

## H. Mdingi

Dr. H. Mdingi, Department  
of Systematic and Historical  
Theology, University of Pretoria.  
E-mail: h.mdingi@up.ac.za,  
ORCID: [https://orcid.  
org/0000-0002-5866-1560](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5866-1560)

DOI: [https://doi.org/10.38140/  
at.vi.7297](https://doi.org/10.38140/at.vi.7297)

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2023

Supp 36:61-81

Date received:

2 May 2023

Date accepted:

20 October 2023

Date published:

30 November 2023

# The revelation of God: Black liberation theology and African knowledge systems ask: How and to whom does God reveal God self?

## ABSTRACT

*The African world view is not monolithic or homogeneous. However, that being the case, there is a strong metaphysical and existential leaning in terms of Spirit and the world. The Spirit is the medium whereby revelation occurs for all of creation. African indigenous knowledge as episteme and Black liberation theology as a paradigm have something to teach outside Western dualism about the revelation of God not being linear in form. The methodological aspect of this research is a literature study aimed at discussing transmission and reception of biblical discourse in Africa by viewing differently the subject of God's revelation from a variety of sources. The article seeks to argue that indigenous knowledge and, from the Black liberation paradigm, conceptions of God reveal a God with a social existence in contrast to a Western God who abdicates creation when the majority of creation and her creatures are oppressed by White supremacy.*



Published by the UFS

<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at>

© Creative Commons

With Attribution (CC-BY)



## 1. INTRODUCTION: AXIAL CONFRONTATION

As a prelude to this study, it is fitting to assert that Africa knows and has known God, God is Spirit. However, the relation of the process of revelation concerning God is somewhat

different from Western Abrahamic<sup>1</sup> religions because “transcendence and unknowability” within reach and “transcendence beyond the cosmic reality” are interpreted differently for different outcomes. The former is descriptive of Africa and indigenous systems,<sup>2</sup> whereas the latter describes the Christian West and its expansion and experience of propagating Abrahamic religions, especially Judeo-Christianity, in the world through colonialism. It is sometimes very difficult to present, comparatively and interpretatively, the African<sup>3</sup> and Black<sup>4</sup> world view, especially considering biblical discourse and reception in Africa, without a niggling feeling of cascading to fruitless essentialism. This niggling feeling of cascading to essentialism is best displayed between the debate about the God of the Bible and the God of Africa, which both Mbiti and Idowu (Bediako 1989) have adequately addressed. Speaking on the difficulty of the confluence of African religious consciousness (old and new) and the role of the African theologians, Bediako (1989:60) asserts that

[t]he issue of identity also forced the theologian to become himself the *locus* of this struggle for integration through dialogue, which, if it was to be authentic, had to be an inner dialogue and so became infinitely more intense and personal.

Bediako’s assertion also highlights an indelible mark of missiological, evangelistic, and literary work, namely the personal presented as theological by the colonial missionary enterprise. There is thus a need to engage biblical discourse in light of the “theology” of indigenous people, the Bible, and the West. The rise of the Enlightenment, which anthropologically for Africa and what is to be the Third World after the modern Eurocentric colonialism and the developmental stages of capitalist modes of production, is actually a noodge in terms of “logical”, “categorical”, and “empirical” presentation of history and the existing variables, even in the realm of natural or supernatural spirituality. In fact, any attempt to do otherwise (uprooting an imposed history) requires the resolute fortitude to uproot Western “modernisation” in its entirety from its axial roots/ poles that ensure objects (specifically Blacks) are transfixed or arranged

- 
- 1 The reference to “Western Abrahamic religions” seeks to denote and elucidate the fact that Abrahamic religions, especially Christianity and Judaism, have been part of Western history and religions. In fact, this view is false but simultaneously highlights the victory of Western domination of the globe, history and preferred religions.
  - 2 It is a deliberate effort not to say indigenous religious systems because African and non-African indigenous systems can be cultural without necessarily being religious.
  - 3 A distinction needs to be made between African and Black, although I am aware that these two words function as binaries or interchangeably.
  - 4 The use of Black is directly linked to the rise of Black power, Black consciousness and the totalling effect of race on those who are “the problem of the colour line” (see Du Bois ([1903] 1965 ed.). Blackness was and is a call to international solidarity against White supremacy.

for orbital movements in the labyrinth of its (White/Western) gravity, an orbit and gravity that was seen and sets the modern world in motion because of the permeation of westernisation, which seemingly we cannot escape. By centering pre-existing narratives not as mere metanarratives but as reservoirs of truth, logic and belief require going against gravity and axial control. This shift occurs not by comparison between the Bible and Africa, but by what Africa deeply shares not only with the Near Ancient East (the world of the Bible), but also in the *Geist* that permeates all of creation and this Spirit that animates all of existence.

The first proposition of this article is that Western theological enterprise, inclusive of the missiological-colonial project (evangelisation, transmission, translation, interpretation, and so on), to some degree, accepts a form of natural theology or even general revelation as long as it is based on Western categories. Often, the case is that this natural theology can draw from Western philosophy (as is the case with some non-Christian thinkers who have shaped Christian theology), while at times natural theology/general revelation can be considered Christian theology (see Conradie 2011). Connections can thus be made between the conception of philosophical ideas of “Being”, beings, and the links between philosophy, theology, and language. That is, the Greek idea of the *ousia* in the hypostatic union of Christ, and so on.

