

**THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN GOD-IMAGES AND  
HEALING IN PASTORAL MINISTRY:  
ENGAGING AN AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY**

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## **DECLARATION**

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is my own original work, and has not previously in its entirety or in part been submitted at any university for a degree.

Signature:

Date:

## ABSTRACT

This study can as well be termed as “*an attempt to interpret*” pastoral care and counseling methods and modules in an African understanding. For this reason, the study engages concepts, metaphors and images that reflect an African understanding of pastoral ministry. It is argued that pastoral ministry will be enriched more by accommodating an African spirituality and cosmology that usually influences the world view of African people on God, life and the cosmic life-force.

The study attempts to work with God-images that will help people to gain meaning in moments of pain and suffering, and much more also that will help them appropriate faith to life situations in a more meaningful way. Thus the study gives attention to defining God-images in light of pain and suffering within a given pastoral care situation. Two God-images are therefore proposed for use in a pastoral care setting in Africa, namely, God as a friend (*Mubwezi*) and God as companion (*woyenda naye*).

The study proposes a working model that can be used by pastoral ministry in the process of assessment of God-images. It is argued that unless pastoral ministry undertakes to work with models that are going to help African people come to terms with situations of pain and suffering, the work of pastoral ministry will be limited to a large extent. For this reason, the study proposes that pastoral ministry should reckon with African cultural values that are always expressed through metaphors and symbols. It is argued further that pastoral ministry should work with Christian rituals, such as Holy Communion, Baptism and the Cross which are going to help African people understand the involvement of God in their lives and also in times of pain and suffering.

## OPSOMMING

Die navorsing is 'n poging om 'n pastorale hermeneutiek te ontwikkel wat in die prosesse van heling rekening hou met die eiesoortigheid van 'n Afrika-konteks. Vandaar die fokus op 'n Afrika-spiritualiteit en 'n Afrika-kosmologie. Die navorsing is 'n poging om die verstaan van die lewe as 'n werklikheid, beïnvloed deur spirituele werkinge en kosmiese lewenskragte, te kombineer met 'n pastorale antropologie.

**Die navorsingsvoorveronderstelling is dat 'n bepaalde kulturele verstaan en ervaring van God (Godsbeelde en Godsvoorstellinge) menslike identiteit en derhalwe ook prosesse van heling en terapie wesenlik beïnvloed. Die navorsing konsentreer daarom op die interaktiewe en wisselwerkende verband tussen Godsbeelde en die vraagstuk van lyding en heling.**

Die uitkoms van die navorsing is die ontwerp van 'n beradingsmodel vir die pastoraat waarin rekening gehou word met die eiesoortige spiritualiteit van 'n bepaalde kultuurkonteks. Vandaar die ontwerp van 'n ses-fase model vir die maak van 'n pastorale diagnose (pastorale assessering). Verskillende simbole en metafore vanuit 'n Afrika lewenservaring kan help om her na te dink oor die verstaan van God binne lyding in 'n pastorale gesprek oor die vraagstuk van teodisee.

Die beradingsmodel wat voorgestel word, verskuif die fokus weg van 'n analitiese, individualisties-georiënteerdheid na 'n meer holistiese en sistemiese kommunale georiënteerdheid. In dié verband moet die dinamika van verhoudinge saam met 'n narratiewe benadering opnuut herontgin word vir pastorale berading.

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Over and above all and everything else, to our God, the father of our Lord Jesus Christ – who in the power of the Holy Spirit has given me life. To the triune God, be all the glory and praise, in this life and the life to come – now and forever. *Yewu Yesu.*

## DEDICATION

This Dissertation is dedicated to The Rev. **Foston Dziko Sakala**, B.A., M.Th., (RCZ Minister emeritus) for his commitment to theological training and ministerial formation of the Reformed/Presbyterian ministers and students in Zambia. This work is the fruit of his selfless and humble service to our Lord, and his continued spiritual investment in young ministers like myself. “*Ambuye akudaliseni, dzikomo kwabili*”.

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## CHAPTER 1

### 1 INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 The Identification and Delineation of the Problem

In most pastoral care situations in Southern Africa, we are confronted with a problem of “inappropriate God-images<sup>1</sup>” in people’s lives. In the book, *Theology and Pastoral Counseling*, Hunsinger (1995:128) describes inappropriate God-images as “God representation which undermines the person’s sense of self-esteem, bringing about personal insecurity and feelings of anxiety and hopelessness”. Inappropriate God-images are usually as a result of painful experiences people have gone through in life, especially in moments of pain and suffering. In some people, inappropriate God-images have formed part of their lives for a very long time due to an encounter with suffering and pain in their ‘human development’ (see Rizzuto1979:54-84), and as such, inappropriate God-images have become barriers to their healing<sup>2</sup> and maturity in faith. While in others inappropriate God-images have impaired their view of God altogether thus making it difficult for them to attain the much needed healing in their own lives and within their existing

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<sup>1</sup> It could be argued that inappropriate God-images are those understandings and experiences of God by people which are not a true (but distorted) representation of God’s dealing with them in a given context of pastoral care.

<sup>2</sup> ‘*Healing*’, in this research work, will refer to the process of being restored to body wholeness, emotional well-being, mental functioning and spiritual aliveness (see Hunter 1990:497-501). The term ‘*healing*’ will

relationships. Hence the argument of Louw (1999:3)<sup>3</sup> when he stresses that “inappropriate God-images therefore play a decisive role in pathology, i.e. the dysfunctional application of our understanding of God to existential issues”. Cavanagh (1992:81) alludes to this argument when he writes:

*When people have had unhelpful perceptions (inappropriate God-images) of God throughout their lives---whether they are 16 or 66 years of age- they are not likely to surrender these perceptions easily. The reason for this is that these perceptions can be deeply ingrained and may have become a part of the individual's personality (emphasis mine).*

In situations affected by the inappropriateness of people's image of God, pastoral care has not only found it a difficult task to assess the effects of pain and suffering on the affected people, but also in ensuring that their process of healing is not hindered by the same. For this reason, Cavanagh (1992:75) stresses that “many people who go to pastoral counselors for help have a perception of God that is psycho-spiritually unhelpful, if not damaging”. He further argues that “a significant percentage of problems that people bring to ministers is caused, or at least is contributed to, by their unhelpful perceptions of God” (1992:80).

Therefore, one of the great challenges facing pastoral care (presently), as the branch of the *diaconate* (diakonia) of the Church in Africa, is that of ensuring that people's

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also embrace the African cultural context of understanding by referring to the process of reconciling broken human relationships within a given African community and spirituality.

healing is not hindered by inappropriate God-images. Thus our argument and discussion in this study shall call for an investigation of this problem within the realms of a *pastoral ministry* of the Church<sup>4</sup>.

In Africa, we come across people who have fallen victim to a number of eventualities. These may range from crime (such as the loss of a close relative shot by bandits) to rape, domestic violence, abuse, discrimination (either on gender/sexuality or political affiliation), alienation, prejudice, broken family relationships, natural disasters (floods or drought), and disease (especially HIV/AIDS<sup>5</sup>, lately). These sad experiences have left a lot of people hurt and broken. The problem become acute when such experiences influence people's view and understanding of God. In most cases people's understanding of God has also been affected by experiences of pain to such an extent that their images of God have become distorted. And whenever people's images are distorted, the implication is that their 'quest for meaning in suffering' (See Frankl 1984:11, 88 and Louw 1998) and their process of healing is hindered by such a distortion. This

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<sup>3</sup> See Louw's (1999:3) unpublished paper: "*A Pastoral paradigm for God-images in an African context*"

<sup>4</sup> The study shall use the term 'Church' in a much wider context to mean the *ekklesia*, as in the Greek language, denoting a local congregation (*Assembly of Believers*) of Christians. The Church shall refer to particular ecclesial communities that are shaped by acts of worship and mission in response to a common affirmation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Whereas the focus of the study shall be on the context of the Church in the whole Africa, a number of pastoral experiences shall be drawn from the Church within the Zambian and South African contexts to which the researcher of this study has more exposure and associations.

<sup>5</sup> The problem of HIV/AIDS has posed a great challenge on the practice of pastoral care and counseling in the Church in Africa. Louw's argument in his paper, "*Pastoral care for the person with AIDS in an African context*" helps us to understand the fatality and devastation HIV/AIDS can cause on people's view of God. His conclusion is therefore worthy noting when he writes: "AIDS in Africa has become a systemic and cultural problem...as a theological problem, AIDS offers the Church two possibilities: either the point of departure should be the *causal explanatory model* in which case God will automatically be the callous

creates a problem for the pastoral ministry in Africa. It is at this stage that the pastoral ministry of the Church is therefore confronted with the challenge of engaging in a process of assessing God-images in people's lives so as to ensure that healing is not hampered by inappropriate God-images.

It shall therefore be argued, in this study, that the problem of inappropriate God-images in the lives of people leaves the Church in Africa with the following challenges:

- ◆ How to assess God-images in pastoral care while embracing people's understanding of God within an African spirituality (A methodological approach to the problem)
  
- ◆ How should pastoral therapy be informed when the Church takes the correlation between healing and people's understanding of God seriously? (A Therapeutic-Theological approach to the problem)
  
- ◆ Does the Church take into consideration that the quality and impact of pastoral therapy is to a certain extent determined by a process of understanding embedded in culture and context, and whether the interpretation of God (either

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despot who takes people hostage...or the *hermeneutical interpretive model* which identifies God with suffering" (1995:29,36). See also Waruta (2000:94).

from a Christian or religious perspective) affects self-understanding and crisis behaviour? (A *Hermeneutical* approach to the problem)

- ◆ Is pastoral care in an African context sensitive enough to the impact of culture and tradition on people's religious needs and the way they perceive God? (A *Cross-Cultural*<sup>6</sup> approach to the process of pastoral assessment)

We shall contend that an investigation of the above challenges will help us to understand the importance of engaging in the process of a pastoral assessment of God-images by the Church in Africa, so as to ensure that healing in people's lives is not prevented by existing inappropriate God-images. Consequently, we shall also argue that in situations where the Church does not take this challenge seriously, the result is that people's application of faith to life issues is distorted by inappropriate God-images leading to a *pathology* (sick) of faith. In addition, people's discovery of meaning in suffering is blocked and impeded altogether. A further result of this type of condition is the perpetuation of pain and suffering that leads to the unresolved and unsettled '*question of theodicy*'<sup>7</sup> – 'why God?'

In sum, we shall presuppose that the investigation taken by this study will help us to understand the research problem, namely; how to make an *assessment of God-*

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<sup>6</sup> On *Cross-cultural* approach to pastoral ministry and counselling, see Hesselgrave 1984:11-23

<sup>7</sup> For a thorough discussion on the "*question of theodicy*", please see Chapter 3 of this study.

*images in pastoral care and counseling with the view of ensuring that healing in people's lives is not hampered by the underlying inappropriate God-images.*

## 1.2 Hypothesis

Where people hold on to inappropriate God-images, it is very likely that their understanding of God and his relation to human beings will be distorted (pathology of faith) thus giving way to a number of pastoral problems. The pastoral problems, among others, will include brokenness in people's relationships (causing a problem in *communality*<sup>8</sup> – especially when this applies to an African context), and in their relationship with the triune God (causing a *theological hermeneutical*<sup>9</sup> problem in a pastoral encounter). Hence, we ask the following questions:

In the midst of suffering and within an African context, is it really possible to speak about healing without taking into consideration a pastoral assessment of God-images? Is there any *correlation* between healing and appropriate God-images within the pastoral ministry of the Church in Africa? Could we justifiably speak of a *cultural* influence on the formation of God-images among the African people, and what influence does an African world view and cosmology have on their understanding of God and the process of healing within the Church in Africa? How

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<sup>8</sup> On an approach to "*communality*", see Mbiti (1990:2) and Bellagamba (1987:107)

<sup>9</sup> On "*a pastoral hermeneutics*" and "*a pastoral encounter*" with God in a given pastoral situation, see Louw (1998:2ff).



do we classify the *connection* between healing and assessment of God-images - is it merely a *psychological* or *theological* connection as well? Could it then be stated that there is a possible integration of theological and psychological approaches to the assessment of God-images? With these questions in mind, the research hypothesis shall work with the following assumptions and presuppositions:

(1) It shall be argued in this research that in pastoral care there is an existing connection (correlation / link) between healing and God-images in the lives of people. Our basic assumption is that when pastoral care does not reckon with the possible connection between healing and God-images, it is very likely that inappropriate God-images will hinder the process of healing in people's lives. Thus this situation could possibly lead to a situation where people's view and understanding of God is also distorted. Hence the first hypothesis of this thesis:

◆ *Healing is hampered and become 'pathological' when God-images foster a negative self – esteem, existential anxiety and a state of hopelessness and helplessness.*

In terms of the above hypothesis; we shall therefore, contend with a basic thesis that states that changing people's concepts of God (*God-images*) "generates a true transformation in their attitude to life and their understanding of life problems" (Louw 1998:120) thus providing a profound basis for healing to take place in their lives. We shall therefore advocate for a process of assessment that will aim at

determining the types of God-images that influence and determine a Christian interpretation of life as well as the meaning of healing within an African spirituality context.

(2) Healing and the formation of appropriate God-images among the African people should be viewed culturally, and are linked to the important notion of relationships and communality within an African spirituality<sup>10</sup>. For Healey and Sybertz (1996:323), “Healing is a process of ‘whole-ing’, making whole not only the individual, but also the individual’s social relations ---healing is expected to span across the same dimension of relationships.” To this effect, a second hypothesis for this thesis shall state:

- ◆ *God-images which do not challenge an African to relate, are always considered to be alien and foreign to an African spirituality, thus they are rendered inappropriate.*

With the above stated hypothesis, it is of utmost importance to understand the influence of an African culture on healing in relation to God-images. This research shall therefore, work with a proposition which states that the Church in Africa cannot ensure healing to the African people without understanding the influence of culture on an African spirituality (see Lartey 1997:113-120).

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<sup>10</sup> Kasambala (2000:16-18).

The whole process of healing and the formation of God-images in Africa have an underlying influence of a cultural anthropology and cosmology, which, if ignored, could become a great hindrance to a pastoral encounter situation (see Pobee 1979: 48 and Berinyuu 1988: 8).

In the words of Kraft (1996:31), the term culture refers to “complex structuring of customs and the assumptions that underlie them in terms of which people govern their lives”. In referring to an African culture, we point to the values of African people that give meaning to life as a whole within an African context. An Africa culture also refers to symbols, customs and traditions that constitute the way African people live and relate. We shall therefore work with a basic assumption by stating that an African culture is embedded in the aspect of communality and relationship. Thus healing in an African context can only take place within the given parameters of communality which are influenced by the African culture. In arguing this point further, Louw (1994:23) in his book, “*Illness as crisis and challenge*” states: “healing and recovery (*in Africa*) are impossible without the integration of society (*community*)” (emphasis mine).

We can contend therefore, that when pastoral care tends to overlook the influence of culture on an African spirituality, it is then confronted with a problem of understanding the way African people understand God and perceive the process of healing. Hence a third hypothesis:

- ◆ *A pastoral assessment of the appropriateness of God-images should reckon with the cultural influence on spiritual experiences in order to contribute to the process of healing for African people in a given pastoral care situation.*

It shall be argued further that pastoral care in the Church in Africa can not function in a vacuum, but should always consider the way African people experience and understand God within their own context. Pastoral care in Africa should be practiced in a situation of an existing interconnectedness of God-images and a cultural context of the African people (see Waruta 2000:73). In order to ensure that healing is not hampered among the African people, it should be observed that pastoral care, in its pastoral assessment of God-images, must always consider the aspect of communality within an African spirituality (see Mbiti 1990:2). In an African culture, “healing is always about the restoration of human life” (Bate 2000:14). The restoration of human life, in this case, applies to both the sick person and a broken relationship among the African people. Healing is a very ultimate goal of all human harmony with the cosmos and the divine.

The basic working assumption taken by this research will state that the process of healing and the assessment of God-images in people’s lives demand a theological approach because the process, in itself, is basically a ‘*theological problem*’. Whereas psychotherapy (including psychology) has concerned itself with a repair of a *personality pathology* (see Clinebell 1995:151); theology, in pastoral care, has gone a step further by ascertaining that people attain appropriate God-images so

that they can distinguish between a distorted (pathological) type of spirituality and a mature faith that leads to healing. Hence making the argument about the process of healing and assessment of God-images in this research a '*theological problem*'.

It shall be argued further that the difference in "*perspectivism*"<sup>11</sup> between psychological and a pastoral care (theological) approach to the process of healing and the assessment of God-images in people's lives makes this thesis even more of a theological problem than merely a psychological endeavour. Louw (1998:243-251) aptly explains the difference in *perspectivism*:

*The difference in perspectivism between pastoral care and psychology could also be formulated as follows. Pastoral care approaches human beings from an eschatological perspective and deals primarily with the transcendental dimension of meaning; psychology approaches human beings from an intra- and inter-psycho perspective and deals primarily with the empirical dimension of communication and behavioural patterns. From their unique perspectives, psychology and pastoral care both make an important contribution. Each deals with the entire person within all concrete relations.*

(1998:248-251).

We contend that the uniqueness of this approach is as a result of a pneumatological interpretation of a God-human encounter in a given pastoral care situation. However,

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<sup>11</sup> Louw (1998:248-251) argues that the difference between a psychological and pastoral approach to the understanding of a human life is not in terms of dualism but should be understood in terms of perspectivism.

the study shall also argue for an *integrated approach*, which accommodates both psychological and theological dimensions to the process of healing and the assessment of God-images.

### 1.3 Methodology

The focus of this research deals with a theological problem within a Christian understanding of pastoral care, hence the procedure (methodology) taken by this research shall be that of engaging in an investigation of the research problem by considering and weighing all the views and arguments in the available theological-academic literature relevant to the subject in discussion. The research shall also make use of literature review available on the pastoral ministry in Africa with the view of verifying the research hypothesis and in order to attempt answering the research problem. Thus the scope of this research shall limit itself to a theological literature study and narrative analysis based on pastoral experiences in Zambia and South Africa. In addition to this, it could also be stated that indirectly a method of participatory observation will play a greater role in the assessment of relevant literature.

The research has also worked with **case studies** (see chapters 4 & 5) that illustrate experiences of pastoral ministry within Zambia and South Africa. These case studies have been sampled in different congregational settings (in Zambia and South

Africa) representing diverse contexts of pastoral ministry in Africa. The sampling was mainly based on pastoral observation and pastoral interviews in a counselling setting. The presupposition of this study is that the case studies given in this research shall be taken as a fair representation of the pastoral issues that the Church in Africa is being confronted with. These case studies shall be used as a “window” into perceiving how people are experiencing God in different situations of pastoral ministry.

It should also be noted that this study is sensitive to an inclusive language though in different quotes from African authors, one will experience a male biased tone of expression. And this study has not hesitated to bring that out.

### **1.3.1 Research Objective and Aim**

The issue of inappropriate God-images has contributed to a number of pastoral problems in the Church in Africa. Hence the need to investigate how pastoral care can facilitate the process of healing and the assessment of God-images with the view of helping people to develop appropriate God-images for life situations, especially in the context of pain and suffering. This research shall also try to give insight in understanding the influence of a cultural anthropology and cosmology on the formation of God-images, as well as an African spirituality. Thus equipping pastoral ministry (within the Church in Africa) with an awareness of an African culture in its pastoral assessment of God-images among the African people. We should stress here, that this research shall not attempt to answer all the theological

questions concerning God-images, but shall instead limit itself to the stated thesis, namely; “*the connection between healing and the assessment of God-images within the pastoral ministry in Africa*”. Our hope is that the findings of this research will help open up more areas of pastoral discussions concerning the subject of healing and the interplay with God-images within an African spirituality.

In sum, the research shall aim at fulfilling the following:

- (1) **To investigate** the assessment of God-images in the pastoral ministry of the Church in Africa in order to ensure that the process of pastoral healing is not hampered by inappropriate God-images.
- (2) **To argue** that there is a link (correlation) between healing and God-images in people’s lives.
- (3) **To investigate** the interconnectedness of God-images and the cultural context of African people.
- (4) **To investigate** the *question of theodicy*, and establish how it relates to the culture and context of the African people.



(5) **To argue** that the process of healing and the assessment of God-images in pastoral care is a *theological* process.

(6) **To interpret** pastoral care principles and modules into an African understanding of care and counseling.

### **1.3.2 Terminology**

The scope of this research is theological in nature, and the meaning of most terms, therefore, shall be understood from the same perspective. In addition to this, the focus of this research is on the pastoral ministry of the Church in Africa thus most terms shall be defined within the paradigm of a '*pastoral-theological*' and cross-cultural context in Africa. However, it is essential for us to put into focus, right from the beginning, the meaning of common terms used in this research.

#### **1.3.2.1 God-images**

God-images refer to our understanding and experience of God (Louw 1999:1) in different life situations and in our search for meaning. God-images are

representations (Anna-Maria Rizzuto 1979:18-19)<sup>12</sup> of our human concept of God, in terms of his dealing with us in our human endeavors.

In this research, God-images will mostly refer to the experience<sup>13</sup> and understanding of God by African people within their own context. God-images will also refer to concepts of God that have arisen as a result of suffering and the search for meaning in life among the African people. Thus God-images for the African people are expressions of perceptions and concepts of God in terms of metaphors and symbols (Mbiti 1970:91). These expressions come to us in rhymes of music, in African languages, symbols and cultural traditions. Howe (1995:112), in his book: *“The Image of God”*, refers to God-images as “symbols” which make God present to us. In Louw’s words, God-images *re-present* by making God present (1999:12). God-images may also point to the way people intend to express their experience of the “faithfulness of God”<sup>14</sup> in their daily lives.

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<sup>12</sup> For a thorough discussion on “*God representation*”, a psychoanalytical study of Anna-Maria Rizzuto (1979:18-39) can be helpful, so long as we understand that this kind of study follows a detailed study based on the psychological object-relations theory.

<sup>13</sup> For the African people, *experience* of an event is very important. To be Christian means to put faith in God, but much more so to experience his presence in times of pain and suffering. A God who alienates himself from pain and suffering is not worthy of the African praise and dance. It can be argued that the God of the Bible, as a *suffering God* seems to be at home among African people because he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ as a “suffering God” (see Isaiah 53 and Hebrews 2:19)

<sup>14</sup> see Louw (1999:12)

### 1.3.2.2 Pastoral care

Pastoral care refers to the spiritual care and guidance or the shepherding of human souls<sup>15</sup>. The term is often used more narrowly to describe the solicitous care offered to an individual or a group that specifically addresses a life dilemma or crisis (see Benner & Hill 1999:832). Pastoral care, in historical perspective, is in the “*Cure of Souls*” tradition but also finds its theological grounding in the New Testament metaphor of the *poimen*, or Shepherd. In addition, the historic ministry of pastoral care springs from the conviction that Jesus modeled and established the pastoral office for the care and guidance of the Church (John 10:11-14; 21:16-17). Similarly, using Eyer’s (1994:13) description of pastoral care:

*Pastoral care has been understood traditionally to be the uninvited spiritual nurturing of those suffering some kind of helplessness and loss of control over life. It is modeled after God’s care of us following Eden, and it has been God’s way with us ever since, even to the Cross, where God sacrificed himself to heal us for time and eternity.*

In this study, with specific focus on an African pastoral ministry, pastoral care will denote the process of “**accompanying**” somebody on the life journey of faith. To African people, pastoral care is all about “being present” (representation) with somebody in his/her times of difficulties, sorrow, pain and suffering. Pastoral care

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<sup>15</sup> The term soul indicates the total human being, created by and in relation to God. Louw (1998:20) aptly argues that *cura animarum* (care of souls in latin) “implies a ministry that is directed not merely to the human inner life, but also to the spiritual care of total person in all the psycho-physical and psycho-social dimensions. “Soul (*psuche, anima*) signifies the center of human life (Hebrew: *nēphēs*) as it is directed to God and as it manifests itself in dynamic relationships”.

is about good relationship with a care giver (either an ordained clergy or laity) while ‘walking on a very tight rope’ of life. For an African person, pastoral care is about the care of life within a given context of a community. In an African context, effective pastoral care takes place in a community setting rather than a one roomed office. The approach to pastoral care then, is more on a *communal* level than the *individualized* Rogerian client-centered approach promoted by the North American tradition.

However, in our use of the term pastoral care, we shall purposely use it as an ‘inclusive term’, in order to incorporate all the functions<sup>16</sup> of pastoral ministry. We shall work in reference to the following identified functions of pastoral ministry:

- ◆ **Healing:** The ultimate goal of pastoral ministry is that people should become “whole” both in physical and spiritual dimensions of human life. Healing in pastoral care is about attaining “wholeness” in all human endeavours, which also include the restoration of strained relationships among people. Pastoral care, therefore, aims at helping people become whole, especially when they have gone through broken times, pain and suffering. In an African context, to be healed is to be reconciled to, and restored within a relationship with other beings.

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<sup>16</sup> Louw (1998:19)

- ◆ ***Sustaining***: During times of difficulty, sorrow, pain and suffering people tend to always search for support from others. This support may include encouragement, care, financial help or prayers. In this case, pastoral care plays a greater role by providing the needed support to those undergoing pain and suffering.
- ◆ ***Guiding***: Pastoral care guides people as “they seek to clarify their thinking and decide on the way to act in different situations” (Taylor 1983:72). Guidance is an important aspect of pastoral ministry in that it embraces the whole process of growth in the faith journey of a person. In this particular context, guiding entails allowing people (with the help of a caregiver) to search for and discover meaning and understanding to issues of life.
- ◆ ***Reconciling***: This is where people are challenged to face their weaknesses and the guilty of broken relationships, and in turn find reconciliation and restoration, both with God and other people. In this function of pastoral care, the aim is to help people work through their guilty experiences of life with a view of bringing about reconciliation either with themselves, other people and God.
- ◆ ***Nurturing***: Pastoral care aims at enabling people to develop their God-given potentialities through out the life journey. Nurturing, in pastoral care embraces the notion of spiritual growth towards maturity in faith. People are instructed in

issues of faith and Christian life so as to help them mature into becoming responsible Christians.

