on, a very different picture arises. We see people who are often poor or at least living in challenging circumstances, who come to church happy and grateful, responding to what the pastor is saying with great enthusiasm and affirmation. We see that despite the fact that they often do not have much to give, they give freely and gladly. We see them rejoice in the wealth of others, such as that of their pastors. We see that despite the fact that their lives are not improving greatly, they continue to seek out these preachers of the prosperity gospel. Again, it seems like these people accept everything as grace and wholeheartedly celebrate God's goodness whatever happens in their life, doing the good deed of giving to the church merely because that is what they want to do, finding reward in the continued giving itself.

In everyday life, such ambiguities between two different possible interpretations of someone's words and actions often continue to exist without ever being resolved, blinding both onlookers and, in many cases, the people involved themselves from knowing what their true motives are. Does someone bring seed offerings wanting the material blessings that are promised in return or does this person do this as a way to sacrifice him- or herself to God, from now on receiving everything in life as a gift from God? Which one it is will only definitely show at a moment of crisis, at a moment when a radical choice is required, for example, when one's life is at stake. If it will cost someone his or her life to be a Christian, then continuing to trust in the Lord is not a means to a material end. This would show that one is truly living the different kind of life described in this section. In some parts of Africa, such as in Northern Nigeria, it is dangerous to be a Christian. If what is wanted is a comfortable life and material prosperity, one would definitely not choose to be a Christian. For most Christians in Southern Africa, however, as for those in Europe and the USA, such a situation will not arise and the ambiguity will continue. One may try to imagine what choice

one would make if circumstances were different, and it were clear that being a Christian does not bring comfort and prosperity, but, in cases like this, it is extremely hard to know oneself. The prevalent ambiguity concerning ultimate motives may tempt us to assume that in people's lives there will always be a bit of both – people participate in Christianity because they want material blessing *and* they want to dedicate themselves to God. In the final section of this chapter, however, I will argue that, conceptually, this is not possible.

## ■ Not a bit of both

People say their prayers, bring their seed offerings and acknowledge that he or she is blessed who trusts in the Lord. Why do they do these things? Are they hoping that it will bring them material benefits *or* are they expressing their surrender to God, accepting whatever may happen as a gift from his hand? In individual cases – in fact, in most individual cases – it will be very difficult to determine this. What do people really care about? As long as they are not forced to make an ultimate choice between these two spirits in which people can participate in religious practices, the motives will often remain unclear. Yet, in an important sense, the answer to these questions cannot be that it is a bit of both – people do *not* act as they do *partly* out of self-interest and *partly* out of genuine dedication to God. These two motives represent two completely separate perspectives on life, neither of which tolerates the other perspective standing next to it, at least not as a perspective on its own terms.

Someone who genuinely desires to surrender his or her life to God, may, of course, often fall prey to self-serving inclinations. He or she may feel the attraction of worldly goods as strongly as any other person, but for him or her, this is not just another motive or desire within their heart, it is sin. The self-interest is not a separate perspective but is something one regrets, is ashamed of, and wishes to overcome, although one may be aware this will never happen. Likewise, for someone who is actually interested in

religion for the material benefits, he or she is promised to get out of it. Apart from striving for these material goods, such a person cannot desire to dedicate oneself to God as well. For him or her, the dedication to God is meaningless and empty. In order to obtain the benefits one is after, one may need to pretend genuine surrender to God; but from his or her perspective, this does not represent a separate, independent motive within him- or herself, and it is merely a means to an end, a means, which in itself has no value. If someone is into religion for God, one cannot also be in it for material benefits, for it would be regarded as sin to strive for those. If someone is into religion for material benefits, one cannot also be in it for God, for to him or her dedication to God would be meaningless and without value. Until some decisive moment occurs, a person may not know his or her own true perspective. It may remain ambiguous. Over time, someone's motive may oscillate between the two spirits in which one may be engaged in religion, yet someone's motive cannot be 'a bit of both' because both perspectives exclude and redefine one another.

