



“HE DESCENDED TO THE DEAD”: TOWARDS A PASTORAL STRATEGY FOR MAKING PEACE WITH THE LIVING DEAD

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ABSTRACT

The fate of ancestors who died before the evangelisation of their peoples may be a concern for some peoples. This appears a real issue in some contemporary African contexts. There have been a number of responses to this issue suggested which include vicarious baptism, the Chinese Rites controversy, and the intellectual rejection of the worldviews which shape such belief. This paper argues the doctrine of the Descent into Hell may offer some answers to these questions that may be given a ritual or liturgical form. The methodology used to shape a Christianised set of initiation rites (*jando*) in the Anglican Diocese of Masasi (Tanzania) is helpful in developing accompanying rituals and practice that are culturally appropriate.

KEYWORDS

Ancestors; Living Dead; Vicarious Baptism; Descent into Hell; *Jando*

I. INTRODUCTION

“What has happened to my ancestors who did not have a chance to accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour?” is a question that may be asked by those who hear the Gospel and make a commitment to Christ. It is a question that might well arise in any culture where ancestors are venerated or held in respect. It may be a question with implications for the psychological and social well-being of the convert. This article, born out of a conversation with the Anglican Area Bishop of the Horn of Africa, and, indeed from earlier writing, is located primarily in an African context, but soon is revealed to address a global phenomenon.¹

II. CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN CONTEXTS: THE LIVING DEAD

Students of African religious traditions have long noted that rituals and practices around relationships with the departed are found in many different communities across West, Southern, Central and East Africa. We do not need to rehearse these again here. Whilst these were often described as ancestor worship by early Christian commentators that description has largely been replaced by the less polemic “ancestor veneration”. The term “ancestors” is itself difficult and a number of commentators prefer to talk of the living dead — a term that is more accurate within African cosmology.² Given noticeable regional variations in emphasis, there is certainly no fixed system of belief or single orthodoxy.³ Nor are such beliefs universal: the Maasai, for example, do not hold them.⁴ Nonetheless it is possible to draw out widely shared characteristics.⁵ The living dead are exemplars, so not all the departed qualify.⁶ Their authoritative status is complex in its

relation to morality: scholars are divided on whether they are “moral paragons”.⁷ In many cultures, they have an intermediary function.⁸ The living dead retain status within the community because they are assumed to have an authority that is restored in rituals including one known as “bringing home the dead”.⁹

Within many traditions it is paramount that the living dead are included within family activity so that they are at rest.¹⁰ For the Luo, a proper burial is necessary to ensure the positive intercession of the living dead.¹¹ Libations are important within Akan tradition.¹² Among the Asante and Avatime, there are widowhood rites.¹³ Among the patriarchal Bahema (Zaire), grains of millet are taken from a dead man’s hands by his sons, and his eldest son is ritually installed as his heir.¹⁴ The Chaga remember their living dead with libations and offerings of food especially at births, initiations, marriages and deaths.¹⁵ The Bena used forest sites for offerings for the dead (*matambiko*).¹⁶ Many rituals have a shared basic aim:

People want to remain in harmony with their departed relatives, and to lead peaceful lives. To forget the living dead would upset the harmony of life, it would generate ill-health, failure in hunting, difficult childbirth and other evils. Normalizing relations with the departed ensures continued peace and tranquility in the daily affairs of human life.¹⁷

New Christians may well experience a number of guilt or shame feelings when after conversion they shun the accepted rituals and, even worse, engage with the dreadful possibility that the living dead may never be at peace because they died without knowing Christ. The pastoral issue is then to address these concerns and truly set people free from fears associated with the consequences of addressing their authority. After all, the gospel is not just about salvation and the next life, but also includes liberation from fear in this life: African concerns about the living dead are as much about this world as the afterlife.¹⁸

III. THE GLOBAL NORTH: REDUNDANT ANCESTORS?

Many modern and post-modern scholars arguing from a materialist perspective would submit that the best way to address this issue is to consider it redundant. This would engage with the worldviews on which living dead practices are based, and show they are obsolete. It appears very much a modernist approach in which a rational scientific approach might be used, but is actually as old as the wisdom literature of the Jewish Scriptures.¹⁹ Given post-modern critiques of rationalism, it is difficult to defend the objectivity of science upon which such a view depends. Such criticism is not new. Wittgenstein’s *Reflections on the Golden Bough* take issue with Frazer’s scientific reading of religious practice.²⁰

The current state of play in regard to what are called “altered states of consciousness” (ASCs) further illustrates the problem. Western psychology tends to view these as infantile or pathological. Yet 90% out of 488 cultures surveyed record their presence.²¹ Furthermore Western and Indo-European cultures view their scientific world view as normative and fail to recognise that it is not a given.²² As Tart notes,

Our ordinary state of consciousness is a construction, not a given, and a specialized construction that in many ways is quite arbitrary. Thus many of the values associated with it are quite arbitrary and culturally relative.²³

