

Contextual Ethics for Africa in the Twenty First Century

Koos van Rooy

Introduction

Let me start by stating some basic principles of my approach toward the subject of the lecture which I have been asked to present here, to wit *Contextual Ethics for Africa in the Twenty First Century*.

First, let me state emphatically that this is not a comparison of Western European and traditional or contemporary African ethics. Traditional European religion and ethics are in no way superior to traditional African religion. My Frisian ancestors killed Winifreth, the first missionary who brought the gospel to them, because he had the audacity to cut down their sacred oak tree. None of us will try to justify the cruel, superstitious, polytheistic religions of the ancestors of the Europeans, or the secularist ethics of modern Europe. Likewise I am sure none of us will be annoyed if African traditional religion and ethics are compared with the Bible and criticised with that as norm.

One's own culture can never be an acceptable norm for ethics. The norm for all Christian believers can only be the Word of God. Apartheid was justified by many sincere white Christians, who even tried to justify it from the Bible. Most of those who criticized Apartheid on biblical grounds were rejected and hounded as traitors to their own race. Most of the proponents of Apartheid have since then come to see how blind to the biblical teaching of justice and neighbourly love they used to be, and are ashamed of it now.

Had I been asked to speak on Contemporary European Ethics, I would have approached the latter with a critical evaluation of it, with the Bible as norm for comparison. Similarly, since the topic given to me is *Contextual Ethics for Africa*, I see no relevant approach other than a critical evaluation of it using the same norm. In many of the liberal mainline churches as well as in the Independent African Churches, the Word of God has very little to say in the dominant approach to ethics. The norm there is a form of syncretism, a concoction of biblical ideas and traditional African beliefs, rather than the Bible. I believe that we all agree that our norm is the Bible, otherwise I can see no advantage in continuing with the proceedings.

Secondly, let me explain what I mean by the term "African". I realise that many people in Southern Africa are not happy with the term "Bantu". The fact is that the so-called Bantu share much with each other which they do not have in common with the Nilo-Saharan, Semitic or Cushitic peoples, or the Khoikhoi or San, all of whom are also African, but have totally different cultures and beliefs. The Bantu peoples share a common language family with many similar features, which are not found anywhere else; almost all of them are monotheistic, and all of them believe strongly in the ancestors as part of the society, and communicate with them, whereas some African peoples in Western Africa are polytheistic and know nothing of ancestor veneration. I take into account the sensibilities of black South Africans and for their sake use the

term “African” to refer to them, but please take into account to whom I refer when I use this term. It does not apply to the whole of Africa.

Horizontal and Vertical Motivation

Biblical ethics are basically oriented to and based on God’s revelation and one’s relationship with Him. King David sinned abominably by not only making Uriah’s wife pregnant while that faithful follower of him was fighting the Ammonites for his king, but also having Uriah killed in order to cover up his sin. Yet, after his conscience was awakened by the prophet Nathan, he can go so far as to say to God in his confession of guilt (Psalm 51): “Against You and you alone have I sinned and done what is wrong in your eyes.”

This does not imply that human relations were not important in Biblical ethics; the second great commandment, equal to the first, is, “Love your neighbour as yourself.” Sinning against the neighbour is equal to sin against God. Many of the laws recorded in the Pentateuch have the purpose of protecting the weak and helpless against exploitation by the rich and powerful.

In the case of most African peoples, sin is usually judged from a purely human level. During the past sixty years I read everything that I could lay my hands on about traditional African beliefs, and asked African people about it when the occasion arose, and among non-Christians and nominal Christians I have found no indications of a conscience influenced by regard for God. It stays on the human level. There is an elaborate system of taboos in human relations. It seems that the paramount goal in ethics is to promote conduct which does not disturb human relations. The ancestors are regarded as part of human society, and it often happens that the ancestors are offended. The nature of the offence can be disclosed by soothsayers, and disasters are often ascribed to offended ancestor spirits. God is not concerned with human relations, only with the cosmic order. He is much too exalted and remote to concern Himself with the everyday doings of mere humans.

