Exploring African Mysticism through a Transcendental Theology: A Rahnerian Reading of Sotho Spirit Possession

by

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Abstract

Spirit possession is a common transcendental experience that manifests in a variety of ways throughout much of sub-Saharan Africa, but it has often been dismissed, concealed, feared, misunderstood or reduced to a single, often negative, explanatory framework, such as witchcraft. This paper explores cases of “positive spirit possession” among the Sotho people of southern Africa and attempts to steer the discourse from one that is predominantly confused to one that interprets them properly as mystical experiences. To do so, it employs the transcendental theology of Karl Rahner and his typology of mysticism and discernment methodology and applies them to the Sotho examples using Laurenti Magesa’s interpretation of African spirituality. The result is a more accurate and helpful view of the potential of Sotho spirit possession for individual and community spiritual development. This recognition of Sotho mysticism also has broader implications for health and healthy relationships among other peoples.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

This thesis will situate and describe mysticism among the Sotho people of southern Africa. It will argue that some experiences of Sotho spirit possession constitute major types of mysticism and that the transcendental theology of Karl Rahner and his typology of mysticism provide an apt framework for understanding them. The thesis will also refer to the theology of Laurenti Magesa for an inculturated understanding of African spirituality and for insight into the positive individual and communal effects of Sotho mysticism as interpreted through Rahner’s framework.

1.1 Context for Sotho Mysticism

Seldom does one hear or read of “mysticism” in relation to the practices or experiences of the Sotho people, and the only Sotho person I can recall anyone unequivocally referring to as a “mystic” is Mohlomi Monyane, a renowned doctor, sage and chief. What is known and recorded about Mohlomi is uniformly positive, and what has prompted some scholars to regard him as a mystic is the fact that in his vocation and practice as a doctor he not only had knowledge of herbal and other natural therapies but also gifts of divination and prophecy, through trances, dreams or transport to spiritual realms where he communed with ancestral spirits and received blessings, warnings, guidance and healing remedies for his people.

Given the pervasive, multifaceted spirituality of the Sotho people, it may seem surprising that

1. The ethnographic term “Sotho” will be used in my thesis to refer to the Basotho people and to the Sesotho language and culture. Normally “Sotho” is not used without a prefix; one refers to a Sotho person as “Mosotho” (pl. “Basotho”), the language and culture as “Sesotho” and the country or land as “Lesotho.” The “th” in Sotho is pronounced as in the name “Thomas.”


3. Medicine is a very broad field among the Sotho, with numerous specializations and therapies addressing the needs not only of the whole human person, including their psychological and spiritual well-being, but also of the whole human environment. For example, one can “doctor” a field to ensure good crops or a village to protect it from evil.
there are not many obvious examples of mysticism or of mystics. There are, however, several important reasons in my view for this lack of explicit references, not least of which is the fact that the spirit world, where in Sotho culture one would expect mystical practices and experiences to be focused, is highly ambiguous and is also where witchcraft (or sorcery) originates.

The dearth of references to mysticism either by or in relation to the Sotho people also means that there is virtually no literature directly on the topic that one can engage or build upon. It is for this reason that I will consider the inculturation theology of Laurenti Magesa to help locate and describe mysticism among the Sotho. For having recognized the lack of explicit literature on mysticism, there are nonetheless other sources and scholarly literature on ritual and experiential phenomena that have not been labelled or usually seen as denoting mysticism but that I will contend are constitutive of what can and should be defined as such.

Indeed, it would be a major misrepresentation of Sotho spirituality to imply that the kinds of positive mystical experiences Mohlomi had or some of the mystical therapeutic practices he engaged in were either unique or rare. Missionary records, eye-witness testimony and scholarly literature contain many accounts of similar experiences and practices both by individual Sotho specialists or leaders and by large numbers of Sotho people. One may draw examples from a wide range of phenomena, from the more purely traditional Sotho bongaka (medicine/therapy) which includes bonohe (divination), to mothekekehe and bothuela (both forms of spirit possession believed to be of Nguni origin), to Thapelo ea Sephiri (“Secret Prayer”) and similar Christian gnostic movements, to a number of practices found especially in the likereke tsa Moea (“churches of the Spirit,” a large subset of African Initiated Churches) and in some of the

4. The fact that Sotho people understand themselves as having complex interactions with this transcendent world in their daily lives, at different seasons of the year, at major life transitions, and during times of difficulty, ill health or calamity—all of which require careful attention in order to appease and balance the spiritual forces and relations involved—introduces a large measure of caution, including a reluctance to be too forthright about saying something like “this is mysticism” or “she is a mystic.”

5. If there is such a thing as “diabolical mysticism” among the Sotho it is witchcraft. If one wants to locate and describe something called “mysticism” on the other hand, then one has to be clear that it must be positive mysticism.
mainline churches’ *manyano* groups (women’s sodalities). I will claim that some of the phenomena in these disciplines, movements, or groups are mystical, as similar phenomena are seen to be in Mohlomi’s case. The potential field for Sotho mysticism is thus very large and fertile.

### 1.2 Mysticism in Sotho Spirit Possession

Already some idea of the importance of the spirit world of the Sotho has been indicated. This is thought to be a transcendent world beyond the material world but still an integral part of the Sotho cosmos. Communication and interaction with the spirit world is considered necessary for the welfare of human beings and their environment. It is a world inhabited by various kinds of spirits, whose identity or description depends on the particular religious or spiritual framework or frameworks in use. Whether these spirits are understood as ancestral spirits, nature spirits, human spirits or their “shadows,” evil spirits, familiars, demons, angels, the Holy Spirit, or some combination thereof, one may assert that the world they populate is not only mysterious, powerful and very real for Sotho people, but also vitally important. While ritualized, mediated, transient or even unconscious contact with the spirit world is made in many different ways—for example, libations, prayers, sacrifices, healing rites, rites of passage, feasts, purgations, symbolic clothing, medicines, ancestor dreams, dances—the most profound and direct way of engaging with this world is via spirit possession.

Spirit possession—whether seen as positive or negative, good, evil or ambivalent—is a phenomenon that arises within all the Sotho practices and spiritual traditions mentioned earlier (*bongaka, bonohe, bothuela, Thapelo ea Sephiri*, etc.). When a range of different experiences of Sotho spirit possession is examined, certain similarities between them become apparent. One finds, for example, that they are gifted through dreams, visions, trances, journeys or ecstatic states; they are transcendental, mysterious and often ineffable; they are embodied, intense, affective and dynamic; they are often involuntary and they entail the human person surrendering
to be led, taught or acted upon; they almost always involve a spirit or spirits recognized by the human person; they are socio-culturally and historically rooted; they usually address intractable problems, such as disease, drought, infertility, broken relationships, and they meet real needs, such as healing and community; they are morally laden and transformative. I will show not only that these experiences of spirit possession indicate a kind of mysticism that is similar to what is held in high esteem elsewhere but also that from a contextual point of view they indicate an enduring, adaptable and deeply meaningful form of mysticism for the Sotho people and one that also has exemplary value for people elsewhere in the world, especially where mysticism has become a remote, rare or “irrelevant” experience—such as what the theologian Karl Rahner found in twentieth-century Europe.⁶

I introduce Karl Rahner at this point because I think his understanding of mysticism is eminently relevant today, not just for Europeans but also for peoples like the Sotho. Rahner takes mysticism seriously and believes it has an important, ongoing role to play, especially as an aid to spiritual development. His understanding of mysticism is broad and inclusive enough to illuminate both the Christian traditions of mysticism and those of other religions, cultures and spiritualities. He recognizes, respects—and interrogates—different varieties of mysticism, and I will maintain that the three main types he identifies go a long way in helping to understand and appreciate the varieties of mysticism that exist among the Sotho people.

1.3 Mysticism in Rahner’s Transcendental Theology

Karl Rahner famously predicted that “the devout Christian of the future will either be a ‘mystic,’ one who has ‘experienced’ something, or he will cease to be anything at all.”⁷ The first thing to

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notice in this statement is that Rahner emphasizes “experience.” He concerns himself with where people actually find themselves in the world and with how they experience reality. He also describes the “unanimous, manifest and public convictions and religious customs” that sustained people and institutional religion in the West for centuries to be inapt or at least of “very secondary” importance in our present pluralist world. While Scripture, philosophy and tradition long held positions of pre-eminence as sources for theology, especially Roman Catholic theology, Rahner actively promotes human experience not only as a crucial additional source but also as the actual foundation of his theological method.

The second important thing to notice in Rahner’s prediction is that the devout Christian (or authentic human person) of the future will be a “mystic”—or nothing at all. This is not what many people would expect to hear, but it is exactly where Rahner’s theology begins and it takes one immediately to the transcendental aspect of what it means to be human. For Rahner, the human person is not only “a creature of history and reflection” but also “a transcendental creature.” This means that every person experiences not only the limitations or finite character of both the inner and outer objects of consciousness but also of surpassing such limitations in the very act of becoming conscious of them. Human consciousness tends to reach beyond any individual object and this experience of transcendence proves to be absolutely unlimited. For example, Rahner indicates that such transcendence is experienced in “the fear that threatens everything” or “wherever a person loves with unconditional faithfulness and resolve, although the frailty of such love on both sides cannot possibly legitimise this unconditional

8. Rahner, “Christian Living,” 15. This is similar to Lonergan’s view of the passé “classicist notion of culture,” wherein theology was conceived as “normative” or “a permanent achievement.” Bernard Lonergan, Method in Theology, reprint, 1971 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press for Lonergan Research Institute, 2007), xi.

9. Based on other writings where Rahner develops his “theological anthropology,” which includes his theory of the irrevocable relationship between every human person and the Mystery called God, one could substitute something like “authentic human person” for “devout Christian” and still retain the import of his prediction.

determination.”¹¹ According to Rahner, the infinite Mystery called God is the condition that makes such transcendent experiences possible for every human person—even if this Mystery is not acknowledged or named as the term for their tendency and goal. Moreover, such experiences made possible through the human person’s primordial relationship to this ineffable and incomprehensible God are, for Rahner, experiences of mysticism. They are what he means by the “mysticism of everyday life” and in *The Practice of Faith* he gives numerous examples.¹²

In addition to the mysticism of everyday life, Rahner discusses two other varieties of mysticism, the “mysticism of the masses” and the mysticism of the “classical authorities.”¹³ By “classical authorities” Rahner has in mind, among others, the great Spanish mystics of the Christian tradition, such as John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. What is important about these mystics for Rahner is that they can provide an exemplary “initiation into the human being’s personal experience of God.”¹⁴ Their mysticism highlights experiences of sanctifying grace that promote spiritual development.

Rahner is far more tentative in his discussion of the “mysticism of the masses,” which he also calls “mysticism in ordinary dress,” “religious enthusiasm” and “charismatic enthusiasm.” He does not doubt that “the gifts of the Spirit” are found in this variety of mysticism, but he is concerned that the form they take results in considerable lack of clarity concerning what is “pure, confused or distorted,” more so than in the case of mysticism of the classical authorities. A discernment of spirits is therefore required to distinguish between genuine and false elements and between natural psychological events and those that have been elevated by the grace of God’s self-communication. Nonetheless, despite some misgivings, Rahner ultimately does

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acknowledge that “in the totality of the phenomenon of religious enthusiasm there occurs an experience of grace” and that this may be seen as “mysticism in ordinary dress.”

Perhaps the biggest challenge I face in my paper is that the “ordinary dress” of positive spirit possession among the Sotho—of what I interpret as mysticism—is not only very prominent but also quite different from what Rahner observed, thus making discernment especially important. Having said this, however, I take consolation in the fact that I do not need to face this challenge alone. To help bridge the cultural gap between Rahner’s mysticism and what I believe to be Sotho mysticism, and to bolster my confidence in doing this, I refer to the inculturated theology of African spirituality and mysticism found in Laurenti Magesa.

1.4 Magesa on Inculturation and Mysticism

Laurenti Magesa does not often reference Karl Rahner in his writings, and yet it is clear that he appreciates the space that was opened up by theologians like Rahner, especially during and since the Second Vatican Council. Along with this space, he also clearly appreciates the new respect shown to other peoples and religions, the concern evinced for how contemporary persons all over the world can navigate in a pluralistic context and still experience God, and the support given to inculturation as the means to realize this at the deepest levels.

In his book Anatomy of Inculturation, Magesa mentions Rahner in relation to a major project of inculturation: “to propose for discussion, evaluation, and possible implementation the shape of

15. Rahner, “Religious Enthusiasm,” 36–37, 39, 43–44. “Ordinary dress” refers to the prominence of “the categorial element” with its “much greater likelihood of distortion and corruption.”

the Church to come,’ as Karl Rahner titled a book dealing with this issue.”¹⁷ But for Magesa, it is not merely the shape of the Church to come but also of religion and spirituality more broadly, for he defines inculturation as a quest involving a dynamic, ongoing exchange that occurs “when there is a constant search for identification between gospel and culture, and when there is mutual correction and adjustment between them.”¹⁸ In recent years, moreover, Magesa has begun to express the mutuality requirement in more radical terms: “Dialogue between AR [African Religion] and Christianity has been conceived as an encounter between faith (Christianity) and culture (AR), thus making it unfairly one sided in favour of Christianity. The dialogue that must now take place, leading to genuine inculturation, must be conceived and carried out … either as culture to culture or faith to faith.”¹⁹ For Magesa, this precludes a unilateral approach to African culture or religion in order to end up with a better or more workable version of African Christianity. Instead, it must proceed on the basis of genuine dialogue. The two faiths may never join as such, but through an authentic two-way process of inculturation they will both change.²⁰

In relation to my explication of mysticism among the Sotho people, what Magesa shows so clearly is that the goal is not to discover an African “equivalent” of what is found in Rahner—or indeed in anyone else from the West or the East, where traditions of mysticism are ancient and theories about them well developed—for this would result in a superficial, distorted understanding of Sotho mysticism.²¹ Rather, with Magesa’s help, the goal is to develop an


¹⁸. Magesa, Anatomy of Inculturation, 144–45.


²⁰. Rahner knew and accepted this as well. While he may have known quite precisely what he wanted to share from the Christian side with a dialogue partner, he also knew that he too could benefit from the dialogue in unexpected ways: “From the non-Christian side there travels something perhaps completely different, which can turn out to be very important for me.” Karl Rahner, Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews, 1965–1982, ed. Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons, ed. and trans. Harvey D. Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 134.

²¹. As Magesa himself says, real inculturation is not a process of “adaptation”; it does not involve mere “concordism” nor is it an effort to find “correspondences.” Magesa, Anatomy of Inculturation, 144.
appreciation for the major elements and features of Sotho mysticism in experiences of spirit
possession, such as the healing and strengthening of humanity and community, and then to re-
engage with Rahner and imagine what he would say about spirit possession, about every Sotho
person being open to the irrevocable relationship with the Mystery called God and about spiritual
development through mysticism.

1.5 Thesis Statement

In my thesis, I argue that experiences of spirit possession, found in both indigenous Sotho
religion and Sotho Christianity, constitute major types of mysticism among the Sotho people.

I examine the subjective and intersubjective dynamics of this mysticism and its effects on the
individual and community within the framework of Karl Rahner’s transcendental theology and
his typology of mysticism. While I show that Rahner’s “mysticism of the masses” and
“mysticism of the classical authorities” are most pertinent to what one finds in Sotho spirit
possession, I also emphasize the foundational importance of his “mysticism of everyday life” to
an understanding of Sotho spirituality, which leads to spirit possession. To assist me in
explicating core elements of Sotho mysticism, I refer to Laurenti Magesa for an inculcated
understanding of relevant aspects of African spirituality. I believe this makes the task of
appreciating the value of Rahner’s theology of mysticism within a very different context more
cogent. I also believe that by engaging Rahner in dialogue with Magesa I am able to show the
value of both the culturally specific and the universal dimensions of Sotho mysticism.
Chapter 2
Mysticism in the Transcendental Theology of Karl Rahner

In the first chapter, I sketched a bare outline of Karl Rahner’s transcendental theology, indicating where mystical experiences occur and how they vary in terms of recognition, intensity and purity, and also noting their potential for spiritual development. In this chapter, I focus on some key aspects of Rahner’s understanding of mysticism in anticipation of what will be most pertinent in Chapters 3 and 4 on key aspects of African spirituality and on mysticism in Sotho spirit possession.

I begin, in §2.1, with a brief but fuller discussion of the experience of transcendence itself and how for Rahner this may become a religious mystical experience. I then consider how Rahner addresses certain theological issues: §2.2 examines his assessment of the authenticity of mysticism outside Christianity; §2.3 discusses his requirement for a discernment of spirits in mystical experiences; and §2.4 explains his view of the role of mysticism in spiritual development. Finally, in §2.5, I focus on Rahner’s typology of mysticism and its inner perichoresis.

2.1 Experiencing “Something”

The centrality of human experience in Karl Rahner’s transcendental theology was introduced in my opening chapter through his prediction that “the devout Christian of the future will … be a ‘mystic,’ one who has ‘experienced’ something.” Rahner draws attention to this by putting the word “experienced” in inverted commas. In translating and quoting Rahner, however, inverted commas have sometimes been placed, mistakenly, around the word “something” instead—that is, “one who has experienced ‘something.’” This error is intelligible in my view because what
Rahner means by the “something” experienced is also centrally important; it is far from being just anything.

Rahner uses a variety of expressions to indicate what he means by *something*, but “God” and “Mystery” are the most common, which also indicates his ease with both theistic and non-theistic terms, depending on context.\(^{23}\) I will come shortly to some theistic terms he uses, but first I want to look further at what he intends by “Mystery” and will begin with a simple list of other non-theistic terms he uses to reference the same *something*: “illimitable eternity,” “sheer, quintessential Reality,” “the incomprehensible Infinite,” “the absolute question,” “the ineffable,” “the nameless,” “the night,” “the absent,” “that mysterious, silent and inconceivable thing,” “the abyss.”\(^{24}\) Rahner encourages all human persons to be open to the *something* denoted by these terms, even though it may not be clear if the *something* experienced is “the absurd void of death engulfing us, or the blessed holy night which is already illumined from within.” He urges: “Be still for once…. Give these deeper realities of the spirit a chance now to rise to the surface: silence, fear, the ineffable longing for truth, for love… Face loneliness, fear, imminent death! Allow such ultimate, basic human experiences to come first.”\(^{25}\)

While to some this may well sound like a reckless inducement to nervous breakdown or despair, Rahner is never more considered—or hopeful and humane—than on this point, for here one may discern the import of his whole transcendental theology. The *something* that is experienced is not “one element among others in our scheme of things” nor even “a special, particularly unusual

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23. By “theistic” I mean referring to a Deity that is personal, moral, supernatural and active; and by “nontheistic” I mean referring to a Reality that is ultimate but about which one can say little except perhaps, as Rahner does, that it is the ground of human experience.

24. There are others besides these, such as “the inconceivable,” “the absolute mystery,” “the enduring mystery” and “boundless mystery.” All of these terms may be found in Rahner, “Christian Living,” 14, 15; Rahner, *Practice of Faith*, 62, 63, 66, 68, 70, 72, 78, 81, 82; Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Seabury, 1978), 22.

piece of objective reality.”26 Rather, it is Reality itself, the ground of our existence and of all our experience, meaning and knowledge. We discover in the something toward which we are transcendentally oriented that there is infinitely more—and that we need not be prisoners of our own subjectivity. Here Rahner breaks with German idealism and similar philosophies because he contends that openness to the something “does not turn man into the event of the absolute spirit”; rather, it directs the human person transcendentally toward the something such that “he does not experience himself as the dominant, absolute subject, but as the one whose being is bestowed upon him by the mystery.”27 Elsewhere, Rahner says that an open movement toward the Mystery “does not spring back on man and does not again find its endpoint in man himself.”28 In this, he agrees with his old teacher, Martin Heidegger; both thinkers, as Peter Joseph Fritz points out, “aim to defeat modern subjectivism by contending that the truth of being human comes to light not through a return to self, but through a dive into the abyss. And the abyss is, for Rahner and Heidegger, the consummate site of disclosure, revelation, or apocalypsis.”29 In fact, another non-theistic term Rahner uses for the something is “the Truth.”30

While “a dive into the abyss” is a crucially important aspect of the subject’s experience, Rahner parts ways with Heidegger after this because the meaning he ascribes to “the abyss” is not the same.31 For Rahner, an open dive into the abyss becomes a religious mystical experience, and the Mystery one experiences is God.32 Some of the theistic terms he uses for the Mystery in this

30. Rahner, Practice of Faith, 65. (Italics in original.)
31. According to Fritz, for Heidegger “the abyss is the region where the ground of beings withdraws, making way for the advent of the gods”; it is where everything becomes “the self-concealing, callous mystery of Seyn.” Fritz, Karl Rahner’s Theological Aesthetics, 255–56.
32. Rahner does not elaborate on what he means by “God” in this context, but the fact that he uses the term interchangeably with others such as “the Holy Spirit” and “uncreated grace” (see note below) means that he is
context are: “the Spirit,” “the Holy Spirit,” “God’s self-communication,” “uncreated grace,” “God himself.”33 One might reasonably object here that Rahner is contradicting himself by defining the indefinable. In the first place, however, defining terms like God or Spirit or uncreated grace is not straightforward or indeed ultimately possible with Rahner, for although one may attempt in faith to go some distance along this road, in the end one cannot define or contain them as one would an object of the world. They are “beyond the whole world,” and the only reason we experience them is because this “more-than-the-world” breaks in on human existence and “flings man out of the course pre-established by nature.”34 Second, one should not think that the person who experiences the Mystery called God is somehow going to bypass loneliness, terror or ineffable longing simply by using theistic terms.35 For Rahner the experience always remains transcendental, primal, unthematic, a priori, pre-conceptual, pre-categorial; it is an experience of “the permanent mystery,” “the deus absconditus” (hidden god),36 whether it is repressed and buried in everyday life or an explicit but more rare infusion of something. And, in the third place, Rahner says that identifying the abyss or the Mystery with God or another of the theistic terms he uses “can only take the form of a thesis proposed without further theological reasoning to support it.”37 In other words, in the final analysis one can only appeal to the mystical subject and to her or his expression of the experience.38 In Rahner’s own experience and in his interpretation of what great mystics and others try to convey, while God is ultimately

35. In fact, Rahner says, “We do not begin to have something to do with God only when we explicitly name him.” Practice of Faith, 62.
38. See Rahner, “Mystical Experience,” 92.
inconceivable, this “does not derogate from the fact that the more rightly God is understood the more nearly does his self-bestowing love [in the mystical experience] touch us.” Thus, openly embracing the terrible Mystery becomes a mystical religious experience of God’s own self, of uncreated grace. Such a revelation can only be termed or known as such, however, after the fact. As Rahner puts it, the mystical experience of God can “subsequently be the object of historical and categorial reflection and in fact must be reflected upon, since no transcendent experience is to be found without some complementary historical expression.”

The choice of whether or not to dive into the abyss is in the region of the human person’s absolute freedom, which, whether acknowledged or not according to Rahner, is grounded in the Mystery. Upon facing the abyss in a transcendent experience—upon facing the absolute question or the mysterium tremendum et fascinans (terrible and riveting mystery) of Rudolf Otto’s numinous or holy—a person is free to deny its existence altogether, or to refuse to answer it, or to retreat into familiar categorial living … or to choose it and dive in. Only by choosing to face the Mystery does a person discover that she or he is in Otto’s “vestibule of religion” or on Rahner’s “threshold of becoming a religious person,” and only by diving in can that person have a religious mystical experience.

