

AIDS and the Ancestor Cult:  
Toward a Contextual Theological Conversation  
in the “New” South Africa

by

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## RESUMÉ

### **Purpose of the Thesis**

This thesis investigates the meanings of Christian salvation within the context of the AIDS pandemic in South Africa. The pandemic poses enormous social, economic, developmental, as well as theological, problems for the fledgling democracy of South Africa. The pandemic has stricken the whole continent of Africa particularly forcefully, but in South Africa, where there had been expectations of a new order since the peaceful overthrow of the apartheid government in 1994, the expectations of “salvation” for the nation have been cruelly dashed by the force of the pandemic.

With the aid of a lemma, I show that salvation is neither equivalent to and co-extensive with political liberation, nor reducible to a unassignable spiritual state of being in relationship with Christ. Rather, as in Old Testament writings, salvation should be understood as having direct bearing on the immediate context of the person or nation in question - which understanding is frequently overlooked. In the context of AIDS, then, an understanding of salvation should have a bearing on social death due to the stigma of the condition; on the healing of the illness itself; on the reconciliation of people whose lives are immediately affected by the pandemic; on addressing those social factors which allow the spread of HIV, and on the tardiness in the provision of effective medical care for people with various AIDS-related illnesses.

In the thesis I demonstrate that another unavoidable dimension of the “New” South Africa is the traditional Bantu cult of the ancestors. I cite numerous reports showing that the cult is widely practiced, even by Christians. The ancestors are therefore an unavoidable dimension of the common religious understanding of life. If the meanings of salvation in the pandemic are being sought, then it would be a grave oversight not to consider how they relate to the cult of the ancestors.

## Synthetic Contextual Theology

Following the Synthetic method of contextual theology described in Stephen Bevans's *Models of Contextual Theology*,<sup>1</sup> the thesis may at first appear to have a somewhat eclectic approach. However, the motivating idea behind this method is to devise a response that speaks to a particular lived present situation, while remaining as faithful as possible to the past. Thus it is important to understand well the context under consideration, and to relate to it relevant elements from other contexts of the Christian tradition. The synthetic approach takes cognisance of the fact that societies and cultures are always changing, so that no single formulation can be the final word on any given subject.

### Sources Used

As no word is final, no single source provides all that is necessary for a synthetic contextual theology. Thus, for example, I use some elements from my Jesuit tradition, which I deem to be relevant to the present context, as well as relying somewhat heavily on the systematic historical soteriology of Hans Urs von Balthasar. I use the work of Antoine Vergote, a Belgian theologian-anthropologist, as well as the work of many anthropologists familiar with the cult of the ancestors. I rally data from the medical field, in order to describe the AIDS disaster, and have also trawled archives in Lesotho and South Africa to gain a historical perspective of the relation of the cult of the ancestors to the Christian churches in Southern Africa. Drawing on these disparate sources, I conduct a conversation between the past and the present, with the hope of being faithful to both.

But this thesis is most heavily indebted to the *Kairos Document*<sup>2</sup> which supplies both the notion of AIDS as a *kairos* and the skeleton to which I attach my analysis of the meanings of salvation. It is clear that the AIDS context presents a challenge to the

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1. Revised and Expanded Edition, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002) Chapter 7

2. The Kairos Theologians, *The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church, A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa* (Braamfontein, 1985).

country as well as to the very identity and relevance of the churches in South Africa. It is an issue on which the churches have to “stand up and be counted” and is thus a *kairos*. The *Kairos Document* offers a method of analysing some of the theologies that were current at the time of apartheid, when it was written. It compares critically three different theologies, showing what interests are being served by each. In this thesis I borrow this tripartite juxtaposition of theological trends, and compare soteriologies implicit in the cult of the ancestors, in a classical Christian approach, and in a prophetic stance vis-a-vis the AIDS crisis.

### **Findings**

This research has shown that the cult of the ancestors makes a definite contribution to an understanding of salvation in the context of the pandemic in South Africa. Apart from any benefit that people with AIDS may derive from traditional medicinal remedies (revealed by the ancestors), the cult also places them at the centre of rituals of reconciliation and social healing. The eschatological horizon represented by the cult offers people who die of AIDS both a hopeful prospect (being reunited with one’s deceased forebears) and a potential source of disturbance (having no direct descendants to remember one.)

I believe I have also shown that some of the traditional soteriological formulations of classical Christianity do not do much to offer comfort or reassurance to people suffering with AIDS. Likewise, the cult challenges Christian ministers to a more culture- and person-sensitive celebration of the sacraments of reconciliation and of the sick. These have to treat the person within his or her social circle and should encompass more than only the wellbeing of an individual soul in relation to God. People in other contexts have written that their diagnosis of “HIV-positive” has been an impetus for them to become more engaged in a community, and to embark on a new spiritual life. It would be surprising if the same did not hold for people in a similar situation in South Africa.

I have also shown how the AIDS *kairos* challenges Christians to bear a more prophetic witness. They are to announce the Good News, to denounce anything that exacerbates the suffering of people who already have AIDS, or that contributes to the spread of HIV, and they are to engage in prophetic action that witnesses to the love of God for all people, particularly the most stigmatised and marginalised.

### **Conclusion**

The most obvious conclusion of the thesis is that the cult of the ancestors has a significant contribution to make, both to the wellbeing of Christians afflicted with AIDS, and to a better understanding of salvation in the context. Any attempt to understand the meanings of salvation in this context would be incomplete without a consideration of the cult.

