SPIRITUAL DIRECTION IN AFRICA

A Need for a Different Approach?

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SPIRITUAL DIRECTION IS USUALLY seen as a one-to-one relationship with another person for the purpose of obtaining spiritual guidance. By receiving the help of an interested and wise human being, we are assisted on our journey of faith towards the kingdom of God. A spiritual director or soul friend will encourage, guide, confront and challenge us on the path towards holiness. The goal of spiritual direction is to help us fulfil our God-given destiny on Earth, to carry out the purpose of our existence, to fulfil all the duties of our state in life, to save our souls after death in heaven, and to become saints. We meet with a spiritual director at regular intervals of time—monthly, bimonthly, quarterly—to give an account of our stewardship in God's service. This accountability then becomes an added grace and help in our spiritual life. We meet regularly with the spiritual director for about an hour.

But for many in Africa the process I have just described is problematic: it does not express sufficiently an African experience of faith. Aware of this, a group of us at the Jesuit Institute South Africa (JISA) examined how we might adapt spiritual direction to an African context, drawing on a series of interviews with diocesan and religious priests, with women religious (Catholic and Anglican), and with a range of lay Christians, living mostly in Soweto, south-west of Johannesburg in South Africa. We tried to find out what lay at the foundation of these people's spirituality, and particularly what tensions there were with the predominantly Western (often North American) models of spiritual direction that they had encountered. Our findings suggested that a simple adaptation of classical Western approaches to spiritual direction does not work as well as one might hope in an African context—except for some of those, mostly non-Catholics or Catholic religious, who are trained in these modes of spiritual

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direction—and that spiritual direction needs to take note of a number of important cultural factors if it is to be effective.

If spiritual direction is ever going to move beyond the preserve of priests and religious to ordinary African people, in particular to those who are not part of a Westernised élite, it needs to be kept in mind that in Africa faith and spirituality are usually far less individual than they are an expression of communal beliefs and experience. They also tend to be informal and spontaneous—not easily packaged into hour-long therapy-style sessions.

What Is Spiritual Direction in the African Context?

Our interviews found that the notion of spiritual direction is relatively new to African people, but that similar practices have existed from the beginning of our lives as Africans, even from before the coming of Christianity. These may involve meeting and sharing your thoughts with someone whom you see as wise, whom you trust and look upon as good and important. This person traditionally will either be a relative or a close friend of the family. In the past, and sometimes still, the person chosen will be an elder in the family, a community leader or a local chief. The 'directee', to use the language of Western spiritual direction, chooses the person with whom to share his or her story, and this person listens to ascertain what problem needs to be solved—whether social, economic, educational or developmental. Often more than one person will be involved in helping, and these directors may be either men or women.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is treated quite differently in this African version of spiritual direction from how it is treated in the West. Modern Western spiritual direction has a concept of confidentiality similar to that found in psychology and the practice of psychotherapy and related, more traditionally, to the confidentiality of sacramental confession. Information shared by the directee is not passed on to others. This is important for what in therapy is called the therapeutic alliance—the cooperative working relationship that enables a therapist to help a client—as it promotes an environment of trust. There are important exceptions to this confidentiality, both in therapy and in spiritual direction, where a clinician's or director's duty to warn or duty to protect is involved. These include child abuse, suicide attempts and

many other situations. But in most, if not all, cases what two people have shared stays with the two people.

In the African tradition things are different. Inevitably, the family will get to know the story either from the director or directee—in most cases from the director. The issues discussed are likely to be common to both African and Western life, but the specifics will be handled differently. A good example is the difference in approach to questions of marriage in Western culture and in African culture. The process of organizing a marriage in African culture is long and involves a lot of people, because the decision to marry often involves a whole range of 'stakeholders' beyond the couple themselves. In Western culture the process is usually much shorter and focused primarily on the couple. If someone were to discuss the possibility of marriage with a spiritual director within traditional African culture, it would seem inappropriate not to bring in the other 'stakeholders'. According to the southern Sotho proverb, *motho ke motho ka batho bang*: 'I exist because others exist as well'. My well-being is not based exclusively on my own capabilities, talents and so on; it is essentially connected to the existence and the well-being of others around me. By myself I am nothing.

This attitude towards confidentiality obviously has a lot of complex implications for the spiritual direction relationship. On the one hand it may seem 'odd' to a Western or Westernised spiritual director to discover that directee almost expects that the 'sacred confidentiality'

of the relationship will be broken—often the directee him or herself will share this private conversation. On the other hand, we found that some religious and clergy were uncomfortable with spiritual direction precisely because they expected confidentiality to be breached.

