

## ATR's and a Ministry of Discovery for a New Global Ecology

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Most churchmen would regard the Christian missionary enterprise in Africa over the last century as being phenomenally successful. However, in at least one way that is increasingly gaining recognition and importance it has not done very well. This is in relation to the dialogue with African Traditional Religion (ATR)<sup>1</sup>. There have always been some missionaries in Africa who responded positively to ATR, who were open-minded and sensitive toward the religious beliefs and customs of the peoples among whom they labored. But we will be hard pressed to find many who have reflected the attitude of perfect humility first made manifest in the Incarnation--“His state was divine yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the conditions of a slave and become as men are . . .” (Phil. 2: 1-11). And very few indeed have followed the gospel's model of selfless empowerment by considering the other person and his or her culture to be *better* than yours. Besides the interference presented by our own ethnocentrism which acts as an immune system for preserving meanings, most missionaries were very much people of their times and these times did not make Africans or their beliefs and practices out to be *better* than the missionary's.

In most cases the opposite was true. It was the firm conviction of the Western world, both secular and Christian, that nothing could be learned from Africa. And, until very recent times, ATR was either dismissed as ignorance and superstition or it was condemned as “devil worship”. Most missionaries were conscientiously engaged in a two-fold task of mercy and enlightenment--first wiping clean the African cultural slate or creating a *tabula rasa*, and second filling the void with the light of Western culture, which for missionaries reached its pinnacle in church culture.

This was an agenda, of course, that the secular missionaries, the colonial officials, only partly shared. The colonizing powers, while under the same constraints and biases as the Christianizing powers, generally served more secular interests and a more selfish ambition. They did not wish to fill the void so quickly nor so full that they risked losing their place in the hierarchy of power. For example, the secular missionaries in German Togoland allowed the first Christian missionaries to establish technical schools as long as they didn't teach in German, and in neighbouring Northern Ghana,

as a general rule<sup>2</sup>, the British did not allow Christian missionaries at all fearing that their schools would soon reduce the northern manual labour pool.

I don't say this to exonerate Christian missionaries, for blind good will must also accept its share of the blame. More to the point, although each mission expressed itself in very different terms, from the peoples' perspective, both "missions" were viewed as one. All of it came as one package—"superior" Western culture. Their common project was to offer an exchange: the new for the old. The people called this "getting your eyes opened."

In hindsight, however, it now seems abundantly clear that along with the Christian faith and the best elements of Western culture, were willy-nilly mixed in some of the worst elements—the destructive currents of materialism and individualism, a penchant for doing rather than being, for owning rather than stewardship, for managing rather than cooperating, for usurping rather than sharing, and for destruction rather than nurturing. Africa is now caught between worlds and it is reaping the disastrous fruit of this hybrid mixing in a variety of natural and man-made disasters.

#### Facilitating a ministry of discovery

The forest ecology in particular has suffered. When I first arrived in Ghana in 1972, I remember traveling from coastal Accra to Kumasi in the heart of the country through a tunnel of giant hardwoods without seeing the sky. Now the bountiful rainforests are gone. The beautiful hardwoods that have made Ghana famous are not even available at our local timber markets. It is difficult to get wood for building and the quality products used for furniture have all been exported. Even though the influence of foreign governments and companies cannot be discounted, this level of devastation was impossible without the complicity, greed and rapacity of many and the culpable ignorance and indifference of most Ghanaians. Over the years it was done in opposition not only to existing laws of the Ghanaian governments but in stark disregard for the traditional moral values, laws, and prohibitions. The woeful destruction of Ghana's natural resources has been accompanied by a parallel disintegration of the rich moral life of the community.

#### Conflicts in Africa

#### The Faith and Culture Project

Over the last 40 years since Vatican II the church has begun the project of unpacking the contents of the mission era. This process has involved separating faith from culture—something that has been made possible by advances in our understanding of culture and in the self-critical application of cultural analysis, i.e. what other cultures can tell us about ourselves and the nature of the wider reality. Even though the exercise has only begun it has already proven to quite liberating and of great importance not only for the future of mission but also for the future of humankind.

The self-critical process of separating faith from culture has proven to be especially liberating for the church and mission. Indeed, it has become essential for the coming to be of a culturally diverse World Church. Furthermore it seems to have arrived on

the scene just in time to deal with the great changes that have overtaken us, the pressures and transformations of our global era. Whether the church is ready for it or not, diverse forms of Christian life complete with their own cultural contexts are springing up like grass. One gets the sense that there will soon be 7,000 of them—at least one for every culture—not to mention those forms responding to subcultures and cultural scenes. Church orthodoxy has valiantly assumed the task of vetting and guarding the many versions. But the effort lacks credibility and direction. The Church is busy tilting windmills at the behest of our globally mono-cultural dragons. Suddenly it is once again very clear that God’s mission is bigger than that of the old Church. The kingdom is something toward which the Church feebly points and a new culturally broadened orthodoxy is required in order to recognize the kingdom in the midst of our world’s great cultural diversity.

The growing urgency for broader theological models with which to interpret the broadened experience of faith began with *Ad Gentes* but it has come a long way since then. All aspects of theology have been affected and are now affecting each other. The tools of cultural analysis which have up until very recently only been used in mediating and interpreting the other—and have thus been used to facilitate the conversion of the other (I call this the crowbar approach to cultural analysis)—are now finally being used to help us critically understand ourselves and the breadth of God’s mission of bringing his kingdom to completion. The “kingdom” is no longer to be identified with the institutional “Church” but with the whole of creation. It is therefore also eminently appropriate for Christians to take the lead in drawing out the implications of this liberating process for all of creation. Vincent Donovan says, “We Christians have led humankind in despoiling the earth. We have stood at the heart of this original sin of humanity. In a Christianity come of age we must stand in the forefront of every effort to save it” (1990: 82).

