

**RELIGION  
AND  
SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY**

**Inaugural Lecture delivered before the  
University of Nairobi  
on 26 September 1996**

by

**Prof. J.N.K. MUGAMBI  
B.A. hons, M.A., Ph.D. (Nairobi).**

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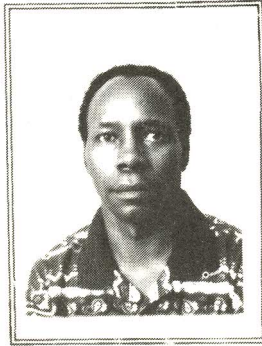
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**PROFESSOR J.N.K. MUGAMBI**

**A Profile**



**Prof. J.N.K. Mugambi**

B.A. hons with Education, M.A., Ph.D. (Nairobi)  
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Jesse Ndwiga Kanyua Mugambi was born on 6th February 1947, at Kiangoci, near St. Mark's College, Kigari in Ngandori Location, Embu District, Kenya. He started school at Kigari in 1954, during the difficult days when the State of Emergency was in full force. Having passed the Common Entrance Examination at Mukangu in 1957, he did his intermediate schooling at Kamama, and entered Kangaru High School in 1962.

His secondary school education was followed by teacher training courses at Machakos College (1966-67), Kenyatta College (1968) and at the Westhill College of Education in Birmingham, UK. (1969-70). On his return from England he served as a tutor at Kagumo College, Nyeri, following which he joined the University of Nairobi as an undergraduate student in 1971. His teaching experience included short stints at Chania High School, Nairobi School and Alliance High School. He expected his stay at the University to be brief, but was to remain here all these years. He joined the staff of the then Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies in 1976 as a Tutorial Fellow, and rose through the ranks to become Professor of Religious Studies in 1993. His specialization is Philosophy of Religion.

Professor Mugambi is one of the few scholars in this University who did all formal tertiary academic studies at the University of

Nairobi. He qualified for B.A. hons with Education in 1974; M.A. in 1978 and Ph.D. in 1984. His research experience dates from 1968, when he wrote a highly acclaimed paper, published in *Dini na Mila* at Makerere University in 1971. His first book was published in 1974. Today, Professor Mugambi has more than twenty books of which he is author, co-author, editor or co-editor. He has dealt with more than a dozen publishers, including the Nairobi University Press which has published two books of which he is editor and co-editor, respectively. He is also a publisher in his own right.

He has been a Curriculum Consultant at the Commission for Higher Education and at the Kenya Institute of Education. He has also been a senior consultant with several ecumenical organizations at national, regional, continental and world levels, including the World Council of Churches and the All Africa Conference of Churches.

During his two Sabbatical tours in the USA, he served as Visiting Scholar and Professor in 1982-83 at Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, and as Visiting Mellon Distinguished Professor at Rice University, Houston, Texas, in 1990-91. Dissertations and Theses have been written and continue to be written on the works of Professor Mugambi, at various institutions in many parts of the world.

These achievements portray Professor Mugambi as one of the most distinguished African scholars in Religious Studies and Philosophy.

In addition to his responsibility as a leading scholar, Professor Mugambi has rendered his service to the University of Nairobi as Chairman, Department of Religious Studies (1986-90); Associate Dean, Faculty of Arts (1990) and Academic Registrar since 1990-94.

His exposure to the management of tertiary institutions has sparked in him an interest in scholarly research on this theme. He is also interested in projects for improvement of the environment, especially agro-forestry.

## **PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

An inaugural lecture is the culmination of many years of study, research, exposure and experience. It is impossible for me to adequately express my gratitude and indebtedness to all those scholars, teachers, mentors, friends, students, colleagues and family members who have contributed to the insights distilled in these pages. I wish to record my appreciation of all those with whom I have enjoyed throughout my academic career, because they helped me to see more clearly the necessity to clarify our presuppositions and clearly articulate our perceptions. The University of Nairobi has been my academic and professional point of reference for a quarter of a century, and for this 'home' I am immensely grateful. The opportunity and privilege to deliver an inaugural lecture in the same institution where one studied, is an experience difficult to describe. It has been a joyous pilgrimage to study and teach at this University.

My exposure to the religions and cultures of other parts of the world has helped me to appreciate the fact that our location of the 'centre of the world' depends largely on our own points of reference, and for this reason we ought to listen attentively to what others have to say to enrich our own social construction of reality. I continue to search for deeper understanding of the reality in which we are entangled and of which we are an integral part. This lecture is part of that quest, and I thank everyone who directly or indirectly, has helped me to discern the insights herein expressed.

## **RELIGION AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY**

by

**J.N.K. Mugambi**

### **1. Introductory Remarks**

The word 'Reality' refers to everything which actually exists. We perceive reality through our senses of touch, sight, smell, taste and hearing. These perceptions are processed by our minds, and this processing makes it possible for us to form ideas about the reality around us. Our perceptions of reality are named through words which are accumulated through socialization. If our senses deceive our minds, we risk ascribing the wrong labels to those things we have perceived. Conversely, if our competence in language is low, we may label reality wrongly or inadequately. The main objective in this lecture is to explore religion as a factor which greatly influences the way human beings perceive and describe reality. The lecture approaches religion from a general, philosophical perspective.

The word 'Truth' refers to propositions which a person makes about reality. A proposition is true if its assertion corresponds to reality, and false if it does not. All religions make specific affirmations about reality. Some of those affirmations are in agreement, but others are in conflict. Owing to the fact that religions deal with some affirmations that can be empirically verified and others beyond empirical verification, it is often difficult to resolve doctrinal conflicts. Philosophical clarification is a useful way of resolving religious arguments, if the parties concerned are prepared to subject their ideas and beliefs to rational scrutiny.

Religion can be defined in many different ways. The following are analogies that may help us to appreciate the role of religion in human individuals and communities:

- i). Religion is the 'fabric' with which human beings as individuals and communities, weave the web of their social existence.
  
- ii). Religion is the 'compass' with which human beings as

- individuals and communities, steer the ship of their social existence.
- iii). Religion is the radar through which human beings as individuals and communities monitor the starting points and the destinations of their search for personal and social identity.
  - iv). Religion is the 'stethoscope' with which human beings, as individuals and communities, diagnose the pathological condition of their social environment.
  - v). Religion is the 'slide rule' with which human beings as individuals and communities identify their relationships with the rest of entities in the cultural and natural environment.
  - vi). Religion is the thermometer with which human beings as individuals and communities measure the heat generated by social and psychological tensions.
  - vii). Religion is the barometer with which human beings as individuals and communities measure the pressure generated by social and psychological tensions.
  - viii). Religion is the 'means' by which human beings define their sense of belonging within the cultural and natural environment.
  - ix). Religion is the set of beliefs and practices through which human beings as individuals and communities, affirms the ultimate origin, ultimate purpose and ultimate destiny of all aspects of reality.
  - x). Religion is what human beings do in the expression of their joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, failures and achievements; frustrations and expectations.

These analogical definitions indicate that religion, as an aspect of human life, is indispensable as a pointer to individual and communal self-understanding and self-orientation. In scriptural religions, the authority for resolving doctrinal conflicts is vested in the sacred texts. However, this authority does not eliminate all difficulties, because controversies remain over the principles of interpreting those texts. It appears that there are more



denominations and sects in religions based on sacred texts, than in those which do not have texts.

## **2. The Dimensions of Religion**

There are many ways of defining religion. The most common definition associates religion with belief in a god or gods. However, this definition overlooks the fact that there are many social movements which are similar in most respects to god-centred religions, but whose focus is not the belief in a god. Buddhism is the best example. A very large part of the populations of Asia is Buddhist. Some countries of South East Asia are predominantly Buddhist. If we defined religion as belief in a god or gods, we would have to dismiss these populations as irreligious. However, Buddhism has a social organization which in many respects resembles the Catholic and Orthodox brands of Christianity. I have come to appreciate a definition of religion, associated with Ninian Smart, which enumerates six dimensions<sup>1</sup> all of which are found with varying emphases in every religion and therefore in every culture.<sup>2</sup>

- a). The Mythological Dimension—every culture seeks to explain its sense of being in terms of stories and figures of speech which may not be empirically verifiable, but which give meaning to existence and contemporary reality as lived and experienced. Religion is a custodian of that mythology.
- b). The Doctrinal dimension —likewise, every culture has its collection of basic teachings about its own self-understanding in relation to its history, environment, and to other cultures. Religion has the most condensed creeds embodying these basic teachings.
- c). The Social Dimension —every culture also has a characteristic social structure, which is most clearly manifested in the religious pillar of the

culture. It is interesting to observe that all religions tend to display the organizational character of the cultures of their origin. The Roman Catholic Church retains the organizational structure of imperial Rome; the Church of England retains the hierarchical structure of monarchical England; the Church of Scotland retains the Presbyterian structure of the Scottish Assembly, and so on.

- d). The Ritual Dimension —every culture also has a set of ceremonial activities which solemnize its identity. Rituals are common acts which, when performed on special occasions, are accorded special meaning for the purpose of conveying specific messages to both the participants and the observers. Religion serves as the most appropriate pillar to solemnize a community's self understanding.
- e). The Ethical Dimension —every culture has its established norms of conduct. The most respected custodian of those norms is the dominant religion with which a culture identifies itself.
- f). The Experiential Dimension—every culture has its own assessment of the role of the individual in the total life of the community. The uniqueness of individual experiences is appreciated and accorded specific significance in social, ritual and ethical life of the community. Religion, more than any other pillar of culture, gives prominence to the unique experience of individuals.

In actual experience, these dimensions are always interrelated. An adherent of a particular religion does not theorize about these dimensions while practising his or her faith. The recitation of doctrines, for example, is at the same time a ritual act and a social affirmation. Likewise, participation in a rite of passage within a religion is at the same time an expression of the mythological dimension of reality as understood in the religion, and an acclamation of the ethical upheld in that religion.

