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THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS IN LIGHT OF ANCESTOR VENERATION IN AFRICA AND ITS SEQUELS ON THE CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF HOPE

Abstract. The article argues that the praxis of ancestor veneration in Africa is a system akin to the Christian belief in the “communion of saints.” It is a system for realizing the fullest potential of human (religious) experience. Humanness is a skill developed to become more and more human with God’s help. In this regard, well-being, or in the Christian sense, “salvation” is the fruitful accomplishment of a person’s proficiencies by sustaining beneficial relationships between earthly descendants and their ancestors. This worldview is scrutinized through the lens of the Christian doctrine of the communion of saints; thus, it is a present reality and pathway to attaining fullness of well-being. The author recognizes the tripartite Church and identifies the “exalted spiritual life,” “resurrected life,” and divine life as systematically possessed through living the doctrine of the communion of saints. Christian hope is thoroughly Christological, transcending merely natural ties.

Keywords: ancestor veneration; theology of hope; salvation; communion of saints.

1. CHRISTIAN HOPE VERSUS SECULAR HOPE

The doctrine of eschatology defines the Christian understanding of hope. An enlightenment philosopher by the name of Immanuel Kant said in his *Critique of Pure Reason* that “all the interests of my reason, speculative as well as practical, combine in the three following questions: (1) What can I know? (2) What ought I to do? (3) What may I hope?” The contemporary thinker Peter Kreeft says that the principal Christian virtues of faith, love, and hope tally with these interrogations. Faith in God’s word answers the epistemological question. Love for God and neighbour recapitulates our du-

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ty. The Christian teaching of eschatology describes our hope beyond earthly mortal existence.¹

It is hope that makes us human in that all menfolk live in hopefulness. There is a phenomenology of human hope. Human persons are therefore by nature beings who have the propensity to hope. Hope is not only an existential category but also an ontological category for man. Indeed, it is because humans are beings who hope that Christian discourses on hope should be done keeping in mind and involving the other public or political discourses on the same. Since Christian hope transcends progress for a better world in historical forms, it is to be understood as a gift and expressed in ontological categories.

An attempt at a false dichotomy between the sacred and the secular must be vetoed as a scheme injurious to true human realization. Christians, just like other people, stand at a crossroads of influences. According to Moltmann, hope is not merely an expectation, but the exigency for a “historic transformation of life.”² Hope is like history’s spearhead that critiques the present in a relentless effort to enact the future in the present. Christian hope goes beyond the present. It gives assurance of life beyond the grave (cf. 2 Cor 4:7-11). Therefore, the insertion of Christian hope in the secular discourses of hope is radically transformative. It has a significant impact on socio-political life. Christian hope transcends historical progress because it is not merely empirical. Christian hope fits into the overarching paradigm of the cosmological/ontological viewpoint of human nature as a trans-phenomenal reality.

In his encyclical, *Populorum Progressio* (On the Development of Peoples) in 1967, Pope Paul VI underscored that unsullied progress is not defined primarily in economic categories.³ Authentic progress is integral and promotes the common good and the good of the whole person – one’s body, soul, and spirit. Thus, not all historical progress with some empirical social impact in the here and now and a “better” future outlook may be beneficial to man eschatologically. If Christian eschatology was only to tell us of the perfectibility of the history of the cosmos and/or its imperfectability, then

¹ Peter Kreeft, *Heaven, the Heart’s Deepest Longing* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 11.

² John Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 330.

³ Paul VI, *Encyclical Letter “Populorum Progressio”* (Rome: Vatican Polyglot Press, 1967), no. 14.

this can either lead to pragmatism (based on human effort) or resignation (based on hopelessness and despair).⁴

Jesus has given a transcendental goal to our human efforts for peace, justice and development.⁵ Socio-political and economic structures without the corresponding values that are to enliven them are doomed to be only short-lived concrete and pragmatic political programmes, as history has shown. Such efforts may promote an individual's or the collective ego versus the aspirations of "redeemed" humanity.

