An Adventist Response to African Traditional Religion

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ABSTRACT⸺*Contextualizing Christianity in a way that is culturally appropriate but biblically faithful is an on-going challenge. This article traces the encounter of Christianity with African Traditional Religion (ATR) and its four components of transcendence: God, lesser gods, ancestors and power objects. Jesus Christ, Scripture and the Devil were new components brought by Christianity. Suggestions are made about how the problems of syncretism and dual allegiance can be addressed.*
Keywords: African, Africa, Religion, Adventist, Power Objects

I. Introduction

The encounter of Christianity with African traditional religion in the modern era changed them both. Although there are African peoples who belong to ancient branches of Christianity, this paper discusses the non-Christian traditional religions which were dominant in most of Africa when the era of modern missions began in the nineteenth century. In that encounter, Christianity was incarnated into African culture just as it was into the Greco-Roman culture of the Early Church and that of every subsequent era. The ancient religions of Africa were also molded by the encounter. Today's "African Christianity" is truly an African religion, just as "American Christianity" is an American religion. At the same time, both forms are local manifestations of the universal religion of Jesus Christ (Walls, 2002, p. 119).

One of the major concerns of missiology is the planting and developing of Christianity that is both relevant to culture and faithful to Scripture. Paul Hiebert used the term "critical contextualization" to describe evangelization done with these two goals (Hiebert, 1985, pp. 171–192; 1994, pp. 93–103). In other words, the universal, eternal principles of the Bible must be authentically expressed in the every day beliefs and practices of Christians who remain members of their home cultures. From this position they are best able to model and proclaim authentic Christianity to their neighbors without seeming like foreigners peddling an alien religion. Just as Jesus incarnated himself into Jewish culture, so his religion is to be incarnated into every culture.

The development of culturally appropriate and biblically faithful Christianity has not always occurred in an ideal way in Africa (or anywhere). The result is syncretism, or the weaving of unbiblical beliefs and practices into the fabric of Christianity. At the core of syncretism is a dual or divided allegiance to both the God of the Bible and the gods and powers of traditional religion. The causes of syncretism can be found on both sides of the encounter between missionaries and African peoples. Some early missionaries failed to teach fully authentic Christianity and to adequately engage issues in local culture and religion because of their own limitations. On the other hand, the initial African reception of Christianity and the way it has developed since have also been marred by human limitations.

Looking at contemporary Africa, Andrew Walls speaks of the "immense theological activity" in the "great theological laboratory" of Africa, which is driven by the mega-issues facing the continent (Walls, 2002, p. 133). Paul Hiebert wrote of "the *right* and *responsibility* of the church in *each culture* and *historical setting* to interpret and apply the Scriptures in its own context" (Italics supplied, Hiebert, 1994, p. 101). He also discussed the development of a "supracultural theology" that involved reaching an "internationalized … consensus on theological absolutes" (Hiebert, 1994, pp. 102–103). As a major player in world Christianity, Africa now has the right and responsibility of doing the best possible theology for the sake of Africa and the world.

One of the most important issues that confront African Christians is the classification of ultimate reality (See Hiebert, 1994, p. 193 ff. and Kraft, 2008, p. 167 ff.). "What is prime reality—the really real?" (Sire, 2004a, p. 20). What is the most real thing in the universe? What transcendent beings or powers exist beyond the everyday human realm? How should humans relate to them? In the modern secularist or naturalistic worldview, ultimate reality is fully

contained within empirically visible nature. For Christians, the deepest reality in the universe is the Creator-God.

Early missionaries around the world had varied success in discovering a vernacular name for this Creator-God. Paul Hiebert has described how the difficulty of naming God persists to the present day in India (Hiebert, 1985, pp. 144–146). Finding a name for God was also highly contentious in China (Walls, 2002, p. 121).