However, what is troubling, which is the second proposition of this article, is that the same pedagogical sensitivities awarded to non-Christian thinkers, who form part of the Christian thinking, are not demonstrated towards Africans. In essence, Africa and indigenous systems have no general revelation or natural theology; neither do they cognitively have any noetic contribution in the greater scheme of things. Therefore, from a Black liberation theology perspective, the dehumanised and, currently, the oppressed are outside of the intellectual or experiential reality of the transcendent God (see Mdingi 2017:81-82). For this reason, the conception of God as expressed by indigenous people cannot be used even to interpret the Bible, unless they are “Christianised”. Bediako (1989:58) notes that the missionaries are “ruthless when dealing with pre-Christian African religious ideas”. Ekeke and Ekeopara (2010:209) note that the West has a serious controversial misunderstanding of God in African traditional ontology.

The last proposition of this article is that, beyond geo-political factors, Western theology is abstract in its appropriation of what was once indigenous knowledge of the Hebrews. It presents a God who abdicates not only in the crucible of historical unfolding, but also creation itself, something that Western society is beginning to experience because of the exploitation of the earth, human capital, and their maximisation of profits.

## 2. REVELATION AND EPISTEMOLOGY: THE AXIAL NEXUS

Westernisation is not simply a plethora of imposed world views, geopolitics, “civilisation”, conquest, dispossession, appropriation, and a narrow path to the silo of “knowledge” and accepted standards. Instead, it is a somatic and intellectual psychosis because of the effect of shibboleths of disassociation created through its processes on a group or individual. This disassociation requires a radical call to wholeness, in order to undo the conundrum of Western theology that has an outer body experience in the world which is experienced by the body being in the world. In short, the logic of purely making the belief that spirituality or the Spirit is, in fact, an outer other worldliness experience is misleading, especially to Africans because their God is in creation and in the world, notwithstanding the unknowability implied in God’s transcendence. Therefore, in the main, spirituality is not out of reach to other worldliness but within the natal annals of constant existential unfolding of a God deeply entrenched in creation, history, and its unfolding. Locating the locus of liberation theology correctly, Cone (1974:62) notes that the social context of theology is beyond language but forms part of divine revelation. In this regard, the God of the Bible (unlike the Greek God) is involved in history and demonstrated in the social and political affairs of Israel. As such, God and subsequent to that, theology is experienced in time. Cone (1975:63) argues that the “Old Testament is a history book” that outlines the drama of God’s mighty act in history, often in line with the liberation of the Israelites.

Cone calls us to the truth of theology, while emphasising the historical revelatory aspect of God contained in the stories of the Bible. As such, the missiological enterprise placed myth on the Bible as an attempt to sublimate the truth of the Bible. It can be assumed and proved that, while the message of the Bible is, in fact, a historical, existential, and divine story, abstraction concerning the deity is the least of its themes. In fact, there is more evidence that the God revealed in the Bible is within reach (Gen. 1-2), theophanies and even the eschatological and mystical moment ending with the *visio beatifica*, the God of the Bible will be within reach in creation.<sup>5</sup> If revelation occurs historically, as suggested by Cone (1975) and seen in the Bible, then God’s immanence in any form (pre-Hebrews, pre-Christian, pre-Islam, and specifically pre-Christian Africa) calls attention to immanence and an operational logic of natural theology

---

5 This analysis is not to underplay sin or the chasm created by sin between God and humanity but rather to insist that the primordial idea of creation and God before the fall is descriptive of transcendence within creation.

that is also contained in the Bible. Therefore, the African world view, in essence, fits in with the now Christianised conceptions of natural theology, general revelation, and, to some degree, special revelation through an understanding of an “uninterrupted” and “interdependency” of the cosmos and the human person, as all of life possesses a vital force endowed to them by God (Bujo 2009:282). God is deeply within creation, perhaps not in categorical terms of pantheism, panentheism, classical theism/monotheism, and so on. If there is an act of soteriological significance – as traditionally purported by most of the salvific schemes such as that of Christianity – it only occurs between the salvation of human beings linked to the salvation of the cosmos, too (Bujo 2009:282). This outlook synthesises Paul’s interpretation of a deep grasp of salvation from God, his agent (for creation and salvation), *Yeshua*, and the triad play between creator, creation, and creatures in the dialectical process of salvation.

I consider that our present sufferings are not comparable to the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the revelation of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not by its own will, but because of the One who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God (Rom. 8:19-21).

This portion of Scripture is not for ecological sensitivities, although it can be interpreted as such. However, Paul revealed the mystery of creation as created by the creator and how soteriology is woven within that mystery and history. As such, the subject of the revelation of God requires creation as an indispensable factor to the whole, while Western Christian theological paradigms on revelation have not fully expressed or placed creation as explicitly central to revelation. What is meant by this is not a metaphysical-idealistic acceptance of creation as merely expression of the creativity of the transcendent deity, but an irrevocable fact that, without creation, all falls down. Even more importantly, natural theology currently faces the reality of scientific development, evolutionary processes of cosmic and biological life, coupled with the challenges of what a doctrine of God should be, considering these factors (Du Toit 2009:2). More importantly, the challenge to the abstract metaphysical conception of God is being driven to insist that God must incarnate, thus rendering the existential immanence and horizontal transcendence as real (see Du Toit 2009:2). Speaking on a call for a new natural theology amidst science, theology, and the ecological crisis, Du Toit (2009:7) correctly asserts that

[I]mmanent transcendence permits a meaningful relationship between science and the impulses of the human mind. A new anthropology that takes account of scientific insight does not restrict the human person but merely wakes him/her up from his/her metaphysical dream world. The dread of secularised modern people is not that the bridegroom will come unexpectedly and catch them on the wrong foot (with no oil in their religious lamps), but that the bridegroom will not come at all and there will be no wedding hereafter. The flight into worldlessness (exploitation of the planet) to keep our metaphysical religious lamps burning has led to world renunciation (we are in the world but not of the world). We are facing a novel dilemma: there is literally no oil (resources) left to keep any lamp burning, and the condition for waiting for a new earth is to have the resources to survive the waiting. The technological carnival of boisterous planetary exploitation is over. In that context the term 'horizontal transcendence' in its negative mode is alarmingly true: the transcendent in the form of destructive forces comes from within, through human agency. Humankind may bring about its own Armageddon.

