

Reshaping South African Indigenous Theology on God and Sin: A Comparative Study of Augustine's Confessions

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Abstract

Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo, is one of the most influential church fathers whose views helped to shape modern Protestant theology. Many of his works are still studied by modern theologians. As an African he contributed to shaping a bible-focused theology that transformed Europe and the world. Many African theologians dream of reaching the international stature of Augustine. However, African theology in the present context differs greatly from the Greek-Roman world to which Augustine was accustomed. The continent is a boiling pot of different cultures, religions and conflicting worldviews. South Africa during the apartheid era was divided into different classes. The Christian community was divided by race and ideology. Western-style education and Christian missions brought a sense of awareness in the black South African communities. During this period, two types of theologies flourished. The first is Black Theology that is political and the second is South African Indigenous theology that sought to present theology in a way that connects and is easily acceptable to black South African communities. The

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

South African Indigenous theology flourished with the African Indigenous Church groups, which currently enjoy more than six million members. The churches are diverse and syncretise Christian theism with African traditional religions. I will examine how the views of Augustine in *Confessions* could influence African Indigenous theology in South Africa.

1. Introduction

This work will examine how the notion of divine providence and sin in African Indigenous Theology can be reshaped to present a more biblical view. The notion of divine providence and sin are fundamental in understanding African Indigenous theology in South Africa. Many theological views practised in black South African cultures are founded on these two views. I believe that when these views are reshaped to reflect the truth expressed in the scriptures, most of the theological concerns expressed by Western theologians can be dealt with.

Bediako (2004:49) states that there are two types of African theologies in the post-missionary era. The first is the liberation theology, which is the product of the anti-apartheid movement. This is known as Black Theology. Black theology is a product of the oppressed in trying to understand and deal with their political environment. Black Theology sees God as the fighter against and rescuer of the oppressed from tyrannical governments. The second is the focus of this research. It is the theology that is generally held by African Indigenous Church groups (AIC). The theology practised by African indigenous churches is not as political as Black Theology. African Indigenous Theology practised by African indigenous churches seeks to present Christianity that connects with black African cultures. Syncretism of western Christian theology and traditional African religions is evident in their views of God and life after death. In the South African black cultures

God the creator is supreme but distant. He is not involved in the life of mankind. The ancestors play a very important role in the affairs of mankind. There is a common understanding of the role of ancestors in black South African cultures. These common factors of God and sin make it easier to construct an African indigenous theology which can be acceptable throughout South Africa.

The AIC churches have steadily increased, while many denominations were either stagnant or slowly declining. The largest of the AIC church groups is the Zion Christian Church (ZCC). The ZCC increased from 3.8 million members in 1996 to 4.9 million in 2011, while other AIC church groups increased from 216 000 adherents in 1996 to 1.8 million in 2011 (StatsSA 2001:25; StatsSA 2012:19-20). These churches represent a type of Christianity, particularly in Black rural communities. In addition, more AIC churches are evident in urban sectors as well. This is due to the increased migration of black South Africans, moving from rural to urban sectors to find better jobs. It is essential that African indigenous churches formulate theologies that reflect the truth of the bible. The nature of the AIC churches makes them ideal for an effective church plant and growth. They do not need permanent structures and do not require extensive financial expenditures. Although there are some positive elements of the AIC churches, the theology that is commonly practised causes great concerns which have spiritual and social impact. Some of these result in the undesired person being ostracised, and even at times the individuals may be killed. What will be examined are the views of Augustine expressed in the *Confessions*, to see how they can help to reshape African Indigenous theology in South Africa. Augustine is viewed as one of the most influential Church Fathers. His writing had great influence on both Catholic and Protestant theologians, including Luther and Calvin. In addition, the *Confessions* is the focus of most work by current scholars. My focus is on how Augustine's views, as an

African Church Father, could reshape current African indigenous theology to be more biblical and social-conscious.

2. God's Divine Providence

Divine providence is understood as God's active role in the affairs of the world. The debate on the notion of divine providence is on whether or not mankind has free will (Jensen 2014:1). There are generally four views on divine providence; God causes all things, God directs all things, God controls by liberating, God limits his control (Helseth, Craig, Highfield and Boyd 2011). I will not debate these views, but will focus on how Augustine understood divine providence, and how his view can help to reshape African Indigenous theology in South Africa.