- ◆ ***Interpreting /Assessing***: This is a very important process of pastoral care because it involves people's search for meaning in life experiences. The function of interpreting or assessment in pastoral care involves the hermeneutics of the underlying assumptions and presuppositions of people's concepts of God, and also the way they apply them to life situations, mostly those of pain and suffering. Pastoral care undertakes to interpret people's understanding of God (a pastoral diagnosis) in order to help them deal with any inappropriate God-images which may hamper the process of their healing.

### **1.3.2.3 Culture**

Culture is a complex but integrated and interacting dynamic whole. It constitutes of the following elements: a common worldview or vision of life; common meanings, values and goals; common categories and patterns of thought, a common tradition and common patterns of behaviour; common organization of relationships and roles; "with religion, spirituality and mysticism supplying the transcendent and in-depth dimension" (see Komonchak 1988:201). Culture is composed of culture traits and culture complexes. Culture traits are the smallest units of culture, individual acts such as a wave, a smile (Grunlan & Mayers 1979:39) and culture complexes are clusters of related traits seen as a single unit.

Bernstein (1990:17) writing from a Western perspective, defines culture as the “*total complex of symbols and codes which penetrates every facet of human existence, generating common orientation, meaning, and commitment*”. He stresses that culture incorporates individual and society, nature and art, religion, morality, and history within an ordered, complex configuration of reality.

In the context of this study, culture will refer to *symbols, customs and traditions that constitute the way African people live and relate to God, to each other and to the cosmos* (creation). The term will also carry a notion of values and events in terms of an African spirituality. Culture is what links the African past events to the present events, and points the African people to the continuity of life in the future. Culture is the way of life, ethos or life-style of African people. All what African people do, is embedded in their traditional beliefs, convictions and values, which are a major component of the African culture.

#### **1.3.2.4 Cultural anthropology**

A cultural anthropology will refer to the way African people have modeled themselves in terms of their cultural values. It will also refer to an African understanding of a human being within a relationship. The uniqueness of an African anthropology is based on an understanding that a human person is only human within a relationship. Outside this relationship, a human being is a total stranger and alien, thus can be considered dangerous to his/her society. In the

words of Mbiti (1990:2), “To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of the community”.

### **1.3.3 RESEARCH OUTLINE**

#### **(a) Chapter 2**

Chapter 2 undertakes to discuss the role of an African spirituality and cosmology in the way African people understand life, and how these influence the formation of God-images and concepts of God among the African people. The chapter contends that at the center of an African spirituality and cosmology lies the issue of relationships and communality. Thus, it is argued that appropriate God-images for the African people are those that are going to depict a sense of relationship, communality and continuity.

It is further argued that pastoral ministry should undertake to accommodate metaphorical and symbolic expressions of African people in order to enable them to express their feelings which, in most cases, cannot be easily verbalized within a given pastoral care situation. The chapter also gives attention to discussing the role of ancestors within an African spirituality and cosmology. To this effect the chapter propagates for an accommodation of an African inculturation within the process of healing and assessment of God-images in pastoral ministry.



**(b) Chapter 3**

In Chapter three, the study undertakes to discuss the process of healing within an African perspective. It is argued in this study that to the African people, healing does not imply merely the taking of medication by the sick person, but also covers the mending and restoration of broken relationships within the well-set harmonious equilibrium of the African society. It is therefore understood that pastoral ministry should work with a pastoral approach that will accommodate a systemic view of healing – as a communal issue rather than an individualistic matter. To this effect, the study argues that sickness and health within an African perspective are part of systems thinking: the whole is more than important than the sum total of its parts; components do not function according to their nature but according to their position in the network.

The chapter also underscores the fact that pastoral ministry should embrace Christian rituals and symbols, such as Holy Communion, the Cross and Baptism as the ones that could be used in strengthening the faith of African believers in times of pain and suffering.

**(c) Chapter 4**

This chapter undertakes to discuss the way African people understand suffering and theodicy, and how this understanding can help pastoral ministry in dealing with situations

of pain and suffering in people's lives. The study contends that when people are confronted with situations of pain and suffering, they tend to address their questions to God. It is therefore observed that in most pastoral care situations, the questions that people raise amidst suffering creates a theological problem. Hence the study undertakes to discuss the question of theodicy (justification of God's righteousness in the face of evil) as a theological problem in suffering.

The study also argues for a possible interplay between suffering and God-images. For this reason, the pastoral ministry in Africa is challenged by the findings of the research to work with appropriate God-images so as to help people deal with issues affecting their lives and faith. Attention is also given to the interplay between suffering and evil within an African spirituality. *Case studies* are used to illustrate the undergirding arguments, and to underscore the fact that there is a major difference between the use of appropriate God-images in suffering and those concepts of God which can be deemed as inappropriate in the same situations.

#### **(d) Chapter 5**

Chapter 5 undertakes to discuss a proposed pastoral model that can be used for the process of assessment of God-images in an African context. The study chooses to work with a *six – phased model* of pastoral assessment, namely;

- ◆ **Discerning**
- ◆ **Clarifying**
- ◆ **Interpreting**
- ◆ **Supporting**
- ◆ **Reflecting**
- ◆ **Responding**

The proposition taken in this chapter is that when people come to a pastor with problems, they expect their pastor to use a different approach to that one of psychologists. It is therefore argued that because the emphasis in approach to the assessment of God-images lies on people's experience and understanding of God – the whole process becomes a theological process. *Case studies* have been used to illustrate the basic arguments of the chapter.

## **(e) Chapter 6**

Chapter six undertakes to reflect on the findings of the research. The study outlines basic core arguments and conclusions from each of the five chapters, and from them, tries to formulate challenges<sup>17</sup> for the pastoral ministry in an African context.

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<sup>17</sup> The emphasis of the research lies on the application of basic principles and modules of pastoral care and counseling into an African context. The research has therefore tried to highlight the need of engaging an African spirituality in the practice of pastoral care and counseling in Africa.

It is proposed at the end of the study that the research outcome contributes to our understanding of pastoral ministry in Africa, especially with respect to the interplay between healing and God-images within the pastoral ministry as it continuously engages an African spirituality.

## CHAPTER 2

### 2 THE IMPACT OF AN AFRICAN *SPIRITUALITY* AND *COSMOLOGY* ON GOD-IMAGES IN AFRICA

#### 2.1 Introduction

In this Chapter we undertake to deal with the role of an African spirituality and cosmology on the way African people understand life and formulate God-images. We shall work with a presupposition that states that the effectiveness of doing pastoral ministry in Africa depends much on a deliberate accommodation of an African cultural understanding of life as well as African world-view (s)<sup>18</sup>. It is therefore argued that this cultural understanding of life, among the *African people*<sup>19</sup> is embedded within a framework of an African spirituality. We shall also argue that there is a meaningful interplay between an African spirituality and cosmology, because embedded in the African belief is their religious and traditional convictions on the cosmic life-force. The

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<sup>18</sup> An African world view (s), in the context of this study, will refer to the way African people understand their existence as embracing their cultural values, norms and traditions (see also Nxumalo 1979: 27 and Imasogie 1993:53-59).

<sup>19</sup> The term "*African people*" shall be used in a homogenous sense to include people in Africa who share similar values, norms and cultural traditions. It should be noted, however, that the scope of this study is around the African people within the Church in Africa (with special focus on the Church in Zambia and South Africa). The term "*African*" will be used while taking into consideration the current debate on what really makes one African, but it will also be used with an assumption that there are more similarities than differences among the African people. While Africa is a big continent with diverse 'African cultures' it has a harmonious celebration of a sense of communality across the board, and this makes Africa to be unique - a worldview based on communal values.

chapter also undertakes to discuss the way African people make use of metaphorical and symbolic expressions to describe God.

This study presupposes that ancestors hold a very important place in the way African people live. Thus in order to assimilate, accommodate and understand the way African people perceive life, pastoral ministry shall need to work with the notion of *inculturation*<sup>20</sup>. We contend with an understanding that at the center of an African way of life lies the whole issue of relationships and communality.

With the view of attempting to answer the research question; the chapter raises the following important basic questions:

- How is pastoral ministry affected by the way African people understand, *God, life and human relationships*? (An attempt to defining an *African spirituality*).
- In what way is the pastoral ministry among African people influenced by their understanding of the *cosmic life-force*, the *living dead* (ancestors) and *ancestral spirits*? (An attempt to defining the composition of an *African cosmology*).
- How are God-images defined within an African spirituality and cosmology?

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<sup>20</sup> Bosch (1991:452ff) gives a detailed discussion on the notion of inculturation. In his own words, inculturation involves the “rethinking”, “reformulation” of Christian faith within a cultural setting of people. Inculturation operates with two principles namely; the “indigenizing” principle, which affirms that the gospel is at home in every culture and every culture is at home with the gospel. The “pilgrim” principle, which warns us that the gospel will put us out of step with society (1991:455). However, It can also be stated that inculturation involves an effort to incarnate Christian teaching in African cultures on the level of theology or christology (van Arkel 1995:191-194). For this reason, Okure (1990:59) argues that “inculturation has to do with the incarnational union of Christ and the peoples of a given culture”. See also Ukpong (1994:40-61).

- And most importantly, how does this understanding influence the doing of pastoral ministry in Africa? ( creating a basis for the *process of healing and assessment of God-images* for a pastoral ministry in Africa)

In sum, this chapter shall argue with a basic assumption that an African spirituality and cosmology has great influence on the way African people understand God, life, human relationships and the cosmic life force; and that this understanding is important for the process of healing and assessment of God-images in an African pastoral ministry.

## **2.2 An African Spirituality**

At the present moment, attention is being given to the study of spirituality within the circles of academic research in Africa. One of the reasons for such an interest could be the quest for meaning and significance in people's lives as they begin to define themselves not only as humans, but also as spiritual beings in a dialectical phenomenon. Subsequently, we should see spirituality as an enormous subject of study covering a wide range of research. This can be noticed when we begin to define the term in a much wider context as in Wakefield's (1983:549) definition of spirituality: "those attitudes, beliefs and practices which animate people's lives and help them to reach out toward the super-sensible realities". For this study, we shall undertake to limit ourselves to defining spirituality within the framework of an African understanding.

One of the African theologians and scholars who has dedicated quality time to the study of spirituality within an African context is Kalilombe<sup>21</sup>. In his essay, "*Spirituality in the African Perspective*", Kalilombe (1999:213) helps us to be cautious when trying to define the meaning of an African spirituality because "on one hand there should be no pretension to claim that what constitutes such a spirituality is exclusively African, and on the other hand, we are not affirming that all Africans necessarily live this spirituality". However, he notes that in defining an African spirituality we should do it by "examining the way of life and following up those attitudes, beliefs and practices that animate people's lives and help them to reach out toward super-sensible realities" (1999:216). Once this consideration is taken, according to Kalilombe, an African spirituality will be centralized by "human beings presently living in the concrete circumstances of life this side of the grave" (1999:219). In this case, and following up Kalilombe's understanding of spirituality, it can be argued that an African spirituality consists of African people's "attitudes, beliefs and practices as they strive to reach out toward the super-sensible realities: God, the spirits, and the invisible forces in the universe" (1999:219).

African spirituality, as in the words of Ma Mpolo (1994:16), "incorporates all dimensions of human and cosmic life". Working with Ma Mpolo's assertion, it could also be argued then, that an African spirituality will refer to the way African people have undertaken to view and understand the physical and spiritual world around them. This understanding will incorporate a socio-cultural, philosophical, political, and religious setting of African people. Hence Louw's (2002:74) assertion: "*an African spirituality refers to certain*

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<sup>21</sup> Patrick Kalilombe is a Malawian national, an outstanding scholar and writer in the Roman Catholic Church. His theological essays have received wider publication in international theological journals and



*common cultural traits and philosophical paradigms that reflect a general mindset, belief system or life approach”.*

Meanwhile, in his book, “*In Living Colour: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral care and Counseling*”, Lartey argues for a spirituality that accommodates a “human capacity for relationship with **self, others, world, God**, and that which transcends sensory experience, which is often expressed in the particularities of given historical, spatial and social contexts, and which often leads to specific forms of action in the world (1997:113)”. When applied to an African way of understanding, it could be argued that Lartey’ view on spirituality underscores the fact that spirituality among African people is embedded in relationships.

In Lartey’s view, therefore, spirituality could as well be defined by a “characteristic style of relating” (1997:113-123), which he categorizes into five dimensions:

- (1) **Relationship with transcendence**: In this sense spirituality generally refers to the apparently universal human capacity to experience life in relation to a perceived dimension of power and meaning which is experienced as transcendent to our everyday lives, although such transcendence is often and certainly may be experienced in the midst of our everyday lives. The response and relationship with transcendence is

most often mediated through particular cultural expressions within a given religious tradition's system of symbols.

- (2) **Intra-personal (relationship with *self*)**: The manner of the relationship we have with ourselves is an important aspect of our spirituality. In traditional Christian teaching much stress has been laid upon self-denial and abnegation. Healthy relationships with self require variable responses to particular characteristics of self.
- (3) **Interpersonal (relationship with *another*)**: The dyad is the starting point of the corporate. To be able to cultivate an I-Thou relationship with another person in which mutuality, respect, accountability and friendship are sustained is indeed a spiritual task.
- (4) **Corporate (relationships *among people*)**: The solidarity of belonging through participation is the mark of being. In traditional African society ritual commemoration is a binding force which expresses the communality of spiritual bonds which tie people together. Spiritual movements are often sustained through the rituals in which members participate.
- (5) **Spatial (relationship with *place and things*)**: The primary metaphor of existence is spatial and not temporal. Spirituality is deeply rooted in all that surrounds human life; the earth and the universe, the spirit and matter.

The fundamental symbol of life is a *circle*, which signifies creation, tribe, clan and family. The circle is seen to be an egalitarian rather than hierarchical symbol.

The foregoing discussion on Lartey's five dimension of defining spirituality is helpful for our understanding of an African spirituality; especially when compared to *other spiritualities* in different contexts of the world. From Lartey's dimensions of spirituality, what stands out, though, as extremely important for our discussion of spirituality in Africa, is his emphasis on *corporate (relationships among people)* dimension. Consequently, it should be underscored at this point that at *the very center of an African spirituality lies the core-issue of relationship*. For the African people, spirituality has to be communal and incorporative. To this effect, Bellagamba (1987:107) argues that a spirituality that does not incorporate all people, their events, their richness, their hopes and concerns, cannot speak to Africans who are fundamentally communal and relational.

In an African spirituality, humanity is only interpreted within the understanding of the whole community. For it can be stated that "an African spirituality is harmony in interpersonal relationships: *muntu ungumuntu ngabantu/motho ke motho ka bantho* roughly translated as: a person is a person through other people" (Louw 2002:74). When a person separates him/herself from his/her extended family, that person then, in as far as the African community is concerned, is no longer considered to be part of the 'whole'. And according to Mbiti (1990:2), it is understood that a person cannot detach

himself/herself from the religion of his/her group, for to do so is to be severed from his/her roots, his foundation, his/her context of security, his/her kinship's and the entire group of those who make him/her aware of his/her own existence; and to be without one of these corporate elements of life is to be out of the whole picture. This argument is alluded to by Kalilombe when he writes:

*...for traditional Africans, humanity is first and foremost the community. In the first place is the extended family based on blood Kinship or on affinity through marriage, and then the clan, the tribe or the nation. Kinship and affinity create a special kind of bonding within which mutual rights and duties are exercised unconditionally. Individuals acquire their basic identity through these relationships, and they enjoy the feeling of security in life as long as the exchange of these rights and duties is guaranteed. It has often been said that where Descartes said: “**I think, therefore, I am**” (cogito ergo sum), the African would rather say, “**I am related, therefore, we are**” (Cognatus ergo sum). In African spirituality, the value of interdependence through relationships comes high above that of individualism and personal independence (1999:220).*

How then is an African spirituality shaped? What influences the making and formation of an African world-view, in terms of cultural values and tradition norms of relationships within the African community? What is the important factor(s) underlying the understanding of an African spirituality? Could we possibly speak about an *African cosmology*? What are the major features of an African spirituality?

## 2.2.1 Features of an African Spirituality

It can be rightly argued that an African spirituality is composed of different features. These features cover the religious, social, and spiritual life of the African people. Since African people are hierarchical in their view of life (world view) and in the way they relate, the features of an African spirituality also demonstrate such kind of hierarchy. This hierarchy is important in an African world view because it illustrates the dualistic reality of an African spirituality; Level one: the **Upper level** of spirituality and Level two: the **Lower level** of spirituality. The Upper level of spirituality incorporates, the position of *God* and the *spirits* (this includes ancestors); and the Lower level of spirituality includes: *human beings* and *nature*. In Mbiti's book, '*The Prayers of African religion*' this kind of categorization of an African spirituality has been termed "*spiritual realities*" (1975:4). It would suffice for us, at this stage to briefly illustrate each of these spiritual realities:

### 2.2.1.1 Level One: The Upper Level

#### 2.2.1.1.1 God<sup>22</sup>

In an African spirituality, God stands in the upper level. He is the Supreme being (*Umkulunkulu*), the creator (*mulengi*), the sustainer of the universe (*musungilili wa vyose*), the final authority of all things, the "overlord of society who has power of life and death" (see Pobee 1979: 46).

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<sup>22</sup> The African *concept* of God is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

According to Mbiti, God “emerges as the clearest and most concrete spiritual reality” (1975:4).

“God is seen as the Great Ancestor, the first Founder and Progenitor, the Giver of life, the Power behind everything that is” (see Magesa 1997:35). God is a Supreme Deity, who is all encompassing as creator and sustainer; he is up and above heaven as well down below the earth. As much as he is present in the lives of African people, he also maintains a “distance” from his subjects. This “distance” follows the hierarchical nature of the African understanding of authority, and it does not necessary mean the absence of God in human life (see Kalilombe 1994:120-121). God will not be bothered by small issues affecting the African family, however, like a village Chief, he can intervene and arbitrate on bigger issues and problems of the African community.

#### **2.2.1.1.2 The Spirits /Ancestors<sup>23</sup>**

In an African spirituality, the spirits belong to what is commonly termed as the world of the invisible. This includes divinities, nature spirits, and the spirits of the dead commonly known as ancestors. These have a central area of the invisible world. For this reason, Kalilombe’s assertion stresses an important point for us:

*The centrality of the conception of the spirits of the dead follows logically on the fact that African spirituality assumes that the center of consideration is the*

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<sup>23</sup> The study gives a more detailed discussion below on the role of ancestors

*community of those presently relationships, on which even the wider expressions of neighbourhood, clan, tribe, or even nation are modelled* (1994:125).

Apart from God, the African people have positioned the spirits/ancestors on the first level, not necessary because the ancestors are equal to God, but that they are intermediaries whose work is most valued. In Kalu's words, "a brand of social anthropologists argue that, indeed, Africans conceive of a High God but, in daily cultic ritual, this God is remote or hidden. The ancestor deputizes" (2000:55). The rationality behind this belief is that the African people perceive time as cyclical: life moves from birth to death, through the ancestral world to reincarnating birth. The ancestral world is a mirror of the human world. Pobee (1979:46) argues that by virtue of being part of the clan gone ahead to the house of God, ancestors are believed to be powerful in the sense that they maintain the course of life here and now and do influence it for good or for ill. It is this feature – the world of spirits and ancestors, that connects an African spirituality to an African cosmology.

## **2.2.1.2 Level Two: The Lower Level**

### **2.2.1.2.1 Human beings**

An ontology of being human is of utmost importance within an African spirituality. Human beings are at the center of activities within the 'creation drama' of the supreme God. And it is important to note that an African spirituality is based on the centrality of human beings presently living in the concrete circumstances of life this side of the grave. This life consists of their attitudes, beliefs, and practices as they strive to reach out toward

the super-sensible realities: God, the spirits, and the invisible forces of the universe (Kalilombe 1994:122).

Among African people, human beings are always defined within existing relationships with other beings, namely; God, the spirits, ancestors and nature. The human being within an African world view should be visualized as a centrifugal force emanating equally complex selves capable of inter-permeating within the person and permeating the selves generated from other personal centrifuges (see Taylor 1963:49). According to Ogbonnaya (1993:121)<sup>24</sup>, human beings are believed to have been created by *chi-be-ke*, the creator God who also is the great spirit or the world's over soul. Ogbonnaya observes that at the time of birth this great spirit *chukwu* gives to each man/woman a part of the Divine nature called *Chi* which becomes the spiritual double of the man throughout his life.

Setiloane (1986:15) argues that our understanding of human being and human personality within an African spirituality explains the interplay which takes place when people come into contact with one another or live together. The essence of being is participation in which humans are always interlocked with one another..."The human being is not only 'vital force', but more: 'vital force in participation'" (1986:14). Hence Pobee's (1979:49) assertion:

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<sup>24</sup> Ogbonnaya is writing from a Ghana experience of an African spirituality, see his paper, "*Person as Community*"



*A man is a compound of mogya (blood), sunsum, also ntoro (spirit) and kra (the soul or individual personality). The mogya he inherits from the mother; it symbolizes his material aspect. The blood makes him a biological being; it gives him status and membership within the lineage, and obligations as a citizen. The sunsum and kra make a spiritual being...It is important to emphasize that by virtue of the sunsum he belongs to his father's kinship group...Truly he exists because he belongs to a kinship group.*

In sum, it can be argued that from an African spirituality, a human being is also regarded not as a purely material or physical being, but also as a psychosomatic unity in view of the soul within him or her (see also Kudadjie & Osei 1998:33).

#### **2.2.1.2.2 Nature (Creation)**

According to an African world view, nature is a gift from God to humankind. Hence, the African people find a lot of connections with nature. Through nature, African people are connected to the divine and the invisible world, whereby they share in mystical powers not ordinarily available to those presently alive (see Kalilombe 1994:126). According to Magesa (1997:73):

*human love and fertility, for example, are not simply symbolized by the fertility of the earth; instead, they are deeply imbedded in the earth as it receives the rain and the seed and produces vegetation and crops for human consumption. Thus they offer up their vital power for the life and fertility of human beings. It follows, then, that in a real and immediate sense the sterility or fertility of the earth affects*

*the fertility of the human community. So water and air are not only symbolic of, but are, in fact the purity of the Divine.*

The African traditional medicine man (herbalist) uses the trees and animals of nature for making his medication. The African peasant farmer is attached to the land for his produce and wealth. The land, water, vegetation and animals form an integral part of an African spirituality. The Creator, God gave them to humankind as a token of kindness, thus human beings are in charge of all that goes on in the physical nature. The spiritual nature, consisting the invisible creatures and spirits are controlled by the ancestors on behalf of the Creator (*mulungu*). The meaning of all this is that “*nature and persons are one, woven by creation into one texture or fabric of life, a fabric or web characterized by an interdependence between all creatures*” (Magesa 1997:73). However, it should be pointed out that this does not mean that African people worship nature, but that they give respect for what nature is – a creation of God and gift to humankind. Thus Magesa further observes: “*This living fabric of nature – including people and other creatures – is sacred. Its sanctity does not mean that nature should be worshipped, but does mean that it ought to be treated with respect*” (1997:73).

In sum, we can therefore categorize the features of an African spirituality into two orientations:

- (1) The conviction that the community of the living is involved in a dramatic struggle between life and death, and the outcome of this struggle depends on how successfully the human community can avail itself of the help of the *invisible*

*world* (mostly, the spiritual world – the world of ancestors and the departed spirits). For this reason two elements, then, animate African spirituality: “First, the consciousness that individuals and the community are committed to an ever-present struggle against menacing evil if life is to be worth living; and secondly, that in this struggle the decisive key is the availability of assistance from the invisible” (Kalilombe 1994:128)

- (2) The conviction that the struggle between life and death is not pursued alone in isolation, but that it is in and through the community that the fight can be carried on effectively. This factor stresses the fact that an African spirituality “relies on the spirit of community, on cooperation rather than open competition, on sharing and redistribution, rather than on accumulation or individualistic hoarding” (Kalilombe 1994:128). And this community is conceived of in terms of “family”, that is, in terms of kinship and affinity relationships whereby ideally duties and rights are exchanged unconditionally (1994:128).

### **2.3 African Cosmology – An African ‘Spiritual Ethos’ of Life**

When referring to an African cosmology we are implying the way the African people have incorporated in their lives "the ‘mystery of the unseen’, and the beyondness of human life" (see Louw 1999:1) An African cosmology could also refer to the way the African people have related to cosmic 'powers' and 'life-forces'. In Ma Mpolo’s words, the African cosmology is perceived and lived as one composed of seen and unseen spirit-

beings. They constitute life-forces which constantly interact with, and thus influence the course of human life for good or for ill (1991:23).

Hence the point that Louw (1998:78) makes: "for the African, life is a continuum of cosmic, social and personal events. When one breaks society's moral codes, the universal ties between oneself and the community are also broken". *Moreover, it could be argued that an African cosmology forms an integral part of an African spirituality. For an African spirituality, as well as an African cosmology, is basically based on the assumption that life is influenced by relationships between human beings, the visible and the invisible.* And that these relationships are basically ambiguous: they can be beneficial or harmful, life-giving or destructive, good or bad, reinforcing or weakening, auspicious or misfortunate (See Kalilombe 1999:223). In this case, an African cosmology is defined within the confinement of an African spirituality. It is the way African people perceive life as consisting of the unseen beings (departed spirits and ancestors), the supernatural and the natural, the spiritual and the physical life-force.