Du Toit (2009:1) further asserts that

[T]ranscendence has to do with double vision, which discerns something beyond physical everyday events. To cite a biblical example, Jacob had a dream at Bethel (Gen 28), which he interpreted as a divine revelation. In another instance the few survivors in the village whose population was wiped out by a plague (and who saw it as God's punishment for their sins) spoke in whispers in the house lest God hear them and discover there were still some left alive (Am 6:10). McGrath (2006:69) mentions the example of Samuel, who hears God's voice calling him and thinks each time that it is Eli, until Eli tells him it is God's voice. Thereupon he interprets the voice differently and encounters God. Thus, immanent or horizontal transcendence puts the accent on the human situation in which transcendence is experienced. Our closed reality is never closed – it always confronts us with openness and unpredictability.

Horizontal transcendence is a remarkable idea, although it can be argued that its implication is *ipso facto* in African religious systems. Ekeke and Ekeopara (2010:209-210) note that God in Africa is known by his presence known to humanity; God's revelation is relational between humanity and God. This knowledge system exists without Africans having no writings. This is often a fact used by others to superimpose the knowledge of the divine or seek to connote a lack of the belief in the divine/supreme being by Africans. Ekeke and Ekeopara (2010:210-211) note that African traditional religious ontology, as it pertains to the belief in God, is based

on a few factors. First, that “Africans believe in God because of the fact of creation and the universe”. Secondly, an acknowledgement of human limitedness. Lastly, the view that the forces of nature act in a certain way because somebody willed them to be. All these factors are even evident in the names ascribed to God (for example, *Oludumare* [king or chief unique to hold the sceptre], *Olorun* [“owner of heaven”], *Chukwu* [“Source Being”], *Chineke* [“the Source being who creates all”], *Nana Buluku* [“the great ancient deity”]). Ekeke and Ekeopara (2010:211) attest to the fact that attributes of God are actually anthropomorphisms. In this instance, we must pause to consider the implication of the colonialist and missionaries to refuse the idea of the existence of God in Africa, or even in the languages of Africans. Considering what Cone (1975:63) notes on theology being linked to human language, Ekeke and Ekeopara (2010:211) note that the names of God in African religion are anthropomorphic, qualities, and so on, which accounts for a concrete religion that negates abstraction. A strong case is made by Ekeke and Ekeopara (2010:212) that these names are not theological inventions by Africans after colonial Christianity. They predate colonialism and, therefore, affirm the knowledge and Being of a God whom they actually know.

Transcendent intervention to the revelation of God is not sought out of creation as a unique event, but the immanent/existential God is the nucleus of the whole system. God is sometimes referred to as *Yataa* (“God is the One you meet everywhere”) (see Ekeke & Ekeopara 2010:213). That idea of God being met everywhere is the potentiality of the nexus between the sacred and the secular as a datum of an inevitable and inseparable encounter with God. In fact, all of creation carries this potentiality. Even more remarkable is God’s revelation, as expressed in this horizontal transcendence. The fact is that African world views do not necessarily rely on the transcendental story of God as revealer, but first as creator. Whether with deist connotation, agency is imbued by the vital force endowed on all of creation. Perhaps this frustration resulted in the Psalmist (139:7-12) uttering the following:

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,’ even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.

Instead, the act of the deity in creating creation is a significant fact that maps out the almost, if not indistinguishable binary of the sacred and the secular in African world views. In this light, a consideration of “thy will be done on the earth as it is in heaven” is better understood. God’s revelation is unique, but ever immanent. No part of history and creation and existence can escape it. The subject of the revelation of God, vertical transcendence, and the essential need of superlative qualitative difference that risks the deep implication of God’s immanence and transcended reality seems to be exclusively linked to the Western interpretation of Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It must be contended that these are not modern religions like the imperial modern West. Therefore, a thorough excavation of their past will reveal their indigenoussness. Edwards (1967:189) asserts that

[t]he notion of revelation is central to three of the major world religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Through Christianity, in particular it has long been [an] important element in the religious thought of the West.

This revelation is often associated with soteriological/salvific significance, as it pertains to the *telos* attached to existence. However, that approach sometimes overshadows creation as the basis of the true revelation of God and is a different feel of the enigma of the transcendent and immanent divine. The interplay between immanence and a transcendence within reach does not compromise God. In fact, it perhaps highlights the importance of the deity, creation, and creature, on which imperialism, colonial Christianity, and so on have trampled to the extent that creation and humanity bleed for the benefit of the West. In the West, they have proclaimed to have killed God after having imposed him on everybody else, including through genocide. Writing on Black liberation theology and Black ecclesiology on the subject of revelation and colonialism, Mdingi (2017:104) argues:

Who can doubt that the white man’s burden in the Congo was borne by the black man? Who can deny that the civilising mission in the Congo was uncivilised to the core? As such, this God who goes parallel with the devastation of Africa and blacks could have died in Europe as noted in the romantics, then mummified in European abstract theological and ecclesiastical discourse. Ultimately, He is to be buried in the hearts, minds, souls and spirits of blacks and He is to be immortalised in the institutions that whites have left behind. There is a strong possibility to be considered that the West actually has never been in the authentic position in understanding the tradition of the Hebrew faith (Christianity).