The changes that are occurring in the world, the transformations or megatrends are a source of insight and God’s revelation. Some of the most pervasive of these are in the area of global geographics. They clearly demonstrate that God’s mission is no longer from the West to the rest of the World. Today our missionaries to Africa are Africans and Asians. The current of knowledge is beginning to flow from Africa and Asia to Europe and the Americas. God’s revelation is inherent in this cultural knowledge--indeed, it is implicit in all of creation. The knowledge is dynamic. There are no longer two distinct camps: those sending knowledge and those receiving it, one replete with revelation and the other devoid. Rather, knowledge is everywhere and access to it is made possible through cross-cultural dialogue. It is progressive, gradually unfolding, slowly coming into being and growing. Everyone and every culture has something to give and to receive. Thus the dialogue is mutually fulfilling and it involves the ongoing cumulative transformation of everyone and everything—not into a culturally contextualized church—but into the universalizing context of God’s Kingdom.

The content and meaning of mission has been expanded accordingly. It is no longer in the promotion of the church and its institutions but in the service of the Kingdom. God’s mission is no longer only, or even primarily, a message of personal salvation but for social and cultural transformation, a re-creation and re-forming of everything

into the reign of God. The new revelation and mission involves all God's peoples and all cultures in a continual process of discovery. Those who would lend assistance to this process, be they development workers, indigenous churches or members of missionary congregations are de-facto agents of the Kingdom. Their work is to bring to fulfillment God's Kingdom. They are not purveyors of their own cultures but explorers, interpreters and mediators of all cultures. God has co-missioned them not to install what their ethnocentrism would influence them to think of as their own "superior" culture but rather to enter deeply into the core of other cultures, sub-cultures and cultural scenes effecting their transformation from within. Their work is no longer church-planting but aiding the process of discovery from within by nurturing the inherent openness of every culture to God's Kingdom.

Today's missionaries are therefore challenged to be radically open and perceptive to the promptings of the Spirit speaking more clearly than ever before in Africa's 1,700 languages and cultures. They respond to the challenge by listening intently to the Spirit of Pentecost who is using the words of Africa's ancestors and moral traditions of abundant life to speak once more of "the wonderful things that God has done" in Christ Jesus. This is indeed good news to the people and to the larger World. Today mission is not to "bring" God's salvation but to "receive" it anew. It is no longer to "teach" but to facilitate a ministry of discovery and transformation.

#### Implications of a ministry of discovery for African History and Culture

The implications of this ministry of discovery and transformation for the cultural histories of African peoples are enormous. ATR is suddenly of special importance to Africa, and indeed to the rest of the world. Within it a rich and precious store of God's revelation has been made accessible. Within it are the seeds of the Kingdom. Even if these seeds have been trampled upon and forgotten by the secular and religious missionaries of a former era and even now continue to be ignored by the dominant Western culture of our time, they nevertheless contain the gospel. They harbor good news for humankind. ATR can no longer be regarded as the nadir of civilization, at opposite poles to revelation and enlightenment. It is the continuous record of God's vital presence in Africa and it offers the oldest and most enduring account of God's interaction with humankind. As such it is a primary fount of inspiration for the ongoing transformation of Africa and the world.

A ministry of discovery requires a different kind of church leadership—more open and participatory. Such a ministry is to be carried out not by an elite corps of Kingdomites but it is an integral part in the life of every Christian. A ministry of discovery goes beyond mere "sensitivity". It seeks to apprehend and experience another reality. It calls for a deep love of other cultures. Only full participation within the new reality of another culture can lead to the inculturation of a new gospel. A ministry of discovery requires the crossing of cultural barriers in a new way—not to "convert the heathen", but to experience, to learn and to be transformed. Such a ministry requires innovators who let their faith take root in a new cultural context and thereby discover a new life in the Spirit. They live out the gospel within their new contexts in such a way that it becomes the fulfillment of the culture. They are to assist the discovery of new culturally appropriate ministries and the development of new rituals to nurture the social and cultural transformations.

A ministry of discovery brings to our attention a new thread of continuity when determining God's revelation. The church continues to serve God's mission to participate in and further the coming of God's Kingdom. But the continuity of God's mission throughout the ages is no longer insured by an unchanging mono-cultural church. Indeed such a narrow view of church is incompatible with the Kingdom preached by Jesus. Cultural analysis has helped us to see that the Kingdom encompasses all peoples and incorporates all of their codified and symbolized knowledge.

### New Role of ATRs

The ministry of discovery that is mission in the third millennium is being assisted by a new world religion. Laurenti Magesa asserts (1997: 10ff) that ATR has finally been given its rightful place as a "World Religion". He sees in it important answers to the puzzles of our global era and he maintains that if Christianity is to survive in the West it desperately needs to discover the ATR doctrine of "abundant life" (1997:13).

The world is in dire need of the help that ATR can offer. The futurist commentator, Alvin Toffler, said twenty years ago: "The dawn of this new civilization is the single most explosive fact of our time. Humanity faces the deepest social upheaval and creative restructuring of all time. A global revolution is under way" (1980: 9-10). Now we are in the middle of this upheaval. The world seeks a new and different way of life—more peaceful, more just, more holistic and ecologically balanced. It seeks a way that is different from the path of destruction born of the industrial age. All currents and traditions of religious experience have a part to play in this restructuring. But the oldest and most mature, those proceeding from the cradle of human life have a very special role to play. Africa has a very precious gift to offer the world in its religiosity. Now it is Africa's turn to help fill the illumination gap in the West and missionaries are leading the way by taking up a ministry of discovery.