### **2.3.1 The Schemata and Content of an African Cosmology**

At this stage, it is essential to outline what really characterizes an African cosmology. In Mbiti's view, an African cosmology can be defined by what he terms as African cosmological thought. According to him, an African cosmology depicts a schemata of African beliefs about everything as can be reflected in the following classification that he makes:

- (1) *God as the ultimate explanation of the genesis and substance of both human beings and all things.*
- (2) *Spirits being made up of superhuman beings and the spirits of men and women who died a long time ago.*
- (3) *Man/woman including human beings who are alive and those about to be born.*
- (4) *Animals and plants, or the remainder of biological life.*
- (5) *Phenomena and objects without biological life*

(see Paris 1995: 28)

According to Kalu (2000:56), the schemata of an African cosmology can possibly be reflected in three dimensions:

*Africans operate with three-dimensional perception of space (cosmic life-force) (emphasis mine): the sky, the earth (land and water), and the ancestral spirit world, which is located under the earth... Each space dimension is imbued with divinities (principalities), territorial spirits (powers), and a host of minor spirits (localized to specific professions, places, and objects – for instance , a river, a hill, a stone, and so on )*

(see Kalu 2000:56)

For African people, religious beliefs and cultural traditions have extrapolation in their world view of the cosmic life-force. Thus Kudadjie & Osei's observes: "Fundamental to the African's understanding of the cosmos is the belief in the orderliness of the universe in which all events are caused and ultimately explicable"

(1998:38) . And in this cosmic order, African people, believe that human beings are not left alone to face the miseries and vicissitudes of life. Their religious inclination make them believe that they can relate to God directly through prayer and sacrifice, as well as indirectly through the gods and ancestors, and appeal for help (1998:38).

According to Buys (2000:12-14), the schemata of an African cosmology can be classified in what he has termed “the Dynamic world view of Africa”. He identifies eight elements composing an African world view:

1) **Plurality of Spiritual beings:** The African world view emphasizes a plurality of dynamic (powerful, spiritual) beings that determine the daily lives of the whole extended family group, the clan or the tribe. There are evil spirits and powers, which are controlled or kept at bay by the influence of benevolent spirits. Examples of such good spirits are the deceased ancestors, who can help a person or community in its struggle against many natural forces and evil or bad spirits. On one side of the benevolent spirits there is a long heirarchy , starting with the immediate Ancestors, in climbing order, until the good creator God is reached.

2) **Holistic creation:** An essential unity, balance and interdependency exist between all parts of creation. This unity of all parts of creation are in balance, between man, animal and nature, in one giant holism. Disruption of this fine balance in creation can result in catastrophe for the whole community.

3) **Human holism:** In the African view of human beings, there is a total absence of any form of categorization of life. The sacred things (the holy and the supernatural) are never separated from the rest of human life. The sacred and supernatural things are never placed in different categories from the secular things (e.g. economy, politics, science, art, etc) as is the case in Western society.

4) **Semi-fatalism of religious interpretation:** All parts of human life are controlled by spiritual forces. This often results in a semi-fatalist world view. Life is controlled by powers from outside human existence, which allow no room for private initiative or self-enrichment or development. The purpose of religion is mostly to control the influence of evil forces on our lives.

5) **Centrality of humans:** In the community of the living and the dead (present and past) humans are the center focus of creation. The creator God has departed from earth and is far removed from humans. God is not much involved while humans are busy with his immediate existence (even while involved in religious activity). Therefore the creator God is not directly involved with humankind- and not nearly as important for human's daily existence as the ancestors, who have an immediate concern with their living family members.

6) **Cosmic struggle between good and evil:** The task of religious activity therefore is rather to ward off evil from humankind and to re-establish the right balance between evil

and good forces in nature and daily living by manipulating “spiritual powers”. This is done by means of prayers and rituals.

**7) Utilitarianist nature of African Traditional Religion:** Good powers are available to control and discharge evil powers. For this reason spiritual leaders who possess supernatural powers are seen as the true spiritual leaders, in contrast with those who only preach a message of faith, but have no real effect on the lives of people. This trend in African Traditional Religion (ATR) is what is described by the term, “Utilitarianism”.

**8) Concept of time and history in Africa:** The past is the focal point for the present – not the future, as is the case in Western society. Firstly, in an African cosmology, the view of history is seen as a cyclic movement, that is, running parallel to the ebb and flow of natural events. In animal life there is birth, growth, maturity and death. Life in an African village is determined by each of these life transitions (rites of passage). A day can be divided into sunrise, midday, twilight and night. In a year there are four seasons succeeding one another. In this way the traditional African view on history is conceived according to natural events and is therefore cyclic. The same things recur eternally in the course of human history.

Secondly, the traditional African view of time within an African cosmology is different from the Western concept of time. African time does not move forward, but “backwards”, into history. Time is something that man himself creates and uses as and when he needs it. Time happens. Events provide time. No events, no time! Time is not



your master, rather you are the master of time, that is, naming specific times of great effect, imprinted on the memory of the tribal community! (the year of harvest (*chaka chamasika*), the year of the birds, the year of the lion).

### 2.3.2 The Role of Ancestors in an African Cosmology

Ancestors (*ambuyafwi*<sup>24</sup>) play a greater role in an African cosmology (see Turaki 1999:34). In this regard, Pobee (1979:48) aptly argues: "Apart from God, the ancestors and the gods, nature is believed to have power and even spirits." *Ambuyafwi* form an integral part of an African cosmology. They have "such a tremendous influence on the daily life of most Africans that some Western anthropologists and theologians wrongly supposed that they are worshipped" (Berinyuu 1988:8). Most African people believe strongly in the presence and influence of ancestors in daily life so much that they do things, often unconsciously, to reflect such a belief but they do not worship them as gods.

In his book, "*African Religion and Philosophy*", Mbiti (1969:83) helps us to understand who the ancestors (*the living-dead*) ought to be in an African traditional society when he writes:

*The departed of up to five generations are in different category from that of ordinary spirits which we have been considering. They are still within the Sasa period, they are in the state of personal immortality, and their process of dying is not yet complete. We have called them the living-dead. They are the closest links*

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<sup>24</sup> *Ambuyafwi* – a Tonga term for ancestors. This term is used with great respect. Nobody still living and alive qualifies to use the *ambuyafwi* term. It is a term given, with great honours, to those that played a great role in society before they died. Now that they are dead, they are in actual fact still living because their role in society continues – the role of being custodians of the African family.

*that men have with the spirit world...the living-dead are bilingual: they speak the language of men, with whom they lived until 'recently'; and they speak the language of the spirits and of God, to Whom they are drawing nearer ontologically...they are guardians of family affairs, traditions, ethics and activities...they are the best group of intermediaries between men and God: they know the needs of men, they have 'recently' been here with men, and at the same time they have full access to the channels of communication with God directly, or according to some societies indirectly through their own forefathers.*

Mwewa (1977:15-18), in his doctoral dissertation, "*Traditional Zambian Eschatology and Ethics confronting the Advent of Christianity*", gives an elaborate outline of what qualifies a person to be on the roll call of ancestors in traditional African society:

- (a) Founders of clans are regarded as ancestors. Through their initiative and efforts for the good of their people, they unified their kinsmen. They made them aware of their common ancestry and goal. They approved or disapproved certain customs and norms in their communities. They showed a positive will that these ways of life be transmitted to their future generations.
- (b) The tradition sets a very high value on procreation. Through posterity, the clan has no fears that will be wiped out from the land of the living. Those people who bore children are included in this group of the forefathers.
- (c) Those people who lived good lives and died in their ripe old age are among those commemorated as forefathers. People look up to them as source of inspiration for good living in their community. Witches, murderers, people who commit suicide and those who died of lightning are never commemorated and no one is named after

them. There is fear that their namesakes might meet the same fate as their predecessors.

- (d) Those who were skilled in some worthwhile profession are also looked to as ancestors. These include people of good counsel, farmers, hunters and *Nga'nga* (doctors and healers)

The role of ancestors in an African cosmology is defined by the services they continue to provide to the traditional African society. They are regarded as real members of the family even though they are departed (Mwewa 1977:17). They are regarded to be watching over their people so as to offer protection either from bad luck, evil people (destroyers of clans) or evil spirits in the cosmic life (see also Magesa 1997:77-81). They are regarded as protectors from various calamities in the land, and they continuously give protection to people of the clan while on a journey to some strange place. They help in hunting and farming episodes by blessing the hunter and the farmer to be successful. They talk to the great one (*mukulu wamacanya*) about the welfare of the African society and the pending prayer requests made on behalf of the living. They understand fully what is going on, “they share preoccupation and projects of the living members, and are intimately interested in what is going on” (Kalilombe 1999: 225).

The role of ancestors can also be equated with the function of the living-dead (see Mbiti 1969:83) as can be reflected in the following summary made by Genham (1989:140-143)<sup>25</sup>:

- ◆ The ancestors function as the guardians of the family traditions and life.
- ◆ When the living fail to follow the customs of the fathers, it becomes the duty of the ancestors to correct their errors.
- ◆ The ancestors serve as the owners of the land, fertilizing the earth and causing the food to grow.
- ◆ The living-dead may receive requests from the living.
- ◆ The ancestral spirits may also serve as intermediaries between man and God.
- ◆ The living-dead become a source of comfort to the living who are always conscious of their presence.
- ◆ The living-dead communicate with the living by revelations using one of the following methods: dreams, calamity, ecstasy and trance, possession, prophets, or divination.

Consequently, the African people believe that the ancestors are to be “regarded as the main custodians of moral law, its police and magistrates, rather than God, who is considered too remote to be bothered with details of human daily life far away on earth” (See Twesigye 1996:208). The ancestors are also the guardians of the community’s morality. Any transgression of the order and rules of the community is at the same time a

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<sup>25</sup> See also Theron (1996:33)

transgression against the ancestors (See Theron 1996:32). Such a transgression will be punished by them. Thus, the social order is maintained through obedience to and veneration of the ancestors.

In Mwewa's words, "apart from providing for their kinsfolk, the forefathers (*ancestors*) are regarded as advisers to the living" (emphasis mine) (1977:18). They see to it that religion and law are being followed by their people. In this respect, they are believed to institute discipline and punishment on all those who break the tradition and the law of the clan. Hence Kalilombe's (1999:225) argument:

*"In this position of special power, the spirits of the dead (ancestors) are natural guardians of their relatives on earth and can act as mediators with God. This is a position of tremendous power. That is why the living cannot afford to ignore them: the more so as their intervention, although normally beneficial, can also be punitive if the living misbehave or break the basic rules of life (such as taboos). The living get in touch with the spirits as often as there is need to ask for help or for advice, to seek protection or simply to show them that they are not forgotten"* (emphasis mine).

### **2.3.3 An Interplay between an African Spirituality and Cosmology**

As can be seen from the discussion above, cosmology within an African world view is an integral part of an African spirituality because, in this world view, there is no separation between the physical /material world and the spiritual/cosmic world. It is

usually difficult to differentiate between an African spirituality and cosmology for the two are embedded deeply within the systematic ontology and nature of African people.

## **2.4 God-images in an African Spirituality and Cosmology**

In most pastoral care situations in Africa, we are confronted with different ways of people's experience and understanding of God. These experiences and understanding of God by people are what we shall term '*God-images*' in this study. According to Louw, (1999:1) God-images refer to the way people understand and experience God in terms of their human ideas, needs and expectations. Louw argues further that God-images could also refer to the many different ways in which humans portray God through metaphors, and are thus connected to symbols that are expressed in rituals and liturgical events (1991:1).

Howe (1995:111), in his book, "*The Image of God: A Theology of Pastoral care and Counseling*" attests to the fact that God-images are 'symbols' which make God present to us. God-images are inevitably expressions of the nearness and remoteness relation of God to people's lives. And sometimes, such expressions of God are positive (*appropriate*) or negative (*inappropriate*) depending on the experiences that people have gone through in life.

It can thus be contended that God-images are categorized into two descriptions, namely; *appropriate* and *inappropriate* God-images. *Appropriate* God-images are those, which provide a helpful experience and understanding of God in the lives of people. Meanwhile *inappropriate* God-images are those which distort people's understanding of God, and therefore lead them to a distorted (pathological) faith. Subsequently, Cavanagh (1992:80) argues that "a significant percentage of problems that people bring to ministers is caused, or at least is contributed to, by unhelpful perceptions of God (*inappropriate* God-images)" (emphasis mine). Moreover, it should be noted that what Cavanagh refers to here as unhelpful perceptions of God; are as a result of negative experiences such as pain and suffering which people have undergone in life.

In the context of this study, we can contend therefore, that God-images refer to the experiences and understandings of God by African people within their own context. God-images embrace the African traditional stories, symbols, metaphors, parables and riddles about the African experience of the divine (God) and the cosmic life-force. God-images (either *appropriate* or *inappropriate*) are formed as result of different experiences of people within a given context (in this case, the African context). And that such experiences take place within a cultural setting and understanding of the African people.

## 2.4.1 The influence of Culture on the way African people formulate

### God-images

Culture, in general, is a very important attribute of human life, and it does influence people's world view as regards to their perception of life and a God-human (a sense of the divine) encounter. In describing culture<sup>26</sup>, Kraft (1996:31) refers to it as "complex structuring of customs and the assumptions that underlie them in terms of which people govern their lives". Culture is "the total life way of a people, the social legacy the individual acquires from his group, a people's design for living" (1996:38). Culture may also refer to "a society's complex, integrated coping mechanism, consisting of learned, patterned concepts and behavior, plus their underlying perspectives (world view) and resulting artifacts (material culture)"<sup>27</sup>. Niebuhr (1975:32) in his classic book, "*Christ and Culture*" writes:

*Culture is the 'artificial, secondary environment' which man superimposes on the natural. It comprises of language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values. This "social heritage," this "reality sui generis," which the New Testament writers frequently had in mind when they spoke of "the world," which is represented in many forms*

<sup>26</sup> In referring to the term culture, the New Dictionary of Theology describes it as: "a complex but integrated and interacting dynamic whole" (Komonchak 1988:201) Culture is understood to be constituting the following elements; a common world view or vision of life; common meanings, values and goals; common categories and patterns of thoughts, a common tradition and common patterns of behaviour; common organization of relationships and roles; with religion, spirituality and mysticism supplying the transcendent and in-depth dimension".

<sup>27</sup> Kraft (1996:38-40) breaks down this definition of culture into eight components namely; coping mechanism, social group (society), ideas or concepts, behavior, patterns, learning, perspectives (world view) and products produced by people.



*but to which Christians like other men are inevitably subject, is what we mean when we speak of culture.*

And writing from a *cross-cultural* pastoral perspective, Lartey alludes to the above stated definitions of culture when he emphasizes that culture is “the way in which social groups develop distinct patterns of life and give ‘expressive form’ to their social and material life experience” (1997:9). The distinct patterns of life, Lartey mentions in his definition of culture include “ideas, values and meanings embodied in institutions and practices, in forms of social relationship, in systems of belief, in mores and customs, in the way objects are used and physical life organized” (1997:9-10). And a New Testament scholar, Malina sheds more light on the meaning of culture when he defines it as “a system of symbols relating to and embracing people, things and events that are socially symbolized” (1981:11).

Further more, in giving an anthropological perspective on the meaning of the word 'culture', Hillman (1975:57) argues:

*In modern anthropology the word culture refers to the whole complex of learned patterns of thought and behaviour which belong commonly and characteristically to the members of permanent human group who share a sense of common history and destiny who regard themselves, and are recognized by other such groups, as a people apart in the family of mankind.*

At this point, then, we are faced with a challenge of describing culture from an African perspective. Does the meaning of culture in an African context embrace the above

definitions which are written in different settings and contexts? What distinguishes the meaning of culture in Africa from other contexts such as the West or the Great North? Could we rightly state that a cultural understanding of people (in this context, African people) does influence their formation of God-images and the way they perceive life?

Culture, within the African context, is a relative term with different facets. In the context of this study, in referring to an 'African culture' we mean; *symbols, customs, rituals, liturgical events and traditions (all together) that constitute the way African people live and relate to each other and to the cosmic life-force*. An 'African culture' can also mean the values of African people that give meaning to life as a whole within an African community. It should be noted, however, that *the uniqueness of an African culture within an African traditional society lies in the whole aspect of relationship and communality*. For Mbiti (1990<sup>2</sup>:31), "to be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of the community" (see also Setiloane 1986:9ff). Outside a meaningful relationship (within a community), a person is not a whole person, but an alien and stranger to human life and the cosmic life-force.

Culture, within an African understanding, can also be reflected in the plural - 'African cultures' - because of the diversity of values and traditions we find among the African people. 'African cultures' play a role of maps which present an African world view and value assumptions or certain implicit theories about Africa and the world that are transmitted from generation to generation through many different ways. Could it be that

the experience of God by the African people is highly influenced by such a world view?  
How then are God-images formed among the African people?

God-images are formed within a cultural setting of the people because “culture is a human reality, and that any given group of people is shaped and conditioned by such a reality in its different manifestations” (Okure 1990:59). Subsequently, God-images among the African people are not only formed within an African cultural setting, but are also influenced by the same. We would agree with the argument that Louw (1999:2) puts up when he states:

*God-images are influenced by contexts and are continuously being shaped by cultural environments, social issues, psychological needs and existential experiences. God-images are not shaped merely by doctrine and confessions. God-images can change and correlate with vital existential needs. In terms of the current demand for a theologia Africana God-images in Christian theology should reckon with both the nature of African spirituality as well as existential needs within the context of Southern Africa.*

#### **2.4.2 The influence of Culture on the way African people experience God**

The understanding and experience of God (*Mulungu*<sup>28</sup>) among the African people is very much influenced by what they have come to believe about God. Their belief about *Mulungu* is embedded within their cultural anthropological expressions of the

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<sup>28</sup> *Mulungu*, a shewa name for God.

supernatural. *Mulungu*, within the African context, is known to be the God of the '**fore Fathers** (*ambuiyafwi*<sup>29</sup>)'. This points to the fact that God is understood to be a *God of communality* – God belongs to every African person who shares in the history of an African community in which he/she lives. With this understanding, the African people acknowledges an aspect of continuity in the faith which had begun in their ancestors (*amubuyafwi*). For this reason *Mulungu* has to relate to what took place in the lives of *amubuyafwi* (in the past) before he can be accepted as the God of the present and the future generations. Thus the 'religious' culture of African people has a rich history that continues into the future.

### 2.4.3 God and the continuity of life among the African people

We contend that the continuity of life in the cosmological understanding of African people becomes a vital force and a link to their association of what is taking place in the present. Thus experiences of God must relate to what the forefathers have experienced before, or else ***God becomes an alien and a total stranger*** to the African experience<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> A relative connotation in Tonga language for the 'Great ancestors'

<sup>30</sup> Does this phenomenon of life not relate to the experience of God by the Jewish people (*semitic people*) in the biblical times? Could it be that Jewish experiences of God and the God-images they held onto, were highly influenced by their semitic culture? What can be said of the following passage from the Old Testament? "*The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God is*

To this effect, Okure (1990:80) argues that African cultures are themselves an invaluable heritage. It has become common place to note that African cultures are much closer to the semitic/biblical culture, which God used as the medium for divine revelation, than it is to the Greaco-Western cultures. It can be stated that such a natural affinity between the African and semitic/biblical cultures should make our efforts at inculturation much easier and more biblical - oriented.

#### **2.4.4 Common Concepts of God among the African people**

Here we give a few examples of the common concepts of God within an African cultural understanding that can also be related to the semitic/biblical culture:

##### **(a) God as the Creator**

In an African cultural understanding, the creation of everything that exists on earth and in the universe is attributed to God (*Mulungu*) – the Supreme being. This can be verified by various traditional concepts used by the African people to depict God as the creator. Such concepts as “*Nyamalenga*” (a Chewa concept for Creator); *Mulengi* (a Tonga & Tumbuka concept for Creator); *M’nikazi wa Zinthu Zonse* (A Ngoni concept for Creator of all things) are used to depict that God is the great Creator of all things –this

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*God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands” (Deut. 7:7-9)*

includes those things that are visible and invisible. McVeigh (1974:17) argues that Africans believe in a great power which they see working in the rain, thunder, sun and the events of life. They also believe in the Supreme God whom they identify with the personal names of *Leza*, *Mulungu* and *Nyame*.

## (b) God as the Healer

African people believe, just like the semitic people, that God is the healer and the source of healing. This belief is confirmed by the concepts of God they use when confronted with sickness or illness. Such concepts like, *Ng'anga Ikulu* (a Tumbuka concept for the Great Physician); *Muchilisi* (a Tonga & Chewa concept for the Healer); *Lucele-Ng'anga* (a Bemba concept of God for the *Lord of healing*) are used to depict God as a healer of all diseases.

## (c) God as the Shepherd

Like in the semitic times, most traditional African societies are agrarian societies. The concept of God as shepherd is very common among African people. Concepts like *Mulisya* (a Tonga / Tumbuka concept for shepherd); *Mbusa* (a Chewa / Nyanja concept for shepherd); *Kapyunga* (a Bemba concept for shepherd) are used to depict God as the shepherd of his people. The shepherd concept of God does qualify Him to be equated on the level of the great ancestor, and the God of the forefathers.

#### (d) God as the King

In most parts of traditional African societies, people are ruled by chiefs or traditional 'kings'. Thus one is able to come across concepts of God that depict him as a royal king over his people: **Kalonga** (a Chewa concept for king); **Mfumum** (Tumbuka / Tonga concept for king); **Imfumum** (Bemba concept for king); **Umkulu mkulu** ( a Ng'uni concept for the great king). These concepts of God are treated with great respect among the African people. Like their semitic counterparts, African people value the presence of a royal king / chief in the kingdom / village as an agent of God. McVeigh affirms this by stating the following:

*Generally the Africans conceive of the High God as a **Great Chief**; and the more highly developed any particular tribal society is from a political standpoint, the more God takes on kingly attributes. One talks to him as one would to the chief. The further the people are separated from the earthly chief, the further they conceive themselves to be from the heavenly Chief. **Like the Chief, God is usually pictured as having a family.***

The emphasis that God is not only a *God of communality*, but also a God of *continuity* becomes a major influence in the formation of God-images among the African people. We should note that the African people are fond of God-images that depict a sense of **relationship, communality** and **continuity**. This can be explained from their communal approach to life. The fact that African people are proud of that which has been passed onto them from the previous generations, (an inclusion of parables and analogies); they

have a deep sense of continuity. They are always looking forward to spend life with the great ancestors. In most rural and traditional Africa, the elderly people would boast about a continuity of life and a belief in a God of continuity who would enable them to be “gathered” to their ancestors and the spirit world. It is this longing in an African elderly person that makes him/her to depict God as a God of continuity. This belief is as result of the hope an African person has that one day the God of continuity will make it possible for him/her to cross the “river of life” (*musinje wa umoyo*) and see the departed loved ones (the *living dead*).

#### **2.4.5 Common God-images and Metaphors in an African Culture**

One can find common God-images and *metaphors*<sup>31</sup> that depict the cultural understanding of God among the African people. God-images and metaphors such as *father*, *mother*, *shepherd*, *companion* and *friend* express the communality aspect of an African life. We shall describe each of these in detail in order to create an understanding of how the African people perceive God in daily life.

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<sup>31</sup> Louw (2000:49ff) in his book, “*Meaning in Suffering*” discusses the use of metaphorical language in pastoral theology. He states that a biblical metaphor can be used as “a figure of speech in the theological vocabulary to present, comprehensively and meaningfully, the unknown (revelation) in terms of the known (creation)” (see also McFague 1982:43ff).



## (a) God as a Father

When God is *father* (*Ciuta Dada*<sup>32</sup>) then he is taken as the one who relates to people just like a natural father would do in a home setting. It may also imply that God, as *Ciuta Dada*, provides a sense of security within the communal life of the African family. Thus, the image creates a sense of protection and security in an African family. For Mbiti (1988:49), "*the sense of God's fatherhood is needed and experienced most in times of need, such as danger, despair, sickness, sorrow, drought or calamity*" Since the kind of cultural anthropology we find among the African people is that one which puts emphasis on human relations, it also means that there is a longing for protection from the perceived evil forces that exist within an African cosmic life force.

And protection from evil forces (cosmic powers) can only be realized when an African person chooses to stay within the boundaries of the family unit (communality). Outside the family unit, a person is exposed to the infliction and oppressiveness of the 'powers' and 'forces' of life. And in most cases the father metaphor of God becomes an important symbol of protection within a given family unit. This is why, the '*father*' *image of God* is at home amongst most African people (and tribes) because of the sense of protection and security it provides to the African family.

The '*father*' *image of God*, unlike in the 'sensitive' Western and Northern continents, is not as contentious a notion or concept to the traditional African people because its '*hermeneutical*' epistemology is derived from the context of a community life within an

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<sup>32</sup> *Ciuta Dada*, a very common expression of God as father among the Tonga and Tumbuka speaking people.

African cultural anthropology. And while the use of a father image of God may arouse negative associations, especially to those who have negative experiences with patriarchal domination, it is important to understand that many African ethnic groups still give respect to its meaning and usage. Hence we contend that the father image of God provides a sense of security and providence among the African family.

To strengthen the foregoing arguments on the father image of God, it is worthy to make an observation of Terrien's<sup>33</sup> exposition of Jesus' use of the name / concept 'father' as reflected in Louw's (1998:85) writing:

*The name Father, which he (Jesus) favoured as a designation of God, paradoxically reflected his radical overthrow of patriarchy. Jesus intended a metaphorical name that meant not mastery over slaves, nor tyranny over women and children, but on the contrary, tenderness and care and responsibility for growth of a new family. Moreover, the notion of divine fatherhood did not at all mean for Jesus the physiological bond of paternity with its repressed archetype of oedipal rebellion, which depth psychology and anthropology have emphasized in our time. For him the name father evoked a transcendence voluntarily curbed by self-immolation.*

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<sup>33</sup> See also Terrien's (1985:138) book, "Till the heart sings: A Biblical Theology of manhood and womanhood."