### **3. Characteristics of Sustainable Religion**

Any religion which expects to sustain itself must have a set of characteristics enhancing its inner capacity to withstand external pressures. The success of a religion depends on the degree to which these characteristics are balanced within each religion.

#### *A. The Cognitive Domain*

- i). Intellectual Satisfaction—A successful religion must be intellectually satisfying.
- ii). Logical Consistency —Coupled with intellectual satisfaction a successful religion must internally coherent, to the highest possible degree.

#### *B. The Social Domain*

- iii). Practical Effectiveness —Whatever is taught in a successful religion must be viewed as being practically effective in the daily life of those for whom it is intended.
- iv). Social Relevance—It must also be socially relevant within the contemporary experience of the community for whom it is intended.
- v). Cultural Adaptability —A successful religion must also be culturally adaptable. Thus it should be acceptable in many cultures, without losing its essence, and without becoming burdensome to new cultures in which it is accepted. If it becomes the organizing principle of a culture in

which it is newly accepted, the culture should not become alienated from its own historical roots by that acceptance.

- vi). Historical Flexibility—It must also be capable of adjusting itself to changed historical circumstances, both within and across cultures.

*C. The Emotional Domain*

- vii). Emotional Reward—A sustainable religion must make its adherents emotionally satisfied by what it provides in its mythology, doctrine, ritual and moral reinforcement.

- viii) Psychological Comfort —Closely related to emotional reward, a sustainable religion must provide for each adherent a conviction that the inner self is taken into serious consideration, both in life and in death.

*D. The Attitudinal Domain*

- ix). Ritual Efficacy —The rituals of a sustainable religion must be meaningful not only to the religious leadership, but also to the ordinary adherents, both young and old, learned and unlearned.

- x). Meaningful Symbolism—The symbols used in the ritual and other practices of a sustainable religion must be relevant and meaningful to the ordinary adherents. They should also be affordable.

- xi). Aesthetic Appeal—The aesthetic aspect of a sustainable religion should be positively attractive and appealing. A dull religion, or one that is aesthetically alienating, may attract a minority of eccentrics, but it cannot penetrate a whole culture.

- xii). Ethical/Moral Support—A sustainable religion must support

the moral norms which are the ethical foundation of the culture as a whole. Any religion which undermines these foundations may have superficial adherents, but is bound to be abandoned, eventually.

Most people are not conscious of the justifications for the religions to which they are affiliated and committed. This is because normally, we do not have to explain why we hold particular religious beliefs. This task tends to be left to religious leaders and spokesmen. It is often assumed that the official position of a particular religion, as articulated by its leaders, is representative of all believers in that religion. However, closer scrutiny reveals that there is a wide variety of justifications, from one believer to another. These justifications will fall into one of the categories of characteristics outlined above. It is worthwhile, however, to further explore the justifications which are most popularly expressed when believers are challenged to defend their preference of one religion or denomination rather than another.

#### **4. Justifications for Religious Adherence**

Ask yourself whether you consider yourself a religious person. If your answer is no, try to explain to yourself why you are not a religious person. If you say yes, try to find out why you have chosen to be religious, and why you adhere to the religion of which you are a member. It is quite likely that your justification will fall into any of the following categories:

1. **Ontological** —that the religion provides a plausible explanation of the way things are in reality.
2. **osmogonic** —that the religion provides a plausible theory of the origin, development and future of the universe
3. **Teleological** —that the religion provides a plausible meaning and purpose of life
4. **Utilitarian** —that religion can provide some benefit to its adherents. That the religion answers the question 'What do I get from my membership in that religion? Is it

worth it?'

5. Pragmatic —that the religion provides solutions, options and alternatives that are workable (applicable in actual situations).
6. Moral/Ethical —that the religion provides solutions to all moral and ethical problems.
7. Recreational —that the religion provides opportunities to utilize excess time, money, and effort without self-destruction.
8. Aesthetic —that the religion provides opportunities for appreciation of beauty, and for participation in art, music, dance, drama, poetry, elocution.
9. Social —that the religion provides opportunities for healthy social interaction.
10. Emotional —that the religion provides for emotional self-expression and growth.

For each individual, several of these justifications may overlap. The justifications for rejection of religion also follow the same pattern. Thus when a person rejects a religion, the justification will be in the negative with regard to any of the aspects outlined above.

## **5. Pointers to Religious Adherence**

How, we might ask, does a person start the religious quest? Assuming that the average individual will, at one time or another, try to justify his or her religious orientation, how is that orientation acquired in the first place? The following is a list of pointers to religious adherence, which direct a person to the religious orientation which, eventually, becomes rationalized if not abandoned in favour of another orientation.

- a). Upbringing —We are born into a setting which without our choice, conditions us to a particular religious orientation. For

example, I grew up in an Anglican setting, which was facilitated by the Church Missionary Society. Later, during my research at the CMS archives in London, I learned that my area would have been within the Methodist sphere of influence, but history evolved differently. In view of the fact that we cannot choose our parents, when or where to be born, there is a sense in which our religious orientation is pre-determined. Our rationalization of religion in our adulthood is subject to the attitudes nurtured in our upbringing.

b). Socialization

—The social environment in which we grow up also greatly influences our religious orientation. This influence, though informal, will be integrated into the personality of the individual. If for example, we grow up in a highly secularized environment where organized religion is peripheral to daily life, our religious orientation reflect that social experience. Conversely, a person who grows up in a religious community which is very ritually oriented, will tend to view life from that perspective.

c). Schooling

—The formal process of inculcating knowledge, values and skills, also shapes our religious orientations. A curriculum which includes Religious Education will produce a generation which is conscious of the institutional value of religion. The content of the syllabus will determine whether the students internalize a narrow view of religion, or a broad one. Conversely, a curriculum which omits the teaching of religion will, necessarily, portray a secular orientation. Reactions to that process of schooling may lead to antagonism towards religion, or to strong advocacy for it.

- d). Mission —For some people, the first exposure to religion is through missionary teaching. This happens, for example, in urban areas where many parents are too busy at work to look after their children and impart religious values to them. Some missionary agencies have availed themselves for social services such as nursery schools, day-care centres, and so on. Missionary influence is also common in areas which are considered to be open for conversion. Throughout the colonial period, Africa was designated as a mission-field European and North American churches. Some Africans became Christians through direct exposure to missionary teaching from their childhood.
- e). Self Re-discovery—In some cases, individuals undergo a traumatic experience, which leads them to adopt a particular religious stance. Such experiences are directly related to specific events which have unique significance for the individuals concerned—such as surviving a ghastly accident, recovering from a severe illness or loss of a very close relative or friend.

These pointers to religious adherence provide the initial instance for religious encounter, but the sustenance of religious life by an individual depends on the ability of that individual to find justification for that adherence. If justification is lacking, the individual will become indifferent or antagonistic to organized religion.

## **6. Philosophy as Conceptual Clarification**

Whatever *needs to be said* can be said quite simply and clearly. Otherwise, one might as well remain silent.<sup>3</sup> The task of philosophy is to facilitate clear articulation of concepts. Philosophy of Religion is a specialization which blends three major disciplines—Philosophy, Religious Studies and Anthropology.



Other related disciplines are also recalled whenever necessary, for the purpose of explaining those aspects of philosophy and religion which may need multi-disciplinary cross-reference. A scholar specializing in the Philosophy of Religion, such as myself, will sometimes operate in the company of philosophers, and at other times amongst theologians and anthropologists.

In this respect, Philosophy of Religion is much like other cross-disciplinary specializations, such as Agricultural Engineering; Agricultural Education; Agricultural Economics; Biochemistry; Biotechnology; Geophysics, and so on. For professional purposes, scholars in these specializations hold double membership in the respective disciplines with which they have association. Some specializations may even qualify the scholars involved for triple membership, as is the case with Nuclear Medicine, which covers medicine, physics and engineering.

To many people, philosophy is an academic subject which should not appear on any curriculum, because, in their view, philosophy specializes in everything and in nothing at the same time. Until 1971, I was a tutor at Kagumo Teachers College, Nyeri. I left that job to join the University of Nairobi as an undergraduate student majoring in Philosophy and Religious Studies. Just before I left Kagumo, a missionary colleague asked me why I had preferred such awkward subjects. What would I do with massive knowledge of philosophy? Certainly, there were many other disciplines in the Faculties of Arts and Education.

My reply to this missionary friend was that I needed to study philosophy because it would give me the best opportunity to come to grips with the *truth*. There seemed to me to be too many claimants to the truth, and no means of determining who was speaking the truth. The context of my answer was that I had been involved in the development of the Religious Education curriculum in Kenya, as a member of a Panel whose majority were Christian missionaries of different denominations from different countries of Europe and North America. There were just a few Kenyans on that Panel, which had thirty members. Being one of those few, I wondered what religious truth was all about, if these missionaries could not agree among themselves, at least in a mission-field such as Kenya.

Are there numerous versions of the truth which Christianity proclaims? If there are many claimants to the truth of the Christian message or that of any other religion, who among those claimants could be relied upon— all, some or none of them? My hope was that studying philosophy, especially Philosophy of Religion, would help me to clarify these questions and other related ones. I wanted

to know the conditions under which one could accept as valid, any claims to the truth. This adventure which I had initially considered to be brief, has preoccupied me ever since.

There cannot be many versions of *the truth*. But there are many perspectives of *reality*. Truth is a quality of *propositions about reality*. A proposition is true if and only if what it asserts corresponds to reality. But how do we know that the assertion of a proposition corresponds to reality? This is where the greatest difficulty lies.<sup>4</sup> Let us suppose that the cloth covering the table in front of me is green. Let us also suppose that I make a statement that this cloth is white. Certainly, this same cloth cannot be white and green at the same time. So, is my statement true or false? Clearly, it will be false since the cloth is green and I assert that it is white. But suppose we were wrong in the first place to think that the cloth was green, and that in fact it is white. What would be the status of the proposition that this cloth is white? It would actually be true, but we would judge it to be false because of our mistaken thought that the cloth was green. Thus there is a distinction between what we consider to be true, and what is actually the case. The most controversial arguments tend to be over *opinions*, rather than about matters of empirical fact.

