

# *Transforming a fragmented South African society through a spirituality of koinonia coram Deo*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Spirituality is a way of living. It is described as that which touches the core of human existence, namely “our relationship to the Absolute”, whatever the definition of the latter may be. In this paper, we deal with the importance of our relationship with the Trinitarian God as revealed in Scripture and determined by Christ. The world experiences a revolution in secular spirituality, rejecting a dualistic supernaturalism. This paper will not try to cover the whole debate and spectrum of spirituality, but will focus mainly on the most obvious spiritualities in the South African society, namely Biblical, post-modern and African spirituality. It is the argument of this paper that transforming and liberating spirituality will have to take the influence of sin on our koinonia with God and with our neighbour seriously. The importance of the different dimensions of koinonia as inner dynamics of the process of transformation and liberation will help dispel the myth that Christian spirituality has no relevance in a socio-political situation.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

The year 2012 was one of the most destabilising years for South Africa since 1994, with riots and strikes against poor service delivery by government, as well as riots and strikes by many labour sectors (such as transport, mine, and farm workers) against low wages.

Three farmworkers have died in clashes with police during stop-start strikes since November (2012) that have also led to hundreds of arrests. The unrest comes as South Africa's economy recovers from a violent two-month strike in the mining sector in which 50 people died last year. In further civil unrest this week, four people died in Sasolburg, in the Free State, as unemployed residents rioted in protest at a municipal demarcation move, which they believe will affect their job prospects. (Smith 2013.)

Counting the 241 391 strikers involved and the number of days that the strikes lasted, South Africa lost nearly 3,3 million working days in 2012, which resulted in workers losing R6,6 billion in wages (City Press 2013). The mining industry lost about R10,1 billion and the farming industry about R300 million, while more than 50 lives were also lost in these strikes. In addition to the strikes, South Africa was also shocked by brutal facts concerning rape (especially the rape of children) and murder, which are increasing every year, as well as riots in townships because of poor service delivery. Related questions that this paper intends to answer are the following: What is the role of (different) spiritualities in our South African society? What role can (different) spiritualities play in developing a more stabilised and peaceful society? Are (different) spiritualities dividing society? The central theoretical argument of this paper is that spirituality is incorporated in and has a direct influence on our everyday lives and experiences. Van der Merwe (2013:3) indicates it in the following remark: "The books of the NT do not only reflect certain early Christian spiritualities, but also evoke certain lived experiences amongst the readers. Their lived experiences cast the process and project of life integration [...]."

It is not spirituality alone that affects people; Gardener (2011:9) affirms the importance of recognising the influence of history and social context, as well as its impact on individuals and communities. In a time in which we experience a spiritual revolution (cf Tacey 2004; Van der Merwe 2006:165-166), one cannot but ask about the spirituality that functions in the South African society. Furthermore, it is important to identify the reason/s for these different spiritualities in a country

in which more than 75% of the population call themselves Christians.<sup>1</sup> The literature that was studied indicates that there is a revived interest in spirituality in general, not only in South Africa, but also all over the world. What will also become clear in this article is that spirituality means different things to different people. The premise of the article is that spirituality as *koinonia*<sup>2</sup> relates to Christian spiritualities, but also differs from other spiritualities such as post-modern and African spiritualities (which will be discussed in this paper). To describe what is meant by ‘*koinonia*’, the first letter of John will be considered. Since spirituality touches the core of human existence, namely “our relationship to the Absolute” (Waijman 2002:1), the author accepts that spirituality takes place *coram Deo* (in the presence of God). In the presence of the Trinitarian God, people are always confronted with the crucified Christ and as such become aware of their humanness and the influence of sin in their lives.

## 2. SPIRITUALITY

Schneiders (2005:15) distinguishes ‘spirituality’ as an academic field of both theology and religious studies. Waijman (2002:1) defines ‘spirituality’ as that which touches the core of human existence, namely “our relationship to the Absolute”, whatever the definition of the latter may be. It is the definition of the Absolute that causes people to understand spirituality differently. Kourie (2010:19) remarks that, in its wider sense, everyone embodies a spirituality of some kind, which refers to the ultimate meaning of our existence. Spirituality, then, is the meaning and values to which we subscribe, whether these are religious or not; it is thus possible to speak of ‘atheist’ spirituality as well. In the book *Critical Spirituality*, Gardener (2011) concentrates on spirituality as that which gives life meaning. She refers to a way in which the inner sense of meaning is connecting with a sense of something greater: “For some people this will clearly be a religious faith with its own traditions and rituals, for

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1 “The country has an area of 470,693 square miles and a population of 47.9 million. The 2001 religious demography census estimated that 80 percent of the population is Christian. Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists and adherents of traditional African beliefs constitute 4 percent of the population. Approximately 15 percent of the population indicated that it belongs to no particular religion or declined to indicate an affiliation.” (International Religious Freedom Report 2008.)