### A Ministry of Discovery in Africa:

A ministry of discovery looks at the ideational aspect of culture or patterns *for* behaviour, not just patterns *of* behaviour. It seeks to uncover the cultural codes that are at the heart of Africa's new cultural formations. It sees the present through the eyes of the past. Very concretely the ministry for discovery demands that African Christians go back to the past in order to understand and take charge of the present. But this return is meant to uncover the foundations of African religiosity in both the present and throughout history. It is not the contemporary myth-making "*sankofa*" of Afrocentrism. It is not seeking lavish kente cloth, golden treasures or artful drumming and dancing as the marks of its preferred civilization. Nor does it seek to discover in the attributes of ATR and African life theological themes that seem to echo those found in Western Church Culture. The search is genuine and cultural analysis has helped the viewers to go beyond their own cultural biases. The ministry of discovery aims at assisting this return—not just in Africa but everywhere. Indeed, the new missionary enterprise is to help all Christians to become conscious of and begin to engage the deeper issues and problems at the heart of their cultures—the age-old social ills of war, injustice and the misuse of wealth and power in all its myriad forms.

This new mission calls for a massive restructuring of the Church, for a World Church, one that can absorb and make sense of the diverse cultural meanings that are coming

in from all sides. As never before, it calls for an army of specialists trained in the social, cultural and historical sciences, who can carry out the investigation, reflection and painstaking cultural analysis that is needed to penetrate the diverse meanings. The Church is less prepared for this than ever before.<sup>3</sup> The crossing over of cultures must involve the whole community of believers as explorers, discoverers, co-participants and de-coders—not just the official Church leadership. The wider participation will afford the rich capacity for discernment that is needed for this ministry of discovery. It must involve as the new missionaries “outsiders” who have become “insiders” and “insiders” who step outside their own cultures to see themselves as they really are.

There are many problems to be overcome. The local churches and “popular churches” are not being sufficiently tapped for their contributions. There are large gaps between the official church and the local church and again from the local church to the popular church. A far greater involvement will also be required of the whole community regardless of belief. It is not some officially promoted version of their religiosity or only those parts of their belief and practice that have the Church’s stamp of approval that are important. Only the current of African religion as it actually is can be a true dialogical partner.

From the perspective of the local community in Africa, the African Church is not well-positioned for this sort of dialogue. The people perceive it as rich and powerful, helpful yes, but far from the people. The priests and the bishops are Africans yet the Church is still perceived as an extension of the West into Africa. How can the Church enlist the peoples’ true cooperation and support when there are such enormous gaps between the present Western cultural form of the Church and the cultures of the people?

#### Ministry of discovery and the World Church

A ministry of discovery directed toward ATR is not just important for Africans and Africa, it is important for our future as a community sharing the same global environment. ATR has an important role to play in forming the new global ecology, especially through its moral tradition of abundant life. The behavioral codes in ATR are part of God’s handiwork in the formation of his Kingdom. Donovan links the all-important task of preserving our planet from nuclear or poisonous destruction, directly to sacramental ministry. “The Eucharistic ministry should be a ministry of stewardship, not ownership, of the things of the earth” (1990:82). The Church as sacrament and Africa’s central sacrament of life in abundance are part of the same transformational reality. But the perspective of ATRs speaks directly to can better assist and guide African peoples to envision and respond to the call of a new ecology, to resist the commoditizing and packaging of our natural resources for sales and consumption. It can help us to preserve our astounding and miraculous bio-diversity, plant life, animal life, and nourish and sustain all our cultural varieties of human life. It can help us to preserve and sustain the precious revelation of God in our midst and each aspect of life features as an important part of our new global reality/identity. All of this is new and holy ground for exploration and discovery.

In this paper I would like to encourage a spirit of discovery and discernment with regard to a particular set of cultural codes found in ATR that may offer a more

Biblical model for global peace-making, reconciliation and sustaining the abundance of life that flows from peace than the current models arising from Western cultural codes. It is the ATR sacrament of ecological reconciliation, something that becomes essential whenever and wherever the earth is “spoiled”.<sup>4</sup>

### ATR and the concept of “Spoiled Earth”

One of the most common features of African Traditional Religious belief is the cult of the Earth. It is consistently found in the pre-Islamic Middle East, among the Israelites in such holy places as El Shaddai, Horeb, Tabor etc., and among peoples throughout Africa, including the Gur-speaking peoples of Northern Ghana, Cote-d’Ivoire, Mali, Burkina Faso, Togo, Benin and Niger. Among these peoples the common linguistic roots of this cult derive from the word *ten* meaning “earth” which is often used together with the word for “animal hide” or “skin” to mean “land-skin” (Tait 1963:35). This cult is particularly important for their relationship to the land. Tait speaks of Konkomba political and geographical districts as “having their own shrines (*luwaa*, pl. *uguwa*) . . . of which the most important in this context is the Earth shrine, *Ntengbe*” (1963:35).

Throughout Africa, land is more than just a political or economic entity. It is also a ritual or sacralized entity governing fertility and vigorous, abundant life. The most elementary feature of this wider ecology is the peoples’ relationship to the land as a spiritual and physical source of life (see Tait 1963:14). This relationship is centered on the “Earth” as a personified deity. It is not just the organic and inorganic elements comprising the earth’s ecology, including the soil, the stones, or the trees and vegetation that grow on it, or just the animals that abound in its ‘bush’. It is not just the DNA or biological fertility of this or that animal or human, but, within a given territorial range, the essence of fertility and vitality itself, including all of the natural elements that comprise, insure or represent instances of fertility and vitality, like rainfall, sunlight, and the nutrients and biological life in the soil. In this deity of sacralized ecology all of these are combined.

### Ritual “Landowners”

This holy ecology of ATR exists within a moral universe—one with meaning and purpose. It is held in place by a web of ethical relationships with God, the provider, the source of life, fertility, abundance and prosperity, at its core. The relationships are hierarchically ordered in a continuum connecting the people, the ancestors, the Earth and God. Our relationship with the Earth must be maintained to insure the life and sustenance of all those living within its sacred domain. Throughout Ghana this is enacted in two main rituals every year—one of petition at the onset of the rains and the other of thanksgiving after the harvest. In the North the “landowners” or “Earth priests” (*tendana*) call upon the ancestors to give their offerings and re-affirm their relations to the Earth and then to God (see Appendix below). The Nankanse say, “When a *Ten’dana* performs sacrifices, the land ascends to *Yini*, the Sky-God, and begs things (*suse bono*) from him and every one prospers” (Rattray 1932:258).