I did find a few interesting exceptions to this rule. It seems that some of the people who call God “Leza/Lesa/Dedza”, particularly in Zambia, do actually believe that God is interested and involved in human affairs. The Tonga people of Southern Zambia often speak of Leza, and according to my sources, even in pre-Christian society Leza is often addressed directly by people and prayers offered to him. A Bemba lady told me that this is also the case among her own people. If a child is naughty, it would be warned, “Leza u no ku mona” (God can see you).

Jesus Christ and an ethic of love

Ethics is about right and wrong in human behaviour. Our Lord Jesus reformulated more clearly and focussed the principle already present in the Old Testament

revelation by teaching us that the fundamental principle of human behaviour is love, including love for one's enemies. In the final instance that should then also be the basis for formulating ethics in any context of time and culture.

The failure of Ubuntu as a basis for ethics

Many African leaders propagate the principle of *ubuntu* as the ideal rule of conduct which is supposed to create the perfect society. The term is the abstract form of the word *umuntu*, which means "a human person". Translated literally, one would tend to render it with "being human". However, it seldom if ever means that. In the Tshivenda language the terms would be *muthu* (a person), and the abstract form is *vhuthu*. But *vhuthu* does not mean "humanness" at all. In order to express the meaning of "humanness", the Venda people use the term *vhumuthu*, prefixing the abstract concord *vh-* to the personal concord *mu-*, followed by the word stem *-thu*.

There seem to be slight differences of the actual meaning of the term *ubuntu/vhuthu/botho* among different peoples, but the basic meaning seems to be "behaviour which can be expected of a person". In Tshivenda one can speak of *vhuthu ha Mudzimu*, "the kindness or goodness of God; his caring for people", which carries no implication that God is human. In isiZulu on the other hand, the term does not seem to be acceptable with that meaning. One cannot speak of *ubuntu bukaNkulunkulu*.

A component of meaning of *ubuntu* which seems to be common to most peoples, and which I noticed particularly in the Zulu people, is the principle of *avoiding confrontation* as much as possible. (The exception to this rule is one's conduct towards a political opponent, which means to many Africans the same as an enemy. If you doubt that, just listen to the debates in parliament). I learned a lot of wisdom from African people about this principle, and I am sure that there is a lot of wisdom in avoiding unnecessary confrontation. According to Proverbs 15:1 a gentle answer quietens anger, but a harsh one stirs it up. However, avoiding confrontation becomes a problem when it is applied at the cost of truth and honesty, and when evil is covered up. The Venda proverb says, "It is seen indeed, but it is taboo to mention it."

A biblical interpretation of *ubuntu* would be *caring for other people*. In my experience, the only persons whom I know who really care about other people are genuine Christians, and Muslims who inherited the Christian tradition of caring, as is illustrated by the work of the body called "The Gift of the Givers". But caring for anyone outside one's own people is foreign to the traditional African mindset. Why else would a nation regard as their greatest hero a man like Shaka, who conducted so many wars of extermination against those tribes which he could not incorporate into his own, and who had pregnant women killed and dissected merely to satisfy his curiosity about the development of a foetus? Or the Venda, whose greatest hero is Makhado, a chief who never allowed either a missionary or a school teacher into his country?

South Africa, where the concept of *ubuntu* regardless of faith in Christ was first propagated, is a particularly poor example of its application. It is the only country I am aware of where striking nurses went so far as to leave patients to die in excruciating pain, and never showed any remorse for what they did. *Ubuntu* without regeneration is bankrupt at the outset. It provides as meagre a basis for ethics as does Apartheid. A contemporary ethic for Africa, as in fact any ethic anywhere, shall have to be based on God's revelation and a living relationship with Him.

