Animistic World View and the Search for Truth in the Christian Classroom: Towards a Holistic Approach

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ABSTRACT—*Year after year many students with animistic world view orientation enter Christian classrooms where they encounter the Truth. However, their orientation serves as a hindrance to an acceptance of the truth. Christian teachers are thus faced with the challenge of facilitating a world view change by such students. For effective interventions, an awareness of animistic world view on the part of Christian teachers is necessary. An insight into basic animistic mindset is presented and the implications of such insight for teachers are indicated. A five-pronged holistic strategy (Power Encounter, Truth Encounter, Motivational Encounter, New Life Encounter and Prayer Encounter) is suggested as a catalyst for effective interventions by teachers.*
Keywords: *World view, animism, spirit world, Supreme Being, deities, ancestor spirits, bayie, wakwak, sasbonsam, Folk Catholicism, syncretism, traditional folk religion, orthodoxy, orthopraxy, Holistic Encounter, Power Encounter, Truth Encounter, Motivational Encounter, New Life Encounter, Prayer Encounter.*

I. Introduction

According to Landa Jocano, "The best way to understand any people is to know their belief system or world view" (Jocano,1975, pp.

37). It is the belief system which points out what is acceptable and what is not in terms of truth and falsehood about nature and the supernatural (Hasselgrave, 1978, pp. 92). Many people converted into our church come with background world views influenced with "animism" (this term will be defined later in the presentation). Such predisposition tends to militate against the search for truth in the Christian church.

For instance some converts may be so preoccupied by lingering fear of the "gods" that their sensibilities can be blocked to the teaching of the truth by the Holy Spirit. Christian teachers and Gospel workers are thus faced with the challenge of helping such new and old converts to encounter the truth with regard to God, His world and His plan of redemption. Consciousness of such inhibiting factors coupled with determination to deal with them goes a long way in enhancing the effectiveness of Christian teachers as they seek to help students find Christ in the classroom.

The problem addressed in this paper is how can the Christian worker or teacher understand the "animistic" world view oriented person, and thereby facilitate the search for truth by such folks? What kind of new data or insights can be introduced to help displace previously acquired erroneous ideas and beliefs that hinder a correct understanding and appreciation of God, and the freedom that He offers? Consequently, the purpose of this paper is to create an awareness of animistic barriers to the search for truth, as well as provide a strategy in response to the challenge of helping animistic oriented people to find God in the Church.

The problem addressed and the purpose for addressing it both presuppose that Seventh-day Adventists teach religion courses in our colleges and universities with the aim of presenting Christ to our students and helping them find and accept Him as a personal Savior. That the teaching of the Bible and the preaching of the Gospel by Seventh-day Adventists in various communities are conducted with the intent of fulfilling the Great Commission by presenting Christ to the world and helping people find and accept Him as a personal Savior.

II. Animism and Its Basic Concepts

Life as it were is lived in a complex universe. Over the years various religions around the globe have served the significant

function of trying to explain to people the mysteries of the universe. By defining our relationship with nature or God, and also our relationship with one another, religious beliefs help us to understand as well as organize the mysterious universe (Henry, 1986, pp. 5). Paul Gilbert says, "Religions are systems of explanations and 'Animism' is one such system of explanation" (Gilbert, 1876, pp. 372).

Nida and Smalley defined "animism" in the following terms: "Animism is a system of beliefs based on the central beliefs in spirits whose power can be manipulated through formulas, rituals, and words" (Nida and Smalley, 1975, pp. 5). Animism includes all forms of belief in spiritual beings. This involves two doctrines: (1)The doctrine of the soul, which maintains that human beings have a soul which survives after death; and (2) the doctrine of spirits which posits that other spiritual personalized beings exist (Taylor, 1931, pp. 32).

Rheenen provided a more elaborate definition of animism below:

> The belief that personal spiritual beings are impersonal spirit forces that have power over human affairs and consequently, human beings must discover what beings and forces are influencing them in order to determine future action and, frequently, to manipulate their power (1991, pp. 20).

Animistic religions do not have creeds or bodies of literature from which one can extract their beliefs. Yet, there is a set of assumptions and beliefs by which they organize the universe and life (Henry, pp. 6). Stephen Neil estimated that 40 percent of the world's population bases their lives on animistic thinking (Neil, 1970, pp. 125).