42. With this choice, Rahner indicates it is often expressed by posing “more and more individual questions and individual answers,” as in the modern proclivity to analyze endlessly and thus avoid what really matters. Foundations, 22.
43. Otto, Idea of the Holy, 117; Rahner, Foundations, 23. It is again important to note that, for Rahner, arriving at this threshold is not a complicated or rare occurrence; it is a simple matter of choosing to be open to an everyday transcendent experience such as the ones he lists in The Practice of Faith, 81–84. From that point, one could “dive in” and have an explicit religious mystical experience or, what is more likely, one could either retreat again into one’s natural self or move into another kind of religious experience where faith, hope and love become operational.
44. Rahner offers another helpful metaphor. He says that human beings are often aware that what they are familiar with is “only a small island in a vast sea that has not been traveled.” Standing on this floating island, the subject is faced with the question: “Which does he love more, the small island of his so-called knowledge or the sea of infinite mystery?” Will that person, with “designs engendered in him by his own longing … launch himself upon the immensity”? Foundations, 22; “Christian Living,” 14.
Rahner urges the last option because it is authentic, because it is the free expression of a person’s self-responsibility which acknowledges that “the transcendence of man is permanently and necessarily ordered to the direct presence of God … [and ultimately to] the beatific vision, the direct knowledge of God face to face in love.”45 By choosing the abyss a person discovers that natural spiritual processes—whether this means a simple act of choosing to be open to the transcendent or a more deliberate discipline of meditation or acquired contemplation—may then be “elevated” through God’s self-communication; and, while this normally takes place through supernatural acts of faith, hope and love, it can through the mystical act “take deeper root existentially in the person’s inmost being … forming him through and through.”46

2.2 Extra-Christian Mysticism

The central importance of the human person’s experience of God, which includes the possibility of mystical experiences of God’s self-communication, poses a number of challenging theological questions. Not least of these is the question of mysticism itself.47 Notably different experiences of mysticism, along with widely varying interpretations of what occurs in them, have yielded many definitions and theologies of mysticism, including some by renowned Christian mystics. In Rahner’s view, however, no one has yet developed a satisfactory Christian theology of mysticism, despite attempts to do so.48

47. It should be noted that Rahner never really gives a final definition of mysticism, although in many places he offers contextual, partial or qualified definitions. Clearly he is aware of the difficulty involved in providing an overarching definition: “It has a meaning for the composer of the Upanishads and for Lao-Tse, for Plotinus and the devout adherents of the Sufis, for a Gregory of Nyssa, a Paracelsus and a Goethe. But what meaning remains to this word, if it has something to say to all of these?” For Rahner, mysticism is like certain other words such as logos, illumination, spirit, and nation—“words in which the knowledge, the hope and the love, the ideals of whole generations and centuries are gathered, words which attempt to say at once all that moves mankind.” But such words, he continues, “are in constant danger of signifying everything and therefore nothing.” “Ignatian Mysticism,” 278, 279.
48. Rahner says: “Of course attempts at a systematic theology of mysticism have been made, even if they have not been expressly called that. We can find them from the period of Spanish mysticism at least down to our own time.” (“Mystical Experience,” 91). Elsewhere, he says that among these attempts are a number from the classical period of mysticism in Spain by those “who have sought to confer upon their experience [of mysticism] … a certain
Although Rahner himself does not set out to provide the Christian theology of mysticism he thinks is missing, he nonetheless does seek to establish a framework for such a theology, one that identifies and at least provisionally addresses four of the central issues involved—the nature of the “unitive” mystical experience; the tension between mystical “knowing” and faith; the relationship between nature and grace in mysticism; and the status of mysticism in relation to personal development. It is not my purpose here to discuss these problems as Rahner lays them out, since his discussion is primarily directed toward a systematic understanding of mysticism within Roman Catholic theology. Much of his discussion is helpful, however, for its insights into mysticism in the broader pluralist contexts in which we find ourselves today, including those in which Christian and extra-Christian mystical experiences occur among people living in proximity. I will therefore focus here on a few questions of relevance to my thesis that arise from his discussion of a framework for a Christian theology of mysticism, beginning in this section with the question: Can an experience of extra-Christian mysticism be as genuine and transformative as an experience of Christian mysticism?

There is no doubt or hesitation on Rahner’s part about responding to this question with an unqualified “yes.” The question does need to be asked, however, for at least two reasons. The first is that Rahner himself, as both a Christian and a theologian, might be expected to argue for a privileged position for his own religion, but here at least he does not do so. The second reason

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49. He does this, e.g., in Chapter 14 of The Practice of Faith and in his essay “Mystical Experience and Mystical Theology.” Also, in his essay “Ignatian Mysticism of Joy in the World,” he provides a good summary of these questions on p. 279.

50. While it might be argued that he does this indirectly when he expounds his theory of the “anonymous Christian” (in part I think to make his pneumatology intelligible to a Christian audience), it is nonetheless clear that for Rahner the Spirit blows where she wills and is in no way bound by religious institutions. The fact that Rahner always maintained a high Christology is not really at issue here—at least not until one begins to reflect on a transcendent experience of the Spirit and realize that for Rahner it is essential that there be a historical complement to such an experience. But even here, he sees his theory of the anonymous Christian as cause for humility and impetus to dialogue precisely because it is so radically inclusive. See, e.g., Karl Rahner, “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions,” in Later Writings, vol. 5 of Theological Investigations, trans. Karl-H. Kruger (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 121, 134.
is that the weight of Christian theology on this question—one that involves the doctrines of revelation and grace, and soon enough that of the Trinity as well—goes against such an unequivocal answer. Christian theology, as Rahner notes, “has been accustomed to thinking in personalistic and therefore historical terms.” Based on the idea that the salvation of all humankind depends on an event that takes place at a point in time and space, it has traditionally held that “Christology should have a place prior to pneumatology.” In other words, a mystical experience of the self-revelation of God in the Spirit has tended to be interpreted in the first instance through the historical revelation of Jesus Christ. But, in his later theology at least, Rahner questions “this all too facile theological perspective” and sees the possibility of a non-European theology reversing it: “Because of the universal salvific will of God and in legitimate respect for all the major world religions outside of Christianity, it may perhaps make a pneumatology, a teaching of the inmost, divinizing gift of grace for all human beings (as an offer to their freedom), the fundamental point of departure for its entire theology.”

Rahner’s speculation here is consonant with his framework for a theology of mysticism, where the theological possibility for such a reversal—giving priority to the Spirit—is already emergent. Indeed, the last quotation above sums it up. Rahner begins with what he takes as axiomatic, that Gods wills all people to be saved. From a Christian perspective, this makes the agency of the Holy Spirit indispensable for reaching all people, for it must include those who lived before Jesus Christ and those who never heard, or heard compellingly, of him afterward.


52. Rahner, “Aspects of European Theology,” 97–98. There are echoes here of passages in Vatican II documents as well as similarities with other theologians, particularly his fellow Jesuits Jacques Dupuis, Frederick Crowe, Bernard Lonergan and Michael Amaladoss—the last of whom, while controversial, could also be seen as part of the non-European vanguard.

53. Although this is a well-established doctrine of the Catholic Church, based on Scripture (e.g., I Timothy 2:3–4) and clearly affirmed in Church teaching (e.g., Nostra Aetate, 1), Rahner is nonetheless known for promoting the doctrine more than almost any other theologian. See, e.g., Rahner, “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions,” 122; Karl Rahner, “Anonymous Christians;” in Concerning Vatican Council II, vol. 6 of Theological Investigations, trans. K.H. Kruger and B. Kruger (New York: Seabury, 1974), 391; Rahner, Foundations, 138, 156.

that the Holy Spirit must also work through other religions because “in very different senses and to very different degrees” they are capable of providing “a positive means of gaining the right relationship to God and thus for the attaining of salvation, a means which is therefore positively included in God’s plan of salvation.”\(^55\) As such, these religions must be considered “lawful” and deserving of respect.\(^56\) Moreover, for the agency of the Spirit to have real meaning, “divinizing grace in the proper sense” must also be fully gifted to every human being, and not just to Christians,\(^57\) and since this gift of grace in the Spirit is not initially offered to the subject from the outside (e.g., through the Church), it must be constitutive of human beings. In other words, there must be something like a “supernatural existential” in every human person.\(^58\) This is why for Rahner all theology is anthropology and vice versa.\(^59\) The “experience of the Spirit … given with faith, hope and love in God’s self-communication to human beings” means there is a prior revelation here, a revelation of grace that “transforms human consciousness.”\(^60\) Finally, the existentially deeper, more intense version of this revelation in a mystical experience also means that “even in an ‘extra-Christian’ mysticism there can be an experience of grace.”\(^61\)

### 2.3 Discernment of Spirits

Another question that arises from Rahner’s framework for a Christian theology of mysticism is: Why is a “discernment of spirits” called for in relation to a mystical experience?\(^62\) To begin with,

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62. Although this does not arise as one of the four main “problems” that Rahner addresses, both in Ch. 14 of *The Practice of Faith* and in Ch. 8 of *Theological Investigations*, vol. 17, it is raised indirectly in these chapters.
it should be clear that Rahner is not concerned here with what he calls “natural mysticism.” He
describes natural mysticism as an experience of “interior absorption” in which any mediation
through categories is wholly or partly lacking. Such an experience, which might be learned or
attained solely through practice by the mystical subject, involves altered states of consciousness
that “psychologically … differ from normal everyday processes in the mind,” possibly resulting
in a pure experience of transcendence.\footnote{Rahner, “Mystical Experience,” 95, 96. (Italics in original.) Rahner is actually unsure about the possibility of
natural mysticism and says that mystical theology cannot decide the matter. Although he has “no fundamental
objection” to it, he prefers “to keep the term ‘mysticism’ for those psychologically unusual experiences … which are
exalted by grace and really include supernatural experience of the Spirit” (96).} With the discernment question, however, Rahner is
concerned with the kind of mysticism we have been examining all along, a mysticism founded
on “the accepted experience of man’s basic orientation to God, the experience that the basis of
man’s existence is the abyss.”\footnote{Rahner, “Christian Living,” 15.} However varied the appearance or interpretation, or in
whichever religion or spirituality they may be found, mystical experiences of interest to Rahner
are ones that are supernaturally gifted or “elevated” by the self-communication of God. And with
these, even though God is integrally involved, a discernment of spirits is important because such
experiences are liable to include natural elements, elements of the categorial, closely tied to the
particularities of human history and culture. Rahner emphasizes that “we are not faced with the
alternatives of being forced either to recognise [these experiences] … as the unadulterated
operation of the Holy Spirit, or to discount them from the start … as ‘rubbish,’ the result of
human religious impulses going off the rails.” He reminds us that even biblical prophets filled
with the Spirit of God made mistakes, and thus some discernment is in order.\footnote{Rahner, “Religious Enthusiasm,” 36, 47–48.}

Given the great range of experiences of the Spirit that occur in many different forms, both inside

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example, in the former, Rahner notes that even in “an act of mysticism in the proper sense” there may be lack of
clarity or misinterpretation (\textit{Practice of Faith}, 76); and in the latter he draws attention to the need for “genuine self-
understanding” and self-criticism (“Mystical Experience,” 99). Both these chapters point to the need for
discernment. The question is nonetheless raised directly in the latter part of “Religious Enthusiasm and the
Experience of Grace,” where Rahner recommends “critical analysis” and the “discernment of spirits” as part of
“mystical theology” and “mystical teaching” (48–51).
and outside Christianity and in every degree of purity or distortion, it is not surprising that in mystical experiences too there are numerous ways in which error and misinterpretation can enter. One of Rahner’s favourite examples is that of a pantheistic interpretation given to a mystical experience of undifferentiated unity between subject and world, which in his view is mistaken as unity between subject and God. This might also be seen in the common animist interpretation of African mystical spirituality (a topic to be considered in the next chapter). Moreover, in our time—given the global dominance of the Western proclivity to manipulate and control the world and to subject all phenomena to scientific inquiry—the problem of error can become even more acute as everything, including God, is remade in the image of human beings. On the other hand, Rahner notes that there are mysticisms “which may perhaps be found in Orphic, Neo-Platonic, or Buddhist asceticism” that renounce or flee from the world in favour of the Absolute. But these, he says, are “fundamentally parallel, though leading in the opposite direction from, the way to an immanent divinization of the world” and they too entail “the conquest of God.” Nonetheless, even if such after-the-fact interpretations are found to be erroneous, the basic mystical experience of grace or of the Spirit may well be authentic.

At this point, one might well ask why a discernment of spirits really matters if the central or basic experience of God can still occur. Rahner answers that it does in fact matter: “Other things being equal, an experience of this type has more chance of being genuine, that is, of being a real transcendent experience of grace which touches the core of personal freedom, if the categorial

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67. See, e.g., Rahner, “Mystical Experience,” 92, 97; Rahner, Practice of Faith, 76.
68. Rahner, “Christian Living,” 11–12. For Rahner, this problem, though more acute today, is not new. Beginning with the Greeks and right up to Hegel, he says, when philosophy spoke of God, God was “always ultimately the anima mundi, the God who can live only in the world itself as its inner radiance.” Thus these philosophers also succumbed to “the ever-present temptation … of so making God the raison d’être of the world that the world becomes the raison d’être of God.” “Ignatian Mysticism,” 284, 285.
content is objectively correct.” And here, Rahner appeals to the experience of mystics themselves. It is as though error or misinterpretation can impede a mystic’s experience of God’s love through the Spirit. It is thus better for mystical experiences to “impart the correct ‘image of God.’” In other words, for a fuller experience of God’s self-revelation one’s theology of mysticism matters; there is meaning in the dialogue between spirit and history.

To discern the spirits of a mystical experience is for Rahner to test the authenticity of its categorial content. For Christians, this means employing “all the normal rules which are valid for the assessment of theological statements and events in general: conformity to the message of the Gospel, to Scripture, to the faith and mind of the Church, etc.” However, as Rahner emphasizes, this is not as straightforward as it might appear. Within the Church, for example, there is always a tension between charismatic and institutional elements. In Rahner’s view, this is a “divinely-willed dualism” in which God operates in the Church sometimes through the ministry of its offices and sometimes directly through its members. For their part, members should be free to follow their spirit as long as they do not yield to what is contrary to God’s Spirit; and for theirs, ecclesiastical authorities should not extinguish a new spirit by always clinging to the old or to what is most familiar and tested. Indeed, Rahner advises authorities not to give way to “incomprehension and intellectual laziness” or to “ill-will and hatred”; instead they must learn to recognize charismata and have the courage to receive them, for although there is always “something shocking” about them, if they come from God they require timely acceptance. On the other hand, he advises members to be prepared for opposition and for the burden of their spiritual gift, for “it is painful to fulfil the task set by the charisma” and “a

72. Rahner, “Christian Living,” 15. Moreover, as was seen earlier, Rahner maintains that “the more rightly God is understood the more nearly does his self-bestowing love touch us.”
charisma always involves suffering.” Ultimately, therefore, Rahner appeals to the law of love to maintain balance and unity.76

How then does one proceed with discernment? It turns out that employing “all the normal rules” to discern the spirits of a mystical experience is not enough. Rahner takes his cue from the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, in which the discernment of spirits in order to discover and follow God’s will is central. Applying “general moral criteria” is fine, but insufficient, for ultimately discernment requires “the seeking and finding of the free decree of the will of the personal God for man in his concrete situation,”77 a process that Rahner explains in the third chapter of The Dynamic Element in the Church. Here Rahner indicates the difference between what he calls “principles” and “prescriptions.” While principles express what is universal or general, prescriptions are particular, individual, concrete … and mysterious. Moreover, the prescriptions Rahner describes cannot merely be inferred from general principles: they are something more; they are irreducible, unique, positive gifts from God constituting the charismatic element78—just as human beings are not determined by universals alone, but also by “the unrepeatable that belongs to history, what is individual and inexpressible.”79 If authentic, prescriptions are also a more immediate form of God’s revelation than the institutional element. In a genuine mystical experience, for example, “the Creator deals directly with his creature and the creature with its Creator”; the creature is “interiorly moved by the Spirit of God” and through this movement the Spirit may well have “something to say to theology which this cannot otherwise come to know.” And yet, it is still possible that an experience is not from God’s Spirit after all. St Ignatius himself, for example, was said to be suspicious of the “calm” that is sometimes taken to signify a good spirit.80 That is why he provides an epistemic road map, with

76. Rahner, The Dynamic Element, 74, 77, 82, 83.
its “rules for the discernment of spirits” and “three times [or ways] for making a choice.”

It must be said, however, that St. Ignatius’s road map for discernment is relatively complex: it demands much even of an experienced spiritual director working with someone who has had a mystical or charismatic experience. Moreover, it is unclear to me whether or not Rahner believed that a neighbour-religionist to a Christian should or could follow it. Regardless, it is good to know that Rahner considers it salutary in the discernment process to at least apply “the normal rules” conforming to the best traditions and teachings by looking at the “effects” of the spirits, that is, “the objective justification, reasonableness and so on of the objects towards which these ‘spirits’ seek to guide the choice.” The knowledge or discernment this yields is “based on faith and reason drawing on the principles of morality and the analysis of a particular case”\(^81\)—and it will be a key means for identifying mystical experiences in Chapter 4, even if, in the final analysis, it cannot provide the kind of epistemic spiritual certainty Rahner believes is possible when one learns to discern God’s self-revelation in a way suited to *prescriptions* of the Spirit.

One final point to note with regard to the discernment of spirits—one of particular pertinence to African spirituality—is the allowance Rahner makes for communal discernment. Rahner remarks that the tradition nurturing his own formation and those around him made for spiritual individualists. He sensed, however, that this was changing even within Catholicism and notes that the Church’s first Pentecost “was not presumably an accidental local gathering of a number of individualistic mystics, but an experience of the Spirit on the part of a community as such.” He further notes that there must be room for both human individuality and solidarity and that a variety of expressions of a communal experience of the Spirit is possible. On the one hand, it need not occur “under extravagant accompanying circumstances almost of a parapsychological character” such as speaking in tongues or faith healing; on the other hand, it might well be a “singular eruption from consciousness or sub-consciousness” involving a “transmission of

\(^{81}\) Rahner, *The Dynamic Element*, 104, 106.
insights and feelings from one person to another.” And where there is a communitarian experience of the Spirit, says Rahner, “Why could there not also be jointly a really spiritual discernment of spirits?” Otherwise, he argues, exercises like the Prayer to the Holy Spirit at the beginning of a consultation may be a vapid or merely pious prelude to an otherwise secular, rational event.  

2.4 Mysticism and Spiritual Development

A third theological question to be considered here is: What does Rahner mean by spirituality and what is the role of mysticism in spiritual development? As with mysticism itself, Rahner describes some of the central attributes of spirituality and of what it involves but he does not offer a final definition. “Spirituality is a mysterious and tender thing,” he says, “about which we can speak only with difficulty.” He then goes on to describe it as an “intense self-realization” of a religious reality in the individual person as individual, and as “very different” in every person according to “the natural disposition, age, life-history, cultural and sociological milieu, the ultimate free and never wholly comprehensible uniqueness of the individual.”

Rahner clearly likes the word “spirituality” to describe this unique and focused self-realization more than other words such as “piety” or “devotion.” One reason for this is that spirituality is more clearly aligned with the charismatic in the charismatic-institutional dualism referred to in the last section. Spirituality, he says, “will always, as in the past, be open for new pentecostal beginnings emerging from the base, not organized and regulated from the outset by authority from above, but bursting out charismatically where the Spirit breathes as he wills.”


84. Rahner can be quite negative about the institutional effect on spirituality. For example, while stressing that spirituality must have “an ecclesial character,” he notes that “the Church can be an oppressive burden for the individual’s spirituality by doctrinalism, legalism and ritualism, to which true spirituality, if it really is authentic and genuine, can have no positive relationship.” “Spirituality of the Church,” 153.

perhaps another reason for Rahner is that spirituality is at root, not a primarily one-way relationship of a human subject seeking the divine reality, but rather a free intercourse of spirits. Rahner defines spirit as “that immaterial being prior to and going beyond every individual thing that can be known and grasped” and as having “unlimited openness for the limitless being of God.”86 If spirituality thus is understood as self-realization through spirit freely relating to spirit, it begins to sound very like mysticism—and for Rahner it is. Mysticism is a relatively direct, pure and intense mode of spirituality that Rahner refers to as “spirituality in its true sense.”87

Because spirituality and mysticism are so closely related, one might think that mystical experiences are a virtual requirement for significant spiritual development and perhaps necessarily indicative of a higher level of spiritual maturity. But this is not so for Rahner. He makes two important points here that elucidate his thinking on the role of mysticism in spiritual development, one negative and the other positive. The first, negative point has to do with the relationship between mysticism and grace and it indicates that, whereas everyone should develop or mature spiritually, not everyone need have explicit mystical experiences to do so. Rahner insists that “mysticism must be conceived of as falling within the framework of ordinary grace and faith.” His insistence here is to counter a strong religious tradition that elevates what is commonly called the grace of mysticism—that “gratuitous, unowed intervention … where the inaccessible God communicates himself in a special manner”88—into something it is not, something more than an ordinary believer’s spirituality and experience of grace, some higher level or “middle term” between everyday faith and the beatific vision.89 But this understanding of grace is mistaken according to Rahner. With a mystical experience, too much attention is sometimes given theologically to what is merely “psychologically distinct” or singular, to

88. Rahner, Practice of Faith, 72, 73.
“parapsychological occurrences” or “natural altered states of consciousness” or an experience of unification with the divine that is so immediate and profound that faith itself seems to be surpassed.⁹⁰ However, to admit that the grace of mysticism is superior would be to admit that the full revelation of divine uncreated grace on offer to every human person and accessible by faith is actually only partial or that it can be surpassed in a mystical experience—in effect, that through mystical illumination God somehow surpasses or offers more than the “act of absolute self-bestowal” itself.⁹¹ Rahner’s rejection of this idea of a higher level of grace does not therefore arise, at least primarily, from his strong anti-elitist tendencies;⁹² it is simply that “the human being’s divinization, the possession of the divine uncreated Grace (realities which Christianity recognizes as attaching to all the justified), cannot properly be surpassed by anything short of the vision of glory, the immediate vision of God, which is reserved for the human being’s final actual consummation and completion.”⁹³ Mysticism is not part of every believer’s life, even of some believers of great faith and openness to grace; it is not a “normal” stage of spiritual development on the road to perfection, even though Rahner foresees it becoming far more important and needful in the future.⁹⁴

The second point Rahner makes about the role of mysticism in spiritual development is positive. Having established that mysticism is only one “variety” or “mode” of the experience of the Spirit

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⁹⁰. Rahner, *Practice of Faith*, 73–74. Elsewhere, Rahner argues that a mystical experience of “radical love for the self-communicating God” in which all “egoistical, particularist individualisation” appears to dissolve leads to “a mistaken belief in an absolute cessation of the finite subject.” But in fact, for Rahner, the Creator-creature distinction is never thus eliminated. “Mystical Experience,” 92.


⁹². Nonetheless, Rahner does express an anti-elitism. For example, see Rahner, *Practice of Faith*, 69, 77.


⁹⁴. Rahner, “Mystical Experience,” 98. Rahner thinks that future devout Christians or deeply spiritual persons will need to be mystics because, without the “unanimous, manifest and public convictions and religious customs” that in the past played a major role in “summoning each one … to a personal experience and a personal decision,” there will be few alternative routes to a transformative experience of God available (at least in the West). While such assistance may still be there to some extent, it will only be able to provide “a very secondary kind of formation.” “Christian Living,” 15. As well, it should also be noted that in talking here of mysticism as a stage in spiritual development, Rahner is referring primarily to the explicit types of mysticism—see §2.5.
offered to every person, he goes on to describe two major benefits of mysticism for spiritual development. The first is the indication it gives, perhaps primarily to the mystic herself, that she “has accepted the offered grace of God’s communication of himself to an existentially intensive degree.” In other words, any experiential evidence or striking content that comes through “natural phenomena of suspension of the faculties … may possibly be a useful auxiliary” to spiritual development. The second benefit of mysticism, alluded to in the last chapter and primarily it would seem for those who have not been privileged with mystical experiences, is the exemplary “initiation into the human being’s personal experience of God” that it highlights; it is “a paradigmatic elucidation of what happens in faith, hope, and love” on the way to perfection. As Rahner notes, this personal experience of God—so vividly illustrated in mysticism—is “the real basic phenomenon of spirituality … the very heart of all spirituality.” Thus if one is convinced of the reality of the great mystics’ experiences of God, it may be an index to relevant meaning or direction and it may lead to one’s own intense self-realization through a personal experience of God, even if that is experience is not similarly mystical.