2.1. Augustine's view of God's divine providence

The first three chapters of Augustine's Book 1 focus on the greatness of God. In Book 1, chapter 4, Augustine goes on to present the dichotomy in the nature of God. Augustine (1.4.4) states,

Most high, most excellent, most potent, most omnipotent; most merciful and most just; most secret and most truly present; most beautiful and most strong; stable, yet not supported; unchangeable, yet changing all things; never new, never old; making all things new, yet bringing old age upon the proud, and they know it not; always working, ever at rest; gathering, yet needing nothing...

The first few descriptions Augustine uses are superlatives, such as 'Most high', to distinguish God above all other deities. He then presents the dichotomy of 'most secretive and most truly present', 'always working, ever at rest', 'sustaining, pervading, and protecting; creating, nourishing, and developing; seeking, and yet possessing all things', 'Thou dost love, but without passion; art jealous, yet free from care;

dost repent without remorse; art angry, yet remainest serene. Thou changest thy ways, leaving thy plans unchanged; thou recoverest what thou hast never really lost' (1.4.4). This presentation of God may be deliberate to present God as a multi-dimensional being in contrast to the pagan gods. God is known and unknown, mysterious and yet revealed himself to mankind. This is a God who cannot be fully known to mankind, and although there is a sense of dichotomy in God, there are no contradictions. The majesty of God is great, but he is, in some sense, predictable due to his consistent moral nature.

Augustine believed in God's providence over all aspects of human life. Crosson (2003:74) believes that Book V is the centre and the pivotal point where Augustine is aware of God's active role in his life. Crosson (2003:75) states the following: 'First of all, Book Five itself is a center, a midpoint. And it happens that that middle of the book is the point where the narrator, looking back, first attributes to God's acting on him, to God's guiding him, something he had decided to do for what seemed at the time purely his own reasons - to go to Rome.' Although I agree with Crosson on his view regarding Augustine's awareness of God's providence in bringing him to accept God's divine truth, there is evidence that in the early parts of the *Confessions* that Augustine, now an older and wiser man, mentions God's providence in the daily life of mankind. Augustine sees God's providence from the moment of conception. Augustine (1.6.7) states,

And yet the consolations of thy mercy have sustained me from the very beginning, as I have heard from my fleshly parents, from whom and in whom thou didst form me in time-for I cannot myself remember. Thus even though they sustained me by the consolation of woman's milk, neither my mother nor my nurses filled their own breasts but thou, through them, didst give me the food of infancy according to thy ordinance and thy bounty which underlie all things.

Augustine not only acknowledges God as the one who created him, but sustained him through determining how much milk his mother and nurse could give him. There are several references throughout Augustine's *Confessions* that make direct references to God's active role in the lives of mankind. Still focusing on his early years Augustine (1.11.17) acknowledges God as his keeper during the time he was sick and states the following:

Thou didst see, Oh Lord, how, once, while I was still a child, I was suddenly seized with stomach pains and was at the point of death-thou didst see, Oh my God, for even then thou wast my keeper, with what agitation and with what faith I solicited from the piety of my mother and from thy Church (which is the mother of us all) the baptism of thy Christ, my Lord and my God.

Augustine (1.11.18) during his reflection on this period asks what God's plan was by healing him, while preventing him from being baptised when he had asked to be. Augustine believes in God's judgment of preventing him from being baptised, but letting him continue in the path that he took. Augustine believes that everything that happened to him was necessary for God's plan for his life.

2.2. The African indigenous theological perspective on divine providence

Bujo and Muya (2006:52) state,

On the contrary, belief in the providence is so strong in Africa that one could well say that God is almost everywhere, and everything ends up being contemplated starting from this transcendence. It gets manifested in the sacrifice of the first fruits. The first fruits of crops, of hunting and fishing, are offered to God as Master of the universe and as the Providence One.

Bujo and Muya (2006:53) further explain that God in the general African perspective is seen as the creator and the sustainer of life. He explains that the divine can mediate in human affairs through various ways, and at times manifest themselves as natural animals. This belief is evident in both traditional and Christian theology. In the South Africa Pedi culture to which I belong, the supreme God is called *Modimo*. Traditionally he is distant, and his involvement in human affairs is limited. Instead, those who are involved in the affairs of mankind are *badimo*, ancestors. It is not a coincidence that *modimo* and *badimo* seem similar as *mo* is a prefix for the singular while *ba* is for the plural. *Modimo* is translated as deity, while *badimo* in a literal translation means deities. Although *modimo* is regarded as the Supreme Being, most veneration is directed to *badimo* that are directly involved in the affairs of the mankind; both in blessings and curses. This view of ancestors as deities is not limited to the Pedi culture, but applies to many African cultures (Wiredu 2013:29).