2 The noun *koinōnia* and related words – with the root meaning “(have in) common, communal; have a share or part (in something); go partners in” – occur around 119 times in the Bible. The background of this word lies in secular Greek, where it meant, for example, “(business) partner” (Luke 5:10) or “possessions held in common” (see Acts 2:44-45; 4:32) (The Encyclopedia of Christianity, vol. 3:134).

others it might be a sense of wonder from the natural world of joy in relationships. Such a broad definition of spirituality encourages an inclusive approach.” (Gardener 2011:9.) Tacey (2004:3-4) describes spirituality as a revolution from below – a people’s revolution. Bosch (1994:9) concludes that most people identify spirituality almost exclusively with their “devotional life”.

Firstly, with reference to the above, this article does not take an academic approach to spirituality, but a pragmatic one, recognising that spirituality is closely linked to theology, religious studies and understanding. This study is concerned with the qualitative and quantitative expansion of spiritual knowledge in order to make a positive contribution to the South African society.

Secondly, this article does not approach spirituality in a docetic<sup>3</sup> way in the sense that spirituality would mean otherworldliness, as if we are saved from this world. We are saved from our sin to live differently in this world and therefore spirituality “can never be something that can be isolated from the rest of our existence” (Bosch 1994:13), but must enhance our earthly existence. In the Bible, flesh and spirit do not refer to two segments of our lives, one outwardly and worldly and the other inwardly and otherworldly, but rather to two modes of existence, two life orientations. According to Bosch (1994:13), being spiritual means being in Christ and this includes every part of our lives. In this regard, the article will approach spirituality as koinonia.

With spirituality being defined as koinonia, the following elected spiritualities that influence the South African society will be discussed: Biblical spirituality, in order to show that the Bible recognises the fact that there are different spiritualities; post-modern spirituality, since we live in a post-modern paradigm; and African traditional spirituality, since a large part of the South African population are practitioners of African spirituality, and since both Christianity and African Traditional religion function from a traditional paradigm.

## 2.1 Biblical spirituality

Schneiders (2002) describes Biblical spirituality in the following way: Firstly, Biblical spiritualities refer to spiritualities that come to expression in the Bible. These include dialogical spirituality (Deuteronomistic tradition), Christocentric spirituality (Paul), contemplative Jesus spirituality (John) and ecclesiastic spirituality (Pastoral Letters).

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3 Docetism (as in the early Christian Church) is a heresy, claiming that the humanity of Christ, his sufferings and death were apparent rather than real. Docetism is the typical Greek contrast between spirit and matter; for example, they believed that, since matter was ipso facto evil, God could not come into direct contact with the phenomenal world in Christ (Ladd 1974:610). For this reason, the incarnation of Christ was dismissed.

Secondly, Biblical spirituality designates a 'pattern of Christian life' that is imbued with the different spiritualities in the Bible and may be called 'Christian spirituality'.<sup>4</sup> Thirdly, Biblical spirituality is a "transformative process of personal and communal engagement with the text" (Schneiders 2002:134-136). For this engagement with the text to be a transformative covenant, the communion of believers and the kingdom of God must be stressed (cf. Van der Walt 2008:28).

If we acknowledge the different spiritualities, the danger exists that we might work with different hermeneutical methods.<sup>5</sup> For transformative Biblical spirituality, the Bible must be read with the same hermeneutical key. The most appropriate hermeneutical key to work with is a missional hermeneutic as described by Wright (2006:33-47): "[...] since a missional hermeneutic must include at least this recognition – the multiplicity of perspectives and contexts from which and within which people read the biblical text." (Wright 2006:39.)

Christian spirituality is understood as a "self-transcending faith in which union with God in Jesus Christ through the Spirit<sup>6</sup> expresses itself in service of the neighbour and participation in the realization of the reign of God in this world. Christian spirituality, thus understood, is necessarily Biblical and it is adequate only to the degree that it is rooted in and informed by the Word of God" (Schneiders 2002:134).

It must also be pointed out that Biblical spirituality is contextual and not something that is distant from our world and society; it equips us to live in (a specific) society. Thus the fourth way, in which Biblical spirituality is realised, is by engaging in transformative actions in this world (Schneiders 2002:139). It is our involvement with transformative actions in this world (to improve the lives of those who are denied full participation) that "should lead to a deepening of our relationship with and dependence on God" (Bosch 1994:13). As our relationship with God is deepening, this relationship should lead to increasing engagement (*koinonia*) and involvement (*diakonia*) in the world, which will eventually lead to thanksgiving

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4 "By Christian spirituality I mean the lived experience of Christian faith. To be more explicit, Christian spirituality casts the process and project of life-integration in terms of the ultimate horizon and basic coordinates of Christian faith. The ultimate horizon of faith is the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ, into whose divine life we are incorporated by the gift (grace) of the Spirit." (Schneiders 2002:134.)

5 Van der Walt (2008:27-32) describes eight popular and scientific hermeneutic methods and four important hermeneutical keys. It is not in the scope of this paper to have a discussion on hermeneutics, but it is essential to take note of the importance of hermeneutics.