95. Rahner, Practice of Faith, 72, 74.
99. These two benefits may seem to indicate that mysticism is indeed a higher stage and better mode of spirituality than others and that explicit mystical experiences would therefore be desirable for all persons seeking greater perfection—and some scholars would argue there is a significant and unresolved tension here in Rahner’s thought (see, e.g., Michael Stoeber, “Mysticism and the Spiritual Life: Reflections on Karl Rahner’s View of Mysticism,” Toronto Journal of Theology 17, no. 2 (2001): 263–275). However, I think that Rahner challenges such an interpretation, even though in my view he also creates problems for himself—of a kind I point out at the beginning of §2.5—through a sometimes unfortunate, too superlative choice of words or expressions, such as “paradigmatic” or “the very heart of all spirituality.” Nonetheless, Rahner’s position is informed by an understanding of spiritual gifts and an interpretation of spiritual development that is both broader and more open to differences, some of which he would readily admit he may not fully appreciate. Within mysticism, for example, he concedes that the individualist approach with which he is familiar is not the only one and he certainly never claims it is superior. Furthermore, he would be among the first to say that we cannot and should not all be like the Spanish mystics. We need these mystics for the “paradigmatic” role they play, and yet, as he points out, the orientation of their spiritual life toward mysticism bears little resemblance to the orientation expressed in the New Testament “about the way and goal of the spiritual life,” such as Jesus advocated in the Sermon on the Mount. This is a crucial insight. Indeed, Rahner thinks that New Testament teaching shows clearly that the mystic is not the only one “who has gone or goes on that path to perfection.” Rather, as the eschatological discourse in Matthew 25 illustrates, “the conscientious observance of routine duties in faith, hope, and love for God and men bring the person through death immediately to perfection and unite him finally with God.” Karl Rahner, “Reflections on the Problem of the Gradual Ascent to
How might this initially vicarious and then actually personal experience of God aid spiritual development? Here again, while Rahner avoids being definitive, he does provide a few examples. On the one hand, it can convince the human subject of “the ultimate data of revelation: that God is, that we can speak to him, that his ineffable incomprehensibility is itself the very heart of our existence.” On the other hand, it may also be “adapted to the historical situation imposed on us” and be “credible even for non-Christians.” Here, it would seem, the field of possibilities is wide open. One can imagine possibilities for liberation and healing, for example. One possibility that Rahner raises again is the communal one: “fraternal fellowship” may be realized through “the same all-sustaining experience of the Spirit,” he says, and then “fraternal community” may become “a real and essential element” of human spirituality.100

2.5 A Perichoretic Typology

In the last section it was stated that in Rahner’s theology mysticism is not part of every believer’s life and it is only one variety of the experience of the Spirit offered to every person. Such assertions are confusing, however, if one compares them to Rahner’s varieties of mysticism outlined in §1.3, where, in addition to mysticism of the “classical authorities” (which I will simply call classical mysticism), I introduced his transcendental theology of “everyday mysticism” and “mysticism of the masses.” In truth, Rahner is not consistent with his use of the word mysticism and his accompanying qualifying language sometimes appears to undermine his own typology. This is most evident when he refers to classical mysticism as “the central core of mysticism” or mysticism “in the true sense” or, as he calls it most frequently, “genuine mysticism.”101 Of course this has the unfortunate tendency of appearing to denigrate or

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downgrade one or both of the other two varieties of mysticism, often discussed in proximity, by implying that somehow they are not the real thing. In my opinion it arises from the fact that Rahner, as a Catholic and self-confessed “spiritual individualist,” is most comfortable and familiar with classical mysticism, and that he finds it easier to identify. For in contrast to everyday mysticism it involves explicit rather than implicit transcendence,\(^{102}\) and in comparison with mysticism of the masses it is less complicated by cultural, historical and social categorial content. Yet any interpretation seeking to assert that Rahner sees classical mysticism as worthier or in some other way superior is mistaken in my view. Even when he describes classical mysticism in such superlative terms as “an ultimate and absolutely radical experience of transcendence into the mystery of God,”\(^{103}\) he still would maintain that, like the other two, it is only one variety. Nevertheless, like the other two, it is an important variety, for as seen in §2.4 it has a significant role to play in spiritual development—and, as will be seen shortly, this role is perichoretic.

What then needs to be said about Rahner’s three varieties of mysticism? What distinguishes them and what is the purpose of the perichoresis that he sees between them?\(^{104}\) I will deal with these topics only briefly in this section, for they will be elaborated further, with examples, in the following two chapters.

It is logical to begin as Rahner does with everyday mysticism because this is the mysticism accessible by all human persons and that each must experience or “travel through” in order to approach the Mystery called God more explicitly in the other two.\(^{105}\) Yet even though this

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102. See Rahner, *Practice of Faith*, 64, 70.
104. Rahner introduces the idea of a perichoresis between them in *Practice of Faith*, 70.
105. Rahner recognizes the similarity of mysticism and faith in that each of these is a primary transcendental “experience” (the German *Erfahrung* has the root meaning “to travel through”) sustained by God’s Spirit and foundational for spiritual development. There is also a difference, however, in that faith is required for the more explicit varieties of mysticism but can never be “superseded” by them in the way that everyday mysticism can. Rahner, “Mystical Experience,” 93.
variety of mysticism is so central to Rahner’s transcendental theology and so basic to human experience, he sometimes appears reluctant to say that it is in fact mysticism—and perhaps this is because it is not easily detectable. It is like being unable to see the forest for the trees. At times therefore Rahner hedges more forthright statements with a conditional “if.” For example: “If someone says that this [primitive experience of God] is mysticism, then it is in fact mysticism and then this very factor of mysticism belongs to God”; or “If we were to use the term ‘mysticism’ to describe this experience of transcendence in which we always, even in the midst of everyday life, extend beyond ourselves and the specific thing with which we are concerned, we might say that mysticism occurs in the midst of everyday life, but is hidden and undeclared.”

Yet occasionally Rahner is unequivocal about everyday mysticism. For example, in The Practice of Faith he writes, “the real basic phenomenon of mystical experience of transcendence is present as innermost sustaining ground (even though unnoticed) in the simple act itself of Christian living in faith, hope, and love.” In other words, mysticism or the mystical act by which human consciousness reaches beyond itself and beyond any and every object to the infinite Mystery is implicit in the more recognizable acts of faith, hope and love that we see every day, even when that which grounds them—that which Rahner unequivocally calls “an act of mysticism in the proper sense”—is “apparently wholly repressed and buried by our daily routine” or by “our theological, ascetic and pious chatter.”

Rahner approaches mysticism of the masses in a similar way. For example, while acknowledging that Christian mysticism is generally taken to mean “infused contemplation,” which is how he

106. Rahner, Practice of Faith, 64, 78.
107. Rahner, Practice of Faith, 64, 70.
108. Rahner, Practice of Faith, 74. It is important to note that Rahner calls this an act of mysticism. In other words, the subject has not denied transcendent reality or retreated into mere categorial living but rather, somewhere in her consciousness, has opted for the abyss or open sea.
109. Rahner, Practice of Faith, 64.
sees classical mysticism, he says that it is “probably distinguished a little too sharply from the other phenomena of ecstasies, visions and so on.” But again, he sometimes moves from a tentative view like this to an unequivocal one where he says, for example, that the “phenomena of religious enthusiasm … contain a genuine, grace-filled experience of transcendence” just the same as “genuine mysticism” and that “in them a man passes ‘outside himself’”—a phenomenon that “enables a person to experience in a clear and inescapable manner his own transcendence and inner reference to God, itself sustained by God’s self-communication.” Here of course we have another variety of mysticism. We have moved from an everyday mostly implicit mysticism accessible by all to a mysticism experienced and expressed much more explicitly—through glossolalia, visions, inspirations, ecstasies, healings, radical conversion, prophecies, and so on, and with tremendous personal, cultural, historical and sociological variations. As these diverse expressions suggest, mysticism of the masses is often accompanied by “natural altered states of consciousness” or “parapsychological occurrences.” It is important to note, however, that for Rahner such manifestations do not define it. Rather, as with the other two, it is the elevation of a natural spiritual process through God’s self-revelation in the Spirit that renders the experience mystical. With mysticism of the masses, one must also remark on its tendency to occur, at least in many cultures and epochs, relatively frequently, communally and eminently—in the sense of “via eminentiae,” by which the transcendental reach into the Mystery or abyss occurs positively and with the presence of shared visions or categorial symbols. And here we note a major advantage Rahner sees for this variety of mysticism: the expressions of religious enthusiasm that accompany it make it easier to objectify the transcendent experience and to mediate it to human freedom in a more intense form than would normally be possible for most people through other

112. On these manifestations, see Rahner, “Religious Enthusiasm,” 35, 49, 50; Rahner, “Ignatian Mysticism,” 279.
113. Rahner, Practice of Faith, 74.
individual or collective religious expressions.\textsuperscript{114} Although discernment is required (and in Rahner’s view there is room for much more self-criticism for genuine self-understanding with this variety), its potential goes far beyond what may described as a “mere mood” or “unverifiable feeling” or “factor in our private interior lives” to experiences with “a fully social and public significance.”\textsuperscript{115}

Coming now to \textit{classical mysticism}, one notes that, like mysticism of the masses, it is explicit and often involves altered states of consciousness, but unlike that variety, there are the following characteristics: it is not as laden with categorial elements, sometimes indeed having a radical absence of imagery as though reflecting a “homoeopathic” or “unreflective” state; it is “rare and sporadic” and thus far less commonly or widely experienced; and it is much more intense, representing the “climax” of mystical experiences.\textsuperscript{116} It is this last characteristic that recommends this variety of mysticism as such a potent auxiliary to faith and spiritual development.

Nonetheless, this variety also has limitations, at least in the way it has traditionally been interpreted. For example, Heribert Fischer, who contributed most of the “Mysticism” entry in Rahner’s \textit{Sacramentum Mundi}, cautions against the tendency to have a narrow interpretation of its role:

\begin{quote}
Down to the present day, the influence of Spanish mysticism has had a disproportionately strong effect on theological study. This meant that the true visage of mysticism was seen in too individualistic a way. There was an unnecessary and unjustifiable stress on what was psychological and subjectivist, the realm of feeling and of private experience... And it also has the disadvantage of giving absolute value, as it were, to what are merely moments in the whole of spirituality.”\textsuperscript{117}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{114} Rahner, “Religious Enthusiasm,” 43, 46, 50.

\textsuperscript{115} Rahner, “The Experience of God Today,” 159.

\textsuperscript{116} Rahner, “Religious Enthusiasm,” 43.

If, like Rahner, one looks to the Spanish mystics as paragons of classical mysticism, at least within the Western Christian tradition, one should also, like Rahner, be aware of these limitations and be open to finding “the true visage of mysticism,” not only in the other varieties of mysticism, but also in “a thousand different forms” within these varieties or even in other typologies or religions. For example, in comparing the work of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, Rahner indicates that with “the loss of imagery today” St Teresa, with her “more frankly visionary mysticism,” probably makes for a better interpreter of our modern experience of God than St John, with his “radical ‘absence of images’”—a difference that will be seen in §3.4 to have a different application in Africa than Europe, but pertinent nonetheless. More than many theologians, Rahner is thus deeply cognizant that the Spirit has her own good purposes and, like the wind, is mysterious and “blows where it chooses.”

It is this recognition of the absolute freedom of the Spirit and of spirit relating to spirit that informs Rahner’s theory of the perichoresis between implicit and explicit mysticism, between everyday and extraordinary mysticism. While Rahner describes it as “a perichoresis between the normal and routine practice of the Christian life and an ultimate and absolutely radical experience of transcendence into the mystery of God,” there are no limits either to the unique spiritual benefit that each variety or experience of mysticism can bestow or to the spiritual embrace and sustaining power found in the interrelationship or interpenetration of the different varieties (not unlike the perichoresis of the Trinity). The mysticism of infused contemplation relies on the same ontological connection with God that everyday mysticism does and at times it may be discovered that one kind supports or flows into the other. For example, everyday mysticism might never be detected without the explicit and exemplary experience of extraordinary mysticism which can help to recognize, “to set free” or “dig out this primal


relationship to God … from under the rubbish of everyday experience.” And between these two varieties of mysticism, giving and receiving meaning and efficacy to and from both in perpetual perichoresis, is the third variety, the mysticism of the masses—the most variable, fecund and astonishing favour of the Spirit.

120. Rahner, *Practice of Faith*, 64, 70, 83.
Chapter 3
Laurenti Magesa on Mysticism in African Spirituality

While keeping in mind the mysticism of Karl Rahner’s transcendental theology, my purpose in this chapter is to identify mysticism in African spirituality, and to ascertain the role of spirit possession in mysticism. This of course presupposes some understanding of African spirituality and of the nature of spirit possession, and for an exposition of these I draw on the inculturation theology of Laurenti Magesa.

In the last chapter, given the Western modern-and-post-modern context of Rahner’s theology, it made sense to begin with Rahner’s understanding of subjectivity and his recognition or recovery of primal, pre-conceptual transcendence, which may result in religious mystical experiences. In the African context, to some extent at least, one can assume a ready familiarity with transcendent experience and an acceptance of its importance. Here, then, I begin with a simple appreciation of transcendence in African spirituality, including some discussion of its elements, dynamics and purpose (§3.1). This is followed by a brief examination of agency in the perichoresis between different spiritual entities in the cosmic community and the energy and experiences that connect them, including spirit possession (§3.2). Next, I examine the phenomenon of spirit possession, with regard both to the critical matter of witchcraft (§3.3) and to its positive counterpart in what is recognized, through the discernment of spirits, as mysticism (§3.4). Finally, I address different ways in which the world of spirits and spirit possession is interpreted, especially by African religions and Christianity, and how Magesa’s inculturation theology with its focus on the Spirit in spirituality can facilitate meaningful dialogue, discernment, and integration (§3.5).

121. While I describe what spirituality means to Magesa in §3.1 and §3.2 below—e.g., it is the “struggle to be in touch with the mystery of life”; “it involves dynamic relationships between visible and invisible powers”; “it entails the mutual exchanges of energies among all beings”—I should perhaps begin by stating clearly the meaning I give it, which is largely shaped by others, including Magesa, Rahner and Walter Principe (see Walter Principe, “Toward Defining Spirituality,” Studies in Religion 12, no. 2 [1983]: 127–41): spirituality is the unique way in which persons struggle for self-realization by committing to the highest ideals of their faith within a particular historical context and by living out that faith in community with others and in communion with the transcendent Mystery.
3.1 Some Fundamentals of African Spirituality

African spirituality is a vast topic that encompasses innumerable variations and differences expressed through literally thousands of languages, cultures and histories; nonetheless, it is surprising sometimes how much common ground there is in that largest and most populous part of the continent referred to as black Africa or sub-Saharan Africa. This common ground contradicts the rhetorical, skeptical question one occasionally hears: What is African about Africa? Indeed, even though one can feel uneasy or open to charges of reductionism by making general statements about African culture or African spirituality, one should recognize that this is something that leading African intellectuals, including theologians, have been doing with good reason for well over half a century, from pioneers like John Mbiti to more recent scholars like Laurenti Magesa.

For his part, Magesa makes no apology for speaking about these things “in an apparently monolithic, undiversified sense” because, as he says, “there exists an underlying basic similarity or sameness of spirit and intention in the different cultural-religious expressions in Africa and among Africans”; and “if one underlines the similarities of inner meaning of the religious worldview and ethical values contained in the expressions, … [then] the terms African culture, religion, philosophy, and spirituality (in the singular) are perfectly legitimate and justifiable.”122 This has also been the discovery of non-Africans—including, for example, successive popes

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Notwithstanding his views on the matter, my discussion here is principally about African spirituality, not “African religion.” The indigenous religions of Africa are very numerous and, outwardly at least, quite different from one another, especially regarding specific beliefs and practices—although I do agree with Magesa that there is great similarity of “inner meaning.” A focus on African spirituality, on the other hand, not only provides a more direct path to the common ground that both Rahner and Magesa would claim human beings occupy existentially, it also points to that which Africans share experientially not only in their indigenous religions but also in their adoption of other religions, including various forms of Christianity, and it is something that has persisted over time.
from Paul VI on once they have had even minimal exposure to the continent or to its people, culture, and scholarship; they recognize that certain lived values are common to Africa and Africans. This has been my own experience too and it is one reason why I do not hesitate to turn to Magesa, who is from eastern Africa, for assistance in understanding Sotho spirituality, in southern Africa.

So what then is the “underlying … spirit and intention” or “inner meaning” of African spirituality? Like Rahner, Magesa does not provide an overarching definition of spirituality per se, but he does describe it in various ways. He says, for example, that it is “an inescapable reality,” it is “the motor of human existence” and it is the “struggle to be in touch with the mystery of life.” In my view Rahner would agree completely with these descriptions and also find them deeply satisfying. But what if anything is distinctive about African spirituality? For Magesa, it is that African spirituality is “absolutely relational and completely unitary.”

To explain what he means by saying that African spirituality is “completely unitary,” Magesa refers to deeply entrenched dualisms of Western thinking—body-mind, natural-supernatural, profane-sacred, matter-spirit—and notes, by contrast, that existence for Africans is a holistic experience in which humans are spiritually preoccupied with one reality. Whether it is the “physical preservation of self and community” or “devotion to a power or powers outside of and higher than the perceptibly human,” their spiritual energy is oriented toward one and the same reality. Spirituality is always all-encompassing because “all reality, whether seen or unseen, [is] composed of sacral mystery.” For Africans, this mystery is the unifying essence and principle of life: “mystery constitutes spiritual power that is not of human origin but is at the foundation of everything that exists. This makes all reality spiritual and of religious concern.” It offers “an essentially ‘transcendental’ perception of all life.” There are evident parallels here with Rahner

123. Magesa includes a number of references and quotations that support this view. See, e.g., What Is Not Sacred?, 9–10, 18, 191–92.

and similarities with other spiritual traditions, but in Africa Magesa finds this worldview to be “much more explicit and comprehensive.”  

Magesa also says that African spirituality is “absolutely relational.” It is based on interactive relationships between human beings as well as between humans and God and the entire cosmos, from ancestors and other spirits to animals, plants and every other thing in existence. These dynamic relationships involve mutual exchanges of the “vital energy”—which Magesa also calls “vital power” or “vital force” (cf. Rahner’s “life-force” or “dynamic force”)—in everything that exists, for “nothing exists as mere matter; everything ‘lives’ fundamentally as spirit-force within matter.”  

This is something more than the animism that has frequently been attributed to African spirituality, and different from the spiritualism that is occasionally ascribed to it.  

Magesa does concede, however, that some observers of the animism school have a valid insight,


128. Regarding the latter, Magesa notes that for Africans “the spiritual is not outside the agent, as in spiritualism.” Vital energy is “always embodied, personalized, or personified,” and the primary focus is not on the spirits of the dead, but on human beings here and now: “The person does not exist outside of [the transforming flow of energy] but right within, or even at the center of it. This is what makes every disposition, every word, every act, good or bad, of spiritual consequence.” *What Is Not Sacred?*, 40.

As for animism, if one means by it the belief that every natural thing (plant, animal, rock, lightning, etc.) has life or a soul (anima) and can influence human events, then this is a somewhat limited and skewed view of animism in African spirituality. It does not account sufficiently for human agency nor for the belief in God or the central role of ancestors. Magesa also says that the animism label tends to imply, erroneously, that Africans worship the spirits in matter, whereas a much more accurate view is that “all spirits demand a sense of awe from human beings because they are so proximate to … the substances that humans need and use to live.” Respect, and in some cases reverence, is not the same as worship. For example, while African spirituality would not condone hunting or fishing simply for sport or recreation out of respect for the spirits of the animals or fish, which would be offended and lead to distorted relationships, these activities are not taboo for the sake of nourishment and survival. Thus Magesa finds that European observers who applied the animism label lacked the “intellectual-analytical categories to name [African spirituality] properly.” Furthermore, he says, the strong, negative connotations that came with the term animism—notions of the primitive, tribal, irrational—require us to avoid this term. *What Is Not Sacred?*, 24–25, 30–31, 37.

Other belief systems that have sometimes been associated or equated with African spirituality include fetishism and pantheism. Here, however, I have briefly addressed spiritualism, because Magesa does, and animism, again because Magesa does, but also because it is by far the most common designation and frankly closer to what is manifest in African spirituality than the others.
namely that “from the African point of view, all reality is spiritual because it is linked together by spiritual power and is connected to mystery.”

The exchange of vital energy that constitutes the relational aspect of African spirituality, according to Magesa, “is primordial and is generally understood to be positive … helping the universe to exist harmoniously in and with all its constituent components.” Within this universe, however, there is a “hierarchical range of vital energies.” Human beings have great responsibility for how these interact for universal harmony “because they represent creation as conscious of itself.” As such they must be especially solicitous with regard to relationships with God and the ancestors, who are “the guardians of vital power.” In §3.2, I look at some ways in which this is done, but here I briefly discuss some of the principal players or components that interact in the African cosmos and why an exchange of vital energy between them is “generally understood to be positive” or conducive to universal harmony.

Magesa notes that the African cosmos is “a composite of divine, spirit, human, animate and inanimate elements, hierarchically perceived, but directly related, and always interacting with each other.” At the top of this hierarchy is the Divine Force or God, clearly powerful and active but also mysterious and inscrutable. God is not “withdrawn” or “idle” (otiosus) or “hidden” (abscoditus), according to Magesa. Nonetheless, he says very little more than this about God, and near the end of his book on African spirituality, he merely asserts: “The

132. Magesa, What Is Not Sacred?, 94. Magesa contends that a mistaken conception persists in scholarship of God’s self-removal from the world at the beginning of time. He notes that African myths do suggest that originally “God was at one with creation, living in intimate unity with it” and that “on account of some folly on the part of humans or one or another of the creatures” that intimate relationship ended. However, he argues that the myths present a “divine physical separation from the visible world” and not “a world without God.” God is still “powerfully present” but “now generally unseen” and these myths are meant to portray or explain “the human longing for God.” What Is Not Sacred?, 94. (Italics in original.)
foundation of the vital force that makes universal existence possible is God, whose being the human mind can never completely fathom. God is God.”\textsuperscript{133} Such treatment of God is not atypical, and in fact where more is sometimes provided one can begin to suspect Christian or Muslim influence. Underlining the sheer mystery of God, moreover, one finds some strange and perhaps surprising representations and descriptions—not unlike Rahner’s “the abyss,” “the night,” “that mysterious, silent and inconceivable thing.” A few of these from southern Africa will be noted in §4.4.

Along with God’s utter mystery, however, God is also known as “the ultimate guardian of the moral order of the universe,” and is never blamed for misfortune or believed to cause evil. On the contrary, God’s holiness, benevolence and justice are assumed and to question these is simply “ridiculous” according to Magesa. Moreover, God is approached directly when the human community faces “limit experiences”—calamities such as drought, famine, disease, premature death. At such times and in some cultures, even though only certain elders can utter the name of God on behalf of the community, God is found to be “solicitous of humanity” and will intervene in ways that are parental, to correct and protect with loving kindness. In some African cultures, this then gives rise to a rich variety of names for God, but in many God is viewed and most honoured simply as the “Elder” or “Great Ancestor.”\textsuperscript{134}

If God is revered as the Great Ancestor, it is perhaps not surprising that the next highest beings in the hierarchy of the cosmos are the ancestors. It would be very difficult to overestimate the importance of ancestors in African spirituality, for “the ancestors see to it that the divine order of existence is observed” and thus “form the axis of African spiritual orientation.” They are the foremost mediators between God and human beings. They are the “living dead” who are

\textsuperscript{133} Magesa, \textit{What Is Not Sacred?}, 195.

\textsuperscript{134} Magesa, \textit{African Religion}, 40, 41, 44–46. For example, in Zulu, the primary name for God is \textit{Nkulunkulu} (the Greatest/Highest One), who led the first people out of the earth from a marshy area with reeds, but who is also seen as the first man and therefore an ancestor. In Sotho, the name for God is \textit{Molimo}, which is the same word used for ancestor (\textit{molimo}), although there is some dispute over whether these two words belong in the same noun class.
biologically and spiritually connected to the family, lineage or people from which they come. As elders who have passed to a higher rank of honour and power, they act as the primary protectors of society and guardians of moral behaviour. They are always present and are the most direct source of both punishment and blessing. “Human attention is concentrated on them as the bringers of fulfillment in life,” says Magesa, “their presence is desired and welcome … [and] everyone’s participation in the rituals as a form of communication and communion with them is expected.” Indeed, so central is the “thought-area” occupied by the ancestors that Magesa states “it is not possible to have an inner understanding of God without the ancestors.”