It is even questionable whether writing off beliefs as redundant will in fact be effective, given that one is engaging with deeply held convictions that, even if not accepted as “scientific facts”, will neither be lightly discarded, nor easily refuted. The Canadian novelist and academic Robertson Davies made a sustained case in his writing for the continued value of unscientific, indeed often theological, language as giving “comprehensible and attractive names to psychological facts”.²⁴ Nürnberger notes the problem: modernity cannot prove that the living dead do not exist, and really needs to deal with their significance:

The decisive question is not whether they ‘exist’ and in what form, but what they stand for and *what they do* to us.²⁵

Rather than arguing about cosmology, the key question is to ask how the authority of the ancestors (*what they do*) might be curtailed.²⁶

IV. A DEAD END: 1 COR. 15:29

1 Cor 15:29 appears to offer a potential strategy for dealing with those who die in pre-evangelisation eras. The interpretation of the text in this way is central to the baptismal practice of the Church of Jesus Christ and the Latter-Day Saints.²⁷

The verse apparently alludes to a practice of receiving baptism for the dead, but this is peripheral to the central theme of 1 Cor 15 that centers on the resurrection. Paul’s first criticism is that it would make no sense to baptise the dead without believing in resurrection.²⁸ Unfortunately Paul does not describe exactly what practice lies behind his remarks.²⁹ It could be a baptism of the dead: either unbelievers, or believers who had not been baptised.³⁰ For most commentators, it is likely that the custom represents a pattern of vicarious baptism, and this is the majority reading.³¹ Richard DeMaris argues that vicarious rites were aimed primarily at ensuring the transition of the departed, and so restoring the fractured order of society.³² Such a scenario is in many respects analogous to African rituals around the living dead, but there are major differences. The Graeco-Roman dead have a shadowy existence, and appear unable to exert any influence over the affairs of the living.³³ However, the care taken with graves and graveside rituals suggests that even if they were considered to be in another realm they somehow visited their burial sites and that pleasing them was considered important.³⁴ Vicarious practices were known in Mysteries at the time of Plato (“special rites for the defunct”) and the Orphic fragments (Plato, *Republic* 364e-365a).³⁵ They were also known in Judaism (2 Macc 12:39): some,³⁶ but not all,³⁷ consider them potentially analogous to the proposed Corinthian practices. Others are even less so inclined. Hull sees no basis for any analogous vicarious pattern: this is about ‘ordinary baptism’.³⁸ Even if one does not wish to go as far as Hull and retain the majority view, the wealth of diversity in interpreting 1 Cor 15:29, and the concomitant lack of information about the practices which inform the verse ensures that we can neither lift this verse into any contemporary discussion nor claim certainty for any particular interpretation.³⁹

If there was any vicarious baptism, it was not accepted within any later orthodoxy. The Church Fathers knew vicarious baptism as heretical (e.g., John Chrysostom, *Hom 1 Cor.* 40.1).⁴⁰ This is a critical pattern that continued within orthodox Christianity up to, and beyond, the Reformation:

Catholics have rejected vicarious baptism as an heretical practice since the second century A.D. On the other hand, Protestants are vehemently opposed to vicarious baptism because of the radical efficaciousness it betokens for baptism in general.⁴¹

This continues to hold true in the modern period. A distinction, however still needs to be drawn between posthumous baptism and early Christian beliefs in which sanctification was possible for those who had incipient or potential faith.⁴² Even if 1 Cor 15:29 leads to an abandoned practice (that is, vicarious baptism), it is not the last word.

V. THE DESCENT INTO HELL: BIBLICAL TEXTS

Within orthodox Christianity, the Doctrine of the Descent offers possibilities for reflection on the fate of the “living dead”. Wolfhart Pannenberg sounds a note of caution as he begins to explore the doctrine: “we can determine absolutely nothing about Jesus’ experience of death”⁴³ and that our reflections should not primarily be driven by distorting images of torment.⁴⁴

The doctrine of the Descent is informed by a number of Scriptural references.⁴⁵ Exegetes across the ages find a number of these claims problematic and question how they apply to the doctrine of the Descent. As we shall see, later treatments of the theme drew on a variety of exegetical traditions.

The Petrine texts (1 Peter 3:18-20 and 4:6), probably the most significant in subsequent development of the Doctrine, may be interpreted variously.⁴⁶ Exegesis in the modern period has brought a wealth of philological and theological issues that weaken the link between 1 Peter and the Descent: the identification of the characters involved and the content of the preaching, to name but two.⁴⁷ *Tois en phylakê pneûmasin* (1 Peter 3:19, — the spirits in prison) may refer, *inter alia*, to people in the time of Noah (that is, dead humanity),⁴⁸ to that group as a cipher for contemporary Christians,⁴⁹ or to fallen angels.⁵⁰ The nature of the preaching is also debated: a message of salvation if preached to dead humanity,⁵¹ of confidence to contemporary Christians⁵² or a proclamation of triumph if preached to angels.⁵³ Also significant is the connection of this pericope to Baptism through the typology of Noah.⁵⁴

We may attempt to summarise these points by noting that interpretations that resonate with the doctrine of the Descent tend to argue that the spirits are human, that the gospel preached is one of salvation, and that 3:18-20 is related to 4:6.⁵⁵ However, it is not helpful to get bogged down in geographical details: *poreutheis* (moving, going) does not imply any specific direction.⁵⁶ Scholars remain divided on whether the universalist tenor of the Descent fits into the epistle. Some would argue that 1 Peter is particularist and the more universalist Descent is alien⁵⁷, while others would argue that the universalist tone is found in both.⁵⁸ This wealth of exegetical variety raises serious questions, for some, about the relevance of the Petrine material if any definitive answer is sought.