I make bold to extend this conclusion to other parts of the developing world which are in the grip of the AIDS pandemic. Christians involved in the crisis would do well to take account of the traditional wisdom and religious background of the people concerned. The Christian ministries of evangelisation and healing will be immeasurably enriched thereby.

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## INTRODUCTION

### **(1) Statement of the Problem**

In the “new” South Africa millions<sup>1</sup> of people are infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, and leads inevitably to premature death. The theology that has been written in the context of this pandemic has been of a largely pastoral nature and has not concentrated on traditional Western systematic theological categories of soteriology, theodicy, eschatology, etc.

At the same time as the AIDS pandemic has been building up steam, an innovation has occurred in theological writing. Many theologians have reappropriated the traditional Bantu cult of the ancestors in Southern Africa. They write about the cult as the traditional source of African spirituality, and about the ancestors as guardians of African morality. This is a re-assertion of black identity which has co-incided with the latter years of the struggle for democracy and the early period of the new political dispensation in South Africa.

Two observations can be made about the renewed prominence of the ancestral cult on the theological scene:

(i) In the Christian literature up to August 2001, the cult is only once related to the AIDS pandemic. Either this is a gross oversight, or there is the perception that perhaps the cult has not the resources to address the pandemic.

(ii) The cult raises the questions of salvation in Christ and of Christian eschatology, neither of which has been adequately addressed in the literature.

### **(2) State of the Question**

#### **(a) New Political Dispensation**

The 1990's saw enormous change in South Africa. The political dispensation changed with the introduction of democracy and the end of 450 years of effective colonial rule. In 1990,

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1. The HIV/AIDS Barometer of the Mail and Guardian, puts the figure at 4.7 million in November 2002. See [Http://www.mg.co.za/Content/13.jsp?a=66&o=11367](http://www.mg.co.za/Content/13.jsp?a=66&o=11367) viewed on 30 November 2002.

the liberation movements which had been banned in the 1960's were unbanned and allowed to operate freely. Symbolic of the new dispensation were the release on 11 February 1990 of Nelson Mandela, a prisoner of conscience for 27 years, and the holding of the first democratic elections, with universal adult suffrage on 27 April 1994.

During the most repressive years of apartheid, the churches were the only voice left unsilenced in the call for justice. Since the 1960's the English-speaking churches had to varying degrees taken a stand against the apartheid political and economic dispensation.<sup>2</sup> The white branches of the Dutch-Reformed (Calvinist) Churches were largely credited with providing the theological justification for the "State Theology" of racial segregation.<sup>3</sup> The focus of much of the social activity of the churches had been support of those who were suffering under apartheid, and the challenging of unjust structures. Much theological writing was in the mode of liberation theology, with a close identification of salvation in Christ with political liberation. Groups of theologians, such as those writing for the Institute of Contextual Theology, concentrated on the political dimension of the context.

In 2004, South Africa celebrated the tenth anniversary of its democratic transition. While many celebrate the liberation from oppression, arbitrarily repressive measures, state domination and internecine political violence, a new and more destructive scourge is sweeping the country. The pandemic of AIDS is proving a challenge of overwhelming dimension at almost every level of society.

With the advent of democracy there was a palpable sense of a job well-done and permission to return to what was perceived as a "normal" mode for the churches. Civil society, and democratic, representative state structures could take over where the

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2. For an analysis of the often-hesitant resistance of the English-Speaking churches to the apartheid regime, see Villa-Vicencio, *Trapped in Apartheid: A Socio-Theological History of the English-Speaking Churches* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988).

3. The Kairos Theologians, *The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church, A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa* (Braamfontein, 1985) offers an analysis of this "State Theology."

churches left off. To a certain extent, the agenda for theology was once again opened. Speckman and Kaufmann write optimistically of contemporary democratic South Africa: “While the details of what should be done may not be clear, it is obvious that a new agenda has to be set for Contextual Theology.”<sup>4</sup> It is the contention of this thesis that the new agenda for contextual theology has to be the mounting AIDS crisis.

#### (b) The AIDS Pandemic

“The first two cases of AIDS were identified in South Africa in 1982. For the first eight years, the epidemic was primarily located among white homosexuals..... In July 1991, the number of heterosexually transmitted cases equalled the number of homosexual cases.”<sup>5</sup>

The deaths,<sup>6</sup> economic effects,<sup>7</sup> social disruption and morale-sapping effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic are slowly being reckoned and will be felt for decades to come.<sup>8</sup> The depredations of the pandemic are worsened by the heritage of the lack of investment in health, educational and leisure infrastructure during 450 years of skewed economy.

The churches, for so long preoccupied with the issue of socio-political justice, hear a new call. The scourge of AIDS poses as great a challenge to the churches’ pastoral, sacramental and theological resources as did apartheid.

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4. McGlory T Speckman and Larry T Kaufmann, “Introduction,” in *Towards an Agenda for Contextual Theology: Essays in Honour of Albert Nolan*, edited by McGlory T Speckman and Larry T Kaufmann (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2001), 6.

5. Alan Whiteside and Clem Sunter, *AIDS: The Challenge for South Africa* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, Tafelberg, 2000), 47.

6. For actuarial projections of the numbers of deaths in South Africa due to AIDS, see Rob Dorrington, et al., *The Impact of HIV/AIDS on Adult Mortality in South Africa* (Tygerberg: Burden of Disease Research Unit, Medical Research Council of South Africa, 2001 September), [Www.mrc.ac.za/bod/complete.pdf](http://www.mrc.ac.za/bod/complete.pdf) viewed on 28 September 2001.