This has proven true in African spirituality whether people have remained within their indigenous belief systems or have converted to other religions, including Christianity.

In addition to the ancestral spirits, there are also other spirits that play a role in African spirituality. Some of these will figure in examples in the next chapter, but here I will briefly mention four kinds that are widely experienced in Africa and discussed by Magesa. One kind are the spirits of the dead, sometimes called the “dead-dead” (in contrast to the “living dead”), which did not acquire the status of ancestors—usually because they did not lead an exemplary life, or were separated from the community and forgotten, or were improperly buried. The dead-dead often cause trouble for the living. Another kind are what are sometimes called “nature spirits.” These are spirits of animals, plants, and other natural phenomena such as mountains, rivers, lightning, mist. Especially important among these spirits are the totems of different clans. Totems are powerful symbols of clan unity and their spirits are honoured and appeased for the external protection and internal bonds they vouchsafe their human community. A third kind of spirit, perhaps related to nature spirits, are what might be called “familiars.” Whether assuming some kind of humanoid shape or that of an animal, familiar spirits usually act under the direction of a diviner or sorcerer, or may be seen an extension of them, and their deeds are often mischievous or terrifying. Finally, and perhaps most difficult to describe, there are “shadows.”

Sometimes they appear like familiars and at other times are like an extension or layer of human beings where physical and spiritual reality meet and where humans are particularly sensitive or vulnerable.136

If African spirituality is the “struggle to be in touch with the mystery of life” and is pursued and expressed by humans in a way that is “absolutely relational and completely unitary,” one may still wonder what specifically its purpose is—what is required of humans or what they are aiming for in their spiritual exercises? The answer, for Magesa, is summed up in *Ubuntu*, which he translates as “full or perfect humanity.”137 *Ubuntu* is an Nguni word from southern Africa but it has its equivalents throughout sub-Saharan Africa.138 Magesa finds that *Ubuntu* is manifest in two broad categories of relationship: interpersonally, where respect and care for others are paramount, *Ubuntu* is seen in acts of hospitality, generosity, tolerance, patience, and cooperation; and intrapersonally, *Ubuntu* is seen in the spiritual integrity of one’s feelings, judgements, decisions, and actions. Together, says Magesa, “these give personality to the individual, not only in the psychosocial sense of personal worth and dignity, but in tandem with it, in the more important sense of the spiritual depth of communion with the whole of life and the entire creation.” *Ubuntu* is the opposite of individualism; it believes and declares that “motho ke motho ka batho” (Sotho: a person is a person through or in association with people) and that “sumus

136. Magesa does not treat of shadows as a category of spirits, although in *What Is Not Sacred?* he does have a chapter entitled “You Are Your Shadow,” in which he equates a person’s shadow with his or her personality, and suggests that it reveals a person’s “inner identity” which is shaped by relationships with others (42). In different parts of Africa, however, shadows seem to be more than this. They are often described as strong or weak and they can be accessed and manipulated through “outer” parts of the body or through things that are tangentially related, such as nails, hair, clothing a person has worn, or used bathing water. They may also be sensed as a presence. (See Udelhoven, *Unseen Worlds*, 254–58.)

In Sotho spirituality, shadow (*seriti*) can mean something like a spirit but it also refers to someone’s authority or respectability. Moreover, it may once have had a more central place, perhaps similar to *Ubuntu*. Nussbaum translates *seriti* as “personality” or “soul force” and notes that in three of the churches he studied, robes, cords, staffs, water and the Bible were variously used as “empowering” agents for *seriti* or to prevent *seriti* from becoming “light or inconsequential.” Stan Nussbaum, “Toward Theological Dialogue with Independent Churches: A Study of Five Congregations in Lesotho” (DTh dissertation, University of South Africa, 1985), 133.


138. Nguni languages include Ndebele, Swati, Xhosa, Zulu, and others. The Sotho word for *Ubuntu* is *Botho*. For a list of some others, see Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred?*, 13.
ergo sum” (we are, therefore I am). One works at Ubuntu intersubjectively throughout life; it is “something that must be earned” and it contributes directly to one’s status in the community both here and as an ancestor. What Ubuntu ultimately means is authentic participation with others in the good life ordained by God, where one finds purpose, belonging, and spiritual fulfillment.139

3.2 Agency and Spirit Possession in the Cosmic Community

The overview in the previous section introduced some of the concepts and components of African spirituality. In this section, I discuss some of the ways in which the principal components or spirit-forces interrelate, either to safeguard universal harmony through the proper exchange of vital energies or to restore that harmony by strengthening vital energy that has been weakened.

Human agency is a central feature of African spirituality, and the environment or arena in which humans act is the cosmic community, teeming with life and energy. There is nothing static or empty about the exercise or context of African spirituality.140 Moreover, active involvement in the community is not optional for spiritual fulfillment: “Spirituality in Africa is seen as human participation in the total, universal existence, the whole of human existential experience in the world… Humanity must constantly interact intelligently and compassionately with all spiritual powers for its own good and that of the entire universe.” Elsewhere Magesa notes that “life is not a ‘spectator sport’ or something to be experienced by proxy. What is expected for one to grow into Ubuntu in Africa and become fully human is to participate in the dance of life… [This] includes everything that is connected with nurturing life in the world.”141

If this view of spirituality with its implications for human agency in the cosmos sounds rather

140. Magesa notes that “spirituality is more of an activity than a passive quality. Rather than being a ‘state of being,’ it is a way of behaving or, rather, relating. It involves dynamic relationships between visible and invisible powers. Better yet, it entails the mutual exchanges of energies among all beings.” What Is Not Sacred?, 26.
grand or all-encompassing, or, as Rahner would put it, in danger of “signifying everything and therefore nothing,” it is rapidly brought down to earth and made thoroughly practical by two factors. One is the African acceptance of and respect for differing roles that each person in “the dance of life” is given, and the other is the particular situation or season calling for human participation and indicating the type of “dance” to be performed.

It was noted in §3.1 that there is a “hierarchical range of vital energies” in the cosmos. Just as this is true of all the constituent parts of the cosmos, it is also true of the human link, which has special responsibilities in this vast chain of being. People are at different stages of life, and some people have also acquired or been gifted with more vital energy than others. With greater vital energy, usually as one gains status as an elder, comes greater responsibility for the health of the community. In general, children are seen as being in formation for their full spiritual responsibilities in the community, be it the family, clan, nation, or beyond. However, once they have been initiated into adulthood the performance of their responsibilities in the community becomes vital. There is much that each human adult can do to acquire more vital energy and exercise Ubuntu, but each also has a given role to play. For example, a woman must marry and bear children so as to ensure the continuity of life; she must be a good mother and a faithful wife; and she must seek to become an elder who is respected for her diligence, resourcefulness, maturity and wisdom. Similarly, a man must marry and beget children; he must protect and provide for his family and be kind and patient as well as strong; and he must seek to become an elder whose advice is weighty and who earns respect through generous community service.

There are also specialists who have roles that are vital for the continuity and health of the community. Some specialists are hereditary, others are elected or appointed by the people or community elders, and still others are called by the ancestors. Among these specialists are two broad categories commonly found throughout sub-Saharan Africa, namely, chiefs and medicine-doctors. While chiefs are often responsible for ensuring that the community’s mores are observed and that the proper rituals are performed, doctors often know how and when these should be
carried out. Moreover, if there is any kind of trouble or disease disrupting the health or well-being of the community, chiefs will often take the lead, consult with others, and call on the appropriate doctor. There are many kinds of medicine-docors in Africa, including a broad category that will here be referred to as diviners.

The rituals performed as part of African spirituality are complex and vary according to culture and religion, but in general one can say that some rituals are for maintaining the good life, which is the health and harmony of the community in all dimensions, and others are for restoring it.\textsuperscript{142}

As complex and varied as all these rituals and requirements may be, however, their purpose is one that Rahner would appreciate, for according to Magesa:

\begin{quote}
The ultimate intention of ritual is to transform human experience, not to escape from it. It is to bring out the transcendental significance of the everyday, which humans tend to forget precisely because of its (transcendental) nature. The process of ritual is aimed at giving back, of returning reality to where it originally and ultimately belongs, in the hands of God through the ancestors.\textsuperscript{143}
\end{quote}

Magesa also points out that “the ideal for any human being and society is always to forge stronger relationships with the strongest vital forces, in the sense of rendering to each according to its ability to deliver life’s benefits.” He continues, “If obeisance to a living elder, say a parent, is a spiritual act because it fosters the strength of the elder’s life in the younger person, so much more does the respect of an ancestor. By virtue of his or her higher position in the hierarchy of powers, an ancestor possesses more influence than the elder.” Ancestors are pivotal players in the cosmos because they know “the language of God and the spirits and human language, making them uniquely equipped to unite the two worlds together.” It is for this reason, says

\textsuperscript{142} Some rituals have to do with the major rites of passage, such as birth, naming, initiation, marriage, childbearing, death, burial; others are linked to the seasons, such as the new moon, seed-cleansing, harvest; and others yet are occasional, such as establishing a new village, healing disease, opening a business, preventing lightning, preparing for war, thanking the ancestors. Ritual expressions are also extremely varied, but common forms may include singing, chanting, drumming, dance, prayer, libations, sacrifices, feasts, trances; and these may require special material objects such as clothing, medicines, cords, instruments, staffs, masks, plants, seeds, animals, bones, beer, wine, water, fire, which have symbolic and sometimes also sacramental significance.

\textsuperscript{143} Magesa, \textit{What Is Not Sacred?}, 50.
Magesa, that “of all practical spiritual activities of consequence, ancestral cult in its various ritual forms is the most prevalent and structured all across black Africa.”

It is precisely here, moreover, that spirit possession comes to the fore, for it is through spirit possession that the perichoresis of vital energy flowing between all members of the cosmic community is most evident. According to Magesa:

the most radical way that the spirit world encounters and communicates with humanity is through possession, when the spirit powers take over certain individuals and speak through them. This is the nature of divination or the charism of revealing the secrets of the spirit world.”

In §3.4, I will explore how African spirituality involves all responsible adults in spirit possession, at least implicitly. Here, however, I present a few more observations from Magesa on the purpose and nature of spirit possession in its more explicit forms.

Spirits possess humans (or other creatures) in one of two ways. Either they are invited to possess them, or they unilaterally possess them without invitation. In the former case, it is usually part of a ritual to be in communion with the spirit world or to divine causes and solutions to problems in the community. In the latter case, it is often the beginning of a diviner’s vocation or it is part of a warning, healing, or reintegration process for someone or some group of people experiencing an intractable illness or problem. Spirits thus can “possess any creature for a certain purpose,” and they can “be induced by a specialist to seize things or people.”

As much as they are respected and even feared by people because of their esoteric knowledge, diviners do not heal or vouchsafe the good life themselves; they are instruments of the spirits. Possession illustrates this very clearly because, in the course of divining, they or those they help surrender their own personalities; they are transformed or taken over by the spirits which then act

visibly through them: “the possessed individual acts at the whim of the possessing spirit, often in an altered state of consciousness in the form of trance or ecstasy, or simply through abnormal behavior.” Nonetheless, Magesa notes that “a certain receptivity is needed on the human side,” and he expresses this in terms of freely cooperating or letting go: “Surrender to the discretion of the powers of life, or swimming with their current, is the only wise path that provides insight into the mystery of the good life.” As with the transcendent experience of Mystery in Rahner, the human subject thus has a choice regarding participation. As Magesa puts it, “In possession, the presence of the spirit is always something to be reckoned with whether it is desired and sought after or, conversely, feared and resisted.”

There are numerous ways to induce spirit possession; however, it is worth noting that one very common way, especially when a community is inviting possession, is by singing and dancing. These activities “transform the personality” and participants become “something more.” Often a participant mimics animal, occupational or other symbolic movements and sounds, and thereby combines “the spiritual, verbal, and visual in one performance so that, in a sense, the performer becomes the expression of the energy of the object that he or she impersonates.” In short, says Magesa, “nothing is as effective in coaxing the spirits to join human activity in terms of possession, divination, augury, or casting away witchcraft as song and dance. Prayer is best expressed by song and dance.”

Once possessed, persons manifest their possession in a wide variety of ways, all of which indicate “an extraordinary presence.” These might take the form of trance, ecstasy, incoherent speech, prophecy, visions, involuntary movements, falling down as though dead, and so on. In addition, if the possession is initiated by spirits, it might include dreams, illness, other voices, or

148. Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred?*, 77, 117. Magesa says that “dance and song supersede word as an expression of deep joy, health, power, anger, and even pity.” He notes the “ubiquitous” role they played in the anti-apartheid campaign in South Africa, and he concludes, “The very poor all over Africa sing and dance as an expression of hope for redemption from their pitiful conditions” (117).
extraordinary physical actions taking over persons. While such manifestations may be considered prayer or communion with God through the ancestors and other spirits, Magesa does not hesitate to point out the “practical, almost utilitarian accent” of possession: it has the purpose of enabling the perichoresis of vital energy, as seen earlier. However, because “the depth and weight of meaning render … [human] language inadequate to express the experience satisfactorily,” it normally requires interpretation “by the diviner or by an adept surrogate.”149 Finally, then, following a correct interpretation or discernment process and possibly the stipulation of further action to be taken, disease may be eradicated, relationships healed, fertility bestowed, families shielded, good fortune granted, communal harmony restored.

3.3 Recognizing Witchcraft

It would be fundamentally irresponsible, in my view, for anyone to discuss spirit possession at any length in the African context without recognizing and addressing the widespread, deeply entrenched phenomenon of witchcraft. In fact, I have never read or heard a serious account of spirit possession or of the spirit world of Africans which did not tackle this topic in some way. Certainly Magesa is no exception. “Witchcraft,” he says, “must be understood as part of the mystery of the human person…. As Africans see it, it is ubiquitous; it permeates all areas of life and is an ever-present reality in people’s political, social, and economic organizations.” Moreover, Magesa does not pull any punches in describing its insidious, negative effects: “Witchcraft is the enemy of life”; it is “the greatest wrong or destructiveness on earth, of which all other wrongs are but variations, emanations, or manifestations”; it is the “incarnation of evil”; it is “the ultimate sin against the ancestors”; and it is “the ultimate expression of possession by … spirits of evil.”150

With such an introduction, one may think it would be too difficult to identify any areas of

ambivalence, let alone any positive terrain, in proximity to witchcraft that would perhaps signify a different kind of possession by spirits. However, Magesa does do this, as I will show in §3.4. Here, though, it is important to understand, first, why so much attention and energy is devoted to dealing with witchcraft and, second, what witchcraft really is.

In a recent book entitled *Unseen Worlds*, a German Catholic priest working in Zambia wrote that he found it difficult to engage with the witchcraft he frequently encountered, not because of any European skepticism, but because of the “violence” surrounding it as well as the impact that all the intense “emotions, suspicions and fears” had on everyone involved.151 Magesa also recognizes the problem of fear and violence in relation to witchcraft. He says that for Africans there are “two dreaded things: that one might be accused of witchcraft, or that one will be harmed by witchcraft,” and he goes on to describe the violent deaths that people convicted of witchcraft face, including spearing, beating, strangling, burning and banishment from the community, which is “the equivalent of death for the individual.”152 With such consequences and with the sheer mystery surrounding witchcraft, it is little wonder that the average person simply tries to avoid any association with it and chooses not to be too curious about probing the wider spiritual context in which it operates.

Witchcraft manifests itself in many ways, and often these are not different from other signs of spirit possession—positive, negative, or ambiguous. Moreover, many of the signs may be observed as pertaining either to witches (male or female) or to victims. They cover a wide variety of paranormal phenomena, physical afflictions, aberrant behaviours and adversities from nature.153 As such, it is perhaps not surprising that Magesa concludes, “Witchcraft constitutes the

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151. Udelhoven, *Unseen Worlds*, 16–19. Udelhoven describes here how people whom he knew well were subjected to accusations and mob justice; humiliated by being stripped naked, or dragged along a road, or bathed in mud; killed by poisoning, burning, or beating, and their property taken or burned. Such events prompted him along with others to explore and apply a new pastoral theology. (I too have known people, both in Zambia and Lesotho, who have been implicated in witchcraft and killed in different ways. The phenomenon is not uncommon.)


153. For example, as seen earlier, they may include dreams, visions, trances, incoherent speech, other voices,
perversion of everything that is good and desired in human beings; it is the personification or incarnation of all that is anti-life, and therefore the ultimate enemy of life on earth.”

While there are many possible ways to prevent, detect and counteract witchcraft, ultimately there is only one way to deal with genuine witches: they must be removed from society. This is almost always done either by execution or banishment, while their property is burned or confiscated so as to remove completely their influence and memory. Such measures can appear harsh, and yet the perception is widespread in Africa that one cannot negotiate with “hardcore evil.” Sadly, one also hears of people who are falsely accused, resulting in terrible injustice and suffering, but as Magesa points out, false accusations of witchcraft are also severely punished.

As for the witchcraft itself, fortunately it can be diagnosed and overcome in many cases, despite the difficulty and disruption this entails. According to Magesa, “no ingenuity or energy in Africa is spared in trying to combat witchcraft” and “most persons in the social hierarchy responsible for the welfare of life at any level are actors in this struggle.” To correctly detect witchcraft, to discover the identity of the witch and the spirits involved, and to prescribe the proper antidote or remedy normally requires the services of a diviner as well as the cooperation of the afflicted person or of that person’s family or community. Diviners will invite possession by spirits either to learn directly from them what is going on or to read the behaviour of objects or animals through augury. From the spirits or the oracle, diviners may then also know what remedy to prescribe. The afflicted person or community could be told to obtain charms or amulets, apply or

extraordinary physical movements, vomiting, belching, collapsing, falling unconscious. They may take the form of personal affliction such as illness, impotence, barrenness, sudden insanity, premature death. They may manifest as aberrant behaviour, such as excessive secrecy, going about at night, sullenness, meanness, lack of hospitality, disrespect, non-conformity, incest, bestiality, shape-shifting, irregular placement of human waste, drinking blood, eating human organs or flesh. Finally, signs of witchcraft may include adversity from or in relation to nature, including drought, poisoning, lightning strikes, crop failure, poor fishing, stock disease, or ominous encounters with familiars or with animals like snakes, owls, and hyenas. Magesa, African Religion, 120, 172–73, 182, 185–88, 214.

consume protective medicines, offer a sacrifice, observe certain taboos, perform a specific ritual, seek forgiveness, undergo exorcism. In these cases of divination and deliverance, participants are accessing the vital energy of benevolent powers in the spirit world, usually ancestors, or the energy in plants and animals, and healing or reintegration follows.  

From the above description, it should be clear that witchcraft is not a rare, remote or vague phenomenon. It is found wherever there are weightier cases of affliction, disharmony, and disease. As Magesa puts it:

The negation of growth into goodness, depending on how serious it is, is described in African spirituality as witchcraft. To the extent witchcraft grows, Ubuntu diminishes, so that, in the end, avoiding witchcraft and pursuing goodness or Ubuntu are one and same struggle. Theologically, they belong in a similar system.

As the counterpart of Ubuntu in African spirituality, then, witchcraft not only features prominently as something “out there” to avoid, something external to the subject; it is also part of the human subject, at least in latent form. In the struggle to be more authentically human, one must strive to ensure that the power of witchcraft remains dormant or “cool,” as it is sometimes expressed. For as Magesa notes, “the power of witchcraft is not a prerogative of only certain individuals. Every human being has this potential power, so that in fact, every human being is potentially a witch.” Active or “hot” witchcraft is usually seen as being either inherited, bought, or “caught,” but in all cases it is a negation or distortion of the good and ultimately a kind of anti-social selfishness or sin against the community. At any time—and this is its “horror”—witchcraft may overcome an insufficiently vigilant or protected individual or community in an attack from the outside, as in a disease or curse, or from the inside, as in an upsurge of greed or some other distortion of authentic humanity. Then the “witchcraft substance” takes hold of its victim, “causing friction in the physical and moral fiber of the individual, society, or the universe


at large.” In the ensuing struggle to be rid of witchcraft and restore peace, the outcome “all depends on how the exchange of energy is negotiated by humanity.”

### 3.4 Discerning Mysticism

Locating serious disruptions and distortions of the good life in witchcraft, in the way and on the scale it is done in African spirituality, is admittedly quite foreign to other peoples, especially those in the West. Many would prefer either to ignore or dismiss the phenomenon of witchcraft in Africa or to explain it in other ways, through different lenses or disciplines. For example, psychology may propose theories of hysteria, dissociation, psychosis, schizophrenia; physiology may suggest a lack of certain nutrients such as calcium or thiamine, or conditions such as epilepsy; sociology and anthropology may point to theories of deprivation, compensation, counter-hegemony. Theologians like Magesa are familiar with many of these theories and do not discount their possible validity and application, but they are also aware of their limitations. By addressing witchcraft *theologically*, Magesa is able to locate it in the same framework as *Ubuntu* and thus to express it in terms that are germane to African spirituality.

In my view, Rahner would appreciate Magesa’s approach, for he took a similar one when he made it clear that he was approaching some contemporary experiences of transcendence and mysticism, not “with the tools of the psychology, history and phenomenology of religion,” but *theologically*. In this way, he was able to remark, for example, that theological error could result either when too much attention is given to what is merely “psychologically distinct,” to “parapsychological occurrences” or “natural altered states of consciousness,” or when phenomena of “religious enthusiasm” or “such things as prophecies, proclamations, missions”

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161. In fact, Magesa is well aware of what he is doing. After presenting a few of these other theories, he writes: “These explanations may, no doubt, be the case, but there is a danger … that ‘psychologizing’ the phenomenon too much robs it of its essential theological character… The fundamental reason for sorcery and witchcraft as explanations of disease and other afflictions is theological.” *African Religion*, 190.
are categorically devalued.\textsuperscript{162} Psychology, sociology and other disciplines have their place and can be very illuminating—indeed in Africa there have been clearly documented correlations, for example, between periods of major social upheaval and an upsurge in witchcraft\textsuperscript{163}—but without knowing why all anthropology is theology and vice versa, without appreciating the defining importance of transcendent experience, Rahner says that human beings will be stuck on their little islands of so-called knowledge. Embrace Mystery! he urges. “Give these deeper realities of the spirit a chance.” Initially it may not be clear if they are “the absurd void of death engulfing us, or the blessed holy night which is already illumined from within”—witchcraft or the wellspring of \textit{Ubuntu}—but apart from the transcendent experience of Mystery one may never discover what it is to be authentically human, infused with vital energy and vitally interconnected.

I did not refer to Rahner in §3.3, not because I think he would be unable to recognize or appreciate the reality of what Africans experience as witchcraft, but rather because I wanted simply to acknowledge it and then move on to what is central to my thesis, the mystical experience in positive spirit possession. And here, I find the theology of Rahner once more comes critically to the fore due to its emphasis on the discernment of spirits. For when one begins to look closer at the phenomenon of spirit possession in African spirituality there is a strong element of ambiguity—just as there can be in Rahner’s primal, pre-categorial transcendent experience of Mystery.

