

Spirituality of liberation: A conversation with African religiosity

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The arrival of a salvationist, authoritative religiosity through Western Christianity in South Africa, in the company of a capitalist modernity, did not only dismantle and subvert the African indigenous dispensation of religiosity. It also sought to destroy it completely and arguably continues to do so in subtle forms in the 21st century, by attacking the imagination and consciousness of black Africans. This article argues that African religiosity as expressed in African Initiated Churches (AICs) is the site of the spirituality of liberation. Employing the notion of *mokhnkhu* – a shack – the article places the sanity of black Africans, the spirituality of liberation, black African agency and consciousness within the narrative of African religiosity. It concludes by offering African religiosity as a resource for an alternative civilisation and an important agenda in the current debates of the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

Introduction

This article originated from an address presented by me at the University of Stellenbosch in 2013, at a conference that was held under the auspices of the South African Missiological Society (SAMES). The original title of the address was ‘Christian spiritualities of liberation and human dignity: A conversation with African religiosity (African Traditional Religions).’ I have reworked that paper and changed the title to its current form mainly to give it a focus on liberation spirituality and its locus in African religiosity. The main argument of this article is that African religiosity is the site of liberation spirituality. For this reason, African religiosity does not require inclusion in Western frameworks but equal recognition as a value system amongst others. The article first presents an overview of liberation spirituality from the point of view of a struggle against a salvationist, authoritative religiosity that was transplanted to South African soil. It highlights the resources of spirituality of African religiosity expressed through the African Independent Churches as a response to this salvationist, violent and subjugating form of Western religiosity. As a site of the spirituality of liberation it is argued that African religiosity offers resources for cultural liberation, African history, black African agency and moral consciousness. African religiosity, the article further argues, is a resource for an alternative civilisation in the context of empire¹ and concludes with a brief reflection on current debates in the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

An overview of spirituality in African religiosity

It is now common cause in theological circles that before the arrival of Western Christianity on the African continent, there was a free dispensation of moral and ethical thought that shaped the lives of the black African people. Black African encounters with Christianity essentially meant an encounter with modernity. The modernist ethos not only disrupted the norms and values of the life of black Africans, but also their spiritual dispensation. As a black Reformed Christian in South Africa, it would be logical to include Reformed faith as part of this modernist ethos, at least in as far as black Africans have experienced its transplantation as part of the missionary enterprise and later as a distorted theological basis for apartheid in South Africa. It should be conceded that Western Christianity, including Reformed faith, became a form of religion that became authoritative and argued broadly for a salvation based on ‘true’ belief.

Western Christianity became an expansionist religion concomitant with modernity, but also with terror as experienced by black Africans in South Africa. In this manner, Western Christianity became part of the historical disruption of the moral and ethical dispensation of life amongst black Africans. Some further explanation is probably necessary, but more importantly, this historical perspective requires to be punctuated at this very point of our conversation as it forms the basis of this overview. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (2009) conveys this as follows:

1. I use the notion of empire as shorthand for my social analysis, taking my cue from the numerous works that have been published since the adoption of the Azusa Confession in 2004. Cf. Rasthy (2006), the entire volume is dedicated to the notion of empire. Also cf. Vellem (2012).

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