It is a widespread feeling among many African peoples that human beings should not—or cannot—approach God alone or directly, but must do so through the mediation of special people or other beings. This feeling and the practices it entails seem to derive mainly from the social and political life of the peoples concerned. For example, it is the custom in some societies for children to speak to their fathers through their mother or older brothers and sisters. Elsewhere, subjects approach their chief or king only indirectly through those who are closer to him. This social and political pattern of behaviour is by no means found in all societies, but the concept of intermediaries exists almost everywhere—although there are still many occasions when individuals or groups approach God directly without their intervention.[1]

The Complexities of the Spiritual Direction Process

The process of entering into spiritual direction is also not the same in Africa as in the West. People go more readily and easily to their relatives for 'direction', or to close family friends. There is not the same unease in African culture about speaking about God or prayer as there is in modern Western culture. African people, whether Christians or not, frequently mention God in their conversations, a God who is known fundamentally as Creator of the Universe. A clear awareness of God is there. They will also obviously mention their ancestors.

In African tradition, ancestors are members of one's family who have died. Ancestors are not communal but belong to a particular family: the different surnames we have thus determine where we belong. Not everyone becomes an ancestor: the family of a dead person, usually the elders, make the decision. People who were celibate or who did not have children are not regarded as ancestors. People, again, who lived evil lives do not become ancestors; murderers are believed to be carrying the bad spirit. The family examine a person's way of life; different rituals are used for different people and situations; and the results determine

[1] See John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1999), 68.

whether the person is an ancestor or not. Ancestors are seen as watching over the living in spirit, as people who are near to God and who are speaking to God on their behalf. Since the ancestors also look over the living, they are inevitably part of any spiritual conversation.

Despite the spiritual openness of African culture, directees generally choose their director or directors carefully, although the director chosen for the first meeting may be changed for subsequent ones. A change of directors happens with no difficulty: for the African directee the choice is wide because directors are either family or friends. Another difference appears here: in Western spiritual direction people are perceived to need a good training or some kind of authority based on office, for example as a priest or religious, to qualify to be a director. But in African practice anyone seen as wise—almost always older people, on whom the younger generation in particular rely—may be involved in direction. A wise person in the African culture is someone who is rooted in tradition, African and Christian.

In Western spiritual direction, directee and director meet regularly, whether once a month or once a week, usually at set times and places with an implicit time limit to the session (all of which, once again, demonstrate the way in which a therapeutic model has come to dominate this form of spiritual direction). In the African culture that we investigated, people usually assume that it is acceptable to meet their directors at any time they want to. It could be after three months, eight months, two years; everything depends on whether a person needs direction or help. No time or date is set, especially if the matter is urgent. And director and directee are not tied to an hour's meeting. Their time is open until they get to the end of their discussion. Meetings may be arranged in advance, but in many instances they are spontaneous. This traditional approach is known and understood by the director, who does not expect directees to make appointments. A chosen director is always prepared to sit and listen to a person who comes to the door: he or she understands the urgency of the situation and gives help. The conversation will not only involve religious material, but everything that a person may want to share with another person. In Western spiritual direction we normally ask questions such as 'how are you, and how is your prayer life?' In African direction the director will ask, 'how are you and how is your family?' Since directors are generally

A chosen director is always prepared to sit and listen

Isangoma ***performing a ritual***

either family or friends of the directee they will know both the living family and the ancestors of the directee. This helps them to understand the directee's background and provides continuity; in Western spiritual direction the director will have to find out more about the directee.

Such knowledge is particularly helpful if there is a ritual that the directee must do. Western spiritual direction is very limited in its ritual dimension—spoken prayers, and occasionally the laying on of hands, are the most that may happen. In this it is influenced, once again, I suspect, by the 'talking cure' approach of many Western psychotherapies. But Africans pray and worship very much through ritual. These may be Christian rituals or traditional ones that honour the ancestors and ask for their intercession. While many Churches oppose the latter traditions, in practice they still happen, with or without ecclesial permission. Although some may be reserved to traditional healers, many are carried out by 'lay' people, often the same people who are chosen as spiritual directors. If the issues that the directee has require him or her to do a ritual, the director will refer the directee to someone who will know more about what to do next. The family will look at what kind of ritual needs to be done and find the person appropriate to do it.