### (e) God as a Mother

However, it should suffice to mention here that some of the African people are very much at ease with the *mother* (*Ciuta Mama*<sup>34</sup>) image of God because they share a matrilineal<sup>35</sup> descent. When God is *mother*, then it means that God relates to his people in the same way as a natural mother does to her family. The mother image of God provides a sense of care, love and security in terms of nurturing to the members of an African family unit. It is evident enough that the mother image of God is not only used among the African people with a matrilineal descent, but also among those with patriarchal background as it can be seen in Mbiti's (1988:49) argument below:

*The image of Mother also carries with it the idea of cherishing and nursing, and it is used even in patriarchal societies. We cannot draw conclusions therefore that the image of God as father is confined to patriarchal societies, and that His image as Mother is confined only to matrilineal societies. In both cases, these images are used figuratively, to convey the idea of God originating all things, and caring for all things (particularly mankind).*

### (f) God as Shepherd and Companion

Images or metaphors of God such as, the *Shepherd* (*Mulisya*<sup>36</sup>) metaphor depicts the compassionate and loving care that God (the shepherd) has on the people. Similarly, the

<sup>34</sup> *Ciuta Mama*, a common expression of God as mother among the Tumbuka speaking people

<sup>35</sup> Most Churches in Africa have a mixed composition of African people, some come from a patriarchal background while others have a matrilineal origin. In Zambia, people like the Tongas in Southern province and the Bembas on the Copperbelt province are very much patriarchal while many ( eg. Tumbuka and Chewa) of those from the Eastern province have their roots in a matrilineal setting.

<sup>36</sup> *Mulisya*, a term used for shepherd among the Tonga and Tumbuka speaking people. The term *Mulisya* depicts someone who feeds and cares for the sheep.

*companion* (*wakwenda nayo*<sup>37</sup>) metaphor carries the notion of somebody who cares and is very close to one's life. A companion metaphor is mainly used by the African people in their understanding of God's involvement with human life. African people believe that God accompanies them everywhere, and he is always there to help, especially in times of pain and suffering. Thus the shepherd and companion images of God are used to depict the caring and companionship of God in human life – which in most cases is interpreted as a pilgrimage,

### **(g) God as Friend**

The image of God as Friend (*Mubwezi*<sup>38</sup>) is mostly used to show that God can be trusted. It is an “image which shows great confidence in God” (Mbiti 1975:47). The African people believe that there is a place in God's ‘heart’ which accommodates the notion of friendship, and therefore he can be counted on in times of difficulties. “Because he is their friend, they can speak to him or with him as freely as they wish” (1975:48).

We can therefore contend that for the African people, there is always a sense of relationship, communality and continuity in all the God-images and metaphors listed above. For this reason, the formation of such God-images is always influenced by an African cultural understanding – the understanding of human life by African people,

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<sup>37</sup> *Wakwenda nayo*, a tumbuka term for companion, literally meaning ‘someone I walk with in a journey.’

<sup>38</sup> *Mubwezi*, a ‘friend’ image of God among the Tumbuka and Tonga speaking people

without which all images imposed on African people will become obsolete and invalid to the African context.

#### **2.4.6 God-images in a Pastoral care Situation in Africa**

Arising from the foregoing discussion on God-images in an African context, and when applied to a pastoral care situation in Africa, it can be stated that God-images point to the way people intend to express their experience and understanding of God in their daily lives. It can also be argued, as in the words of Louw (1999:2) that; *“The undergirding supposition and assumption is that, despite changes and flexibility, God-images in the Christian tradition are inevitably linked to and determined by the durable and fundamental theological notion of the faithfulness of God”*. God-images link the African people to God especially in times of pain and suffering.

A pastoral care situation therefore, provides an opportunity for people to tell their stories on how they understand and experience God's involvement in their lives, more especially in moments of sickness, sorrow and suffering. The pastoral ministry of the Church in Africa will be enriched more by allowing people to express themselves with the God-images they are used to. In doing so the Church will help, in the process of a pastoral assessment, to determine whether people are holding on to appropriate or distorted images of God altogether. The pastoral ministry of the Church in Africa should be sensitive to the fact that God-images are also connected to different ways in which African people describe God through metaphors, traditional events and symbols. For the

African people, God's love (*Chitemwa*) and faithfulness (*Chigomezgo*) are expressed through the use of God-images, which in most cases have become part of their religious metaphorical expressions.

It will therefore help at this stage to give a brief synopsis of the interplay between God-images and metaphorical expressions.

### 2.4.7 God-images and Metaphorical Expressions

Metaphors and symbols are often used to describe God-images which African people have formed to express their experience of God. Metaphors are used "to say something about things people know little of"<sup>39</sup> (McFague 1975:43). In his paper, "*God as Friend*" Louw (1998:238) describes metaphors as "meaningful instruments for the naming of God, metaphors about God act as helpful instruments to signify and create possible meaningful and symbolic interpretations".

Metaphors help to remove the idea of a *distant God*; they express a notion of the *nearness* of God – as a God who relates to his people (the God of Communality). In a later development and in his book, "*Meaning in Suffering*", Louw (2000:50) aptly argues that "in the light of our search for metaphors which convey the pastoral dimension of God's involvement in history, the following four have been identified by pastoral theology: *shepherd, servant, wisdom* and *paraclete* (see a summary description below).

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<sup>39</sup> McFague (1975:43-65) in her book, "Speaking in Parables" discusses the meaning and the use of metaphors. She describes a metaphor as "a word used in an unfamiliar context to give us a new insight; a good metaphor moves us to see our ordinary world in an extraordinary way" (1975:4).

- (1) **Shepherd Metaphor** – In a pastoral care situation, the shepherd metaphor connects the unique meaning of pastoral care, compassionate and loving charity of Jesus Christ's sacrificial and redeeming love. In the shepherding function, pastoral care concretely represents God's caring support for people in need. Because of sheep's defencelessness in God's flock, his guidance, cherishing and protecting simultaneously imply the entire congregation to be the Lord's flock.
- (2) **Servant Metaphor** – The servant metaphor uniquely links God's compassion to human suffering as a result of sin, illness, persecution, disruption and death. It indicates God's pathos and compassion for our human needs. The servant metaphor is thus linked in a special way to the healing, recovery or reconciling function of pastoral care, which demands a very special disposition from the pastor: that of woundedness.
- (3) **Wisdom Metaphor** – This is a metaphor for God's active involvement in our human experience and creation. It is also a metaphor for our quest for human dignity and justice. In a given pastoral care situation, the importance of wisdom lies in the fact that it takes human experience within concrete relationships seriously. It is also directed to decision making and acting.
- (4) **Paraclete Metaphor** – This metaphor functions as central metaphor in pastoral care, it expresses both the indicative components of care and comfort

(justification on the grounds of Christ's reconciliatory work and victorious resurrection) as the imperative component of care (admonition, reprimanding, encouraging), with the view to changing direction in life. This paracletic activity takes place out of God's mercy, in accordance with the scriptural intent (Rom.15:4). Care and comfort take place focusing on hope and growth in faith, so that the congregation itself (corporate dimension) is spiritually prepared.

According to Louw, the above stated four metaphors are intended for the development of sensitivity (the *shepherd-metaphor*); conciliation and woundedness (the *servant-metaphor*); discernment and insight (the *wisdom-metaphor*); support and empowerment (the *paraclete-metaphor*).

In the same way, through metaphorical expressions, African people are able to describe the way they experience God – at a particular time, in a specific situation and within a specific event. Thus Louw argues: “Metaphors express the fact that in their effort to structure experience of God, they provide us with means for comprehending domains of experience of God, they provide us with means for comprehending domains of experience that do not have a pre conceptual structure of their own” (1998:238). Through metaphorical expressions, African people are able to describe God as immanent as well as transcendent. Through metaphoric expressions, God is made to be brought closer to the different situations the African people are confronted with, and also in their quest for meaning in pain and suffering.



### **2.4.7.1 The Use of Metaphorical language among the African people**

It is also important to note that metaphorical language is very much part of the African expression of life. Metaphorical language as an expression for understanding the experience of God in the lives of people is not only an important part of an African tradition, but also for the biblical narrative. Metaphorical language is used to describe the unfamiliar with something familiar, the transcendent with the African objective immanent. For Hodgson (1994:5) the “metaphorical and symbolic character of language is not something to be avoided, not only because its richness and concreteness are irreplaceable but also because the broken character of the bond between the human and the sacred can best be expressed by indirect language of faith”. McFague describes metaphorical language in the context of metaphorical theology, when she writes that metaphoric theology (even metaphoric language) “will insist that many metaphors and models are necessary, that a piling up of images is essential, both to avoid idolatry and to attempt to express the richness and variety of the divine – human relationship” (1982:20).

In metaphorical language God is depicted to have taken human personality; for he is able to speak, to walk and to despair just like humans do. In this way, metaphorical language assists in portraying God as a vulnerable God. Hence Blumenthal’s (1993:6) argument: “In many of the classical texts of tradition, God walks and talks. “God feels anger, despair, and joy. “God exercises moral judgement. God even laughs.”

We contend therefore that metaphorical language forms an integral part in the way African people express themselves about the significance of God's nature and character. Similarly, Louw (1999:5-6) writing on "*A hermeneutic schema*" for the interpretation of the biblical text and the cultural context, argues:

*In interpathic caring, the process of "feeling with" and "thinking with" another, requires more than one entering the other's world of assumptions, beliefs and values – one needs to probe deeper. One needs to understand the different metaphors which try to express our human endeavour to come to terms with the meaning, question and our spiritual yearning for the divine. **In Africa, metaphors are deeply embedded in a culture determined by a spiritual world and a communal awareness of co-humanity (ubuntu)** (emphasis mine).*

It is contended further that in the African tradition, metaphorical language is extremely useful because of its usage in the formation of God -images and concepts that are used in people's quest for the significance of God. Through metaphorical language, African people are able to express themselves on the way they understand God and on how they experience him in their daily lives.

## **24.8 God-images and Symbolic Expressions**

Like metaphorical language, symbolic language has also an important function in the way African people express their experience of God. Through symbolic language the African people are able to enliven their experience of God. Whereas metaphorical language has

been used to describe God's involvement in human life, the African people have used symbolic language to depict God's "presence" in situations of pain and suffering.

A symbol is a representation and as such to be distinguished from a sign. For this reason, Pobee argues that a symbol is a representation "in the sense of witnessing to the presence and the power of the represented entity" (1986:53). For Berinyuu (1988:90), symbols are part of a cultural set-up. Any one individual is a product of a culture. In other words, each one of us perceives and interprets meaning with symbols and signs from a certain cultural perspective (see also Augsburg 1986:61-62). Symbols are embedded within the dynamics of life and the African cosmos. Symbols are some form of fixed sensory sign to which meaning has been arbitrarily attached. Persons within a cultural tradition share common symbols with common understandings, and those outside such symbolic system or language take great risks in inferring the meanings of symbols from the context of their own system (see Kraft 1979:61). Thus symbols have been used by the African people to offer them "a closeness to things divine that signs cannot" (Louw 1999:1). We can argue further that symbols are what give meaning to life among the African people.

To sum up the above argument in Farley's (1996:5-6) words, "*Any theology of God inevitably takes place in connection with the history and symbolics of actual religious community. The symbolics of God arise from the way God comes forth as God, for instance, as redemptive*". Symbolic language and the use of symbols are inevitable in the process of God-image formation among the African people, and for this reason Ma Mpolo (1985:324) states: "***pastoral care (in Africa) should use real symbols, rituals and***

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*symbolic languages capable of enabling the individuals to express their inner feelings which cannot be easily verbalized"* (emphasis mine) .

## 2.5 Preliminary Conclusion

In order for us to understand the research findings of this particular chapter and to arrive at a meaningful conclusion, the following summary of the core arguments in the chapter is given:

- ◆ It has been aptly argued that an African spirituality incorporates all dimensions of human and cosmic life, and that it also reflects the general mindset, belief system and life approach of the African people.
- ◆ In searching for a proper definition of an African spirituality, the study has settled on an understanding that an African spirituality consists of African people's attitudes, beliefs and practices as they strive to reach out toward the super-sensible realities: God, the spirits (including ancestors), and the invisible forces in the universe and the cosmic life-force.
- ◆ In an African spirituality, humanity is thus interpreted within an understanding of the whole community – *'a person is a person only through other people'*.

- ◆ It has been aptly argued that at the center of an African spirituality lies the notion of an African cosmology. In this case, it has been observed that the shaping of an African spirituality takes place within an African cosmology – which, in most cases, is a reference to the mystery of the unseen and the beyondness of human life within an African context.
  
- ◆ The study has also brought to surface the fact that for the African person, life is a continuum of cosmic, social and personal events. When one breaks society's moral codes, the universal ties between oneself and the community are also broken.
  
- ◆ The ancestors (*Ambuyafwi*) play a vital role in an African spirituality and cosmology. It has been established in this study that the role of ancestors within a traditional African society can be described by the following factors:
  - (1) They are protectors of the African family clan from adversaries and possible calamities
  - (2) They are guardians of the African community
  - (3) They are custodians of the African moral and community law
  - (4) They are intermediaries between man and God
  
- ◆ It has been observed that the African people are often confronted with different experiences of life – and mostly, negative experiences which arise from an experience

of suffering. Such experiences have led the African people to cling to what has been termed as *inappropriate God-images*.

- ◆ Among the African people, God-images –whether appropriate or inappropriate, are usually expressed through rituals and liturgical events of the African life.
  
- ◆ An African culture consists of symbols, customs, rituals, liturgical events and traditions, and that these have a great influence on the way African people formulate God-images.
  
- ◆ It has been observed that concepts of God, among African people, have been greatly influenced by an African cultural understanding of God.
  
- ◆ In expressing themselves about the significance of God’s nature and character, the African people make use of metaphorical and symbolic expressions.

To conclude, this chapter has therefore helped to highlight the need for a pastoral ministry to understand the influence of an African spirituality on the formation of God-images by making the following observations:

- (1) Pastoral ministry in Africa will be helped greatly by accommodating an understanding that all life among the African people is influenced by an African spirituality. Therefore, pastoral ministry should at all times embrace the core

issue of an African spirituality and cosmology that emphasizes communality and relationships. A good pastoral assessment of God-images will always take place within existing relationships of an African spirituality.

- (2) Pastoral ministry in Africa must reckon with the way African people use metaphors and symbols to express themselves about God. Therefore, pastoral ministry in Africa should undertake to make use of symbols, rituals and symbolic language so as to enable African people to express their human feelings which can not be easily verbalized within a given pastoral care situation.
- (3) Pastoral ministry in Africa should be sensitive to the fact that God-images are also connected to different ways in which African people describe God through metaphors, traditional events and symbols.
- (4) To make a proper diagnosis of God-images used by African people, pastoral ministry should undertake to understand the use of metaphoric language, which forms an integral part of the way African people express themselves about the significance of God's nature and character.

It should be noted, however, that the foregoing discussion of an African spirituality and cosmology is still part of African people who are mainly to be found in the African villages where traditional life style is still the pride of the people. Mostly those who are in the urban areas are losing out on this world view.



## **CHAPTER 3**

### **3. THE PROCESS OF HEALING<sup>40</sup> FROM AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, we undertake to deal with an African understanding of healing. The study works with a basic working assumption which states that for the African people, healing does not only imply the taking of medication by a sick person, but also covers the mending and restoration of broken relationships among the same. The African people understand that healing can only take place within a given community. Thus the African community becomes a ‘therapeutic community’ where members are restored into an equilibrium of harmonious relationships and good health. It is also argued that sickness should be understood as an imbalance in African societal order and cosmology. For this reason, the study undertakes to engage an African spirituality and cosmology in its definition of healing and sickness.

It is contended that the Church should begin to embrace Christian rituals and symbols which could be used to helping African people relate to an understanding of God’s involvement in times of pain and ill health.

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<sup>40</sup> In this study “Healing” shall be treated as a process in this study.

To this effect, the study identifies *Holy Communion*, the *Cross* and the *sacrament of Baptism* as living Christian rituals and symbols that could be used in strengthening the faith of African people, especially in times of sickness (and also in pain and suffering).

### **3.2 The Impact of a Cultural Understanding on Healing in Africa**

Healing (*kuchizika / Kuchila*) is a very comprehensive term when used within the African context. It is also a central feature within an African world-view. Lartey (1994:47) has described healing as involving the “restoration to wholeness of relations within, between and transcending human persons”. To this effect, he also stresses that the “transcendent or spiritual dimension” (1994:47) is very important to an African understanding of healing. In his argument, ma Mpolo agrees with Lartey’s thinking by emphasizing that healing should be looked at in a much wider context of an African spirituality “which incorporates all dimensions of human and cosmic life” (Ma Mpolo 1994:16). To be healed in an African context means to be at peace with the cosmic life as well as the people around oneself. For Healey & Sybertz (1996:298), healing in an African perspective includes restoration of the broken – physically, psychologically and spiritually. Mwaura (2000:78) alludes to this observation when he states:

*In traditional African society, health is conceived as more than physical well-being. It is a state that entails mental, physical, spiritual, social and environmental (cosmic) harmony. Having health (to be healed) evokes equilibrium in all these dimensions (emphasis mine). It is associated with all that is positively valued in life. It is also a sign of a correct relationship between*

*people and their environment, with one another and with the supernatural world.  
Health is understood more in a social than in a biological sense.*

In Africa, healing goes beyond a physical restoration of the body, it also covers the restoration of broken relationships with both the living and the dead. Healing, within the African context, takes place in a community that has maintained the existing harmony with the visible and the invisible world, the human and the divine, the mortal and the immortal. Healing is more of a process of whole-ing, making whole not only the individual, but also the individual's social relations. One's illness affects those very close to him/her, depending on the degree of their relationships with the sick person. Therefore, "healing is expected to span across the same dimension of relationships" (see Healey & Sybertz 1996:323).

In the book containing '*collection of Prayers in Africa*', Mbiti (1975:45-52) dedicates a section of his collection to issues of health and healing. And what is interesting to note is how these '*prayers*' underscore the fact that healing in Africa incorporates all "dimensions of human and cosmic life" (Ma Mpolo 1994:16). The following prayers (Mbiti 1975:45-47) could possibly illustrate our argument:

**Prayer for help in sickness**

*You, Father God,  
Who are in the heavens and below;  
Creator of everything and omniscient;  
Of the earth and the heavens;  
We are but little children;*

*Unknowing anything evil;  
If this sickness has been brought by man;  
We beseech you, help us through these roots.  
In case it was inflicted by you the Conserver,  
Likewise do we entreat your mercy on your child;  
Also you, our grandparents, who sleep in the place of the shades,  
We entreat all of you who sleep on one side.  
All ancestors, males and females, great and small,  
Help us in this trouble, have compassion on us;  
So that we can also sleep peacefully.  
And thus do I spit out this mouthful of water!  
Pu-Pu! Pu-Pu!  
Please listen to our earnest request.*

#### **Prayer of blessing for the sick**

**LEADER:**

*(a young person of good character)  
Akongo (God) of the ancestors,  
Akongo of fathers,  
Akongo of fathers,  
I broke no commandments of your,  
I chopped firewood in the rain,  
When I killed (an animal) I hid nothing.  
So-and-so is suffering,  
Make his body strong,  
Let him, Akongo.  
I leave off.  
(spits) Bless, Kunda, bless.*

**PEOPLE:**

*(Utter agreement)  
Mokanga  
Mokanga  
Mokanga*

From the ‘prayers’ (above), it is quite clear that African people understand healing as incorporating the societal order, equilibrium and harmony of the cosmic life. For African people, healing does not only take place on an individual level, but it also takes place within a community of people – of both the living (those who are still alive) and the dead (those who have departed to join the ancestors). The whole process of healing is properly understood within the common good of the whole community in which the sick are found. The community becomes a *'therapeutic clinic'*, one in which the members act as healers to each other (Shorter 1985:62). In his book, *Illness as crisis and challenge*, Louw (1994:22) states: “Recovery and cure (health in Africa) thus obtain a new dimension: it is firstly not the person who must be cured (*healed*) but the broken ties and relationships” (emphasis mine). In this context, healing can therefore not take place in isolation of the community, family system and tribal system (Louw 1994:25). This is so because the restoration of social harmony and wholeness is an object of communal concern and the rituals that are used are a celebration of social healing (Shorter 1985:62).

### **3.2.1 An African Community as a ‘Service Provider’ for a Healing Process**

Arising from the discussion above, we can argue that the African understanding of healing is highly influenced by a cultural anthropology of the African context, and that the African community is a ‘service provider’ of a healing process. In the first place, healing takes place within a given *banja* (community) of the African people. Shorter

(1985:56-57) in his book, “*Jesus and the Witchdoctor*” gives us a good example to illustrate the role of an African community in times of sickness:

*When Africans are sick, they usually do not want to be left alone. Sickness is a social concern and the sick are a focus of solicitude on the part of their family and immediate community. In 1978, when I was on the staff of a large theological seminary in Tanzania, I felt ill with a bad attack of malaria lasting a full eight days. During that time all the African staff and virtually all two hundred students called on me in my sick-room, hanging around and murmuring the Swahili condolence *ugua pole* – ‘sympathy in your sickness’. The room was full of people, with people even sitting on the bed, although I was in no condition to be social. It was touching, but it was tiring.*

The African concepts of healing are far much more social and cultural than biological (van Arkel 1995:193-194). It is in the community of the African people that we find a provision of “harmonious linkage of relationships” (Niekerk 1991:227). And it is within the harmonious linkage of relationships that we find healing taking place because such provide a good social environment which is a necessity for healing. Thus Niekerk (1991:230) argues that “harmonious relationships are vital for healing and for protection against witchcraft”. Healing involves the restoration of harmonious relationships which are usually threatened when one member is ill or a group of people have a strained relationship within the African community.

The restoration of social harmony and wholeness is an object to communal concern and the rituals that are used are a celebration of social healing (Shorter 1985:62). Hence Long’s (2000:132) observation in her book, “*Health, Healing and God’s Kingdom*”:

*Sickness and healing in Africa are communal experiences. Neither sickness nor healing can be private matters. Missionaries who have been hospitalized in Africa, or Africans who have been hospitalized while visiting a western country, soon recognize the vast differences between African and western approaches to illness. Westerners living in Africa soon are exhausted from the steady stream of visitors to their hospital room; Africans visiting in the West become depressed by loneliness if well-meaning friends cut short their visits or visit infrequently 'so that they can really rest'. Those who try to hide their sickness cannot be healed. Illness hidden from the community cannot be diagnosed and treated.*

From Long's observation and the foregoing arguments, we can therefore contend that the African community is a **service provider** for a process of healing in Africa. For this reason, healing must be facilitated by the community. The Zambian *Kaonde* speaking proverb rightly reflects this argument: "*Wifwila pa bengi bamwalawila*" (literally meaning, "The one who encounters problems (sickness) in a crowd (community) will be helped").

It can also be argued that there is great need for the pastoral ministry of the Church in Africa to work towards an integration of African traditional approaches to healing (see also Nwachuku 1994:83). In trying to incorporate the aspect of an African traditional approach to healing, the pastoral ministry of the Church in Africa should in the first place understand the impact of an African spirituality and cosmology on the process of healing within the African communal life. To this effect, Healey & Sybertz (1996:298) argues that the process of healing in Africa "also incorporates holistic ideas of God, power, the spiritual world and the ancestors". Is this not also what the ecumenical body of the

Church is wrestling with, world-wide, as it is ably reflected by this statement from the Roman Catholic Synod in Africa:

*Africans often ask questions about healing; the concrete lives of Africans are closely connected with sickness, suffering and healing. The challenge to the African local churches and the world Church is clearly expressed in the **Instrumentum Laboris** of the 1994 Synod: "Those responsible in pastoral matters should analyze the nature of inculturation of Christianity in Africa and its capacity to constitute vibrant ecclesial communities, the role of the laity, the response to the thirst for spiritual experience and the word of God as well as the reply to be given to the vital questions posed by suffering, sickness and death." What is needed now are actions, not words*

(see Healey & Sybertz 1996:304)<sup>41</sup>.

### **3.3 The Influence of an African Spirituality and Cosmology on the Understanding of Healing and Sickness in Africa**

#### **3.3.1 Sickness in an African Context**

Who is considered to be a sick person in an African context? Is it not that type of person who has created some disorder within the harmony of the community and the cosmic life? Is it not that kind of a person without regard or respect for the traditional life style of his family and the community? Is it not that kind of a person who finds it difficult to fit into a 'status quo' of an African traditional life?

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<sup>41</sup> see also Bate's (1995:25-61) discussion on "*The Coping-Healing Ministry in South Africa*".



Sickness and health are thus part of systems thinking: the whole is more important than its parts, components do not function according to their 'nature' but according to their position in the network (see Louw 1994:21). Sickness indicates that there is somewhere, a disturbance of the vital harmonious linkage, and this disturbance must be eliminated so that harmony and balance could be restored (Niekerk 1991:229). Sickness or illness is often attributed to the breaking of taboos, offending God and, or ancestral spirits (Mwaura 1994:79). For to be sick is to experience an imbalance in the societal order and the cosmic life-force, and this eventually generates physical, emotional, spiritual, psychological and disharmony in all human life. Sickness is not an objective fact, not even a phenomenon that strikes a particular individual, but a disturbance of social relationships. In Africa, Sickness is the business of the entire family (or even the whole village) and extends to the universe (see van Arkel 1995:193).

### **3.3.1.1 'Cause and Effect' in an African understanding of Sickness**

In the quest to understand the process of healing in Africa, it is extremely helpful for the Church to come to terms with notions of an African spirituality and cosmology that always work with '*cause*' and '*effect*' when it comes to issues of health. The African people believe that there is always a cause for any sickness affecting a person's life. One could not possibly fall sick unless there is a disturbance within the systemic rhythm of life, which includes; the breakdown of harmony in personal and communal relationships, disrespect for the cosmic existence within the cosmology of an African spirituality and, or lack of adherence to African traditional 'health rules'. According to Mbiti (1969:155),

within the African thinking, no person can get sick or ill without a cause – just like death does not just occur but with a cause, and so it is with sickness.