Phalanndwa

I recently attended the memorial service of Phalanndwa Ntshikovhela, an ex-student of mine at the Bible school in Venda. He was not an impressive character. He had been born with an incomplete right arm, and his family did not have the means for more than basic education. He was not quite fit for manual labour, and had it not been possible to help him to study to become a teacher, he might have become a miserable person. He surprised us all by his progress as a teacher. He was not a very bright student, but once he set himself a goal he persevered until he reached it. After starting teaching at a primary school he persisted with private studies and did several extra courses until finally he acquired B.Ed. and B.A degrees. There were thirty speakers at the memorial service, and the way his character was described, was to me the perfect example of *ubuntu*, loving people and caring for them. But the one characteristic that was mentioned most often was his fervent love for God. He was one of the clearest examples of what a Christ-like person looks like. He loved people because he had been born again and loved God above all else. His whole life was a demonstration of love. He sowed joy, love and peace wherever he went.

I intend mentioning him again to illustrate some points, for an ethic for contemporary Africa will accomplish nothing unless it is based on a living relationship with God.

Now, to come to the topic of "a contemporary ethic for Africa":

An ethic of conscience

Most pre-Christian cultures are shame cultures rather than guilt cultures. That is also valid for traditional African cultures. The term used by the indigenous languages for conscience is *uvalo/letswalo/luvalo/ripfalo* which in the first place means "midriff"/diaphragm", and derived from that, "feeling of anxiety", "apprehension", "fear of being discovered". In a Christian context it may acquire the meaning of "feeling guilty", but basically it has nothing to do with conviction of sin. Most Africans would insist upon being innocent until proven

guilty beyond doubt. A teacher at a mission school rendered a girl pupil pregnant, and I spoke to him about it. He was very indignant and held it against me that I even dared mentioning it, when he thought that it had not been proven beyond doubt. When he committed the same sin again and the heat was turned on from the side of the Department of Education, he finally admitted having done it the first time, but still blamed me for believing he did it. I was in the wrong and he had right on his side. I had sinned against *ubuntu*.

Another teacher had admitted that he had made a girl pregnant. Then she had a spontaneous abortion. Next thing the missionary received a telegram from him: "Confession cancelled."

Ubuntu is bankrupt if there is no regeneration. It is the Holy Spirit who convicts us of sin and guilt before God.

One aspect of Phalanndwa's character which I experienced myself many years ago was his integrity about disclosing sin. He once came to me and did the unthinkable in African culture: he told me about a secret sin of a close friend of his, not because of any malice, but because he regarded it as sinful to cover up sin. He made it possible for us to deal with that sin and to lead the sinner to repentance. That is true *ubuntu*. He "spoke the truth in a spirit of love" (Eph. 4:15).

Conscience in the biblical sense presupposes knowing God. He knows everything, and we are accountable to Him for all our actions. An action may seem not to be harmful to another person, but if God disapproves of it, it is wrong. That should be the basis of an ethic for contemporary Africa.

Ethics of responsibility; a work ethic

In a culture where school teachers are notoriously negligent in their duties, and are more zealous at striking for higher wages than at lifting the standard of teaching, Phalanndwa was a shining example. The subject he taught at school was English. Without any extra remuneration he regularly organized extra classes at six in the morning in order to improve the knowledge of his pupils. The only recognition he received was an acknowledgment from the department of a high standard of teaching. He put in that extra effort because of his love for people, based on his love for God, and realising the meaning of what the apostle Paul wrote in the letter to the Ephesians, 6:7: "Do your work... cheerfully, as though you served the Lord, and not merely human beings."

It is not politically correct to say openly what I am going to say now. No one dares to say it, but everyone knows that the most basic reason for the economic difficulties in South Africa is the poor standard of primary and secondary education in this country. Students leave school not having been prepared for anything. And no one dares to say that the main reason for this low standard of

education is the poor work ethic of too many teachers. It is much easier to blame all evil in this country on Jan van Riebeeck and the whites. People do not seem to realise the implication that black people are still immature, like children, still not responsible for their actions, perpetual victims and nothing more. Phalanndwa was then at fault when he displayed a real sense of calling in his work. Anyhow, the record of whites in Africa is bad enough as it is, it is not necessary to add imaginary evils to them.