Our Relationship with God and Family

The communal nature of spiritual life is clearly very important in African culture. God is for the whole community; so feelings of intimacy with God include everyone equally. People do not speak about God on an individual basis but in relation to the family or community. The language of direction is likewise very inclusive rather than individualistic. The directee will not only talk about him- or herself but will include family in the discussion. Praying for oneself sounds selfish and is never encouraged; and the director will include the family and its needs in what he or she says.

This is not surprising given that every person in African culture has a particular role in the family. Aunts and uncles, for example, handle emotional issues about love for their nieces and nephews, helping them to make the right choice of spouse. They will help find out about the relevant person mentioned by the niece or nephew. Knowing the other family is important so as to avoid mistakes or blunders. If the family is suitable the uncle or aunt will encourage the niece or nephew to propose to the person, or agree on the proposal. Aunts and uncles in most cases try to do their best to help with the selection of a new suitor or relative. If a person goes to spiritual direction and raises the issue of discerning whom to marry, this will therefore also involve the other people who will share in the discernment process.

Marriage is a complex affair with economic, social and religious aspects which often overlap so much that they cannot be separated from one another. For African peoples, marriage is the focus of existence—the point where all the members of a given community meet. As when approaching God, intermediaries are often used. Among the Kiga, when parents wish to arrange the marriage of their son and know of a suitable girl, they confide the matter to a close and trustworthy relative. This person acts as an intermediary, finding out all about the girl and her family and reporting to the boy's family. If they are satisfied, the parents of the boy and the intermediary go to the girl's parents and declare their intentions. Should the other parents be unwilling or less enthusiastic, it is the duty of the intermediary to smooth the way. The intermediary also plays an important role when the time comes for the marriage itself. The girl and boy are not allowed to meet until the wedding has taken place.[2]

[2] See Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 133–137.

Age is also seen quite differently in Africa from how it is seen in the West. Wisdom is associated with older people in African culture. Decisions come from the top down, from older to younger, from those who have authority to those who have less. This is not a coercive process, but one based on trust; elders do make mistakes and will admit to them, but their influence is seen as educating younger people. Among some ethnic groups there are complicated and highly stratified age hierachies. But in general all males of a given ethnic group are usually classified into three or four categories: children, initiates, young initiated adults (warriors), and elders. In some cases, the initiates and young adult men are fused into a single category of warriors. Obviously, this classification has something to do with age. But the most significant determining factor for an age-set is the socioreligious institution of initiation. Initiation is the time when new members are inducted into the ethnic group and when a person's status and responsibility in the clan begin to be clearly determined and consciously appropriated. All the young people initiated together form an age-set. Jomo Kenyatta has spoken of the special social and moral bond of 'loyalty and devotion' within age-sets: 'Men circumcised at the same time stand in the very closest relationship to each other', no matter where members of the age-set were initiated or may currently be.[3]

Wisdom is associated with older people in African culture

One difficulty that arises in cross-cultural spiritual direction, especially with younger African directees in seminaries and even in religious communities, is that the seminarians and religious sometimes find it difficult to share with their superiors. The reason is that the directors—who are often, even now, white—are not relatives or friends. They often know little or nothing about the person's ancestors. As I have also indicated, African culture involves a form of spiritual direction that ends up in giving advice. Other cultural issues aside, a younger man or woman will often wait for advice from a priest or sister whose own approach is influenced by the 'non-directive' style of Western psychotherapy.

[3] Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1998), 102–103.

I am not claiming that the traditional African approach to spiritual direction is perfect, or that the communal life that it reflects is perfect. There is often profound loneliness amid the bustle of African communities, and it is difficult for people who experience such emptiness, solitude or low self-esteem because they have come to expect the community itself to provide advice, care, love and help in such situations. Internal dynamics within the family or community are not dealt with easily by the traditional African approach to spiritual direction. But no culture is perfect, and no model of spiritual direction can stand alone.

Healing and Harmony

Two recurring themes that feature in African spiritual direction are healing and harmony. *Izangoma*[4] and other spiritual healers have always been consulted for help and for advice about the future, and also about messages from the ancestors. Even in modern, urban South Africa these healers remain popular in the community. Many people from different walks of life, including devout Christians, experience a spiritual calling and go for *sangoma* training, at centres both in the townships and in rural areas. When children or other members of the family are sick, they are taken to a *sangoma* to see where the problem lies. The *sangoma* will diagnose the problem, make predictions and let the family know if there is a ritual that needs to be done. The *sangoma* will also tell the family if he or she thinks that there is a person bewitching them or that the ancestors are not happy with what they are doing. Physical, psychological and spiritual problems are almost always understood as primarily spiritual, to be solved by healing rituals.