For Westerland (1989:179, the causality<sup>42</sup> of disease and sickness within an African understanding can be categorized into three levels:

- (a) **Religious (Suprahuman) Causality:** This presupposes a belief that human beings in different ways are influenced by or dependent on suprahuman or spiritual powers such as God and spirits of nature. It is believed that when God or spirits of nature, and the ancestral spirits are offended then those who are the culprits will receive punishment through disease and sickness. In this case the cause is established: *an offense to the cosmic forces, including God.* And the effect is; *people falling sick and getting diseased.*
  
- (b) **Social (human) Causality:** This refers to relations between living human beings, which in Africa frequently entail a supranormal component. Witchcraft<sup>43</sup> and curses serve as examples, even though “witchcraft” is often used as an all-embracing term for affliction causation. The relationships among the African communities must be guarded jealously. Some kind of brokenness in relationships may lead people to practicing witchcraft- which in an African world view is perceived as a major cause of a number of illnesses. In the words of Healey & Sybertz (1996:291-

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<sup>42</sup> For further reading on this, see Westerlaund 's (1989:179) book , “*Pluralism and Change: A Comparative and Historical Approach to African Disease Etiologies*”.

292), when someone gets sick (within an African context), the two most frequently asked questions are, “*Who did it?*” ( social causality) and “*Why?*”

- (c) **Natural (mainly physical) Causations:** This mainly refer to entities of nature, that is the effects of, for instance, insects, germs, natural substances, forces or conditions, such as certain food, the weather or lack of equilibrium of some basic elements in the body. Nevertheless, the natural causes are still perceived to be connected to both the social and religious causations.

Thus the Church in Africa would do well to take the advice of Dickson (1984:50) in his book, "*Theology in Africa*" when he observes:

*There is no happening which is uncaused. Disease (sickness) may be the result of invading bacteria and other micro-organisms as the western trained doctor would explain; the death of an old person from respiratory disorders may be the result of a weakened body. Systems being unable to cope with the deleterious effects of say smog in London or Los Angels. To the African, disease (sickness) and death are caused ultimately by spirits' powers (emphasis mine).*

To this effect, Lartey (1994:39) argues that for the traditional African, sickness and death are caused *ultimately* by spiritual forces. Likewise, Ma Mpolo & Nwachuku (1991:23) assert that sickness in Africa has spiritual and relational causes. subsequently, we can

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<sup>43</sup> For further reading on this subject, see Healey & Sybertz (1996: 291-293)

contend with the idea that to an African person, sickness comes as a result of trespassing against the well-set harmonious linkage to - either the cosmic order of the ancestors or the African (communal) societal order of the living.

Consequently, causes of sickness among the African people could be ascribed to *be-witching, anger of mistreated and offended spirits, to possession by an alien spirit* or to *broken human relationships*. Hence Berinyuu's argument:

*Some sicknesses are seen as a result of breaking the taboos of the clan. Others are seen as punishment inflicted on the individual and/or the clan for an evil deed one and/or all have committed.*

(1987:56).

It is observed that before one can prescribe a method of healing, remedy, or a particular kind of medication by which a person could be healed, a process of diagnosis on the cause of sickness must be taken and a postmortem be made known to the whole community. This is done because of the assumption that possibly a person who has fallen ill may have offended the cosmic harmony of existence, which should be reconciled with before any medication could be prescribed. African people have always associated what happens in the physical life to the influence of the cosmic existence of powers and forces of nature.

### 3.3.2 African Rituals and Symbols in the Process of Healing

It is contended that the pastoral ministry should reckon with the use of African rituals (*malusu*) and symbols (*chizindikilo*) which could help to restore balance and give meaning to the process of healing in Africa. In her essay, “*Rituals and Symbols in the Healing of Infertility in Africa*”, Nwachuku (1994:68) argues that “the paradox that faces contemporary pastoral care (in *Africa*) lies not in the concept of sickness but in beliefs about the causes of sickness and the cultic rituals and symbols involved in bringing about wholeness” (emphasis mine). For this reason, pastoral ministry should undertake to understand what is involved in African rituals and symbols in order to help those who are confronted with such realities within an African context.

In defining a ritual, Mbiti (1991<sup>2</sup>:131) in his book, “*Introduction to African Religion*”, states: “*A ritual is a set form of carrying out a religious action or ceremony. It is a means of communicating something of religious significance, through word, symbol and action. Therefore a ritual embodies a belief or beliefs*”. Alluding to Mbiti’s definition of rituals, Nwachuku (1994:68) asserts that:

*Rituals and symbols per se are nothing evil, heathenish, idolatrous, mythical nor even scientific in themselves. Basically, a symbol represents an emblem or a construct imputed upon it. That is to say, a symbol wears the ritualistic interpretation imposed upon it. Thus, some symbols are universal within similarities of social or religious context, for example, the cross in the Christian world. Other rituals and symbols are human creations, human empowered to*

*exercise authority, bondage or liberation ascribed to them in the human societies; and while some cut across cultural barriers, others are culture biased.*

As regards to health rituals in Africa, Mbiti observes that since sickness or disease is not just a physical condition, but also a religious matter, the African people revert to religious practices and rituals (1991<sup>2</sup>:139). They use religion to find out the mystical cause of the disease, to find out who has been responsible for it or has sent it to the sick person. They use religion to prescribe the right cure, part of which is often the performance of certain rituals that the medicine man may specify. And according to Long (2000:161), “traditional healers and prophets use a staggering number and variety of symbols and rituals in addition to medicine”.

To ignore the role of rituals and symbols in an African understanding of healing is to ignore the fundamental aspect of African life and practice. For this reason, it is therefore important for us to understand why the African people opt to using their own traditional methods in restoring the sick people back to good health. It can be stated here that there are diverse traditional methods (*rituals*) which African people use to restore their beloved ones to good health. The use of herbs (*makhwala*), offering of sacrifice (*sembe*) to the 'could be' offended ancestral spirits, religious rites (*mapemphelo*), rituals (*midauko*), and the involvement in communal reconciliation (*chiphemaniso*) are some of the ways by which African people attempt to restore the imbalances in the health equilibrium. Hence Mbiti (1991<sup>2</sup>:139) writes:

*In every society of the world, health is always a major concern. African peoples have many rituals directed at ensuring good health, healing, preventing danger to health, curing barrenness, removing impurities in people and homesteads, and protecting animals and crops... Disease (sickness) is not just a physical condition, according to African interpretation and experience.*

### **3.3.2.1 Application of Christian Rituals and Symbols in Traditional African Society**

Christian symbols, for example the **Cross**, can play an important role in the sick person's awareness of the meaning of restored relationships within an African context (See Louw 1995:42). The sacrament of **Holy Communion**, symbolically, can be used to demonstrate the suffering of God and how God in Christ identifies with those who are in pain. The Church can use the symbol of **Baptism** to give assurance of God's continuous protection on those who are threatened by the activities of witchcraft and sorcery within the African context. The symbol of **Baptism** can assure an African person of God's claim of ownership over his/her life – that he/she belongs to God. Commenting on the same Nwachuku makes the following observation:

*There is the question of sacraments and devotions which involve rituals and certain symbolic elements such as eucharistic bread and wine; and water for baptism. Some patients have been known to recover from ill-health after water baptism or partaking in the Lord's supper. Others on their dying beds have requested the performing of any of these sacraments on them.*

(1994:65)

We contend therefore, that Christian symbols are powerful 'tools' to use in strengthening the faith of the Africa people - whose world-view is mainly influenced by African traditional rituals, symbols and passage of rites. Christian symbols, (especially *Holy Communion*), could also be used to help African people understand the message of reconciliation as demonstrated in the *salvific plan* of our sovereign God:

**"...that God was reconciling the world back to himself in Christ..."**

(see 2 Corinthians 5:11-21).

To this effect we can therefore summarize our discussion by stating that for African people health is a blessing from the ancestors while sickness is not only a disturbance of a physical body or an existing relationship (within a given community of the African people), but also a curse from the disturbed harmony of the cosmic life. The disorder of the body has implications for social order and disorder (Shorter 1985:57). Could this be possibly why most African people in the Church prefer to visit a medicine man when they are confronted with sickness prior to seeing a pastor for counseling? Could it be that they want to make peace with the cosmic life so that their prayers are not hindered in the Counseling office of a pastor or Care giver? Could it be also true that a pastor's insensitivity to such beliefs could possibly block his counseling advice (s) to the people, who in the first place, come to him for help when they are confronted with sickness? These are some of the most challenging questions pastoral ministry in Africa should be prepared to encounter while engaging in a ministry of healing among the African people.



### 3.4 Preliminary Conclusion

To conclude, our core arguments in this study have been as follows:

- ◆ Healing in an African situation, is the restoration of balance in the societal order, the mending of broken relationships within a community and the maintenance of harmony in the cosmic life of African people.
  
- ◆ It is important to observe that healing, for African people, has to take place within a given African spirituality which incorporates all dimensions of human and cosmic life.
  
- ◆ Pastoral ministry in Africa must understand the way the African people perceive the process of healing so as to help them come to terms with their own associations with the cosmic life-force, which they have made on healing.
  
- ◆ Pastoral ministry in Africa should work with a pastoral approach that will accommodate the systemic view of healing - as a communal issue rather than an individual matter. The pastors within an African pastoral ministry must understand that broken relationships and offense against the ancestral 'fathers' are some of the major causes, if not the chief causes, of a number of 'sicknesses' within an African perception (*world-view*) of life.

- ◆ Restoration to wholeness, therefore, implies that the Church should move from an individualistic centered therapy (*personalistic therapy*) to that of a community based therapy (*systemic therapy*) where healing aims at addressing the pains and suffering of the whole community.
  
- ◆ The Church should take note that in pastoral ministry to the sick in Africa, the "accent should be more on life care and the development of relationships and group dynamics than on individual counseling and individualistic need-satisfaction" (Louw 1995:43)

Hence, this chapter raises the following issues for the Church in Africa:

- (1) In dealing with the African people, the pastoral ministry should reckon with an African spirituality that defines healing in terms of the communal life of the African people.
  
- (2) The pastoral ministry in Africa should come to terms with the influence of an African spirituality and cosmology on the understanding of sickness. Subsequently, the pastoral ministry in Africa should work with a process of diagnosis that will reckon with a dimension of '*cause and effect*' in understanding sickness among the African people.
  
- (3) In order to help people who are confronted with the realities of witchcraft within an African cosmology, the pastoral ministry in Africa should therefore reckon

with the impact of African traditional rituals and symbols on healing. To this effect the pastoral ministry in Africa should make use of the existing Christian symbols, such as; *Holy Communion*, the *Cross* and *Baptism* in order to strengthen the faith of African people - whose world-view is mostly influenced by African traditional rituals, symbols and passages of rite.

## CHAPTER 4

### 4. THE NOTION OF THEODICY WITHIN AN AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY

#### 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we undertake to discuss the way African people understand suffering<sup>44</sup> and theodicy, and how this understanding can help us in dealing with situations of pain and suffering in pastoral ministry. We argue with a basic assumption which states that when people are confronted with situations of pain and suffering, they tend to address their questions to God, either directly through prayers or indirectly through laments, sighs, rituals and meditation. It is argued further that whenever people address God with questions of meaning and significance in life – this does not imply a loss of faith in God, but that they seek to understand who God is and what he ought to be in those difficulty moments. In other words, the questions that people ask are as a result of their search for meaning in life situations.

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<sup>44</sup> In the scope of this study, suffering (*Kuvutika*) is defined within the context of pastoral care and an African spirituality. The term suffering (*kuvutika*) will be used in the context of terminal/serious illness, periods of grief, mourning, sorrow and death and experiences of divorce. It is our view that suffering embraces a wider perspective than the focus of this study, but for the sake of clarity and limitation of this study we shall use the term as stated above.

In most pastoral care situations in Africa, people's search for meaning and significance in life has given room to what we shall term, in this study – the '*question of theodicy*'<sup>45</sup> – a justification of God's righteousness in the face of evil. To this effect, the study makes a proposition that notions of suffering and theodicy, within an African context, create a ***theological problem***<sup>46</sup> for pastoral ministry in Africa.

The study also argues for a possible interplay between suffering and God-images. For this reason, the pastoral ministry in Africa is therefore challenged to work with appropriate God-images so as to help people deal with issues affecting their lives and faith. Case studies are used to illustrate the arguments of the study.

## **4.2 The Effect of Suffering on the View of God among the African People**

What is the most obvious question in times of pain and suffering? What do people search for when their lives are devastated by a disease, like HIV/AIDS and cancer? Who do people talk to when they are bed-ridden with sickness and pain, and when they are in the process of dying? To whom does a young couple address their searching questions when their only child is struggling with a brain tumor? What is implied by the question

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<sup>45</sup> Theodicy concerns the attempt to justify God in the light of existing evil (see Louw 1998:397). Using O'Corner's (1998:3) description of theodicy; Theodicy is an attempt to answer, in a systematic and comprehensive way, the question, "What is the source of evil we find, and why does God permit it?"

<sup>46</sup> 'A **Theological problem**' has to do with people's quest for God in any given situation of life. When people are confronted with painful situations, usually their searching questions are directed to God – "*Where is God in this?*" and "*Who is God?*" These questions, mostly, arise in pastoral care situations where people are in search for appropriate God-images which they could use in the process of pain and suffering. Thus making the process of healing and assessment of God-images a theological issue.

'where is God?' in suffering? These and many more searching questions underscore the fact that suffering has an effect on people's view and understanding of God. In the words of Richard (1992:5), "the experience of suffering becomes a critical question about God". And in his book, *"Meaning in Suffering"*, Louw also alludes to Richard's words when he aptly emphasizes that *"suffering affects our human as well as our spiritual identity, i.e. our understanding of God. In suffering, our human dignity and even God's faithfulness are at stake. Who am I? Who is God?"* (2000:9).

The pastoral ministry in Africa is always confronted with the effects of suffering on people's view of God. Nearly every pastor in the parish is faced with questions that point to a search for God and meaning in suffering. In many pastoral situations in Africa, people entrust the pastor with their troubles, their sorrow or their disappointments, and much more their questions with the view of addressing them to God. Like Vossen (1995:6) has stressed, "when people are weighed down by the suffering they have to bear existentially, they express their deeper questions and doubts". In most cases these questions and doubts are concerned with not only the meaning of suffering, but also the position of God in such moments. For this reason, Mbiti (1969:37) argues:

*There are, however, situations when calamities, misfortunes and suffering come upon families or individuals, for which there is no clear explanation. Some societies would then consider these to be brought about by God, generally through agents like spirits or magic workers, or as punishment for contravening certain customs or traditions. By so doing, they do not consider God to be intrinsically 'evil' as such: that is simply a rational explanation of what may otherwise be hard to explain.*

People tend to look to someone higher and powerful than them in times of vulnerability and suffering. They want to lean on someone who will be able to give them meaning and significance when all they have been trusting has suddenly fallen apart and the world around them altogether. They are in search of something meaningful to give meaning to their abstract worlds of meaninglessness and purposelessness. They are in *search for God* – they want to understand whether God is present or absent in their moments of suffering. They want to discover the involvement of God in the human struggle for wholeness in order to come to terms with situations of pain and suffering. They are looking for answers which the pastor or any other caregiver could not give because their questions in the first place are addressed to the divine (God). Indeed, if all other explanations about suffering have come to nothing, “God remains as the only ‘explanation’” (see Bosch 1973:12). Therefore, the effect of suffering on people’s view of God is that, in most cases, people’s image of God become distorted thus their faith is also affected by the same.

### **4.3 - Suffering and God-images in a Pastoral Ministry in Africa**

In people’ search for God, there is also a genuine search for appropriate God-images which they could use to make God represented in situations of pain and suffering. To this effect, Louw makes a very important point to illustrate such an understanding:

*Suffering, as a ‘theo’-logical issue, indicates that people seek an explanatory foundation and a source of security that is able to carry them safely beyond the limits of finite world. Therefore the sufferer’s concept of God is fundamental to*

*the way in which he/she works through his/her suffering. This link between our human quest for meaning and significance and our God images implies that our human search for meaning is fundamentally a spiritual issue (2000:12).*

What is the appropriate concept of God for people in suffering situations in Africa? What kind of God-images do people associate with in times of suffering? What are the implications of distorted God-images on people when they are undergoing moments of pain and suffering? Is there any link between particular images of God and the way people come to terms with pain and suffering? Are some images of God more helpful to this handling than others? How does a person's image of God affect his/her process of healing?

The notion of suffering and God-images is very pertinent to the pastoral ministry of the Church in Africa, because in situations of suffering people tend to hold on to different images of God - some which can be classified as helpful (appropriate) while others can be unhelpful (inappropriate / distorted). According to Depoortere people in pain and suffering have either helpful or unhelpful God-images, however it is "neither easy nor beneficial to fiddle with a sufferer's image of God while he or she is in the midst of suffering" (1995:2).

#### **4.3.1 Suffering and Appropriate God-images**

It could be stated here, however, that helpful or appropriate images of God are those which can help people not only to come to terms with suffering situations, but also to



appropriate their faith into action by doing something about their conditions of suffering. Appropriate God-images help people discover the involvement and concern of God in their suffering. In the context of suffering, appropriate God-images are those which depict God in terms of an identification with human needs and suffering<sup>47</sup>. It could also be stated that appropriate God-images are those that effectively make an association of the metaphorical concept of God within a given suffering situation.

Mostly, in suffering and painful situations, appropriate God-images are those which make the transcendent God to become immanent and present in the sufferer's life. For people in great pain, appropriate God-images convey a sign of God's love and care hence bringing hope in their situations of distress and despair.

The following two case studies could be used to illustrate the argument for the need to use appropriate God-images in times of pain and suffering. The first case study was sampled using different approaches, that is; the use of pastoral interview within the setting of Naomi Nyirenda and pastoral observation on her experiences. While the second case study was sampled basically by pastoral observation on the lives of David and Charmaine during the suffering and after the death of Greg.

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<sup>47</sup> see Louw's (2000:49) discussion on "*God-images and metaphors in pastoral ministry*".

## Case Study 1

Naomi Nyirenda is a member of Kaunda Square Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa<sup>48</sup>. She was diagnosed with cancer of the stomach and bladder two years ago. Naomi has been in and out of hospital several times. She has suffered for quite a long time. According to her, she can not remember a week passing without pain. Nearly everyday of her life has been filled with a lot of pain and suffering.

As a result of the diagnosis taken by medics, Naomi has gone through several tests. She claims that there are times she feels like not a human being any longer, but a “*testing experimental tool*” for medical doctors. According to Naomi, the tests she has undergone have actually reduced her to “nothing”. She complains that there’s no more privacy in her life. Everybody (the Medics and her family) have access to every part of her body. This makes her angry at times because she feels as if “foreigners continuously invade my privacy”. She claims that there is nothing she can call her own, her body no longer belongs to her alone, but also to medical doctors, nurses and family members. At home she is told what she is supposed to eat; how she should dress; and where she should go. All this experience is, for Naomi, an invasion of “one’s privacy and personal human rights”.

When it comes to issues of faith, Naomi can not be moved on the fact that God is a caring God. She is convinced that all that happens to her is of a passing phase, one day God will restore her life to wholeness either presently in this life or the life after death. When asked whether she believes that God will heal her physically, she responds by stating that

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<sup>48</sup> Kaunda Square UPCS is in Lusaka, Zambia.

for her, “every day of my life is a miracle experience because under normal circumstances, with this condition, I am supposed to be a dead person”.

Naomi gets angry with God at times. Her anger comes whenever she hears that somewhere a ‘healthy person’ has died in a car accident, or a child who became ill all of a sudden has died. She is angry with God because “He allows those who are well and healthy to die while some of us, in a worse condition are allowed to continue living!”.

This paradox in life makes Naomi extremely uncomfortable, and sometimes makes her question the meaning of life altogether. However, Naomi does not hesitate to underscore the fact that the power of life is in the hands of God – “a God we can only understand through the revelation of His suffering Son, Jesus Christ”.

Naomi is always grateful to God because of a son the Lord gave her. She feels that the young Chiza<sup>49</sup> is “a source of strength (*mpamvu*) and a reminder (*chikumbutso*) of God’s care for me”. Naomi claims that even the times she has felt tempted to doubt God’s love for her, she has always been reminded of those who are childless and barren, and have no child to thank God for. Therefore, for her, Chiza is and will always remind (*chikumbutso*) her of God’s love. She justifies this claim by pointing to the fact that she has managed to bring up her child as a widow, even during moments she felt too weak (in terms of her health) to look after him. For this, “I will always be grateful to God”.

The faith in Naomi gets stronger and stronger each day of her suffering even when her body looks weak and frail. When asked how she can explain this condition, Naomi’s answer is that “the more I am in pain and ready to give up, the more I am convinced that

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<sup>49</sup> Chiza is the only child (Son) for Naomi. He is fourteen years old. Naomi’s husband, Geoffrey – (Chiza’s father) – died when Chiza was a small baby. And so Naomi has brought up Chiza on her own to this very day that now Chiza is in High school. He is an energetic sports young man.

God is the source of my strength (*mpamvu*)". Her God-image is that "God is my *companion (woyenda naye)* and *friend (Mbwezi)*". She feels that God knows her complaints and that though she does not understand all His ways, at least she knows that He is always there for her. In this way Naomi feels that "there is no need to give up on my faith because she I have come quite far with my suffering condition". "And I am very much convinced that without the divine strength of my *woyenda naye* (companion) and *mbwezi* (friend), I would have died a long time ago".

### **Case Formulation (Case Study 1)**

According to the case study (above), it could be argued that what has kept Naomi going in her faith and in life is the fact that she has discovered appropriate God-images to use when she is confronted with pain and suffering – God as a *companion* and *friend*. For Naomi, the belief that God accompanies her in her pain and suffering is enough consolation to make her feel 'strong' and positive about life. Admittedly, Naomi's consolation does not take away the aspect of pain and suffering, but much more it keeps her journeying on in her faith without giving up.

The image of a friendly God helps Naomi to be assured of company especially when she feels lonely and isolated from those who love her. In an African context, the '*friend – image*' of God depicts great confidence in God. "*People feel at home with God, believing that he is trustworthy, faithful, close to them and ready to help them just as a true human*

*friend would do. Because He is their friend, they can speak to him or with him as freely as they wish. They know that he is always there for them”* (see Mbiti 1975:54).

Equally the companion – image of God depicts the faithfulness and the presence of God in one’s life. Like in the African traditional society, a companion keeps company with those who are traveling long distance to unknown places, and also through periods of darkness and fear. God as companion, then, keeps company with those who are undergoing suffering and pain. Naomi has come to know through her encounter with suffering that only God can keep company even when death has threatened to take her life.

## **Case Study 2**

David and Charmaine Payne, a couple from Elgin United Church<sup>50</sup> experienced a very traumatic tragedy in the year 2000. They lost their only adopted son. The story goes back to twelve years ago when David and Charmaine decided to adopt a baby boy after years without a child. They adopted a handsome boy whom they named Greg Payne. Greg grew up like any other wonderful and active little lad. He was a healthy child until he turned seven. He started showing some signs of pain and illness. At that time David and Charmaine never had a clue to what extent the illness would affect Greg. They took him to their family Doctor who later found that there was some growth on Greg’s nerves

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<sup>50</sup> Elgin United Church is in Cape Town, Republic of South Africa. At the time of writing this case study, David and Charmaine are living on a private farm in the Elgin valley. The researcher of this study has become a personal friend to the couple, and visits them often to continue with the process of healing.

in the head. After several tests and diagnosis, it was discovered that Greg had cancer. The findings brought a lot of despair and depression on the Payne couple. They decided to take Greg to a number of specialist Doctors who conducted tests and applied chemotherapy, but as time went by Greg's health deteriorated. There were no signs of improvement, but pain and suffering.

Greg's performance at school was equally affected. David and Charmaine were left with one choice, that is, to keep Greg at home for further observations and home based care. They got two pet birds, named *Tom* and *Jerry* to keep Greg some good company. And in order to give an undivided attention to the health of their child, Charmaine had to resign from a nursing career.

Being a Medic professional herself, Charmaine committed herself to nursing and to trying serving Greg's life. However, the more she tried to do what she could for her son, the worse Greg became health wise. A house that was once full of life and joy, became a house of sadness, despair and depression.

One thing kept David and Charmaine strong during the trying moments of Greg's ill health – and that is, their faith in God. In the first place, the couple believed that it was the will of God for them to adopt a child. They were convinced Greg was a gift from the Lord since they could not have a child of their own for a very long time in marriage.

Meanwhile, the couple struggled to get to terms with the goodness of God in the midst of suffering. They wondered why God chose not to intervene during Greg's painful

moments. "We have always wondered what wrong we have done to God", contemplates the couple. The search for answers to the theodicy question became more acute when Greg's health deteriorated and eventually died.

Instead of giving up on their faith and on God altogether, David and Charmaine joined a Christian group of friends for bible study discussions. They listened carefully to Christian friends who had been through traumatic tragedies and events, and how these people maintained their faith despite such experiences. They invited friends to their home to keep company with them and to discuss the most difficult question: "*Why God?*" According to David and Charmaine, "We were helped at that time of great pain and suffering by opening up to friends who could accommodate our searching questions about suffering and God". Although they could not find an answer to the theodicy question, David and Charmaine believed that God was still in control of their future. They embarked on searching for opportunities to tell their painful story to other families that experienced loss of a beloved member, especially those who lost a child through a terminal illness. And by telling their story, they came to know that God strengthened them through other people. They discovered that God was a *friend* and *companion* to them. The image of a God who *empathizes* and *identifies with those* who undergo suffering became a very real experience in their lives.

## **Case Formulation (case study 2)**

Like in case study two, this particular case study helps us to understand the importance of holding to appropriate God-images in times of pain and suffering. David and Charmaine have managed to go on with life because they believe that despite Greg's death, God has not forsaken them. The image of a God who empathizes with them and identifies with their suffering (as can be referred to Jesus Christ, God's only son in his suffering for us) – helps David and Charmaine to be strong in life and faith.

