

# Exploring issues around Biblical, Western and African social values

J Eugene Botha

Department of New Testament

University of South Africa

## Abstract

*This article explores the differences and similarities between the social value systems of the New Testament, the West and Africa. While it is acknowledged that the categories “The New Testament”, the “West” and “Africa”, are very broad general categories, it is possible to distinguish between them at a certain level of abstraction. It is shown that Biblical social values and traditional African social values are much closer to each other than they are to Western social values. This has enormous implications for the practising of theology and for the interpreting and use of Biblical texts.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Let us start this essay off with a quiz. At a superficial glance, what group of people would roughly be represented by the following characterization or stereotype?

To them punctuality is of little importance, they have little interest in planning for the future. They have a very high regard for their ancestors, and ancestral land is valued extremely highly. To them work and jobs are not critical, they like to make friends and gossip a lot. They like to do things as a group, they have very little ambition for upwards mobility, and their self esteem depends on what others think of them. They do not place a high value on uniqueness, in fact, they actually require that one conform to the group and people are required to be part of the group and what the group does. Individual likes or dislikes are not important in this regard. Individuals are rooted in a familial identity and family ties are overriding values, and extended family or tribal structures predominate. They do not take personal control over the world and nature, and they do not believe that the future can be shaped by individuals. They are more interested in a day to day survival. They consider people to be comprised of both good and evil. It is

### ***Exploring issues around Biblical, Western and African social values***

necessary to work for the good of the group, and it is not really necessary to pay attention to the needs of outsiders.

What is your verdict? Are they African? Perhaps. Latin American? Perhaps. South American? Maybe. Western? Definitely not! The least one can say is that this stereotype is a stereotype often ascribed to people in the developing world, and for certain, Africans have been stereotyped like this, especially by Westerners.

However, the interesting thing is that in fact, the above description would fit the followers of the historical Jesus like glove! The above description is an excellent and accurate description of a first century Mediterranean personality and the phrases used above, in fact come from Pilch's (1991) description of general first century Mediterranean social values!

The problem this paper attempts to raise and address is the fact that in many publications on contextual theology, ethics and values, there is an unspoken assumption that in human interaction, where we consider aspects such as equality, human rights and so on, we are dealing with a single homogenous and unchanging set of human values. The assumption is that the values are timeless and are expressed in the Biblical texts and these values are the same values modern interpreters of the text ascribe to. In this paper we will show that this is not true. Biblical social values are as far removed from Western values as the east from the West, and it is not a simple undertaking to construct theologies and ethics and interpretative models for a modern and post modern era, based on the Bible as many would like to believe.

In the process of our discussion we will attempt to show that what can be defined in broad terms as Biblical social values, are in fact much closer to traditional social values than to Western value systems! This is not only true of traditional African social values, it is also true of almost all other more traditional value systems in the developing world. To conclude, this article will briefly explore what the implication of this is for creating theological constructs and using the text of the Bible in theological and ethical argumentation based on the underlying values of the interpretation or of the texts themselves.

## **2. INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL VALUES (AND DISCLAIMERS)**

As the topic of this paper suggests, we will be looking at three aspects in this article: the social values of the ancient Mediterranean, the values of Africa and a Western value system, and furthermore we will explore a few of the issues raised by the discussion and comparison of the various value systems. This is

important because these value systems underpin theologies and ethics and contextual constructs.

However, a few disclaimers are necessary. With a topic such as the above, it is extremely easy to fall into the pitfall of stereotyping and over-generalizing. To a certain extent we will succumb to this temptation, as it is impossible to fully express all the nuances of the various values and value systems we will be dealing with. However, it is possible to use the broad categories of the West, Africa and that of ancient Mediterranean culture as we have done in this essay, knowing that one is dealing with a certain level of abstraction and not pretending to give a finely nuanced representation. For example, Pilch (1991:97) argues convincingly that it is quite legitimate to speak about “the ancient Mediterranean” in these terms (and quotes support by Raphael Patai and David Gilmore in this regard). It is noteworthy that in the literature references to and studies about “Asian Values” abound and that that category is utilised widely (see Yu 2000). However, the warning about using essentialist categories and the implications of this by Painter-Morland (1999:150-152) is valid if the analyses of the various categories is done oblivious to the inherent dangers of oversimplification. I have pointed out above that I am aware of the fact that there will be some broad generalizations in our argumentation, and I am indeed conceding that there are various nuances possible in these broad general categories. For the purposes of this article I have deliberately chosen to stay with broader categorization because the issues I wish to raise can be raised adequately in this way. The call for a very specific and detailed explanation of the values we will be talking about, is perhaps not so pressing here. We are dealing here with the various value systems not only for the sake of discovering what they are, but also, and this is perhaps the most important aspect here, to utilize them as tools in our quest for evaluating some trends in Biblical scholarship and contextual studies. Much more detail and nuance is of course possible, but that is not the point here.

In addition, in South Africa we are functioning in a multi-cultural context, of which African culture is perhaps a significant cultural context of the vast majority of its people. In this regard, there is a call to make the theologies we build, more relevant for people of Africa. This task is however, much more complex as many would like to assume it to be, because the various sets of social values involved when we do theology, make theological constructs, and interpret ancient texts, have a fundamental influence on how these constructs are fashioned. It is thus of cardinal importance to have a firm grasp of the core social values underlying a specific cultural group or society.