A wide spread of exegetical opinion also surfaces in relation to Ephesians 4:8-10. Its application to Pentecost is debatable given that it depicts a descent followed by an ascent⁵⁹ and, further, is not primarily a descent of *Christ*.⁶⁰ The phrase “the lower [parts] of the earth” (*eis ta katôtera tês gês*) may be queried as describing a descent into Hell as opposed to the Incarnation because the cosmology of the time specified only two levels.⁶¹ Is this as strong an objection as it looks? It begs two questions. That there was a single cosmology comprising only two levels is patently not the case.⁶² More importantly, it refers to different levels *within* the earthly, not a lower tier: a point made more explicit by the inclusion of the word “parts” (*merê*) within some

textual traditions. Ancient cosmologies might admit of a heaven, earth and Hades, without clearly grading them in three tiers: after all, Lazarus, placed with Abraham, is depicted as visible to the rich man in Hades in a passage that appears to refer to a number of traditions (Luke 16:23-24).⁶³ These are not geographically accurate maps, but symbolic cosmologies.⁶⁴

Colossians 1:18-20 is sometimes linked to Ephesians 4:8-10 as revealing Christ’s triumph over death and Hell,⁶⁵ but neither uses overtly spatial imagery (though this might be implied, given that the dead are “somewhere”) or the language of movement. Moving beyond cosmology, there was not even one single set of beliefs about post-mortem existence: Shaul Bar notes that there are major differences between views found in the Wisdom literature tradition, and those of “kings and commoners”.⁶⁶

Two passages in Romans are also relevant, and, in my opinion, are the strongest indicators of an embryonic Descent: Romans 6:3-4 and 10:7. Nicholas Taylor, in a *tour-de-force* that shows how much modern interpretation really stems from a misleading understanding of burial practices, argues that Rom 6: 3-4 indicates Paul’s understanding that Jesus died, and, as a shade, entered the realm of the dead, and was resurrected from there.⁶⁷ This does not fulfill all the criteria of the later doctrine, but shares the basic movement through three stages: dead, with the dead, resurrection. Less contentious, but in full agreement, is Romans 10:7 that depicts Christ resurrected from the abyss, which stands for Hell:⁶⁸ references to the Incarnation are not viable (Käsemann 1980, 288).

Beyond the Pauline traditions, Acts 2:24, drawing on Ps 16:10, appears to have implied a “descent into hell”,⁶⁹ but modern exegetes consider it more to do with the power of death⁷⁰ and the Resurrection.⁷¹ It is worth pondering how much the difference in emphasis may spring from the contextual presuppositions and prejudices of the commentators than the text itself.

Matthew 27:51-3 has been taken to refer to the Descent by presupposing it as a condition for the rising of those already in the tomb,⁷² but a number of commentators are loath to connect the event to the Descent: for them, it addresses the existential significance of Christ’s death as overcoming death.⁷³ Similarly, Matthew 12:40, that talks of the sign of Jonah, has been used to indicate Christ staying in Hades for three days,⁷⁴ but “at best only hints at that”.⁷⁵

John 5:25 appears to refer to themes of eschatological judgment, and does not need a movement to the realm of the dead to be imported⁷⁶ though it may be implied in v.25, 28 through reference to the physically dead.⁷⁷

Rev 1:18 describes Christ as the bearer of the keys of death and Hell and so supports the idea of movement between different realms of existence. Spatial imagery⁷⁸ is a better explanation of this image than a reference to personifications.⁷⁹ keys open ways to places, not to people. Modern scholarship may project its own treatments of space into the analysis of such imagery: John O’Neill has commented on this phenomenon in regard to the Kingdom of God,⁸⁰ and his remarks seem apposite here.

The modern exegetical arguments may appear to weaken the foundations on which the doctrine rests, but they do not destroy them. They also raise a key question about the relationship between the texts and the doctrine. Does the fact that a doctrine in all its fullness is not present mean that subsequent applications of a text within such developments are erroneous? What criteria might be used to assess this? There are two dangers here: the unconscious privileging of particular critical methodologies and, following that, a doctrinal form of the etymological fallacy based on a supposedly pure interpretation. From these passages the doctrine of the Descent grew,

and it is simply wrong-headed to expect to find this, or any, doctrine, to be found fully-formed in scriptural texts, like Athene bursting forth from the head of Zeus.

It also raises questions about the controls used in the exegetical process that affect NT studies even at a text critical level. J. Eugene Botha has recently argued that even the scholarly quest to identify a single definitive Greek text that forms the benchmark by which all manuscript traditions are assessed may be erroneous and it might be better to study the history of a text noting its manifold variations.⁸¹ Here too we may be well-advised to explore numerous trajectories forming doctrines of the Descent rather than look for one correct or definitive movement starting from one correct exegetical interpretation: a number of trajectories rather than a single one.

