



# Morality in Africa: Yesterday and today

## The reasons for the contemporary crisis

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### Abstract

Morality in Africa: Yesterday and today. The reasons for the contemporary crisis

*We are experiencing the results of moral decline in South Africa and on the continent at large daily. Academics are also worried by this “moral vacuum”. It seems as if something important has disappeared and nothing good has replaced it. This article will, by way of introduction, mention some of the moral virtues of traditional Africa. They reveal a stark contrast with contemporary “morality”. The main emphasis will be on the possible reasons for the present moral decline, because knowledge about the causes may assist us in our search for solutions. By quoting extensively from African authors on the topic the article provides an in-depth look at the following reasons for the moral crisis: (1) some general characteristics of traditional morality, (2) inherent weaknesses in traditional morality and (3) different external influences. The article concludes with a few ideas of how the challenge of the moral crisis can be met from a Christian perspective.*

### Opsomming

Moraliteit in Afrika: gister en vandag. Redes vir die huidige krisis

*Ons ervaar daagliks die gevolge van die morele verval in Suid-Afrika en op die Afrikakontinent. Ook akademici is bekommerd oor hierdie “morele vakuum”. Dit wil voorkom asof iets belangriks verdwyn het en niks goeds die plek daarvan gevul het nie. By wyse van ’n inleiding noem hierdie artikel enkele van die morele deugde van tradisionele Afrika. Hulle staan in skerp kontras met die huidige “moraliteit”. Die hoofklem van die artikel val op die moontlike redes vir die morele agteruitgang, omdat kennis van die oorsake ons kan help om na oplossings te soek. Deur Afrikaskrywers self aan die*

*woord te stel, word indringend na die volgende redes vir die morele krisis gelyk: (1) algemene trekke van tradisionele moraliteit, (2) inherente swakhede van die tradisionele moraliteit en (3) eksterne invloede. Die artikel word afgesluit met enkele gedagtes oor hoe die morele krisis vanuit 'n Christelike perspektief die hoof gebied kan word.*

Judging from the following two statements there seems to be a vast difference between traditional and contemporary morality in Africa:

- “Ethical education was the ultimate aim of education in the traditional society” (Kigongo, 1991:23).
- “Contemporary African society is lamenting a moral world fallen apart ... Today the African society ... seems to be in a state of near chaos in the realm of morality” (Kinoti, 1992:75, 86).

This statement is echoed by many other writers. Shutte (2001:1), for instance, speaks about a “moral vacuum, something has gone and nothing has replaced it”. Two moral summits have already been held in South Africa (Oct. 1998 and April 2002) to address the moral decay. At the last meeting a Moral Regeneration Movement (MRM) was established.

One way to describe the present situation of moral degeneration is to contrast it with the values or virtues appreciated in traditional African society. Limited space does not allow us to discuss the religious, social, educational and other structures which form the basis of these values (cf. Motlhabi, 1986:92-93).

## 1. The virtues and values of traditional African society

In traditional Africa a shared morality was the cement of society. It is clear from the agreement in the following lists of traditional values mentioned by different authors: Charity, honesty, hospitality, generosity, loyalty, truthfulness, solidarity, respect for nature, elders and God (Kinoti, 1992:84). Elsewhere she distinguishes between *personal values*, which helped individuals to be integrated people, like honesty, reliability, generosity, courage, temperance, humanity and justice and *social values* that helped society to remain integrated, like peace, harmony, respect for authority, respect for and fear of supernatural realities (Kinoti, 1992:80). Mojola (1988:30) adds: harmony, peace, friendliness and decency. Apart from those already mentioned, Gyekye (1998:324) mentions the following traditional African moral ideals or virtues: kindness, compassion, benevolence, concern for others – in short, any action or behaviour that is conducive to the promotion of the welfare of others. Elsewhere (p. 332) he gives the following list which imposes on the individual a duty to

the community and its members: interdependence, co-operation and reciprocity. (See also Gyekye, 1996.)

Motlhabi (1986:91, 95) draws attention to the fact that equivalents of the Ten Commandments, like prohibitions to steal, murder, commit adultery, tell lies or deceive, are encountered in the traditional African concept of a virtuous life.

Gelfand (1987:65 ff, 82 ff) not only provides a description of the cardinal values or virtues of the Shona people, but also of the bad qualities. The most important *virtues* are: respect, love, compassion, kindness, generosity, truth, rectitude, humility, self-discipline, forgiveness, mercy, pity, sufficiency, repentance, trust, giving, strength, patience, courage, hard work, unselfishness and the willingness to share whatever one has, no matter how little it may be. The *vices*, rejected by traditional society, were: abuse, lying, deceit, stealing, adultery, drinking, violent quarrelling, pride, jealousy, covetousness, hatred, ingratitude, anger, negligence, weakness, assault, provocation and selfishness.