### ***Exploring issues around Biblical, Western and African social values***

Before we attempt to describe the various social value systems we encounter, it is perhaps wise to dwell a little on values themselves. For the purposes of this paper I have taken the work of John Pilch (1991) and Pilch & Malina (1993) as a point of reference because these works deal directly with values in the ancient Mediterranean world, the world of the New Testament. These works are seminal in this area and have not been eclipsed by any other more recent studies, are built on sound and tested social scientific data and are especially useful for our purposes here. I will also use the work of Van der Walt (1997) rather extensively because it deals with Western values and African values in a comparative way, written from a South African perspective. Many other sources could of course, also have been used, but I have chosen the above because of their focus and specificity for the topic of this article, and because I want to illustrate how these values impact on Biblical interpretation, rather than present an exhaustive study on the intricacies of values and value systems. These studies are adequate to obtain a fair understanding of the values and value systems we are examining in this article. I will thus in the discussion make liberal use of material found in these studies.

To talk about values is to talk about a whole complex system and structures created by human beings to facilitate their being in the world and their dealings with others. (Pilch & Malina (1993:xiii) remark:

The word "value" describes some general quality and direction of life that human beings are expected to embody in their behaviour. A value is a general normative orientation of action in a social system. It is an emotionally anchored commitment to pursue and support certain directions or types of actions.

In addition to the way in which human beings behave, their evaluation of and behaviour towards certain objects also reveal their values. This is called symbolizing, i.e. the way in which humans ascribe/affix value to value objects. These value objects can also be called symbols. Human beings do not relate to each other and their value objects, and do not realize their values, in a vacuum. It is always integrated in various structures or social institutions which help to give direction to certain social actions. Pilch & Malina (1993:xv) explains that:

... kinship or family is a social institution that serves as the means for bringing new human beings into existence and then nurturing them for a life time. Institutions mark the general boundaries within which certain qualities and directions of living must take place. Generating and nurturing human beings must occur within the

boundaries of kinship, whether in the form of a U.S. style of a nuclear family, the single parent family.

These institutions not only give general directions for living but also define certain objects that are considered to express a certain value. These objects can be inanimate but can also include people. Pilch & Malina (1993:xix-xxii) indicate that value objects can help illustrate values and these can include nature, God, the others, time, space, and the All. For instance, with regard to the individual person, certain institutions can ascribe certain values to the individual person which is usually expressed in terms of roles or statuses. In a specific social institution, like the military, certain individuals are ascribed with certain roles and statuses exactly because it is necessary to distinguish them from another person, and because they have a specific social function. In any society then, social institutions endow persons, things, and events with meaning and feeling.

Pilch & Malina (1993:xvii) furthermore indicate that there are many ways to categorize values, and they distinguish between core values and peripheral values. Core values are values that are expressed in all human interactions in a specific culture. These core values differ from culture to culture and they use the example that the core value of modern day US society is “efficiency”, while the core value of the ancient world could perhaps be described as “honour and shame”. Peripheral values are values that are specific to certain conditions and interactions. In the ancient Mediterranean world, compassion is an example of a peripheral value because *it is expected only in situations guided and governed by kinship considerations*, and not expected generally as in perhaps a Western, more individualised context.

The various value systems and orientation in a specific culture finds expression in the way in which they realize their value preferences. The following very useful chart adapted from Pilch (1991:244) illustrates the range of value preferences available to all humans in dealing with specific social problems:

**PROBLEM 1: Selecting a Principal mode of HUMAN ACTIVITY**

RANGE OF SOLUTIONS

Being	Being-in-becoming	Doing
-------	-------------------	-------

**PROBLEM 2: RELATIONSHIPS of human beings TO EACH OTHER**

RANGE OF SOLUTIONS

Collateral	Lineal	Individual
------------	--------	------------

**PROBLEM 3: Determining the primary TEMPORAL FOCUS OF LIFE**

RANGE OF SOLUTIONS

Present	Past	Future
---------	------	--------

**PROBLEM 4: RELATIONSHIPS of human beings to NATURE**

RANGE OF SOLUTIONS

Be subject to it	Live in harmony with it	Master it
------------------	-------------------------	-----------

**PROBLEM 5: Prevailing ASSESSMENT OF HUMAN NATURE**

RANGE OF SOLUTIONS

Mixture of good and evil	Evil	Good
--------------------------	------	------

According to Pilch (1991), the responses on the right would probably generally be the preferred option of the US culture while the responses on the left would probably be the preferred responses for ancient Mediterraneans. We will return to these concepts and value orientations again when we deal with the specific cultures and their values.

### 3. WESTERN SOCIAL VALUES

What we call “Western social values” here are the kind of value systems we typically find in modern day Western societies, such as that of Western Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. It is to a large extent the kind of value systems many people in South Africa would also subscribe to and certainly it is true that this kind of value system is the prevailing value system found in most Western controlled companies and governments.

In addition, when we speak here of *traditional* Biblical scholarship, we focus on the kind of biblical scholarship and exegesis which arose in the climate created by this kind and Western value systems, and which have dominated the study of the Bible the last few hundred years. Most Biblical scholarship the world over takes its point of departure from this mindset. Of course there are many versions of contextual theologies and attempts at contextualization as protest against this domination of the West, but in terms of the sheer volume of publications contextual material is relatively insignificant. The chart above makes it clear that modern Western social values are profoundly different from that of the ancient Mediterranean. Our point of departure here will again be the chart of Pilch (1991:224) and we will supplement it where necessary.