6 It is this union with God that defines *koinonia*, as discussed in this paper.

(leitourgia) (2 Cor. 4:15). As we love God, we will love our neighbour (1 John 4:7-10), because it is not possible to love God more than we love our neighbour.

People with different worldviews think differently about (Biblical) spirituality.<sup>7</sup> Traditionally, spirituality is linked to religious thinking, specifically the idea that religion must provide the answers to life's questions. Spirituality is also seen as a "shared and public experience" and individuals are not expected to develop their own answers (Gardener 2011:19). According to Nurnberger (2007:9), traditionalism does not distinguish between religion, worldview and culture, but views it as one concept; therefore a person's role and status in a (traditional) African society are defined by age, gender and seniority, because "[in] compound societies, the spiritual order reflects the social order, indicating that it is an order of power and authority" (Nurnberger 2007:23).

It may also be argued that Biblical spirituality was institutionalised in traditional thinking. In the modern era, the influence and power of religious institutions and traditions have deteriorated, as individuals and communities have gained knowledge and have started to believe that life's questions may be answered from a scientific perspective. Biblical spirituality has been moved to the background and humanism valued for people's ability to bring about change. Since we live in a world with a post-modern worldview, post-modern spirituality will now be discussed in more detail. However, it is important to bear in mind that the three different approaches to spirituality are functioning simultaneously, rather than separately, at specific times.

## 2.2 Post-modern spirituality

Post-modern spirituality intends to deconstruct.<sup>8</sup> These rational deconstructive pursuits of many traditional spiritual practices "dissolve" the ego-constructs in the history of Christian and Oriental spiritual practices (Schreiber 2012:2). Gardener (2011:20) mentions "history shows how spirituality in the form of religion was used to validate violence in the form of war and oppression of many kinds". The value of post-modern spirituality is that it makes provision for difference. Post-

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7 Most of us have more than one worldview, emphasising a specific one in a given situation.

8 "Deconstruction delivers us to the recognition of historicised falsehood within; the presence of a *false-self*. Deconstruction seems then to be a deeply emancipative impulse, the necessary prerequisite to enlightenment. Krishnamurti's (1954) 'watching the watcher, watching the ego' describes how we can cognitively participate in a spiritual practice of ego-deconstruction for the moral and spiritual purpose of deconstructing narcissism." (Schreiber 2012:4.)

modern spirituality can be seen “as an epistemological<sup>9</sup> possibility, authentically in line with an existential and phenomenological reclamation of traditional spiritual doctrine removed from theology” (Schreiber 2012:6), with a modern view of the importance of the individual (Gardener 2011:20). It is, however, vulnerable in terms of its regressive and narcissistic elements, and seems empty, as it is most radically a religion of immanence and individualism: “The anthropological interrogative ‘who am I?’” in post-modernism “is unfathomable, but palpable at every turn” (Schreiber 2012:7) and “the individuals then seek their own ‘truth’ from their own internal search for meaning and their experience of the spiritual” (Gardener 2011:20). Post-modern spirituality is also described as a proto-spirituality, which makes us aware of “time transcending witness” and is also trans-traditional (Schreiber 2012:7). This new kind of spirituality is described as “a spending spree in the religious shopping mall” (Nurnberger 2007:12). It is no longer the religious or scientific truth that demands one’s respect and commitment, but the quest for enjoyment.

The current concern about the presence and increase in fundamentalism in various religious traditions, with an active promotion of intolerance, suggests a revival of interest in the ‘traditional’ approach in post-modern times. Fundamentalism believes in a fixed truth, “rather than expecting that [...] the experience of spirituality will change in response to culture and history as it always has” (Gardener 2011:21). In this sense, fundamentalism denies that the context has any influence on spirituality. This brings us to the South African context and African spirituality as a traditional spirituality.

### 2.3 African spirituality

It is generally recognised that native African people are greatly influenced by the spiritual world. Reality is believed to be determined by ‘animistic’ or ‘dynamistic’ power. In dynamistic communities such as in Southern Africa, power flows can be channelled into beneficial directions through rituals that are conducted by authorised leaders, or detrimental directions through magical means that are used by sorcerers and witches (Nurnberger 2007:9). Within this “flow of forces”, the concept of ‘ubuntu’ (human solidarity) plays an important role. Ubuntu differs from

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9 “However, the point is this: complexity in the world of epistemology is par for the course (of post-modern sensitivity) and we need the insights of as many specialised epistemologies as possible, for two reasons: 1. Spirituality must offer some promise to broaden and ‘fill out’ our understanding of being and anthropology. For me, academic spirituality ought to earn its stripes as a human story in a world of science. 2. Following then, academic spirituality requires an epistemology larger than purely those of the Humanities.” (Schreiber 2012:5.)