Geldfand also mentions different types of sanctions designed to ensure proper behaviour. One of them is public ridicule to cause shame, guilt and fear and to prevent antisocial behaviour. Kudadjie (1983:171-173, cf. also Motlhabi, 1986:96) discusses the question how morality was enforced in detail, and distinguishes between two main types of sanctions: religious and social.

*Religious sanctions* included the practice of cursing through magic and the fear of punishment by the ancestors and the gods – the “policemen” of traditional Africa. *Social sanctions* included the following: (1) praising and honouring the good and brave; (2) parental gifts to good, reliable children; (3) confidence between parent and children.

Apart from these *positive* social motivations, the following were *negative* social sanctions: (1) Family or clan renunciation; (2) disinheriting; (3) swearing of oaths and curses; (4) ostracism; (5) public disgrace or scandalising; (6) execution, in the case of notorious criminals, adulterers, seducers, etc.

## 2. The present moral crisis: uncertainty and confusion

The present situation contrasts sharply with the previous (cf. Mugambi & Nasimiyu-Wasike, 1992). Elderly people lament daily that they are meeting behaviour that shocks them: sexual immorality, dishonesty, corruption, crime, violence and many other things which hasten the old to their graves. Middle-aged people lament about children they fail to

control. The youth complain of a lack of example from the older members of society.

Eitel (1986:1) describes the present African as someone between two worlds: unable to part with the old and not yet of the new world. In a limbo between these two worlds a dichotomy permeates his moral behaviour. Kinoti (1992:73) draws attention to the same phenomenon by way of the following folk tale. A hyena was following the general direction of the smell of meat. But when his path forked into two he was not so sure which one would lead him to the meat. In his uncertainty he put his legs astride the two paths and tried to walk along both. He ended up splitting in the middle! Many other people have written in similar ways about the “divided soul” of Africans.

This uncertainty is evident when Oruka (1990:105, 106) lists the types of values which form the roots of contemporary Kenyan culture: (1) the pure traditional; (2) the pure Christian (or Muslim); (3) the traditional-cum-Christian; (4) the secular West; (5) the secular traditional and (6) the unspecified culture in transition.

The first is a cultural root which results in a cultural attitude which does not go beyond the values of a given ethnicity. The second is a commitment to Christian values ... in defiance of any other values. ... The third is a category which caters for those who believe partly in African traditions and partly in Christianity. The secular West is an unreligious attitude ... The secular traditional is an unreligious and unmagical belief in traditional culture. The unspecified culture in transition is the culture of the urbanised youth in Kenya today – it is what others have begun to refer to as the *sheng culture*.

### **3. The reasons for the contemporary crisis**

When we know what caused the moral crisis, we may be in a position to look for solutions. This main section will, firstly, characterise traditional morality. Secondly, it will become clear that traditional morality reveals some inherent weaknesses. Thirdly, important external influences will be discussed.

#### **3.1 The characteristics of traditional African morality**

Traditional African morality can be described in the following terms: (1) communalistic; (2) humanistic or anthropocentric; (3) pragmatistic and utilitarian; (4) tribalistic; (5) shame-oriented and (6) this-worldly.

These six characteristics imply the following:

### 3.1.1 Communalistic

According to Kollman (1988:59) “African morality and ethics ... cannot be conceived outside of the community”. Gyekye (1998:318) regards communalism not only as its outstanding but as its defining characteristic. Traditional African society was therefore characterised not by one’s own rights but by duties towards others:

If I carry out a duty to help someone in distress, I would not be doing so because I think a person has a right against me, a right I should help to fulfil. I would be carrying out that duty because I consider that person worthy of some moral consideration by me ... (Gyekye, 1998:333).

Wiredu (1998:305) is also of the opinion that African traditional morality is “quintessentially social”. When writing about the ideal person according to the Akan he says the following:

The communalistic orientation ... means that an individual’s image will depend rather crucially upon the extent to which his/her actions benefit others rather than him/herself, not of course, by coincidence, but by design ... an individual who remained content with self-regarding success would be viewed as so circumscribed in outlook as not to merit the title of a real person (Wiredu, 1998:312).

Motlhabi (1986:95) agrees: “... the central moral norms were the maintenance of harmonious relationships within the community ...”