- According to the chart above, the “*PRINCIPAL MODE OF HUMAN ACTIVITY*” is for the Western mind one of doing, where the focus is on *activity*. Van der Walt (1997:51) agrees with this and typifies the Western attitudes in this regard as *focused on getting things done*. In the introduction to their book, Malina & Pilch (1993:xiii-xiv) points out that one of the core values of modern day American society (and much of the Western world) is that of instrumental mastery, which is the ability to control and master others and things “so as to maximize one’s well-being. Being efficient is simply one variation on the value of instrumental mastery”. High value is placed on getting things done, work and job are critical, competitiveness dominates, feelings are controlled to get the job done, there is a strive for upward mobility, self esteem depends on how the world views our accomplishments (Pilch 1991:98).
- In the sphere of “*INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS*” the focus in the West is on *individualism*. The focus is on the individual above all else and education and training is aimed at individual development,

individual choice, individual rights, individual reliance, self-realizations and so on. A person is an individual first and foremost and member of a group secondly. Individuals make up groups and the individual still retains their own identity within a group. Kinship relations are influenced by this and are subject to individual choice too. Kinship relationships can be dismissed or upheld according to an individual's choice. Even in the sphere of religion the focus is on the self, on individual relationships with God, on self acceptance and individual emotion. In addition to these Pilch (1991:130-133) adds some other characteristics of individualism such as “promotes independence, see the parts, urges uniqueness, behavior is governed by rights and duties determined by one's personal goals, status is achieved, equality is a key value, friendships are functional, key values are leadership and variety, nuclear family structure dominates”.

- With regard to “*TIME ORIENTATION*” it is clear that the West is focused on the future. Time orientation is a very crucial component in any culture. Hall (1983:10) argues that “time as I have been using it is a core system in our lives around which we build our picture of the world. If the time systems of two cultures are different, everything else will be different”. In the West the focus is predominantly on the future. Planning is for the future, Westerners devise contingency plans based on (imaginary) things that might go wrong, and so on. Van der Walt (1997:49) indicates that for a Western perception of time the following are crucial: time is an absolute given, it is static, it can be measured, it is something abstract, not part of general life, situated outside a person, people move through time, time must be filled, etc. This means that human beings are slaves to time, one must plan thoroughly, schedules and procedures are necessary, punctuality becomes an important value.
- With regard to “*RELATIONSHIPS OF HUMANS TO NATURE*” the attitude in the West is to *master* it. In the West, perhaps because of the fact that it is no longer a pre-scientific society, the awe of nature has been replaced by a sense of controlling it and controlling it absolutely. Even the value of conserving nature is an expression of this, and is manifested in the many organizations aimed at this: “We are in control of nature, and we will even control the destiny of the endangered species on the planet.” Furthermore, in a Western scientific paradigm, material activities are important, there is an emphasis on technology



and verification and knowledge is considered neutral. All of these are basically reflection of the attitude that one can and should control nature. The implications of this for values are also far-reaching. “Obviously then, in a Western culture the appeal to God will ordinarily be a second order value. It generally occurs when human knowledge or intervention fails” (Pilch 1991:192).

- With regard to a “*VIEW OF HUMAN NATURE*” the Western approach is that human nature is considered to be *essentially good*. It is considered to be neutral and correctable if anything should go wrong. This attitude is found in most Western countries’ punitive systems where the inherent belief that people are essentially good means that even criminals can be rehabilitated in jail! Penal systems are called “Correctional Services”. Pilch (1991:219) says that this is the basic attitude of “I’m OK, you’re OK”, based on “the conviction that all people are basically good or neutral and capable of improving themselves no matter what their situation”. This attitude is very prevalent in many Western countries. However, the other approach where human nature is seen as *essentially evil* is also prevalent in modern society, but appears mainly and especially in fundamentalist circles.

Thus the Western attitude is one of control over one’s own destiny, where individual choice and achievement stands paramount. This means that these values will inevitably find their way into theological constructs made by people who come from this culture or who subscribe to some of the aspects in this cultural mindset. It is inevitable that certain social values will be reflected in the theological constructs created by the people who live in that particular culture. Westerners will inevitably populate their ethics and theologies and constructs with social values their culture has deemed important and significant. But because the alleged source for the ethical and social constructs is the Bible, the assumption is that the Bible also has these same values.

An important question which arises here is: Are the values implicit in the theological constructs created in a specific Western context also the values of the texts upon which they are supposedly based? Or are these implicit values actually Western values which have been transported or read into the constructs? Or is it a mixture of both?

#### **4. BIBLICAL SOCIAL VALUES**

The book by Pilch & Malina (1993) entitled *Biblical social values and their meaning* referred to above, gives an excellent picture of the very strange world of Biblical social values. This book is but one example of a current development in Biblical Studies where methodologies from the social sciences is applied to the society and texts of the ancient world. In this approach known as social scientific criticism the focus is on the social world of the Bible and all it implies. Included in this is, of course, the value systems of the ancient world.

So far the dominant paradigm in Biblical studies has been the historical critical method, where the text of the Bible was subjected to various historical methodologies. Questions as to the historical development of the texts, the author and first readers and aspects of the ancient world are raised here. However the advent of social scientific criticism of the Bible has opened up our understanding of the ancient world even further, because here the focus is not only asking questions with regard to how things worked and *how* society functioned, but are also introducing question as to *why* it functioned in the way it did.

