

Dr. Fritz Stenger

MSC 111 MISSION ANTHROPOLOGY

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1. Introduction

What is Anthropology?

Anthropology is the science that studies human cultures. The word derives from two Greek words: *anthropos* meaning ‘man’ or ‘human’, and *logos*, meaning ‘word’ or ‘reason’. Anthropology is, therefore, a word about man, the study of who and what the human being is. It is a *behavioural science*. This means that anthropologists attempt to study what human beings do, how they behave. Other behavioural sciences are sociology and psychology.

Anthropologists are interested in people’s total behaviour, not just how people think, but also in what people do in their every day activities. This includes their work, their rituals, their play, music and art, their religion, their politics, their food, their family organization, in short everything that people do and think in their ordinary life. In anthropology, we are concerned with people *as they are*, not as we like them to be. As a behavioural science, anthropology looks for truth in empirical discovery. ‘Empirical’ simply means looking at the universe and at the people around us. Empirical research is concerned with things we can see, touch or observe. Whereas in theology final truth comes from revelation, in anthropology the final truth comes from empirical discovery.

Anthropology is divided in two major disciplines, physical anthropology and cultural anthropology.

- 1.1. Physical anthropology** is concerned with the biological aspects of human beings: racial differences, human origins, study of human fossils.
- 1.2. Cultural anthropology** deals primarily with the growth of human societies, group behaviour, origin of religions, social customs, technical developments, family relationships and oral history [poems, songs, myths, proverbs, and folk tales].

In this course, we deal mainly with cultural anthropology. Because it is such a wide-ranging discipline, it must draw upon research done in other disciplines, such as history, geography, biology, economics, psychology, sociology, linguistics and archaeology.

Within cultural anthropology, there are several schools of thought, of which I like to mention two: **evolutionism and structuralism:**

1.2.1. Evolutionism

The theory of biological evolution was first presented by Charles Darwin in *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. He argued that the human being is a social animal and possesses many of the same instincts and needs, as do animals. He stated that the species adapted to changing environmental conditions, and that through a process of natural selection only the most adaptable individuals or groups survive. He showed that nature selects those forms that are better adapted to a particular climate and way of life. The notion of adaptation implies that organisms changed slowly over million of years.

1.2.2. Structuralism

Another influential school of thought [20th c] is structuralism. Their leading proponents were the British anthropologist A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and the French ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. They asserted that by taking all of the many aspects of a society into consideration, one could arrive at the structure of a society. Lévi-Strauss was convinced that a culture, like a language, has a structure that can be analysed. The difficulty with structuralism is that it presumes a static condition of a society and neglects its historical changes.

1.3. Dimensions of Cultural Anthropology

1.3.1. Anthropology historically has dealt primarily with Non-Western peoples

How did anthropology originate? As people from the West came into more frequent contact with peoples of other societies, whether through colonialism, trade, travel or missionary endeavour, some began to develop the new discipline called anthropology. Judging from the number of distinct languages in the world, about 6000, one can estimate that there are at least 6000 separate cultures in the world. Anthropology deals primarily with the cultures of non-western peoples.

1.3.2. Anthropology has developed the concept of culture

What is culture? Culture consists of all the things that we learn after we are born into the world that enable us to function effectively as biological beings in the environment. We are all carefully indoctrinated from birth, mainly by our parents into certain patterns of behaviour. By the time we become aware of what is going on, we have already been pressed into a cultural mould [cast]. As we learn our culture, we organize ourselves biologically according to it. Human biology requires that we eat.

Each environment provides a certain range of edibles and imposes limitations [no bananas in the Arctic]. But it is in terms of our cultural patterns that we choose to eat certain things [beef] and refuse to eat other things [cat meat, frogs]. We ordinarily follow cultural guidelines concerning what to eat, and in what way [fingers, forks, chopsticks].

Environment often dictates that we protect our bodies from the weather. But it is our culture that we follow in deciding what clothing and housing we use.

Anthropologists regard cultures essentially as equal to one another. They do not speak of ‘inferior’ or ‘superior’ cultures. Well-functioning societies normally meet the needs of people within a culture. But even healthy societies are not perfect or without flaws. Nor do they provide for meeting every conceivable need. Cultural patterns often have only inadequate answers to modern influences. People are often left with customs that don’t work in modern situations, and, therefore, they may develop social and psychological problems.

1.3.3. Anthropology has developed the concept of worldview

Culture consists of two levels: the surface behaviour level and the deep worldview level. At the heart of any culture and of human life, we find basic assumptions, values and allegiances, which we accept without questioning. This is what we call ‘worldview’.

- 1.3.3.1. **Assumptions:** When people from the West assume that the only personal beings in a given room are the ones we can see, they follow a worldview assumption, taught by their culture. Or, when people in Africa assume that in a given room there are not only personal; beings, but also spiritual beings, then they follow a different worldview, taught by their cultures. [Sacred cows in India].
- 1.3.3.2. **Values:** When people from the West value individual rights more than community values, and when Africans value family loyalty above individual rights, then this is a consequence of different worldviews.
- 1.3.3.3. **Allegiances:** When people in the West commit their loyalty first to themselves, then to their jobs, their friends, their country, their family, to God, then these priorities of allegiances [loyalties] is determined by their worldview. For members of other societies allegiance to family often comes first.

Christian anthropologists are especially concerned about worldviews, since a person's worldview is affected when an appeal for conversion is made. When people become Christians, they make certain changes in their worldview assumptions, values and allegiances.

1.3.4. Anthropology takes a holistic view of people

Rather than segmenting humans into various compartments such as psychology, religion, philosophy, history and language, anthropologists try to look at the whole spectrum together by trying to integrate all that can be known about the relationships between human beings and the cultural patterns in which they live. This is what is meant by 'holistic'. Anthropologists are interested in people's total behaviour, not just how people think, but also what they do in their everyday activities. This includes their work, their rituals, their music, art and religion, their family structures.

1.3.5. Anthropology has developed the research method most helpful to missionaries and social ministers

Traditionally research has been done in libraries and laboratories, but anthropologists find it very difficult to study people that way. That is why they use the method of fieldwork, by observing the behaviour of people, and by living with them. This method is particularly appropriate for Christian workers who need to find out the worldview and the needs of the people they work with.

1.3.6. Anthropology deals with culture change

It used to be thought that traditional peoples do not change their cultures much, if at all. Anthropologists know that all cultures change at all times, some more rapidly than others. People are changing their cultures at all times. Anthropology can give us reasons for these changes. Since everything that we do and think, is affected and influenced by culture, it is important to have a solid understanding of the culture and the cultural changes of the people with whom we work.