A communalistic ethics or morality does not only imply that all human behaviour should be to the benefit of society. Society itself is also the *norm* for moral behaviour. According to Mojola (1988:31) the fundamental criterion of morality is the community: “An act is right if and only if it also conforms to the rules and regulations established by the community ...” The moral norms are, therefore, not derived from the will of the Supreme Being: “... the thought is not that something is good because God approves it, but rather that God approves of it because it is good in the first place (for society)” (Mojola, 1988:31).

Kigongo (1991:24) stresses the fact that in a society – like the present African one – where there is rapid and profound social changes and fundamental conflicts in people’s social experience, one’s ability to make choices in respect of moral behaviour is of paramount importance. Traditional morality did not prepare Africans for such choices because it emphasised conformity to the *status quo* and punished non-conformity.

Having impinged considerably on the freedom of the individual ... the traditional society left very little room and opportunity for one to make

a deliberate rational choice in the realm of ethical conduct (Kigongo 1991:24).

### 3.1.2 Humanistic or anthropocentric

According to Wiredu (1998:308) African concepts of morals are generally of a humanistic orientation:

... at all stages ... morality is grounded in conceptual and empirical considerations about human well-being ... this is why the term 'humanistic' is so very apt as a characterisation of Akan moral thinking. At least in part, this is why it is correct to describe that ethic as non-supernaturalistic in spite of the sincere belief in a Supreme Being.

Elsewhere Wiredu (1983:11, 12) concludes:

We now see that the 'gods' or even the Supreme God are irrelevant to the conceptual foundations of morality in Akan thought ... The gods are treated with respect if they deliver the goods, and with contempt if they fail ... Attitudes to the gods depend on their success, and vary from healthy respect to sneering contempt.

The anthropocentric (man-centred) orientation is clear from the following quotation:

... a human person is essentially the centre of the thick set of concentric circles of obligations and responsibilities matched by rights and privileges revolving round levels of relationships irradiating from the consanguinity of household kith and kin, through the 'blood' ties of lineage and clan, to the wider circumference of human familyhood ... (Wiredu, 1998:311).

Mojola (1988:30) agrees that because of its preoccupation with human welfare and well-being, traditional morality was "essentially humanistic" and "man-centred". Bujo (1990:49) also describes traditional African ethics as "fundamentally anthropocentric and humanistic", in other words a horizontal relationship between humans. When Motlhabi (1986:94, 95) discusses traditional African moral values, norms and codes he arrives at the same conclusion: "The concept of ubuntu placed emphasis on the person as the highest and intrinsic value."

It is clear that traditional morality is not about obeying the will of a god or pleasing him, but about obeying the will of the community and seeking the well-being of human beings.

### 3.1.3 Pragmatic and utilitarian

Gbadegesin (1998:302) asks the important question “Why be morally good?” “It will pay you” appears to be the ultimate appeal for moral goodness in traditional Nigerian worldviews. He concludes:

Far from having a religious foundation, then, we have here a system of morality which, while it makes use of religion as a motivating factor, is clearly pragmatic and ‘this-worldly’ to the core ... the Yoruba are very pragmatic in their approach to morality, and though religion may serve them as motivating force, it is not the ultimate appeal in moral matters (Gbadegesin, 1998:305).

Mojola (1988:32) and Bujo (1990:50) use the word “utilitarian” to describe traditional ethics. Wiredu (1998:307) uses the same word and indicates that this utilitarian attitude even applies to the Akan’s relationship to his gods:

... what is good in general is what promotes human interests ... the Akans are known to be sharply contemptuous of ‘gods’ who fail to deliver; continued respect is conditional on a high percentage of scoring by the Akan reckoning.

### 3.1.4 Tribalistic

In spite of the fact that Africans do not prefer their traditional culture to be described as “tribal”, Turaki (1997) does not hesitate to use this term. He (Turaki, 1997:66 ff, cf. also Motlhabi, 1986:94) provides the following description of what he calls Africa’s tribal morality and ethics:

#### **Its source or basis**

In Africa the source/basis of morality is the ancestors, kinship and in-group. External and objective moral principles lack legitimacy and authority. This contrasts sharply with most Christians who accept God’s will as the source and basis of morality.

#### **Moral and ethical codes**

Moral and ethical codes are derived from the ancestors and also from the ultimate interest and security of the blood group. Even though individuals might operate under national and universal moral codes, their loyalty and allegiance are first to their tribal/ethnic groups. The difference with mainline Christianity is again clear according to which the moral codes (like love) have universal implications and applications.

## **Right and wrong**

What is right and wrong can only be committed against a member of the own ethnic group, race or tribe, but not against a stranger or an outsider. An outsider has no rights or protection and anything done to him has no moral or ethical value. It is an insider who has rights, privileges and protection under racial and tribal laws. Thus killing or discriminating against an outsider is not a crime (Turaki, 1997:68).