The relationship between those living on the land and the Earth itself can be jeopardized or broken by certain individual or group acts of desecration (see Tait

1963, Rattray 1932: 258, Froelich 1963: 151, Kirby 1986), which unleash a state of chaos or “ritual pollution”. Among them are certain lesser, offenses against the Earth such as sexual acts in the bush, the occurrence of a “bad death” (someone dying in childbirth, alone in the bush or by drowning) or the dragging of a branch of a certain thorn tree (*nabuli*) across the surface of the land thereby rendering it infertile. But the most abhorrent act is the spilling of human blood through war, tribal conflict or murder. This act, more than any other act of desecration, “spoils the Earth”.

When the "Earth" is "spoiled" our relationship with reality itself is shattered. In the African multi-dimensional ecology, encompassing the seen and unseen worlds, the land and all life supported by it are caught up in the ensuing chaos and disharmony. Life becomes tenuous and everything about it fragile and insecure. Crops fail. Nothing grows. The weather changes unpredictably. People fall victim to unlikely accidents and misfortunes. Things fall apart. When the vitality and fertility in the Earth is killed, only pain and suffering are harvested. All living things fall sick. If the land is not purified, if harmony is not restored, it will eventually lead to death for all.

Because of the ultra-serious nature of this problem and the fact that all are affected by it, dealing with the problem becomes a matter of the utmost urgency for everyone. The solution must involve the whole society in unison. Rattray quotes one informant as saying: “the land is a bitter thing, it will cast out, finish, your house (if you refuse to purify it)” (1932:258). In order to address this situation and to revive and restore the Earth, the elders, the chiefs and the people call upon the Earth priest (*ten'daana*) to intervene. Harmonious relations can only be restored by means of a ritual of purification called the “burying the blood” or “smoothing of the land” (cf. Rattray 1932: 258), which is performed by the Earth priest.

### The Burying of the Blood

The state of war is a state of “Spoiled Earth”. It is a state of imbalance, it constitutes a break with life and introduces a deadly contagion, which will ultimately lead to death for everyone and everything. The very fruitfulness and abundance of the earth is affected by this contagion. Because of the belief in an ecology which brings together both the seen and the unseen worlds and the belief that bloodshed ultimately shatters harmonious relations between the two worlds, warring parties in Africa are always ultimately forced to set aside their petty disputes and to deal with a more basic problem which unites them—the need to live in harmony or not to live at all. Thus the ritual of the “burying of the blood” has a dual purpose. It both offers the possibility of reconciliation and makes reconciliation absolutely necessary as a step toward the resumption of life. Existentially speaking, without reconciliation there still exists a state of war.

The restoration of the Earth is, therefore, not merely a secular matter. It cannot be accomplished by decrees alone, or by a policing force or through long arbitration or conflict-management processes organized by the super-powers or the United Nations. It requires the cessation of hostilities and a genuine reconciliation. But the urgency to reconcile is not based on fear of economic and political instability, the desire for political gain, or prestige, or even the fear of harsh reprisals from a “peace-keeping” force. Its urgency is impressed upon people by the moral order in life itself.



The “burying of the blood” ritual is an attempt to re-harmonize all living things and all relationships to the Earth. It marks the end to the state of war and the beginning of a new state of harmonious co-existence and peace. But this peace comes into existence only after the rite has been performed. If hostilities break out again between clans or if there are incidental fights and quarrels after the ritual is performed they are not regarded as part of war but as isolated incidents. Rather than further polarizing the community as in war, such incidents will bring the community together to quell the disturbance. The ceremony also wipes away the necessity for blood vengeance, which is still a requirement among many peoples of Northern Ghana.

### The Church and Ethnic Conflicts in Africa

In Ghana, at least in former times, the very threat of war was an assault on our relationship to the Earth. Rattray wrote of the “warlike” Asante that even the threat of destabilizing war was so perverse that “To raise the war cry necessitates purification, even when fighting has not followed, and no one has been killed . . .” (1932: 125). One of the principal duties of the Earth priest in times past was to prevent war by casting down his animal skin mantle (the insignia of his office) between the combatants (Rattray 1932: 257).

This ritual has particular importance for our time because of the broader moral perspective that it gives to our understanding of war, peace, and reconciliation that are so problematic in Africa today. The escalation of armed conflict throughout Africa, e.g. in Somalia, Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Ghana in 1994, has led to an increased awareness of the importance of conflict management and the need for more cooperation and planning in this area. Peace initiatives are being proposed and supervised by statesmen, national governments, local and national NGOs, and international aid organizations. Providers of aid responding to the needs of refugees and to the tragic damage to life and property caused by armed conflicts, are now getting involved with disaster-prone communities in various efforts aimed at prevention.

The Church has also responded both formally and informally to comfort and assist the suffering and to prevent such disasters in the future. Indeed, the Church’s mission of discovery necessitates her involvement in the quest for universal justice, peace and the integrity of creation. As the representative of the Prince of Peace, the Church has very important dimensions to add to these peace initiatives. But it can only make its good news accessible by entering deeply into the cultural contexts of the people. Indeed, the Church’s efforts can only claim to participate in God’s mission to establish his Kingdom of Peace to the extent that they arise from the life of the people. By merely echoing the peace and justice proposals of the Western world or by solemnly preaching the doctrines of another faith in another culture, in another time, when there is so much to learn from ATR, the Church is in danger of neglecting her mission of discovery.