These questions can only be answered by the application of social scientific principles, models and methodologies and in the last three decades the world of the ancient Mediterranean has open up to us as never before. Today we know more about how that society thought, what drove them, what their core values were, what their economy, social structures and institutions were like than even before. In fact, the importance of the introduction of this methodology is so significant that one can hardly begin to interpret ancient texts responsibly without taking the results of this research into consideration. This is especially true of the historical Jesus research of the last two decades. This research has, of course, furthered our knowledge of the ancient world, but this has not been to only effect this kind of research has had and should have had. We will return to this a little later, but suffice it to say here that social scientific research into the social world of ancient world has revealed a startlingly strange world. In fact, for theologians and believers who have used the Bible as their point of departure, believing that the texts of the Bible can be used to give direction to their lives because they reflect a world and values and people upon which they can model their behaviour, this has now radically changed, or rather should have changed radically. Because with what we now know of the ancients, their world and how it functioned through the research of Biblical social scientists is even further away from our world than we could have imagined. I will take this point up again later when we deal with the dilemma represented by this.

Perhaps a good way to illustrate this foreignness of the world of the Bible and its social values is to return to the value orientation profile chart (Pilch 1991:224) given above and contrast it with what we have said of the Western value system:

**PROBLEM 1: Selecting a Principal mode of HUMAN ACTIVITY**

RANGE OF SOLUTIONS

Being	Being-in-becoming	Doing
-------	-------------------	-------

**PROBLEM 2: RELATIONSHIPS of human beings TO EACH OTHER**

RANGE OF SOLUTIONS

Collateral	Lineal	Individual
------------	--------	------------

**PROBLEM 3: Determining the primary TEMPORAL FOCUS OF LIFE**

RANGE OF SOLUTIONS

Present	Past	Future
---------	------	--------

**PROBLEM 4: RELATIONSHIPS of human beings to NATURE**

RANGE OF SOLUTIONS

Be subject to it	Live in harmony with it	Master it
------------------	-------------------------	-----------

**PROBLEM 5: Prevailing ASSESSMENT OF HUMAN NATURE**

RANGE OF SOLUTIONS

Mixture of good and evil	Evil	Good
--------------------------	------	------

### ***Exploring issues around Biblical, Western and African social values***

If we again examine the chart of the distinctive orientation of cultures toward the five basic challenges, and look at the column on the left, we can form a general overview of the dominant values of the Bible. According to Pilch this is broadly speaking the value preferences of the people of the cultures reflected in the Bible.

- The above suggests that people from the Mediterranean culture *favours being over doing*. Especially in the New Testament this value is expressed through the concept of being in God's kingdom. Jesus liberates people “and brings them into God's kingdom, that is, in a different state of being (Pilch & Malina 1993:xxiv). The focus is thus not like that of the modern West on doing and achieving, but “calculated according to plan with a view to reaching some goal within a very specific time frame” but rather on being, an activity “that is characterized by lack of planning and having no long range goal in view at all. Such human activity is totally spontaneous, responding to the challenge of the moment” (Pilch 1991:96).
- With regard to values and “*HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS*” the basic orientation in Mediterranean society is *towards the group*, while for the West it is focused on the individual. For Pilch (1991:130-133) this includes the following: it promotes interdependence, there is a strong integration into society, primary responsibility lies towards the group, conformity is urged, group membership results from one's inherited social and familial place in society, behaviour is dictated by the group's mores and sanctions, individual worth is rooted in familial status or group status, achieving and competing are disruptive, submit personal rights to the group, the individual self is viewed as organically linked to the physical world and with others, strong familial or fictive kin relationships, involvements are moral according to group values, key values are orderliness and conformity, other people are viewed in terms of competing factions, people are also viewed as part of an in-group or part of an out-group, lesser to no degree of social mobility.
- With regard to “*TIME ORIENTATION*” the focus in the Bible is on *the present*. According to Pilch (1991:161-162):

... this value reflects preference for the moment, for achieving proximate goals. Immediate needs and desires are of the utmost importance ... The present orientation attends to the current

moment understood in a wide sense to include even tomorrow but nothing beyond that ... This time orientation favours a group focus since in the present moment every member of the group stands an equal chance of addressing the present challenge and determining the proper response to the present opportunity.

Included in this is the belief that there is no personal control over the outcomes, the present must be guarded, the present drives and propels the forthcoming (see Pilch 1991:163-164).

- “*HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS WITH NATURE*” in ancient Mediterranean society can best be described as being in the form of *subjugation or submission to nature*. Nature is not to be conquered with technology or cunning. Nature is viewed as having power over human beings, and humans cannot control it. It must be suffered.

Such an attitude towards nature is especially characteristic of peasants who live in the present, who have no control over their lives, and who feel that they are at the mercy of forces, personal and impersonal alike. People whose attitude towards nature is subjugation or subjection are most likely to appeal to God for help. If no human being can control or master nature, then God is the only recourse.

(Pilch 1991:192)

- In a society where this value is strong, the ideal solution is not to prevent or eradicate the problem (which in that context is not even considered feasible), but to alleviate the problem as far as possible.
- In the sphere of values and “*HUMAN NATURE*” the societies reflected in the Bible have the conviction that *human nature is essentially a mixture of good and evil*, because it contains the potential for both good and evil.