(Maybe discuss SAOU and SADTU)

As long as this excuse for failure is accepted and black people refuse to take responsibility for their actions, I see little hope for Africa. It is heart-breaking to see countries like the Kongo and Southern Sudan, with all their vast natural resources, falling into national misery and poverty because of their lack of responsible leaders, lack of men who know and fear God.

Africans tend to shy away from individual decisions. Everything has to be discussed in detail with a group of people first. Then the responsibility for the decision rests with the group and no individual can be called to account for it. This approach to decisions makes it possible for individuals to avoid being called to account for their actions.

An ethic for contemporary Africa will have to address the responsibility of individuals to God for their actions.

An ethic of *responsibility* includes an ethic of *responsible use of resources*. I am not thinking here of resources such as energy, where the industrialised countries are the greatest sinners as far as irresponsible exploitation is concerned, I am referring specifically to an area where African countries cause themselves massive damage by lack of maintenance of infrastructure. It is hard to understand why and how African authorities in the fields of roads, electricity, water supply and sewage disposal seem to be totally uninterested in regular maintenance and forward planning concerning these forms of infrastructure. The managers of the Electricity Supply Commission were warned that this country was facing load shedding if power stations were not inspected on a regular basis, but they simply ignored it until the electricity supply almost broke down and caused huge industrial and economic damage before they finally started to attend to the matter.

The rule seems to be to wait until a crisis develops and only then apply crisis management, while all aspects of logic demands no more than reasonable maintenance.

New roads all over Africa are built with aid from foreign powers, and then left to decay until nothing is left and an entirely new road has to be built again at astronomical costs, whereas had it been maintained at a fraction of the cost it

would have been unnecessary to build a new one. The same is the problem with infrastructure, buildings and furniture at schools. It seems as if a consciousness of providing and planning for the future is absent in Africa. One could almost agree with the Ugandan Prof John Mbiti who wrote that Africa is so much past-orientated that the future as a reality, being an unknown quality, is not considered as relevant.

Ethics of Honesty and integrity

The honourable president Zuma once stated in an interview, “According to African tradition, corruption is not wrong”. Now there may be many things which the president does not know, but no one can accuse him of ignorance about African tradition. African tradition is his natural element. If he ever spoke the truth he did it in that statement.

There are corrupt persons in all countries, but in most western countries corruption is at least regarded with disapproval and guilty persons are dealt with according to the law. In present day South Africa and generally in African countries, most government officials benefit personally from corruption, and many are not ashamed to declare openly that given the opportunity it is foolish not to enrich oneself by corruption.

It will be of no benefit to answer my views by referring to the evils of Apartheid as cause of what is wrong in Africa today. Corruption was not initiated by Jan van Riebeeck. Africans are mature people and not infants who cannot be held responsible for their actions.

In Africa, particularly in our own country, numerous manifestly corrupt actions by the president came to light, yet he still enjoys the continuing support of the majority of members of parliament. It is clear that this support was bought at a price, to wit appointing high officials in positions where they were in the position to embezzle billions of rand, enriching themselves and thereby impoverishing the rest of the country. There are exceptions which prove that corruption is not the fate of Africa, and that clean government is possible. Those two countries are Botswana and Namibia.

Mozambique is an example of the general conditions. In Mozambique it used to be a general practice in schools to hold back examination results until pupils could pay a bribe for them.

The Japanese government once sent a shipload of second hand tractors in excellent condition as a donation to the people of Mozambique. When the ship arrived at Maputo and the sailors wanted to deliver the load, the official at the harbour demanded a bribe before giving permission for the tractors to be offloaded. The captain of the ship promptly threw the load overboard into the sea and departed. I cannot conceive the Japanese ever giving aid to Mozambique again.

A friend of mine who is a very successful farmer in the Limpopo and Mpumalanga provinces once offered to develop an agricultural project along the Komati River in Mozambique. He prepared the soil and planted the orchards, at which point the local trade union started demanding bribes. When he refused and the trade unionists made it impossible for him to continue, he withdrew his support, having already spent five million rand of his own funds. Now nothing is left of the project and hundreds of employees have lost their jobs. He vows never to invest in Africa again.