2. What is Christian or Missionary Anthropology?

We said, that anthropology is the study of who and what the human being is. Christian or Missionary Anthropology then is the study of human beings from a Christian perspective. It is a reflection on the human being that takes place in the light of Christ. Christian faith has a particular vision of the word and of humanity, a vision that is founded upon the relationship between God and God's creation.

The pastoral constitution of Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, sets forth a basic Christian Anthropology in its first three chapters, when it speaks about the:

- dignity of every human person,
- the centrality of community,
- the significance of human action.

The *dignity* of all men and women, created in God's image, is grounded in their unique relationship with God. The dignity of every human person does not diminish the fact that one can be human only in *community* with others. Apart from relationships with others, we can neither live nor develop. In order to live in community, a social order based on the common good is required. This social structure must grow from a basic reference for others, especially for those who think or act differently, so that the basic equality of all is recognized.

Human action: Christian faith demands that human beings labour to build up the world and develop themselves a truly human persons according to the divine plan. The happiness, which God wills for the creation, cannot be identified simply with "progress", especially where technology is developed without moral principles. Christians must be committed to the transformation of the world into a community of justice and peace. Christians live in the expectation of a 'new earth', the Kingdom of God where there will be lasting peace.

These are the main themes of Christian Anthropology, considering human persons in their relationship to God.

2.1. The World and You

If we could reduce the world's population proportionately to a village of 100 inhabitants, such a village would be composed of the following inhabitants:

57 Asians
27 Europeans
14 Americans [north and south]
8 Africans

52 Women
48 Men

70 Non-Whites
30 Whites

70 Non-Christians
30 Christians

80 Heterosexuals
20 Homosexuals

6 people, all from the USA, would own 59% of global wealth.

80 would live in insufficient living conditions.

70 would be illiterate.

50 would be undernourished.

1 would own a PC.

1 would have an academic degree.

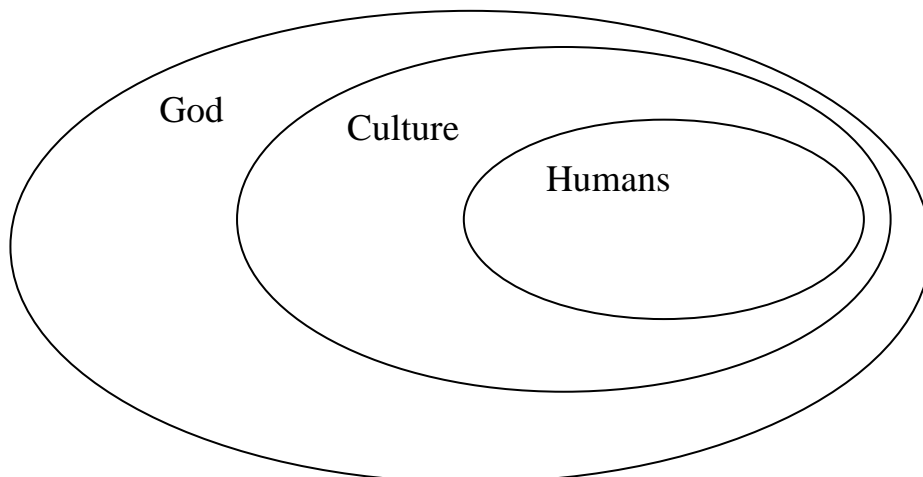
2.2. Differences between Theology and Behavioural Sciences

In theology, the ultimate authority rests in God, whereas in behavioural sciences the ultimate authority rests in humans. In theology, the final truth comes via revelation, in behavioural sciences via empirical discovery.

	Theology	Behavioural Sciences
Ultimate Authority	Rests in God	Rests in Humans
Final Truth comes	Via Revelation	Via Empirical Discovery
We are defined	By God	By Nature, Psychology, Culture
Evil is	In Human Beings	In the Environment, Structures

Theologians have seen human beings as limited by God; the behavioural sciences see the limitations of human beings in nature and in culture. Regarding evil, the theological position has always been that evil lies in human beings; we are sinful. Since human beings operate structures, then those structures are seen as evil as well. The behavioural sciences, however, see evil in the structures. If we could only straighten up those structures, they say, we would find that human beings are basically good. [Kraft, p.87] Theology, especially in the past, focussed on the relationship between God and human beings, as if there were nothing in between. Anthropology provides an understanding of the cultural conditions in which divine-human interaction takes place. Though anthropologists tend not to take God seriously, some even claim that our understanding of God is a product of culture; we can use their insights concerning the cultural influences on human beings.

Is it possible to combine theology with cultural anthropology? Neither theology alone nor Christian Anthropology alone can give us a full understanding of reality. Since God communicates with us through the medium of culture, it must be possible to combine theology with Christian Anthropology. A comprehensive approach of the study of God, culture, and human beings is necessary for an adequate understanding of reality. God, who exists apart from culture, interacts with human beings through the culture in which we are immersed.



3. The role and dimension of culture in reference to religion

3.1. Is God the product of culture?

Some anthropologists regard God as the product of our imagination. They observe that the peoples of each society have a different perception of God. They conclude that people create their own gods. People do, of course, create false gods. The Bible makes this abundantly clear.

It is also a fact that the people of each society see even the true God in slightly different ways, according to the different cultures. On the other hand, we maintain that God exists, as he is, outside of culture, whether or not he is accurately perceived by the different cultures. Accepting this cultural conditioning in our perception of God enables us to explain the different perceptions of God.

Sometimes Christians have assumed that God is against culture. They quote 1John 2,15: *“Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him”*. They assume that what God means by ‘world’, is what we mean by ‘culture’. But in John 3,16 we read: *“God so loved the world”*. The term ‘world [*kosmos*] is used in two ways:

- In a positive way as the people for whom God gave himself;
- In a negative way as the place of evil and sin.

The evil world, of which John speaks, occurs only within culture, but the world is more than culture. God is opposed to the evil, to Satan, not to the cultural structures that both God and Satan use to interact with human beings. We must also remember that Jesus was born into a specific culture, the Jewish culture, to which he subjected himself. God was willing to use Jewish culture. The Jews felt that since God was willing to use their culture, he must be endorsing it as the proper way for everybody. Paul, of course, fights such an idea in Acts 15, maintaining that God is willing to use Gentile cultures to reach Gentiles [1Cor. 9, 19-22]. There is no one culture that would be valid for all peoples, but God wants to reach each people through their own culture. He sought to reach the Hebrews via Hebrew culture and the Greeks via Greek culture. These cultures were available to God at the time of Jesus. Today God wants to reach us via our own cultures. This means that:

- a. The God of the Bible exists outside of culture. He is ‘supracultural’.
- b. God uses cultural structures, e.g. languages and customs.
- c. Human beings perceive God only via their different cultures.