In §3.5, I will address the fact of different interpretations of spirit possession mediated by different religious frameworks. While some of these interpretations are decidedly black-and-white, it is important to know that traditionally spirit possession was often felt to be ambiguous. Magesa gives a good example of this from a Tanzanian Catholic parish where he was doing

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\textsuperscript{163.} Such was the case, for example, in the 1940s “Liretlo Crisis” in Lesotho, where upheaval caused in part by the restructuring of the chieftaincy under British rule coincided with a major upsurge in medicine murders.
some research. He found a distinct generational gap among parishioners when it came to certain elements of tradition, including divination, protective charms, witchcraft and spirit possession. Younger respondents were “vehemently opposed” to these things, while older ones were “very cautious,” arguing that these elements are not in themselves evil but depend on how and why they are employed.\(^\text{164}\) That the latter group saw a place for the discernment of spirits should not come as a surprise since witchcraft and *Ubuntu* are part of “one and same struggle.” If, as Magesa says, there is “no aspect of culture, however small or insignificant, where the power and influence of witchcraft is absent,” then “witchcraft in general must be understood as part of the mystery of the human person … as ‘a mysterious power’ … that resides in, and with, human beings.” Seen in this way, the lines between “malevolent witches, sorcerers, medicine-doctors, and herbalists” may be quite thin, for all are believed to have “mystical power.”\(^\text{165}\)

Nonetheless, it is within this spiritual cosmos, where the presence and activity of spiritual powers are mysterious and often ambiguous, that one can experience Divine Reality in mysticism. “In the African indigenous context,” says Magesa, “the mystical experience is evident in the practice of divination and the occurrence of positive spirit possession.” Like Rahner, he finds that when one opens oneself to Mystery, and does not try to deny or retreat from it, or to manipulate it for selfish ends, one experiences God, the source or foundation of reality and the good. He writes:

> Although human cooperation is required in the experience if it is not to dissipate, mysticism involves the *before* and the *beyond* … [It] is before and beyond human ingenuity. It calls for surrender to a higher, unifying divine power as the principal element in the spiritual life on which everything else is dependent. We have seen that the healer in Africa will constantly utter the disclaimer, “It is God who heals.”

\(^\text{164}\) Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 39. In the same place, Magesa says that one older person even went into some detail on witches: “‘Some witches are good but others are bad. The good ones do not lie, antagonize or create hatred between people in the community. And if you have a problem to which they have no solution, they tell you the truth. The bad ones pretend to know everything.’”

\(^\text{165}\) Magesa, *African Religion*, 181–83. Moreover, some of the rituals and substances used both by witches and diviners are the same or very similar. According to Magesa, “all medicines contain (or are) a power that ought to be used for the benefit of humanity, but can also be put to detrimental use by immoral individuals.” *African Religion*, 210. Similarly, the performance of certain rituals “not only leads to possession, but it can also identify a situation of possession and help to remove it.” *What Is Not Sacred?*, 77.
Importantly, on the same page, Magesa notes that “mysticism, understood as deep union of love with God, can be arrived at only through deep union of love with people, never in separation from them.”\textsuperscript{166} Here, then, are some of the principal elements of mysticism in African spirituality according to Magesa: it is mysterious and transcendent, before and beyond human capacities; it requires both cooperation and surrender, in acknowledgement of and possession by a greater spiritual power; it is moral in that it is experienced positively as a union with divine love (which Magesa also calls “love-justice”\textsuperscript{167}); it is embodied, for spirits require material beings to possess in order to express their wishes; it is practical, for it is manifest above all as healing; and it is communal, for it can only be experienced in unity with others for the benefit of all.

A little more elaboration on the last points is in order since these elements are interconnected and may be seen as especially distinctive for African mysticism. I begin with the practical aspect of healing. Healing is focused on disease, and disease, in its widest possible (African) meaning, is “ultimately a moral-spiritual issue beyond what the apparent cause may seem to be.”\textsuperscript{168} Whether one is referring to physical illness, crop failure, unemployment, infertility, troubling dreams, family discord, or a host of other problems, they are often viewed simply as “disease” and experienced immanently,\textsuperscript{169} sometimes even manifesting in specific organs of the body where spirits take up their abode. But always, according to Magesa, disease is ascribed to “moral conflicts within the human community.” Positive spirit possession is concerned with healing, that is, with restoring right relationships within the human and cosmic communities. The diviner is above all a healer who becomes possessed on behalf of a client or community: “in the moment of

\textsuperscript{166} Magesa, \textit{What Is Not Sacred?}, 112, 135.
\textsuperscript{167} Magesa, \textit{What Is Not Sacred?}, 113.
\textsuperscript{168} Magesa, \textit{What Is Not Sacred?}, 93. Elsewhere, Magesa says that “any lack of community harmony is ‘disease.’” \textit{Anatomy of Inculturation}, 81. He also states that while the power of nature in medicine is obvious to Africans, what is also important is that medicine powerfully demonstrates “the interconnectedness of, and interdependence between, humanity and the rest of creation.” \textit{African Religion}, 210.
\textsuperscript{169} Magesa notes that the “immanence of spiritual powers, including God, is … powerfully felt in African religious consciousness.” Indeed, “sometimes people wish that spirits were not so near or so immanent.” \textit{What Is Not Sacred?}, p. 95.
ecstasy during the exercise of healing, the individuality of the healer may cease to exist, as it were, so that the possessing power truly encompasses and acts through him or her.” And any healing that ensues is attributed to the divine: “it is God alone who heals, not the healer or the herbs, which are only the instruments of the spirits.” Here, then, the apparent distance between an individual’s mystical experience of “deep union of love with God” and an almost utilitarian focus on healing and communal health is not an issue, for mysticism in spirit possession easily encompasses both. “The point to note in all cases of possession,” says Magesa, “is that although the devotion the spirit seeks is manifested by the individual, the lessons imparted [or healings granted] are intended for a larger audience of the family or community.”

Therefore, while this is what Rahner called a “frankly visionary” kind of mysticism, it is also explicitly purposeful and communal. As Rahner put it, the mystical experience can convince the human subject of “the ultimate data of revelation” and also be “adapted to the historical situation imposed on us” and allow the “transmission of insights and feelings from one person to another.”

One can already imagine that within African spirituality there are some persons who are privileged with mystical experiences like those of Rahner’s classical authorities, persons who have experiences of “deep union of love with God.” One can also see many possibilities for mysticism of the masses, especially given the great African yearning for and openness to holistic healing. Examples of both types will be given in Chapter 4. But what of Rahner’s everyday mysticism? Magesa speaks to this right after indicating that “the mystical experience is evident in the practice of divination and the occurrence of positive spirit possession.” He says:

Moreover, to the extent that the presence of the ancestors and spirits is felt, every responsible adult is also in a sense a mystic in this tradition, especially as far as the responsibility of prayer for the well-being of the community under him or her is concerned, since this should bring him or her in communion with spiritual energies.

African spirituality thus embraces the transcendence of everyday mysticism; it is well-disposed

to the idea that every responsible adult member of society, through the prayerful exercise of *Ubuntu*, opens herself or himself to an infusion of vital energy from the ancestors and spirits and God for communal healing and health.

I return finally to the requirement for a discernment of spirits. According to Magesa, African spirituality has to do “with the quality of people’s relational life,” including “economics, politics, and general social relations” and ultimately “the whole of creation.” When it comes to spirit possession, discernment of this “quality” can be complicated. In the next chapter, I will indicate how a communal, intersubjective discernment process over time can lead to a broad consensus as to what promotes *Ubuntu* or diminishes it. But here I conclude with the discernment criteria that Magesa advances. Not only are they consonant with “all the normal rules” for discernment that Rahner suggests (see §2.3) but, interestingly and similarly, they draw on the Judeo-Christian tradition, thereby anticipating the kind of inculturation Magesa promotes in a context of religious pluralism. Initially at least, the “discernment of spiritual powers” is not complicated as far as Magesa is concerned:

The spirit of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” is the spirit of *Ubuntu*, while the spirit of “immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of fury, acts of selfishness, dissensions, factions, occasions of envy, drinking bouts, orgies, and the like” (Gal. 5:19–24; 1 Cor. 13) is one of witchcraft. These human life-attitudes define human spiritual orientations.

But Magesa then goes on to indicate the importance of not being distracted or fooled by rituals or non-essentials, by what Rahner would call “parapsychological occurrences” or the phenomena of “religious enthusiasm” or techniques for “interior absorption” in natural mysticism. Rather, Magesa says, one must learn to discern the spirits like the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures,


“where cult is subordinated to love-justice.” This methodology will be key in Chapter 4, for only where love-justice is evident may one identify instances of mysticism in positive spirit possession.

3.5 Religious Pluralism and Dynamic Inculturation

In his book on African spirituality, Laurenti Magesa quotes a whole paragraph from Pope Benedict XVI’s Apostolic Exhortation *Africæ Munus* (2011). Although it is one of only two paragraphs dealing with interreligious dialogue between Christianity and traditional African religions, its main focus is the “revival” of witchcraft, which Benedict describes as a “scourge” creating “paralyzing bonds of subjection” and leading to “practices … that are incompatible with Christian teaching.” As a corollary it also addresses “the problem of ‘dual affiliation’” and recommends “profound catechesis and inculturation” to meet this “challenge.” While Magesa does not contest the pope’s assertion of a revival of witchcraft, he does tackle the supposed problem of dual affiliation. In fact, he uses it as an opportunity to promote what he sees as the most promising example of inculturation in Africa:

In practice, however, and contrary to this view [of Pope Benedict], the acceptance of dual religious belonging among African Christians is now evident and has been institutionalized, without apology or embarrassment but with pride (as in the case of Michael Amaladoss above) by the African Initiated Churches (AICs)… [These churches have] been much more practical and radical in terms of acknowledging and appropriating

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175. Benedict XVI, “Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Africæ Munus*” (Ouidah, Benin, 19 November 2011), §93, in Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred?*, 126. At a pastoral level, one can appreciate what Pope Benedict was trying to do. He was made aware of a widespread problem, he detected considerable confusion and suffering among the laity, and he suggested a way forward. The problem is that the path he recommends has in fact been tried for a long time, not only by the Catholic Church but by mission churches of all stripes, and thus far it has failed to realize “the fullness of Gospel values”—at least as they would define them. Another telling problem is that, while endorsing dialogue with traditional African religions, Benedict focuses on witchcraft, a phenomenon that these religions oppose. For authentic inculturation of “Gospel values” one would surely achieve much more by looking to the best of what these religions offer and teach, including concepts of *Ubuntu*, communal health, and cosmic harmony, but perhaps especially positive spirit possession as a direct countermeasure to witchcraft.

176. I think Magesa would say that witchcraft has always been widely practised but that it does vary in intensity depending on people’s perceptions of their health and wellbeing.
African values than … the mainline Christian denominations.¹⁷⁷

In Magesa’s view, AICs have integrated African religions and Christianity along the same lines that Michael Amaladoss, an Indian Jesuit, has integrated Hinduism and Christianity in order to become a “Hindu-Christian.” He contends that “in Africa, multiple religious belonging is not merely an academic or theoretical issue. African converts to Christianity (and Islam) have always lived it, despite strong and persistent condemnation from Christian missionary spirituality, teaching, and practice”; he agrees with Fritz Stenger who said that “the newly converted moved their most signifying practices to a hidden social space and restructured it in newly organised esoteric ways.”¹⁷⁸ In addressing the question of dual allegiance, Magesa outlines the four interreligious options put forward by Paul Knitter—replacement, fulfillment, mutuality, and acceptance. He finds that only the last two hold any promise for authentic inculturation and that Pope Benedict’s implied procedure of making African perspectives conform to Western Christian norms “inhibits genuine dialogue, innovation, and insights into the gospel evoked by the African cultural and spiritual environment.”¹⁷⁹

This brief discussion is meant to indicate that, viewed from different religious and even different intrareligious perspectives, one is entering a varied and contentious area when proposing a reconsideration of spirit possession as a primary mode of African mysticism. For the same experience of possession may be interpreted in vastly different ways,¹⁸⁰ as containing elements from the divine to the demonic, depending on whether the prism used is one of the traditional African religions or one of several major strands of Christianity (mainline, evangelical, charismatic, African independent) or one of many hybrids. What Magesa’s focus on African

¹⁸⁰. Udelhoven has described how an experience of spirit possession can even be given different interpretations by the same person when there is a focus on healing: “One and the same person may call his/her afflictions ‘demonic’ when seeking help from a Christian pastor, ‘witchcraft’ when going to a traditional healer who analyses family constellations, and ‘virus’ when seeking treatment in a modern hospital.” Unseen Worlds, 34.
spirituality has hopefully achieved is to show that despite all these different religious perspectives and interpretations, there are certain deep African experiences that perdure and that continue to manifest in the African quest to be in touch with the mystery of life.

In the next chapter, local interpretations of what is going on in the examples of Sotho transcendent experience I have chosen will be seen to vary, but I will argue that a Rahnerian typology of mysticism and discernment of spirits expressed through African spirituality yields convincing instances of mysticism—especially when the kind of radical inculturation that Magesa espouses (and that was introduced in §1.4) is brought to bear on these experiences of spirit possession. In his view, African spirituality can inspire Christian theology to “unbind the Spirit”; in fact, he is convinced that “a rich theology of the Holy Spirit … is at the basis of authentic inculturation.”

Here again, then, there is significant convergence between Magesa and Rahner, who (as seen in §2.2) said that, given the universal salvific will of God and the fact of legitimate religions other than Christianity, “a pneumatology, a teaching of the inmost, divinizing gift of grace for all human beings” may well become “the fundamental point of departure” for all theology. For his part, Magesa contends that “a fundamental act of faith in the power and performing presence of the Holy Spirit” must be brought to bear in the African context, but he notes that, to date, such an development has not been allowed to operate openly in mainstream Christianity:

[It] has been stunted by the inattentiveness of medieval-centered Christian theology, fixed overwhelmingly on a certain static understanding of God, one that has tended to weaken the horizons of divine salvific action in the world. There seems to be a tragic loss of consciousness of the Spirit, or cosmic animism in the positive sense of the concept… We might describe the current phenomenon as an underdeveloped or sick pneumatology whose equivalent in scientific endeavors is overextended materiality… [a] failure to recognize the power of the Spirit, and Divine Spirit, in human affairs and creation.

Nonetheless there is hope in phenomena such as positive spirit possession. Magesa makes it clear

that Africans “do not abandon their indigenous spirituality; it “always remains as a foundation of acceptance of any other religion.” One must therefore take the practical approach of the AICs which demonstrate that “the Spirit of God cannot be limited to one religious perspective alone.” It is the Spirit who creates “the desire of the human heart for transcendence,” who ordains that “everything should incline toward reconciliation,” and who moves “all three faiths here under discussion, Islam, Christianity, and African Religion … toward integration,” answering to the most basic yearnings for healing and reconciliation, health and community.\footnote{Magesa, \textit{What Is Not Sacred?}, 136, 191, 192.}


Chapter 4

Mysticism in Sotho Spirit Possession

In the two foregoing chapters, I have tried to show the aptness of Karl Rahner’s existentialist, phenomenological theology for appropriating and understanding human transcendental experiences, even across religions and cultures. Recently, one Missionary of Africa theologian said that Rahner “elevated human experience over abstract ideas as the grounds for a theology of the future,” and, in relation to the world of spirits in Africa, he noted that Rahner’s methodology would have one “start with an exercise of listening to the concrete experiences with this unseen world.” 184 Indeed, Rahner himself said

> it [would] seem particularly interesting to hear what the mystic himself has to say. How does he feel and interpret his experience? For we should not depend solely on the views of the metaphysician on the human spirit and its absolute transcendental nature, nor merely on the theologian, with his account of the difference between God and created being. We must also hear the views of the person who himself experiences most clearly and with the least distortion the relationship which exists between the human subject and the reality which we call God. 185

This listening methodology, which Magesa shares, will be mine as well, as I now consider some “raw data” of Sotho spirit possession. In the following three sections, therefore, I stick to the accounts as they have been related, either by the person in question or by eyewitnesses or those in close proximity. I also include some interpretation of the persons’ experiences and influence by people proximately affected. My own observations and analyses using a Rahnerian reading and a Magesan interpretation only follow in §4.4 after all the accounts in §4.1–§4.3. I do, however, group the experiences according to Rahner’s typology and give each of the first three sections titles that indicate the type of mystical experience I explore and claim in §4.4.

I have deliberately chosen experiences in each section from different time periods, ranging from the early 19th century to the post-independence era (from 1966). This serves to reflect the

184. Udelhoven, *Unseen Worlds*, 402. (Italics in original.)

growing influence of Christianity among the Sotho and the ways in which their traditional religion and Christianity have interacted through time and continue to challenge and enrich Sotho spirituality on an ongoing basis. There are three examples in each of the first two sections and nine short ones in the third. Although there are more examples than might be expected in a paper of this length, the decision to cast a wide net was deliberate so that important themes and patterns can be discerned. These may be detected in §4.1–§4.3, but will be explicitly referenced and analyzed in §4.4.

4.1 Classical Mysticism among the Sotho

Mohlomi Monyane was introduced in §1.1 as a Sotho leader who was universally held in high esteem and unequivocally regarded as a mystic. He was born around 1720 at Fothane (near present-day Fouriesburg, South Africa) and he died in 1816, less than a decade before Christianity was introduced in the region north of the Orange River. He therefore lived completely in a pre-missionary era and within a traditional Sotho religious framework. Mohlomi began as a relatively minor Sotho chief of the Koena (Crocodile) clan, but by the early 19th century his chiefdom was probably the largest in Caledon Valley. 186

Beyond this, and at least of equal importance to his political leadership, Mohlomi was a highly successful medicine-doctor who travelled widely and specialized as a herbalist and rainmaker. Throughout his life he had visions and dreams, which he attributed to his ancestors. The earliest dream that was recorded was related to one of the first Christian missionaries in the country, Thomas Arbousset, by one of Mohlomi’s senior widows, ’Maliepollo. It occurred when

186. Peter Sanders, Moshoeshoe: Chief of the Sotho (London: Heinemann, 1975), 22. According to the historian L.B.B.J. Machobane, “his subjects considered him the wisest man that had ever lived” (“Mohlomi,” 5, 17), but his political renown was primarily as the tutor and mentor of Moshoeshoe Mokhachane, the founder and first king of Lesotho, who likewise considered him “a great king, a wise and gentle king; under [whose] government, men grew like the grass” (Thomas Arbousset, Missionary Excursion into the Blue Mountains, trans. and ed. David Ambrose and Albert Brutsch [Morija, Lesotho: Morija Archives, 1991], 64). Unlike most chiefs, Mohlomi abhorred violence and warfare, and believed one could achieve far more through generous rule and justice. He frequently helped young men who could not afford the bride wealth required to marry, by lending them cattle. He protected widows and orphans and he insisted that the law did not discriminate between rich and poor.
Mohlomi was a young teenager being initiated to manhood:

One night when all were asleep in this village of boys, Mohlomi, also asleep, had a dream; he beheld the top of their hut open. Then arrived a bird like an eagle; it took him, put him on top of its wings and flew with him, until it put him on top of some tall mountain. On top of this mountain he found a lot of people who had long died … Then after some time one of the men stood up and said Mtanami [my child] you should not be afraid because here where you are is a place of your ancestors. After some time you will be a king; you should rule our people well [with peace] and study medicines, so that they may not be troubled by illness while you are still around.  

Arbousset indicates (in 1836) that this story was told over all the territory of the Sotho and quite clearly it was understood to be Mohlomi’s vocation by the ancestors.

Mohlomi’s understanding of medicines was extraordinary and it is believed that he excelled in this area at least in part because he learned much from other practitioners on his extensive travels. Oral accounts indicate that he not only had great success against evil spirits but that he was also able to cure all kinds of diseases, including leprosy. It was also believed that he was “so loved of the gods that he was able to transport himself from one place to another in a supernatural way.” Moreover, as a rainmaker (moroka-pula; lit. one who praises the rain) in a region prone to drought, his services were in even greater demand. It is recorded that “in times of drought he would shut himself up in his secret place [a hut called sefahla, which was reserved for these mysteries] and manipulate herbs, roots, etc., stirring up a concoction of them with a reed, and invoking the aid of the Supreme Being through the intercession of the shades of his ancestors.” His ability “to open the teats of the heavens” was unparalleled, and it is significant

188. “He brought back an honest and prudent heart,” according to one of Arbousset’s informants, “and he never forgot what had been there said to him, “Go, govern with love; see always in thy subjects men and brethren.” Thomas Arbousset, Narrative of an Exploratory Tour to the North-east of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope, trans. John Croumbie Brown (Cape Town: A.S. Robertson, 1846), 268.
189. Ellenberger and Macgregor, History of the Basuto, 92.
190. Ellenberger and Macgregor, History of the Basuto, 93. A more detailed, but general, description of what occurred in the sefahla is given later: “There he [the moroka-pula] would have pots of water drawn from some special fountain, and some fuel. He would boil the water, adding thereto plants and roots of miraculous virtue, and powerful to work on the rain. When the water boiled, he would stir the decoction vigorously with a churning-reed, so as to make it froth, the steam being the means of transmitting the virtues of the plants to the clouds, which would
to note that Mohlomi specifically invoked God in the process. The early ethnographer W.C. Willoughby indicates that Sotho of the Koena clan believed that only God, “the Supreme Spirit,” could send rain.\textsuperscript{191} Thus, as Machobane notes, “it greatly mattered how close a relationship a rain-maker … had with Molimo [God].”\textsuperscript{192}

Despite his life-long communion with the spirit world and the fact that he himself was a diviner, Mohlomi rejected the branch of divining medicine known as bolaoli (divination involving the throwing and reading of bones). He derided its practitioners and even set up situations to expose those he suspected of quackery. Moreover, because Mohlomi did not trust diviners who could supposedly “smell out” witches (divination called bonohe), he made it illegal in his chiefdom to put anyone to death on an accusation of witchcraft.

A lasting indication of Mohlomi’s discernment and integrity came at the end of his life. If false diviners and prophets had a tendency to tell people what they wanted to hear, Mohlomi’s final messages from the ancestors were far from pleasant, for they told of impending calamities and he did not hold back on the revelations. During his last illness, he prophesied: “You will suck a white cow [i.e., there will be a famine]; preserve your grain, or what will you eat? You will eat each other.” Then on his last day, Mohlomi fell into trance, and when he emerged from it he called his wife ’Maliepollo and told her: “the spirits have spoken to me who am about to die.

so agitate them that a plenteous rain could not be withheld. Perhaps the steam was also symbolical of the prayers by which the more famous spirits were invoked” (253). If this ritual in the sefa\textit{hla} did not work, there were three more that could be tried by the community. The first was a hunt called molutsoane, undertaken by the men and ending with a prayer. The second was a kind of game that women and girls undertook with a porridge-stick (lesokoana) “stolen” from the great wife of the chief, and also ending with a prayer. The third was the sacrifice of a black ox at the grave of a great ancestor.

191. Willoughby writes: “Bakwena [i.e. Koena] experts assured me that none but the Supreme Spirit can send rain; but that their prayers for rain are addressed to spirits of the ruling dynasty, who intercede for them at the court of One too great to be approached by mortals, and that the smoke from the rain-pots is incense which gives efficacy to their prayers.” W.C. Willoughby, \textit{The Soul of the Bantu} (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1928), 206–7.

192. Machobane, “Mohlomi,” 12. Signs of this relationship might be seen in the fact that people often remarked on Mohlomi’s asceticism and preoccupation with big questions. Although Mohlomi was wealthy and had over 40 wives, it was said that by middle-age he abstained from all sexual relations, ate little and drank nothing but water or milk. He also used to ponder questions such as “Where does the world end?” and “Does anything create itself?” As reported by Thomas Arbousset, in Ellenberger and Macgregor, \textit{History of the Basuto}, 92.
Great trouble will come upon this land of ours…” Later in the day he told those who had gathered around: “After my death, a cloud of red dust will come out of the east and consume our tribes. The father will eat his children. I greet you all, and depart to where our fathers rest.”

Two years after Mohlomi died, King Shaka of the Zulu began his wars of expansion, which resulted in the Mfecane (Lifagane in Sotho; lit. “the hammering/shattering”), a period of scorched-earth devastation, disease, famine and death, in which some Sotho people even resorted to cannibalism. But it was also during this time of terror that Mohlomi’s disciple Moshoeshoe earnestly began putting his lessons into practice and in the midst of widespread chaos founded the new kingdom of Lesotho.

The second major figure I consider here is ’Mantsopa Makhetha, who is often cited as the greatest or most influential Sotho prophet of the 19th century. ’Mantsopa was a transitional figure for although she practised as a traditional diviner during much of the reign of King Moshoeshoe, her transcendental experiences were increasingly expressed and interpreted in relation to European inroads to Lesotho and featured a combination of Sotho and Christian imagery. Prior to her conversion to Christianity in 1870, her messages from the spirit world were sometimes opposed to aspects of the missionaries’ message and sometimes supportive, perhaps reflecting the turmoil and transition all Sotho people were experiencing politically, economically, socially, culturally and spiritually.