One might have expected that early missionaries to Africa would have struggled to find suitable vernacular names for God when they translated the Bible. Their orientation did not lead them to anticipate discovering God among the "heathen" peoples of Africa. At the time of the 1910 Edinburgh mission conference, "The general feeling was that there was 'practically no religious content in [African] Animism,' nor was there in it 'any preparation for Christianity'" (Bediako 2004, p. 4). Robert Moffat, early missionary to Botswana, said that the Tswana had neither a knowledge of God nor a religion, in the proper sense. However, Moffat changed his mind when he translated the Bible. "God did have a Tswana name; and Moffat found it, *not because he was looking for it, but because it was there*" (Italics supplied, Walls 2002, p. 121). Missionary Bible translators "found" the Creator-God in the vernacular all over Africa because he belonged to the conceptual universe of Africa's traditional religions. By comparison, Buddhism is essentially a religion without a God and Hinduism has 330,000 gods. Thus, neither of those great world religions was prepared like Africa to accept the God of the Bible.

II. Traditional Components

Walls says that the traditional African map of the universe has four components that define the transcendent: (1) God, (2) lesser gods or divinities, (3) ancestors, and (4) objects of power (Walls, 2002, p. 123). This conceptual map provided a ready template upon which to plant the beliefs of the Bible. This does not imply that the ancient concepts stayed or should stay the same for Christians, however. In fact, the understanding of these four major components has changed dramatically in many different directions (Walls, 2002, p. 122). Contemporary African Christianity reflects a wide range of adherence and non-adherence to the biblical map of the universe.

Ancient African religions were neither monolithic, nor rigid, nor immutable with regard to the four components. Some were God-dominated, some were dominated by the lesser gods, others were ancestor-dominated, and some made power objects central. Not

every group had all of the components. Internal and external forces sometimes changed the role a particular component played. Some components were dominant in certain parts of a society but not in others. If traditional Africa was not monolithic, modern Africa is even less so. Africa is a vast theological patchwork of infinite variation.

A. God

The first component of Africa's traditional map of the universe is the Creator-God. What greater point of continuity could there be between traditional religion and Christianity? Among many peoples, however, the nominally supreme God was functionally relegated to a secondary position while the focus of religious life was placed on other components. The most consistent and important impact of Christianity was the magnification of God. The vernacular Bible, using a vernacular name for God, provided new content and depth to traditional beliefs about God, some being corrected and others augmented. One of the challenges for contemporary believers is to ensure that the Triune God of the Bible is indeed sovereign in both the theory and practice of their faith.

B. Divinities or Lesser Gods

The second component is what Walls calls divinities or lesser gods. Missionaries whose beliefs were shaped by the Enlightenment tended to deny the reality of beings in the middle zone between humans and God. For them, Gabriel, Lucifer, and the other angels identified in the Bible had a rather theoretical, ethereal existence. Their usual solution for African converts whose daily lives involved divinities, ancestors, and power objects were to say, "It's all superstition. You have become Christians. Just stop believing it and you won't have any more trouble." This solution was really no solution at all. Because of their own experience, African converts could not simply deny the existence of the divinities, ancestors, and power objects. Hiebert referred to the missionary non-solution as the "flaw of the excluded middle" (Hiebert, 1994, p. 189 ff.). The divinities, ancestors, and power objects were in the "middle zone" between humans and God that was "excluded."

The non-solution was based on a theological error which grew out of their own cultural biases. Not all missionaries excluded the "middle zone" in their theology but many failed to directly address issues arising from African traditional religion. The middle zone is

not empty, according to the Bible. Traditional religion was correct in saying, "There is something out there." The non-solution was also a methodological mistake because they did not systematically engage traditional religion in dialog and critique. The methodological mistake continues today when indigenous leaders fail to engage traditional religion directly.