The use of appropriate God-images has also helped David and Charmaine not to just sit and get depressed, but to gather around them friends who have gone through similar crisis of suffering in life. These friends have shared the way they went through moments of pain. And also, suffice to mention, that in many instances it was because they too had appropriate God-images which carried them through difficult times.

### **4.3.2 Suffering and Inappropriate God-images**

*Inappropriate* (unhelpful) God-images, however, depict concepts of God that are not adequate for people's appropriation of faith in situations of suffering. In most cases, inappropriate God-images arise as a result of people's negative experience of God when they pass through times of pain and suffering. People, whose expectations were not met by God's intervention during a painful course in life, mostly, end up developing negative feelings against God. And in many instances, once left unattended for a long time, the



negative experiences of God not only affect people's image of God, but also contribute to a distorted faith. Similarly, it can be argued that all God concepts (and God-images) that forget to embrace the nature of God – as the faithful God – can be deemed inappropriate in times of suffering.

People with inappropriate God-images find it very difficult to embrace the idea of God's love when they are confronted with situations of pain and suffering. Mostly, these people make negative associations of God because their understanding of God arises from such experiences<sup>51</sup>.

We shall illustrate this kind of experience by the following Case Study. This case study is based on pastoral observation and assessment of Suzan's life. She was interviewed within a pastoral counselling process.

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<sup>51</sup> According to Cavanagh (1992:75), the way people perceive God "has a profound influence on how they live each day".

### Case Study 3

This narrative is about a young lady whom we shall call Suzan<sup>52</sup>. Suzan has experienced great pain and suffering at different levels of her life. She lost both parents when she was just 8 years old. Her father died earlier than her mother, but within a space of seven months. She still remembers attending the burial of her mother. At that time the experience of loss never meant anything, not until she started feeling lonely and in need of somebody to be close to her. Suzan has been brought up by her mother's young sister (her aunt) who apparently is married to a very irresponsible man. Her aunt's husband has been drinking irresponsibly to an extent that he has become an abuser. The man has abused Suzan's aunt many times. The unfortunate thing is that such things have been taking place in the presence of Suzan. Since she was 8 years old (now she is 23 years old), all she remembers is abusive language, curses and insults from her aunt's husband. The man has also molested Suzan several times.

Suzan has grown up in a situation of fear, and her self esteem has been affected because of what she has gone through. Her image of God is associated to the man (aunt's husband) who has been abusive. When asked with whom does she associate God with, her answer is: "I associate God (*Mulungu*) with some one frightening and watching me very closely, ready to punish me anytime I go wrong".

She is afraid of God, and can not address him as *Father* in prayer, because the image brings memories of pain and suffering in her life.

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<sup>52</sup> Not her real name, for she had requested to remain anonymous, but allowed her story to be told.

Her faith in God is almost zero. She is very negative on the fact that the so called loving God (*Mulungu wachikondi*) took her parents at a time she needed them most. She can not see herself forgiving her aunt's husband and, also God whom she makes associations with the man.

Suzan has started to attend a Presbyterian Church in Lusaka. She is in search for a God who will be different from her abusive aunt's husband. But where can she find such a God? For her, such a God is non existent. If anything, if there is such a God, then He cannot relate to her. She feels that she is not holy enough to befriend such a God. She is convinced that "God has his own favorites whom he often relates to well enough".

### **Case Formulation (Case study 3)**

The case study 3 is a typical example of many people's sad experience of loss, abuse, orphanage, alienation and death. These negative experiences contribute to a negative association of God in people's lives thus leading to a formation of inappropriate God-images.

Consequently, Suzan's experience (as illustrated above) has led her to associate God with a negative '*father -image*' of her aunt's husband. For Suzan, God can not be a loving father because all she knows about a father image or concept is that of an abuser. To this

effect, Suzan's God-image is associated with pain (*zowawa*) and suffering (*mabvuto*). For her, God is the cause of pain in people's lives. Such an image of God perpetuate suffering instead of helping a person to heal. This becomes a challenge to pastoral ministry in Africa.

In sum, the reality of God's care and love is made eminent by those God-images and concepts that portray the involvement of God in and around the lives of people within a given context (in this case, the African context) of pastoral care and counseling. Hence Mbiti's (1975:53) assertion:

*Since God is considered to do things (creation of all things, sustaining, providing for what he has created, and ruling over the universe), and since many of these activities are similar to those carried out by people, it is helpful to the imagination for people to picture God as if he has human characteristics. Such mental images are aids to our understanding of God; they illustrate something about God. It does not mean that God is overlooked on as human being. These mental images have their limitations, but they nevertheless assist the mind to have a working knowledge of God. They also help people in communicating their ideas about God. Other human images make people feel close to God even though he is their Creator. It is because of such images that people can approach God...*

### **4.3.3 Suffering and the 'Problem' of Theodicy within the African Community**

In suffering, people are confronted not only with existential questions of their being (ontology), but much more also with the question of God – a theological question of

significance and meaning. For people in situations of suffering, the ‘*why me?*’ question (an existential<sup>53</sup> question) is usually followed by the ‘*where is God?*’ and the ‘*who is God?*’ question (a theological question). The burning question for most people in a suffering situation is “*Why, and Why me, for God’s sake*”? And the question of ‘*Why*’ is an expression of the existential distress in which sufferers end up in: on one hand the experience of disarray, chaos, senselessness, anomy called up by the suffering, and on the other man’s striving for wholeness, order, integration, meaning in our lives (Vossen 1995:13).

For Richard (1992:5), “the experience of suffering tends to change one’s perception of God; the experience of suffering becomes a critical question about God”. The focal point of suffering is usually not an “ontology of suffering and evil, rather a hermeneutics of suffering and evil which challenges a theistic understanding of the power of God” (Louw 2000:18). In other words, suffering raises a question of *theodicy* – a defense of God in the face of evil and pain.

For an African situation, suffering (*mabvuto*) has to do with people’s painful and uncomfortable experiences of life. Human suffering, in an African experience, is ***shared suffering*** – “we suffer because of and / or together with other persons” (Depoortere 1995:1) and we suffer when those whom we love suffer (Mc Grath 1995:19). When one member of the African community is suffering, in one way or the other, the whole village (community) undergoes suffering also. Suffering deprives not only the joy and

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<sup>53</sup> According to Frankl (1985:123), the term ‘*existential*’ may be used in three ways, namely; (1) *existence* it self, i.e., the specifically human mode of being; (2) the meaning of existence; and (3) the striving to find a concrete meaning in personal existence, that is to say, the *will* to meaning. The later applies more to the question of theodicy.

tranquility of an individual, but also the peace and harmony of the community to which that particular individual belongs.

From a pastoral care perspective in Africa, suffering covers a wider range of painful experiences, namely; the loss of a beloved one (spouse, parent or child), the loss of a close relative, an experience of a terminal illness such as Cancer and HIV/AIDS<sup>54</sup>, and an experience of divorce.

#### **4.4 Understanding Theodicy within a Theological Perspective**

The question of theodicy has to do with our coming to terms with the goodness of God in the midst of suffering and evil. People undergoing periods of suffering and pain have usually raised this question; *'If God is good and loving, and omnipotent (Almighty and Powerful), then why doesn't he stop suffering?'* *'Why does God allow evil in the first place?'* *'If God can do anything, why doesn't he put an end to suffering? If God is omnipotent, why can't he decree that suffering will be abolished?'* (McGrath 1995:21). Hence Imasogie's (1993:60) argument:

*There is no event without a spiritual/metaphysical cause; hence man must look beyond physical events to their spiritual etiology. Each man may have a chosen destiny to actualize, but this may be thwarted by malevolent forces which operate*

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<sup>54</sup> It is not within the focus of this study to get into details on what HIV/AIDS is all about, but it should suffice to state at this stage that HIV/AIDS has brought more suffering than any other disease on a lot of people in Africa, and has given more room to the question of theodicy (see van Houten 2002:2ff; and Louw 1995:29-44)

*either as evil spirits or through witches and sorcerers who are in alliance with them. God may or may not intervene and, in any case, he has made provision by means of which one may deal with life's problems. This is the theodicy of the typical African about evil.*

However, suffice to stress that the question of theodicy must be understood as a theological question because it aims at addressing God's position in the midst of pain and suffering (see de Villiers 1986:5). It seeks to vindicate the "justice and goodness of God in the face of the disturbing facts of evil and suffering" (Oden 1986:57). For Vossen (1995:17), the question of theodicy "takes the doctrine of God as our departure, in which two aspects are of essential importance...God's omnipotence and God's love". According to Louw (2000:25), "the theological problem is whether or not one can hold simultaneously that God is omnipotent, omnibenevolent and evil is real, without contradiction". Further, Louw makes two assertions concerning theodicy as a theological problem:

- *Theodicy is primarily, a logical problem of how to ingest apparently contradictory propositions simultaneously without contradiction.*
- *Theodicy unmasks the appropriateness of our God-images and belief about God and the world<sup>55</sup>*

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<sup>55</sup> See Louw (2000:25). Louw opts for a hermeneutic interpretation of theodicy rather than a positivistic explanation. "Theodicy within a hermeneutic paradigm is an attempt and search for a revision of power, and a larger perspective on the divine reality which reveals the identification of God with suffering and the transformation of suffering in order to instil hope (2000:25)

In his research (from an *empirical-theological perspective*), Vossen (1993:19) asserts that the problem of theodicy can be seen as a problem of signification: the process in which suffering man looks for possibilities to place the unwanted and unacceptable reality of suffering in a meaningful whole, in which God takes up a place in some way or another. Vossen continues to argue that the signification of suffering in the problem of theodicy does not necessarily mean “the allocation of an intrinsic meaningfulness to suffering; it only means making an attempt to place suffering in a broader meaningful whole, so that what is negative and painful no longer have the only say” (1993:19-20).

With the foregoing discussion, we can contend that the question of theodicy raises a theological problem in suffering. People would want to come to terms with the meaning of life in suffering, but also to understand the significance of God in such moments. **The question of theodicy is not raised because people have no faith in God, but it is raised as a searching question for meaning and significance in life.** It is raised as a ‘*faith question*’ seeking understanding. The question of theodicy then provides an opportunity for people in suffering to have an encounter with the God of promise, as a Faithful God. Is this not the kind of situation in which Job, the Old Testament ‘*long suffering*’ man found himself when suffering suddenly befell his life?

*As surely as God lives, who has denied me justice, the Almighty, who has made me taste bitterness of soul, as long as I have life within me, the breath of God in my nostrils, my lips will not speak wickedness, and my tongue will utter no deceit...I will maintain my righteousness and never let go of it; (Job 27:2-4, 6); And now my life ebbs away; days of suffering grip me (30:16); I cry out to you, O God, but you do not answer; I stand up, but you merely look at me. You turn on*



*me ruthlessly; with the might of your hand you attack me (30:20-21); ...When I hoped for good, evil came; when I looked for light, then came darkness. The churning inside me never stops; days of suffering confront me (30:26-27).*

#### **4.4.1 The Interplay between Suffering and Evil in Africa**

In Africa, suffering is closely associated with evil. To this effect, Lartey (1994:46) argues that “*it must be said that in popular African traditional thought any suffering is regarded as an evil to be overcome*”. Thus, the understanding of African people is that all suffering has a cause – it is either caused by natural forces or the cosmic powers (evil spirits). According to Mbiti (1967:214) “different forms of suffering are believed to be caused by human agents who are almost exclusively witches, sorcerers and workers of evil magic”. In his book, “*Theology in Africa*”, Dickson (1984:60) argues that: “*In the African thought, evil (suffering) can be caused by various spirit powers: the gods, ancestors, witches and sorcerers, and other baneful spirits*” (emphasis mine). For this reason, African people are known for making sure that they appease the ancestors so as to be protected from evil forces (spirits)(see Imasogie 1993:55)<sup>56</sup>. Hence Long’s (2000:123) assertion:

*Ancestral spirits are easily offended and, because they cause trouble when they are angry, ...often requires that they be appeased through sacrifices and other rites. Africans must sometimes also appease living relatives or enemies that have pronounced a curse upon them or employed a spiritist to rally an attack against them”.*

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<sup>56</sup> see also Kwenda (1999:5-7)

The African people believe that suffering is as a result of the evil that pre-existed in the cosmic make up. In order to overcome suffering, ancestors should first of all be called upon to help eradicate the evil forces that have been assigned to torture people with suffering. In his observation, Mbiti (1969:204) makes the following observation:

*In nearly all African societies, it is thought that the spirits are either the origin of evil, or agents of evil (and suffering). We have seen that after four or five generations, the living dead lose personal links with human families, and become 'its' and strangers. When they become detached from human contact, people experience or fear them as 'evil' or harmful. Much of this is simply the fear of what is strange; but some are believed to possess individuals and to cause various maladies like epilepsy and madness (emphasis mine).*

#### **4.4.2 The Interplay between Theodicy and Suffering in Africa**

In most pastoral experiences in Africa we are faced with a possible link of suffering to the question of theodicy. Whenever people undergo suffering, the question of how they have lived their lives in relation to God, always arises (see De Grunchy 1986:6-11)<sup>57</sup>. Thus when suffering strikes, the understanding is that God will intervene, but when he doesn't (or delays), the question of theodicy is put – *Why, God?* In order for us to address the possible link of suffering to the question of theodicy, we need to understand the meaning of suffering and the question of theodicy within a pastoral care perspective. However, we should take note that our usage of the terms, 'suffering' (*mabvuto*) and 'the

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<sup>57</sup> See De Villiers (1986), "The C.B. Powell Public Lectures"

question of theodicy' (*ubwino wa Mulungu muthawi ya mabvuto*)<sup>58</sup> are used within a 'pastoral – theological' context with an African spirituality perspective.

The interplay between suffering and the question of theodicy stands at the center of a pastoral theology. Theodicy cannot be abstract, it must be pastoral (see Perkins-Buzo 1994:158). In his argument, Eyer (1994:26) underscores the fact that pastoral care (pastoral theology) is concerned with the interpretation of suffering, a process in which a parishioner is helped to see God in the midst of it all. Oden (1986:57) also rightly observes that the pastoral tradition has repeatedly faced the most harsh and undeniable realities of suffering, and has been required to respond to them in deed and word.

In a pastoral care situation, people undergoing pain and suffering have usually posed searching questions which hypothesizes that God is absent in moments of suffering. It is usually a big dilemma for those who are suffering to come to terms with the fact that God is not the author of suffering and evil yet he is present in their moments of suffering. According to Depoortere (1995:23) "suffering raises the question of God's existence because suffering hides God". He further observes that suffering "raises the question of God's existence for believers as well as unbelievers" (1995:24). For the question of suffering will not be answered by any "cosmological justification of this world as God's world" (Meeks 1974:57), but is rather provoked by it.

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<sup>58</sup> This is a Chewa translation of *theodicy*, literary meaning "the goodness of God in times of evil and suffering."

Arguing from a South African perspective, De Gruchy in his lecture, “*An Excess of Suffering*” states:

*... none of us is exempt from suffering of some kind, for suffering is built into the fabric of human existence. Moreover, who knows what experience of suffering, pain and anguish awaits us around the corner of our lives. There are varieties of suffering, and different degrees to which people have to suffer. Yet, for many of us the privilege of class and race have enabled us to escape the excess of senseless and unmerited suffering... We may be exposed to and moved by the horrors of starvation as we watch news bulletins on Ethiopia flash across our television screens. But we personally know little about hunger. We may be angered and pained by events in our own country which have dehumanized people and destroyed communities, events seldom confronting us on TV, yet few of us know what it means to be uprooted from our homes and dumped elsewhere.*

Commenting on the theology of Jurgen Moltmann under the theme, ‘*Divine Suffering*’, Bauckham (1995:50) identifies a link between suffering and the question of theodicy in Moltmann’s doctrine of God:

*So Moltmann, recognizing the justification of atheism’s protest against the God of metaphysical theism on the ground of innocent suffering, seeks a way beyond both metaphysical theism and protest atheism, an understanding of God which neither suppresses nor evades the problem of suffering. He finds this in ‘a theology of the cross which understands God as the suffering God in the suffering of Christ and which cries out with the godforsaken God, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” For this theology, God and suffering are no longer contradictions, as in theism and atheism, but God’s being is in suffering and suffering is in God’s being itself, because God is love.*

**(Bauckham 1995:50)**

According to Bauckham, the link between suffering and the question of theodicy in Moltmann's '*Theology of the Crucified God*'<sup>59</sup> is made possible when Christian theology has understood what took place between Jesus and his Father on the cross. And from the strength of such an understanding can Christian theology speak of the "significance of this God for those who suffer and protest at the history of suffering in the world" (see Bauckham 1995:51)<sup>60</sup>. God chooses to suffer with humankind because "in order to be involved with his creation, to love men in their need, there must be a pathos in God, a voluntary opening to the possibility of being affected by another, the active suffering of love"<sup>61</sup>. And to fulfill his purpose, if need be, God must be supposed able to lay himself open to pain and even to death<sup>62</sup>. Moltmann has insisted that theology's most primal question is born out of the juxtaposition of God and suffering, of God and the concrete misery caused by the absence of justice (see Meek 1974:57). Louw (2000:114) gives a threefold interpretation of Moltmann's notion of a crucified and suffering God, which is worthy taking note for our understanding of the existing link between suffering and the question of theodicy, and that is;

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<sup>59</sup> (see Bauckham 1995:47f). For Moltmann the contemporary focus of the theodicy issue is political (Auschwitz) rather than naturalistic or cosmological. In developing his theodicy, Moltmann's basic strategy has been to demonstrate that an authentic Christian understanding of God points to God suffering with us as we suffer (see McWilliams 1977:35).

<sup>60</sup> According to Moltmann, the link between suffering and the question of theodicy could also be illustrated by the fact that "the dialectic of the cross and resurrection means that the resurrection of Jesus represent complete opposites: death and life, the absence of God and the presence of God, Godforsakenness and the glory of God" (see Bauckham 1995:83ff)

<sup>61</sup> (see Attfield 1977:47)

<sup>62</sup> See Attfield 1977:48

- ***Although suffering is not abolished, it is never final.*** Because of God's vulnerability and woundedness, those who suffer can relate to this God. Despite the pain, a reliable relationship of trust (faith) always prevails: *God is there*.
- ***Although suffering creates much tension, doubt, despair, anguish and anxiety, one can always, under all circumstances, address God, even accuse Him, and vent one's anger.*** God's vulnerability and faithfulness make the lament an important component of pastoral therapy. The crucified God opens up new avenues for being honest with him about anger and resentment.
- ***Although the problem of suffering prevails without any solution, the theme of solidarity does not promote a fatalistic submission, but an active resistance to suffering.*** Hope fosters both *resistance* and *surrender* (Bonhoeffer). Christian hope is not about *passivity*, but about *agony (activity)*. Solidarity, therefore, necessarily includes love's *protest* against the infliction of suffering on the beloved. Love's protest leads believers through their solidarity with sufferers into a liberating praxis on their behalf.

(Louw 2000:114)

The link between suffering and the question of theodicy is made to be clarified further in our understanding of a theology of the cross. According to Louw (2000:111), "a theology of the cross reframes God as the suffering God, portrayed in the suffering of Christ who cries out together with all the Godforsaken, 'My God, my God, why have you

forsaken me?’ A theology of the cross therefore regards the question of theodicy in earnest and reveals that God and suffering are no longer contradictions, as in the theism and atheism, but God’s Being is in suffering and the suffering is connected to God’s Being itself (see Louw 2000:112). In times of suffering, “God does not look at it from the outside as through the window” (Fretheim 1984:128), but instead he is internally related to the suffering of the people; thus putting the question of theodicy in connection with suffering. A possible connection of suffering to theodicy also helps to understand that “God’s suffering is the heavenly counterpart to the suffering of the earthly servant of God” (Fretheim 1984:148)<sup>63</sup> And in the words of an Old Testament Scholar, Brueggemann, the link between suffering and theodicy can be found in the lament story of the Israelites – God’s people:

*Israel characteristically met the hurtful dimensions of existence head-on, of course viewing them as faith crises, times of wondering about God and his fidelity, but also as faith opportunities, times to articulate again their expectations and assumptions, times to reformulate their vis-à-vis the world of hurt and the God of faithfulness*

(1974:4).

In another development, Brueggemann argues that the link between suffering and theodicy is not simply a theological question: “It is a question with much social implications. Serious theodicy is linked to social arrangements of access and benefit” (Richards 1992:19). In this particular case, the basic theodicy problem whenever it presents itself in relation to suffering, “must be understood sociologically as a question

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<sup>63</sup> Fretheim (1984:148) also adds to this statement that “the suffering servant takes upon himself the

about law, about the rule of law, about the reliability of the system of rewards and punishments (1992:19). For theodicy ...concerns the character of God as practiced in the system of values in a social matrix (1992:19).

In his commentary on the Psalms, Brueggeman<sup>64</sup> gives different dimensions for our understanding of the interplay between suffering and theodicy:

- *Theodicy is a **religious crisis** about the character of God.*
- *Theodicy is a **social crisis** that doubts the social settlement of goods and power and assaults the legitimation of that settlement.*

*Theodicy is **revolutionary** action that seeks to displace the rules of the game.*

(Brueggemann 1984: 172)

The foregoing discussion can be summarized by Louw's words when he aptly argues that theodicy links theology (our quest for God) to human experience and daily existence (our quest for meaning). As a result theodicy raises the question of the relationship between revelation and experience, and any attempt towards a positivistic synthesis inevitably leads to the question of God's justice<sup>65</sup>.

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suffering of God and does what is finally necessary for the forces of evil in this world to be overcome: suffering unto death.

<sup>64</sup> Brueggemann (1984:168-176) discusses in detail the whole issue of theodicy in the Old Testament. He argues that theodicy is the oppressed against the unjust. According to him the "conventional idea of theodicy concerns God in relation to evil" (1984:169).

<sup>65</sup> see Louw (2000:39)



In sum, we argue that there is a link between suffering and the question of theodicy because whenever people undergo moments of pain and suffering, the question of God's presence in and around their lives is always raised. In a pastoral care situation, it is always important to note that people's situations of suffering call for answers on whether God is concerned about them and involved in their suffering.

#### **4.5 Preliminary Conclusion**

We can conclude this part of the study by firstly summarizing the core arguments of the chapter and then highlighting the challenges<sup>66</sup> it raises for the work of pastoral ministry in Africa:

- Understanding the impact of an African spirituality on suffering helps us to know how to apply pastoral care to situations of pain and suffering in Africa.
- The notion of suffering creates a theological problem in people's lives because it is during such moments that questions about God arise. This also tells us that there is an interplay between suffering and people's God-images.
- In the context of suffering, appropriate God-images are those which depict God in terms of an identification with human needs and suffering. And appropriate God-

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<sup>66</sup> A number of theological sources, not only from an African perspective, have been used in this chapter to give us a good background of the theological discussion on the notion of theodicy and suffering. However the focus has been on how this discussion has reflected within an African spirituality.

images are those which can help people not only to come to terms with suffering situations, but also to appropriate their faith into action by doing something about their conditions of suffering.

- Inappropriate God-images depict concepts of God that are not adequate for people's appropriation of faith in situations of pain and suffering.
- In an African context, the notion of suffering is a notion of the community – “shared suffering”. When one member of the family of the African community is suffering, in one way or the other, the whole community (village) undergoes suffering too.

This study raises the following observations for the pastoral ministry in Africa:

- The pastoral ministry in Africa should come to terms with the notion of suffering during the process of healing and assessment of God-images. Africa at the moment is experiencing a lot of suffering that has come as a result of political instability in some counties, famine due to drought – especially in the Southern regions of Africa, disease such as HIV/AIDS and malaria. All these situations of suffering affect people's lives. Unless the Church acknowledges the reality of suffering in people's lives, her gospel will be irrelevant and short lived.

- Pastoral ministry should not avoid the theodicy question, but help people formulate God-images which could be used for their appropriation of faith to life situations. People coming for pastoral care should be helped to address underlying God-images which may not be helpful for their healing process. In so doing, even the questions people have on God must be allowed to be discussed with the view of helping them to come to terms with their own doubts and anger.
- Pastoral ministry should develop the use of scriptural passages on the suffering of Jesus Christ as therapeutic and healing process for those whose images of God in suffering have been distorted by previous sad experiences. In this case, the theology of the cross become an essential theology for the formation of new God-images which people can use to associate with the goodness of God and his identification with suffering.
- Pastoral ministry should help people challenge their situations of suffering with the understanding that we can conquer and be victorious through the vicarious sacrifice of Jesus Christ. And that this does not mean that suffering comes to an end, but that there is a new attitude and approach to suffering – a way of fostering spiritual growth in people.

- During pastoral therapy, people should be encouraged to tell their own stories arising from their experiences of God. This narrative<sup>67</sup> approach to therapy will enrich pastoral care, especially in an African context where such an approach is the most effective way of doing therapy for those who have undergone hurt and brokenness in life.

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<sup>67</sup> Since it has not been the focus of this study, narrative approach to therapy could be a subject for further research. It suffices in this particular discussion to mention it in relation to foregoing arguments of this study.

## CHAPTER 5

### 5 TOWARDS A MODEL FOR A PASTORAL ASSESSMENT OF GOD-IMAGES WITHIN AN AFRICAN CONTEXT

#### 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we undertake to work with a *pastoral model* for a process of pastoral assessment of God-images within an African context. The model provides us with six different phases, namely; *discerning, clarifying, interpreting, supporting, reflecting, and responding*. In this section of the study, we argue that the meaning of the proposed model is based on a theological understanding of a pastoral assessment. The reason for such an argument is based on the assumption that people come to a pastor with problems that are theologically related, and they expect a pastor to have a different approach to the therapeutic encounter. We contend that the therapeutic moment in pastoral care should focus on the assessment of people's understanding and experience of God (God-images). With the foregoing argument in mind, we work with a proposition which states that the process of a pastoral assessment is a *theological process*. Arising from this framework of understanding, a pastoral assessment is defined within a given theological - pastoral dimension so as to make it distinct from assessments made in the fields of psychiatry, physiology and clinical psychology. It is therefore argued that a pastoral assessment is a theological issue within the process of healing.