In Hebrew tradition, there is belief in “two tendencies” which are innate in the human person. These tendencies are called the *yesev hatob* (the good tendency) and the *yesev hara* (the evil tendency). This belief existed in Judaism at the time of Christ, is reflected in the New Testament (see Galatians 5:16-22), and has endured in the rabbinic tradition as well.

(Pilch 1991:222)

### ***Exploring issues around Biblical, Western and African social values***

- In addition to the above, it is necessary to point out that according to many scholars the pivotal values in Mediterranean society was *honour and shame* (see Malina & Neyrey 1988; Pilch 1991:66; Pilch & Malina 1993:95-104). "Honor is a claim to worth that is publicly acknowledged. To have honor is to have publicly acknowledged worth" (Pilch & Malina 1993:95-96). This whole concept of honour and shame regulated society, human interactions, group behaviour towards members and outsiders, and so on. It was *the* driving force behind human behaviour in the ancient world.

There are, of course some nuances from geographical area to geographical area, and between people from different social strata and of different gender, but the above can suffice as a general indication of what value controlled and drove their social world. A separate chart in Pilch & Malina (1993:xxix) captures some of these smaller nuances. They use the same categories as in the above chart, but show the slight variations in the value orientation profiles for the following: Italian rural, Roman, Greek, Israelite peasant, Judean elite, Pharisees, Jesus, Paul, and for modern day America. Perhaps it would be interesting to single out their description of the value orientation profile they give for Jesus:

- With regard to activity they classify Jesus' first value preference as being-in-becoming (which means that there is a tendency to respond to challenges as they occur, begin a new task before completing a previous task, enthusiasm, variety, be all things to all people, and so on) with being second and doing only third. A good example of Jesus' preference for this value of being-in becoming can be found in Matthew 5-7; see Pilch 1991:114-117).
- Jesus displays his typical Mediterranean personality in his focus on belonging to a group and displaying his dyadic personality (with individualism and lineal relationships coming second and third). Examples mentioned by Pilch (1991:143-149) include Mark 9:38-41; 3:13-19 and 10:35-45.
- Jesus is also a typical Mediterranean in his dealing with time and here his primary focus is on the present, with little planning for the future (examples are found in Lk 9:27; 21:32; 12:13-34; see Pilch 1991:170-171).

- In his relationship with nature Jesus stands out as appearing to have some mastery over nature, but there are other instances where subjugation to nature is reflected (see Pilch 1991:202-212), but it seems that for Jesus it is more a case of living in harmony with nature (see Mt 7:24-27; 9:16-17).
- With regard to human nature it seems that in the case of Jesus human nature is considered a mixture of good and evil (see Pilch 1991:231; Mark 7:1-23).

From the brief discussion above it is clear that there are vast differences between the values of the ancient Mediterranean culture (and that of Jesus) and what we have found to be true of modern Western culture. In most instances they are diametrically opposed! In a context such as the South African context where, in addition to Western value systems, African value systems also play a significant role, it is also necessary to examine African social values. Where would they fit into the picture? It is important to ask this question because the contributions of African theologians and African interpretations of the Bible are becoming more significant and important in our context and are beginning to impact on traditional/Western theology as well. But just as Western theological constructs are deeply influenced by the implicit values and value system they subscribe to, so deliberate African interpretations are also deeply influenced by the social and cultural values which can be termed African.

## **5. AFRICAN SOCIAL VALUES**

In comparing African social values with the above it might be useful to use the same categories from the chart above as we have used for the above discussion. Again I would like to stress that there really is no such thing as uniform African social values. We will use it merely as a broad category while recognizing that within Africa there are many specifics and many unique value systems, trends, nuances and the like. There is however enough commonality between the various African cultures to observe some general similarities.

There is no scarcity on the subject of African thought patterns, religion, philosophy and values systems, with the work of Mbiti perhaps the most well known in theological circles (see Mbiti 1970, 1975; see also Westerlund's 1985:49 evaluation of Mbiti's work). In addition, a growing source for extremely useful material on social values, social perceptions and organization in Africa is to be found in various business studies. There is a growing realization that the Western mind set, values and ethos which have

### ***Exploring issues around Biblical, Western and African social values***

been forced on the people of Africa in colonial and even post-colonial times, are in stark contrast to what is prevalent in Africa (see also Menkiti 1971, Sindima 1994; 1995). The dichotomy between African traditional values and Western values becomes apparent in various studies on Human Rights and African values. See for example the excellent essay by Cobbah (1987) on Western liberalism's human rights values *vis-à-vis* African values.

Thus for doing business successfully in Africa the realization has come that Africa must be understood and allowed to make its own unique contribution in the sphere of business, management and transformation strategies. Literature on these topics abound (see for instance Mbigi & Maree 1995; Arien 1993; Lessem, R *et al* 1993). We will be dealing here primarily with traditional values and traditional beliefs when we talk about African social values here.

Mbigi (1995:42) correctly points out modern day Africans are subject to a number of influences and has to cope with a number different styles of expressing themselves in the world, and coping in the world. He indicates that there is at least a triple heritage modern African managers must take into consideration when dealing with and developing a unique management style in Africa. The three influences he points out is that of Europe (Western), African (traditional African) and Asian (because of religious and trade influences).