Like Mohlomi, ’Mantsopa practised as a rainmaker, but she was best known for her visions and prophecy of future events. She first gained widespread national attention in 1851, when she predicted the defeat of the British and their allies in the Battle of Hail. The French Protestant missionary Eugène Casalis was probably with King Moshoeshoe at the capital when the

prophecy was delivered:

Manchupa [i.e., ’Mantsopa], a women till then unknown, informed the chief that she had fallen into a trance, and that a being whom she designated in no other way than by the words He, Him, had charged her to tell the whole tribe to stand upon the defensive, that the enemy would come, and would be almost destroyed in a contest so sharp, and of such short duration, that it would be called the Battle of Hail, and that after that there would be a long interval of repose, the rains would be abundant, and that the seed might be sown and the harvest gathered in without fear. 195

Three weeks later the Battle of Hail took place on a plateau called Viervoet. The British allies under Major Henry Warden lost over a hundred men while the Sotho lost only 16. “The conflict had been as sharp and as dramatic as a hailstorm, and her [’Mantsopa’s] imagery had been strangely validated by the tumbling bodies of the enemy warriors” who were driven over the steep cliffs of Viervoet. 196 It was expected that Warden would return very soon with a larger force to subdue the Sotho, but the Cape Colony was engaged in a war with the Xhosa at the time and was unable to spare enough men. Thus ’Mantsopa’s further predictions not only of good rains but also of a period of peace for planting and harvesting were fulfilled. 197

The middle decades of the 19th century were a period not only of political turmoil in the region but also of religious ferment, as the struggles between traditional beliefs and missionary teaching were playing out. Some of ’Mantsopa’s visions and at least one experience of transport to “heaven” during this time were thus seen as also addressing issues of a more cultural or religious nature. There are few particulars of her visit to heaven other than the interesting detail that she went “up” to get there and that she saw Molimo (God). 198 More detail is extant from some of the other visions she had. For example, in opposition to missionary teaching, she claimed it was

196. Sanders, Moshoeshoe, 174.
197. Two years later, in 1853, ’Mantsopa’s further prophecy of a Sotho victory over the Tlokoa people on their northern border was also fulfilled and the Tlokoa were subsequently integrated peacefully into the Sotho nation.
198. Letter from Joseph Orpen to John Burnet, Civil Commissioner of Aliwal North, 30 September 1862, in Basutoland Records, ed. George McCall Theal (Cape Town: W.A. Richards, 1883), 3:181. It is significant that she did not claim to have gone “down” into the earth, where the Sotho believed God and the ancestors to dwell and where a rival Sotho prophet said he had been to see God.
revealed to her that “the way to heaven is not a narrow road, that the missionaries are ridiculously mistaken in saying so, but that God is really the Supreme Chief, and that of course the road to his town is very broad indeed and constantly full of crowds of people going to court.” ’Mantsopa would vouch for the authority of such revelations by saying that although the God of the Sotho and of the missionaries are the same, “the missionaries have their inspiration at second hand and out of a book, whereas they [i.e., prophets such as herself] receive direct inspiration and are thus enabled to point out where the missionaries are in error.” At other times, however, ’Mantsopa’s messages from the spirit world were not opposed to the European presence or to missionary teaching.

It should be remarked that ’Mantsopa’s divining and her visions, or at least their interpretation, were not infallible. In 1862, she was commissioned by King Moshoeshoe to bring an end to a drought in the country and although she travelled up and down engaging in rainmaking rituals, the drought did not break. That same year she also predicted another war, but it did not materialize. It was perhaps the non-fulfillment of prophecies like this that caused the generally sympathetic British official Joseph Orpen to view ’Mantsopa as an “imposter” and her activities as a profitable “dodge.” For a time she also fell out of favour with the king, but by 1865 she was again being consulted.

When ’Mantsopa embraced Christianity in the late 1860s, it was arranged that her baptism would be held together with that of the king, who had also converted. As events unfolded, however,

200. For example, soon after the British had abandoned the Orange River Sovereignty in 1854, ’Mantsopa foretold that “if the Basuto stole cattle or commenced an aggressive war they would be beaten; that if they did not hearken to the missionaries dreadful misfortunes would befall them; that if they hearkened they would retain possession of their land and the arms of those who attempted to deprive them of it would be broken.” Edwin W. Smith, The Mabilles of Basutoland (1939; repr., Morija, Lesotho: Morija Museum and Archives, 1996), 121.
201. ’Mantsopa had predicted that the Sotho would be attacked from four sides. Only those who submitted to being doctored would be saved. It was said that nearly all the women in the country came in large groups to be doctored by her and thus rendered invulnerable; many guns were also doctored.
Moshoeshoe died two days before the scheduled baptism, while 'Mantsopa’s baptism went ahead, on 13 March 1870. There are no records of 'Mantsopa continuing with her career as a diviner after this time, but her reputation as a great prophet was secure, her conversion influenced many others, and after her death she became an important Sotho ancestor, to whom, for example, barren women pray for children.\(^{203}\)

The third and final Sotho prophet under consideration here is Mazinyo “Walter Matitta” Phangwa.\(^{204}\) Matitta’s mother was the daughter of Moshoeshoe’s top military commander, Makoanyane Ntseke, and the story is told that as a girl her parents took her to see ’Mantsopa. The latter prophesied that she would later have a son (Mazinyo) who would have the same gift of the Spirit that she herself had. When Matitta was a young man, there was really no sign of this gift beyond the fact that he had some charisma and was known as a good dancer. Instead, he had a reputation as an irresponsible, self-centred person. All that changed dramatically, however, around 1910 during a traditional festival in the village of Fobane. After dark, Matitta took one of his girlfriends to a secluded spot, but his plans were interrupted by several terrifying visions.\(^{205}\) The next day he fell seriously ill and, despite the ministrations of traditional doctors, he went into a kind of coma. For three days he lay as if dead, but afterward he related a most extraordinary extra-corporeal experience that included his vocation as a healer and spiritual leader and transformed the rest of his life.


\(^{204}\) As among other peoples, names among the Sotho often have great significance. While more will be learned about the names “Mazinyo” and “Walter” below, here I mention the importance of Matitta’s family name. “Phangwa” is an Nguni name from the Hlubi clan. For some people, this would associate Matitta with the kind of spirit possession known as mathuela, which will be featured in the next section and was believed to be of Nguni origin. A link through his father with the Nguni and through his mother with ’Mantsopa (see below) gives Matitta an especially strong propensity for gifts from the spirit world. As for the name “Matitta,” its importance is ambiguous. He was given it as a nickname after a mentally and physically challenged person in his village.

\(^{205}\) According to one version, Matitta had four visions in succession and during the fourth he was struck by lightning from a clear sky. Samuel A. Mohono, “Spiritual Maturity of Matitta and Schisms,” (unpublished typescript, n.d.), 2–3.
There are different hagiographical versions of Matitta’s visions, illness, transcendental experience, and return to his body to carry out his vocation, but there is little variation on certain central aspects, including the overall framework of illness, “death” involving a number of ordeals and rituals, and a return to human life on the third day—a framework remarkably similar to the vocation of a diviner. The first sign of a diviner’s vocation is often a dream or vision from the ancestors. This is usually accompanied or followed by a period of illness which may be a kind of epilepsy or hysteria or perhaps a kind of psychosomatic disorder or neurosis. The visions or dreams may also continue during this time. When the person is ready to submit to the ancestors, in effect to be possessed by them, the next stage is a wilderness experience away from the community, in a desert, on a mountain, or in a pool, river, or ocean. This is a transcendental experience and among the Sotho the underwater variety is probably the most common. Contact underwater is often made with a large mythical snake (noha or noha ea metsi). The snake is associated with the deep mysteries of life, and may be seen as symbolic of new life because of the way it sheds its skin. It may even have divine powers (see §4.4). The submersion in water is like a spiritual death or baptism, from which the person then rises with new life. The final stage is the return to the community, as a different person, in fact as a medicine-doctor who has been equipped by the ancestors to begin employing specialized knowledge on their behalf, often initially as an intern under a more experienced diviner.

The transcendental experience for Matitta was highly dramatic, symbolic and pedagogic. It involved encounters with God, Satan, angels, Moshoeshoe, Makoanyane, and his own namesake, a mysterious one-legged warrior called Walter. In a major ordeal, Matitta was accused by Satan, who almost succeeded in having him consigned to hell, but Matitta was saved when an

207. It has been suggested that Walter is linked to the one-legged agent of God, Thobega, who led the first humans out of the earth in the Sotho myth of origins. For some Sotho people, one leg is symbolic for unity and for someone who is just and benevolent. See Gabriel M. Setiloane, *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana* (Rotterdam: A.A. Balkema, 1976), 34.
angel produced the teeth he was born with. These were taken as proof of his prophetic vocation and of his calling to fulfill Moshoeshoe’s desire for a Sotho Church.\footnote{Matitta’s birth name, Mazinyo, is Zulu for “teeth.” It was said that he was born with a full set of teeth, which fell out about a week after his birth. Matitta’s followers believe that he was called by Moshoeshoe to bring the Sotho people to conversion in place of Moshoeshoe’s son Jeremiah Libopuoa, who was sent to Canterbury, England, in 1861 to study for the priesthood but who died there prematurely. See Craig W. Hincks, \textit{Quest for Peace} (Morija, Lesotho: CCL and HCL, 2009), 279–80, 441, 450–51.} He was subsequently commissioned in heaven by Moshoeshoe to bring the Sotho people to conversion. Before returning to his earthly life, Matitta was baptized and tutored by Walter. He learned to read and write and obtained gifts for evangelism and healing. When Matitta finally returned to his body, he was presented with two roosters, one white and the other black, given by his maternal and paternal uncles. These roosters subsequently lived with Matitta and brought him messages concerning the black and white peoples of southern Africa, including a prophecy of the ultimate victory of blacks over whites.\footnote{There are different accounts of these roosters and how long they lived with Matitta, and also different interpretations about the fulfillment of the prophecy they brought. Haliburton says that, according to Matitta’s namesake Walter Lefela (son of Matitta’s political colleague Josiel Lefela), Matitta’s own interpretation was that although white people had injured black people, in the end blacks would regain their independence. Haliburton also suggests there was personal symbolism for Matitta, since he, the black catechist, survived his principal missionary adversary, Édouard Jacottet, who died suddenly in 1920. Gordon M. Haliburton, “Walter Matitta and Josiel Lefela: A Prophet and a Politician in Lesotho,” \textit{Journal of Religion in Africa} 7, no. 2 (1975): 116.}

When Walter Matitta began preaching and healing after his initial, major transcendental experience, he gained national attention almost immediately. People came to hear him and to be healed from all over the country and he received numerous invitations to testify to his extraordinary experience. He joined the main Protestant church in the country, known at the time as the Church of Basutoland,\footnote{The Church of Basutoland (\textit{Kereke ea Lesotho}) was established by the first missionaries to Lesotho, who arrived in 1833 under the auspices of the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society. Shortly before Lesotho’s independence in 1966, the church was renamed the Lesotho Evangelical Church and came under local leadership. Today it is by far the largest Protestant church in the country.} and was soon appointed as a catechist in charge of a new congregation at Koalabata. He agreed to this work on condition that he would be free also to undertake evangelistic tours. Hundreds of people all over the country, and in South Africa as well, were converted through his ministry. It is said that “where he preached people wept,
sometimes they became noisy, ecstatic and hysteric and fell shamelessly on the floor or rolled on the ground.”  

During these early years, Matitta and a colleague named Petrose Maliba also organized an association for the most ardent new converts. Initially it was called “Friends of the Spirit” (Ba-Moea) but, in 1916, it was formally established as the Nazarites Association (Lekhotla la Ba-Nazare). Many Nazarites, as they were called, had experienced healing or were still in the process of being healed, and transcendental experiences in the group were commonplace. Members were required to take solemn vows, which included refusing to cut their hair, to make incision marks on their bodies, or to take medicine; abstaining from alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, and pork; and renouncing all forms of witchcraft and divination.

Around 1920, major problems began to surface in the relationship between Matitta (and his followers) and the missionaries in the Church of Basutoland as well as some white leaders of South African churches. What is important to know here is that there were significant cultural and doctrinal differences between the two sides and that there was a clear power imbalance. Matitta was asked to renounce or at least relinquish a number of practices and teachings and instead “to preach the plain Gospel.” But this was not a real option as far as he was concerned;

211. Samuel A. Mohono, “African Independent Churches” (unpublished typescript, c. 1979), 7. It was Matitta’s practice when people converted to urge them to join a church of their own choosing, which, significantly for the time, included the Roman Catholic Church. For his work in South Africa, Matitta was given letters of introduction from his church. His tours probably reached their peak in 1918, during the Spanish Influenza pandemic when people were desperate for good news and for healing.

212. It is very common among AIC believers to draw heavily on Old Testament beliefs and practices. In this case, there are clear similarities to vows taken by Hebrew Nazirites, described in Numbers 6:1–21. Members also wore uniforms, including brass badges in the shape of a rooster, and they went barefoot. Nazarites belonged to different Christian denominations, but they met by themselves on Friday night, after a day of fasting. Meetings had four parts: preparation, confession, worship, and a sacred fellowship meal. During Matitta’s time, confession of sins was made to the whole group, but this was changed to silent confession in 1977. Matitta made it clear that the sacred fellowship meal was not a substitute for the Eucharist; it was rather an “ecumenical worship meal” intended to unite Christians and to unify Old and New Testament traditions with an African framework. (Stan Nussbaum, “Liturgical Innovations in the Nazarite Association of Lesotho” [NERMIC symposium, Durban, 2–3 July 1987], 3, 9–10). The Nazarites Association bears the distinction of being the first ecumenical group in Lesotho and it still exists today, although it numbers many fewer members than in Matitta’s time.

213. J. Henri Bertschy, “Report on Walter Matitta” (Colonial Office, box 417, file 696; Church of Basutoland
the things he was asked to lay aside had been revealed to him and in his view were not extraneous to the Gospel or to his ministry. In the end, whether he was forced out or left of his own accord, Matitta established an independent ministry at the end of 1921, and in the following year the “Church of Moshoeshoe” (Kereke ea Moshoeshoe) was formally constituted. The new church was supported by a number of chiefs in Lesotho, and many people followed Matitta out of the Church of Basutoland. Stories of Matitta’s Spirit-filled ministry continued to circulate; they involved conversion and healing as well as a kind of African nationalism with a liberation theology foundation. When Matitta died in 1935, he was buried in a sandstone mausoleum, topped by a double weathercock featuring the black and white roosters. It became a place of pilgrimage, where members could enter once a year on Easter Sunday. Matitta’s reputation as a great Sotho prophet continues to this day, as does that of the Church of Moshoeshoe as one of the earliest and best known AICs in the region.

4.2 Sotho Mysticism of the Masses

My first example of Sotho mysticism of the masses, which I describe here and interpret in §4.4, took place in the 1870s. There was an outbreak at that time of what Swiss Protestant missionary Adolphe Mabille called “hysterical mania,” in which whole villages would be “taken,” as the

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214. A number of ministers were ordained in the Church of Moshoeshoe and congregations were established both in Lesotho and South Africa. The Church of Moshoeshoe itself became closely allied with a grassroots political movement called the Commoners’ League (Lekhotla la Bafo), and provided it with chaplaincy services. A lengthy praise poem or ballad was composed by the founder of the Commoners’ League to honour Matitta. Hymns with both traditional spiritual themes and nationalist and black empowerment motifs were written and sung in the church. On the Commoners’ League, see Robert Edgar, Prophets with Honour: A Documentary History of Lekhotla la Bafo (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1988); for the Matitta ballad, see Raymond Molupe Mohono, The Messenger of God, Walter Matitta (Birmingham: Interact Research Centre, Selly Oak Colleges, 1991), 83–92; for Church of Moshoeshoe hymns, see Haliburton, “Walter Matitta and Josiel Lefela,” 131.

215. Matitta left detailed instructions for his embalming and entombment with a man called Libenyane Jobo. He wanted people to have access to his body for healing purposes even after his passing and specifically mentioned lepers and barren women. Some of his instructions were carried out, but some major parts were not, including the embalming (Haliburton, “Walter Matitta and Josiel Lefela,” 122–23). Following his death, there were divisions in the church, resulting in two main factions. One was based in South Africa and held a quasi-messianic view of Matitta; the other was based in Lesotho and maintained a Matitta-as-messenger-of-God stance. Both factions still exist.
Sotho put it. The biographer of Mabille and his wife, Adèle, described it as follows:

To all appearance the country enjoyed profound tranquillity and ever-growing prosperity; but those who saw below the surface detected signs of unrest. In 1876 there was a strange epidemic... Mrs. Mabille used to describe the extraordinary scenes she witnessed of women rushing downhill, their heads flapping about like a knot on a whip lash. Some of these would fall into a state of trance and give messages from the unseen world; and many of these were to the effect that everything deriving from the white man, wagons, implements, clothes, even pipes, should be destroyed. Sotho observers said that those who were “taken” in this outbreak were seized by motheke theke (a condition that causes one to move erratically or uncontrollably), which is itself a symptom of an illness called ho thoasa (lit. to speak with divinatory inspiration). Among the Sotho, healing for ho thoasa requires submission to bothuela (the therapy of the spirit-possessed), and sometimes for lasting relief one has to become a member of their society. Other eyewitness interpretations at the time of the outbreak included that of the British officials of the Cape Administration then in charge in the country who dismissed it as “silly” and the missionaries’

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217. Adolphe Mabille was the leading missionary of the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society in the country at that time. His wife, Adèle Mabille (née Casalis), was the first white person born in Lesotho and the daughter of the first missionaries.


219. This kind of “speaking” often manifests as fever, dizzy spells, headache, temporary deafness, aching joints, loss of appetite, a bloated feeling, frequent belching, or deep sighing.

220. Although sources agree that bothuela is a divination practice that the Sotho adopted from the Nguni in the 19th century, they vary widely on precisely when, where, and how it entered the country. According to the Catholic missionary François Laydevant, for example, it entered Lesotho during the time of the Mfecane (in the 1820s) and that the name bothuela is derived from the Tugela River, which flows through Zululand. François Laydevant, *The Basuto* (Roma, Lesotho: The Social Centre, 1952), 82. The historian Hugh Ashton says it was introduced by the Thembu people “and others” from Cape Colony in the south. Hugh Ashton, *The Basuto* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 283–84.

In Lesotho, bothuela has some things in common with the indigenous Sotho divination called bonohe (divination without the use of divining bones) and it probably built on this tradition. In bothuela, messages are received through trances directly from the ancestors or from God. One of its central features is a healing dance called hlopho. From its beginning in Lesotho, most practitioners of bothuela have been women. The interpretation of communications from the spirit world has tended to include advocacy for a strict return to Sotho tradition, perhaps as a type of collective purification, even though in its expression it incorporates both Nguni healing rites and Christian imagery. With this 1876 outbreak of motheke theke, for example, references were apparently made to Jesus Christ and to the River Jordan as “the river of the gods (melimo).” Gill, *Short History of Lesotho*, 125–26.
view that it was “the psychopathic outbreak … of deep-seated discontent.”221 It also bore some resemblance to a number of other mass movements in the southern Africa region, including one led by the Xhosa prophet Mlanjeni, who had a very large following among the Sotho.222

My second example of Sotho mysticism of the masses takes place in a spiritual movement called *Thapelo ea Sephiri* (Secret Prayer).223 It is widely believed that the movement was initiated around the beginning of the 20th century by women who were already members of mainline mission churches and who in most cases continued that membership even as they became actively involved in Secret Prayer. It spread rapidly throughout southern Africa and has continued to flourish to the present day.

Aspirant members of Secret Prayer are usually, if not always, suffering from an affliction or illness, often described as “possession by spirits.” To members of Secret Prayer, this illness signifies election by the Holy Spirit to suffer with Christ and experience the deeper mysteries of God. If the illness is not properly attended to, it will persist, but if treated in the correct manner it


222. In 1851, Mlanjeni told people that they needed to purify themselves from all witchcraft and to sacrifice all their cream- and dun-coloured cattle. If they did so, it would bring an end to Christian missions and to the power and oppression of the British. Many Sotho people believed Mlanjeni was a kind of reincarnation of Mohlomi and the movement gained a massive following in Lesotho, including among some major chiefs. The Protestant missionary Eugène Casalis wrote that “the enthusiasm became universal; thousands of animals in the finest condition, and of great value, were sacrificed without hesitation. Some of the members of our Churches, who had for years given proof of their sincerity, did not escape the contagion.” Eugène Casalis, *The Basutos*, 288.

Other movements which may be cited include the 1819 movement of the Xhosa diviner Makanda who led an attack of 10,000 men on Grahamstown; and the 1856 so-called “cattle killing tragedy” which followed visions of the Xhosa girl Nongqawuse and ushered in a major famine. What these and other movements, which continued into the 20th century (e.g., the Zulu rebellion of 1906; the Wellington movement of 1921), have in common are messages from the spirit world to return to traditional ways in order to overcome missionary and colonial inroads.

223. A definitive description of Secret Prayer (sometimes also called *Phutheho ea Baitlami* or “Assembly of Vow-takers”) is difficult, if not impossible, for two reasons. First, members take a vow of secrecy so it is not easy to conduct research into the movement. Second, the near autonomy of each Secret Prayer group means that there is probably considerable variation among them. Nonetheless, data collected from ex-members and close relatives and friends over a long period of time and from different places has contributed to at least some knowledge of the movement. The first known reference to the movement in Lesotho was published in an issue of the Protestant newspaper *Leselinyana* (A Little Light) in 1904. In 1905, another article indicates that the movement was begun by Sotho Christian women living in Bensonvale, near Sterkspruit in the Eastern Cape. From there it spread northward into Lesotho, beginning at Masitise. “Phutheho ea Baitlami,” *Leselinyana*, 1 March 1905.
is viewed positively as the first step to secret knowledge. Sick people who elect to join Secret Prayer are sometimes called “goats”; but goats become “sheep” when their initiation of healing is complete. Of central importance in the initiation process are a set of *lipaki* (passwords; lit. witnesses) carefully chosen for each aspirant and then committed to memory and used at meetings in prayers and rituals.\(^{224}\)

Meetings of Secret Prayer almost always take place at night, usually beginning on Saturday evening. Groups are known to have clear hierarchies and a highly symbolic theology which draws on both testaments of the Bible and on Sotho tradition.\(^{225}\) Passwords are required to gain admission and once inside robes or uniforms are donned and windows are covered for privacy. Among the Sotho, a Secret Prayer group is sometimes called a *letša* (lake, river pool), and during part of the night meetings members of the “lake” may leave the others to pray alone or in secret.\(^{226}\) Any of a variety of other spiritual activities may also take place at meetings, including some that involve spirit possession: singing, dancing, healing, group prayer, Bible reading, dream interpretation, purification rites, protection rites, libations, burnt offerings.

From the beginning, people have made comparisons and connections between Secret Prayer and

\(^{224}\) Passwords obtained in one study were given to the aspirant by three different people. Altogether there were ten words in the set, the first seven concerned the sick person’s symptoms and the last three indicated the way forward: *molumo* (noise), *tlallano* (anger), *letsoalo* (remorse/apprehension), *mali* (blood), *metsi* (water), *sefapano* (cross), *bokete* (heaviness), *mollo* (fire), *mohau* (mercy), *thapelo* (prayer). A.G. Schutte with E. Moloantoa, “Thapelo ya Sephiri,” *African Studies* 34, no. 4 (1972): 249.