The study also undertakes to make a distinction between the African and Western approaches to a pastoral assessment process. To this effect, an overview of the six phases of a pastoral assessment is given. We argue that an African approach to a pastoral assessment process accommodates the aspect of communality where the community participates in the diagnosis (assessment) and the process of therapy (healing). In many instances within Africa, pastors have come to appreciate the help of the community in assessing the needs and problems of parishioners. It is therefore argued that the pastor must know when to consult the community for assistance.

How does one do a pastoral assessment? Why do we call it an “assessment” instead of a diagnosis? What exactly do we focus on in a pastoral assessment? When is a pastoral assessment recommended, and to whom must it apply? Is there any connection between the formation of God-images to a pastoral assessment? What does a pastoral assessment mean in an African context? What makes a pastoral assessment theological? These questions will lead our discussion of the subject in this chapter. Our view is that at the end of this study, there shall be a model relative to the African context that can be used for assessment of God-images.

## **5.2 A Pastoral Assessment within a Theological Perspective**

A pastoral assessment is an important aspect of pastoral ministry, and has a very critical role in the process of healing and assessment of God-images. In his classic book, “*The Minister as Diagnostician*”, Pruyser states that a pastoral assessment is a very important

pastoral task, and that it should be “a substantial part of any pastor’s daily activities” (see Pruyser 1976:31). For Pruyser, a pastoral assessment should be defined in a more theological perspective than psychological for the reason that “problem-laden persons who seek help from a pastor do so for very deep reasons – from the desire to look at themselves in a theological perspective” (1976:43). Pruyser’s argument is that people are usually driven by their beliefs to come and consult a pastor on several issues affecting their lives. And because of such beliefs, most of the problems people bring to pastors can be termed as religiously biased. For this reason, Pruyser’s advice to those in the pastoral charge or parishes is worthy taking note;

*While pastors may wish to respond to such approaches in different ways, the point I want to make is that such clients seek, among other things, religious counsel. Their beliefs drive them into the study of their pastor. They want their problems sized up and tackled within a definite frame of reference...they want a glimpse of their faith to clarify their predicament...Though the person may have a poor understanding of his faith and formulate his inquiry awkwardly, he raises a theological question and knocks for this purpose at the right door*

(1976:48-49).

This argument is alluded to by Ramsay when he states that a pastoral assessment is an “*evaluative process of discerning the nature of another’s difficulty in order to provide an appropriate, restorative response*” (Ramsay 1998:9). For generations a pastoral assessment has been practiced as “theological reflection on the contingencies of human experiences in order to discern the truthfulness and usefulness of the ecclesial paradigm for providing healing and constructive responses for believers” (1998:37). For our

discussion, the assertion by Pruyser affirms the argument which states that a pastoral assessment is founded on theological principles which undergirds pastoral care and counseling situation.

In Louw's argument, a pastoral assessment (which he terms as '*pastoral diagnosis*') involves "a dynamic process of understanding and analysis of information is focused on the integration of data concerning faith" (1999:236). A pastoral assessment, Louw contends, focuses primarily on an assessment of faith in terms of God-images and life's ultimate meaning. Within a Christian pastoral perspective, a pastoral assessment takes a new definition in that it is "a process within which the events taking place in a person's life are understood from a perspective peculiar to Christian faith: eschatology" (1999:236)<sup>68</sup>. Louw's discussion is very important for our definition of pastoral assessment because of the components of God-images and faith that he brings along in his argument. We can not avoid touching the assessment of God-images because in the first place the reason for a pastoral assessment is to determine and assess people's understanding and experiences of God in every day life. A pastoral assessment goes beyond just a mere psychological diagnosis that looks at the intra-psychic problems in terms of the personality pathological disorders of a person, but it also addresses issues affecting the whole being of a person in terms of his relation to the significant others

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<sup>68</sup> For Louw (1999:239), a pastoral assessment cannot ignore the connection between faith and the socio-political dimension of a parishioner's life (*contextual dimension*). And a pastoral assessment focuses on the interplay between faith and its fields of application within the whole spectrum of anthropological data: the affective, conative, cognitive, experiential, ethical and cultural dimensions of human behaviour. For a thorough discussion on the meaning of a 'pastoral diagnosis' (pastoral assessment), see Louw (1999:235-246).



(inter-personal issues). A pastoral assessment gives attention to the vital role of diagnosing a *pathology of faith*<sup>69</sup> in people's life.

In his book, "*Assessing Spiritual Needs*", Fitchett observes that the recent interest in a pastoral assessment (which he terms "*Spiritual assessment*") by pastoral care givers is caused by "the maturing of the field of pastoral psychotherapy, where attention is shifting from mastery of psychological skills and knowledge to the integration of distinct theological perspectives" (see Fitchett 1993:15). In defining assessment, Fitchett chooses to use the term *assessment* and *diagnosis* interchangeably. Assessment is both a statement of a perception and a process of information gathering and interpreting. And because it is both process and content, Fitchett observes, it is inherently a dynamic concept.

According to Ivy, a pastoral assessment is "the art of understanding the concerns, perspectives, and life story of another person within the context of the ministry of the Church" (Ivy 1992:284). A pastoral assessment further examines persons' life fabrics so as to appreciate their sense of purpose, identity, and meaning. Ivy argues that the broader theological foundations of a pastoral assessment can be appreciated by reviewing the importance of 'theological hermeneutics' in contemporary pastoral dialogue.

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<sup>69</sup> Louw (1998:241-244) in his book, "*A Pastoral Hermeneutics of Care and Encounter*" discusses the issue of a 'pathology of faith' in great detail.

In arguing for a theological perspective of a pastoral assessment, Underwood (1982:109) in his paper, "*Personal and Professional Integrity in Relation to Pastoral assessment*" states:

*Pastoral assessment is a process wherein a representative of the Church's ministry and one or more other persons encounter one another with the intent and hope that the light of Christian faith will enable a more accurate and meaningful anticipation of the future than had previously been possible.*

According to Underwood, there is a relationship between a theology of hope (or what he calls 'anticipation') and the "predictive validity of pastoral assessment" (1982:109). This relationship does not only present a challenging agenda for pastoral ministry today, but also argues for a theological perspective of a pastoral assessment.

In summary, a pastoral assessment deals with the interpretation and evaluation of people's faith and maturity in terms of their understanding of God and the application of faith values on life issues. The interpretation and evaluation process occurs within a given pastoral context and in the presence of God, against the background of scriptures and the person's existing images of God (See Louw 1998:299). Pastoral assessment focuses on people's images of God with the view of helping them to deal with inadequate images which quite often hinder their understanding of God's involvement within their lives, in times of pain and suffering. For Fitchett (1993:23), "in assessment we are concerned to know how God is at work, in ourselves or in another, and to consider what implications that knowledge has for our lives". It has also been argued that the purpose

of a pastoral assessment is to determine people's God-images thus making the whole process a theological process.

### 5.3 A Six – Phased Model of a Pastoral Assessment Process

The nature of a pastoral assessment is that it is an ongoing theological process involving different phases. According to this study we have determined six phases that compose a pastoral assessment process namely; *Discerning, Clarifying, Interpreting, Supporting, Reflecting and Responding*. Each one of the phases give attention to issues that arise during a pastoral care and counseling situation. However, the phases should not be treated in isolation, for they compliment and inter link with each other. The process is in such a way that it can be reversed from the end to the beginning and vice versa. Each phase depends much on the faith maturity (*faith development*) of each parishioner. Our contention is that the more there is in terms of distortion in one's concepts of God, the longer a pastoral assessment process shall take. This is affirmed by the observation that Louw makes when he writes:

*People's concepts of God are an integral element of both their faith and their psychic structure. God-images in people are internal components of our human psychic structure. They should therefore not be viewed separately or assessed as something apart. The close association between psychic structure and God-images is an important factor which pastoral care should consider most seriously in the development of faith towards maturity. The pastor will thus have to work very carefully (even spend much time) when attempting to change people's God-images (emphasis mine)*

(1998:243).

It must be emphasized though that the six phases have one thing in common, and that is to assess a person's understanding and experience of God in terms of their application of faith to life issues. For this reason, it can be argued that when doing a pastoral assessment, a person's God-images become an integral element of how he/she understands and experiences God. This model therefore helps us to determine not only the psychic problems of a person, but also their faith development – "as a dynamic and imaginative process of continual interpretation of God-images" (Louw 1998:244).

We shall now discuss the phases in a more detailed manner so as to give us understanding on what each phase is all about.

### **Phase 1: Discerning**

Discernment is one of the major components of the process of pastoral assessment. In this phase, an analysis of what the parishioner shares with a pastor is taken so as to distinguish between a faith problem (in terms of the parishioner's God-images) and a psychic disorder (mostly caused by psychological problems). It is imperative to make this distinction because a pastoral assessment, as defined above, concerns a theological analysis of people's faith in terms of their understanding of God and the search for meaning in life. Whereas psychotherapy concerns itself with a person's personality disorders and intra-psychic problems. For our study a pastoral assessment shall concern itself with the analysis of faith, in terms of people's functions of faith and their

relationship with God. “Insofar as psychic, relational and contextual problems are at issue in pastoral care, they are connected to belief and the quest for meaning in life” (Louw 1998:444). During the phase of discerning, a parishioner’s problems are analyzed in terms of how they affect his/her images of God. The phase of discerning concerns itself with the process of distinguishing between faith related problems and psychological breakdowns.

Discernment in pastoral assessment constitutes different levels of analysis<sup>70</sup>, which Louw terms as; an *analysis of faith*, an *analysis of religion*, and a *theo-logical analysis*. At a time when a pastoral assessment is done, the levels of analysis help a pastor to determine the nature of a parishioner’s problem.

- (a) ***An Analysis of faith***: the character of a parishioner’s faith is examined with regard to maturity and existential events.
  
- (b) ***An analysis of religion***: determining the nature of a parishioner’s religion. The purpose of a religious analysis is to distinguish an extrinsic (distorted) form of behaviour (legalism, being bound to tradition, dogmatism) from the intrinsic (appropriate) value of religion.

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<sup>70</sup> See Louw (1999:245-46), “*A Mature Faith*”

(c) *A theo-logical analysis*: assessing parishioner's understanding of God. This part of discernment concentrates on an analysis of underlying God-images in a parishioner's life, which could either play a constructive role in faith development or constitute a disruptive factor, resulting in irrational and distorted images of God.

## **Phase 2: Clarifying**

The function of this phase in the process of pastoral assessment is to ensure that the pastor's own convictions and images of God do not obstruct his/her understanding of the parishioner's problem. Clarifying phase makes sure that all perceptions on the part of both the pastor and parishioner are made clear before continuing with the pastoral assessment process. And for this reason, Cavanagh (1992:79) contends:

*Before attempting to help people loosen their grip on their unhelpful perceptions of God, ministers need to examine their own perceptions of God. When ministers themselves have unhelpful perceptions of God, they are liable to reinforce the unhelpful perceptions of those they are trying to help.*

When we clarify something, we aim at making that particular thing more clear than before. In terms of pastoral assessment, the phase of clarifying is where the pastor and the parishioner takes time to explore the problem together with the view of finding the right words, attitudes and posture for the situation. It is a phase of "*faith seeking understanding*" – meaning a phase of searching for the truth. But also it is in the clarifying phase where the parishioner's faith and religion is made known. This phase

helps the pastor to know the theological biases underlying the parishioner's world-view. It is a phase of bringing to surface the under girding convictions on who God is to the parishioner's life. For Miller & Jackson (1985:95), one complexity of the clarifying phase is that the parishioner may be trying to decide whether or not to decide! And there may be an indication of a threat or hint of an opportunity, suggesting that perhaps a decision should be made. When the pastor chooses to listen carefully, Miller & Jackson argues, then he/she helps to "clarify whether or not the risk or opportunity is important enough to warrant an active decision" (1985:95). It can therefore be described as a phase of *careful listening* with intention of making clear specific perceptions within a pastoral care and counseling encounter.

### **Phase 3: Interpreting**

Closely linked to the clarifying phase is what is known as interpreting phase. At this point the parishioner's God-images and concepts of God are interpreted with the view of identifying underlying God-images which could hamper the process of a pastoral assessment. The parishioner's different experiences of life could have at one time or the other distorted his understanding and view of God. The interpreting phase therefore, helps the pastor to notice such existing inappropriate images of God in a parishioner's life. However, it is important to take Louw's advice when it comes to identifying and assessment of God-images,

*The Quest for criteria for identifying and assessing God-images must be undertaken with extreme care. God-images are a complex issue, within which*

*important roles are by cultural concepts, ecclesiastical confessions and dogmas and questions about philosophical and anthropological concepts. This complexity means that no "pure" concept or image of God exists which could communicate God credibly and meaningfully (1999:246).*

The interpreting phase takes into consideration that any understanding or interpreting of God-images are controlled by hermeneutics and thorough exegesis (Louw 1998: 244). For this reason the interpreting phase employs a pastoral hermeneutics in the assessment of God-images in a parishioner's life. The purpose of taking a pastoral hermeneutics is to regard faith development as a dynamic and imaginative process of continual interpretation of God-images (Louw 1998:244).

The interpreting phase also involves the analysis of narratives. Stories of life experience form a very important part of a pastoral assessment process. In telling the story of life experience, parishioners allow themselves to be diagnosed according to the contexts of their stories. Thus it is important to emphasize the importance of telling the story in the way the parishioner experienced it. Ivy attests to this when he argues that a diagnostic (*pastoral assessment*) process involves hearing person's perspectives in the context of their life stories, using the styles of meaning-making as ways to structure the information, and evaluating their story in light of clear diagnostic criteria (1992:296). According to Ivy, pastoral assessment begins in a good pastoral conversation, which enables people to tell their stories in their own worlds, and at their own pace. All what the pastor does in the interpreting phase is to apply the skills of "listening and accurate interpretation"<sup>71</sup>.

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<sup>71</sup> Ivy (1987:331) in a paper, "*A Faith Development / Self Development Model for Pastoral Assessment*" further argues that pastoral assessment proceeds on the basis of two principles when it comes to the



For Miller & Jackson, “the telling of the story involves some preparation. The individual is invited to tell, in whatever fashion seems natural, his or her whole life story from the beginning” (1985:118).

#### **Phase 4: Supporting**

The aim of the supporting phase in a process of pastoral assessment is to *nurture*, *motivate* and *guide* the parishioner so that he can handle his problems in a more constructive manner. For Clinebell, the aim of supporting phase in a pastoral assessment (and also in pastoral counseling) is to help the person gain strength and perspective which will allow him/her to use his/her personality resources more effectively in coping with his life situation (see Clinebell 1966:140). It is in the supporting phase where the parishioner’s abilities to formulate appropriate God-images are challenged.

It should be pointed out, however, that the supporting phase is an on going phase because at the center of it all is the aspect of nurturing. And nurturing is an on going process which is sensitive to the crucial ‘life stages’ through which every parishioner undergoes (Lartey 1997:41). Nurturing allows times of opportunity and crisis to happen so as to reach a mature faith that can apply to all life issues.

In a pastoral assessment, the pastor’s supportive presence becomes vital to the parishioner’s need for affirmation and confidence as he/she struggles to make meaning

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interpreting stage. First, there are discernable patterns to the ways in which persons make life meaning – the “styles of Consciousness”. Second, these patterns may be perceived through diagnostic lens. These

out of difficulty situations. In this phase (supporting), the pastor aims at ‘empowering’<sup>72</sup> the parishioner to make right decisions based on the interpretation of events within a given situation.

## **Phase 5: Reflecting**

Time for reflection is very essential for the process of a pastoral assessment. In this phase, the parishioner is helped to examine his/her beliefs and attitudes towards himself/herself, others and God. All “defense mechanisms towards”<sup>73</sup> life are explored with the view of getting to the root of an existing problem within the life of the parishioner. This phase brings the parishioner to come face to face with his real situation, and to begin to prepare for change. Reflecting is the transformative phase of a pastoral process. From a theological perspective, reflecting phase involves the pneumatological dimension of the assessment process. The more the parishioner takes time to reflect on meaning and significance of life, the deeper the Holy Spirit transforms his character and personality traits.

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lens provide windows on the inner life of persons – the “diagnostic structure”

<sup>72</sup> Lartey uses the term ‘empowerment’ to mean the processes of re-valuing, self and personal characteristics together with finding and using available resources outside oneself, in such a way as to enable and motivate persons and groups to think and act in ways that will result in greater freedom and participation in the life of societies of which they are a part.

<sup>73</sup> In the book, “*Psychology*” Edwards & Louw (1997:561-62) have identified six examples of defence mechanisms; Denial, Repression, Rationalization, Isolation, Projection and Reaction Formation. They argue that these mechanisms help people to cope with emotional pain. However, in the long run, there is a high price to pay for three reasons:

- ◆ Memories and impulses that are unconscious do not simply go away. They stay in the individual’s life outside of awareness and control.
- ◆ Certain situations or people may activate unconscious material. As a result we try to avoid them or become very irrational when confronted with them.

Reflecting phase is the renewal<sup>74</sup> stage of a pastoral process. The parishioner's worldview is challenged with the realities of the experiential world and the one coming from his beliefs based on confessions of faith. Reflecting phase helps one to meditate on new avenues and possibilities in life. What seemed impossible and impractical, in terms of one's view of life, becomes possible when there is a renewal of concepts and metaphors. In terms of a pastoral process, reflecting phase (as the renewal stage) helps people to form new concepts of God which eventually could be used to address their pain and suffering.

Having stated what reflecting phase in a pastoral process is all about, we should however, note the warning of Capps in his book, "*Reframing: A New Method in Pastoral care*", when he argues:

*Self-examination leads to healthy self-assessment, but exaggerated self-observation may be harmful. To counteract hyper-reflection, one cannot simply counsel clients not to think so much about a certain subject; this advice simply draws their attention to what they are trying to avoid. It is equally difficult not think about anything at all. The technique of deflection involves suggesting that clients think of something else, thus detaching them from their symptoms and directing them to another, more positive subject (1990:30-31).*

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◆ Defences may be one reason why people feel less alive or very alienated or separate from others.

<sup>74</sup> In his commentary (based on Romans 12:1-2) about the transformation process in a Christian's life, Cranfield (1985:296-97) writes: "The Christian has always to confess that to a painfully large extent his life is conformed to this age. Instead of going on contentedly and complacently allowing himself to be stamped afresh and moulded by the fashion of this world, he is now to yield himself to a different pressure, to the direction of the Spirit of God. He is to allow himself to be transformed continually, remoulded, remade, so that his life here and now may more and more clearly exhibit signs and tokens of the coming order of God, that order which has already come – in Christ. And it is by the renewing of your mind that this transformation is effected.

## Phase 6: Responding

The last phase for the process of a pastoral assessment is the responding phase. This phase should only be arrived at after a period of listening and clarification, when the pastor is certain he fully understands the situation and the parishioner's feeling (Taylor 1983:109). Responding in the process of a pastoral assessment entails a period of *action* and *participation*. The parishioner, in this phase, is faced with a challenge to taking action on what he has discovered during the phases of *discerning*, *clarifying*, *interpreting*, *supporting*, and *reflecting*. It is a time of embarking on new God-images, which are able to offer the parishioner a helpful interpretation of life situations confronting his life.

The responding phase attaches a lot of meaning to the application of faith to life issues. Therefore, it is vital to emphasize that the responding phase involves an aspect of responsibility on the part of the one seeking pastoral help. The parishioner is encouraged to take responsibility for the decisions he makes in life. Here the parishioner is helped to overcome all defence mechanisms and projection<sup>75</sup> which could have been hampering the formulation of new God-images in his life.

Responding phase also involves what Taylor (1991:139) calls the stage of "*Acting*". According to Taylor, when the parishioners have understood the good news (within a pastoral assessment process), the task that remains for them is "to develop an action plan to get from where they are to where they want to be" (1991:139).

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<sup>75</sup> "In projection, people attribute their own repressed or denied feelings to other people" (see Edwards & Louw 1997:564)

Taylor proposes three 'guidance skills of setting' to aid the parishioner in the development of an action plan. These guidance skills include:

- ***Setting goals***

This involves moving from vague intents and general goals to Concrete objectives that are meaningful, measurable, and manageable.

- ***Developing programs***

This includes choosing steps, scheduling them, and then creating reinforcements to support the resolve to take the steps.

- ***Planning implementation***

After the programs are designed, parishioners prepare to carry them out by planning implementation through reviewing, rehearsing, and revising.

## Table Summary of the Guidance Skills

<b>Setting Goals</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Vague intent</li><li>• General goal</li><li>• Concrete objective</li></ul>
<b>Developing Programs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Choosing steps</li><li>• Sequencing steps</li><li>• Creating reinforcements</li></ul>
<b>Planning Implementation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reviewing</li><li>• Rehearsing</li><li>• Revising</li></ul>

With the guidance skills in place, Taylor also includes in the action plan a list of other things such as;

*the religious resources: pastoral persons, scripture, tradition, theology and ethics, covenant communities, prayer and the arts, and rites. These tools help parishioners dispute the unhelpful beliefs and incorporate the good news in their lives*

(1991:139).

When the parishioner takes the action plan into effect, only then can we describe him as responding to the pastoral assessment process. This phase therefore, indicates that the

parishioner is on his way to recovery. There is an anticipation - new God-images are formed, new concepts and perceptions are formulated – and indeed a new life in Christ is anticipated.

### **Summary of a Six-Phased Model of Pastoral Assessment Process**

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Component</b>	<b>Function</b>
<b>1.</b>	<b>Discerning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Faith analysis, including analysis of religion and God-images (a theo-logical analysis)</li> <li>◆ Analysis of metaphors</li> <li>◆ Distinction between theological problems and psycho-social issues</li> </ul>
<b>2.</b>	<b>Clarifying</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Examination of the pastor’s own God-images</li> <li>◆ “Faith seeking understanding” approach</li> <li>◆ Clarifies theological bias and convictions</li> </ul>
<b>3.</b>	<b>Interpreting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Identification and interpretation of God-images</li> <li>◆ Analysis of life stories and narratives</li> <li>◆ Listening with the view of coming up with accurate interpretation</li> </ul>
<b>4.</b>	<b>Supporting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Nurturing, guiding and motivation</li> <li>◆ Formulation of new God-images</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Empowering parishioner to make right decisions</li> </ul>
5.	<b>Reflecting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Examination of the parishioner's own beliefs and attitude</li> <li>◆ Exploration of defense mechanisms</li> <li>◆ Renewal of paradigms and concepts of God</li> </ul>
6.	<b>Responding</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Action &amp; participation</li> <li>◆ Formulation of new God-images</li> <li>◆ Application of faith on life issues</li> <li>◆ Setting goals, developing programmes, Planning implementation</li> <li>◆ A new life in Christ</li> </ul>

#### 5.4 A Pastoral Assessment Process within an African Setting

A pastoral assessment in Africa could basically be described as a “*narrative*<sup>76</sup> *assessment*” of pastoral issues. In Africa, pastoral assessments are based on story telling. A parishioner comes to the pastor with his/her story of events and the experience encountered. The parishioner's hurts and brokenness are all imbibed in the story he/she tells the pastor. It is from his/her story that meaning and interpretation of what has

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<sup>76</sup> Narratives play an important role in Africa. They form part of the Oral tradition where events are accounted by their order of happening through narratives.



happened to a parishioner's life can be deduced. The pastor's role then is to listen carefully to the narrative. For it is in listening that the pastor can offer a good pastoral assessment concerning the problems affecting the parishioner. To this effect, Lartey argues that "*in the story-listening role the pastor carer enables people to hear their own story aloud, hear it for themselves and thus possibly obtain a more objective view of who they are in their multi-faceted complexity*" (1997:46).

The telling of a story in a pastoral situation helps both pastor and parishioner to engage in an interpretive process. Stories possess dynamics, which can be used in the therapy of sad and painful experiences of life. In Ma Mpolo's words, telling stories "contribute to the interpretation of illness, misfortune and health" (Ma Mpolo 1985:314). Lartey attests to this as he aptly argues:

*Every story is, naturally, an interpretation. The telling of a story entails, among other things, the selection, ordering and emphasizing of events in such a way as to make a coherent and meaningful sequence which may be tragic, comic, indifferent or combinations of these. A pastoral carer is as such involved as he or she participates as listener or stimulator, in a process of interpretation and re-interpretation. This role has, of course, been and is being played by therapists and counsellors* (1997:46).

The culture of the African people gives a lot of attention to narratives because it is through such that one can hear story description of painful experiences. It is through story telling that you can know to what extent a parishioner's life has been affected by an existing problem. It is through story telling that a pastor will come to understand a parishioner's struggle with issues of faith and life. The African culture in this regard

shares a lot in common with the Jewish culture in terms of the importance it gives to narratives in daily life of an individual and the family. Most Biblical texts<sup>77</sup> show that narratives (story telling) were an integral part of expressions in daily experiences of life by the Jewish people. As such, the oral tradition of an African culture makes it convenient for African people to express their experiences through narratives. And it is through such narratives that one can come to understand what is involved in the search for meaning and significance by African people.

#### **5.4.1 Applying a Six-phased Model of a Pastoral Assessment Process to an African Context.**

##### **Phase 1: Discerning**

In the phase of discerning, a parishioner tells the story of his experience. In his story the parishioner uses metaphors<sup>78</sup> to illustrate how he/she feels about the experience. He may also choose to use parables, proverbs<sup>79</sup>, riddles and wise sayings to further illustrate his experiences. The story is told as experienced by the parishioner, and this is important to stress because at this stage all what is needed is to hear the whole story.