Unfortunately, even matters of empirical fact cannot be easily settled. Does light travel in straight lines, in waves or in particles? Physicists and engineers tell us that all these explanations are correct even though their theories sometimes seem to be in conflict. It depends on the perspective from which light is studied. Chemists and physicists can explain the composition of matter from their respective perspectives, and it would be unreasonable to quarrel over the validity of any perspective which is backed by adequate empirical evidence.

I shall illustrate this explanation with another example, which is a point of common controversy in religious discourse, especially in Christianity. There are some people who suggest that all religions are of equal validity, and lead to God. There are others who would say that their own religion is the only way to God. God in both cases is equated with Truth. Now let us consider these two views a little more critically. Both of them cannot be true simultaneously. One of them may be correct, in which case the other one will be false. But there is a possibility that both could be false.

The two views can be illustrated using what I call the analogy of the Mountains of Religion. The diagram conveys the following message. On one mountain, God is believed to be at the top, and the adherents of various religions are at the bottom.<sup>5</sup> Each religion struggles to reach the top before all others, and boast that it has

done better than every one else. Some of the people at the bottom give up the competition, and argue that all religions are only attempts to reach the top, and any approach is as good or as bad as any other. Even those who make no attempt should be respected just as much and as well. It does not matter, therefore, which religion one follows, or how hard anyone tries.

At the other mountain, God is not at the top of the mountain, but on the horizon in every direction.<sup>6</sup> All the adherents of religions are at the top of the mountain, because they are the 'crown of creation'. They celebrate the creation with God, because they are creatures bestowed with intelligence. At the top of the mountain, each religion faces outwards to one direction, and praises God for the wonders of creation. Some adherents insist that the follower of other religions must come to their vantage point to see the wonders of creation in that direction. But of course the whole world is very beautiful. If all the adherents of all the religions represented at the top of the mountain would form a circle and tell one another of the wonders of creation, they would all, no doubt agree, that the world that God has created is wonderful indeed. They might then praise God together, and co-operate in witnessing to God's glory.

Philosophy, like religion, can be defined in a wide variety of ways. Although philosophy at its best is mainly concerned with stipulating definitions, it is itself not easy to define clearly. The following are some of the definitions associated with Philosophy.

- i). Love of Wisdom
- ii). The quest for truth
- iii). Reasoned discourse
- iv). Principles by which an individual organizes his or her life
- v). Principles which guide the operations of an organization
- vi). Principles which guide the operations of a state
- vii). The collection of the ideas of a well known thinker
- viii). The search for the principles underlying all reality
- ix). An academic discipline which adds another subject to the undergraduate curriculum in the Humanities

- x). A preoccupation which gives a few eccentric scholars a means of livelihood, by earning salaries for wasting time arguing among themselves and with published ideas of dead thinkers of bygone ages.
- xi). The 'battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language'.
- xii) Process of determining the conditions under which discourse can be considered meaningful.

The last of these definitions, indicates that philosophy is not a classroom affair, but a necessity in all purposeful discussion. Philosophy's task is to raise relevant questions to facilitate the progress of discourse. Once the necessary clarifications have been made, the people involved can proceed with discourse and with other business. Without clarity, discourse cannot proceed effectively— people just repeat themselves and get onto each other's nerves.

A useful analogy has been given by Ninian Smart, who is an eminent scholar in the Philosophy of Religion. In his book entitled *The Philosophy of Religion*, he suggests that Philosophy is like a mirror, which can reveal to us the shapes and connexions (sic) of the concepts we use. 'In using concepts we are, so say, too close to them to understand them fully. By holding them up to the mirror of philosophy, we can perceive their nature more clearly'. Philosophy of Religion, he adds, is a mirror through which religion can be studied more clearly.<sup>7</sup> This is a very appropriate analogy.

## **7. Academic Philosophy**

Academic Philosophy is like a tree with many branches. Some of the branches have more twigs than others. Some are older than others, and on some of the branches and twigs there are more leaves. Here below are the main branches. Each of the branches has twigs and leaves, which there is no time and space to discuss in detail:

- a). Logic—Logic is concerned with consistency of arguments, not with the truth of propositions. An argument can be perfectly logical, even though the claims in its propositions are totally false. Suppose I argue as follows:

All animals walk on four legs. I am an animal. Therefore I walk on four legs.

This argument is perfectly logical, but each of its propositions is false. Logic will not help us to determine whether it is true that all animals walk on four legs. Nor will it help us to determine whether I am an animal or not. Logic, will, however, help us to derive and infer conclusions out of the propositions we make. There are two well known systems of logic— *deductive* and *inductive*. Deductive logic draws particular conclusions from universal premisses. Inductive logic infers universal conclusions from particular observations. This is the kind of reasoning which is used in the biological and physical sciences. There are also other less familiar systems of logic, which are of special concern to some logicians.

- b). **Metaphysics**— Metaphysics is concerned with reality as a whole — with the reality upon which all things depend. It is the study of the foundation of all being. Most of metaphysics is speculative. Since human beings were not there at the beginning of the universe, they can only speculate what might have happened. One approach is to infer from scientific experiments. Another approach is to start with hypotheses which are derived from intuition or synthesis of facts already known.
- c). **Epistemology**— Epistemology is the study of knowledge and knowledge systems. How do human beings acquire knowledge? What are the limits of human knowledge? What are the social factors that influence the acquisition of knowledge? What is the role of language in the acquisition of knowledge? Such are the questions with which epistemology is concerned.
- d). **Axiology**— Axiology is the systematic study of values and value judgements. Ethics is concerned with moral values, and could be considered an aspect of axiology. As a branch of philosophy, axiology explores all aspects of values and value judgements. Aesthetics would also belong to this branch.<sup>8</sup>
- e). **History of Philosophy**— The history of philosophy is an

academic specialization which traces the development of philosophical thought within specific intellectual traditions. For example, Bertrand Russell wrote a very interesting book entitled *History of Western Philosophy*, which is a standard textbook in philosophy in many universities in the Commonwealth. Another similar study, by the same title, was written by Frederick Coppleston, in several volumes.<sup>9</sup>

- f). **Comparative Studies in Philosophy**— This is another academic specialization whose objective is to acquaint the students of philosophy with various intellectual traditions. Whereas history of philosophy compares the ideas of one period with those of another within the same culture, comparative studies in philosophy compare and contrast intellectual traditions from culture to culture.<sup>10</sup>

Quite clearly, philosophy cannot be conducted in a cultural vacuum. A philosopher is always a product of the culture in which the philosophical training has been conducted. Although the philosopher seeks to rationalize or offer critique to culture, it is impossible to escape the cultural conditioning which has inspired the critical response. Again, we might use the analogy of a swimmer. The swimmer will adjust his or her swimming style to the type of pool where the swimming is done. In the ocean, where the water is heavier, the swimming will be lighter. In the fresh-water lake or river, the swimming will be harder, depending on the strength of the currents. At a swimming pool, the conditions are artificially adjusted. In all cases, the swimmer must apply the appropriate strokes to remain afloat and swim along in the different contexts.

Culture influences philosophers in their philosophizing. Conversely, philosophers may influence culture depending on the public appeal of their ideas. Plato observes that philosophers who may have genuine critical contributions to society may be considered a liability, because they may seem to challenge the status quo. At the same time, he wishes that the Ideal Republic should be governed by a Philosopher-King.

- g). **Applied Philosophy**— Applied philosophy is a general title referring to all the various applications of philosophy to different disciplines and professions. It includes such specializations as philosophy of science; philosophy of Education; Philosophy of Law; Philosophy of Language;

Philosophy of Religion; and so on. This branch of philosophy is always multi-disciplinary, requiring the specialist to have some acquaintance with the discipline or profession to which philosophy is applied.

## **8. Philosophy of Religion as a Discipline**

Philosophy of Religion is an applied specialization. It deals specifically with the philosophical questions arising from religion as a phenomenon, and from the practices and teachings of particular religions. In this respect, it belongs to the same category of specializations as Philosophy of Education, Philosophy of Science, Philosophy of Law, Philosophy of Mathematics, and so on. The expert in any of these specializations must of necessity, be fully trained in philosophy, following which the specialization is developed.

As an academic specialization, Philosophy of Religion deals with ten main themes. The themes can be taught with varying degrees of emphasis, depending on the interest of the teacher, and on the cultural context of the teaching.

- i). Definitions of Philosophy and Religion
- ii). Modes of Thought and Expression
- iii). Problems of meaning in Discourse, especially religious discourse
- iv). Religion and Ethics
- v). Religion and Science
- vi). Religion and Culture
- vii). Justifications of Religious belief
- viii). Critique of proofs for the existence of God
- ix). Relationship between Religions
- x). The future of Religion

A course on Philosophy of Religion will elaborate each of these themes in detail, equipping students with the knowledge and skills

to analyze and synthesize various aspects of all related topics. One of the most important aspects of the course is acquainting students with the methods of analysis and synthesis which other philosophers have developed. The practical component is essential, in which students are assigned challenging problems to solve through seminars, essays and research projects.

I have often been asked to explain the relationship between philosophy and theology on the one hand, and theology and religion on the other. Theology is the rationalization of a religion. Thus there can be no theology without a religion which it rationalizes. Whenever a thinker articulates a *new* theology, it becomes the rationalization of reform within an existing religion, or the justification for establishment of a new religion.

For example, Siddharta Gautama, by articulating a new perspective on Hinduism, became the founder of a new religious movement, which today we call Buddhism. Jesus, by teaching Judaism in a new way, became the founder of Christianity. Likewise, Muhammad taught Arabian communities a new way of understanding themselves and their relations with other peoples and with nature, and by so doing he became the founder of Islam. These are the most famous founders of religions. Among the most famous reformers are Martin Luther, John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli, who became founders of reformed Christianity in the sixteenth century of the Christian era. Islam has its own catalogue of reformers.

