The notion of eschatology in African ancestral religions: A category of deliverance, promise, remembrance

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1. The Notion of Eschatology: A Starting General View

Generally speaking, eschatology is the theological doctrine of the ultimate things, of the last or final days, of the world to come, of life after death. It is a theological investigation or a religious quest about the ultimate meaning and the destiny of the world and of human beings. In this sense, eschatology has a teleological dimension. It deals with expectation, with hope, with death, with the future. Its relevance lies on the belief that not everything about human beings is over after death, that death is not human beings’ radical end and absolute destination, and that there is something beyond.

But eschatology is not only about the future (the not-yet-there). It is also about the present (the-already-there) and the past, the memory of the past, through the act of remembrance. As Davis Tracy says: the apocalyptic being the genre to articulate the sense of expectation for the parousia of the Lord Jesus Christ, eschatology is lived in the recognition act that “the gift of the spirit of that Lord to the present is also a promise for the future and a disclosure of the true meaning of the past”.

2. Dimensions of Christian Eschatological Consciousness

And Karl Rahner defines eschatology as the doctrine about human beings insofar as they are beings who are open to the absolute future of God himself. Such a theocentric understanding of eschatology opens it to any messianic religion, to any religion characterized by a messianic hope. And in that sense, eschatology does not presuppose or requires Christology, and it is not an exclusively Christian category. Eschatology does not have to be christocentric.

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However, taken within the context of his transcendental theological anthropology, Karl Rahner’s eschatology has a Christological foundation: for him, eschatology gives expression to human beings as Christianity understands them: as beings who ex-ist from out of their present “now” towards their future\(^3\). He affirms that eschatology provides a view on human beings from the perspective of their experience of salvation, the experience which they now have in grace and in Christ\(^4\). Therefore, for Karl Rahner, because of human being’s very nature, “Christian anthropology is Christian futurology and Christian eschatology”\(^5\).

Indeed, from a Christian perspective, eschatology is Christocentric and found its meaning from the paschal Mystery: it is not only grounded on Jesus’ Resurrection and proclamation of God’s Kingdom, but it is also oriented towards Christ’s return in glory, towards the coming of “a new heaven and a new earth” that the Risen and Glorious Christ will bring about upon his return to judge the righteous and the sinners, the living and the dead, and to instaured his eternal Reign.

Christian eschatology contains, as John Sobrino would put it, the belief that “present reality is not capable of revealing God fully”, and that “the authentic reality of God will only show up at the end of history”\(^6\). And with that, “‘re-ligion’ (looking to the past) becomes ‘pro-ligion’ (looking to the future)”. That’s why Christian eschatology reminds us that human history is not a “history continuing on into infinity”\(^7\), and that the world and its history do not simply continue on indefinitely\(^8\). This world and our human history will rather experience an “interruption” -in the words of J.B. Metz- and they, in Rahner’s words, will “enter into eternal life with God”\(^9\). It is that eschatological “interruption” that makes Christianity a religion of hope -hope understood as “imminent expectation” of the Messiah’s entry into history-, rejecting, as Johannes Baptist

Metz would say, the “image of time as an empty continuum, expanding evolutionarily into infinitude, mercilessly encompassing everything”.\(^\text{10}\)

Such an “eschatological consciousness” that “breaks the spell of timelessness”, and that injects some “element of discontinuity in time”,\(^\text{11}\) such an eschatological consciousness does not exist in African Ancestral religious worldview.

### 3. Interpreting Time and Eschatology: An African Perspective

African ancestral religious thought has a timeless understanding of time. It views and feels time as a timeless infinity, and the cosmic “future as an empty slide screen”\(^\text{12}\). As John Mbiti put it, “African peoples expect human history to continue forever”\(^\text{13}\). “They expect the events of the rain season, planting, harvesting, dry season, raisin season again, planting again, and so on to continue for ever,”\(^\text{14}\) “and there is nothing to support that this rhythm shall even come to an end; the days, months, seasons and years have no end”, just as there is no end to the ontological rhythm of human life.\(^\text{15}\) “People expect the years to come and go, in an endless rhythm like that of day and night, and like the waning of waxing of the moon”\(^\text{16}\).

So, indeed, both in the sense of a messianic expectation and in the perspective of a cosmic apocalyptic marking the final end or destruction of this earthly world, there is has no eschatological consciousness of time of African ancestral religions.

