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Sin and evil in African Christian theologies: A classification

ABSTRACT

This article is based on the observation that there is a tension between an affirmation of the inherent goodness of humanity and the widespread prevalence of corruption in Africa. In African traditional culture, there is a tendency to regard human wrongdoing (sin) as the product of external evil forces beyond the control the individual. By contrast, there has been a tendency in Western Christianity to regard evil as the product of sin, understood as alienation from God. This contribution is based on a bibliographic survey of how African Christian theologians relate such traditional African thought patterns with Christian convictions. It offers a classification of the ways in which the relationship between sin and evil is understood in enculturation theologies, liberation theologies, Pentecostal theologies, by Zionist churches and in evangelical theologies in the African context.

1. INTRODUCTION: *UBUNTU* OR CORRUPTION?

How is the relationship between sin and evil understood in contemporary African Christian theologies? This is the question which will be explored in this contribution. The significance of this question has to be understood in the light of the contrast between an affirmation of *ubuntu* and the widespread prevalence of corruption in the African context. A few comments in this regard are important:

In African traditional culture the inherent goodness of human beings is typically affirmed. This is classically expressed in the notion of "ubuntu". It seems that especially three connotations contribute to the meaning of *ubuntu*. Firstly, it expresses the conviction that a human being is human through other human beings. One's basic sense of identity is formed through one's belonging to a larger community. Secondly, it calls for respect for the basic human dignity of others because one's own sense of identity and dignity is determined by the way in which others are treated. Thirdly, it calls for solidarity within human communities. Those members of a local community who are experiencing difficult personal circumstances and those who have specific material needs should be assisted by others in the community.

In calling for a spirit of *ubuntu*, the individualism that is prevalent in modern urbanised and industrialised societies is often criticised. Many hope to retrieve something of the social harmony of traditional African villages. However, an enthusiasm for the notion of *ubuntu* should guard against a romanticised version of the "the sweet African village of a bygone period". In traditional culture a spirit of *ubuntu* did not always prevent authoritarian rule, cruelty against outcasts, the oppression of women and children and brutal ethnic conflict. *Ubuntu* may therefore be understood (perhaps more appropriately) as a future vision for the good society – a society which has never existed before.

What is more important for the present argument is that the inherent goodness of humanity is typically affirmed on the basis of the notion of *ubuntu*. Musopole (1994:177) argues that human beings have dignity and integrity that is exclusively human and that the source of these qualities is God. In addition to that, he comments that any conduct, that is inappropriate, amoral and a betrayal of moral integrity reduces one to a level of a beast with a human face. Apart from that, *ubuntu* can also be attributed to what Tempels (1959) refers to as *vital force* or what Setiloane (1986) refers to as *seriti.* Tempels argues that, in African thought, everything is seen in terms of vital forces. He maintains that, from an African perspective, a human being is a vital force that is related to other forces. A human being can either influence or be influenced by other forces. Like Musopole, Tempels claims that the vital force originates from God and for that reason is sacred. It can be argued therefore that actions of *ubuntu* are nothing other than the manifestations of that vital force which is part of human nature. Setiloane (1986:13) describes "seriti" as the physical phenomenon that manifests itself externally to the human body. Africans believe that "seriti" is in the human blood. *Seriti* gives human beings power that enables them to interact with others in a harmonious way. It can be argued therefore that actions of *ubuntu* are nothing other than the manifestations of the vital force or *seriti*. Therefore, in African thinking, human beings are regarded as being inherently good, and that such goodness implies dignity, which is deeply seated in human nature.

In the light of this view on the human condition, Africans have to come to terms with the hard reality of corruption, which is prevalent throughout the African continent. In almost all African countries, poor people are suffering under the hands of corrupt individuals. There are various forms of corruption in Africa, including bureaucratic corruption and political corruption. The realisation that corruption is endemic in Africa raises a fundamental question regarding an affirmation of the goodness and the dignity of humanity. If humans are inherently good, as the notion of *ubuntu* seems to suggest, where should the origins of corruption be located? Why is corruption so pervasive, if a spirit of *ubuntu* prevails in African communities?

There is no need to compare Western, Eastern and African manifestations of corruption here. Many plausible explanations for endemic corruption may also be offered with reference to the legacy of slavery, Western imperialism, colonialism, apartheid in South Africa, capitalism, the forces of globalisation, the burden of international debt and so forth. However, for Africans, the hard question which cannot be evaded is: Where does evil really come from? Is it not all too easy to always blame the origins of evil on outside forces? Is there not a need for Africans to accept some responsibility for endemic corruption? If so, how does an acknowledgement of corruption correlate with an affirmation of *ubuntu*, understood as an expression of the inherent goodness of humanity?

2. CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIES ON HUMAN DIGNITY AND SIN

In the context of Christian theology, this appreciation of the dignity of humanity and the recognition of human corruption has traditionally been expressed in terms of both the goodness and the fallenness of humanity. Christianity has traditionally affirmed both these seemingly paradoxical statements. The relation between them has engaged the attention of the most renowned theologians such as Paul, Augustine (e.g. in his famous controversy with Pelagius), Aquinas, Luther, Calvin and several contemporary theologians.

The affirmations of both the goodness and the sin of humanity raise questions about the origin of sin and evil. Does sin come from God? Does it come from some primordial power or being that is in opposition to God, or does it come from human beings? This is one of the most vexing questions that have been discussed within the history of the Christian doctrine of sin. In the history

of the Christian doctrine, three classic approaches to this question may be identified, namely: *dualism*, *monism* and *human responsibility for sin*.

Dualism: The classic example of this approach is Manichaeism. It maintains that since God cannot be the origin of sin, sin must have its origin in a reality other than God. This approach is attractive because it protects both God and human beings from being seen as the authors of evil. However, it was widely rejected because it seems to indicate that there has been, from the beginning, a force that is as powerful as God, thus compromising the sovereignty of God.

Monism: Under the conviction that God is the creator of everything (including sin?), and also cautious not to repeat the mistakes of dualism, monistic thinkers reached the conclusion that God was the author of sin. Sin could therefore not fall outside of the confession of God as the ultimate source of reality (see Berkhof 1986). This position was rejected by the mainline Christian tradition because it suggests an internal tension within God.

Human responsibility: One of the core Christian convictions is that these many manifestations of evil cannot ultimately be derived from Godself (monism), from a power (for example Satan or fate) that is beyond God's reach (dualism),[1] or from the finite material world itself (e.g. a Manichaeist denouncing of bodily existence or human sexuality where the emergence of good and evil is related to the duality of spirit and matter). Such explanations for the origins of evil can only lead to human exculpations. The world of finite, dependant and contingent existence has not become evil due to its finiteness or brevity. It is primarily through the action of human beings that evil entered the world. Evil remains an enigma; it is something that ought not to be, does not have to be, but nevertheless is (Williams 1985:197). Our natural inclination is to shift the blame for evil unto someone or something else. It is easy enough to recognise the pervasiveness of evil; it is less easy to accept responsibility for such evil. As Luther insisted, this is perhaps the final sin of humanity: to stubbornly refuse to concede the obvious truth, namely that we human beings have to accept the primary responsibility for the evil that surrounds us. This is expressed in the Christian confession that human beings – all human beings – are sinners. Human sin is, if anything, the origin and root of evil. This confession suggests that other explanations of the origin of evil have to be resisted, since this may tempt us to justify ourselves and to shift our responsibility upon God, the devil or the material world.[2] The confession that we are ultimately responsible for sin constitutes a refusal to be drawn into attempts to explain the origin of sin in any way that will let humans off the hook.

On this basis, one may argue that evil describe the consequences of sin in the world.[3] Sin is the origin of evil and evil should therefore not be regarded as the origin of sin. This description of the relationship between sin and evil may nevertheless be too simplistic. In Christian theology, the reality of evil forces such as demons and Satan is usually acknowledged. One also has to reckon with the problem of what is called "natural suffering" and "natural evil". Moreover, there is a dialectic between what is sometimes called structural violence and a culture of violence that result from oppression. Clearly, evil also leads to sin if this is understood as moral wrongdoing.

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1   See also the excellent essay by David Bosch (1974:62-91) on monist and dualist approaches to the existence of evil, with specific reference to African theology. Bosch suggests that traditional religions in Africa have tended to see good and evil as two sides of the divine being: As long as God stays far from us (God's transcendence) and does not interfere with human existence, then God may be considered to be good. The God who comes to close to us (God's immanence) is dangerous and may cause humans harm. African myths suggest that God has withdrawn himself from humans in primeval times and this has been a blessing. Communion with God is not considered to be something desirable.

2   Debates on the origin of evil tend to become rather sterile. It is perhaps more appropriate to speak of the (human) beginning of sin instead of the origin of sin (König 1988:127).