### The Religious Dimension offered by ATR

If those participating in God's mission of peace in Africa are to take up their roles of discovery, it will be absolutely necessary for them to understand local cultural knowledge and behavior concerning war and violence, peace and reconciliation—especially the beliefs, attitudes and practices arising in these contexts—from the perspective of African Traditional Religion. “The African is incurably religious” as Mbiti (1960) says, because in the African mentality the unseen or the spirit world and the physical, material one we see about us are all part of the same reality. All of creation participates in relationships extending in two dimensions—horizontally in the visible world among the living and vertically to the unseen world of the living dead, the ancestors and the various spirit agents including the Earth and God. A breach in our relationships with one another in the visible world affects relationships with the unseen and vice-versa. As they are both linked by a common ecology, disruptions in the visible world, brought about by bloody conflicts, not only destabilize elements of the visible world horizontally, they also disrupt the vertical connection making farmlands infertile and unproductive. Thus the aim of peace-making and dispute-settlement is only secondarily the restoration of balanced relations in the visible world. Its primary concern is with the holistic restoration of the whole ecology in both its visible and invisible, horizontal and vertical dimensions. If any priority is to be assigned in this ecology, however, it must go to the vertical relationships since they are the conduit for the essence of life itself.

Would-be peace-making policy-makers in Africa, especially in situations of conflict over land must be tuned to the expansive nature of the project. It is not just a political or even economic venture but one that involves all of life, especially the religious dimensions and particularly the cult of the Earth and its institutions for reconciliation. as an option for restructuring peace processes throughout the continent. Thus it seems that the first step toward bringing about a genuine peace in Africa is to address the enormous gap that exists at all levels between two opposing cultures of peace-making—the Western-based culture of “conflict-management” and the universal African need for “reconciliation” as prescribed by ATR. The gap is at its widest with regard to the moral presuppositions of the opposing systems.

### Opposing Cultures of Peace-making

Applying this advice locally here in Ghana, perhaps the greatest problem the Church faces as a potential peace arbitrator is not the accusation that the Church is not neutral or even that it sides with the oppressed.<sup>5</sup> The problem is with its Western cultural outlook as a whole, especially the tendency to employ the Western cultural codes of “conflict-management” and everything that is implied by these including the particular notions of law, justice, and peace (see Gluckman 1969). All of this is so different from the perception and understanding of those experiencing the conflicts in Africa, that without reaching this level of local meanings first, the stage is set for ongoing miscommunication.

The striking differences that exist between the African political and judicial systems as compared with the systems of Europe and the West have been referred to in numerous classical studies of the colonial period (Gluckman 1956, 1969, Fortes 1949, Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940). The most fundamental of these differences focus on the aims. African systems, often termed “dispute-settlement” (D-S), aim at re-

establishing harmonious relations in the community. Assigning blame, exacting punishment or allocating compensation are less important than healing the breach and re-establishing cordial social relations. In Africa, the society as a whole puts pressure on the disputing parties to settle disputes for the good of the whole community.

These studies were done more than half a century ago and some would say that this Africa is gone forever. But culture must not be equated with the outer forms such as “drumming and dancing” or colourful displays put on for tourists. These things change constantly. The heart of culture, the codes by which we organize and share our knowledge of the world around us, does not change as quickly. These codes rather act to incorporate the innumerable new influences brought on by electronic communications.

Everywhere in Africa today we find Western institutions of politics, systems of justice, economy, family life and religion. But African politics works by a different code. Its systems of justice are modeled on those of the West but as compared with Western-styled notions about justice as immutable, in Africa justice is more contextual, following the sliding scale of human relations. Similarly, status is more important than contract. Laws and entitlements seems relative, fuzzy, soft-edged, and open to interpretation and re-interpretation. Everything seems to swim in negative space waiting to be defined by relationships. Everything is subordinated to human relations and the negotiations themselves are meant to initiate and preserve these relations rather than destroy them. Here in Africa, negotiations are not for bargaining, they are essentially peace overtures. One does not enter into negotiations, therefore, unless there is the heartfelt need for peace. Formerly this “need” was initiated or ensured by an overarching moral authority. But now these transactions occur in a genuine moral vacuum.

The West employs a much different code. In stark contrast to Africa’s time-honored modes of settling disputes, repairing the breach, reconciling and reuniting communities, Western cultures of “conflict-management” aim at securing the rights of individuals. Thus individuals are in competition with one another for “scarce” rights from the outset. The process does not aim at harmonious relations but at minimizing conflicts or keeping them manageable, which is to say, not too violent. Negotiations are linear and progressive, moving sequentially from one point to another. They are concretized in positive space. Gains and losses are calculated, quantified and concretely defined. Protagonists are clearly identifiable. One prosecutes, another defends; one party is judged “innocent”, another “guilty”. Indeed, at the cultural core, we find, implicit in the very language and strategies of Western peace efforts, an oppositional code which conflicts dramatically with the culture-based expectations of African communities for reconciliation and harmonious relations.

The philosophies of each system are diametrically opposed. African “Dispute-settlement” presumes peace as the status quo, the normal state. “Conflict-management” presumes war is the normal state. The “peace” of Alexander, the pax Romanum and the pax Britannicum have all been based on conquest. Following from this we find different strategies and tactics employed in each system. “Dispute-settlement” looks for ways to extend the olive branch. “Conflict-management” employs “lines of attack”. One process emphasizes the resumption of normal social

interchange and friendly relations beginning with greetings<sup>6</sup>. The other fosters the “hard line” positions necessary for successful negotiations. In the former, the tactics favor everything that foster, insure or better these relations. The latter is concerned with “managing” the tension, keeping the balance between “hot” war and “cold” war. The tactics favour threats and coercion versus “damage control” and taking “acceptable losses”. The threat of war is used to gain more concessions and chips for negotiation at the conference table. “Concrete” gains are emphasized like rights to compensation, mineral resources like diamonds and gold, the production and stockpiling of weapons, or the reduction of weapons. These are piled up as chips for negotiation at the conference table. But in the case of D-S threats are counter-productive of peace. In fact they are an admission of guilt—namely that there is no peace in the heart, no real yearning for peace.