Theology employs philosophical tools for the articulation of religious themes within a specific religious tradition. The theologian takes the doctrines for granted, whereas the philosopher considers such religious doctrines as subject matter for critical scrutiny. Philosophical theology can be distinguished from dogmatic theology. On the one hand, philosophical theology seeks rational grounds for the central doctrines of a religion, allowing reason to flow to logical conclusions. Dogmatic theology, on the other hand, tautologically explains the doctrines of a religion without adding any new insights to the faith. Such addition would be considered a distortion of the faith.

Interestingly, it is philosophical theology which, in most cases, adds new dimensions to religious doctrine, although at the beginning the philosophical theologians tend to be condemned as heretics or as spoilers of religious coherence. The fundamental questions of both philosophy and theology are the same, but the answers are different, owing to the difference of perspectives and starting points. The three fundamental questions are:



- a). Ultimate Origin— Whence has everything originated? How can we explain the *ultimate origin* of the universe and everything therein? A philosopher leaves all possibilities open, and on the basis of reason alone, conjectures about any explanation that might make sense. A theologian starts with the doctrines of his or her religion, and elaborates on the various aspects of that doctrine, to show its completeness and its relationship with other teachings of the same religion. It is inconceivable for a theologian to disown the doctrine of the religion to which he or she belongs. A philosopher, *qua* philosopher, has no such obligation.
- b). Ultimate Purpose— Why is the universe and everything therein the way it is *now*? This is primarily a question of *ultimate purpose*. In other words, does the present configuration of the universe and everything therein have any purpose? If it does not have any purpose, why should the universe exist at all? If indeed there is a purpose, what is it, and for whom is that purpose? The philosopher's answer is again always open ended and open minded. The theologian, on the other hand, is bound to answer this fundamental question according to the doctrine of the religion to which he or she belongs, and synthesize this explanation with the other teachings of that religion.
- c). Ultimate Destiny—*Whither* is everything *proceeding*? In other words, is the universe, and everything therein, destined towards any end? What is the future of the universe in general, and of humankind, in particular? What happens after death? The theologian answers this question in accordance with the teachings of his or her religion, and makes any additional explanations as preferred. The philosopher, in contrast, remains open to any view that might convince his or her rationality.

Analogically, philosophy is to religion as logic is to mathematics. Likewise, theology is to religion as science is to engineering. Although these analogies might not fit exactly, any reader who understands the relationships involved will appreciate the intricacies implied therein. The famous scholar in philosophical theology, Paul Tillich has lucidly explained the difference between philosophy and Christian theology as follows:

The philosopher looks at the whole of reality to discover within it the

structure of reality as a whole. He tries to penetrate into the structures of being by means of his cognitive function and its structures. He assumes—and science continuously confirms this assumption—that there is an identity, or at least an analogy, between objective and subjective reason, between the *logos* of reality as a whole and the *logos* working within him. Therefore, this *logos* is common; every reasonable being participates in it, uses it in asking questions and criticizing the answers received. There is no particular place to stand to discover the structure of being; there is no particular place to stand to discover the categories of experience. The place to stand is no place at all; it is pure reason.

The theologian, on the other hand, must look where that which concerns him ultimately is manifest, and he must stand where its manifestation reaches and grasps him. The source of his knowledge is not the universal *logos* but the Logos who became flesh, that is, the *logos* manifesting itself in a particular historical event. And the medium through which he receives the manifestation of the *logos* is not common rationality but the church, its traditions and its present reality. He speaks in the church about the foundation of the church. And he speaks because he is grasped by the power of this foundation and by the community built upon it. The concrete *logos* which he sees is received through believing commitment and not, like the universal *logos* at which the philosopher looks, through rational detachment.<sup>11</sup>

Gordon Kaufmann has explained the distinction between philosophy and Christian theology as follows:

What distinguishes the Christian theologian from many philosophers is his conscious awareness of the tradition which sustains his thought, and his explicit acknowledgement of dependence on the events which created and formed that tradition. His work is rooted in the conviction that it is through an understanding of those events that the real meaning of human existence is grasped. Hence, the concern of theology to relate those decisive events to contemporary existence arises not out of slavish subservience to external authority, but out of the sincere and responsible pursuit of truth itself. In this respect, theological claims and contentions are not restricted in import to the community of faith but are of general human significance.<sup>12</sup>

Without self-contradiction, a philosopher can engage in theological discourse on behalf of the religion to which he belongs. Just as lawyers, engineers, doctors and other professionals can express their religious views, so can a philosopher articulate his or her response to particular aspects of religion. Some philosophers are antagonistic to organized religion. Others are strong advocates of it.

Between these extremes there is a wide variety of responses to organized religion, which can be rationally supported. Common sense demands that we should respect a person for the views he holds even when we might not agree with those views. Philosophy

of Religion, as a discipline, brings scholars who specialize in it into contact with the whole range of responses to organized religion. This exposure may sometimes encourage religious skepticism, but sometimes it also leads to strong commitment to particular approaches to religion.

## **9. Religion and Culture**

Religion is a social phenomenon which is always to be found fully blended with the way of life of individuals and communities. It is impossible to find an individual who practices religion in isolation from culture. Let us express this observation differently. If we wish to find out how one people is culturally distinct from other peoples, religion will be a very significant indicator of distinction. Rather curiously, it happens that the most prominent cultural achievements of every community, are religious artefacts — places of worship; ritual practices and paraphernalia; clothes of religious hierarchy; religious art; religious music; religious organizations; and so on.

It is impossible, therefore, to study any religion without studying the cultural contexts in which the religion is manifested. Conversely, it is impossible to conduct a comprehensive study of any culture, without including its religious component.

Religion is both an individual and a corporate affair. The same could be said of culture. Whatever is manifested as the culture of a people, can be found at the micro level in the lives of the individuals that compose that society. For example, the Portuguese monuments along the East coast of Africa are manifestations of the Portuguese culture of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Fort Jesus, at Mombasa, tells us much more than that it was a fortress to defend the Portuguese from attacks by the Arabs and local inhabitants. Vasco da Gama's Pillar, at Malindi, tells us much more than that a man named Vasco da Gama stopped there early in 1498, and erected the pillar on his way to India. What, we might ask, was going on in the minds of these Portuguese adventurers who erected Fort Jesus, Vasco da Gama's Pillar, and all the other monuments along the coast? They represent a particular religious outlook, and at the same time they are manifestations of a particular culture — Portuguese culture in its Age of Discovery and Expansion.

Let us consider another example, closer to our current experience. If someone who left Nairobi say, in 1946, were to visit this city today and tour all the residential, commercial and

- The Kenya Catholic Secretariat headquarters, Westlands
- The Global Museum, Westlands, which is sponsored by Raja Yoga Missionary Movement
- The Mennonite Guest House, Church Road
- The spectacular All Africa Conference of Churches Headquarters, Waiyaki Way

The list is not exhaustive. Many more cultural and religious landmarks could be mentioned. Similar variety could be observed in some of the residential estates, especially in Eastlands and Nairobi South. What do they betoken? It is quite clear that during the last forty years, religion and culture have thrived considerably in Nairobi, with great vigour and remarkable variety.

The individuals and organizations who have been involved in the construction of these monuments, surely must have had a concern to make the future different from the past. Culture is the artifactual manifestation of a people's preoccupation with social reconstruction. We could have talked of social construction, but as human beings, we find society already in existence. We cannot construct society—we can only make changes to it. It is significant that throughout the world, most religious places of worship are found in conjunction with or in close proximity to educational institutions. There certainly is a connection between education as a cultural endeavour, and religion as an agent of social reconstruction.

## **10. Culture and Nature**

Culture can be defined as the visible achievement of human beings in their endeavour to improve on their past experience. The activities associated with culture involve the modification of the natural and social environment. For example, human beings in a particular environment discover that if they plant some of the grains they have used for food, they could be sure to have more food when the rains fall again. Later they learn that even without rain they could harvest, if they provided water through irrigation. They also learn that they can improve the yield of the grain, through selective breeding. Later, they discover that they can manipulate the genes of the plants, to create new varieties of crops.

Nature is that part of reality which is not artificial—wild plants, animals, rivers, lakes, oceans, mountains, and so on. Dams and

canals are not part of nature—they are part of culture. Human beings can choose to live in a natural environment without making any changes to it. If they take this option, they will live in caves and holes, or on the branches of trees. They will make nests like birds and lairs like terrestrial mammals. They may also choose to live on water like fish or even partly so, like amphibians.

Whenever human beings try to modify their natural environment in order to live more comfortably, the environment itself can no longer sustain itself naturally. For example, a community may decide that the caves available are too few and too small to accommodate all the members. So the older members decide to establish a settlement some distance away from the caves, possibly on the rock above the cliff to which the caves open. The consideration is that it may be safer above the cliff, than in front of the caves. The caves themselves may be converted to some other use, such as storage of food, or shelter during adverse weather. After some time, the community may do away with the use of caves, so that granaries replace the caves.

Within our own lifetime we are witnessing the modification of the ways of life of whole communities on this continent. Pastoralists are changing to the agricultural mode of life. Agriculturalists are changing from shifting cultivation to intensive farming. Rural communities are, in some places, becoming engulfed by urban expansion. Such changes affect the way communities understand their relationship to nature. A child who has always considered a cave as home, will have a different understanding of that word from the one who has grown up in a flat at the top of a twenty-storey apartment building in a large city. Likewise, an African child who grows up in a rural village will understand the word 'home' to mean something different from the one who grows up in a sprawling residential estate in a tropical city such as Nairobi.

One important question that we may ask is: Is human society natural or is it cultural? Human society is natural to the extent that human beings are by nature, social creatures. Human individuals grow naturally and normally only in the context of a human community. The specific characteristics of the community need not be defined, for there are infinite possibilities of configuring a human community. Thus, human society is cultural to the extent that it is never predictable. Every human community develops its own ways of coping with the problems it has identified. There is no standard formula for the organization of society. Thus culture is a social construction. There are infinite possibilities for the organization of a human community, and there are infinite

possibilities for human response to challenges posed by the natural environment. Some alternatives are more efficient than others, and some communities are more adaptable than others.