A number of New Testament verses do, however, bear witness to a widely shared set of beliefs that see Jesus dying, going to the place of the dead and being resurrected. They give us the basic stuff of Christ’s actions in different realms of existence. We should not allow these interpretations to be ruled out on the grounds that their cosmology is apparently redundant (so Bultmann) or because of our own ideologies. Even the most “this worldly” and materialistic ancient philosophies, like Epicureanism, could use the language of heavenly “flight of the mind” to explain themselves,⁸² a combination of ideas that we might be tempted to think mutually exclusive.

Attention now turns to the subsequent developments of the doctrine, for it appears to be these, not least the Apostles’ Creed, which helped to secure the Descent’s abiding presence within Christian theology.

VI. THE DESCENT INTO HELL: PATRISTIC TREATMENTS

In its classic form the Descent into Hell is a doctrine that addresses the fate of those who died in the period before the Incarnation, that is, those who had no opportunity in their earthly life, to hear and accept Christ.⁸³ It makes its first formal appearance in the creeds in the Fourth Formula of Sirmium, which dates from 359 CE: general acceptance took place by the seventh century.⁸⁴ Yet the texts from this period are varied in content and emphasis. They are not restricted to a single trajectory, but may be summarised under the following parabolae:

- The prophets or righteous people in Hell are raised from the dead (Christ descends to Hell as part of the pattern of death and Resurrection (Pol. *Phil.* 1, 2-3, Pseudo-Hippolytus, *Homily*, 55-56,58)
- The preaching of the apostles raises the dead (Herm. *Sim.* 9.151-55)
- Christ preaches a message of deliverance to the dead in Hell (*Epistula Apostolorum* 27 [in Gnostic terms]; *Sib. Or.* 1:376-78, 8:310-17; *Odes Sol.* 42:11-20; *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, 78, cf. *Haer* 3.20.4, 4.33.1, 4.33.12; 4.22.1-2; 4.27.1; Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 6.6.44.4-5, 6.6.46.1-4, 6.6.47.1; *Ep. Apos.* 26-2); to prophets and the righteous (Ign. *Magn.* 9.2., *Gos. Pet.* 38-42; Hippolytus, *AntiChr.* 26, 45; *Eis tēn ôdēn megalēn*); to non-Judaic pre-Christians (Irenaeus, *Haer* 1.27.3)
- Christ plunders Hell or frees captives (*Mart. Ascen. Isa.* 4:21, 9:13-17, *T.Dan* 5:10-11; *Odes Sol.* 42:11-20; Hippolytus *Trad. ap.* 5-6)
- Christ, in his soul, descends to Hell and has pity on the dead (Melito, *On Pascha* 102-03, 8b, fr. II, 5, 12 and 15)

- Christ pays a ransom to release the dead (Hippolytus, *AntiChr.* 26, 45; *Eis tēn ôdēn megalēn*)

These summaries show a number of themes common to some, but not all of the passages cited. Commentators are divided on the verses that may inform particular passages. Elliott would reject citation of 1 Peter 3:18-20 before Clement,⁸⁵ whereas Wicks does not. We note that different exegetical stances inform their dispute. For Wicks, the preaching to human souls affirms the references⁸⁶; for Elliott, the preaching to angels does not. For Wicks these become permissible adoptions of the text, for Elliott, even Clement oversteps the mark. No simple resolution of these two positions seems possible. The controversy highlights the difficulty of resolving exegetical issues by reference to subsequent tradition.

The post-biblical texts reveal common points. Salvation is offered to those who had lived before Christ, usually by preaching or proclamation, but this may be used to settle historical scores. The views of Marcion, if accurately cited, become a soteriological equivalent of his rejection of anything positive in Judaism. Those of Justin Martyr similarly re-iterate his positive evaluation of some Graeco-Roman thought. *Epistula Apostolorum* 27 fine-tunes the core ideas in the doctrine to engage with Gnosticism. These are gentle reminders of the contextual nature of the texts.

The Descent reveals Jesus’ triumph over death, and, in a few cases, over the Devil, where reflection on the Atonement begins to intrude. Yet, never is this presented as a proclamation to the angels: the message is invariably redemptive. In its broadest terms, then, the doctrine reveals Christ’s triumph over death, and concerns with the salvation of the dead. Opinions were divided on who exactly was redeemed: the OT saints only, or pagans as well.⁸⁷

We cannot leave this period without referring to Augustine of Hippo, whose interpretation of the descent would predominate in subsequent Western reflection. The *Epis ad Evodium* (164) gives an exposition of the Descent in which its scriptural foundation is based on texts, such as Luke 16:26 (164.7), not 1 Peter 3:18-20 which is explicitly and lengthily rejected as undermining the role of faith. Rather the preaching in the time of Noah is considered a type of baptism for believers, and destruction to unbelievers (164.16). Augustine is certain that Christ descends to hell, but maintains a judicious silence on who is saved by the event (164.8). This view is modified slightly in *City of God* 17.11 where he eliminates anything positive from the Judaic experience of God, and makes the Descent, not their faith, the means by which the patriarchs and great figures of Old Testament might be numbered among the redeemed.⁸⁸

Western Christianity is of course only one part of the story. Other churches had different views. Thus, the Assyrian church viewed the Descent as primarily referring to the conquering of death.⁸⁹ Phillip Tovey’s study of the West Syrian church reveals the Descent as a fulfillment of OT prophecies related to Jonah and Jacob and based on typology or fore-shadowing to a higher degree than in Western treatments.⁹⁰ Death is forced to give up the dead and is itself destroyed.⁹¹ This assessment of the continuing importance of the Descent must surely make exegetes question the degree to which their own conclusions are culturally conditioned. It is vital to note these variations as part of theology’s global context: theologians should not restrict their reflections to their own denomination, cultural context or history if they are serious about examining their own prejudices and presuppositions in the name of theological advancement.