7. For estimates of how the AIDS will affect the welfare of children and families in South Africa, refer to Deborah Ewing, “Welfare,” in *Impacts and Interventions: The HIV/AIDS Epidemic and the Children of South Africa*, edited by Jeff Gow and Chris Desmond (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press / UNICEF, 2002), 79–93.

8. Whiteside and Sunter, *AIDS*, Chapter 7, projects “The Economic, Developmental and Social Impacts of AIDS” using worst-case and best-case scenarios for the next 35 to 85 years.

Theological reflection on HIV/AIDS changed as more information about the disease became available and as understandings developed. Writings from the late-1980's debated whether AIDS is a punishment from God for the promiscuous behaviour of homosexual men.<sup>9</sup> Other writing of the time looked at appropriate pastoral care for these afflicted people.<sup>10</sup> In the early 1990's it became apparent that AIDS was not restricted to homosexual men, but that it was spreading like wildfire among the general population, especially sexually active people between the ages of 15 and 50. Theological writing shifted to the questions of pastoral care of people with AIDS, caring for orphans, the need for moral renewal, AIDS education in schools and the family, the use of condoms as a means of reducing the spread of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) responsible for the syndrome, etc. Towards the end of the 1990's the churches realised that the pandemic would be a feature of society for the foreseeable future, and that long-term planning and strategies should be in place.<sup>11</sup> It became apparent that even if life-saving drugs were available for everybody infected by the virus, society would be irretrievably changed.<sup>12</sup>

An exclusively biomedical approach to the pandemic is alien to the thinking of most Africans rooted in their traditions. The spiritual and social aspects of living with a killing disease were being investigated. The churches established AIDS desks to co-ordinate their response to the pandemic. The AIDS crisis has also given rise to tentative systematic theological explorations.<sup>13</sup> The present work is one such exploration.

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9. Daniel J. Louw, "VIGS: Die radikale siekte met 'n radikale uitdaging aan die pastorale bediening," *Ned. Geref. Teologiese Tydskrif* XXIX, no. 1 (January 1988): 66–79.

10. Daniel Louw, "Ministering and Counselling the Person with AIDS," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 71 (1990): 37–50.

11. Philippe Denis, "Sharing Family Stories in a Time of AIDS," *Missionalia* 29, no. 2 (August 2001): 258–81.

12. For example, Emmanuel M. Katongole, "Christian Ethics and AIDS in Africa Today: Exploring the Limits of a Culture of Suspicion and Despair," *Missionalia* 29, no. 2 (August 2001): 144–60, discusses the ways in which people have changed their approach to intimate relationships.

13. See, for example, Susan Rakoczy, "Christology in the Context of the HIV/AIDS Pandemic," *Grace and Truth* 18, no. 2 (2001): 5–15.

## (c) The Ancestors Reclaimed

During the years of colonialism and the height of apartheid, the churches proscribed and sanctioned the exploration of Christian theological expressions rooted in the traditional African ancestral cult. Political activism against racism grew from the 1970's onward, and theologians in other parts of the continent were exploring the cult of the ancestors as their countries were gaining independence. South African theologians also began exploring the life-giving dimensions of the cult of the ancestors,<sup>14</sup> its relation to Charismatic experience,<sup>15</sup> and in some cases introducing elements of this cult into the worship of the mainstream ("missionary" and particularly Roman Catholic) churches.<sup>16</sup>

Historically most of the writing about the cult of the ancestors had been by Western missionaries<sup>17</sup> and South African white theologians<sup>18</sup> or anthropologists,<sup>19</sup> in an academic setting. Thus, the cult was described from without, and not from the perspective of an insider's experience. At the least critical, the cult of the ancestors was

14. See, for example, Jerome Skhakhane, "African Spirituality," in *The Church and African Cultures: Conference Papers*, Mohlomi Makobane, Bongani Sithole, and Matheadira Shiya (Lumko, Germiston: Mazenod Institute, 1995), 101–13.

15. Teresa Okure, "Belief in the Holy Spirit and in Ancestral Spirits," *Grace and Truth* 15, no. 3, Steps of Inculturation (November 1998): 5–25.

16. See, for example, Buti Tlhagale, "Bringing the African Culture Into the Church," in *The Church and African Culture: Conference Papers*, Mohlomi Makobane, Bongani Sithole, and Matheadira Shiya (Lumko, Germiston: Mazenod Institute, 1995), 169–85. For further discussion in the same volume, on the introduction of the ancestor cult into Catholic liturgy, the reader is referred to Letsie Moshoeshoe, "Healing Rite," 86–90, and Bafana Hlatshwayo, "Proposed Rites of Marriage: Tswana Pastoral Region," 73–85.

For a response to such proposals, in Zimbabwe, see Josef Elsener, "Traditionelle afrikanische Ahnenverehrung im christlichen Ritual?" *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* 57, no. 4 (2001): 261–86. A search of the Worldwide Web will give an impression of the responses to such proposals as Archbishop Tlhagale's to incorporate sacrifice to the ancestors in the Catholic Mass.

17. See Klaus Nürnberger, "The Sotho Notion of the Supreme Being and the Impact of the Christian Proclamation," *Journal of Religion in Africa* VII, no. 3 (1975): 174–200. Also, M.L. Daneel, "The Christian Gospel and the Ancestor Cult," *Missionalia* 1, no. 2 (1973): 46–73, and Gideon Thom, "A Reformed Perspective on African Belief in Ancestors," *Missionalia* 1, no. 2 (1973): 73–85.