koinonia,<sup>10</sup> since the focus of ubuntu is on the inside of closely-knit communities such as the extended family or clan. Ubuntu also assumes that people have evil intentions and hidden resources at their disposal; therefore one cannot let one's defences down or have enemies. Nurnberger (2007:195) points out that "this again may lead to overt demonstrations of goodwill and solidarity, while grudges are suppressed and suspicions remain secret". The influence of the spiritual world on Africa is also noted in Mbiti's (1990:29) quote of an Ashanti proverb: "No one shows a child the Supreme Being." Thus, everybody knows about the Supreme Being as creator and is related to him. Many Africans also believe in Jesus, although, in many instances, as one of the ancestors, and they also believe in the work of the Spirit. Although all three Persons of the Trinity are part of their notion of God, they don't view them as one God. The following question may then be posed: Do Africans believe in a tritheism? The Supreme Being, as understood in Africa, is not the same as the Triune God as He reveals himself in the Bible.

In his discussion of African spirituality, Edwards (2012:50) refers to "the experience of spirit as distinct from 'religion,' which is generally concerned with systematized forms of spirituality". He defines spirituality as a multidimensional, universally experienced phenomenon, involving four interrelated domains, namely (a) higher or universal power; (b) self-discovery; (c) relationships; and (d) eco-awareness (Edwards 2012:52). Nurnberger (2007:9) makes it clear that Edwards's distinction between "the experience of spirit" and "religion" is a false distinction, since in traditionalism such as African Traditional Religion (ATR); there is no distinction between religion, worldview and culture. It is also important to realise that self-discovery in Africa happens in relation to other people in the spirit of ubuntu and not in relation to who a person is before God, as in Christianity. Given the current situation in South Africa, it is clear that we need to focus on Africa's spirituality as in ATR and the influence thereof on our society, since the larger portion of the labour force grow up in the context of ATR. The important influence of African spirituality is illustrated in situations such as the mineworkers' strike at Marikana, during which 45 lives were lost and in which the striking workers consulted a sangoma.

## 2.4 Spirituality and the labour market

Gardener (2011:4) observes "there is movement in Western culture towards recognising that spirituality is part of life and so part of work". In this regard,

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10 Although ubuntu is an important aspect of African spirituality, it is not within the scope of this article to unpack the influence thereof. For the differences between ubuntu and koinonia, see Marumo (2012).



Gardener refers to books and articles in the fields of social work, palliative care, education and organisational management. The following reasons are suggested for this interest in spirituality (Gardener 2011:4-9):

- Interest in a more holistic way of working in professional practice
- A desire for practice with greater integrity and integration with professional values
- A desire for inclusive spiritual practices in an increasingly diverse world
- Concern for the environment
- Questioning of materialism
- Demonstrated relationship between spirituality and health
- Less of a split between religion or spirituality and other spheres of life
- Social recognition of spirituality

Among others, this paper intends to explore the influence of spirituality in the vocational (un-schooled) labour market in South Africa, for example mining and farming. The author believes that most of the reasons that have been identified by Gardener are applicable to the issue that is discussed in this paper, namely the influence of spirituality on the South African society.

It is important to identify the interfaces between Biblical, post-modern and African spirituality if such interfaces exist. Furthermore, the influence of spirituality on society needs to be determined. Nurnberger (2007:224-225) discusses (African) traditionalism in a post-modern context and makes the following remarks:

Firstly, the perception that post-modernity reinstalls the dignity, social acceptability and validity of traditionalism is deceptive. Post-modernity will tolerate the belief systems, but it cannot, for example, shut a factory down because the ancestors disapprove of its mechanisms. The following question remains: What positive role can ATR spirituality play in unrest situations like these, where “sin is not a direct offence against God, or a transgression of some moral law or virtue, but a breakdown of the complex structure of human relationships within the community, including the ancestors” (Nurnberger 2007:27)? There are definite questions about the influence of ATR in the strikes at Marikana, especially since a sangoma was involved and taken into account that many of the workers are from the Eastern Cape, where ATR is general practice.

Secondly, the possibility exists that those who have half-heartedly and with uncertainty ventured into modernity will revert to pre-modern assumptions and

will legitimise assumptions like these. Such traditionalists may continue their way of life on post-modernist assumptions, bypassing the tests of modernity such as empirical evidence, efficiency, productivity and reliability.

Thirdly, post-modern people who want to include traditionalist spirituality as one of their choices may suddenly assume a power they have never suspected to be possible. Since convictions and assumptions are not all that innocent, post-modernity is quite naïve concerning alternative spiritualities, spiritual powers and their consequences. It may then be asked whether spirituality of koinonia will indeed make a difference.