Certainly the overarching and core value of Africa is what has become known as *Ubuntu*. It is a metaphor which describes the significance of group solidarity. It is a practice of collective unity and governs every aspect of life in traditional African life, and to a large extent also in modern day Africa. It is immediately obvious that this would place Africa and what we have come to know about the social values of the Ancient Mediterranean very close to each other, because the same kind of collectivism is a core value there, and almost all other values are in some way determined by this. In this regard see Battle's (1997; 2000:173-182) discussion of Archbishop Tutu's "*Ubuntu* Theology". If we examine traditional African values with the table we used above in mind the following emerges:

- With regard to selecting a "*PRINCIPAL MODE OF HUMAN ACTIVITY*" we find that in traditional African life the following rings true: there is an emphasis on being rather than on doing, there is preference for collaboration to a great extent (Mbigi & Maree 1995:8), friendship is valued more than achievement, competitiveness is valued less than collaboration, there is a general acceptance of the way things are, and self esteem depends on the way in which they viewed by the world.



Van der Walt (1997:18-22) gives a list of differences between what he calls communalism and individualism, and in this list many of the features Pilch (1991:98) singles out as indicative of a preference for being occurs there. An important aspect here is that punctuality is not a sought after value here.

- There can be no doubt that what is true for the ancient Mediterranean in terms of values and "*HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS*" is true for Africa. The main orientation is centred on the group and the spirit of *Ubuntu* is all pervasive. Van der Walt (1997:18-22), Mbigi & Maree 1995:2ff), Van Niekerk (1993; 1996) and Ikenga-Methu (1987:181-195) all agree on this. The individual is determined by the group, other values flows from this central value and consequently people are sociable beings. Individuals are less important than the group and group pressure is strong. Conformity is important, obligations towards the group is to be valued above all other obligations. The strong group orientation is even reflected in the act of eating (the Westerner eats to be able to work harder). Poverty and wealth are also viewed in terms of strong group orientation: poverty is lack of family or children and there is a distinct preference for doing things together as a group. Individual morality is virtually unheard of and ethnic or tribal ethics and morality dominate (see also Ikenga-Methu 1987:243-259; Wreh-Wilson 1994:93-179 in this regard). Again it is significant how much in common Africa and the ancient world has in terms of this central value.
- "*TIME ORIENTATION*". There is not a scarcity of the amount of literature of the African concept of time. Perhaps it is because so many of the authors write from a Western perspective where efficient management of time is an extremely highly valued value that different perceptions of time is so significant to them! Van der Walt (1996:39-58) has a whole section dealing with time in African thought and again there are remarkable similarities between what we have found for the ancient Mediterranean. He indicates that in Africa people are considered more important as time and in fact in control of time, it is no problem to wait, it is orientated more at the present and the past than at the future, there is little planning, and thus little value on punctuality, rigid schedules and the like. This is again in stark agreement with what Pilch (1991:163-164) has indicated for the people of the Bible where "affective, group focused processes dominate present oriented behavior" (Pilch 1991:163). Perhaps it is necessary to note that the

### ***Exploring issues around Biblical, Western and African social values***

time orientation in Africa has a very strong past orientation, which can clearly be seen in the practices of ancestorism, where past generations are seen to have an influence on the present. This is again a result of the very strong group values, where even the deceased are still viewed as part of the current group. An interesting observation in this regard is that ancestors play a significant part in the Bible as well, especially the Old Testament, and very little work has actually been done on ancestorism in the Bible and Africa (see Cohn 2003:147-166; Van der Toorn 1996:1-11; Mafico 2000:481-489)

- “*HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS WITH NATURE*” in Africa can perhaps be classified as subjugation. When we speak of traditional African values, we speak of a pre-industrialized, agrarian society where technology has not yet influenced the feeling of being at the mercy of higher powers, nature, spirits and the like. Authors such as Mbigi (1995:1-3) links this general feeling of powerlessness to Africa communality and argues that African *Ubuntu* and communality is one of the answers provided in a survival culture.
- With regard to “*HUMAN NATURE*” it is clear that in Africa both concepts of good and evil are well developed. Ikenga-Methu (1987:161-162) in discussing good and evil indicates that agent of evil can be both humans and spirits. Human beings thus have the capacity for evil and so do ancestors. It is interesting to note that in the sections dealing with human nature in term of good and evil, both in Pilch (1991:240) and Ikenga-Methu (1987:161) there is reference to the “evil eye” which is a belief widely held the world over, but considerably less so in Northern Europe, United Kingdom and the United States of America.

From the above two things become clear: on the one hand one comes to realize that African social values and Biblical social values have a lot in common. This not that remarkable if one considers that these values are typical of traditional pre-industrial, pre-modern value systems. This does not mean that Biblical social values and African social values are one and the same, but there are many striking similarities. All sorts of implications arise from this, which needs to be considered seriously in doing theology, making ethical constructs and interpreting and using the Bible in a modern world. We will deal with some of these implications in the following section.

## 6. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

What are we to make of the above? Certainly it seems that African social values and Biblical social values are quite closely aligned. It furthermore seems that what we see as typical Western values are certainly not Biblical, and is as far removed from the values of the ancient Mediterranean as it is from African social values. There are numerous conclusions one can draw from the above, but I would like to focus on three pertinent aspects here, and also make a few suggestions with regard to further study.