In responding to the natural environment, a settling community may completely destroy the natural environment where it settles, replacing it with a totally new environmental design, planned or haphazard. Such redesigning may be consistent with the climate and soil structure of that zone, or it may not. Should the adaptation fail, the settlement may find itself unable to survive in the new environment. Another community may carefully study the weather patterns and soil structure of the area in which it intends to settle, then adapt its environmental design to these natural conditions. Such a community has greater chances of survival in that natural environment, than the one which has not carefully studied its new environment.

In contemporary Africa, it is observable that Christian mission stations have been centres through which the surrounding natural environment has been greatly changed by the introduction of exotic trees, new cereals, new fruit varieties, new vegetables, new flowers, and so on. At the same time, such centres have been gates through which new cultural norms and religious values have been introduced, eventually diffusing into the community as a whole.

## 11. Culture as Social Reconstruction

Culture is a social product, dependent upon a people's understanding and interpretation of themselves and their environment. Every generation ends up reconstructing the culture it has inherited from previous generations. This reconstruction is conducted under the direction of the opinion leaders. The majority in every society are followers. The opinion leaders, irrespective of the aspects of culture they lead, fit into the following categories:

1. Conservatives — those who endeavour to maintain the *status quo*, at whatever cost. They maintain that whatever has been inherited from past generations is satisfactory, and needs no change.
2. Reformers — those who endeavour to modify the social structures, as inherited from previous generations. They insist that

some aspects of inherited social structures could be improved, while maintaining the general pattern of culture as a whole.

3. Iconoclasts

—those who endeavour to shatter all the images, symbols and rituals of the past and present, because they have lost faith in them. Iconoclasts have no visions of their own; they are to society what juvenile delinquents are to their families. They have no alternative futures to propose, but they are dissatisfied with both the past and the present.

4. Cynics

—those who are indifferent to whatever goes on in society. They are not neutral; rather, they take the view that whatever happens, there will be problems and promises, therefore it does not matter whichever way a society is organized. They take the view that 'Whatever will be, will be!'

5. Prophets

—those who consider their role to be that of comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. Prophets will have visions of a better future, but they will not necessarily be activists. Some may be poets, artists, singers, writers and orators. Some of these are popularly respected as the 'conscience' of their societies. In *Plato's Republic*, all such opinion leaders are banned, because they are considered to be obstacles in the way of the Philosopher-King.

## 12. The Pillars of Culture

I define culture as the cumulative manifestation of a people's achievements over generations and in physical space. Culture has six pillars. It is not possible here to discuss all the pillars in much detail.<sup>13</sup> It is important to appreciate that religion as a social phenomenon is an important pillar of culture, intricately related to

all other pillars.<sup>14</sup> The six pillars of culture are:

1. Politics —the distribution of social influence. At the personal level, politics is what you do with your sociability.
2. Economics —the distribution of resources and opportunities. At the personal level, economics is what you do with your resourcefulness.
3. Ethics —the regulation of conduct and values. At the personal level, ethics is what you do with your moral values and judgements.
4. Aesthetics —the regulation of beauty, proportion and symmetry. At the personal level, aesthetics is what you do with your sense of beauty.
5. Kinship —the regulation of marital and family relationships within the community.
6. Religion —the synthesis of perspectives to produce a plausible world-view, binding on and relevant to the whole community. At the personal level, religion is how you sum up your being in the world; how you account for your being in the world.

Each of these pillars has many aspects. Experts in each of the pillars tend to view the other pillars from their own perspectives. Philosophy is a tool which enables us to see more clearly the interrelated and multi-disciplinary character of culture. It is like a magnifying glass which enables us to see more clearly how a particular perspective relates with other approaches to reality. Each pillar needs some rationalization, and for this purpose some training in philosophy is helpful.

### **13. Visions of the Future**

Every society becomes innovative when its opinion leaders accept new alternative models for the organization of society. A



culture is dormant when there are no innovations. The circumstances which facilitate innovativeness are various, but the sparks which ignite innovation are found among the artists. Take the following illustration: The Renaissance was facilitated by 'dreamers' who visualized alternative futures, without insisting that their dreams should become reality overnight. Throughout the history of European thought there have been many Utopias proposed by visionaries who wished to propose alternative ways of organizing human communities. Among these we might mention Augustine, Dante, Erasmus, Thomas More, Milton, Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Feuerbach, Comte, Marx, John Bunyan, Arthur Blair, H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, William Golding, Alvin Toffler, and others.

One question we might ask ourselves in Africa is: Where are our dreamers? Where are our Utopias? Ayi Kweyi Amah wrote a novel called *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born*. When will our 'Beautiful Ones' be born? In African folklore there are many stories that talk of a dreamland where there are no sorrows, no worries and no failures. In my childhood I used to hear many stories told and retold about 'The Land Without Hawks and Without Flies'. I always wondered where this land was. It was the land where strange things happened. It was the place where things were done perfectly. In contemporary idiom, this would be a place of total sterility— it would have to be totally barren— either a desert or an ice plain. In a total desert there would be no hawks because there would be no carcasses. There would be no flies either, because there would be no dirt for them to feed and breed on. Today, it appears that 'The Land without Hawks and Without Flies' is in the kitchens of many homes — in the refrigerator and in the deep-freezer.

In the Bible, five models or motifs of the future can be identified. Those who teach about the future using the Bible, use one or other of these motifs.

- a). The Exodus Motif— In this motif, there is a liberator, who is revered for delivering the people from bondage to freedom. The struggle for freedom is portrayed as being very difficult, and the passage to freedom is very long. There are always people who are accused of betraying the struggle, particularly when they complain that some of the suffering is unwarranted. In this motif, Egypt under Pharaoh symbolizes bondage, whereas Canaan symbolizes freedom. Moses symbolizes the ideal liberator. Ironically, Moses never reaches the promised land. For that reason, the

motif is incomplete for the purpose of raising the expectations of African peoples.

Although the Exodus motif was used considerably during the struggle against colonial domination, its relevance in post-colonial Africa is highly questionable. Perhaps one of the reasons for lack of creativity in social reconstruction in Africa, might be that the Exodus motif was used for too long. Other motifs of social reconstruction are possible. We can, for example, consider another of the biblical motifs for illustration.

- b). The Exile Motif—In the Exile motif, the leaders of social reconstruction consider themselves as being physically removed from their cultural home. The task is to sustain the aspiration towards a society which would be consistent with the ideals of the exiles. Underlying the Exile motif is the conviction that social reconstruction at home is not currently possible, and therefore the project of social reconstruction at home is postponed until the conditions are favourable. The question as to when those conditions will change for the better remains open. Waiting can be very long, and the present generation may even pass away before the aspirations are realized. One problem with this motif, is that the visions of the future change with time, and the conditions at home also change. Given such flux, it is difficult to sustain consistency of aspirations and struggles amongst the exiles. Consequently, some Exiles design a mode of existence molded by an exile mentality. Diaspora cultural norms are based on this mentality.
- c). The restoration motif—In this motif it is assumed that the past which was glorious, has been destroyed, and that the community cannot survive without restoration of that glorious past. Therefore, all efforts of social reconstruction are devoted to restoration of the past. Monuments of bygone generations are reconstructed— music, songs, dances, drama, buildings, statues— everything that reminds the community about the achievements of the past. The restoration motif has little or no use of the future. The future is perceived in terms of the achievements of the past.
- Unfortunately, the restoration motif focuses so much on the past that the creative genius of the community cannot be released to imaginatively configure new visions of the future. The Restoration motif is past-oriented, rather than

future-oriented. J.S. Mbiti has proposed that Africans have no future orientation, and that they are more interested in *Zamani* (past) than in *Sasa* (present). If this were the case, African peoples would be tied only to the restoration motif. But it is hard to find evidence to support the view that African peoples concentrate their aspirations only to restoration of the past. At the same time, there is ample evidence that many Africans are disillusioned by the past, whether traditional, colonial or post-colonial. Africa today is at the crossroads, searching for alternative futures that can meet the needs of a continents whose priorities have been changed by rising populations, rocketing expectations and unmatched opportunities and facilities in every country.

- d). The Existentialist Motif— The existentialist motif emphasizes that we need not bother about past or future. What matters is the present, and the individual's ability to cope with the demands of this moment. The maxim of the existentialist motif can be summarized in the words of the rich fool, as told by Jesus:

The land of a rich man brought forth plentifully; and he thought to himself: What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops? And he said, I will do this: I will pull down my barns, and build larger ones; and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich towards God. (Luke 12:13-21)

- e). The Reconstruction Motif— Social scientists and activists struggle to reconstruct their contemporary societies on the basis of their research and practical experience. In so doing, many of them assume that the communities they hope to reconstruct will respond positively to their strategies. However, human communities are not as predictable as research models and strategies designed by activists. In reality, human groups respond to circumstances in a very unpredictable manner. The reconstruction motif designs the future on the basis of the assumption that it is possible to make the future better than the past, and that it is worthwhile to act today in preparation of a better tomorrow. Most reformers are reconstructionists.

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- f). The Utopian Motif— In this motif, visionaries anticipate a social structure which is much better than their experience of the past and the present, but as ideals which might be impossible to realize in reality. Augustine contrasted the City of God with the City of Rome. Though Rome was rich and beautiful, the City of God was much more so. In the Book of Revelation we find similar contrast, between the present cosmos and the cosmos to come. In comparison to the New Heaven and the New Earth, the present world is chaotic. The visionary envisages a social structure that is so beautiful as to be unattainable within human history. Only beyond history would these ideals be realized. Utopian expectations were especially common between the 13th and 18th centuries in Europe. These utopias were useful in giving Europeans imaginative ideas on the basis of which they were able to reconstruct their societies.