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<sup>77</sup> See Zimmerli (1978:174-182) and Bright (1981:67-77)

<sup>78</sup> McFague (1987:33) describes metaphors as “a strategy of desperation, not decoration; it is an attempt to say something about what we do not know in terms of what we do know... Metaphors always have the character of “is” and “is not”: an assertion is made but as a likely account rather than a definition”.

<sup>79</sup> Mbiti (1991:27) states that proverbs “provide us with a rich source of African wisdom. They speak about God, the world, man, human relationships, the nature of things and so on. They are set within the cultural and social environment of the people who have produced them and use them.”

The role of a pastor in the phase of discerning is to make *analysis of metaphors, parables, riddles and wise sayings* in order to distinguish between what may be psycho-social problems and those that are theological. The main reason of doing this is to avoid confusing faith issues needing spiritual assessment and those that need medical attention. The African people express themselves indirectly through parables and metaphors. This can be seen in the example given below.

As the story is being told, the pastor should also give attention to how the parishioner uses images and metaphors to describe God. In most cases this will show whether the parishioner has some distortion of his/her view and concept of God. By distinguishing this, the pastor will be helping the parishioner to deal with his/her view of God thus drawing his/her attention to a number of underlying world views he/she could have been holding onto for a long time. This does not only help the pastor to make a faith analysis, but also gives him an opportunity to deal with inappropriate God-images underlying a parishioner's world-view. For until the pastor brings to surface all underlying inappropriate God-images and concepts, there shall be very little progress in the pastoral assessment process.

Analysis of the influence of an African cosmology<sup>80</sup> on the parishioner's life is important at this stage of discerning. If a parishioner believes that his problem has been caused by cosmic "*powers*" and "*forces*" then the process of pastoral assessment should reckon with such an understanding. From an African perspective, it is difficult to make progress in a pastoral assessment without giving space to analysis of world-views of a parishioner. Thus the African cosmology (world view) dictates the course of therapy, and any pastor who does not reckon with this phenomenon, should not expect to make good progress in as far as the process of healing for a parishioner is concerned. The phase of discerning, therefore helps the pastor to detect the influence of an African cosmology on a parishioner's God concepts and God-images. This can be illustrated in the following case study:

### **Case study 1 - Influence of an African world view**

- Mr. Sondashi comes to see his pastor over what he believes is the problem of spiritual powers invading his house. He explains that every time the moon shines, his house is invaded by some '*talking*' spirits. These spirits *talk* to each other. They greet and call the names of both his departed grandparents. "They talk as if they are physically present, they even know the birth dates of my two children", explains Mr. Sondashi.

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<sup>80</sup> An African cosmology has been described as referring to the way African people have incorporated in human life the mystery of the unseen and the beyondness of human life (refer to Chapter 2).

“One night I called my father to come and hear these voices for himself. He was also astonished to hear of the old names of his peers who died along time ago. He advised that I should consult a Medicine man”, Mr. Sondashi narrates.

At this point Mr. Sondashi shows a lot of worry on his face. He is a very sad man.

Mr. Sondashi being a Christian himself, finds it very difficult to go and consult the medicine man over these experiences. He expects the pastor to come and sprinkle holy ‘baptism water’ on the door steps of his house. He fears that when the spirits will get tired talking to each other, they will turn to him and his family.

Then what will he do?

How should the pastor handle this kind of pastoral assessment process? What underlying concepts of God does Mr. Sondashi have? Should the pastor give in to the request about going to sprinkle water at the door steps of Mr. Sondashi’s house?

The above questions can be handled in the phase of discerning because this is where distinguishing of distorted concepts of God are made so as to help the pastoral assessment move to another phase – the *Clarifying Phase*.

## Phase 2: Clarifying

In a clarifying phase, the pastor should be aware of his own world view (s). The pastor needs to have a basic understanding of what constitutes an African world view. The missionaries from the Western countries made a mistake at this stage. They condemned all they found within an African tradition as pagan. They condemned the use of drums in the Church for this was associated to the drums used for divination. They condemned the African herbalist (see Magesa 1997:188-89) and medicine man<sup>81</sup> because they associated him to the witch doctor (isangoma). They never took time to understand the African people, their culture and traditions. And a pastor who takes such a stance as the missionaries from the West did, is assured of losing out in the process of pastoral assessment. Hence the need for the phase of clarifying.

In a pastoral care situation in Africa, a pastor is expected to have an understanding of the anthropological / cosmological notions which are imbedded in the faith of an African Christian. To be ignorant of these notions is to delay the progress of assessment and therapy. Apart from clarifying his own concepts of God, a pastor is expected to help people clarify their own beliefs and convictions. We give the case study, below, to illustrate the meaning of clarifying in the pastoral assessment process.

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<sup>81</sup> The medicine man (*sing'anga*) is usually someone who uses herbal medicines (*mankhwala*) to cure diseases within a given African community (see van Breugel 2001:246) while a Witch doctor is some one

## **Case Study 2 - The Phase of Clarifying**

An African couple who have had no child for ten years of their marriage comes to a pastor for help. To the surprise of the pastor the couple brings along with them a large sum of money – three month’s saving! They tell the pastor that this will be their offering to the Lord for a child. They tell the pastor that according to the African tradition, they are supposed to offer sacrifice to the ancestors in form of a goat or seven white chickens. Since they are Christians, they feel it is not right to offer sacrifice to ancestors because Jesus Christ was the ‘last living sacrifice’ for all people. They have instead decided to offer a “holy sacrifice of praise” a three month’s tithing to the Lord.

What should the pastor do, accept or refuse to get the money into the church confers? Is this couple correct in their interpretation of *sacrifice, offering, and giving*? Are they correct to replace an African traditional practice with a biblical act?

These are the issues the pastor will have to clarify with Mr. & Mrs. Tembo. Leaving these issues pending, will hinder the pastoral assessment process. And there is no way a pastor could avoid addressing such issues, in as far as the African context is concerned. But once these issues are clarified, there is need to begin to interpret some of the underlying convictions that people usually hold on to when they are seeking help within a pastoral care setting – the *phase of interpreting* then follows.

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who has given his life to divination . He can “interpret by means of lots (ula) the will of the spirits of the dead” (van Breugel 2001: 233)

### **Phase 3: Interpreting**

In this particular phase, narratives play a very important role. The pastor's role is to listen carefully to stories and interpret them accordingly. The parishioner brings with him a story of his experience that expresses his search for meaning and significance in life. In his narration, the parishioner uses parables and riddles from the richness of an African culture to illustrate how he feels about his situation. The use of parables and riddles may signify the failure to talk about certain issues which are a taboo in some traditional setting of African people. Problems concerning human sexuality and death are mostly discussed indirectly through parables and riddles. This means that a pastor who wishes to engage in a pastoral assessment among African people must at all times be familiar with the African proverbs (see Kinoti 1998:55-77). Apart from listening, the pastor is also engaged in an interpretive process where all that he hears from a parishioner's narration must be subject to interpretation. To this effect, Louw (1998:281-82) argues:

*Interpretation in counselling implies seeking clarification, gaining insight and obtaining a systemic understanding of a person's unique identity. Interpretation is an attempt to understand a parishioner's reactions within a network of existing relationships, social contexts and cultural influences. The purpose of interpretation is to make an assessment that will help a person to understand him/herself better in terms of past events, the present context and future consequences.*



### 5.4.1.1 The use of Metaphor, Parables and Indirect Speech in the Phase of Interpreting

- An example on the use of metaphor and indirect speech is when a parishioner has a problem in coming to terms with his/her human sexuality problems. In most cases the story will not be told in direct speech, but the African person will find metaphorical expressions to talk about someone else having that kind of problem. He will talk about a '*tree never bearing fruit*' (to mean impotence or barrenness). He will talk about a '*bare field*' (to mean unproductive sexual organs). It is then up to the Counselor to interpret the story in terms of what is being said and what is implied by the story. In most cases, within an African context, what is implied could be the exact focus (s) of a parishioner problem. In this case the pastor must learn to interpret and 'read' between the lines to understand what is affecting the parishioner's life.

Why should the story of a parishioner be subject to interpretation? Does this mean that the parishioner could not be trusted? The parishioner's story might include among other things the fear of death, the fear of witchcraft, the fear for cosmic powers and the fear for the unknown. All these fears should be interpreted and translated according to the contextual experiences of the parishioner. And in order to address such fears, the pastor should be very sensitive to the cultural background of the parishioner. In other words cultural beliefs, within an African context, influence the course of a pastoral assessment. In his story, a parishioner expresses not only fear of things, but also fear of pain and

suffering. During a pastoral assessment, the pastor should understand that the fear of pain and suffering creates room in a parishioner's life to cling to images of God that, in most cases, might not be helpful.

Interpreting God-images during the process of a pastoral assessment is a very important task in pastoral care. It is also an important task in the process of healing. In most pastoral care situations, parishioner's God-images are so distorted that if left unchecked they will hamper the process of healing altogether. During the phase of interpreting, a parishioner is encouraged to talk about his own God-images with the view of helping him to realize that some of the images of God he has been holding on to are not helpful. This is a mammoth task of a pastoral assessment that needs to be handled with a lot of care for it is associated with a parishioner's faith journey. With this in mind the pastor can then move to another phase, that of *supporting*.

#### **Phase 4: Supporting**

The supporting phase in a pastoral assessment concerns nurturing, guiding and motivation of a parishioner. In an African pastoral care setting, this phase could involve the support of the community. The pastor calls upon the community to help the parishioner with his process of recovery. Due to the nature of some African pastoral problems, it is not only the pastor that gives guidance and help to the parishioner, but he engages the community to help him with the process. In this case the community

contributes to the therapy of the parishioner. If the pastor chooses to overlook the role of the African community in the pastoral assessment process and therapy, he does so to his own pastoral disadvantage. Pastoral therapy within an African context is about the company of the 'significant others' – it is an '*accompanying process*'.

It is in supporting phase that the process of a pastoral assessment within an African context becomes a unique process. While the emphasis for a pastoral assessment in the Western world falls on the onus of the person concerned (individualistic Rodgerian client-centered approach), it is different in Africa because therapy depends on the support of the community. The community provides a therapeutic environment that can help for the recovery of a person in problems. The parishioner is then *empowered* by the community to meet the challenges posed by the situation of his life. Hence the importance of having the support of the community in the process of a pastoral assessment. The community then becomes a vehicle for a process of healing – which could lead to another important stage, a renewal stage – the *reflecting phase*.

## **Phase 5: Reflecting**

The reflecting phase can as well be termed as a '*renewal*' phase. This is when the parishioner begins to apply what he has learnt from the situation affecting his life. For instance, a parishioner whose life centered on the existing inappropriate God-images, he is then challenged to take a step towards reformulating God-images that are helpful for

his own situation. Some God-images, which existed in a parishioner's life prior to a pastoral assessment process, could have been quite harmful to his own faith and to those around him. For instance, a parishioner who believed that God was a great *Judge*, lived with some judgmental attitude towards his community, and as a result once confronted with a pastoral problem such a person automatically believed that God was after him. In the reflecting phase, a parishioner is challenged to look at how his concepts and images of God contribute to the state of affairs in his life.

The parishioner's world-view is renewed as he confronts the reality of his own attitudes and beliefs. If the parishioner's problems were as a result of his self-centered life; at this stage, he is made to take a new course of life – a communal approach where he lives in harmony with his own community. In an African context, the phase of reflecting can only be effective if consultation with the community has been done. It is actually almost impossible to expect somebody to make progress in healing when that particular person has issues he needs to make right with his community. For broken relationships (in as far as the African context is concerned) can lead to a broken life style. It is in the reflecting phase that a parishioner is made to look at how he has lived with those around him. The pastor concentrates on the need for reconciliation between the parishioner and his community.

Cases of HIV/AIDS in an African context call for a phase of reflecting because the disease itself has a communal dimension. In a World Council of Churches' study

document entitled: “*Facing AIDS*”, the following excerpt illustrates the need for a phase of reflecting that emphasizes a communal dimension<sup>82</sup> of HIV/AIDS:

*In Zaire a team visited a man who had been abandoned by his family because of his illness. He was pitifully lonely, waiting for visitors, and looking for what the team might be bringing for him. Some discussion began to build his confidence to take the initiative to call his family together. The team offered to come and talk with them in hope of encouraging reconciliation. He invited them; and when the team left he was looking very different from when they first arrived. He was looking forward to an opportunity for family reconciliation, not just for his own benefit but for the wellbeing of his children and grandchildren all of whom, he felt, need to protect themselves*

(WCC 2002:82).

In a reflecting phase, the problem facing the parishioner is defined in a wider context with the view of making him understand that part of the solution to his problem lies with his community. The aspect of “*belonging*”, within the African community, therefore becomes pertinent to the process of healing for the parishioner. Those who have cultivated an attitude or spirit of belonging make quick progress in the process of healing. It is important for a pastoral assessment process to reckon with the notion of belonging because such provide a good framework of understanding therapy. Healing, in this case, is based on whether a person has some interconnectedness to the community of his environment. Once the equilibrium of being connected is broken, the result is that the healing process will be hampered altogether.

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<sup>82</sup> See also Mcetywa (2001:31ff) in his paper, *HIV/AIDS: A Traditional African Religious Perspective*”

## **Phase 6: Responding**

The responding phase is a stage of *action* where a parishioner takes steps towards decision making in his recovery process. The parishioner is challenged to do what he has not been able to do before he embarked on taking a pastoral assessment. The aim of the responding phase is to provide a parishioner with an opportunity for reconciliation and participation in the process of healing. The responding phase takes the parishioner from a process of listening to a process of activity and responsibility. This will include; the formation of appropriate God-images, reconciliation with the community, repentance and forgiveness.

In a responding phase, a person is given a second chance to become part of the system of the community in which he will contribute to the good of others. If his life was individualistic (self-centered), he is challenged to change directions towards a more communal centered life. And what is mostly interesting is that at this stage, the whole community has a say on somebody's life. The whole community is involved in instructing the 'healed' person to reflect and reconsider the way he has lived his life in the past – which in their belief was the major cause of the sickness or problems. The person is challenged to say sorry to those he offended. He is challenged to make peace with the cosmic life force, just in case he offended the departed ancestors – '*the living dead*'.

In sum, the *six-phased approach* to the process of pastoral assessment fits very well within the African context for it links well with the communal approach to the life of African people. Healing is never seen to be an individual thing, the whole community gets involved.

## **5.5 Preliminary Conclusion**

This chapter has worked with a proposed *six-phased model* for a pastoral assessment process. It has been argued that the focus on assessment of God-images in a pastoral assessment process, makes the whole process theological. It has also been argued that for an African context, the six-phased model has to embrace the communal approach to the methodology of healing and therapy - that is, the involvement of the community in the process of assessment and healing.

The chapter has made the following observations for the pastoral ministry in Africa:

- (a) Pastoral ministry must recognize that the process of a pastoral assessment is a theological process.

- (b) There is a link between the assessment of God-images and the assessment of faith development in people's lives. Usually the concepts of God that people use are an indication of the levels of their faith in God.
- (c) The six-phased model (*Discerning, Clarifying, Interpreting, Supporting, Reflecting, Responding*) of a pastoral assessment process is being proposed to address a number of problems the pastoral ministry has been facing in trying to offer pastoral help to the African people. The pastoral ministry is therefore being challenged to consider taking a different approach to the method of therapy – the communal approach as opposed to the individualistic centered approach. It has been established, in this study, that the individualistic approach does not provide a methodology for an African therapy.



## CHAPTER 6

### 6. CONCLUSION: FINDINGS OF THE STUDY AND ITS CHALLENGES FOR PASTORAL MINISTRY IN AFRICA

#### 6.1 Introduction

This study can be as well termed ‘*an attempt to interpret*’ pastoral care and counseling methods and modules in an African paradigm and understanding. All along pastoral ministry has made use of methods and modules that have worked in other continents, but lacks its own. This study has therefore tried to work with concepts and images that reflect an African understanding of pastoral ministry. It has always been the focus of the study that African people have their own distinct ways of looking at human life, divinity and the cosmic life. Hence the study has also, tried to wrestle with a *hermeneutical praxis*<sup>83</sup> for a pastoral ministry within an African context. For this reason, the study has raised a number of challenges for doing pastoral ministry in Africa.

We shall therefore undertake, in this chapter, to discuss the findings of the study, and the challenges they raise for the pastoral ministry in Africa. We work with a basic presupposition that the findings of this study have helped to verify the research

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<sup>83</sup> By hermeneutical praxis of pastoral ministry, we refer to the meaning of practical issues affecting the doing of pastoral ministry in Africa. Hermeneutical praxis of pastoral ministry points to the way pastoral work is understood and practiced by African care givers within an African context.

hypotheses and to answer the research question. To help us establish this, we shall first and foremost give a synopsis of core arguments and preliminary conclusions of each chapter, and thereafter we shall give a general conclusion reflecting some of the challenges that this study raises for pastoral ministry in Africa.

### **6.1.1 VERIFICATION OF THE RESEARCH HYPOTHESES**

The study has tried to establish that there is an existing interplay between healing and the assessment of God-images within the pastoral ministry in Africa. For it has been argued that the process of healing in people's lives is hampered when their view of God is distorted by existing inappropriate God-images. In this regard, the research has shown that due to existing inappropriate God-images in people's lives, there is a dysfunctional application of faith and understanding of God to existential life issues. It has also argued in this study that in situations where people's images are inappropriate, pastoral ministry has found it difficult to make an assessment of the effects of pain and suffering on the affected people. Hence the research has proposed a *model* by which such an assessment could be done. The proposed *model* of assessing God-images aims at determining the types of God-images that influence and determine a Christian interpretation of life as well as the meaning of healing within an African spirituality.

## 6.1.2 A SUMMARY OF CORE ARGUMENTS IN THE STUDY

In chapter two we identified the following core arguments that can be used to establish the research findings:

- ◆ An African spirituality consists of African people's attitudes, beliefs and practices as they strive to reach out toward the super-sensible realities: God, the spirits, and the invisible forces in the universe. Thus an African spirituality incorporates all dimensions of human and cosmic life.
  
- ◆ At the very center of an African spirituality lies the core-issue of relationships. Thus a spirituality that does not incorporate all people, their events, their richness, their hopes and concerns, cannot speak to African people who are fundamentally communal and relational.
  
- ◆ An African spirituality and cosmology has great influence on the way African people understand God, life, human relationships and the cosmic life-force; and that this understanding is important for the process of healing and the assessment of God-images in an African pastoral ministry.

- ◆ In an African cosmology, life is perceived as consisting of the unseen beings (departed spirits and ancestors), the supernatural (the divine), the natural life-force. Ancestors (*ambuyafwi*) play a great role in an African cosmology.
  
- ◆ God-images within an African understanding refers to the way African people have portrayed God through metaphors and symbols which they usually express in rituals and liturgical events; such as weddings, funerals, births and deaths.
  
- ◆ To African people, God-images embrace the African traditional stories, symbols, metaphors, parables and riddles about the African experience of the divine and the cosmic life-force. Moreover, God-images are formed within a cultural setting of African people. Hence, God-images link the African people to God especially in times of pain and suffering.
  
- ◆ The African people are fond of God-images that depict a sense of relationships, communality and continuity. The formation of God-images is always influenced by an African cultural anthropology, without which all images imposed on African people will become obsolete and invalid to the African context.
  
- ◆ An African culture consists of symbols, customs, rituals, liturgical events and traditions (all together) that constitute the way African people live and relate to each other and to the cosmic life-force. The uniqueness of an African culture within an

African traditional society lies in the whole aspect of relationships and communality – to be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of the community.

- ◆ Metaphorical and symbolic languages and expressions form an integral part in the way African people express themselves about the significance of God's nature and character.

In chapter three the following core arguments have been identified to establish the research findings:

- ◆ In an African perspective, healing incorporates all dimensions of human and cosmic life-force. Healing also incorporates holistic ideas of God, power, the spiritual world and the ancestors.
- ◆ The African community is a 'therapeutic community' where members are restored into an equilibrium of harmonious relationships and good health. Thus healing can only take place within a given community. To this effect, the African community becomes a service provider for a process of healing in Africa.

- ◆ Sickness and health are part of systems thinking in Africa: the whole is more important than its parts, components do not function according to their 'nature' but according to their position in the network. For this reason, sickness comes as a result of trespassing against the well-set harmonious linkage to either the cosmic order of the ancestors or the African societal order of the living.
  
- ◆ To ignore the role of rituals and symbols in an African understanding of healing is to ignore the fundamental aspect of African life and practice. Therefore, Christian rituals and symbols, such as Holy Communion, Baptism and the Cross can be used to strengthen the faith of African believers in times of pain and suffering

In chapter Four, the study has established the following core arguments:

- ◆ Understanding the impact of an African spirituality on suffering helps us to know how to apply pastoral care to situations of pain and suffering in Africa.
  
- ◆ The notion of suffering creates a theological problem in people's lives because it is during such moments that questions about God arise. This also tells us that there is an interplay between suffering and people's God-images.
  
- ◆ In the context of suffering, appropriate God-images are those which depict God in terms of an identification with human needs and suffering. And appropriate God-

images are those which can help people not only to come to terms with suffering situations, but also to appropriate their faith into action by doing something about their conditions of suffering.

- ◆ Inappropriate God-images depict concepts of God that are not adequate for people's appropriation of faith in situations of pain and suffering. People with inappropriate God-images find it very difficult to relate to a God of love and care. Hence, the study proposes a *friend* and *Companion* metaphors of God.
- ◆ In an African context, the notion of suffering is a notion of the community – “shared suffering”. When one member of the family of the African community is suffering, in one way or the other, the whole community (village) undergoes suffering too.

In chapter five, the study has established the following core arguments:

- ◆ Pastoral ministry must recognize that the process of a pastoral assessment is a theological process.
- ◆ There is a link between the assessment of God-images and the assessment of faith development in people's lives. Usually the concepts of God that people use are an indication of the levels of their faith in God.

- ◆ Story telling, as narrative therapy is very important for pastoral counselling situations in Africa. For this reason, pastoral ministry must undertake to equip pastors with narrative skills which they could use for counseling and pastoral assessment.



### **6.1.3 RESEARCH FINDINGS AND CHALLENGES FOR PASTORAL MINISTRY IN AFRICA**

Based on the arguments and observations of this study, it could be argued that the following are the challenges that this research raises for work of pastoral ministry within an African context:

- (1) Pastoral ministry in Africa will be enriched more by allowing people to express themselves with the God-images they are used to. In cases where people have held on to inappropriate God-images, pastoral ministry should work with an understanding that such images of God are as a result of the negative experiences people have gone through due to pain and suffering. Hence the assessment of God-images within an African context, must be based on an informed understanding of people's experiences in life.
  
- (2) Pastoral ministry in Africa should be sensitive to the fact that God-images are also connected to different ways in which African people describe God through metaphors, traditional events and symbols. For this reason, pastoral ministry should undertake to accommodate African symbols and rituals that are capable of enabling the African people to express their feelings during the process of healing and assessment of God-images – which in most cases cannot be easily verbalized.

Hence, metaphoric and symbolic expressions of the African people must play a greater role in the process of healing and assessment of God-images.

- (3) Pastoral ministry should embrace Christian rituals and symbols, such as Holy Communion, Baptism and the Cross as ones that could be used in the care of strengthening the faith of African believers in times of pain and suffering. Hence Pastoral ministry must work towards an integration of African traditional approaches to dealing with the process of healing in people's lives. Pastoral ministry should also undertake to accommodate the systemic view of healing – as a communal issue rather than an individual matter. In other words, pastoral ministry in Africa should reckon with notions of an African spirituality and cosmology that works with 'cause' and 'effect' when it comes to matters of healing.
- (4) The pastoral ministry in Africa should come to terms with the notion of suffering during the process of healing and assessment of God-images. Africa at the moment is experiencing a lot of suffering that has come as a result of political instability in some counties, famine due to drought – especially in the Southern regions of Africa, disease such as HIV/AIDS and malaria. All these situations of suffering affect people lives. Unless the Church acknowledges the reality of suffering in people' live, her gospel will be irrelevant.

- (5) Pastoral ministry should not avoid the theodicy question, but help people formulate God-images which could be used for their appropriation of faith to life situations. People coming for pastoral care should be helped to address underlying God-images which may not be helpful for their healing process. In so doing, even the questions people have on God must be allowed to be discussed with the view of helping them come to terms with their own doubts and anger.
  
- (6) Pastoral ministry should develop the use of scriptural passages on the suffering of Jesus Christ as therapeutic and healing process for those whose images of God in suffering have been distorted by previous sad experiences. In this case the theology of the cross become an essential theology for the formation of new God-images which people can use to associate with the goodness of God and his identification with suffering.
  
- (7) Pastoral ministry should help people challenge their situations of suffering with the understanding that we can conquer and be victorious through the vicarious sacrifice of Jesus Christ. And that this does not mean that suffering comes to an end, but that there is a new attitude and approach to suffering – a way of fostering spiritual growth in people.
  
- (8) During pastoral therapy, people should be encouraged to tell their own stories arising from their experiences of God. This narrative approach to therapy will enrich pastoral care, especially in an African context where such an approach is

the most effective way of doing therapy for those who have undergone hurt and brokenness in life.

- (9) The pastoral ministry is being challenged to consider taking a different approach to the method of therapy – the communal approach as opposed to the individualistic centered approach. It has been established, in this study, that the individualistic approach does not provide a methodology for an African therapy. Therefore a six-phased model has been proposed for pastoral therapy with a given pastoral care situation in Africa

## **6.2 Conclusion**

This research has tried to give attention to the research question and the research hypotheses. We work with a presupposition that the findings and challenges of this study as outlined in the foregoing discussion will help pastoral ministry engage an African spirituality and cosmology in the process of healing and assessment of God-images. We pray that this academic exercise will provide the Church with meaningful models that are going to be applied within an African context, and that will eventually yield fruits in the pastoral ministry in Africa.

## 7.

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