Do we always have to accept all elements of a culture? Certainly not! There is much within culture that Christians need to oppose, e.g. when the cultural norms are in conflict with biblical norms. But there is even more in culture that we accept.

3.2. Cultures must be life-giving

Each nation develops its own culture. Culture is defined by what we think of God and creation, family and sex, work and leisure. There is such a thing as Christian culture, Muslim culture, Hindu culture, African culture, European culture, and Asian culture. These cultures do not have to clash, but often do.

There are, however two super-cultures which are incompatible with one another:

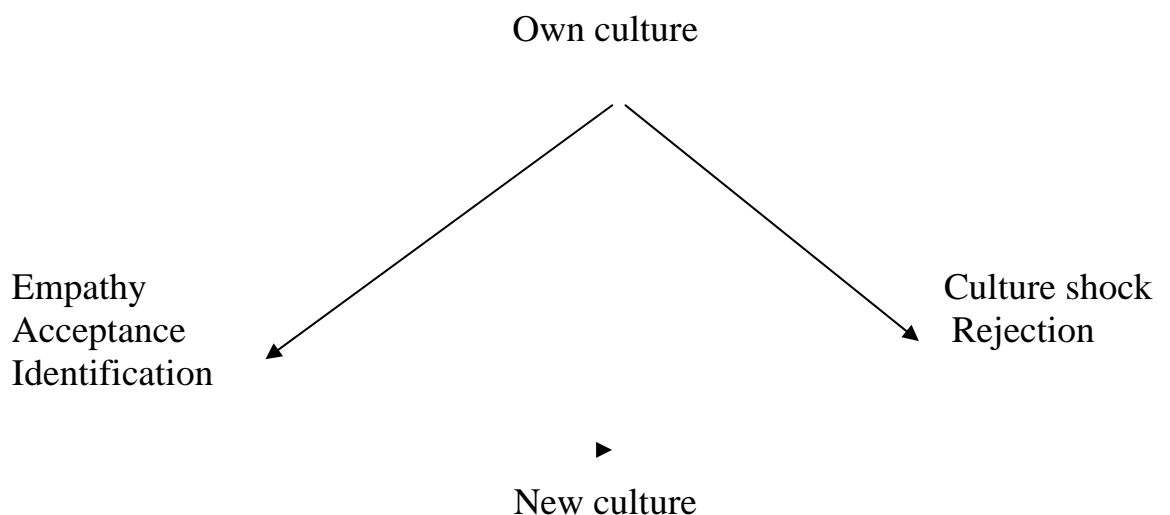
- A culture of life and
- A culture of death.

We develop a culture of life if we treat sex as a sacred gift from God. The couple that conceives thinks of the baby as the result of God's action allowing them to cooperate with God in creation new life. But we develop a culture of death if we reduce sex to a form of entertainment. The conceiving couple looks at the baby as a meaningless accident, like a weed in the garden that may or may not be convenient to live. Either the culture of life will triumph and the world will be a civilised community or the culture of death will spread and destroy civilisation.

4. Entering another culture

To minister in another culture, one must enter the culture. When someone leaves his or her own culture with its familiar customs, traditions, social patterns, and way of life, the individual quickly begins to feel like a fish out of water, because often one is not sure how to behave.

Two reactions to a new culture:



One can move into one of two directions when confronted by a new culture:

- either towards acceptance and identifications, which will result to adjustment and success
- or towards culture shock and ultimate failure.

4.1. Culture shock can happen when we lose all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse, such as: how to behave in the different situations of daily life, when to shake hands, what to say when we meet people, how to give orders to a servant, when to accept or refuse invitations, when to take statements seriously and when not. Culture shock comes in three stages:

- Fascination, when a person first enters a new culture. New sights and sounds.
- Rejection, when the fascination begins to fade. The newcomer becomes frustrated when he attempts to behave in the new culture by applying the rules of his own culture [e.g. people sitting down in the office without being asked to sit down]. This rejection can lead to making derogatory and joking remarks about the people of that culture.
- The third stage, recovery, begins as the person starts to learn the language and the rules of the new culture. The frustration slowly disappears.

Cultural anthropology can give a person a perspective that will enable him/her to enter another culture with the least amount of cultural shock. A person entering another culture should recognize his/her ethnocentric tendencies.

4.2. Ethnocentrism is the practice of viewing the world in terms of one's own culture.

4.3. Cultural relativism is a way of viewing the world in terms of the relevant culture, that is, in terms of the culture in which one finds himself. An action is right or wrong as defined by one's own culture.

When a person has been raised in the context of his own culture, everything does appear quite natural to him. When a person enters a new culture, he/she may react to it as being strange, silly or funny. This means that when you enter a new culture, make a conscious effort to detach yourself from your old culture as much as possible. In order to do this, one must realize that all cultures are relative, and that your own culture is not more right than the new one. Accept it as different but not better. Never try to judge another culture by the standards of your own culture.

Christianity is never found apart from a culture. It is rather like a fish that can only exist in water. Religion is always part of a culture. There is no such thing as 'plain Christianity'.

4.4. What is God's view of culture?

A key question for Christians who study anthropology is: What is God's view of culture? We have an answer in 1Cor. 9,19-22, where Paul describes his approach to cultural diversity:

I am a free man, nobody's slave; but I make myself everybody's slave in order to win as many people as possible. While working with the Jews, I live like a Jew in order to win them; and even though I myself am not subject to the Law of Moses, as though I were working with those who are, in order to win them.

In the same way, when working with Gentiles, I live like a Gentile, outside the Jewish law, in order to win the Gentiles.

From the very beginning of Scripture, God has shown himself willing to work with people *within* their own culture. God want us to adapt to cultural differences. In the past, the Church has often forgotten this teaching of the scriptures in Acts 15.

5. Key Concepts of African Traditional Religions

5.1. Definition of ATR

Most African languages have no word equivalent to the term ‘religion’, but there are a number of terms in each language that describe activities and practices, which correspond with what people in the West mean by religion. African religions are often closely associated with African peoples’ ethnic identity, language and culture. They developed with all the other aspects of the heritage, and therefore belong to each people within which it evolved. It is not preached from one people to another. Therefore, a person must be born in a particular African people in order to be able to follow ATR in that group. It would be meaningless to try to transplant it to an entirely different cultural setting. When people move, they often take their religion with them, e.g. Aladura Church in London.