Examples of a similar nature can be multiplied. The point is that corruption destroys the economy of a country. It may benefit one or a few dishonest people for a short time, but in the long run it leaves many more people without a steady income.

I cannot find fault with affirmative action in principle, but by nature it creates scope for serious corruption, and indeed with affirmative action as a front many incapable people are appointed to senior positions and make heaps of money in the process of steering their projects to bankruptcy, after which they receive a golden handshake of millions of rand to induce them to leave the job. Recently a man was appointed as head of ESCOM, and after one and a half years of mismanagement was given a golden handshake of R30 million rand for the favour of leaving the position to someone else (sufficient funds to build 500 houses for lower income families) It seems that in South Africa the quickest way to get rich is to make a mess of an important job in order to receive a millionaire's reward for it on which one can retire in comfort. In this way one incompetent person becomes very rich, and hundreds poor black families lose their jobs and suffer because of the incompetency of that person.

An ethic for contemporary Africa will need to address adequately the evil of corruption and the debilitating effects of it. The Bible is clear about the evil of corruption. As early as in the Book of the Covenant in Exodus 23:8, the Lord instructs his people, "*Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe makes people blind to what is right and ruins the cause of those who are innocent.*" (See also

Ethics of Power and weakness

The ground breaking book of father Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, about *life force/force vital* as the dominant principle of ethics of people in the southern half of Africa has never been effectively challenged. What is good there, what is to be strived at, is the acquisition and preservation of *life force*. Life force can be described more accurately as meaning health, power, influence, prestige, success and good luck. Every individual and object are in themselves also forces, arranged in a hierarchical order. At the top of the forces is God, or in the isolated instance the Baganda people who have a tradition of polytheism, the High God. Beneath Him are the first

ancestor spirits, followed by the younger ones in their own order. Then follow the living, at the top the paramount chief and his descendants down to the lowliest subject. Inanimate objects are also powers and can exert power, either healing or destructive power. Magicians and traditional doctors have more power than ordinary people. They have been given this power by the spirits, and have the knowledge and skills to manipulate other powers.

The guiding principle of ethics in such a society is preserving one's life force and where possible and acceptable, strengthening it.

Leaders, whether a bishop such as Lekganyane of the ZCC, or a president like Mr Zuma or Dr Mugabe, are regarded as having the right to enrich themselves, even at the cost of the little people. It is believed that the life force of the church or the nation is concentrated in those leaders, and that in some way the followers share in the glory of their rich and powerful leader. The fact that the president is totally corrupt and would not hesitate to destroy the economy of the country and let a million people die of hunger if that could leave him in control to live a life of luxury, is not held against him.

These beliefs explain how a corrupt individual such as a president is tolerated and even supported by masses of people in Africa. One black man expressed his approval of the conduct of the president with the saying, "The male lion eats first until he has satisfied his hunger."

It is very important in this ethic that one should acknowledge one's proper place in this hierarchy of powers and never venture to change it. For a lowly person in this hierarchy to acquire wealth can be very dangerous. Such a person is often suspected of acquiring his success at the cost of someone else. The reason for this is that the amount of life force in the world is believed to be limited, and one can only increase one's own share in it by taking it away from someone else and thereby threaten his very life. That is regarded as witchcraft, which is therefore feared like a form of death.

A witch is treated the same way as a murderer. Many black people bitterly resent it that under the previous regime they were not allowed to deal with people suspected of witchcraft. When Mr Mandela was released in 1990, the first thing that happened in the country of Venda was an explosion of killings of people who had been suspected of witchcraft. It was regarded as the proper way to kill them to pour petrol into their throats and set them alight.

The only group of people who protected the victims, gave them shelter and aided them in finding employment was the Reformed Christians in that country. This in itself is an indication of the direction a contextual Christian ethic should take. First and foremost it should be based on a Christian faith. But what aspects of the Christian faith are specifically valid here?