As soon as 'blessed is he or she who trusts in the Lord' or 'a true believer cannot be poor' is felt as a discovery or revelation, as soon as it converts one's perspective on what it means to be blessed or what it means to no longer be poor, then one's desires have changed as well. It is said that if one seeks first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, then all these other things will be given as well (Mt 6:33). In fact, this statement from Matthew 6:33 is one of the most important texts for the prosperity gospel (see Kroesbergen 2017 for an analysis). Now, when this person who seeks first the kingdom of God and his righteousness receives these other things, he or she will regard them as loss or as temptation. As Paul writes (Phlp 3):

[W]hatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish. (vv. 7-8)

What seemed like positive promise telling believers about their profits becomes not so positive after all. It is like handing out

grapefruit only to those who do not like grapefruit – other people who like grapefruit may be jealous, but for the people who get the grapefruit it is not a treat. If being a believer really brings benefits in a worldly sense then that cannot make them happy, because from their new perspective these things are no longer what they strive for but rather distract from what is really important – they tempt people to return to their old perspective.

How the two perspectives exclude one another can be illustrated by the story from the gospels of the murderer on the cross who during his dying moments converted and surrendered to Christ. From an outside perspective, it may seem like the murderer on the cross had the best of both worlds; during his lifetime, he had all the benefits of being free from the law, taking whatever he wanted without caring about whether it involved killing or stealing and so forth, and after his lifetime, he would be in paradise because of his last-minute conversion on the cross. But did he really have the best of both worlds? After he met Christ, he would no longer have considered the results of his crimes to be something to rejoice in. Following his conversion, these worldly ‘benefits’ were something to repent and feel guilty about. His converted self would definitely not be happy about his exploits during his lifetime, and, from his former perspective, paradise would probably look like a dull and not very desirable place. There is no perspective from which the murderer on the cross had the best of both worlds, no perspective from which he could have it both ways.

Likewise, someone cannot bring seed offerings to get material benefits and simultaneously to dedicate him- or herself to God. If one does it to get material benefits, dedication to God makes no sense. If one does it to dedicate oneself to God, the desire for material benefits is sin and to be regretted. In practice, it may be almost impossible to determine in which spirit someone participates in religious activities, but conceptually it cannot be in a bit of both spirits because they exclude one another.



Religion in Africa is often seen as a quest for holistic or even materialistic salvation, but, using the idea of conceptual instead of causal connections, an alternative interpretation is possible even of the prosperity gospel. Statements like ‘a true believer cannot be poor’ and ‘blessed is he or she who trusts in the Lord’ do not need to be interpreted as offering guidelines to obtain blessings or avoid poverty; in fact, a more plausible reading of these statements is that they propose a new definition of blessings and avoiding poverty. Someone whose perspective on the world is converted by the revelatory power of such a redefinition will live his or her life in a different kind of spirit. To judge whether someone lives according to this spirit or a more materialistic spirit remains a difficult issue. However, we can fairly say that people do *not* participate in religion *partly* out of self-interest and *partly* out of genuine dedication to God, because each of these motives represents a complete perspective on life, which does not tolerate the other perspective next to it, at least not as a perspective on its own terms.

## ■ Conclusion

Many theologians I have encountered in Southern Africa were proud of their holism, and rightfully so, to some extent. They are not burdened by Cartesian divides between spirit and matter discussed in Chapter 4; therefore, whereas Euro-American scholars have been trying to bridge this gap for centuries, within the African way of thinking it does not even exist. In this chapter, I have discussed the context to which holism in Africa is most often applied within theology, that of blessings and salvation. Many scholars have argued that a proper inculturation of Christianity in Africa implies the acknowledgement that religion in Africa is a quest for not merely spiritual but especially material blessings and salvation. People in Africa are considered to be practising religion for what they physically get out of it.

In this chapter, I challenged this conception, discussing the most extreme example of such a materialistic interpretation of

faith, the prosperity gospel. Applying a distinction between conceptual and causal connections, even the prosperity gospel does not need to be considered a materialistic type of Christianity. A statement like 'a true believer cannot be poor' may be straightforwardly materialistic and superstitious, but it does not need to be. I argue that it can also be a conceptual proposal for a redefinition of what it means to be blessed. Which one it is will be shown in what one truly cares about in one's life. What prosperity preachers say often sounds extremely materialistic, but if we pretend not to understand the words that are spoken in a prosperity gospel meeting, we see people who are happy despite their dire circumstances.