Many pre-Christian cultures in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere were religiously animistic in the sense that their religion was centered on the spirit world. They believed that there were many classes and types of spirit-world beings which inhabited the universe. These spirit-world beings ranged from beings which had purely spiritual qualities, to humans who had spiritual powers. These cultures also had a concept of a high and supreme God as well as a belief in an afterlife with previously departed ancestors (Henry, pp. 7).

It is important to note that even though pre-colonial cultures were animistic in their religious orientation, they were not primitive people waiting to be civilized by European culture (Gowing, 1976, pp. 20). **Animism or Animistic in this presentation is not used in the**

prejudicial or derogatory sense of "primitive religion" as some would want to have it; rather it is used in the sense of traditional religion before the taint of western influence.

A. The Supreme Being – God

Animism has a concept of a high and Supreme Being – God, who is not only transcendent but also other-worldly supernatural being. He is a far away remote God who is directly inaccessible and to reach him one has to go through intermediaries. This God is ultimately responsible for all the things that mankind enjoys. Events in the world such as suffering and death are attributed to Him. He is credited as the source or creator of things in the world (Amponsah, 1974, pp. 10-11, Idowu, 1973, pp. 140-73).

B. The Lesser Deities

Animism also has a concept of various groups of environmental deities (lower than the Supreme Being) which inhabited man's immediate environment. They are believed to dwell in rivers, lakes, rocks or other spiritual phenomenon. Idols are carried in representation of these gods. Since God is unapproachable without intermediaries, people call upon these lesser gods to take care of the mundane affairs of life (Opoku, 1978, pp. 1-10).

C. Ancestor Spirits

Animism further has a concept of ancestral spirits which are to be worshipped and appeased. These spirits have powers superior to human beings and are asked to intercede with the supreme God on behalf of the living. They are believed to have power to molest the living if they are displeased. Belief in ancestral spirits provides the sanction for the basic unit in the social structure (Henry, 8).

D. Other Spirits

Animism also comprises of countless kinds of spirit-world beings which inhabit the universe. They range from beings which have purely spiritual qualities to humans who have spiritual powers. Examples are: (1) Bayie: a human witch who can turn into a spirit and prey on victims at night. (2) Wakwak: an evil spirit that allegedly ate

the liver of its human victims and (3) Sasabonsam: the forest monster. In general these spirit-beings were greatly feared (Amponsah, 10-11).

E. Fear in Animism

Fear is the outstanding characteristic, the moving power of animistic religion. The animist lives in constant fear, surrounded by evil spirits who are constantly out to destroy him. As such, much of the animist's energy is expended in the effort to appease or manipulate these spirits. These spirits are seen as hostile and waiting for a reason to inflict their wrath on people (Amponsah, 12-15).

Though the animists live in fear of the spirit world they also seek to find ways to control it through rituals and other means. Protection against evil spirits was principally provided through the possession of charms, amulets and magical objects which possessed power against the spirit-world and thus protected a person possessing them against attack. They were believed to automatically radiate good luck and supernatural powers, especially with purpose to protect against bad luck and diseases. The amulet or talisman is always worn or used in a designated place. For example it can be worn on the body as an earring, bracelet, and necklace or as a belt.

In summary, it can be said that basic to animistic world view is a personality view of the universe. This implies a belief that the universe is directly controlled by other personal beings, and different from oneself. This view is diametrically opposed to the mechanistic view that impersonal laws which are discoverable govern the universe and can be manipulated by human beings both (self and others). It is against this background that Christians should seek to understand and help their animistic oriented friends find truth in the Christian Gospel.

III. Impact of Foreign Religions

A. The Impact of Catholicism

The bane of colonization in many parts of the world saw the blessings of Christian missions. Christianity in the form of Roman Catholicism was introduced as a rival religion to "animism" in many parts of Africa, Latin America, and Asia (LaTourette, 1975, pp. 935). Following its policy of evangelization and colonization, the Roman Catholic Church allowed the people to keep their traditions and folk

ways as long as they were not in conflict with the teachings of the church. *Even though the church in time became the center for teaching Catholicism, the home remained the center for teaching the old religion of animism.* Catholicism and "animism" intermingled in many countries. The overlap of the two religious world views resulted in syncretism, referred to as "Folk Catholicism."

Vitaliano Gorospe acknowledged "Folk Catholicism" in the following statement:

> Consequently, even today especially in the rural areas we find merely the external trapping of Catholic belief and practice superimposed on the original pattern of pre-Christian superstitions and rituals (1966, pp. 37).