Because Christianity magnified God, it tended to diminish the role of the traditional divinities. Sometimes they disappeared altogether from religious belief and practice. Other times they were demonized and made to represent all forces that opposed God, the Bible and the church (Walls, 2002, p. 124). Among some contemporary Christians, the divinities have reemerged into religious life because of a sense that available spiritual resources are insufficient to cope with life's stern challenges, like HIV/AIDS. However, even those who seek power from the divinities tend to locate the ultimate source of that power in God or the Holy Spirit. Some Christians have filled the gap made by the departure of the divinities with a fervent belief in the role of angels who mediate God's power and protection.

Adventist missionaries taught the existence of Gabriel and the "good angels" and Lucifer and the "evil angels." However, I am not aware that they generally took the next vital step that I think is needed to deal with the divinities. The divinities can be used as an effective point of contact or starting point from which the biblical doctrine of angels can be taught as a functional substitute. The message would be something like: "Your traditions are correct in saying that there are transcendent beings, greater than humans but lesser than God. The Bible calls them angels and here are the details about them …"

C. Ancestors

The third component is the ancestors. As with the divinities, the role of the ancestors has often been diminished by the God-centeredness of Christianity. Roman Catholics have redirected African ancestor veneration toward the Catholic saints. Protestants have usually forbidden ancestor cults. Yet, the ancestors remain problematic for many African Christians.

The Adventist critique of the situation is that dealing with ancestor cults is inherently problematic for Christians who believe in the immortality of the soul, which gives the "living dead" ontological existence. The doctrine of non-immorality means that ancestors have no ontological existence. Adventists link the non-

immortality doctrine with the ontological existence of evil angels to conclude that evil angels impersonate the dead in various deceptive ways, as with Saul and the witch of Endor (1 Sam 28; See White 1911, pp. 551–562; Andreasen, 2000, pp. 325–326). Thus, Adventists affirm that ontologically real beings (evil angels) are behind the apparent encounters of living humans with their dead ancestors. Seances and other spiritualistic activities are not relegated to "primitive superstition"—but neither are they what they appear to be.

The divinities component of traditional religion includes "trickster gods" of many kinds which trick each other and humans. Among other things, they are accused of causing the first human sin through trickery which resulted in the general human predicament. I think that the trickster gods can be linked with the deceptive, impersonating evil angels of the Bible to address the challenge of ancestor cults and other spiritualistic rites. The message would be something like: "Your tradition is correct in saying that people sometimes seem to encounter their ancestors. The Bible teaches that Satan and his angels are very deceptive (like your traditional trickster gods) and can impersonate the ancestors. The Bible also teaches that dead people are asleep and cannot communicate with us. Therefore, we should not be deceived by the tricks of Satan."

D. Power Objects

The fourth component is power objects (like charms, amulets, costumes, statues, relics, or holy water) that are used in African traditional religions to mediate power for either good or evil. Walls states that the use of power objects has been "painlessly drawn" into the African Christian world (Walls, 2002, p. 128). He means that Africans who joined Christian groups that used Christian power objects continued to use some traditional power objects, although with altered meanings. Some believe that Christian power objects have inherent powers and others ascribe their powers to Christ or the Holy Spirit.

Many Christian groups, including Adventists, have seen the use of power objects as wholly unbiblical and do not believe that God's power is mediated through them. Adventists have rigorously required converts to remove power objects placed on their bodies, in their homes, or in other important places. In my observation, the use of power objects has visibly decreased in the last half-century but some usage has gone underground. Where dual-allegiance is present, it is often expressed in the visible or secret use of power objects.

I suggest that the traditional trickster gods be used to address the challenge of power objects, as with the ancestor cults. Just as evil angels act like trickster gods to impersonate the ancestors, so they really do use objects in deceptive ways to do good things or bad things to people. The message would be something like: "Your tradition is correct in saying that certain objects seem to have power to do good or bad things. The Bible teaches that Satan and his angels are very deceptive (like your traditional trickster gods) and can use objects to do good or bad things. Therefore, we should not be deceived by the tricks of Satan."