3   For the notion of evil as the effect of sin, see Tillich *ST 2*, 1957:59f, Gutièrrez 1973:173f, Peters 1994:8f.

If human beings are responsible for evil, there is still a need to account for the very possibility of human sin. This is often related to human volition. It may also be related to an awareness and anxieties over human finitude (see Tillich 1957:33f). Wolfhart Pannenberg (1998:561) more cautiously defines sin as the "non-acceptance of finitude". He thus relates the possibility of sin (not its inevitability) with an awareness of finitude: "The deeper reason for the possibility of sin, and therefore for the coming of evil into creation with all its consequences, is that there is an original imperfection in the creature because the creature is ontically limited, cannot know all things, may be mistaken about many things and can thus be guilty of other failings. ... Limitation is a necessary part of creature-hood insofar as every creature is different from God and his perfection" (Pannenberg 1994:171). Pannenberg adds that this does not explain the origin of evil in any way: "We are to seek the root of evil, rather, in revolt against the limit of finitude, in the refusal to accept one's own finitude, and in the related illusion of being like God (Gen 3:5)" (1994:172f). The emphasis here remains clearly on human responsibility and human guilt, for spreading evil in the world.

3. AFRICAN TRADITIONAL CULTURE AND RELIGION ON SIN AND EVIL

In traditional African religion and culture, both human sin and evil are perceived in terms of the breaking of peaceful relationships within the community (see Maimela 1982). Mbiti (1991:200) argues that African people recognise social order and peace as essential and sacred. Any disruption of these would therefore be regarded as sin, and would thereby be punishable. However, at times, this sense of peace and harmony may be disrupted and this is typically understood to be the work of the evil spirits. Apart from the direct impact that evil spirits are seen to have on people's lives, it is also believed that certain individuals within the community manipulate these forces to accomplish their evil deeds. This usually transpires in the form of witchcraft and sorcery.

According to Thorpe (1996), witchcraft is the major form of disruption within the community, since it represents the dark malevolent feelings that lie in human hearts, namely hatred, envy, vengefulness and malice. After spending a period of approximately five years in Soweto, Ashworth (1996: 91) observes that although people hardly speak about witchcraft in public, except to those close to them, it is part of ordinary life and something that all people are concerned with. Parish (1999: 438) makes similar observations about witchcraft in her study of the Akan society. Both Ashworth (1996) and Parish (1999) agree that jealousy is the root cause why people inflict harm against each other through witchcraft.

According to the Shona, witchcraft manifest in anti-social behaviour: "Their conduct is an inversion of that which is approved of by society, and this disregard for generally accepted norms gives them their extraordinary power to harm their fellow men" (Bucher 1980:110). According to this description, evil spirits are the reason why there is unrest within the community. Firstly, they attack people and cause illnesses and thereby cause people to point fingers at each other. Secondly, and more importantly, with the aid of these forces, those who want to cause misery and make life difficult for others do so without any difficulty.

One may therefore argue that human sin is regarded in terms of a disruption by evil forces. Sin is the result of the contamination of evil. Again, this description may be too simplistic. Individual human guilt is usually acknowledged in African worldviews and moral philosophy (see Mbiti 1969, Turner 1967, Sawyerr 1964, 1972, Adegbola 1969, and Pobee 1979). In fact, a pervasive sense of guilt may perhaps be regarded as the polar opposite of social rhetoric where the blame for wrongdoing is placed on external evil forces. In a society where social patterns are governed by a sense of honour and of shame, it is extremely difficult to accept responsibility for wrongdoing publicly. A confession of guilt is therefore often repressed. Guilt is something that is widely

recognised, but remains hidden deep beneath the surface. It is present only as the unspeakable. To know that you have done wrong and to fear that this may become public knowledge causes immense anxiety, as is expressed in the Xhosa notion of "Isazela" which is used to refer to being haunted by an acute sense of guilt which may manifest itself in psychosomatic illness and intense suffering. Nonetheless, the emphasis in traditional African culture on evil forces that may influence and contaminate society is quite striking.

4. THE EMERGENCE OF AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIES

Christianity has its roots in the Ancient Near East. This implies that it is as much an African, as it is a European religion. Nevertheless, most contemporary forms of Christianity have been deeply influenced by Western forms of Christianity as a result of the legacy of colonialism and missionary work. Many African theologians have therefore called for Christianity with an African face. This suggests the need for an African theology and African forms of Christianity. Theologians such as Bediako (1995), Bujo (1992), Dickson (1984), Idowu (1973), Mbiti (1969), Mugambi (1989), Oduyoye (1986), Pobee (1979) have been at the forefront of this endeavour.