Kollman (1988:59) agrees: "The clan or tribe ... is in traditional Africa the only locus for justice ... outside of which all others are strangers and inferiors, if not enemies."

For this reason cheating, mismanagement, embezzlement etc. are not viewed as wrongs as long as it brings material benefits to one's own kinsfolk. Those are praised who have succeeded in looting a state's or company's treasury for the benefit of their group, for instance to build churches, mosques and community centres! Again this is in stark contrast with the guidelines of the Bible which have universal implications.

## **Responsibility and accountability**

In traditional Africa, according to Turaki (1997:69), one is expected to carry responsibility in accordance with the wishes of the ancestors and the community of blood relations. One does not live in terms of objective principles. Similarly, one is not accountable to oneself, but to one's ancestors and blood relations. Patriotism and loyalty to the state or a church therefore becomes a problem.

Personal sense of sin, shame and guilt are always interpreted in terms of the ingroup and blood community. It is the ingroup that is wronged or sinned against ... One sins only against kinsfolk, and feels ashamed or guilty because of them. The behaviour, attitudes and practices of individuals and groups within the context of the modern state do not carry with them any strong sense of sin, shame and guilt. It is on account of this that the state's moral and ethical codes are not always adhered to or respected. They are usually considered to be of the outside world, hence they lack legitimacy and authority (Turaki, 1997:71).

In Christianity responsibility and accountability are to God and all fellow human beings. It is not limited to one's own ethnic group. The scope of one's duty has been enlarged to embrace the totality of humanity, transcending tribal values and interests.

Turaki's description of the traditional tribal morality of Africa is confirmed by authors like Kollman (1988) and Waruta (1992) who wrote extensively



on the issue of tribalism in Africa. According to Kollman colonialism heightened the tribal consciousness of Africans. Also contemporary urbanisation has not neutralised but strengthened tribalism. In the urban setting the African is lost in the impersonality of today's relationships from which he takes his refuge into tribalism. Tribal identities today play an important role in the competitive struggle for all-too-scarce political and economic assets. And because the goods and services are not distributed freely and equally, but according to ethnic criteria, tribalism should be regarded as discrimination and as serious injustice.

Waruta defines and describes tribalism, gives many examples of its manifestations and its detrimental effects and also suggests some solutions. At the end of this essay he warns against a new form of "tribalism":

New groups not based on tribal relations but on class interests such as the rich, the elite, the military and so forth, are now on the increase to protect their class interests. A new form of 'tribalism', the 'Wabenzi tribe' or the Mercedes-Benz car owners tribe (the rich), is now a reality posing a greater danger and threat to society as a whole than the earlier tribalism (Waruta, 1992:134).

### 3.1.5 Shame-oriented

Benedict (1946) was the first to distinguish between shame cultures (more communalistic cultures, like that of traditional Japan and Africa) and guilt cultures (individualistic cultures, like the West). Lienhard (2001), however, argues that the salient difference is an honour orientation versus a justice orientation, more so than shame and guilt. After a transgression an honour-oriented person experiences shame, while a justice-oriented person feels guilty. Restoration, therefore, deals either with shame by restoring one's honour in the community or with guilt by seeing that justice is done. Lienhard (2001:136-139) also indicates that the Bible has a message for both honour- and justice-oriented people and that it has implications for how we communicate the Gospel to the two different cultures.

The reasons why one refrains from doing wrong should not simply be shame or loss of honour when one's faults are exposed, causing one to lose one's position in society. Personal relationships are, however, often more important to an African than the truth is. A Westerner feels that he has the right to speak the truth. If an African realises that speaking the straight truth is going to cause trouble and incite people to hostility and hatred, he will rather keep quiet. To say to somebody's face: "You are lying"! is a great sin. Therefore you simply remain quiet, pretend to believe what he is saying or tell the truth in an indirect, roundabout way.

You will say to someone who wishes to drive with you that you will pick him up tomorrow – rather than saying that he cannot come with you. Another example: if your mother-in-law asks for a goat, you dare not say directly that you do not wish to give it to her. If she enquires again later, you simply say that you are still looking for a goat. It is much more important to respect people than to speak the truth. Fear of trouble often makes Africans say yes when they mean no.

This habit of pretending to be willing to do something (unreliability, according to the West) does present difficulties for the dissemination of the Gospel in Africa. In the churches this tendency has had the result that the sins of the members and the officials of the church are concealed and not made public. (Behind the person's back, however, gossip goes on unchecked!) The Bible teaches, however, that wo/man should fear God more than their fellow human beings.