Regarding the role of ancestors in African belief, Tanye (2010:108) states,

At death, the God-given spirit departs and starts its journey back to the world of the spirits. From the spirit world, it maintains contact with the living and mediates between the spiritual world and the earthly family and often visits their family members in their dreams in concrete creatures such as snakes, hyenas, caterpillars, butterflies, etc. or through direct contact with the living through possession.

This veneration of the ancestors is often translated into many African Indigenous Church (AIC) movements in South Africa.

Gilliland (1986) has excellent classifications of the AIC church movement. Gilliland (1986:266–270) places the AIC churches into four

groups. The first one is the Primary evangelical-Pentecostal group. These are the churches that have direct connection with European and American church groups that helped to establish the indigenous churches, and are often bible-based. The leaders often received Western theological training (Gilliland 1986:267). The second group, Secondary evangelical-Pentecostal, is similar to the first group, but with fewer trained leaders and often without external connections. In addition to adhering to true biblical messages they rely more on the supernatural than the first group (Gilliland 1986:268). The third and fourth groups, Revelational indigenous and Indigenous eclectic, rely more on personalities and the supernatural than on the bible (Gilliland 1986:269–270). These groups incorporate the traditional African belief that ancestors are mediators to God.

In the South African context, it is difficult to place all AIC churches into these categories, as many are independent churches without any allegiance to a specific denomination. The largest AIC church group in South Africa is the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) that has more four million members which include neighbouring countries like Zimbabwe and Namibia (StatsSA 2001:25; StatsSA 2012:19-20). The ZCC theology includes the worship of ancestors and other African traditional spirituality (Oomen 2005:153). Although on the surface ZCC churches and many other African Indigenous churches seem to have a Christian view of God, it places God at a distance with the ancestors filling the vacuum.

2.3. A juxtaposition of Augustine's view and African indigenous theology on providence

One of the contrasts between the Augustinian view of God's providence and the African Indigenous theology in the South African context is the view of the role of God in this human life. Augustine sees God as both

the creator (1.6.7) and keeper (1.11.17) of life. I agree with Crosson's (2003:75) view that Augustine became aware of God's providence when he understood God's active role in bringing him to Ambros to receive the Gospel. But the view of God's active role is different from African Indigenous theology that views God as a distant being. Although Bujo and Muya (2006:52) believe that God in the African religions reveals himself to mankind through various ways such as creatures, in the South African context these manifestations are believed to be of the ancestors. The ancestors in the black South African cultures can work through animals and even possess people to fulfil their plans.

There are three reasons why Augustine's view is better than the African Indigenous theology practised by the AIC churches in South Africa. The first reason is that the African Indigenous theological view of God conflicts with the biblical view of God who reveals himself directly to mankind. Throughout scriptures there are references to God revealing himself to individuals (Gen 6:13; 12:1–5; Exod 3:1–21, 33:1–21; Acts 9:1–19; Rev 1:8, 17–20; 22:7–16), to the nation through public manifestations (Exod 13:21–22; 19; 1 Sam 5), and through heroic actions of individuals (1 Sam 11; 14; 1 Kgs 18). More so, the incarnation of Christ can be understood as the combination of all these elements; God revealing himself to individuals through personal encounters (Matt 8:5–13; 9:20; Luke 7:37–39), public displays of miracles witnessed by the multitudes (Luke 18:35; John 2:11; 9:1–12), and the heroic actions and ministries of the Apostles (the Book of Acts).