Folk Catholicism is described by Henry as the coexistence of two religions in the same person without inconsistencies. He explained that the Roman Catholic aspect of "Folk Catholicism" dealt with the higher or ultimate concerns, while the animistic aspects dealt with the concerns of everyday living. There are two congruent thought and behavior systems dealing with a different area of life (Henry, 11).

Henry believed that Catholicism, as it came to many places, had little to say about the everyday concerns of the people. He says, "There was not theology of weather, fishing, where to build a house or how to cure spirit-caused sickness" (Ibid). Consequently, people assumed that this was the domain of their own spirit religion (Henry, pp. 11-12). The validity of Henry's assessment is attested to by the reality that up to today, belief in the power of the spirit-world continues in the everyday religion of Catholic dominated countries like the Philippines. According to Mercado, "apparently the Filipino is still as animist at heart, in spite of four centuries of Catholicism" (1979, pp. 36-58).

B. Protestantism

Protestantism did not change the picture much, if any, since it was basically a conversion of Roman Catholics to Protestantism. Moreover, Protestantism in its religious philosophy was at variance with local beliefs and values of many indigenes, thus failing to address the everyday practical religious needs of converts. Protestantism like Catholicism had no theology of the weather, fish and deliverance from demon possession and witchcraft. Therefore, at

the level of internalizing beliefs and values, it has been indicted as "Folk Protestantism" (Henry, 15). Consequently, all the theological differences between the indigene Catholic and his Protestant counterpart notwithstanding, they virtually shared the same spirit world view at the animistic level.

IV. Implications for Christian Teachers: Holistic Encounter

From the foregoing discussion it is clear that Christian teachers need to be aware that students come to class with "animistic" oriented world views. As they help such students find the truth in the classroom, it is therefore necessary for them to be aware of the following:

> That even though students may profess a belief in a supreme God, they may not consider Him a personal God who is interested in their day to day lives.

> Those students may be consulting deities and spirits for their day to day problem solving situations in life though they may be professing Christians.

> Students may be using rings, bracelets, talisman, etc to protect themselves against evil spirits.

> Students may be victims of demon possession and or witchcraft.

> Students may be staunch believers in ancestral spirits and their influence in the lives of people.

Failure on the part of the Christian teacher to reckon with these factors will certainly be counterproductive in the effort to impart the truth. It is against this background that the Christian teacher should attempt to understand the student and help him find God in the classroom. The task now is what practical strategy or action can a teacher take in bringing a genuine encounter of the animistic student with God?

Taking cue from Seventh-day Adventist's holistic approach to education, a holistic strategy is hereby proposed. It is a practical

strategy that seeks to help students make the necessary mind set change worthy of the educated.

The proposed strategy is made up of five basic types of encounters which can be used together. The strategy is designed to deal with multifaceted challenge of helping students find the truth in the classroom. The five combining encounters are: Power Encounter, Truth Encounter, Motivational Encounter, New Life Encounter and Prayer Encounter. These will be explained briefly in the order listed.

A. Power Encounter

Van Rheenen has defined power encounter as:

> A spiritual encounter that exposes and calls to account the powers of darkness in their varied forms, by the power of God for the purpose of entreating the identity of the true God, resulting in an acknowledgement of, and or allegiance to His lordship by those present (Rheenen, 20).

People with animist beliefs cannot simply drift into the Christian faith. At the time that a student is attracted to Christ, he or she may still be enmeshed in the old way of life. The transition between the two worlds can be very confusing and painful. A power encounter is usually the first step leading to a definite break with the traditional sources of power that have held people in bondage. *In simple practical terms this can be the throwing of rings into sea or the burning of talisman.*

B. Truth Encounter

David Burnett has suggested that not only should there be a power encounter; there must be also a "truth encounter (Burnett, 1988, pp. 218-20). A truth encounter is the systematic sound grounding of people in the fundamentals of Christian belief. This is when truth encounters error and brings people to a correct understanding about Jesus Christ and His truth. Students must be helped to understand that since creation God has been actively involved in rescuing us from the consequences of our destructive decisions.

Christian teachers should not merely or only teach that Jesus is the Savior and that He died to save mankind. They should also stress that

God is very much interested in people and that He is actively involved in our daily lives. There should be strong emphasis on the power of Jesus to free human beings from the devil and all his agents. Such emphasis will bring conviction and true freedom through the help of the Holy Spirit.   This is one area where the practical testimonies of the involvement of God in the lives of Christian teachers serve as poignant catalyst of conviction and transformation for students.