### 3.1.6 A this-worldly morality

This last characteristic of African traditional morality indicates the fact that it does not believe in any judgement of our moral behaviour in life after death. Beyond death there is only the ancestors who continue to live as they used to live in this world. There is no final judgement by God which can encourage one to live a morally good life here on earth. Bujo (1990:61, 62) quite correctly addresses the following question to traditional African morality:

Why so much effort and pain, why such an obsession to avoid wrongs and practise virtue, if, in the end, all turns into nothing? ... If all ends with the tomb, or certainly does not change after death, then treachery and loyalty, torture and justice, drunkenness and temperance, war and peace are all the same ...

If there is no expectation of a new creation, as promised by the Bible, there is no reason either to live a morally good life in this world.

## 3.2 Inherent weaknesses of traditional morality

From our exposition of traditional African morality it will already be clear that it contains inherent weaknesses that should not be ignored. People sometimes tend only to blame present or external circumstances for the moral bankruptcy of Africa while they idealise traditional morality.

In the preceding part of this article I have deliberately given the word to Africans themselves and have quoted extensively from what they have to say about traditional African morality, including its weaknesses. It is interesting to see how these weak points are in line with what a

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Westerner, like Steyne (1989:186-198) has to say. According to him animistic morality is characterised by the following:

The human being is in charge, s/he has to take care of her/himself. He can acquire everything he needs for life by manipulating the spirit-world successfully. The spirits respond to the correct rituals, not to a good moral life. Man does not merit anything by being moral. Man's will and desire is supreme – it is a totally anthropocentric morality. Man himself does not have to change to be morally good. He can live as he pleases as long as he can acquire power through the manipulation of the spirit-world.

There is no basis or standard for moral action outside the human being. The norm is the securing of power for the individual. This can be acquired by any means, good or bad. The end justifies the means. In spite of the emphasis on the community, traditional morality is always about personal gain or advantage – it is a self-centred morality. Because the motivation is to be successful above and over one's fellow-men, abuse and mistreatment of the less privileged and exploitive attitudes towards outsiders by a small elite which live at the expense of the poor masses, are tolerated if not fully approved.

There is no need for universal social concern. The neighbour is narrowly defined as the in-group, while all others may be deceived and exploited as fair game. Justice applies only to the in-group, and even injustice to the own group can be covered with the right means, namely a specific ritual for the spirit-world.

The human being's relationship with an untrustworthy god and spirit-world (both good and bad may issue from them), have a negative effect on social life. If he/she fails to exercise power over events, someone else is to blame and should be punished. The community, the ritual performed or the spirit-world could be guilty. In spite of the strong community spirit – or perhaps because of that? – man will not hesitate to blame his close kin for natural or normal physical problems or calamities. Moral guilt is therefore not accepted by the individual.

Similarly a person's actions are not his/her own responsibility. Responsibility is shifted onto the community or the spirit-world. Guilt is also not related to an offence against the will of a God. There is no objective standard to measure guilt or "sin". Relativity reigns. If the right ritual is performed, such as making an appropriate sacrifice, man can circumvent all the consequences of his moral misbehaviour and remove his guilt. In this way, should he be caught, the spirit-world can be appeased.

For an outsider the traditional African virtues mentioned above (like fidelity in marriage, hospitality to strangers, love and respect for relatives) seem praiseworthy and commendable until their deeper motivation is understood.

These virtues are motivated by fear. Fear because of the fact that the spirits are unpredictable and can never be fully trusted, but frequently respond to whim and fancy. Fear of not performing a ritual accurately enough to motivate the spirit-world. Fear of fellow-men – even those very close to oneself – who can cause one harm. Fear of not acquiring enough power to protect oneself.

What therefore appears to be objective standards for morality does not arise out of love or altruism, but is motivated by fear that you will be the loser. The question is whether a sound moral system can be built on such a pervasive feeling of fear.

Elsewhere Steyne (1989:183) characterises animist beliefs and morality as (1) anthropocentric (man exists for himself), (2) humanistic (everything from, to and for man), (3) self-centred and (4) utilitarian (everything must serve man). This characterisation shows remarkable similarity to our own description on previous pages as well as with the book of Nyirongo (1997). This also makes us aware of the fact that, in spite of traditional Africa's emphasis on good human relationships (see the first part of this article), its morality can be very self-centred or egoistic.

### **3.3 External reasons for the contemporary moral crisis**

The internal causes are not sufficient to understand Africa's moral degeneration. The following external reasons should be added.