### 3. SPIRITUALITY OF KOINONIA ACCORDING TO THE FIRST LETTER OF JOHN<sup>11</sup>

Spirituality of koinonia is all about the relationship, but also the transformational impact, of the Trinitatis Dei on life as revealed in Scripture. For the purpose of this article, the author will focus on the revelation of God in the First Letter of John and the implications of koinonia for life. Describing some of the aspects of the Trinitatis Dei's revelation in 1 John, it is the role and function of Jesus in legitimising fellowship between God and (these) believers that need to be pointed out. Koinonia amongst believers and with God is founded in the unique relationship between the Father and his Son Jesus Christ. This is portrayed by the chiasmic pattern that is built by Van der Merwe (2006) around the noun 'koinonia' in 1 John 1:3-7: "The function of the chiasmic structure here is to emphasise the interrelatedness and interdependence of the fellowship among believers and their corporate fellowship with God. The one kind of fellowship demands and constitutes the other." (Van der Merwe 2006:173.) Jesus was incarnated into the world so that people may come to know God through him (Van der Merwe 2006:176) and may become, with other believers, familia Dei<sup>12</sup> through the work of the Spirit (Van der Merwe 2006:165). This letter of John portrays Christian life as koinonia with the Trinitatis Dei (Van der Merwe 2006:182). One of the reasons for writing this letter is to urge the readers to "test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (4:1), because of the heresies that led to different spiritualities and, in the end, to schisms. One of the most dangerous heresies of

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11 After searching for references on spirituality in 1 John, the author came to the same conclusion as Van der Merwe (2006:166): "Unfortunately, in the above search, nothing could be found on "spirituality" in 1 John."

12 "[In] the family terms of the New Testament, old and new structures come together. [...] What we see in the New Testament is not an egalitarian community that is being replaced by patriarchal structures; the brotherhood-like nature of the Christian fellowship is in the making, embedded in household structures." (Sandnes 1997:156.)

the first two centuries of Christianity was Gnosticism. The central teaching of Gnosticism was that spirit is entirely good and matter (the physical body) entirely evil. This teaching led to the denial of the Incarnation of Jesus by some believers in the Johannine community:

From the point of view of their “experience of fellowship with God”, we can conclude that the Elder wants to *warn* his adherents that this false teaching, the denial of Jesus’ Incarnation, would lead to an existence without experiencing fellowship with God and God’s Son (Van der Merwe 2006:169).

In the secular and consumerist context of today, many Christians still make a distinction between what is spiritual (belonging to religion or religious institutions and is practiced at specific days on specific times in specific places) and our everyday lives, especially in the working place. The question remains whether our spirituality has an influence on our everyday life of work and survival. Is there any recognition of spirituality in the industrial environment? Aspects of Gnostic teaching, as described in the first letter of John, is largely applicable to the South African society, as described in this paper, because it involves a context in which different dogmas and views of spirituality divide society.

The traditional African perspective<sup>13</sup> can be compared to the Christians from Jewish background of this Johannine congregation who had professed their commitment to Jesus, but still felt a loyalty to Judaism, with the result that “[t]his section of the community may have found it difficult to accept the *messiahship* of Jesus, but its members would have given an exalted place to the Jewish law” (Smalley 1984:xxiii). In the same way, many Africans have professed their commitment to Jesus, but still feel a loyalty to the African Traditional Religious beliefs,<sup>14</sup> which leads to syncretism. From a more post-modern worldview, some people in Africa act like the Hellenistic Christians who depend more on a dualistic (Gnostic) background, or Docetism (the belief in a “phantom” Christ). In Docetism, the physical body (matter) was considered evil, but not the breaking of God’s law (1 John 3:4); breaking his law was of no moral consequence. In this regard, the *koinonia* between God and the familia

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13 Most of the workers who are relevant to this discussion are from Africa and most of them have grown up in the ATR environment.

14 Such African Traditional Religious beliefs include, for example, animism (personal manifestations of power/spirits), dynamism (impersonal power/spirits), ubuntu and ancestral worship (Nurnberger 2007:22).

Dei is broken because of the different views on the role and function of Christ.<sup>15</sup> It is true that within both African Traditionalism and post-modern spirituality there are those who believe that true spirituality is only found in ubuntu or in the self and in enjoyment, regardless of the moral consequences for the broader society. In the First Letter of John, the theology is a “balanced understanding of the person of Jesus: that is, He is both one with man and (in some sense) one with God” (Smalley 1984:xxiii). It is the understanding from the Johannine letter that true spirituality is found in *koinonia* and that this *koinonia* between God and man, and man and fellow man, leads to joy.<sup>16</sup> It is from this perspective that the spirituality of *koinonia* will be discussed, namely as relationship with God and relationship with one’s neighbour.

*Koinonia* (Christian fellowship) is not the sentimental or superficial attachment of a random collection of individuals, but the mutual relationship of those who remain “in Christ” and therefore belong to each other (1 John 3:23-24). Our relationship with God determines our relationship with each other;<sup>17</sup> this is totally different from communalism as described in ubuntu. The intensity of *koinonia* (fellowship) is indicated when the author uses the phrase *κοινωνιαν εχητε* (“to have fellowship”) and not the verb *κοινωνειν* “to fellowship”. This expresses not only the fact of fellowship in Christ, but also the conscious enjoyment of this fellowship.