Traditional healers are important in African spiritual life, but their influence is not always beneficial. Negatively, *izangoma* and spiritual healers sometimes do destructive work which leaves a family in pain by falsely accusing people, including their relatives. Some observers have noted how suffering and misfortune in African culture is almost inevitably linked to blame: if something goes wrong someone is always to blame, whether myself for offending the ancestors or someone else who has cursed or bewitched me. Unscrupulous *izangoma* often

[4] An *isangoma* (plural *izangoma*) traditionally diagnoses problems and mediates between the living and the ancestors.

Isangoma, ***Langa township***

manipulate such beliefs for personal power or gain. They are like a spiritual director who misuses his or her authority to manipulate or abuse the directee.

Traditional rituals can have good results, however, leading to psychological well-being and spiritual growth. In this sense the *izangoma* can be seen in some ways as a cross between spiritual directors, psychotherapists and physicians. But their role involves attempting to re-establish communal as well as individual harmony. When a family or community finds it difficult to let go of collective pain they often use a ritual to help them to find peace. Older people are careful not to die leaving the younger ones with undone rituals.

In the 1980s and 1990s thousands of people died in a township in the East Rand of Johannesburg called Thokoza as a result of political violence connected to the struggle against apartheid. The community was deeply divided politically between different liberation movements, collaborators with the apartheid state system, and the South African police and military who tried to crush resistance. There was a lot of torture, and some young girls and women were raped. Family members

saw their relatives being killed in front of them. The survivors experienced anxiety, depression and many other psychological issues. On a spiritual level people were acutely aware that there was no harmony and that it needed to be restored.

Years after the political violence ended the community met and agreed on a ritual that would help them bring closure. A stone inscribed with the names of all the people who died was laid. Priests of various Christian denominations, spiritual healers and *izangoma* were called in to lead the service for the people. Prayers were then said, including a cleansing ceremony to heal the havoc that had taken place in Thokoza. People were reconciled with each other, and since then there has not been any comparable political violence. This illustrates for me the way in which traditional African and Christian spiritual practises can work together for communal well-being.

The Ongoing Challenge: Spiritual Direction in a Different Culture

Those who come from a Western culture to practise spiritual direction in an African context need to come to terms with helping people to pray in a way that is different from how they were formed, and from how they themselves pray. What can they do?

One option (taken by some of the spiritual directors we interviewed, black as well as white, South Africans as well as missionaries from elsewhere) is to adhere rigidly to the Western model. Some of those we talked to denounced any attempt at inculturation. The problem with this approach is that, historically, it has not worked—nor will it work in the future. From the late nineteenth century onwards, many African Christians broke away from the missionary-led Churches, partly, but not wholly, over culture. Today these African Initiated Churches (AICs) are the largest bloc of Christians in South Africa. Recent national surveys show that they are the largest religious bloc in the country. Even the Catholic Church, which has been among the more tolerant and creative Churches in approaching inculturation, has declined in its overall 'market share'.

The alternative is to take African traditions of spiritual direction seriously and adapt Christian spirituality and spiritual direction to the new situation. This will involve far more than translating the classics of Christian spirituality into the many languages of South Africa—although this is certainly a task that needs to be undertaken. What we

really need is a way of bringing African themes and practices into dialogue with the Western traditions in which we—in which I—have been formed and to create a new form of spiritual direction. Spiritual directors clearly need to be better informed about traditional African cultures, the role of the ancestors, the role of immediate and extended family, bad luck, and the importance of ritual. Directors need to look beyond the individual person.

The Jesuit Institute South Africa has started work on a process of trying to inculturate Ignatian spirituality in a 'township setting'. Through the Tsoseletsa (the word means 'renew') Programme we have tried to take the traditional Week of Guided Prayer, popular in Western parishes, and recontextualise it in African culture. We have shifted the emphasis away from individual guidance of directees to interactive group guidance, sharing and communal prayer. We have tried to incorporate song and storytelling into the prayer process, sharing accounts of those who are 'ancestors in faith' (saints and ancestors), as well as elements of advice. More can be told of this experiment as it progresses, as we assess its strengths and weaknesses. This is a start. We have a long way to go.

In the end, whatever form it takes, spiritual direction allows a person to pray, notice, reflect and discern. I am reminded of the opening line of one of the most memorable speeches of South Africa's former President Thabo Mbeki: 'I am an African'. We pray, notice, reflect and discern as Africans. We need a way of spiritual direction that is Christian, Ignatian, but also African.

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