Mdingi (2017:97) further asserts that

[i]t should be pointed out that there is a high level of mischievousness and deceit on the part of whites and the colonial God and its existing vestiges. Other than taking over the land, colonialists and missionaries are guilty of preaching, bringing and revealing a dead God, whom they have lost sight of metaphysically and personally in Europe. Yet the same package of a dead God, which seemingly can be interpreted as a mummified God, beautiful at face value but rotting beneath is brought to Africa buried in conversion in the body and soul of blacks.

Concerning revelation, Wyman (1998:54) postulates that

[p]sychological analysis discloses the religious consciousness of divinity. The primary phenomenon of all religion is mysticism, that is, belief in the presence and influence of supernatural powers and the possibility of an inner connection with them.

Without creation and the immanence of God bleeding through creation – giving life through the Spirit – we would not even know that there is a God. Therefore, contrary to Western Abrahamic faiths, indigenous religions have focused on creation as the basis of God’s revelation and unfolding of existence. For this reason, some African moral systems are not imbued in their intramural operation contingent on sacred sources such as the Decalogue; but they are, in fact, extramural factors created by societies within creation and history (see Outka 2005:199; Hallen 2005:407-408). God should not instruct you or be focused on you so that you might not steal or commit murder against your neighbour, and so on. This view of perceiving God that has always existed in Africa clarifies why morality cannot always be associated with religion. By such an articulation, it baffles logic why those who intended to civilise and preach to others clearly did not have a moral compass, even by their own religious standards. Whereas a God who creates and is immanent, not only for religious purposes but for organising society, results in the high moral standards of that society set by itself animated by God’s presence in all things. Biko (1978:102) correctly asserts that

[w]e also believed in one God, we had our own community of saints through whom we relate to our God, and we did not find it compatible with our way of life to worship God in isolation from the various aspects of our lives.

### 3. COLONIAL THEOLOGY IS EPISTEMOLOGICAL RACISM

It has to be established that colonialism had, to a great extent, no regard not only for the humanity of Blacks but also a direct disregard for African metaphysics/ontology and conception of history. This attitude is particularly evident in the missiological enterprise that refused, to a certain extent, theological dialogue between the evangelist and the native. To grasp this properly, we must understand that the idea of God's revelation in Africa is undermined by Western theological experience. Safe to say, any declaration about God in Africa is futile. However, this study argues that natural theology, in its most basic sense, is the privilege of human beings who have a belief or experience of the divine. Of course, at some level, we should accept that those who have opposed natural theology have done so because it pertains to human fallenness (see Conradie 2011:58), although serious issues come to bear when the subhuman is given fallenness, hermeneutical and pedagogical erasure, coupled with the dispossession of the land as their "portion". On the most basic level, God has revealed himself throughout history and creation. Conradie (2011:62) asserts that God's revelation necessarily has a "natural, an earthly character". Therefore, a true discourse on not only what the Bible says but also on what the Bible actually means is highly required. The meaning of the Bible is not only in instruction and conversion, but also in essence; it is the engagement of God and the world, a message within and out of the Scriptures. Conradie (2011:63) asserts that

[i]t should be noted that 'nature' and 'natural theology' is used here primarily as a hermeneutical category. We have access to the world around us and to God's revelation only on the basis of that which is natural – which includes the history of nature, the history of life on earth, human histories, human culture and those aspects of human life that are invisible and may therefore appear to be immaterial, but that are fully dependent on material brain functions (thought, language or love).

If we are to accept the hermeneutics proposed by Conradie, then we must assess the meaning of God in Africa for two reasons. First, to prove or disprove the congruence of the revelation of God across the spectrum; therefore, dethroning a provincial God and authoritative theology (see Conradie 2011:62). This move, in fact, is precisely a move in the Bible as the Near Ancient East moves from pantheism to monolatry and then later to monotheism, *YHWH* beginning as a provincial God, then proceeding to being the God of the Hebrews and, finally, the God of all creation – accentuated by the incarnation and soteriology in Christ.

Secondly, if it is true that God has revealed God-self in Africa, then the whole missiological enterprise is not only theological bias but, in fact, a rejection of God. This then accentuates the view that Western theology, as practised in Africa, is not theology or the message of the Gospel, but oppression with a quasi-theological twist. This proposition then highlights why the West dominates the planet without care, perhaps because they have not only killed God but actually never knew Him.

If we are to move from the premise that “all theology is natural theology” (see Conradie 2011), then we can assess the view of God in Africa. Masubelele (2009:63) notes that, among the Zulu, the idea of religion is transmitted orally; therefore, there is a constant knowledge of God. Masubelele (2009:63) asserts that

[t]he terms *uNkulunkulu* (the Great-Great-One) or *uMvelinqangi* (the First-to Appear) were used interchangeably by the traditional Zulu people to refer to the Supreme Being.