#### **3.3.1 The influence of Western secular culture, especially Western individualism and capitalism.**

According to Mwikamba (1992:86) whereas in the past Africans were much more community-centred, today they are becoming more and more ego-centred. Bennaars (1993:23) expresses agreement in the following words:

In traditional Africa morality was always intrinsically linked to the community ... the sole criterion of goodness was the welfare, the well-being of the community ... Any form of individualism was seen to have a negative value; it was seen as a potential threat and thus regarded as intolerable.

But today the situation has changed:

Individualism in various forms is increasingly evident in daily life. Education, religion, culture imposed from outside have all contributed, not to speak of economics and politics. Today, African individualism has largely replaced communalism, as both individuals and nations struggle for survival ... (Bennaars, 1993:38).

Oruka (1990:103) draws attention to the influence of colonialism. For a society so seriously disturbed by the invasion of a foreign culture to come back to cultural normality it needs at least to pass through five generations or a hundred years!

There can be no doubt about the fact that the influence of the West uprooted the cultural, social, political, economic and moral systems of traditional Africa and restructured them to meet the needs of the West (Nthamburi, 1992:108). This was not only the case during colonial times, but it is continuing up to the present.

### 3.3.2 Materialism

One of the clearest influences from the West is the growing materialism in Africa (cf. Mwikamba, 1992:102, 103). Money and material well-being have become a semi-god. Economic activity, success and material gain have become ends in themselves. People are subordinating and exploiting others for economic purposes. Materialism and consumerism erode both traditional and Christian morals. Hedonism (seeking only my own pleasure) has the upper hand. The idols which the African youth imitate are the business, sex, music and football idols from the West. Human sexuality becomes a "tool" to be used and discarded, sexual violence and rape are increasing.

### 3.3.3 The mass media

Another strong influence is the mass media, especially television and videos. Most of the programmes are imported from the West, especially the United States. They propagate the secular moral values of the West like materialism and free sex. Especially young people in Africa become die-hard worshippers of Western ideals because they are considered to be "modern".

### 3.3.4 Education

Western education is another agent of cultural change (Mwikamba, 1992:94), reinforcing alienation from traditional morality. Initially schooling was Christian-orientated (mission schools), but after independence it became secularised state education. The new morality fostered by this kind of education was materialistic in outlook. Above all, such morality

was very private – it allowed the individual to pursue his own interests without much regard for the welfare of others (Bennaars, 1993:25). Education, furthermore, often only provided intellectual or professional training without any moral “education for life”. (See Kigongo, 1991 for more moral weaknesses of the Western educational system as well as Mpinga’s, 1990 proposals to improve the situation.)

### 3.3.5 The influence of Christianity

A number of authors express the opinion that Christianity did not always have a beneficial influence on the moral life of the Africans.

Richardson (1996:129) is of the opinion “that the Christian understanding of ethics and the moral life, which has been shaped almost entirely by Western culture, has seriously impoverished itself by not appreciating and learning from the customs, concepts and time-honoured wisdom of Africa”. The Christian ethics propagated in Africa was strongly influenced by Western individualism, secularism and dualism (Richardson, 1996: 135-139). Traditional African ethics is of great relevance for Christian ethics today because of its emphasis on community, religious rituals and *ubuntu* (Richardson, 1996:137-140). Christian ethics should therefore look to Africa for guidance and inspiration. (However, to my mind some writers are not critical enough about the idea of *ubuntu*, e.g. Teffo, 1998; Shutte, 2001 and Broodryk, 2002.)

According to Bujo (1990:40, 41) Christianity in two ways did not help the traditional African who accepted the Christian faith.

Christianity, firstly, was too often preached as “dos” and “dents”, a catalogue of sins – the virtues being for the most part only briefly mentioned. The negative (sins) were more important than the positive (virtues)! Morality was often transformed into a catalogue or code of dry laws, not leaving room for the love Christ came to bear witness to among humans.

Christian morality, in the second place, tended to concentrate on the sixth commandment (“You shall not commit adultery”). “Immorality” was in the first place understood as *sexual* immorality, while Christian morality consists of much more than only sexual morality. The Bible is far too rich to let itself be reduced to a lesson in sexual shortcomings!

A third weakness of Christianity in Africa is mentioned by Bennaars. Christianity waged a constant war against African traditional morals. Such warfare had serious, negative consequences for the African because his moral traditions were an integral part of communal life in Africa. If an African refused to reject the traditional morality – as was

required from Christians – it implied a refusal to reject traditional social life in its entirety, the value system included. “The African Christian became thereby a displaced person, who had substituted for traditional social ethics a foreign kind of personal ethics” (Bennaars, 1993:25).