Today in Africa, as elsewhere, we live in tension between the past and the future. This might sound a commonplace statement, but it has very serious implications. Whether we shall starve as a nation in the next decade will depend on how we perceive ourselves today. We hear of Wine lakes and Butter Mountains in Europe, and we hear of artificial reservoirs of petroleum in South Africa and of massive grain silos in North America.

Several years ago, Professor John S. Mbiti, suggested that one explanation for Africa's inability to manage its own destiny, is the incapability of its people to perceive of the long-term future. In my view, the problem is not that many Africans do not think of the distant future. They do. Rather, their problem is twofold: they may not see the *need to plan* for the future. If they are conscious of such a need, they may be ill equipped to plan adequately and efficiently for it. Much too often many of us tend to think that the future will be a replication of the past. This view of the future might be acceptable if our past has been glorious. However, if the past has been miserable, whether by design or by accident, we have an obligation to act now to ensure that the future will not be as miserable as the past.

Let me illustrate this point with a testimony I heard from a leading Nigerian physicist. We were attending an international conference in the early 1980s, during the peak of the energy crisis. A scholar from Canada asked him what he thought about the energy crisis. He replied that panic was one way of responding to the realization that energy was in short supply. Another response,

just as rational, was to make the best of whatever was available, while it lasts. After that, we can think of whatever else to do. He added that in any case, he would not be alive when the energy was completely exhausted.

We cannot say that his view is irrational. What we are entitled to say, is only that at the attitudinal domain, this physicist had attitudes to life which were at variance with those of the advocates of energy conservation. To convince him that energy conservation is a more worthy goal to pursue, we would have to influence his world view, so that extravagance is rated below thrift, with regard to energy utilization.

The future ought to be anticipated not merely for ourselves, but for future generations. If we were to think only of ourselves, even mass suicide would be justifiable, and culture would be impossible. Investments of all kinds are based on the conviction that even after our demise, there will be descendants to enjoy the fruits of our labours. We need many proposals for alternative futures, derived from our African cultural and religious heritage. Living out the dreams of others will not solve our social and technological problems in the long term.<sup>15</sup>

## **14. Dynamics of Social Transformation**

Social transformation, or social reconstruction, is always effected through an interaction of the leaders of opinion and their followers, in every pillar of culture. Thus the conservative and the transformative forces are always in tension, and the stance of reconstruction will depend on which of the forces becomes most influential. It is important to appreciate that conservative forces are not always of negative value. If all societies were totally dynamic, it would be impossible for cultural character to emerge and become consolidated. The function of conservative forces is to consolidate those achievements which they cherish, for whatever reasons they might have to convince the majority. Thus there will be times when conservation is preferable to change. Likewise, the transformative forces will be useful when indeed a culture needs change. If a culture became totally conservative, it would suffocate itself. Some cultures in the past have died because they lacked the capacity to transform themselves under changed circumstances. Each of the opposite tendencies, when promoted to their extremes, have their advantages and also, their disadvantages which can be summarized as follows:

- a) Conservative tendencies— Some people believe that the best way to organize society is by relying on the past. they will quote what has been achieved in the past, and argue that the only way we can advance is by applying strategies which have been tested by time. This tendency has its advantages, but it has its shortcomings also.

*Advantages:*

- The majority of people will easily be persuaded
- There are likely to be less drastic changes in social structure
- The cost of immediate change is low

*Disadvantages:*

- The chances of benefiting from new ideas are minimal
- New leaders tend to be ostracized, to the disadvantage of the society at large
- The cost of default is very high. Delayed change is very expensive

- b). Transformative tendencies— On the opposite end of the spectrum there are those who believe that society should always be in flux, always changing. They base this stance from the assumption that no generation is identical to its predecessor.

*Advantages*

- The leadership tends to be in the hands of the innovators
- If the changes are planned, the society can immensely benefit from adjusting itself in time.

*Disadvantages*

- The majority of people tend to lose touch with the elite
- The social fabric may disintegrate owing to a

communication breakdown, if transformation is hurried.

- Mistakes often occur when changes are implemented too rapidly. Perhaps the experiments of social reconstruction in the former socialist countries of Europe would fit in this category.
- A society can easily lose its stability as a result of shunning its traditions.
- Authoritarianism often results from rushed schemes of transformation, whereby the transforming agents demand change, while the majority of the society resist on the basis of unpreparedness.

In every society, the two tendencies are always in tension. Whatever stance is actually taken will depend on the forces which are stronger at that particular time. By 'strong' I do not mean military or even economic power. I mean the ability to mobilize opinion and all the sectors of the society in order to tilt the balance of consensus. I defined Politics as the distribution of social influence. Dynamics of social change require great subtlety in the cultivation of consensus.

Religion is a very important factor in this process. If a religion happens to be exclusively identified with conservatism, its adherents will find it difficult to mobilize themselves for necessary change. On the other hand, if the religion becomes exclusively identified with radical change, it will lose its function as a stabilizing force in society. In most South American countries, the Catholic Church became a significant agent of change during the 1960s and 1970s. Although Catholicism has been reputed for conservatism, this image was remarkably modified by Latin American Catholics.

In South Africa, the Church has been an important agent of change, even though at the same time it remains a stabilizing and harmonizing factor. In most African countries, the role of religion has been sometimes ambiguous and sometimes confused. Part of the reason is that it is difficult to know when one should advocate for change, and when one should press for conservatism. The leaders, as we have earlier observed, have to take the responsibility of showing the way, because the majority whom they lead often depend on that leadership— be it directed by conservatives, reformers, iconoclasts, cynics or prophets.

## 15. Levels of Social Reconstruction

In young nations the question of the role of religion as an agent of social reconstruction is of tremendous importance. Older nations have benefited from the normative function of their dominant religions for many centuries. What insights and guiding principles can we discern from the foregoing observations—insights that could provide normative signposts for social reconstruction especially in Africa?

Kwame Nkrumah defined social reconstruction as the endeavour to promote 'freedom from poverty and economic conditions of the people so that they will be able to find better means of achieving livelihood and asserting their right to human life and happiness.'<sup>16</sup> If this endeavour were used as a measure for evaluating the success of religious denominations and agencies, how would each of them be rated? According to the Gospels, Jesus came so that people may have life and have it abundantly. Social reconstruction, as I have defined it implies the endeavour to *enhance life at personal, social and institutional and ecological levels*. Religion at its best provides the normative direction for such affirmation and enhancement of life at all these levels.

There are three levels of existence, and a hierarchy of needs which correspond to these levels. The struggle for survival is waged at each of these levels. Religion as the pillar of culture which synthesizes this endeavour, is most appreciated when it deals with existence to affirm and enhance survival at all these levels. Social reconstruction at best should facilitate the provision for human needs at every level.

- a). Biological Survival. —This is the most basic level of existence. All living things, from unicellular organisms to the most complex primates, are involved in the struggle for those necessities which make life possible—food, shelter, clothing; health. At this level of existence the quality of these necessities is not of primary concern. The struggle is for such adequate quantity as would ensure biological survival.

Thus during a famine, the people affected by it cannot choose foods—they will consume whatever is available, if it



will ensure their biological survival. Refugees, who have to depend on relief supplies, are in this situation.

b) Social Survival

—Not all living organisms are social (gregarious) by nature. Human beings are social creatures, sharing this characteristic with the primates such as chimpanzees, monkeys and baboons. They also share the characteristic with such insects as termites and bees. However, human beings supersede their natural state by designing social systems to suit their own interests. There is no predictability in the struggle of human beings for social survival. Nevertheless, the quest for orderly social existence is characteristic of all human beings. Individuals and groups in any culture will resist imposition of a social structures which, in their view, is against their own interest. They may be mistaken, however, when they assess the alternative future possibilities. Since the future is not directly accessible to us, our choice of models cannot guarantee success. It is for this reason that most individuals and groups tend to be 'conservative', echoing the old saying, 'We know where we have come from, but not where we are going'.

c). Self-fulfilment

—This is the highest level of human existence. Having satisfied the primary biological and social needs, an individual feels the need to be accepted, appreciated and self perpetuated. This need for self-fulfilment is most clearly manifested in organized religious ritual. The rites of passage—associated with birth, puberty, marriage and death—are solemn affirmations of the belief that human life is continuous, existing before birth, and extending beyond death. Doctrines of salvation also explain human finitude in

terms of divine eternity. The mortal human individual is taught to cope with mortality through admission into divine immortality. These beliefs are extended to the corporate identity of communities and nations through the notions of self-determination and sovereignty.

## 16. Aspects of Human Endeavour

Human endeavour always has *individual, social, institutional and ecological* aspects. To ensure social harmony, these aspects ought to be balanced. Too often, however, one aspect tends to be over-emphasized at the expense of others. It is often said that North Atlantic cultures tend to be characteristically individual-oriented while African cultures are community-oriented and Oriental cultures are cosmos-oriented. There is some truth in these observations. To say that a culture is individual-oriented is suggest that the individual aspect is given prominence over and sometimes against the social and cosmic aspects. In religion, this over-emphasis is reflected in the doctrine of individual salvation, which is associated with North Atlantic Christianity—especially with Protestantism.

The African cultural heritage places emphasis on community, so that the individual derives self-identity from the community to which he or she belongs. Organized religion in Africa reflects this community-orientation. Oriental cultures are famous for relating human achievements to cosmic entities, real or imagined. Thus 'enlightenment' in Buddhism means the absorption of the individual self (*atman*) into the universal self (*Brahman*). In Hinduism, the doctrine of 'transmigration of souls' also highlights the link between individual human identity and the non-human beings. It is worthwhile to explore these aspects further.<sup>17</sup>

- a). Individualistic-Orientation— The European Reformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries endeavoured to free the individual believer from the power and authority of the Catholic Church. The reformers placed the scriptures higher than the tradition and practice of the Church. This theological challenge provided a political opportunity for European principalities to declare their independence from the domination of the Bishop of Rome. Luther and the other reformers were not politicians in the popular sense of the word. Rather, they were churchmen whose primary interest

was to reform the Catholic Church. Their campaigns, however, had an irreversible impact on the social reconstruction of Europe. Individuals became the norm-setters for most of Europe, where previously the Church had been the guardian of knowledge and morals. This change of social orientation, from ecclesial to individual emphasis, gave the society the impetus for creativity, innovation and inventiveness. Thus the Reformation became the theological foundation of capitalism.<sup>18</sup>

The Counter-Reformation was intended to reverse the wind of change in Europe, but in effect it accelerated the process of individualization.<sup>19</sup> Emigration and settlement of Protestant Europeans in North America throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries further accelerated the experiment of individualization, especially when the pioneers demonstrated that they could conquer the frontier through individual initiative and improvisation.