III. New Elements

Although the conceptual map of traditional African contains components similar to those of Christianity, there were also new elements that came with the religion of Jesus.

A. Jesus Christ

The person of Jesus Christ was something new. As a member of the Trinity, incarnated into human life, and then ascended to the right hand of the Father, Jesus "greatly intensified the sense of the immediacy of the presence of God" (Walls, 2002, p. 129). Jesus was known to appear by spoken voice, visions, and dreams, thus displacing the divinities from that traditional role. Whereas traditional divination sought answers from the lesser gods, Christians sought wisdom from God, through Jesus Christ.

The enhanced immediacy of God through Jesus can be felt in the frequent use of the Malawian Chichewa exclamation *Mulungu, Yemwe!*, or, "God, Himself!" Apart from the fact that the phrase is from the Bible (Gen 22:8; Rev 21:3), my impression is that Malawians find great comfort in sensing God's immediacy through Jesus. Their relationship is not with lesser deities but with *Mulungu, Yemwe*! Christology remains a matter of lively theological discussion in Africa (See Bediako, 2004, pp. 34–44). Nevertheless, the addition of Jesus to the conceptual map was very enriching.

B. Scripture

Written scripture is a component not found in African traditional religion. If God is the first component of ultimate reality, the book by which he reveals himself must occupy a very high position.

Africans accepted the Bible warmly and, like everyone, viewed it from their cultural perspective. While many early missionaries were trained in the hermeneutics of higher criticism, their African converts had different worldview assumptions that led them to a more literalistic hermeneutic (Jenkins, 2002, p. 8). Some would go beyond seeing the Bible as a vehicle of God's revelation to making it a power object.

As African converts learned the vernacular Bible (usually from fellow African teachers and preachers), they perceived some things differently from the general missionary perspective. Some books of the Bible (like Leviticus) which were given little emphasis by missionaries became prominent in African usage because of their concern with ritual cleanliness. The Adventist focus on the Sanctuary fits easily into this cultural context. Although the whole idea of blood sacrifice is abhorrent to many Western Christians, the concept makes good sense from an African cultural perspective. The biblical dreams, visions, and ecstatic utterances which were not typically part of the missionary's religious experience found a natural home in African thinking.

In my view, the main theological task with regard to the Bible is to avoid the pitfalls of an overly literalistic hermeneutic that overlooks or denies the role of culture in Bible interpretation, belief, and practice.

C. The Devil

Along with a magnified God, Christianity brought a vastly more powerful opponent to God (Walls, 2002, p. 132). We have already seen that trickster divinities were blamed for the human predicament. These tricksters were much less powerful than the Devil described in the Bible. Evil is centered in the person of Satan and his angels and good and evil are locked into what Adventists call the "Great Controversy." The biblical details surrounding the human predicament and its solution add depth, detail, and urgency to the traditional African perspective.

The theological task is to treat Satan as seriously as he deserves. The continued participation in unbiblical beliefs and practices involves not just playing with trickster gods or human-like spirits or grumpy ancestors but with *Satana, yemwe*, Satan, himself.

IV. Conclusion

This paper has traced in very broad strokes the way Christians in African have come to think about the four traditional components of the transcendent and to suggest some helpful directions. My study suggests to me that African Christians, although already embarked on a profound theological journey, have a major theological agenda remaining. At the top of the agenda is the doctrine of the Triune God. Closely following is the doctrine of the angels, which I have suggested is important in addressing the divinities, ancestors, and power objects. Next is the doctrine humanity, in life and death. Much deeper attention must be paid to the local cultural and religious context. The theological journey has to reach the deepest, most remote places where the real power of tradition resides. Adventists need to become expert practitioners of the processes of critical contextualization and worldview transformation so well described by Paul Hiebert (1994; 2008) and Charles Kraft (2008). To bring current members and future converts into fully authentic discipleship requires unprecedented theological work followed by the best possible missional methodology.

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