However, the eschatological consciousness found in African ancestral religions is of personal and existential “eschatology”, of eschatology seen as the end of the individual’s historical human


\(^{11}\) Johannes Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 162.

\(^{12}\) Johannes Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 162.


and cosmic journey, and the beginning of a new life, a more enhanced life with more vital force, in the invisible world of ancestors. The fundamental belief underneath this is that human beings, as individuals, die; but human race survives time and it is embarked on an endless journey toward the future of abundant life sustained by endless generations made of the living, the dead and the yet-to-be-born. And time continues uninterruptedly, alongside this world whose existence and history will never end.

African ancestral religions generally do not have the belief of a future resurrection of the bodies as such; but they do have the belief of life after death, lived in the “invisible world”, in the “village of ancestors”, where all the righteous dead meet and dwell, enjoying their personal and collective immortality. The access to this invisible village depends on the quality of life in the land of the living where much value is given to the faithful respect of ancestral traditions and customs, and to the remembrance of the clan’s dead, both the defeated and the successful, the rich and the poor, the famous wise and the unknown victim. A remembrance that binds the community together in communion with the dead, and in fellowship with one another to guarantee the survival of the future generations.

But this eschatological belief of the afterlife village of the ancestors is not the focus of life in term of longing or expectations or claim to resurrection or reincarnation. However, it shapes peoples’ actions and provides them with a sense of orientation and hope in living a life characterized by personal virtue, cosmic harmony, clanic solidarity and ancestral wisdom.

Reflecting on the African concept of time and history, John Mbiti declares that “in traditional African thought, there is no concept of history moving “forward” towards a future climax, or towards an end of the world”¹⁷. According to him, in the African traditional societies, the golden age lies in the past rather than in the future, and that peoples are more concerned with the past or history than with the future to the extent that they only have a virtual conception of the future, and that time for them only has two dimensions: a dynamic present and a long past.¹⁸

¹⁷ John Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, 23.
So that’s why, interpreting the New Testament Eschatology in an African Background - *A Study of the Encounter between New Testament Theology and African Traditional Concepts* - Mbiti argues the Christian view of a new world in the heavens request a radical discontinuity with the traditional worldview, especially because these religions do not expect or think of a future world situated somewhere in the heavens, and therefore have no futuristic eschatology.\(^{19}\)

According to him African time moves from the present (Sasa) to the past (Zamani), and that each year that comes and goes adds to the time dimension of the past, while ‘eternity’ or endlessness is something that lies only in the region of the past”.\(^{20}\) So for him, an event gets its plenitude of meaning once it becomes realized and therefore part of history.

Here I break with John Mbiti and I embrace theologians such as Bénézet Bujo and John Parrat who challenge Mbiti’s assumptions and reduction of African time to the present and the past. For Bénézet Bujo, the ancestors being models for the living, the respect for their traditions and customs bring existential wisdom and vital strength to the living, enabling them to live better in the future. And that even though history is the guiding force and that life is rooted in the past, it is past which has meaning for the present and the future. Moreover the Africans cherishing their ancestors’ traditions, they do so, not for the sake of the past, but for the sake of the present and the future, with the hope that this would render them better men and women.\(^{21}\) So, “*in looking toward the ancestors, and hence becoming a partaker in their privilege, such an African becomes in turn a source of life for succeeding generations*”.\(^{22}\)

And John Parrat argues against John Mbiti that “*the emphasis upon the fullness of life indicates that Africans have a concern for the future. And if fact, the African outlook is therefore eschatological in the sense that it looks beyond death, for the welfare of the living depends upon those who have passed beyond death.*”\(^{23}\) Indeed, “*salvation, wholeness, and the meaning of life*
are inextricably bound up with the ancestors, who are the guardians of the present and the guarantors of the future. The future is existential possibility, the success or failure of which depends upon how far the heritage of the ancestors is actualized". So, against John Mbiti and according to Bénézet Bujo and John Parrat, the African does indeed stand in a history that has a future and that moves forward, not only backwards, and that the very cherished past “points ever toward the realization of a salvation that is grounded in the ancestral tradition”. And that constitutes an eschatological dimension, and this possibility for the future depends upon humans themselves.