A society which glorifies the individual at the expense of the community is potentially anarchical, unless there are checks and balances to limit individual freedom. How can such checks and balances be instituted? In the case of Europe and North America, Protestant Christianity inculcated the values of hard work and thrift, as means by which devout Christians might earn their tickets to heaven.<sup>20</sup> The apparent decline of overt commitment to organized religion in these regions has left individualism without a metaphysical foundation. The introduction of Christianity in Africa has not succeeded in displacing the traditional value-system, which is based on a community-oriented ethic.

- b). Community-Oriented— Some people view the community-oriented structure of African societies as a hindrance to progress. However, the idea of progress, itself, is a subject for philosophical discussion. In 1973, E.F. Schumacher<sup>21</sup> published a small book entitled *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*. This book emphasized that progress ought to be viewed not in terms of material or monetary accumulation, but in terms of the ethical and aesthetic pillars of culture.

The community-oriented approach to social reconstruction takes this approach. In religious terms, one can summarize the approach with the saying that 'Man shall not live by bread alone, even though bread is important.' The community helps the individual to achieve social

survival and self-fulfilment, which would otherwise be impossible in an anarchical setting where the rule was 'Everyone for himself and God for us all.'

- c). **Cosmos-Orientation**— I use this term for lack of a more accurate one. It refers to an orientation which consciously relativizes human individuals and communities with reference to their existence in the entire cosmos. Oriental cultures and religions are much more sensitive to this orientation than any others. The least sensitive is the individualistic orientation, which exalts personal interests above any other consideration. Sensitivity to the cosmos is summarized in this quotation from the *Katha Upanishad*:

The tree of eternity has its roots in heaven above and its branches reach down to earth. It is Brahman, pure Spirit, who in truth is called the Immortal. All the worlds rest on that Spirit and beyond him no one can go. This in truth is That. The whole universe comes from him and his life burns through the whole universe. In his power is the majesty of thunder. Those who know him have found immortality. From fear of him fire burns, and from fear of him the sun shines. From fear of him the clouds and the winds, and death itself, move on their way. If one sees him in this life before the body passes away, one is free from bondage; but if not, one is born and dies again in new worlds and new creations. Brahma is seen in a pure soul as in a mirror clear, and also in the creator's heaven as clear as light; but in the land of shades as remembrance of dreams, and in the world of spirits as reflections in trembling waters. When the wise man knows that the material senses come not from the Spirit, and that their waking and sleeping belong to their own nature, then he grieves no more.<sup>22</sup>

Whichever orientation one presupposes will determine the impact of his contribution to social transformation. Mystics, for example, tend to internalize their outlook on society and nature. In their own lifetimes they may lead ascetic lives, but in later generations their teachings can have great social impact. Such was the case with Siddharta Gautama, the founder of Buddhism. However, the social orientation of the culture in which one lives prescribes the context and possibilities of one's creativity. We are the children of our cultures and of our times. At the same time, we are challenged to transcend those limitations, using the knowledge, skill and imagination at our disposal.

## **17. Concluding Remarks**

Today, more than ever before, humankind has become sensitive to the necessity for ecologically sensitive social reconstruction. The

Earth Summit in Brazil, June 1992, was a public acclamation of this new awareness. It is in the interest of humankind to care for the natural environment in such a way as to sustain life. Continued destruction of the environment can only threaten the survival of humanity. Interestingly, religious organizations were very active in promoting the Earth Summit, and they are the prime movers of the follow-up programmes throughout the world.

A society which is religiously divided cannot achieve national unity. It is for this reason that Constantine summoned and presided over the Council of Nicea in the fourth century. When his empire was threatened with disintegration, he sought ecumenical consensus amongst Christians as a major step towards the re-integration of the empire. Although he did not fully succeed, the Old Roman Empire survived in two fragments, the eastern (centred at Constantinople) and the western (centred in Rome). Modern Europe has been the heir of the western fragment, whereas the Eastern Bloc was the heir to the eastern fragment. The collapse of Soviet Communism has revived the quest for re-unification of Europe. The success or failure of this quest will depend to a large extent on the capacity of the peoples of Eastern and Western Europe to mutually respect and appreciate one another, with all the corresponding cultural and religious traditions.

In Kenya today, the concern for mutual respect, mutual appreciation and reciprocation will go a long way towards enhancing national cohesion and social harmony. Social reconstruction in this direction can be achieved through the principle of co-existence on the basis of consensus. Common sense demands of us to accept that though we may be individually different, we at the same time have many things in common. We have to accept that we need one another, for survival in a very competitive world.

Religion can facilitate this perspective. Unfortunately, religion has often been used to highlight differences while it should have been used to promote reconciliation. Deeply religious people of all religions ought to be peacemakers, agents of reconciliation. In all cultures, the majority of people are searching for lighthouses in the troubled ocean of life. Those who accept to become converts, and those who tolerate the religions in which they have been brought up, all adhere to their faiths with the conviction that these faiths are the lighthouses that provide the safest course in the billowy ocean of life. If a religion fails to provide that guidance, its followers become very frustrated, and experimentation with new cults is the result. Those who are charged with the responsibility of religious leadership are obliged to face the challenge of allowing

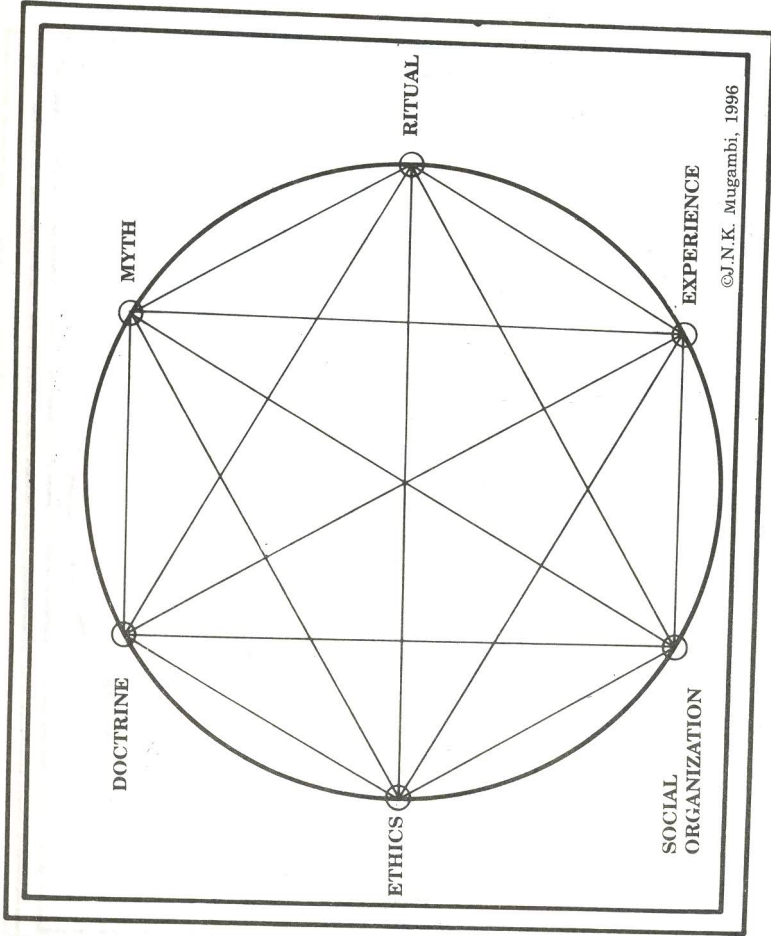
their religions to stand the test of reason. Only by rational justification can religion become a safe set of beacons in this controversial, but exciting world.

The insights, observations and suggestions articulated in this lecture indicate that religion has a prominent place as the norm-setter in the long term project of social reconstruction. Africa, particularly, needs the services of the churches and other religious groups, because they are among the social institutions having the facilities and resources for leadership development. At a time when state apparatus in many African countries seem desolate, the churches and other religious agencies can, and should, provide a stabilizing and catapulting influence, on African societies. Philosophy can, and should help churches and other religious agencies to become more self-critical in this endeavour of norm-setting.