Teaching of the word of God should address the immediate problems of everyday life and not just deal with cosmic issues. People retain their traditional folk religion if they are not given Christian answers for their everyday problems. Christianity as it was previously becomes a religion for the sky and the future, but not for today and here and now.

C. Motivational Encounter

This is the next crucial factor in helping students find the truth in the classroom. It is defined in this presentation as conscious efforts in attempting to help students who respond to the gospel to self evaluate the motivational basis for their response. In a sense, it is the same as helping one to "count the cost" of discipleship, borrowing the words of Jesus.

A motivational encounter is not the same as *"judging motives."* The latter is not our responsibility. People are not asked to judge the motives or the intents of the heart of fellow human beings. God is the one who weighs the heart. A motivational encounter is the help extended to people to enable them to encounter their own motives.

This encounter aims at giving students cause for sober reflection and confirmation of their decisions. Students may be interested in the gospel for many varied reasons, some good and some bad. Sometimes students are motivated by everything except the desire for salvation. One student once said that he got baptized so he could stand as a candidate for students Association Presidency.

Some people become Christians in order to have access to God's power, rather than because they truly believe in Christ.   In such situations, they may merely be looking for better sources of power rather than searching for God. *A dialogue or interaction situation by way of assignments that require students to reflect on their response to the lectures in the classroom is a positive step in the right direction.*

D. New Life Encounter

Teachers should not be satisfied with mere acquisition of theoretical knowledge on the part of their students. Teachers should expect a demonstration of experiential knowledge. Consequently, an integral part of the responsibilities of teachers as they help students seek for the truth is to help them exhibit characteristics worthy of the truth. There must be characteristics that can be seen and heard, such as tests of orthodoxy (right beliefs) and orthopraxy (right behavior).

There must be a link between knowledge and also an ongoing practice of the truth. There must be lifestyle changes in the attitude of students to the Gospel. When they accept Jesus as a Savior, and recognize Him as the Lord of their lives, they should be willing to serve Him in the fellowship of the church. They should be encouraged to make changes in their actions, what they say and what they do. Harsh and derogatory words, curses, abusive words, idle talk, gossip and lies should give way to words of encouragement, praise and exaltation (Psalm 19:14).

Here again the Christian and exemplary lives of teachers will go a long way in helping students experience new life encounter. This encounter also calls for a conscious effort in teaching and modeling moral values to students.

E. Prayer Encounter

The power of prayer (**and for that matter the Holy Spirit**) should never be underestimated as students are assisted in their search for truth. A powerful prayer encounter by, with, and for students goes a long way in yielding desired results of changed minds and hearts. If the soul winning efforts of teachers are to be effective and successful, prayer is imperative. Effective prayer promotes spiritual growth, brings power into one's work and results in the conversion of souls and blessings upon both teachers and students.

There is tremendous power in small group prayers. Praying together with our students in small groups brings extra power and such power helps to bring miracles and accomplishes wonders for the cause of God (Matthew 8:18-19). Fasting works in harmony with our prayers and can add even greater power and serve as a booster to them.

Intercessory prayer in the interest of and on behalf of students by Christian teachers and leaders is certainly very relevant in this respect.

Jesus our Savior is constantly involved in the work of intercession on our behalf and He invites His followers to be partners with Him in this great work of mediation. *Therefore, Christian teachers ought to back their efforts in helping students encounter the truth with strong prayers of intercession.*

V. Conclusion

This presentation began with the presupposition that Seventh-day Adventists teach religion courses in our colleges and universities with the aim of presenting Christ to our students, and helping them find and accept Him as a personal Savior. From the outset, the presenter made a proposition that many students come to Christian classrooms seeking the Truth. However, many of such students are hampered by hindrances stemming from their background "animistic world view". The submission was made that Christian teachers are thus faced with the challenge of helping such students find Christ, their animistic predispositions notwithstanding.

Further, the basic concepts of "animism" were discussed, and fear was identified as a striking characteristic of "animism". The impact of Christianity was looked at briefly. Implication of the study for Christian teachers seeking to help students with "animistic" background was considered. A five-pronged holistic strategy was proposed to facilitate the efforts of Christian teachers in their bid to help students encounter the truth in the classroom. These are: Power Encounter, Truth Encounter, Motivational Encounter, New Life Encounter and Prayer Encounter.

The presenter has found this approach very helpful and successful in teaching religion courses to "animistic" world view oriented students both at the college and the university levels. It is hoped that readers will find this presentation not only helpful but also a key that will open their imagination to more successful approaches in presenting Christ in the classroom.

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