\(^{225}\) Common ranks within the hierarchy include, from the top: the *mookameli* (overseer), usually a man assisted by his wife (even though a good majority of members are women); *baruti* or *basebeletsi* (those who minister or serve); *bapaki* (witnesses) or *barapeli* (those who pray); and *balekoa* (probationers). According to Schutte and Moloantoa, Jesus and his apostles (or angels) are sometimes viewed as the archetypal Secret Prayer group. Jesus is the *mookameli* and the apostles or angels are the *baruti*. The ancestors correspond to the regular members of the group, the *barapeli* or *bapaki*. Ordinary Jewish or Christian believers are the *balekoa*. Members of Secret Prayer also say that Jesus spoke in parables, but while he shared the meaning of his parables with the apostles he did not do so with other believers, namely ordinary Jews. The apostles shared in Jesus’s divine knowledge and miraculous healing powers, which other Jews did not. Some members also see themselves like Nicodemus who came to Jesus at night and, unlike other Jews, discovered certain mysteries, including that he was the Son of God. “Thapelo ya Sephiri,” 256–57.

\(^{226}\) Schutte and Moloantoa, “Thapelo ya Sephiri,” 256. These authors indicate that a Secret Prayer group could also be known as a *seliba* (spring). Cf. page 70 above.
two movements that preceded it: bothuela, introduced earlier, and manyano (Christian women’s associations). Regionally the manyano movement began in the 19th century and it became so popular that there is hardly a church today that does not have some kind of manyano group, which is basically a women’s sodality for prayer, fellowship and good works. However, from an early date, manyano also gained a reputation for some secrecy and mysterious goings-on, as a forum where Christian women expressed themselves in ways that might raise eyebrows in other contexts. One person described it thus:

The general atmosphere of a manyano is one of weeping and sighing. The air is heavily charged with intense emotion. Women stand up and speak out their troubles, sometimes wailing or screaming, sometimes in frenzied whisperings. Their bodies tremble. Their eyes are tightly closed or fixed heavenward. There is talk of miracles, of the sick and the dead.\(^\text{229}\)

The theologian Gabriel Setiloane even makes a link between manyano and bothuela:

As they sing, or pray in loud shrieks, and swoon in the power of the Holy Spirit or fall to the floor until someone comes with cold water to bring them back to consciousness, these beautiful women … reveal that in their bosoms still burns the same fire that makes “mathuela”.\(^\text{230}\)

Although the secrecy and degree of spiritual autonomy exercised by Christian women in the  

\[^{227}\text{See page 70 and note 219 above. The link between Secret Prayer and bothuela arises from their very similar patterns of progression: an illness involving spirit possession (like mothekeetheke and ho thoasa); submission to initiation, which usually takes place over a period of time and involves a variety of experiences at different stages or levels, including a solitary wilderness experience (like that in a leša); and healing followed by reintegration with the group.}\]

\[^{228}\text{In southern Africa, the common term for these women’s associations is manyano, which comes from the Xhosa word umanyano (unity). The Sotho equivalent is kopano (union, fellowship), but Sotho people usually call them manyano or bo-’m’a-bana (lit. mothers’ unions). Similarities between Secret Prayer and the manyano movement have been noted in Lesotho from the early 20th century. See, e.g., J. Mphala, “Phutheho ea Mafumahali,” Leselinyana, December 1904.}\]


\[^{230}\text{Setiloane, Image of God, 213. Mathuela is the plural of lethuela, a diviner specializing in the therapy of the spirit-possessed (bothuela). Setiloane is basically saying that the possession of manyano women by the Holy Spirit manifests like the possession of the diviners called mathuela.}\]
Manyano were problematic for some\textsuperscript{231} (as they were in Secret Prayer as well),\textsuperscript{232} the manyano were apparently still lacking when it came to enabling the kind of transcendental experience of deep healing sought by at least some individuals. For the latter, only a fully independent movement like Secret Prayer could provide the spiritual freedom they required and thus there was some migration between them.

The third example I have chosen to illustrate Sotho mysticism of the masses is the wheel dance of the AICs. This dance is very common in the AICs of Lesotho, especially in those that self-identify as likereke tsa Moea (churches of the Spirit / spiritual churches).\textsuperscript{233} A description of the dance in two different AICs follows. The first is from the Christian Apostolic Zulu Independent Church.\textsuperscript{234} It takes place during the regular Sunday service in a room reserved for worship, attached to the bishop’s house. The room is largely unfurnished except for a few benches reserved for the clergy, who sit along one wall in order of their rank.

The service opens with a dance… The drum is beaten as a hymn or chorus is sung, and anyone who wishes may join the continually spinning circle of dancers in the centre of the room. The circle is usually only six or eight feet in diameter, and may have three to

\textsuperscript{231} The mystery or exclusivity of manyano has been unsettling for some people. Even though a Protestant missionary established the first manyano group in Lesotho (in 1889), missionary women soon found they were not always welcome in the groups; their presence evidently stifled full expression and a deep experience, including spirit possession. One missionary woman, who even served as president of all the manyano of her church in the country, said that members “could be very exclusive.” She went on to say that “the wives of missionaries for the most part did not attend their meetings for they could be ostracized. They were also disturbed by the women’s ‘mysteries’ which were a bit dangerous from the point of view of church doctrine.” Additionally she noted that attempts to introduce “professional Basotho women” into the manyano were rejected. Alina Brutsch, quoted in Epprecht, \textit{This Matter of Women}, 150.

Leaders in the Catholic Church also had trouble accessing manyano. One priest in Lesotho reported that the Ladies of St Anne manyano were “everywhere” but difficult to monitor: they carried on with their program whether or not he was there to direct them and they rarely reported on their activities. In Epprecht, \textit{This Matter of Women}, 150.

\textsuperscript{232} Some Secret Prayer members have given as a reason for their secrecy the need for complete independence from mission church interference. Others have indicated that Christ revealed his mysteries only to his apostles and those called by his Spirit (see note 225). Still others say that the transcendental experiences and rites of the group would be disturbing to non-members. See Hincks, \textit{Quest for Peace}, 396; and Schutte and Moloantoa, \textit{“Thapelo ya Sephiri,”} 258.

\textsuperscript{233} There are literally hundreds of different AICs (i.e., different denominations) in Lesotho. Over 200 of them are listed in Hincks, \textit{Quest for Peace}, 944–49, but there are likely well over double that number.

\textsuperscript{234} The term “Zulu” in this church’s name does not necessarily mean the church originated among the Zulu; it could be a spiritual designation like “Jerusalem” or “Ethiopia.”
ten or so dancers. Some jog, some do a limping step, some glide as if they are on wheels, some jump, some continue ringing their handbells, some have other variations. The dance usually continues for about five minutes … with people spinning off the circle and others jumping into it as they wish.235

The second is from the New Jerusalem Holy Church of Lesotho, in which the wheel dance is much more prominent. It too takes place in a room set aside for worship, on the homestead of the archbishop. “Warm-up” wheel dances are performed before the service begins and these are interspersed with greetings, testimonies, and prayer requests. The dance is then performed at the beginning of the service, and again before the prayers of the congregation. Finally, it is performed once more at the end of the celebration:

The archbishop moves to the centre of the wheel. He lays hands on each person who presents himself or herself for prayer, starting with the young children… The prayers are loud but are drowned out by the continuing singing and drumming as the wheel turns. The wheel finally stops, the congregation kneels, now facing the centre of the room, and each person in his own words prays a final prayer aloud, simultaneously. The wheel moves again to the brief benediction chorus, after which the group turn east to receive the verbal benediction. The service lasts nearly three hours, though some of the women may begin the singing and drumming before the service actually starts and carry it on for an hour or so after the benediction.236

The author of these descriptions undertook multiple visits and detailed interviews with members of these two churches (and of three others). A number of the members testified how they suffered from bokuli ba moea (spirit sickness)237 and were led through a dream or vision or the word of a prophet to join one of the likereke tsa Moea (churches of the Spirit), which often required them to leave one of the likereke tsa molao (churches of the law).238 Relief from spirit

237. Bokuli ba moea could be translated either as “sickness of spirit” (something like “heart-sick” in English) or “sickness sent by the Spirit.” In the author’s opinion, his respondents meant a combination of these two things: “a sickness in which the person’s spirit or soul is somehow afflicted through the influence of the Holy Spirit… The invading spirit has a mysterious right to take control and it is somehow wrong for the subject to resist… Healing is surrender.” Nussbaum, “Toward Theological Dialogue,” 73.
238. AICs that self-identify as “churches of the Spirit” often refer to the older AICs that broke away from the mission churches as well as to the mission churches themselves as “churches of the law.” The label tends to be both descriptive, in that law churches are seen to be legally recognized and well established, as well as critical, in that they are closed to the Spirit, overly formal, not very participatory and “go by the book.” Spirit churches, on the other hand, see themselves as directly led by the Spirit. Martin E. West, “People of the Spirit: The Charismatic Movement
sickness came when they made this move and participated in their new church’s liturgy and rites for inviting the Holy Spirit to enter and heal them, including the wheel dance. In effect, they exchanged one kind of spirit possession for another, a largely negative one for a positive one. Members made it clear, however, that they did not actively seek to be “seized” by the Holy Spirit. The reason was twofold. In the first place, they said it made “absolutely no difference” whether they wanted the Spirit to seize them or not because the Spirit is “completely independent of human control or inducement.” Second, although possession by the Spirit is sometimes “pleasant,” more often it is “fearsome.” Paradoxically, however, they felt it was better to suffer the “problem” of Spirit possession than to live without it.239 One person from the first church above gave the following account:

“Spirit sickness” is what you know you have when Western medicine does not cure you. I had the traditional spirit sickness which was giving me extreme pain in the top and back of my head. I gave in to it and was a practising lethuela [diviner of botheuela] for about ten years, but I never really got better. I was weak and rapidly aging. Some people from an independent church said that prayer was the answer to my problem. I was baptised and soon afterward I got better and have remained free of this trouble. They explained that the source of my illness was the Holy Spirit not the traditional spirit.240

River baptism,241 prayer, holy water, robes, staffs, drumming, singing, the wheel dance—these and other channels of spiritual healing, whether alone or in combination, are used in AICs to be in communion with the Spirit and perhaps also “seized.” Uncontrollable “wild dancing” during

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241. It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of baptism in AICs as a distinguishing feature of initiation and submission to the Spirit. Many AICs think that the method of baptism in many of the mission churches is wholly inadequate. Baptism in their view must take place in a natural body of water, preferably water that is moving as in a river; it must be done by immersion; and often three immersions, one for each person of the Trinity, is required. They specifically note that Jesus was baptised in a river by John—and then the Spirit came. The background symbolism of a diviner’s initiation is unmistakable here. Baptism is a type of solitary wilderness experience that fundamentally changes a person. The event may also include a kind of struggle between good and evil or old and new. One may even encounter the noha (snake) there, which for the AICs is a powerful symbol of evil—though traditionally it was more ambiguous. Cf. Nussbaum, “Toward Theological Dialogue,” 79, 88–89.
the wheel dance—along with “falling down” and “speaking in tongues”242—was found to be one of the major manifestations of Spirit possession in the two AICs above. Other signs of Spirit seizure in the wheel dance that were cited included a sudden buckling of one knee, a hand placed against one’s temple, staggering out of the wheel, a sensation of great heat or tension throughout the body.243

Among the Sotho, according to Setiloane, “the Dance has come to be universally accepted as part of the Church… It has come to be seen as a sign of people under the influence of the Holy Spirit” and the “liberation” that has come with it, he says, is “largely traceable” to the AICs.244 For the Sotho in Nussbaum’s study, Spirit possession in the wheel dance and in other parts of AIC worship, gives “a sense of the numinous”:

Something is happening, something unplanned by people, something not even understood, yet this mysterious something is to them the tangible proof that God remains in a dynamic relationship with His people through His Spirit. This is the most fundamental of God’s revelations, the revelation of Himself as a living power.245

4.3 Everyday Mysticism of the Sotho

I come now to what Rahner would call “actual life-experiences” of the Sotho “in the midst of banal everyday life.”246 As he does in The Practice of Faith, I simply list some of these, with minimal annotation:

1. Renowned for clemency in his judgements, Moshoeshoe not only insisted on pardoning the

242. Among the Sotho speaking in tongues is rarely in terms of foreign languages. In fact, part of Brandel-Syriër’s description of a manyano meeting quoted earlier is much more typical of the Sotho style of speaking in tongues: sighing, wailing, frenzied whispering. Martin West notes that in AICs “the utterances under the control of the Spirit—usually gasps, groans, sighs, etc.—are in biblical terms much more in terms of 1 Corinthians 14:2 (‘for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit’) than in terms of Acts 2:4–13.” West, “People of the Spirit,” 26.
246. Rahner, Practice of Faith, 81.
crimes of Mfecane-era cannibals but also on giving them cattle, land and tools, hoping thereby to “wean” them from their diet. One day this policy was put to the test when men alleged to be those who had eaten his own grandfather, Peete, were captured and brought to court:

RaKotsoane and his band was brought before him… People now clamoured for revenge, but, with extraordinary skill and good humour, as well as a remarkable lack of resentment, he [Moshoeshoe] merely observed that it was not customary to disturb the graves of one’s ancestors, and the delighted cannibals were set free.247

2. A man named Sekesa, who was contracted as a guide by the French Protestant missionaries, once shared this memory with them when they rested on a journey:

“A dozen years ago, I went in a cloudy season to pasture my flock along the Tlotse [River], among the Maluti [Mountains]. Seated on a rock, in sight of my sheep, I asked myself sad questions, yes sad, because I could not answer them… The wind,—it is as nothing to my eyes:—but what is it in itself? Who brings it, or removes it, makes it blow, roar, rebound, and frighten us?”248

After many such questions about the world around him, he turned inward:

“I recalled many wrongs which I had done to others, and because of them my conscience gnawed me in secret, as I sat solitary on the rock. I say I was afraid. I got up and ran after my sheep, endeavouring to enliven myself,—but I trembled much.”248

3. Both Protestant and Catholic missionaries noted how openly Sotho expressed their emotions around the times of their conversion or baptism. This account, by a Wesleyan Methodist missionary, is typical:

As soon as any of them were brought under conviction, they wrapped their heads up in their skin mantles and ran into the mountains to weep and pray. They always seek some retired spot, such as under a rock, or in a hole in the ground. Some would remain in that situation, weeping, confessing and praying for three or four days together.249

4. Nicholas Bhengu, a famous Pentecostal preacher, once told the story of a Sotho woman whose family he had met after she was killed in a violent storm:

247. Sanders, Moshoeshoe, 56.
This woman I am talking about now had a baby almost three months old. She was indoors, and the tornado took place. She couldn’t leave her baby and run away. She decided to kneel and cover the baby with her body. The bricks passed over her. The roofing iron scraped her body. You know what a tornado does. Her back was ripped open. You could see the lungs inside. Still she covered the baby, and she died.  

5. An Anglican missionary recorded the following story about a Sotho couple in his care:

Michael served for four and a half years with Basuto troops [during World War II] in Syria, Egypt, and Italy. He returned joyfully to his family at the cessation of hostilities; he was not poor, and he had a pretty wife and three fat children. Within two months he was unaccountably struck down with an illness which left him half-paralysed and completely helpless… Some time ago I asked Anastasia [his wife] if she could account for his illness at all. With a surprising insight for an unlettered woman she went straight to the psychological aspect of it [i.e., shell shock/PTSD]… The intense devotion of Anastasia to a man who apparently is little more than a useless heap of humanity, her faith in having her marriage with him “tiisa’d” (made strong—blessed by the Church) has probably given her an insight into what is wrong with him.

6. One of the first Catholic missionaries to Lesotho, Fr Joseph Gérard OMI, was venerated by the Sotho after his death—long before he was actually beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1988. People spontaneously began going to his grave and taking a little of the soil. Initially Catholic missionaries did not encourage the practice; they felt constrained to investigate it:

Noting that a large number of Basotho had pinned Father Gérard’s picture on the wall of their hut, they were asked:

—Why do you also use the earth from his grave? Don’t you think … that by using this dirt you copy the pagans, and perhaps shock them?

—It’s our own way to honour Father Gérard, they answered. When we hold in the hollow of our hands this earth which has practically touched his body, it seems as if we touch the body itself. But we know well enough that this dust resembles the dust of our paths, and when it heals us or consoles us, it is God … who through these lifeless grains of dirt grants us blessings as He pleases.

7. A member of an AIC related the following vision and the interpretation he acted on:

252. Aimé Roche, Clartés australes: Joseph Gérard, OMI, le “Prêre bien-aimé des Basotho” (1831–1914) (Lyon, France: Du Chalet, 1961), 385–86. (Translation courtesy of Cecile Woolman.)
In a vision a person came to me for healing. One spirit told me to go to the river and draw water to use as medicine, but another spirit told me to go to the mountain and dig roots. From this I understood that the spirit of traditional medicine (bothuela) and the spirit of the independent churches were battling in me. I wanted the bothuela spirit to leave me alone so I sacrificed a goat [to it]. Now I present myself to God by sacrificing a sheep, and that other spirit has not troubled me again.253

8. A local Sotho leader of St John’s Apostolic Faith Mission, one of the largest AICs in southern Africa, had an unexpected vision in 1984 at the beginning of a church service:

When the leader entered the service he had a vision which revealed that somewhere nearby there was a two-headed noha (snake or reptile) sent by sorcerers to enter the church. Instead of going to his chair and sitting down as usual, he took some of the holy water from the altar and sprinkled it on the whole congregation as well as the building, inside and out. This was to break the sorcerer’s spell and prevent the noha from harming anyone.254

9. While researching the history of one of the older Catholic parishes in Lesotho, a university student met a traditional Sotho believer and recorded her interview with him:

“My child, how foolish we Basotho are. This white man’s teaching sounds holy and acceptable to us. [But] imagine, we had our God above and our gods, i.e. the God of our ancestors and our gods who are our dead fore-fathers. To these, we used to make feasts and burn mahlabelo, which I think to be equivalent to this incense. Why were we forced to abandon this traditional religion of ours for the white man’s religion? Were our forms of prayers not good and acceptable to us?”… He then recited an old Basotho prayer and was touched—tears rolling down his face… The old man lamented the lost being of the Basotho.255

4.4 A Rahnerian Reading of Sotho Mysticism

The intentionally eclectic list in §4.3 above contains life-experiences both of “magnitude and glory, goodness, beauty and illumination” as well as of despair or failure, “where the graspable contours of our everyday realities break and dissolve” and the “lights which illuminate the tiny

islands of our everyday life go out.”

Longing, fear, sorrow, guilt, loss—as well as joy, energy, insight, healing, love—may remain “hidden and undeclared,” and yet, “implicitly they indicate that inconceivable mystery” of existence that always surrounds humans and supports their everyday awareness. For the Sotho, no less than for all human beings, these largely “anonymous, unreflective, and unthematic” experiences in their existential history, where they extend beyond themselves and beyond the banality of quotidian life, are experiences of what Rahner calls everyday mysticism: “There is the mysticism of everyday life, the discovery of God in all things; there is the sober intoxication of the Spirit.” And even if unnoticed, they are there as “innermost sustaining ground” not only of the grace that may engender supernatural acts of faith, hope and love but also of transcendental experiences of God in explicit mysticism.

I chose the experiences in §4.3 because I think they are good examples of everyday mysticism among the Sotho. While some of the stories ring true for me as universal human experiences of the mysteries of existence and of relationships with others—such as Sekesa’s sad, unanswered questions and his guilt and fear, in the second example, or the seemingly unconditional love and devotion of Anastasia for her husband, in the fifth—other stories ring true due their consonance with Sotho spirituality—such as the solitary wilderness behaviour of new converts, in the third example, or the physicality and amuletic use of Fr Gérard’s grave soil, in the sixth.

Simply to say that these experiences are good examples of everyday mysticism, however, does not make them so. I could be wrong. What if Moshoeshoe actually had a perverse sense of justice and instead of banishing or executing the cannibals preferred to see them squirm with every display of supposed generosity? What if the woman who covered her baby was not motivated by love but paralyzed by fear and perhaps even fainted on top of her baby before being killed? What if the old man actually believed he should convert to Christianity but, due to

256. Rahner, Practice of Faith, 81.

257. Rahner, Practice of Faith, 70, 78, 80–81, 84.
a major crime in his past, was avoiding the confessional and the courts and trying to rationalize his position? However unlikely in my opinion, these are possibilities. Moreover, some of the stories raise other questions due to puzzling ambiguities. In short, it would take a full discernment of spirits in each of the nine stories to determine whether they really do qualify as instances of everyday mysticism.

Due to the frequency and relative anonymity of such everyday mystical experiences, however, such a process is not necessary or practicable, at least not in every case. Furthermore, every case does not require validation to accept that this type of mysticism does in fact occur among the Sotho and provide the kind of sustaining ground that Rahner indicates. With mysticism of the masses, however, this process of discernment becomes more important because of what Rahner calls the “fully social and public signification” of this type of mysticism. It has a greater and more explicit or discernable impact on the culture and wellbeing of people. And with classical mysticism, discernment not only enables a clearer vision of our personal relationship with God but also of mysticism’s exemplary, strengthening role for the spiritual life of the whole community.

Turning first to mysticism of the masses and the three examples given in §4.2, it is important, especially in view of the abundant categorial content involved, to stay focused on whether a transcendental experience of the Mystery called God has taken place. Here it is immensely helpful to recall Rahner’s point that even Spirit-filled biblical prophets made mistakes and that one is not forced either to recognise these experiences “as the unadulterated operation of the

258. For instance, in the seventh example, the sacrifice of a goat would normally indicate that a person is submitting to the call of the spirits and choosing to undergo initiation for bothuela, but here it is the opposite: with his sacrifice the man is ostensibly leaving bothuela for God. On the other hand, the goat to sheep progression mirrors the path of an initiate to full membership in Secret Prayer, not to mention biblical goat and sheep imagery in the judgement of nations. See Matthew 25:31–46.

To take another example, the eighth above, why is the noha presented or interpreted as an evil emissary of witchcraft requiring the protection or purification of St John’s Christians and their church? While the noha is indeed mysterious and fearsome in Sotho spirituality, it is also practically indispensable to the wilderness initiation of Sotho diviners, who derive their power from it. And it has sometimes even been identified or associated with divinity. See page 70 above and the discussion of God (Molimo) later in this section.
Holy Spirit” or to discount them “as ‘rubbish,’ the result of human religious impulses going off the rails.” With the mothekeheke outbreak of 1876, British administrators saw “rubbish” while missionaries more wisely saw “deep-seated discontent.” In my view, however, Magesa would go much further and see the operation of the Holy Spirit, not in a way “unadulterated” by human emotion, “natural altered states of consciousness” or shared visions and cultural symbols, but nonetheless providing the kind of cathartic healing that purifies and enables healthy relationships and a full expression of what the Sotho call botho (i.e., Ubuntu), which, as seen in §3.1, is so central to African spirituality and the African experience of God. The same is true in the holistic healing experienced through Secret Prayer or the wheel dance of the AICs. It signifies election by the Holy Spirit, the grace of God’s self-bestowing love, even if this involves suffering with Christ or “spirit sickness” or a fearsome seizure. And, perhaps paradoxically, the burden of the charisma indicated by this categorial content helps to establish what is “objectively correct,” thereby imparting a truer “image of God.”

Central to the categorial matrix of what I am calling Sotho mysticism of the masses are the phenomena directly linked to positive spirit possession. As seen in §3.4, Magesa asserts that “in the African indigenous context, the mystical experience is evident in the practice of divination and the occurrence of positive spirit possession,” which he calls “the most radical way that the spirit world encounters and communicates with humanity.” I address the matter of divination in the final chapter, but here the question is: Are my three examples occurrences of positive spirit possession? Can I interpret eye-witness accounts of the mothekeheke outbreak as positive spirit possession? What about the affliction or illness described as “possession by spirits” that leads to Secret Prayer? And finally, what of the “spirit sickness” that leads to the wheel dance of AICs? Are these all occurrences of positive spirit possession? And what about the categorial, historical content immediately surrounding these cases of alleged mysticism: “hysterical mania” and “heads flapping about like a knot on a whip lash”; purification from European influence, including their material culture; secrecy, passwords and other esoterica; goats, sheep and
elaborate hierarchies; drumming, singing, “wild dancing,” “staggering” and “falling down”?