Any attempt to explain the relationship between Christianity and Africa remains problematic. This is due to the fact that both terms are complex and are influenced by a conflicting plurality of traditions. Different methodological strategies to engage in African theology have been proposed on the basis of concepts such as indigenisation, enculturation (Keteyi 1998), contextualisation (see Bosch 1992: 425-432, Martey 1993: 63-87), accommodation, or "constructing local theologies" (Schreiter 1985). Since these concepts are all contested and ambiguous, the methodological debates within the context of African theology remain unresolved. African theologians have been accused of putting too much emphasis on culture and thereby disregarding other important issues such as the history of the encounter of African peoples with Christianity (Ross 1997). Nevertheless, it is clear that African theology may be regarded as an attempt to relate Christianity and African traditional culture.

Contemporary Christian theologies in the African context have diversified considerably. Various typologies have been offered to chart the terrain of African Christian theology (see Bosch 1974, Maluleke 1997, Parratt 1995). For the purposes of this contribution, the following different manifestations of African Christian theology may be identified:

a) African *enculturation theology* is a trend of African Christian theology that puts emphasis on the importance of African religion and culture, especially in terms of the survival of Christianity on the African continent. Such theologians believe that in order for Christianity to appeal to the religious aspirations of the African peoples, it must be integrated with African religion and culture. African enculturation theology is therefore mainly concerned with the use of African culture and traditional African religion, as a base from which Africans express their Christian faith. To accomplish this, African theologians following this trend have called for a continuous dialogue between Christianity, African culture, and African traditional religion. Ukpong (1984: 18) warns that African enculturation theology is not a way of promoting African culture: "... it would be wrong to think of African theology as a means of promoting African culture; any theology aiming at the promotion of a particular culture would hardly be worthy of the name theology." He further warns that African theology also does not aim at justifying every aspect of African culture whether good or bad, for that would lead to syncretism. Instead, African enculturation theology seeks to inquire into the religious sensibility of the African peoples through a study of their cultural practices.

b) *Liberation theology* seeks to reflect on the socio-economic development of the poor with a view to structural change (Ukpong 1984: 49). In Africa, liberation theology became popular after a conference of the Third World Theologians, held in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania in 1976, where Latin American theologians played a major role (see Sergio and Virginia 1977). This theology became attractive to Africans, because it addressed challenges which were similar to those that Africans had to cope with (Ukpong 1984: 49-50). Such challenges included poverty, hunger, malnutrition, starvation, political oppression, discrimination and colonialism. According to Ukpong (1984:52), there are three currents of African liberation theology (see also the analysis of Parratt 1995 who distinguishes between Latin American-style approach, South African Black theology and feminist theology):

- *The indigenous approach:* According to Ukpong (1984:52), theologians following this approach, tend to employ indigenous African concepts to promote human development, which they believe have the potential to free poor people from situations such poverty.
- *The Latin American approach:* Ukpong (1984: 54) notes that African liberation theologies often focus on issues of race, whereas Latin American liberation theologies typically focus on the issue of a class struggle (where Marxist categories are often employed). Some African liberation theologies follow the Latin American example by also focusing on class struggles within the African context.
- *The combined approach:* Some African theologians employ both African socialism (which is typical of the first approach) and an analysis of class struggles (which is typical of Latin American liberation theology. Ukpong (1984: 55) refers to Laurenti Magesa's theology as a typical example of this form of African liberation theology.

c) African *evangelical theology* is a trend of African Christian theology that puts emphasis on the use of scripture as the only source of doing Christian theology, also within the African context. In accordance with this conviction, some African evangelical theologians have openly challenged the openness of African enculturation theology towards African religion and culture. African evangelical theology emerged in the early seventies as a critical response to African enculturation theology (Mbiti 2003:13) and, at times, to African liberation theology and African ecumenical organisations (see Bediako 1992). The leading figure in African evangelical theology since the 1970's was Bang Kato. In 1975 he published a book entitled *Theo-logical Pitfalls in Africa*. In this book Kato voices his criticism of the method used by African enculturation theologians, especially John Mbiti. Byang Kato is also the founder of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa and Madagascar.

d) African Pentecostal Theology is a biblically based theology that puts emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit. According to this theology, the promise of Pentecost can still be realised today. Through the Holy Spirit people can be saved from their sinful lives, they can be baptised in the Holy Spirit, healed, and they can speak in tongues. For this reason, African Pentecostal theologians put emphasis on issues such as the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the fruits and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. According to African Pentecostal theology, God is working through the Holy Spirit to communicate with people. It is the Holy Spirit who regenerates the sinners. Anderson (1992:7) classifies African Pentecostals into three major streams, namely, Pentecostal mission churches, independent Pentecostal churches and indigenous Pentecostal-type churches, also known as the spirit-type churches or Zionist-type churches (also see Hollenweger 1972:149-171).