Concluding Remarks:

In sum, the spirituality of cosmic eschatology cultivates a sense of God’s transcendence that leads to the relativization of everything else that is not God; a relativization grounded on their historicity and temporality. The eschatological belief and practice “transgress” limits, displace frontiers, inverse hierarchies institutionalized and imposed by the stronger or powerful. The proclamation and teaching of the end of the world unveil the provisional character of human institutions, hierarchies, and values transformed into ultimate realities. In this sense, as declares Eboussi Boulaga, “the eschatological activity is an operation of deconstruction and deconditioning. It relativizes ideologies and institutions in order to place them in correlation with the desires and interests which have given rise to them and which ensure their vigor and durability. It also places them in relation with one another, thereby demonstrating that they are defined in relation with one another, and that the system or totality which they constitute must be transcended if one seeks ‘salvation’- if one seeks that leap out beyond the impasses and contradictions of today toward another world”.

However, with due respect to Johannes Baptist Metz who criticizes the “anthropological reduction of the eschatological time” by religions that do not share Christian eschatological

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consciousness and create a distinction between the universal eschatology (oriented by cosmic time) and individual eschatology (oriented by the time of one’s individual existence), there is some anthropological value and sociological relevance in this distinction that we should not lose sight. And I disagree with Metz that “a society without Christian apocalyptic has made death deadlier” since it would mean to them that there is no resurrection of the dead. One can speak of the world after death without the Judeo-Christian notion of the resurrection. Moreover, the implication of the absence of a cosmic eschatology allows a radical focus on the here-and-now, the already-there of history; it encourages a mobilizing commitment to the making of history, instead of an evasive spirituality that would lead to certain resignation vis-à-vis the present historical reality. In fact, sometimes, “the concept of the future becomes over-valued and exaggerated, and is easily exploited by ‘Messianic’ figures proclaiming the end of the world and future blessedness for the faithful.”

On the other hand, the absence of the spirituality of the irruption of the end of the world and its history may allow the attribution of a certain religious transcendence to the world that goes beyond existential phenomenology, and leads to a religious ontology characterized by a radical sacralization of the cosmos, where everything becomes sacred and gets a religious meaning. The consequence that some green lands, plants, trees, sea or forest animals, and natural elements would be declared sacred or religious taboos, leading to, for examples, the spread of hunger, or to a public health issue because of lack of medical treatment since some herbal plants would be seen as taboos! Some rivers (even though full of fish) or mountains would become sacred;

For examples: According to the Langi (Uganda) and Turu (Tanzania), buffalo and lions express the divine manifestation of power. The Massai (Kenya & Tanzania), the Meru (Kenya) and Mao (Ethiopia) use grass as sacred herbs during religious rituals. The Herero (Namibia) regard all cattle as sacred, and they eat them only when sacrificed in religious ceremonies. The Dinka (Sudan) view bulls or oxes as sacred and destined only for sacrifice. The Ashanti (Ivory coast and Ghana) or Akan (Ghana) view the spider as sacred and symbol of wisdom; so one of God’s titles is “Ananse kokroko”, meaning the “Great Spider”, that is the “Wise One”. The Kongo

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28 Johannes Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 164.
forbids their women to eat pangolins, and in many Congolese cultures, Leopard and Okapi are sacred: killing them is a sacrilege.

About the nature: the Kongo (DR Congo) see as sacred Kongo-bololo, a medicinal plant that releases headache and stomachache. The Akan (Ghana), like many other cultures, such as the Kongo, forbade to clear sacred forests or bushes, to fish or hunt animals during forbidden seasons or sacred days, to sell or lease a piece of land without the chief permission, to farm around watersheds, or more importantly to make love in the forest or in the bush [which today is relevant for ecology and public health as it helps to create a safe and healthy environment for love-making [cf. in case of heart attack, or animal attack or snake or insect biting...public health issues].

Another thing: the Massai (Kenya & Tanzania) called a volcano mountain, “Ol Doinyo Lengai”, that is the “Mountain of God”. And the Chagga call their mountain, “Kilemakyaro”, the Mountain of God (Kilimanjaro). According to the Bambuti (DR Congo), Bavenda (South Africa), Ila (Zambia), Ewe (Ghana, Togo & Benin), the thunder is God’s voice 53. And the Gikuyu (Kenya) and Zulu (South Africa) see it as God’s movement. And for the Yoruba (Nigeria), thunder is the expression of God’s anger.30

In fact, there is a certain religious understanding of the cosmos that goes with those taboos that is great for biodiversity, ecological protection, environment preservation, land management and sharing. It helps agriculture, prevents desertification and drought, deforestation or destruction of forests.31

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