The second reason is that the reliance on the ancestors is very troubling, as the spirits always seek to be appeased. Ancestors are human spirits and there are no criteria for indicating who can be an ancestor. In other words, anyone, regardless of how they lived on earth, can attain deity. There is no heaven or hell, only spiritual and physical realms. In

addition, there is no indication that a person who lived an immoral life can change and be good. The expectations depend on each ancestor and not on any specific criteria. This creates great uncertainty, as one does not really know whether or not the ancestors have been appeased; only when one experiences either good or bad fortune. Uncertainty creates fear and suspicion in the community and family. One is not free to take responsibility for his or her own life, but has to be careful not to make the ancestors angry and disappointed. What makes it so difficult is the lack of coherency in the belief. In the Pedi (Nothern Sotho) and Shangaan cultures there is no specific hierarchy among the ancestors. Each ancestral spirit can demand different things, even if it contradicts the demands of other spirits. This creates anxiety in the lives of individuals and families. The notion of a personal and loving God, who is superior, as mankind's expectations of God is consistent and revealed. It eliminates anxiety on the part of individuals and communities, and gives individuals charge of their own lives. God is involved in the lives of mankind, but mankind is responsible for each decision made. Each individual is responsible for living a moral life revealed in the scriptures, and each person knows the fruit of the kind of life he or she lives.

The third and last reason is that the African Indigenous theology practised by the AIC churches in South Africa robs individuals and society from having a direct communion with the one true God. The focus is on the veneration of ancestral spirits, and the connection between mankind and God does not exist. Mankind is always at the mercy of the ancestral spirits, which display great inconsistencies in their expectations. The ancestors can control whom one marries or where one lives. People do not have the freedom to control their environment or their lives. More so, the ancestors can manifest their presence in a manner that can torment individuals. The reliance on ancestral spirits easily strips individuals of self-confidence. Reliance on the ancestors makes mankind unable to take responsibility for their

decisions and the outcomes thereof. Everything is seen as the will of the ancestors. If a person gets a promotion or a good harvest, then it is seen as the blessing of the ancestors. If an individual loses his or her job or receives bad news, then it is seen as the will of the ancestors. People do not have to take responsibility for their own lives or face the consequences of their actions. The spiritual focus is on the invocation of the blessings from the ancestors on the individuals through appeasement.

In contrast, Augustine, although acknowledging God's providence, believes that every decision still belongs to each individual. The consequences of his decision to steal pears (2.4–7) or to play games instead of studying (1.19.30) were not seen as God's fault, but the results his own sinfulness. For example, Augustine (5.8.14) reveals the motive for his going to Rome. Although he acknowledges God's work in his life, Augustine also acknowledges personal motivations for his decision. The motive of the reputation of the students and the academic environment appealed to him. The notion of mankind taking responsibility for their actions is evident throughout Augustine's reflection on his life. African Indigenous theology does not encourage this, and it is vital for the development of black Africans in South Africa. It creates a trend where blame is placed elsewhere and not on the individuals. Augustine's view is essential as it empowers individuals to take charge of their lives. It causes each individual to evaluate his or her life through choices made. Good results can be seen as God's blessings, but at the same time it does not negate the will and intellect of the individuals. There can be no scapegoat to take responsibility for each individual action. More so, the veneration of the ancestors can be abused by those who do not even believe in them. Ndumiso Ngcobo (2014) in *Eat, Drink and Blame the Ancestors* as a Zulu man documents situations in his life where he and people that he knows misuse the idea

of ancestors to get out of trouble and to indulge in binges on meat and liquor dedicated to the ancestral spirits. A theology that makes mankind accountable to one true God enforces the idea that each decision is important, and that one is responsible for one's life.

This is evident in the black South African community, which often places blame for the current failures on apartheid. For example, the unemployment rate in South Africa among black South Africans is high. Statistics South Africa (StatsSA 2014:6) states,

Black Africans account for 79,3% of the working age population but they are underrepresented among the employed (73,0%) and over-represented among the unemployed (85.7%) and the not economically active population (83,3%). Compounding the dire labour market situation of Black Africans, is that an even larger percentage (87.4%) of those that are unemployed have been looking for work for one year or longer.

In addition, there is more power blackout due to the lack of sufficient power production. In January, 2015 the current president of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, blamed apartheid for the lack of adequate infrastructure (du Plessis and Makinana 2015:www.citypress.co.za/news/zuma-blames-apartheid/). Twenty years after the fall of apartheid, black South Africans still find it easier to blame the past regime for the present failures than to take responsibility for the current situations. In May 2008 the world witnessed xenophobic attacks in South Africa. The attacks lasted a couple of weeks, and African foreigner business owners and residents were the focus of the attacks. There was another spell of xenophobic attacks in 2014, and in February 2015 there were still some incidents of xenophobic attacks. The attacks were concentrated primarily in black settlements and townships. The motivation for these attacks was economic. With a large number of black South African being unemployed, the blame was put on the foreign nationals, and not

the government or their own choices they had made. The targets were foreign-owned businesses that employed local workers. The actions do not correspond with the logic behind the motivation for the attacks. However, this is not surprising, as the culture of passing blame is entrenched in black South African communities. A theology that encourages individuals and communities to take responsibility for their lives and decisions is needed to transform the South African society.