However, Masubelele (2009:63) notes that there is a different opinion in the choice of words or even in the name of God as it pertains to the supreme being, although there is enough evidence that such knowledge (about God) is known. Similarly, *uThixo* is derived from both the Xhosa and Khoi people. Van der Kemp worked among the Xhosa in 1799-1801 and noted that the Xhosa people did not have a name for the deity. They thus borrowed this from the Khoi<sup>6</sup> (see Masubelele 2009:71). In fact, one would assert that part of the lack of a name for a God must not be accounted as ignorance, but as a deep grasp of the incomprehensibility of God, a different apophaticism not contingent on platonic point of references. Within the colonial and missiological enterprise, the term *uNkulunkulu* was rejected because it was believed that it was associated with African creation myths. At times, the name was used to refer to a beetle, a fly or a worm (see Masubelele 2009:64). Therefore, the missionary saw rather to appropriate *uThixo* from the Xhosa to be used by the Zulus. However, in this instance, we must pause because Western outlooks cannot conceive of a lower creature, created by God, as being used by God, thus truly affirm “I AM THAT I AM” or “I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE”. However, the likes of Colenso were among the first to use *uNkulunkulu* as an equivalent of *YHWH* (see Podolecka 2020:111). Even the idea of viewing *uNkulunkulu* as an equivalent of *YHWH* is troubling because the same perverted logic is not true when it comes to Western conceptions of the deity as “being”, “the ground of being”, or “being above being”. The acceptance

6 *uThixo* is associated with mantis, despite the fact that missionaries viewed it as more theologically developed than *uNkulunkulu*.

of *uNkulunkulu* is not seamless or based on consensus, as it is reported that, in some instances, the Wesleyans after the American missionaries and the Norwegians rejected *uNkulunkulu* and introduced *uJehova* as an alternative (see Masubelele 2009:72). In this instance, it must be considered that *uJehova* is a transliteration from Jehovah and a new word introduced into the native dialect. This approach was also used to take Greek words such as *Deus* into isiZulu resulting in the introduction of the name *uDio*. Masubelele (2009:73) asserts that

while the earliest missionaries had feared that the existing vernacular terms for God would convey unbiblical connotations about the Christian God to the people, Colenso concluded that they in fact conveyed the exact meaning of the Hebrew terms. In his translation of the New Testament, probably first to appear in 1876, Colenso used the term *uNkulunkulu* for God (Hermanson 2002b:5).

As to why it was difficult to accept the native view of the preferred name, whether correct or not, can only be explained by White racism. On the other hand, Podolecka (2020:108) notes that *uNkulunkulu* is an important figure within the Zulu pantheon and his nature is not really defined, as for some time he was defined as the first ancestor. This word is linked to the appropriation of *uThixo* from the Xhosa. Podolecka (2020:108-109) notes that missionaries needed the pantheon of the indigenous people to contrast with the new God. At the same time, the Zulus did not have a local God but then the missionaries encountered the highest God in Zulu beliefs. This is evident in the missionary work done at Port Natal in the 1830s by Allen Gardiner, John W. Colenso, and Theophilus Shepstone (see Podolecka 2020:109). Podolecka (2020:109) notes that, before the colonial missionaries, Zulus believed in deities representing natural forces. The Zulu system was based on the homestead instead of temples. In the traditional *Makhozinis* huts, there was no physical symbol of *uNkulunkulu*, while some thought of *uNkulunkulu* as the one who was born from the reeds (see Podolecka 2020:110). One is tempted to agree with Podolecka (2020:110) that

*uNkulunkulu* seems to become more and more important for Zulus with the beginning of the colonisation than before. Callaway's main informant was surprised with the sudden importance of *uNkulunkulu* but one hundred years later Berglund's informants admitted the existence of this god and the praise-names given to him by Zulus.

As a by-product of the Enlightenment, Western missionaries are, in fact, moving Africans from their form of expression of the incomprehensibility of God – the incomprehensibility that is in essence revelation, revealing

what clearly cannot be fully revealed in its totality. Similarly, pushing the Africans (in this instance, the Zulus) from a viewpoint of a given African human-centric agency orientation as it pertains to creation and society – consistent with the namelessness of the Supreme Deity – to a divine and named oriented agency. In essence, White missionaries presented the abstraction of God through Scripture and God’s agency in salvation, which was, in fact, their own act of agency. In current modern theological discourse, the paradigm of liberation theology is pushing us to negate this. In simple terms, African religion was both material and spiritual. Through the colonialist, Africans are drawn into a theological discourse that gazes at heaven and what proceeds forth is a White deity from heaven – because White metaphysics does not end there (the abstract) but ends with God being White – with a White agent on earth who wills oppression and plunder for himself and his god. This approach also led people to unfamiliar terrains beginning with the fact that the Zulu people did not agree concerning a clearly defined and refined theological meaning of *uNkulunkulu*, as he was both God and an ancestor (see Podolecka 2020:112). In the current theological discourse, this should not be a problem. Often, African theologians have defined Jesus as the great ancestor, by engaging the idea of death, intercession, and mediation. The idea of *uNkulunkulu* being God and ancestor elucidates our theological horizon and horizontal transcendence because the image of the “invisible God” and the “image of the human” are both a binary between transcendence and creation, thus justifying the anthropomorphic character of proper theology (see Cone 1975:63; Ekeke & Ekeopara 2010:211-212). Furthermore, this insistence on naming the deity imposed by the Western missionaries had the Zulus having to break their way of theologising, which is the fact that there is on the main this unknown God whose name is not to be pronounced (Podolecka 2020:112). This is the God deeply imbedded in creation.