*The first* is that through social scientific methodologies we as Western Biblical scholars have come to know much more about the ancient world than ever before. On the surface it seems a very positive statement, but the implications are not always without problems! While more knowledge about the ancient world could imply that this world is more accessible to us, the opposite is fact true! We have now come to realize that this world in which the Bible originated and which is represented in the Bible, is an actually much more inaccessible to a Western mind-set than ever expected. Modern Western value systems are so vastly different from that of the ancient world that we can hardly begin to understand it. In addition, we now are beginning to realize that our prior interpretations of the Bible in the past were (to for Western interpreters to a large extent still are) based on the belief that the Biblical world and the values implicit there have a lot in common with our own society. This implied that it is fairly simple to translate these common principles there into a “language” or discourse acceptable to all modern believers. The basic belief was that the values underlying the New Testament and the values underlying modern, Western interpretations of the Bible, are basically the same. But this is not the case. The Biblical world and its underlying social values systems are actually very foreign, and have very little in common with modern Western societies. We will have to gear ourselves to a renewed look at what is actually Biblical and what has been translated into or carried forward into our constructs from modern perspectives. This means that to relate Biblical values to a modern world is exceedingly difficult and problematic.

This of course means that many values we would like to see in the Bible like gender equality, lack of racism and discrimination and so on, are just not part and parcel of a Biblical values system. The Bible is not egalitarian in the modern sense at all and no amount of tinkering and adjustment and re-interpretation would make the Bible for example less sexist. The Bible is a sexist book! As much as people would like it to be otherwise the Bible is an ancient document and as such it reflects ancient value systems and not modern values. This is especially pertinent for work being done on ethics and

### ***Exploring issues around Biblical, Western and African social values***

social values, which are the building blocks of societies. If our core values are diametrically opposed to what the core values in the ancient Mediterranean is, how are we to go about still using the ancient collection of books we call the Bible responsibly? It also has implications for doing theology in contexts other than the first world. In the past Western forms of Biblical interpretation were forced on many countries and cultures in the third/developing world, including Africa. Little wonder many people in Africa have felt themselves alienated from the “ethos of the Bible” as Westerners have presented it. It was not the people and values of the Bible they encountered, but a Western aberration of it! Little wonder there is a demand for African readings of the Bible which Africans can find authentic in their contexts.

Second, and closely aligned to this, are questions regarding the historical Jesus. We have only briefly touched on what we can deduce for the value system he probably subscribed to. Without the knowledge we now have, it was much easier in the past to depict Jesus in terms of our own modern Western values, and ascribe some qualities motives and aims to him that is totally foreign to his time and to the society he lived in and functioned in. A good example of this is the value of equality. We as modern Westerners would like to think that this is a value also held in high esteem by Jesus. But this is not the case at all. Equality in the way we use it as part of an expression of our own individual worth, was totally foreign to the society of Jesus' time who tended to focus much more on groups than on individuals and which was exceedingly (in today's terms) authoritarian (see Pilch & Malina 1993:11-17). It is thus necessary to re-evaluate Jesus research in terms of the research that has been done in this regard, since the Jesus depicted in many studies could just not have been any part of an ancient world as we have now come to know it. Even the utterance in John 3:16 that God so loved the *world* that he gave his only Son can convincingly be shown to be aimed at Israel only and not humankind of all ages in general (see Botha & Rousseau 2005). I must add here that many of the newer studies on the historical Jesus do indeed reflect some knowledge of the contribution of the social science to the understanding of Jesus. However, the full impact of the implications of this still need to be spelled out. Our investigation of the values Jesus subscribed to makes him an unlikely role model for modern Western liberal democratic values!

In the third place one must comment on the fact that African social values and Biblical social values seem to have so much in common. What are the implications of this? First and foremost it implies that there is indeed a place and a need for African readings of the Bible, and that African readings can bring dimensions to understanding and interpreting the Bible Western

reading just cannot do. There are some African readings in existence (see for example West & Dube 1996) but there is, relatively speaking, very little of what can be termed a real African readings of the texts where the shared social values are consciously accounted for. Some African concepts recently embraced by the West such as *Ubuntu* could be a very useful way of giving expression to what we have found in the social world of the ancient Mediterranean. This is not something which would attract much attention in a typically Western value system. Here an Africa perspective can, based on the values shared with world of the Bible, make a significant contribution.

While this aspect needs to be encouraged and developed much more in theological and ethical and contextual studies in Africa, there is also a downside to this. As we have mentioned, there are many similarities between the social values of Africa and that of the Bible. However, many of these shared values are no longer acceptable to modern, Western society. For example, the role and status of women in the Bible and role and status of women in traditional African societies are not that far apart, and women are indeed considered inferior to males. The value placed on the female is totally different from that the modern world demands. In a Western context this would be considered oppressive and discriminatory. But the Bible can be and is used as a very strong instrument to perpetuate the inferior social location of women in many African churches. The irony is that a view in which women are considered equal to men is quite foreign to the Bible! Cultures and social groups in Africa and other parts of the world which have the same value systems as that of the Bible find no problem with perpetuating the inferior position of women: their value systems and that of the Bible are closely aligned. For them it is really not difficult to come to those conclusions. Western and feminist interpretations find this unacceptable, but their point of departure and their underlying value systems are modern, Western systems and very far removed from both the Bible and the more traditional value systems. So far removed, in fact that one needs to ask if it is appropriate and possible to use the Bible to legitimise such modern interests such as the equality of the sexes.