3. The Difference in the View of Sin

Augustine's view of sin expressed in the *Confessions* and African Indigenous theological perspective differ greatly. Augustine's writings express a specific view of sin. In the Book 1 Augustine expresses his belief in the inherent sinful nature of mankind. Augustine (1.6.8) observes that infants have selfishness and pride, as they seek to be served. In addition, Augustine (1.7.11) states, 'Hear me, O God! Woe to the sins of men! When a man cries thus, thou showest him mercy, for thou didst create the man but not the sin in him'. He believes that God created mankind but not the sin in him. Augustine (1.7.12), also, observes that he was never innocent, but guilty of sin as he was conceived in iniquity (meaning that he inherited a sinful nature from his parents). This concurs with the biblical descriptions of the fallen nature of mankind, that no one is good and man is incapable of being good (Ps 12:1–2; Rom 3:9–20). Augustine believes that mankind sins not only because they have to, but because they enjoy sin. An example that he uses is the situation where he stole a bunch of pears as a young man. Augustine (2.4.7) says that he did not steal the pears because he was hungry but states,

Behold, now let my heart confess to thee what it was seeking there,
when I was being gratuitously wanton, having no inducement to

evil but the evil itself. It was foul, and I loved it. I loved my own undoing. I loved my error-not that for which I erred but the error itself. A depraved soul, falling away from security in thee to destruction in itself, seeking nothing from the shameful deed but shame itself.

Sin is delightful, as it is that which is in the heart (Jas 1:14). Sin is attractive and easily lures individuals (Wannas 2014:xxxvi). Augustine's view differs from African Indigenous theology. Kunhiyop (2008) in *African Christian Ethics* contrasts African and Western moral laws. Kunhiyop (2008:8) states that 'African moral laws are passed down orally from generation to generation and they become absolute guide to the communities. The elders and the ancestors decide on moral laws that are deemed good for the communities.' This applies to the Christian community as well. According to the African Indigenous Churches, the concept of church is based on the African idea of an extended family (Oduro 2008:62). Obedience to the leaders and elders is necessary, as disobedience can cause communal disunity and suffering. Sin, therefore, is breaking communal laws and bringing hardship on the community (Kunhiyop 2008:8). In the South African context, hardships are often interpreted as retribution by the ancestors. Therefore, if calamity befalls a community, it is customary to find the culprit and either excommunicate the individual, or even at times kill the individual. Mob justice in black communities is not uncommon. Those killed are often criminals and people suspected of practising harmful witchcraft. They are often viewed as those responsible for calamities in communities. However, in the present context, xenophobic attacks can be grouped under this principle as well. The presence of foreigners is seen as a curse that brings hardships and unemployment in the community. The only way to bring back good fortune is to get rid of those responsible. Therefore sin is not individual-based but communal. The focus is on the well-being of the community. Shaun Smillie (2010),

a reporter of African Eye News Service, reported on the criminal case of a man who killed his relative and consumed parts of his body because he believed that the ancestors instructed him to do so. Adam Ashforth (2005) in *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa* focuses on crimes, many violent, attributed to the belief in the ancestors. Many of these cases come from ritual killings of members of the AIC church groups. Although it is essential to note that not all AIC churches encourage this belief it is undeniable that most do. Syncretism of Christianity and African traditional beliefs blurs the lines between biblical morality and cultural allegiance.

Both Augustine's and the African Indigenous theological views have their weaknesses. Augustine's weakness is not theological, but rather based on the focus of his presentation. Augustine's focus in the *Confessions* is primarily on the individual and not on the effect of sin on others. The *Confessions* focuses on Augustine's reflection on his life. There are some references to how his sins affected his mother, but these are limited and they serve as admiration of his mother's faith in God. Unfortunately, Augustine does not mention the effects his decisions had on the woman with whom he fathered a son. There are short references to the woman and the son, but he avoids mentioning how his selfish ambitions affected them. Augustine (6.15.25) uses a passive voice, creating a perception that the decision to remove the son's mother was not his. The reader of the *Confessions* is left with an unanswered question of who removed the woman from Augustine's life. Was it his mother due to her desire to see her son married to a legitimate wife, or was it God through his divine providence through circumstances and people that caused the woman to leave? These are questions that are not answered in the *Confessions*.