VII. THE DESCENT INTO HELL:

MIEVEAL, REFORMATION & MODERN TREATMENTS

The doctrine went through considerable development in the conciliar period, as questions were addressed about the nature of those delivered from Hell, and whether Christ’s preaching effectively destroyed Hell. Several writers of the time, mainly following Augustine, explored the doctrine,⁹² amongst them Thomas Aquinas (Aquinas, *ST IIIa* q. 52, a.2, ad 2).⁹³ In the medieval treatments, the writers are at pains to show that Christ truly died, truly descended into Hell, that Hell was not to be confused with this world, that not all were removed from Hell by his preaching, only the “just dead”, and that Hell was not destroyed.⁹⁴ The doctrine thus avoided sliding either towards universalism, or removing the eschatological implications of behaviour and judgment. Nevertheless, it gave an opportunity for some of the dead to be liberated depending on how the geography of Hell was configured with limbo and purgatory.⁹⁵ The doctrine also found expression in liturgy, art and popular devotion such as the liturgical texts for Holy Saturday, icons of the *Anastasis*, non-iconic Western art,⁹⁶ and para-liturgical Passion plays and dramas, such as the Book of Cerne (9th century CE),⁹⁷ the *Passion du Palatinus* (late 13th/early 14th century CE) and the *Passion d’Auvergne* (1477 CE).⁹⁸

After the Reformation, increasing variations on the theme appeared: Augustine’s influence remained strong.⁹⁹ Luther (and some of his followers) envisioned Christ descending to the Underworld to preach triumphantly.¹⁰⁰ Lutheran thinking was not static: there appears to have been a shift in thinking of the Petrine passages from referring (after Augustine) to people still living in ignorance to one in which the salvation of “the nobler heathen, such as Scipio and Fabius” was achieved — although this is considered dubious by some.¹⁰¹ Later Lutheran theology tended to downplay the salvation of particular groups, and focused on the vanquishing of death and Hell.¹⁰² In the Reformation period, Robert Bellarmine claimed that 1 Peter 3:18-22 was an announcement of salvation to the dead of Noah’s generation.¹⁰³ As such it supported his views on purgatory,¹⁰⁴ views that came to predominate in Roman Catholicism.¹⁰⁵

Strangely, the Chinese Rites Controversy did not see the doctrine of the Descent used in its attempts to integrate Confucian ancestor rituals and Christian practice.¹⁰⁶ The history is well-known: the project failed,¹⁰⁷ but was later vindicated.¹⁰⁸ The strategy allowed participation in the existing Confucian and ancestor rites, and was judged idolatrous:¹⁰⁹ syncretism rather than inculturation.¹¹⁰ The marriage of Christian theology and Chinese metaphysics using “three stages of revelation” was not straightforward: at one level it appeared to suggest salvation could be achieved without reference to the incarnation, and demanded un-Chinese understandings of body, spirit and soul.¹¹¹ Ricci also appeared to distort the Confucian classics in the search for traces of a personal God.¹¹² Yet, the Chinese Rites controversy affirmed that early church thinking in which “salvation could be conferred after death”.¹¹³ The ecclesial context may explain why the Descent did not figure: if the Descent had become identified with a pattern in which the souls of the righteous were released from purgatory, as it had in Bellarmine’s version, it simply would not have been considered a good fit. This seems to have been detrimental: a Christocentric narrative of Descent might not ultimately have proved as problematic as cross-cultural metaphysical speculation. If such reasoning is correct, this raises a major question about modern attempts to treat the question as redundant, namely, how an ideologically driven approach ultimately may compromise its efforts to engage with alien contextual realities.

Reformed theology for the most part, follows Calvin in interpreting the phrase “He descended into Hell”, as speaking figuratively of Christ suffering God’s wrath for us on the

cross.¹¹⁴ Tovey comments that Calvin’s description of the traditional doctrine as a “fable” and its replacement with an interpretation based on Jesus’ cry of desolation is founded on an even weaker biblical basis than the one he rejected.¹¹⁵ The debate over a glorious or suffering Descent remained a bone of contention in the post-Reformation debate; one that did not divide neatly along denominational lines.¹¹⁶ In the eighteenth century, a number of Protestant theologians accepted the interpretation of 1 Peter 3:18-20 as implying “hopeful preaching for the unconverted in Hades”, particularly as a reaction to rationalism, and, in part, as a consequence of humanist conceptions.¹¹⁷