African religious practices are not limited to beliefs in supernatural beings or to ritual acts of worship, but govern all aspects of life, from farming to hunting and travel. Like most other religious systems, ATR focus on the eternal questions of what it means to be human:

- What is the meaning of life?
- What are the correct relations between humans,
- between humans and spiritual powers,
- and with the natural world?
- They seek to explain the existence of evil and suffering.
- They also teach certain types of ethical behaviour, which has an influence on their status in the afterlife.
- These ideas are expressed in sacred oral traditions, handed down from generation to generation.
- through the performance of rituals and
- through intensive periods of education, including rites of passage.

Religion is a very elusive concept to define. This is partly because the object of religion is mainly invisible. Spiritual beings that are not subject to observation are conceived in different ways by different peoples. Man’s relationship with the supernatural may evoke two different responses: Man may seek to control and command the supernatural or he or she may adopt an attitude of submission. The former attitude would be magic and the latter religion [Ikenga-Metuh, 1992: 4].

However, this distinction between magic and religion is not always clearly defined. Some religious rituals include magic and some magical rites include sacrifice to the deities. The aim of magic practices is the control of supernatural forces by human beings through mechanical acts and formulas. It would, therefore, be wrong to label African religion simply as magic, as was often done by outsiders. It is true that magic and witchcraft feature much in the life of Africans. But their religion is not constructed around magic [Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 1991:19]. It is much more than that. It is, therefore, wrong to equate ATR with magic.

5.2. How did ATR originate?

Mbiti argues that religion is part and parcel of the African heritage which goes back many thousands of years. African religion, he says, “is the product of the thinking and experiences of our forefathers. They formed religious ideas and formulated religious beliefs, they observed religious ceremonies and rituals, they told proverbs and myths, which carried religious meanings, and they evolved laws and customs which safeguarded the life of the individual and his community [*An Introduction to African Religion*, p. 12]. This means that ATR are not found neatly formulated in library books, but rather in the very life of people, in their daily practices and languages. It “evolved slowly through many centuries, as people responded to the situations of their life and reflected upon their experiences” [idem, p.14]. It is a dynamic phenomenon that is found in all aspects of life in Africa, in all activities, such as the birth of a child, the giving of names, circumcision and other initiation ceremonies, marriage, funerals, harvesting festivals, praying for rain and many others” [idem, p.19]. Shrines, sacred places, religious objects, art, symbols, music, dance proverbs, riddles are all forms of religious expression. “Because traditional religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and the non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life” [Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p.2].

It also implies that God does not exist without the world, and is not thought of in Africa apart from the world. Therefore, access to him can only be via the world and nature. God is experienced in, with and through the world. He speaks through the world. We cannot get away from God. It is practically impossible, not to be aware of him. And yet, with a few exceptions [Ashanti, Nuer], God is normally not the object of ritual acts in Africa. Ritual acts deal mainly with daily needs. “God is too great to be reached with our sacrifices, he has no need of them”, the Akan in southern Ghana say.

5.3. The relationship between the living and the ancestors

Most known spirits in ATR are ancestral spirits, that is the ghosts of the dead, either the recent dead or living dead, or those who have died long ago. Belief in life

after death is found among most African peoples from earliest times. Belief in the ancestors permeates the traditional religions of Africa. It forms the core of their religious practices. It was so central that missionaries utterly opposed it, because they saw in it the most fundamental threat to belief in God. Africans, on the other hand, have never been able to understand why one thing should exclude the other. The Ghanaian theologian C. Baeta stated categorically: “Our people live with their dead” [*Christianity in African Culture*, 1955:59].

The most visible signs in Africa for life after death are the pyramids in Egypt. The pyramids were the burial places of the pharaohs. When they were buried, they needed the same standard of living to which they were accustomed. The culture of the pyramids allowed no break between the living and the dead. The many burial customs and prayers in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* [about 2000 BC] confirm that the belief in immortality among the Egyptians was one of their oldest religious beliefs. All this happened on African soil!

Among the Bantu, scholars agree, survival after death is not a matter of speculation. This belief is a guiding principle and basis of life for most people [Gehman, 139]. Mbiti says: “Without exception, African peoples believe that death does not annihilate life and that the departed continue to exist in the hereafter” [1970:264]. Some believe that they live underground where they are buried. The underworld of the dead is a common belief among many. At the same time, many believe that the departed ascend to the sky to live somewhere above the world. In general, among the Bantu, there is the belief that the ancestral spirits are closely associated with their former home. It is for that reason that many want to be buried in their village of origin. The ancestral spirits are where their descendants are. It is believed that distance does not hamper their movements as it used to do before they discarded their body. They can even be at several places at the same time. Wherever the living-dead are, their abode is modelled after the pattern of the living. One major difference, however, is the absence of marriage. Africans do not “pray” to the ancestors, they request or beseech them in an attitude of profound respect. This distinction between “prayer” and “invocation”, however, is not always clear on practice.

5.4. What is their role among the living?

5.4.1. As senior elders of the clan, the ancestors function as the guardians of the clan. The concept of seniority is basic to the understanding of their function. A man’s prestige increases, as he grows older. It is the concept of seniority that makes an elder almost indispensable in the life of a people. The authority of the ancestors is rooted in that concept.

5.4.2. When the living fail to follow the customs of the fathers, it becomes the duty of the ancestors to correct their error. Nearly every crisis that develops, drought, sickness, death, may be attributed to the displeasure of the ancestors. In

the understanding of the people, the living-dead make known their will by these means and seek correction of the wrong.

5.4.3. As elders, the ancestors serve as the owners of the land, fertilizing the earth and causing the food to grow. The land becomes sacred in the sense that it binds together the living with the ancestors.

5.4.4. The ancestors receive the requests from the living. Fertility is of great interest to the living-dead, since without a continual reproduction of children, the clan may be in danger. Thus, people often request their ancestors for help in bearing children.

5.4.5. The ancestral spirits may also serve as intermediaries between the people and the Supreme Being. Being close to the living they can best understand their needs. At the same time, they are close to the Supreme Being to whom they have full access. But in reality, many people are not aware of this.

5.5. African beliefs about spirits

The African belief about spirits is closely related to the practice of offering sacrifices, since they are normally offered to the spirits. Most practices in ATR are directed towards the spirits. Mbiti, in his *Introduction to African Religion*, p.70 distinguishes between nature spirits and human spirits. The nature spirits are divided in sky spirits and earth spirits. The human spirits are divided between the long dead [ghosts] and the recently dead [living dead].