In answering this question, it should be noted that there is in the Word of God no appreciation whatsoever of the powerful or for the idea of power as something desirable in itself. To the contrary, the powerless are the ones who are called blessed by the Lord Jesus. He Himself agreed to be born a helpless baby. In his ministry, though filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, He consistently refused to use that power in his own interest. When He could call twelve legions of angels to his rescue, He chose to die in weakness. He was Lord of all, yet He demonstrated to his disciples the meaning of being a servant, and He told them that the one who desired to be the greatest should strive to be the servant of all. "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." "When I am weak, then am I strong".

We as Christian believers should then demonstrate in our conduct an ethic of weakness, of rejecting any association with earthly power. Only then shall we be able to act in the power of the Spirit, the power that does not rule, but which transforms the lives of people, the irresistible power of the Spirit of God. White Christians in South Africa were at their weakest and spiritually most powerless and least credible while they possessed and exerted earthly power, and enjoyed the favour of the government. It was a great relief to me as a messenger of Christ when finally I could no longer be regarded as a representative of that power. Blessed are the poor in spirit: this means those who have only God to rely on. Phalanndwa appeared to be weak, and he never sought power, and in his weakness he became an eloquent witness to the power of the Holy Spirit.

An ethic of denying destructive power

Many people failed to understand the violence with which protest is often demonstrated in Africa. In the very recent past students demonstrating in the Fees Must Fall campaign damaged university property with many millions of rand. In the country of Venda thirty school buildings were destroyed by fire in a protest about a matter that has nothing to do with education. Equally illogical was the action taken against Dutch mission doctors in 1990 at Siloam Hospital, based on false, concocted charges, and which benefited nobody and eventually caused the death of a number of patients, including a child of one of the protestors. Having considered a number of explanations (eg.: It seems to be the only action that brings results, or: It expresses the only power of the powerless), one has to come to the conclusion that those explanations are inadequate. The fact is that in African society, people are impressed by destructive power, power that breaks down rather than builds. That is a tragedy, since only the devil benefits from that kind of power. After the excellent, devoted Dutch doctors were chased away, many people admired the protestors in the terms: "Those people have power, they could even chase away Dr

Helms”) Dr Helms was a man who, together with his wife, had devoted his life to selfless service to the Venda people, and was chased away like a dog, and called a devil by the protesters – who later themselves admitted that they had no reason whatsoever for it apart from blind hatred towards whites.

The point is that blind, destructive power is demonic power. Any fool can strike a match and burn down a hospital, but it takes more than a fool to rebuild it. A contextual ethic for Africa would address the demonic nature of destructive power and the responsibility of humans to rule the earth wisely and constructively.

An ethic of authority

In traditional African society subjection to authority was a very basic tenet. This was only logical according to the philosophy of the hierarchy of forces. A lesser power was subject to a higher one as a matter of course.

In South Africa the many recent demonstrations and the violence accompanying them points to a serious disruption of authority. A very important reason for this disruption is obviously the suppression of black people during the era of Apartheid. Authority in that era became to them synonymous with oppression. The rulers became the enemy. Parents lost their authority because of the modern society in cities. Many young people also were very critical of the passive way in which their seniors accepted oppression, and lost their respect for them because of it.

When black people gained authority with the end of Apartheid, young people were naturally elated with their hard won freedom. But they had by then acquired the tradition of rejecting abuse of power. They had found ways of expressing their dissatisfaction, and those measures were usually violent. They had lost their respect for authority in itself, even if that authority was beneficial. They had tasted the power of violence, and they used that power to get what they wanted, whether justified or not. Very unfortunately they had to deal then with an authority which ignored their legitimate pleas, but ironically granted them whatever they demanded in a violent way. They were taught by the new authorities that violence paid.

This revolutionary mindset needs to be addressed by a biblical approach to authority, based on the fifth commandment of the Decalogue, particularly as elaborated by Paul in Romans 13: “*No authority exists without God’s permission, and the existing authorities have been put there by God*”, and what follows. The church of Christ should address both the authorities who abuse their power, and the subjects who have no respect whatsoever for authority.