5. MAPPING CONTRIBUTIONS ON SIN AND EVIL IN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIES

In terms of these observations, one may observe that, in generalised terms, while classic Christian theology regards evil as the product of sin, the emphasis in traditional African religion and culture is on humans being the victims of evil forces. This raises a number of interesting questions, especially in the context of African Christian theology. What is the relationship between sin and evil? How do African Christians integrate the classic expressions of the Christian faith and theology with traditional African culture and religion? Is the emphasis on human responsibility? Or is it perhaps on the way in which humans are subjected to evil that is beyond their control? More specifically: *How is the relationship between sin and evil understood in recent publications in the field of African Christian theology?*

A research project to address this problem has recently been completed at the University of the Western Cape (see Sakuba 2005). The task of this project was to identify, classify and describe different ways in which the relationship between sin and evil is understood in the context of contemporary African Christian theologies. The task of this study was therefore one of a classification of various approaches that may be identified in the relevant literature.

For the purposes of this project recent English language publications from the post-colonial period were considered, with specific reference to the four decades, between 1960 and 2000, in which African Christian theology started to flourish. This implies that classic African contributions to an understanding of the Christian faith, for example those by Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius, Augustine and many others were excluded from the scope of this study. The ways in which the relationship between sin and evil is understood and expressed in the oral and contemplative wisdom of ordinary Christians in Africa, which may be fascinating to investigate, were also not considered.

This project forms part of a larger co-operative research project entitled "Mapping Systematic Theology in Africa" initiated by Prof Ernst Conradie of the University of the Western Cape. The purpose of this larger project is to co-ordinate a number of post-graduate research projects in the field of systematic theology that will investigate specific aspects of Christian doctrine, as this has emerged in post-colonial African theology. An indexed bibliography, edited by Conradie and Fredericks (2004) has been published in this regard as part of a series of "Study Guides in Religion and Theology" by the Department of Religion and Theology at the University of the Western Cape. The purpose of this bibliography is to provide logistical support to postgraduate students working on themes within the context of the larger project. The hope is that this project will contribute to the growth of systematic theology within an African context.

6. AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIES ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SIN AND EVIL

An investigation off the relationship between sin and evil in African Christian theology is faced with two methodological problems. Firstly, not much has been written on sin and evil in African Christian Theology. Secondly, the literature that is available,[4] as limited as it is, does not always

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4   There are only a limited number of articles written by African Christian theologians on the subject of sin. Adeolu Adegbola wrote an article entitled "The theological basis of ethics" (in Dickson & Ellingworth 1969:116-136). Sawyer (1964, 1972) wrote two articles, the first one was entitled "Sin and forgiveness in Africa" and the other one "Sin and salvation: Soteriology viewed from the African situation " (in

deal with issues of sin and evil in African Christian Theology. Instead, when writing on this subject, most authors tend to allocate more space to sin and evil in African Traditional Religion.[5] Due to these problems, several other related topics such as sorcery, witchcraft, healing, exorcism and salvation had to be taken into consideration in this project.

There are especially two ways in which contributions on sin and evil in African Christian theology may be classified. Firstly, one may use a classification based on two contrasting positions, namely that *sin is the source of evil* or, alternatively, that *evil is the source of sin*. Let us investigate this first classification in more detail:

a) Sin as the source of evil

The belief that sin leads to evil forms a major part of any African Christian doctrine of sin. This thought is common, especially among those who understand sin as alienation from God. Also, it is probably the most common way in which most African Christians and theologians understand the relationship between sin and evil. When they teach about sin during their Sunday sermons and Sunday school classes, preachers and Sunday school teachers from all denominations teach that sin leads to evil. Parents and elders also teach the same thing whenever they offer some sort of guidance to those under their care. Every African child who is brought up in a Christian home knows that Adam and Eve were chased out of the Garden of Eden because of their sin. The most common expression attesting to this fact among the Xhosas of South Africa, is that "Umvuzo wesono bububi", which means, the prize one gets out of sin is evil. All African Christian theologians, irrespective of the trend of African Theology which they may follow, know this by virtue of being Christians.