5.5.1. Nature spirits

They are personifications of natural objects and forces. People give personal characteristics to these forces and objects of the universe, as if they were living intelligent beings. Some are associated with objects in the sky: the sun, moon stars rainbow, storm, thunder and lightning. They are either regarded as spirits themselves or as being inhabited by spirits. In some societies in Nigeria, Ghana and Uganda, it is believed that there are spirits who rule over the weather, the sun and rain [Fr. McCoy, the rainmaker]. These spirits are often considered as divinities. There is no clear distinction between spirits and divinities. May be one could say that divinities are nearer to God and further away from the earth than spirits. The home of the spirits is the earth. However, there are also earth divinities.

Not all African societies believe in nature spirits. Some see the heavenly forces as directed by God himself. Even when their existence is recognized, they are not always venerated. Nature spirits are more often known from creation myths and legends. These nature spirits help people to explain the mysteries and forces of nature for which people otherwise have no explanation. Instead of a scientific explanation, the nature spirits explain thunder and lightning in religious terms.

This satisfies people who have a non-scientific mind. As scientific knowledge increases, the acceptance of nature spirits diminishes.

There are not only nature spirits of the sky but also of the earth. They are connected with hills, trees, rocks, rivers, waterfalls and also certain animals. They are spoken of in human terms as if they can be pleased or offended. Diseases such as smallpox or madness or even death may be regarded as spirits. The idea of earth spirits provides people with a means of explaining many things for which they have otherwise no explanation. People do not acknowledge any particular spirit all the time. They may abandon the idea of a particular spirit if there is no need for a particular spirit.

5.5.2. Human spirits

Human spirits are those that once were ordinary human beings. It is a consequence of the strong belief in ATR that human life does not end at death. As a result, there must be a huge number of human spirits. Many of them appear in legends and myths. Some appear to people in dreams and visions. They can be divided in two groups: Those who have died long ago and are mostly forgotten. Exceptions are those who are mentioned in myths and legends, e.g. the founders of a clan. About those who are forgotten, people do not have a clear idea. Sometimes they are said to have simply disappeared into the unknown or may have become nature spirits. In some stories, they appear as animals or plants. They may be shown as having human behaviour, sometimes also stupid or exaggerated. In these folk stories, people use these human spirits to caricature human life and to make comments on society, and to voice their frustration. These human spirits appear in these stories as a channel through which people can voice their emotions without offending one another. They really serve an important social function. The spirits of people who were once leaders, warriors or clan founders are not so easily forgotten and continue to be respected. In some societies, outstanding spirits of the dead are elevated to the status of divinities and people ask for their aid through prayers and ceremonies.

5.6. Witchcraft and Evil

Until now, the emphasis has been on how ATR helps to maintain, or sometimes to restore, order in society and in people's lives. In this chapter, we look at conflicts and tensions between individuals in society. People's lives can be disrupted by quarrels and conflicts, but also by disease, death, and famine. Serious disruptions of any kind in such societies may be attributed to witchcraft. Belief in witchcraft is not a particularly African phenomenon, it is common among small-scale, settled agricultural communities throughout the world, in which people are tied together by the land, and in which people are bound to socialise even with those they do not get on with. It is, therefore less common or

sometimes even absent in nomadic and pastoral groups, i.e. in highly mobile African societies, where tensions can easily be resolved by moving away [Bourdillon, 187 f].

How is witchcraft related to religion? Some would argue that witchcraft is the opposite of religion, but the mechanisms by which symbols of witchcraft and religion operate to motivate the participants, are very similar. Spiritual powers associated with witchcraft often overlap with those attributed to religion.

Witchcraft accusations usually arise out of conflict within a community. They always reflect some kind of social tension. Sometimes it is easy enough to understand why things go wrong. A lazy person gets poor crops because he has not done sufficient work in preparing the soil. It is obvious how people get venereal diseases through breaking sexual taboos. Sometimes it is clear why spirits who are believed to control the health of people should be displeased. But sometimes things go wrong when everyone has done their best, and this is a puzzle. If an explanation is to be found, it must be outside the realm of moral norms.

Witchcraft beliefs are not irrational. Evans-Prichard gives the example of a granary being eaten by white ants. It collapsed while people were sitting under its shade. Everyone knows that it collapsed because it was weakened by termites. But why did it collapse just when those people were sitting under it? People brought up in a different way of thinking, may conclude that it was the will of God. For people brought up to think in terms of witches, the answer is witchcraft.

Beliefs in witchcraft provide a way of thinking and understanding things and events. Like any other belief system, belief in witchcraft cannot easily be proved or disproved by empirical evidence. Witchcraft beliefs fit in logically with the events in people's lives as they perceive and understand them.

5.6.1. What is witchcraft?

Witchcraft is *the* enemy of life. Witchcraft is something that is totally evil, and a witch is a person that practises witchcraft. Contrary to what the English word suggests, witchcraft in Africa is not primarily an "art" or a "craft". It is rather a mysterious power that resides in human beings. Evans-Prichard says in *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, p.63: It permeates all areas of life and plays a role in agricultural, fishing and hunting pursuits; in domestic and communal life. Efforts to preserve life cannot be understood without reference to the power of witchcraft. There is no aspect of culture, where the power or influence of witchcraft is absent. When natural or religious explanations fail to satisfy, the social explanation – witchcraft – is invoked.

Generally, witchcraft involves the reverse of normal values and behaviour. Witches are believed to act secretly at night, normally a time of danger, instead of openly by day as honest people do. They are believed to have special powers, often through the help of evil spirits. Witches reject kinship loyalties, and the kin

of witches are believed to be in as much danger as anyone. Witches are associated with death, and are often presumed to desecrate graves, to eat human flesh and to kill. They are believed to sexually abnormal, incest is associated with witchcraft. They are believed to delight in evil for its own sake. The logic of witchcraft is that witches are doing things what others are afraid to do or cannot do. They are assumed to have special powers to protect themselves from dangers of which others are afraid. E.g. they commit incest and break other taboos that protect the coherence of society. Others are afraid to do this for fear of supernatural punishment. Witches break the rules of society and of nature without fear. The solidarity of society and the unity between the living and the dead, fundamental elements in any African society, mean nothing to people who practice witchcraft.