Ethics of Service

In Western European societies there is still appreciation for some Christian values such as selfless service, even among non-Christians. People disapprove of powerful who abuse their power, and admire people who live a life of service to others. Few people have ever been admired more than Sister Theresa, the Roman Catholic nun who devoted her life to serving the poorest of the poor in India. Pre-Christian Africans tend to be very suspicious about this. They find it difficult to conceive someone devoting themselves to serving others without an ulterior motive, since in their own culture it is unknown. My daughter is a very devoted teacher who teaches young African children. Those of the parents who understand the Christian ethic appreciate her and make no secret of it, but a black man once told her, “We cannot have respect for you, because you love us, and that is a sign of weakness”!

Yet practising the Christian ethic of selfless service has apparently had more impact on Africans than many sermons. Phalannawa was a shining example of this principle. He was a servant of God and therefore also a servant of people. He never tried to present himself as a strong or dominating personality; he was much too humble to even consider the idea of it, yet at his memorial service people witnessed that he had *tshirunzi*, (in Sesotho and isiZulu *seriti, isithunzi*, “prestige, personality”). People respected him for being humble and noted his strength in his weakness.

Ethics of koinonia

In traditional African culture, as has already been explained, one basic norm for a system of values is peaceful interpersonal relationships. However, there is usually constant strain because of jealousy between people and suspicion of others. Whenever there is disunity, people start suspecting one another of witchcraft. I remember an incident in which a small girl was told by her mother to carry a heavy mortar down a steep and slippery mountain. When she slipped and the mortar fell on her leg and broke it, no one even considered the possibility of an accident; it was regarded as an act of witchcraft by an enemy as a matter of course.

People are often unwilling to let close family members go to a certain hospital for treatment, because at that hospital there might be a nurse who is a family member of an enemy, and she would be sure to abuse her position by harming or even killing the patient.

Another example of stumbling blocks in the way to koinonia is the taboos about relations within the nearest family. There is little confidentiality between fathers and their children, especially their daughters. Daughters are expected to avoid communication with their fathers, and any familiarity is regarded as a lack of *inhlonipho*, respect. The relationship is one of fear rather than love. The

real confident is the *malume*, the mother's brother. It is also regarded as very improper to educate one's child about sexual matters.

One is struck by the many cases of children of pious, devoted pastors who run wild, become drunkards or have extra-marital relations. When the causes are investigated, it turns out that there was no relationship of trust with the parents in the family.

Among a number of pastors' and evangelists' sons who attended the seminary where I taught, I never found a single one who knew that one is saved by trusting in Christ. Their fathers probably knew about salvation and believed it, but they never took the trouble to share it with their children.

In such a situation, traditional *ubuntu* is useless. The only way towards unity and good relations is Christian love. An outstanding characteristic of Phalanndwa was his free and spontaneous communication with his children. They spoke openly and with great appreciation of the spontaneous communication with them all, and with almost every person wherever he met one, whether young or old. Every night they had family Bible study in which all the children took part. From their earliest youth the children were taught to pray – not reciting a little rhyme which they had to learn by heart, but really conversing with God as with a Father.

When Phalanndwa encountered a child on his way and he could think of nothing else to talk about, the standard question was, "What did you dream last night?"

His family continues his tradition of open friendliness in the following generations. They are all of them devoted believers.

This tradition can already be found in other families to whom Phalanndwa has ministered, and should be taught and demonstrated to all Christians if we desire to see families living in love and harmony.

An ethic of forgiveness and reconciliation

In the traditional African ethic, it was very difficult to establish true reconciliation once people fell out with each other. Once an enemy, always an enemy. People are very reluctant to become involved in other people's personal quarrels. "This is not my quarrel, becoming involved might just make it worse", the argument goes.

One characteristic of Phalanndwa which was mentioned by more than one person was the way he exerted himself to reconcile people who were at odds with each other. If anyone complained to him of someone else, the first question was always, "Why haven't you spoken to him yourself?" Then Phalanndwa would persevere with the matter until the two were reconciled. It was useless to try to remain an enemy of anyone once Phalanndwa got involved in the matter.