Jesus Christ in his earthly saving ministry, passion, death, and resurrection had one agenda, that is, to do his Father's will of gathering together a family from every nation, race, and tribe (cf. Rev 7:9). Just as the whole of creation is ordained to its Creator, so spiritual beings should of their own accord orientate their lives toward God, the first truth and supreme good. Thus, it is human fulfilment that constitutes, as it were, a summary of our duties.⁶ Paul VI goes on to state: "By reason of his union with Christ, the source of life, man attains to new fulfillment of himself, to a transcendent humanism which gives him his greatest possible perfection."⁷ By the very fact that we are one human family, all are summoned to the fullness of development.

Human beings have a desire to generate their mortality. This arises from the ancient pride of our first parents. They wanted to fabricate immortality out of their own substance: *non omnis moriar*, not everything about me will perish. The *monumentum aere perennius*, the achievements I leave, these will immortalize a part of me. However, in man's attempt to manufacture eternity, the vessel of man must, eventually, slip up.⁸

Africans have a spiritual worldview. It is centred on the perception of God as permeating the whole of existence. Man is created by God and hence is to have a relationship with God; this relationship entails immortality. The capacity in man for relatedness to God is a gift from God; when accepted by man, it makes him immortal. Man finds his fullest realization only at the

⁴ Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, "Eschatology and Utopia," in *Joseph Ratzinger in Communio*, vol. 1: *The Unity of the Church*, translated by James M. Quigley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 10–25, 24.

⁵ See John Paul II, *Message for the World Day of Peace "Development and Solidarity: Two Keys to Peace,"* (Rome, 1986), no. 10, www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19861208_xx-world-day-for-peace.html, accessed May 15, 2023.

⁶ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, no. 16.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 156.

end. The reality in man is that he is connected to God, the source of life, and others, including dead kinsmen who are venerated because they are deemed to have achieved plenitude of well-being.

2. THEOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF BASIC PRECEPTS OF ANCESTOR VENERATION

Saint John Paul II in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (Faith and Reason) decries that there is a break nowadays between the modern conception of reason as autonomous and separate, a conception that necessarily excludes faith.⁹ Both *Gaudium et Spes* and the recent Magisterium situate this separation between faith and life in the unbalanced anthropology of modern times.¹⁰ Christians in their encounter with others need to acknowledge and accept any dimension of authentic cultural elements found in other cultural and religious practices. Simultaneously, they need not put their Christian faith into epoché.¹¹ The revelation of Christ has a tremendous anthropological significance in that Christ's revelation elevates and heals our human condition.¹² Christ has empowered us, meaning that he has empowered our human faculties, especially our freedom to know and love him, to know our noble vocation of communion that eventually leads to eschatological communion.¹³ The religious sense must not be put to sleep.

The grace of Christ and the Church's ministry indeed sustain and enable us to attain authentic human development. In his homily at the opening of the 1994 Synod of Bishops for Africa, St. John Paul II echoed that the universal papal Church of Rome has high regard for the African religious traditions that express the aspiration for the one God through the veneration of their ancestors. These traditions are open to the gospel. Africans believe that the dead continue to live and remain in communion with them. Moreover, this is in some way a preparation for the belief in the communion of the

⁹ John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter "Fides et Ratio,"* no. 45 (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998).

¹⁰ See *Gaudium et Spes*, 43, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 32, *Veritatis Splendor*, 88.

¹¹ According to Wikipedia: "Epoché is an ancient Greek term. In Hellenistic philosophy, it is a technical term typically translated as 'suspension of judgement' but also as 'withholding of assent.' In the modern philosophy of Phenomenology it refers to a process of setting aside assumptions and beliefs." Find in en.m.wikipedia.org, accessed 3 December, 2022.

¹² Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Nairobi: St. Paul's Publications, 1994), no. 412.