*Koinonia* is also a specific or qualified fellowship (*μεθ ημων*, “with us”). “Us” is further qualified, as it is not a fellowship involving “us” as Jews or Greeks, but as Christian believers (*και η κοινωνια δε η ημετερα μετα του πατρος και μετα του υιου αυτου ιησου χριστου* “and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ”). Therefore the fellowship to which we are called in 1 John is both Christian and apostolic. John’s use of the full title, “his Son Jesus Christ”, points to the human as well as the divine status of Jesus to counter the Docetism (Smalley 1984:12-13). A spirituality of *koinonia* is founded in Jesus Christ, who is both human and divine, and thus links the spiritual and physical, so that spirituality of *koinonia* can never be an outer-worldly experience which distances us from the reality of the world we are living in. Spirituality of *koinonia* can never separate us from the Trinitarian God

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15 In ATR, Christ is not seen as the Redeemer, but as one of the ancestors (Beyers, J. & Mphahlele, D.N. 2009).

16 In 1:4, the noun “joy” (*χαρη*) is not a purpose in itself as in the case of the *ἵνα* clause in verse 3, but it depends on the establishment of fellowship, stated in verse 3 (Van der Merwe 2013:2).

17 Van der Merwe (2006:176): “Moreover, the knowledge of God, revealed through the Incarnation of Jesus (cf. John 17:3), is the common basis for both ideas of “fellowship” described in this verse, the human and divine.”

as revealed in the Bible. Since we have *koinonia* with him, we are part of the *missio Dei*, the saving acts of God, and therefore take part in his concern and love for his cosmos; we live in *koinonia* with it and all those living in it (Ps 24:1; John 3:16).

This Johannine letter urges the readers to test “the spirits” (1 John 4:1) in order to “measure the charismatic utterances of all so-called prophets by the norm of the sound Christian tradition, at the centre of which is the real incarnation of Christ (1 John 4:2-3)” (Ladd 1974:610). The incarnation of Christ has to do with his identification with this world<sup>18</sup> as the Saviour of the world (1 John 4:14). If spirituality is then understood as “our relationship to the Absolute” (Waaiman 2002:1), we may conclude that Christian and/or Biblical spirituality only takes place in *koinonia* with God in Jesus, as the Saviour of this world, through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. The world that is described in 1 John could just as well have been our society, “addicted to the pursuit of the satisfaction of gross sensual pleasures (which John characterises as the ‘lust of the flesh’), to the materialistic view of life and values (‘the lust of the eyes’), and of self-glorification (‘the pride of life’) (1 John 2:16)” (Ladd 1974:612). Christ inaugurated a new order, since not everything in this world is from God (1 John 2:16). Christians are not to love this world (1 John 2:15), but this cannot mean a denial of love for the people of the world, since Christ has come to save this world (1 John 4:14) and in *koinonia* with Christ and the Father, as *familia Dei*, we participate in this saving act as part of the *missio Dei*: “And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.” (1 John 5:4-5.) There is also reference to the spirituality of the “antichristos” (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3) as the adversary of Christ, either opposing him or replacing him: “We may conclude that the spirit of the antichrist manifests itself everywhere in heretical, schismatic teachers.” (Ladd 1974:613.) Abiding in Christ may also mean remaining in true Christian tradition (1 John 2:24); in this regard, false teachings rupture the fellowship of God’s people, which also implies rupture with God and with Christ.

According to 1 John, spirituality of *koinonia* will be characterised by unconditional love for all people, in contrast with the “fearful love” of ubuntu. The verb “to love” (ἀγαπάω) occurs at least 28 times in 1 John. Ladd (1974:616) points thus out that “[t]he totality of Christian life is summed up in shunning love for the world (1 John 2:15), in loving God (1 John 2:16), and expressing this love for God by loving the

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18 “The world in 1 John, as in the Gospel, is not creation, but the world of men, seen in their rebellion and hostility to God.” (Ladd 1974:612.)

brethren (1 John 4:20)”. This love and spirituality are not human achievements, but only the human response to the love of God (1 John 4:10-11, 19, 21).

As children of God we must remember that we are all sinners and responsible for what happens in society: 1 John 1:8 reminds us that “[if] we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us”. We will only achieve perfection when we become like Christ in his presence (παρουσία) (1 John 3:2), but the Gospel of John (John 16:13) also reminds us “when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you in all truth”. Therefore, the Spirit does not give us any excuse to live as we wish, thinking only of ourselves and our own enjoyment; He guides us in truth to stand coram Deo at the cross. It is only coram Deo that we can deal with sin in an honest and liberating way.

#### 4. A VIEW ON SIN

Van der Merwe (2013:4) describes spirituality as follows:

[Spirituality is] the lived experience through spiritual senses. It is only when people have encountered Jesus Christ physically or through the hearing of the Gospel and consequently perceive the otherness and identity of this person (to be the Son of God or the Word of life) that a new and different lived experience emerges. Christian spirituality is not simply to encounter an amorphous personal God, but represents more specifically the revelation of God, manifested in Jesus Christ (1:2, ἐφανερώθη) through the Spirit.