18. For example, Balcomb. A.O., "Modernity and the African Experience," *Bulletin for Contextual Theology* 3, no. 2 (1996), [Http://www.hs.unp.ac.za/theology/mod.htm](http://www.hs.unp.ac.za/theology/mod.htm) viewed on 30 November 2003.

19. In a distinguished career, the doyen of South African anthropologists, W.D. Hammond-Tooke has published a number of books and articles of direct relevance to our theme. These will be cited in the second and third chapters of this work.

Other anthropologists have studied various aspects of indigenous culture and have shown how they relate to the cult of the ancestors. See for example, Dan Bosko, "Why Basotho Wear Blankets," *African Studies* 40, no. 1 (1981): 24–32.

described as the manner in which “pre-modern” Africans explain the working of the universe and try to influence favourably the forces in control of their destiny.<sup>20</sup> More often than not, the missionaries’ writings were to condemn the cult as contrary to the First Commandment, and to warn against any attempt to reconcile the Christian life with the cult.<sup>21</sup> This negative attitude to the ancestors has been evident from the outset of Christian mission among the Basotho, for example, with the earliest catechisms.<sup>22</sup> The third chapter of this work examines the changing attitude toward the cult of the ancestors from the beginning of missionary work in Southern Africa to the present.

Many African Christians have internalised this dimension of mission theology, and regard the traditional cult of the ancestors as a remnant of paganism. So they eschew any family rites to do with their ancestors.<sup>23</sup> Conversely, many Africans have refused to join the mainline Christian churches, because they understand that this would mean they have to forsake the ancestral cult. Indeed, adherence to the ancestors has been presented as an impediment to membership in the mainline (or ‘missionary’) churches.<sup>24</sup> However, many faithful members of mainline churches practice the cult of their ancestors “in secret” during the week and come to church on Sundays. This kind of “religious

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20. Balcomb. A.O., “Modernity and the African Experience.”

21. In recent times, examples of such an outlook are: Klaus Nürnberger, “Ancestors and Christ: The Power of the Dead or the Risen Christ - Make up Your Mind!” *Woord en Daad* 36, no. 355 (Autumn 1996): 11–12, and Hans-Jürgen Becken, “Beware of the Ancestor Cult: A Challenge to Missiological Research in South Africa,” *Missionalia* 21, no. 3 (November 1993): 333–39.

22. See for example, A. Mabile, *Religione ea Bokreste* (Morija: Morija Press, 1873).

23. On this point, the African Catholic Priests Solidarity Movement (ACAPSM) wrote in their *Memorandum Addressed to the Bishops of the Southern African Catholic Bishops’ Conference* (SACBC) (Pretoria: 1999) para. 6:

Many black African members of the Church (including priests and bishops!) still suffer from a colonised mind which results from the phenomenon of internalised oppression. This, among other things, makes them to view things African as necessarily suspect and to uncritically work within the prevailing white-tailored structures, either because of complacency, fear or a sense of helplessness.

24. In 1948, Bengt Sundkler, a Swedish Lutheran missionary, wrote a seminal work, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (London: Lutterworth Press), in which he described the central role played by the ancestral cult in the African Independent Churches (now more acceptably called ‘African Initiated’ or ‘African Indigenous’ Churches) (AIC) of which there are some 6000 in South Africa alone. They have an organic combination of traditional African religious beliefs and practices with Christian beliefs, and attract an enormous following. They are led by indigenous ministers and have a much more ‘Africanised’ liturgy than the mainline churches. Sundkler’s work has spawned libraries on the topic of the AIC’s, with which I will only be obliquely concerned in this work.

schizophrenia” is so widespread as to be a pathological dimension of the mainline churches, in need of serious attention.

The mainline churches are in the process of modifying their stance on the ancestors. The ground-breaking change came with the doctoral thesis of a Tswana Christian minister, describing the life he has received from his family’s ancestral cult.<sup>25</sup> Setiloane’s work is seminal, and is widely quoted in works on the ancestors.

A new generation of scholars of religious studies have attempted to explain the way the cult operates as a cohesive force for societies under stress.<sup>26</sup> The cult is a rallying point in the quest for reconstructing identity in the new political dispensation.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, some people use it as a mark of identity, saying that only those people who practice the cult of the ancestors are truly African.

The debate about the cult of the ancestors in the Christian church is taking place as if it is in another theological universe to that of AIDS. Those theologians who call themselves proponents of “black theology,” such as Buti Tlhagale, Tinyiko Maluleke, S. Mtetwa, etc. write about the cult of the ancestors as the foundational African religious experience.<sup>28</sup> While their writings occasionally refer to the AIDS pandemic sweeping the country, they do not relate how the experience of the ancestors might help African Christians to respond to their experience of the scourge. Only three writers: George C.

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25. Gabriel Setiloane, *The Image of God Among the Sotho-Tswana* (Rotterdam: AA Balkema, 1976), 298.

26. This fairly common theme can be seen in: Jim Kiernan, “The ‘Problem of Evil’ in the Context of Ancestral Intervention in the Affairs of the Living in Africa,” *Man (N.S.)* 17 (June 1992): 287-301 and in Jim Kiernan, “African Traditional Religions in South Africa,” in *Living Faiths in South Africa*, edited by Martin Prozesky and John de Gruchy (Cape Town: David Philip, 1995), 15-27.

27. Malinge Njeza says “It [African concern with the ancestors] is an affirmation of African-ness and Blackness and a rejection of the European derogation of ancestor cult.” in Malinge Njeza, “Christianity and Africanization Project: Possibilities of African Christianity Within Mainline Churches in South Africa” (Cape Town, 1989), [Http://www.uct.ac.za/depts/ricsa/projects/african/afprop.htm](http://www.uct.ac.za/depts/ricsa/projects/african/afprop.htm) viewed on 24 September 2002.