¹³ *Ibidem*, no. 2002.

saints.¹⁴ The relationship between the “living dead” (the ancestors), the living kinsfolk, and those yet to be born is quite interdependent.

Nyamiti has used the category of the African understanding of ancestors to reinterpret the Christian mysteries.¹⁵ Thus, the ancestral relationship includes the following components: *Kinship* (consanguineous or non-consanguineous between the dead and the living kin); *Superhuman status* (usually acquired through death) including proximity to God and sacred powers; *Mediation* (not indispensable) between God and the earthly kin; *Exemplarity of behaviour* and *Right to sacred communication* with the living kin through prayers and oblations.¹⁶ For Bujo,¹⁷ ancestor veneration designates an anamnestic-narrative soteriology.

Ancestral linkage is of great importance to an African. Identity is deeply grounded in it. One’s ancestor is an organic member of the community of the living, they are one of the vital links in the chain. God is at the utmost extension of the notion of ancestor. People are indebted to their remarkable ancestors. They owe them their wisdom and the guarantee of authenticity for long-standing customs; they owe them gratitude for their mediation.

In the anthropology of Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes* highlights that man, though made of body and soul, is a unity, and so we can understand him only in relation to the destiny of his entire being. Through his very bodily condition, he sums up in himself the elements of the physical world. They are brought to their uppermost perfection through him and can raise their voice in praise freely given to God (*GS*, 14). Jesus as the Godman is the only mediator bringing the African to his highest perfection in God.

2.1 DEATH IN CHRIST: AN ENTRANCE INTO A SUBLIME UNION WITH GOD

Africans believed in continued existence after death in one’s posterity. When someone who lived a fulfilled vital openness dies, they eventually acquire the status of a supernatural being and are exalted. The fullness of life consisted in keeping long-standing traditions, dying old, tasting the full richness of earthly life, and seeing one’s children participate through them in

¹⁴ Cf. John Paul II, “Homily at Opening Mass,” in *L’Osservatore Romano* 15, 1336(1994): 1.

¹⁵ Cf. Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective* (Zimbabwe: Gweru, 1984).

¹⁶ Cf. Charles Nyamiti, “African Christologies Today,” in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, edited by Robert J. Schreiter (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 11.

¹⁷ Cf. Bénézet Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992), 79.

the future or one's perpetuity. Childlessness or a "premature" death was considered to be inexplicable in natural terms, a punishment falling on man. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 260 emphasizes that the ultimate end of the whole divine economy (God's saving activities in history) is the perfect entrance of [human] creatures into perfect union with the triune God. In the life of Christ originated ritually by baptism, there is no "premature" death.

Ancestral spirits are believed to link the living and the ancestor *par excellence*-God. Death, though mysterious, is a means to a communion of life beyond the grave. Death rituals are communitarian. Death and life lead to the issue of social time (time lived and its duration). The purpose of these rituals is to exalt those whom society considered heroes and heroines. Death is an apotheosis, that is, release from earthly life to a kind of exalted state.

In the light of the gospel and the New Testament message, death conserves its basic excursion. Eternal life is born from death in Christ and, in turn, death is not merely the prolongation of life but its fullest actualization. The cross of Christ is our redemption. The fullness of life transcends the longevity of earthly existence. For Christians, dying young or old is not qualitatively different. Every life cycle is a redeemed state. From the African perspective, newborns are also linked to their ancestors vertically. However, horizontally, they have not achieved life's beneficial skills and, as such, when they die, their entrance into the category of ancestors is jeopardized.

Theology today does not recognize the so-called limbo of infants who die unbaptized. There is much accentuation on the life of the resurrection. Since the human person is a being en route, the process of full maturation may also include post-mortem purification. The descendant's physical origin is from their ancestor. Their corporal termination should not be outside the ancestor. In the following sub-section, I intend to examine the life of the resurrection from the African viewpoint already discussed.