Most people in Africa therefore take it for granted that sin leads to evil. This is also reflected in the writings and sayings of African Christian theologians across the spectrum:

African Enculturation Theology: The fact that sin leads to evil is definitely affirmed within the context of African enculturation theology. This affirmation comes out clearly through the work and thought of African Christian theologians such as John Mbiti (1969: 1979), Harry Sawyerr (1972, 1964), Adeolu Adegbola (1969) and John Pobee (1979).

Becken 1972). Simon Maimela also wrote two articles, which were both published in *The Journal of Theology in Southern Africa*. The first one was entitled "The atonement in the context of liberation theology" (Maimela 1982) and the second one "Traditional African anthropology and Christian theology" (Maimela 1991). John Pobee wrote a chapter on sin entitled "Sin in African Christian theology" in his *Towards African Theology* (Pobee 1979:99-118). John Mbiti also wrote a chapter entitled "The concepts of evil, ethics and justice" in his *African Religions and Philosophy* (Mbiti 1969: 204-215). Another article by Mbiti (1989) was on "God, sin and salvation in African religion. G.C. Oosthuizen (1964:188-205) wrote a section on "The concept of sin in the nativistic movements" in his *Post-Christianity in Africa: a theological and anthropological study*. Van der Merwe (1989) wrote an article on sin in which he reported the findings of a research project which he conducted on the concept of sin among Zionists in Kwazulu Natal. Turner (1967) wrote about the concept of sin in a study he conducted among the members of the Aladura Church of Christ. In a collection of Byang Kato' s articles and addresses (1985) there are also some very brief comments on the issue of sin. See also Bediako (1992: 386-425) for a contribution in this regard.

5   More or less 90% of each of the articles mentioned above, except for Kato and Turner, deal with sin only in African traditional religion. Only a few sentences and a paragraph here and there, deal with sin in African Christian theology. Even then, almost all these authors fail to be more specific on their own thoughts as African theologians on this subject. All that they do is to give suggestions for what an African Christian theological doctrine of sin may entail.

African Liberation Theology: African liberation theologians also view sin as the origin of evil, albeit that they emphasise that the suffering of the oppressed is the result of the sinful actions of the oppressors lead to evil and oppressive structures (such as the apartheid system). The oppressed are therefore being sinned against. Hence Simon Maimela (1991) believes that the idea of sin and evil in African anthropology, whereby sin is measured in terms of the life of the individuals who suffer injustice, oppression and destruction at the hands of their fellow human beings, can be a valuable contribution to Christian theology. On this basis, Maimela (1982: 51) criticises the traditional concept of sin. According to him, in traditional Christian conceptions of sin, sin is only understood as a personal problem and as an abstract idea, which must be discussed theoretically with reference to obedience to some divine laws, laws that are not familiar to African people.

African Independent Churches / Zionist Churches: The view that sin leads to evil is also reflected among the leaders and followers of African Independent Churches. Analysing the concept of sin in "The Church of the Lord" (Aladura), Turner (1967: 359-361) observes, that its members have a view of sin that is based on the Bible, with special emphasis on sin as a human responsibility instead of on personal misfortune. He further reports that even though the role of the supernatural evil spirits is not denied in this church, the magnitude and reality of this demonic realm does not exempt people from personal responsibility for their own sins. Instead, since the Lord is believed to have power over all the forces of evil, if the evil spirits captures a person, that person is regarded as a sinner or as being alienated from the Lord. To be captured by evil forces, in other words, is seen as a form of punishment by God (Turner 1967:361).[6]

African Pentecostal Theology: African Pentecostal theologians strongly believe that evil which takes the form of human suffering and problems is the direct outcome of sin. One may argue that this conviction has to do with the very origins of the world-wide Pentecostal movement. African Pentecostals believe that problems such as drunkenness, smoking, adultery uncertainty, hunger, unemployment, boredom, homelessness, indifference and hopelessness, are the direct results of being distant from God. Accordingly, they believe that when Jesus Christ enters into a person's life, such a person's problems will diminish and that sinners will thus be liberated from the problems associated with their sinfulness. Filled with the Holy Spirit, a sinner goes through a process of regeneration that restores the sinner to his or her original perfection. Sin in this context seems to be mainly understood in terms of being separated from God. In South Africa, most Pentecostal African theologians or leaders – such as Elias Letwaba, Edward Mutaung, Engenas Lekganyane, Job Chiliza, Nicholas Bhengu, Richard Ngidi, Frank Chikane and Mosa Sono – are known for their ability to heal the sick and help people with different problems. All these leaders believed that sufferers should allow Christ to dwell inside them before they can be saved from sickness and other forms of evil (see Anderson 1992: 36-55).