In the modern period, two of the giants of the twentieth century have revisited the Doctrine. Karl Barth affirmed the credal statement that Jesus enters the depths of Hell. David Lauber describes this as “the culmination of his life and passion, which is lived and endured *pro nobis* – on our behalf and in our place” in which Christ becomes “*the Rejected of God*”: the ultimate expression of this rejection is the descent into Hell.¹¹⁸ The Descent thus becomes part of a substitutionary theory of reconciliation.¹¹⁹

Hans Urs von Balthasar has also sparked a resurgence of interest in the doctrine. Alyssa Pitstick, his chief critic, argues that von Balthasar depicts a Descent which is a continuation of the Cross, includes a degree of expiatory suffering which surpasses the Cross, and demands Christ’s being “made sin”.¹²⁰ As such it is a far cry from the Descent in triumph of traditional dogma, and is closer to the contentious teaching of Nicholas of Cusa and Calvinism.¹²¹ Pitstick’s interpretation of von Balthasar is not without its own problems: its dogmatic categories, the claim that glory and suffering are mutually exclusive, and that the novelty of von Balthasar’s approach somehow invalidates it.¹²² Nor is it the case the innovations in von Balthasar’s thesis place it “beyond the bounds of the traditional doctrine of the descent”.¹²³

Note that, for both Barth and von Balthasar, the focus of their reflections is Christological, though not exclusively, and related to the nature and depth of Christ’s actions, rather than directed to the question of who may or may not be saved. This suggests that their modern contexts have provided fresh perspectives for the examination of the credal statement within their systematic programmes.

Thus, the doctrine of the Descent still remains a valid option within modern theology for some.¹²⁴ Although himself skeptical about the doctrine, Scharlemann offers a helpful summary of how it is currently viewed:

Where the doctrine is still taken seriously today, it is usually described as intending to suggest a “larger hope”, a partial answer to the question as to what happened to such as died in the ages before Christ without hearing the Gospel.¹²⁵

Our examination of the history of the doctrine suggests it cannot be reduced to “one right answer”. Rather, there are a number of theories, sometimes in conflict: a descent in triumph or glory, who is saved, and so on. All reveal engagement between a tradition (Scriptural or confessional) and scholars whose reflection on that tradition is shaped or guided by particular pastoral needs or contexts, even, perhaps, by a worldview, or an ideological or confessional stance.

This doctrine and its history exemplify how a number of conflicting expositions, prompted by the contextual nature of theology,¹²⁶ may be held in tension. It is not unique. Arguably, most key Christian doctrines include variations of these kinds: it is just that here they are thrown into stark relief. Very few, if any, doctrines would pass Vincent of Lérins’ famous

definition (“believed everywhere, always and by all” [*Commonitorium*]),¹²⁷ itself a reminder that consensus “is not a self-evident fact even within the ‘orthodox’ church”.¹²⁸

The variety of expressions may be judged a sign of weakness or of strength. Taylor implies that the varied fragmentary evidence is significant:

Notwithstanding that these allusions are controversial in modern scholarship, and that the texts were so understood by a variety of their earliest interpreters, their existence under-scores the importance of the *descensus* traditions in early Christianity.¹²⁹

It is from this basis that we explore how the doctrine might be applied to the issue of the living dead, noting that a Descent in which Christ preaches to the dead is only one of several variants. A choice has been made: it may be accepted or rejected. There is, however, one adjustment that needs to be made.

As it stands, the doctrine so far described refers only to those who died before the Incarnation. Yet, even today, people live and die before hearing the Gospel preached. Why should the effectiveness of this part of Christ’s work be limited purely and simply to those from one time period? After all, the cross is seen as effecting a redemption not just for those who were Jesus’ contemporaries but also for those who come after. As the compilers of the *African Bible* put it:

...Christ went to liberate the spirits in prison, i.e. all men and women of good will: first of all, Adam and Eve, and then our African ancestors of good will. Christ is really the proto-Ancestor for all. He gives the ancestors the abundance of life that they anticipated.¹³⁰

VIII. THE DESCENT IN PASTORAL MINISTRY

Christianity has often had an uneasy relationship with rituals related to ancestors. This is especially the case if the tradition from which such rituals come is not valued as a “world/high” religion: they may easily be dismissed from Christian discourse. African traditions appear to buck this trend.¹³¹ For African Christian theologians have paid considerable attention to ancestor rituals. Moreover, European theorists have often conveniently overlooked the elements of such veneration that persist within their own traditions.¹³² Thus, in starting to develop a ritual, due respect is paid to the existing cultural traditions.¹³³ It will be seen that Scripture provides a precedent for this in the letter to the Hebrews, as do early Christian apologists such as Justin Martyr¹³⁴ and Minucius Felix.¹³⁵ Hebrews 9:1-10:8 deals with, for want of a better phrase, the “Christianising” of existing sacrificial practice: the *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement) liturgy.¹³⁶ This follows a pattern known as “spiritualisation”¹³⁷ or “sacrificialisation”¹³⁸ that occurred in Second Temple Judaism when sectarians gave a sacrificial dimension to non-sacrificial forms of worship, especially through metaphor.¹³⁹ Thus, the Pharisaic party spiritualised cult worship because of the geographical constraints that made it impossible to attend all the Jerusalem festivals: “acts of temple worship were performed in a liturgical setting of prayer and praise”.¹⁴⁰ While the Qumran/Essene sectarians did not reject the aims of the cultus at Jerusalem, they developed their own rituals because they felt the official system was compromised or tainted.¹⁴¹

What we are about here is a similar “spiritualisation” of a set of rituals and their associated beliefs to be accomplished by merging traditional and Christian beliefs and practices. It is rather claimed that traditional hopes may be fulfilled in a new way.