28. See, for example, S. Mtetwa, “African Spirituality in the Context of Modernity,” *Bulletin for Contextual Theology: African Theology* 3, no. 2 (1996): <http://www.hs.unp.ac.za/theology/tonyb.htm> viewed on 25 February 2002, and Tom Obengo, “The Role of Ancestors as Guardians of Morality in African Traditional Religions,” *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa* (1991).

Bond, Letta Mosue and Vitus Siphon Ncube make the connection between the cult of the ancestors and the AIDS pandemic.

George C. Bond suggests that the cult of the ancestors is likely to undergo some modification as the number of people dying of AIDS increases. He writes from the perspective of religious studies (and not theology):

Thus, in the next decade, millions of Africans are expected to die of AIDS. This magnitude of death will impose a heavy strain not only on medical facilities but also on customary religious and medical systems, geared to localized, parochial misfortunes. A different order of explanation will no doubt be required.<sup>29</sup>

Bond explains that he has lived through a severe epidemic and witnessed death on an enormous scale in a smallpox epidemic in Zambia in the mid-1960's. He says that "the sheer number of organic deaths tested the order of religious explanation related to death and burial practices."<sup>30</sup> He suggests here that the cult of the ancestors may be inadequate for the explanation of large numbers of AIDS deaths. As one element of a dynamic cultural reality, religious explanation systems are also creative in the face of challenge. For example, it is already evident how changes are occurring in funeral rites in South Africa, as people are called upon to attend more and more funerals.<sup>31</sup>

Until 2001, a solitary theological article, by Sr Letta Mosue, spanned the gap between the cult of the ancestors and the AIDS pandemic.<sup>32</sup> Through arguments based on the cult in East Africa, she links the ancestors to the generation of life and the reproductive organs. She says the spread of HIV is due to a misuse of this gift which is justly the preserve of the ancestors. "The ancestors' participation in the healing process might help revive the sense of the sacredness of life and that of the sources of life, namely, the reproductive organs and sexual intercourse."<sup>33</sup> On page 31, Mosue also

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29. George C Bond, "Living with Spirits: Death and Afterlife in African Religions," in *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions*, edited by Hiroshi Obayashi (New York: Praeger, 1992), 4.

30. Bond, "Living with Spirits: Death and Afterlife in African Religions," 4.

31. See Ntombi B. Ngwenya, "We Are All Believers: Crisis in Living Conditions and the Intervention of Burial Societies in Botswana," *Missionalia* 29, no. 2 (2001): 282–303. She discusses the way in which burial societies are now helping members to deal with the increasing number of deaths.

32. Letta Mosue, "Ancestors and HIV/AIDS," *Grace and Truth* 18, no. 2 (August 2001): 28–33.

33. Mosue, "Ancestors and HIV/AIDS," 32.

challenges the claim that tradition permits men to have to sexual intercourse before marriage.<sup>34</sup> Mosue hereby falls in line with the commonly held position that the cult of the ancestors functions primarily to guard moral behaviour in Africa.<sup>35</sup> If the ancestral moral injunction of premarital continence were followed, there would be less chance of spread of the HIV infection.

In 2002, Ncube delivered an MTh thesis,<sup>36</sup> which specifically linked AIDS to traditional Zulu divination and witchcraft in a pastoral theological context. This work was discussed and commented upon at a conference of Catholic theologians in February 2003.<sup>37</sup> Ncube's work brought the question of AIDS and the ancestor cult into mainstream theological thought in South Africa. The final chapter of this present thesis takes Ncube's ideas further in an enquiry into the meaning of salvation in the context of the AIDS crisis. I link his work particularly with the Christian mission of healing and care for the dying.

The absence of other theological writing linking the cult of the ancestors to the AIDS pandemic in Southern Africa is inexplicable and unexpected. The purpose of this present research is to address that shortcoming, specifically within the systematic theological category of soteriology.

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34. Mosue quotes Oliver Alozie Onwubiko, *African Thought, Religion and Culture*. (Enugu, Nigeria: Bigard, 1991): 88 "The misconception that sex before marriage is culturally endorsed is not true because birth and childhood rituals, initiation and puberty rites all expressed the religious emphasis placed on the virtue of virginity among both males and females." I have not been able to verify this citation.

35. See Desmond Mpilo Tutu, "The Ancestor Cult and Its Influence on Ethical Issues," *Ministry* 9, no. 3 (July 1969): 99–104.

36. Vitus Siphon Ncube, "Towards a Theology of *Ukugula, Ukufa Nokuphumula Ngoxolo* (Sickness Unto Death and Rest in Peace) in Times of HIV-AIDS with a Special Reference to Zulu Concepts of *Ukubhula* (Divination) *Nokuthakatha* (Witchcraft)," dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Theology (School of Theology at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, supervised by Dr Stuart C. Bate, 2002).

37. See Vitus Siphon Ncube, "Responsibility in Inculturation: The Healing Ministry in a Zulu Context," paper presented at conference on Responsibility in a Time of AIDS, Johannesburg, 5–7 February 2003 in *Responsibility in a Time of AIDS: A Pastoral Response by Catholic Theologians and AIDS Activists in Southern Africa*, edited by Stuart C. Bate (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2003), 78–115, and the response: Sithembele Sipuka, "A Response to Vitus Ncube's Paper," response to paper presented at conference on Responsibility in a Time of AIDS, Johannesburg, 5–7 February 2003 in *Responsibility in a Time of AIDS: A Pastoral Response by Catholic Theologians and AIDS Activists in Southern Africa*, edited by Stuart C. Bate (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2003), 116–20.