2.2 THE DOCTRINE OF THE RESURRECTION WITH AN AFRICAN STAMP

Since death (not merely a biological reality) came through a human being (Adam), the resurrection of the dead also came through a human being. In Christ (Godman), all shall be brought to life (cf. 1 Cor 15:21–23). Man's relatedness to God entails indestructibility.

The principles of life and death, as it were, are at work in us every day. A growing consensus understands the resurrection of the body to imply that the personal identity established in an embodied history is raised to a transphys-

ical reality. The debate is about the idea of a resurrection in death that would preclude an “intermediate state” in which separated souls await bodily resurrection on the “last day.” Divergence abounds as to how and at what point bodiliness is wholly incorporated into one’s identity. However, a number of authors concur that the intermediate state ought to be reinterpreted as suggesting that an individual’s relationship to the world will be wholly incorporated into their identity only with the completion of history in general, since everyone is a social being.¹⁸

For Rahner, we must fit what we term “bodily resurrection” in the narrow sense into the wider sense of the history of the world that will come to an end. There will be no annihilation but participation in the perfection of the spirit.¹⁹ Body means the whole person. The process of man’s perfecting and entrance into perfection is not an identical quantity in all respects. For instance, our resurrected bodies will possess freedom from libido.

Once the history of the world has come to its full completion, then the vision of the new heaven or the new earth would have been fully accomplished. Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, further developed the proposal that the soul after death retains a relationship to the corporeality of the body.²⁰ A relationship he termed “pancosmic” implies that the soul, by yielding its restricted bodily structure in death, becomes open to the cosmos and, in some way, it is a co-determining element of the universe exactly in the latter’s character as the basis of the personal life of other spiritual material beings. An individual is rendered pancosmic through death and might have a direct influence on the world.²¹ A hint can be made here to the parallel doctrine of the communion of saints.

For Ratzinger, man’s indivisibility posits that corporeality or corporality is the mode for achieving man’s one being. From this perspective, the biblical message, which promises immortality for the whole man, becomes intelligible.²² Resurrection is not reducible to the idea of restoration of the body. The resurrection of the body is only the pictorial image used throughout the Scriptures.

¹⁸ Cf. Bernard P. Prusak, “Bodily Resurrection in Catholic Perspectives,” *Theological Studies* 61(2000), 64.

¹⁹ Cf. Karl Rahner, “The Resurrection of the Body,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 2: *Man in the Church*, edited by Karl Rahner (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1963), 210–213.

²⁰ Cf. Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961), 18.

²¹ *Ibidem*, 22–23.

²² Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, translated by Joseph R. Foster (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 268–269.

Beyond pious platitudes, it is obvious that the notion of the resurrection of the dead or the resurrection of the body is not found explicitly in African Traditional Religion. However, it is implied in their belief of ancestor and ancestor veneration. Centering emic²³ perspectives of ancestor veneration reveal that an ancestor is revered because of their status as a supernatural being acquired after death. This African perspective adds an insight into the current state of the debate on “bodily” resurrection. Resurrection is an experience fitting one’s whole life. The whole person resurrects.

Resurrection is not reincarnation. The African belief in the continued existence of an ancestor in one’s children and posterity may at face value look like reincarnation. This is not so. If an ancestor has already acquired that revered status, far exalted than earthly existence, then why should an ancestor reincarnate in order to die again and with no assurance that they will acquire the supernatural status thereafter? I advance the argument that newborn children (considered at times to be an ancestor come back to life) are reminders of the exalted dignity of the ancestors who give them their inherent worth. Human persons as icons of their ancestors are expected to follow their archetypes. If God is situated at the farthest extension of the idea of an ancestor, He is a proto-ancestor. Jesus Christ is the Godman, the Son of God made man. Therefore, Jesus is the perfect image of God.

Jesus’ question to his disciples: “Who do people say I am?” (Mt 16:13–16; Mk 8: 27–29; Lk 9:18–20) and the subsequent answers, together with Peter’s confession, are apt here for further inquiry of our topical issue. Indeed, Jesus is the perfect image of God. The ancestors are masterpieces of God’s creative and saving work. They are no longer living an earthly existence with its weariness. They have attained and have been gifted with supernatural existence. Ancestors are an indication of the origin of human dignity as coming from God himself.