The two systems organize time very differently. Dispute-settlement is cyclic and recursive, whereas C-M is linear and progressive. D-S goes round and round building up momentum and strength as it goes. It seems to be getting nowhere but suddenly breaks through to a new level altogether nullifying earlier “gains” and “losses”. C-M on the other hand, makes quantifiable, but often illusory, gains. Each step, each conference, each summit meeting, each set of concessions is hallowed as a new “barrier” that has been overcome on the road to peace.

Because D-S focuses on relationships, the measurement of specific units of time is counter-productive. Because C-M focuses on strictly measured gains attempts are made to measure and to maximize quantifiable gain. Thus time is also strictly measured. Culturally speaking, D-S is an open system but C-M is closed. D-S searches for new integrations, even new bases for peace, but C-M is blind to new models of integration.

The two systems have different goals. D-S has a specific peace objectives to which it directs its efforts and it eventually reaches them. But D-M has no substantive vision or definition of peace (only a relative one) and there is no end to the negotiations.

D-S assigns time for mourning and healing, which makes the process seem longer but in the end a genuine peace is achieved. The healing or mourning process involves the three normative stages of separation, liminality and reaggregation (cf. Junod, Turner, Douglas). The stages do not easily lend themselves to measurement in discrete units of time (days, weeks, months) but are better measured by needs in the mourning process. The greater the trauma, the longer the time it takes for the emotional, physical and psychic healing to take place. Before re-integration or reconciliation is possible, there must be broad periods for denial, anger and acceptance. In the Western C-M processes there is “no time” for healing or mourning.

The key indicators of “progress” in the African mourning process, especially for farmers and the people of the land, are not tied to this or that concession or to the ratification of documents but to the stages and corresponding rites of separation, purification and re-integration. Among them the final objective is not to bring about a negotiated settlement that each party can “live with” but to start new life on its way—to bring about a new equilibrium based on renewed relationships.

Therefore, from the African D-S perspective, healing is absolutely required for genuine peace. Therefore grieving is a socially-imposed responsibility. It is not a luxury. Yet typically in the West, “mourning is treated as if it were a weakness, a self-indulgence, a reprehensible bad habit instead of a psychological necessity” (Geoffrey Gorer 1965:85). Because of this, and because mourning time is not easily quantifiable, there is a tendency for a Western Church, like Western culture as a whole, to ignore it or suppress it, even in ritual. C-M rushes toward completion, thus only the third stage is acknowledged preventing any true re-engagement. Whatever was lost remains socially unburied and thus unstable.

Here the Church should take up its mission of discovery. It must take the moral initiative. Archbishop Kpiebaya’s presence at the mourning celebration to mark the tragic slave-raiding that occurred throughout Northern Ghana from 1700-1900, which was held at Salaga in August 2000<sup>7</sup>, is a step in the right direction.

### Stretching the D-S model to meet Africa’s Conflicts

The case for making the D-S model rather than the C-M model the standard for Christian reconciliation in Africa and beyond is a strong one. But there is one big drawback to using the D-S model in our global era. The traditional D-S model is “in-group” based. Every tribe has its own effective mechanisms for D-S that work well settling conflicts between its members but there are no such mechanisms for inter-tribal conflicts. At the inter-tribal level there is no overarching group or principle applying the necessary, unifying moral pressure.

Here the C-M model may even appear to have an initial advantage because of its clearly demarcated path to progress, the idea that progress can be quantifiable and the fact that its dynamics are not group-based. C-M assumes that the steps toward peace, like everything else, can be measured and are thus quantifiable. In this way it attempts to objectify and maintain control over the peace process. It can “report” on definite steps taken toward peace and predict how many more are necessary to achieve an envisioned goal. But of course, subjects in the social sciences are not quantifiable in the same way as they are in math, chemistry or physics. The peace process is not obliged to follow the C-M track as if it were a chemical formula.

The problem of reconciling warring tribes or interest groups in Africa, therefore, can be described as essentially one of stretching the D-S model to a higher level of integration so that it can work trans-tribally. For this a set of overarching principles—a common moral code—is needed. One of the most obvious places to look for such principles is ATR.

The actors in the two systems (D-S and C-M), like all the other aspects of the systems, are also quite different. The principal actors in the C-M mode are the various development providers, peace brokers, negotiators and ambassadors for peace. There is little or no mention of the various non-material agents such as God, the ancestors and personified deities of the “Earth”. Yet they are essential to the D-S mode. Here Christian agents must be willing to go beyond their “cultural boundaries” to re-discover the larger dimensions of Christ’s message of the Kingdom. There is enough commonality of belief and practice in African Traditional Religion beginning with the

common belief in and dependency on the High God, that ministers can begin to build a workable trans-tribal process using the traditional codes of D-S.

### The Traditional Feast of Reconciliation

To illustrate the dynamics of the “burying of the blood” ritual, I would like to recount the performance of such a ritual among the Anufo, which I witnessed in 1984 (see Appendix). It was made to redress a murder that had occurred in Chereponi three years before. The immediate cause was a number of misfortunes occurring in the town and nearby villages, especially the village of Sangbana where the Earth priest resides.

The animals sacrificed include a chicken and a goat. It was explained to me that in the past, each of the quarreling parties had to supply a part of the sacrifice. One was obliged to give the guinea corn beer, the other the sacrificial animals. But in this case Sangbana supplied everything. A hole was dug about a foot deep and six inches in diameter. Then the sacrifice began with invocations and libation-pouring. Finally the chicken’s throat was cut and its blood is dripped into the hole. Following this, the goat’s throat was also cut and its blood poured into the hole. The very knife used in the fight was used to sacrifice the animals. After the goat was sacrificed, its meat was eaten at the site by the elders and representatives of the offending parties. Only part of the cooked liver, the head, the feet and the offal of the goat were left. These were buried in the hole along with the blood, the chicken and the knife. Both parties in unison pushed in the dirt and covered up the hole.