To further grasp this, it is important to note that *uNkulunkulu* is not worshipped like the God in the Abrahamic religions, perhaps with the synonymous relation between deity and ancestor (see Podolecka 2020:113). Therefore, *uNkulunkulu* has anthropomorphic qualities in terms of nature and identity. It is, however, important to note, while speaking on the subject of apophaticism, that the name *uNkulunkulu* is older than Christianity in South Africa and expresses mainly superlatives such as greatness, despite being used in the Zulu Bible translation as the name of God (see Podolecka 2020:113). Podolecka (2020:113) argues that attributes of the Christian God and *uNkulunkulu* are different. He notes the danger of Christianisation of the name *uNkulunkulu*, currently with lack of consensus on a clearly theological identity of *uNkulunkulu*. He also points to the fact that others identify the name *uNkulunkulu* as “The Lord-of-the-Sky”, a

view that Podolecka believes can be applicable to important spirits. In this instance, one can pause on two accounts that, in fact, pertain to the name that describes the nature of deity and is more about superlative (great of greatness), then Africans have long ventured in apophaticism that is, to a large degree, simply similar to the *YHWH* Tetragrammaton. *YHWH* is not an ordinary name and is, in fact, above a name, despite being Hebrew and revealed to Hebrew slaves; it connotes a general permeation of the deity. Yes, it can be restricted for covenantal purposes but, in the main, it affirms a general concern of the deity/God is Spirit (John 4) for all.

On the second part, which is critical, is the fact that *YHWH* has, in most parts, been ascribed with epithets that, in the past before the prevailing of monotheism, were ascribed to Baal as the Lord of the Sky. Therefore, my contention is that natural revelation, general revelation, and natural theology are not outside of Scripture, but indications thereof are within Scripture, the God of the Bible engaged in the process of historical unfolding that is accentuated by the Exodus account where the transcendent God is vividly involved in history at least for the enslaved Hebrews. However, that does not negate that God is active outside of Hebrew and Judeo-Christianity. Therefore, it is true that, beyond the incomprehensibility, Podolecka (2020:113) records that “*uNkulunkulu* is the same as worshipped in the church the one who is above meaning God”. Setiloane’s (1986:204) poem captures this clearly. First, by acknowledging the African conception of continuity of life, which then raises a number of questions such as: If there is heaven, why does *YHWH* need a temple? If there is a temple on earth, does he abdicate creation or the heavens? Certainly not. Setiloane leads us to the understanding of the nexus between God, death, life, and ancestors as not only metaphysical exteriors but conjoint elements of creation which, in essence, possess the vital force and thus the wind, rains, and creatures all can speak. Setiloane (1986:205) also notes that the African resurrection is immediate with a different cosmic plain, inseparable of moral obligations that are enforced by the ancestor who has transitioned. Thus, in terms of the knowledge about God, God has always been known through this horizontal transcendence that moves into the incomprehensibility/apophaticism about God. Setiloane (1986:206) notes:

He did Himself, *UVELINGQAKI*,  
That none should reach His presence...  
Little gods bearing up the prayers and supplications  
Of their children to the Great Great God...

He also adds that Jesus, as the animal of sacrifice, means that the temple in Jerusalem meets the altar in Africa. Lastly, Setiloane (1986:207) notes that, in fact, Blacks share in the Christological humiliation by being stripped, whipped, tortured, and spat on for no reason. It can be postulated that Christology, specifically special revelation, fits in with the mould of natural theology, although radically different. However, that special revelation for Blacks is evident in that Christ incarnates in our suffering, therefore affirming horizontal transcendence. Du Toit (2009:5) points out how Christianity has personalised God through the person of Jesus Christ. He views the incarnation as an early glimpse into immanent transcendence but, citing Žižek, he notes that the incarnation presents us with irreversibility that puts an end to superterrestrial transcendence.

Perhaps, the reality is that the belief in *uNkulunkulu*, being God and ancestor, prefigures this special revelation, while simultaneously fitting with theophanies and Christophanies that gave the impression of the transcendent one of Israel identifiable with humanity, with biological life, elements,<sup>7</sup> and creation. Even more pressing is the incorporeality of the deity before the incarnation and corporeality after the birth, death, resurrection, and ascent. This implies either a change in the Trinitarian Godhead because “God has a biological body” or it means immanence having a (biological, historical, class, existential, and so on) face. The variations in creation stories in Africa baffle Western conception of and about God. Even worse is the fact that, when Africans are asked to name their God, the name is not meeting Western metaphysical assumptions. The same is true of creation myths in the Bible that ordinarily would not meet Western metaphysical assumptions. In fact, the philosophical status given to the Bible by the West ignores the Bible, beginning with myths, myths about creation, chaos creation stories, and battle between *YHWH* and Baal (see Thomson 1971:203, 206). For instance, *uMvelinqangi* (the one who first appeared), beyond already the pre-existing linguistic-theological confusion in the name itself (to the Western mind), is known as the God coming out of the ground like mushrooms (see Adeyemi 2012:440). Furthermore, in the creation stories, *uMvelinqangi* comes from the ground and *uNkulunkulu* comes from the reeds. Adeyemi (2012:440) retells the story:

In the beginning, among the people living with Mvelinqangi was a man who was fond of mischief. One day, this man was caught riding the favourite white ox of Mvelinqangi and was sentenced to live on

---

7 It is important to conduct a study on why the elements of fire, water, clouds, smoke, and so on are used by God, especially in the departure from Egyptian captivity. Maybe there is a thematic undertone of a confluence of liberation and creation playing out by the God of the oppressed.

earth so he would not cause any more trouble in the sky. Mvelinqangi ordered him to be lowered through a hole by way of the navel cord (inkhaba) tied around his waist. When the man got to the earth, he took a reed and severed the cord and started living. After a moon, Mvelinqangi opened the hole in the sky again and saw the man lying under a banana plant, looking very weak and thin. Mvelinqangi then decided to send a wife to him to keep him company and assuage his loneliness. So, a maiden was lowered to join the man. When the man saw the maiden, he took a reed again and cut the cord dangling from her waist. Mvelinqangi, seeing they are happy together, closed the hole in the sky so that the people on earth could not look up into heaven, and vice versa. This is why they are called AmaZulu, people of the sky.