Man is created by God in his image and likeness (cf. Gen 1:26). Man’s relatedness to God immortalizes him. In the fall, man lost the way to a full and joyful life. Jesus was the first person to resurrect (cf. 1 Cor 15–20). The crucified and risen Christ appeared to his disciples. His dead body was hypostatically united with his divine nature. As such, he rose by his power. On the other hand, he was raised by God his Father. Therefore, the resurrection is the exaltation of human nature.

²³ Of or pertaining to the analysis of a cultural system or its features from the perspective of a participation in that culture.

The African view is not incompatible *per se* with the fact that the Christian faith does not include reincarnation. This is so because the notion of a descendant as an ancestor coming back to life is not reincarnation as taught in Eastern Asian traditions. African belief accentuates a vital connection between the people on earth, the dead and those yet to be born. Dead ancestors have crossed the threshold of death. They have acquired a supernatural status. They can help the living in their varied situations.

If widely modified, an attitude of descendants as progenitors come back to life could transform our relationships with the saints and the souls in purgatory (whose commemoration is celebrated in the worldwide Catholic Church on November 1st and 2nd respectively). These and other similar African cultural narrative soteriology have always been saturated by protological and still eschatological salvific stories. Next, they are distilled through the lens of Christian hope that gives us a glance at resurrected life.

Resurrection flows from God's divine life. Resurrection requires an end to earthly existence and a transformed continuation of life.²⁴ Jesus was the first person to resurrect (cf. 1 Cor 15:2). In the post-resurrection, Jesus ascended from the material sphere (*ascension*), and was thus removed from the inherent weakness of bodily existence that includes vulnerability to death. Thus, theologically speaking, the resurrection and ascension can be considered as one event. However, the divine life was always possessed by Jesus as the incarnate Word before the Son of God became man, during and after his incarnation (cf. Jn 1:1–5).

Christian eschatology can be enriched significantly by African traditions and practices of ancestor veneration. This vision of community and communion presents the powerful intercession of the saints could be well-thought-out as a kind of "incarnation" in the sense of a real but mysterious presence of the saints in aiding in specific situations without forfeiting their life of bliss.

Our relationship with the other is orientated towards our relationship with God (cf. Mt 25:40). The doctrine of the communion of saints illumined by the cultural practice of ancestor veneration posits an anamnestic²⁵ worldview.

²⁴ Cf. Kenneth L. Shenck, *Cosmology and Eschatology in Hebrews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 136–137.

²⁵ Anamnesis means a representation of God's saving works so that [true] worshippers can participate in these events as present realities and thereby receive eschatological salvation, new life and sanctification divinely accomplished through them. Anamnesis, thus, unites the past, present and future in a single present event of worship.

One can safely assert that there is a continuity and discontinuity at the same time between the post-resurrection person and the pre-death person. The reasons that we have for this assertion include the fact that the resurrected Jesus appeared to his disciples but his post-resurrection life was indeed a transformed continuation of his indestructible life.

Therefore, any attempt to de-cosmologize the Christian mystery of the resurrection of the dead is untenable. Christian doctrine proffers to the African belief that, at the moment of death, one encounters the triune God not only for judgement but for communion. Thus, it should be noted that, in light of Christian truths, no one ends up in the “ancestral world” all alone. According to some contemporary theologians, for instance, Rahner, Ratzinger and Schillebeeckx, a person posits their first ever full human act at the moment of death. This is the time presumably one is most free and able to decide for or against God conclusively.

The African ancestral world has some similarities to the Christian concept of heaven and the resurrection of the dead. Yet, some troubling differences also exist between them. The ancestral world is thought of as a state of eternal bliss, power, and intercession, above the mundane. Yet this belief among the Africans is tainted by the erroneous idea that man can come to perfection only or almost merely through one’s act. The specificity of Christian hope is that the entire person will attain redemption and this resurrection of the body follows the pattern in light of the crucified, risen Christ.