5.7. The Mungiki Movement in Kenya

[Grace Nyatugah Wamue, Kenyatta University, Nairobi 2002]

The introduction of missionary Christianity in Africa was the turning point in African religiosity. Missionaries introduced a new religion and culture that included new beliefs and practices detached from indigenous religio-cultural values and beliefs. This missionary-cum Western view posed a real challenge to certain core beliefs in African religiosity, which was especially felt by the Gikuyu, the largest ethnic group in Kenya. Among these are ancestral veneration, sacrifices, polygamy, clitoridectomy, traditional dances, dowry, widow inheritance and traditional medicine. The Africans had to be liberated from these beliefs and practices. The struggle to change Africa from spiritual “darkness” to “light” was at the core of evangelism. During the last ten years, a group of Kenyan youth has emerged that has tried to adapt religion to the African condition rather than accept the foreign structures of Western Christianity. It addresses the youth’s emotions by promising a self-determined new sense of identity.

The Mungiki movement is claiming that Christianity has been used as a tool of oppression; hence, African religion has to be used as a means of liberation. It is a movement with diverse aspirations ranging from political to religio-cultural and socio-economic liberation.

5.7.1. Gikuyu

To understand the Mungiki, it is important to highlight the culture and religion of the Gikuyu, where they originate from. The Gikuyu are the largest ethnic community in Kenya with a population of 6,5 Mio. They mainly live in Central Province. They have a strong attachment to their land. Land tenure is the most important factor in the social, political, religious and economic life of the tribe [Kenyatta]. They depend entirely on the land. They consider the earth as the “mother” of the tribe. The value they attach to the land is derived

from their mythical origins. According to the legend, Ngai [or Mugai, the divider], in the beginning, called Gikuyu, the founder of the community, to the top of Keringaya [Mount Kenya] and showed him the country that stretched from East to West and from North to South. Mugai assured Gikuyu that he would always come to his assistance, if the latter were in need. He instructed Gikuyu on the need of prayer and sacrifice to him.

5.7.2. The Gikuyu concept of God

They believe in one God, Ngai, the creator and giver of all things. Ngai has no father, mother, or companion. His work is done in solitude. He lives in the sky, but when visiting the earth, he dwells on Mount Kenya. Ngai has no messengers. He manifests himself in the weather, rain and sunshine, thunderstorm and lightning. Ngai is distant and takes little interest in the daily lives of the people. He is called upon during the rites of passage. There, communion with Ngai is established. Gikuyu people refrain from praying to Ngai if all is well. In Gikuyu religious worldview, prosperity means good health, fertility, and peace with the neighbours and absence of calamity and disease. It is a symptom of God's blessing.

5.7.3. Missionaries

The coming of European missionaries to Gikuyuland around 1890 was a turning point in Gikuyu religiosity and cultural heritage. They introduced a new religion and social structure, basing themselves on two assumptions: the Gikuyu people were heathens who had a vague idea of monotheism; their own religion and culture were of a higher civilization as compared to the that of the Africans. To them Western values and customs were synonymous with Christian morality. The aim was to liberate the Africans from "heathenism". Total conversion to Christianity meant to adopt Western civilization. In this way, the missionaries interfered with Gikuyu tribal organization, which led to tensions that culminated in the Mau Mau rebellion.

5.7.4. Origin of the Mungiki

Mungiki is a political and religious movement asking for the revival of Kikuyu traditional culture. Mungiki followers define themselves as a people united by a common purpose, to liberate the country from mental enslavement, corruption, bad governance, capitalism, Western dominance and Christianity. The term Mungiki comes from the Gikuyu word *Nguki* which means crowds or masses, coming together. The movement emerged in 1987 during a time of serious civil and ethnic conflicts, during which more than 500 people were killed. Many Gikuyu people were displaced from the Rift Valley, and there was the general feeling among them of being sidelined by the Moi government. Many Gikuyu, in particular those who fought for independence,

the ex Mau Mau, who had lost all their property during the land clashes, virtually live in poverty.

Mungiki was formed with this social background. In 1987 Ibrahim Ndura Waruinge, aged 28, and Maina Njenga had a vision about taking back the Gikuyu to their cultural roots. They are the movement's self-appointed spiritual leaders. The movement has various shrines where initiates are 'baptized'. Attempts to appropriate the legendary birthplace of the Gikuyu, Mukurwe wa Nyagathanga in Murang'a as the holy ground of the Mungiki, has been refused by the local population.

Originally the majority of the movement were school drop-outs and low income earners. But recently they were also joined by university students. The group comprises the less advantaged in the society. For them 'Mungiki' stands for oppression, exploitation, discrimination and alienation of the masses. The members are easily identifiable through their peculiar mode of dress, hairstyle and lifestyle. They clad in green, red, white and black berets, long dreadlocks like the Rastafarians, traditional sandals [akara]. They wear of late white sheets instead of trousers and shirts. This with a walking stick [authority and wisdom] is their ceremonial dress for worship. Mungiki youths insist that Gikuyu elders have failed in guiding the youth and therefore the youth must show them the way. Members have a unique way of greeting one another. They take raw tobacco [snuff]. The dreadlocks are an indicator of good character, because criminals behind bars have their head shaved clean. They believe that men who worship God in truth should not shave their hair.

The Mungiki have a definite mission and objective. Composed of mainly young, jobless people who feel marginalized in society, they are desperate and confronted with hopelessness and uncertainty in Kenya. Consequently, any hope and change is readily welcome. They teach their followers that joblessness, Aids, economic and moral problems are the result of the old people who have turned away from the true worship of God. The solution to these problems should be sought in reverting to what the elders have abandoned, a return to the traditional Gukuyu religious practices, as well as a return to indigenous methods of government, which is based on Gikuyu age-grade system. This was a system where the rulers stayed in power for a specific period of time, and handed over power to the younger generation in a ceremony referred to as *itwika*.

6. Particular themes analysed through Christian and cultural anthropology

6.1. Creation

We find the creation stories in Gen. 1 –11.

- Priestly tradition: 6th century BC. Gen. 1, 1-2,4a is less concrete, more theological than the
- Yahwist tradition: 10th century BC. Gen. 2,4b-25.

The creation stories are not meant to be reports about what actually happened in the beginning. They speak about the God from whom the world and human beings have their origin. They want to establish a relationship between God and the world: The world is reliable, because it comes from God. The creation stories are therefore an expression of faith. They focus on the divine power, which forms, orders and sustains life. There is no cosmic battle like in many creation myths. God merely speaks and creates through his word.

God created the world ‘from nothing’. That means that the world received its entire being and identity from God. It also means that we depend upon God. Just as I owe my existence to others, the cosmos as a whole owes its being and life to God. To be is to come from others.

God has not merely created the world, but he holds it in existence at every moment. All reality is related to God and sustained by God. The world is a good place.