There is biblical evidence of the effect of sin on the community. There is the effect of Cain's murderous act on his family (Gen 4), the sinful nature of mankind that brought judgement on the earth (Gen 6), the stubbornness of Pharaoh that brought suffering on Egypt (Exod 7–12), the rebellion that brought forty years of wandering in the desert (Num 14), Achan's sin at Ai (Josh. 7). There are numerous other examples in the scriptures that can be found. The communal aspect of sin has a biblical premise. However, this does not make African Indigenous theology superior to Augustine's view of sin.

The African Indigenous theological view of sin in the South African context prevents mankind from taking responsibility for his sinful actions. There are two main reasons why the communal view of sin, alone, is insufficient. The first reason is that it does not correspond with the biblical notion of sin. Sin is regarded as disobedience to God's commandments and laws. Each individual is responsible for his or her actions. The sons of Aaron disobeyed God regarding the laws of the sacrifice. Their sins did not affect the community, but God punished them for their transgressions (Lev 10:1–3). The same occurred with the sons of Samuel (1 Sam 3:11; 4:14–18). Each individual will be judged based on his actions against God's moral law (Heb 9:27). Just as each individual's unrighteousness is judged, so is each individual's faith rewarded with eternal life (John 3:16–17; Rom 10:9–10). The judgement of God is not based on communal consensus but on the individual's responsibility to God.

The second reason why the communal view of sin, alone, is insufficient, is that it creates ethical and a theological enigma. This notion encourages a relative view of ethics. Everything depends on the consequences of the actions. Adultery cannot be deemed wrong if there are no negative consequences that will affect the community. Therefore God's absolute moral law becomes obsolete. There is binding moral

law, but only the consequences of the actions matter. If lying and cheating can benefit the community, then they can easily be accepted as good and noble even though they may, theoretically, be bad (Pollock 2012:37). In addition, everything is relative, as it will depend on the good of each local church community. The African Indigenous theological view is based on the notion of evil and suffering. The emphasis has been on avoiding suffering and embracing the good in life. During apartheid the leader of the ZCC church encouraged its members to support the regime and not oppose it, as opposition would bring suffering to the community (Oomen 2005:153). The focus was not on whether or not apartheid was based on moral grounds, but the focus was on the retribution of the state on the community. In African Indigenous theology there are moral absolutes that are based on the bible, but the commands from the ancestors supersede these moral laws if they can bring good fortune to both individuals and the community.

Good fortune and suffering are the measuring rod of whether or not the individual or community has pleased God and the ancestors. Suffering is seen as punishment from the ancestors due to disobedience. Augustine views all the pain and suffering as meaningful to work to establish God's divine plan on earth, (Crosson 2003:75). Therefore, suffering and pain are part of fallen mankind's existence, but they find meaning within God's divine providence. Not all suffering is due to the individual's or communal sin. African Indigenous theology in South Africa encourages the wait-and-see approach. If there is suffering, then one has to bring some sacrifices and perform rituals to appease the ancestors and to cleanse one from all the misfortunes attached to the individual or community. After the ceremonies one continues with his or her own life and waits for good fortune to come. The passive nature of this view is dangerous, as one simply waits on the decisions of the ancestors. Whatever happens is based on the will of the spirits. For this

reason, South Africa performs cleansing rituals annually for the country to get rid of all the misfortunes in the land, so that the spirits can bless the country. Both President Mbeki and President Zuma attended and performed the annual cleansing rituals. Augustine creates a balance between the sovereign act of God and the responsibility of mankind for his life. This balance is needed when dealing with sin and suffering.