It is clear that if one takes the differences between Western social values on the one hand and the Biblical social values and more traditional values such as African social values seriously; it raises enormous problems in interpreting and using the text of the Bible responsibly in today's world and church. Much more sophistication in terms of making theological and ethical constructs is definitely necessary and the issue demands further research and consideration.

**Works consulted**

- Arien, A 1993. *The four-fold way: Walking the paths of the warrior, teacher, healer, and visionary*. San Francisco, CA: Harper.
- Bailey, R C & Grant, J (eds) 1995. *The recovery of black presence: An interdisciplinary exploration. Essays in honor of Dr Charles B Copher*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon.
- Battle, M 1997. *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu theology of Desmond Tutu*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim.
- Battle, M 2000. A theology of community: The *Ubuntu* theology of Desmond Tutu. *Interpretation* 54(2), 173-182.
- Botha J E & Rousseau P A 2005. For God did not so love the whole world ... only Israel! John 3:16 revisited. *HTS* 61(4), 1149-1168.
- Cohn, R L 2003. Negotiating (with) the natives: Ancestors and identity in Genesis. *Harvard Theological Review* 96(2), 147-166.
- Cobbah, J A M 1987. African values and the Human Rights debate: An African perspective. *Human Rights Quarterly* 9, 309-331.
- Craighead, H A 2003. Review article of Edwards, R B 2000. *Religious values and valuations*. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 53, 57-60.
- Dammann, E 1963. *Die Religionen Afrikas*. Stuttgart: W Kohlhammer. (Die Religionen der Menschheit Band 6.)
- Davis, K & Farajaje-Jones, E (eds) 1991. *African creative expressions of the divine*. Washington, DC: Howard University School of Divinity.
- Elliott, J H 1993. *What is social scientific criticism?* Minneapolis, MN: Fortress. (Guides to Biblical Scholarship.)
- Hall, E T 1983. *The dance of life: The other dimension of time*. Garden City, NY: Anchor.
- Ikenga-Metuh, E 1987. *Comparative studies of African traditional religions*. Ontisha, Nigeria: Imico Publishers.
- Lessem, R et al 1993. *African management: Philosophies, concepts, applications*. Randburg: Knowledge Resources.
- Mafico, T L 2000. The biblical god of the fathers and the African ancestors, in West G & Dube M W (eds), *The Bible in Africa*, 481-489. Boston, MA: Brill.
- Malina B J & Neyrey J H 1988. *Calling Jesus names*. Sonoma, CA: Polebridge.
- Mbigi, L 1995. Towards a rainbow management style. *Enterprise* December 1995, pp 42-45.
- Mbigi, L & Maree, J 1995. *Ubuntu: The spirit of African transformation management*. Randburg: Knowledge Resources.
- Mbiti, J S 1970. *African religions and philosophy*. London: Heineman.
- Mbiti, J S 1975. *Introduction to African religion*. London: Heineman.
- Menkiti, I A 1971. Person and community in African traditional thought, in Wright, R A (ed), *African philosophy*, 166-172. New York, NY: University Press of America.

- Osiek, C 2003. Review of Newman, J 2001. *Biblical religion and family values: A problem in the philosophy of culture*. *Interpretation* 57(1), 100-101.
- Painter-Morland, M 1999. Dealing with "difference": A alternative approach to "Western" and "African" values in the South African workplace. *Scriptura* 69, 149-162.
- Pilch, J J 1991. *Introducing the cultural context of the New Testament*. New York, NY: Paulist. (Hear the Word 2.)
- Pilch, J J & Malina, B J 1993. *Biblical social values and their meaning: A handbook*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.
- Pityana B N & Villa-Vicencio C (eds) 1995. *Being the church in South Africa today*. Johannesburg: SACC.
- Sawyers, H 1970. *God: Ancestor or Creator: Aspects of traditional beliefs in Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone*. London: Longman.
- Silberbauer, E R 1975. *Understanding and motivating the African worker*. Johannesburg: Hugh Keartland.
- Sindima, H J 1994. *Drums of redemption: An introduction to African Christianity*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Sindima, H J 1995. *Africa's agenda: The legacy of liberalism and colonialism in the crisis of African values*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Van der Toorn, K 1996. Ancestors and anthroponyms: Kinship terms as theophoric elements in Hebrew names. *ZAW* 108(1), 1-11.
- Van der Walt, B J 1997. *Afrosentrieties of Eurosentrieties?: Ons roeping in 'n multikulturele Suid- Afrika*. Potchefstroom: PU vir CHO.
- Van Niekerk, A S 1993. *One destiny: Our common future in Africa*. Kaapstad: Tafelberg.
- Van Niekerk, A S 1996. *Anderkant die reënboog*. Kaapstad: Tafelberg.
- Werkmeister, W H 1967. *Man and his values*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska.
- West G & Dube M W (eds) 1996. *"Reading with": An exploration of the interface between critical and ordinary readings of the Bible: African overtures*. Atlanta, GA: Scholars. (Semeia 73.)
- Westerlund, D 1985. *African religion in African scholarship: A preliminary study of the religious and political background*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wicksell.
- Wreh-Wilson, D E 1994. *Community and morality in African thought: A critique of Temple's Bantu ontology; its impact and its implications for the role of community in African moral thinking*. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI.
- Yu, A C 2000. Review article of De Barry, W T 1998. *Asian values and human rights: A confusian communitarian perspective*. *Journal of Religion*, 80(2), 299-304.