To achieve such an end, Hebrews stresses belief in the efficacy of Christ’s works, and that their remembrance “allows their effects to be re-appropriated”.¹⁴² This is seen in Jesus’ death effectively replacing the sacrifices of *Yom Kippur*. In the case of rituals associated with the living dead, a Christocentric dimension is brought in through the Descent. The potential reconciliation of the living dead who did not experience the good news of the Gospel is effected by Christ’s own preaching in the Descent. Christ, not a ritual tradition, is efficacious: the dead are saved by the goodness of the hero, not their own virtues.¹⁴³ This even offers opportunities for salvation for the living dead who are not moral exemplars.

Hebrews raises a further point: the repetition of ritual. The Atonement day rites were celebrated annually. A central criticism of Hebrews is that repetition implies a denial of efficacy: the Platonic distinction of the one and the many is significant with its implication of perfection to the number one.¹⁴⁴ That said, what Christ has done once may be remembered on different occasions.

The Chinese Rites controversy does not seem to have considered the pros and cons of the repetition of ritual. This may in part be due to their ecclesial context. A pattern of repeated rituals for the dead would have been, in part, consonant with the Requiem Mass tradition,¹⁴⁵ and Bellarmine’s views of the afterlife and purgatory. It is highly likely that a tradition in which Requiem Masses were offered repeatedly for the benefit of souls in purgatory would naturally shape a ritual pattern in which repetition was seen as a viable option. Christians who would offer different proposals for the geography of the afterlife might well reach different conclusions. There would be a considerable difference between conceptual and ritual frameworks that posited a one-off liberation from hell over against repeated reductions of time spent in purgatory. It may well be preferable for rituals for any particular group of the living dead only to be offered once.

There also may be sociological ramifications: it would be easy for a repeated rite merely to become a Christianised version of an existing pattern and so perpetuate a set of beliefs (the need to keep favour with the living dead, or a continued process of gaining them a favoured status) rather than indicate final reconciliation to God. This is also important psychologically, given that Hebrews’ understanding of cultic cleansing also demands a cleansing of heart and mind in the believer.¹⁴⁶ This echoes Gifford’s observation that living dead traditions are not just about the afterlife.¹⁴⁷ Hebrews itself works with a strategy in which the contrast of the one and the many functions positively to reveal the incomparable benefits gained by associating with Jesus, as well as providing a warning not to backslide to old practices.¹⁴⁸

If this all seems to be the claim of an outsider breathtakingly unqualified to comment on living dead traditions, it has already been made by Kwame Bediako, who argues that Hebrews’ depiction of Christ’s priestly work demands the end of all sacrifices,¹⁴⁹ and Bénézet Bujo, who demands that Christ be described as the proto-Ancestor.¹⁵⁰ Indeed, Nyamiti, drawing on Ephesians 4:9-10 as indicative of the doctrine of the Descent and Ascension of Christ, also sees the passage both referring to his “company with the dead” and “his superiority to the dead ancestors”.¹⁵¹

A more positive insight from the Chinese Rites controversy is apparent: the *direction* of the rituals. In the Christianised form of the rites these are focussed on God for the benefit of the ancestors, rather than on the ancestors. A similar shift needs to be made here, and is helpful in clarifying the difference between worship and veneration (*dulia*).¹⁵² A ritual pattern that has a clearly defined focus on God as its object, even with others as beneficiaries is less open to

misunderstanding. Thus, it is suggested that the language, rituals and symbolism associated with any developed rituals express this focus in culturally appropriate terminology.

Here the Anglican experience with initiation rites in Masasi (Tanzania) may be helpful, particularly the way in which *jando* (the Christian rite of initiation for males) was formulated. Whilst it has commonly been assumed this was primarily Bishop Vincent Lucas’ work, Stoner-Eby points out that the real impetus for such a change came from the African clergy.¹⁵³ The three principles on which the Masasi changes were based are crucial. First, the Christianised rite should be distinct from other rituals and traditions; second, what is contrary (“objectionable”) to Christian belief must be removed; and third the rites must be under ecclesiastical control.¹⁵⁴ This process may well include further teaching on the state of the dead, and the degree of intervention that the dead may have in the events of this life from a Christian perspective.¹⁵⁵ Some, on the basis of such reflection, may conclude that there is no need for any such ritual. If that is so, well and good: ritual or not, the fear of the living dead, and an influence for harm, has been removed.

What kind of ritual might be devised if thought appropriate? I would tentatively suggest that any liturgy was held in identifiably Christian environments, such as a church, rather than environments where the primary associations might be to another community.