The words and actions of the ritual itself demonstrate the peace-making dynamic. All the parties join together to ask pardon of the ancestors, the Earth and God. They promise to cease all hostilities and to live in peace. The landowner traces his right and duty to preside through his ancestor, the founder of the village who first established their harmonious relationship with the Earth. He announces that they have a serious, life-threatening problem—the pollution caused by a murder three years ago. During this period the people have experienced many misfortunes and communal disasters, which they have interpreted as a sign that the Earth has been “spoiled”. Now they can’t go on. They say, “The evils are too many to bear” and “Fire consumes them.” God, the Earth and ancestors are all invoked to “make it better”. It is the duty of the Earth priest to restore harmony. Those responsible for the infraction are to be judged by the Earth. The sacrifice of the chicken then takes place. It is “red” to repel the danger involved. Then a white goat is sacrificed to symbolize innocence, victory, cleansing. They want to see justice done. Finally the protection of the ancestors is invoked for a last time and the sacrificial remains are covered up together with the weapons, the dangers and misfortunes caused by bloodshed.

### Theological Reflections

Murder and the spilling of blood in wars injure more than just those directly involved; the very fabric of society and, in the minds of all concerned, the “Earth” itself becomes alien and inimical. It is no longer a safe refuge, no longer home. This is to say more than “wars are a threat to society.” They are a threat to the natural scheme of things, to reality itself. If not dealt with, the contamination will eventually kill the

Earth itself and all the living. So, for the good of all, the breach must be ritually mended and the "Earth" once more made whole.

At this point, we as modern, informed and committed, but very Westernized, Christians may only be beginning to realize that ATR beliefs about the "Spoiled Earth" and our relationship to one another seem better adjusted to our multi-dimensional World ecology than our own Western perception. Three and a half centuries in the shadow of industrialization have numbed the gospel's critique and re-made us more in the image of our own machines than our Creator. We are just beginning to discover the importance of a global ecology—how the effects of our greed and misuse of our natural resources pollute the water, the soil and endanger ourselves and the generations to come, how our over-dependency on oil has launched our long-distance mobile economy and the scarcer the resource becomes the greater the chances for war and bloodshed.

In Northern Ghana, the peoples' beliefs about "spoiled earth" attest to a sound, well-developed ecological sense—one that is necessary for today's global citizen and a worthy moral foundation for the World Church. They also show a truer understanding, than is often found in contemporary "Christian" societies, of the need for reconciliation and the power that ritual reconciliations have for healing and reconstituting social interaction.

Fulfilling our new role as "discoverers" in this instance, we should note that the traditional believers of ATR in N. Ghana have much to teach the contemporary Church about social and "original" sin, about its affect on our lives, about the necessity and urgency for reconciliation, and about the social and ritual contexts of such a reconciliation process. It also offers realistic warnings about what will happen if we ignore this responsibility. If we talk about a new "forward mission" or how we might engage in a process of mutual discovery, rather than "reverse mission" or what Africa can re-teach the West (as we have lost it), the African sense of unity with God and nature needs only to be re-connected to the gospel through sacred scripture and the Church's tradition.

#### Implications of Discovery for Ritual and Ministry

What can we learn from ATR? First we can learn to unhook the Spirit from our cultural contexts. We can learn to be more trusting of the Spirit, less exclusive and more adaptive. Unlike Christianity and Islam, ATR is not exclusive culturally. Rather it is incorporative, flexible and adaptive. There is a special niche within ATR for the adaptation and incorporation of outside ritual solutions to their problems. General problems and disasters such as widespread famine, drought, or epidemics which affect all within a given territorial range, are often thought of as being caused by the Earth's being "spoiled". Typically such problems must be dealt with by the Earth priest. But if they affect people beyond the boundaries of one or more Earth shrine districts, they are dealt with by those whom the people call "God's people." Within the context of ATR, Christians and Muslims are both recognized as "God's people," or "people who pray." For this reason the Dagaaba of Northern Ghana who invited Father McCoy to "pray" to God on their behalf during a widespread drought in 1931 were acting from religious convictions based in their own ATR, not out of a

desire to become Christian. Even though this openness eventually led to their mass conversion to Christianity, at what terrible cost if being Christian required them to lose this precious openness to discovery.

We can learn from ATR how to ritualize about the social dimension of sin rather than just the individual dimension. ATR encourages us to devise new sacraments and sacramental responses that open the floodgates of Christ's love redeeming especially the social contexts of sin.

God intends for us to be good stewards and to take good care of his creation. Through the beliefs and practices of ATR, non-Christian Ghanaians reverence the Earth and its resources. Through them we can learn to develop a social and ecological moral conscience, a conscience of stewardship complete with an emotional sensitivity for such wrongdoing as wounding "the skin of the earth" with open pit mining. From the perspective of ATR it is no wonder that in those places, such as the despoiled land caused by open pit gold mining in Asante, people are plagued by Buruli ulcers. ATR can tell us much about the direction our own Christian beliefs must take toward a wider ecology which gets stifled in our Western cultural context by materialistic concerns. They can remind us that our resources are not to be used solely for material or political advantage but for their rightful purpose. Like our bodies and our very lives, the earth and her resources are not possessions but temples to be revered and occupied for a time. An assault against them is a sin against God and humanity.

We also have much to learn about reconciliation from ATR. Here in Ghana, our recent Northern Conflicts have shown us that we are living in a situation that is extremely fragile. Our Western way of "managing" these conflicts does not reconcile those involved but rather perpetuates a condition of war. The Earth has indeed been "spoiled". We have much to learn from ATR about the stages of mourning. ATR takes the time needed to reconcile, they punctuate the stages of mourning with universally recognized rites and bring the parties together in a sacrament of reconciliation which is a solid foundation for a new beginning, a new life together.