While keeping in mind the importance of Magesa’s entreaty to “unbind the Spirit” or, in Rahner’s terms, not to preclude “prescriptions” of the Spirit, one can proceed with applying “general moral criteria” and with looking at the “effects” of the spirits, that is, the “reasonableness … of the objects towards which these ‘spirits’ seek to guide” the human subjects in question. Many aspects of morality are established by tradition and practised in the people’s spirituality and much reasonableness or “objective justification” may be assessed by looking for coherent patterns known to be of benefit for the common good. While there are different ways to discern the spirits in my three examples, what I will briefly explore here is how each of them participates in the time-honoured divination or bothuela pattern of progression I described in §4.1. It involves: (a) vocation through spirit sickness or disturbing dreams—where one faces Rahner’s abyss; (b) submission to possession by the Spirit or spirits—where one dives into the abyss and begins the mystical experience; (c) initiation, including a solitary wilderness experience—where the mystical experience continues and reaches its climax; (d) healing and reintegration with the community—where the concluded experience is interpreted and the benefits realized.259 Adherence to a time-honoured pattern such as this indicates the probability, if not the proof, that the experience meets the morality criterion for the Sotho, while the specific interpretation and realized benefits may bolster a favourable assessment of the “effects” criterion.

In the first example, there are indications of the first three stages of the pattern, and while the fourth stage is not explicit, one might assume that there was some measure of collective therapeutic catharsis involved in such a large “epidemic” of unrest, for although only some articles of European manufacture are known to have been destroyed, the epidemic itself receded. While all participants appeared to be possessed in the ecstatic passion of first stage, which in

259. See page 70 and §4.2 above.
itself was seen to be a transcendental experience of “divinatory inspiration” (*ho thoasa*), it would appear that some of them also submitted to the “spirits” and had the deeper experience of falling into a “state of trance” and receiving “messages from the unseen world” calling for purification through the elimination of polluting European influences. I would thus argue that, while it might be debated whether or not all of the participants had mystical experiences, the latter who were more thoroughly possessed did. Moreover, the parallels with other mass movements in the region both before and after this particular charismatic eruption serve to underscore its authenticity and provide a kind of regional African consensus regarding a widespread experience of upheaval and spiritual malaise.

In the second example, one sees again the same pattern, this time with all four stages clearly in evidence. It begins with an affliction or illness described as “possession by spirits” and interpreted by Secret Prayer members as election by the Holy Spirit. This is followed by submission to the Spirit seen in the decision to join Secret Prayer and become an initiate (*molekoa*). Once in Secret Prayer, the initiate finds that he or she is part of a “lake” (*letša*) and that one component of meetings is secret or solitary prayer. Mystical experiences involving possession by the Holy Spirit may take place in this solitary prayer or in confession to the “lake” as a kind of ecstatic outpouring. Eventually healing and reintegration follow. Here too there are wider parallels, in this case both with *bothuela* and the *manyano* movement.

In the third example, the four stages of the pattern are again in evidence, but the third stage perhaps requires more interpretation. The pattern begins with “spirit sickness” which is often accompanied by a dream or vision calling the afflicted person to join one of the “churches of the Spirit.” After acquiescing, the person’s healing process begins, usually with river baptism, but then followed by a number of other rites and practices, including the wheel dance, which not only give assurance of the presence of the Holy Spirit but also a suitable forum for seizure by the Spirit, which takes the form of “wild dancing,” body fever, staggering out of the circle, and so on. Such seizures are mystical experiences; they cannot be induced or manipulated, however,
because the Spirit blows where she wills. With healing comes wholeness and a new experience of community.

The solitary wilderness experience of the third stage may be detected in this example either in the individual’s experience of immersion in baptism—where the person is alone under water and where encounters with the noha in the context of baptisms have been reported—or in the personal decision to submit to the Spirit by joining the wheel dance and expressing oneself as the Spirit leads. For although the dance is somehow mysteriously coordinated, each dancer is following his or her own choreography of the Spirit. The latter, as seen earlier, may involve jogging, limping, gliding, jumping, or other forms of dance, which, as Magesa says, is the best form of prayer. An indication that the spirit possession is positive arises from the fact that despite appearances of a lack of control on the part of the subject, there is what St Paul would call the spirit of order from the God of peace, both in the dance and the worship service as a whole.

That countless Sotho people have been blessed and strengthened by experiences of spirit possession in phenomena and movements like bothuela, Secret Prayer, and the wheel dance of AICs is irrefutable in my opinion and it is their adherence to the traditions and morality of the community and the good effects evinced in and through their healing that makes the possession “positive.” Their experiences of spirit possession include explicit mystical experiences, not of their own initiative or manufacture but quite beyond them; they have merely acceded to cooperating freely with the Mystery that calls, heals, purifies and brings them into new relations with others, encompassing new exchanges of vital energy.

260. See page 70 and note 241 above.
262. Nussbaum found that Spirit manifestations such as seizures, visions and tongues are seen as enhancements of worship by AICs, and not disruptions. He also discovered that though they may appear to be completely unbounded, there are unwritten rules that apply. “Everyone knows who is in charge of the service at any given moment, and I have never seen a person have a spirit seizure at a time when [the one in charge] was presiding.” Nussbaum, “Toward Theological Dialogue,” 99.
Very probably there are also proximate aspects of spirit possession in these cases that are not healthy and that do not facilitate a personal experience of God, or a strengthening of personality (seriti), humanity (botho) and community. For example, there have been rumours of orgies and sexual abuses in Secret Prayer groups (mostly unsubstantiated to my knowledge). Or again, the gnostic aspect of Secret Prayer has led some to believe that members think they are superior to other Christians. Here one must remember Rahner’s caution with regard to mysticism of the masses: “even when the experience is genuine” it can be “psychologically conditioned either individually or socially” and can be “extremely limited and primitive in character.” Therefore, whether it comes in the “ordinary dress” of religious enthusiasm and the charismatic movement in the West or of bothuela, Secret Prayer and the wheel dance among the Sotho, this type of mysticism not only calls for “critical analysis of the categorial content” but also for much self-criticism and “genuine self-understanding.”

Coming finally to my three examples of “classical mysticism” in §4.1, I begin by acknowledging that there appears to be at least as much categorial content in these accounts, including both vivid imagery as well as historical and cultural detail, as there was in my examples of mysticism of the masses, and perhaps not much that corresponds to the “infused contemplation” of Rahner’s mysticism of the classical authorities. However, one needs to remember Magesa’s admonition in pursuing authentic inculturation not to look for mere correspondences. Rahner himself noted that historically in the Christian West infused contemplation is “probably distinguished a little too sharply from the other phenomena of ecstasies, visions and so on.” He also indicated that mysticism may take on “a thousand different forms.” It is completely unnecessary in my opinion to apologize for the robust visionary, kataphatic nature of African mysticism, and it is not as though there are not respected instances and theories of visionary mysticism elsewhere. In short,

263. See note 136 above.
264. See Hincks, Quest for Peace, 395–96.
one must get past any essentialist ideas stating or implying that the mysticism in question is inferior because it does not conform to what is deemed normative or does not qualify as what is considered to be the “highest” kind of mysticism.266

Why then do I categorize the transcendental experiences of Mohlomi, ’Mantsopa and Matitta as examples of Sotho classical mysticism rather than mysticism of the masses or mysticism in ordinary dress or even some other kind of spiritual experience? There are several reasons. First, it is clear that all three had transcendental experiences in which they were possessed by the Spirit or spirits in a positive way so that in Magesa’s formulation of African spirituality they had mystical experiences. Proof of this is in part evident from the fact that their experiences of mysticism conformed to the divination pattern seen in the examples of mysticism of masses earlier in the chapter. Two of the three mystics were known as diviners who were called by the ancestors in the traditional way and, if anything, Matitta’s calling follows the pattern even more closely than what was shown in the three previous examples. Proof of mysticism in their spirit possessions is also evident in part from the effects of their experiences on the whole community. All three have been judged by the Sotho to be outstanding examples of people who evinced botho and cultivated good relations with all. Their high moral example has been ascertained over

266. Sometimes a kind of cultural bias also plays havoc in the discernment process, making one or another account appear less or more credible. For example, the belief that Mohlomi could transport himself from one place to another appeared so incredible to some that they have argued he tricked people, that because he travelled so widely he knew shortcuts that they didn’t and could reach another place before them. (See, e.g., Ellenberger and Macgregor, History of the Basuto, 92.) But why do most Christians not try to rationalize the transport of the apostle Philip in the same way? (Acts 8:39–40.) One could argue that both men were going about doing good, led by “the Spirit of the Lord.” Or to take another example, some people, including missionaries to the Sotho, found rainmaking and the vocation of rainmakers incredible. And yet some of the same people had no trouble believing the biblical account that the prophet Elijah controlled the rain through the power of God. (1 Kings 17:1, 18:41–46.) And among their own number, both the Catholic missionary Joseph Gérard and the Protestant missionary Theophile Jousse were known to have prayed for rain, and it came. The Sotho believed these missionaries had a special relationship with God to bring this about—just like Mohlomi and ’Mantsopa—but the missionaries only believed it of their own. (Hincks, Quest for Peace, 332; Smith, The Mabilles of Basutoland, 121.) Even the English term “rainmaker” indicates a misleading bias tending toward some kind of shamanistic manoeuvring, for as seen earlier the Sotho term actually means “one who praises the rain.” Although shallow practitioners and charlatans existed and still exist, the great Sotho diviners and prophets knew more than to believe that they themselves could “make rain” or manipulate the ancestors or God to do so. It behooves one, then, to be careful about jumping to conclusions or dismissing what may seem naive or bizarre.
time by a kind of communal, intersubjective discernment process and the veracity of their positive encounters with the spirit world is not questioned. From the time of their calling, these three mystics also carried out their vocations responsibly, knowing the burden of their charisma; their divination or ordination status meant that they did not lead lives like most other people. Their transcendental experiences had categorial content but in what might be called “consecrated dress,” for they submitted to lifelong availability for “the spirit powers” to “take over … and speak through them,” as Magesa put it, and they continue to serve the people as revered ancestors. Finally, all three were believed to have had explicit, direct contact, meetings or encounters not only with the ancestors but importantly also with God, and through these, they enhanced people’s understanding and relationship to the Mystery called Molimo.

This last point is particularly important because, in no small way, these three mystics received visions or revelations that helped to impart a truer image of God—as the Spirit of “God’s self-bestowing love”—in a context where this Mystery, Molimo, was often not readily referenced and was variously experienced, often in highly ambiguous ways. Indeed, there has been much debate as to what or who Molimo was and is to the Sotho. An omnipotent Creator God or the first ancestor? Personal or impersonal? Proximate and involved like human grandparents or remote and unmovable like the Fates? A loving, benevolent Deity or a powerful, cunning reptile? The following examples will suffice to illustrate this diversity of understanding and experience:

- In 1805, one of the earliest European visitors to the region, Dr. Hinrich Lichtenstein, learned that Molimo was “the cause of all appearances in nature and the origin of all the good and evil that happens to [people] without any act of their own.”

- The historians, Ellenberger and Macgregor, wrote:

  Among the Bahlaping [a Tswana clan] there is a faint trace of the memory of one God, invisible, wise, and powerful; but among the Ancient Basuto He was, for the most part,

regarded as a malignant spirit, invisible and wicked; a pitiless master, residing in a subterranean cavern, always working evil, to whom they attributed all their ills and sufferings.

But they also noted that the Rolong clan invoked *Molimo* directly in times of famine and referred to *Molimo* as “God of our fathers.”

- The Protestant missionary Robert Moffat said that people saw *Molimo* as “something cunning or malicious”; “a noxious reptile.” He also reported that in the northern area of the Sotho region *Molimo* was described as a “thing” that lived in a hole.

- One of the first missionaries to Lesotho, Samuel Rolland, said “By *Molimo* the Basuto designate the Great Lord Creator of their several tribes.”

- In 1834, Moshoeshoe’s eldest son, Letsie, once advised the missionaries: “If you speak of a good-hearted god, give him the name of your language, but never say that *molimo* is good-hearted.”

- One of the early indigenous Christian pastors in the region said that the word *Molimo* was related to a verb meaning “to penetrate” and that *Molimo* was “He who penetrated, permeated all things.”

- Much later, a Canadian Catholic missionary noted that Sotho mythology depicted the *noha ea metsi* (water snake) “as a kind of supreme being or God but under the image or the symbol of a surprising figure.”

- The theologian Klaus Nürnbergber wrote that *Molimo* is “infinitely beyond bribery,

manipulation, approach and reproach” and that the nearest English equivalent may be “fate.”

• The Sotho historian L.B.B.J. Machobane said:

People did not get up every morning to greet and exchange trivialities with [Molimo]. But the ancestors, who were present in their memory, did the interceding… [Molimo] was an originator of all that was … Rain and children came from it. It fashioned human beings with its own hands… It was the source of peace… It alone was without fault. Its name was not to be invoked in vain.

• And the theologian Gabriel Setiloane, who like Machobane refers to Molimo with the impersonal “It,” says that despite Molimo’s more endearing or nurturing names, such as Mohloli (Source/Root), ’Me (Mother) and ’Melehisì (Midwife/Enabler), It is “a fearful, awful, ugly, monstrous thing” and ultimately unknowable. He notes that the Sotho experience of Molimo is “wholly misunderstood if it is not recognised as being an existential response to the ‘mysterium.’” And he goes on:

For missionaries who—in Otto’s terms—had come to identify holiness with the moral (the moral, moreover, as conceived in bourgeois terms), there was something lacking. There was indeed something offensive. [Yet] they were incapable of recognising that the Sotho-Tswana found something lacking, something offensive … in the western, Christian image of God.

Over the years, while most Sotho people have come to identify Molimo with the God of Christianity, there is still something of the ancient Mystery about Molimo that perdures and precludes an over-familiarity. In my view, the mystical experiences of Mohlomi, ’Mantsopa and Matitta have helped to maintain this image of a holy God, while at the same time demonstrating

276. Setiloane, Image of God, 80–81, 84, 85–86. Setiloane says that “the Sotho-Tswana make statements about MODIMO; but they are statements of here-and-now response, not attempts to make rational sense of IT.” In Otto’s terms, “IT is ‘mysterium’, intangible, all-pervasive, at no point capable of definition. IT is ‘tremendum’—’selo’ [thing], monstrous, whose very name is taboo to all but the few. IT is ‘fascinans’—‘mother’, concerned for the poor and the weak, and for justice among all.” Image of God, 85.
that the human longing for Molimo brings a surprising measure of grace from a divinity that wants to send rain, to protect, to heal, to convert, to communicate, to love. Mohlomi lived among people who believed only Molimo could send rain, and so in his rainmaking he invoked this “Supreme Being.” He was cited as an exception among the Sotho for believing, through revelation, “that there was in existence somewhere a Supreme Being, a mighty and invisible Power which ruled all things.” It was said that his relationship with Molimo “greatly mattered,” and when he died he knew he was going to “where our fathers rest.” ’Mantsopa was transported to heaven and saw Molimo. She discovered that Molimo is accessible as “the Supreme Chief” and that crowds of people go to his court. In mystical experiences, she received inspiration directly from Molimo, lending credence to point that the Spirit of Molimo deals directly with creatures in the manner of Rahner’s prescriptions. And later in life she submitted again to Molimo in Christian baptism. Matitta was also transported to heaven and saw Molimo. He was saved by an angel of Molimo and he was baptised, taught and commissioned by Molimo’s faithful servants. He taught and healed in Molimo’s name, founded an association for the “friends of the Spirit” of Molimo and through his rooster companions even brought Molimo’s message of liberation to people, demonstrating that in mysticism one may not only be privileged with “the ultimate data” of Molimo’s self-revelation but also with messages “adapted to the historical situation imposed on us,” as Rahner put it. All these, I think, were nothing if not exemplary, intense experiences of God’s grace within powerful experiences of mysticism through Spirit possession, demonstrating in Magesa’s words how “cult is subordinated to love-justice,” touching the core of people’s personal freedom and strengthening Sotho spirituality.

277. Ellenberger and Macgregor, History of the Basuto, 239.
Chapter 5
Concluding Remarks

There is no doubt that in a context of great uncertainty and insecurity—which is today replete with high unemployment, low wages, climate ravaged agriculture, environmental degradation, an AIDS epidemic, weak institutions, exploitation, corrupt governance, fractured families—Sotho people, like all Africans and all human beings, look for ways to eliminate or at least mitigate the pain, anxiety and alienation they experience. Much relief and genuine healing in this context comes in and through their spirituality, which not only testifies to their remarkable capacity for faith and hope but also fuels the love and joy they experience in community, knowing that this is life, belonging and being in healthy relationships with others, including the human family, the whole visible world, the ancestors and God.

It must be said, however, that a major part of Sotho spirituality is also focused on what many Africans see as witchcraft—what Magesa calls “the enemy of life,” which “permeates all areas … and is an ever-present reality in people’s political, social, and economic organizations.” Much of the recourse to divination comes from the compulsion to address the evils of witchcraft, which manifest in so many ways, causing trouble, instilling fear, triggering disease and damaging relationships.

My focus in this paper has been on Sotho spirit possession, the locus of mysticism, of intense encounters with the Spirit of God’s self-revelation and healing—but what of divination? On the one hand, I have noted Magesa’s view that “in the African indigenous context, the mystical experience is evident in the practice of divination and the occurrence of positive spirit possession.” Here divination is integral to mysticism, providing “the most radical way that the spirit world encounters and communicates with humanity.” On the other hand, for the integrity of Sotho spirituality, one must also consider long-held Christian views of divination because the
great majority of Sotho people today are Christian. One of the clearest statements on divination, which I think many Christian traditions share at least in broad strokes, is found in the catechism of the Catholic Church: “All forms of divination are to be rejected…”; and “All practices of magic or sorcery, by which one attempts to tame occult powers, so as to place them at one’s service and have a supernatural power over others—even if this were for the sake of restoring their health—are gravely contrary to the virtue of religion.”

Does this, then, effectively undermine and nullify my thesis?

Obviously I do not think it does. Like the spirit possession it facilitates, divination requires careful analysis and discernment. The catechism paragraph before the ones quoted states that “God can reveal the future to his prophets or to other saints,” but it warns against “all unhealthy curiosity about it.” And the paragraphs taken as a whole clearly indicate that what the church forbids is “recourse to Satan or demons,” “the intention of harming someone,” “traditional cures … [involving] the invocation of evil powers or the exploitation of another’s credulity” and, perhaps most telling, “a desire for power over time, history and, in the last analysis, other human beings.”

This then is a rejection, not of all divination as Africans understand and practise it, but of the divination of witchcraft.

It is important, nonetheless, not to adopt a strictly good versus evil position on divination. Bernhard Udelhoven, who has dealt with witchcraft matters and the persons involved for many years, counsels a very Rahnerian approach, one that seeks to move people from the “logic of divination” (understood as the divination of witchcraft) to the “logic of discernment.” Indeed, for Rahner, as for St Ignatius of Loyola, discernment is rarely a simple matter of choosing between good and evil, as though reality were strictly dualistic; it is, rather, a faithful, responsible evaluation of one’s existential situation with its various factors and options, all of

280. Udelhoven, Unseen Worlds, 368.
which may be good. The real problem is that all too often the kinds of adversity listed at the
beginning of this chapter overtake human beings and make them desperate. They become
embroiled in the witchcraft discourse and the solutions it offers; they seek to divine a remedy by
any means. King Saul in the Bible was not condemned for using divination, but rather because he
did not use a legitimate form of divination. Saul had become mired in difficulties and faced a
great army of Philistines. In his quest to recover and defeat the enemy, he consulted a witch-
medium of the kind he had formerly expelled from Israel. He was desperate to reverse his
fortunes through the very real powers of the witch, but the Spirit of the Lord was not with him
and he failed.\(^{281}\) Saul’s successor to the throne, King David, also used divination. Often David or
a priest he consulted put on the sacred ephod with a breastplate containing Urim and Thummin,
which were essentially divining dice, in order to “inquire of the Lord,”\(^{282}\) but this was legitimate
divination and David used it unselfishly and with God’s blessing.

Udelhoven reminds us that “witchcraft discourses have existed for thousands of years, in most
cultures of the world. They crystallize for us in powerful symbols experiences with senseless evil
and loss, alienation, and an awareness of being controlled and exploited by others.” He goes on
to say that “these experiences remain whether a person believes in witchcraft or not” and that the
tendency of witchcraft to make scapegoats responsible for our problems “does not cease with the
abandoning of witchcraft beliefs.”\(^{283}\) Among the Sotho, there have been many cases where
people desperate to save a dying child, a failing business, a withering crop, to protect a house or
win an election, to beat a disease or land a job have resorted to the divination of witchcraft.
Through spirit possession in dance, in the reading of bones or the word of a diviner, they may put
their faith in charms, medicines, sacrifices, rituals. In more extreme cases, they may be party to
sending curses or familiars (lithokolosi) or to committing medicine murders (liretlo)—all

\(^{281}\) I Samuel 28:3–25.
\(^{282}\) See, e.g., I Samuel 30:7–8.
\(^{283}\) Udelhoven, *Unseen Worlds*, 417, 418.
ostensibly to effect a good end. The difference between the divination of witchcraft and the
divination of positive spirit possession in which experiences of mysticism are found is not so
much a difference in the ends sought, which may all be good, but rather the difference between a
desire to control or manipulate the spirit world for one’s own narrow ends and a desire to be in a
relationship of radical submission to the ancestors and God and to trust in providence. Mohlomi
knew that Molimo alone could make it rain; he longed to be in a relationship with this God and
through mystical experiences in spirit possession he discovered that God also wanted this. The
rain was proof of God’s solicitous love. Mohlomi shared that love with the whole community;
rain fell on everyone and everything. In the process, as a result of his mystical experiences, right
relations were restored, a perichoresis of vital energy took place, the land was refreshed and
healed, new life sprang up, and the whole community thrived.

From Rahner one learns about the fundamental orientation of human beings to the transcendent
Mystery and that the basis of human existence is the abyss. By facing the abyss, by being open to
the experience of transcendence in which we extend beyond ourselves and the routine specifics
of our lives, we may experience an everyday variety of mysticism, an “elevated” encounter with
Mystery—perhaps a deep longing, an unaccountable fear, an unconditional love. Through
visions, prophecies, glossolalia, ecstasies, and other phenomena, often in altered states of
consciousness and often with other people, such experiences may manifest more explicitly as
experiences of transcendence into the Mystery of God’s self-revelation, that is, as a kind of
mysticism of the masses which has shared symbols and communal significance. And when,
much more rarely, a person is granted an absolutely radical and intense experience of
transcendence into the Mystery of God’s self-bestowing love in the Spirit, then the climax of
mysticism, like that of the classical authorities, is realized and will hopefully be an example that
strengthens others’ experience of God.

From Magesa one learns that African mysticism, deeply embedded as it is in the people’s
spirituality, is experienced most clearly as positive spirit possession through divination. A
process of discernment following traditional principles of morality and establishing through community consensus that there are good effects and no lasting harm are strong indicators that the experience is positive. Moreover, the African mysticism of positive spirit possession is marked by features and experiences that are both universal, such as what we have seen in Rahner’s three types, and ones that are distinctively, though not necessarily uniquely, African. The latter include radical submission to possession, an apperception of love-justice, profound embodiment, abundant visionary content, and practical applications with healing and other communal benefits.

Finally, from the Sotho one learns from the examples given that experiences of mysticism are not always sought for or comfortable (as Rahner also noted), they are often initially ambiguous, they fit into divination patterns that are deeply meaningful and adaptable through a perichoresis of vital energy, they are found to be moral and meet the most profound human needs for healthy communities, and they demonstrate that the more genuine and selfless they are, “the more nearly does [God’s] self-bestowing love touch us,” enabling a personal experience of God that forms us through and through.

The lessons from the Sotho and more broadly from Africa are clear in my view, and more universally relevant than ever. To paraphrase both Karl Rahner and Laurenti Magesa: Be authentically human for once! Face fear, isolation, ineffable longing, spirit sickness. Dance with others and allow such ultimate, basic experiences to possess you, even if you do not know at first if it is the dark spirit of witchcraft or the healing spirit of Ubuntu. Unbind the Spirit—and let mystical experiences of God’s love-justice fall like the rain on all creation!
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