When discussing revelation, natural theology is necessary as we encounter existential transcendence that is different from the vertical transcendence often from the top. Horizontal transcendence is linked to God's immanence as an ascent to the human situation (see Du Toit 2009:1). Du Toit (2009:9) defines transcendence as a double vision of the "here to the beyond". This outlook is critical in the African religious system because of how the religious practice concerns this horizontal transcendence that speaks from the beyond to the now. What transcendence implies in Africa is even more important. Mbiti (2001:8-9) asserts that

African religiosity acknowledges the reality of God but does not define God. If anything, it confesses that God is unknowable. The Maasai (Kenya and Tanzania) name for God, Engai means (among others) 'the Unseen One, the Unknown One'. Likewise, among the Tenda (Guinea), God is called *Hounounga* which means: 'the Unknown'. People affirm that God is invisible, which is another way of asserting that they do not know God in any would-be physical form. Subsequently, nowhere in Africa do we find physical images or representations of God, the Creator of the universe. This is remarkable.

The idea of an unseen and unbodied divinity is critical for displaying the need for an existential understanding of God's revelation and variation to grasping transcendence. Du Toit (2009:1) asserts that transcendence is part of our "metaphysical thinking" contingent on our experience of the transcendent. This transcendence is existentially relational and gives us an understanding of something radical from inner human life. This is demonstrated in that it is usually attached to "awe", "mysticism", "fear", and so on. However, Du Toit (2009:1) accepts that transcendence in this definition is immanent and followed/facilitated in experience and definition by human "physicality and historicity".

In most of the African spiritual systems, the role of the deity is not only to create but also to maintain creation and creatures. Thus, transcendence is not loftiness but the expression of the existential presence of God's immanence, ambience, and enigma, all occurring concurrently in reality. This immanence is not a depersonalised reality but an essence imbued in all aspects of creation living and those who have transitioned over, at least in the African religious and ontological system. In this sense, God is not enthroned in the heavenly realm alone but deep within creation, however, different from the ontological essence of God in pantheism, panentheism, and pandeism. As such, the portrait of an African natural theology and general revelation is not only logical deduction or a sense of awe but, in fact, completeness. Again in this sense, God who, in the truest sense, is veiled in the apophatic reality of incomprehensibility or unknowing can even render the unique special revelation of the Lord *Yeshua* as part of natural theology, general and special revelation because the embodiment of the divine in biological flesh in history displays God's value in creation. Therefore, if salvation of the human being is linked with the soteriology of creation, then *Yeshua* makes this unique understanding of natural theology, general and special revelation in a different way of conceiving and viewing God, creature and creation especially for the necessary liberation paradigm in theology.

#### 4. CONCLUSION: AGENCY, INCARNATIONAL EXISTENCE

The moves made in liberation theology and Black liberation theology for any discussion on biblical discourse and transmission are significant, as there is a need to affirm God in history and creation in relation to indigenous people's systems, current oppression, and the pillage of the earth. The idea of the *God of the Oppressed* is both an affirmation of God in history and, in this study, an insight into a God of creation. The creation aspect pertains to dehumanisation of the humanity of others (in other words, indigenous people within history, at least history understood in anthropomorphic terms). But more importantly, it affirms the existential/immanent character of God, a God who cannot be without penetrating all of existence materially and otherwise. Therefore, the struggle for justice against White supremacy and an end to exploitation, when understood from the perspective of the oppressed and God of the oppressed, is not only of a socio-economic and political character. It also requires a synergy and dynamic that marries a fight for all life forms and the validity of knowledge systems. The current rise, particularly in Western politics and disciplines, regarding ecological factors with serious neglect to the

oppression of indigenous people continues the racist agenda (see Cone 2000:36) and erasure of different epistemes, praxes and world views.

Therefore, concepts such as the “preferential option of the poor” are existential issues – fitting the existential/immanent God – that are clearly demonstrated in the kenotic moment when the creator not only assumes flesh but geopolitics standing, class, status and oppression (a part of horizontal transcendence). To then dangle on the cross – the king of glory enfleshed in deplorable social, economic, and cultural standing – hanging below the splendour of his throne. Certainly, vertical transcendence is challenged fundamentally, as the Spirit of God (third person in the Triune) permeates all of creation as before and African concepts of God’s revelation have witnessed this. If we accept that the incarnation, which implies creation (his birth) and history (the exact event), of *Yeshua* was an act of a transcendent God, we must accept, first, that something happened to the Trinitarian God. God could not remain the same after the incarnation and *Yeshua* did not abandon his bruised body with the ascent on high. Secondly, the position of God working in and through history (for example, the Exodus). It is logical that God, who made *Imago Dei* in the beginning and revealed himself historically, would logically incarnate at one moment and then to every moment (solidarity to the enslaved, lynched, and so on). Western Christianity is a by-product of the planetary status of the West as the “centre” moving from the Dark and Middle Ages (see Dussel 2011:97-98). The God who emerged was not indigenous to history as the Spirit that animates all of creation. Whether the Zulu or Xhosa people did not have a lofty theology, the point is that their God is historical, part of creation and they too are witnesses to the myriad manifestations of the transcendent God. In this regard, we might consider the idea of *uNkulunkulu* walking out of the reeds. We assume, in Western logically thinking, that walking out of the reeds implies the reeds are older/primary than *uNkulunkulu* without any ponderance that the reeds may be in reverse the door of unknowability that God enters the world. In fact, those who come out of the reeds cannot do so without him (*uNkulunkulu*) calling them out. The idea of *uNkulunkulu* being in identity and simultaneity a God and ancestor is, in fact, a Christology of sorts – as *Yeshua* is the “invisible Image of God” and the “image of humanity”. God’s revelation is a fact, the missiological and evangelisation enterprise is godless, exploitative and not revelatory, divorced from creation and the humanity of others since Papal Bulls, European churches, and so on came to “discover” and conquer. It would be daring to say that God has long been revealed – Christianity would simply crystalise that, as it was awaited on before the coming of colonialists – but colonialism hid that until the evaluation of indigenous religions (including the Hebrews) and liberation theology that unveiled God again in history and creation.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