#### (d) Choosing Soteriology as an Appropriate Theological Category

The constellation of the AIDS pandemic and the ancestral cult opens numerous avenues for theological research. These include:

Moral Theology: the ancestors as the guardians of the group's morality. The changing nature of intimate relationships, the purpose and function of sexuality, and responsibility toward the sick and dying also feature here.

Liturgy: how to include in a meaningful way the ancestors in the celebration of Christian communal life and death.

Christology: Christ as an ancestor; the kenotic Christ suffering with AIDS.

Eschatology: the meaning of life, premature death and human fulfillment implied by the ancestors.

Soteriology: being saved from AIDS through the intervention of the ancestors.

Interfaith Dialogue: working with people of other faiths or none, in crucial healing ministry.

For reasons of originality and relevance, I have chosen to pursue the question of soteriology in this research. The pandemic confronts people daily with the existential questions of death and the meaning of life. The African notion of fulfillment involves living to great age, being a guardian of morality and tradition, handing on wisdom, having offspring who will venerate one as an ancestor, etc. When so many people are dying prematurely and unfulfilled, thoughts turn to the notion of a life hereafter in which there might be fulfillment and satisfaction, perhaps another chance, in continuity and community with the lived experience of family and friends. Is fulfillment of life attained in a "hereafter?" Does it consist in the memories that people retain of the deceased? In denial of the reality? Does the traditional articulation of the ancestral cult - which says that ancestors are those who died in old age, having handed on life and wisdom, having been sources of unity - not cause further distress for young, often childless people facing their

own mortality?

Where can one find salvation? What might salvation be in such a seemingly hopeless context? Life-prolonging drugs? The experience of a supportive community? A closer relationship with God or the ancestors? When despair can so easily take over, what is the source of the enormous hope that one sees daily in people's lives? What is the specific contribution of the Christian faith? Christians also contract HIV and die of AIDS.<sup>38</sup> What is the Church offering that is unique? Are traditional presentations of Christ as Saviour adequate to this situation? Can the Church consider the ancestors as salvific in any way?<sup>39</sup> Individuals and communities of believers are confronted with these issues when pastors or funeral ministers have to preach at the all-too-frequent funerals. What words of consolation don't eventually ring hollow? Which biblical passages speak of God and people in similar situations?

As the churches move away from an agenda that focussed mostly on the political dimension of the message of the Kingdom of God, they are confronted with a new *kairos*. Salvation is already and not yet - already, in the political realm, but not yet, in terms of a healthy life. This eschatological tension is acutely felt in the context of the AIDS pandemic.

### (3) Hypothesis

Two new topics have emerged on the South African theological scene since the late 1980's:

(i) Black theologians reclaim the ancestral cult as foundational to African spirituality.

(ii) Christians respond to the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

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38. Marc-Éric Gruénais, "La religion préserve-t-elle du sida? Des congrégations religieuses congolaises face à la pandémie de l'infection par le VIH," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* xxxix-2, no. 154 (1999): 253–70.

39. See Patrick Kalilombe, "The Salvific Value of African Religions," *AFER* 21, no. 3 (June 1979): 143–57.

Yet surprisingly, these two topics are discussed in almost complete isolation from one another, and the link is not made that both should be part of a contextual South African theology.

It is the hypothesis of this research that no comprehensive contextual theology is possible which does not bring into dialogue these two ubiquitous realities in the context of the “new” South Africa. The theological category of soteriology plays an essential role in this dialogue.

#### **(4) Methodology**

This research will follow the Synthetic model proposed in Chapter 7 of “Models of Contextual Theology” by Stephen Bevans.<sup>40</sup> Before examining the actual models of contextual theology, I will consider some of Bevans’s presuppositions.

##### (a) Bevans’s Presuppositions

This research appropriates a number of the presuppositions Bevans makes in his first chapter.

(i) Primarily, present human experience is an important *locus theologicus* and a valid source for theological expression. The two traditional *loci* of Scripture and Tradition are not the exclusive sources for theological reflection. At the very least, theology is always articulated in the language and with the sets of thought-forms available in a particular time and place.

There is thus a recognition that theology is to some extent a subjective pursuit. In order to retain some objectivity, there is the need for a critical appraisal of the subject doing the theology. While it is recognised that experience, especially at the level of faith, is ultimately personal and private, and to a certain extent incommunicable, there is the

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40. Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Revised and Expanded ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 88–102.

pragmatic recognition that people in similar situations share like experiences. The presumption of all language is that communication of ideas is possible and that people do make sense to each other. We are not in an impasse of a tower of Babel. Theology is thus possible within a community of people with similar experiences. In an African context, personal identity is often tied up with that of a group, what Teresa Okure calls “corporate personality.”<sup>41</sup> If we accept this commonly held opinion as true, then the privacy and subjectivity of experience are less of an impediment to communication than in societies which elevate the individual to the basic unit of meaning.

Bevans also maintains<sup>42</sup> that the outsider or “nonparticipant,” who does not share the experiences of a community, must therefore approach with great humility and respect, with an openness to learn and be evangelised. He or she may not presume to speak on behalf of a community whose experience he or she does not share. The expertise of a theologian may be useful to a community in helping them to order and systematise their reflection on and articulation of their theology. Further, the non-participant theologian may help a community to widen and deepen their reflection by relating it to experiences of other communities who have encountered similar situations. Finally, with great circumspection and humility, the outsider may venture a critique of inconsistencies and weaknesses of a culture, because culture is always ambiguous and no culture is totally good.<sup>43</sup> An outsider may thus help a community to develop its own contextualised

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41. Okure, “Belief in the Holy Spirit and in Ancestral Spirits,” 12.

42. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 19.

43. While culture is not the primary category of this thesis, it is important to state here what I mean by the term. I find Geertz’s semiotic approach (see, for example, Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture: Selected Essays* [New York: Basic Books, 1973]) most useful for the purposes of this thesis, because Geertz analyses culture as a web of meanings, which shed light on the cult of the ancestors. Culture is a set of learned and transmitted behaviours that help to give meaning to our physical and social environment and to predict, control and modify this environment. Functionalist, materialist (economic) and elitist approaches to culture are equally useful for the purposes to which they are applied, but the present research concerns the *understandings* and *explanations* that underlie a certain set of behaviours.

The dimension of indigenous South African culture with which this work is most concerned is what I call the “worldview” of the ancestors, but which could equally be called a “cosmology” or “*Weltanschauung*.” The ancestral worldview helps South Africans to describe, define and maintain relationships of kinship, and therefore to live in an economy that often mitigates against the survival

theology.<sup>44</sup>

(ii) Secondly, on page 7, Bevans quotes Douglas Hall by saying that “[c]ontextualisation ... is the sine qua non of all genuine theological thought, and always has been.”<sup>45</sup> By ‘contextualisation’ is meant making explicit reference to the culture and social changes of the context. This makes of theology a hermeneutical exercise done with a reflectivity on the context of the subject and on the context of any texts being used. This necessarily involves deliberate engagement with the live questions of the context in which the theology is being articulated. These questions arise from events or crises of the time. The focal questions of the present thesis are the way in which the cult of the ancestors is lived and experienced and the challenge posed by the AIDS pandemic.

A contextual approach to theology does not reduce the significance of theology which is retrospective in intent, trying to understand what was at stake in previous generations. Theology done with this focus also takes into account the context in which questions were originally considered. Indeed, contextual theology often requires a review of the history of a situation in order better to understand the present situation. This is evident in the third chapter of this present work, in which the reasons are considered for the demise of the cult of the ancestors under pressure from 19th Century European missionaries.

(iii) Thirdly, Bevans distinguishes between creation-centred and redemption-centred basic theological orientations:<sup>46</sup> The redemption-centred basic orientation sees nature as corrupt and in need of redemption. The world therefore distorts the reality of God and grace must replace, rather than build upon nature. This means that Christ must

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of nuclear or individual families. The set of understandings entails specific expected behaviours and also material obligations.

44. I am aware that I am an outsider in the sense that I do not have AIDS or practice the cult of the ancestors. But I am affected by the AIDS pandemic as is every other South African. Thus this research will be conducted with respect and a realistic awareness of its limitations.

45. Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 21.

46. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 21f.

be brought to the world for any chance of healing it. There is no analogy of being between God and humans, so theological language is dialectical rather than analogical. This approach allows very little room for contextualisation of theology.

The creation-centred approach operates from the conviction that “God saw all that God had created, and indeed it was very good.”<sup>47</sup> Therefore culture and human expressions are generally good. Grace builds on nature which is essentially good. God’s self-revelation takes place in the created world, through ordinary words and people. Human life gives us analogical access to God’s goodness and there is thus a continuity between divine reality and human life. The aberration of sin can only be exterminated by confrontation with the power of good. The creation-centred approach allows that human events and culture are arenas of God’s activity, and therefore valid sources of contextual theology.

In the original *Models of Contextual Theology*,<sup>48</sup> Stephen Bevans describes five different models, or approaches, which might be used to devise theology for a particular context. The models differ in their fundamental outlook, and therefore in their methodology:

Thus, the Translation model, sees the task of theology to translate faith, seen as a deposit of revelation, into terms that are best understood in a receiving culture.

The Anthropological model, at the other end of a spectrum, looks to a particular culture for the text of God’s self-revelation, and accords a secondary role to the Scriptures and traditional formulations of the faith.

The Praxis model views faith as expressed most accurately in the socio-political commitment of the faithful, and thus the most important dimension of faith is intelligent action.

“The transcendental model proposes that the task of constructing a contextualised

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47. Gen 1:31

48. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992

theology is not about producing a particular body of any kind of texts; it is about attending to the affective and cognitive operations in the self-transcending subject.”<sup>49</sup>

In the revised and expanded version of *Models of Contextual Theology*,<sup>50</sup> Bevens adds a sixth model, the Countercultural model. Theologians using this model believe that all culture is radically ambiguous, and that any experience, past or present, is merely a clue to unmask the real meaning of history.

However, this present research uses Bevens’s Synthetic model because it utilises elements that are already available in the context under consideration. It opens conversation with multiple partners, and recognises that this type of theology is always a “work in progress” and never a finished product.

#### (b) The Synthetic Model of Contextual Theology

In Chapter 7, Bevens outlines the particularities of the Synthetic model. The model comes closest to what Aylward Shorter describes as inculturation.<sup>51</sup> People who apply the model understand that there is a dynamic interaction between cultural change and developments in theology. They recognise a reciprocity between theology and the culture of people engaged in that theology. This means that culture shapes theological thinking, and that theological thinking has an impact on the lives and experiences of the believing community.