It is often hard to discern a person's true motive – even when considering oneself – but the two perspectives cannot both be present because they exclude each other. If one adopts the materialistic interpretation of 'a true believer cannot be poor', then the other one is fake and an illusion; if one adopts the conceptual or spiritual interpretation, then the other one is a temptation. One can never be part of both worlds. Holism, in particular, concerning blessings and salvation, is not as romantic as it is sometimes portrayed, because it easily slips into materialism. However, it is not necessarily materialistic either. In the final chapter, all the different aspects of the language of faith in Southern Africa that have been discussed throughout this book will be brought together. It will be investigated which questions should and which questions should not be asked about the distinguishing concepts of an African language of faith that have been discussed.



# Wrong questions

## ■ Introduction

It looks like African Christianity is the future of Christianity, but what does African Christianity look like? The time of building systems like an African inculturation theology or a black liberation theology has passed and they never had much influence at the grassroots level on African Christianity anyway. Yet, what it means to be a Christian in Africa seems to differ from being a Christian in Europe and the USA, the traditional homelands of Christianity. The way in which people speak of the spirit world or powers appears strange to outsiders, and the sense of community and the holistic worldview differentiate the African way of life from its Euro-American counterparts. By investigating these distinguishing concepts that colour the language of faith in Southern Africa, this book contributes to future projects of both fellow theologians who try to construct a contemporary African theology and those who are interested in theology in Africa given the well-known shift of the centre of gravity of Christianity towards Latin America, Africa and Asia.

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## ■ Understanding the language of faith

Understanding the language of faith in Southern Africa is not an easy task. Theologians, anthropologists and philosophers have all been struggling to make sense of it. How should we take seriously a form of language that often seems so strange and different? Two schools of interpreting an African language of faith can be found in theology, anthropology and philosophy alike. On the one hand are the critical realists, who interpret references to the spirit world and so forth as metaphors, and on the other hand there are the postmodernists, who interpret these references as straightforwardly describing the reality that people in Africa live in. I have argued that these two schools are both mistaken in interpreting African references to the spirit world as *descriptions* of the world. Proper attention to how this language is used shows that references to the spirit world are in fact *responses* to the world. Speaking of the spirit world is not to provide some additional information about reality but is a personal response to the world. In arguing this, I have used the descriptive parts of anthropology, African theology and my personal experiences in Zambia as source material and applied a Wittgensteinian philosophy of language to it. I demonstrated that the concepts of the language of faith used by these two schools are wrong and, consequently, that they ask the wrong kinds of questions.

## ■ The picture theory of language

The hidden assumption in most theology, anthropology and philosophy is that language makes sense if it describes something, if it is a picture of the world. Critical realists take the language of faith to be an attempt to approximate aspects of life that cannot be pictured directly. New models and hypotheses are continually created, intended to describe a reality that in the end remains elusive. Postmodernists emphasise that everyone has his or her own basic assumptions. There is no single elusive reality, but everyone's own metanarrative determines one's reality. The language of faith is basically a description of what the world

is like for this particular person. However, whether the language of faith is seen as metaphors approximating an ultimately indescribable reality or as defining the basic tenets of the reality in which one lives, both schools restrict the meaning of language to how it mirrors the world. Both critical realists and postmodernists consider language referring to the spirit world to be describing something out there, in this case the spirit world.

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein began his career by building a similar ‘picture theory of language’. His basic intuition came from hearing about a court case in Paris, where a small-scale model had been made of what happened during a particular accident. Consequently, Wittgenstein proposed that the way in which this model relates to what happened is the way in which language relates to reality. In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Wittgenstein 1922), he describes language as consisting of complex concepts, which can be broken down into basic units that have a one-to-one relationship with basic objects in reality – just like the parts of the small-scale model correspond with objects out there in the world.

In his later work, Wittgenstein criticised this perspective of language as a picture of reality. He came to the conclusion ‘that there is [not] *one* way in which language relates to the world [but that] language [makes sense] in many different ways’ (Kroesbergen 2015b:1). Language does not need to be descriptive and even ‘description’ can mean many different things. The way in which language has meaning is shown in how it is used in a particular instance within the flow of life.