ADEYEMI, S.

2012. Performing myths, ritualising modernity: Dancing for Nomkhubulwana and the reinvention of Zulu tradition. In: O.S. Omoera, S. Adeyemi & B. Bineba (eds), *A gazelle of savanna: Sunday Ododo and the framing of techno-cultural performance in Nigeria: Theatre, culture, literature, art*. Volume 2, (Nigeria: Alpha Crownes Publishers Ltd), pp. 435-445. [https://gala.gre.ac.uk/id/eprint/10255/1/AdeyemiPerforming\\_Myths](https://gala.gre.ac.uk/id/eprint/10255/1/AdeyemiPerforming_Myths).

BEDIAKO, K.

1989. The roots of African theology. *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 13(2):58-65. <https://doi.org/10.1177/239693938901300203>

BIKO, S.

1978. *I write what I like*. London: The Bowerdean Press. <https://doi.org/10.5070/F783017356>

BUJO, B.

2009. Ecology and ethical responsibility from an African perspective. In: M.F. Murove (ed.), *African ethics* (Scottsville: UKZN Press), pp. 281-307.

CONE, J.H.

1974. Biblical revelation and social existence. *Interpretation* 28(4):422-440. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002096437402800403>

2000. Whose earth is it anyway? *Wisdom of the Heart and the Life of the Mind: Fiftieth Anniversary Issue* 50(1/2):36-46.

CONRADIE, E.M.

2011. All theology is natural theology: The hermeneutic necessity of natural theology? *Dutch Reformed Theological Journal/Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 52(1-2):58-65. <https://doi.org/10.5952/52-1-6>

DU BOIS, W.E.D.

[1903] 1965. *The souls of Black folk*. London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd.

DUSSEL, E.

2011. The “world-system”: Europe as “centre” and its “periphery” beyond Eurocentrism. In: J. T. Levy & I. M. Young (eds.) *Colonialism and its Legacies* (New York: Lexington) pp.97-120.

DU TOIT, C.W.

2009. Towards a new natural theology based on horizontal transcendence. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 65(1):1-8. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v65i1.186>

EDWARDS, P.

1967. *The encyclopaedia of philosophy*, 7. New York: The Macmillan Company & The Free Press.

**EKEKE, E.C. & EKEOPARA, C.A.**

2010. God, divinities and spirits in African traditional religious ontology. *American Journal of Social and Management Sciences* 1(2):209-218. <https://doi.org/10.5251/ajsms.2010.1.2.209.218>

**HALLEN, B.**

2005. African ethics? In: W. Schweiker (ed.), *The Blackwell companion to religious ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing), pp. 406-412. <https://doi.org/10.1111/b.9780631216346.2004.00044.x>

**MASUBELELE, M.R.**

2009. Missionary interventions in Zulu religious practices: The term for the Supreme Being. *Acta Theologica Supplementum* 12:63-78. <https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v12i1.67245>

**MBITI, J.**

2001. General manifestations of African religiosity. An exploratory paper at the first meeting of the standing committee on the contributions of Africa to the religious heritage of the world, Engugu, Nigeria. [Online.] Retrieved from <https://www.centroafrobogota.com/attachments/article/21/33739700-General-Manifestations-of-African-Religiosity.pdf> [13 November 2023].

**MDINGI, H.M.**

2017. The revelation of God: Meditations of the Black church in existential times. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Pretoria: University of South Africa.

**OUTKA, G.**

2005. Christian ethics? In: W. Schweiker (ed.), *The Blackwell companion to religious ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing), pp. 197-203. <https://doi.org/10.1111/b.9780631216346.2004.00024.x>

**PODOLECKA, A.**

2020. *UNKulunkulu*: God, a god or the first ancestor? The quest for a supreme deity in Zulu religious beliefs. *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 73(1):108-118.

**SETILOANE, G.M.**

1986. I am an African. *Currents in Theology and Mission* 13(2):78-80.

**THOMPSON, P.E.**

1971. The Yahwist creation story. *Vetus Testamentum* 21(2):197-208. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853371X00056>

WYMAN, W.E.

1998. Revelation and the doctrine of faith: Historical revelation within the limits of historical consciousness. *The Journal of Religion* 78:38-63. <https://doi.org/10.1086/490122>

*Keywords*

Revelation

God

Bible

Africa

*Trefwoorde*

Openbaring

God

Die Bybel

Afrika