4. The Difference in the View of Suffering

The view of suffering in South African Indigenous theology is connected to its view of sin and divine providence. Augustine sees God as an active deity in the lives of mankind, whether or not they realise it. The South African Indigenous theological role of a distant God leaves a practical question of the existence of evil and suffering. The view of the ancestors attempts to fill the vacuum by attributing suffering and blessings to the active role of the ancestors. Taking Augustine's position would lead to the question of the existence of evil and suffering. Augustine (12.7.7) maintains that when God created the world everything was good and perfect. There was no sorrow and sadness. Everything changed due to rebellion and disobedience to God of both angels and mankind (13.8.9). Unfortunately, Augustine does not mention suffering caused by natural disasters, but focuses on man-caused suffering. The man-caused suffering is due to sinful acts that affect both the perpetrators and the victims, such as the man from whom he stole the pears, or the suffering of his mother when he ran away to Rome and Milan. Augustine acknowledges social suffering as part of the fallen human existence with the poor and the needy. However, he focuses on the Christian response to suffering. Augustine (13.18.22) states,

Thus, O Lord, thus I beseech thee: let it happen as thou hast prepared it, as thou givest joy and the capacity for joy. Let truth

spring up out of the earth, and let righteousness look down from heaven, and let there be lights in the firmament. Let us break our bread with the hungry, let us bring the shelterless poor to our house; let us clothe the naked, and never despise those of our own flesh.

The call for truth and righteousness indicates the strong presence of falsity and unrighteousness causing concern. These can be seen as contributors to the social ills of mankind. Augustine, however, does not dwell on the causes of suffering, but on the Christian response to it. He calls for a pragmatic response rather than a spiritual response, with feeding the hungry, finding shelter for the homeless, clothing the naked and taking care of one's kin. The South African black communities differ in their responses to dealing with suffering. There is a general view that suffering is the curse of the ancestors. The responses range from support for the individual by trying to appease the ancestors, to bringing good fortune to the suffering individual, to rejection as he or she may be considered the cursed member of the family. The severity of the treatment of the offender differs according to the perceived view of the suffering by the community. The suffering of the community may result in the perceived offender being excommunicated or, in some cases, being killed by mob justice. Augustine's view places the responsibility on Christians to help the sufferer. This is a very practical view that will help to create an African theology which not only coheres with the scriptures, but one that encourages social responsibility. This can be acceptable to many South African black communities, as it corresponds with their communal view of family. There has never been any assurance that once the person is removed from the community the suffering will cease. The biblical view of caring for the poor and the needy is essential to ensure both the well-being and development of the

community. This view is what is needed to be enforced in South African Indigenous theology.

5. The Way Forward in Reshaping South African Indigenous Theology

It is a near impossible task to transform the South African Indigenous theology, as everything is relative to each local congregation. The ZCC church, for example, is the largest AIC denomination in South Africa but it lacks theological coherence. There are several common practices in local churches, such as drinking a special tea that is considered holy, the use of holy water from the river near the headquarters in Limpopo and the use of the badge for both identification and protection. However, what I have noticed when I visited several local churches is that their views of spirits, the bible and divine providence differ. Each local church leader has a different view of the Bible, sin and the role of baptism. Therefore, dealing with each theological view would be impossible. Both the view of God's active role in mankind and sin are fundamental in encouraging a more biblical coherent theology.

There have been attempts and suggestions on how an authentic African theology can be developed. The primary suggestion for creating an authentic African theology focused on presenting Jesus Christ as an ancestor. Bénézet Bujo (1992) in *African Theology in its Social Context* presents Jesus as a Proto-Ancestor. Bujo (1992:77–92) states that Jesus founded and sustains the Christian community through the ages, and through his earthly life has realised all the moral attributes found in the idea of ancestors in African communities. The concept of Jesus as an ancestor has been championed by many African scholars, such as Charles Nyamiti (1985) in *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective*, and Francois Kabasele Lumbala (1991) in *Christ as Ancestor and Elder Brother*. Although I support the need for

presenting an authentic African theology, it is dangerous to associate Jesus with the ancestors. My first criticism is that not only would it create a theological problem that the western theological community would struggle to accept, but the view of ancestors differs in each local community. Even though there are some similarities, the specific notion of ancestors should be taken into consideration (Reed and Mtukwa 2010:148). In the Tsonga-Shangaan and the Northern Sotho (Pedi) cultures in the Limpopo province, like all black South African cultures, there is a belief in the ancestors. The highest honour that the ancestors can bestow on a family member is calling the individual to be a traditional healer, *n'anga* in tsonga and *ngaka* in pedi. The ceremony of initiation bears a close resemblance to Christian baptism. This can pose some difficulties in communicating baptism to the local people. However, in neither the Tsonga and Pedi cultures are there criteria for who can be an ancestor. This is different from the Zulu culture in the Kwazulu-Natal province which has broad criteria of who can be an ancestor. The inconsistencies and different views of different cultures and local communities will make it difficult to present a consistent view of Jesus as an ancestor, even a Proto-Ancestor.