Arrupe writes of a reciprocal relationship in which theology and culture mutually enrich each other, when he writes of inculturation as:

the incarnation of the Christian life and message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question (this alone would be no more than a superficial adaptation) but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming it and remaking it so as to bring about a ‘new creation’.<sup>52</sup>

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49. Bevens, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 103.

50. Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002

51. Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988).

52. Pedro Arrupe, “Letter to the Whole Society on Inculturation,” in *Other Apostolates Today: Selected Letters and Addresses of Pedro Arrupe SJ*, edited by J. Aixala (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978), 172.

The Synthetic model does not eschew the theological and cultural resources of other situations, and is not developed in isolation from other world-contexts. People who use the model recognise that cultures are always in contact with each other, constantly forming a synthesis of the home and visiting cultures - a process Shorter calls "interculturalisation."<sup>53</sup> Contextual theology follows this same dynamic as cultures, borrowing ideas and themes developed in other contexts, in order to come to new expressions. There is a constant interplay between difference and similarity.

Accordingly, this thesis relies heavily on a framework developed in another context. The *Kairos Document*<sup>54</sup> was a collaborative, ecumenical reflection of South African theologians, pastors and lay Christians during the days of the struggle against apartheid. It had as its focus the spiral of violence into which the country was descending. I use this document, specifically, as a framework for the reflection on the meaning of salvation in the present context. In the fourth chapter, the document is introduced at greater length in its own historical setting, and in the fifth chapter I use its elements as a pattern for the present theology.

The Synthetic model views culture as morally neutral - neither essentially good nor essentially bad. There are elements of every culture that are praiseworthy, and others that are in need of redemption.<sup>55</sup>

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53. Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 13.

It is important to remember that talk of culture is talk at least at one level of abstraction. Cultures are not agents. Individual or groups of people are agents of culture. Thus, talk about "cultures" interacting is really shorthand for talk about members of respective cultures interacting, with some of their ideas and behaviours affecting each other. It is this reciprocal process which Shorter calls "interculturalisation."

When a critical mass of sufficiently influential people approach a topic with new understandings, they can transmit these new ways of predicting, controlling and modifying their environment, and consequently the culture changes.

54. The Kairos Theologians, *The Kairos Document*.

55. Thus, for example, the Sotho notion of *botho*, or what it means to be human, namely being a fundamentally social being, dependent on others and obliged to others by ties of relationships, is a laudable corrective to Western individualism. But the dimension that tolerates ritual killing in certain very prescribed circumstances, is frequently criticised by people from other cultures. As one is predisposed to the possibility of God speaking through one's own culture, it is equally necessary to remain open to the same possibility in other cultures. I attempt to maintain this openness throughout the thesis.

The major difficulty about doing theology with a synthetic model, is that there is no outline of steps to be taken in any particular order. Rather, it relies on an eclectic approach, using scripture, tradition, personal and group experience, traditional religiosity, cultural and social analysis, previous traditions, etc. Gleaning from Robert J. Schreiter's *Constructing Local Theologies*,<sup>56</sup> Bevans presents a diagram on page 93 of the elements from the past and present that have to be kept in constant dialogue. These elements are: Scripture and Tradition; culture; social change; and other thought forms and cultures. It is from attention to all of these that themes emerge. The ubiquity of AIDS and the ancestor cult in the "new" South Africa,<sup>57</sup> led this research to the point of identifying them as the two indispensable elements of a contextual theology.

The primary cultural resource used in the study is the wealth of published anthropological data and interpretation available in the country. For reasons of linguistic limitations, any first-language work has been restricted to the Sotho-Tswana group.<sup>58</sup> This necessary restriction has the disadvantage of not being able to consider first-hand accounts of people of the Venda, Tsonga and the Nguni language groups who are concentrated in the northern and coastal provinces respectively. As the ancestral cult is closely connected with the topography and thus ecology of the country,<sup>59</sup> this limitation has perforce omitted some local variants in the cult in South Africa. But the Sotho-Tswana-speaking region includes Botswana and the Kingdom of Lesotho.<sup>60</sup> Each of these countries has relative cultural homogeneity, particularly in rural areas. Limiting the

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56. Maryknoll, Orbis, 1985. This book was seminal in helping communities to express and own their understanding of the Christian life.

57. Chapters one and two, respectively, establish the ubiquity of AIDS and the ancestor cult.

58. There are 11 official languages in South Africa, two of European and nine of Bantu origin. Other indigenous non-Bantu languages are of the Khoi and San people, the region's earliest inhabitants, who have been reduced to living in small bands in areas set aside for their hunter-gatherer economy. In addition, hundreds of thousands of refugees and immigrants speak numerous other languages.

59. See Jim Kiernan, "African Traditional Religions in South Africa," in *Living Faiths in South Africa*, edited by Martin Prozesky and John de Gruchy (Cape Town: David Philip, 1995), 15–27.

60. On the independence of Lesotho, see John E. Bardill and James H. Cobbe, *Lesotho: Dilemmas of Dependence in Southern Africa* (Boulder Colorado: Westview, 1985).

research to these, as much as possible, has made for more consistent work.

I am aware that there is the possible perception that this synthetic contextual theology has the weakness of being “neither fish nor fowl.” It is neither purely African nor traditionally Western, because it uses elements of both of these cultural milieux. An African might regard it as a “sell-out” to Western categories. A Western theologian might equally say that it is insufficiently rigorous, systematic or “tight.” Both of these critiques may be true. But it is my purpose to steer a middle path, using the best of both theological worlds - aiming at what Hegel called a synthesis: “developing, in a creative dialectic, something acceptable to all standpoints.”<sup>61</sup>

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61. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 90.