We can learn from them that catastrophic situations and conditions of crisis, such as drought and famine, can hasten the process of reconciliation by manifesting the disturbed state of the Earth and thus clarifying the fragile situation to all. Western conflict-management only elongates this process. The Church can stimulate this kind of clarity of purpose through discussion, workshops or its rituals without having to wait for such situations of crisis or affliction. Fasts should be proclaimed, as a self-imposed "affliction" especially during or following tribal conflicts when everything is so much at risk. To make it more effective wherever appropriate, the fasting could be in the Semitic way of eating and drinking nothing during the day.

We have much to learn about the power of reconciliation through the ritual of the burying of the blood itself. Acts of prayer and fasting could be accompanied by a general cancellation of old monetary debts, or debts of vengeance, by staging reconciliations between feuding families, or clans, or by mending the broken friendships of prominent people in our communities. It could involve blessing the earth, or quenching fire with holy water, and the burial of broken weaponry or other instruments of cruelty and inhumanity. These should be ecumenical in the broadest



sense, involving not only the various Christian Churches but also the Muslims and especially the traditional Earth priests.

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## Appendix

## Text of the “Burying of the Blood” Ritual at Chereponi

1. I call upon *Nyeme Cela* (the High God) and the *bonvofo* (the village founder).
2. He came to start the village and all others followed.
3. It is your own water (pouring libation)!
4. Today is Wednesday.
5. Here is pito, fire-quenching beer.
6. Let us receive help from our grandfathers and fathers.
7. When you ‘got up’ (were alive) nobody saw things as we do today.
8. Everything has now spoilt.
9. I am an old man and also a child.
10. This case has come to meet me.
11. It is serious.
12. It is three years now that dangers have been with us.
13. I do not want any more.
14. If any bad man or ‘bad tree’ wants to bring danger to the village let it be on his head.
15. All of you ‘get up’ and receive this and bring us life and health.
16. After this, the fire I am quenching should not bother us again.
17. I am removing the blood and by this I am quenching the fire.
18. We do not want to see it any more.
19. If there are any bad spirits in the village, then help us. Send them away.
20. We do not know if they are here or not.
21. As you told us, the land is ours. We are now removing the trouble.
22. All (kinds of) troubles have been coming to us.
23. The one who started the village must come to help us.
24. You took the lead and we followed.
25. If the elephant leads, the calf follows.
26. So everything that comes comes upon OUR heads.
27. We do not know how we have faulted our grandfathers and fathers.
28. The one who started the land, if you are for us you will show it to those who say the land is not for us.
29. If it is [addressing the ancestor] a *Karamo* or any Commoner. It is you who have told us to do this.
30. You must help us along with our grandfather Yanumbo whose farm was on this spot.
31. [He pours the rest of the libation on the ground]
32. Here is your red chicken.
33. Our grandfather who started the village, here is the fire-quenching chicken, his red-faced chicken.
34. It is for the High God and the Earth. It is your chicken.
35. This is Kwaku’s house; we are cleaning it.
36. It was his children who brought the case here, not he himself.
37. The person who does not want Kwaku to stay in the house, we have left blood on that person.
38. If anybody thinks badly of Kwaku let it be turned against him.

39. [The chicken's throat is cut, blood is dripped into the hole and then the chicken itself is thrown into it]
40. Here is your goat.
41. It is a white one.
42. Clean the whole town.
43. If it is a *Karamo* that wants to take the town from us let us see it.
44. If you let us see the person.
45. The children did not cause the trouble.
46. They were in their own house.
47. It is only that the townspeople say they hate them.
48. If it is a *Karamo* that wished to cheat us and get the land, all is over to you.
49. This Earth has an owner.
50. Our grandfather Nabue, you farmed here, so 'get up'.
51. The danger that Jabale [the one who committed the crime] brings us should turn against him and if it was somebody that sent him, it should turn against all of them.
52. [The blood of the goat is meticulously poured into the hole and the goat itself is put into the hole.]
53. All black thoughts against us let them turn back on them.
54. All dangers are what we are covering up here.
55. Anybody who says he will take over the land you must 'get up' and stand behind us.
56. [Then all use their right hand in pushing the dirt into the hole on top of the sacrifices.]

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<sup>1</sup> In this piece we adhere to the view of L. Magesa (1998) who speaks of ATR in the singular because of the overwhelming unity of African religiosity and to further its potential as a dialogical partner with a dominant Western-influenced Christianity.

<sup>2</sup> Missionaries of Africa had penetrated the Northern Territories before the northern borders of Ghana were accurately determined and the British allowed them to continue as long as they were commonwealth citizens and not causing any political difficulties among the local populace.

<sup>3</sup> There seems to have been an unacknowledged suppression of the cultural sciences in missionary societies over the last 40 years. In the SVD (6,000 members worldwide) for example, which was once famous for its anthropologists, there are now only four PhD's in anthropology below retirement age. The figures are not any better among the other big four: the Society of African Mission Fathers, the Holy Spirit Fathers, the Maryknoll Fathers or the Missionaries of Africa.

<sup>4</sup> If I may define it in a Western way, the "spoiled earth" is a state of total ecological disintegration brought about by certain symbolic and virtually destructive acts and resulting in famine, drought, disease, infertility, and ultimately the death of everything.

<sup>5</sup> During the 1994 Northern Conflict in Ghana, the Dagombas and the Gonjas attacked the Churches, especially the Catholics, for favouring and even supplying arms to their enemies, the Konkombas and their allies. The Churches hotly denied these accusations but the news media and high governmental bodies presented a biased picture (see Katanga 1994). One of the accusations leveled against the Church by the "chiefly groups" was that the Church was ultimately responsible for the unrest by educating the "non-chiefly groups" in their schools.

<sup>6</sup> The Western process disallows this. A slightly ludicrous reminder of this was reported in the 15 September 2000 issue of Newsweek. At the recent U.N. Millennium Summit of world leader President Clinton found himself inadvertently shaking hands with his arch-enemy Mr. Castro. "It just happened," he said. "I turned around and he was standing there."

<sup>7</sup> Archbishop Kpiebaya gave a talk and prayed for the healing of memories at this Church-sponsored event.