## ■ The meaning of language is in the use

In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein (2009) highlights the problems with the picture theory of language by criticising the idea of a clear contrast between complex concepts and their basic units:

To the *philosophical* question ‘Is the visual image of this tree composite, and what are its constituent parts?’ the correct answer is:

‘That depends on what you understand by “composite”’. (And that, of course, is not an answer to, but a rejection of, the question). (# 47)

When in ordinary life someone asks whether a tree is composite, it will be clear from the context what is understood by ‘composite’ and, based on that knowledge, either the answer, ‘yes, it is composite and its constituent parts are the trunk, the branches, the leaves, etc.’, or the answer, ‘no, it is not composite, it is one plant’, is correct. Asked outside of any such specific context – or, as Wittgenstein puts it, *philosophically* – the question makes no sense and should be rejected. If the answer to a question is ‘that depends...’ or ‘yes and no...’, then there is something wrong with the question. Such diverting answers show that the context, the form of life within which the question makes sense, is not clear yet. We may be tempted to think that the question makes sense, if we assume that language makes sense in one way, namely, as a description of the world. In that case, we assume that either ‘the tree is composite’ or ‘the tree is not composite’ must be the correct picture of reality. Before we can say anything about that, however, we need to know how the words are used. We need to know the flow of life within which these words play a role. We need to see what it means to say either one or the other and what consequences follow from it.

To free ourselves from the temptation of asking the wrong questions or trying to answer them, the Wittgenstein (2009:#126) of the *Philosophical Investigations* encourages the philosopher to provide reminders about the context, without adding anything, ‘[p]hilosophy just puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything’. Philosophy tries to turn wrong questions into answerable questions by merely presenting contexts and uses that would endow those questions with meaning. Wittgenstein (2009:#127) continues, ‘[t]he work of the philosopher consists in marshalling recollections for a particular purpose’. Philosophy does not tell us new things, but it reminds us of what we know in our everyday lives but seem to have forgotten once we engage ourselves with these wrong questions. These wrong questions often have a kind of grandiose

air about them, ‘now we are going to settle once and for all whether trees are composite or basic’. Once they have been placed into context, the questions lose their feeling of importance; ‘within the context of a forest of plants, is a tree a composite or one unit?’ or ‘within the context of [the] medicinal use of plants, is the tree a composite or one unit?’ Asked in such a way, the answers become easy and the question no longer seems to be as important.

Wittgenstein (2009:#116) explains his task to be, ‘[t]o bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use’. Wittgenstein directs us away from ‘composite’ or ‘the tree’ as metaphysical entities back to what these ordinary words mean in a concrete context. We can only assume that ‘composite’ or ‘the tree’ *in general* makes sense if we assume that language makes sense in only one sense – as a description of objects in reality. However, in order to turn such wrong, metaphysical and empty questions into real questions, we need to be reminded of how these words are used in this particular case. Wittgenstein (2009:#126) proposes that ‘[t]he name “philosophy” might also be given to what is possible *before* all new discoveries and inventions’. By assembling reminders, the philosopher turns our wrong questions into real questions, not in order to answer those questions him- or herself but to give other scholars real questions to work with.

## ■ Wrong questions

Throughout this study, I have been trying to turn wrong questions, which theologians, anthropologists and philosophers are tempted to ask about the language of faith in Southern Africa, into real questions, for theologians of the Christianity of the future to work with. Time and time again we encountered the wrong questions that one is tempted to ask when struggling to make sense of apparently strange and different ways of speaking, such as, ‘do people in Africa really believe these strange stories about the spirit world?’ If one assumes to know how language relates to the world, as the critical realists and the postmodernists



do, then one has to assume that these questions make sense and need to be answered. When one is reminded, however, of the context and use of words and how this determines the way in which words mean something, then wrong questions may lose their grip on us. We see that we do not even know what 'to believe' means in this question. We would have to answer the question by saying things like 'that depends...' or 'yes and no...', thereby not answering the question but rejecting it. We need to open ourselves up to see how words are used in everyday life and what they mean in that context, instead of struggling on with the wrong questions to start with.