Such a new lived experience encounter is only possible when the Trinitatis Dei is met at the foot of the cross. It is in front of the cross that people are reminded of the reason for the Incarnation and the crucifixion of Jesus, namely sin. It is only via the cross that we can live in koinonia with God.

In a post-modern society in which people live according to their own values, and where consumerism and the individualistic self are prioritised, the concept of sin is vague and has lost much of its credibility in the discussion of spirituality. In many instances, especially in the labour market, relationships are not a priority; materialism and capitalism are prominent and contributing to the deterioration of families and societies. Spirituality is first and foremost relational – with the Trinitarian God or a Supreme Being, with fellow-humans and with creation. Spirituality as such is the opposite of sin, as expressed in the concept *incurvatus in se* (curved in on oneself or concerned only with oneself). It can be argued that Africa also regards the deterioration of relationships as a sin by viewing sin as “inherently the destruction of the group’s solidarity, so that a person sins, not against God, but against others” (Nurnberger 2007:44). In the context of post-modernism and post-colonialism,

some attention must be given to sin as *incurvatus in se*. In his book, *The gravity of sin*, Jenson (2006) provides an analysis of sin, which helps us to understand our different lifestyles in theological terms. A key concept in his analysis is *relationships*. Jenson (2006:5, 130-131) argues that the image of being “curved in on oneself” is the best paradigm for understanding sin relationally.

A spirituality of *koinonia* is founded in the Trinitarian relationship and will take a Christological starting point for its anthropology and its views on sin. A Christological anthropology is thoroughly relational: We exist only because we exist in (relation to) Jesus Christ. The *real man* is Jesus and we are in him. The actual man is the man of sin (1 John 1:8); we cannot exist independently first and then enter into a relationship with Christ, we only have real existence because of the *missio Dei*: Christ’s relationship with us as revealed on the cross (1 John 2:1-2). This reality cannot be done away with by sin; sin remains a secondary reality. We find hope in this insight that human reality is first and foremost constituted by Christ and not by sin. Man did not establish the covenant and it is not for him to dissolve it (Jenson 2006:161).

African anthropology and sin, in contrast, are not defined so much by one’s individual personality traits as by one’s location in communal hierarchy and the impact of this “status” on other spheres of people’s lives: A person is a person through persons (Nurnberger 2007:31). It is important, though, to recognise that this network of relationships is not limited to the human community, but also extends to the living dead.

Sin, though, can also be described in a potent, phenomenological manner, when the three primary forms of sin are identified as pride, sloth and falsehood. All three forms are important for our understanding of the influence of spirituality in society, since they “are characterized first and foremost by broken relationships in which people live for themselves rather than for God and others” (Jenson 2006:131). According to Jenson, it means that, in this approach, “one might recognize different forms of sin and yet still speak meaningfully of an over-arching structure in all human sinning”.

The following examples will illustrate how relations in the context of this article are central to our understanding of sin:

Firstly, many labourers (vocational workers) believe that the sin of *pride*, for instance, cannot have the same meaning in the different economic contexts. Different contexts are shaped by different factors: race and ethnicity, class, culture, geography et cetera (cf. Jenson 2006:130).

Secondly, the sin of *sloth* is illustrated in the refusal to live for God and for others, but this sin is contextualised as ignorance about God (e.g. the atheist); the philanthropist

who commits himself to an abstract cause and so escapes being with his neighbour; the downtrodden labourer who escapes conflict and allows his company to abuse him in the name of service; a big company who is very busy in developing the community – perhaps a homeless shelter – but nevertheless misses any real encounter with the people; or the mother who serves her family in a way that denies mutuality and their subjectivity and responsibility (cf. Jenson 2006:174-175).

Thirdly, the sin of *falsehood* involves our counter-movement against Christ's prophetic office. Wanting to present our own truth, we do not accept the truth of Christ. Job's friends did not say anything wrong, but presented a good doctrine. Yet, they were false, because they wanted to speak for God and they spoke in 'unhistorical' terms. While Job was in a despairing struggle for the knowledge of God, they presented timeless truths: "They seek to evade an encounter with the living God by constructing closed systems which, for all their orthodoxy, give place to neither God nor humanity in their freedom." (Jenson 2006:165.) They did not enter into a relationship with either God or Job, or with what was happening between God and Job.

The view of sin as it is presented above opens up a broad spectrum of concepts and relations, which are especially important for understanding spirituality in the South African (labour) context. The economic society must learn to be attentive to the way in which the practice of spirituality of workers and companies affects each other and the society (environment). There is a need in the South African society to look at spirituality and sin, not as moralists who want to induce guilt, but like doctors who want to promote healing and life. Healing and life are possible when attention is given to a spirituality of *koinonia*. When sin is understood as broken relations, its gravity will be recognised, not merely because it is morally wrong, but because it is harmful and dangerous, like an illness that destroys our bodies. To be saved from sin is to be healed from a relationship that is a danger to us and to others (Van Niekerk 2013:16). A private salvation is no salvation at all. Salvation from sin as *incurvatus in se* implies peace with God, society and the self, and this is only possible in a spirituality of *koinonia*, and then in *koinonia* as an experienced reality.