b) Evil as the source of sin

According to various African Christian theologies evil is not only the product of sin; evil can also, from time to time, lead to sin. In Africa it is very common to hear people referring to a sinful incident as the work of the devil or of the evil forces, or to hear them saying: "*uSathana uyabasebenzisa abantu bakaThixo*". This means, "The devil is using God's poor people." Those who share this view believe that there are evil forces that can possess a person and cause him or her to act in ways beyond the person's control. For example, they believe that some mysterious

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6 For more information on sin as the cause of certain diseases, see Becken (1972:37), Martin (1964: 116), and Oosthuizen (1991:17).

force can possess a person and cause him or her to commit sinful acts such as incest, rape or murder. Among the Xhosa, this is known as "*ukubulawa*", which means to be killed. To be killed means that the person is totally under the control of the evil force. This can happen even if someone is a devoted member of the church. For example, if a supposedly good man rapes a child, or a woman, and this is exposed, it is possible that a verdict may be that the whole incident was the work of an evil spirit. Both the rapist and the raped person would then be regarded as victims of this evil force. The perpetrator would remain a sinner, but the evil force is regarded as the main cause of his sin. It might happen that the aims of the evil one were either to harm the reputation of the rapist or to destroy the future of the rape victim. In such a case evil leads to sin because the victims are not aware of their actions.

Sin is regarded as the product of evil when it is believed that some evil force is behind a sinful act. This would apply especially to cases where a particular act does not correspond with the previous reputation of the sinner. The classic context in which sin may be regarded as the product of evil is that of witchcraft. Witchcraft is crucial in this regard because, for most Africans, witchcraft is the greatest of all sins, while the witch is the greatest of all sinners. Witchcraft is any human endeavour that is aided by mystical powers in order to harm or to manipulate events according to the liking of a witch (Mbiti: 1979: 202).

The notion that sin is the product of evil forces is found in various manifestations of African Christian Theology:

African Enculturation Theology: African enculturation theologians strongly emphasise the individual's responsibility of sin. Pobee made it clear that evil forces do not absolve people from their responsibility for sin. Nevertheless, the notion that evil may lead to sin is not completely rejected within the circles of African enculturation theology. Pobee (1979: 118) acknowledges that, "… in Africa, witchcraft beliefs continue to hold their ground and to some extent account for the popularity of the spiritual churches, which are sometimes also called 'witchcraft eradication movements' because that appears to be their major concern and preoccupation. So with no apology, one can speak of sin as captivity by the forces of evil ... " Pobee's comments have not been challenged by other African theologians. This suggests that African enculturation theologians are partly in agreement with the view that evil can lead to sin.

Zionist theology: The view that sin is the product of evil is definitely affirmed among the members of Zionist churches. This is evident from the emphasis that these churches put on the impact that evil spirits have on human lives and the society at large. For example, followers of these churches believe that evil spirits may possess human beings with the aim of using them as instruments to accomplish their evil deeds. It is believed that such interference by evil spirits in human lives is reflected in anti-social behaviour, for example, failing to assist one's loved ones and community, cruelty, pride, selfishness as well as stupidity. Sin is thus understood in terms of disturbing harmonious communal relationships and as the product of evil forces. Accordingly, a sinner is not necessarily responsible for his or her sins, for he or she is sick from evil. Hence healing through exorcism plays a major role in Zionist churches (see Daneel 1992: 195-236).

African liberation theologies also acknowledge that sin can be the product of evil forces, especially in the case of oppressive social and economic structures Gutierrez (1973: 232). In apartheid South Africa the government, its laws, its policies, its officials and its institutions were typically regarded as the embodiments of evil. Maimela (1982: 50) refers to these as powers of enslavement. Dwane (1977: 10) argues that such enslaving powers can be socio-political, cultural, and psychological or spiritual. Such oppressive structures are regarded as at least partly responsible for the wrongdoings South Africans who suffered as "innocent" victims under apartheid.