In Chapter 2, references to the spirit world and their reality were discussed. We encountered wrong questions such as 'do people in Africa really believe that their prayers heal people?' and 'do they really believe that their prayers keep their bus journey safe?' Well, that depends on what you mean by 'believe', by 'healing', by 'safe' and so on. Instead of marching on with wrong questions like 'how can they believe that?', 'why do they believe such stories?' or 'what are the consequences of their beliefs?', reminders are needed to clarify what it means to believe in the spirit world. The same people who believe that charcoal can turn into corpses do not check whether the contents of their drawers have changed overnight. The same people who believe pastors can use spirit doubles to do their preaching do not assume that the man next to us might be at home at the same time. Such common facts provide a necessary context for questions like 'do they really believe this?' to begin to make sense. Similarly, 'does the spirit world explain every event for people in Africa?' and 'do they believe either that everything is luck or that nothing happens by chance?' are wrong questions, because they do not take into account the many different ways in which the words 'explaining', 'luck' or 'chance' are used in day-to-day life. Yes, the spirit world explains what happens but no, not in the way that rain explains the wetness of the streets. Questions about the reality of the spirit world need context before they can be answered and this context is not a context that is discovered

after much research but the context that becomes visible through reminders. Most often, we do not need to learn new things but to be reminded about what we already know but forget when we are under the spell of a wrong question.

In Chapter 3, the wrong question as to whether we should suspend our scepticism about the existence of the spirit world was discussed. Reminders were presented about consequences that are and are not drawn from statements concerning ancestors or the actions of deceased loved ones. Someone who tells us that the ancestors are angry with him or that his deceased wife still loves him is not presenting a theory about the existence of mysterious entities. Before speaking of belief or scepticism, we need to unpack the many meanings of 'existence' with respect to the spirit world first.

A long list of reminders showed that questions like 'does the priest really believe that praying to Saint Anthony helps him find a parking spot?' or 'does a prayer to Saint Anthony work better or worse than using a parking app?' as such do not make sense. Other questions like whether the priest experiments with his prayers or abandons them when he does not find a parking spot may seem less interesting, but, at least, they are more real questions.

Wrong questions like those about the priest were investigated in Chapter 4 as well, 'do people in Africa believe that anointed pens help with exams?' or 'do they really believe that saying positive things makes them come to pass?' Instead of assuming that the answer is 'yes' because that is what people tell us in interviews and continuing with questions like 'why do they believe this?' or 'what are the consequences of such beliefs?', the assumptions behind the wrong questions need to be unmasked. To believe in mystical powers in things and words may mean something other than what one expects. The word 'power' in this context does not need to be a picture of a particular object or force out there.

Wrong questions do not only concern language that sounds strange and different. There might also be wrong questions about what seems beautiful and romantic. People in Africa are often said to still have community, but Chapter 5 showed that the question ‘do they still have community?’ is a wrong question because community can mean so many things. Asking ‘is their community inclusive and natural?’ or ‘is their community harmonious?’ assumes that we know how these concepts are used in everyday life. ‘Are people, as people, valued more highly in Africa than in Europe and the USA?’ and ‘are people connected to one another on a deeper level in Africa?’ can only be answered by rejecting the question, saying things like ‘that depends...’ or ‘yes and no...’.

In Chapter 5, I analysed the use of the concept of community in the context of African society at large, while in Chapter 6, I focussed on community as it is lived in African Christianity. Early European explorers of Southern Africa did not find any religion in the area because they asked the wrong questions. They asked whether the people had a religion, without being aware of the many different ways that religion can be taken up in someone’s life. The contemporary cliché that people in Africa are notoriously religious often suffers from the same shortcoming; one does not pay much attention to what is meant by ‘religion’ in a specific, concrete context. Next I showed how, even if this is acknowledged, many wrong questions can still be asked about religion in Africa. ‘Is it democratic?’, ‘is it based on mediators?’ or ‘is it ecumenical?’ are questions that cannot be answered directly and are, therefore, wrong questions. I pointed out how a community is shaped in African Christianity by highlighting the different uses of the terms in these questions.

Chapter 7 dealt with wrong questions surrounding the holistic worldview, in particular, concerning blessings and salvation. It is wrong to ask ‘do people in Africa think that their rituals actually work, that there is a connection between what they do and the results?’, because ‘actually working’ and ‘connection’ can mean different things in someone’s life. We should not ask whether

people in Africa give seed money in order to obtain wealth but should rather look at the role that is played in someone's life by giving seed money. Before asking whether people really believe that true believers cannot be poor, we should remind ourselves of what conclusions people draw from such statements in their lives. We cannot determine whether it is materialistic or not to say that a true believer cannot be poor, as this depends upon how this statement is used in someone's life.