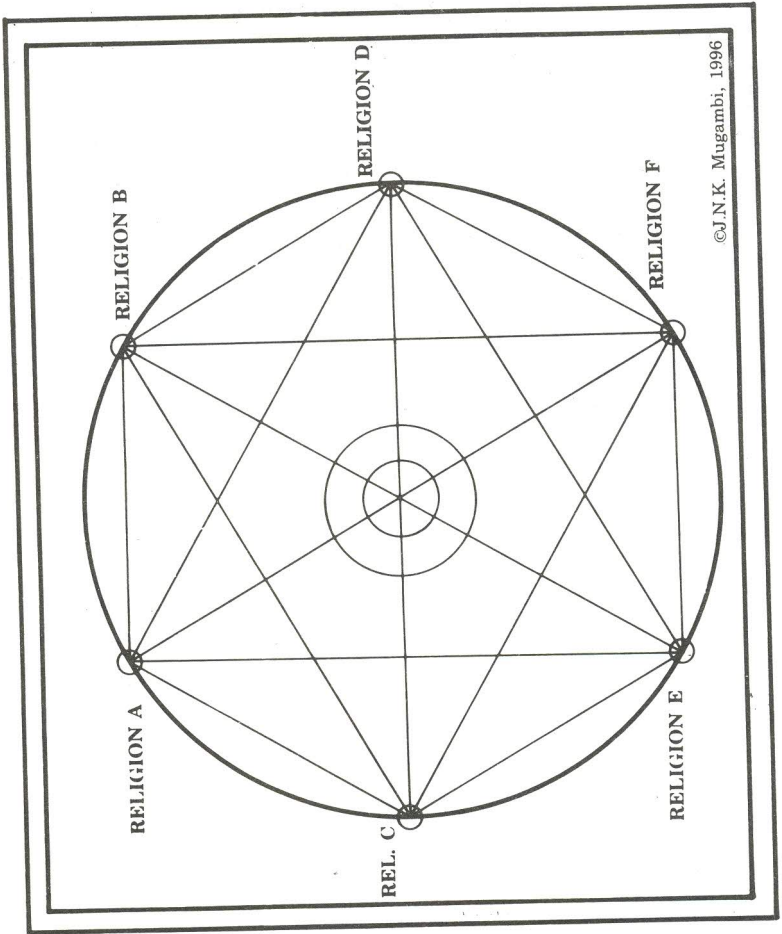
The task of the philosophy of religion is to clarify the ambiguity and vagueness of the norm-setting endeavour, to facilitate the formulation of more constructive models and norms. The philosopher may engage in theologizing according to his respective religious persuasion, but such theologizing should not be confused with his philosophical task. Just as a scientist engages in other types of discourse when not in the laboratory, so does the philosopher when not in philosophical argumentation. It could not be otherwise.

# APPENDIX I

## DIMENSIONS OF RELIGION

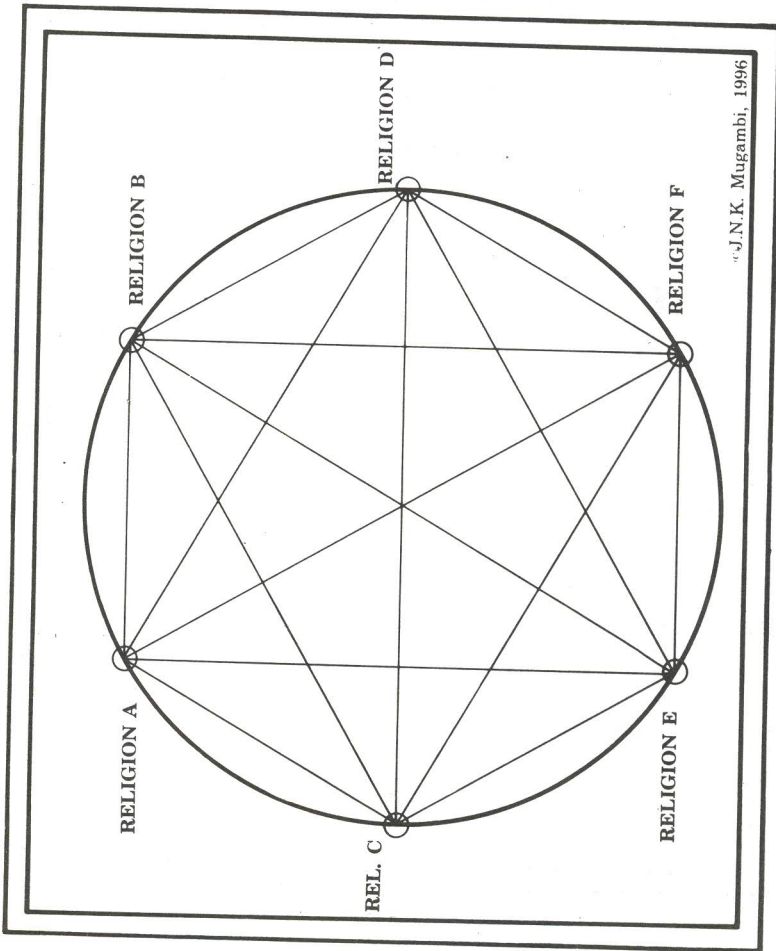


**APPENDIX II**  
**GOD ON THE MOUNTAIN TOP**

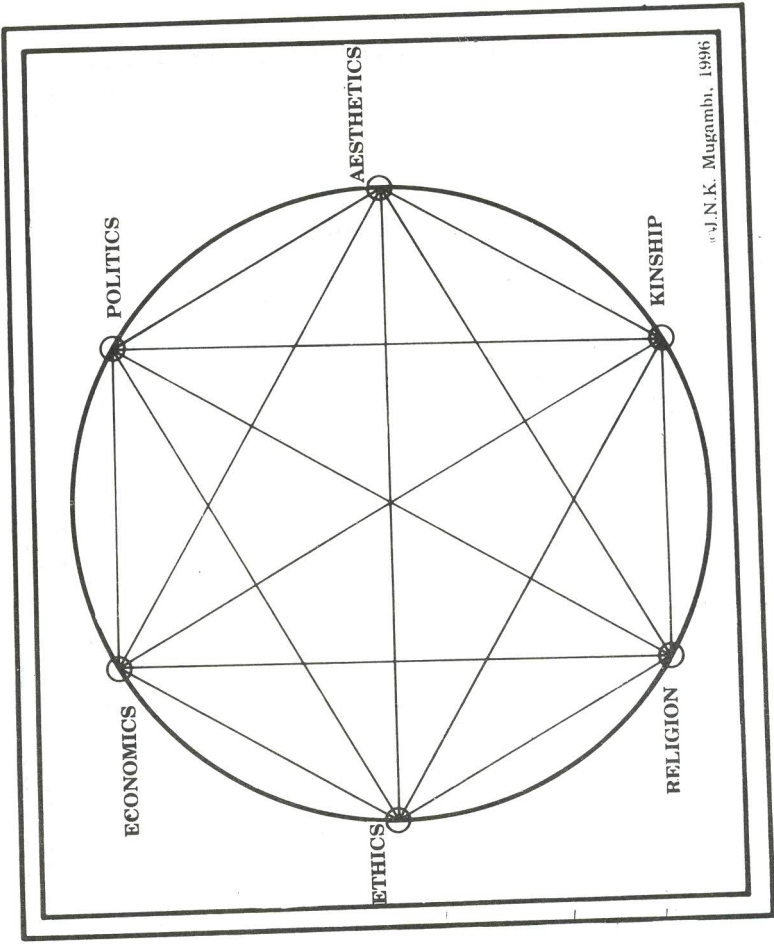




**APPENDIX III**  
**GOD AROUND THE HORIZON**



**APPENDIX IV**  
**THE PILLARS OF CULTURE**



v. J. N. K. Mugambi, 1996

NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix I

<sup>2</sup> Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*, London/Glasgow: Collins/Fontana, 1971, pp. 18ff.

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Ludwig Wittgenstein for this insight. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 2nd ed., eds and translators: D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972; *Philosophical Investigations*, Third edition, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, New York: Macmillan, 1968; *Culture and Value*, Second edition with English translation, edited by G.H. von Wright, translated by Peter Winch, Oxford: Blackwell, 1980.

<sup>4</sup> Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was preoccupied with this problem. He proposed that it makes sense to distinguish between reality as it is, and reality as perceived. I have found this distinction very useful. His most important book is *The Critique of Pure Reason* (first edition 1781, second edition 1787). For a simplified presentation of his ideas see Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*. London: Allen and Unwin, second edition 1961, pp 675-690.

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix II

<sup>6</sup> See Appendix III

<sup>7</sup> Ninian Smart, *The Philosophy of Religion*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1979, vii.

<sup>8</sup> For a general introduction to axiology see Nicolas Resceher, 'Axiology: the General Theory of values,' in *Introduction to Value Theory*, Washington DC: University Press of America, 1982; Edward J. Bond, *Reason and Value*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983; David Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value*, Aristotelean Society Series, eds Jennifer Hornsby and Martin Davies, vol. 6, New York:Blackwell, 1987

<sup>9</sup> Bertrand Russell, op. cit.: Frederick Copleston, *History of Western Philosophy*, London: Chapman, 7 vols.

<sup>10</sup> The following are interesting examples of comparative philosophy: *Choose Life: A Dialogue Between Arnold Toynbee and Daisaku Ikeda*, ed. Richard Gage, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976; Frederick Copleston, *Philosophy and Cultures*.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951, pp 23-24.

<sup>12</sup> Gördon Kaufmann, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective*, New York: Scribner, 1968, p. ix.

<sup>13</sup> For more details on components of culture see J.N.K. Mugambi, *The African Heritage and Contemporary Christianity*, Nairobi: Longman, 1989, pp 129ff. The views expressed therein have been further refined. I now view culture as having six pillars, whereas I had earlier identified five. Kinship has been added as a pillar. I am indebted to Douglas Waruta for the discussion leading to this revision.

<sup>14</sup> See Appendix IV

<sup>15</sup> This point has been made by J.G. Donders, *Creation and Human Dynamism: A Spirituality for Life*, Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1985, pp 21ff.

<sup>16</sup> K. Nkrumah, *Towards Colonial Freedom*, London: Heinemann, 1962, p.43.

<sup>17</sup> For a comparative overview of religious traditions see J.N.K. Mugambi, ed., *A Comparative Study of Religions*, Nairobi: the Nairobi University Press, 1990; Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*, op. cit.

<sup>18</sup> R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1941; Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans by Talcott Parsons, New York: Scribners, 1958.

<sup>19</sup> Philip Hughes, *A Popular History of the Reformation*, New York: Image Books, 1960.

<sup>20</sup> Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1962; Alan F. Geyer, *Piety and Politics: American Protestantism in the World Arena*, Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1963; Harold Lindsell, *Free Enterprise: A Judeo-Christian Defense*, Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale, 1982.

<sup>21</sup> E.F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*, New York: Harper and Row, 1973.

<sup>22</sup> *The Upanishads: Translations from the Sanskrit*, with Introduction by Juan Mascaró, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965, p. 65.

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