The first 11 chapters of Genesis want to tell us that the world is a good place to be. They give a description in popular style of the origin of the human race; in a simple way, suited to the mentality of the people, they declare the fundamental truths on which the plan of salvation rests. These truths are:

- The creation by God at the beginning of time;
- God’s special intervention in the making of man and woman;
- The unity of the human race;
- The sin of our first parents;
- The fall from divine favour;
- The penalties their descendants inherited as a consequence of sin;

All these are truths, which have their bearing on theological doctrine, and which are guaranteed by the authority of Scripture. They are also facts, but we cannot know their nature, as they are presented to us in mythological form, consistent with the mentality of their time and place of origin. It would therefore be unreasonable to reject the creation stories of the Bible, because they don’t speak with the precision of modern science. These texts make use of the primitive knowledge of the time. It would, therefore, be a mistake to seek points of agreement between these stories and the data of modern science.

The aim of the creation stories is to offer explanations for different aspects of the human condition as we experience it. The Priestly account of creation is like a litany. Over and over, we are reminded how good creation is: “*And God saw everything God had made, and behold, it was very good*” [Gen. 1, 31].

That is why we profess in the Creed: “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth”.

There were those who argued that everything has come to exist through change. The Bible says that God created the world from nothingness. God is the Lord of all things because he is their creator. It means that freedom and love are the sustaining forces of reality, of creation. In studying all that exists, we can recognize the creating intelligence behind it.

Albert Einstein once said that in the laws of nature “there is revealed such a superior Reason that everything significant which has arisen out of human thought is, in comparison with it, the merest empty reflection [Einstein, *Mein Weltbild*, p.21, quoted by Ratzinger, *In the Beginning*, p. 23]. In the world of heavenly bodies, we see revealed a powerful Reason that holds the universe together. When we study the smallest reality, the cell, we again can discover the Reason behind it, the Creator.

God himself shines through the reasonableness of his creation. Physics and biology have given us a new creation account, which let us recognize the face of the Creator. The universe is not the product of darkness and unreason. It comes from intelligence, freedom and love. It gives us the courage to have hope for the world.

6.2. The gift of human freedom

Human beings are not the centre of the universe, and they are not the measure of all things. Human beings are creatures, and are therefore dependent on the creator. They are finite, that means limited. But they are different from other creatures, because they are created in the image of God. God has created man and woman as the crown of creation, he has put them the responsibility of being in charge of creation, but that does not mean that human beings can do what they want. They have to administer creation responsibly. In this way, human freedom is limited. Human beings are not their own masters. But our freedom is also limited in another way: We exist in a particular context and are to some extent determined by different relationships within this context, such as:

- Our genetic make-up.
- The particular place and time of history, in which we are born and live.
- From childhood, we are shaped by cultural forces about which we have no choice. They greatly influence the development of our character and behaviour.

Mudimbe: Nobody speaks from nowhere!

But our genetic, historical and cultural heredity does not totally determine what each of us will do in a given situation. Within these limits, there is a wide range in which I can determine what I want to do and how I desire to live.

6.2.1. What is freedom?

Our ordinary experience of freedom is in making such choices. All of us like the freedom to decide what clothes we are going to wear [Sisters' habit?] and what we are going to eat. But these choices have little impact on our personality. The freedom to choose one's religion, country, home, profession, friends, and partner is more important, because the choices we make in these matters have a lasting impact on our lives.

Freedom is the capacity to choose who I am going to become as a person [Sachs, p. 29]. Life is not only a gift, it is also a task. We are not merely objects thrown into existence, determined by others and by outside influences. We are also subjects, responsible agents, persons who are challenged to become someone. We have real choices to make about our lives, which nobody else can make for us. That is our freedom. Human freedom is, therefore, the capacity and responsibility for self-determination.

Freedom is also the capacity to desire. What is it that we most deeply desire? I suppose it is "life". Life is found only in relationship with others. To be alone is to die. Freedom is the desire to reach out beyond ourselves. This desire leaves us restless. Our desire for life leaves us unrestricted. No single object of person completely satisfies us. Throughout our lives, the desire to find life which is full and lasting. This is what St. Augustine meant when he said that our hearts would never come to rest until they rest in God. What we most deeply desire is God. God alone provides life in its fullness. Only God can be the 'object' of a complete, unconditional, fulfilling choice. This is what human freedom is finally for and where it comes to its fulfilment.

But how do we 'choose' God? God does not appear as an 'object' among other objects. God's presence is mediated through the world, through creation. Whenever we care for this world, when we respect it and hope for it, we enter in relationship with God. Whenever we attend to the needs of the least of our brothers and sisters, we are meeting and loving God [Mt. 25]. This is why ultimately the love of God and the love of neighbour are one and the same. True freedom is not only freedom *from*, but it is also freedom *for*. Freedom is not merely autonomy; it is a freedom for others, a freedom for service. Gal. 5,1: Christ has set us free for freedom, without any other 'hidden agenda'.

All of us are to some extent caught up in ourselves, unable to reach out freely to others. The NT speaks of freedom as a gift of the Spirit, which overcomes our selfishness. Freedom, therefore, does not refer in the first place to the rights of private, individual human beings. It refers primarily to the foundation of a living communion among human beings, since 'no man is an island'.

Question:

Is personal freedom the right to do whatever one wants to do, as long as it does not hurt anyone else?

6.3. The individual and the community

What is the significance of community for an authentic Christian understanding of the human person especially in the African context? In Europe, on the other hand, individualism and competitiveness are for the majority the rule of life.

The dignity of the human person is to be understood in the context of community. We know and understand ourselves only in relation to others.

6.3.1. Being = Being-in-relation

Think for a moment on how many people you depend on in order to be able to be here today. We all depend on others from the moment of our birth = mother-child relationship. We become never totally self-sufficient. Human beings are by necessity interpersonal. I cannot live unless there are other persons who desire it.

Let us not treat others as things, trying to manipulate them. Let us treat them as persons with feelings and with a free will. Often we see others only as means to an end, i.e. my own happiness. If we want to have a meaningful relationship with others, we must choose to establish it. It does not come by itself. This is what distinguishes us from animals who just follow their instinct. The human community must be desired, chosen and worked for. A genuine community is not only based on common interest. It is based on mutual respect and affection. In a real community, there must also be freedom, justice and mercy.

The Gospel gives us an image of real community in 1Cor 12,12:

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.”

Apart from the body, a member is only a dead organ.

The Church is the sacrament of communion and community. Vat. II in L.G. and G.S. focused on the Church as the people of God and stressed the communitarian nature of human life.