In the various chapters of this book I have shown how language of faith in Southern Africa can be used in different ways and have demonstrated that, by assuming that language *must* be a description of something out there, the critical realists and the postmodernists in theology, anthropology and philosophy, referred to above, misunderstand language of faith in Southern Africa.

## ■ One church?

Throughout this book, I have shown that many of the questions asked in theology, anthropology and philosophy concerning the language of faith in Southern Africa are wrong questions because in these questions the fact that language can be used in many different ways is ignored. Given all these differences in the use of language, however, to what extent can we still speak of one global church?

First of all, the question of whether we are still one church is, of course, again a wrong question. In some ways we are, and in other ways we are not. So, 'it depends' would be the appropriate answer, which proves that there is something wrong with the question. What does it mean to say that people belong to one church or not?

This question may come up in certain situations, for example, when one considers whether one should support a particular church or receive support from a particular church, when one considers using reading material provided by a particular author

or group of authors, or when one has to decide whether to partake in Holy Communion in a particular context or not. Outside of such concrete situations, it makes no sense to ask such questions – they could only be wrong questions. Yet, if one finds oneself in such situations, a decision needs to be made. Others can give advice but ultimately people have to decide for themselves whether or not to share communion at this church or with that person and so on. However much others may influence a person's decision, it remains that person's personal decision, which answers the question whether he or she is still in one church with those particular people in those particular circumstances. I hope to have shown that African Christianity is not as strange as it may appear, nor as romantic, and how an accurate understanding of someone else's position is helpful in making a decision, such as in these examples, but the decision remains a personal one.

With the critical asides discussed in Chapter 6, I value Rowan Williams' suggestion that one can share communion with someone as long as one shares the Christian language and recognisably tries to obey Christ. Williams' warning that the boundary of this communion can never be determined in advance but has to be decided case by case makes sense as well. In making such personal decisions when the moment comes, it is important to pay attention to how the language of faith is used in the lives of others, as I have tried to showcase in this book. Instead of focussing on the phrases, images and formulae someone uses, one should pay attention to the spirit behind someone's words. As argued in Chapter 3, big differences in the pictures that someone uses in responding to the world do not necessarily form a stumbling block to recognising a shared spirit, whereas sharing the same pictures does not necessarily imply that people's beliefs are compatible with one another. If one does justice to the role the language of faith plays in the lives of Christians in Southern Africa, as is encouraged throughout this book, new possibilities and perspectives open up for world Christianity. We can learn from one another despite each other's

strangeness and differences, and in acknowledging each other's strangeness and differences we can learn about our own limitations as well.

In this book, I have provided tools to see beyond the surface language of faith in Africa and determine the spirit that is expressed in this language. The discernment of spirits that should follow if the occasion arises is itself a spiritual matter. What matters is not the peculiarities of the language of faith that someone uses but how one uses these pictures in response to the one world in which we are all living. The real living encounter with the other is what allows us to move beyond our temptation to ask the wrong questions – both those who construct African theologies and those who try to understand them. Instead of focussing on how people express what they have to tell you, what matters is to look behind the particular words that someone uses in one's response to the world in order to listen to what someone is truly saying.



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Generally, for people in Africa nothing happens by chance, but everything is determined by the spirit world. They involve the spirit world in almost every activity of their lives through prayer. In using the philosophy of language developed by Ludwig Wittgenstein, the author asserts that it is important to remember that the meaning of people's words is not determined by what they say or how they understand their own words themselves, but by the wider context. Saying that the spirit world is behind something is a way of expressing the reality of living in a world dominated by chance. Spiritual entities do not represent concrete, external spirits or ghosts but a description of an experience with a negative power that can create havoc. They are personal responses to something bad that happened to people. The spirit world is not something made up, but it is a response to the world, and in that sense the spirit world is real. This book's perspective is relevant for its elucidation of an important aspect of African discourse about religion.

**Prof. Marius Nel, Unit for Reformational Studies, Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa**

This book offers an invitation for scholars to use social scientific tools and religious language to think theologically and philosophically about the belief in supernatural power which promotes fears and accusations of witchcraft and excessive promises of well-being and miracles. This scholarly monograph offers a critical understanding of the nature and function of religious language. It creates a context where members of different religious communities might participate in ecumenical dialogue and pursue justice.

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