That sin can be the product of evil also features in an African Pentecostal theologies, especially in terms of references to the devil and demons. Pentecostal churches teach that sin is the work of

the devil that sends his agents (the demons) to possess some people and use them as tools to do his dirty work. In addition, these churches teach that the world is being taken over by the devil and all those who are not saved are working for him. In some Pentecostal churches this has completely overshadowed an emphasis on the individual's guilt for sin. Because the blame is put on the devil and the demons, people – also those who are HIV-positive – are made to believe that the devil and the demons have inflicted their sicknesses on them. Church members with dysfunctional families and relationships are taught that their partners are being controlled by the devil, or that they are possessed. Only if the demons inside of them are removed will they be able to act rationally again.

7. A FOURFOLD CLASSIFICATION

In the discussion above two opposing views on the relationship between sin and evil have been identified and mapped out. It is striking that some forms of African Christian theology subscribe to both these views. This seems to indicate the need for a more sophisticated classification. It is also possible to identify four main positions in views on the relationship between sin and evil. These positions may be located on a continuum between an exclusive focus on evil as the product of sin and an exclusive focus on sin as the product of evil forces.

The first position is that *sin leads to evil while it is also acknowledged that evil can lead to sin in exceptional cases*. African enculturation theologians represent a typical example of this position. For example, if asked what the relationship between sin and evil is, most African enculturation theologians would probably respond by saying that sin leads to evil, but if someone else answers differently, they would not challenge that either.

The second position is that *sin is the product of evil although evil can sometimes also be a product of sin*. The main representatives of this view of the relationship between sin and evil are the followers of African Independent Churches or Zionist churches and African liberation theologians, albeit in different ways. In AIC's this is affirmed through a strong belief in evil spirits that can control and manipulate human beings into doing things they would not have been able to do if they were not possessed. In liberation theology this is expressed in the view that the evil embodied in oppressive structures, put in place by the rich and powerful, may cause people, mainly the oppressed, to engage in anti-social behaviour – which may sometimes be regarded as a form of retaliation or rebellion against such structures. The poor and the oppressed are victims of the sins of others.

The third position maintains that *evil should be understood exclusively as the product of sin*. The main representatives of this position are evangelical theologians who resist any suggestion that would allow people to find a scapegoat which they may blame for their sins. For these theologians, human beings are themselves responsible for their sins.

The fourth position is that *sin is the product of evil as much as evil is the product of sin*. The main representatives of this position are the followers and theologians of the African Pentecostal churches. African Pentecostals have a strong belief in the individual's guilt for sin. This implies that humans are fully responsible for their sins, and not some external force. At the same time, there is an equally strong emphasis on the role of the devil who works through demons to torment people. African Pentecostals teach that the demons possess people and use them for their own evil purposes. This implies that a person can do something, not out of his or her own will, but through being manipulated by the devil.

8. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this contribution is primarily one of classification in order to discern the state of the current debate on the relationship between sin and evil in African Christian theology and not

to offer constructive views in this regard. Nevertheless, it seems that a retrieval of the classic Christian doctrine of human responsibility for sin and evil would be advantageous in the context of African Christian theology. Africans need to accept responsibility for their own mistakes and failures instead of attributing every failure to the work of evil spirits. Clarity on the relationship between sin and evil can also address the problem of a moralistic gospel, that is, a gospel which calls for respectable individuals and does not announce forgiveness for sinners.

In addition, it is important to note especially two factors in African Christianity which contribute to the view that sin is caused by evil:

A lack of exposure to the Christian doctrine of sin is one important reason why many Christians presume that evil can lead to sin. Many Christians in Africa are simply not aware of the Augustinian legacy within the Christian doctrine of sin. They would not know the significance of expressions such as, bondage of the will, original sin, total human responsibility for sin, total depravity and God's grace. In trying to address the mystery of sin, people would therefore have to rely on traditional African ways of accounting for the origins of evil. A lack of adequate theological education amongst the leaders of churches in Africa contributes to this problem. This may be exacerbated by a lack of communication between theologians and the laity.

Another factor is an inability to differentiate between sin and moral issues. Sin is not understood as alienation from God, but in terms of breaking the moral codes of the society. To sin is equal to stealing, drinking alcohol, incest, having an extra marital relationship, not respecting one's husband or smoking. Many regard smoking as more sinful than breaking all ties with God, pride, self-appraisal or excessive love for money! This inability to distinguish between sin and the breaking of moral codes has not only reduced God to the level of a judge whose role is to punish those who break the moral codes; it has also allowed a moralistic view of the Christian gospel. Although such a view of sin emphasises human responsibility, it does not preclude the view that perpetrators are the victims of evil forces beyond their control.

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KEY WORDS

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TREFWOORDE

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