3. COMMUNION: PRIORITY TO BAPTISM RITUAL AND CHRISTIAN KINSHIP

The African worldview concerning the future ancestral world postulates a disembodied, pure spirit-world, but there is a lacuna of conscious seeking to understand that in our transformed bodies we shall see God who is pure spirit. Their understanding is that ancestors have a superior perception of God since they live near God’s vicinity. The Christian doctrine of the life hereafter espouses a face-to-face encounter with God. Christian hope enlightens that worldview.

The Christian faith teaches that the resurrection of the dead follows the pattern of Christ’s resurrection. He had to be the first fruit of those who have fallen asleep (cf. 1 Cor 15:20-23). Christ understood as the proto-ancestor is the head of the body (community and communion of the saints). In their pil-

grim status in the here and now, Christians are wearing Christ's crucified, risen body as earthen vessels (cf. 2 Cor 4:7). Through the resurrection as one of the elements of the Incarnation, Jesus Christ reached transcendental openness to absolute fullness.

In human communities, interfaces among various actors produce a new level of being and existence. Instead of prioritizing the quantity of networks, it is more valuable to focus on the variety and quality of those connections. It is always about critical connections. Baptism implies putting on Christ. In baptism, one dies with Christ and rises with him. That which has to have fulfillment in the future is already experienced in the present.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Ancestor veneration in Africa has the following embedded beliefs, viz., the credence that their dead are still alive but in a transformed way beyond phenomenon. Accordingly, these ancestral spirits are invoked and propitiated. They are offered what is termed as *dulia* (veneration), not *latria* (worship). They were previously human and even presently they are not animistic forces. They are entitled to absolute veneration, not relative as given to animistic powers. The African praxis of ancestor veneration delineates between the spirits of the living dead and other spirits in the spiritual world. There is personal continuity based on phenomenal manifestations: the living dead can appear to them (African Christians) in dreams; a newborn infant is regarded as an ancestor who comes back to life. There is a distinction between the pre-death person and the post-resurrection individual, yet this does not imply separateness. The process of transition from the condition of a living member of an earthly family to an ancestor through death does not separate one from the living.

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OBCOWANIE ŚWIĘTYCH
W ŚWIETLE KULTU PRZODKÓW W AFRYCE
I JEGO NASTĘPSTW DLA CHRZEŚCIJAŃSKIEJ TEOLOGII NADZIEI

Streszczenie

Artykuł dowodzi, że praktyka kultu przodków w Afryce jest systemem zbliżonym do chrześcijańskiej wiary w „obcowanie świętych”. Jest to system realizacji pełnego potencjału ludzkiego (religijnego) doświadczenia. Człowieczeństwo jest również zdolnością rozwijaną tak, by stawać się coraz bardziej człowiekiem z Bożą pomocą. W takim wzglądzie dobrostan albo, w chrześcijańskim znaczeniu, „zbawienie” jest owocnym spełnieniem osobowych umiejętności danej osoby dzięki pokarmowi zbawiennych relacji między żyjącymi potomkami i ich przodkami.

W artykule taki światopogląd został zbadany, wychodząc z perspektywy chrześcijańskiej doktryny o obcowaniu świętych jako obecnej rzeczywistości i drogi do osiągnięcia pełni dobrostanu. Autor przyjmuje potrójny wymiar Kościoła i wyróżnia „wzniosłe życie duchowe”, „życie zmarłychwstałe” oraz życie boskie jako systematycznie rozwijane dzięki przeżywaniu nauki o obcowaniu świętych. Nadzieja chrześcijańska jest głęboko chrystologiczna, transcendując więzy naturalne.

Słowa kluczowe: kult przodków; teologia nadziei; zbawienie; obcowanie świętych.