This is a very important point mentioned by Bennaars. The individualistic, pietistic kind of Western Christianity transferred to Africa was very much worried about *personal* morality (lying, drinking, smoking, cheating, adultery etc.), but it did not provide a new *social* Christian ethics to take the place of the rejected traditional social ethics. There was nothing to guide converted Africans in socio-economic political life.

The same point is taken up and emphasised by other authors as well. According to Mwikamba (1992:86) beliefs and morals were not private matters in traditional societies. In fact there was no distinction between private and public morality. However, with the advent of Western culture and Christianity, life has been compartmentalised into private and public sectors. Today we have a growing trend in Africa to claim that what one believes and does in private is a private matter.

An example is when a corrupt politician is welcomed in the church and even given a prominent position. The church seems to give credence to the view that one can remain in good standing with the church – and even be saved – and yet continue to enrich one-self by paying poor wages to one’s workers. In this way the church preaches against individual sins, but condones social sins – which are no less sinful in the eyes of God.

Nthamburi (1992:107 ff) also rejects this dangerous distinction between private and public morality “Morality does not only concern the individual’s behaviour but the whole of society” (Nthamburi, 1992:110). He also traces the origin of this idea back to the kind of Christianity proclaimed by missionaries who tended to overemphasise personal sin and salvation and neglected social or structural sins and the need of social renewal. By condoning the *status quo*, they have also condoned social sin and injustice. His urgent plea is that “Christians have to extend their witness from the personal so as to have an impact on political, social and economic systems” (Nthamburi, 1992:117).

Haselbarth (1989:67ff) and O’Donovan (2000) are two of the few authors, writing on Christian ethics in the African context, who took up this challenge by dealing in their books not only with sex, marriage and the family, but also with urbanisation, labour, industry, politics, etc.

### 3.3.6 A variety of other causes for moral decline

Because it is impossible to go into detail a few other reasons for the present moral crisis will only be mentioned: (1) The disintegration of traditional religion, society and culture removed important religious and social structures and sanctions (see above) against immoral behaviour. (2) The disintegration of marriage and especially (extended) family life – the place where young people learned how to behave correctly – worsened the situation. (3) Urbanisation disrupted traditional ways of life and commercialisation – not only of agriculture but nearly everything – resulted in a materialistic way of life. (4) Increasing poverty and the struggle for survival also played its role. (5) It should also be kept in mind that today the people of Africa is encountering all kinds of new problems to which traditional morality cannot provide the answers.

## 4. The challenge

Few if any will disagree with the conclusion of Mwikamba (1992:104): “The urgency of moral reforms both in theory and in practice are of paramount importance. The reforms must be radical at all levels: the churches, individuals and society.” But these few words pose a formidable challenge.

It seems to me that the essence of the problem we are dealing with is this: From where can we obtain reliable norms to guide moral life in contemporary Africa? I fully agree with Bujo (1990:66) when he says: “Ethics ... by definition has to formulate ... norms of human behaviour, without any concession to human weakness, otherwise ethics would renounce its guiding function.”

What people today need in Africa, more than anything else, is guidance, which direction to follow in the daily choices they have to make. Like the hyena in the folk tale they are confused because they have to choose between two different kinds of roads, indicated by two different norms. As was the case with the hyena they cannot simply combine the two. The one road is that of traditional African morality and norms and the other is that of modern Western morality and norms.

### 4.1 The traditional African road

If we take this road the following should be kept in mind: (1) That not everything black is beautiful. Traditional African morality contains many weak and even questionable aspects (cf. Bujo, 1990:102-111). (2) To a great extent we have already missed the opportunity to save many of the good African moral traditions from disappearing. (3) We are confronted today with many new problems, not considered by traditional morality.



If we follow this road we will therefore have to listen carefully to the still living traditions in Africa which have withstood the savaging deluge of slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism and Western Christianity and which are still pulsating in the hearts of Africans. At the same time we should be self-critical and not simply accept everything because it is “traditional”. Tradition cannot be accepted wholly without careful discrimination.

## 4.2 The modern Western road

The opposite, but identical danger exists in this case: To accept European moral values wholly and treat them as the only standard for being “civilised” and morally good, while castigating anything African as “backward”. It should also be strongly emphasised that “Western” cannot be identified with “Christian”. Christianity in the past played a significant role in the formation of Western morality, but its influence has steadily declined since the 17th century.