Sexual ethics

In the traditional African culture, physical virginity in girls is highly valued, and there were ceremonies where girls were physically examined from time to time. Among some peoples, sexual contact and petting, pseudo-coitus of unmarried young people, up to orgasm, was actually encouraged as a form of preparation for marriage. It was acceptable to have more than one petting partner, provided there was no penetration. In Tshivenda it is called *vhudavhu*, (and in other languages –*tlabola/-hlobonga/-gangisa/-metsha*). This practice seems to have fallen into disuse and to have been replaced by unrestrained sex.

Although it is frowned upon by elder people, the instruction that traditional young ones receive consists of hardly more than an emphatic “it is not done”, without any moral basis being mentioned. In practice sexual licence is accepted as inevitable. A Zulu headman in the Nqutu district in KwaZulu some time ago that he had to try to put an end to the moral laxity of his subject, and ordered all the young girls to be physically examined. It turned out that of a thousand girls there was no more than a single one who was still a virgin. Many of those girls were church members, but there seems to be no difference in this regard to church members and outspoken pagans.

In another district of the same province, there was only one young girl of whom it was known that she had remained pure. The other girls got so fed-up with her constantly being held up to them as an example to be followed, that they ganged up against her and killed her.

A female official of the Department of Education once visited the school where my daughter teaches, with a questionnaire about the sexual behaviour of school teachers. She was amazed to hear that here was one woman who had had no premarital sex, and who had had only one partner all her life. The rule she was accustomed to, was promiscuity. The official’s reaction to my daughter’s history was, “You live on another planet. I myself do not dare marrying, for then the husband will demand unprotected sex and I shall have to run the risk of contracting AIDS.”

Because of the mutual trust, openness and confidence between Phalanndwa, his wife and children, they have all started their families in a creditable Christian way which is a model for others.

An ethic of hope

The biblical terms for “hope” refer to a joyful expectation of salvation which is absolutely sure. Traditional African beliefs offer no hope of resurrection, no more than a dreary conscious existence of one’s spirit after death. Death is usually experienced as an unmitigated tragedy, something to be sad about. Especially a widow is expected to display outward signs of grief between the death and burial of her husband. A Venda woman has to sit covered with a

blanket and be sad. There is nothing to be joyful about, no hope for a life of bliss.

The memorial service of Phalanndwa was a remarkable deviation from this tradition. He had a very happy, faithful and loving relationship with his wife, and everyone was aware of that. Still she showed no outward signs of grief at the service. She mixed with the guests and even had the courage to address the meeting as one of the speakers. His children and grandchildren showed gratitude and joy in what they said, recalling his lovely character and sharing anecdotes about him, which often had the audience in peals of laughter. The service was not one of mourning, but of celebrating his life, and everyone present accepted that as quite appropriate. The whole was one eloquent witness to Christian hope.

An ethic of time

A saying that illustrates the attitude towards the use of time is the following: “Time never runs out, it is a person who comes to an end.”

The traditional African has very little appreciation for the value of making the best use of time. There is always more time. What is not done today, can be done tomorrow. One is always amazed at the patience with which Africans, even modernised Africans, endure the wasting of time. A marriage or memorial ceremony can go on endlessly, and people do not complain. I recently attended a memorial service at which there were thirty speakers, some of whom spoke for half an hour saying very little. Seminars are often organised and ten or more speakers put on the list, with no time limitation indicated, and the first speaker might use one and a half hour without being called to order by the chairperson. People do not complain if a person wastes a lot of time saying nothing relevant or useful. Preachers might deliver long sermons with no meaningful content, for it seems as if, to the audience, participation is more important than meaningful communication.

Scripture is very clear about the responsible use of time. One could refer to specific texts such as Eph. 5:16 and Col. 4:5 or Ecclesiastes 10:14: “A fool talks on and on.” Which reminds me that this is a good place to stop.