The second criticism of presenting Jesus as an ancestor is that it compromises the Christian theological notion of the deity of Christ before the incarnation. Houlden (2003:9) expresses this concern on the grounds of contrasting definitions and characteristics of ancestors. What needs to be taken into consideration is that ancestors are primarily human spirits that attain deity after death. In cultures that do not have criteria on who can be an ancestor, the only qualification is death, while those that do have criteria the focus is on living an ethical life and obedience to the ancestors. Presenting Jesus as an ancestor in South Africa can encourage an Apotheotic view of Christ; that Christ was a man who was deified due to his obedience to God. This compromise of

the deity of Christ can have an effect on the message of the Gospel. Reed and Mtukwa (2010:150) make an interesting observation that ‘the anger or blessings of the ancestor is directed to those who consider this ancestor their ancestor—that is, family or clan members.’ This means that the boundary of influence is limited to kinship or some kind of recognition and acceptance. If the role of the ancestors is limited to their kin, associating Christ will limit the role of God to Christians and those that recognise him, only. The rule of God will not be absolute over all nations in the world, but only over those that profess to be Christian. This will create some challenges in Christian Eschatology that sees the second coming as judgment on all nations (Rev 19-21) (McConkie 2010:121). In addition, the primary mediatory role of the ancestors would still define God as a distant being, who cannot relate to mankind. The mediatory role of the Jesus as an ancestor, or the Proto-Ancestor (Bujo 1992:77–92), cannot be seen in the same light as the Jesus the High Priest (Heb 4:14–16). Jesus is not only a mediator, but the sacrificial lamb to reconcile God and mankind (John 1:29; 1 Peter 1:18–20). God cannot be seen as a distant deity, but active in the lives of mankind.

Augustine’s view expressed in *The Confessions* of an active God is the best way to start reshaping African Indigenous theology in all the different contexts. The notion of an active God who can communicate and reveal himself to mankind will solve many of the theological problems facing the African Church. This view will challenge the necessity for the notion of the ancestor. If God came to redeem mankind, then the role of ancestors becomes unnecessary. Individuals and societies become accountable to God directly and not to other forces. Therefore, the view of sin is not just about the commands of what is believed to be the ancestors, but rather on God’s law revealed through the scriptures. True African theology is a theology that breaks the barrier between mankind and God, and mankind can develop

through individual relationship with God and social transformation that reflects the rule of God.

6. Conclusion

This paper demonstrated the differences between Augustine's and African Indigenous theological views on God's providence and sin. These two points are essential in shaping a true African theology. Augustine's view of an active God who is concerned with the affairs of mankind is necessary, and serves as a stepping stone to other theological issues in African theology. This will pose a challenge to the role of ancestors in African Christian theology. This is the reason why I do not encourage the association of Christ with ancestors as advocated by Nyamiti (1984), Kabasele Lumbala (1991) and Bujo (1992). This will pose many theological difficulties that will hinder the Gospel being fully understood and accepted. The only way is to present Augustine's view of God who is involved in the affairs of mankind to the point of dying on the cross. More so, Augustine's view of suffering encourages a social response that can be easily accepted by the Black communities in South Africa. This view will help to develop individuals and societies as people take more control of and responsibility for their lives. African theology should aim at creating a balance between a belief in the divine and holy God who is involved in the lives of mankind, and mankind bearing responsibility for both their lives and the consequences of their sinful actions. These are the foundations of a true biblical African theology. Further research is needed on practical strategies to reshape South African Indigenous theology. The strategies should not focus on the African Indigenous churches only, but reshaping the overall traditional view of God in Black communities. It is easier to focus on AIC churches and their theology, but if the notion of an existing yet distant God still exists in Black communities, it would not stop the re-

emergence of the African-Christian syncretic theology. The battle would be like fighting the mythological seven-headed Serpent with problems that will keep on re-emerging. Whatever strategies will be employed they ought to have a cultural impact.

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