## 5. CONCLUSION

If spirituality is described as that which touches the core of human existence, namely "our relationship to the Absolute", whatever the definition of the latter may be, it is clear that spirituality is closely linked to self-understanding or identity. From the Biblical, post-modern and African spiritualities, as discussed, it can be seen that each one gives attention to the identity question, although from different perspectives or departures. It is clear from the above that one cannot answer the questions, *Who am*



*I?* and *What am I to do?* without first answering the following question: *Of which story or stories am I a part?*

Firstly, all three mentioned spiritualities give attention to the relations, but all with a different emphasis; this emphasis does not exclude the other mentioned dimensions. Biblical spirituality puts emphasis on the relation with the Trinitarian God and his new faith community, focused on the not-yet part of this new community (koinonia); post-modern spirituality puts the emphasis on the relation with the self and how the community can help me (individualism); and African spirituality puts the emphasis on the relation within the community of origin, as well as this community's efforts to keep peace with the living dead (ubuntu). It is in a spirituality of koinonia, though, where the different emphases are equally important, as is clear (for example) from the chiasmic structure in 1 John 1:3-7. It has been argued before that there can be no real koinonia with God without koinonia with my fellowman and vice versa, and there can be no koinonia without knowing and loving the self.

Secondly, the three mentioned spiritualities have developed from different contexts and find them now within the (one) context of South Africa. It is in this instance that spirituality of koinonia helps us to understand that we are all partners in the same context. As a society, we are all equally responsible for, and part of, the story within the context of South Africa and Africa. Africa's story is our story; it is in our DNA.

In the economic world, it is important that industries and employers engage in identifying and stating the spirituality that determine their own (company's) values as well as the (different) spiritualities within their workforce. Understanding the spiritualities and the values of the different spiritualities might enhance dialogue and relationships. Everyone must realise that although people's history and context influence their identity, it is not in the first place their context that determines what they do, but their spirituality. It needs to be pointed out that the history and context of Africa, namely colonialism and post-colonialism, the different worldviews and the newly found democracy are an inseparable part of the current unrest in South Africa. From this history, it can be asked whether the vocational (unschooled) labour market, mostly the disadvantaged from (South) Africa's history, "skipped" the modern era and went directly from a pre-modern to a post-modern era via technology. If this is true, it might have resulted in traditionalism on the one hand and "internal truth", relativism and enjoyment on the other hand, without access to the "tests" of modernity such as empirical evidence, efficiency, productivity and reliability. This may help to understand the anger and destruction that accompanies the strikes, since it is the only way to veto the power structures in the labour market.

If this is indeed the situation, we need to identify ways to bridge the gap. The first tangible way to do it is through education and development. The question is, though, education and development to what end? (cf. Bruwer 2001:19-38.) Education alone will not change a traditional society with its own education system, or the society of a post-modern world; what is needed is the acknowledgement that spirituality is the core influence in our lives. People need to be assisted in turning back to the core of their lives, namely their relationship with the Absolute. In a spirituality of *koinonia*, such as is proposed here, this Absolute is defined as the Trinitarian God as revealed in the Bible. It is only from *koinonia* with him that we can live in *koinonia* (as ἀγάπη, unconditional love) with our fellow man and the self, and it is only with this unconditional love (1 John 3:16) that the South African society will change. *Koinonia* with the Trinitarian God places us in relationship with God and society, and makes us accountable to him and the community. In a young post-modern society with a newly found democracy, experience shows that people are mostly looking out for themselves, because they are “curved in on themselves” and therefore, as argued above, guilty of sin against God and the community. The only way to deal with this sin is through *koinonia* with God and the community, in the presence of God, as He dealt with our sins at the cross.

*Koinonia* is living *coram Deo*, and therefore *koinonia* with society can only be understood in the context of the cross of Jesus Christ. It was at the cross that Jesus identified himself in totality with this world and society, but it was also at the cross that Jesus distanced himself in totality from this world and society. It was at the cross that all people were forgiven and the possibility of a new life was created. Spirituality of *koinonia* is living this new life *coram Deo* in a broken society, taking up our cross every day (Luke 9:23-24).

A spirituality of *koinonia* has the following implications for the Church who, according to the Bible, is the elected to participate in the *missio Dei*, building and rebuilding a society through a spirituality of *koinonia*. This might create a society with more social capital to address differences in a more constructive way. Firstly, the Church will have to confess its own brokenness and sin regarding *koinonia*, not only to God, but to the communities which were failed in so many instances, for example at Marikana and in the farming communities. Secondly, the Church needs to listen to the different communities in the presence of the Trinitarian God, discerning what God is doing. It then has to start participating in his actions, exposing others to the possibility of a life with Christ and trusting the Holy Spirit to do the rest.

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## KEY WORDS

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