The African Synod spoke of the Church as family of God. God himself exists only in communion with the Son and the Spirit.

6.4. Body and soul

The understanding of the body as the dwelling place of the soul, as it is commonly understood, is not what the Bible tells us. This concept of body and soul, as two separate realities, is based on Greek philosophy, especially on the philosophy of Plato. It has led to a dualistic understanding of the human person.

The Bible sees the human person in a holistic way as a unity. It does not make the separation of body and soul. What the English Bible translates with ‘soul’, is the Hebrew word ‘nepes’, which has a much broader meaning: breath, life, person. When God blew the breath of life into Adam, Gen. 2,7, Adam became ‘nepes’, a living being.

There is another Hebrew word, which has the same meaning: ‘rûah’, = breath or life force [Gen. 7,22]. ‘Rûah’ does not refer to something distinct from the body. The reduction of life to the ‘soul’ is unknown in the O.T. Compare the Swahili word ‘roho’, which means ‘soul, spirit’.

The NT uses soul [psyche] and flesh [sarx] in much the same way. Psyché is much more than what we understand by soul. It means mortal life. “The son of man has come to give his ‘psyché’ in ransom for the many [Mk. 10,45]. It includes the whole realm of feelings, emotions and attitudes. It means the whole human being in his vulnerable, mortal nature.

Because the Bible stresses the unity of body and soul, this implies that at the resurrection not only the immortal soul, but also the body will be resurrected, although in a transformed way. Body and soul are not composite parts, but different ways of describing the complex reality of the human person. Otherwise, there is the danger of dualism, which sees the body as evil and the soul as good. Body and soul are distinct but not separate. They are related to one another. I do not simply have a body and a soul. I am a body, I am a soul, or: I am a spiritual body.

Gaudium et Spes [no. 18] says that God calls us in our ‘entire being’ to a sharing of divine life. Why is it important to stress the unity of body and soul? Because there has often been the danger of downgrading the body, especially its sexual activities [cf. celibacy]. We are challenged to turn away from sin, not from the body or from the world. The enemy of the spirit is not the body, but sin! We must equally care for body and soul.

6.5. Sin

To sin is commonly understood as doing something wrong, to go against one’s conscience, or to disobey the 10 Commandments.

Some sins are relatively minor = venial sins.

Others are more serious = mortal sins.

This classification, however, is not always clear-cut. Used e.g. to be a mortal sin to eat meat on Fridays. Now it is not a sin at all. Formerly the Church stressed more personal sins, but today the Church stresses more social sins, emphasizing that sin is not an individual act, but a reality, which has a social dimension.

6.5.1. Sin in the OT

The OT, beginning with the story of the fall of Adam and Eve in Gen. 3, understands sin as a transgression of a divine command and as a rebellion against God and his authority. Adam and Eve decided to be their own gods. Their sin, original sin, is not so much a transgression of a command, as it is a turning away from god with a heartened heart [Jer. 7,24-26]. It means saying no to the one who

is capable of giving us life. Only God can forgive sins. Ps. 51,17: “A humble spirit and contrite heart will not be despised by God.”

6.5.2. Sin in the NT

According to Paul, sin is a power to which we are slaves and from which we must be redeemed [Rom. 7,17-20].

For John, sin is the refusal to believe in the Son whom the Father has sent [Jn. 16,9].

But there is also forgiveness: Lk. 11-32.

6.5.3. The social dimension of sin

Sin not only affects the individual, it is a social reality, something that has an effect on the whole community. Most sins are in fact a failure of love towards the neighbor. Sin is often against the common good, e.g., driving carelessly or exploiting workers.

Sinful people create sinful social structures, e.g., racial or ethnic oppression [Apartheid-system in South Africa]. Only the conversion of sinners can bring about lasting peace and justice. We can speak of the universality of sin, even in the Church. We are not able on our own of loving the world and God.

6.5.4. Sin and Death

According to the Scriptures, the world as we experience it, is not as God intended it to be. Gen. 2-11: The reality of suffering and death are the consequences of human sin. To turn away from God is to die, because the sinner has abandoned the only source of life. Death is a consequence of sin, teaches the Church. Through Adam’s sin, death entered the world. It is not a punishment inflicted by God, but the consequence of sin itself.

Death is not only a biological process and physical pain. Death is radical loneliness, being cut off, isolation, and absence of God.

6.6. Grace

We can only escape the power of sin through the power of God, i.e. through God’s grace. Christian life, therefore, exists in the dialectic of sin and grace. Grace is God’s love and life-giving power.

For Paul, grace is seen in the love, forgiveness and service of community life. Grace brings freedom from the power of sin and death; Rom. 5; Gal. 5. We need God’s to live in peace and harmony with others and ourselves. Grace is a

force that frees human freedom from its bondage to self and to sin. Grace is a free gift that cannot be earned through good works or through prayer [Reformation, indulgencies]. Nobody can buy one's way into heaven. Only trust in God's forgiveness can bring salvation.

Vatican II states that god's saving Spirit is not limited to or controlled by the visible church. Grace is at work in the hearts of all who sincerely follow the dictates of their conscience, even if they are not explicit believers {LG 15-16; GS 22}. The Church is not the sole possessor or dispenser of grace. God's grace is present not only as the gift of freedom but also as the on going call of conversion to truer, deeper freedom.

The signs of grace are not always extraordinary events. Often they are not even explicitly religious. We experience grace in those surprising, unexpected moments when we feel ourselves in the presence of an incomprehensible depth: the birth of a child, the power of the sea, the beauty of a great work of art, the extraordinary generosity of certain people, when enemies forgive one another and nations lay down their weapons. Grace is present whenever men and women are united in love with one another and with God. Grace leads the human person to the fullness of life which is only found outside its own narrow, enclosed 'self.

6.7. Death and resurrection

The resurrection of Christ is the heart of the Gospel message and the foundation of Christian faith. The Scriptures speak quite definitely about the resurrection of the dead, and not of the resurrection of the soul. The ancient creeds speak of the resurrection of the body. The foundation of Christian faith is the testimony of those to whom the risen Christ showed himself. God has raised the man Jesus whom we have crucified [Acts 2, 23f]. Something had happened which was unlike any other event in history. It was the beginning of a new age. It is God's final act of judgment on sin and death. It is the revelation that God's final word is life and not death. It does not mean that my body will be revived to what it was before. It means that I, as a person, will reach definitive and lasting fullness. Paul sees life after resurrection as a transformation of the whole person by God. Resurrection, therefore, is an image of God's eschatological and universal saving act. It shows us what our final destiny will be, something that at present we can hardly imagine.