MAN'S KINSHIP WITH NATURE -
AFRICAN REFLECTION ON CREATION

Gerard van 't Spijker

For religious man, nature is never only 'natural'; it is always fraught with a religious value. This is easy to understand, for the cosmos is a divine creation; coming from the hands of the gods, the world is impregnated with sacredness. It is not simple a sacrality communicated by the gods, as is the case, for example, with a place or an object consecrated by the divine presence. The gods did more; they manifested the different modalities of the sacred in the very structure of the world and the cosmic phenomena. [...] Despite the deep and sweeping changes that Christianity made in the religious valorization of the cosmos and life, it did not reject them.¹

In this article an attempt is made to explore what African theology has contributed so far to the question of humanity's relation to nature. This implies that attention has to be paid to a sacramental concept of the universe. On the basis of this African reflection, some conclusions are drawn as to what kind of theology of creation may be expected, and the specifically related fields indicated which are still open to further research.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Searching for an intercultural theology of creation

While within world Christianity the interconfessional dialogue continues to be important, and globally the interfaith dialogue between adherents of the world religions goes on, another feature is also gaining in value: the development of intercultural dialogue. It may occur in different fields of interests, like agriculture,

or medicine, but can also take the form of intercultural philosophy,\(^2\) and of intercultural literature.\(^3\) Within the ecumenical dialogue it could be called intercultural theology.

The Conference on African and Asian spirituality in Colombo in 1992 may be seen as a challenging initiative in intercultural theology.\(^4\) Its participants endorsed a statement in which the relation between man and cosmos in African and Asian spirituality was formulated as opposed to man's relation to nature in the western world. Asian and African spirituality may be characterized as friendly and open to environment and cosmos, whereas western-dominated theology was seen as patriarchal, and aggressive towards nature, attitudes that are the main reason for the present ecological crisis. In the same statement the affinity of African and Asian spirituality with biblical spirituality was stressed.

African and Asian spirituality or religiousness, no less than that of the Bible, is concerned for life-giving blessings, not only in the after-life, but also within this world and within present history. [...] This spirituality is global and cosmic in that it understands salvation in terms of life-giving blessings for humanity, individually and collectively, envisioning all this to happen in a new world and a new history. By life-giving blessings we mean food, rain, shelter, land, human rights and dignity, freedom, justice, forgiveness of sin, the Spirit in people's hearts — in short the fullness of life.

Unlike religiosities that promote 'other-worldliness' which prevents the emergence of a socially engaged spirituality and praxis, African-Asian-biblical spirituality promotes a 'this-worldliness' and commitment to history and the earth without degrading material things through atheistic contempt or idolatrous greed.\(^5\)

This different view on earthly realities is not an academic question only, as is clear from another quotation from the statement:

> We need ... a spirituality that will train us to fight in defence of our right to shape our future, to define our goals and to tread the path we choose instead of letting our

---

2 H. Kimmerle has formulated what he sees as the aim of intercultural philosophy. The comparison of different systems of philosophy in different cultures is not the first aim, but rather that philosophers of different cultures get to know each other better in order to enter into an essential philosophical discussion, to work out common projects of research in long term programmes. This intercultural philosophy holds that transcultural philosophy which accepts a universal truth beyond the cultural particularities, is not feasible ('machbar'). The aim is not unity, but togetherness within the differences. See: H. Kimmerle, *Philosophie in Afrika-afrikanische Philosophie*. Frankfurt/Main/New York 1991, 15, and 189-190; H. Kimmerle, *De dood is (g)een einde*. Rotterdam 1992, 2.


5 o.c. 135s.