Input to the liturgy should include Christian Scriptures that inform the doctrine of the Descent. A sermon explaining what was being performed would also be appropriate. Coming to such matters from an Anglican perspective, the Collect, a prayer that often expresses the central intention or focus of an act of corporate worship, and asks for a particular benefit, may be particularly helpful. Traditionally the Collect has three parts: “(1) an invocation, (2) a petition and (3) a pleading of Christ’s name or an ascription of glory to God”.¹⁵⁶ Nicholas Taylor has adopted a similar strategy in his reflections on rites appropriate for the burial of the unbaptised.¹⁵⁷ The following is suggested as an example:

(1) Almighty God, whose Son Jesus Christ descended to the dead to preach the good news of salvation and bring them freedom, (2) grant that our living dead may so hear his preaching and respond to it that they may be one with us in the family of God and so be at peace. (3) We ask this in His name, who died and rose and lives with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and always. Amen.

Such a prayer marks the hopes of those taking part, bases them in the events of Christ’s Incarnation and Resurrection, and stresses that peace comes from identification with the community of faith. It may be appropriate to mention the living dead by name. Any rites should be performed within the liturgical life of the local church as a whole to locate them in a visibly Christian community.

Within some Christian traditions, a rite of this kind might lend itself to being celebrated on the feast of All Souls, and perhaps to the requiem Mass tradition. It would certainly be useful to consider embedding such rituals within the celebration of the Eucharist as this would anchor the whole thrust of the rites in Christ, and particularly in a central act of remembrance of which he is the focus, and the Descent a part. Although a ritual linked to the Eucharist is suggested for a Christocentric focus, what is suggested is, in many ways, closer in analogy to Baptism than the Eucharist.¹⁵⁸

The outlined strategy prioritises the role of local people in designing a ritual that should run as an alternative to existing rites. A Christianised rite, building on, but separate from, existing traditions has been suggested: it must be designed by those most familiar with the local

customs involved. Hebrews provides a model for approaching such a construct in which the ritual tradition is not denied, but rather fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Any rituals that are developed must also be for the living, and must not enthrall them to a cult of the dead in a new, pseudo-Christian disguise, and leave them vulnerable to continuing fears or exploitation.

There is one last global dimension to this reflection. For it need not be restricted to African contexts, or even those with similar traditions concerning their ancestors, given that Western societies are seeing a resurgence in primal religious experience in the guise of the “New Age”.¹⁵⁹ As an example of this, the contemporary Australian context reveals popular concerns about the fate of the departed. *Woman’s Day* (May 3, 2010) contains a column entitled “Afterlife” (p.96) that claims to report a communication with a reader’s dead son, and pages 96-97 further carry adverts for psychics, clairvoyants and mediums. Some of the manifestations of such beliefs are highly contentious: recent controversy over the psychic medium, John Edwards, and his claims to talk to the dead are a case in point.¹⁶⁰ Concerns about the dead persist, even in post-modern industrial societies. In such a secularised, post-Christendom society it may well be the case that people are dying who may effectively never have heard the good news of Jesus Christ. It may even be the case that, in years to come, relatives or friends of theirs may come to wonder about what has befallen their loved ones. The Descent motif may again be needed in cultures that are currently considered to be historically Christian.

¹ The Right Revd Andrew Proud prompted me to complete this long-intended piece of research. Fergus J. King, “Angels and Ancestors: A Basis for Christology?” *Mission Studies* XI-I:21 (1993): 10-26 at 26, fn.34.

² Anza A. Lema, “Chaga Religion and Missionary Christianity on Kilimanjaro: The Initial Phase, 1893-1916” in Thomas Spear and Isaria N. Kimambo (eds.), *East African Expressions of Christianity* (London: James Currey, 1999), 39-62 at 45; John S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1975), 230; Klaus Nürnberger, *The Living Dead and the Living God: Christ and the Ancestors in Changing Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2007), 24-28.

³ Paul Gifford, “African Christianity and the Eclipse of the Afterlife” in Peter Clarke and Tony Clayton (eds.), *The Church, the Afterlife and the Fate of the Soul: Papers read at the 2007 Summer Meeting and 2008 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society* (Rochester NY: Boydell, 2009), 413-429 at 416.

⁴ Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective* (Gweru: Mambo, 1984), 15.

⁵ Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 218.

⁶ Joseph Osei-Bonsu, *The Inculturation of Christianity in Africa* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2005), 6.

⁷ Gyekye, cited in Osei-Bonsu, *Inculturation*, 6.

⁸ Mbiti, *Concepts*, 231-232.

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- ¹⁰ Isaiah M. Dau, “The Problem of Evil and Suffering: Theological Reflections from an African Perspective” in Diane B. Stinton, (ed.), *African Theology on the Way: Current Conversations* (London: SPCK, 2010), 118-127 at 121; see Nürnberger, *Living*, 25.
- ¹¹ Blaine Harden, *Africa: Dispatches from a Fragile Continent* (London: Fontana, 1992), 101-102; Mbiti, *Concepts*, 232.
- ¹² Bediako, *Christianity*, 219-223.
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- ³⁸ Michael F. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead (1 Cor 15:29): An Act of Faith in the Resurrection* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 166-167, 223, 230-40, 250-255.
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