## 4.3 A third way<sup>1</sup>

The most important reason why we have to look for a third way out of the dilemma of the hyena is because of the *wrong conceptions of the origin of moral norms* in both Africa and the West. As we have indicated, moral norms, according to traditional Africa, are derived from the community. For this viewpoint I have coined a new word “communomy” (from *communitas* + *nomos*). In the West moral norms have their origin in the individual. To describe this viewpoint, I use the word “autonomy” (from *autos* + *nomos*), meaning “I am my own law(giver)”.

In actual fact there is not much difference between the two viewpoints. In both cases *moral norms have their origin in the human being* – in one case the community of humans and in the other the individual human being.

Simply from their practical results it is clear today that neither the norms of the group (majority) nor that of the individual can be reliable guidelines to a full human life. From the Bible it is clear what the reason is: Man cannot be his own law, but is subjected to a law *outside* himself or themselves. We call this viewpoint “heteronomy” (from the Greek *heteros* + *nomos*).

God has not only created us. He has also given us clear guidelines of how to live in order to experience life in its fullness. We have to obey

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1 This third way will be discussed in much more detail in my forthcoming book (chapter 9): *Understanding and rebuilding Africa* (2003).

these guidelines or laws. They are the real origin of reliable moral norms. This viewpoint is called “theonomy” (from the Greek words *theos* + *nomos*), which implies that God’s laws are the origin of our moral norms.

Earlier in this article we have already drawn attention to the fact that traditional African morality obeyed God’s laws as expressed in the Ten Commandments.

The norm that transcends humanity is, according to Turaki (1997), God’s commandment of love: “Love your neighbour as yourself”. Nthamburi (1992:112, 113) agrees: “The basic principle of Christian moral life is love to the neighbour ... Love takes the first place among all other values.” The same is emphasised by Eitel (1986: 98, 99):

Love ... is one of the most powerful motivators in Christian living. It serves as the major, controlling factor in the moral life of a disciple. God’s love for man draws out man’s love for God which, in turn, spawns love for others.

Bujo (1990:66) is correctly of the opinion that “in morality it is neither the majority nor the minority who should dictate what has to be done; only the validity of principles counts”. According to him a morality based on the Gospel goes far beyond what even the highest African, Marxist or Hindu morality is able to give.

Our norms are, however, not to be identified with God’s will as formulated in his laws, for example the Ten Commandments or the law of love. Not we, but God is laying down the law or order for life. We can only discover it, respond to it in obedience or disobedience. Divine laws are *infallible*, human norms are *fallible*. God’s will does *not change*, human norms *may change*, because of our deficient or even faulty understanding and formulation of God’s will, or because God’s will has to be embodied differently in different times and circumstances.

God’s written Word is not culture-*conditioned*, because the Word itself conditions every culture. Neither is it culture-*bound*, since it transcends every culture, it is trans-cultural. It is culture-*related*. God’s universally valid Word was revealed concretely in the local and temporal-historical particularities of Israelite and early Christian habits. But embedded in these changing conditions are enduring motifs which lay their claim upon us today.

Spykman (1985:47) therefore distinguishes between the “then-and-there *form* of obedience and the here-and-now *norm* for obedience”. Elsewhere he says:

Abiding norms come to us in Scripture couched in the historical-cultural forms of the day. This is nothing to regret. Nor may we play the contingent off against the permanent, neither absolutising its forms, nor relativising its norms (Spykman, 1985:53).

In our altered situation the *formal* aspect of a certain law may no longer be relevant. Yet it also has a *normative* aspect which carries an abiding validity.

Because Christ, for example, instructed his disciples to wash one another's feet (John 13:14), it does not imply that we today have to do exactly the same. In His times and circumstances (dirt roads, long walks, open sandals) it was necessary. In our times (tarred roads, travel by car and wearing a different kind of shoe) we, firstly, have to acknowledge the different context. Secondly, we have to determine what Christ's will is that transcends the specific context. And, in the third place, we have to recontextualise His will of humble service for our own times, we have to formulate it as a norm for our own specific circumstances.

Both *absolutism* (the idea that norms are supra-historical entities, valid for all times and places) and *relativism* (the denial of any constants to guide us) should therefore be rejected. Because norms are *human responses* to God's will at a certain time and place, absolutism cannot be accepted. And because we believe that norms are applications or positivisations of *God's will* for life, relativism should be rejected.

When discussing moral issues, legalism is a constant threat. Therefore one last perspective should be added. This is the need of a living relationship with God in Christ Jesus – the only real guarantee for a morally good life (Col. 3:3-17).

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**Key concepts:**

Africa – contemporary (crisis)  
Africa – traditional (characteristics)  
ethics  
morality

**Kernbegrippe:**

Afrika – hedendaagse (krisis)  
Afrika – tradisionele (eienskappe)  
eties  
moraliteit

